

A Tangled Web

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Prologue

Celestia woke with a start. A shudder shot down her spine as her large pink eyes blinked back the darkness.

"Again..." she sighed softly, sliding her head back onto its pillow. Her mind returning, the Princess' eyes danced lazily from one end of her four-poster canopy to the other. It had been like this for over a week now. Granted, the day to day minutiae of running a kingdom could be stressful sometimes, and what with the Summer Sun a week away...

In all her years as Princess, she couldn't recall a single night of lost sleep, but now... Something was bothering her. She couldn't quite put a hoof on it, but even after the unpleasantness with her sister, there had always been sleep once the dark of night had settled.

She lay in the darkness, wrestling with this weight that had been wrapped around her dreams. Though dark clouds muddled the remnants of her reverie, flashes remained... faces that she had known, if from another life, ones that she could not recall...

The sweet sounds of a nightingale stole what remained of her torpor. Rousing herself from her warm bed, the ancient Alicorn draped a blanket around her broad shoulders, and flicking her stiff wings slightly, she shuffled slowly towards the far end of the room, with the slightest hint of a limp shaking the fringes of her flowing pastel mane.

"Sometimes," she mused quietly, "sometimes I think I just might be getting old..." She smiled to herself at the thought, stretching the stiff sinew along her withers. Before Luna had come back, there was no knowing who would ever be able to take over once she had stayed too long... of course, there was her young protege, but now...

Another shiver. Celestia had been uneasy for some time... and yes, the Hoofington Post *had* been writing some nastiness about the administration, some scandalous twaddle about misappropriated farm subsidies or something, but this was nothing new. Ever since her sister had returned

there was always somepony or another who just couldn't accept it without raising hay.

A spark flew off the tip of her long slender horn, landing in the fresh kindling of the fireplace by the bay at the far corner of the room. She frowned, and walking over to the window, felt a burst of warm air rush over her as the fire ignited.

Setting her large head against the window frame, she admired the starry skies above her magnificent kingdom. She had missed Luna's nights so very much. There had always been a certain melancholic mischief to her sister's work, the way the stars played wistfully upon the wispy clouds that hung so very high in the sky, painting soft contrasts onto the deepest purples of the endless void... it was something Celestia could never quite duplicate. Her eyes slowly touched on each end of the horizon, hovering for a time on the one light in Ponyville, knowing that her beloved student would, of course, still be up at this hour, pouring over one book or another. She smiled softly. Her gaze shifted onward, as she took in the pristine peace of it all, this world that she had helped to create... It had always filled her with pride, that such a beautiful land was hers, what her dedication and hard work had been able to provide for her ponies; and on nights like this, the sacrifices all seemed worth it. One thousand years seemed worth it... *Equestria was worth it*, she thought.

Lost in the beauty of the full moon's night, as Celestia gazed out over the stillness, something changed in her, something subtle. An eerie emptiness crept over her mind, as the nightingale's cries grew more urgent, and unsettling. Her eyes widened as her horn began to glow...

CRACK

Celestia doubled over in pain as her hind legs flew out from beneath her, her large frame crashing heavily upon the marble...

CRACK

Again, she recoiled, instinctively trying to will the pain away, tears flowing now, rushing down the side of her face, pooling with... with something red on the...

Celestia tried to cry out, but her voice had left her... she tried to get up, but her body would no longer cooperate... she heard a soft rustling behind her, moving with steady deliberation ever closer, ever nearer. Calling upon the last of her energies, she turned her head slowly towards the door, "*who...dares...*" she whispered hoarsely through the pain...

And then she stopped, and the last traces of anger fled her mien, replaced by the darkest sadness she would ever know...

"...*you...*" she exhaled, with the last of her strength....

There was a blinding flash of light...and then nothing at all, as a shadow slipped past the door and out into the world beyond that room...

Celestia was dead...

A Tangled Web

Vol. I: The Fall

*ancient memories of pony lore
dashed upon the rocky shore
this was a place I'd been before
in tales my fathers tell no more*

*darkness burdens ev'ry dream
as prophets toil endlessly
unseen forces, ceaseless teem
these things are closer than they seem*

Chapter One

Burning Night

A deep haze engulfed the world. There was no sound save a single piercing tone, no vision save for blurred remnants of something oddly familiar, no sensation save burdensome heat. There, rapt against the intrusive fog, a deep velvet unicorn lay silent, unable to speak, unable to move.

The universe swirled around her, cracking and fizzling, nearly singeing her pelt with each new turn. From the mist, strange shapes began to emerge, verging on symbolism, something that she almost knew, before vanishing back into formless void. Her eyes began to sag, melting into the dry heat as it became increasingly oppressive. Existence seemed to pulse and wheel, and every synapse in her body screamed against the pain. She tried to open her mouth to cry for help, but she choked on the fire that clawed down her throat.

