

Divergence

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Chapter 1

Divergence

Rainbow. Raaaaainbow...

Rainbow Dash started, darting glances left and right, trying to pierce the fog that seemed to close about her. Shaking off her fright, she drew herself upright, wings extended aggressively as her front hooves lashed the air in front of her.

"Who's there? I ain't scared 'a you! Show yourself!"

A seductive voice slipped out from the mist, "We've been eagerly awaiting the arrival of the best flier in Equestria."

Dash was nonplussed. "Who?"

"Why, you of course!"

"Really?! I mean, oh yeah! Me!" she said, recovering quickly.

"Hey, uh, ya wouldn't mind telling the Wonderbolts that would ya, cuz I've been trying to get into that group for like, *ever!*"

"No Rainbow Dash, we want you to join *us*, the Shadowbolts!" A trio of Pegasus ponies had galloped out of the fog, coming to a halt in unison, displaying their coat-tight black and purple uniforms proudly; vivid bolts of lightning emblazoned around the shoulder, angling down to meet at the chest. "We're the greatest aerial team in the Everfree Forest, and soon we'll be the greatest in all Equestria! But first, we need a captain. The most magnificent..."

"Yep." Rainbow chirped proudly.

"... swiftest..."

"Yes."

"... bravest flier in all the land."

"Yes, heh, it's all true." Dash quipped in agreement.

"We need... you!"

"Woo-hoo!" Rainbow Dash cried, her life's ambitions laid out before her. "Sign. Me. Up!! Just, lemme tie this bridge real quick, then we got a deal." she said, turning to the business at hoof.

"Ah yes, your friends. You're very loyal to them aren't you?"

The rope dropping from her mouth, Dash's eyes narrowed as she turned to glare back at the uniformed mare that slowly advanced towards her, an air of malice replacing the cooing flattery present just a moment ago. Something was seriously wrong here.

"Of course I am, what's that got to do with anything?" she asked suspiciously.

"Oh, it just seems that if you really cared about them, you wouldn't be leading them into so much danger. Danger that nopony without your talents, your abilities, your *courage* could possibly hope to survive." Dash hadn't noticed the purple mist winding through the grass toward her hooves, and her eyes went wide as it made contact, the visions assaulting her mind...

FLASH. Letting out a battle cry, she twists violently to dodge a burst of flame, watching in mute horror as it strikes Rarity, burning the flawless coat and delicate flesh off the beautiful unicorn right before her eyes.

FLASH. Twilight Sparkle laughs maniacally, standing amidst the wreckage of bodies, her horn casting a violet light on a charred and torn cowpony hat.

FLASH. Ponyville burns, the townspoonies fleeing aimlessly in panic. Windows lie shattered, doors hanging from the hinges of ruined buildings. Above, massive sections of Cloudsdale split apart, the cumulus infrastructure breaking off in enormous slabs, lightning shooting off in every direction. Untrained fillies fall from the sky, a tiny one with a shock of purple mane terribly, horrifyingly familiar.

FLASH. Dash shrieks in horror and pain as her left wing, shorn raggedly off, tumbles away from her. She spirals out of control, her remaining wing

flapping in instinctive desperation as she plummets toward the ground in a sickening spin. She takes one more deep breath, and meets it.

"ENOUGH"

The command cut through the visions like a blade. Tendrils of frayed, purplish mist were sliding quickly into the surrounding brush, fleeing from the rigid body of the rainbow-maned Pegasus. With a ragged gasp and half-swallowed scream Dash sank to the ground, legs numb, wings trembling uncontrollably.

Out of the now-normal gray fog gracefully clopped another form; that of a beautiful midnight blue Alicorn, her wings half-furled, shining crescent moon on her flanks. Her mane billowed subtly, within it shining the intermittent twinkling of a celestial tapestry. She snorted lightly at the retreating magical mists before turning to the thoroughly traumatized filly huddled in the grass.

"Oh my... are you alright little one?" the majestic mare asked as she walked up to stand before the violently shaking pony, wings arching protectively above the filly.

"What.. I... ohmygosh what is going ON? What was that?? Why would Twilight...? Ponyville. Th...The fillies... SCOOTALOO!" Rainbow Dash's body was torn ragged between hyperventilation and blind horror as her mind tried to process everything she'd just seen, tears sliding unchecked down her cheeks.

"There, there. Just breathe. None of what you saw was real. Necessarily... or perhaps, in all honesty, *yet*. You were shown things to sway you to serve a purpose. Vile, yes, but not entirely false. Those things, and many more like them, may indeed come to pass should the Nightmare have its way."

At the mention of Nightmare Moon, Dash regained some of her presence, wobbling to her feet, slipping slightly on the wet grass. "That's right! We have to stop that... that *thing*! She stole our princess, an' wants to make nighttime last forever! She... wait a sec. Who the hay are you, huh? And what are you doing here? My friends are right behind me and we're on a royal mission! Twilight's the personal student of Princess Celestia herself, and she knows what's going on, so if you're plotting something or whatever

you better just back off, right now!" Dash released the torrent harshly, taking a step back and ducking her head, her wings flaring and tail snapping at this dark mare; who reminded her perversely of both Nightmare Moon *and* Princess Celestia - and just HAPPENED to show up out of nowhere in the middle of the Everfree Forest? *Yeah right.*

The midnight Alicorn heaved a deep sigh at the tirade, drooping her head a bit, reading the little pony's expression as easily as a book she'd read a thousand times. "My name is Luna, Arbiter of the Night, and sister to Celestia. I mean you no harm, little one."

Dash stared at the goddess blankly.

"What." It was not a question.

Luna blinked.

"What?"

Dash raised a brow. "You're kidding right? I mean, Celestia's like, a goddess."

Luna daintily fluttered her wings and tilted her head, calling attention to her horn and darkly opalescent crown. The blue Pegasus bit her lip, taking in the shining, silver crescent moon on Luna's flank - the sign-posts of Alicorn divinity didn't get any more self-evident.

"And you are?" Queried the Goddess politely.

"Erm. Name's Rainbow Dash." she said, momentarily side tracked. Rallying, Dash decided to go with her gut feelings, if only to avoid the headache of complexity. "I... dude, this is too much." she sat down with a soft 'poomf'. "So ARE you Nightmare Moon, and is this like a big trick, or... or what?" she finished, thoroughly befuddled, her hooves wide in the air.

"No, kind of, and... I'm not sure what to do with the 'or what' Miss Dash. While the Nightmare and I returned at the same time, we are not the same being... more like polar opposites now, come to that. While we still share latent experience to a minor extent, that connection is nearly severed, and the sooner the better." Luna huffed in disgust. "The Nightmare reached out

and showed you your greatest ambitions to attempt to control you. Failing that, your most terrifying nightmares to break you. I noticed its actions a bit late, I'm afraid." she ended apologetically.

Dash was struggling hard to keep up. "So... that was all fake then, just a line of manure?" she asked with a hopeful desperation.

Luna shook her head wearily. "I don't know Miss Dash. The Nightmare doesn't *a/ways* lie, but it will without compunction if doing so serves its purposes, and it is *very* clever. I have learned to be... profoundly dubious, whenever our interests coincide. As to your friend, this Twilight Sparkle, she may or may not be a pawn in all of this. I'm not certain as to the quality, nor sources, of her information, or even the nature of her relationship with my sister... who has been known to have something of a ...predilection for manipulation herself... but I don't know."

Luna trailed off with a look of distance in her eyes before giving a small shake of her head.

"Nevertheless, one thing is very clear - if your friends make it to the castle, while the Nightmare and I are vying for control, they will *not* survive. The forces unleashed will be well beyond any mortal pony's endurance."

"But what about the Elements of Harmony stuff? Twilight says we're supposed to get them, and that they're the only thing that can stop Nightmare Moon! And where the hay is our Princess? We have to find out what happened to her!" Dash burst out in a rush, unable to contain all the questions the midnight Alicorns' story raised.

Luna frowned thoughtfully. "Yes... the Elements. That's the *only* thing that currently makes sense. The Nightmare obviously hopes to use you and your friends to reveal them, then obliterate you and gain control. Without the Elements of Harmony, it knows it can not hope to defeat me. With them..." Luna trailed off ominously, reminding Dash of her terrifying visions. "No Miss Dash, the Elements must remain asleep and out of reach for now, that is the only way to be certain of the Nightmare's defeat in our coming contest. As for Celestia... I don't know what to make of her disappearance at all. I had hoped..." Luna slipped into a disturbed silence for a moment, her eyes glinting as though in pain. "No, this is an absurdity. Even at the height of its power, the Nightmare could not match Celestia outright. I

should know; I watched as it tried with much of my own power. Where my sister has gone and why she remains there is a mystery of her own design, but I mean to ask her. And soon."

"But... but what if the Nightmare wins?" Dash asked, unconsciously slipping into the regal Alicorn's vernacular.

"Oh, it won't. In fact, it knows full well that it cannot defeat me outright. We've spent the last thousand years becoming intimately familiar with one another, and now I've returned home. The severing between us is nearly complete, and much of my power has returned. Yet it will struggle, and rant, and rave. While futility is not strictly its nature, it is a creature of undiluted pride, and the need to control. The compulsion to dominate drives it, and so I must drive it down. No, it is only the Nightmare's plots that concern me now. I can not be completely certain what it's planning, but the game it plays with you and your friends is central. Whatever that may be, it is the final hand, and the Nightmare is desperate to see it through." Luna finished with a indomitable certainty. A tiny, sad smile slid across her face as she finished, but was quickly gone. "You must prevent your friends from coming further. The best thing would be for you all to return to Ponyville for the night, help keep everypony calm, safe, and return to me when the Nightmare has been subdued in the morning. Then we can attempt to discover my sister's whereabouts."

"Morning?! But the Nightmare and the legends both talked about eternal night. And Celestia's gone, how can there be a morning? How can there be a sunrise?" Dash exclaimed.

Luna's gentle laugh was moonlight across a still lake. "Few things are more imprecise than old legends, my little pony. I will raise the sun in my sister's stead if need be, though I hope to discover Celly's whereabouts before I have a need to work with her sun. It's... uncomfortable, for both of us. Eternal night? What a foalish notion! Equestria as we know it could not survive that, though in its compulsion to dominate, that is indeed the Nightmare's intent. Really, it's quite insane."

Dash stared up into the emerald eyes of the night goddess, searching for some sign of deception or duplicity. Dash's strong suit had never been analysis; she'd always relied on her heart and feelings to show her the way

through when things got rough, but this time was different. There was so much more at stake.

"I... I don't know Princess... I want to believe you. I *do* believe you, but it's more than just me riding on this..." she trailed off, frowning hard at the grass.

Luna stared at her for a moment, then stomped her hoof lightly. "Very well Miss Dash. I understand. Witness."

The Princess turned away from Dash, facing off to her right. What she was looking at, Dash couldn't tell; everything was just a solid wall of fog. Luna's horn began to glow; the violet light building until it seemed to create a nearly opaque sheath of luminescent power. The Princess's eyes had closed tightly, and she released a small sound of effort, tense and strained. The fog before her swirled away in a large funnel, creating a clear line of sight to the horizon beyond. Suddenly, the jagged mountain range in the distance became more distinct, glowing in a soft light. Luna clenched her teeth and groaned, as the sun peeked a brilliant sliver above the far off crags, briefly illuminating the surrounding fog in a surreal orange glow. Luna cried out and collapsed to the ground, breathing heavily. The fog swept back to surround them, the light vanishing as abruptly as it came. "I'm sorry Miss Dash, that was the best I can manage at the moment." she said between deep gulps of air, shaking lightly from the exertion.

Dash was standing rooted to the spot. Her jaw hung down, eyes bugged out as she processed what she'd just seen. *The sun. She just raised the sun...* Realizing she had been staring blankly at a boring wall of fog for several moments, she tore her gaze down to the recovering Alicorn. Trotting over to Luna, she settled down next to her. "Okay Princess. That... that's good enough for me. That should be good enough for anypony. You totally are who you say you are... so... let's go and talk to the others, tell them what's going on." she said, focusing on the one thing that it seemed she *could* get done.

Luna raised her head to meet Dash's gaze, her expression apologetic.

"I'm afraid there's simply no time. I must return to the castle and contain the Nightmare; prevent it from acting any further upon your friends or the land. You must turn back your friends, and I ask that you return to me at dawn, when I have managed to seal the creature away."

Dash stared blankly at Luna. "You're tearing me apart pony." she deadpanned.

Dash sighed, swallowed hard and shuffled her hooves; further considering the prospect and how to explain the situation to the Princess. "Look, I'm not exactly the best pony with, uh, words. Twilight's a reeeaaally smart pony, and she's totally sure she knows what's going on. I'm not sure I can convince her without you there... I mean, I believe you, but I don't see how I can make *them* believe *me*, especially if you're not even there! How the hay am I supposed to explain all this?!"

Luna opened her mouth to speak, but broke off suddenly, craning her neck backward and frowning over her shoulder toward the castle shrouded in the darkness. "I'm sorry, I have to get back quickly. It's gathering for another assault." She turned to look at Dash directly, a sympathetic intensity replacing the serene distance that had filled her eyes. "I wish I could be there to make this easier on you and your friends, but you *must* convince them. Failing that, know that whatever you do, it will be about saving their lives, whether they know it now or not."

Luna leaned forward, nuzzling Dash's cheek. "Be brave my little pony, and... thank you for believing in me. I know you can do it, and I'll need your help even more in the coming weeks." Dash blushed lightly, hesitantly returning the gesture.

They rose to their hooves.

Now that she was set on a course; past the confusion and indecision, her usual fire returned to her and she stomped the ground confidently, ruffling her wings in preparation for take-off. "Be careful Princess Luna, I'll take care of my end in ten seconds flat!" *Though damned if I know how...*

Chapter 2

Confrontation

Twilight Sparkle and Applejack stood nervously next to one another, the other ponies arrayed behind them, peering anxiously into the thick fog that surrounded them in all directions, hoping their friend was okay. There had been an inexplicable orange glow a moment ago that reminded them of a fire, and Dash was taking so long...

As if summoned by their shared concern, appearing in trademark spectrum, Rainbow swooped out of the mist, alighting in front of her friends.

"Rainbow!" Twilight shouted with relief. "I knew you could... do it?" she trailed off in confusion. The bridge was still impassable, one side hanging straight down.

Applejack snorted her impatience, scuffing the ground with a fore-hoof. "C'mon Dash, we need to get a move on, whats the hold up?"

Dash's brow furrowed slightly in concern at the imminent discussion, already taking a poor turn. Her gaze flickered off to the side as she took a deep breath and a pensive stance in front of her friends, one hoof lifted in trepidation.

"Look Twi..." she started lamely, ignoring the workpony entirely for the moment, "um, maybe this isn't such a good idea after all".

Twilight's jaw hung to the hinges, unable to take the words seriously enough to form an immediate reply, her mind going into auto-pilot, cycling through possibilities at high speed.

Applejack stepped forward with a much better reaction time, having never been one to overly suffer from cognitive dissonance. "What the HAY are you on about girl? We need to get a move on and we need to go NOW! So get y'er scrawny flank across that there chasm and tie off that bridge!"

Dash clenched her jaw, her wings flaring reflexively, the hesitant pose abandoned and her uncertainty evaporating at the direct challenge from the orange earth pony, her longtime rival, though their relationship was a bit more complex than either cared to dwell upon for too long.

"Back off AppleJack, there's more going on here than you know."

AJ stood with her mouth open for the second it took for Rainbow to turn to the purple unicorn. "Twi... There's more going on here than you told us, and more than *you* know about either. I think..."

Twilight's eyes narrowed to violet slits as she stepped toward the cyan mare, having settled on the most likely possibility to explain the situation. "Rainbow. What happened over there? You *know* that Nightmare Moon is back! She kidnapped the princess! She's been setting traps for us the entire way here; trying to stop us from stopping *her*! Trying to *kill* us! I don't know what happened to you over there, or what lies she told you, but we *have* to keep going!"

"Twi, listen, what's going on up there at the castle? That's... that's god stuff, we *can't* go up there, we wouldn't survive!" Dash's hoof reached out toward the unicorn, desperate to convince the only one who could convince the others. "And she, I mean, IT, didn't nab the Princess, at least I don't think so. I mean, how *could* it have? Celestia's the damn su... wait! The Sun! Didn't you see it? Like, two minutes ago! It rose!"

Twilight looked at her sideways. "The sun Dash? You mean that orange glow? You thought *that* was the sun?" Twilight was staring at Rainbow in sheer disbelief, certain that something had happened to the blue Pegasus; though whether she had simply knocked her head, or there was some more sinister explanation, she couldn't say, and frankly, right now she didn't have time for it.

"YES it was the sun! She rose... um." Dash trailed off, thinking furiously; *Shit, how do I even mention Luna without sounding like I've lost it? Of COURSE they'd think I've been looped.*

Twilight stamped her hoof with an academic finality, frustration lacing through her voice. "That's why we need the Elements! To get back the *real* sun! That's why you've been so thoroughly deceived, that's why... Oh,

we're wasting time! Move aside Rainbow, I have to go on, stay if you like." she declared, turning from the increasingly desperate Pegasus.

Twilight began to prepare a teleportation spell, trying see a clear path through the opaque mists to the far side for a safe landing zone.

A determined look on her face, Dash interposed herself between Twilight and the canyon. "No Twilight. I can't let you throw your life away like that. If you'll just listen to me for a minute there are some things you *have* to hear. I'm not really sure how to start but-

"I've listened long enough!" Twilight interjected, cutting Dash off. "It couldn't be more apparent that Nightmare Moon tricked you or put a spell on you, or... or something! I thought you were loyal to your friends Dash! I thought you'd 'never leave Ponyville hangin.'" Twilight spat the final words bitterly, her concern for whatever was going on with Rainbow paling with the urgency she felt to save her life-long mentor.

Ouch. "I... it's not that simple Twi! I..." *Gaah! How in the hay do I convince them?!* Dash thought desperately, shaking her mane in frustration, trying to rally her thoughts. A difficult process for her under the best of circumstances, not made any easier with Applejack, having recovered, stomping up nose to nose with her, green eyes glaring into her own. "Rainbow, I dunno what's come over you, but we ain't got time fer your fillyfoolery! Time's a waistin an we gotta git. So either git with us, or git outta the way!" her last words punctuated with a strong hoof to the cyan mare's chest.

Dash's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Listen AJ, don't go there. I'm trying to get you all to see reason here, and you're not makin' it easy! You won't even *listen* to me for two seconds!"

Although she tried not to show it, Applejack was sick with worry for her family back on the farm. Little Apple Bloom had been cryin' somethin' fierce an pathetic when she'd left, and now her frustration was spilling over. "Horseapples to that Sally, 's plain as day ya'll 'uv either been hoodwinked, or just up'n chickened out, but we don't have no more time to be wastin' no-how!"

Rainbow's expression turned furious, matching her building feelings of outrage and incredulity at her friends stark refusal to so much as *hear her out*. "So you're callin' me either a coward or an idiot, is that it AJ? Never thought I'd see the day you got any denser!" Dash growled, squaring up to the earth pony.

"I call 'em like I see 'em sugarcube" AJ said, not backing an inch, sparks glinting in her narrowed eyes. The tension in the air was building towards something inevitable. In a small corner of her mind, locked against the world, was the place she held her doubts, fears, and anxieties. Rarely released from its tightly controlled borders, that dark little space was now prancing about and chanting in a shrill voice, "*ohmygosh this is getting out of hoof. ReeEEEEally quick. Do something do something do something! Crapcrapcrapcrapcrap!*"

A hundred impressions flit through Dash's head in the space of her next breath, too fast to be considered thoughts -

Twilight had moved slightly to her flank, getting clear of AJ. Twilight was a student of the Princess, some magical protege thing, so she was a wild card in Dash's book. She may try to attack, or just teleport across the gap, heading pell-mell to her own stupid death... on that note, she was also the only one able to go ahead alone. Bookworm: priority one, for her own sake.

Applejack. Powerful, sturdy, unbelievable stamina. Dash knew she couldn't match her only real rival in Ponyville with strength alone. She'd seen AJ put her hoof into a dead tree with such force that it had shattered in a resounding snap, the corded wood splitting right up the trunk. She'd have to be really, really fast. Fortunately, she'd known AJ long enough to know how she moved, how she thought, and hopefully, how she fought. They'd scuffled before, sure, but never like this was shaping up to be. Never for real. On the upside, AJ wasn't very imaginative; she was a heavily traditional pony. Once Dash got her rhythm down, it wasn't likely she'd have to deal with many surprises. She could do this... but it was really gonna suck.

Fluttershy. Poor filly hadn't made more than a series of squeaks since Dash got back. As nopony had accorded her attention, she hadn't gotten any. No threat, but no help either. She cowered behind Pinkie with a

terrified, disbelieving look across the bit of her expression visible behind her mane.

Pinkie Pie. Frozen, standing in place; she looked to be in shock. Hopefully that would last, Dash had no clue what was going through her head, (at least one thing tonight was normal), which way she'd go, or what in the hay she'd do when she got there.

Rarity. She'd been making indignant squawks for the past few minutes of "*Darling!*" and "*Really now ladies!*" Dash figured she'd stay out of anything that might chip a hoof, her most significant contribution likely to be ear-splitting noises. As usual.

Suddenly, Dash caught a glimmer of magic forming around Twilight's horn, arching into electrical currents as it built, pointed not across the canyon, but right at her. The ingrained muscle memory from the thousands of hours of training it had taken to get her black belt kicked in, and that was that.

In a fluid motion, Dash stepped to the side and back, dropping low to brace on her front hooves and pivoting her haunches and lashing one back leg in a blur, nailing Twilight precisely on target on the side of her head, hopefully with just enough force to put her down. The magic building in the unicorn's horn flared brightly as the spell dissipated. Twilight cried out as the hoof slammed home, falling away and to her side in a heap.

Snapping her attention back to AJ, she was glad of the space she created between them in sliding back, because she just had time to register the blur of a hoof arching toward her head. Snapping her head to the side, it glanced off her shoulder, and she regained her balance, pulling into a light stance in front of AJ after a quick flutter backwards. Applejack followed- powerful, full bodied punches lashed out in a classic one-two, then spinning around, she launched into a full-force buck with her hind legs. *Predictable*, Dash thought, the Earth pony's body language too telling. And way too slow for the Pegasus that felt most at home at subsonic speeds. Dash's head jinked right, then left; she felt the first blow graze her cheek, the second brushing through her mane. As Applejack went for the buck, she ducked low, pulling her wings in tight, then surging up with her shoulders while AJ's legs were above her, connecting with the workhorse's belly and sending her flying head over hooves in an uncontrolled roll.

In the lull of the exchange, Dash took stock.

Rarity had begun screeching, and looked altogether disinclined to stop anytime soon. Twilight was immobile and insensate on the ground, a trickle of blood leaking from her mane, her head laid on the ground and her eyes closed. Amazingly, Fluttershy had gone mobile, and was now crouching over the unconscious unicorn, nuzzling her and whispering to herself, having gone into medic-mode. Pinkie on the other hand, looked to be carved out of stone, not even blinking away the tears that poured down her face in a shocking contrast to her usually unbounded effervescence.

A groan drew her attention back to the orange filly on the ground, who was struggling back to her feet, glaring pure fury at the Pegasus before her from ragged blonde bangs, torn loose from her braid. She gasped twice as she rose, trying to catch the breath that had been knocked out of her from the impact and subsequent roll across the hard ground. Spitting out a bit of grass, Applejack roared "You... You buckin' TRAITOR!!" and flung herself straight at the rainbow-maned filly.

Dash was expecting another combination, not the full body slam that AJ delivered. She attempted to roll around it, but the force of AJ's rush had already over-balanced her, and she fell backwards, cracking her skull sharply against the ground. She felt a weight settle roughly on top of her before stars exploded and her head was wrenched to the side, the vivid imprint of a horseshoe left across her face, trailing the solid blow AJ leveled at her after getting the athletic pony in one place. Another connected. And another. "Aaahh!" Dash tasted blood in her mouth and looked up at the wild-eyed Applejack straddling her, reaching back for another blow. The Earth pony's hooves were hardened to the point of stone from hard years of harder work, and each strike had felt like slamming straight into... well, an apple tree. No way she could take a few more of those; Dash already felt her face swelling, and a cut had opened up above her eye. *Shit.* Snapping her tail above and behind AJ, she connected with her old friends beloved hat, knocking it forward over her face. There was a gasp from beneath the hat and Dash used the distraction to stretch both hooves back above her head before bringing them in a full arch right into the center of the worn Stetson with all of her strength. This time the hat produced a deep "Uff!", and the orange pony tumbled backwards. Dash quickly flapped her wings and gained her hooves, blinking rapidly to clear her vision and

spitting the blood from her muzzle. Altogether more blood hit the ground than she was happy with.

