



# A Future Worth Saving

By Flashgen

# Table of Contents:

<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Chapter 8</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>Chapter 9</b>	<b>124</b>
<b>Chapter 10</b>	<b>144</b>
<b>Chapter 11</b>	<b>162</b>

# Chapter 1

The acrid scent of rot and decay.

That was the first thing to fill Twilight's nostrils as her eyes fluttered open slowly. Her hooves tried to quickly cover her nose as she adjusted to the lack of light. After a few moments of her eyes darting around she stood up slowly, the smell weakening from its original intensity as it was replaced by grogginess and the onset of a headache. As she let out a groan, rubbing her forehead lightly, she heard similar sounds behind her. She turned around and closed her eyes to focus past the headache, a bright light forming from the tip of her horn. Its glow illuminated her friends, who appeared to be just awakening as well. They slowly rose to their hooves, squinting in the sudden light.

Rainbow Dash hovered up off of the ground, hooves shielding her eyes. "Not so bright, you're gonna make this headache worse."

The light dimmed considerably, though the six ponies were still illuminated, standing in what seemed like a pool of mud and dirt within a rotting tree. The interior walls were overgrown with vines and weeds, and it seemed like the tree would collapse without them. Rarity was quick to begin fidgeting, trying to get caked bits of mud out of her mane and coat as she hoped to suppress a panic attack.

"Yuck! Of all of the disgusting places for some spell to take us. It'll take me forever to get my mane back to pristine condition. It's like I've been tossing and turning in the stuff for days!"

Rainbow Dash and Applejack simply rolled their eyes as they moved over to Twilight, who seemed just as confused as the rest of them. Meanwhile, Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie tried their best to calm Rarity down, despite how impossible a task it seemed. Applejack looked down at Twilight, who seemed focused on looking for her own answers as she stared into the mud.

“You... do know where it took us, don’tcha Twilight? I mean, we couldn’t be too far from Ponyville, right?” Applejack tried to keep a smile as she spoke, though it was a bit difficult considering the situation they were in.

Twilight looked up at Applejack, nervously smiling back at her. “Not... exactly. But I’m not talented enough to take us all that far. We’re probably just somewhere in the Everfree Forest. I mean it is wild enough to be.” Twilight turned around within the tree, focusing the light on the walls as she saw a torn section of bark leading out of the decrepit tree. She looked back to the others, noting that Rarity had calmed down a little, although she was still tugging at parts of her mane every few moments. The others were soon gathered around Twilight, waiting for her to lead the way.

As they stepped through the hole, Twilight’s horn illuminated the surrounding forest, moonlight shining weakly through the canopy. There wasn’t any way to see the night sky clearly, and so Twilight decided that they should find a clearing nearby to get a sense of their location. The six trotted along slowly through the thick woods, trying to search for a break in the treeline.

Fluttershy shook nervously near the back of the pack. “Should we really be going off in some random direction? What if there’s something dangerous out here?”

Applejack looked back at Fluttershy, slowing down to get beside her. “We have to find someway outta here. Besides, we’ve handled ourselves just fine out here before, so don’t you go frettin’ Fluttershy. Once Twi finds out where we are we’ll be home lickity split.”

Rainbow Dash hovered over the others as she looked up at the rough canopy, her wings flapping idly. “Or I can just fly up now and find out for us. It’s not like it wouldn’t take me a minute.”

Twilight slowed down, looking back at Dash. “No, if something happened to you we’d have no way to know about it. Just wait until we find a clearing and then you can fly around all you want.”

Dash landed back on the ground, sighing heavily. “Fine. I still don’t know why you had to have us with you to try that spell in the first place.”

"You would have preferred if I vanished without a trace and ended up here on my own?" Twilight stated flatly.

"... Good point."

---

It seemed like hours passed by before they saw stronger beams of light shining through the trees ahead. As the group entered a small clearing, they could see the night sky clearly, and Rainbow Dash took the opportunity to jet up into the air. The others took a chance to rest their hooves for a moment as Twilight looked up at Rainbow Dash. "What do you see Rainbow Dash?!" she called out from the ground below.

It took a few moments before Rainbow Dash flew back down to the ground, looking worried, "I-I don't know. There's forest in every direction, and a few mountains, but I saw smoke in the distance. Maybe somepony is out camping?" she proposed with a slight grin.

Pinkie jumped up between the two. "Oh yay, we can throw them a camping party then! I mean I don't have any balloons or streamers or cake or anything but maybe I can whip up something with some sticks and leaves and berries."

Twilight seemed a bit amused as she dismissed the comments from Pinkie Pie, looking at Dash. "I guess it's the only thing we have to go on. Point the way Dash, we're right behind you."

Rarity sighed as the group prepared to march. "I'll never get a chance to clean this mess up at this rate."

"Shouldn't you be a bit more worried about finding our way home Rarity?" Fluttershy asked meekly, lowering her voice, "Or maybe finding food and water if we're stuck here?"

"I suppose so, but a girl still has to have her standards. Oh! And water would mean a chance for a bath. We'll have to make sure to keep our eyes out for that then," Rarity said, gaining an air of confidence at the thought.

“That’s... not exactly what I meant.”

Applejack moved up beside Twilight. “Supposin’ it is somepony that’s causin’ that smoke, what exactly are we gonna do? We can’t ask some stranger to give six ponies food and shelter for nothin’ in return.”

“I’m sure whoever it is will be more than willing to help us. Even if it’s only directions on how to get out of here.” Twilight looked up at the sky. “Besides, the Princess will want a report on her spe- Ah!” Twilight was cut off as she felt a splitting headache, images of her home and the strange book she had read the spell from flashing in her head. She had received it from the Princess... hadn’t she? She could barely seem to remember.

“Are you alright sugarcube?” Applejack asked, placing a hoof on Twilight’s back sympathetically.

“Y-yes... just a headache, that’s all. It’ll be good to take some time and relax once we get home to Ponyville. The spell must have just... taken more out of me than I thought.” The pounding subsided quickly as Twilight brought her thoughts back to the present, though she still felt troubled by the sudden pain.

After a few more minutes of walking, they could finally see the smoke clearly from under the canopy. It wasn’t long before they felt a slight rumble in the ground, as if there were some kind of stampede off in the distance, and it only seemed to get stronger as they got closer to the smoke. None of them seemed fully certain in their course now, but given that they didn’t know where they were, it was the only path they had.

“What if it’s something dangerous? What if it attacks us, or tries to eat us?” Fluttershy asked, hiding behind the others as they kept moving.

“I told ya already Fluttershy, we ain’t gonna let nothin’ bad happen to us. Maybe the Princess just... sent some ponies out to look for us, that’s all,” Applejack said trying to comfort Fluttershy, and quell her own doubts at the same time.

“... Do you hear that?” Rainbow Dash said as the rumbling grew louder. She flew up a few feet ahead of the rest. “It sounds like, I don’t know, some kind of machine.”

The others looked confused as the rumbling and faint sounds in the distance were replaced with the crash of falling trees. Despite their better judgements they picked up the pace and charged forward. The rumbling grew stronger, and the sound of destruction and machinery filled their ears with each hurried step forward. It wasn't long before they saw blinding lights coming from beyond a set of trees. A behemoth of metal was on the other side, with a series of sharp claws and teeth at its front. It cut through the dense trees in its path as it bellowed dark smoke into the sky above.

The six ponies did their best to hide, finding a set of heavy bushes close to the tree line. Whatever this monstrosity was built for, it seemed to be doing its job well as it progressed deeper into the dense forest, crushing whatever its gaping jaw did not swallow whole under a set of thick treads. However, it wasn't the wanton destruction that had the six friends worried as they kept hidden, it was that there were a group of what looked like ponies following the monster at its side and rear, and they were wearing armor and helmets. It was almost like they were prepared to go war in the woods they were cutting through, or at least prepared for a fight.

"Who the hay are these guys? They're gonna tear apart this whole forest at this rate," Rainbow Dash muttered, barely managing to keep herself from charging headlong into the unknown to demand answers.

"All of those poor critters and their homes... We can't let them do this," Fluttershy whispered strongly, gaining a bit of courage in her voice.

"What are we supposed to do about it darling? It's not like we can just waltz up to some soldiers and demand they stop doing... whatever it is they're doing. Maybe they have to accomplish something important," Rarity responded with a sigh.

"We can't just sit around and do nothin', ain't that right Twilight?" Applejack asked to the unicorn.

"I-I don't know... maybe we should just wait here until they leave an-"

Twilight quieted herself as the large machine stopped, several of the armored ponies pressing a button on their suits as a pair of oddly shaped metal rods extending from their saddles. Silence overtook the woods as the

rumbling of the machine began to die down to a faint hum, and the rustling of leaves in the wind was the only thing that could be heard over it. They were looking around nervously as one of the soldiers stepped forward, a set of pins on the chest of his armor, though he was too far away for any of the girls to tell what they were for.

“It looks like a false alarm. Now get moving. We don’t have any time to waste. We have to find what Her Highness wants and get out of here befo-” As he turned back to the other soldiers a spear flew through the air, grazing the side of his armor. It easily cut a section of his flank, and caused a streak of crimson to stain his armor. The rough sound of metal on metal cut through the silence as he glared at the trees. “Quickly! Take positions around the crusher! Spread fire in all directions! No prisoners!” The rest of the soldiers moved around the iron behemoth as they aimed the metal tubes at the seemingly empty wilds. A mix of thunder and fire filled the air as the leaves and branches of trees were torn-apart in seconds.

A few of the girls let out a screech as Applejack jumped up. “We have to get outta here, now!” It didn’t take much more than that for the rest of them to scurry out of the brush, trying to stay low as the forest was torn apart by shrapnel around them. Through either some stroke of luck or skill, none of them managed to be injured by whatever was being shot at them. Only the sounds of thunder and screams of agony echoed through the woods behind them as they kept running.

---

It seemed like an eternity passed as they fled, even once the sounds of battle were gone in the distance. The six mares managed to stumble into a clearing next to a waterfall, taking a moment of relief in their luck. All of them took another chance to rest, and to get something to drink. Rarity was especially enjoying the fact she had a chance to clean her mane, even if it was just to get the mud and leaves out.

Rainbow Dash sighed as she bucked a rock into a nearby tree. “Great, so now we still have no idea where we are, and there’s some crazy psycho ponies out there trying to kill us?! Not to mention we don’t have any food at all! Can’t you just zap us out of here or something Twilight?”



Twilight had been sitting on a nearby rock, trying to go over the predicament they had found themselves stuck in. They had no way back home, no idea where they were, and somepony out there was willing to destroy half the forest looking for... something. She looked up at the irritated pegasus, letting out a sigh.

“No, I can’t. I don’t know which way Ponyville is, and even if I did, I’m too exhausted to get us there in the blink of an eye. Besides, I don’t think they were trying to kill *us* specifically.”

“What the hay is that supposed to mean? They tore apart half the forest in our general direction.”

Applejack stood up, walking over to Rainbow Dash. “Because something attacked ‘em. They had no idea we were even watchin’ them. But I reckon after our escape somepony had to notice us. Maybe they’ll come lookin’ for us.”

“It stopped,” Pinkie Pie stated calmly as she looked up at the sky, the others looking confused at her. “The smoke, it stopped,” she continued as she pointed in the direction they had ran from.

Sure enough, the last bit of black smoke in the sky was fading into thin air as they watched from the safety of the clearing. “D-do you think they got e-eaten by something?” Fluttershy asked, shivering.

“That hunk o’ metal is probably done for at least. I don’t reckon whatever or whoever it was coulda done in that many soldiers though,” Applejack said rubbing her hoof idly along the ground.

“We shouldn’t worry about that now,” Twilight said as she stood up on the rock, “We should try and get some rest here, and once morning comes we can probably walk around a lot easier.” The others nodded in agreement as they found a section of grass close to the waterfall, the sounds of rushing water fading as one by one they drifted off to sleep.

---

Twilight’s dreams were not peaceful to say the least. Images befitting nightmares and horror stories were all that seemed to fill her thoughts as

her mind kept trying to find its way back into the past, searching for some, any kind of answer. Each image flashed into her mind for only a moment, mixed with chaotic gibberish, and the voices of her friends accompanied them.

The library she called home in Ponyville.

“Are ya sure you should be tryin’ this Twilight?”

A strange dark book filled with runes and scribbles.

“Of course, the Princess wouldn’t send me a book to study if I couldn’t handle what was inside.”

A picture of herself and her teacher Princess Celestia, its edges burning.

“What’s going on?!”

The ruins of the castle in the Everfree Forest.

“I-I can’t feel anything... it’s getting so cold!”

A solar eclipse.

“Tw-twilight! What’s going on?! Stop it!”

Darkness.

“... I can’t.”

A grin, staring at her from the shadows.

---

Twilight leapt up from the ground in shock, gasping for air as sweat fell down her brow. She looked around at her sleeping friends as she began to calm down. “It... must have been a bad dream.” She held her head as the headache started to form again, but a rustle in the trees caught her attention. Slowly, Twilight stood up, moving towards the forest’s edge.

She called out into the empty trees, "H-hello? Who's there?" There was no response as she lowered her head, sighing in mock relief. "Right, just the wind... I should try and get back to sleep."

She turned around, face to face with a masked earth pony. A smooth facade of painted wood stared back at her, its cold eyes piercing through the small holes. She jumped back, letting out a shriek in response. "W-who are you?!" she demanded, and pointed her horn in the pony's direction, trying to at least seem threatening.

"I could ask you the same." The voice was a colt's, rough and aged. His coat was dark blue, an odd match to the brown, rugged mane of hair around his mask. Twilight could barely make out his cutie mark through the patches of armor on his body: an eagle.

Her attention was pulled away from him as she noticed other masked ponies emerging from the treeline, some of them with crude weapons attached to their sides. Her friends were just beginning to wake as Rainbow Dash and Applejack were quick to jump to their hooves, and tried to get between the strangers and their friends. It was obvious that they were outnumbered, but they weren't about to go down without a fight.

There was a sharp whistle that cut through the air as the masked ponies began to back off. The one facing Twilight looked past her to the treeline, "Aqua? I thought you said that anypony left behind after the attack was to be taken out. We can't let her-"

An unmasked unicorn with a light blue coat and white mane stepped into the clearing. Her appearance seemed unnaturally graceful considering the companions she was traveling with, as she adorned with a simple silver gown instead of ragged armor. She looked more like she belonged at a gala than the wilds which surrounded her.

She cleared her throat as she spoke, "I am aware of my words, Breeze, but it seems the conditions have changed. You heard them talking before the attack, didn't you? What they were searching for." She walked up to Twilight, standing before the confused unicorn, and looking back at her companions. "I think we have found them. The only thing she fears coming back to haunt her."

Twilight stood firm, horn still pointed at the masked pony. “W-what are you talking about?” Her friends moved up behind Aqua and Breeze, looking cautiously at the other masked ponies and the weapons they carried.

A smile grew on Aqua’s lips, one of sincerity and relief as she replied to Twilight’s question calmly, “You six... you’re the Elements of Harmony aren’t you? From the Legends of the Sun.”

# Chapter 2

Rainbow Dash nervously eyed the masked ponies that were escorting them through the woods. She still didn't trust them, and she was sure that her friends felt the same way. After all, they were the ones that were about to attack them in their sleep, and then this Aqua showed up and they just wanted to back off like that? How the hay did she know who they were? Why were they following and attacking those soldiers? Who were they all working for? What was this Legend of the Sun nonsense?

Applejack nudged Rainbow out of her train of thought, whispering to the edgy pegasus, "Would ya stop lookin' like yer gonna tackle one of them to the ground and hold 'em hostage? It's not gonna make anything better. Besides, she said she'd answer our questions when we get somewhere safe, remember?"

Fluttershy moved close to them, her voice low as well, "And they said they'd give us food and shelter too. So they seem... nice, I think."

Pinkie Pie hopped up next to them, avoiding the subtlety the others had managed as she shouted with her usual energy, "And then we can throw them a welcome party, well I guess they could throw us a welcome party, but maybe we could throw a 'thanks for welcoming us' party. Oh, but what if they don't have balloons and streamers and cake leftover after the first party? I'll have to work extra hard to get the second party ready then."

Rarity rolled her eyes at the hyperactive pink pony. "We should probably hold off on the parties until there's something to celebrate dear. Like finding our way home."

"Oh, good idea Rarity! We can save the welcome party and 'thanks for welcoming us' party for when we get back to Ponyville, and we can show all our old friends our new friends." Even in the oddest of situations Pinkie Pie managed to put her joyful side forward, even if that seemed to be her only side.

Twilight was a few feet ahead of the others as they conversed about the strange ponies that were leading them through the forest. She had her own questions to ask, but they would have to wait like all of the others. Well, hopefully all of them except for one. She trotted for a moment to get closer to Aqua at the head of the pack. Breeze was still at her side, keeping a vigilant watch around them.

“Excuse me... Aqua was it? I’m sorry but, could you at least tell us where you’re taking us?”

She tilted her head back, still showing the same sincere smile to the confused unicorn. “Of course, we’re going to Gallant Hollow. It’s our village here at the base of the mountain. It shouldn’t be much farther.”

Breeze glared at Aqua. “Lady Aqua, we shouldn’t be talking about these things around them! How do we even know they’re n-”

Aqua cut him off quickly, “We have to have faith Breeze... it’s what makes us different from the others, who only believe in the absolutes *she* gave them. It is why we follow the creeds of the Legend and why we are still here today. However, it is still possible somepony, or something, is watching... Crimson Sky, fly ahead and let the guards know we’re coming with guests, and that Pollen was injured during the raid.”

The red-coated pegasus nodded as he took off just above the canopy, leaving the others behind. Aqua turned back to Twilight. “I do apologize for the secrecy, but given the circumstances... You’ll understand, I’m sure.”

---

It was about thirty more minutes before they were greeted by a heavy wooden gate, which swung open with a loud creak at their arrival. Inside was a sight that they had never seen, like finding an oasis tucked away within the dark woods. Before them was perhaps the largest tree anypony had seen in a lifetime, hollowed out and bustling with activity. Lights shone from its windows, and a small stream of water encircled its base before snaking deeper into the village. Several smaller trees were hollowed out the same, with ponies running between them urgently, carrying papers or

small packages. There were numerous tents set up around the hollowed trees, lit lanterns hanging at their entrance. It seemed like the village extended all the way to the base of the nearby mountain, which towered over their heads through the thick canopy and blocked out the moon in the night sky.

As the gates closed behind them, two ponies wearing nurse capes came to the side of one of their escorts: a dark green pegasus whose wings appeared bound by stained gauze under his armor. A white unicorn stepped up as the two helped him to a nearby white tent. "We'll have things as good as new in no time Lady Aqua. Was the wound greivous?"

"No, luckily. Are the others gathered at the Hollow?"

"Everypony couldn't make it on such a short notice, but the majority are ready for your report."

"Good, that will be all." She nodded to the unicorn before turning to the six strangers. "Please follow me, and do not stray far. This place is larger than you think." She looked at Breeze. "You are relieved, your help was appreciated as always."

He nodded silently in return to her as he followed the nurses to the tent.

Twilight looked at her friends, who could only offer a shrug in response. They didn't have any choice now, if they even had one to begin with.

Aqua led the group through a door at the base of the massive central tree, which opened into a large central room inside. All the way to the high ceiling they could see segmented floors, ponies running in and out of doors, some of which seemed to be meeting rooms, while the others were small offices. The open air leading up to the ceiling was filled with small objects floating magically in any given direction, or pegasi quickly navigating from one floor to the next. Aqua began walking across the open room, a few ponies nodding in acknowledgement to her or exchanging a quick greeting. She took the six to a long staircase tucked into the corner, which ended at a large room above the ceiling at the top of the tree.

As the door swung open, the sounds of debate quickly filled the air, as nearly twenty or so ponies of various age and appearance were caught up in at least ten different conversations. Aqua only rolled her eyes as she stepped into the middle of the room, the six strangers filing in behind her. The talking slowly subsided as their attention was drawn to the strange arrivals, though some kept whispering to one another. Aqua bowed to the group as they quieted, clearing her throat.

“Thank you all very much for coming here on such a short notice. I have a few things to report. The first is that two new villages have been established here in the Everfree Wilds. Both of them are far from the reach of Equestria, and Gallant Hollow still remains our closest stronghold to the borders. We have sent enough volunteers to aid them in stabilizing their food supplies and security, and their leaders will have more detailed reports within the week. We have also gained the support of another minor noble house within the Kingdom, and every precaution is being taken to keep *her* eyes averted from the exchanges.”

It seemed surprising given the arguments beforehand that nopony had even attempted to interrupt Aqua during her speech. She continued on with various accounts that were beyond the comprehension of the girls. Politics, military movements, supply routes. What exactly were these ponies planning?

“Which brings us to our most pressing development... Sir Breeze’s squad led an assault under my direction on a convoy about thirty minutes away from here. When we noticed their movements we had thought that these troops were attempting to locate a village, but upon observation it seems their mission was one more pressing. They were searching for the Elements from the Legends, and I believe that we managed to find them first.”

Every eye in the room returned to the six young ponies gathered near the door. All of them seemed confused still, Fluttershy hiding behind Applejack meekly as the others tried to stand tall. After only a few moments the room exploded into debate again.



“You can’t expect us to believe that these are the same from the legends, can you? That nonsense is over five hundred years old!”

“We’ve followed the Legends for centuries, you want us to lose faith now?!”

“A war cannot be won on faith alone. We need strength and supplies, not superstitions and prayer.”

“If we deny their existence and they really are the Elements, we’re as lowly as those that serve *her*!”

“*Enough!*” Aqua’s voice echoed through the room as silence returned. “This meeting is adjourned for now. Any debate over this subject will have to wait. May the Sun’s Majesty see you all home safely.”

It took a few minutes for the crowd to file out of the large room, their voices hushed as conversations resumed from where they ended at Aqua’s entrance. Aqua stood alone as she let out a sigh, turning to the six.

“I apologize that you were placed under such scrutiny, but not all of our members are as... faithful as I am. You may ask your questions now, if you would like.”

Rainbow Dash had barely waited for Aqua to finish before she flew through the air, stopping a few inches from her. “How do you know who we are?”

“From the Legends of the Sun, which speak of a brighter time in our history. A time when two sisters helped one another rule over this Kingdom in Harmony.”

“What are you ramblin’ on about? Everything is fine in Equestria,” Applejack interjected.

“Because the six of you are from that time... it’s the only way. A thousand years ago, before the Usurper stole the throne from her sister, when the kingdom of Equestria shone bright like a beacon of hope. When light shined in this world, other than from a cold moon.”

Fluttershy stuttered as she spoke, “W-what? A t-thousand years? But... we were just in Ponyville before Twilight cast her spell...”

Rainbow Dash shrugged, chuckling at the thought. “Right, it’s just some kind of joke, isn’t it? There’s no way we could be gone for a thousand years... we’d be, well, long dead by now!”

Aqua sighed heavily, shaking her head. “I... I know that it sounds odd, and I know that you don’t want to believe me, but this is the only explanation I can offer. Whatever that spell you cast was, it has brought all of you here today... and chances are the Usurper knows about it.”

Twilight walked up next to Rainbow Dash, pushing her back. “You said Usurper... Who are you talking about?”

“You probably know her by her true name: Nightmare Moon. She who subdued the Sun’s Majesty and shrouded the world in darkness since that day one thousand years ago.”

Everypony’s jaw dropped as Rainbow Dash hovered back down to the floor. “That’s impossible, we beat her in the Everfree Forest, and Luna went back to normal, didn’t she?” She looked at Twilight questionably.

The unicorn was at a loss for words as she turned to Dash. “I... don’t know. I mean, she seemed fine, and Princess Celestia spoke about her feeling well.”

Applejack stamped a hoof onto the ground furiously. “That little... She was just playin’ everypony for foals! I can’t believe we all fell for it.”

Aqua tapped her hoof against the floor, hoping to keep the six focused as she continued, “Regardless of why she returned, she has been in control for over a thousand years. She destroyed most signs of her sister’s reign and let the Everfree Wilds overtake them. Every book that mentioned her, every city that stood as a sign of her rule, it was all crushed without question. Those that resisted her were either banished... or sentenced for high treason, but there were more than enough willing to sell themselves to evil for a chance at survival and luxury. And so she rebuilt Equestria in darkness, a society where only those that served their queen

without question were worthy of importance, or happiness. A world of cold machinery and oppression.”

Rarity gasped, a hoof over her mouth. “T-that’s simply dreadful!”

Fluttershy moved from behind Applejack. “B-but the Princess... How could she be defeated? She used the Elements of Harmony before on Nightmare Moon.”

“But you were all the Elements, in a physical form. Without you to call upon, the Princess had to stand alone against her sister, and in that hour she was tricked. The Legends say that her magic was taken from her by Nightmare Moon in the heat of battle, and then she surrendered wholly. Now you know why those soldiers, Nightmare Moon’s, were searching for you. Because you are all awake again, you are the only thing standing in her way, and she will do anything to stop that.”

Pinkie Pie actually seemed depressed as she spoke up, “How are we supposed to do anything against a whole army of Black Snooty’s meanie pants soldiers? We’re only six ponies.”

“That will have to wait until I can speak to the other Council members. We may not be a part of Equestria anymore by name, but we will not see our brothers and sisters oppressed with no hope in sight. For now, I will lead you to your quarters for the time being. We are already overcrowded with a few refugees, but the village’s library has been quartered off for you. You can take a chance to read up on what you have missed after you get some food and sleep. What little there is to read at least...”

# Chapter 3

The small cots set up inside of the corner of the hollowed out tree were not the most comfortable thing a pony could have slept on, but considering the circumstances they were all in, it was about the best the six mares could have expected. Even as the lights of a nearby lantern were dimmed and good nights were exchanged, nopony could really find the urge to sleep. Rainbow Dash turned over, letting out a rough sigh into her pillow before she chuckled under her breath.

“H-how is any of this even possible? We couldn’t be gone for a thousand years, it’s just... it’s nonsense. And Nightmare Moon was in control this whole time and nopony did anything to stop her?”

Applejack turned to face her. “I know it don’t make a lick a’ sense, but what else explains all this? Nopony’s ever heard of villages in the Everfree Forest, and here we are sittin’ in one... and just thinking that everypony in Ponyville is...” She bit her tongue, trying to hold back tears. She didn’t want to state the absolute, even if it was obvious to all of them: everything, everyone they knew was gone. All that was left now was the unknown.

There was a light sound of sobbing coming from one of the cots in the darkness. Fluttershy lifted her head in its direction. “R-Rarity? Are you alright?”

Rarity scrambled to wipe her face with her hooves. “O-of course darling. Just, getting something out of my eye... that’s all...”

“You don’t... have to keep it in. If it’s something on your mind...” Fluttershy got out of her cot and moved to Rarity’s side.

“I just... I never said goodbye to Sweetie Belle yesterday. There were so many things I could’ve apologized for, but now...” She grabbed at her pillow, feeling Fluttershy’s hoof on her back. “I can’t take any of it back, all of the times I put work first over spending time with her, or when I got short with her. To think about... how heartbroken she would have been without me I-”

Fluttershy wrapped her hooves around Rarity as the unicorn flung her head onto her friend's shoulder, crying openly. Tears trickled down Fluttershy's cheeks as she held Rarity close, her own thoughts drifting back to Ponyville, her cottage, and the meadow where all the animals she cared for lived. "H-How could they... without me?" she choked out, clinging tighter to Rarity, "A-all those poor animals... H-how could I not be there for them? How could I abandon them?" Her body shivered as she held onto Rarity, the two caving into a wave of tears and sorrow.

Applejack looked at the display in the dim light, still trying to hold back her own tears as she whispered to herself, "Everypony in the Apple Family... I promised I'd teach Red Delicious some lasso tricks at this year's reunion, and I was going to ask Braeburn how things were in Appleloosa... and Apple Bloom." Tears dripped down onto her pillow as she wiped her eyes with a hoof. "I'll never get to see her face when she finally gets her cutie mark... to see how happy she'd have been..."

Dash turned away from the others, letting out a small sigh before she continued to mutter to herself, "W-what is everyone crying about? I-it's not that big a deal." A smug smirk was plastered on her face as a tear slid down her cheek. "The Wonderbolts... who really needed 'em? I-I was fine on my own. And that filly Scootaloo, s-she was a nice fan, but... she could've handled herself without me around." The single tear was joined by others as Dash kept chuckling, "She... she would've kept thinking of me... trying to be like me... She would've stayed strong..."

Twilight tried to push her own lamentations, of the Princess, of Spike, of everyone, to the back of her mind as she hoped to drift off to sleep amidst the cacophony of sorrow. After a few moments she heard mumbling at her side join the symphony. Her attention was drawn as she resolved that sleep was a hopeless endeavor, wiping a tear idly from her cheek.

Pinkie Pie sat on the cot as she frowned down at her pillow, muttering to herself, "Mr. and Mrs. Cake, Lyra, Bon-Bon, Derpy, Lotus, Caramel, Flora, Lily, Carrot Top, Daisy ..."

Twilight looked at the others for a moment before turning back to Pinkie. "Pinkie Pie... What are you doing?"

"I-I have to remember everypony... I have to, to throw a party to make up for everything. For all the birthdays I missed, and holidays, and special occasions. And Mr. and Mrs. Cake's anniversaries. They always liked it when I did something special for them... or Lyra and Bon-Bon. They always tried to keep things between them hidden, but everypony could tell how close they were. I was going to throw them the biggest party when they finally told everyone." She smiled brightly as she looked at Twilight, dried tears across her cheeks. "W-we have to, right Twilight? Even if they aren't here now..."

Twilight smiled in return, wiping her own tears away. "R-right Pinkie, but... we should probably sleep for now though... I know we're all upset about this... a-and it seems so hard to believe, but... We're not going to get any rest like this."

Rarity dried her eyes, nodding as she gained her usual regal presence once again, though more tears replaced those wiped away. "Y-you're right Twilight... this is no way for a lady to be acting at a time like this. T-thank you very much for your help Fluttershy, you're a good friend and... I'm sure your animal friends were fine without you..." Rarity offered a smile through her tears, hoping to calm Fluttershy's laments.

"I-I know I... they could probably take care of themselves, but..." She tried to stop her tears as she trotted back to the cot and laid down. "A-angel bunny he... he would have been strong for them. I know he would have." She smiled as she nuzzled her pillow lightly.

It took some time, but the room returned to silence as one by one the ponies drifted off to sleep. The calm was soon replaced by sobbing as their consciousness drifted off to their dreams. Perhaps there, they could be home again.

---

Twilight's dreams were once again tumultuous, constantly shifting between events she either couldn't recall or found herself trying to forget. Somewhere amongst the tides of memory she found calm as her vision became focused. She felt cold, like all the heat from her body was gone. Her eyes were closed, but as she heard muffled voices in the distance her mind filled with images once again.

“You did wonderfully, I told you that the spell would work perfectly with your magic as the catalyst.” The dark leather-bound book lay open on the floor, its pages flying past her eyes before stopping at one in particular. The words were gibberish, but as runes danced off of the parchment, one started to become clear before it all faded to black.

“None can challenge my will now, especially not her.” The ruins of the castle within the forest, a faint, purple glow coming from its empty windows as laughter filled the air.

“And in return, I shall offer you everything you desire. Power. Fame. Im-” The voice cut off as she saw the eclipse, and was replaced by the sound of burning wood and screams in the distance.

“The old Equestria is dead. From its ashes will rise a new, greater power: one controlled by her Majesty, Queen Nightmare Moon. If you do not wish to die with it, surrender now.”

Red. The taste of metal. Crying in the distance. Heat growing warm against her cold skin. Sweat pouring down her brow as-

“Twilight?! Twilight wake up!” Applejack nudged at the tossing and turning unicorn before she jumped up in the air, looking startled as her friends were gathered around her cot. The library was well lit, and she could hear the sounds of the village as it bustled with activity once again. Even if the sun did not hang in the sky, the ponies of Gallant Hollow were certainly treating things like a bright new day.

“W-what happened?” Twilight said rubbing her forehead, the visions from her dream fading. Her eyes darted around the room. She saw a few loose bits of parchment and a quill in the corner.

Rainbow Dash stamped her hoof down, trying to keep Twilight’s attention, “You looked like you were seeing ghosts, that’s what. And you kept mumbling to yours- Hey!” Rainbow Dash was caught off-guard as the unicorn leaped out of the temporary bedding and over to the papers. Her horn was glowing as she tried to scribble down every last detail she could recall before it faded from her memory.

“What the hay is her problem? This is the third night in a row...” Rainbow Dash remarked as she glared at Twilight, her wings flapping as she headed towards the door. “I’m gonna go grab some food again, I’m starving.”

“Ummm... Twilight, I think we should maybe go with Rainbow Dash. Not that writing isn’t a... fabulously fun activity.” Rarity said as she trotted over to the door. Fluttershy followed behind Rarity meekly as she looked between the two unicorns.

Applejack and Pinkie Pie looked at one another before gazing over Twilight’s shoulder, the scribbles barely legible as they were coupled with drawings and small notes. Applejack tapped Twilight’s shoulder. “Ummm, Twi? What exactly are ya... drawing there this time?”

She didn’t respond as she was obsessed with the parchment and every detail on it. It took a few moments before she stopped, tears forming in her eyes. “I-I don’t know... I keep having these dreams and they’re... so vivid... I can’t tell if they’re nightmares or...” She held her forehead. “Imma go lie down,” she slurred as she stumbled back to the cot and laid down.

“We’ll go get you some chow and be back in a bit... Just try and relax Twilight, okay?” The two left as Twilight groaned, pulling a pillow over her head. Outside the lights of several lanterns illuminated the village as its residents went about their daily routines, a few young fillies and colts running around playfully. Applejack couldn’t help but smile to herself. Even in the face of all they were going through, it was like everything was still normal.

It had been three days since they’d arrived in Gallant Hollow, and nearly all of it had been spent in the library. Lamentations, sorrows, and heartfelt thanks were shared between the six friends as they sealed themselves off from the world they had stumbled into. Aqua had been kind enough to provide them with meals so far, but the six had resolved the day before that they had spent too long locked away already. With her advice, they ventured out to find a food tent in the morning, or “the early” as she kept calling it.

Pinkie and Applejack saw the large beige tent in the distance, a few tables set up outside as villagers grabbed a bite to eat. She couldn’t help



but be surprised when she stuck her head inside and heard arguing coming from within, and the source was a familiar white unicorn.

“I’m so sorry, but are you sure there’s not something more... cultured available? I’m not one to turn down perfectly, uh... edible grass.” There was a tinge of annoyance in her voice, “But maybe some daisies or-”

An annoyed colt was behind the counter, rubbing a hoof across his forehead. “Look lady, if ya don’t want food, you can leave and let somepony else take your spot in line. We have lots of mouths to feed and I’m not gonna have another riot eatin’ my stores.”

“R-Rarity... maybe you should just take it?” Fluttershy said picking up her own plate, thanking a pony behind the counter.

She tilted her head up, “Fine... but it wouldn’t hurt to have something of higher quality available in the future.” Her horn lit up as the small plate floated through the air, trailing her as she followed Fluttershy.

Applejack rolled her eyes as she waited in line with Pinkie Pie. She soon noticed eyes around the tent watching them, ponies making hushed remarks to one another. She tried to ignore them as best she could. It was only natural to be wary of newcomers in a place like this, wasn’t it? It wasn’t long before their turn in line came, “Can I get two plates please? We got a friend waitin’ for a bite to eat, but she’s a little under the weather.”

“Not a chance, if everypony starts asking for extras for imaginary friends we’re gonna run out. She can come and get some when she’s better.” He lowered his voice, “If she’s even real...”

Applejack raised an eyebrow in response. “What kind a’ nonsense is that? You can’t take a pony’s word for it?”

The colt looked up. “Lady, I don’t care if your words are coated in gold. No. Exceptions.”

Applejack glared as she heard Pinkie Pie snorting and giggling behind her, almost falling down to the ground amidst the crowd. She sighed in defeat as she moved along, picking up her plate before she exited the tent and trotted back to the library. Pinkie hopped along behind her and

somehow managed not to spill an ounce along the way. They both noticed ponies watching them closely as they arrived back at the library, Rairy and Fluttershy eating at a table in the corner, but Rainbow Dash was nowhere to be seen. Applejack took her plate over to Twilight, placing it down next to her. "There ya go sugarcube."

