

Pony Space

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Chapter 1

First Move

The majestic city of Canterlot, capital city of all Equestria, was a wondrous marvel of pony engineering, art, and magic. It was a shining jewel carved out of the side of a mountain and decorated with precious metals and gems mined from deep within. Canterlot's towers of smooth stone rose prominently into the air. Like fingers from the hand of a giant; stretching high, reaching endlessly for the blue sky as if to claim the sun for itself. For miles and miles in every direction this awe-inspiring place dominated the horizon for every citizen pony that dared to lift their eyes from the Earth. It was the center of culture, learning, trade, and science. It was also an object of philosophical wonder and legend. There were those who believed it had existed even before ponykind, stretching back into the days when gods and angels shaped the land.

In the center of the city was the royal castle, the central seat of the monarchy and home to the princesses Celestia and Luna. It was a large square structure of the finest hoof polished marble decorated with statues of tempered gold and silver as well as large carved murals colored in the finest paints and adorned with gems. The murals were dedicated to the memory of those who had come before and had built this place as well as wishing for the prosperity of the nobility and all the citizens of Equestria.

On this particular day Princess Celestia was not in a happy mood. If one were so bold as to ask her why she would say it was time for her to pile-drive some of her staff into the ground out of a need to vent her pent up frustration. If there was one thing she dreaded most about ruling over Equestria it was these end of the month mandatory council sessions. At these times it would be necessary for her to entertain the kingdom's cabinet of numerous advisors, political leaders, scholars, and scientists as she was subjected, nay forced, to listen to their financial and economic reports, treasury counts, construction schedules, population propagation charts, food stock counts, among many others. Poets they were not and everything was read so dry and devoid of prose that it was like a sandstorm in her brain trying to erode her sanity.

Then the real fun began as she was required to sign off stack after stack of paperwork to the point that she developed a horn cramp from magic strain. As a princess it was her royal duty to keep abreast of all of this, but she had grown weary to the monotony and tedium that seemed dominate her life over the many long years of rule. There was hope though, a light at the end of the tunnel as it were. This was the last such meeting before the beginning of the Summer Sun Festival which was tonight. It was finally a chance to get out of this stuffy castle and have a little fun, maybe do a little catching up with her favorite student. All she had to do was keep a smile on her face and draw upon an extra reserve of patience.

The council chamber was large circular room big enough to hold a congregation of several hundred ponies. Banners hung from the wall and each bore a different insignia of a city or town under the Princess' rule. Overhead a stained glass dome was covered in still art depicted various scenes, in beautiful watercolor, of historical significance. It gave the room a bright and cheerful atmosphere as the sun effortlessly shined down through it.

Princess Celestia sat at the head of a circular table made of a rich dark mahogany wood. Sitting with her were twenty other ponies of varying professions. The circular nature of the table signified equality as it allowed everyone who sat there the freedom to look upon the face of every single occupant without obstruction. As the Princess and the politicians continued with business, palace servants periodically appeared to serve light snacks and refill goblets with refreshments.

"...and due to the continuing peace I recommend the following cuts in the defense budget." spoke General Star Sword. He was a white pegasus colt dressed in elaborate royal gold armor and bearing the insignia of ultimate command over the Equestrian military on his helmet, a sword flanked by four stars. "We should further reduce the number of palace guards by ten percent and divert the funds towards more immediate concerns regarding..."

"No." Princess Celestia sharply interrupted him.

"B-b-but your highness," he stuttered in indignation.

"General," Celestia raised her hoof for silence, "you've proposed the same cutbacks for the past year and I've made it quite clear that any further

reductions would be unwise. Unless you wish to leave the security of this city in such a miserable state as to invite troublemakers into our very midst?"

"With all due respect your Excellency," chimed Administrator Golden Sacks, head of the treasury. He was a yellow earth pony with green hair and a cutie-mark consisting of a pair of golden moneybags. "It has been over fourteen centuries since the army has been called upon to defend these lands from a hostile force. I'd also like to draw attention to your own pupil who has proven most capable at handling several minor 'incidents' that have occurred within these lands. If a single unicorn can soundly deal with these problems then we need not waste our funds on the expensive training, upkeep, and maintenance of an army. I for one...."

"No!" Celestia sternly reinforced her earlier answer with a stomp of her hoof, "In case you haven't noticed Mr. Sacks, there has been an ever increasing number of 'incidences' recently in Ponyville and in other surrounding areas." Celestia placed both of her front hooves on the table and lifted herself to tower above the assembly. "As it stands there are just enough guards left to keep Equestria relatively safe and secure from the common thief and wildlife. Now, while I am grateful that my dearest pupil and her friends have managed to settle many of the more 'unique' problems themselves we should not dismiss the value of military preparedness in the unexpected event of a greater unseen threat!" Celestia lowered herself back into her seat. Several advisors clapped their hooves in agreement while others wanted to speak in opposition, but knew better than to cross Celestia.

"Enough of this," Celestia continued after the clapping died down, "let us move on to the next item of business." After she spoke the economic specialist, Ledger, rose to give his report. Celestia only paid him half a mind as she took a deep draw of water followed by a servant refilling her goblet.

"...there has been an large upturn in the cost of precious gems and metals as demand continues to outstrip an unusual downturn in supply. Investigations have not discovered any foul play or thefts from the mines at this time, but it continues to be a major concern of local metal workers and fashion designers..." As he was giving his report there came a loud and impatient knocking on the assembly's main door.

"Enter." Celestia commanded, relieved for the interruption. A guard pony dressed in a more traditional set of golden armor entered the room with measured step and undisguised pride, yet his eyes darted around the room nervously.

"My princess," the guard was sweating uncontrollably while he bowed down, "I bring terrible news."

"What news?" Celestia felt her relief fading.

"I'm sorry your majesty, but it appears there has been a theft from the royal treasury!" A disbelieving gasp arose from the assembled crowd. Celestia ignored them as she arose from her seat and approached the guard.

"Tell me guard pony, what has been stolen?" she now stood over the guard who somehow managed to bow even lower.

"My lady," the guard continued, " My partners and I were on our way to the treasury to relieve the previous shift when we happened upon a disturbing sight." His breath caught in his throat out of fear.

"Guard," Celestia said with warm concern in her voice. "Please stand and tell us what has happened." Slightly reassured by her words the guard stood, but did not make direct eye contact with the princess.

"The three guards on post were on the ground with terrible wounds from an unknown attacker. The wounds suggested the attacker came from behind."

"From behind?" General Star Sword interjected angrily, "Impossible, that would mean the thief attacked them as he left the vault, but the guards watch over the only entrance. Are you absolutely sure of that?" The guard nodded.

"Yes sir! They were struck by a blunt instrument from behind."

"Are they still alive?" Celestia feared the worse.

"They were still breathing when I last saw them. I ordered them taken to Dr. Hawkeye's office and after that I surveyed the vault in the hope of capturing the thief." The guard inhaled sharply before continuing. "I'm sorry to say there is no sign of him and we're not sure what has been stolen yet,

exactly." Something about that last sentence raised a red flag in Celestia's consciousness. "What do you mean you don't know what has been stolen?"

"Your majesty it appears that a hidden safe was opened and any contents it might have held was removed. I apologize," the guard bowed low again, voice trembling with anguish, "but I was not aware of this particular safe and worse I have failed in my duty to protect it."

The Canterlot treasury was a massive vault that held the kingdom's surplus currency of minted gold coins in numerous stacks of neatly arranged and counted piles. More than that, the vault also home to numerous artifacts, treasures, and weapons of immense value or lethality. Most of these were held within secret safes in the walls and floor. Any guard pony awarded the honor of protecting the vault was tasked with memorizing the location of each and every one of them. If a guard was not aware of a safe then either he was lacking in commitment to his duty or...

"Was this safe," Celestia said gravely, "located on the third floor balcony hidden under a statue model of Canterlot?"

"Y...yes," the guard was speechless with incredulity. How did the princess know?

"I'm canceling this council meeting until further notice," Celestia immediately turned to address the room of advisors, "Everypony return to your stations and prepare for further instructions." The advisors looked upon each other in confusion and alarm before gathering their possessions and papers. As the gathering of individuals began to disperse a melodious voice, like the ringing of silver bells, called out amongst the shifting of chairs and shuffling of hooves.

"Sister Celestia!" it came from a pegasus unicorn with grayish purple skin, light blue mane, and a cutie-mark of a crescent moon.

"Luna! What are you doing here?"

"I heard about what happened," Luna panted, "I came to see if it was true." Her eyes begged for it not to be so.

"I'm afraid it is." Celestia confirmed to Luna's abject disbelief. She then used her wing to lift the chin of the still bowed guard before her, speaking in

a firm and critical voice "Guard, I have orders that need to be passed along."

"I am at your mercy Princess Celestia." The guard said eagerly, prepared to do whatever it took to redeem his earlier mistake.

"I need the city to be sealed off. Double the guards at every post and increase the patrols over every aerial route. No pony gets in or out without explicit consent from my immediate subordinates or myself. I feel we may have a traitor in our midst and they cannot be allowed to leave with the treasure." Celestia then paced a few steps before she continued. "My sister and I will be heading to the throne room to discuss our next course of action. Once we enter I want the doors sealed until we finish our deliberations. Make sure that no pony disturbs us, not even my own pupil Twilight." She then motioned for the guard to leave, which he did without hesitation.

"This can't be happening," Luna trembled in fear. "Not again, I won't go back."

"Shh, it'll be ok, I promise," Celestia kissed Luna on the cheek and nuzzled her closely in an attempt to comfort her. "Come with me my dear sister. I think it's time we paid a visit to an old friend."

...

It was the beginning of another beautiful day in the peaceful village of Ponyville. The morning sun trailed a lazy path slowly overhead illuminating the landscape with its majestic rays. With the conclusion of the summer rains the day before the land was filled with an especially upbeat vitality. On this day ponies of all types, colors, and professions milled around with an unusually high sense of firm purpose as they set about their daily errands. There was a heightened atmosphere of anticipation; an expectation of something wonderful about to happen. Tonight would mark the start of the Summer Sun Festival, a celebration at the conclusion of the longest day of the year. It was a tribute to the sun and Princess Celestia beloved ruler over all ponies in the Kingdom of Equestria.

The town square was jam packed with merchants of all trades plying their wares of goods and services to the assembled masses and especially anyone who passed within earshot. Anything any pony could want was

there food, clothes, jewelry, trinkets, toys; a feast for anyone with the coins to spare. The diversity of merchandise was second only to the thousands of voices that filled the air, intertwining and mixing in song of life and joy, and happiness. Yet, there was one certain pony that was not keen on partaking in the excitement that had swept up so many. For her she had found something far more interesting.

Removed from the inexhaustible hustle and bustle of the day, seated in the spacious lobby of the only library in Ponyville, was the unicorn pony Twilight Sparkle, star pupil of Princess Celestia. She was intently absorbed in reading a large and very old tome with pages that were a decayed brown and yellow, the cover was faded and worn thin, and it had a distinct musty smell as if it had been locked away in an attic for countless years. Carefully using her magic horn to gently turn each page Twilight was about to begin the final chapter in earnest when her companion, the small purple dragon Spike, opened the front door and hastily stepped inside.

"Tch," he gave a puff of disappointment as he surveyed the empty library shelves and the piles of books seemingly tossed hither and thither upon the wooden floor. He slowly shook his head when he spotted Twilight.

"Twilight Sparkle," he said in a business tone, "I know I shouldn't be surprised, but how can you be reading at a time like this. We're really going to be late."

"Just a few more minutes Spike, I'm almost finished." She turned another page with a gentle nudge before sinking even deeper into her bookworm trance than before. Once she began reading a book it was almost impossible to break her away before she finished it.

"Twilight!" Spike gave an audible sigh like a disappointed father, "The Summer Sun Festival is tonight and do I need to remind you that you promised Pinkie that you'd help her with the cooking." Spike replaced a few books from the floor back onto the shelves purely out of habit. He wished Twilight would take better care of the place it was becoming ever more difficult to keep his patience over the pony's disregard for proper sorting. Everyday it was the same thing books all over the floor out of an impatient urge to find the desired text, whatever it was, and it could be anything at any time.

"Did you know Spike," Twilight spoke as if she hadn't heard, "that before the coming of Nightmare Moon a millennium ago that the last Great War ever fought in Equestria took place almost 1400 years ago. According to this book the 'War of Thrones,' all of Equestria witnessed two great armies clashing in a final climatic battle that would determine the next successor to the throne. What is even more interesting is that it all took place on the spot where Ponyville would later be founded."

"Yeah, yeah that's interesting and all, but seriously if we don't hurry the food will be late and we wouldn't want to disappoint the princess especially after what happened last year."

"Last year?...last year," Twilight's brain began to reboot. "Has it already been a year since we arrived?" she put the book down.

"Yup," Spike suddenly became overly excited, "in fact I hear Princess Luna will be joining us for the celebrations this year. So we need to put some extra effort into it and make sure she really feels welcome."

"Your right Spike, " Twilight placed a bookmark between the pages, "if anypony needs a warm welcome it's Princess Luna." Before Twilight could begin to gather her things the front door opened and in trotted a white unicorn with an immaculately styled violet hair.

"There you are Twilight, darling, and Spike too. How are you both on this magnificent day?" Rarity greeted them warmly.

"We're doing fine, thanks." Twilight replied happily, while Spike nearly fell over in complete awe of Rarity's beauty. It was no secret that Spike had a crush on her, but it still remained to be seen if Rarity was even truly aware of this.

"Can you imagine that I thought you'd be at Sugarcube Corner with Pinkie by now," Rarity glided around the piles with grace, "but here you are with your nose buried deep into another book. Oh, what are we going to do with you Twilight Sparkle?" It was a rhetorical question; Rarity knew there was no curing the total nerd in Twilight.

"Sorry Rarity, I couldn't help myself," Twilight's ears drooped in embarrassment as Spike rolled his eyes. "I found it..."

"You found it?" Rarity playfully gasped in shock "You'd lose your head in this place if Spike wasn't around to put it back on." Spike pumped his chest in pride over the compliment. "Seriously you should treat your possessions with the utmost care. Just like a certain refined and overall perfect pony that you might happen to know." Rarity fanned her mane a few times before batting her eyelashes in a knowing smile.

"I'll get right on it." Twilight sarcastically deadpanned.

"Anyway you were going to tell me where you found it."

"Yes," Twilight was grateful to get the conversation back on track. She could appreciate Rarity as a close friend, but there were times when the fashioner unicorn was a little stuck up. "I found the book locked away in a box hidden in a corner of the attic and I was curious." Twilight briefly looked around the library before addressing Rarity again. "You wouldn't happen to know who the previous curator of the library was before I lived here? I've been meaning to ask somepony, but I keep getting sidetracked by one thing or another."

"I honestly have no idea, I never used to come here before. Libraries can be such stuffy places full of dust that is unhealthy to a lady's skin. At least that was true until we became friends." Rarity raised a hoof to her chin in thought, "Hmm...the mayor would be the best pony to ask, dear. You should start there."

"Thanks Rarity," Twilight smiled, "we can ask her on our way over to Pinkie's place."

"Oh no Twilight, it can wait until tomorrow. We have..." Spike was unable to finish as the front door suddenly and violently crashed open with a force of a bull having rammed it head on. Entering the room in a tornado was a hyperactive pink pony with a mane of poofy magenta.

"Twilight, Spike!" shouted a frantic and hyperventilating Pinkie Pie, "You need to come with me now!"

"What's going on?"

" My Pinkie sense went off. It's gonna be a doozy!" Pinkie said in-between gasps before light speeding out the way she came.

"Follow that pink blur!" Twilight shouted as she bolted out with Spike on her tail, leaving behind a stunned Rarity.

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Twilight, Spike, and Pinkie arrived in front of the Ponyville mail office. This worn, unassuming wooden structure was the heart of all communications between Ponyville and the outside world. To the immediate right of the main door hung a well-used bulletin board, made of simple corkwood, which the local ponies had come to know as the Equestrian Daily. It was the place where important news bulletins, job applications, quotes of the day, advice from the mayor, and special deals were pinned up for all locals to read and peruse. A large gathering of ponies has assembled in front of it and their heated discussions made it difficult to separate one conversation from the next..

"There it is." Pinkie Pie pointed to an editorial that carried the royal sun crest and Celestia's signature. Twilight had to force her way through the crowd before she was able to read it.

An Emergency Declaration From Princess Celestia.

On this day a crime most foul as been committed against Equestria. A vile theft from the royal vault has resulted in three loyal guards suffering serious wounds and a treasure of great value and significance to be purloined.

Until the perpetrator is brought to justice the following shall be enacted immediately:

All appointments with, and from, the Princess are hereby canceled until further notice.

Canterlot shall be closed to all further visitations. All routes in and out of the city are closed. Any individual attempting to arrive or depart without government permission will be arrested under suspicion of theft, conspiracy to commit theft, and disobedience of this royal decree.

3.) A reward is offered for any information that leads to the successful recovery of the stolen treasure. Contact your local mayor's office for further details.

Twilight had to read it three times before she was able to gather her thoughts and return to her friends with the news.

"Princess Celestia has canceled her trip for the Summer Sun Festival!" Spike was heartbroken from disappointment.

"I'll tell you why," Pinkie Pie said gravely in an unusual bout of anger. "It's because some terrible teeny meanie-pie thief must have stolen all of Celestia's treasured cupcakes."

"Uh, I seriously doubt that's the case" Twilight groaned at Pinkie's naiveté.

"Her cookies then? The apple pies? Cause that'd be even worse." Pinkie began to hop in excitement at the endless possibilities of pilfered pastries and pies "Maybe..."

"No Pinkie, the guards wouldn't be putting food in the treasury. Besides wouldn't it be a lot easier to steal food from your shop instead of a the royal treasury?"

"Your right," Pinkie's expression widened in disbelief. "Oh no, what if they are already helping themselves to my raspberry cake." With that shocking thought she was off at warp speed to secure her baked assets

"I'm just wondering what was taken that would require a lockdown of the whole city." Spike pondered aloud. "Must be something pretty crazy, or important."

"Like a weapon!"

"Gah!" Twilight recoiled in terror as Pinkie Pie returned with raspberry frosting all over her face. "Don't do that!"

"Yum." Pinkie just continued to smile as she licked her lips, while Twilight facehoofed in exasperation.

"Spike, I need to you to address a letter to the princess." Without delay Spike readied an empty scroll and a quill pen.

"Dear Princess Celestia. I..." her voice trailed off in a moment of hesitation. "I wish to extend my sincerest concern for the events that have happened

in Canterlot. I am prepared to offer any assistance I can provide to help in the search for the perpetrator."

"Me too, me too." Pinkie pie added with an earnest bobbing of her head, "I want to play detective too." She produced a magnifying glass seemingly out of thin air.

"Count me in as well Twilight," Spike mirrored the sentiment.

"Also, I do not doubt that my friends will wish to help too." Twilight gave a thankful smile to both Pinkie and Spike. Hearing her friend's ready offers of assistance went a long way to helping ease her concerns. "I hope to hear from you soon and that there can be a quick end to this terrible ordeal. From your faithful student Twilight Sparkle." Sensing the end of the message Spike neatly rolled up the scroll, sealed it up with Twilights insignia, and with a puff of green fire sent it off to the princess.

Chapter 2

Signs and Portents

The news spread quickly like a hot wind to all four corners of Ponyville and further beyond still to cities like Cloudsdale, Fillydelphia, Hoofington, and even as far as Manehattan and Appeloosa. However, the undisguised panic in Ponyville was especially severe. "Given its close proximity to Canterlot it was the hardest affected. Horribly it was beginning to look as if everypony had forgotten all about the Summer Sun Festival as merchants closed up shops, parents were guiding their children home, and the rest were engaged in rampant gossip. Most were not emotionally prepared to handle a situation like this. For them the memories of last year's events were still too fresh, too raw. That terrible night when Nightmare Moon had returned, kidnapped Celestia, and for the second time in a thousand years had nearly succeeded in plunging the world into a darkness from which it would never recover.

"Something frightful must have happened to Celestia." One pony said hauntingly.

"I betcha it's that terrible sister of hers who is responsible." "Another agreed.

"Luna has always been a curse on these lands, Celestia should've kept her banished to the moon." A third pony spat venom at mentioning the moon princess' name.

Twilight was deeply ashamed overhearing hearing such horrible unquestioned rumors being spread about Luna. It was like a contagious flu, the more ponies who spoke about it the more it spread. Pretty soon ponies everywhere were talking about Luna as if she'd already been tried and sentenced before a court judge. Twilight felt the unmistakable burning of rage in her chest. She wanted to scream at them all for being so quick to jump to conclusions without any corroborative evidence to paint Luna as the perpetrator of this crime. Aside from the coincidental fact that today was the anniversary of Nightmare Moon.

Pinkie Pie, on the other hand, ignored the ugly rumors as she felt a far more pressing concern at the moment. Being the resident cheer-meister she knew she's never forgive herself if she allowed a party to fail while she was on watch. If it meant pulling out all the stops and using every trick she had ever written in her 'Guide to Pinkie Pie's Pretty Practical Party Pranks and Jokes' memoirs, then that is what she would do. She wasted no time and started to jump, twirl, skip, and bop her way around town. It was like she was suffering from an epileptic seizure multiplied by a sugar rush and raised to the umpteenth power. The fantastical display drew the attention of every pony and some began to forget about their troubles as they watched the uninhibited party animal stir up a cloud of happiness and goodwill followed up with a song.

Come on everypony, turn that frown upside down

Princess Celestia, is the one with the crown

She won't give up the chase, while a thief is loose

She'll hunt him down quick, and tie him with a noose

Till the thief is served, like a steaming hay bun,

We will continue on, so laugh, and have fun

Today is the day, to give thanks and share

So let's prance and dance, like you just don't care

Thanks to Pinkie Pie's cheerful and infectious good nature along with a healthy dose of her little improvised ditty she was pleased to find that she'd had a noticeable impact. Ponies were beginning to come around, and again welcomed the feeling of celebration back into their hearts. Unfortunately, there were many others who just couldn't be consoled no matter how hard Pinkie tried. The unfortunate among them were ponies that had recently found themselves stranded from home or separated from family.

Meanwhile Twilight and Spike came to the conclusion that the only real solution to the problem was to be found at the Mayor's office. They quickly made their way to the town hall, located conveniently across the street, and entered through the double door entrance. They were now in the gathering

hall; a fairly small room constructed of interlocking wooden planks and beams, well lit, and smelling heavily of pine. It was only able to seat a few dozen individuals around a narrow stage with a single podium in the center where the mayor stood to address an assembled crowd. It was here where residents had the opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns to the mayor during policy sessions or emergency meetings. Much to Twilight's surprise the room was alarmingly empty. If there was any better time to make use of this hall Twilight certainly was incapable of contemplating it.

"Can I help you?"

Twilight carefully turned to her right and saw that the voice had come from the Mayor's receptionist, Secret Cherry, who was seated at a table with a visitor registry, a mug that proudly stated, 'I Love Ponyville,' and a bowl filled with assorted candies. Behind her there was a single inviting door that led to the office quarters.

"Um, we'd like to see the mayor." Twilight said plainly, but pleasantly.

"Sure thing, one moment please." The receptionist smiled her official smile before briefly studying a form she had in front of her. Giving a nod of approval she looked back up at Twilight with another grin that was a bit more welcoming. "Your in luck, the mayor has no appointments at this time. Please sign in while I tell her she has guests." The receptionist pushed a quill pen towards Twilight before disappearing through the door. Twilight quickly signed the visitor registry and dated it. She was about to put the pen down when Secret Cherry returned.

"The mayor will see you now. Her office is at the end of the hall."

"Thank you." Twilight said as she passed by with Spike giving a silent wave to Secret Cherry before grabbing a candy from the bowl. He popped it into his mouth and smiled broadly as he tasted the juicy red treat.

"Mmmmm...cherry punch."

Twilight and Spike followed the narrow undecorated hallway that circled around the outer wall of the building before arriving at the mayor's office. Which, if she had her bearings right, was at the very back of the town hall. She knocked three times before being greeted by an Earth-pony with a

colored coat of khaki, a mane of curly light grey hair, and wearing a white collar with a green bowtie.

"Come on in Twilight, it is good to hear from you." The mayor spoke calmly, but urgently gestured for her visitors to enter. "May I assume that you are here for information about the reward?" Her crystal blue eyes darted wildly to the sides as if she feared being overheard by shadows.

"Yes, I am." Twilight stepped into the office. "Anything you can tell us would be terrific."

She saw that the office was comfortably spacious and sported a clean and tidy appearance with immaculately organized shelves and files. Even the wooden floor did not creak when they walked upon it. The Mayor's desk was a different, altogether frightening, story. It was completely buried in a mountain of papers and legal forms that Twilight was not familiar with. She suspected that several ponies could easily get lost inside that clutter and never be heard from again.

"Sorry about the mess." The Mayor closed the door behind them. "I'm afraid I don't have much to tell you." She returned to her desk to shuffle through a few papers. "Give me a moment the letter is in here somewhere."

"Is everything alright, Mrs. Mayor" Twilight had a right to be concerned. She'd seen the Mayor in some bad moods before, but this was beginning to get scary. The Mayor was a very dependable and stable pony, a good choice to run the day-to-day affairs of the town, but she had an unfortunate habit of getting very upset when things didn't run smoothly or according to plan. Right now she looked like an overstressed bundle of nerves ready to snap at the drop of a horseshoe.

"To be honest, the whole situation is like trying to pull teeth from an Ursa Minor. News out of Canterlot has been very hush-hush and I'm still waiting for a reply to my inquiries. At this point I'd rather have a meaningful conversation with an apple pie. Sure, not much would get accomplished, but at least I'd get something out of it." A look of humor mixed with anger settled on her aged face.

"But what about you?" At Twilight's question the Mayor regarded her critically and then began to rapidly pace the room. She let out an aggravated sigh before calming down enough to answer truthfully.

"In all my years of service to this community I've done my best to maintain a peaceful town and address everypony's concerns while keeping an organized timetable. But this...this!" She slammed a hoof down on the desk and glared at it with such an immense intensity that one was left to wonder how the whole thing didn't burst into flames right then and there. "Each of them might as well have personally slapped me in the face. Ever since the news came down I have been continuously bombarded with unfair complaints, petty criticism, and dismissive letters from Canterlot that tell me nothing but trivia! I mean look at this desk;" she pointed at it angrily, "I can't find a thing on it, you know me, is this me?"

Twilight visibly recoiled from the Mayor's abnormal outburst. A pang of sympathy arose in her generous heart for she understood that being the Mayor of Ponyville was never an easy job even in the best of times. However, such feelings were snuffed out by a spark of indignation and anger at seeing the Mayor fall into such a panicked state of self-pity. This was not how a leader should act. The answer to the question was, yes. This was not the Mayor she knew and respected.

"Mrs. Mayor, like everypony here I have come to appreciate everything you go through." Her tender words were quick to turn cold. "I've only been here for a short time, so maybe I'm not the best to tell you this. Ponyville elected a mayor because they need somepony who will get things done; keep the trains running on time, so to say. But more than that they want a leader to be there for them. A leader to look up to and reassure them when the Princess can't."

"Uh, Twilight..." Spike tugged at her mane, afraid that she was being to harsh.

"They chose you!" Twilight pointed an accusing hoof. "Were they wrong?"

"I don't know." The Mayor shook her head, ashamed to make eye contact. "Nothing in my experience ever prepared me for this. What was she thinking closing down the whole city like that? I know it's no excuse for me to crumble to bits like a day old muffin." She collapsed down into her chair; tired and defeated. "Maybe I'm just getting too old. Its just that..." the Mayor looked up, eyes filled with apprehension and fear, "I have a terrible feeling about all this."

"I understand," Twilight felt ashamed at snapping at the Mayor like that, but she had to finish what she wanted to say. "What I'm trying to say is that," Twilight leaned forward and stared straight in the Mayor's eyes, never flinching, "the ponies here need you, right now, no matter where this goes."

Twilight said her piece and watched as the Mayor sank into a deep morose silence. The room was as still as a statue, except for the tick-ticking of an ancient grandfather clock sitting forgotten in the corner. The awkward pause began to intensify until it seemed to weight down heavily on them. It reached a critical point, when the Mayor suddenly erupted upwards with a newfound vigor, scattering several papers to the floor.

"Your right Twilight, it is my responsibility to lead them and to make sure the Summer Sun Festival continues despite our hardships. I promise you, this year will be the best we've ever had, Celestia or not!"

"That's the spirit." Twilight smiled broadly, relieved at not having made the situation worse.

"Oh my, I do have a lot of work ahead of me." The Mayor stared at the pile as if seeing it for the first time and began to organize it into neat stacks.

"Um, Mrs. Mayor?"

"Oh yes, Twilight before I forget..." The mayor moved diligently amongst the desk clutter and soon found what was looking for. "About the description of the treasure, this is what all of Canterlot is worked up over." The Mayor handed over a single picture to Twilight.

Twilight examined the picture closely. It was very old and had been drawn by hoof, or by magic. Long before cameras had been invented if she ventured a guess. The parchment was dry and a sickly brown, Twilight was afraid it would disintegrate at her touch so she used her magic to gently levitate it in front of her.

"This is what they want so bad?" she asked skeptically. For some reason she had anticipated something much more dangerous, or at least more valuable, than a book. At the top of the picture was a single caption that read, 'Tome of the Marker' and below that a single symbol decorated the otherwise blank parchment.

The longer she looked at the unfamiliar symbol the more she felt a headache begin to grow. It was building to an unbearable intensity and followed up by a maddening ringing sound. The pain soon hit a horrendous level of intensity. It felt as if a great hand had reached inside her skull and was digging around, searching for something. She was certain of it, there was something alien inside her head and it wanted out. Sweat poured down her face as she desperately wanted to look away, to tear her eyes from the symbol, but some unseen force held her gaze firm. The ringing grew louder and louder still and words were starting to emerge from the white noise. She couldn't tell from where the words came from and at the same time it was as if they were being whispered directly into her ear.

When the blazing sun is gone

When the nothing shines upon

The words sang in a gentle yet uneasy rhythm from an ethereal voice. Twilight nearly screamed as she dropped the picture and instinctively jumped back in a surprised panic. Once eye contact was broken the headache immediately vanished and the voice became silent.

"Are you ok, Twilight?" Spike asked, concerned.

"Oh," Twilight struggled to bring her breathing under control, "it was nothing Spike." Twilight chuckled nervously, "Just thought I saw a spider on the page."

Spike picked up the picture and when he didn't see the offending arachnid decided to familiarize himself with the strange symbol. The alien symbol was a twisted image of two black monolithic spires that were attached at the base, intertwined around each other at the middle, before nearly touching their points at the top. It was also decorated on its exterior by other strange signs that looked to be letters of some unknown language. He had never seen anything like it and wasn't sure what meaning it had.

"What's a Marker?" He asked, but only received unknowing shrugs from the ponies.

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As the three of them departed the town hall they were again witness to Pinkie Pie's continuous crusade. She was still going full throttle and wielding a sledgehammer of righteousness against the diabolical forces of melancholy and fear, figuratively speaking of course.

"Hey Twilight, you didn't ask about the library." Spike reminded her with a whisper.

"I know Spike, but it can wait for another time." She gave him a reassuring smile, but she was still shaken up inside. Dismissing such feelings she departed the office to fight a more immediate battle

Twilight, Spike, and the Mayor had soon added their combined forces with Pinkie Pie. Amongst their collective might they crashed down amongst the thresholds of ponyville, never surrendering, vanquishing doubt and trepidation in its citizens until the preparations for the Summer Sun Festival were again back on track.

In doing her part, Twilight had offering her guest room at the library to a stranded Canterlot unicorn. They were in the middle of the discussion when Twilight heard a familiar southern accent call out her name.

"Twilight?" an orange earth-pony wearing a fedora galloped up to her. "Tarnations girl, I've been lookin' all over fer ya." The pony's blonde mane was slick with sweat.

"Applejack!" Twilight brightened, grateful to see another of her good friends.. "How are you?"

"Fine, just dandy apples." Applejack replied unenthused, her normally indomitable spirit noticeably absent from work. The gloom bug was everywhere, it seemed and even Applejack appeared bitten. That seemed to be par for the course today, but Twilight hoped that the worst was already behind them.

"Twilight, I do hate to impose, but I was wonderin' if ya'll could do me a favor?"

"I'll gladly help any way I can." Twilight replied reassuringly. "I wouldn't be much of a friend if I didn't."

"Well its, ah, like this." Applejack fidgeted from side to side before she took a deep breath. "We at the farm had ourselves an unexpected bumper crop a few day back, a lot bigger then we'd been expectin'. So Granny Smith and I, we gets to thinkin' that we should sally forth and open another apple stall in Canterlot to sell off them extra apples and earn more coin." Applejack had broken the speed dial on her mouth and was rambling off faster than Twilight could follow.

"I think I'm beginning to see the problem" Twilight interrupted, hoping to stall for time while her brain caught up.

"Big Macintosh wanted to go as he dun never seen the big capital city before, but he needed sompony's help movin' all them apples, but we couldn't spare another farm hand. So I recon one of mah friends could help out and I remember thinkin' that it seemed like a good idea that the time, and..."

"Applejack," Twilight interrupted again before the southern belle fell over from asphyxiation, "What do you want to ask me?"

"Oh, uhh, well..." Applejack shook her head trying to reassemble her thoughts. "Tomorrow we have to trim the trees, cut down ah couple of dead ones, and plow the new fields. Normally Big Mac and I could handle the job ourselves, but with him gone I'm ah little short on help." Applejack smiled nervously. Twilight simply giggled at the farmer's comical display.

"Of course I'll help, Applejack. Did you ever think I wouldn't?"

"Not really, but with it being so last minute an all, I'd understand if you'd been busy with somethin' else." Applejack exhaled in relief. "Thank you Twilight, it's mighty fine of you, sugacube."

"No at all." Twilight replied. The two ponies shook hooves in recognition of their agreement and began to depart their separate ways when Twilight had a sudden revelation.

"Applejack?"

"Yeah, Twilight?"

"Out of curiosity, who did you ask to go with Big Mac?"

"Rainbow Dash." Applejack replied in as steady a voice as she could. Twilight stopped in mid trot only to turn around with a look of pure disbelief.

"Your kidding right?"

" 'Fraid not suga."

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Back in Canterlot a small group of ponies had assembled in front of the royal castle in protest. They didn't dare to approach too close as the gates were guarded by a trio of guard ponies keeping watch over the portcullis with a half dozen more Pegasus guards on the parapet. Things had been chaotic all that morning with ponies running to and fro, stopping only to ask some questions before continuing on their way. They knew better than to challenge the Princess' royal guard. A few had tried in years past and the result was always a quick and harsh retribution from the guards before the perpetrators were faced with swift judgment before the Princess. However, they hadn't counted on the arrival of a certain cyan colored Pegasus pony, with rainbow hair, arriving with an over abundance of righteous irritation she was just dying to dish out.

"This is so stupid!" Shouted a most irate Rainbow Dash, as Canterlot seemed to shake at its very foundation from her wrath. The unfortunate victim of the verbal tongue-lashing was a guard that she had whimsically chosen at random. Doubtful he'd find any solace in that fact as he fought to retain his composure which had seemed so easy to do just minutes before.

"I flew here because out of the goodness of my heart I agreed to help some friends sell their apples. Now your telling me I can't leave? You should be out chasing the thief and not keeping us prisoner here!" She had trouble believing her rotten timing, on all the rotten days, had just managed to strand her in this city. Now it seemed she was condemned to miss out on the celebration with her friends. Not if she had any say in the matter. Yet it seemed near hopeless as she hadn't even managed to make one of the guards budge from his post despite a full solid ten minutes of her tortured screaming in his face.

"That is correct Ma'am," the guard replied while standing at attention like a living statue. "Princess' orders state no pony gets out or in without official permission or until a sound resolution to the current crisis is settled"

Dash wanted nothing more than to beat the guard's smug face right at that moment. She wasn't stupid though and knew that fighting the guards would have some unpleasant results. The least of which was facing Twilight and the rest of her friends and having to carefully explain to them why she suddenly had a criminal record. It would also be a far worse fate if she attempted to ignore the lockdown and fly her way out of the city. Rainbow Dash was knowledgeable of some rather nasty tricks the guards had for bringing down unwanted flyers. Dash didn't want to risk it as she was just too attached to her wings.

It was at the moment that Rainbow Dash had found herself at an unpleasant crossroad and wasn't sure which direction to take. Then an idea struck her, she suddenly remembered something her friend, and occasional rival, Rarity had told her a while ago. It had something to do about stallions being unable to resist a mare's charms. Rarity had said something along the lines of, 'A real gentlecolt is nothing but putty in the hooves of a sophisticated and charming lady, darling.'

This was problematic as Rainbow Dash had to first admit that she wasn't exactly the model of sophisticated womanly wiles as Rarity was. Furthermore she wasn't exactly considered beautiful either, even by her close friends, pretty maybe, but not beautiful. In Dash's case a casual observer would probably offer a more accurate description of her as a brash, mischievous, and aggressive tompony. And ok, this wasn't the best tactic she felt at ease using or had that much experience in working with. She was willing to admit all of it, yet still felt that her plan was beyond flawless. She gritted her teeth in nervous expectation and forced her anger down into the dark pits of her being.

"Look, I'm sorry for yelling at you." Rainbow Dash strained to channel her best impression of Rarity complete with a longing stare, the batting of eyelashes, and the shining of her best million-dollar smile. "I'm really desperate to get back home to my family. Can't you make an exception just for me, handsome?" In all likelihood she would've made Rarity proud by that sensual display of mare diplomacy, and against any other colt it might've succeeded. However she failed to take into account that the royal guards were trained to resist such advances.

"Princess' orders."

"Do you have any idea who I am?" Rainbow Dash dropped the façade like a 16-ton weight and moved dangerously close to the guard. When he didn't react it only added fuel to her fire.

"I am Rainbow Dash, number one flyer in all of Ponyville and Cloudsdale, the future member of the Wonderbolts, and one of the ponies who saved Princess Luna." She raised her head in pride over her accomplishments, real and imagined. To her it was a vast mystery as to how this lowly guard wasn't bowed in awe before her. Unbeknownst to either of the two, a large crowd had begun to surround them in curiosity as to what all the commotion was about. The other two guards at the portcullis began to shuffle their way closer to the fight while the Pegasus on the parapet watched on with undisguised amusement.

"I'd rather eat my armor than dare to disobey Princess Celestia." The guard had yet to move, but his resolve, and more importantly his patience, was beginning to wane.

"That can be arranged! Care for some help?" Rainbow Dash approached even closer to the guard's face, their noses nearly touching. Normally he wore a neutral expression, yet he couldn't help but betray a scowl.

"Threats are not tolerated here, Ma'am."

"And I don't listen to ponies who try to tell me where I can or can't fly."

"I'm warning you, please back up and leave now!"

"Why don't you move out of my way?"

"Not happening!"

"Then maybe I'll make it happen!" Dash was about to poke the guard in the chest. Her hoof lifted but no sooner had she made her move then the other two guards ambushed her, one on each flank. They moved with a discipline that spoke of years of physical training. Their plan was simple as all they needed to do was knock Dash down and pin her under their combined strength. They easily had the muscle and size to do it, there was no way Dash would've been able to fight them off and they knew it. Unfortunately for them they didn't realize, or didn't care, that they were up against one of the fastest Pegasus alive.

Rainbow Dash wasn't really surprised when it happened. She was perfectly aware of her rising anger issues that seemed to get her in trouble all the time. Now was not the time for reflection, the checkered flag had been dropped and now it was time to dance. Dash quickly shifted her weight to the side and knocked one guard back with a savage rear kick. He was caught unprepared and flew through the air like a small rag doll before impacting the floor and rolling away. The second guard managed to grapple hooves with Dash taking advantage of his momentum and size to force her backwards. Dash would not go down so easily, but she allowed herself to be knocked onto her back as she used all four of her limbs to ruthlessly work with the guard's inertia and flipped him up and over her head. She felt a smug satisfaction as the guard landed hard with a mighty crash. A groan was heard as the impact left him winded..

The assembled crowd let out a cheer of excitement and encouragement as the fight unfolded before them. They watched every move with baited breath grateful for an outlet for their own stress. One enterprising pony seized the opportunity to open a betting pool for the gamblers among the gathered. The coins began to flow like sweet wine, as the ponies laid their bets down on who would be the victor.

The beaten guards lifted them selves back into fighting positions and this time were joined by the third guard that had suffered through Dash's insults. Their pride was more wounded that their bodies and not from having been bested by a filly like Rainbow Dash, but because they had made the grave error of underestimating their opponent. It was a judgment they would not repeat twice. With patience and military pacing the three guards encircled Dash like a pack of sharks. They respected their opponent's strength and slowly, gradually, tightened the noose around her.

Dash knew for certain that she was deep trouble; even if she won the day their compatriots would surly join in or track her down to finish the job. But she would not run, she would fight until she was unable to continue. At random intervals a guard would launch a feign attack on her to try and draw her attention from an ambush to the rear. Dash was wise to this trick and kept her back legs ready for a good face bucking.

Time slowed to a molasses pace but the enthusiasm of the crowd continued on. To Dash it was just a background static, a hum of white noise. She continued to turn with the guards, keeping as many of them in

her sights as possible. Just as things seemed to freeze at an impasse the guards launched a coordinated attack and all of them rushed in for the kill. If she'd been an Earth-pony she would've been done for right then and there, but she still had one possible avenue of escape left. Unfolding her wings she leapt into the air at the final moment. The guards collided with one another in an angry mess, like three freight trains at full speed. The whole scene was a terrible sight, but nopony could bring them selves to look away. Rainbow Dash lowered herself to the ground placing a triumphant hoof on the pile of guards before her as stars danced in their eyes..

"I came, I saw, I conquered." Rainbow Dash smiled for the crowd and declared her victory for all to see.

Her satisfaction was short lived, however. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the shimmering light of a magic spell being prepared on the tip of a unicorn's horn. She wanted to believe it was Twilight coming to help celebrate her glory with her; instead it was a unicorn guard on the offensive. She deftly maneuvered to the side, but it was too late, she had taken too long in celebrating. The spell shot through the air like a star bolt and struck Rainbow Dash on the side. The world lost equilibrium and shapes became blurry and indistinguishable at the same time as her eyelids felt like limp noodles. The cheer of the crowd slowed into a hum of low bellows as she fell over, her legs no longer possessing the strength to keep her up.

"I think I'll just lie down...for...a...minute." Dash mumbled between yawns and was soon fast asleep, snoring loudly and sprawled uninhibited atop of the guard pile she had once dominated over.

"Take her to the dungeon," The unicorn leader instructed his subordinates, "A night of solitary confinement in one of our plush cells ought to cool her wings."

Chapter 3

The First Night

Slowly, tenderly, her eyes began to open. It felt like the inside of her head had exploded and a fire spread every corner of her being. Every sense ached as she returned from oblivion and was able to start grasping reality. At first she perceived nothing but a big dark blur filled with dancing sparkles in circular patterns, but the sparkles began to collide together into a big white smog. Her eyes continued to adjust and everything blank was dissolving into vaguely defined shapes and sensations. She looked upon a smeared mess of fuzzy grey matter, feeling only confusion speaking to her as her vision traveled from one grey blotch to another and then to something white again.

There were sounds too, a loud clanging thing of metal on metal. It instinctively frightened her, yet she could not tell why nor could she turn her head to investigate. What ever it was it didn't repeat a second time and was trailed by a ringing clatter and then a solid click as if her fate was sealed. The unmistakable clomping of hooves on stone flowed from some point behind her, the paced sound echoed all around as if she was stuck in a cavern or a large room.

"Uhh," she groaned, her mouth so dry her tongue was a dead weight hanging limply over her lips. "Is...anypony...there?" She moaned in a low raspy voice that had trouble reaching her ears. The hoof steps had started off close by, but were now long withdrawn into the darkness beyond her perception and only the distant rhythmic drip-drip-dripping of water remained to comfort her. She continued to lie there, not able to feel the flow of time. It could've been minutes or hours yet it didn't matter. Her reality was confined, her limbs hung uselessly by her sides, and she struggled in vain to remember why she was here or who she was. With no forthcoming answers or hope of escape she slowly lowered her head back down to the cold unfeeling floor and blacked out.

When she awoke some time later the light of the sun was creeping through a window she hadn't noticed before cut into a wall of stone. The light seemed to stare accusingly at her face, silently scolding her for her sins.

She looked away, her eyes fully open now and unobstructed by a cloud of fog. Memories had begun to neatly reassemble themselves in fits and bursts. Carefully, like a newborn foal, she raised herself up testing each of her legs in turn. Her limbs were slightly stiff and there was a small bruise on her side from where the magic spell had struck her, otherwise she was perfectly fine.

She knew she was in a prison cell and it looked, and unfortunately smelled, like it had been abandoned for some time. The metal bars were worn and rusted and a single mattress was tucked away in a forgotten corner as if fearing to dance in the sun. There was also a single tarnished sink with a missing faucet, and the entire package wouldn't have been completed without a toilet that looked and smelled like month old manure.

Sure there was very little crime in Equestria and at least until that morning it had been unheard of in Canterlot. That, in Dash's mind, translated into there being no excuse for why the room wouldn't have been kept at least a little tidy.

She wouldn't have asked for much, maybe a nice fluffy cloud to snuggle upon or a cool aquamarine sky to soar through like a bird without a care in the world. At the very least she should've had a toilet that didn't smell worse than Spike's morning breath after dinning on a sack full of onions and garlic cloves.

While this was a unique opportunity to be the first, in several generations, to experience the full fledged tour of the Canterlot jail system from the inside; Rainbow Dash dreaded what this little adventure was going to do to her reputation. Was she doomed to rot like a rat in a cage and never allowed to realize her full potential as a Pegasus? Challenging the guards was the same as openly questioning the Princess' authority before a gathered assembly. What was she going to say to her friends, especially Twilight? Would they hate her now and wish to never see her again?

"I've really done it this time." She stared morosely out the barred window. "I wonder if the Wonderbolts will even accept me now." Depression flowed freely within her veins before she decided to turn towards anger and proceeded to stomp her hoof in a fit of blind rage. "If I ever find that jerk," She emphasized with a punch into the air, "POW! A sonic rainboom right into the sun!"

Feeling that her anger wasn't as effective at getting her *out* of jail as it was at getting her *in*, she walked over to the window to see how long she'd been out and maybe find an avenue of escape. The sun was already starting to set beyond the horizon. Looking down she was able to make out a large congregation of ponies in the courtyard. The ponies were surrounded by countless banners waving languidly in the wind in celebration of the festival. Dash heard music and lighthearted cheer rise up upon the wind along with the faint hint of delicious foods and sweet drinks that sought to stimulate every aspect of her being.

It was a constant reminder of what she was missing and she tried to ignore it but it only sent her back to Ponyville. In her mind's eye she could clearly make out images of Pinkie's sugary snacks, Applejack's mouth-watering apple pies and cider. There was also the honeysuckle fritters, the sticky candied yams, and the fresh squeezed orange juice that she loved so much.

Using her teeth she hungrily attempted to pry the bars from the window and escape the strangling confines of the dilapidated cell, but found no relief as the bars refused to yield. Well that was at least one thing, she thought ironically, that they made sure worked in prison and worse yet it had given her a painfully aching jaw.

