

# Irreplaceable

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# Prologue

## Exile

***"WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN MY CAVE? AND WHY ARE YOU EATING MY GEMS?"***

Hastily spitting out the long topaz gem he'd been sucking on, Spike's mind raced. The dragon was colossal, easily fifty, no, a hundred times his size, maybe even bigger. Scrambling to his feet, he began to backpedal as he attempted to reason with the snarling giant.

"Uh, Heya, bro! I didn't know this was your cave, and I didn't know these were your gems! But, we're cool, right? Woah, WOAHH, we're like brothers, you know! Us against the world, right?!"

He looked about, seeking an avenue of escape. How had he gotten himself into this mess? He thought back to several hours ago, as a furious Twilight Sparkle had stormed out of the Ponyville library, that owl- THAT BLASTED OWL- sitting on her back. As she left, it had slowly turned its head to watch him, those smug eyes letting him know full well that he'd lost. Twilight was HIS now, Spike had officially been replaced. Ever since that smug, condescending featherbag had flapped its way into his life, he'd had nothing but misfortune, culminating in the loss of his best friend. She was more than my best friend, he thought. She was like my sister. Almost like my mother. But she's gone now, replaced me with HIM. Spike's eyes and heart grew hard. If he was going out, it would be on his feet like a man, not babbling apologies like a coward. "You don't scare me!" he yelled, claws outstretched in a defiant address.

"So you're big... really big... And your claws're super sharp... and your tail... extra spiky..." Shaking away his trepidation, he again shouted his challenge.

"You don't scare me!"

Inhaling, he drew back and blast forth a plume of green flame.

"How d'you like that?!"

The great green and gold beast rose, rearing to its full height. It drew in a great breath, threw back its head and laughed. Its deep, throaty chuckle echoed throughout the cave.

**"Well, little one. That is certainly a mighty roar you have there. You could almost toast a marshmallow with it."** Reaching down, he gingerly lifted Spike with two claws. Placing him in the palm of his other hand, he raised him up to eye level.

**"What is such a small and, if I may say so, fierce"** here, the dragon chuckled again, sending wisps of smoke from its nose and mouth **"young one doing out here on his own? Where is your clan?"**

Spike's voice faltered as he answered.

"I- I'm alone. I don't have a clan. No family". His mind turned to Twilight and the rest, how they'd replaced him with that thrice damned buzzard.

"No friends."

The dragon cocked an immense, scaly eyebrow.

**"Is that so? How then, I ask, did you get here?"**

Spike sat down, leaning against the other dragon's scaly fingers. Taking a deep breath, he began his story. He told him of his life, from his birth in Canterlot, as part of Twilight Sparkle's entrance exam to Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns, to the present day, his rejection and self imposed exile from Ponyville. The great beast listened to his story with interest, remaining silent throughout. As Spike finished his tale, the dragon spoke.

**"You have suffered through much, young one. Our kind are not meant to be servants, nor are we pets. Although you took to your position willingly, and fought to keep it, you were still cast aside. You are blameless in this affair, it is all you were raised to know. To be raised in servitude..."** He shook his head in disgust.

**"Unforgivable."**

Spike shrugged his head, despondent.

“What can I do? Like you said, it’s all I’ve ever known. What do I do now?”  
A slow grin spread across the great beast’s fanged mouth.

***“ I believe I know exactly what to do from this moment forwards. Tell me, young one...”***

***Have you ever dreamt of the sky?”***

# Chapter 1

## The Search

“SPIKE!”

The early morning calm of Ponyville’s library was shattered by the outburst. From the main room of the library, Twilight Sparkle (looking a mite perturbed) was busy, digging through shelves and stacks of books, briefly scanning covers before tossing them aside. Again, she called for her assistant.

“Spike, have you seen my copy of Magical Mysteries and Practical Potions? I need to... Spike?” More confused now than anything else, she began to head up the stairs towards the bedrooms. Spike had always been a deep sleeper, but he’d never been one to ignore her. She supposed he was still upset over the whole mouse incident the day before. In a fit of jealousy, he’d attempted to frame Owlysius for killing a mouse in the library, and she’d scolded him quite harshly. *Maybe TOO harshly*, she thought. *So he made a mess of the library and tried to blame Owlysius. It was plain to see that he’d been really jealous. I guess I should’ve paid more attention to his feelings, and let him know he’s still my #1 assistant. I know I expect him to know that already but still is it too much to ask for me to occasionally give him the thanks he deserves and reaffirm his position all the books I read on psychology said that much at least that you should always give love and affirmation when a new member of the family comes along I know that’s more child psychology but still Spike’s only a baby dragon and I guess-* Twilight shook her head. She was doing it again, getting caught up in the science of a thing when all that was really needed was some love and understanding. Trotting down the hall, she came to the door to Spike’s room. She tapped gently.

“Spike? You alright? Look, I’m sorry I got mad yesterday, but-” she stopped short. She’d peeked in the partially open door, and seen his empty bed.

“SPIKE?! Where are you?”

This was VERY unusual. Spike, up and about before she was? She could barely get him out of bed most mornings. Hay, she could barely get him out of bed most AFTERNOONS. *Where could he be? I should go check with Pinkie Pie, maybe he went to Sugarcube Corner for an early snack, or he could've gone to see Rarity, or Fluttershy, or- No. Okay. Calm down. We got a bit angry, some hurtful words were said. I really should give him some time to cool off. Besides, I'm SURE he'll be back for lunch. In all the years I've known him, I've never seen him miss a meal.*

That night, there was an impromptu meeting in the library. After Spike hadn't shown up for lunch, Twilight's initial worry had returned full force. After he'd missed dinner, it escalated to full blown panic. After a quick but furious search of the town, with nopony remembering seeing him at all that day, it had been all her friends could do to prevent Twilight from charging out into the Everfree Forest that very night.

"C'mon now, sugarcube," Applejack said, "Ah'm as worried 'bout the lil' guy as you are, but there's no use chargin' out there in the middle o' the night. What d'ya think y'all can accomplish like that?"

"I CAN FIND HIM! Look, something's wrong. I don't know what-"

"EXACTLY, dear!" Rarity cut in. "You don't know WHAT'S going on right now. You don't even know if he's in the forest! He could've just dropped off to have a nap somewhere!"

Twilight fixed her with an icy stare.

"A nap. For an ENTIRE DAY. Missing THREE MEALS. Look, we ALL know something's wrong, and it's entirely MY FAULT." Rainbow Dash put her hoof on Twilight's shoulder comfortingly.

"Look, Twi. You know me. If I thought there was ANY chance we could do ANYTHING tonight, I'd be the first one out there. It's just not safe. If you go out there tonight, all you're gonna do is get yourself eaten by something". With a resigned sigh, Twilight slumped back.

"But..."

“But NOTHIN’, sugarcube. Look, if y’all REALLY want to do summat tonight, why don’cha get everything organized and ready for tomorrow? I’m sure y’all can drum up a couple dozen folk ready ta help ya search”. Leaping to her feet, Twilight raced towards her desk. Tossing aside crumpled scrolls and cracked quills, she spread a fresh sheet of parchment and began scribbling furiously.

“That’s IT! Okay, we’ll need to spread out over a 5 by 5 grid, organize separate search teams, get some pegasus ponies doing aerial recon...” As she busied herself with her work, her friends slowly let themselves out. As they departed, Applejack spared a second to glance back towards her friend.

“Poor gel, workin’ herself all in a tizzy o’er this. Ah know they’d had a fight, but I never thought that Spike’d do sumthin’ so dang foolhardy like this.”

By morning, Twilight had a search plan organized. After explaining the situation to the mayor, she was able to rally almost every pony in Ponyville for help. But, as day turned to night, one by one, ponies began to drift away from the search, returning to their daily lives. By the night of the third day, the only ones still searching were Twilight and her friends. However, even they eventually departed. It was true that he was an important part of all their lives, and it pained them to see Twilight so sad, but they just couldn’t afford to keep searching.

“We’re really super sorry, Twilight,” said Pinkie, unusually despondent. “But we just CAN’T keep this up much longer. We ALL miss him SO MUCH... It’s just that we’ve all got so many things to do that we just CAN’T put off any more!!” As an outraged Twilight rounded on her, but before she could speak, Applejack stepped between the two.

“She’s right, sugar cube. The Cakes are havin’ trouble at Sugarcube Corner, Clouds are startin’ ta pile up around Ponyville, Rarity’s WAY behind on her orders, Fluttershy’s animals need her help, an’ Big Macintosh ‘n Apple Bloom can’t handle the farm alone. I miss th’ lil’ guy powerful, but there comes a time when y’ just need ‘ta accept that... Well...” She paused, at a loss for words.

“Accept what? That he’s gone? And that he’s never coming back?”



“Look, Twi. All’s we know fer sure’s that he’s not here. We’ve been out here fer three days without any sign o’ him. It’s time we git back t’our lives. We just can’t do this no more.”

They stared at each other in silence for a full ten seconds. It was Twilight who looked away first.

“We’re sorry, Twi.” Applejack said sadly. “We just can’t do this no more”. Twilight bowed her head. She knew they were right, she knew that the longer it took, the less likely they’d ever find him. With a sigh, she began to follow her friends on the long trek back to Ponyville.

Meanwhile, much deeper in the Everfree Forest, bursts of green flame lit the darkness, splashing out in strong, clear gout.

***“Excellent work, young one, excellent. Your control is greatly improving. Soon, we will be able to take the next step towards making you a proper dragon.”***

# Chapter 2

## Flight

~Three Weeks Later~

Through the darkness of the Everfree Forest, around trees, through the dense woods, through the darkness, with the wind at their backs and sheer terror, like the grim spectre of death, nipping at their heels the two foals fled.

Needless to say, they were out of their minds with fear. Brigadier and Sapphire Glory, not more than 15 years between them, dearly wished that they'd stayed home tonight. Brigadier, his usual bluster and bravado nowhere to be seen, looked back at his best friend, mere steps behind him. Her normally perfect golden mane was completely askew, tangled with leaves and twigs, and her cyan coat was splattered with mud. Sapphire met his gaze, their mutual terror plainly visible in her eyes.

"I- I'm not s-sure how mu-much longer..." She panted, completely exhausted. Swallowing hard, Brigadier swallowed hard, willing his usual fearlessness to return. Putting on a brave face, he called back to her.

"Don't worry, Saph, It can't be that much farther! We're almost home!"

It was at that moment that she suddenly dropped, falling flat on her face. Skidding, Brigadier wheeled around and ran to her side.

"I'm stuck!" she cried, tears in her eyes. In the darkness, she had strayed too close to a large pile of rocks, and her hoof had become jammed.

"Okay, hold on, just hold on!" he said, mind racing. The rocks she had stuck under were unstable; If he moved them to get her out, they'd fall, trapping her completely. Unless...

“Alright. I’m going to move the rock. The SECOND you can move, get away from the pile, got it?”

“But, th-”

“Look, Saph. You’ve gotta trust me here. I’m gonna get you out, but then you have to RUN. Promise me that no matter what, once you get out, you’ll run. Run for home. Okay?” She nodded.

“Okay. I promise.”

Bracing his back against the pile, Brigadier pushed. He pushed as hard as he had ever pushed anything in his entire life. His exhausted limbs cried out in protest, but still he pushed. As he strained, the rocks began to shift and rumble, bits of stone and pebbles dropping down. As soon as Sapphire realized what was happening, her eyes widened and she opened her mouth to protest, but a single look from her best friend silenced her.

“It’s my fault you’re out here... And I’ll be damned if you’re not gonna make it back, with or without me!”. With one final grunt of exertion, the rock shifted. Pulling herself out of the way, Sapphire could only watch in horror as the pile of stone and dirt and wood crashed down around her friend, burying him up to his chest in rubble.

“Ngh... GO. YOU PROMISED. JUST GO!”

With one final glance back at her best friend, a trickle of blood running down his face, staining the edges of his bluegold mane and the gray of his face with a deep red, Sapphire Glory ran. She ran like she had never run before. When she had run earlier, she was only running for herself. Now, she was running for the both of them. Oh, why had she dragged him out here with her? True, it had started as a fun little adventure, just the two of them out there in the darkness of the great and mysterious Everfree Forest. *It was even sorta romantic*, she confessed to herself. But then, the weather had turned, and they had run to a cave, seeking shelter...

Sighting a light in the distance, she steeled herself for one last burst of speed. *Please, PLEASE let this be it...*

“Thanks for letting me stay, Fluttershy,” Rainbow Dash said as she finished towelling herself dry. “I guess I overdid it a bit with the storm, huh?” The yellow pegasus she was addressing nodded, uneasy. Fluttershy had never been the bravest of ponies at the best of times, and thunder and lightning always put her even more on edge than usual.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say- EEP!” Fluttershy started, a particularly loud crack of thunder echoing across the night.

“Okay, maybe you overdid it a teensy bit...” Dash clopped over to the window, shaking her head at the tempest raging outside.

“I hope everyone got inside safely. That’s a NASTY one. Heh, sometimes I impress even myself”.

Dash’s self congratulations would have to wait, as it was at that moment that the door to Fluttershy’s cottage flung open with a resounding bang. Sapphire Glory stood in the doorway, tears in her eyes, soaked to the skin and completely out of breath. Immediately forgetting her own fear, Fluttershy bundled her inside and wrapped her in a blanket.

“Oh, you poor little thing! Are you alright? What happened?” Sapphire choked back sobs as she tried to answer.

“I-in the forest, it’s Brig, he’s stuck, we were running, and I got stuck and he moved the rocks and they fell on him and he got stuck and he told me to run and I left and it’s all my fault and-”

“Hush, dear, it’s going to be all right.” Fluttershy hugged her reassuringly. “We’re going to find him, isn’t that right, Rainbow Dash?” All thoughts of a warm bed were now completely gone from the blue pegasus’s mind. Ready for action, she prepared herself to brave the storm yet again.

“Okay, kid, if I’m gonna find him, I need to know which way you came”. Sapphire, still fighting against tears, tried several times to start a sentence, but broke down and cried, rendering everything she said unintelligible. “Just point to which direction. Can you do that much?”. She nodded, and raised a hoof, pointing the way into the Everfree Forest.

“Right, that’s all I need to know. Be back with your buddy in 10 seconds flat!” As she ran for the door, Fluttershy stopped her.

“Wait! It’s too dangerous, we need to go find the others first! You can’t just head off alone!”. Dash shook her head.

“There’s no time! We don’t know what’s going on, where he is, or what condition he’s in. If I don’t go right now, there’s no telling what could happen to the little guy”. Spreading her wings, Rainbow Dash launched herself out the door, into the storm.

“Don’t worry, little one. Rainbow’ll find him. She’s the best flier in Equestria!” Fluttershy cooed, reassuring the little filly, but her words fell on deaf ears. The night’s events had taken their toll, and Sapphire Glory had finally slipped into unconsciousness.

It was half an hour later that Rainbow Dash returned to Fluttershy’s cottage. Covered in mud, hooves scuffed and raw, she carried the limp form of Brigadier on her back. Fluttershy gasped.

“Is he...?”

Hurriedly, she lifted him from her friend’s back and, laying him on the couch, began to clean his cuts and scrapes..

“Nah, he’s fine” Dash assured her. “Nothing’s broken, he’s only a bit scraped in spots”. She shook her head. “It’s amazing. I found him easy enough, she left a path that a blind pony could follow. I got there, and here he is, buried under a pile o’ rocks at least twice his size. I could barely move them to get him out. From what the little one told us, he’d have had to roll one aside himself so that she could get out.” Fluttershy stroked his brow gently.

“Some say that, in extreme circumstances, ponies can do incredible things. There are stories of mothers lifting fallen trees off their children, and I guess, in this case, moving rocks”.

Satisfied that the young ones were taken care of for the night, Rainbow Dash dried herself off for the second time that night and, exhausted after the night’s excitement, headed off to bed. The next morning, she awoke to find Nurse Hart in the living room.

“I’m happy to say, miss Fluttershy” she was saying, “That aside from a couple bumps, bruises and scrapes, they have a clean bill of health from me. I’ve called their parents, they should be here shortly”. Noticing Dash, Fluttershy ran over to her, the normally quiet pegasus alight with excitement.

“Dash! Oh, thank goodness you’re awake!” Taken aback, Dash put a hoof on Fluttershy’s shoulder.

“Whoa, calm down! What’s up?” Still barely able to contain herself, Fluttershy had to take several deep breaths before she could speak.

“Oh, Dash, you need to hear this! They’re awake, and- oh, dear! Here, just listen. Brigadier, Sapphire, tell Rainbow Dash what you told me!” The foals looked at one another, before Brigadier spoke, telling the story of the night before. As he finished the tale, Fluttershy and Dash looked at each other, before speaking the same thought as one voice.

“We GOTTA tell Twilight!”

# Chapter 3

## Change

Emerald light flashed through the darkness of the storm, its colours clashing with the blue-white lightning of the storm's own fury. Deep within the great cave, flames of green and orange clashed, sending flickering shadows and a kaleidoscope of colours across the stone walls as the light refracted off the piles of gold and jewels. Again and again, green met orange in a crackling blaze of glory. Spike rounded on the great green beast, slipping between its legs and blasting his flame at his back. Easily dodging the blast, the larger whipped his tail in a rising arc, trying to swat the purple annoyance like a fly. Jumping into the air, Spike slipped past the attack, hitting the ground in a roll.

***“Enough!”*** The great green dragon stretched, a series of sickening cracks echoing throughout the cavern as the nitrogen bubbles in its joints popped one by one. ***“You are improving much, young one”***. Spike got to his feet, rubbing his shoulder. The young dragon looked much different than he had three weeks before, having shed much of his baby fat. Now lean and muscled from intense training, he was beginning to come into his own. However different his body had become, though, what had changed most was easily his eyes. Once bright and shining, always a cheery smile plastered across his scaly features, those eyes became hard. His emerald irises were now somehow dark and steely. Gone were the happy thoughts of his friends and home, replaced simply with desire. A desire for power, for strength, a desire to throw away the Spike that he once was and become something... *different*. Something no-pony would be able, no, that no pony would DARE try to hurt.

“Why’d we stop? I’m ready for more! I can take it!” Spike stomped a scaly foot.

***“No, young one. While you have learned much, and gained much control of your own power, your strength, but you are still young. At this stage, too much exertion-”***

“That’s the PROBLEM!” Spike’s shout echoed throughout the cavern. “I’m too small! This *power* you keep talking about, what good is it if I’m too small to use it!? You promised me power, old one. You promised me the chance, and the power, to show them just who it was they deserted”.

***“Aye. You WILL have your revenge. You will have the power to right the wrongs done to you, to fight back against those who shunned you, who used you and tossed you aside. You will attain this power and so much more, but only once you are ready. Several more years, and you will be ready to-”***

“NO!” Again, Spike stamped his foot. “I can’t wait years, I’ve barely been able to wait this long!”

The young dragon stared at his towering mentor, anger in his eyes. Since that first fateful night, the great dragon had begun to train him. Spike was stronger, faster and his breath could do more than simply cook popcorn. His control over his own flame had grown exponentially, in fact. Once unable to summon more than a short burst, only good for sending letters, the colossal plumes of flame he could now call up with a breath would put most dragons ten times his size to shame. However, as his strength grew, so did his temper. The little dragon had, with the help of the incensing words of his master, turned the loneliness that grew inside him to bitter, base rage. Rage at himself for not being good enough. Rage at Twilight and her friends for casting him out and replacing him. Rage at that feathered freak who had ruined his life.

In the beginning, he had absorbed the great dragon’s words, doing his best to better himself, to become stronger. With the closest thing to a family he had ever known gone, he began to focus on a new goal. With his new strength, the flames and power to be bequeathed to him, he knew what he would do. He would burn. Burn himself into their minds, a great beast of legend. They would no longer see a weak, pathetic infant, hurt by what they had done to him. They would see him as a DRAGON. As the days passed, his master’s words molded him, incensing his pain and inflaming his desires. The tiny dragon’s body no longer matched his spirit. With one thought on his mind, he continued his training. He would BURN. Waving the older dragon’s words aside, he argued.



"It takes hundreds of years for a young dragon to grow to even HALF your size. By the time I grow to where you think I'm ready, they'll all be long dead!"

Spike huffed, a cloud of greenish black smoke spurting from his nostrils.

The larger dragon sighed, a giant hot air balloon deflating all at once.

**"There may be a way..."** Stopping abruptly, his head snapped around. He sniffed the air, scenting something. Something that shouldn't be there. **"We are not alone."** he snarled. With a bound, Spike charged towards the entrance to the cave.

**"Stay Where You Are!..."**. But he was too late. Spike had already rushed outside, into the darkness and storm. His sharp dragon eyes darted about, examining the muddy ground outside. Hoofprints. Two pairs. Small. A pair of foals, from Ponyville, no doubt. Out on an adventure in the Everfree Forest. As he began to run through the trees, following the quickly disappearing tracks, a great clawed hand lifted him, bringing him back to the cave. Spike was livid.

"Why'd you stop me? I could've caught them!" he raged. The other silenced him with a roar.

**"To what end? What, pray tell, would you have done had you caught them? In all likelihood, you'd have simply gotten yourself lost. You're of no use to me dead, boy!"** The great beast paused, shaking its head. **"There will be a time and a place where the significance of tonight's events will make itself known, but this is not that time."**

Spike was still angered, though he was willing to listen to the mighty beast. He was never one to be patient, but his mentor has shown much wisdom in the time they have be together, *for now*, he decided, he will listen to the dragon's words. "Very well, Delicraw, while I don't agree, I am willing to hear you out."

**"We need to prepare for the eventuality that they will reach Ponyville. We do not have much time, until tomorrow afternoon at the latest, is**

***my best guess. By then, they will have alerted the town to our presence here. They will mobilize, they will find us, and they will attempt to destroy us***". Taken aback, Spike questioned the other.

"Are you sure? We're doing them no harm, why would they come after us?" for a moment, Spike's new fierce demeanour slipped, revealing a shade of his former self, indecision showing on his face. "We've done nothing to them".

***"Aye, lad, that much is true. However, ponies are fearful creatures, quick to condemn anything they see as a threat. How have dragons been dealt with in the past in this area? How has your former \*family\*"***  
The great dragon spit this word through a mouthful of hatred and malice, ***"acted towards any dragon they've seen? I trust their reaction has not been to invite them in for tea"***. Spike had to agree.

"Princess Celestia had Twilight and the rest drive the last one to try to settle in the mountains away..."

***"Exactly. They want us gone. Dead and gone. They drove a dragon who settled all the way in the MOUNTAINS away, what do you think they would do to dragons who live that much closer to them?"*** Spike grunted, another plume of smoke.

"So what do you think we should do, then?" The elder dragon let loose a thunderous laugh, and gave the younger a grin that was simultaneously cheerful and malevolent.

***"I suppose congratulations are in order. It looks as though you'll get your wish after all"***. Returning to his treasure horde, the great green dragon began to dig, tossing aside gold, gems and other trinkets, muttering to himself. With a roar of triumph, he pulled two items from the heap. As he placed them on the ground, Spike was able to see that he was clutching what appeared to be an ancient book and a goblet emblazoned with the image of a raging dragon.

"My wish?"

***"This is the Lexicon Draconus"*** he began. ***"It is an ancient tome, filled with secrets of otherwise forgotten dragon magic. With this, you can continue to grow, to heights far greater than you could ever hope to***

***achieve within the next millennium. However, its use comes at a price***".

"What... What sort of price?" The elder dragon looked at him, his stare dissolving any trace of insincerity between them.

***"A Blood Price."***

# Chapter 4

## Plans

“...Are you sure?”. Twilight Sparkle, incredulous, looked at her friends with a look that can only be described as heartbroken. That morning, she had been woken by an insistent banging at the library’s door. Initially, she had ignored it, as she had for the past several weeks. However, this time, whoever it was hadn’t given up and left when she didn’t answer. Finally, frustration outweighing her desire to be alone, she’d stormed down the stairs and thrown open the door, only to see Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash standing outside. Before she could give them a piece of her mind and launch into her prepared speech of how she just wanted to be alone, they spoke.

“We found him!”

Twenty minutes later, Twilight and her best friends were all gathered in Fluttershy’s cottage. Brigadier and Sapphire Glory were sitting huddled together on the couch, understandably unnerved by the goings on. Upon their arrival, Brigadier leaped up, anger in his eyes.

“This is who you brought? We just told you that there are DRAGONS in the Everfree Forest, and you bring your social club?”. Upon seeing Twilight, however, he quickly calmed, addressing her respectfully, but seriously. “Miss Sparkle, you’re close to Princess Celestia, right? Please, ask her to send some of her royal guards, or an army, or, or, SOMETHING! We’re gonna need all the help we can get if we were going to kick some dragon behind and send them packing out of Equestria!”. The group tried their hardest to look serious, despite their own amusement at the little colt’s earnest tirade. Even Twilight found herself having to suppress the urge to giggle, despite her current state.

“We can’t just force them out of Equestria”, Twilight explained, as gently as possible. “Just the fact that they’re dragons doesn’t mean they’re a threat to us, or even mean us any harm. Even if they were, we always try to resolve

things with words first". Brigadier stood his ground, looking her right in the eye.

"I heard them talking! They ARE a threat, and they DO mean us harm!"

"Listen, kid" Putting a hoof on his shoulder, Rainbow Dash tried to explain their current predicament.

"The situation we're in right now is kinda..."

"Unique" Rarity suggested.

"Yeah, that's the word! Unique". Dash looked at Brigadier, and addressed him firmly yet gently.

"Now, Brig, are you 100% sure of what you saw?" The colt raised his head, his face set in stone.

"200% sure!"

"Alright. You told me there were two dragons, right?" The colt nodded rapidly. "Ok, kid. I need you to tell Twilight and the others exactly what you told me".

"There were two of them" Brigadier began."The first one was huge, absolutely massive. He was-"

"Forget him!" Twilight broke in. "Tell me about the other one". Taken aback, Brig obliged.

"He was about this tall" he said, raising his hoof and indicating a point at about ear level. "He was purple, well, most of his scales were, anyways. He also had spikes along his back. Green ones". Twilight exhaled; she hadn't even realized she was holding her breath.

"His fire. What colour was his fire?" The purple mare asked, in a voice almost completely devoid of emotion.

"Green, the same colour as the spikes. It was really weird, though. It wasn't like a fire you'd see in a fireplace. It was kinda... wispy I guess. Sorta sparkly. Almost..."

"Magical?"

“Hey, yeah! How’d you know-” Applejack stepped in quickly, silencing him.

“Brig, honey, just hush fer a sec, ‘kay?”. All eyes were on Twilight as she processed this piece of information. She stood, staring blankly ahead. Her mind raced. It was true, they HAD found Spike! The description was unmistakable, and from someone who’d never met him before. It was a certainty. Suddenly realizing that everyone was watching her, Twilight shook her head.

“Please, continue. What were you doing in the cave, and what, exactly, did you see?”. Brigadier looked to Sapphire Glory. Their eyes locked, silently confirming the previous night’s events. Without taking his eyes from Sapphire’s, Brigadier spoke.

“We... we wanted to go out and have an adventure. We wanted to explore the forest. We’re sorta new here, and we wanted to make a bit of a name for ourselves, I guess. But yeah, the cave. We really didn’t stay for long but... well, at first it seemed like they were fighting”. For the first time that morning, Brigadier quieted, and Sapphire Glory, who had been silent the entire time, picked up the story.

“There was treasure everywhere, diamonds and rubies and emeralds, gold and silver, all sorts of stuff. We went inside, and... they... they were fighting. That’s how we found the cave, actually. It was raining, and it was dark, and we saw the lights, from their fire, and... Well, yeah. We thought they were fighting over the treasure, actually. After we saw them, we started to leave, but...they just stopped. The big one told the little one to stop, and they just started talking.” They broke eye contact, and Brigadier continued where she’d left off.

“I could be mistaken. I won’t lie, we were both scared out of our minds, and maybe I don’t remember everything perfectly, but...” The young colt paused, looking at Twilight. Their eyes met. He wasn’t sure how he knew, but he *knew* that what he was about to say was going to break the older mare’s heart.

“It looked like he was teaching the little one. And... I don’t think he was teaching him anything good. No matter what else I forget from last night, I know I won’t forget what he said”. The air hung heavy with an unasked question. To everyone’s surprise, it was Fluttershy who asked it.

“What... did he say?”

Brigadier swallowed before answering.

*"You promised me the chance, and the power, to show them just who it was they deserted"*. Twilight couldn't breathe. Her head began to spin, and everything started to go blurry, though whether from shock or tears she couldn't tell. She couldn't believe it. It couldn't be true, it COULDN'T. *Spike is...is trying to get stronger so he can...so he can...* tears welled in her eyes as she tried to finish the thought. For a long time, not a word was spoken. The group had come together, ready for another mission, just like old times. They came together in with a cautious optimism, ready to set out and bring back the dragon that had wedged himself so deep within their hearts. Now, however, it seemed as though they had a newer, much darker task. Applejack, never one to stand idly by, spoke first "I dunno what in th' hay is going on here, but I, fer one, find it hard ta believe the lil' guy would evuh say sumthin' like that, but it's crystal clear what these young 'uns saw". Every pony listened attentively as Applejack began issuing instructions. "Ah'm gonna keep on hopin' that this all's gotta be a mighty big misunderstandin', and that we c'n fix it all up nice an' peaceful-like, but this ain't somethin' we can take lightly. Rainbow Dash, you're the quickest of us all Get'cher self ta the post office and tell Ditzy Doo to take a letter ta Princess Celestia. Explain th' sitch'e'ation to the Princes and request some royal guards." Dash looked to Twilight, hoping her friend would be able to say something, anything, but she simply stared at the floor, remaining silent. Dash, seeing she wouldn't speak up, decided to herself.

"Hold on a second" she said. "Why don't I just go? Ditzy's a good mailpony and all, but I'm the fastest flier in Equestria!". Applejack shook her head.