"But that was yo-" Pinkie Pie started before she found a hoof at her mouth suddenly.

"You just eat up Twilight, hopefully gettin' some food in ya will help with that headache."

Twilight looked up at Applejack and smiled at her. "Thanks... I just want a chance to find out whatever it is I've been dreaming about, and what's been going on here for so long." She looked out the closest window, barely seeing the night sky through the canopy, "I hope the Princess is alright..."

---

Dark clouds of smoke hovered over a large metropolis city that stretched for miles, blocking out the star-lit sky. Its cobblestone streets were like a shawl on the dirt beneath, hiding the beauty it could bare, and that which it once held. The shining meadows and vast forests that once covered Equestria's landscape were nothing but a memory now, and what little natural resources remained were in far-off lands, harvested out of sight from prying eyes. The lines that separated the social structure of the despondent landscape were obvious to the naked eye.

The majority of the city and its outskirts were made of houses that appeared tossed together in minutes, on the verge of falling to pieces around their inhabitants. Space was scarce as hundreds of houses were crowded together with little of a gap between them. Several large factories were crammed in nearby, billowing smoke into the large cloud overhead. A few of the ponies walking through the streets bore large headbands of black against their foreheads, their heads hung in shame. Across a set of bridges over a large river, each packed to the brim with guards, the city seemed more stable and well-maintained. There were homes, businesses, and the streets were wide and free of debris. However, underneath the

appealing exterior there were still dark alleyways filled with misdeeds and corruption, hunger and strife.

The city slowly rose up a large hill towards the mountains, the smaller homes being replaced by extravagant mansions, looking down over the shamble of a city with pity. From their tops flew banners of what seemed like cutie marks, symbols of the families that lived within and of their right to power, no matter its source. The nobles had no shortage of reasons to justify their vices that overshadowed whatever good tried to raise its weary head: corruption, magic, legacy, loyalty, money, fame, strength of will, mind, or arms, they were endless.

At the top of the hill, above it all, stood the menacing towers and walls of a large castle. Its massive iron gates and walls stood barred, visages of a unicorn's head looking over the city in all directions, their eyes closed and heads bowed. From behind the castle, black smoke grew to join with that from the far away factories in the clouds above. On the tallest tower, she looked over it all. Her world, the one that she took claim of to recreate in the way she saw fit.

She turned away from her creation towards the stairs, a grin on her lips as her violet, flowing mane followed behind her like smoke. She descended from the tower, step by step, her heavy hooves ringing echoes against the iron walls. As she passed the ground floor she went deeper, finally arriving at the bottom. A heavy wooden door with two guards adorned in pitch black armor greeting her. They needed no instructions as they bowed, excusing themselves from their posts as her horn glowed a dark light and the door swung open.

Inside, on the cold stone floor she sat, her neck wrapped in iron and chained to the stone beneath. Her once glorious white coat was covered with soot and ash. She offered a smile as she craned her neck up, but stayed seated. Her multi-colored mane and tail still managed to flow with some of its majesty, despite her ragged appearance. "My dear sister. What is so special about this occasion to bring you down to visit? It's been years since we saw each other, would you like to catch up on things? Or will this be like your last visit when you needed me to preform parlor tricks for your nobles? Should I pull a rabbit out of a hat this time? Or perhaps try something more mundane like juggling or jumping through a hoop?" A wry smile grew on her lips.

The dark-coated alicorn only glared in response, a tinge of anger in her voice, "I see you still have that wit of yours after all these years. But no, I don't need my prized *pet* today..." She turned away, her wings unfolding. "I know you felt it... you don't have to hide it anymore. I know that they're back as well. Your faithful student and her dear friends."

Celestia closed her eyes as she sighed. "Are you going to gloat again? It becomes rather dull after the first hundred years, don't you think? Maybe shutting your mouth for a decade might do you some good, to let you think about what you've done again." She squirmed in pain as the dark light grew from Nightmare Moon's horn once again, Celestia's chains glowing with magic.

"You'd think a thousand years in this pit would teach you some manners," Nightmare Moon stated flatly.

"And you'd think a thousand years on a throne of lies would teach you honor..." She coughed heavily as the pain stopped.

"It doesn't matter anymore. Once they are gone it will finally be finished. Every obstacle will be gone, and nopony will be willing to risk their lives to save a dusty old relic from a forgotten age." A small book floated over from the corner, dark runes covering its pages as it flipped open. "Would you care for a history lesson again? Let's start from the beginning..."

---

# Chapter 4

Several books flew off of a shelf onto an open table as Twilight's horn glowed brightly. The others watched from a distance as the stacks grew taller with each book piled on top. Applejack finally moved up behind her, placing a hoof on Twilight's shoulder. "Uh, Twilight. I think that might be a bit much if ya ask me. Maybe you should just start with one or two?"

Her horn stopped glowing suddenly as one of the books continued to fly through the air, hitting the wall with a thud. Twilight blushed and turned around to face Applejack. "M-maybe you're right... one of these has to cover most of what's happened."

Pinkie Pie pointed at a large book on one of the higher shelves. "What about that one? It does say 'History of Equestria' on it."

Twilight sighed as it floated over to her sluggishly. "I was trying to avoid that... It has that crescent moon symbol on the binding, which means it's probably one *she* had written. It's probably nothing but a pile of half-truths and propaganda."

Pinkie blinked a few times in response. "But we can't really know that, and it's the only thing that probably has all of this stuff in it, silly."

Twilight let out another sigh in defeat. "Fine... I guess it's better than nothing." She cleared the other books off of the table before placing the large book down, flipping through its pages. "I guess we should start from the beginning... Well, for us at least."

---

In the days before her Majesty's rule, Equestria was nowhere near its current strength within our world. Those with the will to lead or the strength and determination to make a place for themselves were deprived of opportunity, while those that were too weak to pull their own weight were given the world to be their oyster. We let land that was rightfully ours remain held by savages and inferior races, its resources squandered or

ignored. Our Queen, the glorious Nightmare Moon, saw an error in all of this, and took it upon herself to act accordingly.

As she struck down her sister's reign with remorse, she knew that Equestria would prosper under her guidance. As such, the symbols of her predecessor's reign were removed as well. The once respected and admired capital of Canterlot was destroyed to make way for a new glorious symbol of our strength. The capital of Mare Umbra was established at the center of our nation and has since grown into a prosperous industrial, educational, and military hub for hundreds of years, rivaling long-standing cities such as Fillydelphia, Manehattan, and Cloudsdale.

Following her ascension, the size of Equestria grew by over seventy percent as land was claimed from several surrounding nations and wilds, including: Aeolus, the collective of nation-states that belonged to the gryphons of the north; the Faerwind Forests, the wilds that existed to the east which were dismantled to make way for new villages and cities; Savanra, the vast grasslands of the far south that were once inhabited by the zebra and other creatures; and several mountainous regions that were inhabited by savage creatures or dragons. At each of these fronts, Nightmare Moon herself led the charge of battle, serving as but one symbol of our strength and power.

---

Celestia tried to suppress a snicker as her sibling read the words off the pages. "I can't believe they all buy that from you. You think somepony would have the decency to look at the signs under it all, wouldn't you?"

"It is the winners that decide history, not the weaklings that fall before them."

"But with how ruthlessly you took everything, with how you drive them now like slaves and pawns... why would you even bother hiding what really happened that day? Are you afraid they would actually start to hate you for it more than they already do? Oh wait, the ones that would revolt can't even read this drivel, can they?" She winced as the pain from the chain around her neck returned.

“I deprived them of remembering the sadness so many experienced that day, and now you’re probably the only one left who knows.”

---

The normally bright midday sky above Canterlot was dim. Overhead, the sun had been blocked out by its sister moon, something completely unheard of in the entirety of Equestria’s history. As citizens gathered in the streets to gaze up at it in amazement, some felt a sense of dread as whispers and rumors started to fill the air. The chattering was broken by a thunderous crash that came from the top of the castle’s highest tower. As the citizen’s attentions were drawn, some gasped in surprise, while others began to scream in horror.

Nightmare Moon stood on the balcony overlooking the city, her smoky mane flowing above her head into a vast purple cloud, shimmering in the dim light. She had finally accomplished what she had sought to do for so long, and now no pony was left to stop her. Her horn glowed with a dark light as she began to speak, her voice booming throughout the city.

“Good evening my subjects. It has been far too long since I saw you all. I’m afraid our time will be a bit short however. Celestia’s reign of this kingdom is over. This eclipse above your heads is the ending of her failed rule, and the banner of my new beginning. This world coddles the weak, and pushes the strong into the dirt to prevent them from having what they rightfully deserve: power. I will mold it to how it should have been from the start. And now, we’ll begin here.”

There was a flicker of light from inside of the tower, followed by a scream of pain as Celestia fell out onto the balcony. The dark-coated mare leaned down to her sister’s ears, whispering gently to her, “And now you can watch everything you made disappear.”

There were screams from below as fires started throughout the city. Citizens ran in every direction, panicking as they tried to gather their belongings or simply flee to the gates. Soldiers appeared from the castle as the city’s residents ran for the exits, standing between them and escape. Their normally shining golden armor was replaced by pitch black, glowing with tints of orange as the flames grew ever closer. They held their ground, keeping the scrambling ponies from leaving.

Nightmare Moon's voice echoed through the city once again, "All of you have a choice! You can serve me without question, or you can burn to the ground with your once glorious city... I'm sure you'll all make the right choice." The large cloud of smoke wrapped around the top of the tower as she and Celestia vanished from sight. The flames continued to consume the city as several carriages appeared at the city's gates.

One of the soldiers stepped forward, a silver crescent moon on the front of his armor. "The old Equestria is dead. From its ashes will rise a new, greater power, one controlled by her Majesty, Queen Nightmare Moon. If you do not wish to die with it, surrender now. All those that do will gain a place of power in her new order."

Canterlot burned in the distance as several of the carriages fled from the distant screams of pain slowly being drowned out by the collapse of buildings.

---

We will never forget those that were the first to trust in Nightmare Moon's vision. Let their names and their symbols be remembered forever, even if their lines may end: Meadows, Prairie, Flowers...

"APPLE?!" Applejack yelled out from over Twilight's shoulder, pushing the unicorn away to skim the page. "T-that's impossible! There's no way an Apple would help Nightmare Moon, no way a'tall. We'd rather go down with a fight than serve some two-timin' filly like her." She stamped her hoof down, looking at the others with anger in her eyes.

Rarity rubbed a hoof under her chin, looking to Fluttershy, who had taken shelter behind her. "Well, darling... Maybe you didn't, umm, know some of your family so well. And there is the possibility they were, well, forced?"

"Or it could be a typo," Pinkie Pie said as the others glared at her. "... Well it could."



“There’s... there’s just no way. We Apples’ve been around for generations, and there ain’t never been a filly or colt in our line foolish enough to do somethin’ like that!”

Twilight put her hoof on Applejack’s shoulder. “We don’t know what happened Applejack. We just have to assume it was a dire circumstance. There’s a reason for everything, I’m sure of it, along with all of these other families here.” Twilight looked back down at the list, recognizing some of the other names from her time in Canterlot, before she became Princess Celestia’s pupil. There was no way that so many ponies would willingly follow Nightmare Moon, would they? She pushed the thought away as she flipped past several pages of names.

---

During the first hundred years of our Queen’s rule, there were many conflicts that posed a large challenge to our nation’s prosperity, and in fact the world’s. It was not only the initial resistance that other nations presented, but also various peasant revolts and rebellion movements. The majority of these were unsuccessful, except for the most prominent. The annexing of Aeolus as a state of Equestria was widely successful due to the assistance of the previous gryphon administration and military. In fact, to this day the gryphon reserves are a common portion of any standard Equestrian military battalion.

However, several of the lower-caste members of Aeolus were not pleased with the transition of power. A series of rebel groups known under the common flag of “The Steel Wings” emerged and continued attempts at sabotage and assassination for over thirty years before the group dissolved. These “Steel Wing Rebellions” posed a large challenge at the time given the lack of directly-controlled military presence within the region. However, thanks to the cooperation of local officials and several of Nightmare Moon’s personal troops, the revolts were finally ended with minimal incident.

---

“Personal troops, is that what you decided to call the ponies you dragged from their families and homes by force and sent to die in a fight

they didn't understand? And where's the part about destroying villages without remorse, or the thousands that died from needless bloodshed?"

Nightmare Moon offered a grin in response. "And what would you have done, asked them kindly to stop and then invited them over for tea? It would be quite the spectacle, wouldn't it?" The book slammed shut as she walked over to Celestia. "You could never understand the importance of doing what it takes instead of the right thing."

Celestia's head stayed low as she let out a sigh. "The right thing is what it takes. What you did was what you wanted, just like the skittish filly from thousands of years ago who couldn't keep her temper."

---

The sounds of battle echoed through the skies above the city of Wingless. Only weeks before, the only grounded city in Aeolus had been peaceful, filled with ponies and gryphons working on plans for expansion or the mining operations in the hills nearby. Now the cold ground was matted with dried blood, the corpses of gryphons and ponies alike strewn throughout the streets. It had been days since the siege began to root out the rebels, and thankfully most of the civilians had been removed from the battlefield beforehand. On the ground amidst the ruins of destroyed buildings, groups of unicorns tried together to fling large chunks of rubble at the rebels in the sky. Meanwhile, several pegasi, armed with small blades attached to their wings or hooves, tried to avoid being sliced to ribbons by their talon-armed opponents.

Every few seconds another body would fall, piled needlessly atop the lifeless corpses already present. A brown-feathered gryphon swooped down from the battle above, dashing towards a building. He quickly knocked one of the unicorns inside into a wall as their horn dimmed, the large piece of rubble nearby dropping to the ground with a thud. The gryphon's claws cut through the unicorn's throat with ease, a weak scream escaping her lips before being silenced. In moments a few earth ponies had knocked the gryphon off of her, a series of blades attached to their saddles piercing through him. A smaller unicorn rushed over to the injured one, trying to stop the bleeding.

One of the earth ponies spat on the fallen gryphon. “She’s not going to make it for long... We have to fall back to another post, or we’re gonna be in the body pile soon.”

One of the unicorns looked up at the battle above. “She said more reinforcements are going to be coming, we can’t leave now.”

“Like I’m gonna risk my neck on the words of some higher-up sittin’ in a tent looking at all of this and sippin’ apple juice.” There was a thud as another limp body crashed into the side of the building, leaving a crack in the brick. “We’re moving out, now.”

As the group left the barely breathing unicorn on the ground, a loud crash of thunder echoed through the sky. As if it were a signal, the fighting stopped suddenly. Every pony and gryphon’s attention was drawn to a large hill at the edge of the city, and a single unicorn overlooking the battlefield. There were cheers from several of the ponies throughout the city.

The earth pony smirked as he looked at his companions. “See? It doesn’t even matter, this’ll be tied up in no time.”

The unicorn’s horn glowed brightly, her visage obscured from sight as a large black cloud formed and blocked out the night sky above the city. Several of the gryphons and pegasi above tried to retreat from the cloud, but found themselves held in place underneath its ominous form, a thin blue energy coating their bodies. The same began to happen with several of the ponies on the ground, who struggled to try and move. A few were lucky enough to be close to the edge of the city, escaping the fate that awaited their comrades. The dark cloud began to glow brightly, spreading past the edges of the city before its center opened up. The last thing they saw was a bright light above their heads as a large boom deafened their ears.

---

Following the initial obstacles to Nightmare Moon’s rule, a period of peace and prosperity has existed in Equestria for hundreds of years. Education, economics, science, industry, and several other fields were developed quickly and have remained in steady development since.

However, to keep order and stability, many acts and laws have been ratified to ensure the state of calm we remain in today. To this day the most prominent remains...

Twilight blinked as she read the words aloud, "What's the Magic Privilege Act? It doesn't say anything about what it is, except it 'ensures the privilege of magic is not misused'." Her attention was drawn away from the book as the door to the library opened slowly. Aqua stepped through the entrance, a smile on her face as she looked at the assembled.

"It's good to see you are all awake, and looking into things as well it seems. Oh, I apologize for not telling you sooner, but I happened to spot your friend... Rainbow Dash was it, earlier near one of the food tents. She seemed a bit... discontent with being cooped up in the village, so I had her go and talk with one of the scouting parties. Hopefully a chance to stretch her wings will calm her down." The light-blue unicorn looked over Twilight's shoulder as she approached the book, her smile fading momentarily to a grim frown.

Twilight flipped through the pages quickly, paying little attention to Aqua. "Do you know what this Magic Privilege Act is Aqua? I can't seem to find anything on it-" Twilight turned around to face Aqua. "... Is something wrong?"

Aqua let out a sigh as she walked over to a window. "I don't think you girls should hear about something like that."

Applejack stepped forward. "We can't be havin' ya keep secrets from us Aqua. If we're gonna help y'all 'round here, we need to know what's gone an' happened to Equestria. All of it."

Pinkie Pie hopped over to the unicorn, her hoof wrapped lightly around Aqua's neck. "Besides, if it's too bad, I can throw us a party and we'll cheer right up! I guarantee it."

Aqua's lips shifted to a thin smile as she muttered under her breath, "I doubt that..." She managed to free herself from Pinkie's grasp before she began, "Very well, I suppose it might be best, however, if I told you how exactly it affected me, and brought me here." She cleared her throat before she looked over the girls. "I was born to the noble house of Pearl in the

capital of Mare Umbra. My family was noble on the basis of my great-grandfather's service in the military several years before. My father wanted me to study in politics or economics so that our family could advance on more than the laurels of our past. I wasn't really interested in my classes often, but I continued at my father's wishes. One day, going into the shopping district on my own, I saw a young colt in an alleyway. I wasn't too unaccustomed to the sight, given the state of the city, but something about him seemed... odd."

Aqua continued, looking back at an open window, "Sure enough, a few minutes later I saw him running from a few of the guards with some fruit stuffed into his saddlebag. I wasn't really sure why I did it, but... I used my name to get him off the hook. His name was Bluetail, and he was a unicorn from the Dark Side slums. We spent so much time together after that day. He told me about the Legends that ponies followed and put their faith in while they toiled away in the slums. Being the foolish filly I was I tried to explain the order of things to him, but the more I heard about everything they suffered through, the more curious I became, especially about the ponies in the Wilds he always spoke so highly of. I even tried to teach him some magic, since they weren't educated in it like the nobles were."

She let out a sigh as she looked down. "... After a few months my father had been curious about where I was going all the time. He sent one of his guards out to follow me, and found Bluetail and I practicing magic. Because of that Act, the lower class is not allowed to practice magic outside of where it is required for occupation... My father had him arrested, and gave me my punishment: being forced to watch his."

---

The small square in Mare Umbra's merchant district was filled with citizens gathered around a small wooden stage that had not been used in months. As such, a majority of the crowd was, in a word, excited over the events about to transpire, rumors flying amidst them. Among the masses there were two guards with an older colt, and a young filly hiding behind his legs with terror in her eyes. He looked down at her with remorse, moving to the side as she was forced to look at the empty stage once again. "No, you have to watch this. This is why we are above them."

It was a few minutes before a trumpet sounded through the air, and a trio of guards emerged from a nearby alleyway, dragging a white-coated, blue-maned unicorn in chains behind them, his coat covered with dirt and bruises. The crowd let out a mix of boos and cheers as he was led onto the stage. One of the guards remained on the ground in front of the stage as a scroll floated in front of him. "For the crimes of breaking the Magic Privilege Act on multiple occasions, this peasant, Bluetail Craft, will receive the normal sentence for his punishment." The scroll closed as the guards pushed the colt down onto a wooden block on the stage.

The small filly fidgeted, trying to look away from the sight. Her heart wanted to do something, but her body couldn't move an inch. Her mind wanted to look away, but her eyes were fixated on the stage, as if there was some hope it would all go away. Then, *she* appeared, the Queen, flying in from the castle above before she came to rest on the stage, which buckled under the weight of her landing. The colt tried to struggle against his captors, who dug a hoof into his side at his resistance.

Nightmare Moon looked out over the crowd as she cleared her throat. "Let what you all witness today serve as a reminder of how our world is. The strong are those with privilege and will, and the weak are those that will learn their place. There must exist a gap between us all for prosperity and stability to continue. Everypony must make sacrifices." A small box next to the wooden block opened up with a screech, aged by rust and negligence, as Nightmare Moon's horn glowed dimly. A square metal tool with a hole through its center floated out of the box. The hole slid firmly over the colt's horn, tightening close to the base.

Despite the resistance the guards gave, the unicorn still tried to break free. "The ponies won't stand for this forever! The Legends of the Sun will come true, and there's nothing you can do to stop it! The Sun's Majesty will retu-" He gasped in pain as he was hit in the side by one of the guards, the air knocked out of his lungs.

Nightmare Moon only offered a smirk as her horn glowed brighter, the instrument shining with a similar dark light. He screamed in pain for a few moments before it was done. The colt's horn lay on the floor of the stage, sparking with a flicker of light as the last bit of magic it held escaped. One of the guards quickly covered the stump with a black bandanna, tears on the colt's face as he muttered quietly to himself, "S-she will come back."

The Queen's gaze remained fixed on the colt as her smirk grew. "And spouting such heresy in my presence as well. I think that deserves a worse punishment. Captain! Give me your blade." The stallion who had read Bluetail's verdict appeared hesitant before pulling the blade from its sheathe at his side, the handle gripped firmly between his teeth as he bowed. It was only a moment before it glowed with the familiar dark light and was yanked from the Captain's mouth, pressing lightly against Bluetail's neck.

Nightmare Moon's voice boomed as her gaze was fixed on the blade, drawing a small bit of blood from his coat. "And remember this... fairy tales are not worth believing." A small flash of light from her horn enveloped the square as the sword rose before quickly slicing down.

---

Everypony in the library was silent, a look of shock on their faces as Aqua finished her tale, turning back to them and wiping a tear from her eye. "B-Bluetail, he... was unlucky. Maybe she just felt like toying with him, giving him a false hope that he'd live, but more than likely she was proving a point... of how meaningless his life was. Most of those that have their magic taken from them are sent to the factories or mines, living their lives locked up like slaves... A few are just shoved back into Dark Side, traumatized by the experience... T-the rest, no one knows..."

Aqua tried to calm her sobbing as she continued, "I gave up my nobility to find the ponies Bluetail always spoke of, hiding here in the Wilds. I wanted to help, I had to, because I couldn't that day. There are so many nobles that lend their support in the shadows, but they're only playing both sides of the game. That's why I believed in all of you when I found you out there, and why there is hope for us yet."

Aqua's tears were quelled for a moment as she turned back to the window, taking a moment to gather herself. "The Council has yet to come to a decision about your role here, and if you are who you say you are. Given the large number of delegates seated on it, and their current preoccupation with less... superstitious events, it's going to take some time before a meeting can be arranged. However, I have managed to convince

those present that it is advantageous to tell the ponies here in the Wilds you've come back."

Twilight's shock over Aqua's story was broken at her announcement. "W-what do you mean? We'll get mauled out there if everypony knows who we are."

Rarity stepped up to Twilight's side. "Not that I don't enjoy some attention now and then, Twilight's right... If you all worship these Legends about us, everyone is going to want us off saving the world for them."

"We are not going to reveal who you are, or where the Elements were found. We do not want to endanger your lives here, whether you are the Elements or not." Aqua turned back to face them. "I'd suggest you find a way to occupy yourselves around the village, because this may take longer than I had hoped... It will go miles to showing the Council that you mean well, and what you are capable of here. In the meantime, I will do my best to gain support, and call a conference here in the Hollow."

---

Celestia glared in anger at the floor as Nightmare Moon began to leave the room. "You're a monster! Not for taking our throne for yourself, not for stealing land or murdering innocents... Just for that one thing, thinking you have the *right* to take their talents from them!" She looked up, eyes locked on her sister. "When this is over, you will have no mercy from me, the same as I was shown... I won't make the same mistakes again."

"That day won't come sister... You should stop wasting your breath." The door slammed shut, leaving Celestia alone in the darkness once again.

---



# Chapter 5

Twilight groaned as she awoke in the corner of the library, a pile of books scattered around her cot. It had been almost two weeks since she and her friends had arrived in the village of Gallant Hollow, and things had started to settle down, relatively at least. Her nightmares had all but vanished after the first few nights, and everything else was going smoothly. As Aqua had promised, their identities had been kept a secret for the time being, and while rumors were rampant around the village after the announcement of the Element's return, they were left to their own devices. One by one everypony had started to settle in, and they'd all found some way to show their support by lending a helping hoof.

---

Applejack groaned as she shuffled around the library, a small weed between her teeth. She had hoped she could help the village by lending her hoof with farming food, but she was a bit dismayed when she found out that they got almost of it by gathering in the nearby woods. Unfortunately, the village had no shortage of ponies that could lend a hoof with such a small task, so for the past two days she had shuffled around the library, and the sound of her hooves scraping across the wooden floor had practically driven Twilight up the wall.

"You know, you don't have to walk back and forth here Applejack... You *could* do it outside." Twilight said a bit disgruntled, though she tried her best to sound sincere as she was focused on a small book floating in front of her.

Applejack's circling stopped suddenly. "I-I'm sorry Twilight, it's just bein' stuck in here with nothin' ta do, it doesn't feel right!" She let out a sigh, "I don't wanna be gatherin' sticks and leaves for days on end." She looked at the unicorn for a moment before she turned to the door, spitting the weed out of her mouth, "I need to go for a walk." The door slammed shut behind her as she let Twilight return to her reading.

Applejack's head hung low as she trotted slowly through the streets, muttering under her breath, "Consarnit, if only there were somethin' else worth spendin' mah time on." Her concentration was broken as the sound of rusted bells rang through the air, piercing her ears. Her head shot up, and she could see ponies galloping into some of the nearby hollowed-out trees, while others trotted towards the gates, wearing the same armor she and her friends had seen on the ponies who found them. Applejack's gaze shifted between the two sets of ponies before she followed the ones headed towards the front gate.

At the gates, a few unicorns were busy moving cut logs in front of the gate one at a time in an attempt to barricade it, while several earth ponies and pegasi took stations near the top of its walls. Applejack was stopped short by a colt wearing tattered armor across his flank, a rough contrast to his bright yellow coat. "The guards have this under control civilian, you should get back to your home until things are resolved."

"Like I'm gonna sit by and twiddle my hooves when there's some emergency goin' on round here. I'm not some helpless little filly. Now tell me what the hay is happenin', and don't say you don't need an extra hoof to help." Applejack stared down the young colt who seemed more than a little shocked by her response.

He sighed as the bells continued to echo through the village. "One of the scouting patrols spotted a hydra nearby. They usually don't come this close to the village, and it's headed in this direction pretty fast. Hopefully we can keep the gates secured and wear it down."

Applejack looked up at the towering gates. No matter how big they were, they were still made of wood. They couldn't really keep something like a hydra from smashing them open, could they? A familiar looking pegasus landed next to the colt, wearing much looser armor to allow her wings room enough to move freely. "It's almost here, the captain says we need everypony at the re- Applejack?"

Applejack smiled as she looked at Dash. "Rainbow Dash! Is this where you've been running off to every day?"

“You know this pony Dash?” the colt asked. He looked back at the gates, the ground starting to shake. He held a hoof over his face, letting out a grunt of frustration. “Alright, fine, you can help, but we don’t have any extra armor to spare. If you end up battered and broken in the nurse’s tent for a week it isn’t on my conscience.”

Rainbow Dash slung a hoof around Applejack’s shoulder. “Like she would let any kind of monster hurt her. Isn’t that right Applejack?”

“You can bet your horseshoes on it Dash.” Applejack watched as Rainbow Dash waved a hoof goodbye to her, and flew back up above the gates. She turned her attention to a small set of crates nearby, a bit of rope hanging out of one. “Well, this is gonna be a lot tougher than the rodeo.”

The ground’s shaking intensified as the sound of falling trees echoed in the distance. Several of the ponies readied small catapults behind the walls while the unicorns kept the logs pressed firmly against the gates. Applejack ran up one of the staircases attached to the wall, several bits of rope hanging loosely around her neck. It was only a moment after reaching the top of the wall that she saw the hydra break through a nearby cluster of trees. Luckily, it seemed smaller than the one she and her friends had encountered at Froggy Bottom Bog, though its size was still a bit daunting. Its three heads let out a hiss as it charged towards the gates.

A voice rang out clearly through the air as the bells stopped ringing. “Fire!” At the order the catapults aimlessly flung rocks over the gates. Most of them landed around the hydra, though one managed to impact a single head, which hit the ground a few moments later. Its tail swung around in a large arc at the wall, knocking a few ponies off of the top and back into the village and ripping off a small section of the wall. One of the ponies flew straight into a catapult, splinters raining down in the vicinity as the ponies operating it rushed to his side. As the other ponies tried to rearm the catapults, several of the pegasi tried to keep the hydra’s heads occupied. Applejack took a moment to secure a crude lasso to her tail, holding another one in her mouth as she jumped down onto the ground below. She managed to barely dodge out of the way from another tail swipe, ducking into some nearby brush.

As the heads were preoccupied with the pegasi, she waited for her moment. One of the still-conscious heads impacted the ground roughly

close to her, and Applejack took the moment to wrap the lasso in her mouth around its neck as it tried to regain its bearings. It only took her a few moments to crisscross through several trees, securing the rope to a heavy tree trunk with a tug. As the constrained head struggled to break free from the rope, its partner crashed into the ground as well. Applejack flung the second piece of rope around its neck, letting out a whistle. "Rainbow, help me out over here!"

Dash flew down, grabbing the lasso from Applejack's tail as she helped tie the second piece of rope to another tree. There was a spree of cheers as the two returned back to the clearing, a few ponies emerging from the gates to knock out the still-conscious heads. The aged stallion Breeze, who had escorted them into the village, came out to greet them. "Rainbow Dash, it's good to see you didn't spend all of your time showboating today."

Dash rolled her eyes. "Whatever Breeze, you owe this one to Applejack anyways." She put her hoof around her friend's shoulder.

Breeze turned his attention to Applejack. "I can see that... That was quite impressive Applejack. How would you like to join up with the guards? We can always use another strong hoof at our backs, especially a skilled one like yours."

Applejack smiled at Dash before she turned to face Breeze. "You can count me in. Just hope it ain't always this excitin'."

---

Rainbow Dash's first flight had proven more effective at livening the pegasus' spirit than Aqua could have expected. During the following days she had gone out on patrols with the guards at nearly every opportunity, though her attempts at showing off had gained her the ire of most of the veteran guards, but the respect and friendship of a few younger ones. Following the attack by the hydra and Applejack's joining the guard, however, the pegasus' spirit for competition only seemed to grow.

"Chillax Applejack, I was only showing Pollen and Crimson some moves, they asked me to!" Dash sighed as she hovered behind Applejack, the other guards on their patrol further ahead: two pegasi, a unicorn, and four

earth ponies. It wasn't *completely* her fault one of the other guards got in her way while she was waiting for everypony to meet at the rendezvous point. It was only natural she'd want to practice with nothing else to do but nap... especially with a war probably on the way.

"Then at least watch where ya goin'! We don't have the extra hooves to be putting ponies in the nurse's tent for gettin' injured practicin' tricks." Applejack readjusted the armor running along her flank, glaring at Rainbow. "So please, try an' keep your eyes open next time Rainbow."

"Maybe somepony else should be keeping their eyes open t-" She stopped as the other guards started to take formation up ahead. It was only a second before they saw a flash of orange jump out from the nearby brush, knocking two of the earth ponies into a tree, and out cold. Applejack and Rainbow Dash rushed in from behind as the guards started to corner the manticore, readying the weapons on the side of their armor.

One of the earth ponies pulled a small blade from its sheath, held tightly between his teeth as he charged in. He tried to dodge the manticore's claw, succeeding for a few moments before he was sideswiped by the tail. His blade managed to put a scratch in the manticore's hide as it flew out of his grip. The earth pony grit his teeth as he got back to his feet, the unicorn checking on the two unconscious guards. The two pegasi moved to Dash's side, a dark green colt named Pollen speaking up, "We need to distract it. Applejack, can you help the others take it down?"

"You got it partner," she said with a nod as the pegasi flew off above the treeline. Applejack got up beside the others, trying to keep the manticore pressed up against the trees as they pointed their weapons at it. It was only a few moments before the three pegasi swooped in, a mix of colors obscuring the manticore's view as it tried to swipe at them. His claws barely missed the three on several occasions before one impacted Pollen, pushing him into the branches of a tree. Applejack and the others counted down before the pegasi moved out of their path to the manticore. The group jumped forward, letting out a set of kicks to the manticore's dizzied face. The force managed to knock it into a nearby tree, splintering on impact before the creature slumped down to the ground, groaning in pain.

The two pegasi with Dash moved over to the unconscious guards as she landed next to Applejack, a smug look on her face. "See? Practice

does pay off Applejack. Been working on that one for two days, and see what it gets us? One knocked-out manticore with no bruises to show for it." She looked at the two guards on the ground a few feet away. "Okay a few."

"I didn't go sayin' there was anything wrong with practicin' Rainbow... Ya just need to be careful is all. You're not the only pony 'round here and we need to look out for one another." Applejack looked back at the two guards being pulled up to their hooves and those that were tying the manticore down. "And besides, you could take a moment and act serious once and awhile. It won't hurtcha."

"I always have my eyes open Applejack. Nothing is getting past me," Dash scoffed looking to the manticore, their group's captain busy tightening a rope to keep its paws together. She started to follow Applejack before she noticed a glint out of the corner of her eye: the smallest bit of movement in the manticore's tail as it tensed up.

Applejack felt a gust of wind as a rainbow-colored streak whizzed past her, and saw Rainbow Dash knock their captain and his companion to the ground. She was about to yell at Dash, until she felt the earth shake and saw the manticore's tail embedded almost a foot into the ground, only inches from where the captain had stood a moment earlier. The manticore's body twitched for a few moments before falling limp. Dash slowly hovered off of the captain on the ground before she offered a hoof to help him up, which he accepted reluctantly.

The captain chuckled looked between the manticore and Rainbow Dash. "Well, color me impressed... I guess I actually owe you one for once Dash. Though don't expect me to keep it that way for long." He trotted past her to the others. "Get Lantern and Shade up on their hooves again, we can't stay here much longer... I don't want any more of those things jumping out on top of us like this."

Rainbow Dash didn't even try to suppress a smirk as she looked at Applejack, who pressed a hoof lightly to her face in response. "Not a word Dash..."

---

Rarity let out a sigh as she trotted next to Fluttershy through the open streets of the village. It wasn't hard for them to occupy their days getting a look around the expansive village or mingling with its inhabitants. The place seemed so calm despite the overshadowing presence of dread that hung in the air. Reminiscing about old times in Ponyville seemed the only way to make time move faster than a snail's pace.

The unicorn lifted her head quickly with a smile, a chuckle escaping her lips. "Oh, and then there was that time that Pinkie Pie threw a surprise party for that little filly Scootaloo. I swear that girl seemed on the verge of running away for her life between greetings and hugs from nearly every pony in town. Thank goodness Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom managed to keep her calm long enough to enjoy herself."

Fluttershy smiled in response. "All of the adventures those three found themselves in, it reminds me a bit of us, don't you think Rarity?"

"I suppose so, though you know I preferred a quiet day sewing or at the spa over being out and about in the muck..." She looked at Fluttershy. "Speaking of, we should spend tomorrow over at that hot spring near the base of the mountains. They said it's *al natural*, and I'm sure it does wonders for one's coat, much better than going without a bath of course."

Their peaceful walk was interrupted by the familiar sounds of shouting in the distance as their friends garnered a few odd looks from the villagers. "Look Applejack, it's done. I promise I'll take your advice, okay? Just drop it already!"

"I'll believe that when I actually see it, but fine. I know buggin' you about it ain't gonna solve nothin'." Applejack turned around to leave, almost bumping head first into Rarity and Fluttershy. "Oh, hey girls. You two out for a walk?"