"Horse Feathers." She cursed while crossing her arms in a pout before settling down upon the mattress. Promptly she felt the painful stinging sensation of something sharp stabbing her on the butt. Taken by agonizing surprise Dash cursed out the mattress for a solid five minutes in a display of colorful language that would've made Granny Smith blush. She'd just started to enjoy beating the crap out of the bedspread, imagining it was a guard's face, when the clang of an opening metal gate echoed throughout the room, accompanied by the sound of three individuals traveling coming down the hallway in her direction.

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Sugarcube Corner served as a confectionary shop which was famous for its many sweets and delicious treats that were baked daily within its walls. The entire building itself appeared to be constructed out of the very same foods that it served. The three-story structure looked good enough to eat as it resembled a giant gingerbread house complete with white frosting, candy

canes, colored sprinkles, chewy gumdrops, and with a giant pink cupcake sitting atop the roof.

Twilight Sparkle smiled as she inhaled the pungent fragrance of the fresh blueberry muffins she pulled from the oven. They smelled so delicious that she desperately wanted to stop right then and there in order to greedily consume them. Steeling herself against such a selfish temptation she placed the muffins on the counter to allow Mrs. Cake, a light cyan pony with a wild swirling rose-colored mane, to liberate them away from Twilight's moist eager taste buds. Mrs. Cake, the owner of Sugarcube Corner, placed the tray amongst all the other delectable baked goods that had been prepared for the celebration. The bakery was filled to the saturation point with the mixed heavenly scents of various types of muffins, cookies, cakes, and pies.

Beneath the delicious calm there lurked a stalking terror of unbridled aggression and its name was Pinkie Pie. Her mission and duty as the self-elected, unofficial, taste tester was to sample the food for consistency and flavor while helping herself to as much of it as she could. She hummed a cheery tune as she hunted for the poor defenseless delicacies while avoiding certain elements that threatened her success.

Twilight and Spike maintained a stoic vigil around the festival food with Spike donning an iron pot for a helmet and a wooden spoon, which he carried proudly like a faithful sword. Patrolling valiantly, he ensuring that no diabolical thief or pilfering pony would bypass his watch. He happened to spot the encroaching pink terror and proceeded to raise his weapon high into the air. He masterfully struck the beast gently on the muzzle. Pinkie hissed menacingly at being denied her treasure and slinked back into the shadows to wait for her next opportunity.

Twilight giggled as she watched the ridiculous exchange. Things like this were happening everyday, yet she never grew tired of the endless antics that forever seemed to be a critical part of life in Ponyville; annoyed perhaps, but never bored. However, Pinkie Pie, insanity, and deserts were not the foremost thing on her mind. A part of her desired nothing more than to return to the library and scrounge amongst her books for any information regarding the Marker. The Mayor hadn't allowed her permission to take the picture from the town hall, but that was unimportant. The image of the Marker was forever burned into her memory like the cutie-mark on her

flank. Fulfilling her obligations to Pinkie came first, yet she couldn't put it out of her mind the questions that she so anxiously wanted to answer. What was the importance of the Marker, who had stolen the Tome, and where were they now?

The more she tried not to dwell on it the further her curiosity began to get the better of her. There was something about it that tickled her memory and not in that pleasant humorous way. It was a disturbingly familiar memory and yet she had never heard nor seen anything regarding the Marker until a few hours ago. It was awkward, like feeling nostalgic about next week. It made no sense yet she was unable to shake the feeling that it held gravity over her life and that of her friends.

"Hey Twilight, Twi, Twi, Twilight, watcha thinking about?" Pinkie interrupted while dancing around Twilight in a storm of accelerated acrobatic backflips.

"Oh, um it's nothing Pinkie Pie." Twilight shook herself out of her silent reverie. "I was just thinking about the celebration tonight." She grinned in an attempt to reassure Pinkie, but the Earth-pony was not convinced of her sincerity.

"Oh you silly filly, with a frown like that I know you're worried about more than a little party." Pinkie then eagerly lifted a blueberry muffin to her lips and took an enthusiastic bite out of it.

"Pinkie Pie!" Twilight barked like an air horn, "Don't eat the snacks before the party starts." She had a perturbed look written all over her face. Looking around the store for Spike, so that she could scold him for failing to protect the goods, she found him stationary on the floor tied firmly in place by a pink party ribbon. It didn't seem to be a big problem for him since he was happily munching on the apple that Pinkie had used as a gag.

"Did you know your face is really bad at hiding secrets?" Pinkie said in-between willing bites.

"I'm not that bad." Twilight shouted in her defense, perhaps a little too quickly for comfort.

"Absolutely terrible," Pinkie was sure to emphasize the 'absolute' part, "Honestly the only pony worse than you is Applejack." She gulped down the last of the helpless muffin. "So what were you *really* thinking about?"

"Ugh," Twilight growled at being caught with her mane down. Of all of her friends Pinkie Pie was probably the worst one to consult with on matters of great importance, but Twilight had to try anyway. "Pinkie, do you know anything about a Marker?" To which Pinkie let out a gasp in horror.

"Did somepony lose a marker?"

Twilight nodded slowly and waited for she believed would be the inevitable response.

"You can borrow my markers if you like. I have lots and lots of colors; red, yellow, white, purple...Oh and pink too, I have tons of that."

Twilight would've facehoofed if she hadn't already anticipated this outcome. She admitted that Pinkie sometimes did surprise everypony with an occasion tidbit of obscure knowledge, but this was clearly not one of those times.

"No! Not that kind of marker. It looks kind of like this." Lacking paper and pen Twilight attempted to demonstrate by using both of her arms. She pressed her elbows together, crossed her arms with a slight twist, before angling her hooves back towards each other till they nearly touched. "It's black, and has strange symbols carved on it." Pinkie regarded Twilight's display with an unusual intensity.

"Nope," Pinkie answered without a hint of shame or concern. "I've never heard of anything like that before."

"That's not surprising." Twilight glared daggers at her.

"Although there are lots of things I've never heard of before. Like that thing with the thing."

"What thing?" It was Twilight's turn to be confused.

"Well if I knew that then I would've heard about the thing." Pinkie patted Twilight on the shoulder and sighed in sympathy for the unfortunate soul, "You really should get out more Twi."

"Hey!" Twilight's sharp squeal of heated indignation was interrupted as a bell above the shop's front door rung to announce the arrival of a customer.

"Howdy, ya'll." Applejack greeted as she cantered into the shop. Her southern hospitality a lot more relaxed then from before, until she nearly tripped over Spike. "Uh, should I ask why Spike is hogtied tighter than white on rice?" She looked at the others in utter puzzlement.

"Oh, that was me." Pinkie readily admitted while throwing her arms up in surrender before changing into a gravel voice, "Ya caught me red hooved copa' but you'll never take me alive."

Applejack wasn't in the mood to entertain Pinkie's absurd behavior, and so ignored the felon while she helped aided Spike in untying his restraints.

"Thanks AJ." Spike said as he stretched his sleeping limbs and picked apple seeds from in teeth.

"Hello Applejack," Twilight calmly interposed herself between Pinkie and AJ. "Have you had any luck in reaching Big Mac and Rainbow Dash?"

"Sorry Twi," AJ seemed to deflate as she spoke, "Thar ain't no mail courier willin' to fly and the Mayor has her hooves full. What about you? Have ya'll heard anything from the Princess" AJ leaned forward in a vain hope for any good news.

"I'm sorry Applejack," Twilight looked away in shame. "Princess Celestia hasn't replied to any of my messages." She fidgeted from side to side under Applejack's waning optimism. "I wish I could do more for you, I'm really starting to worry."

"I see." AJ took a few tentative steps towards the exit before stopping at the door. She switched between an urge to leave or to stay, but simply stood there in an accusing silence. Everypony in the store was still, unsure what to do next or what to say to console Applejack. After awhile Applejack took a deep breath and turned back to her friends with a genuine smile. "Thank you."

"For what?" Twilight was confused at AJ's sudden praise and even felt a little uncomfortable for it.

"For being here for me. Ah mean If it wasn't for ya'll," AJ gave an appreciative nod to everypony, and dragon, in the room. "I don't know what I'd do or who I could turn to." She wiped away a few tentative tears.

"Don't worry AJ," Spike gently stroked Applejack's mane in consolation. "I'm sure they're alright. Princess Celestia has everything under control."

"Spike's right." Twilight place a reassuring hoof on Applejack's shoulder, "We need to have faith in the Princess. I know that she is doing everything in her power to fix the problem."

"Ah hope you're right Twi, ah really do." Applejack let the tears flow freely as she accepted her friend's touch.

"Hey you know what this calls for? A party!" Pinkie Pie's voice exploded like a fireworks display through the oppressive atmosphere and in uncontained delight she jumped over to the window in order to point at something critically important. "Look! Everypony is gathering at the center of town."

In Sugarcube Corner everypony assembled in a tight ring around Pinkie Pie as they all gaped at the sight before them. The Mayor proudly addressed the Ponyville crowd that had gathered in the town center. It was the end of the Mayors speech as the cry of excited ponies pierced the atmosphere like an arrow through a glass window. This was the moment they'd all been waiting for all day, the checkered flag that signaled the beginning of the Summer Sun Celebration.

...

Rainbow Dash edged herself into a corner, using the mattress as an improvised shield; she fortified herself against whatever wicked thing was coming her way. She was able to distinguish three vague shapes heading in her direction. They were like three shadows that flowed against the prison wall, unable to be stopped. One of them, the leader of the group, gave off a reflection of gold mirroring sunlight as he arrived at the mouth of Dash's cell.

"Stay where you are." The guard ordered her in a tone that offered no room for funny business.

"What are you going to do with me?" Rainbow Dash seethed in defiance and readied herself against the inevitable rough treatment. Knowing that she'd easily taken on three guards before, she remained confident that she could do so again if forced to.

"I got good news for you." The guard grumbled in restrained displeasure while he placed a key into the door lock, "Your free to go."

"Your letting me go?" Dash could hardly believe her luck. She felt a faint gleam of hope blooming, like a fragile flower, but she wasn't going to allow herself to be fooled into falling for an obvious trap. This had to be a trick, she couldn't contemplate it being otherwise and she never lowered her guard because she really, really didn't want to find out.

"Yeah," he mumbled under his breath while turning the key. His body language was dismissive and he wore a permanent scowl, "as it turns out you have some rich friends who paid bail on your behalf." The guard motioned towards the other two ponies that had accompanied him.

Dash could not recall another time when she'd been so pleasantly surprised to see any pony, let alone the two ponies that stepped forward to greet her with welcoming smiles.

"Howdy," greeted a large red stallion with an orange mane and an oversized green apple cutie-mark on his flank. He calmly chewed on a sprig of wheat as he approached the threshold of the prison gate.

"Big Mac!" Dash betrayed her relief as she jumped out from behind her makeshift fort and stuck her head through the bars. "You have no idea how glad I am to see you." Dash then turned to contemplate his companion whom she recognized immediately because there was no other zebra immigrant who wore several golden rings around their neck and a pair of hoop earrings.

"Zecora too, I didn't realize you were in Canterlot." Dash was a little unsure as to Zecora's strange presence, but she wasn't going to complain a gift horse, or zebra, in the mouth.

"Only in Canterlot is one who sells. An herb I need for my simple spells." Nopony was sure why she had a habit of speaking in rhymes but Zecora was, by and large, considered to be a rather eccentric individual. When compared to the crazy residents of Ponyville, that was saying something. "You must calm down young flyer. Or you'll find yourself in the fire."

"I know," Dash rubbed the back of her head in embarrassment. She already knew that if pushed too hard she could potentially explode like a whirlwind of unstoppable vengeance.

"Alright, I'm releasing you into their custody." The guard slid the metal gate open in a single harsh movement. The sound was a loud forceful crash of anger upon metal. "You'd best behave yourself. There are plenty of us guards eager to see you tossed back in."

"Yes! I know, I know!" Dash only reassured the guard because she wanted to speed up her release. As far as she was concerned the guard could take a long fall off a narrow cloud. Putting the guard out of her mind she rushed over to join her friends. "Thanks for helping me out of there. I promise I'll find some way to repay you."

Together they followed the guard as he led them out of the dungeon. Dash came to a sudden realization. Big Mac was an apple farmer and Zecora was a bit of a loner who often spent most of her time living or working in isolation in the Everfree forest. Neither of them were exactly the type of pony to be considered rich, which was what the guard had described them as.

"I was wondering. It couldn't have been cheap to bail me out. How did you manage to get that many coins?"

"Well," Big Mac began neutrally, "We have ya'll to thank for that."

"Six to one, your defeat was sound, we felt it wise to invest a pound. Now there's reason for us to sing, for we have won plenty bling." Zecora shook her saddlebag which jingled with the unmistakable song of many coins.

"You didn't?" Dash froze in horror her wings fanning out in flaming ire. "You bet against me in the fight?" It was an accusation, which Zecora confirmed with a money-winning smile and no shame.

"Even you, Macintosh?" Dash's voice broke.

"Eeyup." Normally Big Mac wore an expression of mild disinterest. Right now he was beaming like a foal given a new shiny toy.

"I can't believe this, you both sold me out!"

"Now looky here missy," Macintosh scolded her without raising his voice a single decibel. "It twas ya'll who had the pig-headed gumption to buck more than ya'll could handle."

"Do not protest in indignation, we'll treat you at the celebration." Zecora

"Hmph!" Rainbow Dash sulked, refusing to move another step. "Maybe I don't want to go."

"Let's go missy." Big Mac had grown up with two younger sisters and had plenty of experience on how to handle rebellious and stubborn fillies. Using his teeth he grabbed Dash by the ear and pulled her away.

"Ow! Ow! Ow!" Dash cried in pain while trying to break free from her tormenter, "That hurts, let me go!" She was powerless before the bigger and stronger colt as he dragged her out the door. Zecora with a hearty chuckle bowed her head to the guard before following Big Mac and Dash out the door.

...

Later in the evening Twilight decided she'd had enough of the half-hearted celebrations and returned to the library. She was sure that she wasn't the only one who'd left the festival early. It wasn't a failure in the least but it didn't have the energy, the punch, needed carry it all the way until sunrise. Now was her only opportunity to try and get in some study time followed by much needed shuteye before she had to Sweet Apple Acres later in the afternoon. She was certain that helping Applejack would prove to be an all day affair.

Twilight noticed her book, 'War of Thrones,' still sitting on the table where she'd left it. It looked so lonely by itself and seemed to call out to her; pleading for her to finish reading it's pages. It pained her to the core that she didn't have ample time to peruse the last chapters, but personal intellectual curiosity took a sharp back seat to the more critical research into the events unfolding before her. Gazing up at the shelves of books, trying to decide where to start, she was sideswiped by the impulsive recollection of a more pressing duty she had nearly forgotten to complete.

For Twilight it was an enjoyable daily routine, some would say ritual, for her to submit a letter to Princess Celestia about the things she'd learn that day

about the importance of friendship or other interesting matters. Twilight didn't see much use in the exercise now since the Princess seemed to be too busy to even respond right now. On the other hoof, Twilight didn't want to fall behind in her reports and she could simply stockpile them for future delivery.

Deciding that was the best course of action she pulled out the necessary implements and began scribing the daily report. Memories began to sweep over her like a fickle wind. The day had been such a muddled mess that Twilight wasn't at a loss on what to report, but rather she was at an impasse at how to express it clearly. Twilight still felt bad about talking to the Mayor in such a harsh fashion, but that had turned out fine in the end. Then there was the troublesome case with Applejack. Twilight was very upset that by her inability to console Applejack in her time of need or to provide closure. A note of inspiration struck Twilight and her pen struck paper as she furiously wrote her account.

...

Dear Princess Celestia,

From your faithful student, Twilight Sparkle.

I learned a valuable, if hard, lesson about friendship today. I realized that there are times when you can help a friend with their problems and there are times when you cannot. No matter the situation a pony must always be willing to listen to the troubles of their friends. It is always important to listen, to let them know that you care about them, you support them, and that you are willing to do whatever you can.

I helped one friend, but disappointed another. When I think about it, I realize I have not failed anypony. The answer may not always come today or tomorrow, but they know I care and it gives them hope. Sometimes that is the only answer.

...

Twilight signed her name and after briefly scanning over the letter for mistakes she rolled it up and sealed it with her insignia. Feeling satisfied it was ready for delivery she placed it aside so that Spike could mail it later. She yawned loudly from fatigue and was ready to slide in-between her bed

covers when she felt a magical presence emerge from behind her and a voice spoke, seemingly from thin air.

"I think I understand why you're her favorite pupil." It called out from the shadows, a melodious tone of silver bells ringing in a cool night wind.

"Who's there?" Twilight shouted and spun to face the intruder. Emerging from the second floor balcony was a Pegasus Unicorn with skin the color of a moonlit midnight sky and a mane of blue silver that shined with a thousand points of light.

"Princess Luna!" Twilight hesitated, breath catching in her throat, and immediately regretful for her earlier outburst. She felt both bewildered and confused at the sudden arrival by the moon princess. Instinct overrode thought and Twilight bowed low before her out of respect and even a little fear. "I'm sorry your highness, I didn't realize you were there."

"It's alright Twilight, I understand." Despite her regal bearing, Luna seemed uncomfortable at being address in such a formal fashion. "Please, just call me Luna. I just hope you're not mad that I let myself into your home."

"Its no trouble at all, princ...,eh Luna. You just surprised me, that's all. How are things in Canterlot? Are you here for the festival?" Twilight couldn't control the rush of words that sought escape from her mouth. She hadn't seen or heard from Luna since the Nightmare Moon incident. Was Luna bitter about the whole incident and here to inflict her revenge? Twilight's mind went back to the rumors she'd heard about Luna. She didn't really believe they were true, so why was she feeling so nervous.

"I'm afraid not," Luna shook her head slowly. "I would love to join you in celebration. I fear though, that I would not be welcomed." Even now the sounds of the party could be heard from inside the library. The sound was torture to Luna, it was a reminder of what she'd lost so long ago when she'd betrayed Equestria for her own selfish gains. Though she had finally been forgiven for her sins, it was only after a thousand years of punishment until she'd been allowed her freedom to make amends. It had taken a terrible toll and she feared she would be forced to live as an outcast for an equally long time before she could hope to be considered an equal again.

She regarded Twilight up and down with a critical eye, contemplating on what to say next. Twilight spoke with respect, but there was an

undercurrent of fear in her voice. Luna wondered if Twilight's kind words truly directed at her as a pony or her position as Celestia's sister? Twilight only answered to Celestia and not to her and even though she'd come here on Celestia's behalf would Twilight even trust her with what she had to say?

"I guess you've heard the rumors." Luna turned her back to Twilight.

"Rumors? What rumors. There are no rumors around here." Twilight chuckled timidly trying to hide her guilt while beads of sweat formed on her head.

"I know what Equestria thinks of me." Luna peered out the window and glimpsed upon the distant crowd. Although the ponies celebrated under a starlit sky, she knew they only rejoiced the rising of the sun. She didn't want to show it, but it took every ounce of willpower for her not to cry. "They believe I'm the cause of all this chaos. Maybe you've only heard rumors, but in Canterlot I've been openly and directly accused. Some ponies have even petitioned Celestia to have me banished again, or at least locked away until I confess to a crime I did not commit."

"That's terrible, I can't believe they could be so heartless." Twilight was truly shocked. Canterlot was suppose to be the center of culture, magic, and enlightenment.

"Twilight, would you care to walk with me?" Luna asked a little uncomfortably, "I think I could use a friend tonight."

...

Overhead the full moon illuminated the night sky with an ethereal light surrounded by innumerable twinkling stars like diamonds in the night sky. Twilight followed Luna as she led them both along a path leading out of Ponyville. As time passed the streetlights and festive sounds of Ponyville receded into the distance. Twilight noticed that they were heading north towards the Everfree forest. Twilight noticed that the Princess was not wearing her black crown and instead donned pair of saddlebags on her back which appeared weighted down with supplies of some nature.

"Where are we going?" Twilight was getting a little nervous at the idea of entering the forest. Ever since her encounter with a cockatrice she'd

avoided Everfree like the plague. She felt a little better having Luna by her side since the Princess was the second most powerful magic user in Equestria, but why Luna would want to risk the wrath of Everfree was a mystery.

"I'll tell you when we get a little closer." Luna peered up at the moon her eyes loosing focus for a moment. "Tell me, Twilight, what do you know of the Everfree forest?"

"About as much as any other pony. The Everfree forest is not a pleasant place for anypony to visit because of hostile flora and fauna. I've have done extensive research into why its weather and existence seemed to stand in contradiction to everywhere else, but I have found very few hard facts. Most of the books I've read are just harmless ghost stories, but there are some accounts that are just too fantastical to be true."

"What kind of stories?" Luna walked a little closer to her companion

"Oh, I shouldn't waste your time with fiction." Twilight didn't really want to discuss the matter any further as she found the topic disturbing and didn't want the Princess to think she was mentally disturbed.

"Please, indulge me." Luna said encouragingly, clearly interested.

"Well," Twilight inhaled sharply, "I found some old fragmented reports detailing a series of unexplained surge in cases of insomnia, insanity, and even suicide. It seemed to affect any pony that dared to pass through the forest or lived too close for a period of time." Recalling those reports gave her shivers as she recalled the almost obsessive amount of morbid detail that the author had written.

"Go on." Luna's excitement had only grown in intensity.

"It gets weirder from there. There are some who claim to have seen the dead come back to life, family or friends speaking to them in dreams, or visions warning them about the end of the world."

"Do you believe any of it?"

"There are no such things as zombies and ghosts." Twilight strongly asserted. "These are just old mares tales to frighten children away from

Everfree." Twilight slowed her pace as she regarded Luna more closely. The princess seemed unusually interested in a bunch gruesome tales that were most likely written by a seriously disturbed pony. "Unless you're implying I should believe them?"

"Fantastical nonsense to be sure," Luna giggled unconcerned, "but then I heard many ponies thought the same of the, 'Mare in the Moon,' tale, yet you didn't." Luna leaned in closer and whispered, "What made you think otherwise?"

"Because..." Twilight stalled trying to answer that one. It was true that there had been some corroborative accounts to support the story, but it had mostly been a gut feeling, something deep inside, that had driven her to believe it even when faced with ponies who had been skeptical.

"Ahh, we've arrived." Luna spoke up as the two of them arrived at the border to the Everfree Forest.

The forest was dark and forbidding it was a place that no pony was ever meant to enter. Inside, the forest was darker than the night sky, it was as if the moonlight was unable to penetrate the tree cover. No, it was more fitting to say the moonlight was scared to even touch the forest. It was a nervous experience entering the forest during the day, but at night...only if she had a death wish.

"I need to be straight with you Twilight." Luna turned to face the purple unicorn with a look of deep sadness in her eyes.

"What's this all about?" Twilight arched an eyebrow in confusion, watching as Luna paced in thought.

"I was not exaggerating when I said I needed a friend." Luna Since you freed me from Nightmare Moon's influence I've struggled to fit in back in Canterlot. I have no real friends and the guards and servants avoid me for the most part. But," Luna stared deeply into Twilight's eyes. "Tonight our fortunes have changed." Luna seemed almost manic as she spoke.

"I don't think I understand." Twilight began to panic as she shrunk under Luna's overpowering gaze. She felt as if she was looking upon the surface of eternity. An endless field of stars reflected in Luna's bottomless jade

green eyes. More than that, she felt as if her very soul was being drawn into another world.

"The truth is that I need your help Twilight Sparkle. We both need your help." Breathing heavily, Luna managed to calm herself enough to break the connection between them. Startled by the intensity of her own power she looked upward to stare at the moon for a second time, allowing Twilight to recover from the intense stare. "You know I've always admired my sister. She was always the center of attention; loved and worshipped by everypony while I was chiefly ignored."

"I know, Princess Luna. I'm sorry." Twilight wanted to cheer up the Princess, but was at a loss on what to say. What could she say to an immortal princess who had been imprisoned in the moon for an entire millennium? It was a wonder that Luna was still sane after such an experience.

"What I must do now requires secrecy and an expert's touch. Celestia would do it, but she has a thousand eyes watching her at every moment, some of which may now have more vile intentions. I on the other hoof," Luna smirked dryly her mania beginning to build back into a fever pitch., "My isolation has given me freedom to move about unnoticed. So it seems that fate has a sense of humor after all."

"I suppose that is very ironic." Twilight wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or worried over Luna's newfound sense of purpose. She certainly no longer felt entirely safe alone with her. "So what do you need from me?"

"When we enter the forest we will head straight to the ancient stone castle where the Elements of Harmony once rested."

"You mean?"

"Yes, it is the place where you freed me from Nightmare Moon. The Everfree forest is a place of many ancient secrets and surprises. The Elements were just one of them."

Chapter 4

Traveler in the Dark: The Summoning

Proceeding in silence Twilight and Luna slowly weaved their way deeper into the Everfree Forest, approaching ever closer to its tainted black core. Surrounding the forest was a barrier of trees that stood straight, tall, and proud. They were as healthy a wooden brown and leafy green as any other of their kind to be found around Equestria. From a respectable distance this shield of foliage gave the forest an appearance that didn't seem all that frightening. It was nothing more than a dirty trick that the forest employed to welcome unwary souls. Any pony unfamiliar to Everfree might think it was a tempting spot for a lazy afternoon picnic or a peaceful site to enjoy a good book under a beautiful blue sky. That was all just a facade, a mask, an elaborate ruse to hide the dangers of the forest from casual passersby. Penetrating past the inviting exterior the forest was a corrupted abomination where the laws of nature did not always apply. Where a wide host of all manner of hideous beasts and ruthless predators stalked and hunted amidst the fouled vegetation.

Flora, from the mightiest tree to the simplest grass, were all twisted decrepit shadows that looked wet and rotten, covered with a disgusting sheen like a layer of slime. Everything seemed inexplicably alive yet frozen in silence and surrounded by a vile aura as if possessed by a horrendous evil that was delightfully laughing at the pair of equine intruders that dared to trespass into its lair. Low hanging branches groaned and moved about chaotically with their only source of locomotion being a hot wind blowing through the forest like a great invisible serpent. Dancing in the wind the branches were like clawed hands reaching with undisguised contempt for the living. Wanting to grab the ponies, wanting to tear skin from bones, but only succeed in slowing the ponies down slightly when the fingers happened to become tangled in their manes. Apart from the whistle of the wind through the treetops, the forest was completely silent. Not a single animal uttered so much as a howl or grunt, however that was normal. The only time a creature dared to announce its presence or show its face in Everfree was when it entertained carnivorous desires.

As the two ponies continued to explore deeper and deeper Twilight became more conscious of a sweet putrid smell that was building in the air around them, a foul stench akin to hot curdled milk. It had started off as an occasional annoyance traveling along the wind, now it was saturating the air in an attempt to try and choke them out. Twilight raised a hoof to her nose and shut her mouth tight. Even then she could still sense it forcing itself into her body through her very pores. It made her feel so unclean that she decided a long hot soak in the bathtub would be priority one when she got home. She'd even use the special bathing salts that Rarity had given her as a birthday gift. She had only been this deep into Everfree once before, but knew that this stench hadn't been here at the time. She looked to check on how Luna was holding up, however the alicorn acted as if she was oblivious to everything around her or it simply didn't worry her.

Twilight regretted not remembering to drag Spike along by his scaly tail for this little adventure. She knew that he, more than likely, would have chickened out at the idea of traveling this far into the darkest depths of the Everfree, but it might've helped delude herself into believing that she was far braver than she felt right now. At the very least it would've been nice for a good laugh at his expense in the meantime. At this moment he was probably still partying his little dragon heart out at the festival, stuffing his face full of delights and dancing to the techno music. The last she'd seen of him was in the company of Pinkie Pie. The mischievous pair was about to pull off a rather messy prank on Applejack. A trick that involved the employment of several cherry bombs that were hidden inside a triple chocolate-fudge apple cake with whipped cream and, the coup-de-grace, a single maraschino cherry on top. Assuming Spike survived Applejack's bronco buster beat down he wouldn't be in any shape to assist anyway.

Twilight knew that she'd have to eventually get around to having a serious talk with Spike about this prank business. Pranks were a practice she very much discouraged, especially in her friends. After all, he was her faithful little helper at the library and it simply would not do for her to have to keep one eye on the little bugger whenever she wanted to study for fear of some random tomfoolery heading her way. There was enough of that already going around courtesy of Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash. Those two mares were infamous for their love of high jinks, jokes, and overall adolescent mischief. Speaking of which..,

"Luna, I was wondering if I could ask you a question?" After inquiring Twilight sneezed something fierce in order to get the stench out of her system.

"Bless you. I'll try to answer as best as I can. I can't promise you'll like it." Luna was strangely reassuring despite the negative connotation.

"Well, I have some friends that are stuck in Canterlot and have been since this morning. I was wondering, I don't mean to impose," Twilight raised her hooves in defense, "but if you could help me find them I would be grateful." Asking favors from royalty was something that Twilight felt extremely awkward doing. Even as Celestia's star pupil she was very much worried that she could overextend her unique privileges and cause offense. Luna just stared at her, making her fear that she might have indeed offended the moon princess. At least until Luna allowed a nervous snigger to escape like a popped balloon.

"Sorry, I was expecting a very different question." She shook the laugh away, "You need not worry about that, I would consider it a pleasure to help your friends. You have already helped me a great deal just by being here." The two exchanged smiles, grateful to be of help to one another.

"Who are you thinking of?" Luna asked.

"Well, there's Big Macintosh and Rainbow Dash. They went to Canterlot to sell some wares before the festival began. I'm pretty sure you've met both of them before."

"I do remember Big Macintosh," Luna nodded in affirmation, "big red stallion, apple farmer, and quite a handsome fellow if my memory still works. You know," Luna gave a sly grin, "if my situation was a little better off I'd defiantly go chasing after that fine a..ahem." Luna excused herself noticing a curious sidelong glance from Twilight. "It shouldn't be a problem getting him permission to leave Canterlot. Unfortunately it won't be so easy for Rainbow Dash. I'm afraid she was arrested earlier today."

"What!" Twilight's voice took a sharp upturn for the shrill upon hearing the news. Halting in her tracks she turned towards Luna half expecting it to be a joke. It was just a joke, wasn't it?

"How? Why? What in Equestria did she do?" Twilight blubbered.

"She assaulted several of the castle guards and they were forced to put her to sleep." Luna calmly summarized, "That's not the worst part, though. I lost two hundred bits betting on her in that fight."

"Your kidding!"

"Your right, it was 300 bits." Luna sat down to think about it.

"But,"

"No, no, it was defiantly 200 bits and one of my bridles too, how embarrassing. That pair was especially popular with the stallions at the night club."

"Lunaaa!" The mental image in Twilight's head caused all her blood to rush to her face. She wasn't sure which seemed more surreal. Rainbow Dash chained to a prison wall or Luna entertaining stallions in a very un-princess like manner. Nope, it was defiantly the latter.

"I'm joking," Twilight's look of petrified embarrassment and shock only made Luna laugh harder, "your friend is fine. She'll be cooling her head for a night in the dungeon, but she's otherwise unharmed. I doubt she'll try that little stunt again in the near future, but," Luna stopped laughing, "seriously though I'm still short 200 coins over this whole debacle."

Twilight just gaped at the princess. It was true that she didn't know Luna all that well, but she'd never expect the princess to have such a perverted sense of humor. As if reading her mind Luna broke out into another fresh wave of laughter.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to offend. Big sis always did say I was bad with my naughty little jokes."

"Oh, it's ok," said Twilight beginning to recover from her embarrassment and still unsure of what just happened. It was refreshing to see Luna with her mane down, but the two of them were still smack dab in the middle of the Everfree and this wasn't the best environment to have a casual heart to heart.

"Would you like me to sing instead?" Luna abruptly changed the subject feeling guilty over putting Twilight in such and awkward situation.

"You sing?" Luna was indeed full of surprises tonight.

"Oh yes, I'm very good at it. I used to sing all the time before, well, you know."

"Um, could this wait until later?" Twilight was eager to continue on their journey and a song would only delay them further. The silence made her very nervous and that didn't take into account the horrible smell. She still couldn't understand how Luna wasn't affected at all.

"You haven't heard me." Luna protested before she took a deep breath and started to sing. She chose a patter song that originated from a comic opera she'd once enjoyed as a foal. For this occasion, however, she had added in her own lyrics.

I am the very model of a Princess Luna-tarian.

I have information Sciences, on Magic, and Equestrian.

I know the mares and seas and I quote the names historical

From Babylon, to regolith, and craters categorical

I have mastered learning on all matters of Astronomy.

I know the moon and stars and of their orbital velocity.

I'm at my very best when the sun is clear out of sight

And I whistle to the tune of 'Twinkle Little Star' all the night

Luna finished and glanced towards Twilight expectantly.

"You've been talking to Pinkie haven't you?" Twilight could see clearly that this was a symptom of exposure to high levels of Pinkemania.

"We've exchanged a couple of letters, yes." Luna admitted without hesitation or concern, "She once told me that, 'when in doubt, sing it out,' or something like that."

The Alicorn princess' overly friendly demeanor and confidence was infectious. Twilight felt her tensions ease as the two of them continued on

their way through the forest. The fear of Everfree was now a distant memory and even the smell receded. They talked eagerly about all manner of things from sleepovers, to friendship, and daily life in Canterlot and Ponyville. Luna even began to share stories of her childhood growing up with Celestia.

"There was this one time," Luna began giggling like a school foal, "When Celestia got hit with skunk spray and somepony suggested we use tomato juice to wash the smell out."

"Did you?"

"Ooh yes, a whole bathtub full."

...

Before they knew it Twilight and Luna arrived at their destination near the center of the Everfree. Clearing past a tall shrub they approached the gates of an ancient stone castle that violently emerged from the forest bed like an obstinate mountain that refused to yield to the combined wiles of nature and erosion. In terms of architecture and design the castle was very similar to the one in Canterlot, if a bit smaller in scale. That was not unusual since it once served as the personal sanctuary of the two princesses in ages past. The friendly atmosphere shared between the two ponies began to retreat as they crossed the portcullis into the sanctuary.

Luna continued to lead as they traveled the abandoned hallways of the castle. Twilight was taken aback at how different the place had become in the year since her last visit. The forlorn building had fallen further into disrepair over that single short period of time than in the millennium since its abandonment following Celestia's victory over Nightmare Moon. What had once been clean from any sort of encroaching plant life or entropy was now replaced with unrestraint wilderness.

Grass grew in-between the cracks in the cobbled stone floor, vines invaded through the broken windows and snaked along the floor amongst the glass shards. The majestic rugs and tapestries now hung in tattered shreds and there was a sharp musty smell, like an old attic. Twilight wondered if her removal of the Elements of Harmony had something to do with it. She could easily reason that it was the Elements that had shielded the castle from Everfree and now that the Elements were gone the forest had been given

free rein. At this rate, it wouldn't be long before everything here would disappear, possibly in less than a single generation.

The idea gripped Twilight tightly with a profound sense of loss. There was so much history here, so many lives had touched this place, and now it was fated to vanish off the face of Equestria, lost in silence to the unstoppable march of time. As bad as it made Twilight feel she knew it must be worse for Luna.

...

Luna gently traced a hoof along the empty walls trying to feel for the pulse of life that she had once known. The hoof prints of family and friends that lay behind the grime that encrusted the walls. Her face was a mask of grim neutrality as she felt it clearly, it was here, but it only existed in her memories. She knew now that this place was just a dead husk now.

"Luna, are you alright?" Twilight asked from behind her.

"I'll be fine." She replied knowing that it was just another lie, one more to add to the pile. Luna hesitated, biting her lip when the tears began to gather in the corner of her eyes. This place brought back so many precious memories of her life before she messed everything up, before she grew jealous and hateful of her sister. It was a cruel reminder of all the terrible things she'd committed in the past. She wanted to forget, to move on, but the memories clung like tumors. Would Equestria ever be able to forgive her even though her big sister and Twilight had? Now the tears flowed freely down her cheeks like a gentle salty rain. She couldn't find forgiveness in herself with the knowledge that it was not the passage of time that destroyed this place. It had been her

Her fault,

Her responsibility.

She could feel her heart break and she did not know how to put the pieces back together.

"I'm sorry for acting this way." Luna tore her sight from the empty wall and hung her head in shame.

"For what? You haven't done anything wrong." Twilight's voice was full of concern. Luna wondered if Twilight would be so friendly if she knew the whole truth.

"I can't help it. This place is a part of me. We are both a thousand years obsolete. Maybe it would be best if we were to vanish from Equestria forever. Big sis doesn't need me anyway."

"How can you say such a thing?" Twilight was horrified at such inconsiderate words. "Celestia was so happy when you came back....she wanted you to come back, to be free of Nightmare Moon, and if she lost you again....I don't even want to think about what it would do to her." Twilight nuzzled against Luna in a gesture that spoke of pure friendship. "It's alright Luna, we can get through this together."

To Twilight it felt weird, unnatural even, to embrace the princess in such a fashion, but Twilight knew she'd only make things worse if she held back. She stroked Luna's mane to try and reassure her, to calm her fear. The Princess' mane felt soft and silky under her touch and in the light of the moon it reflected a flawless shine with the combined sparkle of a million points of exquisite light. It reminded her of the endless field of stars in the night sky.

"Come on, we are almost there." Twilight said confidently helping the princess up.

"Thank you," Luna truly meant it and smiled, "It makes me happy to know that I have your friendship. I would also like to have your trust and it's time I told you a little more about this book and why I brought you here." Luna spoke carefully in a measured pitch so as not to cause her unicorn companion any more worry. "Hmm," Luna was unsure exactly how to begin.

"I know that things have gotten out of hoof after it was stolen." Twilight said knowing it was an abrupt interruption, but she wanted, needed, to know what this was all about. "For that matter what exactly is a Marker? I've been thinking about it all day and I suspect it involves more than a simple book."

"Twilight, I would love to tell you everything, but big sis would hate me if I needlessly endangered her most beloved and favorite pupil." Luna admonished.

"Just because I'm Celestia's pupil does not mean I need special treatment."

"Not so, because I know big sis planned on telling you the truth about everything when she decided that you were truly ready. I would not dare to step on her hooves in this matter."

"What kind of things?" Twilight could not withhold her curiosity.

"Nice try," Luna deadpanned.

"Well, can't blame a pony for trying." Twilight grinned knowing her little ploy had failed.

"What I can say that on the outside it looks as normal as any other book you could find in a library. However, if a pony were to read it they would see a sequence of mathematical formulae, blueprints, and philosophical meanderings. A lesser mind would be driven mad. Only a pony of sufficient intelligence and learning can hope to decipher it."

"Mathematical formula and blueprints?" Twilight intoned, understanding dawning upon her, "Are you saying it's a guide to building a Marker?"

"Yes," Luna said gravely, "The Marker is an artifact of great power and influence and that book is the key to building a new one. Celestia and I hadn't even ascended the throne when the original Marker was discovered below the Everfree Forest." Luna gazed out a window taking in the sight of the forest and the gentle lights of Ponyville visible on the horizon. "It was black. Black and glowing with symbols, symbols which whispered to me...." Luna choked because she feared saying far too much too soon. "I can safely say that only three ponies have ever read that book and survived the madness; the author, Celestia, and myself."

"The book was only stolen this morning. I'm sure they have not had time to build it yet." Now Twilight was even more infused with zeal and alarm. As well read as she considered herself to be there was no record she'd come across that even hinted at just how long the two princesses had been in power. No mortal pony had any memory of the epic timescale that Luna only hinted at. Just how long and deep did this rabbit hole go?

...

The two ponies ascended the stairs and entered into a large antechamber at the top of the castle. It was in similar disarray as the rest of the castle, yet despite the overgrowth Twilight easily recognized this room. It was here that the Elements of Harmony had once been stored, magical weapons waiting patiently for somepony to claim the power for their own. This was the place where the fateful confrontation with Nightmare Moon had occurred.

Luna purposefully approached the statue where the Elemental orbs had once rested. The statue was carved from crystal and shaped into something that resembled a bare five-branched tree with each 'branch' curling upwards and ending in a bowl shape. The bowls once held the Elemental orbs, but now stood empty except for a small amount of water at the bottom. Without warning Luna gave one powerful backwards kick and broke the statue at the base. A second swift kick finished the job and sent the stone structure flying forcefully into the opposite wall where it shattered into a thousand fragments.

"Was that necessary?" Twilight wasn't entirely sure, but it seemed as if Luna really enjoyed doing that. Twilight grew increasingly concerned that Luna's emotional health was dangerously unbalanced. In the hour or two since both of them had started on this journey Luna had run the proverbial emotional gauntlet. She was all over the place expressing emotions that had begun at nervousness, traveled to naughty, then silly, and then joyful. Before ending in sadness, depression, and finally ending on anger.

"Nevermind! It's useless now and besides what we want is right below us."

At the place where the statue had broken from its foundation was a tiny box shaped depression in the floor. At the center of the depression was a tiny hole. Luna knelt down before it and carefully inserted her horn down the hole while mumbled a few words. Twilight could feel the casting of a magical spell, yet was unfamiliar with exactly what kind of spell. After a few tentative seconds there was the sound of a lock being keyed. Twilight felt the floor beneath her vibrate with the movement of some long dormant machinery. The weathered gears creaked and protested over their rude awakening.

"Steady yourself." Was all the warning Luna could give before there was a flash of magical energy that surrounded them. The ground below their

hooves seemed to dissolve and they fell into the darkness beneath them. The vertigo didn't last long before their hooves touched down on solid ground again. It happened so fast that Twilight had not realized it was happening until it was already over.

"Where are we?" Twilight asked while inspecting this new environment. They had been transported from the Sanctuary antechamber into a large and spacious cavern. Twilight had done a lot of research on old Equestrian technology and magic and recognized what they had just gone through was called a 'transportation plate,' which served as a quick and convenient means of near instantaneous teleportation from one location to another predetermined destination. The advantages of such a device were that the teleportation worked across vast distances and that the user did not need to be in the line of sight to their destination, unlike the simple spell Twilight had used on multiple occasions. It was not that much of a surprise to find such a device in the Sanctuary, but to have it still in working condition after all these years was amazing. Especially since the knowledge to create and maintain such devices was an art form lost in ages past.

"These are the old mines, below Everfree." Luna now spoke with no hint of emotion or concern, only purpose. "Generations of ponies worked here to extract the materials needed to build Canterlot. No living creature has been down here for ages." Strangely Luna seemed to put special emphasis on 'living.'

"None of the books I've ever read mentioned mines and tunnels below the forest."

"That's not surprising. I did say there were far more surprises than just the Elements."

...

The mineshaft elevator descended down the subterranean tunnel at break-neck speed. Twilight wondered if this is what it felt like when Rainbow Dash attempted a sonic rain-boom maneuver. There was no source of light in these tunnels so Twilight was forced to cast a light spell. Her horn glowed magnificently and even then the darkness was too thick. It was so oppressive she couldn't see much outside her immediate area. Worse yet, even with the spell she could not determine how far down they were going.

The walls of the shaft were featureless subterranean dirt only interrupted by the pair of elevator tracks and the occasional floor landing. The elevator abruptly began to slow down in its decent before coming to a sudden stop at what seemed to be the lowest level. The door that greeted them was so old and rusted that to even call it a door would be like describing a slice of swiss cheese as an impenetrable bank vault. The only other highlight was the number forty-two stenciled on in faded yellow spray paint.

The tunnel behind the door was bigger than Twilight had anticipated. It was tall and wide enough to fit her house inside, with a generous amount of room to spare. The tunnel was lined on either side by equidistant metallic ribs that Twilight presumed held the tunnel up and prevented it from collapsing. In between the ribs were veins of silver, gold, and various gems that had been exposed, but never collected. Twilight placed a couple of the more loose gems in her saddlebags positive that Spike would appreciate her efforts later.

The packed dirt ground was littered with countless puddles of soupy goo laid out all over the place. Passing too close to a puddle allowed Twilight to make out the same rotten stench she's experienced before in the forest. There was no wind in this place and apart from the sound of their hooves; there was only a deathly silence. It didn't last for long as Twilight could begin to notice a scratching sound that had begun to follow them from behind shortly after entering the tunnel. Whenever she stopped to check on it, the sound stopped. When she started to move again the scratching would wait awhile and then come back. Luna still didn't seem bothered by any of this. It made Twilight wonder if her own fear was playing tricks on her.

It was hard to judge the passage of time in this place, but after what felt like an hour of a nonstop linear progression the cave suddenly opened up to reveal a great cylindrical room. Stairs and catwalks were built into the sides of the room and ascended upwards at an indeterminate distance. The magical lights from the ponies were sufficient to illuminate the curved wall that surrounded them on all sides, but there was no way to glimpse at how high the ceiling went.

Luna stepped upon a raised circular platform that occupied most of the ground area in the room before she motioning that Twilight should follow her. Twilight place a hesitant hoof upon the altar, unsure of what Luna

intended to do. Twilight didn't know why she called it an altar, but there was something in the air, something sacrosanct and horrific about this place. She couldn't put her hoof on the exact reason why until she took a closer look at the platform. Its polished onyx like surface showed an uninterrupted pattern of symbols carved into its surface. Some she recognized from the image of the Marker, but most were unfamiliar. Twilight wanted to study these symbols and everything about this room, but in her haste to follow Luna she had forgotten all of her writing supplies back at home.

Luna, on the other hoof, was well prepared. Retrieving a scroll from one of her saddlebags she opened it and began to read. She nodded her head in satisfaction before telekinetically handing the scroll over to Twilight.

"What am I suppose to do with this?" Twilight asked skeptically as she accepted the document. The scroll was written in old Equestrian, a language Twilight had been studying, but had not fully mastered. She couldn't read most of it apart from an occasional word or two. It was clearly a magical scroll of great power; she didn't have to be able to understand the writing to know that. Twilight could feel a higher concentration of magical energy radiating from it.

"Don't worry about the words," Luna seemed to sense Twilight's confusion, "concentrate on the magical flow instead."

Twilight held the scroll in her hooves and closed her eyes. She moved her horn closer to the scroll until she touched it directly as she concentrated on the weave of magical energies. It was not a single spell, rather a combination of multiple spells mixed together. Some were simple, others complex, some she knew, and many she did not. She recognized a teleportation spell right off the cuff, but the actual destination she could not ascertain. There was also a telekinetic spell and a mind-control spell; both were highly unusual magics too be used in conjunction with teleportation. The further she tried to explore this intriguing case the more she heard whispers in her head.

Twilight is here....shhhhh....

Isaaaac....

....the traveler in the dark....

"Well?" Luna said breaking Twilight's concentration. Twilight looked to the princess who seemed brimming with anticipation.

"If I had to guess, then, um," Twilight delayed to give herself more time to think it over. Teleportation, telekinesis, and mind control all used together in a spell so complex that she couldn't wrap her mind around it; what did it mean? Then like a bolt from the blue she realized what it was and it was the mind-control spell that was the key.

"It's a summoning spell." Twilight's answer birthed a smile on Luna's young face. "You're going to summon somepony or something into Equestria and control it for your own purposes."

"Exactly," Luna confirmed, "I'll be brief since we do need to get back home before daybreak. The threat of somepony making a new Marker is such a terrible possibility that we need to prepare for the worse. However, General Starsword is dragging his hooves about following proper procedures and protocols in training new soldiers. So big sis and I consulted an old friend of ours and he told us about a weapon we could summon to help bring this matter, hopefully, to an early and peaceful conclusion."

"A weapon?" Twilight was dubious, "Would a weapon require the use of mind-control?"

"Yes, a caster that brings forth items of power uses mind-control to link themselves to the item so that only they may use it. Not unlike the Elements of Harmony"

"Shouldn't the Elements of Harmony be able to help?"

"I'm sure they can. Yet, the elements may not be enough." Luna indicated the scroll in Twilight's hooves. "That spell was written by Celestia and I with help from our friend and I want you to cast it and bring that weapon back to Equestria."