"Two things, sugarcube. First, she's not just a good mailpony, she's the BEST mailpony. She may be a bit derpy at times, but she's got direct access ta th' princesses. Second, once I tell y'all the rest o' th' plan, yer not gonna WANT ta go ter Canterlot. Now, g'won, get. The sooner ya get back, th' sooner we can get th' rest organized. As Dash left the cottage, she gave one final look behind her, as if waiting for someone, *anyone* to stop her. When no pony moved, she took off at full speed, heading for the center of town. No pony said a word, but all, with the exception of Twilight, looked to Apple Jack, waiting for her next instructions. "Spike is our friend, an' I got no intention o' loosin' th' guards on him if I can help it. Brigadier, if'n we gave y'all a map d'ya think ya could mark th' path ya took ta the cave?" The colt nodded "Alright then. Fluttershy, you go get 'im a map and help 'im out

with that.” Fluttershy nodded and left the room, followed closely by Brigadier.

“Alrighty then. Once we got a map an’ know where we’re headed, we move out. Any questions?”

“Um...” Sapphire spoke up quietly from her place on the couch. “What’re you gonna do?”. Applejack looked at her.

“We’re goin’ ta get our friend back”.

“Excellent sentiment, dear! I agree wholeheartedly. While there’s absolutely no doubt in my mind that Spike is quite upset and it’s quite possible he may have said some rather nasty things he probably doesn’t even mean.

However, I strongly believe we can convince him to come back to Ponyville with his friends, where he belongs. From where I sit, though, there DOES seem to be one *teeny tiny* little problem.” Rarity walked over to the couch where Sapphire Glory still sat and placed a gentle hoof on her head.

“According to this young filly, Spike isn’t alone. There’s a fully grown dragon there with him. I think it’s quite safe to say that he is the one responsible for our scaly friend’s drastic change in personality. How do you suggest we get past that great brute so we can speak with Spike?”

Applejack opened her mouth, paused for a moment, then closed it. She had been so caught up in getting everything up and running in Twilight’s place that she’d entirely missed that little detail. The orange earth pony sat there, pondering, before coming to the conclusion that she was absolutely clueless.

“I’ve... got nothin’. But yer right, we gotta separate the two of ‘em. Twi?... Sugarcube?” Twilight still stared at the floor, motionless and silent. It was time for a bit of tough love, Applejack decided. “ Look, if’n we wanna go get Spike, we’re gonna need yer help. Now, buck up and help us think o’ somethin!”. Twilight didn’t budge “Twilight Sparkle, are y’all even listenin’ ta me?”

“Why?”

“Pardon?”

“Why would that dragon take Spike in and train him?” Twilight wondered aloud.



“Perhaps the dragon saw Spike as a possible companion? Or maybe even a son?” Rarity suggested.

“No...No, dragons aren’t like that. Well, at least not those of the age to live outside their society. They’re fiercely territorial, and will attack just about anything it feels is encroaching upon its territory, whether it be young or old, dragon or pony”. Twilight had awakened, it seemed. Almost as if her natural intellect and curiosity had taken over again and were working double time to find a solution to the problem facing her. For the first time in almost a month, she was back to her old self. She began to pace the floor, a look of fierce calculation on her face. Her eyes cold, she paced in a circle, muttering to herself. This is what she did best, she could figure out anything and she could figure this out. She HAD to figure this out. When she finally stopped and raised her head, she had an idea. When she spoke, it was with the confidence and renewed vigour of someone with a plan. She could do it, it would work and she could finally put everything back as it should be. For the first time in a month, Twilight Sparkle felt hope.

“Ladies, I think I have a plan.”

# Chapter 5

## The Hunt

“Okay. Applejack, did you bring the can opener and the garden hoe?”

“Right here, sugarcube”.

“Excellent. Fluttershy, have you got the can of silly string and the spoons?”

“Um... Yes, they're right here”.

“Perfect. Rainbow and Rarity, I assume you've got the paintbrushes, the telephone wire and the sunglasses?”

“You know it!”

“Of course, darling”.

“Alright. Looks like we're set. Let's do this!”

Armed with a strange assortment of odds and ends, the group left Fluttershy's cottage, heading into the Everfree Forest. However, this was not the same group of the past three weeks. This was the old group, the true carriers of the Elements of Harmony. In high spirits once again, the prospect of once again getting out and doing what they did best, *fixing* the world and helping their friend, had given them new life, almost. Twilight, almost completely back to her old self, absorbed herself once again in the finer details of her plan. It did her friends' hearts good to see her like this, after having endured three weeks of the mopey, depressed Twilight. As they followed the trail left by the two foals, they almost didn't need the map Fluttershy had prepared. Applejack sighed, shaking her head.

“Not the hardest trail t' follow, eh? Poor li'l mites, they was runnin' scared”. Rainbow chuckled, hovering slightly ahead.

“C’mon, can ya blame them? They were convinced they were being chased by a couple of dragons. Hay, even \*I\* might think of running in that situation!”.

“They were runnin’ from Spike, sugarcube. They were runnin’ from Spike ‘cause he gave ‘em cause to. Just think o’ that fer a sec before ya go laughin’ about it”. Momentarily sobered by that thought, Dash fell back, silent. However, seconds later, she sped forwards with a laugh.

“Ha! I know where we are! This is where I found Brig last night!”. They approached the rock pile which, the night before, held captive a young pony. Twilight’s curiosity caused her to pause, to inspect the pattern into which they had fallen.

“...This doesn’t make sense...”

“Whaddaya mean, Twi?”

“Well, look at this. These few off to the side, you moved them there, right, Dash? But before, they would’ve been over here. But.. That’d mean...”. Rarity rolled her eyes.

“Twilight, dear, if you have a point to make, could you kindly make it? We ARE in a bit of a hurry, after all”. Twilight snapped out of her reverie.

“Well, just look at this. If they fell like this, trapping him, he’d have to be standing right over here, and they would have to be balanced over here”. Twilight gestured with her hoof.

“But if they were balanced there, there’s no way-” Twilight paused, her eyes going wide. Dash, deciding she’d had just about enough of Twilight’s sciency rambling.

“Come on, Twi, spit it out!” Twilight turned, looking at her friends with all seriousness.

“There’s no way he couldn’t have known. If he moved the rocks he did to get Sapphire out, there’s no way he wouldn’t have known where they’d end up. He knew that if he got her out, he’d be trapped instead”. The friends stood silent, stunned by the news.

“Well I’ll be. That lil’ colt’s got guts, I’ll give ‘im that”.

Approximately ten minutes later, the six had reached what was undoubtedly the dragons' cave. Quietly, they crept up to the entrance. Peering inside, Twilight whispered to her friends.

"Alright. You all know the plan. We're only gonna have one chance at this. Any questions?"

***"Just one. What'll you do if there's nobody inside?"***

"Well, in that case, we can just-" Twilight stopped. Slowly, the six ponies turned. Behind them, its great bulk framed by the sun coming through the trees, stood the great green dragon. Twilight swallowed.

"Well, in that case, we'll probably RUN!". She shouted the last word as more of an instruction to her friends than as a legitimate answer. Immediately, the six ponies scattered. *Oh no no no no NO! This can't be happening, this CAN'T BE HAPPENING! I had it all planned out, it was going to work, it HAD to work!* Twilight shook her head, clearing her thoughts. There was only one thing left to do. Rounding on the dragon she called instructions to her friends.

"Rainbow, keep its attention! Applejack, Rarity, try to- GAH!" Twilight stopped suddenly, forced to dive away from the swing of a monstrous spiked tail. As the ponies spread out through the trees, Rainbow dash spread her wings and blasted off, racing at full speed in a blurring figure eight around the dragon's head. With a roar, he snapped at her, bursts of flame and smoke coming forth from between his teeth.

"Ha! Ya can't catch what ya can't-Unh!" Rainbow's boast was cut short as a lucky swing from his clawed hand knocked her from the air. She hit the ground hard, rolling to a stop with a grunt. As she tried to stand, the great beast chuckled, lifting her still form with two giant claws.

***"It's been many a year since I've had the pleasure of dining upon pegasus."***

He opened his mouth wide, far wider than necessary, and lifted her above his head, obviously planning to simply drop her into his cavernous maw. Suddenly, Rainbow's eyes snapped open. With a quick burst of speed, she pulled something from its place tucked behind her wing and hurled it into

the waiting mouth below. Dropping her with a roar, the dragon fell back, clutching his throat. Rainbow Dash fell once more, wings trailing limply behind her, her left wing at an awkward angle. This time, she didn't move. Still roaring out its wrath, the dragon staggered, slumping down to all fours before collapsing to the ground, blinking slowly.

"Oh WOW! Dash, that was AWESOME! He was like ROAR, then you were like ZOOOM, and then he was like NO WAY, and then you were all YES WAY! That was SO COOL!" Pinkie Pie gushed, clearly enthused at the excitement, as she bounced over towards her friend. The rest of the group, satisfied that Pinkie was helping the fallen Dash to her feet, cautiously approached the dragon.

"Oh my, what WAS that?" Rarity asked, puzzled.

"Dragonsbane" Twilight replied, mentally cursing herself for not coming up with the plan herself. "It's an herb with a rather pronounced effect on dragons, thus the name. It causes lethargy, dizziness, loss of coordination, and contraction of the flame canals in the back of the throat, with the general-" Applejack cleared her throat.

"Um, Twi? English, please".

"Oh, sorry. Basically, it messes up dragons in a big way. Nothing permanent, just makes them sleepy and stops their fire. What I want to know, however, is how Dash got some". Fluttershy looked at her feet, shuffling awkwardly.

"Um... That would be from me. After the last time we had to deal with a dragon, back up on the mountain, she came by and asked me if there was anything you could stop a dragon with. I... I've always had... *issues* with dragons, so I gave her some of mine. She made me promise not to tell anyone, though, so I didn't...". Twilight nodded understandingly.

"That makes sense, I guess. She WAS a bit... wary of them after that, I guess". Their deliberation was cut short by Pinkie's voice, its tone shifting from annoyed to terrified.

"Come on, Dashie, just get up. This isn't funny anymore. Seriously, just get up... Dash? Rainbow Dash, GET UP! PLEASE, JUST GET UP ALREADY! SAY SOMETHING!".

But Rainbow Dash did not get up.

# Chapter 6

## Conscience and Consciousness

*Pain. Pure and simple pain. Endless fire, running along every inch of every scale, through the cracks and crevices, through every fiber of every cell. Burning, scouring, cleansing, changing. Changing. Changing and growing. Changing and growing and twisting and burning. Similar yet different, different yet the same. What was once is no longer, but still is. What could be is now, but not wholly so. Time is irrelevant, so it seems. What is, was and could be merges with what might've, would've and could've been. Size, space, possibility, flame, ice, burning, freezing, growing, shrinking changing shining glowing raging sparking shifting changing rising falling beginning ending beginning falling rising changing shifting sparking raging glowing shining changing shrinking growing freezing burning ice flame possibility space size. And pain. Whatever changes, pain remains. Pain is the constant throughout flux. Pain is the indicator. Pain means life. Life, though it changes, brings what never does. Through life comes pain, pain cannot come without. Pain means growth. Pain means life. Though life changes, pain never does. Constant tirade, endless wave, endless wave, constant tirade. Strangely enlightening. Pain does not hide, it does not lie, it does not pander or preach. Its message is straight and plain. It speaks of the past and the future, what should have been and now is, though far before its time. The future is the present, though not the past. Change is constant, though not so constant. Time fades, space recedes, fire douses, ice melts, thirst quenches, glows dim, air breathes. Breathing. A strange sensation, to be sure. It's been a while. Rising now, to be sure. Different than he was before. He. There's a new word, or is it? He. I. Me. We. They. Well now, that's a word that brings back memories. They. Who ARE they? They, their actions, their thoughts, their betrayal. Their betrayal. Now THERE'S a memory for the ages. What they did to him. How it made him feel. Rising emotions. Sadness, loneliness, helplessness. Rage. A fun emotion, rage. Quite empowering. Another fun feeling. Power. He had it. He WAS it. Gone was the past, who he once was. He was still he, still himself, but a NEW himself. A new him, but the same. Physically new, physically renewed, but*

*mentally, was he the same? He had the same memories, the same thoughts, the same feelings. He felt the pain, no longer physical, but still present. Once more he rose. Rising above, in more ways than one. He rose mentally, above the changes, returning to who he is, but not who he should be. Physically, as well, he rose. Casting aside expected weight, soaring through to new heights, spotting vengeance down below. He rose, and he flew. He gained something he once thought lost. He gained purpose. He gained a dream. He dreamt of doing what he knew, and he knew vengeance, proof, fear and power. He knew his dream. He dreamt of the sky.*

It was a sunny day in Ponyville. After the previous night's storm, the sunlight was all the more welcome. The Mayor of Ponyville was hard at work, dealing with all the various problems that generally arise with the administration of a small town. Today's workload, however, was considerably lighter than normal, and she was happy for the change of pace. For once, she mused, she might be able to actually get to enjoy the beautiful day Celestia had granted her town. The mayor stood from her chair, as much to trot across the room to a filing cabinet as simply an excuse to take a moment's break from her paperwork and stretch her legs. When she opened the drawer, however, she couldn't help but notice a single piece of paper poking out from inside a folder. As she completed her intended filing, she plucked the offending folder from the drawer and she returned to her desk. The Mayor was a very orderly pony, almost obsessive about neatness, as was her secretary, so finding anything even the tiniest bit out of place was an event in and of itself, almost completely unheard of. So unheard of, in fact, that the Mayor made a bit of game of it. Whenever she found a folder that seemed untidy and out of order, she would retrieve it and look through the contents. Originally, it was simply to break up the long hours of monotonous reports with just something different, a change of pace. However, after one of her earlier 'cleanups', during which she had gone over some extraneous tax records, she realized that an accounting mistake had been made. Due to someone failing to carry a one somewhere, each pony in Ponyville was overcharged by 10 bits. Ever since, she took her game a little more seriously. After all, wherever there is bureaucracy, there will always another mistake to be mended. As she began to sift through the folder, she discovered that it was in regards to this year's filed emergency reports. The offending paper, specifically, was a



report filed by one Twilight Sparkle. The Mayor sighed, shaking her head in sadness at the report. Poor Twilight. Just the look on the young mare's face when the Mayor had told her that the search was being called off had broken her heart. Under normal circumstances, the searching would have lasted far longer than the three weeks it had. It probably would have been much closer to three months before a single pony would have given up. This situation was different, though. When the ponies of Ponyville had learned that the young dragon wasn't simply lost, that he had actually run away, most of them had almost instantaneously lost all interest in searching. That's not to say they didn't care, of course, just that they just thought it silly. She remembered overhearing a conversation between two young fillies at Sugarcube Corner. They had been laughing about the whole incident, and how the silly little dragon was probably sleeping in some secret spot he kept, munching on a secret stash of gems he kept hidden for just such an occasion. To them, dragons were TOUGH. Almost indestructible, even. Even a baby dragon was seen to be far tougher than most any pony, and had no doubts that the little guy could survive for months, even years on his own, even in the Everfree Forest. They had seen him eat things that had given every pony who had even a bite of them a serious case of food poisoning without any ill effects whatsoever; it was very difficult to imagine him going hungry. It wasn't lack of interest or lack of hope that had stopped the search, it was just a lack of belief that the emergency was even an emergency that ended the efforts. The Mayor herself had subscribed to the theory that Spike would do just fine on his own. However, as she again read through the report, something occurred to her that hadn't before. Fight or no fight, she knew the little dragon well enough, through personal contact and through reputation, to know that he wouldn't have stayed away as long as he had over something this trivial. He would at least have sent a letter. The Mayor rose to her feet suddenly, slamming her hooves down on the desk. She was absolutely furious with herself. How could she let herself be carried along by the popular opinion? How could she let them affect her, and decide this wasn't a serious matter?! Spike could be seriously wounded, or worse! All of it her fault, simply because she didn't take the situation seriously. She shook her head. The search would have to be restarted, that much she was sure of. One of Ponyville's most vulnerable residents was in trouble, and she'd ignored them. Even though Twilight Sparkle herself, star pupil of Princess Celestia and holder of one of The Elements of Harmony had come to her directly and pleaded for help, she had simply dismissed her concerns. Something had to be done, and fast. A search effort had to be organized again.

Rotating shifts, spreading patterns, Pegasus air patrol, the works. Miss Sparkle and her friends had left town for the day, no doubt searching for Spike even after all others had given up. Once they returned, The Mayor would turn over the reins of the operation to her, letting her natural talent for organization carry the efforts forwards. Many ponies wouldn't come willingly, though. They'd complain about lost business, or the natural hardness of dragons, or the weather, or *something*, but she'd put an end to all of their complaints. The city's coffers were doing particularly well this year, as the winter wrap up had gone exactly as planned, thus not necessitating any further cleanup costs, so almost the entire budget for this year was still sitting in the city accounts. She'd offer compensation for anypony willing to resume the search. Even if she had to pay it out of her own pocket, she needed to do this, both for Spike and Twilight Sparkle's sake and for her own conscience. As she passed through the door into the town hall proper, she nearly bumped into her secretary.

"Miss Mayor, is everything alright?" she asked, puzzled.

"Hold all my calls. There's something I need to do". As she passed, the secretary shook her head.

"I haven't seen her this worked up since she found out that every pony in Ponyville was owed 10 bits!".

She was halfway to her office door when the screaming started.

# Chapter 7

## Smoke on the Water

“No no no no NO! Come on, Dash, BREATHE!” Twilight Sparkle knelt by the still form of Rainbow Dash, her hooves pounding her fallen friend’s chest. *This can’t be happening. This can’t be happening!*

“Come on, Twi, Don’cha know any healin’ magic or somethin’ like that?” Twilight shook her head, tears brimming in her eyes.

“I can fix cuts or bruises, but nothing like this! It’s like trying to run a lightbulb with static electricity!” Suddenly, her eyes went wide, a thought. *That’s it! A spark!* “Okay, I have an idea! Everybody, stand back!” Twilight rose to her feet and took a deep breath, concentrating magical energy in her horn. With a thought, she sent an arc of lightning into Rainbow Dash’s unmoving body. Taken aback, her friends were stunned.

“Twilight, what are you-”

“SHUT. UP.” Twilight grunted, launching another bolt into Rainbow’s still-convulsing frame. This time, however, Dash’s eyes snapped open as she lay stunned, gasping for air. As she struggled to inhale, she found the breath squeezed from her body again, this time by the arms of a certain pink pony.

“OHMYGOSHDASHIWASSOWORRIEDIWASALLDASHWAKEUPBUTYOU DIDN’T WAKE UP AND YOU WEREN’T BREATHING AND I-” Eyes watering in pain, Rainbow Dash gave a strangled grunt.

“Unh...Pinkie...Can’t...Breathe...” Pinkie flew back, eyes wide in concern.

“Oh, Dash, I’m so sorry! I was just so-” Applejack patted her on the back.

“Easy now, Sugarcube. She’s alright now, so just calm y’self down”.

“Yeah, Pinkie. I’m fine, just a bit-GAH!”. Attempting to get to her feet had been a mistake, it seemed. Twilight placed a restraining hoof on her shoulder.

“Please, Dash, don’t move. We need to figure out just what’s wrong with you first”. Twilight’s horn glowed again as she called up a scrying spell. She turned the glow on Dash, bathing her in light. As the glow faded, she shook her head. “You’ve got some damage along your costovertebral joints, a fractured carpus and a damaged fibula on your-”.

“Twilight. English”.

“Right, sorry. A couple cracked ribs, a broken bone in your wing and your right back leg is broken”. Dash rolled her eyes.

“Perfect”.

Twilight’s horn pulsed with energy, gathering several branches and vines. Stripping the leaves from them, she wrapped them together into a makeshift stretcher.

“There. This should be sturdy enough to hold you. Alright, help me get her on top.” Twilight’s voice was calm, abnormally so. Stepping forward, Applejack and Fluttershy lifted her gently, placing her upon the stretcher. Dash craned her neck, looking up at Twilight.

“Can’t you just use your magic to levitate me home?”

“Well, the general magical principles of levitation has a different effect on actual living tissue as the-”

“TWILIGHT.” Twilight cringed.

“Right. English. Basically, it’s harder to levitate a pony than an inanimate object. I’d be able to lift you, but gravity would still affect whatever part I wasn’t holding. I’d need to steady your limbs with another spell. While I AM good with magic, that would take a lot of concentration, and I’m not sure I could walk any long distances while doing it. Not to mention the fact that if I made a single mistake, I could hurt you even more badly”. Dash lay her head back down, more due to exhaustion than any real satisfaction with Twilight’s answer. While Twilight had spoken the truth, there was no magical reason stopping her from simply levitating the stretcher, but, in

truth, she was so shaken that the normally simple task seemed almost impossible. Instead she came up with a hasty jumble of magi-babble about pivot points and the effects of levitation on different tensile strengths of wood. In the end, the task of carrying the stretcher fell on Pinkie and Applejack. Rarity, being incredibly well acquainted with the finer points of levitation, perhaps even more so than Twilight, had given Twilight a curious look at this, but opted to remain silent. She was tactful enough to realize that Twilight needed her to keep quiet right now.

As the group made their way through the Everfree Forest, the noonday sun beat down through the treetop canopy. Though Ponyville wasn't all that far away, considering Dash's present condition, bringing her to Zecora's seemed like the wisest course of action. Zecora's knowledge of healing was far more extensive than almost anypony's, so they were suitably comfortable leaving Dash with her while they returned to Ponyville to fetch Nurse Hart. Approaching the hut, Twilight knocked on the door. Zecora answered. Seeing Twilight and the rest, she smiled, but that smile quickly vanished as she noticed Rainbow Dash.

"What has happened to poor Rainbow Dash?"

There's more damage here than could be caused by a crash! "

Twilight shuffled awkwardly as she explained the day's events. Zecora sighed, shaking her head.

"You ponies of Ponyville always take on great tasks.

What did you think you could accomplish, might I ask?" Twilight opened her mouth, then closed it. She repeated this action several times more before finding the words she was looking for.

"We... I just thought... I thought we could bring him back". Stepping back, Zecora opened the door wide, beckoning for the ponies to enter.

"My home and skills I'll gladly lend,

Bring her inside, her wounds I'll tend". As Pinkie Pie and Applejack carried Rainbow Dash inside, followed by Rarity and Fluttershy, Twilight hung back.

“I said my door is open wide,  
why hesitate to come inside?”.

“I’m... sorry, it’s just... I can’t... I... I think I need to be alone right now!” With those words, Twilight turned and ran, charging off into the Everfree forest with reckless abandon. Stunned, her friends looked at each other momentarily before Applejack gave chase. Galloping at top speed, she easily caught up to Twilight.

“Hold on, Twi, slow down. Just talk to me!”. Twilight skidded to a halt, whirling around to face her friend. Tears streaming down her face, her red rimmed eyes locked onto Applejack’s, staring her down.

“I don’t understand!” Applejack starred into her friends eyes, filled with sadness and anger.

“Wha...”

“I DON’T UNDERSTAND! None of this can be real. Spike got upset, I was cross with him, he left. I understand that much. Anyone can become upset, anyone can feel hurt and sometimes they leave because of it. I get it, I understand that. But why didn’t he come back? Why did he let that *monster* train him? Why did he say such terrible things?” Her words were bordering on hysterical, but her voice maintained the same unnatural calm it had held since the fight with the dragon. Applejack couldn’t think of anything to say, her mouth closed firm, afraid that if she opened it, what would come out would make matters worse. “Rainbow Dash got hurt. She got hurt badly, horribly, she almost *died*, all because I was too stupid to take a moment to sit Spike down and just tell him what he means to me, just take *two minutes* to say ‘You haven’t been replaced. You are still and always will be my number one helper, one of my closest friends and very dear to my heart’. That’s it. That’s all I had to say. If I wasn’t so *STUPID*, NONE of this would have happened.” The purple mare’s eyes were glistening with tears, but her face bore such a look of pure, impossible fury that, for the first time in her life, Applejack wanted to turn tail and run. The look on her beloved friend’s face was enough to pierce something bordering on terror into the earth pony’s heart. Twilight’s front hooves began to pound the ground, over and over, again and again. Applejack swallowed, banishing her fear to the back of her mind. This was her friend, she had to do everything in her power to help her.

“Why don’cha calm down a mite, Twi. I understand, I-” Twilight’s hooves paused in their tattoo as her head whipped up, eyes fixed in a glare. Her eyes were dry now, their only occupant raw ferocity, yet her voice still retained its now disturbingly calm tone.

“You understand? Do you really?”

“Look, we all make mistakes, bu-” Twilight reared onto her hind legs, the calm in her voice replaced by a powerful scream.

“How *DARE*...”

“QUIET!” It was Applejack’s turn to yell, Twilight recoiling at the sudden outburst. “I won’t have you standing there interruptin’ me when I am TRYING to speak with y’all”.

“But-!”

“But nothin’! We all make mistakes, lil’ things that we didn’t think ‘bout at the time ‘cause it was such a tiny detail we couldn’ see the significance. IT HAPPENS. You’re right, though, I spoke outta turn. I don’t understand. Maybe someday I will, but at this point I don’t, and I don’t care that I don’t. Dash is hurt bad, Spike is still missing and I think it’s apparent that that there dragon did sumthin’ to him”. The fury faded from Twilight’s eyes, replaced by a deep sadness. “I ain’t about to think any less of you because you failed ta see the significance of reaffirmin’ Spike’s and your relationship, and I sure as shoot ain’t about to let you do the same. Now then, you can leave if you want and give yourself time to think or you can come on back inside. But, if’n you do decide to leave, I’m givin’ you fair warnin’. You’ve got one hour to get’cher self back her afore me and the others come searchin’ for ya”. As Applejack turned and began the walk back to Zecora’s hut, there was a loud magical *shing*. She didn’t bother to turn; she had seen Twilight teleport enough times to know the sound.

“Oh, sugarcube...”. Applejack shook her head as she resignedly returned to Zecora’s hut. As she opened the door, the rest of the group regarded her with surprise.

“That poor young mare seemed quite distraught.

Your solo return means she was not caught?”. She shook her head.

“We had a couple words, then she went an’ teleported outta there. I gave her an hour before we all go out there an’ drag her back, kickin’ and screamin’ if we gotta”. The friends sat together in silence, the worry in the air permeable as a marsh fog.

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*Burning smashing ripping tearing crushing blasting smiting shredding piercing.* The blaze spread across the town, sending up clouds of billowing, spiralling smoke. Debris from smashed houses, toppled trees and broken windows littered the square. *Ripping shredding tearing burning smiting blasting piercing smashing crushing.* Claws crunched, biting deep into the ground as the great beast stalked through the town. Coldly, almost detached, it surveyed its surroundings, more familiar to it than it would have liked. Carousel Boutique, Sugarcube Corner, the public library. Ah, yes. The library. *Shredding smashing crushing burning blasting smiting piercing tearing shredding ripping.* It moved through the town, destruction in its wake, as it headed for the library. Noticing the strangely depopulated town, he began to think. *Where are they? There should be ponies. Where are ponies? So few... Where have they gone? The town is here, but where is the town?* Rage clouded its countenance. *They have gone. They have left, too. They’re all gone. They, too, have abandoned us. It was not enough to cast me out, it seems. Now they have abandoned their home in fear I would find them again. I will not be ignored. I will not be cast aside. I WILL NOT BE FORGOTTEN.* Inhaling, he blasted a mighty gout of flame, raking the city before him with green destruction. The town was indeed empty; currently, the only occupants were those who had stayed behind to grab extra valuables; a keen eyed pegasus pony had spotted the beast approaching and had sounded the alarm. The evacuation had been remarkably quick. As he reached the library, he roared, a terrifying, chilling sound. Again he roared, though this time, words were formed.

“FACE ME”. From inside the library, nothing. *Hiding. They know our power. They fear our power. Before this day has ended, they will taste our power.* Another great roar, met only by silence and the crackling of the flames engulfing the town. Furious, he spat a burst of flame at the great tree housing the library. As the fire blazed, spreading through the canopy, he



felt nothing. He wasn't quite sure what he was supposed to feel, to be honest. Should he feel triumphant? Should he feel powerful? Should he feel accomplished? Should he feel sad? Depressed? Angry? Whatever it was, why didn't he feel it? Spreading his wings, he shot upwards, leaving the scene of devastation far below as he turned and soared out over the Everfree Forest.

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"Right. Time's up". Applejack got to her feet. "Come on, y'all, let's git goin'". Reluctantly, the rest of the ponies, with the exception of Zecora and the sleeping Rainbow Dash, got to their feet. As they gathered outside, Applejack began issuing orders. "Right. Now, if we're gonna find her, we gotta split up. Now, it's too dangerous fer us ta be goin' off alone, so we'll head out in groups. Fluttershy, you an' Pinkie head off ta th' north. Rarity, you're comin' with me. We'll meet back her in an hour. Got it?". Everypony nodded. "Let's go".

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"Cowards, filthy, blasted COWARDS!." The words echoed throughout the swamp as the furious dragon gave vent to his fury, roaring the words to the sky. It didn't seem right, though. The screaming felt good, sure, but the words didn't. Calling the ponies cowards wasn't right, it didn't feel right, but he wasn't sure what was right anymore. Wasn't sure what to say, what to feel, what to think. He had unleashed his fury upon those who had scorned him, the town that shunned him, and yet he felt nothing. What was he supposed to feel? Surly satisfaction at what he had done, maybe even remorse for the innocent lives that- *NO. There are no innocents. They all abandoned us. They are all a part of it. All of them, all, all, ALL OF THEM. They cast us aside, they abandoned us. We were nothing to them, now they are nothing to us. They should die, they DESERVE to die.* Well, not really, he supposed. After all it was Twilight that- The dragon's mind froze, seizing the word. Twilight. It was the first tangible connection he had been able to muster for some time. After all, that word- no, that *name* was the reason he was doing all this. *Wasn't it?*

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By a small pond not too far from Zecora's hut, a confused pony sat next to the water staring at the reflection cast by the still liquid. The pony in the water was her, sure enough, but it wasn't anypony she recognized. The normally bright eyes were dull and lifeless, red rimmed and bloodshot. Her normally well groomed mane was dishevelled and unkempt. Who *WAS* this creature? Where was the normally irrepressible magical genius? She stared at a stranger, somepony she had never seen before in her life. She stared deep into those eyes, *those worthless, empty eyes*, as she sat, trying to figure out exactly who she was looking at.

"Twilight!" The purple unicorn started, snapped out of her reverie by a familiar voice. She turned to see Pinkie Pie bouncing towards her, followed closely by Fluttershy.

