

Knights of Equestria And Equestrian Knights: The Two Powers

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Knights of Equestria

Chapter 1

The Night the Sky Burned

The moon shone brilliantly, thought Twilight Sparkle, sitting atop the balcony of her library home. Night had fallen on Ponyville and the rest of Equestria some hours ago, the blazing sun replaced by a full moon and countless stars, little pinpricks of light in a sea of deep blues, purples, and blacks. A faint wind rustled the leaves of her home, and if Twilight listened hard enough she could just make out a faint noise in the air; the combined sound of sleeping of all of Ponyville. Except for her, of course.

A shooting star shot across the sky, and another content sigh left Twilight. She loved looking up at the sky on nights like this, clear and cloudless. It soothed an ache in her heart of hearts that she never felt during the day, but at night, when she was alone, it would draw her out to the heavens above. She had tried to share the experience on many occasions with her friends, but none really seemed to appreciate it as much as her, except possibly Rarity. Twilight giggled as a particular memory of Rarity comparing the stars to diamonds came to her mind. What a beautiful pony...

Another shooting star passed through the night sky. And then another, and then a whole shower began. Twilight watched it go for several seconds, before turning around to head back in. She had a long day tomorrow to rest up for; she remembered that Rainbow Dash wanted her to-

"Twiiiiiiight..."

Twilight stopped at the sound of her name and turned back around. She looked this way and that, searching for the source of that unfamiliar voice.

"Hello? Is anypony there?" She took a few steps back out onto the balcony, away from the doors in. With each step she took they slid a bit further closed. "Is anypony out here?"

After a few seconds passed, filled with no sounds but the rustling of the leaves in the wind and her own beating heart, Twilight chalked the mysterious voice up to her imagination and turned to head back inside. It was late, she reasoned. Her mind, tired from a long day with her friends and a late night studying, was playing tracks on her, she reasoned. There was no reason for the flutter in her stomach and the shiver up her spine, she reasoned. Twilight Sparkle, always reasoning.

Before she could take a single full step however, something out of the corner of Twilight Sparkle's eye caught her attention. As she turned to look at it, the balcony door slid fully closed.

Rainbow Dash wasn't sure what had woken her up first; the frantic knocking on her cloud home door or the terrified screams of Ponyville below. Her eyes shot open as she rolled out of bed, groaning as her tired body fought to catch up with her alert mind. She didn't know what could possibly be going on at such an hour, but if the sounds coming from outside were any indication...it wasn't good.

The rainbow-maned Pegasus Pony hurried as best she could to the front door, reaching it just as it was thrown open by a wide-eyed Ditzzy Doo. "Rainbow Dash, hurry! We need you, we need every Pegasus Pony!"

Rainbow Dash frowned and pushed past the grey Pegasus, only half-noticing in the back of her mind that something was casting her clouds a hot orange, and that the air was far hotter and drier than when she had gone to bed. "What's going on that it calls for waking me up? Ursa Minor attack, Hydra attack, Parasprite atta...what..."

Below her, Ponyville burned. Rainbow Dash watched in horrified silence as buildings burst into flames, seemingly at random, sending their inhabitants and any ponies nearby running for their lives. Other ponies rushed to and fro, desperately fighting to put out the raging inferno that was beginning to engulf the town. Earth Ponies pulled carts of water, from which

their Unicorn partners sprayed streams at high velocity to douse flames, while up above them Pegasi flew in with rainclouds, positioning them above the burning buildings and releasing the rain inside. From her vantage point, Rainbow could see that nearly a third of the town was in flames. They were all losing.

"Ditzy, come on!" Rainbow Dash sprang into the air with outstretched wings, catching an updraft from the flames below and zooming up and away. The grey Pegasus was not far behind her, quickly catching up at the pair rushed to where Dash could see the fires were worst.

"How did this happen?!"

Ditzy coughed as she flew through a cloud of smoke before answering. "No one knows! Just one moment everything was peaceful and quiet, and then flames and screams everywhere! And we can't seem to put it out, no matter how much water we use!"

"WHAT!?"

Ditzy nodded and flew closer to Dash. "One of the Unicorns, I heard them say they felt some kind of magic in the fire. Powerful magic."

Dash gritted her teeth as she swerved to avoid a plume of smoke, Ditzy following in her wake. "Dang it, then we need powerful magic! Ditzy, go get Twilight, get her to send a letter to the Princess! I'll go meet the Mayor and-

"

"MAMA! MAMAAAAA!"

Dash and Ditzy froze in mid-air, the mail mare's eyes widening in horror at the sound of the distant voice screaming. "Mu-Muffin!" Faster than Dash had ever seen her friend fly before Ditzy sped off to her home, leaving thunderous boom and a grey and yellow streak in her wake. Dash hovered in place in surprise for a moment, before putting on a burst of speed and following. In their wake, unnoticed by either pony, the flames were snuffed out.

Dash caught up to Ditzy to find the wall-eyed Pegasus circling above her two-story home. Immediately, Dash could see it was a lost cause, flames

eating away at it from the ground up, smoke pouring out from every window, and only the roof itself not burning a deadly orange.

"Muffin! Muffin, get to the roof, please!"

No answer came up to them from the building except smoke and ashes. Dash flew up to Ditzzy and placed a hoof onto her shoulder. "Ditzzy, I'm so, so sorry...but I don't think, well..."

Before Dash could finish Ditzzy whirled around and slapped her hoof away. She glared at Dash with wet, angry, FOCUSED eyes. "No! If, if she can't come out to me then I'll...I'll go in for her!"

"Ditzzy, no!" But Dash's cry was too late, as Ditzzy had already turned and with another boom rocketed straight through a wall into the building. Dash made to follow her, but stopped as hot smoke began to pour from the new opening. Before she could stop herself Dash breathed in a lungful and suddenly felt her insides burning. "Khhht, khhtaa!" Her limbs flailed, her wings beating in sudden terror as the world spun about her. She couldn't breathe! She couldn't breathe couldn't breathe couldn't breathe couldn't breathe...

Rainbow Dash collapsed down onto the hard-packed soil of the street, wings pinned beneath her as she was forced to stare up at stars rapidly disappearing behind a veil of smoke. Her chest rose and fell rapidly with no effect, the sharp rasping from her open mouth coming quieter and quieter, slower and slower. Her eyes filled with tears no one was around to wipe away.

The last sight Rainbow Dash saw before everything went dark was a grey and yellow streak erupting out the side of Ditzzy's home.

"Sweetie Belle, come back here this instant!"

Rarity stomped her hooves in agitation as she watched her little sister run off, away from the town fire station. Her gaze shot back from the little filly's dwindling form to the Earth Pony beside her, shooting the wild-maned doctor a pleading look. Doctor Whoof sighed and motioned her on. "Go on,

catch her." He motioned with a hoof to where the water cart he pulled was being refilled. "I'll get the lovely Lyra to help me with this."

The purple-maned Unicorn gave an appreciative smile, giving a quick nuzzle to the other pony before turning and taking off. Doctor Whoof sighed and shook his head, before returning back to his work. "Confound these ponies. So disorganized."

Rarity was humble enough to admit that she was not the most athletic pony, even by Unicorn standards. Her slim body was finely tuned for quick, accurate movements, elegance, and balance. She was not a speed freak like Rainbow Dash, or an endurance monster like Applejack. Even Twilight, the Unicorn from Canterlot, was better than her. This undeniable fact had been seared into her mind this evening, as she had been practically gangpressed into helping fight the fires raging through Ponyville. She was exhausted; so, so exhausted. At that moment Rarity knew the only reason she was even managing to keep her sister in sight was because of her longer legs.

"Sweetie Belle, I am ordering you! Stop...stop running!"

To Rarity's surprise, Sweetie Belle did. Before the little filly could say anything Rarity tackled her to the ground, pushing up a cloud of dust that momentarily obscured them. It settled to reveal Rarity on top, pinning Sweetie Belle to the ground. If one were listening close enough, they would hear the weak sobs coming from the elder sister. "Sweetie Belle, how could you run away from me like that? It's not safe! So...so much, I've lost so much tonight already! Don't make me lose you too!"

Sweetie Belle lay motionless beneath her bigger sister, her own eyes watering up as she really looked over Rarity for the first time that night. How the silvery-white fur had been colored an ugly grey from the ash; the unkempt mane, burned and crinkly at the edges from too-close brushes with flames; the simple blue shawl she wore, the only thing they had been able to salvage from...from...

"I'm sorry!" Sweetie Belle bawled. She pressed her face into Rarity's chest for comfort as the tears streamed from her eyes. "I didn't, I didn't think, I just needed to make sure Sc-Scootaloo was okay! I didn't mean to sc-scare you!"

Rarity wrapped her forelegs around Sweetie Belle, holding her close as she also began to cry. "I understand...neither of us want to lose any more tonight...oh Sweetie..." Rarity sniffled and forced back her tears, before looking down at her sister. "I know what we'll do. We, we'll go to where everyone is being evacuated, and we will find your friend there, safe and sound. Okay, Darling?"

Sweetie Belle sniffled and gave a weak nod. Rarity smiled a tired smile and helped her sister to her hooves, before gently leading her away from the spot of their brief confrontation.

Behind them, just yards away, the Carousel Boutique burned.

Applejack raced down the main street of Ponyville. Around her pairs of Unicorns and Earth Ponies fought hard to save their homes, their belongings, their loved ones. The stench of burning buildings, the heat of the flames, and the acrid taste of smoke that managed to filter through her makeshift mask of a wet bandana; it was as if somepony had dropped hell onto the town. For all anypony knew, maybe that was what had happened.

With every step Applejack felt the fear grow stronger, urging her to turn back, abandon her job and gallop back to Sweet Apple Acres. The wind was blowing just the right way; no ashes were sparks were going near the place. But Applejack pushed that fear down deep, to where it bothered her none, and pressed on. She had a job to do, and she would do it. She just had to find her friends.

Rounding a bend in the road, the orange Earth Pony gasped and screeched to a halt at the sight she found.

"Rainbow Dash!"

Pinkie Pie looked up at the sudden voice, the limp form of her Pegasus friend shifting just a bit from the movement. Happy tears threatened to spill from the pink pony's eyes at the sight of Applejack, and the two hurried to meet up. "Oh Applejack, thank goodness you're here!"

Applejack moved to Pinkie's side and quickly took Rainbow off of the obviously exhausted pony's back, onto her own. "Pinkie Pie, what in Tarnation happened!? What happened to Rainbow Dash?"

"I don't know!" Pinkie Pie replied. The tears that had been threatening to fall began to as the pair began trotting to the relative safety of the evacuation area. "I'd just been running around, not hopping because this really isn't the right situation to hop in, trying to help however I could by looking for stragglers when I rounded a corner and found Dashie lying in the middle of the road by Ditzzy's place so I ran over to check on her and she wasn't breathing! Well she was, but I couldn't tell at first because it was really weak and no matter what I tried I couldn't get her to wake up, so I picked her up onto my back and began to carry her, and after a few minutes I ran into you! So-"

"I git it, Pinkie Pie!" Applejack grunted and readjusted Rainbow Dash on her back, before increasing her pace. "Come along, then. If y'all are right, we need ta git Rainbow here to a nurse pronto!"

"Right!" Pinkie nodded her head and then frowned. "If only Twilight were Rarity were here. One of them could levitate Dashie easy-peasy lemon-squeezy!"

"Well then dear, it's a good thing that Rarity is here!"

Both Applejack and Pinkie Pie gasped and whirled around. Genuine smiles broke out on their faces at the sight of Rarity and Sweetie Belle trotting up to them. Pinkie Pie screamed and rushed forward, nearly knocking Rarity to the ground with the force of her hug. "Oh Rarity, Sweetie Belle, I'm soooo glad to see you're okay! When I found Rainbow Dash I got so worried, because she was the only one of us I'd run into, so I didn't know how the rest of you were so my imagination started running off and I couldn't catch it so I imagined the most horrible things!"

Fresh tears came to Rarity's eyes, for once nothing but grateful for the barrage of words her friend released. After a moment of hugging she pulled away from Pinkie and smiled her own genuine smile. "I understand, dear...I was so scared too. For everypony."

After a quick greeting with Applejack Rarity magically lifted the still-

unconscious Rainbow Dash from the cowfilly's back, and then together the small group began heading for the evacuation area set up by the lake.

As they hurried along, Sweetie Belle trotted up to beside Applejack. "H-hey, is Apple Bloom okay? Is she safe?"

Applejack gave a smile and nod. "She was askin' me to find out th' same about you. Almost had ta git Big Mac ta keep her from coming with me."

The little Unicorn smiled and fell silent after this. The rest of the group followed suit, and for the next several minutes they went along in silence. They had entered a deserted area of town, where the fires had not yet touched. Applejack looked around and nodded in satisfaction to herself; it looked as though the evacuations for this area were well and done. Glancing back behind her, Applejack noticed how Sweetie Belle had drifted back to Rarity, and how both Unicorns were sharing a small smile.

"Hey, what's so good y'all can smile 'bout it?"

"Oh, well it's nothing you have to be concerned over, dear," Rarity replied, waving a hoof. "It's just this is the area little Scootaloo lives in, and Sweetie Belle is just ever so happy to see it was safely evacuated."

The little Unicorn nodded her head eagerly, and Applejack chuckled at the sight. "Well shoot, y'all got nothin' ta worry your heads over. I saw Scootaloo and her folks over at the safety zone myself. I reckon at this point, we're tha only ponies left in Ponyville, 'sides the firefighters of course."

Pinkie Pie bounced up alongside Applejack. "Everypony's at the safe zone place? Really really really? Even Mr. and Mrs. Cake, and Cheerilee, and Twilight Sparkle, and Spike, and Mr. Breezy, and Snips and Snails, and-"

"Yes, yes Pinkie Pie!" Applejack groaned and nodded. "They're all there! The Cakes an' Cheerilee an' Mr. Breezy an' those two little foals an' Twi..." The cowfilly stopped in her tracks, making everyone else stop as they looked at her. The look on her face grew increasingly scared. "I, I don't recall seein' Twilight or Spike at all this whole evening!"

The whole group gasped. Sweetie Belle began to fidget and look around in worry. Twilight was the most powerful Unicorn she knew; she had to be safe, right? "Then...then where is Ms. Twilight?"

A sudden explosion of light and force, and everyone was sent flying through the air, crashing back down to the ground yards apart from where they had been. Applejack was the first to recover. She shook the dizziness from her eyes and looked to where the explosion had been, at the center of their group, and gasped. Her jaw dropped.

"Twilight!?"

The orange Earth Pony's cry roused the rest of the group, except for Rainbow Dash. They all looked to the epicenter of the blast, all gasped at the sight of the purple Unicorn standing there. She stood there, moving her neck around to survey the town around them. Atop her head sat the Tiara of Magic that represented her Element.
"Everypony...stay still."

Rarity took a step forward towards her fellow Unicorn. She didn't know what Twilight planned to do, but she could feel the magic building up. But not just within the purple Unicorn's horn, but throughout her entire body, from the tip of her horn to the bottoms of her hooves. Rarity had never felt anything like it before in her life. "Dear, what are you-"

"BAR-RAH-DON!"

All at once the magic that had been building within Twilight burst outward in a wave of purple light. The surrounding ponies were sent to their knees, Rarity and Sweetie Belle both nearly fainting as the pure magic dwarfed their own as it passed through them. All around them windows shattered, doors were blown inwards, and trees were uprooted. Applejack felt her hat blow away but made no move to catch it.

Purple energy radiated around Twilight's body in a cocoon of magic. Her eyes, open, shone with white light, and little bolts of electricity sparked across her skin. As they all watched the purple glow grew more powerful, and as it did the fire throughout all of Ponyville began to shift and flow

inwards. The waves of flame ebbed and flowed through the air, coalescing into rivulets of angry reds, oranges and yellows as they moved in ever-closer circles around Twilight.

For a moment the magic almost faltered, the inferno spreading out just a bit, but then Twilight screamed and poured out even more power. Before the eyes of everyone watching, her coat shifted to an off-white hue, her mane and tail burst into flames. The white glow from her eyes turned a burning red, and all at once the flames stopped spreading and began again to pull in towards her.

Just as it seemed the flames would encircle her and burn her to death, Twilight threw her head back and screamed another set of strange words. All at once the flames stopped flowing to her and streamed upwards, forming into a blazing orb first dozens, then hundreds, and finally thousands of feet above the town. The gaze of every pony was drawn up to that orb, looking in awe and terror at the sight of all the fire they had been fighting mere moments ago forming together. Darkness evaporated around them as a new sun filled the sky, blocking off sight of Luna's moon.

Finally, just as all the flames had been drawn away from every single building that had been burning, Twilight released the final part of the spell. All at once the orb of fire exploded, scattering the flames to the four winds. Twilight's colors changed back to normal and she collapsed back to the ground, rolling to her back so that she was looking up at the sky.

As all her friends snapped from their stupors and rushed over to her, one final thought crossed Twilight's mind as she stared up at the dissipating fire in the above them all.

"The sky...it's burning..."

Then she slept.

Chapter 2

Recoveries and Returns

Twilight's body ached. It ached as if she had run the Running of the Leaves three times in a row, followed immediately by a couple Winter Wrap-Ups. For a while all she did was lie where she was and contemplate on her achingness.

After a time she didn't know the length of, Twilight came to the realization that she was not lying on her own bed in her library home, but on one a lot less comfortable. With this realization she opened her eyes, quickly groaning and closing them again from the harsh hospital light. "Ow..." She was in a hospital. She couldn't quite remember any reason to be in the hospital.

A sound of movement to her right made Twilight turned her head that way and open her eyes into a squint. On a chair beside her bed slept an Earth Pony Twilight only faintly recognized. His coat was a medium brown, matching nicely enough with his wild dark brown hair. His Cutie Mark was an hourglass, and on his right side was strapped some kind of holster.

Twilight rolled onto her stomach to get a better look at the holster, and when she did the bed beneath her creaked. Instantly the strange pony's eyes shot open and locked with hers. They were a beautiful shade of green, Twilight thought.

"Oh you're awake. Fan-TAS-tic!" The hourglass pony jumped up from his seat and pulled a thin little...cylinder thing from his holster with his teeth. Pointing it at her he activated the blue light at the end and began waving it over her body.

"Uh...doctor?"

"Hmm?" The pony Twilight now assumed to be a doctor stopped whatever it was he was doing and looked her in the eyes again. "Pthwat ith

it?" At her confused look he slid the device back into its holster and grinned. "Sorry about that. Now, what is it, hm? Come along now, out with it."

Twilight frowned and gave her head a shake. Faint memories of a fire, and her friends, were beginning to come back to her. "Doctor, I'm not sure if I remember...what happened, why am I in the hospital?"

"Oh, nothing too much to get worked up over. Saving places from certain doom gets rather old after a while, wouldn't you agree?"

Before Twilight could give any kind of response to this statement the hospital room's door burst open, and in rushed Applejack, Pinkie Pie, and Fluttershy, all screaming Twilight's name.

Pinkie Pie reached the bed first, at which point she scooped Twilight up into a bone-crushing hug. "Oh my goodness Twilight I am soooo happy you're awake now! You were so awesome when you saved the town from all the mean fire, then you collapsed and we were all worried and then you were in the hospital for so long with the Doctor watching over you while we helped rebuild the town, and now you're awake! And so-"

Applejack stuffed a hoof into Pinkie's mouth to get her to stop talking and let go of Twilight, who then collapsed back down onto the bed gasping for breath. Applejack chuckled and smiled. "What Pinkie Pie here means is, sure is good ta see you back among the living, Twilight. Plus, thanks for savin' our butts and all." Applejack then glanced over at the Doctor. "And thank you for keepin' an eye on her, Doc."

"It was my pleasure." The Doctor noticed Twilight trying to climb out of bed and hurriedly rushed to her side. "Hold on dear, lean on me. You've been resting for a while."

A light blush colored Twilight's cheeks as she got back on her hooves with the stallion's help. After a moment of testing her footing she smiled. "Thank you, Doctor...?"

"Whoof," the pony replied. "Around here I'm Doctor Whoof. Now, if you'll excuse me, ladies," he said, edging his way around the group to the door. "I have another patient to check on. Allons-y!"

And with that, he was gone. Applejack shook her head and sighed. "What a strange pony."

"Oh, I don't know," Fluttershy quietly offered. "He seems pretty nice..."

"Yeah, he does," Twilight spoke, softly, continuing to look out the door Doctor Whoof had left through. After a moment she shook her head and looked to her friends. "Uh, Pinkie Pie. A moment ago you said I'd been in here a while, recovering from saving Ponyville...how long?"

At this question the three ponies who had come to visit her suddenly found their hooves very interesting to look at. Twilight frowned and stomped her hoof hard on the ground, making the three jump and look back up at her. Finally it was Fluttershy who spoke.

"Um, well you see, th-this is the morning of your third day here..."

Twilight's eyes widened, and she quickly sat down in the chair the Doctor had been in minutes earlier. "Two whole days...I haven't been knocked out of it like that since I was a little filly..."

Applejack coughed and continued on where Fluttershy had stopped. "There's uh, there's more ya need ta know. I'm sure ya noticed some of our number ain't here right now..."

"Oh, that's right!" Twilight's head shot up and she began looking around. "Where's Rarity, and Rainbow Dash? I want to see them too."

Applejack kicked her hooves and shared a look with Pinkie and Fluttershy, before looking back at the purple Unicorn. "Twi...ya might want ta come with us...there's somethin' ya need ta see."

The air was thick with the smell of ashes, even now, two days after the great fire. Teams of professionals had been dispatched from Canterlot immediately upon hearing of the disaster, and as such rebuilding was going at a steady pace. Steady, but slow. Rough estimates put the amount of fire-damaged buildings at nearly a third of the entire city, mostly important

infrastructure such as city hall, and the post office. Rebuilding efforts were therefore focused on these places, followed by houses. Private businesses were...less fortunate.

"Nnh...nnggh!" Another piece of broken and burnt timber was levitated away, and Rarity looked down into the crevice it had covered, hoping beyond hope that she would find something, anything, in salvageable condition. When nothing but charred remains were found, Rarity forced back another sob and continued on with her self-imposed work.

Sweetie Belle sat in silence by where the door had once been and watched her sister move on to another pile of debris. It worried Sweetie how the white Unicorn, normally borderline obsessive compulsive about cleanliness, paid no heed to the ash and cinders she was smearing on her body through her salvage work, dying her coat an increasingly-darker grey. She would catch her increasingly frayed and torn mane in some overhanging timber, and without any thought yank it out and continue on, leaving a few, or not so few, strands behind. Before the young filly's eyes, her older sister was transforming into a whole new person. And she didn't like it.

"Rarity, when can we go get breakfast? I'm hungry, and this place is making me feel weird..."

Rarity didn't bother to look up as she shifted aside some more debris. "We'll go soon, dear. Just a couple more minutes...there has to be something left..." This last bit was whispered more to herself than to Sweetie Belle.

"But that's what you said half an hour ago!"

Rarity dropped the remains of a dresser she was levitating and whirled around to face her sister. "Sweetie Belle, please! I am trying to see if there is anything salvageable of my career and our home! I really don't need your constant...constant..." Rarity faltered as she looked down at Sweetie Belle and saw the tears forming in the young filly's eyes. Immediately her irritation vanished, and she rushed to her sister's side and enveloped her into a tight hug. "No no, please don't cry dear. I didn't mean to yell at you, I promise. I was just so...frustrated with all of this!"

Sweetie Belle sniffled and pressed her face against her sister's chest, hugging her back. "I understand...I'm sorry I can't help you with anything..."

Rarity gave Sweetie a nuzzle on the face and did her best to smile. "Oh, don't say that, Sweetie. You're...you're inspiring me. Yes, that's it; moral support. I just don't know what I would do if I didn't have my little sister to care for."

Sweetie Belle smiled then, and Rarity gave a nod of satisfaction. "Good, now then, let's get something to eat..." she looked down at herself, coat colored black and grey from moving around in the wrecked store. She then looked at Sweetie Belle and saw that hugging her and dirtied up her mane and coat as well. "Um, after we have ourselves a shower, okay?"

Sweetie Belle gave a vigorous nod of her head. "Yeah, okay! Oh, let's go to Sweet Apple Acres! They've got hot showers, and Applejack's sure to fix us something good to eat!" Rarity smiled and nodded in agreement with this idea, and so together the two sisters left the remains of their home and began the long walk through town to Sweet Apple Acres.

As they went, Rarity could not help but look around. Everywhere she looked seemed to be bustling with activity. Teams of construction workers from Canterlot and native Ponyville ponies mingled through the streets and on the houses, working together like all good ponies knew to do. Meanwhile, stores sold their wares at half-price to everyone, even those not directly involved in the work of rebuilding. It was at times like this that helped communities come together.

The pair passed Sugarcube Corner, the only store not to be damaged in any way from the fires. Rarity glanced at it and felt a tingle of something like jealousy pass through her. She shook her head and quickly pushed this back down, away from her thoughts. It was horrible of her, she thought, to resent Pinkie for not losing anything...unlike her...

"Excuse me, Ms. Rarity?"

Rarity was snapped from her darkening thoughts by the unfamiliar voice. She looked to the source to find a pony in a deep blue cloak exiting from Sugarcube Corner and trotting towards them. "Um, yes?"

The pony held her head down, and Rarity knew it was a she from the voice, and so as she approached Rarity could not see under the hood. "Tell me, where can I find Twilight Sparkle? Official Canterlot business."

Rarity frowned, but motioned towards the hospital with her horn. "She's in there, but, the doctors said she probably wouldn't wake up for another day, at the least."

The hooded pony nodded at this, before a sudden bluish-purple glow came from under the hood. A small sack floated out from the cloak to lie at Rarity's hooves. When she looked into it she found it filled with gold bits.

"Oh my, I just couldn't take this much for simple direc-"

But when Rarity looked back up, the mysterious Unicorn was gone.

In a bush that had been not-so-subtly following Rarity all morning, Spike sat and thought.

"Something about that Unicorn seemed so familiar..."

The first thing to come to Twilight's mind after she entered the intensive care ward her friends had directed her to was how...stifling, it felt. The air was cool, not cold but cooler than Twilight was used to in Ponyville at that time of year, and it had an overwhelming smell of antiseptic.

Immediately after this Twilight noticed the two patients in this particular room. In one bed lay a small Unicorn filly, her coat a purplish-grey and her mane and tail lemon-yellow. At this patient's bed sat the town's mailmare, Ditzzy Twilight thought her name was, and beside her was Doctor Whoof. Neither paid Twilight or her friends any attention as they entered.

In the other bed lay a familiar rainbow-maned Pegasus. Hesitantly, Twilight trotted over to the bed and looked down at her fallen friend. Rainbow lay on her left side, her chest only barely rising in quick, labored breaths. Her hair lay limp and lifeless around her head, and seemed to

have dulled a great deal since last time Twilight had seen her. An IV was plugged in, and a clear oxygen mask was affixed over her face.

"What...what happened?" Twilight asked, wanting to look away but unable to.

None of her friends answered her. Instead Ditzzy sniffled and turned away from her sleeping daughter's side, walking over to the side of Dash's bed opposite Twilight and the others. "It's the fault of the fault lines. Measuring right substance overflow cabbages, grew a big spindle. Lights out with the cheese grater."

"Uh..." Twilight looked at Ditzzy. "What?"

At this moment Doctor Whoof joined in on the conversation, walking over to beside Ditzzy. "Don't think anything bad about our dear Ditzzy here, she couldn't help it. It's an old speech problem I helped her get over a long time ago. Seems she's relapsed since the big fire, curious. Very curious."

Doctor Whoof wrapped a foreleg around Ditzzy's shoulders and held her close. "Anyhow, what she was trying to say was that she thinks it's her fault. She's the one who alerted brave Rainbow to the fires, and it was following her into her house to rescue young Dinky over there when Rainbow got hit by a rush of smoke and superheated air. Filled her lungs with smoke and burnt them, pretty nastily I've heard. Oh, and then Rainbow fell about 12 feet to the ground. Miracle she didn't break her ne...um..." He faltered at the glares he was receiving from everyone. "Well anyway, that's how it happened. Personally I think it's rubbish for Ditzzy to blame herself, but what do I know, eh? I'm just the Doctor is all."

Twilight nodded to this, though she wasn't really paying much attention anymore. The weakness of her body after two days of not moving was catching up to her, and so she rested her head on Rainbow Dash's bed and sighed. "I never thought something like this could happen to her, to anypony I knew. This is all my fault, I'm not prepared. I don't KNOW any healing magic!"

"But I do!"

Everyone present turned to find a new pony at the door, wrapped in a

deep blue cloak that hid all features. Twilight, the only Unicorn present, immediately sensed something familiar about this pony. "And who are you?"

"I have been sent here by Princess Luna, to take care of matters very dire." The stranger slid her way through the small crowd of ponies, stopping at Rainbow Dash's bed by Twilight's side. Though it was hard to tell past the hood, the others got the impression that she was focused just as much on Twilight as on Rainbow Dash. "However, I could never conduct my business without bestowing assistance to such a courageous Pegasus!"

Near the back, Applejack rolled her eyes and leaned in to whisper to Fluttershy. "Is she a medic, or a showpony? Yeesh!"

The mysterious stranger chuckled then, and held out her forelegs over the downed Pegasus's body, revealing her coat to be a royal blue. "Oh ye of little faith, watch and be amazed at the healing powers of-"

"Trixie!" Twilight shouted, just as a bluish-purple haze of magic burst from the stranger's hooves and swept over Rainbow Dash's body. The oxygen mask was lifted from Rainbow's face and her lips were opened, a tendril of magic sliding in between them and down to reach the burnt areas. The whole room was silent, no one daring to speak for fear of breaking the Unicorn's concentration.

Twilight watched her fellow Unicorn work with the focus expected of Princess Celestia's prized student. This was a kind of magic she had never bothered with much, more interested in her youth in studying the most impressive-looking magic she could, and then later on becoming more interested in myths and history. It was, she realized then, a glaring hole in her knowledge.

A sudden bright flash snapped Twilight from her thoughts as the stranger she thought was Trixie ended the magic. As the magic glow retreated back under those blue robes everyone present could see that Rainbow's breathing was now much less labored, and the color had returned to her mane. The stranger nodded in satisfaction. "There, that is much better."

"Fan-TAS-tic!" Doctor Whoof shouted, rearing up on his hind legs. "What a GREAT display of such POWERFUL healing magic! Most impressive I've

seen since I lived in Gallopfrey!"

Twilight took a step toward Rainbow's healer as the hooded Unicorn turned away from Rainbow Dash and faced them. "Trixie, is that really you?"

The stranger began to laugh, and suddenly threw off her robes and hood, revealing that it was indeed the Unicorn magician they had not seen for over a year. "Yes, it is I, the Humble and Competent Trixie! I have come back for the turn of the tide!"

The next moment Trixie was tackled to the ground by Pinkie Pie, followed quickly by Fluttershy, Applejack, and Ditzzy Doo in a massive group hug. All four were crying from joy. "Oh thank you thank you thank you!" Yelled Pinkie Pie. "Thanks to you, Dashie's all better now!"

Trixie flailed beneath the four-pony pileup. "Help...can't...breathe..."

Standing to the side, Twilight laughed past her own tears and shook her head at the sight. "I don't know why you're here, oh 'Humble and Competent Trixie', but thanks. Thank you so much."

After a few more seconds the pile of hugging ponies finally stopped and pulled away, allowing Trixie space to climb back up onto her hooves. She gave her mane a shake and brushed some imaginary dirt from her shoulders, before turning fully to Twilight Sparkle and smiling. "Yes, well, thank you very much. Although, Trixie will do for real conversations. That's who I am now."

"Golly, where'd ya learn that fancy healin' magic, Trixie? Lat we saw of ya, you weren't much more than'a lotta flash with no bang. No offence."

"None taken, apple farmer. And I suppose all of you deserve to hear the story of what happened to me after I was run...no, after I ran away from town. Wandering the countryside for months, shunning the company of others, I was filled with anger, humiliation, and hate. And as anypony who has studied the magic arts knows, our emotions are a powerful and dangerous source of strength..."

"GRAAAAHHHH!"

The towering Oak tree shattered from the magical impact. Woodland animals scattered, their shrill cries filling the night long after the echoes of the explosion faded away.

Beneath this overlaying cacophony of fear, Trixie sobbed as she stumbled along the forest path. Practically blind from the hot tears that filled her eyes and streamed down her cheeks, as she went Trixie tripped over every rock, every upraised root that got in her way. Every time this happened the blue Unicorn let loose another scream, another pulse of magic, and another random tree or boulder was shattered.

Trixie's rage was blind and consuming. It coursed through her veins, filling her with power and dark magic that ate away at her as much as it drove her on. She screamed and cried like a wild beast from the mythical Time before the Taming. In her wake lay a wide, meandering path of destruction, more suited for a dragon than for a pony.

Trixie began to charge up another magical blast when a sudden drop made her yelp and cut it off. She tumbled down the slope, coming to rest after a moment at the very edge of a small lake; a pool, really. She climbed back up onto her hooves, shook her mane in a feeble attempt to rid it of the leaves and broken twigs, only to slump back down onto her stomach the next moment. The anger left her system, leaving behind only cold, numbing sadness. She took one glance at her reflection in the pool, but only for a moment, before looking away and burying her head in her hooves, her crying renewed.

Seconds passed with the only sound her weakening sobs, the cries of the animals long faded away. Suddenly a new sound reached Trixie's ears, soft at first but slowly growing. A rush of wind, and then she heard the sound of four hooves touching down onto solid ground. Despite herself, Trixie looked up to the source of the sound and found herself looking straight into Princess Luna's concerned eyes.

"Gah!"

The shout startled Luna, making her wings flare as she took a hesitant step back from Trixie. Trixie herself scrambled back to her hooves and took

more than a few steps back. "Pr-Princess Luna!"

The princess nodded and pulled her wings back in, looking down at the quivering Unicorn with concerned eyes once more. "My little pony, what is the matter? Why has filled you with so much darkness and led you to the Lunar Pool?"

"L-Lunar Pool?" Trixie glanced back down at the pool, avoiding her reflection, and saw that it was indeed in the exact shape of a crescent moon. She had stumbled onto a place of legend without even realizing it. "I, I hadn't known where I was...not for the longest time..."

Luna's eyes grew even softer, and she moved closer to Trixie. "Little pony, what is your name? No, wait, don't tell me, this will be easier..."

Before Trixie could ask what would be easier, Luna leaned down and touched the tips of their horns together. The soft glow of magic filled the clearing, and suddenly before Trixie's mind's eye all the events of her life were played out again, rushing by as if on fast-forward. Through the power of the ancient magic Trixie smiled and laughed when she visited the fair for her first birthday, heard the first joke she understood, wowed her mother when she read successfully for the first time; cowered as she huddled under her blankets from a storm, screamed when a spider plopped down onto her head while in the shower, discovered her extreme allergy to bananas; and cried when she used magic for the first time, learned she had a sister somewhere in the world, and finally, the humiliation of her time in Ponyville and the long months since.

Once the spell ended, Trixie took a stumbling step back and fell down on her rump. She heard sniffing and looked up to see Luna in a similar position, looking back at her with such caring and understanding, Trixie almost ran from her.

After a moment of silence, Luna spoke. "Oh Trixie, I understand now. I understand what you are going through. The despair...the rage...the hate...you can't stand it, but you think it's all you have. I was like that, once..."

The words slipped from Trixie's lips before she could stop herself. "Nightmare Moon..."

Luna nodded. "Yes. I fell into the darkness you now stand at the edge of. Go, look in the pool. See yourself."

Trixie almost refused, before those all-too understanding eyes drove her to stand up and walk to the edge of the Lunar Pool. She looked at her reflection, and for a moment did not recognize herself. Her mane and tail were bleached white as snow. Her coat meanwhile had darkened to a midnight blue, almost black, and her purple eyes had bled into a horrible red. She cried out but was unable to pull herself away from the image. Behind her Luna spoke.

"They tell you dark emotions are a source of terrible power, but they don't tell you what that means. Your magic changes, and through it you change. The same process that made me Nightmare Moon is happening to you, Trixie."

Trixie was silent a moment, looking herself in the eyes, before she huffed and turned away. "W-well, maybe I should just be a villain then! That's all those ponies in Ponyville think of me as, a villain and a liar! And I bet they spread news of my humiliation everywhere, so everypony knows! There's nothing left for me!"

Silence, and then Luna started laughing. "Oh Trixie, you've been in these woods for too long. You've missed all the tales of the 'Brave Trixie', who held off an Ursa Minor long enough for help to arrive. What stories they tell of you!"

The dumbfounded expression on Trixie's face would have made Snails feel smart. "I, what, huh?" She shook her head and looked back at Luna. "But...why would they do that? I embarrassed them, I caused an Ursa Minor to attack their town...I ran away!"

"But not when it counted," Luna spoke. "You boasted, yes, and held yourself as better than others because of your admittedly-powerful magic, but when danger showed itself you did try to save the town instead of running. Bravery in defense of others goes a long way, and few really held it against you for failing."

Trixie stayed silent for a long while, her head hung so that her frosty-

white hair hid whatever expression she wore. Luna sat, waiting, before finally Trixie looked up at her and whispered. "Please, help me."

"And she did," Trixie finished, sitting down at the library table with the others. She, Twilight, Applejack, Fluttershy, and Pinkie Pie had walked there during the course of Trixie's story. Ditzzy and Doctor Whoof had stayed at the hospital, after a quick check by Trixie to make sure young Dinky was simply asleep. "And so I became Princess Luna's pupil, just as you are for Princess Celestia, Twilight Sparkle."

A small round of applause broke out around the table, causing a faint blush to appear on Trixie's cheeks. Twilight, the one sitting closest to Trixie, leaned over and gave her a brief but warm hug. "I am so happy to hear that you're doing well. Though if I'd known that you would suffer like you did, I would have had Rainbow Dash bring you back like she wanted."

Trixie returned the hug, before smiling and shaking her head. "No, I'm glad you didn't. I've learned so much under Luna. Some things magical and wondrous, others...more personal."

Before Twilight could ask what she meant, Pinkie Pie jumped from her seat and began bouncing toward the door. "Hurray! Dashie's well, the town's safe, and Trixie's not a big meany-spuneenie anymore! This calls for a party!"

And before anyone could stop her, Pinkie was gone. Twilight and the others chuckled at this, before the purple Unicorn turned to her blue counterpart. "Trixie, what did you mean by learning personal stuff?"

"Ah, yes..." Trixie's smile disappeared and she sighed. "I'll tell you later, but first, we must get down to business. I did say I was sent by Princess Luna on matters very dire. Matters relating to the great fire...and you, Twilight."

The room seemed to grow 20 degrees colder as Trixie looked hard at Twilight. "Twilight Sparkle. Where. Did. You. Learn. Dragon magic?"

Chapter 3

Yellow Jacket

Silence fell onto the gathered group in the wake of Trixie's question. Twilight Sparkle was motionless in her chair, trying to ignore the confused looks she was getting from her friends. The knowing look from Trixie was not helping, in Twilight's mind.

"Dragon magic? Don't, don't be silly, Trixie! Hehe, ponies aren't allowed to learn dragon magic, heh..."

Trixie rolled her eyes and sighed. "Twilight, has anypony ever told you that you're a terrible liar? And besides, there's no point in denying it. The young dragon Spike mentioned it in his report to the Princesses of your saving Ponyville from the fire. Did you really not expect a dragon to recognize his kind's magic, just because he's a baby?"

