

A World Without Rainbows

By UberPhoenix



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~~Act One~~

Chapter 1

Entrada

"Twilight Sparkle."

The voice carried authority. It was the voice of a pony who had the situation under control, who knew what she was doing at all times, almost laughter in the face of peril. But it was also an honest voice, one of compassion and loyalty, one whose softness came not from weakness, but from kindness. It was a magical voice. Most of all, it was a voice of royalty, and it spoke again.

"Twilight Sparkle," said Princess Celestia. "Pray tell, what do you think you are doing?"

In the middle of the large chamber, the unicorn pony Twilight Sparkle searched desperately for an exit, but the royal guards had already blocked them all. The question gave her reason to pause, and she wondered what she was doing. She didn't remember how she had gotten here, only that she needed to escape.

One of the guards, an earth pony named Silver Shield, pressed himself against the wall, trying to hide. You foal, he chastised himself. You should be protecting the princess, not being a coward. Before he could make a move, a pegasus pony emerged from the darkness behind the princess. He recognized her as his old friend, Stone Wall.

"Stand back, your highness," warned Stone Wall. "Your life is more valuable than that of this traitor."

"Nonsense," said Celestia. "Let me speak to her."

Twilight grinned. "Your guard is right, Celestia," she said, her scorn clear. "You should listen to them more often. But if we're speaking about lives, then I have a proposition to make." Her horn began to glow with an intense light that forced the guards to close their eyes. Only Celestia looked on, unfazed. A similar light formed around Stone Wall, and the mare discovered that she was leaving the ground. She was pulled across the room until she was hovering directly above Twilight. "Let me go," she said. "Or else I snap her neck."

Silver Shield couldn't help himself. "Wally!" he cried, accidentally using her nickname.

Celestia remained calm, and Twilight wondered if she was getting through to the stubborn princess at all.

"No pony has to die today, Twilight," said Celestia. "If you would merely return that which you have taken, then perhaps we can resolve this peacefully."

Twilight was enraged. "What, so you can hide it away again in some dusty old cellar? Control the ponies' knowledge, keep them pinned down?" She lowered her gaze, and the shame of her past transgressions passed through her. "I know I've done bad things before, your Highness. I don't deserve the power within the Element of Magic. But neither does a tyrant. Better my hooves than yours."

Twilight knew she was past the point at which she could escape without any violence. She was preparing to fight her way out when the princess's words shocked her.

"Let her go."

"No!" cried Stone Wall from her place above Twilight. "If that stone does what you said it does, then we need to protect it. Somepony like her could wreak havoc."

"My decision is final, Stone Wall," said Celestia. "Let Twilight go free."

Twilight awoke to the sensation of water pouring down her face. She was in the perpetual gloom of the Everfree Forest, her body sunk into the thick mud that coated much of the ground. Dazed, Twilight saw no problem with letting the world spin in circles around her for a little while.

After a minute, Twilight's eyes had focused and adjusted to their environment, and she tried to stand on her hooves, but as she did, the world shifted out of focus, up became down, and she found herself lying on her side.

Another splash of water hit her flank, and she shivered at the cold. She tried to figure out where it had come from, and she finally concluded that it was raining. The canopy was blocking and gathering most of the water, until the weight became too great and the water would be dumped in a single moment on anything that may have been lying below. See? thought Twilight. At least your brain still works.

Instead of trying her seemingly useless body, Twilight instead considered what she could do with her mind. Her first priority was to figure out what she was doing here. She tried to think back to the night before, but found nothing. It was like a dream, with a middle but no beginning. She knew who she was. Her name was Twilight Sparkle. She was Princess Celestia's apprentice. She turned these thoughts over in her head, quickly confirming them before moving on to the more complicated ones. She had been sent to Ponyville to learn friendship, and she had met timid Fluttershy, kind Applejack, brash Rainbow Dash, eccentric Pinkie Pie, and stubborn Rarity. She met Zecora on a trip in the Swayback Mountains.

But what then? What was the short term, the events leading up to her strange awakening? Twilight couldn't recall. Feeling a little better, she stood, and while the forest swayed beneath her and threatened to toss her aside, she held her ground and stared down the feeling until it gave up and went away. The one thing Twilight knew was that she wasn't going to get any answers lying in the mud. Picking a random direction, Twilight began to walk, and while she did, she pondered her dream.

It didn't feel like most dreams. Her past dreams usually faded after a couple minutes, leaving behind only brief flashes of color and emotion. But

this one stuck, almost like it wasn't a dream at all but a memory that didn't tie in with the rest, and so she had assumed she had dreamed it. She saw it in perfect clarity, the calm in her mentor's voice and the anger of the somehow-familiar pony she had lifted above her head.

But it couldn't have been real, of course. Levitating an entire, struggling pony was a bit beyond her ability.

A loud noise, like the screeching of an owl, echoed from Twilight's left, and she winced in pain. Her head was pounding, and she brought a hoof to her forehead in hopes that it would help her cope. Instead, her hoof came away sticky. She realized now that she needed to find better shelter. The dark dampness of the forest could not possibly be healthy, especially in her potentially concussed state. Maybe she could find Zecora to help her.

Except Zecora was where she had come from. She remembered now that she had been returning to Ponyville from Zecora's home when she'd collapsed. But it hadn't been raining, nor had it been this dark. Twilight turned around and began walking back the way she came. Unfortunately, the path looked nothing like where she had been moments ago. Her walk until this point had been completely level, but now the forest seemed to slope downward in front of her, almost inviting her into its depths. Twilight considered stopping and resting, or perhaps calling for help, but before she could make up her mind, her front hoof hit a stump, and she tumbled.

She rolled down the hill, the thorns and branches tearing at her as she passed them. The ground finally leveled out by a lakebed, and Twilight slowed to a halt, her head half-submerged in the water. Unable to gather the strength to stand again, she wondered if she was going to die when a four-legged figure appeared on the other side of the lake, silhouetted by the darkness and Twilight's own mind-fog.

Zecora? she remembered thinking before the darkness swallowed her up completely.

Applejack surveyed the ponies gathered in a circle alongside her. "Is everypony accounted for?" she asked, even though it was clear they all were.

"Aye, aye, Captain Jack!" shouted Pinkie Pie as she saluted, her pet alligator Gummy in her lap.

Rarity was a bit preoccupied eying her surroundings with disgust. "Yes, but why did we have to meet here?" They were inside one of the Apple family's barns, and the smell reminded Rarity of one of the "surprises" Opalescence had left after she had eaten one too many outdated treats.

Fluttershy, who had until this point said nothing, boldly attempted to answer Rarity's question. She tried to explain that Apple Bloom's treehouse, the original meeting place, was still being rebuilt after the latest attempt by the Cutie Mark Crusaders to find their talents had backfired in an embarrassing and extremely combustible way (an incident Apple Bloom refused to elaborate on, other than to state that it was "a minor miscalculation"), but as she opened her mouth she was interrupted by Rainbow Dash.

"Yes, Applejack," she said, irritated. "Everypony's here but Twilight. Now will you please just tell us what this is all about?"

"But that's exactly what it's about," said Applejack. The other ponies stared at her, uncomprehending. "Twilight," she clarified. "Don't y'all think she's been acting mighty strange recently?"

"Yeah, of course we have," said Rainbow Dash, who actually hadn't noticed at all.

"Now that you mention it," mused Rarity, putting a hoof to her mouth in thought. "She's been quite kind to me recently, letting me put her in my dresses to see how they fit."

"That's not what Applejack means at all, Rarity," said Pinkie Pie, and her voice echoed across the barn. "Haven't you noticed how she's been behaving these past couple weeks? She's been really really, well, Twilight!"

Rainbow Dash shot Pinkie a glare that was a mix of frustration and confusion. "And that's weird, why, exactly?" she asked.

Pinkie Pie shook her head. "No, I mean super-duper Twilight. Like, extra

Twilighty. You know how she spends a lot of time reading and not wanting to go sky diving or ice cream tasting or skating or skiing or hang gliding or cake decorating or any of the fun stuff? She's even worse about it now. She doesn't even pretend anymore, and when she does, like when she's trying on Rarity's dresses, she gets all funny about it, like she's doing it because she has to, but she wants to be somewhere else. It's like she never learned anything about how fun friends can be."

Applejack quieted the rest of them. "What Pinkie Pie and I have been trying to say is, something's funny going on with Twilight. Whatever it is, we need to let her know we're there for her."

"Right," said Fluttershy, who hadn't been following the conversation but felt that she should agree anyway. She'd been noticing changes in Twilight too. She never seemed to want to talk anymore. "What do we do?" she asked.

Pinkie was the first to answer. "A party, duh," she said, as if the other ponies were stupid for not knowing the obvious. "A good party can wipe a frown like that off of anypony. Even a grim-dark-sadface-pony like Twilight."

Dash seemed skeptical. "So Twilight wants to be left alone sometimes," she said. "There's nothing wrong with that, and a party isn't going to change anything."

Applejack ignored her. "I'll leave Pinkie Pie in charge of planning the party," she said. "A surprise party at the Sugar Cube Corner. How does that sound? Anypony opposed to the idea, say Neigh."

Rainbow Dash sighed in frustration, but no pony said neigh. And so it was decided, and Pinkie Pie set to work preparing Twilight's surprise party. She hung balloons across the store, which she had twisted into the shapes of different foods. After a couple balloon cakes and balloon pineapples, Pinkie realized the difficulty in twisting balloons with hooves and decided to make the rest hot dogs. She prepared a batch of cupcakes filled with chopped up sprinkles she decided to call "Sparkle Bits." By the next day, the Sugar Cube Corner had been transformed into a festive environment. Even Rarity failed to hide her amazement.

"Wow," the unicorn pony had said upon seeing all the brightly colored streamers and balloons. "You, er, outdid yourself this time, Pinkie."

"The banner was a nice touch," added Applejack, gesturing toward the large banner which read, "Welcome to your surprise party, Twilight Sparkle." "Although the bottom half it looks erased and re-written," she added as an afterthought.

"Just making do with what I got," said Pinkie, proud of herself.

"It is very pretty," added Fluttershy quietly.

"Yup!" said Pinkie Pie. "Only the best for Twilight. I can't wait to see the look on her face when Rainbow Dash brings her back here!"

"Actually," said Rainbow Dash, who was now standing in the doorway, a folded paper in her mouth, "she's not home."

"What?" screamed Pinkie Pie, and Applejack covered her ears.

"She's not home," Rainbow repeated. "No a big deal, we'll stop by later. And she left a note. See?" She spit out the paper, which fluttered gently to the floor.

Rarity levitated the note, shuddering in disgust at the saliva still dripping off of it. "Gone to Zecora's. Be back soon," she read aloud. "That's all it says." She stared at Rainbow Dash. "You could have just told us."

Rainbow Dash shrugged. "Sorry," she muttered.

"No party..." said Pinkie Pie softly, still in a state of shock.

Applejack patted Pinkie on her back. "Sorry, sugar," she said. "We'll still party, just tomorrow."

Pinkie's face instantly lit up. "Yay!" she shouted, beginning to literally bounce off the walls. She gathered some boxes from a back room and began neatly storing the party decorations. The other ponies, after a brief goodbye, left to return home. As Rarity left, however, she felt a hoof on her shoulder, stopping her. The look of urgency and worry on Applejack's face,

told Rarity enough, and she turned and followed her friend as they walked toward the front of the ranch.

"Something's not right here," began Applejack, after they were a safe distance away from anypony else. "I can't say why, but it reeks something awful."

Rarity nodded. "I didn't believe you until I saw the note. But it just doesn't sound like something Twilight would write."

"Exactly," said Applejack. "This is Twilight the egghead we're dealing with. She once wrote me an eight page apology letter because she was too busy to go kelp-fishing with me. A six word note just don't seem her thing at all."

"I could check the writing," offered Rarity.

"Do it. I knew something fishy was going on with Twilight. And I won't stop until we get to the bottom of it, honest."

Chapter 2

Discord

Twilight was wandering through the Swayback Mountains. Somewhere, some part of her knew that this was wrong, that it didn't make sense for her to be here. She knew she was still lost in the Everfree Forest. But these thoughts, if they were real, had no effect on her actions, as she continued her trot toward a stone building set within the mountains themselves.

Once inside, the path slanted downward, into the heart of the mountain, and soon it became too dark to see. At this, Twilight stamped her hooves on the ground in rhythm. Two clops, a pause, and then three clops.

The lights went on in Twilight Sparkle's laboratory. Machines were set against the wall, lights glowing and gears grinding as they worked. At the moment they were connected to an elliptical dish, processing data gathered from the stars. A large circle was etched on the floor with chalk inside a ring of rubber tubing. Star charts, complete with scribbles and marker-drawn arrows, filled another wall. The large hollow room in the middle of the mountain, most of which Twilight had carved herself, had a disorganized feel when viewed all at once. Even her assistant could never figure out where things were kept, but Twilight knew. She had her own system of organization, even if it wasn't obvious to anypony but her.

Twilight refused to let herself get distracted; she had work to do. "Scribe, take a note," she ordered. A quill lying on the table nearby rose of its own accord, dipped its end into a bottle of ink, and began writing the words Twilight dictated.

"Geloto the Twelfth, year nine hundred and ninety eight of the reign of Celestia," she began. "First, a thank you to Madam, for generously donating the required materials for our experiments. Work is coming along very nicely, although some more tests need to be done before I can say with complete accuracy that the conclusions I've drawn are the correct ones. Running out of time, of course, so we may have to take some risks and plow ahead with minimal preparations." She levitated the crystal orb

out of her satchel and set it on the table. "The Element of Magic is in our possession. One thousand years ago, so the legend goes, Princess Celestia's ancestor used it to defeat Nightmare Moon and seal her inside the moon. What the legend does not say, however, is why. Not is sufficient detail, at least. Nightmare Moon, although that's probably not her true name, so let's call her Suki. Suki was jealous of the Princess. Why? Because the Princess had more power than her? What if Suki was political opposition, and enough of a threat to force the Princess to take action? We don't know, and I refuse to make any assumptions until we find out.

"The legends also said that a thousand years later, the stars would aid in her escape, and it's vital the Element be in responsible hooves when that happens. Somepony devoted to the truth. Somepony able to tell right from wrong. And somepony powerful enough to defeat Nightmare Moon, if it comes to that. Somepony like me."

She walked over to the star chart, eying it carefully. "Still, information is missing. The mention of the stars in the prophecy has significance, I can feel it. There's just a piece or two missing, waiting to be found. When Nightmare Moon returns, I need to be ready. Because that's the day." She paused, a smirk spreading across her face. "That's the day I become famous."

Twilight woke up lost and confused for the second time. She was no longer outside in the cold, but rather in a warm and cozy, if very cramped, room. In the middle of the room a fire burned, and Twilight, feeling a bit too hot on the side facing the fire twisted around, letting the fire reach her in different spots, until she was satisfied and a goofy grin appeared on her. You probably look like Winona right now, she thought, chastising herself. She repositioned herself so that she was sitting neatly, and she looked around.

The first thing she noticed was the room's shape. It wasn't rectangular, and its corners were curved, hinting that she was in something that was hollowed out. There were no furnishings of any sort, and the wall was a dirty brown. The room had one exit, a rounded hole in the wall leading to a slightly larger room ringed by various vegetables, pitchers of milk, and

medical appliances, all coated with a fine layer of dirt. Twilight's heart skipped a beat when she realized that the syringes and scalpels she saw may not have been cleaned before their last use. Given the general disarray of the home, cleanliness was unlikely.

Light came in from the entrance, a tunnel that sloped upward until it opened up on what Twilight could only assume was the surface, but it was still too dark to make out what lay beyond that. Twilight assumed that this meant she was underground, that the cave had been carved into the earth. It reminded her a little of the cave in her dream.

With nothing else to do, Twilight reflected on the dream. The first dream had worried her, and she had briefly considered that maybe she was seeing things that hadn't happened yet. Was there magic that could do that? Twilight wondered. She didn't think so. It seemed too much in the realm of fantasy, like curses and hexes. Besides, the second dream had disproved that. The dream had a date. Geloto the Twelfth, 998. Two years ago. But that was impossible; Twilight had been studying at Cantorlot two years ago. There was no reason for her to carve out a new home in the Swayback Mountains. Maybe it was just a nightmare, she reasoned, brought about by a poorly timed baked bads incident. Any other alternative was ridiculous. Dreams don't have literal meaning, she reminded herself. Stuff like that is old mare's tales.

Besides, thought Twilight, there are more important things to deal with right now. She was in somepony else's home right now, somepony that had potentially saved her life. It only made sense that she should find this pony and thank him or her. But something about the closed space scared her, and Twilight realized that if she never found out who had saved her, it wouldn't trouble her in the least.

She lifted up a hoof. On one hoof, she didn't want to be a burden. On another, she thought, lifting up a second to represent her options, she really should at least say thanks. On a third hoof, anypony that lived in a hole in the ground couldn't be a pleasant pony. She lifted her fourth hoof and tumbled to the ground, thinking, on the last hoof, Zecora had taught her to have more trust in others. Shouldn't she at least give the stranger a chance?

Above her, Twilight heard a crash, followed by screaming. She scurried

into the larger room and began climbing the slope to the door as quickly as she could. "Hello?" she called. "Are you all right?" As she emerged from the top, now covered in dirt, what she saw made her freeze: a squirrel riding atop a bright orange earth filly. Neither appeared to be enjoying the ride, as the filly was frantically trying to buck the squirrel off, a frenzied look in her eyes. The squirrel refused to let go, instead hissing into the filly's ear.

"Um, hello?" said Twilight nervously.

The filly only screamed in response, still trying to dislodge the animal in her fur.

Twilight sighed, and levitated the squirrel off. For about a second the squirrel's grip held, and it hung upside down, grasping onto whatever it could reach. But the force of Twilight's magic became too much, and the two newcomers were separated. The filly turned her head upward and shot the squirrel a raspberry, and the squirrel chattered back while throwing rude gestures.

"Well, that wasn't very nice of that thing," said the filly. "Don't you think so, miss?"

Twilight looked the filly over. Bright blue eyes filled almost her entire face, and a short-cut red mane dangled limply from her head. She was young, younger than Apple Bloom. And certainly too young to be wandering the Everfree Forest alone. Twilight tried to figure out which question to ask first.

The filly, bored of the silence, grabbed Twilight's hoof with her own and shook it vigorously. "Name's Pumpkin. Nice ta meetcha."

"Hello, Pumpkin," said Twilight, trying to be as friendly as possible. "What are you doing here alone?"

Pumpkin squinted at Twilight. "Explorin', duh. What else? But you should be careful, miss. Evil things lurk in these woods."

"Right," agreed Twilight. "So we should get you out of here as soon as possible."

Pumpkin shrugged off the suggestion. "Nah," she said. "You sound like my mum. I'm brave enough to handle myself. And don't worry. If anything does come after us, I'll protect you."

Twilight had to admire the filly's courage, and she wondered if Pumpkin had ever met Rainbow Dash. "There's more to it than courage, Pumpkin," she said. "Have you ever heard of the Ursa?"

Pumpkin looked up from a rock she had been sniffing with what Twilight decided was an unnecessary amount of interest. "Nope," she said. "But it doesn't sound that scary."

Twilight grinned and raised her forelegs above her head to resemble claws. "It's a giant monster that lives inside this very forest, bigger than Sugar Cube Corner. And it has enormous fangs that can rip a pony in half with a single bite. And they say if you wake it up by wandering too close to its den, it will keep chasing you forever until you leave the forest."

Pumpkin stared into Twilight's eyes, and for a moment Twilight believed her plan was working.

"Yawn," said Pumpkin at last.

"You aren't scared?" asked Twilight. She had considered using magic to make lights and noises in the background, but she worried that would be too effective for use on a young filly like Pumpkin. Now she was beginning to wish she had.

"Course not," said Pumpkin, laughing. "And course it's bigger than a sugar cube. No pony would be scared of it otherwise."

"Fine," said Twilight, deciding to play along with Pumpkin's game. "I guess I'll accept your help. But stay close to me; I don't want to get lost."

"Then it's a good thing you have me," Pumpkin nearly shouted, "Cause I'm an adventurer, and we adventurers never get lost." She began to skip off into the darkness.

"Wait!" said Twilight, trying to keep up. Pumpkin stopped and turned,

already getting bored with her new companion. "I mean," continued Twilight, "What were doing when I found you? When you found me, I guess. How did you get here?"

"Well," said Pumpkin, "I was explorin', like I told ya. Only I didn't climb out of the ground like you did, and when I got too close to this hole, that squirrel started throwing a big ol' hissy fit. What happened to that thing, anyways?" She looked up to see that the squirrel, having accepted its fate to be free of gravity, was now performing acrobatic twists and turns in midair. Pumpkin looked at Twilight. "We gonna do something 'bout that?"

"Oh, right," said Twilight, embarrassed to have completely forgotten about the squirrel. But in that case, she reasoned, shouldn't the squirrel have fallen the moment she stopped thinking about it? Twilight shrugged and lowered the squirrel to eye level. "Are you going to stop bothering Pumpkin if I let you go?" she asked.

The squirrel chattered in response, and Twilight realized she didn't understand squirrel-talk. If only Fluttershy was here, she bemoaned. She removed the levitation, and the squirrel fell to the ground. It shouted something that sounded angry and then retreated into the hole Twilight had climbed out of.

Well," said Twilight. "Glad that's over with." As she raised her eyes, she looked out into the darkness on the other side of the cave. Two blue eyes stared back at her. "Pumpkin," she said quietly.

Pumpkin turned. "Yes?" she called with a volume that made Twilight flinch. "What is it?"

"Stand absolutely still," warned Twilight. "Don't make a sound."

"Why?" complained Pumpkin. "What's there?"

Twilight looked for the eyes again, but they were gone. "Nothing, I guess," she muttered. She could have sworn she saw something there, but whatever it was had vanished.

"What if it was Zecora?" Pumpkin asked.

Twilight stared at the filly. "What?"

"Lots of evil things in these woods, and Zecora's one of them. She's an enchantress who lures young fillies into the darkest parts of the woods and gobbles them up."

"I don't think so," said Twilight. "Who told you that?"

"My mum," said Pumpkin, offended. "And she's smart about stuff like that."

"I don't think that was Zecora," she said, hoping it was. Maybe then they were safe.

"Fine," said Pumpkin, grumpy. Then her face lit up. "Maybe it was a manaco."

"Pumpkin..." began Twilight. "And I think you mean a mantacore."

"Ooh, ooh, I got it this time!" shouted Pumpkin, excited. "It was a Twilight Sparkle!"

Twilight froze. "A what?" she asked. She must have just misheard the filly.

"Twilight Sparkle! She's an evil sorceress that lives up in the mountains. But sometimes she comes down to the forest to perform her magic rituals. And she doesn't eat fillies. She sucks out their souls with her magic." She looked at Twilight suspiciously. "What? You never heard of a Twilight Sparkle?"

Chapter 3

Stowaway

"You were right, Applejack," said Rarity.

She was standing over the magnifying sheet she used to inspect jewels. Two pieces of paper lay next to each other on a table. Applejack peered anxiously over her shoulder, curious to see what the other pony had seen, but also desperate to avert her eyes from anything else in the room. There was something about the Carousel Boutique that always put Applejack on edge. As far as the earth pony was concerned, the frilly outfits that decorated the back room were no different than shackles, and just looking at them made Applejack feel trapped.

"I don't see it," admitted Applejack. "Both of them look the same."

The first slip was the note Twilight had left. The second was a star chart Twilight had left with Rarity for reference during the fashion show incident. Notes were scrawled in the margins, labeling the constellations.

"The strokes in the note are more angular," explained Rarity. "You can clearly see where each line begins and ends. And they're a lot darker, like she was pressing into the paper a lot harder."

"So?" As far as Applejack was concerned, hoofwriting was hoofwriting.

"Their similar, I'll give them that. The letters are mostly drawn the same way. But Twilight has a distinctive style; it's constant everywhere on the chart. Light, elegant curves. Beautiful really, and certainly not the brutish markings on the note. She didn't write it. Somepony else did. Somepony trying to imitate her, perhaps, but not succeeding. In other words, a forgery."

Applejack smirked, looking vindictive but slightly surprised at their success. "You sure about this?" she asked.

"Not really," Rarity admitted. "We're making quite magnificent assumptions. Have you considered just asking her what's wrong?"

Applejack hadn't. "Like that would work," she said quickly, trying to defend herself. "If it was something she wanted us to know, don't you think she would tell us on her own?"

At this, something inside Rarity seemed to snap. "And if she doesn't want anypony to know, then why are you prying into her personal space like this? You know, for a pony obsessed with honesty, you can be quite untrusting."

Applejack felt like she had attacked. "Are you calling me a bad friend?" she hissed. "At least I care about Twilight enough to notice when something's wrong. And what do you do? Oh, right, you force her into dresses she really doesn't want to wear. You insult my character."

"And you insult my dresses," screeched Rarity in response. "I would never make Twilight do anything she's not comfortable with, unlike you. Why do you always have to be in everypony's business, Applejack? Who crowned you leader of Equestria?"

Out of breath, Rarity stopped talking and began panting. Applejack opened her mouth to speak, but she never got the chance.

"You know what?" shouted Rarity, levitating Twilight's note and tossing it in Applejack's face. "I regret ever helping you with this scheme of yours, and I want no more to do with it. Find your own reasons not to trust Twilight, but I certainly don't need any." She turned her tail to Applejack. "Get out," she said. "I don't want you in my shop anymore."

From another room, the two ponies heard a sound like glass shattering. "Oops," came the voice of Apple Bloom.

"Think big sis can fix that?" asked Sweetie Belle.

"So much for Cutie Mark Crusader Acrobats," muttered Scootaloo grimly.

Rarity scowled, trying to keep her breathing normal. "And take the girls with you, alright? If it's not too much trouble. Please?" Then she

remembered that when she was angry, she was supposed to say angry things. "I mean, take them with you, Applejack. Out. Now."

Applejack turned and started toward the door. "Fine," she said. "I don't need your help. I'll solve this without you, and when I do, you can be the one to tell Twilight you didn't care about her enough to even look up from your silly dress-making to help her." Applejack raised her head, trying and failing to look dignified, and left the room.

Rarity hurriedly folded up the map, set it in the corner, and retrieved the dress she had been working on the day before. "Who needs a mess like her," Rarity wondered aloud as she worked. "That nose of hers is going to get her into trouble, one way or the other. And she better not come crying to me afterward, because I won't hear it." As she prepared to begin stitching the dress, she stopped and thought. "Well, maybe I will hear it, just so I can rub it in. She does try to have a good heart, after all."

Applejack searched the rooms of the Carousel Boutique until she found the Cutie Mark Crusaders, trying to glue together a shattered ceramic unicorn.

"Guess we're not Cutie Mark Crusader Repairponies, either," said Sweetie Belle, pouting.

Applejack remembered the unicorn. It was a hideous distorted figure that Rarity rather optimistically referred to as "Art."

"That's what you broke?" Applejack asked, amused.

Apple Bloom looked up at her big sister with fear in her large eyes. "Ya aren't mad, are ya?" she asked quietly.

Unable to control herself, Applejack began laughing. "Of course not," she said. "That's the best thing I've seen all day. Come on girls, you get to hang with auntie Applejack for a while."

The crusaders looked at each other nervously, and then, one at a time, a grin broke out on each of their faces. "All right!" shouted Scootaloo as she pumped one of her hooves into the air.

Applejack left the Boutique, and the crusaders followed, all four of them

giggling. "Yeah," sighed Applejack as they walked. "I'm not mad. But Rarity'll kill you." Sweetie Belle shivered. "Although, nice job helping Rarity and me find the star chart."

"It's fine," said Apple Bloom. "We thought we could be Cutie Mark Crusader Treasure Seekers."

"I've got a question", said Scootaloo. "If you wanted something Twilight wrote down, why didn't you just search the library? You could swipe one of her journals or something."

Applejack stopped walking and looked at Scootaloo critically. "Okay Scoots. First thing, I think you need to spend less time with Rainbow Dash. Second thing, I'm not going to steal stuff from Twilight. It wouldn't be right or honest. 'Sides, Twilight locks the back rooms of the library when she's out. You don't know anypony who can pick locks, can you?"

Apple Bloom looked at the ground, shamed.

Scootaloo's eyes darted back and forth until they found Sweetie Belle, who was shaking her head.

Applejack stared at the trio incredulously. "You fillies are kidding me, right?" she asked.

"Well," began Apple Bloom nervously, "Do you really think we'd try something like Cutie Mark Crusader Treasure Seekers if we hadn't already tried all the fun ones."

"We wanted to try being Cutie Mark Crusader Phantom Thieves," said Scootaloo.

Applejack sighed. "I guess I shouldn't expect less from the three of you," admitted Applejack. "'Cept maybe Sweetie Belle; she should know better. But I promise to forget you ever said that, so long as you don't remind me."

Ahead, Applejack spotted Rainbow Dash clearing the clouds from the sky. Rainbow Dash, noticing the four ponies, took a break from her duties and flew down in front of Applejack. "Hey, slowpoke," she taunted,

"enjoying the view from down there?"

"Rainbow Dash," shouted Applejack, excited to see her for once. "Tell these ponies that we are not breaking into Twilight's place."

"I can't believe we're breaking into Twilight's place," muttered Applejack.

"Neither can I," said Rainbow Dash, rubbing her front hooves together. "Man, this is going to be awesome!"

They were hiding in the overgrowth behind the Ponyville library, waiting for the Cutie Mark Crusaders to unlock the back door.

"This is ridiculous," said Applejack. "I came because I promised I'd look after the girls, and Scoots was dead-set on going with you. But you don't even believe there's anything wrong with Twilight!"

"That's what this is about?" said Rainbow Dash. "I thought we were pranking her. I mean, Pinkie Pie was getting a little too miss Uppity Pony with that exploding cake of hers, and now she's going around like she's queen of pranks. Somepony needs to put her in her place with something totally awesome."

Applejack was skeptical. "And what 'totally awesome something' were you planning here, exactly?"

Rainbow Dash's jaw hung open, as if she couldn't believe she was being questioned. Then she gave up the charade and closed it. "I don't know," she admitted. "But it's going to be something awesome. More awesome than anything you lame ponies would ever think of doing," she said, getting defensive.

"And done!" squealed Apple Bloom, descending from a tree branch overhead. "The doors are open!"

"I still just don't feel right about this," said Applejack.

"Relax," laughed Rainbow Dash. "She's probably asleep by now. So just

don't make too much noise."

Zecora peered at the face, critical.

The face stared back at her silently, it's large empty black eyes chilling her. That was the problem, Zecora decided, and she grabbed the white brush from the pallet, adding a small circle in the middle of each eye.

She stepped back to admire her artwork. She had decided to recreate some of the art she remembered owning as a foal, and although she had spent the entire morning hiding away in the back of her home, she'd gotten a lot of work done. Maybe now it won't look so dead, she thought. But it was still a work in progress. The bottom half of the mask hadn't been painted at all yet. But she would get it done, eventually. She had spent the last couple of days stockpiling herbs, and so she had a lot of free time. Stepping back into the main room to check on her cooking, Zecora wished someone had warned her that being self sufficient could be so boring.

As she dipped a ladle into the soup, testing its consistency, she heard the door swing open. She released the ladle, regretting the action moments later when it sank beneath the surface of the soup, and turned to face the newcomer.

"Twilight Sparkle, my special guest," she said, excited for the company to break the monotony. "Do you need something? I'll do my best." The expression on the unicorns face seemed distant but deadly serious. Zecora quickly grabbed a rug from the corner and laid it out by the fire. "Here, sit," she said.

"Zecora?" said Twilight softly. The zebra looked at her friend, worried. Twilight swallowed and continued. "It's me, Zecora."

Zecora swore, and Twilight admired her ability to maintain the couplet. "After all this, you still came," she said bitterly.

"I know you must think I'm a coward," Twilight told Zecora. "But let's face it. I failed. I have nothing over there, and she had everything. Friends, the

sun, how could you blame me?"

"In that case," accused Zecora, "who should I blame? Impersonating Twilight Sparkle is not a victimless crime. She has done nothing and is a close friend of mine."

"It's not all bad," said Twilight, attempting to quickly cover herself. "If I can only discover how the ponies here defeated Nightmare Moon, then I can go back. We can call this a success. We can save the world."

Zecora laughed and stepped toward Twilight, staring her down. "Is that really why you came, to save the day? Or are you just running and hiding away? Do you ever plan to go back home? Or are you too afraid of being alone?"

Twilight's breathing became unsteady, but she attempted to maintain a steady voice as she spoke. "And what do you know about being alone?" she said. After the words left her mouth, she knew she had said something wrong. Zecora eyed her in the same manner that she might eye an ant. Twilight suddenly felt small and insignificant.

"I know it hurts you, inside," said Zecora. "I couldn't count the tears you've cried. Young Twilight had things you never knew, so you did some things you never thought you'd do. But as you took her place and stole her fate, you left her lost; you left her filled with hate. And so, my friend, one answer, if you dare: If you are here, then Twilight Sparkle is, where?"

Twilight didn't answer. Instead, as the tears welled up in her eyes, she fled. She ran out the door and through the underbrush of the Everfree Forest until she saw the lights of Ponyville up ahead. She blindly galloped along the streets until she was finally safe in the library she called home.

And then, filled with emotions she didn't know how to place, Twilight Sparkle cried. She cried, not knowing why. The fight with Zecora had left her feeling shamed and guilty. Why shouldn't you tell everypony the truth, she asked herself.

Because you're not her, a voice answered. You're not the Twilight they know. And as soon as they figure that out, they'll leave you. They don't care about you at all; they care about Twilight. They'll make you tell them

what you did with her, and then they'll leave you all alone. Again.

Through her blurry vision, Twilight looked up to see Applejack rifling through a bureau drawer.

Chapter 4

The Hermit

The small equestrian figure moved through the growth of the Everfree Forest, her bright blue eyes rising and falling in the darkness with each step she took. Her skin clung close to her ribs; while she was not dangerously malnourished, she had less meat on her body than anypony would want. She carried in her mouth a crude handwoven basket filled partway with any herbs and grasses she could find.

As she neared the entrance to her den, loud noises ahead of her prompted her to pause. She set the basket on the ground and cautiously approached a clearing in the thick woods, trying her best to stay hidden and preparing to flee at any time. Near the entrance to her den were a mare and a very young filly. The filly was unfamiliar to her and frightened her, but she recognized the mare's violet fur. She had found the mare unconscious and suffering from a head injury, and she had somehow been persuaded to drag the mare back home with her to treat the wounds.

She realized the mare was looking at her, and she ducked her head into the undergrowth, her heart beating quickly. Had she been spotted? She dared to look again and discovered with relief that the mare and the filly were now talking to each other and had left her alone. She backed away slowly, lifting the basket in her jaw. She would come back later, and maybe by then the strangers would be gone. She turned and made her way back into the darkness of the forest but stopped when she heard a cry from the clearing. Daring to look, she saw the mare buckled over on the ground, the filly dancing around her, frantically.

She's still hurt, the figure realized. She hasn't healed. She needs help. Leave her, a voice in her head instructed. This was never your problem; she'll be fine. And then the blue-eyed figure saw a spark light up, just for a moment, casting light into the darkness. Taking a deep breath, she stepped into the clearing. "Help me carry her," she instructed the filly, and she grabbed the mare's tail between her teeth.

The mare was not aware of any of this, as she was already elsewhere.

The Summer Sun Celebration was the most celebrated holiday in Canterlot. And by the looks of it, thought Twilight, Ponyville seemed to be taking it pretty seriously too. A large banner had been hung across the village square, proudly announcing, "Welcome, Princess Celestia."

Twilight scoffed. "They sure do love their princess, don't they, Madam?" she asked her traveling companion, an well-dressed orange earth pony that Twilight thought looked stunning in her velvet dress.

The earth pony, looked back at Twilight confused. "I thought you enjoy the Summer Sun Celebration," she said.

Twilight shook her head. "I used to," she lied, "but not anymore." Watching the princess raise the sun still took her breath away. It was the most spectacular display of magical talent anypony could witness. As a filly watching the majestic performance, Twilight was filled with wonder and admiration, but Twilight liked to think she had grown since then. She now saw the spell for what it really was: just a spell. A spell anypony could pull off with enough raw power.

And hidden in the bag Madam currently had slung over her shoulder was the most powerful artifact to ever grace Equestria.

"In a few hours, the sun will rise," remarked Madam. "And this has been a rather uneventful night. I'm beginning to think we came all this way for nothing."

"Maybe," Twilight admitted. "I don't know what to want. If we were wrong about Nightmare Moon..."

"Suki," corrected Madam playfully.

Twilight rolled her eyes. "I never should have told you about that," she said bitterly, with a hint of playfulness. "If we were wrong about Nightmare Moon, then our planning is wasted. On the other hoof, though..."

Madam finished for her. "The world won't be destroyed."

"Shrouded in darkness, you mean. Although both possibilities are things I'd like to avoid. And thank you, by the way, for your support in all this."

Madam smiled as she looked at Twilight, the way a mother might look at a child. "My little protégé, why wouldn't I assist you? We make an excellent team."

They passed a table stacked with apple pies being sold by a white unicorn. "You hungry?" Twilight asked Madam.

"Not at all," said Madam, even though she was. "And I think I'll stay away from the village slop, anyway."

The unicorn looked up and cast a beaming smile at Twilight. "Good morning," she said cheerfully, and then her eyes fell on the earth pony behind Twilight. "Oh," she said flatly. "It's you."

Madam tried her best to look indifferent.

Twilight looked back and forth between them. "You know each other?"

The white unicorn answered. "Madam Orange, the rising entrepreneur of Manehattan? Is there anypony who doesn't recognize that atrocious cutie mark of hers? To what do we owe this pleasure, being graced with your appearance?"

Madam laughed, moving so that she was directly in the unicorn's face. "I came for the celebration," she said. "I hope you don't have a problem with that, and there isn't some law against us educated types ruining your quaint little backwards world."

The unicorn, while intimidated, didn't flinch. "Enjoy the party," she said with as much scorn as she could fit.

Twilight felt the sinking feeling in her stomach even before she knew where she was. The sudden transitions were jarring, and each jump left Twilight

feeling tense and panicked. Worse, the dreams had all but destroyed her sense of time. They weren't normal dreams; rather, they felt like things that had happened a long time ago, but she had forgotten about them until now. Each time a memory unlocked, she berated herself for not remembering them before. Twilight knew for certain that somehow, the dreams were real, but she knew that they couldn't be. It was her gut against her common sense, and like always when the science-minded pony had to make a decision, common sense won out.

There was a logical explanation out there somewhere; Twilight just had to figure out what it was.

As the ceiling slowly stopping spinning above her, Twilight recognized the uneven cave walls. She was back in the underground burrow, and Pumpkin was looking down at her, the filly's face scrunched up with worry that quickly became relief when she saw her friend was okay.

"You made it!" said Pumpkin excitedly. "I mean, I knew you would, of course, never doubted you, but she said you were hurt, hurt bad, and by the way you shouldn't move, and drink lots of water, and I got you some, but don't drink it too quickly or you'll choke, and you should rest, and she'll be back soon to check on you, and she said to thank chestnuts or something." Pumpkin paused to inhale. "At least, I think that's what she said; it was kind of quiet, and I may have made some of it up."

"Did she say anything about not making noise?" asked Twilight, covering her ears with her forehooves.

Pumpkin put a hoof on her chin. "Nah," she said, "don't think so. Maybe. Probably."

A brown furry mass leaped onto Twilight's stomach from beyond her field of vision and stared down at her, rapidly making high-pitched squeaks.

"Oh, yeah," added Pumpkin. "That thing's back."

Twilight tried to stand, but her head began pounding, and a sick eruption of feeling in her stomach almost made her vomit. The one leg she had managed to lift gave way, and she resigned herself to lie on her back, staring at Pumpkin, the squirrel, and the ceiling.

The squirrel, seeing her attempts to move, put its paws down on her chest and shook its head back and forth, as if it was pantomiming, telling her to stay down.

"Am I crazy," Twilight asked Pumpkin, "or is the squirrel trying to communicate with me?"

The squirrel nodded vigorously.

"Who are you?" she asked the squirrel, and the squirrel leaped off her body and out of sight. Half a minute later, it returned carrying a large seed, which it deposited on the ground next to Twilight. Bending her head to get a better look, Twilight recognized the seed as a chestnut.

"Chestnut." She looked up at the squirrel. "Your name is Chestnut. You kind of remind me of another animal back home, but he was a rabbit named Angel."

Chestnut glared at Twilight angrily, as if she had crossed some sort of forbidden line. "Sorry," said Twilight. "I guess you don't like rabbits. But Chestnut and Pumpkin. You guys are making me hungry."

Pumpkin chuckled. "And speaking of names, miss, what's yours?"

"Twi-" began Twilight, before remembering that telling Pumpkin her name probably was a bad idea. She hesitated, trying to think of a cover and hoping Pumpkin hadn't heard her.

Pumpkin peered at Twilight expectantly. "Twi..." she said, awaiting the rest of it.

Twilight found inspiration as a name rose up to the surface of her mind. "Trixie," she said. "My name is Trixie." It wasn't the most pleasant sounding name, in Twilight's opinion, and it was one she certainly wasn't going to enjoy hearing, but Twilight was in the clear, so long as she remembered her name was Trixie now.

"Okay, Trixie," said Pumpkin, who had bought it completely. "Stay there and drink up. She'll be back soon."

"She? Who's she?" Twilight tried to say, but she was interrupted as she begun by a glass of water that Chestnut had shoved against her lips. Twilight stopped talking long enough to drink the whole thing. She hadn't realized how thirsty she was until now. After she finished, she asked Pumpkin her question.

"She's some weird mare who lives out in these parts. She said she found you out by the swamps and dragged you back here."

Twilight remembered the figure she had seen before she had fainted and woken up here. Was that the mare that had saved her? The blue eyes in the darkness of the forest flashed through her mind. Was that her rescuer too?

"Oh," she said. "We should thank her if she comes back before we leave. Maybe we could write a note."

Pumpkin shook her head, and Chestnut mimicked her motions. "Why are you in such a hurry, Trixie?" the filly asked. "We're on an adventure, remember?"

Twilight opened her mouth to argue, but instead almost vomited again. As she tried to recover, she thought about Pumpkin's question. How could she explain that she didn't know what day it was, or how she had gotten here? There were holes in her memory, giant blank areas that refused to yield any information. Twilight was confused and lost in the unknown, and it terrified her. She needed familiarity. She needed comfort, and she knew she wasn't going to find either of those things in the Everfree Forest. The feeling of entrapment had been constricting itself around her since she had first awoken, and until she saw her friends, brash Rainbow Dash and sweet Applejack, serene Rarity and timid Fluttershy, exuberant Pinkie Pie and even little Spike, the feeling wasn't going to go away.