"Oh, Twilight, we were super duper worried! Why'd you run off like that?". Avoiding her gaze, Twilight studied the ground intently.

"Pinkie, Fluttershy... I just needed a bit of time to myself". Pinkie, ever the irrepressible one, hopped about gleefully.

"Well, silly filly, you had your hour, now you gotta come back, okay?". Twilight allowed herself a small smile at her friend's antics.

"Okay, Pinkie. Let's go". They made their way back to Zecora's hut, Fluttershy deep in thought over the state she had found her friend. Pinkie didn't really seem to notice, but there was a change in Twilight Sparkle. It was difficult for the shy pony to put into words but it was almost as if Twilight was losing something deep inside of her, part of what made her who she was, and she knew it was happening. It was tearing her apart.

"Twilight... Are you okay?" The question seemed so... *wrong*. It was clear Twilight was not okay, but what else was Fluttershy to say? Twilight forced a smile, but there was no heart in it.

“Don’t worry, Fluttershy. I’m fine”. The remainder of the journey was spent with no words spoken between the three, however Pinkie Pie made a point to hum a song the entire time as she bounced her way along the path.

Upon their return, they found Rarity and Applejack waiting for them, apparently having only just arrived themselves.

“Oh, Twilight, darling, where have you been? We were worried sick!”.

“I just needed a bit of time to myself”.

“It is good you don’t return alone,

I fear there’s trouble at your home!” Zecora, seeming quite agitated, pointed over the trees in the direction of Ponyville.

“What do you- Oh my gosh!” Applejack stopped mid-sentence, stunned into silence. Over the treetops, a cloud of thick, black smoke coiled up towards the sky. Without another word, the five ponies took off towards home as fast as their legs could take them.

# Chapter 8

## Fire in the Skies

The five friends took off in the direction of Ponyville as fast as their legs could carry them. The closer they got, the stronger the acrid smell of smoke became. Running harder than they'd ever run before, they broke through the treeline and into Ponyville. Chaos. That was the only word suitable to describe the scene spread before them. Ponyville was in ruins. Most of the fires had been extinguished, the pegasus ponies having brought rainclouds from miles around, until only smouldering embers remained. Cries of ponies looking for missing loved ones filled the air amid a mix of screams and moans of pain. Stunned, the friends could only stare. As they stood there in silent shock, the Mayor limped towards them, part of her side severely burnt. "Girls! It's good to see you safe, especially after what happened to the library. Has anyone filled you in on what's happened yet?" The friends were utterly frozen. They couldn't move, couldn't talk, couldn't think. They were, quite simply, unable to grasp what they were seeing. "We were attacked. A dragon. It flew in, and it just started burning, and smashing, and..." The Mayor paused, closing her eyes briefly. "We were able to get most of the ponies out before it got here, a pegasus pony spotted it before it arrived, Celestia bless him. I shudder to think of what would have happened had he not. Not everyone made it out in time, though..." The mayor closed her eyes for a moment, pained, before she continued. "As well, many ponies were severely injured dealing with the fires. Please, I understand that you're shocked, we're all rather shaken after this, but we need your help. We need to finish dealing with the fires, and we need to continue looking for survivors". As the friends stood, taking in the scene, the Mayor turned, moving to help a yellow earth pony carry a pegasus towards a medical tent. "Whenever you're ready". Applejack was the first to come to her senses. Chasing after the Mayor, she called out to her.

"Did the dragon make it to Sweet Apple Acres?" The Mayor shook her head.

“No, and thank Celestia for that. That’s where we were staging the evacuation, not to mention the town’s main food supply. In addition I spoke with your brother. He is allowing any ponies whose homes were destroyed to stay in your home and barn until repairs have been made. I hope you don’t mind.” Applejack let out a small sigh, her relief immediately replaced with guilt at doing so in the wake of so much destruction.

“Course I don’t mind. They can stay as long as they need”. Applejack returned to her friends, all of whom had snapped out of their trances and began to spread out silently, moving to help those in need. The sole exception to this was Twilight, who was still standing stock still, staring at a small, still burning flame a short distance away, transfixed by the flames. Applejack began to approach her, but a wing sprang up in front of her, blocking her path. Applejack looked at Fluttershy in surprise, who shook her head.

“It’s best we leave her alone for a few minutes.” The timid pegasus looked over her shoulder at her shaken friend, then back to Applejack with an expression of pure hurt on her face.

“Look, Shy. I know this is a lot to take in, but she needs to-” Applejack paused, suddenly realizing why her friend still stared and why Fluttershy was so determined to ensure that she was left alone. The small flame that had stolen the attention of the purple mare, the same flame that had scorched Ponyville, nearly burning it to the ground, was a vibrant shade of emerald green. The wing retreated back to its owner’s side.

“I’m not saying it’s...that it was Spike that did this, but...” Fluttershy looked away and began to paw at the ground “Green fire *is* pretty rare for a dragon... I... I know it doesn’t seem possible that, well that this could have been caused by our little guy but... I mean, I AM sure Twilight knows Spike couldn’t be responsible, it’s just that...”

“Must be kinda hard to convince yourself your friend ain’t responsible for something horrible when he leaves behind a pretty distinct callin’ card”. Fluttershy looked back to Applejack and gave her a weak smile before flying off to help the other pegasi collect rain clouds. The orange pony looked back to Twilight. What must be running through her head? Surely, such a logical pony couldn’t think for a second that Spike was the dragon that did all this. Deciding it was best to listen to Fluttershy and leave Twilight alone for now, She trotted off to help a group of earth ponies clear

debris from the streets. She did this for some time, trying her best not to stray too far from her friend. It was clear that the others had the same idea because every so often Pinkie Pie or Rarity would show up, as if just to keep an eye on her. After about an hour, Nurse Hart stopped by to speak with Applejack. Rarity had told her about Rainbow Dash's predicament, and had left straight away. Thankfully, Dash was in much better condition than she looked. With a bit of healing magic to help the process, along with some medicine to take the pain away and help her sleep, she was well on her way to recovery. She assured Applejack that, while she was on the way to recovery, she shouldn't be moved for at least a week. Zecora would have no problem looking after her for that time, and had assured Nurse Hart that she was more than willing. Before returning to the hospital, she gave Applejack a prescription for Dash's medicine in case the pain became too much or she couldn't sleep. Placing the paper into her hat for safekeeping, she took a moment to simply stop and take in the destruction around her. In reality, it wasn't all that bad, considering a dragon had chosen it as a good place for a rampage. She hadn't had either time nor opportunity to ask anypony what exactly had happened, but from the looks of it, the dragon wasn't quite sure what it was doing. It was as if he'd simply attacked buildings at random. Next to the town hall (which had its first and second floors violently merged), the library had sustained the most damage. There was a lot of damage, but most of it could be repaired with a few months of hard work. It could have been much worse if they hadn't managed to get the fires out as quickly as they had; with all of the flammable debris scattered over the town, the blaze could have quickly spread all over town and become an uncontrollable conflagration. Applejack looked over to where Twilight had been standing to see that she was slowly making her way towards the nearest pony, a green unicorn attempting to pull a wagon full of burnt wood. Applejack trotted over, curious to see what was going on.

"Um, excuse me, sir..." Twilight said meekly "Are you at all able to describe the dragon?" The colt finished his work and turned to face her.

"Oh, Twilight! It's you, excellent! We haven't been able to get a letter out, all of the pegasus ponies are still in search of as many rainclouds as possible, for obvious reasons. Please, you need to send a message to Celestia as soon as possible. We can't handle this on our own".

“Of course, I’ll do that immediately. In my report, though, I would like to include a description of the dragon“. The colt seemed to think about this for a minute.

“Good idea. That way, they can start looking for the monster as soon as possible. I didn’t see it, myself, but I talked with a few ponies who had. By all accounts, it was covered with purple scales, and it had green spines lining the length of its body. Now, hurry up and write that letter. The mayor established a base of operations in Carousel Boutique. It was the only building big enough that didn’t sustain heavy damage. You should be able to find what you need there“. Twilight nodded to him, heading towards Carousel Boutique at a quick trot. Applejack followed close behind, lost in thought. *A purple dragon with green spines that spits green fire...* The pieces fit perfectly, but she knew it wasn’t Spike. It COULDN’T be. It simply wasn’t possible. Spike was smaller than Apple Bloom, for Celestia’s sake, and whatever dragon had done this had been a darn sight bigger.

The boutique was bustling, busier than she’d ever seen it. Ponies rushed back and forth, each with an agenda. Bypassing them all, Twilight made her way inside. Applejack watched as her friend wrote what appeared to be a very detailed letter. When she was done she rolled it up and began to concentrate, pulling energy into her horn, which began glowing a bright purple. Seconds later, the letter and the glow vanished with a loud *shing*. As Twilight left the dress shop and began walking towards her library, Applejack noticed her friend shaking.

“I haven’t had to send a letter to the princess like that in years. I hope it arrived“.

“Twi, are you-“

“He burned it, Applejack. The library. He... He burned it“.

Applejack remained silent. What could she say to that? All she could think of to say was

“I know, sugarcube. I know“.

Thankfully, the library was in better shape than expected. The canopy of the great tree was black, almost entirely gone, as was the door. Several books were charred beyond all recognition, but most all of them had survived intact, and that, at least, was something. Applejack stayed with Twilight, sitting in silence in the burned husk of her friend's home, until a letter from Celestia magicked itself into existence. Quickly, Twilight read the letter. Then, passing it to Applejack, she asked her to deliver it the Mayor at once. Applejack didn't want to leave her side, not at a time like this. The girl was one smart filly, but she just had so much to deal with all at once. There was no doubt in her mind that Twilight somehow thought this was all Spike's doing, no matter how implausible it seemed. Reluctantly, Applejack took the letter and left the blackened shell of her friend's home.

Applejack was entirely correct in figuring that Twilight blamed Spike, and by extension herself, for the destruction. Twilight was far more familiar with magic than the earth pony, and knew that it was entirely possible to age a dragon magically. However, it wasn't her knowledge of magic, the colt's description of the dragon or even her own general intuition that had convince her. Above the spot Twilight had stood was a rather large hole in the tree roof, most likely caused by the fist of the dragon so that he could rain ruin upon the inside. The walls and floor were covered in deep gouges, as if the dragon had been groping about inside for something. One area caught her eye, though. An area of damaged floor seemed more... *deliberate*, more structured than simply clawing at the inside could cause. Twilight had stared at those gouges when she first entered her home, and continued to stare long after Applejack left. To anypony else, with the exception of Princess Celestia, they would seem simply vicious claw marks, left in rage by a senseless killing machine. Twilight and Celestia, though, the two ponies who were all too familiar with a certain dragon's scratchy penmanship, were able to see a simple and saddening message. After what seemed like hours, the purple mare was finally able to tear her eyes away from the floor. She turned and fled, heading towards the Everfree forest, with darkness in her soul.

Not long after, Applejack returned.



“Sugarcube? You in here?”. When Twilight didn’t respond, she did a quick search of the remaining rooms of the library without any success. “Well, maybe she’s decided to start helpin’”. As she turned to leave, something caught her eye. It was the strange markings on the ground, the ones that had kept Twilight’s attention for so long. She wasn’t so sure why those particular marks were so special. The whole place was covered in them. She walked to what was left of the door and put her hoof on the handle. Sighing, turned back. Her curiosity had gotten the best of her yet again, she just *had* to know what was so special. She looked at them from every conceivable angle, even trying to stand exactly where Twilight had been. Not yielding any luck she gave up and left the library, looking for her friend. If she had only thought to climb to the second floor and look down, she may have been able to read the message, even despite the near illegibility of the writing. She would have been able to see what Twilight saw, three words engraved into the floor.

*I loved you.*

# Chapter 9

## For the Best?

Passing through Ponyville, Applejack looked for Twilight. All around her, ponies struggled to douse fires, shift rubble and to help their friends. No Twilight. Noticing Rarity, Applejack picked her way over to her through the debris. Seeing her, Rarity quickly finished snuffing out a flaming tree branch and turned to face her.

"Applejack... Is this really happening? I know it is, really, it's just... I just can't seem to get my head around it all...". Applejack nodded sadly.

"'Fraid it is, sugarcube. Wish it weren't, but it is, an' we gotta do our best ta try fixin' it. Y'all seen Twilight about? She's takin' it all pretty hard". Concerned, Rarity looked at her.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I DID. She was heading in the direction of the Everfree Forest, come to think of it. I wonder-" Rarity fell silent. Applejack had already gone. At a full gallop, Applejack reached the forest's edge within a minute. Taking a deep breath, she continued inside, following a trail of fresh hoofprints. Within minutes, she'd caught up to Twilight. No longer running, she'd slowed to a deliberate trot.

"Twilight!" Applejack called. No response. "Come on, Twi, let's get on back to town".

"Leave me alone".

"Twi?"

"Leave me alone".

"Look, I know that-" Twilight wheeled around.

"I SAID LEAVE ME ALONE!" Applejack was taken aback by her sudden outburst.

“Everything that’s happened is all because of me. Ponyville, Dash, Spike, everything. It seems, these days, that everything I touch crumbles around me.”

“Twi, things happen, ya cant go beatin’ yerself up about it. All ya can do is push forward and do your best to make things right. Its not as if y’all coulda known any... hold on a tic, how is what happened in Ponyville your fault?” Twilight turned away from her friend. “Twi, that dragon wasn’t Spike. That dragon was huge, our Spike is a mite smaller. I ain’t no scholar, but last I checked it takes hundreds o’ years for a dragon to get that big...Twi?...Twilight?”

“We live in a world of magic. I move things with my mind, control the wind, I even made Spike into a giant once myself. Is it really so hard to believe there’s magic out there that could age a dragon to such an extent in such a short time?” It was a rhetorical question; Twilight knew very well Applejack was able to grasp such a concept.

“Twilight, what makes you think Spike did this?”

“I suppose you didn’t notice”

“Notice what?”

“Those marks. In the library. Didn’t you wonder why I gave them so much attention?”

“No...I mean yes...I mean, look there just claw marks from a monster gone wild.”

Twilight turned on her friend, eyes wild and furious.

“He is *not* a monster!”

“It wasn’t Spike, sugarcube!”

“It doesn’t really surprise me you didn’t notice, actually. His penmanship was always so terrible, but he loved taking my letters so much that Celestia and I just learned how to read it.” The fire left Twilight’s eyes as her mind began wander, reminiscing of times gone by. She turned away from Applejack, her head raised. She looked to the sky, watching the clouds as the wind carried them slowly along. Applejack slowly began to inch forward, sensing Twilight was preparing to teleport away again.

“Please.” Twilight turned, shifting her gaze from the clouds above to her friend. “Please, Twilight, don’t go off again. I know y’all see me as the rough ‘n tough pony, that I’m never ‘fraid of anythin’, but when ya ‘ported away before, I... I can’t even *begin* to describe how scared I was that I’d never see you again. So please, *please* Twilight, don’t leave me here thinking I’ve lost y’all again”. Twilight looked back to the sky.

“Friendship is magic, Applejack. A true friendship lasts long after the friends have been forced apart. True friends are never forgotten, and never truly leave. It sounds cliché and silly, but it’s true. At least, I think it is... Do me a favour, Applejack?”

“Anything, Twilight.”

“Remember the days before. Back in the times when we were all together. Don’t remember Dash wrapped up and in pain, don’t remember Spike as a giant monster that destroyed Ponyville, and don’t remember me as I am now.”

“I can do that, just so long as you promise that in fifty years’ time we’ll both be sitting in your library with the rest of the gang, not rememberin’ together.” Twilight turned around, a small sad smile on her face. It was the first time in almost a month that her smile, no matter how sad, seemed genuine.

“I’m sorry, A.J. I can’t make that promise”. Before Applejack could reply, the purple mare summoned a fierce glow, which quickly bubbled out to surround her. There was a bright flash that made Applejack turn away. When she looked back, the light had gone, taking her friend with it.

Applejack slowly began her journey back to Ponyville, her head hung low. *How could Twilight do that to me, especially after what I told her? I have never begged for anything in my life, and I outright pleaded with that girl to stay, and she left anyway.* Even at her slow pace Applejack made it back to town rather quickly. Upon arrival she saw Rarity and Fluttershy waiting nearby. The orange mare began making her way towards her friends, who, having spotted her, were likewise attempting to close the gap. When they were in earshot, Rarity called out to her.

“Did you manage to catch her, darling?” Applejack looked to Rarity to answer, but stopped when her eyes locked onto the town library. Applejack

shot off past her friends, moving towards the burnt tree as quickly as she could manage. She burst into the main library and began reexamining the scratches on the floor. She once again tried every conceivable angle, she simply couldn't see what Twilight saw. Rarity and Fluttershy entered the building just as Applejack ran upstairs to view them from a different height.

"Applejack! Fluttershy and I have been worried sick about you and Twilight, how could you just ignore us like that?"

"Consarnit, Rarity, I've got to figure this out! Can I please deal with y'all later!" Applejack squinted, turning her head at various angles in an attempt to see just what it was that Twilight had seen. At this height, they almost looked as if they formed letters, but she simply couldn't make it out.

"Applejack, what *are* you doing? Where is Twilight, and what has gotten you in such a fuss that you feel the need to speak so rudely towards your friends?"

"She left. 'Ported off again."

"Oh my! The poor girl must have a lot on her mind... Even so, that still doesn't explain what you're doing". Applejack kept up her examination, ignoring Rarity.

"Applejack! Don't you *dare* ignore me! Now, *tell me what's going on!*" Applejack found herself frustrated, moreso than she'd ever been with the white unicorn, and just wanted to scream at her to *just shut up*, but she managed to calm herself.

"Twilight said there was something about these markings, that they somehow proved the dragon that did all this was Spike. From this height, it sorta looks like words but fer the life 'a me, I can't rightly figure it out".

*"I loved you".*

Applejack whirled around to face Fluttershy, who had flown up to stand next to her.

"Wha...What?" Applejack started, feeling herself begin to blush.

"T...that's what it says." Tears were falling, now, running down the shy pegasus pony's face. "It...it sa...says I loved you. An...and it...it looks like Spike's writing..." Fluttershy turned away, hiding her face in her wing, and

began to sob. "Oh, Celestia, what's hap...happening?" Applejack placed a gentle hoof on her friend's shoulder.

Rarity had joined the two friends on the second floor and was peering down at the marks on the floor. Her face scrunched up in what the others would have, under better circumstances, found quite amusing ways as she tried to see what Fluttershy saw.

"We gotta find her. I know we gave her a bit o' time ta herself earlier on, but she's not herself at th' moment". Rarity gave up her search, from the look in her eye she didn't need to confirm it herself to believe Fluttershy. Spike, their little Spike, had attacked Ponyville, and was, it seemed, now a hundred times his original size. It was no wonder Twilight had run off.

"But, wouldn't it just be best to give her a bit of time alone? I mean, I can't even imagine how tough a time she must be having with all this, after..." Rarity bit her lower lip and looked away, the tears forming in her eyes mixing with her makeup as she fruitlessly tried to rub away the rivulets of colour making their way down her cheek. Always the optimist, Rarity normally managed to find good in every situation, but this time it seems even she couldn't put a positive spin on this. Applejack embraced both her friends, pulling them close in a tight hug.

"Not this time, sugarcube. Normally, I'd agree with ya, but I ain't never seen her like this. We really shouldn't be leavin' her alone." Rarity nodded. There wasn't a sliver of doubt in her mind, for even she didn't believe that Twilight should really be unsupervised. Applejack, releasing her two friends, began to gently issue instructions. "Now then, we need to get to work. Fluttershy, you go find Owlysius; it's gettin' dark out, and his eyes are a darn sight better'n ours at night. Meet us at Zecora's".

"He..." Fluttershy swallowed, doing her best to force back her tears and put on a brave face. "He's staying at my house. The poor little guy hasn't stopped searching for Spike since he went missing. He showed up at my house a few days ago, exhausted. Hopefully, he'll be rested enough to help!". With that, Fluttershy took off at top speed..

"Alright. Rarity, I need you go find Pinkie Pie and meet us at Zecora's. I'ma go see if I can find us some lanterns".

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Twilight stared. This time, the other mare was in a puddle of muddy water. Despite the discolouration, it was clearly the same pony she had earlier seen in the pond. This time, though, she recognized the pony in the water. The useless, worthless mare, red and teary eyed, unkempt and dishevelled. Completely worthless. Entirely useless. A failure.

Her.

She finally recognized the pony staring back at her. It was her, Twilight Sparkle the failure, Twilight Sparkle the ineffectual, Twilight Sparkle the empty, the useless, the nothing. Nothing. That's what she was, nothing. *Nothing*. It struck her, then. Not only did she know who the mare in the water was, she knew who SHE was. Looking away from the water, she knew what she had to do. It was her fault, all of it. She was the one closest to Spike, it was her fault that he'd left, that he'd done what he'd done. It was her fault Ponyville had burned, that Rainbow Dash had been hurt. Almost in a trance, she began to walk. Summoning energy into her horn, turning that energy into a teleport spell. She disappeared midstep in a magical flash, reappearing in a familiar place without breaking stride. Froggybottom Bog. She knew what had to be done, how to make amends. She walked, passing rocks and trees, through patches of swampy mud and wet sand. Finally, she came to the first of her two destinations. The second would be her last. She stood on the edge of the cliff, looking down. She'd taken this fall once before, a freak gas bubble the only thing saving her life. She smiled, almost in spite of herself. No chance of that this time. This time, she'd hit the water. This time, she wasn't coming back. She debated closing her eyes, but decided not to. She'd faced everything in her life eyes closed, blind to almost everything around her. Now, she would face what was coming with her eyes wide open. She paused a moment, trying to ascertain what she felt, if anything. What *SHOULD* she be feeling? Should she be sad? Afraid? Happy, even? It didn't matter anymore. Taking a deep breath, she stepped out into open air and let gravity take hold.

# Chapter 10

## Sudden Death

The air rushed past Twilight as she fell, her eyes streaming as she struggled to keep them open. Tumbling head over tail as the wind caught her, she was sent spinning, narrowly missing a rocky outcropping. She hit the water hard, driving the breath from her. Instinctively, she started thrashing and tried to breathe, but the thick muddy bog defied her body's natural attempts to save itself, and she only inhaled a lungful of slime. Coughing and spluttering, she began to sink. As her vision began to swim and her head sank beneath the surface of the swamp, lungs and stomach full of thick mud, she had time for one last thought before darkness claimed her.

*Thank you... Thank you all for showing me the spark.*

~~~~~

"TWILIGHT!" The call echoed through the depths of the Everfree Forest as her friends searched, the light from their lanterns illuminating a small circle of the wilderness around them. After leaving Zecora's hut, a sleeping Rainbow Dash oblivious to their presence, they had proceeded to spread out into the depths of the forest, sticking close enough to see each other's lights through the gloom. Every so often, their calls were interrupted by a mournful hoot, a status update of a fruitless search.

"Twilight, dear, where are you?"

"Twilight? Are you there? Please come home..."

"C'mon out, Twi! Let's get you home!"



“Twilight, this isn’t hide and seek! ...But if it WAS hide and seek, you’d be doing really really good! But it’s not! Come on out!” Four different voices, four different calls, one message.

*Twilight, come home.*

Originally, there had been some talk of splitting up to cover more ground, but, surprisingly, it was Pinkie Pie who had been the voice of reason.

“Nuh uh!” she had said, shaking her head emphatically. “I know we gotta find her, but we also gotta stay together. There’s all sorts of nasty stuff in the forest during the day, but it’s gonna be even worse at night, when all the creepies and the ghosties and stuff come out. And I don’t think we can laugh these ones away”. And so they’d stuck together, spread apart, but just close enough to see one another.

“TWILIGHT!”

Again, there came a hooting. This time, however, it was different, almost frantic. Landing near Applejack, Owlysius hooted again and again, a rapid fire tirade. The ponies clustered around the agitated owl, both excited and terrified of the news he brought. Owlysius hopped from foot to foot, frantically flapping his wings. The four ponies listened intently until he’d finished. Applejack spoke first, breaking the silence.

“I gotta say, I sure as sugar wish I knew what the hay he just said”. Owlysius covered his face with his wings. Suddenly taking off, he hooted again, pausing a moment to look back at them before heading off at top speed. That, at least, was clear enough. Fluttershy straightened.

“I’ll follow him; you girls follow behind us”.

“Are ya sure ya can keep up with ‘im, sugarcube?” Fluttershy looked at her, a strange light in her eyes.

“Oh, I’m sure, Applejack. I’m *very* sure”. Spreading her wings, Fluttershy rocketed into the night sky faster than any of her friends had ever thought possible for the shy pegasus.

“...Well, I’ll be”. Without another word, the three ponies took off at a full gallop in the direction Owlysius had flown.

~~~~~

A powerful scaly fist crashed into a large slimy head, creating a loud *crack* that echoed through the swamp. Reeling back, the head slumped to the ground. It wasn't dead; the blow had simply knocked it unconscious, now only serving as dead weight to the monster it was attached to. Shifting his weight, Spike leapt back as another head lunged, wrapping its maw around the space where his neck had been milliseconds before. Spike and the hydra circled one another, each looking for an opening. The hydra snarled, its unconscious head dragging across through the swamp, unable to assist the other three. The dragon circled and watched, looking for an opening, waiting for the right chance to strike and immobilize a second head. Though harder than simply removing the head, it was, in the long run, the easiest way to beat it. The hydra lashed out, striking at him with two of its heads. Lightning fast, Spike shot upwards, sending the two heads crashing together. Folding his wings, he dropped like a stone. Crashing down onto the stunned heads, he struck, bashing at the heads with fists, legs and tail, delivering as much damage between the two as possible. One of the heads pulled back, rearing up unsteadily, but the other stayed down, the vicious beating having done its job. Spike leapt to his feet and sank into a fighting crouch. Two heads down, two left to deal with. The right head lashed out, snapping. As Spike raised his tail and lunged, ready to deliver another crushing blow. As he swung, the head suddenly fell back as the other head quickly darted in from the side, catching him by the shoulder. Lifting him, the hydra swung forcefully, hurling Spike away. The hydra's teeth failed to penetrate his thick, armoured hide, but the impact caused the joint to ache regardless.

Catching his balance and rotating in midair, Spike landed and immediately pushed off, hurling himself at the other beast. He opened his mouth and struck hard and fast, clamping down onto the side of the hydra's face. The creature let out an unearthly shriek and tried to rear back, but, even with its overwhelming size advantage, the dragon's raw strength and ferocity kept the head down and firmly within his grip. Unleashing a flurry of strikes at the head, Spike spat it out and leapt back as the final head rushed past, barely missing him. Spike stepped back, creating a distance between them. The head Spike had bitten thudded to the ground, as immobile as the other three, while the one remaining reared back, still ready for a fight.

*Perfect Three down, and...*

Spike froze, unable to believe what he was seeing. The final head opened its mouth and bit deep, but not into Spike. The three unconscious heads flopped to the ground, twitching like fish out of water. The severed necks pulsated and bubbled, the sickly sucking sounds it created mingling with the creature's shrieks. In a matter of seconds, the necks had split and burst outwards, growing at a rate almost not to be believed. Where there had once been four heads, now there were seven, each of the necks sprouting two additional heads.

*Well now. That's just plain unfair.*

Spike looked from head to head, inspecting each as quickly as the situation would allow. The creature seemed woozy, off balance, as could be expected from the exertion of growing six new heads, but that wouldn't last for long. Spike needed to find the correct head, and find it NOW. Something drastic had to be done, and quickly, before it was too late. The hydra shook itself, snapping out of its momentary torpor, then hurled itself at the dragon, all seven heads snapping. *There! Third from the left!* It was all he needed. Again he spread his wings. This time, though, he pushed backwards, forcing himself into the trunk of a great tree. The moment the hydra was in range, he used the tree as a springboard, catapulting himself towards the beast at great speed. His wings catching the night air, he stayed low, gliding, ducking under its guard and slipping underneath the hydra. Lashing out with his tail, he struck at the unprotected belly of the beast again and again, the sharply bladed tip of his tail leaving deep lacerations where it struck. All seven heads shot backwards, shrieking as one. Dodging out from beneath, Spike flipped around the wildly lashing tail. Steeling himself and planting his feet directly in the path of the lashing tail, he readied himself for the blow. Again came the frenzied tail, swinging almost blindly in pain and rage. This time, however, Spike didn't dodge. Taking the mighty blow full in the chest, he caught the massive tail. Gritting his teeth at the near indescribable pain, he sank his teeth and claws in as deeply as possible, giving a great yank and pulling on the tail with every fibre of muscle in his body. The combination of wounds on its underside and the sudden surprise of Spike's seizing its tail made it easy for Spike to force the larger beast to the ground. The many headed beast hit the ground hard, shrieking in pain and fury through seven throats. Seizing his chance,

Spike leaped into the air, unfurling his wings with a mighty flap for added height. He landed at the base of the creature's neck, poised behind the head he had targeted. Wasting no time, he tore fiercely at the neck, ripping the head off with a sound unequalled in its nauseating thickness. The other heads, furious at this attack, struck, lightning fast. Spike dove forward, slipping through the forest of scaly appendages. A jolt of pain shot up his side; a lucky blow had managed to force a tooth into a gap between scales. Ignoring the wound, Spike seized the head he had torn off and, pushing off, shot off into the air. Pain racked his body as he spread his wings, soaring off towards a nearby cliff overhang, overlooking the swamp. Forcing the fanged mouth open, he rammed a scaly arm down the dead throat. He actually managed to fit his arm up to the shoulder inside the monster's esophagus.

*Come on, COME ON! It doesn't matter if it swallowed, it still takes longer than that to reach the stomach!* Rooting around in the great beast's severed neck like Santa Claus reaching into a grotesque stocking, he groped blindly until-

*YES!* Closing his fist, Spike gingerly removed the object he had been searching for from the colossal gullet.

# Chapter 11

## Fear

Fluttershy flew, fast and strong, faster, actually, than she had thought herself capable. Owlysius had found Twilight, of that much she was sure, and if Applejack was right, that meant she desperately needed her friends with her. As she soared through the night sky, forest beneath her gave way to the swampy marshland of Froggybottom bog. Spotting a familiar silhouette on a cliff's edge, she sighed, a weight lifted from her heart.

