

# My Little Star Wars

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It is a period of civil war.

Rebel spaceships, striking  
from a hidden base, have won  
their first victory against  
the evil Galactic Empony.

During the battle, Rebel  
spies managed to steal secret  
plans to the Empire's  
ultimate weapon, the GREAT  
SPHERE, an armored space  
station with enough power  
to destroy an entire planet.

Pursued by the Empony's  
sinister agents, Princess  
Rarity races home aboard her  
starship, custodian of the  
stolen plans that can save her  
ponies and restore  
freedom to the galaxy...

# Chapter 1

The space above the desert world of Tolfetooine was usually calm, with maybe one or two freighters taking off and landing per day. Certainly nopony would look up and expect to see weapon's fire. Nor would they expect to see one of the Empony's cruisers chasing the smaller vessel this far out into the galactic rim. However this exact scenario was playing out at that very moment. The small ship lurching from side to side as it desperately tried to avoid further injury. Its efforts proved to be in vain as yet another lance of energy struck its aft, causing the ship to shutter violently. The explosion was felt by everypony onboard, but especially Fluttershy and her companion, Angel Bunny.

Angel glanced up at Fluttershy, who was frantically making sure their corridor was still intact, and let out a silent sigh. He knew that Fluttershy was frightened by most things, but could hear that they weren't in any real danger. Being a rabbit had its advantages after all, even in a galaxy dominated by pony life. He grew more concerned when the normally omnipresent drone of the main engines suddenly died.

"Oh dear, did you hear that Angel? They shut down the main engines. Maybe we should, um, hide. You know, if you really want to. If you don't that's okay too." Fluttershy finally spoke. Instead of answering, Angel pulled her to the side out of the way of a small group of armed ponies trotting down the hall. He then pointed upward.

"What is it Angel?" asked Fluttershy, "Is something happening above us?" Angel made a gesture that clearly commanded Fluttershy to be quiet, causing her to squeak softly. They could then hear a faint scraping noise coming from the deck above them, followed by a short silence and then sounds of laser weapons discharging.

"Oh my, they've broken in! Maybe we should just surrender? Or hide? Or we could panic. Oh, maybe we should just stay here." moaned Fluttershy, sitting down. This display earned another sigh from Angel, who then turned and started hopping away.

"W-wait Angel, where are you going? Eep!" cried Fluttershy as another, louder explosion shook the ship. Fearing for their safety, Fluttershy flew after her friend.

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Two meters tall, quadruped, and with a starry blue mane which seemed to behave like a fifth appendage, Nightmare Moon was an awesome, terrifying shape as she strode through the corridors of what was the rebel's ship. Fear followed her, as the dark cloud that hung about her like a sudden increase in air pressure caused even hardened stormponies to back away and mutter nervously amongst themselves. The once resolute crewmembers who would die to delay the advance were suddenly scrambling to get away from the black shape with blacker thoughts coming upon them. Only one thought was travelling through Nightmare Moon's head now, however, as she turned down another passageway.

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Fluttershy had lost track of Angel, and was frantically searching for her little friend. She had always cared deeply for all of what most ponies would term "lesser creatures", and Angel was by far her favorite. They had travelled everywhere together, and having misplaced him was leaving Fluttershy on the verge of panic.

"Angel, oh Angel, where are you?" Fluttershy called as she checked each and every passageway she came across. The sounds of fighting were still audible, but most of it was thankfully above her.

Finally, she saw Angel at the end of a small maintenance tunnel. Overjoyed, she started to gallop towards him, but noticed another presence. Through the smoke, she saw what looked like a pony giving something to Angel. She slid to a stop as the haze thickened past the point of visibility.

"Oh I'm sorry, was I interrupting? I can, just, come back later..." Fluttershy began, until Angel hopped out of the smoke obscuring Fluttershy's vision. He had gained a new accessory, a backpack, but that was the least of Fluttershy's concerns right now.

"Angel! You shouldn't run off like that, especially now. You could hurt yourself! Oh, I'm so glad you're okay. Wha-?" Fluttershy started as Angel

began thumping her leg. "What is it?" Angel merely pointed towards the end of the hall and ran.

"Oh, not again Angel! Come back!" cried an exasperated Fluttershy as she began to run after her.

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The corridor outside the main control center was crowded with the prisoners gathered by Imperial stormponies. Some lay wounded or dying, some stared back at their captors in silent defiance. Orion stared at one stormpony in particular who suddenly became very distracted. Satisfied that he had successfully intimidated his guard, he returned to looking down the hallway.

Everypony stopped what they were doing and became silent as the form of Nightmare Moon appeared from a side passage. She stopped in front of Orion with a look of purest disdain on her face, as one of the stormponies came to deliver his report: "The Great Sphere plans are not in the main computer."

Nightmare Moon nodded, then without warning her starry mane reached out and encircled Orion around the neck and lifted him into the air. Reaching, Orion desperately tried to pry himself loose, but to no avail.

"So, what *did* you do with those plans?" Nightmare snarled, "Where are the stolen data disks?"

"We...intercepted...nothing of the sort!" Orion gasped in reply, "This...is a councilor ship...on a diplomatic mission..."

"Oh? This ship carries the royal crest of Aldermare." Nightmare leaned in close, "Tell me, are you carrying somepony important I can...talk too?" The implied threat was evident to everypony in the hall. Orion didn't try to say anything; he just looked into the eyes of the black alicorn.

Finally having enough, Nightmare Moon squeezed harder, finding small satisfaction in the stallion falling limp in her mane. Flinging him to the deck, she turned to the stormponies and shouted, "Tear this ship apart! Those plans have to be onboard somewhere. If you find any passengers, I want

them brought before me alive!" Noticing how nopony was moving she added, "QUICKLY YOU FOALS!"

Every stormpony around scrambled over each other in their haste to leave - not only to carry out Nightmare's orders, but to get away from her.

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"Um, Angel? If you don't mind me asking, do you know where you're going?", asked Fluttershy quietly. Angel had led the duo down what seemed like an endless series of passages and crawlways that all seemed to travel towards the bottom levels of the ship. She had finally stopped at what looked like an escape pod entry hatch.

"Are you sure we're supposed to go in there? I mean, we don't know if- Eek!" Fluttershy screamed as a panel on the far wall exploded, and jumped inside. Angel just nodded and hit the emergency release. As the pod ejected itself from the doomed ship, both were wondering what they would find after the inevitable crash landing on the planet below.

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Three stormponies made their way down a dark corridor, the lights having stopped working when the power was cut. The trooper in the lead noticed something moving behind a fallen piece of piping and shone her flashlight towards it. Revealed was the shivering form of a snow white unicorn staring back at her with fear in her eyes. The trooper smiled through the flashlight as she continued down to her flank and saw what she was looking for: a cutie mark of three diamonds-exactly what Nightmare Moon was looking for.

"I found her!" she called, looking back at her companions, "should we set for stun or-". The rest of her sentence was cut off as the unicorn had pulled out an energy pistol seemingly out of nowhere and fired. The officer behind her pointed her own weapon and returned fire at the fleeing mare, striking her flank with the stun blast. He cautiously approached the unconscious unicorn looking over her for signs of life. Behind him the third stormpony had removed the helmet of the first, revealing a blue-gray pegasus with a yellow mane, and eyes that weren't quite looking in the same direction.

"Muffins?" the gray blue pegasus managed to ask before falling into unconsciousness, as a squad of stormponies rushed up the hall, having heard the shooting from the deck above. The officer pony turned back to the unicorn on the ground. Satisfied that she had no visible injuries, he turned back to the stormponies. "She'll be alright; inform Nightmare Moon we have our prisoner: Princess Rarity."



# Chapter 2

It was an old pony's tale that you could burn your eyes out faster by looking straight out at the desert surface of Tolfetooine than by staring at the twin suns themselves. You were also likely to be baked like a cupcake for trying. Despite the heat of this desert world, life could exist on the surface thanks to the reintroduction of water.

Two shapes whose concern was extracting that water out of the air were standing on a slight rise: a cylindrical metallic vaporator and a not as cylindrical organic pony. Twilight Sparkle was nearly banging her head in frustration at the vaporator, which seemed to go out of its way to malfunction whenever she went near it.

"Can this day get any worse?" she asked rhetorically of the vaporator as she tried to slowly pull out a failing component. In response, a large roar came from overhead. Twilight looked up to see something falling from the sky; it looked like a meteor. She followed the object until it fell just below the horizon, then shook slightly as a rumbling thud told her that it had landed not far away.

The whole machine started to whine and emit sparks. "Oh no, no, nononononono", Twilight realized that as she followed the meteor across the sky, she had inadvertently yanked the part she was holding clear out of the vaporator. Twilight tried to put the part back in quickly, but she had it wedged in the socket like it was never meant to go there in the first place. The vaporator started to shake and whine louder; Twilight racked her brain trying to remember everything she had read about these machines. Suddenly the fuel in the vaporator gave up the ghost and exploded in a large fireball as Twilight dove behind a dune for cover.

It wasn't a very large explosion, but somepony could've gotten hurt if they were right next to it. Peeking out from behind the sand dune, Twilight saw the vaporator just sitting there as if nothing had happened.

"I guess whatever fuel was left just evaporated in this *heat*." Twilight emphasized the word heat a little more than she would have normally, but she was getting hot and bothered by this time. "I wonder what that was

anyway." Looking around, she figured the ruined vaporator wasn't going anywhere, and she wanted to see what had fallen from space.

Twilight started to trot over to her landspeeder nearby. It wasn't fast, she thought, but it had something more important: storage space for a personal mini-library. She climbed into the backseat and looked through reference texts on moisture farms and landspeeder function until she found her copy of *SPACE: Comets, Stars, Galaxies, Orion, and More*. Smiling, she jumped into the front seat and drove off toward the impact site, where a plume of sand had started to rise over the horizon.

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Rarity turned the corner into what seemed like the thirtieth hallway since she had been so rudely awakened from her nap on the deck, and she was fuming. The stormponies had not been gentle with her so far, and nothing in their posture gave the impression that they would leave her alone anytime soon. Rarity started wondering about all of the possibilities that could happen to her now: where she was going, what would occur when she got there, when they would eventually let her go...

Evidently she had slowed as she let her mind wander. One of the armored ponies shoved her roughly to get her moving again, which didn't have quite results he was hoping for.

"Ugh, do you know where that hoof has been? Would it kill anypony to wash their hooves after a battle before touching a lady in such an undignified manner; somepony needs to teach you some new manners; I mean would have *killed* anypony to allow me to dust myself off before *rudely* shoving down this hallway, not to mention that I'm getting quite thirsty; would anypony care to get me something to drink?" Rarity just kept talking in one long, incredibly unbroken sentence, moving from topic to topic so that none of the stormponies had a chance to interrupt. Almost hypnotized the stormponies nearly walked straight past their destination: the boarding tube they had boarded from, with Nightmare Moon waiting for them.