Twilight cringed at this, silently berating herself for not thinking of this. She shot a look to Fluttershy and Applejack, who both looked back at her confusedly, but trustingly as well. Neither thought at all that she had done wrong in any way. This gave her the strength to look back at Trixie. But only that. "I..."

"Twilight, what's goin' on here?" Applejack, as always, spoke her mind. "What's dragon magic? Ain't there only that stuff y'all Unicorns do?"

Twilight sighed and looked away from Trixie to Applejack. "No, actually," she responded, going into her infamous "lecture mode" despite herself. "Magic is a vast, mostly unknown thing, manifesting in many forms. Unicorns, of course, are granted it to channel through our horns to do things. Pegasi also contain a form of potent magic, it's what allows them to fly and manipulate the weather. Some researchers theorize that with the right training Pegasi could learn to do other things with it, but nopony's tried. Then there are the kinds of magic found in nature, such as the Crystal Sea to the west, and Daggeroth's Cave to the far north."

"So, um, what's dragon magic?" asked Fluttershy, while wondering if her "Stare" was a manifestation of her magic.

At this question shifted in her seat, but forced herself to continue. "Well, that's where things get complicated. Dragons are more closely connected to the elements of the world than ponies, and their magic reflects that. It's what allows them to fly and breathe fire, as well as many other acts known only in legend. It's also the only other kind of magic that can be used by ponies. Like...like I did the night of the fire. But!"

Twilight whirled back around to face Trixie, making everybody jump at the sudden movement. "I didn't do anything wrong! I had no choice, using dragon magic was the only way to control those flames and save everypony! I had to save everypony!"

"Yeah!" Applejack yelled as she jumped from her seat and took Twilight's side. She might not have had all the fancy details on just what her friend supposedly did wrong, but she wasn't about to let her down. "I bet everypony in town's willin' ta back Twilight on this when we say she didn't do anything wrong!"

"D-definitely," Fluttershy added in, though she stayed firmly in her seat.

Trixie looked from Applejack to Fluttershy, before looking back at Twilight. She sighed and shook her head after a moment of silence. "No pony said that you were in trouble for anything, Twilight. The Princesses understand that you only did what you had to do."

The other three ponies all sighed in relief, and afterwards Trixie spoke again. "All I want to know is where you learned that magic from. Was it while you were still in Canterlot, or...did anypony visit you while you were here? Anypony at all?"

"I," Twilight hesitated just a moment. "No pony's visited me here. I learned the magic in Canterlot. From a book."

Of all the expressions Twilight expected to appear on Trixie's face, a mix of relief and disappointment was not high on the list. The blue Unicorn sat up from her chair and began to pace around. "So, he hasn't made contact yet. Good..."

"Um, Trixie?" Twilight followed Trixie's movement, confused. "Who hasn't made contact yet?"

Trixie stopped her pacing and turned back toward Twilight and her friends. She regarded each of them for long enough to make them uncomfortable, and then looked away, out the window at the clear day beyond. "Tell me this, Twilight. How well acquainted were you with the Pegasus Yellow Jacket? And don't feign ignorance please, Princess Celestia already told me that you two were at least acquaintances."

"Oh, Yellow Jacket?" Twilight smiled and chuckled softly at this, earning herself some confused glances from Fluttershy and Applejack. She turned to look at them and smiled. "He was a Pegasus at Canterlot University. The only one actually. He was only allowed in because he had such a delight in historical and myth research. He was very good at his research, but most of us considered a Pegasus in a Unicorn university a bit of a joke."

"Yes, that's what many of us thought," Trixie whispered, drawing the other three to look at her. She stood by the window looking out of it, her shoulders slumped and cloak thrown haphazardly to the ground beside her. "Until two weeks ago, when he disappeared from Canterlot without a trace and no clues as to where he went."

"So he finally ran away from the University, so what?"

Trixie shook her head and looked back at Twilight. "No, you don't understand. He disappeared as in he teleported. With magic."

Hidden within the bushes that lay nestled beneath the window Trixie stood at, Doctor Whoof frowned in thought at this little revelation. "Pegasi using magic? Troubling..."

Once Twilight had finished rolling on the floor laughing, she climbed onto unsteady legs and looked back at a rather annoyed-looking Trixie. "Oh Trixie, you can't be serious. Teleportation, really? Next you'll tell me he

breathed fire like a dragon and screeched like a gryphon."

Trixie nodded. "I'm completely serious, Twilight. He did it in the main hall of the castle, Princess Celestia saw it herself. As did I, and half the court."

Twilight's smile broke. "Oh. Oh, this is bad. Like, throw Equestria into turmoil bad. But wait, why did you expect him to visit me?"

Trixie shrugged and turned away from the window completely, walking back over to the table. "Not to you specifically. But as I was investigating his quarters for clues, I found several vague references to the Everfree Forest, and the Ruins of the Ancient Pony Sisters. Princess Luna simply thought that, if Yellow Jacket is in the area, he might pay a visit to the world's most powerful Unicorn."

Before Twilight could say that she wasn't the world's most powerful Unicorn, Applejack once again spoke up. "Now hold on, there's somethin' that's bugging me. Ya keep mentioning Princess Luna, what about Celestia?"

Trixie rolled her eyes and sighed. "Princess Celestia is conducting the official investigation, but Luna and I are conducting our own. For the Sun Princess's own good, of course."

"Own good?" This time it was Fluttershy who spoke. "What do you mean by that? Is something wrong with the princess?"

"No. Well, maybe." Trixie shook her head. "She has just been strangely on edge lately. Even before Yellow Jacket disappeared, similar fires to the one here have been springing up all across Equestria. She is too busy dealing with those to pay any real attention to one missing Pegasus."

Trixie suddenly snorted and stamped her hooves on the ground. "But listen, enough talk, we need action! Will you all please help me in finding Yellow Jacket and insuring chaos does not overtake the country?"

Twilight, Applejack, and Fluttershy all nodded, when suddenly Pinkie Pie burst out from beneath the table and looked out a seemingly random direction. "There, ya got all that? The whole basic plot? I hope so, because I really don't want any more exposition to slow us all down from my party!"

"..."

"..."

"..."

"...Pinkie Pie, you are so random."

"Om nom nom nom nom!"

"Sweetie Belle! Show your manners while eating, young lady!"

The filly in question looked up from the slice of apple pie she had buried her face into and blushed. She quickly cleaned her face off with a napkin and looked up at the massive red stallion across the kitchen table from her and her sister. "Um, sorry Big Mac. I was just really hungry..."

Big Macintosh chuckled and shook his head. "Don't worry 'bout it none, little missy. Ain't nothing impolite 'bout liking your host's cooking. Now y'all eat up, there's plenty more where that came from."

"Thank you again for all this, Big Mac," Rarity said between dainty bites from her own slice of pie. "After the fire three nights ago you must be run ragged from helping ponies!"

Once again, the Earth Pony known as Big Mac chuckled and shook his head, his deep voice ringing through the room. "Nah, it ain't a trouble at all. Any friend of AJ's is a friend of mine. So don't you worry none, y'all can take the guest room upstairs for as long as it takes to git back on your hooves."

"Well, thanks again, anyway."

The pair continued eating for the next several minutes, Big Mac hanging around the kitchen for anything they needed. None spoke, even Sweetie Belle enjoying the comfortable silence that had fallen. This silence was broken however, by the sudden banging of the front door opening and

closing. Apple Bloom came trotting in, with Scootaloo right behind her.

"Hey Big Mac, ya mind if we-Sweetie Belle!"

"Apple Bloom, Scootaloo!"

Sweetie Belle jumped from her seat and ran to the two fillies, pulling them both into a hug. "Guess what? My big sister and I are going to be staying here until the Carousel Boutique is rebuilt!"

Scootaloo pulled herself from the hug and smirked. "You know what THAT means, girls!"

All three fillies nodded and pressed their front hooves together. "CUTIE MARK CRUSADERS SLEEPOVER!"

Rarity looked back and forth from the trio of fillies to Big Mac, who was watching the proceedings with a small smirk. "Um, do you think you should...say something?"

Big Mac shook his head but waited until the CMC had left the room before talking. "It's fine. The girls need somethin' ta brighten their day, after all they've been through lately." He looked Rarity over as she sat on her chair. "I'd reckon you do too."

Rarity laughed and waved a hoof at Big Mac. "Oh, don't worry about little old Rarity, hehe. I'm doing, eh, just fine."

Perhaps her smile had been a little too forced, or her laugh a little too high, but Big Mac didn't seem convinced of Rarity's wellbeing. Instead of pressing it though, he sighed and collected the dirty dishes from the table, before turning to the sink to get to work cleaning them. At this Rarity jumped from her seat and circled around the table to Big Mac's side, telekinetically taking the dishes from him. "Oh no no no! I just couldn't allow you to clean up after all you've done already!"

Big Mac shrugged and nodded, though Rarity had already begun to wash the dishes. "Well then, much obliged, Miss Rarity." He watched her work for a few seconds, until a thought crossed his mind and he smiled. "If you'll excuse me, Miss Rarity..."

"Hm? Oh yes, I'm sure you're quite busy with apple bucking or something, don't let me keep you." Rarity mumbled this over her shoulder, keeping the bulk of her attention on her work. As such, she didn't really hear as the heavy hoofsteps of Big Mac went not out the door to the fields, but up the stairs to the floor above.

There weren't that many dishes from the meal, just three dishes for herself, Sweetie Belle, and Big Mac, but there were already several dishes in the sink from sometime earlier. Since she was already started Rarity washed these as well, humming a soft tune that she wasn't quite sure the origin of. One of Pinkie Pie's many songs, she assumed. The poor filly sang so many all the time, it was hard to keep track of them sometimes.

Rarity had just finished up the last dirty fork when the sound of Big Mac's heavy hoofsteps in the kitchen behind her caught her attention. She smiled and began to turn around to greet him. "Oh Big Mac, I hope you don't mind, I took the liberty of washing your..." Rarity's voice trailed away to nothing. Big Mac stood across the table from her. Sitting on the table between them was a large shallow box divided into sections, containing pins, needle and thread, scissors, pinking shears, and even a sewing awl.

Rarity shuffled over to the box of sewing supplies and stared at it. "What..." she lifted up a sewing needle and looked numbly at Big Mac. "What is this?"

The red workhorse coughed and shuffled his hooves, looking uncharacteristically nervous. "Well, sometimes one of Apple Bloom's dresses is ripped, or AJ's hat gets a tear in it from something or other, so I gotta fix it up, but I...well I just went and figured you could use it more than a simple farmer like me."

Rarity looked down at the needle she held and the box of other supplies. It was a meager supply, poorly taken care of, utterly crude compared to the stuff she'd had to work with in her shop...she had never received a better gift in her life.

Big Mac said nothing as Rarity circled around the table to him and wrapped her forelegs around his neck. He simply stood there and gave the beautiful mare the shoulder to cry on that she needed.

Doctor Whoof trotted back to the town hospital with a frown, having left the tree home right after Trixie, Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie and Applejack. The conversation between Trixie and the others (which he had listened to with the help of his trusty Sonic Screwdriver) was all the brown Earth Pony could think about. All the information he had was being mentally fitted together, like interlocking puzzle pieces.

"Pegasus goes to Unicorn school. Pegasus treated as a joke at Unicorn school. Pegasus uses advanced piece of magic in front of princess and disappears. Now co-ruler is conducting search for Pegasus behind sister's back, while throughout country things burst into flames. Now where does that fit in I wonder."

The Doctor passed by an archway leading from the road he was on to the main town square. He glanced at it as he passed. "Trixie girl, full of herself before almost turning into world-ender, now comes back to town she hates the most for help from the ponies she hates the most. Heh, wibbly wobbly, timey wi-"

The Doctor suddenly stopped walking. "No, hang on, shut up! Wait, I missed it! I saw it, and I missed it!" He hit himself on the forehead. "What did I see, I saw, what did I see, I saw..."

In his mind's eye, the Doctor began zooming over everything he had seen from his glance into the town square. Lyra and Bon-Bon stood near the fountain, talking, then a rush over to Blues standing still as a pink-coated Unicorn levitated lumber from his back, then a spin around and zoom in on a couple nameless Canterlot workhorses taking a break at a sandwich shop, then past them to Snips and Snails hiding behind a bush and watching somepony walk through the town entrance, and then through their eyes zooming in on the stranger pony, wearing a heavy black and yellow cloak with hood.

The Doctor blinked and grinned. "Two ponies in cloaks walk into a bar. Both say ouch." With that he was off racing across the open space of the square to the town entrance. He slid to a halt in front of the mysterious stranger, making the stranger stop as well. "Ello there, new person.

Perhaps you'd like a tour through town before visiting a mutual friend?"

Beneath the hood nothing could be made out of the pony except his muzzle, which was a bright, almost neon yellow. This muzzle smiled at the Doctor. "Hmm, a mutual friend you say? Interesting, I don't believe I know anypony who would bother associating with an...Earth Pony."

"Oh, really?" The Doctor stepped closer and smirked. "Well, she was nice enough to associate herself with a Pegasus like you, eh Yellow Jacket? Not too big a step up to Earth Ponies like me from there."

The smile remained on that muzzle; if anything it grew wider. "Oh, a comedian hm? Who knows my name too. Alright, I'll bite then. Where could I find Twilight Sparkle? We're old university friends you see, and I haven't seen her in ages."

"Ah, now there's your problem, you see." The Doctor stepped to Yellow Jacket's side, and together the two continued walking. "The princesses have gotten to her first, you see. A Unicorn called Trixie's in her tree home right now, all finished talking about you. Teleportation without a horn, how did you do that?"

"That's a secret, I'm afraid." The Pegasus threw off his hood, revealing to the Doctor a yellow-coated head, with a black mane that ran in long spikes, similar to the Doctor's own mane, but longer. He looked at the Earth Pony with purple eyes. "And you know, the more you talk, the more prudent it seems to me to stop the blood flow to your brain. I can do that, you know."

"No, I didn't." The Doctor shrugged and motioned with his head to the town library. "But you won't, because you need to know how much I know. Besides, whatever it is you're doing is just too fascinating for me to want to stop. Pegasi with magic? Fantastic!"

Yellow Jacket laughed and shook his head. "Well, how can I say no to such enthusiasm? Sure, stick around while I talk with our mutual friend. I'm sure you'll love to hear my side of the story."

"I'm sure I will."

A knock came from the front door. Twilight looked up from her book at the door and frowned as whoever was on the other side continued knocking. "They shouldn't be back already, should they?"

Trixie had gone off with Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie and Applejack to the Everfree Forest, to talk with Zecora. Having the pony most knowledgeable of the place would be invaluable while looking for someone in there. Twilight had stayed behind to search through her numerous books, to see if there was anything unique or especially magical in the area that might be of interest to Yellow Jacket. So far, the only thing that really stood out was the Ruins of the Ancient Pony Sisters, and that was something they already knew about.

As the knocking continued Twilight sighed and walked from her work desk to the door. She opened it to find the Earth Pony from the hospital standing there with a magnificent grin, beside a cloaked figure. Twilight looked back and forth between them and sighed. "Another cloaked and mysterious pony wanting to speak with me. Of course."

Doctor Whoof laughed and pushed past Twilight into the library, the rehooded Yellow Jacket following close behind. "Oh come now, Twilight darling, don't be like that. After all those long days and nights watching you in the hospital, I thought I'd earned some gratitude. Oh, and you have an old friend visiting."

"What are you talking about, I have no old friends. Just Spike and my Ponyville frie-"

Yellow Jacket lowered his hood, and then the whole cloak, revealing himself to Twilight. He flared his broad wings, raven-black, once, and smiled at her. "Hello, Twilight Sparkle."

Twilight stuttered, slowly sliding down onto her haunches as she stared at the Pegasus she had just spent nearly the whole morning talking about with Trixie. He looked just as she remembered him from the Canterlot University, black mane and tail, yellow body, black wings, Cutie Mark of an unfurled scroll with bee wings. And he was there, in her home.

"J-Jack?" She shook her head and looked again. He was still there, still

smiling at her. "What are you doing here? No wait, how are you, how did you, why are you, nnggh!" She shook her head again and took an aggressive stance. Her horn lit up as she prepared a spell. "Trixie told me you used magic. That you were on the run. That you had to be stopped."

Standing behind Yellow Jacket, or Jack as he was called by Twilight, Doctor Whoof waved a hoof. "Oh, oh, but she didn't say why he needed to be stopped, did she? Come on Miss Twilight, let's hear what the plan is! I do so love it when the villain monologues!"

Twilight flinched at the Earth Pony's statement. Her stance relaxed, the flow leaving her horn as she looked at Jack with unsure eyes. "You're not really a villain, are you Jack?"

The Pegasus scoffed. "A villain from whose point of view? The ruler who forbade ponies learning dragon magic? The kind of magic, I might add, that I've heard saved this town and everyone in it? The kind of magic that I," here he stepped closer to Twilight, his smile growing softer. "That I as the head librarian's assistant helped you learn? Remember all those late nights in the university library, pouring over ancient tome after ancient tome, thirsting to learn all that we wanted, all the secrets forgotten through time?"

"Some secrets need to be forgotten," Doctor Whoof mumbled from the couch, though neither listened to him.

Twilight gulped and took a step back from Jack. "Yes, I, I remember. But...if you aren't a villain, why did you disappear? What are you doing?"

"Revolution!" Jack shouted, his wings flaring out. From the couch Doctor Whoof perked an ear up. "I plan to overturn the established way of things, and share the gift of magic with everyone, so that it's not just the privilege of Unicorns like you and that bothersome Trixie!"

Jack began to pace, his voice growing more and more excited as he went. "The first step is already complete, getting the word out! Even as we speak, rumor of my remarkable display in Canterlot spread throughout the country. Before long other Pegasi will be seeking their own magic, and then from there the Earth Ponies, rabble as they are!" He turned and smirked at Doctor Whoof. "No offense."

"None taken!"

Twilight huffed and stomped her hooves against the wood floor. "But Jack, what you're talking about is madness! You may have somehow unlocked the magic that helps you fly, but you're an incredibly gifted Pegasus! Most Pegasi would never be able to do it, and most Earth Ponies wouldn't have enough magic to DO anything!"

"WRONG!" The yellow Pegasus jumped into the air and began flying around, laughing madly. "I've discovered something in my research, something amazing, incredible! As I was looking through some tome of forgotten lore!"

Doctor Whoof lifted an eyebrow and looked over at Twilight. "Was he always this energetic?"

Twilight sighed. "His name IS Yellow Jacket. Though normally he was only like this when alone with me."

"And how often was that," Doctor Whoof asked with a smirk, before laughing at the purple Unicorn's blush.

Suddenly Yellow Jacket landed beside Twilight, glaring straight at the pony on the couch. His eyes shone yellow, and before Twilight could do anything Doctor Whoof was levitated into the air and slammed against the wall clear on the other side of the room. "Earth Pony, don't you dare make fun of your betters!"

"Jack!" Twilight ran between the Pegasus and the Earth Pony, her horn once more glowing with power. "How can you talk like that after going on about sharing magic between all the pony types? What's wrong with you?"

The glow left Jack's eyes, and the next moment he collapsed to his knees. When Twilight tentatively stepped closer she found his eyes quivering with tears. Yet still he smiled. "It's, it's the thing I told you about, Twilight. The thing in my forgotten lore. I released my inner magic the wrong way, and eventually it's going to kill me, hehe, heh." He looked up at her and forced back his tears. "I don't want to die, and I'm sure you don't either. There's a way to fix me, and safely grant Pegasi and Earth Ponies magic. You've already done it once, in your first big adventure."

A second passed before Twilight's eyes widened in understanding. "The Elements of Harmony! But," her brow furrowed. "Those are mystical artifacts, they only grant magic when worn!"

Jack laughed and forced himself back to his hooves. When he looked at Twilight again they were free of tears, but seemed so weary. "You just haven't...read the right books, Twilight. Please, help me, and together we can fix all this. Fix everything to how it should be, eh? Don't you want to help people? Or, would you rather wait until the next big fire?"

Twilight did not want to wait.

Chapter 4

Horrors and Legends

Rainbow Dash floated in darkness. It surrounded her, engulfed her, filled her. Her chest rose and fell but no breath came, and every second felt like an eternity of suffocation. In the darkness, her color and light were an affront. She was alone...except she wasn't.

"You are the embodiment of Loyalty. Willing to give up anything for those you love, even your dreams and your life."

Rainbow Dash spun around, looking for the sudden speaker. There was nothing but the darkness.

"But you have no power to stop us. Your light is weak and flickering. All you will be able to do is watch as everything you love is swept away...and corrupted. And then your loyalty will mean nothing."

Flames enveloped Rainbow's body. She screamed.

She woke up. Rainbow Dash found herself lying in a hospital bed. She knew it was a hospital bed because it was stiff, and smelled of chemicals, and the ceiling she was staring up at was a mind-numbing white. She was already bored with staring at it. She turned over onto her side and found she wasn't alone in the room. At the other bed stood...

"Dit...Ditzy..." Rainbow Dash flinched at how raw and weak her voice sounded, and how much it hurt to say even that one word. How long had it been since she last spoke?

Despite the weakness of Rainbow's call, Ditzzy rushed over, giving the blue Pegasus a warm neck hug. "Oh Rainbow Dash, pumpkin muffins sing the mathematics! Kaloo, kalay!"

Rainbow Dash blushed softly and returned the hug, but after a moment

pulled away from her friend. "Ditzy...your speech th...th..." she coughed hard and frowned. "Water..." Ditzy nodded and trotted to the sink, quickly filling up a glass with water. When she brought it back Rainbow drank it all in one gulp, nearly coughed it all back up, and then held the glass back out. "More, please..." Ditzy nodded and took the glass.

It took three more trips before Rainbow Dash felt that she could speak properly again without feeling like her throat was tearing. She looked at the grey-coated Pegasus and smiled. "Thank you Ditzy...what happened? How long have I been in here? Is everypony okay, is Dinky okay!?"

Ditzy silenced the panicking pony with another neck hug. "Butterscotch. Free birds like diamonds, 100% on the final exam. Dinky good, just sleeping!" Ditzy directed Rainbow's attention to the other bed, where a grayish-purple Unicorn filly slept. She frowned suddenly, as if concentrating extra hard. "Rainbow...Rainbow marred by smoke...five days a week, no walking it off...I'm...I'm sorry, Rainbow Dash. I got you hurt."

"Don't worry about it, Ditzy," Rainbow waved her hoof. "As long as Dinky's okay, I'll inhale a hundred lungfuls of smoke. Now then," she said as she rolled from the bed onto her hooves. "Since I'm awake now, let's get go-nngh!" Her legs buckled beneath her, sending Rainbow face first into the floor.

"Rainbow Dash!"

"Ow..." Rainbow rolled onto her back and looked up at the ceiling. "How long did you say I was in here?"

"Five days."

"Ow..." Rainbow Dash fluttered her wings and started kicking her legs. "Well, how about you fill me in on what I missed out on while I just...lie here working the kinks from my muscles."

"Gramophone sundae. Not two-thirds of town burnt down. Place of rare clothing destroyed, so living with big apples. Big-top wizard working for moon came back for turn of the tide, lives in books to find evil wasp. No bad to the lightish red, but been real unbouncy while Rainbow slept. Now should be better!"

Rainbow Dash just lay there staring up at Ditzzy. "So...about a third of the town was damaged by the fire, including Rarity's place, so she and Sweetie Belle are living with Big Mac over at Sweet Apple Acres. Trixie is now a student to Princess Luna and is living with Twilight over in the library while she searches for a pony called Wasp? Oh and Pinkie Pie's been really sad while I was in here, but was hiding it and should now be better because I'm awake?"

Ditzzy nodded, her blond hair waving wildly. "Bingo!"

Rainbow Dash sighed and rolled back onto her legs. This time they held, though were somewhat shaky. She stomped her hooves a couple times and shook her wings. "Well, guess I'm good enough to go. Ditzzy, you want to get something to eat?"

"Muffins!"

"Uh, yeah, Sugarcube Corner sounds good to me. Might wanna get that speech thing worked on..."

Rarity stood still, looking up at the apple-filled branches hanging above her. She had never really noticed before what a beautiful shade of red they were, like little organic rubies. She smiled at the thought and sent some power to her horn, making a spark shoot out from the tip. Immediately a glow of magic surrounded each individual apple in the tree and levitated them to the set of baskets strapped to her sides. Within seconds the tree was completely stripped of the ripened fruit, and Rarity turned to smile at Big Mac behind her.

Big Mac smiled back and nodded in approval. "Let's go get some lunch."

Rainbow Dash hadn't made it three steps past the bakery door before she was tackled by a hyperactive ball of pink.

"Oh my gosh Dashie you're awake! And here! And Ditzzy brought you!"

Thanks Ditzzy!" Rainbow's limbs were flailing, but the overjoyed Earth Pony didn't seem to notice. "I am so happy you're here, I mean you missed my big party for Trixie, who came back by the way, only nice, and then you missed my follow-up party the next night for all the hardworking ponies from Canterlot helping us rebuild town, they're making it all go faster and OOOOH! I know, I'll throw a new party to celebrate you waking up and oh my gosh I am so glad you're awake Dashie I missed YOOOUUU!"

"Pinkie...can't...breathe..."

A few ponies browsing the bakery snickered at the sight, but most just smiled. After a few more seconds Pinkie let go of Rainbow Dash's neck and stood back up, helping her to her hooves before dragging her along to the kitchen. "Come on Dashie, I bet you're wanting something good after such a long time with nothing but hospital food!"

"Pinkie, I didn't have any hospital food, I was unconscious!" But Pinkie seemed not to hear this, making the blue Pegasus role her eyes and smile. Ditzzy just followed along behind them.

Once they were all in the kitchen, Pinkie Pie sat Rainbow down in the middle of the floor. "Now you sit right there, Auntie Pinkie will fix you something super extra scrumptious!"

Dash and Ditzzy sat side by side, neither saying anything as they watched Pinkie get to work on some kind of sweet confection.

"All you have to do is take a cup of flour, add it to the mix
Now you just take a little something sweet not sour, a bit of salt, just a pinch!
Baking these treats is such a cinch, add a teaspoon of vanilla,
Add a little more, and you count to four, and you never get your fill of!!!!!!
Cupcakes, so sweet and tasty
Cupcakes, don't be too hasty
Cupcakes, cupcakes cupcakes CUPCAAAAAAKES!"

Rainbow Dash swallowed the bite of cupcake she had in her mouth and chuckled. "Pinkie Pie, you are so...random!"

"Muffin!" Ditzzy concurred, though she didn't wait to finish the bite of muffin

in her mouth.

"Teehee, thanks you two!" Pinkie Pie bounced over with her own cupcake. "It's a good thing I already had these ready, that batch I just made is gonna take about half an hour. Catchy song though, right?"

"Oh yeah, sure!" In all honesty, Dash hadn't paid too much attention to the actual song. All she could think about was how the cupcake she was eating was the best cupcake she had ever had. The cake was so light and fluffy, the frosting rich and creamy with all the colors of the rainbow, and so sweet with just a hint of spicy. She didn't know if it was because she hadn't eaten anything while in the hospital, but Rainbow Dash had never had anything so good before.

"Oh jeez..." She gobbled up the one she held in her hoof and grabbed another from the tray. She moaned. "Pinkie, what did...what did you put in these?"

Pinkie smiled, revealing teeth colored bright shades from the frosting. "Just a little bit of rainbow, Dash!"

"...what?"

Everything stopped as Rainbow Dash looked at her friend in confusion. In her chest she felt something bubbling up, something heavy that made her breath quicken and her limbs tremble. Pinkie continued smiling at her, but as Dash watched the smile changed, growing wider, impossibly wider. The teeth grew longer, thinner, changing into sharp needle-like points. "What's wrong, Dashie? Don't you like the taste?"

Rainbow Dash dropped the half-eaten cupcake to the floor and stood up, backing away a few steps as the shifts continued. Pinkie Pie's hair was still pink and poufy, but it now seemed matted down with something, something shining and wet that dripped down onto the floor and left bright red stains. Her eyes were wide and bloodshot, frenzied like some madness had taken hold. And then she began to laugh.

"Dashie, why are you leaving? I have so many more cupcakes to make, and I WANT YOU HERE FOR THEM! YOU HEAR ME, DASHIE!?"

"N-no, stay back!" Rainbow backed up until she hit the counter. Tears began streaming from her eyes as Pinkie Pie stalked towards her, still giggling, always giggling! Why wouldn't she stop giggling, why!? Why why why why whywhywhywhywhywhywhywhy-

"Shut up!" Rainbow Dash grabbed a knife from the counter behind her and slashed at Pinkie Pie. She felt the blade meet resistance, and suddenly the giggling stopped. Everything was back to normal now. Rainbow Dash stared at what she had just done.

"Wh-what..." Pinkie brought a hoof up and touched at the ragged gash across her left cheek. She brought it up to eye level and saw that it was covered in fresh, warm blood. Her blood. Rainbow Dash had cut her. She looked back over at Rainbow Dash. "Why did you..."

"I don't know!" Rainbow Dash dropped the knife and kicked it away from her. She looked to the entrance and saw several ponies looking at them with shock, and some with fear. They must have been attracted by the shouting. Rainbow Dash felt the tears continue down her cheeks. "It, it was an accident! Please...please understand..."

Rarity and Big Mac forced their way to the front of the crowd and looked at their two friends. "Gracious, Rainbow, what got into you?"

"I, I don't know!"

In the confusion, no one noticed Ditzy was not there.

It took until they had reached the skies above the Everfree Forest before Ditzy Doo managed to catch up to her target. Approaching the yellow and black Pegasus from above, Ditzy suddenly tucked her wings in and dove straight into a sonic boom. He didn't even have time to open his mouth to yell before her body slam drove him straight down into the ground, a mushroom cloud of smoke and dust obscuring the site.

As the wind slowly blew the dust away, Ditzy climbed up out of the crater her sonic boom had made in the forest floor. Standing at the edge she surveyed it. It was a good six feet deep and a half a dozen yards across,

and all around it for several more yards the trees had been flattened, blown back by the sudden swell of air pressure. Whatever wildlife had been in the area had been scared away by the explosion.

Hard coughing came from behind Ditzzy. She looked to see the mysterious Pegasus struggle out of the hole his body had punched into the ground. He shook some dirt from his mane and looked up at her. "You...you weaponized a sonic boom!? Oh what a brilliant Pegasus you are!"

Ditzzy scowled down at him and flared her wings, getting into the basic fighting stance she learned in her previous employment. "You hurt my friends," she spoke with an eerie calm, her speech impediment swept away by the adrenaline coursing through her veins. "Made them hurt each other! How, why, who are you?"

The Pegasus smirked and flared his own wings, slowly rising up into the air until he was level with her. "I'll let you be the first to know me by the name I'll go by as ruler of this country...Thunder Scream!" With a great beat of his wings he sped forward and tackled Ditzzy to the ground, pinning her beneath his larger body. "Now tell me, who are you, and how were you not affected by my horror illusion?"

Ditzzy didn't try to struggle out of from under Thunder Scream. Instead she smirked up at him. "The name's Ditzzy Doo, Private First Class of the Equestrian Marines, and I escaped from your illusion by doing this!"

She went derp-eyed.

"Gah!" Thunder recoiled from the sight, giving Ditzzy enough room to wedge her rear hooves against his chest and push him off. He stumbled back, and without a second's hesitation she launched herself into the air, bursting above the canopy within a second.

Turning at a sharp 90 degree angle she flew over the treetops, trying to put some distance between her and her opponent. As she flew she thought. Her element of surprise was gone. She'd been hoping that sonic slam into the ground would be enough, but he'd simply shrugged it off like it was an inconvenience! What was this Pegasus?

Ditzzy's train of thought was broken by Thunder Scream bursting from the

treetops just in front of her. His right hoof smashed into her face, sending her spinning from the force of the blow. His next attack she dodged by letting herself stop flying, dropping down beneath him a foot. The next instant she rocketed back up, delivering an uppercut with both hooves to his chin. His head snapped back, his wings faltering a moment. That moment was all Ditzzy needed to twist around and hammer her rear hooves into his gut.

"GAARGH!"

A wild swipe got lucky and smacked Ditzzy back a few feet. When she recovered and looked back she saw Thunder Scream clutching at his stomach and breathing hard. He was slowly flapping backwards, away from her. His eyes glared knives into her.

"Let's, let's call this a draw, shall we? I've hurt you with my illusions on your friends, and you've hurt me with your...your eyes, bleh. Besides, you might want to be getting back to your friends so they can know the truth. It'd be a shame, after all, if our favorite Junior Speedster was charged with attacking somepony without reason, wouldn't it?"

Ditzzy Doo snarled, but knew he was right. Without sparing another glance at him she turned and rocketed back to Ponyville.

Sugarcube Corner had been closed in the time Ditzzy had been gone, all the customers forced out by Mr. and Mrs. Cake and the front entrance locked. Ditzzy entered through the back entrance into the kitchen, where she found everyone basically where they had been when she left. Pinkie sat near the center of the room with Rarity, who had cleaned up the cut on the pink pony's cheek and bandaged it up. Both refused to look over at Rainbow Dash in the far corner from the door, her hooves tied together and her head hanging low. Big Mac kept watch over her, making the rainbow-maned Pegasus seem even smaller.

When Ditzzy took her appearance and flinched, making Ditzzy flinched. She must have looked as bad as she felt. Rarity trotted forward with the first aid kit. "Ditzzy my dear, what in Equestria happened to you?"

Ditzy ignored the offer of help and stumbled over towards Rainbow Dash. "I got into a fight with, ow, the pony that made Rainbow attack Miss Pie." She undid the knots, letting the ropes binding Rainbow's limbs and wings fall to the ground. "Some kind of illusion, he said."

"Illusion?" Pinkie Pie perked up, looking back and forth between the pair of Pegasi. The next moment she had tackled Rainbow Dash to the ground with a flying hug. "Oh Dashie, I just knew that you could never want to hurt me like that! But you had me so worried!"

Rainbow's limbs flailed. "Why can I...never breathe...when around you..."

Meanwhile, Rarity had finally managed to get Ditzy to stay still enough for her own cuts, scrapes, and bruises to be cleaned up. "Oh my dear, thank you so much for this news! I was simply horrified when I walked in. I had never seen such violence in my life!"

The others all nodded, but Ditzy sighed. "I haven't really done much though. Rainbow Dash could've easily hit Pinkie's neck or an eye instead of the cheek." She looked over at Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie, who while not hugging was still cuddled close against her. Both had lost all color in their faces at Ditzy's morbid statement. "Oh, sorry..."

"The thing I want to know," Big Mac said, wanting to draw the conversation away from that morbid area, "is what kind of pony in their right mind could possibly want to hurt Miss Pinkie Pie. 'sides from being a mild bit grating on occasion, I can't think of a nicer pony."

"Well I-ow!" Ditzy scooted away from Rarity and her Neosporin spray. "Well, this might seem crazy to everypony, but the pony I fought...who claimed to have cast the illusion spell...he was a Pegasus."

"No, that doesn't seem crazy to me at all."

Everyone jumped and looked to the newcomer. Rarity glared and stomped at the ground. "You! I should dye your whole coat green for showing up here!"

Trixie rolled her eyes and trotted from the doorway. "I'll apologize for that later, but right now we have a serious problem, and I'm the only pony here

other than Pinkie Pie who knows what is going on. So will you listen to me, or continue standing there and scowling?"

Rarity's eye twitched, but before she could charge at the other Unicorn she felt Big Mac's hoof on her shoulder. "Ain't no point in makin' trouble now. Calm down." To Trixie he turned and said "and what exactly IS going on?"

And so Trixie told the group, with some help from Pinkie Pie, all about what had happened to her after leaving Ponyville, about Yellow Jacket and her search for him, and about how she was staying with Twilight and being helped by her. By the end of her story all had new frowns on their faces, except Pinkie Pie, who had for the most part returned to her normal self and had left to let the rest of the town know it didn't have to worry about Rainbow Dash attacking them.

"So what you're saying is, this ruffian Yellow Jacket cast the illusion?" Trixie nodded, making Rarity frown. "But I still don't understand why he would target Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie, when Twilight's just a few blocks down."

"Yes, that is troublesome," Trixie admitted. She rubbed her hoof over her chin and looked at the others around her; Rainbow Dash, Rarity, Ditzy, and Big Mac. "Anypony have any ideas?"

The room was silent, until Ditzy raised a hoof. "Sonic Rainboom?"

"Sonic what?"

"You really need to get out more," Rainbow Dash mumbled, standing to her hooves and striking a pose. "It's when you go so fast, you make a sonic boom and a rainbow at the same time! And I'm the only pony who's ever done it!"

Trixie raised an eyebrow. "Well, it's good to see you've gotten your bravado back after the events earlier today" at this Rainbow flinched and wilted somewhat, "but you do realize that either of the princesses could do that easily enough, right?"

Rainbow Dash glared. "Well, uh yeah, but that's...that doesn't count! They're like, goddesses and whatever, they can do anything!"

"...they're not invincible, you know." Trixie sat down and hugged her cloak close. Her eyes had gone distant. "They can be hurt just like anypony else, physically and emotionally."

An awkward silence came after this, none quite sure what to say after something like that. Eventually Trixie cleared her throat. "Well anyways, I doubt the attack on your sanity was related to your sonic rainboom. That's an impressive feat, but it's not magic."

"In that case," Rarity said next, "it could be that the target wasn't Rainbow Dash or Pinkie Pie, but their elements."

Rainbow Dash gasped and smacked her forehead. "Of course, our Elements of Harmony! The things we used to kick Nightmare Moon's butt!"

Trixie smiled. "Now that's a theory I can get behind. Magic of that power would be irresistible to Yellow Jacket, or Thunder Scream, or whatever he's calling himself now." She turned and began trotting to the door. "I'll go to the library and see what I can find on the Elements. But be careful. If Rarity's right, then anypony with one could be attacked next. You three, Twilight, Pinkie Pie, that...yellow pony. So watch yourselves."

Trixie shut the door behind her. Big Mac sighed and looked to Rarity at his side. "Are the things y'all get into always this crazy?"

Rarity laughed and leaned against him as they too left the shop. "You get used to it, darling."

"Jack! What in Equestria happened to you?"

Yellow Jacket looked down at his body, at the bruises already forming from his brief fight with Ditzzy. Snorting he shook his head. "It's not important. What have you found?"

Twilight opened her mouth to press the issue, but then just sighed and shook her head. Instead she turned back to the table she stood at. It was littered with books and scrolls, most of them open. She levitated one particularly old book, its grey covering cracked in places, and motioned

Jack over. "Doctor Whoof found it actually, up in the attic. What do you know about the Knights of Equestria?"

"Not as much as I should," Jack answered, going to stand beside Twilight to look up at the book. "I remember seeing mention of it a few times in our old study sessions together. It's an old legend, dating back to before Luna's fall." Looking at the book, he frowned and squinted. "That's Old Equestrian. You're better with that than I am, could you read it for me?"

"Well sure, but," Twilight quirked an eyebrow at him. "Since when could you not read Old Equestrian?"

"The past year I've been more focused on studying other cultures. Gryphons, dragons, sphinxes. I've gotten a bit rusty with pony stuff, okay?"

Twilight giggled at the flustered look on Jack's face. "Okay, okay, don't worry about it." She smiled at him until he smiled back, before turning to the book and clearing her throat.