"Oh, thank goodness! Owlysius, dear, thank you SO MUCH for finding her! Could you please fly back and make sure the others are on the right path?". With a hoot, the owl circled and left, returning back the way they had come. Fluttershy smiled. There she was, safe and sound. Twilight was safe.

Then she jumped.

Fluttershy's heart, having so recently lifted, dropped like a stone as she screamed, the normally almost inaudible sound immediately whipped away by the wind. Too far away to do anything, even if she flew faster than she'd ever flown before, Fluttershy could only watch helplessly as her friend plummeted, spun around by the winds, and landed with a sickly splat in the marsh, rapidly sinking from view. Snapping out of her daze, she dove, making a beeline for the spot where her friend had disappeared, suddenly stopping as the entire surface of the swamp began to bubble. Rising from the slime and much, four mighty heads rose from the swamp. Before she could react, one of the long necks flicked, as if dislodging something, before snapping at the air.

Speechless, Fluttershy stared, disbelief etched into her features. Before she had a chance to move, to say a word, to even fully realize what had happened, a dark shape struck the beast like a thunderbolt, knocking it back.

A powerful scaly fist crashed into a large slimy head, creating a loud *crack* that echoed through the swamp. Reeling back, the head slumped to the

ground. It wasn't dead; the blow had simply knocked it unconscious, now only serving as dead weight to the monster it was attached to. Barely capable of conscious thought at this point, Fluttershy did the only thing she could: she hid. Taking shelter on the shore of the swamp behind a large boulder, she watched as the hydra fought the aggressor, a creature she could now identify as-

"*A dragon!*" she gasped. Could it... Could it be? Was it Spike? And what was he *doing*? A mighty beast in almost every sense of the word, the dragon was nowhere near fully grown. Standing close to twelve feet high, it was dwarfed by the mighty hydra. Still, though, it pressed its assault, darting, dodging and attacking, delivering punishing blows with head, claws and tail. It was strange, though. Despite the distinct size advantage, the hydra should be clearly outmatched, yet the fight was strangely balanced, as though the dragon were holding back. Mouth agape, Fluttershy spoke softly the only coherent phrase that would agree to be spoken.

"What are you doing?"

As the dragon immobilized the second to last head, it spread its wings, creating some distance, and that was when the hydra struck. Horrified, Fluttershy watched it *chew off three of its own heads*. The yellow pegasus could only stare as, neck stumps bubbling like a vat of tar, two heads sprouted from each severed neck. *I'd heard that a hydra could- could- but I never thought-!*

Renewing its attack, the dragon pounced, striking again and again. Diving under it, the dragon managed to catch hold of the other beast's tail and pull it over, knocking it flat on its back. As it leaped onto its foe, Fluttershy closed her eyes, knowing what would come next. A hideous ripping, tearing sound proved her correct. When she opened them, the dragon was perched on the great beast, the severed neck on the ground before it. What it did now, however, surprised her. Instead of attacking further, it seized the limp, dangling head from where it had fallen and shot off, disengaging completely from the other monster. Perching on a cliff, the dragon turned its attention to its grisly trophy. For once, Fluttershy's curiosity overcame her fear, and she winged her way near to its perch, careful not to be noticed. She needn't have worried, however; the dragon was completely engrossed with its prize. She watched, fascinated, as the dragon stuck its arm inside the great mouth, a look of fierce concentration on its face. Its expression changed, suddenly, shifting from an intense grimace to... well, to what she

could only describe as concern, almost fear. The biggest change, she saw, were its eyes. Yellow sclera seemed to drain as the black of the iris boiled and ran, dissolving like ink poured into running water, leaving behind normal green eyes. *SCARED* eyes. The eyes... the eyes of a lost child, looking for its mother. As it began to withdraw its arm, it reached inside with the other, fitting both arms almost up to the shoulder into the mouth. Finally, he pulled his target from the great throat, carefully laying it down on the rocks before it. It was absolutely fixed on this- whatever it was, this soggy, filth caked- Her eyes widened suddenly.

“TWILIGHT!”

Still oblivious to her presence, the great beast lowered its head to her chest. It was all Fluttershy could do not to immediately rush to her friend’s side. She bit her lip, tears flowing freely down her face. *No...* The dragon raised its head and tenderly rolled Twilight onto her back. Grasping her chest between thumb and forefinger, it applied a gentle pressure, over and over again, rhythmically compressing her ribcage. Water began to ooze from her mouth and nose. With a cough and a splutter, Twilight’s eyes snapped open. Rolling onto her side, she began to vomit and cough, great gouts of mud, water and sludge splattering the stone as she emptied the contents of her lungs and stomach. The dragon sat silently, watching. It closed its eyes, squeezing the lids shut as tightly as possible. When they opened again, it was as if a different dragon was looming over Twilight. Gone were the sad, scared green eyes; the yellow and black had returned, as had its fury. Launching itself from its perch, it dove back into the swamp with a snarl.

Immediately, Fluttershy left her hiding spot, rushing to Twilight’s side as fast as her legs could carry her. Wrapping a foreleg around her back, she patted her friend’s chest.

“Shh, that’s right. Get it all out. You’re safe now. Oh, Twilight, what were you *thinking?*”

From below, the shrieks and roars of combat had begun again in earnest. Slumping back to the ground, Twilight closed her eyes again.

Lowering her head, she placed her ear to Twilight’s mouth, the gentle breeze of her breath shifting Fluttershy’s mane slightly. Relieved, Fluttershy

smiled sadly. She was breathing, at the very least. With a slight jerk, Twilight's eyes opened again, as did her mouth. What came out this time, instead of breath, was another torrent of muddy water. Her eyes widening in disgust, Fluttershy shot back, but only slightly. She'd been covered in much worse over her years of treating all sorts of sick animals. Giving her mane a quick shake to dislodge the largest clumps of mud, she continued to soothe her friend. Twilight's eyelids fluttered as she mumbled something vaguely resembling a question, but Fluttershy shushed her, stroking her friend's brow until sleep's gentle embrace took her away. Now that she was completely convinced that Twilight was alright, Fluttershy turned her attention to the brutal battle taking place below her. From the looks of things, Spike had held back before, afraid of harming Twilight.

Fluttershy swallowed hard. Spike. It WAS Spike; there was no doubt in her mind, but what had happened? The little dragon, barely up to her shoulder, now dwarfed her, 12 feet of raw muscle and sinew. Gone was the appearance of an almost chubby baby, the dragon below her, though far from fully grown, was nonetheless a vicious warrior.

Now that Twilight was no longer a factor, the dragon held nothing back. A fight that had once seemed almost fair was now entirely one sided. The hydra didn't stand a chance. The dragon ripped, slashed and tore at any part of the larger beast he could reach, his incredible speed keeping him safe from any counterattack. Any head that found itself within his reach was torn off, and the stump immolated with a gout of green flame.

*He's cauterizing the necks!* Despite her horror at the sheer brutality, she couldn't help but admire the strategy. Eventually, there was only one head left. The hydra staggered, hissing balefully at its foe. Before it could act, Spike was there, striking at its legs and knocking it down. For the second time during the course of the battle, the hydra found itself face down in the mud. Like a flash, Spike seized the final great head in his claws.

Fluttershy's breath caught in her throat as she watched the scene unfold, waiting for Spike to deliver the final, ending blow. To her surprise, however, Spike let the head drop. Spreading his great wings- *he had wings!-* he took off, circling once before returning to where he had left Twilight. The hydra picked itself up off the ground, staggering unsteadily. The remaining head turned, as if to examine the damage, before beginning to pick at the burned scabs left by dragonfire. Not all the necks could be saved, it seemed; seven heads had been reduced to five. Fluttershy nervously watched as it looked



up at Spike, fury in its eyes, but she needn't have worried. The mighty beast, lord of the swamps, turned and walked away. It knew it was completely outmatched against the dragon, and it wasn't about to waste the gift of life the dragon had given it.

Spike landed on the cliff, furling his wings as he perched. He seemed much bigger up close, towering above Fluttershy, like a hungry bird staring down a worm.

"Hello, Spike." Fluttershy swallowed, trying to hide her nervousness. "How are you?" *Really, Fluttershy? How are you? Come on, what kind of a question is that?* Fluttershy silently cursed herself. "I mean...well...uhm...*Mew!!*" Spike leaned down, bringing his head to her level, and looked her in the eye. Again, Fluttershy noticed the strange shifting of his eyes, colours combining and colliding, as if fighting each other for supremacy. He looked to Twilight's still form, then back to Fluttershy. She swallowed hard.

"She's going to be alright. She just needs some rest, then she'll be good as new." There was an uncomfortable silence. Spike, a look of concern and anguish plastered across his features, seemed... *wrong*. Could this really be the same dragon who, moments before, had delivered a vicious beating to a hydra? This Spike was much closer to the one she'd known a month ago. "I'm...I'm guessing you saw? *W*what she did?" The dragon nodded, slowly. Once again, there was silence. Fluttershy couldn't think of anything to say that could possibly improve the situation, so she opted to ask a question that had been eating at her mind.

"Spike...Is there any hope for you?" Spike looked at her, his eyes once again making that strange change from terrifying beast to gentle friend. Then he spoke. The voice could have struck terror into the heart of the bravest pony, but the fact that it was emanating from Spike, just the fact that he was still there, still capable of logical thought and conversation caused Fluttershy's heart to soar like a bird. His words, however, were the windowpane that sent it crashing to the ground in a bloody mess.

*"I... don't think so"*. Her eyes filling with tears, Fluttershy wanted to run to him, to hold him, to keep him there with her, but she held back, not wanting to leave Twilight's side.

"No... no, *please* tell me that's not true!". Spike opened his mouth to speak, but froze. His head snapped up, his eyes scanning over the forest for-

"*HIM.*"

Spike raised his head, giving vent to pure, raw fury, a monstrous plume of emerald smoke scorching the skies. Spike whirled back to look at Fluttershy, his face the essence of pure, unbridled fury. And there, eyes wide, staring him down, was Twilight, a look of sheer horror etched upon her face. Spike's heart shattered, as did his sanity, his mind once again plunged into the mindless psychotic frenzy of madness. He roared once more and took flight, the last remaining fragments of his sanity urging him to flee before he did something he could never recover from.

# Chapter 12

## Spark

Twilight closed her eyes as the cool water washed over her, coursing through her coat and clearing muck from her mane. She barely responded as Fluttershy delicately splashed her again, using her wings to flick the clear water of the small tributary stream. Fluttershy had half led, half carried Twilight down from the cliff, the purple unicorn seemingly awake but almost entirely unresponsive. On their way out of the swamp, they had stopped by the little stream as much for a chance to clean Twilight as for Fluttershy to take a rest. Twilight shuddered, shaking water from her mane. Opening her eyes again, she looked towards Fluttershy, not quite meeting her eyes.

“Fluttershy... I-”

“Shhhh. It’s okay, Twilight”.

“But-”

“No buts. We’re getting you cleaned up and back to Ponyville as soon as .....” Fluttershy’s voice began to fade away, falling off into the distance, as the events of the night started to sink in. Twilight’s memories, slowly returning, flooding through her mind, a swirling current of horror and realization snapping her to her senses.

*I... tried to kill myself! I tried... and I failed. Just another thing I managed to screw up, another mistake in the endless line of mistakes that’s been my life.* Twilight closed her eyes as she got to her feet unsteadily.

“Oh, Twilight, you shouldn’t stand up just yet, you just need to rest... Twilight?” Shifting herself, Twilight paused for a moment, looking into the rushing waters. She’d done it. She’d found Spike. She’d found him, but at the same time she’d lost him. He was... a lost cause. That’s what he was, a lost cause. She’d resigned herself to, well, to the truth. He was... he was *wrong*. *SHE* was wrong. She was wrong, not incorrect, wrong. Something was wrong with her. She was broken, a snapped axle on a cart, a shattered

china cup. She was quite simply wrong. Wrong about everything she had ever done, wrong about everything she was. She closed her eyes.

*I am going to do SOMETHING RIGHT!* Without a second thought, Twilight plunged her head into the water and held it there, locking her teeth around a submerged root. In less than a second, there was a pull, a pair of legs wrapped around her neck. Fluttershy pulled as hard as she could, with all the strength she could muster, but she couldn't break Twilight's grip. Fluttershy locked her hooves together, screaming. There could've been words, it was entirely probable, but Twilight was entirely oblivious, all sound obliterated by the rushing waters. Twilight was well read enough to know that it was entirely impossible for her to kill herself this way, her body simply wouldn't allow it. However, she was entirely beyond caring.

*Heh, maybe I'll get lucky. I've been the first to do a lot of things, maybe this'll be one of them.* Her head began to swim, coloured lights forming at the edges of her eyes.

*Any minute now...* It was then that something quite unexpected happened. She flew. She flew backwards, ripped from the water, and collided with a tree on the bank. Stunned, she took an involuntary breath, her body fighting for air. Her sides hurt, the impact from her disagreement with the tree outweighed by the pain in her other side, a pain that was focused, almost as if *she'd been bucked, hard*. Twilight stood shakily, staring at Fluttershy in an almost awed silence.

Fluttershy was angry. Panting hard, she glared at Twilight, an almost insane light in her eyes. She was wrong, she realized. Fluttershy wasn't angry. Fluttershy was *furious*.

"You. Will. Not. I repeat, YOU WILL NOT DO THAT AGAIN!" Fluttershy screamed, rage etched across her features. Twilight huffed, turning away.

"It's my life. I can do what I want, and you-" Twilight was cut off by a hoof slamming into the side of her head. She fell to the ground, coloured stars encroaching on her vision. Looking up, dazed, she saw Fluttershy standing over her. Though Twilight didn't think it possible, she seemed even more furious than she had been.

"Don't you *dare* turn your back on me."

“Wow, Fluttershy. I didn’t know you had it in you. Then again, it’s always the shy ones that turn out crazy, isn’t it?” Twilight knew it was harsh, not just harsh, but completely unjustified, but she didn’t care. At this point, she’d given up. All she wanted was to be alone, to be left in peace so she could die properly.

“What’s the matter?” she continued. “Is that all you’ve got? I’ve known trees that hit harder than that”.

“id...”

“I beg your pardon? Speak up, I can’t quite hear you. Then again, that’s usually your M.O., isn’t it?” The words hurt. They hurt deeply. It was as if the letters themselves, sharp edges and points several times too large to fit into her throat, were forced out through her mouth. Twilight couldn’t believe that she’d said that. It pained her deeply to say these things, but she simply didn’t care anymore. She was going to be left alone, no matter what it took.

“I *said* you’re an idiot”. The words hit Twilight harder than the punch had. *I am an idiot*. Twilight squeezed her eyes shut as tightly as she could. She couldn’t take it. She simply couldn’t take anymore. With a cry of frustration, she began to slam her head against the riverbank, over and over again. As Fluttershy advanced to stop her, she charged her horn with energy and let loose with a burst of static that sent the yellow mare flying backwards into the water with a splash. Standing up, Twilight concentrated hard, grasping a sizable rock set into the opposite bank. With a great heave, she wrenched it free from the thick mud of the bank. Lowering her head, she whipped it towards her with all of the magical strength she could had. Stepping into its path, she closed her eyes and waited for the impact. An impact which never came. She opened her eyes to see Fluttershy, standing in front of her on wobbly legs. She’d somehow managed to move herself between Twilight and the stone missile, taking the impact she’d meant for herself. Twilight reared up with a scream of anger, seizing another rock, but stopped. Fluttershy had moved, staggered, really, across the riverbank, again placing herself between Twilight and the rock. Her legs wobbly, tears in her eyes, the furious face gone, Fluttershy spoke, swallowing hard.

“wait....Wait, please. I didn’t mean to hit you, or call you an idiot...” Twilight raised her eyebrows. “...Okay, maybe I did. I- I don’t want to lose you. It was... I don’t even know how to say it, I was just- I’ve never really felt anything like that before. I didn’t even know how I was supposed to deal with it, I just know I did what I thought I had to”. Twilight wanted to stop, she wanted to put the rock down, embrace her friend and apologize and beg forgiveness. She wanted to go back to Ponyville and start over, but everything just seemed so... *different*. It seemed like it would be entirely impossible. Emotions churned, whipping through Twilight’s brain like the rapids of a river, just pure, brutal, unstoppable force, overwhelming her usual logic and making her nearly blind to almost everything except her own burning desire to atone for what she’d started by destroying herself. Twilight lifted the rock higher, adjusting the angle of her throw so that Fluttershy couldn’t stop her this time. Stepping forward, Fluttershy moved forwards to intercept, collapsing to her knees with a small cry. Twilight’s eyes narrowed in surprise, then shot wide in horror. Her right flank was bleeding, blood running down her side and dripping onto the ground. She’d hit Fluttershy. She’d just struck one of her best friends with a rock. She’d hurt her, and hurt her badly. Twilight dropped the rock and rushed to her side.

“Oh, Celestia, I’m so sorry!” Twilight’s horn glowed again as she scanned the injury with her magic to determine the extent of the damage. It was a small fracture, nothing too serious, but it had to be quite painful. Twilight concentrated hard, forcing herself past what she’d previously thought to be her limit. She’d dealt with injuries before, but nothing more serious than cuts and bruises. With a burst of coloured light, she released the built up magical pressure, forcing it into the wound. Scurrying sparks of energy spread along Fluttershy’s leg, sinking into the skin as the magic did its work, repairing the damage the rock had caused. Very soon, the only sign that there had been any injury whatsoever was the trail of quickly drying blood tracing a path through the yellow coat. The light died, Twilight’s energy spent, and she collapsed to the ground. Still conscious, she was nevertheless completely exhausted. “Is... Is that better?” Twilight asked, panting with exertion. She felt a warm body press up against her; Fluttershy had lain down next to her and wrapped her in one of her wings.

“It’s much better, Twilight. A little stiff, but just fine. Thank you”. Fluttershy sighed.

“You know, Twilight, when I first moved to Ponyville, there were a lot of rumors going around. Ponies would say nasty things about my family, and about pegasi in general. Everyone seemed to assume I was so shy because everyone had treated me horribly, or hurt me, or just been mean to me all the time, or because I’d had a terrible childhood. It wasn’t, not at all. I never really got picked on. Heh, for the most part, I was so quiet that most ponies didn’t even really know I was there. That’s probably the reason I really didn’t have any friends growing up. It wasn’t until I was enrolled in Summer Flight Camp that anyone took any notice of me. When I was younger, I was a very weak flier. I... I’m not quite sure exactly why, but when I was there, for some reason I wanted to improve, to get better, so I started practicing hard. Well, trying, anyways. That’s when that whole Sonic Rainboom thing happened, and I got my cutie mark. Actually, I think I got something more important than my cutie mark. I got a friend. I met Rainbow Dash, and we became friends. She was really the first pony (other than my family, that is) to ever really go out of their way to be nice to me. I loved my family very much, and they loved me. My mother was in charge of rainbow consistency at the weather factory, and my father worked with clouds. He sculpted tables and chairs and shelves, all sorts of things. You could call him a carpenter, I guess. Although, he used clouds instead of wood, so I guess that makes him a clouddenter”. She giggled a little at this, and even Twilight smiled some at the terrible joke. “My parents where very nice to me,” Fluttershy continued. “They never yelled, and the only time either of them raised their voice was at cloudball games. I... actually signed up for a team, once, and nobody cheered louder. They were very supportive, and weren’t upset at all when I wanted to quit. They never tried to force me to do anything I didn’t want to, and never made me feel guilty about being shy. I really do wish I could give you some big, enlightening explanation as to why I am, but the honest truth is that it’s simply who I am. But you know what? I’m fine with that. It’s who I am, and I’m completely comfortable with it. I do need to try a bit harder to make myself heard sometimes, but it’s alright. While I can’t say that being so shy is a good thing, I will never deny that it has led to a lot of good things. If it wasn’t for me being so shy, I would never have learned to be calm and quiet, which really does help me deal with animals. It’s almost part of my special talent. I’ve learned I can get angry just like anypony, and that I’m able to stand up and be strong when I need to. What I’m trying to say is, basically, that good or bad, mistakes and triumphs, you need to be happy with who you are, and proud of what you’ve managed to accomplish. Things can’t always go to plan, and can’t always be perfect.

‘What’s important is making it through the bad times and not letting them weigh you down. That when you make it out, you can float up and bask in the wonderful moments, the times worth remembering’. That’s what my dad always used to tell me, whenever I was down on myself or upset over anything. Although he was just a simple carpenter, and most ponies wouldn’t have given him a second glance, I don’t think anypony has ever spoken words so wise.”

Her eyes damp with tears, Twilight looked at the ground, lost for words.

“Fluttershy...”. Pulling her friend in close, they sat on the bank in silence. They stayed that way, huddled together, for some time, until approaching hoofbeats jarred them from their reverie.

“Twilight! Fluttershy!” The friends looked up to see Applejack, Rarity and Pinkie Pie approach from across the stream. “Thank Celestia y’all’re alright!”. Crossing the stream, Rarity momentarily hesitating before abandoning the well being of her pony pedi in the face of the muddy bottom.

“Oh, dears, it’s so good to see you safe! We were so worried! Oh, and just LOOK at your coat! How did you ever manage to get so filthy, and...” At this, Rarity sniffed, a wry expression of disgust spreading across her features. “Eeeeeugh! What *is* that stench? You smell as if you’ve been bathing in rotten... I don’t even *know*, just *something* rotten. We simply must get you cleaned up immediately.” Twilight couldn’t help but smile. Rarity was direct and to the point, as always. Getting slowly to her feet, Twilight began to stumble, only to find herself propped up by Applejack.

“Woah, steady there, Twi. You all right?”

“Erm... Yeah, just a bit tired. I’ve had a... busy night”. As the friends turned to head home, they were interrupted by Rarity’s shriek.

“Oh my STARS! Fluttershy, your leg!”. All attention was now on Fluttershy, and the now dry bloodstain adorning her flank like a second cutie mark. Twilight looked to her, and their eyes locked. This was it. Fluttershy broke the stare first, looking down at her hooves. Taking a deep breath, she opened her mouth. Twilight closed her eyes.



“Oh...umm, well... You see, we were in the swamp, and then the hydra...”

“HYDRA?!”

“Yeah... And... and then Spike came, and he fought it-”

“*SPIKE?! Are you sure- he WHAT?!* ”

“He... He fought it. It got sort of... messy. I guess I must’ve gotten splashed from one of the heads he tore off...”

*\*THUD\**

It was all too much for poor Rarity to handle. Her eyes rolling up into her head, she swooned, falling to the ground in an unconscious heap. An incredulous Applejack shook her head.

“Well, I’ll be darned. First thing’s first, we need to get y’all home. I’m sure ya got ’cherselves a whale of a tale ta tell, but first thing’s first. Pinkie, would ya mind...”

“Okie dokie lokie!” Pinkie said brightly, lifting an unconscious Rarity onto her back. “Let’s go!”

Applejack turned.

“Alright, Twi, let’s- Twi?” Twilight didn’t respond; the night’s events had taken their toll, and the purple unicorn was fast asleep. Applejack shook her head with a smile. “Poor gal. Had quite a night, haven’t ya?” Hoisting her onto her back, the party set out for home.

It was almost a full day later that Twilight awoke. The smoky atmosphere and flickering torchlight of Zecora’s hut greeted her as she opened her eyes.

“Hey there. Look who’s awake!”. Twilight blinked sleepily.

“Hey Dash. What time is- DASH! YOU’RE AWAKE!” Twilight’s eyes shot wide, sleep entirely banished from her mind as she shot across the floor of the hut, wrapping her arms around her friend’s neck.

“Urk... Ow, easy on the neck!” Instantly, Twilight released her.

“Oh Dash, I’m so sorry! It’s all my fault and if I’d just planned things out better or taken a look before hand or made sure that everything was in place or tha-MMF!” Twilight’s babble stopped abruptly, cut off by a hoof pressing itself over her mouth.

“It’s okay, Twi. It wasn’t your fault, and besides, I’m fine!” Dash chuckled, lying back on her pillows. “At least, I WILL be, once I can get outta here and fly again. Being laid up like this is just *soooooo boring!*”

“I tell her to sleep, she just complains and moans

And won’t take the medicine to help heal her bones!” Twilight turned in time to see Zecora, accompanied by Applejack, enter the hut. “You are my friends, and I’ll help when I can,

But Rainbow Dash stubbornness I just can not stand!” Getting to her feet, Twilight turned to face her friends.

“Oh, Zecora, I can’t thank you enough for all you’ve done to help her. To help *us*. The zebra shrugged, smiling.

“No need to praise me like I have accomplished some great feat

All I did was give treasured friends a place sleep” Twilight paused a moment.

“How long, exactly was I out for?”

“Almost a full day, sugarcube. We figured that after all the craziness last night it’d be best ta just let’cha sleep it off. What were ya doin’ down in that swamp, anyway?”

“Oh, well, I was just, y’know...” Twilight stammered, fumbling for an answer, as Applejack’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. She was saved by the arrival of Fluttershy, Pinkie and Rarity.

“Oh, Twilight! It’s SO good to see you up and about, dear!” Pinkie hopped about excitedly.

“Hee! Wow, Twilight, usually it’s only Rarity who passes out like that! You musta been really super tired, huh, Twilight?”

"You can say that again, Pinkie. Let's just say I had an exhausting night". Applejack crossed the floor of the hut, sitting next to Rainbow Dash.

"Speaking of which, I'm feelin' mighty curious 'bout it. Fluttershy here won't say much about it, wanted you ta tell the story".

"Oh, yes, darling! Please do! Fluttershy HAS been rather tight lipped about the whole thing, could you please shed some light on last night's events?". As she moved to join the other ponies, Pinkie bounced after her, sitting next to them.

"Ooh! Story time! I LOVE story time!" Twilight gulped. She hadn't really had time to think since her time on the cliff, and wasn't sure where to start.

"Well...uhm...hmmmm..." Twilight quailed slightly under the gaze of four pairs of eyes. "Well, after I ran- uh, left, I really just started walking. I didn't really plan on going anywhere, all I wanted was somewhere I could be by myself. I ended up finding myself in Froggybottom Bog. I wandered a bit, and I stopped at the cliff where we escaped the hydra last time we were there. I figured it was a good enough spot, so I decided to stop there. I was pretty much just lost in thought at that point. That's why I didn't notice when the edge of the cliff began to crumble until it was too late." A collective gasp arose from the assembled ponies. "I... I fell. I hit the swamp, and I sank. I honestly thought that was the end for me. Next thing I knew, I was on a rocky outcropping with Fluttershy... and Spike". A hush fell across the hut.

"Are... Are you sure?". Twilight closed her eyes.

"I'm positive. He was bigger, much bigger, but it was him. I- He-" tears began to form, running down the young mare's face before dripping to the floor. "It was him, but... It wasn't him. Not anymore. He's not Spike anymore". Her shoulders began to shake as silent sobs racked her body. She was absolutely certain it was him. "I opened my eyes, and h-he was there, an-and he was roaring. And then... he lo-looked at me... and just... his eyes..." Twilight cried. The weight of all those weeks of worry and fear and terror and god knows what else, combined with the trauma of the previous night had compounded on one another, and the poor filly had finally snapped. Immediately, Fluttershy was at her side. Embracing her friend, she simply held her, shushing reassuringly.

"Don't worry, Twilight. It's all going to be okay. Why don't you just sit down for now, okay?". No longer sobbing, but eyes still wet with tears, Twilight

sat with her friends, surrounded on all sides by love and support. Fluttershy, however, still stood. Clearing her throat slightly, the shy pegasus spoke. "There are a lot of holes in Twilight's story. While I'm not arguing with what she saw, there's a bit more to it than that. I... I saw everything that happened, and I can fill in the holes". In the hut, there was nothing but silence. All eyes were on Fluttershy, expectant and waiting. She gulped, not quite used to being the centre of attention. Straightening up, Fluttershy stood tall as she began to tell the rest of the tale.

"I was following Owlysius after I'd split off from you. I... I saw her fall. I was too far away to catch her, but I headed down as fast as I could. I wasn't fast enough, though. I couldn't even get close. I saw the hydra come up out of the water. It moved, flicked one of its heads. I wasn't sure what it was doing at the time, but from what I know now... well... it... it ate her." There was a chorus of gasps from those assembled, along with loud *thud* as Rarity swooned again. Immediately, however, she shot back upright, a wide eyed look of terror on her face. Immediately, she embraced Twilight, wrapping her legs around her neck.

"Oh, Twilight! You poor, poor dear! So THAT'S what that... *smell* was". Twilight shrugged awkwardly, as best as she was able considering the grip Rarity had around her neck.

"It's... It's not like I was awake for it. I passed out after I... went under".

"Well, Twi, I'm sure as sugar glad you're alright now" Applejack offered, throwing a sympathetic hoof around her shoulder while simultaneously removing Rarity's deathgrip.

"And that's... That's when Spike came in. I'll... spare you some of the more... *gruesome* details..." At this, Rarity coughed slightly and turned what the local colts might've considered a rather fetching shade of red, silently cursing herself for her last fainting spell. "I was there when Twilight opened her eyes, and I won't deny that the Spike that Twilight opened her eyes to seemed a monster, but she wasn't in my position". Twilight, her emotional outburst behind her, looked up. Her eyes met Fluttershy's, just as they had the previous night, but this time the gaze was different. The shy aura that normally encompassed the yellow pegasus was instead projected by the

normally robust Twilight. She was just as curious as the rest, if not more so, to find out what really happened that night.

“And... what did it look like from your position?” Not moving her eyes from Twilight’s, Fluttershy spoke again.

“It was clear to me that Spike attacked the Hydra for one reason and one reason only: *to save you.*” Twilight closed her eyes, bowing her head yet again. Almost imperceptibly, she shook it, though it would have been impossible to tell whether in disagreement or despair. “I made it to the ledge where he’d pulled you out”.

“No... That’s not true. It can’t be. There was not enough left in him to care that much! I SAW him!”

“It’s the truth, Twilight. He fought it so carefully... He got hurt quite badly. He didn’t do anything that would risk hurting you. He *reached down its throat to pull you out.* He squeezed all the water out of you, got you breathing again. He was so gentle... The monster you saw, the rage, it was AT THE HYDRA. He was absolutely furious with it for daring to hurt you!” Twilight got to her feet, stumbling away from her friends. She shook her head viciously, as if trying to shake loose a thought.

“No, That’s... That doesn’t make any sense!”