"Why me? Don't you have more experience than I do in this kind of magic."

"Yes, but understand that after a millennium of imprisonment in the moon my power is far too weak. Besides somepony needs to stay and protect you from danger." Twilight was about to raise more concerns, but Luna didn't allow to her speak.

"Twilight, we don't have time to argue. Please trust me." Twilight wanted to trust Luna. No! She DID trust Luna and she'd come too far to back out now. Besides, she did not want to disappoint her new friend.

"Ok I'll do it." She said, resolute.

"Thank you Twilight." Luna bowed her head in gratitude. "I should warn you that once you cast the spell you will need to hold onto it with all your might and only dispel it when you have the weapon in your hooves." Luna dismounted from the alter and walked to the entrance she and Twilight had arrived through. Turning back to Twilight, Luna remembering one final detail.

"Oh, and one more thing, be wary of shadows."

...

Twilight stood at the center of the platform while holding the scroll before her. She closed her eyes before touching the scroll with her horn, feeling for the magic. Instead of passively observing it this time she reached out with her own magical talents and united the two of them together as one. The intermingling of these separate flows required the utmost levels of concentration on maintaining a state of balance. If one flow grew too powerful over the other then she risked the spell backfiring, which could have dangerous, even deadly, consequences. The Element of Magic manifested itself upon her head in the form of a golden tiara with a magenta tourmaline shaped like a star similar to her cutie-mark. Her eyes shot open, pupils disappeared under the intense projection of a bright white light. The whole of the chamber became illuminated in this light as the growing magical energies bathed the alter in currents of ether. Twilight felt herself being lifted beyond the veil of reality before emerging into a world that only existed in the darkest depths of space and time.

...

Twilight was thrown like a piece of detritus from the pillar of light and landed hard upon a dirt ground behind some jagged rock formations. She laid upon the ground for a few precious seconds while her eyes adjusted to the darkness.

Shaking from fright Twilight cautiously peered out from behind the serrated rock she had arrived at. Apart from the glow of the summoning spell on her horn, everything was illuminated by a dim and sickly yellowish-green light originating from a source she could not determine, as there was no sun or moon in the sky or even a simple lamp or candle present. She was on some barren wasteland of an island surrounded on all sides by an infinite expanse. Everything looked and felt real enough yet it shifted and distorted as if made of reflections in a fog of empty shadows. Not to say there was much to see here. The most significant features were large rocks seemingly placed at random locations, but there was something else in here, she could sense it. She felt like she was being watched. That there were others in this place, but there was no scratching noise, no oppressive smell, and the whispers in her head were silent.

In an abrupt flash of blood red light she witnessed the emergence of the colossal visage of a Marker towering over her like some demonic overlord. It was standing far away on the other end of the island, yet its massive size somehow still allowed it to tower above her and everything else in this forbidden place.

Its unnatural light pierced through the shadows with a rapid pulse, like a heartbeat. She seemed unable to focus upon its terrible form, her eyes slipping off its skin, unable to focus. The image was clear in her mind, however, at the top its narrow twin spires, nearly touching, twisting around each other like two poisonous snakes embattled in eternity. Its surface covered with the same glowing symbols she'd seen a few times before.

"Twilight," a voice spoke out from the darkness. Twilight spun to face this new threat, a scream dying in her throat with a pathetic squeal. An elderly Pegasus was sitting behind her, his skin a faded purple and mane a weathered grey. Twilight gaped, recognition spreading over her face in a disbelieving stare.

"Pa..Pappy?" She gasped. She wanted to believe it, but it was impossible.

"Tiny Twilight, my dear granddaughter," he whispered in concern, his arms held open invitingly.

Luna's warning echoed in her ears, Twilight understood that what she was seeing was not her grandfather. He had suddenly, but quietly, passed away many years ago in his sleep. She remembered crying for days after the

funeral fondly remembering the times he let her ride on his back high above the clouds. Yet here he was, his warm blue eyes twinkling like stars with a reflection of sadness and concern.

Her logical mind hesitated, but she couldn't help herself. Against her best judgment she threw her arms around him in a loving embrace, hugging him close.

"I've missed you so much." The tears came easily. She nuzzled close to him listening to his gentle breathing and feeling his strong arms close around her.

"Tiny Twilight, why are you here my sweet child. You're not supposed to be here. You shouldn't be here." He held her close in that special way only a loving grandparent could. "I did not wish to see you suffer."

"Pappy, what is this place? Why are you here?"

"Leave now. Please!" He suddenly pushed her back at arm's length, his face reflecting the pain from having to break the embrace. "There is very little time, this place will soon be destroyed and you along with it. Don't use the weapon! It will only save your world so it can destroy it."

"I don't understand." Twilight shrank under his intense glare and scolding speech. Grandfather had never once before raised his voice at her in such hateful anger or held her so roughly.

"Don't sacrifice yourself to the Marker's plans!" He screamed.

Twisting forcefully to her left Twilight broke free from his grasp and retreated back a few steps before turning to confront him or the evil that claimed to be him. Grandfather Sparkle was gone, vanished back into the darkness where he had come from. In his place the dark mist began to move in a circular pattern, slowly at first then gaining purposeful speed. Bits of the swirling vortex began to break off, falling away in random directions.

Wherever these slivers of shadow landed they began to grow in size. They twisted, morphed, and collapsed in upon themselves, slowly assuming pony forms. Twilight backed away in horror as these shadow ponies gazed upon her with blood red eyes that held no emotion or soul, only the desire to consume. Twilight didn't wait for the shadows to attack. She turned tail

and ran as fast as her hooves could carry her. She drove forward not bother to try and see if she was being followed, her panic serving as a focusing lens for her desire to reach a place of safety. Behind her erupted a harsh mare's voice screaming in a shrill fit of uncontrollable rage that shattered the silence like a million shards of glass.

"YOU SHALL NOT TAKE HIM FROM US! WE....ARE....WHOLE!" The voice overflowed with hatred and disgust, which seemed to enter Twilight's ears and tear at her brain. It was the sound of something unholy and it was trapped inside this place with her, hungry for her.

Twilight was ready to take her Grandfather's advice and break her hold on the spell when the air was again filled with a familiar throb of red light. Without realizing it she had run all the way to the opposite side of the island and now found herself standing before the Red Marker as it rose endlessly into oblivion, far beyond her sight. She was close enough to touch it and sensed that this was more of a transparent image projected from some unknown and hidden source. She could clearly see her reflection upon its flawless exterior, so it also acted like a mirror too.

Mere inches from the Marker, Twilight could discern an object suspended within it's being. Something instinctual told her that this was the object that she had come here to retrieve. Not really a weapon, as she thought it to be, more like a suit of armor that she had never witnessed before or could have conceived of in her wildest dreams. It was not made of gold or shaped for ornate appearances or ceremonial traditions like the uniforms used by the guard ponies in Canterlot. This armor was made to completely cover the user from head to hoof in uninterrupted segments of padding and protection. The helmet had three slits for the wearer to see out of, the chest was covered in metallic plates and ribs to protect the major organs, and all four limbs were completely sealed with a combination of thick, yet flexible, material with metal plating attached at key points to provide maximum protection to the muscles against attacks from the side. Overall the suit was made to appear sleek and smooth, like a polished stone. It seemed as if any violent blow would simply slide off its shell.

However, this suit was made to for a creature that was foreign to her. Judging solely on the body structure it was apparent that the creature meant to wear it possessed four limbs as well, but would only use two of them to carry itself vertically, standing nearly twice as tall as the biggest

stallion she knew. The creature would also sport unusually broad shoulders with the other two limbs, the arms, ending in hands with five articulate fingers each. Spike was the only individual she could think of that could wear such a contraption, but he only had four fingers on each hand, was way too short, and sported a tail that this armor didn't seem to account for.

Twilight instinctively reached out with a single hoof, it passed unimpeded through the image of the Marker and touched the suit. As soon as she made contact she saw flashes of memories appear in her mind's eye. They were memories belonging to somepony else. Twilight saw images of a bipedal creature, encased in the armor, fighting against vile monstrosities spawned from the nightmares of only the most depraved psychopaths. Scenes of unrestrained violence, death, and destruction that stretched across cities of impressive gothic architecture, churches of colorful stained glass, a school where the children had been slaughtered, and reaching into the deepest void of space where even the stars refused to shine. A place where no hope remained.

No dreams.

No future.

No life.

Only dead space.

She felt herself drifting in emptiness, an abyss deeper than any ocean. She clutched the armor tightly as her only means of support. Was this the weapon that Celestia and Luna sought? It was too terrible to comprehend; it had no place in Equestria. Something inside her felt only despair and she wept openly.

As she felt the cold lifeless suit press tighter against her skin she experienced an astonishing feeling of calm confidence and renewed hope. As bad as things seemed now something inside her said that this was not the end. That only as long as she continued to fight, refusing to surrender, refusing to bow down, then the darkness could be defeated. She had done it once before, she could do it again.

...

Twilight awoke upon the alter and felt the firm touch of stone on her side. She didn't know when she had released the spell, that didn't matter, the dream was over and she was back in reality.

"Oh no," She heard Luna gasp, rushing to her side, "Something is wrong!"

Twilight opened her eyes to look at the armored suit she continued to hold close to her body. It was just as impressive as before, but now it had changed. Its shape had shifted, transformed, and now could easily fit a pony her size. The armor began to move of its own free will under her grasp and she heard a groan of pain escape from it

"Holy crap that hurt." The armor spoke in a gruff male voice.

Chapter 5

Strange Relations

Isaac was having the worst day of his life. It was now over twelve hours since he'd escaped the psych ward of the hospital. In all this time he had yet to afford a single decent rest and his muscles ached from the nonstop struggle against these creatures. There were no reserves of adrenaline left in him and every fiber of his being begged for mercy. He pushed away such impulsive temptations, but they had become harder and harder to ignore. If he gave in now his death would follow soon after and that very failure would spell doom for every man, woman, and child of the Human race. Stopping that nightmare was the only thing that kept him going now.

He forced himself to stand as tall and proud as his battered body could manage. His bloodied left arm hanged limply in its socket with large gaping wounds punctured through the shoulder and hand. Isaac did not feel any pain the arm had long since gone completely numb from blood loss and shock. Tunnel vision was creeping in making it hard to focus. A problem intensified by his nearly useless right eye. It wasn't completely blind, but it burned horribly and was covered in a haze of tears and blood that he couldn't clear away because his helmet defied him that luxury.

Not that there was much to look at while he was stranded upon a chunk of rock hurtling through a starless void. The lights from his helmet's blood caked visors failed to cut far into the eternal night and further obscured in a thick fog that blanketed the area. He tried to wipe some of the blood off of his visor but it failed to improve his situation.

He could not conceive of a more fitting place for his final act of sacrifice, his Alamo as it were. This was a one way trip and even if he won there would be no hope of escape and no last minute rescue. There was no future to hope for anymore and that was alright. He would be the last life consumed by the machinations of the Marker, his Marker. The finality of it all gave him a strange sense of peaceful anger.

...

The Marker exploded with an ear splitting thunderous boom. A hail of deadly shrapnel rained down, but never touched the ground. The scattered pieces were drawn into orbit around the exposed and rapidly beating heart of the now defenseless artifact. The intense golden light of that unholy life filled the space around him and difficult to look directly at it. Isaac promptly raised his weapon and focused down the laser sights. His aim was unsteady from using only one hand, but crippled as he was there was no way he'd allow himself to miss a target that size. The pulse rifle screamed in a sharp metallic chorus of rapid mechanical hammer blows. Deadly spears of blue plasma energy surged unflinchingly and traveled at the speed of light to strike the core of the Marker. Injecting themselves deep into the essence with gruesome consequence.

The recoil from the weapon's deadly delivery shook Isaacs' entire body. It bucked in his grip like a wild stallion and caused pain to shoot up and down his good arm as he tightened his hold and forced his aim to remain true. In seconds the ammo counter flat lined at zero and the pulse rifle clicked in rapid futility as it tried to draw sustenance from the drained power cell. After the final rounds impacted home, the Marker's evil heart ruptured into a wild tornado of golden energy. The tornado quickly degenerated into a tar black color as the Marker's life force rapidly bled out. Countless streams of dark energy sprouted like tentacles from the ruined core whipping about madly like a great animal enthralled violently in its death rattle. The tentacles sliced and smashed off sections of the island and sent the pieces careening wildly about as they were absorbed into the core and it grew bigger, an uncontrollable spire of insanity. The sensors in Isaac's suit sent warning messages to his HUD registering a growing concentration of energy that was quickly approaching critical mass.

His head felt like it was being crushed under an industrial press as the Marker's influence over him grew in intensity tenfold. Finally facing his ultimate annihilation a part of Isaac relented and desperately searched for a way to survive, to escape the inevitable. He turned on his heel and began to run in the opposite direction. He only managed a single opening step when he noticed a rectangular mirror, a little taller and wider than he, appeared just inches from him. His image was clear in the mirror's reflection as well as the unrestrained destruction of the dying Marker behind him. None of that was what caused him to freeze dead in his tracks in abject shock. Standing in front of his reflection was a creature that he would never ever, not in his wildest dreams, have thought to see in a place

like this and at this very moment. It was standing a couple of inches below half of his height, with large violet eyes that radiated innocence and concern tinged with obvious fear. It was what he could only describe as a purple unicorn with a mane of dark blue accented by a single stripe of pink.

Before Isaac could fully appreciate the impossibility which stood before him the unicorn reached a forearm through the mirror and actually touched him. At the moment of contact his mind imploded under a wave of lightening quick flashes, each flash accompanied by an unfamiliar memory. He groaned under the unexpected onslaught of another person's mind and soul merging with his own. The raw awareness traveled along the edges of his mind, filling him with renewed hope and purpose. He could see a majestic city of stone carved out of a mountain, a humble town of horse-like creatures, six elements that seemed to resonate in time with each other, and many more in such bright colors it hurt to watch. The memories were as strange as they were impossible and Isaac struggled to force these foreign images out of his mind convinced they must have been born of the Marker's control over him, trying to lull him into a false sense of victory through a kind of invasive reverse psychology.

His act of defiance was woefully short lived as he was struck brutally from behind as the Marker detonated with the force of a nuclear warhead. His entire existence buckled under the irresistible force. The intensity of the titanic fireball propelled him through the mirror and it shattered under the force as he passed through the veil. Tumbling head over heels in oblivion Isaac felt his chest tighten under the scrutiny of a vice grappling him strongly. He looked down and saw the purple unicorn wrapped around his torso, clinging with all its might like a fearful child to a loving guardian. His instincts commanded him to rip the alien creature off of him, to throw it away, and kill it. He grabbed its arms, ready to tear it apart limb from limb.

Suddenly it felt as if the whole universe had blinked and changed. In that infinitesimal moment beyond all human comprehension of time and reality, a feeling he could neither identify nor fathom intervened and held him back from the cruelty he had been about to commit. He was not entirely sure why he stopped and eagerly the gesture of friendship from the unicorn.

He wrapped his arms around this innocent entity, even if it did ultimately come from a fabrication of his own crazed and deluded imagination. Maybe, just maybe, a part of him wanted to be comforted, to show it that

everything would turn out for the best in the end. Or he simply did not care to fight anymore and this unicorn was, by far, a great deal of a prettier sight than what he'd been through that day. It felt good, as if someone finally recognized everything that he'd fought for and all that he'd sacrificed in order to save humanity from its own selfish mistakes.

...

"Holy crap that hurt." His mouth felt full of cotton as he gently shifted his body into a slightly more comfortable position. The impact from the sudden landing left him winded and a little disoriented. The peaceful presence of the unicorn was gone and he realized it was getting very hot inside his suit. The environmental control was inactive and judging from the total lack of a HUD his entire RIG was without power. Without power he might as well be wearing a giant paperweight since that was all it would be useful for.

Breathing in ragged gulps he concentrated on locating the Marker's presence within his brain. He still felt the Marker's corrupting influence, like the worst migraine he'd ever experienced, but it was fast evaporating away. He allowed a few moments of personal congratulation and a tentative smile of victory.

He had beaten the odds and had emerged both alive and in surprisingly good spirits.

It was finally over and he was free.

...

Twilight quickly jumped away from the strange new pony, to stand at Princess Luna's side unsure of how to deal with the armored interloper laid out in front of her. The situation had certainly taken a turn for the bizarre.

"Wha...What happened. What it suppose to work that way?" Twilight couldn't remember a time when she'd so screwed up a spell this badly before. Well there was that one time when the parasprites had invaded Ponyville and started eating all the buildings because of her mistake, but that was immaterial compared to this.

"I can't remember releasing the magic maybe I missed what I needed to find and brought him back by accident. I'm sorry Luna, I panicked I should've heeded your warning about shadows." Twilight sputtered.

"Calm down Twilight." Luna said in almost near panic herself. "While you were inside I was able to follow along with the weave of the magic and I'll be honest, I am very impressed with your talents. Whatever went wrong I don't think it's your fault."

Twilight briefly explained to Luna what had transpired inside the shadow world. Beginning at her arrival, to her grandfather's appearance, and ending at the moment she had discovered the armored suit. By the end of her tale she was hyperventilating herself to pieces.

"You told me that this would be a weapon." Twilight couldn't fathom anyone being so cruel to think of anypony, armor or not, as some mindless tool created with the intent to cause harm. He was an individual blessed with the same right for happiness and friendship as any other pony. He also had a name and she knew what it was....

'Isaac Clarke'

"Yes, that's what I was told." Luna sat down. She was laid so low her nose almost touched the ground. "I wonder if this was all a terrible mistake and I'm responsible for dragging you into the middle of it all."

"Princess, it's my fault," Twilight felt just as guilty as Luna was acting. If only she had studied harder and had been more vigilant, more confident, then maybe she could've made Luna proud. Luna had come to her out of confidence and she'd rewarded that trust with failure.

"I just wanted to do a good deed," Luna was crying, "to prove that I wanted to make up for my past sins. If I had known this was going to happen I would not have been so eager to have pushed us, all three of us, into this terrible impasse. Summoning a live creature, or pony, was banned long ago for good reason, because of the inherent dangers of cross world contamination."

"What are we going to do now?" Twilight closely examined Isaac with a critical eye and a profound sense of curiosity and uncertainty. The influx of Isaac's memories gave her more than enough reasons to fear what he was

capable of. Yet, the bookworm side of her wanted to study him in unrestrained depth to find out where he'd come from and how his armor worked. More importantly she wanted to know more about him as an individual and apologize for what she'd done. Normally she was very reserved when it came to meeting new ponies, but there was something alluring, mysterious even, about Isaac. She wasn't sure what it was, but she wanted to find out.

"Well, our plan was to....my plan." Luna stalled trying to collect her words carefully. It had been a flimsy plan at best and even Celestia had been against it, at least from the start. What was she to tell her big sister now that she'd made a mess everything yet again and now expected Celestia to fix it for her?

"If..If it was simply to be used against the Marker then I was going to hide it away until the time was right. Now..I don't know." Luna shook her head in shame wondering if it was ever possible for her to do something right for once.

"I got it," Twilight suddenly exclaimed excitedly, an idea converging in her head. While she only managed to remember Isaac's name and a few other disjointed images from the memories, her instincts told her that he was perfect for the job laid out in front of them.

"I'll take him back to Ponyville with me. If I help him make new friends there then I'm sure he'll be willing to help us, just as my friends did a year ago when we defeated Nightmare Moon. Umm, no offense Princess Luna."

"None taken, but are you sure? I don't want to offload even more of this burden onto you, beside we don't know if he will help us or if he can."

"Trust me Luna." Twilight felt her spirits lifting and she gave the princess a confident smile, "The memories I saw inside the shadow world showed me that he is perfect for the job. Isaac Clarke," she pointed towards the armored pony, speaking his name out loud for the first time, "has already destroyed a Marker in his own world already." Luna bolted upright, eyes wide, and mouth gaping when she heard Twilight refer to it by name.

"Are you sure?" Luna was afraid to think that things actually might work out.

"Would I dare lie?" Twilight's smile grew broader. Luna turned her gaze to regard Isaac with a renewed sense of hope at Twilight's words, but she was also tempered with doubts. She did, after all, still had to explain all this faldral to Celestia and it was become more complex than she'd feared.

"Though I am curious as to how you learned his name. " Luna asked rubbing her chin in thought.

"Well," Twilight's smile faltered slightly as she contemplated the how and why herself. "I think that mind-control portion of the summon spell went both ways. We connected with each other on a deep personal level and were able to share our collective experiences for just a brief moment. Though it was so fast and unexpected that I'm afraid I don't remember much about the finer details."

"This is going to be trouble." Luna sighed.

"He already is." Twilight agreed with a nod.

...

As his night-vision slowly kicked in Isaac found himself inside a cavern, or a mine judging from the smooth walls and the erected scaffolding. He was surprised that it wasn't the metal corridors of the EarthGov Research Center. It was possible that he had been blown back inside the Titan mines.

There was only a single source of light, a gentle bright white that hovered just behind him judging from the way his shadow was cast out in front of him. He heard two voices full of confusion and doubt whispering in hushed tones behind him. Isaac could tell they were not the phantom disembodied whispers that frequently echoed inside his head, calling out his name or other random gibberish. These were flesh and blood voices uttered from at least two young women, judging by the youthful higher register. He was curious as to who it was, but didn't feel especially motivated to eavesdrop on their discourse. Rather he just wanted to take a well deserved rest. At least until he unmistakably overheard one of them say something about a Marker.

His body felt slightly numb all over, the feeling was especially prevalent in his hands and feet where he could not register a single thing. His joints felt

misplaced and attached in all the wrong places, and his midsection felt unusually tight like the armor had shrunk. Regardless he forced himself onto his feet so that he could try and face the people that had either saved him or captured him. Desperately hoping that it was the former and they were friendly.

...

His back still turned towards Luna and Twilight. Slowly Isaac had begun to lift himself up, rising to his full height to stand vertically on both of his hind legs, just as Twilight had seen him doing before he had become a pony. Twilight realized Isaac probably had yet to fully appreciate the fact that he was transformed otherwise he might've known that this was a very unusual position for a colt to take.

"The hell!" Isaac shouted in alarm, now fully aware of his hooves for hands before he suddenly lost his balance. He tried to catch himself with a step back on his toeless feet, but it only served to accelerate his reverse speed. He tumbled backwards uncontrollably, arms splayed and swinging trying to find something to hold onto.

"Whoa, Whoaaaaa!"

"Look out!" Twilight's warning fell short as Isaac collapsed on top of her in a clatter of metal, cymbals, and dust. When the smoke cleared Luna glanced upon the tangled knot of limbs and hooves that was Twilight and Isaac. Twilight's pupils spun like tops and Luna giggled at the humorous sight feeling her tensions easing greatly.

Isaac was shocked when he realized he had fallen upon the enigmatic unicorn from the mirror, only she was not an unknown element anymore. A part of his subconscious identified her as the most favored student of some royal figure or other and that she was a social misfit and nerd who went by the silly name of Twilight Sparkle. She had also been the one whose mind he'd touched upon. Or was it the other way around? Not that the distinction really mattered, he was confident that this was all just a product of his own deranged brain. It was all cooked up to show that he'd finally flown over the coo-coos nest and was nuttier than super-dense peanut brittle. If Twilight's existence wasn't enough to prove he was totally bonkers then there existed a second, even more inscrutable, figment of his imagination to further the strong case against his sanity. This one was a darker skinned unicorn with

wings and her name was Princess Luna, goddess of the moon. He scoffed at the uncreative name and was convinced she was most likely the underhanded leader of some cult that worshipped the moon and other nonsense. Currently she was laughing at him like a giddy schoolgirl with a voice that was both too sweet and flighty to belong to a real regal monarch.

"You know our names?" Luna's humor melted into incredulity. She realized that Twilight was absolutely right about the spell acting as a two way door. It sounded far too similar to what had happened to her.

Isaac wasn't sure when he'd spoken aloud, but he set about peeling himself away from Twilight only to stumble a few panicked steps away to open up the distance between him and them. He almost wished they had simply turned out to be more Necromorphs then at least he would know what the proper response should be and that was to strategically dismember all their limbs and stomp the remains into bloody mush. He checked his harness for his weapons and all he found was the empty pulse rifle on his back. All his other weapons from the plasma cutter, to the line gun, and even the contact beam were all MIA. The latter of which would've been really useful for blasting these mind parasitic pony illusions into chunky salsa.

'*Shit!*' Isaac silently cursed.

"You're not real, none of this is. I'm not really here. It's just a dream, just a dream." He chanted to himself hoping that through sheer willpower he could cast them away and return back to reality.

"I know you're confused right now," Luna said gently trying to play the diplomat and to reassure him. "I can explain everything, ok, but you have to trust me." Luna took a few tentative steps closer.

"Leave me alone!" Isaac yelled. Luna jumped in surprise at the sudden outburst and backed away nearly tripping over her hooves in the process.

"You're just a hallucination and you're not going to break me, damn it!" Isaac's hateful words struck Luna right in the heart and she seemed to shrink pitifully under the verbal assault. The princess was saved when Twilight Sparkle interpose herself between her and Isaac.

"Stop!" Twilight commanded, "Where are your manners? That is no way for a gentlecolt to addresses the princess!" Twilight's face was twisted in anger

and positioned less than an inch from his. She was utterly furious with his disrespectful attitude and tone towards Luna. Foul language was an especially pesky pet peeve of hers too and really got her goat whenever she heard it. If he had insisted in talking to Celestia in the same fashion then there was no way Twilight could be held responsible for what would have happened next.

"You're Isaac Clarke right? Show some respect for royalty! You're her guest after all." An unwitting guest, but a guest nonetheless Twilight finished silently.

"Who are you and how do you know my name?" Isaac pressed his faceplate against Twilight's muzzle to show he meant serious business.

"You should already know my name, the same way I know yours. Through the mirror and when our minds touched each other." Twilight shoved back, giving a nervous smile in hope that she was right,

"Please calm yourself down and I can explain everything about what's happened."

"I only want two explanations. Why am I here and why the fuck am I a horse?" Isaac pushed back even more, his curse eliciting a flare of incense from Twilights eyes. He figured that if he pushed her buttons enough, made her angry, then she'd show her true nature.

"I can explain that too," Twilight strained to stand her ground under Isaac's emerging physical superiority, "but we need your help."

"My help?"

"Do you know what a Marker is?" Twilight asked. Isaac recoiled sharply like she had just physically struck him.

"Maybe I do know what it is," Isaac said slowly, reflecting a greater degree of caution, "and maybe, this is all just hypothetical talk you understand," he chuckled, "I might have just killed one and sent it straight to hell where it belongs. Supposing that this is true then what exactly is your business with me, hypothetically?" Isaac wanted to shout in absolute frustration. Just when he had thought he was finally free now he found himself being dragged back into the nightmare.

"Well, in theory, somepony wants to create another Marker," Twilight was sweating heavily under the strain to keep Isaac at bay, "and we'd like you to help us to find them and stop it, theoretically speaking of course." She gave another, more consoling, smile this time hoping that she might win him over. She really wished his helmet was not in the way so she could see his face and maybe glimpse at what he was thinking.

"No." Isaac replied plainly craning his neck back slightly, breaking contact between the two of them.

"What? But why?" Twilight's felt hurt from the rejection.

"Because, damn it, I've already served my time I have nothing more to give."

"I said you need to watch your language!" Whenever he cursed her anger rose exponentially and overrode all logical thought. If he cursed one more time in the presence of the princess then bad things would happen.

"What did I tell you about the foul language, your being rude to the princess."

"What are you going to do about it you piece of shi...", Before Isaac could finish there was a pulse of air that passed over him as he felt a massive force impact his chest. His body was easily and forcefully blown back with the power of a sledgehammer, the impact flung him spinning through the air at a dizzying speed. He didn't go far before crashing into the cavern wall with a humorous flattening crunch.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I..I didn't mean to do that." Twilight rushed to Isaac's side as he slowly slid back down to the ground and caught up in an uncontrollable fit of coughing. She had been angry at ponies before, but never to the point that she would strike at them. So Isaac had a dirty mouth, but that was no excuse for her to lash out in such fury. She was better than that, wanted to believe that she was disciplined enough and in complete control of her emotions and magical talents that this would not happen.

"What was that?" Isaac clutched a hoof to his chest as he gasped for air.

"Sorry," Twilight repeated as she tried to help Isaac back onto his hooves, "I didn't mean it. It was an accident!" She would have to do something extra special to make it up to him. Right after she cleaned his mouth out with soap, just as her parents had done to her when she had made a linguistic oopsie. It would not proper to have him speaking in such a fashion amongst her friends or the impressionable foals of ponyville.

"It felt like a force gun hit me."

"I was just so mad that I kind of, well, punched you with my telekinesis."

"Good one," Isaac half congratulated her and half laughed at the absurdity of the fact that he'd just been blown away by a purple unicorn with a kinesis module, "but next time a simple slap to the face would have sufficed." He tried not to laugh too hard as he was set upon by a fresh wave of coughing.

"Are you ok?" Luna had winced in pure sympathy when she'd seen Isaac taste the full unbridled fury of Twilight's nerd rage. Luna knew well and good to never drive Twilight over the edge because for as unassuming and bookish as the unicorn appeared she could be a real terror when provoked.

"Oh yeah, good times." Isaac groaned in agony. Pain certainly had a way to focus one's mind. Where he had once been set in his personal convictions of what was real and what was not, now he began to doubt himself. He still wanted to believe this was just a fever dream, yet everything was just too vivid for it to be false. It could still be a hallucination although he'd never had one that had been so persistent especially after he had just been back-handed halfway across the room right into a solid wall. All five of his senses told him that this was somehow real. There was the dead weight of the suit on his body, the fresh wave of pain in his back and chest, the salty taste of perspiration in the corners of his mouth, and the smell inside his helmet; which his nose judged him to be in desperate need of a shower.

"Are you real?" Isaac hoped so because it would mean he wasn't crazy, but he simultaneously also feared it. It would mean that this was not his world and that he was an outcast wandering through an alien landscape. He just wanted to go back home to the life he had once enjoyed and not wallow in a reality where he was a flippin' talking horse socializing with other talking horses.

"Of course I'm real. Why do you refuse to believe the evidence right in front of you?" Maybe she was being unfair, but Twilight could not comprehend why Isaac persisted in being so stubborn despite the facts.

"I'm getting too old for this." Isaac steadied himself, this time on all four limbs. "Ok then, enlighten me on where the hell I am and how I got here."

"Well I, um," Twilight rubbed her head in embarrassment, "We're in the mines just under the Everfree forest, just outside my home in the town of Ponyville, located in the kingdom of Equestria. As for why you're here, you can blame me for that. I sort of pulled you into Equestria by accident."

"Pulled? I don't understand. Did you employ the use of a shockpoint gate?" Isaac was dubious at that idea. The ponies didn't seem advanced enough to possess such technology, but it was the only explanation he could think of. Well apart from magic, but that would just be childish.

"Shockpoint?" Twilight had never heard of such a term before, but it sounded important and served only to increase her inquisitiveness. "Is that what you call magic in your world?"

"Guh, no." Isaac grunted forlornly. Of course it had to be magic, it was only sensible that if he was going to go insane then he might as well do it properly.

A shockpoint 'reactor,' Isaac explained, was the single most powerful piece of technology the Human race had ever created. It was what enabled Human starships to travel to distant star systems in mere seconds instead of years. Isaac had served several tours in the Merchant Marines as a civilian systems engineer helping to protect and repair merchant starships as they transported goods and services in between planetary colonies. While serving he had heard many stories about people disappearing into thin air at the exact moment a starship passed through a shockpoint 'gate.' One tall tale alluded to an entire ship never returning once it had entered the gate, but he equated that to a modern retelling of the 'Flying Dutchman,' a story which was older than space travel itself.

"Oh, that sounds so exciting!" Twilight clapped her hooves together in joy. She wanted to know everything about this shockpoint technology and was determined to get Isaac back to the library so she could write down everything he knew about it. The idea pushed her into ecstatic levels of

bliss just thinking about all the knowledge and stories she could learn from him, the first of its kind in all of Equestria and she would have exclusive access to it.

Princess Luna had fallen prey to the especially alluring idea of space travel, her face lit up in a smile of optimism at the idea of all ponies, not just the unicorns, being able to travel the star lines and to dance upon the moon alongside her. If such a thing were to become possible then maybe all of ponykind would be able to appreciate all the effort she put into sculpting the night sky and she wouldn't feel so alone all the time. Isaac said he was an engineer and had worked and lived on such ships before. Luna was dead set on getting him to Canterlot at the first available opportunity so she could learn how to build such wonderful devices herself.

Under the intense hungering glare Isaac felt a cold shiver go down his back. The only time he had ever seen anyone so excited over the idea of space travel was when he was in elementary school back on Earth. The idea of traveling the stars was a child's dream fated to grow altogether boring and mundane in its regularity. However, seeing the same enthusiastic feelings he had once felt now on display in front of him through the expressions of these ingenuous ponies made him feel an emotion he hadn't felt in a long time.

He was getting desperate and needed to settle the matter once and for all, he needed to see them with his own eyes. Feeling the underside of his helmet he touched the two emergency release latches. There was a hiss of air as the seal was broken and he lifted it over his head. He looked upon his two companions with his naked eyes and they had to audacity to persist in their refusal to disappear into thin air. He sighed in resignation to the inevitable, dropped his helmet to the ground, and leaned back in reluctant defeat using the cavern wall as his only means of support.

"Story of my life." He rubbed his eyes. The simple act failed to elicit any discomfort from his injured right eye. He blinked a few times to test it and rubbed it again. Finding that there was no blood or tears he could only conclude that his eye was somehow healed. When had it happened, that was a mystery. He studied his left arm as well and where the wounds on his shoulder and hand had been so grievous before, they were now inconspicuously absent from his person.

When he had removed his helmet Twilight realized that this was her first opportunity to finally see the pony behind the mask. He was a handsome, in a rugged sort of way, colt pony with light grey skin and a mane the color of onyx black and cut very short. Considering the extraordinary circumstances that had brought them together Twilight was feeling somewhat disappointed by his slightly above-average appearance. Now that she thought about it he did appear to be a little on the short side for a colt, standing only a couple of inches taller than her.

'You should never judge a book by its cover or a pony by his armor.' Twilight thought silently. After all it was clear he was very intelligent, capable, and well traveled. If he also shared her love of books then that would seal the deal for her.

Such positive feelings only lasted until she took note of his eyes. There were prominent dark circles under them, clear indications of a terrible lack of sleep and disturbance of mind. Yet, these bottomless blue-green pupils reminded her of Luna in a very strong way. The color was different, of course, but they shared a bottomless quality about them that reflected a terrible reality of an individual who had experienced far too much suffering and despair for a single lifetime. Twilight understood now, the real fact of the matter was that for all of Isaac's bravado, foul language, and attitude it was, all of it, a simple façade to mask his terror. He was afraid of them and Twilight could not fathom why he should feel so.

The three of them stood in an awkward silence when there emerged a disgusting and sickly choking sound that echoed from deep within the mines. It was faint at first, but quickly gathered volume. It sounded like a pony trying to scream in agony while its lungs were filled with fluid; a repulsive and wretched sound.

"Hello? Is anypony there?" Twilight called out with an edge of concern. There should not be anyone else down here besides the three of them. Had they been followed or was something else living down here?

That single instance of random gurgling babble quickly multiplied into at least a dozen more individuals and still more joined the group after that. In less than a minute the airways were saturated with an oppressive undulating mass of unearthly screams, cries, and moans.

'You've got a job to do and you know what it is.'

Twilight felt the words echo unobstructed in her head at the moment she saw a faint hint of movement emerge from the tunnel.

"Both of you get back!" Isaac barked the order as he positioned himself between them and the tunnel entrance. His fear fell away, taking a backseat behind a mask of grim resolve. Twilight and Luna both strained to see what had spooked Isaac. While he didn't need to see what was heading their way, the sound alone told him everything. He backpedaled in tune to the dual gasps of horror that escaped from his companions as the first of the creatures emerged into the light. It was something that Isaac had hoped he would never see again. It didn't matter if it used a human or a pony for a host it was clear that this perverted abomination was what he had come to know as a Necromorph.

Some might have simply called it a zombie, but that was both a poor and inaccurate description, for a necromorph was something far more sinister. It was a reanimated corpse of a deceased creature that had its body twisted and mutilated in ways that spoke of a deliberate redesign and a total disregard for whatever the natural anatomy had once been. The monster that had entered the cavern used to be an Earth-pony, its mane and tail hung in wet clumps of grime matted hair. It stood upright, shuffling uneasily on its hind legs, its hooves stretched out unnaturally into rudimentary 'feet' to aid in keeping its balance. Its forelegs, held high over its head, were swinging wicked looking organic scythe blades that had grown out from the pony's own skeleton being pushed through the hooves. Its torso was savagely ripped open revealing the lower rib cage and all of the entrails in order to allow a smaller pair of grasping arms to push out through the abdominal wall. Its face was no longer in possession of a nose while blood and other fluids dripped from a mouth that was missing the lower jaw.

"In Celestia's name..!" Twilight was paralyzed in fear, horrified at the visage of the former pony.

What evil magic could make such a ghastly thing? The Marker? Twilight struggled to come to grips with everything that was happening.

If this was truly the work of a Marker then it was no wonder that Luna and Celestia wanted to keep the knowledge of such a thing secret. Everything from the closing of the Canterlot borders, the high levels of secrecy, and the need for a weapon to fight it, all of it made a horrible kind of sense now.

Was this to be the fate of Ponyville and all of Equestria?

Similarly Twilight also felt deep remorse and pity for the unfortunate necropony stumbling towards her. No pony deserved to be shaped and abused this way, it was..it was.. She was utterly speechless, in her vast well of knowledge to draw upon she was at a loss to find the words or measurements adequate to put this fiend into context. Forcing herself to look it straight in the face she found an impression of graphic déjà vu.

...

Twilight backed away in horror as these shadow ponies gazed upon her with blood red eyes that held no emotion or soul, only the desire to consume.

...

It was the same sensation as before. There was a faint glow of red emanating from necropony's black lifeless eyes and it looked upon the three of them with the same remorseless desire to consume every living thing it encountered.

The necromorph reared back casting a shrill guttural wail that echoed throughout the mines. Before long more nightmares just like it began to pour into the room from the mines.

Dozens more.

"To the scaffolds! Get out of here now!" Isaac's desperate warning seemed to snap his companions out of their silent revelry.

Luna spread her wings, took two steps, and hastily launched herself into the air while Twilight and Isaac made for the nearest stairs. Isaac risked a brief detour as he snatched up his helmet using his teeth. By the time they scaled to the first level of catwalks the cylindrical room was nearly full of the monsters. The first necro had begun its own ascension while more of its kin were already on the first level having used the stairs on the other side of the circular room.

"This way!" Luna called from up above them, the light from her horn was the only indicator of her location.

"We'll use the next tunnel up to make it back to the elevator." Isaac and Twilight followed Luna's light and continued to climb up the scaffolding. They gained precious distance between them and the necros only by virtue that the necro's malformed feet were not suitable for stairs, but they were still close enough for the red glow in their eyes to be visible.

Up and up the ponies fled, climbing level after level carried upwards through the zig-zaging stairwell. The entirety of the structure was incredibly unstable after countless centuries of neglect and decay. Now uncomfortable amounts of debris, consisting of tendrils of dust and small rocks, were beginning to fall as the structure was being pulled out of its wall supports under the incredible weight of two live ponies and several hundred necromorphs.

Arriving at about the fifteenth level they had reached the ceiling. Sweat poured from their brows and their legs felt like jelly after such an exhaustive climb. Isaac and Twilight met up with Luna as the princess pointed them towards the exit tunnel on the other side. The scaffold continued to wrap itself around the circular walls, but now there was a single catwalk that cut straight through the middle. Twilight imagined that if the marker had still been here then this would take them right through the middle of its twin spires.

The three of them raced down the middle path only to be ambushed by a pair of necros that jumped out of the shadows of the exit. These new creatures looked just their kin from below, except for the single horn that adorned their foreheads which glowed with dark energy. Their lithe decayed bodies shook and thrashed about in violent uncontrollable spasms as if they were gripped in the middle of a terrible epileptic seizure, their faces frozen into a permanent scowls.

The pair of twitching necros charged with unnatural blinding speed. Energy erupted from the horn of one and it blinked out of existence only to instantly reappear after it had teleported itself half down the catwalk between it and the three living ponies.

"I'll hold them here," Isaac ordered after he dropped the helmet, "take the other paths and get out of here." he reached down to pick up a loose metal rod with his teeth. Isaac brandished the improvised weapon, testing it by striking it against the guardrail and feeling satisfied with the solid metal ring.

He stood firm before the undead unicorn, ready to do whatever it took to save his companions.

Chapter 6

Taste of Blood

"Isaac," Twilight cried, "We can't just leave you here."

"Dohn't whorry ahbout me, I do thish all de time," Isaac replied as best he could with a mouth full of metal.

"Go! I havf thish undur kontroll!"

Brave or not, Isaac was ready for the twitcher which had not hesitated in its murderous rampage. It lunged at him with its blades raised high, seeking his warm flesh to rip and tear at. Standing up on his hind legs, using the railing for support, Isaac swung and delivered a powerful right hook to the monster, rotating his entire torso for maximum damage. The blow connected with the monster's face with a sickening wet crunch as decayed flesh burst in a shower of gore and a popped eyeball. The creature staggered, head held at an awkward angle, and Isaac followed it with a downwards swing of the metal rod. The twitcher nimbly dodged by shifting away, mere moments before the weapon would liquefy the rest of its head.

Unsure how to better help the former human, Twilight and Luna retraced their steps before splitting up with each taking opposite paths around the scaffolds. Meanwhile both twitchers occupied the central path with Isaac where he was struggling against the first one with the second one blocked by its partner.

"Hold on!" Luna came to a stop against the right wall, "I can flank it from here." Waves of magical light surrounded her horn as energy was drawn in and forcefully concentrated into a sphere of power. Still weak after her long imprisonment she fought hard to concentrate on drawing in so much magic into a single point no bigger than an apple seed, beads of sweat ran down her forehead.

"Let's see how well you move after this." Reaching maximum containment the sphere of magic fired from her horn with a thunderous bass, aim straight and true for the rear necromorph. The bolt tore through the air,

leaving a trail of steam as it super heated the moisture in the atmosphere. The necromorph unicorn seemed to sense the incoming attack as it blinked out of existence before the collision and leaving the projectile detonated against the earthen wall. Solid rock exploded under the impact and left a foal sized crater.

"Where did it go?" Luna desperately checked her surroundings.

Twilight yelped, skidding to a halt, as the creature reappeared in front of her, blocking her escape. Twilight choked in fear as she stared death in straight in the face.

"Help!" Twilight screamed as the twitcher moved in. Quickly she jumped back to avoid being beheaded by a scythe, but wasn't fast enough. The tip of the blade raked across her left cheek leaving a very deep cut. Her cry of pain was echoed in her hears as she felt the sensation of warm fluid running down her neck. The necromorph shrieked in a cruel laugh as it thrashed and quaked, readying for another strike.

"Twilight, defend yourself!" The princess instructed while she searched for a better firing position. "Use that spell from before."

"What spell?" Twilight breathed heavily while her heart was beating rapidly against her chest. She was slowly retreated from her attacker, never breaking eye contact with it.

"That kinesis punch you used on Isaac!"

"I can't! I don't know how I did it in the first place."

"Do it Twilight or you could die!" The desperate order had somehow given her the strength to free her near paralyzed limbs and she sidestepped as the twitcher struck the spot she had just been occupying. Its blades had become stuck in the metal grating and it convulsed violently trying to free itself. Twilight had a sudden burst of inspiration as she recalled a portion of the knowledge she had gained from Isaac.

Twilight took advantage of the creature's weakness and quickly turned around to deliver the mightiest buck she had ever given in her life. Her blow struck one of the creature's arms and on its side, followed up by a loud snapping of bone as the arm broke away leaving a blade still embedded in

the catwalk. The creature collapsed against the railing, but was quickly rising. With telekinesis she extracted the severed blade from the grating with a powerful pull to the tune of bone scraping against metal. She aimed the improvised weapon at the twitcher's heart. Yet Twilight hesitated, terribly unsure of the act she was about to commit. She had never killed before not in self-defense or out of a need to protect others, another reason why she was Celestia's favorite student. She could find solutions without a need for fighting.

The abomination leaped into the air, its murderous intents clear. Without thinking Twilight had unleaded a blast of telekinesis, punching the weapon forward in a similar fashion as she'd done to Isaac. The organic blade was propelled at lethal velocity and impacted the twitcher in the chest with a sadistic result. Blood and gore gushed from the impact area, splattering Twilight in an oily black fluid, as the abomination flew back in a spiral clear across the room before being impaled upside down onto the wall.

"I'm so sorry." Twilight wept in pity for the former pony. Yet even having struck a blow that would've killed any normal pony, the creature was still moving and teleported itself back onto the catwalk. Twilight stared agape while the creature regarded the object in its chest, as if in a moment of confusion, before it uttered a cry of mindless anger before continuing the offensive.

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Isaac was slowly losing ground as the necromorph unleashed a flurry of blows, swinging with wild abandon. He expertly defended himself, using the metal rod as a means of parrying the strikes away. He heard Luna say something, but was unable to respond back. He noticed the rear twitcher suddenly disappear and then there was a bright flash of light as an energy projectile flew over the rails. The unexpected light wrecked havoc on his night-vision and he was momentarily blinded.

"Crap!" he cursed as the rod was knocked from his grasp and vanished. In a desperate move he readied another punch at where he thought the creature was. The twitcher had anticipated the move and brought its blades in for defense and the punch landed harmlessly against the its blades and left Isaac vulnerable. It barrled forward and knocked him down the ground before bringing its scythes down for a killing strike to his neck.

Isaac's experience told him what to expect and he flaying his arms out hitting the dull side of the scythes, redirecting the blades to land harmlessly to either side of his head. Pulling in his legs he kicked the twitcher square in the exposed solar plexus, knocking it onto its back.

"I have had enough of **you!**" Isaac, half crazed from fury, pounced on the downed creature trampling, striking, and stomping. His legs had become covered in black blood as hoof pulverized bone and destroyed sinew. The monster cried in pain, but Isaac was far beyond remorse. The only thing he saw or felt was the need to break and destroy as he viciously crushed the necromorph, sending up a shower of fluids and bits. He never stopped until the twitcher was a bloodied pulpy mess, a waterfall of viscera falling from the catwalk.

"Die! Die! DIE!"

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By this time the flood of necromorphs had reached the top level, a surging mass of knives and hunger. Twilight knew there was only one way out and it was through the twitcher before her. Desperation overrode fear as she gritted her teeth and charged forward, horn aglow with magic. Like cracks of thunder pony and necro hooves galloped against the metal grates as Twilight charging forward towards a final confrontation. The necromorph readied for the killing blow and Twilight held out her horn ready to run her opponent through. The two of them continued their suicide charge, but it was the twitcher who was faster and had better reach. Feeling victory was at hand it swung its arms and found only empty air. It stopped and grunted in confusion, unable to understand how it lost its prey.

"You're not the only unicorn that can teleport." Twilight had thought as she reappeared behind the twitcher and ran away. She didn't have to look behind her to know the twitcher had already about-faced and was after her again. It still proved faster than her and it was only a matter of time before it caught her. Twilight saw a burst of movement in front of her and looked up to see that Luna had already landed on the platform in front of her. The princess was already ready with another sphere of raw concentrated energy.