Instead of explaining these impossible facts, Twilight merely muttered, "I need to get home," before the headache returned and made her close her eyes, moaning softly.

How had she ended up here, anyway? Twilight tried to think again, hoping that this time the memories would come more easily. Instead of trying to

figure out what had happened last, she let her recent experiences flow over her one at a time, looking for one that didn't have a conclusion. She had celebrated Pinkie Pie's birthday party, an event nearly destroyed by Pinkie Pie herself. She'd been preparing to go the Grand Galloping Gala, but she didn't remember going. This narrowed down the possibilities to a span of a couple days, and she ran through each of them in her head. What had she done those days, before the Gala. Images flashed briefly. Studying for Academy exams, helping Fluttershy feed the chickens, writing her most recent report on friendship, receiving the letter from Zecora.

It was an unusual letter, one that just showed up in her mailbox one morning. No postage. She had asked Ditzzy Doo, the local mailpony, about it, but the response she got, as best as she could decipher it, was that Ditzzy hadn't delivered it. Twilight finally came to the conclusion that Zecora had dropped it in the box herself, in which case Twilight failed to understand why the zebra didn't just come and talk to her in person.

The text was short and simple. "Twilight. Please meet me today, by noon, at the old castle of the Royal Sisters in the Everfree Forest. This is urgent, but please come alone." Twilight was immediately suspicious, particularly of the part about coming alone, so she showed the letter to Rainbow Dash, a decision that turned out to be a huge mistake. Rainbow Dash, overcome by curiosity, insisted that the two of them go together to get to the bottom of the mystery.

That was the last thing Twilight remembered before she woke up, hurting and alone.

But you're in safe hands, Twilight reminded herself. Relatively, she added, remembering the dirty scalpels. As long as nopony tries to perform surgery on you, she decided, I think you'll be okay.

"How is it?" she asked Pumpkin. "Does it look that bad to you?"

Pumpkin nodded, slowly, and Twilight realized that she might not be the only pony in the room trying to keep her stomach contents down. "You've got this, gash," said Pumpkin as she traced a line down the side of her face to show Twilight just where it was. "It's not bleeding, but it looks awful. What happened to you?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," muttered Twilight softly. Maybe she had a concussion. That would explain the urge to vomit. Could concussions cause strange dreams, she wondered.

A clapping sound from the entrance disrupted her thoughts. Pumpkin turned around excitedly. "That's her," she said, and she bounded forward to greet their host. Twilight, still not wanting to risk moving, watched on from a distance and got her first look at her savior.

It was the dirtiest mare Twilight had ever seen. She looked like an incredibly frail earth pony. Dirt clung to her coat in such great quantities that Twilight could not even begin to guess what color the coat would be when clean, only that now it was the brown color of rabbit droppings, with a darker brown unkempt mane. The only bright part of the mare was her eyes, which shone a brilliant blue. The mare paused her approach as she spotted Pumpkin and took a few steps back. Something about the mare's behavior seemed oddly familiar to Twilight, and she looked vaguely recognizable in a way that Twilight couldn't place.

The mare walked a large circle around Pumpkin and approached Twilight. "You're lucky Chestnut found you," she said, and her voice was sad and grim. "He brought me to you, made me help you. I was scared." She opened her saddlebag and pulled out some bandages with her teeth. "I had to go into town to get some strips for your face," she explained. "I was hoping you'd still be out of it when I got back. You must be in a lot of pain after surviving an attack like that."

"Attack?" said Twilight, trying once again to sit up. As she moved, the mare flinched and almost fell over. She's scared of me, Twilight realized, and she politely laid down once again. After a few seconds the mare recovered and continued working.

"The shape of the wound, that's a claw mark," said the mare. "You can tell by the shape. But it's not like anything I've seen before. Too big for the little creatures, but too small for most of the predators. Rest now."

The mare turned around, and Twilight thought she saw something jagged sticking out of the mare's back. "Okay," the mare called up the entrance. "Come and get your food." A large number of creatures stampeded down the tunnel and immediately began feasting on the piles of

lettuce and carrots that had been lying about. One of them, however, put off eating to stare disdainfully at the new ponies, and he hopped over to get a closer look.

He was an all-too-familiar white bunny rabbit. Twilight remembered why the mare looked so familiar.

It was impossible, of course. But she had to find out.

"Fluttershy?"

The mare turned around, and Twilight could now make out the pink in the tail, the three butterflies on the flank. There was no mistaking Fluttershy, even under all that grime.

"Fluttershy!" she repeated. "But you're, I mean, you don't..." She trailed off, pointing at where Fluttershy's wings were supposed to be. "You're an earth pony," she said at last. This was crazy, thought Twilight. This had to be a dream.

Fluttershy looked at where Twilight was pointing, confused. She scowled, as if she was trying to remember something from long ago. "Oh," she said, visibly ashamed. "I really am an earth pony, when you think about it," she said. "I talk to animals, I'm not good at flying. I belong here, in the ground, like earth ponies do. I was never supposed to be a Pegasus. That was all just a mistake."

Twilight didn't understand. "But that doesn't explain," she began. And then she once again saw the jagged points sticking out of Fluttershy's side. In the background, the dirty scalpels suddenly seemed to begin shining. Twilight froze in fear, the only part of her moving was her chest, which began heaving faster and faster. A sense of horror spread through her, and her imagination ran wild, showing her images she didn't want to see.

"Oh," she said weakly, before the food she had been trying so hard to keep down finally made its way to freedom.

Chapter 5

SUNSIDE

Fluttershy was exhausted as she returned to her house, the sun setting and painting the world around her a soft and warm russet. She had spent the better part of the afternoon attempting to rebuild a groundhog burrow that had been flooded after the most recent rain. She made a mental note to talk to the Weather Agency at the next chance she got. The rain was important, Fluttershy knew, but there had to be a way to go about it that didn't involve evicting woodland creatures from their homes. A strong breeze whistled through the trees, and the noise seemed louder in the silent twilight hours.

There was something off about the weather, thought Fluttershy. Every part of the weather had to serve a purpose. The strong winds would just cause damage and scare little fillies, and there wasn't much reason for the flying crew to let it happen, not when the wind could be redirected to flow around Ponyville. At least, Fluttershy assumed it could; she'd left her weather training after it became clear that she didn't belong there, and she wasn't getting any less accident-prone. Another gust hit, and she closed her wings, which she had left unfurled without thinking. Some days she forgot she even had them until they got caught on something.

Fluttershy crossed the threshold, her eyes beginning to droop. As she removed the scarf she had been wearing, she considered what to do about Applejack and Twilight. Nothing, was the obvious answer. Whatever was going on between them would sort itself out in time, and Fluttershy had no desire to be a part of it. She stumbled onto her bed and was soon in a deep enough sleep that she could not hear the moaning of the wind as it began to gain strength.

A rock hit her window. "Hey, Fluttershy!" called a voice, quieted by the walls of the house. After a minute, another rock hit, and the voice repeated itself. Fluttershy, dead to the rest of the world, didn't respond.

A few minutes passed, and then Fluttershy felt the warm touch of a hoof

disturb her from her sleep. The hoof quickly became an entire equestrian body that wrapped Fluttershy in a suffocating hug. The pegasus pony opened her eyes and stared into a pair of large unmistakably blue eyes.

"Pinkie Pie!" she cried, confused and feeling quite violated.

Pinkie Pie began rubbing her face in Fluttershy's mane. "I never realized you were so soft," murmured Pinkie Pie happily, and Fluttershy pushed her friend away.

"What do you want?" asked Fluttershy. "How on Equestria did you even get in here?" She was fairly certain she had locked the door.

Pinkie Pie pounced on top of her friend again and brought her face inches away from Fluttershy's. She brought a hoof to her mouth and forced the air between her teeth, indicating silence. "Listen," she said.

Fluttershy tried, but all she could hear was the sound of wind through the trees. "I don't hear anything, Pinkie Pie," she said. "It's just a storm."

"No," cried Pinkie Pie. "It's not just a storm. Ever since it started, I've been waiting for my ears to go flat and my tail to frizz, but they haven't!"

Fluttershy didn't understand. "So?" she asked.

"So that's my Pinkie Sense for huge storms," explained Pinkie Pie. "And even though this one's a doozy, I'm not getting anything."

Fluttershy, still exhausted, turned away from Pinkie Pie. "Well your Pinkie Sense can't be going off all the time," she said, trying to spin the conversation in a way that was likely to get Pinkie Pie off of her. Their proximity was making her very uncomfortable.

Pinkie Pie shook her head. "But my Pinkie Sense is doing stuff," she said. "Just different stuff. My eyes are twitching and my hooves itch and that means that something really bad is about to happen and you're the only pony who can stop it."

Fluttershy tried her best to keep her voice level in the face of Pinkie's ridiculously specific Pinkie Sense. She had never exploded at one of her

friends before, and she wanted to keep it that way. After all, if she exploded once, what would stop her from doing it again? "Pinkie Pie, you're so random," Fluttershy began to say, but she was interrupted by the sound of a wooden wheel impacting the side of the house. She quickly pulled herself upright, banging her head into Pinkie Pie's.

"The chickens!" she cried, seeming to not notice the collision. "Rainbow Dash was helping me patch up one of the walls in the coop, but we left a giant hole in it." She envisioned the chickens blowing away in the fierce wind. "Help me, Pinkie Pie. Please, I mean, if it's not too much trouble..."

Pinkie saluted her friend. "Okie Smokes, Fluttershy!" she said, and the pair ran out into the storm. To Fluttershy's surprise, there was still no rain, but the wind was even stronger than before. The ponies struggled against the wind until they reached the gate surrounding the coop, but as they turned the corner, the new direction of the wind bowled them over. Fluttershy gritted her teeth and stood up, pressing onward. Inside the coop, the chickens were running around crazily, startled by the storm. The pegasus grabbed one by the neck and carried it back into the house with Pinkie Pie following behind her, a second chicken in between her jaws. Pinkie Pie closed the door as they both released their chickens, panting heavily.

"Two down, twenty eight to go," breathed Fluttershy.

The task took the ponies almost an hour, but when they were finally done, Fluttershy's home was blanketed in the feathers of the thirty chickens that were now running freely throughout the house. Fluttershy watched as one of them leaped off the top of the stairs, descending erratically until it landed on a vase in the corner, knocking it over and smashing it.

"Is this it?" Fluttershy asked Pinkie Pie. "Are your Pinkie Senses done now?" The pegasus looked over at her friend and noticed that Pinkie's eyes were twitching painfully, and she was running one of her hooves maddeningly over the carpet.

"N-nuh-uh," said Pinkie Pie, and she began to stutter. "I-it's just g-getting w-worse," she said. "S-someth-thing really r-really b-b-bad is ab-bout to happen."

Fluttershy's wings began to flare in whatever amount of frustration she could manage, but they immediately dropped when she realized how terrified she was. As crazy as her friend was, Fluttershy still trusted Pinkie Pie. If Pinkie said that something bad was about to happen, that was enough to scare Fluttershy speechless.

Actually, Fluttershy realized, there were many things that could scare her speechless. But the visible terror in Pinkie's twitching eyes was worse than any of them.

"What do we do?" asked Fluttershy with trepidation.

Applejack dug through the contents of Twilight's bureau, looking for something, anything that would prove that Twilight was hiding something. After each drawer revealed nothing worthwhile, she carefully closed it and moved on to the next one. If Twilight and Spike were sleeping on the floor above her, Applejack wanted to make sure they didn't wake up.

The drawers were mostly empty, containing the clothes Twilight wore on special occasions, allowing Applejack to be able to quickly search through them. The earth pony quickly grew frustrated with the profitless ordeal.

Applejack opened the bottom drawer, and her composure changed instantly. She knew she had hit the jackpot. A dress had been thrown on top of a rectangular object in a failed attempt to hide it. Applejack pushed the dress aside and removed the book. It bore no title on its koskin cover, yet its edges hung limp where Applejack was not holding it. The book had seen much use; Applejack didn't hesitate to use it again.

The words in the book were written in a neat cursive script that Applejack recognized as Twilight's. This was her diary, Applejack realized. She skimmed through the pages until the dates became more recent. Most of the writing included technical details of Twilight's experiments or mundane personal details that Applejack didn't have much taste for, although she made a mental note to never let a certain stallion learn about a particularly steamy passage around the halfway mark. The passages continued until about a week before the present day, at which point they abruptly stopped.

The last passage was as uninteresting as the rest of them, musing about Pinkie Pie's attitudes after their failed surprise party, and no amount of scrutiny by Applejack gave any clues as to what could cause the sudden change in Twilight's behavior.

Frustrated, Applejack kicked the book into the corner. She wondered where Rainbow Dash was, hoping the multicolored mare was taking the Cutie Mark Crusaders back to the farm and not getting them into more trouble. Applejack knew that for some reason or another, it wasn't going to be that easy. She turned to look over the rest of the room and discovered a teary eyed Twilight Sparkle staring at her.

"Horseapples..." muttered Applejack.

Seconds passed, and neither pony spoke. Then, when Applejack realized that for the first time since the fiasco began they were finally alone, she spoke.

"Well, Missy," she said. "Ah guess it's just you an' me here."

"What are you doing?" Twilight asked, and Applejack heard the hysteria in her voice.

"Ah want the truth," said Applejack coldly. "Ah won't take nothin' else, so just fess up, 'cuz nopony's here to judge you but me."

As she finished, Rainbow Dash stuck her head through the ceiling. "There's nothing in the floorboards," she announced, before the thin wooden ceiling gave way and she tumbled to the floor. Seconds later, Pinkie Pie kicked open the door leading to the library, and Fluttershy awkwardly stumbled in behind her, her head hung low.

"Um, excuse me, sorry," mumbled Fluttershy. "I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

Applejack glared at Fluttershy and bared her teeth. "'Twilight' here's fixin to spill the beans, so back off. I'm not lettin' her get away."

Fluttershy squeaked and backed into the corner.

"Applejack," said Pinkie, with a cautionary tone, "You'd know what Rarity would say if she were here."

"Well she ain't, is she?" snapped Applejack. "And ah'm not gonna to stop until ah get answers. Twilight's been lying to us. In fact, ah don't even believe she's really her. Ah ain't even goin' to call her Twilight no more." She began to advance toward the purple mare threateningly.

Rainbow Dash watched the encounter, filled with uncertainty and mixed feelings. Applejack had become a truly frightening force, and Rainbow doubted that a single pony there wasn't completely terrified. Her pulse increased rapidly, and she felt as if her heart was about to jump out of her throat. She looked at Twilight nervously, tears now pooling around the unicorn's eyes.

Then came the spark. It was a feeling Rainbow had felt only a couple times before in the past. The room lit up around her, and Twilight was no longer Twilight. In her place sat Fluttershy, or what Fluttershy looked like when she was younger. Applejack had been replaced by one of the jock ponies from Flight School, the brown pegasus with the basketball cutie mark. The image only lasted a second, and when it faded, Rainbow Dash knew exactly what to do.

"No," she said sternly, stepping between Applejack and Twilight. "I'm not going to let you hurt her."

"Outta the way, Rainbow Dash," said Applejack, the anger in her voice rising. "Ah'm tellin' you, this ain't Twilight."

"Prove it."

Applejack froze. It was a question she should have known was going to be asked, but it didn't prepare her for when it actually was. "Pardon?" she said, her voice now quieter and much higher.

"You heard me," said Rainbow Dash, walking forward until her face was directly in front of Applejack's. "Prove it. Really, Applejack, I don't know what's gotten into you these past few days, but I'm not going to stand back and make Twilight deal with your craziness."

Applejack attempted to rush past Rainbow, but the strong pegasus barely managed to hold her back. "Why don't y'all trust me?" screeched Applejack.

Pinkie Pie bounded forward, joining Rainbow Dash. "W-why won't you trust Twilight? What's she d-done?" she said, still stuttering a bit.

"Well..." Applejack tried to think of an answer.

"Applejack," whinnied Pinkie Pie. "You need to listen to your f-friends. Otherwise you can lose them, f-forever."

"But that's what ah'm trying to say!" screamed Applejack, frustrated.

"No, you're not," said Rainbow Dash. "The only pony you're willing to listen to is yourself."

Applejack wanted to protest. She wanted to knock some sense into her friends, literally if she had to. She needed them to see things the way she saw them. But after she opened her mouth, she closed it again. What could she say? Nothing she wanted to say would convince them, but it took her a moment of silence to realize why. It wasn't evidence. Nothing she said, or could say, would ever hold up in a formal argument. She couldn't prove that Twilight was hiding something. It was just something she knew. Now, feeling weighed down by Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash's accusatory stares, Applejack asked a question she hadn't even considered before then.

What if she was wrong? What if Twilight was acting strange because she was hurt or upset, and all Applejack was doing was yelling and making things worse? Applejack repeated the encounter in her head, trying to look at things from Twilight's perspective, and suddenly she felt like a monster. She hung her head, trying desperately not to look at anypony.

"Ah'm sorry, Dashie" she murmured softly.

Rainbow Dash's expression didn't change. "I'm not the pony you need to be apologizing to, Applejack," she said.

Applejack knew it. She raised her head and looked across the room at

Twilight. The unicorn was heaving quickly, scared out of her mind. Was she really that bad? Applejack wondered. She stood slowly and cautiously approached her friend. "Look here, sugarcube," she said, and Twilight flinched. "I don't mean no harm," she continued. "ah never did. I just want you to know that you've got friends that'll try to help you. And we'll stand by you, no matter what."

Twilight looked into Applejack's eyes, suspicious. "No matter what?" she echoed.

Applejack nodded. "Yup, no matter what. Ah meant well, sugarcube, but ah guess ah got a little lost along the way. Ah stopped thinking about you. And nopony can decide what's best for her friends, especially if she doesn't even listen to them. And for that ah'm really, truly sorry."

The storm that had been fiercely blowing outside calmed a little.

Applejack turned away from everypony else in the room, so none of them could see the smirk that had appeared on her face. It was the widest she had smiled all week. "Ah guess ah learned my lesson, Twilight," she said, her voice sounding genuinely remorseful. Then she lifted her head and turned, pretending she had just been struck with a bright idea. "Ya know, you could include this in yer next friendship report!"

"See?" squealed Pinkie Pie as she began hopping up and down. "Now we're friends again, like Odysseus and Achilles."

"Who?" said Owlowski, having awoken from his perch.

"That... could be a good idea," said Twilight, struggling to find the right words to say in the aftermath.

Applejack stood tall, a proud grin plastered onto her face. "In fact," she suggested, "why don't ya write it right now?"

"Is now really a good time?" asked Rainbow Dash skeptically.

"You shouldn't push her like that," said Fluttershy, but she was too quiet for any of the other ponies to hear her.

Pinkie Pie frowned, beginning to understand what Applejack was getting at. Applejack's behavior left a bad taste in her mouth, but she kept quiet, curious to see what would happen next.

Twilight stared blankly at Applejack, and her breathing began to quicken again. Outside, the storm increased in intensity. "Now?" she asked.

Applejack nodded. "Of course now," she said. "You should do it while it's still fresh in our minds." She paused and leaned inward. "Unless, of course, ya don't know how."

Chapter 6

The Element of Kindness

SUNSIDE

"Well?" said Applejack, running out of patience. "Ya gonna write the letter or ain't ya?"

"I'll do it," said Twilight, her voice panicked. "I just need a quill and paper, right?" She used her horn to lift a blank parchment and a quill from the desk. "Let's see. 'Today I learned that a true friend will always support you.'"

She didn't get a chance to write a second sentence before Applejack pushed the paper away from her. "Now hold on, Twilight," she said. "Don't you need to address it first?"

Twilight swallowed. "Address?" she stuttered.

"Yeah, you silly filly," interjected Pinkie Pie. "Address means you write the name of the pony you're sending it to."

"I know what it means," said Twilight resentfully. She raised the quill to the paper again, but didn't write. She stared at the paper nervously, then at Applejack, then at the paper again. Beginning to sweat, she squeezed her eyes shut, trying to think of a way out.

"Here's a hint," said Applejack, growing tired. "She more or less raised you."

Taking a guess, Twilight began writing. "Dear Mom," she said, dictating as she wrote.

Applejack grabbed the paper with her teeth and threw it to the ground. "Wrong answer," she said. She pushed her face up against Twilight, forcing the smaller unicorn back. "Who. Are. You?" she asked, saying each word

with as much anger as she could muster. "Because you sure as hay ain't Twilight Sparkle."

Twilight trembled, but this time Applejack felt little remorse. "Answer me," Applejack ordered.

The unicorn looked up into the earth pony's green eyes. "I am Twilight Sparkle," she said, but the voice was lacking resolve, almost uncertain of its own conviction. "I swear to you, I'm Twilight."

"Liar," spat Applejack, and behind her a book toppled off the shelf and hit the floor. No pony save Fluttershy noticed it.

"Applejack," Fluttershy cautioned, but she was again unheard.

"I'm not her," said Twilight. "But I am Twilight. Just not your Twilight."

"And what in tarnation is that supposed to mean?"

Outside, lightning flashed. Pinkie Pie felt a light breeze against her fur, and she looked for the open window.

"What did you do with the real Twilight?" Rainbow Dash asked, finally convinced.

Twilight shook her head. "I think," she began, but she couldn't finish. She was beginning to feel overwhelmed. A burning sensation lit up her gut, a familiar feeling she knew to well. "I think," she said again, struggling to get the words out. "I think you should go away. Please."

Applejack shook her head. "That ain't happening. So spill. You still look like Twilight, and I don't want to mess up that familiar face. But I will, for her."

"No," Twilight breathed as Applejack and Rainbow Dash forced her into the corner. She felt as if she was suffocating. "Please."

"Um... guys?" said Pinkie Pie, as a vase behind her melted into slag. The wind was stronger now, tangling Pinkie Pie's mane into knots. Frames on the wall began to swing violently. "Guys," she shouted, although she only succeeded in catching Fluttershy's attention. "All the doors and windows

are closed, so where's the wind from?"

Applejack, undeterred, grabbed Twilight on the shoulder. The sharp sound of electric discharge lanced into everypony's ears, and a second later, Applejack was dazed and head-first on the floor on the other side of the room.

Twilight began to levitate off of the ground, the wind curling around her, forming a protective sphere that flashed every color of the rainbow. Her horn began to emit a blinding light that rode on the air currents and leaped around the room. Furniture disappeared, or shrunk, or turned into rabbits.

Applejack struggled to her hooves. "Twilight, stop that!" she called.

Twilight wanted to. It was painful to endure, the magic forcing its way out through every orifice. Her eyes squeezed shut, and when they reopened they glowed an intense violet that brought agony to her eyelids.

Applejack tried to approach Twilight again, but was tossed against the back wall the instant she raised a hoof. A sickening crack resounded through the room, and Applejack didn't try to stand again.

The other ponies backed up slowly, aided by the harsh wind that was forcing them away from Twilight. Rainbow Dash began to feel incredibly hot underneath her mane. A bolt of lightening leaped from Twilight's horn, striking a doorknob and letting off a shower of sparks.

Twilight resigned and hung her head, no longer trying to fight the energy that was rippling across her body. She didn't want this to happen, but there was nothing she could do. The howling wind drowned out every sound, and Twilight felt herself sinking into a murky blackness. Then, one noise managed to break through the maelstrom, and she heard it clearly.

"Twilight."

She struggled to focus her eyes, to see what was going on around her. To her complete shock, while Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie were forced up against the wall, trying to survive the winds that were now beginning to topple bookshelves and fling them in any direction, Fluttershy was anchored. Her body bent forward and her wings folded inward as tightly as

they could, Fluttershy was the only static element of the shifting chaos that was once the library.

"Twilight," she said again, not shouting but no longer in her usual whimper. "You don't have to do this."

Twilight tried to figure out what to do, how to explain that Fluttershy was wrong, that whatever happened was going to happen. She opened her mouth to talk, but the only sounds she made were screams.

A change had settled over Fluttershy. Hearing the scream, the pegasus flinched, but she then strengthened her resolve and pushed against the wind. She no longer seemed afraid; her fear had been replaced with a serene calmness. Twilight looked into Fluttershy's eyes and saw the empathy within them.

"You can stop this," said Fluttershy, taking another step forward. "If you have enough power to do this, you have enough to turn it off."

Twilight scowled, tears streaming down her face. She never understood ponies who would risk themselves for ponies like her. She didn't deserve their compassion. She was worthless, an outcast, a mistake. Everything and everypony she touched turned to ashes, in some cases literally, even when they could have avoided it simply by walking away. Twilight looked at Fluttershy again, seeing another pony within her, the last pony who had flown too close to the sun and gotten burnt. The memory of the other pony, the golden-maned pegasus, burned brightly in her mind, and Twilight knew it would kill her to watch it happen all over again.

Fluttershy, having closed the distance, wrapped Twilight in a hug. "You can do this," she said, whispering words of encouragement. "It's okay now. Everything's going to be okay." Twilight could feel Fluttershy's muscles as they tensed and locked up. The electricity was now arcing directly between them, and their pain was shared. Yet Fluttershy refused to let go or make even the quietest sound to show that she was hurting. Instead she only whispered. "I'm here for you. Everything will be okay." Fluttershy wiped a tear off of Twilight's face and smiled. "Feel free to cry on my shoulder, alright?"

Twilight buried her muzzle in Fluttershy's mane and cried harder than she

ever had in her life.

The storm began to die down, and Pinkie stopped shivering.

Rainbow Dash approached the embracing ponies, confused and feeling somewhat scornful towards Fluttershy's treacherous behavior. "Fluttershy, what are you..." she began, but she froze when she saw Fluttershy narrow her eyes, the beginning of a stare.

"No," said Fluttershy, the assertion in her voice unusual and unsettling for Rainbow Dash to hear. Then it softened. "Can you check on Applejack, please?" Rainbow nodded silently and trotted over to Applejack, who was beginning to moan and lift her head.

"What in blazes," muttered Applejack as she tried to understand what had happened to her. She tried to stand, but cried out at a sharp pain in one of her hind legs.

"Thank Celestia," Rainbow Dash breathed. "I think she's okay," she called to the rest of the ponies. "Well, all things considered."

Pinkie Pie galloped toward Fluttershy before bouncing in circles around her. "You did it!" she cried. "You did it!"

"Did what?" asked Applejack, still somewhat dazed.

"Fluttershy saved Ponyville!" shouted Pinkie Pie, celebratorily and emphatically. "I was giving Gummy a bath when my eyes started twitching and hooves started itching and I started getting shivery all over, like when I eat too much candy only I hadn't eaten any candy in at least an hour so I went to see Fluttershy because I knew it was my Pinkie Pie sense saying something really bad was about to happen to Ponyville and Fluttershy was the only pony who could stop it in time even though she's not very tough but I told her this and I told her that it was here because I just knew that Twilight would be involved just like she always is whenever my Pinkie Pie sense is tingling and I was right again and Twilight started to go *WHOOSH* and then Fluttershy hugged her because that's what she does and she's so nice to everypony and then everything went back to normal and I was thinking about how maybe I could throw another party to cheer everypony up like the surprise one we were going to do for Twilight- sorry,

Twilight- but we couldn't because she wasn't home and we didn't know why but that was okay because I still had leftover cupcakes and streamers and that banner that was for Rainbow Dash until I erased part of it and put Twilight's name in which looks kind of funny because it's longer to write so it didn't really fit on the banner but nopony noticed so I figured it was okay." She paused and inhaled for ten seconds. "And then Fluttershy saved Ponyville!" she shouted.

Twilight had stopped following the speech after the first occurrence of the words "Pinkie Pie Sense."

"Pinkie Sense?" she asked Fluttershy.

Rainbow Dash shrugged. "It's a thing," she said.

"But that doesn't..." began Twilight.

Rainbow cut her off. "Don't start this again," she muttered. "It was bad enough the first time."

Applejack frowned. "Where's Apple Bloom?" she asked Rainbow Dash.

"Upstairs, huddled in a little wooden box with her friends. Some ponies don't know how to handle a storm."

Applejack smiled, relieved that her sister hadn't been caught in the storm, while Fluttershy stared into Twilight's familiar, alien eyes, trying to figure out what to do next.

"You don't have to do this," said Twilight as Fluttershy helped her across the threshold and into the house.

"What else could I do?" asked Fluttershy. "I think the others are going to start being a little nicer to you, but having you sleep in Twilight's house was where Applejack drew the line."

Twilight didn't blame her. "I mean, I can find some other place to spend the night," she said.

"You need to be comfortable," said Fluttershy. "And I think Applejack wants you under a watchful eye." As she spoke, Angel hopped onto the table from his bed, pointing two claws first at his own eyes and then at Twilight's.

Twilight tried to laugh, but found she couldn't. The sight of Applejack being so abusive and cruel made Twilight never want to laugh again. It wasn't every day that a pony got attacked by her only friend. Angel hopped onto Twilight's back, but she did nothing to force the rabbit off.

"There's only one bed," explained Fluttershy. "Upstairs, on the right. I can sleep on the couch."

"No." That was the one service Twilight could give, her one reparation, even though she knew it wouldn't be enough. "I've already stolen one life. I'm not going to start taking yours. I'll take the couch, and that's that."

Fluttershy nodded, understanding. She started up the staircase, but stopped when she heard Twilight's voice calling to her.

"One question," said Twilight. "Her and Applejack. Were they good friends?"

"I guess so," said Fluttershy. "I don't know about Twilight; she was always so private. But Applejack cared about her a lot."

Twilight smiled, a small bit of warmth and hope flowing into her. "Good night, then," she said.

"Good night," repeated Fluttershy. She entered her bedroom and realized that sleeping in her own bed wasn't going to work, since it was now inhabited by two and a half dozen sleeping chickens. She wandered back out into the hall and saw that Twilight hadn't taken the couch but instead had made a nest on the rug with a sheet. Feeling sorry for the stranger that looked like her friend, Fluttershy descended the stairs and laid down beside her.

"I thought you hated me," said Twilight coldly.

Fluttershy was shocked for a moment, and heart melted in pity. "Hate is a

strong word," she said softly.

"No it's not." said Twilight. "If it was, it wouldn't be used so often. Now answer, do you hate me?"

Fluttershy was tempted to answer immediately, but she stopped herself. If Twilight wanted an honest, heartfelt answer, she would get one. "I don't know," Fluttershy admitted at last. "You've done some really bad things. I'm scared to think of what you did with Twilight. But I also know that tomorrow we're going to work together to get her back."

"Do they hate me?" Twilight asked.

"I guess we'll find out tomorrow," said Fluttershy.

Twilight, satisfied by this answer, fell asleep.

Before Fluttershy joined her, she noticed that the weather outside was calmer than she had ever seen before in Ponyville.

The next morning, Rarity was preparing to open up her shop when she heard a knock at her door. Rainbow Dash was waiting anxiously when she opened it. "Everypony's meeting at the library," she explained curtly before she took Rarity around the neck and dragged her out of the shop. "Shop can wait," she said when Rarity tried to protest.

Rarity followed her across the Ponyville to the back entrance of the library. As they entered, she saw the mess that had been left by the previous night's encounter. Shelves were overturned and entire tables were on their sides. Fluttershy was comforting an incredibly sobered Twilight while Pinkie Pie adjusted a cast on Applejack's leg.

Rarity tried to piece together what had happened, but couldn't. "Goodness, what is this?" she asked Rainbow Dash.

Rainbow looked at Rarity. "It's the end of the beginning," she said.

Chapter 7

The Family Business

MOONSIDE

Pumpkin was waiting for Twilight anxiously when she climbed out of the burrow, struggling beneath the weight of the homemade saddlebag. When the purple unicorn was finally out of the earth, the filly began jumping, impatient and ready to move.

"Hold your horses," muttered Twilight. "I told you I would take you home. Leaping around like this isn't going to make it happen any faster."

Pumpkin dug her hooves into the earth in irritation. "I know," she groaned. "But we're finally getting a move on, and even then you're slow."

Pumpkin had been ready to leave not long after Twilight had met Fluttershy, but Twilight had refused to let Pumpkin go off into the Everfree Forest on her own. Fortunately, Fluttershy had somehow managed to get Pumpkin to stay, as Twilight would have been unable to force the issue herself.

"I mean, my mum's probably scared to death," said Pumpkin. "You made me stay a whole day. A whole day! What if she thinks I've been eaten by a manaco or something?"

The thought of Pumpkin's poor mother hadn't really occurred to Twilight. "I'll explain everything to her, I promise," said Twilight. "And you're lucky. Fluttershy really wanted me to rest for two days before I left. I managed to convince her I'd be fine with one."

Fluttershy. Something was very wrong with her. That much was apparent, even for somepony who didn't know her. But after their first encounter, during their second conversation, Twilight realized just how bad her condition was.

"I'm really sorry to bring this up again," Twilight had said when she and Fluttershy were alone in the burrow. "But how long have your wings been, you know?" She didn't want to finish, but what she had said should have been clear enough.

"It's fine," was Fluttershy's reply. "It doesn't bother me that much anymore. They don't hurt. But they've been like that as long as I can remember, as long as I've been living here, perhaps."

Something about Fluttershy's behavior had unsettled Twilight. The pegasus seemed nervous around her, even though they were good friends. Twilight slowly realized that Fluttershy had never referred to her by name.

"Fluttershy," she had asked, scared of the answer. "Do you know who I am?"

The silence that followed told Twilight everything she needed. Fluttershy didn't remember her. From the conversation that followed, it became clear that she didn't remember Pinkie Pie either. Or Applejack. It was as if all of her memories had been wiped clean, and none of their adventures together had ever happened.

Now, as Twilight and Pumpkin began their journey through the woods, Fluttershy's health was the only thing on Twilight's mind. "We need to get a doctor out here," she told Pumpkin. "First thing when we get back to Ponyville."

"Why don't you ask Fluttershy?" asked Pumpkin. "She patched you up nice enough."

"I mean, a doctor for Fluttershy," explained Twilight. "She doesn't remember who I am. There's something in her head, like some kind of mad horse disease, and whatever it is that's got her acting like this is making her not remember things she really should know."

"Oh," said Pumpkin, and both ponies stopped talking.

The only way Twilight could measure time was by evaluating her energy. Each step made her a little more exhausted.

After a while, Pumpkin broke the silence. "Are you sure we're going the right way?" she asked.

"Of course," said Twilight. "Fluttershy showed me which way to go. Why, don't you trust Fluttershy?"

"Not really," said Pumpkin, and Twilight realized that she might agree with the filly's decision.

"Why can't you use your adventurer skills to get out of here? Retracing your steps, maybe?" Twilight asked Pumpkin, recalling their first meeting.

"Cuz," said Pumpkin. "Adventures are always going into jungles, to find treasure and stuff like that. You never see an adventurer leaving a jungle, do you?" She looked up at Twilight, who was straining under the weight of the saddlebag. "You positive you don't want any help with that?" she asked.

"Nope," said Twilight, determined. "A good part of it is food, anyway. I just don't think Fluttershy wanted us to be completely unprepared.

"I helped," said Pumpkin, who was now on Twilight's back and eating salad out of the bag. Twilight glanced over to where the filly had been standing a moment ago, wondering how she could have possibly moved so quickly.

Pumpkin sprung off of Twilight's back, and the saddlebag felt noticeably lighter. She began jumping in circles around Twilight.

"Did you eat all of that?" Twilight asked the filly.

Pumpkin nodded. "All gone."

"Well then, you'd better slow down, or else you're going to get a stomachache, or you'll get all worn out," warned Twilight.

Pumpkin was still bouncing when Twilight collapsed, all of her energy gone.

"Trixie," moaned Pumpkin, prodding her, and Twilight mentally berated herself for not coming up with a more bearable name to use. "Trixie, we're almost there."

"I don't care," said Twilight, who had found the dirt road surprisingly comfortable. Then the words registered. "Really?" she asked, trying to lift her head. The trees had gotten noticeably thinner since they had started, but Twilight hadn't been willing to get her hopes up. "How do you know?" she asked.

"Easy. I can see the light."

Twilight looked around. "Lights?" she said. "Where?"

Pumpkin looked at Twilight sternly. "Now you're just foaling with me," she said. "I don't like bein' foaled. Up there, in the sky."

Twilight looked up and saw it. A single bright light hovering above Ponyville. She might have thought it was a star, but it was far too bright. Nothing else in the sky came close to matching it. Then, to her amazement, the light moved. It swung sharply downward beneath the canopy before rising up again, somewhat to the right.

"What is it?" asked Twilight, transfixed.

Pumpkin rolled her eyes. "It's the Ponyville light. Honestly 'tain't nothing too special. You've never seen it before, though? What are ya, nocturnal?"

"Nocturnal?" echoed Twilight.

"Yeah. The light only comes out during the day. It's like the sun, but smaller."

Twilight was still confused. "This is daytime?" she asked. If they were really close to the edge of the forest, the lighting shouldn't still be pitch-black.

"Duh. 'Cuz of the light. That's how you tell the night from day."

It took Twilight a few seconds to realize that Pumpkin was probably playing some kind of prank on her. The filly must have seen the light and decided to have fun with it. "Well, you got me," said Twilight, and Pumpkin stared at her, not comprehending. "Maybe we should just take you back to your mom now," she added, trying to give Pumpkin a chance to move past the joke without any embarrassment.

Ten minutes of trotting later, a very familiar building came into view on the very fringe of Ponyville.

"This is where you live?" asked Twilight, shocked.

Pumpkin smiled, proud to be home. "Yup!" she said. "Welcome to Sweet Apple Acres."

The barn stood majestically in front of the sprawling fields; there was no mistaking the farm. Yet something put Twilight on edge, something that she couldn't place. Actually, Twilight mused, that feeling, that familiarity overlaying a sense of the bizarre, was beginning to become a recurring theme in Twilight's struggles. She felt like there was always something in the corner of her eye, something just beyond her comprehension, and it created a sense of dread, a pit in the bottom of her stomach.

"You live here?" said Twilight, trying desperately to fit together the pieces of the puzzle.

Pumpkin stared at her again. "That's what I said."

"But I've never seen you here before."

"And I've never seen you before, period," said Pumpkin. "What's your point?"

"I thought only Applejack lived here, with Granny Smith and Big Macintosh," said Twilight.

Pumpkin shrugged. "Beats me," she said. "There were lots of ponies living on the farm when Gramps and Mum and Dad moved on." She began sprinting down the road toward the large entrance gate without checking to see if Twilight was following her.

Twilight followed slowly, her face furrowed into a frown and her eyes looking at the ground. She wondered how long she had been gone. Was Pumpkin some relative of Applejack's?

As Twilight examined her surroundings, the differences began to compound. Pumpkin was right; there were many ponies on the farm. Twilight saw mostly glimpses of them, through windows or in the distance, but she could easily count past the four residents of the farm she knew. The fourth was Apple Bloom, whom Twilight had accidentally skipped over in her confusion. Some of the buildings seemed old worn down, including a shed that Twilight remembered had been rebuilt a couple months ago; she had helped.

Twilight tried to figure out why there were so many other ponies working, and according to Pumpkin, living on the farm. The Summer Sun celebration was still a few months away. Was it apple harvesting season? Twilight couldn't remember, so she looked out into the apple orchard and realized what had looked so wrong with the orchard: a distinct lack of trees.

There were some apple trees; the fields weren't completely barren. Yet large swaths of grass littered the farm, and some sections were growing other plants, like potatoes and pumpkins.

Twilight could only think of one explanation for the sudden changes. A lot of time must have passed since the last time she had seen the farm. She reached up and touched the bandages on her face. Maybe the injuries and concussion had caused some memory loss. That would explain why everything seemed so disjointed, why the day Twilight had gone into the forest with Rainbow Dash seemed so distant. The distorted memories could be her mind trying to repair itself. Twilight wasn't a neurologist, but she decided that this was a possible explanation, and seeing as she couldn't think of a better one, Occam's Razor said it was probably correct.

She needed a calendar. She was about to try and catch up to Pumpkin to ask her the date when a shrill voice calling Pumpkin's name interrupted her thoughts and made both ponies freeze. Pumpkin turned and leaped even higher than normal when she saw who was speaking to them.

"Rarity!" she cried, and she dashed between Twilight's legs and out of sight. Twilight tried to track Pumpkin as the filly moved but only ended up viewing the now upside-down world between her forelegs.

A white earth pony wearing a Stetson looked at Twilight briefly in confusion before turning her attention to the bouncing filly. She bit down on Pumpkin's ear, holding her in place. "Settle down, now," she instructed between clenched teeth. Pumpkin's leaps became smaller until she was vibrating slowly on the ground. The white pony let go and promptly spit onto the ground. "Better," she said. "But you taste terrible. What have you been up to? Your mother is worried sick." Before Pumpkin could answer, the white pony looked back at Twilight. "And who's the mare who looks like she lost a fight to an owl-bear?"

Twilight self-consciously rubbed the bandage, wishing she would stop being reminded of it. "Rarity?" she said quietly, trying to wrap her head around this new piece of information.

Rarity sighed. "Go take a bath," she told Pumpkin. "I'll let your kin know you're safe." She swatted Pumpkin on the rump with her tail, and Pumpkin took off toward the house. "You. With me," Rarity ordered Twilight, and she complied. "What's your name?" Rarity asked, once the gap had been closed.

The voice did sound like Rarity's, thought Twilight. It wasn't something that she would have figured out purely by listening, but since she knew it was supposed to be Rarity, she could see the resemblance. Rather, it sounded like a hybrid between Rarity's normal voice and Applejack's, like a cowpony that chose her words carefully. She had both Rarity's elegance and Applejack's softness and honesty. "Rarity?" Twilight repeated, not knowing what else to do.

Rarity shook her head. "No, that's me. I'm asking who you are."

Yet the pony standing before her looking intimidating couldn't be Rarity,

thought Twilight. She couldn't see the cutie mark from this angle, but this "Rarity" didn't have a horn. Then Twilight remembered Fluttershy, her wings broken off, the stubs standing out at an angle, and Twilight almost threw up again. She forced herself to look up at Rarity, the other pony's blue eyes examining her suspiciously. The dream of Rarity selling apples returned, and Twilight tried to remember if the dream-Rarity had a horn.

"You," began Twilight, "Your, you don't, I mean, what happened to your..." Unable to get the words across, she began frantically gesturing to the horn on her own forehead.

Rarity rolled her eyes, annoyed by their newest guest. "You mean this?" she asked, pushing up the brim on her Stetson, revealing the horn underneath.