“Twi-”

“I saw his eyes, Fluttershy. I SAW THEM. All that was there was just... pure rage! There isn’t anything left of Spike. If he saved me, its because he wanted to finish me off himself. Spike’s gone. All that’s left is just... a *monster.*”

“Would a rage filled monster spare an enemy?”

“...What?”

“Spike never killed the hydra. After he got you out and made sure you were okay, he was really mad. He was absolutely furious. He flew down, and he attacked the hydra. It was a totally different fight. It was just... brutal” At this, Fluttershy shuddered, still trying to repress the memory of what she’d seen. “He beat it, and beat it badly. I was convinced he was going to kill it. He had every opportunity, it was completely beaten, but he stopped. He let it walk away. He stopped the fight, and he came back to you. The fire in his

eyes was back, but... it was different. I've taken care of a lot of hurt or sick animals over the years, and one look I'll always know is worry. He was worried about you, Twilight. He was *scared*. I'm not sure what it was that made him so angry that he roared the way he did, the change came over him so suddenly, but I DO know that if you'd come to just a few seconds earlier, you would have seen a dragon deeply concerned for your wellbeing."

"Stop it...just stop it. He's a monster; that's all there is to it. He's a monster and there's nothing that can change that. So just... stop trying to give me hope. Please...just stop...". The friends rose, mouths opened, but they paused. What would they say? What COULD they say? Twilight, her near manic insistence given way to simple depression, sat alone in the corner, completely despondent. It was then that Pinkie Pie, who had remained silent throughout the entire tale, rose and walked over to Twilight. In an oddly composed tone for the pink party pony, she began to speak.

"I'm not sure if Fluttershy is right or wrong. There is a chance she might have made a mistake ,but frankly, I really don't care at this point. It's not important in the slightest. I trust her, and I believe her in such a powerful way I don't think there are big enough words to describe it. If she says that Spike, OUR Spike, the Spike we know and love is still in there somewhere, then I believe her. I trust her instincts. Now c'mon, Twilight, you're smart, you're the superest smartest pony I've ever met, and I know you trust Fluttershy as much as I do. So use that amazing brain of yours. You can figure all this out, I KNOW it. I trust you to be able to do anything as much as I trust Fluttershy to be kind to animals, or Rarity to have a good fashion sense, or Applejack to buck apples. And that's a lot. So get that brain of yours workin and come up with an answer that fits. Okie dokie?"

Twilight was stunned. The unusual pearl of wisdom had struck home. So what if Twilight had only seen a monster? Fluttershy had said otherwise, and she couldn't think of a pony who'd done more to earn her trust, especially over the course of the last few days. It didn't matter what Twilight thought she had seen, what she felt, her trust in her dear friend was all that mattered. Twilight's analytical brain, outmatched and buried beneath layers of emotion for far too long, buzzed to life. The gears turned in her head as

the purple mare pondered. She could figure this out. She WOULD figure this out. She was Twilight Sparkle, personal student of Princess Celestia.

And she was back!

# Chapter 13

## Revelation

Twilight paced the floor of the hut, her mind churning. Despite the seriousness of the situation, the atmosphere in the hut was air was upbeat, almost triumphant. Twilight Sparkle, the prize pupil of Princess Celestia, was back on her game. She could figure this out. She **WOULD** figure this out. If anyone could, it would be her. Back and forth she paced, searching every fiber of her magical experience and knowledge for an answer. True, there was so much information out there, so much old and forgotten lore, that it would be almost impossible for her to have already absorbed the information, no matter how much she'd read. Somehow, though, she knew she could work it out. She had a feeling. Almost a nagging little voice in the back of her mind. A niggly little brain tremor. It was there, all right, just hiding. Always a step away. The harder she searched for it, the harder it became to find. If only she could remember exactly **WHY** she knew it. She knew this, she **HAD** to know it. She ground her teeth, upgrading her assault on her memory to a full blown war. If it wanted to hide, so be it. She'd do whatever it took to-

*Wait- War!* "THAT'S IT!" The small group looked to her, a slow smile spreading across her face. "That's it! War! I've got it! I know what's wrong with him!" Turning to the assembled, Twilight took a deep breath and began to speak.

"A while back, before I met all of you and still lived in Canterlot, I began research on a spell that would cause Spike to grow. Not too big, mind you, just a couple decades' worth. He was having a bit of a macho crisis, if you know what I mean. He didn't think that anyone could take him seriously, just because of his size and age."

"Well, he **IS** awfully cute... Um, right, sorry. Go on, Twilight." Fluttershy blushed.



Twilight continued. "I decided I'd do what I could to help him out, basically just give him one day of being big. I started to look through the archives and such, different sorts of magic, all the old draconian records and the like, both pre and post Celestial, although why they wouldn't shelve the two together is anyone's guess, what with both being-" Rarity coughed.

"Um, Twilight, darling? You had a point to make, if I'm not mistaken?"

"Right, right. Sorry, I just get somewhat absorbed when I start discussing the finer points of the filing systems and the-" Another cough, this one slightly exaggerated. "Gah! Okay, sorry. Anyways, the issue ended up getting resolved without magic. I DID, however, find the spell I was looking for. It's old magic. Dragon magic."

Twilight paused to take a breath. Her previous energy and jubilation began to evaporate, her excitement drops of water flicked onto a hot plate as she became serious. "I did find the spell. Ancient Draconian magic. Incredibly powerful. I may have found the spell, but I never cast it. Even if I *could've* pulled it off, there is just absolutely no way I would, not in a million years. It wasn't just difficult, it was..." Twilight paused, shuddering. "It was *evil*. Thousands of years ago, the dragons used to be in a constant state of war and conflict. Hundreds of clans, thousands of grievances and enmities, the entire species was just involved in a constant war, every clan for itself. The spell... It was designed to cause a young dragon to age and grow, creating a new, powerful warrior from an infant. Basically, nigh disposable shock troops". In the momentary silence that followed this grim pronouncement, Applejack spoke up.

"I can see that th' spell does have some mighty disturbin' origins, but why'd that stop ya?" Shaking her head, Twilight began to elaborate.

"You see, the thing about this spell, what made it just so... *wrong*... It corrupts them. It takes what they are and just twists it horribly. How could an infant have the will to fight a war? The dragon warlocks needed to fix that if the spell was to be effective; otherwise, the clans would end up with hundreds of fully grown warriors with absolutely no will to fight. One thing

they couldn't do, though, was to control their free will. Even if they could've used magic powerful enough to rob a dragon of its free will, it would be almost impossible to maintain for long, and it would be absolutely impossible to field an entire ARMY of them. So the warlocks basically found a loophole. Instead of controlling their will, they..." Twilight stopped suddenly, the last vestiges of her scholarly fervor vanishing as she realized the implications of what she was saying, what it meant for Spike. What it meant for her.

"I-in order to get around the problem, the spell... it... *it breaks their mind*. They go insane. Absolutely, unequivocally insane. Then they'd just let them loose on the enemy". Twilight paused again, allowing her friends time to digest the information and giving herself more time to steel her nerves against the facts she relayed. It was Rarity who spoke first.

"But... I don't understand. Why would they use a spell like that? Desperate or not, an army composed entirely of mindless berserkers would be incredibly easy to defeat, in a tactical sense? They'd be nearly useless if they just blundered around, completely uncontrollable."

"This is very true. However, that's why they *weren't*, in fact, entirely uncontrollable. In order to control them, the warlock who cast the spell would establish a mental link with them, a powerful magical bond. In their madness, nothing anyone could say to them would be even remotely understandable, except for the warlock. The one who cast the spell would be their commander, their voice of reason, their GOD, for all intents and purposes."

"So... what you're saying, in essence, is that Spike has gone absolutely and completely mad and that we have absolutely no hope of being able to save him because even if we DID manage to speak to him, he is entirely incapable of understanding a word we say?" Everyone looked to Rarity as she spoke, their hope, newly rekindled by Twilight's return to herself, beginning to burn away.

"Um... but-" Suddenly the center of attention, Fluttershy quailed slightly. Even among her group of friends, she was still rather uncomfortable

speaking aloud. “I... I don’t think that’s quite right. Spike didn’t attack me when he saw me. I talked to him, and he understood me.” Twilight sighed.

“I know that it may have looked like he understood you, but it just sounded like gibberish to him. He probably didn’t attack you because he didn’t see you as any sort of a threat.”

“But he talked back-” Instantly, she had Twilight’s full attention.

“What.”

“He talked to me. That’s how I was absolutely sure it was still him inside somewhere.”

“But... That can’t be! How could he...” Twilight started pacing again, lost in thought as she muttered to herself. How could this be? There was no way he could understand what she was saying, much less actually reply! This just didn’t make sense...

“Unless...” Abruptly stopping, Twilight turned to face her friends. “I think I know. I’m not 100% sure about this, but I believe it has something to do with the... *uniqueness* of our situation. It’s different from the situation the warlocks used the spell for.”

“But, why would it work differently? Didn’t the warguys use the spell the same way?”

“That’s not exactly true, Dash. The WARLOCKS had a completely different reason for the spell, and completely different dragons to cast it on.” Dash kept quiet, knowing Twilight was in full scholar mode now.

“As I said previously, basically breaks their mind, it makes them go insane. There are many ways for a pony (or a dragon, as the case may be), to go insane, but a spell isn’t one of them.”

“What the hay, Tw? You JUST SAID the spell makes them go whacko!” Twilight rolled her eyes, exasperated, as she warmed to the subject, beginning to sound almost as if she were reciting from a textbook.

“Could you calm down for *just* a second, Dash, and let me finish? As I said, there are many ways for a creature to go insane, but the most common would be the brain’s inability to deal with certain situations, emotions and/or memories. For the most part, everyone has certain mental barriers. Their brains do it, instinctively. What the spell does is to break those barriers. Without them, trauma, pain, anguish, whatever would already be in the mind would swell up and drive them absolutely, irredeemably insane. When the warlocks would cast the spell, it would be on infants, barely old enough to walk. Because of their age, they had almost no worldly experience. The...” Twilight’s cracked slightly. “The babies were flown over the battlefields to witness the carnage. That way, when the spell was cast, the pure horror of what they’d seen would entirely consume them. Being babies, the only barrier against such things is ignorance. An easy barrier to break, magic would barely even be needed. This is different though.”

“How so?”

“First off, Spike is not as young as they would have been. He’s... He’s *lived*. He’s spent time in the world, time to build up different barriers to keep his mind safe. He has had a chance to live, make friends, see the good in the world. He’s had bad moments in his life, and has learned to get past them. These are the sort of things that helps your mind evolve, to create barriers. The second, and probably most important part, is what, exactly, Spike’s preoccupied with. He’s not wrapped up in the horrors of death and violence, he’s obsessed with his loneliness and how he feels he was abandoned. When someone feels as lonely as Spike does, all they want is just to be accepted, to be happy, to feel like they belong somewhere. More than anything, they want things to go back to normal. I know what I’m talking about here, trust me.” Twilight gathered her thoughts one final time, confirming to herself that she knew how to phrase it right. “My guess is that when the spell on Spike was cast, that feeling, that deep down feeling of... of wanting things to be the way they used to be basically put a hole in the spell, so to speak. It lost some of its bite. Couple that with the fact that the spell couldn’t properly cope with Spike’s mental barriers, and you’ve got a pretty weak spell. Now, if Fluttershy is right, and I can honesty say there’s

absolutely no doubt in my mind that she is,” She paused, glancing first to Pinkie, then to Fluttershy. “Then we can still reach him. We can fix his mind, because past the hurt and the loneliness and the revenge lies a part of him we know. The part who was the best little assistant and friend there ever was. The part of him that we’re trying to get back. The part that’s, well, irreplaceable. All we need to do is just make him see that we still love him, and that we’re willing to do anything to get him back”.

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Spike soared through the sky, each beat of his powerful wings pushing him farther and farther away from... from what? Spike was fleeing from something, of that he was sure. Having slipped back towards the demented pit of his own madness, the only clear objective he had was the last bit of sane thought he had managed to grasp. *MOVE! Go now, go fast. Go as far and as fast as you can. It doesn't matter where, anywhere but here. GO!* The red fog clouding his thoughts mystified him. What was he running from? Why should he run? He was a dragon, what could possibly threaten him? The harder he tried to concentrate, the harder he looked for the answer, the further it would run, leaving his thoughts even more distorted. He could pick up snippets of thoughts, emotions. He remembered feelings, worry, relief. Why would he feel this? Regardless, in his state of constant rage, they were welcome additions to his emotional wavelength. He wasn't sure why but for the first time in a while rage didn't seem to be enough. He needed something else, he needed *more*. And so, despite the dizziness, despite the haze descending upon him, he thought, and thought hard, delving deeper into his shrouded mind, searching for the memories that would trigger these other, almost alien emotions. Each time, however, something pushed back, darkness pressing in on the edges of his vision. He made a curious sight: A purple dragon soaring across the sky, occasionally seeming to lose control and plummet to the ground, only to catch himself and resume his flight path.

After several attempts (and near misses), his brain began to itch. At first, it was a barely noticeable sensation, a slight prickle, but the longer he ignored it, the stronger it got, until, reaching a fever pitch, his mind buzzing, affecting his centre of balance, pushing him in a certain direction. Pausing to hover, Spike turned towards the east, the direction he was seemingly being pulled, and looked out, trying to find the source of the pull. He didn't particularly WANT to go, but at this point, it felt as though he had no choice in the matter. Unable to make a decision as to whether or not he should follow the itch or ignore it, Spike simply hovered there. Eventually, he entirely forgot why he was hovering. Thoughts turned to mist, to water, running away, droplets running down the windowpane of his mind. He simply floated in the air, his eyes locked onto the forest spread before him, not due to any appreciation of the scene, but because he quite simply couldn't think of anything else to do. He couldn't even think of a reason to think of something. Even that itch in the back of his mind, attempting to pull him along, could not spur him from his stupor. Even when the itch grew, from an itch to a burn. He simply hovered there, thoughtlessly, for several hours, until a booming voice echoed through his head.

***SPIKE! You have lazed about long enough; it is time you held up your part of the bargain. Return to the cave at once!*** Finally snapping out of his daze, Spike wheeled about and soared straight for the dragon's cave.

A short time later, Spike landed at the mouth of the cave. It was strange, he thought, not remembering much of his journey there. He couldn't quite remember any of the events that took place before his decision to listen to Delicraw and return to the cave, either. Not that he could even recall making any decision. All he could recall was Delicraw, telling him to return, and then he was landing in front of the cave. Spike made his way into his master's lair. Not that he could ever recall thinking of him as his master before. Inside, Delicraw lounged atop a pile of gems and gold.

***"Ah, you have arrived. Good, we must speak of important matters. I have to ....."*** Delicraw's voice faded to a low buzz as Spike caught sight of a small pile of turquoise gems. Suddenly, all he could think about was devouring all those gems and then having a nice long nap before he had to reorganise the Library. Spike started to lick his lips, but paused, becoming confused. He started looking around the cave. While

big, there wasn't any other tunnels or paths to follow, and there was most definitely not a Library.

**"SPIKE!"** BAM! Spike staggered as a giant, scaly hand slammed into the back of his head. **"We have important matters to discuss. KEEP YOUR MIND LOLY SQUID SOFA BURN CAT!"** It was the most curious thing. Delicraw's speech began to drift, shifting into unintelligible babble. Spike couldn't understand a word he said. Another strike landed, snapping him back to reality.

**"Did you burn Ponyville to the ground, yes or no?"** Spike thought about it. He could recall screaming, and fire, and a pain in his chest. What was it, though? He hadn't been injured, had he? He could remember a tree, and more fire and claws and screams and... Spike nodded. Yes. He wasn't sure if he had actually achieved the razing of Ponyville, but saying yes felt right.

**"And the mare? The purple one?"** Spike gave Delicraw a confused look. **"Twilight, I believe her name was. Did you make her pay? Did you devourer her body? Did you crush her bones? Did you savour her blood and her suffering?"** Again Spike tried to remember. He could recall blood. Lots of blood. He recalled the feeling of flesh being rent, and bone crunched, he recalled the sight of a purple mare, unmoving on a cliff side. More blood, anger and rage, but also worry and happiness. Again, Spike nodded. Yes. Again, he felt that it was the right thing to do. Delicraw smiled, clapping Spike on the back. **"Excellent work, my boy. Now that your revenge is taken care of its time you helped me with what we talked about before. Do you recall?"** Spike shook his head. He didn't recall. He really didn't recall much of anything. **"No matter, we only briefly touched on it and you've been though a lot basically rubber chicken hose dogs green flame apple soup man rare, harping giant portal glue stick manifest home land goose net."** Spike tried in vain to make sense of his master's words, but while some things were clear, the rest was simply an endless stream of nonsensical babble. It reminded him of Ditzzy Doo, except that if you took the time to listen what she said, it mostly made sense. Spike laughed, thinking about the wall-eyed Mail Mare.

**"What is so funny, Spike?"**

*"Oh, I was just thinking about the time Ditzzy Doo Crashed into the cave and spilled your tea all over your copy of Levitation and Levity: A*

*Study in Antigravity.*" Spike chuckled again while Delicraw gave him a rather concerned look.

***"Not only do I not recall that particular incident, I do not own such a book, I have NEVER drank tea in all 1356 years of my life and I have never met anyone by the name of Ditzzy Doo."***

*"Ditzzy who?"*

***"The pony you were just talking about. I do not know her."***

*"I don't recall talking about anyone named Derpy Hooves."* Delicraw's colossal brow furrowed into a look of confusion, shifting into one of concern, just now noting Spike's sorry physical appearance.

***"My boy. What exactly happened to you?"*** Spike craned his neck and took his body in. He smiled. THIS he remembered. He was rather proud of it, as a matter of fact, and he was sure his master would be, too.

*"I had a fight with a hydra. I won."*

***"Hydra?"***

*"Yes. It's a multi headed creature averaging on 20 to 25 feet tall. A peculiar evolutionary trait unique to the species is that when a head is cut off, two heads will immediately replace it, creating an exponential increase against the number of heads severed. The Hydra was first discovered 400 years ago by Silver Dollar, a botanist looking for rare plants in the EverFree Forest. 100 years after the discovery by Silver Dollar, a farmer by the name of Hay Stack is noted as being the first to discover the creature's ability to replicate heads. He witnessed the creature get into a fight with an Ursa Minor, during which the Ursa caused considerable damage to a head, thus causing the hydra to cleave it off itself, resulting in the growth of two new heads. Hay Stacks' account goes on to say the hydra then killed the Ursa, but only after the Ursa bit off two other heads, resulting in the growth of 4 additional heads, giving the creature a total of 12, which was too many for the Ursa to handle, resulting in its defeat."*

Delicraw just stared. He was being given a history lesson. Him, getting a history lesson? Ridiculous. He WAS history. He himself had been aware of the existence of hydras for well over a thousand years. When Spike was done, Delicraw gave his head a shake. It seemed his run in with



the hydra had left him a mite scrambled. Hopefully, he would still be able to serve his purpose before he completely lost it.

***“Thank you for that... informative lesson, Spike. Now, why don’t you go get some sleep? We need to be well rested for the twilight hours.”*** Delicraw turned away and, with a monstrous yawn, snuggled down onto a bed of riches. Spike stood where he was, intently thinking upon what Delicraw had just said. It was that word, twilight. Something about it. He could vaguely recall fleeing from twilight. He snorted a laugh at that thought. Now that was ridiculous. The very thought of him fleeing from twilight, it was ridiculous, Twilight would never hurt him.

# Chapter 14

## ...WHAT?!

Spike huddled in a corner of the cave he shared with Delicraw, reading a rather large book he'd found amid a jumble of treasure by the light of a small green flame. It was a simple story book, retelling the exploits of a terrible ice dragon. The book seemed out of place in a dragon's cave, but Spike didn't care. He was just happy he had something to read. He had never been much for books, preferring organizing them to reading them, but he had an overwhelming urge to read something, anything. While the book was long, Spike finished it rather quickly, his urge to read doing nothing to diminish his usual predilection to skip the boring parts. Placing the rather large (even to him) tome down, Spike's eyes wandered around the cave as he wondered what to do next. A low grumble from his stomach tipped the balance toward finding something to eat. He wasn't quite sure why, but his mind was slowly starting to slip, and he was determined to keep himself busy to take his mind off, well, his mind. Without even thinking about it, he walked outside the cave. Locating a rather luscious patch of grass, he lowered his head and began to eat, tearing up large mouthfuls. It wasn't until his seventh mouthful that Spike stopped and took the time to think about what he was doing. *Why am I eating grass!? Delicraw told me that I could eat any gems I wanted!* Returning to the treasure pile deep within the cave, he set out to find the perfect gem to quench his hunger. His search lead him to a rather large spherical ruby, the most delicious gem he had ever seen. It almost reminded him of an apple. Apples, in turn, made him think of Sweet Apple Acres and the Apple family. One member of the Apple family, in particular... Big Macintosh, with those broad shoulders, that ruggedly handsome face of his, that strangely masculine yoke he always wore. Then, of course, there was Doctor Whooves; he was pretty cute, too. That mane of his... Spike couldn't help but imagine his claws running through that silky- *\*SMACK\** Spike's head shot forward, crushing the ruby with the force of the blow. *What in the hay was I just thinking about?!* Shaking his head, he decided that sleep was probably more important than

what he ate right now. Grabbing a fistful of gems, he gulped them down before curling up to sleep in a pile of gold.

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Twilight sat on the floor reading a book about dragonic magic. At least, that was her plan. For some reason, even back to her old self, she couldn't concentrate on anything. Often, she found herself skipping ahead and ignoring whole parts altogether, continually having to backtrack to try and understand what she'd been reading. After the fifth time trying to read the same paragraph, she let out a scream of frustration, and kicking the book across the burnt and scratched floor of her precious library.

"Somethin' wrong, sugarcube?" Applejack asked, looking at her with concern.

"I can't seem to concentrate on anything today. It's just getting frustrating now."

"Perhaps, my dear, you could stand to eat something. Unless I'm very much mistaken, you haven't eaten since we got back from Zecora's. Last I checked, your kitchen survived unharmed; why not go ahead and get something for yourself?" As if on cue, Twilight's stomach let out a low rumble. Smiling sheepishly, she headed off to the kitchen to get herself a bite to eat.

Once Twilight was out of earshot, Applejack turned to Rarity, shaking her head.

"I AM glad ta see the ol' gal back to her ol' self, make no mistake, but she's pushin' herself awfully hard. I don't rightly even know what it is we're all lookin' fer. I mean, Twi says we can get through to Spike so what exactly is there to read up on? We need ta take action, how're we gonna do anythin' sitting around here?"

“Oh, you know our Twilight. She is simply making sure that she has everything she might need. I *am* assuming that, since she has us all looking through old dragon spellbooks, she is looking for a way to reverse what was done to Spike.”

“Ah guess that makes sense.” Applejack sounded rather unconvinced. “I kinda wish Pinkie Pie was here, she always had a knack fer finding what we need.”

“Indeed. But I dare you to try saying no to Pinkie when she gives you those sad eyes of hers.”

“It is p...pretty difficult.” Rarity gave Fluttershy a sympathetic smile, knowing full well she was often the one to deal with Pinkie’s dreaded puppy dog eyes. Once Twilight’s explanation of what happened to Spike had come to an end, whatever sense of propriety had been keeping Pinkie quiet and calm wore off, and she had once again become a bouncing hyperactive ball of limitless happiness and excitement, insisting that she go make Spike’s favorite dessert in preparation for there eventual confrontation with him. She had also mentioned whipping up some of her famous “get better soon” cup cakes for Dash, which she insisted would help the healing process because they are ‘filled with pony magic’, whatever that meant.

“GAH!!!!” The three friends whirled around, shooting into the kitchen as quick as they could at the sound of Twilight’s pained scream. Upon reaching the kitchen, they saw her slumped on the floor clutching her jaw, a small bag of quartz sat on the table.

“Um...Twilight, dear, you, uh... you didn’t just try to eat a *gemstone*, did you?” Rarity knew how Twilight missed Spike. She had once heard that some ponies began absentmindedly picking up the habits of missing friends or relatives, subconsciously trying to fill the void they left behind, but

this is just plain silly. Surely she must have known she couldn't possible eat a *rock*. Twilight gave a small, almost ashamed nod of her head.

"Now why would ya'll go and do a darn silly thing like that for?"

"I know, Applejack. I honestly don't know what came over me. I was hungry and looking for food, and I saw the bag of gems, and I just... had a craving. I can't really say what happened. I wasn't thinking, I guess." Rarity walked over to Twilight.

"Open wide."

"But-

"Open."

Reluctantly, Twilight opened her mouth so that Rarity could peer inside.

"It's alright now. Luckily I didn't bite down too hard. It was mostly just shock." At least, that's what she intended to say. It came out more like "Auph mmph muphuh muh, muh muhayah huh."

"That's nice, dear." Stepping back, Rarity gave her less than professional opinion.

"I, for one, am not really the pony with the most expertise here. Fluttershy, would you be a dear and take a look?"

"Oh, of course!" Fluttershy slipped between Rarity and Twilight, inspecting Twilight's mouth rather thoroughly. As she did so, Twilight happened to notice that Rarity and Applejack had moved across the kitchen to have a word in private. As Fluttershy went about her work, Twilight couldn't help but let her eyes wander over Rarity's perfect form. She couldn't help but understand what the local colts saw in her, there was just so much about her that was just... *perfect*. Her hair, her legs, the elegant curve of her back, her perfectly proportioned flank coupled with that dazzling cutie mark... Twilight began to long for her to turn around, just so she could get lost in

those beautiful blue eyes... When Rarity finally did turn, her heart began to race as their eyes met.

“Twilight, my dear, let’s get you some proper food, and then its off to bed with you, alright? You can stay with me, seeing as the library happens to be... less than habitable at the moment. I have a spare room you can use, we just need to clean it out first. I’ve been using it as a supply closet.” Her voice was like the sound of a hundred beautiful birds singing the most amazing ballad ever written. No, it was ten times better then that, a hundred times better!

“amythin fur yuh, muh tweet ahrity” Rarity gave Twilight a confused look. Fluttershy was still busy inspecting her mouth, and her speech was quite unintelligible.

“I beg your pardon?” Fluttershy finished her inspection and gave her seal of approval; nothing had been damaged. With her mouth free, Twilight was about to repeat herself but stopped when she realized what exactly it was she had just said, and the thoughts that had accompanied it regarding Rarity. Twilight’s eyes shot wide as her cheeks turned a vibrant shade of red. “Anything the matter, dear? You look as though you’ve seen a ghost.”

“NOTHING!....um, sorry, uh, no, nothing! Nothing’s wrong! I uh, I’m just tired! Yeah, that’s it, tired!” Twilight mimed a yawn. “ I said ‘anything for you, my good friend Rarity’. Now, come on. Let’s get some proper pony food and then head to Carousel Boutique for some rest.” Twilight finished with a large and admittedly rather creepy smile.

“Uh, alrighty then, sounds good. I’ll just go rustle up some grub fer us and meet y’all at Rarity’s.” Applejack turned and left the library, giving the burned library one last concerned glance before running off.

Twilight began pacing in circles, trying to figure out what the hay had just happened to her, why she'd thought what she had. Had she always been a fillyfooler and just didn't know it? No, no, that didn't make sense. She liked colts, she always had. She KNEW she did. Didn't she? How many afternoons had she gone over to Sweet Apple Acres and pretended to read a book in the shade, just so she could watch Big Mac and those broad shoulders of his as he worked?

"Shall we head out, Twilight?" Rarity's question brought Twilight out of her trance and caused the blush to return.

"YES, LET US HEAD OUT!" Twilight dashed past Rarity and began collecting books. In no time at all, she and her friends were off to Carousel Boutique. Rarity was rather happy her friend wasn't fighting her, trying to avoid food and sleep, as it was rather clear she was not feeling well and needed plenty of both.

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Twilight sat in bed, feeling much more focused then she had earlier. The break from reading and the lovely dinner provided by Applejack had obviously helped. The bed in Rarity's spare room was quite comfortable, and the room itself had a cozy feel to it, even with all the dress making supplies piled up against one wall (organized by colour, size and frequency of use, of course). Now that she had her headspace back, she could finally concentrate. She'd found a very useful book in the library, and had almost read the entire thing. Most of it was, truth be told, rather shocking, and one part in particular made her want to cry when she realized the implications it held for Spike. Unfortunately, there was nothing on how to reverse the spell. She shook her head. *Nothing yet. I WILL find it, it's just a matter of time.* Just as she was finishing up the last few pages of the book, there came a soft knock on the door.

"Come in, Fluttershy." she said as loudly as she dared, knowing that Rarity had put Sweetie Belle to bed some time ago before heading to bed herself. The door slowly creaked open and the yellow pegasus poked her head in.

"How did you know it was me?"

"Lucky guess. What can I help you with?" Fluttershy came the rest of the way in and, closing the door, stood there silently. She was obviously trying to work up the courage, finding the best words to broach the subject. Twilight knew exactly why she was here, and precisely what she was here to talk about. She'd been hoping this conversation would be put off until much later. Actually, she'd been hoping to put it off forever, but Fluttershy obviously wouldn't let that happen. "I'm guessing you want to talk to me about... what happened in the bog." Fluttershy nodded slowly.

"It was really... surprising. I never really thought you were capable of doing... something like that. I never thought you would ever consider taking that route. I have to say, I really didn't understand what you were talking about most of the time, either. You... you just weren't making sense."

Twilight sighed, nodded her head. She could see how, from Fluttershy's perspective, what she had done and the things that she'd said would have been rather confusing.

"I suppose it's only fair I give you an explanation. Thinking back, I honestly don't know why I was like that. I've always been good at keeping my feelings inside and handling them by myself, but ever since Spike... I've just had a difficult time dealing with anything."

"What do you mean? What feelings? That is, if you don't mind sharing..."