"Long ago, when the reign of Princesses Celestia and Princess Luna was fresh and before treaties of peace between ponykind and the other races of the world were settled, the land of Equestria was a realm of safety for Unicorns and Pegasi. There few had to fear the predatory claws of gryphons, dragons, drakes, serpents, chimeras, and harpies. King Cronus had just begun his multi-millennia slumber."

Twilight flipped the page and continued.

On the eve of the 10th Winter Moon Celebration, a being that was neither pony nor any other known race came from the Void beyond the stars of Luna's night, falling somewhere beyond the borders of Equestria. It was not until the following Summer Sun Celebration when the gryphons came, the last refugees from their fallen kingdom."

"I always knew the gryphons had had their own kingdom once!" Jack grinned. "It was what my graduation thesis was on."

Twilight gave an absent nod and continued on. "The gryphons told tales of the being of metal and shadow that had spread over their realm like a plague. It was not until messages from the realm of dragons pleading for

assistance in war came that a name was given: Tirek, terror to all free peoples." Twilight hoped it was simply her imagination when the lights flickered. "Assured of the threat this Tirek posed, Princess Celestia gathered together her Pegasi, Unicorns, and the few gryphons that volunteered, and marched to join the dragons in war against the interloper's metal armies. Princess Luna..."

"Yes?"

Twilight turned the page. "Princess Luna took a different path. Gathering six Unicorn knights of renown to her Midnight Castle, the princess...the princess took the magic from a third of the ponies of Equestria, and thus Earth ponies were created."

"Fascinating..."

"Using the six knights as conduits for the gathered magic, Luna destroyed Tirek's armies, banishing the darkness back to the Void. And so the six Knights of Equestria passed into legend."

Twilight closed the book and gently set it back down on the table. She stared off into nothing, silent as she digested all that she'd read. "I don't know what to think. Taking the magic from so many ponies..."

"That's if the legend is true," Jack added, walking to Twilight and nuzzling her comfortingly. "But considering the tale of the Mare in the Moon was true..."

"I know, I know..." Twilight returned the nuzzle, but then turned away and began to pace. "It's just hard to imagine, Princess Luna being the creator of Earth ponies." She shook her head. "But regardless, this at least puts us on the right track. If magic can be taken, it can be given back. All we have to do is find this...palace the story mentions, and we may find clues there. Perhaps I should ask Princess Luna herself."

"No!" Twilight looked back at Jack. "We can't go to Luna for help; she's the one who sent Trixie to find me! This has to be why exactly she doesn't want to risk an Earth pony uprising, she remembers when she robbed them of their magic!"

Twilight didn't want to admit it, but that made too much sense for her liking.

Turning back to the book-laden table she sighed and began going through the books. "In that case I suppose we will just have to do our best with these-" Her eyes suddenly flashed red, and Twilight gasped. "Jack, cloak, now!"

Jack didn't wait for an explanation. Grabbing his cloak from the floor he wrapped it around himself, and without even a flash disappeared. A moment later the library door swung open and Trixie trotted in. "Twilight, help me find that books on the Elements of-what are you reading?"

Twilight shut the legends book before Trixie could get a good look inside and levitated it back to its spot in the shelves. "Oh, nothing, hehe, just brushing up on my Old Equestrian say Trixie what were you asking for a moment ago?"

Trixie regarded Twilight with a quirked eyebrow for what felt to the purple pony like forever, before finally huffing and rolling her eyes. "Princess Luna made me learn that stuff. Seemed like a waste of time to me, but whatever." She turned away and began looking over the bookshelves. "Now where is your book on the Elements of Harmony? It is gravely important."

"It's under E, oh Great and Impatient Trixie," responded Twilight with a giggle, suddenly having a flashback to when Pinkie Pie had given a similar answer. "Why do you need it?"

Trixie levitated the book from its place and walked over to a table to begin reading it. "Your friend, Rainbow Dash, had a horror illusion placed on her earlier today. She attacked the pink one with a knife."

"What!?" Twilight galloped over to the door, not bothering to slow down and open it normally, instead throwing it off its hinges with her magic. "Who could've done that!?"

"My guess is whoever started those fires, Yel-" Trixie looked up. Twilight Sparkle was already gone. "...always on the move."

Chapter 5

The Legend

Twilight Sparkle floated in the darkness. She felt its eddies and flows, its soft currents as it swirled within the Void. In the darkness her chest rose and fell steadily, her breathe coming as easily as if it were a warm spring day. In the darkness, she was welcome, expected. She was not alone.

"You are the embodiment of Magic. A leader, a faithful guide to those you surround yourself with."

Twilight Sparkle turned around, searching the darkness for the speaker. There was nothing but her and the darkness.

"But you are not strong enough to stop us. Your light shines like a star, clear and powerful. But not powerful enough. All you will be able to do is watch as those that counted on you are swept away...and destroyed. And then your magic will mean nothing."

Darkness like knives punctured Twilight's body. She screamed.

The nightmare filled Twilight's mind as she ran through the streets of Ponyville. Ponies yelled out greetings and thanks for stopping the fire, but she ignored them all. She had to find Rainbow Dash, or Pinkie Pie, or someone important.

"Oh, no no no no no! Why can I never remember my dreams until they're relevant!?" The answer came to her almost before she was finished asking the question. "Because they're like Pinkie's twitches to me, nonsensical. Darn it!"

Twilight dashed around a corner, intending for Sugarcube Corner, and found herself slamming face-first what at first seemed to her a moving brick wall. She collapsed with grunt onto her back, eyes rolling in their sockets as

mini-Spikes ran circles around her head. "Ow..."

"Oh, hello Twilight Sparkle. What a SURPRISE seeing you around here."

"Whu?" Twilight looked up at where the voice had come from and saw two blurry blobs, a red one and a white one. She gave her head a shake and the blobs resolved into Big Mac and Rarity. "Oh, Big Mac, Rarity. Big Mac, Rarity!" Twilight jumped to her hooves and circled around past them. "I just heard from Trixie that Rainbow Dash attacked Pinkie Pie under a spell, come on!"

Before Twilight had gone more than a few steps Rarity spoke up. "We know dear, we were both there. Everything was worked out just fine without you."

Twilight stopped and turned back to look at them. She frowned for a moment at the way Rarity had said "you", but brushed it aside. It wasn't important. "They're both okay, you're sure? The spell fully dissipated, right?"

Rarity nodded. "Whatever illusion Rainbow Dash had been under snapped when she cut Pinkie on the cheek, and I felt the last bit of magic in the area fade away after a few minutes."

"Ee-yup. 'Sides a nasty cut and a bad scare, I'd reckon those two are okay enough." Big Mac nodded. "Though I reckon they'd appreciate a visit from a friend anyway, Miss Twilight. You too, I'd say."

"I, what?" Though her worries about Pinkie and Dash had been calmed somewhat, Twilight's nightmare still echoed through her mind. Even so, she could tell something was bothering the pair of ponies in front of her, especially Rarity. The other Unicorn would anywhere except actually at her. It was unnerving. "Guys, is something wrong?"

"...nnnnnnno, not at all..." Rarity frowned. "We just haven't seen you the last couple of days. What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Oh! Hehe, well I-" Twilightg stopped a moment, wondering if Trixie had told them about Yellow Jacket yet, and then shrugged. Couldn't hurt to be on the safe side. "I've been helping Trixie with some research and stuff."

Can't, uh, keep those books waiting too long, hehe."

Twilight smiled and waited for Rarity to say something. And waited. And waited. Twilight's smile weakened as Rarity just looked at her, blankly, as if expecting her to say something more. Finally, after nearly a minute of silent staring, Rarity just frowned and turned away, trotting off.

"Rarity?"

Standing between the confused Twilight and the departing Rarity, Big Mac sighed and looked to the purple Unicorn. "I reckon ya don't know, seein' as you've spent all your time in those books of yours, but Rarity's home burned down in tha big fire. She an' Sweetie Belle been living over at tha farm since."

At this news Twilight gasped and looked back at the now-distant form of Rarity. A weight settled into her gut, while the nightmare flared with life. "Her whole life was in that boutique...her clothes...her designs...her supplies..."

Twilight suddenly felt like she was going to be sick. She staggered, before a strong hoof from Big Mac steadied her. "Whoa there, calm down. You look 'bout as sick as when Applejack discovered her allergy ta lemons."

Twilight ignored the red stallion's words. She shook her head and lowered it so that her hair was hiding her eyes. She couldn't stop thinking of Rarity's face as her fellow Unicorn waited, waited for any act of grief or condolence for her loss. The loss that Twilight herself felt responsible for.

"I should have been able to help her, Big Mac." Twilight shook her head. Tears fell past the hair hiding her eyes. "I had all the power to stop the fire, but not enough to keep my friends from suffering. Rarity's home and shop destroyed, Rainbow unconscious in the hospital for five days...and it would have been worse there if it wasn't for Trixie. I couldn't even help that much."

Before the words could even finish leaving her mouth, Twilight felt a heavy foreleg rest on her shoulders, and a heavy sigh just above her head. "Twilight, I ain't gonna say that Rarity doesn't feel some anger at ya for the loss of her way of life. I ain't gonna say that she's the only way either." The

look on Twilight's face told him that he wasn't doing a good job cheering her up so far, so he continued. "What I am going to tell you is that you can't blame yourself for everything. Sometimes bad things happen, sometimes we fail, but we can't let the guilt of every little thing eat away at us. Ya gotta just accept it, and move on."

As Big Mac finished speaking Twilight looked back down, away from him. Past her amazement at hearing the stoic stallion say so much at once, she thought over his words. Lay down her guilt, could she do that? Did she even have the right to? What if she messed up again, wasn't fast enough again, wasn't attentive enough again?

"Please, help me, and together we can fix all this. Fix everything to how it should be, eh? Don't you want to help people? Or, would you rather wait until the next big fire?"

Twilight looked back up at Big Mac as Yellow Jacket's words echoed through her thoughts. She smiled and gave him a brief hug, before pulling away. "You're a good shoulder to lean on, Big Mac, and a good listener."

The stallion returned the smile and nodded, though he probably wouldn't have if he had known what made Twilight smile. "Much obliged, Miss Twilight. Now if you'll excuse me, I best be getting back to the farm. Wouldn't want Miss Rarity ta buck all the trees without me."

"Right, of course. I think I'll just go visit my friends then. Goodbye."

With that, Twilight turned and resumed her journey to Sugarcube Corner, though now at a slower pace. Inside her the weight was still there; all the guilt of failing her friends, of allowing a third of her home to be burned to the ground. It roiled within her chest like burrowing thing, threatening to burst forth at any moment and consume her. So Twilight Sparkle buried it. She buried the guilt and self-anger beneath the feelings of self-assurance and self-righteousness that came from knowing she was doing the right thing. She would help Yellow Jacket on his mission to share the power of magic with everyone. That would be how she'd make amends for her failures. As long as she focused on that, Twilight knew, she was safe.

Twilight found Sugarcube Corner much as Ditzy had found it earlier that day after her fight with Thunder Screem. Though everything had been cleared up with Rainbow and Pinkie and the knife and floor had been cleaned of the spilled blood, the Cakes had felt it would be better to keep it closed for the rest of the day. "Let everypony calm down" they said.

Twilight began to walk around the building from the front entrance to the back entrance when she noticed someone coming up the road towards her. Her face broke into a genuine grin when the pair of figures got close enough to identify. "Fluttershy, Doctor Whoof, good afternoon!"

Fluttershy gave a soft smile and nod. "Hello Twilight."

Doctor Whoof grinned and pranced forward, stopping just short of colliding into Twilight and instead warmly hugged her. "Twilight Sparkle, I must say it's fantastic to actually talk to you somewhere not in a hospital or library! You really sparkle best in the sunlight!"

At first surprised by the hug, after a moment Twilight returned it. "Uh, thanks, Whoof. The feeling's mutual." She then pulled away and looked between him and Fluttershy. "So what are you two doing out together?"

"Oh um, some of the regular nurses themselves were hurt in the fire, so Doctor and I have been doing volunteer work there." Finished speaking, Fluttershy suddenly gained a grin that was surprisingly smirky for the yellow Pegasus. "But um, what was that about you two meeting in the library?"

Twilight's blush was matched only by Doctor's blush. He quickly coughed and chuckled. "Oh well you see, I've just been helping our friend Twilight with a little research project of hers, hehe. Been very...interesting. And busy."

"Yes," Twilight added, interested in looking anywhere except at the earth pony. "With Spike busy helping out the town metal smiths, Doctor has been very helpful. And just that."

Fluttershy giggled and smiled. "I was just, um, having fun with you two. Anyway..." she looked away from them, to Sugarcube Corner. "We'd just started our break when we heard about Rainbow and Pinkie. Um, do you think we could get in through the back?"

"Never seen Pinkie or the Cakes lock that door before." Twilight led the way around the building to the back door into the kitchen. There the trio found the door not just unlocked but open, with Rainbow Dash in the process of carrying out a bag of trash. When the sky-blue Pegasus saw them she eeped and dropped the bag, which in turn made Fluttershy eep, which made Doctor Whoof quirk an eyebrow and Twilight Sparkle sigh.

"Oh! Uh, hi guys, what brings you...here?"

"We came here to see you and Pinkie of course." Twilight walked over and picked up the dropped trash bag with her magic, levitating it over to the trash can. "We all heard about what happened and came to make sure that you were both okay."

Fluttershy wandered over to Rainbow and gave her a gentle nuzzle. "You are okay, right Dash?"

Rainbow Dash backed up from the nuzzle and laughed, though all there could tell it was strained. "Of course I'm fine, I'm Rainbow Dash, Equestria's fastest...fastest flyer!" her smile cracked some, but it was genuine. "But thanks girls, really..." She turned to look at Doctor Whoof. "Except you. I don't know you."

He grinned and trotted forward, joining the make-shift huddle near the door. "I'm Doctor Whoof, the 11th."

"11th?!"

"My family's rather fond of the name," he replied, chuckling. "Though I'll have you know, I'm the first one to actually become a doctor."

"...right...anyway!" Twilight turned back to Dash and gave the Pegasus her best smile. "I'm really glad to see you're really okay...even though you don't act it...so is Pinkie Pie inside? We'd like to talk to her too."

At that moment Pinkie Pie stuck her head out from the open doorway. Twilight and Fluttershy both flinched as their eyes instantly snapped to the bandage covering half the pink pony's cheek. "Oh hi gang! Hey, what do you use to fix a broken tuba?"

Twilight knew it would be better not to respond to that question. "I don't know, what?"

Pinkie giggled. "A tuba glue!"

Twilight knew it would have been better to not respond. "Ughhh..."

"Brilliant!" shouted Doctor Whoof. He trotted over to Pinkie Pie bumped hooves with her. "Puns, lovely. They're why the Element of Laughter's my second-favorite."

"Ooooh!" Pinkie's eyes shone. "Who's your absolute favorite?"

The brown stallion grinned. "Oh now, that would be telling." He turned slightly and, in a way only Twilight could see, winked at her. "But any who, I'm feeling rather peckish, mind if we come in for some late lunch?"

"Oh of course," Pinkie replied with a grin and hop out of the way. "Dashie and I were just about to enjoy ourselves a super-yummy lunch ourselves!"

"Fish sticks and custard," Twilight heard Rainbow Dash mutter to Fluttershy as the group shuffled into the kitchen. "I'd been planning to sneak off for something actually good, until you guys showed up!" Turning her attention away from the quickly whispered "oh, I'm sorry" from Fluttershy, Twilight stopped and frowned at the sight of Doctor already at the kitchen counter, dipping steaming-fresh fish sticks into a bowl of custard and then eating them.

"That looks...so appetizing." Twilight was glad then that she wasn't the Element of Honesty; if she had been, the beaming smile Pinkie gave her would have broken her right then.

Before Twilight could say anything more though, Rainbow Dash tapped her on the shoulder. "Hey, Twilight? Could, could we talk? Ya know, in private?" Twilight frowned, concerned by the odd request, but nodded. Silently the two peeled off from the group and left the kitchen for the main area of the bakery, where ponies bought the products on display. Only Fluttershy noticed their departure, and she didn't say anything.

Twilight looked around the main room as she and Rainbow Dash entered it. In their general rush to get the customers out of the store the Cakes had left it pretty much as it was, with several samples set out along the display shelf and one large cake with cutting knife and forks near the stairs. It felt weird to the purple pony to see the place so normal, yet eerily empty. She turned to Rainbow Dash as the Pegasus shut the door behind them. "I think I have a pretty good idea of what you want to talk about. Attacking Pinkie Pie?"

Dash nodded, her wings fluttering nervously against her sides. "It was horrible, Twilight. I'd never felt so terrified in my life, not even at the Young Flyers Competition. And Pinkie Pie, she was so..."

Twilight stopped her from continuing with an upraised hoof. "No please, I understand. I studied horror illusions for several weeks back in Canterlot; a, uh, juvenile hobby...anyway. The spell works by affecting the victim's heart and mind. It activates when specific words are said in a specific way, casting an illusion over the victim that twists whatever they see, hear, and feel into a darker mockery. It lasts until the victim takes an action that would logically alleviate their fear, at which point the illusion dissipates."

"I...I attacked Pinkie with a kitchen knife..." Rainbow Dash sniffled and wiped at some tears that threatened to spill from her eyes. "I only got her cheek though."

"Right," Twilight said. "If Pinkie was the source of your horror in the illusion, then attacking her would have been enough to make it stop. But more importantly, how did it start? Dash, what can you remember?"

"I remember...us talking," Dash answered, furrowing her brow as she tried to remember all the details. As she talked she paced around to the stairs and cake. "We were eating some cupcakes, and I noticed...noticed that they were tasting really good. I mean REALLY good. So I asked if she had done anything different. So she told me she added...added..."

Twilight stepped toward Rainbow so that they were both near the cake. "Added what?"

Rainbow wracked her brain trying to remember. But it was all fuzzy. "Added...rainbow."

"...rainbow, Dash? Rea-" Twilight's comment was interrupted as Rainbow Dash's eyes dilated, and the knife she had grabbed from the cake tray was buried to the hilt in Twilight's chest.

Rainbow Dash's eyes returned to normal and she hastily pulled the blade back out, throwing it to the ground. "Oh my Luna, Twilight!"

Twilight coughed, bright red fluid dribbling past her lips as she sank down to the floor. Her mouth opened but only a horrible, wet wheezing came from it. Her front hooves pressed against her blood-gushing chest in a panic.

"No no no!" Rainbow Dash collapsed beside Twilight's weakly thrashing body. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she pulled the Unicorn into her forelegs. "I'm so sorry, I didn't kn-know what I was doing!" She looked into Twilight's eyes and saw the light leaving them. "No!"

And all of a sudden, it stopped. Twilight's body convulsed, her back bending nearly to breaking as pure white light burst from her eyes, mouth, and chest wound. Rainbow dropped her in shock and backed away, watching in awe as Twilight's body levitated off the ground, a look of pain and exertion on the Unicorn's face. Before Rainbow's eyes the light shining from Twilight's chest wound slowly disappeared as the wound stitched itself up, until nothing was left to show that it had ever been there. The red stains in her coat faded back into her body, while even the blood on the knife and floor disappeared.

With a final flash of light, Twilight lowered back down to her hooves. The white light faded from her eyes, leaving her looking at an utterly shocked Rainbow Dash.

"What. The hay. Just happened?"

Twilight felt at her chest and, upon finding no sign that she had even been stabbed, sat back on her haunches. "I really don't know. Nothing like that's ever happened to me before. But I'm not complaining." Twilight closed her eyes and breathed out a sigh, before quickly snapping them open and glaring at Dash. "Now get over here."

Rainbow Dash gulped. "Twilight, I-"

"Get over here!"

The Pegasus flinched and stepped toward Twilight. Twilight matched her step as the Unicorn's horn light up with magic. She touched the glowing tip to Rainbow's forehead, and Rainbow felt something drawn from her into Twilight. No, not drawn, ripped; as if a sickly part of her had been ripped out, leaving an empty spot that was at once horrible and strangely relieving.

The magic faded and Twilight pulled away. Rainbow Dash just barely caught sight of the last few wisps of dark light getting sucked into Twilight's horn, before her eyes rolled up and unconsciousness claimed the Pegasus.

Twilight stared down at Rainbow and sighed. A few tears escaped her eyes and rolled down her cheeks as she thought about what she had just done. She had forcibly drawn out from the Pegasus the horror illusion magic that had lingered on her, however... "Her magic will build back up soon enough. It was...the only way to be sure."

Without another thought regarding her friend on the floor or the friends in just the next room, Twilight teleported herself from Sugarcube Corner. She needed answers.

Applejack bucked another apple tree, sighing as the thuds of the falling apples into the baskets granted a few seconds of blessed relief from the veritable tirade that had been filling Sweet Apple Acres for the better part of an hour. If she was going to be honest with herself, and she was, it was beginning to get annoying.

"Hey, sugarcube," spoke Applejack as she began walking to the next tree needing bucking. "No offense 'n all, but would ya kindly stop your whining? It's getting a might bit distracting for us ponies who are actually workin'."

"Whining!?" Rarity huffed as she followed the cowfilly to the next tree, telekinetically setting the baskets in place. "I am not whining about Twilight Sparkle, I am complaining." She huffed again and kicked the tree, making several apples fall into the baskets. "Do you want to hear whining? Thiiissss is whiii-"

Applejack plugged an apple in the Unicorn's mouth. "Don't do that."

Rarity's cheeks flushed. She chewed the apple up and swallowed. "Well yeesh, no need to be rude about it."

Applejack rolled her eyes and kicked the tree. As the apples fell to their baskets she turned to face Rarity fully. "Listen, sugarcube, I've gotta be honest, I just don't git what y'all whi-" Rarity glared "-complaining about Twilight for. What'd she do, anyhow?"

"That's the point!" Rarity stomped her hooves against the ground. "She didn't do anything is what she did...did not, do, do did not do the, um..." Rarity shook her head and growled. "You know what I mean!"

"I'll tell ya what I know." Applejack began walking back to the farmstead. Rarity followed. "Twilight's bein' Twilight. Stuck with a problem, that girl's got her head so stuck in books looking for answers, she's missing everything goin' on around her. That's everything, Rarity, not jus' that you'n'yer sis lost ya home."

"And-"

"Hold on," Applejack continued, cutting Rarity off. "You know Twilight's a good girl, even if she can be a bit, er, off. If she's missed details, like the Carousel Boutique, you should know it's only 'cause she's got her eye on the big picture."

When nothing was said in response to this Applejack stopped walking and turned back. She saw Rarity standing back at the edge of the orchards, looking out at the fields where Big Mac could be seen plowing. Her brow was furrowed in thought.

"Rarity? Y'all all right back there?"

The Unicorn jumped and looked back at Applejack. "Oh! Yes, yes I'm fine. I was just thinking. This pony that is going after our Elements of Harmony, this...Thunder Scream. Do you think he will attack our loved ones to get at us?"

Applejack frowned and trotted back over to Rarity. Rarity's eyes had gone to Big Mac, but hers went to Apple Bloom over by the farmhouse, doing something or other with Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle. "Well golly, I hadn't considered something like that."

The cowfilly thought back to the events at Sugarcube Corner Rarity had told her about, and a shudder ran down her spine. Ponyville was normally a peaceful town; heck, it had won the "Most Peaceful Town in Equestria" award so many times in a row they had been banned from being counted just to give the other cities a chance. Applejack knew there hadn't been a violent crime since her Granny Smith's youth, a good 70 years ago. The fact that this attack had not just happened, but happened to her friends, tore her up inside.

"I just don't like it," She half-whispered to herself. Rarity looked over at her, silently prompting Applejack to continue. "I mean, this town used ta be so peaceful. Worse thing I had ta worry 'bout was a bad harvest or a stampede. Then all this nonsense started. Started..."

"When Twilight Sparkle moved here," Rarity finished for her. The two friends shared a guilty look, before quickly looking away. Neither knew what to say after an admission like that.

"Ah monkey-feathers," cursed Applejack. She stomped the ground. "I just can't stand ta think about Twilight like that. She ain't never meant us any harm, she's a good girl. The best of us."

Rarity sighed and started trotting back to the farmhouse. "Here's a little bit of advice I've learned from my fashion shows, darling. The best fall the hardest."

Trixie closed the book with a sigh. "Well, that was a load of help." Having gone through the whole story of the Elements of Harmony three times, it hadn't amounted to much. Much of the information Trixie had already learned from her studies under Princess Luna or gleaned from conversations with Princess Celestia. In other words: Yellow Jacket probably knew just as much.

Picking the book up with her telekinesis, Trixie trotted back to the right section of the library and put the book back in its place. As she turned to go back to the table, her eyes slid almost of their own accord to where she had seen Twilight put the book she had been reading earlier. The book that she had been nervous about Trixie seeing. And Twilight wasn't there to stop her from seeing it.

After a quick glance to the library door, Trixie levitated the mysterious book to the table. She sat down at the table and stared down at the book. It was an old thing, that much Trixie could tell, and in far worse condition than the book about the Elements of Harmony. Whatever lettering had been on its cover was long-since faded, leaving an ugly grey both front and back, and its spine was ever-so-slightly bent.

"I'm amazed she doesn't pull a Rarity whenever she sees this thing," Trixie said with a chuckle. The chuckle died after she opened the book and realized what it was. "Why would she be looking up the Knights of Equestria? And why would she be nervous about me knowing? I should to report this to Princess Luna immediately."

Trixie jumped from the chair and hurried across the room to the stairs, grabbing her cloak on the way. She headed up to the second floor and into Twilight's spare bedroom. Closing the door behind her she pulsed her magic through her horn; at once the lights went off and the curtains slid across the window, casting the whole of the room into a shadowed gloom.

"This is going to take a maaaassive ton of concentration," Trixie mumbled to nobody but herself. This was an ancient bit of magic she was about to do. She had never done what she was about to do so far from Canterlot, and therefore from Princess Luna.

"Just...breathe..." Trixie let out a low, slow breath, her eyes shutting as she reached deep into herself for the magic. A smile crossed her face as the familiar warmth washed over her, filling her with its essence. Every Unicorn's magic had its own unique feel to it that took a trained mind to tell; Trixie was such a trained pony, and through it she had grown to know her fellow Unicorns Rarity's magic had a feeling of elegance, soft silk sliding smoothly against fur; her own was energetic, light and whiz-bang like the fireworks she had once used in her show; and Twilight...Twilight's magic felt like nothing Trixie had ever experienced, apart from the Princesses

themselves. All at once like a crashing wave, a roaring inferno, a rushing gale that flattened all in its way...it had taken a while for Trixie to understand why, with all that raw energy, the purple Unicorn had looked so strained when she handled the Ursa Minor. It had not occurred to Trixie until she had heard the reports of Twilight banishing the Ponyville fire that it dawned on her that her fellow Unicorn was straining to hold the power back.

Trixie shook her head, banishing these thoughts. She could ponder the mystery of Twilight's power some other day, now she had a mission.

After several minutes of simply basking in the feel of her energy, Trixie channeled it into the spell she wanted. At once all sounds coming in from beyond the room vanished, replaced by a low, watery sound; the lapping of waves against a beach. The light, too, had changed, from the artificial darkness of the closed room to natural moonlight. The scent of soft grass and freshly fallen pine needles filled Trixie's mind with each soft breath she took. When she opened her eyes, she found herself looking across the Lunar Pool to her mentor, and more, Princess Luna.

"My beloved student, I am so happy to see you once more."

"Thank you, my princess." Trixie bowed her head and smiled at the alicorn across the distance of the pool. "You look well, Luna. I think you've grown since I left."

Luna nodded to this and smiled. "Yes. As the ponies of Equestria once more begin to trust and believe in me, I am restored by their faith. Although," she chuckled, "it will be a while longer before I once more match my sister." Luna's face grew grave then, and Trixie knew the time for pleasantries was over. "Reaching out to my spirit through the Lunar magic in the day, and at this distance, must be a heavy power drain. What has happened?"

"Much has happened, my princess. I can feel the machinations of Yellow Jacket throughout Ponyville. Several of the Six are growing distant, and just a few hours ago one of them, the Element of Loyalty, was ensnared in a horror illusion and attacked the Element of Laughter. She snapped out of it before any serious harm could be done, however."

"Oh dear," Luna said. "Horror illusions? I didn't know they even taught those in the university..."

"They don't," Luna offered. "It seems your sister has been too trusting with who she allows in the royal archives."

Luna sighed and nodded. "Perhaps, but that is neither here nor there. I sense that this is not the worst you have to tell me, my Trixie. What else has happened?"

"Twilight," Trixie replied. "Earlier today, but after the incident with Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie, I found Twilight reading a book that she was nervous about me seeing. So naturally I retrieved it from the bookcases as soon as I could." The light-blue unicorn paused here. "It was...about the legend of the six Knights of Equestria."

Luna's eyes widened. Slowly, she stood up from her sitting position and looked down at her reflection in the pool. Trixie could only guess at her thoughts. After an eternity in an instant, she spoke. "This is...very troubling. Very very troubling. Why must all the troubles of Equestria always come back to my failings..."

"Luna, please, you are too hard on yourself." Trixie tried to smile across at her teacher. "In the months we've been together you have taught me so much; and not just magic. Of all the subjects we have covered however, you spent the least time on Tirek and the Six Knights."

The glistening of a few tears could be seen sliding down the princess's cheeks. "They were my dearest friends, each of them. Whilst my sister and the army went off to war, they were sworn to protect me, no matter what happened. Then I took them with me to Midnight Castle, birthplace of the moon, and there weaved my most powerful magiks into them."

"And the creation of the earth ponies? And Tirek's defeat? And what does this have to do with today?"

Luna waited for Trixie's questions to fade before continuing. "Magic is the very foundation of our world. It flows through everything at some level, affecting it in some way. To so completely draw the magic from so many ponies as I did, I had to...overstep my boundaries." Trixie quirked an

eyebrow. "For such a massive act...I changed a key part of the world itself. Like rewriting a part of a story to your suiting I altered how the world worked so that earth ponies were as like a natural thing, and then infused the energy that would have been in those thousands of ponies into my six knights."

"That's...incredible." Trixie could say no more.

"Yes, and very terrible. With that power the Six Knights went into battle and successfully sealed Tirek's evil away...and then had to be sealed away themselves."

"What!? But, but why?"

Luna shifted in her position. "Because they were lost, totally and completely, to the power. They were ordinary ponies, just like you, or Twilight Sparkle, or any of her friends. They lived, they loved, they had families descending down to today, they got hurt and made jokes and worried over this and that and all the trivial things that give life flavor to you mortal ponies. They were normal ponies exposed to the Source that powers the greatest star to the smallest leaf, drives the most significant events and the most insignificant...and in doing so they lost all sense of perspective. One thing became as unimportant as another."

Luna went silent for a while, allowing her smaller companion to take in all that had been said. Minutes passed by like the leaves falling around them. One leaf, purple with black veins down the center, touched down at the center of the still pool and sent ripples sliding across its mirror surface. "As for what all this has to do with today; everything. Tirek and the Six Knights are still sealed away in Midnight Castle, their power waiting for any pony foolish or insane enough to seek it."

"Like Yellow Jacket." Luna nodded. Trixie frowned and lowered her eyes to the Lunar Pool. The purple leaf was still there, only now the black veins had spread throughout its body. The edges were slowly withering away. Trixie looked back up from it to Luna. "Twilight?"

Luna, too, looked at the leaf. "Twilight Sparkle...I don't know. Celly was always better at empathizing with the hearts of our subjects. All I can see is that she faces a great danger, just like her friends. Perhaps...perhaps her

deeper connection to magic is leaving her vulnerable to-

"TWILIGHT!"

Trixie cried out as Luna, the Lunar Pool, and the forest clearing all around her rumbled from the shock of the outside voice. Before Trixie could regain her concentration the spell broke, and she found herself once more sitting on the cloak at the center of her room. She groaned and collapsed to her side, the exertion of the spell catching up to her as she fought to stay conscious.

"TWILIGHT, ARE YOU HERE?"

Trixie slammed her front hooves against the floor and worked herself back up. There was no way she could manage that spell again so soon. For the moment she was on her own. Gathering her cloak back up she slid it around her shoulders and turned, exiting the room. Trotting down the stairs back to the ground floor, she found Spike there, looking around. "Oh, it was you calling?"

Spike looked up at Trixie. His eyes narrowed and he huffed, folding his arms across his chest. "Yeah, what's it to ya?"

"Oh nothing," Trixie replied, walking past the little dragon to the kitchen. "It is just that I, the Great and Powerful Trixie, do not like having my studies disturbed by annoying little baby dragons."

Spike's eye twitched as he glared at the retreating pony. "You're doing that Great and Powerful thing just to annoy me, aren't you?"

Trixie poked her head out of the kitchen. "My first night here, you tried flaming me back to Canterlot in my sleep."

"And I would have gotten away with it too!" Spike shouted, shaking his fist. "If it wasn't for those meddling Cutie Mark Crusaders and that dumb owl!"

(The author would like to note here that the afore-mentioned events were incredibly silly and bear no further explanation.)

"Yes, sure you would have." Trixie exited the kitchen with several water bottles levitating beside her. She trotted over to her saddlebags and slid them in, along with a few books. "But anyway, Twilight isn't here. She left after hearing about-"

"The Sugarcube Corner thing?" Spike interrupted. "Yeah, I hear about that, it's why I'm here looking for Twilight instead of helping at the forge."

"Well then..." Trixie levitated the saddlebags under her cloak onto her back, and then turned to the door. "Feel free to tag along with me. I'm going off to find Twilight myself."

"Well...fine." Before Trixie could stop him Spike hopped up onto her back. He smirked victoriously down at her. "But uh, what's with the water bottles?"

"Just...a precaution." With that, the unicorn and dragon left.

Chapter 6

Hints of Things to Come

Time passed. Noon slid into a summer afternoon of clear blue skies and warm breezes that caressed the skin and set leaves on their branches fluttering. Sitting on the front porch of her home, Applejack sat munching on a bowl of apple slices and looking at onto the rolling groves of Sweet Apple Acres with some well-deserved pride. It spread out for miles in all directions before her, reaching almost to the very edge of Ponyville itself.

"Eyup, I reckon we bucked enough apples to support them good Pony folk for quite a while."

To the left of Applejack, Granny Smith rocked in her chair and let out a snore that sounded suspiciously like "Give me some sugar, baby" in reply.

Applejack chuckled and shook her head. That was Granny Smith for you. Then she looked back over the acres and acres and sighed. It really had had her nervous for a while. A lot of the food stores had been lost in the fire. Add to that the already-bought food in destroyed homes and that equaled a lot of hungry ponies. But after several long, sweat-filled days of work, they'd managed to gather up enough ripe apples to last until the regular supply trains made their way over.

They. Applejack smiled at that. Her eyes shifted from the apple orchards to the barn. There she could just see her friend Rarity and brother Big MacIntosh, who in turn were watching the Cutie Mark Crusaders doing something or other. The orange earth pony watched as Big Mac said something to Rarity, followed by the unicorn holding a hoof to her mouth and giggling. This was promptly followed by Applebloom huffing and walking deeper into the barn, followed by Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo.

"Boy howdy, that right there's the strangest coupling I've ever seen. I reckon either could've done worse, though."

Applejack was smart. Not book-smart like Twilight maybe, but still plenty smart enough to recognize budding love. It was cute, in a way. Applejack

had spent enough time with the Oranges in Manehattan to pick up on what would be considered "romantically romantic" from the fancy city folk, and was pretty certain the tale of a prim and proper lady falling for the strong, stoic workhorse who graciously took her under his roof would make for quite the popular dime-store romance. That or the trashy romance she knew Rarity liked to read. Applejack wasn't really sure of the difference. Still, she was happy for her friend.

A flash of light and crack of thunder, and Applejack's attention snapped back to the apple orchards. Her eyes widened at the sight of the purple unicorn striding out from it, seemingly not noticing the fact that her teleportation spell had left a ring of charred trees circling around where she had appeared.

Applejack stood up and watched Twilight Sparkle climb the steps up to the front porch. Something was different about her, the farmpony thought, and then she noticed what it was. Where there had once been a bright pink streak through Twilight's hair, there was now a black streak.

"Uh, howdy Twi'. Haven't seen ya in a while, what brings ya around these parts?"

Twilight smiled at Applejack, a warm, genuine smile that calmed Applejack down some. "Hello Applejack, sorry I haven't seen you in so long. I've been...well, I'm sure my idea of busy pales compared to yours, heh." The unicorn looked back at the charred trees in the orchard and blushed. "And uh, sorry for my rather dramatic entrance. I put a bit more power into my teleport than I had intended."

"Oh, don't you none 'bout that," replied Applejack, waving a hoof. "I was just planning on clearing that grove out some anyhow. Least I know what's good for firewood now."

"Of course, right." Twilight smiled again, until a loud grumbling came from her belly. She chuckled and blushed. "Sorry, I never got around to having lunch. I've been kinda busy. Bad, uh, heartburn."

"Well golly, here," spoke the earth pony, holding out the bowl of apple slices with a smile. "Take all ya want, this'll cure what ails ya."

"Thank you, very much." The unicorn levitated the bowl out of Applejack's hooves and began eating one slice of juicy apple at a time.

For several minutes the two friends sat in silence, except for the rocking of Granny Smith's chair nearby and the munch and crunch of Twilight's rather enthusiastic eating. Applejack watched with mounting amazement as the purple pony finished off the whole bowl, the equivalent of six apples, before plucking three more from a nearby barrel of apples and eating those too.

"Well golly, I guess you were hungry!"

Twilight paused, her cheeks bulging with half-chewed apple. She swallowed the mouthful and blushed, chuckling in embarrassment. "Uh, sorry about that. I guess I was as hungry as I thought."

"Oh, don't you worry none 'bout that," replied Applejack, before getting déjà vu. Shaking her head she smiled at Twilight. "If you want I can go inside and fix something up. I think we might have some apple pie left in the ice box..."

"Oh no, that's fine," said Twilight, stopping the earth pony from going. "I actually came here for a reason, though I'd love to hang out and have some pie when I'm done."

"Oh? And what reason might that be?"

Applejack watched as Twilight's smile grew wider. Sweeter. Too sweet. "Would you kindly tell me where Rarity is? I need to talk with her."

"...and that's the story of how I got my cutie mark, ee-yup."

A chorus of amazed exclamations came from the wide-eyed Cutie Mark Crusaders.

"That was the most amazing story I've ever heard," mumbled a dazed Sweetie Belle.

"Ah always suspected ah had the coolest brother in all of Ponyville, an' now ah'm certain of it!" shouted Applebloom.

Scootaloo sat slumped on the barn floor, staring off into nothing. "I can't help but look back at my life before hearing that story and realize how incomplete it was. I can't imagine a fate worse than never hearing about how you got your mark, Big Mac."

Off to the side some, Rarity wiped away at her tear-filled eyes and sighed. "So...beautiful..."

Big Mac grinned and kicked at the dirt floor. "Well shucks everypony, y'all do this farmer too much honor. It wasn't nothing but a simple tale."

"Big Mac, what're y'all doing in there?" came a shout from outside the barn. Everyone inside looked towards the barn entrance as the sound of two sets of hooves approached. "Y'all telling that story with the pirate and the three ghosts again? Knock it off, we've got some more company!"

The half-open barn door opened all the way and Applejack trotted in, followed a few paces behind by Twilight Sparkle. When she entered the purple unicorn's eyes went straight to Rarity. She began to say something, before without warning she was tackled to the ground by three over-excited fillies.