Brilliance fading to dulled blacks and grays, the unicorn struggled impotently against the veiled bonds that controlled her, seeking vainly one last gulp of air, one last moment of consciousness. As her mind began to slip silently from this new reality, she could almost see the walls of her library, twisting and burning in the vapor; and a strange face floating just beyond her sight, an after image of a world she had once known. Somewhere outside this place, she thought she might have heard a soft voice, muted, cold, calling her name...

Twilight...

Twilight...

“*Twiiii*..LIGHT! Oh horse-feathers, Dash, will you clear this? TWILIGHT SPARKLE! Can you hear me?”

“Apple...jack? Wha...?” Twilight groaned, pushing the words through her teeth.

“Oh thank Celestia, it’s okay sugarcube, I need you to concentrate now, we have GOT to get you outta here... DASH!!”

Straining to see through the red stains that coated her vision, Twilight feebly struggled with the weight that constricted her movements.

“What... what’s happening?”

“I don’t rightly know, Twi,” the orange earthpony grunted, her forehooves flailing against some unseen force, “but right now, I need yer help.”

Grasping what small comprehension she could, the unicorn focused her magic on the offending burden, as a dim light flitted across her horn...

“NOW, DASH, GO!”

A surge of heat, a murderous crash, and all was dark once more...

Rarity’s mind was racing. Fast asleep, the alabaster unicorn had awoken first to what she’d imagined was hail, before the panicked cries had risen to a fevers pitch, and the humid summer’s eve had run hot with chaos.

Trotting cautiously down what remained of the cobbled streets of Ponyville, Rarity hung now to the shadows, unsure of what steps were next to take. She’d already stopped at the town’s library, but it had been flattened. Sugar Cube Corner was naught but rubble, and nothing remained of the Town Hall but a foundation. She was getting desperate, as the chances of finding anypony left alive were growing slimmer by the minute. Anypony she could trust...

Rounding another corner, Rarity quickly slipped back into the shadows, as two hooded ponies stood not ten feet from what had once been the old Quills & Sofas. They seemed to be arguing, but about what was not clear. She was too far to hear exactly what was being said, but the larger of the pair seemed intent on imparting a sense of urgency upon the smaller. The

longer she watched, the more familiar the smaller one looked, a light blue coat peeking from under her hood, but she couldn't quite...

"HI!"

Rarity gasped audibly as her world became quite suddenly pink.

"Rarity! Oh my goodness! I was starting to get worried! Well, not worried as much as alone, but after what's happened tonight, I don't know anypony I'd rather see than a friend! And you're ok!"

"Pinkie PIE!" Rarity hissed, slamming a hoof into the mouth of the pink pony, "Shush for a minute!" She turned back towards the old shop, but the two ponies were gone. Cursing softly, she turned again towards Pinkie. "I'm glad to see you as well. Did the cakes..."

Pinkie Pie's face fell. "Mr. Cake broke his leg, but they got him out ok... they took him out to the Everfree Forest, but I... stayed behind to see if I could find anypony else." Her face brightened a bit. "And now I found you!" she smiled. "Where *is* everypony else, anyway?"

"Well, Applejack has been rounding up survivors, and supposedly they are all heading out to Appleloosa. I haven't heard from Rainbow Dash in a while, but I'd assume she's taking Twilight out to Nurse Tenderheart as well. As for Flutter...." Rarity paused. She couldn't think, she could scarcely breathe. "Pinkie pie," her voice trembled. "Darling... hav..have *you* seen Fluttershy?"

Pinkie said nothing...

"*Fluttershy!*" Rarity wheeled back and sprang into a gallop.

"Hey! Wait for me!" Pinkie replied, bounding close behind.

The first thing Twilight became aware of was the wet ground upon which she lay, and the soft crackle of something burning in the distance. Her body felt sluggish, and she lacked a will to move; but she quickly surmised that

the events of earlier that evening were no dream, as the acrid smell of rotting sulphur filled her nose with each breath.

Ticking down a mental list, she took note of each limb, and each joint, which all seemed to be in working order, if a bit sore. Slowly opening her eyes, a blue face gradually came into focus, as she found herself staring into the rosy gaze of Rainbow Dash.

“What’s with you and passing out today?” Dash quipped softly, a dark worry etched deeply into her proud visage, betraying the soft smile she tried desperately to present. “That’s twice now.”

“Where am I? What happened?” Twilight tried to right herself, but was met with a sharp ache that ripped across her torso.

Rainbow gently placed a hoof on her shoulder. “Easy now, that beam fell hard. A few inches to the north and...” she stopped herself, unable to finish the thought. “A..anyway, nothin’ I couldn’t handle.” She continued, puffing out her chest. “Applejack’s off helping everypony get out OK, so *you* don’t worry, just try’n rest.”

Twilight’s thoughts were flying, desperately reaching for some meaning to give the words she was hearing. *Applejack? Evacuation? Beam?*

“Rainbow Dash, what in the name of all things Celestial is going on?”