Lesson learned. Dash gave the sturdy country pony no chance to recover this time. She was airborne, slamming both hoofs into AJ's side with as much speed as she could gather on the way over. Applejack lashed out in blindly with an elbow, but the lightning-quick Pegasus simply rolled up and out of its path, sending a hoof down to snap across the work ponies face for her trouble, then flowing with the momentum of her punch she spun on her mid-air axis to deliver a powerful buck, throwing her opponent back to the ground. As Applejack tried to rise again, '*She just won't quit!*', Dash stepped in for a snapping uppercut under the orange pony's jaw, sending her blonde mane flying back and collapsing the workhorse into an unconscious pile of bruises.

Breathing heavily, she stood over AJ, making sure the stubborn ass was done, and gasped out "Da... Damn it! Why wouldn't you just listen?! That's all you had to do! Just take two seconds and bucking *listen to me!*" Her legs suddenly trembling, she reached up an unsteady hoof up to wipe away the blood that had begun to trek down the side of her face.

A strained, weak voice broke through her reverie "... Dashie...?"

Chapter 3

Evidence

Pinkie continued in a high, weak tone: "Dashie... how could you?"

Dash was pulled from her reverie, her thoughts and feelings poorly sorted. She had been staring blankly at the disheveled mess that was one of her oldest friends, now laying in a beaten heap before her. She turned to the pink filly, whose mane seemed to deflate by increments before her eyes.

"Pinkie, I- ow!" Rainbow Dash yelped, stung by something hard striking her on the flank at high velocity.

Rarity was advancing slowly, horn shining brighter than Dash had ever seen it. Her eyes were narrowed, her jaw bunched hard enough to make a vein near her temple throb... well, pulse delicately at least. Rocks were levitating around her, a dozen strong, and she was hurling them one after another at the Pegasus with incredible force.

Having taken a few hits from the stones, Dash knew she was going feel the bruises for days; provided they didn't break any of her light bones outright. She threw herself into dodging them before a lucky shot could fell her.

"Rarity, you throw one more stone at me, I'm going to shove your horn sideways up your-"

Rarity reared back to her hind legs with a scream, abandoning the stones easily dodged by the agile Pegasus. She seized a large log laying nearby with her telekinesis, raising it above her.

"You're supposed to protect your friends!" she yelled, the shout tearing at her throat.

Dash had dropped into a balanced crouch, gritting her teeth; prepared to leap any direction the moment Rarity hurled the deadly object. "That's exactly what I'm TRYING TO DO!" She shouted back.

"**STOP IT!**" yelled Fluttershy. At volume. The effect stunned everypony to shocked silence. "J- just stop it. Everypony. Please... Just stop." she said, reverting to a whispered plea, dropping her eyes from their wide-eyed stares and moving over to apply her attentions to the insensate Applejack, now and again releasing little exclamations as she examined the wounded pony.

Rarity, glaring azure death at Rainbow Dash, let the log drop and stepped over to the front of the focused Fluttershy; she stood protectively before the natural medic and her patient, as though she half-expected the unstable acrobat to rush over and attack at any moment.

Pinkie walked towards Dash, unafraid, too wounded to be afraid, just wanting to understand. "Why Dashie? Why did you hurt our friends?"

Looking into the dinner-plate sized eyes of the pink pony, the lack of her trade mark exuberance cut deeply into Dash's heart and she heaved a deep sigh. She'd never felt so horrible, so guilty. She *had* hurt them. She knew Twilight wouldn't be too bad, even soft as she was, but Applejack... she'd gone overboard, and she knew it. This was the one pony she could compete with, *really* had to work to win against. She'd never once backed down from a challenge, and while she and Fluttershy had known one another since their Cloudsdale school days, Applejack had come to hold a very special place in her heart...

"Pinkie. I'm... sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I-"

"SORRY?! You're sorry are you? Oh yes? Quite contrite, yes, I can see how very *penitent* you are, you filthy, crass, lowlife-deviant-BEAST!" Rarity interrupted, unable to contain herself, ending the tirade with a screech. "You could have *killed* Applejack, concussed Twilight, and doomed us all! So help me...*So. Help. Me-* if harm comes to Sweetie Bell over your little psychotic run, I will *personally skin you alive!*"

Dash hung her head throughout the abuse, flinching violently as Rarity finished. A single tear traced her cheek, falling to the grass. She was

done being angry, and besides, Rarity was right. *If anything happens to the fillies, I deserve it. I really do.*

Pinkie looked over at the white unicorn through hooded eyes, not a hint of a smile on her face. "Rarity. Hush." She turned her attention back to Dash, looking down at the stooped Pegasus.

Stepping closer, she reached out a hoof under Rainbow's chin, lifting it up gently until she made eye contact with the bruised, blue pony. "Dashie. You have to explain. You have to tell us why you did this."

Dash, to her credit, rendered a very thorough, albeit very thoroughly butchered, account of her experience across the canyon, trying and failing, to convey the depth of Princess Luna's sincerity; how her serenity and assurance had carried Dash's doubts to conviction. And the Princess's final warning.

Rarity was not in a particularly forgiving mood; refusing to make eye contact with Dash whenever she looked her way and interjecting biting comments regarding the "mental instability of certain blue Pegasi, who may or may not be present, who may or may not be inclined to schedule an extended stay with a psychiatric facility in the very near future."

Pinkie had her head tilted oddly to the side, an odd look of attentiveness to her posture. Dash had the odd but distinct feeling she was only half listening to the story; most of her focus seemed to be on her own body. When Dash had finished her story, Pinkie blinked, straightened, and pulled a whole body shiver.

"I believe you Dashie. I think you did the only thing you thought you could do." A little smile began to slide back across her face. "Even if you did maybe doom all Equestria."

"Um." Dash could think of absolutely nothing to say to that, so she turned to gaze at Fluttershy, who had been, while unobtrusive, listening attentively; taking in everything. She blinked, startled under the sudden scrutiny.

"Fluttershy?" Dash prompted.

"I... I don't know..." she muttered, glancing from the still livid Rarity, to the not-quite-happy Pinkie Pie, to the openly pleading Rainbow Dash; her oldest friend. "I... it's not the most important thing right now. Twilight. Applejack. They're hurt, and we need to get them care right away. We have to get them back to Ponyville."

Rarity snorted, "Very well done Rainbow Dash, your *brilliant* plan worked marvelously." her scorn searing like acid.

Dash visibly winced, but refused to look away from the unicorn this time. Despite the previous wave of forlorn weariness, her ire was beginning to rise again.

"NOPE!" chirped Pinkie Pie, crossing a good four feet in a single bounce, hopping between the two mares. "We're done with all that hurty stuff now 'k guys, and if anypony starts anything like that again why I'll just tie her up with her own tail and *drag her through every puddle of mud on the way back home.*" She finished, fixedly grinning in Rarity's face. Rarity, for her part, blanched, (as much as her alabaster coat could visibly allow), certain to her very soul that this pink ... *creature*, would actually do it.

"*Fine. Very well.* Have it your way Pinkie." Rarity said, lifting her nose to the air, and turning lightly back towards Twilight. Her horn lit again, and both Twilight and Applejack began to float softly off the ground, their bodies cushioned in the magic. "We should move quickly, I'm not certain how long I can maintain this."

Pinkie and Fluttershy moved to the unicorn, Pinkie snagging up Applejack's hat where it lay on the ground. Flipping it into the air, it spun three times before falling to settle perfectly on her head. After a moments consideration, she cocked it roguishly to the side.

Fluttershy looked to Dash, who hadn't moved a muscle to follow them. "Aren't you coming with us?" she asked, already sounding sad, as though the question had answered itself.

The other Pegasus grimaced, "That's ... probably not a good idea."

"I'll say." came a haughty barb.

Pinkie blinked and asked, "Why not Dashie?"

Fluttershy took a step towards Dash, her mouth open to speak.

Everypony froze as a shock of light and clap of thunder violently erupted in the distance, splitting the night in a brilliant bolt, casting a stark relief across the friends' faces, distorting their frozen expressions with jagged shadows. A beam had shot straight upwards in a solid spear, like a beacon, drawing their eyes to the source; an ancient and dilapidated castle was revealed startlingly close, its every window filled with the searing light, throwing a surreal aspect on the surrounding forest for miles around.

Dash blinked, breaking the spell the incredible sight held her under. Gravely she turned her gaze on her friends.

"That's why. ... Guys? Guys!" she shouted, jerking them from the transfixed state and getting their attention. "You have to get AJ and Twilight home. Now."

Dash didn't hear Fluttershy shout her name as she sped toward the castle; the source of this nightmare.

~

Days had passed, or so the clocks counted and the calendars assured.

The atmosphere of the usually light-hearted and joyful little town was now subdued and tense; the streets mostly empty, shops open but vacant. No pony could remember a time like this. The darkness had endured for twenty-four hours without break. A lone courier Pegasus arrived late in the natural hours of the first night after the disaster, meeting with the mayor behind closed doors, before leaving as abruptly as he came. Shortly after the mayor issued a proclamation of emergency; curfew was established, watches were set directed toward the Everfree Forest, and travel outside the town's borders was strongly discouraged. No announcements had been made about Princess Celestia.

The sun finally broke the horizon on the second day. Everypony cheered its rise, but their bursting celebration held a current of desperation. The weak cheer quickly stilled altogether as the ponies saw the rising orb was not the brilliant sun they knew so well, but cast its reddish-orange light fitfully, as though none too pleased to be making an appearance. Nor did it

take its usual track through the sky; staying low to the horizon as it made a two hour trek from rise to set. The moon mirrored its path like a silver guardian, drifting in parallel above the sun as it made its belabored journey.

The next day, the sun was up for nearly four hours, everypony in town solemnly gathered to watch it rise, even the youngest foals roused from their uneasy slumber.

Twilight had regained consciousness with a mild concussion and had been released from the clinic with an order of bed rest. Applejack had been admitted to critical care; her broken rib and fractured foreleg leaving her heavily bandaged, with a prescription of pain medication she flatly refused to take, despite the constant, if submissive, nagging she received from Fluttershy.

The friends stayed together in the library for the most part, taking comfort in one another's presence, if little else. Twilight maintained a brooding silence since she had awoke, settling a pervasive anxiety upon the general atmosphere.

Dash had not been seen since their parting in the forest, and it was anypony's guess if she was alive or not. Her welfare had been as much a subject of discussion as her intentions.

In the weak light of the third day, Twilight spoke gravely to the assembled ponies.

"Girls," she said, the one word falling like the somber call to a counsel of war.

"I've been thinking everything through, and there are few things I'm not confused about. There are far too many coincidences surrounding my coming here; about my research into the prophecy, and subsequent discoveries about the Elements of Harmony. I think... I think Princess Celestia knew this was going to happen. I can't get much farther than that with any assurance, but everything has lined up far too well for me to believe her hoof was absent from how things have unfolded. I can't... I don't understand why she wasn't direct with me, or for that matter, bothered with me at all in procuring the Elements." she ranted, waving a hoof vaguely before her. "I've been having Spike send letters to the Princess three times a day, but either she's not receiving them for some reason or... I don't even want to consider the alternatives. But one thing is clear- I have to stay true

to the Princess. She gave me a task, and it is unfulfilled. I have to go back into the forest, and try to get to the Elements."

The announcement was met with scattered, if half-hearted, protestations and the near-immediate reaction she had both feared and expected. They insisted, once again, on going with her and she had as little success in dissuading them as she had the first time.

"Um..." Twilight began with more hesitancy, "we have to discuss what happened with Dash, one more time. I want to believe that she was under some kind of compulsion, not in control of herself, as much as any of you. But after hearing everypony's perspectives, I don't really think that's the case. I know you all feel betrayed; you've known her a lot longer than I have. But if we encounter her in there, and she tries to stop us again... I..." Twilight broke off, biting her lip. She knew what she had to say, even believed she was right, but giving voice of her intention to take Rainbow Dash down if need be, by any means necessary, pulled a string in her heart. It was true that she hadn't known the brash Pegasus long at all, but she'd come to feel as much a connection with her as she did with the still loyal ponies sitting with her now. How these crazy ponies had come to hold such a place in her heart in such a short time, when all her life she'd barely given a second thought to social ties outside of the most common courtesies, was beyond her.

A delicate "Ahem" stirred her from her musings, and she focused her attention to the unicorn that produced it.

"We all know what you're trying to say dear, and as you say, you know as much as we do about what happened. What you may not be considering is that we've all known Rainbow Dash much longer than you have, and as such, her vile betrayal cuts all the deeper. The others may still have reservations, though how *you* can Applejack, after how badly she beat you, I'll never know, but I for one have none. When I see her again, I will attend to her personally." Rarity finished primly, the glint in her eyes bespeaking her tightly reigned fury at the absent Pegasus.

Pinkie spoke from where she lay on the floor, not raising her head from its resting position on her hooves. "You're wrong everypony. I know you are. I get why Twilight won't believe me, she doesn't know. But you Applejack, and you Rarity, an Fluttershy too - If I told you my tail was twitch-a-twitchin' right now, you'd all dive for cover." AJ flinched a bit at this,

sending a reflexive glance to the ceiling. "And I'm telling you that my Pinkie-Sense told me Dashie wasn't lying. She was telling the truth."

Rarity was biting her lip and looking like she'd dearly love to argue the point, but Twilight got there first, her eyebrows raised high into her mane. "Pinkie-Sense?"

A weary Applejack turned to the confused unicorn with a deadpan expression.

"Long story sugar cube. Anyhow, I been thinking bout all this my own way, 'n see here: me 'n Rainbow been close for ages now, e'er since she came down from Cloudsdale to help Fluttershy set up her cottage. It may seem like we argue more'n otherwise, but honest truth is that's just our way; how we 'spress ourselves. Ain't neither one of us sharp on that mushy, frou-frou stuff, so we always show'n how we felt with jibes an horsin' about. Camaraderie type a thing. Wouldn't expect y'all ta understand that Rarity." AJ snapped, casting a glance at Rarity, where a repugnant look was painted on the unicorn's face for all to see. "I know what yer thinkin', but we ain't discussin' it, so wipe that look offa yer face."

She turned to Twilight, "Listen here Twilight, cuz here's what matters: Dash ain't no traitor. It ain't in her. She cares more about her friends than she does her own life. Bout this time last year Fluttershy an Dash an me were hoofin' it about the back country, up north round the bend of the Everfree, just explorin'. We took a rest in a scenic lil meadow we happened upon. Fluttershy an I were havin' a drink at the creek runnin' through, when we heard this huge crack behind us. An ol' dead tree had given way, an was loomin' over us on its way down fast. Dash had been flyin' about up above an saw it 'fore we did. Just as we're about to get it, Dash slammed inta us from the air, pushin' us clear. That tree came down in a almighty crash... an for what felt like forever, Ah thought Dash hadn't made it out. She did o 'course, an was mighty pleased about it, lemme tell ya. But if she hadn't? She still woulda' done it. Ah know that sure's anything. In the forest Ah... Ah got carried away; swept up in everythin'. Ah should've heard her out..."

Fluttershy nodded her agreement from her place on the couch pillows.

Twilight and Rarity shared a glance, their reservations wavering, but unchanged.

The divide in group consensus tacitly ignored, Twilight began to lay out the logistics for the trip.

~

On the fitful dawn of the third day, Twilight and Applejack decided they had recovered enough to act on their plan. Fluttershy, however, was none too pleased. Applejack was still heavily bandaged, but flatly refused to be left behind. She limped along stoically beside a grim-faced Twilight.

The group gathered what few supplies they felt were needed, and packed them into their respective saddle bags. They had trotted past the edge of town when they heard the warning cries shouted from the posted lookouts on the roofs behind them. Stopping to watch something breaking from the canopy of the Everfree Forest; it soon became clear that the odd sight was a group of Pegasi flying in a tight formation. They landed some short distance in front of the group, conversing briefly amongst themselves in muted tones, before trotting up as a unit towards the five friends.

A tight fitting weave of dark black and dark blue covered the Pegasi; an emblazoned bolt of lightning crossing vertically over their shoulders and meeting at the chest in an impressive 'V' shape. Three were large, barrel chested stallions, evidenced by their size and the squareness of jaw. The others were smaller; obviously young mares by their graceful lines and sinuous movement, though their coat-tight uniforms revealed the angular lines of taught and powerful frames. They held about them, one and all, an air of tight discipline and singular purpose as they trotted in formation towards the friends.

A gasp came as one from the Ponyville cadre; the lead Pegasus mare had broken off from the others as they halted, the leader continuing on alone. Raising a hoof, she had pushed back her goggles and pulled back the cowl. Magenta eyes regarded the group, still shocked to silence; though not at the unveiling of her face. They had recognized the leader for who she was the moment she broke from the other uniformed Pegasi; the way she moved, the cyan wings, and her rainbow colored mane. All were easily distinguishable and unmistakable.

Twilight's eyes were large as the lead pony pulled her mask off, revealing the Pegasus that had occupied so many of her tormented thoughts. She stepped forward with no small amount of apprehension to meet the steadily approaching rainbow-maned pony...

"Rainbow Dash." Twilight said flatly, sweeping her with a cool look from hoof to laid-back ears.

Dash pulled to a stop before Twilight, giving her a small nod and a carefully neutral expression. "Twilight." she acknowledged, before glancing away and stepping around her, leaving the bookish unicorn momentarily nonplussed.

Coming to a halt in front of AJ, Dash's composure suddenly fell away; her eyes alight with conflicted emotion as she took in the workponies injuries. "AJ... Applejack... I'm so, so sorry... I-" AJ shot a tight little grin at the faltering Pegasus. "Lucky shot was all that was, sugar cube," she quipped dismissively. The two mares stood staring at one another; the light smile spread to Rainbow as, for just a moment the world fell away from them. The few words were enough to bring the two to every understanding required between them. The soft smiles slowly took on the character of familiar, challenging grins as they leaned in to press their foreheads together in mock challenge; stylized goggles meeting worn Stetson, before chuckling and stepping back.

Rainbow cast a look around, taking in Pinkie and Fluttershy, and throwing them a friendly wink. Rarity had been glowering since Dash had appeared, looking as though she wanted to say something harsh and was struggling to contain herself. Dash barely spared her a glance before turning back to Twilight. "Twi, it's time to head up to the castle. Princess Luna will explain everything."

Twilight blinked. "*Who?*"

Chapter 4

Foresight

An angry ochreous sun drifted slowly overhead, the immense moon hovering in tandem directly above it as it mirrored the fiery orb's painfully low arch across the horizon. Though its gaze was gentle and warm, the sun's alien appearance was far from comforting, shining principally as a reminder of the dystopian circumstances that had swept so suddenly across Equestria. A steady wind had been blowing throughout the unnaturally short day, sweeping in from the south over the far distant mountains. It came in hard and low across the plains, bending down the long grasses and carrying vagrant leaves in its wide wake. Whipping on through the idyllic borough of Ponyville, it buffeted the two groups of ponies standing just a short distance outside the little town, ruffling their manes and tails as they silent faced one another.

One of the groups stood tightly together, waiting stoically. Their postures were alert, but not visibly impatient. These ponies were uniformly dressed from head to hoof in the stylized black and purple designs of a flight suit, dual-designed for high speed maneuvering and aerial combat. Needless to say, they stood out of the common herd.

Most of the tension in the air, however, was reserved for the opposing group, which consisted of five brightly colored and nervously clustered fillies, conversing with one errant member of the uniformed Pegasi, whose mane was an unruly shock of rainbow hues.

"Princess Luna will explain everything," Rainbow Dash asserted, her tone clipped.

Twilight blinked, her confusion temporarily calling a full-stop to all higher cognitive functions at hearing any other name but her beloved mentor's associated with the royal title. "*Who?*"

"It's... kind of a crazy story, but c'mon, I'll explain what I can on the way," Dash said, before sharply turning to address the unfamiliar Pegasi she'd arrived with. "Okay guys, er- Wing, you've got your orders."

The five imposing Pegasi gave a series of nods before crouching down and launching themselves into the air, erupting off the ground with a power and flair that the five friends had previously only seen in their resident speed-demon. The Wing jinked around one another on their way up to cruising altitude, then catching the strong wind, they fell into a tight formation and took off at an impressive speed toward the Archback mountain range far in the distance.

Twilight was watching the quickly receding Pegasi with a small, worried frown. "Orders?" she inquired, struggling to reign in her suspicions. While attempting to give Dash the benefit of the doubt, this new development was making her more commiserative efforts increasingly difficult, not to mention the fact that, despite her previous bluster and all of her outward displays of confidence, Dash's new appearance was rather... imposing. Compounding her unease was the fact that this Pegasus had actually attacked her once... sure, she was somewhat clumsy, and had knocked herself about on more than one occasion, but nopony had ever actually *hit* her before. Real violence was something one heard about from the lower streets of Canterlot, not something actually encountered in the Princess' School for Gifted Unicorns. The admission stung, but she had to concede, at least to herself, that at this point she was more than a bit afraid of Rainbow Dash.

Utterly oblivious to Twilight's concerns, a fierce little grin appeared on Rainbow's muzzle, "Heh, yeah. I'm the Captain of Princess Luna's Shadowbolts! They're the best fliers in all of Equestria, and *I'm* the Captain!" she restated, just in case anypony had missed that particular item on the first pass.

Fluttershy ducked her head, raising a fore-hoof pensively off the ground. "But... Rainbow Dash, what about the Wonderbolts?" she asked, trying reflexively to hide behind bangs that were being blown over her shoulder. Under different circumstances, the timid little mare would have been amusing, but Dash had known Fluttershy long enough not to discount her comments when she mustered up the nerve to be heard, and the seemingly innocuous question was true to form. Dash rapidly back-peddled, "Um... well, yeah. Okay, they're still awesome, but *this* is totally different. I still want to be a Wonderbolt someday, totally. But this? With

Luna? I'm the Captain of a Princess's elite team! I mean, come on, how cool is that?"

"And what... *orders* are they to fulfill, precisely?" Rarity interjected, refusing to be sidetracked.

"They're headed out as official envoys. To other nations way beyond our borders. Some mountains way up north to talk to the Griffons, the Deer nations to the south, even the Wolves somewhere east! I didn't even know Wolves were still around, I thought they'd gone extinct or something."

Twilight, unable to contain her soapbox impulses, began to correct Dash on the finer points. "The Wolf Tribes aren't actually extinct, Rainbow. In fact, they used to hold control over huge swaths of disjointed territories all across the continent, according to the histories. They even had their claws in a large part of southwestern Equestria, from what I could decipher of their old maps. Their long term weakness came about from their innate and fierce independence. They would gather in tribes, but rarely established townships of any sort beyond winter camps. Much like the Dragons in their decentralization actually..." Dash gave a little cough at this. Twilight, in full swing lecture mode, failed to notice. "In any case, when Princess Celestia stepped forward to lay claim to the ponydom we know today, the Wolves secluded themselves within the huge forests to the far eastern reaches. Apparently they had always abhorred the notion of central leadership."

Applejack had limped up to stand closer to Dash, "Whatta ya'll mean 'envoys' sugarcube?" she asked, the pair tuning out Twilight's oration.

"Princess Luna is sending out contacts to the other nations, asking for representatives to come and meet with her. She wants to talk with the higher-ups all over, mostly about treaties an' history an' stuff I guess. But look, let's talk on the way, alright?"

That said, Dash was fixed to set off at a brisk trot, but eased after just a few steps, noting that Applejack was limping along stoically at her best speed. Though she hid the pain it caused her impressively well, Dash's sharp eye caught her friend's strained movements. Saying nothing, she slowed her pace to an easy canter.

“So, okay, look...” she began, “this is gonna be a lot to take in all at once, but just hold off until I get through it, okay?” Dash said to the group as they moved in the direction of the forest line in the distance. “So to start, Princess Luna is Princess Celestia’s little sister, and...” she broke off, grimacing as she caught the sound of a set of hooves abruptly stumbling to a halt. Twilight was standing stock-still, staring at her incredulously as the gears spun furiously in the little Unicorn’s head, working to make all the possible connections to the prophecies she had been pouring over so obsessively these past few days.

Dash sighed, “It’s gonna be like that huh?” she gestured with a padded, black foreleg to the path ahead, “Can we at least keep moving while we plow through this? I’d like to get there sometime *today*.”

Twilight appeared to make several attempts to speak, cutting herself off at what could be assumed to be the beginnings of syllables, before simply shaking her head and stepping back in with the group.