"Twilight Twilight Twilight!" shouted Applebloom. "Where ya been? We haven't seen y'all around town in days! Mah sis and Rarity were getting right on worried 'bout ya!"

"Yeah!" shouted Scootaloo next. "Whenever I visited Rainbow Dash in the hospital they said you were already out, so why haven't you been helping with the reconstruction?"

"And I have a new song!" finished Sweetie Belle, as usual not quite lined up with the thoughts of her fellow Cutie Mark Crusaders.

Twilight flailed beneath the collective weight of the filly trio, while to the side Applejack, Big Mac, and Rarity all shared a laugh at her expense. Rarity especially, Twilight noted, seemed to be enjoying the show. "My, Twilight, you don't look very comfortable down there."

Twilight Sparkle shot Rarity a glare that would have made lesser ponies burst into flames.

After a few more seconds of death-hugging, Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo, and Applebloom climbed off of Twilight. The Ponyville librarian groaned as she climbed back to her hooves. "Girls, would you kindly not jump me like that again?" The three fillies all giggled and nodded. Twilight smiled.

"Good. And answering in no particular order; Scootaloo I haven't been helping with the reconstruction work because I have been busy trying to find out how the fire started and make sure it doesn't happen again, Sweetie Belle I would love to hear your new song when I have more free time, and Applebloom I didn't mean to make anypony worry about me. That's actually why I here."

Looking away from the CMC, Twilight looked back up at Rarity. "There are...some things we adults need to discuss. Would you three kindly go outside for now?"

"Aww, but Twilight!" Applebloom stomped her hooves. "We're big ponies, let us stay!"

Twilight opened her mouth to say something, but then Applejack stepped in. "Now girls, you listen to Twilight. Go on down to town and deliver a batch of apples to the Cakes, would ya?"

At this suggestion all three little fillies seemed to light up. "CUTIE MARK CRUSADERS APPLE DELIVERERS!"

By the time Twilight Sparkle, Applejack, Rarity, and Big Mac all regained their hearing the terrible trio was already gone. Rarity sighed and shook her head. "I have Sweetie Belle, Applejack has Applebloom. I wonder if Scootaloo's parents have to deal with this."

"That doesn't matter right now," spoke Twilight drawing all their attention back to her. She took a small step toward Rarity, her face set into a frown. "There is a lot we need to discuss. Things to put into order. First off, I'm sorry."

Rarity blinked. She couldn't have heard that right. "I'm sorry, but what?"

Twilight lowered her head just a bit, looking down at the straw-strewn floor. In the back of her mind she began counting the pieces of straw in her field of vision. "I said I'm sorry. I'm sorry for not being there for you after you and Sweetie Belle lost the Carousel Boutique. I'm sorry I couldn't save it that night. I'm..." Twilight swallowed, a sudden lump in her throat as tears threatened to spill from her eyes. On the ground there were 359 pieces of straw. "I'm sorry for failing you as a friend."

Silence filled the barn. Rarity, Applejack, and Big Mac stared at Twilight as the quivering pony's strength seemed to crumble before their eyes. Unbidden, all the dark, spiteful thoughts she had been having towards her fellow unicorn swirled through Rarity's head, making her feel suddenly sick and oh so foolish. What had she been thinking? Applejack had told her Twilight was just being Twilight, not some...horrible...cruel...Rarity couldn't understand where these ideas had ever come from in the first place.

"Oh, darling..." Before Rarity could say anymore Twilight looked back up, locking eyes with Rarity, and the other unicorn recoiled back. The torrent of emotions in those eyes... "D-darling...?"

"But it had a purpose! I never meant to hurt any of your feelings, but I had to work! I had to try my best to find how the fire started, make sure it never happened again! Make sure none of you!" Twilight whipped her head around left and right, looking pleadingly at everyone there. "I had to make sure none of you could be hurt like that again! What if next time I'm asleep when it happens, or out of town, or caught by surprise and buried in rubble, or-"

Applejack shut Twilight up by pulling her into a bone-crushing bear hug. "Twilight, you silly pony, hush now. You don't need ta ask for our forgiveness, 'taint none needing to be given."

"But...but I..."

"Sugarcube, y'all are always worrying, always tryin' ta keep track of every little thing. But you don't have to worry about this, Twi'. You don't have to worry." As Applejack hugged Twilight she could hear her sniffing, trying to fight back tears. She smiled to herself at this. "Come on girl, let it out. Don't lie to yourself, just let it all out."

Twilight sniffled once more, and cried.

Fluttershy sighed as she shut her cottage door behind her. Finding Rainbow Dash collapsed on the floor had been horrible. One of the worst things Fluttershy could say she had ever experienced. Seeing Pinkie Pie's smile crumble at the same sight had been even worse. There was something not right, not natural seeing the pink pony's colors dulled, her poofy mane hanging flat. Dead. Not seeing Twilight there had just been strange.

Worse of all to the pink-maned Pegasus came afterwards. After Doctor Whoof had run off looking for Twilight, she and Pinkie had worked together to carry the unconscious Rainbow Dash to the hospital. The hospital...

"I'm sorry Miss Fluttershy, but in the state you're in I just can't let you work right now. You can't help. Go back home, rest."

The head nurse's words echoed through Fluttershy's mind, making her slowly slump to her knees. Unable to work. Unable to help her friends. Worthless, so worthless. Tears streamed down her cheeks. "Angel...Angel Bunny, come here...I just need someone right now..."

The familiar thump-thump of the rabbit's hopping did not come to Fluttershy's ears. She looked up as the clip-clop of pony hooves came instead. "Who-"

Slowly, Rarity stepped forward as Twilight pulled away from Applejack. Though her own eyes were misty she gave her fellow unicorn the best smile she could manage. It wasn't much. "Darling, I feel I too should be apologizing. Lately I've been having such...unladylike thoughts and feelings towards you. I didn't give you the benefit of the doubt like I should have, and I'm so sorry."

Twilight looked at Rarity and did her best to smile as well. With a handkerchief from Applejack she worked to dry her eyes. "Don't...don't worry about it, Rarity. I would've done the same thing in your position. And

besides, sometimes...sometimes, ponies look like they're doing the wrong thing when they're doing the right thing, right?"

Wood shattered as Fluttershy's body smashed against her den coffee table. The air rushed out of her in a soundless scream, painting her yellow lips with flecks of red. Several of the larger splinters dug into her back, breaking the skin and spilling forth rivulets of blood. Her legs flailed, wings flapping against the ground, until a sudden kick to her side sent Fluttershy rolling across the floor.

"I mean, think about when Princess Luna became Nightmare Moon, and Princess Celestia was forced to seal her into the moon! Of course most ponies understood why she had to do that, that she had no choice if she wanted to save Equestria. But others, oh...others saw her as a tyrant. They, they were horrified at the idea of imprisoning your own flesh and blood for a thousand years, all alone, cold, with nothing but her bitterness and anger. But what would they have done in Celestia's place, right? They weren't there, they didn't face the choice. They had no right to condemn her! She did her best!"

A crack rent the air as Fluttershy's head smashed against her own kitchen counter. A gash across her forehead sent blood pouring down across her face, turning her vision red. Her front hooves scrabbling for a knife from the sink she twisted and stabbed backwards as best she could. A cry of pain told the Pegasus that she had hit her mark, so she stabbed again, and again, and again.

After the fourth stab the hooves holding her down pulled back, allowing Fluttershy to move. Quickly grabbing a second knife between her teeth she turned around to face her attacker. "Get away from me!"

"Sugarcube..."

"You're right, AJ, that's so long ago we need a more recent example. I know, us!"

"Darling..."

"I bet none of you ever gave it much thought, but I did. I couldn't help myself. I never can help myself, I have to give everything every little bit of thought I can." Twilight paced the length of the barn. "Think that Celestia placed us like chess pieces. The greatest chess game ever. You, Rarity, you, Applejack, all the others, you were all given those jobs for the Summer Sun Celebration just to meet me. And when the time was right I was sent to meet all of you in just the order I did. Each meeting leading into the next perfectly to make you all like me and me...tolerant of you. Even Pinkie. Even Pinkie was planned to have enough time to throw together a party for me. Some might be horrified at the princess for this, but not me! Because I understand!"

Fluttershy screamed as her knives, her only weapons, were driven straight through her wings into the wall behind, pinning her there. She kicked and flailed, sobbing as she fought to pull herself free; get at the pony standing just out of reach of her hooves. But each movement sent pain throbbing from her wings through her whole body. So slowly her struggles weakened until she just hung there, legs limp at her sides and beneath her.

Slowly, with tears dyed red running down her bruised cheeks, Fluttershy looked up at her attacker. "Why...just why?"

"...why are you talking like this, saying all these strange things!?"

Twilight stopped pacing. She looked at Rarity and something changed in her eyes. The predominant emotion shifted. "Because...because I am Celestia. And because earlier today I was killed after Rainbow Dash drove a knife into my heart because you didn't sense the horror illusion still lingering on her!"

The echoes of Twilight's last few words, screamed, rendered the other three ponies silent. Big Mac's and Applejack's mouths hung slack, while Rarity's knees threatened to give out beneath her. It felt like all the world was looking at her for answers and she had none. "I...I..."

"You nothing!" Twilight's eyes lit up, blinding white light pouring from them as she began stepping backwards to the barn's exit. "Were you too weak to sense it still there? Too untrained? Too troubled? Then...then I'll make you stronger! I'll make you skilled! I'll erase your troubles from the face of Equestria! For all of you, no matter what!"

"Twilight, wait!" But no matter how loud Applejack or Rarity yelled, it was too late. Twilight had teleported away.

"Why...just why?"

"...why?" Fluttershy watched as the other pony walked towards her, totally sure of her safety. And she was right. There was nothing Fluttershy had the will or strength to do anymore. "Because I need a few things from you. And now I am about to have them."

Strong cyan eyes met violet eyes, and something broke in Fluttershy. Her lips twisted down into a snarl, her breath coming in harsh rasps as she glared at the unicorn. "We were friends! Friends, you monster! I trusted you, I loved you! And you do this to me, you sick, demented, f-fiend! I hate you! I want to kill you! KILL YOU, YOU SICK FREAK! I HATE YOU, HATE YOU HATE YOU HATE YOU!"

Blood vessels ruptured in Fluttershy's eyes, turning them a horrible red as, for the first time in all her life, she used the Stare on another pony. The pony staggered back a few steps, before stopping and smiling. Her horn suddenly lit up with a sickly yellow glow and Fluttershy screamed. Her body thrashed about, the knives pinning her to the wall tearing her wings apart as something was torn from her. A swirling pink light spilled from her mouth, twisting as it coalesced into a golden necklace with a butterfly-shaped opal at its center. Before their eyes the jewel disintegrated, leaving the necklace plain; unclaimed.

The yellow glow faded from the unicorn's horn. The necklace dropped down to the floor with a clunk, followed soon after by Fluttershy as the knives were pulled from her. Fluttershy barely had enough strength left in her to keep her eyes open, watching as the other pony scooped up the Element of Kindness from the ground and placed it in a bag. "You'll...you'll never be able to use that Element...Twilight Sparkle."

The purple pony turned away and began trotting to the door. "I don't have to use it. I just need it away from you. Goodbye, Fluttershy."

Fluttershy's eyes widened, before her world went dark.

Princess Celestia touched down to the earth, wings flaring out before tucking in close to her sides. Beneath her hooves the hot desert soil shifted and crunched with her weight. It sent a vague feeling of warmth up through her legs, passing completely unnoticed by the sun princess as she surveyed the scorched land. Blackened husks of buildings stood in messy little rows, interrupted here and there by buildings that had collapsed completely. Smoke drifted up from everywhere, up into the cloudless blue sky. The lanes were littered with debris; shattered glass; overturned carts and carriages; personal items discarded in mad rushes to escape. Nothing remained of Appleloosa but smoke and ash.

Tears welled up in Celestia's eyes. She made no move to stop them as they spilled down her cheeks and splattered to the ground. "I was too late. I failed them." It had been a young town. A fresh town. Its whole life had lain before it, its history waiting to be made. What stories could have been told, what adventures could have been had, what generations upon generations of ponies could have lived their lives. And now it was all gone, robbed from the world.

Celestia sank to her knees and sobbed over the losses, heedless of how the ruins she kneeled in marred her pristine white coat grey with ash. It was here when the stench finally hit the princess. She reeled back, nearly taking flight as the sickeningly alluring aroma of cooked flesh filled her nostrils and mind. Her wings flapped erratically, kicking up dust and ash as she threw her head forward and emptied the contents of her stomach onto the ground.

The next moment she was off, soaring higher and higher until she burst free of the clouds of smoke that had cast the ruins of Appleoosa into a twilight gloom. Once she was back in the sunlight she commanded, some of the nausea left, but the horror remained. Always, always Celestia had hoped and believed for the best, even with the worst of disasters. Foolish as it was, up until she had smelled it all herself she had hoped whatever casualties there had been had died painlessly, with as little suffering as possible. But Celestia knew better now; already she could hear the screams on the wind, the whimpers as flames licked at blackening flesh, the cries for help, for relief, for a final release from the pain...

Princess Celestia feared death. For thousands of years she had watched it take all ponies she ever grew to know. Sometimes they were young when they were taken, in a horrible accident, or sickness. Sometimes they were older; favored adventurers who wandered into the wrong cave, or fell afoul of some roving bandits. Most often though they were old, lying in bed and surrounded by their closest friends and family. A quiet, peaceful death...that Celestia feared most of all. Because after untold millennia, she understood that by the time that death finally came for her, there would be none left to stand by her bedside, save her sister.

Celestia shook her head, banishing the thoughts. There was no use in allowing oneself to be overwhelmed by emotions such as those. Still though she allowed the tears to flow freely as she looked back down at the town, its gutted carcass little more than a smudge on the earth from how high she was. She let her eyes wander, and that was when she saw it. Another rising trail of smoke several leagues to the north, pass a plateau. A new emotion welled up in Celestia's chest as she spread her wings and began soaring towards the source. Was it possible...did she dare hope?

With these thoughts fueling her speed it took scant seconds to reach her destination. Passing over the final ridge Celestia looked down on a massive herd of buffalo, spread out over the plains. Celestia could see many ponies mingled throughout the herd, mostly concentrated near the center around a massive fire.

"A funeral pyre," Celestia whispered as she glided down towards the herd. Several cries rang out when she was spotted, and two earth ponies, a mare with a caramel coat and a large train-pony broke off to meet her as

she touched down to the ground. They made to bow down, but before they could they found themselves scooped up against Celestia by her wings.

"Oh, my little ponies..." Celestia held them close, as a mother hugs a child, pressing her muzzle to theirs. "I am so overjoyed to find some of you safe and sound!"

"P-Princess!" The caramel pony quivered in equal parts shock at the entirely informal closeness, and primal need of it, while her male companion had simply fainted. After a moment of indecision she gave in and hugged back, letting the white coat soak up the tears dripping from her eyes. "Oh Princess, it was so t-te-terrible!"

"Shhh, hush now, child..." Celestia nuzzled the ponies muzzle and neck, willing an aura of calm onto her. Slowly the caramel pony's sobs weakened, until eventually she fell silent, asleep. Celestia gently placed her and the male pony onto the ground, and then looked up at the crowd of ponies and buffalo that had formed around her. To every pair of tear-filled eyes she imparted some of her own aura of calm, smiling as she saw the sadness and despair lessening. This time, when she spoke she spoke to all hearts, not just the one.

"My little ponies, and brave buffalo, I am so happy to see so many of you safe. I felt a most terrible event from my castle in Canterlot and rushed here without delay. However, I am too late, and I am so, so sorry for that." Many of the ponies in the crowd shuffled and looked away, uncomfortable at seeing their princess and divine sovereign actually crying. The listening buffalo, having never seen the princess before, were mostly in awe at the sight of a pony bigger than them. "Who is in charge here?"

The crowds shifted, and a young buffalo girl stepped out of it towards Celestia. Several bandages wrapped around her head, Celestia saw, with more covering a burn along her right flank. "That would be my father, Ch-Chief Thunderhooves...your highness. I will take you to him."

"Thank you."

It was a little more than a minute later when Celestia ducked into the main tent of the camp. Unlike the others it was rectangular, and roughly the same size as the Ponyville town square. In it were rows upon rows of the

injured. Some slept, some lay groaning in pain from burns and broken parts, and others lay silent, staring up at the ceiling with dead eyes.

Celestia let her aura flow out as she passed through the aisles, feelings of calm and peace washing over the ponies. At this some fell into peaceful sleep, while others looked up and, upon seeing their princess, began crying out in the best they could approach to joy. Celestia listened to them all, burning each individual voice to her ageless memory. She would never forget.

At the far side of the tent from where Celestia entered was Chief Thunderhooves. He stood beside a pony-made cot, looking down at the amber-yellow coated pony that lay on it on his back. Celestia flinched at the state the pony was in. Severe burns covered his right foreleg and shoulder, spreading out a bit onto that side of his chest and back. More burns spread over his hind legs, while his tail was simply gone. And the right side of his face...Celestia did not want to know what could have warranted THAT to be the only burn actually covered, hidden by a white veil.

Silently Little Strongheart left Celestia's side and took the earth pony's, gently caressing the uninjured side of his face. Celestia herself went to the buffalo chief's side. "Chief Thunderhooves?"

Chief Thunderhooves turned to her and inclined his head. "Princess Celestia. Your ponies here have spoken much of you. They always knew you would come."

Celestia smiled, though her eyes shone with held-back tears. Then, before the eyes of everyone present, she bowed to him. "I thank you from the very bottom of my heart for protecting and caring for my little ponies as you have. Please, know that until the day Equestria itself dies, I, Princess Celestia, will be in your debt. If ever you need aid, just send the word."

Chief Thunderhooves smiled and returned the bow with one of his own. "Likewise, your highness. I pledge-

"Celes...tia..."

The two leaders fell silent as they realized the pony in the cot was now awake. Celestia looked down to see the uncovered eye wide open and

locked on her. Something in it unnerved her. It was...wild. She leaned down close to him. "Young pony...Braeburn. What happened?"

The bloodshot eye left her and began to swirl around in its socket. When Braeburn began to speak it was with a raspy, smoke-tortured voice. "It was a regular...evening...I was in...the orchards with...Little Strongheart. We were...suddenly clouds...came out of nowhere. So dark...then...then fire began to rain from the sky..." Braeburn fell into a fit of coughing, and when he stopped the cloth over the right side of his face was stained with red. "The orchards were engulfed...it's all I-lost...we ran back to town...found it burning too...saloon began crumbling, I pushed Strongheart away...ahhh...the embers, it's all over my face...it b-burns...why..."

"Why..." Celestia quickly put Braeburn into a dreamless sleep, and then made to turn away to look at all the other cots. So it was just like all the other towns and cities she had found...

"Rainbow..."

Celestia froze. She turned back to the sleeping pony, noticing her buffalo companions were also confused by the word. She took a step closer and listened.

"Rainbow...the Rainbow...it comes...she comes..."

Celestia's eyes widened. "Is it possible...oh Cronus, my father, after nearly 2,000 years...?"

"Princess?" Thunderhooves watched as Celestia turned away from the still-mumbling pony and began trotting to the door. "Princess, what is the Rainbow?"

Celestia paused at the tent flap and turned to look back at Thunderhooves, Little Strongheart, and all the ponies. She smiled as tears, now of joy, streamed down her cheeks. "It is something wonderful, Chief. Everything is going to be okay."

Chapter 7

The Mad Stallion with a Box

"Let's see, let's see, Bardaby's Book of Biconian Ballads, Shakesteed's 7th-century Poetics, Quantum Magic Theories, and one old copy of Legends of the Rainbow." Yellow Jacket straightened out the stack of books on the university library's counter and looked around it at the purple unicorn across from him. "I never took you for a Shakesteed filly, Twilight. Got a secret poet side nopony knows about?"

Twilight Sparkle gave the yellow Pegasus and fellow university student a small smile as she levitated the pile of books into her bags. "Not really, no. I just came across an utterly fascinating theory on working magic through song and voice, and I wanted to explore down that avenue for a while. You know how it is."

"Oh, yes I do!" Yellow Jacket smiled. His forehooves clopped against the wood of the counter as he grew more excited. "Beethooven's theory on sonic wavelengths affecting the density-per-distance of magic fields was incredibly forward-looking for his time. Looked at through the lens of Colterson's-

"Reverberation Paradigm," Twilight continued, "And it not only provides an explanation for why sometimes music seems to come out of nowhere, but it also opens up the possibility of artificial magic manipulation-

"Through hoofheld sonic generators!" Yellow Jacket beamed. "You have been doing your research into this field, haven't you Twilight Sparkle?"

"So have you," Twilight responded, returning his smile. "Sometimes, I think you would have made a fantastic unicorn."

"I..." Yellow Jacket's smile faltered some. "I think so...too. Still, I make do..." But Twilight had turned away and was trotting to the arched doorway leading out into the Canterlot University courtyard. Jack watched her go for a few seconds, his eyes locked on his lazily swinging tail. She had such a

lovely color scheme, he thought, and her cutie mark was beautiful...

"Uh, Twi-Twilight!"

Twilight looked back to Jack at she shout and put on a smile. "Yes, Yellow Jacket?"

Jack shuffled his hooves a moment, the sudden butterflies in his stomach threatening to send him to his knees. "Uh, well you see, Moondancer is throwing a little party tomorrow in the west castle courtyard, and I was wondering if maybe you'd like to go together?"

Twilight's smile dropped, making his drop with it. She coughed and scratched the back of her head with a hoof. "Oh...jeez, sorry Jack, but I...already have plans for studying tomorrow. Plus you're not really my type."

"..." Jack looked down and turned away. "Oh, okay. Well, have fun with your studying then. Tell Spike I said hi."

The only answer he received was the sound of the door shutting.

Yellow Jacket woke up. A groan escaped his lips as he sat up and looked around at where he was. It seemed to be a meadow, though strangely quiet. No birds chirping, no grass rustling as little animals scampered through it; nothing at all. Several yards to the left of where he lay, Jack could see the outermost edges of the Everfree Forest.

Jack moved to stand up from his laying position and suddenly screamed. He looked down to his side and saw it covered in blood, four stab wounds leaking the precious red fluid. He grimaced. "Oh, that's right...I must have passed out from using too much magic..."

Turning around Jack reached into the leather satchel beside him, withdrawing from it the Element of Kindness. Looking at it, Jack slowly smiled before slipping it back into the bag. Next he pulled out a crystal vial filled with a crimson liquid. Jack looked into the liquid, its soft glow nearly imperceptible in the daylight, and smiled. Here, then, was how he had unlocked the magic within him. Here was why his life would end if Twilight did not save him. Here was why his soul was forever damned. Never

before in the written history of Equestria had any pony done what he had done. None had ever drunk...

"Pony blood..."

Pulling out the stopper on the vial, Jack threw his head back and chugged every ounce down. A burning sensation filled his body, as broken skin began knitting itself back together.

Ditzy soared through the mid-afternoon sky from the Ponyville General Hospital. Her lemon-yellow mane flared out behind her, whipping wildly in the wind. The streets of Ponyville passed by beneath her, ponies looking up at her and giving cheerful waves and hellos. She returned their waves with ones of her own five, no, 10 times as enthusiastically. Today, she thought, was a good day.

"Fly faster Mommy, fly faster!"

Ditzy turned her head and smiled at the little unicorn filly clinging to her back. Dinky had just been released from the hospital. "Okay muffin, hang on tightly!"

As the pressure from the hooves gripped around her back tightened Ditzy faced forward again. A grin crept across her face, and the next moment Ditzy and Dinky disappeared in a blast of light, replaced by a grey and yellow ribbon of light that whipped and zipped through the Ponyville skies, filling it with a child's wild laughter. Inside, Ditzy smiled with contentment. It wasn't a Sonic Rainboom like what her friend Rainbow Dash could do, but it was good enough for her little muffin.

"Hey Mommy, if our house burned down, where are we going?"

To the eternal confusion of anyone close enough to actually hear it, Ditzy screeched to a halt in mid-air, nearly throwing little Dinky off. The grey Pegasus blinked and thought about the question. "Uh...huh, yeah, I guess we're homeless now, aren't we?"

Dinky groaned and pressed her face into her mother's back. "Mommy,

where did you stay when I was with the nice nurses and Rainbow Dash?"

Ditsy hesitated answering. Truth be told she hadn't been staying anywhere at all other than at her daughter's side the whole time. Through her close friendship with Doctor Whoof she had been allowed to sleep in a small cot a room over from Dinky and Rainbow Dash's room. Wait a moment. Rainbow Dash...

"Ooh, ooh, that's right!" Ditzzy looked back at Ditsy and smiled. "I've been staying at Rainbow Dash's house. Somepony had to keep it in shape while she was...er, gone. I'm sure she won't mind at all if we crash there until our house is rebuilt!"

"But Mommy-" But it was too late as, with a whoop, Ditzzy Doo zoomed off to Rainbow Dash's cloud home, leaving Dinky with nothing to do but hang on for dear life.

It was but mere moments before the mother and daughter pair arrived at Rainbow Dash's cloud palace. Ditzzy circled around it once, then twice, admiring as she always did the incredible level of craftsmanship her fellow Pegasus had put into it.

"Rainbow Dash!" Ditzzy landed on the front terrace and knocked on the front door. "Rainbow Dash, are you home?"

"Maybe she's still in the hospital?" Dinky asked from Ditzzy's back.

Ditzzy frowned and continued knocking. "No, she's out. I saw her earlier today at Sugarcube Corner when...ahhh...they had a muffin sale. Yum, muffins..." Ditsy gave an especially hard knocking, making the cloud door poof away. "Oops. Uh, I'll pay for that, Rainbow! You know I'm good for it!"

Her shout through the open doorway received no response. Ditzzy shuffled her hooves and flicked her wings with nervousness, a frown growing on her face. This wasn't right, her old marine instincts screamed at her. This wasn't right at all...

"Maybe she's still at the bakery, Mamma. Ooh! Can we go? I want a cupcake!"

Ditzy took a step away from the doorway, then another, and then turned away from it and prepared to take flight. "No my muffin, that's not a good place to be right now. Also I just realized how stupid an idea this was because you can't walk on clouds. Feel free to bonk your mom on the head, sweetie."

Bonk.

Ditzy rubbed the back of her head. "Ow. Okay, now we-"

"Hello up there! Rainbow Dash, are you there?"

Ditzy blinked at the distant voice, barely audible over the wind. Peeking over the cloud edge she looked down at the ground and saw Trixie standing there, the little dragon Spike sitting on her back. Ditzy leaned a bit further out and waved. "Hi there! Rainbow isn't home right now, can I help you?"

Trixie ignored Ditzy's question and looked back at Spike. "Well, you know Rainbow Dash better than I do. Where else could we find her?"

Spike tore his eyes from the grey Pegasus and her increasingly animated waving and looked at Trixie. "Well when she's not napping in a random tree she can usually be found playing pranks with Pinkie Pie or challenging Applejack to a contest."

"Hmm." Trixie scratched at an ear and looked back up at Ditzy, who by this point was somehow balancing on her rear hooves on the cloud while waving both front hooves at them. "Who IS that? She's the pony who fought off Yellow Jacket, but what does she actually do?"

"Oh, that's Ditzy Doo, Ponyville's mailmare and second-fastest flyer." Spike grinned and crossed his arms across his chest. "She's pretty cool, for a mo-wait, Yellow Jacket?"

"Yes yes, Yellow Jacket, now an evil magic-using Pegasus with unknown plans, what, does Twilight not tell you anything anymore?"

Spike frowned. "Well, no...not since you arrived."

"Oh." Trixie looked away from Spike, back to Ditzzy. "Well sorry for that. But anyway, DITZY! Could you come down here and-STOP THAT WAVING!"

Ditzzy froze mid-air, a light blush covering her cheeks as she dropped all four legs back down to the cloud. On her back Dinky giggled. "You're funny, Mommy. But I think you mad the Unicorn lady mad."

A grin crossed the mail pony's face as she gave her wings a flap and drifted down from the cloud. "A life's not fully lived if you never upset somepony at some point during it."

Once Ditzzy touched down on the ground she smiled at Trixie and Spike. "Hello, people. How can I help you?"

"We need your help to find Rainbow Dash," answered Trixie.

"Why do you need to find Rainbow Dash?"

"To help us find Twilight."

Ditzzy blinked, shared a look with her daughter, and then stared at the unicorn. "Then...why don't I just help you find Twilight?"

"..." Trixie raised her hoof, paused, looked off into the distance for several seconds, and then set it back to the ground. "Uh...that is exactly what I was going to suggest. Yes, exactly." Spike began laughing at Trixie, until a buck sent him flying off her back. She huffed at the baby dragon before turning back to the mother/daughter pair. "Whatever. Do you have any idea where TWILIGHT might be then?"

"Ooh, ooh!" Dinky hooped up and down on Ditzzy's back and waved a hoof. "We could go check out Doctor Whoof's place! He fancies her!"

"Fancies her?" Trixie quirked an eyebrow at the child, before switching to Ditzzy. "That eccentric doctor...fancies our favorite egghead? I was wondering why he visited the library so much."

Ditzzy frowned and looked at her daughter. "Dinky, hush, it's not polite to gossip about other ponies. But yes," She continued, looking to Trixie and a

recovering Spike. "Doctor Whoof has had a little crush on Twilight Sparkle for a while. I only know because I'm a close friend of his, nopony else knows.

"Feh, that's what you think," mumbled Spike. He climbed back up onto Trixie's back and glared down at her. "Please don't buck me again."

"I'll consider it," she responded. "Anyway, we're getting nowhere by just standing around here expositing. Ditzzy, if you really think Doctor Whoof can help us, then lead the way."

"Okay!" Ditzzy turned and began trotting away, before suddenly halting. She and Dinky shared a look, before she glanced back at Trixie. "I should...probably warn you, Doctor's house is...kinda really weird."

"Oh, please. I, the Modest and Humble Trixie, have traveled the world and seen countless bizarre sights. I am sure this will be more than ordinary enough."

"The Modest and Humble Trixie is willing to admit she might have been wrong in her earlier estimation." Trixie looked the blue wood box up and down, not quite sure what to make of it. "This is nowhere near ordinary enough."

"I told yooouuu," Ditzzy sang as she trotted pass Trixie and rapped several times on the door. "Doctor's house is like nothing you've seen."

"But it's nothing like a house!" Trixie waved her hooves at the thing. "It's a box! It's blue! It's standing in the middle of Whitetail Woods! It's too small to fit anything! It's-"

"-bigger on the inside," interrupted Doctor Whoof's head, poked out of the now-open door. He smiled at the two mares, filly, and baby dragon standing at his doorstep. "I couldn't help but hear and get annoyed at your shrill jaw exercising, so I came out to tell you to shut up."

Trixie gaped at the pony head sticking out of the blue box. "I-but-space-what. What." She growled and gave her head a shake. "No. No, I got this,

plenty of experience from my magic act with sleights of perception. That's just a plain box with enough room for one pony, barely. Lame prank."

"Oh, is that so?" Doctor Whoof hopped out of the box and to the side, out of the way of the door. Then he gave a nod to Ditzzy and Dinky. "If you fine ladies would like to go inside, go on. I have company who could use some cheering up. I need to have a little chat with our magician friend and the dragon." For a moment he glanced at Spike. "And you, stop being so quiet! It's freaking me out!"

"Ooh, Trixie made Doctor mad!" Dinky giggled and hopped off Ditzzy's back.

"Dinky, hush, it's not polite to tease others like that." Ditzzy frowned at her daughter, before turning and winking at Doctor. "Do try to be a little easy on her, Whoof. She's new around here."

And with that, Ditzzy and Dinky trotted into the box. Trixie tried to get a look inside, before Doctor stood in her way. He frowned down at her. "Hold on, magician, there's a few things I need to set down first." He waved a hoof at the box. "Firstly, you will be the first other than Ditzzy, Dinky, and one other I've ever allowed into the DRIS, so treat it with respect and dignity. She is a sweetie."

Spike held up his hand and Doctor nodded to him. "What's a DRIS?"

"Ah, leave it to the child to ask the most obvious and most important question first." He turned and opened the door, motioning inside. "Welcome, magician and dragon, to my Dimensions Relative In Space."

The unicorn and dragon both looked at the doorway, whatever lying beyond hidden by a golden glow, and then shared a look. Trixie took one step, then another, and then with the third was inside the DRIS. Their jaws dropped at the sight, followed by what Trixie believed to be her stomach. "It's really...really..."

"Go on, say it," Doctor Whoof said, closing the door behind them before half-trotting, half-skipping past the dumbfounded pair into the room. "I've not heard it too many times, but it never gets old."

"Bigger on the inside," mumbled Spike. He looked around at it all. Gold/bronze walls surrounded a wide-open area that reminded him of the main lobby of the Ponyville library. It was littered with trinkets and strange machinery, all centered on some kind of dias at the center, from which emitted a soft humming sound. "This is so cool!"

"I know, right!" Doctor held up a hoof, to which Spike gladly gave a high-five. "It's all Gallopfreyan in design. 10 generations worked on this thing, I'm the 11th. A sonic resonator at the center," here he pointed to the glass and metal pillar they now stood by, "manipulates ambient magic and PKE energy in the environment. Think of it like your old stagecoach, Trixie. How you could fold it up for travel, but when time for a show it could be unfolded for several magnitudes more space? Well, basically this place is folded and unfolded at the same time."

Like Spike had done earlier, Trixie raked her eyes over the area, ignoring the giggles from Spike at what must have been a very dumbfounded expression. "Incredible...I'd always heard the Gallopfreyans were natural geniuses, but I never believed they had accomplished anything like this before-oh!" She looked over at Doctor to find his expression unreadable. "I'm, I'm so sorry."

An awkward silence followed, until Trixie coughed. "Earlier, you said you had a guest? Is it Twilight Sparkle?"

Doctor Whoof sighed as he looked away to a door on the far side of the room. "No, I'm afraid not, but it's somepony just as important. Listen, there are some things you need to be filled in on..."

"Mommy, may I go to the pool?"

Ditzy looked from the door she stood in front of, down to her daughter. She smiled and patted the unicorn filly on the head. "Of course muffin, have fun."

Ditzy watched her little filly scamper down the hallway until a corner took her out of sight, before sighing and dropping her smile. It was a good thing that Dinky had asked that, she thought to herself as she brought a hoof up to knock on the door. It would make this next part much easier. "Rainbow

Dash, are you there?"

"..."

Ditzy frowned and knocked again. "Rainbow Dash, that was just me being polite, I know you're in there. Doctor told me."

"...go away. I don't want to hurt you."

Ditzy sighed and gave the lock of the door a swift kick. It broke, allowing her to simply push the door open and enter. "No offense Rainbow, but you couldn't hurt me right now even if you wanted to."

Rainbow Dash lay limp on the guest room's bed, her wings tucked to her sides and her eyes trained on the ceiling. Her eyes were red and puffy, her cheeks wet from recent crying. "I didn't w-want to hurt my other friends either," she whispered. She fought back a sob and turned onto her side to look at her fellow Pegasus. "But I did anyway. I couldn't stop myself."

Ditzy began to say something, before her friend's wording caught her attention. "Friends?"

Rainbow Dash nodded. Her eyes filled with tears again as she rolled away to stare at the ceiling. "Twilight...I was telling her what happened, when she said the trigger words. I...stabbed her in the damn chest!" Rainbow collapsed, sobs wracking her body as all the guilt burst forth. "She was tr-trying to help me and I buried a knife up to the ha-ha-handle in her! But, but then she came back and did s-something to me, and now I can't fly! I-"

Ditzy slapped her. Rainbow's words stuttered out as she held a hoof up to where her cheek stung. Her fellow Pegasus meanwhile flapped her wings and hovered above her, forcing Rainbow to look up at her. "Rainbow Dash, you calm down this INSTANT. You are not to blame for attacking her friends. The pony who put the illusion spell on you is. And no, you could not have overcome it through sheer willpower, that's a myth propagated by lame fiction. No pony without the proper training can break out of them. Trust me on this, once those are on you, you're gonna be affected."

Rainbow Dash sniffled and looked away. "Let me guess, Marine Basic

taught you that...wait!" Dash sat up and looked Ditzzy in the eye. "Taught! You can teach me how to break out like you did! Then I wouldn't have to worry about attacking any of my friends again!"

Ditsy smiled and placed a hoof on Dash's shoulder. "I thought you would never ask. Sorry for slapping you."

"It's okay, I probably needed it." Dash settled back onto the bed, moving over so her legs were under her. "Now I just wish I knew what happened to Twilight and why I can't fly."

Ditzzy settled down next to Dash and wrapped a wing around her shoulders. "You don't remember?"

Dash shook her head. "No, I blacked out after...after Twilight did something. It felt like she ripped something out of me. Could have been the illusion for all I know. Then next I wake up in a hospital bed with that crazy Doctor Whoof nearby, and together we came here. I..." she looked down. "I didn't want to be alone. And he promised that if anything happened again he would...take care of me."

"That sounds like Doctor, all right. If it makes you feel any better, he really would have. Taken care of you, I mean." At this Dash shrugged and kept her gaze towards the floor. Ditzzy sighed. "Well anyways, from your account I wouldn't be worried too much about not flying. It just sounds like she had to take a lot of your natural magic that lets you fly to remove the spell. It will replenish soon enough. So take stock of your fish shares, bumblebees sleep down the canal."

"Yeah I-what?" Dash looked at Ditzzy. Ditzzy smirked back. A moment passed, and then just like that the tension snapped, and they fell off the bed onto the floor. Their raucous laughter filled the room and rang down the halls. It was the hardest Rainbow Dash could remember laughing in quite some time; a loud, clear, happy laugh that seemed to make all the hardships of the past and coming days that much smaller, that much easier to handle. Maybe it was, they didn't know. All they knew was here, in each other's presence, the laughter just wouldn't stop.

Then suddenly a bump, a yelp, a little bit more rolling on the floor, and Rainbow Dash found herself on her back, looking up into a pair of beautiful

lemon-yellow eyes. Ditzzy Doo smiled down at her, seemingly more than happy with the position. Slowly, Rainbow Dash smiled back. The warm weight of Ditzzy's body lying on her own felt so right, as if it had been missing all this time and was only now as it should be.

"Ditzzy, I-"

A pair of soft lips against her own stopped Dash's words cold. Her eyes fluttered, a moan rising from her throat as a bolt of white-hot lightning raced down her spine. Her wings flared out to the sides, bringing a hot blush to Dash's cheeks before she wrapped her front legs around Ditzzy's sides and began returning the kiss.

"HOLY GUACAMOLE!"

Both Pegasi yelped at the sudden shout and sprung away from each other, taking different sides of the room. They looked to the open door to see a slack-jawed Spike standing there. Rainbow Dash growled. "Spike, you little...little jerk! Knock next time!"

Spike blinked, arms hanging to his sides and eyes glued to the spot where a moment ago he had seen Ditzzy and Dash. "Holy guacamole!"

Rainbow Dash quirked an eyebrow and looked at Ditzzy. "I think we broke him."

"Holy guacamole!"

Ditzzy sighed. "At least it wasn't little Dinky."

"Holy guaca-"

A blue hoof knocked Spike out of the doorway and Trixie walked through it into the room. "Doctor Whoof asked me to tell you two to keep it PG while he's gone." Here the Unicorn smirked, a light blush covering her own cheeks. "And to at least leave that kind of stuff to rooms without security cameras."