A dark sadness washed over Rainbow’s face as she scanned the horizon, dreading deeply what would come next. She was never very good with bad news, and as news went, this was *bad*. “Hold on...” she whispered, flicking her wings. “I’ll be right back”

Twilight stared into the inky blackness as the colorful trail of the Pegasus pony whisked past. As she lay there in silence, the mare did her best to put the pieces together, but the past several hours were awash in dark fog, and what small bits she could recall made no sense. A flash of light, fire, unfamiliar faces and a language she couldn’t place... nothing seemed to connect! In fact, the only thing the mare was sure of was that anything that could shake up Rainbow Dash like this...

A soft tug broke her concentration, as a winged shadow gently washed over her line of sight.

“Twilight, I...” Rainbow hesitated, staring at the wedged rock she had retrieved from the bottom of the hill. Shaking her mane slightly, the Pegasus carefully pulled Twilight up onto the flat side of the stone. “I’m sorry.”

Several minutes passed in silence, broken only by the cracks and whistles that crawled softly through the night air, mingled with the occasional flutter of feathery wings. Twilight took in the scene with quiet shock.

“Rainbow Dash,” Twilight rasped, finally, “what... exactly am I looking at?”

“This...” Rainbow sighed deeply, “was Ponyville.”

“Was...” Twilight breathed, carefully piecing the images together. “Was this a natural disaster? Was it an earthquake... a volcano?”

Dash stared out over the wreckage, and with an outstretched hoof, pointed slowly towards the capital city of Canterlot.

“It’s a disaster, Twilight, but there’s nothin natural about it...”

A sharp scream pierced the air, and for a moment Twilight couldn’t place herself. It was only after her aching chest reasserted its presence that she realized the scream had come from her; and that in the process she’d leaped several feet in the air. Her hackles now at full attention, she pushed passed the pain, limping forward, toward the castled city.

“WHAT... How... why...” Twilight knelt down at the edge of the hilltop. “Where are the princesses? *How could this happen?*” her voice cracked, as at last tears began to form at the edges of her face. “Where is everypony? Where.. oh Celestia, where’s SPIKE?” she slammed a hoof deeply into the ashen loam, struggling to stand. “Sp... Spike is in Canterlot, he’s in... THAT!”

Rainbow Dash stared mindlessly at the blackened spires of the castle. She knew that Twilight wouldn’t take this lying down, but knowing what she

already knew was making this far more difficult than it would have been otherwise.

“Twi...it’s not just Canterlot. Fillydelphia, Stalliongrad, Cloudsdale. Equestria is burning, Twilight. And if you’re up, we’re movin’. Let’s GO!”

“Go *where*, Rainbow Dash?” Twilight spat the words angrily. “Unless it’s towards that castle, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Twilight, you’re in no condition to fight. You’re in no condition to THINK! Nurse Tenderheart has got some kinda hospital set up in the Everfree Forest, the fires haven’t hit there yet. We gotta get you checked out, and I gotta get back to Sweet Apple Acres to help AJ. If Spike’s with the Princess, he’ll be fine. *We’ll* be fine. If you’re up, let’s move!”

Twilight turned tail, staring down the Pegasus. She knew Rainbow Dash was right, she was in no condition to do anything. Pushing back her anger, she consented, and the pair trotted carefully down the far side of the hill, towards the Everfree Forest. Still, she found herself at a loss. Of all the things that were there, something wasn’t. Realization setting in, she turned towards the sky.

Something *was* missing, something very important.

“Rainbow,” Twilight hoarsed, “where’s the moon?”

Dash looked back sadly, shook her mane, and started towards the forest; as behind them, a new cloud of ominous crimson belched forth from the battlements of the beleaguered castle.

Approaching the edge of the Everfree Forest, a sharp chill descended harshly, and with it an eerie stillness. Slowing to a brisk trot, Rarity scanned the darkness, surveying the charred grounds, searching for something recognizable.

“FLUTTERSHY!” cried Pinkie Pie, to no particular direction.

“Hush!” scolded Rarity, “honestly darling, have you no tact? Heaven only knows what could be out here, what with the ...strangeness... of this night...” turning about, she added flatly, “heaven only knows where **here** is for that matter...”

The Everfree Forest had never been of particular interest to Rarity. Not much in the way of gems, and what was there could hardly be worth the trouble one would have to endure to reach them, let alone the muck and drear that made its home in these wild woods. Fluttershy, on the other hand, was another story completely, and being her best friend, it was more than disconcerting that she couldn’t find her way.

“Besides, if we can find that bridge, we should be able t...” A sharp noise cut her short. Cracks and whistles sung out in the distance, followed by low, distinct rumbles. Rarity’s eyes grew wide, as the dark sky slowly inched closer to a malevolent shade of orange.

“Rarity...” Pinkie whimpered, a tremor slowly creeping into her voice, “my tail...”

A shared glance was all it took. Smoldering flecks of molten rock pelted the landscape as the two ponies bolted towards the treeline, dodging what bits they could. Rarity yelped as a bit of ember landed on her flank, and she stumbled forward.