"Duck!" Luna barked shooting a bolt of power twice as big as her first. Twilight did as she was told and felt the burning heat of the bullet as it

passed overhead. This time the twitcher failed to dodge and was ripped apart as the magic exploded in a shower of blue sparks. The many smoking pieces sailed into the air before disappearing down into the pit. The way was now clear and Twilight searched to discover Isaac's fate.

"We have to get out of here." Twilight called, but unsure if he had heard her. He stood over the remains of his work, eyes cast to the ground, and body trembling. He seemed to be mumbling something to himself.

"Isaac! We have to escape, NOW!" She called, louder this time. He looked up with an unreadable expression that quickly changed into urgency as he was pulled back from the brink of whatever dark place he had just been. Picking up his helmet he galloped to catch up.

Twilight and Luna had sojourned at the exit as Isaac made his way to them, the flood of necromorphs close behind. Suddenly and without warning the metal structure gave off a loud deep groan as the structure suddenly lurched perilously to the side. The sheer weight of so many bodies had finally overwhelmed the ancient structure. Bolts, screws, and thick wires snapped with loud metallic pings sending metallic shards flying like bullets and wires arcing like whips as the structure broke free from the walls. Isaac grabbed onto a rail post as the structure dipped backwards coming to crash at a dangerously low angle as the fatigued metal buckled and warped, a total collapse imminent.

Numerous necromorphs fell or were crushed, but still they still kept coming. The violent movements of the scaffold had little to no effect at slowing down the movement of hundreds and hundreds of necromorphs. The enclosed room was saturated with the vociferous cry of countless strangled voices as they continued get closer and closer, uncaring of the danger that they were in. If they couldn't walk they crawled, pulling themselves along with their blades, hungry eyes never breaking sight of their quarry.

When the structure fell Luna was fortunate to be able fly. However, Twilight had lost her balance and fell, sliding down the walkway towards Isaac and the monsters. Without hesitation Luna had launched herself after her friend, knowing she had to catch Twilight before it was too late. Unable to arrest her fall Twilight screamed in terror and then in pain as her arm crashed against one of the rail posts causing her to spin out of control. Her protests

were cut short as her head struck against another pole with a snap, the impact leaving her disoriented and lethargic.

"I got you." Isaac reached out as Twilight slid past, catching her arm with his. His strength was waning but he pulled her up close trying his best to shake her out of her dazed state while simultaneously holding onto the railing for dear life, the necros only mere feet away.

"Hey, can you hear me? Come on, snap out of it. We need to climb our way out." There was no way he could carry her out in time by himself, the necromorphs would surly catch them.

"You can do that right?" Isaac encouraged and Twilight felt her bafflement start to fade as she listened to his voice.

"Ok." She said neutrally, but her eyes were still glazed over. He feared that she might be suffering from a concussion caused from the blow, or perhaps something worse. There was just no telling with severe head trauma.

"No need for climbing," Luna said as she reached them and held out her forelegs, "leave Twilight to me. I can fly her up and come back for you." Isaac gladly handed Twilight over to Luna's care.

"Don't worry about me." He said as he began his climb, using the rail posts as a ladder. "She's hurt and you need to get her out of here. I'll catch up."

"I,....Are you sure?"

"I told you I've done this before, remember." He gave her a confident smile.

"I understand, but you better not die." With no more time to argue the point Luna carried Twilight out of harm's way, but swore that she'd return to get Isaac soon. She wasn't ready to leave anypony behind.

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Reaching the safety of the top tunnel, Luna carefully laid Twilight down upon the rocky earth. The purple unicorn did not respond and was completely still, her pupils fully dilated and staring at nothing. Luna now also noticed that her forearms and chest were smeared in blood.

"Twilight?" Luna felt the pit of her stomach fall out as she gently tapped the unicorn trying to elicit a response of some sort. Luna was not doctor and when she examined the wound to the unicorn's head she could not find the words to describe how terrible it was. What she saw looked bad, really bad, there was blood everywhere and already forming a puddle on the ground.

Dismissing the mess Luna put her ear to Twilight's chest and listened closely with hope fading. There was no breathing, no heartbeat.

Twilight Sparkle was dead.

"No! Stay with me Twilight. You can't die, not here, not like this. It's all my fault!" Luna cried out in despair, tears falling unchecked.

"This isn't good. What can I do now?" At no point had Luna ever hated herself more than she did now. She was an immortal goddess, the second ruler over all Equestria, and responsible for the rising and setting of the moon itself, and yet completely helpless to save a single pony's life. Any healing knowledge she once had was a thousand years out of practice.

"Please, Twilight, wake up. I didn't mean for this to happen, please forgive me."

I forgive you Princess Luna.

"Twilight?" Luna had heard her voice, but her body remained motionless.

But there are more important things for you to do, Luna. You have to stop them.

"No....no, no, no!" Luna stood over Twilight as if to protect her from some unseen force. "Don't you dare take her away you damned cursed rock!" Luna shouted into the darkness, shaking with rage. "She's too young. None of this is her fault it's my fault and my responsibility. If you want to take somepony, then it should've been me!"

Only the cries of the dead answered her plea. Luna forced herself to take several deep breaths to try and calm down; panicking would not help either of them.

"Focus Luna," the princess reassured herself, "alright, I have an idea. I just hope it works." She lowered herself to lay next to the still warm body of her friend.

"Hold on Twilight. I can save you, though I feel this will hurt me more than it does you." Luna touched her horn to the wound on Twilight's head. She closed her eyes while once again concentrating her magical energy into a single focused point. Currents of magical energy flowed all around her in a wild vortex of unrestrained power. Before her magic had always glowed with an inviting blue radiance now it was a lethal destructive red. She could now hear the voices in her head, whispers that turned into pleading cries. Luna could still clearly hear Twilight's amongst the vast chorus, still loud and strong. Twilight was telling her to stop what she was doing, that this was a terrible mistake she was committing.

"Come back Twilight, you're friends would miss you if you left now." Luna coaxed gently. Luna's eyes opened burning with an overwhelming fire, like twin suns trapped inside immaculate polished rubies. "I give of myself, to replenish you. Together we can embrace the infinite!"

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"Come on, you necromorph bastards! Let me see you work for your meal!" Isaac taunted the undead horde while kicking at a necro that had gotten too close, sending the insane creature falling into the pit and taking several of its kin with it.

"Yeah, fuck you!" Isaac frantically climbed. He was like a bat out of hell with necromorphs constantly nipping at his heels. The top was only a dozen more rungs away from his position; he was going to make it.

Abruptly a brilliant crimson light illumined the space above him. He instinctively looked away to protect his eyes while he could feel sudden and intense vibrations travel through the air and in the ground. Isaac feared that the quakes would cause the scaffold to crumble taking him with it. A few seconds later the light and vibrations ceased just as quickly as they had arrived. Something about the light gave him a feeling of sinister purpose and he redoubled his efforts to reach the top not sure what he'd find.

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"Wha....What happened?" Twilight coughed, her whole body felt cold and numb. Even the modest blue glow of Luna's horn seemed blinding to her. Out of reflex Twilight rubbed the spot where he'd hit her head, relieved to find no sign of injury, but it really hurt.

"Uh, Luna?" Twilight felt awkward when Luna suddenly Luna embraced her closely, not sure what had done to deserve it.

"It's ok Twilight, you just blacked out for a moment when you hit your head, but you'll be ok." Luna said wiping the tears from her eyes.

"You should thank Isaac, if he hadn't caught you at the last moment...."

"Yeah, speaking of that guy, a little help here."

The two mares turned to find Isaac struggling to lift himself over the side of the pit. Luna separated from their embraced to help the gruff colt. After they parted Twilight realized she could taste blood in her mouth and also felt nauseous, bile rising in her throat. She stepped away hoping the others didn't notice as she spit it out. That's when she noticed the pool of blood and something told her it was her own.

"Are you alright?" Luna examined him and apart from the splatter covering his armor she didn't see any injuries.

"Yeah, thanks, but we're not out of danger yet. There's a whole lot of necromorphs behind us and they're really angry. You said there was a way out of here?"

"Yes, just down this tunnel. Follow me." Luna led while the others followed and the trio galloped with all their might. The scaffolding had given up the fight and at long last had collapsed, the sounds of destruction echoing all around them. but there was no telling how many necromorphs might have made into the tunnel. They didn't bother to check behind them because they could see the elevator shaft in front.

Monsters behind them had become the least of their worries. One moment the tunnel was clear and in the next swarms of necromorphs jumped to life and descended upon them from all sides. The tunnel wall itself was alive, crawling with countless numbers of slashers, twitchers, and a lot of new

strains that they'd never seen before. They blocked the exit and encircled the ponies.

"We're all going to die down here!"

"We're not going to die!"

"Look out, they're all around us!"

The three of them were back to back ready and willing to fight until the very bitter end. They were hopelessly surrounded, outnumbered, and had an impossible chance at escape, but they would kill as many of these abominations as they could before they died. It would all be over any second now. Then seconds turned to minutes as they continued to wait in anticipation for an attack that never seemed to come. The necromorphs had halted in their tracks, standing still, not uttering a sound.

"Why are they just standing there?" Twilight whispered, feeling as if time itself had stopped. Somewhere in the darkness they heard the sound of a body hitting the cave floor. It was followed by the sound of another body collapsing, then another, and then multiple bodies at once. Soon, without warning or explanation, every single necromorph collapsed, like puppets with their strings cut.

Every single one.

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As the elevator safely carried them out and upwards Twilight, Luna, and Isaac all lay upon the platform gasping for air and completely exhausted. Not a word was said while everyone sat in complete silence, except for the occasional whooshing sound of a passing floor. After awhile a light snoring could be heard coming from Isaac as he had fallen asleep perched against the elevator side.

"How can he sleep now?" Luna was incredulous at the sight and especially so soon after their narrow escape. Her heart was still thumping at an incredible rate. "I thought Pinkie Pie was the only pony who could so casually dismiss a nightmare like this."

"No that's not it," Twilight shook her head, a small smile on her lips, "but I think we should let him rest for now. He's had a tough day."

"He's not the only one." Luna complained, "We could have died back there."

Twilight's smile faded as she suddenly found an interest in studying her hooves. She saw the caked blood on her legs and chest, a mixture of red and black. Some of it was hers and some belonged to that creature she had attempted to destroy. Intellectually she knew that there had existed no other choice but to do what she did. That there was no possible way to reason with the creature, still it was hard to accept that such appalling measures had to be taken on her behalf.

"Luna," Twilight quietly spoke, "those things, is it, are they....Is that the future of Equestria." She casually scrapped some of the filth off her skin.

"Possibly," Luna confirmed solemnly, "only if we can't stop the Marker before it's built." She kicked a pebble about absentmindedly. "I think you now understand why big sis and I wanted to keep this quiet. We didn't want ponies to know how fragile the world has become. We just wanted them to continue being happy and not fearful for the future. I especially wanted to atone for my sins and, well, I'm sorry I dragged you into this."

"What you said before, about me hitting my head, did I, um," Twilight dreaded asking this question. A part of her already knew the answer but she need to ask, she needed the closure.

"I felt it when it happened, something pulled me away. I fought it but I couldn't resist. I was dead. I, I died didn't I?"

"Yes," Luna knew it was a fool's hope to believe she could hide it from Twilight. The bookworm unicorn was too smart, too observant, to be deceived.

"You brought me back?" Luna nodded. "Well, I suppose that makes us even now." Twilight glanced at the princess as another reluctant smile lit her face. She was truly grateful to be alive and wanted to find a way to properly thank the princess.

"I didn't want it to let you go because of my mistake. None of this would have happened if those things hadn't come back to life."

"Did you know they were there?"

"No, I was honestly more surprised than you were. You see, Necromorphs can only live while in the presence of a Marker signal. But there is no Marker here, not anymore. Celestia and I saw to that personally. Afterwards we buried the bodies here so that they would no longer be able to come back, but they did anyway and I don't understand how it could have happened."

"Maybe it happened when I carried Isaac to Equestria." Twilight hypothesized, her curiosity perked. "Yes, that might be it. I thought what I saw in that shadow realm was just my mind creating an internalized physical representation, but it could've been real. If so then maybe there exists another Marker in this third realm and its signal was able to spill over and bring the necromorphs back to life, temporarily. I think we've stumbled upon to something big here. There exist other worlds beyond Equestria and even worlds inside those worlds. I'd love to try and study them all."

Despite herself, Luna giggled as Twilight proceeded to geek out. It was a welcomed change from the earlier somber atmosphere.

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Between the two of them they were able to carry Isaac's comatose body back to the teleportation plate. Luna keyed the spell and in a brief, but intense, moment they found themselves back in the central Sanctuary chamber. Luna peeked outside a nearby window and noticed just a faint glimmer of sunlight ready to rise above the mountains.

"Drat, it's almost time for the sun to rise and I have to get back to Canterlot before then."

"Can we make it back to Ponyville in time?" Isaac was on her back and he was heavier than he looked. Twilight could carry him but not all the way back to the library by herself.

"No, I'm afraid you'll have to take him yourself, there just isn't enough time left." Luna apologized and lifted herself to the window prepared to jump out and take to the air.

"Hey guys, whatcha doin'?" Both Luna and Twilight jumped ten feet into the air in abrupt surprise at the sudden intrusion of a sweet and carefree voice.

"Pinkie Pie? What in the wide, wide world of Equestria are you doing here, and Spike too?"

"We should be asking both of you that question." Spike ran up to Twilight eyeing the wound on her cheek critically with a mixture of horror and concern. "Geez, Twilight you look horrible! Is that blood and your face is cut, what happened?"

"Oh, I'm fine and this," Twilight gingerly felt the laceration on her cheek, "it's not as bad as it looks."

"Are you kidding? The three of you are covered in more red than Big Macintosh," Pinkie stood inches from the violet unicorn's face, her eyes bugging out in alarm, "and you want us to think there is nothing to it?" Pinkie was absolutely livid, "Why are you with Princess Luna and who is the new guy? I can't throw him a welcoming party with you looking all sticky-icky. Why were you in the Everfree forest without telling me? What is your favorite color? What is pi to the thousandth place, what is the capital of Assyria, what is the air-speed velocity of an unladen swallow?" Pinkie squeaked at a rapid fire pace, so many questions to answer and so little time.

"All right, all right!" Twilight relented under the party pony's assault. "I'll tell you everything if you help me carry him," she pointed at Isaac, "back to the library without anypony noticing. Ok?"

"Twilight!" Luna gave a warning shout. They had to keep this operation a secret and she shouldn't just talk about it to anypony.

"I'm sorry princess Luna," Twilight sighed knowing that the battle was already lost before it had begun, "But I've learned that it's dangerous to keep secrets from Pinkie Pie and Spike is my most trusted assistant, I'd be lost without him." Both Pinkie and Spike beamed with pride at Twilight's compliments. "The truth is; I need their help. They are my friends after all

and shouldn't a threat this big require the attention of all the Elements of Harmony?"

"Your right Twilight," Luna returned to the window, "You do know best. Before I go I just want to say it's been a pleasure fighting at your side. I'll return later tonight and we can discuss our next course of action. Until then," Luna, in turn, looked at all the ponies gathered in the room, "keep our new friend safe. He just might be the key to our survival."

With those parting words, Luna launched herself from the Sanctuary window and carried herself high in the sky towards Canterlot.

Chapter 7

Secrets and Lies

The trip back to Ponyville passed in silence as the two mares carried the armored interloper. Time was of the essence as the sun was quickly rising, so they had run the entire way back as Spike struggled to keep up on his stubby little legs. By the time they reached Twilight's house they were all panting and sweating heavily. Thankfully, the trip ended without further incident as most of the residents of the town were either fast asleep in their homes or still in attendance of the Summer Sun Celebration's final climatic event; allowing Twilight and her friends to sneak into the library without rising undue suspicion or unwelcomed questioning.

Absconding into her home, Twilight took to the bathroom to clean the blood off of her. Meanwhile, Pinkie Pie was tasked with using the water hose in the backyard to wash up Isaac as well as herself and she was having far too much fun doing it. Lacking any sense of urgency, Pinkie spent more time chasing Spike with the hose than doing the cleaning. The poor dragon complained helplessly under the watery assault and Pinkie's endless giggling.

No pony was sure how to remove Isaac's advanced suit so she had to settle on washing the gore off the suit while he was still wearing it. He was so worn out that the cold water failed to stir him out of his slumber. The party pony followed up with a quick Super Pinkie Pie towel drying and buffeting before carrying him up to the guest room, armor practically shining in the morning sun. However, the suit didn't look particularly comfortable to sleep in, so she made sure to gather a bunch of pillows, placing them around him for his own comfort. When she'd finished, Isaac had disappeared under a pile of white fluffy squares.

Twilight was in the lobby now being tended by a sopping wet Spike who had retrieved a first aid kit. The little dragon cleaned out her wounds and started applying bandages, along the way pointing out more lacerations on Twilight's back and sides. He had also found several pieces of shrapnel embedded in her skin. None of it was very serious, but it was uncomfortable for the unicorn while Spike set about his business of

plucking metal shards and applying peroxide, which burned as it cleansed. To distract herself from the pain, she entertained herself by studying the helmet from Isaac's suit.

Using telekinesis she held the helmet up and slowly rotated it while observing every little detail she could see and sense with her eyes and magic. Her scientist sensibilities were on fire as she studied the complex piece of alien technology. The front of the helmet had three visor openings, the middle one ran across the center of the user's eyes, and a faceplate that protected the nose and mouth and reminded her very much of a surgeon's mask, only more intimidating.

She also marveled at the realization that although the helmet looked like a single solid object it was actually composed of forty-two separate components that slid and interlocked into each other with deft machine precision. Furthermore, although she was no metalworker, she could also sense that the synthetic material alloy was far beyond anything the blacksmiths or magicsmiths in Ponyville, or maybe even all the smiths in Equestria, could hope to duplicate. She didn't know much about humans, but their level technology and science simply blew her away.

"La, la, La, la, La," a dry Pinkie happily sang as she meandered into the room, "hey, Doctor Spike, how's the patient?"

"OW!" Twilight jumped and dropped the helmet, "Spike! Be more careful."

"I can't do this if you keep moving. You need to stay still." Spike argued while using a pair of tweezers to removing another sliver of metal from Twilight's side and placed the offending material on the table.

"I still say you should see Nurse Redheart later, just in case."

"I'll be fine and besides that would just lead to all sorts of questions I don't want to answer right now. Speaking of which, I'd still like to know how the two of you find me in the Everfree Forest."

"Duh," Pinkie hooped like a spring to take her place by Twilight. "Pinkie Pie sense, that's how." Pinkie's ears flopped about while Twilight just sighed and rested her head on the table.

"Of course." She wondered when she'd ever learn to remember the pink pony's uncanny ability to somehow foretell random future events.

"It was the oddest thing." Pinkie took on a suspenseful and bewildered tone, "First I got another hum-dinger of a doozie followed by my knee being pinchy, warning me of something scary. Then I felt a new combo telling me of things I've never felt before."

"What sort of combo?" Twilight groaned in defeat while Pinkie tried to demonstrate.

"Like a cold flash in my legs and a feeling of walking on pins and needles." Pinkie's legs shivered and then she pranced about like she was walking on broken glass.

"Maybe your hooves just fell asleep." Twilight modestly suggested.

"I was standing the whole time, Twilight. Actually I was dancing, and prancing, and movin' to the grovin', and just when it hit me I was doing all the stuff you're supposed to do at a party, but there was definitely standing involved."

"Uh, yeah I guess that is pretty strange." Twilight felt another prick, "Ow! Spike!"

"Less moving, more stilling." the dragon protested while applying another bandage, "There, done."

"Thank you, Spike." Twilight said, grateful to have that ordeal out of the way.

"I also heard voices." Pinkie continued breathily, drawing Twilight's curiosity.

"Voices?"

"Yeah," the pink pony was pacing now, she seemed unusually disturbed, "normally I just sense that danger is coming and sometimes from where, but this time I heard creepy voices telling me to go to the Everfree Forest and saying you were in terrible danger."

"You too Pinkie? I've been hearing them too." Twilight had thought she was the only one; it was nice to hear the contrary, yet at the same time she was growing more concerned. There was something else that played at the edges of her senses, beyond the voices, and she'd noticed it ever since coming back to the library. Where it had once been warm and inviting place of learning, it had grown cold and threatening. It had affected her friends too; Spike was still the same funny (but dependable) companion he'd always been and Pinkie was still Pinkie. Now they seemed....dull, as if their color had become muted slightly, less vibrant.

"For real? Really, really?" Pinkie danced with relief.

"Yes," now it was Twilight's turn to pace, "I started hearing them at the Mayor's Office when we talked about the stolen treasure. At first it was disjointed and hard to make out, but then I could hear full sentences. One sang me verses from 'Twinkle Little Star,' and another said I had a job to do and that I'd know what it was. I don't know what any of it means, but it must have something to do with the Marker."

"Sheesh, listen to yourselves," Spike interrupted heatedly, "I'm very worried about the two of you; hearing voices, songs, warnings of danger, and all involving some sort of book about an ancient artifact of doom and destruction. I can believe in ghosts and zombies and Pinkie's twitchy tail, but this is just too farfetched to be true." Twilight stomped a hoof in indignation.

"But Spike, it happens to be - um... possibly true."

"Speaking of truth," the dragon continued to assert himself, "didn't you say you were leaving the Summer Sun Celebration early because Celestia wasn't coming and you wanted to study instead? Then, lo and behold, Pinkie and I find you in Everfree with Princess Luna, no less. What about the pony in the armor, though it's very cool looking armor, but where did you pick him up and what does he have to do with anything?"

"Yeah, lying to your friends isn't nice Twi." Pinkie gave the unicorn a narrow-eyed accusing glare.

"Hey! How did I become the bad pony here? I didn't lie, I really was coming here to read. I didn't know Princess Luna would be waiting for me. She said she needed a friend for the night and one thing led to another...."

"Twilight, you didn't? In the forest... all three of you?" Pinkie was absolutely mortified, "And I thought Dashy was the daring one!"

"No Pinkie, not like that." Twilight could not believe she had gotten herself into this mess. "We were actually; well, it's complicated."

"We've got time to spare," Spike crossed his arms, "and I'd rather hear it from you before Celestia announces the wedding is tomorrow."

"Uugh, you two are incorrigible." Twilight shouted in frustration and a stomp of a hoof. Why couldn't they understand that the situation was serious? She wished they would just shelve the jokes for just a little while.

"Thanks." The mischievous pair said in unison, proud of their work.

"Look," Twilight tried to regain a small ounce of control over the conversation, "it's been a long day. I'll tell you everything, but you have to promise me you'll keep it a secret."

"I promise." Pinkie got serious right away, raising her left hoof. Twilight gave her a dubious glare.

"Super Pinkie promise?"

"Cross my heart, hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye." The magenta mare happily animated the rhyme. Nodding in satisfaction Twilight turned to her little assistant.

"What about you, Spike?"

"Y'know Pinkie is the expert at keeping secrets and I'm not half bad myself." Spike stated only the facts. "What about you, Twilight? I'm still a little miffed at you for spilling the beans about my secret crush on Rarity."

"But everypony already knew about that." Twilight couldn't believe he was still hung up on that incident, it had happened months ago. In fact, it was amazing that Rarity still had not picked up on it. Spike may be mad at her slight slip of the tongue, but it wasn't as if he was being any less subtle about it.

"Point is that you're not very good at keeping secrets, Twilight."

"Absolutely terrible!" Pinkie chimed to the bookworm's absolute annoyance.

"Point taken," Twilight grumbled, "but leave me to worry about that, it is my secret after all. So do you promise?" Spike begrudgingly nodded, still unaware of the reality he was being swept up in.

"Alright, I promise."

"Spiiiiike."

"Cross my heart, hope to fly, yadda yadda yadda I'm a dragon guy."

"Good enough for me." Truthfully, Twilight already trusted both Pinkie and Spike with her life and would've told them anyway since they had caught her red hoofed and red faced, literally. It had made her feel a lot better to hear them voice aloud their commitment to secrecy, so with a heavy heart she began to tell them about everything that had transpired that night. From Luna's arrival, to Isaac, and the fight with the necromorphs. However, she decided it would be best to leave out the part where she died.

...

"Ugh," Dash groaned, having failed to muster the strength to further elaborate on her feelings. For the second time in as many days she found herself waking up in a strange place, head filled with fluff, and a mouth like a parched desert. All during the Summer Celebration she had vented her frustrations over several salt-licks as well as a couple jugs of the 'special' apple cider. It was a powerful combination of vices and had left her stumbling around Canterlot in a dehydrated stupor, making an absolute fool of herself. She couldn't remember much about what had happened but there was a vague - very vague - memory about a hijacked desserts cart and her dive bombing ponies with frosted treats. There was also something about an eggbeater, a safety cone, and her initials carved into the royal flower garden and also something about falling asleep in a very exposed, very embarrassing, position atop a statue of Celestia.

Dash could still feel the hoof-prints where Macintosh had been forced to hold her down while Zecora made her to drink a large container of water while under the supervision of several guards to make sure she didn't cause further mischief. In the end, Mac and Zecora had used some of the money they'd earned gambling to rent a room for all of them. An act which

Rainbow Dash was eternally grateful for, and decided she would have to make up to them sometime. It certainly beat going back to the Canterlot dungeon again.

Dash slowly examined the hotel room and quickly lost interest when she saw it looked absolutely average in every way, nothing but the bare necessities. Zecora was asleep on the second bed, while Big Mac snoozed on the floor like some great red beast. At least they'd been kind enough to let her use one of the beds, although it felt like a slab of stone; cold, hard, and relentless. Still, she wasn't going to complain about it. Nope, no complaining to be heard here, that was for sure.

"Freakin' penny-pinching traitors." Rainbow Dash muttered under her breath.

A slow and firm knocking announced an arrival at the door. Dash took refuge under the pillow as the sound seemed to explode in her ears like a bomb.

"Mmmph, go away." Dash pressed the pillow tighter around her head. The knocking came a second time, a little more rapt and impatient. She continued in a desperate attempt to ignore it, hiding under her blanket this time, but to no avail. The perpetrator was attacking the door with a strong pounding force that vibrated throughout the whole room.

"All right, all right," Dash broadcasted her surrender, "hold your horses, I'm coming." She then tumbled unceremoniously out of her bed, having become hopelessly entangled by the white sheets while she'd slept. As she fought in a life or death struggle against her linen foe, Big Macintosh stood up and cracked his neck a couple times before nonchalantly passing her by to greet their unknown guest.

"Howdy." He greeted warmly while Dash was a whirling of color as she rolled her way to the door and crashed into the wall.

"What do YOU want?" She blurted when she saw the neutral and unfriendly face of another palace guard Pegasus. Dash often wondered how it was possible to tell one guard from another since they all looked the same in that golden centurion armor. She didn't dwell on it long having seen enough of them already to last a lifetime. This one, however, sported a pair of messenger bags which clearly marked him as a courier of a sort.

"Rainbow Dash and Big Macintosh, I presume." The guard gave Big Mac a critical once-over, but otherwise didn't acknowledge the red stallion.

"Who wants to know, chump?" Rainbow Dash challenged as the guard reached into a leg pouch to retrieve a scroll which he dismissively tossed at Dash, smacking her on the forehead, and regarded the colorful Pegasus as something offensive he had just scrapped off the bottom of his hoof.

"Her royal highness, 'Princess' Luna, is requesting the presence of one Rainbow Dash and one Big Macintosh in the council chambers at your earliest convenience." The guard said with a slight air of antipathy. "I suggest you make haste right away."

"What does Princess Luna want with us?" While Dash had never hid her distrust of the former Nightmare Moon, the way the guard had spit on Luna's royal title made Dash's blood boil. There was something about the guards nowadays that was eating at her nerves far too easily. They seemed to be getting meaner and more aggressive lately.

"It's not my job to know, just to deliver the message." The guard's job completed he departed with nary a concern and glad to be done with it.

"Hostility towards Luna fills the ponies of this city, we should regard such mislead souls with great pity." Zecora said, as she joined them.

"Eeyup." Big Mac agreed.

"It just shocks me how shallow some ponies can be." Dash wanted to give the braggart guard a piece of her mind and shove it right up his....

"I seem to recall a not too distant time, when your regard for me was less than prime." Zecora interrupted.

"I know and I've said I'm sorry already, but this is different." Dash opened the scroll to change the subject. Breaking the seal and spreading the rolled parchment she began to read the message. It wasn't too long before her mouth creaked into a reluctant grin before reaching a fully formed smile.

"Whats gott'n you smilin' bright'r than sunlight offa ripe apple's skin?" Big Macintosh asked trying to read over Dash's head. It was unnecessary as Dash was more than happy to read aloud the contents of the message.

"Dear Rainbow Dash and Big Macintosh,

I know you have no reason to trust me given my sordid history, but I would like to extend to you both an olive branch of friendship. I have recently had the pleasure of speaking to your friend Twilight Sparkle in Ponyville and she asked me to grant the two of you permission to leave Canterlot in light of the recent lockdown. I want to show that there are no hard feelings between us and that I am eternally grateful to all the ponies who aided in freeing me from Nightmare Moon's influence, as well as their friends and family. Therefore, I see it only fitting to grant Twilight's request and I wish that the two of you will join me in the council chambers as soon as you can so that I might allow you safe passage back to home.

With all my thanks,

Princess Luna."

"Do you hear that?" Rainbow Dash proclaimed in excitement, "We're finally going to get out of here."

"The two of you might find salvation, but will I be stuck in isolation?" Zecora asked sadly.

"No, of course not!" Dash answered with confidence, "Luna said friends and family were included, and since you are one of my friends I'll convince her to help you too!"

"Grateful I would be, to leave the city free, the herbs I buy spoil fast you see." The zebra strapped on her saddlebags, eager to leave right away.

"I'm just grateful for the chance to make it up to you." Dash placed a hoof on Zecora's shoulder, "It was wrong of me to think you were a soul stealing witch who could cast curses on ponies, but hey, no pony's perfect"

...

The trio of mare, stallion, and zebra departed the quaint little hotel and began their trek to the Canterlot Castle, a good hour's trot from the residential quarter. Celestia's sun infused the city with blanket of vitality that warmed and energized all the citizens. Despite the night's long and exhaustive festival, most ponies were already awake and attending their

jobs. Even Dash could feel her hangover quickly fading under the sun's warmth.

Workers were cleaning the streets and depositing various articles of trash and discarded scraps of food into large dust bin carts, while shop keepers and merchants were busy carousing, purchasing, and moving supplies to restock their own shelves. Conspicuously absent were all the noble ponies, all the lords and ladies with positions in government had stayed in for some extra shuteye.

A mostly normal day in Canterlot; however, the presence of so many guards at almost every street corner, reminded everyone that the city was still locked down due to the unfortunate theft yesterday. It filled the city with an undercurrent of nervousness and mistrust and it showed on every single face. Yet everyone remained civil and seemed to be handling the situation surprisingly well, but there was no telling how long it would last if a solution didn't present itself soon.

As the trio traveled down through the crowded streets their journey happened to take them past the Canterlot Central Post Office. It was a massive structure that put its counterpart in Ponyville to abject shame. The polished marble building was over two dozen floors high, with each floor dedicated to the sorting and distribution of the mail to a different province of Equestria. A landing platform extended from each level to support the hundreds of mail Pegasus ponies that would arrive and depart to and from all four corners of Equestria.

On this day, however, the post office saw less than a trickle of its normal activity. Mail bags and packages were piled high outside the office doors and were growing by the second. Dash would not have taken notice of this special situation if it was not for her spotting a fellow resident of Ponyville, and one of her dearest friends, emerging from the building.

Ditzy Doo was the best mail pony in all Equestria, who sometimes went by the nickname 'Derpy Hooves' despite her hooves not being her most significant feature. The grey Pegasus mare had a bright blond mane and a cutie mark consisting of several bubbles, but what distinguished her most was her lazy yellow eyes which twirled about and seemed to look in two different directions at once. Most ponies thought Pinkie Pie was the most random and eccentric pony in all Equestria, but that award went to Ditzy.

Pinkie lost out because of the sole fact that she was intelligible. Most of the time no one could possibly fathom what went on it Ditzzy's head.

"Hey Ditzzy!" Dash called out excitedly.

"Hey, hay howdidly dee doo Dashy!" Ditzzy replied in her overly special and perky manner, waving while happily jogging down the street with a wide smile of unrestrained ignorant happiness. She was carrying a pair of postal saddlebags hanging from her sides that were loaded down with various articles of mail and a single brown package secured to a special saddle on her back. For a pony that couldn't focus her eyes straight forward, she was very deft at avoiding and colliding with anyone or anything meandering her way through the crowd, with an elegant grace that could challenge Rarity, towards Dash with not a care in the world.

"Ugh, do you guys hear that?" Dash suddenly heard a persistent ringing in her ears. It quickly grew beyond a simple background annoyance as the tone climbed to the point where it was now a high pitched whistle. The sound was so intense that it made it difficult to concentrate on anything else. She rubbed her ears in a hope that the sound would go away, but it was useless gesture.

"What's with this noise? It's driving me crazy." When there was no reply from her companions, Dash checked to see what up with them. She failed to spot either of them behind her and her confusion only intensified when the ringing suddenly ceased. In fact was that she was the only pony left standing in the now empty streets. The cobbled roads were utterly devoid of life as if every living pony and animal had simply ceased to be, the silence deafening in its absolution.

"Hello?" she called out in futility looking for anypony at all. Yet, not the simple chirp of a bird or the welcomed sound of a gentle breeze dared to respond. Silence continued to be her sole companion until there came a resonating clapping of hooves on stone. It was coming for her and she turned back to face Ditzzy Doo. Dash felt relieved to find the grey Pegasus was still here, but the mail carrier seemed to be moving in slow motion with each step echoing at an unnatural volume.

"Ditzzy, are you okay? What's wrong with you? Your... your wings..." Feathers were falling from Ditzzy's wings, a couple at first and then in large tufts. When the feathers touched the ground they burned under an invisible

fire, curling up into piles of carbon ash. She was crying red tears and soon was bleeding from her nose and mouth as well, marking a crimson trail where she walked. Dash was unwillingly and utterly transfixed by the sight, unable to comprehend it. She felt a tight clenching desire to help her friend, hopelessness to stop it, and disgust at the horror of what Ditzy was becoming.

There was a sick crunching of bones as Ditzy started to shake violently, yet her innocent smile never left her face as she kept coming. Flesh fell from her body in pulpy clumps, exposing muscle and bone. Her wings gave one final crack before rotating forward, the bone lengthening and become sharp spears, flexing, and more resembling deadly grasping fingers than wings now.

"Help me!"

"Ditzy!" Dash screamed, the tears cascading. Ditzy was a kind and gentle soul, why was this happening? She'd done nothing to deserve such a terrible fate. "Why is this happening? Ditzy who....who's doing this? Why?"

No matter how fast Dash tried to retreat Ditzy continued to close the distance. Her gentle smile was a gaping maw of razor sharp teeth, the lower jaw bone had rotted away. Small wriggling tendrils were growing from every orifice; eyes, nose, mouth, and from in between her very muscle fibers.

Dash couldn't stand the sight any longer: she needed to escape, needed to get away. She jumped into the air, wings pumping with all her might, but she didn't get far. She felt the creature below her grab her by the tail and harshly pull her down.

"Ghuu!" Dash sharply impacted the ground on her back, her spine snapping under the force - she was now paralyzed and helpless. She closed her eyes and waited for the end to come.

"Wake UP!"

Rainbow Dash stared into the sky, suddenly her view was filled with red, white, and gray.

"Are you al' right?" Big Mac's voice reflected the worry on his face. He reached out a hoof and helped Dash onto her hooves.

"Dashy fall down, down. Go crash boom baa, make big noise." Then there was Ditzzy, just as crazy and random as ever, dancing around like nothing had happened; perfectly normal, for her at least. Without thinking Rainbow Dash reached out for Ditzzy and embraced the mail Pegasus in a firm, distressed hug.

"Ditzzy! Thank Celestia you're okay." Dash felt tears trying to break free again. She fought them back, however, and not so much out of a sense of pride.

"Dashy, you are strange. Are you okie?" Ditzzy warmly returned the embrace deeply worried about her colorful friend.

"All of a' sudden' ya'll stopped, swayed a bit, and then collapsed." Big Mac recounted while placing an arm against Dash's head, checking for fever, and looking into her eyes. Dash didn't resist the examination, she was similarly concerned that there was something terribly wrong with her and hoped that it was just a side-effect from the sleeping spell or her hangover.

"I...I'm alright. I can't seem to remember what just happened." Dash shook her head and backed away, an embarrassed blush on her cheeks, "I thought I saw, I saw..." Dash stammered, not sure how to express herself. "It doesn't matter. I'm just happy to see you, that's all."

There was a glint of light that caught the corner of her eye, having come from a piece of elaborate jewelry around Ditzzy's neck. A silver collar was firmly clamped around her neck with a crescent shaped pendant swinging lazily from a short chain. Two alicorn figures, both facing each other, were pressed into the sides of the collar using polished platinum and there appeared to be cursive writing carved into the rest of the collar and pendant.

"Tell us young pony, before you depart. What is that badge you keep near your heart?" Zecora asked, clearly impressed.

"Oh, this little itty-bitty thangy-wangy?" Ditzzy stood straight and proud, making sure everypony could see her badge of honor.

"Lovely Luna lent me this little license of limit leaving for a, um, special delivery."

"You're kidding?" Dash raised a curious eyebrow, "isn't that a job better suited for the royal couriers?"

"I don't know. The nice pony guy in black, with the boorish voice, said."

"Sooo, you never actually saw the princess?" Ditzzy just shook her head.

That seemed totally unfair to Rainbow Dash since Luna had personally summoned her and Big Mac for an audience, but didn't offer the same recognition for Ditzzy.

"A 'special delivery' huh?" Dash reasoned that the postal mare must have been referring to the brown package on her saddle holster. The brown paper was expertly folded and the whole thing was tied up in golden thread, bearing the seal of Luna's heritage on the sides. It all looked very official, but was that the package seemed wrong somehow. She couldn't quite pinpoint what it was, yet the more she looked at it the more it felt as if something was staring back. She had never felt anything like it before and it was unsettling to say the least. That horrible ringing sound was coming back as well.

"Dashy rainbow. You're zoning crazy again." Ditzzy giggled and waved a hoof to get her attention.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Um, who did you say you're delivering it to?" Dash shook her head to clear it, the ringing passed away.

"Oh, there is no namey, but I do know the address, I do. I'm taking it to Fluttershy's place."

"Fluttershy? I don't think that's a good idea." A terrible idea in every way, Dash was confident of that. She didn't know what Ditzzy was carrying, but whatever it was it had no business being near the gentle, sensitive, and loving Fluttershy.

"I'm the bestest mail mare ever, I know my addresses I do." Ditzzy certainly didn't lack for confidence and that was what Dash really admired about her.

"Ditzy, would you mind if I sneaked a peak inside the package?" The way Ditzzy reacted to the question, Dash might as well have asked if she could

"Oh no, no, no, that would violate mail mare rule number 65," Ditzzy cleared her throat and then spoke with all the confidence of a general ordering his troops into battle.

"When a delivery has no specific designated recipient then only those who are living at the intended address can be allowed to open the postal delivery, not their friends or any guests. Unless specific requests have been made in advance and approved by the general post manager. Failure to abide...."

"Ok Ditzzy, a simple no would have been fine, but...."

"No buts, Dashy, no tubs, stubs, or subs either. Rules are rules and rulers." Without another word Ditzzy spread her wings and began to lift off, "I must go now, I'm nearly late for a very important date with a blueberry muffin." With that Ditzzy was airborne and speeding away at a clip that very few Pegasus could best, Rainbow Dash being one of the few exceptions; the Wonderbolts being the others.

With Ditzzy's words echoing in her ears, Dash was filled with a new sense of purpose. She could feel the machination of something sinister in the works. There was only one other time in her life when she'd felt this sensation before. This went beyond simple feeling though, the vision of Ditzzy and the evil presence the mail mare carried. Who would send such a thing Fluttershy's way, and did this have anything to do with the theft yesterday? Dash certainly felt the idea had merit, but before she could leave she needed to know who had given Ditzzy the job.

"You guys go ahead without me," Dash said to Zecora and Big Mac, handing the latter the royal letter from the princess, "I need to check this out. Something funny is going on around here." Her companions only gave her mixed reactions. Clearly they didn't share the same sense of urgency as she did.

"I mean funny-weird, not funny-haha." Dash clarified, but it did little to clear the air.

Chapter 8

Lunch in Equestria

Leaving behind Big Mac and Zecora, Rainbow Dash had made her way into the post office. Her mission was clear: to find the pony who had given Ditzzy that package, whoever this pony in black was. A small bell jingled and a creaking of age-old hinges welcomed as she opened the front door. The inside was a scene of absolute chaos, far worse than what she'd seen on the outside. Piles of mail were stacked so high and long you could almost lose an adult dragon in them. Several pegasus ran or flew back and forth trying to sort out as much of the mess as possible, a critical shortage of capable hooves doomed their punitive efforts, however.

"Hello, my name is Penny Post, can I help you?" said a gray pegasus mail carrier with yellow eyes and a copper mane. Apart from the hair color, and the fact her eyes didn't spin like free-falling clouds, Penny resembled Ditzzy Doo so much that Dash was almost convinced that the two were related somehow.

"Oh my gosh, you're Rainbow Dash!" Penny gasped and then hopped in delight, "I saw your amazing air work at the 'Young Fliers Competition' in Cloudsdale. You were so awesome!" Postal squealed with such raw joy that Dash couldn't help but feel slightly embarrassed, a slight blush coloring her cheeks.

"Yup, that's me."

"Oh! Oh! Can I have your autograph?" Penny reached into her post bag to extract a blank shipping form and a quill pen.

"Sure!" Dash proudly obliged and signed the blank side of the form. No pony had ever asked for her autograph before so she had to make sure this one was an extra twenty percent more special than just her regular signature. So she adorned it with a cursive form she invented on the spot, decorating it with a superfluous amount of curls and swirly patterns.

"Ohhh, my friends are going to be, like, so jealous." Penny hugged the signed paper like it was a check for a million bits.

"It's all in a day's work for the greatest flier in all Ponyville. No, in all of Equestria!" Dash was swollen with pride, she pumped her chest out and held her head high.

"Thank you, thank you!" the postal mare happily tucked the paper away for safekeeping, "So, how can I help you today, Rainbow Dash?"

"I'm just curious about a package I saw Ditzzy carrying earlier."

"Oh, you mean the one tied with the golden thread?" Dash nodded, "That's easy, it was sent by Mr. Ledger, one of Celestia's supervisors. He comes here all the time for the mail."

"Doesn't Celestia have her own mail carriers in the castle already? Why doesn't he use them?"

"Sure he does, but to be honest the gossip on the street is that Ledger has a thing for Ditzzy. He always specifically requests her when he has to ship some mail. I don't know why he tries to hide himself under a black hood and cape since every pegasus here knows who he is. He's probably just shy," Penny concluded, sighed wistfully and clutching her arms to her cheek, "it's so romantic."

"Blegh," Dash stuck her tongue out in disgust, "I just want to find out what he wanted Ditzzy to deliver?"

"Hmm, I think I overheard him say something about a book. It seemed rather important since he gave Ditzzy royal permission to get out of the city. Normally I don't get involved in or talk about another pony's mail, but there was just something totally weird about it."

"Weird? What do you mean?"

"Well," Penny leaned towards Dash with a hushed whisper, "when I got a close look at it I felt like something was off about it, y'know? It's hard to explain; it's like, when I saw it I felt as if something was looking back at me. It gave me the heebie jeebies."

"Did you see anything unusual happen to Ditzzy?" Dash felt a chill down her spine at the memory.

"It was just a creepy feeling, that's all. Are you saying something has happened to Ditzzy Doo?"

"No!" All eyes shot towards Dash, startled at the sudden outburst from the tomboy mare. Dash felt her cheeks heat in embarrassment under the scrutiny, "No, she's perfectly fine, um, thanks for your help!" She turned and made a hasty exit.

"Okay," Penny flinched at the mare's awkward behavior, "please do come again. The Canterlot Residential Post Office is always open for your shipping and postage needs."

Outside, Dash soaked in the cool breeze as it washed away her heated humiliation. Big Mac and Zecora remained unmoving from where she had last left them. She was thankful that they had shown the patience to wait for her Dash explained what she'd learned and all three continued their trek towards the castle.

(...) Twilight Sparkle gave a lazy yawn when she gazed out the window at the beautiful midday sun as it shined over Ponyville. Just another normal beautiful afternoon in Equestria, only to her it wasn't. The sunlight caressed and warmed her aching body, yet failed to sooth her unease. There was something inside her that had begun to eat away at the edges of her consciousness, a sort of emptiness. It made sleep more tempting than ever, but it was past noon and she had made a promise to help out Applejack with some farming chores after lunch time. Hoping the unrest would eventually sort itself out she went about her daily routine, albeit with a little more haste than usual. She cleaned herself up and changed her bandages, before finally turning to nudge Spike out of his bed.

She looked upon the chubby little dragon all nestled snugly in his bed, sucking contently on a half eaten ruby. The covers rose and fell under his measured breathing; his easy snoring told her that he was dreaming of something pleasant. Maybe it was about him wooing Rarity or something else as equally rambunctious. Even though Twilight had told him all about the conflict with the necromorphs in the mines, she saw he was unable, or unwilling, to fully appreciate the severity of what had transpired. Though to be fair, if any other pony had told her about this gathering threat she

would've regarded it as a morbid fabrication at best, or a case of flagrant exaggeration at worst, at least until sufficient evidence was presented. The itching on her cheek and the bandages on her body turned out to be all the evidence she needed now. Twilight left her assistant to rest and headed down the stairs, content to let her companion sleep for a little while longer; just a few more minutes of peaceful innocence.

She had wandered into the kitchen, a rumble in her stomach, deciding that a good lunch is just what she needed to lift her spirits and confident that Spike and Isaac would both similarly appreciate it too. Isaac's helmet was still on the table where she'd left it, and it raised an interesting question.

"What exactly do humans eat, anyway?" She asked aloud to no pony in particular.

(...)

"Achoo, achoo!" Isaac sneezed an answer to a sudden intense irritation in his nose. He bolted suddenly upright and erect, sending an eruption of pillows and feathery down flying everywhere. Freed from the pillow prison, the first thing he noticed was how unnaturally bright the room was. He soon realized that it was not the sun shining in his face, every object around him was done up in bright, smooth, and vibrant pastel colors. It was all so lively and cheerful looking that it immediately put him on edge. The last time he'd been in a place like this he'd been ambushed by hordes of exploding baby necromorphs crawling out of the very walls. This led inexorably to the second thing he noticed: that he was still stuck in la-la land and continued to lack the normal human extremities.

He sat for a few minutes trying to carefully examine his surroundings and listening for signs of danger. He found himself deposited in a bedroom of sorts, with the bed carved directly into the wall. The room was irregularly shaped, made entirely out of wood, and had a faint, sweet smell of tree sap. Opposite from him was a small desk, below a single circular window, with stacks of blank paper, an ink bottle, and a cup of quill pens placed upon it. Any left over space on the walls were covered in shelves that held a massive array of books covering an even more impressive array of topics; 'The Complete Equestrian Guide to Mythical Creatures and Supernatural Entities,' 'Sleepovers 101,' 'A Unicorn's Thesis on the Nature of Magic and the Flow of Energies,' and, 'Advanced Quantum Mechanics

and You,' were just a sampling of the categories held here. The last two books especially caught his attention, but they'd have to wait for another time.