"Ah, Nightmare Moon, only you would be so bold, and so sloppy. Your ponies don't even clean up after the messes they make. Why anypony would attack an unarmed diplomatic vessel is beyond me, especially when

we repeatedly stated our inten-" Rarity began before being cut off by an impatient stamp by the black alicorn before her.

"Rarity of Aldermare," Nightmare smiled menacingly as she leaned closer to her newest captive, "You flew through restricted space, paused to receive several messages from a rebellious world, and then jumped here. You weren't on any diplomatic mission; you were carrying messages between alliances of rebels. I want the data you were carrying."

Unlike the stormponies behind her, Rarity didn't back down. "I honestly have *no* idea what you're talking about. I was simply *trying* to state-"

"That you are part of the rebel alliance and a traitor." Nightmare cut her off, and turned to a nearby officer pony "Take her away!"

Rarity glared at her as she was shoved into the boarding tube and another officer approached. "The data disks we're looking for are nowhere on the ship." He said, "Some of the escape pods were jettisoned recently, however."

"You foal!" Nightmare Moon suddenly turned on the officer, "The plans were clearly in one of those pods. Send down a retrieval team at once!"

"As you command, but what of..." the smaller pony's voice trailed off as he gestured to the ship around them.

"It is of no importance to us anymore; destroy it." Nightmare Moon responded as she entered the boarding tube.

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Twilight Sparkle slowed her landspeeder as it approached the shallow impact crater, and couldn't help but look disappointed; this wasn't a meteorite impact, the crater was much too shallow. She hopped out and went over to the edge of the crater- No, she thought, this isn't a crater, it's more of a depression. Looking in, Twilight realized she was looking at an escape pod.

"Oh Angel, I'm glad we landed, but could you have set us down just a teeniest bit more gentle?" Twilight started as she heard a soft voice coming from the far side of the pod. The voice continued as she made her way

around the crash site, "I'll take that as a, maybe." Twilight finally saw them: a yellow pegasus with long pink hair and a rabbit. What was a rabbit doing in the middle of a desert? Twilight was intent on finding out.

"Hello?" she inquired. The pegasus almost jumped three feet into the air, and before Twilight could blink she was hiding behind the pod.

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to scare you. I'm Twilight Sparkle, what's your name?" Twilight asked. The pegasus muttered something and looked away shyly. "I'm sorry? I didn't quite catch that." The yellow filly let out an almost adorable squeak and tried to look as small as possible.

Angel had had enough of this. He had decided that there was only one way to get Fluttershy to talk to this newcomer, so he started gasping and making gestures indicating his thirst.

"Oh dear, I um..." Fluttershy turned to the purple unicorn that had addressed her before. "Would you happen to have any water you could share? I mean, if that's okay...I'm Fluttershy by the way..." She let out a small whimper at the end of her request.

"Oh right, water. Just a sec." Twilight looked over to her landspeeder and concentrated. Her horn started to glow, and the vehicle floated up in the air a few feet and then over to her. Fluttershy and Angel got up and moved to climb into the vehicle. "I don't have much with me, but there's more at my aunt and uncle's place."

"That would be wonderful", replied Fluttershy, climbing in after Angel, "you know, if they don't mind."

"Don't worry," Twilight said she levitated a water bottle to Angel, "everything'll be just fine. I hope..." She wasn't looking forward to telling her uncle how one of his vaporators overheated on her watch.

# Chapter 3

The conference table was as soulless and unyielding as the mood of the various aristocrats and officers surrounding it. Stormponies stood guard at the entrances to the room, which was poorly lit considering somepony might be expected to read in there. One of the newer arrivals was speaking; he exhibited an attitude of one who had been given their position in life. Senator Blueblood didn't have what one might call genius, but he did have a certain charisma that had helped to secure his position. The other things were best left unsaid in pleasant company. And though his uniform was neatly molded and his body cleaner than anypony else in the room, a certain sliminess clung to him, an inferred sensation rather than tactile. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, many respected him. Or feared him.

"I tell you, she has gone too far this time," Blueblood was insisting, "This 'Nightmare' inflicted on us at the urging of our Empress will be our undoing. Until the Great Sphere is operational, we shall be vulnerable."

An older pony, whose facial scars hinted at his experience, shifted in his chair. "Dangerous to your security fleet maybe, but not to this battle station. I think that-"

"Excuse me," ventured another Senator sitting across the table, "but why is this station called the Great Sphere anyway? Surely a more appropriate name could've been chosen."

"Because," began a worker pony introduced as Arnie, "when the Empress commissioned it she wanted it to be called 'The Great and Powerful Sphere', but unfortunately that wouldn't fit in the allotted space, so she was convinced to go with the shortened name."

"As I was saying," the general spoke up again, "I happen to think that Nightmare Moon knows what she's doing. The rebellion will only continue as long as they have a sanctuary to relax in and-"

"I have to disagree," rudely interrupted Blueblood, "The construction of this tacky ball is more to do with the Empress's ego and Governor Octavia's bid for personal power than any sort of military strategy."

"Then perhaps you would like to share your thoughts on what we should be doing instead, Senator," came a voice from the door. Everypony in the room fell silent and turned to face the sound.

The two ponies standing there were as different in appearance as they were united in cause. Nearest to Blueblood was a grey bodied earth pony with a face that hardly ever changed its stony expression. The Grand Moff Octavia, governor of numerous star systems, was dwarfed by the tall, slender bulk of Nightmare Moon. For a minute, she stared directly at Blueblood, who had been cowed into silence, and then looked away as if nothing had happened.

"Fillies and gentlecolts," Octavia began, a small smile forming on her lips, "I have just received word that the Great and Powerful Empress has dissolved the Imperial Senate; the last remnants of the Old Republic have been swept away."

"What?" exclaimed now former senator Blueblood, "How is that possible? How will she control the bureaucracy? WHAT AM I GOING TO DO FOR A LIVING?"

"I am sure you can think of something." Nightmare Moon was enjoying watching as the stallion's world crashed down around him.

"At any rate," continued Octavia, "regional governors now have direct control over their territories. From now on, *fear* will keep the populace in line, fear of this battle station."

"And what of the rebellion?" ventured somepony that Octavia didn't bother to identify.

"Any attack made against this station would be a useless gesture," began Blueblood, obviously trying to avoid his impending unemployment, "regardless of any technical data they have obtained. This station is now the ultimate power in the universe!"

"Don't be too proud of this technological terror you've *just* started supporting," responded Nightmare Moon with contempt, "the ability to destroy a planet is insignificant compared to the power of Discord."

"'Discord' and 'Friendship'," Blueblood sneered, "Don't try to frighten us with your sorcerous ways. Your sad devotion to that ancient religion hasn't allowed you to conjure up the stolen data tapes, or given you the clairvoyance to locate the hidden rebel ba-" Blueblood's eyes suddenly bulged and his hooves went to his throat as he began to turn blue.

"I find your lack of faith disturbing," ventured Nightmare mildly, her horn glowing black, "as I do your lack of respect."

"Enough of this; release him," ordered Octavia, "this bickering amongst ourselves is pointless." Nightmare Moon shrugged and released her hold on Blueblood's trachea. Blueblood slumped forward, rubbing his neck and looking with newfound fear at the night pony.

"Nightmare Moon will provide us with the location of the rebel's hidden fortress. That done, we will behead this pathetic rebellion in one swift stroke," declared Octavia, commanding attention, "Are there anymore objections?" One look at Blueblood dissuaded anypony's questions.

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"It just isn't fair!" Twilight Sparkle shouted as she slammed the door behind her. A sudden squeak reminded her that there were others in her room this time.

"I-Is there anything I can do to help?" meekly asked Fluttershy after a moment.

"Not unless you can use those wings and fly me off this rock," Twilight snapped back, before softening her expression. "Sorry; I'm not mad at you. I've just had a *really* bad day."

"It's okay but, um, why are you so upset?" Fluttershy asked, giving Angel a carrot.

"Well, when your pod flew over, I accidentally, uh, let one of Uncle Oaten's vaporators explode. I tried to tell him it wasn't exactly my fault, but he didn't

listen; he never listens." Twilight sighed, and then continued; "Now I'll have to go out there again tomorrow, instead of going to the library in Stableage. Honestly, I think he cares more about those vaporators than he does about me."

"Oh no!" Fluttershy began, "I mean, umm, I think he's just trying to help you learn about responsibility. Maybe, in my opinion I mean." At Twilight's look of incomprehension she continued, "You know, when I took care of animals back home, sometimes, I'd keep them in their cages so that they wouldn't get into other ponies' gardens. But I'd let them out to have fun if they promised not to go dig them up." She smiled wider as a look of comprehension dawned on the other mare's face. "Besides," she said, "it looks like you already have a library here."

"Oh, yes!" Twilight exclaimed quickly, "I have over two hundred titles ranging from archeology to zoology, and most topics in between. I've just been so excited when a new library opened up in Stableage that I wanted to see if they had any new books right away."

"Oh, that's...um, nice." Fluttershy stammered as looked at Angel for help. Angel just looked back up at her, still munching on his carrot. She turned back to Twilight hoping to be able to keep the conversation to topics that she could understand.

"So, if your family is made up of farmers, um, how did you get all of, umm," Fluttershy gestured around at the stacks of books all around the room, "these? You know, if you don't mind me asking."

"Well," Twilight slowly began, "I got a couple of books from simply asking around in the neighboring towns, but mostly they were given to me."

"Oh? Who gave them to you?" Fluttershy asked inquisitively, her curiosity making her forget for a minute that she was talking to a pony she met just hours ago.

"She's a strange hermit pony," Twilight explained, "Most ponies around here call her the Mare of the Sands, but I think she'd rather be called 'Celly'."



At the sound of the name, Angel almost gagged on what was left of his carrot. He started rummaging through his pack until he found a small metal disk, and as the two mares continued to talk, discreetly turned it on.

Both Twilight and Fluttershy jumped at the sound of the device beginning its playback (Fluttershy much higher) and turned to stare at it. A three dimensional image of a pony had suddenly materialized out of the projector on the floor. Twilight noted that, despite its superficial sharpness, it looked to have been recorded quickly and on a lower quality device than what was found at nearby holo-theaters. However, she was still enraptured by the snow white mare on the floor, and it was a few seconds before she found her voice again. "What-?" The question was never finished, as the image began to speak-seemed to speak, rather. Twilight recalled that the audio would be generated from a speaker concealed somewhere on the projector disk.