“RARITY!” shouted Pinkie, skidding to a halt. “COME ON, HURRY!” The pink earthpony doubled back, and dipping her head, bolstered the velvet-maned unicorn as they picked the gallop up once more, narrowly avoiding a large chunk of char that fell from the night.

Debris was falling more heavily now, singed leaves and branches flying out of the forest. Ducking into an opening, they took cover under a thick stone wedged into the soft ground. Panting heavily, neither spoke as the firestorm rained down around them. Sharp points of light sparked and fizzled like fireworks, and small explosions shook the ground beneath their hooves. Angry shades of red and yellow swirled in the air. Rarity couldn’t help but think that under different circumstances, it would make for a beautiful

display. Pinkie just stared off into the distance, narrow pupils cringing at each concussive blast. Just as quickly as it had started, the bedlam slowed, and ceased.

The two ponies remained flat against the ground a moment, neither wishing to reengage the wrath of the fiery onslaught.

Rarity was the first to stir. "Is it... is it over?" she whimpered hopefully. Pinkie blinked a few times, then nodded.

Cautiously peeking her head out from beneath the barrier, she surveyed the skies. Bright bolts of red and yellow, followed by trails of fire streaked silently overhead, towards the center of town, or what remained of it.

"Come on.." coughed Rarity, clearing her throat.... "let's keep moving.

"MOVE'M OUT!" Applejack bellowed, hoisting the last bushel of apples atop the cart. Her hooves were bucked raw, but in just a few short hours the last apple had been released and the caravan was moving. Slowly. Too slowly for her tastes. "I swear, Mac, if these ponies were any slower..."

"Eeyup," Big Macintosh sighed, plaintively chewing a stalk of hay, "They're slow cuz they're tired. Ain't never seen this farm bucked this quick, even **if** it ain't applebuck season. I reckon you know somethin' about bein overworked, don'tcha sis?"

"Now just a minute there Mac!" Applejack started with a grin, "Don't you go bringin' that back up. 'Sides, we had half the town workin' for six hours, an' the last of 'em just started west. We gon' need these supplies time we get to Appleloosa... If'n there is an Appleloosa..."

The siblings rested by the barn, watching the final carts pass out of sight. Even in the pitch of night, the sight of all those apple trees sitting there empty... It just didn't feel right.

“Whelp,” crooned Macintosh, “I guess it’s ‘bout time we take up the slack. They’ll be watin’ for us.”

“Yeah...” Applejack sighed, shooting Macintosh a furtive glance. “Y...you go on ahead, my hooves are still a bit raw. I’ll catch up with y’all in a bit, y’hear?”

Eyeing his younger sister with some suspicion, Big Macintosh nodded, and after a moments lingering, galloped hard into the darkness. Finding herself alone, Applejack turned towards the barn, lit dimly by the fires burning in town, her face bearing an angry glow .

“T’aint fair...” she growled. “T’aint fair, and you know it. Y’work yerself to the bone, fight hoof and nail... You build it from the ground up!” Foaming at the bars, she spat angrily at the ground. Rearing back, she bucked the barn door.

“You work for yer kin!”

BUCK

“You work for yer TOWN!”

BUCK

“You work for everypony BUT YERSELF!” Seething, Applejack reared back, and bucked the barn door clean off. Sinking to her knees, the long built tears streamed effortlessly down her tired face. “T’aint right,” she sobbed in the darkness. “T’aint right at all...”

Several minutes passed. For all Applejack knew, hours might have passed. It hadn’t been just her dream, this farm. Mind, it had been in the family as long as she knew. Abandoning her home just didn’t sit right. Her sobs slackening, she started to stand, turning back towards the orchards, which seemed oddly visible in the dead of night. A pale orange glow shone heavily upon the bare branches, growing brighter, and more like...

“Horse-apples...”

Bolting out towards the caravan, brimstone began to tumble aimlessly out of the skies, now lit up against the darkness like a sunrise. Applejack dodged, left and right, sprinting away from the farm. Turning to look, a massive boulder slammed into the orchard, sending a plume of debris impossibly high into the firelit sky, while the fires spread out to her front. Turning tail, she sprinted back towards ponyville, only to find herself trapped by the flames.

Sensing she was boxed in, the orange earthpony ran back towards the barn, and threw open the cellar door, leading her into the underground. The old hatch slammed shut behind her, as with a sickening crunch, the barn collapsed in on itself, and onto the cellar door.

The pair trotted on in silence, periodically shaking the soot from their manes. Rarity had initially been hopeful that her friends cottage would have been untouched, as far as it was from the town proper, but that hope was all but dashed at this point. They'd been wandering like this for far too long, and her last nerve was beginning to fray. Her mind kept running over the events of that evening. If she'd been quicker to realize what was happening... If she'd only come out here sooner... Sure, the town needed her, and she'd helped with the evacuation efforts, but her best friend needed her as well, and now she couldn't pick her way through the forest to find the cottage???

"Ugh..." Rarity grunted in frustration, "this is hopeless!" She reared back and bucked the nearest tree. Instantly realizing her error, she narrowly escaped the falling ash and branches that tumbled down, landing with a sharp sob on the soot that had caked heavily upon the peaty forest floor.