One of the room's two doors was ajar and headed into what appeared to be a bathroom. Isaac felt incredibly stiff and gritty from having spent a whole night inside his exo-suit and was looking forward to a hot shower. The restroom was well stocked with all the sorts of toiletries and accessories that went with a well planned household.

"Something is wrong here." He told himself when he realized just how 'human' the bedroom and bathroom had appeared. Almost every single object was easily recognizable; lamps, a toothbrush, combs, sink, medicine cabinet, and bathtub. Even the toilets, with the bowls built into the floor, were similar to those he'd seen while serving a stint on a Japanese-built frigate. It gave him an ominous foreboding, he was stuck in an alien reality; logically he had expected that they'd do things at least little differently here.

He didn't feel comfortable taking the suit off here, but he couldn't wear it forever. There was a hiss of air as Isaac triggered the suit's manual release, a switch seated just below the triangle shaped holographic projector that stuck out from his chest. If the suit had power the switch would've been magnetically locked to prevent an accidental release. With the seal broken air was allowed to flow into the hermetically locked suit, filling air bladders behind the chest armor and the rig on his back. This allowed the skin tight suit to 'unfold' and hang from Isaac's frame like an oversized bag of burlap, allowing it to easily slide down off of his body.

Carefully putting it aside he went to examine himself in the mirror, one glimpse confirmed everything he'd feared. The thing looking back at him was definitely not human, but rather a gray colored pony with short black hair. Everything about its face was wrong; the ears were too big and too high, the nose was too low, the blue eyes seemed monstrously huge, and it even sported a five o'clock shadow. He couldn't remember if horses had facial hair - he was pretty sure it didn't grow like this even if they did.

The parade of discoveries didn't end at his face, a full examination of his body revealed a pair of new problems. He closed his eyes and in his mind's eye traced down his spine, along the path of nerves and muscles, looking for the new connections. He found them and concentrated at moving them,

flexing and contracting. With a little effort he had managed to fully extend a pair of wings. His face was twisted with indecision, an ambivalent expression. On one hand a part of him felt in awe at his new feathery appendages and wanted to test them out to see if they actually worked. On another hand his engineer's proficiency told him that in no way, no scientific discipline, could such fragile things ever work on someone his size and weight.

By this point, after realizing he'd broken into a cold sweat, there came a rising panic that gripped his stomach, making him feel incredibly nauseous. He broke away from the mirror and steadied himself over the sink, just in case, while taking slow deep breaths.

"Okay," he tried to reassure himself, "it'll be fine. I'm fine."

"I don't think so."

He felt a pair of hands close around his throat, tight and unyielding, choking the air out of him while his head was jerked upwards to once again stare at the mirror, his whole body lifted off the ground. He saw himself, no, his human self, emerged halfway through the mirror and looking at him with an expression of complete repugnance and glass-eyed insanity.

"Our diseased brain brought us into a world of magical talking ponies. Does that sound... fine to you?"

Isaac struggled in vain to break his own hold on his neck while his doppelganger laughed maniacally at himself. His legs dangled uselessly and even his wings were flapping in rebellion. It was useless, his big fingerless hooves just couldn't gain leverage around the fingers at his throat so, instead, he brought his arms up and punched his mirror self several times across the jaw. His strength was quickly fading and the choke hold failed to weaken.

"You're only hurting yourself, Isaac."

"No," Isaac croaked, "you are not me."

"Then what am I? Just a hallucination? Perhaps I'm the real one and you're the imposter, the disease that haunts my mind."

"Go to hell!" There was a loud crack of glass as Isaac's head slammed into the mirror. The impact left a spider web like tapestry of slivers throughout the surface. The frightful presence was gone and once again left only his pony-fied self reflecting back at him, but no less taunting. He felt rattled, his whole body shaking as hopelessness took over. He reared his head back and shot it forward. A second, even louder, crash of glass echoed throughout the room as he smashed the mirror again, pieces falling into the sink and on the ground. He followed up with a third strike and then a fourth, by now the mirror was completely and utterly destroyed. Several blood trails flowed from his cut forehead down and around his nose to gather at his chin, falling to form a small puddle on the floor.

He didn't care about any of that; he hated this place and what it had done to him. He just wanted to go home, go back to Earth. To return to the way things were before he discovered that damned Red Marker, before the love of his life was taken from him.

"Damn it, Nicole. Why did you have to leave?"

(...)

Twilight gave a contented sigh as she inhaled and delighted in all the pleasant fragrances that filled the dining room. Unsure as to what her unusual guest would find pleasing for lunch she had pulled out all the stops and cooked up a little of everything. The table was filled with all sorts of simple culinary delights. Among them were daisy and daffodil sandwiches, whole apples, apple fritters (her favorites), apple sauce, bowls of oats and barley, a bowl of salad, hay fries, nuts, chips, scrambled eggs, and finishing off the meal were glasses of milk, soda, tea, orange juice, apple juice, and coffee; and that was just the first course.

Her preparations finished, Twilight was heading upstairs to roost her guest out of bed when she suddenly heard multiple abrupt instances of shattering glass. Galloping upstairs, she didn't bother to knock before hurdling into the guest bedroom, she didn't see Isaac. The restroom door was open, however, and from here she could see broken glass all over the floor along with a trail of blood and accompanied by the sounds of water.

"Isaac?" Twilight called from the doorway. She didn't want to walk in on him unannounced, but when she received no reply it was her only course of

action. Stepping over the shards of glass she found Isaac curled up in the bathtub while the shower head rained cold water.

"Isaac, what happened?" She asked, truly concerned. He looked at her briefly, but didn't respond before settling back into his depressed state. At a loss of what to do Twilight examined his suit-less body. She was surprised to find, in contradiction to her earlier deduction, that he was in fact a pegasus. While that was an interesting discovery she found herself more interested in what cutie-mark was. She looked at it carefully from several different angles. It was unique, to say the least and she remembered seeing it from some of the memories gained from him, it was a weapon of sorts, but that was all she knew. A metal object that looked like a pistol grip and trigger guard connected to a rectangular head with three lines of blue light coming out of it.

"Um, I hate to ask, but what exactly is your cutie mark?" she pointed at it.

"My what?" Isaac, finally acknowledging her, raised an eyebrow.

"Your cutie mark, uh, of course you wouldn't know anything about that. It's the picture on your flank."

"Oh," Isaac deadpanned, "you mean the tattoo of the plasma cutter? That's a standard engineer's tool, useful for cutting metal and rock. Though I've also found it also has other useful applications." He sat up in the tub while turning off the water.

"Maybe you'd like to tell me why you put a tattoo of it on my ass?"

"Every pony gets a cutie mark when they find what their special talent is, or purpose in life is."

"You get branded for that?" He seemed somewhat appalled at the idea.

"No, it just appears on a pony's flank."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that, don't humans have something similar?" Honestly, she'd be surprised if they did.

"No, humans don't grow tattoos out of thin air. Besides, you should never describe anything about me as 'cute' to begin with." Isaac sarcastically retorted while air-quoting, "It's a tattoo, plain and simple, because I am a man, damn it."

The argument continued on like that for awhile with neither of them willing to concede the point, but in the end she was able to convince him to join her for lunch. It hadn't taken much coaxing since both of their stomachs began to growl right in the middle of the heated exchange.

"Is that coffee I smell?" Isaac asked as he sat at the table, sniffing the air in deep longing breaths.

"Yes, made it myself, there is sugar and milk if you care to..." Twilight stopped when Isaac grabbed the coffee mug and had downed its contents in a single gulp. He exhaled in delighted exclamation.

"It's coffee, real coffee," he had a warm laugh and a genuine smile, she found herself sharing the feeling "I would've been happy with just the synthetic stuff, but this is real and it's so good!"

"Would you like some more?" Twilight hovered the nearly full coffee pot over to him. His good mood faltered as he scrutinized her magical display, but he held the mug out regardless.

"Thanks." He said while downing a second cup, followed by another refill.

"I'm happy you like it. I made all of this," she drew a hoof over her labors, "as a way for me to apologize for, well, you know." Twilight nervously twiddled her hooves. She had once read in a book that the best way to win a pony over, especially if it was a stallion, was through their stomach. That meant good food and good company, first impressions were everything and they'd certainly gotten off to a bad start.

"I do know." Isaac examined the food, a mixture of unreadable feelings, but didn't seem to reach for anything else.

"I just want to apologize for making such a mess of things."

"Apology accepted." He said dismissively. She felt her jaw clench, this wasn't good, she was losing him and she needed him, no, all of Equestria

needed him. Whatever the reasons for him being here, she knew that he had a critical role to play in the fight against the Marker.

She knew it.

"Isaac, I know you're upset right now. It's my fault," Her ears dropped as she looked away ashamed, "I know I would be lost too if I suddenly found myself trapped in your world. I can try and find a way to turn you back into a human, but for now I ask that you help us. We can be friends and work together to sort all this out." She followed up her plea by giving him her biggest puppy-dog expression she'd ever made. An effective trick she'd learned from Applebloom, and although she hated using such under hoofed tactics, she couldn't readily see any other way.

"Y'know what, fine," Isaac took a few steps away from her before attacking her with a very stern tone of barely restrained anger, "you turned me into a Pegasus pony, it's a little awkward, but I can certainly think of a thing or two far worse to get 'morphed' into. I'll get over it once I'm back to normal, might even make a movie out of it."

His sudden outburst, the words of undisguised scorn, wounded her terribly. It felt like her heart was being crushed under the weight of his anger. She had seriously messed up this time, and such failure only brought her misery. She loathed that feeling, so much wanted to please her friends, and especially Princess Celestia. To show she was reliable and talented, to be entrusted with a great task and succeed against all odds. It also made her angry and sparked a fire in her belly with a sensation she'd never felt before. She was trying to apologize and show how truly sorry she felt and yet this horrible pony across from her couldn't understand that simple fact. She was trying her best, what else could she do?

"I'm not that upset about being dumped in your little pony fantasy land of magic and sunshine." He continued, getting even redder in the face. "I can get down with that. I used to watch these kinds of shows when I was seven, even had a unicorn poster over my cubicle when I worked at the CEC home office. This is a fate far more appealing than anything I had to look forward to back home. I'm willing to forgive all of that, but please drop the friendship act. You just want me to make your Marker problems go away and I'm just looking to survive it and go home."

"Stop yelling!" Twilight's rage overflowed her senses and she lashed back, screaming at the top of her lungs. "I'm sorry, okay, I just wanted to help. But I didn't know that this would happen, I couldn't have. If I could make things right I would, but I don't know how to make the spells that would send you home!" She tore at him with her words. Her uncontrollable tirade did nothing to help her overcome this burning ire. It did have the effect of stopping him dead mid-sentence and she began to slowly come down. "I don't care if you hate me, but don't you dare accuse my offer of friendship as merely an act!" The empty silence stretched on between them as they stared at each other. Isaac was the first to regain control.

"Sorry," he looked down, "I guess I hadn't realized how much these feelings needed airing. It's," he choked, "it's just.. I'm so tired of all this crap. I didn't mean to take it all out on you. I'm just a tired broken old man. I've lost everything to those damn Markers. I have nothing left."

"No, you're wrong." She gingerly approached him, suddenly forgetting the reasons why she was mad in the first place, and put a hoof on his shoulder, "You're alive. That must count for something."

"Tch," Isaac snorted pensively, but didn't refuse the touch. "Yeah, I guess I have that. I know I shouldn't complain, but I do." He gave a long deep sigh before breaking out in a second wind. "So, you want me to help? Then you'd better make it well worth my while. I'm thinking maybe a great hall built in my honor, or a museum dedicated to my great works." Although Isaac seemed serious, Twilight found herself suddenly laughing with him instead.

"You have my word. As Princess Celestia's star pupil I can assure you that you will be well rewarded for your help."

"Not sure I really believe you, I've been betrayed before. Though, I guess I can take a chance. Never worked with a pony before, might be interesting."

"Agreed, I've never worked with a human before." Twilight rapidly nodded in approval, happy to have a chance to fix the animosity between them. "So, let's eat, then. Afterward I'll take you to Sweet Apple Acres to meet a good friend of mine who can help us."

(...)

Isaac wasn't sure if it was on purpose or accident, but Twilight's trail took them through the center of the aptly named Ponyville. All the different kinds of colored equine critters made it look like Jackson Pollock had vomited a rainbow all over his canvas. The residents milled about as a close-knit community, very open and innocent; it was strangely inviting. Almost all of them had acknowledged him as a newcomer and welcomed him with a friendly wave, a warm smile, or offered up simple greetings and well-wishes. Isaac felt his long tense muscles start to relax in the friendly atmosphere, but he didn't allow himself to become complacent, continuing to stay alert for any sudden attacks or signs of trouble.

Along the way Twilight gave him the abridged tour of the town, pointing out all the major landmarks as they passed.

"Over there is Sugar Cube Corner," the purple unicorn happily pointed out to him, "That's where Mr. and Mrs. Cake live. They bake all sorts of wonderful treats." She turned to him, "We'll have to stop by for a snack after we help Applejack and I can introduce you to another friend of mine."

"Shouldn't we save the meet and greets for later?" Not that he was against meeting new people, or ponies, but there were more pressing matters on hand. "We should be working out a plan."

"One step ahead of you," Twilight declared confidently, "when we meet my friends we'll pull them to the side, someplace secluded preferably, and explain the problem. With the seven of us together there's no problem we can't face with the power of the elements." Isaac just rolled his eyes.

"I did just fine solo." He muttered, stepping aside to avoid a mare walking the other way.

"Sorry, didn't catch that."

"I wish I shared your optimism." He quickly filled in.

"Over here is the town hall where Mayor Mare oversees the day to day business of the town."

"Hey," Isaac stepped in front of her, "Concentrate on the business of the Marker. Our best bet is on getting my suit up to code so I can rip the schematics from the RIG and build us some weapons, like the plasma

cutter. They've saved my life in more ways that I can recall, but building them from scratch will be a significant investment in resources and, more importantly, time provided your world has the technological means of doing so. Failing that we still need to find out who our enemy is and where they're building the Marker."

"Again, just wait until you meet my friends." Twilight replied, unfazed, "All of them each have their own special talents that I'm sure will help us."

"Such as?"

"Take the pony we're going to meet, Applejack, she runs the apple farm and-"

"Twilight, ohhh, Twiliiiiight." Isaac heard a beautiful voice call out with an intense air of sophistication and class.

"Rarity, good afternoon." Twilight returned the cordial greeting.

"A most marvelous afternoon isn't it, darling." The white skinned unicorn with the immaculate mane of violet hair said as she trotted up to the two of them, "I was hoping to catch Spike with you but I see you have, instead, a handsome new friend. I don't believe I've had the pleasure of an introduction." Rarity batted her eyelashes at him.

"Oh," Twilight stumbled, having failed to plan this far ahead. There were too many strangers around them and their secret was for Rarity's ears only, "Rarity, this is Cutter. He's an old friend of mine from, uh, Manehattan."

"Ma'am." Isaac greeted, bowing his head slightly. He then mouthed towards Twilight, "*Really? Cutter.*"

To which she mouthed back, "*Best I could think of.*"

"So polite too, but please, any friend of Twilight's is a friend of mine. Feel free to call me Rarity. I run Carousel Boutique, the local fashion shop, perhaps you've heard of it?"

"Sure have, Twilight told me all about you." Actually she hadn't, but he was sure she would've gotten around to it eventually.

"Fantastic, and you're from Manehattan you say? Such a marvelous city full of such glamour, glitz, and so many sophisticated socially connected fashion-centric urbanite ponies. It's the capital of all things hip and stylish in all Equestria, not even Canterlot can follow it." Rarity took one of Isaac's hooves in hers and in a joyous proclamation said, "My dear Cutter, you should join me for tea tomorrow and tell me all about it, all about you."

"Well," he nervously fidgeted under her twinkling eyes of hope and anticipation, "I'm afraid I'm only here on a short business trip, sooo, I won't have time in my schedule, I'm sorry."

"Then we'll make it a dinner date. Tonight!"

"Uhh," The way she emphasized 'tonight' had made him afraid to refuse and he felt his vocal chords seize.

"Well, would you look at the time," Twilight separated the two, "we gotta go, a lot of business to take care of and all that." Twilight poke Isaac's side with her horn in order to get him moving, but only succeeded in getting a dirty look.

"Wait!" Rarity called out dramatically, "before you go, could you direct me to where Spike is?"

"He's still sleeping in the library," Twilight said, "need him for something?"

"I'd love it if the little dear would accompany me on another gem hunt in the stone foothills next to the Everfree Forest."

"Are you sure that's safe? You remember what happened last time?"

"Twilight please, remember who you're talking to. I can handle myself against a couple of diamond dogs." Rarity had propped her head up while giving a winning smile, "Besides, have you seen the cost of gems nowadays? They're through the roof and I suspect the clouds as well."

"I'm sure he'd more than eager to help, once you wake him up."

"I know he would, he's such a dear. Well, I won't keep you two from your business, ta-ta, and do remember, Mr. Cutter, dinner tonight at the Riverside Café at 8, byeee."

Isaac stood frozen in place with a look of complete bafflement and shock, one eye twitching.

"Would you mind explaining to me what the hell just happened?"

"Sorry," Twilight apologized softly, "Rarity is drawn to anything and everything that can help her fashion business make it big. She can sometimes come across a little too strong."

"A little?" he protested, "I was afraid she was about to jump me."

"Well, if you think Rarity is bad," she added with a sly wink, "wait until you meet Pinkie Pie."

"Christ!" he shouted, "is everyone in this town crazy?"

"Yes, but you get used to it after awhile."

(...)

Ditzy Doo made a strong landing just outside of the Everfree forest. She bounced slightly as her hooves contacted against the soft earth. She loved visiting Fluttershy's cottage, located just outside the Everfree forest. Close enough to see the darkness beyond the inviting exterior, yet far enough away to where it was safe from the wild denizens of the woods. She was at the border between the natural and unnatural and here there was an exciting mixture of smells and fragrances that could not be found anywhere else.

The forest was not her purpose for coming here but rather a respectably large abode made of wood and decorated with a ceiling constructed of finely woven lattices of leaves and moss. It was positioned on the opposite end of a small stone bridge crossing over a narrow river. The river flowed directly out of the forest, yet its waters were clear and pure for any pony to drink.

It was easy enough for Ditzy to canter her way across the bridge up to the front door of Fluttershy's home. However, along the way, she noticed that Fluttershy's chicken coop and various outdoor birdhouses had been knocked to the ground and scattered about. The area around the house

seemed to be covered in an awful lot of bird feathers, but there were no signs of life; no chickens, birds, or wildlife to speak of.

"Postal Delivery." Ditzzy made three firm raps on the door. The windows were closed and there were no lights on, still she could hear slight amounts of movement from inside.

"Come in." spoke a low-key voice. Ditzzy recognized the friendly tone; but it wasn't Fluttershy's.

"Fluttershy-shy has guests," she reasoned, "I hope they have delicious muffins." Ditzzy nudged the door open and stepped inside. The interior was very dark, but the light from the door revealed an absolute mess. Birdhouses and cages were thrown everywhere, bags of food, chairs, tables, and other items were overturned and broken. Amongst the shattered furniture were many little bodies of mice, birds, and other critters that had been mercilessly slaughtered and discarded. It filled the room with an overwhelming smell of death.

"Fluttershy-shy?" Ditzzy whispered with a sudden feeling of dismay when she spotted her friend. The blond pony was lying in the middle of the room, face covered in dry tears and a little bit of blood. Her wings and legs were tightly bound with thick lengths of rope and were both simultaneously gagged and blindfolded. Her pink mane was frayed and her body had several pronounced welts and thin cuts.

"Mmmphh!" At the sound of her name, Fluttershy began to fight against her restraints, her normally soft voice was hot with fear and she seemed to be trying to shriek something that sounded like a warning.

The moment Ditzzy made a step to help Fluttershy, the front door slammed shut behind her, casting the room into near total darkness. Furniture skittered along the floor as three pairs of heavy footsteps flanked Ditzzy while clawed fingers materialized out of the shadows. With her back to the door, she was cornered and vulnerable. Ditzzy instinctively went on the defensive, bucking her legs at a random attacker. There was a loud ring and a grunt as her hooves struck metal and managed to send one of the fiends reeling into the wall with a loud thud. But the other two were already upon her and they clawed at her legs, grabbing them tightly before lifting her up and forcefully slammed her to the ground and onto her side. The saddlebags of mail cushioned the blow; however, there was a crack as her

skull impacted against the hard floor and left her bewildered while stars circled in her eyes. Her next instinct would've been to scream for help, but there was already a gag in her mouth before she even realized what was happening, and all that came out afterward was a muffled whimper.

It was over as quickly as it had begun and in only a few seconds Ditzzy had her legs and wings bound with a very course rope that irritated and chaffed her skin the more she struggled. By this point the attackers had already stripped her of her postal bags and the package she'd been in the middle of delivering.

There was a click of a switch and suddenly the room was filled with lamp light, allowing Ditzzy to look upon the faces of her assailants. Three brown furred diamond dogs stood over her; each pit-bull was a bulky mass of muscles and stood nearly a head and a half taller than she was. Each wore an armored helmet, chest piece, and shoulder guards that were made of crudely smelted and beaten iron plates. To Ditzzy they looked more like medieval hoof-ball players than knights-errant.

One of them held the brown package with the golden thread and handed the item off to another pony that had entered from the back room. Ditzzy immediately recognized the newcomer as the voice that had greeted her into the house. This neon bright pony with a coat of pink and a mane of yellow accepted the package eagerly, her lavender eyes dancing with a gleeful hunger. Ditzzy was well acquainted with this pony, but the two were not friends. Still, it hurt so very much to see one of Ponyville's own betray her.

"At last," Secret Cherry, secretary to the Mayor of Ponyville, spoke with adulation, "the tome is ours now." The pink pony tore at the thread and wrapping like an eager foal on Christmas day. She held up a leather bound book that carried no title and no noticeable features save one; the monolithic symbol of the Black Marker burned onto the cover. Cherry lovingly traced a single hoof over the symbol.

"Ten thousand years," she inhaled sharply, "ten thousand years we've been looking for this book. You two ponies should feel honored to be in the present of pony-kind's greatest legacy, the key to our return to greatness. Can you feel its power? I'm sure you can." She held the book over Fluttershy who began to brutally writhe about, twisting and arching her back

in intense spasms. Her pitiful moans and screams reflected a state of intense pain, as if she was being burned alive by the book itself.

"That's right, bathe in its glory," Cherry beamed in pleasure as she practically placed the book against the mare's head.

"I guess the good Doctor was right. You and your friends, all the Elements of Harmony, are especially sensitive to it." Cherry pulled the tome back and slowly Fluttershy's aggrieved seizures ceased, leaving the gentle caretaker in a puddle of tears, sweat, and blood soaked mucus. That wasn't good enough for Cherry, she wanted these worthless ponies to suffer, so she lashed out with a brutal kick to Fluttershy's midsection. The remorseless blow caused the pegasus to squeak in agony before fainting.

Despite the hopeless situation Ditzzy felt her fear melting away at the sight of another fellow pony who dared to treat Fluttershy in such a cruel manner. Bad enough Cherry had completely disregarded the sacred postal rule sixty-five, but this was too much. Ditzzy would never be able to find it in her heart to forgive her for committing such heinous acts, even for all the muffins in Equestria. Ditzzy glared with unbridled fury, unfortunately it only made her eyes act more derpy than usual due to the intense cocktail of emotions.

"You! Take this tome back to the labs," Cherry shouted the order while handing off the book to one of the guard dogs, "I'll be sure to inform the Doctor that we are ready to begin construction tomorrow, in earnest."

"What about the ponies?" A second guard asked in a deep bass voice that sounded like two stones grinding against each other. Cherry shrugged, with a groan of exasperation, as if the answer was plainly obvious.

"Take them back to the gem mines as per usual," She back-hoofed the guard, knocking away the helmet from atop his dome, "this is why I'm the one in charge of this operation, for my brains. We can always use more slave labor to help in the construction, and afterward I'm sure the Doctor will love to have a couple more test subjects." The traitorous pony was about to trot away when she noticed how Ditzzy was snarling at her.

"However, I very much don't like the way this one is looking at me." She glanced over the defiant gray pegasus. To think such a pathetic creature

would dare challenge her. She decided that it was necessary to make an example of it.

"Pluck out her eye." She commanded the guard, while watching the pegasus' defiance crumble into complete shock.

"Which one? The guard asked plainly.

"Tch, I don't know. Does it matter?" she replied in a sing-song voice while waving a hoof back and forth, carefully considering the two options. Ditzzy cried, forming a puddle on the ground. She didn't want to lose an eye, and couldn't understand why this would happen. She didn't know Secret Cherry very well, but would never have imagined she was so cruel, so heartless. It felt as if everything she'd ever known had turned against her and she was wracked in terrible sobbing fits as she tried desperately to beg for mercy.

"That one." Cherry declared.

(...)

As she made her way down the trail towards Ponyville, Cherry whistled a cheerful tune. From behind she could clearly make out a series of high-pitched, stifled screams, burst from the cottage. She felt a flash of ecstasy wash over her being. It was unfortunate that the pegasus had to be gagged, otherwise it would've been such a delicious scream to behold.

"This has been a great day." She mused, and knew that it would only be the first of many to come. She particularly looked forward to when her superiors finally wised up and sent the order down that would finally free her break that goody-four shoes Twilight Sparkle, and her other friends, too.

Chapter 9

Of Apples and Engineers

Twilight and Isaac both arrived at Sweet Apple Acres later than anticipated due to several unforeseen encounters, of which Rarity was the most memorable, but not the only. Shortly after the white unicorn had departed, Twilight felt she should guide Isaac through the Ponyville marketplace to give him a better understanding of their culture and daily livelihoods. Most importantly, she needed to prove that not every pony was out of their corn-loving minds.

It was an idea she came to regret as she was forced to pony up the fifteen bits to pay Lily, Daisy, and Rose for the flowers they had given Isaac as a 'gift.' Still, he appeared to be taking it all in with a lot more level-headedness than from before, but she had to continue to watch him closely for further signs of distress.

On the way out of the market they happened to cross paths with Mayor Mare and her aide, Secret Cherry, both of whom were engaged in a quiet yet heated discussion, judging from the strained looks they gave each other.

"Mayor Mare, Cherry, how are you today?" Twilight hailed with a zeal that quickly sank as the two politicians became intensely aware of her presence. What she had thought was just a simple argument at first, not the phrase 'locally contained explosion,' now seemed more fitting.

"Oh," the Mayor quickly softened her composure, "Twilight, it's good to see you."

"Is something the matter?" Twilight found herself fidgeting uncomfortably.

"No, not at all, my dear. My secretary and I were just having a little disagreement about current matters on hoof. Speaking of which, have you made any progress on the investigation of the stolen tome?"

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Mayor," Twilight shook her head, yet found herself eying Isaac despite her efforts not to, "I don't have much to go on right now but I'll let you know the moment I find anything useful."

"I see, I eagerly await any news, I have faith in your abilities, and in the Princess to bring a quick resolution to the situation." The Mayor then turned to her aide, "Let us go. We have a lot more business to take care of and we should discuss matters of your behavior in private." She said with a scolding tone.

"Of course, Mrs. Mayor, whatever you need." Secret Cherry said with unerring submission, while giving a brief bow before falling into measured step behind the Mayor. After a few strides she gave a momentary glance over her shoulder at Twilight and Isaac, giving them an appraising look and a cocky grin.

"I don't like her." Isaac growled as soon as Cherry was out of sight.

"You shouldn't say that about the Mayor." Twilight verbally rebuked him, "I know we didn't get a chance to introduce you, but she's been under a lot of stress lately."

"No, I'm talking about that Cherry pony," Isaac huffed defensively, "did you see the look she gave us? I've seen that expression before and nothing good ever comes of it."

"You're just imagining things. Cherry is one of the most level-headed ponies you could ever meet."

"I'm telling you, she's dangerous."

"Come on," Looking to change topics Twilight began trotting at an increased pace, "we don't want to be late."

(...)

Erected all along the perimeter of Sweet Apple Acres there was a wooden post-and-rail fence that cordoned off the farmland from the surrounding areas. The wood was very old, with numerous fractures and splits up and down its length, yet remained strong and unyielding. In truth the fence was used more for land marking rights than actually trying to keep anypony in or

out. Twilight could not recall a single time when she'd ever witnessed the front gate being closed. Apple Acres was always open to anyone at anytime, a true testament to the openness of the local community, barring a single incident with a certain Zebra notwithstanding.

She looked out over the prosperous farm and its many hundreds of apple trees that had grown upon the green of the rolling hills. It seemed as if every single tree was filled to burst with countless red delicious apples, a sight that never ceased to amaze her.

Over the hills and in between the trees was a well traveled and weather-worn dirt path that headed towards the heart of the apple orchard operation, to Applejack's home, a big red barn-like structure with white trim, an extension built into the east side, and a reinforced gray gabled roof with a tower, no more than a story tall, on the front. It was a robust structure that had served generations of apple farmers well.

Just outside said house, Twilight could see Applejack unpacking an open top cart that was loaded down with broken tree branches and several wooden buckets overflowing with fresh apples. Pinky Pie, wearing twin buckets that too were full of apples, had been bouncing about like a hyperactive puppy on stimulants as she joined up with the farmer. It was a miracle that she didn't scatter her cargo of fruit all over the place with her unrestrained energy.

"Twilight," AJ greeted warmly, her freckles seemed to brighten with her smile, "thank ya ever so kindly for comin' ta help me out."

"No problem, Applejack. I'm always happy to help a friend." Twilight's smile hesitated when she spotted the dark patches under said friend's eyes.

"You don't look like you got a lot of sleep last night?"

"Naw, I'm just right as rain suga' just some bad dreams that's all." AJ casually dismissed the suggestion. "Nothing ta worry about, it'll take more than one bad night ta tame this pony."

"AJ, you're not exactly known for having bad dreams. I'm curious, what were they about?" Twilight was growing very concerned. She had hoped it was just an exaggeration on her part, but between Pinky and herself they had begun to hear disembodied voices and now AJ was having

nightmares. She wondered if all her friends were beginning to show similar signs of mental disturbance. She had since dismissed that idea since Rarity hadn't shown any signs of being afflicted, though Twilight would have to ask her about that later tonight; as well as Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash, when she could.

"Shoot, Twilight. Its nothin' ya'll need to worry your lil' head over."

Uncomfortable with the subject AJ found herself drawn to the gray Pegasus standing silently behind the lavender unicorn. The Stallion's eyes were darting nervously over the trees, cautiously inspecting each one as if the boogey-mare herself was about to jump out and eat them all.

"Ah see ya'll brought some extra help too, don't recognize him from around these parts. Seems ta be a mite on edge, though."

"That's Cutter, he's an engineer from Manehattan, and an old friend of mine." Twilight smirked apprehensively at the alien's odd behavior. "He's just nervous around new places and ponies." She had hoped her explanation would satisfy the farmer and would be the end of it. A flimsy hope that faded as AJ raised a suspicious eyebrow and leaned oppressively.

"Ah never knew you'd done been to Manehattan?" Applejack interrogated, while Twilight cursed her absolutely terrible ability to act out a convincing story. She noted with grave annoyance that Pinky Pie had been smiling at her the whole time, shaking her head in quiet guffaws as if watching the funniest thing in the world.

"I haven't," Somewhere Twilight could hear her conscience screaming at her to quit while she was ahead, "we met, uh... met in Canterlot, at the library."

"It's no good, abort! Abort!" At least she hoped that was her conscience.

"Ah see," AJ's abruptly pulled away, but had a much snarkier expression as she unhooked her cart's harness and went over to greet the new arrival. Isaac had halted in his apple orchard reconnaissance just long enough to notice an orange pony grabbing one of his hooves in hers.

"Howdy partner." She vigorously pumped his arm in a series of rapid hoof-shakes. "Welcome ta Sweet Apple Acres, here we grow tha biggest,

tastiest apples in all Equestria. We're always happy to be makin' new friends here and any friend of Twilight's is ah friend o' mine."

"Hi!" Pinky joined in on the fun as she shook Isaac's other hoof with equal amounts of enthusiasm and jollity. The former-human was shaken about like a flag in an utterly merciless hurricane crosswind.

"I'm Pinky Pie and I know every pony in Ponyville, but I don't know you so you must be new. Of course you are, how silly of me, oh, but you're Twilight's friend too even though you just got here. That gives us so much in common, you know. Even though you're still new aren'tcha and probably don't have many friends yet, other than Twilight that is. Oh, it'd be so great to throw a welcoming party for you. Do you like cupcakes? Muffins? Strawberry-rhubarb pie?" So it continued on until the moment Isaac's legs had managed to find a solid register in the dirt and he forcefully withdrew both arms, breaking away to freedom from the pair of overly eager ponies and the sugar rush ramblings.

"Ah must say we don't get many city folk around these parts." AJ continued, good mood uninterrupted as Isaac rotated his shoulders popping his joints back into alignment.

"You must be Applejack, Twilight said you needed some help." Isaac said in a no-nonsense tone, now more eager than ever to be done with this nonsense.

"Ah sure as suga' do. Got me some old trees that need ta be gottin' ride of right away." AJ circled him, evaluating his body closely, while he watched her closely for any sudden moves, "Hmm... yer not quite as sturdy as Big Macintosh, but ya'll should do nicely." She nodded in satisfaction.

"Twilight, can ya and Pinky finished unloadin' the cart and buck som'more apples while ah show Cutter the ropes?"

"Actually, Applejack, I was wondering if we could talk to you in private." Twilight protested, whether from a desire to extrapolate the situation to a fellow element holder, or from nervousness at casting Isaac out into the world unsupervised, she couldn't tell.

"No time suga', we got'sta finish these here chores before suppa' time. Pinky can show you the patch of trees we've been buckin' and Cutter here

sounds like he'd be the perfect pony ta help me cut down them raggedy old trees over yonder." AJ pointed to some unseen point in the north.

(...)

Isaac followed the farmer pony as she led him towards a section of the farm far to the north of the barn. Of all the ponies he'd met that day, she was the first to wear any sort of distinctive clothing; in this case it was a Stetson hat. He had been fully aware (even before he removed his advanced suit) that clothes were the exception, not the rule. He knew that he, himself, was walking around in his birthday suit in a reality where the dominant species mostly consisted of females. Given all that it didn't bother him at all, that was the problem. It bugged him that it didn't bug him.

Setting aside such thoughts for the moment he instead wished to focus on the task at hand. He wasn't too keen on the whole tree cutting idea, but given that moments of respite between necromorph outbreaks were a vanishing opportunity, it was nice to finally have something else to do, if for only a little while.

Their travels had brought them to a patch of farmland that was home to ten of the most wretched trees he'd ever seen. They were mere leafless brown husks with a smattering of fungus and moss beginning to grow on the trunks. It was no wonder that the farmer wanted such things removed from her land A.S.A.P.

"Tools are raight over here." Applejack pointed to a parked cart burden with various lengths of rope, several saws, an ax, a few shovels, and other various pieces of farming and gardening equipment.

"I reckon a two-pony saw it will make it easier." Reaching in she pulled out a single-sided saw that was between six to seven feet long with a pair of handles on each end for ponies to grip with their front hooves. Carrying it in her mouth she set it down next to the first tree.

"Ya'll know how to use one o' these, right?" she smiled with self-assured confidence as if she truly anticipated him to give a negative.

"Of course, even a first year novice would know that." Isaac snorted glibly.

Applejack grabbed the saw and used it to make a notch on the trunk of the first tree, a guiding line for where the cut would be made, and waited for Isaac to join her.

"Can't believe I'm doing this," Isaac mused quietly to himself, "a Master's in electrical and mechanical engineering, a twenty-one year career serving on every model of ship across trillions of miles of space and it ends with me cutting trees with a talking pony using a saw straight from the dark ages. Since when did someone decide that hell was too good for me?" He took hold of his end of the saw, mirroring the gripping method the farmer pony used.

"Ready?" she asked eagerly.

"Sure," he mumbled, lost in his gloom.

"Then GO!" Applejack gave an excited holler and in a flash of movement Isaac felt himself suddenly snapped forward to be forcefully face-flattened into the tree with a mighty thwack.

"Guh!" he shouted in surprise as he wheeled backwards, head over heels, to land flat on his back, legs and wings comically flopped about.

"Heh, heh," the freckled farmer chuckled, "whoops, sorry. Forgot ya'll city folk ain't accustomed ta a lil' hard work. I'll be sure ta go a bit easier on ya." Applejack apologized as Isaac shook his head and blinked back the dazed mist from his eyes. Her words had sounded sincere enough, but he had seen the unmistakable glimmer of mischief in her eyes. He silently rebuked himself for letting his guard down, allowing himself to be made the fool. Behind those large innocent green orbs there was just as much playful mirth and deception as anyone else he'd known. Well, two could play at that game.

"I'm okay," he said while rubbing his nose, relieved to find nothing had been broken, "it was an honest mistake, don't worry about it."

"Good ta hear partner. Ready ta try again for real?"

The two of them had returned to their original positions, saw at the ready.

"Ready?" she repeated.

"Yup!" He jumped into action, not bothering to wait for the signal. He dug his feet into the dirt and pulled the saw as quickly and vigorously as he could. His efforts were quickly rewarded with a loud crash and the sight of a much flattened orange pony half embedded in the rotten tree. She slid down the trunk with a noticeable squeaking sound before coming to rest on the ground with a clunk. With a pop and a shake of her head, she was able to straighten herself out, eyes like green lasers that wanted to burn him into a smoking brown puddle.

"Ya'll did that on purpose!"

"Whoops, guess I don't know my own strength. Need me to slow down?" Isaac said taunting her.

"So that's how it's gonna be?" Her previous expression of injustice made way for a smile that was as cocky as it was all knowing.

"This is how it is."

"Why of all the nerve!" She shot back up onto her hooves, "I refuse to be shown up by a high falootin' city slicker who don't know tha meanin' of an honest day's apple buckin'."

"And I won't tolerate some fedora-wearing fruit with a superiority complex."

"Don't ya'll use your fancy words on me, you're just as bad as Big Macintosh."

"I don't know who that is, but he sounds like my kind of guy."

With words exchanged, a challenge issued, the two of them once again had taken up ready stances by the tree, saw at the ready. The hot-headed human engineer and the stubborn-as-a-mule farmer pony glared venomously at each other, hooves twitching, waiting for the other to make the first move. From an unseen direction a slight breeze had begun to blow while a piece of tumble weed appeared and rolled lazily by.

Isaac was first on the offensive, pulling his end hard and quick with sweat already appearing across his body. Despite his efforts Applejack was able to stand her ground and recovered the initiative with an equally potent fury, the handles digging uncomfortably into her skin. Both of them heaved and

grunted as they continuously alternated the balance of power. Sometimes it was in prolonged tugs-of-war, and other times in a series of lightning quick exchanges. It was an intense and dangerous struggle that both poured all of their efforts, all their passions, into: pulling, pushing, and resisting. Each cutting movement was more intent on the defeat of their rival than actually felling the tree, yet it was still working. Within minutes after they'd started, the familiar sound of splintering wooden fibers had filled the air and the dead tree collapsed with a mighty crash.

That minor interruption didn't concern them and did nothing to stop them from continuing on with their unwavering focus. Moving as Siamese twins connected by a long metal blade, they headed to the next tree to continue the war. Back and forth, back and forth they vied for position. Every victory added another new bruise to their opponent, their own bodies keeping track of the score. So far they had been tied in points and the realization of such made them fight even harder, redoubling their efforts. No inch or quarter was given, the pride of apple farmers and the integrity of engineers everywhere had been laid bare that day and only one would emerge victorious.

The second tree tumbled and neither hesitated as they moved to the next.

(...)

Within an hour Twilight and Pinky Pie had bucked enough trees and gathered enough red fruit to fill the cart to the brim with more produce than either could eat in a single month by themselves, even if they ate nothing but. When they had tried to move the cart, however, they soon realized that they had made a grievous error in judgment. The personification of pink pony was grinding her teeth as she strained against the harness trying to pull the cart up the shallow hill while the magic purple pupil had thrown her back against the wagon and pushed from behind. Progress was slow but as the pair made it to the summit they decided, or rather were forced, to take a brief respite to catch their breaths.

"Applejack always makes it look so easy," Pinky gasped like a drowning fish alongside Twilight who was not faring any better, "Can't you use a little of your magic, Twi? Just a teensy-weensy-itty-bitty, 'I'm a Doctor not a farmer, Jack,' bit?"

"Not... an option," Twilight paused for a big breath, "especially not after what... happened... at the," another large gulp, "Winter Wrap Up."

"Oh yeah," Pinky inflected as if remembering something funny, "AJ did have a word or two with you about magic on her farm. Actually it was a lot more than a few words, but I don't think I have to remind you of that since you were the one who just brought it up now."

There was a slight interruption in the conversation when the sound of three filly voices rose above the silent orchard, cheering and hollering in high-pitched squees of delight. Only one group of fillies could manage that feat and have decibels to spare so that even the deaf could hear them. It seemed to originate somewhere around the northern quarter where Isaac and Applejack had gotten off to.

"That sounds disturbingly like the Cutie-Mark Crusaders. I wonder what's going on that's got them all excited?"

"Oh, oh!" Pinky had begun to bounce about excitedly, leaving a still fatigued Twilight to wonder where the sugar lover stored all that extra energy.

"Come on Twilight, let's go check it out. Maybe they've started a party already. I do so love parties, but they shouldn't have started it without me, how rude. We'll I'm sure they just got excited and couldn't help themselves, after all every new pony deserves a party..."

"Enough, Pinky!" Twilight interrupted, screaming in a sudden anger, "Are you always so annoying? Can you ever think of anything besides parties?" Normally she didn't mind the party pony's rambunctious rants, she enjoyed them at times, but sometimes she wished she could, to Pinky, could just... could just...

Twilight had to bite her lip hard to interrupt her darkening thoughts from spiraling further out of control. Having regained her senses she hung her head in shame. She would never, ever, wish to cause harm on her friends or treat them unfairly. That unfamiliar feeling of emptiness was creeping in now, she closed her eyes steeled herself to fight the darkness, to keep it away.

"You okay?" Pinky gently placed a hoof across her friend's forehead. Thankfully she was far more concerned and not offended.

"This isn't like you Twi, you've been acting strangely since last night."
"I noticed," she agreed, "I've been feeling funny too."

"You just need something to turn that frown upside down. Come on," she intertwined her arm with the egghead's, "a party awaits us and laughter is always the best medicine, Doctor Pie is never wrong."

"Actually, that sounds like a great idea. Thanks Pinky."

"Don't mention it! What are friends for?"

(...)

With the sound of gleeful shouting fillies as their guide it had been a cinch to track down the source of the disturbance. The sight that greeted Twilight and Pinky was both a typical situation of the usual chaotic shenanigans that frequently played out in Ponyville. At the same time it was so utterly bewildering that Twilight had to sit down before she dared to attempt to make sense of it all.

The best way to describe it was that both farmer and engineer had been at each others' throats engaged in an all out, no-holds-barred, Iron Pony competition. Isaac and Applejack were both covered in numerous bruises on their bodies and legs and each sported a black eye on top of that. A few of his feathers had fallen onto the ground, while she had lost her hat somewhere. Nearby there was a neat stack of ten freshly cut logs, all of which had pony shaped holes in them, and a pile of eight exhumed tree stumps. The entire area looked like a demolition zone. Grass was trampled flat, a cloud of dust hovered overhead, and apples had been scattered and squished under hoof.

Through out it all sat three little ponies who continued to cheer and encourage the combatants. These three fillies were known to all residents of Ponyville as the Cutie-Mark Crusaders.

"Yeaahh! Way to go Mister, show Applejack who's the boss!" Cheered Scootaloo, the first member of the CMC. She was an orange skinned and purple mane pegasus child with stubby wings and grayish-purple eyes.

Although she was still too young to fly, that didn't stop her from buzzing her wings in support of the gray stallion.

Next to her was Sweetie Bell, Rarity's younger sister. The two unicorn siblings shared the same white skin. Yet Sweetie Bell, unlike her older sister, had sap green eyes and a twirls in her mane that were half rose and half purple, offset with a grayish tint. Having no clear role model to cheer for, she just made a ruckus for the sheer thrill of it, voice ringing clear and melodious as if caught in a song.

"Come on, Applejack! Ya'll can't lose to some newcom'r! Then there was the final member of the CMC, Applebloom, who was shouting her lungs out in support of her older sister, Applejack. The fervent pale olive colored filly, with orange eyes, was perhaps most recognizable for the big red ribbon she wore in her rose colored mane, which was currently obscured by AJ's signature Stetson hat.

Now Applejack was using her famous apple bucking legs trying to uproot her remaining tree stump. Isaac, however, had tied a rope around his stump and used a nearby tree as a fixed axle in an improvised pulley system and beating his wings to give him an edge, but never leaving the ground. The battle only ended when there was heard a stereoscopic sound of ripping roots as they tore their stumps clean of the earth.

"Done!"

"Finished!" They both shouted their victory in unison, ending the fight in yet another tie. For them that was an unacceptable - offensive even - outcome. They expressed this intolerable situation by colliding into one another, pressed together; chest to chest, muzzle to muzzle, and eyes undeterred.

"There are no more stumps ta uproot."

"Sure about that? I can see one more in front of me."

"Then there is only one way left ta settle this." AJ stepped back and upturned one of the freshly liberated stumps, "a hoof wrassle."

The five bystanders watched the two combatants lock hooves in a deathgrip. Both AJ and Isaac heaved and panted, growling against each other, completely united in their desire to emerge victorious over the other.

Seconds seemed to stretch out into minutes as the exhausted ponies heaved with all their remaining strength. Their arms remained unmoving like stone pillars while their sweat ran like rapids down their faces. While Twilight and the Cutie-Mark Crusaders watched, unconsciously holding their breath in rapt fascination, Pinky Pie was happily munching from a box of caramel popcorn while pumping a yellow, '#1' foam finger fist into the air.

It had been an impressive fight, but, in the end, there could be only one winner.

"Yeeehaaaawww!" Applejack gave a victorious yelp as a defeated Isaac slumped limply onto the tree stump, his face one of utter shock and bewilderment. He couldn't believe that he'd just lost, and to a southern talking pony fruit to boot. He felt a terrible blow to his male pride, as if he'd just been kicked in the family jewels. It felt both demeaning and yet strangely liberating at the same time. He'd been defeated, true, but at least he wasn't going to be torn into bloody shreds as a consequence of it.

"Aww, cheer up there, Cutter." Applejack not-so-sympathetically patted him on the back, "Ya'll done put up a good fight, but nopony could eva hope ta put me down." Isaac just rolled his head to the side and stared with an unimpressed look.

"Hay, Cutie-mark Crusaders," At AJ's beckoning the three fillies had rushed in to stand at attention before her, "It'd be mighty helpful if ya'll could show Cutter here back ta tha barn so he could get cleaned up."

"Yes Ma'am" the CMC saluted with military precision before rushing off to pull, push, and plead with Isaac to follow them. He gave Twilight a pleading look asking for

"Don't forget ta introduce him ta Granny Smith, ya hear me Applebloom?" AJ called out as Isaac was lead away. Once he was a safe distance away walked up to Twilight, suddenly serious.

"Twi, ya'll sure he's from Manehattan?" Her question must've hit a nerve because Twilight suddenly cringed. "He certainly ain't no stuck up prissy pony that ah would associate with that stuck-up city."

"That's what I wanted to tell you about, AJ." "Not in the open however, we need to go someplace where we can talk in secret. You see..." Applejack raised a hoof to silence the unicorn.