Rarity nodded. "You could say that. I see you two are settling back into the usual friendly quarrels?"

Applejack glanced at Rainbow Dash, the pegasus' hooves crossed as she hovered above the ground. "Just tryin' to keep this little showboater from makin' new rivals every half second. Can't have everypony on the guard thinkin' she's nothin' more than a showoff." She winced a bit as she

readjusted her armor, muttering under her breath, "Consarnit, would it hurt anypony to actually fit this stuff?"

Rarity looked at Fluttershy for a moment before raising an eyebrow at Applejack. "Is... something the matter darling?"

"It's just this darn outfit. I swear it don't make a lick o' sense to just hand everypony the same ol' thing without even a thought to how it fits." She winced again before letting out a sigh. "Hey! They probably got some unused sewin' machines round here somewhere, you should fix 'em up for us Rarity. I'd sure feel better with your work on my flank than these stock scraps, and I know Rainbow here keeps whining that she can't fly easily in 'em."

Dash landed next to Applejack as she brushed one of her wings with a hoof. "It's not my fault they just cut a wing hole in them and assume it's gonna work."

Rarity moved closer to them, smiling widely. "Why, of course Applejack. Anything I can do to help a friend in need, but I might need some more... scraps was it?" She ran a hoof along Applejack's side, inspecting the rough stitches that kept the bits tied together. "There have to be bigger ones than these, aren't there?"

Applejack tried to avoid jumping away from Rarity's close inspection. "Well, they only get what they can scavenge, and that usually ain't a lot. They don't stumble on nothin' 'cept once a week or so, and it's not the best quality stuff."

After managing to find the village's stockpile of armor scraps and a few ragged sewing machines that had seen fairer days centuries ago, Rarity had set off on her work. It only took a few hours to piece together Applejack and Rainbow Dash's new "duds," though she took an extra day to add a bit of style to them. It wasn't long after that there were lines of guards waiting outside of the library looking for adjustments of their own, and shortly after Twilight had to push Rarity out to remove the constant clicking that echoed inside of the tree.

Soon she had more orders in a day than she did in a week at Carousel Boutique, though Fluttershy was more than happy to lend a hoof



when the need arose to keep things manageable. Along the way she managed to add her own personal flair to every single one of them, much to the annoyance of the more senior guards. She even had civilians asking for the upkeep of their own garments, and word was that a even members of the Council had requested hoof-made outfits.

---

Fluttershy sat outside of the food tent as she watched several ponies trotting by with urgency. She didn't have much of a chance to spend time with Rarity since her orders started to slow down, at least to the point where she wasn't constantly fixing armor and had some normal requests from the villagers to work on that didn't require Fluttershy's help. Fluttershy had tried joining the guards after she heard about all the creatures they had to deal with from Rainbow Dash and Applejack, but her friends seemed too concerned for her safety to vouch for her. With Pinkie Pie still missing and Twilight trying to study, it seemed like she was on her own... not that it was a horrible thing. It's not like her friends were trying to abandon her, they were just... preoccupied.

She took another small bite of grass from her plate before the ringing of a bell drew her attention, the sound of the front gates opening with a creak that resonated through the village and the sound of urgent hooves barely audible underneath it. Perhaps it was her sense of curiosity or simply a desire to cut short the spree of nothing she had been doing, but whichever it was, Fluttershy made her way towards the front gates. She saw a group of nearly thirty ponies make their way through the village gates, and could barely make out what seemed like three or four pairs in the group carrying ponies between them on crude stretchers, trying to get to one of the medical tents through a crowd that formed to greet the others. Fluttershy galloped over to them as they disappeared into one of the small white tents, a chorus of groans flooding her ears as she grew closer.

A clear voice came from inside the tent, like a conductor amidst the chaos within, "We need to keep them stable or they're going to go into shock! Gauze, get some presses ready, and Well, stop worrying about those two, they only have a few bruises or a head injury, these ones are bleeding out. Is there anypony else that's on call?"

A deeper voice called out in response, managing to overcome the groans, "Everyone else is either out on patrol or seeing to the sick over at the base of the mountain. We won't be able to get to them in time."

Fluttershy moved forward, lifting the drape to peak inside the tent. She saw two ponies barely holding onto consciousness in the corner, but her focus was drawn to the center of the tent, even as she tried to avert her eyes from the cruel sight amongst a growing puddle of red. Before she could move away there was a hoof pulling her into of the tent, a white unicorn looking her over. "You, we need an extra hoof in here. Get her some scrubs."

In a flash the two ponies behind her tied a small cloak to her back and a mask to her muzzle before she was pushed over to a bedside. The pegasus laying on the cot underneath her had a set of cuts on her underside, a rough set of bandages trying to keep the blood from flowing freely to no avail. The unicorn looked up at Fluttershy from the other side of the cot. "I just need you to keep her still so that I can stitch her up." Her horn glowed as a needle and thread floated up by the pony's injuries, the other two nurses doing their best to lessen the other pony's bleeding a few feet away.

Fluttershy swallowed hard as she put her hooves up on the pegasus's flank, trying her best to be gentle enough not to make matters worse. She remembered having to help her animal friends so much before, but never with something this serious. Sprained legs, small head injuries or fits of illness, that was all that it was, but this wasn't an animal with an injury. It was a life in danger, and she wasn't going to run away from a situation like this. It took only a few seconds for her to gain the confidence to press down a bit harder as the pegasus started shaking. Fluttershy hoped to stop her from tearing away the bandages before the nurse was ready.

"P-please, just stay still... It will only be a minute, I promise." Fluttershy's voice didn't seem like it carried much weight over the mix of groans to the pony's deaf ears, but the pegasus' shaking slowed down as the bandages were peeled off one by one, and the unicorn managed to quickly stitch the wounds closed. It was obvious that she'd done something like this numerous times before, though Fluttershy wasn't exactly sure how much of a help she was. Several minutes passed before the nurse was

done and the needle and thread rested on a small table nearby. She held up a small damp cloth to Fluttershy with a smile.

“If you wouldn’t mind, just rub this along the stitches, and thank you so much for helping. I guess we’re lucky you stepped in.” She turned away and headed over to the other two nurses that were busy with the other pony. Fluttershy looked down at the pegasus before she smiled, rubbing the cloth lightly against the blood-stained wounds. It was a while before she was pulled from the tent, the four ponies inside having been helped as much as they could be.

“Thank you again for the help. We could always use an extra hoof around here, if you wouldn’t mind helping. I’m sorry for pressuring you, I’ve just noticed you around the village for the past few days without a whole lot to do.”

Fluttershy shuffled her hoof against the ground timidly, “O-of course, I’d love to help... I’ve just never really helped anyone with injuries except animals before. I’m not sure how much of that will help.”

“A helpful hoof is better than nothing. If you’d like I can teach you a few things here and there, and I’m sure you’ll pick up on it in no time at all,” the unicorn said with a smile, turning back to the tent. “Just be here tomorrow when the early bells ring, hopefully something this... gruesome won’t be waiting.”

---

A calm set of bells echoed through the streets of Gallant Hollow, signalling the end to another “day”. Rainbow Dash and Applejack were just arriving back at the library following another long patrol, though it was at least uneventful this time around. As the door opened up they could see Rarity and Fluttershy in the corner talking about the day’s events, and of course Twilight somehow still had her nose planted in a book for the eighth day in a row. Rainbow Dash landed outside of the door before she started to unbuckle her armor, letting it fall onto the floor in a heap. “It’s always good to get out of that, even if Rarity did make them more comfortable.”

“You can say that again Dash. Nothin’ like gettin’ a chance to come home after a long day’s work and rest your hooves, even if it’s just for a

night.” She took off her armor as well, though she at least had the decency to put it on a small rack by the door. Applejack took a quick look around the room. “So, still no sign of Pinkie Pie?”

Twilight looked up from her book as she tried to force a smile. “No. It’s been days since we got here and after our ‘history lesson’ we haven’t seen any sign of her. Though I’m sure she’s alright. I mean, it is a pretty large village after all.”

Applejack started to close the door. “But we haven’t seen heads or tails of her since then. I know she ain’t one to go runnin’ off in ta somethin’ dangerous, but we can’t go expe-”

The orange earth pony was pushed away from the door as it was swung wide open, the familiar pink pony landing awkwardly on the floor of the library. She looked up at the assembled. “Hi girls!”

Fluttershy quickly bounded across the library, managing to wrap her hooves around Pinkie and lift her up off the floor. “Pinkie Pie! We were so worried about you, we kept trying to find you everywhere.”

Rainbow Dash and Rarity helped Applejack back to her hooves while she tried to shake herself out of a daze. “Ya know you can open the door slowly next time Pinkie...”

Pinkie Pie found herself standing again, returning Fluttershy’s hug for only a moment before she slipped out of her grip. “But I had to get back here quickly. I needed to tell you all what I’ve been doing!” She managed to keep hopping up and down with her normal energy as the others watched in confusion.

Twilight’s eyes tried to keep up with the bouncing pony as she spoke, “And... what exactly is that Pinkie?”

She stopped hopping as she move closer to the others. “Duh! I had to meet everypony in the village. I mean I couldn’t just leave a whole big place full of new ponies to make friends with go un-... friended!”

The others looked at one another suspiciously before Rainbow Dash spoke up, "Isn't that a bit far-fetched Pinkie Pie? I mean there's like, a few hundred ponies here at least."

"Well that's why it took so long! I had to introduce myself to everyone more than once, cause some of them were too busy to notice who I was the first time. And then I had to ask them about where they came from or what they were doing here. And memorizing everypony's names took soooo long. I thought I'd never finish this soon!"

"Y-you memorized everypony's names?" Fluttershy asked. She, like the others, appeared doubtful.

"Of course." Pinkie Pie opened her mouth as she started to take a deep breath only moments before Applejack's hoof found its way to her lips, barely stopping the pink pony from her impending spree of names.

"I think we can just take yer word for it Pinkie Pie. But ya know you didn't need to spend forever and a day out an' about gettin' to know everypony here," Applejack commented before removing her hoof.

"Well, if we're going to be here for a while, I have to know everypony. That way we can make new friends to spend time with while we're here, and it makes it easier to forget about..." Her smile faded for only a moment. "Losing everything." Her happy disposition returned almost supernaturally fast. "Isn't that what you've all been doing finding a place to work?"

The five friends looked at one another. It was true. Finding a place to occupy their time during the day had taken their minds off of the past they'd left behind. Even Twilight's mindless studying had kept her occupied long enough to forget the friends and life that had been taken from them by Nightmare Moon. Maybe it was all for the best. Twilight stepped up to Pinkie's side. "Well, as long as you didn't scare anypony half to death with surprise parties."

"Of course not silly, I just planned a few parties tomorrow, and none of them are surprises. Oh! I'm also helping one of the food tents by making sweets."

Dash raised an eyebrow. "... Sweets? But all they have here is leaves and twigs." She lowered her voice as she mumbled under her breath, "and they don't even taste that good."

"Well obviously I'll have to be creative. It'll take a few tries but I'm sure once I get the right ingredients they'll be super tasty and everypony will be wanting some. Besides, they only let me use the stuff they can't feed to anyone."

Twilight closed the still open door as she looked at the others, noticing a few ponies in the street staring awkwardly at the doorway. She could of sworn she heard one of them say something about "that's Pinkie Pie for you" before she spoke up, "Well, we should probably get to sleep. You all probably won't see me tomorrow, Aqua has something important she wanted to talk to me about in the morn- early." Twilight corrected herself, trying to get used to the new terminology she had been catching up on. The group bid one another good night as a blanket of silence fell over the dimming lights of the village.

---

Twilight barely managed to see anypony except a few guards or a lone vendor setting up for business as she walked through the quiet streets of Gallant Hollow. As she approached the large hollow tree at the village center, she could still see a few lights shining dimly from its windows, casting long shadows into the village. It wasn't odd given the circumstances. They probably had to spend all hours of the "day" planning, and of course there were guards on duty at all times.

With a light yawn she entered the building, receiving a kind greeting from a group of ponies gathered in the center of the room. She wished she had more time to stay and chat with them, but Aqua had summoned her to the Council room she and her friends had been brought to on their arrival. With a begrudging goodbye she started the long trot up the steep stairs, relieved once she finally came to the top. The door was already open, and she poked her head inside, seeing Aqua looking over some papers at a desk across the long room.

The light blue unicorn looked up from the desk as she heard Twilight's hoofsteps. "Oh, I'm terribly sorry for not coming down to meet you

Twilight. I was trying to get these signed before the next Council meeting, just a few administrative things, nothing serious.”

Twilight tried to suppress another yawn as she put on a smile. “Oh, it’s alright Aqua. I just wish you had called me here a bit... later than this. I’m not usually a mor- early pony.” Twilight let out a small cough at her correction. “You said you had something important to ask me?”

Aqua moved out from behind the desk, her horn dimming as she approached Twilight. “Yes, in fact. It’s a bit, personal though, but I hope you won’t mind the question. It’s about your cutie mark.”

Twilight seemed a bit skeptical as she glanced at her flank momentarily. “My cutie mark? What about it exactly?”

“Well, I guess I didn’t want to ask you and your friends so openly about it, but...you’re the Element of Magic aren’t you? The core.”

Twilight nodded as she tried to seem uninterested by the odd terminology. “Y-yes, I am. I was Princess Celestia’s personal pupil in fact.” She frowned as she became aware of her situation once again. “Before all of this happened of course.”

“Perfect. Then I have a favor to ask of you.” Aqua moved past Twilight to close the door, her horn letting out a glow again as a set of scrolls floated over to her and Twilight. “I have a small, let’s call it a project, for you to work on. I’m sure you remember from the books you read and our conversations that magic isn’t universally taught in Equestria like it was in your time.”

Twilight smiled, showing off the pride she carried for recalling the fact. “Of course, magic is only taught in the military, industry where it’s required to complete a task and sometimes in the noble houses. Even then, what unicorns are taught to do with their magic is limited, like industry workers only learning how to operate machinery effectively, or battle unicorns learning how to fight with it.”

Aqua returned a smile to Twilight’s enthusiasm. “Exactly, and that’s why I need your help. So many unicorns born here in the Wilds, or that

escape from the oppression of Equestria are like you. Their talent is magic, and they are deprived of the tools and the knowledge to improve upon it.” Her horn glowed as several of the scrolls opened. On them were a set of pictures accompanied by a list of names, about a dozen or so in total. “These are all such unicorns we could find. It took me a while to get them all to come here, but they will arrive within the week, and they need a teacher.”

Twilight looked around her to confirm she was alone with Aqua as she finished skimming over the scrolls. “M-me? You want me to teach a dozen unicorns how to use magic? But I barely finished my own studies under the Princess.”

“There’s nopony else like you in the entire Wilds Twilight... Please, I know that this is hard for you, but I believe you can teach them more than anyone else here could.”

---

Twilight moved her hoof to cover her mouth as she let out a yawn. Today was finally the day her students would be arriving in Gallant Hollow, and she started to have second thoughts about staying up past the late bell for last minute studying. She could hear the sound of hoofsteps filling the streets outside as she walked to the open window, gazing up at the night sky through the canopy above. She could barely make out a single star as her eyes closed, whispering under her breath, “Please Princess Celestia, give me the guidance to show them the way. Like how you showed me.”

---



# Chapter 6

Twilight let out a sigh of relief as the final book slid firmly into its home on the highest shelf. Despite her lack of sleep, the excitement of this moment had started to re-energize her in moments, allowing her to quickly tidy up her “classroom.” Aqua had said there wouldn’t be many buildings open in the weeks following their initial discussion, and so Twilight had suggested using the library for her teaching, and while her friends weren’t too pleased with the idea at first, over a few days they had taken the time to move out of their initial abode.

Rainbow Dash and Applejack had moved into one of the guardhouses, mainly because the frequency of their patrols had increased drastically, and they needed to be at the ready. Rarity and Fluttershy had converted a back room in Rarity’s new shop to a makeshift bedroom for two, though it hadn’t turned out to be anything fanciful, much to Rarity’s misfortune. Pinkie Pie on the other hoof had practically vanished once again, though Twilight and the others were reassured by the constant chatter about her amongst the populace. Someponies even said she kept sleeping in a kitchen somewhere, working past the late bell on some new attempt at sweets, which most ponies had turned down the offer to try.

Twilight took a deep breath as she glanced around the empty library a final time. There was so much potential in these unicorns that Aqua had sent her, just from reading the small descriptions she had been provided. She couldn’t help but wonder if they felt the same excitement she had so many years ago.

---

A small purple filly galloped through the streets of Canterlot as the early light of dawn began to shine over the horizon. Her saddlebags were filled to the brim, but their weight seemed no hindrance to her speed as she darted between passersby, trying to avoid bumping into anypony and spilling her precious cargo of parchment and literature. It wasn’t long before she arrived at her destination: a tall set of spires growing overhead, their shadows casted onto her path by the sun. The day had finally arrived, the

first day she would learn about magic under her teacher, and it was going to be Princess Celestia herself!

It was only as Twilight's eyes beheld the large, darkened stairway leading to a massive set of doors that her burst of strength and speed faded, and the weight of her saddlebags became apparent. Her gallop slowed to a trot as she began to climb the steps and her horn glowed dimly as she arrived at the top, pushing one of the doors open. She had been so amazed by the school during her entrance exam, but it was nothing compared to its halls now. Amongst the shining walls and floors of the great hall were unicorns of all shades and sizes, illuminated by the golden sun that shown through its windows. Some urgently galloped to a destination, while others meandered about with friends and listened to tales of travels or adventure from their recent summer break.

As the heavy door shut behind her, Twilight noticed the eyes of many of the students turn to her. She began to move through the crowd, and it wasn't long before she heard the whispers under their breaths, "Is that her? Celestia's pupil? How could she pick somepony so... young?"

"We've been going to this school for years, and we're always at the top of our classes."

"I passed that entrance exam in seconds, how could Celestia pick somepony like her instead?"

"Maybe her parents bought her way into the school?"

"No, you heard what Stargaze said... She's the one that caused all that damage to the south tower."

"Maybe she's a freak of nature, and Celestia has to keep her under lock and key so she doesn't kill everypony around her."

Twilight's focus on the crowd was interrupted as she felt a hoof on her shoulder. She glanced behind her quickly, and barely managed to suppress a scream of surprise as she came face to face with one of the teachers from her exam. "Ms. Sparkle?" The filly only offered a small mumble and timid nod in response. "Very well. Please follow me. The Princess is waiting for you and you're already running late."

As Twilight left the great hall up a wide staircase, her sight blinded by the morning sun gleaming through the tall windows as the weight of her saddlebags began to wear her down...

---

Twilight found herself drawn back to the present by the sound of the door to the library being opened as she wiped a hoof across her face. She spun around quickly and came face to face with a guard holding the door open. One by one a group of a nearly a dozen ponies filed through the narrow opening and spread out before the guard bowed his head and left. The group totaled eleven unicorns of mixed age and appearance. Seven of them were young, towered over by their four peers, and barely seemed old enough to be there on their own. Two of the older unicorns whispered between one another, looking at Twilight with doubt in their eyes.

The silence hung like an ominous fog for several moments before Twilight cleared her throat, glancing over them. "Hello, my name is Twilight Sparkle. I am sure you have all been told about why you've been brought here. All of you have shown signs of promise with magical abilities, and I'm here to teach you." The young unicorns seemed distracted as they glanced around the room, though one or two stayed focused on Twilight as she let out a cough. "All of you come from many different places, but together you all share a common talent; a skill that you can train and harness in ways you could only imagine."

Twilight continued her speech as she kept her eyes focused on one unicorn in particular: a dark-brown colt who seemed more focused on the floor than her as he muttered to himself. After a few more words of kindness and encouragement Twilight's horn shimmered as several thin books floated over to her and landed in a neat pile. "I want you all to tell me your names and then show me what you're capable of. Lift as many of these at once as you can, and there's no need to be worried. We're only finding out where we can work from before we start."

One by one the unicorns stepped up to the pile of books. Most of the young fillies and colts could only lift a book or two before their horn began to dim and their limit was signaled by an audible bang. The older unicorns managed to do better, lifting four to six about a foot into the air before they

slowly lowered them down to the floor. Finally, it came time for the last unicorn, the dark-brown colt, to step forward. Twilight looked at him with a small smile. "And your name?"

The colt was silent as a filly in the line who had called herself Juniper spoke up, "His name is Dusk." A filly and colt next to her suppressed giggles as he shot a glance back at them for a moment. Without a word his horn shone brightly, and the entire pile of books floated into the air slowly as beads of sweat formed on his forehead. Twilight was amazed by the sight, that is until his horn started to flicker and the books shuddered in midair. It was only a moment before they shot out in random directions, almost hitting several of the young unicorns near the door before Twilight brought them to a swift halt.

Twilight carefully let the books rest on the floor as she walked to Dusk's side, his head hung low. "Dusk? You don't have to push yourself past your limits. Magic isn't something that can be forced. You have to focus on it, and use it car-"

She was cut off as Dusk turned around and moved towards the door, his gaze focused on the floor ahead of his hooves. "I don't need anypony's help! I didn't even want to come here in the first place... It was all her idea!" He pointed a hoof at Juniper before he dashed out the door, knocking one of the older unicorns out of his way. Twilight looked around nervously at the remaining students before she cleared her throat.

"I-I think that will be enough for right now. Feel free to go and relax for a few hours, and meet back here after the mid-bell." She turned to her cot in the corner with a sigh as her students shuffled out of the library one by one. She hovered one of the books over to her before she turned back to the door, finding Juniper face-to-face with her. She jumped back in response as the book dropped to the floor with a thud. "Oh, Juniper? Is there something you wanted to talk about?"

She shuffled a hoof against the floor. "Y-yes. I just wanted to apologize for Da- umm, Dusk. He's a really nice colt, I promise just... he just isn't very accepting of help." Juniper finally noticed Twilight's confusion as she recovered from her shock. "Oh, I'm sorry. We grew up together in Swallow's Den and we were always really close friends. His parents always

encouraged him to try and practice magic, and he was really good at it. I mean they always said they were proud of him."

She looked back down at the floor. "Everything was fine... Until his parents disappeared a few years back. He's seemed so... different since then. He's always pushing away everypony's help, even when my parents offered to let him stay with us." She looked back at Twilight as she stomped a hoof on the ground. "I just couldn't let him sit there and sulk over it for the rest of his life. Please don't punish him for running off like that, it was me who dragged him along i-"

Twilight placed a hoof on Juniper's shoulder, bringing her rambling to a halt. "I can understand that you're, well, a bit cautious about this whole thing, but please don't worry. I'm not going to punish him for being... timid." Twilight assumed there wasn't any better way to phrase his actions in polite company. She cleared her throat before she continued, "He can come back when he's ready, and it's obvious he has a lot of raw talent. Thank you for talking to me about this, but please don't worry about it, okay?"

Juniper smiled as she gave a nod in response. "Thank you Ms. Sparkle, I'll try and talk to him, I promise." She trotted out of the doorway and left Twilight alone once again.

Twilight picked up the small book again before the scroll that Aqua had given her and a quill floated over to join it. As she jotted down the names and her observations she held a hoof to her forehead, letting out a groan. "This is going to be harder than I thought."

---

Days seemed to pass by like the turn of a page, and before Twilight realized it over a week had passed. Every one of her students had shown some improvement, though she remained reluctant to move past anything basic. True to Juniper's word Dusk had returned after two days, and while it appeared he was eager to join with everypony else again, he still resisted Twilight at every turn. Whether it was a helpful suggestion or well-earned praise, he simply turned a blind eye to her, as if her methods were some madmare's ramblings.

---

Twilight glared down at the book below her in disappointment as she rubbed her hooves against her forehead. It had been hours since Princess Celestia had left her alone to tend to some important task at the castle in Canterlot, and nearly all of that time had been spent staring hatefully at a small rock a few feet in front of her on the floor. The spell seemed so simple as Twilight tried to change the shape of the rock to make it something more complex, and the book described it simply enough: "Focus on the rock, visualize it changing, control its change." However, every attempt she made ended the same. The rock shook in the air and then fell back to the ground unchanged, taunting her.

As she stood up from the floor and shot one last glare at the inanimate stone out of frustration, her mind drifted back to Celestia's small bit of advice: "We should always keep our minds open to how we can change Twilight. Sometimes the best way to do something is not what you are told by everypony else; yet shunning the opinions and advice of others for your own methods only ends in the same disaster as following them like dogma. It takes balance between the two to remain open to the world so that we can continue to evolve in our understanding and in our talents."

Twilight trotted over to a small open window and gazed out over the city of Canterlot. The streets bustled with ponies going about their days below, while businesses, shops and restaurants alike were filled to the brim with customers. Above them she could see dozens of pegasi flying to destinations; some of them carried mailbags or parcels, while others wore the armor of the royal guards and were busy on patrol. Everything seemed so small below her as she thought about the Princess's words and how they related to it all. In fact the only thing that wasn't under her was the Princess's castle in the distance, which reflected a brilliant mixture of gold and white over the city as the high noon's sun looked down amidst a lake of white and blue.

Twilight turned back after a few minutes of contemplation and stared down the rock once more. "Alright, the book isn't always right, maybe? Or it's only partly right?" Twilight questioned her own words for only a moment as she shook her head to regain focus, her horn glowing. She reached out, trying to feel the rock with her magic as she clenched her eyes closed, "I can make it happen, I can do it... I'm in control..." She saw it inside of her mind: the stone slowly shifted and changed into a small ball again and

again, her mind repeating the process dozens of times. It was a few tense moments before she opened an eye slowly, and was surprised by the ball now sitting in her opponent's place. "I... I did it?"

The silence of the library was broken by the sound of cheers and shouts echoing amidst the bookcases that easily drowned out the small creak of a door opening. Celestia smiled in silence at Twilight's excitement before she spoke up, "I see you had some success after all?"

Twilight nearly crashed into a small pile of books as she stopped, trying to hide a blush. "P-Princess Celestia. I didn't expect you back so soon." Twilight looked at the ball which was sluggishly changing back into a rock. "Your... advice was greatly appreciated Princess."

"I only knew you needed a nudge in the right direction Twilight. Everypony in this world needs to learn their lessons differently, and we all deserve a chance to learn them. Remember that."

---

As another day came to a close and Twilight's students began to gather their things to leave, Twilight's focus was on Dusk. Just as he was about to leave she stepped up behind him, holding a hoof to his shoulder in hopes to stop him. "Dusk? Would you mind staying for a few moments?" He looked in aggravation at the door as he saw the last of his classmates leaving before he gave a begrudging nod to Twilight. She let her horn shimmer for a moment as the door closed and locked before she turned her attention to him. "I want to talk to you about your recent behaviour in classes. I'm trying to do my best to help you all better your talents and learn to use your magic to its fullest so that you can help everypony." She made a note of his eyes rolling before her tone became serious, "The way you treat my teaching makes it seem like you don't even appreciate your own talents, and I'd like to know why."

"I don't need to tell you anything," Dusk stated simply as he started to move to the door. He stopped in his tracks halfway, mumbling under his breath, "You're just the same as them."

Twilight moved closer to Dusk, hoping to get between him and the exit. "Do you mean your parents? I don't know what happened with them, bu-"

Dusk turned back to face Twilight, a gaze of amber staring through her. "You're right, you don't know! They left me without a word. If they did that it means they didn't think I needed their help anymore, that I didn't need anypony's help... that they didn't need me." His head pointed back to the floor as he shuffled a hoof back and forth, gritting his teeth.

Twilight looked down at Dusk with sincerity in her eyes. "Dusk, I want to help you, please, tell me what happened. "

He closed his eyes as he hoped to vanquish his growing tears. "They were like everypony else. They listened to the Legends and hoped the sun would rise again some day. When I was born, they said it was a sign to them. They told everypony I was a 'herald' of the promised day. My mother even named me like... it was my destiny... Daybreak."

His focus remained on the floor as he continued, "They always said I'd do something great, that my magic was a gift from the Legends, and they kept telling me how proud of me they were. And then they just disappeared..." He shifted his gaze, turning away from Twilight. "One day I just woke up, and they were gone. Some ponies in the village said they'd seen them taken away by someone, or something. Others said they were just fanatics that went on some wild goose chase."

He looked up at Twilight, quivering with the same fear in his eyes that she had felt the first time she arrived at the school in Canterlot so many years ago. "B-but they wouldn't just leave me! They wouldn't abandon me unless they knew I was ready to stand on my own four hooves, and I did! Everypony tried to hold me up, or shelter me, or coddle me, but I didn't need their help, I don't need their help... I'm strong! I'm going to do something great someday, and I'll do it on my own, because that's what they'd want from me!" His stern expression had finally conceded itself to sorrow as tears streamed down his face. "It's what they'd want."

Twilight stared in shock at Dusk, a dozen questions storming through her head in an instant: questions about herself, about Dusk, more than she could hope to answer. She pushed them to the back of her mind as she



wrapped her hooves around Dusk. “Your parents wouldn’t want that. They would want you to become better, to make friends and accept the gifts everyone around you is willing to give. We can’t rely only on what others tell and give us, but shunning their gifts only ends in disaster. We have to take both what other ponies can share and what we can offer ourselves in order to move forward.” She let go of Dusk as she smiled at him. “Will you do that for them?”

---

It had been a full month since Twilight and her friends had arrived in the village of Gallant Hollow. Each of them had found a place and carved themselves into the landscape. Whether it was new friends, the services they provided, a few well-planned parties and attempted treats, or simply words of encouragement, they had become something more than passersby. As another early bell echoed through the streets Twilight’s students once again found themselves in the rigours of study.

Twilight was surprised at how they had all progressed in so short a time, especially Daybreak, who had taken back the title his parents had given him with at birth. After their talk he had changed so drastically that it was as if he’d been replaced by somepony else overnight. While others struggled with grasping the lessons Twilight taught them, he sought to master them, and even when faced with failure or difficulty he tried to press through. Twilight had even taken him under her wing, serving as her personal pupil. While others relaxed during the weekends or took their breaks during the day, Daybreak would spend his hours in study with her, determined to better himself.

Just as a new day was about to begin, however, it was all brought to a grinding halt by a knock on the library door. Twilight looked over her students and offered a small apology as she trotted to the door. As it swung open she was greeted by the sight of two older guards, captains from the look of their uniforms, and her friends assembled behind them. “Twilight Sparkle. The Council of the Wilds has convened, and at both their and Lady Aqua’s request, you and your companions are ordered to report to the Hollow immediately.”

Twilight was given little more than time enough to say a goodbye to her students before she was practically dragged out of the door. As they

trotted through the streets of the village she moved up to Applejack and Rainbow Dash. "Do you two know what's going on?"

Applejack turned to her. "Shoot no. We were just about to go out on patrol when we got dragged along with them around the whole village lookin' for Pinkie Pie."

Rainbow Dash kept a few inches off of the ground as she leaned to whisper to Twilight and Applejack. "Pollen said the Council is made up of ponies from all over the Wilds, and even some from inside Equestria. Wasn't Aqua spending all of her time trying to get them to trust us while we busted our backs around here for three weeks?"

Fluttershy kept close to Rarity as they moved up behind the other three. "Do you think she actually convinced them? I mean she said it would take a while and helping out around the village would help. Do you think we finally made an impact?"

Twilight looked between everyone before she lingered on the library growing smaller behind her. "I'm sure whatever it is, she'll let us know when we get there." The large hollow tree grew closer before it towered over their heads. However, as the door swung open and they expected to be lead up the large stairs to its top, they were instead greeted by the large open floors of the central room filled to the brim with ponies engaged in debate and conversation, assaulting their ears. There were literally hundreds of them, occupying every floor all the way to the ceiling, with pegasi occupying nearly every inch of the open air.

As the two guards entered the room silence fell over the assembled as a few dozen ponies on the main floor of the tree stepped forward with Aqua at their side. A unicorn at the center with a dark grey coat and aged eyes looked down on the six with scrutiny. "Are these the ones you spoke of Lady Aqua?"

"Yes, they are the six ponies we found out in the Wilds following our assault on Nightmare Moon's troops. Considering their arrival and the information we gathered from the patrol, there is no doubt in my mind that these six are the Elements of Harmony from the Legends of the Sun."

Twilight and her friends stood proudly again as they had on their arrival, even amongst the hundreds of eyes locked on them. The aged unicorn stepped closer. "And what are your names?"

Twilight spoke for the others, "I am Twilight Sparkle, and these are my friends: Applejack, Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, and Rarity." With each name she pointed a hoof to them before turning her gaze back to him. "We are the Elements of Harmony: Magic, Honesty, Loyalty, Kindness, Laughter, and Generosity. But I think we deserve to know who you are too."

The grey unicorn chuckled in response. "Fair enough. I am Laurels, and I am the head of the Council of the Wilds. Lady Aqua has been kind enough to... enlighten our ears for the past few weeks as to who you are, and been given no shortage of debate in return. Many of our members, myself included, still remain sceptical to the timely arrival of the Elements at such an opportune time. Your kindness and aid around this village hasn't been unnoticed of course, but we still need more proof. Lady Aqua has agreed to a test, though it should have come in time on its own."

Twilight and her friends looked at Aqua who stepped forward when she was mentioned. "You will all be tasked with traveling to an ancient site mentioned in the Legends of the Sun. It is known only as the Temple of the Sisters, and lies somewhere deeper in the Wilds than we have settled for some time. The Legends say that when the Elements of Harmony return to the Temple, where they defeated the Usurper a thousand years ago, they will be able begin again the cycle of day and night. You six must travel there together to prove that you are who you say."

---

The throne room of the Castle Umbra, known only as Castle Nightmare to Equestria's limited foes, echoed with a grim silence. Along its black steel walls hung the flags of vanquished foes, the symbols of nations and rebels alike that stood against Nightmare Moon's rule and failed. Their standards stood like the severed heads of game in the hall of a trophy hunter, treasured and flaunted for all to see. At one end stood the massive throne of purple and black, filled by Nightmare Moon's form as nobles and advisers alike gathered within the vast halls that seemed to stretch on for

miles. A single window in the ceiling of the room let the moon's light shine down onto the throne, yet somehow managed to darken the vast halls.

It was only a monthly occurrence, but still one of great importance as Her Highness received word on the status of her empire and its subjects. One by one ponies passed before their Queen, and offered their graces and praise. Nobles had gifts to offer, whether they were relics, knowledge, trained soldiers, or resources gathered from the far edges of Her Highness's empire. Once the nobles had left their gifts and abandoned the hall, her generals and advisers would speak of the state of her domain. It was a rather bland month in retrospect.

An accident in a series of mines near the deserts of Old Appleoosa believed to be the work of militants, a small set of peasant uprisings at the edge of Manehattan quelled as they had begun, and the graduation of another class of Eclipse fliers from the illustrious CloudsdaleFlight Academy. Nightmare Moon tried to suppress a series of yawns as the reports were delivered and finally came to a close. She paused only for a moment as the last of her military advisers began to leave her sight. "Wait. You are aware of our operation within the Wilds, correct?"

The earth pony stopped in his tracks, and swallowed hard before he turned back to her with a bow. "Y-yes Your Majesty. We have yet to receive word back from the captain you placed in charge of the operation. It is believed that the mission is proceeding as planned for the time being."

Nightmare Moon smiled wide. "And how long has it been since the operation began? It is a month, is it not?"

He tried to keep himself from shaking as he stood still. "Yes, about thirty days Your Majesty."

"Are you aware why I personally selected the captain for that assignment?" She stood up from the throne and slowly moved down the ebony steps until she towered over the colt. "It is because throughout his short career he has made himself known in two ways. One, he has yet to fail a single assignment given to him, no matter how trivial or difficult it may be." Her mane flowed down to lift up the earth pony's chin to meet her gaze. "And two, in every case, he has updated me about every trivial, little, insignificant detail he comes across, much to my annoyance... In fact, on

many occasions I have received letters hoof-delivered to me by his personal guard, every month, on the dot.”