Twilight breathed a giant sigh of relief. "Thank Celestia," she breathed.

Rarity eyed Twilight no longer with suspicion but with confusion and concern. "Are you all right?" she asked. "You're the first pony that's asked to see my horn before." Realizing what she had just said, her face flushed with embarrassment. "There were probably a dozen better ways to word that," she muttered. Desperate to move on, she asked Twilight, "Would you like to come inside for a moment? Those bandages look atrocious. We should change them out, and you look like you could use something to eat."

Twilight nodded eagerly, thankful for Rarity's generosity. She still had many questions running through her, and one of them was more important than the rest. Based on Rarity's behavior, however, Twilight was afraid that she already knew the answer.

Do you recognize me?

Five minutes later, Twilight was sitting at a small circular table across from Rarity, sipping some cold apple cider. They were in a back room of the main building, a room the farm had decided to use as a combined food storage and tool shed.

"So," said Rarity, leaning forward. "Who did you say you were again?"

Twilight felt crushed. Rarity didn't remember who she was either. She answered honestly, not wanting to hide anything from her friend, even if the friend didn't know her.

"Twilight Sparkle," repeated Rarity slowly, as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Well, I guess that explains quite a bit. Except what you were doing with Pumpkin."

"I found her in the forest. I wasn't going to eat her soul or anything!" exclaimed Twilight, getting defensive. To her surprise, Rarity began laughing. Twilight sat still dumbfounded.

"Darling," laughed Rarity, "you hardly seem like the type to eat anypony's soul. Even if that were possible."

"But Pumpkin said..." muttered Twilight, trailing off.

"I've been trying to figure you out, Twilight," continued Rarity. "Who you are, that sort of thing. It's easy to figure out what you're not. For example, I know you don't eat souls. But you're clueless enough to listen to a little filly on matters you should already be well-aware of. Namely, yourself. Be honest with me, Twilight. What are you doing here?"

Twilight finished the cider. She leaned in to match Rarity. "I think that there's something wrong with me," she confessed.

Rarity started laughing again. "Oh, I doubt there's any argument against that," she said. Noticing Twilight's empty cup, she added, "Sorry, darling. I wish I could give you more, but everything here's strictly rationed. They can't notice anything's gone missing."

"Rationed?" The word surprised Twilight. "But this is the Sweet Apple Acres. Half the food in Ponyville comes out of here."

Rarity sighed again, and her face once again showed worry. "That may have been true, before the Darkness. Now it's all we can do to get enough to eat."

"The Darkness?" asked Twilight, who hadn't heard anything after that.

Rarity raised an eyebrow. "You really are behind the times, aren't you, Darling? Look outside. It's the middle of the day, if you still believe in differentiating them. The sun doesn't rise anymore. It hasn't, not since the Summer Sun Celebration two years ago. And food doesn't grow without sunlight. The whole extended Apple family's moved here to work together, to make what we can, even if it's barely enough to get through. We've got the Apples, the Melons, and the Pumpkins, all under one roof."

Twilight stopped breathing. "That's impossible," she said. "We stopped it. We did. Both of us. Together."

Rarity shook her head and looked at Twilight sadly. "I don't know what you're going on about, Twilight. I'd remember something like that, I think. And the two of us have never been acquainted before today."

Something Rarity had said before began to bother Twilight, and she figured now would be a good time to ask. "Which one are you?" she asked.

Rarity didn't understand. "Excuse me?" she said.

"The Apples, the Melons, and the Pumpkins. Which one are you?"

"Oh, I'm nothing yet," said Rarity, and a small mischievous smile spread across her lips. "I just work here. And I've started living here too. I'm not a blood relative, but I'm still part of the big family. At least, they treat me like I am, and I like it that way." She picked up Twilight's plate and carried it to a sink. "Now, let's get those bandages replaced."

That evening, Rarity was sitting in a rocking chair behind the house, watching Apple Bloom and Scootaloo tussle on the ground over a ball. The game was a sport of Apple Bloom's creation, and she would often force the other fillies on the farm to play it with her when she wasn't trying to find her special talent with her friends.

Rarity watched as Apple Bloom gained control of the ball and bucked it toward Pumpkin, who shot it past Sweetie Belle and into the goal. What

she wouldn't give to be that young again, without a care, not understanding the hardships she would have to endure to make a living.

Today had been a relatively lax day, but tomorrow she would have to start uprooting some of the potato plants to see which ones had become infected with a rather nasty worm. It would be a lot of hard work, and Rarity figured she could manage. She wasn't averse to labor like she had been as a filly, and it paid well. She could feel the muscles in her chest and couldn't imagine what it would be like to live without them. She also couldn't forget the numerous lessons discipline had taught her. She recited the Wayfarer's Creed silently to herself.

Never do by horn what can be done by hoof. Patience, endurance, and the value of work can't be taught with magic.

It had taken Rarity far too long to realize this, and so she had made the promise with herself. No pony else was enforcing it but her; maybe that's why she found it so compelling. If she broke it, it would become meaningless, and she had lived by it far too long to risk sacrificing its meaning.

After she had changed Twilight's bandages, it had become apparent that the purple unicorn still hadn't recovered enough to be out of bed. She was easily fatigued and had trouble maintaining focus during the procedure, and so she gave up her bed to Twilight. After all, it wasn't like she used it that much now.

Pumpkin's mother had approached her soon afterward, anxious to meet the stranger that had rescued her daughter. That would have to happen tomorrow too.

Who was Twilight Sparkle? Rarity had heard the legends; so had every pony, but she'd never given them much credit. The real Twilight had turned out to be a confused, disoriented mess, and Rarity had taken pity on her. She only hoped the rest of the farm would react the same way when they learned who their new guest was.

Pumpkin bucked the ball again, and this time it went over goalpost, hitting Granny Smith, who nearly toppled over backward. Rarity called out the filly's name, scolding her before going to check that the older mare was

unhurt.

"Pumpkin Alyssa Pie!"

Chapter 8

Shattered Glass

SUNSIDE

"You know," said Twilight to Applejack as they trod along the path, leaving Ponyville behind them, "this would be so much easier if you let me lead."

Applejack snorted. "And give you the chance to escape?" she said, laughing. "Not a chance. I know the way. I think. I can lead fine," she added before stumbling over the cast on her leg, making the other ponies slow their pace again.

From the back of the line, Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. "This isn't going to be like the time you tried to take us to Zecora's, is it?"

"We got out of that okay, didn't we?" asked Spike, who was riding on Rainbow Dash's back. As he spoke, he lost his grip on Rainbow's coat and nearly toppled, and he had to grab onto her mane to avoid from falling off altogether.

Rainbow winced from the pain, but said nothing as Spike climbed up her

mane and back into position. "Eventually," she said. "After a certain dragon panicked and started sending random sticks over to Celestia. We're lucky she was smart enough to figure it out." Her voice then dropped an octave, and each words emerged from her lips separately and covered in malice. "She summoned the Royal Guard to find us. I've never been more humiliated in my life."

"Sure you have," interrupted Fluttershy, who was walking alongside Twilight in the middle. "What about Rarity's botched fashion show? Or that incident back at Flight School in the principal's office?"

"Which one?" asked Rainbow, who had visited the principal more times than she could count on her two front hooves. Which was to say, she had been more than twice.

"The only one where the principal hadn't called you there. Remember, you made me promise never to tell anypony about it?"

"No..." said Rainbow, still trying to narrow down the possibilities.

"I think it involved a certain griffin and a can of WD-40, among some other things," recalled Fluttershy.

"Right..." moaned Rainbow Dash. "She didn't even go to the same school, you know that? Some snooty private school."

Rarity, trotting next to Rainbow Dash, broke her silence. "This nostalgia is nice and all, but it doesn't exactly explain what is going on here."

Spike shrugged. "You've got me," he said. "I'm as lost as you are."

Pinkie Pie, who had managed to refrain from speaking by hopping in circles around the other six, found an opportunity to join the conversation and seized it. "Twilight's been acting all funny because she's not Twilight," she said.

"Yes, yes," muttered Rarity. "You explained that already. But where are we going?"

"Sky Mirror Lake," answered Twilight. "I can explain things better once we

get there. Trust me."

"Not likely," huffed Applejack. "I'd trust ya about as far as I can buck ya. I wouldn't put it past ya to run away."

"I can teleport, Oran-" Twilight paused. "I mean, Applejack," she finished. "If I didn't want to cooperate, I'd already be halfway to Stalliongrad."

"Jus' don't talk," ordered Applejack. "The next time you open that muzzle of yours, it better be explaining what the hay's goin' on around here."

To Twilight's relief, Sky Mirror Lake existed sunside.

Sunside was the word she had used in her notes to describe this world, and it made sense. The side with the sun, even if it wasn't sunny all the time. Now, as the group neared the water's edge, six pairs of eyes turned to her, expectantly.

"Okay," she began, her voice shaking. "I want you all to imagine that the world is like this lake."

Applejack's eyes narrowed. "Excuse me," she said insincerely, "but what does this have to do with you tellin' us where the real Twilight is, or what you're doin' here lookin' like her." She felt a shove against her shoulder, and she turned to see Rainbow Dash giving a glare.

"Let her finish," said Rainbow Dash. "She'll get to it."

Twilight shrunk back a little, frightened by the animosity. Fluttershy gave a small nod of encouragement, and Twilight continued.

"I told you, I am Twilight, just," She paused, not sure how to say it. She eventually decided to just explain it the way it was. "I'm her from another world."

"Horseapples."

"Now, as I was saying, imagine this lake is the world. Look into the water, and tell me what you see."

The others obeyed and began scanning the water for whatever Twilight was talking about. Fluttershy, noticing a school of fish, became distracted, giggling as they darted about. Applejack begrudgingly complied but didn't say anything. Pinkie Pie, rather than watch anything actually in the water, began making faces, using the lake as a mirror. Rainbow Dash looked over at Pinkie Pie's reflection and began laughing, filled with a sort of giddiness that could only happen around Pinkie Pie, and had to happen around Pinkie Pie.

"What do you see?" asked Twilight.

Rainbow Dash turned her head forward and examined her own reflection. "Just some kelp," she answered, "and rocks. And one very awesome pony."

"Exactly," said Twilight. Rainbow Dash raised her head, confused about what she had done to get the question right. "Your reflections," clarified Twilight. "If the lake is the world, then it has two halves. The part above the surface, where you are, and the part below, where your reflection is."

"You're Twilight's reflection," guessed Spike.

"And she's mine. In a manner of speaking."

Spike looked back at the water. "I guess," he said. "But wait. The reflections are exactly the same as us. Wouldn't that make your world just like ours?"

Twilight smiled. "An excellent observation, Spike. Which brings us to point number two: magic." She lifted a rock off of the ground with telekinesis. "Now imagine this rock is a spell. Watch what happens when I 'cast' it." She tossed the rock into the water, where it sunk to the bottom, creating a number of concentric waves at the point of impact. Pinkie Pie watched her reflection as it was distorted by the waves passing over it.

Fluttershy leaped away from the water and hid in the grass, while Pinkie Pie continued making faces in the water. "It's like a fun house mirror!" she

exclaimed.

"Right," said Twilight. "Magic has a measurable 'rippling' effect of sorts on the other side. It's the use of magic that makes the two worlds different."

"Nah," said Applejack. "Look. The waves are already gone. They don't last forever."

Twilight nodded, trying to stay calm. "Right, Applejack, but remember this is just a model. When it comes to magic, the ripples can last a lot longer before they settle out. The point is, sometime in the past there was very powerful magic. Powerful enough to cause a major divergence between worlds that still hasn't resolved itself. That's why I don't know the things she knows. I'm not her; my life is completely different. That's why I wanted to come here."

"How?" asked Rainbow Dash, who now didn't know what to feel about the impostor. "What's so bad about life over there, on the other side?"

Twilight looked at the ground. Some part of her had been trying to convince her that the dark and barren world was only in her imagination, and it had taken all of her courage not to give up and believe it. "I never met any of you guys, for starters," she said. "You know the Summer Sun celebration, two years ago? That was the last day the sun rose in Equestria."

"Black Snooty?" asked Pinkie Pie.

Twilight stared at the pink mare, not comprehending. "Sure," she said at last. "This creature, Nightmare Moon, came to Equestria and covered it in eternal night. I was supposed to stop her. I failed. All across Equestria ponies are starving, and it's all my fault. But that's not important. The important part here is the rock."

"What's so special about a rock?" asked Rarity.

"Not what it is," corrected Twilight. "Where it is. The rock is on the other side of the water now. In the model, that means it's gone through the barrier between worlds. So, the question we asked ourselves was, if magical potential can travel across worlds, then why can't energy, or

matter? What if it was possible to send a pony through to the other side?"

"We?" asked Rainbow Dash.

"Zecora and me. She was my assistant."

"So that's what you did," said Applejack, trying to regain control of the situation. "You couldn't stand to look at the world you created, so you ran away."

Rarity shot Applejack a glare. "It wasn't her fault, Darling, it's was Nightmare Moon's."

"We couldn't run away. We couldn't figure it out," said Twilight. "Our first experiments were with light. We were able to build mirrors that would subject the photons to a magical field, force them to cross over. It was a way to see into your world, and it worked both ways. That was how we met the other Zecora. It must be a strange experience, meeting yourself. I don't know if I'll ever get to know it, though."

"But you did," said Rainbow Dash, staring at the impostor that resembled her friend. "You had to have met yourself. You kidnapped her."

"Let me finish," said Twilight. "After that, we started to become a bit more ambitious. We could send small items across, even though it took a lot of energy. We could even control where they landed, to a certain extent. And then I guess we got cocky. Full of ourselves, because we tried it on a pony."

"And?" asked Pinkie Pie.

Twilight closed her eyes, once again imagining the poor mare's singed flesh and flaming mane. "It was a failure," she explained. "A catastrophic failure. I don't know what went wrong. Maybe we didn't have enough power. But she didn't go through all the way."

"What happened?" asked Fluttershy, and the look on Twilight's face, grimacing and about to cry again, told Fluttershy she had struck a tender chord.

"We needed two burial sites," answered Twilight, slowly, trying desperately not to relive the memories. "One on each side."

"Oh," said Applejack quietly, her calm breaking.

"I'm so sorry, darling," counseled Rarity, not sure what else to do.

"We gave up after that," said Twilight. "It wasn't worth losing somepony else. We just wanted to ease the suffering, do what we could. We started building a magical greenhouse that could grow food, even without the sun. If we couldn't bring back the sun, we could at least try and solve the hunger problem. I like to think we saved a lot of lives with that." Twilight smiled, knowing that she had done some good, even if it was just reversing damage she had caused.

"Twilight," interrupted Applejack. "This still doesn't explain how you came over here. You said you never figured out how to transport a pony."

"We didn't," said Twilight. "And Zecora moved on. But I didn't stop thinking about this place. It was an endless temptation. A paradise, just out of reach. If we could only find a way across. But we couldn't, of course. The power required increased drastically with mass. We might be able to manage a filly, but I wouldn't stoop so low as to experiment on somepony that young. We just needed some way to reduce the mass of the transfer. And eventually we did. It was a theory, something untested. But it was a way to cross over purely using things we already knew how to do. It didn't require any matter to be transferred at all. After all, a body is just flesh. It's nothing special. It was the mind we needed to get across."

"You mean a brain-switching spell?" asked Pinkie Pie, who had decided to approach the story as a riddle. She'd seen a spell like that in Twilight's library, but had failed to convince her friend to use it to prank Rainbow Dash.

"A memory exchange," corrected Twilight. "Not even the whole brain. Memories are information; they have no mass. The only requirement was that the two parties had to be in close physical proximity to each other, even if they were on other sides. I knew where she lived; I followed her enough with a mirror to figure that out. So I wrote a letter, asking her to come to the castle of the Royal Pony Sisters in the Everfree

Forest."

"I remember that," said Rainbow Dash. "We didn't see anypony there, and then Twilight just collapsed. She woke up all confused and embarrassed, so I took her home. But now that I think about it, right before it happened, I saw something. Like a shimmer in the air, only there was darkness behind it." She looked back at the lake. "It looked like ripples. That was you, wasn't it?"

"Girls," interrupted Rarity. "You're missing the important bit. This means that Twilight, our Twilight, is lost somewhere in a world ruled by that, that Tyrant Nightmare Moon. Hopefully, if she has an ounce of salt in that new brainpan of hers, she'll be hiding out somewhere safe. We just need to get the other Twilight to switch them back."

"It won't be that easy," said Twilight quietly.

"And why the hay not?" asked Applejack.

"Like I said, we need to be in close proximity to each other. I wouldn't know where to find her."

"You could build another mirror," suggested Pinkie Pie.

"Actually," said Twilight, biting her lip, "there's another reason it may not work. You see, I didn't mean to come to this world unprepared. I wanted to spend a week or two following her, figuring out how she behaved, how to blend in, but my hand got forced a little early. I was attacked."

"Attacked?" echoed Pinkie Pie with a gasp. Twilight nodded. "By what?" asked Pinkie.

"I don't know," admitted Twilight. "Whatever it was, it wasn't pony. And it hurt me, pretty badly. Left a giant gash in my face." She traced down the side of her face with a hoof.

Rainbow Dash was about to interject and ask why they couldn't even see a scar, but the answer dawned on her. "You mean you put our friend in a wounded body?"

Twilight nodded. "The wound was bleeding pretty freely, but I managed to get away from it. But it looked like a hunter, and I figured it was only a matter of time until it found me again. If I wanted to cross over, I had to do it then. It's been a week since then. I don't even know if my old body is still alive. If it received prompt medical attention it might be okay, but it wouldn't since she would have woken up in the middle of the Everfree Forest."

Rarity couldn't believe what she was hearing. "You jackanape," she whispered.

Applejack looked at Rarity, shocked. "Rarity!" she cried. "That language ain't necessary."

"Don't you get it?" shouted Rarity. "Twilight may be dead, and it's all because this pony here was so much of a coward that she threw our Twilight under a metaphorical dragon's nest to save her own flank!"

"Hey, now, we'll get her back," said Fluttershy, but none of the other ponies heard her.

"Enough!" shouted Applejack. "Now I don't know 'bout the rest of y'all, but I don't plan on leaving a friend of mine out to dry." She approached Twilight, staring her down. "There's a killer after Twi' right now because it thinks she's you. But I ain't gonna let her die. Yer going to find a way to get Twilight back," she said. "I don't care how long it takes you. And if you can't do that, then yer going to find a way to get us over there to save her ourselves."

"But without a sufficient power source..." Twilight began to mumble.

"No buts. You will save her, y'hear?"

"Don't worry," said Fluttershy. "You'll find a way. You do live in a library now, so you have plenty of research material. I believe in you."

Twilight sighed, resigning herself to the impossible task before her.

"Actually," said Pinkie Pie, "I may be able to help too."

Everypony stared at her. "And how do you plan on doing that?" asked Rainbow Dash.

"Well, not me helping, exactly," said Pinkie. "But I know a stallion who might be able to help Twilight."

"Who?" asked Twilight anxiously.

"Exactly!" shouted Pinkie Pie. Then her voice quieted. "Wait, no. Not 'who', but close. You know, he's that brown stallion with the hour glass cutie mark. I call him Doctor Whooves."

Chapter 9

The Party Hasn't Begun

The world felt hazy around Twilight, as if it wasn't entirely certain what it was supposed to look like. Objects around her seemed wavy and out of focus, and she couldn't look at them without getting a headache. The walls of the cave were almost smooth like oil, and the entire experience felt psychedelic.

This was another dream, thought Twilight. It had to be. She realized that this was the first time she was aware she was dreaming. She wondered what would happen if she went crazy and broke character, but she didn't dare disrupt what was already in progress. If these dreams had a meaning, she wouldn't figure it out by turning them into her own playtime. She had to behave and do what the dream asked her to.

There were hoofbeats behind her; she wasn't alone. When she turned to look, however, she couldn't make out the faces of her comrades, nor how many there were. If this was a memory, it was a memory from long ago, the details long since washed away.

"Zecora?" she called, and her voice echoed back through the darkness. If the zebra had heard her, she didn't respond.

"It's... dark," said a voice from behind Twilight.

"Yeah," said another. "How about some light?"

Twilight laughed. Right. Light would help. She beat her hooves on the floor in rhythm. Two clops, a pause, and then three clops. The lights came on, and Twilight became aware of how much the room had changed since the last time she had seen it. The machines lining the wall were smashed in, and holes in the shape of thick claw marks adorned them on all sides. The damage was irreversible, realized Twilight, crestfallen. Her star map had been torn up. Jars were smashed and quills broken in two. Zecora was nowhere in sight, but two holes in the back led deeper into the mountain.

"Stay back," ordered Twilight, and she crossed the room and entered the left hole, which led to Zecora's sleeping quarters. Maybe she was just resting, reasoned Twilight. It was difficult to keep a reliable sleep schedule in a world without daylight, she reasoned.

The room was sparse and the walls were bare. A dirty mattress took up most of the space on one side, and the only other features of the room were masks and other trinkets from the zebra homeland. As in the main room, everything was destroyed. Wooden zebra heads, separated from their bodies, almost looked like they were crying over the destruction.

Twilight's head turned slowly as she took in the surrounding. There was little lighting in the bedroom; Zecora didn't need it, as she only used the room to sleep, so Twilight had to strain to make out the details, and it took her some time to notice the figure lying on the mattress.

"Zecora?" she repeated again, falling back on her haunches to get a closer look. Her horn hummed softly as it provided additional light. The zebra didn't appear to be moving.

"No." she whispered softly. She cried the zebra's name one more time and shoved her gently on the shoulder. Before she could do anything else, a large mass collided with her side and send her sprawling across the room. Trying to orient herself, she raised her head and found herself looking at two large glowing eyes.

"So you came back," hissed the voice. "Good. I wasn't done with you."

Twilight screamed.

When morning came, Twilight didn't have the strength to get out of bed. Her entire body ached when she tried to move, and the image of Zecora's broken body wouldn't leave her mind. She buried her head in the pillow and cried softly, not knowing what else to do.

She felt lost. Everything was changing around her; she didn't understand it and she had no control over it. It was all a horrible nightmare that she couldn't wake up from.

Twilight lost track of how long she lay in bed, trying not to think about anything. Rarity came in briefly to offer her some breakfast, but when she didn't respond to any of Rarity's questions, the white unicorn set the tray of food down and left.

When Twilight finally stopped crying, she began to consider her situation rationally. The dreams made a bit more sense now. They were her life, her real life. Any happy memories she had were fake. I really am brain damaged, she thought quietly.

Still, brain damaged or not, Twilight knew she couldn't let her fears and confusion rule her. When Rarity returned to check on her eating, she was ready.

"I can't eat this," she said, levitating the tray and shoving it back into Rarity's mouth. "It's charity."

"Who said anything about charity?" asked Rarity. "I told you, we don't have enough food for ourselves. You'd be earning your keep."

Twilight looked at the host of the Element of Generosity. "I'm not staying," she said. "And would you really let a complete stranger just join your family like that?" she asked.

"Well, the rest of the clan might have problems with it, but I'd talk some sense into them. Family's important, but it's not everything. I'd remind them how they took me in back before I was family. Which reminds me. Pumpkin's mother wants to talk to you. You're the mare of the hour, apparently."

"Really?" asked Twilight as she got out of bed. "I suppose I should get that over with. Can you show me the way?" She managed to get to the door before Rarity cleared her throat to get her attention.

"Yes?" Twilight asked, irritated.

"Darling, you're not fit to go anywhere until you finish your breakfast. I insist."

Twilight returned to the tray, which held two apples. Twilight felt stupid for not predicting the meal, and she devoured them both in a couple of bites. "I'll make this up to you," she told Rarity. "If I can use my magic, I'm sure I can help."

"And I'm sure you will help," said Rarity. "But first you have somepony to meet."

As Rarity led Twilight through fields and between houses, Twilight got her first detailed look at the real Sweet Apple Acres, and nothing in the atmosphere could betray the overwhelming sense of sorrow and desperation. Sickly thin trees stuck out of the ground at uneven angles, and they reminded Twilight strongly of the skeletal claws of some poor creature that had been buried before its time. The ponies they passed bore grim expressions, resigned faces drained of all energy, the only remaining hope being the hope of seeing their next meal. It reminded Twilight of how she felt on a cloudy day, only multiplied thousandfold. And that was precisely what it was, Twilight realized. The scene before her was what a thousand days without the sun had wrought.

"Is it like this everywhere?" she asked Rarity.

Rarity stopped walking, and Twilight almost bumped into her from behind. The white unicorn was thinking, trying to decide which words to use that would not betray the bitterness on her tongue.

"Only in the small towns," she said. "Most of the big cities, like Manehattan and Canterlot, are actually quite well off. You see, not long after the famine started, this big industrial company up north developed these magical greenhouses that could grow crops just as well as with the sun, if not better. No pony goes hungry there, especially not if they have the right connections."

"Why don't you have any?" asked Twilight, figuring it was the obvious question.

Rarity reacted as if she had just been stung. "We'd love to," she explained. "But the company that makes them doesn't sell them. It rents them, and

most of the food it makes itself. And they're not even going to notice a place like Ponyville, much less build their greenhouses here. The only option we'd have is to buy food straight from them, and while I'm no economist, I figure that if all of our bits leave Ponyville to get consumables, Ponyville will drown in its own debt. Somepony has to make food locally, and that's us." She started walking again at a slow trot. "Doesn't stop ponies everywhere from leaving for artificially greener pastures, though."

Twilight didn't understand why that was so difficult for Rarity to say. There was something her friend was intentionally leaving out, Twilight figured, some vital detail, but she didn't dare press any further and spent the rest of the trip in silence.

Pumpkin's family lived in a shack on the edge of the farm. As Rarity and Twilight approached, they noticed a gray earth filly struggling to gnaw a pumpkin off of its stem with her teeth. After ten seconds of furious chewing with little progress, she noticed the arrivals and waved to them, not letting go of the fruit.

"Hello, Inkalina," said Rarity. "Is your sister home?"

Inkalina released the plant and trotted over to Twilight. "Is this the new girl?" she asked in a timid voice that sounded like Fluttershy. "Um, it's nice to meet you, I guess. She's inside, with Pumpkin."

Rarity nodded and nudged Twilight forward. "Go ahead, darling. I need to get working. When you're done, ask Inky here what you can do. I'm sure she could use the help."

Twilight started toward the door, and Inkalina followed her. "So, you grow pumpkins?" asked Twilight.

Inkalina nodded. "We didn't, before sister got married. Back then, we grew potatoes. None of us liked them, though. Pinkie would joke that they were no better than rocks." She knocked on the door, twice in succession, and shouted. "We got company!"

Twilight hadn't heard anything after "Pinkie," and when the door opened

and Pumpkin darted out between two pink forelegs, Twilight couldn't help but stare at the mare that now looked back at her with a weary expression. Her mane was flat and clung to her head, lacking its usual perkiness, and her normally lustrously bright coat was dull and muted. She looked nothing like she should, except for the basic coloring, and for a moment Twilight figured she must have simply misheard Inkalina.

The pink pony stretched her head through the opening and called Pumpkin's name, but her voice lacked any amount of assertion, and her request sounded more like pleading than an order. Inkalina opened the door fully and swung a hoof around the pink pony's neck.

"This here is Pinkamena Pie Custard, but we call her Pinkie Pie," Inkalina said, and Pinkie Pie seemed to shy away from the contact. "Now don't you worry," Inkalina said to her. "I'll take care of Pumpkin," and she trotted down the field after the filly, shouting "Now hold on, Sweetie Pie, yer not clean yet."

Pinkie Pie sighed and gestured to Twilight. "Would you like to come in?" she asked timidly, as if she wasn't even sure if she wanted it. Twilight nodded and followed Pinkie into the home.

"So, Pinkie Pie," she began, figuring she should get the dreaded conversation over with. Remembering Fluttershy, Twilight could only imagine what horrors the real Pinkie Pie had suffered that she had been spared in the idyllic dream world of Twilight's memories.

"Pinkamena," Pinkie Pie interrupted, not looking back.

"Excuse me?"

"My name is Pinkamena. Don't call me Pinkie." Pinkie began reorganizing a series of pans that had been left on a shelf, avoiding making any eye contact with Twilight.

The room was dusty and littered, having long since surrendered the battle against filth. Twilight knew she couldn't blame Pinkie for having higher priorities than making sure her home was well-dusted, but she still couldn't avoid the feeling of light disgust that pushed down on her whenever she was surrounded by anything in desperate need of organization. This,

compounded by the stress of being forced into a new and unfamiliar situation with a new and unfamiliar Pinkie Pie, was not helping Twilight think clearly, she knew. "So, Pumpkin?" she said, trying to bring the conversation to something they both knew.

"She's my daughter," said Pinkamena, and Twilight saw her crack a smile. "And my life." She looked directly at Twilight for the first time since they'd entered the housing. "Thank you for saving her," she said slowly, and then immediately broke eye contact and grabbed a sponge in her teeth.

The way Pinkamena was acting, intentionally avoiding any real communication, disturbed Twilight. She didn't understand the way everypony seemed to be acting. Even Rarity, while the white unicorn hadn't shown any fear, had displayed carefulness mixed with curiosity. "I thought you wanted to talk to me," said Twilight, after another minute had passed with silence.

"I wanted to thank you," said Pinkamena, scrubbing one of the pans. "Which I have. I don't know what I'd do without Pumpkin. And so you can leave now."

Twilight wasn't satisfied. "So Pumpkin's your daughter," she pressed forward. "How did that happen?"

The Pinkie Pie Twilight knew would have used the opportunity to make a joke; Twilight realized after she spoke how the question could have been alternatively interpreted. Instead, Pinkamena stopped scrubbing, irritated. "The usual way," she answered. "I'm married, if that's what you're wondering."

"Of course," said Twilight, furiously backpedaling. "I didn't mean to say you weren't."

"Good. Please leave, then."

Twilight turned toward the door, but then she paused. She still had one more question to ask. "Why are you all afraid of me?"

No response. Twilight turned her head to look back at the earth pony.

"Please answer me, Pinkie. Why are you scared of me?" Pinkamena cringed when she heard the nickname. "I know I've probably done something bad, because Pumpkin said I eat fillies' souls, and Rarity said my name explained a lot. But whatever I've done, I don't remember it. I need your help, Pinkie. I need your laughter."

Pinkamena slowly forced herself to look at Twilight. "You called me Pinkie again," she said. "Why do you keep doing that. Only my family calls me that."

"I am your family. Or like a family, at any rate. I know you, Pinkie Pie, even if you don't know me. I remember you. You're the pony with the curliest mane and the brightest smiles and the biggest parties. You're the Element of Laughter, and nothing can ever scare you. But you've changed now, like the old you never even happened. But I still believe she's in there."

Pinkamena trotted toward Twilight, and Twilight winced, unsure what the other pony was going to do. Instead, Pinkamena moved past Twilight and closed the door. "I think we should sit down," she said. "And you need to run that by me one more time, because that's a lot for a pony to take in at once."

So Twilight recounted her tale to Pinkamena, starting with her first trip to Ponyville, describing their adventures together to defeat Nightmare Moon. Pinkamena listened thoughtfully and didn't interject except to ask questions about the other ponies in the story.

"I don't expect you to believe me," said Twilight after she finished.

"I do," admitted Pinkamena. "The Pinkie Pie in your story, I can kind of see it. She seems happier than me. And you called her the Element of Laughter." She leaned forward. "Have you ever heard the legend of the Sparks of Creation?"

"I don't usually pay attention to legends and mares' tales," said Twilight dryly.

"You did once," interjected Pinkamena. "And it paid off."

"I got lucky," insisted Twilight. "So, what are the Sparks of Creation?"

"An old pony legend. From the moment the first royal sisters were born, they were enemies, so the story goes. They fought each other, violently, and each spell cast, each blow they dealt with their horns shot hundreds of sparks off into the world. As the world was young at the time and not fully formed, most of the sparks weren't caught until they reached the backdrops at the edge of the universe, where they were embedded, becoming the stars. But as the world grew, the sparks became stuck in other things. Things like ponies."

"Stars don't work that way," interrupted Twilight. "They're gaseous bodies millions of miles away."

"But that part isn't important. What matters is that each pony has a spark. It's a glimmer of their true potential, and it can take many different forms. And I know mine exists because I've seen it."

Twilight was confused. "How do you see your spark?" she asked. "Is it like a cutie mark?"

"Sort of, but only in the sense that everypony has one. But while a cutie mark says what your talent is, your spark is more personal. And you know what they are because sometimes they ignite. When you need to do something important they flare up, like a bright flash, and then they tell you what to do. Are you curious to know what mine is?"

"Sure," said Twilight, trying to sound disinterested, although she was curious.

"I discovered it the day Pumpkin was born. It was actually the same day I got my cutie mark." She turned and showed Twilight the picture of three hearts on her hindquarters. "I was a nervous wreck that day. I didn't know how to handle being a mother. But when I saw her, everything started to settle down. Just looking at her made anything seem possible. Have you ever had a child?" Twilight shook her head. "Then I can't explain what it feels like. But it's the most amazing feeling ever. And as we looked into each other's eyes, she suddenly started laughing. And that's when I saw the flash. And I found myself laughing with her. Just looking at her face filled me with the greatest joy I'd ever known. I kept laughing and I never wanted to stop. The doctors probably thought I was deranged, but I just

watched the laughter as it glowed and filled up the room. And that's when I knew why I was alive. For her. I loved her. Are you crying?"

"No," lied Twilight. "Continue."

"My spark was laughter. Laughter for my precious daughter. I never told anypony about the spark, and then you come along and call me the Element of Laughter."

"So you believe me?"

"That's not the only reason. On my wedding day, five years ago, I met a mare, and she said some of the same things you said, but she was older than you. 'Pinkie Pie'. 'Element of Laughter'. No pony had called me by either of those names before. And she had a message for me. She said 'Someday, a long time from now, you're going to meet a pony by the name of Twilight Sparkle, and she's going to ask you for help. Do what you can, and pass along this message. The sun's wind can reach where the sun cannot. And what you have will show you what you need. Do either of those make any sense to you?"

Twilight shook her head. "I don't know," she said. "Who was she?"

Pinkamena shrugged. "I never saw her again after that. Who knows who she was? It's a mystery."

"Speaking of mysteries," asked Twilight, "who am I? My memories are clearly wrong, and you and your family seem to have heard about me. I want to know who I am, in your eyes. I want to understand why everypony's afraid of me."

Pinkamena thought for a moment. "First off," she said. "Ponyville's founded on earth pony tradition. Magic doesn't sit well with us. Just hearing that a mage had made a home in the mountains was worrisome. The fact that Nightmare Moon appeared the year the Summer Sun Festival was in Ponyville probably didn't help much either. But most of us ignored you until he showed up."

"He?" asked Twilight.

"I don't remember his name. He was a royal guardspony, still loyal to the missing princess. He believed that you were allied with Nightmare Moon, that you knew where the princess was taken to. He came to Ponyville because he was looking for you. He said you were a thief and a scoundrel, and he said that you killed anypony who got in your way, including foals."

"I would never hurt a foal!" exclaimed Twilight, feeling threatened. "Why would he say that?" Some small part of her reminded her that this Twilight wasn't her, that this Twilight was somepony else. Maybe the real Twilight, the Twilight that existed before she hit her head, would kill foals if they got in her way, but Twilight immediately took that notion and tore it to shreds. She would rather live in denial than face that she murdered foals.

"I'm not saying it's true," said Pinkamena, trying to defend herself. "I'm just repeating what he told us. And that's really all we know about you, Twilight. He searched the mountains, but I don't think he found you. The mountains are a pretty big place, after all."

"I see," said Twilight. She didn't know what to say after that. She had even more to take in than Pinkamena. All her life she had striven to do right by other ponies while she perfected her craft. She would never harm anypony, foals least of all. But now she was learning that the life she thought she had didn't exist and may never have existed. She didn't know anything about her past.

But she did know about her future. She knew that whatever monster she had been was gone now. It had no hold over her. And while she didn't know about the past, there was a very easy way to figure it out.

"Thank you, Pinkamena, you've been helpful," said Twilight as she stood and headed toward the door. "But I promised Rarity I'd help Inkalina today."

Pinkamena nodded. "You should do that. Breaking a promise is the fastest way to lose a friend."

"Forever," finished Twilight. "You really are Pinkie Pie, aren't you? And I just have one more question. Is there a library in Ponyville?"

"I think so," said Pinkie Pie. "Although it doesn't get used often."

Twilight smiled. "Good."

It was time for her to go home.

~~ACT TWO~~

Chapter 1 Science in the Library

SUNSIDE

Rainbow Dash watched, bewildered, as the stallion with the hourglass mark practically danced across the library. His brown mane hung over his head, bobbing with each step he took, of which there were many. Everything about him seemed to be at a quicker pace than the world around him, as if his heart beat twice as fast, or perhaps twice as hard.

It was the day after Twilight had taken the other ponies down to the lake to explain the truth. In the mean time, Applejack, who seemed to have taken over as the leader of the group and representative of their Twilight, had permitted the other Twilight access to the lab in the library's basement, on the off chance that something there would help them discover a way to cross over or retrieve Twilight. Fluttershy had gone into the Everfree forest to talk to Zecora, since it appeared the zebra knew more than she let on.

While it seemed Zecora knew about the existence of the 'moonland', as she had chosen to call it, she refused to offer any advice on crossing over, and attempted to discourage the ponies from any attempts to do so. "Remember what happened the last time," she said, and the image of the twin graves again passed through Fluttershy's mind. So far, all of their efforts had been fruitless. Rainbow hoped that the Doctor would change that. Pinkie Pie had managed to contact the Doctor by a means Rainbow Dash didn't know, and Pinkie refused to explain.

"It's complicated," said Pinkie Pie when Rainbow Dash had attempted to press the issue. "You can't just walk up to his home and knock; it doesn't work that way." Eventually, Rainbow relented and allowed Pinkie to do

whatever she needed to do to reach him. Fortunately, it seemed he wasn't busy, as he showed up unexpectedly in Ponyville the very next day, albeit with no luggage and no form of transportation.

Now, Rainbow Dash stood in the corner of the library with the others, listening to their newest guest. The way he talked was by the far the most interesting part of him, Rainbow Dash decided. He spewed out details almost as fast as anypony around him could process them, following one train of thought before jumping onto the next. The rhythm of his speech was inconsistent, passing quickly over the minor details but becoming slow and heavy for anything the Doctor wanted to put emphasis on.

"Let's see what we're working with," the Doctor said to himself. "A library inside a tree. Interesting, a library tree. A tree of knowledge. Bit on the unfortunate implications, don't you think? Also, very flammable. Not a good dragon home. You might want to do something about that." He paused, inhaling deeply. "Oh, but you have! An interesting odor, the smell of magic but no resin. A stasis charm, probably, put on the whole tree. Makes it fireproof. Rot-proof, too. Well done, Twilight, was it?" He held out a hoof to the equally bewildered Twilight. "I'm the Doctor. Just the Doctor."

Twilight took the hoof and shook it. "Twilight Sparkle. Can you really tell that just by smelling?"

The Doctor paused, in thought. "No, not really, not with certainty. Hold that thought for a moment." He cantered over to the wall and gave it a solid lick with his tongue. "Definitely a stasis charm," he concluded.

Twilight stared at him incredulously. "You know an awful lot about magic for an earth pony," she said.

The Doctor froze, and then he approached her slowly, his eyes slanting. "Whoever said I was an earth pony?" he asked. Twilight didn't know how to respond, but an instant later the expression was dropped and the upbeat attitude returned. "Right. So, like I said, I'm the Doctor. Official consultant to the princess herself for all matters relating to physics, temporal mechanics, and butterscotch." He removed a wallet from a satchel on his side and opened it, revealing an official looking license, his name and picture displayed prominently at the top. Twilight reached to get

a closer look at it, but the Doctor quickly tucked it away again. "Stay close, follow my orders, don't wander off," he added. "That last one's important; you wouldn't believe how frequently ponies forget that don't wander off part."

Applejack looked at Pinkie Pie wearily. "What did you say ya did to make this fella owe you a favor?" she asked.

Pinkie Pie giggled and vibrated slightly where she stood. "It has to do with the the story of how Equestria was made," she answered.

Applejack stared uncertainly. "Come on," interjected Rainbow Dash. "She's just being Pinkie Pie. The point is, we have this mad pony on our side, so we might as well use him."

"Right. This mad stallion is yours," exclaimed the Doctor, drawing an embarrassed blush from Rainbow Dash. "Because I always repay my debts. It takes a while, sometimes, but I get around to it. Usually on a Tuesday; those are easy. Not a Thursday, though. I never did like Thursdays. So," and he turned to face Twilight. "Twilight Sparkle, mare of the hour. Guest, inquirer, clientèle. How can I help you?" He paused, confused by his own statement. "That's a bit generic to say. 'How can I help you?' Makes me feel like a greeter at a convenience store. I'm not used to being wanted in the situation. Sometimes, but usually it's the other ponies wandering off, followed by an awful lot of running. And most of the time somepony has to die first, making this a refreshing change of pace. But yes, questions. Ask them."

Twilight peered at the Doctor, not sure if he was in his right mind. "I was wondering," she said, "hypothetically, I mean, about the existence of other worlds."

"Other worlds?" The Doctor raised an eyebrow uncomprehendingly.

"Other realities," explained Twilight. "A multiverse, with worlds like ours, ponies like us, but different. And whether or not it would be possible to travel between them."

The Doctor frowned, suspicion clouding his features. "Hypothetically," he repeated, scrutinizing Twilight with his gaze.

"Yes," said Twilight, breaking into the widest grin she could manage. "Completely theoretical."

The pair stared intently at each other, and the Doctor, seeing the ambition and intent in Twilight's eyes, stepped back. He knew he couldn't handle the situation lightly. "No," he said firmly. "I'm sorry. I can't help you."

"But you know, don't you?" asked Applejack, forcing her way into the conversation.

The Doctor turned, irritated at the intrusion. "This isn't anything to do with you," he said, growing flustered.

Applejack trotted over to him, pushing Twilight aside. "Like hay it doesn't," she shouted, leaning in toward the Doctor, forcing him to take a step back. "One of my friends may be in critical condition, and I'm not going to just leave her. You're the Doctor, right? Then do what Doctors do. Help her."

"Yeah!" added Rainbow Dash. "You owe Pinkie Pie anyway."

"This isn't a simple request," begged the Doctor. "The gravity of what you're asking..."

Pinkie Pie, who had been listening to the spectacle with a worried look, spoke up. "Alrighty then. Tell us your name," she told the Doctor.