"Then why don't ya'll keep it a secret until after we finish with these chores."

(...)

Once again Isaac found himself being led about by pastel ponies. He was fast losing his patience; it was feeling like he was regarded more as a pet than someone who'd single-handedly survived impossible odds, twice. Then he only had to take a single look at the three children at his side before such anger and indignation vanished like vaporized water. He would never admit it to anyone, but he found them rather... cute, even adorable. The fact that they looked up to him with eyes filled with adoration and respect didn't hurt either. With them around it was easy to almost forget about his recent humiliation, almost. The best words he could find to describe their behavior was 'bubbly innocence.' They certainly had the energy of Pinky Pie, but were not nearly as unrestrained or insane.

"Wow, mister. Ya'll must be really strong," Applebloom said in genuine admiration, "Ya'll managed ta get Applejack ta take her hat off."

"Is that good?" Isaac looked at her as if she were speaking nonsense which, to him, she was.

"Good?" Applebloom sputtered in incredulity, "My big sister says that she has a lot o' tha Apple family pride in her. If she takes off her hat it means she's really getting' down ta business. She didn't even take it off during her race with Rainbow Dash during last year's 'Running of the Leaves' competition."

"Yeah," Scootaloo jumped in with merrily, "you were awesome back there, not as awesome as Rainbow Dash, but still very cool."

"So what do you do, Mister Cutter?" Without warning Sweetie Bell had hopped onto his back in a single bound. While he was of a mind to order her off, he could help but resist doing so. Human or pony, he had a weakness when it came to children. At time really wished he could've had some of his own.

"Well," Isaac briefly considered following Twilight's example and making something up, but surely there was no harm in telling these kids what he did as long as he avoided specifics. Besides if it ended up irritating Twilight then that was just an added perk.

"I'm a systems engineer." He proudly told them.

"What's a sys..syte..syst, what's an engineer?" Sweetie Bell felt her cheeks heat in embarrassment.

"I'm a 'systems' engineer," Isaac corrected, feeling a wash of confidence and self-importance overtake him, "It's my job to build, repair, modify, and maintain the various tools, weapons, and machines that peo... er, ponies use in their day to day activities. Got something that is broken? Bring it to me and I can fix it and improve it. Got a nasty monster breathing down your neck? I know how to build the weapons that'll put that creature in its place."

"Could ya'll teach us ta be enghineers?" The red haired child asked with winded anticipation.

"I suppose I could." He answered; unaware of what would come next. All three of the fillies had taken deep potent breath before, in unison, they shouted an almighty cheer that left him wondering how something so small could produce a sound so big.

"Cutie-Mark Crusaders: System Engineers GO! Yayyyy!"

They certainly had not held back in their gleeful adulation and afterwards they smiled at him, continued to speak highly of him. Isaac hadn't seen such happiness in such a long time, however he knew that they were ignorant of the fate that awaited them. Then the reality of the state of affairs came crashing back down on him. For a moment, brief although it was, he didn't see three little pony children full of life and silly vigor, but something else. Voided, lifeless eyes, decayed flesh hanging by threads from shredded muscles, a trio of tentacles sprouting from their backs with the sole deadly purpose of spitting spiked barbs at the living. There was a word for such abominations; necromorphs, lurkers, undead children. The name didn't matter, he could hear their screams in his mind's eye, could picture the moment of their deaths and terrible conversion.

They didn't know what was coming, they were only children. It was at that moment he had made his decision. Repayment and rewards be damned, he didn't need either from Twilight or her Princess and it no longer mattered that they were a different species. He could not allow himself to stand idly by and allow such a future to befall any of them. The Marker wasn't built yet, therefore he had a chance to avert the outbreak before it began.

(...)

It was some time later before Isaac emerged from the bathroom. He had taken his time cleaning the sweat and grim off, but in truth he had wanted the alone time to collect his thoughts while the warm water massaged his sore muscles. In the end he was clean and presentable even if all the bruises made it look like he was wearing a gray shirt with black polka-dots. He heard familiar voices and followed them into what he assumed to be the dining room.

Inside was a large maple table, circled by five wooden chairs, which looked almost as old as the pony that he saw sitting at its head. The elderly green pony he saw had more wrinkles on her face than there were apples in the orchard, her snow white hair was done up in tight buns that look almost uncomfortable, and when she walked towards him he could clearly hear the joints cracking in her four knees.

"Hello, Mister Cutter." Applebloom greeted him happily, "Are ya feelin' better?"

"Yes I am, thanks for asking." He responded in kind.

"This here is my grandma, Granny Smith." The child introduced him to the wizened old pony before him.

"Little Applebloom has been tellin' me all about ya, young un." Her smile was devoid of teeth, but no less warm and inviting. Isaac found himself a little put off by her invitation, though. She'd called him young, well, compared to her he must be.

"So, she continued, "ya'll are tha stallion who done tried ta put the spurs ta my granddaughter?"

Suddenly, Isaac felt incredibly uncomfortable around the elder pony. She was the least threatening person he'd ever seen and was very open with him. Right then, however, she was giving him, 'that look.' He knew, 'that look,' well; others had used it on him before. It was the judging gaze of a protective guardian sizing up a potential candidate for their daughters.

"Is she shitting me?" He thought coldly. "Does she not realize I'm far too old for her granddaughter?" He was about to voice said objections when said grandchild suddenly emerged into said dining room.

"Howdy everyone." Applejack arrived, hat firmly placed back on her head, accompanied by Twilight and Pinky Pie.

"Granny Smith, ah see ya'll all have met Cutter."

"Indeed ah have, my child, he's not quite what ah had expected." She answered truthfully, "But it appears Big Macintosh might have some competition."

"Granny, since we've finished early, what say we celebrate with a little o the good stuff." Applejack walked over to the kitchen door in anticipation.

"Good stuff?" Isaac liked where this was going.

"Sure thang," AJ exalted when Granny Smith gave a wink of approval, "we gots jugs o' moonshine, sunshine, appleshine, saltshine, and since ya'll are from Manehattan maybe ah should get the orangeshine. Ah made it from the finest oranges my uncle and auntie sent over."

"Then fire up that son-of-a-bitch and throw it at my head." Is what he wanted to say but given his close proximity to both the purple mage and a trio of children he figured it wouldn't go down exceptionally well, so he settled for a simple, "I'd love some of that orangeshine," instead.

"Cutie-Mark Crusaders, time fer ya'll to skidaddle." Granny Smith ordered while pushing the three fillies towards the door.

"Awww, but we wanna watch." Sweetie Bell pouted at the injustice of it all.

"Sorry young-uns, this here is big pony business."

"You're no fun Granny."

"Ah said for you ta get. Go on and play in ya'lls clubhouse."

(...)

"Well... so much for that idea." Sweetie Bell sighed after their imposed ejection from the barn.

"Don't worry, girls," Scootaloo said in her usual energized tomboyish manner, "we can have Cutter show us how to be engineers tomorrow."

"So, what'll we do until then?" Applebloom kicked a stone.

"Same thing we do every day," Scootaloo brayed, "to try and discover our true talents."

"Ah know that, Ah mean what ac'tiv'ity thing are we gonna try next?"

As if in answer to her question a sudden rumbling crack, like distant thunder, echoed in the air. The sound had been short, sharp, and powerful enough to startle the fillies with its sudden invasion. The three fillies exchanged confused looks as they searched the sky for any signs of a storm, but not a cloud graced the flawless blue sky. They put an ear to the sky and waited a few breathless moments for a repeat performance. Their patience was rewarded as a second thunder crack blasted through the air, but this time they were able to pinpoint the direction it was coming from.

"Look! Over there!" Scootaloo shouted while pointing at a large column of black smoke and dust that had suddenly appeared, rising slowly over a nearby hill. It was soon joined by a second trailing plume of dark smoke that seemed to wrap around the first. Youthful curiosity overrode caution and the fillies ascended the nearest hill to get a better view. Once they had reached the summit they looked over the rolling fields of Apple Trees, but they found nothing was out of the ordinary. Their gaze lifted higher and they briefly considered Ponyville. Even from here they could see a flurry of frenzied activity had overtaken the town, but the smoke didn't come from there. Looking even higher they traveled to the base of the Prismatic Mountains and proceeded slowly up the bare rocky slopes. The end of the journey was at the summit of Mount Eclipse, and what they saw there had made their hair stand on end and their blood freeze. Without realizing it

they had huddled close together, bodies pressed tightly, trying to find solace in each other arms.

There were three massive spiraling plumes of smoke now, the third following in the wake of a large fireball. This wasn't supposed to happen; everything they'd been told and had learned in school had said this was impossible. So they just stared and watched, their young minds blank, unable to find the emotions to express the horror unfolding high atop Mount Eclipse.

It was on fire, the very heart and soul of Equestria had been pierced and was bleeding rubble down the mountain side.

Canterlot was burning.

Chapter 10

Into the Fire

In Canterlot, there was a toughened metal-bar fence that completely surrounded the castle grounds of the monarchy. It was as tall as six ponies, and designed with the dual purposes of strength and beauty; as much protection for the princesses as it was part of the pleasing aesthetic of the city. The only way past it was through the front gates, which were comprised of two reinforced beams made of the strongest steel, forged and tempered from Fillydelphia itself, and flanked by four elite guards; their helmets covering their faces completely.

It was said that even in the long forgotten days when war and conflict had spread over the land, no invading force had ever managed to break the gates and set hoof upon the castle grounds, not even pegasi - as an invisible magical barrier domed overhead. At least that had been the case up until last night, when a certain drunken crazed cyan pegasus had simply let herself in. Scholars and scientists would debate that anomaly for centuries to come.

This time, however, Rainbow Dash had to wave Luna's royal summons in order to convince the guards to allow her to gain admittance. The guards had hesitated initially while they quietly communicated their concerns between each other through minuscule head twitches and subtle body language. In the end they followed their duties and allowed her and her friends to pass through unobstructed, but insisted they be escorted by a pair of soldiers for safety concerns.

After the gates had closed behind the trio of ponies and their escort, they traveled down a road that was made entirely out of large carved slabs of bleached marble. The pieces were evenly spaced, measured, and cut to make a straight unbroken line straight to the castle. It was flanked on both sides by a single massive garden that wrapped itself around the castle, filling all the gaps between the structure and the enclosure. Rainbow Dash remembered once that Fluttershy had told her that the Canterlot garden contained a far greater variety of flora and fauna species than there were individual ponies in Ponyville and Canterlot combined. Dash didn't believe

all that, but noticed that no matter where she looked she had trouble spotting the same animal twice.

Dash felt uneasy being back here again for the third time. The first visit had been during the Grand Galloping Gala, a month back. It was suppose to have been the greatest night of her life, and had started off promisingly enough. It had been a fantastic party, but that was not her reason for attending. It was the prime opportunity to mingle and work her way in with the Wonderbolts, the greatest team of the six most professional aerobatic fliers in all of Equestria. They were her greatest heroes and her lifelong ambition was to join their distinguished ranks. That's not how it turned out that night - nothing but an extreme disappointment, a complete and utter disaster.

Much like her second visit last night when she'd 'accidentally,' (and that's how she'd explained it), had gotten tangled up with a lawn mower long enough to have 'just happened' to write her initials into the entire eastern part of the lawn. Then she'd dropped several servants into the water fountain, and finished off the night by embarrassing the head gardener by bringing the size of his manliness into question. An act which had won her several giggles from a few nearby mares before the guards and her friends had managed to catch up and put an end to her rampage. Back in the now she had noticed several grounds workers she passed by were giving her a few nervous sidelong glances.

"Looks like ya'll are not very pop'lar round these parts." Big Mac stated the obvious while chewing on a fresh hay stalk he'd mysteriously found.

"I know," Dash said irritably while becoming very self aware of the blush heating her cheeks, "but I tried to explain that it was all just a misunderstanding."

"Ah misunderstandin'? Ya'll ripped up and ate his wife's photo." Big Mac austerey reminded her.

"How was I supposed to know it was his wife?" Dash shouted in defiance, "I thought it was a production shot from, 'Planet of the Monkey Men.' Besides he can always get a new one. I don't see what the big deal is," she brought it down into a hot whisper, "stupid photograph."

"And then ya'll shoved a quill up his nose?" Big Mac simulated the act with his hay stalk while the escorting guards grunted their disapproval.

"It was the feather end, besides the doctors said they could get that out in a jiff."

"May I suggest; an apology would be best." Zecora offered.

"Yeah, yeah, maybe later, we've got more important things to do, Zecora."

"Be on your best behavior, do not be stubborn to excess; we are here to meet the Princess." The zebra cautiously lectured.

"Ahem." A stallion cleared his throat and seemingly out of nowhere a tan colored pegasus pony, with a slicked back dark blue mane, landed right next to them. He was dressed in a black two-piece suit with a matching bow tie and a white under-shirt. Pinned over his left breast pocket was a broach made from a silver crescent moon hugging an oval shaped amethyst jewel, polished to a brilliant shine, and glowing gently from an internal light that came from the gleam of a small star that had been implanted inside the jewel.

"Who are you?" Dash asked with a mask of indignation while admiring the gentle shine of the amethyst star.

"My name is Star Watch," he replied with well rehearsed professionalism, "I am Princess Luna's personally appointed aide and butler. Her Majesty has assigned me to act as your escort for the evening. A pleasure, Miss Dash." He bowed respectfully at her, playing the part of the exemplary gentlecolt quite well, but Dash did not find it comforting or endearing at all.

"You know my name?"

"Of course, ponies have been talking a lot about you lately. Princess Luna, herself, did speak very highly of you. Others... less so."

"Yeah, I'm getting that a lot lately." Dash rubbed her head in shame.

"Her Majesty has retired to the dining hall to enjoy an early breakfast. If you'd care to join me, I can take you there straight away." At Dash's nod of

approval, Star Watch dismissed the guards after a brief exchange of reassurance on his part.

"Hey," Dash jumped into Watch's face, "what does the princess want from us?" Watch stopped in his tracks to regard Dash with a perplexed expression.

"Surely, Miss Dash, you must have read the letter Her Majesty sent, did you not?"

"Yeah I did, but what does she 'really' want?" She unfolded her wings to punctuate the question.

"Princess Luna intends no deception," his voice was stern with a hint of caution, "You would do well to watch your tone."

"Excuuuse me, or what?"

"Hm, do you wish me to give you the polite version or straight up, Miss Dash?"

"Straight up, and stop calling me Miss."

"Very well," Star Watch looked her straight in the eyes, the air of sophistication and restraint remained but was fueled by raw emotion just under the surface. To Dash it was like a bolt of lightning had struck her to the heart.

"I don't like you. I think you're nothing but a spoiled troublemaker as your despicable performance last night showed. By all rights you should have been tossed right back into the dungeon. Had Princess Luna not interceded on your behalf, then that's exactly what would've happened."

"R... really? She did that for me?" Rainbow Dash was speechless and looked to her friends for confirmation. Her surprised look was met with confused shrugs.

"She did, and is taking a great risk in helping you. She certainly won't be winning any friends from it. Her Majesty's reputation is, to put it generously, abysmal. She's given nothing but her best in order to win over the hearts

and minds of her subjects. Yet most ponies trust her about as far as they can throw this castle."

"I-I'm sorry, I didn't know." she looked away, feeling a lump in her throat. Her own attitude had put her in this position. Now she owed Luna a favor, and she hated that. It wasn't like she loathed Luna, in the short time they had gotten to know each other Dash had found she kind of liked the inscrutable princess, but she just couldn't get over that whole Shadowbolts business.

"Remember Dash, it is wise to take a closer look; before judging the cover of the book."

"Eeyup."

(...)

Star Watch guided them down the boulevard and over the bridge that bypassed the moat, escorting them through the massive double doors of the castle's entrance, which were just as majestic as Dash remembered them. Through the gates was the entrance hall, where countless servants darted about with focused intent while well-dressed lords and ladies discussed matters of politics, fashion, status, and wealth. Most of the nobleponies were gathered around the foot of the wide staircase that lead up to the second floor. The top of the stairs was where Princess Celestia had stood and greeted all her guests during the Grand Galloping Gala.

The rest of the trip was a blur that ended as soon as they had arrived at the royal dining hall. The room was long, half a hoof-ball field sized long. In the center was a polished oak table with enough room and chairs to seat many hundreds of guests and was set with all the plates, goblets, and utensils necessary to entertain that many at a moment's notice. Princess Luna was sitting on the right side of the head of the table with the chair on her left unoccupied. Luna was enjoying a simple garden salad while sorting through a large pile of forms and documents. She gave a warm smile as the ponies approached.

"Thank you Star, please leave us for now. I'd like to speak to them in private."

"Of course, your Majesty." Star gave a respectful bow before promptly spinning in place and departing the way he'd come in without another word. Luna watched him go and only when he'd completely left the room did she directly address the others.

"So, we meet again Rainbow Dash." Luna arose and Dash found herself compelled to bow low before her.

"Please, there is no need for all this stuffy formality. When it's just us you can call me Luna too. I see you brought Macintosh as well, but I don't recognize your other companion."

"That's Zecora, another friend of mine. She's a zebra who lives out in the Everfree forest and kinda got stuck with us here when the city was closed."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Luna said sincerely, "I was only expecting two of you, but I certainly can spare another one for your friend." Luna lifted out a box decorated with ordinate carvings all over it from a bag that had been propped next to her chair. She set it on the table and before opening it was interrupted by Dash.

"Princ- Luna. I..." she stuttered, "I heard about what you did for me and... I... well..."

"What my pony friend here wishes to say; is she is grateful for the help you sent her way." Zecora helpfully interceded to a sigh of relief from the cyan Pegasus. Then Luna had started laughing and Dash fell into such a fit of heated embarrassment that her face lit up redder than Big Mac's coat.

"How could I not help you out after that wonderful display last night in the gardens? The look on Green Hoof's face after you ate his wife's picture and vanquished him with his own quill. You and I must think alike, because those were exactly two of the three things I most wanted to inflict upon that hot headed, trumped up, gardenite."

"So," The room was filled with Luna's choking amusement and Dash couldn't help but join in, "what was the third thing?" Luna gave an impish wink.

"A Princess would not dare say such a thing out loud. I will hint that it would involve using a certain gardening tool in a manner it wasn't intended for."

"Oh." As Dash had begun to contemplate the implications of that statement she found herself growing fonder of the Princess.

"That's strange," the alicorn had spoken after opening the ordinate box, "there's suppose to be six of them." She then pulled out three of the objects. Each was a silver collar, adorned with two alicorns, made to clamp around a pony's neck and had a crescent shaped pendant swinging lazily from a short chain. Like a sucker punch, fondness turned to suspicion as Dash recognized the objects as an exact copy of the jewelry Ditzzy had been wearing.

"If you wear these you can come and go from the city as you please."

"Thanks, but we can't leave just yet."

"Is there a problem?"

"Yeah," Dash was struggling with whether or not to trust the princess now, "do you know a pony named Ledger?"

"Ledger? Sure I do, economic specialist, quiet guy. Rather anti-social."

"Yeah, well, he was spotted sending mail out from the post office and not through the castle."

"That is odd, but not really illegal, at least not under normal circumstances. The mail mare would need royal permission from Celestia first."

"That's just the thing: she had one of yours." Dash indicated the medals on the table. Luna looked at her as if she'd suddenly exploded.

"That can't be right. Ledger is one of Celestia's staff and has no royal right to handle my affairs. Celestia may allow her subordinates to handle hers, but I've never given any such decree. Not even when we heard the book had been stolen from the treasury."

"A book!" Dash growled, "Is a book really what has everypony by the tail hairs? I could see Twilight getting all hot over such a thing, not all of Canterlot. I've been trapped here since yesterday because of a book?"

"It is no ordinary book. In fact, it is very special, and for all the wrong reasons. To just be near it could be dangerous and can cause certain afflictions." Warning bells were going off in Rainbow's head. Slowly, the pieces came together, and she began to feel unease with where this conversation was headed. "Would this book... cause ponies to, uhm, kinda- I mean, see things that were not there?" She'd said so little, yet it had made all the difference. "You felt it, didn't you? You actually came under its influence?" Luna suddenly grabbed Dash by the shoulders, "Tell me everything you know. We have to recover that book before it is used by the wrong hooves!"

(...)

It hadn't taken long to pinpoint Ledger's position. A couple of inquiries to the staff had revealed that he was currently in the middle of a meeting in the dome shaped council chambers. There were two pegasus guards on duty by the entrance to the chambers, and when Luna approached them they didn't appear to acknowledge her presence nor did they step away from their post.

"Guards, I wish to be allowed entrance. I must speak with Mr. Ledger at once on a matter of dire importance." Her decree was met with silence. She took a step to get by but they immediately blocked her progress by raising their wings.

"What is the meaning of this? I am your Princess and as the Keeper of the Moon and of the Night Sky, I am ordering you to step aside!" Still the guards taunted her with silence.

"Guards, I should warn you that you are set on a very dangerous path! By disobeying me you are disobeying Princess Celestia!"

"Sorry, your Majesty." A guard finally spoke, "but it **is** by Celestia's orders that no one else be allowed to interrupt." Luna feigned surprise, then she smile coyly.

"I see, even risking my wrath you remain steadfast and loyal to my sister." Luna inched close to the guard's ear, "I find that very attractive in a big strong Stallion such as yourself." She said in a deeply seductive voice. The guard didn't visibly react, but she could feel his body temperature start to climb. She gently traced a hoof around his ear and down his neck.

"Maybe you and I should get to know each other better, handsome." That got the guard's attention; breaking his rigid stance he risked a slight peek in her direction. The moment he looked straight into her eyes the spell she'd cast on herself made it impossible for him to resist her any further.

Luna felt completely humiliated at what she was doing. Not only at the awkwardness of the situation, but the fact that it was her sister who had taught her the tricks on the finer points of 'diplomatic negotiations.' Though, Luna confessed, she might've overdone it a bit.

As she worked her charms on the guards she observed Rainbow Dash, Big Macintosh, and Zecora silently sneak down a perpendicular corridor. The plan was working so far.

(...)

Rainbow Dash and Zecora ducked into an empty staff room while Big Mac stood watch outside. Just as Luna had predicted, the office was unoccupied at the moment. Dash didn't know what business went on in this room and didn't care. The only thing she was interested in was the window at the far end of the room.

"Remember to not be so bold; follow Luna's path as she has told." Zecora said as she unlocked the window with the key Luna had given them.

"Yeah, I know. Just be sure to give the signal in case of trouble."

There were many pegasus guards flying patrols overhead, but with Luna's instructions Dash knew the best way how to avoid them all. Still Dash insisted on wearing Luna's royal medal in case she got caught. It would allow her to talk her way out of a bad situation if necessary, or so she'd hoped.

Stealth required patience, the latter of which was her most prevailing flaw. A couple of times it had almost gotten her noticed by the guards. Inch by inch she had managed to crawl her way down the roof of the castle hiding behind walls, parapets, smoke stacks, and other chest high walls till she reached the glass dome of the council chambers.

Just below the dome was an uninterrupted band of evenly spaced windows. She attached herself to the wall and snuck around under the windows

slowly making her way around the structure. Even here on the outside Dash could clearly hear two ponies whispering in a debate from within the chamber, though she didn't understand what was being said until she had reached an optimal position.

"Mr. Ledger, is everything prepared?" Spoke a gruff and authoritative voice that Dash didn't recognize.

"Yes sir. The explosives are primed and awaiting detonation, but still I have doubts as to this course of action, sir." Ledger paced nervously about the room.

"I understand you may have reservations, Mr. Ledger, but do not fear. Everything has been accounted for. Even if the plan fails there are contingencies in place to assure our success."

"Would not killing her star pupil be easier? Secret Cherry is growing impatient."

"No, ignore Cherry! We kill Twilight Sparkle now and fifty ponies will rise up where she fell. With Celestia out of the picture Luna loses her safety blanket and it'll be easy to convince those scared foals in office that Luna was the mastermind behind the whole thing. Then Prince Blue Blood will rise up into a position of prominence."

"That incompetent buffoon? Hardly leadership material to inspire the masses." Ledger spat with undisguised contempt.

"He will be the perfect pony puppet to serve our needs."

"Maybe, but are you absolutely sure that assassinating the Princess will work? She is a goddess after all."

"Do not worry. The device has been laced with pellets made from orichalcum. Let's see how she handles that at point-blank range."

"Orichalcum?" Ledger gasped in disbelief, "Then you found it! The god slayer."

"Yes, and with the power of a new Marker under our control we will make all of ponykind whole again. A return to our former glory, just as it was back

in ancient times. The whole world will be ours and no nation will be outside our reach. Not even the moon itself." There was a chime from a clock, striking the hour.

"Celestia should now be heading to her private quarters for her weekly makeover. The moment she opens the door and it will all be in our hooves." The unknown stallion dramatically exposed.

Rainbow Dash exhaled a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, frozen in place with inconceivable disbelief at what she'd just overheard. Her first raging impulse was to fly right at them into a head on confrontation. This was just plain stupid, unforgivable.

"You guys are sick!" she yelled out of impulse, then quickly realized she'd made a terrible slip-up.

"Who's out there?" Ordered the gruff stallion, heading in her direction.

"Guards! We have a spy in our midst! Find her!"

Dash didn't wait for the guard. With a mighty push off the wall she dived straight back to the office, no longer caring if she was spotted by patrols. Zecora saw her charging in hot and quickly opened the window, shutting it again once the cyan pegasus was through.

"Quickly, we have to get to Luna! There is no time to waste; they'll going to kill her!"

"Steady yourself Dash, tell me what you have heard; what pony would be so absurd?" Dash bolted out the door closely followed by a stunned Zebra.

"They going to kill Celestia, we have to get to her room now!"

"What in tar'nation ya'll talkin' about?" The hay stalk slipped from Big Mac's lips.

"HALT! Stay right where you are!" Two guards interrupted them, and were charging right for them.

"There are intruders in the castle! They mean harm to our princess!"

"No, no it's not us its.." The guards paid no heed to her protests. They galloped forward prepared to trample and subdue her.

The first guard had the misfortune of meeting the red stone wall that was Big Macintosh. The giant farmer rammed the guard brutally into the wall and pinned him there, knocking the helmet clean off the guard's head. Zecora reached into her saddle bag and extracted a flask filled with a green liquid. She tossed the glass bottle into the face of the second guard and he collapsed, skidding to a halt as his hooves clutching his eyes in painful agony.

"Rainbow Dash, do not hesitate; save Celestia before it's too late." Dash faltered anyway despite the advice. It was all happening so fast that she couldn't cope. So she just stood there in a panic stricken state.

"Git goin,' Now!" Big Mac shouted as he struggled to hold the trained soldier. "We'll handle these here stallions. Ya'll have ta warn tha Princess!" Dash snapped back into reality and with a nod and a promise to get the job done she shot down the corridor like a bullet. Unfortunately in her panic she went the wrong way, away from Luna. As Dash flew she thought of Twilight and how devastated her friend would be if she failed to avert this disaster.

(...)

She had trouble wrapping her head around just how big the castle was on the inside. The narrow confines of the castle made it hard to achieve any decent speed; the constant fear of sudden sharp turns limited her potential. After awhile she had to stop in order to gather her bearings. She had tried her best to retrace the path Luna had taken them to only find herself stuck at an intersection with three possible directions to take. By now she had come to the awareness that she was completely and utterly lost. All around her was a near maddening silence, not a servant or guard to be found. She listened carefully for any sign of life, but there was nothing.

Each hallway looked exactly the same. She had a feeling that the way was straight ahead and she had not flown more than a dozen feet in that direction before she heard somepony call out to her.

"You're going the wrong way."

"Hello?" Dash called out to the enigmatic speaker hoping to find a friendly face or at least somepony she could grill for directions. Either she had imagined it or they were hiding from her. She had to rub her temples, suddenly finding it hard to concentrate on her surroundings and returned to the intersection, hoping to find the voice.

Then she heard something.

It had begun as quiet clatter that echoed at the periphery of her hearing and slowly gained volume. She recognized the slow, but purposeful, clapping of light hoof steps upon stone. Yet there was something strange about it, an unusual quality that shouldn't be there, a kind of sticky wetness with each hoof fall.

"Run! Run, now!"

The voice implored and had abruptly instilled within her a strong feeling that she was in terrible danger. The moment the emotion had hit the slow canter from the unseen pony became a full gallop as it suddenly picked up deadly speed. Sharp animal cries echoed behind her and on both her sides followed by vociferous barking as if from a large canine. The raw sounds filled her with a primal fear and she blindly took flight for dear life in the only direction she felt was safe.

Back the way she came.

Whoever following her was soon joined by a second set of hoof steps, then three, and then more joined it making it impossible to judge their numbers. She bolted ahead, countless turns and intersections passed but she never broke flight. From time to time she spotted one of them, a flurry of moment in the corner of her eye. Every time she looked the assailant was gone. Yet the wet sounds never allowed respite that they were there and all around her, surrounding her on all sides. No matter how fast, they were close by; chasing, following.

Stalking.

She didn't know where to go. The hallway had become a featureless void, removed of all landmarks. It just went on forever in a straight line, no deviations. A low hum had become a loud ringing as dozens of voices were unexpectedly talking in her head. Some encouraged her on and others told

her it was a hopeless effort. She ignored them as best she could as her only desires remained reaching Celestia in time. Pumping her wings harder, she was achieved dangerous speeds all the while gulping for air, body covered in sweat from the exertion.

She peered to her right and managed fleeting glimpse of one of the stalkers. Whatever it was stared her straight in the face. Hollow vacant holes where eyes should have been, all the flesh and muscle peeled back from its face leaving only a bloody grinning skull and a muzzle that had elongated into a sharp point at the nose. It had been a pegasus, once, now it was something far worse; unspeakable, and unnatural. Its featherless and flightless wings were fully erect, the bones elongated into spear like appendages.

"Ditzy?" Dash cried in frightened disbelief. There was no way to tell if it was the gray Pegasus that had been butchered in such a abominable manner as any distinctive features were gone such as the mane, tail, and cutie-mark. Yet, the signs were just too similar to be coincidence. The thing, whatever it was, lifted its head and barked several times at her. Dash had a feeling it was communicating with its brethren.

"Stay away from me!" Dash had shouted in dismay as she attempted a sudden left turn at a T-shaped intersection.

A second stalker ambushed her on the spot, turning the corner at the same time as she did. Its hardened skull struck her square in the chest like a battering ram. The crushing blow sent waves of agony through her entire body. Her vision blackened for a second as she cratered into the wall the impact cracking her spine and tearing her wing muscles. The inertia of the impact threw her several feet back before she had forcefully landed onto the stone floor. She couldn't scream, her lungs refused to operate, and all that came was pitiful whimper.

The stalker was standing over her, reared on its hind legs, giving a predatory wail that froze the very marrow in Dash's bones. She crawled on her back, struggled with a taste of blood in her mouth, and incapable of looking away from the corpse monster. The stalker was moving its wings, the ravaged appendages separated from its body spreading out further than was possible. The wings were attached to a pair of arms that were unfolding as if parts of its spine had been cut out from its midsection and

still wrapped up in strands of muscle and gore. The wings flexing like a pair of hands with three spear like fingers. She imagined those claws plunging into her chest and ripping her in two. Tearing her apart and painting the walls with her blood, eviscerated organs pulled from her torso one by one as she met a slow and painful demise.

She was bewildered to witness the creature had hopped back a step before it retreated back the way it'd come, folding its wings back in as it left. Dash's breath was slowly returning in shallow and rapid gasps, her chest was covered in a large bruise. It felt as if several of her ribs were broken, and it was agony to move her wings. She was easy prey; she couldn't understand why it'd left her to live. Speculation dropped as a second stalker peeked its mutilated head around the corner, low to the ground and preparing to charge. She knew then that they were playing with her, toying with their meal.

Still reeling in agony, eyes bulging from the pain, she rolled over and forced herself back up. She limped away as fast as she could and only took a few steps before the path terminated at a door that was reinforced with golden metal bands and an impression of Celestia's sun. She opened it just as the stalker charge, its wailing getting louder and higher pitched as it swiftly closed in. Ducking inside she slammed the door shut without delay. It shuttered under the impact, the metal hinges groaning in protest as the door was bent inwards. Dash offered up thanks that they were not smart enough to open doors.

She had entered the throne room through the servant's entrance. Safe for the moment, Dash examined her surroundings. There were stacks of papers, scrolls, money, and other unidentifiable baubles circling the room. To her right were the massive, ceiling-touching gates where guests were heralded through. From there a plush red carpet traveled down the center of the marble floor to the two ordinate thrones placed side by side; one was gold and the other silver, flanked by four blue glass windows as big as the main gate. They were blue because they were strengthened by magic woven right into them, unbreakable.

There final option was a door, partially concealed by a velvet curtain, built behind the thrones. She reasoned, hoped, that this door would lead to the Princess. Placing a hoof on the latch she attempted to turn it and was devastated when it remained unmoving no matter how hard she tweaked it.

It was locked, the faint glitter of a spell circling its edges. She stepped back from as a second impact rocked the servant's entrance. The stalkers hadn't given up on her yet. They screamed with howls of rage, she was a rat in a cage.

Trapped.

Dash collapsed with a sigh of defeat sliding down the back of Celestia's throne. She covered her face as she cried, face covered in tears and bloody mucus. She began thinking about her life and how she had paraded around her friends with such stubborn pride and bravado. It was just a mask, an act, in reality she was just as scared and helpless a little pony as everyone else, and she knew it. Now, here, trapped at the mercy of monsters she could not comprehend, she knew she was going to die.

In her despair there was a memory that had broken through the haze of fear and pain. It reached out to her from way back in her childhood during the days she spent in the Junior Speedsters flight team. It was strange to hear it now, but she recalled a bit of advice from her old coach.

"In a game of cat and mouse, never be the mouse."

It was almost like she could hear him speaking now. That was because she could, and he was sitting right next to her. By her side, dressed in his old blue Wonderbolts flight suit and blue mane waved under an invisible wind was Vertical Jump. His coaching whistle hung loosely around his neck and wore goggles on his forehead. Dash was stunned, she wanted to ask him how it was possible and desired to warn him to escape. Her tongue felt swollen and her voice caught as he looking at her, disappointment saturating every inch of his face.

"What's happened to you, squirt? I thought you were going places?" He asked softly. She could hear his breathing and feel the heat off his body as he inched closer. She could smell the cheap cologne he had worn every day.

"I'm sorry, c-coach. I... can't do it." She sputtered pitifully, trying to hide her face from him. It was like she was a child again, crying, making excuses for herself. She had never felt so useless, so empty. Like that day when all the other junior flyers had nicknamed her Rainbow Crash.

"What can't you do?"

"Some pony wants to k-kill the Princess. I need to warn her, but I can't. I mean... won't be able to make it. Even if I knew the way, the door is locked."

"Then that's what I'm here for, squirt," he gently stroked her mane, "to show you the way." He cantered over to the locked door. She wanted to tell him it was useless, yet somehow the door opened with just a simple touch from him.

"Head straight through the museum, and when the path forks like a V go to the left and up the tower stairs to the top. You'll be able to manage it from there. Now get up."

"I can't, those things, they... it hurts so much." This was not just a coach to her, he was somepony she had honored and respected before she's even knew he had been a Wonderbolt. She had loved him, like the father she'd never had.

"I want to go home." Her heart ached under his displeased stare, an expression that she feared more than anything in the world. The room vibrated as the stalkers rammed the door again their screams of frustration made her shiver.

"Listen to me, squirt." He sat down next to her, "You can make it home, but first you have a job to do. You know what it is." Slowly he wrapped his arms around her and brought their faces close.

"Every day I saw you practicing, doing your best to surpass all the other speedsters. Often times you failed and others called you Rainbow Crash for it, but that isn't how I saw it. I saw a young filly, full of life and ambition, and from time to time you'd strain a wing or get a black eye, but you never gave up. Don't give up now. Your friends, your team, are counting on you." Dash finally managed to look at his face.

"It... it really is you isn't it, coach." Dash smiled as her despair became joy. "You made us all believe you were dead, why?"

"No time to explain, focus on the now first."

"Y... you're right, I can't let my friends down."

"Then get back into the game and show everypony what you're made of, show it to your friends, to Celestia. Never let them doubt you again!" He lifted her back onto her hooves.

"I... I will. I'll save Celestia and all of Equestria will know that I am the greatest pegasus!"

"Then hurry now, the Marker is waiting for you." Vertical brought the whistle to his lips and blew it as hard as he could.

The high pitched clamor hit her like a burst of consciousness as reality seemed to shift around her. In a final mighty strike the servant's door gave way and exploded into a hail of wood and metal shrapnel as four stalkers swarmed into the room and had started spreading out, looking for her.

Vertical was nowhere to be seen.

"F-fine," Her voice quivered as she escaped. "Rai-Rainbow Dash is no mouse, you'll ha-have to work for your meal!" She slammed the door, just as the stalkers sounded the alert and ran after her.

Just as Vertical had said she was now in a museum of sorts. The walls were covered with large portraits of various ponies or still art. Large statues played amongst the many display pedestals topped with glass bubbles. Inside the bubbles were gadgets and gizmos that Dash had never seen before.

None of it interested Dash except for one thing. Arranged against the west wall were six suits of armor, three made for stallions and mares equally. These armored suits were not like the golden ones that guards wore nowadays. These suits were the real, full on head to hoof plate mail made for a war, deal. Dash used her mouth to grip the weapon that was modeled with the nearest suit. A short staffed voulge with a meat-cleaver like blade at the top. Dash grinned; the mouse now had sharp teeth.

Gaining her second wind she galloped at best speed, but not without a noticeable limp and wings hanging limply at her sides. The V-shaped fork was just ahead when she heard the tell-tale wet and sticky hoof steps of fast approaching stalkers. One of them charged, its screams drowning out

all other sounds. Dash turned to face it, teeth firmly clenched over her weapon.

The stalker ran, and she reared onto her hind legs and raised the voulge high. Just before impact she brought the blade down with deadly intentions. There was a loud snapping of bones and ripping of flesh as the blade burst the stalker's head like a melon. Sending a shower of gore all around as it cut through the brain matter, out the bottom of the head, and between the jaw bones before firmly burying itself into the floor. The creature gave a pitiful squeal as it was impaled to the floor, yet refused to expire. It thrust out and around with an unfolded hand, the three knife fingers cut through her feathers and stabbed her in the side leaving three gaping wounds.

Dash rolled with the blow, traveling to the side and backwards, leaving a bloody streaked trail as she did so. She felt the room start to grow cold as her body started going into shock. She refused to be beaten now, and ran for the left hallway when she was forcefully pulled back. The impaled stalker had grabbed her tail with its other hand, its ruined skull continuing to grin at her gloating in its victory.

With failing strength she attempted one last burst of speed. She pulled and pulled and the creatures grip tightened. Suddenly she heard the ripping of hair and fell forward as her tail was sheared in half by the stalker's sharp claws. She had escaped death once again and at the end of the road was the foot of the tower. Closing the gate, she climbed the spiral staircase. Using the rails for support she slowly and deliberately made her way past dozens of floors, her blood marking her progress.

"One more step, just one more." She chanted, wheezing uncontrollably and covered in a mixture of sweat, body fluids, and gore. After an unusual stretch of silence she wondered what had happened to the stalkers. It was as if they had halted in their chase and given up.

The staircase continued on and up with no end in sight. It all felt pointless now. She would never make it to the top; it hurt too much just to stand. Yet she held on, just one more step, always just one more. Eventually her effort paid off and she reached the apex. Emerging from the tower, she was on a bridge that connected her tower with Celestia's. The whole bridge was like a greenhouse, rows of flowers and plants down the walls.

Far on the other end she spotted Princess Celestia accompanied by two earth-pony servants. They seemed to be happily talking and laughing amongst themselves unaware of the trap that they were headed into. Dash managed a few uneasy steps before tripping over her own wings. She had gone as far as she could, there was no more strength left in her legs. Breathing in a lung full of air, she gave the loudest shout she could manage.

"Princess Celestia!" Dash cried at the top of her lungs and thankfully the princess turned at the sound of her name, "It's a bomb!" Celestia's seemed confused at first, then her eyes went wide in understanding. However, a servant already had her hoof on the latch. In that single terrible moment Rainbow Dash bore sole witness as Princess Celestia disappeared under a massive explosion.

The fireball blinded the cyan pegasus with its intense light. The blast roared like an angry beast, shaking her to the core, as the fire expanded exponentially to consume the entire top of the tower. Too weak to escape she watched as a wall of stone and glass flew right at her. Then she felt herself blown away by the concussive force, thrown through a pane of glass, and she fell over the side.

Flaming debris and stone blocks erupted up and out, raining death down upon the horrified crowds below. Mass chaos and panic gripped them as they fled in all directions. Many unfortunate individuals met their end that day, crushed under tons of stone or run through by falling debris. Those were the lucky ones. Before the reality of the moment could catch up, a second massive explosion blew out the base of the tower. The tall structure could no longer hold itself up, and in a deafening bass of grinding stones the tallest tower in Canterlot collapsed.

Thankfully, its path of destruction did not take it over the rest of the castle or the city. Instead its falling might obliterated the eastern wall before it toppled over the side of the city, rolling down the side of Mount Eclipse, leaving behind a cloud of dust and black acrid smoke.

Rainbow Dash silently watched it all, saw the world coming undone, and she had nothing to say.

She would have met her end long before now, but in her numb state hadn't noticed that Princess Luna had caught her. The young monarch carried the

broken Pegasus away, she couldn't stand the sight of her own sister's demise.

(...)

Luna had carried Rainbow immediately to the medical wing of the castle. The doctors assured her that there was hope for the young pegasus, though it was slim hope. She then went to help the firefighters put out the blazing inferno that had spread to the city after a third blast had ignited for an unknown reason. Only after the fires were out and the injured being treated did Luna retire back to her quarters. She wanted to check up on Dash, though right now the pegasus would probably be in emergency surgery. Besides, she needed some peace and quiet to think and mourn the loss of her sister.

She slowly meandered up to her own tower, refusing to meet the faces of any. Using her magic, she had carefully examined her own quarters for any booby traps. Finding none, she opened the door into darkness. The windows had the curtains drawn over them and all of the light fixtures were extinguished. Luna was instantly on guard as she sensed another presence in the room.

"Sshh," a familiar voice called, "Calmly enter and close the door." Luna did as she was told. When it was safe she lit a candle and looked to her guest sitting upon her bed.

"Big Sister? You're all right." Luna wanted to embrace her sister, but stopped when she saw Celestia's wounds. The sun goddess' mane was smoldering in places and there were innumerable burns and sores all over her body. At the moment she was using her magic to slowly mend the worst of the damage.

"We should get you over to Dr. Hawkeye's office right away."

"I'm more shaken than injured. I will not cause you additional worry and turn myself over to his ministrations in a little while. I just wish I could say the same for Sun Dancer and Wind Walker." Celestia choked back her tears, now was not the time for mourning.

"I'm sorry, I'll miss them too." Luna tenderly nuzzled her sister.

"I know, ah, but first there are a few matters we need to discuss. I fear if it hadn't been for Rainbow Dash's warning then I would not have survived. How is she?"

"Very bad, her injuries were horrific, like she'd been mauled by a wild animal. The doctors don't hold much hope."

"I see, then I should go to assist the doctors soon." Celestia hesitated, gathering her thoughts,

"Little sister, we are far shorter on time than we'd first estimated. I had hoped that I could prepare Twilight Sparkle for what was ahead. This attempt on my life has forced my hoof." She inhaled sharply knowing she very well may regret her next decision in time.

"Luna, I think it's time for my dear pupil to meet our 'old friend' face to face."

Chapter 11

Dark Places

Twilight Sparkle was well known around Ponyville for being many things; a bookworm, Celestia's pupil, and a prodigy of magic; to name just a few. On this particular day it was discovered that she was also a total light weight when it came to indulging in the drink. She was not a fan of imbibing alcohol, sipping the bubbly, or entertaining the 'green fairy.' When Applejack tried to convince her that the drinking game between farmer and engineer was, 'another understandin' in tha study of friendship,' Twilight figured she should at least give it a test run, just this once. Two drinks later and she was out like a light, face buried deep into an apple pie. When she awoke a short time later, complete with a headache that could split the moon, she had almost wished for a return to that blissful oblivion than face the news that the Cutie-Mark Crusaders had delivered.

Celestia's tower had vanished from the horizon, rolling clouds of black smoke saturated the sky while Canterlot continued to burn, lit ablaze by the flaming debris. What was left of the tower had left a trail of ruin that ran down the mountain side, a scar that would decorate the horizon forever. Twilight was beside herself with worry, hyperventilating at the absurdity of it all. Maybe it was just an accident, could it be deliberate, both, neither. She didn't know, but surely Celestia was all right, she had to be. There were so many questions; so many possibilities and contingencies to consider and they were all running through Twilight's mind like a horde of locusts. Then there were her parents, were they all right, were they injured, how were they handling the situation?

Twilight departed the farm to make a quick return to Ponyville. Spike and Rarity should have already witnessed the disaster and be on their way back at this very moment from the gem fields. If Celestia was alive she would've sent Spike a message. Not wanting to leave the children unattended during this crisis, Isaac followed close by while he carried Sweetie Bell on his back. Applebloom stayed on the farm with her family, and Pinkie Pie was in charge of escorting Scootaloo back home.

Confusion and chaos were the new masters in Ponyville. The streets were filled with litter as every pony had dropped what they'd been doing and degenerated in to a dust cloud of bodies running to and fro like a stampede of cattle. Mothers were herding their children, fathers barricaded their houses, street merchants were closing up their carts, all while other ponies were buying up large amounts of supplies from the stores that had yet to close. Every pony was desperately preparing for the worst possible situation, even if the details were sketchy on what that could be. The sudden and inexplicable torching of Canterlot had left some to believe Equestria was under attack from a neighboring kingdom, others said it was the end of the world, while an obstinate few declared that it was clearly an inside job.

"Twilight! Twilight!" She heard Spike calling out to her, his pudgy little legs a blur of motion, while he waved a scroll in his hand.

"Spike, there you are." Twilight galloped over to him happy to see he was still in good shape, "You got back from your gem hunting trip awfully quick."

"Rarity gave up and came back early since we didn't find a single gem up there," He pointed to an unseen location beyond the western border of the Everfree forest, "seems that someone has really been cleaning up house lately. That's not important right now, on our way back we found Fluttershy's pet bunny, Angel. He was limping with a broken paw and collapsed soon after we arrived."

Fluttershy, the calm and shy pegasus who was afraid of her own shadow, was known to keep many different pets across a wide range of species such as birds, amphibians, reptiles, mammals, herbivores, omnivores, and even a few carnivores; she was the definitive animal expert. Of all the critters she kept none was more famous than the bunny rabbit she called Angel. He was a tiny white critter well known around Ponyville, because despite Fluttershy doting over him like he was her own child, she had to tolerate a level of grief from the white rabbit that would have gotten any pony lynched by the whole town if they'd dared to treat her in a similar fashion.

"And..." Isaac annoyingly coaxed the purple dragon. He didn't know what was so important about some stupid rabbit, everyone else acted as if they'd been submerged in ice water.

"Right, Nurse Redheart is caring for him at the hospital right now." Spike finished.

"How is he doing?" Twilight would freely admit that she held no special love for the white rabbit. She was more concerned for Fluttershy's sake.

"Still pretty bad. He was rather roughed up, but y'know Angel. He's more stubborn than both Applejack and Rainbow Dash combined. I'm sure he'll pull through."

"Does Fluttershy know?"