"Help me Celestia!" the mare's image implored, "Please please please please!" It looked off to the side before a burst of static momentarily disrupted her image. Momentarily it reappeared and repeated its dialog.

Twilight kept staring at the hologram for what seemed like to Fluttershy a short eternity as it continued to play and replay its message, so she asked, "Angel, what is that you have there?" Twilight finally tore her eyes away from the moving image to see Angel making a complicated series of gestures.

"Oh dear," Fluttershy turned to Twilight, "Maybe we should stop watching. Angel says it's a private message to a pony named 'Celestia' who lives somewhere nearby. I don't know anypony around here with that name, do you?"

"Not that I know of," said Twilight as Angel started banging his head on the wall softly, "Celly might know, but my uncle keeps running her off before I can get a chance to talk to her. Maybe we can visit her hut out west, but it would have to be after I help my uncle fix his vaporator."

"Twilight!" called a voice toward the kitchen, "it's time for dinner! Ask your new friends if they would join us please."

"Alright Aunt Mareu, we're coming!" Twilight called back, and then turned to Fluttershy. "So, do you want to come? We're having an alfalfa salad tonight."

"Oh I'd like some, thank you." responded Fluttershy, "Are you coming, Angel?" Angel glared at her for a few seconds before scooping up the holodisk and storming off. "I'll take that as a, no."

# Chapter 4

"He's gone!"

The first words that greeted Twilight Sparkle as she returned to her room were ones of panic; Fluttershy had excused herself a few minutes early from dinner, and seemed to have used them to search every nook and cranny in her bedroom. "What do you mean? Who's gone?" she asked, unintentionally beginning to mirror the yellow pegasus.

"Angel won't come out, and I've tried everything I know. I've tried calling, and begging, and beseeching, and asking politely, and-", Fluttershy started before noticing an open window, "You don't think he could've gone outside do you?"

"Oh no," Now Twilight really started to panic, looking at a clock on the wall, "Nononononono! He can't go outside *now*!"

"W-Why not? If you don't mind me asking, that is" inquired Fluttershy, her curiosity overriding her panic.

"There's all sorts of crazy things that come out at night here!" Twilight was hysterical, "He could be eaten by a hydra! Or grabbed by scavenger ponies and sold as some sort of exotic pet! Or..." She stopped as she noticed her paranoid ramblings were bringing Fluttershy to tears. The sight came close to making Twilight follow suit, how did this pony have that effect on her, she wondered. Putting the thought out of her mind, as well as fifty more horrible scenarios that Angel could find himself in, and put a comforting hoof around Fluttershy.

"Don't worry, that probably *won't* happen," she said, earning a small smile from the pegasus, "Besides, Angel's smart, and he's small; he can hide if things get too dangerous out there. Still, first thing in the morning we'd better go looking for him."

"You don't think he went out to find the 'Celestia' from the holo-recording, do you?" Fluttershy asked, wiping her hoof across the tears in her eyes.

"I don't know, but it's an excellent place to start," Twilight responded while searching her shelves for a local map before turning back, "Angel will be fine; try to get some sleep Fluttershy, we'll have to get up early tomorrow if we want to find him and get back before Uncle finds out." Fluttershy found herself thinking Twilight was being a little too optimistic.

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Sand and dust was kicked into a fog as Twilight's landspeeder raced across Tolfetoine's dunes. Twilight alternated her focus between piloting the craft and making sure Fluttershy was correctly using a bio-scanner she had...acquired from her uncle's tool shed. Despite her previous optimism, Twilight couldn't help but think to what he would say when they got back; it would probably involve things like "shirking your duties" and "I thought I raised you better" and other things that she'd heard a hundred times before. Twilight suddenly felt a hoof on her shoulder bringing her out of her inner thoughts.

"I'm sorry, I really don't know but, um, could that be Angel Bunny here", Fluttershy was just barely audible over the whine of the engine as she pointed at the sensor display. Twilight looked over at the blip on the screen.

"We won't be able to tell at this distance," she advised, "I think from the size alone it could be him. Let's go!" As she accelerated the landspeeder towards their new destination, neither pony was aware of two ponies tracking them from the ridge.

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If this planet had any, Angel was sure there would be airborne scavengers circling above him, waiting for him to drop dead of dehydration. He was fortunate to have found a mesa on his journey so far, but was silently berating himself for not swiping a canteen before leaving. So intent was he on his self-depreciation that he didn't notice the sound of a vehicle pull up behind him. He only became aware of his new visitors when a pair of hooves came and grabbed him from behind.

"Oh Angel, I was so worried about you!" came a familiar voice as Angel struggled to free himself from his captor. Hearing Fluttershy's touching concern was enough for Angel to stop from twisting around to start

strangling the newcomers, but he decided he was going to put up a fight anyway on principle.

"Just where did you think you were going?" came the agitated voice of her companion, whom Angel remembered was called Twilight Sparkle. Before he could think of a way of reply, Fluttershy had interrupted again.

"How could you just run away from us like that? You could have gotten eaten by some big scary monster, or hunted for food by some mean smuggler pony, or even hurt your little bunny paws." Fluttershy's gushing over him was getting to be quite enough in Angel's opinion; luckily the other mare spoke up, causing the fawning to cease for a moment.

"Not much chance of that now," she giggled at the show of affection, "Come on, we need to get back before Uncle Oaten really chews me out for b-"

Angel had detected a strange, seeming dangerous presence on the other side of the ridge opposite of the mesa he had taken shelter near. The moment Fluttershy had set him down he began to gesticulate wildly in the hope that one of the ponies would notice and take action that could save their lives. Instead, the purple unicorn in front of him just looked confused.

"What's wrong with him now?" she turned to ask Fluttershy.

"I'm not sure," she responded, looking down at the rabbit, "He's usually not this excited. Is there something you're trying to tell us?" Angel continued pointing in the direction of the ridge with a note of budding panic. "Are you pointing because there's water over the ridge?" Angel shook his head quickly before resuming his frantic pointing. "I-Is there something scary out there?" Angel responded with a short nod.

"Well, let's check it out," the unicorn responded, levitating her binoculars out of the landspeeder and doing the exact opposite thing that Angel wanted to do. Angel could do nothing but facepalm at the purple mare's cluelessness. He decided to do the smart thing instead and find a nice crack in the mesa wall to hide in while the two ponies, he was certain, were climbing straight into danger. His fears were soon validated as a massive pony, bandaged from head to hoof, suddenly rose up from behind the ridge and let out a decidedly non-pony-like roar. As expected, Fluttershy fainted immediately with her characteristic bleating. The other pony-Twilight, he

reminded himself- fared little better, as a swift kick from the monstrous thing before her sent her rolling back down the hill. She stopped at the bottom, motionless.

Neither the sandpony that had attacked them nor the other one that had come around the ridge had noticed Angel, which was how he liked it. However, he wasn't sure if these new ponies were scavengers of metal or of flesh, or if they liked the taste of live animals. Luckily, they seemed to have no interest in the two unconscious ponies around them as they went straight to their mode of transportation. Supplies and parts were tossed in all directions, sometimes pausing when the two squabbled over a choice bit of booty.

Unexpectedly, a loud, animalistic roar sounded down the canyon. The sandponies stopped their current argument and fearfully looked around for the source of the noise. When it sounded again, nearer this time, they galloped as fast as they could in the direction they had come, uttering grunts and moans of fright. The sound had no meaning to Angel, who nonetheless tried to squeeze further into his tiny alcove; if the approaching thing did eat bunnies, he wasn't going to be easy to get at. A dark shape, smaller than Angel had expected, rose over the dune guarding the entrance to the canyon; it was tall, but hardly monstrous. Angel frowned inwardly as he shuffled around for a better look. Features became recognizable to the bunny as it loomed closer: a shabby cloak, and four white hooves, a pony? The figure bent down at the purp-Twilight, seeming to check for any serious injuries, before moving on to Fluttershy. Angel tried to silently move out of the crack, but before he could get very far a pebble dislodged from the wall. The figure suddenly turned around and gazed at him. Slowly, it lowered its hood, revealing a long horn and an even longer pastel rainbow-colored mane, flowing in the non-existent breeze.

"Hello there, my friend," she spoke, "There's no need be afraid now."

# Chapter 5

"Ugh, my head," Twilight moaned as she finally woke up. She found herself lying on a bench in a small hut, which was odd since the last thing she remembered was being outside, with two hind legs stretching out to-

"Ouch!" Twilight grimaced as she started feeling the various scrapes and bruises that came with being bucked and rolling down a rocky incline.

"My little pony, you're awake!" a voice almost sang from kitchen. A large white unicorn pony with a sun as her cutie mark seemed to glide into to room to stand beside Twilight as the latter started to get up. "Rest easy, dear. You've had quite the adventure this morning, haven't you."

"Cel-?" The voice had snapped Twilight awake, "Celly? Am I glad to see you!"

"As am I," Celly replied, "I am also glad you're uninjured; It's a foalish pony who tempts the hospitality of sandponies. But I am curious as to what brings you this far out into nowhere."

Twilight's eyes slowly swept around the room until they settled on the still unconscious form of Fluttershy and the very conscious Angel Bunny. "That rabbit," she eventually said, "that *crazy* bunny managed to trick me into leaving a window open, drag me all the way to the middle of nowhere, and nearly got me killed by sandponies *just* so he could find *you*." Twilight had finally had enough of Angel's mischief, but before she could continue to vent Celly moved over to Fluttershy's couch.

"She'll be alright," Celly comforted the rabbit as she smoothly trotted to the yellow pegasus, "She just fainted from surprise, but I think I can help with that." With that she bent down by the sleeping mare's ear and whispered something.

"EEP!" Fluttershy leapt off the couch she was on and crashed into the wall behind her. Twilight gasped at how Celly was able to just wake somepony up like that. Her mind tried to begin figuring out how the event could've

happened, but an aching in her head reminded her that it would be best not to try.

"Gotcha!" Celly laughed, before turning back to inspect Angel. "So, why were you trying to meet me here in my humble abode?"

"He claims to have a message for a 'Celestia'," Twilight spoke up, "but I've never heard of such a pony. Is it a relative of yours?"

A smile crept across Celly's snout as she stared wistfully off into space. "Celestia," she recited, "Now that's a name I haven't heard in a very long time."

"Celestia isn't dead, is she?" Twilight noted that Celly seemed to be walking down the paths of memories long gone.

"Oh no Twilight," Celly corrected easily, "She's not dead, not yet."

"So, you do know her, or you don't?" Twilight asked.