"It'll be alright, you'll see..." Pinkie tried to sound hopeful, but she was having her own issues. Since the onslaught had begun, a terror had begun to creep into her mind, and with it, she could all but hear Pinkamena whispering her dark mantras. She shook those thoughts from her head. "We just need to keep looking." Several paces later she stopped, adding "It's not your fault, you know. You can't be everything to everypony, and

with what's happened tonight, with what's happening right now, we're doing the best we can... all of us."

"Thank you, darling," Rarity sighed, feeling a bit guilty, "I hate that you have to see me like this, I just can't stand the thought of Fluttershy being alone right now. The poor thing must be terrified." She couldn't, or wouldn't, let herself begin to consider the alternative.

The two stood in an uncomfortable silence, listening closely to the patter of the falling ash as it softly blunted the sharper edges of the world like fresh snow. Over the din of the weary wood, a muted mewl rose somewhere beyond the brush.

"Do you hear that?" Rarity whispered. "It sounds like..."

"...Singing?" Pinkie finished the thought.

Bounding through the brambles, they quickly came upon a clearing at the edge of the forest. At the far end, they finally spotted the shattered remains of Fluttershy's cottage. By the looks of it, the fires had done their damage when the first wave had soared through. Pushing down the darker thoughts in her mind, Rarity raced onwards, towards the felled structure. The fires sweeping the skies provided a harsh light, revealing hastily opened cages crushed and melted, and stray pieces of wood strewn far across the field. The chicken coop was completely flattened, and bits of wire and fencing protruded dangerously from the softened grounds.

Rounding the bend towards the forest, they spied a hunched figure squatting by the treeline. Rarity turned full gallop, with Pinkie springing close at hand. Drawing nearer, the subtle shape of their friend materialized, shades of pink and yellow dotted with dark patches of grey and white.

A gallop slowed to a canter, to a trot... and as the image sank in, Rarity's heart crept into her throat... Pinkie slunk to her knees....

Fluttershy rocked slowly on her hind hooves, shivering weakly as a pile of ash collected on her mane and shoulders. Red-ringed eyes staring blankly through the world, her face swollen with tears, she gently clutched a small, white, lifeless rabbit...

and through her sobs, she sang...

"hush now..quiet..now....."

+ + * + * + * + * + * + * + * + * + * + * + * + * + * + * +

The Fall

*A lie told once can go unmarked,
told twice or thrice unseen.
While countless fictions foul minds
with one fell truth; they are wiped clean.*

Chapter Two

Collapse

Twilight had never been one for hospitals. Sanitary, cold, they never seemed to have any life to them. Even in the darkness of this cave, the idea of being poked and prodded, even with magic, was unsettling at best.

“Now this will only hurt for a moment,” cooed Nurse Tenderheart, softly swabbing Twilight’s flank with wet cotton.

“EYOWCH!” cried Twilight, flinching violently.

“Uh, Twi... Y’know she hasn’t stuck you yet, right?” Rainbow Dash noted with a giggle.

A blush rose to Twilight’s cheeks, as she began to relax. *Millennia of magical medicine*, she thought to herself, *the cure for every major disease known to pony-kind, and yet the only way we can draw a bit of blood... is with needles*. She cringed as she felt the prick, and feeling a bit woozy, turned back towards nurse Tenderheart.

“All done,” Tenderheart sighed, the sample she’d taken spinning rapidly above her. “And you are good to go!”

“She’ll be OK, nurse?” Rainbow asked.

“Couple of bruised ribs, but no sign of infection. You take it easy, young lady, you’ll be fine.”

“Thank you, nurse,” Twilight sighed, allowing herself to relax as an orderly began to wrap a brace around her chest, “and thank you, Rainbow. You saved my life back there. I’m sorry I was so...”

“Don’t mention it,” Rainbow spat, a bit more quickly than she might’ve liked. “It was nothin’, really. Rough night, all around. If you’re gonna be OK, I really gotta get back to AJ, check on evac, y’know...”

“I understand,” Twilight smiled softly. “You go, I’m in good hooves here.”

Issuing a small salute, Rainbow Dash turned tail and trotted towards the mouth of the cave. A pre-flight sniff, and a few bars of rainbow trailed behind her as she gave a mighty flap of her wings.

Twilight lay silently on the make-shift cot, staring through the roof of the peaty cave. She’d recognized it instantly when she arrived, as it had once been the home of a very greedy dragon, and a very scary night. Shifting her thoughts from Spike, she began to contemplate the events that brought her to this place. The smoldering ruins of Canterlot, the strange visions in the smoke of her library... there were so many puzzle pieces. Seeing discretion as the better part of valour, Twilight noted with a deep yawn that perhaps she’d be better fit to consider these things with a bit of rest...

.....

“Twilight,” Nurse Redheart whispered urgently. “Twilight, sweetie, I’m sorry to wake you, but there’s something you need to see.”