“Right, okay. So Luna is an Alicorn, and Celestia’s little sister,” Dash began anew, grinning over as Twilight noticeably bit her lip. “and they had a... um, ‘falling out’ a long time ago. Celestia sorta banished Luna to the moon for a thousand years.” She pulled ahead yet again, unsurprised as her ears swiveled back to register that her hooves were now making the only sounds of travel along the packed earth. The entire little herd had come to a full stop in unison, staring at her. Dash released an irritated little groan as everypony found their voice at the same time, except, she noted, for Twilight, who was frowning thoughtfully.

“To the... moon?! That’s horrible...”

“Her own lil’ sister?”

“For one thousand years?!”

“That must have been a *HUGE* slingshot!”

“Ooooookay. Well, I guess we’ll make it there sometime *tomorrow*,” Dash quipped sarcastically, her stylized goggles glinting in her mane as she snapped her tail, “Can we *please* keep moving?”

The ponies shared a look between them, and once more began to follow the Pegasus’ lead.

“Right,” Dash began again, her tone a grim promise of a short temper becoming dangerously frayed, “So. Luna. Alicorn. Celestia’s sister. They had a big ‘thing’ a long time ago, like a thousand-year long time ago, and apparently it turned pretty ugly. Princess Luna was kinda vague-ish on the details, but she said she ended up locked in the moon for all that time.”

Twilight had clearly been waiting for Dash to draw breath, and pounced into the breach with didactic abandon, rapidly fitting the pieces together. “Wait wait wait. Why did they disagree? What happened?” It all made sense, but Dash was clearly badly misinformed of the proper recounting.

“Uh... to be honest, I don’t know much more than the basics. I only spent a while with her, and we talked about other stuff. Then she had me go off an meet with those other Pegasuses an bring em back to the castle. We spent the last couple of days practicing together. They’re really, really good! I mean, not as good as me, obviously, but they’re all top fliers. We’ve been sharing techniques and practicing for days!” Her tone grew lighter as she recalled the long hours of drills, the new tricks learned, and the shared experience of talented fliers with such dynamic skill sets.

“Rainbow, give me one reason to believe you,” Twilight demanded, jarring Dash from her wistful preoccupation.

“Gee Twi, I dunno, how ‘bout that?” she said in retort, waving a hoof at the sun and rolling her eyes.

Twilight stomped her hoof in a preemptive declaration, “Not good enough. There are a hundred possible explanations for why the sun could be up, and a thousand as to why it looks so... so sick.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say here Twilight. I don’t think it matters what I tell you if you won’t believe me anyway. I know you’re freaking out right now, I do, I get that. But what do you want to do? You want to go to the castle, talk with the one pony who actually knows what the hay’s happening? Well, that’s what we’re doing, so get off my mane, will ya?”

“I... Rainbow, I just need to know... where’s Princess Celestia? Is she okay?”

“... I dunno Twi. That’s... you’ll have to ask Luna.” Dash asserted in a tone that clearly implied she wasn’t prepared to discuss the matter further. Twilight unexpectedly subsided for the time being, somewhat surprising the Pegasus, though she wasn’t about to complain. A silence fell upon the group.

~

They had been travelling now for some time at a fair trot. The forest loomed not far ahead, and the short day was nearing its close. Everypony was occupied with her own thoughts, ranging from barely restrained and frantic, to one particular quietly smoldering grudge.

Dash looked back, noting that Rarity was trailing a bit behind, her face covered in a frown. She had been seemingly removed from the proceedings about her thus far. Dash slowed her canter, moving back to intercept her, mentally preparing to bite the horseshoe. As she let her pace slow, the others drifted to pass ahead. As she slid by Applejack, the orange mare smirked over at her, “Nice threads there Rainbow. Bit tight, aren’t they?” Dash gaped at her, blushing brightly right up to her ears. “Where the hay did that come from AJ?” she stammered, utterly thrown for a moment. . Fortunately AJ wasn’t intent on embarrassing her friend... well, not just yet. She cast a quick glance to the cyan pony’s destination and said, “Yer doin’ the right thing Dash. Ah know you know how she feels, an that ain’t gonna make it any easier. Just do yer best an’ talk from the heart. Try to be the bigger pony.” She winked, then quickened her pace a bit, moving up next to Fluttershy, and began a low conversation in tones of reassurance with the little Pegasus. Rainbow huffed at the antics of her rustic friend, *When did she get so darn unpredictable?*, before recalling her current little mission.

With a deep breath, Dash matched pace with the smoldering fashionista. Trotting beside her in silence, the moment unfolded uncomfortably. She had just been getting used to the notion of waiting the Unicorn out when Rarity began speaking suddenly, startling her.

“Rainbow Dash. This isn’t easy. I meant what I said before, and I still don’t know what to think. I do know how loyal you are, and that makes this all the more confusing. I’ve never had cause to question you before, and to

have you do what you did... so suddenly... It still feels like you betrayed us all. Betrayed *me*."

Dash grimaced. "Rares, look. What happened at the bridge that night, you think I wanted that? That was the *last* thing I wanted to do, and it scared the hay outta me! I feel awful that I hurt AJ and Twilight, but I didn't know what else to do! Everything happened so fast, and Twilight was going to take off no matter what I said an' get herself killed!" her brash tone softened as she continued, "It was my fault; if I were better with words, if I could have explained it right..."

Rarity huffed. She hated to admit it, but she could understand how Rainbow Dash felt, without condoning her actions. She grudgingly said as much. "I'm just so worried Rainbow Dash. What if you're wrong? You've sided against your friends, and for what? Somepony with crazy stories that we've never met before? Have you even considered what is going to happen to us when we reach this 'castle' if Twilight Sparkle is right?"

Dash hesitated. "I... Honestly? No, not really Rarity. Y'know why? Cuz if I thought for a second anything bad was gonna happen to you up there, you think I'd let you go? You think I'd be *taking* you there? Pony feathers Rarity, that's why I did what I did in the first place! To *protect* you guys! You didn't see what I saw that night. When you all went back to Ponyville, I flew towards the castle and watched. That light was shooting out everywhere, totally randomly! It plowed through trees and stones like nothing. It even tore through the walls of the castle once or twice, an' almost took *me* out a couple times!" Dash exclaimed, her eyes large and voice animated with the recounting.

Rarity grimaced, but there was little doubting Dash's sincerity. That filly could as easily glide through charm school as pass off a duplicitous tale with that much enthusiasm. Still... just because she *believed* she was in the right, by no means meant she actually *was*. Not to mention Twilight; an educated and proper unicorn... *Well, for the most part at least...* the magical protege of the Princess herself, born and raised in fabulous Canterlot itself, the glowing gem of Equestria. *Why, if I could get my latest line into those boutiques...* Rarity lightly shook her mane, returning her thoughts to the present. It would seem she was at something of an impasse. She could only hope for the best, and prepare for the worst, but she didn't have to be happy about it. Kicking a stone along the path, she

sent it skittering off into the grass. *And that insufferable wind certainly isn't helping matters*, she thought, fretting over her mane for the thousandth time, and trying not to show it.

Rainbow had been casting quick looks at her for the past minute, waiting for a response. Rarity knew that what she said next could cut the Pegasus to the quick, and it frankly pained her to see the brash young speedster so unconventionally vulnerable...

Struggling to put on a bright smile, she turned to face Rainbow directly. "You did what you thought best Rainbow Dash. There's no point fretting over frayed silk; if we stick together, I'm sure everything will be alright."

Dash broke into a huge smile, too relieved to say more than, "Thanks Rares."

Rarity bumped her shoulder delicately against Dash, "Though you simply must let me do something about that outfit. *Far* too utilitarian for a filly of your build," they shared a laugh over that, trotting down the road.

~

The entrance to the forbidding forest was just ahead, when night fell suddenly over the ponies. Rarity released a startled, "What!" while Fluttershy let out an almighty "Meep!". Their world turned dark beneath an enormous shadow, and the rushing thunder of gale-force winds roared high overhead. Everypony, aside from an enamoured pink filly who simply stared into the sky with a long "Oooooo" of admiration, hunched to the ground, an instinctive throwback to a more wild past, and looked upwards. Fluttershy entered that very special level of panic reserved for just one thing in the wide and scary world - Dragons... Huge. Dragons. Three of them, gliding across the sky in a wide triangle formation, arching lazily above them. Although, to be fair, anything a dragon wasn't doing fearsomely, they seemed to go about lazily. It was as though any action that didn't call them to the mind of battle was done with a laconic disregard of affairs beneath their attention.

Chuckling at the wide eyed expressions of her prostrate friends, Pinkie noted that Fluttershy had gone into full emergency lock-down. After

a moment of experimentally nudging her to no response, Pinkie just giggled at the silly fillies antics and burrowed underneath her, rising with the insensate Pegasus stiff as a board across her back, a fair amount of earth crumbling from her fluffy mane.

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The trek through the forest was largely uneventful, the notorious bridge in full repair, and the castle loomed as they broke through the tree line, just as the sun was lowering behind the horizon. Situated in an circular clearing was the first bright, clear patch they'd seen since entering the ancient forest. While in heavy disrepair, the monolithic structure held a feeling of old majesty and sorrowful nostalgia. The stalwart masonry of the great outer walls was cracked here and there, vines tracing about haphazardly. The great encircling wall obscured the lower portions of the castle and courtyard beyond, but it was clear a large village could easily fit within its bounds and apparently once had, if the nearly fossilized ruts in the road were anything to go by.

In contrast to the ruin's long-abandoned appearance, evenly distanced globes of soft moonlight were glowing, magically contained and suspended along the outer walls, as if in preparation for the advancing darkness. Passing through the arching portal, Twilight quickly calculated it to be wide enough for at least fifteen ponies walking shoulder-to-shoulder. Dash turned left on a side path of the sprawling courtyard that curved into the great shadow cast by the castle, her uniform making her outlines hard to distinguish. Leading them toward the trickling sound of running water, their destination obscured by the curve of the castle itself, she grinned to herself as her friends gaped about them in amazement.

Trotting round the bend, even Dash drew to a shuddering halt at the sight before them. On the far side of the clearing, on the bank of a flowing brook rose a grove of elegantly placed maple trees, their leaves gently rustling in the soft breeze. Just before the copse sat Luna; her tail curled primly about her, contemplatively focused on a table before her. This, however, was not what drew the collective shock and ragged gasp from the six little ponies. Dwarfing both board and Goddess, great wings tightly furled, body sprawled out behind him, the tip of a massive tail flicking idly, and long-necked head resting against one raised fist... was a dragon. A truly huge dragon. His silver-green scales glinted with his movements in a

youthful shine, belying the great age necessary to achieve such a size; massive even by the standards of his kind.

As if this weren't enough, movement had caught the ponies' eyes, and the friends stood frozen as the heads of two more dragons swiveled towards them, their light green colors blending perfectly into the dips of the natural hillside where they had lain motionless. The two lay on either side of the meadow a good distance from the Alicorn and ancient dragon in the center, piercing the ponies with a predatory gaze.

The two at the center of the meadow affected not to notice, as they continued their conversation. "Much has changed my old friend," Luna was saying in melancholy tones to the ancient dragon, the clear ring of her voice carrying with ease across the meadow's sprawl.

"Indeed..." he rumbled in reply, the baritone of his voice struck as poorly suited to pony ears, rumbling forth in a depth more akin to stone and earth. "and all else aside, it is wonderful to have you back with us. Your sister always did have finer relations with the more... 'established' beings. She had little inclination to appreciate the nomadic ways of the Enclave, nor the fascination with the deep mysteries that you always showed. Do you remember the last time we plumbed the Nova Solaris quasar? We stood upon the highest peak of Grayscale Mountain for four days and four nights..." the pair shared a fond smile of remembrance, lapsing for a moment into another language as they reminisced on days long past into the ages.

"Hah!" Luna cried out suddenly. "Checkmate you scaly old buzzard!" she gloated, laughing joyfully.

"Little Princess, you wound me!" the dragon rumbled melodramatically, "Using the nostalgia of days gone by to distract an old friend!" he mourned, before erupting into a laugh that shook the pebbles underhoof. After a moment he sobered, his great eyes hooded. The atmosphere changed.

Solemnly now, he spoke. "How is this so little Luna? I've often pondered this in your long absence. You have known my father, and his before him, and I am myself now ancient beyond the understanding of near any other race of this world. And yet... still you laugh with me, as a friend.

You were by my side as I learned to fly, when I could nearly fit under *your* wing. My father told me many of the tales of his youth when you were by his side as well. You sat on the counsels of Elders. You stood as ambassador for the Wolves and the Deer when they seemed destined to annihilate one another. You raise the moon, you weave the stars, and the Dreaming is your realm. What strange magics do you wield, Goddess of the Night, that we mortals so easily fool ourselves into feeling your equals?"

Luna stared up solemnly at the scaled giant, her eyes lost for a moment from the touch of Equestria. "The Dreaming is not *my* realm old friend. I have some weight in it, true, but that burden rests on the shoulders of one far older than gods and time. He is of the Endless, and I speak of him as you now speak to me; in the barest of comprehension. I am not so great as you would imagine me... There are depths that are beyond me, and I take comfort in this little land, with its easy joy and bright laughter... now more so than ever..." The moment stretched out in silent contemplation as the leaves fell and the creek sang.

The massive dragon glanced around, taking in the halting approach of yet more diminutive equines as they slid out of the castle's shadow, reluctantly following a single tiny mare in black. "My goodness Luna, you've become quite the social butterfly in your old age." He quipped, chuckling lightly. Luna smirked at him and briefly peeked out her tongue, giggling a bit herself.

"Well, I suppose I shall excuse myself while you attend to things. My wing-brothers and I will be at the lake, should you need us before sunrise."

Luna smiled gently, with great fondness. "It really is wonderful to see you again. Thank you for coming so quickly. You don't know what a comfort it is to have you close in uncertain times."

The dragon bowed his head, Luna rejoined with a playful curtsy, and he slowly rose, the other two dragons stretching their wings and preparing to take flight with him. He turned piercing eyes toward the ponies, seeking out the distinctively purple mare, "Regard your charge well little Unicorn. He is precious to our kind. To me."

Leaving no room for contemplation or response, he launched himself up into the sky, the gale of his wings tearing at the manes of the diminutive

equines. Sliding above the castle walls and out of sight, the two others with him, they disappeared into the encroaching dusk.

The ponies assembled before the goddess began a deep bow, barring Rainbow Dash and Twilight, though for reasons entirely mutually exclusive. Even Fluttershy had revived herself. Luna's expression lost any hint of mirth as she regarded them. Rainbow coughed from behind a hoof, muttering surreptitiously, "Guys, don't do that, she really hates it."

On cue, Luna grumbled discontentedly; "Must everypony keep doing that? Such affectations were rare one thousand years ago, but now it seems common place. Ugh."

Twilight, who had resisted the ingrained urge to prostrate herself, stared hard at the midnight-blue Alicorn, and wasted no time plunging in.

"Where is Princess Celestia?" she demanded, her voice loud and ringing across the meadow.

Luna met her gaze evenly. "I do not know."

"YOU LIAR!" Twilight screamed, losing grip of her frayed composure entirely and stomping both hooves down furiously into the grass. "You've done something with her! I know it! I read the prophecies, I know what you really are! You're Nightmare Moon, the evil mare of darkness, and you're trying to take over! Well I won't let you! You think you can trot in and take over just like that? You really think everypony is just going to stand for it?!"

Dash had recoiled from Twilight's initial outburst, but now her ruby eyes were narrowed, her muzzle pursed. A look of tightly contained anger writ across her face as her wings began to unfurl from her body.

Luna's expression never cracked a hair. She continued to gaze serenely down at the raging purple Unicorn for a moment, before asking, "Indeed? And just what, little one, do you intend to do about it?"

The fire inside Twilight's chest flickered. "I... um. I know what we need to find, and when we do, I'll banish your sorry flank back to the moon for ANOTHER thousand years! The Elements of Harmony took care of you once, and they can do it again!" Twilight thought she had done a rather fine job of hiding the uncertainty in her voice, while the little autodidact in her

head pranced about, shrilly informing her that she was currently threatening a Goddess.

Luna managed to make the rolling of her eyes appear almost dainty. “And the Elements? Where do you intend to find them? How will you use them?” she asked, sardonic amusement alive in her voice as she humored her sister’s pupil... who appeared to be ever so slightly cracked. *Celestia always did have a taste for eccentric characters*, she thought, mildly entertained. Her gaze hardened as she continued, “And most importantly, how do you know about about the Elements of Harmony?” her eyes glinting emerald in the last rays of the setting red sun, she put Twilight to task.

Twilight simply was not prepared for this. Being questioned rationally by the psychotic monster she’d seen at the Summer Sun Celebration? Not to mention said monster having hit upon nearly every weak point in her plans... she stammered, fumbling for a response.

Luna spoke coldly in the awkward silence. “Twilight Sparkle. The power you seek... is beyond your understanding. The Elements of Harmony are perhaps the single most potent force on this plane. With them, you would have the power to level mountains, acidify oceans, and scorch the earth of entire continents. Is that what you want?” she asked, pausing a moment, “My sister once used them, at great cost to herself. You see, the Elements choose their bearers. It is not the other way around. Not even for gods. Understand this: my sister wished for us to rule together. I wished for us to not rule at all.” Luna shrugged lightly, “That was the heart of our disagreement; a reminder of the inexorable twilight between us, the divide of night and day. In near all else we stood in harmony. To provide the peace and abundance our little ponies needed to flourish together... we already do this! By our very existence! There is no need for the constant reminder of an imposed order by a ‘royal’ presence. Does that make any sense to you? Can you try to understand, just this, without judgement?” Luna asked seriously, staring down into Twilight’s wide violet eyes.

Twilight Sparkle had never been so conflicted in her life. Emotionally, her frustration was boiling over. She wanted to denounce every word this creature was speaking as lies and spit at what must be twisted half-truths. But... she couldn’t. Not really, not with any intellectual honesty. She hadn’t heard a single thing that crossed her analytical compass negatively. Though even this meager admission felt like a betrayal of the most

important being in her life: her Princess... she could not bring herself to betray her own senses and reason... and so she whispered, "Yes."

Luna nodded, "Very good little one," her horn suddenly glowing as points of light began to materialize about her near the ground. "in that case, why don't you hold onto these for the time being." With a final surge and blinding flash, five stone orbs came to a rest on the soft grass, each with a unique sigil upon it. The Elements of Harmony.

Chapter 5

Bereavement

Rainbow Dash lay atop the highest tower of a hidden castle, deep within the vast forest of Everfree. Legs curled comfortably underneath her, she gazed up to the night sky that cradled an immense moon. The smooth tile felt warm beneath her, and she drew in a deep breath of the cool night air. Her mind was unusually focused and still as she took in the beauty her vantage offered. It was strange... lately she'd been finding much more pleasure in the nighttime than she ever had before. The pinpricks of brilliance that dotted the sky were far more vivid than she'd realized, and the moon... the waxing moon now stirred something deeply inside of her, firing her blood almost as much as flight at breakneck speeds...

Despite the serene atmosphere, her thoughts were deeply troubled. Nothing was what it used to be. Things used to be simple. She had her friends, her dreams, and the sky. Now everything was getting so... *complicated*. She was used to tolerating the dislike of some ponies, (those jerks in flight camp coming quickly to mind), but not *trusting* her? On the one hoof, she knew she had done the right thing those days ago on the cliff-side. She had saved her friends' lives, of that she had no doubt, but their reservations stung deeply. Especially when they tried to hide it. Like Rarity.

She grimaced as an unwelcome thought occurred, *maybe... maybe it's me. I was pretty excited about the whole Shadowbolts thing. Do they think that means I don't care about them anymore? About what's going on? Still... damn it, Rarity was such a MULE!* she thought plaintively, her muzzle crinkling. *Did she think I couldn't tell she wasn't being for real? That I'm so dumb that I couldn't tell she was just humoring me?* As angry as the thought made her, and as good as that indignant anger felt, she just couldn't hold on to it. After everything else, the most cutting feeling bearing down on her was that she was driving a wedge between the ponies she cared about the most.

Not to mention Twilight Sparkle... she didn't know *what* to make of the bookworm at this point. The way she'd acted with Luna was just... *nuts*.

Sure, the Celestia-gone-missing thing was freaky as all-hay, but Luna was *not* Nightmare Moon, and the Unicorn just couldn't seem to get that through her head. *Luna even gave Twilight the Elements, and then healed up AJ! What more does she want?!* Dash bit her lip; she was really starting to hope that Twilight wasn't going to keep this up... even the brash Pegasus couldn't imagine anypony getting all up in *Celestia's* face like that, and she was worried Twilight was going to start pushing her luck.

Dash rose with a nicker of irritation, shaking herself brusquely; she knew the best way to clear her head. Spreading her wings, she crouched low before launching herself with powerful hind legs straight over the precipice. As it always did, her heart gave a sudden lurch, a pulse of fear just begging to be overpowered by the flood of adrenaline rushing through her veins. With a snap of her wings, she was suddenly spiraling upwards into the sky. As the wind rushed through her mane, she truly pitied the ponies who would never know the joy, the *freedom*, of flight. She privately doubted that even other Pegasi had quite the same... intimacy with the sky that she did. She could almost see the flowing currents, the pockets of pressure ebbing around one another as they shifted in density. It wasn't as though she recognized it by the signs and inferred the conditions, like they taught you to in the Weather Corps - she *felt* it.

Before she knew it, she was high above the castle, hovering idly on an updraft and looking out across the expanse of forest in all directions. She alit carefully on a string of cloud. It was a wispy stratus, so insubstantial it could barely support her, thin enough to glow brightly in the moonlight as if lit from the inside. Pegasus eyes are extremely sharp... though she didn't quite recall her night vision ever being quite so acute before, so she could just make out the form of a lone dragon stretched out by the bank of a lake in the far distance. Dragon eyes must be keener still, for as he turned his head toward her, she was pierced by the certainty that he was gazing straight up into her ruby eyes. Her blood froze in a moment of instinctual terror before she snapped out of it, flicking her ears in irritation.

She rose to her fullest height, puffing her chest out in the most impressive pose she could manage, and let out a squawk as the fragile cloud gave out beneath her. She recovered quickly, almost sure she'd put enough spiral into her descent before leveling off to make the move look intentional. Despite herself, she cast a glance to the far-off form of the

dragon. She couldn't be sure, but it looked like his shoulders were quaking in... *is he laughing at me?! That's it. I'm outta here*, she thought, decidedly NOT pouting as she pulled a sharp bank, settling into a comfortable glide back in the general direction of the castle. As she descended in a lazy spiral, she could make out Luna and Fluttershy among the copse of trees, walking sedately along the bank of the stream. Lights were glowing from the windows of two rooms in the castle, and she wondered who else was up and about.

Twilight restlessly paced her room, the sharp crack of hooves on the bare stone was becoming grating. She grit her teeth and uttered a frustrated groan. She cast what was perhaps the thousandth glance at the pile of stone orbs resting on the small bed which, aside from a desk, was the only furniture in the room. *THESE things were the Elements of Harmony? And where in Equestria was the sixth? And how the hay did they work?* She had spent the last several hours focused intently on examining the stones, exhausting her fairly impressive repertoire of analytical and diagnostic spells, all to no avail. The most she had been able to ascertain was that these relics were extremely old, and highly potent in... *something*. They were more magic than stone, but their properties, aside from being *individually* unique, were unlike anything she'd ever encountered before. Whether or not these turned out to be the Elements of Harmony, they were incredibly significant artifacts in their own right, possibly among the most powerfully imbued items on record. Twilight was a very clever pony, and like most clever ponies, her inability to crack a vitally important puzzle was making her increasingly inclined to throw a tantrum.

The night was growing late, but the little pony cantering about her head showed no sign of slowing, shutting up, or ending the maddening circles it was prancing, despite how furiously she cursed herself. She had returned from an extended 'discussion' with Luna earlier in the evening, and those thoughts were the worst of the lot. In so many ways, she was reminded of Princess Celestia, and not merely in physical resemblance (Alicorns are fairly distinctive in appearance after all), but in sheer presence. She took the forced resemblance to her beloved mentor as an almost personal affront... her mind cast back, yet again, to the discussion. Luna had sat so primly; no matter what accusations Twilight had slammed at her, she just stayed so... *calm*. It was not only infuriating, it was downright suspicious, was what it was! No pony should remain so unruffled

when the order of Equestria had been turned up by the tail! The conversation, *more like a lecture*, had not unfolded in the way she would have liked...

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Twilight had stood before Luna, gaping as the stone orbs, supposedly the legendary Elements of Harmony, drifted over to settle on the grass at her hooves, released from Luna's magic. She blinked, *Five? There are only five!*

Narrowing her eyes, she looked back up to the smug, self-righteous Alicorn sitting before her. "Sooo sorry '*Princess*', you can't trick me that easily. There are *six* Elements of Harmony, not *five dumb rocks*," she spat.

Luna raised a single brow at the irate filly.