"Of course I know her: she's me", Celly answered spreading her wings, which Twilight realized she had never noticed before. "I haven't gone by the name *Celestia* for a long time. Since before you were born, in fact."

"So we did find you? YES!" Twilight jumped up and started bouncing around a table in the center of the room. "Yes yes yes yes yes yeeesssss!"

"Calm down Twilight," chuckled Celestia, "You're scaring your friend here."

"Um, it's okay," Fluttershy finally spoke for the first time since being woken up, "If, you know, she really wants to do that, I mean." Twilight calmed down regardless.

"Sorry," she apologized sheepishly, "but now we can figure out what that message is that Angel's been carrying this whole time."

"Well, let's have a look then, shall we?" Celestia motioned towards the table that Angel was already setting up the projection disk. Twilight eagerly sat on the vacant couch and scooted over to allow Celestia to sit with her. Celestia accepted the invitation gracefully and watched as the recording finally started.



"Dearest Celestia," the snow mare's projection had started again, "I am Rarity, princess of the planet Aldermare. Years ago, you fought with my father in the last Great Equestrian War. Now he begs you to help him in his struggle against the Empony.

"I regret that I was unable to present his request in person. Alas, my ship has fallen under attack, and I will be unable to bring you to Aldermare personally. In lieu of this, I have given information vital to the survival of the Rebellion into the...erm, paws, of the rabbit before you. You must see him safely to Aldermare, you must, you must, you MUST!" The message abruptly paused, startling Twilight until an automated message emanated from the disk.

"To view the rest of this message, please flip the disk over to side B." Twilight's jaw dropped at the absurdity as Angel scrambled over and turned the holo-projector over.

"Help me Celestia!" Rarity's image flickered back into view, right where she left off, "Please, please please please!" Once again she looked over to the side as the message ended. Silence lingered in the room afterwards.

"Wait," Twilight finally broke the silence, "you managed to trick me into telling you where to find Celly just by playing the second side of the tape?" Angel just gave a nod which was equal parts sheepish and smug. Twilight just stared stupidly at him; how did this creature foal her with such an obvious trick? It was obvious wasn't it?

"Twilight, please pick your jaw up off my table." Celestia said after a few more seconds. Twilight immediately clammed up, but then a new thought came to her.

"She said you fought in the last Great Equestrian War?" Twilight asked, gesturing at the now inactive holo-disk.

"Yes, she did," Celestia responded, "It was a long time ago. I was a Knight of Harmony once, same as your mother."

"Mom never fought in any wars," Twilight countered, "she was a simple navigator on a hay freighter." Celestia laughed lightly at Twilight's confusion before continuing.

"That's what your uncle told you? He never did agree with your mother. Neither really got along. He believed that your mother should've stayed on Tolfetoine and not gotten involved..." Her voice trailed off in remembrance. Neither Twilight nor Fluttershy said anything. Angel couldn't say anything if he wanted to.

"Oaten was always afraid your mother's adventurous life might influence you into leaving as well," Celestia shook her head, "There wasn't much of a farmer in your mother."

"I wish I knew her," was all Twilight said. She suddenly felt Fluttershy's comforting hoof on her shoulder.

"She was the best pilot I'd ever known," Celestia continued, "and a smart fighter. The mag...the instinct was strong with her." Celestia looked older now than Twilight had ever seen her before. "She was a also good friend."

"How," Twilight looked down, hesitant to ask, "How did my mom die?" She stole a look at Fluttershy, whose eyes were wider than she'd ever seen them, before looking straight back at Celestia.

Celestia looked like she didn't want to talk about the subject. After a while though she answered heavily, "She was betrayed and murdered, by Nightmare Moon, my brightest pupil, and my greatest failure."

She continued slowly, "Nightmare Moon used the training I gave her and the magic within her for Discord, and to help the corrupt Empress. Sometimes, I wonder what she was after. Perhaps we may never know. Such may be the destiny of one who masters the Magic of Friendship and turns to its dark side."

Twilight's face twisted in confusion. "The Magic of Friendship? I've never read anything about that."

Celestia smiled and nodded. "I sometimes forget in whose presence I babble. The Magic of Friendship is what gives a Knight of Harmony her power. Usually, it gives a boost to the natural magic that all ponies possess."

Celestia looked straight at Twilight, making her fidget uncomfortably before saying, "You must learn the Magic of Friendship also, if you are to come with me to Aldermare."

"What?" Twilight jumped up, "Nonono, I can't go to Aldermare. I need to go home. It's late, and I'm likely in more trouble now than I was this morning!"

"I need your help Twilight," Celestia explained, her voice barely kept back from rising, "I'm getting too old for this. I can't trust myself to finish it on my own. This is far too important for one pony, even one such as myself."

"But I have stuff to *do*. I can't get involved with anything like that." Twilight was now hurriedly pacing around the hut. "I've got work to do. I mean even if Uncle Oaten broke down a little and hired some extra help. I mean one, I guess. But there's still nothing I can do about it now. Besides, it's such a long way from here. Frankly, I think this whole thing is really none of my business."

"That's your uncle talking." Celestia observed.

"My uncle...how am I going to explain all of this to him? 'Hi uncle! Just stopped by to tell you that I'm leaving to fight the Empony! Bye!'" Twilight stopped to catch her breath.

Celestia started quietly, "Twilight, the suffering of one pony is the suffering of all. Distance is irrelevant to injustice. Discord and evil will eventually reach out to engulf all life if not stopped soon enough. Please?" Celestia wasn't used to asking for help like this, but she hoped it would be enough to convince Twilight.

"I *guess* I can take you to Stableage," Twilight confessed, "You can get a transport there to wherever you're going."

"All right," agreed Celestia, "That's a start. But then you must do what you feel is *right*."

"Right," Twilight turned away, "Right now, I feel sick..." She then ran off to find the bathroom.

# Chapter 6

"Um, Twilight?" timidly asked Fluttershy, gesturing slightly to left as the landspeeder carried the trio of ponies (and one rabbit) speedily towards Twilight's home. "Do you see that scary cloud of black smoke?"

"Oh yeah, but what's so scary about it?" Twilight contemplated just ignoring it. Anymore time spent away from Uncle Oaten's moisture farm meant more punishment to her, as far as she was concerned.

"Well, um..." Fluttershy hesitantly spoke, "Smoke like that usually means fire, and, um, somepony could be hurt..." Her voice trailed off as if she was trying hard not to think about what she just said.

"I agree; we should go over and make sure nopony's injured." Celestia interrupted Twilight's protest.

"Fine," is what Twilight wanted to say, but as they got closer the sheer amount of smoke coming from beyond the slight rise caused her sarcasm to give way to concern. She let out a gasp of surprise as they cleared it; before them lay a shallow canyon littered with the twisted and burnt forms of ponies and machinery. Strewn about the carnage were several large, tracked vehicles that Twilight recognized as hay transports.

Twilight brought the speeder to a complete stop, and everypony jumped out into the sand and began to survey the destruction. Before long, several depressions in the sand caught Twilight's attention. Trotting a bit faster, she came up to them and looked for a moment before calling back to her companions.

"Looks like a group of sandponies did it. I found their hoofprints..." Twilight spotted a shaft of a metal axe sticking out of the sand. She levitated it out of the ground with her magic, "...and one of their weapons." Dropping the axe, she shook her head in confusion. "This doesn't make any sense: sandponies have been known to raid caravans before, but I've never heard of them completely wrecking one like this."

Celestia passed by, looking at the ruined trucks. "That's because they didn't," she casually declared.

Twilight was almost dumbfounded. "Huh?"

"But we, and anypony else I imagine, are meant to think so."

"Huh?"

"Come here," Celestia said giving a patient smile, "While these are indeed sandpony tracks, do you notice anything strange about them?" Twilight looked intently at the tracks, searching for something she missed before, but came up empty. "Whoever left these was traveling side by side; Sandponies always canter in single file, to hide their numbers."

Leaving Twilight to gape at the revelation, Celestia turned back to the hay trucks. She peeked into one of them, before quickly pulling her snout back. "Sandponies would also take care not to burn all of the hay in here," she managed to cough. Clearing her throat, she continued, "And here: see where the doors and treads have been shot off their mountings? No pony on Tolfetooine has shown this kind of precision firepower before; I'd be surprised if anypony here had the kinds of weapons required." Celestia started to scan the horizon, searching for a potential threat. "Only imperial stormponies are so well equipped," she finally said heavily, causing Fluttershy to shrink back even more than usual.

"Ugh, stormponies. Could this day get any worse?" Twilight muttered. She saw another depression in the sand, shallower and wider than the hoofprints she'd found earlier. It was also far longer too, she thought, continuing both ways into the distance. One way lead out to a familiar looking mesa, the other lead back to...home.

"Celestia!" she shouted, "This looks like my landspeeder's wake from when we came looking for Angel." She looked up to see Celestia come as close to jumping in surprise as she'd ever come. "Oh, sorry, I didn't realize you were right here."

"That's quite alright, Twilight, please continue." Celestia said as she regained her composure.

"Well, the ponies that attacked this convoy seemed to be following the wake left by my landspeeder's engines. That means..." Twilight stopped talking as she realized the full implications of what she was about to say. A look of horror appeared as she continued, "T-That means...they could've...followed...it...home." She shot off towards the landspeeder.

"Twilight, wait! It's too dangerous! Stop!" Celestia called out after Twilight.

Twilight heard nothing more than the pounding of her own heart as she threw the accelerator to full. In a small explosion of sand and dust, she had left Celestia, Fluttershy, and Angel standing alone, amidst the smoldering wreck of the convoy.

---

The smoke that Twilight saw as she pulled up to the homestead poured from holes in the ground. Holes that had been her home, the only one she'd ever known. She leaped out of the landspeeder and galloped for the front door. Again and again she tried enter, again and again she was repelled by heat and smoke, coughing and choking.

Weakly she found herself stumbling towards the garage, eyes watering. It too was burning, but there was another landspeeder that they could've escaped in.

"Uncle Oaten...Aunt Mareu!" It was hard to see in the eye-stinging haze, but Twilight saw two smoking shapes inside. She angrily wiped the tears from her eyes and squinted harder. The shapes almost looked like...

No.

Twilight ran back to the landspeeder, but only made it halfway before collapsing in tears. It was all she could do to lay flat on her belly, and bury her face in the sand so she wouldn't have to look anymore.

---

A solid screen filled with stars filled one wall of the vast chamber. Even this tiny portion of the galaxy was an impressive display when exhibited in such a fashion. Nightmare Moon entered the room to stand beside Octavia and Blueblood, who was sufficiently intimidated by the Dark Mare's presence into taking one step away.