The Doctor froze, his eyes moving slowly until they were looking at Pinkie Pie. "What?" he said quietly.

"You heard me," said Pinkie, knowing her plan would work. "If you'd rather pay me back in some other way."

Pinkie Pie smiled devilishly at the Doctor, who was staring at the ground, swallowing and trying to stay afloat in the sea of mounting anxiety. Fluttershy, who had spent the encounter trying to stay as far away from the Doctor as possible, now moved behind Applejack, as if the sturdy earth pony offered additional protection against whatever theoretical danger Fluttershy had concocted. Twilight, also anxious, awaited the

Doctor's next reply.

The Doctor's head swung up, and he clapped his front hooves together. "Right then, parallel worlds. Neighcola Tesla theorized that there were many other dimensions; they were just too small to see. Of course, he later claimed to have misplaced one of them in his trouser pocket, so Celestia knows if he wasn't just off-canter."

"You mean they really exist?" asked Twilight, attempting to feign ignorance and failing horribly. She was surprised the Doctor had changed his mind so quickly, and she decided that later she would have to ask Pinkie Pie what just happened.

The Doctor frowned, giving Twilight a sinister glare. "Don't play games with me, Twilight Sparkle," he warned. "I don't believe for a moment that this is all just theory. You have every intention of finding a way across worlds, and I see now that if I just walk away, you're going to do something reckless, that for all we know will lead to a vortex destroying Equestria."

Twilight had never considered that to be a possible outcome. "A vortex?" she asked fearfully.

The Doctor ignored her. "So yes, it's possible to cross. Yes, I will help you find a way. But I need to know everything."

Twilight sighed, relieved, and didn't notice Fluttershy escaping through the front door.

Fluttershy didn't breathe until she was far away from the library. Everything that was happening was too confusing and strange. Fluttershy had never been able to handle changes well, and now that Twilight was no longer in desperate need of sympathy, Fluttershy was slightly scared of her. The Doctor certainly hadn't helped to calm her at all. She needed something more familiar to calm her nerves.

Out of breath, Fluttershy sat down on a bench and panted. She was near Sugar Cube Corner, and she realized she had come quite a ways. She would return, when she was good and ready.

In the sky above her, Ditzzy Doo, the local mailpony, circled aimlessly in her route. Fluttershy, feeling a bit lonely, called out to the other pegasus.

Ditzzy circled around Fluttershy a couple of times before coming to an unsteady landing, true to her name. Fluttershy peered at Ditzzy timidly but with a smile, thankful for something normal. As if anypony would call Ditzzy normal, Fluttershy realized, but that was part of the pony's charm. She had a frightening appearance, as her eyes weren't always looking in the same direction. Ditzzy had once admitted to Fluttershy that she couldn't always see clearly through her right eye, and that was one of the reasons she was such a poor flier. Fluttershy had wondered before what it would be like to see through Ditzzy's eyes, but she never said anything, afraid she might offend. Yet, despite the disability, Ditzzy never let it affect her relationships with others. She was always kind and friendly, even if what she said didn't always make sense.

"H-hello," said Ditzzy slowly as she forced the word out. "You w-well?"

That was the other thing about Ditzzy. She had trouble recalling words, and even more trouble saying them. As a result, she didn't often speak in complete sentences, not when a single word would do.

"Yes, Ditzzy," said Fluttershy, in the kind soothing voice one might use to address a loved one. "I'm doing very well. Thank you."

Ditzzy frowned at Fluttershy, sneering a bit. "N-not foal," she said, pained.

Fluttershy's jaw opened, but no sound came out. She berated herself silently. She should have known better. "Right. I'm sorry," she said. "You're not a foal. I won't treat you like one."

Ditzzy nodded. "Not foal, not Derpy." She looked almost angry, a sight that looked silly when combined with her damaged eye. Ditzzy's appearance always seemed precious to Fluttershy. Her mane shone in the bright morning light like a bale of hay, and while her coat was a dull gray, it always gave Fluttershy the impression that it was merely dirty, ashen, and that if she cleaned it hard enough, the beauty underneath would shine through.

"Listen, Ditzzy," said Fluttershy, "Can we talk? I mean, if you're not doing

something else. I need somepony to be with right now."

The gray pegasus shook her head, and her right eye suddenly swung over to the side, chilling Fluttershy. Ditzzy seemed somewhat on edge. "Can't. W-work." She pointed to the satchel, filled with mail.

"Well then," muttered Fluttershy. "I'll let you get to it. Say hello to Dinky for me. She's such a gem."

Ditzzy beamed, and then she suddenly frowned. Fluttershy feared she had said something wrong. "Letters," Ditzzy said at last. Fluttershy feared her friend had finally lost the last of her marbles. Instead, Ditzzy reached into the satchel and removed an envelope, offering it to Fluttershy. She took it. "See ya," said Ditzzy. Then she took to the air, slowly, and was gone.

Fluttershy looked at the envelope in her mouth. The word 'Fluttershy' was written in purple ink on front. There was no sender written, but in the corner was a familiar symbol, a black spiral in the shape of the sun. Fluttershy opened the envelope and removed its contents, which, much to her surprise, contained a second envelope in addition to a single page. She read the page first:

My dearest Fluttershy, I hope this message finds you well.
I have a favor I must ask, and no one can you tell.
You spoke to me the day before to ask about the place
A world like ours without the brightest star in outer space.
I tell you now in confidence the story is quite true.
Which brings me back to favors that I must now ask of you.
Should you ever find a way to cross (you will, I have no doubt.)
The pony who's name is written here, I ask you to seek out.
When you do, I only ask you deliver this letter.
Perhaps the two of us can make these worlds a little better.

Indeed, there was a name written on the second envelope. Fluttershy read the note again, in case she had missed something. The 'no one can you tell' line unsettled her. What was so important about the letter that she wasn't allowed to tell anypony about it? She was tempted for a moment to open the second envelope and read its contents, as they probably

contained answers, but that would be breaking Zecora's trust. Pinkie Pie had warned her about what could happen if she broke another pony's trust, and that was still true, even if Zecora wasn't technically a pony.

Instead, Fluttershy put everything back in the larger envelope and started to make her way home. She needed to drop off the letter before she returned to the others; they would become suspicious if she came back to them with it.

"Your plan is ingenious, Twilight. Projecting a cross force in quaternion space? It's brilliant. It just has one small problem."

"What's that?"

"It's impossible."

Applejack tried her best to tune out the conversation between Twilight and the Doctor. She wasn't a stupid pony by any measure, but she knew she was over her head. They were using terms Applejack had never heard of before, and it was beginning to make her head hurt. She returned to the game of poker she had been playing with Rarity. This was where she could prove her smarts.

Rarity revealed her hand. "A full house," she announced proudly.

Applejack stared at her, dumbfounded. "And you're sure ya never played this game before," she asked.

Rarity shook her head. "My first time, I promise. Why, what do you have?"

Applejack attempted to elegantly lower the cards onto the table, but as she was only able to hold them in one hoof, they quickly fell out of her grasp. By reflex she attempted to catch them with her other hoof, but it quickly caught against the sling and the movement made her cry out. Rarity levitated the cards and returned them to the table face up.

"A pair of threes," she said slowly. "And are you certain that you are all right?"

Applejack pouted; she hated being pitied. "I'm fine," she insisted.

"How did that happen, anyway?" asked Rarity casually as she began shuffling the deck.

Applejack gestured over to Twilight frustratingly with her free hoof. "She happened," she muttered angrily.

Rarity lifted an eyebrow in surprise. "Twilight did this to you?" she asked, concerned. "Did she attack you?"

"Nah. I guess you could call it self-defense, though."

Rarity dropped the deck as her magic faltered, and she leaned in toward Applejack. "You attacked Twilight?" she hissed. "I can't believe you!"

"She ain't Twilight!" cried Applejack, defending herself. "Am I the only pony who sees that? 'Sides, you weren't there. You don't know what happened. She was going apple-brained. If I hadn't calmed her down, the whole town would have been destroyed in her fury."

"Except you failed," interjected Rainbow Dash. She had been occupying the time by playing "I spy" with Pinkie Pie.

"My turn!" the pink mare shouted excitedly. "I spy something rainbow-colored."

Rainbow Dash narrowed her eyes. "It's me, isn't it? Nothing else in this room is rainbow."

Pinkie Pie gasped in surprise. "Fine then, Dashie. I've got a harder one. I spy something wearing a hat."

Rainbow buried her forehead in her front hoof.

In the middle of the room, Twilight had laid out a diagram on the floor. "No, look," she insisted to the Doctor. "It works. I've used it before. It works fine."

"But only on small, inanimate objects, right?"

Twilight looked at the Doctor, confused. "How did you know? It's because I don't have enough, power, right?"

"No, your power level is fine," said the Doctor. Then he froze. "Out of curiosity, how much power were you using?"

"For something Pony-size? Ninety-five thousand watts for a fifth of a second."

The Doctor did the math in his head. "Assuming 250 kilograms for our pony, that's 19,000 joules.

"Is that not enough?" asked Twilight, uncertain where the Doctor was trying to go with this.

The Doctor groaned. "It's more than enough, Twilight. A lot more. Let me start over. You think you can't travel between worlds. Truth of it is, you never stop. Every particle collision sends you veering off into quaternion space. Only problem with dimensional travel is there's a wall between them that pushes you back in the opposite direction. Back and forth, like a tiny multidimensional pendulum. Only not at all like a pendulum and more like a spring. Does anypony have a spring?"

No pony had a spring.

"Ah, well," sighed the Doctor. "Worth a shot. That point I'm trying to make, Twilight, is this." He galloped into the kitchen and returned with a plate. "The boundry between universes is strong and tough, like the walls of your home. A pony is soft and fragile and blunt, like this plate. What you're doing is trying to pierce the wall by driving the pony through it with enough force. But it doesn't matter how much force you use, because it's never going to be enough. The end result is always the same." The Doctor threw the plate like a discus, and it sailed into the wall and shattered.

Twilight became incredibly pale.

"You can send other things through because they're not fleshy like a pony,

and because you probably enchanted them, hardened them first. But you can't harden a pony without killing her, so the most you can do is a sort of magic shell, which still won't soften the blow. You could send a whole army through with the amount of power you're using. But they'd all end up in pieces on the other side. Hence, as I said before, it's impossible."

"I have an idea," suggested Applejack, who had started paying attention after the plate had shattered. "You used a memory exchanging charm to get over here yourself. Couldn't you use the same thing to get us back?"

"And put us where?" asked Rarity. "Our doubles? Twilight admitted she's never met us before."

"How about the first six Ponyvillians we come across?" said Rainbow Dash jokingly.

Rarity failed to find the humor, and she stood aghast. "Absolutely not!" she screamed. "Am I the only pony here with morals?"

"Besides, then we'd have six strange ponies running around in our bodies," added Pinkie Pie.

"Actually, we can avoid that part," Twilight corrected. "It's theoretically possible to make the transfer spell one way. We'd be both here and there. The original owners of the bodies would just sort of disappear."

Rarity's jaw hung a good foot below her face. Pinkie Pie's literally hit the floor.

"And that would be wrong," added Twilight quickly.

"There is another way," said Doctor, desperate to move the conversation in a direction away from body snatching. All of the other ponies turned to look at him. "If increasing the force won't help us, we can instead weaken the boundry between worlds."

"That's what I've been trying to do," complained Twilight. "I've mapped out the strength of the wall, and it's thinner in the Everfree Forest than anywhere else. That's why I sent the other Twilight there to perform the transfer. I even made your Zecora move there to help facilitate the

experiments on the other end."

"Zecora helped you kidnap Twilight?" asked Rainbow Dash, horrified.

"No. Your Zecora stopped helping me after..." Twilight trailed off, again trapped in the memory of the exploding pegasus. It was worse now, because Twilight knew it was her fault for not stopping to think about what she was doing. She had never considered that it was the journey itself that had caused the accident, rather than getting stuck halfway.

"I mean weaken the boundary artificially," said the Doctor trying to keep the conversation going.

"Like a rock through a window," Twilight said softly.

"Exactly! Like a rock through a window!" The Doctor pumped a hoof triumphantly, then turned to Twilight mystified. "I have no idea what that means."

"Yesterday, I said that the barrier between worlds was like a pond." Twilight smiled as she spoke, a glimmer of newfound hope in her eyes. "Magic passes through it really easily. But it's only a pond for magic or energy, and it becomes a wall when you try to send matter through. But remember what happened to the rock I used in the example? It sunk. It passed through. No, better than a rock, a book." She levitated a book off of one of the shelves and opened it, tearing out two pages.

Rarity gasped, and Twilight shifted her eyes toward her, concerned. "What?" Twilight said. "The book's already in terrible condition. It looks ancient. Really, how valuable can a book like that be?"

Rainbow Dash facehoofed for a second time.

"Now watch," said Twilight, making sure she had everypony's attention. She placed one of the pages on top of the book, the other page hovering beside it. Then she dispelled the levitation. While the book and its accompanying page dropped to the floor quickly, the lone page fluttered slowly to the ground.

"It's a nice little science experiment," said Applejack. "But would you mind

tellin' us what it means?"

Twilight grunted, irritated that the other ponies couldn't grasp at the metaphors she was trying to make. "The page fell quickly because it had no air resistance. It moved faster than normal because of the book. Alternatively, think about if I had tied a message to the rock before I threw it? The point is, instead of using magic to try and push us through, we can ride behind it, like a vehicle. I said that using magic causes ripples, distortions in reality that make our worlds different. If we can make a ripple intentionally, big enough and precisely calculated, we can make it break down the wall for us, and we slip through in its wake."

The Doctor nodded, in thought. "That's the principle, yes. But you need to be careful when you're messing with the fabric of reality. If you let things get out of hand, boom!" and he threw his hooves upward, miming an explosion. "Vortex."

"What exactly is a vortex?" asked Rainbow Dash.

The Doctor hummed and waved his hooves around sporadically as he tried to come up with an answer. "It's kind of like a black hole," he said at last.

Rainbow looked at the Doctor blankly.

"A black hole?" said Pinkie Pie, excited. "Mrs. Cake said I have one of those for a stomach."

Applejack rolled her eyes. "Here's an idea," she suggested. "Let's not have to find out what one of those vortex-majiggers is."

Twilight nodded. "Agreed. But how do you carefully create an explosion?"

Rainbow smiled and rubbed her front hooves together. "This ought to be good," she muttered excitedly, a lifelong fan of blowing things up.

Chapter 2

The Homecoming Party

MOONSIDE

After a day of helping Inkalina uproot potatoes and pick pumpkins, Twilight prepared to leave the farm for Ponyville proper. It was the next morning, or at least Twilight assumed so, for she had fallen asleep, dreamed of a life that wasn't hers, and then woken up again. The light hovering in the sky above Ponyville had descended for some time, but had now risen again. She packed what precious few belongings she had, her spare bandages rattling around in what was otherwise an almost empty saddlebag. In exchange for her work on the farm, the family gave Twilight a small assortment of fruits and vegetables. Twilight felt guilty taking it, since the farmers all seemed to barely get enough to eat themselves, but Rarity insisted.

There was something odd about the way the other ponies listened to Rarity, like she was running the show. Twilight wanted to ask for an explanation, but by the time she would find a good opportunity, she would forget. Still, it was hard to miss the other ponies being incredibly careful around her. The only other pony they treated with this much respect was Big Macintosh, whom Twilight had unfortunately only managed to get a couple of glimpses of throughout the day.

Twilight wanted to learn more about the new extended family at Sweet Apple Acres. She wanted to stay and do everything in her power to help. However, the drive for information was stronger. For all Twilight knew, Equestria's very history had changed, making half of everything she knew worthless. The past would have to be rediscovered, and the library was the perfect place to do it. Twilight doubted there would be any distractions or interruptions once she got there.

At the front gate, a small gathering of ponies were waiting for

Twilight. Rarity was in the front and center, and Twilight thought she had a impressive commanding presence under the wide-brimmed hat. Pinkamina flanked her on one side with Big Macintosh on the other. A gray stallion Twilight didn't recognize seemed to tower over Pinkamena, and Twilight assumed he was her husband. Like Rarity, he also looked intimidating, but he filled Twilight with nervousness instead the feeling of security she got from Rarity. Pumpkin was circling around the four grown ponies, never staying on the ground for more than half a second.

Big Macintosh stepped forward to address Twilight. "You're leaving," he said, more a statement of fact than a request for confirmation.

Pumpkin stopped jumping and looked up at Twilight with pleading eyes. "What?" she cried. "You can't go. You're too cool."

Twilight nodded. "I need to figure some things out, and I can't stay here to do it. I hope you understand."

"We do," Rarity said sympathetically. "We won't ask you to stay. Just know that you're welcome here." Her cheeks flushed a little, embarrassed. "I mean, you really were a big help, with that spell and all."

Twilight had modified the gem-detecting spell the other Rarity had taught her to predict which potatoes were ready to be uprooted. Along with her telekinesis, she and Inkalina had managed to more than triple the work they had accomplished.

"Promise you'll come back," wailed Pumpkin.

Her father glared, silently telling her to stop talking and sit still. Pinkamena seemed to have lost her voice, as she did and said nothing.

"Okay," agreed Twilight. "I'll come back. It's not like there's anyplace else I can go."

The statement was a lie, and Twilight knew it. She had trouble sleeping the night before; the farm felt like a prison she had emerged from after twenty years, to discover that the world had continued after she had left it, evolving into something strange and new. Another night in the same bed would be unbearable.

"Good," announced Pumpkin. "Come back in time for the wedding!"

A wedding? This was news to Twilight. She looked at each of the ponies in turn, at their dreary, defeated faces, and tried to wonder what a wedding would look like. Only Rarity and Pumpkin had any energy, any fires in their hearts. They would be the only ones dancing. The others would move slowly, trying to create an illusion of livelihood that would fool nopony. Cheap mono-colored lanterns would be at the tables, as it was either the atmosphere or the food. Twilight prayed no wedding would look like that, and she hoped these ponies would prove her wrong and light up the sunless sky with the most memorable party this side of Nightmare Moon's victory. After all, they had Pinkie Pie to help them. And part of Twilight dared to believe that even the new Rarity wouldn't stand for gaudy decorations.

"A wedding, huh?" Twilight asked Rarity.

Pumpkin interrupted. "Yup! With cake and banners and tents on the lawn and everything!" she shouted, removing any doubt of her parentage.

"We've been over this, Pumpkin," addressed Rarity, frowning. "We can't afford those. Or even find them, in all likelihood. It will be a simple gathering among family. And you, Twilight, if you like."

Twilight expected this. "Why don't you make the decorations?" she suggested. "You and Pinkie Pie? I think you'd both do an amazing job."

"But," began Rarity, "I don't think..."

"Trust me on this one," asserted Twilight. "I think the two of you would do an amazing job."

The conversation didn't last for much longer. The farm was waking up around them, and Twilight saw the other ponies begin to leave their homes and head into the field to begin work. She didn't want to keep Rarity and Big Macintosh and the rest from doing the job that fed them, but also, secretly, she didn't want to see the looks on any more ponies' faces if they found out she was leaving. She didn't know if they would be upset that a pony that had the potential to save them from starvation was selfishly

running away, or glad that the ill omen, the foal killer, was going to leave them alone. Twilight felt that either possibility would devastate her. The only way to stop her from breaking down was to leave the question unanswered, so she hurriedly said her goodbyes and left, walking down the dirt path toward the only light in the sky.

Traveling into town should not have taken long. Twilight could usually clear the distance in fifteen minutes, even if she walked at a slow gait. Now the journey took her thirty. It seemed that for every three steps she took toward Ponyville, she took one step back. No need to rush, she told herself. Ponyville will still be there, waiting for you, when you're good and ready.

She finally neared the town, approaching Fluttershy's cottage. Although the house clearly was no longer Fluttershy's, Twilight circled around it, separating herself by almost her entire line of sight on the off-chance that Fluttershy, wings torn, caked in dirt and worse, was somehow inside.

Once the cottage was safely behind her, Twilight was able to breathe again. The town looked almost exactly like it should, yet something she couldn't place unsettled her. Just like the lack of trees at the farm, something in the corner of her eye was bothering her, some detail she was unable to find. But her gut knew it was wrong, and no amount of cold logic would settle it.

As if cold logic had any value at this point. It had done practically nothing to help her.

Twilight navigated the streets of Ponyville, taking the most direct route to the library. As curious as she was to discover the fates of Carousel Boutique and Sugar Cube Corner, she didn't want to risk an encounter with anypony, especially a pony she knew. Fortunately, she was alone. The streets were completely deserted.

Twilight shivered again. That was the problem. No pony was outside. She was used to seeing large crowds of ponies every day, on the way to the market, or perhaps just enjoying each other's company, but it appeared that the residents of the new Ponyville had no time for company. Or maybe

there were no residents, and Ponyville had become a ghost town. Twilight pushed the thought aside as the towering branches of the library appeared in the distance.

The tree wasn't always a library, Twilight remembered. In Ponyville's early days, it was a prison. She silently prayed that the town hadn't decided to return the tree to its original purpose. However, a picture of an open book adorned the sign outside the front entrance, giving Twilight hope that her journey had not been a waste of time. As an added bonus, Twilight realized, if the ponies of Ponyville had to work so desperately to keep themselves from starving, then it seemed unlikely that any of them would be wasting time at the library to disturb her.

The thought was incredibly selfish and only a small consolation. Twilight berated herself for even thinking it. Now she stood frozen, reflecting on her surroundings and herself as the true gravity of the situation sunk in. She had been numb to the horror, not because she doubted it was real, but because the world was so far removed from the Ponyville she knew that the plight of the starving ponies felt like something out of a book she had read or an opera Celestia had taken her to as a filly. As long as the deaths occurred offstage, Twilight wouldn't have much of an emotional response. She had always had little skill relating to others, but even less experience. She had been unable to truly understand, and thus unable to grieve. Now, if she began crying, she didn't think she'd be able to stop. Instead, Twilight forced herself not to think about anything other than her own personal goals.

She hesitated at the door. She considered knocking but realized she didn't want to draw attention to herself. The library was a public facility, and she planned to use it as such. She forced open the door, which resisted briefly, and found herself in complete darkness.

At first, Twilight could see nothing. Then, as her eyes adjusted, she became able to discern shapes in the blackness. She recognized a rectangular protrusion as a bookshelf and a series of parallel lines as the staircase. In the all-enveloping dark, Twilight finally felt home.

She considered shedding some light with her horn, and for a moment the room was bathed in a wavering uncertain glow that was still too dim for seeing. After a second's thought, however, the room plunged back into the

shadows, and a mischievous smile spread across Twilight's face. This was her home; she shouldn't need light to get around. Feeling slightly emboldened by her surroundings, she took a step forward and immediately tripped over a book, landing painfully on her face in another book.

Lighting suddenly seemed much more preferable, and as her horn lit up again, she found herself at the edge of a mess almost comparable to one she would have made. She supposed that without her, there was no librarian. No librarian meant no green-scaled assistant to pick up. She lifted her head out of the book and closed it. *Ecological Evolution: Equestria in an Age of Darkness*, the title read, a picture of an aurora adorning the front cover as it bent and rippled across the starry sky.

Twilight was shocked by the relevance of the book; it seemed to be precisely what she was looking for. She was also surprised by the book's wear. It couldn't be more than a year or so old, but it was tattered around the edges and remind Twilight of books that had been around for decades. She was so elated, however, that she didn't stop to consider what it was doing on the floor, instead opening the book to the first couple of pages.

Equestria's socialized weather management system, founded in 128 C.E. (Celestia's Era), was the first attempt by a sentient race to use magic to control the weather. It was based on older research done by well-known Equestrian polymath Neighcola Tesla, who theorized that an ecosystem, once tamed, would become significantly easier to maintain. Crop failures, by flooding or drought, could be avoided, leading to higher yields for farmers. Cloud cities would no longer risk destruction every time a minor storm passed through.

The risks of such a practice were well known before its implementation, even in Tesla's time. (His work was discontinued due to the infeasibility of safety procedures, and not, as many young fillies and colts are told, due to his sudden vanishing from the face of the planet. This disappearance, while true, happened more than a decade later.) The incredible amount of terraforming required would cripple any naturally occurring biomes, and would require hundreds of years before returns on the project could be generated. However, Celestia's curiously long lifespan and willingness to

donate from personal funds in addition to tax dollars brought the project into the realm of reality. To combat the destruction of nature, certain regions were designated "Everfree", and would continue to develop as nature intended, without the guiding hand of the monarchy.

The weather management system had one other risk. Should, at any time, the abilities of the weather ponies to perform their job become significantly impaired, and the carefully planned procedures cease, the ecosystem would become extremely unstable. Unable to protect itself from sudden changes, small fluctuations would sweep across the country, compounding like a snowball, causing no end of natural disasters.

It is this exact scenario with which Equestria now finds itself. However, rather than admit defeat, the scientific community of Equestria decided to fight back with their most powerful weapon: knowledge. This new wilderness had overtaken the world, but it was not untameable, because of one simple truth: Everywhere in nature hide patterns. New nature meant new patterns, but this is the only difference. The discovery of these new patterns is what would lead to Equestria's salvation.

In the following pages we have compiled over two dozen studies performed by Equestrian scientists in the year and a half, the ten months since the sun disappeared from the sky. Each study is examined closely and in turn, its conclusions analyzed and its implications considered. The chapters divide the studies by scientific field, in increasing scope, beginning with the individual organisms found in nature, traversing through habitats and ecosystems, and ending with astronomy and the possibility that our beloved sun's disappearance is not a complete or as permanent as we may have at first believed.

Twilight lost track of how long she had been reading. The sky never really grew darker or lighter. She picked up the book and added it to her saddlebag. It was everything she was looking for, almost. She still wanted to figure out what had happened on that day, two years ago, when Nightmare Moon's thousand year prison sentence ended, if anypony knew.

Twilight tried to remember the dream she had of that day. It had ended abruptly, before Nightmare Moon took the stage, and the second part, if it

was buried somewhere in her subconscious, had yet to show itself. But Twilight remembered Rarity was there. So was Applejack. If she ran into one of them on the farm, she would have to remember to ask. She would look like an idiot, but it would help her get her bearings. In the mean time, she looked around the nest of books that filled the floor. Somepony had been here before her, perhaps many ponies, and if she never found out who they were, she at least wanted to figure out what they had been after, and get a bit of cleaning done in the process.

Some of the books she recognized. *Elements of Harmony: A Reference Guide* and *Predictions and Prophecies* were both among the first books she picked up. Twilight rationalized that whoever was here must have been just as interested in the legend of the Mare in the Moon as she was. Other books covered a variety of topics, such as a book on the history of the Equestrian royal family, and one on protecting oneself against dark magic.

As she finished cleaning, Twilight noticed the door to the basement. In her memories, when she had moved in, the basement was mostly empty space, perhaps for storage, and she had converted it into her lab. Now she wondered what had happened to it. She pulled open the door and slunk through, following the staircase down into the earth.

Here the familiarity began to fade. Were she still at home, Twilight would have followed the wires that hung from the ceiling as she made her descent. At the bottom, she would round the corner into her lab, lit by electric lights in the ceiling, which, while expensive, were brighter than fireflies and less likely to accidentally damage her delicate instruments than an oil lanterns. While the stairs had the same shape, and ended with the same bend, there were no wires on the ceiling. When she finally rounded the corner, no lights hung from the ceiling. The large room before her was not her lab.

Twilight did not immediately realize the room's purpose. A plush chair at the far end of the room was raised by a table, towering above anything else. A smaller wooden chair was at its side. Half a dozen seats formed a ring around the pedestal, for Twilight couldn't think of a better word to describe it. In the back, an assortment of mismatched benches and pews were filed in rows, some made of splintering wood, others made of red cloth. An image of the sun, its rays stretching out, filled the corners of one

wall. The wall opposite, instead of one large picture, was a mural. Dozens of images ran together, scenes of a pegasus pony flying, fighting, and striking a number of poses that seemed to serve no practical purpose but looked impressive. In many of the picture she wore the golden armor of the royal guard. Whoever had painted it had put a lot of care and effort into both the design and the execution. The fringes showed the mare as a young filly, and she aged as Twilight's eyes approached the large piece at the center, a close-up of the mare, her wings spread behind the copies of her, forming a backdrop. Twilight swore she could make out each hair in the mare's pale white coat, and the brilliance of the mare's mane was painted in a brighter color than the sun she glared at so fiercely, and perhaps the coloring choice was intentional. This mare did seem to outshine even the sun.

Twilight took a step back to take in the entire painting at once. The mare was indeed glaring; for a moment Twilight thought she had simply imagined that detail. The look was fierce, but not necessarily malevolent. Those who had done nothing wrong had nothing to fear. It was just. That was the best way to describe her. She was justice. As soon as Twilight made this observation, she realized where she was.

Her lab had become a courtroom. The pedestal-chair was where the judge sat. The scene was thrown together with whatever parts looked even half-decent, but that somehow made the overall effect even more chilling, as if it were built by a frenzied madpony. Twilight stepped away from the mural to clear her head, and as she did she saw movement near the entrance from the corner of her eye.

She turned in time to see a pale violet earth pony charge forward, driving his head into her shoulder. Fire arced across her body from the point of impact, and Twilight staggered. Her vision unfocused, she tried to back away from her attacker and prepared her counterattack. A purple lance began to materialize above her head, a rapidly solidifying mist. She had never used the spell in actual combat before, and she hoped now that the threat would pacify her opponent. Before the lance was even finished taking form, the stallion raised a forehoof and brought it crashing down on Twilight's horn.

Twilight screamed, not expecting the new pain. She felt like her horn had been driven into her skull. The lance vanished, and her legs gave

way. She crashed onto the floor, her opponent standing over her triumphantly. Twilight wanted to call for help or beg for mercy, but she was too occupied gritting her teeth from the agony. Her horn had never been treated like that, not intentionally, and Twilight hadn't expected it to hurt nearly as much as it did. The face above her wavered, and then dissolved into mist as Twilight fell into darkness.

At first, all Twilight could see was the pegasus from the painting. If she had looked intimidating in the painting, the effect was even more powerful in real life. Every feature demanded attention, from her muscled frame to her outstretched wings to the way her eyes darted back and forth, taking in every fine detail of the cave. She wore the same armor Twilight had always seen her in, and it seemed to flash golden even with no light to shine on it. The mare was in command and knew it. Twilight hardly noticed the flashes of lightning from the outside storm; they were small candles compared to the light from the mare.

"Twilight Sparkle." The mare seemed wearied by their encounter, but not at all afraid. "Truth be told, I was dreading the day we would meet again, and I prayed it wouldn't be just the two of us. But I've overcome my fears in the recent months, and I've come to look forward to this. I won't go down quite as easily this time, you know."

This was another dream, Twilight knew, and as the impulses filled her head, she played along.

"I remember you," remarked Twilight, stupefied. She knew the words she wanted to say, something along the lines of *I'm sorry*. Instead, she hardened her face and repeated herself. "I remember."

"I should hope so," said the mare, almost bored. "Making such threats against another pony's life isn't an experience you just let die. I haven't forgotten you, either. You almost snapped my head right off, or so you claim. I personally question whether you would have gone through with it."

"Stone Wall," said Twilight, and the pegasus stirred slightly at the sound of her name. "What are you doing here?"

Stone Wall's eyes opened wide, and she stared at Twilight. "You're not a foal, Twilight," she said. "I'm here to reclaim the Element of Magic, obviously. Little good it will do us now, though. Do you know how many known bearers of the Element there are? One. Princess Celestia herself, and only she knows where she's gone to. I'm also here to bring you to justice, but that's second priority. Does that answer your question?"

"No. I mean, why haven't you killed me yet?" Twilight gestured to the crossbow strapped to Stone Wall's side. "I've seen those used before. I grew up in Canterlot. And you. Your eyes were good enough to find this cave from above, something I designed to be impossible, unless you found some other way to discover where I was hiding. You had every upper hand, and you didn't use them. You could have taken me out before I even knew you were watching. Why?"

Stone Wall grimaced, a combination of mourning and frustration. "This isn't a time for bloodshed," she answered sympathetically. "Too many ponies have died from this; I'm not about to add another body to the count. My goal isn't vengeance, Twilight; it's understanding. I know we used to be enemies, but that seems like ages ago. There is no longer a princess for me to serve or you to oppose. There is only our shared enemy, an enemy to all Equestria." A bolt of lightning struck outside, and the roar of the thunder briefly deafened Twilight. "That storm is because of her, you know. Nightmare Moon. After the Last Sunset, most of the weather ponies scattered. Some to find their loved ones, others to save their own flanks. What remained really wasn't large enough to keep much of anything under control. Please, Twilight Sparkle. I am coming in good faith, and I ask you for help. I believe that the two of us, together, can heal this broken world."

Twilight wanted to hear what Stone Wall said next, but the voice was drowned out by a sudden wind. Twilight felt herself rising back up to the surface, and the world around her melted away. Desperate, she finally found the strength to say the words she had been longing to say.

"I'm sorry."

It wasn't in the original memory; Twilight chose to add it in. She knew that her dreams could not alter the past, but she hoped that, if anything, the words would help her to finally sleep soundly.

Twilight's first sensation upon her return to the world of the waking was a rude shake by her captor. Too soon, thought Twilight. She awoke too soon. Just a little bit longer, and she would have had something she could use. Instead, as she looked into the angry eyes of the stallion, she remembered where she had seen him before.

"Silver Shield."

The stallion's face seemed to be uplifted at the utterance, and Twilight got her first close look at him. While Stone Wall was perpetually in a state of grace, the male guardspony seemed to have taken a fall long ago and never recovered. His pale brown mane was dirty and unruly; his fetlocks were unshorn. His eyes were wild and bloodshot, in constant motion. Twilight had never seen a pony look like this before, but she understood it well enough. Silver Shield had lost his marbles and was out for blood.

Twilight began struggling to stand but was unsuccessful. Each motion brought friction to her ankles, and she realized her hooves were tied behind a chair. Looking out, she saw both painted walls and the doorway. From her perspective she realized she was in the chair adjacent to the judge's chair.

The chair used for witnesses being questioned.

"That's right," said Silver Shield. "I'm so glad you remember me after all this. I missed you."

Twilight realized that struggling wouldn't do her any good. Trying to think, she considered using magic to escape. But the ropes were behind her, and using magic on something she couldn't see was like firing a bow into a dark alley; she would be clumsy and imprecise.

A second possibility occurred to her. She knew where part of the rope was, the part that was touching her ankles. If she lit it on fire, the flames would burn through the rest of the rope. She couldn't escape without burning herself in the process, but it was the only thing she could think of. Her horn

lit up.

Silver Shield spun and bucked it as hard as he could.

Twilight gasped as her breath left her, and the horn's light winked out. Every muscle in her body locked and then released, and Twilight almost fell out of the chair in the process, the rope keeping her forelegs connected. The strain on her legs was painful, but it worsened when Twilight attempted to lift herself back up. She fell to the floor again, as much as the rope would allow, almost on her knees, and started panting for air until the pain dimmed to a dull throb. She fought the urge to vomit again. She had read before that unicorn horns were sensitive, and her own experiences could confirm this, but she had never considered its potential for abuse.

"Can you imagine my surprise to come home and find you waiting for me?" Silver Shield hissed. "It's like my birthday. Best present I could receive."

"Your home?" murmured Twilight weakly.

"Sure. The library's public property, so it belongs to the government. Which is me. When I came to Ponyville, the mayor graciously set up a little home for me in the back room. A place to sleep, and all the research material I could ever want. I figured out what you did that day, at the Summer Sun Celebration. I know about the Elements of Harmony. The one thing I didn't have, the final missing piece, was you. I made it my mission to find you. And here you are. Do you know why you're here?"

When Twilight didn't answer, he kicked her again, this time in the side.

"Celestia may be gone, but her kingdom lives on through me. She cannot be here to deliver her punishment, so I must do it for her. Look at me, Twilight. There are still laws, and I am the enforcer. I am Justice. And this is your trial."

Each line was uttered without hesitation, as if the speech had been prepared beforehand and rehearsed many times.

"The charges: one count of royal theft; grand treason; one, no, now two

counts of breaking and entering; witchcraft; and two counts of murder."

Twilight's mind froze as it tried to process the last bit. Two counts of murder. That wasn't possible. It couldn't be true. Another kick brought her back to reality.

"I am your prosecutor, judge, and jury. You have now heard your charges. Twilight Sparkle, how do you plead?"

Twilight realized he was waiting for an answer. With each second he grew more furious, and Twilight feared she would be kicked again. "Not guilty," she whispered. She couldn't have done what he claimed. Theft, she remembered. She had stolen the element of magic. Breaking and entering she had just done, although the library was public property; even Silver Shield had admitted that. But treason? Murder? Twice?

Silver Shield seemed irritated at her answer but not surprised. "Well then. I suppose today is the first day of your trial. And the last day you'll ever see the sky."

Chapter 3

Jury-Rigging

SUNSIDE

Rainbow Dash shivered in the late evening cold. She knew it shouldn't bother her; after all, anypony who had flown above the clouds, or through them, must have faced worse temperatures at one time or another. Anypony who could break the sound barrier and not mind the wind chill had no right to complain about a breeze. Yet attitude was ninety percent atmosphere, and Rainbow Dash knew this more than most ponies. And in the suffocating darkness of the Everfree Forest, even the gentlest sensations could feel threatening.

After Doctor Whooves had left, the group had adjourned while Twilight worked on a plan to open a gate between worlds. Knowing each passing hour could mean the difference between their Twilight's rescue and her death, Rainbow Dash found herself unable to focus on anything. She had flown down to the weather center, to let Cloudkicker know she wouldn't be showing up to work for a while and to ask the other pegasus to take over for her. Cloudkicker, perhaps seeing the request as an opportunity to prove herself, accepted gleefully and without any questions. When Rainbow Dash returned home, she found a note taped to her door waiting for her. A time, place, and an unusual and probably illegal request. And now Rainbow Dash was outside the Castle of the Royal Sisters for the second time that week.

"I'm glad everypony could make it," said Twilight, looking over the five ponies she liked to think were her friends. "I asked all of you to bring something for this experiment. First, Applejack."

The orange pony brought forth the bundle of rope she had carried on her back. "I don't see what this'll be good for," she said.

Twilight took it out of her hooves with telekinesis. "This is perfect,

Applejack. Thank you. Now, Fluttershy, the stakes."

Fluttershy approached Twilight, a cloth bag swinging from her mouth containing six metal stakes left over from the construction of her chicken coop. She dropped the bag at Twilight's feet and raised her head to look at the strange familiar pony. For some reason, Twilight had become far more disarming since she had managed to regain some control over her life. Fluttershy wished the unicorn could be weak and helpless again, so she could help again, instead of being scared, but the thought was selfish and Fluttershy did her best to ignore it. This Twilight was still the same pony she had protected in her time of need, even if she didn't act like it. Fluttershy quickly retreated to the other thing she was asked to bring, a first aid kit.

Twilight lifted each stake, one at a time, and she brought them in a circle around her, about four feet across. With a single swift flick of her neck, each stake sped downward and was buried in the ground, only a couple inches sticking above the ground. The rope slithered around the stakes, and the two ends tied themselves together; the result strongly resembled a snake swallowing its own tail. Twilight stared disapprovingly at the knot, which began to glow more brightly. When the light faded, the knot was gone, the rope now a single loop.

Rarity inspected the hexagon. "It's nice, dearie, but what's it for?"

"It's a spell circuit," explained Twilight. "A circle, or close to one, at any rate. Everything in magic is about circles, one way or another. In this case, it's about establishing a boundary. Defining the scope of the magic."

"A controlled explosion," echoed Fluttershy. "You mean the explosion's only going to be inside that circle?"

"That's the idea. Assuming everything goes as planned, we won't feel anything more than a warm breeze. Rarity, I trust you memorized the spell I gave you?"

Rarity's face went pale. "I'm sorry, Twilight. I tried, but I couldn't make any sense out of it." She could tell Twilight was disappointed, but there really was nothing she could do. She had read over the entire spell once and tried to figure out where to start making heads or tails of it, but the effort

was wasted, as if the spell, even the footnotes, had been written in a completely different language. "I'm a dressmaker, you know, not a wizard."

"Maybe not," said Twilight, "but I know a sorceress when I see one."

"Excuse me?"

Twilight peered at Rarity, sighing. "Do you really not know anything about magic? There are three types of spellcasters. There are wizards, like your Twilight. They study magic, understanding how it functions at the most basic level, and they build from there, making more complicated spells by combining simpler ones that they've already mastered. In theory, wizards are the most versatile, since almost all magic is available to them, provided they have a fully-stocked library and lots of free time to research. Then there are sorcerers, like you and me. We don't need to know how magic works to use it. We can see how the parts of the spell fit together, which parts supplement each other and which parts clash. We use our gut and intuition, hitting the books only when we have to. Thus, we're the most adaptable on the field of battle, since we can change strategies on the fly with little consequence and try things that feel right, even if we haven't studied them. When it comes down to it, for a wizard, magic is like building a machine, shaping each gear. For a sorcerer, magic is like painting, or dressmaking. I think you'd make a very good sorcerer if you put your mind to it."

This was indeed news to Rarity. She had never considered a future in magic before. "I'm flattered, really," she said. "But that doesn't change the fact that I can't memorize an entire spell in the span of a few hours."

"Fine. At least you brought the other item I requested?"

Rarity nodded and removed the ruby hairpin she had been wearing. "Take good care of it," she told Twilight. "It's expensive."

Twilight nodded as she took the hairpin, barely registering the request. She focused on the hairpin, prying the ruby off with telekinesis and crushing it into powder. Rarity, aghast, almost began crying.

"What's the third type?" Twilight head Pinkie Pie ask. "You said there were three types of spellcasters."

"Warlocks. I have a bit of that in me too, I guess. Since magic is my special talent, it means I'm not locked into learning magic of a specific school. Most gifted mages are a bit of all three, although I'm a lot more of a warlock than your Twilight is. Warlocks are all about power. Gathering up as much as you can at once and then releasing it, which is interestingly basically what we're trying to do right now. They can be deadly if they catch you surprised or unprepared, but otherwise they're pretty easy to handle, since they only have one strategy and one setting. Unless they're paired up with another spellcaster, in which case they can channel all their energy into powering up their partner's spells." Twilight strung out the powdered ruby into a ribbon and began writing symbols around the perimeter of the hexagon, just inside the circle.

"What're you doin' now?" asked Applejack.