"Oh. Well then, I tried. Good luck with all that," came the sardonic reply.

Twilight bit her lip, but refused to take the bait, forcing her muddled wits to work once again. Pouring over what Luna had said just moments ago, she switched tracks and attacked, "You claim you didn't 'want to rule at all'? So what *did* you want then? Chaos and anarchy?"

Luna's left ear twitched and she snorted, visibly irked at that, "Anarchy? Let me get this straight; you're saying that without a divine mandate at hoof and above your heads, you ponies would degenerate into chaos, madness and war? War for what? For bits? For land that you all share? That the virtues of friendship and harmony are lesser than greed and the compulsion to own?"

Luna's voice turned hard as steel.

"You listen to me carefully now, Twilight. I've witnessed the tragedy of other species that had begun walking those paths with good intentions, and each and every one inevitably hung themselves with their own avarice."

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The door to her room slammed in her wake; she couldn't stay cooped up in that confining cell a moment longer. She briefly considered seeking

out one of the others, but it was late and come to that, despite everything, she wasn't entirely comfortable opening herself so fully to them, especially when her own thoughts were so... chaotic. Which wasn't to say she didn't *want* to, which was all the more confusing! She had never been a very social pony, so the ease with which she found herself creating bonds with them was startling... maybe if circumstances were different... She found her thoughts drawn to Rarity, the elegant mare who had protected her, stood up for her, and argued on her behalf, against her longer-standing friends. Fluttershy... something about the timid Pegasus made Twilight's heart melt; the depths of her kindness and compassion were almost beyond description, and she had tended to Twilight when she had been unconscious. Pinkie Pie was... well, an anomaly, but a darned captivating one. She was perhaps the single oddest creature Twilight had ever met, heard of, or read about. She was... fascinating, and a joy to be around. Applejack's heart was simply golden, despite her... 'miscalculations' about *that other* Pegasus. Applejack was a sturdy young mare, honest and true. Twilight's ears laid back as her thoughts turned toward *that other* Pegasus. Rainbow Dash. It was obvious now that she was the blight in an otherwise pure group - that she was not under some spell, or being compelled in some manner. She had chosen to side with evil, to be evil, and Twilight would have her arrested, maybe even banished, the first chance she got.

Aimlessly, she walked down the moonlit halls of the ancient castle, the intensely bright light of the moon pouring through evenly spaced windows providing more than enough illumination to see clearly. Twilight had always been an intensely curious pony, though her predilection for academics usually kept her away from more mischievous pursuits; had it not, however, she may have had the benefit of past experience to warn her that venturing down into deeper and deeper recesses of the keep may not have been the wisest choice. Gritting her teeth, she stomped along the corridors, her hoof-falls echoing down the passages. Luna had taken her every argument and turned it around back at her like a... like a two-bit *charlatan*...

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Twilight was utterly incensed, her mane shining in the moonlight.

"That is *not* what I'm saying! Good governance is the foundation of social order! How peace is maintained!" Twilight was hardly a student of the

political sciences, (in fact, she privately doubted 'sciences' was even a proper term for study), but she'd seen Princess Celestia at work, holding court, soothing wounded pride, and maintaining good relations with the dignitaries of neighboring states.

Luna didn't hesitate to rejoin, her voice growing more animated than ever before, and Twilight marked herself a point for getting a rise out of her. "Social order? Is *that* what you're calling this meritocracy my sister has fostered? Competition between ponies is a wonderful method of *self-improvement*, but it is a terrible precept to stand as the foundation of a social structure! You think ponies should seek to better themselves by the exploitation of their fellows? Look at the results; tell me who has managed to find seats closest to power? Sycophantic aristocrats! Their dreams are filled to the brim with nothing but their own ambition, greed and desires for authority over others. This is the manner of pony my sister would see rise above others? This mental sickness is worth reward? Insanity. The ethical devolution of such a system is as inevitable as its own gathering momentum. "

"Stop talking about Celestia like she's a damned evil TYRANT!" Twilight screamed.

Luna's eyes went wide for a moment, before she broke down laughing.

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"Graaaah!" Twilight growled to herself as she stomped through the corridors. How *dare* that... that... *winged cow* imply that Celestia had fostered a predatory social structure, and that *she* was complicit in it! Luna had maintained that it was by mere chance she had been born to parents wealthy enough to afford her enrollment in Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns, and had things been different, her potential could have just as easily withered away in some Manehattan alley, or backwater rock farm! She had been prepared to argue the point with venom until Luna had looked to the sky, her heated tone fading, and spoke in a soft voice about feeling the dreams of the thousands of fillies and colts sharing that unhappy, and eminently unfair, fate at that very moment. In that melancholy moment, Luna had turned her back on Twilight without another word, walking away toward the brook in outright dismissal of the purple Unicorn.

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She rounded a corner, still trying to shake the unwelcome feelings of empathy with the Princess' closing statement. Looking up and glancing around, she realized she'd come to a dead end, the ambient light there almost nonexistent.

The corridor she found herself in was cavernous, dusty, and far darker than the halls by her room... running back through her mental map, she determined she was two staircases and three right turns from her quarters. With a flick of her horn, magic ignited, bathing the stone around her in a violet glow. Just ahead was a massive wooden door; the wood appeared extremely weathered with age, but still very solid. Further sparking her curiosity were the unique inlays on the aperture. Stepping closer, she tilted her head, her horn's magic playing with the shadows of the carvings that ran along the wide frame. The sigils were etched deeply into the hardwood, curving in a runic language she didn't recognize... which was decidedly odd, as she could at least identify most known languages, alive or dead.

Under normal circumstances, she was a mare who respected the privacy of others... but these were not normal circumstances. Whatever that silver-tongued monster had locked away could well be the edge Twilight needed to gain the upper hoof! *Hay, I'd settle for gaining an 'even' hoof at the moment.* Glancing quickly over her shoulder to be sure she was still alone, Twilight turned back to focus on the door itself. Enveloping the round iron handle, she pulled. It didn't even budge. Below the handle was a circular mechanism, with a hole in the center - a lock. Releasing the handle (a little too abruptly, its clang sending a metallic echo down the corridor behind her), she focused on the lock. She closed her eyes, allowing her magic to replace her visual senses, and she felt for the workings of the tumblers. One here, move it up. Another there, up again. This one? ... Down. *\*Click\**, came the satisfying sound.

Grinning in triumph, she again pulled on the door, and it swung open smoothly. Somepony had obviously kept it in good repair, for it neither creaked nor squealed on its hinges. Peering within... was nothing. An inky blackness that her magical light didn't seem to penetrate. It was as if there were a second door blocking her, one of a palpable darkness. Frowning, she cautiously stepped forward.



Her world turned white with pain, the sound of an electrical crack tearing through the air.

She found herself on her back, slowly recovering her senses on the unforgiving stone floor several feet from the door. “Uhhh, what the?” she muttered aloud. Rolling to her side and raising her head, she looked ahead, and saw faint lines of magical current flickering across the blackness behind the door. A shield spell then. One the likes of which she had never encountered before. Working her limbs to shake off the tingling aftereffects, she shakily regained her hooves, pondering this turn of events. *Okay... no touchy.*

Cautiously, she eased closer, until she was just outside the frame. She detached the light spell from her horn, sticking it on the wall to her right, where it would glow independently for at least an hour. Her horn began to shine anew as she carefully exerted a blanket of sensory magic against the ward. Both energies crackled in protest at the contact, but she ignored the visual display, trying to get a *feel* for its constitution. It was incredibly strong, tightly woven, and... far beyond her ability to break. *At least... outright*, she thought, an idea forming. A grin slid across her muzzle as she adjusted the application of her magic from a wide, flat surface to finely-honed vibrating probes, searching for weak spots in the weave. Expanding her senses totally into her magic, she felt for something... anything... THERE! In one spot, the size of a needle point, was a weakness. Focusing onto it, she began the arduous task of loosening the weave, while pushing her own purple magics into the widening gap. The energies of the barrier crackled in protest, but Twilight kept at it, sweat dripping from her brow as she poured her will into the task.

Refusing to relent, she continued to pick, and dig, and *strain* against the ward, the task no easier than trying to whittle through sheet rock with a file. Tapping into what little of her magical reserves remained, she at last managed to create a hole that she could squeeze through, if just barely. She reinforced it as much as she could, fairly certain it would hold out while she was inside, as long as she didn't linger. She didn't want to contemplate having to go through that all over again. Taking a deep breath, she crouched down and shimmied through the hole into the room beyond.

She had never seen anything like this before. The domed chamber was entirely circular, the only right angles to be found were where high walls met the floor. The barrier spell covered every inch, making the surface appear to have been constructed of solid obsidian. The flowing script she had seen on the door was everywhere, glowing a golden light and softly illuminating the room. The only adornment in the room was directly in the center: a small stone table, and on it stood a statue. It was a small, jet-black effigy of an Alicorn, head and horn raised high, wings stretched to their full length. Baffled, Twilight looked about, marvelling at the most potent array of containment magics she had ever seen. *All of this, for a statuette? Could it be some kind of weapon?* Cautiously, she moved toward the centerpiece for a better look. She froze as a horrifyingly familiar voice filled the room.

*"Well well, a visitor, how lovely."*

Recoiling, Twilight spun back toward the door and her tiny exit.

Laughter echoed through the room as smokey tendrils erupted from the statue and wrapped about her neck. In the blink of an eye, Twilight had been lifted off her hooves and slammed hard into the far wall, held high above the floor. In that contact, she felt her mind flayed, an alien presence sorting contemptuously through her memories.

The voice was filled with unbridled delight.

"Oh my, this *is* an occasion! Celestia's own private little pet has come calling, to be graced with my presence once again. And still so very deluded! Well little one, shall I ease your troubled mind before I feed you your own horn? Very well... everything you suspect about Luna is correct, almost. We may not be the same being, but everything I've done has been by her will! As for your greatest fear- it's true. Oh yes. Celestia is dead. I tore off her wings, one after the other, before slitting her *pompous throat!* The blood of a goddess is heady wine indeed!" the voice crowed before breaking into maniacal laughter.

Twilight choked off a sob of denial, her small body struggling against the bonds.

“Oh now, don’t be like that! Just look at you, so pathetic, so innocent, so... pure. *You make me sick!*”

The magic about her throat tightened, Twilight felt her larynx began to creak under the pressure, before it suddenly eased off. Her relief was short-lived.

“Oh... why yes Luna, that *is* a wonderful idea! Let’s show this little filly a thing or two about lost innocence.”

Twilight cast her eyes about the room, expecting to see Luna standing there, laughing down at her, but saw nothing. She didn’t have long to ponder this new oddity as the magic holding her turned viciously *sharp*, the vice-like pressure now slicing into her neck like talons. The sudden flood of pain overwhelmed her senses and crushed any attempt at coherent thought.

Twilight's eyes shot wide as her limbs were gripped and spread painfully wide. Independent tendrils of the black force began sliding down her back and up her ribs, leaving long, thin, white-hot cuts in their wake, in a sordid mockery of a caress. Gritting her teeth against the pain, she felt the magic move lower, around her flanks and about her haunches... her *inner* haunches, lacerating her flesh as her thighs were pulled widely apart.

*...No. No. No no no ! Please! No!! STOP! **NO!! PLEASE!***

She tried to scream, but the vice of magic that held her by the throat was so tight she could hardly draw breath. Twilight knew she was going to die, but before being granted that grace, this creature was going to subject her to something much worse. She’d never imagined a situation where she would find having her neck broken to be a preferable alternative.

As her terror reached a frenzied peak, something inside her *snapped*. Her mind went blank and her vision blurred into a searing light.

~

The Nightmare was enjoying itself *vastly*. It had been denied *everything*. Then, like a dream on a silver platter, in strolled the treasured student of the second-most loathsome creature on the planet. It was too perfect. It didn’t expect the game to last long; the little Unicorn was far too fragile, but it had every intention of exacting as much pain and sordid

pleasure from the pathetic little beast as possible, before tearing her to shreds. Perhaps it would paint the walls of this damnable chamber with her blood when it was all over. Then something happened. The Unicorn ceased struggling, the delicious outpouring of her terror and panic cut off like a closed tap, and was replaced by something utterly unexpected. *Power*. And it *burned*, pouring out of the purple filly in waves the Nightmare had never known mortal ponies to be capable of. Utterly unprepared for the assault, its magics holding Twilight simply evaporated, and it quickly retreated its essence to within the ironically protective confines of the cursed statuette.

~

Twilight found herself lying on the floor, the taste of blood thick in her mouth. Her entire body was on fire from the multitude of cuts. She didn't know what had just happened, and at the moment, she couldn't care less. All she knew was that this thing that had planned to rape and kill her was now screaming in pain, and filling the room with vile threats of her slow and bloody dismemberment. She bolted for the door, her burrowed tunnel through the barrier still holding, and frantically scrambled through it. Skidding around, she wrenched her magic away from the barrier and watched it instantly snap back into place, whole and solid. An unholy screech filled the corridor, and the black barrier flared, the arcane ruins around the door frame bursting to golden life, as something slammed against it hard enough to shake dust from the ceilings. Twilight turned tail and ran for her life, leaving a spattered trail of blood in her wake.

In a blind panic, Twilight galloped all-out, almost instinctively retracing her steps back up to her room. Bursting through the door and slamming it behind her, she threw her weight against it, her chest heaving with sobs. *I have to get out of here. NOW*. Nothing else mattered in this moment but to put as much distance between this place and her very-violated self as possible. No more doubts. 'Luna', or whatever in the four ponyhells she was, was a deceiver of godly skill and that thing in the basement, (a violent shudder racked through her), was her servile monster, and she was *done* with this nightmare. She rushed over to her bed, fumbling about with her saddlebags, increasingly shaky as the bolstering adrenaline in her blood faded. The painful aching of her battered body was coming to the fore as she hobbled about.

A knock resounded on the door and she let out a scream of surprise, spinning around. Frozen, she could neither move nor speak. The petrified moment drew out, unbearably. Had it come for her?

A concerned voice came through the door, "Darling? Are you alright in there? What was that sound? I'm coming in!"

Rarity pushed through the door, stepping inside.

She stopped dead as she took in the sight of Twilight, backed up against the far wall and cringing in terror. The purple mare's pupils were shrunken to pinpricks as she stared unblinking at the other Unicorn. It was a moment before Rarity recovered enough to actually take note of Twilight's appearance - her coat was littered with small cuts, circling her neck like a noose, long slices running the length of her midsections and... *oh goddess...* trickles of blood were running down the inside of her haunches, the liquid darkening her violet coat to a near-black color. The bookish Unicorn looked more like a blank-flanked filly, her tears flowing unchecked, running rivulets down her muzzle. She was trembling like a leaf.

In a rush, Twilight was all over her, clinging to her with desperate strength and bawling her heart out. Rarity's coat was getting horribly stained from Twilight's seeping wounds, but such was her concern that she didn't notice. "OH! By Celestia's Grace Twilight! What has *happened* to you?!"

Between heaving sobs, Twilight choked out, "We. have to. get out. of here. NOW. Before it gets out!"

"Before *what* gets out dear?"

"IT! Whatever Luna has down there, it's EVIL, it's *pure* evil, and I saw it, and it saw me, and it got me, and almost... almost... Oh goddess, Rarity, you have to help me!"

"Darling, breathe! It will be alright, I promise, but we can't just leave the others! Fluttershy is still talking with Luna, and we have to tell Apple- "

“NO Rarity! Please! There’s no time! Applejack is wrapped around Dash’s hoof, you saw how they are together! And Dash, Dash is with **HER!**”

“Twilight, you may be right... maybe... about Rainbow Dash, but we simply *cannot* leave without a word to Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie!”

“Rarity, going to get them right now would be *suicide*! Fluttershy is with Luna *right now*! And we haven’t seen Pinkie Pie since we got here; she just disappeared and started exploring! It’s impossible, and I can’t stay here another second, I just can’t!”

Rarity’s lip was clenched between her teeth, her ears laid back. The position she found herself in was beyond untenable, but a choice had to be made. Twilight was leaving, with or without her.

“... Very well Twilight, but I must at the least leave them a note, and gather my things. I’ll be *right* back,” she assured as she spun and galloped out of the room and down the hall.

Twilight turned and tore the blanket off her bed, ripping it crudely with shakily-controlled magic into small strips, wiping her blood away with some, and doing her best to tie make-shift bandages around her wounds with the others. She nearly retched wrapping the cuts all about her inner haunches. Twilight then turned to her own belongings, stuffing as many of the stone artifacts into her saddlebags as would fit, which turned out to only be four, and just barely. Rarity would have to pack the other one.

She tensed and perked an ear at the sound of rapidly approaching hooves. Rarity barreled back through the door, saddlebags strapped and ready to go. “I’ve left a note for Fluttershy in her room. I absolutely abhor the idea of leaving without her, but... she *is* a Pegasus. With any luck, she’ll be able to find Pinkie Pie and slip out without anypony the wiser.”

The pair edged down the corridors toward the main entrance, saddlebags bulging with their precious cargo. Finding the brilliance of the moonlight no ally, they stayed to the pooling shadows as best they could, wincing every time an errant hoof came down too sharply on the stone floors. The pair soon came to the massive antechamber, peeking about before they exited the corridor; the huge double-doors on the far side the final obstacle to their escape. Mid-way across the room, an explosion from below rocked through the castle, and a blaring clarion-call filled the air.

They heard the clattering of hooves coming from an adjacent hallway, picking up speed. Luna came into sight down a far hall, about to enter the chamber, looking alarmed and none too pleased. She caught sight of Twilight immediately. "What have you *done*?!" she demanded, her voice booming.

"Rarity, get the doors open, *quick*!" Twilight screamed. Panicking and out of time, she wrapped her magic around the support structures above the corridor Luna was in, and with all her strength, *pulled*.

The stone archway between Luna and the main room collapsed. It was only as she spread her wings in alarm that Twilight thought she caught a glimpse of a pink-maned and yellow-coated Pegasus cowering behind her. Then the passage was sealed with stone rubble, a thick dust filling the air.

*Oh goddess! Was Fluttershy with her?*

"Twilight, hurry!" Rarity called out, just as the sound of glass shattering came from above. Rainbow Dash had burst through a high window, looking for all the world to Twilight like an angel of black death in her uniform, as she curved sharply in the air above the war-torn room.

"What in the hay is going - HEY!" she began, before being cut off by a searing bolt of purple energy from Twilight that blasted past her, close enough to sear her armored side. Her evasive maneuver had cost her what limited lift she'd been able to maintain in the close quarters, and she barrel-rolled down to the floor.

Dash landed heavily, fully prepared to tear out after the pair of psychopaths that had just bolted through the main doors, when her perked ears caught a whimper of pain. It had come from a pile of rubble to her left, all that remained of what had once been a hallway. Rainbow Dash lifted a hoof to her mouth, coughing in the heavy dust, and her blood turned to ice as she made out a mangled yellow wing sticking out of the rubble.

# Chapter 6

## Gravity

The little purple Unicorn tore through the underbrush, her mane a riotous tangle of branches and leaves. Her normally lustrous coat was heavily frayed and scuffed, abrasions and small cuts perforating her hide; a trail of fresh blood smeared across her cheek from the tree she had careened into mere moments ago. In her haste, she had been paying scant attention to where she was going beyond a hazy guess at a general direction. Most importantly at this time however, her only real concern for a heading was *away*.

Bursting from the bushes, she launched herself into the air from a small incline and plunged at full speed into a narrow river, the water coming up to her chest as she desperately powered her way through to the other side, the icy cold of the water numbing her open wounds. As she gained her hooves against slippery stones, she paused to gasp in burning lungfuls of air, vigorously shaking herself dry.

The plaintive voice of her companion came from behind her, less in a series of individual protests, and more a consistent bemoaning of every tangled snag and thorned bush she had to push through. Twilight lifted her head to see the alabaster Unicorn just now clearing through to the far side of the bank.

"Rarity!" Twilight called out, "Come ON! We need to *move*! They could be right behind us!"

"I... am *trying* darling, but all of this... 'flight for one's life' business... is not precisely... my *forte*... as t'were, " she gasped, chest heaving for breath, "and these bags are stuffed... so full they catch... on absolutely *everything*!" Rarity protested as she forged her way through the strong current. Shaking the excess water away from her coat as well, she took a moment to try to catch her breath, and took in Twilight's appearance. Having already been horribly assaulted before their flight began, the purple filly truly was in an awful state; the make-shift bandages she'd applied in the castle had torn away in their frantic rush through the wilds, now she had



the additional injuries of the forest's obstacles. With a shudder of revulsion, Rarity pushed away any thoughts of what *she* must look like at the moment.

The pair had been in full flight for the better part of half an hour, and neither of the Unicorns were particularly built for the effort. Twilight had spent more time in academic and mystical pursuit than sports; her trim build was more a matter of a naturally high pony metabolism than anything. Rarity herself was *far* from being considered an athlete in any arena, and if put to the question, would be rather proud of the distinction; she did, although, maintain a regular habit of exercises to keep her haunches trim and lines angular. At the moment however, both were bemoaning their respectively low reserves of endurance as they panted raggedly.

"Twilight, where... is the path?" Rarity asked, beginning to recover her wind.

Reflexively, Twilight looked up to the sky to orient her position with the constellations she had grown so familiar with over long, loving hours with her telescope and charts back in Canterlot. Two things prevented her from doing so. Primarily, it was the sprawl of the thick canopy overhead, blotting out nearly any view of the sky above. Yet, even without the near omnipresent boughs to obscure her sight, the stars would have likely been impossible to see, as brilliant beams of moonlight were cutting through the leaves and limning the air around the two ponies. To illuminate the surrounding forest as it did, the moon must have been uncannily bright. As such, it was likely far too bright to allow the shine of the stars to be seen clearly. While the moon's intensity was as unnatural as it was unsettling, it did make the forest easily bright enough to be navigated without having to light their horns, so Twilight wasn't going to complain, at least on that front.

Looking around, Twilight answered hesitantly, "I'm... not sure Rarity. I'm not even sure that we *should* take the path. I can't think of a quicker way to be caught than to stay on the only road coming or going."

Rarity blanched at this. She couldn't mean... "You *can't* actually be saying we have to continue pressing through this *jungle*! Not only will we be horribly lost, it shall take us simply *forever* to get anywhere," she protested. Though Twilight's reasoning was sound, the thought of what lay ahead was... daunting, to say the least. On the other hoof, now that she

considered it... she sighed, "I suppose you're right Twilight, staying to the main path *would* be foolish. We have not a hope of losing anypony staying to the road. Not to mention Rainbow Dash and Applejack... if... well, either way, we have to be clever. Simply trying to outrun those two isn't an option, I'm afraid."

Twilight frowned, greatly disquieted. While the assumption of inevitable pursuit was a given, this cast an entirely new perspective on the situation, one Rarity hadn't actually raised directly yet. They apparently couldn't simply be content with orienting themselves and forging a path through the forest- once Dash and AJ had discovered they weren't taking the road (and they would, before long), they would begin to track them. Looking down, the sight of a few drops of her blood on the river stones served as a stark reminder to yet another layer of complication to their predicament.

Without warning, the roar of an outraged dragon ripped through the forest, slamming into the two Unicorns with a psychological force so intense it was not unlike a physical blow. Their poses were darkly comical in the manner they mirrored one another; one hoof raised, mouth hanging open, ears laid back, tail tucked, their respective pupils the relative size of pinpricks.

*The dragons. How the HAY could I have forgotten the dragons?!* Twilight thought frantically. Other ponies were one thing. Dragons... were another entirely. Twilight's mind spun with a chaotic brilliance as she analyzed the situation from a dozen angles, strategically; keeping to the deep forest was even more the correct decision now, but the vague notions that had been flitting about her mind for throwing pursuit off their trail just got a lot more serious. No dragon would be deterred by a simple cantrip... not that she wouldn't still use them creatively, but now more... drastic measures were called for. She would have to play it by ear though, there was simply no time to fully formulate any plans now, so she acted on the first tactic that came to her mind.

"Give me a moment here Rarity."

Pointing her horn towards the river, she built up enough energy for a fairly common holding spell, innovatively tweaked the weave, and released it into the flowing water. The river glittered and slowed for just a moment

before the motes of light settled, merging fully with the surface. The instant somepony, or dragon, set foot in the stream for twenty feet in either direction from the casting point, the entire section would turn to solid ice, capturing whatever happened to be in the drink. She turned to explain what she'd done and the implications to their additional predicament, but found Rarity's eyes clenched shut, her horn aglow and already working at something, pointing in her direction. Curious, she looked about, left and right. Nothing was enveloped in the Unicorn's distinctive hue of levitation magic... Twilight cocked her head, curious as to what the Unicorn was attempting. She gasped as pain lanced about her sides, legs, all over really. Stumbling back with a cry, she exclaimed, "Rarity, what- ?!"