"The final checkout is complete," came a voice from the intercom, "All systems are operational."

"Wonderful!" cried Blueblood, "Where shall we take our new battlestation?"

Nightmare Moon appeared not to have heard as he mumbled, half to himself, "She has a surprising amount of control. Her resistance to interrogation is considerable." She rubbed an ear with one hoof as she looked down at Octavia. "It may be sometime before I can extract any useful information from her."

"I've always found your methods rather...quaint." Octavia smirked back.

"They are effective," Nightmare argued, before wincing at the memory, "usually."

"Then perhaps we need a change of tactics," Octavia mused, "Such stubbornness may be worked around by applying the threats to ponies other than the one being interrogated."

"...I'm listening." Nightmare Moon scowled at everything in the room.

"I think, it is time we demonstrated the full power of this Great and *Powerful* Sphere," Octavia began. She turned and stalked over to Blueblood, who tried his best not to back down before her advance. "Set our course for Aldermare."

---

There was a shrill whine as a orb of light, shining as if a third sun had dropped down to the windswept surface, appeared near the still smoking farmhouse. The orb expanded to reveal Celestia, Fluttershy, and Angel, the latter two looking shocked at the state of their new surroundings.

"It's been awhile since I've had to use that spell," Celestia muttered before calling back to her companions, "I see her landspeeder; Twilight should be nearby."

"O-ok," Fluttershy replied as she took to the air to look for the purple mare. Angel hopped directly for the landspeeder; the sand here didn't agree with his paws, he had decided. He peered out over the sand dunes towards the house, not knowing exactly what to look for, but he had to try. He knew that

Fluttershy would blame herself for the unfortunate events that had befallen her new friend; deep down, he also knew it was more of his fault. If he hadn't convinced Fluttershy to accept her assistance, the deaths here could've been avoided after all. The first thing he was going to do, Angel decided, was to make an effort to remember that mare's name; second, he was going to give her a hug as an apology for all of the trouble that they- no, he had caused.

He looked back towards the house and spotted something in the sand: something vaguely pony shaped. Thinking that this was the pony they were looking for, he hopped off of his perch and towards the shape. Fluttershy and Celestia both saw him go at the same time and landed just behind him as he brushed off a thin layer of sand. Revealed was a dark purple tail.

"Oh Twilight," Celestia spoke, grabbing the appendage and giving a gentle tug, "this is no time to bury your head in the sand." She managed to pull Twilight out of her sand blanket, but not out of her sorrow; the lavender unicorn continued to stare straight ahead.

"I share your sadness," Celestia continued, "There was nothing you could've done. If you had stayed here, you'd be dead too. And your new friends would be in the hooves of the Empony." Twilight murmured something into the sand at this, but didn't care if she was understood. Celestia made to speak again, but stopped as she saw Angel slowly walk up to Twilight and put his paws around her in the best hug he could manage in that position.

"I'm sorry Twilight; I feel awful, just awful," Fluttershy said as she joined Angel to give Twilight a hug, "No pony should have to go through what you have today, no pony." Twilight sat up at her touch.

"Celestia," she finally said, staring straight ahead, "I'll take you to the spaceport at Morab Eisley. I want to go with you- to Aldermare. I want to learn the Magic of Friendship and be a Knight of Harmony...like mom. I want..." She found that she couldn't continue.

Celestia put a hoof on Twilight's shoulder as the other two let go. "I'll do my best to see that you get what you want. But are you sure you want to go to Morab Eisley? There is no greater hive of scum and villainy around after all."



Twilight rose to her hooves, her previous face replaced by one of determination. "I'm ready for anything," she declared as she walked over to the landspeeder, "This day can't possibly get any worse."

# Chapter 7

This day just got worse, thought Twilight upon spying a stormpony checkpoint guarding the road into the spaceport town of Morab Easley. Remembering what had happened to the hay caravan and her home, she considered turning her landspeeder around to go looking for another spaceport. She felt a firm nudge and looked over to Celly in the passenger seat, who gave her a comforting smile.

Earlier, before entering the landspeeder at the homestead, Celestia had insisted on disguising her appearance (so as not to stick out more than anypony else, she had said). She was now no bigger than Twilight or Fluttershy, with a mane and tail that no longer flowed in the wind, whether or not there was any to begin with. It was a relatively simple spell, and it didn't change the colors of her mane and tail, nor did it hide her nature as an alicorn. Putting her cloak back on had solved these problems, or so they hoped.

As they pulled up to the checkpoint, Angel hopped down under the seat he was sitting on. One of the troopers motioned with an armored hoof to pull over to the side for inspection; Twilight had no choice but to comply. Her heart was pounding furiously as the trooper walked up, his face unreadable behind his helmet.

"The Empony has ordered a search of all vehicles and containers for illegal contraband," the stormpony recited with practiced ease as he examined the landspeeder, "Do you have any items to declare?"

"Just the portable library," Celly responded calmly, opening the shelved box before Twilight could say anything, revealing it to be stuffed with books of all sizes. Twilight continued to stare straight ahead, and hoping nopony noticed how nervous she was. Fluttershy was looking at her forehooves, too scared to make eye contact with anypony.

The trooper circled around the back of the vehicle, not deigning to reply. "Did you come in from the south?" he asked as he continued past where Celly was sitting.

"What? No. Nonono. We come from the north; you know, towards Boerstine?" Twilight answered uneasily.

"Uh huh," responded the armored pony, studying the front. Twilight plastered a nervous grin on her face, as the trooper finished his examination and stood ominously close to her.

"I'm going to have to ask you to step out of the vehicle," the trooper snapped. He raised his weapon to point at Twilight's face. "Right now," he added sinisterly.

Twilight panicked; surely this stormpony knew they were hiding something. Various thoughts shot through her mind; would they be locked in a dungeon? What would happen if they found Angel's recording? Would they just be shot on the side of the road for all to see?

"HOW DARE YOU!" Twilight blinked and turned her head to observe Fluttershy, now flying within inches of the stormpony's masked face. She was bristling with a fury that Twilight had never seen before.

"Just who do you think you are, pointing your gun at innocent ponies like that?" Fluttershy continued to berate the trooper, "Somepony could get hurt if you kept doing that."

"Wha-?" the trooper responded dumbly.

"You should be ashamed of yourself! I have half a mind to find your commander, and tell him how irresponsible you've been."

"But-" The stormpony backed up. He was finding it difficult to take any action at all under the withering gaze of the yellow pegasus staring into his very soul.

"Don't you 'But' me, mister. Now, you are going to apologize to my friend Twilight. Right. Now. And then you are going to let us go about our business. Do you understand me?"

"Erm..." The trooper couldn't tear himself away from the fearsome pair of eyes before him. His squad mates were equally intimidated by the formally passive pegasus.

"I said: Do you understand me?" Fluttershy repeated, intensifying her stare.

The hardened combat veteran nodded meekly, and slowly rose to his hooves. Twilight and Celly both stared blankly at Fluttershy as the trooper shuffled up to them; neither of them quite believing what they had just witnessed.

"I'm sorry about that; you're free to go," the stormpony muttered quickly as Fluttershy settled herself back in her seat, glaring at him. When Twilight didn't move, he added, "Now!" hastily. Twilight nodded politely at the trooper, and accelerated away. As they left, he missed Angel popping up from his hiding place to blow him a giant raspberry.

Twilight drove her landspeeder towards an older section of the city. No pony said a word as she guided the craft through the narrow and winding streets of Morab Eisley. Celly seemed to have an idea of where they were headed, though, as she pointed out a seemingly random cantina in the myriad of tan-colored blockhouses. Twilight quickly parked her vehicle in an open spot, and turned back to Fluttershy.

"Okay, back at the stormponies: what the hay did you do?" she asked Fluttershy, who shrank back.

"I'm also curious; please, tell us," Celly added.

"Well," Fluttershy explained, "sometimes, when I'm really upset with a creature or pony, I sort of lose control of myself and, just, look at them in the eye. My friends like to call it 'The Stare', but I don't like doing it much; I don't even really have any control over when that happens. It just happens."

"You have a very special gift," Celly commented as the group exited the landspeeder and started walking into the cantina, "Not many ponies can claim to stare down a masked and armored pony and win after all."

Fluttershy mumbled her thanks as they approached the door, but then stopped when they saw a sign that had been posted: NO PETS ALLOWED.

"Seriously?" Twilight asked no one in particular.

"Oh," Fluttershy sighed, "I'll stay with Angel, you know, out here."

"You sure you'll be ok by yourself?" Twilight asked with concern. Fluttershy nodded uncertainly. "Okay, be careful you two," she finished as she followed Celly inside.

---

Twilight squinted as she entered the cantina. It was darker than she had expected. Perhaps it was to keep the interior temperature from rising, or the ponies here would rather not be seen clearly. It never occurred to Twilight that the dim interior combined with the brightly lit entrance would allow everypony inside to see each newcomer before he could see them.

Once inside, Celly leaned close to Twilight. "The ponies over there seem like a good place to start," she said, gesturing towards the far wall where several tables full of pegasi were animatedly telling stories to one another.

"Do you really think one of them can take us to Aldermare?" Twilight asked incredulously.

"I do, if the price is right," Celly replied. "This place can get a bit rough. Please wait for me at the bar, I won't be long."

Twilight nodded as Celly worked her way through the crowd. One of the pegasi immediately welcomed her with a drink before engaging her in conversation.

Continuing to the bar, Twilight's eyes surveyed the room. Ponies of every size, shape, and color seemed to be making use of the establishment; there were even some creatures that clearly weren't ponies. A white unicorn with shades was working a turntable at the far corner, being the most likely source of the techno beat pervading the place. A brown stallion nearby seemed to be examining a crack in the bar with an unknown tool while a light purple mare watched what he was doing intently. Over at a nearby table, she saw a light blue mare with a brass instrument obscuring her cutie mark sitting with a darker blue stallion; they were presumably the next ponies in line to entertain, Twilight mused. As she passed by a trio of ponies with flowers for their marks, she noted that other ponies seemed to keep to themselves mostly. Twilight quickly picked a spot at the bar and sat down next to a plum colored mare, who had her face on the counter and

surrounded by empty shot glasses. Twilight shook her head before ordering a non-alcoholic beverage and proceeding to search the room for Celly again.

Twilight found Celly talking to a rather large, red stallion. She had evidently just pointed out Twilight, given that the stallion had looked up towards her. Twilight briefly wondered what was going through his head as he lowered his head back down to Celly without saying a word. She trusted that Celly knew what she was doing, however. She turned back to the bar where her drink had just arrived.