Twilight grunted, wishing that the others would just let her work instead of asking so many questions. "External storage space," she answered. "Spells take up space in the working memory of the caster. Rarity seems unable to lend her own brainpower to the cause, and it's too complicated for me to handle on my own, so this is the alternative. I'm writing some parts of spell into the circle itself, so that I won't need to hold them in my mind the entire time. It's not as elegant, and it probably doubles the risk of us all being killed in the rebound, but it'll do." She glared at Rarity, silently letting her know, *if we die, this is your fault*.

"Alright," she said when she was finished. "Rainbow Dash, your turn." The multicolored pegasus nodded and nudged forward her item, an unstable thundercloud. Small arcs of lightning leaped from the surface, not enough to kill, but certainly enough to give any non-pegasus a long-lasting fear of storms. Rainbow Dash, immune to the cloud's small bolts, pushed against the cloud uninhibited until it was just outside the circle, whereupon she dragged it to a stop. "We're blowing up a cloud?" she asked, trying to understand how that would work.

"No. A bomb has two parts, a fuse and a payload. The cloud's the fuse. We don't want the entire thing to just blow up on us; that's a walking disaster, so we have one part we can control that triggers the rest." She turned to the only member of the group who had not yet contributed

anything. "We're going to use Pinkie Pie's military-grade explosives. Celestia tier."

Pinkie Pie bounded into the center of the group, a crate labeled "Danger: Do Not Shake" in all capitals strapped to her back, jostling with each step. Rainbow Dash stared, dumbfounded, but decided that she truly didn't want to know why Pinkie Pie owned a crateload of volatile explosives or where she had obtained them. Like everything involving Pinkie Pie, it was easier to simply accept. The pink mare stopped at the edge of the hexagon and shook off the crate, which landed perfectly in the center of the circle with a resounding thud. Rainbow Dash squeezed her eyes shut, expecting the worst, but when they opened, nopony had been reduced to cinders.

Twilight carefully maneuvered the cloud so that it was over the box. The setup complete, she turned again to Rarity. "At the very least, Rarity, can you at least pipe the spell and channel it?"

Rarity's face was blank. "Do what?" she asked slowly and after a good pause.

Twilight squealed infuriatingly. "I form the spell and pass it to you so you can add your own power to it. Is that too much for you?" Twilight wondered how any unicorn could possibly be unfamiliar with one of the most basic magic techniques.

Rarity nodded, recalling the miniscule amount of formal training she'd actually received on the subject. "I think I can handle that."

"Good. Go stand on the other side."

Rarity walked around to the far end of the contraption. She eyed the storm cloud worriedly. "Are you sure this is safe?" she asked, trying to find an excuse to chicken out and get as far away as possible, as quickly as possible.

Twilight was unable to respond. Her eyes were squeezed shut in concentration. The rope closest to her began to turn a iridescent purple like it was made of glass and filtering sunlight, only the light came from inside it. The rough form of multiple bound threads melted into a single cylinder, and the effect spread around both sides of the hexagon, pulling it

into a circle in the process. The magic met at Rarity's feet, and as the two links met, she felt her mind fill with feeling.

There was no logic in what Rarity saw. She was expecting to see a neat diagram, with each part of the spell conveniently labeled. Instead she faced a jumbled mess of shapes, colors, and emotions.

Twilight had been right about one part, though. Even though Rarity had only looked at the spell in its written form once, and she had barely understood it at the time, she could sense which parts of the spell were meant to connect to each other. Colors that clashed should stay far apart. Conflicting emotions shouldn't be adjacent. She still didn't understand what the spell did, even remotely, but she knew how to assemble it. In her mind's eye she guided the parts together with a gentle hoof, strengthening the bonds with her own energy. One element, a red bit that reminded her somehow of Rainbow Dash before a race, became the output for the rest of her power.

She could now feel the spell straining against the boundaries Twilight had placed it in. It wanted to be released, and Rarity wasn't going to stand in its way.

"Is this safe?" echoed Twilight. "Not at all." But it was too late to stop what had already begun as the thundercloud shot downward, colliding with the crate.

The resulting sound was deafening. Rainbow Dash tried to stand her ground, but found herself sliding backward, pushed by a force worse than any storm she had ever encountered. Beside her, Pinkie Pie rocketed back, thrown by the explosion but seemingly not caring. The heat of the blast engulfed Rainbow Dash, and for a moment she felt like she was being cooked alive. She swore she could smell singed hair.

Then the magic kicked in. A shimmering barrier rose up from the circle, pushing the explosion back. Rainbow Dash watched as the fire was compressed into a sphere about the size of the circle, spinning erratically above it. Every couple of seconds part of the fire would break free and jet out, only to be quickly forced back into place.

Rarity felt the spell straining under the force of the explosion, and she

fought to maintain its structure. Twilight, as the spell's caster, was subjected to more of the backlash, but she seemed to be controlling the spell with much less strain, although Rarity saw that she was sweating.

The world around the ponies seemed to be rippling, distances elongating and suddenly contracting. Only the sphere in the circle seemed to have focus; everything else was bent awkwardly at an angle, as if it was being swung around the sphere at massive speeds. And through her constantly shifting viewpoint, Twilight was certain she saw trees that weren't there before, skeletal and bare, a second castle, even more decayed and downtrodden than the first, and fleeting, shifting figures peeking out from the windows, their green eyes watching the events unfold. She tried to reach out to it, draw it closer to her and keep it there, but already the image was slipping away. The shield, unable to take any more, vented the fire upward, and Twilight and Rarity simultaneously collapsed to the ground.

No pony spoke. A minute passed. Then another. All Rainbow Dash could think about was the world on the other side, the world she had now seen.

Fluttershy trotted up to Twilight and nudged her. When the unicorn didn't respond, Fluttershy dug her head beneath the collapsed mare and slowly lifted Twilight onto her back. "Come on," she said to the others. "Let's take them back to the library."

They had failed. Rainbow Dash realized this now, although it should have been obvious for some time. Twilight's plan to get them across hadn't worked. Rainbow Dash was about to help Fluttershy carry Rarity when something in the distance caught her eye.

Pinkie Pie and Applejack bounded over to Rarity, hoisting her up and balancing her on the pink mare's head. "You coming?" Pinkie Pie called.

"Yeah." Rainbow Dash peered into the darkness between two of the trees. "I thought I saw somepony, but I'm not sure."

"Who?" asked Fluttershy.

"I don't know. I didn't get a good look, and it's not there anymore. Maybe I just imagined it." She gave up and took half of Twilight onto her back. As the friends left the clearing to head back to town, Rainbow Dash dared one

more look into the darkness, and she swore she saw a pony's head looking back at her.

MOONSIDE

Twilight tried to focus on Silver Shield through the haze, her stomach still lurching from the attack. He was pacing the room, muttering to himself. She couldn't make out what he was saying, but she didn't have to. The important part was clear enough; he wasn't paying attention to her. Trying her best to push the pain aside, Twilight closed her eyes and concentrated, and her horn began to glow softly.

Behind her, a small seed of violet light appeared. It spun, stealing wisps of energy from the air as its elongated ends approached them, and it grew in size. When it reached the size of a small apple it slowed to a stop, and as it hovered small strands escaped, only to quickly be reabsorbed. The surface constantly shifted and roiled, giving it the appearance of a miniature purple sun.

Silver Shield turned to address his captive and then raised an eyebrow, amused. "You're really going to try magic again?" he asked, bored. He stepped forward, and Twilight instinctively flinched. The sphere shuddered but maintained its shape. Silver Shield looked at Twilight mournfully. "I'm not going to hit you again, Twilight. You're not stupid, and you can understand how this is going. I'm in control, not you. I trust that you're not going to do anything to make me angry."

Twilight didn't want to admit that he was intimidating her, so she merely nodded silently.

Silver sighed. "I suppose we should just get this over with. The prosecution is ready to make their case."

Prosecution? They? Twilight wanted to ask Silver Shield what he meant, but her breaths were still ragged, and she couldn't force the words out. Instead, she watched as Silver climbed onto the judge's chair, perhaps because the witness booth was already occupied. "The prosecution calls to the stand their only witness," he announced with an air

of theatricality. "Silver Shield, of the Silver Star lineage, royal guard of Canterlot. Please state your relation to the victims."

Twilight again tried to speak, trying to figure out how to admit she didn't know whom she had killed, but Silver Shield cut her off, and it became apparent that he had begun talking to himself again, playing both sides of his own interrogation.

"I owe it to my family," he said. "Without their disregarded advice, their overbearing presence, and my loveless captivity of a childhood, I never would have met her. My father had high hopes for me, even before I was born. Success runs in my family's veins. Not quite as literally as some of the other aristocratic families, but nonetheless, the very name Silver Star struck awe in every Canterlot pony, as it should. An endless line of scholars and mages, all of them with the strongest of minds and the purest blood. And all of them unicorns. Keep it within the upper tiers, they said. Don't defile something so precious. And then I popped out. You can imagine the scandal. There were accusations of infidelity. I was their mistake. And when the reputation of the family began to falter, I was their scapegoat as well."

Twilight didn't understand why the speech was unnerving her. She knew she shouldn't be feeling any sympathy for the stallion who had taken her hostage. She couldn't relate to his life at all; magic had always been her gift, and she couldn't imagine what it would be like to be surrounded by it but unable to use it. His treatment of her had afforded him no respect. But when she looked into his eyes, she saw fear, overwhelming panic as he struggled to bring justice to whatever small pieces of his life he had actually cared about. Silver Shield was afraid of the world and had nothing to live for but revenge, and as Twilight realized this her heart broke.

"They named me Silver Shield. I used to think it was something to be proud of. I was too young to know the truth, that my name was some secret inside joke. Silver may be beautiful, but it makes a terrible shield. It's too soft. It tarnishes. It can't do what it was made to do. It's expensive and yet worthless, and that's what my family thought of me."

Silver Shield lowered his eyes, downcast, and Twilight seized the moment to finish the spell, visualizing the last piece that would bind the loose ends of the spell together and connect them. She built the set of instructions for

the sphere so that it could run parallel to and independently of her own will, sending them over the pipeline. She felt the sphere acknowledge the connection, and she activated the final trigger. The spell complete, her horn faded just as Silver Shield looked up and resumed his speech.

"I was determined to prove them wrong, that I really could amount to something. So I joined the royal guard. If I couldn't give my life to my family, I could give it to my country, the country that kept the Silver Stars safe, kept them from being torn apart by dragons and griffons and who knows what else. And maybe, just maybe, I could win back a shred of respect. And it almost worked. I wasn't scrap anymore, just damaged, impaired. And then I met Stone Wall."

Behind Twilight's back, beads of red bubbled to the surface of the sphere, combining with each other into a circular mass covering a fourth of the surface. Slowly, the skin on the red circle lifted, and Twilight's Third Eyed opened, awaiting its next orders.

"I don't know what my family was expecting. One one hoof, they wanted to salvage what was left of the diluted bloodline. On the other, however, they had made it clear that any unicorn who would defile herself with anything less than perfection was scum. I suppose they were hoping I would wither up and die, and they could prune the less stellar branch of the family tree, trying to pretend that I had never happened, that I was just some bad dream. Instead, when I found Stone Wall, I lost their respect. And I realized something that had never occurred to me before: I didn't care. I didn't care that my family hated her; I didn't care that she was a Pegasus. For the first time, I was happy."

Twilight took in the new image granted to her by the Eye. Until now, she had been scared to use magic to untie herself. If she couldn't see where to aim, any attempts to sever the ropes would be ineffectual at best and harmful at worst. Now, aided by the Eye, she was a bit more confident in her ability to not miss the rope and strike skin instead.

"Are you listening to me?"

Twilight froze. Silver Shield was glaring at her now, intense contempt filling his eyes and frown.

"I'm getting the feeling you don't even care about what I have to say, sometimes. Like you're not taking this trial seriously. Do you even value your own life, Twilight Sparkle?"

Twilight feigned ignorance, hoping Silver Shield would continue his speech, distracting himself from her escape plan. After ten seconds of silence, Twilight realized he was awaiting a response. "Yes," she choked. "I want to live."

"I find that hard to believe," sneered Silver Shield. "Do you believe I'm even worth your time? Because I don't have to do this. This trial, this whole presentation is out of the goodness of my heart and my respect for an established system. If you'd rather, we can both agree on your guilt and I'll just kill you here and now. It would save us both a lot of time, don't you think?" He pushed his face close to hers; she could feel his ragged, panicked breath, and she was certain he could feel hers. "Or is this all because I'm not a true unicorn?"

Twilight sputtered, not comprehending. "I don't," she began, desperate to say something, but she had no idea what word should come next.

"Don't interrupt me," barked Silver Shield, forgetting he had been awaiting an answer. "I refuse to be patronized by your type. I used to buy in to all of that garbage. My parents had me thoroughly convinced about the superiority of our breed. That magic conquers all. That one day the earth ponies and the pegasi and the sea ponies would all be put in their proper place. And I believed it. I believed I was worthless, and I wished that somehow, things could be different, that I would wake up in the morning and be more like my beautiful, perfect family." He slapped Twilight across the face. "That's the effect that you have!" he screamed, and then he instantly quieted. "And I thank you for it. If it wasn't for their abuse, I might have turned out like they did. I never would have joined the Guard. I never would have met Stone Wall. My family did one thing right; they opened my eyes to the truth.

"But all good things come to an end, and my life ended when the Darkness fell. Our chain of command was toppled at the top when Celestia vanished, and everything was thrown into chaos. I was a coward; I wanted to run and hide. Stone Wall, on the other hand, was a natural leader; she took charge and held us together. She believed that there was a way to fix

things, to bring back the sun. But she wanted your help. She trusted you. And that was her last mistake. A month after the Darkness, Stone Wall told me she had tracked you down. Somewhere in the Swayback Mountains. She said you had something that could save us. The Element of Magic, although I didn't know it at the time. That night was the last time I saw her.

"The question that is now put before this court is: what happened to Stone Wall? The answer is obvious. We know where she went; she visited a known enemy of hers who had multiple reasons to kill her. To remain hidden, to avoid being brought to justice, to protect her treasure. No other pony with motive to kill her would have known where to find her, and most would not even have been able to reach her. In addition, Stone Wall was a competent fighter, a strong flier with excellent eyesight. The only way she could have been subdued would be if she were betrayed, attacked when her guard was down. Logic dictates the truth, Twilight Sparkle. She put her trust in you, and you betrayed her. This is proof, beyond a reasonable doubt, that for the charge of ponyslaughter, the jury finds you, Twilight Sparkle..."

"Wait," cried Twilight, panicking. Silver Shield eyed her with the contempt he would spare for a horsefly. "This is a trial, right? Don't I get a chance to defend myself?"

Silver Shield cursed as he realized that he was going to have to follow his own rules. He cleared his throat and spoke. "Of course. The defense calls to the stand Stone Wall. Oh, wait, they can't. Because you murdered her!" As he spoke the last sentence he shoved his face against Twilight's, his mouth drawn into a vicious scowl. "Anything else you'd care to present? It's clear from the stakes we can't trust the testimony of the accused.

"Please," Twilight choked out. As crazy as it seemed, even to her, the truth was her only chance. "I don't know who you're looking for, but it's not me. I'm not the one you want. I don't even know you." She watched Silver Shield's scowl as it transformed in utter rage.

"You're not Twilight Sparkle?" he asked, barely managing to keep an even volume.

"Yes. But no. I don't remember you, or anypony. I don't even know who I am."

Silver Shield pondered this for a moment. "So you plead insanity," he finally concluded.

Twilight nodded enthusiastically.

"I'm tempted to believe you," admitted Silver Shield. "It would certainly explain how you were so easy to catch, like a bumbling foal on her legs for the first time. And there's definitely something wrong with you, although that's not a new development. But there's one gaping problem with that. The first thing you said to me when we met. Do you remember what it was?"

Twilight didn't, and she shook her head to say so.

"You looked me in the eye and said 'Silver Shield'. You called me by my name, even though I never told it to you. Which tells me two things. Firstly, that you're not quite as dumb as you're claiming to be. You're not an amnesiac. Secondly, there's only one place you could have learned my name. From Stone Wall, right before you killed her."

Twilight desperately thought, trying to remember where she had heard Silver Shield's name before. Was it possible that he was telling the truth? Had she killed Stone Wall? She knew the answer was somewhere in her subconscious, if she could only fall asleep again and find it. "Please," she begged, one last time. "I don't want to do this."

"Too late," growled Silver Shield, and he raised his hoof to strike her horn again. Then he paused. "Wait. Don't want to do what?"

Twilight smiled, but her expression was not joyful. If anything, it was her way of asking for forgiveness. "This," she said softly, before she executed her new-found unconventional use for her Third Eye. The bright purple sun behind her, at her order, flew around the chair and into Silver Shield's face. The stallion reared back in surprise, falling over on his back. Taking advantage of the distraction, Twilight closed her eyes, trying to recall what she had seen of her own backside. Drawing a line in her mind, she prepared to make the cut. Her horn lit up, a single crack rang throughout

the room as a lance of hardened wind struck the ropes, and Twilight was free.

Silver Shield howled, trying to push the Eye away from him, but every attempt only scorched his hooves. Finally, he managed to hit it on the soft red flesh, and it flew backward before changing direction in the middle of its journey to follow its master. The stallion blinked rapidly to eliminate the dancing spots that now obscured his vision. To his left he saw a large shrinking shape, and although he still couldn't see clearly, there was only one thing it could be. He stood, taking only a second to steady himself before charging after his enemy.

As Twilight ran, she noticed that the view from the Third Eye had gone out. Whatever Silver Shield had done, he had blinded it. Twilight wasn't sure what to make of this; she had only used the spell a couple times in the past, and that had never happened before.

If Twilight had to give Silver Shield credit for one thing, it was his speed. She left the makeshift courtroom and entered the long hallway, and as she turned the corner she heard Silver Shield impact the wall less than a second behind her. She knew she couldn't outrun him; the only question was how far she'd be able to get before he caught her. She bounded up the stairs, forming what she hoped would be enough of a plan to save her. She could feel Silver Shield's breath on her flank, and knew this was her only opportunity to escape; if she didn't pull some sort of trick immediately, he would never give her a second chance.

Through the Third Eye, Twilight saw a light. This struck her as odd; the Eye was damaged; it shouldn't be seeing anything at all. The light stretched and sharpened until it looked less like a light and more like an incredibly blurry image. An image of a pony that, in the last couple of days, had become very familiar to Twilight. Twilight didn't understand how this was possible, but the pieces of the puzzle slowly began to come together. The Eye was always supposed to be broadcasting an image. Now, unable to look at the outside world, but still having to send something, the Eye was, somehow, looking at her memories and surface thoughts. In any other situation the effect would have been useless, perhaps even unnoticeable. Now, however, it was a stroke of luck.

As Twilight passed through the doorway onto the first floor of the library,

she slammed the door shut behind her. Then, holding the door shut, she began to concentrate. All she needed to do was teleport; it was a spell she'd done many times before, but in the heat of the situation it came to her with difficulty. She felt Silver Shield's weight slam into the door with regular rhythm, and she didn't know how much longer she'd be able to manage. She needed to escape; she willed her body to dissolve and take her somewhere, anyplace but where she currently was.

Her horn lit up and sparks flew off of it, but one last kick against the door, combined with fatigue from her exertions, finally sent her sprawling. Distracted in the middle of the spell, her horn sputtered and the light died.

Silver Shield knocked the door off its hinges and entered the room, looking even more enraged than he had been before. To him, Twilight had not only doomed Equestria and murdered his lover, but now she had made a fool of him in his own home, while he was supposed to be in control. He loomed over her, and Twilight knew that she was about to die. Desperate, Twilight did the only thing she could think of.

Her horn lit up once again, and with it came another figure. The new pony appeared next to her, slightly transparent and flickering in and out of focus. At first, Silver Shield stared at the projection, pacified. Then, he became even angrier.

"How dare you!" He shouted. "How dare you defile her image like this? I'll kill you!"

And Twilight had no doubt that he would have killed her, had the projection of Stone Wall not taken that moment to speak.

"Listen carefully to me," it said, pulling words from the memory Twilight herself could not consciously remember. "We can save Equestria, together, but first I need to die. You have to kill me, Twilight Sparkle."

Chapter 4

The First Divergence

The moon shone brighter than Twilight had ever seen it before. The stars were a thousand glistening spearpoints in the sky. The thousand wasn't a wild estimate, either. When they had begun appearing she had counted each one, but she knew that would quickly become unfeasible, and she adapted a new strategy. She counted the rate at which she found new stars until that two was impractical. From there she extrapolated.

"You really think there's a thousand of them?" asked Luna, her stargazing companion.

"Nine hundred and sixty three, actually. But who's counting?"

"It sounds like you are," said Luna mischevously.

Twilight quieted, flushed with embarrassment. She didn't understand why she was getting so nervous. Luna's comment wasn't really that humiliating. Everything had been planned out, by the books and with a rigid schedule. Wasn't that supposed to make it officially fun? You're trying too hard to impress her, thought Twilight. Relax, enjoy the company. This is the perfect night for stargazing, using your deck and your telescope.

That wasn't a guess either. Twilight had asked Rainbow Dash for a favor, and as a result there wasn't a cloud in the sky.

Luna seemed to sense that Twilight was withdrawn. "Is everything alright?" she asked sympathetically.

Twilight blinked, as if she were just noticing Luna for the first time. "Yeah," she said with fake cheerfulness. "Yeah," she repeated, this time despondently. "But I'm not impressing you, am I? You probably already know all about the sky. You got a closer look than I ever did." She instantly shut her mouth, afraid that she'd just crossed a very serious line. "Oh gosh," she stammered. "I'm sorry, I didn't..."

She was interrupted by Luna nuzzling her cheek. "It's fine," she said, but the wavering in her voice told Twilight that it wasn't. "Tia told me to make friends, and she recommended I start with you. You do a really good job."

"What are you talking about? I'm terrible at making friends."

"But you're really close to the others, even though you've only been in Ponyville for a week. I think Fluttershy admires you a lot. So does Rainbow Dash, although you'd never get her to admit it." Luna reclined and watched the stars. "Do you know why I like the sky so much?"

"Because you're the moon princess?" guessed Twilight.

"Only until the coronation. Then I'm the moon queen."

Luna had mentioned this once before, confusing Twilight. "Why isn't Celestia queen?" Twilight asked. "She's never given me a straight answer."

"Probably because she couldn't tell you. Not without bringing me up. Twilight, Celestia isn't the heir to the throne, I am. Under Equestrian law, she can't become queen unless I die."

"Not even if the current heir is trapped on the moon?"

"Her advisers probably wanted her to, but instead she waited. She became acting ruler, but she continuously refused the title. She was keeping it safe for me, because she knew that one day I'd be coming back. The reason I like the sky is because it doesn't change. Sure, it's different depending on the seasons, but the constellations never go away forever. A thousand years ago tonight, the stars would all be in the same positions."

Twilight felt a pang of sympathy for the temporally displaced mare. "I imagine it can be hard to get used to. All the new magic research, a less conservative culture..."

"Tia's changed a lot too," murmured Luna, making clear that she didn't really care about what Twilight was saying. "What's she like now?"

"You keep bringing up the princess," said Twilight. "I know she hurt you, but you need to let that go."

Luna snorted. "It's not because she hurt me. It's because she's my sister. I love her. And she loves me. That's why she waited a thousand years for me to return. I want to now how she's changed. I'm worried about her well-being."

Twilight was about to say something to calm Luna, but she was distracted by a unicorn that was watching the pair from the ground below. Something about the unicorn bothered Twilight. It's because she's not supposed to be here, part of her said. This is wrong. She wasn't here the first time around.

"Excuse me for a moment," said Twilight and she stood and leaped off the edge of the balcony. Luna watched in amazement as Twilight fell, decelerating as she neared the bottom. She slowed to a near stop just before the grass, and she landed gently on four hooves.

The other unicorn chuckled at the display. "'Twilight' doesn't know how to do that trick yet," she pointed out.

Twilight sized up the stranger. The mare's coat was the same bright purple of Twilight's, but she was taller and older, and her mane was styled differently, flowing neatly down the back of her neck instead of getting in her eyes.

After half a minute of intense scrutiny by Twilight, the older mare gave up. "Yes?" she asked.

Twilight peered up into the stranger's eyes. "Do I know you?"

"You tell me. I've already given you everything you need. Do you remember any of it?"

The mare looked incredibly familiar, and it disturbed Twilight. She knew she had seen the mare before, but she couldn't figure out where. Around Twilight, the world seemed to be blurring, melting into new colors. The only things that stayed constant and real were Twilight and the newcomer.

"Do you know where you are right now?" asked the older unicorn.

"That's a stupid question. I'm outside my house," answered Twilight.

"Wrong. You're outside Twilight's house. I know you wish you were her, but you're not. For starters, she's nowhere near this antagonistic."

A series of images flashed in front of Twilight's eyes. Stone Wall. The cave laboratory. The botched spell in the Everfree Forest, and then Twilight realized where she was. "I'm dreaming," she said softly. Then she looked up at the mare. "If this is my dream, how are you here?"

"We had this conversation a long time ago. At least, I did. You're just experiencing it for the first time. I could also say I'm experiencing this right now, and you haven't yet. I remember you, and now you get to remember me. The circle of life."

Twilight stared blankly; she didn't understand a word of the mare's strange ramblings.

"We've met before, Twilight, and we'll meet again. Remember when, and where." The mare turned, as if to trot away.

"Is this why you brought me here?" Twilight asked. "Just to let me know that we'll meet again?"

"You assume too much, Twilight. I didn't start this dream. I have about as much control as you do. If you really want advice, though, hear this. When the dog barks, run. And don't be afraid to follow your dreams."

"Why the riddle? Why can't you just tell me what's going on?"

"Would you listen to me if I did? You still have a lot of growing up to do, Twilight Sparkle." The image of the larger pony began to fade away.

Twilight felt the air grow thicker around her, as if she were under water. The air was forced from her lungs, and she saw the bubbles she expelled float gently up toward a light somewhere above her. All the remaining colors of her world melted away, and suddenly Twilight was rocketing upward, toward the unknown.

SUNSIDE

Twilight broke the surface and gasped for air. She was in a white tent, lying on a bed; Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy were looking over her. Twilight tried to remember where she was, how she had gotten there, but the cacophony of different thoughts and memories bouncing around in her head forced her to lie back and try to sort things out.

This wasn't the first time she'd had such a detailed dream. It only took her a few nights to figure out what was going on. Somehow, the other Twilight's memories were still there. The transfer hadn't wiped her mind of its previous occupant's history, only suppressed it. And every time she woke up, the new experiences battled for dominance or a place in her timeline until they finally gave up and just hovered, fragments without a reference point, a beginning, or an end.

The other Twilight appeared to be on a first-name basis with Nightmare Moon, who seemed to be quite a bit smaller than Twilight remembered from her battle. She made a mental note of this and decided to ask one of the other ponies if the right moment presented itself.

"Shes... alive," said Fluttershy, tears falling from her face.

"Of course she is," stammered Rainbow Dash, whose eyes were red and puffy. "I told you she was going to be all right." She noticed that Twilight was now looking at her, and she balked. "I wasn't crying!" she squealed, before any accusations could be made. "I don't cry. Really. It cramps my style."

Twilight glanced around groggily. "Did it work?" she mumbled. She didn't recognize her surroundings, so she figured that maybe there was a chance they had made it across. "Where are we?"

"Nurse Redheart's. Worst case of fatigue she'd ever seen. But with a little bed rest you'll be fine."

"And Rarity?"

At the other unicorn's name, Fluttershy gave a cry and burst into even harder tears. "Rarity!" she moaned, before running out of the room.

Twilight slowly turned back to Rainbow Dash, a look of horror on her face.

"Rarity's fine," explained Rainbow, exasperated. "She woke up before you. Pinkie Pie and Applejack are looking after her, and Applejack's crying like a foal." She then added, quietly, "Seriously, what's with all the tears? I'm like the only pony here who isn't sobbing." She leaned in toward Twilight, sticking her snout in Twilight's face, and her demeanor instantly changed. "Good thing she's not hurt. If we found a scratch on her, I would have bucked your face in."

Twilight stopped breathing, the sudden change in mood startling her.

"Look," said Rainbow Dash. "Everypony makes mistakes, and I'm glad that you're trying to atone for yours. But that doesn't change the fact that you're dangerous. Like a rabid animal. And the most humane thing to do to a rabid animal is to put it out of its misery."

"Rainbow Dash?"

Rainbow's features softened. "Yeah, Twi?"

"What happens if we don't find a way across?"

The question shook Rainbow Dash, even though she had already given it a lot of thought. She would have been surprised if one of them hadn't considered the possibility at least once.

"Then life goes on," she said at last. "We'd have to grieve the loss of a very close friend of mine, and we'd be reminded of our loss every time we look at the pony who murdered her, who looks exactly like her."

Twilight swallowed, and her body trembled.

Rainbow grimaced. She had been expecting to feel better after putting Twilight down. After all, it was justified revenge. Yet somehow, her behavior only made her feel worse. Rainbow Dash wrapped her forelegs around Twilight and pulled the unicorn close to her. "But you will find a

way, Twi," she said, trying to comfort. "I know it. This is just like the Best Young Fliers competition. I didn't think I'd be able to pull off the Sonic Rainboom, but when my friends were counting on me, I found a way to pull through and save the day. So don't sweat it."

Twilight frowned. "What did you just say?"

"Don't sweat it?"

"No, before that. You mentioned a Sonic Rainboom."

"Yeah. It's when a sonic boom and a rainbow..."

"Sonic Rainbooms are impossible. You're joking."

Rainbow Dash grinned. She never got tired of this. "Maybe in your world," she explained. "But over here, you're looking at the only pony to ever pull it off." She struck a pose, raising her head majestically. The sudden shift left her unprepared when Twilight pushed her and stood.

"A controlled explosion," she mumbled, "a large burst of energy." She took off toward the door.

"Twi?" Rainbow Dash called after her.

"I need to check something," Twilight called back. "But I think I know how we're getting to the other side."

"For the last time, Applejack, I'm fine."

"Like hay you are. You can't even walk steady."

"Because you won't let me, you imbecile. You keep reaching out and grabbing me the moment I take even a single step."

The Doctor looked up from the book he was reading. The interruption was a real pity, he thought. He was just getting to the good part. He closed the book and focused on the door. He heard a "Hey, wait!" followed by rapid

hoofsteps. The door jolted open, making a dull thud as Rarity impacted it and a louder one as it hit the wall. As Rarity stepped over the threshold, she tripped, receiving a jaw full of a welcome mat that read "Tome Sweet Tome."

"Now listen here, Missy," ordered Applejack as she stepped around the unicorn. "I'm going to help you, and you're going to..." She looked up. "What the hay is he doing here? And why is the door unlocked?"

The Doctor grinned and waved his forehoof. "What, I can't check up on my new friends? See how they're doing?"

"The door was locked."

"Then perhaps you should make it more difficult to force open. I suggest wood." The Doctor resumed his read, paying no attention to the other ponies. Applejack was about to resume bickering when she noticed the Doctor was reading Twilight's diary. She quickly ran forward and grabbed it in her teeth. Looking for a place to put it, she finally just dropped it the saddlebag that Fluttershy had left behind.

"What's yer problem?" she nearly yelled at the Doctor. "You can't just go reading other ponies' private writing." She just hoped he hadn't stumbled open the page at the halfway mark.

"It was just lying on the floor. I thought it could have some clues about finding your friend." He then stuck out his tongue in mock disgust. "Unfortunately, it was as dry as Appleloosa creek in the summertime."

"That's hardly the point," said Applejack, but before either of them could continue the discussion, they were interrupted by the sound of glass shattering. Rainbow Dash tumbled from a window, but she instantly righted herself. She was grinning sheepishly in a way that reminded Applejack of the time Rainbow got to spend a whole day with the Wonderbolts. She didn't notice she was bleeding, or perhaps she noticed but didn't care.

"Twilight's coming!" she shouted. "She has a plan! And it's about me!" Rainbow suddenly teetered unsteadily on her hooves. She looked down at her forelegs, noticed the cuts from the glass, and nervously

laughed. Her other three hooves gave way, and she fell onto her stomach. "Gosh, this floor is comfortable," she remarked.

When Twilight finally arrived, Rainbow Dash and Rarity were both asleep on the floor, and Applejack was doing her best to push the Doctor out the door. The Doctor's ears were hanging low, and he was growling, but he perked up when he saw her.

"Twilight!" he cried.

"Doctor."

The Doctor leaned in close. "Rainbow Dash says you have a plan. She seems really excited."

Twilight nodded. "You said we needed an explosion. I was thinking of a sonic rainboom."

"Those are impossible."

"In that case, you can't really help us, can you? I think we're capable of managing on our own, without you."

She didn't say what was really on her mind, but she didn't have to. The Doctor understood. "You don't trust me."

"It's nothing personal. A strange stallion showing up on my doorstep? Forgive me for not putting all my faith in you, when I don't even know your name."

The Doctor nodded and moved until he was standing beside Twilight, facing the opposite direction. "I guess I'll be on my way, then. However, can I ask you something? You told me your theories about this other world. It's remarkable research, really, and one part intrigued me. You said that magic causes divergences, differences between our world and theirs. You concluded that, sometime in the past, there was a very significant release of energy that created major changes, like a butterfly effect. Have you given any thought as to what this release was?"

"No, sir. I didn't think it mattered."

The Doctor was horrified. "You're trying to travel into unknown territory. Your only clue is that the world is defined by some critical moment, some Divergence. And you haven't even bothered to figure out what it is? If you ask me, that's the real mystery here. You solve the mystery of why the other world exists in the first place, you answer a lot of questions, don't you think?"

Twilight hadn't thought about this. It was something to be curious about, but Twilight didn't think that figuring out why there were two different worlds would actually benefit them. It didn't change their current situation.

"One more thing, Miss Sparkle, and then I'll depart," said the Doctor. "I'm not nearly as flexible as you make me out to be."

As the Doctor left, Twilight grimaced, confused. "And what is that supposed to mean?" she asked Applejack, who was watching from the doorway.

"Best not to dwell on it," mumbled Applejack, blushing.

Chapter 5

Memories

MOONSIDE

A silence fell over Silver Shield and Twilight Sparkle as both pairs of eyes settled on the illusion conjured in the middle of the room. Twilight's breathing froze, while Silver's seemed to quicken. They both felt their hearts racing. The image of Stone Wall stood proudly, her golden mane flowing down her back. Her lustrous armor hid most of her fur, but white tufts jutted out at the edges. The only thing that had changed about her since Twilight's last dream was her expression. Before, she had been smiling, and every part of her face had been filled with kindness. Now her eyelids hung lower, her frowning mouth revealing her desperation.

"I need you to kill me," the image repeated. "Help me, Twilight Sparkle. You're my only hope." Stone Wall froze, her piece given. The illusion flickered, stretching and shearing in different direction, making it obvious she wasn't real.

Silver Shield's eyes darted between Twilight and Stone Wall, his jaw hanging open and quivering. She could tell he was trying to find a way reestablish control over the situation, and that involved figuring out exactly what was going on around him. But every time his brain started down a particular line of logic, it froze up in contradiction. Nothing made sense. There was no explanation.

"What... is... this?" he finally thought to ask.

Twilight looked over the newcomer. The picture was startlingly detailed. The mare's silver armor even seemed to reflect the light that was already in the room naturally. "I don't know," Twilight said as she stood up and began to move around Stone Wall, examining her from every angle. "I think..." She closed her eyes and began to concentrate, forcing herself through the strain that had started in her horn and was beginning to work

its way down her body.

"Stop," warned Silver Shield. "Don't act. Explain." Even though Twilight was no longer in any immediate danger; she could maybe teleport away before Silver Shield would be able to reach her, the force and conviction in his command persuaded her to obey.

"The memories are there," said Twilight, softly. "Even if I can't recall them on my own, they still exist, somewhere in my brain, just out of reach. Maybe I can use magic to draw them out."

If Twilight had been offered a choice for her circumstances, she would have asked for a week alone, with her computing machine, all her books on magic, and her trusted abacus. Improvised magic, such as what she was now suggesting, was not her area of expertise. It was possible, she knew, devising spells on the fly; many of the mages on Celestia's court were sorcerers, but she had always considered it a crude form of spellcasting. Less understanding meant less capability.

She thought back to the time she had tried to hypnotize the parasprites, figuring that the spell would be easier if she had a baseline to work from. This time, however, she would be retrieving thoughts instead of implanting them. She tried to remember how that spell had felt as she had cast it. Next, she buried her consciousness into the fine-woven structure of the Third Eye spell, trying to figure out where in her brain it had begun looking.

Silver Shield watched her, quickly becoming bored. To him, Twilight appeared to be quietly meditating, her face occasionally twisting up in concentration before settling back into a relaxed state. She was interesting to watch at the beginning, but after five minutes Silver turned his attention to Stone Wall.

Twilight had captured her beauty well. Looking at the image, knowing it wasn't real, still took Silver Shield's breath away. Stone Wall was the most dazzling pony to ever grace Equestria. Silver softened, remembering the times he had spent with her. Chasing the infamous jewel thief Sapphire Stones down a back alley in Tampa Bray, escorting the Princess on her diplomatic mission to the Land of Fiends and Fire, and even that time he and Stone Wall had gotten caught in the vicious ice storm after the

Canterlot weather crew had fled; Silver Shield remembered all these things and let himself fall into their comforting embrace.

Then he remembered why these were only memories instead of his current fate. He remembered the mare who had killed his lover.

"Are you done yet?" he asked Twilight. The unicorn opened one eye and looked at Silver, unfocused.

"Just about," she said as she retrieved the pointer from the Eye's emulated brainspace and fed it into her projection spell. She smiled, pleased with what she hoped was success. "Would you like to see the whole scene?"

Silver Shield wasn't impressed. "How do I know you're not making this all up?" he asked. "How do I know that what you show me is real."

Twilight scoffed, and the act did much to improve her attitude. "I almost died today. Do you really think I'd have the clarity to improvise an entire exchange with somepony you know a lot better than I do? If I'm faking, you'd probably be able to tell."

"Good point," said Silver Shield, feeling foolish for suspecting that a brute like Twilight would be able to make up a story about his beloved without him immediately seeing through it. "But if you try to teleport away, I'm tying you up again. Or maybe just killing you outright. I can recognize a teleport spell now." He thought back to the book on defending against dark magic he had been reading. One thing he had learned was that different spells had distinct visual effects upon use. Thus, a trained observer would be able to recognize if a spell being cast was attack magic or escape magic, even before the spell was completed. Of course, his statement was still a bluff. Silver doubted he'd be able to remember exactly which effect corresponded with which spell.

Twilight nodded and closed her eyes again, feeling around her own mind, guided by the pointer. Each new fragment of the memory was fed into the projector, and the image expanded, revealing rough rock walls and the lab equipment Twilight had seen in the cave in her previous dreams.

Silver Shield became extremely disoriented as the floor fell away beneath him. The blackness that replaced it slowly faded into a stone floor that

Silver could feel beneath his hooves. The new setting was unfamiliar, and Silver Shield slowly took it in. He assumed this was Twilight's base in the Swayback mountains, and he wondered if she had found the cave or if she had carved it herself. While the walls were flat and the corners sharp, parts of the room seemed unfinished and natural, like the stalactites that hung from the ceiling.

In addition to Stone Wall, the illusion now contained a second Twilight. Silver Shield could easily tell them apart, as the younger Twilight was missing the scars and bandages that obscured parts of the older Twilight's face.

The scene began to rewind. Both ponies' lips moved, but neither made any intelligible sound. The fake Twilight took steps backward.

The movement slowed to a crawl; the scene had halted, ready to play from the beginning. Twilight looked down at the floor, as if she was trying to process some new piece of information, but she was shaking, and her breathing was ragged. Silver Shield suspected that she had just seen what she was about to show him. Whatever she saw had startled her. "Are you ready?" she asked, managing a weak smile. "This is Silver Shield's final message to you."

The words "final message" chilled Silver Shield, but he refused to let it show. "Do it," he ordered.

The image of Stone Wall lost its statuesque appearance as it took on the movements of a living, breathing, being. "I am coming in good faith, and I ask you for help. I believe that the two of us, together, can heal this broken world."

Impossible, thought Silver Shield, but he said nothing. Stone Wall wouldn't reach out to the enemy like this.

"You're wrong," said Fake Twilight. "I'm hardly suited to save anypony."

Stone Wall laughed, softly and gently. "I think you underestimate your own ability."

"I don't know what stunt you're trying to pull," said Twilight. "At worst you're

cruel. At best, you're overly optimistic. Neither of those traits cause anything but pain and disappointment. You don't know the first thing about me."

"Twilight Sparkle. Daughter of Sun Sparkle and Twilight Star. Sister to April Bluff, also known as The Great and Powerful Trixie. Graduate of the Hoofington School of Wizardry. According to Professor Tweed Jacket, you show amazing potential but suffer from a lack of control. Overall, however, he thought you were one of his most inventive students."

Twilight was dumbstruck. "How did you..." she began.

"It turns out," explained Stone Wall, "that private records are a lot easier to access if you pretend to be a Shadowbolt."

Twilight shivered, and Silver Shield shook with her. The Shadowbolts, Silver Shield knew, were Nightmare Moon's trusted pegasus guard. They were the eyes and ears for the tyrannical pony and were spread all across Equestria. Together with the Ironhooves, an army of earth ponies, and the Aethernauts, Nightmare Moon's circle of magi, the three Shadow Cults were the most dangerous forces in Equestria, short of the Nightmare Queen herself.

"And I see you haven't let your magical talent go to waste," Stone Wall remarked as she gave the cave the scrutinous look-over. "I can't begin to guess what half of these things do, but surely something here can help us."

"Us?"

"There's quite a few of us ponies who still want to fight, Twilight. We're not all broken shells. Granted, the hard months have gotten to a good deal of us. There's only a couple of ways to get food, and that's to be born rich or work for Nightmare Moon. As our supplies ran low, quite a few of us defected." Stone Wall, while she talked, meandered over to a machine mounted on the wall, examining its features. It was nearly a perfect cube and was decorated with lights and dials. "Perhaps that's for the best, though. It means those who stayed are the truly loyal ones, the ponies we can trust. But we still need a miracle, and that's where you come in."

"I still think you have the wrong pony," scoffed Twilight. "And don't touch

that."

"Why? Is it fragile? It looks sturdy enough to me." She pressed a switch with her hoof, and a grinding sound emanated from deep within the machine. A tube connected to the machine began to glow with golden light, and Stone Wall followed it to an oversized bowl with half a dozen equally spaced cylindrical protrusions all pointing to a space above it.