"Sorry for the lack of warning darling, but it was necessary for our predicament. You were... *leaking*, all over the place. I'm no Florent Nightingale at medical magics, but I am an *expert* at manipulating fabrics and... well, skin and coat are something of a fabric... in a manner of speaking..." she said, slightly abashed, "... that couldn't have felt pleasant, for which I *do* apologize, but you've been leaving a fairly vibrant trail up to this point."

Looking down and about at herself, Twilight took in what Rarity was talking about. Her wounds had been, while not "healed", at least closed... mostly. It wasn't pretty, but she was not longer bleeding profusely, and as the pain ebbed, she found a measure of relief in the ministrations. Voicing her thanks, she turned back to the forest. "Well, we need to press on, but I don't want to just keep going in a random direction."

"Speaking of direction darling, where *do* you intend on going?" Rarity asked, a note of trepidation in her voice.

Twilight blinked at this; she thought the answer would be self-evident. "Well, we're heading to Ponyville, obviously. I can't just leave Spike there!"

Rarity let out a breath of relief, "Oh, good. I was concerned you intended to head straight to Canterlot, and I simply wouldn't be able to do so without seeing to Sweetie Bell's safety first."

"Wait, 'first'? You mean to say you intend go to on with me? I don't... Rarity, *why*?"

“Well let’s see Twilight Sparkle. Things aren’t exactly going to be safe for me just sitting out in the open at my boutique, will they? That’s the first place anypony will think to look for me. You think I just ran out of the castle with you on a whim?” Rarity’s voice was rising indignantly, as she began to get worked up. “I came with you because I *care* about you!”

Taken aback, and now somewhat abashed, Twilight stumbled for words, “I... thank you Rarity. I honestly don’t know what I’d do if I were all alone out here. Thank you,” she said, a powerful warmth flooding through her chest. After a brief moment of the pair smiling at one another, a thought crossed Rarity’s mind, “Darling, how precisely *are* we going to find our way back?”

Twilight paused a moment, extrapolating the information at hoof. “Well, based on our direction of flight from the castle, and this point where we’ve reached the river... Ponyville should be... generally *that* way,” she said, pointing her hoof with a fair amount of confidence. “if you you could focus on just edging aside the larger branches out of our way, and be extra careful not to break any, then I’ll work on covering our trail and figuring out a few more ‘distractions’.”

The Unicorns nodded at one another, and set off.

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Rainbow Dash was seeing red. Some ponies with a bent for sarcasm may have been tempted to make a quip at that, perhaps snarking that her large, ruby-tinted irises produced such an effect anyway. Such a pony would not be wise to venture such a comment at the moment, for they would likely stand to lose a muzzle-full of teeth. To phrase the situation more aptly, Rainbow Dash was *pissed*. In fact, she may well have never been so angry in her life.

After Twilight had nearly blasted her out of the air, she had been more confused than anything and was about to follow. Rarity was with her, and they were obviously really freaked out. That was when she had seen it; the broken wing jutting from tons of rubble. A *yellow* wing. With a strangled scream of denial, she launched herself over to the pile, bloodying her hooves as she desperately tore at the jagged stone and mortar, trying to reach her oldest friend.

Dash hopped back with a startled yelp when a luminescent aura suddenly enveloped every stone of the cave-in, large and small. Dust plumed anew as each chunk began to lift individually, all moving as if with a negative magnetic polarity with the body of the bloody, yellow-coated Pegasus. Once clear of her body, every stone simply dematerialized; there was no great flash, no burst of flame, just a fizzling of star-lit energy, and the tons of granite and marble simply ceased to be.

Dash could now see that Luna had been pinned beneath the rubble as well. She was crouched down and was, to all appearances, completely unharmed. Her wing had been extended over the body of Fluttershy; even so, the all-too-mortal little filly had not escaped the battering of tons of falling stone, though it was certain the Princess had saved her life.

“Fluttersha’!” the shout preceded the arrival of Applejack, who came to a skidding halt next to Rainbow Dash, who was crouched down, nosing the seemingly lifeless body of Fluttershy and mumbling incoherently between sobs.

“Dear Goddess, wha’ happened?!” the question, at no lower volume than her first exclamation, went unanswered as Luna rose and shook herself brusquely, producing a cloud of dust that filtered through the slanted moonlight of a nearby window.

Frowning down, Luna stepped forward, shooing Rainbow clear from her friend’s body and ignoring AJ’s outbursts entirely. Dipping her head to hover just above Fluttershy, her horn burst into a darkly violet radiance which softly enveloped the fallen Pegasus, raising her into the air in a light cloud of scintillating energy. As Fluttershy’s limp form hung there in the cloud of magic, the true extent of her wounds came into full display. Dash gagged, turning away, while Applejack moaned lightly, staring transfixed at the sight. Their friend’s wing was completely shattered, the feathers torn and matted with blood, her hind leg roughly broken, a deep gash running its length. Luna frowned, and the intensity of the magic increased, enveloping the Pegasus in a miniature, sparkling nebula, completely obscuring her form from view.

Applejack moved closer to Rainbow, placing a hoof across her shoulders in sympathy. The touch seemed to snap Dash out of her stupor;

she blinked rapidly and roughly wiped the tears from her face with a foreleg. Her wing unfurled, throwing AJ's hoof away from her. Her eyes narrowing to slits, Dash failed to notice the hurt look Applejack gave her as she turned toward the door where the two Unicorns had made their escape. A growl rumbled low and deep in her throat and she took a step toward the castle's courtyard. AJ, suddenly coming to terms with her dear friend's mentality, threw herself in her intended path.

"Dash! No! Now's not the time, ya' hear me?" she said, her tone openly pleading.

"Goddammit, AJ! Get... out... of my... way!" Dash growled the emphasis into each word, every muscle in her body painfully taut.

"Git ahold ah yerself Rainbow! Ya' can't just go buckin' off full tilt right now! Fluttershy needs us! She comes a'fore dealin' with Twilight 'an Rarity right now!" AJ insisted, stomping a hoof.

Dash blanched, her ears folding back as AJ gave voice to the fount of her rage. It was so much easier to be in the midst of an emotion than confront its source. Unbidden, a thought rose to the fore of her mind, and it terrified her to the core, for she knew it was true: *If Fluttershy dies, I swear on everything I'm worth - I'll fucking kill them both.*

"Rainbow Dash."

Luna's voice, hard as silver, cut into Dash's private terror with her own thoughts.

The pair looked over to the princess, who stood above Fluttershy's curled form, now returned to the ground. She was breathing more easily now, and to Rainbow and AJ's dual shock, not only were her wounds now closed, her wing and leg mended into their proper forms, but Pinkie Pie was nestled up next to her, her head resting atop Fluttershy.

"Pinkie! Where'd y'all come from?!" AJ exclaimed.

Pinkie raised her gaze to meet the eyes of her friends, a light shine of unshed tears reflecting the moonlight. "I'm always around silly," she said, a ghost of smile gracing her muzzle before she returned her attention to

Fluttershy; she began to sing a light, bittersweet tune under her breath into the pink mane of the prone filly.

Once more, Luna's voice cut the moment as she took charge; her tone could well have been carved of ice. "Rainbow, see to your friend, she needs rest. Get her into bed, and then return to the hall immediately. I will not be long, but I have some *personal* business below." Turning, Luna began to trot brusquely down the corridor toward the lower halls of the keep.

Watching her go, Rainbow huffed, not at all satisfied with the putting off of finding out what the hay was going on, or having to hold back in doing something about it... but the Princess, and AJ, were right— Fluttershy came first.

With great care, the three fillies lifted their friend between them; AJ and Dash were at her sides, allowing Pinkie to slide underneath her and fully bear the limp weight. The unconscious Pegasus moaned in pain at the movement, despite the care they took with her. The three trotted carefully toward Pinkie's room, which happened to be the closest, where they quickly gathered extra blankets, arranging them atop the mattress and easing Fluttershy carefully atop the now triple-layered, extra-cushiony bed.

The friends had said not a word on the way, but now, with Fluttershy settled, they shared a meaningful look, the tension in the air almost daring one of them to speak first into the silence.

Applejack had just opened her mouth to speak when an unworlly, feral wail tore through the air, stifled almost immediately by the castle shifting under what felt like the force of an earthquake. It was as though the fist of a god had slammed down on reality itself, as the friends were forced to the ground under a blanket of sudden pressure from above. As quickly as it came, the force relented, and all was silent.

"What in the hay was *that?!'*" squawked AJ, terrified and wide-eyed.

Dash shook her head roughly, "I dunno, but let's go find out! Quick!"

AJ spoke, "But what about—"

Pinkie broke in, "You guys go. I'm not leaving Fluttershy."

"Good on ya' Pink!" Applejack said warmly. Dash nodded at Pinkie in acknowledgement and thanks, and the pair tore out the room at full speed heading back to the hall. In her haste, Dash reflexively spread her wings, her hooves still in full gallop but barely touching the ground as she pulled ahead of the earth pony. Taking the final corner at top speed, Dash banked hard and felt a sharp pull as AJ latched onto her tail. The Pegasus's tail in her teeth, AJ's hooves skid hard against the stone as they jackknifed around the sharp angle and out into the large antechamber.

There stood Luna, as promised. Her feathers were ruffled, and she was fluttering one wing while delicately preening the other, returning them to a pristine order.

"Princess!" Dash shouted, barely slowing in her approach. "What was that just now?!"

"Oh, just attending to a reminder, Rainbow. Nothing to be concerned about."

AJ opened her mouth to ask just what in the hay *that* was supposed to mean, but Luna continued unabated. "Now then, we are needed outside. This is proving be a very *interesting* evening, and we must act before certain things get entirely out of hoof." Turning abruptly, she led the way through the rubble-strewn antechamber and out into the cool night air.

Applejack need not have worried about her curiosity going unanswered, for as they came out into the vast, grassy courtyard, she gasped in shock. At two things, really, and she would have been hard-pressed to say which weighed more heavily upon her frayed nerves. Firstly, there was the moon. It was *huge*, filling over a full quarter of the night sky. She had admired many a full moon above a ripe orchard before, but *this* one looked like it had decided to come down for a picnic with Equestria! Below it, and coming in close second for her immediate attention, were the dragons, assembled together in a half circle. Scales shining in the near-daylight brightness of the silver light, they sat arrayed in a half circle, awaiting the princess' approach.

Luna, not breaking stride, looked skyward and tutted lightly to herself. "Hm. Perhaps I overdid it a bit," she said under her breath. Luna didn't actually need to ignite her horn to work with the moon any longer. Her ancient affections were now fully reestablished and so it was that she merely... *flexed* her symbiotic connection and the great body began to gently recede to its more natural size and space.

Nearing the dragons, not that one needed to be terribly near to make them out, it became clear that one of them was not in a very good mood. While the other two were composed, including the gigantic one that spoke with Luna before, the one on the far left was clearly struggling to contain himself. He was snarling deep and low in his throat, claws tearing furrows in the ground as they flexed, his gaze fixed on the treeline of the forest. His companion, the one of similar size, nudged him roughly and growled something short and harsh at him.

The sight was not a comforting one for anypony trotting up to any dragon, and AJ felt her mane beginning to bristle in instinctive fear as she and Dash shared a look, together they fell in a bit more tightly behind Luna.

The great dragon nodded respectfully at the approach of the moon goddess, intoning a somber greeting, "My Lady."

"Saliant. I'm afraid we have had some rather unfortunate developments." rejoined Luna.

"So I had noticed," the dragon cocked a sardonic brow to the subtlety receding moon, still massive in the sky, then smirked, "you frightened the younglings my lady. Dragons are not accustomed to being flattened to the ground." The other two shifted uncomfortably at the rare reminder that their kind were not, in fact, the most powerful beings of the land.

"My apologies Sali, I'm afraid I may have lost my temper with the creature."

The more irate of the smaller dragons burst forward, "My Lady, I saw the two Unicorns flee into the forest from above, stuffed in their saddlebags were the Elementals. They have **stolen** them! And I felt what occurred within the castle. I cannot tolerate this disrespect, both to you and to my

Elder! I beg release to retrieve them and give full answer to this insult!" the dragon said, his fury barely restrained.

Saliant's eyes glinted at this as he restrained his immediate impulse to cuff the youth for allowing his emotions to so fully overpower his will. Rather, he chose to hold his peace while Luna considered the young one's demand. There was a measure of honor involved here, after all, and he was curious as to Luna's reasoning.

As far as Dash was concerned, Luna had paused for way too long. There's no way she could let this dragon go after Twilight and Rarity! She got the distinct impression he was more interested in retrieving the Elements, and any pieces of the offending Unicorns that happened to still be attached to one another would be so merely by fortunate happenstance. Yes, she was beyond furious at the pair at the moment, and the Sun and Moon knew what she'd do when she got her hooves on them, but if this DRAGON got to them first...

Pushing abruptly past Applejack, Rainbow turned to face the goddess of the night.

"Princess, please, let *me* go after them! I'll bring them and the Elements back, I promise!"

"Hmm..." Luna hummed under her breath.

Applejack had quickly matched Rainbow's frightening rational and coming to the same conclusions, agreed wholeheartedly. She moved to stand beside her friend to plead their case. "Please yer Highness, Dash an' me can take care ah this! Working together we can have a sight in the air and hooves on the ground." AJ did her best to substitute the panicked motivation in her heart for the sound reasoning she was laying out; her resulting tone was admirably level.

"My Lady!" the impatient dragon intoned in protest. His blood-lust was peaked, and these two little creatures were attempting to deprive him of his duty to avenge the insult done to the Elder! Not to mention the betrayal of this little goddess he had heard tales of since he was a hatchling, who had long been held in the highest of esteem by the Elders.

His sibling leaned in, gripping his wrist in a vice as he hissed, “You fool! Hold your tongue! Do you *want* to serve a penance, or have you forgotten the honor brought to our Cave by being chosen to attend the Elder on this flight?”

The other dragon turned his head, fangs bared, an acidic response on his lips... when both froze under the sudden realization that Saliant was gazing at them both; a stare level, prolonged, and *quite* foreboding. The shine of his eyes held the promise of something dire should their little scene continue. With a great huff, the one who had pled and lost his case in one fell swoop wrenched his arm from the grip of his sibling, bowed low to both Elder and goddess in apology, and took to the air. His wings beat furiously as he drove himself higher and higher, venting his impotent fury in a great roar.

Turning back to Luna and the frightened little ones with her, the Elder spoke, “Forgive them Luna, the young are ever impetuous. I suggest you allow these two to go after their friends. Perhaps with fortitude and patience this matter may be resolved without any unfortunate duress.”

Luna had been smirking lightly throughout the exchange, and nodded at the dragon’s words. “A wise decision my friend.” she intoned. Turning to the ponies at her side, her countenance took on a stern appraisal.

“Rainbow Dash, you have been appointed as Captain of my Shadowbolts. This is not a distinction I have granted lightly, nor does it come without expectations of your quality. You have met these in spirit, now do so once again in action. You are to pursue the Unicorns Twilight Sparkle and Rarity, apprehend them, and return with the Elements. I place no small concern upon their well-being, but understand that the Elements of Harmony are of incredible significance. Should they fall into the wrong hooves, the potential for devastation is... vast. Do you both fully understand the situation?” she finished, regarding the pair solemnly.

In unison, and with equal gravity, the pair nodded. “We do Luna.” Rainbow Dash asserted.

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The Unicorns were traveling doggedly through the forest for all they were worth. As frantic and rushed as their travel had been initially, it was now careful and attentive. Rarity worked diligently, leading the way in their best guess of the direction of Ponyville, her horn aglow and delicately manipulating the foliage ahead, allowing them to pass without breaking any of the hanging vines or crisscrossing branches.

Twilight was just behind her, the greater portion of her attention on their back-trail, doing her best to erase any scuff marks on stone or hoof prints left in the soft earth. She had also been focused on coming up with a variety of clever tricks and traps to confound any pursuit. Unfortunately, despite her impressive knowledge of the arcane, there was little she could contrive that would prove more than minor inconvenience to a draconic hunter. Though several could certainly be fatal to a pony, this was a particular concern she didn't share with her companion.

In the routine and repetitive task of clearing the signs of their passage, Twilight was becoming increasingly lost in the downward spiral of her silent contemplations.

*That **thing** was lying. It had to have been. Celestia can't be dead, she just can't be. But... lies. Why are there are so many lies? Even Celestia was lying to me... worse, she was **using** me. That's clear now, she had some kind of plan behind me being in Ponyville, she expected me to be able to do something. Should I be more upset that I failed her, or that I was just a pawn for her to throw about? I thought she cared about me, was that all just another charade? My entire life?*

Twilight found herself biting her lip as her eyes began to water. The feeling of utter betrayal permeating her attempts to rationalize her way through everything.

*And what was I supposed to DO anyway? What did Celestia have planned? She must have thought I would be able to use the Elements somehow, that's the only thing that makes sense. Why me? Did she give me something I'd need to use them? What did I bring with me... Spike? Could Spike be the key to using them? No, that doesn't make any sense at all! If I can't figure this out, it doesn't matter how far I manage to run. Even if I make it all the way to Canterlot, I doubt even the full Counsel of Mages could do more than slow those dragons down if they decide to come for*

*me, not to mention Nightmare Moon herself. Would the Counsel know how to use the Elements? How could they, as far as I know the Elements of Harmony are just an old ponytale to any serious scholar... and I **would** know! So what then?! I guess I can either just throw myself off a cliff or -*

Twilight was broken roughly from her thoughts when she walked directly into Rarity's behind. As fortune would have it, her horn was not down.

"Oof!" she exclaimed in surprise, "Rarity, what is it, why'd you- " she was cut off by a sharp "Shhh!" from the alabaster Unicorn. Perking her ears, she froze to listen for whatever had caught Rarity's attention. Was that... music? Barely discernible, filtering through the forest was, indeed, the unmistakable sound of music.

Twilight and Rarity exchanged glances. Nodding in accord, they changed direction, heading toward the sound. As they grew nearer, the music grew clearer and the forest about them began to thin out. What had been rugged and tangled jungle since the castle, slowly began to turn into a more orderly forest. A thin mist was in the air, wisps of the ephemeral substance clinging to the ancient trees. The scents of the wood about them were rich and old, the moss carpeting the ground beneath them sinking slightly under the weight of their hooves, making for silent progress.

They were close enough now to clearly discern that *two* instruments were at work. One resonating and deep, the other higher toned, like a... harp, perhaps? A duet was in progress, but not one of a classical harmony. The two instruments seemed to weave around one another in the refrains, as though in fluid competition for the more beautiful melody. The effect was a tone of an increasingly heartbreaking melancholy that seemed to echo the very heartbeat of the ancient forest around them.

The Unicorns were utterly transfixed as they grew closer, the fog about them had become so thick they could barely see, but it sounded as though the source of the music was right there, all around them. Suddenly, the fog was gone, and Twilight looked back, startled by the abruptness of its end. A thoroughly opaque wall of mist was behind her, obscuring any sight of the forest beyond. Ahead, glimpsed through a copse of trees, was a picturesque glen. They cautiously edged closer, sneaking up to crouch behind one of the larger trees and one to either side, peeked out around it.

The clearing was large, here and there tall wheat grasses rose in tufts, their ripe ends golden and shining in the moonlight, as fireflies flit in a random synchronicity about the meadow. It was a stunningly beautiful scene. This place felt... hallowed. Sacred.

In the center, beneath the full glow of the moon, were two ponies, sitting a short distance apart and facing each other. One, whose dark brown mane was elegant and flowing, slid a bow across a large stringed instrument; Twilight thought she recognized it as a contra-bass. The other was... *reclining* in a manner Twilight had never seen anypony do before, though she plucked with exceptional grace at a shining lyre.

Reaching its inevitable crescendo, the song came to an end as the final note rang throughout the clearing. Twilight blinked, realizing she had begun to cry softly at the beauty of the music. Truly, the melancholy tone was so heartbreaking, that she identified with it down to her core, as it seemed to sum up the emotional totality of her situation; how very lost she felt, like she'd never know the feeling of being home again even if she stood upon its doorstep, that her entire existence was as significant and long-lasting as a wave breaking upon the shore.

The slate-grey pony in the glen let out a long breath, then rose and dipped a graceful bow, as though a contest had been decided and she conceded a dignified defeat. With loving care, she slid the large instrument into a protective case and hefted it across her back. Without a word she left the clearing, disappearing into the mists.

The [verdant Unicorn](#) stood, cloaked in the silence of the meadow, emanating an atmosphere of both the serene and the arcane.

The two fugitives looked at each other, exchanging hushed whispers behind the shelter of the tree.

"Do you know her? Who is she?" Twilight asked.

"I do, vaguely. I believe her name is Lyra, she lives in Ponyville. She moved recently."

"Why... *how* was she sitting like that? It looked so uncomfortable."

"I'm sure I haven't the faintest idea," Rarity replied, her tone faintly indignant.

"Well how did she get out here? I thought the town was under lockdown?" Twilight whispered back.

Lyra's voice broke through the hush, loud and clear in the glen, causing the two in hiding to jump in shock. "I come and go as I please. Don't you?" she said, without turning to look back at them.

Their clandestine charade was up. Frowning in concern, the pair stood, slowly edging around the tree they'd been hiding behind.

"Beauty is so ephemeral a thing, wouldn't you agree?" the green Unicorn asked, seemingly rhetorically, as though not expecting an answer.

Tilting her head up and back, looking at them through the corner of her eye, she added, "Though beauty without wisdom is a shallow thing, and grace without humility is a rather pathetic affectation... don't you think?" she grinned lightly, casually stretching out her back with a feline grace.

Lyra finally turned to face the pair squarely, who were still standing hesitantly by the tree line. "Well? Come sit down and make yourselves comfortable. You are quite safe here, and by the looks of things, you could both use a moment of refuge."

Twilight wanted to be cautious, she really did, while Rarity was still struggling over whether or not she had the energy left to act affronted by this green Unicorn's implications, which she felt were directed at her specifically. In the end though, neither had it in them. The offer of sanctuary, however tenuous, however temporary, was too appealing to reject for their physically and emotionally exhausted states.

Trotting closer, Twilight spoke, "Thank you for the offer. We just need a place to stay while we catch our breath."

Lyra laughed a bit at that, "Oh, my dear, you need much more than that."

Tilting her head, she asked, "What is *that* supposed to mean?"

Lyra sighed, and paused a moment before replying. "You *need*... a reason."

"Um, what?" Twilight asked, officially nonplussed.

"A reason. You've lost yours, and now doubt that you ever had any to begin with. An average pony cannot live day-to-day without one, not without becoming a hollow shell, to say nothing of one in whose saddlebags rest the fate of so many." Lyra said, one eyebrow raised.

Twilight felt her hackles rising at the mention of her saddlebags, or rather, what they contained. She was beginning to wonder when the last time she *hadn't* been suspicious of somepony was.

"And what would you know about *that*?" she demanded.

Lyra smiled with an enigmatic serenity. "Clearly much more than you're comfortable with. Peace, Twilight Sparkle. Not all things in this world exist to threaten and confound you, though it may seem so at times."

Unprepared to tackle *that* particular line, Twilight switched tracks, trying to stifle a yawn. "What... is this place? There's powerful magic here, I can feel it but... it's strange. Not like any kind I've studied."

"This is my special place. The magic here is very old. It... called to me. It's not like any kind of spell to be used. There's something sanctified about the glen itself." she shrugged lightly, as though discussing the weather. "The point is, it's safe. Are you two hungry?"

At the mention of food, Twilight and Rarity's stomachs growled in angry unison. They hadn't eaten in what felt like ages, and the war between trepidation and hunger was a short one.

With a light chuckle, Lyra bent and lifted a basket from behind the stump she had rested her lyre upon. It was filled with carrots, cabbages and a small loaf of bread. She moved forward and set it down in an open offer, "Don't be shy. Come, take your fill and rest." she said, as she turned back to collect her lyre and settled back in her unique manner, resting against the stump.



Twilight and Rarity gratefully moved to the basket, settled down upon the comfortably thick grasses, and began to munch ravenously at the crisp and crunchy vegetables. Lyra, a short distance away, closed her eyes and began to play softly again, the music wrapping once more around the meadow.

Before they knew it, their bellies full and their bodies exhausted, the gentle music had lulled the two Unicorns down into a deep, dreamless sleep.

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Into the night, Lyra played and the two little ponies snored. The shroud of fog drifted in a lazy, ever-swirling arch about the clearing, as the moon slid across the sky.