Her gaze twisted into a glare as her horn lit with a dark light, lifting the colt off the ground and up into the air. “I want an entire battalion at the Wilds in a week’s time, and I want it all torn to the ground and burned. Take everything: Talons, Eclipse, Battlehorns, Crushers, whatever it takes to tear it asunder and drag those six fillies out into the open with their hooves tied together. *Do you understand?!*” The colt quickly nodded in response before he was dropped back to the ground. Nightmare Moon turned back to the throne as the rest of the ponies sifted out of the room in hurry. Nightmare Moon sat back down slowly before shifting her gaze behind her throne., “And you, what do you have to say?”

A small unicorn cloaked in black stepped out from behind the throne, her voice struggling to remain strong after the display she had witnessed. “T-the injections are continuing as planned... but we’ve run into some, well, complications. Some of the subjects are exhibiting psychological problems and we think it might be a hea-”

Nightmare Moon waved a hoof in the air. “Continue as planned. The side effects are expected.”

The unicorn looked up at Nightmare Moon in disbelief. “But at this rate there won’t be anypony left that will su-”

Nightmare Moon’s eyes glowed a dark black as her voice bellowed through the empty hall, sounding like a multitude of voices layered upon one another, “I said: continue. I will not have dissension from my most trusted members. You are dismissed, Amber.”

“Yes Your Highness.” The unicorn left through a small passage leading to the back of the castle as Nightmare Moon turned her gaze to the moon shining bleakly onto her throne.

“The war is finally beginning. We’ll see how strong your Elements are this time, and if you can save your precious world from the brink of disaster.”

# Chapter 7

The moon hung silently overhead as Twilight and her friends made their way through the overgrowth of the Everfree Wilds, their path barely illuminated by the silver light that shone down through the canopy above. It had been two days since their departure from Gallant Hollow with enough provisions to last them a week's journey, and the conditions they faced were thankfully not as rough as they had expected. While their destination was deep enough into the Wilds that it had remained uncharted by any pony for hundreds of years, the map Twilight had taken from the library before their departure was more than sufficient to bring them close to Ponyville, or at least what they hoped was its location.

Underneath the tangled roots and vines of trees Twilight barely made out the burned-in images of hoofprints and debris within the cold dirt, as if they were a warning sign to any travelers of the disaster which occurred on that spot so long ago. Her sight shifted between her friends as her mind began to rebuild their old home piece by piece. They had just passed Sweet Apple Acres, its crop replaced by decrepit and rotting foliage that bore little more fruit than a lifeless rock. As they entered the outskirts of the town, everything fell back into place.

Under close inspection they could see the remains of fountains and statues, degraded or crumbled, yet not completely destroyed by time's passage, buried beneath a tangled weave of vines and roots. They arrived near the center of the village, Ponyville's once massive town hall now nothing but a mound of ash and dirt at their hooves. Applejack sighed as she rubbed a hoof along the ground and examined the black marks it left on her coat. "It's hard ta believe. Even after so long, some of it's still here."

Rarity tried her best to avoid the large piles of soot and ash as she rested her hooves next to an overturned log. Her saddlebags opened up at the glow of her horn as she pulled out a small canteen of water. "I'm more amazed it's taken us more than a day to get this far. It's like that map is less help than Rainbow Dash when it comes to sewing. Oh, no offense darling."

Dash only rolled her eyes as she rested on a sturdy limb in a nearby tree. "Oh, believe me, none taken. Are you sure this map is even going to help Twilight? I mean we have no idea where that Castle or Temple or whatever it's called is from here. And if we go in the wrong direction we'll be wandering for days!"

Applejack looked up at the pegasus, taking her own canteen from her saddlebags. "We have ta trust in Twilight here Dash. I know it's been awhile since we went through that part of the Everfree Forest, but it can't be too hard to retrace our hoofsteps, right Twilight?"

Twilight looked down over the map as she attempted to make heads or tails of its contents other than the directions they had already followed. "I suppose so. I mean we headed west when we left Ponyville before, so if we follow the path that's, maybe still there, it shouldn't be so hard, right?" She tried to offer a smile of confidence to her friends as they took a moment to rest.

Pinkie Pie dug into a small sack from her bag as she pulled out something that closely resembled a clump of burnt dirt and quickly shoved it into her mouth. The others only offered her odd looks as she swallowed it with some difficulty. She let whatever "flavor" it held sink in before she spoke, "Hmmm, too crunchy, and bland." She picked out another as she repeated the process.

Fluttershy walked up to her with a look of concern. "... How can you keep trying those Pinkie? I mean your baking can, uhhh, wait until we get back, can't it?"

"Awww, but I spent weeks making all of these, and I didn't want to try them until they'd sat for a while, you know, to see if they held onto any flavor." She easily swallowed another one, mumbling through crumbs, "Too chewy, and muddy, but it might work."

Twilight folded up the map before placing it gently into her saddlebags once more. "We need to get moving again soon. Every second we waste is another that Nightmare Moon has time to plan."

Rarity sighed as she rubbed her hooves together. "Twilight, we've been walking for a day straight already. I feel like I'm going to collapse if we go any further."

Applejack nodded, looking around the square. "I think Rarity's right this time, sugarcube. We need a good night's sleep on our shoulders if we're gonna make it there safely. Maybe the library is still in one piece, I mean it did hold together for our little 'nap' and all."

It only took a few minutes before the group found themselves at the large hollow tree they had awoken in a month earlier. Its walls were still kept rigid by several vines, weeds, and roots in the time they had been gone. Somehow even more had managed spring up, covering it inside and out in a vain attempt to conceal the hole they left through. As the others tried to lay out blankets amongst the dim light Twilight and Rarity provided, Twilight moved along the wall, her hooves pushing away some of the vines that concealed the tree's past. She was surprised to find that some of the books were still intact after so long, or at least their bindings were. As she pulled out one of the books and opened it slowly, she was only greeted by the crumbling of paper as it fell to the floor in a fine mist. With a begrudging sigh, Twilight placed the cover back in its home and joined the others.

As everypony drifted off to sleep amidst the tree's walls, Twilight's thoughts were back with the village they had left behind: her students she had left to their own tutelage, the friends and lives they had all left behind at a moment's notice, and the ponies they were meant to protect that didn't even believe in them. Then there was Ponyville: the friends they had abandoned, the ponies they would never see again, the home that rested as rubble under their hooves now. In one fell swoop they'd walked away from a life they held so dearly, right into the remains of one they had been torn away from. The last thought that passed through her mind as she drifted off was a simple one: "It won't happen again."

---

As the six awoke from their slumber and prepared for another day's journey in Ponyville's ruined town square, Twilight took another look around the shelves of the library, hoping she would find something in readable condition. It was only a few minutes before she stumbled on what had started everything: "The Elements of Harmony: A Reference Guide." The words along its spine remained legible after so long, and she prayed it would not crumble like the others as it slid out of the bookcase and floated



in front of her. With a deep breath and her eyes sealed shut, she let her magic slowly open the pages. She was honestly surprised when it was intact, as new and crisp as the day she had found it on Nightmare Moon's return. She was even more shocked when it opened to a page with a neatly-folded note, untouched by age or decay.

As the book rested on the floor and the note unfolded, she was greeted by the all too familiar writing of her teacher, Princess Celestia:

*To my Faithful Student Twilight,*

*I know that in time this letter will reach your eyes, even if it takes longer than I care to imagine. Yes, the worst has happened, and while I fear for my subjects' safety in this dark hour, I must make sure that this reaches your door before I cannot act any further. The path you must follow is a more dangerous one than you can imagine, and with more obstacles than you will be able to count, but the strength you and your friends possess will bring you to your destination in time, I am certain of it. Remember, the magic of friendship can weather the fiercest storms, pierce the strongest armor, and brighten the darkest night, but only if you trust in it.*

*The sun will rise again, and you will be its dawn.*

*With Hope,  
Princess*

*Celestia*

As Twilight started to fold the letter and place it in her bags she saw dark lines appearing along its back. After a few moments they began to piece themselves together, one after another, until before her eyes was a map; its markings led west, with an "X" marked at the end of a winding path. In all her life she wouldn't have imagined the Princess could have seen all of this happening, and yet been unable to stop any of it. Was it all merely a back-up, some plan designed solely if she should fail in battle against her sister, or were she and her friends truly the only hope she had? She tried to stifle her doubt as she stepped out of the tree and found her friends waiting for her. Rainbow Dash flew down from the canopy, shaking a few leaves off her wings as she landed next to Twilight. "What took you so long?"

Twilight wiped a tear from her eyes as she held up the note. “Just finding a map for us. I don’t know how accurate it will be after so long, but the Princess left it for us. I don’t know how, and I don’t know why, but we have to trust it.”

The others nodded amongst one another before they started moving, their heads high at the stroke of luck, though Dash seemed a bit skeptical as they trekked deeper into the Wilds. “Wait, how do we know it isn’t some trap Nightmare Moon left for us? We can’t just trust some words written on a scrap of paper that just happens to be intact in a library after a thousand years.”

Rarity sighed as they trudged along the darkened path. “It’s not like we have anything else to follow Dash. Besides, if she were laying in wait to pounce on us I’m sure somepony would’ve taken notice after this long.”

Fluttershy looked between Dash and Rarity. “But Dash does have a point. I mean it all seems too much like a coincidence when you think about it. Maybe we shouldn’t just be, well, following it blindly, but that’s just what I think...”

Applejack shot a glance at Dash behind her. “I keep tellin’ ya ta stop bein’ such a downer bout this whole thing. Now you’re makin’ Fluttershy worried. It’s not like we wouldn’t a’ gone off in this direction anyway.”

The bickering only intensified as Twilight tried to stay focused on the map. After a few moments she turned back to everypony, but still trotted forward. “Girls! We don’t have time to argue about all of this. I know Celestia wrote it, it *has* to be from her, and arguing about it is only going to set us back more than we already are, so if you could ju-”

She was cut off when Applejack rushed to her side. “TWILIGHT!” It was only as Twilight turned back to her front that she noticed the sharp drop a few feet ahead concealed by a few bushes. After she skidded to a stop she swallowed hard, offering a bleak smile to Applejack.

“S-see? That’s the kind of thing that can happen because of this...” She peered over the small brush to get a look down the cliff’s edge. It wasn’t so steep after a few feet, but it was obviously too much for them to

climb down safely. "I think we're going to have to find another way down there girls."

Pinkie Pie looked around at a nearby hill that jutted up behind them and the large open valley that was at the bottom of the cliff face as she rubbed her chin lightly. "It seems so familiar." It took a moment before she hopped in place, shouting, "Aha! I got it, I got it!" Everypony looked at Pinkie with a confused look before their gazes shifted back to their surroundings.

Applejack tapped a hoof against her chin before she spoke, "I think Pinkie's right. This is where that cliff fell apart." She took a chance to prod her hoof lightly against the ground, inching towards the edge. "Though it's a mite more stable now thankfully. Don't suppose you girls wanna take a leap a' faith?" Applejack held back a chuckle as Twilight and Rarity raised an eyebrow in her direction. "Didn't think so."

Fluttershy called out after a few moments, pushing some brush aside to peer through, "I think there's a cave over here. I don't know if it goes anywhere though..." The others trotted over to the brush, and saw the entrance to a small cave just around the corner. Its entrance appeared just large enough for them to fit into, though on closer inspection it appeared to widen several feet in. Twilight stepped forward, her horn flickering to life as she shone a light into the cave.

"It looks like it goes down, though I can't say how deep it is. Still, it's better than trying to get down from that cliff," Twilight said, stepping into the cave as her friends followed one by one. Twilight's horn grew brighter to accommodate the fading moonlight behind them. Their timid hoofsteps echoed through the cave before fading into the distance. The cave began splitting off into every direction as the girls passed tunnels jutting out of the passageway, some of them ending in dead ends within their view, while others looked to go on for a quite a while.

Rarity let out a sigh as she looked around the cave walls, which dripped lightly with moisture. "Are you sure this is the right idea? I mean we have no idea if this even has an exit."

Dash rolled her eyes. "Then we'll just go out the way we came. I don't think the entrance is going to just disappear or something."

Fluttershy muttered from the back of the pack, "But what if we go down the wrong path on the way back? W-we could end up lost down here forever. Or worse."

"I doubt there's much worse than that," Rarity added, moving up behind Twilight. "Maybe there's some other way?"

Twilight turned back to face Rarity, trying to keep a smile on her face. "I doubt that. The cliff wasn't too steep, but still, I don't want to risk it falling apart underneath us." Twilight stopped in her tracks as she heard a light rumbling down the tunnel, the rest grinding to a halt behind her. It only lasted for a few moments, but it was enough to grow doubt and frowns on the group's faces. Applejack let out a sigh of relief as the rumbling stopped, stepping up to the front of the group.

"I'm sure it was nothin' girls," she said with an unsure smile before she moved forward. "We need to keep movin' so we can find a way outta he-" Her words were cut off as the rumbling returned, more forceful and closer than before. On cue rubble and dirt started to filter down off the ceiling. It was only a moment before the small pebbles were replaced by large chunks of rock, and the top of the cave closed in on itself between Applejack and her friends. She quickly galloped away from the cave-in, hopping to avoid any damage should the rest of the tunnel suffer the same fate.

It took a few moments for the dust to settle as Twilight got back on her hooves, the light at her horn returning as she regained focus. "Is everypony alright?" She was greeted by nods as she looked around, scanning over her friends. "Wait, where's Applejack? Applejack?!" The group quickly jumped to their hooves, trying to call for their friend.

Applejack let out a groan, rubbing her head lightly after having dived into a small split from the tunnel. She could hear the muffled yells in the distance, her gaze drifting up to the pile of rubble a few dozen feet away from her. She took a moment to shake stars out of her vision before stumbling over to the wall of rock, barely visible in the darkness. She shouted, hoping it would carry through the stone, "T-Twilight? Girls are you there? Is everypony okay?"

Twilight dashed over to the wall. "Applejack, thank Celestia you're alright. We're okay over here, but..." She looked up towards the ceiling, a few loose rocks falling down the length of the cave-in. "I don't think we can dig through this Applejack. Hold on, we'll try and find someway around."

Applejack let out a sigh. "I don't know if that's a good idea Twi... We ain't got an idea of what caused this, and if it's even gonna happen again, but-" She turned back away from the wall, squinting into the empty darkness. "I can't exactly see much over here, so I guess y'all are gonna have ta take a chance. Just, take it easy girls. I don't wanna be stuck in this cave too long."

Twilight turned away from the wall for only a moment, nodding to her friends. "Just stay put Applejack, I'm sure one of these tunnels leads to the other side of this wall."

Applejack could hear soft whispers fading into the distance, her friends trotting down the tunnel. She shook her head for a moment before laying down on the cold floor, rubbing her eyes with a hoof, straining to see anything in the darkness. It was several minutes before she heard the quiet pattering of hoofsteps in the distance, snapping her head up quickly.

She saw a small flicker of light down the tunnel, and jumped up to her hooves, moving forward with a smile on her face. "Girls! Glad y'all found a way aro-"

Applejack stopped in her tracks as she was greeted with the sight of a young colt trotting up to her, a dirtied pair of goggles over his eyes, with soot and dirt matting his light brown coat and red mane. Along his flank were two heavy saddlebags, and a small arm of metal jutting out from his right side, holding meekly onto a small lantern.

He tried to suppress a chuckle as he moved up to Applejack, pushing the goggles up with a hoof, his green eyes locked on her. "I think you might be a bit incorrect on that."

Applejack kept her legs tense, backing up a few inches as her eyes adjusted to the light. She squinted, trying to stare the strange colt down. "W-who're you? What're you doin' down here?"

"I could ask the same to the mare that looks like she's going to tackle me into a wall." The colt sat down on his flank, pushing the lantern over his shoulder before reaching into his saddlebags and pulling out a large piece of parchment. He unfolded it on the floor. Applejack saw a mesh of lines of varying color barely visible in the dim light. He grabbed a crude pen attached to its side, making a simple mark on the map before looking up at Applejack. "Yew knowf-" The colt blinked, stopping to place the pen down on the map before he continued, "Sorry. You know these caves are... kinda dangerous."

Applejack remained wary, her eyes focused on the colt, though her stance relaxed. "We... Me and my friends aren't from around these parts."

"New to the Wilds or just... here? And, what do you mean we exactly?" The colt tilted his head to the side, looking past Applejack at the wall of rock. "You seem to be alone at the moment."

"We were goin' down this tunnel when a cave-in started for no reason... They're supposed to be tryin' ta find a way around it, though I don't exactly know how that's goin'." Applejack's stern look faded, her lips bent to a frown.

The colt rubbed his chin, looking down at the map. He moved his hoof across it, tracing lines. "Well, there aren't many way they could of gone... All the splits stop past here except for a few, but there's enough ways to put them anywhere." He looked back up at Applejack with a smile. "Tell you what, I know this place pretty well, probably more than your friends at least, let me just see if I can map out a few things and..."

The colt became lost in his thoughts as he muttered to himself, looking down at the map. Applejack glanced back at the wall, shaking her head. *No... I ain't got any idea who the hay this colt is... and I'm sure the girls can find their way here soon enough, but I can't just go sittin' here for days. What if he's some kinda spy from Equestria, or somethin' worse...* Applejack looked down at the colt, who had finally stood back up on his four hooves, placing the map back in his saddlebag.

"Look... I know it's pretty odd to be finding a colt out in the middle of nowhere, so..." He held out a hoof, a thin smile on his lips. "The name's Dig... well, kind of a title-slash-nickname thing, hobby too. I'm a..."

scavenger, sort of. I come out here looking for scraps of history or something that some half-wit noble or scholar'll be interested in. I know it sounds silly, but there's a lot to find out here. I'm not out to steal from you or anything I-I just want to help."

Applejack looked the colt in the eyes, her breathing slowing before she began to turn her head from side to side. "I know you mean well." *And every fiber of my being is sayin' not to trust you...* Applejack echoed in her mind. "But..." Her hoof moved up, pressing against the colt's before shaking it up and down lightly. "Name's Applejack, nice ta meet ya, Dig. Let's hope you do know your way round her like ya say you do, I don't want my friends showin' up here without me around."

"Don't worry, it's just a few twists and turns, that's all. We'll find them in no time, I promise."

---

Dig sighed, trotting slowly in front of Applejack as he glanced around the cave. "You know, I've actually found some stuff in these caves before, though they're always changing every time I come here. A lot of ponies don't come out this far on superstition. They say some... tragedy happened and the whole place is haunted now. I don't believe it per say, but there's plenty to find. Gotta be something digging all these tunnels but, well, I never see it."

It had been nearly thirty minutes since the two had left the cave-in. Applejack had kept her guard up around Dig, despite her acceptance of his offer for help, but her mind kept wandering to thoughts of her friends somewhere inside the endless tunnels. She was only brought back to reality when the colt stopped suddenly in front of her, her head nearly knocking into a saddlebag as she ground to a halt. "Wait... w-why are we stoppin'?"

The colt flexed an ear idly before turning back to Applejack. "They're close. Applejack, thank you... for trusting me that is." He reached into the saddlebag, pulling out a small satchel, tied shut by a knot at its top. "I found these a few days ago around here. I really don't think anyone would be interested in them, but... I think it's a good sign of appreciation." He slowly undid the knot, the cloth falling to reveal what appeared at first glance to be a few pebbles in the faint light.

“I found them over by where some ponies say there used to be a village and, I know it sounds crazy, but I think they’re seeds. Amazing that there used to be something like that out here, and that they’re still in one piece. Must have been petrified to last this long. You ummm, you seem like the patient type. I mean you’ve had the patience to stand walking around with me while I’m rambling. So, maybe you’ll value these more than somepony who expects them grow.”

Applejack slowly reached for the satchel in Dig’s grasp, her eyes locked on the small seeds in the dim light as she dropped to her hind legs. Her eyes started to well with tears at a closer inspection of the small curves, and her mind only came to one conclusion. She tried to hold back tears, clenching her eyes shut. She rested the small satchel on the floor, the lantern’s glow fading from her eyelids, replaced by a faint purple light in the distance, and a familiar voice calling out to her.

“Girls, I think that’s... Applejack! Applejack is that you?!”

Applejack’s eyes snapped open, and she looked up to the sight of her friends galloping at her. She was quick to rise back to hooves and trot over to the others, her lips turned up to a smile. “Girls, thank goodness I stumbled onta y’all.”

The others looked perplexed as Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow. “Umm, Applejack I thought it was too dark to go wandering around here, and that is a wall of rocks back there from the looks of it.”

“What are ya talkin’ about Dash? I’ve been-” Applejack glanced back over her shoulder, greeted by the same wall of rocks she had thought to have left with Dig close to an hour before. Her smile faded for a moment as she shook her head, holding a hoof to her forehead. “I... I musta, dozed off waitin’ fer y’all I guess.”

Twilight stepped up past Rainbow Dash. “Sorry Applejack, we stumbled on the way out before we found you so we took a while to make sure we could find our way back. It was Rarity’s idea to leave some crumbs behind, and thankfully Pinkie brought enough of those... ummm, ‘treats’ for us to find you.”



“Eh, they were only a first pass,” Pinkie commented, taking a bite of another smoldering crumb of food. “Hmmm, surprisingly salty.”

The others shook their heads with a smile. They began to trot away from Applejack, whose focus was still on the cold wall of rubble. Her gaze shifted down as she turned to follow her friends, barely catching the glimmer of the satchel out of the corner of her eyes. She timidly reached a hoof out, surprised when it didn't fade from existence before her. With a smile she tied a knot in the satchel and wiped a tear from her cheeks, galloping to catch up to the others.

---

It was not long before the girls were greeted by the pale moonlight at the end of their path, emerging from the cave into a vast valley. They could barely see the cliff above their heads as they trotted forward, the path out of the valley thinning as trees jutted out from the nearby rocks, their rocky path soon giving way to the familiar overgrowth and forest of the Wilds. It was not long however before a faint fog was visible in the distance, growing thicker with each timid step the group made.

Twilight closed her eyes for a moment, her horn glowing in an attempt to pierce the thickening veil. “Stay close girls... we don't want to get separated in all of this...”

The group closed into a tight circle, trying to keep their eyes focused on the path ahead, Twilight's horn barely lighting the way more than a few feet ahead. Fluttershy kept at the back of the path, an eerie wind blowing through trees and setting her on edge as her eyes darted from side to side. Her mind twisted the faint images of trees through the fog into nightmarish figures, the whistling of the wind into the pattering of hoofsteps, and the shiver along her spine into eyes peering from the shadows.

Her eyes shut tight and she started to slow down, her voice barely carrying through the fog, “Ummm, g-girls? M-maybe we should just w-wait until this fog clears so that there's n-nothing spooky or s-scary or...” She swallowed hard to clear her throat. “D-dangerous that jumps out at u-” Fluttershy opened her eyes slowly, her face twisting into a look of terror in seconds as she was greeted by the empty fog in front of her.

Her shaking increased as she timidly continued forward, eyes darting around the fog, her voice carrying little weight as she was overcome with fear, "G-girls? I-... this is some kind of p-prank right? I don't really think it's a... good time for that." Fluttershy tried to squint through the fog, hoping to find the faint light from Twilight's horn in the distance to ease her woes. Instead, she was greeted by the silhouette of a tree growing closer in the veil, a small circle of clear air around its towering form.

Fluttershy inched towards the tree, eyes darting from side to side. "T-Twilight? Rarity? A-... anyone?" Fluttershy nearly jumped back from the gnarled roots when she saw a small pair of auburn eyes, followed shortly by a flash of red as they disappeared around the bend. Her curiosity began to pique as she approached the large roots, peering around the trunk. "H-hello? I-it's okay... I won't h-hurt you."

She was greeted by a small red fox, cowering behind a heavy root as it let out a whimper. Its weight shifted uneasily, trying to stay off of its front legs which bore a darker shade of crimson along their length. Fluttershy reached a hoof over her mouth as she tried to inch closer. "Oh my, y-you're injured." The fox whimpered in response once more, shuddering as it tried to back away. "No, please don't run, I-I have something that will fix you right up."

Fluttershy lay down a few feet from the fox, lifting a saddlebag off of her flank before she reached inside, pulling out a small satchel. As its contents of bandages, gauze and poultices emptied onto the damp ground, the fox timidly approached them, sniffing lightly before slinking back. "D-don't worry, they're good for you. Well, at least they're good for all the ponies in the Hollow..." Fluttershy patted a hoof lightly on the ground next to her. The fox approached, laying down at her side.

It only took a few moments for Fluttershy to clean the pair of wounds and wrap gauze securely around them, a small pin keeping them help together around the fox's legs. The fox gave a small sniff to its dressings before prodding the root with its paws. After a few moments it jumped forward, nuzzling against Fluttershy's front hooves. The pegasus smiled before standing up. "See? All better... Just, ummm, don't go doing anything dangerous, okay foxy?"

The fox's ears twitched lightly as it looked behind Fluttershy, quickly darting away from the tree. Fluttershy stood up quickly, trying to follow the fox, but its form faded suddenly into the fog. "N-no, wait, you can't be running around yet!" Fluttershy turned around, making out a dim light breaking through the fog. She donned her saddlebags, galloping at the glow as she heard the distance shouts of her friends growing closer.

Twilight's voice was the loudest of them, shouting into the thick veil, "Fluttershy?! Fluttershy are you out there?!"

Fluttershy trotted out of the fog, seeing her friends gathered in a tight circle. Pinkie and Rarity were quick to rush to her side, hugging her close. Rarity sighed in relief. "Oh Fluttershy, we were so worried about you, darling. Where ever did you run off to?"

Fluttershy's ears flattened as she looked down. "I-I'm sorry, I just... got a little scared and... I'm sorry." Fluttershy looked back, a gust of wind picking up through the path, the fog thinning enough for the group to see the path they had taken from the valley. However, the tree Fluttershy had visited was oddly out of sight.

Twilight's horn dimmed as the moonlight returned to illuminate their path, moving away from the others to get her bearings. "Well, that's a good stroke of luck for us. Come on girls, we need to get moving before it rolls back in." Twilight and the others began trotting down the path from the valley, while Fluttershy took one glance back to the treeline, barely making out what looked like two small eyes peering back at her. With a smile she rushed over to the others, shouting for them to wait.

---

It was a few minutes before the path thinned as the trees grew closer on either side of the group, moonlight fading as Twilight's horn illuminated itself once more. The group was shocked when the path split into two before them, either path twisting and turning amongst the trees, blocking their destination from their sight. Twilight looked down at the map, shaking her head. "This doesn't make any sense, this isn't anywhere on this map."

Rainbow Dash sighed, rolling her eyes at Twilight. "Well, neither was the treacherous cliff or the foggy valley, was it?"

Twilight stared back over her shoulder at Dash for a moment before rolling up the map. "We have no idea where these go, but we have to pick one. Which one do you girls think is the right one?"

Pinkie Pie tried to stifle a giggle as she hopped up to the fork in the path, pointing a hoof down the right split. "Duh, the right path is obviously to the right. What other way would it be?"

The others looked between one another, their eyebrows raised in confusion as Applejack shuffled a hoof nervously against the ground. "Ummm, Pinkie Pie? I think yer logic might be a bit, uhh, off there."

Twilight stayed focused on the map as the others gathered around her, peering over her shoulder. "Well, I suppose just picking one of these paths should be fine. I mean what's the worst that could happen right?"

Rainbow Dash floated up to the fork, staring down the left path. "Oh, probably just some deadly trap, an ambush, maybe us going in the wrong direction for, you know, forever? Yeah, let's just go and chance it huh?"

Rarity glared at Dash with Twilight, a small tinge of irritation in her voice, "I don't think that kind of... *negativity* is welcome right now dear. I say we just, flip a bit or something. I mean honestly, it's nothing to fret about."

Twilight nodded, turning around to look at the others. "Right... let's just go down the left and-" Twilight blinked, looking over the others before raising an eyebrow. "Umm, where did Pinkie Pie go?"

---

Pinkie hopped steadily down the turning path, humming lightly to herself with a grin across her lips. She giggled, talking to herself as she continued along, "Oh, I'm sure they'll figure it out eventually. I mean it's so obvious." It wasn't long before her ear flicked, her hops grinding to a halt as she heard the faint echo of crying in the distance. Her smile bent itself into a thin frown as a hoof ran across her chin. "Who could be all the way out here and crying? Oh my gosh! What if Fluttershy got lost again?! Oh no!"

Pinkie galloped down the path, the faint sorrow growing in intensity. She saw a small blue pegasus curled up into a ball on the muddy path, tears matted across her cheeks. Pinkie's advance slowed as she called out, "Hi! Are you lost?"

The filly's head jerked up, darting around to find the source of the greeting before her blue eyes met with Pinkie's. She rose to her hooves, trying to back away. "N-no! I'm not lost I just..." Tears continued to roll down her cheeks as she looked away from Pinkie. "I'm just p-passing through."

Pinkie blinked, her frown turning back to a smile as she hopped to the filly's side, wrapping a hoof around her shoulder. "Well that's silly, why would you be passing through a scary place like this? You should be off at your home where it's safe, or going to a friend's home where it's safe, or just going somewhere where it's safe. Unless there's somewhere safe around here. Oh! If there is can you show me?! Me and my friends are looking for something."

The filly tried to squirm out of Pinkie's grasp, her frown turning to a smile despite her efforts to keep a solemn disposition. "I... ummm, I know where I'm going and-"

Pinkie's grip loosened as she jumped in front of the filly. "Oh, that reminds me! I don't even know your name yet. I'm Pinkie Pie! What's your name?"

The filly's eyes darted away from Pinkie, though she managed to move herself into the pegasus's gaze with each shift. It wasn't long before she conceded defeat. "I-I'm Cumulus... everyone in the village calls me Cumi though, but, I don't like it."

Pinkie Pie giggled, pulling the filly close again. "That's silly, you shouldn't hate the names friends give you. Unless they're mean names, but if they're from friends how could they be mean?"

Cumulus looked down, trying to pull away from Pinkie again. "I... don't really have any friends."

Pinkie moved her hooves to her mouth, a gasp slipping from her lips for a moment. "No no no no! That can't be true! Everypony has to have some friends."

"Well I don't." The filly moved away, sniffing as she laid back on the ground. "That's why I ran away..."

"No, there has to be somepony you could be friends with. No pony should ever be without a friend. Never ever ever!" Pinkie moved away from Cumulus, clearing her throat as she started to rummage through her saddlebags. The blue pegasus looked on in confusion as a record player popped out from its contents, spinning up and filling the air with a simple tune.

*Everypony needs a friend, someone to help them out  
With no one to be your pal, all you'll do is sit and pout  
Finding one isn't hard, you just have to take a look  
Searching far and wide, here and there, even inside a... book?*

The music stopped, Pinkie rubbing her chin and shaking her head lightly. "No... it doesn't work really well... Umm, let's just skip the song." Her hoof nudged the record player aside before she turned back to Cumulus, whose sniffing and tears had been replaced by a smile and a snicker under her breath. Pinkie smiled in returned as she hopped forward, pulling her up to her hooves. "See? It's not so hard to cheer up. Just turn that frown upside down, those tears into cheers, and those sniffles into, ummm... wiffle balls? Raffles? Truffles? Those are tasty, do you guys have truffles where you come from?"

Cumulus rubbed her hoof across her cheeks, whipping tears away and smiling. "I just... nopony ever seemed like they wanted to be-"

"Now don't ever think like that! You have to have something in common with somepony. Maybe you both like art, or parties, or grass... Lots of ponies like grass, that should be easy." Pinkie smiled as she moved back to the record player. "But you should leave here for sure, I mean your chances of finding anypony to be friends with out here is pretty slim. Well, except for me, but I wanna be everypony's friend... Unless they're meanie pants."

Pinkie turned on the record player again before she turned back to Cumulus. "Hey, do you wanna help me with my song?" She was greeted by the empty path, tilting her head for a moment before shrugging "I guess she decided to head off. I hope she'll be okay." Pinkie Pie returned to the player, turning its volume up as she mulled over the song in her mind. *There has to be something good that rhymes with look...* she mused before hearing the patter of hooves approaching along the path.

Pinkie turned around, face to face with her friends. She waved a hoof at them. "Oh, hey girls! I was wondering when you'd finally get here. I told you the right path was to the right. And don't worry, there wasn't anything dangerous down here, just somepony who needed a little help."

Twilight blinked, looking between Pinkie and the record player. "Ummm, Pinkie, what are you talking about? And where did you get that thing from?"

"Well obviously I was going to need music if I had to cheer somepony up with a song. Though I don't think the song really did it so much, but it all worked out for the best anyway. See how I found the right path?"

Twilight looked at the others. "But Pinkie we haven't even seen if this path goes anywhere."

Pinkie Pie held back another giggle as she pointed at some hoofprints on the ground, leading towards the group from the other end of the path. "If these prints came from the other side it has to go somewhere right? Besides, if you turned around and walked down the left backwards it would technically be your right, so maybe they were both right."

Dash shook her head as she started to float down the path. "Let's just get moving. My head is hurting trying to even understand that." With a few odd glances at Pinkie the group headed forward once again.

It wasn't long before the sound of rushing water carried itself to the group's ears, the path opening to the familiar river they had once crossed. Its banks had grown, while its width and depth had shrunk. It was no longer a challenge to cross like they had experienced before, especially without a serpent throwing a tantrum in their way. It only took a moment for group to cross, though Rarity stayed close to the shore afterwards.

She cleared her throat, looking at the others who came to a halt, glancing back at her. "Oh, girls, I'm sure you wouldn't mind stopping for a moment, would you? We've been out here in this muck and well, I think this is the best opportunity I'd have for a chance to clean up."

Dash groaned, dragging a hoof across her face. "Are you serious? We have somewhere important to go! We can't stop to take a bath."

"Well *excuse* me for wanting to stay hygienic out here with this filth. I'm only considering my safety and, well... sanity. Do you know the horrible things dirt and germs can do to you? Let alone to one's coat. Oh, it's dreadful just to think of it."

Twilight patted Dash lightly on the shoulder. "Look, we've been walking for a while. Maybe a few minutes of rest could do us all some good." The group started to rest their saddlebags on the ground before Rarity cleared her throat. "Oh? Is something wrong Rarity?"

Rarity stared blankly at Twilight and the others. "A bit of privacy would be nice, if it isn't too much... trouble?" With a few groans they picked their bags up once more, trotting towards the treeline and out of sight. Rarity smiled to herself, laying her bags down and her magic pulling a small cup from its contents as she trotted into the river. She took her time, trying to work out as much of the matted dirt and mud from her hooves and coat.

As she drew close to finishing, she heard a small rustling from the tree line, her eyes rolling in irritation. "I'm not finished yet girls. If you wouldn't mind being a little patient, please?"

Rarity's gaze shifted to the brush, just as a young colt stumbled from its confines onto the dirt. She tried to hold back a shriek as her hooves struggled in vain to cover some portion of her body. It was only after his body laid still for several moments that she jumped out of the river, rushing to his side. His coat of dark yellow was nearly snuffed out by the rough patches of brown and black armor strapped around his flank and haunches, and his mane of orange and red was ragged. He gasped for air, his legs twitching lightly.

"Umm, s-sir? Are you alright?" Rarity asked the colt, nudging a hoof at his flank meekly. "Oh dear, you must be parched and starving with that



look on your face. Just stay right there.” Rarity trotted back to the river, recovering her saddlebags before dropping them back to the ground next to the colt. He tried to shift his body, rolling onto his back as Rarity pulled out a small bag of rations and a canteen, holding it to the colt’s lips as he tried to chug it down.

“My goodness, whatever are you doing out here in this condition? It’s simply dreadful.” Rarity moved the canteen away, replacing it with the small napkin full of grass and mulch, which the colt quickly consumed.

He tried to stifle a cough before breathing a sigh of relief, his voice strained, “T-thank you m’lady. It’s... a good sight to see such helpful folks out here.” He winced in pain before rolling over, rising up to his hooves with a bit of trouble. “I-I got separated from some friends. I’ve been trying to find my way back, but these Wilds are just, well, confusing on the mind. I’ve been out of supplies for nearly a day and... I heard the river and voices, hoping I’d find somepony.”

Rarity tried to keep the colt steady, her hooves running across his coat, trying to check for a wound under his armor. After finding nothing serious, she spoke, “Well you happened to be lucky for today dear. How far are you from home?”