“gghgh...wha?” Twilight gurgled, her head swimming a bit. “How long was I out?”

“Only about an hour... as I said, I’m sorry to disturb your rest, but we...we’ve got a bit of a situation.”

Slowly returning to her senses, Twilight noted that the cave had gone eerily hushed, no orderlies bustling, no carts clattering. Lifting her head from the cot, she saw a herd of ponies dumbstruck, staring reverently towards the back of the cave. Tenderly rising to her hooves, she checked her balance, and began to limp softly behind Nurse Redheart.

“She just wandered in, like it was nothing!” Redheart explained. “Honestly it took us a moment to realize who it was, and by the time we did, she’d just... passed out!”

“Who exactly are we talking about, nurse?” Twilight asked dryly. “If it’s so important, why...” Twilight stopped cold. Before her lay an unconscious Alicorn, velvet as the night, bearing a cutie mark that resembled a crescent moon...

“Princess Luna?”

For all the weirdness this evening had brought, Rainbow Dash felt, if only for a moment, a bit more normal. Soaring high above the Everfree Forest, she sighed contentedly, finally able to stretch her wings. It wasn’t like she didn’t *want* to help Twilight, it was just... a bit uncomfortable, all that emotional stuff; up here, though, everything was much clearer. Darting and wheeling through the night sky, she felt as though she could see all of Equestria, all her problems laid bare.

Settling down a bit, she dared fly a bit closer to the trees, scanning the forest floor. She’d flown this route before, many times, but lit as it was by the various flames, it seemed... off. There was a strange sense of movement on the ground, like rats scurrying about when you flick on the lights. Dash thought it might just be the heat playing tricks on her eyes, and squinting against the wind, it was almost as though bits of the forest were getting closer.

Yelping loudly as a bolt of flame whisked past her right ear, Rainbow dipped sharply, cutting one wing to a heavy yaw. She threw both wings out harshly, shedding speed, and flapped to a steady hover. Scanning the forest floor, several points of light sped towards her new position, and she quickly set into a dive. Soaring past sharp spears of flame, she picked up, pulling out just below the canopy.

Dodging trees, she did her best to hide her trail, but each time she changed direction, a new volley of flaming arrows seemed to renew their pursuit.

Diving further into the brush, a hot streak of pain ripped across her left flank. Cursing as she lost altitude, she pulled out once more, alighting softly on a thick branch of one of the larger trees in the canopy.

The throbbing in her leg subsiding, Rainbow Dash sat perched near a small knot of branches. Absentmindedly rubbing her wounded leg, her ears pricked sharply for any hint of movement.

Quiet. Short of the crackles and light mist that had begun to settle on the leaves, she could scarcely hear a sound. Heaving a sigh, she laid her back against the tree.

“Come on, Rainbow, *think!*” Rainbow Dash whispered softly, catching her breath. From this vantage point, she could see the forest floor spread wide beneath her, the various passages seemingly open. “But if I can see them, so can they.” *Whoever they are...* she thought to herself. A loud **THUNK** broke her concentration, and slowly twisting her head, she saw a flaming arrow not two inches from her face, stuck deeply into the trunk of the old growth.

“No more thinking, *MOVE!*” She exclaimed, springing from the branch. Soaring straight into the sky, Rainbow whipped back around, and spotting the edge of the forest, made a straight shot of it, as a new volley of fiery arrows and darts peppered the sky.

The long silence ended with a clamor of activity, as a new mass of injured ponies burst into the cave, and the nursing staff rushed back to work. Standing alone, Twilight eyed the Princess carefully, studying her features. Her breathing seemed normal, her eyes quite still, if closed. She didn’t appear to be sleeping, she just... wasn’t all there. Twilight moved to shift the hair out of the Regent’s face when a familiar voice stole her concentration.

“Good heavens, Twilight, what happened to your... well, everything?”

“Rarity!” Twilight said, lifting her good hoof in embrace, “Thank goodness you’re ok!” Stepping back, she looked sheepishly at the stains that still marked her fetlocks. “I... suppose nearly getting crushed by a tree doesn’t

exactly suit me,” she continued with a sly grin, “and beige really isn’t my color.”

“I should think not darling, though I suppose in a pinch...” Rarity hesitated, glancing past Twilight at the felled Princess. “Is that...?”

“That’s her, alright...” Twilight said with a shrug. “No idea how she got here. The nurses say her vital signs are normal, they can’t explain why she won’t wake up.”

“Oh my, that is truly bizarre,” said Rarity, dropping to a whisper, “it’s not the only bit of strangeness I’ve come across this evening...”

“Oh?”

“Well, back in ponyville before Pinkie very nearly took me down, I happened upon two very suspicious ponies, one of whom I could have *sworn* looked just like....”

“Wait, *Pinkie*?” Twilight interrupted, “Is she with you? Is she alright?”

Grimacing lightly, Rarity was for a moment taken aback. “Y..yes, she is, and Fluttershy as well...” Sliding back onto her haunches, she took a breath. “There’s... been a...”