If one had been unaware or distracted, the sudden appearance of the new arrival would have gone completely unnoticed. Massive as the figure was, its emergence was utterly silent as it stepped smoothly through the ubiquitous wall of grey mist. Though Lyra was neither unaware nor distracted, her song continued unabated. For a time, the hulking new arrival simply stood, eyes turned skyward as he listened, large ears erect. A closing note ending the refrain, Lyra turned her head.

“So many visitors tonight.” she stated.

Large yellow eyes shifted to take in the slumbering ponies. “So it would seem.”

“And to what do I the honor of another visit so soon, night walker? It’s hardly been a fortnight since we last spoke. Have you missed me?” she sidetracked, a glib amusement in her voice.

The yellow eyes rolled as the massive, wildly furred creature stepped forward. “As though the wide forests haven’t been abuzz with recent events, speaks this little pony. As though she hasn’t decided to directly intervene,” he replied sternly. “This is not our way. I would know why you choose to interfere in the affairs of the Sun and Moon.”

With mock melodrama, Lyra rose a hoof in protest, "*Interfere?* I would never!"

The pair stared at one another blankly, before breaking out into a mutual laugh: one high and sweet, the other low and resonant. The Wolf curled his tail and sat, still towering head and shoulders above the green Unicorn. He flicked an ear and spoke again, "I do indeed bring news this night. As you know, there are more players in this little intrigue. And this one," he pointed his muzzle at a slumbering and oblivious Twilight Sparkle, "has been playing seriously. She left some fairly clever dissuasive arguments to pursuit scattered along her back-trail."

This gave Lyra pause, her eyes half-lidded as the light touch of amused banter faded from her voice. "Is that the never-ending Lycanth understatement I hear speaking? Just how 'clever' are we talking about here?" she asked, her concern genuine.

The Wolf stared at her levelly for a moment before barking out a single word, "Lethal."

Lyra touched a hoof to her chin in contemplation.

"Perhaps, old friend, you should keep an eye on those that follow. I rather doubt any party invested in this would care to see the players irrevocably damaged. That is, of course, if it is your will to do so."

She had known this Wolf a long time, and knew well that his kind were not well-pleased by demands.

The Wolf nodded amicably enough, "It was, and is. I don't care to get too heavily involved, so I'll leave them in your care, provided they're not already dead, hmm?"

"Of course, of course. Keep your paws as clean as you like old friend, though I know you and your Packs are as interested in this as I am, or you would not be here. This is no petty political intrigue... this is the great game of our age, is it not?" Lyra chuckled, waving a hoof.

The Wolf grinned, long fangs glinting as he huffed, "Heh. I suppose this is what we get for shepherding a Pony into the depths of the Night. You begin to speak like one of the Pack, little Lyra."

He rose, padding silently towards the wall of fog. "Expect to receive them before the dawn. I make no promises as to their condition," he tossed back over his shoulder before disappearing into the darkness.

Chapter 7

Ambiguity

Applejack and Rainbow Dash tore down the wide thoroughfare at a full gallop, the bright moonlight casting long shadows all about them. Their hooves clattered sharply on the wooden bridge as they crossed. Both ponies were strong athletes, their bodies already shifted into the high-gear mode of a challenge thrown down. Between controlled breaths, they had little trouble with conversation.

"AJ, I'm gonna pull ahead and up a bit, see if I can spot 'em down the trail!"

"Good call Dash, if they hear us comin' they might make a duck into some bushes- I'll keep an eye out!"

Dash nodded as she unfurled her wings and lifted off the ground. Now airborne, the wind flowing easily around her aerodynamic frame, she began to pick up greater speed than any earthbound pony could hope to match, even AJ. Soon, she was well out of sight, powering along just below the high boughs that converged above the path.

Left to her thoughts, it wasn't long before AJ began to wonder, *Somethin' don't feel right. Twilight sure ain't no athlete, an' I'll be shorn if Rarity coulda' kept this pace for this long.* Glancing about to confirm her theory, she had been paying special attention to the brush off to the sides, looking closely for any sign of a pony-sized hole that may have recently been plowed through. *Nothin'. This don't make no sense... unless...* She pulled to a halt, pursing her lips and let out a piercing whistle, signaling Dash to return. Which, after barely a moment had passed, she did.

"What the hay AJ? Why'd you whistle? Give us away much?" the Pegasus snarked.

"Dash, this ain't right. Think about it. There just t'ain't no way them two could have come this far this fast. We've been after 'em for too long, and ain't seen any sign."

"Well, what the hay are we gonna do? We *can't* go back empty-hoofed and let that dragon go after them! You *heard* what he said!" Dash frowned thoughtfully, "So, what do ya think?"

"Ah'm bettin' the only thing they coulda done was go right into the forest. That's the only way we'd a missed their trail so far. We need'a backtrack and find where they went in."

"Great! That's just *great!*" Dash exclaimed, crossing her hooves over her chest and hovering in the air, clearly pouting.

"Ah know it sugarcube... but the way it's lookin', trackin' is what we're gonna have to do. They must'a gone into the deep o' the forest. No way 'round it."

"UGH! That'll take *forever!* ... Okay, tell you what- *you* backtrack, look for wherever they went in. I'm gonna zip up ahead to the end of the road, just to be totally sure. If I don't see 'em, I'll head back in a snap."

AJ nodded. "Alright then," she said, turning about and heading back the way she came. She knew she'd been paying close enough attention to the surrounding path that she hadn't overlooked their point of entry- it *must* have been back closer to the castle itself.

Coming back across the bridge, she slowed to a brisk canter and really started to scrutinize her surroundings. *Ah sure wish Winona were here right about now. She'd be on their trail lickety-split.*

Applejack was growing increasingly frustrated when she caught the sound of flapping wings coming up from behind- Dash had caught her up.

"Any luck?" she asked, looking back to find her question preemptively answered by the scowl painted across her airborne friend's face. A "Humph" from the disgruntled Pegasus confirmed it.

They were now back within the huge clearing, the castle in the distance. Together, they began searching the circular tree line and quickly found what they would have spotted, had they not been in such a rush initially. Broken branches and a flurry of tracks leading into the heart of the

Everfree Forest - they had the trail. It wouldn't be long now, the two Unicorns couldn't be making good time through the intensely thick, jungle-like forest.

"All right then AJ, you take the trail, I'll take the air. Keeping track of you shouldn't be a problem, so just whistle if you need me. With any luck we'll find them pretty quick," Dash paused, her eyes narrowing. "They have a lot to answer for."

"Dash, I know what yer feelin', an' Ah'm angry 'bout Fluttershy too, but don't get too carried away when we catch 'em up, okay? This whole thing ain't makin' much sense right now, and we gotta lot to figure out 'bout what happened back there."

Dash glared into the darkness of the forest, "Like I said - answers. We're wasting time, let's go." With that she was off, above the tree line in a heartbeat, disappearing from view.

Applejack frowned upwards, more than a little concerned about the ambiguity of that last statement... but Dash was right, time was wasting. With a grumble, she proceeded into the forest. It was dark, and the canopy heavy, but the moon was so bright it wasn't long before her eyes adjusted more than enough to see clearly.

What she saw was at once reassuring and disturbing. Reassuring in that the path the fleeing pair had taken couldn't be more obvious- they had plowed through the brush like a freight train: the grasses were bent, leaves scattered about and broken branches and twigs completely littered the trail they had taken. What disturbed her was the other side of that bit- they were running scared, blind and totally panicked. A pang of concern warred with the curiosity in her mind and the anger in her heart at what had happened to Fluttershy.

*What **happened** to you Twi?*

Applejack knew there was only one way to find out. She set off at a good canter. Not knowing if Dash could pick up the shifting of the brushes as she made her way, though she assumed she could, AJ nevertheless let her hooves clatter against the occasional stone loud enough to be heard from above.

Making good progress, AJ flinched at the occasional tufts of mane and coat hanging from branches, torn from the Unicorns in their flight. She gasped as she came across a particular tree smeared with blood at head-height, as though one of the ponies had slammed right into it. Falling silent at the thought of what could have caused the grisly stain, her ears soon perked, picking up the sound of rushing water not far ahead. Pushing her way through the thick brush she cleared to the bank... and froze, her jaw hanging wide open in complete disbelief.

"DASH!"

Rainbow Dash had been flying in a tight circular search pattern, keeping an ear on AJ's location below, not wanting to lose her. At the same time, she was on the lookout for some sign of the fleeing Unicorns- a sound, *Rarity must be whining non-stop*, or perhaps a glint of light from their horns, not that they'd really need it to light their way with how crazy-bright the still huge moon was.

Her thoughts were lingering on what AJ had said before- the implications were perfectly clear: Applejack thought she was going to fly off the handle when they caught up with Twilight. The sudden swell of rage in her breast at the thought of what the purple Unicorn had done to Fluttershy made her admit that AJ was right to be concerned... the admission of which made her slightly uncomfortable. She knew she'd always been bit... 'impetuous', sure, but it's not like she was just going to start breaking bones when they caught up to Twilight. The more she thought about it all, the more she got the feeling that something was out of place. Twilight just didn't seem the type to fly off the handle like that, at least to the extent that she did. Whatever reason she had though, she'd gone too damned far! *Nothing* could excuse-

Her ears perked to attention. She had just spotted what she was sure was movement up ahead, past the snaking line of the river below, when a shocked cry from AJ sent her banking sharply around, toward the sound of her friend's call, trying to find a place to drop safely through the near-ubiquitous canopy. *Why the hay is she shouting?! Damn it, if they hear us they're just gonna try and hide!*

AJ called out again, "**Dash!** Ya'll need ta see this! Git down here *now!*"

She abandoned her attempts at a cautious descent at the panicked tone in Applejack's voice and burst down through the thick foliage, jinking hard in her rapid fall to avoid the larger branches.

There was AJ, standing stock-still in front of... *what... the fuck is that?!*

Dash found herself just as lost for words as her friend had been as she came to a rough landing next to the orange pony. Before her was a twisted, morbid scene, made all the more horrific by its unnatural beauty. The water of the river before them had somehow been turned to solid ice and ... *erupted*, rising in stiletto spires into the air, the solid ice glittering in the moonlight. The blood that ran thickly down the central spikes was also shining in the ambient glow. Ten feet above them, a Manticore was hanging, speared through in a dozen places, its body hanging limp and lifeless. One of the razor-sharp icicles had pierced up through its throat, nearly severing the head of the beast.

How long the moment of shock held the pair immobile, they couldn't have said, but it was Applejack that broke the horrified silence, her voice barely a whisper.

"Sugarcube... what... what *is* this?"

Dash snapped out of her stunned silence, her mind shifting from shock to the absolute clarity of fatalistic realism. Turning her head, she met AJ's wide eyes with a level stare.

"This is Twilight. It has to be. There's no way Rarity could know magic like this. Hell, I've never even *heard* of any magic like this. She must have known we'd come after her, and wised up. Look across the bank, no more broken branches, just a few tracks."

AJ squinted over, but lacked the intensely sharp vision of the Pegasus to distinguish the tracks at that distance.

Dash continued, her tone low and raw, "She's thinking now, and she's not playing games. This would have killed you if you'd set it off."

Applejack's ears flattened against her head. She couldn't believe this. She couldn't believe that Twilight would actually do something like this, would go this far.

And Rarity... Rarity is with her, she knew about this! I don't... I can't...

Applejack felt like her heart was breaking. She didn't even notice the foreleg that wrapped around her shoulders until it pulled her into a crushing embrace. Blinking past tears she hadn't realized were flooding her eyes, she buried her face in Dash's multi-hued mane.

After a long moment, Dash pushed her back.

"AJ. Turn around and go back to the castle," she said, her tone clipped.

This Applejack was *not* prepared for. "Wait, what? What are you on about Dash?"

"The rules have changed, AJ. Twilight's not playing damn *games* here, I just told you. You're turning around, and going back to the castle. I'm not letting *that*," she jabbed a hoof at the grisly spectacle before them, "happen to *you*. No. Way."

Emerald green eyes flashed in recognition of what Dash meant, and her jaw set.

"Rainbow, you think I'm letting *you* go in there alone, you spent too much time in the clouds," AJ said, her voice hard as oak.

The two stood, squared off and glaring at one another, each by their stubborn natures unwilling to yield her position.

"Go. Back."

"No."

Dash stomped a hoof and growled her frustration, "Damn it AJ, do I have to beat some sense into you? *Again?*"

Refusing to rise to the bait, underhoofed as the jibe was, Applejack knew how to win this debate. "Dash, think 'bout this. How do you expect to find em? You got sharp eyes, but you don't know the first thing 'bout trackin'. If'n ya recall, the only reason the Princess didn't let that dragon go after 'em was because *my* plan was a good one. One in the air, one on the ground. 'Sides, what if I *do* go back, an' that dragon gets his chance? He wants their blood, the Elements, an' that's it."

Dash was silent for a moment, considering all this. She was terrified for AJ, but AJ seemed equally afraid for her. She knew she lost this round, but with a stroke of brilliant mischief, she decided not to leave her friend comfortably dwelling on the victory.

"Y'know Applesnack, you're pretty sexy when you get mad," she said with a smirk, turning abruptly and snapping her tail under AJ's chin, leaving the workpony totally flustered.

Giving AJ no chance to respond, Dash was back to business.

"Okay, so we're going on together now, but I'm not leaving you on the ground alone. Who knows what else that freakin' sorceress set up. C'mon, I'm gonna lift you over to the other side."

AJ grinned, "Just watch your hooves there Sally."

~

The going was much, much slower now. The pair they were tracking had really collected their wits- as obviously panicked and thoughtless as their initial rush through the thick forest was, the path they blazed was now conversely subtle. The only signs to be found were the occasional hoof-scuffed earth, bent grasses, and oddly arranged branches. It was enough, if just barely. Even more troublesome was the constant stress of vigilance. They could only guess what *e*/se lay in store for them down the trail, courtesy of a hyper-powered, highly trained and intensely paranoid personal protege of a goddess.

Having already encountered a couple more of her calling cards, they were developing a decidedly healthy level of paranoia themselves.

The first after the slaughtered Manticore had been some kind of illusion-baited trap. How they triggered it, they had been unable to figure out. They had been passing beneath the arching branch of a massive tree, when without warning came the voices of Twilight and Rarity, right next to them -- "They found us! RUN!" -- the colors of violet and alabaster forms barely discernible as they dashed away through the middle of a thick bush.

Dash had reactively bolted after them, only to be tackled to the ground by Applejack before she got two steps. "AJ! What the hay?!" she squawked out indignantly.

"Dash, that ain't right. Didn't you notice? Those leaves didn't move around 'em, no sound of their hooves, and now listen- nothin'. My bottom bit says that was another trap." To test her theory, she lifted a stick off the ground in her mouth and tossed it into the bush that the "Unicorns" had so suddenly appeared in.

The pair flinched and stepped back reflexively as the space within the foliage lit up in a fierce, if tightly contained, storm of electrical energy.

The third encounter was as fortunate for the pair as the first- another denizen of the forest had triggered it before their arrival, though not by much. They heard the explosion clearly, not far ahead. Arriving on the scene, they looked around cautiously. Something had been blown to messy little bits here. The only identifiable piece of the unlucky creature was the clawed foot of a chicken. As gruesome as the Manticore had been, the sheer amount of gore and blood painting the trees and ground around them was worse.

Applejack turned, retching at the fetid stench, while Dash grimly pushed past her own nausea, trying to figure out exactly what had happened here. Looking about carefully, she saw that there were jagged shards of stone scattered amidst the gore... as if... *an exploding rock? This is getting insane! Did that thing even have to step on it, or did it blow when it got too close? What the hay has Celestia been teaching this filly?* Dash's first impression of Twilight had been of an admittedly cute bookworm who

didn't get out much. Now she was wondering if she wasn't some kind of secret agent Unicorn!

~

AJ, having successfully vacated the contents of her stomach and feeling none the better for it, began to speak in hushed tones as they made their way through the forest.

"Dash, I been thinkin'. Now I know what yer gonna say, but just hear me out- I don't think Twilight's been tryin' to kill us." AJ got the look of incredulity she'd expected, but before the Pegasus could start verbally questioning her sanity, she pressed on, "I mean, us specifically. The more I think 'bout it, the more I'm sure she was really expectin' those dragons to be comin' after her, not us. Think 'bout it- lethal as all that would'a been for *us*, I don't much think they'd ah dun more'n slow a full-grown dragon down. She's desperate, scared, an' tryin' to buy as much time as she can."

Rainbow frowned thoughtfully. "I get what you're sayin' AJ, and it makes sense, but it doesn't exactly change the situation does it? I mean, one wrong step we might not even see coming, an' it's over."

"Yeah Dash, I know. I'm sayin' this cuz I want ya to try to understand where she's comin' from... I'm just afraid o' what you two are gonna do when we *do* catch 'em up. Just... promise me, please, that you'll at least hear her out. Please. For me."

Dash's frown deepened into a scowl. She walked on in silent vigilance of their surroundings. Applejack decided not to press her any further, her point and plea had been made; she was confident Dash would think long and hard about her words.

~

A short while later, Applejack suddenly pulled up, ears perked high as they swiveled about. Dash looked at her questioningly, but AJ's attention was completely focused on something elsewhere.

"Dash," she said, her voice barely audible, "we're not alone."

Eyes darting surreptitiously all about, Dash saw... nothing, felt no hint of what would make AJ say such a thing, but there was no questioning that her friend was serious. A chill ran down her spine.

"How can you tell?" she whispered back.

"Earth pony thing. Ya'll Pegasi can control the weathers 'n such, Unicorns have magic, my kin have... it's hard to describe- it's a *connection* to the land, I guess ya'll could say. An Ah'm tellin' ya, we're being stalked. Ah can feel it."

While Dash didn't really know what to make of the explanation, she didn't doubt the validity of it, but there didn't seem to be much they could do about it at the moment, and she said as much.

AJ nodded, "Jus'... jus' be on yer guard, okay?" she whispered, rounding a tree heavy with vines. The irony of her last statement was lost on both ponies as the vines wreathing the tree suddenly lit with a distinctive purple radiance and came alive. With blinding speed, they lashed out and whipped about Applejack, binding her and pulling her into a bone-crushing impact with the tree. She struggled frantically, but was strung up tightly to the base of the tree as more vines snaked about her torso and neck, their long thorns cutting into her.

"Dash!" she screamed, "Get these damned things offa me! It's getting tighter! Aaaah!"

Bolting over, Dash pulled at the malignantly enchanted flora, her armored uniform protecting her forelegs from the sharp thorns. They were wrapped far too tight against her friend's body to find enough purchase to get any leverage, so she began to use her teeth, frantically trying to bite through them, as all the while AJ cried out in anguish as the thorns dug deeper into her flesh. Applejack's cries grew weaker as the vines wrapped ever more tightly around her throat, effectively strangling her. Eyes wide and pleading, she stared at Rainbow as her friend desperately tried to free her. It wasn't working. Applejack felt the vertebrae in her neck begin to creak as the vines constricted relentlessly, forcing her head inexorably back and up to an unnatural angle that would soon snap her neck.

The huge creature appeared out of nowhere, throwing Rainbow Dash out of the way like she was a rag doll. Moonlight flashed on silver claws as they cut through the death-trap vines in a single, fluid arch. Applejack collapsed to the ground, barely conscious and gasping raggedly as her lungs greedily filled with oxygen. Her senses slowly returning, she could hear Dash's voice, cursing from somewhere in the middle of a bush as she thrashed about, trying to clamber free. Her blurred vision began to clear, and she found herself at eye-level with a pair of huge, clawed paws.

Lifting her head, she found herself gazing up at a creature she had only heard tales of, traditionally the kind used to frighten misbehaving colts and fillies. This close up, his massive frame nearly completely filled her field of vision. His fur was thick and wild, the breadth of his chest and shoulders easily twice that of her brother, who was one of the largest stallions she'd ever seen. His large ears were perked and fully forward... and those eyes. Large and yellow, they seemed to glow with an internal light as they pierced her with an emotionless and steady regard. She was struck with the certainty of intuitive knowledge that he could see past her coat, beyond her bluster, into the very core of her... and that he was little impressed.

The flood of curses pouring from Rainbow's direction ceased abruptly as she cleared the tangled mass of leaves and shrubbery she had been hurled into. A frozen moment lingered on the scene as she took in the massive creature standing before a prone Applejack... correction, the massive *predator* looming over a helpless Applejack! Impulse and recognition washed over her. *No time to think, just act- do something, try to get him away from AJ, buy her time to escape.*

Wings flaring, a snarl of rage and fear tearing from her throat, she launched herself at the predator.

A single shaggy brow rose above the ambient eye.

~

Lyra was beginning to grow concerned. The dawn was fast approaching. The greater Convergences were ever tricky- unpredictable as their results were pivotal. Planning was all good and well, but once the

events were in motion, things always had a tendency to spiral beyond the murky waters of chaos. Beyond the sight of even the wisest.

*Why did gods always seem to think they could control everything? The same reason **we** always do I imagine, she ruminated, endless self-delusion at our own grandeur. Could be worse, I suppose - I've heard the tales of those other realms, too horrible to even contemplate. And what can any of us do? Where do we find a modicum of sanity in it all? Why, we can laugh. We laugh at the sheer, endless absurdity of it all.*

She strummed distractedly at her lyre as her thoughts tread these disturbing paths.

Suddenly perking, Lyra felt the familiar approach through the skein of her magics. *Finally*, she thought. The great wolf strode into the clearing through the mists. Lyra blinked as the two expected visitors did not appear behind him. Rather, as he drew closer, she saw that two unconscious ponies were draped across his back. She half-rose, "What-" she began in alarm.

He interrupted her gruffly, shrugging the pair unceremoniously off him and onto the grass at his feet. "They were troublesome," he rumbled by way of simple explanation, clearly lacking the inclination to elaborate.

Well, this was unexpected. Lovely. But then... she glanced over to a particularly thick patch of grasses woven to conceal the still slumbering Twilight and Rarity, *I suppose this somewhat simplifies things. For my part, at any rate.*

"Does anything ever work out as planned?" she asked in a wistful, almost rhetorical tone.

The wolf gazed at her solemnly. "Never."

She paused, long and hard. "It was all a mistake, wasn't it?"

"Everything is, Lyra, sooner or later."

~

The haze of golden light radiated painfully behind her closed eyelids. Squinting hard, the ambient light abated, and she sighed in relief as the pounding in her head lessened slightly. Slowly, the intrusion of senses awakening began to demand more and more of her attention, even as she struggled to return to that blissful solace of oblivion. The warmth of the sun growing uncomfortably hot upon her back and the sweet sound of wind rustling the grasses all around her proved enough incentive to cycle her groggy consciousness through the "*who-what-where*" phases of awakening. In short order, memories of recent events flooded in and her eyes snapped open.

Twilight Sparkle raised her head, looking around in alarm. The scene before her did not mesh with what she last recalled before falling asleep to a full belly and the serene music of that odd, green unicorn.

She was no longer in that peaceful glen that radiated a palpable sense of protection and peace. A rumbling snore drew her attention to the curled mass of alabaster coat and purple mane that was her companion. She couldn't help but smirk a bit at the contrast of the prim and proper Rarity, normally so graceful and poised, now rumbling away like a jackhammer as she slept.

Rising, she was struck with how very *refreshed* she felt. She took stock and was amazed to discover all of her considerable wounds seemed to have been fully healed. She felt fresh, alive, and *thoroughly* confused. Where in Equestria were they? How did they get there? The Everfree, this most certainly was not - she felt reconnected to the magical stability of civilized Equestria.

Proceeding down the logical course of action, first thing was first - rousing Rarity. The Unicorn might know where they were; she had lived in the area and may know the terrain well enough to recognize their position.

"Rarity. Wake up," she said, nosing the slumbering mare.

She was rewarded by a distinctly unladylike snort and grumble from her friend.

"Rarity!" she said louder, prodding the Unicorn with her hoof, "Wake up!"

"Bwa-what?" Rarity announced, startled from her sleep, raising her head and blearily meeting Twilight's gaze.

Twilight couldn't help but smirk a bit at the tussled mane and sloppy appearance of her friend. "Time to get up. It's early morning by the looks of it, but I have no idea where we are."

"Where we are? What do you-" she broke off as she looked around, taking in their surroundings, "why, this is White Tail Wood! Just on the edge of Ponyville! How ever did we get *here*?"

Twilight grimaced, "Yeah, no idea. But we're close to Ponyville? Can you lead us back? How far is it?"

Rarity looked up and around, gauging their bearings, "Very close. Just 'round the corner actually."

"Well, that's a relief. Sorry to wake you so abruptly, but we'd better get going. How do you feel?"

"I..." Rarity cocked her head to the side, "I feel *wonderful* actually," she said in a tone of bewilderment.