Stone Wall felt the heat before she saw the light. The air rippled around the bowl, as if everything around her were merely painted in precise detail into a tapestry that was now blowing in the wind. From a seeming fold in the imaginary fabric, a small red sphere appeared above the bowl. The ball burned bright spots in her vision, and she shied away.

"What is this?" she asked, already having a sneaking suspicion.

"It's an artificial sun," explained Twilight. "It's an idea Madame Orange came up with. It mimics the properties of actual sunlight, and we can use it to grow food. Or we could, if I could figure out the right proportions of elements to include in it. The current model can't be sustained for more than half a minute, if we're lucky." As she finished speaking, the sun shook violently and then exploded, splashing Stone Wall with a searing and sticky red liquid that matted her fur. The pegasus yelped and tried to shake it off. Twilight, panicking, cast a spell that condensed the water vapor around Stone Wall, soaking her in water that dissolved the liquid.

Silver Shield shot the real Twilight a disapproving glance. "You really don't remember any of this?" he asked.

Twilight shook her head. "It's strange," she said slowly. "I'm still trying to figure it out. But she doesn't seem much like me. She's too cold."

In the illusion, Stone Wall laughed softly, never losing her cheerful demeanor. "I suppose I deserved that," she said. "That's ingenious, though. What else do you have?"

The friendly attitude startled Twilight. Weren't we supposed to be enemies? she thought. "You really think I can help you?" she asked.

"Listen to me, Twilight. I know the ponies around here don't respect you;

they fear you. But it's not all like that. You were the first pony to stand up to Nightmare Moon, even if you lost. You fought her when she first appeared at the Summer Sun Celebration, and nopony's forgotten that. You're an icon, Twilight Sparkle. An inspiration. I know for a fact that some of my comrades get through the day by thinking of you. You're already a hero."

"Now, I don't think you've spent these last few months hiding and doing nothing. And if you have anything, anything at all, that can stop Nightmare Moon, I want you to share it with us. Save us, Twilight."

Save us. Twilight had never been called upon before for a favor of such magnitude. "You want to know," she said slowly, "if I have something that can defeat Nightmare Moon. Some sort of weakness."

"Pretty much. Anything would be a lifesaver at this point."

Twilight paused, wrestling with the decision to share her greatest secret. "Fine," she said at last. "I may have something."

"A weapon we can use against Nightmare Moon?"

"Better than that. A lot better." Twilight motioned once for Stone Wall to follow her and began walking deeper into the lab.

Twilight's sudden enthusiasm bewildered Stone Wall. What is she planning? the pegasus wondered. Twilight was smiling now, the sort of smile that meant she had a secret that nopony else knew. Something that gave her an advantage, and she knew it. Stone Wall wondered what could possibly give Twilight such a spring in her step, and she followed eagerly.

Twilight led Stone Wall all the way to the back of the large chamber, stopping at the far wall. Small cylindrical rods were attached to the wall at even intervals, each one studded with smaller spikes and ending with a disc. They reminded Stone Wall of mechanical flowers. "There's a question every little filly asks, at least once. Have you ever gazed at the stars and wondered what's out there, miss Stone Wall?"

Twilight was giving her "miss", Stone Wall realized. She was certainly putting on a show. "You mean, like life out among the stars?"

"Not quite. The question, technically, is 'Are we alone in the universe?' The answer is no. There's life out there. Zecora and I found it. But it's not in the stars. It's here, in Equestria. Just a stone's throw away, but it's hidden out of reach." She pulled a switch on the wall, and the protrusions began humming with energy. Stone Wall watched the bolts of energy that built up in each rod before jumping between them.

The bolts smoothed and became a bright, pulsating grid that slowly faded into an image. At first, Stone Wall wasn't sure what she was looking at. Within the transparent picture was another cave, although this one appeared more natural than Twilight's base. Many more stalactites hung from the ceiling, and the corners were rounded, much unlike the blockish shape of the lab, which were signs of deliberate intervention by hoof. The high level of detail in the image almost convinced Stone Wall that the room had suddenly doubled in length; in fact, when she moved the image seemed to shift with her to a new vantage point, as if she were looking through a window, but she could still faintly see the wall behind the picture.

The physical Twilight and Silver Shield were equally dumbfounded. A glimmer of something unidentifiable flared up inside Twilight, perhaps determination or familiarity or some combination of the two, as she desperately tried to fit the pieces of the puzzle together. All she could tell with certainty was that this memory was important, and critically so.

"What is this?" Stone Wall asked for the second time.

"It's a very specific type of mirror," explained Twilight.

Stone Wall shifted again, watching the angle of the image change. Indeed, it did seem to behave how a mirror should behave, except for an obvious glaring problem. "I don't have a reflection. And this isn't your lab."

"I did say it was a special mirror. It filters the light that passes through it. I assure you, what you're seeing is real. It's just not something you can usually reach. Or even see."

"What am I looking at?" To Stone Wall, it just looked like a normal cave. Clearly, there was something special, something Twilight found extraordinary, but Stone Wall wasn't able to comprehend it.

"The B-side of the world. An alternate universe. Filled with alternate versions of me and you, in theory. And more importantly than anything else, a sun."

Twilight had expected this revelation to stun Stone Wall. Instead, perhaps because Stone Wall had never encountered anything of this sort before, she did not quite understand what she was looking at, even after the verbal explanation. The full impact and implications of this discovery were lost on her.

The same impact was not lost on the real Twilight. For her, the nightmare around her finally made sense.

This was not her world. She was not the Twilight Silver Shield was hunting. She glanced over at Silver Shield to see if he was coming to any of the same conclusions. His expression was blank, and he was completely focused on the scene playing out before them.

"I don't understand," said Stone Wall.

The Twilight in the illusion decided to create an example. "Why did you decide to join the Royal Guard?"

Stone Wall thought for a moment. "I grew up in Trottingham," she said. "I was a little filly during the griffin occupation."

Twilight had heard about the occupation. It was part of a series of conflicts between the ponies and the griffins before Twilight was born. Although she didn't look it, if Stone Wall was a filly during that time, then she was nearly old enough to be Twilight's mother.

"One day, a fight broke out in town square, and I was caught in the crossfire. A curse, cast by one of the unicorn soldiers, struck me, gummed up my insides. It was the most painful thing that had ever happened to me, and I thought I was going to die. But I didn't, clearly. As I was lying there, in the middle of the impromptu battlefield, one of the griffins thought I'd make a good prisoner of war. And prisoners aren't effecting bargaining chips if they're dead. So one of the griffin soldiers who knew a little bit about magic patched me up. And in the days following that, we got to know

each other a little better, and it turned out he didn't help me just because he was ordered to. He was just as opposed to the war as I was. A lot of griffins were. The whole thing was their chief's idea, and he was starting to get old. Soon, he thought, one of his offspring was going to challenge him for the throne, and most of them didn't want the war either.

"About a week after I was captured, there was a raid on the complex. I was rescued, but the ponies that saved me slaughtered all the griffins in the place, including my friend. I never even got to learn his name.

"Before then, I hated all the soldiers, Pony and Griffin both. It was because of them that so many ponies I knew died. But I realized that it didn't have to be that way. A true soldier sought peace and understanding. A true soldier protected everyone around her, kept them safe. I couldn't control the actions of those around me. The only way I could control a soldier was to become one myself. So I did. Eventually I was promoted to the royal guard. And who knew? Maybe, in time, I could join the Princess's cabinet, make some real changes to this world."

"All in the unknown name of a griffin."

Stone Wall sneered at the lack of respect Twilight was giving her fallen friend. "Yes."

"An honorable motive, I suppose, becoming a soldier. But what if you hadn't? Can you imagine where you might be if only things had played out differently. What if the pony that shot you had been assigned someplace else? Or the griffin who helped you? Perhaps you never decided to join the royal guard. Perhaps you're dead. What do you imagine the world would be like."

Stone Wall didn't know. "It's an interesting thought to ponder," she said, "but I don't see the use of it. It doesn't matter what would have happened; it didn't."

"Fortunately, then, Stone Wall, you don't need to imagine. You may be looking at it."

For the first time, Stone Wall understood what she was looking at. "You're saying that there's another me out there, through this mirror, in a world

where I turned out differently."

"I believe I may have said that, although not in as many words. And it's not just you that's changed. It's a world where the sun still shines." In the back of the mirror's image, the cave began to slope upward. Stone Wall could barely make out the sunlight streaming in from the opening.

"Tell me, Twilight," began Stone Wall, her voice suddenly losing all of its enthusiasm. The sudden shift came with a drop in pitch that startled Twilight. "Is it possible to actually travel to this world?"

Twilight felt for the pegasus. She understood the allure of the mirror world, the desire to reach another world where everything was better. "Theoretically," she said. "We've managed to transport small objects, so presumably you can move a pony as well. We just haven't tried it yet."

"Listen carefully to me," said Stone Wall with newfound determination. "We can save Equestria, together, but first I need to die. You have to kill me, Twilight Sparkle."

Silver Shield was dumbfounded. He had hoped that this performance would shed some light on Twilight's motives or his lover's disappearance. Instead, they were back at the beginning, and nothing was any clearer. Even in context, he couldn't comprehend why Stone Wall would say what she did.

The Twilight in the memory was equally shocked. "I don't follow," she said sheepishly.

"Think about it. This other world, for some reason or another, is free from Nightmare Moon. Now either she never existed over there, or she did and was stopped. This world is, if anything, proof that Nightmare Moon is not invincible. Somepony defeated her, and maybe that somepony can help us. All we need to do is find her and ask her for help."

"I don't see what this has to do with you dying, Stone Wall."

"I want to travel to the other side," said Stone Wall, her voice lacking a single shred of doubt or insecurity. "If the other world is the paradise you

claim, I want to see it firsthand, and leave this world behind. As far as this world is concerned, I'm dead."

"That's not dying, Stone Wall."

"Isn't it? I cease to exist in this world. I leave behind everything I know, this sinful, tragic earth, and ascend to paradise. How is that not dying? I need you to kill me. Help me, Twilight Sparkle. You're my only hope."

Twilight groaned as she realized she was dealing with an existential poet. "It's not that easy," she argued. "We barely know anything about the barrier that separates the worlds, except that it incurs a large amount of stress. I wouldn't want to send living tissue through it once, let alone try and make a return trip."

"That's fine, Twilight," said Stone Wall, smiling softly. "I have no intention of returning."

Twilight stared into Stone Wall's fierce eyes and felt like she was falling into a tide of unending resolve. Something was driving her. No pony was this determined on a whim. In the same moment, both Twilights realized what was pushing the pegasus.

She was running from something. Some pony. Somehow, despite Stone Wall's confidence and courage, she had seen paradise and decided she needed to escape to it. Still, Twilight was hesitant to use Stone Wall as her test subject. "I can't do this," she said. "I'm sorry, Stone Wall. I can't help you."

Stone Wall seemed brokenhearted. Her eyes were cast downward, and she slowly raised them, tears forming at the edges that somehow failed to diminish her resolve or force of presence. "You don't understand," she said. "I have to do this. A pony I love dearly is counting on me. It's the only way."

Twilight knew that she wasn't going to change Stone Wall's mind, and the guard pony was still the one in control. Twilight had no doubt that Stone Wall was fast enough to subdue her before she could use magic, and the pegasus was under order to bring Twilight to justice.

"Fine," relented Twilight. "I don't really have a choice, do I?"

Silver Shield, who had been gradually becoming more and more furious throughout the entire presentation, used this moment to finally snap.

"Enough!" he cried, and he charged into the scene and through the illusion of Twilight, which dissolved like mist. He then wheeled on the other Twilight. "I thought I told you not to try and pull one on me!"

Around the destroyed Twilight, the image began to dissipate, like a frayed carpet. The floor fell away and was quickly replaced by the wooden floor of the library.

"I didn't!" assured Twilight. "This is what really happened!"

"Stone Wall's dead, Twilight! You killed her! And to cover it up, you made up some stupid story about her leaving me forever to travel to some fantasy land! As if Stone Wall would ever abandon me! She loves me. Nice try, though, the bit about her leaving to protect me. But that's not her. The things she said, the things she did, I know us better than that. So don't even start that bullcrap!" Silver Shield padded his front hooves on the ground twice, gave an unintelligible scream of rage, and charged toward Twilight. Twilight, seeing no other option and too surprised to prepare magic, ran toward the front door.

She emerged from the front of library and into the empty street, turning a sharp right as soon as she was able to do so. Silver Shield, not expecting the turn, skidded out into the middle of the street before chasing after her.

Twilight had already figured out that Silver Shield was a faster runner. A chase like this would be futile, and brief. She quickly charged a teleportation spell, leaving the destination field blank. She didn't care where she ended up. She could land on the moon, for all she cared. Right now, what she needed was to escape.

The energy built up in her horn, but before she could release it, she felt a large force crush her flank. She cried out and reared instinctively, and Silver Shield launched himself into the air and landed on top of her. The air left her lungs and her magic left her horn as she crumpled to the ground.

"This is it," said Silver Shield, raging. "It's over, Twilight. For the crime of two counts of murder, I find you guilty. Your punishment is death." Glancing down at her flank, Twilight realized that Silver Shield had bitten her. "Goodbye, Twilight Sparkle. If you follow a god, then pray he have mercy on your soul." He raised his forehooves and brought them down against Twilight's neck, blocking the flow of air.

Twilight was frozen, unable to move or think clearly. She tried to struggle, to push Silver Shield off of her, but her movements were sluggish. She kept trying to breathe, but every attempt created an unbearable and unnatural strain in her stomach; she felt like she was going to explode. A strange light was filling the corner of her vision. Is this what it's like to suffocate? she wondered. The stories she'd read seemed to imply everything would go black instead.

She closed her eyes and tried again to teleport, but she could find neither the strength or the focus to pull off the spell. Tears pooled on her face as she realized she was going to die.

Then Silver Shield screamed. Twilight opened her eyes instantly closed them again as she was blinded by a bright light. Squeezing her eyes shut did not fully protect her, as the light stained the back of her eyelids a dull throbbing red.

She felt Silver Shield's weight leave her, and her breath returned, rapidly and raggedly. She stumbled backwards and opened her eyes. An intense glowing ball was pressed against the stallion's face, and he had released her to shield his eyes from the glare with his hooves. At first Twilight thought the ball was her Third Eye, but it was a pure brilliant white, with a small hint of amber, as opposed to the Eye's solid violet. The Eye probably dispersed when Silver Shield destroyed the projection, anyway, she thought. Looking into the light, Twilight thought she saw movement, but the intensity of the glow quickly drove her away.

This was her chance. The light had saved her, and now it was providing her distraction. She focused on the magic inside her, willing it to well up in her horn and take her away. The spell was slow, slower than she was used to, and she hurried it along as quickly as she could, panicking as she strung the subroutines together. She wasn't used to casting under stress, but she knew that this was her last opportunity. Teleport now, or die.

The world winked out around her. Twilight opened her eyes, exhausted and out of breath. She was somewhere up in the mountains. Away from Ponyville. Away from Silver Shield. Satisfied, Twilight collapsed onto the uneven rocky floor. She nearly fell asleep, but she felt a hoof nudge her face.

"Twilight?" a voice asked quizzically.

Twilight froze. Somehow, Silver Shield had tracked her down. Now she really was going to die. In her fear and panic, it took her seconds to realize that the voice belonged to a mare. A very familiar mare. Twilight looked up and into the comforting gaze of Madam Orange.

Below her, in Ponyville, Silver Shield howled as he tried to bat away the light that had blinded him. It wasn't fair, he thought, falling for the exact same trick twice. Whatever stunt Twilight had managed to pull this time, he swore she would regret it.

The light moved away, and Silver's vision cleared. Twilight was gone. Vanished. He was so close to finally getting his revenge, and he had lost her. He tried to stare at the light, but he ended up squinting. Whatever the light was, it seemed to sense that he was looking at it, because it bobbed once, and then slowly ascended back into the sky, moving in a careless looping pattern as it rose.

On the rooftop a few buildings away, an adult unicorn watched it rise. The strong wind tore at her mane, which somehow managed to still appear elegant, as if the wind were merely cradling it as a mother would a small foal.

"What are you?" she whispered as the Ponyville Light resumed its place in the sky. "You're the only riddle I haven't solved. The only missing piece of the puzzle. You saved her life, and I don't have the first clue where you came from."

She sighed as she removed a book from her plain brown burlap saddlebag. The paint on the cover was flaking off, revealing the splintered

wood underneath. The mare closed her eyes and inhaled; in all the years she had owned the book, the smell was the only thing that hadn't faded, and it reminded her of the dew on grass in the morning. The book was her most precious possession. It was also her most useful one. "I'm not going to screw this up," she said to herself as she began flipping through the book, somehow simultaneously quickly and daintily, rushing but taking the utmost care not to bend any pages.. "Not when we're so close to the Final Moment." Giving up, she put the book back in her bag.

She needed to prepare for her meeting with Rainbow Dash.

Chapter 6

Through the Looking Glass

SUNSIDE

Rainbow Dash stood at the edge of the cloud, looking down. The sun was rising over Ponyville; swaths of long pale shadows cast Rainbow's surroundings in a shifting mosaic that seemed to reflect her inner thoughts. Everything was changing around her and moving too quickly. She could sense the cloud moving beneath her hooves, a feeling she thought she'd gotten used to long ago. All she wanted was for everything to go away and give her a moment to herself to think.

Looking at the trembling yellow pegasus next to her, Rainbow remembered that she wasn't alone. All of her friends were scared, and right now they were counting on her.

Or maybe Fluttershy was just being herself, scared of anything that moved and quite a few things that didn't. Living on the ground, she had never quite gotten used to the sensation of walking on moving clouds. Rainbow Dash had once tried to explain it to Twilight as being like seasickness, but, having felt both before, there wasn't much of a comparison. When seasick, Rainbow still had a hard surface to stand on and give her her bearings.

"I'm ready," lied Rainbow Dash, hoping it would get Fluttershy to leave. "Tell Twilight I'm ready to do this."

Rainbow Dash had gone back and forth when it came to calling "Twilight" by her name. It wasn't an alias; the pony's name really was Twilight. Besides, just using pronouns seemed dehumanizing, reducing her to an object, and if Rainbow's talk with Twilight in Redheart's sick bay had taught her anything, it was that the emotional Twilight was not an object.

Fluttershy had come to keep Rainbow Dash company and to get away from the confusing Twilight. Around Twilight, Fluttershy was thrown by an

overwhelming mix of pity and fear, one urge to comfort her and another to run away as quickly as possible. Desperate to escape, Fluttershy had decided that today was the perfect day to try and overcome her fear of flying, in a sky where Twilight couldn't follow her.

Now Rainbow Dash was asking her to return. She sighed and swallowed her heart that was leaping around in her chest; the thin air had done nothing to calm her nerves. She leaped off the cloud, although Rainbow would have described it better as "fell," and she fluttered haphazardly to the ground.

Alone, Rainbow Dash reflected back on the plan. She had been excited, at first, when all she knew was that the plan involved sonic rainbooms. Now that she knew all the details, including the danger involved, she was worried.

Not that she would ever admit that. Rainbow Dash never got scared. Just like she never cried.

According to Twilight, special mirrors were the only way to cross over. That was why their last attempt to cross was at the Castle of the Pony Sisters, the same place the Twilights had traded minds. The mirror she had used before was still sitting there on the other side, waiting to be used again.

For their new plan, however, Twilight had determined that the mirror she had built was too small a target. No matter how much Rainbow Dash had insisted she could hit it, Twilight refused, insisting she could build her own, on this side. Unfortunately, building a mirror large enough to make Twilight complacent was impractical. The other option was to enchant an already-existing mirror.

Rainbow Dash looked out over the edge of the cloud at Sky Mirror Lake, miles directly below her. She couldn't believe that Twilight considered this the smallest acceptable target. If Rainbow couldn't make this mark, then she didn't even deserve to be a pegasus.

Still, hitting the target was easy enough. Surviving was going to be another whole challenge on its own, especially considering what Twilight had asked Rainbow Dash to do.

"You want me to do what?" Rainbow had nearly screamed when she had found out.

"You need to be breaking the sound barrier when you hit the water. Preferably, you perform the rainboom as close to the water's surface as possible. The closer you are, the longer the portal stays open."

Rainbow Dash had made the mistake of speeding into water before. "Let me explain something," she had told Twilight. "The faster you go when you hit water, the harder the water is. I can do it; you've come to the right pony. But at those speeds, even a pony as awesome as me will be shredded. I'm not invincible. See these wings? They're like tissue paper, and they break all the time. All the *clopping* time."

Twilight frowned, and Rainbow had the distinct impression she was trying to develop an excuse. "You won't actually hit the water, though, I think," she finally said. "After the rainboom, the entire surface of the lake should be weak enough to push you through to the other side. You'll be reflected, like a beam of light. There won't be any water for you to hit."

Rainbow had finally agreed, but now, as she prepared to jump, she had second thoughts. What if her fear of going too quickly prevented her from reaching the sound barrier? What if she couldn't break it, and it just pushed her away like it had done so many times before?

She tried to see if she could spot her friends, waiting patiently at the waters edge to jump through after her. A bright light flared up on the ground, the signal that Twilight had finished enchanting the lake and that they were ready for her. Even though she couldn't make out any of the others, she swore that Pinkie Pie was eating popcorn.

Feeling suddenly more powerful, Rainbow Dash smirked. She would do this for Twilight, and to put on a good show for Pinkie Pie.

She leaped. For a moment she hovered in the air, and time seemed frozen around her. Even time had slowed. The world was just Rainbow Dash floating in the expansive cloudy sky. Then Rainbow began to accelerate.

The clouds sped past her as she picked up speed. She recalled the name of each type of cloud as she encountered it; each new cloud type meant

another layer was gone, another buffer expended. Some of the clouds went right through her, blinding her temporarily and soaking her coat. The temperature at the high altitude was much colder than Rainbow Dash was used to, and the strong wind chill didn't help at all. She shivered, the freezing water numbing her skin. She should have spent more time training, acclimating herself with the high-altitude weather. She had read somewhere that the Wonderbolts spent an hour warming up before every performance. She had always laughed at the fact and wondered why ponies as cool as the Wonderbolts needed to warm up in the first place, why they couldn't just pull off their stunts any time they wanted. Now, Rainbow Dash was wondering if an hour would have been enough for her.

The ground was quickly approaching, and Rainbow Dash knew she wasn't anywhere near the sound barrier. She could only see the beginnings of the cone forming around her. She wasn't going to make it.

Rainbow Dash squeezed her eyes shut, not wanting to see the water racing toward her. She wondered if it wasn't too late to pull out of the dive; she'd made more ridiculous turns in the past. I'm sorry I'm letting you down, she thought. But sonic rainbooms had never been easy to pull off. She'd only done in twice in her lifetime, out of hundreds of attempts, and even then they had been in special circumstances. Both times she had been much too busy having fun or saving Rarity to think too much about her actions. Now, Rainbow worried that her self-awareness was causing her to slip up.

She felt the turbulence of the cone as it rocked her body. In a few seconds it would reject her and fling her far off into the horizon. She took comfort in the fact that at least she wouldn't hit the water. But she still knew she was letting Twilight down.

I'm sorry, Twi, she thought in her head. I wanted to save you. I really did. At the very least, she would have to get revenge against the impostor, make her pay for what she'd done, make it clear that she would never replace their lost friend. Except that the impostor really was Twilight, in a sense. It had taken Rainbow Dash a while to see it, but now she understood their similarities. Both Twilights had the same sort of shyness. They were both determined but stubborn, and they buckled under pressure. The false Twilight reminded Rainbow of her very first meeting with the real one, before they had become friends. Would it really

be fair for Rainbow Dash to destroy all that was left of one of her best friends?

Twilight Sparkle. The mare that had brought them all together. Rainbow didn't care about her first sonic rainboom earning everyone their cutie marks. Twilight had said that they were all bound together, as if by a thread, and she agreed. But it was Twilight, not her, that had united them when they fought Nightmare Moon. Without Twilight, they'd all still be living in Ponyville, but they'd know each other only by name and by the brief glimpses of when they passed on the streets. Twilight was the common thread. She was a hero, a stronger pony than Rainbow ever was. As Rainbow thought this, she saw the light penetrate her closed eyelids, the same spark she'd sensed so many times before, whenever she stood up for her friends. She saw her Spark of Creation and let it guide her. And she came to a decision.

She was going to save Twilight, whatever it took. She owed the unicorn this one. Even if she failed today, she'd try again tomorrow, and the next day, and so on until she found a way to repay her debt.

Yards above the water's surface, the world exploded in every color of the rainbow.

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From atop her home within the Everfree Forest, Zecora watched the display of colors that rose above the canopy. She doubted a single pony in Ponyville would miss it. She smiled, but she was unable to mask the concern in her eyes. All she could do now was hope for the best. She began rhyming quietly.

"And so begins young Twilight's path
To find herself, her better half
Who waits beneath the vengeful moon
And prays the light will reach her soon.
Across the stars, another world
Is filled with stories not yet told
There's so much nopony knows
In a world without rainbows."

She had promised to deliver the letter over a year ago, but because of her own decision, she had no means of doing so. And so she had passed it along, hoping that Twilight and her friends would succeed where she failed.

Everything depended on Fluttershy now.

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In the skies above Ponyville, the mailpony stopped mid-flight to watch the rainboom as it expanded outward across the sky below her. For once her eyes were both looking in the same direction, watching the six ponies assembled at Sky Mirror Lake as they dove into the lake, one after the other. Ditzy realized that the image was probably more beautiful for her than for any other pony lucky enough to see it.

She wished she could stay and watch it longer, but she was on a tight schedule. The mail wasn't going to deliver itself, after all. Her job wasn't the most fulfilling, but it paid the bills. More importantly, it allowed her to get a good view of everything that happened in Ponyville, especially when everypony thought she was a fool and paid her no mind. She'd have to pop around later, after the route was done.

Ditzy Doo resumed her flight, trying to think about what she would be making for dinner. Probably something with muffins. Dinky loved muffins almost as much as she did.

One of her eyes shifted downward, spotting movement in the street below her. She recognized the ponies almost immediately. This was certainly something that demanded her attention.

The mailpony flew down to join them.

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MOONSIDE

The history of teleportation had always fascinated Twilight, and she had written many papers on the topic during her time at the Hoofington

Wizardry Academy. Or maybe it was Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns. One or the other.

In the beginning of its development, teleportation magic wasn't invented but rather discovered. Various magical creatures had the skill figured out long before unicorns ever put their hoof to replicating it, and for sorcerers, ponies of innate magical skill, it was often just as easy. However, for the wizards, the learned mages who gained their powers through study, emulating what they saw in nature proved to be quite difficult. The early trials had side-effects on nearly all the unicorns who attempted it. The lucky ones would reappear with heavy foreign accents, or recolored manes. The unlucky ponies would return disfigured or not at all. Mass teleportation spells were even more error prone. In time, the spells became refined and more stable, but the process was still not completely flawless. While Twilight was better at the spell than most ponies, a feat Celestia often attributed to her double status as a student of magic and a source of great magical potential, she was still often disoriented after teleporting under stress, or across large distances.

The instability and unreliability of teleportation was probably another warning sign Twilight should have listened to before she had attempted to transfer Stone Wall to the other side.

She could feel a dull throbbing pressure in the back of her head, and her vision seemed to come and go with her heartbeat, sharpening and blurring the outlines of the angular rocky hillside around her. She squeezed her eyes shut and waited for the pain to go away. The air was thinner than it had been a moment ago, something that would have gone unnoticed had the change not been so abrupt. She was at a higher altitude, probably in the mountains somewhere. She hadn't bothered to specify a destination for the spell; she had been in such a rush to leave. She wondered what part of her subconscious had brought her here, or if her location had just been due to chance.

Also, somepony was calling her name repeatedly, but in Twilight's confusion and pain, she didn't really consider that to be a high priority. Still, it was annoying and distracting her from sleep, so she figured she might as well make it shut up.

Looking up, she saw an orange earth pony glancing down at her in

confusion. She recognized the mare almost immediately as her good friend Madam Orange, although she seemed to have grown out her hair quite a bit since the last time they had seen each other; it now fell over her shoulders in a ponytail. A couple of other ponies were gathered behind her.

"Twilight?" asked Madam Orange, her voice thick with an unfamiliar accent. "You alive down there?" She was desperate, choking on her own words as she forced them out.

Twilight smiled, and she chuckled as hard as her battered and bruised body would allow. Her reverberating chest hurt as it rubbed against the hard rock. "Madam Orange?" she managed weakly.

The orange earth pony stared blankly. "Beg pardon?" she asked, taking a step back nervously.

Twilight's heart was racing in her chest, and she felt a giddiness rising up in her, despite her exhaustion. Madam Orange wasn't like Silver Shield. She was gentle, like a mother. Those under her care were safe. Twilight could never remember feeling afraid around her.

They were rivals. Twilight liked to think they might even be soulmates. She smiled and then gave up struggling against the rising tide of darkness.

Everything was going to be alright.

===

Applejack didn't know what to say. She had been looking forward to her reunion with Twilight, hoping they would find her alive but aware of the possibility that they wouldn't. And she did have to give the other Twilight credit; she had known exactly where to find her counterpart. Applejack had spent their climb up the mountain planning exactly what to say should they be reunited, and now that they had, none of her pre-formed words could address the situation.

The unicorn's health hadn't exactly filled her with much hope, either. She had bandages across her face that were beginning to slip, revealing the

long gashes beneath them.

Still, prior experience had now given Applejack a pony to turn to when things got strange.

"Twilight?" she asked. After a pause during which the purple unicorn in front of her stirred slightly, another voice behind her spoke up as it realized Applejack was addressing her. "Applejack?"

In a dry monotone, the earth pony asked, "Who's Madam Orange?"

Behind Twilight, the four other ponies exchanged confused and worried looks.

Twilight fidgeted, feeling the other ponies' eyes on her. It was strange for her to hear those words said by Applejack, even if they had different accents.

"She's you."

Applejack scowled darkly. With two words, Twilight had managed to change the entire game. Applejack berated herself for being so stupid. She knew that there was a second Twilight, and that they were venturing into her world, but the true impact of that journey, the discovery that there were alternate versions of themselves, hadn't really been in the front of Applejack's mind.

Once the shock faded, she realized that she still had questions, but Rainbow Dash beat her to it.

"Wait a tick. Why would Twilight get Applejack mixed up with her? Wouldn't it be the other way around?"

"Um, excuse me," muttered Fluttershy, but nopony heard her.

Twilight felt like her mouth was glued to the roof of her mouth. Even if she wanted to tell the others her theory, she knew they wouldn't want to hear it, and a part of her was demanding she keep quiet. But the six pairs of eyes on her made her feel small and helpless. Applejack isn't your friend, Twilight reminded herself. She may look like her, but she's from another

world entirely. She has her own friends, and she'll do whatever it takes to save them.

"I think," began Twilight, "I think..."

The glared became expectant stares, and Twilight couldn't tell if they were better or worse. She was on trial, and if she slipped up and said the wrong thing, if she was found guilty, she would be at the mercy of the court.

"Do you remember what I said before, about how it was possible for the memory transfer to be one-way?"

Rarity was aghast. "You didn't..." she breathed.

"Not intentionally," cried Twilight, desperate to finish her explanation before they just decided to kill her. "But that's because of the way the spell works; it's not guaranteed to stick. It doesn't overwrite the original memories; it only suppresses them. And when we're not fully conscious, say, if we're asleep, or drunk, or aroused, it's possible for the host memories to resurface. That's why I thought she might be here. Maybe she saw my lab in a dream, or some subconscious impulse brought her here. But I was right! And it's been happening to me, too. I've been seeing her in my dreams."

And another pony too, she added silently. She wasn't quite ready to share that detail before she'd had a chance to work it out for herself.

The ponies considered this new piece of information. "You're saying Twilight's drunk?" asked Rainbow Dash. She moved around Applejack to get a closer look at the Twilight from their world, but her face went pale when she saw the gashes. "No," she muttered.

"Maybe," said Twilight. "Or maybe she's lost a lot of blood, or she's exhausted. Madam Orange and I didn't exactly perform clinical trials when we designed it."

She regretted the words "Madam Orange" as soon as they left her mouth. Applejack stiffened and held her breath. Twilight could tell that she was stressed, that she was trying to find an appropriate response to handle this delicate situation.

"Um, girls?" repeated Fluttershy.

"I think I know why you call her that," said Applejack, "but she's not me. I chose to leave that life. Even if I hadn't left when I did, I would have eventually. I wasn't happy there. If she stayed, she's not me."

"Left where?" interjected Pinkie Pie, startling Applejack and Twilight as she seemed to have dropped from the nonexistent ceiling.

"Manehatten," said Applejack. "She grew up there, didn't she?"

"She's the city's largest entrepreneur," said Twilight proudly, even though she knew that pride wasn't what the situation called for.

Applejack frowned, struggling to envision herself as an entrepreneur. She was an apple farmer. Always was, always would be. That was why she had apples on her flank. "Really? What's her cutie mark, then? A bunch of bits? 'Cuz it sure as hay ain't apples."

"It's a martini," explained Twilight. "It's supposed to symbolize rhetoric. Persuasive conversation." The other ponies stared at her blankly, not seeing the connection. "You know, a drink to facilitate the negotiations? She's the drink. The fact that she likes it herself probably doesn't hurt, though."

Fluttershy tried again. "I really think we should," she began, but she was interrupted by Applejack.

"What are you going on about? I always stay away from the stuff. Stole some of Granny Smith's hard cider once, when I was a filly. Couldn't stand it and haven't touched it since."

"Hey! Listen!"

All the ponies turned to see Fluttershy panting and snarling. "Enough! Twilight needs help. We need to get her someplace safe. So stop arguing and carry her!" Her breathing slowed as she recovered. "I mean, if you want to."

Twilight sighed, realizing Fluttershy was right. "The lab's not that far from here," she said. "I'll lead the way. Rainbow Dash and Applejack, you can carry her."

The two athletic ponies each nudged their heads beneath their Twilight's body and struggled to lift her. The other Twilight focused, using her own energy to assist them and lift the body off of the ground.

Before any of this nonsense with alternate worlds had happened, Twilight would have been able to lift her counterpart on her own, effortlessly. Yet since the mind-switching spell, she had noticed her power levels had decreased substantially. Magic power was like a muscle, she knew. Exercising magic daily allowed for increased output when the situation demanded it, and such regimens had always been a large part of Twilight's training. Other ponies may have called it inelegant or not befitting any civilized mage, but Twilight had learned at a young age that there was a certain level of force that nothing would be able to stand up to. She had spent her life trying to reach that level, and it was part of her motivation for acquiring the element of Magic.

Now, after training her body for about a decade, she had passed it on to her counterpart, who had spent the same time learning to better manipulate magic. Now her counterpart had both power and skill, and Twilight herself had been left with neither. She wondered if the other Twilight had noticed this increased magical potential.

While she was thinking, Pinkie Pie had bounded up beside her. "I was thinking," she said. "You're Twilight."

"Yes?"

"And so is she."

"I suppose." Twilight didn't see where the pink pony was going with this.

"Well, isn't that going to get confusing? You need different names. I'm thinking we should call her Sunlight. You can be Moonlight!"

Twilight cringed at the nickname. It was a constant reminder that this world, the world without the sun, was her fault. "Can't we choose

something else?" she asked as politely as she could manage. "Like, Twilight-A and Twilight-B or something?"

Pinkie Pie ignored her, having already made up her mind. "We already have a name for the other Jackie, so she doesn't have to change hers. Now Rainbow Dash, that's going to be tricky. Moonbow Dash? No, no, no. How about Maru-Dashie and Moro-Dashie? I guess we'll wait until we meet her. Two Dashies, though. I think I had a dream about that once, but it ended a lot differently." She paused and looked at the terrain around her. "This one's a real letdown."

Moonlight did her best to tune out Pinkie's ramblings. The crested a small peak and began a descent, approaching an indentation in the side of the mountain.

The Twilight being held by Applejack and Rainbow Dash stirred a little. "Applejack?" she murmured groggily.

Applejack almost started crying. "That's right!" she declared. "And don't you forget it!"

"Where are we?"

"Don't you worry about that, sugarcube. You're safe now. We're going to get you out of here."

Fluttershy, noticing Twilight was awake, trotted over and nuzzled her cheek gently. "Yay," she whispered, her nerves calming for the first time since this nightmare had begun. She felt like Twilight deserved more, to know exactly how relieved she was, but she couldn't find the words to say and settled for simply burying her face as far into Twilight's soft stomach as possible.

The group carefully maneuvered down the slope and into the cave. "Welcome home," announced Moonlight. "It's not much, but it's always been good enough for me. I'll fetch Zecora, and she can help you with other me. She's a much better doctor than I am. She's patched me up a few times, even." She then called into the cave. "Zecora?"

As the group stepped into the shadows, Fluttershy was struck by the

complete lack of visibility. "It's... dark," she said, summing up neatly what everypony was thinking.

"Yeah," agreed Rainbow Dash. "How about some light?"

Some small part of the proceedings disturbed Twilight, as if some ancient memory was flaring up but fading again before she could get a firm grasp on it.

Moonlight laughed, and then she began beating her hooves on the floor. Two clops, a pause, and then three clops. The lights flickered on, and Moonlight was shocked by how much her lab had changed since she had last seen it. Her computing devices had been crushed and gouged in by massive claws. Furniture was overturn and in pieces.

"Do you normally live like this?" commented Rainbow Dash.

"Stay back," ordered Moonlight. Damage was to be expected, she realized. She had been attacked, after all. She cautiously made her way across the lab toward the tunnels in the back.

"What do you think did this?" Fluttershy asked Rainbow Dash.

"I don't know," lied Rainbow Dash, who had figured out exactly what had happened but was praying she was wrong.

"I just hope it doesn't come back," said Applejack.

From within the tunnels, Moonlight cried out Zecora's name. Fluttershy and Applejack shuddered to think about what she had found.

Twilight didn't have to imagine. She remembered. The walls weren't slick now, like oil, or sketchy or faded, but Twilight recognized the scene, and she knew exactly what was about to happen. There was no explanation for how she knew, but Twilight was seized with a sudden compulsion. She had to act now or Moonlight would die. She struggled to stand on her weak legs and charged toward the tunnel. She began shouting her own name without realizing the absurdity of it.

"Hey!" cried Rainbow Dash as she watched Twilight stumble over her own

legs. "Get back here!"

Then Moonlight screamed.

Twilight, driven to do something, anything, but unable to walk properly, lifted one of the machines with her magic and launched it into the tunnel, hoping it would hit the monster that was now certainly towering above Moonlight, preparing to strike. An anguished roar informed her she had hit her target.

Within seconds, Moonlight came bounding out of the tunnel, the large creature from Twilight's dream at her heels.

It was large, taller than any of them, although not by much. Its four burly legs carried it effortlessly across the stone, its claws easily finding traction against the floor. Twilight imagined the wings would have shone like a golden mirror were they not clinging to each other in different angles with dirt and blood. She doubted the creature's blood was its own, and more of the blood was found on its talons and on the side of its large curving beak.

Twilight had seen pictures of griffins in books before, and had met one in person, but nothing had prepared her for this display of ferocious power. The griffin's large eyes looked at each pony in turn before they froze on Rainbow Dash.

Rainbow had recognized the claw marks on Twilight's face. Now, as she looked into her old griffin friend's eyes, wondering if she recognized her in return, she didn't know whether to be relieved or terrified.

"Hey!" chirped Gilda in a jovial, almost seductive tone. "Glad you decided to come back for round two. And you brought company! What perfect timing; I was just thinking about getting a bite to eat."

Chapter 7

Loyalties

Trying her best not to cower in the presence of such a powerful display of savagery, Rainbow Dash wracked her mind for an explanation, any alternative to accepting that the griffin before her was her old friend.

Maybe it was just someone else who looked like Gilda. That was excusable, was it? There weren't many griffins in Equestria; nopony could fault her for getting two of them mixed up. A tad racist, perhaps, but plausible.

Except that Rainbow knew this wasn't true. The way she limped slightly on her left back leg when she walked, the result of a childhood accident she had refused to explain, and the familiar patterns on her wings, subtle but obvious to anypony who knew her well enough, were both signs told Rainbow that this was Gilda who was standing before them now, caked in Zecora's blood. And even if Rainbow Dash had been blind, she would have recognized the voice: gruff, with a hint of irritability, even when she was happy, and that small bit of genuine empathy that nopony but Rainbow ever seemed to notice.

Rainbow Dash wanted to deny it, but she had been close enough to Gilda to recognize her. And now she was faced with a different dilemma.

This wasn't her Gilda. The Gilda on this side led an entirely different life. For all Rainbow Dash knew, they had never met before. She looked into the griffin's eyes for a sign of recognition, but they were focused on the two Twilights now, switching back and forth between them.

"What's this?" Gilda asked sarcastically. "Twilight Sparkle has friends? I did not see this one coming. Seriously." The voice, although familiar to Rainbow Dash, was so completely *wrong*. Gilda had always had a mean streak, but she was never this cruel. She was never brutal. She wasn't a killer.

Gilda began a long circle around the ponies, looking over each one for a

few seconds. "I'll admit, the Twilight clone is a bit freaky. What is she, your sister? Not that it's too important. I'll just kill you both, for good measure. The rest of you can go, actually; I don't care, and I'm not too hungry. You got ten seconds to make up your mind."

The ten seconds were excruciating for Rainbow Dash, frozen with indecision. Too much of her mind was preoccupied with making sense of her surroundings. Whatever Gilda was doing, she only seemed to care about the Twilights. Twilight was on her stomach near the center of the room, Moonlight close beside her. If Rainbow Dash moved quickly enough, she might be able to pick up Twilight and get her out of the cave before Gilda could respond. Moonlight and the others would have to fight their way out, but the odds would be stacked, five to one.

Four to one, Rainbow Dash corrected herself, choosing to not count Fluttershy. Maybe three to one, if Fluttershy was more of a liability than an asset. It was still a battle the ponies could likely win, but not without injuries. Besides, Rainbow didn't want to hurt Gilda either, not while nopony had any idea what was going on. The small part of Rainbow Dash hoping for a peaceful way out refused to let her move.

The other ponies must have had similar thoughts, Rainbow Dash realized, because none of them made any move to escape.

"We're not leaving," said Rarity, deciding that she should speak if the Element of Loyalty wasn't going to. "Twilight is our friend, and we won't abandon her."