"I don't mind at all. In fact, it really is about time I talked to someone, I think. Do you remember my cutie mark story? How I went to the Summer Sun Celebration and was inspired by the Princess?" Fluttershy nodded. "Before that day, I was... Well, for lack of a better term, a screw up. Look, this is a rather long story. Why don't you come and join me? Come on, have a seat." Fluttershy joined Twilight on the bed and draped a wing over her friend. "Thanks. Look, I know you probably think I'm exaggerating, but it's true. I was a complete failure. My magic skills were worse than terrible. I could barely pull off the simplest of spells, and when I tried, the results were usually...unpleasant, to say the least. I always did poorly in school, and the sole reason I never got held back was that no teacher ever wanted to deal with me for a second year. I was really clumsy, too. I always seemed to be getting into accidents. I'd find myself constantly spacing out, just staring off into the distance. If you combine all of that, it's no wonder I didn't have any friends. All the other ponies in my class avoided me. They all thought I was *\*special\**, and not in a good way."

"But you're nothing like that now. You've got plenty of friends, everypony likes you, and you're the smartest pony I've ever met! Well, I mean, you DO tend to space out sometimes and... sorry."

Twilight giggled.

"Don't be. It's true, I do still do that. Only, now my eyes don't glaze over and I don't make funny faces anymore." Fluttershy tried to hold back a giggle. "Okay, so sometimes I still make funny faces. Anyway, me being a screw up all the time led me to become rather depressed. My mother wanted to take me to a psychologist, but my father convinced her to try something else first. Instead, they took me to go see Princess Celestia raise the sun, and that's basically when everything turned around for me. I was so taken aback by the beauty and power of it all, of what magic could do, it spurred me into action. I completely overhauled my life. You know most of the story from there."

"But... I don't understand, why would you like that as a filly?"

"I was... preoccupied. I was always thinking about something, trying to figure it out. To be honest, I wasn't that different when I was younger, but something that happened basically made me put my life on hold. I was so busy thinking about it, I just stopped caring about everything else. Because I stopped caring, things started to go downhill, and that made me more depressed, which made me care even less. It was like I was digging myself deeper and deeper."

"What were you so preoccupied with? What could've been so important that it could just destroy your life like that?" Twilight turned her head, looking Fluttershy in the eyes.

"I used to have a friend. Yes, \*A\* friend. Just one. Even back then, I was often too busy reading to socialize with anypony. She would often come to my house and force me to go outside and play a game with her and the other ponies our age. I can honestly say that, if it wasn't for her, I would have spent my entire childhood indoors, buried in books. We were friends for about three years when it happened." Fluttershy was silent, but nodded her head, signalling her to continue.

"Her family life began to... degrade. Her parents argued all the time, which led to her becoming a very angry little filly. She got in trouble at school all the time, and began to turn into something of a bully. She was always nice to me, though. We shared everything; our hopes, our dreams, what colts we liked... She began to stay at my house more and more often, just to get away from home. This went on for several months until her parents decided that they simply couldn't do it anymore. They decided to get a divorce. It was a really tough time for Shadow Dancer, dealing with her parents, being forced to go to court so many times, just so her parents could fight over who got what, and which one of them would be allowed to keep her. In the end, she went with her father. This meant that she had to move, from Canterlot to Fillydelphia. Before she left, we met up for the last time. There really wasn't much to say, it was a bit awkward. When I finally got the nerve

to speak up she interrupted me..." Twilight turned away, lowering her head to rest on the mattress.

"She yelled at me. She'd never yelled at me before. She told me it was all my fault, and she ran off. That was the last I ever saw of her. It wasn't until I saw the Princess raise the sun and put my life back in order that I was able to understand. She was angry. That's all she was, just angry, sad and hurt. She needed someone to blame. But, at the time, I believed her. She was my best friend, and I just couldn't fathom her being that angry with me unless I really did something so horrible to her. For two years, I dug myself into a hole. I honestly thought I had ruined her life. I just wallowed in depression, trying to figure out exactly how I caused what happened to her family. I have long since come to terms with how I felt, though. It took me two years to get over it. While it saddens me to think I let myself live like that for so long, I never let it get me down. Knowing I was past that part of my life, all I could do now was just make sure I never let it happen again... but..." She closed her eyes, lost for words. Fluttershy nuzzled her affectionately. "But when all this happened... I just can't explain it. It was like everything I had done, all the progress I'd made in all the years since then was just gone, and all those old feelings came back and just... I blamed myself for what happened to Spike, just like I blamed myself for what happened to Shadow Dancer, and all those feelings of just being useless, of being worthless, of being nothing, being LESS than nothing, of everything I touched just turning to failure... It was just too much to bear. I... I just had to end it, somehow. Fluttershy, I... I c- I can't possibly thank you enough for helping me. If it wasn't for you and Pinkie Pie I don't think I would have gotten better. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't... I wouldn't be alive right now. Thank you." Fluttershy blushed.

"It was nothing..." Twilight stopped her.

"It was NOT nothing. What you did for me... I do know how I'll pay you back, though. While I still know that it's my fault this happened to Spike, I am NOT going to let that hold me back. I am going to get my Spike back. I am going to get OUR Spike back." The two shared a long silence.

"Thank you for sharing your story, Twilight Sparkle."

“You don’t need to thank me. You’re my friend and I owed you an explanation.”

“But, that really sorta didn’t...”

“Pardon?”

“Um... well, that sorta, I mean, it didn’t really explain... um, anything... nevermind... forget I said anything.”

“What do you mean it didn’t explain anything? Come on, Fluttershy, you can tell me.”

“Well its just... You said yourself that you’ve made peace with your past. And while this whole incident with Spike is really big, I just can’t see it causing you to act how you did.” Twilight paused, considering.

“I see what you’re saying. I guess what with my being so worked up and worried about Spike, I just let whatever mental barriers I’d built up-” Twilight froze.

“What? What’s wrong, Twilight?”

“It... it wasn’t as if. It WAS!”

“Pardon?” Twilight wheeled to face her, eyes wide with excitement.

“That’s what happened! It was exactly like the mental barriers I’d built up over the years were destroyed! I’ve coped with those feelings all my life, and yet only now they hit me like a ton of bricks!”

“But... I don’t understand... How could that have happened? Actually, it sort of sounds like the spell that was cast on Spike. It sounds exactly like that, actually.” Twilight hopped out of bed and began to pace. Her mental barriers had been removed; it’s the only explanation that made sense. But how could that have happened? It was as if the spell cast on Spike had...

“leaked over to me...” Twilight stopped her pacing and faced Fluttershy. “I think we may have more hope for Spike then I originally thought.”

“Why is that?”

“A bond. We share a link, a magical one. That has to be it! It must’ve been created when I hatched him from his egg. This explains so much! My moods, my mental barriers, my brief but serious attraction to Rarity-”

“...What?” Realizing what she’d just said, Twilight blushed.

“Uh... please forget I just said that.” Fluttershy’s own face turned a little red as she nodded. “Thanks, I \*REALLY\* appreciate it. Anyways, as I said, there is a link between the two of us. It’s been extending the effects of the spell to me, as well as Spike’s moods and emotions, probably because the barriers we’ve subconsciously built up to prevent our thoughts being shared have broken down. This explains SO MUCH. If I’m right about this link and I can safely say I am, then that means some of my emotions and feelings are leaking over to Spike. And that means....” Twilight began to bounce happily in place, reminiscent of a certain pink party pony.

“If you’re not angry when we find him, he won’t be?”

“Not just that. You and Pinkie Pie helped me to rebuild my mental barriers, which means there is a very good chance that some of that control leaked over to Spike. That would have helped him repair some of his, too! Things are looking up even more now. We have a great chance of getting through to him!” Twilight continued bouncing, ecstatic. Fluttershy sat on the bed and smiled. Not only was Twilight back to her old self, it looked like the odds of saving their friend had just improved greatly.

“That is amazing news, my dear, now why don’t you stop jumping around and get to bed so we are all well rested in the morning?” Twilight whirled around, startled, to see Rarity at the door.

“Oh, sorry about that, Rarity. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Not a problem, dear. I understand you’re happy. I heard most of what you’d said and am overjoyed that our odds have improved. Now will you *please* go to bed? As for you, Fluttershy, I won’t have you making your way home alone so late at night. If Twilight doesn’t mind, why don’t you two share the room?”

“I don’t mind if Fluttershy doesn’t.”

“Oh thank you for your hospitality, Rarity. The bed is large enough; I think we can share it just fine. And sorry for waking you.” Rarity gave a small smile left the room, closing the door behind her. Fluttershy got off the bed and prepared the covers for sleeping, placing the book Twilight had been reading on the night stand. Twilight turned off the lights and, climbing into bed, contemplated saying something. At first, she felt she should, but eventually opted not to.

“Thank you for sharing your story, Twilight. I know that must have been hard for you, and I promise I won’t tell it to anyone else.”

“No, Fluttershy, thank you for listening. And for saving me from myself.”

“Anytime.” Twilight turned on her side and, closing her eyes, she began to fall asleep. Just as she felt the gentle embrace of rest coming to her, a voice from directly next to her caused her to bolt upright.

“I *am* sorry to barge in on you again, girls, but I just had to ask. Did I hear you correctly when I head you say you where attracted to me?” Twilight’s eyes bugged out of her head as she stared at the shadow she assumed was Rarity.

“Uh, nope! No, I didn’t say anything of the sort, you must have misheard.” Twilight held her breath, waiting for the shadow to move.

“I’ll take your word for it. I don’t know what made me think you said that. So sorry to disturb you, sweet dreams.” Twilight could’ve sworn she saw her smile just before she left, but couldn’t be sure. Lying down again, Twilight sighed, praying that she wouldn’t press the matter further. As she began to fall asleep, she caught sight of the book she’d been reading. The memory of a certain passage leaped out at her, ruining her previous good mood. *I’m confident we can save Spike from his madness... but can we save him from the consequences of the spell?*

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*unmatched by even Pinkie Pie on her happiest day. He wanted to scream out to her, to call her name, but found himself unable to talk. Twilight eventually arrived, towering over him, twice as big as she normally was. She leaned down close to his ear. Spike could feel tears in his eyes. She was going to take him back, he knew it! He would be her number one assistant again, he could go home! He closed his eyes as she whispered into his ear.*

*“Kill...”*

# Chapter 15

## To War

A mighty roar sounded through the heavens, rebounding off the icy northland peaks, as the order to charge was given. A determined draconic battalion a hundred strong, beat their wings furiously, closing on their enemy with reckless abandon. The mountains rumbled and shook, the ground quaking under the charging talons of the wingless troops keeping pace with their winged kin above. The valley was bathed in flame, trees and grass washed away like shells before a mighty tide. Thick, black smoke permeated the air, roiling up in massive clouds, robbing the fighters of much needed oxygen but providing cover. Even to the mighty wardrakes, used to fighting in such conditions, it was difficult to handle. Their target, the mountain their enemy had claimed for their own, loomed before them. Storming the bulwark, they rained fire upon the mountain, the combined heat of a hundred throats so great the very rock melted, slag oozing down the sides in a glowing heap of pure unfathomable fiery destruction. The dragons continued their assault, either not noticing or not caring that the thick smoke in the air hid the very enemy they challenged. Attention fully on their assault, none were prepared for the retaliatory strike. Outflanking the attackers, two hundred armoured dragons burst through the haze, tearing through those who had been foolish enough to take the bait of an undefended mountain fortress. The comparatively small force, expecting nothing less, turned on the flanking behemoths and roared their challenge, prepared to sell their lives dearly. Though a quarter of their number had already fallen, the remainder of the strike force prepared to charge yet again, this time into the ranks of their more experienced, better equipped foes.

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The dragon warlord was roughly knocked from his stupor as the door to his throne room burst open. Rising in anger at being disturbed, his indignation turned to confusion and then concern as the state of the dragon stumbling across the floor became apparent. The soldier was half dead, looking as

though he had been dragged to hell and back. Leaping from his perch, he landed next to the wounded dragon.

“What’s happened? Tell me, what of the fortress? What of the battle?”

Stumbling and falling heavily to a knee, the messenger coughed wetly.

“The battle is lost, we were overwhelmed. They... They were unstoppable. We can’t win. They can’t... be def...defeated...” With these words, the messenger fell, dead where he lay. Roaring in fury, the warlord lifted the messenger’s body over his head and hurled it mightily into a wall. As he prepared to further vent his fury on the corpse of the dead soldier, he was again interrupted as one of his subordinates entered the room.

“SIR! Those dirty *ragno-calak* have attacked the eastern encampment on Fire Jewel Mountain. We can not afford to lose that base. What are your orders?” the warlord let loose a torrent of flame, further burning the already scorched ceiling. Those thrice damned traitors had caused him nothing but problems since the start of this war. It was supposed to be a simple takeover, a quick overthrow of a neighbouring kingdom. However, it turned out that many of his subjects subscribed to the theory that war doesn’t determine who is right, but who is left, and chose to defect to the defending nation. He fumed at the indignity of it. His great assault, the full might of his armies, had insofar amounted to absolutely nothing. Not only had they been unable to overtake his enemies, but they had actually been pushed back beyond his own borders. He was on the defensive! How? HOW COULD THIS HAPPEN?! Nothing seemed to help. No matter how well armed his troops were, or any advantages in numbers. As it stood, right now his men had lost well over 85 percent of all the battles they have engaged in. That eastern encampment was indeed very important, but the only men he could spare was the personal retainer he kept at his side at all times. If they were sent into battle, there was no doubt that the enemy would take full advantage of the situation, and the outcome would be dismal.

“Sir, we *really should* do something about those traitorous *garlin-nax* scu-!”

At that moment, the stunned subordinate discovered that it was, in fact rather hard to discuss battle strategy with a hole in you. The subordinate crumpled to the ground in a heap as the warlord withdrew his scaly fist, snarling in fury.

“Temper, temper, my dear Orthanx”. The voice emanating from behind him seemed to chill the very air around him, smug amusement dripping from

the words, freezing in midair to shatter against the floor. The warlord whirled, ready to kill whomever had dared to address him so. Freezing in place, he took in the dragon that stood before him. A monster among monsters, the great dragon was far taller and broader than he. His eyes sparked unnaturally, the blue tinge of mystical energy crackling and snapping between his spines marking him as a warlock. A large scar wrapped around his muzzle like a snake, however, gave away the identity of the icy beast in a heartbeat.

“Frozen Claw of the White Wastes. You taint my halls with your presence, malefactor. What brings you here? Speak quickly, and watch your tongue or I will *tear your head off and piss in your gaping neck cavity*” A plume of icy mist shot out of the ice dragons nose as he snorted out a laugh.

“Save your bravado for one of your subordinates. We both know it would take nothing less then the combined efforts of- well, *what’s left* of your army to even come close to truly challenging me.” The warlord scowled, knowing full well the warlock was right.

“What do you want *ice-tapper*?” The warlock furrowed his brows. The racial epithet was not entirely called for at this juncture.

“Watch your words, *flame-licker*, you may regret angering me once you discover my purpose here.” In a unique feat of quantum mechanics and precise biological engineering the result of hundreds of thousands of years of evolution, the warlord managed to deepen his scowl even more without his face collapsing in on itself. The last dragon to call him that had found himself plummeting wingless into a volcano. Unfortunately, he would quite simply have to sit there and take it.

“Speak your piece, then.” The warlock smiled.

“Smart little hatchling aren't we?” Orthanax's claws dug into his palms, piercing the thick scales and drawing blood. The warlock smiled sardonically at this “I have come to offer my assistance. The fact of the matter is, quite simply, your current enemy is in possession of something I want. I would simply take it myself, but even I am no match for an entire army, ten thousand strong. So, basically, you just need to let me help you help me help us both. I help you win your war and defeat your enemies, and you help clear a path to my... item. Sound fair?”

“How, exactly do you expect to help us? You just said yourself that even you can not take on an entire army and win. Regardless of that, even if, *IF*, we could defeat these blasted traitors, we are far and away outnumbered. So, unless you have brought with you several thousand warriors, I don’t quite see how you can possibly lend us any kind of aid.” The warlock’s smile froze the air to an extent that even his frigid breath had failed.

“My dear Orthanx... It’s simply a matter of how far you are willing to go”

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“HeeheehehehehAHAHAHAHAHAHA!” The warlord’s laugh, teetering on the edge between glee and insanity, echoed across the battle field as the traitorous dragons fled for their lives. With the warlock’s ‘help’, the warlord’s forces had managed to gain the upper hand in the conflict in less than a week, and had managed to push back the enemy forces well across the border. After today he would finally be able to take his armies into the neighbouring kingdom. “My dear warlock, heeheehee, you have truly done me a great turn. Look! Look at that!” Orthanx gestured wide, indicating the battlefield, the once pristine field now littered with corpses. “We WILL win this war, and we WILL take this kingdom! You can have your precious trinket, my friend, as well as one tenth of spoils of war. HAHAHAHA!” The ice dragon smiled.

“A most generous offer, my friend. However, now that you and I are on... better terms, you may call me Baradur.” Orthanx laughed again, clapping him on the shoulder.

“Is that your true name?” Another smile.

“No.”

“For what you have given me, I would call you no less than KING, if I did not already serve one.” Orthanx laughed again but stopped half way. Some of the ‘special’ troops created for him had turned on one another, attacking each other in a blind rage. With a snarl, Orthanx began barking orders, to no avail.

“As I have already said, my friend, they cannot understand a word you say. Their madness has seen to that. That is one of three negative effects of this spell. I will take care of it.” With a word, he instantly halted their scrap.

Exchanging a dirty look, the two troopers broke off from each other, and began to feed on the corpses of the fallen.

“Yes, I do recall you mentioning that little fact.” Orthanax spat bitterly.

“Why so glum, my friend?”

“I am not quite fond of this setup. The fact of the matter is, you are the only one able to control them. So long as I had control over you, I would not mind, but I obviously do not. What is there to stop you from simply turning your soldiers on me? For, in reality, they are YOUR soldiers, not mine.” Orthanax was glaring daggers at the frozen beast, his good mood obviously soured. The ice dragon regarded the situation for a moment before he spoke.

“You don’t. But, as I have said, I want but a simple trinket which I am unable to retrieve myself. I have little interest in ruling another kingdom, as I already essentially rule two myself. From the shadows, it’s true, but you know what they say: ‘the hidden hand strikes hardest’. I can assure you the gold and jewels and whatnot that I could steal from you with such a betrayal hold no interest to me. To be perfectly honest, the only thing ensuring that I will not turn on you is the fact that I quite simply don’t care enough to.” The warlord stared at the warlock for some time before turning and walking away, a small laugh escaping his mouth.

“Never thought I would be glad to be insignificant enough that you wouldn’t want to stab me in the back.” He paused, turning back towards the warlock. “After all is said and done, is there any way for you to turn control of the madlings over to me?” He nodded.

“It can be done, and seeing as they are, in fact, your peoples’ children, I have absolutely no need of them. I would be more than happy to do so when the time comes.” Orthanax nodded his head and began to walk away again, only to once again stop and address the warlock.

“Baradur... you mentioned there are three negative effects... What, exactly, are we talking about here?”

“Well, the loss of innocence is the most obvious, seeing as that is a core focus of the spell. The second, as I have said, is the inability to understand

or focus on anyone or anything that isn't the original caster or their own madness."

"And the third?" The ice dragon smiled one of his icy smiles.

"The third negative effect is purposefully added in order to deal with any madlings that get loose."

"And that is?"

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Baradur struggled against the chains that bound his form. He was strong, incredibly so, but these chains were magically reinforced. Powerful magic. He could break them, sure, but the effort required would exhaust him, both physically and magically, leaving him vulnerable. In his current state, and with so many armoured guards at the ready to kill him, he doubted he could pull off an escape.

Yet.

He craned his neck, examining the limp form to his right. Orthanax, now headless, was lying in an ever expanding pool of spreading darkness. He had been executed immediately following his trial. The introductions, presentation of evidence, deliberations and sentencing had, all in all, taken approximately ten minutes. Baradur doubted he would last any longer than that. Dragons were not known for their patience.

"Frozen Claw of the White Wastes." The raspy voice of the dragon king before whom he was chained echoed through the chamber. The icy warlock neither raised his head nor acknowledged that he had heard his title. "I have heard many stories about you. A great many. Since you refuse to speak, we cannot ascertain exactly *why* you assisted in the war against my kingdom, though I think I can guess. I believe" he said, digging into a small bag at his side "you were after this" Raising his head, he saw the exact artifact he had been seeking, a small but intricately carved puzzle box. He growled, the item he sought so close but still unattainable. "From what I understand, you rule both the kingdom of Firewrath, as well as the kingdom of Stone Helm. Not overtly, of course, simply poking and prodding, little adjustments, causing events to unfold just so." The king laughed "Ruling a kingdom is difficult, ruling one from the shadows is twice as

difficult. Ruling two from the shadows? Well, I would have pegged that as downright impossible. You have proven we wrong it seems.”

Suddenly, a ten minute trial seemed far too long. “I have heard through my... *sources* that your grip on Stone Helm has begun to slacken. I bet you racked your brain for hours as to how to fix your problem, didn’t you? And when you finally came up with an answer, lo and behold, the one place that held the key to your salvation was at war, making it nearly impossible to try and steal the item, what with so many armoured guards everywhere and on high alert.” He was no longer looking, but he could feel the king’s smile, cold as his own breath. “Why didn’t you simply offer your help to my side and then steal the item after you helped me win the war and had gained my trust, hmm? No need to answer, I know why.” The chained warlock heard the king rise from where he sat and approach, the screeching sound of scales on marble echoing through the halls as the king’s colossal tail dragged across the ground. Stopping in front of the restrained warlock, he lowered his head so his mouth was level with his ear. “ You figured I would lose to those cretins.” A ball of heat surged past him as a fireball struck Orthanax’s corpse, the smell of burning flesh wafting to the rafters. Returning to his throne, the king spoke again. “Now then, captain, proceed with the trial of ‘The Frozen Claw of the White Wastes’, known as Baradur to his now deceased friend.”

“The Frozen Claw of the White Wastes, formally known as Baradur” The captain’s voice carried over the proceedings, its stiff and formal tone a contrast to what had already taken place. “You are charged with knowingly acting against the crown with intent to overthrow and commit regicide. You are charged with the murder of hundreds of crown soldiers, as well as the murder of every man, women and hatchling that perished during the razing of the town of Emerald Keep.” He rolled his eyes, waiting as the same charges brought before Orthanax were read to him. “You are also charged with attempted theft...”

*Really? They seriously tacked that one on?*

“In addition to the mutilation of five hundred hatchlings, and forcing those hatchlings to engage in open combat.”

“What do you care about enemy hatchlings?”

“Enemy or not, hatchlings are innocent, and *NOTHING* should be forced to experience what you did to them.” The captain’s tone shifted, becoming



somewhat less than professional. "The charges for these crimes is death by decapitation." At this, the warlock laughed, loud and strong.

"Decapitation? Are you *serious*? Go ahead. Try it. I DARE you. Let's see how well that goes, shall we? Not only will it not kill me, it will simply make it that much easier for me to kill you." The ice dragon laughed again, the raw, insane glee chilling the bones of his guards, even moreso than the frozen aura surrounding him.

"We are... aware of such a possibility. It pains me to say, but there lives no dragon with strength enough to kill you. Nor are we are prepared to waste more lives by pitting you against our army." The warlock smiled. He would simply be locked away. That he could handle with ease. With enough time, he would regain his strength and escape his prison with ease. He might even be able to steal the item he wanted after he broke out. His smiled deepened. "That is why we have decided..." He could hardly suppress the chuckle building within him. "To remove you and send you elsewhere to be dealt with. You will be sent to a creature that *can* kill you." His smile vanished, his eyes shooting wide. "We have already spoken to her and asked her for her assistance, and she has agreed to take care of you. She knows of your deeds and, like us, feels that death, while too good for you, is necessary." Baradur was furious now.

"How *dare* you! How *DARE* you assume there is some creature out there powerful enough to kill me! It would take nothing less than *the full force of a GOD* to kill me."

"That is why..." The furious ice dragon turned his attention to the king "A god is who we asked."

# Chapter 16

## No Tomorrow

As the first silvery rays of the summer moon leaked into the cave, the great green dragon's eyes flicked open as he rose from slumber. Letting out a powerful yawn, he rolled in his glistening bed of gold and gems, sending waves of treasure cascading down the mound. As he rose, shaking the last vestiges of sleep from his head, he discovered that he was, in fact, being watched. No less than five feet away stood Spike, the young dragon looking almost feral. His eyes, wild and wide, danced with green flame as his slaving jaws snapped at nothing. Delicraw growled in displeasure. It seemed that the full force of the spell was sinking in, shrieking messages of death and destruction into the purple dragon's mind.

Had Delicraw not been the one to cast the spell, and, as a result, bonded to him, he may very well have attacked him, size difference be damned. The feedback loop between the urge to kill and the magical protection bestowed on his master had all but shut down his brain. In all likelihood, he had been standing there for several hours, at the very least.

**“Go to sleep, you mad fool.”** A given order snapping him out of his trance, Spike retreated to a corner of the cave and, within seconds, filled the cave with the sound of echoing snores. Delicraw frowned. He couldn't actually order him asleep, so that meant that the young dragon must have been absolutely exhausted. That wasn't good. He needed him well rested and able for what he had in mind. Rising from his mound, the great green dragon stretched, sickening cracks mingling with the sound of snores as he worked out the kinks in his spine. In no particular hurry, he decided it would be wise to let the boy sleep for a few hours. He had his own work to do, and Spike's nap would give him ample time to prepare. Leaving the cave, the dragon spread his great wings, before thinking better of it and beginning to walk. He hated not being allowed to fly, but there wasn't much he could do about it. Yet.

After close to an hour, even with his great walking speed, he arrived at his destination. The great rock face, at least eighty feet tall and more

than two hundred long, was as perfect for his intended purpose as the first day he had found it, over 300 years ago. The ravages of time had taken their toll, foliage and ivy overtaking the cliff, and sizable cracks had spread through the rock wall. Nothing that would truly impede him, truth be told, but he wanted everything to be absolutely perfect. He was taking no chances. Taking a mighty breath, he unleashed a torrent of flame at the stone. Vines and creepers were incinerated before the onslaught. As he continued the infernal barrage, even the stone beneath began to melt and slide, running down to the ground. As he finally relented, he stood back to admire his handiwork; the wall was now glassy and completely smooth, the night air cooling it to a dull shine. It was as good as the naturally formed wall was going to get, and would serve his purposes just fine. Turning, he began the trek back to the cave. The great dragon could barely contain his glee. Everything was going according to plan. Chuckling, the great beast actually began to sing to himself, the ancient language of the dragons leaving his mouth for the first time in almost a millennium. In truth, none in Equestria beyond the princesses themselves and possibly some of the most learned scholars in Canterlot universities could understand him. Realizing this, he chuckled to himself again, before switching to a more modern language. It just seemed wrong to him that the ancient words would be lost on any who might overhear him. It didn't quite translate properly, but he didn't particularly care at the moment.

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"Twilight."

The pony in question groaned, pulling the blankets closer to herself.

"It's late, Fluttershy. Go back to sleep, we have a busy day ahead of us."

"I'm afraid, my dear Twilight Sparkle, that sleep will have to wait." Who was that? It definitely wasn't Fluttershy, of that she was sure. The voice was so... elegant, and cultured... It must be Rarity, she realized, although what she needed this late at night Twilight couldn't fathom.

"And why might that be, Rarity?"

"As I'm sure you're aware, there is a dragon on the loose. It has already attacked Ponyville once. We need to look into this right away."

"Rarity, that's what we're doing tomorrow."

"This cannot wait until tomorrow, my little pony. You must wake up and tell me everything. On a side note, while I *am* glad that you are finally being as informal as I've asked you to be, I would appreciate if you called me by my name." Far too tired to fully comprehend what she was hearing, Twilight pulled the pillow over her head.

"And that would be?"

"Well, while my sister likes to call me Celly, I would prefer it if you called me Celestia." If the princess hadn't been as familiar with her student's magic as she was, she would have thought that Twilight had teleported out of bed. In a microsecond, Twilight was on her feet, bowing low before the ruler of Equestria.

"P-P-PRINCESS! HELLO! What are you doing here?! No, I'm sorry, that was rude! Uh, How can I help you??"

"You can start by standing up." Twilight shook visibly. "What's the matter, Twilight?"

"I...I don't think I can."

"I'm sorry, Twilight, but we do not have time for this right now. I need you to straighten up this instant." Physically incapable of resisting a direct order from the Princess, Twilight bolted upright. "And don't bother apologizing; we don't have the time. Fluttershy and Rarity are already downstairs with Luna making preparations. I have already received as much information from them as I could, but I need to hear what you have to say." Twilight swallowed. Here was the moment she had been both waiting for and dreading these past few weeks. Twilight opened her mouth, took a deep breath and proceeded to tell her everything. She told her about Spike running away, about the spell that she believed has been cast on him, of the dragon she thought responsible. She told her of how lonely Spike must have felt, and even of her mental breakdown and subsequent suicide attempt. She explained her theory on how it was caused by her link to Spike, but the look of horror and disappointment on her mentor's face still hit her like a buck in the gut.

"I believe that you are correct, Twilight. You do, indeed, share a link with Spike, and that is probably what caused your... *episode*. We will have time to speak of this later, and I strongly insist we do. For now, however, I need

you and your friends to guide me to the cave to which you tracked the dragons.” Twilight nodded shyly, her eyes fixed to what seemed to her to be an incredibly interesting floorboard. Moving to the stairs, they descended to a waiting cluster of ponies. Princess Luna, flanked by two royal guards, along with the assembled Elements of Harmony. With a nod, the group departed Carousel Boutique, running as fast as they could through the damaged town.

As they ran through town, ponies stopped what they were doing and bowed in deference to their rulers. There were an unusual number of ponies, far more than would normally be about at this hour. Then, Twilight realized exactly who they were. They were royal guards, carpenters, masons and other various tradesponies, and they were everywhere. There were piles of raw materials, stone and wood and steel, scattered about. Celestia had come through for her subjects. Now, not only was Ponyville protected, it was well on its way to recovery.

As they ran through the twisting, turning paths of the Everfree Forest, Twilight could feel Celestia’s eyes on her. Magical bond or not, Twilight had tried to kill herself, and it was clear that the Princess was rather upset about it, to put it mildly. Twilight could tell that Celestia wanted to talk about it with her, it was just that there was simply no time. The ten of them arrived at the cave in record time, and, after the guards quickly searched the cave and confirmed it empty, the party headed inside. As the princesses darted towards the piles of treasure, the six friends hung back at the entrance with the guards. They seemed to be searching for a book, as they were separating them from the piles and, after giving them a quick scan, setting them to the side. Not wanting to feel useless, Twilight began sorting through the treasure as well, placing any books she found in a pile off to the side. With the exception of the guards, who were keeping watch at the entrance, everypony else began to follow suit. Fluttershy and Rarity began sorting the books that Celestia and Luna had already examined, while the other four assisted in locating books. By the time they found the specific tome they had been searching for, there were at least seventy books neatly piled in stacks around the cave. Twilight made a mental note to return and collect them, finding it hard to resist simply running over to the pile and reading them that very moment.