Rainbow Dash groaned and collapsed to the floor, covering her face with her hooves. Ditzzy merely blushed and released a chuckle. "Um...right,

hehe. You said Doctor's gone?"

"Yep." Spike picked him up from the floor and shot a glare at Trixie, before dusting himself off. "Whoof told Trixie about Dash attacking Twilight and stuff, Trixie told Whoof about some Knights of Equestria and stuff, then Whoof grabbed a metal cylinder thing and ran off. Also we need to go find Twilight and the others immediately, fate of Equestria, something something Tirek...I think that's it."

"Find egghead #1? No problem!" Rainbow Dash lunged forward, wings spread, and promptly crashed to the ground, completely flightless. "Ow. Okay, new plan. You guys go find egghead #1, I'll stay and keep an eye on Dinky."

"Okay! My muffin's in the pool."

"Holy guacamole, this place has a pool!?"

"That's strange, according to the security monitors she is in the library."

Ditzy smirked. "So is the pool."

"JAAAAAAAAACK!"

Doctor Whoof slammed the library door behind him, nearly breaking it. He strode to the center of the library's main lobby and threw his head back. "Jacket! I would have some words with you!"

The sound of pots banging and the fridge door closing came from the kitchen, and then Yellow Jacket poked his head out through the doorway. His mane was covered in small splotches by flour, and a bit of milk dripped from his chin. "Would you mind? I'm trying to make dinner here. Trying very hard."

Doctor began striding towards Jack, glaring holes through him. "Oh really? How nice of you, let me make you something." In a flash he'd punched Jack in the snout, sending the Pegasus reeling back into the kitchen. "There, enjoy the hoof sandwich!"

Jack climbed back up onto his hooves. His legs wobbled a moment before he steadied himself. He trained his eyes on the other stallion as he began edging his way out of the kitchen. "What the hay was that for!?"

"Oh, don't play dumb with me!" Doctor kept pace with Jack, keeping the yellow Pegasus between him and the wall. You got really dumb or really arrogant, attacking Rainbow Dash with that illusion spell. Sowed some great confusion, but you know what happened?" He twisted around and hammed a rear hoof into Jack's side, forcing the air from his lungs in a gasp. "You got Twilight hurt!"

Jack coughed, panting for air. With a flap of his wings he shot upwards towards the ceiling, out of reach. "Wh-what? What are you talking about? Is Twilight hurt?"

"I said stop playing dumb with me!" Reaching his head back to the holster on his side Doctor drew a silver and gold rod, about the length of a toothbrush and with a green crystal fixture at one end. He pointed this end at Jack and pressed a button, causing it to light up and a shrill sound to fill the air. The next moment the Pegasus fell to the ground, his wings flopping uselessly to his sides. Before he could do anything Doctor strode up and pressed a hoof to his chest, pinning him to the ground. "Don't move."

Despite the warning Jack continued flapping his wings, but no matter how he flapped, he couldn't get his magic to synch up with it. Wide eyes stared up at Doctor as panic began to set in. "What did you do? What did you do to me!?"

"I de-synched your magic with your motor functions," replied Doctor. "It will take hours before you can fly again. So now you know how Rainbow Dash feels, I hope."

"What?" Jack's flapping ceased. His chest rose and fell, still winded from the kick from the earth pony. Despite this his eyes blinked, flicking back and forth from Doctor's face to the device clenched between his teeth. After a moment understanding dawned in them. "You...you got Colterson's theories worked out. No, not just worked out, implemented! You're Gallopfreyan!"

"..." Doctor Whoof removed his hoof from Jack's chest and stepped back, but kept the device trained on him. "Maybe, maybe not. That doesn't mean the same as it used to, and I'm not quite sure what my sonic screwdriver has to do with anything."

Jack struggled to his hooves, letting out one, hacking cough before looking up at Doctor. "I didn't...I didn't do anything to hurt Twilight, or Rainbow Dash, or anypony at the bakery. Please, please, give the benefit of the doubt to a fellow Gallopfreyan."

Doctor Whoof's eyes widened. He took another step back, before slipping the device back into its holster. Then he looked back at Jack and sighed. "I'm a doctor. My choice in life is to help ponies. So I'll let you explain yourself."

Jack pulled a chair from the nearby desk and sat in it. "Firstly, everything I told you and Twilight those few days ago is true. I found a way to harness the natural magic within myself, discovered I would die from it if I didn't do something, and fled here. I've spent all my time here, in this library, in these books, looking for something, anything that could help. Twilight's been helping and so, I've noticed, have you. Thank you, I don't want to die."

Despite the situation, Doctor Whoof found himself smiling. "I'm a doctor. That's what I do." Then his smile dropped, and he pulled over a chair to sit beside Jack. "So what you're telling me is that you haven't left this library at all? No scouting about town, no visits to the local shops, no prancing through the flower fields with your mane blowing in the wind?"

"No, of course not, that would be stupid. Listen! Why would I attack Twilight's friends and risk alienating her? My life depends on her! I won't..." Jack slumped in his chair, his head hanging down. "I guess I have no proof to show I didn't do...whatever happened, you haven't told me yet. I only have the honesty of my emotions. I could never hurt her. Not her."

Silence followed as Jack finished speaking and looked up at Doctor Whoof. Doctor looked back, his expression blank to the Pegasus. Minutes passed, and then, "You sound like a forlorn lover, sentencing himself to a dark and gloomy life."

"Hm." Jack stood up from his chair and began to pace. "At the university, all the Unicorn students and faculty were against me. Except for her. Sure, I couldn't really call us friends, she never opened herself up for that, but she never judged what I could get accomplished just on my being a Pegasus. She, and the research, made everything else bearable."

"Oh yes, of course. I take it everything else was unbearable then."

The globe Jack had wandered to exploded in a burst of yellow magic. Jack whirled back to face Doctor. "Oh, that's an understatement. They did something they had no right to do. I was a Pegasus, they said. I had no right to study magic, no future studying magic. And they all worked...so hard to get me out of there. But they failed! They had no right to decide my future, my destiny for me! I will decide that! I am THE MASTER of my destiny, not them! It's their fault I did what I did!"

No sooner did Jack finish speaking when a wisp of green smoke flew in beneath the front door and materialized into a letter in front of Doctor Whoof. Grabbing it from the air he held it in his hooves and read silently to himself.

"We have found Twilight, and worse! Stay at the library, we're coming!"
-Spike.

Doctor Whoof looked up from the letter at Yellow Jacket. "You might want to hide."

Chapter 8

The One with a Song in It

Celestia's day ended, as Luna's night began. All the little ponies retreated back to their homes, ready for a good book by the fire, or a belated meal with family, or simply an early retreat into bed in preparation of an early morning rise the next day. It had been a long, hard day of work for everyone, even those not directly working to rebuild the town from its recent disaster. There was still much to be rebuilt, many ponies were still homeless and forced to stay with friends, relatives, or complete strangers. In as good and wholesome a town as Ponyville, none had to go without a roof over their head. Even the workers from Canterlot were welcomed with open doors and smiling faces. Many ponies, indeed, felt that in the wake of this upsurge of friendship, perhaps the fire was not so bad.

But something else ran through the undercurrents of Ponyville other than friendship. All noticed it, and all were afraid to broach it. An unnatural chill filled the air, making every breeze a touch of ice. Every gust of wind carried with it a sound, like a far-off shriek faded through memory. Every light seemed dimmer, vaguer than it should have been, as if seen through a haze that wasn't there. And though the presence of other ponies brought comfort, it also brought fear. Throughout town there were flinches, shudders barely hidden as, for scant seconds, to viewers' eyes those they were looking at took on visages of madness. Smiles snapped into wicked grins before snapping just as quickly back. Eyes seemed to fill with an evil gleams, statements with cruel intentions, and every movement with the intent to grab a knife. Then it would all be gone, and the pony would be left wondering whether or not to keep a knife of his or her own close by. For safety.

The harmony was dying.

At the Ponyville library all the "heroes of Ponyville", and several others, were gathered. Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, Ditzy Doo, Rarity, and Spike the

dragon all milled about in the main lobby of the library, gathered around the table there, or hung out in the kitchen, fixing themselves something to calm their nerves. It could be said that the feeling that permeated the rest of the town was focused on that building, that room. Whoever said that would be right. Upstairs in Twilight's room rested Twilight Sparkle herself, found unconscious in the Whitetail Woods by Spike and Ditzzy. Unbeknownst to the other gathered ponies Trixie was also there, standing at the bedside and watching over her fellow Unicorn.

In the library's second-floor guest room, other ponies were gathered. An eccentric doctor, a down-to-earth farmpony, and an innocent Pegasus.

"Be honest, doc. Is she gonna be all right?"

Doctor Whoof swept the green light of his sonic screwdriver over Fluttershy's body a final time, before deactivating it and sliding it back into his holster. Instead of answering Applejack's question he sighed and looked over Fluttershy with his natural eyes. The poor Pegasus's body had been found by Applejack in her cottage after the call to gather had been sent out, and brought with all haste to the library and Doctor Whoof. With Rarity's help he had cleaned her and bandaged her injuries. Now Fluttershy rested in the guest bedroom, with none but the two of them keeping watch. Everyone else was downstairs or in Twilight's room.

"Doc, please answer me! Will she be okay?"

Doctor Whoof dragged his eyes up from Fluttershy to the earth pony at his side. He couldn't meet her eyes. "She has severe internal bleeding, multiple compound fractures all along her rear right leg and a single clean fracture in her front left leg. A broken collarbone, two broken ribs, a broken nose, and a massive bruise on her skull, probably from having her head slammed through something hard, like a kitchen counter. About two dozen shards of glass and wood splinters, pulled from her back and sides with Rarity's magic. And then the wings...what remains of them...it's a bloody miracle she survived this long without medical treatment. She will live, I can tell you that. But she will desperately need her friends when she wakes up."

Applejack nodded, slowly. Tears that had threatened to break loose throughout her fellow earth pony's description of the injuries now began to flow freely down her cheeks. "O-okay then. Th-thanks for everythin', doc."

Her knees trembling, Applejack sat down on the floor and rested her head onto the bed, eyes focused on the unconscious form. "If'n ya don't mind, I'm just gonna...keep her company awhile. In case she wakes up..."

Doctor Whoof nodded and turned to go. Trotting as softly as possible he made it to the bedroom door, and then turned to look back at Applejack and Fluttershy. "I'm so, so sorry."

Applejack gave no response as the door closed, casting the lightless room into total shadow.

Doctor Whoof closed the door behind him and trotted over to the stairs to the main floor. From the main floor he could hear several raised voices, though he could not tell who exactly was speaking. One he thought was Rainbow Dash, although it might've been Ditzzy.

Halfway down the stairs, Doctor Whoof met Rarity going up them. He nodded to her and she smiled back, though the smile was weak. "Doctor Whoof, how is she?"

Doctor Whoof sighed and ran a hoof through his hair. "Well, if she lives through the night, she'll probably be okay. Though she is definitely probably going to be out of commission for quite a while."

"Oh...okay." Rarity hung her head, her purple bangs hiding her eyes. Whoof sighed again and made to continue on down the stairs when she looked up again. "Doctor, I was just on my way to check on Twilight Sparkle in her room. Will you join me?"

"Oh, no," Whoof replied, waving her off with a hoof. "She's perfectly fine, just tired and asleep. It wouldn't be appropriate for a doctor to hover around his patient like that."

Rarity smiled and, taking him by the shoulder, began leading Whoof back up the stairs. "Then don't visit her as a doctor, dear, visit her as the friend you want to be." She looked at him from the corner of her eye. "Besides, I think you could use the company. You seem lonely."

Whoof didn't reply, merely walking to the door to Twilight's room and opening it a crack. Rarity made to push it open all the way but Whoof held up a hoof to stop her. "Wait, I think somepony's already in there," he whispered.

Rarity frowned and leaned in close. She wanted to peak through the crack. "Applejack's with Fluttershy. Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, Spike, and that Ditzzy girl are downstairs, and Big Mac went home to watch Applebloom and Sweetie Belle. Who's that leave?"

Whoof widened the crack just slightly and peaked in with Rarity. The room past the door was dark, lit only by the moonlight streaming in through its windows. "Well either Yellow Jacket snuck in here, or..." he caught sight of a light blue coat. "Oh right, Trixie."

Trixie sat on the stool and looked down at Twilight Sparkle. The purple Unicorn was nestled up deep in her bed, covers pulled tightly over her body to her chin, leaving just her head free to look at. Trixie's eyes were locked on that face, absorbing every little detail of it to memory. It had changed since the last time she had seen it. The pink in her hair had been replaced by jet black, while the slate blue of the hair had gone several shades lighter, until it was almost as light as the hair Trixie had. The strangest changes however were the marks beneath Twilight's closed eyes; a black line, like an elongated tear, stretched from just beneath each eye to halfway down her cheeks.

"Oh Twilight, I'm so sorry..." Trixie reached down and, being careful not to wake the sleeping Unicorn, brushed a hoof through her mane. "If I had detected the remnants of the horror illusion on Rainbow Dash, I could have removed it. But I didn't, and now you've been hurt. Not physically maybe, Celestia's research suggests that both of us are beyond simple bodily damage. But emotionally...I'm so sorry."

Twilight shifted in her bed and mumbled, making Trixie pull her hoof away. After several seconds of no further movement from the other Unicorn, Trixie sighed and resumed her gentle stroking. "I hated you, you know, after the Ursa Minor incident. My wagon crushed, all my possessions lost, my pride in tatters, I thought you had ruined my life. I was so full of

hate, rage, and despair that I wanted to destroy everything I saw. Then Luna found me. It's so strange how our lives now mirror each other, is it not, Twilight? Both losing control of our powers, both found and saved by the princess sisters, both becoming students of the princesses. Though I followed quite a bit later than you I'm afraid, heh."

Trixie stopped her stroking. A frown crept across her face. "One day your teacher Celestia told me a story, of a pair of Unicorns, a mare and a stallion, who loved each other very much. Her pregnancy was the happiest event of their lives. However, the birth of twins was unexpected, they were young and couldn't afford to care for two little fillies. So the filly born just a few minutes first was very reluctantly given away to an orphanage in Canterlot, from which she was eventually adopted by a troupe of magicians passing through. And after many years she set off on her own, to make her own way in the world..."

The door to the bedroom creaked shut behind her, but Trixie didn't notice. Brushing some loose strands of hair from Twilight's face Trixie leaned down and planted a soft kiss on her forehead, just below the horn. "I found you, little sister."

Trixie pulled away, and as she did a look of calm and contentment spread over Twilight's features. Trixie thought she could see some of the color return to her sister's hair, but it might have been her imagination. Either way, Trixie felt that for the moment there was nothing more for her to do. She hopped off her stool and began trotting to the door, pausing just a moment to glance appreciatively at a piece of authentic Gallopfreyan statuary. Then she was out of the room and shutting the door behind her.

Twilight Sparkle opened her eyes and looked at the door.

"So...crazy day, wasn't it, Hehe..." Rainbow Dash gave a very soft, very weak smile to the pink pony across the library table from her. In response Pinkie Pie sniffled and hung her head lower, her limp mane falling down around her head. Rainbow Dash instantly dropped the smile. "O-okay, maybe crazy isn't the right word..."

Pinkie Pie sniffled again. "This has been the absolute most horrible,

bad, terrible day ever..." Her body, the colors dulled by her grief, shuddered as she held back a sob. "First Rainbow Dash wakes up, then some big meany casts an evil spell on her, then she attacked me, then she was okay and Ditzy fought the big meany, th-then Twilight showed up, then Rainbow Dash attacked her and Twilight made Rainbow Dash faint and then she disappeared, and then the cake I was baking burned, and then I lost the Game, and then we found Twilight collapsed in the woods, and then we found Fluttershy d-dead!"

Ditzy Doo stood up from her place by Rainbow Dash's side and moved around the table to Pinkie. Sitting down to her left Ditzy wrapped a foreleg around the pink pony's shoulders and pulled her into a hug. "Hey, hey, hush now. Hush now. Fluttershy's not dead yet, and Doctor Whoof's not going to let her go that easily."

The next moment Dash took Pinkie's right side and joined in the hug. "Come on Pie, Ditzy's right. Now do you really want Fluttershy to wake up and see you breaking your heart like this over her? She wouldn't stop saying 'sorry for making you worry' for a year!"

"I...I guess..." Pinkie sniffled again, and then looked up at them. "But, that big meanypants who made you attack us is still out there somewhere! And I bet he's the pony who attacked Fluttershy!"

"Well then," replied Dash, smirking. "We'll just have to kick his rump all the way to Stalliongrad! Ditzy already did it once, and next time he'll have to deal with all of us! Right?"

"Right!" shouted Doctor Whoof from the stairs. The trio of ponies all jumped and turned in their seats to see Doctor Whoof and Rarity descending the stairs. He beamed down at them. "I'd love to give that Thunder Scream fellow a nice whack on the head! I mean really, what a ridiculous name!"

"Doctor!" Pinkie Pie shot from Dash's and Ditzy's embrace and tackled her fellow earth pony to the ground. "Is Fluttershy okay? Is she gonna live? Will she be okay? Will she live!? Tell me tell me tell me!"

"Yes, Fluttershy's going to be okay, Pinkie!" Rarity let out a ladylike giggle at the pink pony's antics. "Now let Doctor Whoof go, it looks like

you're choking him!"

All the color seemed to return to Pinkie Pie's mane and coat as she leapt up off Doctor Whoof and began bouncing around the room. Her giggling, as bright and lively as a Spring day, filled the library, drifting slowly out into the town beyond. Lights began to regain their brightness, colors their richness, and foods their sweetness.

"Fluttershy's gonna be okay, Fluttershy's gonna be okay, Fluttershy's gonna be o-oh!" Pinkie Pie paused in mid-bounce and dropped back down to the floor. "We need to through a celebratory party! Ain't no way some big meanypants called Yellow Jacket gonna take us down, nu-uh!"

At that moment, Rarity looked at Doctor Whoof and smirked. It was an all-too-cheery smirk, the kind of smirk that males of every race in Equestria instinctively feared. "I can think of a sweet little doctor who might like some help getting his crush's attention."

"Yeah I-wait, what?" Whoof stared in utter shock at Rarity, before slowly dragging his gaze over to Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, and Ditzzy Doo. They all had on the same smirk, and were slowly trotting in towards him. "Oh. Oh no, no no no! Not that! Not a-"

"MAKEOVER!"

Doctor Whoof lunged for the stairs. Before he made it up two steps he was dragged back down by Rarity's telekinesis. He was forced down into a chair at the table, where he was held down by Ditzzy and Dash while Rarity went off somewhere. Desperately he looked at the pair. "C-come on girls, this is silly! I mean, you don't even like frilly frou-frou stuff like this!"

"Maybe not, doc," replied Rainbow Dash. "But we also don't like security cameras. Know what I mean?"

"...I do, actually. How about that?"

Rarity reappeared from wherever she had gone, dragging along behind her an absolutely massive trunk. "I found this in the basement! It looks like it's full of old clothes from the former librarian!"

Doctor Whoof screamed and renewed his struggles to escape the pony death grip. "H-hey, come on! I-wait, where'd Pinkie Pie get to?" The lights dimmed as, from somewhere, music began to play. "...tell me you aren't."

"Shirt by shirt, putting you together
Twilight, she deserves somepony fetching
Personally I think she could do better
But you like her quite a bit
So we'll do our best to make you hip
As long as you aren't a bore
We'll help you Doooctoor!"

Doctor Whoof sighed. "You are. Ow!" Ditzzy grinned at him as she raked a comb through his messy mane. Rarity opened the trunk and began levitating clothes out.

"Heart to heart, working out the details
A high neckline, don't you think that'd look just fine
Make you look like you inspire
Remember that Twi' loves formal attire
Make sure it all fits your looks
Even though she's more concerned with books
We're putting you together!"

"Matchmaking's not easy, when happiness is on the line,
Twilight wants somepony with precision
Blend looks and smarts..."

Rarity took a step back. "How is this decision?"

"Hmm..." Ditzzy looked over the massive coat and scarf combo Doctor Whoof wore. "Looks kinda hot in there."

"Can't...breathe..."

Rarity ripped the scarf off and threw it into the corner. "Back to work, girls!"

"Something brash, perhaps quite fetching
Look at that coat Pinkie Pie, couldn't you simply die?"

Make sure it fits forehooves and breast
Let's add some magic to the rest
Even though it hangs low off the shoulder
Doc you won't look like a boulder
We're putting you together!"

Doctor Whoof gave himself a little spin, watching as the patchwork coat he wore whipped around. "This is the most ridiculously colorful thing I've ever seen."

"Hmm, good point." Rarity pulled it off him and levitated it to Pinkie Pie. "Here you go, dear."

"Ooh, neat! I can wear this while making cupcakes!"

"Girls, come on!" shouted Rainbow Dash. "We're wasting time!"

"Piece by piece, bit by bit

"Question marks on a shirt? Blegh!"

Straighten shoulders, push out hip

"I love the formality of the outfit, but it just seems off on you..."

Shirt by shirt, don't get stressed

"A leather jacket? How biker-ish!"

Heart to heart, it's the best

"Why would you wear glasses, your eyesight is just fine."

And that's the Art of the Dre-er, Vest!"

"Hmm..." Doctor Whoof looked himself over in the mirror, while several paces to the side Rarity, Ditzy, Rainbow Dash, and Pinkie Pie looked on with sly grins, nearly bouncing with excitement at hearing his opinion.

Except Ditzzy, who was hovering with excitement.

"This is some sort of therapy for you girls, isn't it, to cope with the emotional trauma. Oh well, doesn't matter. Well it does, but in the good way. Hmm..." Doctor once more examined his new outfit. It consisted of a plain brown tweed jacket with leather elbow patches, a light brown dress shirt, and a gold wristwatch. His mane meanwhile had been combed and straightened out from its original messy mess, though it was still rather long and curly.

"Mmhmm..."

Rarity coughed and took a half-step forward, joining Whoof by the mirror. "Well, what do you think?" In her mind's eyes she was reliving her fashion show experience.

"Well, it looks great, fantastic. But...it feels like something is missing...aha!" Whoof turned around and trotted to the nearly-empty trunk on the table. He began sifting through its contents. "I know just exactly what I need, there must be one in here. Here we go!" After a few more seconds of messing with whatever he had found, Whoof stepped away from the trunk and turned to Rarity and the others. At his collar was now affixed a burgundy bow tie. "So, what do you think?"

"I-I..." Rarity's right eye twitched and a few strands sprang loose from her curled mane. "It's a bow tie."

Doctor Whoof huffed and reached a hoof up to adjust the tie. "Yeah, so, it's cool. Bow ties are cool."

Rainbow Dash mumbled something under her breathe that made the paint crinkle a few feet around her. Meanwhile, Pinkie Pie started bouncing around. "Ooh, neato! You look just like my old physics professor!"

"Ah!" Whoof looked back at Rarity and smirked. "Well at least one of you girls has good taste."

Ditzzy Doo hovered over and adjusted the tie for Whoof, all the while giving him her brightest smile. "You look like yourself, Doctor, that's what matters. Also thanks. You were right, this was a much-needed breather."

The others all nodded their heads and agreed on this, making Whoof blush and smile. "Well in that case, I suppose nearly getting strangled by that scarf was more than worth it!"

Well away from the group, Spike poked his head out from the kitchen and looked at the ponies. "You're all a bunch of weirdos." He then pulled his head back inside and closed the kitchen door.

The sound of hoofsteps caught their attention, making the group look over as Trixie descended the stairs to the main level. "The Modest and Humble Trixie has no clue how the four of you can prance around like that, considering the situation."

The small group shared a brief glance, and then Rarity took a step forward. "Well, if you don't mind my asking, Trixie, just what is the situation? We have all gathered together, we have shared everything that has happened to each of us, all that we know, but what is all this nasty business leading to? What is the end-game, as it were?"

Trixie nodded at this and started for the table. "That is a very good question. Let's sit and think this through. Doctor Whoof, would you mind going up and watching Twilight? I don't like the idea of leaving her unguarded."

"Well sure, I don't mind at all." Doctor Whoof trotted to the stairs, as behind him Trixie, Rainbow Dash, Ditzzy Doo, and Pinkie Pie all sat down at the table. As he set a hoof down on the first step however he stopped and turned to look back at them. "Just one question, just one. Do you want me guarding her for her protection, or yours?" The others all froze, before as one turning to look at him.

Doctor Whoof continued. "Don't try to play dumb with me, I know what you're all thinking. Except Pinkie, you're crazy. Rarity started it with her anger and resentment towards Twilight for not showing any concern about her shop. That resentment lessened when Twilight apologized but it's still there, lurking, like Dashie's horror illusion, but subtle. Then Trixie finds Twilight researching sources of massive magic, sources that Yellow Jacket would definitely be interested in so! We have suspicion cast on just what Twilight's been doing to ignore Rarity's plight."

He held up a hoof in a stopping motion. "Then, Rainbow Dash attacks Twilight because of illusion spell, drives a knife through her chest, but! One fancy light show later and Twilight's back on her hooves and draining Dash of her magic. So, we add in the freaky factor and that Twilight can do something Yellow Jacket would want to do. Finally, Twilight appears at Sweet Apple Acres, gives a crazy rant to a couple of you about doing what she has to do, then vanishes. Finally, you find poor Fluttershy in her cottage, beaten half to death and all of her magic drained. Like Rainbow Dash."

"Doctor-"

Doctor Whoof waved a hoof at Rarity. "Shut up, I'm thinking. Plus whatever you have to say doesn't matter. You're all scared of Twilight Sparkle. Maybe each other too. Recent events have thrown fear and suspicion into your lives, fear of each other. You don't have to sit there and try to figure out what the situation is, the answer's plain as day. Intentionally or not, the Elements of Harmony are under attack. Now, would you like to know the real question you should be asking yourselves?"

Trixie looked up at Doctor Whoof, trying to say something. "What would that be?"

Doctor Whoof shrugged and began trotting up the stairs. "Who's attacking; Yellow Jacket, or whatever started the Ponyville fire?"

And then he was up the stairs and out of sight. Silence in the library, until it was broken by Rainbow Dash. "Wait, we aren't blaming Yellow Jacket for the fire?"

Doctor Whoof entered Twilight's room to find her sitting up in bed, examining her appearance in the moonlight with a levitated mirror. "Twilight Sparkle, you're awake!"

Twilight smiled and set the mirror down, before turning to Whoof. "Doctor Whoof, you're...wearing a bow tie."

"This is going to be a thing for you ponies, isn't it?" Whoof sighed and

shook his head, but he smiled all the same. "Well anyways, it's good to see you're okay. You are okay, aren't you?"

"I'm...not sure." Twilight levitated the mirror back up and looked herself over once again. "I feel different. I feel lighter, as if I could jump up into the air and stay there. But I also feel...irritated. Not at anything in particular, but like I just want to be angry at something, anything. And my mane has changed color, what's up with that?"

"Hmm..." Whoof stood by the bed, but his eyes were focused on the authentic Gallopfreyan statue in the room. At the sound of the question he turned back to her. "Hm? Oh, I imagine that is somewhat like the tales I've heard of dark emotions affecting Unicorn magic. I think your...friend, Trixie, went through something like that recently by the way that is a very nice statue where did you get it?"

"Statue?" Twilight looked at the statue that, until right then she had never seen in her room. That meant only one thing. "Jack, stop hiding like that. You know Doctor Whoof is on our side."

As the Pegasus statue shifted back into the familiar form of Yellow Jacket, Doctor Whoof looked at him and then back at Twilight. "Neat trick, but as far as I knew there were no sides. Why are there sides now, what do we need sides for?"

"Well, sides might be a...simplistic term for the situation." Twilight rolled into a kneeling position, with a shake of her head making her mane fall to one side, hiding her right eye. "Anyone, pony or otherwise, whoever stands in the way of Jack and I sharing the power of magic with all ponykind...they are not on our side. Anyone who does not seek the future safety and happiness of Equestria and its inhabitants...they are not on our side. Anyone who hurts my friends, physically or emotionally...they are not on MY side."

Yellow Jacket stirred at this last one, but said nothing. Doctor Whoof coughed and looked Twilight in the eye. "How conveniently black and white. What about Trixie? You know, the Unicorn who was in here a bit ago, confessed to being your older sister?"

"You're not supposed to know that." Twilight's whisper seethed with

annoyance. Around them the room shook, until Twilight reigned in her emotions. She sighed. "About Trixie...if she understood what Jack and I understand, she would side with us. She is just misguided right now."

Whoof snorted. "Funny, I think she would say the exact same thing about you right now."

"Then she would be wrong!" Twilight's horn sparked and the window in her room exploded outward, showering the ground below with shards of glass. Whoof and Jack both backed away as Twilight continued. "I mean, what would you have me do, Doctor? What would you have me do? You know as well as I do that fires just like the one here have been happening all across Equestria, and you know that the ONLY reason Ponyville was saved was because of me! Because of the magic I could do! But I can't be everywhere, Doctor, there is only one of me. Only one me, only one Jack, only one Doctor! And even if the fires weren't happening, Jack will die if I don't help him with his research! So what would you have me do, Doctor?"

Doctor Whoof groaned and rubbed the bridge of his snout. When he looked up again he stared into red eyes. At some point while she was talking, Twilight's eyes had changed color. "Twilight, listen to me, I want to help Jack and anypony else as much as you do, plus this has all been fascinating. But right now, downstairs, your friends sit and think of you. Your sister included. They are scared, and confused, and vulnerable, and you need to be there for them! Fluttershy was almost killed, for Celestia's sake!"

"Then I will find her attacker and kill them!"

"Then you should know that Jack-"

"Twilight."

Twilight's eyes shifted back to purple as she and Whoof looked to Jack. The Pegasus stood there with his saddlebags strapped on, his traveling cloak once more wrapped over his body. The raised hood cast a shadow over his face, from which his eyes shone. "Twilight, Doctor Whoof is right. Your friends need you. So I'm leaving, tonight."

"Wh-what? What!?" Twilight shot a shocked look at Whoof, which he

returned, and then looked back at Jack. "But you need our help! We promised that we would help you!"

"And you have, you have." Jack shook his head and gave a small, pained smile. "When I first arrived here in Ponyville, I'll be honest, I had no idea what to do. No direction, just...wandering, surviving however I could and with a holier-than-thought attitude to hide my desperation. But then Doctor found me and brought me to you, and I had hope. And now I have direction. I can start researching more into the Knights of Equestria, find the location of Midnight Castle, and use the stored power there to save myself. Bring about a revolution of the ponies to a new, peaceful age and shake things up for Princess Celestia."

"And if you don't, Jack? What if you're stopped, or killed, or captured by Trixie!?"

Jack's smile grew more pained. He stepped forward and nuzzled Twilight on the cheek. "Then you will be safe, Twilight. Your reputation with Princess Celestia won't get damaged, you won't get estranged from your friends or...or your sister, for helping me. That's worth the extra chance of failure, I think."

"Oh, how noble of you," Whoof remarked, but then froze. He stared in numb shock as Twilight Sparkle pulled Jack's hood down and kissed the Pegasus on the lips. An ache formed in Doctor Whoof's chest, as if a dragon's fist had stabbed through and given his heart a squeeze. He closed his eyes and looked away, unwilling to witness the intimate moment.

"Hey you, Doctor."

Doctor Whoof sighed and looked back at. Twilight lay sprawled out on the bed, eyes closed and chest steadily rising and falling. Jack had pulled his hood back up, although this failed to hide at all his smirk. "Don't worry, she's just asleep. A thin layer of sleep-inducing lipstick on my lips did the trick, heh."

Doctor Whoof blinked, looking back and forth between Jack and Twilight. Finally he focused on Jack. "Two things. First, that lipstick thing is just...weird. Blegh. I mean really. Secondly, how could you have possibly known she would kiss you?"

Jack shrugged. "I didn't know, though I admit to hoping she would." The next moment Jack's smile dropped. He looked down at the sleeping Twilight. "My leaving will be...easier this way. Less chance of her trying to follow me. You will take care of her, won't you Doctor?"

Doctor Whoof met Yellow Jacket's stare gaze to gaze. "Of course. You have my word as a doctor, and a Gallopfreyan."

Jack nodded and smiled again. "That's a strong oath you've sworn, Doctor. Careful, I'll hold you to it."

Then Jack turned from Doctor Whoof to the broken window. Some glass littered the wood floor but most had been blown outwards, leaving a relatively clear path to the window. He sighed. "Well, there is my exit. Goodbye, Doctor. Lose the bow tie."

Doctor Whoof watched the Pegasus disappear through the window into the night beyond. "Well then, goodbye, Jack."

Chapter 9

Fights and a Terrible Decision

Doctor Whoof burst from Twilight Sparkle's room. Ignoring as he nearly ran into Spike coming up the stairs he ran down the stairs two steps at a time. Rainbow Dash, Ditzy, and the others looked up from whatever they were discussing as he approached. "Doctor?"

Doctor slid to a stop beside Trixie. "Okay, listen, you know how sometimes ponies withhold information they shouldn't to protect somepony they care for?"

Trixie frowned. "Yes...Doctor?"

"Right, okay, uh..." Doctor brushed a hoof across his mane and chuckled. "Okay, these next few words I'm going to say are going to make you really happy, and then the next few words after those are going to make you really mad. So you probably want to take a moment. Get yourself in a calm place, go 'hommmm'..."

"Doctor..."

Doctor gulped and gave a nervous laugh. "Okay, well you see, Yellow Jacket is leaving Ponyville tonight, probably passing through the park and into the Everfree Forest to avoid any ponies out late."

"..." Trixie stood from her seat and advanced on the earth pony, making him back up. The rest of the group followed behind her, while Spike came up behind him from the stairs, blocking him. "And just how do you know that, Doctor Whoof?"

"Uh..." Doctor eeped as he backed up into Spike behind him. He glanced back at him to see the scariest scowl he had ever seen on a baby dragon's face. He gulped and looked back at Trixie. "Okay here's the few words that are going to make you really mad you see, these past couple of days Twilight and I were helping Yellow Jacket in his research, right under your noses! Haha, hah...funny how you can say something in your head and it sounds fine..."

A rainbow blur, and suddenly Doctor Whoof found himself in the very odd position of pinned against the ceiling, with a screaming Rainbow Dash wailing away at him with her forehooves. "WHY THE HAY DIDN'T YOU TELL ANYPONY!? AFTER EVERYTHING THAT SICK DEMENTED FREAK HAS DONE TO ALL OF US YOU JUST LET HIM CONTINUE ON WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO SAY FOR YOURSELF!?"

Doctor spit out a loose tooth and smiled at the Pegasus. "Hey, all three of you are flying again, fancy that..."

"GRAAAAHHHHH!"

Rainbow Dash pulled back a hoof for another strike to his face, before both were yanked down by telekinesis. Rarity used hers to pin Doctor Whoof to the floor, while Trixie held the struggling Pegasus in front of her in the air. She turned Rainbow Dash around so that they were facing each other and looked her in the eye. "Beating him until he is unconscious or his face is too swollen from bruises to speak will not get us anywhere, Rainbow. You need to calm down."

"Calm down!?" Rainbow Dash struggled in the levitation field. "Buck you then! If this idiot had just come to us from the st-start, nothing would've happened! We'd all b-be happy right now! I would've never a-attacked any...anypony...and Fluttershy wouldn't be half-dead!" Tears appeared in the blue Pegasus's eyes, but she refused, simply REFUSED to do any more crying. She had done enough of that with Pinkie, and then Ditzy. "So give me one good reason why we shouldn't kick Whoof's ass like we're gonna kick Yellow Jacket's!"

Trixie shook her head, and when she spoke her voice was firm. "I think it is Doctor Whoof who needs to give that one good reason. Well, Doctor?" Trixie turned to face Whoof, who was still magically pinned to the ground by Rarity. The others turned to look at him with her. "Why didn't you tell any of us about Yellow Jacket? Don't you understand all the suffering you could have saved us from?"

Doctor Whoof looked at Trixie and nodded as best he could under the magical force. "The why is simple; I never had any reason to until today. I wasn't there when you explained about him to Twilight and you other girls. He needed Twilight's help, and mine, to save his life. That's what he

explained anyway."

"And of course, you're a doctor," Rarity spoke up, frowning down at the brown earth pony. "You just had to help him."

"Of course," Doctor replied, grinning back up at Rarity. "You're a dressmaker; making clothing is your life. Helping ponies is mine, and he needed help. Why Twilight helped him instead of instantly turning him over to you...well, I guess she's just a kind-hearted pony. Not like you gave her any specific reason he was dangerous. Also it's rather uncomfortable pinned down like this."

"Yes, well, I believe today's events have shown otherwise." Trixie looked from Doctor Whoof to the rest of the gathered ponies and baby dragon. Looking each of them in the eye, she found the same, singular thought that she felt: enough was enough. "Yellow Jacket has proven a terrible threat to the safety and happiness of this town and its inhabitants, attacking, torturing, and turning them on one another. If he is allowed to reach another town then he will certainly do the same there. Whatever his plans are, he has to be stopped. Now."

Doctor Whoof groaned. "That's what I said five bloody minutes ago, you idiot! Jack is on his own, he's leaving so that Twilight doesn't ever have to know what exactly happened to him, and you now know most of what he's capable of and how dangerous he is! I've been waiting all blasted week for a moment like this to let you at him, and all you stupid ponies can do is stand around and talk! Did I mention it's rather uncomfortable pinned down here? I think I mentioned that at some point."

Trixie rolled her eyes and motioned to Rarity. "Let him go, he's no threat to us. Doctor," she said looking at him. She waited until he had climbed to his hooves before continuing. "Earlier, I was torn on whether you were more genius or idiotic. I'm now convinced it is the latter. Two ponies are nearly dead because of you, and another is on the verge of turning traitor to the throne. If it were not for the fact that you finally came to us with this information, I would charge YOU with treason, in the name of Princess Luna, Regent of the Moon."

Blue eyes met purple as Doctor Whoof matched Trixie's gaze. "Do I look like I give a damn about that, agent of Luna? I saw a pony needing help,

and I did what I felt was the right thing to do. Now then, before you go I have one request, just one."

Trixie turned away from Doctor Whoof and marched to the main library entrance. As she went her belt of water canteens floated over to her and wrapped around into place, followed by her cloak. The door out opened, but before she stepped through it she looked back at Doctor Whoof. "And what would that be?"

Ignoring the stares at his back, Doctor Whoof stepped forward toward Trixie. His eyes were still locked on hers, but they had changed from earlier. They were soft, sad, pleading. "Incapacitate him however you want, but please...please don't kill Jack. I beg this of you. We're the only ones left, the two of us."

Trixie's eyes narrowed. Seconds passed in silence, before she looked at Rarity. "Stay here, don't let him or Twilight Sparkle leave this library and get involved in what's about to happen. This is where things get...violent."

And then, with a bang of the door, Trixie was gone.

While all of Ponyville was close to the heart of nature, the one area closest to the wilds around it was the town park. Connected to the main of Ponyville by a bridge over a little stream, the other sides of the park were bordered mostly by fields and woodland, the same that Fluttershy made her home in. Through one of these fields, just barely a dozen yards across, a pony could easily make out the dark outline of the Everfree Forest. It loomed there, a distant presence that, while it never encroached on the tamed area, always made the ponies feel more comfortable going to the park in at least groups of two or three.