“I-I’m not sure. We were a day out when we got separated, and it’s been 3 days since then... I didn’t travel too far each day, but I think I can find my way back in the same time, if not shorter.”

Rarity smiled, her horn glowing as her saddlebags lifted from the ground, resting on the colt’s back gently. “Then you’ll need quite a bit in case you get lost again.”

The colt shook his head, looking at Rarity in disbelief. “No, I couldn’t take all of this, leaving somepony like you out here with nothing.”

“It’s no worry, darling, I have more than enough friends who can help me. You are the one that’s alone out here. I’d suggest you get moving soon though. We’ve gone through some rather unpleasant weather on our way here.”

“B-bless you m’lady. You’re truly a saint.” With a small wave the colt departed, leaving Rarity next to the river alone. She took a moment before she trotted to the tree line, following a set of hoofprints to a clearing where her friends were resting.

“All done girls. And from what I recall we shouldn’t be too far now, right?”

“I hope so Rarity,” Twilight said, picking herself off of the ground. “Let’s get moving girls, I’d rather we get there before anything else rolls into our way.”

Dash hovered up into the air. “Oh come on, what’s the worst that can happen, we’ve already made it this far. Just a quick trip over that bridge and we’re home free!”

---

Applejack looked to Dash, nudging a hoof into her side. “Just a quick trip over eh? That’d be all well an’ good if it were still here.” She looked out over the open chasm, two sets of rope tied to the other side of the gap, though what it was attached to was blocked by a thick fog.

Dash rolled her eyes as she lifted off of the ground, flying out over the gap. “Yeah yeah, I’ll get it fixed in a jiffy, piece of cake.” Her wings fluttered as she flew down into the small chasm, searching through the dense fog for the remains of the wooden bridge along the cliff wall. It took a bit for her to get close for fear of crashing into the side, but she could make out its worn form, still holding together after so long.

She was shocked when she reached out to grasp it, and felt a gust rip past her, nearly knocking her into the jagged cliffs. She was quick to turn around, shouting into the fog, “Who’s there?! Show yourself.” Another gust moved through the air towards Dash, which she barely noticed and dodged before it sliced into the cliff face, chipping a small bit of rubble off which fell into the endless abyss. Her front hooves shuffled back and forth in front of her face. “Come on, are you scared of fighting me face to face? I’m not gonna run away from a challenge.”

The fog began to thin in front of her as Rainbow Dash came face to face with pegasus adorned with black armor. Her mouth formed a thin smirk at Dash's response. "Of course not little filly. Though I don't think fighting a defenseless foal is the best option to test my skills now is it?"

"Who are you calling defenseless, huh?! You think I can't handle myself, that I can't take you on?!" Dash's gaze tapered down to a glare as her body leaned down, prepared to charge at her foe.

"Now that's the tenacity I like to see in my prey, but I wonder if you can back it up with your own two wings." The armored pegasus whipped her wings forward quickly, sending another gust at Rainbow Dash, but she only managed to impact the wall once more. As Dash tried to charge forward and push the pegasus into the cliff wall, she only moved out of her path with a laugh. "Is that as fast as you can go? This is going to be easier than I thought. Try and catch me if you can featherweight." The pegasus dashed off deeper into the fog and left Dash with a sneer on her face.

"Featherweight?! I'll show that lit-" She looked back at the remains of the bridge she hung from the wall before she glanced back up, the moonlight barely piercing the thick fog. A fight was just what the pegasus wanted, and Dash was more than willing to provide it, but now wasn't the time.

With a sigh and one last look into the fog where the pegasus had fled, Dash hovered over to the hanging rope and gripped it in her mouth before she shot up to the other side of the gap. It only took a moment before the ropes were taught, turning to face her friends with a smile. "Sorry about that girls, just a bit hard to see down there." As the others started across the bridge, Dash took a moment to collect her thoughts before following them.

Through the thick fog and over the rickety bridge the six fillies walked, just as they had a thousand years before, and were greeted by the sight they had long since forgotten: the ruined walls and deteriorated towers of the Ancient Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters, somehow not completely swallowed whole by time's passing. As they drew closer to its walls and the stone gate passed over their heads, they were greeted by a large open room, filled only with the statue that had once held the "Elements of Harmony," or at least the stones that bore their symbols from ages past.

Twilight looked around the room as she approached the statue, the letter from her saddlebag a foot or so in front of her, "What are we supposed to be looking for? Is it something? Someone? The Elements were destroyed when we fought Nightmare Moon, so it can't be those... So what could it be?" A hoof brushed along her chin as she examined the letter for any kind of clue it might offer, or hoped that something might magically appear out of thin air to offer them guidance. Her focus was broken as she heard Pinkie Pie shout out something from behind her.

"A combo! I feel a combo coming on..." Pinkie's tail twitched for only a moment before her ears began to flop, followed by a shudder along her spine. Everypony looked nervous and Applejack appeared ready to take cover under the nearby statue as Pinkie simply blinked. "Huh... I haven't felt that one in a while."

Twilight's eyes darted around the room as she moved to Pinkie's side. "Well? What does it mean? Is it something bad, something good, something at all?!"

Pinkie rubbed her chin as she traced her tongue along her lips. "Hmmmm, don't remember, but I'm sure it'll come to me."

A roar pierced through the air like a crash of thunder, everypony poised on their hooves for whatever was on its way. The roar was followed by the flapping of wings, the feeling of heat in the air, and the crash of one of the nearby towers into a chasm. The ponies only caught a glimpse before the beast towered over their heads. It was a dragon, its large emerald eyes fixed on them through the shattered remains of the Castle's roof. Its dark scales gleamed in the pale moonlight, contrasted by bright spines along its back. Its neck craned down into the room, his face only inches from Twilight as smoke drifted out of his nostrils.

Twilight tried to keep her composure as the dragon stared intently at her before it shot a glance at the other five. Her mind was overcome by fear, but somewhere amongst the tempest of doubt she held onto the hope of who she prayed it really was.

The dragon's glare and grim visage was replaced by a smirk as its neck reared back out of the room. "Well, well, well. I never thought the day would come." His voice echoed through the silent halls, a deep bass that

assaulted their ears. He started to laugh at Twilight and her friends' expressions as he looked up at the moon, "Oh come on, it hasn't been that long for you, has it?" He leaned back down to Twilight's level, though nowhere near as close to her as before. "To forget your number one assistant that is."

"S-s-SPIKE?!" Twilight gasped as her eyes went wide at the realization, her fear replaced by joy as she jumped forward, tears rolling down her cheeks, "It really is you! I-I hoped, some part of me knew, it just had to be you!"

"I guess I have changed a lot since the old days huh? Though you all look the same as before. I guess that's to be expected, given the circumstances."

Dash flew up to Spike's side and nudged a hoof lightly into his thick scales. "Well, glad you beefed up a bit over the years there Spike. Can't say we aren't gonna need a little muscle with what's on the way."

"I was just glad after the runes started going off that it was really all of you... There have been so many that just stumble in, false alarms..." Spike shook his head lightly, "But no, that's not what this is about. You guys need to get on board, we've got somewhere important to be."

Rarity looked up at Spike with a small chuckle, "Surely you don't mean... riding on you, Spike? I mean, I'm sure you can get us where we're supposed to go, but it's just-."

Spike laughed, accompanied by a small puff of smoke from his nostrils, "Don't worry, it's a smoother ride than you'd think." He turned around and let his tail rest on the ground to provide them a path onto his back. "Trust me, it's important..." As each pony slowly climbed onto Spike's wide back, he glanced at Rainbow Dash, still in the air at his side. "Don't want to join Dash?"

"Ehhhh, no thanks Spike. No offense but I prefer my own two wings to someone else's. Besides, I can race ya there." She flew in a small circle to get her wings stretched.

“That’s going to be a bit hard not knowing the way, don’t you think? But you’re on Dash, I have been practicing out here with nothing to do, so don’t expect a pushover.” He made sure that everypony was secure on his back before his wings flapped heavily, lifting off from the ruins. The flight was almost as smooth as Spike had promised, though his attempt at outpacing Rainbow Dash managed to upset that stillness a few times.

The Wilds looked so different from above as Twilight glanced over Spike’s side. She barely made out the lights of several villages in the distance, including Gallant Hollow at the base of the mountain they had traveled from. Granted, the lights could have been mistaken for anything from so far away, but the other lights she spotted could not. They were past the borders of the Wilds in Equestria, the land they once called home, and the one they now called an enemy. It wasn’t long before they faded from sight and Spike began to land at the entrance to a large cave.

Spike let his passengers off before he moved inside, his heavy footsteps causing the ground to shudder in response. Around a few dark turns the ponies were greeted by a bright light, right before their silence was broken by a squeal of excitement from Rarity, “My goodness Spike! How ever did you find so many jewels?!” She quickly rushed forward from the others to inspect the pile as Applejack and Dash rolled their eyes.

Spike moved into the large open cavern and took a seat against a smooth wall which showed signs of wear. “Don’t go getting envious of them Rarity. I mean it is my dinner for the next year or so.”

Twilight moved up to Spike’s feet, her neck craned to keep eye contact with him. “Spike, you said there was somewhere important we had to be? Is this it?”

Spike nodded, “It’s actually to meet someone.” His tail moved behind the large pile of gems and emerged seconds later carrying a small crystal ball in its grip. He gently placed it between the ponies before he moved his tail away.

Dash raised an eyebrow at the crystal before she turned to Spike, “Ummm, I don’t really feel up to playing fortune teller after all of this trouble, Spike. If we’re supposed to meet someone, shouldn’t it be face to face?”

There was a bright flash of light from the orb as it hovered a few feet above the ground, a faint echo emanating from it that transformed into a voice, calm and clear, "I'm afraid that won't be possible at the moment Rainbow Dash." Its owner was affirmed as Princess Celestia's face appeared within the orb, a glow of white and gold around her.

Twilight pushed Dash to the side in an attempt to get closer to the Princess's image. "Princess Celestia, but how? I thought you were captured, or... worse." Her hoof shuffled against the floor at the thought of the Princess being gone forever.

The orb turned to face her, Celestia's face offering a smile to her student. "It's very good to see you and your friends Twilight Sparkle, but I'm afraid it's not so simple. I am merely a fragment, a piece of the Princess which she tore from her mind and soul in preparation for Nightmare Moon's return. Luckily, Spike was able to perform a few tasks for her, including caring for me these many years."

Spike bowed his head. "It was my pleasure, Princess."

Twilight's face was affixed with a look of confusion at the "Princess's" words. "Something like that... how could she have done that? It would've taken most of her magic, she could've defeated Nightmare Moon."

"Celestia was aware that if Nightmare Moon had taken the steps necessary to remove you and your friends from her reach, then she had plans to deal with her as well. Her only option was to ensure that if, or when, you should return, you would have the tools necessary to combat Nightmare Moon." The orb rotated, allowing Celestia's visage to glance at the six fillies. "And now that you have come here, it is time you know exactly what transpired on that day a thousand years ago."

Celestia's horn within the sphere glimmered with the same golden light the orb emanated. An image appeared in the air above, a light blue mist that twisted itself into an image of Twilight's library. "I do not know the entire circumstances surrounding it, but Twilight, you and your friends were trapped within your home in Ponyville. A spell almost as ancient as the world itself was cast by you, and placed you all in a stasis. Because of the spell, no pony was able to enter or affect the library in which you six

resided for some time, though the spell's effect did fade on the tree before it did you. The Princess was unsure how long the spell would last, but she was immediately aware of the perpetrator and their motives."

The image shifted to Canterlot, and the throne room within its walls gleaming with golden light. Celestia was seated upon its throne, her gaze locked upon Nightmare Moon at the room's entrance and the dark shadow which grew from her mane. "Nightmare Moon had returned once again, and sought to bring about the same endless night she wished for twice before. However, she had assistance this time, a unicorn of strong magical talents and a heart, mind, and soul easily bent to her will."

Fluttershy looked up at the image that seemed so real above them, "Who would do something like that, to help someone so dark?"

"It was somepony you are all too familiar with unfortunately, whose hatred was a seed cultivated to fruition." The mist shifted again as a young blue unicorn hovered above them, a wand with dust trailing its path along her flank, "Trixie, the unicorn that you and your friends had driven from Ponyville in embarrassment. How she came to find Nightmare Moon, or was twisted to her will is beyond my knowledge, but with Trixie's aid, Nightmare Moon was able to remove Celestia's magic, the only thing that kept me linked to her."

The mist shifted to Nightmare Moon's visage with images of destruction behind her, each one fading and replaced with each passing moment. "Without Princess Celestia to oppose her, Nightmare Moon brought about the night she had longed for, and came to rule Equestria, and the world followed after. You are no doubt aware of how the world stands now. Equestria is ripe with oppression and corruption at its core, infecting everything it touches, and in the Wilds ponies hope to hide for the rest of their days in solitude and fear."

The mist faded as the glow from the orb dimmed. "And so here you all stand, the Elements of Harmony, the symbols of hope and freedom that will be the banner which unites this world against Nightmare Moon."

Dash stamped a hoof on the ground. "And how are we supposed to do that? We don't have weapons, and there are only so many ponies in the Wilds. We can't just make an army appear out of nowhere."



“But you can build one. Equestria’s enemies may be subverted, but they are not gone entirely. You will have to travel far and wide in order to find those that will aid you, and the path will not be an easy one. However, I do have a few gifts that may help. The first is a means of transportation. In the ruins of Canterlot, buried deep in the mountains is a gateway, a portal once used as a means of traveling to far-off nations. Princess Celestia was able to use it for diplomatic reasons. However, you will need a key, which is your second gift. Spike, if you please.”

Spike nodded as his tail moved back behind the pile and returned with a large book in its grasp. He held it up to Twilight before placing it gently on the ground. It was colored solid white and adorned with gold and gems. At its center was a bright golden sun, shaped to match Celestia’s cutie mark. Twilight’s horn glowed as she lifted it up to her and flipped through the pages. “This... I’ve seen this before. This is Princess Celestia’s spellbook, but... no, no I can’t take this, I don’t-.”

“You must, Twilight. Princess Celestia herself had Spike take this from Canterlot, for you. She alone wanted to entrust it to your hooves.”

Twilight wiped a tear from under her eyes. “T-thank you, Princess.”

“And there is one last gift, for all of you. While I do not have the magic that the true Princess Celestia possesses, I was given enough to unlock your potentials.”

Applejack looked between everyone before she gazed up at Celestia’s image, “Potentials? I don’t think we know exactly what yer talkin’ about Your Highness.”

“You’ll see in a moment Applejack, though I think you all may want to close your eyes.” They were only given a moment before a flash of golden light enveloped the entire room. Everypony could feel the weight of their saddlebags vanish from their shoulders, only to be replaced with something else. For Applejack and Rainbow Dash it felt heavy, though not constricting, while for Rarity and Pinkie Pie it felt somewhat lighter their bags had been, and for Fluttershy and Twilight it almost felt like a feather was draped across their shoulders. As the flash faded and the normal light

returned to the cave's recesses, they were greeted by the sight of one another, adorned with armor, each different from one another.

Applejack stood covered with silver plate on her entire body, accented by sections of alabaster, and three orange apple crests at the front of her armor, with a golden sun seated behind it like a shield. The armor tapered off around her neck, but as she looked at the others it expanded and formed a helmet around her face, giving her enough vision to still see clearly around her. She reared back on her hind legs with a small grin on her face. "Now this is better than them leather scraps by a long shot!" She was shocked when the side of her armor expanded the same as the helmet had, and a spear grew out from her side, glistening in the light of the cave. "And that ain't half bad neither."

Rainbow Dash had sections of light plate on her legs and body, colored silver like Applejack's, but accented with streaks of blue instead of white. A red thunderbolt on the foreground of a golden sun sat on her chest. Her armor expanded the same as Applejack's to form a light helm on her head that opened in the back to let her hair flow freely. On her wings were a similar material that easily bent with the flexing of her wings. As she fully flexed them and took a glance at her armor, a series of blades shot out underneath. Each blade was thin enough to move easily in the wind, and were all colored differently: on her right wing were red, yellow, and blue, and on her left were orange, green, and violet. As she drew her wings back to her flank, the blades receded in the blink of an eye. "Oh yeah, definitely cool."

Rarity's armor was not as heavy as Applejack's or Dash's, but it did cover most of her body, colored a glowing white that reflected the dim light of the cave like a mirror. At her front were the three purple diamonds of her cutie mark against a golden sun, just as the others, but at her back was a small white gown flowing over her flank and hind legs, cut off just before it reached the floor, with a small quiver attached to her side. She looked over herself with a smile on her face. "Well, this is quite fashionable, though I doubt how useful it's all going to be on the battlefield." As she moved her hoof up to the diamonds at her front, portions of her armor separated into various shapes and stretched out from her body, reflecting the light as they moved like mirrors and lenses. Rarity's horn glowed to remove one of the arrows from the quiver, her eyes examining it as it floated in front of her. "And it has been a few months since I used one of these."

Pinkie Pie was covered with small bits of cloth, blended together to look like a jester's costume colored in pink, yellow, and blue. The similarly colored balloons of her cutie mark against a golden sun hung from her neck as a small medallion, twisting lightly from its chain as her hoof nudged it. Against her flank sat two small saddlebags, each adorned with a theatre mask against a pink background: Tragedy on her left flank, and Comedy on her right. Pinkie quickly took them off and placed them on the ground in front of her as she proceeded to open them. Everypony seemed shocked as Pinkie nearly shoved a leg shoulder deep into the 'Comedy' bag, digging around for several moments before she pulled it back out. In her grasp she held onto a small plastic figure which was shaped to look like her, though it did a horrible job at it. "My hair doesn't look like that," she mused before tossing it back onto Spike's pile of gems.

Fluttershy's body was adorned with an elegant gown, colored to match her yellow coat with small vines and flowers embroidered on its length in a mix of white, green, and purple. Underneath was a small layer of white leather, and at her front it was emblazoned with the three pink butterflies of her cutie mark, against the background of a golden sun. Fluttershy felt a small heat from the crest as it glowed with a pink light. She felt somehow stronger amongst its glow, as if its warmth revitalized her. "This... it's beautiful."

Twilight looked between the others before she turned to herself. Along her flank was a simple robe of white and gold, and atop her head, just behind her horn, was a golden tiara. However, it was not the one that had appeared on Nightmare Moon's defeat. Instead, it was Princess Celestia's, or at least shaped in the same form, with Twilight's cutie mark at its crest in a gleaming mix of purple and white. Around Twilight's neck was the same large golden necklace that Celestia wore as well. With a smile she looked back up at the floating orb. "Thank you, Princess Celestia. These are... they're amazing."

The orb started to shudder in the air before it came to rest on the ground, its bright light dimming as Celestia smiled up at Twilight, her voice straining to continue, "Well, that has taken more out of me than I expected. Spike can lead you to the ruins of Canterlot, but you will have to split up to reach your destinations effectively. The gryphons of Aeolus have been the start of many rebellions over the years, and while the zebras of Savanra

abandoned their northern grasslands at Nightmare Moon's invasion, rumors say they are still alive within the oases of the vast deserts of the south. However, you and Spike, Twilight, will have somewhere special to travel."

The others looked at Twilight with perplexed faces as Celestia continued, "On the other side of this world, on the far side of the sea lies a small chain of islands, known for millennia as Kraulith. It is there that you will find the ancient home of the five tribes of dragons, an area of peace and refuge far away from the other races of this world. Since Nightmare Moon's reign began, not a single dragon has been seen outside of Kraulith, and I want you and Spike to attempt and recruit them to this cause." Celestia grunted in pain as the orb's glow began to flicker, "You have to leave now, time is of the essence. I will remain here to collect my strength again."

Twilight moved closer to the orb and leaned down to stare into Celestia's image as it flickered within the ball. "Please, Princess, there's so many questions that we have to ask, we-." Twilight stopped as the crystal ball was clear once again, deaf to her pleas. With a sigh she raised her head back up, looking at the others, "Then... I guess we have to go. Spike, we'll need to go to Gallant Hollow first to tell them about what's going on. Can you take us there first?"

He nodded, "Of course Twilight, I'll be waiting outside, whenever you're all ready to go." The ground once again shook with Spike's footsteps as he left the cave. Twilight gave a short glance to the Princess's spellbook on the cold ground before she grabbed her saddlebags a few feet away from her, freeing enough room to place it snugly inside.

---

The sky above Mare Umbra was filled with the crashes of thunder and flashes of lightning as rain crashed down heavily on its cobble streets. Within the slums of Dark Side the ground melted into a soup of mud while ponies tried feebly to stay warm within trembling shacks. The recesses of Castle Nightmare offered some refuge from the bitter cold, but even its guards at the peak of its walls and towers, steadfast and vigilant in their watch, shivered in the torrential downpour.

Illuminated by the flashes of lightning, slowly approaching the iron gates of the Castle, was a dark blue carriage pulled by a pair of pegasi, dressed entirely in black. As they touched down outside of the gates and waited for its doors to part, a figure stirred inside of the carriage, brushing sleep from their eyes as a faint yawn resonated from within. Once under the cover of the Castle's main entrance, the two pegasi detached from the chariot and moved to the side.

A figure cloaked in a blue and black shawl stepped from the chariot, and walked towards the Castle's doors. "Rip, Tear, you can take your leave for now. I won't need your assistance for quite some time." The two pegasi bowed before they flew off to one of the guard towers, leaving the pony to herself. As she walked through the massive doors and through the winding halls she was greeted with bows at every turn. Before long she arrived at the throne room, with Nightmare Moon and her guards to greet her as she kneeled in front of her.

Nightmare Moon smiled at the cloaked figure, "Ah, it's good to see you again. What news do you have to bring me?"

The figure rose to her hooves as the shawl removed itself with a faint magical aura. Locks of silver glistened in the faint light against her light blue coat as she grinned at Nightmare Moon, a hoof adjusting her cloak, "Nothing of interest, Your Highness. The pathetic rebellions were nothing before the might of the Great and Powerful Trixie."

"I expected nothing less. You'll be pleased to know that Foulric and Mossrow are on their way to Wilds at this moment, and our problem will be solved soon."

Trixie's face contorted to one of shock and anger as she shouted, "What?! You let those pathetic generals take the honor of dragging that pathetic unicorn and her friends to your throne?! I'll have to depart now to show those precious little Ponyvillians what's been waiting for them all these years." Trixie turned to leave the throne room quickly.

Nightmare Moon's mane billowed with fury as she glared down at Trixie. "No, you have things to tend to here. Besides, your vengeance can wait until they lie broken on this floor. Amber is performing less than

admirably at her task, and she will need your assistance to ensure things go correctly.”

“What?! The Great and Powerful Trixie being stuck on some senseless science project instead of out on the battlefield? Besides, Foulric can’t see more than the medals on his fluffy, feathered chest, and Mossrow is more obsessed with showing up his peers than fighting an actual battle.”

“*Enough Trixie!* You have your orders, and you will follow them. The final hour is drawing close and I will not have anything slip out of my grasp at this crucial hour. I am fully confident in Foulric and Mossrow’s abilities.”

---

The cold air of the night sky whipped past everyone as Spike made his way towards Gallant Hollow with Twilight’s directions. Rainbow Dash was busy trying out her new armor, and was more than capable of making her usual aerobatic maneuvers, even with the odd plates attached to her wings. In fact the entire set almost made them easier to complete as she performed a few rolls around Spike’s torso with ease. “Man! These are incredible. How come we didn’t get this cool stuff the first time we beat Nightmare Moon? You know, not that my necklace wasn’t totally awesomer than all yours already.”

Twilight and the others could barely hear Dash over the roar of the wind as they drew closer to the distant mountain with each passing moment. It was only as they neared it that their attention was drawn to something else. Smoke. The same smoke they had seen on the day they had awoken, but this time there was more of it, and it was coming straight for them.

---

# Chapter 8

About a mile into the Everfree Wilds, the crushing of bark and the splintering of tree limbs resonated through the air, deafened by the hum of engines as seven large metal monstrosities pushed forward, tearing down every tree in their path as a pair of grinders attached to their fronts tore the wood to shreds. From their backs spewed pitch black ash and smoke which rose into the air as an ominous signal of the destruction they carried with their arrival and left as their trail. At their sides were several earth ponies, making sure that they were working properly as they cut a swath through the treeline, growing deeper by the minute. The more alarming sight, however, was what the smoke concealed from sight in the open fields behind them.

Set up across several acres was an army prepared to march, made of troops resting in tents or tending to supplies or catapults in similar appearance to the metallic monsters cutting through the woods. Amidst the scattered tents were several circles of earth ponies or unicorns facing off against one another in armed combat or dodging bolts of magic flung through the air, which left a sizzling trail of heat behind them. The air was thick with the scent of blood lust and rage as an injury or death appeared a somewhat common occurrence, and while the former was remedied quickly with the aid of some trained unicorns cloaked in grey the latter was left to rot on the soft green grass.

In the skies above, several lightly armored pegasi and gryphons did the same, practicing maneuvers or traveling between tents with orders, maps, and supplies for the march to come. One young gryphon in particular dashed through the calm sky with urgency towards a large tent set up at the edge of a hill overlooking the army, her brown and white feathers blowing lightly in the gust that trailed her. She took a moment to compose herself after landing at its entrance before throwing the drapes open.

Inside the massive tent were a few ponies wearing black uniforms gathered around a large table littered with maps and documents concerning troop make-ups and supplies that had been accounted for. The air hummed with debate over proper strategy or what kind of enemy force

they might expect to encounter. At the head of the table stood a large gryphon, his entire body covered with black feathers, tipped with a light tinge of red, with a black metal plate at his breast, adorned with two crossed golden talons. He seemed uninterested in the discussion as his eyes stayed focused on the documents around the table, until the younger gryphon entered.

His neck craned up as his voice bellowed over the discussion, "That is enough for now captains. The strategy Mossrow and I have prepared will be more than adequate. Remember, we are dealing with a highly organized group of ponies more than capable of defending their homelands for this long, and in an environment that is extremely harsh to its outsiders. Make sure that your troops are well aware that these are not untrained savages, and that they should be ready for whatever we come across. We'll commence the march in two hours' time. You are dismissed."

As the captains filed out of the tent and set out to return to their troops, the black gryphon looked to his visitor with a warm smile, "Ah, Avia, I see you've returned from the crusher group. Do you have good news to report?"

The young gryphon bowed quickly in response, "Yes General Foulric, the crushers have been keeping their speed for the last hour, and there appear to be no major hiccups so far. Unfortunately, much of the debris can't be cleared at this pace, so we may have some trouble marching the entirety of the troop line through as planned."

Foulric shook his head lightly, "I knew this idea wouldn't work... Mossrow is nothing but a brutish foal trying to push through a brick wall with his bare hooves. Have the troop movements cut in half for normal ground forces, keep the same planned Battlehorn and catapult contingents moving forward like the original strategy called for. Get the information to the Scryers for relaying once the movements start."

Avia nodded as she stood up from her bow, "And what about General Mossrow? Do you know his whereabouts?"

"Given his past, most likely out enjoying his usual 'festivities'... I'm sure his stomping grounds are whatever circle forms closest to his quarters, so we won't need to travel far to find him."



“I can have one of the guards call him back to you.”

The black gryphon shook his head, “No, I’ll go have this discussion with him now.”

---

The clash of steel resonated from the center of the dirt ring, ponies of all shades gathered around. Inside its boundaries a small, light green colt squared off against a dark red colt who towered above him, adorned with armor. In each colt’s mouth was a blade, held tightly between their teeth. Despite their differences in size, however, the larger colt was breathing heavily, on the brink of exhaustion as the green colt dashed forward for another strike. He tried to get his guard back up as the smaller colt swiftly dodged a slash of the blade, using his own to push his opponent’s head upward, leaving his legs open.

With a swift buck to his legs and a grunt of pain, the large colt released the blade as it pierced the soft earth next to his body, now strewn across the dirt. The green colt quickly placed the blade against his throat, stamping a hoof onto his gut as he stared into his eyes with a grin, muttering lightly around his blade, “So predictable, filled with pride before the fight and fear at its conclusion... I wonder if your mother even let you stop sucking from the teat before you asked her to sign you up to play soldier...”

Beads of sweat fell down the colt’s face as his eyes darted from side to side, “Please... I- I’m sorry, w-we’re supposed to be on the same side!”

The blade pressed harder into his neck, drawing a trickle of blood, “And now you’re begging! It’s enough to make me laugh... You don’t even belong under my command you pitiful little bi-”

A shout pierced through the crowd, “Mossrow!” The ponies around the ring parted to let the black gryphon enter the ring, Avia standing at its boundary as she kept a close eye on the two. The green colt smirked as he turned to face his peer, twisting the blade lightly with his tongue before he jumped off the colt, throwing his weapon through the colt’s hind leg, pinning

him to the ground in a small puddle of crimson as he screamed in pain and two cloaked unicorns moved forward from the edge of the ring.

“Foulric, such a pleasure to see you out on the field. I thought you’d be up in your little tent giving orders for the entire battle like usual. Do you want to get your precious talons bloody this time around? I promise it comes out, though I think it might match your feathers it leave it in.” The green colt turned back to the sobbing colt, muttering under his breath, “What a foal... do you expect an enemy to care while you’re bawling at the edge of death?”

Foulric narrowed his gaze, “The march is starting soon, I thought I had told you to stay at the generals’ station so that we could finalize the movements. And injuring your troops isn’t exactly helping our situation.”

Mossrow trotted towards the edge of the ring, rolling his eyes, “If it’s injuring ones like that, we’ll be better off in the long run. Besides, you always boast about how my strategy is nothing but horse-apples, so isn’t my input less than appreciated?” He turned back to Foulric, “I see you brought your little prodigy, is she going to be attached to your hip like usual?”

Foulric tried to ignore his “partner’s” pokes and prods as the crowd began to dissipate and the three began to walk back towards the generals’ tent at the crest of the hill, “The path cleared by the crushers isn’t going to be free of debris like we expected, so the ground troops will be cut in half for the march. But the special troops will be the same number. We’ll have to move slowly to be prepared.”

“I still don’t know why we need to be so cautious. These savages won’t stand on their hooves for a second once my soldiers get close to them.”

“These ‘savages’ are more prepared than you might expect, and your troops are not used to fighting out here. Besides, we have no idea what they might have in sto-”

Foulric was cut off as a loud roar echoed through the sky and everypony’s attention was drawn to the treeline of the Everfree Wilds. Under the pale moonlight they could barely see a shape that resembled a

massive lizard only a few feet above the tree tops in the distance, soon obstructed by a massive blur flying towards the camp. The ground under their hooves shuddered like an earthquake as one of the crushers crashed into a section of tents, a series of screams silenced in a moment's notice as shards of metal flew into the surrounding area and an explosion of gasoline and oil showered the meadow with a burst of flames. Mossrow couldn't help but grin as he turned to the gryphon, "You're right... it looks like this will be more exciting than I could have dreamed..."

---

Spike let out another roar as the ponies on the ground below began to scurry quickly around the remaining six crushers in a panic. He flew away from their cover as he looked back to the five ponies still on his back, "Are you sure about this Twilight? I don't know if you all should be heading down there."

"We have to Spike, the others still need time to get here and we're the only ones that can hold them off." Twilight turned back to Applejack, whose helmet obstructed her face, "Are you sure you'll be alright down there Applejack?"

"Sure as sugar, ain't nopony gonna stand a chance against this here Apple." Her vision scanned across the debris stricken path out to the meadow, spotting several ponies trying to make their way back to the main camp, "Spike! Over there, just get me close and ah'll take care of the rest!"

Spike flapped his wings quickly as he barreled through the air, his shadow passing over the group in moments. Applejack wasted no time as she jumped from the dragon's back with a yell, "YEEEEHAW!" It was only seconds before her arrival at the ground was followed by a large shockwave, knocking several of the ponies to the ground while others quickly prepared the weapons on the sides of their armor or drew a blade in their mouths. Applejack took a quick count of her opponents before one dashed towards her. He was met with a swift buck, sending him flying into a nearby tree that splintered on impact.

The others wasted no time in trying to gang up on her as the side of her armor expanded to form her spear, twisting and shifting at her thought as she tried to knock her attacker's weapons away or send them flying.

Even those that got through had their weapons slide harmless against her armored flank before she countered their attack. A few of the soldiers regrouped as more of their companions arrived, fleeing from the scene of destruction caused at the cluster of crushers as flames began to grow in the air.

Applejack cursed under her breath, "This is gunna be tough... but it ain't nothin' an Apple can't handle!" She charged forward towards a group of three colts as she clenched her eyes shut, a single thought repeating in her head: "It's to save lives..." Her spear easily pierced through the side of one of the colt's armor before she flung him away, a tinge of red flowing down from its tip as she bucked the other two away. Applejack repeated the phrase under her breath as more soldiers arrived, "...It's to save lives."

---

Spike opened his claws as he gripped another crusher, giving a shout as he flung it into the camp like the previous one, knocking two more to their sides as their operators abandoned them. Once most of the ponies were gone from the front he landed with a heavy flap of his wings, bending down to let the others off. "I'll do my best to keep them occupied with Rainbow Dash in the clouds. You guys need to be careful."

Twilight gave Spike a nod as she looked at Fluttershy, still on the dragon's back, "You'll be safe with Spike, Fluttershy... And don't worry, we'll be okay, I promise." Fluttershy could only reply with a small squeak as she laid her head down on Spike's scales, trying to hide her face under her mane as he took off back in the air.

Twilight looked at Pinkie and Rarity as she squinted to see Applejack in the distance, "She won't be able to hold them off for long on her own, we need to get moving. Rarity, can you keep them at a distance?"

Rarity rubbed a hoof on her chin as one of the arrows from her quiver floated in front of her, "I only did this for recreation darling... I'm not sure I can hit a moving target, but I can do my best."

"We need just enough to get them cautious about charging forward to meet us... though Spike will probably help with that too. I can try and do my best to help, but I wasn't able to study much fighting magic under Princess

Celestia..." She pulled the book from her saddlebags as she continued, "I'll try and find something in her spellbook before they actually move forward. Pinkie, are yo-" Twilight turned to look at the pink earth pony, only to find her missing from where she stood moments before, "...I guess she already left on her own."

---

As the flames began to rise in the distance, troops started to scurry into the path of destruction left by the crushers in small numbers, rushing to meet their fleeing peers, while in the skies above several pegasi and gryphons grouped up in attempt to prepare for a charge from the massive beast who soared nearby. As a set of twenty or so moved with talons and blades ready, a streak of rainbow-colored light soared out from a nearby cloud and between three armored pegasi before they began to fall down to the ground below, scars under one side of their wings as they tried to slow their decent with the other.

The streak twisted through the air sharply as it returned, the group faced to meet it. With every return trip however, more of the gryphons and pegasi met the same fate, falling down to the ground slowly. Only one gryphon was left as the streak began to dissipate, Rainbow Dash hovering before him. "T-there's no way one pegasus could do that! Not even an Eclipse, it's impossible!"

Dash smirked as she flexed her wings, the blades on their underside glimmering in the pale moonlight, "You've obviously never met the fastest pegasus alive, now or then!" She pushed her hooves forward as the blades retracted for only a moment, letting her wings flap to pick up speed. The gryphon reached his talons forward as he soared towards her, trying to swipe at her as she got close. With a shift of her weight and twist of her wings, Dash barely dodged from the swipe, the blades on her right wing shooting out as she passed the gryphon, his wing torn in half as feathers and blood fell like a light snow to the ground below, followed by his figure.

Dash noticed another large group of fliers approaching as she turned to fly to Spike, taking only a moment to rest on the dragon's back, "We have to hold out... for all of them."

---

Twilight and Rarity galloped across the debris of the forest as they could see Applejack holding out against a dozen or so earth ponies around her, and in the distance they could see several more making their way towards them. As Twilight opened the saddlebag at her side, carefully removing and opening Princess Celestia's spellbook, Rarity took position near the tree line and squinted to get a closer look at the ponies charging forward. As an arrow floated to her side and the tip aimed towards the approaching soldiers, she felt a small piece of her armor break off and hover in front of her eye, bending and flexing as the image zoomed in her sight.