“Rarity,” Twilight started, “what happened?”

As Rarity began to tell the story of how they found Fluttershy, Twilight’s throat began to swell. Knowing how sensitive the demure little pony was already, she couldn’t imagine what a shock like this would do to her, on top of everything else that had happened. Unsure of what to say, the two stood in uncomfortable silence. Around them, the make-shift hospital moved mechanically, seemingly unaware of the unfairness of it all.

“Twilight,” Rarity said, breaking the lull, “We’re going to bu...”

A stir rose from the front of the cave, and above it all, a flurry of words rang out.

“CANTERLOT! PRINCESS, run, RUN! fall, broken, HELP!”

“SPIKE!” Twilight screamed, galloping to the source of the commotion, nearly slamming the baby dragon into the dirt with a relieved hug. “Spike, you’re ok!”

Catching his breath, the purple dragon returned the hug, similarly relieved, and stepped back to see the entire cave staring him down. He gulped lightly.

“I’m OK, Twilight, but *we’re* not.”

Twilight stared at him, confusion washing over her face. “What do you mean, Spike? What’s going on, where’s the Princess?”

A wave of concurrence rose from the crowd, all wondering the same thing. Spike began to shake a bit, and tears began to form. Closing his eyes, he looked away from the expectant ponies, and clearing his throat, spoke.

In the cellar of what used to be Sweet Apple Acres, Applejack gimped wearily across the floor, nearly an hour of bucking the wrought iron doors had taken their toll. Slumping in the far corner, she rested her head against the footlocker that the caravan had left behind. *Too heavy*, Mac had said. She supposed he was right; but filled as it was with so many memories, it was all she had at the moment.

Fiddling with the lock, AJ deftly opened the chest, taking out a few photographs. They were aged, but they told a story. A story of triumph, of disaster, of feast and famine. It was her story; but so too was it the story of her family, and her kin. A grainy picture of Granny Smith, *a very young Granny*, she chuckled to herself, locked in a dance with her Grandpa Golden, holding their first daughter: Sweet Apple. Wiping a tear that had wet the surface of the old picture, she pulled out another memory. Lost in time, a sharp scratching at the cellar door snapped her back to reality.

“AJ, you in there?”

“Yeah, I’m here, Rainbow, s’t that you?”

“No, it’s Pinkie Pie...”

“...Pinkie? Well, Run and get some help, I’m kinda stuck down here...”

Applejack heard a thud, followed by a word she was sure Pinkie would never use. “Are you sure you ain’t Rainbow Dash?” She inquired.

...

“Yes, AJ, it’s me, Rainbow...”

“Well why didn’t you say so?”

“*AJ, I swear...* look, I cleared the door, but I can’t get the lock unstuck, it’s busted or something. You got anything down there you could brace it with?”

Glancing around the dimly lit cellar, she couldn’t see anything that sturdy, unless... “Dash, you said the door is clear?” Applejack shouted, pulling the hope chest up against the metal hatch.

“Yeah, but...”

“Stand back!” AJ roared, rearing up and bucking down on the end of the chest. Slamming open, the chest flew out the now open entryway, crashing into the ground several meters away, the contents scattered over the distance.

Bursting out into the open, Applejack took a deep breath of air, and looking about, called to her friend.

“Dash... Where’dja...go?”

“I’m right here,” came the muffled reply, under a pile of old clothes and picture books.

“Ah,” Applejack chuckled, “Sorry ‘bout that...”

“No problem,” Dash replied dryly, rising to her hooves, “After what it took to get here, I guess some old cloth is the least of m...”

“Land sakes, girl, what happened to you?”

“I’m fine, I’ll tell you on the way, but right now we’ve got to get back to the Everfree Forest and figure out what we’re gonna do about all this...”

“Sorry, Rainbow, but the only way I’m headin’ is thata’way.”

“Out west?” said Rainbow, incredulous. “AJ, come on, our friends are hurt, I still don’t know where half of them are, and they need our help. I need your help. I came out here to find you and help with gettin’ everypony else out, but that’s done and we gotta go. NOW.”

“Rainbow, I done told you, I gotta go get back with my kin.” I don’t have time t’...”

“Time to what? Time to help us fix this mess? Time to help your friends?”

Applejack sighed. “Look. I appreciate you comin’ t’get me. I understand that we might be able to help, but I gotta look after my family. You know they come first.” She sniffed the air, looking away. “They always come first.”

Frustrated, Rainbow Dash kicked the pile of clothes that once lay atop her. Looking a bit more closely, she saw something glittering in the darkness, seeming to have it’s own light.

“Then don’t do it for our friends, AJ. Don’t do it for me, heck, don’t even do it for your family.” Reaching into the pile, she picked up a jeweled necklace, bearing a large red apple, and tossed it at AJ’s hooves. “We got a duty, Applejack. Not to ourselves, not to our friends. To Equestria. To Celestia.”

Applejack sighed heavily. “Look, I...”