As Celestia read, Luna flitted about impatiently, examining piles of treasure at random. The six friends, now standing patiently in a semicircle in front of Celestia, waited with bated breath. When their princess finally put the book

down, her expression was one of true sorrow. Luna, landing beside her sister, whispered something in her ear, obviously confirming whatever Celestia had already figured out, for her expression somehow became even sadder. Twilight stepped forward and, after a polite bow, spoke.

“Princess, I can’t help but feel that there is even more going on here than we all originally thought. Which I must say is pretty scary, considering all that has happened so far.” Her beloved mentor and goddess nodded; a small nod. Luna placed a foreleg around her sister as the sun goddess began to cry. “Princess! Are you alright? What’s wrong?!” Celestia did not answer immediately. She simply sat there, wrapped in her sister’s embrace, for about a minute before composing herself and answering.

“It seems as though my kindness has returned to hurt me.” The six friends looked on in what could only be described as pure confusion. They truly wanted answers, but when their princess, their *GODDESS*, began to cry again, their own curiosities were immediately banished. Throwing protocol and propriety to the wind, the six ponies joined Luna in hugging and comforting Celestia. The goddess spread her wings, enveloping her sister and subjects, no, her *friends*, returning their much needed comfort.

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Spike awoke with a sudden start. Although only an hour previously he had been absolutely exhausted, he was now fully awake and alert. He was also, for reasons he couldn’t quite fathom, rather embarrassed. Yawning mightily, Spike surveyed the interior of the cave. Although Delicraw was nowhere to be seen, both his strong sense of smell and the bond they shared told him that his master was nearby. Leaving the cave, he spread his wings and launched himself into the air, searching for his master. The night air was cool, and, with all but the nocturnal inhabitants of the Everfree Forest asleep, it held an almost eerie silence. As he flew, Spike spun on his axis, raising his belly to the sky, so that he might see the stars as he flew. They were absolutely beautiful, moreso than Spike had ever seen them. While he was not particularly interested in the academic pursuit of astronomy, he would always jump at the chance to go stargazing. Even though he couldn’t really pick the stars out one by one, call them by their given names or trace the patterns that many insisted on giving them, he truly loved them, simply sitting back and admiring their ethereal beauty. Ever since the return of Princess Luna, the night sky had been so much more, almost magical, to an extent. So much so, in fact, that Spike had

actually made a point of taking a moment from each night to simply gaze upon them. In recent times, though, he'd let this habit slip. This was the first time in more than a month that he'd raised his head to the stars. It was nice, almost. The roars and shrieks of the rage burning within his brain began to recede, an ocean reaching low tide. Still present, but sinking back further towards the depths of his mind. The young dragon liked these moments. They were the simplest. They were the clearest, too. And the happiest. These were the times when he could forgive Twilight and go back to the way things used to be, the times when he actually believed the town would forgive him and welcome him back. These were the times where he could push away all the bad memories, and just wrap himself in the warmth of times gone by.

Spike's eyes lingered on the vast heavens above for some time. He was so at piece he began to fall asleep, his eyes slowly closing and his wings slowly, slowing down, his body slowly falling to the earth. It was in this state of blissful happiness, on the threshold of dreams, that the voice began to speak. The voice didn't bother him at all. In fact, he was used to them by now, although this one was different. It was female, for starters. It was warm and loving, with a hint of mischievous innocence. It was everything the voices he was used to weren't.

*"Hello, Spike"*

"Hello, starry sky." The voice laughed. It sounded like... the twinkling of a star, if that made any sense. It did to Spike.

*"That is a wonderful name; I quite like it, Spike. Thank you."*

"You're welcome, Starry Sky"

*"You've been looking at me a lot lately, haven't you?"* Spike nodded, a rather impressive trick for a dragon flying upside down. *"I appreciate that. I always thought that no creature liked me. I thought that they all thought me an inconvenience, something that stood in the way of their fun. They all ignored me, went to sleep until I left."*

The voice sounded sad now, so very sad. Spike didn't want her to be sad, he couldn't bear it. This was the beautiful night sky he was talking to! She deserved nothing more than happiness, and should be bright and sparkling, filled with ideas and dreams. He felt, though, that he needed to be honest with her.

"I... sleep through you..." he admitted.

*"But you take the time to look!"*

"Astronomers look! They all think you're really pretty."

*"They look at me for science. They see me as something to be studied and analyzed, not to be enjoyed. They miss my true beauty. I do my best to look beautiful every night, and there are very few who take notice. You are one of the few. Tell me Spike, why do you look?"*

"I look because of something she said to me once."

*"Who?"*

"She." The voice laughed again, a sparkle in the night sky.

*"I understand. Please, go on. What did she say?"*

"When I was old enough to understand what it was she was going to show me, she brought me to the tallest tower in Canterlot. At the top, there was a little balcony. When we got there, she told me that we were going to look at the stars. We had done it before, many times, so I asked her why this was special. She had a great big telescope in her room to look at stars with, so why did we need to come here? She told me *'That big telescope is good for looking at things up close, and that's nice for doing research, but...'* she stopped there, I remember that. I remember that she stopped for a long time. It seemed like hours. She told me, then, *'the night sky is more than something to be researched. I can't speak for every pony, but when I look at the night sky, I can feel, truly FEEL, the vastness of it all. Some might say it makes them feel small and insignificant, but I think it means that I'm a part of something that's just too great to put into words. The night sky... It's peace, and chaos all at once. It's a place for dreams to be born and grow into something great'* She turned and looked at me. She was sad, but she was smiling, and I could tell it was real. *'Someday you'll be far too big to be my assistant'* she said. *'During our time together, I can only hope you learn a lot from me and gain many happy memories. But, if you could only remember one thing, just one thing, remember this. You are a part of something too great to put into words and more magical than all the magic of all the ponies, dragons and Princess Celestia combined.'* We spent the whole night looking at the stars. It was... It was probably one of the most important moments in my life. Ever since then, I always made a point to look up at the night, and think back on what she told me. When I look at the



sky, I, just like her, can feel just how big it all is.. And it really does make me feel like I'm a part of something...." Spike trailed off.

*"Too great to put into words..."*

"That's right, Starry Night, that's right."

*"Thank you, Spike."*

"Everyone has the right to feel important and needed."

*"Have you ever felt similar to me?"*

"I have...yes...yes, I have."

*"What did you do about it?"*

"Terrible things."

*"Me too." There was silence for a long time. "I still feel bad about it sometimes, even though everyone has forgiven me. They say that you are truly forgiven only when you can forgive yourself."*

"I'm not sure I could ever do that."

*"Why? Is what you did truly so terrible?"* Spike nodded again. *"What did you do?"*

"I destroyed my home... And the homes of my friends... I tried to kill someone who didn't deserve it."

*"What did they do?"*

"They replaced me, and stopped loving me."

*"Are you sure?"*

"...no. And that's what makes it all worse! I've destroyed, and I've killed, and nopony there deserved any of it!"

*"I see." Silence. "You used to live in Ponyville correct?"* Spike nodded. *"I have looked upon that town recently. You are responsible for its current state?"* Spike nodded, tears forming in his eyes, running up his face to drip to the ground above him. *"Nopony died, Spike, and the damage you caused was rather minimal."*

“...What?”

*“It’s true, dear Spike. You killed nopony.”* for a long time, Spike couldn't find the words. Finally he spoke.

“Do you...do you think they can forgive me?”

*“Do you forgive her for what she did to you?”*

“Long ago.”

*“Are you truly sorry?”*

“Truly.”

*“Do you think you can forgive yourself?”*

“I’m... not sure.”

*“Then it looks as though it all falls to you.”* Spike nodded yet again.

“If you can, could you pass along a message to her?”

*“To whom?”*

“Her.” The voice laughed.

“I think she would rather hear it from you.” Spike nodded.

*“We all make mistakes, Spike. Not all of them are on such a grand scale as the ones made by you and I, but they do happen. It may take a long time for you and I to forgive ourselves. But I am willing to work towards that point, and I would like to do so along your side. Would you care to join me?”* Spike smiled.

“If I can....I would love to.” Though he could see no face, Spike could tell the Starry Night was smiling. He could feel it in his heart, and it was the most uplifting thing he had ever felt.

*“You sound as if there is no way out of this. There is always a way out, Spike, if you fight hard enough for it.”*

“Thank you, Starry Night.”

*“And thank you, my dear, sweet Spike. I must go now. But before I do, I have one last thing to say.”* Spike waited, listening patiently. *“When you*

*wake up, tuck your neck and wings in, I would hate for you to break something."*

"Huh?" Spike's eyes shot open and he realized he was falling. With barely a thought, he tucked in his wings and neck, curling into a ball. Spike crashed through the canopy of the forest and hit the earth with the force of a meteor, creating a sizable crater. Extricating himself from his curled position, he flopped out of his hole and onto the forest floor. He ached all over. Spike heard the cracking of twigs as some beast moved towards him. It was entirely possible it was something that would try to kill him, but he couldn't bring himself to move just yet. So, instead, he braced himself for whatever might pop out of the darkness. He expected a great many things, but a string of obscenities was not among them.

**"*You stupid mad lout. What is wrong with you?*"** Spike opened his eyes to find Delicraw standing over him. **"*Get on your feet and move along.*"** Climbing to his feet, he began to follow his master, who had slipped back into the shadows. As he walked, Spike stole a quick glance at the sky.

*"A part of something too great to put into words..."*

# Chapter 17

## Bargain

The clink of enchanted metal accompanied that of scale and claw on stone as the once mighty ice dragon was led to his doom. Although dragon fortresses are known for their grandeur and opulence, their dungeons are far more utilitarian than their main halls, and, as such, the room where judgement had been passed over him was less than ten seconds' walk from the chamber where he was to be dealt with. Escorted by ten of the King's personal guard, the icy beast would have been hard pressed to escape, even if he'd had the time to think of a plausible plan. As the doors swung wide, he gazed at what he surmised to be the last room he would ever see. Surrounded by an additional ten members of his elite guard, the King stood in the center of the room, accompanied by a wizened orange dragon. At a nod from the King, the orange dragon stepped forward as the room's other occupants stepped back. The back wall of the room was inset with a colossal obsidian rock face, whose edges were intricately and ornately carved with languages and pictograms a thousand years dead. Closing his eyes, the orange dragon took a deep breath. As he opened his eyes, the normal iris and sclera were gone, replaced by an unfathomable darkness. As magic coursed through his veins, his eyes, black as coal, blacker even than the wall he faced, began to literally blaze with green fire, coursing magic bursting from the sockets. With a mighty breath, he let loose with a torrent of flame the colour of crushed emeralds, unleashing all of his magical might at the wall before him. As flame met stone, the emerald fire took root as if the polished stone were centuries-dried wood. Growing, crawling, spreading outwards, the flame clawed its way across the surface. As the torrent of flame grew to touch the four corners of the great wall, the dragon ceased his flame. Stepping back, the dragon turned from the wall and bowed to his king. What had once been a solid wall of rock was now a dancing, crackling sheet of flame. Then, it began to shift and twist, swirling and spiralling, a vortex in jade. As the vortex widened, the center of the whirling mass of flame expanded into an endlessly bubbling blur of colour and light, solidifying into a solid, shimmering image;

a starkly beautiful forest clearing, the moonlight painting the ground a pale yellow. A portal.

This was it.

He could feel it, then. The magic, overpowering and entirely smothering. He could feel it as it slipped through the portal, creeping like a northland mist, winding itself around him, completely entwining him, restricting his movements and magic even more than the enchanted chains had.

Entirely immobile, both magically and physically, he was unable to resist or fight back as the chains were removed. As they were removed, the all encompassing magic lifted him into the air. Entirely unable to move, he could but listen at the sound of scales on marble as the King approached him.

“So. This is it. You are to be removed from my lands and destroyed. You have been judged. You have been sentenced. Any final words?” The resulting chuckle was colder even than his normally icy breath.

“I would not have thought you would bother giving me that honor.”

“We can not all be monsters like you.”

“This is true. As much as I wish to spout some drivel about my own immortality or how I can never be defeated, or perhaps throw out a string of obscenities, I don’t think that wise. I am no fool, great king. Powerful as I may be, I doubt I will come out of this alive. If you are truly offering me the gift of last words, then I would like to accept that gift.”

“As wise as you are mad, it seems. It is truly a shame you turned out the way you did. Someone like you, used in the right way, could have brought great change for the betterment of us all. My offer was no lie; speak your words and I will let them be heard by anyone willing to listen.” The ice dragon paused; he had never expected to die. Well, in all fairness, that wasn’t quite true. He had expected to die eventually, just not like this. He had always envisioned himself, undefeated after a hundred millennia, the only force capable of stopping him the ravages of time itself. Last words were something he never considered quite simply because he had never expected to have to say them. Opening his mouth, he paused for a moment before he began to speak his mind.

“There are those that would call me evil. I would not argue with them, for one that does evil things is most certainly evil, of that there is no doubt. I too, mighty king, saw the possibilities I could create, and wanted to make them happen. I truly wanted to make things change, for the better, but when I set out to do them, I discovered that no creature was willing to help me. I discovered that the dragons that had the power to change things for the better had no interest in doing so, simply because they would not benefit themselves. I was determined though, to cause change, but I knew that I could not bring about change by playing by the rules. I worked my way into the depths of society, the seedy, diseased underbelly, the place that held the most sway. And do you know what I found? *Do you know what I found, mighty king?*”

“Tell me”

The great dragon’s eyes narrowed, his scaly lips turning up in a snarl as the unflinching rage deep within the core of his being burst through once more.

*“I found evil.* Worse than anything you could dream up. It was then that I realized: even if I succeeded in changing things for the better, even if somehow all the evil, vile, *SCUM* that infested these lands would let me help them... They would not be worthy of it. I am evil, of that there is no doubt. I kill indiscriminately and commit atrocities on a whim because it is all for a purpose: to wipe out those that are evil, to give the creatures that *deserve* a glorious world a fighting chance to get one. Every dragon I killed, every horrific act I committed was against one that deserved it. I would purge the world of this filth. Noble intentions they may be, but I know all too well that how I go about it is evil. Do you know what, though? I don’t care. / *DON’T CARE!* Why must I be kind and play by the rules, whilst others do not? How can I make a difference that way? Call me a villain, call me evil, call me a malefactor. I don’t care, it’s what I am. I may die today, but know this: everything I have done up until now has only benefited the world. Those two countries I ruled and was running into the ground? They deserved it. One is a colony of religious fanatics that murder others that do not follow their mad beliefs, all in the name of some made up god. The other is filled with rich nobles who fund all the villainy that goes on simply so they can stuff their caves with more gold. That village I decimated in the Archback pass? Inhabited by dragons who would sacrifice any child born during harvest season because they thought a hatchling being born during that time was bad luck. The city where I poisoned all of the wine in certain

pubs? Each and every one of those pubs, filled itself every night with thieves, murderers and all other manner of disgusting filth. That army that you somehow *miraculously* defeat? HA! You were on the losing side and you *knew* it, you bloody well knew it. Who do you think helped those rebels kill Orthanax's men, hmm? Those rebels were outnumbered, outmaneuvered and outfoxed. And yet, still they were winning. I did it so Orthanax would ask me for help. That country is... excuse me, *was*, the worst in all of the dragon lands, right down the the hatchlings I so easily led to the slaughter."

Here, the great dragon chuckled, and would have shaken his head sadly if he had been able to move it.

"Ironically, the lands which you lead is one of the better ones, one I actually felt worth saving. Powerful as I may be, I cannot take on an entire dragon army. So, I used you to help me do it. Who do you think led them into that canyon that could so easily be host to an ambush? How did you beat all the madlings I created, mighty king? With numbers and strength? HA! *I told them to let themselves be killed*. The only hitch in an otherwise perfect plan, the *ONLY* failure on my part, was my escape. I never would have thought your men capable of chasing me down, and I would *never* have guessed you owned a set of Cadea chains. After I had escaped, I was going to relieve you of that little box and use it to finish what I had started. You were smarter than me, mighty king. Be proud of that; there are few who can say such a thing. If, *IF* I somehow get out of this, make no mistake. I will come for that box, I will get it, too, no matter what defences you put up, and I will finish what I started. I will not allow the dragon society to rot in a cauldron of its own bile."

"You're mad."

"Indeed I am. And a good thing, too, or I might actually feel the slightest bit of regret for what I have done, and where will that get me, hm?" There was no reply but the pound of footsteps and the scrape of scales on marble as the king retreated. As the king retreated, the magic surrounding him began to pull him forwards, the green flame, cold as the ice of his homeland, engulfing his senses as he was thrust through to the forest beyond.

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He didn't need to look to know the portal was already closed. There was absolutely no chance they wouldn't immediately close it, even if it meant missing his death; the king was far too smart to risk the lives of his subjects with such a trivial joy. He rose, standing upon shaky legs, his head racing with thoughts. He needed answers, and he needed them now. First and foremost: he needed to know where he was. He scented the air, and flicked out his tongue. He was in a forest, that much he was sure of, and from the taste of the air it was incredibly ancient. He closed his eyes, opening himself to the ethereal, and fully took in his surroundings, the sensations impossible for any creature to explain. This forest was older than he could ever have imagined. It held many dark secrets, and was host to many dark parts of history. Bathed in powerful magic, the very air of the forest seemed to breathe as it altered and shattered the flows of the natural world. This place was unlike any other in the world. He had never been to this forest before, he had no cause; the evils he fought did not exist in such a place. He had never been there before, but he knew where he was all the same. As a young dragon, many of his studies had involved it.

"The Everfree... I should have known. So, they managed to enlist the help of a god after all. Show yourself, Eternal Radiance. If I am to die by your claw- hooves, I wish to at least look upon my executioner."

"I have not heard that name since long before you were born, although it does not surprise me that one of your learning would know it. Although, if you don't mind, I prefer to go by Celestia now."

The one to whom he'd spoken, an elegant Alicorn of ageless wisdom and eternal beauty, stepped from the darkness of the woods, her hair ominously flowing as if caught in an eternal breeze that graced only her with its gentle touch. "So, Kalt'Vindur. Your own kind have deemed you too dangerous to live, and as such have sent you to me to be destroyed."

"It seems that tonight is a night for true names to be spoken."

"My true name has always been Celestia. I simply indulged those who wished to call me such." A laugh escaped her lips, the sound like sparkling rays of light as they danced on the water's surface. "I am honestly surprised you recognised your own name. After keeping it hidden for so long, substituting so many others, I would have thought your true name lost even to you. It seems I was wrong." Another laugh.



The mighty dragon sneered, his loathing of the goddess only increasing as she toyed with him.

“If I am to die, then kill me. This taunting is beneath you, and only serves to make me question my decision to not fight back.” Celestia’s ever-present smile remained firmly where it was, though her eyes took on a look of sadness.

“I have never teased someone who is about to die, and I have no intention of starting with you. We are simply talking.”

Kalt’Vindur huffed a puff of frost in Celestia’s face, the icy mist dissipating in her aura of warmth almost instantly. “So... As opposed to a goddess of evil, revelling in the pain of others, you’re a cowardly one, fleeing her duties.” Her smile never wavered.

“I am neither. To those who contacted me and asked my aid, I simply said that you would be dealt with; I never said how. All life is precious, and I would not rob it from any creature so easily without great reason.”

“And have my deeds not given you due cause?” The smile slowly faded.

“While you have done... *terrible* things, I can not deny your noble intentions. As the king said, your last words were heard by any willing to listen. I am willing to grant you a second chance. I will spare your life, if you agree to follow my terms and do your best to improve your mindset. This chance is the only one you will be given. If you betray my trust or refuse my offer, I will return you back to the tideless flow. What say you, Frozen Claw of the White Wastes? Will you accept my terms?”

“You have listed no terms.”

“You will hear them only once you have agreed.” Her smile was completely gone now, replaced with the stern expression of a teacher with a naughty pupil, though her eyes were still bore same sadness.”What say you?”

Kalt’Vindur said nothing. Not with words, at any rate, although they often say that actions speak louder. The dragon unleashed a torrent of icy winds from his maw, the forest before him withering, freezing and dying instantly at their touch. When he ceased, all before him was encased in a foot thick sheet of ice. All, that is, with the exception of a three meter circle around the goddess herself.

*"I am the goddess of the sun. Did you really think an ice dragons breath would have any kind of effect?" Kalt'Vindur snarled. "I have no intention of sitting here playing these games with you."* she continued. "You may not know my terms, but that is irrelevant at this point. Whatever my terms may be, it is still a choice between life, or death. You may think me a coward for sparing your life, but let me assure you: I will take your life if it means protecting my subjects. I will not continue to press the question if you continue to retaliate. Accept my terms or perish. What say you?"

"Six thousand years I have flown across this mortal coil. Four thousand of those have been spent trying to better the world. You have not stated your terms, but I know full well what they are. However you word them, whatever fancy flair you throw in to dress it up and disguise it, in the end it all amounts to my total seclusion, forced to hide away in a cave for the rest of my days as the world falls to bits. Dying would mean the end for me, no matter what, whereas hiding would allow me the chance to escape and press on. The choice seems obvious, but I cannot simply lay down and give up. I have sacrificed too much and have done too many horrible things for it to end here. What say , you ask? I say *I will be damned before I let myself so easily be subdued by a little pony.*" Eyes aglow with power and fury, Kalt'Vindur spread his wings in a fighting stance. "If you have it in you, pony, come and kill me."

Celestia's eyes never lost their sadness.

A rush of blinding light flowed forward, smashing her draconic opponent off his feet and hurling him backwards through the forest. As he flew backward, crashing through trees and foliage, he left only devastation in his wake, a path of shattered wood and destroyed shrubbery between Kalt'Vindur and the sun goddess. Twisting himself into the force of the blast, he landed on his feet, skidding several meters before coming to a full stop, a powerful spell already leaving his fanged mouth.

*"Great power of the heavens, rain down upon the earth like a volley of ethereal spears. Branch out and breed craters and death in your wake. Swords of the gods. Light that cracks open the night. Arch down and bring devastation."* The ancient words carried on the wind, mixing with it, the two becoming one until the wind itself rang with the ancient tones. A crackle of thunder echoed throughout the forest, the moon suddenly blotted out by seemingly endless clouds, crackling with fury and blacker than the night itself. As he spoke the final syllable, the clouds began to roar, spewing

electric wrath. Responding to his call, the lightning lanced down towards the goddess, the raw power of the elements scorching the earth where she had stood but a moment before. The white alicorn was surprised at first by the attack, unfocused as she darted and dodged around the white hot bolts. Whirling, she stood her ground. She no longer dodged the lightning; indeed, it now seemed to arch away from her before they struck, surrounding her in a corona of flame. Her horn glowed with a dazzling radiance and emitted a beam of concentrated light into the sky. The beam pierced the heavens, causing the clouds above to swell and burst, once again revealing the night sky. With a flash, the beam arced out in an ever-expanding halo of light, turning night to day for a brief second as the remainder of the clouds disappeared in a puff and a spark.

Celestia whirled around, prepared to parry the next magical attack from her foe, but was met with nothing but forest. "I did not think you the type to flee from battle. Let me assure you, however, hiding is entirely pointless. I can sense you. I can feel the ebb and flow of the magic of this world, it keeps no secrets from me. I could easily pick out a simple filly hiding in these woods. With your raw power, I need not even exert myself in seeking you out." She closed her eyes momentarily, taking a deep breath. When she opened them, her normally violet irises were a bright, iridescent blue, glowing with a radiance that even the sun goddess's normally luminescent eyes failed to match. Shaking her head, she began to approach the hidden dragon, his magical presence lighting up the night like a beacon for her enhanced senses.

"This is getting ridiculous; I will not continue with this bout. *Yield to me now, and accept my terms.*" Once again, the darkness of the night was pierced by the ethereal glow of the alicorn's horn as she began to weave a spell. She had had enough. She was done defending, done holding back, done firing warning shots. This fight was getting out of hand, and fast. What she had hoped to be a quick scuffle was turning into something else altogether. "What say you, dragon?" At first, only silence greeted her words. Then, the beacon of energy that was Kalt'Vindur shimmered and flexed, twisting in the night like a fish on the line, before it began to expand. Growing and shifting, it continued to stretch until it covered an incredible area. Now, with his presence expanding into a dome stretching across what was easily a mile, Celestia realized the danger far too late. Thinking quickly, she altered the weave of her spell slightly, shifting the beam she'd prepared into an

explosive wave of light. With an extra burst of magic, she shaped the explosion, directing it squarely at the dragon's aura. Trees and plants evaporated into ash, stone crumbled and blew away, and the very dirt melted and boiled.

One thing that can be said for Celestia: Among whatever faults she may have had, she was quite practical; There was nothing left alive within the blast radius.

As the night air cooled the cracked and destroyed ground, Celestia stepped forward, the newly formed glass cracking and shattering beneath her hooves. The magical aura of the great dragon had winked out, gone without a trace. Celestia could sense nothing. She sighed, shaking her head. Saddened that things had gone the way they did, Celestia unfurled her wings, preparing to return home. As she began to rise, the wind began to speak, echoing, whispered words formed from creation itself. Dropping back to her hooves, Celestia summoned a powerful shield, acting almost on instinct. The wind's voice rose, flowing and spiralling, a deadly ballad of unknown purpose dancing its way through the currents of the aether. The goddess's eyes darted about the clearing, scouring every shadow, every shard of glass, trying to pick out where the attack might come from. For the first time in a very long time, Celestia felt fear. No longer was she the confident deity who had confronted the dragon as he emerged from the portal. Now, she was merely a pony. A powerful pony, it was true, possibly even the most powerful, but a pony nonetheless. The dragon, though... He was something more. He *WAS* power. Not only had he survived her attack, but somehow, he had managed to hide his magical aura from her, even while casting a spell. Celestia herself couldn't accomplish that. Until now, she hadn't even thought it possible.

Celestia stood low, attempting to plant her hooves to steady not only her body, but her nerves. The glassy ground, however, made this a near impossibility. She scanned the clearing, searching with both eyes and magic for her foe, but to no avail. The dragon was pulling out tricks even Celestia, with all her ageless wisdom, did not know. The spell he was casting, long and intricate as it may have been, was reaching its climax. She had no doubt it would be anything less than cataclysmically devastating. The words began to climb, growing in power and intensity as they reached a crescendo, the raw power in each word, each *syllable* shaking Celestia to her core as they were uttered.

Then, suddenly, silence. There was nothing. No wind, no sounds, no movement. Nothing.

Then the screaming started.

No more than a hundred feet away from the alicorn, the dragon suddenly snapped into existence. Floating extended, stretched to his maximum, claws raised to the sky, the dragon raised his head to the heavens, neck perfectly straight. The spell was complete. Above the dragon, the sky began to shift and crack, splintering like bone. Glowing a spectrum of colours from the mundane to the unimagined, they split and spread, splitting the skies with a thousand glowing fissures. What Celestia looked upon, what that monster had called down on her, was the very power of existence itself. Celestia's eyes shot wide, fear plain upon her features. How was this possible? How could any creature, god or mortal, call upon the raw power of life itself and twist it to their own dark purpose? The hole in reality burned brightly as thousands of tendrils, each shimmering with a billion dazzling colours, shot through the hole, lashing out at the princess. The strands of life and colour struck the goddess's shield, lashing mercilessly at the barrier. For the time being, the shield held firm, but it was beginning to waver. Celestia cursed herself silently. If she had been ready, if she'd been prepared for such an attack, she may have been able to close the rift before any damage could be done, but... she hadn't even thought these forces *could* be controlled. As it stood, she could barely keep up her defenses under the onslaught of the reality-bending lashes.

The sound as the sheer power of the perversion of existence burned the air around the fractures and tendrils was like the death rattle of a thousand birds roasted alive. It was *maddening*, attempting to concentrate enough to maintain her defense while that twisted, shrieking, *wrong* sound echoed in her head. The relentless attack coupled with that deathly noise drove Celestia to her knees. Her shield wavered and began to fall apart, splintering off in flakes that slowly drifted to the glassy earth and vanished. Celestia was afraid. She feared not for her own life, but for those of her subjects, those of the creatures under her protection. If she died here and now, without turning over her control over the sun to her sister, the world would be thrown into chaos. Without the sun, the land would wither and die... as would her little ponies. She couldn't let that happen. She was their goddess. She was their princess. She was their mother. She would not abandon them to a slow and dark death. Mustering all the will she could manage, Celestia forced herself to her feet. Her shield slowly peeling away,

she pressed forward. One hoof in front of the other. Step by step, bringing herself closer to the beast. She had absolutely no clue what she was planning to do once she reached him, but she had to try *something*.

“STILL HANGING IN THERE, ARE WE, PRINCESS?” The voice, accompanied by a terrible laughter, pierced even the sound of reality warping. “YOU TRULY MUST BE A GOD, TO WITHSTAND THE RAW POWER OF LIFE ITSELF. TELL ME, PRINCESS, HOW MUCH LONGER CAN YOU LAST? TELL ME CELESTIA! TELL ME, ETERNAL RADIANCE! WELL? *WHAT SAY YOU?*” The laughter rose to a fever pitch, raw insanity creeping in on the edges of his voice. Celestia couldn’t manage a response, so focused was she on maintaining her trek. “HAHAHAHAHAHEEHEEHEEHEEHEEHEEHAAAAAAAA! I MUST SAY, PRINCESS, THIS BLEAK LOOK DOES NOT SUIT YOU. I SUPPOSE YOU CAN’T BE ALL SUNSHINE AND LAUGHTER ALL THE TIME.”