"Friend'?" echoed Gilda as she walked. "That's really the word you dweebs are going to use? Twilight Sparkle doesn't have friends. She's a solitary creature. A poor, pathetic loser who spends all her time playing with toys so she doesn't have to admit she screwed up. I don't know what's worse, the things she's done or the fact that you're standing up for her. And now time's up. Pity. You don't all look like bad ponies." As she finished speaking, she completed her semicircle and maneuvered in front of the entrance to the cave. Moonlight grimaced as she realized too late what Gilda had planned. The griffin's show of theatricality was a distraction while she blocked off their only means of escape.

Fluttershy, literally rigid with fear, backed herself against the cavern wall

and squeezed her eyes shut tightly. Twilight looked up weakly from the floor, trying to focus her eyes on Gilda. Moonlight swallowed, berating herself. She shouldn't have come back here. She should have known the creature would still be here, waiting for her.

Pinkie Pie had stopped bouncing and was glancing around the room nervously, trying to find anything that could help them. Her eyes settled on a small circle in the ceiling, about a foot in diameter, from which light was shining into the room, and her face lit up, an idea forming.

"You meany-pants!" she shouted at Gilda. "What's the big idea, threatening to hurt my friends?"

"Excuse me?" said Gilda incredulously. "That's your defense? Your elegant, sophisticated, intelligent response is to call me a meany-pants?"

"But you are a meany-pants! What did Moonlight ever do to you? You just want to boss her around to make yourself feel better, and you're nothing but a bully, just like last time. You haven't changed a bit. Who would have guessed you'd be a grumpy party pooper in both worlds!"

Gilda's jaw quivered as she tried to process Pinkie's rant. "Moonlight? Last time? Both Worlds?"

Pinkie continued, undeterred. "Well guess what, missus meany mc-bully fun-sucker murder queen? I'm not going to let you hurt my friends. I'm going to save every last one of them, just like I know they would for me."

Gilda smirked, intrigued. "Really? And just how do you plan on doing that?"

Instead of answering, Pinkie turned her head to address Moonlight. "Get ready to move when the opportunity comes."

"What opportunity?" asked Moonlight. She was inspired by Pinkie Pie's courage, but she had no idea what the pink pony could possibly be planning.

"Oh, you'll recognize it when it happens," answered Pinkie. "But I want to keep it a surprise for Gilda."

"Well?" demanded Gilda. "Don't keep me waiting. I can't wait to watch you fail. But I'll give you an A for the effort and eat you last. That way you can watch your friends as they get torn to pieces. So go ahead. What's your brilliant plan to stop me from eating all your friends?"

"Five taps," answered Pinkie Pie.

"What?" Gilda scowled but then froze as another part of Pinkie's speech registered in her brain. "You called me Gilda," she muttered softly.

"I'm sorry, Gilda. I'd love to stay and try to turn that frown into something happier, but my friends need me." She beat her right forehoof on the ground twice. Moonlight and Rainbow Dash smiled, realizing what Pinkie Pie was planning. Rainbow stretched her wings, preparing to launch. "Goodbye, Gilda," Pinkie announced before she stuck her hoof against the stone three more times in rapid succession.

The lights went out.

Fluttershy squealed and pressed herself even more tightly against the wall. All she could see was Gilda's silhouette blocking the perpetual moonlight from outside. A shadow passed in front of her vision, blocking out all the remaining light, and Fluttershy fell, trying to make herself as small a target as possible as Rainbow Dash rocketed past.

The rainbow-maned pegasus raced toward where she remembered Twilight to be, trying to reach her friend before Gilda got the same idea. She looped her forelegs around Twilight's, fumbling awkwardly in the dark, and a vicious, unnatural scream echoed through the cave.

"Wrong move, ponies!" snarled Gilda as Rainbow Dash secured her grip on Twilight. Rainbow heard a rush of air from Gilda's wings as the griffin took off, launching toward them.

"Hold on," Rainbow whispered to Twilight. "This is gonna get messy."

Twilight's neck snapped back as Rainbow Dash threw herself toward the cave entrance.

Rainbow let her hind legs dangle so she could measure her distance to the cave floor. She needed to be as close to the ground as possible, as she wasn't going to get much clearance. She thought she could hear Twilight's belly scraping the ground, but she ignored it and pressed onward. Injury was better than death, she thought as she tried to fit in the gap between Gilda and the floor.

The painful sensation of claws digging into her back and becoming ensnared in her wings told Rainbow she had made the squeeze, if only barely. After a second of intense pain, she was free. Gilda could only turn and watch, beak agape, as Rainbow Dash extended her wings fully and carried Twilight through the cave opening and out into open air. Angrier than ever, the griffin flexed her wings and took off in pursuit.

"Everypony into the tunnels," Moonlight commanded, seizing control as soon as Gilda was gone.

Fluttershy, too overcome with fear to put up a fight, obediently bounded to Moonlight's side. "What h-happened?" she asked. "I thought she wanted to, um, you know, kind of kill you?"

"Isn't it obvious?" asked Pinkie Pie. "She went after Twilight because she got them mixed up. She wanted Moonlight and went after the wrong pony."

"Hold up a minute," added Applejack. "How would Gilda do that? They're two of the same pony."

"Nope!" Pinkie Pie drew her hoof down Moonlight's face, mimicking the gash on Twilight's face. "Because Gilda marked her prey."

"Fine. But instead of talking, shouldn't we be, ya know, running away from the slaughterhouse, and not cornering ourselves into it?" asked Applejack.

"There's a back exit," explained Moonlight hastily, "a series of natural tunnels beneath the lab. Naturally formed and here before me. We can use them to put more distance between us and Gilda. Rainbow Dash can meet up with us later; she'll find a way." She started toward the leftmost tunnel, and the other ponies followed behind her. "Plus," she added, "there's something I need to pick up. The other reason I came back here."

The path sloped down, and Moonlight had to dig her hooves into the tunnel to keep from slipping. She really wished she had taken the time to build stairs when she had been given the chance. When the path leveled out, she turned at the first opportunity into a new room, much smaller than the first and filled with various scrolls and magical components organized neatly on shelves. A few bookcases in, she pulled from a shelf a small circular metal object, slightly smaller than a pie plate.

Rarity leaned in and read the name off the side of the device. "Columbus?" She looked up. "What does this do?"

"A last resort," answered Moonlight. "It will bring us to safety." She lowered it to the ground and stomped on it. A crack sounded, and Rarity worried Moonlight had broken it, but it was still in one piece when she lifted her hoof, and a series of green lights were now flashing on the machine's perimeter.

"Good. It's transmitting. Now we just to get where she can find us."

"Shouldn't we be helping Dashie?" asked Pinkie Pie. "I mean, I told Gilda I was going to save all of us. Letting her chase after Dashie while we escape isn't exactly all of us."

Moonlight sighed and furrowed her brow. "And how do you suppose we do that? Rainbow Dash and the griffin are locked in their own aerial battle right now, and you can't fly. Out of all of us, Fluttershy's the only one that could even reach them, and frankly, I really don't want to put her in any more danger than we're already in. So, basically, unless any of you know how to sprout wings, the best thing any of us can do is get as far away from Gilda as we can."

"Perhaps we can't grow wings," said Rarity from behind her, "but what if we were to wear them instead?" Moonlight turned to see Rarity lifting a metal harness above her head. From each side of the harness a segmented metal sheet extended, strongly resembling a pegasus wing. "Tell me, Twilight," she continued. "Did you not mention this remarkable piece of engineering because you forgot, or was it because you knew we'd insist on using it?"

Moonlight used her telekinetic grasp to pull the artificial limbs away from

Rarity. "Because it's dangerous. The Daedalus Mark II is a project Madam Orange and I abandoned long ago. It was, well, unethical."

Rarity raised an eyebrow. "Unethical?"

"The Daedalus binds to the user's nervous system. The integration is painful, crippling, even. And there are side effects."

Rarity's voice instantly dropped. "And what," she growled, "makes you think I wouldn't do anything to keep my friends safe?"

"I'll do it!" shouted Pinkie. "Ooh! Let me! Flying sounds like loads of fun!"

"Thank you for the offer, Pinkie, but I should be the one to do it," said Rarity. "I've had experience flying before."

Now it was Moonlight's turn to be surprised. "You have?" she asked skeptically. She remembered dreaming about something like that, but she had decided it was merely that. A dream. She'd had crazy dreams all her life, like the one where she was trapped in a never-ending snowstorm, or the one where she murdered Celestia.

"Indeed. At the Best Young Flyers competition in Cloudsdale. I had the most beautiful set of gossamer wings I'd ever laid eyes on."

"Even I thought so," added Applejack. "And that ain't easy."

"And therein lies the problem," said Moonlight. "You're used to flying slow and gracefully. That won't work with the Daedalus. It's heavy, so you'll need to maintain a minimum speed to keep aloft."

"I still have more experience than anypony else. If anypony's going to get in that thing, it's me."

"Exactly. If anypony uses it, it'll be you. But nopony's using it, so it's a moot point."

"This is not up for discussion. Now answer me truthfully. Will wearing that thing allow me to help Rainbow Dash and the other you?"

Moonlight paused, trying to come up with any alternative answer. "Yes," she finally admitted.

"Then put it on me."

Moonlight placed the Daedalus snugly over Rarity's body. "Do you even understand what you're about to do?" she asked, her last attempt to get Rarity to change her mind.

"Not at all," admitted Rarity. "Nor do I care."

"Very well."

The device activated with a soft hiss. Rarity gritted her teeth and screamed.

Pinkie Pie started to move toward her, but she raised her head and growled, keeping the pink pony at a distance.

"Stay back," Rarity warned. "Don't try to stop this." The wings extended involuntarily to their full length, an impressive span of almost ten feet. A grinding noise began from within the Daedalus, and Rarity's cries increased in volume.

Rainbow Dash struggled to keep herself aloft. Her injured wings weren't responding properly, and she had to grit her teeth with each beating. She hoped they were only bruised and not torn. Either way, she knew she was going to have to land soon.

Could she take Gilda in a fight? The two had fought before, when they were friends, but it had always been playful. Neither of them were actively trying to kill the other. And for all Rainbow Dash knew, this Gilda was much more skilled.

Rainbow tumbled out of the sky, spinning in the air at the last moment so that she would be the one to take the impact instead of Twilight, who remained safe cradled in her forelegs.

She felt the impact as Gilda touched down a dozen yards away. Rainbow quickly set Twilight on the ground and turned to face her former friend. "I don't want to fight you," she said as calmly as she could, although she knew her voice was shaking.

"Then why are you defending her?" Gilda asked. It took Rainbow a moment to realize it was a serious question. Gilda didn't want to fight either.

"She's my friend, like Rarity said. I don't know what she's done to you, and I bet it's something bad, but she doesn't deserve this. I have to believe there's a better way than killing."

"What she's done to me?" echoed Gilda, surprised to hear the comment. "She hasn't done anything to me. Not personally. But that's just the way it is sometimes."

Twilight raised her head and tried her best to look Gilda in the eye. "You're an assassin," she surmised.

For a moment, Rainbow Dash thought she saw Gilda's impenetrable image break, the beginnings of a sympathetic smile forming. "Sorry, sister," said Gilda, regaining her composure. "This wasn't my plan. I always thought you were pretty cool, personally."

"Who hired you?" demanded Rainbow Dash, but she was too late; Gilda's defenses were up again, her professionalism overriding any empathy. Instead, the griffin shook her head.

"This is just the way it is," she repeated as she turned her back to Rainbow Dash and spread her wings for takeoff.

Rainbow dared to believe Gilda was leaving. As Gilda took off, Rainbow sighed in relief, and then watched in shock as Gilda looped around in a circle, descending in a straight line toward the helpless Twilight. Rainbow let her instincts take over.

Before Gilda could reach Twilight, she was intercepted by a rainbow blur that knocked her off target and sent the pair of fliers rolling down the rocky slope. Luckily for Rainbow Dash, the pair stopped with the pegasus on top.

"If you won't do this for Twilight, do this for me," she begged.

"You?" Gilda's intonation was impossible to read.

"It's me," said Rainbow, taking a gamble. "It's me. Rainbow Dash."

"You," repeated Gilda flatly. Then, with rage, she screamed, "You!"

Rainbow Dash had never felt as much force behind the griffin as she did then, as Gilda kicked off of the ground, carrying Rainbow Dash aloft with her.

"Why in the world would I do anything for you after what you did for me? I don't owe you any favors, Rainbow Dash!" She dropped Rainbow Dash in midair and kicked her in the jaw as she fell. Rainbow Dash barely managed to right herself and achieve flight before hitting the ground. She quickly ascended to keep up with Gilda.

"I'm really sorry," she said, trying to figure out the best way to phrase the question and wondering what the other her could possibly have done. "But what exactly did I do, specifically, to make you mad like this?"

Gilda stopped flying and hovered in midair. "You don't know," she said dryly. "You really don't know. How did you think I would react after hearing about what happened at Buraq? Every pony I asked told me you were dead!"

Rainbow Dash almost forgot to keep flapping her wings. "But I'm not dead," she protested before the full implications of the statement hit her. A coldness began creeping up her back, making her wings stiff and impairing her flight. It reminded her strongly of how she had felt during the Best Young Flyer's competition. Was this what it felt like to go into shock? she wondered.

She was dead.

"Gosh," she said softly, still trying to come to terms with the revaluation. She saw things from Gilda's perspective now. She was a ghost, a memory, and she had just walked right back into the land of the

living. "Gilda, I'm so sorry..."

Her words did nothing to calm Gilda. "I knew there had to be a mistake," she continued to scream. "I hoped that you'd found a way to survive. But then, why would you have never attempted to find me? Or even let me know that you were alright? I finally accepted it, that you were dead and gone, when you show up like nothing had ever happened, and you're trying to protect, of all ponies, her!"

Gilda was acting hysterical, Rainbow thought. This wasn't like her at all. She was supposed to always be in control of the situation. Gilda was the queen of cool, and what was happening was completely uncool. Gilda shot toward Rainbow Dash, and Rainbow, still trying to come to terms with the revelation, didn't have time to defend herself. The pair plummeted, crashing to the earth and knocking the air from Rainbow's lungs.

In the distance, through blurry vision, Rainbow Dash spotted a shape rapidly approaching their location. "Gilda?" she asked weakly?

"Buck you, Rainbow Dash!" cried Gilda. "So no. I will not do you any favors. I will not spare the life of your girlfriend. You haven't changed a bit, you know that? You're still pretending to be a hero. You're still just a stupid loser who likes to go and get herself killed, and you're still asking for sympathy. Well, guess what, Rainbow? Killers like us don't deserve any sympathy."

If Gilda was about to say something else, she was cut off by a streak of silver that cut into her side as it passed. The griffin hissed and turned to face the new foe, but it had already moved beyond her and was out of reach. Rainbow Dash, taking advantage of Gilda's distraction, took to the skies again and chased after the blur. She saw now its purple mane and tail flowing behind it, obscuring the white flank and revealing it only in flashes. With a bit of difficulty, Rainbow Dash managed to catch up.

Rarity raised an eyebrow. "Glad to see me?" she asked smugly. Rainbow watched as she attempted a smile, struggling against an invisible strain. Giving up, Rarity returned her gaze to the land in front of her, narrowly avoiding a boulder.

"You're flying," said Rainbow Dash, unable to do anything but state the

obvious. "Again."

"I can't stop," Rarity told her, not moving her eyes. "You need to keep her away from Twilight. Keep her distracted until I can do another pass."

Rainbow nodded and broke away, turning back to Gilda, who was examining the new gash in her side. "The hell..." muttered the griffin, as she clutched the wound with one claw and looked up just in time to see Rainbow Dash barrel into her and pin her to the ground.

"Ready to give up?" Rainbow taunted. A look of rage was glaring back at her.

Rainbow Dash knew that this was her moment to attack, to cause as much damage as she could, to bite or stamp or claw, anything that would leave a permanent mark on Gilda. But she couldn't. Even to protect her best friend, she couldn't bring herself to hurt Gilda.

The moment of hesitation was all Gilda needed to throw her off and send her tumbling. As soon as Rainbow recovered, she charged again. She had to keep Gilda focused on her, and keep her from noticing Rarity, or going after Twilight. Gilda, ready for Rainbow, knocked her aside with a sweep of a claw as soon as she was in range.

Rainbow Dash struggled to her feet, snarling at Gilda like a bull. It was no longer about creating a distraction or bargaining for peace. Gilda was making a foal out of her. Nobody made a foal out of Rainbow Dash.

Rainbow saw Rarity level off behind Gilda and speed toward them, the sharp metal wings reflecting the moonlight. Rainbow had already seen the damage a glancing blow could do, and she didn't want to think about the damage that could be caused with a direct hit.

Gilda, noticing the change in Rainbow's eyes, turned to face Rarity, and her eyes narrowed. She had no intention of letting that vermin get another attack in. She flexed her wings and raised her claws, and she was trying to figure out the best way to take on Rarity's attack when Rainbow Dash tackled her from behind again.

Rainbow Dash caught Gilda by surprise, but by the time the griffin hit the

ground, she was already planning her next move. Rainbow Dash couldn't stay on top of her for long without forcing Rarity to give up her attack. After all, unless Rainbow Dash moved, Rarity wouldn't be able to get a clear shot and risked hitting her friend instead.

Rainbow Dash counted the seconds in her head as Rarity approached for her second pass. Everything would have to be timed perfectly. It began to occur to Rainbow what she was doing. They were going to seriously hurt Gilda, maybe even kill her. Rainbow's breath came to her fits and starts. She didn't want to be a killer. This was never supposed to have happened. But it was too late to stop. Everything was in place, and all Rainbow Dash could do was escape and save her own skin. "Why are you doing this?" she begged of Gilda. "Don't make me do this." She looked into Gilda's eyes, trying to find that small glimmer of compassion, the sliver of kindness she had always seen but was invisible to everypony else. She thought she had seen it in this Gilda, back in the cave, but now she wasn't sure. Was this Gilda really so far removed from the griffin Rainbow knew that she would kill a long-lost friend to finish her mission? "You were my best friend," continued Rainbow, "my hero. Why did you have to go and become," she paused and made a broad gesture with one of her hooves, "this? Don't you care about anything?"

Gilda, for the first time in the battle, was at a complete loss. She imagined that Rainbow Dash was offering her hoof, showing her a way out. But the rational part of her knew better. There was no way out of this world. There never would be. "I did," she confessed. "I used to care about something. A lot. Then she died." She felt Rainbow loosen her grip, and she seized the moment, kicking hard and throwing Rainbow Dash off of her, straight into the path of Rarity.

Rainbow Dash didn't feel what happened next, but she heard it. The blunt, almost hollow sound of the collision and the sickening wet squelch that followed. Rainbow Dash fell, her weight bringing Rarity down and throwing her off course. One of her metal wings dragged into the ground, and Rainbow heard the metal being torn from the joints. Half of the wing, separated from the rest of invention, skittered along the mountainside at high velocity, narrowly missing Gilda. Rarity, now off balance and unable to steer, but still moving at only a slightly reduced speed, found herself carried by her momentum for a hundred more yards, her one remaining functional wing slowing her descent, before she touched down again and

tumbled along the ground, over a steep embankment, and out of sight.

Rainbow Dash didn't know how to react. Rarity had vanished, as quickly as she had appeared. The battle was back to Rainbow and Gilda. Rainbow tried to stand again when she realized she couldn't feel one of her forehooves. Slowly, and with intense trepidation, she looked down to examine the damage.

She was honestly surprised the hoof was still attached. A deep gouge cut almost halfway into her leg, and the hoof at the end of it wasn't responding to her commands. She felt multiple other scrapes and cuts along her body, but none of them seemed to be as bad as this. She looked at Gilda to see the griffin's reaction.

Slowly both sets of eyes turned to Twilight, neither combatant forgetting what was at stake. They ran, Rainbow to protect her friend, and Gilda to finish the job she'd started. Rainbow was much closer, but she hobbled, avoiding her butchered hoof, and she reached Twilight only seconds ahead of Gilda. She threw herself on top of Twilight, using her own body as a shield. It was the only thing she could think of, and she was much too tired to continue fighting.

Gilda seemed fatigued as well, and now she became frustrated. "Step aside, Rainbow Dash," she demanded, her voice rising.

Rainbow Dash hugged Twilight tighter, trying to cover as much of the unicorn's body as she could.

"I said, step aside, Rainbow Dash."

Rainbow Dash cradled Twilight's head in between her hooves, pushing the purple mane from the unicorn's eyes. Twilight's eyelids fluttered, but in her state of injury and exhaustion, she only seemed acutely aware of what was going on around her. "I'm sorry," Rainbow Dash whispered. "I'm so, so, sorry. But it's the only way. I can't kill her, and I can't let her kill you. I'll protect both of you, and this is the only way to do it." She closed her eyes and waited for Gilda's claws to strike her. She waited for Gilda to beat her legs against her defenseless flank, to rake her side and watch her bleed out. She tightened her grip around Twilight. No matter what happened, no matter what she was forced to endure, she wouldn't let go. She would

protect Twilight, even up to her last breath. And even then, she would wish Gilda the best of luck prying her lifeless body from the pony she cared so much about.

"Damn you, Rainbow Dash," she heard a voice say. It sounded like Gilda. It had to be Gilda. Rainbow Dash didn't care. Nothing mattered except keeping Twilight safe.

Seconds passed. The seconds stretched into a minute. Finally, Rainbow Dash dared to open her eyes.

Gilda was gone.

It took another minute for Rainbow's breathing to return to normal. She sat on her rump, holding Twilight gently and watching her breathe. She had kept her promise; she had kept Twilight safe.

But not without cost. Rarity was gone. Not dead, Rainbow prayed, but gone nonetheless. But Rarity was strong. She'd been in worse situations before. Even though she didn't like to get her hooves dirty, she would, if the situation required it. And Rarity was smart. Rainbow had faith that she would survive until they could rescue her.

Rainbow turned her attention her injured hoof. It was bleeding rather freely, staining her coat and Twilight's. She knew she needed to get back to the others. Fluttershy would likely know how to treat it.

"Rainbow Dash?" asked Twilight, who was once again coherent. "What happened? Is she gone?"

"Don't worry about anything. You're safe. Just hang in there, and everything's going to be okay."

Rainbow Dash pushed her head underneath Twilight's body and lifted her onto her back. Fortunately, neither of her wings had been broken or damaged to the point of inoperability. They hurt, worse than Dash could ever remember, but she could still fly with them.

"Everything's going to be okay," she said again, straining as they rose slowly into the air. "This never should have happened," she added to

herself.

As for Twilight's questions, Rainbow Dash didn't have any answers. She scanned the sky and the ground, looking for any sign of Gilda, but it really did seem that the griffin was gone.

Her thoughts turned to what Gilda had told her. The her from this world was dead. Rainbow Dash wondered if this was really true, and if so, how she had died. The fact didn't seem to bother her as much as she thought it would. What was the place Gilda had mentioned, the place where it happened? Berrick? It sounded vaguely familiar. Still, Rainbow Dash felt like she was taking the news of her demise rather well. It was something else Gilda had said that terrified her.

"Killers like us don't deserve any sympathy."

Chapter 8

Singlet

Moonlight carefully maneuvered down the steep gradient, being careful not to lose her balance. "Come on," she urged the other ponies. "We need to put as much distance between us and Gilda as we can."

The underground tunnels had opened up on the unstable cliff-side. The steep plane stretched downward with no obstacles except for the occasional rocky protrusion that looked as if part of the mountain had been wrenched out of place. The terrain changed with every step, from flat stone to mud to gravel, all equally treacherous and all the same dull gray. Above Moonlight, the sky had somehow managed to become darker and more morose. She couldn't tell why. Thick clouds had grouped in the sky, but it wasn't as if they had a sun to mask. The moon, which before had shown brightly, was now no longer visible. Maybe the clouds were hiding the moon, or the Ponyville Light, whatever that strange sphere truly was, had settled in for its nightly nap.

Moonlight was trying her best to balance a desire to hurry and an even stronger desire to not die. Pinkie Pie had bounded ahead and was in the lead of the pack, miraculously managing not to slip. The progress of the other ponies, however, was much slower. Applejack was trying not to put too much pressure on her broken leg. Fluttershy, her wings locked rigidly to her body, was taking a minute for each step, prodding the earth with her hoof multiple times to make sure it was solid. Moonlight was trying to coax her along.

"Why can't you just fly?" she begged as Fluttershy took another step, and then quickly took it back.

Applejack looked back and forced a smile. "Do ya always get all blue in the face the minute things don't go yer way?" she asked. "You're all happy and chipper-like when you're in charge, spouting commands like, 'Let's put distance,' but you get all flustered the moment you ain't the leader. It's like you can't stand to be ignored."

"Are you this cross around everypony?" called Moonlight, trying to ignore the outburst.

"Not really. I'm usually pleasant. It's just you, I suppose."

Moonlight grunted audibly as she tiptoed across the rocks to meet Applejack. "What did I do to deserve this?" she muttered under her breath.

"You really want me t' answer that?"

Moonlight landed in front of Applejack and shoved her face up against the earth pony's. "Will you quit grumbling and just take one for the team?" she demanded.

Applejack chuckled. "I was about to say the same to you,"

"Does this really matter?" cried Pinkie Pie, who had had enough. "The last thing we need is more fighting! We're already down three of us."

Applejack's jaw froze mid-swing. Pinkie Pie's voice was entirely void of humor. If Pinkie wasn't laughing, then things were serious. She started to speak up to defend herself, but no words came out. She had no words to say. She closed her mouth, thought for a moment, and then started again, but she still couldn't find the words.

"I know you two aren't getting along," said Pinkie, the strain in her voice clear, "but can you please set aside your differences until we're safe?"

Applejack grumbled. "I'll be nice if she is," she mumbled under her breath.

"Same. I'll show respect if I receive it."

Applejack turned to face forward. "Good," she announced. "Problem solved," even though it wasn't. For emphasis, she stomped her front hoof on the ground as she began climbing again.

The slick gravel slid beneath her feet as the mountain gave way. Applejack, carried forward by her momentum, lost her balance and toppled head over hooves down the mountainside.

Moonlight panicked, and her breathing froze. She hadn't been expecting this. "Fluttershy!" she managed to cry. "Grab her!"

"I can't!" Fluttershy stood, completely frozen, in a complete panic. "Ohmygosh, ohmygosh, ohmygosh," she began to mutter to herself. She wanted to help. She knew she needed to, but she couldn't get her wings to respond. Her legs finally began to answer her, and she instinctively backpedaled, trying to distance herself from the accident. No longer carefully plotting her course, she felt her too begin to slip as one leg landed carelessly, and soon she was tumbling down after Applejack.

Not stopping to think, Moonlight reached out with her telekinesis, growing tendrils of energy that chased after Fluttershy and reached around her waist. Moonlight gasped as the air was knocked out of her, and she nearly lost her footing herself. Even though Fluttershy wasn't physically connected to her, she could still feel the pegasus straining against her bonds, being pulled along by gravity. She could not arrest Fluttershy's momentum with inheriting it herself. Magic could do many things, but it couldn't stop physics without proper planning beforehand.

Moonlight felt her own hooves begin to slip. She desperately tried to regain traction, but in her distraction accidentally released her grip on Fluttershy. Freed from Fluttershy's weight, she fell backwards, losing the air in her lungs again and losing all balance. "Pinkie!" she called to the remaining pony still on her hooves. As Moonlight began to roll down the cliffside, she caught a glance of Pinkie Pie. To her dismay, the pink earth pony was rolling along with her, treating the disaster as some sort of game.

Amidst Applejack's hollering, Fluttershy's unearthly wail, and Pinkie Pie's exuberant hoots of joy, the four ponies rapidly descended the mountain. Rocks and trees spun around the edges of Moonlight's vision, blurred and indistinct, coming into view and leaving within a second. She could feel each revolution as her back collided painfully with the rocky slope. She desperately tried to think of magic she could use, but she knew that rhythmic attack to her spine by the hard stone would have prevented her from focusing anyway. She let go of any remaining focus in her vision and she was carried downhill, off and over a sudden drop.

Rainbow Dash scanned the ground below her as she flew, looking for a sign of her friends. All of the mountainous region looked the same, and none of it looked familiar. This had to be near the mountain, but nothing stood out. The cave entrance which had seemed so obvious from the ground was invisible now.

How in Equestria did Gilda find it, Rainbow wondered. It didn't make any sense.

She began circling around, increasing her radius slowly and searching for something, anything. The weight of the unconscious Twilight was beginning to wear her out. She needed medical attention. They both did.

Finally, Rainbow swore she saw a splash of pink amongst the gray. Then it was gone, and she wondered if she had only imagined it. Really, it didn't matter. She couldn't afford to keep flying. She had to land, and if Pinkie was there to greet her, all the better.

She touched down in the largest clearing she could find and began to make her way towards where she thought she'd spotted it. She rounded a corner and blinked, startled.

For a moment she thought she'd stumbled across a mirror. The pony in front of her was also struggling under the weight of a purple unicorn, her head bowed low as she tried her best to provide support. Then Rainbow saw the pink mane.

"Pinkie?"

Fluttershy lifted her head, her eyes filled with desperation. "Help me," she murmured before she saw that Rainbow was also carrying Twilight. "Oh, dear," she added.

It took a few tries for Fluttershy to get the fire started.

Rainbow Dash was amazed. It never would have occurred to her to bring flint on their journey, but it was certainly proving to be useful. "What else do you have in that bag?" she asked, trying to make Fluttershy more

comfortable before she brought out the more difficult questions. Like where Pinkie Pie and Applejack were.

"Oh, not much," said Fluttershy, her face flushing at the attention. "Food, mostly. Some medical supplies." She eyed Rainbow's injured hoof. "Speaking of which, we should probably take a look at the hoof of yours."

"That's alright," said Rainbow Dash as she quickly tried to hide the hoof behind her back, but the sudden movement made her wince. "It's fine," she lied. The last thing she wanted was to spook Fluttershy with all the blood. A pony so scared of her own shadow would probably faint at the sight of such a gruesome injury.

Fluttershy's eyes narrowed, a look of concentration and authority overcoming her. "Please, Rainbow Dash. I mean, I don't want to force you or anything, but please."

"Promise me you won't freak out," Rainbow Dash murmured.

"I'm an animal caretaker. That includes being a veterinarian. I didn't get the job by having a weak stomach."

Rainbow Dash reluctantly held out the injured appendage, but was surprised as Fluttershy delicately cradled it and examined the wound.

"It's not too bad," she concluded. "We'll need to disinfect it, of course. That won't be a problem, will it?"

Rainbow laughed nervously. "Of course not!" she boasted. "Who do you think I am?" Her smile wavered as Fluttershy reached into her bag. Fluttershy rummaged about in the bag for a couple seconds and then frowned.

Rainbow Dash began to panic. The anticipation was killing her. "Fluttershy?" she asked.

When Fluttershy removed her hoof from the bag, she was holding a book. "I didn't put this in here," she remarked, and she opened it. The contents were written in a neat hoofwritten scrawl. She flipped through the

pages, trying to figure out what she was looking at.

She recognized some of what was written. The Dragon on the mountain, Winter Wrap-Up, The Best Young Fliers competition. "The is Twilight's diary," she realized. "How did this get in here?"

"Can we hurry up?" asked Rainbow Dash, who wanted to get the unpleasentries out of the way as soon as possible.

Fluttershy retrieved the bottle she was looking for, labeled on the side with a peppermint leaf. "Alright. Give me your hoof."

Pinkie Pie was bouncing along a rocky trail, the Columbus device grasped firmly in her mouth, when she heard the scream. Her gait changed to a quick gallop as she took off in direction of the cry.

"Hold on Rainbow Dash!" she cried. "I'm coming!"

Rainbow Dash clamped her mouth shut so that she wouldn't scream again. Her eyes were beginning to water. There were so many words she wanted to say, but few of them had more than four letters.

"Rainbow Dash!" hushed Fluttershy. "You don't want to wake up the Twilights!" She froze up, trying to come to terms with the inanity of the statement.

"Maybe one of the others will have heard that," said Rainbow Dash through clenched teeth.

"Yeah, or Gilda."

Rainbow Dash shut up. To Fluttershy, she looked like she'd been kicked.

"What happened out there?" Fluttershy asked. "Where's Rarity?"

"We lost her."

Fluttershy didn't know what to say. "Oh."

"No, not that!" cried Rainbow Dash, her voice cracking as she frantically tried to correct her mistake. "She's not dead. I hope. We just lost track of her."

"Same here, with Applejack and Pinkie Pie. What about Gilda?"

Rainbow paused, trying to figure out the right words. "Honestly? I don't have the first clue what to think. She's the same griffin I used to know, but at the same time, she's completely different. And I think she feels the same way. She's just as confused, just as lost. I think that's why she let me go. It's so hard for both of us. Can you imagine what it's like to have someone you know, someone you're close to, someone you've shared so much of your life with, so many experiences, and then you run into another version of her where that's all washed away, like it never happened?"

Fluttershy cast a sideways glance at the two Twilights, huddled together. Neither of them had woken up yet.

"Oh."

The ponies sat in silence, trying to work out their thoughts so that they could have something to say. "What do you think of her?" Rainbow Dash finally asked.

"Gilda?"

"No. The other Twilight."

"Moonlight? I think she's, um, really intimidating."

Rainbow Dash balked. "You're kidding, right? You're the one who calmed her down back in the library. You showed her kindness when the rest of us were afraid to."

"That's different!" cried Fluttershy defensively. "It's like treating a wounded animal. You don't have time to think, because every second counts. You forget you're supposed to be afraid. She was helpless, so I did what I had

to do. What anypony would have done, really. But Applejack was right. Now that Moonlight's back in control, I can't be like I was before. She scares me too much. And it gets worse."

"Oh?" Rainbow Dash, for the first time in conversation, had her curiosity piqued.

"We rescued Twilight, but I can't help but look at them the same way, like they're the same pony. Which I guess they are. I look at her and I feel exactly the same."

"You're scared of Twilight?" asked Rainbow Dash, confused.

"No! Of course not." Fluttershy paused, quivering, as if she was afraid to admit what she was saying. "I don't know! I don't understand it myself. It just so hard to think about!"

As Fluttershy sat with her head in her hooves, attempting to regain her composure, she was startled by the sound of laughter. It started as a light chuckle, but soon Rainbow Dash had to stuff a hoof in her mouth to keep herself from waking the whole camp. Still, for half a minute afterward, Fluttershy could still hear the muffled giggles.

"What's funny?" Fluttershy tried to demand, but it came out as more of a desperate plea. "I don't get it."

"It makes so much sense" said Rainbow Dash with bewilderment after she had recovered. "It's so perfect, and I hadn't thought about it."

"Thought about what?"

"The recluse and the bookworm. Why would it ever be anything else?" She began laughing again. She smiled at Fluttershy, and then her eyes moved past Fluttershy, staring at something out of view.

"Don't panic," she said quietly. "But there's somepony watching us."

Fluttershy's attempt to avoid panicked failed. She dove to the ground, covering her head in her hooves. Rainbow Dash maneuvered in front of her, protecting her from the intruder.

"Who are you?" she called. "Show yourself."

The stranger wasn't Gilda; it was definitely pony-shaped. But it was too far away, and in the dark. Slowly, the figure approached the fire.

It was a unicorn mare, older than Fluttershy. Her dark mane flowed down her back, extremely unkempt. She locked eyes with Rainbow, and her face, at first tense and wrought with apprehension, flooded with relief.

"Rainbow Dash," she breathed, a wide and almost euphoric grin rapidly forming. "It's you. Good. Took me long enough; I'm terrible at following maps. Reading them, sure, piece of cake. Using them is something else though. Not really the explorer type." Realizing that she had started rambling, she shut up. She reminded herself that this was their first impression of her. She was a stranger to them.

"How do you know my name?" asked Rainbow through bared teeth.

By the time Rainbow Dash had finished her question, the mare had managed to recompose herself. Professionalism had won out, and she stood tall. When she spoke, she did so more slowly, more controlled.

"I know a lot of things about you, Rainbow Dash. You embody the element of loyalty. You'll always protect your friends in their time of need. You're one of the few ponies to ever pull off a Sonic Rainboom, and you've done it four times."

"Three," corrected Rainbow.

"Details. The pegasus behind you is Fluttershy, your closest friend. You both earned your cutie marks the same day, when you defended her honor in a race. That was the first Rainboom. That Rainboom, due to a series of interesting events and contrived coincidences, resulted in you, eight years later, saving the world from eternal darkness." She rolled her eyes upward toward the sunless sky. "I suppose I don't have to tell you that I also know you're from another universe."

Rainbow Dash was silent as she thought this over. It sort of made sense, in a way. Had she never performed the Rainboom in this version of

reality? It would certainly explain why Madam Orange still lived in Manehattan.

Everypony everywhere has a special magical connection with her friends, maybe even before she's met them.

Rainbow Dash had always considered this to be a blessing. Her Rainboom had made a positive difference in the lives of so many ponies. But what if this connection was a curse as well? Because she failed to make the Rainboom, Applejack's life had been completely thrown off course, possibly for the worse.

But Applejack wasn't the only one who had been affected by the Rainboom. Twilight never would have become Celestia's apprentice. Rainbow Dash never would have met her.

They never would have stopped Nightmare Moon.

"Is that was this?" she asked weakly. "This is what would have happened if I didn't do the Sonic Rainboom?"

The stranger pondered the question. "Technically. The split in time goes back a bit further than that, but you're more or less correct. In this world, you did not win your race against that braggart colt."

"Why not?" Rainbow Dash felt insulted to think she would lose a race to those brutes, in any version of reality.

"You were distracted."

"Distracted? By what?"

"By me."

Silence hung suspended in the air. Rainbow Dash's frustration quelled instantly and left her speechless.

"I think we should sit down for this talk," suggested the mare. "I brought us some food."

A meal of campfire roasted carrots and potatoes later, Dash began to find herself strangely acclimated to the newcomer. By all reason, she should have been scared of this newcomer. Instead, perhaps due to some sense of familiarity she didn't quite understand, she had made the decision to trust her.

"What's your name, anyway?" she asked as she chewed. "It's not really fair that you knew mine."

"You can call me Stargazer," the unicorn replied, having already finished. It was much easier to eat with telekinesis.

The fact that Stargazer had avoided answering the question hadn't escaped Fluttershy, who had been listening in on the few spoken words, but hadn't been contributing. "Is that your real name?" she asked.

"No."

"Then what is?" asked Rainbow Dash.

"That's hardly the most important question you should be asking right now."

"Right then," said Rainbow, cutting to the chase. "You said this world is like it is because you kept me from performing the Sonic Rainboom. Why?"

"It wasn't intentional, I assure you. But I was there, and that was enough. You see, I'm not like you. Or Fluttershy. I don't belong in either world."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm a singlet. There's two of all of you, but there's only one of me. And that makes me dangerous. This is all my fault. I did my best to not touch anything, to let things go on as they should, but some things were unavoidable. Somewhere, somehow, I stepped on a butterfly. I altered a key point in history, a point that so many future events hinged upon. Your Rainboom was a defining point in time, and I broke it." As Stargazer neared the end of her speech, her pacing grew less controlled and more

sporadic, and the words seemed to be becoming more difficult. "I make the universe asymmetrical. I'm what's wrong with everything."

Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy were at a loss. They wanted to comfort her, but neither of them really were in any position to do so. Stargazer knew so much more about this predicament than any of the others did. Telling her this wasn't her fault would hardly be convincing.

Stargazer looked longingly at the rest of Fluttershy's food; the pegasus has barely touched her meal. "Are you going to finish that?" she asked.

Fluttershy fidgeted. "I'm saving it for Twilight. I didn't think it was fair that we got to eat and they didn't."

Stargazer shook her head. "Sorry. You can't give it to them. I can't leave any traces behind. They can't know I was ever here."

"What?" Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash cried simultaneously.

"Twilight is important." Stargazer explained. "Kind of like your Rainboom, she has a big impact on the world. There are things she's supposed to do, mistakes she has to make, and I can't get in the way of them. I've interfered enough, just to balance out the damage I've already caused, to get her on the right track, but this isn't one of those moments. If she knows I've been here, it might throw everything off. I can't afford that."

"How can you know that?" asked Rainbow Dash suspiciously. "Who decides what's supposed to happen?"

"It's my special talent," answered Stargazer, earning herself two pairs of raised eyebrows. "In my dreams, I can see these important things, these critical moments. Things that have already happened. Things that need to happen. Different possible futures. But I don't know everything, Rainbow Dash. That's why I chose this moment to approach you. I could have waited a day or two, until you were in these mountains alone, but I wouldn't be able to find you. I wouldn't have the first clue where to look."

Rainbow Dash furrowed her brow, trying to synthesize all the information she was receiving. "But why did you come in the first place? Because right now, it sounds like you want to tell us what to do to clean up your messes."

Stargazer shook her head. "Nothing like that. This is just a social call. I'm tired of communicating through riddles and dreams. It's too impersonal and unreal. I just wanted to talk to a familiar face. You don't know how long I've been waiting to see you again, for real, Rainbow Dash. I miss you. I miss you all." She stood and walked over to the two Twilights, both still asleep. "Hello, girls," she whispered as to not wake them up. "Do you still remember the good luck charm I gave you all those years ago? Don't be afraid of it, Twilight. You've been groomed for a great destiny."

She returned to the campfire. "I should go, before they wake up. Thank you, Rainbow Dash, for letting me talk to you. And for not telling Twilight about me."

"What makes you think I won't tell her?"

Stargazer's response was curt. "Because you won't." She flashed a smile at Rainbow Dash, gave Fluttershy a quick nod, and closed her eyes, recalling the components of the teleportation spell. She felt herself lifted off of the ground as the magic flowed through her.

"One more question," interrupted Rainbow Dash.

Stargazer lowered herself back to the ground and opened one eye. "Yes?"

"Why are you doing this? What's your motive?"

"I already told you. I'm not a spy or anything. I am merely attempting to fix the mistakes I've made. Call this an atonement, if you will."

"That's it, then? Set right what once went wrong?"

"More or less."

"Fine, then. Goodbye, Stargazer." The light began to glow again, and it increased in intensity until Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy had to close their eyes. When they opened them again, she was gone.

"Atonement my flank," said Rainbow Dash after Stargazer had left. "She's up to something. What do you think?" she asked Fluttershy.

"Um, I'm not sure. She seems nice. But, but..."

Rainbow Dash smiled. "You noticed it too, huh?"

Fluttershy nodded. "I've only seen one other pony with that cutie mark."

A couple of minutes later Pinkie Pie mounted a nearby crest and began racing toward them. Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash, overjoyed, rushed to meet her.

After the longest hug any of them could remember, Fluttershy asked the question.