"...Well, that certainly helps. Stylish and functional." Rarity focused through the sight as her magic bent around the arrow, a blue wisp of air forming the faint shape of a bow around its form. With a deep breath, the string began to tense as the arrow shuddered lightly in place. Once her vision was focused on one of the soldiers, she aimed ahead of his path and let the arrow go, quickly piercing the side of his armor as he fell down with a grunt of pain. A few of his companions stopped to help as the others continued their march forward before Rarity drew another arrow, "...This has to be done... for everyone at the Hollow... for everypony we left behind."

Meanwhile, Twilight quickly skimmed through the pages of the spellbook, past several pages of several traditional spells before it opened to a list of a more offensive variety. Everything from focusing on throwing larger projectiles to summoning fire or twisting the elements to one's will were listed on its pages. As she looked up and took note of Rarity's progress on the soldiers and Applejack's situation with the dwindling number around her still on their hooves, she kept the book open as her eyes closed tight.

Her horn began to grow brightly as her breathing slowed, a wisp of air kicking up dust around her figure. After a few moments of concentration her eyes opened wide, covered by an aura of purple energy as she focused on the battle ahead of her. It was only seconds before a wave of flame cut off the path of the reinforcements, stopping them in their tracks. The flames quickly receded as a wave of purple energy collected and shot out down the path, knocking ten of the ponies to the ground or into the tree line before it faded. "I won't let them hurt anyone else, I won't!" Her horn glowed

even brighter as she prepared for the next wave of attackers, the air around her blowing in a frenzy.

---

Foulric stood at the crest of the hill outside of his tent as he overlooked the devastation. Nearly all of his catapults had been shredded by the second crusher that had exploded in the back of the camp, while many of his ground forces were either dead or injured nearby. Luckily, it was only the rear of the troops which were left in shambles while the front of the camp had moved to engage their attackers, and Mossrow had of course left to join them. Meanwhile, in the sky above his gryphons and pegasi were moving to engage the flying beast and rainbow streak that had joined it.

What troubled him however were the bursts of light and energy coming from the woods, and the forces he could see retreating. He sighed as he turned back to the tent and stepped inside, where a unicorn with a black cloth covering his eyes was waiting for him.

“Are you ready for the connection sire?”

Foulric gave an uncomfortable nod as he sat down for a moment. The connection to the Scryer network was not the most enjoyable experience, but it was necessary for any battle situation, especially one so dire. It took only a moment before he felt the wisps of magic around the edge of his neck, followed shortly by a burst of pain as he felt his mind invaded by the thoughts of dozens of ponies, all shouting between one another, their emotions in a furious storm as they tried to overcome his own calm. It took a few moments before he could gain control of himself again, quieting the shouts as his own thoughts came back to the forefront.

He opened his eyes before looking back to the blinded unicorn, his voice booming through the connection, “All captains and squad leaders, this is General Foulric. We are against an unknown opponent and our forces have been caught off guard. I want all available captains to report in on their status and call a regroup at the entrance of the path into the Wilds. All gryphon and pegasi units press the attack on the winged lizard, but be prepared for a quick retreat at my order.”

Foulric exited the tent and was greeted by Avia, waiting on him as ponies made their retreat in the distance. With a heavy flap of his wings he lifted off, making his way towards the front as he drew information from the minds of his captains. Whoever they were up against, they were definitely stronger than his troops.

---

Fluttershy watched the battle bellow as she could see the charging ponies headed towards Applejack, Twilight, and Rarity making their retreat. Meanwhile, Rainbow Dash was taking a moment to rest as Spike hovered in place, waiting for another wave of fliers to try and take him down. She had wanted to do something, to help, but she couldn't fight, she couldn't stand up here, not against an entire army. She just wasn't brave enough, or strong enough, to place her hooves on the ground.

As a final wave of ponies made their way through the debris of the wilds while others made the retreat, she closed her eyes, muttering under her breath, "I want to help..." In response the crest at her front began to glow, the cloth draped around her billowing lightly from a sudden gust of wind and warmth in the pink light. A soft voice filled her head, uttering only a single phrase: "Let them fight for you."

Amongst the fallen trees, large roots and vines began to burst from the ground, grasping the charging ponies by the hooves as they were held in place. Their arrival was followed by the rustling of leaves and the crack of branches as a manticore jumped from the brush, tackling an earth pony to the ground with a swipe before it turned to the others. Fluttershy tried to avert her eyes from the scene as she shook her head, "N-no, please. I don't want to..."

The soft voice spoke again, "Hope is your weapon... it will cleanse you and others of their sins, rally the souls of your allies, and shatter the hearts of your enemies." As Fluttershy opened her eyes slowly she could see the group of ponies unconscious, the roots and vines slowly releasing them as the manticore made his way back into the woods.

"But I can't... to have to protect them like this... by hurting somepony else." Fluttershy's self-doubt was interrupted as Spike began to twist and turn within the air, his tail lashing out at a nearby gryphon who charged out



on her own. Dash had already faded in the distance with a large streak trailing her as Fluttershy looked down at the glowing pendant, a tear going down her cheek, “b-but... I won’t let them hurt my friends... I can’t!”

---

“What do you mean the ground rose up?! What happened to the troops that reported it, they couldn’t have gone silent like this.” Foulric hovered at the precipice of the battle, taking a quick note of the troops that had started to gather below. The Scryer network was filled to the brim with confusing reports or simply a lack of information, but it wouldn’t be long now before he was prepared to make the counterattack. His hopes however, were quickly crushed as he heard the familiar voice fill his mind.

“These savages think they can take us on?! Why did you run like cowards from a chance at glory with your tails between your legs?! This little farce is going to end now, and I’m going to do it myself!” Foulric could see the green colt charge into the Wilds with a blade drawn in his mouth, “If any of you want to have an ounce of respect for yourself left, you’ll follow me or be killed when I’m done with them.”

“Belay that order, this is General Foulric, you are not to-” His words were of little use as the entire ground force charged forward down the path, followed by what forces remained in the air joining their comrades by the dragon. Foulric tried to keep his focus as he glared at Mossrow, and let out a low growl under his breath, “This is going to end badly.”

---

Applejack’s breath was slow and heavy as the last of her attackers fell down with a shout of pain. Her armor shined in a mix of red and silver as her spear retracted itself. She was soon joined by Twilight and Rarity as her helmet opened, letting her look directly at them, “That was one hay of a workout... glad y’all could lend a hoof or it mighta been worse.” She grunted as she finally became aware of a few small chips in her armor, seeping blood slowly.

Twilight rushed to her side, “Applejack! You’re injured, let me try and-”

The purple unicorn stopped as Applejack's armor pieced itself together slowly with a pink glow, the cuts fading from view as it did so. She looked back at her flank with a smirk, "It don't hurt much anymore, so I reckon it ain't gonna be much trouble." She turned to face the charging ponies, "But those guys sure are."

Twilight nodded slightly, "I don't think we're going to be able to take them on our own... It should be soon, we'll have to hold them back until they're ready."

Rarity moved the bent section of her armor up again as she took a closer look at the charging front of troops, "Holding them back is going to be more than a feat darling... I think we'll need to settle for biding their time." She looked back to Twilight, "Are you sure they'll be here soon?"

"They have to be, or else-" The charging ponies were only a minute's journey from the girls when a series of arrows and spears flew from the surrounding woods into the bulk of troops, and quickly left then scattered and confused before they were surrounded by earth ponies, blades drawn. It was not long before the fighting started in full force, and Twilight breathed a sigh of relief, "Good, they managed to get here in time."

---

As Twilight and her companions saw the smoke rising in the distance, panic was the first thought which burrowed its way into their minds. They had only just found what they had been looking for, only just understood what they needed to do, and already violence marched on their doorstep. Spike quickly flew down towards the treeline in an attempt to avoid notice from the distance as he looked back over his shoulder, "What are we going to do, Twilight?"

Her mind raced as she tried to consider every possibility, muttering under her breath as she tapped a hoof to her forehead, "We could charge in, but we have no idea what we're up against, but letting them get further in too soon will mean we might not be able to stop them... We could try and use Spike to come at them from behind and the front, but... No no." She looked up at the others with a sigh, "We can't do this on our own, we have to get to Gallant Hollow and warn them about this... maybe they'll know what to do."

With a nod Spike continued on his path to the hidden village, making sure to remain close to the treeline. It wasn't long however, before a few pegasi appeared in their path, trying to appear bold as they visibly quivered at the sight of the winged beast. Rainbow Dash quickly hovered in front of Spike, hooves raised in front of her as she tried to explain the situation to the frightened guards. After a few moments of uncertainty, they nodded in response and flew ahead of Dash as the group continued ahead.

Spike began to slow his descent as he approached a small clearing a few minutes' journey from the gates of the village. As he let the others off his back, Twilight looked back up at him, "I'm sorry you can't come Spike, but I think you're about as big as the entire village." He gave a small chuckle in response, as he curled up inside the clearing and Twilight made her leave with the others.

After a quick gallop through the woods and waiting for the gate to open, they found themselves greeted by every face they had left in the village a few days earlier. At the head of the crowd were the council members, Aqua at their side with a smile on her face. Laurel let out a small chuckle as he looked up at the six, "Well, well, I guess you did find what you were looking for."

Twilight spoke up quickly as she moved to the center of what little open ground there was, "We wish we could come back under better circumstances, but on our return we saw smoke on the horizon, and it's the same kind that was with that... machine when we first arrived. We think that Nightmare Moon is trying to invade the Wilds, and probably with a full army."

There were hushed gasps and whispers amongst the crowd as Laurel looked at Aqua with a small nod and then back to the six, "We are aware of the smoke, and share your assumptions. We have already sent scouts to nearby villages to try and rally what troops we have available, but without any information about what we're up against..."

Twilight looked back to her friends, adorned in the armor they had been gifted so shortly before. They were the beacons of hope for these ponies, they had to do something. With a heavy heart she turned back to Laurel, "We'll go first."

Applejack moved up to Twilight's side, a hoof on the unicorn's shoulder as she tried to keep her voice low, "Are you crazy, Twi? I mean, me and Dash've been out fightin' and what not, but y'all ain't got much experience at it."

Twilight kept her voice low as she responded, "We don't have a choice, Applejack... they still need time to prepare..." She raised her head back to turn to Laurel and Aqua, "How long do you need?"

Aqua took a moment to think before speaking up. "We'll need a few hours... all of the ground forces should be moving now, and the pegasi from the other villages will arrive within the hour. If we send the scouts back out to tell them to move faster, they should be at the edge of the Wilds in full force before the late bell."

Twilight nodded as the crowd began to dissipate and orders were shouted amongst what guards were present. The entire village became a well-oiled machine as Twilight and her friends gave a quick farewell to Aqua and made their trip back to Spike in the clearing. They formed a small circle near the dragon's head and sat in silence for several minutes. Rainbow Dash was the first to speak up as the others seemed content with sulking.

"Well? What are we doing sitting here? There's an army out there waiting for the flank kicking of a lifetime and we're the ones that are gonna give it to 'em first, right?" She stamped a hoof down and tried to force a smile as she received a few confused glances, stuttering a bit as she continued, "I mean... we're the Elements of Harmony... We're supposed to be out there fighting right now, not sitting around and sulking about that we have to..."

Fluttershy covered her face with her hooves as she shook her head from side to side, "I-I can't... How are we even supposed t-t-to, kill somepony else..." Dash's smile faded as the others gave Fluttershy a few uneasy looks, Rarity moving over to comfort her as tears streamed down the pegasus's cheeks.

"We have to," Applejack said as she stood beside Rainbow Dash, "We're not like them, we aren't tryin' ta barge into somepony's home and drag them out by their hooves... We're defendin' these ponies, and their home. Defending our home." Her words were greeted by nods as Twilight

and Pinkie Pie joined their friends, shortly followed by Rarity and a less than eager Fluttershy. The group boarded Spike's back and lifted off as the dim lights of the village faded behind them, and the ominous smoke drew ever closer.

---

Foulric's talons extended again as a pegasus flew past him. The sound of torn feathers and a small shout of pain accompanied the pony's descent as the gryphon took a glance over the battlefield; it had all fallen apart right before his eyes. The ground troops had been easily surrounded after their foolish charge forward, and now from the forest pegasi were springing out like weeds into the sky.

The confusion hadn't helped their situation in dealing with winged beast, and even worse his captains had been sending reports about a lack of will in their troops, almost like something was trying to force them to give up. He tried his best to mend the broken situation as he barked orders through the Scryer network, hoping to get the ground troops in a circle to defend their position. His concentration was tested, however, as a rainbow colored bolt began a charge at him.

His yellow eyes tried to keep focused as it bolted in every direction imaginable, hoping to catch him off-guard. At the final moment of its approach his claws reached open, talons withdrawn as he grasped at the figure, and the two went twirling towards the ground. His eyes stared deep into the face of his assailant as his beak let loose a grin, "I knew I could catch you."

Dash tried to wiggle her way free from the gryphon's grip as the two kept hurdling through the air. Any attempt she made to budge her way out of his talons was met with resistance, but her wings were free to move. Her right wing pointed at the gryphon's side as one of the blades shot out, slicing through the side of his stomach as he winched in pain, releasing her and grabbing at the wound. Dash retracted the blade as she hovered a few feet from the gryphon, her breath heavy with exhaustion.

"You're... a lot more resourceful than I expected... You must be one of them, aren't you? The Elements of Harmony... I didn't expect so much strength from you, to be honest. Now draw your weapon and come at me. I

won't be holding my talons back this time." Foulric dashed forward as he took a swipe at Dash, who dodged upwards, trying to keep her distance.

Meanwhile, on the ground below, a small green blur continued to cut through many of the masked and armored ponies that had ambushed the Equestrian soldiers from the woods. He gave a swift kick to a nearby colt before twisting the blade in his mouth with expert dexterity, cutting through the neck with a splash of blood. A grin of pleasure was affixed to his face as he turned to his next opponent, speaking with a rough rasp through the hilt of his weapon, "I knew this would be fun. You savages certainly are resourceful!"

He felt the ground shaking under his feet as a silver armored pony came charging in from the Wilds side of the battle. He quickly dodged from its path as his blade slashed across her leg armor, but was unable to cut through it. The blade fell to the ground at his hooves as blood poured out of his mouth. He smiled through the pain as he grabbed the blade once again, jumping at the armored pony's back with a shout, trying to pierce through a section.

Applejack let out a winch of pain as Mossrow's blade found its target, but she was quick to buck him off her back, and the blade with him. She felt a surge of adrenaline as the armor closed itself with a pink glow again and she felt a searing pain on the wound at its closure. Her spear formed at her side as the colt regained his balance.

"Well, well, well, you must be one of them. I was wondering when some fitting opponent would join the fray. And you aren't one to disappoint, are you?" He spit out a small chunk of blood onto the blade as he ran a hoof through the dirt, signaling his charge for only a moment before he clashed with the heavy spear in an attempt to knock it away from her flank before he rushed behind her, "I'm not going to lose to some savage, even if you are this strong! I'm a damned General!"

---

A few tree limbs crunched under frantic hooves at the rear of the line as a group of five earth ponies tried to make a hasty retreat from the slaughter that had been before them. They tried to shut out the cries for help from their captain as the edge of the Wilds came closer and closer,

and with it a chance at freedom. Just as they reached it however, their escape was cut short by a pink earth pony who appeared more fitting in a circus sideshow than a battlefield. They raised their weapons cautiously before inching forward.

Pinkie looked between her five opponents with a glare before it quickly faded to a smile and giggle, met quickly by baffled looks, "Hehehe, oh, wait, I mean. Grrr!" She raised up on her hind hooves as she started to reach into the saddlebag at her side, the face of comedy fading from sight as she dug around inside. "Oh, wait, I can find it, just... give me a second." She faced away from her attackers as she placed the bag on the ground, both of her front legs buried.

The five soldiers were torn between fighting the odd pony and simply skidding past her to freedom until she turned back with a large cannon mounted above her shoulder. Fear overtook them as the sound of whirling gears and crackling electricity filled the air, accompanied by the sound of a kazoo shortly afterwards as balloons and streamers filled the air, and a large cake landed with a splat on the ground between them. "Oh, I had it set to party... are you gonna eat that?"

Pinkie's attention was cut short as the ponies continued their approach, and were halted once more, but this time by the twitching of her tail. Pinkie looked back with concern as she backed away from the five, shaking her head, "Uh oh... you guys had better run, I'm not kidding around." They paid no heed to her warnings as they continued forward, and one colt began his charge in full force, only to be flattened with his companions by a purple-scaled blur as the ground shuddered with its arrival.

Spike let out a small burst of fire into the air at an approaching gryphon before he turned his head to Pinkie. Fluttershy looked down over his wings with concern, "P-pinkie Pie, you should be more careful... I-I don't know what I would have done if-"

Pinkie let out a giggle as she hopped up onto Spike's back, "Don't be silly Fluttershy, the twitching stopped. Now let's go!" Fluttershy looked back down at her glowing pendant as Spike lifted off into the air once again, swatting away the frightened gryphon in his path.

---

Mossrow gave a grunt as he landed away from Applejack, flexing the blade in his mouth as he surveyed his damage, and took notice of the small chips of armor that had fallen to the ground, and were luckily not repaired like his initial hit. The filly was obviously showing signs of exhaustion, but unfortunately, the green colt showed them as well. Matters were only made worse as the battle around them had been shifted against his soldiers, and some of them were even fleeing in terror. If he was not preoccupied with this little nuisance he would have killed them where they stood.

With another scrape of his hoof against the dirt he charged in, dodging the swipe of her spear as he gave a strong buck to her legs, managing to knock the filly to the ground for a moment before he raised his blade for a blow. From the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of a small shimmer before an armor sailed past him, grazing the side of his ear. As Mossrow turned to the source he was greeted by a blinding flash of light before he fell down to the ground, his blade flying a few feet away.

“Y-You little bitch!” He glared through his eyelids as he tried to move his hoof in the direction of the blade, but it was soon kicked away by his opponent. As his vision slowly returned he was greeted by Applejack towering above him and two unicorns approaching to join her, one adorned in flowing white robes and the other with armor that was slowly piecing itself back together along her flank. Mossrow grinned through bloodstained teeth as he looked up at Applejack, “What’s the matter? Can’t finish things on your own you lit-.”

He let out a grunt of pain as Applejack pressed her hoof lightly onto his side, glancing at Twilight as she spoke between heavy breaths, “He’s... he’s one of the ones leading them... at least he said so... What should we do?” Twilight looked down at Mossrow before glancing at the waning battle behind them. She was quickly greeted by a splash of blood on her hooves as the green colt twisted his neck to look at her.

Mossrow’s voice was twisted as he spoke, on the verge of hysterics, “Kill me... that’s what your goal is right? You probably think you’re high and mighty and fighting for justice? Then kill the evil that’s going to rip your throat out if you don’t.”



“N-no... we aren’t like that. We are not like all of y-”

“Look around you little foal... the blood, the smell of death and violence,” Mossrow paused to take a deep breath, visibly pleased as he did so, “I love it... and you’re causing all of it, and you’re even stupider than I expected if you don’t believe it...”

Twilight glared in response to the colt’s comments before she turned and started to walk away. As she turned, she heard Applejack grunt in pain as Mossrow craned his neck up, biting at her through a broken section of armor. He quickly dashed to the fallen blade before he leapt through the air, Twilight turning suddenly to face him. Time slowed down for a brief moment as he took in the look of fear upon her face, the smell of death and blood that she would know as her last feeling, and the screams of pain he would delight in even if the afterlife greeted him. It was all foalhardy.

The blade fell down to the ground as Mossrow’s breaths became ragged, the tip of Applejack’s spear dripping crimson to the ground as it pierced through his body. It was only there for a moment before retracting, and his body fell down to the ground with a thud. His hooves twitched lightly as he smirked up at Twilight, his last words echoing in his mind as his final ounce of life slipped away, “... You always have to be right Foulric.”

In the skies above Foulric heard the pony’s final thought as he shifted his attention for a moment to the battle below. Dash sped past the gryphon in his moment of distraction, leaving another small cut on the side of his breast as he dodged away at the last moment. He closed his eyes as he reached into the network, ‘Avia, Avia are you alright?’

It was only a moment before his question was returned with her voice, ‘Y-yes General Foulric.. w-we’re losing ground in the air. We can’t hold them off for-’

‘That’s fine... I couldn’t do this if I didn’t know you were safe. All troops! Fall back immediately under the order of General Foulric! Mossrow has fallen on the battlefield, I repeat, fall back immediately!’ He turned to the pegasus with a small frown, “I’m afraid we’ll have to settle this another time.” He didn’t give her a chance to respond as the gryphon made his hasty retreat with the rest of his troops.

---

Cheers of joy and celebration filled the air as the last of the Equestrian army made their exit from the scar cut into the Wilds, and several ponies seemed focused on jubilation while others made an attempt to get much needed rest against the dim treeline. Near the edge of the scar by the abandoned crushers Spike rested on the ground, with Twilight and her friends gathered around. Twilight seemed filled with disbelief, "I-I can't believe... we won. We actually did it."

Rainbow Dash looped around in the air shortly before landing, "Hay yeah we did! Did you see me cut through those gryphons I was like woosh! And kapow! A-" Dash stopped as there was a small pain in the side of her wing, rubbing it lightly with her hoof, "A-alright, I may have gone overboard..."

Fluttershy ran a hoof lightly against the ground as her pendant still let out a dim light, a timid frown on her face, "I-I'm glad no one was... I mean, we had to right?"

Applejack retracted the helmet as she sat next to Fluttershy, "Don't go gettin' your mane in a tustle there sugar cube... They didn't leave us a choice." She turned to face Twilight, "So, what now?"

"We have to split up. We can't waste any time now. Nightmare Moon will know we were here, and we need an army to fight with..." She called a soldier over, who trotted up with a bow, "Tell Lady Aqua that we will be gone for... an unknown amount of time. We will return with good news, we promise." The soldier nodded before heading back to the mass of ponies as Twilight got onto Spike's back, "You know the way right?"

"Of course," Spike said with a smile, waiting until everypony was aboard to lift off into the air, "But how exactly are we going to split up? I know the Princess said you and I have to go to Kraulith, but what about the others?"

Twilight looked back to them with a smile, "I'm already prepared for that Spike. Dash and Fluttershy should head to Aeolus, since it's probably easier for pegasus to get around than earth ponies and unicorns. Applejack, Pinkie, and Rarity should be fine in the Savanra Desert. And

once we get to the portal I can summon us some, ummmm, less obvious attire.”

Rarity looked at Twilight with an eyebrow raised, “But Twilight, these are only one way, right? I mean I hope you don’t expect me to get us back, and Dash and Fluttershy aren’t capable of that for sure.”

“The gates are designed around that,” Twilight’s horn glowed as the Princess’s spellbook flipped open to the others. “Once the gate is activated, the other side will be ‘open’ for about a month, and allows the ponies that walk through it to return where they came from. I just hope it works if we’re going to different places at the same time.” She smiled as she closed the book, “I know we can do this girls, and then, once we have our army, we’ll march on Equestria, save Princess Celestia... and defeat Nightmare Moon, once and for all.”

---

# Chapter 9

Applejack's forehead ached as she craned her neck up from the cold stone floor. A faint glow emanated from behind her, offering a small bit of warmth to the room. She slowly picked herself up off of the floor. "R-Rarity? Pinkie Pie? You girls here?" she asked, turning to face the glow. She was greeted by a massive stone archway, inscribed with deep etchings that appeared to be ponies along its frame. At its center was a small glowing orb, and in front of it her two friends were strewn about on the floor.

Rarity shook her head, trying to shake stars from her vision before her eyes squinted to see Applejack. "I think so... though I'm more than a little shaken up after... whatever *that* was." She was barely on her hooves before Pinkie Pie hopped between the two, giggling under her breath.

"Hahaha, are you kidding Rarity? That was fun!" Pinkie's balance was wavering as she continued, "Can we go on it again?! I mean it was all like vroom fizzie whip crash! And there were all these cool colors and it was super dizzy, like, I don't think I can sta- Woah!" Pinkie fell down, still giggling as she landed on her side. "Whoops, there I go!"

Applejack tried to hold back a chuckle while she helped Pinkie up, looking over the gateway. "Well, that sure looks like what we walked into. Though I can't say if we're in the right place."

Rarity flexed her legs before trotting over to her friends. "I certainly hope so. I don't want to do that anymore than absolutely necessary. You think something designed for travel wouldn't be so jarring. And why does it have to be so dark in here?" She felt the panels of her armor flex and bend, reflecting the light of the orb to illuminate the cave, the stone archway's etchings becoming clear. "... Well that's certainly helpful."

At the top was a brilliantly etched sun and moon, with earth ponies scattered along the arch's sides. Those on the right side appeared different, with stripes drawn across their forms. Applejack looked at the high level of detail in awe before her attention was drawn to the other side of the cave. Rarity's light managed to illuminate a small tunnel leading out

of the cavern. Applejack motioned for Rarity and Pinkie to follow her as she trotted towards it.

It was not long before Rarity's armor relaxed to its original position, and her own horn lit itself to accommodate. The group trekked down the tunnel for what seemed like an eternity before they saw a light at the end of the tunnel, and it wasn't the normal moonlight they had grown so accustomed to. It was daylight.

Applejack galloped forward, not wanting to believe the possibility. Rarity and Pinkie did their best to keep up, the rough whistling of the wind outside filling their ears as they grew closer. Applejack slowed down just as she reached the tunnel's entrance and gasped as her friends finally caught up to her.

Stretched out before them was a vast desert, an ocean of sand that rose and fell like waves frozen in time. Winds whipped sand into the air across the desert's length, and in the east, they saw a sight that was both welcoming and perplexing. Frozen in its earliest moment was the sunrise, its light casting long shadows across the desert, and its form giving off enough heat to keep the desert scorching. Applejack shook her head, trying to make sense of the situation.

"This don't make a lick of sense. I didn't think this place was *that* far from Equestria..." She stepped out of the cave onto the soft sand, feeling her hooves sink in as its warmth slithered up her legs. She looked back to the others, motioning them forward. "We best get moving girls, don't wanna stay in one place too long."

"How are we even supposed to find where we're going?" Rarity asked, shaking her saddlebags lightly. "We can't just pick a direction and wander aimlessly. We only have so much we could carry with us. And I doubt we'll find another cave to rest in for miles."

Applejack rubbed her hoof lightly as she looked around, seeing nothing but sand in every direction. Her eyes squinted at a shimmer of light to the north, and a thin trail of smoke rising above it. "I reckon that's about as good a bet we're gonna get."

Pinkie hopped around in the sand, gazing in the same direction as Applejack. She giggled, "Yay, then we can start making even more friends. I wonder if zebras make good cupcakes. Do you think we'll-" Pinkie was stopped as Applejack tried to hold her back.

"Pinkie, this is serious. We ain't here for sightseein' or enjoyin' ourselves. Everypony else is countin' on us to find these zebra that are... hopefully out here." Applejack's voice sank low for a moment before she started trotting in the direction of the smoke, "Let's... just get movin'. I'm sure somethin' has to be makin' that smoke." Pinkie frowned before falling behind Applejack and Rarity.

Even with the sun on the edge of the horizon, its heat still blanketed the desert, and the three ponies' journey was not as smooth as the soft sand under their hooves. It took nearly an hour before the pillar of smoke began to grow closer, blending into the sparse clouds above their heads. Applejack let out a groan as her heavy hooves sank into the sand with each step. "Ya know... this'd be a whole lot easier... if I didn't have ta wear all this junk..."

Rarity sighed, her own armor shifting loosely along her flank. "You can say that again, and this air is so dry. Though it's still more bearable than a humid summer night in Ponyville." She felt her hooves stumble as the sand shifted underneath, a faint rumble coming from below. "D-did either of you hear that?"

Applejack stopped while Pinkie continued to hop forward rhythmically. She held a hoof up to her ear and looked to Rarity with an eyebrow raised. "Hear what Rarity?"

"It... I'm not sure. It sounded like, well, something moving." She started moving again as her eyes scanned the surrounding sand, its shape shifting subtly, although her eyes could barely make it out. "I-I'm sure it was nothing."

Pinkie giggled, turning around to look at the two. "You two are worrying too much, what could there possibly be out here? It's so empty and boring..." Pinkie's bouncing ground to a halt as the rumbling grew, pits forming in the sand around them. Dark chitinous claws jutted up from the vortexes, four of them in total around the ponies and each one about the size of their heads. They backed themselves into the center of the circle

they formed as the monstrous claws clung to the surface of the desert, pulling up the bodies they were attached to.

In seconds they were surrounded by four large creatures. Their shapes were similar to that of a scorpion, but more twisted with bits of chitin jutting out like spikes along their shells. Their tough hides were segmented, and colored a mix of black and orange, barely hiding a bright pink membrane underneath. Their claws cracked open and shut as they closed in on the girls, their tails curling, preparing to strike at a moment's notice.

Applejack's spear extended from her side as her front hooves bent down, prepared to charge. She turned her head just enough to look back at Pinkie and Rarity with one eye, her helmet locking into place. "Girls, I think we mighta stumbled onto some trouble here," Applejack said, turning back to creature before her, its dark yellow eyes piercing through her.

Rarity inched back into the others, an arrow floating up from her quiver as she kept her focus on one of the grotesque scorpions. "I think that's an understatement darling. The only question is what are we going to do now?"

Applejack kept her voice hushed, "I don't know Rarity... We can't sit here between all of 'em, or we're gonna end up even worse off." Applejack's mind raced trying to search for some way to turn the tide against... whatever these monsters were. She was interrupted as she heard the familiar sounds of Pinkie's giggling.

Turning to face the noise, Applejack was greeted by the pink filly hopping onto one of the scorpion's heads, barely avoiding its claws and tail as she landed behind it. Its stinger was left impaled through its tough hide, the beast's body writhing in pain as its claws and legs twitched uncontrollably. Applejack turned to Rarity as the other scorpions seemed distracted, and shouted at the top of her lungs, "Rarity! Let's move, now!" Applejack kicked up sand as she galloped out of the circle, her spear retracting as she jumped over the incapacitated bug.

Rarity followed close behind Applejack. The mirrors along her flank flexed and sent flashes of light behind her, blinding the three that tried to give chase to them. The fillies galloped quickly through the shifting sands, hoping to at least reach the smoke, in hopes someone would be waiting

there. The sounds of clattering claws and skittering legs followed behind them, and the smoke grew ever closer with each moment.

Applejack started to shout as the source of the smoke appeared in her vision, its form resembling that of a campsite, "Somepony! Anyone! We need help!" Applejack's head turned around to see Rarity and Pinkie right behind her, and their three pursuers close behind. She was astonished that they moved so swiftly, especially given how large they were. She saw a glimmer of light as Rarity let loose an arrow at the closest scorpion, the sharp tip bouncing off its rocky hide, barely leaving a scratch.

Rarity cursed under her breath. "Really?!" She tried to take aim with another arrow, her magic bending around it like a bowstring drawn taught before it sailed through the air. She heard a small squeal of pain as it embedded itself between the thick plates of one of the beasts. However, her look of pride at the accomplishment faded quickly when the scorpion's pursuit was barely hindered by the arrow. Rarity picked up her pace as she conceded that any further damage would have the same effect.

"We're... almost there... girls," Applejack stammered between heavy breaths as her armor grew heavy along her haunches, "Keep up... the pace!" It was another minute's trot before they arrived at the smoke's source: a small tent over a large clay pot, its contents smoldering as if they'd been burning for days. Applejack stopped, shouting once again, "Someone, is anyone there?!" She turned back to see their pursuers closing in, cursing under her breath as she extended her lance again.

Rarity moved behind the tent, taking aim with an arrow once more as her mirrors bent to shine the early sun at their attackers. One of them stalled from the burst of light, and another from an arrow's impact. The third's advance quickened as Applejack steadied her stance, bending forward for only a second before she leapt forward at it. Her spear twisted past its claws, impacting the shell roughly as it started to crack. The rough sound of the hide's sharp spines scrapping against the spear mixed with the clattering of the creature's jaws as its claws tried to grab Applejack.

Applejack tried to leap away, but found one of her hind legs trapped in a massive claw. Her armor creaked as the claw clamped down tightly, lifting her off the ground easily. Her other leg tried to buck at the claw, but her attempt appeared feeble, the spear retracting into her side as she



shouted in pain. Rarity tried to keep the other two at bay with a spree of arrows as Pinkie dug into a saddlebag at her side. She pulled out a few small balls, which bore what looked like the shape of a green splatter on their surface.

Applejack's cries of pain stopped as the massive claw released her, her body hitting the sand hard as she looked up at the beast whose vision had been obscured by a green slime stuck to its body. Its claws tried to wipe the substance away as its tail curled to strike Applejack, missing her as she rolled away and back to her hooves. The other two scorpions suffered a similar fate, with one's tail stuck to its back, and the other's claws meshed together.

Applejack took heavy breaths as she moved beside Pinkie, nodding to her. "T-thanks for the help there... Pinkie Pie," she said between breaths, looking back at the empty "camp" behind them. "Dang it! There's no one here, and I don't think we can just outrun... whatever these things are." Her spear extended as she looked back at Rarity and Pinkie. "I think we're gonna have to find some way to stop 'em..."

"But how?" Rarity asked, readying another arrow as a scorpion managed to free its claws from the green muck. "They don't seem to be backing down, even after all we've thrown at them." Her breathing became unsteady as her horn flickered slightly, the arrow barely reaching its target. "And... I can't keep this up forever."

"I-I know Rarity but... It's the only option we got," Applejack said, kneeling forward to prepare for another charge. "We can do this girls. I know we can."

As one of the freed scorpions began to charge forward, its tail raised, Applejack extended the lance as far as it could reach. She sprinted forward, trying to keep her aim steady before the tip impacted its shell, shattering the chitin plate as the spear sunk into the soft flesh beneath. A thick purple liquid sprayed from the wound as its body convulsed, falling limply into the sand with a cry of pain.

Applejack took a few steps back, sweat dripping from her brow onto her hot metal armor with a sizzle, the two remaining scorpions freeing themselves from the green goop. Applejack was prepared for another

assault before a shout came from a hill behind the three fillies, "Please! Over here!" The voice was deep, heavy with an accent the girls could barely comprehend from so far away, and belonged to a cloaked figure at the top of the ridge.

Applejack's eyes darted between her friends and the stranger before she turned back to the scorpions slowly advancing towards them. It only took a second for her to make up her mind as she galloped towards the hill, Rarity and Pinkie soon behind her. As the figure grew closer, its striped legs became barely visible underneath the beige cloak draped on its haunches. It reached down to its neck, holding onto a length of rope with three small gourds attached.

Its head pulled back, the cowl sliding off to reveal a smooth black and white striped face with a short mane, colored a pale mix of grey and black. The zebra's head shot forward, and the rope sailed through the air. The tips of the three gourds ignited with a faint spark as they fell down towards the ground, just in front of the scorpions' path. With a crack the gourds exploded in a burst of fire, their contents aflame as they rained down on the sands, halting the scorpions' charge. Their clattering claws and screeches filled the air as their legs scampered back, turning to try and run away.

The flames continued to burn as a faint odor wafted through the wind which smelt like burnt grass mixed with stagnant sewage. The scorpions faded into the distance before burrowing down into the sands, leaving the three mares alone with the zebra. Applejack tried to suppress a cough as she breathed a sigh of relief, turning to face their "saviour". "T-thanks for the help there. Things might not ah gone so smoothly if you didn't show up."

The zebra's face was stoic and silent as he trotted past Applejack and the others, heading past the dieing flames to the camp below. Applejack looked at Rarity and Pinkie who could only offer a shrug. Her helmet retracted, along with her spear as she followed him, shouting as she tried to catch up, "Hey! I was talkin' to ya!"

He arrived at the camp as Applejack caught up, and pulled up his cloak up to reveal a slim saddlebag lined with a plethora of pockets, flasks, and satchels. He looked back to Applejack, bowing his head as he spoke again, struggling with his accent, "I'm sorry, please, this is important." He

grabbed a small pouch, opening it gently before he poured the contents into the clay pot, adding to the smouldering pile within. He turned from the tent, his eyes locked on the still twitching body of the fallen scorpion as he approached it. "Kuraxxis blood is volatile after leaving body. Must be preserved fast."