"Me too. I'm really going to have to expand my studies. There's so much more to magic than I ever thought- Unicorn magics are inherently linear, a framework of will, effect, and application. What we experienced last night was almost... an inverse of that understanding. Almost cyclic in its manifestation..." she trailed off, mumbling to her herself for a moment, lost in the implications.

Rarity rose and shook herself. "Yes darling, that's all well and good," she said, interrupting Twilight's ruminations, a habit of the purple Unicorn she was becoming increasingly familiar with, "but as you said, we need to get moving."

Twilight nodded, jarred from her thoughts, "Right, which way?"

Taking the lead, Rarity broke into a brisk canter with the reassuring knowledge of finally knowing where they were and how to get where they

were going- *home*. The thought filled her with confidence and joy- things would be alright soon, back amongst the familiar. It wasn't long before they cleared the forest, the bright morning light falling around them; breaking into an all-out gallop across the wide grassy plains, the sunshine felt like a benediction.

By the time they made the edges of town, they were breathing heavily, the sweat from their brows burning into their eyes. So it was that they didn't hear the building shouts until the crowd had nearly surrounded them. The cacophony was deafening, ponies overriding one another in their rapid-fire exclamations-

"Rarity!"

"-thought you were dead."

"Where did you all-"

"-where are the others?!"

"the Princess,"

"guards everywhere, I don't-"

"-light Sparkle!"

A voice, hard and commanding, cut through the din, "Make way!
NOW!"

Blinking away the sweat from her vision, Twilight took a moment to process what her eyes were telling her.

Approaching her was a stallion, adorned in armor from hoof to head, the gold of it glinting in the morning light. A cordon of the townsp ponies opened for his approach, but this clearly wasn't enough for him, "Disperse! Clear out! Go home, I don't care, but back off now, all of you," he ordered left and right, the fillies and bucks cringing slightly under the rigid tone and unyielding glare. Snorting, he drew up before a still panting Twilight. "Miss Sparkle. I am pleased to have found you. I *had* heard you and some others had gone into the Everfree Forest, yet here you are. Please, follow me."

Bemused at his words, yet relieved at his presence and all the familiar order it represented, she began to follow, pulling up to his side as a flood of questions vied for dominance in her mind. A victor didn't have time to make itself known however, for as she pulled up next to him, the sight previously denied her left those thoughts gasping in the dirt.

Ahead, in the open square before the Town Hall, were arrayed what Twilight, despite having lived her entire life within the walls of Canterlot, had rarely seen- a fully formed Elite Contingent of the Royal Guard. While the military sciences were at best an ancillary draw to her academic pursuits, she had nevertheless taken (and of course excelled at) the requisite courses that touched upon the subject matter of the modern Equestrian military. An Elite Contingent was unique in both its efficacy and composition- they were among the few quarters of the military that actually seemed to *do* anything, though what it is they got up to she was never privileged to be made aware of. She had merely noted them coming and going at all hours, and as far as she recalled, there were only a few such units active in all of Equestria.

The Contingent was comprised of seven heavy Earth ponies--her escort the eighth--their armor far from ceremonial, each bearing scars and grooves unique to its owner. These ponies were the first in and the last out of an engagement. Four Pegasi were adorned in lighter armor, designed for agility and swift movement, extensions from their shoulders ribbing across the front angles of their wings, the razored edges glinting.

The final three wore no armor, at least none that could be seen, as dark brown cloaks hung about them. The sunburst sigil on the right breast marked them for what they were- Elite Mages of the Equestrian Military. Twilight was effectively trotting on autopilot as she drew nearer.

Her escort drew her towards the cloaked three, one of whom stepped forward and spoke, "Sergeant, excellent. Take your Heavies and attend to some crowd-control."

The Heavy stomped a salute, glanced at his ponies, and off they went to follow orders.

The tall Unicorn stood, his coat a dark blue, white mane clipped short and curling about his horn. "Well. Twilight Sparkle. Nice of you to finally show up," his tone was curt and efficient.

Twilight found herself at a loss for a moment. This Unicorn knew her name. Not only that, but he implied he had been waiting for her? She mustered all the eloquence of her years of academic and arcane pursuit.

"Um."

The Mage's brows rose when she did not immediately continue. "Right then. I'm afraid questions will have to wait, both for a safer location, and when your tongue decides to start working again. Now. I understand you have companions. Where are they?"

Okay. A direct question to answer. Much easier. "Yes, I-" Wait. Where was Rarity?! Looking about, she saw no sign of the alabaster beauty. "Um..."

Another pause as the Unicorn Mage visibly bit down on his frustration, "Lovely. Description please. Succinctly," his last word slightly emphasized.

She gave it, as well as the name of her friend's place of business.

The Mage nodded to one of the Pegasi, and two took off towards the Carousel Boutique.

"And the others?"

Frowning, Twilight responded, "What do you mean?" Something felt... *off* about this.

"Miss Sparkle, I have specific orders. We are here to collect yourself, and five other mares. Two Pegasi, two Earth ponies, and one additional Unicorn. Aside from yourself, all residents of this town. You were the only one named and described. Tell me who, and where, they are."

"I... what is this? How did you know where I was, and what do the others have to do with anything!"

The Mage stepped forward, frowning slightly. "My orders are... opaque, at best. I don't like bringing my men out here to collect a bunch of fillies while in the midst of what is quickly becoming the greatest crisis in our recent history. I don't like not knowing why I've been ordered to do so, and I *especially* don't like being cross-questioned and hamstrung by the ungrateful recipient of our protection. Now. Will you *please*-"

He got no farther. There was a shout from one of the Elite Pegasi, a flashing of eyes as all turned to the focus of his alarm- just enough time to register what appeared to be a small mountain dropping from the sky in a blur, and a shockwave knocking half the town off their hooves as the dragon slammed into the earth on the far side of town. In retrospect, it really was an incredible irony that, standing amidst an elite, highly trained fighting force of veterans, it was Twilight Sparkle who first broke from the shock. She had a particular reason, of course, for it wasn't until she watched the dragon nosing about, peering in the windows and rumbling low in his language, that she realized where he was. Specifically. Not just over on the other side of Ponyville. He was at the Library. And that meant one thing to Twilight- "SPIKE!!!" she screamed out, bolting forward in a full-out gallop.

A surprised curse and rapid flurry of orders lashed out behind her, and suddenly the ring of Earth pony Heavies were in full charge ahead of her, two blurs of gold flashed over head, and the billowing cloaks of the Mages began to pull ahead of her. All converging on the Library.

In her panicked flight, Twilight overheard, but paid scant attention to, a running argument between two of the Mages just ahead of her. She caught something about "diplomacy" and "foreign relations" from one, the leader responding with "orders don't allow for-" and something about "potential invasion". She frankly didn't give a damn what they were on about- Spike, the only brother she had ever known, was in the Library, and the great dragon's words back at the castle returned to haunt her- "He is precious to me," that was what he'd said, hadn't he? And now, here was one of his escorts, rooting about the Library! He was going to take Spike! No, she thought grimly, *he was going to TRY*.

A bolt of violet energy lashed out, cracking the air, throwing the galloping Mages off-canter as it streaked out below the Pegasi, between

the Heavy guards, and slammed into the dragon's side. He staggered back. One step.

Everything seemed to slow as the great beast turned his head, eyes narrowing.

Twilight caught a murmur from one of the Mages, "Oh shit."

Chapter 8

Horizons

Her feathers ruffled as she banked gracefully into the stiff wind, the pressure of the cool air comforting beneath her wings, her long mane streaming out behind her. Heights had always been a bit of an issue for her, a fact that some of the crueler fillies and colts back in school had taken gleeful advantage of when they got bored. Not that it *wasn't* odd, she'd be the first to admit- a Pegasus afraid of heights? She chuckled lightly, the irony not lost on her, before swallowing a gulp as her thoughts led her to acknowledge just *how very* high up she was. She'd never come *this* high by herself willingly. Fortunately, she did indeed have company.

Fluttershy leveled off and darted a glance to her left. The tips of long, midnight blue feathers stretched out next to hers, almost close enough to touch, as she flew alongside Princess Luna. The presence of the Alicorn was strangely comforting- she emanated a powerful feeling of serenity and assurance, and watching her fly... the Princess never seemed to have to flap her wings or exert any effort at all. Fluttershy doubted she could have even made it up here amongst the spatterings of alto-cumulus clouds had Luna not led her to the rising thermal near the lake.

Spiralling upward with the billowing drafts of warm air had been exhilarating, and she used the time to reflect on the events of that morning.

She had awoken before dawn, as was her custom for attending to the animals that had come to depend on her care over the years. There had been a moment of confusion as she peered about at the unfamiliar stone walls and large bed she was nestled upon. She may well have devolved into a full-blown panic had it not been for the pink ball of riotous-maned pony curled up next to her, snoring lightly and talking in her sleep. As it was, the reassuring presence of her friend had held her lurch of fear in abeyance while her sleep-addled mind struggled to catch up with recent events.

With a shocked little cry, the visceral memories of being crushed beneath tons of stone washed over her. Craning her head back with a

panicked gasp, she looked over body and was amazed to find herself whole and undamaged, with no injuries to substantiate her horrific recollections; not even a feather was out of place as she daintily fluttered her wings in careful inspection. After the collapse of the hallway, she remembered... nothing. With the tiniest of frowns, Fluttershy began to carefully extricate herself from the multiple layers of blanket she was nestled in.

Wide awake, she gently eased herself off the bed and tiptoed across the floor, so as not to disturb the slumbering Pinkie Pie. No pony would have accused her of being the adventurous type, but she was up, and at least Applejack should be awake... wait. *Applejack?* Vague impressions of the hardy workpony flit through her scattered memories of last night but... nothing distinctive, just that her friend had been shouting and distressed. Shaking her head, she carefully eased the door closed and turned to trot down the hall to her friend's quarters.

The stone corridors were frigid with the pre-dawn air; Fluttershy rubbed her wings against her sides as she made her way to Applejack's room. Nosing the door open with a timid query, "Applejack? Are you awake?" she was bewildered to find the room empty, the bed neatly made. Frowning slightly in confusion, she turned to the next door down- Rarity's room. Propriety abandoned with the growing knot of unease in her stomach, she pushed through the door. Empty. "What's going on? Where is everypony?"

Trotting to the window, she peered out in hopes of finding some sign of her missing friends. In the courtyard below she caught movement- somepony was walking through the grasses across the wide field. It was still quite dark, so she had to squint to make out... *Princess Luna! Oh! She'll know where everypony is!* Fluttershy turned and, exiting the room, began to trot brusquely down the halls to the exit. She almost tripped over herself as she passed into the main entranceway- rubble was strewn about, blackened scorch marks scarring the walls in random profusion. The great stained-glass window high above she had so admired yesterday was now broken out, the shattered pieces littering the floor in multi-colored shards. "Oh my..."

Fluttershy broke into a gallop; she did not like this scene that both looked and *felt* like a war-zone. The huge atrium was cloying with a sense

of oppressive violence that overwhelmed the timid Pegasus, a violence that triggered an atavistic instinct to *escape*, to get as far away as possible. The large main doors were wide open and she galloped straight through them, taking deep breaths of the cold, open air in relief. Looking about, she saw the Princess still casually strolling into the middle of the field, and she began to move toward her. Her ears perked at the songs of the morning birds that filled the treeline, their jaunty tunes calming her somewhat. Closing to hailing distance of the Princess, she pulled up short as she picked up a palpable feeling of... *expectancy*, that lay heavy in the air.

Luna was standing tall and rigid as a statue, her eyes closed as she drew in deep, even breaths. The space around her began to shine with small motes of light as her horn burst into a brilliant radiance; Fluttershy felt the hackles on her neck prickle with the rising energy. A small, strained sound broke from the Alicorn's muzzle, and she slowly began to raise her horn upwards, as though struggling against some great invisible weight. Fluttershy had never seen magic like this -- not that she was terribly familiar with Unicorns and their predilection -- but the sight before her was unlike any she had encountered before. Waves of power rolled off Luna; suddenly, bursting from the mountain range on the far horizon, the sun flared into existence, shepherding the darkness of the night to the far horizon and casting its life-giving warmth across Equestria.

Fluttershy belatedly realized her jaw was hanging on its hinges; she had never seen Princess Celestia raise the sun before. In fact, the Summer Sun Celebration was to be her first time witnessing the famous spectacle and she had been excited about the opportunity. So taken aback by what she had just seen, it was a moment before she noted that Luna had lowered herself to the grass and was breathing heavily, this time as though working to catch her breath.

Sheer wonder swept aside her usual reticence and she cantered forward joyfully.

"Oh, Princess! That was amazing!" she called out in admiration.

A startled sound burst from the Princess as she jerked in surprise, looking up with wide eyes.

Fluttershy pulled to a quick halt, slipping a bit on the wet grass. "Oh! I'm so sorry!" she squeaked. "I didn't mean to scare you... that was just so

wonderful! I never got to see Princess Celestia raise the sun! It was wonderful and... I... um, that is..." she trailed off, her excitement giving way to a consuming embarrassment as the Moon Princess just looked at her, expressionless. She began to curl up on herself behind the obscuring curtains of her pink bangs.

Luna rose with a small smile. "It's quite all right little one, I'm just... not quite used to having anypony around. Sometimes it's easy to forget I'm not alone anymore," she finished softly.

Fluttershy had not the faintest idea how to respond to this, though her heart went out to Luna in a wash of empathy. The call to heal, to reach out and give of herself to anypony, to any animal in pain was as natural to her as breathing, and every bit as compelling. "Um... what was it like? Being up there all alone for so long? It must have been so hard..."

Luna looked up, her eyes resting on the fiery orb that hung in the sky. "What was it like? How can I even begin to describe it in terms you can understand? Mortality really is a gift, you know," she said, scuffing at the grasses with a hoof. "Your kind have no conception of everything just... *never ending*. I hear the wishes in their dreams you know- the fear of dying, the longing for immortality... they have no idea what they're asking for. And if they did? Should they receive their heart's desire? They'd curl up on themselves in the abject horror of what they wrought. The centuries would soon begin to pass as if they were days, all they had ever come to love turned to dust before their eyes. Mountains would rise where verdant plains once rolled, oceans once teeming with life fade away, leaving naught but scorched deserts and the bleached bones of civilizations. Without the release of death, everything becomes ephemeral, both what is remembered and *all* that is cursed to remember..." The Princess shook her mane out, enveloping the trembling Pegasus with an amaranthine gaze. "Do you understand yet Fluttershy? We *envy* your kind.

"... In the wake of all of *that*, my time spent on the moon was merely an... interlude, I suppose you could say." Luna narrowed her eyes at the sun. "Though it was not without its trials. Solitude is a wonderful thing Fluttershy, when it is intentionally sought. As an *imposition*, there are few things more unpleasant..." Luna trailed off, as though she had forgotten the presence of the little pink-maned Pegasus entirely.

Fluttershy was at an utter loss for words... the wound she sensed here was so... *vast*. Inwardly flailing, she unwittingly stumbled upon the one solace that mortals could offer the gods- *distraction*.

“Um, Princess? I’m sorry, but where is everypony? Where are my friends?”

Luna blinked. “... Would you like to join me for a morning flight Fluttershy? There are some things we need to talk about...”

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Near mid-day, the pair slipped down through the clouds, gliding casually back toward the castle. Details began to resolve as they drew closer and revealed one of the dragons sitting in the vast veranda, head tilted back as he patiently tracked their approach. Fluttershy released a squeak as she realized she was being scrutinized by the enormous beast and reactively flared her wings to drift back behind Luna, who turned her head with a light chuckle.

“It’s all right my dear, Sali is a very old friend of mine. He would never harm you. He’s actually a very gentle soul... But it appears he wishes to speak with me about something, would you mind giving us a moment? I’m sure Pinkie Pie is wondering where you are, and you have much to discuss.”

Although Fluttershy attempted to keep the relief from her features, a surreptitious smirk from the Moon Princess suggested that she might as well have tried to hide her wings. “Al-Alright Princess. I’ll go find her. Tell... tell your friend I said good morning,” she said with a brave little smile.

Luna giggled. “I’ll be certain to. See you soon.” With that, she banked off, drifting gracefully through the air towards the great dragon.

As she fluttered to a landing, Saliant bowed his head and intoned somberly, “My Lady. Good day to you.”

Luna rejoined with a playful curtsy. “Good day to you as well, my Lord.”

The pair stared at one another for a moment of haughty appraisal before breaking into a laugh.

“Never gets old, does it?” he rumbled mirthfully.

“Never,” she replied with a warm smile. “Though I take it you’re here for more than mid-day greetings.” She paused and cocked her head to the side. “Something weighs on you Sali. What’s wrong?”

The ancient dragon hesitated before replying, “There has been a... complication.”

“A complication,” Luna repeated leadingly when he didn’t continue.

“Aye, just so.” His wings shifted nervously against his sides and the tip of his huge tail began to flick about erratically.

Luna frowned, her concern growing.

“Sali... I haven’t seen you this nervous since you were little more than a hatchling, about to embark on your first hunt. What happened?”

The dragon’s massive chest expanded as he pulled in a deep breath. If Luna were just about any other pony, extremely pressing thoughts about the maelstrom of flame that generally followed such an inhalation would be crowding her mind. As it was, she merely raised an eyebrow and waited patiently.

“I’m afraid young Demetrius has acted precipitously. When it became evident that a confrontation was likely to take place, he took it upon himself to go into Ponyville and ensure the safety of the young one there.”

Luna’s voice turned hard.

“He did ***what***.”

Sali raised his hands up defensively. “He acted in concern for a Clan member. If any is to blame, it is my loose tongue. I spoke of my concerns freely to them both. I should have known he would take in upon himself to act on my behalf.” Pride flared in the Elder dragon’s eyes as he remembered himself. “And even if I had, I would not have stayed his wings.

I will not have one of our own sit unprotected and helpless in the midst of a contest of goddesses. Such things rarely end well, even for my kind."

Luna huffed her displeasure. "Oh, do calm down Sali. I'm hardly going 'spit my bit', as they say these days...

"However, this is *not* good news, and your reaction tells me there's more to this story." she said expectantly, with no small amount of foreboding lacing the words.

"Sadly, you are correct. As I said- complications arose. There were Equestrian guards in the town, and... Twilight Sparkle was there as well. When she saw Demetrius speaking with the young one, she attacked him. He... responded in kind."

Luna's eyes went wide. "No," she said breathlessly, "tell me she's not-

Sali gestured to forestall the Princess' alarm. "No my Lady, she is alive and well...

Luna exhaled a shaky sigh of relief. "Thank the Endless. We're already walking the edge with this."

The dragon continued as though she hadn't spoken, "Though I'm afraid the same cannot be said for the town itself and... many of the guards, who followed suit and attacked as well."

The silence stretched out, and if ancient dragons could sweat, this one would have been.

Finally, Luna spoke. "Salient. *Elaborate.*"

"My Lady... you must understand. The ponies broke peace and drew first blood. Demetrius acted in defense of himself and the young one. He only-

Luna's hoof struck the ground and a deafening crack filled the air, as though a bolt of lightning had broken right above their heads. Her eyes were hard, bright as emeralds.

"How many died Sali?"

Salient stared at the ground, unable to meet her regard, and rumbled, "Many."

Luna turned abruptly away from him, visibly trembling in the effort to control herself. Dragons were exceptionally sensitive creatures, and powerfully magical. As such, Salient could clearly feel her struggle, both her emotional distress and the immeasurable surges of power that she struggled to contain. It had literally been *ages* since any of the world's races had freely preyed upon Pony-kind, and Salient shivered at the stark reminder before him of precisely why that was. He harbored no doubts that this diminutive, Equine-shaped being could obliterate him with a thought, should she choose to do so. Only his courage and pride kept him still, stoically awaiting her judgement.

As abruptly as shutting off a faucet, the turmoil emanating from Luna ceased, and she turned back to look up at him, her expression inscrutable.

"This will *not* happen again Sali. Am I understood?"

The dragon nodded.

"Perfectly."

"And what of Rainbow Dash and Applejack? They were not with my sister's protege?"

"Demetrius reported no sign of them my Lady."

Luna sighed.

"Very well. Thank you Sali. I trust young Demetrius is unharmed?"

"He is well my Lady. He bears a new scar proudly."

Luna surreptitiously rolled her eyes and huffed. "Stop calling me that Sali. It's not amusing when you *mean* it, and this is no time for old jokes. Now, if you'll excuse me, there are some *new* issues that need attending to."

The Princess was already lost in thought as the great dragon dipped his head in a short bow and turned, launching himself into the air, his vast wings pulling him effortlessly skyward.

As soon as he was gone, Luna's gaze hardened once more. If she chose to put the power into it, the stare would have been enough to shatter stone; she turned this regard to the drifting sun and began to hum a light tune. It was a very, very old lullaby.

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Bile. The acidic taste of it filled her mouth. A wave of nausea stole through her, and she bit her lip in protest, attempting to hold her stomach down. The world was spinning. *No... her world was... moving?* As awareness slowly returned to her, she felt the rush of strong winds pulling at her mane and the rhythmic motions of the platform she was laid upon. Her ears worked to translate the sounds of an argument underway: the voices were male, their tones grim and angry. Slowly blinking her eyes, she didn't have the energy to make sense of the exchange just yet. Twilight Sparkle regained consciousness gradually, finding herself curled up in the corner of a flying carriage. Ironically, her first clear impression was that this was not a *royal* carriage; the design was sleek, the lines more angular and hard- this transport was meant for speed, not comfort.

"Nice to have you back with us darling."

Twilight snapped her head around in surprise, the sudden movement eliciting a wave of vertigo and pain. "Rarity! You're okay! What's going on? What happened? I-" she broke off, nausea hitting her once more as it threatened to turn her entrails inside out and force them up and out of her muzzle.

"Oh, you poor dear. That bump on your head looks just awful." New concern flared in Rarity's large blue eyes. "Oh my! Twilight, are you feeling dizzy? What's the last thing you remember? How many hooves am I holding up!"

Twilight raised a hoof to hold the overbearing Unicorn out of her space as she replied, "I'm... well, I'm not fine, Rarity, but I don't think I have a concussion. And you're only holding up two hooves, that's not much of a test. Just... give me a moment please, and room to breathe." As Rarity complied, Twilight turned her gaze to the knot of tightly clustered Elites at the far end of the platform. Their voices were low and she couldn't make

out the words over the rush of the wind, but the undertone of the discussion was clear.

"What are they arguing about? ... For that matter, where are the rest of them?" The purple Unicorn raised a hoof to her pounding head and flinched as it made contact with a searingly painful spot; she pulled it back to see a splotch of sticky blood. "And what the hell happened to me?!"

Rarity cast a withering glare at the soldiers, who seemed to be ignoring the pair entirely in their private huddle. "*They* happened to you. They happened to me too, for that matter. I was just coming back from seeing to Sweetie Belle - I left her with Berry Punch, do you know her? Lovely mare, old friend, bit of a lush these days - and was on my way back to you, when that dragon came dropping out of the sky! The next thing I knew, everypony was rushing at him, and somepony threw a spell at him! Well, he didn't take kindly to that, and then... Oh, it was terrible Twilight! You really don't remember any of that?"

Twilight frowned, forced to entertain the possibility that perhaps she *did* have a mild concussion after all, if chunks of her memory were missing. But that didn't explain *how* she had actually been concussed. "Not much. I don-" she broke off in horror. "SPIKE! Where is he?!"

Rarity looked on the verge of tears, her ears laid flat against her head. "The dragon took him Twilight. I'm so sorry. When everypony started attacking - a rather foolish impulse I must say - he went... berserk. It was terrible! I knew dragons were powerful, but I had no idea what they were capable of! He just shrugged off the waves of magic like they were so much fabric! The only thing that actually hurt him was an attack from one of the Pegasi, he dove in with those wing blades and managed to cut along the the dragon's side. He... didn't make it out though." Rarity's eyes glazed over with a vacant look. "I've... never seen such horror in all my life. The dragon's head just snapped around and he... he bit the Pegasus guard nearly in half! And then he started breathing fire. Five of the Earth pony guards were caught in the first wave. They just... melted. They didn't even have time to scream..." Rarity trailed off and looked up to meet Twilight's eyes beseechingly.

"Twilight, I... I thought I was a cosmopolitan mare. I thought I knew what the world was like but... but now, I've seen things that change a pony. I used to think in gossamer and silk... now... there's blood everywhere. I

just-" Rarity couldn't continue, her voice breaking as tears filled her eyes. Her understanding of things - how things were *supposed to be* - had been irrevocably shattered, and nopony walks away from a shattered paradigm comfortably. It was, after all, her entire world she had lost. She could never go back. She had struggled to convey all of this, but some things were simply ineffable. Some things must be intuited in the end, and only a compassionate friend can bridge that gap- something Twilight finally understood.