"Hey!" A voice came from below her. Twilight was startled out of her thoughts as she searched the floor for the source of the shout. Her eyes found two colts: one short and blue, the other taller and gold colored.

"You're sitting in our favorite spot!" shouted the shorter one, pointing an accusing hoof at Twilight. The noise level in the cantina had dropped noticeably since he had started talking.

"I'm sorry, but, who are you?" Twilight asked, hoping to steer the conversation in a direction that would hopefully calm the two irate colts.

The taller one spoke this time. "Oh hi, I'm Snails, and he's Snips. Who're you?"

"Nice to meet you; I'm Twilight Sparkle," Twilight replied quickly, hoping that her plan of calming down the colts would work.

"Yeah, well, I don't like you!" Snips snapped.

"Yeah, I don't like you either, eh," Snails joined in.

So much for that plan, thought Twilight as she slipped out of the barstool. Snips and Snails advanced on her threateningly. She didn't know if they were actually capable of hurting her, but she didn't want to take her chances; that usually ended up badly for her. "I'm sorry?" was all she could say.

"You'd better be sorry," Snips sneered, "We know enough magic to make you wish you'd never crossed our paths."

"Eh, we do?" Snails asked his cohort. "Oh yah, we do," he corrected himself when Snips glared back at him, "Let's show her!"

"There's going to be a bar-fight! The horror, the horror!" cried one of the pink flower ponies Twilight had passed by earlier as the crowd gave the confrontation a wide berth.

"This little one isn't worth the trouble," a calm voice beside Twilight said. Twilight looked, startled; she hadn't noticed Celly come up from behind her. "Let me buy the two of you something. Do you like banana smoothies?"

By way of reply Snips unleashed a wave of force from his horn at Twilight. It didn't hurt, but it caught her unprepared, sending her flying into a table. She cried out as she was drenched in tea.

That spurred the heretofore neutral barpony into action. He came clumsily around the edge of the bar shouting "No magic, no magic! Not in my place!" Snails looked lazily at him before charging his horn to back Snips up.

In the split second Snails' attention was on the barpony and Snips was watching Twilight sail through the air, Celly's horn was aglow with a powerful spell. There was a loud crack and a bright flash of light as she unleashed her power. When it was over, Celestia was no longer cloaked pony sized hermit. She stood as a full grown alicorn, her wings spread, and her eyes daring anypony else to come and challenge her. And where Snips and Snails had stood, no pony was there. If somepony had walked in then, they could've sworn there was no pony there to begin with.

Celestia sighed and folded her wings. That final movement broke the silence gripping the rest of the ponies there. Conversation resumed, as did the movement of ponies at tables, the scraping of mugs and cups on tabletops, and the music from the turntable. To all appearances, the cantina had returned to its normal state, with one exception: Celestia was being given a respectful amount of space.

Twilight barely heard the renewed conversation. She was still shaken from her flight into a table and by Celestia's unimagined abilities.

"Are you alright, Twilight?" asked a concerned Celestia above her.

"I think so," Twilight answered truthfully. She looked back at where Snips and Snails had been standing. "What did you do to them?"

"I sent them to the moon," Celestia replied simply as Twilight stood up.

"But...this planet doesn't have a moon," observed Twilight.

"Hmm..." Celestia looked thoughtful for a moment before shrugging.

"This is Big Macintosh," she said, changing the subject and gesturing to the large red pony she'd been talking to earlier. "He's the first mate on a ship that might suit our needs. He'll take us to her captain now."

"Eeyup," the stallion nodded. They started to wind their way deeper into the building, the two larger ponies parting the crowd like a knife through bread.

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#### Author's Notes:

All characters from My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic are all owned by Hasbro, Inc.

Original story Star Wars: A New Hope by George Lucas

Let's play name that pony! Other than the barpony, everypony should be a background character from the show. See if you can identify everypony in the cantina by name.

---

#### BONUS SCENE!

The first thing Snips noticed when he awoke was the sound of critters quietly chirping. The second thing he noticed was that was the only sound he heard. Somehow, both he and Snails had been transported to a forest.

"Snails, wake up!" Snips prodded his friend with his hoof.

"Just five more minutes, mommy," Snails mumbled, rolling over. Exasperated, Snips started poking him with his horn. "Okay, I'm up, eh."



Standing up, they both took in there new surroundings. The climate was much more temperate then they were used too. The trees that surrounded them seemed to go on forever in every direction. Presently, Snails glimpsed a small round bug with large eyes looking at him from atop a rotting log.

"Hey, check this out," exclaimed Snails as he approached the small creature. The creature smiled and chirped at him. "Sweet."

Snips watched as more of the creatures appeared, hundreds more. They appeared from behind seemingly every tree, log, and rock that he could see.

"Hey, Snails, are you thinking what I'm thinking?" he asked.

"Why is it that every planet in the galaxy only has one biome?" replied Snails, still staring at the first creature.

"Yea, what?" Snips coughed in surprise. "No, I think we aren't in Morab Eisley anymore."

"Well duh," Snails said turning around to look at him. He finally noticed the other creatures that were slowly surrounding the two of them. "Do they look hungry?"

"I don't wanna find out!" cried Snips in a sudden panic, "come on!" Snips galloped further into the forest, with Snails close behind. Neither of them looked back to see the horde of parasprites chasing them.

# Chapter 8

Twilight looked around as they went deeper into the structure, noticing how everypony was giving her group a wide berth. She had supposed that, between an alicorn and a massive stallion, most ponies would want to keep their distance. Especially now since the story of what Celestia had done to those two colts back at the bar was starting to get around.

"We don't usually see magic like that 'round these parts," Big Macintosh, or Big Mac as he preferred to be called, was explaining, "Most folks here are downright suspicious of it."

At a rear booth, they encountered a cyan-blue pegasus mare with a mane and tail that sported all of the colors of the rainbow. She displayed the openness of the supremely confident-or the insanely reckless; Twilight felt that those two adjectives were pretty much the same anyway.

Big Macintosh, whispered something into her ear, and she shot up right into Celestia's face.

"Omigosh omigosh omigosh! You're that pony that I've been hearing about! That stunt you pulled with those colts? Priceless!" She spoke a mile a minute and it was all Twilight could do to keep track of it all. Big Mac cleared his throat.

"Oh, right," she calmed down and settled back into her booth while Twilight and Celestia joined her. "The name's Rainbow Dash, best flyer in all of the galaxy. And I hear *you're* looking for a ship to Aldermare."

"That's right, if it's on a fast ship." Celestia told him.

"Fast ship? You mean you've never even *heard* of the *Sonic Rainboom*?"

Celestia appeared to be amused. "I'm afraid I haven't."

"It's the ship that made the Corral Run in ten. Parsecs. Flat." Rainbow stated with flourish.

Twilight spoke up. "Wait a minute: a parsec is a unit of distance, not time. How can you call yourself a starship captain without knowing that?" With everypony looking at her she continued, "Also, the Corral Run is 18 parsecs long. There's no possible way you could've done it in ten."

Rainbow stuttered, "Yeah? Well...do you want your ship or not?"

"Yes!" Celestia said quickly before Twilight could say anymore to alienate their best shot to Aldermare. Giving her a stern look, she continued, "We only have passengers. Myself, Twilight, a pegasus Fluttershy, her pet rabbit Angel-and no questions asked."

"No questions, huh?" Rainbow smirked. "This isn't some kinda local trouble is it?"

"Let's just say we'd like to avoid any...complications with the Galactic Empony." Celestia replied easily.

"Hey, no problem! I *am* the number one flyer in the galaxy, no matter what anypony says." She gave a sideways glance at Twilight before continuing, "Still, it'll cost you extra: ten thousand, in advance, with no questions asked."

"Ten thousand bits!" Twilight stammered, "We might be able to find our own ship for that!"

"Not as good as my ship," Rainbow leaned over the table towards her, "*and* you wouldn't get its awesome crew. You think you could fly it?" Twilight looked down at her hooves. No, she thought, she probably couldn't. She'd read about piloting, of course, but she didn't think her book knowledge of the subject would get them all safely to Aldermare.

"Unfortunately," Celestia explained, "we haven't that much money now. But we can pay you two thousand now..." She leaned right up to Rainbow Dash's ear, "and fifteen thousand more when we get to Aldermare." Rainbow's jaw dropped.

"Seventeen thousand bits..." Rainbow Dash stared in awe as Celestia smiled and nodded in affirmation. "This is going to be *so awesome!*" She flew up to the ceiling and started darting around in her excitement.

"You ladies have yourself a first class ride to Aldermare! Meet me in Docking Bay 94 in about an hour!" Rainbow Dash lived up to her name as she shot out of the room.

"Is she always like this, Big Macintosh?" Twilight inquired.

"Eeyup," was the reply as Big Mac trotted out the door after his captain.

---

Twilight squinted as she stepped back out into Tolfetooinie's blistering twin suns. When her pupils contracted enough she was able to make out Fluttershy and Angel standing under an awning not twenty paces from where they left them.

"Oh, hello," Fluttershy greeted her, "Did you two get us a ship?"

"I guess so," Twilight answered uncertainly; she still didn't quite trust their safety in the hooves of somepony who didn't know their units of distance from units of time. "We're to meet a pegasus named Rainbow Dash in Docking Bay 94 in about forty five minutes."

"Before we do, however, we're going to have to come up with two thousand bits," Celly informed the group, having now finished transforming back into her disguise. "We'll have to sell your speeder."

"Sure," Twilight replied earnestly, "I don't think I'll need it anymore."

"We'll also need to sell those books in your library." Celly continued.

"WHAT?" Twilight spun around in shock to face Celly. "What am I supposed to do without my books? Even the fastest ships take hours to get from here to any planet worth going to; what will I read on the way?" Twilight made a face which looked like a filly that had just had her favorite toy snatched away.

"Twilight, don't you think this is a worthy sacrifice for getting the information we have on the Great Sphere to Aldermare?" Celly asked simply. Twilight dejectedly looked away in silent acceptance.

Celly pressed on, "If we can bring any of them along, we will. But you will have to choose which ones you want to keep the most. Is that fair?"

Twilight nodded, but didn't look any happier at the prospect. "Alright, let's go find a pawn shop," Celly sighed as everypony climbed into the landspeeder for the final time, "We'll be there and back with plenty of time to make better acquaintances with our new friends."

---

Rainbow Dash and Big Mac were idly trotting along one of the hallways in the docking complex towards Docking Bay 94, and their next job.

"This job could save our necks," Rainbow was excitedly telling her partner, "Seventeen thousand bits! They've gotta be desperate to get out of here; I know / am."

"Why? Got somewhere to be?"