"That's the worst part," Spike suddenly became more interested tracing a foot across the dirt road, "Rarity and I went to her house and found that it had been broken into. Twilight... a lot of her animal friends were dead. Everywhere we looked there were an awful lot of little bodies, but we searched and searched everywhere and we couldn't find her."

"That's terrible!" Twilight shook in a mixture of disbelief and anger. "What pony could possibly be so... so... villainous, depraved, insidious even, to commit such a deed!"

"Twilight," Isaac interrupted, "with everything that's been going on lately are you really surprised that anything or anyone would be considered sacred or beyond influence? Whoever is behind all this has already shown they're not pulling any punches."

"You don't know Fluttershy." Logically Twilight knew he was right, but chose to ignore him instead, "It's okay Spike, we'll find her."

"I hope so, maybe when Angel wakes up he can tell us what happened. Rarity is staying by his side and she'll tell us when he wakes up. I guess that's the best we can do right now."

"I suppose you're right, we'll just have to wait and see, but I'd like to examine Fluttershy's home for clues if he doesn't come around soon. Now, what about the letter you're holding? Is it from Celestia?"

"Yeah, I think so, but I'm not sure. Look." Spike held the scroll out and allowed the lavender unicorn to lift it away. The plain brown paper letter was tied with a simple length of twine and lacked a proper sigil or any

identification mark that could tell her who it was from. All the same, Twilight opened the letter with great haste and began to read.

"Do not read this letter out..." She hesitated at the final word and dropped into silence before continuing. Unbeknownst to her, Spike, Isaac, and Sweetie Bell had noticed this strange shift in behavior and had gathered together to read over her shoulder.

(...)

Do not read this letter out loud!

To my dearest pupil, Twilight Sparkle,

No doubt you are aware of the tragedy that has befallen Canterlot this day. It seems our enemy has made an attempt on my life. A plan that failed as I am sure you have concluded with the delivery of this letter. Were it not for Rainbow Dash's heroic efforts I might not have had time to teleport before the explosion. Dash has also revealed to me and Luna that the Tome of the Marker has left the city and was delivered to Fluttershy's home. Most likely it is in enemy hooves now, as well as Fluttershy along with it.

However, the enemy has revealed themselves to me. They placed orichalcum into the explosives that decimated my tower. Orichalcum is a material which can absorb and nullify even the most powerful of magics. It was Nightmare Moon's answer to the Elements of Harmony. However, Nightmare is not the enemy we face now. A thousand years ago, she had built an army with the purpose of hunting me down should I have eluded her grasp. They were defeated along with Nightmare, but I fear some of these sinister allies have survived into the present. For a thousand years they have been quietly waiting and watching and wish to take matters into their own hooves after suffering their master's defeat for a second time. I am deeply concerned for Luna, she is not taking this revelation well.

All of Canterlot believes me deceased and, for the time being, so does the enemy. For now keep my survival a secret and bury it close to your heart. I need time to recover and observe. Luna will remain by my side for she is the only one I completely trust left in Canterlot now.

I have decided to send you the aid of an old friend of mine; the oldest I have left. He may come across as harsh, uncaring, and spiteful but trust

me when I say that his heart is in the right place and that he wishes to put an end to this horrible situation, as do we all. He will meet you tonight, at the stroke of twelve, in the Ponyville clock tower. Go alone and do not keep him waiting. He will help you understand what you face as well provide certain gifts to assist you and Isaac Clarke. I wish you both the best of luck.

Do not try to contact me and do not approach the capital! The enemy has their eyes on you now and I do not know how long it will be before they try to come for you like they did with me. Keep the newcomer, Isaac Clarke, safe and close by your side. He is an unknown element in this fight, but I believe he was sent to us for a reason and may indeed help save us all.

Please know that I did not choose lightly when I took you in as my star pupil,

With all my love,

Princess Celestia.

P.S. Be wary of shadows, the enemy could be any pony, even the ones you trust.

P.P.S. This message will self-destruct in 3..2..1..

(...)

Twilight gave a surprised yelp and jumped back at least ten feet as a plume of green fire erupted mere inches from her face. Spike's sudden mighty burp had incinerated the scroll into a pile of ash.

"Spiiiiike!"

"Sorry, it just came over me! I couldn't help it." he shrugged in protest.

Despite the unexpected surprise, or maybe because of it, Twilight felt a little giggle escape from her. It was just like Celestia to pull a little prank like this. It was her way to try and inject a bit of humor into an otherwise awkward or tense situation. Twilight's laugh evaporated as soon as it had emerged. She appreciated the gesture, yet there was nothing that the Princess could do to pretend that things were not as bad as they were. The serenity of the world was as hopelessly lost as the Canterlot tower. Now

Twilight could see the glimpses of darkness that were showing through the cracks and she wondered if the evil had always been there.

She quietly looked to the sky, trying to find some comfort in the sun's majestic rays. She ached to embrace her mentor, to hear Celestia's sweet voice again.

"Nothing is the same anymore."

(...)

"I'm scared, Mr. Cutter. Are bad things going to happen to us? Are there monsters coming to eat us?" Isaac felt Sweetie Bell tightly grip onto his back seeking protection, her curly bangs tickling his neck. He wondered why this young unicorn had decided to put her faith in him. For as much as he'd survived death he had only been able to save the life of only one other, Ellie. She had wanted him to go with her, but he had sent her away to be rescued. The Marker had to be destroyed even it cost him life. He wondered what Ellie was doing right now.

"Hey, don't get all sad on me now. Nothing is going to happen as long as I have anything to say about it." He hoped he sounded more convinced than he felt. He was terrible at handling kids.

"Really? Do you promise?" she asked with twinkling eyes. Isaac hesitated, there were no guarantees when it came to fighting against a Marker and the Necromorphs it spawned.

"I'm an engineer and that means I solve problems. Yeah, you won't find a better engineer suited for the job of killing monsters than me in the entire world." He boasted and Sweetie Bell smiled a comforted look. Satisfied his work had been done, he then turned to Spike.

"So you're a dragon?" Isaac said plainly, wondering why he couldn't have been made a dragon in this world instead of a damn horse. Though he would have preferred his dragon self to be a bit taller, maybe a bit more threatening, and a lot less purple than the one standing before him now.

"Yup, name's Spike and I'm Twilight's number one assistant. You don't have a problem with dragons do you?"

"Not at all, it's good to see someone who's not a pony."

"Yeah, and it's nice to have another guy to hang out with for a change. Being around so many girls all the time and their frilly fru-fru nonsense can really be a drag on a guy." Sweetie Bell shot Spike an accusing glance. After all, he was the one who had a crush on Rarity.

"Twilight told me all about you. I tell you, it felt so good to finally look Twilight in the eye and say, 'ah-ha, I told you there were zombie ponies.'" Spike sang his own praise.

"Zzzooombie Ponies!" Pinkie Pie arose from the grave, clear out of nowhere, using a flashlight strategically placed under her chin for an effect that was useless in sunlight.

"Yeep!" Sweetie squeaked.

"Warn us when you're going to do that. You scared her." Isaac found his vision uncomfortably filled with pink, upon pink, with a side of pink, and an extra helping of another kind of pink on top. This was his third time he'd met Pinky Pie and each time he felt an ulcer coming on. Did he mention that the pony was pink? Gahh! Seriously, what the shit?

"Sorry." she sheepishly grinned, "Hey! If we have zombie ponies then it's great that we have you here. You're supposed to be the big hunter, chief zombie killer engineer guy that I've totally heard of so much from Twilight. You should totally show us your supremo awesome sweet maxie-extremeo ultra super moves."

"Yeah, that'd be amazing." Spike second the motion. Isaac rotated between the combined forces of dragon, unicorn child, and pink abomination that conspired against him. He started to feel a strange feeling of pride swell like a bubble in his chest. It was nice to finally feel appreciated. Though, when they eventually learned the truth about the 'zombies' they won't be quite so happy about it. Why not indulge a bit for now?

"Well, there is one thing I could show you. A tool I frequently use when fighting zombies. I'll need to gather the parts first so I can build it. If you want to help then the first thing I'll need is a flashlight."

"Here, take this one that I just happen to have for reasons that I can't remember." Pinkie tossed him the device. He caught it nimbly and handed it off to Sweetie Bell.

"Thanks, now are there any.." he had to think for a moment. Of all the components he needed the internal circuitry, like the laser lights, emitter, and circuit board would probably be the hardest to find.

"Are there any places that sell electric hardware like wires, batteries, or even lasers?"

"Ooh, ooh, follow me." Pinkie bounced in bursts of ecstatic joy, "I know the perfect place to go. Follow me."

"Hey, Emo Sparkle!" Isaac called, breaking Twilight out of her silent misery.

"What?"

"You wouldn't happen to have any money." Even if he could access the credit chit in his suit's rig, Isaac seriously doubted they accepted credits as a form of legal tender in this place.

"Yeah, some. Why?" What she had meant to say was that she got a monthly allowance from the Princess and it was always far more than she needed. So she had saved up a substantial amount of bits over the year.

"I think it's time we visited the stores."

"Wait, you want to go shopping? Weren't you saying we needed to concentrate on a plan to fight the Marker?"

"This is part of the plan, I said we need weapons. I helped a friend of yours, now I need you to help me make a friend of my own. I'm going to show you why a plasma cutter," he pointed to his tattoo, "is an engineer's tool of choice. Do you know anything about ionized plasma?"

(...)

It turns out Twilight didn't, at least not right off hand, or hoof as the local slang went. She'd look it up at the library as soon as they returned.

"I come here a lot for party music. That's because I love to throw a lot of parties, so I come here a lot for more music and then throw more parties. But I haven't given you a party yet so this'll be a great opportunity to get the music and we should totally get DJ Pon-3 to DJ, of course. Cause I can tell that everypony here needs and extra-extra especially big party to shoo away all the doom-gloom, gloomy, glue feelings."

"Is she always like this?" Isaac felt an onset of diabetes, and humans had cured that disease centuries ago.

"This is only her getting warmed up. You should see her when her Pinkie Sense starts to tingle." Twilight shuttered at the memory.

"Right."

Under the guidance of the pink one they approached a two story building that was the single most technologically advanced structure in the whole of town, yet that still wasn't saying much. In Isaac's own time this place would have been described as retro, archaic, or obsolete and that was putting a positive spin on it. Here, in a town of wooden walls and thatched roofs, it seemed odd to finally find one made of brick and using neon signs to advertise its wares.

"Vinyl Scratch: The store for all your Disk Jockey, Stereo System, Bass Music, and Power Lighting needs." Read the store's colorful sign. While a posted advertisement on the store's window declared this the home of the one and only DJ Pon-3.

True to its name there were a set of mounted speakers above the entrance, broadcasting a booming bass beat originating from within the music shop. It was so loud that it vibrated through the ground and shook the air.

"So ponies like techno and electric music, and I can't believe I just thought that." Isaac mused. It did raise an interesting question. The technology of this world was very enigmatic and all over the place. It seemed feasible in a strange, disjointed way, yet some areas of science had clearly made leaps and bounds while others lagged far behind. Probably due to unicorn magic acting as a substitute or maybe he'd simply landed in the pony equivalent of Amish country.

Inside the music store all his questions faded and he could only grin and rub his hands, or hooves, together in pure delight of the possibilities laid out before him. Not even that ear-splitting music could distract him now as he had found, neatly arranged upon the shelves, was a bounty of electrical treasures. There were stereos, speakers, sub-woofers, audio mixers, tuners, DJ turnstiles, stage lights, spotlights, microphones, and more. The entire catalogue of equipment one would need to throw a concert the size of the town square and ignite the night sky with a thousand florescent bulbs. It didn't end there; spare parts, miles of coiled wires, tools, and...

"Are those laser diodes?" Isaac said with incredulity as he inspected the display of penny sized focusing lenses.

"Ah dude, finally a customer who recognizes quality." The loud techno music was abruptly cut off as a unicorn mysteriously appeared at Isaac's side. She was an eccentric looking off-white pony with a wild raving blue and cyan striped mane, matching tail, and a tattoo of a double quaver on her flank. She also wore a pair of black rimmed goggles with purple lenses that made her eye color intangible.

"You're the owner?" Isaac found he liked this unicorn for some reason. It might have had something to do with the fact that she was the only technologically savant pony he'd met so far.

"DJ Pony at your assistance. That's P.O.N, a little dash, then a three, DJ Pon-3. Can ya dig?"

"I can, so what were you saying about these diodes?"

"Man, these here are some of the most rad lights I have ever seen. These little babies here are special; they can seriously pump the wattage and deliver a coherent beam of awesome! They're used all the time in those Stalliongrad laser light shows. Totally off the chart stuff, you should see them sometime."

"Great, this is just what I need." Isaac was calm although inside he was beaming with excitement.

"You're in luck, dude. With it being the end of the world and all, I've got a special 'end-of-the-world' sale going on today only. Buy two get one free."

"Done and done. I'm also going to need a lot of other items, mostly spare parts and pieces, the best you have, and you can charge it all to Twilight."

"What?" A hot rod of fury exploded from the lavender unicorn.

"Right on, cool cat." DJ Pon-3 departed to get a blank receipt and a quill.

"Wait just a minute; I didn't agree to pay for anything!" Twilight stomped a hoof for emphasis.

"Yes you did." Isaac patiently reminded her.

"When?"

"Did you not say that I would be rewarded by the Princess for my assistance?"

"Yes, but..."

"Then consider this a down payment. It might even be tax deductible."

(...)

With his funding secured and Twilight's growing angst over the increasing size of the bill vocally apparent, they made several more trips for additional items. They stopped at the clock shop for items like gears, springs, and rods, then at a hardware store for an assortment of tools and screws. After that made a trip to Carousel Boutique and even though Rarity had closed the shop for the day, Sweetie Bell let them in and showed where Rarity kept all her extra sewing machines. Isaac swiped one of the smaller machines to be used for parts while Twilight left a note of apology and a stack of bits to pay for it.

Finally the trip ended with Pinkie Pie extracting her own oven from Sugarcube Corner. It was, in fact, the same oven she'd used for years to bake cupcakes, muffins, and other sugary delights. Isaac and Twilight had insisted they pay for it, or rather Twilight pay for it, but Pinkie assured them that the Cakes were going to throw this old one out and buy a new one. Besides, she was all too happy to donate to the zombie killing cause. Having gathered all the necessary materials, they made their way back to

the library. The team of Twilight Sparkle, Isaac Clarke, Pinkie Pie, Spike, and Sweetie Bell made for an interesting caravan.

Back at the library Isaac pulled up one of the reading tables and had all the supplies placed on it, with the oven nearby. He was about to begin work when he realized he'd overlooked the single most important element when it came to building the plasma cutter. He was so put off about this oversight that he had to pull Twilight aside, into the kitchen, to explain it to her.

"How the hell am I going to build something with no hands?" He moaned while Twilight face hoofed.

"Why didn't you think of that before you made me spend nearly all my money?"

"Two reasons, I've lived all my life with five digits on my hands, until yesterday. So excuse me for not paying more attention that I'm now a damned horse. Even if I remembered it, I still would have made you pay just to see the look on your face, because pissing you off keeps the insanity away."

"Ughh!" Twilight rolled her eyes, wanting nothing more than to throw him out a window and into a pit of fire. "Fine, then maybe I should explain to you the basic principles of magic and how it is different between ponies. Take a seat, this might take a while."

(...)

"Oh, don't rub it, you'll get an infection." Fluttershy softly cooed while carefully cradling the distraught Ditzy Doo, gently stroking her mane.

The two of them had been kept in isolation deep underground inside a cage cut out from a block of hard red earthen clay. It appeared to have been two separate cells at one point because it had two crudely made iron bar doors on opposite sides of the same wall, along with evidence of an intermediate barrier still present. Light was provided from wall mounted torches, however, with no sunlight or moon overhead Fluttershy's sense of time's flow had grown fuzzy and she could no longer tell what time of day it was. It felt like days and Ditzy had been sobbing the whole time. No matter what Fluttershy did or said she could not alleviate the gray pegasus' tears.

When Fluttershy had first awoken in this place, right away she had felt and incredible burning and stinging sensation in her back and wings. It was like a thousand needles had been driven into her sides, the reality was quite the opposite. While she'd slept her wings had been ravaged and all the feathers forcefully removed leaving nothing but two useless appendages. The process had left her back covered in her own congealed blood, long dried by this point, and she could no longer fly. A cocktail of incomprehensible emotions had left her frozen on the spot and were fast driving her into a state of total breakdown when she heard the sounds of faint crying coming from a darkened corner. It was there that she had found Ditzy Doo and realized that the same fate had befallen the mail mare's wings.

Given time the skin would heal and feathers would grow back, but Ditzy had another problem that was more permanent. The left side of her face was slightly swollen and covered in a large bruise. Forgetting her own troubles Fluttershy had gone to attend to wounds of the mail mare. She didn't know the gray pegasus very well, they had only briefly exchanged pleasantries whenever Ditzy had delivered the mail. Which Fluttershy never got a lot of.

"Okay, I just need to take a look." Fluttershy calmly spoke while trying to inspect Ditzy's wound. Every time she got close Ditzy knocked her away.

"No, no, don't look!" she cried, shielding herself as if Fluttershy was about to strike her.

"Oh, Ditzy, I... I can't help you unless you let me take a look." She didn't want to cause Ditzy any additional distress, she only wanted to help. Fluttershy had dealt with more difficult patients before, not that Ditzy was being difficult, not at all, she was just as scared.

"I'll be as gentle as a summer breeze. So, please let Doctor Fluttershy have a look, um, if that's all right with you."

Gladly her reassurance worked, although she felt that it was only because Ditzy, sadly, lacked the resolve to fight her. True to her word she inspected the wound before carefully pulling open Ditzy's left eyelid to check for damage. What Fluttershy found wasn't what she'd been expecting at all and she stared in confusion for a second till she realized that it was just a hollow socket. Ditzy's left eye was missing and judging from all the scarring

it told the yellow caretaker that whoever had committed such a heinous act had done it with deliberate sadistic violence. Fluttershy had to bite her lip hard in order to suppress a shriek that threatened to burst from the depths of her lungs.

"Oh... oh my, oh dear, this is awful." The bottom of her stomach fell out leaving her light-headed and nauseous as her mind began imagining uncontrollably what it must've been like to have an eye forcefully extracted.

"Oh, who could possibly be so evil? Who... who did this to you Ditzzy? It was Cherry, it was her wasn't it?" Ditzzy nodded.

Fluttershy felt a hot essence begin to overtake her. It started just behind her eyes and quickly spread throughout her head and down to her throat. The normally meek and soft-mannered Pegasus felt her temper skyrocketing.

"Don't you worry, our friends will rescue us soon and then we'll go have a few words with Cherry." She had to forcefully swallow these terrible feelings down. Ditzzy's well being was what mattered most now, yet there really wasn't much Shy could do anyway in this empty cell. Then she had an idea, it wouldn't be much, but maybe it could help."

"You know my Mom used to sing me a little poem whenever I got scared about getting lost from home. Would you like to hear it? I mean... as long as you're fine with it." To her relief Ditzzy looked up and nodded in agreement. Fluttershy lightly inhaled and quietly sang in her soothing tender voice. She performed just for the two of them and for just a moment the gloom seemed to recede.

(...)

My child, we must talk

There may come a day

When you are far away

If I can't be near

You need not fear

*In your darkest time
May you always find
An ally to meet
And a friend to keep
Stand strong with each other
Like sister or like brother
Through the empty spaces
And all the dark places
Where you must walk.*

(...)

After Fluttershy had finished, Ditzy rubbed her tears away and managed to lift herself up into a seated position.

"You know," Fluttershy looked away in embarrassment, "my Mom sang that to me a lot before she passed away. I never really understood what the poem meant until today. Oh, I wish you could have met her, she was so wise and beautiful." Fluttershy felt a light nuzzle from Ditzy Doo and she returned it, grateful to have found a new friend in this terrible place.

"Thank you, Fluttershy. Your mother sounds wonderful, bountiful. I want to sing-a-wing to my little muffin too."

"That's right, little Dinky Doo is probably worried sick about you. We need to find a way out of here."

The way out came as a creaking of rusted metal hinges that ended their conversation as a hulking and armored Diamond Dog lumbered into the room on all fours. He briefly considered both pegasi before pointing to Fluttershy.

"The yellow pony will come with me." He growled with evil intentions clear on his voice. Unfortunately for him it was going to be the yellow pony that would be giving out the orders this time.

"Now look here, mister!" Fluttershy was all up in the dog's face. The moment he'd spoken she'd felt all the anger come rushing back into her head and out her eyes, which were projecting like twin daggers piercing deep into his. If looks could kill, then the dog would've been a hissing brown spot on the floor at that moment.

"I'm not going anywhere with you unless it's the way out of here. You've been a very bad doggy, nobody! Hurts! My! Friends!" Each exclamation was like a buck shot to the dog's soul. The overwhelming power of her personality burrowed past his mental defenses and left him a slave to her will.

In Ponyville, Fluttershy had grown famous for what the other ponies called, "The Stare." Although she didn't fully understand how it worked, nor did she have full control over when it happened, it had once allowed her to make a full grown dragon cry like a baby and he had easily been a hundred times her size. Right now she was far more ticked off at the dog than she'd ever been at the dragon because she recognized this canine as one of the assailants that had captured her and Ditzy, had smashed up her house, and killed her animal friends.

The dog cracked immediately under the stare, cringing on the ground whining and whimpering pathetically as if the Stare Master was the most diabolical sight he'd ever seen. Even Ditzy had to back up a bit at the sight.

"Now are you going to apologize to Ditzy or..." She abruptly let out an undignified yelp as she felt a line of searing pain cross her flank followed by the loud snap of a whip. Another Diamond Dog had entered into the cell from the other door. The sudden attack had interrupted her stare and left her momentarily stunned. When Fluttershy had turned to look at her foe it left her wide open. A third Diamond Dog rushed into the room and grabbed her in a unyielding choke hold. Large arms were wrapped around her throat as she gasped for a breath that was impossible to perform. She pounded on the dog's thick arms and kicked him in the shins a few times.

"Let Fluttershy-maitai go!" Ditzy commanded, stepping forward to assist. The whip once again arced cruelly through the air to land a welt across

Ditzy's bad eye. The gray mother clutched both hooves to her bad eye and collapsed to the ground writhing and rolling in unimaginable suffering, unable to scream through the pain and awash in an eruption of fresh tears.

"Ponies will be quiet." The dog barked, trudging straight up to her. She held up a hoof in defense, a hopeless gesture that had failed to stop the guard striking her in the chest with his large meaty fist.

Witnessing the torture being cruelly unleashed upon her friend, Fluttershy decided that enough was enough and she must fight back. She was, by no means, a fighter or even an athlete, yet none of that mattered now. No one was allowed to hurt her friends. No one! She bit, she wriggled, she punched, and she bucked and for her efforts she'd managed to break the jaw of one of the guards and knocking out a few teeth in the process. She would not go quietly this time, that's for sure. Rainbow Dash would be so proud of her.

All too soon she began to grow tired and more guards had arrived to deal with the obstinate prisoner. They wheeled in a stretcher and threw her down upon it roughly. She was helpless, useless, to resist them as they tightly strapped three leather belts to hold her tightly in place. As they did this she noticed a pony standing nearby, partially hidden by the shadows and quietly watching the spectacle. At first she thought it was Cherry, but the color on this pony was too dark to be her.

"Room seven." The stallion commanded while adjusting a pair of thin spectacles.

That was all she could discern before a dog pulled a black sack over her head and tightened the string on her neck like a noose. As she was being carted away she could hear the whip crack again and her friend screaming in agony.

"Ditzy!" Fluttershy yelled miserably, more of a strangled squeak. Her stare had faded as well as her rage. She had nothing left to give. "Let go, oh, please let us go!"

(...)

Princess Luna landed upon the balcony of her personal tower. From here she had a front row seat to an empty patch of sky that only a few hours

earlier had held Celestia's tower. There was still smoke rising from site, as well as a scattering of small fires that continued to burn. The situation remained tense and uncertain, but overall things had calmed down. Yet, underneath the thin surface every pony was holding their breaths. Watching and waiting while they were swept up in the midst of a great changing tide. If nothing was done soon Luna feared there might be a full scale riot on her hooves.

In Celestia's faked absence Luna had walked the streets and done her best to appear confident and strong to assuage the citizens' trepidations. Finding herself suddenly in the spotlight was not easy. Given the circumstances it seemed the city was full of mixed emotions over her sudden rise to power. Most appeared civil about it, if a bit stuck up. Others screamed and begged in fear over the fate of a loved one or seeking assurances that everything was going to be alright. Yet, there were a few anarchists out there who pinned the blame solely on her back and had even degenerated into throwing things like rocks, shards of glass, or rotten food at her.

Luna didn't know where she'd found the patience and the resolve to weather this personal onslaught, but she took it all in stride. The last that thing she would allow herself to do was to give these fools the satisfaction of seeing her stumble. Still it hurt, every projectile, every accusing word was like a hot needle in her heart.

It was now going on six hours since the incident and it was nearly time for Luna's daily moon rising ceremony. Celestia had remained in Luna's room during that time and had continued to heal herself almost nonstop. Apart from a few lingering burns it was impossible to tell she'd nearly been done in by an explosion that had, at last count, killed over three hundred ponies and wounded nearly three times that many; and still counting.

Cautiously lifting the curtains as she entered her room, Luna was vigilant to inspect the immediate area outside to ensure that she hadn't been followed before closing the balcony doors and dropping the curtains into place. In the safety and quiet of her bedroom Luna was ready to unload, like a cannon.

"Bastards! Those cold-hearted rat bastards!" Luna proceeded to pace around the room with a fury that rivaled the sun.

"Luna! Such language is not like you and unbecoming of a royal princess." Celestia scolded. "Please calm down and tell me what has you so worked up."

"Oh, big sis! I just want tear this whole castle apart with my bare hooves and box the ears on every single one of those self-righteous snobs!"

"Oh? Who are you referring to?" Celestia stopped her healing and went to try and comfort Luna. However, the moon Princess was inconsolable.

"General Star Sword and the rest of your council members, every single pony in council, all of them have declared that I'm unfit to rule and have even directly accused me of conspiracy in your assassination and want to strip me of my crown. They've filled all the paperwork already." Luna summoned a large stack of scrolls and placed them before Celestia to read.

"I didn't even know they could do that. Can they do that? I'm going to turn each of them into glue! Just as soon as I calm down!" Luna was far from calming down. Rather, she was winding her own gears and getting more and more upset by the second.

"My dear sister. I believe you when you say you had no hoof in this ghastly matter. You should not let those other ponies get you riled up into such a state." Celestia ever remained the persona of patience and understanding, yet even she was starting to feel aggravated with how Luna had been treated.

"What about the others? Rainbow Dash, Zecora, and Macintosh? Could they have any evidence of who was involved beyond Ledger?" Celestia briefly considered the scrolls before shoving them aside in disgust.

"In the middle of the confusion I gave Zecora and Macintosh permission to leave the city." Luna trotted over to her wine cabinet and poured herself a stiff one. She knew she shouldn't drink in front of her sister, especially since over the past year she'd grown dependent on it to ride out the bad times.

"They should be back in Ponyville by now. Its about the only good thing that came out of this debacle. According to them, Dash was the only pony

who had grown wise to the plot against you. She's the only one who could possibly know who planned this."

"Good, then she can provide a testament and possibly evidence that you are innocent." Celestia maneuvered in and, to Luna's surprise, poured herself a drink too.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible as no pony will listen to Rainbow Dash's testimony. It appears she is being accused of murder." Luna continued.

"Murder?" The very word almost caused Celestia to spill her drink.

"Yes, several servants were inspecting the grounds for damage when they came across the body of slain guard in the rear of our private museum, his head had been run through by a vaulge. Before he died, it appeared that he'd managed to grab Rainbow's tail in his mouth."

"I see, but could it not have been faked?"

"Unlikely. The servants reported that when the culprit impaled the guard to the ground they had accidentally pinned their own tail at the same time. Since there is only one pony currently known to have such distinctive tail hair and Rainbow Dash is missing half of her's... well, it's not hard to put two and two together." Luna walked with great control and measured step over to her balcony, opening the curtain slightly to inspect the last rays of light before they disappeared behind the horizon.

"It gets worse." Luna sipped lightly from her goblet.

"How so?"

"Once Dash had been accused of murder the order came down to have her placed into protective custody until she was well enough to stand trial. On a hunch, I went to the archives to find the copies of that order. Turns out there were no copies made and the room she was transferred to is a closet for medical supplies."

"Great!" Celestia stomped in anger and disbelief, "So she's gone and any evidence with her?"

"I'm afraid so." Luna confirmed. The sun princess had to inhale sharply before regaining her composure.

"Have you notified General Star Sword?"

"He's... not responding to any messages at this time."

"I see..." Celestia nodded with a suspicious grin. Luna moved out into the night air and felt the cold wind caress her body.

"It gets cold up here sometimes, doesn't it big sis?"

"Yes," Celestia joined Luna out in the open, "it does indeed." Together they raised a toast to each other and drew deeply before looking out amongst the tarnished glory that was Canterlot.

Chapter 12

Dream Reaver

For Isaac, the unicorn's lecture on magic was a complicated affair, like trying to solve a jigsaw puzzle when you didn't know what the picture was. It didn't help that she was a complete obsessive-compulsive when it came to explaining how it all came together in the fundamentals, principles, rules, and applications. She made magic seem more of an exact science and not the mystical force that existed beyond all reasoning like it was in fairy tales. Every single little detail, from the major and minor, had to be explained, extrapolated, and reinforced. Like listening to a dry audio reading of a history book, and he hated history.

The whole time Isaac had a grave frown plastered on his face. He hadn't thought that magic would come with so many rules and restrictions. After thirty mind-numbing minutes of this he'd had enough.

"Ok, just give me the short version? You've caught my interest, but we are in a hurry." Actually he 'd lied, he wasn't at all interested in all this magic mumbo jumbo except where it applied him and building his plasma cutter.

"Isaac, I've studied magic my whole life. Magic is about making something happen that you want to happen, happen. It's not just some random event or unexplained force, and magic is different between ponies. About a quarter of the books in the library are about magic and research into the field. I've almost read them all and for your information I have been avoiding the intermediate and advanced theories altogether. This was the short version. " Twilight paced with an ever thinning layer of patience.

"Then make it the short-short version." Isaac crossed his arms with finality.

Twilight puffed her cheeks at that thinly veiled insult and disappointment for the lost the opportunity to share her vast intellect with someone who needed it. It was going to take some time to get him to open up to magic that was for sure. Reluctantly she attempted to simplify it a bit more for her alien student, but still gave him quite an earful. He wasn't going to get off that easy.

"Ok," Isaac held his head then slowly traced his hooves down his cheeks, "I think I have it now. So let me just summarize the basics. There are three types of horses,"

"Ponies." Twilight snapped, correcting him for the fifteenth time.

"Whatever," Isaac waved her off, "three types; earth, unicorn, and pegasus. All three have magic powers that arise from different places in their bodies. For unicorns it's in their horns, pegasi in their wings, and earth in their hearts. The three also have magic in their hooves which allow them to handle small items as if they'd had fingers."

"Not exactly," Twilight corrected again, more calm this time, "As you can imagine we unicorns don't use our hooves very often since we have horns. The use of hoof magic is more commonly used by earth-ponies and pegasus ponies. For example," Twilight walked over the kitchen window and opened the curtains to show the simple town outside, blanketed in the dying rays of sunlight.

"All of Ponyville was founded only by earth-ponies and it was years before any unicorns or pegasus ponies moved in. What do you notice most about the town, Isaac?" She looked on keenly.

He walked to her side and observed the even length of Ponyville's main street. The friendly atmosphere had taken on a more ominous feeling as he watched a handful of ponies wandering aimlessly, like lost phantoms emerging at dusk. He ignored them and studied the town, specifically the architecture of the buildings. He wasn't sure as on what to look for in this world of bright pastel colors and sentient ponies. Comprising the town was a multitude of structures of all shapes and sizes. Each one was a unique work of art unto itself with different layouts and color schemes.

Realization hit him like a bolt from the blue. Despite all their differences the buildings were made out of natural materials like wood and hay, with metal a nonexistent part aside from the street lights and a few odd fixtures. Then there was the solitary existence of DJ Pon-3's store. It was made of red brick and cement, adorned with all kinds of artificial materials like glass and electrics. It was the only one of its kind, and it was home to a unicorn.

"If it was all built by earth-ponies then they seem favor simple and natural materials." Isaac answered with as much confidence as he could muster.

"Exactly," Twilight gave pleased smile, "specifically organic for earth-ponies to grip it with their hoof magic. Wood, hay, plants, and even food, although it's considered impolite to eat with your bare hooves since we walk on them all day and they do get dirty."

"Yeah, kind of like humans eating with their feet." Isaac offered to a light chuckle from Twilight.

"Yeah, that could be difficult for your kind."

"Oh it is." Isaac agreed though he'd never tried such an odd activity before.

"Anyway, this is what makes earth-ponies great at being farmers and working with the land."

"Then what about the earth-pony with the hour glass tattoo we bought the clock from?" Isaac disputed, unless she was about to argue that the clock was made from plants, then this train of reasoning was useless.

"Of course there are exceptions to this rule from time to time," Twilight hadn't missed a beat, "one of his parents was probably a pegasus."

"So now you're saying magical skill is a genetic trait as well?" Isaac hadn't thought of that before and oddly it made more sense to think of it that way.

"Yes I am, but that's a topic for another time. Now can you see that large cloud on the horizon over there?" Twilight pointed to a single distant cloud in the night sky which appeared to be wrapped in strands of Christmas lights.

"That's the famous city of Cloudsdale built from clouds by pegasus ponies."

"That's a city? On clouds? That sounds like a dangerous idea even if it could be done." Isaac scoffed at the absurdity of it all. Twilight just giggled at him.

"I know it's hard to believe, but it's true. In Cloudsdale the pegasus manufacture the weather using cloud machines and rainbow pools. Only pegasus ponies can use their hooves to walk on clouds and it is that principle that also makes them better adapted at using their hoof magic to tinker with machines and non-organic things. Earth-ponies and unicorns

can't walk on the clouds, not even that clockmaker; we'd all just fall through unless I cast a very special spell before hoof."

"So the pegasi are the engineers of the air? I like that, still how do they keep the machines up there or stop the clouds from falling apart? Do they use some sort of anti-gravity field? More magic? Are you honestly telling me you can build cities out of water vapor?" Isaac felt his blood pressure rising at the idea of such a literal raping of the very laws of physics and of the engineering sciences. It was impossible, it had to be.

The closest to a floating city on Earth was when a starship had to make planet fall. It was a rare sight because starships were too heavy to be aerodynamic they had to use massive anti-gravity fields to suspend them in the sky. It usually meant the ship in question was heading for decommissioning and dismantling because of the massive amounts of power that was required.

"If Rainbow Dash was here she could explain it better than me. I guess you were lucky when you became a Pegasus with a little practice you'll be a natural in using hoof magic in no time."

"You know this would all be a lot easier for me if you found a way to make me human again. I don't really want to stay a pony forever,...um, no offense."

"None taken, still things have been crazy today. I'll try to find something while I research this plasma you talked about," Twilight had a wide smile while clapping her hooves in excitement, "besides, I want the opportunity to study your species up close and ask lots of questions about your world and this shockpoint technology. I want to learn as much as possible."

"Just find the spell." Isaac groaned, about to head back into the main foyer when Twilight stopped him.

"Oh, one last thing I forgot to show you," she moved in close almost to the point of violating his personal space and raised her left arm at him, "touch my hoof."

"Huh?"

"Don't worry it's just a little demonstration." She smiled assuredly. Unsure what was about to transpire Isaac placed his hoof against hers, the moment he did he felt something like a mild spark of static electricity.

"Now try to pull away." She challenged and Isaac obliged by retracting his arm only to find that Twilight was pulling back against him and their hooves remained connected. She smiled knowingly as he tried again and again to no avail.

"I can't, is it you doing that?" It was as if she had a kinesis module built right into her hoof and was holding him prisoner with it. It was rather freaky to see himself being the one pulled around. He folded his ears back and gave a mighty yank and managed to drag her across the entirety of the kitchen floor, but still the connection remain, as solid as ever.

"All ponies can grip another's hoof." She released her hold on him, much to his panicked relief.

"One time I nearly fell off a cliff and Applejack saved me by gripping our hooves together like that." Twilight turned away in embarrassment as she remembered another similar, more recent, incident while subconsciously rubbing her head where she'd been stricken.

"It's sort of like how you saved me," she grew silent as she struggled to express her gratitude, "Um...I don't know if I ever properly thanked you for saving my life back in the mines." She nervously played with her bangs.

"So...um...thank you."

"No problem, I've seen too many people lost to the necromorphs." Isaac replied with a sad frown, "Just don't make a habit of it."

"I know, I've already had enough bad luck with falling off cliffs and ledges to last a lifetime."

"Or two in your case."

(...)

Isaac and Twilight returned to the main hall of the tree library. To their shared disbelieving wonderment they found Pinkie, Spike, and Sweetie Bell

had been busy occupying themselves with a round of pin-the-tail-on-the-pony. Somehow the tail was stuck to the ceiling with super glue, Spike was covered from head to toe in needles, and Pinkie was jammed inside the oven which at this moment was hanging perilously off the top of the stairs. All of Isaac's equipment was scattered about like carnival confetti, a scene of inexplicable chaos. In the center of it all was Sweetie Bell looking very guilty, ashamed, and gloomy, but mostly guilty.

"Umm...sorry." She whimpered.

(...)

After a quick cleaning up, Isaac began his preparations for building the plasma cutter while Twilight searched the bookshelves for transformation spells and chemistry. Everyone else watched with rapt fascination as Isaac worked his engineer skills, except for Sweetie Bell who was condemned to observe from a dozen feet away.

The basic concept behind a plasma cutter was fairly simple. An inert gas, in this case ionized plasma, was pumped into a firing nozzle, called a plasma torch, and ejected outward to pass through an electrical spark which ignited the plasma into a bolt of superheated material that could burn through or even blow apart its target.

Armed with his newfound knowledge Isaac started by drawing outlines of various shapes on the oven's light metal case. The outlines, when cut out, would form the body of the cutter. He then dismantled the appliance in order to get at the interior chamber where the actual cooking was done. This heat resistant metal was perfect for forming the head of the cutter where the superheated plasma would be fired. The shapes were cut and with the assistance of Spike's fire breath the metal was heated and making it more malleable and easier for Isaac to fold the sides into the needed structure.

While the transformed metal pieces cooled, Isaac dismantled the small clockwork motor. The rods, springs and hinges would be used to form the trigger assembly, in addition to the ejection system where spent ammo packs could easily be catapulted from the top loaded magazine.

The sewing machine was gutted for the small electric motor and larger gears. These would serve the dual purposes of providing electric current to

ignite the ionized plasma in the firing chamber and, with the addition of a secondary switch, would allow the head of the cutter to rotate at a ninety degree angle giving a horizontal and a vertical firing position.

The final step was to solder the electrical cords, laser diodes, switches, and capacitors onto a circuit board (that had originally belonged to an audio mixer system) and connect it to an internal power supply. Then the two halves of the device were screwed together tightly to seal the deal. The flashlight from Pinkie Pie was mounted on the body using electrical tape and the ammo counter was made from a stereo's volume display.

The final result was a jury-rigged tool that that was better suited more for pony use than human. In his modified design he had to install a larger trigger, remove the guard, and make the body of the tool a little longer than normal so his hoof could fit. When he eventually became human again it would be simple affair to revert it for use by a human hand.

It wasn't perfection, but damn it was close.

He surprised himself, he'd though it would have been impossible to build a cutter with the stumps for hands he had. The magical qualities of pegasus hooves had helped, it was still not the same as having an opposable thumb and fingers which were far better suited for this kind of precision work. Five digits were better than one; a hoof was too big, imprecise, and limited in what it could hold. Fingers were more precise, could fit into smaller places, and could hold onto far more. At one point he'd been forced to ask Sweetie Bell for help. He needed to use her unicorn kinesis to help fit the smaller springs and circuits into the more confined spaces of the tool. Thankfully there was no repeat of her earlier disaster.

This plasma cutter was special, it meant something to him. He wasn't just building a tool to dismember necromorphs with. It was a deliberate endeavor to restore a part of his humanity and a reminder of the world where he'd come from. He felt a deep need to make it official so he signed his name onto the side of the new weapon.

"Property of Isaac Clarke," the inscription read. All that was left to make now was the ammo.

(...)

"I don't have a way to make the stuff you wanted," Twilight proclaimed to a deeply disgruntled Isaac, "I did find a good alternate," she levitated a book over to him, "take a look." Isaac peeked into the book's worn pages. He briefly skimmed the instructions, finding some of the terminology confusing.

"Liquid Schwartz?"

"Other page."

"Fire vapor: a red gaseous ingredient essential in the brewing of the hottest of hot sauces and the red stripes in rainbows?" Isaac's disposition soured like a lemon. No way in hell was his cutter going to be shooting rainbows. Pinkie popped in with a mighty laugh.

"I tried it once and I was like, 'spiiiiicccyy!' Because rainbows are very spicy, like really spicy. I like some hot sauce on my cupcakes, they are so good. I wonder what a rainbow on my cupcake would be like. Ohh, ohh, Twilight you have to show me that recipe later."

"This is a really bad idea." Isaac interrupted, his foul mood deepening.

"Am I just full of bad ideas then? You've been arguing with me all day about my magic. This is the best compromise I could find between a magical solution and a chemical compound that matched your specifications." Twilight felt herself getting rather hot under the collar.

"I'm still not sold on the whole 'magic' thing and now you want to put it in my tool?"

"Do you have any better ideas?"

"Well, no, but...! Fine I'll give it a try, but if it explodes in my face..." Before he could finish delivering his ultimatum he was drawn to a rather rambunctious snigger echoing behind him. Pinkie, Spike, and Sweetie Bell were crouched around his weapon and writing on it.

"Hey, hey, hey, what are you doing?"

"I'm writing my name." Sweetie Bell cheerfully said with childish delight as she finished inscribing her signature onto the side of the Plasma Cutter just below Pinkie and Spike's.

"It was your idea silly," Pinkie laughed while hopping all around him, "now when you're blasting away zombie ponies, slaying the undead, and laughing at the ghoulies it'll be like we're right there, helping too. Y'know cause that's what friends are for, helping each other."

"All right everyone just back up!" Isaac stopped Pinkie in her rambunctious bounding as "What's wrong?" Pinkie asked, concerned.

"It's getting a little too touchy-feely in here and I need to get some fresh air." He scowled as he left through the back door, slamming it behind him.

"Geez, does he always act so grumpy all the time?" Spike crossed his arms defiantly, "I mean, seriously, what's his deal?"

"Don't worry about him, Spike. I know what he's going through." Twilight reasoned, "It's not all that different from when we first came to Ponyville. I know he'll come around eventually."

"Oh, he must be upset cause I haven't thrown him a 'Welcome to Ponyville,' party yet." Pinkie reasoned.

"A party is your answer for everything."

(...)

It was not because Isaac was in a foul mood, quite the opposite. Although a negative disposition was part of it, the sudden surge of emotions he'd felt had overwhelmed him and driven him to seek a way out. The naive innocence these ponies exuded, the way they treated him as an equal, and the genuine care and concern they showed for him. He wasn't ready for it. Then they ruined his Plasma Cutter, well, not really, but they were only trying to be friendly. He didn't deserve their amity it only drove his paranoia. It was sick, he was sick.

He pushed these thoughts away. What he wanted right now was to relax somewhere he could be by himself for a while. When he'd first arrived at the library he'd never have guessed that there was a miniature garden hidden out back. Four pony-sized rectangular plots of land had been upturned and were being used to grow several types of herbs. The purple unicorn probably used them for cooking or as a light snack since some of the leaves had teeth marks.

Beyond the garden and past a few quaint abodes he found himself standing at the boarder of the town. Laid out before him was an endless field of green grass with a lazy river meandering its way through. The sparkling night sky and incredibly bright moon overhead gave the terrain an almost mystical aura of limitless possibilities. As he walked out further from town he trailed the river bank closely so as not to get lost. The soft soil felt good under his hooves and the crystal clear water looked so clean it was probably good enough to drink, although he didn't feel brave enough to test that idea. Back on Earth most rivers were too contaminated to even swim in and the clean ones were heavily guarded. Approaching within a hundred yards of a clean reservoir could get you shot on sight.

The sun had long since retreated beneath the horizon and Isaac continued his walk in the country side enjoying the feeling of the night breeze as it washed the fatigue from his body. High above the stars twinkled with a supernatural gentle light. He'd forgotten how long it'd been since he'd watched the stars planet side. He'd spent most of his adult life traveling between the stars and yet it was only when he could look up at them did they truly shine like diamonds.

He lost all track of time and later stopped and looked over the river bank into water. His reflection was clear in the moonlit water. He'd had a whole day to get used to his new form and nothing had changed since he'd woken up, apart from the black eye.

"I never pegged you as the vain type Isaac." Spoke a smooth, confident female voice. Isaac instantly recognized the owner of that voice judging from the condescending attitude and the 'total bitch' tone. It belonged to a woman he had never thought he'd ever see or have to suffer the company of again.

"What the fuck do you want, Kendra?" Isaac scowled at her, his loathing to deal with her. Across the river on the other bank the object of his hate stood with her hands on hips.

She was a human of moderately tanned skin, dressed in the same CEC computer technicians' uniform she worn at the moment of her death. The gray colored synthetic fiber undershirt and military green cargo pants complimented her brown hair, tied in a pony-tail, and equally brown eyes filled with humor, not contempt.

"Isaac, Isaac," she spread her arms wide, "it's been a long time since we last saw each other. I see you've changed a lot since then, going for the equine look, huh."

"Get the fuck back. I know what you are," Isaac seethed. This thing in front of him was an abomination, "you're just the Marker trying to screw with my head again. It won't work this time!"

"Got it in one, Isaac," Kendra stepped onto the water's surface, "that's not why I'm here though."

"Then why are you here!" He stepped back. He wasn't afraid, but the greater the distance the better since he had no weapons or armor to protect him. He was just a pony now; with wings he didn't know how to use.

"This is just like you Isaac, always so angry. I should say you're pretty cute as a pony." Kendra took a second step and slowly walked across the water's surface, slowly working her way towards him. Her footsteps never disturbed the water's surface, nor did she have a reflection.

"And you made a pleasant crunch when you were splattered all over the wall."

"You enjoyed my death, didn't you Clarke? You probably thought, 'finally the bitch is dead. She got what she deserved.' Am I right?" she said, rather blasé about it.

"You fucking betrayed me Kendra. You sold me out for EarthGov. I brought that nightmare to an end, but you took the red Marker from the pedestal and tried to abandon me on that godforsaken planet. I don't think anyone deserves to die like that. Still I didn't lose any sleep over yours." The closer Kendra approached, the more he retreated.

"Maybe, but that is in the past. I am dead, but what about you Isaac? When are you going to tell your new friends the truth?" She was now on his side of the river, hips swaying seductively with each foot fall.

"What are you talking about? I have no friends, it's all just business." he rebuked.

"You're lying. Do they know that you're bat shit insane? That you hear voices and see dead people. That you're a murderer!" she yelled that last word and Isaac visibly cringed.

"You've killed so many necromorphs you've grown tired of it and want to find more satisfaction. So you started killing anyone who got in your way."

"Fuck off Kendra. I had no choice, but you lead Hammond into a trap and shot Dr. Kyne in the back. You should take a long look at yourself first."