"Is Applejack with you?"

Pinkie, stung, looked at the floor dejectedly. She spat out the Columbus to speak. "I was hoping she was with you. What about Rarity?"

"We'll find her," asserted Rainbow Dash. "I'll scour every square inch of this mountain until I spot her. I promise."

The images were unfocused this time, jagged, reaching out of the darkness to grab hold of her but splintering into fragments before they could reach her. As she drifted in and out of consciousness, sounds and sights flickered through her mind, forming an incomplete image.

Moonlight felt as if she couldn't move, as if a large weight was pressing down against her, forcing her back. The room was dark, except for a small sliver of light that was steadily shrinking. In a few seconds she would be alone in the cold and the dark. Again. She swore she saw a pony's face in the light. Angry. Hurt. It spoke a couple words, but she couldn't make them all out. One of them sounded like "Punishment."

Moonlight awoke, or at least it felt that way. Her sight was still blurred, crags bursting out at her from the edges of her vision, but their edges

seemed rounded, blended seamlessly with the sky. Unable to learn anything from her eyes, Moonlight first real observation was the heat of the campfire warming her side.

She turned to get a closer look at the heat source, regretting her decision as soon as she exposed her previously heated back to the cold winds behind her. It was always cold up this high in the mountains, although her lab was magically heated. In front of her, three figures were huddled around the flames, a blob of yellow, a mass of pink, and a blue one that were quickly becoming more defined. Rainbow Dash noticed Moonlight first, and she nudged Fluttershy to get her attention. Her vision beginning to clear, Moonlight watched the yellow pegasus burst into tears. Then, silently and without coordination, the three ponies trotted over to her and embraced her in a hug that enveloped both her and her counterpart.

Eventually the other ponies left to clean up the campsite, leaving the two Twilights alone. The other Twilight had woken up too now, and was staring at Moonlight with an analytical glare that made her feel like she was being dissected.

"You're me," said Twilight slowly. She had considered that this confrontation might eventually happen, but suddenly thrust into the event, her wellspring of knowledge had dried up on her and left her babbling obvious statements.

Moonlight tried to crack a smile. She had no idea what reaction she was about to receive. Anger, fear, and bewilderment were all likely candidates. "Yes."

"I'm really in another universe."

"Again, yes. I don't want to startle you. Please don't freak out."

"Oh, I'm not startled. For once, things are starting to make sense. I've finally got a firm grasp of what happened. And you're not a stranger. I know you. Not only because you're me, but because I've been seeing you in my dreams." She paused. "Why is that?"

Moonlight balked. She didn't want to admit what she had done to Twilight, but she figured refusing to talk would be worse. "We swapped minds,

initially. Our memories, however briefly, occupied the same space."

"Okay..." began Twilight as she mulled it over. "I'll take your word for it. I'm not an expert on this sort of thing, but you are. Which means I am, I guess. But that doesn't explain my dream about your cave."

"Excuse me?"

"Your encounter with Gilda. I had a dream about it before it happened. Just having your memories would do that, would it?"

Moonlight laughed, but knew it sounded fake. "You must be mistaken," she said. "You can't dream about something that hasn't happened yet."

"But I saw it."

"I've been in my cave before. Maybe you saw something else that happened there."

"But I saw Gilda. And I heard Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy talking, but I didn't recognize them because you wouldn't have. At least, you wouldn't have known them like I do."

"Listen, me," said Moonlight beginning to become irritated with her other self's incompetence. "You still study magic, right?"

"Of course."

"Then you know that magic doesn't work that way. Magic is about making a specific thing that you want to happen, happen. It's not clairvoyance. You can't see the future because the future hasn't happened yet."

This time it was Twilight who smiled, sympathetically and genuinely. "Wow," she said, managing to capture all of her astonishment and fit it into the word. "You really are me, aren't you? A me who never learned about friendship."

"What does friendship have to do with any of this?"

"A lot. Because it was a friend," and Twilight paused, interrupted by a sudden gust of wind. After it passed, she continued. "It was a friend who taught me that just because you don't know how something works doesn't mean it's not real. That a real scientist studies the seemingly impossible to learn from it, not to dismiss it. She taught me to be open to other things, other kinds of magic. You could learn a lot from her."

"That still doesn't change the fact that what you're describing is completely impossible." Moonlight, exasperated, laid her head down in her hooves when she remembered something said to her just the other night, in a dream of her own.

When the dog barks, run. And don't be afraid to follow your dreams.

The first part was still complete and utter nonsense. Was she talking about a Diamond Dog? But the second part stirred up a bit of curiosity in Moonlight, and she decided to ask.

"Hey, me. Have you ever been imprisoned?"

"Imprisoned?"

"Yes. You know, like as a punishment for committing a crime."

Twilight didn't have to think long. "No. I can't say I have. Does this have anything to do with my dream?"

Moonlight decided to table the discussion and file it under her list of things to deal with later. Predicting the future was impossible, because the future hadn't happened yet. There was no other way about it. Besides, it was becoming too difficult to focus with the sporadic bursts of wind that had begun roaring through, each one louder than the previous one.

Pinkie Pie leaped a couple yards up into the air in surprise as the Columbus device began to flash and vibrate, and she slowly fell back down to the ground, shaking with the machine. Refusing to spit it out, she pranced over to the Twilights, her hooves vibrating to quickly for her to maintain full contact with the earth for more than an instant.

"W-w-w-what's happening?" Pinkie Pie managed to cry, although her voice

was incomprehensible beneath both the Columbus and the constant shaking. Moonlight groaned and pulled the machine from her grasp, causing her to fall forward.

"Is this an earthquake?" asked Fluttershy, who was trying to back away from whatever was causing the wind, oblivious to the fact that it was all around her.

"She's here," said Moonlight, once quietly and to herself, and then she repeated herself more clearly. "She's here!"

"She?" asked Twilight, confused. "Who's she?"

Meanwhile, Rainbow Dash, looking in all directions for the source of the currents, had finally decided to look up. "Uh, guys?" she interrupted. "What's that?"

Twilight and Moonlight followed Rainbow's gaze. Twilight was frowning in concentration, while Moonlight smiled widely with anticipation, bubbling with newfound mirth. Fluttershy lowered her head between her front hooves and hid.

"I don't see anything," said Twilight. She spoke slowly, out of fear of sounding like an idiot for missing something obvious.

"Exactly. Where are the stars?"

The stars were not completely gone. Rather, it appeared to Twilight that a single oblong swathe of stars had been cut out, leaving an oval of blackness. An oval that was slowly getting larger. Whatever was blocking out the stars was getting closer. Unable to tell how large it was, Twilight felt as if it would crush them at any moment. Yet it remained aloft, giving the unicorn an ever-increasing impression of its size.

"She's finished it," breathed Moonlight. "Last I heard, it was just theoretical, but she's done it."

"Again," said Twilight, slightly more irritated. "Who's she?"

"Somepony marvelous. A wonderful and inspiring genius. A visionary in

her own right. A leader among mares and stallions, and the most dependable of ponies."

As the shape got closer, Twilight was able to make out the rotors. Four disks, one at each corner of the object, were shimmering, letting the stars shine through dimly. It took a moment for Twilight to realize they were rotating blades. These rotors were keeping the machine aloft, and they were also the source of the erratic winds.

The shape stopped growing. It was directly above them, nearly blocking out the entire sky. Rainbow Dash launched, deciding to investigate up close, but the force of the winds from the rotors quickly knocked her back into the ground.

A light appeared on the underside of the ship, for that was now what Twilight suspected it was. Like her hot air balloon, but many times larger. The underside, now clearly lit, appeared to be almost entirely a dark canvas stretched over a metal framework. A cabin was suspended beneath the sphere, although it was many times bigger than Twilight's balloon.

A rope fell, landing next to Moonlight, who neatly sidestepped out of the way. A shadowed figure appeared above, quickly descending the length of the rope, coming to a stop just a few feet above the ground.

The first thing Twilight noticed was the pony's smile. She was adventurous, cunning, devious, and her smile reflected that. It was a smile that demanded full attention, and it prevented Twilight from looking at anything else for a good while.

"Twilight! You're looking sharp! Amazingly composed, all things considered." The mare's voice was pristine, punctuated, perfect. Only the lingering trace of an accent remained to betray her roots. She wrapped Twilight in a suffocating hug. "I'm so glad you're all right. Every Columbus we've built, I never thought I'd see the day when yours would activate. I knew I'd have to come myself. Why, if anything had happened to you..."

She paused, noticing the other ponies for the first time. "And you brought friends! What delight." She turned to greet Rainbow Dash, and Twilight noticed her body.

The mare's yellow mane was tied up in a beehive, which kept it out of her eyes. She was missing a lot of the muscle Twilight was used to seeing, and she had become a bit pudgier. The bright orange coat sunk beneath her belly, and Twilight followed it down to the cutie mark on her flank, a red beverage in a margarita glass, complete with a olive and toothpick.

"Your ship," murmured Twilight, still awestruck at what was going on around her.

"Yes ma'am. The S. S. Mooncatcher. I told you we'd get it off the ground. The perfect combination of rotary thrust and hydrogen cells allows it to change altitudes without having to vent or drop ballast. Truly one of the most remarkable of inventions. But then, you should know. You helped me create it."

Rainbow Dash was frozen. "Applejack?" she whispered.

The mare scowled, as if the name tasted bitter on her tongue. "The name's Madam Orange," she said, extending a hoof. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance. It sounds like you've got quite a story."

Chapter 9

The Plan

Twilight had never been to Manehattan before.

It was every bit as glamorous as described. The S. S. Mooncatcher had cleared the distance from the Swayback Mountains to New Yoke City in a matter of hours. As the airship approached the city limits, Twilight was caught by the beauty of the city. Towers and spires springing up from the earth itself decorated the horizon. Something itched in the back of Twilight's brain, but she couldn't place it, and it quickly became second in importance to the beauty of her surroundings. She ignored it.

The Mooncatcher docked in a specialized port atop one of the tallest buildings in the city, and the occupants disembarked. Madam Orange led, followed immediately behind by the two Twilights. She seemed to be parading them, showcasing her star business partner for the world to see. Neither Twilight was particularly comfortable with this layout. The Twilight who was new to this universe was unsettled further by the guards.

The term Madam Orange used was "allies." But they were definitely guards, devoted not to Madam, but to their jobs. Their faces, while not expressionless, were by no means welcoming. They had spent a good deal of time watching over both Twilights, perhaps because they saw the unicorns as the greatest threats, until Madam had specifically ordered them to give the girls some privacy. Neither of the Twilights were eager to challenge the guards, though, as all of them were armed with swords.

Twilight had explained the situation to Orange on the ride, figuring that there was no point in denying the existence of the alternate universe when she and her counterpart were standing next to each other. She had explained that their one desire was to return home, as soon as Rainbow Dash had succeeded in locating their lost companions. Rainbow had voluntarily stayed behind in the mountain range, aided by two of Madam's pegasus guards. The identities of these missing companions was a detail Twilight had intentionally obscured. She wasn't sure how Madam Orange would react to the idea of her counterpart, and Twilight wanted to put this

reveal off until she could find a good way to introduce it. Throughout her entire explanation, she stressed the importance of returning home, but Madam Orange had another idea.

"In your time, you defeated the Nightmare Queen?" confirmed Madam Orange, impressed. "How? By exploiting a weakness of hers?"

And so Twilight found herself explaining the Elements of Harmony to a very attentive Madam Orange.

"We knew about the Element of Magic," explained Madam Orange when Twilight had finished. "Supposedly the most powerful magical artifact in Equestria, kept safe in Celestia's vaults. Or it was, until my Twilight stole it. We tried to use it against the Nightmare Queen when she first arrived, but it didn't work. We never figured out why. And now you're saying that we had only one of six?"

Twilight nodded. "All six are needed to bind Nightmare Moon's power. But it's not just an issue of finding them. You need the spark to activate them. And for that, they need to be wielded by the right ponies." Something about Madam Orange's story finally clicked. "Wait. Celestia had the Element of Magic? The reference guide said the Element had been lost."

"And who do you think wrote the book?" Madam Orange asked. "Although, where did you find it, then, if it had been lost?"

"I had it. Inside me, the whole..." her voice trailed off.

Celestia, you sly manipulator, she thought. You had that planned the whole time, didn't you?

"I suppose the more pressing question," posed Orange, "is whether it needs to be the same six ponies that wield the Elements of Harmony."

"I don't know," confessed Twilight. "I mean, I'm not the only pony who's ever wielded the element, since the princess used it one thousand years ago in her battle against Nightmare Moon."

"Regardless, it might do us well to locate the other versions of your

friends. If not for them to save the world, than at least to ease your mind concerning their safety."

Twilight agreed, having been thinking the same thing, but the ship had docked before they could discuss the matter any further, and Madam Orange, noticing their arrival, refused to talk to Twilight any more until she and her friends were, in Orange's words, "a good deal more presentable."

Twilight, realizing that she hadn't showered since she arrived in this reality, didn't argue.

On arrival, Madam Orange's top priority was the health and well-being of her guests. Her first request was that they all get some cleaned and well rested for the trials they would undoubtedly face. As Twilight quickly discovered, Madam Orange's definition of cleaning was more meticulous, and many times more expensive, than anything Twilight would have come up with. She followed along, trying her best to enjoy the grooming and the spa treatment, but the itching in the back of her brain had returned. Something strange and unidentifiable, floating on the edge of her awareness just out of reach, was preventing her from getting the most out of her experience.

All this, and Twilight still hadn't left the building they had docked in. It began to occur to her just how incredibly wealthy Madam Orange must have been. And it was while Twilight was having her hooves cleaned by a suave and sturdily built gray stallion with a foreign accent that she noticed the tapestry. It was made from a material Twilight had seen before, but only in Celestia's castle in Canterlot, and it was made up of a series of still images. Some of the features were easily recognizable. A number of houses dominated the center of each image. A small town, Twilight realized. A number of ponies were standing around the town, their backs to it. From the fringes of the tapestry, monstrous creatures, vaguely pony-like in appearance but with malformed muzzles and spindly elongated limbs, were clamoring toward the town. As Twilight followed the series of images, the ponies fought bravely against the monsters, but by the time her eyes reached the bottom of the tapestry, the creatures had won. In the last image, the town was completely gone, and only the monsters remained, scurrying away. Awkwardly, unsure of the proper way to address the pony

tending to her, she asked him if he knew anything about it.

He turned around to get a better look at it. "That thing?" he asked skeptically. "Some ancient decoration that was dug up a couple years back. Madam has a thing for antiques, so she scooped it up."

This explanation gave Twilight pause. "Wait," she said slowly, processing the information. "The tapestry belongs to Madam? As in, Madam Orange Madam?"

"Yes'm. So does everything in this building. Including us."

The stallion probably meant she owned the salon, and that he just worked for her, but the words still made her jump. Madam Orange wasn't just rich. She was practically an empress. The itch came again, and this time Twilight knew what it was. How could this possibly be in the same world as the Ponyville she had been in only a day or two ago? Why was it that a couple day's journey by hoof away, ponies were very nearly starving, and here she was getting every square inch of her body cleaned? She suddenly had some more questions for Madam Orange.

"Is there any reason you're asking about the decoration, ma'am?" The stallion startled her back to reality. "Besides simple curiosity, I mean."

"No, not really. It just looks really familiar, that's all. Like I've seen it before, somewhere else. What's it about?"

"It's an old mare's tale," explained the stallion. "Beastly ponies, called Shades, are said to live in the Everfree zones. Sometimes, according to the legend, at least, they'll venture out into the rest of the world, find a town or city, and devour the whole thing, including everypony inside. When they're done, nopony would ever be able to tell there ever was a town there."

The story sounded vaguely familiar. "If they eat everypony there, how do we know it was the Shades that did it?" asked Twilight.

The stallion sighed. "Congratulations, miss. You have discovered why this is a legend. A fairytale."

"Where was it before it was here?" Something about the tapestry was grabbing at Twilight's attention, and whatever it was, it was pressing, important. But she couldn't figure out what it was.

The stallion narrowed his eyes confused. "Nowhere. It's always been here. It was put on auction soon after it was discovered, and it's been residing in this room ever since."

Twilight thanked the stallion and closed her eyes, trying to enjoy the rest of the cleaning. She failed. There were just too many questions burning in her mind. Some of them were for Madam Orange, yes, but during her time in the spa she had also created a small list of questions for her alternate self. Two of them were more pressing than the rest.

How did I get here? And the most important one:

What happened to Stone Wall?

The next time she saw either her other self or Madam Orange, they were together, and Orange had an unpleasant surprise for her.

"This is your bedroom," said Orange, waving a hoof at the open doorway and adding dramatic flair to her voice.

"For which one of us?" asked Twilight.

Orange paused, not prepared to answer the question. Then, she repeated the motion. "This is your bedroom," she said again.

Twilight glared, slightly disgusted, before peeking her head through the doorway. The room inside was huge, and amazingly decorated, with giant patterned curtains covering a rose-tinted glass window that stretched from the floor up at least twenty feet. And although even the bed was super-sized, there was still only one.

"Oh, it's just you," said Orange when Twilight pointed this out. "How awkward could it be?" Before either Twilight could respond, Orange turned, making her way back toward the stairwell. "Now, you two should

really get some rest," she said, looking back over her shoulder.

It was still five in the afternoon, and Moonlight told Madam Orange so.

"Still, both of you two are running dangerously low in the sleep department. Don't try to deny it, darlings; you have exhaustion written all over the both of you. This is your time to relax, get on the same page. There's no point in trying to save the world if we're all too tired to think straight. So sleep, and then we'll come up with a plan. I expect you two have a lot of catching up to do." She paused, stumbling over the words she said next. "I'm really sorry about Zecora," she told Moonlight. "She was a good mare."

Moonlight tensed, trying to forget the image of her friend's lifeless, partially consumed body. "Yeah," she said softly. "We need to give her a proper burial. She deserves better than to lie about in some cave."

"And she'll receive better," assured Orange. "We'll do it her way. By her customs. It's what she would want, don't you think?"

Moonlight nodded glumly and, without another word to either Orange or Twilight, turned away and crossed over the threshold into her new bedroom. Madam Orange tried her best to smile cheekily at Twilight, but Moonlight's weariness weighed her down, and she soon gave up and departed silently.

When she was gone, Twilight followed Moonlight into the room, desperate to have her questions answered. It only took one look at Moonlight's downtrodden face for Twilight to realize that now was not a good time to be asking these questions, but she knew she was going to ask anyway. Nothing bothered her more than not having answers that were just out of her reach. Knowledge was power, after all.

She tried to approach the subject cautiously, but she couldn't think of anything to say. In the end, she sat down next to Moonlight, embracing her alternate self.

"I don't understand," bemoaned Moonlight. "Who was that griffin? Why did she want us dead? What did Zecora do to deserve a fate like that?"

Twilight bit her tongue to keep herself from revealing that Zecora's only crime had been her association with Moonlight, that the unicorn was Gilda's intended target, not the zebra. She imagined Moonlight wouldn't be able to handle the guilt.

"I don't know," lied Twilight.

"You should have let me be the one to break it," mumbled Moonlight bitterly.

Twilight didn't understand. "Break what?" she asked.

"The news. To Madam Orange. I should have been the one to tell her that Zecora died. You don't even know her."

"I knew the other her."

Moonlight bared her teeth, irritated. "That's not the same thing, and you know it. She was my friend, and there was a good chance her death was my fault. I should have been the one to tell her."

"Agreed," said Twilight, trying to calm the other her. "But you should tell that to Pinkie and Fluttershy, not me. I wasn't the one that stole your moment."

Moonlight turned away, embarrassed. Twilight used the silence to pose one of the less harmful questions she had been pondering, or so she thought.

"Why did I end up here?" she asked. "You said we switched minds, but that doesn't explain why." She saw Moonlight bury her head in her forelegs and realized she'd misjudged the severity of the question.

"I was jealous," answered Moonlight quietly. "So I... stole you."

Twilight was about to express her surprise, but she stopped herself. She tried to consider things from Moonlight's perspective, and she realized that, given the state of the world she was in, she would probably want to escape too.

"How does it work?" she asked, because of both genuine curiosity and a desire to steer the conversation away from Moonlight's confession. "Do you have any diagrams?"

For the first time, Moonlight's eyes lit up. "Would you like to see them?"

Ignoring Madam Orange's imposed curfew, the pair, with Moonlight in the lead, descended the stairs of the building into an enormous room filled with books.

"Madam Orange's personal library," said Moonlight as she gestured to it with a flourish. "It contains some information you won't find anywhere else, like records of the spells I designed while working for her."

It didn't take long for Moonlight to find the scroll containing the memory-switching spell, and Twilight read over it with fervor.

"You're not moving memories," remarked Twilight as she read. "You're copying them, with the expectation that the news ones will displace the old ones." This was a frightening thought, or would be if it weren't for the fact that the displaced memories were also being copied and the fact that such a displacement clearly hadn't happened. "Does this mean that every one of your old memories is still bouncing around in this head I'm using now?"

"Not intentionally...but yes, probably. You can't recall them because your subconscious hasn't realized they exist yet."

"Is there any way I can extract them?" She remembered the trick she had pulled with the Third Eye, but that was a glitch, and not something she could easily repeat. She needed some reliable way to finish the scene that Silver Shield had interrupted. She needed to figure out what had happened to Stone Wall without bringing back painful memories for Moonlight.

"Recall them from your head? No. But you could just ask me, you know."

Twilight tried to change the topic to Madam Orange's history, but Moonlight persisted.

"What did you want to remember?"

"It was nothing important, really."

"No it wasn't. What did you want to know? I'll tell you."

Twilight relented. Moonlight, hearing the request, swallowed hard.

"I need to know the truth," clarified Twilight. "I know you agreed to fake her death, but if she's alive, she's on my side. It's something I need to know."

Moonlight mulled over Twilight's words before finally hanging her head in defeat. "Close your eyes," she commanded. "And show me your horn."

Twilight obeyed. Moonlight brought their horns together, focusing on the memory she had hoped she would never have to experience again.

The jolt was sudden, and the shift nearly threw Twilight off balance. She felt as if an eye inside her, which had until now been closed, had suddenly opened up. At first, the sensations were meaningless chaotic flashes of emotion and sound. Her mind had no way to interpret what she was seeing. She forced herself to peer into the maelstrom, willing the pieces to come together in a way she could understand.

The cave. She saw the same cave that had appeared so frequently in her dreams. Against the far wall, amidst a mesh of crystals woven into a lattice pattern, a pegasus stood tall, her eyes closed in anticipation. Two other figures, a unicorn and a zebra, stood at the control station ten yards away.

Both ponies were nervous, but the zebra was worse than either of them. She kept murmuring under her breath, and then pulling the unicorn aside and speaking to her in hushed tones. Twilight could not help but feel the gravity of Zecora's concern. Still, she insisted, the subject was willing. If Stone Wall had no objections, why should they?

It was a moment where, in hindsight, the outcome should have been obvious. The lesson of exercising caution was clear to Twilight now, and she realized how much her counterpart must have beaten herself up over this incident. She knew what was going to happen before the memory of her ever pulled the lever, and she discovered she had no desire to watch it

unfold.

The machine activated, and for a second there was nothing but the soft hum of the mirror powering on. The situation almost seemed hopeful, inspiring.

Then Stone Wall burst into flames.

Twilight, horrified, watched as the flames began on the pegasus's mane, charring it a dark black and staining parts of it gray with ash. The fire quickly spread onto her coat, and she was no longer a pony, but a vaguely pony-shaped inferno.

Twilight tried to close her eyes and block out the horrific torturous image before her, but squeezing her eyes shut did nothing to stop the nightmare. The image came not from her eyes, but from their magic. She was seeing what the other her had seen, and the other her had kept her eyes open in terrified fascination.

Stone Wall took a step forward before collapsing to her knees. And before anypony could rush to her aid, the sound of a large explosion rocked the lab, and Twilight similarly collapsed.

Her head was ringing, and her sight had become blurred. She struggled to stand, to make her way over to the flaming pony, but Stone Wall was gone. In her place was a couple chunks of flesh and singed hair, with half a wing sticking out of the gore seemingly untouched. As Twilight approached, overcome with horror but unable to stop looking, she discovered that Stone Wall, or what was left of her, was looking back. A single eye rested on top of the charred remains, and it seemed to be looking directly at Twilight.

Beneath the smell of the burnt hair, Twilight thought she detected something actually marginally pleasant, but she began to gag and recoil when she realized the smell was the odor of cooked meat. Defeated, Twilight collapsed again.

Her entire face clenched up as she attempted to vent her frustration and rage, but she found no outlet. The only pony that deserved her onslaught was herself. Screaming incoherently, she levitated a rock from outside the

cave and brought it smashing down on her backside. How could she have been so stupid? She lifted the rock and hit herself with it again. *This wasn't fair!* Another assault. She should have been the one on that platform. Maybe she'd use it on herself, just to get a taste of what Stone Wall experienced.

She felt a soft hoof on her shoulder, and she turned to watch Zecora wrap her into a hug. And, not knowing what else to do, Twilight cried.

The image shattered, and Twilight was back in the library. She realized that she really was crying, and she quickly wiped the tears away. Moonlight wasn't faring much better.

"I'm so sorry," said Twilight after she had finally worked up the courage to say anything. "I didn't mean for you to go through that again."

"I didn't know it had killed her, at first," replied Moonlight, pausing repeatedly for heavy breathing. "I dared to hope she'd survived. Zecora, your Zecora, found her, brought her back to her home. But her injuries were too great. Maybe, if there had been a mage on hand. Unicorn magic is powerful. It can even regrow lost limbs. Not perfectly, but enough to save a life. But there wasn't a unicorn to help her. She died that night. You deserve to know. I take it you've met Silver Shield, then, if you knew about this. It's not fair if he tries to hurt you for something I did."

Twilight nodded. "So, were Stone Wall and Silver Shield..." she trailed off, the rest of the sentence obvious.

Moonlight nodded. "Lovers. Yes."

"Oh." Twilight looked down, and then: "I can see why he wanted to kill me."

Moonlight shifted uncomfortably, making Twilight suspicious. Was there something she wasn't being told? That was the reason Silver Shield wanted her dead, right? There was the whole jury setup, where Silver Shield had read Twilight her charges. She still remembered his voice; she didn't think it was something she'd be able to forget.

"One count of royal theft; grand treason; one, no, now two counts of breaking and entering; witchcraft; and two counts of murder."

Two. Not one, but two counts of murder.

"Moonlight," she spoke cautiously, not wanting to upset her counterpart further but knowing she likely would. "What else is he blaming me for?" Then she remembered something else. Something Pinkamena had told her on the farm. "A foal killer. Pinkamena said Silver Shield told ponies that I killed foals."

Moonlight tensed up, but Twilight pressed forward. "Why did he say that?"

By now Moonlight was biting down hard on her tongue. She would occasionally open her mouth agape, as if she was going to speak, but it closed before words could come out. Her breathing became even more intense, something Twilight hadn't thought possible.

"Never mind," said Twilight. "This is probably really personal."

"No," came Moonlight's reply with a level of conviction Twilight hadn't expected from the distressed mare. "I dragged you into this. You deserve to know." She paused, and Twilight waited tensely while she formed the right words. "I didn't find out until later," she began.

She had to pause as she hung her head, trying and failing to combat the shame and choke back the tears. Twilight embraced her.

"I didn't know at the time," she continued after she had calmed down a little. "I had no way of knowing, I swear. It was too early for it to be showing. But after Stone Wall... was gone, after your Zecora and I had decided to bury her on both sides, Zecora made a discovery."

Twilight's jaw dropped. She had not been expecting this. But now, all of Silver Shield's rage made sense. "Stone Wall was pregnant," she finished when it became clear that Moonlight might not be able to.

Moonlight nodded. "Silver Shield wants me dead, wants you dead, because you didn't just kill his lover. You killed his child." She paused. "I suppose that's why Stone Wall wanted to cross over so badly. She wanted a safe home for her foal. I wish now we'd been more careful, though...done more research. Maybe, if we had, we wouldn't have tried to

send her over, especially if we'd figured out the real reason your side still had the sun."

Twilight was confused. "Because we defeated Nightmare Moon?"

Moonlight froze in surprise. Twilight swore she very nearly smiled. "What day is today?" she asked, with an air of cleverness that told Twilight she already knew the answer. As she should; it wasn't a particularly challenging question. At least, Twilight didn't take it for a difficult question until she racked her brain and realized that she didn't know.

"Well, it was the twenty-third of Armonia the day I first came here, and it can't have been more than a week. The twenty-seventh, maybe?"

Moonlight tried to play up her actions to overcome the crushing moroseness of the previous conversation, but she never managed more than a slight curl of the lips or a soft chuckle. "It's the fifth of Genidor. Didn't you see the calendar in the lab?"

Twilight frowned. "That can't be right. That's still two months away. I haven't been trapped here that long. Please tell me I haven't been trapped here that long," she asked anxiously. "I missed the Grand Galloping Gala. The princess would be freaking out."

"Relax," assured Moonlight, but her flat tone did little to make Twilight obey. "You've only been here around a week, at the most. And a week ago, it was the twenty-seventh. On your side, at least. Time doesn't flow at the same rate across the dimensional border. We didn't know that at the time, simply because it had never occurred to us to ask your Zecora for the date, or even the time of day. When we saw the light streaming in from your world, it wasn't because Nightmare Moon had been stopped. It was because she was still imprisoned."

Since nothing could be done to change the past, Twilight tried her best to change the topic of conversation again, and lift Moonlight's spirits. The task proved much easier than either of them suspected. They were the same pony, and as such felt immensely comfortable around each other, as if they had known each other for years. Yet they clearly hadn't, so they had

a lot of catching up to do.

Twilight intentionally posed her questions in order to uncover where Moonlight's life had differed from her own. She discovered that Moonlight had failed the entrance exam to Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns, and had attended the Hoofington School of Wizardry instead.

"How are Mom and Dad?" asked Moonlight, a question that gave Twilight a great deal of pause. "You do keep in touch with Mom and Dad, don't you? Even I still managed to keep in touch with Mom and Dad until they disappeared."

"Mom and Dad are missing?" asked Twilight, shocked.

"A lot of ponies are missing. Probably dead. But please tell me you at least try to maintain correspondence."

Twilight was silent.

"Really? Celestia's School turned you into April."

April Bluff, Twilight's sister, had attended Celestia's school with her until she dropped out to live a life on the road, declaring "The bondage of society is too restricting to contain my undying spirit!" That was the last Twilight had heard of her.

"I am not April in the least!" objected Twilight. "For starters, I graduated."

"Your April quit school?" asked Moonlight, amused. "Mine was top of her class. Got a little too uppity, you could say. Started demanding to be called The Great and Powerful Trixie."

If Twilight had been drinking anything, she would have choked. "I guess I really have been out of touch with the family," she admitted.

Eventually, the conversation turned to Twilight's favorite topic, astronomy.

"You like astronomy too?" asked Moonlight excitedly.

"Of course! We both did, back when we were little fillies. Remember? On our eighth birthday, Dad bought us that glow in the dark star chart for our bedroom ceiling?"

Moonlight finished the story. "And we got mad and threw a tantrum because the size of the stars weren't to scale?"

"Yeah," muttered Twilight. "We've grown since then, haven't we?"

"I still like the stars, though," added Moonlight. "Most ponies will look out into the vastness of space and feel small. The idea that there's so much out there that's out of their reach, that they can't touch and will never touch, makes them seem worthless and insignificant. But I don't agree, because it's all a matter of scale. I'm still the same size I was before I learned that I could fit inside the sun a million million times over. The world is huge, and vast, and even though I could never see it all if I wanted to, that doesn't upset me. Because it means that no matter how far I wander, there's always going to be some new sight to behold and knowledge to learn. I don't have to be intimidated by the stars or the moon or the aurora when I can learn about them."

"Except the aurora isn't in space," interjected Twilight. "It's in the atmosphere, created by solar... Oh, Celestia."

Moonlight peered at Twilight, awaiting an explanation.

"Oh, Celestia," Twilight continued, "of course. How did I not see it?"

"See what?"

"This whole time I thought it was a riddle, but it never was. It was always meant to be taken completely literally. She wasn't trying to confuse me; she was telling me flat out what I needed to know, and this whole time I've been looking at it from a completely wrong angle."

By now Twilight had leaped to her hooves and was prancing around excitedly. She managed to hold herself still long enough to give an order: "Me. You know your way around this library, right? Think you can find a specific book?"

Moonlight inspired by her counterpart's enthusiasm, responded promptly: "If not, I'm a failure to library science!"

"Good. There's a book we need to find." She paused, trying to recall the name of the book she had seen once, just a couple of days ago. "Ecological Evolution: Equestria in an Age of Darkness."

Moonlight nodded and rushed to find the card catalog, but she stopped halfway across the room and turned, confused. "That book shouldn't exist on your side," she remarked, confused.

"No. But I found it in the Ponyville library."

Moonlight's jaw hung open, recognition showing in her eyes. "Is that where you met Silver Shield?" Twilight nodded. "Alright. But what's so important about that book?"

Twilight smirked. "The cover."

Madam Orange, Pinkie Pie, and Fluttershy sat around half of the circular table that filled the meeting room. Twilight and Moonlight stood tall at the other end, bags hanging underneath their eyes, but they were too excited from their recent discoveries to be affected.

"Darlings," said Madam Orange before the Twilights were able to begin their presentation. "I thought I told you to get some rest, not spend the whole night planning some sort of show for us." Fluttershy seemed to have lost her focus and was rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. Only Pinkie Pie seemed fully alert, her eyes bouncing around in her head as she anxiously awaited the report.

"We have a plan," began Twilight, trying to be as direct as possible. "A course of action. And while I can't speak for all of us, you should know that I am now fully committed to staying and helping you find a way to deal with Nightmare Moon."

As her planning session with Moonlight the night before had progressed,

Twilight had become more and more certain that this was true. She began to see Moonlight as an extension of herself, and she realized that even though she had been dragged into this misadventure against her will, her own misfortune didn't change the fact that there were ponies here that needed help and guidance that she could easily give. The very least she could do would be to share her information on the Elements of Harmony.

"Firstly," Twilight continued, "I believe it's imperative to find out as much as we can about the differences between these two worlds. If anything, this knowledge could serve as a clue to help us locate the First Divergence."

"The First Divergence?" asked Fluttershy, who figured she may as well try to figure out what was going on.

"That's what we're calling the initial split between worlds," explained Moonlight. "We believe that at some point, these two worlds were the same, or very nearly the same. But then something happened to send them down different paths. We're calling this something the First Divergence. And while we may not have the first clue what it is, my other self figured out a way to calculate when it happened."

Twilight stepped forward. "Time doesn't flow at the same rate between worlds. It's not the same date here that it is over there. Yet clearly, before the split, there was only one side, with one date. Using Madam's records of other me's correspondences with our Zecora, I was able to make a graph comparing the amount of time displacement in both worlds. I connected the dots, extrapolated the lines, and got a date. Ten years ago, which places it about two years before the rainboom which clearly didn't happen."

"Are you sure?" asked Fluttershy. Stargazer claimed her birth was the cause of the disruption, but she was much older than ten years. Of course, Fluttershy had promised not to reveal Stargazer's presence, which left her unable to explain her objection.

"Not with certainty," said Twilight. "It's only a theory. But regardless, the more we understand about our situation, the better. Which brings me to the second point: there's a unicorn out there who's been giving me messages. I don't know her, but she knows me, and she told me something important, that the sun's wind can reach where the sun can't."

"A guessing game?" Pinkie Pie perked up at the possibility of a game.

"I thought so too, at first. But it couldn't be clearer. The sun's wind is solar wind, ionized particles from the sun. When I figured that out, I remembered seeing this." She slid the book across the table so that the others could get a good look at it. "It's an encyclopedia of sorts, detailing changes to the Equestrian ecosystem after the Final Day. What caught me, though, was the choice for the cover image."

Fluttershy leaned over the table so she could see the sparkling Aurora that danced across the book.

"All images in the book were taken after the rise of Nightmare Moon. At first I thought the author chose that image simply because it was visually stunning, which it is. Breathtaking, really. But I now feel that there was a second reason, an ulterior motive, as a symbol of hope. Can anypony here tell me where the Aurora comes from?"

Madam Orange was the only pony to answer. "If you're going where I think you're going with this," she responded, "I'm going to go out on a limb and guess solar wind."

"Correct. Creating an aurora is too complicated for a pegasus weather team to pull off. Solar radiation gets caught in the planet's magnetic field and is carried off toward the poles. Of course, as the wind approaches the poles, there's less room for the same number of particles, and they begin colliding with each other. These collisions create the light that we know as the Aurora. The point I'm trying to make is thus: If there were no sun, where does the solar wind come from? No sun means no Aurora, yet clearly the Aurora is still present, and so must be the sun."

Pinkie Pie raised her hoof and waved it frantically around as she jiggled around in her seat. "So if the sun's not gone," she said when Twilight called on her, "where is it? You can't just hide a big giant ball of fire in your pocket, you know."

"Exactly," said Moonlight, picking up where Twilight had left off. "And it seems silly to think that even a being with the Nightmare Queen's power could make the whole sun vanish. It's far too massive. But there is one

place you can hide it." She gestured to Twilight, who placed their second prop on the table, a globe. "The planet is round, but only half of it is habitable. Thus, to shroud the world in eternal night, Nightmare didn't have to destroy the sun. Only move it to the opposite end of the planet. The antipode. Celestia's sphere of influence would be limited to the section of the planet where nopony can survive."

"Very impressive dears," said Madam Orange, "but I don't see how that helps us at all."

Twilight, now longer able to contain herself, spilled the beans. "I think we can talk to Celestia," she blurted.

"By journeying to the dead half of the world? I'm sorry, darling, but not even my own guards are that eager to die."

"Not there. Just to the Aurora. If I can tap into the stream of the solar wind, I may be able to contact Celestia, no matter where she is, based on her connection to the sun. If anypony will be able to help us in the battle against Nightmare Moon, it will be her."

"Then I think we should split up."

Twilight froze at Madam Orange's suggestion. "Pardon?" she asked weakly.

"We already know that somepony's after your head. I hope you won't mind me saying that time is of the essence. Not to mention that the longer we wait, the more we risk the Nightmare Queen herself realizing that there are two of you, and that's an element of surprise I'd prefer to keep hidden." Madam Orange stood, taking charge of the situation. "The way I see it, our objectives are threefold. Firstly, to communicate with our lost princess. Secondly, to find the Elements of Harmony. And thirdly, to find the ponies that can wield them."

"Actually," said Twilight, "neither of those last two should prove to be much of a problem. We know where the Elements are. Or, at least, where they were two years ago, in the old Palace of the Royal Sisters in the Everfree Forest. As for the bearers, I've been fortunate enough to run into five of them already. The only one we're missing is Rainbow Dash, and we'll

probably want our Dash to help us track down yours."

"Three groups, then" suggested Madam Orange. "The first group will travel to the Aurora in the Mooncatcher, and should consist of both Twilights, plus enough of my own men to fly the ship. The second group will seek out Rainbow Dash. That group should consist of your Dash, of course, so we'd need to wait for her to find your friends. And they are?"

Twilight realized it was time to bite the bullet. "Their names are Rarity and Applejack," she confessed.

Madam Orange smiled awkwardly in surprise. "Really?" she said, impressed. "So I've got a clone of my own to meet? I suppose I'll be joining Rainbow Dash in her journey, since she'll need a guide that's familiar with this world. I don't know how the other me will feel about meeting me, as keen as I am to meet her. I suppose the remaining assignments are left up to personal choice. We need a third group to venture into the Everfree Forest to claim the Elements of Harmony."

"That spooky woods sound like a barrel of laughs!" exclaimed Pinkie Pie.

"I'd like to stay with Twilight, if that's okay," said Fluttershy quietly.

"Then it's decided," announced Madam Orange. "I hope you're all ready to save the world."

Applejack groaned as she regained consciousness. The world seemed to be sliding around her, and she felt a rough friction on her back. Her vision was mostly of stars, with the occasional tree or crag coming in from the side but quickly moving past. It took her a few moments to realize she was being dragged through the mountains, carried on another pony's back.

"Hello?" she asked groggily, and the pony carrying her froze, nearly dropping her. She craned her neck as far as she could, and she saw a dirty yellow coat beneath a matted pink mane.

"Fluttershy?" The yellow mare recoiled at the sound of her own name, and this time she did drop Applejack, who landed painfully on the

ground. "What in tarnation?" Applejack looked up at her friend. She tried to stand up, but her broken hoof hindered her success.

Blasted hoof. If it hadn't been broken and in a cast, she might have been able to regain her balance back when she was with the others.

"Wait. You're not Fluttershy. You don't have wings."

The earth pony backed away slowly, hiding her face beneath her mane. This was definitely Fluttershy, Applejack realized. But she was acting very strange. She had no reason to be scared around her friends.

It clicked.

"You're the other Fluttershy, ain't you? It's okay. Please don't run. You got no reason to be scared of me. But how in blazes did you find me?"

Fluttershy stopped retreating and looked Applejack in the eye. Applejack tried her best to take on a compassionate demeanor, as if to say, "It's okay. You can trust me." It must have worked, because Fluttershy opened up a bag at her side, removed a metal plate, and set it on the ground. Applejack stared, confused, until Fluttershy pressed a button on the plate and a shimmering column of light sprang up between them. Through it, Applejack saw clouds, and the sun shining brightly.

"Where did you find this?" she asked, but Fluttershy shook her head. The time for asking questions had ended.

Applejack tried to stand, and she realized rapidly that more than just her hoof was injured. Her chest was badly bruised, and a second leg refused to respond to any of her commands. She had taken quite a tumble. She resigned to let Fluttershy pick her up again and carry her.

After a while, Fluttershy began talking, without prompting. She spoke slowly as if she wasn't used to it and had to get the hang of it back. "I found it in a clearing," she explained. "I looked through the light and saw a bunch of ponies. You were one of them. There was another who looked like Twilight, but she was missing the injuries she had when I treated her. And there was a pegasus who looked like me. I was scared. Really scared. But I was also curious. So I started following you. I followed you

down to Sky Mirror Lake, and then you started showing up here, for real. I almost ran, but I didn't. I kept following you, at a distance. When I saw you fall, I knew I had to help you."

"Where are you taking me?"

"You're really hurt. You need bed rest, which is something I can't give you easily. So I'm taking you to some ponies who can. They're nice, nice enough that I can talk to them sometimes. They'll help you."

"They? What they?"

"They have a farm. It's called Sweet Apple Acres."

END OF ACT II