Rainbow quickly looked forward. Standing in their path was a griffon with her wings spread, standing up to almost Big Mac's height, and barring passage to the docking bays beyond. Rainbow Dash knew that, while she could probably take the half-eagle-half-lion creature in open air, she had no chance in the cramped confines of the hallway they found themselves in.

"Hey Gilda," Dash said slowly, nudging Big Mac to continue on to the ship, "What's up?"

"You know perfectly well what's up!" the griffon snapped, "The boss man wants his money, and I'm here to collect." What she didn't say was there were other reasons as well.

"Hey cool! I was just on my way to see him now," Rainbow lied, "You can tell him that I've got that money-."

"Yeah right, that's what you said yesterday-and every other day this past month! He's getting really tired of you ducking him, Dash!" Gilda sneered at her.

"Is that so? How come short-stuff can't come to me and say so himself?" Rainbow retorted, trying to keep the conversation going.

"We both have our reasons," Gilda replied, looking away.

"Gilda, I..." muttered Rainbow, knowing full well what Gilda's reasons must have been.

"Save it!" Gilda was rapidly losing her patience with the pegasus. "How about I take that money now? Unless that's another one of your lame lies."

"I, uh, don't actually have it on me, sorry," admitted Rainbow Dash, shifting her weight to one side.

Gilda smirked as she slowly advanced on Rainbow Dash. "That's okay, I'll just take you instead."

"Heh, you'll have to catch me first!" Rainbow shot down the hallway past Gilda as fast as she dared to fly indoors.

"You're not ditching me this time," growled Gilda as she took off after the rainbow colored blur.

---

Docking Bay 94 was no different from any of the ninety three docking bays before it. It consisted mostly of an entrance ramp and an enormous pit gouged into the rocky soil. This provided clearance for the effects of the various types of antigrav and sublight drives which propelled all spacecraft free of the gravitational field of the planet.

The basics of space travel were simple enough, thought Twilight idly. Supralight travel could only take place once the ship had cleared the gravitational well of the planet, hence the necessity of sublight engines to get the ship past that threshold.

The ship she now beheld, however, barely looked like it could hold its shape. The ellipsoid that made up the hull looked to be made of various bits and pieces salvaged from other vehicles which had met untimely ends and then thrown in a blender with every color of paint imaginable. The very *idea* that this ship would be their transport to Aldermare would've had Twilight laughing at the absurdity at any other time.

"We're travelling to Aldermare in, *this*?" Twilight couldn't help but exclaim.

"Eeyup," Big Mac replied as he walked out of the entryway.

"I think it's, nice," Fluttershy offered as Angel rode in her mane.

Twilight rolled her eyes as she continued her slow march towards the entrance where Big Mac was standing. After a few seconds of silence, she realized something was missing. Rather somepony was missing.

"So, where is 'the fastest flier in all of the galaxy'?" asked Twilight, not without sarcasm.

To answer her question, a rainbow color blur burst in from the hallway they had just exited. It collided with the lavender mare, knocking the wind out of her while sliding to a complete stop, revealing itself to be Rainbow Dash.

"Sorry," Rainbow apologized. She sat up and looked around; smiling as she realized that everypony was already present. "Okay, change of plans: we're leaving now," she declared before bolting up the ramp into her spacecraft, followed quickly by Big Mac.

Before Twilight could protest, another shape appeared in the doorway out of the docking bay. An angry griffon was shortly followed by four ponies, all wielding weapons of various types.

"Take 'em down!" shouted the griffon as she sighted down the barrel of her own rifle, taking advantage of her claws.

The ponies started firing just as Twilight had risen to her hooves; fortunately for her ponies were notoriously terrible shots, mainly due to having no easy way to hold a gun. The griffon had no such impedance, however, and fired a shot at her. Twilight opened her mouth to scream, but a bright yellow barrier intercepted the lethal lance before it reached her before fading.

"Run!" shouted Celly behind her. Twilight didn't need to be told again as she galloped up the ramp behind Fluttershy. Once inside, she followed the tail of the aptly named Rainbow Dash to the cockpit.

"What was that?" Twilight asked panicking.

"One of my biggest mistakes," replied Rainbow Dash sourly before turning back to Twilight. "Sit down and get comfortable, you're in for one bumpy ride."

"Eeyup," Big Mac agreed with Dash's assessment as he deftly worked his hooves over the controls. As Twilight sat down in the seat behind him, a rumble sounded from the rear of the ship as the engines came to life; the *Sonic Rainboom* began to lift and rotate in the air as Big Mac steered the small freighter out of the dock and over the city, with the ponies on the ground still firing at it futilely. Just as she finished strapping herself in, Twilight finally noticed her pilot's cutie mark: a cloud sporting a red, yellow, and blue lightning bolt.

"Uh," she meekly asked, "would now be a good time to mention that I've never actually flown bef-" Her sentence was cut off as Rainbow Dash slammed the throttle all the way open; she was flattened into her seat back as the *Sonic Rainboom* shot skyward, its modified engines leaving their own rainbow in their wake.



# Chapter 9

The sky quickly faded to black as the *Sonic Rainboom* soared away from the scorched sands of Tolfetoine. Rainbow Dash slowly, as if reluctantly, eased off on the throttle as Twilight finally managed to recover her voice.

"Would you mind taking it easy?" she berated Dash, "Some of us aren't used to the high-speed maneuvers that you're used to."

"Oh, sure, we'll take it easy alright," replied Rainbow Dash, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "In fact, why don't we take a nice, slow flight all the way to-" She was interrupted by a burst of light outside the window as the ship shook from a short burst of laser fire. Rainbow quickly turned to the rear scanner to see an eagle-shaped starfighter rocketing up from the planet to meet them.

"Wow G," she muttered appreciatively, "that was quick." She quickly snapped back into focus as Big Mac tried to boost the rear deflector fields. "Looks like our griffon friend caught up," she called to her passengers behind her, "Don't worry; I know a few maneuvers that'll lose her." Rainbow slowly tilted her control yoke to the left, her ship slowly tilting along with the motion.

Twilight couldn't believe it; here they were getting shot at and the pilot was simply drifting to the left. "What are you doing?" she cried, "All you're doing is turning slowly! Can't this thing go any faster?"

"Well, it *can*," easily replied Rainbow Dash, grinning back at her, "but you wanted me to take it easy, remember?"

"Forget I said anything," Twilight shrieked as another blast of energy caused their only means of survival to shudder and groan, "Just GO!"

"Aw yeah!" exclaimed Dash, "Hey, Big Mac, we're doing the Lightspeed Loop!"

"Eeyup," was the simple reply as Rainbow Dash twisted the *Sonic Rainboom* into a dive that pointed directly at the planet's surface and slammed the throttle back to full power.

The *Sonic Rainboom* screamed past its pursuer as Rainbow Dash started angling towards the horizon of Tolfetoine. Gilda turned her craft as hard as she could, cursing as she realized Dash's low speed meant that she could turn faster; by the time she turned around, her target would be flying by the planet. No problem, she thought, my ship is still lighter and more agile. I'll catch her in no time.

Just before passing by Tolfetoine, Rainbow Dash rolled over and pulled hard on her control yoke. The *Sonic Rainboom* started to orbit the planet in an ever tightening spiral as Gilda tried in vain to bring her weapons to bear. Twilight was getting nauseous, but she couldn't help but marvel at the skill of her pegasus pilot: by tightening their turning radius, both angular momentum and gravity were giving the *Sonic Rainboom* a massive speed boost, held in check only by Rainbow's deft manipulation of the throttle. At the same time, the planet itself was giving them cover from their pursuer. She probably was planning this when she first slowed down, thought Twilight as she felt her stomach twisting into several knots.

As they were rounding back to their original flight path, Rainbow Dash opened the throttle all the way and slingshot her ship away from the Tolfetoine's gravity well. Gilda howled in frustration as the *Sonic Rainboom* swiftly exited the usable range of her weapons out into space. Seconds later, they were long gone.

"That was so awesome!" exclaimed Rainbow Dash as she slapped hooves with Big Mac. "So," she said, turning around to grin at Twilight, "how was that for your first space flight?"

Twilight continued to stare unblinkingly ahead, her mind trying to catch up to the rest of her body. Everypony noticed then that she had turned a faint shade of green.

"Twilight Sparkle, are you all right?" asked Celly with concern.

Twilight slowly turned her head to face her mentor. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came. Instead the contents of her stomach were unceremoniously regurgitated into Celly's lap. Rainbow Dash immediately

burst into uncontrollable laughter, her seatbelt straining to keep her in her seat. With everypony staring at her, Twilight couldn't help but start tearing up from embarrassment as the shock of throwing up all over another pony wore off.

"That's quite alright, my dear," Celly soothed Twilight after a few moments, "We'll clean this right up, and then get something to eat. How does that sound?" Twilight just nodded as Celly used her magic to undo their restraints. Big Mac vacated the cockpit with them, leaving Rainbow Dash still rolling with laughter in her seat.

---

Blueblood entered the command center, his face illuminated by a giant viewscreen where Aldermare was peacefully orbiting its star. His gaze went to where Governess Octavia was pacing impatiently, and made a small gesture of respect. "We have reached the Aldermare system," he formally announced.

"I can see that," Octavia glared at Blueblood's intrusion; the sheer amount of sycophantism he could put out had been grating on her nerves. She perked up as Nightmare Moon marched into the room, leading Rarity in behind her.

"I am Octavia, governess of-" she began.

"Yes yes, I know who you are," spat Rarity, "Governess Octavia, I should have expected to find you here. These drab grey interiors just scream you."

Octavia's eye twitched. "Charming to the end," she declared in a manner of one who clearly wasn't charmed. "You have no idea how hard it was for me to sign off on your...termination."

"I'm flattered you felt the need to take the responsibility yourself," Rarity retorted.

"Ahem," Octavia cleared her throat before continuing, "Before you leave us, I would like you to attend a special ceremony; one that will not only certify this station's operational status, but also usher in a new era of supremacy for the Empony. This station is the final link in a chain which will bind her millions of citizens together once and for all. Your insignificant rebellion

can't help to stand up to us; after today's demonstration, nopony will dare oppose the Empress's decrees, not even you."

"I hardly think that's the case; that kind of thinking led to the rebellion in the first place," Rarity countered.

"Unfortunately," Octavia continued unfazed, "I was hoping to hold this ceremony above the rebellion's secret base. However, since you have been so uncooperative, that base is still secret." Rarity smirked as Octavia paused. "This has forced me to consider alternatives, and I have finally decided on your home planet of Aldermare."

"But you caaannnnnnnn'tttt," Rarity cried, her voice getting dangerously high-pitched. "Aldermare doesn't have any way of defending itself. Hooowww cooouuullldd you?"