That night, the full moon shone down on the park, illuminating a solitary figure. His hoofsteps, though muffled somewhat by the heavy cloak he wore, still rang out clear as day in the otherwise-empty park. His raised hood hid all features of his face, rendering the pony little more than a solidified shadow, trotting along as if without a care in the world.

Yellow Jacket came to a stop. From the darkness beneath his hood

purple eyes looked out at the archway that would have led him into the fields beyond the park and, passing by Fluttershy's cottage, eventually to the Everfree Forest and freedom. Another figure stood there, her royal blue cloak a strange complement to his pitch black. Unlike him her hood was lowered, revealing the Unicorn underneath.

"Ah, Trixie, we meet at last. From your presence here I assume Doctor Whoof told you about me?"

Trixie took a step forward. As she did from her a canteen beneath her cloak streamed a rope of water, which quickly froze into a blade of ice. "He told me everything."

"Ah, I see..." Yellow Jacket lowered his own hood, casting the whole of his cloak to the side. His smirking face glared daggers at Trixie. "Then he also told you about me and...your sister?" Across the several yards separating them Trixie flinched, making Yellow Jacket's smirk widen. "Yes, I know about that. Tell me, how does it feel to realize just how alone you...really are? All this time, perhaps Twilight never forgave you for your earlier actions at all!"

"Shut up." Trixie stomped a hoof and advanced another step towards Yellow Jacket. Beside her the ice blade floated in the air, ready to stab or slash at nothing but a thought from its wielder. "I don't know what you did to Twilight Sparkle, but it ends tonight. Tonight you will be brought to justice!"

"Justice? Justice!" Yellow Jacket cackled. "What's that, have you ever wondered? It's such a...malleable concept. A Unicorn born into the wealthiest family in Canterlot, the smallest, weakest pup in a Diamond Dog litter; never would such two ever agree on 'justice'. It's quite easy for those with all the magic, all the power to talk about such nonsense as justice, and fairness, don't you think?"

"I think you're insane," Trixie replied, and then another step. By this point the two ponies were less than three yards apart. But then, to Yellow Jacket's surprise, a pulse of light swept over her body and she began to change. Her blue coat darkened in hue to a deep midnight blue. The mane that cascaded down around her head bleached of all color, its snow-white strands glinting silver in the moonlight. From her eyes leaked purple, running down her cheeks into two, thin strands. The new eyes burned red.

Yellow Jacket laughed. "Oh, so that's why you didn't notice my illusion still lingering on Rainbow Dash! That part of your focus was on keeping up your own illusion! Luna unable to fix you from the affects of your own breakdown, even after nearly a year with her? How disappointing it must be for you."

"Jack..." Trixie lifted her ice blade over her head and got into a ready stance. "It's time I shut you up."

"You can certainly try."

Trixie watched the Pegasus before her take flight, climbing 10, 15, 20 feet up into the air before screaming and unleashing a bolt of lightning down at her. She did not worry, did not pay the crackling, snarling blast of heat and ionized air any more attention than she would a passing bird, even as it raced towards her. Months of learning and training with Princess Luna had taught the former stage magician to calm herself, to remain as cool and detached as the moon itself when she needed to be. Such it was to be a Hoofmaiden of the Moon.

Closing her eyes, Trixie reached deep into herself for the magic that resided within her. It had always been there, her closest companion, her earliest memory. The other fillies and colts in the orphanage had at first loved her when she did her first trick, making a spoon turn into a fork, and then grew to resent her as her power had only continued to grow. Trixie hadn't cared; the magic was there, promising a great destiny.

Her consciousness touched the magic, and it flowed forth, welling up in her chest before bursting out and filling her whole body, bringing with it a feeling of moonlit glades, silver water lapping at a beach untouched by hoof. With not so much a thought as a feeling, Trixie tilted her ice blade in front of her, just in time to catch the lightning. The magic-reinforced ice crystals did not melt but instead refracted the energy of the attack, releasing it away from her body.

A park bench to her right blew up from the blast, chunks of superheated metal and rock flying in all directions.

Yellow Jacket roared in rage and released a second bolt of lightning,

and then another. Again and again he blasted away at Trixie, flying up, flying down, circling her this way and that; but no matter which way the attack came, it could not touch the Unicorn. She was the eye of the storm.

Then Yellow Jacket failed to notice that his latest attack had been reflected back at HIM. The lightning arced past, taking with it his entire left wing. For a nothing he felt nothing from the smoking stump, and then he screamed in agony as he plummeted to the ground. His right wing flapped uselessly, whipped about by the wind. He crashed to the cobblestone ground with a sickening crunch and lay still.

Trixie opened her eyes and looked at the fallen body of her foe. He had fallen several yards away from his starting position, nearly onto the bridge connecting the park with Ponyville. He had landed on his right side, crushing it beneath him. From where she stood Trixie could see the charred stump that remained of his left wing sticking up into the air, steam rising from it and much of the hair on that side of his body blackened. Trixie took a step toward him, then another; then he shuddered.

"Wh-what..." Yellow Jacket's head rose up. He looked at the approaching Trixie and then at the stump of his wing. Trixie paused mid-step as his head snapped back to her. "You...you..." His breathing grew harsh as he forced himself back to his hooves, his right wing hanging limp at his side. Wisps of smoke curled into the cold night air from between gritted teeth. "You destroyed my wing. You've destroyed my wing! YOU'VE TAKEN FLIGHT FROM ME!"

Yellow Jacket threw his head forward and roared. Trixie watched, the serenity she had felt a moment ago ripped away by horror and dread and the Pegasus's throat bulged out, and a massive gout of white-hot flame, enough to make a dragon nod respectfully, burst from his open mouth towards her. Fire filled her vision, simple instinct overriding any sense to cast a protective spell as she leapt to the side. Flame flew past just inches to her right, even the proximity enough to make the skin on that side blister and her cloak to catch fire. Trixie ripped off the burning clothe and let it float away in the wind. She had never seen anypony, Unicorn or otherwise, generate such intense flames.

Yellow Jacket gave her little time to ponder this as he turned and fired off another blast of flame. This time Trixie was more prepared. With a spark

from her horn and a wave of a hoof, a wave of water launched from the nearby river and formed a barrier in front of her.

The fire hit the wall of water dead on and vaporized it, sending out a blinding plume of steam in all directions. Trixie hid her eyes behind a foreleg to protect them, even as she strained her hearing for any hint of another attack. Beyond the hissing of the steam, she could make out the distinct sound of hoofsteps, galloping away.

Trixie wasted no time in giving chase.

Twilight Sparkle's eyes shot open. She barely caught the scream on her lips, instead releasing a groan as she rolled off the bed and onto her hooves. She staggered as her mind tried to piece together what had happened. Jack was leaving, going away for her safety and...then she kissed him and everything went blurry to her...

"Did he knock me out...? How long was I..." she half leaned, half collapsed against the bed frame and gave her head a shake. "How long was I out?"

A flash of light drew Twilight's attention to the window. Looking out, the young Unicorn could see blasts of fire and sheets of lightning paint the fields beyond the town crimson and blue. Her heart sank to somewhere in her stomach and stayed there as she realized what this meant.

"Jack, no...no!"

Twilight turned and dashed for the door. Not wasting time in stopping to open the door she flung it open with her magic and ran through. Making a quick turn for the stairs she took them three at a time, so great was her hurry. Halfway down she gave up on them and leapt the railing. Twilight landed with a grunt in the middle of the main library lobby...only the grunt was not hers.

"Ow...oh hello, Twilight Sparkle." Doctor Whoof smiled up at the Unicorn that had sent him sprawling onto the ground and now lay on his back. "This is a bit kinky for my tastes, but if you really want to-"

"Doctor, shut up." Twilight clambered off the earth pony's back, before bending down and helping him to his hooves. A cough from behind her made Twilight look around and see who all was there. What she found surprised her. "Rarity, Pinkie Pie, um, Ditzzy? Spike, R-Rainbow Dash? What are all of you doing here?"

Rarity and Pinkie Pie shared a look, but it was Ditzzy who stepped forward and answered first. "Trixie gathered us together because of the situation, Sparkle. Please don't hate him, but...Doctor told us everything. We know about you and Yellow Jacket."

The world fell out from beneath Twilight. She turned accusatory eyes at the aforementioned doctor. Almost unconsciously he fell back a step. "You told them?"

Doctor Whoof opened his mouth to respond. Before he could say anything however, Rainbow Dash pushed him out of the way and flew up right into Twilight's face. With the glare the blue Pegasus focused on her, now it was Twilight's turn to take a step back. "Hay yeah he told us! Twilight, what is wrong with you!? Trixie warned us about that Yellow Jacket creep, so you HELP him? What the hay is wrong with you?"

"I...I..." Twilight gulped and forced herself to look away from Rainbow Dash. "You weren't there Dash, you don't understand! He needed my help, he begged for it! And all Trixie told us was that he had learned to use magic and had run away. For all I knew, for all any of us knew, he had been wrongfully accused or something, and had to flee!"

Rainbow Dash huffed and rolled her eyes. "Yeah maybe, but he sure as Pinkie Pie's sweet tooth isn't being wrongfully accused today!"

In the back of her mind, Twilight felt, somehow, a sudden discharge of magic and a pained scream. She gave her head a shake and looked around the room at all her friends. "Girls, Spike, Doctor, please, let me just go. I'll stop Trixie, bring Jack back here, and then we can all explain-"

"It was his nightmare illusion on Dash."

Twilight whipped her head to Doctor Whoof. She gaped at him. "What?"

"It's true, dear." Rarity stepped forward and placed a hoof on her fellow Unicorn's shoulder. Whatever her personal feelings toward Twilight might have been, it was clear to all there that the girl was in desperate need of some kind of stability. The way the purple pony leaned into her touch only confirmed Rarity's thoughts. "After the illusion had been broken the first time, Ditzzy here fought and chased off a yellow and black Pegasus. He claimed to be the one to cast the illusion...I'm so sorry, darling..."

Twilight hung her head, forcing back a choking sob. Her thoughts raced, tumbling end over end as she tried to process everything the ponies around her were telling her. She lifted a hoof to her head and pressed against it, groaning as her thoughts rose to a cacophony, a million of them all clamoring for her full attention. "No...it can't be true, I know him..."

Rarity felt her heart break at the sight before her; her friend, normally so brave and in control of herself, shaking from the effort of holding back the tears that threatened to break free. She leaned in, nuzzled the poor dear, and hated herself for what she was about to say.

"I'm sorry, Twilight darling, but there's more. About Fluttershy..."

"Spar...no...Spark..."

"Fluttershy?" Applejack sat up straight and looked down at the bedridden Pegasus. She watched as Fluttershy continued to weakly mumble in her sleep. A frown crossed the orange earth pony's face as she leaned in close to her friend. "Fluttershy, what are ya tryin' ta say, sugarcube?"

"No...Spa..." Fluttershy scrunched her face up in pain, her breathing growing rapid as whatever night terrors she was suffering became worse. "N-no..."

"Sugarcu-"

Fluttershy's eyes snapped open. The blood red orbs flicked to Applejack and focused all the intensity of the Stare on her. "Twilight-"

"-SPARKLE!"

Everyone's heads snapped over to the stairs at the shout. Twilight had just enough time to register in her mind the pair of hooves coming towards her at terminal velocity before, suddenly, impact. Her head snapped back, a clear crack resounding through the library letting all there know her neck had snapped, and she dropped to the floor like a puppet with its strings cut.

Applejack landed beside the fallen Unicorn's body. The next moment she was tackled to the floor by Rainbow Dash and Ditzzy Doo, and then telekinetically hauled into the air by Rarity. She gave no resistance as the ivory Unicorn brought her close. "Applejack, what have you done!? Helping Yellow Jacket or not, Twilight Sparkle was our friend! And you...you..."

"Shut it, Rarity." Applejack snorted, ignoring Rarity in favor of staring daggers at the corpse before them. Doctor Whoof had rushed to Twilight's side, and from where Applejack was held she could see the trained doctor barely holding back tears as he ran his sonic screwdriver over Twilight's body. She didn't care. "Fluttershy woke up. The poor gal was in pain, suffering, but she couldn't stop sayin' one thing. She kept sayin' Twilight Sparkle."

Shock overcame Rarity's concentration, and she let the earth pony fall back to the floor. Spike near-screamed and ran to Applejack's side. "Shut up, AJ! Don't you say it, d-do-don't you dare say..."

"There's only one reason I can reckon Fluttershy would wake up sayin' that name," said Applejack. "If Twilight was the last pony she saw. If Twilight Sparkle was her attacker. I was just givin' that no-good pony her just desserts...didn't quite mean to k-kill her though...oh Celestia..."

Silence followed this pronouncement, broken only by Spike's sobs. Pinkie Pie hurried over to the baby dragon and pulled him into a deep hug. Spike instantly hugged her back, quickly soaking her mane with his tears.

Rainbow Dash dropped to the ground, wings limp at her sides. She stared down in horror at Twilight. "W-We did find her in the woods near F-

Fluttershy's cottage, but...how could she ever..." Rainbow squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. "No..." A spark seemed to flare to life inside her chest, granting a feeling she had not felt since they had defeated Nightmare Moon. "No, I'm sorry but I don't believe it. Twilight Sparkle would...she would never hurt a friend like that! I refuse to believe she could ever be that disloyal!"

Doctor Whoof slid his sonic screwdriver into a jacket pocket and stepped back from Twilight's corpse. He looked up at Rainbow Dash, and something in his gaze made that feeling in her chest flare all the stronger. "Rainbow Dash, you are brilliant. Now, I'd suggest everypony and dragon to stand back out of the way."

Ditzy, who until then had been floating up a few feet above everyone and watching the proceedings, flapped up higher and looked at Doctor. "Out of the way of what?"

Doctor Whoof responded by standing back up and backing further away from Twilight's body. Rainbow Dash's eyes widened, and then she followed his example. "Oh."

Light exploded out in blinding beams from Twilight's eyes and mouth. All there watched in amazed silence as she rose up into the air, crackles of energy running over her body. Before their eyes the body convulsed, the head flopping around grotesquely on its broken neck before, with crack that sent chills down the spines of all those gathered, it snapped back into place and stayed there. Twilight's chest began rising and falling, returning breathe to the once again alive body.

The light shining from her faded as Twilight settled back to the library floor. Her color scheme had returned to normal, but with an afterimage, as if the altered appearance were just a second out of sync. A new silence settled over the library, as if every sound were muffled by a thick clothe. Twilight opened her eyes and looked at the shocked to silence ponies.

Then her eyes settled on Applejack. "You killed me."

Applejack felt her legs give out under her. She collapsed to her knees and looked away from that awful voice. "I, I didn't mean to. I just got riled up by Fluttershy, I couldn't control myself. Honest, sugarcube...she kept sayin'

your name..."

"..." Twilight Sparkle looked away from Applejack and to Spike. When she did Pinkie Pie, still hugging the baby dragon close, yelped and jumped away from Spike as if stung. "Spike, I'm okay, you can stop crying."

"Twilight dear..."

Twilight looked at Rarity and scowled. Rarity suddenly felt like the gravity had been tripled on her. "None of you trust me...none of you believe in me...none but Doctor Whoof and Rainbow Dash. I thought we were friends, but you've lied to me...snuck around behind me, conspired against me, KILLED me...but I still love all of you. I am going to go now."

"Twilight-"

"I am going to go now!" Twilight shouted over Rainbow Dash. "I am going to Trixie and Jack's fight, and I am going to find out the truth of everything, one way or another."

Twilight turned to go. She only went one step before a sudden force on her legs and body made moving impossible. She turned her head to see Rarity's horn glowing with magic. "You're trying to stop me?"

Her brow furrowed in concentration, sweat from the effort of keeping the much more powerful Unicorn still spreading over her body, Rarity returned Twilight's gaze and grimaced. "We promised Trixie...you wouldn't...interfere..."

Twilight looked from Rarity to Ditzy and her other friends, and found them all snapping from their awe into similar looks of determination. She smiled. "How noble...that's why I love all of you. But, I hate saying this..." Twilight's horn gave off the slightest of flickers, and she began walking to the door. Her legs moved slowly, as if wading through water, but she forced her way through Rarity's telekinetic hold. "I'm so much more powerful than you, Rarity."

A moment later Rarity fell to the floor, totally exhausted. A flash of light, and Twilight teleported away.

Doctor Whoof sighed. "Well, that was rubbish."

Sounds of battle echoed through the Everfree Forest. The natural creatures of the forest, from the lowly bird and squirrel up to the cockatrice and Manticore, fled before the oncoming wave of destruction burrowing deeper and deeper into the woods. In the wave's wake the forest was wasted, burnt and overturned and blasted apart by two beings more powerful than the natural order had meant for them to be.

A blast of fire roared, Trixie jumping from the tree limb she balanced on moments before the entire tree was reduced to ash. Throwing her forehooves forward, a sheet of lightning crackled out, turning the night briefly into day as it raced towards its target. Jack held a hoof out and the lightning parted around him, striking everything else but him. Jumping forward he pushed out with his magic; the telekinetic field that a moment ago had been his shield flying forward like a freight train and smashing into Trixie. The Unicorn was sent flying, tumbling to the broken earth a dozen yards from the point of impact. There she lay prone on her back.

"Yes, die!" Jack charged and leapt forward, a ball of pure magic energy crackling to life around his left forehoof as he reared it back, intending to drive it through his adversary's chest. Suddenly Trixie's head snapped up to look at him. A fallen log smashed into the Pegasus from the side, carrying him with it as it continued on towards a mountain ledge. Before it could smash him against it Jack roared and wrenched it from Trixie's control. Jack landed back on the ground with a grunt and stagger. Turning to face Trixie he held a hoof out towards her. The log at his side convulsed before breaking into a hundred jagged pieces. With a flick of his wrist he sent all these pieces flying at her.

In the dark, Trixie felt more than saw the improvised daggers flying towards her. Throwing a hoof forward she prepared her telekinetic shield again, but saw Jack merely smirk. At the last second before impact the cloud of wood burst outwards, shooting around the forward facing shield before turning back inwards toward Trixie again. Desperately she broadened her shield into a bubble around her, but this weakened it. She could only cry out in pain as nearly a dozen jagged pieces of wood stabbed through her body from all directions. The telekinetic bubble popped, and Trixie's body fell limp to the forest floor.

"I...I did it..." Exhaustion slammed down on Jack like an avalanche. His legs quivering he fell down on his haunches. His chest heaved for breathe as he watched a puddle of blood slowly spread out from Trixie's body. With it a smile spread across his face. "I really, really did it...I'm powerful enough to kill an apprentice of one of the princesses! Yes!" The Pegasus would have jumped in joy, or taken to the air and done victory laps around the forest, but his right wing was broken, and his left was nothing but a charred stump, cauterized by the same strike that destroyed it. So instead all he did was spit at the corpse, and then turn to limp away.

Jack made it three steps before an eruption of brilliant white light from behind him sent him staggering. Turning to look back he gasped at the sight before him. Trixie's body floated several feet from the forest floor, the white light pouring out from her eyes, her mouth, and around every piece of wood piercing her. Before his eyes the pieces of wood slid out and fell to the ground, whatever blood coating them streaming back up into their respective wounds. Once all this was done the wounds stitched themselves back up, leaving nothing but unblemished skin and hair behind.

The lightshow ended. Trixie dropped back to the forest floor and opened her eyes at a shocked-silent Yellow Jacket. She smirked. "What, thought you could kill me that easily?"

Jack stumbled back several steps, his eyes remaining fixed on the Unicorn before him. "I k-killed you though..." He gave his head a shake and near-screamed. "I killed you!"

"Yeah, about that..." Trixie shrugged and stretched, several loud pops ringing through the trees as her refreshed joints worked out any kinks. "The Modest and Humble Trixie, and her sister Twilight Sparkle, have natural magic too potent to allow such simple injuries to cause our death. A mix of such close, personal contact with the princesses, and our own rather special lineage."

"Lineage?" Jack continued backing away. It was obvious to him now that this was a fight he could not win, but if he could keep her talking just a bit longer than maybe he could make an escape. "What do you mean by lineage?"

Trixie rolled her eyes. Her legs widened into a bracing stance as a blue glow enveloped her horn. "Yes, lineage." A similar blue glow shone from her eyes. "And you will die never knowing what I mean."

With a flare of her power, pure magical energy streamed from her horn towards Yellow Jacket. His telekinetic shield, flung up purely by instinct, nearly buckled altogether when the attack struck it. He clenched his eyes shut, focusing all his remaining power into that one shield spell, knowing without a doubt if it faltered for even a moment he would be obliterated from the face of Equestria.

Still though, even with all his effort it bent beneath the force of Trixie's magic, Jack slowly skidding backwards across the broken ground from the pure kinetic force. To the despairing Pegasus, it almost seemed as if his Unicorn adversary had grown stronger as the battle had progressed.

An explosion ripped through the clearing the two combatants had become locked in. A blinding flash, momentarily outshining the blue light of Trixie's energy beam and Jack's shield, made both Unicorn and Pegasus cry out in shock and not a small amount of pain. Looking to the epicenter of the explosion, Trixie's left and Jack's left, both hope and sudden terror seized their hearts.

Twilight Sparkle had arrived.

"Trixie, Jack, please stop this!" the purple Unicorn cried. She looked back and forth between the two combatants, her heart near to breaking at the sight of Jack's lost wing. "We don't have to fight, please!"

"No, Twilight!" A pulse of power swept over Trixie's body, crackles of energy gathering around her horn as she poured more magic into her attack. "He is a traitor, Twilight! He has hurt your friends, so many innocents!"

"Please, Twilight!" A sudden scream rent the air as part of Jack's shield broke away. A stray bolt of energy from Trixie's attack leapt out and struck him on the left shoulder, leaving a bloody gash. Still he continued on. "I...only want...the best for Equestria! We both do! Please, help me!"

"Don't listen to him, Twilight! My sister!" Trixie forced herself to step

forward, shortening the distance between her and Jack. Errant bolts of energy struck out wildly around, striking trees, the ground, rocks. Twilight remained untouched. "He made Rainbow Dash attack you and Pinkie Pie! He certainly attacked Fluttershy! Nnngh...he...he deserves no mercy from you!"

Twilight held a hoof before her eyes to guard against the brightness and intensity of Trixie's attack. She looked towards Jack and nearly sobbed, her voice breaking with each crescendo of emotion within her. "Jack! Tell me it's not true! I don't know what to believe anymore, please, in Celestia's name, say you didn't hurt anypony!"

"I...I-" Another bit of his shield broke, another errant bolt struck him. He cried as most of his right ear was blasted away, blood splattering his face and neck. "Twilight please! SHE'S GOING TO KILL ME!"

"You deserve to die!" A final burst of power, and Jack's shield shattered. The explosion sent all three ponies tumbling, the shockwave spreading outwards and knocking trees down for miles. The mushroom cloud of dust and smoke could be seen from as far away as Canterlot itself. It blocked the watching moon, casting the whole of the forest into shadow.

Twilight coughed, opening her eyes to look around. She saw nothing but a black haze around her, as the clearing returned to the darkness of night. Summoning a wind with her magic she blew away the dust and smoke immediately around her, and then climbed on to her hooves. The sound of labored breathing somewhere ahead of her made her begin to limp forward, her horn lighting up with a soft glow to show her way.

She traveled some ten yards before finding the source of the breathing. Jack lay in a crater, staring up at the star-filled sky with nothing but despair. His other wing, already broken before then, had been blasted off in the explosion, leaving nothing but two stumps on his back, one charred and one bloody.

"Oh dear Celestia, Jack..."

Another sound made itself known then. Twilight looked up in the direction of the hoofsteps and watched Trixie appear from the haze. Her mane was matted and torn, scratches littered her body, and a small trickle

of blood seeped from a gash in her front left ankle, but still she limped on towards the crater and Jack.

"For all your power, all your skill, you are no Unicorn." She stopped at the edge of the crater, directly across it from Twilight, and looked down at Jack with pitiless eyes. All you are, Yellow Jacket, is a bratty little Pegasus who wasn't content with the sky."

The Pegasus in the crater, if he could still even be called that, ignored Trixie's words. He slowly, achingly turned his head to Twilight. Two pairs of purple eyes locked. "Please...don't let her kill me, Twilight...I don't want to die..."

Twilight looked desperately over at her fellow Unicorn, her sister. "You won't kill him, right? I mean, look, you've won, he's beaten!"

Trixie shook her head. If anything her eyes grew harder, the lack of pity turning into hatred. Her irises turned a brighter red, as her sclera shifted to black. "No, he's too dangerous to be left alive."

"But he can't even fly anymore! You can't just kill him without trial, or-"

"As a Hoofmaiden of the Moon, I am charged to do whatever I deem fit to protect Equestria and the crown," interrupted Trixie. "And he is dangerous because he can inspire others to follow his path, perhaps already has. I will not allow revolt to tear this country apart because of one Pegasus on a power trip!"

Twilight felt tears on her cheeks. She watched as energy began to once again crackle along Trixie's horn, before shaking her head furiously. "Don't make me choose..."

"Don't let her kill me..."

"Don't try to stop me."

Trixie reared back, ready to unleash her spell and destroy Jack once and for all, when suddenly a ball of telekinetic energy impacted her in the chest. With a grunt she flew back, the energy fading from her horn as she struck the ground and began to roll.

Twilight meanwhile jumped down into the crater and grabbed hold of Jack around the shoulders. "Jack, hold on, please don't let go."

Summoning the necessary magic from her inner self, Twilight Sparkle cast one last look in the direction she had sent Trixie flying, then a final glance towards the distant Ponyville. Her body trembling with grief, Twilight teleported herself and Jack away.

Silence and darkness descended.

Chapter 10

Good and Evil

Yellow Jacket awoke to cold and darkness. Lying on his left side, nothing met his open eyes but an old, decaying wall of blueish grey stone. Seconds seemed to stretch into hours to him as his eyes traced over the line work and delicate details, all but faded away through the ages. It reminded him somewhat of the older halls and passages in Canterlot University, if they were allowed to face the ravages of time like anything else.

A slight shuffling, a tapping of hooves on stone, eventually caught the Pegasus's attention. He rolled over onto his other side and looked to see Twilight Sparkle. She was a few feet away from Jack and with her back to him, ruffling through multiple knapsacks and saddlebags for something or other. He did not know, and right then he did not care. In fact, it was strangely difficult to feel anything at all.

As if sensing his gaze on her back, she stopped what she was doing and looked over her shoulder at him. Jack startled when, a split-second following her turning to look at him an afterimage of the same movement occurred. This second Twilight had a fiery mane and tail. Her coat was a deeper purple than regular Twilight's and her eyes were the red of open flame. The last thing Jack noticed of the ghostly afterimage was the pair of sky-blue wings on her back.

"Oh, you're awake," Twilight spoke, barely above a whisper. The echoes of her voice rang through the area they were in, which Jack only then noticed to be a large room, some kind of castle's court. She frowned at the echoes. "I had hoped you would sleep for a little longer. I didn't want to deal with you so soon."

Twilight's voice was broken, lifeless. It sent shivers down Jack's spine, and a dark chill through his gut. Even these feelings were strangely muted, and after scant seconds had faded away. "I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry...I never wanted to make you choose between me and your friends..."

Twilight's eyes went to somewhere just behind Jack for a moment, but then she shook her head and turned away. She began again to look through the saddlebags. "You were leaving on your own; I understand that you didn't mean this...at an intellectual level. At the emotional level...I wish you had never come back into my life. You and Trixie. I...think I hate both of you at the moment. It feels weird and horrible; I don't think I've ever hated anypony before."

"...I'm sorry." Something nagged Jack in the back of his mind. Something felt missing, something so important to him he was a different pony without it, but he couldn't seem to focus. All he could seem to manage was to feel a dull throbbing around his back. He turned his head to look, and his entire midsection wrapped in bandages. A pair of small bumps rose from the bandages on his back, discolored an ugly brownish-red. Then it all fell into place for Jack.

"My wings...oh, my wings..."

Here Twilight's eyes, up to that moment as dull and lifeless as her voice, took on some measure of real emotion. It was sorrow, Jack decided, though he could not feel it himself any longer. "Jack...I'm afraid those are totally lost. I don't know any real healing magic beyond simple scrapes and bruises, I couldn't heal them even if I wanted to. The best I could do after we...after we escaped...was to even out the stumps so that the skin could properly heal over them."

Jack nodded in understanding to this, but then frowned. He had the idea that he should have been screaming, or raging, or sobbing his eyes out; something. But he realized he wasn't doing any of this. "I can't feel anything."

"Yeah..." Twilight gulped and looked away from Jack. Her attention seemed drawn to a five-branched pedestal of some sort at the far end of the chamber. "After I teleported us here, to the ancient castle where Celestia and Luna once ruled Equestria, you were...unconscious, but in so much pain you were still screaming. Plus working on your wing stumps would have caused you even more pain. I cast a spell to numb your feelings before I set to work, but...I'm not very practiced in the spell, I guess it affected more than just physical feeling."

"Oh...will it wear off?"

Twilight shrugged. "Eventually. You've been asleep for several hours while I procured supplies, including the cloak you left at the park, so I can't imagine it lasting any longer than until sun up."

"Okay then, good." Jack grunted and climbed to his hooves. Looking over the gathered stuff a moment, he spotted his cloak and began moving for it.

"Jack...did you attack Fluttershy?"

Jack stopped mid-step and looked at Twilight Sparkle. They were closer now, and he could more easily see the signs of crying around her eyes. He could not feel any reason to lie to her. He could not feel any reason to tell the truth to her. "Her name is Fluttershy? I only knew of her from Foto Finish's work with her, I though her name was Flootershy. I believe it was whatever started the Ponyville fire that attacked her."

Twilight stepped closer to Jack, moving in between him and his cloak. "And what about Rainbow Dash? Did you cast the illusion spell on her like everypony is saying?"

Again, Jack felt no reason to lie or tell the truth. He just felt numbness, through which came through a vague want of survival. "I did. But it was the spell you showed me when you still lived in Canterlot, for use entertainment during All Hallows Eve. Something...in Rainbow Dash's mind warped it, I guess. No harm had been meant or expected, I was just bored."

Twilight Sparkle frowned and looked away from Jack. To Jack, she seemed to be remembering something. "When I removed the corrupted magic from Rainbow Dash...I found a dream in it, a nightmare. In it Dash was confronted by an evil force..."

"...taunting her that she would fail? That she wasn't good enough?" When Twilight looked back at him Jack shrugged. "It is a dream I am familiar with. It is why I am so convinced there is some **THING** behind these fires, and that the legend of the Knights of Equestria is the key. Something has been working against us. Playing both sides to destroy us all with suspicion and violence."

"That makes sense..." Twilight frowned and began to pace. Being presented with a problem like this, being able to focus her thoughts on one singular goal, made coping with everything so much easier. Of course, the magnitude of what they were talking about terrified her almost beyond rational thought, but that was still an improvement. "The list of beings powerful enough to do something like this is depressingly low, of course. Princess Celestia, Princess Luna...Trixie..."

"This could be a well-timed plan on her part to get revenge on the lot of you," responded Jack. He pulled a vial of red fluid from a hidden pocket in his cloak and set it aside, before looking over at Twilight. "My magic and subsequent disappearance from Canterlot could have been just the excuses she was waiting for before enacting her plan, with me as the improvised scapegoat."

Jack popped the cork from the vial and downed the contents in one gulp. Giving his head a shake he tossed the bottle away, where it shattered against a stone wall. "Or this could all be over-thinking, spurred on by a desperate need to cope with all the horrific events that have transpired this day. Hm, the two of us could be losing our minds."

Twilight...Twilight laughed at this. Stopping her pacing she spun around to face him, and Jack once again saw that strange afterimage. "Oh Jack, it is so funny you said that! I, hehe, was just thinking about how crazy I am to do what I have to do!"

Jack blinked. It appeared that Twilight's numbness spell did not affect confusion. "What do you mean, what you have to do?"

Twilight laughed again; it was not a happy laugh. Jack could very nearly smell the desperation she felt, coming off her like waves. "Well you see, obviously we can't go back to my library quite yet, hehe. And there's only, Haha, one other place in all of Equestria with the information that could possibly lead us to Midnight Castle and to, hehe, saving us from being traitors to the throne and the execution that entails. Hehehe..."

"I want my friends..."

Most everything was quiet at the Sweet Apple Acres farmhouse. As usual for when not all members of the Apple family were home, many of the lights in the house were still on, even that late into the night. Rarity shut and locked the front door as quietly as she could, not wanting to wake anyone that might have been asleep. That done she turned and started down the main hallway of the house to the stairs, and from there to the guest room and what she hoped would be a peaceful, dreamless sleep.

The ivory Unicorn had just begun to pass by the open kitchen door when a cleared throat made her stop. She looked and found Big Macintosh sitting at the kitchen table, a mug of coffee at his hooves and an indescribably tired expression on his face. "Rarity."

"Big Mac..." Rarity shuffled into the kitchen, taking the seat opposite the big draft pony. She made no effort to fix up the frazzled and limp state her mane and tail were in. "Darling, what are you still doing up at this hour? I figured you country types have to get up early for your farmwork."

Big Mac nodded his head, and as he did he pushed the mug of coffee across the table towards Rarity. "You figured right. However, I thought of somethin' a might bit more important than a good night's rest." He looked her square in the eyes, and Rarity saw that it was not exhaustion hanging off his shoulders, but concern. "Are you alright, Rarity?"

A sniffle escaped from Rarity before she could stop it. Looking away from him, down at the table where the wood was old and the coffee stains of a dozen generations lingered, she wiped a hoof over her eyes. It came back wet and smeared black, her makeup running from the crying she had done on the long, lonely walk from Twilight Sparkle's library to Sweet Apple Acres. She hadn't even thought about what it might do to her complexion.

"I..." Rarity sniffled again and shook her head. "No Big Mac, I'm not alright. Nothing's alright anymore, everything's ruined! Trixie's been hurt, and that sc-scoundrel Yellow Jack escaped, and Twi-Twilight Sparkle, she...she helped..."

Big Mac circled around the table and pulled Rarity into tight embrace, which she gratefully buried herself in. For the longest time the pair stood there, Rarity silently crying against Big Mac's shoulder, and Big Mac

brushing over her mane with his muzzle. For those endless minutes, time stretching into eternity, not a word was said and not a word needed to be said.

The moment was broken by the soft clip-clop of hooves on the hardwood floor. "Big sis?"

Rarity oh so reluctantly pulled away from that strong, warm, protective shoulder and looked toward the door, the red earth pony following suit. Sweetie Belle stood there in the open doorway, a tired but worried expression in her olive eyes. "Big sis, what's wrong?"

Rarity sniffled and wiped at her eyes, inadvertently smearing her makeup further. "Oh, oh yes, yes I'm fine Sweetie Belle. G-go back to bed now darling, I'll be up in a moment."

Despite the request to leave, the little Unicorn filly stayed there, hanging her head and shuffling her hooves nervously. Letting out a little whimper she looked up at her only sister. "Big sis, you don't look fine too me..."

Rarity's heart nearly broke at this. Moving toward her sister she knelt down and pulled Sweetie Belle into a hug of her own. "You are right, Sweetie. So right..."

The loud clop of heavy hooves, and Big Mac walked up from behind and placed a hoof on Rarity's shoulder. "Why don't you wash up and head on to bed, hun. I'll take care of Sweetie Belle down here."

Rarity pulled away from Sweetie Belle's hold and smiled up at him. It was a weak smile, small, but it was genuine. "Yes, I-...thank you, darling."

Rarity placed soft kiss on his cheek, and then turned back around to her sister and placed a kiss on top of Sweetie Belle's head. Giving them both a final look, Rarity exited through the doorway she and then Sweetie Belle had come through, and left.

Sweetie Belle waited until Rarity's hoofsteps had faded up the stairs, and then turned to look up at the red stallion beside her. "Big Mac, what's been going on? Rarity has been so sad lately...and I don't think it's just because we lost our house."

"Why do you think that," asked Big Mac, curious on what had led the little filly beside him to that conclusion. It might also help him decide how much she needed to know.

"Well..." Sweetie brought a hoof up to her chin and thought. "I just noticed that a lot of other ponies in town who lost their homes seem happier than her, that's all. I've seen them sad yeah, but also laughing and smiling and stuff with their friend...oh! Is that what's gotten Rarity all upset?"

Big Mac let out a heavy sigh and sat down on his haunches. "Yes Sweetie Belle, I reckon it is. She and her friends are having...just a little spat, is all."

Sweetie Belle frowned and sat down next to the older pony. "But I don't understand. They're all friends, and heroes! Applebloom and Scootaloo and I never upset each other like this. Friends are supposed to be for each other!"

Big Mac found himself sighing much more often than he liked. Scooting closer to Sweetie Belle, he wrapped a foreleg around the filly's shoulders in a half-hug. "Eyup, you're certainly right about that, Sweetie. Friends should always be for each other. It's the other business, I'm afraid. You see, they've a, uh..." He wracked his brain for the right thing to say. "Well, all heroes want to do good and follow the right path. Sometimes though, heroes can't decide what the Good is exactly, so they fight on it."

Sweetie Belle looked up at Big Mac suddenly. "Is Twilight evil then? I, er, I heard some of what Rarity said...I'm sorry, I know it's wrong to eavesdrop..."

Big Mac only hugged her tighter after this question. At a time like this, he thought, he would gladly trade places with Applejack and let her do the talking. But she wasn't there, just him. So he would have to do. "No Sweetie, I don't think Miss Sparkle is evil. She just...did what she thought was best for the Good. That don't mean she's in the right though."

Smiling as well he could, he stood up and ruffled Sweetie's mane. "Go on ta bed now, and don't you worry about a thing. Miss Rarity and Miss

Sparkle's other friends will get that girl sorted out well enough. That's what friends are for, I reckon."

"You really think so, Big Mac?"

"Eyup."

Sweetie Belle bounced back to her hooves and pressed against him in a hug. "Thank you, Big Mac! Now I'm even gladder my sister likes you!"

Before the red stallion could say anything to dispel the bright blush that had enveloped his cheeks Sweetie was off, running as fast but as quietly as she could. After a silent moment he shook his head and grinned. "Likes me, eh? Well then, now I just feel like a million bits."

Upstairs, Sweetie Belle stood between a pair of doors facing each other across the width of the hall. To her left stood the door to Applebloom's room, where she and Scootaloo were sleeping in during their sleepover. To her right stood the door to the guest room Sweetie knew her sister was staying in. She could just barely make out some soft crying coming from that room. Looking at Applebloom's room a final time, Sweetie Belle turned and entered Rarity's room.

Inside the room was almost pitch black. The lights were shut off, and the window across the room from the door had its curtains open only a sliver. After waiting several minutes for her eyesight to adjust to the darkness, Sweetie Belle silently made her way to the bed situated just beneath the window. She climbed up onto the bed and lay down next to her sister. Rarity's body shook beneath the dull orange covers, the older Unicorn having fallen asleep crying.

A sudden compulsion filled Sweetie Belle as she looked at her uncharacteristically vulnerable older sister, and all that she and Big Mac had discussed swam in her head. Snuggling in against her sister's back, Sweetie Belle cleared her throat and leaned in close to Rarity's ear. And then, as if from somewhere else, the words came to her.

"Here we're standing in the night
All your hope gone from your sight
Alone against your darkest fear

Remember that your friends are near
Draw from each the power you need
This dark thing you will defeat."