Applejack raised an eyebrow at him as she walked over to the corpse and noticed him take a small flask from his side, holding it up to the scorpion's oozing wound. After it was filled to the brim and its stop secured, he turned back to Applejack, bowing his head again. "Apologies, very important for research and ingredients... Name Zevra," he began before he raised his head and looked the three over.

"Nice ta meet ya Zevra," Applejack said, raising a hoof to shake Zevra's, "Name's Applejack, and this here's Rarity and Pinkie Pie." She motioned to the two as she introduced them. "Thanks again for helping us."

Zevra bowed his head once more before he scanned the desert the three fillies had come from and inspected the shattered remains of the scorpion's hide, muttering something incomprehensible under his breath. He reached back to pull out another pouch, holding it up to the girls. "Please, take one. It's necessary." Applejack seemed unsure as she looked inside the satchel, a few small green pellets scattered inside.

"Umm, what exactly is this?" she asked and pulled three from inside the pouch, handing one each to her friends. On closer inspection it smelled worse than the burning mixture he'd used to scare off the scorpions.

Zevra only repeated himself as he motioned a hoof at them, putting the satchel back on his side, "Please, it's important, eat, please." Rarity shrugged at Applejack as they ate the pellets slowly, while Pinkie had already swallowed hers whole. A bitter taste filled their mouths as nearly all the moisture inside dried up, and left the three coughing heavily.

"W-what the?" Applejack stuttered between coughs, "What the hay was that?"

Zevra pocketed a few shattered pieces of chitin from the sand before trotting back to the camp. "Stops dehydration. Increase water retention. Necessary for conserving water," he said, inspecting the camp to make sure the clay pot was properly stocked with enough material to keep

burning. "Have to deal with dry tongue, but saves water," he finished with a chuckle before securing the cowl of his cloak back over his mane.

Pinkie prodded her tongue lightly with a hoof, giggling. "Thif if phuni phelig..."

Applejack cleared her throat before speaking up, "Umm, r-right. Listen, we're here looking for help and-"

"I know why you are here. I explain once we arrive at Komahra. Please, I need your trust..." Zevra turned away from Applejack as he trotted back up the hill and motioned the others to follow him. Rarity held Applejack back with a hoof, looking between her and Zevra.

"Look, Applejack... I'm really not sure this is ummm, the best choice we can make," Rarity whispered as her eyes wavered back to Zevra making his ascent on the mound of sand. "I mean some zebra just shows up out of nowhere when we need help? And then he just happens to offer us a place to go, and some weird pills or... whatever they were." Rarity cleared her throat with a heavy cough as she finished, trying in vain to wet her tongue.

"Rarity, we can't just wander around here aimlessly looking for someone... And for all we know maybe this feller's got our best interests at heart. I mean he did chase off those two... Kuh-racks-is whatchamacallits. If he wanted us gone he could have left us ta fight 'em..." Applejack began following Zevra again as Pinkie hopped gleefully beside her. Rarity shook her head, muttering something as she begrudgingly followed them.

---

Their trek through the desert seemed to last an eternity as the frozen sun showed no passage of time for the three fillies and their zebra "guide". At least that was as much a term they could use for a stranger willing to show them the way to some sign of civilization. Luckily Zevra's promise about the pellets they had taken was correct, and despite having severely dry mouths, they had yet to feel thirsty, though Applejack still had to struggle with her stuffy suit of armor.

She let out a groan, trotted up to Zevra and tapped a hoof on his shoulder, pausing repeatedly to take breaths, "Umm, Zevra... Are we gettin' any closer to this town of yours?"

Zevra turned his head back and offered a faint smile to Applejack. "Of course. Komahra just over hill, promise. Please, keep moving. Kuraxxis do not stray far from Cluster, but some have been seen past border." He pulled out a canteen from his cloak, taking a small sip before he continued forward, muttering something the fillies couldn't understand under his breath once again.

Applejack slowed down, and was soon beside her friends once again. "So... what do you girls think?"

"That it's hot, dry, and bright," Pinkie said before she stopped her hopping, "Oh, you mean about Zevra... Well, he seems nice enough, and we don't wanna be stuck with nowhere to go out here. Besides, if he is a meanie we can just defend ourselves."

Rarity offered Pinkie a weak smile. "Hopefully we'll just have to talk to these zebra and be out of here in no time at all." Rarity's smile wavered as she spoke, "I-Isn't that right Applejack?"

"Uhh... Of course it is. I'm sure once we tell 'em what we're here for, they'll be more than willin' to lend a hoof. I mean it's only a matter of time before Nightmare Moon shows up here right?" Rarity and Pinkie nodded in response before Zevra stopped in his tracks at the top of the hill.

He pulled his cowl down and looked back at the others. "We're here," he stated plainly as Applejack, Pinkie, and Rarity arrived at the crest of the mound of sand. Before them in the bright glow of the sunrise was a massive village, though from its size it could have been called a city, built around the trees and glimmering water at its center. A mixture of tents and tan, adobe buildings of all sizes took up the majority of the space around the gleaming central oasis.

However, the closer the ponies' eyes drifted to the center, the more sparse the buildings and tents became, as if the oasis itself were untouched, and stood as a pristine core of the metropolis. All through the streets zebras walked as if everything were normal, and at the edge of the

city they could see several citizens preparing for journeys through the desert. Zevra began his trek down the calm slope towards the city as Applejack and the others paused to take in the sight.

"This is... it's incredible," Rarity said as she breathed a sigh of relief at seeing civilization once again. "All of this in the middle of the desert?"

"It doesn't sound too impossible Rarity. I mean they've been out here for a while," Applejack whispered, keeping her voice low as she followed Zevra. "And they were pushed outta their homes, or at least left 'em when Nightmare Moon came knockin'. They probably had ta make do quick."

"I know, but," Rarity paused to gaze over the city again. "It's still impressive..." Their conversations ended as they approached the bottom of the hill, a few zebras' gazes drifting from their work or preparations to the new arrivals. The on-lookers began to mutter amongst one another as the strangers continued slowly into the city. Zevra sighed as he turned back to his "guests" and tried his best to ignore the stares and hushed words.

"Please, keep moving. I promise everything is fine. They are just not... accustomed to seeing ponies." Zevra forced a chuckle as he continued, "Very, well, odd sight." Zevra closed his eyes for a moment before he looked forward again.

The streets of the city itself were well-maintained, and there was plenty of activity, although it faded quickly as the ponies grew close. It wasn't long before their path was blocked by a large crowd, just as they were within a stone's throw of the oasis. The mass of zebra parted as two guards stepped forward, armed with spears across their flanks and rough chitinous armor on their sides. With them was an aged stallion, a wound underneath his eye and his mane shaved completely off.

His voice was rough as he spoke in a language the three mares couldn't comprehend, his eyes locked on Zevra. The only words they could truly grasp were Zevra's name, and the word "pony", though it was uttered with some hatred. Zevra's response was filled with fervor, though it was similarly incomprehensible, except for one new word: Zecora. The conversation intensified with each speaker's turn, Zevra suddenly stopped at a shout from the stallion.

His stoic gaze shifted to the three strangers before he finally spoke, laboring to form his words correctly as his rough voice became deeper, "I will speak like this, so you can understand. You are not welcome, never. Leave, now, or you will be removed."

Applejack stepped forward, mouth agape in confusion for a moment. "W-what are you talkin' about? We haven't even done anything!"

"And that is the way it will stay," he stated plainly, "I will not risk peace in the Chieftain's absence, not now."

Zevra pushed Applejack to the side as she was about to speak, and shouted, "Baeloc! They are here to help us, the Zecora told me-"

"*The Zecora* has told you nothing Zevra, and has said nothing of importance to the Chief." Baeloc's gaze shifted back to the ponies as he continued, "And if you think I'm going to believe this rabbl-"

"They came from the Cluster!" Zevra shouted. The bickering within the crowd quieted as Baeloc shook his head. He began to speak before Zevra interrupted him again, "They couldn't have come from Equestria! No one could have trekked across the desert, around every village, every patrol, and somehow ended up there. They couldn't have even survived coming from the end of the desert!" His shouting stopped as he glanced back at the three mares, "I-I don't know how they came here, but they are not here to hurt us."

"That's right," Applejack said as she stepped forward again, "We're here lookin' for your help. We're from the Wilds near Equestria, where ponies are tryin' to stop Nightmare Moon, the reason that sun is hangin' there in the sky."

"And the reason that you lost your lands," Rarity stated, joining Applejack. "It's only a matter of time before she wants more."

"Nothing more than empty words," Baeloc responded, spitting into the sand. "Zevra... you can take your *guests* with you... No one else is to offer them aid until the Chieftain has returned." He repeated himself in the strange tongue the ponies couldn't understand, and the crowd dissolved at his urging. He began to trot back to the oasis, the two guards at his side joining him as Zevra was left alone in the streets with the three ponies.

Zevra sighed and turned to face them. "I... I am sorry, that you received this kind of greeting... Please follow me, I can explain more when we are safe." He began to trot through the maze of streets with the three strangers at his back.

---

Zevra's path was jagged as he twisted through streets and around buildings, but the three mares managed to keep up with him. It was nearly a half hour's trot before they arrived at a quaint hovel, shaped like a series of domes and built out of the same tan adobe as its counterparts. However, its design seemed more planned and intricate, rather than being thrown together simply at a moment's notice. Zevra pulled a green and blue curtain that served as the home's door away before he led his guests inside.

Applejack was surprised when she and her friends were greeted not by the same scalding heat they had felt outside, but a cool breeze flowing just inside the doorway. They found themselves inside of a large central room, with a few small curtained doorways leading to the rest of the building. All around they could see various flasks, bottles, and gourds filled with substances they couldn't identify, or that were simply labeled in a way they couldn't understand, seated on shelves built into the walls.

Across a few similar shelves near the entrance were several saddlebags, already packed to the brim with supplies for future journeys or the fruits of past ones. One bag in particular was stuffed with shards of a material that looked very similar to the chunk of chitin Zevra had taken from the fallen scorpion in the desert. At the center of the room was a large wooden table and a bed surrounded by notes and scribbles littered on the floor.

Zevra placed his saddlebags onto a shelf before trotting to a doorway, motioning his guests to sit. "Please, make yourselves at home. I apologize it not much." The girls all took a seat around the table in the center of the room. Applejack flexed her hooves, sand falling out of the loose plates of armor and forming a small pile on the hard floor.

Rarity let out a calm sigh as she did the same, though her pile did not seem so substantial. "I suppose it's from one mess to another then?"



“ ‘Fraid so,” Applejack responded, hearing the clash of pots from the doorway Zevra had taken. She made sure to keep her voice low as she continued, “What do y’all make of this? I mean with how that Baeloc guy was treatin’ us?”

Rarity glanced at a few of the scribbles strewn about the table. “I don’t really know darling. Considering everything that might of happened to them, maybe they have the right. We barely know anything about them other than they left their homes so long ago... Maybe we should ask him.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” Applejack replied with a bit of irritation. “I mean he’s willin’ to give us help like this, maybe we shouldn’t be a bother by jumpin’ down his throat with questions so soon.”

“But we can’t just be clueless,” Rarity whispered as she glanced around the room. “Besides, he said he’d tell us what was going on, so it only makes sense for us to ask.”

Their conversation drew to an abrupt close as Zevra returned to the room, carrying a small teapot with four cups hanging from it spout. He laid them out, carefully filling them before he took a seat across from the three mares. After taking a short sip he smiled. “Please, do not be shy. I understand that things may be... confusing for you.”

Applejack looked at her friends before turning to Zevra as she spoke, “How exactly... did y’all get out here? I mean we know that zebras left their home a long time ago and...”

“Yes... My ancestors decided to abandon our homelands when your... Queen decided that it was her grasp and right. Their hope was to avoid unwanted bloodshed, and so we fled across the mountains of the east, and back to the site the first zebra trotted upon.”

“Wait,” Rarity interjected, “But Savanra was your people’s homeland, wasn’t it?”

“For the longest time, yes. However, our elders and ancestors speak of a time long before, when zebras first walk on the earth in a vast paradise. It was Komahra: “origin” in our tongue. For hundred of years zebra lived in their paradise away from the rest of the world. However, our

race was sinful in the paradise, and did not share bounty with others, and the land was stricken by calamity. All of Komahra began to wither and die, and in its place there was only lifeless sand.”

Zevra took another sip before he continued, “As our people left the shifting sands, pockets of land were left unharmed to remind us and all of our mistakes. Luckily, the vast grasslands of Savanra, spared from the catastrophes in Komahra by the mountains that separated them, were plentiful enough to support us. And so it was there that we stayed, until *she* came.”

“So y’all have just been livin’ out here since then?” Applejack asked, staring at the cup of tea in front of her, deep in thought.

“Yes. Lucky, very little here that she wants,” Zevra said with a chuckle. “No zebra has seen pony for... nearly five hundred years. Not even a single one.”

“But... how are you so calm about us?” Pinkie asked. “And why was everyone else so mean to us back there?”

“... They fear all of you are like her. As for me... I have heard words that... convinced me when you arrived.”

“What do you mean?” Rarity asked, her cup of tea hovering up as she took a sip.

“... From one connected to our ancestors: a Zecora.”

“About that,” Applejack interrupted, looking up from her cup, “Maybe we... need to be a little honest with ya bout something Zev. Ya see...” She looked nervously at her friends as she paused. She waited for a timid nod from each of them before continuing, “We’re... not really from here... or the Equestria that tried to take your land...”

“I... part assumed such,” Zevra said, letting Applejack continue.

“We’re from a long time ago... back when y’all lived in Savanra, and Princess Celestia and Princess Luna ruled together.”

"We don't really know how exactly," Rarity began, "But we woke up in the Everfree Wilds near Equestria nearly a month ago. We're trying to help fix what we couldn't stop, and we need your people's help."

Applejack nodded to Rarity before she turned back to Zevra, standing on her hooves. "Ya see, we knew a Zecora a long time ago, who was visitin' a town called Ponyville."

"You... knew a Zecora? The Zecora haven't left our tribes in... as long as you say." Zevra looked down, shaking his head from side to side. "No, that's... that's impossible. How could you have... come here, so much later?"

"We don't know, but you two talked about *the* Zecora, and *a* Zecora... We always assumed it was her name, but-" Applejack frowned as she adjusted her hat idly for a moment.

"Yes, it is title. Zecora are... shaman, connected to ancestors. You no doubt heard her use Modra, yes?"

"Mah-dra?" Pinkie asked after slurping down the last of her tea suddenly. "What's that?"

"It is... roughly means 'rhythm'. Ancestors, spirits from beyond are in... tempest, like sand storm." Zevra tried to motion with his hooves in an attempt to explain. "Very, very rough, and wild... chaotic. So many voice speak out and cannot be heard. Zecora and Modra are like... a drum, a beat in beyond. By offering beat, rhythm to spirits, ancestors can come forth with wisdom, knowledge, history..."

Applejack quirked an eyebrow, tapping a hoof against her chin. "I was, well, always kinda wonderin' why she did that..."

"It is very, very difficult skill to learn. Takes many year to master, and often becomes habit..."

"And you said a Zecora told you about us coming? Like a prophecy?" Rarity asked. Zevra returned a nod, Rarity rubbing a hoof along her chin in response. "But, didn't Baeloc say something about not '*the* Zecora'? What exactly did he mean?"

"The Zecora are few. There is only one to tribe. However, new Zecora are trained as current is close to... death." Zevra cleared his throat before he continued, "I did not hear about you from the current Zecora. The next Zecora told me, in trance. My sister: Avira."

Applejack started to speak up, but was interrupted as Zevra jumped up to his hooves, looking past the three mares. He started shouting, although they couldn't understand him as he trotted around the table and towards a doorway. As the girls turned to follow them, they saw a small filly rubbing a hoof idly across her eyes. Her voice sounded weak as she spoke, and her legs seemed barely able to hold herself up.

Zevra held a hoof against her forehead as he spoke. The filly looked at the three ponies with a frown before she looked back to Zevra, nodding as she replied. With a cough, the filly turned back into the room and vanished from sight.

Zevra sighed as he trotted back to the table. "I'm sorry... Avira has been ill for a few days. She should be fine with rest. Now, if you don't mind, I have few questions for you."

"Umm, fire away partner," Applejack said with a small smile.

Zevra walked over to the front door, grabbing the pieces of chitin he'd pocketed in the desert and set them down on the table. "How did you do this?"

"What do you mean?" Applejack asked with an eyebrow raised.

"Kuraxxis shell is hard. Very, very hard. Zebra weapons are strong, but it takes many strikes to pierce, or great force. How did you break it?"

"Well, we were kinda distracted durin' the fightin', but... I think it was cracking after one hit from my lance." Applejack extended the spear from her side, but it was much shorter than it usually was.

Rarity nodded, an arrow hovering out from her quiver. "And I suppose a few of these, though I'm not sure how much I really put behind them..."

Zevra trotted over to inspect the two objects, muttering to himself, “I see, I see... This material is... it has to be very strong. Kuraxxis shells are hard, some more than others but...”

“Some? What do you mean?” Pinkie Pie asked.

“Kuraxxis is general term... Ones you saw are most common that we see on surface, but there are many others.” Zevra trotted over to a book shelf across the room, pulled out a leather-bound manual and placed it on the table. It was stuffed with several loose papers that nearly went flying as Zevra flipped it open. His hoof pointed to four pictures spread across two pages. One seemed close to the giant scorpions they had encountered in the desert, but the other three resembled a wasp, beetle, and a centipede.

“Kuraxxis are like... ponies. There are earth ponies, unicorn, pegasi. Kuraxxis all have similar shell, organs. At the core they are the same, but structure, form, purpose changes. Designed for purpose.”

“So you’re saying there are more of these... *things*?” Rarity asked, motioning a hoof at the journal with a look of disgust. “How many are there?”

“We don’t know entirely. In the hundred years we have seen them, dealt with them, only three or four. I think however they may be connected to something our people have dealt with before. Have you heard of parasprite?”

“Yeah, we had to deal with ‘em once in Ponyville. Nasty little buggers,” Applejack said.

“I found notes from before zebra left Savanra.” He pulled a few small papers from the journal that appeared to be dissection notes of a parasprite. He pointed to several sections of it and the other drawings as he spoke, “Wing structure similar to wasp, eye patterns to beetle. I think parasprite may have been... separated from Kuraxxis and evolved on own, rather than with hive.”

Applejack and Rarity tried to follow Zevra’s explanations before he closed the journal. “For the longest time we never had any problems here. Some zebras forming bandit groups or causing minor trouble yes, but...

Then one day out of nowhere they showed up. It started with a caravan and then villages, cities destroyed as zebra fled further from the start of attacks. We found they never crossed a line, the border you saw, marked as warning. We call the first location the 'Cluster': a gnarled structure that jutted from the sands. No zebra has gone past the border enough to see it since the attacks began."

"So... you said we came from there?" Rarity asked, looking up from the closed journal. "And this *Cluster* is... away from Equestria, enough that you think we didn't come from there?"

"Yes... not to mention that so many others would have seen you first. If you are here... you came here to help us, yes?"

"Well, not exactly... We need your help in Equestria, your people's help," Applejack said as she trotted around the table to Zevra.

"I'm afraid my people will not aid you... Not when Kuraxxis still pose a threat, and not while the history of our exodus is in their mind." Zevra sighed, trotting over to a few flasks on a shelf, idly checking their contents. "I do not think you will find what you were looking for."

Applejack quickly followed Zevra as Rarity and Pinkie got up to follow her. "Zevra, there has to be someone we can talk to. Your chieftain or another village, someone."

"Everyone else will treat you the same as the others. Baeloc gave me the benefit to let you stay because of where you came from... but I doubt that will go ver- Avira!" Zevra stopped as he looked behind the girls, moving around them to the small filly, once again in the doorway. "Avira, I told you to stay in be-"

"Time is short, the claws draw near. They seek the pillar while their shells sow fear," Avira said, her eyes distant and unfocused as her legs shook. "The more important battle must be won, but first the deeds at origins must be done."

Zevra tried to wave a hoof at the filly before he grabbed her lightly, the three mares stepping up behind him. "Avira, Avira snap out of it!"

“The harmony of old must crush this threat before all of the world by darkness is beset.” Avira’s eyes became focused only for a moment as she looked at Applejack and her companions. “Defend the pillar, defend us all, or everything you love will fall.” Avira’s body became limp as she fell into Zevra’s embrace, her breathing rapid and jagged.

Applejack, Rarity, and Pinkie Pie looked between one another with confusion and concern, just as a loud horn sounded through the air, and the calm of Komahra’s streets was replaced by a stampede of hooves and screams of horror.

---

# Chapter 10

Rainbow Dash groaned as the burst of light at her back faded to a dim glow which barely illuminated the ornate stone floor beneath her. As she rose to her hooves she glanced around, and found herself in a large room that easily rivaled the one she had just left in size. At her back was a massive stone archway, molded into the face of a cave wall and etched with runes that far surpassed her comprehension. A glowing orb floated at its center, barely illuminating the room around her. Dash turned her attention to the yellow pegasus still strewn about on the ground next to her, wearing a simple cloak and saddlebags similar to her own.

Dash lightly rubbed a hoof against Fluttershy's back as she continued to look around the cave. "Ummm, Fluttershy. Wakey wakey, we're here. Hopefully..." Dash looked back to the archway as she heard Fluttershy let out a small squeak, and her eyes fluttered open. Dash could barely see the images of gryphons and pegasi etched into the the archway, with Celestia's symbol located at its peak. She muttered to herself as she floated up to the symbol, "... Maybe this *is* the right place."

Fluttershy shook her head as she stood up, trying in vain to remove the aching pain in her forehead. "Dash, are you sure we can even find who we're supposed to be looking for?"

Dash took another glance at the etchings before she landed next to Fluttershy. "Well... Twilight said she read about rebellions that were in those history books, and she overheard Aqua talking about someplace called Airlon all the time, or read about it, or... something." Dash rolled her eyes as she left out a chuckle. "I-I'm sure we can find it." Dash looked into the darkness, seeing a faint light in the distance. She helped Fluttershy to steady herself for a few moments before she moved towards the light. "Come on, this should be the way out."

The two stumbled through the darkness, feeling the hard stone walkway under their hooves as the light grew closer. The floor was smooth, as if it had been ground down by someone, or something long ago. Before long the light grew from a dim speck into a bright flame: a torch that burned



at the side of barred door. With a bit of trouble, the two pegasi managed to remove the large wooden bar that kept the door locked, its iron joints creaking as it crept open.

They walked out into a shallow connected cave, the night sky visible only a few feet away. The cave opened up to a cliff, overlooking a small section of forest far below. The bright lights of several cities and villages were visible in the distance, both along the ground and in the clouds above. Dash flapped her wings lightly as she lifted off from the cliff, taking in the geography of the area before she turned back to Fluttershy. "Twilight said travelers round Equestria are common, and I don't think Nightmare Moon is going to have a picture of us to plaster on a sign somewhere. Let's go to that town over there."

Fluttershy looked to the village at the edge of the forest, shining dimly compared to its larger counterparts. "I-I don't know Dash. What if she *does* have pictures of us? Or somepony starts asking questions we can't answer or-"

Rainbow Dash placed a hoof on her forehead as she let out a sigh. "Fluttershy, we'll be fine. Some of the ponies in the guard said Cloudsdale is still around, and it's not like we can't just, make up a name or something. Who's going to know right?" She glided down to her companion, motioning a hoof for her to take off. "We need to be quick about this Fluttershy... We aren't going to get anywhere if we sit around and just think about things."

"B-but, I-... Okay," Fluttershy said with a small frown, and lifted off from the cliff to follow Dash. As the two made their way towards the village, the cliff behind them shifted silently, melding into a solid face of rock that blocked the path they had taken from sight. Dash could feel the cold wind blowing across her wings, amplified by the cold steel that still rested beneath, hidden from sight.

Fluttershy noticed Dash shuddering as she flew, moving closer before she spoke up, "Are you sure you'll be alright with those Dash? I know we couldn't take everything, but-"

"We have to be ready for a fight Fluttershy, and there's no way I'm going to fly around here without a weapon. Besides, Twilight said her spell

will keep them hidden,” Dash said, her vision scanning over the forest below.

“I know, but she said if you use them it won’t work anymore, and, well.” Fluttershy looked away from Dash for a moment.

“Fluttershy, don’t worry about it. We’re not going to have to fight anyway. That’s why we’re keeping a low profile.” Dash slowed down enough to get beside Fluttershy, giving her a small nudge with her hoof. “I promise, okay?”

Fluttershy smiled and nodding, looking down at the forest below as they continued towards the village.

---

The small town near the edge of the forest was bustling with activity amongst the lights of its street lamps. Along its well-kept streets were merchants peddling their wares or travelers making arrangements or deals before they departed for a more important destination. Most of its occupants were gryphons or pegasi, but the occasional unicorn or earth pony was not an uncommon sight. Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy landed near the edge of the town before making their way quietly through the main street, whispering to one another.

“Let’s see if we can ask someone about where we are,” Dash said, taking a look around before she noticed an aged gryphon at a small stand, focused on grabbing the attentions of passersby.

“You there young colt, can I interest you in a fine saddle all the way from Fillydelphia? Made from the finest silks Equestria can offer. Ma’am, perhaps you’d be willing to look at a few of these perfumes from the southern provinces? They’re brewed with flowers from the edge of the Wilds that will drive any colt mad for you.” He quickly turned his attention to Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy as they passed the stand. “Or you two fine mares, perhaps a few jewels from the Airlon mines? They’re said to be the most precious in all of the world, and that a dragon had to be slain just so that they could be reached.”

Dash blinked in response before she turned to Fluttershy, whispering, “W-wait, did he say Airlon?”

The gryphon’s ears peaked as he smiled, nodding in response. “Of course, one of the largest mines in all of Aeolus, and the most successful at that. It’s been producing anything from gems to metals to minerals for close to seven hundred years now.”

Dash smiled as she whispered to Fluttershy, “See? No fighting. No problems.” She stepped forward to the stand and chuckled. “We’re trying to make our way to Airlon to meet someone, but we’re not exactly sure where it is. Do you have a map or something?”

The gryphon peaked an eyebrow in response. “M-meet someone... *there*? I think you two must be mistaken. No one works in those mines except convicts and vagrants who can’t hold down a job in a factory or... mules. And even the town is barren except for guards and the occasional merchants doing business.”

Dash let out an agitated sigh, cursing under her breath before she looked back at the gryphon. “Look, we just need a map, do you have one or not?”

He quickly rummaged behind the stand, some of his miscellaneous wares flying up before he pulled out a rolled parchment and placed it in front of them. “It’s not up-to-date, but it’s not like Airlon is going to move somewhere anytime soon. It’ll cost 50 bits.”

“50 bits?! That’s outrageous!” Dash shouted before feeling Fluttershy tug lightly at her cloak.

“D-Dash... Maybe we shouldn’t make a scene out here in public?” The yellow pegasus looked around, several bystanders staring awkwardly at Dash’s outburst before they began moving along. A few guards, however, kept their attention focused on them. “Besides, we don’t even have anything.”

Dash laughed nervously, noticing the guards as she looked back at Fluttershy. She offered them a calm wave before turning back to the gryphon. “Look, I’m... sorry.” Dash showed a bit of trouble finishing her

sentence before she continued, "We've been traveling for a while and we don't have very much money left. Can you just point us in the right direction or something?"

The gryphon let out a tired sigh and unfolded the parchment on the table, pointing to a dot labeled "Faeroc". "This is where you are," he stated as his talon slid above the map before resting on a small mountain range labeled "Airlon". "And this is the mine... If you fly non-stop it should only take a few hours to get there, but the curfew is starting soon."

Fluttershy moved forward, speaking softly under her breath, "Curfew?"

The merchant cursed under his breath. His voice was strained with irritation, "You think someponies would read a history book... After a few revolts and what not happened in what *were* gryphon lands, the *Queen* instituted a curfew anywhere north of Cloudsdale. Only guards and traders are allowed out past it, and that's only if you have a license for it." The gryphon glared at the back of his stall, muttering under his breath, "Like anyone except a pony could even get one of those."

Dash looked back at the guards for a moment, their eyes still locked on the three. "Do you know an inn where we can stay?"

The gryphon suppressed a chuckle. "Not without any coin I'm afraid, but there is a shelter down the road. Some of those poor unicorns that still believe in giving out something for nothing. If you're only looking for a place to lay your head I guess it would work."

The two said their thanks to the gryphon before departing, looking for the shelter as they waltzed down the street. Fluttershy swore she saw a pair of violet eyes watching from a nearby alleyway, but as she turned to them they were nowhere to be seen in the dim glow of the streetlamps. Her eyes snapped back to Rainbow Dash as she called out for Fluttershy to speed up. She quickly galloped to catch up to her friend, leaving the merchant to his end of day proceedings.

---

Rainbow Dash trotted through the streets with her head raised high, Fluttershy following her closely. The meek pegasus' head turned from side to side as several ponies and gryphons on the street were busy wrapping up their business for the day. She kept her voice low as she got beside Dash, "Dash? Maybe this isn't the best idea."

"What are you talking about Fluttershy? We just stay the night down the road, head out tomorrow, make it there in a few hours and find someone to help us. Easy as learning to fly. Well, in my case at least." Dash's trot picked up speed as she saw the faint glow of a lantern illuminating a sign on a large building up ahead. It bore the image of a unicorn and gryphon with a small lantern and bed etched next to them.

Fluttershy noticed a few bystanders watching her and Dash as they arrived at the front of the building, which was well-lit compared to those around it. She could see about a dozen ponies and gryphons inside through the front window, mingling or heading up the stairs near the back of the room. She could also see two unicorns, a mare and stallion, working behind a small counter near the stairs.

Dash led the way, opening the door wide. The faint sound of music mixed with the gentle undertones of a few conversations filled the pegasi's ears, and the warmth from a nearby fireplace overwhelmed the faint breeze that had begun blowing across their haunches as they stepped inside. A lone pegasus trotted past the pair before the door shut firmly behind them, and a pale green unicorn behind the counter looked up at them with a smile.

"Oh, good evening, and welcome to The Lantern." She waited for the pair to approach her before continuing, "My name is Emerald, what can I do for you?"

Dash's gaze floated over a few shelves behind Emerald and the counter, stocked with a few supplies and loose records. She turned to Emerald as she spoke, "Yeah, we heard from someone that you offer rooms for ponies that can't afford a place to stay?"

The unicorn's face brightened up even more as her smile grew to a wide grin. "Why of course. We're always willing to lend some help to travelers, as long as we have room of course." She looked back, and spoke

to a light blue stallion busying himself with a few open record books, “Dillium, can you check and see if we still have that corner room available upstairs?” The stallion nodded as another book floated over to him, its pages flying open. Emerald looked back to Dash and Fluttershy. “Just the two of you?”

“Yeah, we’re just floating through and figured we’d stop to rest. We’ve been traveling for a while and don’t have a lot of bits left.”

“Oh I understand. No reason to explain to me,” she said, looking back at Dillium, who offered her a nod. “And it looks like we have the perfect room available. Would you like me to show you?”

“Sounds fine, come on Fluttershy,” Dash said to her companion, following Emerald to the stairs.

The meek pegasus fidgeted in place for a moment before following Dash. “B-but Dash, what if this isn’t-”

“Would you stop fussing so much? It’ll be fine,” Dash said, keeping her voice low, though her eyes glared at Fluttershy. “It’s *just* a room.”

“I know, but... Sorry.” Fluttershy conceded what few arguments she had against the action as she followed Dash and Emerald up the stairs. The unicorn led the two pegasi to a small corner room at the end of the hallway labeled “19”.

Inside were two small beds set up near the corner, each in front of a small window. One overlooked the still-lit street, while the other faced the building’s neighbor and gave a clear view of its roofing and the starry sky above, as well as the dark, damp alleyway below. The remaining walls were decorated with a few paintings or portraits of ponies and gryphons the pegasi couldn’t say they knew, and a large dresser and mirror were set up along one wall.

“I know it’s not a lot, but it should be more than enough for the two of you,” Emerald said, motioning a hoof into the room as she let Dash and Fluttershy walk inside. “If you need anything at all, please feel free to ask. Dillium and myself will only be up for another hour, but the room behind the desk is ours.” She smiled a wide grin as she continued, “Please, don’t be

afraid to disturb us if it's something important. There will be a little bit of food served after the early bell. It's not exactly a feast, but I'm sure it will be enough to get you going on your journey."

"Thanks, we really appreciate it," Dash said, throwing her saddlebags on the floor before she laid down on one of the beds, while Fluttershy slowly trotted towards the dresser.

"Again, think nothing of it," Emerald said as she bowed her head, closing the door firmly, her hoofsteps fading down the hallway.

Dash's legs stretched on the bed as she looked out over the street, seeing the few citizens and guards left heading off to their homes or a nearby inn. It wasn't long after that the streetlamps began to dim, and the quiet sounds from downstairs were the only thing the two friends could hear. Dash let out a rough sigh as she turned over in the bed, looking at Fluttershy. "Are you *still* worried? We're fine, warm and toasty with a bed and a meal tomorrow. We'll be fine Fluttershy."

Fluttershy placed her saddlebags down beside the other bed before she crawled onto it. Her head was almost glued to the covers as she looked at Dash. "I know, but it's just-"

"Just what?" Dash asked, closing her eyes as she tried to find a comfortable position in the bed.

"Well, we came here barely knowing where we were going, and now there's this place and these ponies that are just... willing to help us. And the place we were looking for is really a prison and... I just don't like it." Fluttershy looked out of the window at the starry sky, which now shined brighter as the lights of nearby cities began to dim as well.

"Nothing is ever gonna go the way you want it to," Dash said as she finally found a comfortable pose on the bed, shuffling just a bit over the covers. She let out a long yawn before she continued, "You just gotta... just gotta find a way through... no matter what."

"Umm, right." Fluttershy said, getting up to turn off a lantern on the dresser. "Good night then Rainbow Dash." Her wishes were only met with a loud snore as Dash quickly drifted off to sleep. Fluttershy smiled as she

climbed back into bed, sliding beneath the cover before she turned away from the window. "Dash is right," she whispered to herself. "Everything will be fine..."

---

Hours passed by like seconds for the two sleeping pegasi, and soon the faint sounds of The Lantern's common room had faded, leaving only the silence of the empty streets in the dead of night. Fluttershy and Dash's sleep was peaceful, but in the dark of the alley under their window a figure stirred. Being careful not to cause any noise as it tumbled over a few trash cans in the darkness, it made its way under the window. The rugged brown and white feathers along its body bent in the breeze as its neck craned up, its wings unfolding.

In seconds it was hovering outside of the window, its bright purple eyes glancing through the pane. A talon extended from its claws, jiggling against the lock for a few seconds before it gave in with an audible click. With a grin across its beak it opened the window wide, enough for its head to get inside. The gryphon gave one glance to the open streets outside the alleyway before taking a deep breath. With a light touch its talons moved over the covers, gently pulling them away from Fluttershy's body. It took one small moment of hesitation before the gryphon made his move.

Fluttershy's slumber ended abruptly as she was yanked up from the bed by the gryphon's talons. She let out a shriek, quickly silenced by a talon gripped over her muzzle. Fluttershy was soon face to face with the gryphon, her body trembling as he shook his head from side to side. His voice was calm and light as he spoke, a sharp contrast to the situation Fluttershy had found herself in, "I'm trying to help. Just stay calm and I can ex-"

"Let go of her!" Dash shouted as she barreled through the air, trying to deliver a buck to the gryphon's face. However, a combination of the darkness and her drowsiness ended in a size-able chunk of the wall caving in under her hooves instead. The gryphon was quick to grab Fluttershy tightly, yanking her through the open window as gently as he could before he hovered down to the ground. Dash shook the sleep from her eyes as she flew through the window, squinting to see his form below.



Fluttershy let out another squeak before the gryphon covered her mouth once again. "Stay quiet," he said, glaring at her. "I'm trying to help the two of you and you need to be quiet!" The gryphon stopped, jumping back as Dash landed on the smooth cobblestone in front of him.

She scrapped a hoof across the ground, glaring as her wings extended at her sides. "Let her go... Now!"