“AJ, Whatever this is, this insanity, it’s got Twilight and her egghead magic written all over it. She needs you... She needs all of us.”

AJ stared down at the necklace. The element of honesty; her element. Padding it softly, she lifted the pendant out of the dirt. It pulsed lightly in her

hoof, the faint glow calling to her. Applejack closed her eyes, and a soft tear slipped the breach, rolling down her cheeks and wetting the dirt below.

"I reckon you're right, Dash," She sighed wearily, turning back towards Rainbow, "but you promise me, right here, right now, that as soon as we can, we head out to Appleloosa to check on everypony?"

Rainbow held up a hoof, and hocked a wad of spit on it, holding it out with a sly grin. "As soon as we can, sister."

Returning the spit-shake, AJ cracked a smile. "Let's do this."

Twilight's ears rung with a deafening tone; her sight blurred and dizzy, she fell back awkwardly onto her haunches. Spike's voice ran through her mind in rapid repetition, as the world narrowed to a singular point of light.

"...*dead*..." he had said. Celestia, bringer of the sun, Goddess of an empire....Her personal friend and mentor... was dead.

She wasn't sure what one was supposed to feel at a moment like this, but she was entirely sure she was doing it wrong. There was no sadness, no anger, no sickening sense of... anything. She was numb, from head to toe, empty.

Around her, the gasps and cries had fallen to a simmer. The nurses slowly returned to their duties, but most ponies just lay in shock.

Rising to her hooves, Twilight wandered aimlessly down rows of spent ponies, some with broken limbs, others with broken ribs- all with broken hearts. Soft sobs still echoed through the damp corners of the cave. Some painful, most mournful, the pitiful sounds lingered heavily on the peaty walls. The soft clatter of medical routine began to return as Rarity slowly approached her.

"Twilight..." Rarity whispered softly, "I... I truly have no words. I know how close..."

"Don't." Twilight rasped, a subtle anger edging her words, more than she'd have liked. "I... Thank you, Rarity" she sighed, "I just don't think I'll be of any use right now."

Rarity took a step back. She had been unsure of how to approach Twilight, but then she wasn't sure of anything anymore. No pony was. She pressed on, "I understand darling, though I was wondering if you'd be up to helping us bury Angel. It... would mean the world to the poor dear, I'm sure."

Twilight stared blankly past Rarity for a moment, then nodded to no pony in particular. Trotting towards the entrance of the cave, the familiar scent of peat and decay greeted them as they stepped out into the forest. Gazing towards the skies, Rarity noted that the firestorm had all but ceased, for now, but she was anxious to get on with it. Much as she wanted to be there for her friend, she knew this night was far from over.

Stopping at the edge of a small hole, Rarity nodded towards Spike, who reverently laid the small rabbit neatly at the bottom of the grave. Sobbing softly, Fluttershy gently pushed a bit of dirt over Angel, as Pinkie tamped it down into a neat mound.

Hushed, the group stood silent for a moment, as Fluttershy knelt at the foot of the grave, periodically rubbing her eyes. Soft sniffles circled around, and Spike lightly scuffed his feet against the damp soil. Rarity coughed lightly, and Fluttershy, peering up at her friends, ambled slowly to her hooves. With tears in her voice, she began to speak.

"Um... th..thank you all." Fluttershy croaked weakly, "I... um... I've lost little friends before, working with creatures often comes with that... problem. But...Angel was different. He..." Fluttershy faltered. New tears rose unbidden to her cheeks as she tried to continue... "He was my friend when no pony came out to the cottage... he... was my first... friend..." Fluttershy collapsed under the weight of the task she was performing. Rarity and Pinkie Pie rushed quickly to her side, leaving Twilight alone at the far corner of the grave.

Trotting slowly around the resting site, she nuzzled Fluttershy's cheek, softly whispering words of comfort. "Rarity, I...I'm going to go check on the

Princess, will you all be alright out here for a bit?" Rarity nodded solemnly, brushing a gentle hoof down Fluttershy's mane.

Leaving her friends at the graveside, Twilight limped towards the back of the cave. The initial shock had begun to wear down, but the numbness remained; it was all that seemed to remain. She'd try to cry, but no tears would come, be angry but no ire. Frustrated, she sat with a huff at the back of the cave, facing away from the felled Princess. Staring blankly towards the forest, she could see Pinkie and the others helping Fluttershy to her hooves, as they began to slowly trot inside.

“Well, Princess, I’m lost.” Twilight started. “Your sister is gone, Canterlot is in ruins, my friends are in pain, and I don’t know how to help any of them. Honestly, how could things get any wors...”

Interrupted by a sharp rustle behind her, she turned to investigate. Princess Luna stood looming against the shadows of the cave. Her eyes were impossibly wide, and moist with tears, dark pupils narrowed to a fine point. Her horn began to glow white with heat, as energetic motes of light sparked off in every direction. As the two ponies blinked out of existence, a single sentence lingered in the ether...

"I'm not a Princess," said Luna.

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