"Remember, Isaac, who you shot through the throat with a javelin gun. Tiedemann was already dead, drowning in his own blood, and you relished your victory. Standing tall over him like a king before executing him." Kendra pointed at him accusingly, her voice dripping in disgust. "Don't deny it Clarke, you enjoy the killing like I do. Love the moment when you can snuff out another's life with a well placed shot or a screwdriver in the head." She knelt down to look him directly face to face.

"How about the two hundred souls you willingly sacrificed to the necromorphs. Did you forget that it was you who removed the power cell and opened the blast doors? You allowed them to be slaughtered by the necromorphs in order to achieve your own ends. You might as well have pulled the trigger yourself."

"The Marker needed to be destroyed. Nothing else mattered and I don't need to justify it, not to an apparition of a Marker. Where ever you are I'm coming for you. I'll destroy you like I did the others!" By now he was screaming so hard that his throat hurt.

"So confident, but what do you hope to accomplish now? A pitiful, broken, human in a weak pony body, though now that I think about you don't have to worry about that awkward cross species thing." Kendra crooked smile split her face and she reached out with her hand as if to stroke his mane.

"What are you getting at?" Isaac side stepped with a jerk.

"Face it Isaac, Nicole is dead and you're not getting any younger. I know men your age love to bag the young naïve school girl. Or maybe you prefer the city dweller fucks the farmer's daughter ending. I know you love playing the knight in shining armor that saves the princess in another castle." She

tried to touch him on his muzzle, but he jumped back and then spit in her face.

"This whole place is just another hallucination so you can screw with me? It's rather funny that a Marker was so desperate to stop me it would resort to using children's cartoons and one made for little girls too" Isaac laugh at Kendra.

"Maybe it is all illusion, maybe not" she wiped her face, "that didn't stop you from having fun before. So why not go all the way. Find yourself a one-night stand or a suitable fuck buddy and if you don't like them, kill them afterward. Go ahead Isaac you can't deny your urges."

"You're fucking sick, and I'm not going to listen to this. I'll break out of here soon." He turned and walked away. He didn't run because it was pointless. Surprisingly she didn't follow, but continued to goad him on.

"You can't keep running forever Clarke. Eventually you're friends will figure it out and they'll lock you up. Clarke? Clarke!"

He didn't look back and drove himself to remove all thoughts of Kendra. The killing, yes, he had killed more than just necromorphs. Maybe that made him a criminal in some people's eyes, still he hadn't wanted to. Had tried to avoid it at all costs or had he? He couldn't deny that a small part of him had enjoyed watching Kendra be crushed under the giant tentacle, especially after what she'd put him through.

Then there were the ponies. He didn't think that the Marker was really responsible for them. He was still on the sidelines as to the question of their existence. They seemed too full of life to be fake but too anarchic to be real. Yet, they had treated him well and they were smart and funny in a way. Since he now had the body of a pony...

"No!" He berated himself, "This is exactly what the marker wants me to think. It wants me to turn against my nature and make me something I'm not. I won't give in to that crap."

He wanted to launch into a full rant when the chime of a large brass bell rang out nearby. He stopped and listened to the magnificent clang as it traveled clear and flawlessly through the night sky. He counted eleven rings and turned to face where they'd originated and saw he was near a large

clock tower. The very place Twilight was scheduled to meet that friend of the princess'.

(...)

When Isaac had stormed out the back door he left a rather rough silence in his wake. Twilight shook her head in dismay, hoping that he'd eventually warm up to them and stop being so miserable all the time. She checked the time on her wall mounted clock which showed that it was nearly a quarter to eleven.

"Ok you two," she cooed to Spike and Sweetie Bell, "it's getting awfully late. Time for bed." Neither of the children offered any resistance against her as Spike gave a sudden deep yawn.

"Can I watch Mr. Cutter use his weapon in the morning?" Sweetie nearly nodded off where she stood.

"Of course you can Sweetie Bell, but right now its bed time."

With Spike resting comfortably in his basket bed and Sweetie sound asleep on Twilight's bed the lavender unicorn returned to the main hall where she'd hoped to continue her work uninterrupted. She retrieved the book with the fire vapor recipe and retreated to the basement to start brewing a batch of the compound. Or she would have till there then came an anxious knocking at the front door.

"I know where Fluttershy is?" Burst in an almost hysterical Rarity, eyes wide, and covered in sweat from sprinting all the way from the hospital.

"You do?" Twilight froze what she'd been doing, "Did Angel tell you? I thought you were going to tell us when he woke up?"

"Oh good gracious no, the last thing the poor dear needs is a crowd of hysterical fillies overwhelming him with questions?" Rarity took out a handkerchief and began clean her face, "No, no, Twilight dear, the little darling was in such a terrible state of mind it was best that the one pony with the best grace and patience attend him."

"If you say so. So what happened to Fluttershy?"

"A most scandalous even has befallen her." For just a moment Rarity's voice broke. The fine cultured tone stopped and Twilight heard the fear inside the white unicorn, "Fluttershy's been abducted by a pony and some diamond dogs and the despicable curs have taken Ditzy as well, oh it's so horrible."

"A pony helping diamond dogs, who?" Twilight gasped, absolutely stunned. Rarity might have just told her that she wasn't a real a unicorn. It was just unfathomable. Rarity leaned in close, eyes dancing amongst the shadows, looking for an unseen listener.

"Secret Cherry." she whispered.

"The Mayor's secretary?" Twilight instantly had her mouth filled with Rarity's hoof.

"Sshhh," Rarity cautioned and released the bookworm.

"I just saw her earlier today, she was having some sort of argument with Mayor Mare. Still, why would she kidnap two pegasus ponies and especially Fluttershy? Neither of them have the magic to find gems?"

"Twilight, darling, the hows and whys don't matter now. Our friend's well being must come first. Angel was able to follow them to the gates of their lair and now we must warn Applejack and make haste. Afterwards we can have a little chat with Cherry." Rarity's face was becoming flushed with anger.

"Fluttershy and Ditzy must be absolutely terrified right now and judging from the way the dogs treated Angel and the other animals I fear the worst may have happened." As if to bolster her words the clock in the library began to toll the hour. Eleven chimes pierced the tense tranquility of the room.

"Ok," Twilight plopped the book down next to the cutter, "Pinkie go tell Applejack what's happened and then get ready to head out. Rarity, Sweetie Bell is upstairs in my room. Go take her back home and we will all meet back here at about one."

"Okey dokie loki" Pinkie cheered and bolted out the door, seemingly unfazed.

"Twilight, we can all be ready in half that time. Why the hold up?" Rarity inquired.

"I've got a...meeting to attend at midnight with someone sent by Celestia who may be able to help."

(...)

Twilight galloped her way through the empty dirt roads. Obscuring her way through the bright night was a crisp cold fog that had suddenly and quickly had blanketed the town. The thick eerie cloud relentlessly obscured her vision and chilled her to the bone. It was defiantly not normal to see such weather in this time of year. Her destination was the clock tower atop the hill at the west end and she had only a few minutes left before midnight. She was all packed up and ready to go and rescue Fluttershy, she just had to get this meeting out of the way.

Within minutes she had arrived at the base of the clock tower. It was a twelve story high structure adorned with a single brown gabled roof and a yellow painted exterior. It was one of the oldest buildings that still stood today, the silent hands of the massive clock and the brass bell had watched over the town for many generations, tolling the hours in solitude as the years passed.

She'd come to know this lovely building well over the past year. She was fascinated with the machinery that drove it, spending many a lazy afternoon taking notes on how it all worked together in harmony. Tonight, however, it was accompanied by another familiar sight; a gray pegasus stallion sitting next to the door.

"Isaac?" Twilight slid to a sudden stop, "What are you doing here?" He didn't respond, his head lowered to the ground. Twilight warily approached him. It looked as if he'd been sitting there for awhile judging from all the moisture that had settled onto him.

"Next time you should try reading secret messages in private. I want to talk to this friend your princess mentioned." He interposed himself in front of the door, blocking her way. He seemed so much bigger in the dark and the way the moonlight was reflected by his blue eyes and the dew in his coat. It gave him a mysterious and deadly guise and there was a hint of insanity that played his expression. She felt her throat constrict as if caught in the

birth of a scream. She was seeing a whole new part of him, he was something else now. He seemed darker, merciless, and it frightened her. She sucked in a lungful of air.

"No," she snapped at him trying to push away the fear, "the princess said I needed to go alone!"

"I don't care what she wants." His dismissal was immediate and full of scorn.

"I do. She is my mentor and has absolute trust in me that I will respect her wishes."

"She'd not my princess and I hate to do this to you, but I need answers. So," he slowly treaded towards her, his hoof steps deliberate and unfailing. Twilight bit her lip, would he really hurt her if she refused him? She was paralyzed, frozen, as he approached closer until their muzzles were inches from each other, "either you take me with you or you don't go at all."

(...)

Although the tower was twelve stories tall only the last four were dedicated to the clock itself with the first eight just a spiral staircase. As the two of them ascended stairs the metallic grinding and clicking of clockwork gears grew louder and louder as the wooden stairs creaked and moaned in protest beneath them. Twilight had insisted that Isaac lead the way since having him behind her would've been extremely uncomfortable. Half way up she had a change of heart.

She'd been so terrified of him a moment ago, and then when she'd agreed to his terms it was like a snap of a hoof and his aggression had deflated like a ruptured balloon. He'd seemed so little and full of regret over what he'd done. He'd apologized a second time and she had tried to pass it off serenely. Now, in a peculiar way Twilight felt glad that Isaac had insisted on coming. She felt that there was something off about this meeting, there was an aura of unease tonight. The weather, the secrecy, and every other crazy thing that had happened over the last two days, it just made her feel truly safe to have a friend tonight.

The smell of hot oil and grease permeated everything around them. The clockwork mechanism was so loud it was hard to hear herself speaking as

the gears tumbled and worked against each other. There were ladders and scaffolds that allowed access to the myriad levels and parts of the machine. Next to the stairwell was the machinist shop where the tools and spare parts were available when the great machine needed maintenance or repair.

Twilight poked her head inside this room to see if anyone was there. In a far corner she caught a feeling of magic being cast and saw a unicorn stallion sitting at table levitating a drink to his lips, eyes closed. He was partially obscured by the shadows but she could tell he was a lithe pony about her age or maybe a few years younger. His light yellow coat was faded as if from a critical and unhealthy lack of sunlight and despite his youthful appearance his mane was silvery gray and coarse looking like that of a pony four times his age.

"Hello?" she cautiously called out.

"Come on in Twilight Sparkle," His voice was the sound of smooth music, calm and filled with a beat that was hypnotic, "I see you brought Isaac with you. That was to be expected."

"You knew I was coming?"

"Of course I did. I know a lot about you." His horn had begun to glow with a sudden display of great magical power. White energy run off his horn and as he gathered the flows of energy to him effortlessly weaving it to suit his purpose and then released a cone of magical power that quickly adhered itself to the walls of the room, filling in the cracks and crevices. The moment the spell was complete the room was completely silent, the sounds of the clockwork machine no longer audible.

"Wow," Twilight mouth dropped, "that was an amazing spell."

"A necessary precaution," the unicorn said, "no sound will pass through the barrier we can talk freely."

"About the Marker?"

"That, among many other things." For the first time he opened his eyes and looked at them. His irises were the color of teal, the richest colored eyes she'd ever witnessed. Light danced over the infinite darkness of his pupils,

those cat-like slits. Twilight found herself dashing in full retreat, slamming into the opposite wall. Those eyes held her there she'd faced only one other who had eyes like that. Her voice froze and she was breathing hard. To confirm her fears he arose to his full height and flexed a pair of wings, he was an alicorn.

"Who are you?" Isaac sternly asked, put off by Twilight's flustered reaction.

"Now...that's not appropriate for you to know right now." The alicorn frowned in displeasure at the question. His teal eyes captured Isaac in their infinite depths.

"Who are you?" Isaac repeated, more insistent. The alicorn placed his drink on the table before gesturing with his hoof.

"Who decides that the work day is from nine to five instead of eleven to four? Who decides that saddles with emeralds will be in style this year and rubies next year?" The alicorn then smiled wickedly.

"Who draws up the borders, controls the currency, decides your cutie-mark, handles all of the decisions that happen transparently around us."

"I don't know" Isaac shook his head, looking rather confused.

"Aaaaaahh," the alicorn slowly exhaled. "I'm with them, same group, different department. As for my name call me Dream Reaver."

"Pleasant name." Isaac said cynically and felt a shiver go up his spine.

"U...um," Twilight stuttered half way recovered, "I don't want to be rude but I noticed that you don't have a cutie-mark."

"As it should be. Think of me as the collector of unfulfilled wishes. Ambitions lost and dreams that were never realized. I gather lost memories of young flowers that never truly blossomed." Reaver blinked as if suddenly remembering something.

"But you didn't come here to listen me talk about myself, you want information. Information that only Celestia and I can provide."

"How well do you know the princess?" Twilight inquired.

"I've been with her since the beginning. Ten thousand years ago when we first discovered the original Black Marker."

Chapter 13

Room Seven

"T...ten thousand years?" Twilight stammered slowly falling into a stunned seated position, her face a delicate mask of disbelief. She always knew that alicorns were immortal, even then it was a difficult concept to believe that Dream Reaver had known the Celestia for such an incredible amount of time. As a fan of mathematics she understood that such a number may not have seemed all that big. When applied it to a sense of time it became altogether meaningless, impossible to comprehend what a significant amount of history that had transpired, all of the lives that had come and gone in the intermediate years while an alicorn remained ageless, unchanging. In a profound way Twilight was grateful that she hadn't been born an alicorn.

"In actuality it has been ten thousand, three hundred, and twelve years?" Reaver said plainly, refilling his glass with another round. "Relationships between immortals and long lived species are complicated and hard to explain to ponies whose lives are measured only by decades."

"I....still I'd like to hear more," Twilight quickly overcame her earlier trepidations and pulled out trusty quill, ink, paper, and began dictating the conversation up to that point.

"Celestia has never talked her past before or even about the existence of a third Alicorn. I'm curious to learn more. Like what is the extent of your relationship with her?" Twilight leaned in closer, not realizing her quill was forming a large ink spot on the paper.

"You'd do better to ask Celestia yourself if you want to know about her past. I'd rather not speak for her." His voice was the measured cadence of a dignitary, confident and deep, betraying no emotion unlike his body which visibly tensed up at the subject.

"As for my side," He went tacit and slowly panning his head from left to right as if he was carefully examining the room for unseen eyes, "we are friends and allies with a similar goal, but our methods clash. Though she

does comes to me from time to time for advice and counsel when certain past sins catch up with us or old wounds are opened. Other times we are bitter, hated enemies. Sometimes it's all of the above, none of the above, but we've always had the utmost respect for each other."

"That's not really an definitive answer." Twilight said, annoyed at his paper thin answer, it was more a transparent concept than a quantitative object.

"Of course it is, just not the one you wanted. There is a difference." He grinned lightly when she became even more annoyed, "It's not a simple thing, but if you want a story then let me tell you of the time, long ago, when I rose up to declare myself to be the rightful heir to the throne and nearly denied Celestia her right to rule." Twilight opened and closed her mouth like a panting fish. Suddenly taken aback and regarding him with fresh fascination and a little anxiety, but continued to write her account.

"It was right after we removed the previous tyrannical ruler from Equestria," Reaver continued, spreading his arms dramatically. He rose onto his hind legs to stand tall like a king towering above a royal assembly, spreading his wings to their full length. Light and lightening crackled from his horn in waves of raw energy that traveled along his body and diffused into the air.

"I declared myself superior in every way; power, intellect, and wisdom. I was destined to ascend the throne as the true ruler that Equestria needed, far surpassing anything that Celestia, young and foolish, could ever be. Failed policies made way for a battle that raged for days in the skies over Canterlot with the fate of the future to be decided." Soon his burst of energy faded and he settled back into his previous neutral mindset.

"I take it you lost." Isaac interrupted tactlessly, acting as if he was not impressed.

"Did you rub both brain cells together to figure that out?" Reaver deadpanned, receiving a 'touché' grin from Isaac, "You've never seen sweet Celestia when she's mad, Isaac. The last ten millennia have mellowed her out somewhat, although I wouldn't be surprised if she still had a bit of that youthful pride still in her. I hear there are some ponies who still call her Trollestia to this day. Respectfully, from behind her back, of course."

"Of course." Isaac agreed not entirely sure why. He didn't know much about Celestia, though she sounded like just another government type that he needed to watch out for.

"Look," he stamped a hoof out of frustration, "can this history lesson wait until we've dealt with the Marker. I'm tired of just waiting around, right?" He nudged Twilight.

"Huh?" she jerked as if awoken from a day dream, "Oh, yeah, I guess we'd better do that." She signed and wondered if ponies really did call Celestia by such a horrid name? She'd have to look into that and the elements help any pony she caught red hoofed.

"Our next step is clear because I sense the enemy is close to completing the Marker as we speak." Reaver said calmly as if discussing the weather.

"What?" Twilight gasped nearly dropping her paper, body going cold, "How do you know that? Is it even possible?"

"Have you not felt its influence on your mind? Voices, hallucinations, other strange phenomenon happening around you?"

"He's right," Isaac agreed wincing as he recalled a fairly recent encounter, "remember the fight in the mines, all those necromorphs? We thought the signal followed me in. It might have come from this new Marker."

"Yes, but..." Twilight sputtered, "Then why did the monsters suddenly die if there was a Marker controlling them?"

"Maybe something blocked the signal?" Isaac thought out loud, scratching his cheek. "I have no idea. If it's not fully built then maybe it can't maintain a signal for a long period of time?"

"Those are...sound ideas," Twilight calmed herself, if only a tad, "right now maybe we should be more concerned that they built a Marker in less than a single day?"

"Twilight, the enemy has known for generations how to construct a Marker." Reaver countered, "They never dared to try it until now because it would be useless to them."

"But Luna said the book was what they needed to build it. Why steal it if already knew?"

"What Luna said was true, but for a different reason. There is a second part to the book. Our enemies are not foals; they know an uncontrollable Marker would equally spell their doom as much as it would ours. No, they needed the Tome in order to enslave the Marker and bend it to their will."

"How?"

"Celestia's pupil, at the time, found a way to control it. She discovered ways to use magic to manipulate the signal and modify the frequency of the energy waves that it emitted. She described it akin to putting a pony in a straitjacket."

"Both of you are fucking idiots," Isaac shouted giving Reaver a dismissive wave of his hoof before he was sharply interrupted by an angry kick to his leg from Twilight. He afforded her a sidelong scowl and ignored her.

"I've seen what comes from trying to control a marker. You may think you're safe, that you've got it all figured out but that's just what the Marker wants you to believe. It will never stop trying to find a way out and eventually it will."

"Just so, by the time we realized what was going on it was too late." Reaver contributed.

"Either outcome will be bad for Equestria," Twilight looked up to Reaver for guidance, "We can stop it, right?"

"...No," he replied curtly, "I brought you all the way out here to tell you there is no hope, nothing to be done, because I find it cute how your jaw goes slack in the presence of total planetary genocide. *YES*, there is a way to stop this."

"Then tell us how?"

"I can't," he shook his head to emphasize, "unfortunately the one who defeated the Black Marker passed away before they could pass on that information."

"Who? Was it Celestia's pupil?" Twilight prodded.

"No, it was her son."

"She had a son?" Twilight's mood plummeted at the news. She wondered how much more there was that she didn't know about her mentor. Wasn't she the princess' trusted, most faithful, student? Yet she realized now how much she didn't know.

"Had and he was the first pony to ever wield the Elements of Harmony."

"Ohh, Poor Celestia, she must've been so heartbroken." She felt a few tears threaten her.

"As all parents are when they have to bury their children. It is important that you understand that you too may have to make a similar sacrifice."

"No, I refuse to let anything like that happen to my friends." She snapped up ready to move the heavens to prevent such a fate, turning to Isaac with face full of purpose. "We can stop it right now."

"How are you planning to do that?" Isaac said.

"Right after you stormed out of the library, Isaac, Rarity came by and said that a friend of mine had been kidnapped. Her name is Fluttershy and Rarity knows where she's been taken to." Twilight panned back to Reaver, "My friends are preparing to go and rescue her as we speak. I can't,...won't, let anything happen to her."

"I see," There was a glimmer of light in the alicorn's eye, "A strange turn of events. This might prove to be a very fortunate development for us, indeed."

"What's fortunate about my friends being taken away from me?" A few strands of hair unsettled themselves from her main as her fury simmered. "Her house was broken into, her animals murdered, and to top it all off Ditzzy Doo was kidnapped as well! There is nothing good about that."

"You need to put your personal feelings aside. You, of all ponies, should know the value of understanding the nature of the enemy you face and not running in half blind."

"Ghuu," she barked, "Fluttershy is one of my best friends and the most gentle and kind pony I've ever known. I will not so casually dismiss her?"

"Because I know what you are up against." His voice raised a few decibels to match the unicorn's. The two of them glared at each other in a test of willpower before Reaver unexpectedly broke it off and looked upwards as if losing himself in an old memory.

"Twilight, have you ever heard of a species called grundels? How about a bushwooly, mountain elf, a sea pony, or even a flutter pony?"

"I've read about them," her anger melted away at the change in topic, "but I haven't actually seen any of them."

"You never will since they're all gone now, my fault." He raised a hoof over his face, voice whispering. "Myths and legends are all that remain now. In a single week hundreds of civilizations were consumed by the marker or died out soon after the war ended...the world was a very empty place." Reaver inhaled sharply falling into a horrible gloom that contrasted his earlier confidence.

"The moment we saw it we knew it was not of this world. It was massive, ancient, and alien. It hadn't just fallen from the sky but had been delivered to us for reasons no pony could figure out." He shook his head, "We didn't win, we simply survived and now we're at the cusp of it all happening again and all you can think of is saving one friend?"

"Shove it up your ass, you son of a bitch," Isaac yelled unrelentingly, "If Twilight wants to go save her friend then that's fine with me. I know what it means to lose someone you love." His outburst quickly dissolved and he looked away in shame. "To...fail to be there for them."

"Besides destroying the Marker is my job and I can do it by myself." He finished reasserting his earlier statement.

"Yes, I heard that you have enjoyed some success in the past. While I respect your skill and am partly responsible for your existence here in Equestria, that does not mean I trust you. While you've been stumbling through Everfree and playing apple farmer many more ponies have been disappearing all across Equestria. Fluttershy was not the first and even Rainbow Dash has been counted amongst those missing."

"Rainbow Dash too? When!" Twilight screamed.

"Several hours ago."

"What are they going to do to them?" Twilight already had a sneaking expectation of what the answer was. She didn't want to speak it out loud, she was too afraid she'd be right. On her behalf, Isaac stepped in to answer it for her.

"They're going to be used as test subjects aren't they?" he pounded his hooves in disgust, "They'll use them as test subjects until they can no longer serve a useful purpose. Then they'll be used to make necromorphs." It was a disturbing parallel to how Earthgov had treated him and several other prisoners in their mindless pursuit in building an obelisk of death.

"No!" Twilight released an anguished wail, heart clenching under a death squeeze, while her legs turned to jelly, "they...no. They wouldn't...their going to turn my friends into more of those abominations." Her eyes begged Isaac, pleaded for him to say that she was simply playing a cruel joke or that there were other possibilities; however Isaac could not bring himself to look at her.

"There is still hope though," Reaver said lifting his drink to sip at it, accompanied by the gentle sound of tumbling ice cubes, "until now we were unsure where the stolen ponies were being taken. Now it seems you might have unwittingly stumbled upon the enemy's home."

"Your right, if they are kidnapping ponies to make necromorphs then we might be able to solve two problems at once."

"Exactly, Twilight. It is good to see that you're still in good spirits. Most ponies would be a little more 'hesitant' chasing after the enemy after nearly being killed."

"I was lucky to have Luna and Isaac with me," Twilight gave Isaac a small approving grin of thanks, "they both saved my life."

"An act that came with a lot of strings attached."

"What do you mean?"

"Hmm..." Reaver hummed while closely examining Twilight. So long and intense was his gaze that Twilight felt herself blush a bit in embarrassment, "Again I won't presume to speak for another, especially Princess Luna. I love her like a sister and if she hasn't told you then neither will I, you'll have to take it up with her. I will say you won't feel so grateful when you learn what it cost her to save your life and the price that you too will have to pay."

"Speaking of Luna there is something I need to know." Isaac stepped in, "She tasked Twilight the duty of summoning a weapon into this world. Twilight said it was her fault for miscasting the spell, that I was not suppose to be here, that it was an accident, and Luna seemed to support this. Thing is, I don't believe it was an accident."

"But it was. It's my fault. I let everypony down." Twilight admonished, placing a hood on Isaac's shoulder.

"Oh?" Reaver beamed with interest, "How so?"

"Come on, I'm not an idiot." Isaac felt insulted, "A world facing destruction from a Marker and I just happened to fall into it on random chance by a failed spell? I'm not a scientist but the numerical odds of such a thing must be incredibly small. You can't sit there and tell me I'm here by coincidence."

"Your right, I can't." Reaver smiled, "When the two princesses came to me for my council I told them that I knew of a weapon that could possibly tip the odds in our favor. The fact your standing here is proof that Twilight performed the spell to my exact specifications."

"So you lied to me, to Celestia and Luna." Twilight huffed, insulted at the very notion.

"Had I told them the truth about what the weapon really was I suspect neither of them would have agreed to go through with it, especially since it involved you at the center of it all."

"So you're the reason why I'm here and a horse too." Isaac poked Reaver in the chest but failed to incite a reaction from the alicorn.

"I made you a pony so as to allow you move more freely in the world and not draw unwarranted attention from the enemy. So you could speak and

read the language as well. This is why your mind bonded with Twilight's, it was an exchange of information."

"But why drag me back into this crap? Huh? Why me?"

"Because...for those of us who dwell in the infinite space between science and magic, between delusion and ultimate truth, you are what we call a nexus, both of you. Wherever you go, the world has a tendency to follow. It has saved lives and is exactly what we need now."

"Now there's one thing I don't understand." Twilight piped in, "There was a mind control spell woven into the summoning..."

"A mind what now?" Isaac asked.

"A spell that Luna said would bind the wea...uh, you to my control." Twilight absent-mindedly played with her mane.

"Hey, no one is controlling me, especially not a purple figment of my imagination."

"Too bad, because the first thing I'd do is give you a sunnier disposition. Then there is the matter of your foul language."

"How about I give you my foot right up your..."

"Enough," Reaver's howl settled the matter once and for all, "You were an unknown element, Isaac. There was no way of telling how you'd react once you arrived and I couldn't risk you actually harming Twilight, Celestia would never forgive me."

"So you screwed with my head?" Isaac never wished more that he could make a pony's head explode just using his mind.

"Just a small mental block to ensure that you'd never be able to cause her any physical harm directly or indirectly." The alicorn informed Isaac who fumed with indignation.

"I'm tired of being manipulated to serve another's agenda!" The former human wanted to kill this bastard, rip him apart and paint the walls with his blood. The more he thought of it the more his body stiffened to the extent

his muscles clenched so hard making that it immobilized him. Anger was defeated by shock when he realized what was happening.

"No doubt you realize it's also futile to try and attack me." Reaver demonstrated this by leaving his throat exposed to Isaac's mercy.

"Please stop this," Twilight pleaded, "There is no need for all this, and we're supposed to be on the same side." Whether or not her words had any effect Reaver backed away.

"The hour is getting late," he said, "and you should be on your way, but before you go there is one final matter." Using his magic he levitated a medium sized jewel box from a brown sack that had been hiding behind the table. The jewel box was painted with a midnight blue and laced with gold along the edges and on the hinges. Rhombus shaped gems of red, pink, and green wrapped around the box in four sets of three.

"Open it," he said as the box was laid at Twilights hooves. Twilight complied and was rewarded with a flash of light and a burst of a familiar magical energy that filled her with feelings of absolute safety. She knew exactly what was inside before the light finally faded away.

"The Elements of Harmony," she marveled, plucking a golden tiara with a large star, made of a magenta colored tourmaline, set upon the crown. The inside of the box was padded with a fine pink silk that contained six valuable treasures, the tiara among them. The other five were gold necklaces and each one had a different shaped and colored pendant that corresponded to the cutie-mark of its representative pony, who all happened to be Twilight best friends. They were the elements of honesty, kindness, laughter, generosity, and loyalty. Twilight's was the most powerful element of all, magic.

"Celestia wanted you to have them, a word of warning though," Reaver grew unusually hushed with a serious scowl, "the Elements are powerful weapons, however, use them only as a last resort since they will draw the Marker's attention to you."

"I don't understand."

"You will in time. Just remember that each element grants the user powers that can be used individually, apart from the whole." Reaver turned away

from Twilight, addressing a rather brooding Isaac, "I did not forget about you Mr. Clarke."

"I swear if you pull out a crown or earrings I'm going to jump right out the window." Isaac jabbed a hoof in the alicorn's direction.

"No there is no seventh Element or jewelry for you."

"Good, he'd probably represent crabbiness." Twilight giggled.

"I think a certain purple pain in my ass should be quiet." Isaac huffed, receiving a raspberry from Twilight in return.

"I managed to pull a few favors and requisitioned an item from the Princesses' own private museum. It's over there, in the sack behind the table.

"What is it?" Isaac tried not to sound too interested.

"Something I think you'll like." Reaver nodded assuredly, "One more thing, I had hoped that Twilight's friend, Rainbow Dash, would've been around to help you get your wings off the ground, so to speak. Since she's missing I hired another fast flyer to help you out, someone you can trust, and I hear she's one of the best." A pale aura of magic formed around the alicorn's horn and he backpedaled a ways as the pool of energy began to grow brighter.

"She should be at the library now." He said just as a great conflagration of magical energies swarmed and filled the room with a deafening tone and a push of force that sent reality itself seeming to buckle under the strain. It lasted only a second and when it was over Reaver was nowhere to be seen.

"Oh my," Twilight gasped picking herself up off the floor, "I've never seen a teleportation spell that powerful before." Isaac just brushed the dust and dirt from his coat noting that the great grinding of the clock tower's gears had returned in full force. Sparing not a thought for it he strode over to the table and spotted the sack where his 'gift' awaited him. He slowly reached out for the bag, hesitating only briefly, unsure as to what was inside or that it might even be a trap.

Feeling that such reservations were just unfounded paranoia he reached inside and felt something cool and hard in his hoof. Extracting it into the light he beheld an octagonal shaped black metal tube with a handle on one end. He couldn't help but feel an instance of déjà vu. He'd seen this object many times before. Back home it was a standard sight aboard starships, but he'd never thought he'd see it in a place like this.

"Holy shit." He mouthed as he placed the flat end of the tube on the table. Threading a hoof through the handle he gave a firm clockwise tug and the top of the cylinder rotated with ease. After half a rotation there was a click and Isaac pulled up and a hiss of air escaped the tube, with the billowing of cold white fog, as he extracted a clear circular glass tube.

Isaac stared disbelieving at the smooth rectangular, bronze colored, object encased inside the glass. There were no logos, safety stickers, or even a serial number but there was no doubting what it was; a CEC nano-lithe fusion battery for his RIG. He had just been handed the means to power his advanced suit back into life.

"You're fucking kidding me. How the hell did he get one of these?" Maybe he didn't want to know the answer to that. The question alone raised all sorts of uncomfortable scenarios.

(...)

The stretcher shook and jostled her wildly about as the dogs pushed her over the uneven rock strewn path towards their destination. Fluttershy could see nothing past the black sack wrapped tightly over her head. Occasionally the light from an overhead lamp managed to break through and warm her eyes, otherwise she had lost all sense of orientation and position as she was guided down endless tunnels that twisted and turned before suddenly folding in on themselves with no sense of purpose or goal.

It went on like this for an immeasurable amount of time until the stretcher's wheels collided with a sudden steep incline and she had let out a loud scream of discomfort and surprise, her face flushing from the embarrassment and shock. Afterwards the ground leveled out and from the sound the wheels made on the floor the ground was made from an artificial material that she was unfamiliar with yet it was hard and made a squeaking sound. Even on the smooth surface Fluttershy still continued to shake, her fatigued muscles aching from the earlier fight. Though she trembled more

out of fear and anxiety at what was awaiting her; hunger, fatigue, and confusion only compounded her ill feelings. She didn't know what to do or if there was anything more she could do to escape this dark place. She gasped uncontrollably and was so frightened that she couldn't cry.

Her brain was like leaves scattered in a hurricane; wild, hard to control, and formed into a single coherent thought. With all her might she tried to center her thoughts on a single focus, contemplating what her heroine Rainbow Dash would do to handle a situation such as this. Rainbow was strong and brave, surely she'd find a way out for sure and doing something incredibly cool in the process.

Fluttershy also remembered a time when Rarity had been trapped last year by the diamond dogs. Everypony had believed that Rarity had been in great peril. Turned out the fashion designer had turned the tables on the dogs and won her own freedom without the help of her friends.

The butterscotch pegasus found her feelings had turned their way towards Cherry and the atrocities she'd committed against Angel and Ditzzy. She'd felt a chink in her chain of fear, experienced a contortion forming on her face, and followed by a grinding of teeth as evil thoughts filled her head. All of her animal friends were either dead or without a home now because of a simple fact. That she was the smallest of all her friends and was of no help to anypony. Her friends had encouraged her to be the best pony she could be and while she had tried, in the end, it hadn't been enough.

She was weak.

The procession of pony and dogs halted suddenly and interrupted her train of thought and self pity as a series of sequential clicks of heavy door locks being released echoed down the hall and the metallic reverberation of a very large door opening. She felt the vibration of large motors grinding and protesting as they worked fervently to open the way. Before the engines finished their work, the dogs started moving her again, past the doors and down a curved incline. There was an abrupt upsurge of sounds all around her as she was lead through a large crowd. Footfalls of dogs and ponies could be heard everywhere and a massive amount of disjointed chatter made it impossible for her to pick out a single conversation over another. Rising above the din of voices, like a thunder clap, was the fierce unmistakable snap of several whips filling the air and accompanied closely

by a wail of agony from a pony, mares and stallions, and sometimes from a dog as well.

"Room Seven." One of the dogs barked as they came to another halt. There was an electrical buzz preceding the release of another, smaller, door this time. As they passed this door she felt a wave of gloom fill her to the marrow as the door slammed shut and she was sealed inside with her captors. The restraining belts holding her down were removed while four pairs of clawed hands grabbed at her tightly and lifting her from the stretcher. She was quivering in a cold sweat, too frightened to move. Afraid that if she screamed or tried to struggle that they'd only hurt her more or Ditzzy in retaliation. A bolt of freezing cold snapped up her spine as she was placed against an icy chair that was angled halfway between a horizontal and vertical position. The dogs wasted no time in applying metal cuffs on her legs and immobilizing her once again.

The black sack was removed from her head and she had to impulsively squint her eyes against the assaulting light that was emitted from a lamp hung right above her head. She was afforded no reprieve as the sack was then forced into her mouth. The dog had rolled the sack up and held it like a rope across her cheeks, silencing her protests and holding her head firm against the chair. He pulled with such indissoluble strength that she felt like her jaw was about to break and she struggled to breath as her tongue was forced back into her throat. She closed her eyes and wishing with all her heart that this was all just a bad dream. That Angel, Twilight, or any of her friends would arrive and wake her up at any moment. Then they'd look directly into her eyes with faces scrunched up and reflecting great concern and sympathy.

"Hold her eyes open," said a stallion with a tone of calm authority and undisguised repugnance. The dirt crusted fur of a dog's paw forced one of her eyelids open, the overhead lamplight making it impossible to distinguish the faces of her tormentors as they seemed to float above her like ghosts.

"Don't move." The stallion commanded while holding something above her face. It was long, thin, and light shined off its surface with a mosaic of colors.

"No please..." Fluttershy begged softly, memories of Ditzzy's hollow eye socket playing out across her own face.

"Don't worry this isn't going to hurt at all." The stallion cooed condescendingly. Fluttershy bit her lip hard enough to draw blood, tears finally forcing their way out from exhausted ducts as the object was lowered to hover mere centimeters above her eye. She yelped expecting nothing but pain but was surprised as a splash of a warm liquid dropped her eye, followed by a second and third drip. The same was repeated for her other eye. The deed done her captors shuffled out of the room and locked the door tightly behind them.

She blinked her eyes repeated until the light above had become unbearably bright forcing her to seek sanctuary behind closed lids. Continuing to sob uncontrollably as the eye drops mixed with her hot tears to the point both her cheeks were covered in a salty liquid and small rivers ran unimpeded down her neck. The door opened, more dogs came delivering a rattling stretcher and placing it just off to her left side. Other dog carried in several heavy objects and slammed them down front of her. Not a word was said and as soon as the unseen activities were complete the dogs departed. Their heavy footsteps replaced by a singular meandering hoof step of a pony.

The pony halted behind her and Fluttershy visibly tensed unsure of what more they were going to do. She felt one of her eyes forcefully pried open by the pony's hoofs. She gasped in surprise and pain as her eyes started to burn from the lamplight which was now akin to staring straight into the sun. The stranger then let her go and mercifully turned the overhead lamp off. Fluttershy sighed in thankful relief, sniffing loudly, and began blinking her eyes to clear the sun spots.

"The eyes are fully dilated, good." Spoke the pony, quill scrapping against paper, before she departing the room leaving Fluttershy isolated for another indeterminate amount of time.

As the world slowly refocused itself Fluttershy was able to observe her prison in all its bleak existence. The flat featureless gray walls of the hexagon shaped room were unnaturally smooth as if the whole room had been carved from a single piece of metal. Light came from six dim little lamps affixed to the corners and two air vents hung from the ceiling and covered with grates that had been welded on permanently. Even if she could remove the grates the vents were too narrow to fit a pony her size. It

was quite inside yet everything seemed to hum with a subtle power, vibrating ever so slightly from an invisible giant heartbeat.

She craned her neck to look over to the spare stretcher that'd been left next to her. She'd hoped it to be empty or have a friendly face she could talk to, on both counts she had been wrong. Folded neatly on one end there was a single green surgeon's gown with a white mask draped over it. Along with it was an arrangement of stainless medical implements, on narrow trays, whose clean and sterile surfaces caused the light to project around the room, shiny eyes that seemed to be searching for her. Neatly arranged on the trays were surgical tools from syringes and scalpels, to clamps, retractors, needles threaded with sutures, and many more she didn't recognize but all fostered a mounting dread. Her blood froze and muscles went rigid when she saw the drill, a rotating handle attached to a shaft ending in a sadistic looking corkscrew cutting blade. Next to that was a pair of rib spreaders and a serrated hacksaw. Her imagination betrayed her and dreamt up all the horrific results these instruments could inflict upon her body, a ravaged and dissected body with organs missing and limb dismembered.

Fluttershy snapped her gaze away feeling both cold and numb, the world faded into the background becoming fuzzy and somehow alien. Her stress was at a breaking point and a dark depression was descending onto her mind, consuming her with unforgiving anguish.

"Good morning." The cheerful sincerity of that voice snapped Fluttershy back into reality. It had come from the spectacled pegasus stallion that she'd seen before. Stepping into the room the door closed behind him, becoming seamless with the surrounding wall.

Beneath a pair of oak colored reading glasses, with almost nonexistent lenses, was a set of rosy colored eyes embedded into a welcoming grandfatherly face with the kind of smile that delighted in spoiling the grandchildren with toys and candy while telling tall tales of heroic daring. His chestnut coat had almost completely faded with age as well as his mane whose original color had long been lost to the unrelenting passage of time. He wore a vest of a pale royal blue with a single golden chain hanging from the left pocket. In the oppressive silence Fluttershy could hear the tic-tic of his pocket watch.

He was carrying a black suitcase expertly balanced on his back as he purposefully strode over to a table and chair that had been deposited in front of Fluttershy. He said nothing more as he placed the suitcase on the table and opened it, extracting seven tan colored folders and neatly arranging them on the table. One of the folders had her name, 'Fluttershy,' written on it in a thick hoof-heavy font. Five of the other folders also carried the names of all of her friends; Twilight, Rarity, Applejack and all the rest. However there was one file that did not bear a name.

Taking Fluttershy's folder into his hooves he sat down and began to read the contents, occasionally making clicking sounds with his tongue. She noted, with no small amount of curiosity, that her folder was thicker than those of her friends. Thus the time passed in an uneasy fashion while she shivered in the cold indifferent atmosphere. Her only companions were the thrumming sensation emanating from the walls and the sound of a page being turned.

"Mmm ah hm, mm, very interesting." The stallion hummed, his ears peaking in subdued excitement as he looked up to study Fluttershy like she was a pinned butterfly on display.

"Very interesting," he repeated before losing himself in the file again.

"Who are you?" Fluttershy breathed, barely understanding her own voice yet, somehow, the aged pegasus had heard her.

"You can call me Doctor. Not my real name of course but my employer values secrecy."

"What...who...t...um," she swallowed hard trying to alleviate her dry mouth. Her tongue felt like a thick heavy weight, "what are you go...going to do to me?" The stallion leaned forward while adjusting his glasses.

"You and I have never met before; I was hired to do a job nothing more or less. I have no vested interest in helping or harming you as long as the job gets done. As for what happens to you, that depends on you and how much you choose to cooperate. It's nothing personal, you understand." Cradling the folder in one arm he rose from the chair to drive forward and stand between Fluttershy and the medical stretcher.

"Now, before we can begin there are a couple of gaps in our records we need filled. My employer wants everything kept neat and tidy."

In spite of his harmless appearance there was something incredibly off, a dark aura that surrounded him, he didn't move like a pony nor did he smell like one. Her sharp olfactory sense triggered stinging sensations. She could smell the overpowering stench of formaldehyde that clung to him, as well as the nauseating necrotic stink of cadavers and blood.

"Your name is Fluttershy, a pegasus mare, blood type O negative; are you currently taking any medication? Do you have any known allergies? Have you had any trouble with your heart?" Fluttershy didn't respond choosing to fight against her restraints in a vain attempt to get as far away as possible. She hadn't heard the question she only felt an acute sense of panic grip her, overwhelming all of her sensibilities as she struggled towards escape. She wanted, no needed, to get away from this monster dressed with a pony's skin.

"You will respond when spoken to. Cooperation will be rewarded; deception and resistance will be punished." She felt the futility in her struggles give way to hopeless despair as she settled down just enough to actually look him in the face.

"Are you currently taking any medication? Do you have any known allergies? Are you... having any trouble with your heart?" He repeated the question, slower this time. She shook her head letting out a whimper that signaled her defeat as she settled limply back onto the chair.

"Good," The doctor returned to his seat and pulled out a pen, "then let us start with something fairly recent. Now here is a report that says you were once a very successful fashion model under the administration of Photo Finish, correct?" Fluttershy nodded.

"Yet, despite your popularity at the height of your success you suddenly quit. Why?"

"Umm...because I ha...hated it." She stuttered more from confusion at why it was important than from fear of answering. A quick glint of surgical steel in the corner of her eye reminded her of what was awaiting and she reasoned that if she could hold out long enough her friends would find her.

She held no desire to speak with this pony though it was best way to stall for time.

"What did you hate about it?"

"All that attention. All the ponies staring at me, silently judging." It'd been the worst time of her life. She

"Would you say you were loved by your fans?"

"Oh, um, I guess so."

"But you threw it all away."

"Uh, y...yes."

"Really? Well I find that to be quite fascinating. Recall another more recent incident where you erupted into Canterlot castle during the Galloping Gala screaming, and I quote, 'Your going to love me.'"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Well you got everypony's attention that night, including my employers."

"I...I just wanted the animals to like me and let me care for them, but they kept running away. I didn't mean to get angry."

"Do you hate the other ponies?"

"What? No! I could never hate anyone."

"I find it strange that you seek so much approval from animals that you devolve into a uncontrollable rage when you feel you're denied reciprocation. Yet freely given love and consideration from ponies drives a desire in you to disappear from public awareness and cast their feelings aside like flotsam on the ocean."

"No, that's not true."

"Then why do you isolate yourself from your friend by living like a hermit surrounded by stupid creatures? For that matter why would a pony who is," he consulted the folder, "described as being, 'easily frightened, meek, shy

to the point of incapacitation, and known to be afraid of her own shadow,' be doing living right next to the Everfree forest? A place well known for its fierce and violent predators?"

Fluttershy hesitated, unsure how to reply to that question in kind. Though, in truth she wasn't entirely sure as to the answer herself. It just seemed like something she had always been meant to do given her talent and cutie mark.

"Nothing to say? Very well, I'll just write it down as your first fabrication." He wrote furiously into the folder with surprising zeal. "Then there is the matter of, what do you call it? The Flutter-stare? A most unusual ability for the bearer of the element of kindness. It is why you're here." He stated matter-of-factly before pointing upwards, "They want to know it, how it works, and that job falls to me. The fact you hold an element is just a...delightful perk." He said as he continued to write.

"I was quite impressed with your sudden demonstration earlier. Doubtful your victim would agree, but," the doctor stole a peek at the arrangement of surgical equipment, "I'm sure he'll give us plenty of useful research after his interview and dissection."

"Oh, and before I forget," he reached over to a series of buttons that had been built into the table's surface. From her position and angle Fluttershy had been ignorant of their existence. A simple depression of one button sent a surge of electricity coursing through the hoof restraints on Fluttershy's forelegs. The yellow mare convulsed wildly as the current passed through her chest, through her heart, making cracking and popping noises as she screamed in horrific pain. It felt as if her chest was going to rip itself open, it burned and she couldn't breathe. The screams fell silent as her oxygen was wasted.

A second, the stallion had only pressed the button for one mere second, but it was enough. Fluttershy collapsed as limp as a piece of dead meat. Somehow she'd remained conscious and her chest rose and fell rapidly as tried to fight through confusion and pain.

"Never contradict me." He said calmly untouched by the suffering he'd just committed. He reached over and opened another folder that carried a certain lavender unicorn's name,

"Now I wanted to talk to you about Twilight Sparkle, if you could perhaps provide us with the names and addresses of any extended family..."

"Please, no more, just let me go." She pleaded barely able to speak. The stench of burnt hair filled her nostrils as tendrils of smoke lifted from her bruised body.

"That's not up for me to decide," the stallion said dismissively, "my employer has a great deal of interest in you and in your unique talents, best to just accept your fate. One other thing, your friend Ditzzy Doo," Fluttershy perked a little at her friend's name "sends her regards. She's being moved to another room elsewhere in the facility. One of my associates will be handling her case."

"She's still alive." Fluttershy sighed with relief, feeling a tinge of hope returning.

"Hmm, yes, I imagine that we'll only hold her as long as we hold you. Of course that means the more you stall," he chewed on the inside of his cheek "we can't let her go."

"You're just a big bully, a cold hearted, bad pony." Fluttershy hissed through clenched teeth, her anger returning and rising to a boil. She instinctually fought the restraints, her body overflowing with a need to resist somehow if just for the sake of Ditzzy.

"Twilight and my friends will not stop till they have found me. You have no right..."

"No! YOU have no rights." The spectacles Pegasus shot up from his seat and spat acid at the helpless pony instantly silencing her. "Take a look around you Fluttershy. There's no princess here, no friends, no justice, no mercy, No fairness, No Hope, and NO Escape! You will leave through that door only when we know your secrets and not one second BEFORE!"

With a speed that belied his aged body the doctor dumped all the files back into his briefcase and with a steep frown of disgust pardoned himself from the room, the door opening automatically as if sensing his mood. His departure signaled the arrival of a dog guard who took a hold of the stretcher and wheeled it out before the door closed. An instant later the lights went out, plunging Fluttershy into total and absolute darkness.

There was silence at first, then the room filled with her exhausted pitiful cries of anguish, echoing cruelly in her ears as she fell into a painful dreamless sleep.