"I'm trying to help you here. You two need to calm down- Ow!" The gryphon grunted as he felt a hoof from Fluttershy impact his breast. He was quick to restrain her, his talons retracting. "They're going to be here soon if we don't hurry!" he whispered urgently.

"Why am I supposed to trust someone yanking my friend from her bed in the middle of the night?" Dash asserted, keeping her stance. She could feel a light vibration along her wings, the feeling of steel sliding across her feathers. However, Twilight's words of caution were still at the back of her mind: *"Dash, this spell will hide them for a while, but if you use them it will stop. And it won't come back after that. Avoid fighting unless you have to."*

"Because I'm not the biggest problem you have right now," he stated calmly

The gryphon's words were soon followed by a crash coming from their room and the shattering of glass as the large wooden door crushed the window the three had escaped through, sending shards of glass into the alleyway. The sound of hooves stampeding into the room followed before a faint glow shone through the window. One voice spoke out clearly, barking orders, "What's the hold up? Where are they?! The two downstairs said they were in this room, I want them now!"

"Sir, we don't know. The beds are empty."

"Idiots! They couldn't of gotten far! I won't have Lord Zephyr hearing about my failures caused by your bucking *incompetence*!" The gryphon started to back down the alley slowly, motioning a claw for Dash to follow as he lightly tugged Fluttershy along. The blue pony's eyes darted between her friend and the window before she followed. Luckily, she was gone from the window's view just as the broken door was torn away and a unicorn's head peaked out, shining a spotlight back and forth across the alleyway.

“They might’ve gone through here sir.”

“I don’t want *mights* I want them found, *now*! You three, start searching nearby houses and businesses, and get the standbys looking too. You two, go and find the merchant. I want as much information as he has to spit out for a bit. You, you’re with me. We’re going to find out if these pathetic charity saddles are *lieing* to me.”

Dash peered around the corner for only a moment before her focus was drawn to the gryphon. “Explain. Now.”

The gryphon released Fluttershy peacefully, holding his talons up as he spoke, “Can’t, it’s not safe here. There’s a bar not far from here called The Aviary.” He pointed down the alleyway towards a fork as he continued, “Left, right, right, left, straight, left, right. Go to Bri and ask for a bucking bronco on the rocks. If she asks who sent you, just say ‘Skyreil’.”

Dash’s wings flared out once again. “And how am I supposed to-”

“There’s no time. Would you rather have been with the guards who would’ve bucked you into submission without a second thought, or the gryphon who wants you to be alive and can *help you* get to Airlon?”

“I-... B-... Dang it.” Dash turned to Fluttershy. “Are you okay?”

“Y-yes. I mean, he didn’t try to-”

“Good. Let’s go.” Dash turned to the fork in the alleyway, looking over her shoulder at the gryphon. “If you’re lying. You don’t even wanna know.” The two vanished into the maze of buildings as the gryphon let out a sigh, flying up above the building as the streetlights of Faeroc began to buzz back to life.

---

The calm silence of the night had quickly been replaced by the shuffle of hooves and the murmur of rumors amongst the populace. However, while the streets were filled with citizens and guards alike, the dark maze of alleyways only held two pegasi quickly searching for a promised safe

haven. Luckily, the gryphon's directions held true, and Dash soon saw a hanging sign in the alleyway just above a wooden doorway, shaped like a gilded bird cage.

She let out a sigh of relief at the end of her sprint. "Well, I guess he wasn't completely full of horse apples," Dash muttered to herself. She turned back to Fluttershy, whose legs were shaking as she took deep, heavy breaths. "You okay Fluttershy?"

"Just... fine... A little... out of breath," Fluttershy said between gasps of exhaustion. "Can we just... stop for a-"

"Let's get inside first, come on," Dash said, keeping her voice hushed. She waved a hoof in Fluttershy's direction, her eyes looking up and down the alleyway suspiciously before she pushed the door open.

The doorway opened into a large room, dimly lit by candles scattered across a few tables occupied by a hoofful of gryphons or ponies. The walls were barren except for a few candle stands near the ceiling, although they were left unlit. At the far end was a bar and a burly white gryphon seated behind it, calmly cleaning a glass in her claws. A few eyes around the bar idly watched the two pegasi make their entrance, but were soon drawn back to more important events: conversations or a game of cards.

Fluttershy stayed close to Dash as they calmly trotted up to the bar. The gryphon looked up from her glass, a pair of blue eyes glancing over the pegasi. A small grin grew on her beak as she spoke, her voice deep, "Welcome to the aviary chicks. What can I get for you?"

Dash looked back at Fluttershy for a moment, who was still recovering from her exhaustion. She turned to the bartender, placing a hoof up on the bar. "Yeah, a umm... Bronco Bu- Bucking Bronco on the rocks?" Dash questioned her own words, raising an eyebrow as she did.

The gryphon returned Dash's confusion with a blank stare. After a few moments she turned around, pulling out two cloudy bottles and a small tumbler filled with a few chunks of ice. After filling the glass to the brim she pushed it forward, her talon gripped tightly over it. She leaned forward, her face only a foot away from Dash as she spoke, "Who sent you?"

"Skyreil," Dash stated calmly, Fluttershy still recovering behind her.

At Dash's answer, several gryphon patrons in the bar looked up as their conversations came to an abrupt halt. The bartender's talon tightened on the top of the glass, sending a small crack down its side. Her eyes narrowed as she picked up the tumbler, bringing it to her beak and taking a long sip. After the glass rested back on the bar, sending a splash of liquid over her claws, she shouted, "Quill! Look after the bar. I don't want anything missing when I get back from talking to our little hatchlings."

A unicorn nodded from across the room. He had a dark orange coat and a scroll across his flank, and quickly took a spot behind the bar. The gryphon flexed her talons for Dash and Fluttershy to follow as she headed to a door in the back, holding it open for the two.

They were led down a short hallway, and soon found themselves in a storage room stocked with various sacks, bottles, and crates. In the corner were two gryphons. One busied himself with sharpening his talons, while the other was contemplating a move on a small chess board between them. They each shot up out of their seats as the bartender lead Dash and Fluttershy inside, closing and locking the door behind them.

One of the gryphons took his spot at the door while the other sat back down, busying himself with a talon once more, though his eyes stayed locked on the girls. Dash looked between the three gryphons as she spoke, "So... Are you Bri?"

"Yes, I am, for what it's worth to a nopony. Who sent you?"

Dash looked back at Fluttershy, who could only offer a timid shake of her head. "Well, umm, we thought the guy who told us to come here wa-"

"I need a name feather brain, now," Bri stated flatly, scratching her breast with a talon.

Dash stamped a hoof down on the floor as her wings flared out. "Look, my friend nearly got snatched out of her bed by your *buddy* and then these guards busted into our room. We just want to know what the hay is going on, who you all are, and why this Airlon place is so important!"

Bri's wings spread out, their span nearly twice as wide as Dash's. Her glare focused on the pegasus intently. "I'd take a look around you. Three

on two in small six by eight that's gonna make your wings about as useful as they'd be on a brick." She leaned closer, her eyes staring through Dash. "You'd best watch your tone with me hatchling, I'm not about to take orders from a pony in *my bar*. First, names, now. Both of you."

"... I'm Dash, and this is Fluttershy," Dash responded, her wings still spread.

"There, was that so hard? Now that introductions are out of the way, who sent you?"

"What, it wasn't Skyreil? That's the name he gave us."

Bri's eyes relaxed as her wings folded. "Wait, this gryphon. Brown and white? Purple eyes? Stupid enough to think grabbing you from a bed was a good idea?" Dash responded with a nod to each question. "Bloody hell..." Bri muttered, rubbing her forehead lightly. "Of all the dropped eggs, it had to be him."

There was a knock on the door, followed shortly by a groan from Bri as the guard at the doorway opened it slowly. Dash and Fluttershy were greeted by the same gryphon who had snatched Fluttershy from her bed not long before. He gave a small chuckle as he stepped inside. "Well, glad to see you found the place. Meeting the Steel family I take it? Sister Bri isn't being too rough is she?"

"Would you stop calling me that?" Bri asked, her voice strained as a vein showed through her feathers. "Why did you bring them here?"

"Oh come on, we're practically siblings. We were born in the same nest after all." He placed an arm around Bri's shoulder, which was quickly shoved away.

"Because *your* mother got sick for two weeks and *mine* had to hatch *your* egg in *my* nest!" Her eye twitched unnervingly as she repeated herself, "Why did you bring them *here*?"

"Same difference, and they were asking about Airlon," he stated plainly.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Bri demanded as one of her claws grabbed him by the breast.

“Whoa whoa, calm down Bri. You’re scaring the timid one,” he said motioning to Fluttershy. “Sorry about being a little... rough earlier. Pressing matters.”

Fluttershy started to speak up before Dash cut her off, “Hey! We still have no idea what the hay is going on!”

“Bri, if you’d be so kind as to let me go?” He smiled once he was free, patting his breast lightly with a talon. “Well, for starters *Bri*. If they don’t know about Airlon, where do you think they’re from?”

“That doesn’t mean anything you dolt.”

“Yes, it does. It’s practically a threat hung over every gryphon and pegasus’ head. If you don’t eat your veggies you’ll go to Airlon. Don’t clean your room and it’s off to Airlon. Stage a coup and it’s you’ll be locked up in Airl-”

“Would you act like you’re not still in the nest for once?!” Bri shouted. She turned to look at Dash and Fluttershy, and sighed. “You’re from the Wilds then, huh? Is that it?”

Dash blinked, still confused by the gryphon’s odd actions. “Umm, yeah. We came here to look for help. Airlon was mentioned in some reports and we thought it was important.”

“It is, and we’ve talked to you and your people enough for my taste,” Bri spat, turning away from Dash.

“I think what Bri *means* to say is that we know who you’re here for, and we don’t really have anything to offer you.” The gryphon blinked before rubbing his chin idly. “Oh, right, name is Beryl by the way,” he said, extending a talon.

Dash remained where she was, glancing between the two. “Riiight. Listen, this is really important.”

“Oh, really? What is it, more of that Legend pigeon crap?” Bri scoffed, letting out a chuckle. “Like I’m gonna believe what you let yourselves get spoon-fed before it’s even out of the oven.”

“They aren’t made up! We’re from before Nightmare Moon was in charge. We’re the Elements of Harmony *from* those Legends,” Dash stated, noting that Beryl raised an eyebrow at her words.

Bri merely chuckled, turning back to face Dash. “Oh, isn’t that just rich? They went and brainwashed themselves too!”

“It is true! We’re trying to get *your* help so we can all stop her!”

Beryl held Bri back as she seemed ready to tackle Dash to the ground. “Bri, I don’t think it matters if it’s made up or not. If they’re honestly here to get our help-”

“And how do we know they’re really from the Wilds? They could just be more of her lackeys trying to get the rest of us locked up.”

“Listen, I was there. Guards broke in right after I got them out of that room. They were even questioning a merchant they talked to. If they wanted one of us either of them could of grabbed me and-”

“Would you stop arguing?!” Fluttershy shouted suddenly, garnering a baffled stare from everyone in the room, especially Dash. However, her body started shuddering once again as she looked down at the floor. “I’m sorry I didn’t mean to interrupt, but we’re... this isn’t accomplishing anything.”

It took a few moments for Dash to speak up, “Fluttershy is right. We don’t know someway we can prove who we are to you, but we need your help.”

Bri sighed, shaking her head in a talon. “Oh, well, if that’s the case let me just throw inhibition out the window.” She turned away from them again. “It’s all well and good, but we can’t help you anyway.”

“Why?!” Dash demanded, stamping a hoof down.

Beryl stepped up, hoping to stop another fevered outburst from Bri. "Skyreil, the name I told you to use, is our leader. About two weeks ago he was taken by the Queen's guards on a raid, and thrown into Airlon. We've been trying to work on some way to get him out, and we think they're using him as bait to get the rest of us."

"Exactly," Bri stated, crossing her arms. "We can't go rushing into Airlon and just expect to drag him out either. *Beryl* was supposed to be working on a way to get us in."

"Already taken care of. Demi finished the pigment I was telling you about."

"Pigment?" Dash asked, raising an eyebrow.

Beryl nodded. "Yeah, it's kind of hard for a gryphon to disguise themselves with our feather color being a dead giveaway." Beryl smirked as he continued, "Guess it's the same for a pony huh? Especially with those marks." Beryl's smirk faded as Dash stared at him. "Anyway, Demi's an old friend of ours, pretty good with chemicals and stuff. He said he made a paint that works on feathers and coats, and doesn't wear or wash out."

"Took him long enough to deliver on *that*. We've been waiting for months to get this from him," Bri remarked, moving over to a shelf and pulling a few scrolls from them.

"Bri, maybe this could be what we were looking for," Beryl whispered, though his voice carried enough for Dash and Fluttershy to hear.

"What are you rambling about this time?" Bri asked, unfolding a scroll.

"Well, you were worried they'd still know who we are if someone tipped them off about Skyreil, right? *This* is a chance to avoid that."

"Wait, what are you talking about?" Dash asked, her stance finally relaxing. Fluttershy stepped out from behind Dash, her exhaustion all but gone.



Beryl smiled, letting out a small chuckle from his beak. "Well, if you need our help so bad." He leaned closer to Dash, and pointed a talon at her side. "How'd you like to be a blank flank again?"

---

# Chapter 11

Twilight's hooves landed firmly on the ground. The portal behind her glowing a vibrant white that easily illuminated the cave she now stood in. Its walls were a mixture of smooth and jagged rock, with an occasional crystal jutting out near the ceiling. She turned and examined the walls for an exit, noting an odd crack that ran along one of the walls. Finally, she looked at the massive archway around the portal. Several etchings covered the simple stone archway, with identical unicorns on the right column, with two large dragons on the left, and she could barely see a drawing of the sun and moon at the arch's peak. The portal fluctuated, shifting to a mixture of blue, red, and, green. After a few moments Spike stepped through on his claws, his neck bent low to fit through the archway.

After he exited the portal, its glow dimmed, and a small white orb remained floating at the center of the arch. He stood up on his hind legs, stretching as he let his wings unfold. He looked around the cave, though the walls were no longer visible. "Well, I'm glad that worked out, but are we really here, Twilight? I mean, is this Kraulith?" He bent his neck down to Twilight.

"I'm not sure, Spike," Twilight said, floating Princess Celestia's spellbook in front of her as she glanced through its pages. "I cast the spell just like the book said, so we should be there, though I'm more worried that I didn't see a way out." Twilight rubbed a hoof under her chin as she placed the book on the cavern floor. After a moment of thought, Twilight focused. Her horn glowed brightly, shining a beam of light against the cave wall that followed her vision as Twilight searched for a way out.

The beam landed on one of the crystals above, reflecting internally before the light splintered towards several other crystals near the ceiling. Soon the cave was illuminated, and Twilight kept the beam from her horn pointed at the crystal. "Much better," Twilight said. Whoever designed this must have put a lot of work into it. I wonder how long ago it was made?"

She turned to face the crack which ran along a wall in front of the archway. The crack formed a long arch, cutting out a section of the wall.

The section was covered with several scattered, jagged sections of rock, which cut off unexpectedly at the crack. Twilight gave a small nudge to the wall in an attempt to see if it would budge. Her efforts carried no results, however.

She turned back to face Spike. "I think this might be a way out, Spike. Can you move it?"

"Of course," Spike said with a nod as he stepped up to the wall. He put as much of his weight as he could into the wall, but even after several attempts it stood unmoved. Spike frowned as he looked down at Twilight. "I don't know Twilight, it's just not budging. Are you sure there isn't a door?"

"If there is, I can't see it anywhere," Twilight said, squinting at the other walls. "Why would the gate be in a room with no entrance?" Twilight ran a hoof up and down the crack, and her horn brightened as she looked up at the crystal she kept lit. A small orb of light formed off the tip of her horn and floated above her, keeping the beam of light focused and the room illuminated. She leaned forward, her horn pointed at the wall as she focused, a small bolt of magic leaping from her horn and striking the wall.

The wall shifted in response, grinding across its counterparts as the ceiling sent loose pebbles and shards of rock down towards Twilight. Spike moved quickly, sheltering Twilight from a shower of boulders with his wings. After a few moments, the wall began to pull away, and something massive was moving just outside the light of the crystals. Twilight moved back and craned her neck upwards, bending her legs as she prepared to run, or if need be, fight. With every second, the massive form pulled farther away, and soon left Twilight and Spike face to face with an endless expanse of darkness.

After over a minute of hesitation and silence Twilight stepped forward and called out into the shadows, "Hello?"

In an instant, the darkness before her gave way to a monstrous face, easily as large as Spike and covered with scales withered by age. Its nostrils flared, a trail of smoke floating towards Twilight and Spike, and its red eyes looked the two over attentively. Its mouth soon bent into an odd grin, its teeth bared in the process.

“Well, well, well,” he mused. His voice was deep, echoing through the niche Spike and Twilight stood in. “I haven’t had guests in...” He paused to let out a lengthy yawn. “Quite some time.”

Spike was down on his claws, wings spread in a vain attempt to intimidate the giant. Twilight’s legs quaked in fear as several beads of sweat dripped from her forehead. She tried to rationalize the situation in her mind: *The Princess wouldn’t send me here if it was not safe... If he was trying to kill us we’d be dead... I have to be strong, I have to.* She breathed slowly, her eyes closed for several seconds before the quaking of her legs began to die down.

Once she was calm she opened her eyes, keeping them locked on the massive dragon as she spoke, “Is... this Kraulith?”

The dragon chuckled, sending short gusts of wind mixed with smoke towards Twilight. “Where are your manners, child? Guest should introduce themselves, no?”

Twilight cleared her throat, trying to keep herself calm as she spoke, “My name is Twilight Sparkle, and this is my assistant Spike.” She motioned a hoof towards Spike who gave a shallow nod in response, but kept his stance low and his wings extended.

“I see, an oddity as well: not only guests, but a pony with pet in tow.” He leaned closer, his nostrils idly blowing smoke at Twilight as he towered over her. “Yes, you are on Kraulith, though your welcome is running short, little one.” He leaned down further, his eyes as level with Twilight as they could be. “Why are you here?”

Twilight stood firm and stamped a hoof down, her back arched and her head raised. “I’m here to enlist the aid of dragons in freeing Equestria from Nightmare Moon.”

The dragon’s grin twisted before he burst into laughter, nearly falling onto his side. After nearly a minute of glares and confusion from Twilight and Spike, he wiped a tear from his eye, and his laughter began to subside. “That *is* a rich joke, isn’t it?” He raised an eyebrow at Twilight’s silence. “Oh, you didn’t find it funny? No matter.” A massive claw reached forward, lifting Twilight off of the ground with amazing speed for its size. She soon

found herself seated within the dragon's palm as his neck bent to inspect her closely.

"Hey, let go of her!" Spike shouted as he launched into the air, but found himself blocked by another giant claw.

"Patience pet," he said, waving the free claw in Spike's direction. "You are outclassed, and dwarfed to boot."

"Please," Twilight said, backing away slightly from the dragon's gaze as she glanced at Spike and the arch. They were almost a speck in the distance. "This is very important. We need your help to—"

"You don't *need* anything young one, except maybe more lessons in manners." His eyes finally left Twilight as he glanced back to the gateway and the ground in front of it. Twilight could see a glimmer of gold within his irises as the spellbook she had sat down so carefully jetted through the air. The book came to an abrupt stop in front of her, with a faint golden glow around its bindings. "It has been a while," he muttered to himself. "Is it three oddities now? A guest, pony, and thief all in one?"

"Thief?!" Twilight shouted, shaking her head. "No! I'd never steal this from Princess Celestia! She gave it to me!"

"So easy to say, but not to prove, especially with such similar ornaments." The spellbook hovered away from Twilight as she felt the necklace and tiara she wore tugged away from her for a moment. The dragon's eyes pierced her, and it was several moments before his eyes relaxed and he smiled. "You may call me Grados, Twilight Sparkle. I must ask, if thievery did not gain you such a priceless artifact, what did?"

"It was given to me," Twilight stated, not backing down from his gaze. "Princess Celestia herself made sure that it came into my hooves."

"Did she now?" Grados scratched his chin with a claw. "I suppose if she knew before, she would not have left it to fall into her possession. Yet who is so important to ensure its well-being instead of an end by flame, then or now?"

*Then or... now? Does he mean?* Twilight thought. Grados leaned down, placing his claw and Twilight within a few feet of the floor, leaving the book at her side. After Twilight jumped from his clutches, landing safely on the floor, he looked up, took a deep breath, and blew a small burst of fire towards the ceiling. It ignited a crystal, and its light spread through the cave in moments, just like Twilight had done before.

Twilight stared in awe at the cave Grados stood in, towering even above his massive stature. His scales were a faded grey, easily blending into the cave walls, but along his back were a row of vibrant golden spikes, shimmering despite their age. After ensuring the cave stayed lit he lay down, curled up as his head rested before Twilight. "Tell me, how did you know your Princess, Ms. Sparkle?"

"I was her student," Twilight responded, placing her teacher's spellbook securely in her saddlebags. "A very long time ago in fact."

"I would hope it was in the past, considering her likely predicament now." Grados covered his mouth, hoping to suppress a yawn with little effect. "Just a student then? Not many can claim such a thing though, especially now."

"My friends and I, we were the Elements of Harmony, the ones who stopped Nightmare Moon a thousand years ago." Grados raised an eyebrow at Twilight's words, but let her continue. "But... she came back. She trapped us, froze us in time. Now we're trying to fix things, to make things right."

"A noble task, especially for six young ponies. Yet, why do you need us?"

"Princess Celestia left some... thing to advise us, a part of her. She told us to come here, to seek your help in stopping Nightmare Moon." Twilight stepped forward, her head tilted slightly. "You can help us... can't you?"

Grados took a deep breath, a thin trail of smoke flowing from his nostrils. "So she doesn't recall does she? I expected as such, and yet..." He sighed, shaking his head. "No, I am afraid you are mislead Ms. Sparkle."

You will find very little help here, even as her pupil. What little respect that bears, of course.”

“What, but why?” Twilight asked, looking back at Spike. “I know dragons haven’t been to Equestria in a while, but that’s no reason to-”

Grados’s body stretched out as his head craned upwards. “Reasons are deep things, and it takes far longer than you know to find the tips of their roots.” Grados traced a claw along the stone floor between him and Twilight, cutting smooth, shallow lines into it with ease and elegance, like a painter with a brush. “Tell me, being a student, what do you know of your history?”

Twilight smiled, breathing a sigh of relief. “You mean about Equestria? I’ve read a lot of books on it, and-”

“No, child. Of your race, of all races. What do you know of the world’s history?” he asked, his claw frozen in place, only to continue cutting and digging moments later.

Twilight frowned, her head tilted. “I don’t quite understand what you mean. I know a bit about other kingdoms, but there’s not a lot of books about history before the princesses’ rule.”

“Of course not,” Grados muttered to himself as a second claw joined the etching, soon followed by two others. “Do you know of those that made this world, who brought forth life and your princesses as well?”

Twilight tapped her chin with a hoof as she hummed to herself. “I have read some books about mythology. Do you mean the two gods from the creation myths?”

“Mythology, an odd name for factual tales,” Grados muttered to himself, his front claws and eyes preoccupied with the floor. “Alas, yes, those two.” His clawing slowed before he finally stopped. He rested an open palm in front of Twilight and motioned with his other hand for Spike to follow. “Please. Let me enlighten you if I may.”

Twilight reluctantly stepped into Grados’s grasp, and found herself high above the cave floor once again. Spike hovered nearby, and the two

looked down at the floor that had been covered in a multitude of marks. With a golden glimmer in Grados's eyes the lines sparked to life, glowing a vibrant blue. They lifted off the stone floor and began to hover at varying heights, bending and twisting until they became connected.

"Long ago," Grados began, a burst of light filling the already bright room, "there were two celestial beings who built and cared for the endless expanse of the universe." As the light faded two silhouettes hung in the air, forming a circle with one another. A series of images appeared in the center of the circle as Grados continued, "Galaxies, stars, planets, moons, comets, and meteors. Everything within their imagination and will they created. Then, one day, they gave birth to their child. It was a planet, one which would bear their limitless children: plants, creatures both big and small, and limitless wonders beyond their prior work."

Twilight nodded. "Right, and they inhabited the world with all their creations." The images faded and were replaced by pictures of the races of the world, each one glowing at Twilight's call. "Gryphons, earth ponies, zebra, elk, pegasi, ibex, camels, buffalo, unicorns. To every race they gave life and form, and a home within an endless paradise. Even the smallest creatures were given shelter and care from the other races, which is why ponies care for animals, plants, and the seasons in Equestria."

Grados chuckled. "Some of that does carry, yes." All of the images melded into one: a roaring dragon with its wings spread wide. "However, above all else they needed protectors, guardians of their world, and their vision; a vision of harmony. And so we dragons were born, tasked to protect this world and its creators' greatest treasures."

The dragon's image faded and condensed into a faint glow before bursting into a dazzling display of color and light. Before Twilight and Spike were six glowing orbs of light: red, blue, green, black, violet, and gold. "The Elements of Harmony," Grados began, motioning a hand to the orbs. "Together, they were the most powerful magic in the world, and yet even alone they were strong. Six breeds of dragons were created, and one from each born to hold their burden eternal. To the Blue, playful denizens of the deep sea, was given Bliss. To the Red, steadfast protectors of the sky, was given Duty. To the Green, tenders of the vast paradise, was given Empathy. To the Black, vigilant guardians of the earth, was given Balance. To the Violet, helpful wanderers of the world, was given Profusion. Finally,



to the Gold, watchers of unicorns and keepers of magic, was given Potential.”

Twilight watched in wonder as the orbs of light twisted into draconic shapes with Grados’s words, until five of the figures, red, blue, black, violet, and green, formed a circle around a golden center. “I-I’ve never heard this before. No pony knows how the Elements were created... and you said this ‘Gold’ flight watched over unicorns?”

“There is more than one reason for that,” Grados stated as the five dragons around the gold image vanished. The golden dragon grew as several ponies, unicorns, appeared underneath its daunting form. “They were our flock, and we, their shepherds. We were told to give them our knowledge, to teach them to wield their Potential.”

“Potential?” Twilight asked. “Wait, you said that it was one of the Elements. Why don’t we know them by those names?”

“A shift in purpose and power,” Grados flicked a claw through the air. The images faded, and were replaced by several races once again, each with a different colored glow within its form. “Potential is the most powerful and primal of *mortal* magic. When the gods created this world, all their creatures were given it. All of them could wield it, and each developed it differently. Your kind were the only taught to master it.”

“But, there’s nothing about this at all in Equestrian history. There aren’t even any myths or legends about it!” Twilight looked up at Grados, a hoof rubbing across her forehead. “This is just... it’s a lot to take in.”

“Yeah, I haven’t even heard about this,” Spike said, crossing his arms at his chest.

“Not unexpected from a pet,” Grados said to Spike before he turned back to Twilight.

“Hey, stop calling me that!” Spike shouted, his eyes narrowed as his nostrils began to fume smoke.

“Grados, please. Spike is not my pet, he’s a friend and assistant to me,” Twilight pleaded, offering a smile.

“Very well. Do you wish to continue?”

“Yes, please,” Twilight said with a nod.

Grados sliced the image with his claw, twisting it with his fingers. A simple circle formed, split into three pieces: one with gryphons and pegasi, one with earth ponies and zebra, and a third with unicorns and dragons. “Your race, ponies, were scattered around the world. We kept watch over unicorns, ensuring their safety and teachings. Pegasi lived with the mountain dwelling gryphons, even though their companionship was tenuous, and the zebra had taken up residence with earth ponies, whose care for the earth accented the zebra’s affinity for the spiritual.” The pieces of the circle split and drifted apart, revealing two figures behind it: tall, slender ponies with wings and a horn.

“That is when your princesses arrived... Perhaps the dragons had fallen from our creators’ favor for... previous misdeeds, or mayhaps their plans simply changed. Regardless, Celestia and Luna came to us and explained that they were to gather all of their subjects, earth ponies, pegasi, *and* unicorns for their new kingdom of Equestria, and that they would require the Elements of Harmony on their parents’ orders.”

“Their parents? You mean the-”

“Yes, the gods which created this world, though of all their creations they only claimed true parentage to them. Against our judgement and prejudice we conceded on the terms that we would decide when they were truly worthy to wield the elements. From us, they learned and grew, and though it took years, they finally left through the same gate you entered.” Several glowing unicorns formed on the floor of the cave, trotting in a line into the gateway before vanishing.

“I-I’m sorry I had no idea about... about any of this.” Twilight turned to fully face Grados, gazing up at him. “Is... this why you won’t help us?”

“I wish it were child,” Grados said as the images faded completely, the lines on the cave floor slowly smoothed away. “We cannot help you because your rulers committed an atrocity that cannot be forgiven.”

“An Atrocity, the princesses? There’s no way they’d-”

For the first time since her arrival, Grados’s voice was strained, barely drowning out the grinding of his teeth, “There is more about them than you could or would know, Twilight Sparkle.” He leaned down, letting Twilight step onto the cave floor again. His voice was calm as he continued, “All tales are not without tragedy, it seems. One day, a great shadow fell upon this world. We knew its cost as soon as it appeared... The gods that created us all had fallen.” He placed a claw on his chest, clutching his scales tightly. “We could feel it, a part of us was lost, and while their other creations did not know of it, the tragedy still affected them.”

“Affected them how?” Twilight asked as Spike landed next to her.

“War. Disease. Famine. It had many faces, but the darkness was the same: a living nightmare that began to tear the world apart. Your rulers were quick to act, thinking they knew the source of their ailments. The Elements were combined with the draconic magic we taught them, and it cost the world its greatest gift to save it from the flame: Potential.” Grados sighed and lay down, his face level with Twilight’s. “It had been used as a tool for war and death, rather than harmony and peace. With one fell swoop, the Potential of all life sealed, and their memories were taken, everyone’s.”

Twilight stared blankly at Grados, her eyes aghast, slowly shifting to the floor as her mouth hung open. She was at a loss for words and breath as her mind tried to wrap itself around everything she had been told. Could all of this be true? Were Celestia and Luna hiding this from everypony for a reason? She shook her head, trying to remove her daze before she spoke, “I-I can’t really grasp all of this Grados, but... are you really sure about this?”

“I am, Ms. Sparkle, for I have seen all of it first-hand.” He looked up at the ceiling, almost staring through it. “Perhaps you need some rest. I can answer your questions after you’ve had a chance solidify and differentiate them.” Grados walked away and lay down at the center of the cavern, facing away from Twilight and Spike.

Twilight sighed, rubbing her head lightly. She trotted back to the gateway, her horn glowing faintly as the orb of light that kept the area lit

returned to her and faded. After taking a seat near the shimmering orb within the gateway she gazed idly over its etchings. "Is it really all true?" Twilight asked herself, glancing back at Spike. "Spike? Did Princess Celestia ever tell you any of this?"

"N-no, of course not," Spike said, lying down at the foot of the gateway. "I never heard about any of this, even when we were waiting for you all to come back."

"I thought so, but why isn't any of this in a book? Why wouldn't the princesses want us to know about it?" Twilight laid her head down, her mind busily trying to both grasp and question Grados's story. There had to be a hole, a gap, something that made it a lie, but even as Twilight began to drift off to sleep with her mind in the past, she could find nothing, at least nothing she could prove or disprove.

---

When Twilight's eyes opened, she was alone, but not in the cave she had fallen asleep in. All around her, the only thing she could see was white, an endless expanse of nothingness in every direction. She slowly rose on her hooves, turning around as she called out into the void, "Hello? Is anyone here?" *A dream*, she thought, *this has to be a dream... but is it like the other ones?*

As she took a step forward, the featureless ground under her hooves took color and shape. A circle of grass formed around her, swaying gently in a breeze she could, for some reason, not feel. She heard a chime in the distance, a clear tone that resonated around her. With each step forward, more of the world took shape, accompanied by another clear note. Flowers began to spring up in the meadow around her, coupled with the gentle strums of a harp, and a tree sprang to life at her side, beckoned forth by the low hum of a bass.

A path cut through the grass, leading up a gentle hill in the direction of the music as the harmony of a piano joined the symphony. Her pace quickened as she stepped onto the path, but the music stopped suddenly. The white floor before her seemed to give way as her hoof simply fell through it. She was sent hurtling into nothingness as the meadow

above her dissolved. Even the void began to fall apart as she screamed, her fall without end as she was engulfed by darkness.

Her eyes were glued shut, and she began to mutter to herself, "It's just a dream, it's just a dream, it's just a-" A cold shiver ran down her spine, forcing her eyes open as she gasped. She was frozen in place by a mixture of fear and shock, staring at a pair of pure black eyes, which somehow stood out from the darkness around her. They grew closer with each second, joined by a mouth only inches away from her, its teeth bared before it opened wide to engulf her.

---

Twilight jolted upright, sweat pouring from her brow. She could still feel the bitter cold down her spine, but it slowly faded as a warm glow enveloped her. She looked down, her eyes wide when she saw the ground in the distance below, and Grados's face a few feet in front of her. "You have some odd sleeping habits, child. Not many send themselves on a fall while they slumber." Twilight floated down to the floor, landing gently on her hooves as the warmth faded from her body, the frigid feeling along her spine gone as well.

Spike was quick to be at her side, holding her close for a moment. "Twilight! A-are you okay?"

Twilight smiled, trying to wiggle free of Spike's grasp. "I'm fine Spike, please. You can let me go. It's just a little tight..."

"Oh, sorry." Spike frowned, a small blush visible under his purple scales as he placed Twilight back on the ground. He backed away before Grados moved closer to Twilight, leaning down to her.

"I- my dream, it was... I mean I was falling, but... It was actually happening?" Twilight muttered as she took deep breaths, hoping to calm herself. She looked up at Grados as she continued to shudder and shake. "How did I get up there?"

"I would assume you either teleported or levitated. The only signal you gave was your screaming." Grados bent forward, his nostrils flaring as he sniffed the air around Twilight. "There is... a stench about you Ms.

Sparkle. Something very dark, and old.” His claws ran over Twilight’s body lightly, barely touching her coat while he scratched his chin. “Odd that I did not sense it earlier. Perhaps you managed to keep it at bay.”

“What are you talking about?” Twilight asked, careful not to yank her body away from one claw into another, shivering. “You mean magic?”

“Yes... child. Has this been the first?”

“With me almost falling to my death, yes,” Twilight said, rolling her eyes and forcing a chuckle. She shuffled a hoof against the ground, bending her head down. “It wasn’t the same as the other ones. They were scattered and meaningless, like flashes of memories.” She looked back up as she continued, her body finally still and calm. “But, no, it wasn’t the first. There were even times when I...” Twilight placed a hoof on her forehead, shaking her head. “When I’d get a headache if I tried to remember what happened before.”

“Magic can evolve on its own will once it has been freed to the world, and often grows far beyond its owner’s intentions.” Grados’s eyes shimmered, his claws pressing against Twilight’s coat. Her body was assaulted by warmth, slithering across her like a snake. It began to build and focus, the warmth becoming a burning heat in her forehead.

Twilight began to wince, tears on her cheeks as she grunted in protest. “W-what are you doing?”

Spike tried to jump forward, but found himself stopped short by Grados’s massive tail flying at him. Spike flew backwards, his wings barely stabilizing him before he hovered down to the floor.

“Calm yourself, pet, she will not be harmed.” Grados breathed in and out slowly. Twilight’s protests began to calm as she mimicked him, and the searing heat in her forehead slowly died out. Her eyes opened slowly after Grados pulled his claws away. He bowed his head to her, smiling. “Perhaps you will find clarity now.”

Spike timidly stepped towards Twilight, lying down on the floor next to her. “Twilight, are you okay?” Spike asked, his tail curling in an arch around her.

Twilight was still, her eyes darting back and forth as she scanned an invisible canvas with fevered urgency. After an extended silence she turned around. Her face was stoic, her eyes focused on Spike. She simply nodded. "Yes Spike, I'm fine, and I know what happened to us. I know what Nightmare Moon and Trixie did to my friends, and worse, what they did to me."

---