If Sweetie Belle had looked, she would have seen that Rarity's crying had begun to slow. But she didn't, as the song inside demanded release.

"You have the strength to carry on
With friendship's love, you can't go wrong
Only together you face the fight
Nothing can stand against your light."

Rarity's crying had stopped completely. Whatever fears and horrors had been plaguing her mind were driven away by Sweetie's gentle, clear voice.

"You have the strength to carry on
With friendship's love, you can't go wrong
Only together you face the fight
Nothing can stand against your light
With Rainbow's Light the battle's won
With friendship's love, you can't go wrong
You have the strength to carry on..."

Sweetie Belle's voice faded to silence. Rarity slept peacefully, a content smile shining through the tear-covered cheeks. Yawning, Sweetie snuggled up closer against her sister and quickly fell asleep as well, not taking notice of the pair of musical notes adorning each of her flanks.

The Royal Academy of Equestria, better known locally as Canterlot University, enveloped several hills just to the east of Canterlot proper, though with its similar aesthetic it was easy to mistake as part of the city from a distance. Its many towering turrets and trappings told travelers of teachers with tricky taste, with some specific sites showing silly results of some soon-expelled student's stunts. The tallest tower was the Academy library, where many of the older students recalled a yellow and black Pegasus living and working, and a purple-grey Unicorn practically living.

With a blinding flash of light and bang of noise, that Unicorn teleported

right at the bottom step of the stairs leading up to the library entrance. Twilight Sparkle pulled the cloak she had borrowed from Yellow Jacket closer around her body and looked around. As it was the middle of the night no others were around, though a few lighted windows in surrounding towers showed that some late night researchers were still awake, and possibly taking notice of the loud bang of her appearance. She would have to move quickly.

Twilight strode up the two dozen steps to the tower's entrance. The edges of her cloak flitted in the weak breeze as she stared up at the double doors, each tall and wide enough to allow passage of a pony as towering as Princess Celestia herself. With a glow of magic from her horn, hidden by the hood draped over her head, Twilight inched one door open and slipped inside. The door shut behind her with little more than a squeak.

Inside, Twilight lowered her hood and looked around. Long used to late nights reading, it took her eyes no time at all to adjust to the darkness. It was a circular area much like her old home in Canterlot, yet multitudes greater in size. Bookshelves lined the walls, going up, up, up all the way to the top of the tower, the different levels reached by a staircase that started just to Twilight's right. Twilight craned her head back as far as she could, but the top of the library tower and her destination remained shrouded in shadow, untouched by the beams of moonlight shining in through the windows that circled the walls.

Twilight turned to the staircase and began ascending. Her steps rang out uncomfortably loud in the still and silent library, and a small part in the back of Twilight's mind half-expected a librarian to burst through one of the countless windows and scream for silence in the library. The thought made Twilight giggle, as she remembered a time when that did happen. Poor Moondancer had not spoken a word for nearly two weeks afterwards.

Twilight's hoofsteps faded away as she reached the final level and came to a stop. 10 minutes after starting. "This library...needs...elevator..." Twilight wheezed out, staggering the few steps from the stairs to the nearest bookcase and leaning against it to catch her breath. This top level of the library was enclosed, with no windows for moonlight to shine through and illuminate. With a bit of imagination, she could almost imagine the echoes of her ragged gasping as belong to a whole host of ponies hiding in the darkness. This thought...did nothing to calm her nerves.

After some minutes Twilight's breathing returned to normal, and when it no longer felt as if her heart would burst from her chest at any moment she looked to the location of her destination. On the topmost floor of the library there were no windows, and no entrances or exits besides the stairs that she had just come up. And yet, set into the far wall from the stairs was a door. A simple wooden door, painted blue with a gold handle, that logically led to nothing. Twilight Sparkle knew better. Her mentor Princess Celestia had once told her of what lay behind that door. A hidden room, a secret room, hidden and secret from the whole universe itself. And within that room...well, Twilight could not precisely say. But there were rumors.

Striding as quietly over to the door as she could, the purple Unicorn tried to grasp the handle with her magic and pull; nothing happened. She frowned and tried again, but no matter how much power she put into it, her magic could not reach the door or its handle. Huffing, she reached out with her magic to feel around the contours of the door, but to her shock found nothing. The whole thing was an empty space, a vacuum pocket of non-magic.

"So, it's going to have to be like that, is it? Fine then." Pulling her magic back, Twilight leaned forward and gripped the handle between her teeth, being careful not to let her tongue touch the metal. Backing up she pulled the door open. A gust of freezing wind blew from the now-open doorway, sending chills down Twilight's spine and making her cloak flutter. Looking into the room beyond the door, Twilight could see nothing. A wall of blackness barred any sight into what lay beyond. This was a cloaking spell beyond any Twilight had ever encountered before.

"Well then, here goes..." Taking a deep breath, as if for a sudden plunge, Twilight stepped forward and through the darkness...

...into a room that dwarfed any that she had ever been in before. Twilight gaped all around her, taking in the most magnificent sight. It was a room, a massive room. The whole of Celestia's castle in Canterlot could have fit inside with room to spare for a battalion of full-grown dragons. Everything was black marble, inlaid with a strange blue metal that danced and flickered with a ghostly inner light. Above her the vaulted ceiling

glistened with a hundred million pinpricks of light, precious diamonds of the clearest and sharpest quality as a simulacrum of the night sky in all its glory. Within it she could see a million constellations she recognized and a million more she did not. She did not know if it was a trick of the eyes or some magic in the room, but above her the faux-constellations seemed to dance and move about, playing out some unknown and far-reaching struggle that had begun long before Twilight had been born, and would not be resolved until long after the bones of her final descendant had crumbled to dust.

At the center of the room, however, floated the object of her search, the subject of so many myths and legends. A dodecahedron of pure crystal and the rough size of Twilight's library home slowly rotated clockwise. Bolts of blue and violet energy crackled over its surface, at seemingly random moments jumping out and striking a glowing diamondstar above.

"The Magicahedron, storage unit of all knowledge and wisdom past, present, and future."

Twilight shrieked and spun around, freezing in sudden terror at the sight of the pony who had come through the door after her. "Pr-Princess Celestia!"

"Twilight Sparkle, my most faithful student." The pink-white Alicorn towered above Twilight Sparkle, looking down at her with eyes that spoke of love, understanding...and a deep disappointment. "I had come here to consult the Magicahedron on the coming return of the Rainbow of Light, when I received some...disturbing news from my dear sister. And now I find you here, far from home and wearing a traitor's cloak. My student, why have you come here?"

Twilight gulped and began slowly backing away from the princess. As she did her mind scrambled to answer the question. "I-I came here to find the answer to the Ponyville fire, to discover the cause of it, and how to keep it from happening again. Also to find the location of Midnight Castle, as well as...personal questions."

Celestia nodded. Stepping forward she turned Twilight around with a wing and began to lead her to the Magicahedron. "Twilight Sparkle, your intentions are true and good, but the path you trod is very dangerous. I can

feel in your heart of hearts much confusion, anger...and so much fear. As your mentor, please, let me help you."

Twilight hung her head, averting her gaze from Celestia to the floor. "I...I just want to do what's right, Princess. But I don't know what that is anymore. Jack needs my help, he wants to stop the fires too, but he's hurt my friends; Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, maybe even Fluttershy. And then there's Trixie. She says she's good, she says that Princess Luna has helped her. But in the forest with Jack, she was so dark, so cold and merciless. She seemed more like the villain than Jack ever did."

"I see."

Twilight looked up at her mentor. In the shifting glow of the room's magic Celestia's face was cast into sharp shadows, yet she could easily make out the growing frown on the Alicorn's face. She gulped and looked away, forward to the Magicahedron. Now that they were closer, she could hear a steady thrumming sound emanating from the massive crystalline apparatus before her. Her skin felt saturated with the raw excess magic energy around the device, a feeling she would compare to being in a steam room. It was stifling.

"Princess Celestia..." Twilight looked back up at her teacher. When Celestia looked down and met her gaze she continued. "Princess, I have so many questions I need answers to. Why have I survived death two times now? How can I protect from the fires? And...and about your playing me and my friends like chess piec-"

"Twilight Sparkle." The named Unicorn shut up at the sound of her name. Celestia leaned down and nuzzled her cheek. "Don't think on how your friendships have come to be, but on what you have done with the friendships given you. Whatever role my plans played in forging the bonds of friendship between you and Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, Rarity, Applejack, and Fluttershy, remember that it was all you that kept those bonds strong and pure."

Pulling away, Celestia looked from Twilight to the Magicahedron. Twilight followed her gaze. "My student, I have no wisdom to impart to you now except to be careful. Pure, absolute knowledge such as the Magicahedron provides can be more dangerous than any spell or curse.

Not even I fully understand its workings. So please, no matter what you may find in there, please...stay yourself."

Something about that sounded strange to Twilight. She turned to look at Celestia. "Do you know what I will find?"

Celestia bowed her head and backed a few paces back. "Just stay yourself."

Whatever Twilight Sparkle would have normally thought to this statement was swept away with a pulse of ancient magic. As if pulled by some outside force Twilight turned back to the Magicahedron, her pupils shrinking and eyes glazing over as she stared into the device's crystalline depths. Within it a blue light flared, shifting without a moment's pause between azure, cobalt, indigo, and cerulean. Unknown to her, a matching glow enveloped her horn.

From the Magicahedron images began to appear in Twilight's mind, flashing by in the blink of an eye. Faces past by; dragon, manticore, phoenix, diamond dog, before finally settling on the face of a pony with a red coat and blue mane. Strangely, this pony had two horns, set like a bull's horns rather than a normal Unicorn's.

SPEAK.

All at once the voice was like a hundred boulders tumbling down a mountain slope, a raging river rushing over the edge of a cliff and crashing down, a thousand metallic blades scraping against each other in a cacophony of chaos. Whatever magic fueled this device and gave it whatever sentience it had, it was so wholly unlike anything Twilight Sparkle had ever experienced before that it felt to the purple Unicorn like a disruption of the natural order. She felt sick, frightened, loving, and hateful towards it all at once from just a single word.

SPEAK.

Twilight's legs buckled beneath her. "I, I have come for information. What is the way to Midnight Castle?"

New images began assaulting her mind, not of faces this time but

places, starting with the decrepit castle she had left Jack in and culminating with a 360 degree view of a single massive tower, pitch black in stone and metal. It was only after this final image that Twilight was able to put what she had seen together as a visual map to her destination from what would be her starting point. She tried not to wonder how the device before her had known where that starting point was.

"Thu-thank you. How...how do I harness the power of the six Knights of Equestria to save this world?"

A flash of light, and suddenly Twilight's mind began to fill with the details of a vast, intricate spell. Twilight felt the corners of her mouth pull back into a smile as a sort of knowledge she had only ever dreamed of filled her. Not just a spell but theories, plans, ancient techniques and rites, theoretical and metaphorical ideas on the magic superstructure of the world itself. Within the blink of an eye and an eon Twilight knew everything to do with not just the Knights and how to harness their power, but with how their power worked as well, how to restore it to the world...and how to draw more from the world.

IS THIS KNOWLEDGE...SATISFACTORY?

Twilight climbed back to her hooves, bringing one up to wipe absently at the stream of blood leaking from her right nostril. "No, no I have one more question. Why have I survived death two times now?"

For the first time since it had appeared in her head, the image of the blue and red pony with two horns showed an emotion. It was something akin to amusement. Before Twilight could ask what was funny a stab of pain shot through her brain. She screamed and fell to the ground, which she only just then found to be covered in freshly-written runes. She lay in a circle of them. Panicking she shot back to her hooves, screaming as another stab of pain rent her mind. Strange images flashed before her mind's eye, of a towering Unicorn pony, his shining eyes seeming to make his purple coat catch fire; dank, lightless dungeons; a young Pegasus mare, her white coat bloodied and torn, her belly distended with an advanced pregnancy.

"AAAAAAAUUGH!"

Another flash, and now the fiery pony stood with five others, their eyes shining with light as red and blue flames assaulted them and a towering figure of darkness stood in the distance; the first stallion again, standing above the mare and looking down at her and the bawling filly in her hooves; Princess Luna and Princess Celestia standing together, wrapping tendrils of sunlight and moonlight around the six ponies until they were completely hidden.

Twilight's body shuddered, her screams growing in pain and torment. Blood seeped from her nose, her mouth, the corners of her eyes as raw magic began to consume her. Then suddenly, blessed relief came to her as the runes around her took on a golden glow, and she felt herself forcibly disconnected from the Magicahedron.

Princess Celestia was at Twilight's side in an instant, catching the Unicorn as she collapsed to the ground and holding her close to her chest. Her cloak had been burned away in the event. Twilight sobbed and looked up at her princess with bloody eyes. "I am...a descendant of the Six."

Princess Celestia nodded, her face set in a grim mask. "The leader, Skyfire. The only one of them to sire a foal after taking in the magic of the world. His power, flowing down through the generations, only fully began to manifest in you through such close contact to me. My student, I am so sorry..."

Twilight felt sick, her whole body aching. All she wanted was to stay there in the Alicorn's embrace, where it was warm and soft and safe. Yet still she looked around at the runes on the floor. Her eyes widened in realization of what they were, and she looked back at Celestia with her tears renewed. "M-magic absorption runes? Why...I don't, I don't understand...why would you try to take away my magic?"

Twilight's tears grew hotter when Celestia looked away, tears in her own eyes. "I...only tried for your own good, Twilight. Skyfire's magic has begun to grow rampant in your system, it could-"

"I can't protect my friends without my magic!" Twilight's horn flared with magic. Shock flashed across Celestia's face as an invisible power shoved her away from Twilight.

Twilight rolled back to her hooves and continued the pressure, pushing her

mentor back until she slammed back-first into the wood door. A cry of pain came from the Alicorn as a wing bent the wrong way, but Twilight didn't care. In her blazing eyes she no longer saw the kind, patient, wise, ever-loving Princess she had lived much of her life with, but instead a monster. A twisted fiend, who had waited until a moment of horrible emotional anguish before making her move.

"Yes, that's it," Twilight muttered to herself. She stalked towards the princess pinned to the one exit, the glow of her horn growing with every passing second. "You...knew what I would learn in there, counted on it. That, hehe, that's why you allowed me access so easily, the Magicahedron would provide, hah, the perfect distraction as you drained me of my magic!"

Celestia's horn flickered and she burst free from the telekinetic hold. "No Twilight, that's not true, you know it! I only wanted to protect you, and Equestria! You have no idea what will happen if you unleash the power of the Knights of Equestria, stop acting like such a foal!"

"No, I don't know what will happen!" Twilight's horn glowed ever brighter, the skin and hair around it going transparent from the raw energy flowing through it. Through the room a fierce wind developed. Once again Celestia was pinned to the door, and this time she stayed there. "And you know? I'm glad I don't know! It's so sickening to always know, always have all the answers, and always to be EXPECTED to have all the answers! It's just such a rush to not know what's going to happen next!"

With that final shout, Twilight leapt forward. The thick layers of magic around her horn slid back and enveloped her body, and suddenly that form transformed into a purple blur, crackling with lightning. Celestia had only the time to widen her eyes before the blur smashed into her chest. She was sent hurtling backwards, through the door back into the library, and then through the stone and mortar library wall out into the night beyond.

To the ponies below that flocked to their windows and out into the courtyards, a sight met them that filled their hearts with dread. Their beloved ruler, the symbol of love and wisdom that had ruled over them in peace for over a thousand years, was being torn apart before their eyes. A red and purple blur sped around the form of the Alicorn princess, almost

too fast for the eyes of those below to track, battering her again and again from all sides, obviously being the only thing keeping Celestia from falling the hundreds of feet to the ground. Very faintly screaming could be heard, though whether it came from the Princess or the attacker none on the ground could say.

But then, suddenly, more figures joined the sky; royal Pegasi guardsponies from the Canterlot garrison. A wild cheer burst from the watching ponies below as above their heads sped Cirrus Maw, who held the line at Fort Hollow against Diamond Dog raiders; Aurora, who banished the frost giants back to their northern lairs; Skydancer, the only known Pegasus to learn how to harness natural lightning in battle; and greatest of all, leading the charge, flew Firefly, captain of Princess Celestia's personal Pegasi guards.

At the approach of the newcomers the purple blur slowed to a stop, fading back into the form of a strangely tall Unicorn, her horn glowing with magical light and a pair of massive Pegasi wings on her back. With the sudden cessation of strikes Princess Celestia finally began plummeting to the ground, until she was saved from a messy end on the cobblestone courtyard below by the combined efforts of every University student and faculty member gathered there.

Twilight watched the group of Pegasi approach, hovering in place with a slow and steady flap of her wings. She neither wondered where they had come from nor cared.

Once Firefly and the others had come within range Twilight's glowed, and a massive blast of sheet lightning flew towards them. The Pegasi scattered, dodging around the bolts of deadly energy as easily as they would butterflies. Before Twilight could ready another volley Firefly swooped in from above and smashed into her hooves first, sending her tumbling through the air and into the side of a tower. Before Twilight could reclaim her senses another blinding blow came from Skydancer, and then one from Aurora. Twilight tumbled end over end through the sky, the Pegasi timing their swooping attacks in perfect harmony as they bounced her back and forth between them.

Twilight Sparkle planned to fix that.

As soon as she was hit the next time her horn flashed and a telekinetic grip kept the Pegasus and new Alicorn from separating. Skydancer yelped in shock and flapped her wings in a panic, before Twilight twisted the two of them around in midair and slammed Skydancer into the side of a building. Her opponent slumped unconscious.

Undoing the holding spell she had cast, Twilight flipped up and out of the way of Cirrus Maw's reckless charge at her from behind. She smirked as he impacted against the unconscious Skydancer and sent both Pegasi crashing through the wall into whatever lay beyond in an orange and green blur. "Come on soldiers, I just got my wings five minutes ago! Impress me!"

"Okay!" A pink and blue blur slammed into Twilight from the side. Continuing to fly forward with Twilight, Firefly maneuvered around to Twilight's back and hooked her forelegs around the other pony's forelegs while pinning Twilight's wings to her back with her body. Then she twisted them both around, slamming Twilight through the side of a tower as they flew past it at blinding speeds. "Traitor! Twilight Sparkle, how dare you harm your princess and fellow ponies like this!"

"She started it!" Twilight shouted back. Her horn gave off a pulse of light, and suddenly Firefly let go of Twilight to clutch at her blinded eyes. Twilight's momentum carried her forward, until she flipped around and landed with all four hooves onto the top of a rounded dome. By this point the aerial fight had made its way to the skies and rooftops of Canterlot proper, and a whole new throng of ponies was leaving their homes to watch.

A sharp whistling sound made Twilight's ears perk up. The next moment a sharp pain hit her right side, and she looked to see a thrown spear had grazed her flank just above her cutie mark. With barely a mental shrug she telekinetically caught the next spear and flung it back at Aurora, making the Pegasus dodge out of the way. "Keep your toys out of this."

Firefly tackled Twilight from the side, and together the two began to roll back and forth across the dome. The dagger clutched in the pink Pegasus's mouth flashed, and a shallow slash appeared down Twilight's left shoulder. At this Twilight grunted and kicked Firefly away with her hind legs. Firefly

righted herself in midair and glared down at Twilight. "Just why, why are you doing this?!"

"You wouldn't understand!" Twilight telekinetically seized Firefly and threw her into the tower across the street from them. Flying forward she built up a massive charge of telekinetic energy around her hooves and let it go in one burst, blowing apart the tower and sending pieces flying in all directions. Screams came from the ponies on the streets below as hundreds of tons of debris showered down towards them, but with simply a flicker of her horn Twilight caught it all and threw it at Aurora. The white and blue Pegasus had only a moment to scream before she was buried beneath the several tons of rubble.

Twilight made to teleport away, before an organized movement caught her attention. From Canterlot Castle she could see dozens of Pegasus soldiers flying in towards her. Through the streets dozens more of the royal guards, these Unicorns, hurried to form a circle around her, their horns charging with, judging from the color, lightning spells. And then, silhouetted against the moon, Twilight could see Princess Luna flying in.

"I have no intention of killing any of you, or Celestia" Twilight shouted to the gathering soldiers. Her horn glowed, and the air around Twilight's body began to blur, condensing. A deep breathe in, and then out, and wisps of smoke curled from between her lips. "I don't think I could either, I just don't have the combat training like all of you or my sister has. But..." The air around her now formed a thick wall, almost like a bubble. Through it her form was difficult to make out, just as Twilight wanted. "I think I make up for that in sheer power. FIRE!"

With this roar a stream of fire poured from Twilight's mouth and into what was not simply condensed air, but oxygen. It ignited, and with another roar Twilight sent the fireball flying downwards. It impacted the ground and exploded, and suddenly the gathered soldiers were faced with a choice; continue fighting the madmare they had surrounded, or save the city and its citizens from a fiery death.

It was no choice at all. Twilight Sparkle teleported from Canterlot with no more attempts to stop her.

Back in Canterlot University, the healers had arrived, and set to work immediately on the bloody, beaten form of their beloved princess. Students and faculty joined in however they could, and the courtyard shone with the light of a hundred horns, hummed with the sound of a hundred healing spells. Through all this, there were but a few who noticed Celestia awake and mumble out three simple words.

"The Rainbow...comes..."

Chapter 11

Onwards to Midnight Castle!

Rainbow found herself in a void, but not the void she knew from her dreams. All around her for as far as she could see was an endless vista of white. A breeze played through her mane, making it flutter about around her head. On the breeze came a faint sound, like the tinkling of little bells, and children's laughter, and the breaking of waves upon a rocky shore. From somewhere up above her, or perhaps from below, light shined white and pure as crystal.

After an indefinite period of time in which Rainbow simply stood there and listened to the sound and basked in the light, something new appeared. At first she didn't notice it, as vague and weak it was against the whiteness around her, but gradually it grew closer and stronger. A pastel rainbow, its colors softer and calmer than her own wild looks, curled and twisted its way through the void towards her. From it Rainbow felt the millennia of age and sorrow it carried with it.

"Rainbow..." The sound of her name from the being sent electricity running through her spine, and the warmth in her chest to grow. "Darkness encroaches upon the day. As Twilight falls, so does the world. Silence will fall."

Rainbow watched the undulating colors of the pastel rainbow. Somehow, in this place she found herself in, all the bravado she would usually put on melted away from her, and she could only speak her inmost thoughts. "What can I do? I'm just a simple Pegasus from Cloudsdale, I'm not...I'm not some super magical expert pony. Twilight's the kind of pony you want, not me."

Something changed in the pastel rainbow, as if it was...amused by Rainbow's words, but understood the sentiment behind them also. "Life flashes by like a whirlwind; we don't always know where it will lead us. Some run and hide, despairing at life's unfairness. Others rage and scream at the randomness of life, under the strange assumption they can hurt it back. Still others work to control the paths, setting themselves as simply

'knowing better' than those they seek to 'protect'. Only a very few..."

Rainbow felt herself leaning forward. "What? Only a very few what?"

The pastel rainbow flared brighter for just a moment, its colors leaking into the white around them. "Only a very few have the strength and loyalty to themselves to face life head-on. These are the heroes and saviors of the world. Stay loyal to your destiny, Rainbow..."

The pastel rainbow faded away. Rainbow shouted and dashed forward to where it had been. "No, wait! What's my desti-"

It was the silence that woke Rainbow Dash up. As accustomed as she had become over the years to sleep past everyday noises during her naps, the absence of such noises was as good as an alarm clock to the rainbow-maned Pegasus. At first she was confused by the lack of birds singing, wind rustling, and the distant sound of ponies going about their day below her, until she remembered. After the events with Twilight Sparkle she had left Twilight's library with Doctor Whoof. She was in the DRIS, in the same bedroom she had gone to the first time.

Once a few more seconds had passed and the fog of sleep had lifted somewhat from Rainbow's head, she realized that the room was not as silent as she had at first thought. Close, right beside her left ear as she lay on her right side, there was the soft sound of a pony breathing. At the same moment Rainbow noticed this, she also became uncomfortably aware of the grey-coated forehoof wrapped around her midsection.

Rainbow looked at this hoof, blinked, and looked back behind her. Ditzzy Doo lay there, curled up against Rainbow's back and ever-so-softly snoring. Dark bags hung under her eyes from several long days of worrying, and her hair looked like it needed a good hour under Rarity's care, but still something stirred in Rainbow's chest at the sight, and butterflies fluttered through her stomach. Raising her head up a bit further, she could see Dinky nestled against Ditzzy's back, using one of the grey mare's wings as a blanket and the other as a pillow. This sight just made Rainbow want to giggle.

Rainbow watched the mother and daughter pair sleep a few minutes longer, before sighing and turning away. Slowly, so as not to wake up either Ditzzy or Dinky, Rainbow lifted the forehoof wrapped around her and slid out from under it and off the bed. She flared her wings and stretched her back, groaning in pleasure as several bones popped. Giving her mane a quick shake to rid it of the bed mane that had developed, Rainbow began to head for the door to leave.

"Mmm...Rainbow Dash?"

Rainbow stopped at the sound of her name and turned back to the bed. Ditzzy was awake and sitting up on her forehooves, looking at her. Rainbow did her best to smile. "Oh uh, good morning, Ditzzy. I'm...sorry if I woke you up or anything."

The yellow-maned Pegasus sighed and looked down, away from Rainbow. "No, don't worry about it. This probably isn't the best time to sleep in anyway. Lots of...stuff to do."

"Yeah, stuff..." Rainbow gave her wings a shake and joined Ditzzy in the act of not looking at the other pony. After several tense seconds of silence she coughed and turned away. "Well, I guess I'll just go...uh...get some breakfast and see what Doctor's up to. See if everypony's still okay and all."

Ditzzy nodded her head, and then looked up at Rainbow and smiled. "Would you mind if I joined you in that? Maybe I could show you a few things I know while we fly."

For a reason she couldn't explain, the way Ditzzy said this made a blush creep over Rainbow's cheeks. She shook her head and backed away from the bed, to the door. "No no, I'll be fine on my own. You should just hang here and, uh, be with Dinky."

Ditzzy's smile faltered. "Dash, I-"

"Well anyway, see ya later!" Rainbow Dash turned and bolted through the door, shutting it quickly behind her. For several seconds she just stood there leaning against the door, before with a sigh she left it and began wandering down the hall.

Minutes passed as she worked her way to the control room of the DRIS, where she figured she would find Doctor Whoof and get directions to wherever the kitchen was. All the while she thought about the hasty retreat she had just pulled. As sleepy as she still was, even she could get that how she was basically running away from that particular situation. But she just couldn't deal with it right now. Not with the events of the previous day and her dream still so fresh in her mind.

"Besides," Rainbow muttered to herself as she passed through a doorway and into the control room, the second level. "What am I supposed to do when I wake and find another mare in my bed..."

"Kiss and invite her to tea?" Doctor Whoof's head popped out from behind the central dais and grinned at Rainbow Dash around the sonic screwdriver in his mouth. "Although I'm not quite sure who would wear the bow tie in that relationship. Or maybe one would wear a bow tie and the other a necktie? I don't know, Dash, do you feel more a bow tie pony or a necktie pony?"

Rainbow Dash just stared down at him. "What planet are you from?"

"Gallopfrey." Doctor groaned and bopped his head against the console. "No, scratch that, that's not a planet, it's a region in northern Equestria. Why would I answer planet? I don't know. The important question is," he walked fully around the dais and up at her from the foot of the stairs. "Are you okay?"

Rainbow worked her jaw a moment, considering the question, before giving her head a rough nod. "Yeah, of course I'm fine. Are you? I mean, you're still wearing that bow tie and everything."

"Ugh! I knew you ponies would turn this into a thing!" Doctor reached a hoof up and adjusted the bow tie at his neck. He seemed to have switched the red one out for a blue one. "Bow Ties. Are. Cool."

Rainbow rolled her eyes, but didn't bother with answering. Foregoing flying for the moment she trotted down the stairs and past him. She looked this way and that. "So anyways doc, you got a kitchen in this box? Can't save the world on an empty stomach."

"Third door to the left of the entrance," he replied, turning to grin at her. "And who said anything about saving the world?"

Rainbow shrugged and headed for the door he had indicated. "Well, Jack and...and Twilight got away from Trixie last night. There's bound to be some kind of world-saving that needs to be done." Rainbow stopped then and looked back at Doctor. "Hey, where is Trixie anyway? And the others, I guess."

Doctor shrugged and, with a little hop, dropped back into the lower level below the glass floor to work on whatever he had been working on before she had arrived. "Well, let's see. The little dragon baby came by about half an hour ago from the library. Trixie's doing some sort of cool mental meeting thing with Luna, and the cowfilly hasn't left the yellow Pegasus's side since last night."

A sudden crackle of electricity and Doctor yelped. Shaking his hoof he popped his head back out from the floor. "Oh, and your gut feeling was correct. Last night Fluttershy wasn't saying Twilight Sparkle, she was trying to say NOT Twilight Sparkle. So uh, yeah."

As the eccentric earth pony said this, it felt as if a massive weight lifted from the blue Pegasus's shoulders. Rainbow smiled and turned to continue on her way to the kitchen.

Inside the kitchen it was all silver and chrome, a dizzying change from warmer hues of the central room Rainbow had just left. Steadying herself after a moment, Rainbow trotted to the kitchen island, where she found Spike already seated. He sat munching on a large bowl of muffins. She sat down to his left and took a blueberry muffin for herself. "Hey Spike."

Spike yawned and looked back at her. Rainbow had to restrain herself from flinching at the tired look in his eyes. "Oh, hey Rainbow Dash. Yawn...about time you got up..."

"Hm?" Rainbow took a bite of her muffin and looked over at a clock on the wall in front of them. It read 10:26. "Oh...wow. That's...that's late even for me."

Spike shrugged and sighed. "We all had a late night, I guess." He

jammed the rest of his muffin into his mouth and swallowed it without a single chew. "Some later than others."

Surprising herself as much as she did Spike next to her, Rainbow reached a forehoof out and gave him a tight squeeze of a hug. "Hey little guy, you sure you're okay? You look and sound like you're about to collapse."

Spike took another muffin from the bowl between them and began nibbling at it. "Oh, it's just Trixie. She's a harder driver than T-Twilight was, whenever she had an idea. After she got back and you all left, she had me running through the whole library, getting all kinds of books and scrolls for her. All of Twilight's pushiness, none of her politeness or friendship."

Rainbow sighed and hugged Spike harder. They might not have been the closest of friends, but they were still friends and that's what counted. "Hey, don't worry about it, Spike. We'll get the old Twilight back soon as we can, right?"

"Oh, I'm not worried about that," replied Spike. He shrugged off her hoof and looked at her. "I've known Twilight my whole life. Literally, she's the pony who hatched me. She's like a big sister. And the Twilight I know would never act the way she's been acting lately. There's just gotta be something affecting her, but I just don't know what."

Rainbow frowned and looked away, letting Spike's words sink in. She tried to think on it, on that crazy dream she had, on everything that had occurred the other day, and most stressing, on whatever was between her and Ditz. She quickly regretted it. "Gah...I'm not a thinker!"

"Boy, that's right," Spike mumbled.

Rainbow glared at him for the longest moment, before sighing and slumping down in her seat. "No, I mean it. I really mean it. My whole life's been about racing and winning. Getting what I need done in the fastest, coolest way possible, be it clearing the skies or facing a dragon. I've never had to slow down and think things through. Ponies like Twilight, or Applejack, or even Fluttershy have always been there to do it for me. But now none of them are here. Hay, it's one of them thinking too much that's got us into all this trouble!"

Rainbow leaned her elbows onto the counter and her head on her hooves. "I don't know, I just have this weird feeling like I need...I need to...gah!" Two bangs rang out as she smashed her hooves down onto the countertop. "I don't know! I just don't know and I hate it!"

Rainbow smashed her hooves against the counter a couple more times, before collapsing her front half onto it in a huff. Spike fidgeted in his seat some, before reaching out and placing a hand on her back. "Hey, remember when we went to rescue Rarity from those Diamond Dogs? Boy, that was quite an adventure right? And you were so cool, just rushing ahead without a thought when you heard your friend was in trouble. And you know what else?"

Rainbow lifted her head from her hooves and looked at Spike. "What?"

Spike smiled. "Twilight always told me that you were the bravest pony she knew. She's always wished she was as brave as you are. You inspire her."

Rainbow slowly looked away from Spike, at the reflective metal surface of the wall across the kitchen from her. Rainbow Dash, the coolest and bravest pony in all of Ponyville looked back at her. A smile spread across her face and her eyes shined. Inside her chest the strange feeling roared to life. "I...thank you Spike. Thank you so-" She turned to look at him and found his eyes wide. "Spike? Spike, what is it?"

Spike lifted a claw and pointed at her chest. "Wow..."

Rainbow looked down at where he pointed and nearly screamed. Streamers of light in all the colors of the rainbow were sprouting from the center of her chest, shifting and waving, slowly encircling around her whole chest to the back.

"What the hay!?" Rainbow leapt from her seat and out the door, Spike jumping to follow her. Together the two raced to the control room, Rainbow frantically swiping at the tendrils of light with a hoof. "DOOOCTOOOR!"

Doctor Whoof popped his head up from under the glass floor again, and looked around. "Hey, I am being extremely clever down here and there's no

one to stand around looking impressed. What's the point in having you all-" He spotted Rainbow and Spike standing right in front of him, both waving their arms and pointing at the light at her chest. "Ooh, ooh my. Um, wow."

"Doctor!" Rainbow hovered in place with her wings, one hoof continuing to swipe at the light. By this point it had progressed all around her chest and back and had begun to coalesce into something. It had also grown in intensity, until it was almost too painful to directly look at. "What is it, what's going on, why has there been so much dumb magic stuff lately!?"

Doctor climbed up from the lower level and trotted over to Rainbow. Taking his sonic screwdriver in mouth he began scanning all over Rainbow and the light. "Oh wow, oh wow wow wow. That is interesting." He stopped to check his readings for a moment before going back to it. "Oh, that is very interesting."

Rainbow whimpered. The light coming from her was uncomfortably warm to her, almost like it was going to set her on fire, while the little green light going over her from Doctor's device felt cold and strangely metallic. "Please don't tell me you're the kind of pony who finds it interesting when other ponies blowing up in magical explosions of...magicalness."

"Of course not, Miss Dash," Doctor replied. He had ducked low and practically jammed his screwdriver into the source of the light. "Although wait, when you say it like that it does sound kinda interesting."

"Doctoooooor..." Rainbow and Spike looked up as Ditzzy came flying down from the second level. She landed on Rainbow's light side and gave her a quick nuzzle before looking at the earth pony. "What's going on here?"

"Um." Doctor Whoof pulled away from Rainbow Dash and stood to his full height. By this point the rainbow light had finished spreading across Rainbow's chest and was moving over the rest of her. "What's going on? Right, what's going on. Well, I can tell you that magical physics researchers are probably burning their award-winning research in utter frustration right now, Unicorns across Equestria are feeling a power boost like crazy, the sun outside's gone all wibbly, and I think my knees are shaking. Do you need specifics or should I just stop this?"

"STOP IT!"

Doctor stumbled back from the combined shout of two ponies and a baby dragon. Giving his head a shake he aimed the green light of his sonic screwdriver at the brightest point of light on Rainbow and pressed the button once, twice, three times. To Rainbow's relief the light that had spread nearly all across her body immediately began to recede, multitudes quicker than it had spread. Seconds passed, until all that remained of the light was a piece, barely visible when Rainbow Dash looked close, right at the center of her chest. Even then it was barely there, flickering between all the colors of the rainbow.

Doctor Whoof sighed and slipped his sonic screwdriver back into its pocket in his jacket. "Well, that was curious."

Once she was sure the little light that remained was not going to burst forth all of a sudden and consume her, Rainbow chuckled and brushed a hoof through her mane. "Uh, yeah, whatever you say doc. But uh, what the hay just happened?"

Doctor shrugged and turned away to the central dais. Trotting to it he began messing around with a computer screen. "Something interesting. Since there's none here to really appreciate it in the magnificent technical terms I COULD put what just happened in, I'll just say that you sprung a leak. A magical leak of magical soulness from your soul. No wait, the first one was better, let's stick with springing a leak."

"Wait, what?" Rainbow strode forward and grabbed Doctor by the shoulder, intending to spin him around to face her. "What do you mean lea-

"

Doctor Whoof spun around the opposite way Rainbow had been intending to spin him and brought his face inches from hers. She eeped as he looked her eyes all over. "What were you and little Spike talking about when that happened?" He raised his head over hers, lowered it, and then shifted it side to side. "And what was your Element of Harmony again?"

Rainbow blinked, shared a look with Spike and Ditzy, and then blinked again. "My element is loyalty, and I was just getting a...kind of pep talk from Spike is all. Does have to do with anything?"

Doctor looked at Rainbow a moment longer, and in his eyes she thought she saw flicker some...satisfaction? But then the moment passed and he turned again to his screen. "Has to do with nothing. Or everything, I don't know. Everything's going all wibbly-wobbly on me right now. By the way, Spike, anything from the Princesses?"

"Not yet," Spike answered. At Rainbow's questioning look he shrugged. "I sent a letter to Princess Celestia last night, explaining just about everything I could, but we haven't gotten any response yet."

Rainbow frowned. "That can't be good." She wondered if she should tell Doctor Whoof about the warm feeling in her chest. She hadn't noticed when it was going on, but now that she thought about it, the feeling had spread along with the light. And then there was the dream...

Ditzy leaned in close to Rainbow, wrapping a wing across her back to pull her into a hug. "Hey, are you sure you're okay Dash?"

At the touch Rainbow flinched and pulled away. "What? Yeah yeah, I'm fine Ditzy. Uh, hey doc!" She fluttered over to Doctor's side and watched him fiddling around with some kind of gizmo, doing her best to ignore the hurt that flashed across Ditzy's face. "If you're gonna be all eccentric and vague about what happened to me a second ago, then answer this. You said something about the sun going wibbly? What the hay does that mean?"

"Gah..." Doctor reached up and grabbed a copper hose from above him and dragged it down, connecting it to a box seemingly taped to the bottom of the control panel. "Good question, pointless now, would already know the answer if you were up earlier listen," he turned to glance at Rainbow and the others. "Spike, you go watch little Dinky and do...whatever baby dragons do when they aren't being bossed around by bossy Unicorns of...bossiness. Miss Dash, you and Ditzy can go round up the others, eh? Rarity, that Big Mac fellow who looked like he'd be good in a scrap, don't bother with Applejack, and leave Trixie for last. She'll have something for me I think. Oh and don't be scared when you see the sky, even though it is positively terrifying and I'm shaking in my bow tie just thinking about it."

Rainbow worked her jaw and glared at Doctor for several seconds, until

he looked back at her. "Yes, what?"

Rainbow snorted and, still keeping her eyes locked on him, began to edge her way to the door out. "Nothing, it's just, are you always this bossy? You're as bad as Twilight! Egghead!"

Doctor smiled and looked from Rainbow to Ditzzy. "Keep an eye on this one. She'd find trouble going out to get her mail without somepony there for her."

"Hey!"

Ditzzy smirked and again fluttered over to Rainbow's side. This time just began to nudge her, making Rainbow eep and stop looking at Doctor as she was forced along to the door. "Come along Dashie, got to get the others, Doctor's orders."

"Awww, come on Ditzzy, what-" And then the pair of Pegasi were outside the simple blue box, and any words she had intended to say died on Rainbow Dash's lips. Those lips worked soundlessly for seconds, her mind searching vainly for something, anything to say to fit the sight before her eyes. Finally, she could only fall back. "What?"