Celestia couldn’t take it. She quite simply couldn’t take it. She had tried being kind. She had tried reason. She had tried everything, and this monster had thrown it in her face. He had repaid her kindness by attempting to take her life. She wanted to say something, anything, but what could she? She could curse at him, scream at him, but that would do little, and Celestia was just not that kind of pony. She now stood directly in front of her foe, that toothy maw grinning down at her, confident, insane. He had won, he knew it. Her shield continued to flake away, her power waning. Any second now, her power would fail her, and the shield would disappear. The tendrils would rocket through, flaying her to the soul and robbing her of her life. The irony of it actually managed to bring a smile to her face. “THERE SHE IS! THERE’S THE CELESTIA THE WORLD KNOWS!” he laughed. “SO, PRINCESS. WHERE IS YOUR BACKUP PLAN? WHERE IS YOUR HIDDEN ACE, YOUR TRUMP CARD? I’LL ADMIT, YOU’VE IMPRESSED ME SO FAR. YOU’VE LIVED UP TO YOUR DIVINE ORIGINS. I MUST SAY I EXPECTED MORE FROM THE GODDESS OF THE SUN, HOWEVER. SO! WHERE IS YOUR FINAL GAMBIT?”

The smile still fixed upon her face grew a little wider. Calling forth all the magic she could muster, Celestia poured it into her shield, amplifying its power to an insane degree. The resulting shockwave as it overloaded knocked the dragon from the sky, sending him crashing to the ground and skidding to a stop. The blast pushed back the tendrils just far enough so that she was able to seize the rift with her magic, and began to force it shut. Losing all focus, the tendrils began to strike wildly and haphazardly, several

times nearly striking the deity. Finally, it happened. Celestia forced the fracture shut, the tendrils winking out of existence as she collapsed, both physically and magically drained.

After what seemed like an eternity, Celestia heard the distinct sound of glass upon glass; somepony in glass shoes slowly approaching her. The hooves clinked to a stop at her side. A slight sigh broke the silence, followed by a voice like warm silk.

“You did not think I would leave you to deal with a monster alone, did you?” Celestia opened her mouth to speak, but only a rasp of air escaped. Something soft touched her neck, nuzzling her affectionately as the voice encouraged her to stand. Celestia could not move at all. “Come now, sister. You must stand up and raise the sun. If I lower the moon and there is no sun to take its place, it would look rather strange, wouldn’t it?” Celestia slowly struggled to her feet, her horn gathering magic. While she lacked the power to do most anything else, the act of raising the sun was not just her own magic. It was a part of her, not something she had to call upon and unleash. The sun wanted to rise; all she needed to do was let it. Warmth began to course through her body as a force even greater than she used her as a conduit. A torrent of incredible power and tenacity, it knew exactly what it wanted. Slowly, the sun began to peek over the horizon, the morning sky glowing red and orange. Once it was on its way, Celestia released it, and it released her. It had done what it was meant to do, and would be content to carry on its way until it was called upon to rise again. With the devastation wrought in the forest, there were far fewer trees than before, allowing the light to shine through and bathe the sun goddess in the light she had brought to the world, warming her to her core and rejuvenating her. A smile crossed her lips and her eyes opened.

“I do so enjoy the beauty of your nights, but there is nothing quite like a sunrise.”

“I am inclined to agree with you. It is a shame most ponies sleep through it... it seems I’m not the only one with that problem.” Celestia turned to her sister, nuzzling her affectionately.

“I am glad you came. I truly appreciate the power you loaned me; without it, I don’t believe I could have emerged victorious.”

“Do you really think it’s over?”

"I do, because it is. Whether he chooses to accept my offer or not, I am through being kind. He will either accept, or I will do as the dragon king requested. No more second chances." Luna nodded, and the two of them made their way toward the felled dragon, their glass shoes clicking across the scorched and shattered glass of the forest floor. From a pile of shattered debris rose the pained groans of the fallen dragon. "I have no interest in dragging this out any longer. You know the question put to you. What say you?"

"...You seem irked."

"You tried to kill me. So yes. *I am slightly irked.*" Celestia shook her head. "I had expected you to retaliate in some way but I foolishly doubted you had enough power to cause me any real harm. My own overconfidence is no reason to take a creature's life, which is the *only* reason you are being given this last chance. No more stalling, Kalt'vindur. Give me your answer." The pile shifted and, for a second, Celestia tensed, readying for another attack. Instead the dragon's head poked from the rubble, looking her in the eyes. He smiled, a toothy, disturbing grin, madness twisting the corners of his scaly lips unnaturally.

"No need to take it personally, Celestia. I'm with you on this one. I didn't think there was any way I could actually harm you. I simply didn't want to lie down and surrender without a fight, for if I did that, all it would prove is that I wasn't committed to what I was doing. Make no mistake, princess, I am very, *VERY* committed to my work. *There was not a chance in the pits of the Deep Abyss I was just going to surrender without even making the attempt.* Truthfully, if I had known you couldn't handle the attack, I might actually have stopped." Impossibly, his deranged grin twisted even wider, obviously amused by his comment to an ridiculous extent. "I may be insane, but I'm smart enough to know that the world needs a sun. All the time I have put into my work would have been a waste, and all the deaths I caused would have been in vain if I went and extinguished that which makes things grow and brings light to the world. So dear, dear sun goddess, don't remain angry. It was nothing personal. Can you really blame me for trying to protect my very important mission?" Celestia said nothing, she simply stood there, staring, that serene smile and those sad eyes once again etched upon her face. Her sister, slightly shorter but no less imposing, stood next to her, an expression of unmitigated hatred and contempt spread across her face. "Very well then. I agree to your terms, whatever they may be. I know when I am beaten, despite how rarely it



happens.” Celestia’s horn lit up, and the debris that buried the dragon was tossed away.

“All of your magical power will be sealed away. Originally, I had planned to leave you with but a fraction of your true might, but from what I have seen, even that would be far too dangerous; I can only imagine what you would be capable with even that much magic. Your physical form, too, will be sealed. As your own physiology would be a danger to my subjects and this forest, you will no longer bear either the features or the form and abilities of an ice dragon. Equestria can do without an ice age, thank you very much. Next, you are never to leave this forest. Finally, if you ever happen to come into contact with any ponies within the forest, you are to leave them be and bring them no harm. Every thousand years, I will return to this clearing to speak with you. We will see if your views and temperament have improved. Between now and then, however, if any of my rules are broken, *especially* the one about harming any of my ponies, I *will* consider our deal null and void, and I *will* take your life. *Are. We. Clear?* The dragon didn’t scowl, or growl, or speak. He simply nodded his head, winking at the princess, who only shook her head in response. “I see you are not beyond logical thought. Luna, I am far too tired at the moment to deal with this any further. If you would...?”

“It would be my pleasure, dear sister.” The younger alicorn’s horn lit up, and the dragon felt her magic, seeping into his body and deep into his soul, wrapping itself about his magical core, his power itself. Her magic caressed it, softly, gently, the dragon’s body stiffening from the sensation. The magic continued to goad the beast, caressing his magical core, running itself smoothly through his soul. It felt *good*. Beyond good. Exquisite. To the dragon, it was as if he was approaching a state of nirvana... which is probably why it hurt to the extent that it did when the magic suddenly entirely enveloped it and squeezed tightly. The dragon’s eyes and mouth opened wide, but nothing came out, so intense was the pain. Obviously exacting her own punishment for the dragon’s transgressions against her sister, the moon goddess appeared to take no small pleasure in it. While the pain lasted but a moment, it echoed through his entire being, feeling like an eternity before he finally went limp. He could no longer draw on his magic; Luna had sealed it off completely.

“Was that entirely necessary, sister? I did not force him to submit so that you could torture him.” Celestia was fully aware that her question was completely redundant, but she still wished to hear her sister’s explanation.

The explanation, however, wasn't forthcoming. Luna remained silent as she continued with her work. Luna's magic wrapped itself around the dragon, lifting him into the sky as she created a cocoon of dark magic around him. Within the cocoon, the beast thrashed mightily, attempting to free himself, attempting to stop the agony racking his frame. He'd hoped that, if his physiology was to be altered, she would have changed him into a species of dragon that was at least *slightly* physically similar, but it seemed that the goddess was not through punishing him. His spine cracked and split, wrenching out as his neck extended several times his length, his skull bubbled and shrank as his snout shrunk. His back burned as most of his spines retracted into the bone as those on his back and the crest of his head extended, tearing the skin to accommodate the extra bone. The next alteration was almost as painful as when his magic had been sealed. The smallest finger on each of his claws began to bend and twist, *actually moving across his claw*, until it formed a second thumb. His eyes and teeth shrank, his pelvic bone widened, his spine twisted to compensate for the relocation of his wings. Change after change, shift after shift, each more painful than the last. When all was done, the cocoon shattered into nothing and the dragon fell to the ground in a heap, in far too much pain to even *try* and move. Before the sisters lay what was no longer an ice dragon, but a fully grown forest dragon, his green and gold scales glinting in the early morning light. Celestia, to her credit, was rather shocked; she knew full well what he must have gone through to look as he did now. She turned to her sister, stern authority in her voice. "When we get back to the castle, you and I are going to talk about this."

"That was rather tiring, to be honest. I would prefer to sleep first before you lecture me." Celestia nodded, sighing, and the two turned and walked away before spreading their wings and taking to the skies. As they flew across the treetops, the younger shifted closer to her sister. "Regardless of what you have to say, I'm glad you're alright. I did what I did because he deserved it. If not for his crimes against his own people, then for almost taking my sister away." That said, Luna flew back slightly, creating some distance between herself and her sister, and the two flew back to their castle in silence, both from exhaustion and the true fear that still remained from their encounter.

In the clearing, the dragon slowly rose to his feet, his new bones and shifted joints snapping and cracking as they were used for the first time, the pain having long since washed away. Testing his new body out, the beast

stretched and groaned, and he began to plot. What could he do? How could he get out of this? First thing's first, though; he needed to find a place to call his home. Spreading his new wings, the dragon pushed off from the ground and began to fly. However, after only a few seconds of flight, a shock coursed through his spine, paralyzing the great beast. He crashed through the canopy of trees he had attempted to fly over and hit the ground, hard. Upon colliding with the ground, the paralysis disappeared, only to be replaced with painful retching that continued for almost twenty minutes, even after he had expelled all in his stomach, leaving him with nothing to do but heave, over and over again, praying it would stop. When it finally did, he did not need to try and fly again, or even put any thought into an explanation. The dragon roared in fury, shooting a blast of fire into the air. Tearing up trees, he hurled them from him in his rage, tossing chunks of earth and rock about. ***"That vile, disgusting, pidhi kurve!!!!"*** The dragon swore, putting as much spleen into the words as possible. The beast dropped to the ground, defeated. There wasn't a thing he could do to exact revenge on that vile alicorn, or to even escape his situation. There was nothing he could do.

For a long time, the dragon lay where he was. Through half-lidded eyes, he watched their battlefield, examining the destruction the two had wrought. Eventually, something caught his eye; a small spider had decided to build a web between two fallen trees. At first, he was tempted to puff a burst of smoke, or even flame at the spider, ruining its work simply out of spite, but the process of crafting the web proved so mesmerizing he couldn't help but continue to watch. Back and forth, up and down, around and around, the tiny arachnid tirelessly laboured to complete its masterpiece. It crawled, leapt and climbed from spot to spot, a barely visible strand of silk trailing behind it. Finally, the spider finished its masterpiece and returned to a corner, hidden in a crack in the bark. ***"What a marvelous little creature you are, little spider. What patience you must possess, to sit there for hours, waiting for your chance to strike. Not hoping, though, no. You picked your spot too well. You know a delightful little morsel will eventually land itself in your trap. It's just a matter of simply being willing to wait."*** Suddenly, all at once, it hit him. His brain made a series of connections, his mind lighting up like a thousand captured fireflies. He'd had an idea. An awful idea. He got a wonderful, \*awful\* idea. It would take time, yes, and patience. Lots of patience. Just like this little spider. He would need to find the perfect spot, build his web and wait for the perfect moment to strike. It would take a while, but if the

little spider could be patient, then so could he. ***“Thank you, little spider. You have given hope. Not just to me, but the whole world, hope for the future.”*** He paused, examining the spider. ***“What are you, little spider? Your genus is a simple matter to discover, the way you spin your web is evidence enough to that, but your species... Those markings on your cephalothorax would make me think Latropectus, but the placement and length of the legs is wrong. Hmm... Ah, yes! That’s it! How could I not see it before? You were one of my favorites in my younger days, back when I was studying etymology so very long ago. There is only one spider in all of creation that has an abdomen so similar in appearance and texture to the divine and admittedly rather tasty ruby.”*** And then he smiled. A great, new maw of sharp, gleaming teeth. He was happy in a way he could not express in words. Though things had decidedly taken a turn for the worse, but if he worked hard and remained patient, he could get out of this. And get his revenge in the bargain.

***“I suppose, little spider, an introduction is in order. After all, you are my saviour. Hello. I am Kalt’Vindur, Frozen Claw of the White Wastes. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Delidectus Crawspedisia... That truly is a beautiful web, by the way.”***

# Chapter 18

## Consequences

Although every pony in the cave during those early dawn hours reacted differently to the tale told, the one shared reaction was complete silence.

“And so, Luna and I returned to our castle, hopes for the future of Kalt’Vindur high. We were sure that, given the proper environment and time to reflect on his actions, he would most certainly change for the better. We convinced ourselves that by the time we returned to speak with him, he would be more than prepared to turn over a new leaf. However, we never got the chance.”

Celestia turned to Luna, her eyes speaking volumes as the Moon Princess hung her head. “We never got the chance, because 400 years later...” Celestia trailed off. In truth, nopony needed her to finish the sentence.

“After Luna’s... *absence*, I became... More than a little distracted, truth be told. Days faded to months, and to years, and events that had once been of the highest import were entirely forgotten. I never returned to find him, and I almost completely forgot he existed, I’m ashamed to say. He just... faded away. He never reemerged, he never caused any trouble whatsoever, he was invisible.” Celestia closed her eyes, turning away.

“Pardon me, princess, but... I get the feelin’ that yer date with that there dragon was a touch more important than just seein’ if his temper’s improved.” Celestia nodded.

“Yes, you’re correct. There was a purpose beyond simply discussing his current emotional state. When one places a seal on a being’s own magic, there are certain... limitations. You can smother it, seal it, wrap it and bury it deep within them, but... magic is life itself and, quite simply, you cannot contain life. No matter what obstructions it may face, life always finds a way around them. The main purpose of the meeting was to examine the seal that Luna placed on Kalt’Vindur and, if necessary, repair it. I just... I *forgot him*. It has been almost 1400 years since the seal was placed. It’s been degrading since then. This is... This is all my fault. If I hadn’t... He would

have never had the power to do any of this... I... I am so sorry..."Twilight stood from where she sat and walked up to stand in front of her mentor, an angry look upon her face. Celestia opened her eyes and looked to her pupil. "I am... so, so sorry, Twilight, I-"

"Stop." All eyes shot to Twilight, and all jaws dropped. Over the course of the past several months, the ponies had been exposed to and experienced some of the strangest things in their lives. Twilight Sparkle raising her voice to Princess Celestia, however, blew all the rest away. "Are you really expecting me to sit here and accept an apology from you?" Celestia's eyes shot wide, and tears began to form.

"I... I-" The princess tried to speak, really she did, but the words just wouldn't come.

"I told you to stop it." Twilight stomped a hoof, fixing her with the angriest glare that any of her friends had ever seen.

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"...I....I am sorry...but...but I don't get it."

***"It's a rock face... There isn't anything to get, lad."***

Spike sagged slightly, seeming disappointed. "But... you made it seem like we were headed somewhere special..."

***"This is a special place, my boy!"***

"I don't see it."

***"That's because we haven't done anything to make it special yet."***

"Ah... well then. That would explain it." Delicraw opened his mouth to say something, but closed it, raising a set of giant claws to cover his eyes. Being solely responsible for the young dragon's mindset, he knew better than to try and continue with that train of thought.

***"Now then, Spike. Before we continue with the night's proceedings, I need to impart a truth unto you. I... Am not what I seem."*** Before Spike

could respond, or, for that matter, even fully register what he had said, Delicraw's eyes began to glow a pure, blinding white, and with a dull roar and a crackle of magic, was lost to sight in a smoky cocoon. The smoke swirled, twisting and roiling, slowly becoming distended and bulbous. Agonized roars mixed with demented laughter, the eldritch storm shifting and boiling, the stench of ozone filling the air as the magic being released burned the surrounding air. The laughter was simultaneously chilling and familiar, both in its raw madness and its pure evil.

In a powerful explosion of light and mist, the cocoon evaporated and revealed a dragon that was decidedly *not* the master Spike had come to know. At first, Spike had thought himself face to face with a skeleton. The bleached, bone white scales of the great beast before him were not those of his master. Its claws and spines were misplaced, its neck shortened, its hips wider. The great white beast stretched its new body, streaks of silver and blue flashing in the moonlight as a series of pops and cracks echoed through the night, newly shifted joints snapping into place.

Spike looked upon this monster in fear and confusion; though the bond he shared with his master affirmed its identity, every instinct, every draconic instinct screamed at him to flee, to fight, to loose flame until he could breathe no more. The dragon before him was something to be feared, he knew that much. Somewhere in the deepest recesses of his brain, those dark crannies in which sanity still clung to life, realized this and, for the first time in a long time, knew fear.

The colossal ivory beast looked upon the smaller dragon with a crazed smile of utter glee. He had no need of a mental bond to tell him of the raw terror felt by his little madling; he could *smell* it... and it was *delicious*. He laughed again, a low rumbling chuckle starting deep in his belly and rising, louder and longer, ending in a maniacal cackle. This was it. No more hiding, no more cowering, no more running. No more pretending to be *ever so nice*. It had been well over a thousand years, skulking in the shadows of this accursed forest. It was time for him to continue his quest. He was free.

Laughter subsiding, he took a step forward, lowering his head so that he might look his slave in the eyes. "***Hello, Spike.***" The words rose from his throat in a sibilant hiss. "***You know, I don't believe that you and I have ever been properly introduced. While it's true that I've been known by many names over the years, there's one that I've grown rather fond of.***

***My true name, if you'd believe it.*** Spike tried to back away, but the beast easily outdistanced his strides, cornering him against the rock face. Opening his mouth, Spike prepared a burst of flame, only to find a massive claw encircling his jaws, squeezing them shut. ***"Naughty naughty, little madling... you wouldn't be trying to scorch your master now, would you?"*** The ancient dragon lowered his head even more, bringing his right eye level with the smaller dragon's face, merely inches apart as he spoke. ***"Hello, Spike. I am Kalt'Vindur, The Frozen Claw Of The White Wastes. It is a pleasure to meet you at last. Now, I believe we have some business to attend to."*** He grinned again, it spreading across his features, distorting them. ***"Me and you, you and I... We have some work to do. After all, you need to hold up your end of the bargain. I certainly did. I gave you your revenge, didn't I? Now, I require a favour from you. It's only fair, after all."***

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The cave was absolutely silent. Filled with stunned, slack jawed ponies, the only noise was the slow drip of water from the walls and ceilings of the cave. In truth, almost everypony wanted to speak, to say something, *anything*, but not one could bring themselves to utter a word. Of everypony present, Celestia, god-princess of Equestria, was probably the most stunned. Retreating slightly, she was taken aback for the first time in many hundreds of years.

Twilight shook her head once more, a mixture of rage and sorrow etched on her features. *"How. How can you sit there and apologize to us after telling us that story?"*

*"I know... I don't deserve your forgiveness... I just-"* Celestia stopped midsentence as Twilight took a step forward. Luna tensed. Twilight Sparkle was the closest thing that Celestia had to family next to her, but... what would she do if Twilight acted?

Storming up to the Princess, she pressed herself against her mentor. Momentarily taken aback, the startled alicorn wrapped her student in a hug.

*"Your story... Your story was of kindness, your kindness, bestowing a second chance upon a creature that didn't deserve it. There is absolutely NO WAY that you are in any way responsible for what's happened here. It's*



not your fault that... that... *that MONSTER* didn't change. He was given a chance, but he used it to take advantage of you. It's not your fault. I could never hate you, or even be the least bit angry with you for trying to save a life."

Twilight shook her head, looking up at her mentor. "Most ponies would do absolutely anything for a chance at redemption. You don't need to apologize to anyone, Princess, because there's nothing to apologize for. If... If you still insist on taking the blame for it, don't take it all. Leave some for me, too." Eventually, Twilight broke the hug, taking a few steps back in order to look the much taller pony in the eyes. "Now then. We don't have time to sit around feeling sorry for ourselves. We have a monster to defeat, and a dear friend to save!" Celestia stood tall once more, shaking off her sadness. Once again, she wrapped her normal mantle of regal confidence around herself.

"You are absolutely right, Twilight. Now, let's get to work. First and foremost, we need to figure out where Spike and Kalt'Vindur may have gone."

"Right!" Twilight nodded, reinvigorated by her mentor's determination. "Maybe they left some sort of clue here, there's certainly enough places to look!" Twilight ran to the nearest pile of treasure and immediately began sifting through it. Finally snapped from their daze, the rest of the ponies approached the treasure and began to help her look. All, that is, except for Rarity, who approached the Princesses carefully.

"Pardon me, your Majesties, but... something occurs to me."

"And what might that be, Rarity?"

"Well... In retrospect, having Spike attack Ponyville would serve little purpose in the grand scheme of helping that ruffian. In fact, it would hinder his efforts, simply serving to attract your attention. With that in mind, why would... Kalt'Vindur, was it? Why would he bother using his magic to do that unless he had some sort of purpose behind it?" The Princesses looked at one another, pausing as they considered this information. It didn't take long before their eyes shot wide, realization sinking in.

“My little ponies, come here.” Stopping their search, everypony dropped whatever treasure they were sorting through and approached the Princesses again. “We now know what to look for. His plans are now clear to us. Kalt’Vindur plans to escape, and we know how.”

“How?” Everypony present spoke in unison. Celestia turned to Twilight.

“Twilight, are you aware of Spike’s magical talents?”

“Well, I know that he’s capable of sending and receiving messages with his fire.” Celestia nodded.

“Yes, that’s true. However, I don’t believe that you’re aware of how special that is. As you’re aware, there are many different types of dragons. Many different species possess different types of magic. Most times, their type of magic is released through the magical glands in their throats. Many dragons breathe fire, although others can breathe things such as ice, water, steam, the list goes on. Now, Spike’s breath is a rather unique type. In order to possess the power Spike does, a dragon must be hatched through the use of magic. At a young age, this fire can be used to send small things from one point to another. Scrolls, small objects, etcetera. At Spike’s age, he had to create an anchor with me, so I am the only one he is able to send things to. However, once he grows up, he will be able to send much larger objects to just about anyone, just so long as he could picture them clearly in his mind’s eye. Judging by what you have told me, Spike is very large now... That means his abilities have increased, and he will have gained a new ability. It makes perfect sense, now... when Kalt’Vindur and Spike first met in this cave, he must have practically leapt with joy when he realized Spike’s talents.”

Twilight spoke up, concern weighing heavily on her voice “Princess... what, exactly is Spike capable of?”

“If Kalt’vindur manages to find a large enough smooth surface, Spike could use his breath to -”

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“I don’t think I understand.”

***“You don’t need to understand. For the moment, just sit there.”*** Spike obeyed, plopping himself on the ground before the dragon. Kalt’Vindur lowered himself to his level and spoke slowly, almost patronizingly. ***“Now then. I am going to use my magic to show you a image of a location. When you see it, I need you to concentrate hard. You have to focus, and remember every single little detail you see. Alright?”*** Spike nodded his head. ***“Good.”***

Reaching down with his massive claws, the great dragon grasped the younger’s head between them, linking their minds with a thought. It was then that he himself concentrated, thinking hard on the image he wished to share, forcing it into Spike’s mind as he quashed his own worries. It was dangerous, no doubt about it, but Kalt’Vindur couldn’t care less about the mental health of the younger dragon. No, his worries stemmed from time, or lack thereof. It was very easy to lose track of time when not in one’s own head, and they didn’t have much to waste. Closing his eyes, he concentrated even harder on the mental image.

To his credit, Spike did his absolute best to memorize every inch of the scene before him. It was a rather difficult task, however, seeing as the image contained almost nothing but pure, drifting whiteness as far as he could see. Eventually, he picked out a small detail, a rock poking out of the ground. He focused on that small rock, on its position, how it fit into the scene.

He focused to the best of his abilities, but after what seemed like minutes, he shot back to reality as Kalt’Vindur severed their minds, breaking the spell.

***“Majkata! I can’t believe we wasted an entire hour in there. Come, Spike, stand up. It’s time. Do as I instructed earlier, we haven’t a moment to lose.”*** Spike obediently turned, facing the great stone wall. Taking a deep breath, the young dragon summoned the image of that snowy wasteland in his mind. His eyes blazing with green fire, he let loose with every ounce of flame he could muster. As flame met stone, the emerald fire took root, as if the rock wall were centuries-dried wood. Growing, crawling, spreading outwards, the flame clawed its way across the surface. Spike felt a claw on his shoulder, and he knew it was time to stop. Cutting off the inferno, he stepped aside to make way for his master, who inspected the wall with a devilish grin. What had once been a solid

stone wall was now a dancing, crackling sheet of flame. Then, it began to shift and twist, swirling and spiralling, a vortex in jade. As the vortex widened, the center of the whirling mass of flame expanded into an endlessly bubbling blur of colour and light, solidifying into a solid, shimmering image; a endless snowy landscape with a single rock.

Kalt'Vindur threw back his head, letting out a burst of mad laughter. **"YES! YES, YOU'VE DONE IT! Excellent work, boy, excellent! You have helped me greatly. I will always remember you for this, my... friend..."** The great dragon paused, looking pensive for a moment, before grinning widely. **"Yes, my friend. I've never had a real one before. I would ask you to accompany me home, but you would not be able to survive the climate. Only a true ice dragon can survive the temperatures of the White Wastes. In any event, I do believe that this is goodb-"**

Instantly, his head snapped around, eyes narrowing as he looked to the south, his smile turning to a scowl. **"Majkata! I knew we'd taken too long. Spike... my friend, my boy, my madling, I require one last favour from you. There is a group of ponies approaching from the south. Find them and stop them... in whatever way you see fit."**

As Spike turned to leave, he felt a colossal claw close on his shoulder one last time. **"And Spike? One last thing."** His scowl was gone, the demented light in his eyes returning as that impossible grin spread back across his face. **"Get mad. Get very, VERY mad."** The moment he released him, Spike shot away, blind fury crawling through his mind once more.

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"...I....I had no idea he was capable of that." Twilight stood wide eyed, stunned as Celestia finished her explanation.

"We haven't a moment to lose. We must find him and stop him."

A quick glance at her friends told Twilight all she needed to know.

"We're with you, Princess."

Celestia nodded her head, smiling. Returning to the entrance of the cave, Celestia rapped out several quick orders to her guards, who immediately took to the skies.

“I’ve ordered them to retrieve the nearest reserve squadron as fast as possible and return to us. We need all the help we can get.” Turning to Luna, the Sun Princess inclined her head. “We have but a few hours until sunrise, sister. If you would, can you please locate our friend? And our monster?”

Nodding, Luna closed her eyes, and her horn began to glow with an ethereal light. As she concentrated, gravity seemed to lose its hold on her, and her mane began to drift about her head, wafting on an invisible breeze. Stretching herself to the sky, the glow spread to the rest of her, eventually disappearing to be replaced by shadow. As the ponies watched, she began to turn slightly transparent, and she sparkled as though filled with millions upon millions of stars. She stayed like that for several minutes before resuming a corporeal form, landing gently upon four hooves. She wavered slightly, off balance, before regaining her composure.

“They are at a large rock face, due north of our position. If we head this way, we can’t possibly miss it.” Without a word, the ponies took off at a gallop towards the rock.

As they made their way through the early morning light, the two Princesses hung back slightly.

“Do you think we can do it, sister?”

“Indeed I do... That student of yours is quite the pony.”

“No... not student. Friend... and yes. Yes, she is.” A small smile spread across Luna’s face. “As sad as this whole sorry situation may be, I have to say. It feels good to help in a way that doesn’t involve endless meetings with stuffy bureaucrats.” Her sister giggled.

“Indeed.” Luna moved herself closer to her sister, stretching her neck to speak directly into her ear.

“Twilight is right. You need not apologize for kindness. And please, do not let this experience sour your soul. You have always been willing to give any creature a second chance. One poor experience shouldn’t affect that.”

“As always, you show yourself far wiser than I pretend to be. Far more than you let on.” Luna smiled, returning her gaze to the path ahead.

“We *will* stop him.”

“What of Spike?”

“I am one hundred percent confident that his friends can bring him back.” At this pronouncement, Celestia cocked an eyebrow in curious surprise.

“You have always been optimistic, but this seems to be a bit more than simple optimism. How can you be so sure?” The midnight blue mare’s smile grew, winking mischievously at her sister..

“I am the night sky, I am the moon that floats in it and the stars that light its waters.

Truth may try to hide in the darkness my beauty creates, but all things are revealed when I sing.

For when I sing, I am not just using my voice, but the voices of all things in life that are afraid to bear their souls during the day. And truth can never hope to hide from life itself. “

Celestia nodded, choosing to press the issue no further. She knew that little excerpt rather well; it was taken from an excessively long, rather verbose love letter written to Luna over three thousands years ago. It was one of her favourite things to quote, referring to it when she didn’t feel like answering a question in a straightforward manner. Celestia chuckled. She was always so dramatic.

“You still haven’t answered my question. What of Spike?”

The smile faded from Luna’s face, the full meaning of her sister’s question sinking in.

“...At the very least, we can return to him both his sanity and the love of his family. There’s not much beyond that we can do, and you know it. I’m sorry, sister.” Celestia nodded sadly.

“That... is what I thought. Do you think Twilight knows?”

“I would stake my my horn on it. We will deal with that situation when the time comes.” Celestia sighed. Luna was right, there was nothing that any creature could do for poor Spike. That... that *monster* had taken advantage of her kindness and hurt her friends. Before the sun set on this day, he would rue the day he was hatched.

“And there, in the blackest pits of its own vile creation, the monster learned its final lesson: That she, The Eternal Radiance, has no pity for those who would toy with the love of her subjects.” Luna glanced at her sister.

“I thought you hated that story?”

“And I still do... but I do believe that line is fitting.” The sisters paused for a long moment, silence heavy in the air as they ran.

“Indeed.”

And with that, the two sisters quickened their pace, joining the rest of the group.