Twilight reached out and pulled Rarity into a crushing embrace, and they wept together, poured their shared misery into one another's embrace, for at this moment there was no other comfort to be found.

After a time, when she had no more tears to shed, Twilight returned to reality. She opened her eyes to find the remaining Elite forces were all staring at her, rather unpleasantly. The apparent leader, the head Mage she had spoken to before the dragon came, muttered something to his soldiers, and approached. He stood looming above her, his eyes flat and face utterly expressionless, before hunkering down before her with a sigh. For a moment, he just looked back at her in silence.

When he spoke, the hardness of his voice startled her. "Miss Sparkle. I want you to know, if my orders were not otherwise, I'd let my ponies throw you right over the edge." Though his face remained impassive, rage crept into his tone. "Thanks to you, fully half of my squad now lies in so many pieces across a backwater settlement. So help me, the next time you put my soldiers in danger, if you cross *one hoof* out of line, I'll do more than simply knock you over the head."

Twilight was utterly taken aback by his venom and for a moment could find no words. Her face drained of color as she processed the implication. "I... I don't understand. *You* hit me?"

He scowled at her words, as though she were mocking him. "Are you saying you don't remember what happened in the town? What you did?"

"No," she whispered. "I don't."

He snorted derisively. "Wonderful. Now I get to play nursemaid. Yes, / knocked you out. You completely lost it back there. You incited an attack

on a creature that it takes a full battalion to deal with. We are *not* a full battalion, as you may have noticed. In fact, we are now *less than half* of what we were when we arrived." His jaw bunched and his eyes burned into her. "Their blood is on your hooves, and thanks to you, on mine. They were my *responsibility*, and I failed them."

He fell silent, glaring at the floor of the platform. Twilight, guilt and confusion overwhelming her, was completely at a loss for words. Fortunately, Rarity was not, and Twilight started in surprise when she spoke in a voice low and hard as steel. "Touch her, and you die."

Both Twilight and the Mage stared at her, shocked. Rarity raised her head up to look squarely at the Mage, her eyes narrowed dangerously. "You think I'm joking? *Try me.*"

The Mage's recovery was impressively swift for having just received a death-thread. "Finally, some realism. No Miss Rarity, I don't doubt you. However, you'll find you're being overly generous with your threats, as my orders are to return you and your *friends* to Canterlot safely." His expression turned contemplative. "Speaking of which, I think it's high time you leveled with me. Your story," he said, lifting a hoof to point at Twilight, "is at odds with the intel I was given. But it's clear you haven't been entirely forthcoming. Now, however, we have time, and I need to know what you know. Starting with the locations of the others you've been avoiding telling me about."

Twilight and Rarity shared a glance that spoke volumes.

Nodding to one another, they returned their attention to the Mage, and haltingly, began to talk...

The Mage just sat there, brows raised nearly to crown his horn. "You... honestly expect me to believe all of that," he stated flatly, raising a hoof to rub his forehead. "So... let's just *recap* here, shall we? A demonic entity of some kind whose return was foretold by *an old mare's tale* has come to pass. Said creature has taken the form of an Alicorn and claims to be Princess Celestia's *sister*. 'It' has some manner of *pet demon* locked away in its dungeon, has draconic allies, and is in possession of the remaining ponies my orders obligate me to retrieve, several of whom may

have actually joined its side of their own cognizance... all of whom are in a dilapidated castle in the heart of the Everfree Forest. ...Did I miss anything, or does that about sum it up?"

Twilight bit her lip. "Look, I know how this sounds, but it's the truth! And..." she trailed off as something occurred to her. "Wait. If you don't know any of this, then what the hay are you *doing* here in the first place?"

The Mage compressed his muzzle, lips thinning. "Hmm. Just a moment," he said helpfully, before standing up and turning back to his squad. "Scroll, I need you to send a spark message to HQ - 'Lightning One to run escort interference.' Add our course, disposition, and ETA."

The other Mage nodded a sharp acknowledgment, turning to face the outline of Canterlot in the distance and reared up to place his front hooves on the edge of transport. His horn lit up in an intense verdant glow and a ball of contained energy slowly formed from the tip, before collapsing in on itself and disappearing in a flash. He turned back to the captain with a confused expression. "Done sir. But... L-One? Just her? Why not the rest of the team?"

"Because they've been sent off to trail those black-suited Pegasi the Council scryed out, which you'd know if you'd read the file. *Which* you can be damned sure we'll talk about when we get back," the captain finished with a growl.

Scroll's ears laid back and one of the Heavies next to him rumbled out a low chuckle, prodding him in the ribs. "Went an bucked yerself on that one, eh greenhoof? Next time, learn ta' keep your mouth shut. Never know when an officer expects ya to know stuff." The other two remaining Heavy veterans nodded in sage agreement.

Rolling his eyes, the captain returned his attention to the two fillies, who were staring at each other and looking distinctly more pale than they had been a moment ago.

He cleared his throat and asked, "Is there something *e/se* you'd like to share?"

Rarity met his gaze and hesitantly asked, "Did you say... 'black-suited Pegasi'?"

The Mage nodded slowly. "I did, which is the single piece of credibility lending itself to your entire story, aside from the dragon. A few days ago the High Council alerted the Elite Contingents of an 'oddity'. Apparently they had scryed out a group of five Pegasi in black uniforms all crossing Equestrian borders. Their individual flight paths correlate back to the edge of the Everfree as their point of origin, and their destinations - if they don't alter course - are the respective capital cities of bordering nations. Needless to say, this perked some ears. Why do you ask? What aren't you telling me?"

"Sir!" came a shout from one of the Heavies at the end of the platform.

As the Mage looked over, Rarity leaned in to whisper hurriedly in Twilight's ear, her eyes flicking back to the heavily stuffed pair of saddlebags laying behind them.

"What about the Elements of Harmony? Why didn't you mention them?"

Twilight flicked her ear and jerked her head in a furtive negative.

"I'll tell you later. Something just doesn't feel right about all this," she hissed from the corner of her muzzle.

A poignant segment of the soldier's conversation had both mares snapping their heads around in unison.

"We've got company. Hard to make out at this distance, but it looks like one of those black-suited traitors is coming up on us from the forest."

One of the Pegasi pulling the chariot called back, "Lighting One inbound!"

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A bleary-eyed Pegasus raised her head, her jaw creaking wide in a huge yawn. She *hated* mornings. Repeatedly smacking her dry mouth, she raised a hoof to rub the sleep from her eyes. At this moment, the best

young flier in Equestria had one thing, and one thing only, on her mind- *Coffee. Now.* Except... this wasn't her cloud home, was it?

Looking around at the tall grasses waving in the light breeze, the sunlight pouring down through the trees, she thought, *Nope. Definitely not home. So then what the hay-* Dash lurched to unsteady hooves as memory rushed back to her. *AJ! Wolf! Where-* her panic proved short-lived, for slumbering contentedly a few feet away was the object of her concern, cowpony hat tilted askew and covering her face; in her relief, Dash released a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. *But... how?* The admission stung her pride, but she knew that wolf had had her dead to rights. There had been no contest- she hadn't even seen him *move*. With a shudder, she recalled the look in those eyes as she had launched herself at him... that utter detachment and unshakable certainty of a natural-born predator.

Shaking herself from those dark thoughts, Dash stretched out her wings and legs, deciding to let AJ get a bit more rest while she figured out where in the hay they were. They were definitely still in the Everfree, though that was the best she could determine from the ground- it all looked the same to her. Launching into the air, a few powerful flaps of her wings had her catapulting up toward the canopy. Finding a thin spot in the foliage, she slid through into the sharp, clear light of a sunny day. Momentarily blinded, she hovered for a moment, rubbing a hoof across her eyes. Blinking rapidly against the intense glare, her vision cleared and the vista unfolded before her. *Huh. The forest ends just over there! I think... yeah, we're not too far out from Ponyville! Wait... what's that?*

Squinting, Dash peered into the distance. Something glinting in the sunlight had caught her eye... but it wasn't on the ground- it was in the air, flying low and moving at a fair clip. Dash raised a hoof to shield her eyes and bit the tip of her tongue in concentration... at first she thought it might be a royal carriage, but no, it was a weird shape, one she'd never seen before. But she *could* make out that two Pegasi in golden armor were pulling it through the sky. That was when she saw it- a flash of streaked purple mane blowing in the wind on the passenger-laded platform. *TWILIGHT!* She had found her, *finally!* And she was getting away! This was NOT good.

“Applejack!” Dash yelled as she burst back down through the canopy. She hadn’t wanted to wake her friend so abruptly, but there was no time to waste. “Apple**JACK**! Get up!” she shouted again, landing a moment later next to her slowly rousing companion and prodding her urgently.

AJ looked about her groggily as sleep pulled back. “Wha- Where are we sugarcube? What in tarnation! What time is it?!” The mere notion of sleeping in to this hour -- the sun was high enough for it to be nearly noon - - went against every grain of her deeply held pride in years of working the farm from sunup to sundown. HOW in Equestria had she slept in so late?!

Nearly vibrating in her impatience, Dash gave her no time to ponder. “Doesn’t matter. AJ, I saw Twilight,” she said in a rush, pointing her hoof due west. “She’s hooked up with some royal guards, they’re flying toward Canterlot right now, we need to move it before they get away!”

In the rush of emotions upon hearing they had finally found Twilight, AJ still had to frown. *Royal guards...* The thought was more than worrisome. Yes, they were technically ‘on a mission’ for Celestia’s sister, a rightful Princess of Equestria, but... did Celestia’s government know that? Did *Celestia* know that, wherever she was? Things were not looking good. Twilight was close to Celestia, and she’d had a... less than neighborly experience with Princess Luna, not to mention Rainbow. A deep seated feeling of unease nestled in the pit of Applejack’s stomach at the thought of rushing out to meet Twilight and her escort. *This could turn bad, real easy.*

Looking up to Rainbow Dash, the look of impatience couldn’t be more clear on the brash Pegasus’ face. AJ sighed inwardly- there was nothin’ for it at this point, but she had to try to talk some level sense into Dash one more time. Reaching over, she planted a firm hoof on Dash’s shoulder and faced her squarely. She felt the her friend tense under the touch.

“Dash, *Ah* know what the stakes are here. An’ I need’ta make sure *you* do too. We ain’t got no clue what the situation is over there- Twilight could be captive, or she could be with ‘em willin’, but either way ya need to keep yer head. Remember how she took off? Rainbow, she was *scared*.”

Dash scowled, outrage blooming, and AJ rushed to continue before she could interrupt- the ‘Fluttershy’ argument plain on Rainbow’s face. “Somethin’ happened to her that night, an’ damnit all, Ah’m *askin’* you, let’s try ta’ settle this friendly-like. An’ I dunno ‘bout you, but I don’t wanna go

attackin' royal guards fer no reason." Applejack stared pleadingly into the cyan mare's angry red eyes. Her tone softened as she said, "C'mon sugarcube. Can ya honestly tell me ya ain't worried about Twilight at *all*?"

While the scowl was still firmly in place across Dash's brow, her eyes turned thoughtful and a bit of their edge as she sighed and said, "Alright AJ. I hear you. I promise to hear her out, okay?"

AJ raised an eyebrow.

"OKAY!" Dash exclaimed, rolling her eyes. "I admit it, something weird happened that night, an maybe she had a reason for what she did. And yes, maybe I am a little bit worried about her, alright?"

"Cain't say fairer than that sugarcube. Let's go."

Applejack made to move toward a thin trail snaking off through the trees in the direction Dash had pointed, but was forestalled by yet another surprise.

"AJ, we don't have time to go by hoof. We're close to the edge of the forest, but not close enough. You're gonna... have'ta ride me." As pressing as the situation was, Dash couldn't help but feel her face burning as the words left her mouth. AJ wasn't helping matters either, staring at her blankly like she'd just... Well, like she'd just asked Applejack to ride her.

"Come again?"

"I'm serious! There's no other way to catch up to them! If we try to run through this forest they'll be long gone before we even clear the edge!"

"What makes ya think ya can even carry me Dash? Ah ain't no lil filly ya know," AJ said dubiously.

"Puh-*leaz* AJ. Totally not a problem. Now come *on*, every minute we stand here Twilight gets farther away with the Elements!"

With her trademark look, which somehow managed to convey both skepticism and suppressed amusement, Applejack reared up to rest her

forelegs across Dash's back. "Er... Jus' *how* is this supposed to work again?" she asked of her would-be mount.

"Ugh! Just- oh, hell with it," Dash grumbled and promptly laid herself down on the soft grass. "Now just stand over me, an' when I get up, wrap your hooves around my neck, okay?"

"... Right," AJ said as she positioned herself above her rainbow-maned friend.

Dash rose, flushing brightly as she felt Applejack's taut form stretched out atop her.

"Uh, Dash? Is somethin' wrong with yer wings? They're uh, vibratin' somethin' fierce... are you-"

"Not *one. More. Word* AJ, or Goddess help me I'll leave you in a tree," Dash growled between clenched teeth.

A series of choked-off 'snerking' sounds came from behind her head, but she felt AJ's hooves wrap around her neck all the same. It didn't help matters that AJ, in her *oh so cleverly* disguised mirth was now quivering against her with each shock of suppressed laughter. This was unbearable, and soon there would be a reckoning. Oh yes.

For now, Dash savagely shook her head, snapped her wings out to their full length and growled, "Hang on," before abruptly launching herself into the air.

AJ had been right- she was not a light pony. In fact, she was a damned heavy pony, having developed layer upon layer of corded muscle from her years of dedicated apple bucking. Dash was sorely tempted to make a fat joke as she struggled up towards the canopy, but given the fact that AJ had a firm grip about her neck... now might not be the best time. Later.

Dash was getting a bit winded as they finally cleared the trees, but the hard part was pretty much over. Now that she had some altitude, and wasn't straining to lift the both of them straight up, the wind and forward momentum would do a fair part of the work, though her wings were going to



be *pissed* tomorrow. With a sigh of relief, she canted her wings to catch the steady breeze and took off in pursuit of the distant carriage.

Before long, the pair were drawing close enough to their quarry to make out the individual forms of the passengers. Sure enough, there was Twilight, and Rarity was with her as well. In the distance, high above the thin wisps of low-laying clouds, AJ saw something through her wind-streaked vision. Something... odd. The clouds and air were deforming in the streaming flow of a conical heat wave, as though something moving *fast* had just passed through. She was about to mention this... *thing*, to Dash, when an exclamation from the Pegasus she was riding cut her off.

"Shit, they're descending, picking up speed. We must've been spotted. *Hold on!*"

AJ tightened her grip just in time, as Dash angled down sharply, burning off all of the hard-earned altitude in a rush of wind as she dove, picking up speed and leveling off a bare ten feet above the ground.

Dash was confused at the move. *Are they... about to bank? They are! Why the **hell** would they-*

An alarmed shout next to her ear and a flash from the corner of her eye was all the warning she had, before an electric-orange blur moving at an incredible velocity clipped into her. The strike was not a full-bodied collision; rather, the glancing blow at high speed hit her at just the right angle to obliterate any semblance of control she had, sending her into a flat spin amidst a wash of pain.

It felt like her shoulder had been ripped right off. Worse, Applejack had been torn loose from Dash's back in the impact, and she hit the ground hard, sending up a cloud of dust as she rolled to a stop. Dash wanted to call out her name, to rush to her side, make sure she was alright. She was denied all of these things as she caught a streak of movement- *again* from the very edge of her vision. This Pegasus was attacking from her blind spots! Dash had the barest second to evade- wrenching her back in a strained arch, her wings surging, she executed a snapping roll on a knife's edge.

The orange blur shot past, barely missing her and disappearing around a nearby puff of cloud. Shooting a glance down at AJ, she saw her

friend was slowly rising to her hooves, shaking herself off as she stumbled faithfully toward where her worn Stetson had fallen. Relief and focus washed over Rainbow one after the other. AJ was alright. Now it was time to deal with this cowardly buzzard who attacks from behind.

Eyes narrowed in fury, her wings pounded the air as she gave chase. Dash reached down to tighten the black straps on her forelegs, cinching the armored barding tighter. Adrenaline and rage burned through her veins as she neared the cloud where the sneaky bastard had disappeared. He was probably lurking just out of sight, waiting to pounce on her when she came around the side. *Well screw that. Wait'll he sees-*

The cloud erupted right in her face in a burst of obscuring white, blinding her as effectively as if a smoke bomb had just gone off. Dash felt the breath knocked out of her as both the Pegasus' leading hooves sunk deeply into her stomach. Spittle flew from her muzzle as she was hurled backwards. The blow was vicious, but Dash had other matters on her reeling mind- she had recognized her enemy in the split-second that they were nose to nose.

*No way. There's **no way!*** she thought in stunned disbelief. *Spitfire?!*

A Wonderbolt. One of her heroes. There was no mistaking that distinctive uniform, not for her. For as long as she could remember, she had longed to just *meet* them, even dared to dream of being part of the team one glorious day. Now, the stark reality that her greatest idol, her *aspiration*, appeared to be actively trying to *kill her* was just... too much to process.

So she didn't. She didn't even try. As it was, she was cartwheeling backwards through the air, and her immediate survival took precedence over all else. Flaring her wings, she slid out of the tumble and into an elliptical glide, arching back up to gain lost altitude and scanning all about to locate Spitfire.

There she was- high left, banking hard and trying, *again*, to come in at Dash from behind. *Not this time*, Dash thought grimly as she maintained course, acting as though she hadn't spotted her opponent. Sure enough, Spitfire slipped fully into her assumed blind-spot and dove. Dash counted down, having judged the distance as best she could; this was going to be close. *Three... Two... One...* Dash jinked hard to her left and flipped about, her rear hooves already lashing out.

She had mistimed by a hair. Spitfire saw the move coming and, while she didn't have time to get fully clear, managed to roll underneath the blow that could well have crushed her chest. Instead, the hard edge of one of Dash's hooves slashed across her shoulder, tearing away a strip of tight uniform and opening a shallow gash. The maneuver left both Pegasi stranded in the air for a moment, their speed and momentum fully spent as they flapped their wings hard just to stay airborne.

Spitfire spun about, taking off in a flash, clearly favoring the shoulder Dash had injured. Before she had time to consider the move, Dash was off in pursuit, trailing her foe. Spitfire glanced back, a confident smirk sliding across her face to find she was being chased, and poured on the speed.

*Holy shit she's fast*, Dash thought as the Pegasus took off like a shot. Despite everything, despite all of the madness that had occurred in the past week, Dash felt an answering grin hard on her muzzle. Her blood boiled in defiance, and here, right in front of her, was the best challenge she could have ever asked for. This was *it*- her chance to prove herself, *finally*. She slid into Spitefire's wake and powered after her. Spitfire took note of Dash's pursuit and banked hard to the right before fully inverting and taking a nose dive straight down into a tight, spiraling corkscrew, trying to throw her opponent out of her slipstream. Dash mirrored her maneuvers to perfection, actually gaining a few yards on the orange Pegasus. Spitfire glanced back again, and Dash caught the look of incredulity on the Wonderbolt's face.

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Applejack stood shakily, recovering from the rough tumble she'd taken. "What in Equestria-" she broke off as she looked up. Her heart lurched up into her throat as she saw Rainbow engaged in a vicious aerial duel with another Pegasus. The two were moving too fast, too erratically, for her to get much of a clear look, but as it turned out, she had problems of her own. The carriage was banking low and around... back toward her. The two gilded Pegasi drawing it touched down in an explosion of dust at the hard landing. From the back jumped three of the biggest, meanest looking stallions she had ever seen. She nickered. *Oh horse apples*.

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The slalom-like chase had taken the two Pegasi far above the ground, the trees below now just a green blanket across the landscape.

Without warning, Spitfire stopped her evasive maneuvers, looked back to throw a glare at Dash, and dove. Straight down. Dash followed without a moment's hesitation; two blurs descending from the clouds- one the color of fire, the other an extended line of rainbow hues, streaking down from the heavens. Dash felt that familiar resistance begin to form up around her and she thrust both hooves forward to press against it. She was the fastest Pegasus alive, and she was about to *fucking prove it*.

Through the tunnel vision of the compressed air around her, Dash caught sight of something that froze her heart. Applejack: on the ground, surrounded by three huge stallions in golden armor, one of them pulling out a rope while the others pummelled her mercilessly into submission. In her shock she failed to notice the split-second in which Spitfire flared her wings. As she flashed past, the orange Pegasus wrapped her forelegs around Dash's neck. Dash yelped, pulling hard out of the dive but Spitfire refused to be dislodged. Her grip was like a vice, and it was only getting tighter. Spitfire jostled around to get Dash's neck into the crook of her elbow, her other hoof wrapped around the back of the blue mare's head, and she threw all of her strength into the choke.

Dash couldn't breathe. The Wonderbolt was crushing her neck and she *couldn't breathe*. Flailing in panic, gurgling noises coming from her mouth, it was more by luck than anything else that Dash threw her head back at just the right moment, smashing squarely into Spitfire's muzzle. Rainbow felt a sudden rush of wet on the back of her head, heard her enemy cry out- none of that mattered, because suddenly she could breathe again. Pulling in a few huge lung-fulls of air, Dash spun around to face a stunned but quickly recovering Spitfire. For a lingering moment, the pair just stared hate at each other, vibrant manes streaming in the stiff breeze. Every muscle in their bodies was poised on a hair trigger as they waited, each daring the other to make the first move. There was a twitch in Spitfire's eye, and that was enough. Colliding in midair, the two mares tore into each other with a snarling, savage abandon.

Dash was consumed with an incandescent rage. Applejack needed her *now*, and this **bitch** was keeping her from her friend as she was being beaten bloody.

Spitfire got the first strike in, loosing a lightning-fast punch and striking the cyan Pegasus solidly across the jaw. Dash spun with the blow,

returning with an armored elbow into Spitfire's face. At that moment, any pretense of martial decorum was abandoned. As they closed again, Spitfire fainted, and her knee lashed up, sinking into the blue Pegasus' gut. As she doubled over in pain, Dash latched her teeth onto Spitfire's thigh, biting down hard. Warm blood filled her mouth as an agonized scream tore from the other mare. Dash pulled back, barely avoiding the hoof that lashed out at her face. This was it, Dash felt the moment arrive in that perfect clarity of predator and prey- Spitfire was overbalanced, panicked, and in pain. It was a little known fact among the Unicorn and Earth ponies, but a Pegasus' wings were not merely their defining attribute, allowing them the gift of flight. They were *weapons*- the matrix density of the bones making them harder even than a Unicorn's horn. Tilting on her axis, one wing behind her, the other angled low; Dash threw all of her weight at a downward angle, her back wing coming up and over in a cyan blur, connecting with Spitfire's outstretched leg. The crack of bone rang out like a shot.

Dash watched as though through slow motion; Spitfire's eyes were wide in shock, her muzzle open, the burning agony not yet fully reaching her. Nevertheless, she fell backward, her limbs and wings seized up in shock. By Pegasus standards, the fall was not a great one- still the Wonderbolt hit the ground with a sickening crunch, bounced once, then twice, coming to rest on her back, fully stretched out with her head lolled to the side against the grass. As Dash descended, she saw the thin line of blood leaking from Spitfire's mouth, her foreleg bent at an angle it had no natural right to. She was breathing, but it was a jagged, gurgling sound.

Only as Dash landed in a stagger, the sustaining adrenaline burned off, did she come to terms with her own condition. Blood dripped from her muzzle, and its coppery taste was mostly her own. She gasped in pain as she took a deep breath- at least one of her ribs was surely broken, and her shoulder at the base of her left wing was on *fire*.

Her attention was torn from her own pain as familiar screams filled the air. Looking over, Dash saw both Rarity and Twilight screeching their heads off at the guards- two of whom wore brown cloaks and were restraining the struggling, furious Unicorn mares. The three massive Earth ponies in the rugged armor threw a bound and unconscious Applejack into the already moving carriage. The armored Pegasi threw themselves against the weight, powerful beats of their wings lifting them off the ground. In moments, the carriage was aloft.

Dash tried to take to the air in pursuit, a strangled shout of denial ripping from her throat as a muscle tore in her shoulder. Her entire left side felt like it had been lit on fire and she dropped to the hard ground in a heap of feathers. Refusing to give up, tears streaming from her eyes, Dash rose and galloped for all she was worth after the quickly receding transport, her left wing hanging uselessly at her side. Pathetically, all she was worth was little more than a lurching hobble and she soon collapsed into the dirt with an exhausted finality. Clenching her eyes shut, each breath an inhalation of agony, Dash stretched out her neck and screamed.

"APPLEJAAAAACK!"

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From the obscuring edge of the forest, a pair of teal-green ears perked attentively. The mare sighed and *'tisked'* in exasperation. "Really now," she muttered to herself, "I've had quite about enough of this."