"You would prefer another target? A military target?" Octavia's eyes were gleaming in anticipation as she bore down on Rarity, "I grow tired of your antics. For the last time: where is the main rebel base?"

A voice sounded over a hidden speaker that Aldermare had been targeted and the Great Sphere was ready to fire. That was enough to accomplish what the previous few days of enhanced interrogation by Nightmare Moon had failed to do.

"Dantawleed," Rarity finally whispered, staring at the deck in defeat. "They're on Dantawleed."

Octavia turned to the black alicorn nearby. "You see, Nightmare? All we needed was the proper motivation. After concluding our little test here we shall make haste to Dantawleed and run a second test." She turned to the other bridge officers, "You may continue with the operation, gentlecolts."

It took a few seconds for Octavia's words to register with Rarity. "Whhhhaaaaa?" she finally gasped.

"Dantawleed," Octavia explained, turning back to the viewscreen, "is too far from the center of galactic civilization to serve as an effective demonstration. We'll be dealing with your rebel friends soon enough."

"But, you said-"

"The only words with any meaning are the last ones spoken," Octavia declared cuttingly. She gestured to Nightmare Moon. "Take her to the observation deck," she smiled, "I'll join you once I've retrieved my instrument. Make sure our view is...unobstructed." Octavia lightly trotted out of the room, humming to herself.

# Chapter 10

Rainbow Dash walked slowly into the hold area; she could've joined the other ponies twenty or so minutes ago, but she had to work up the nerve to face her clients after her display in the cockpit. She had laughed *at* that unicorn filly, Rainbow thought to herself, wasn't she better than that? Worse, she had openly mocked her desire for a smoother flight, despite it being her first time. Rainbow felt bad for her; pegasi had an innate resistance to high accelerations, making them excellent choices for pilots, and earth ponies at least had hearty constitutions. Unicorns, on the other hoof, were about as comfortable in high-speed maneuvering as a pegasus was standing perfectly still.

"That wasn't cool Rainbow," she silently berated herself, "you're going to march on up there and say you're sorry."

Her pride wouldn't make that easy for her, however. She stopped to watch Big Mac play a holographic version of chess with their rabbit passenger. He sat hunched over the table, chewing lightly on the straw in his mouth. He gave every impression that he was well pleased with himself.

At least, he did until Angel tapped his own computer monitor, causing one of his pieces to slide to a new position and stop there. Beside him, Fluttershy watched the game with great interest.

Big Macintosh first looked over the board in puzzlement. As it slowly dawned on him what Angel had just done, his expression turned to one of shock; his jaw went slack as the straw fell out of his mouth to the deck. Angel had just checkmated him.

"Wow Big Mac," Rainbow quipped, "looks like you've found someone who can actually beat you at this."

"Don't feel bad," Fluttershy said calmly, "I'm sure the next time you'll do better." Angel just looked at Big Mac with a smug grin as he stared dumbly back at the bunny.

Alright, thought Rainbow, I'm not putting this off any longer. The mirth from earlier making it easier, she trotted to the other side of the hold where Twilight Sparkle and Celly were finishing off a rather large lunch; Twilight in particular hadn't eaten at all that day.

"Hey," Rainbow spoke up, getting their attention. Before they could interrupt, she continued. "Sorry about the way I acted earlier; sometimes I just do stupid things without thinking. I should've known you wouldn't be able to handle...that, and I shouldn't have laughed at you."

"W-well," Twilight stuttered at a nudge from Celly, "let's just forget that ever happened and move on, shall we?"

"Deal!" Dash immediately brightened as she sat down at the meal table.

Celly smiled as she brought Twilight back to her previous conversation. "Twilight, I believe you're ready for your first lessons on the Magic of Friendship." She stood up, discarding her cloak as she continued, "First, however, I want to teach you a very special spell."

Twilight rose from her seat as her mentor closed her eyes and began to concentrate. It didn't take much; almost immediately, Celly's horn seemed to grow to three times its original length. Twilight blinked, and looked again. It wasn't actually Celly's horn; it was a shaft of magical energy. It shone like a sun in the dimly lit cargo bay, but oddly enough wasn't painful to look at. And it was so simple, Twilight thought, there has to be more than that.

As if reading her mind, Celly spoke, "As you know, most unicorns can only manage one spell at a time; the Knights of Harmony created this spell to allow a unicorn to be able to cast whilst still being able to defend herself." She swung her horn around gently, the magic blade following its movements. "Would you like to try?"

"Would I!" exclaimed an enthusiastic Twilight, assuming a balanced stance, "Where do I begin?"

"Start by thinking about all the ponies that care about you-"

"Huh?" interrupted Twilight, thoroughly confused. No magic spell she had ever learned started out like that. Most required only to find one's inner power and channeling it through the horn.

"That's the secret to this spell," explained Celly, her horn still aglow, "channeling the Magic of Friendship into a blade to allow the rest of your magic for more, mundane spellcasting."

"Okay." Twilight wasn't entirely convinced, but she trusted Celly's words. She began to think about everypony she knew. She thought of Celly, there to provide guidance and praise when she needed either. She thought of Fluttershy and Angel, who even though they had just met days ago, already seemed like lifelong companions. She thought of Uncle Oaten and Aunt Mareu; even in death she could almost feel them, watching over her...

"That's good Twilight," Celly praised, carefully watching her pupil's expression, "Now, take that feeling and let it out through your horn."

Suddenly a shaft of light burst from Twilight's horn, matching Celly's in every way but color; where Celly's shone like a bright sun, Twilight's blade was a softer magenta hue.

"I did it? YES!" Twilight swung her head around towards Fluttershy, momentarily forgetting her magic blade.

There was a flash as Celly expertly dove under Twilight's magic sword. With a quick upwards motion she brought her own up to meet it, stopping the shaft just inches from Fluttershy's face. Twilight watched in horror as several hairs from Fluttershy's mane fell to the deck; if Celly had been any slower, that would've been the top of Fluttershy's head.

"You need to be more careful with that," Celly admonished Twilight, "this spell is a defensive weapon; but make no mistake, it *is* a weapon."

"Sorry," Twilight said softly, "I just..."

"It's alright," Celly dispelled her own sword before continuing, "but maybe everypony should stand back a bit. Please?" Every pony slowly nodded, then went back to the chess table as Celly picked up a small sphere with her magic and placed it on the table.

"The first thing I'd like you to do is to pick up this training remote with your magic, without dispelling your magic sword," Celly instructed. Twilight easily grabbed the remote and lifted it above the table, before setting it down again.



"Excellent," Celly praised as she grabbed the remote, "Now I want you to use that blade of magic to defend yourself against this drone."

"What?" exclaimed Twilight, "How am I supposed to block lasers on my horn? Shouldn't I just use a shield?"

"Most magical shields can't handle being shot more than once or twice," Celly went back to explaining, "This saber spell reflects the energy instead, allowing it to continue being used."

"As to how to position yourself," she continued before Twilight could ask again, "you'll have to rely on the Magic of Friendship to help you."

"You mean it can control my actions?" asked Twilight breathlessly.

"Goodness no! Nor does it obey your commands." Celly thought back to her days as an apprentice, trying to remember how it was explained to her. "It's...it's a feeling, and something more. It's something that a pony can use to accomplish miracles." Her brow furrowed in remembrance, she continued, "No pony ever really could define the Magic of Friendship, but the best explanation I've heard is that it can influence chance, random probabilities into one's favor; like being very lucky."

Celly looked back at Twilight's unconvinced face. "Well, let's give it a try shall we?" She tossed the training remote into the air towards Twilight, watching as it stopped a couple of meters from her face. Twilight held her horn at the ready as the ball slowly circled around her, turning to face it whenever it assumed a new position. Suddenly, the ball darted behind her. A thin strip of red energy jumped from the remote to strike the back of one of Twilight's hind legs, causing her to drop to the deck before she could react to the probe's sudden movements.

"Ow!" Twilight cried out, struggling to rise back to her hooves. The shot hadn't hurt, but it had rendered the area numb for a few seconds. "How am I supposed to block light? If I can see it, it's already too late!"

"Then you have to stop relying on your eyes," replied Celly simply, "the only way to truly rely on the Magic of Friendship is to stop thinking, and just act."

The ball swung in again, causing Twilight to yelp as it brushed past her shoulder. She swung around wildly, trying to follow the erratic movement of

the remote. It swung under her legs and fired again, this time hitting square on her flank. "This isn't working," she snapped.

"No, it isn't," agreed Celly as she stealthily magicked a cleaning rag off of a nearby maintenance rack.

Twilight cried out again in surprise as Celly slipped the rag over her eyes, blindfolding her. She tried to focus her magic to untie the knot, only to find Celly still had a firm hold on it.

"Let your mind go, Twilight," Celly ordered Twilight, "Don't focus on anything concrete, just the feeling you get when you think of your friends. Let your mind drift freely."

Twilight stopped her frantic swinging and tried to relax. She pushed all of her doubt and worries from her mind and concentrated solely on the feelings she had used to conjure her magic sword before. She held on to that feeling, reveling in its tender embrace. She barely noticed her neck twist, moving her head down and right, and deflecting a bolt into the wall. Her head moved again, as if floating, up and left to deflect another. The remote ceased its humming as it deactivated and fell to the deck.

Twilight ripped the blindfold off to stare at the drone. "Did I just..." she muttered, scarcely believing.

"I'm so proud of you," beamed Celly behind her, "once you learn to trust in the Magic fully, there'll be no limit to what you can do." Twilight smiled back.

"Hey guys, sorry to interrupt." Rainbow Dash was hovering above the deck in front of them. "We're coming up onto the Aldermare system now."

"Thank you Ms. Dash, after you," was Celly's easy reply. The trio began walking back to the cockpit.

"Celly? I felt something different back there," Twilight thoughtfully told her mentor, "It was like I almost could 'see' the remote."

"That's good," Celly smiled again, "You're taking your first steps into a larger universe."

Dozens of blinking lights and humming instruments lent the freighter's cockpit the air of a busy hive. Rainbow Dash had her attention fixated on the most vital of them.

"Steady...stand by Big Mac," Dash adjusted several switches, "Ready...cut it!"

Big Macintosh pulled back on one of large levers adorning the control panel. Abruptly, the tunnel of hyperspace gave way to streaks of starlight, which quickly shortened into the familiar pricks everypony was used too. A gauge on the console read zero.

The ship was immediately slammed to the side. Gigantic chunks of rock crashed into everything around them, including the *Sonic Rainboom*, barely being shunted aside by the deflector shields. What was more alarming was what wasn't there.

Aldermare was gone.