Whitetail wood was dead around them. Tree trunks stood as blackened husks, as if the life had been burned right out of them. The few branches that remained were the same, barren of leaves and whipped about by a wind that echoed like a haunting nocturne, full of sorrow and loss. On that wind floated the stench of burned things. Things that had once lived, but no longer.

Rainbow fell to her knees, and at the crunching that came with this looked down for the first time since she had gotten there. Her stomach nearly emptied itself at what she found. Not leaves, but hundreds, thousands, for all she knew millions of insects of every kind that had lived in the forest and earth, dead and littering the forest floor like a macabre display. Then this got Rainbow thinking on whatever could have happened to the larger forest animals, and this time her stomach did empty itself.

Beside Rainbow, Ditzzy lifted into the air to avoid crunching through the dead bugs and looked around. "What happened?" She looked up at the

sky. "Why is it so dark? It's almost 11 am but the sky looks like night..."

A sudden terror hit Rainbow with these words. She followed Ditzzy's gaze up to the sky, and then she grabbed hold of Ditzzy's hoof and rocketed upwards, ignoring the grey Pegasus's cry of alarm. Within seconds they broke through above the trees, and there Rainbow let go of Ditzzy. Her gaze went to the east and froze there.

"No, not night," Rainbow Dash spoke, her voice barely but a whisper. There before them stretched a thin line of red and orange light along the horizon, lighting the immediate night sky around it blue. "Twilight."

Rainbow Dash raced through the empty groves of Sweet Apple Acres. Her mane and tail billowed out behind her, leaving a rainbow streak in her wake that crackled with lightning. The devastation had spread out even to here, the rows and rows of apple trees dead and withered, while from the barn came no sound of cow or pig. Only a sickening stench Rainbow refused to focus on.

"Rarity, Big Mac!" She landed at the front of the farmhouse, punching a small crater in the earth from the force of her sudden stop. Climbing from the crater she flew up the stairs and through the door into the house. "Rarity, where are you?!"

A sudden clatter of dropped dishes came from the kitchen, followed by Rarity's head poking out from the open door and looking at Rainbow. Her mane was frazzled and unkempt, by Rarity's standards, and her face was void of the usual makeup. "Rainbow Dash, what are you doing here?"

Rainbow rolled her eyes and trotted over to Rarity. "What do you think I'm doing here? The world's practically ending outside, and you're wasting time hanging around here doing-" Rarity stepped out of the way, letting Rainbow see into the kitchen. "Doing...nothing..."

The entire kitchen looked as if one of Pinkie's party bags had exploded in it. Balloons and streamers in the traditional colors of apples hung everywhere. All kinds of snacks sat on the kitchen counters, while on the center table sat a large apple cake, obviously to Rainbow just whipped up

that morning. Around the table sat Big MacIntosh, Granny Smith, Scootaloo, Apple Bloom, and in the guest of honor's seat, Sweetie Belle. They were all talking and laughing amongst themselves, while the little filly wore the happiest expression Rainbow had ever seen her with.

Rarity stepped to the Pegasus's side and answered her unasked question. "Last night, Sweetie Belle got her cutie mark. We were...I just wanted to throw her a Cute-ceanera, just a private little thing you know? In case...well..." A snuffle almost escaped from her, almost, but Rarity seemed to catch it in time. "She deserves that much, I should think, just in case."

"Rarity," Rainbow said. She smiled at her friend. "I think right now this is the coolest Cute-ceanera anypony could ask for. You've done your sister good."

Turning away so that she would miss the sudden tears in Rarity's eyes, Rainbow walked the length of the table to Sweetie Belle and clapped her on the shoulder. "Hey there squirt, congratulations! What kinda cutie mark did a filly like you get?"

"I got a musical note inside a heart cutie mark!" Sweetie Belle replied, beaming and looking down at the image on her flank. "I guess singing and stuff really was my special talent after all!"

Rainbow smiled. "Well, good for you. Ya know, maybe after your big sis and I finish saving the world, I could introduce you to my good friend...Vinyl Scratch?"

The whole group in the kitchen laughed as Sweetie did her best impression of Pinkie Pie at that.

"OhmygoshyouknowVinylScratchthatissoooooocoolpleasepleaspleeaaseintroduce me!" Sweetie finished with her patented puppy-dog pout. Rainbow Dash's will crumbled in seconds.

"Augh, okay okay, I will! Just please don't do that to me again, it's too dangerous to mess with friendly fire!" Rainbow chuckled and looked from the now-bouncing and dancing Sweetie to Rarity, who had come up to them as they talked. "And I bet your sister would be more than happy to introduce you to HER good friend, Saph-!"

Rarity stuffed a hoof in Rainbow's mouth. She pulled her in close to

whisper. "Dash dear, if Sweetie knew I knew HER, than I don't think Pinkie Pie herself would be able to keep up with her. I'd rather save it as a surprise, understand?"

Rainbow nodded her head. Once Rarity's hoof was removed she spit and stuck her tongue. "Bleck. When was the last time you washed that?"

Rarity rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue back at Rainbow. "Well excuse me dear, but even I can see that there are more important things at the moment than looking fabulous."

"Yeah, no duh." Rainbow sighed and looked at the ponies at the table. "Sorry gang, I'm gonna have to have a little talk with Rarity real quick."

Rainbow and Rarity made to exit into the hallway when Big Mac stood up from the table. "Ah figure ah should join you."

Rainbow remembered what Doctor had said and nodded. "Okay, come on."

Leaving the kitchen, Rainbow and the other two walked as far down the hall as the foot of the stairs before stopping. Rarity spoke first. "Rainbow dear, please tell me there's a perfectly good reason it's still night when we should all be having lunch. Preferably a reason that won't send me into hysterics."

"An' what in Tarnation has happened ta all the plants?" Big Mac said. "The entire orchard, a source of nourishment and support for generations of Apple Family members...all gone in a night..."

Rarity nuzzled the big workhorse, while Rainbow sighed and looked down. "I'm sorry, I really have no idea about anything. But I think Doctor Whoof does. He sent me and Ditzy out to gather everypony, including you Big Mac. Ditzy's over in Ponyville getting Trixie and Pinkie Pie right now, so we should probably hurry."

Rainbow watched as both Rarity and Big Mac shared a look and then looked back down the hall to the kitchen. It wasn't until she followed their gaze and perked her ears that she understood. From where the three of them stood, they could make out the voices of Sweetie Belle and Apple

Bloom. They seemed to be trying to sing a duet to Rainbow, but Apple Bloom was managing more enthusiasm than any real ability. Still though, the voices were young and happy, and for a few seconds Rainbow let them wash over her, dispelling thoughts of the ruined world that waited outside the door.

"Guys," Rainbow said when the song was over, attracting Rarity's and Big Mac's attention again. "I'm really sorry. I wish I could understand exactly the fear you're feeling. But I don't. I was born an only child, I'm not gonna leave behind any younger siblings or anything if...if things don't work out. But I..." her thoughts strayed to a little Unicorn filly, and bubbles. "But there are others that I'm terrified of losing, and I can't imagine the pain they would go through if they lost me. But we need you two. I don't know what Doctor's planning, I don't know what Trixie's planning, and I don't know what Twilight's planning. But I do know that if we don't do something, those messed up trees outside are only gonna be the beginning. We've gotta do something! For...for our Apple Blooms, and our Sweetie Belles! And our Granny Smiths, and Scootaloos, and Dinkies, and everypony that's depending on us!"

By the end of her little speech, Rainbow Dash had lifted up into the air, and now she hovered over the pair of ponies with her, her mane and tail softly fluttering in the breeze created by her wings. She looked down at them, from Rarity to Big Mac and back, waiting for their response. Rarity squared her shoulders and gave it.

"It. Is. On."

"Is this everypony then?"

Rainbow Dash fluttered next to Doctor Whoof and set down to his side, looking over the gathered ponies. "Yeah, it's all that's coming. Rarity and Big Mac came after a speech that was about 20% cooler than any I've given before. Trixie came, obviously, but Ditzy told me AJ refused to leave Fluttershy's side again, and that Pinkie Pie wouldn't respond to her knocking, and she couldn't find the Cakes anywhere to let her in." Rainbow swept a hoof toward the small crowd of ponies milling about the main room of the DRIS. "So it's just you, me, Rarity, Big Mac, Trixie, Ditzy, and Spike."

Doctor Whoof sighed and played with his bow tie, even though it looked just fine to Rainbow. "I didn't really expect any different. Pinkie Pie was definitely a hopeless case, and it's cost us valuable time making sure."

"Hopeless case?" said Rainbow. Turning to the pony beside her she raised her voice so as to attract the attention of all there. "What do you mean Pinkie Pie was a hopeless case? And for that matter, would you mind finally telling us what the hay is exactly going on? Like why it's twilight outside and everything's dying?"

"Yes please," continued Rarity, taking a step toward Rainbow and Doctor. "We've all gathered together, we are all ready to help, but what are we going to DO?"

Doctor whirled around to Rarity and bopped her on the nose. "Yes of course, we ponies love exposition. Okay then everypony, gather around! Lots of talking to do and I do not like repeating myself!" Once the others had turned their attention to him Doctor continued. "Right then, let's start with what's probably the biggest thing on your mind; the lack of sun. Once again time is short so I'll stick to the basics" This time he bopped his own nose. "No, scratch that, sticking to the basics would just leave that we are royally f-"

Trixie jumped in. "I think I'll handle this part, Doctor. You just get everything ready for the trip, okay?"

"Oh you're no fun." Doctor huffed and turned away. As he busied himself with pressing buttons, turning knobs, and fiddling with screens along the control panel, Trixie stepped forward to address the group.

"I want no interruptions until I am finished. As some of you may know, I have been consulting with Princess Luna, my mentor, since the early morning hours. Late last night Princess Celestia was gravely injured, and is incapable of raising the sun. Luna tried, but she just isn't as strong as her sister yet, and the twilight outside is all she could manage."

"Strangely fitting," said Rarity, "for the situation we face."

Trixie sighed. "The coincidence has been noticed, especially as it was a

seemingly-insane Twilight Sparkle that injured the princess."

"What?!" Rainbow zoomed forward into Trixie's face. "Tell me you're kidding. Please tell me that."

Trixie magically pushed Rainbow away and shook her head. "I'm afraid not. Worse though, it has been confirmed that Twilight now knows the location of Midnight Castle, where the Knights of Equestria were sealed away, and is almost certainly already there."

Rainbow hovered into the air, her face settling into a scowl as she punched at the air. "Well what are we waiting here for then? Let's get Pinkie Pie and Applejack, DRAG them if we have to, go to Midnight Castle, and stop Twilight and Yellow Jacket!"

"It's not going to be that simple," said Doctor Whoof. He looked up from typing algorithms into his computer and waved a hoof at Rainbow. "First off, you don't even know where Midnight Castle is or how to get there, so stop being an idiot and think. Secondly I already told you, Miss Pie and Applejack are hopeless cases."

Rainbow growled and made to charge at the brown earth pony, but was stopped by Ditzzy biting down on her tail. While this went on Big Mac spoke up for the first time. "Doctor Whoof, what exactly do ya mean by saying that? What's wrong with my sister?"

At this everypony's attention turned back to Doctor Whoof. He sighed and typed in one final command into the computer before turning to fully face them. "It has to do with something I said earlier last night, about how something was attacking us. I'd done a scan of Fluttershy while fixing her up, and to my utmost horror found her natural magic to almost empty. Her Element of Harmony, Kindness if I recall correctly, is completely gone."

"How is that possible?" said Ditzzy.

Doctor shrugged. "Well it would be surprisingly simple actually. The poor girl was pushed beyond her limit I'd guess, some kind of emotional attack to drive her to doing something cruel or hateful, the opposite of kindness. This would have weakened her connection to the element enough for anypony with enough magical power to rip it from her."

"But what about Pinkie Pie and Applejack?"

Doctor nodded to Rainbow Dash and continued. "I had Trixie confirm it for me last night while I was working on some leads here, and Pinkie Pie is missing her Element of Laughter too. Friends getting attacked, going evil, and hooking up left and right, no wonder about that. At the moment she would be a bigger hindrance than help."

Big Mac stepped forward. "And my little sis? I reckon she's missin' her element too?"

Doctor Whoof flinched and shared a look with Trixie, before turning back to the control dais so as not to have to face the much larger earth pony. "I think that would actually be a mercy compared to what's going on with her now. We all know she has trouble lying, to herself or others, but with everything that's happened and her technically, well, killing one of her best friends even though that friend came back, her element's ramped up into something crippling..."

Trixie took over as Doctor's voice dropped off. "All this morning she's been sitting beside Fluttershy, repeating to herself over and over again exactly what she did. Unable to lie to herself about what she did, or even downplay it, she's stuck in a loop of self-hate and depression. Her own element has turned against her, eating away at her sanity."

Trixie finished speaking. Big Mac looked at her, slowly turned his head to look to the door out, and then sighed and turned back. "Ah reckon ah'd be more useful for whatever you and the doc have got planned."

"You would reckon right, my reckoning fellow!" Doctor Whoof trotted over to a box set near the group and pulled out simple ring of chrome and brass, multiple wires hanging from it. "We're going to Midnight Castle to save the day!"

"But-I-what-" Rainbow shook her head and fluttered over to hover around Doctor. "But you said we don't know the way to Midnight Castle! Wait, unless, did Luna tell you?"

Doctor shook his head and trotted over to Trixie, slipping the ring around

her horn and connecting the wires to the control dais. "Nope, got run out of Canterlot by idiots accusing her of going all Nightmare Moon again. But! We don't need Princess Luna because we. Have." He tapped a command into the keyboard, and the central pillar lit up with a neon green light. Doctor spun around to face them all. "The TARDIS!"

Complete silence followed this proclamation. Rainbow Dash looked from Doctor to Trixie, to the control dais, back to Trixie, back to the dais, and then finally back to Doctor. "Trixie and Relative Dimensions in Space?"

Both Rarity and Spike fell over laughing, Ditzy facehoofed, and Trixie groaned. Doctor just chuckled and shook his head. "Clever, but no. It means Time and Relative Dimension in Space. You see, up to this day it was capable of shifting its spatial coordinates with anywhere else in the world. I don't know how it's so complicated. Gallop frey answers were geniuses. But today, oh, today I was finally able to implement what for centuries ponies have only ever dreamed of. Time travel."

"..." Rainbow stared at Doctor and Trixie. After a moment she just sighed. "Time travel, sure, whatever. But WHY exactly do we need time travel to get to Midnight Castle? And you still haven't answered how we're going to find the dang place."

Trixie motioned to the ring around her horn. "Twilight and I are sisters, our individual magic will have similar base feels to them. By using samples of my magic as an example, the TARDIS will be able to scan all of time and space for a match, and then transport us there. And as for the time travel, Midnight Castle is timelocked. It only exists in one single moment, and no time else in the entire time stream."

"That...seems rather excessive," said Rarity. "These knight fellows are really that dangerous then?"

Trixie shook her head. "Not really, no. After roughly 1,500 years their bodies and minds should be almost entirely deteriorated by now, leaving nothing but the energy granted them. No, the danger comes from the evil sealed with them; Tirek the Destroyer, the Conqueror, the Annihilator. If HE gets released, well, game over. Total existential collapse."

Rainbow jumped into the air to yell what were they waiting for, but

paused. Folding her forelegs across her chest she stared at Doctor and Trixie. "Well? What's the reason for not rushing off now?"

Doctor Whoof looked from Rainbow to Trixie. For a moment it seemed as if he was not going to answer, until "Seeing as the frame of time we will be aiming for is small, chances for a catastrophic failure are about 55%. Best thing we could hope for in that case would be ripping a hole in space and time the exact size of Equestria."

"And...the worst?" Rainbow asked.

"The sudden termination of our personal timelines, with a retroactive effect. We would literally have never happened." Doctor walked forward and looked Rainbow straight in the eye. "Does knowing make you feel any better?"

Rainbow didn't blink. "It's not like we really have much of a choice about going, is it?"

A ghost of a grin flickered across Doctor's face. "I think we always have a choice. That's what makes tragedies tragic. Now then, everypony!" He turned and took his position at what appeared to be the main controls for the TARDIS. "I suggest holding on here, it's going to be a bumpy ride. Any last-minute confessions or heartfelt conversations, I suggest having them now because there will be no pit stops!"

With slow steps, the group gathered around the control dais. Grabbing hold of it for support, they all watched together as Doctor pulled levers and flipped switches, as deftly as if he had been doing all his life and knew exactly what he was doing. Only the sweat on his brow and slight trembling of his limbs told them that he was as scared as they were.

"Hey, Trixie?" Spike stood beside the blue Unicorn. "I'm sorry for not really treating you like a friend, and I, I forgive you for being such an annoying show-off when you first came to town."

Trixie smiled and leaned down, giving the baby dragon a nuzzle. "I apologize for being such an annoying show-off. And I thank you for seeing how bad I was then." The room suddenly shook and they returned to grasping the dais for support.

"Big Mac?" Rarity said, looking to her left at the red pony. He looked back and their eyes met. "I want you to know...if anything goes wrong...that sowing set you gave me, with the crummy needles and rusty hooftacks and bent pins and clumsy scissors...it was the best gift I have ever gotten from anypony. And I wish we could have had more time to know each other."

Big Macintosh smiled and reached over, taking Rarity's hoof in his. "Miss Rarity, I feel blessed with even the small amount of time we did have. Thank you for it." From the glowing glass pillar in front of them all a wheezing sound began to be heard. It was as if a pair of iron lungs was struggling for breath.

Ditzy Doo looked away from Rarity and Big Mac across from her. She hung her head, letting her blonde mane fall down and hide the tears glistening in her eyes. She almost flinched at the touch of a hoof on her right shoulder, and turned to see Rainbow Dash there beside her. "Rainbow?"

"Ditzy, I..." She closed her eyes a moment, a few tears slipping down her cheeks onto the glass below. "Ditzy I'm sorry for how I've acted. I thought about...us, too much and got scared. We were friends, and then we-"

Ditzy reached forward and cupped Rainbow's face with a hoof. "Rainbow Dash, I love you as my closest friend. I saw you needed comfort and love and companionship, and I acted. But please don't hurt yourself on my account. As just a friend or as more, I will always be right here, at your side. So be brave."

Rainbow Dash nodded, and then smiled. This moment, for all her friends and loved ones, she could do that. She could be brave. She wiped her eyes of the tears that still lingered there and turned to look at Doctor Whoof. "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's do this!"

Doctor Whoof grinned back and pulled a lever. The shaking doubled in strength and the wheezing noise grew deafening, until none of the ponies there could so much as hear their thoughts. Still though they were able to make out over the din of noise Doctor Whoof's single, exuberant shout.

"GERONIMO!"

Chapter 12

The End is the Beginning is the...

"Nnngh..." Rainbow Dash groaned and opened her eyes. She found herself lying on her back on the TARDIS floor and staring up at the ceiling, her wings pinned awkwardly against her back. Her whole body ached from the tip of her snout to the end of her rainbow-hued tail; she hadn't thought it was even possible for hair to ache. Meanwhile the warm feeling in her chest had progressed into a burning sensation, though no light streamed from her like it had earlier.

Rolling to her side, Rainbow shook her head to clear it of the dizziness she felt and looked around. The other ponies scattered around her were in more or less the same state it looked like, except for Doctor Whoof. He was circling the control console, checking on various things Rainbow hadn't the faintest understanding of.

"Nnnh...what happened?" Ditzzy asked to nopony in particular. Standing up she leaned down and helped Rainbow up. "The last thing I remember was Doctor yelling out Geronimo, and then a bright flash and suddenly I'm on the floor."

Doctor Whoof stepped away from a computer screen and looked around at them all. "We made it. We traveled back in time, hitting the moment of Midnight Castle's existence right on the mark! I am so happy that actually worked because, being honest here, I actually lied. It was closer to an 80% chance of dying horribly! And..." he withered under the glares turned his way by Rarity and Rainbow. "And it'd probably have been better if I never said that...right, I'll keep that in mind for next time we do incredibly dangerous things."

"Guys..."

Big Mac helped Rarity to her hooves, and then looked over at Doctor Whoof. "So now that we're here, what do we do now?"

"Guys..."

Doctor Whoof adjusted his bow tie and began trotting to the door out. "Well, first things first. We need to find Twilight Sparkle. With Trixie's magic we should have landed somewhere in her general-"

"GUYS!"

Everyone stopped in whatever they were doing and turned to look at who had shouted. Trixie remained kneeling at the control dais. In the bright light of the TARDIS control room her eyes were filled with tears, focused on something in front of her on the dais. Her body shook, desperately holding in sobs that wanted to escape.

Slowly, Doctor Whoof walked over and looked at the spot Trixie's eyes were focused on. "Oh..."

"What, what is it?" Rainbow flew over to where the two now sat, followed closely by Rarity, Big MacIntosh, and Ditzzy. Looking to where the others looked, Rainbow felt her heart freeze and her wings fall limp to her sides, sending her dropping to the floor. There on the hand rail they had all used to steady themselves on the ride, was a pair of scorch marks in the shape and size of Spike's hands. But no Spike.

"He...didn't make it..." said Doctor Whoof.

"What?" Rarity looked over at the earth pony as if she couldn't understand him. Grabbing him by his collar she pulled him towards her, getting right in his face. "What do you mean he didn't make it? Where's Spike, Doctor? Where is he, please?" When he looked away from her, Rarity screamed and shook him. "No! Don't do that! You're a doctor, a genius! You've created this incredible machine, managed travel through space and time, don't say you can't help one little baby dragon! Do something, please! He was only a baby, do something!"

"I..." Tears formed in Doctor Whoof's eyes. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. Spike could've been wiped from time, he could've been obliterated at the molecular level, he could've been flung a million years into the past and died before any of us were born, I don't know! I'm sorry, there's just nothing I can do..."

"Nothing you can do?" Rarity let go of Doctor Whoof, letting him drop down to the floor. She kept her gaze on him as she backed away, waiting for him to look back up at her. "Then what's the point of you?!"

Rarity's shouts echoed through the room, fading as she collapsed against Big MacIntosh's side and wept. The whole group hung their heads, holding a moment of silence for the lost friend. They had all gone in knowing terrible things could happen, but none expected anything like this.

From the corner of her eye, Rainbow Dash saw Trixie reach a hoof up at touch the handprints. "He forgave me for all my misdeeds...before I even forgave myself. He was fun to trade jabs with, and a good assistant."

Ditzy sat down next to Rainbow Dash and sniffled. "He was a good playmate for Dinky. He could really make her giggle."

Doctor Whoof bowed his head, an unusual moment of silence coming from him. "He was Twilight Sparkle's oldest, closest friend. And he could...he could keep up with the best of them in burping contests, even Pinkie Pie."

Big Mac looked up from nuzzling Rarity's mane to the scorch marks. "I remember hearing Applejack and Twilight saying he was a hard worker, once ya got him going. Not ta mention that mah sis Apple Bloom had the cutest crush on him you ever saw."

Next Rarity looked up, fighting to regain her composure. "He...he was always such good help whenever I asked. He had the most obvious crush on me, I thought it cute...now the poor thing will never get the chance to get the courage to confess to me..." Rarity sniffed and hung her head back down. Big Mac returned to nuzzling her, whispering words of comfort to her.

"He was...always fun to pull pranks on," Rainbow Dash began, before faltering. Her eyes filled with tears that she hastily wiped away before they could fall. The seconds dragged on and she struggled to find something, anything more to say, before with sudden clarity her mind went back to the conversation the two of them had shared less than an hour beforehand. "And he helped me through a real tough time. We all owe it to him to continue on, I think."

A moment of silence more, and then Rainbow stepped forward and turned to address all of them. "We can't forget Spike. He was a good friend to all of us. We need to keep going and finish what we came here to do. He came on this trip with us to save his oldest friend Twilight Sparkle, and I'll be DAMNED if I don't save her for him."

"All that she's done," spoke Rarity, pulling from Big Mac's side and confronting Rainbow. "Attacked Canterlot, attacked our Princess, ravaged the lands and cast us all into twilight. And now on top of it all she as good as has Spike's blood on her hooves. I came to stop her, not save her, Rainbow Dash."

Rainbow Dash hovered an inch above the floor and looked down at Rarity. "So you'll be happy when you have Twilight's blood on YOUR hooves? I won't allow that, you'll have to have my blood there too, chump."

Ditzy fluttered to Rarity's side and looked with pleading eyes at Rainbow Dash. "Rainbow, Twilight is dangerous. And even if she wasn't, you know she won't give Yellow Jacket up without a fight."

Trixie took Rainbow's side. "And I won't give Twilight up without a fight, hairdresser. Yellow Jacket will be brought to justice for all that he has done, but I will not let you hurt my sister any more than you will let me hurt yours, understand?"

The heavy thuds of Big Mac's hoofsteps came as he sidled up to Rainbow Dash's other side. "Returning hurt for hurt never got anypony anywhere. We shouldn't let ourselves fall as low as the ponies we stand against." He glanced toward Rainbow Dash and gave a half-nod. "And we ain't the only ones to be hurting."

"That's right," Rainbow Dash said, continuing from there when Big Mac stopped. "Do you honestly think Twilight will be able to do anything once she finds out about Spike? She'll be hurt more than any of us! She'll...nnh..." Rainbow fell to her knees and reached a hoof up to the spot of light on her chest. "Nnngh! Gah!" Cracks of light spread out from the spot, before with a scream it burst and rainbow light began streaming out from her chest once more.

"Doctor!" Ditzzy pushed Trixie out of the way and took Rainbow's side, wrapping a foreleg over the blue Pegasus's shoulders to try to keep her steady. "Doctor, it's happening again!"

"What?" Trixie and the others stumbled back, watching the light as if mesmerized. "What do you mean it's happening again?! This isn't possible!"

Doctor Whoof knelt before Rainbow Dash and aiming his sonic screwdriver into the light began scanning. "Doesn't matter if you don't think it's possible, Trixie, you're seeing it happen." He glanced a moment at her. "Now shut up before you spoil things."

"W-wait, Doctor..." Rainbow coughed. From her mouth drifted particles of more rainbow light. "What do you mean...not possible..." She grabbed his shoulder with the hoof not pressed against her chest and looked him in the eye. "What...is...h-happening?"

Doctor Whoof averted his eyes from her and stuck his sonic screwdriver deeper into the light. "You know what it feels like is happening?" A humming filled the air. Slowly the light pulled back into Rainbow. "That's exactly what's happening."

Rainbow's eyes grew wide. She gripped his shoulder harder. "But it feels like I'm-"

"Yes I know!" Everyone jumped back in shock. None of them had ever seen Doctor Whoof shout like that before. The sonic screwdriver clattered to the floor as he wiped beads of sweat from his brow. He looked up at Rainbow Dash, and then around at the others. "Listen, Trixie, take everypony else on ahead. Miss Dash and I will stay here and catch up as soon as it's taken care of, okay? Okay."

"But Doctor." Trixie stepped forward, her eyes turning to the door out to Midnight Castle. "I don't think it would be wise to split up. I don't think we can do this-"

"You'll do fine," Doctor Whoof interrupted. He had picked the sonic screwdriver back up and returned to the light. "You're Twilight Sparkle's sister and some of her best friends, you can handle this." Doctor Whoof

paused a moment and then continued. "And if you can't, well, we're in a time machine, Doo. Dash and I will just zip back a bit and join you then. Now off, shoo, away with you."

Reluctantly, Trixie, Big MacIntosh, and Rarity turned to leave. Ditzzy lingered a moment longer, until Rainbow Dash looked up at her and grinned. "Hey, go on. We'll have this fixed up in 10 seconds flat. You won't even notice we're gone, yeah?"

Ditzzy smiled back, but still did not leave quite yet. Stepping toward the two she placed a quick kiss on Rainbow Dash's cheek, and then turned to go. "I might love you," she said over her shoulder.

Rainbow Dash nodded, her grin softening as she returned the smile. "I might love you too."

And then the door shut, and Rainbow Dash and Doctor Whoof were alone in the TARDIS. Rainbow Dash stared at the door for a moment, took a deep breath, and then looked down at Doctor Whoof. The light from her chest had begun expanding out again, and its brightness was beginning to make it hard to see him. "First things first. Not a word of that to anypony, you hear?" The earth pony nodded. "Good. Now, I'm thoughtless...a lot...but I'm not stupid. That egghead Trixie knew what this is, she said it's impossible. You didn't, so you've gotta know what it is too. Now then, maybe the pony it's happening to should know?"

The TARDIS control room was silent, save for the hum of the sonic screwdriver. Rainbow Dash watched Doctor Whoof work on her, waiting for him to say something, anything. She did not have to wait long. Doctor Whoof pulled away from the light of Rainbow Dash's chest, deactivating his sonic screwdriver and slipping it back into his jacket. He sighed and looked up at her. "Rainbow Dash, the impossible Pegasus. Don't you have any idea what you are, what you mean?"

"What...what do you mean?"

Doctor Whoof smiled then. It was not a happy smile, Rainbow Dash thought, but it wasn't sad either. "Rainbow, no other pony in the history of the world has ever done a Sonic Rainboom like you have. No other pony has ever caused the creation of cutie marks like you have. No other pony has ever had such a natural connection to rainbow magic. It's in your

mane, your name, your role in the lives of all your friends. I mean haven't you ever wondered how you could do all that, or why you were the only pony other than Twilight to suffer dreams of darkness and evil?"

"Doctor, you're making as much sense as Twilight whenever she tries explaining something." Rainbow Dash motioned to the light pouring from her. "Now are you going to explain this and stop it or what?" Doctor Whoof's smile changed then. It was the kind of smile Rainbow recognized from Twilight or Applejack when they knew something she didn't. "Doctor?"

"Rainbow Dash..." Doctor Whoof plucked his sonic screwdriver from his jacket and pointed it to her chest. "Tell me, have you ever heard the legend of the Rainbow of Light?"

Trixie, Ditzy, Rarity, and Big MacIntosh stood side by side outside the TARDIS, gaping around them at their surroundings. The TARDIS had brought them to some kind of indoor courtyard, though for what manner of creature they could hardly guess. The room was as massive all around as the stadium at Cloudsdale. Its floor was paved with black slabs the size of a pony, lines of silver running across it in intricate patterns. The walls were of the same black stone and bare of any drapes or coverings, only more of the intricate silver designs. The ceiling above them was glass or some unknown crystal, allowing them all a clear view of the night sky beyond. If any of them had any knowledge of either place, they would have noticed the throne room of Midnight Castle was in the exact same style of the holding room for the Magicahedron.

Ditzy shook her head to put a stop to focusing on all this and took a step forward from the group. "Okay then, so what's the plan? It's obvious Twilight and Yellow Jacket aren't in this room."

"...I'm not sure," replied Trixie, her response slow. Ditzy wasn't surprised; she too was focused on their surroundings. Though the walls were bare, the room itself was not. Across the courtyard's length stood countless statues of strange beings and different sizes, the smallest as big as manticores, the tallest as tall as Twilight's library. They stood on their back legs like Ditzy had seen gryphons and manticores sometimes do, with swords and spears gripped in claws almost like those dragons like Spike

had. The creatures stood covered in armor from head to hoof, hiding all features except for one. Within the horned helmets shone a pair of rubies where Ditzy figured the eyes would be.

Rarity began walking forward through the statues, followed a moment later by Big Mac and then Ditzy and Trixie. "What are they? I've never seen anything so...brutal-looking in all my years!"

The sound of Trixie gulping was clear in the otherwise deathly-silent courtyard. "I have. Images sprinkled through ancient tomes, veiled references in moth-eaten manuscripts. Legend tells of monsters serving Tirek the Destroyer. They were known only as the Decons, creatures of metal and fire following their dread master from beyond the stars. Though why anypony would want to make statues of them I can't imagine."

"Well, they sound as horrendous as they look. And this place is dusty; it's getting all in my mane!" As if to emphasize this, at that moment Rarity sneezed, sending a plume of dust off the statue she was facing. Shaking her head she turned to Ditzy beside her. "Ditzy, be a dear and fly up a bit, won't you? Where's the closest exit?"

"Good idea." Crouching down, Ditzy leapt into the air and climbed up until she was well clear of the statues before looking around. She scanned the walls of the room, until "There, in the far wall." Ditzy dropped back down to the group and pointed in the right direction. "I saw a staircase leading out of the room; it was the only doorway I could see."

Trixie nodded. "Thanks, Ditzy. Come on, gang, let's go."

Trixie lit her horn up for light and began leading the way through the statues. Rarity and Big Mac followed close behind, looking around at the towering beings of metal around them, with Ditzy bringing up the rear. She too watched the statues, an indescribable feeling of...being watched coming from them. No, that wasn't it, she realized after turning her head and seeing one statue's face pointed straight down at her. It was felt like they were looking back. She didn't like it one bit.

"Guys, I've got a ba-"

"Don't say it," Rarity half-whispered, half-shrieked at Ditzy. The whole

group jumped and looked at Rarity, who huffed and continued. "Don't any of you READ adventure stories?! That is the number one thing said by strapping heroes on their way to rescue the distressed damsel before something bad happens! Are you trying to jinx us?"

Trixie quirked an eyebrow. "You're kidding. You're kidding, right? Guh..." She turned back around and started walking again. "Of all the nonsensical...look, we're at the stairs already, okay?" Trixie waved a hoof over at the stairs that they all had, too busy talking to notice, already reached. Trixie glared at Rarity. "So what, do you expect a boulder to roll down and crush me?"

Ditzy giggled at the look on Rarity's face at this little jab. Making her way past Rarity and Big Mac, Ditzy joined Trixie at the foot of the stairs and looked up them. They were built into the wall, ascending at a straight angle away from them to somewhere else. Oddly, despite the massive proportions of the rest of the room, the steps were pony-sized. "Looks kinda dark in there, going to be a pain taking the steps. Where do you think it goes?"

"I'm not sure," Trixie replied. Her horn shimmered a moment and she placed a hoof on the first step. "I'm detecting a massive amount of magical energy up in the next room however. Twilight's up there."

"Which means the thing she came here for is up there too." Ditzy took to the air and waved a hoof forward. "Come on, we've gotta get up there! Let's-"

A blinding flash of light enveloped Ditzy and then dissipated. "-go. Wait what?" Ditzy looked around and found herself and the others in a completely different room. No statues stood in this one, and walls were interspersed with tall windows looking out onto mountain ranges. In the wall behind Ditzy were staircases leading down.

Ditzy frowned and looked at Trixie. "You can teleport like Twilight?" Trixie shook her head no. Ditzy turned to Rarity, who also shook her head. Ditzy's eyes widened, a chill of realization crawling up her spine. "Then that means..."

"Hello, my friends, sister! I'm...so...happy to see you!"

Together, the four ponies turned to the source of the voice and saw Twilight Sparkle standing at the far end of the room from them, a cloaked form that could only be Yellow Jacket standing to her left and a bit behind. But she was not as they had last seen her. She had grown taller, as tall as Princess Luna had been after being freed from the power of Nightmare Moon. Her mane and tail smoldered and flickered as if made of embers just moments from catching fire, and drifted in a breeze that wasn't there. A pair of wings the same shade of blue as Rainbow Dash's adorned her back, fluttering in anticipation, as if Twilight was just barely restraining herself from taking flight. The greatest change however was in her eyes. They were a pure white, shining in the darkness of the room. Not the slightest emotion could be read in those milky depths.

Rarity stepped to the front of the group. Her body shook from the power emanating from the fresh Alicorn in front of them, the pressure almost too much for her to bear. "Twi-Twilight, is that you?"

"Yes, it is!" Twilight's mouth stretched into a smile, the lack of anything from the eyes making it seem grotesque and artificial. "I am so happy to see you all again, after we parted on such...unhappy terms. I've calmed down now, I won't hurt you. I could never hurt you. Please, let me welcome you to Midnight Castle's throne room, where the greatest prison in the world is kept!"

Turning halfway, Twilight motioned a hoof to the area behind her. Transfixed as they had been by the radically changed form of their friend, Rarity and the others only now took notice of the thing behind Twilight and Yellow Jacket. It looked like a metal box, massive in size, covered in metal engravings forming a circle on every side. These engravings softly shone with a green light. Twilight looked back at them. "The Pandorica is quite an amazing sight, isn't it? The legends just don't do it justice."

"So that's it then?" Trixie motioned to the box. "That's where Tirek and the Knights are sealed?"

"Yes..." Twilight looked at them all for a moment, and then her smile dropped. "I was surprised when I felt your natural magics suddenly appear downstairs. How did you get here? Are there any more of my friends here to witness our great triumph?"

"Doctor Whoof," Trixie answered. "He really is a brilliant pony. Pushed the Gallopfreyan technology of the DRIS farther than anypony else has. Rainbow Dash is here too, with him." Grief filled Trixie's eyes. She began to walk over to Twilight. "There's no talking you out of any of this is there? No profound statement or philosophical argument I could make to change your mind."

"No, there isn't." The smile appeared again on Twilight's face. Turning she trotted past Yellow Jacket and to the Pandorica. As she grew closer, the light from the box grew stronger. "Now then, anything else you or the others want to say before Jack and I open this and become the saviors of Equestria? Or perhaps I'll just have Spike take a note of it later."

"Spike is...he's dead, dear sister."

Twilight froze, her hoof inches from contacting the metal exterior of the Pandorica. She looked back at Trixie, the fire fading fast from her mane and tail and her eyes dimming back to their natural purple. The others looked at her as well, Rarity frowning at the bluntness of Trixie's statement. "What did you say? I...I-I don't understand..."

Trixie continued to walk toward Twilight. As she went she shed her illusion around her, her light tones shifting to the deep blues and bone-whites of her true form. "I said Spike is dead. Gone. The journey here was deadly, but still he came with us. To save you, Twilight, his closest friend, from the path you were treading. He believed until the end that you were a good, kind, and LOYAL pony." Trixie stopped mere inches from Twilight, and for the first true time, the two sisters stared into each others' eyes. "And he would never have needed to if you hadn't come here. So ask yourself this, dear sister. Are you going to make his death meaningless?"

"I...no, I..." Twilight sank to her haunches, her whole body seeming to shrink in on itself to the watching ponies. She pressed her forehooves to her shut eyes, crying softly into them as her body shuddered in grief. "I didn't want this, I didn't want any of this...it's not fair, why can't anything be fair...I didn't want this!"

Trixie sat down beside Twilight and wrapped a foreleg around her shoulders. Twilight pressed into her, continuing to cry. Trixie held her then,

the older sister comforting the younger. "No Twilight, it isn't fair at all. Nothing for quite a while has been fair for any of us. That fire should have never happened, the filly Dinky should never have been hurt, Rarity's home should never have been destroyed, Yellow Jacket should never have done all he did, and fallen so low as to need your help. Rainbow Dash shouldn't have had that spell put on her, you should never have been stabbed, Fluttershy should never have been attacked, and Spike shouldn't be dead. He was just a child."

Twilight's sobs shook her body even harder. Trixie squeezed her sister's shoulders all the harder, closing her eyes in thought. Unnoticed by anyone, Yellow Jacket slid a black dagger from his cloak and moved behind the pair of them. "But Twilight, Rainbow Dash told us all something when we got here and discovered Spike hadn't made it. You want to know what that was?" Twilight nodded and Trixie smiled a forlorn smile. "She said that we can't forget the little guy. That we owe it to him to continue on, with our lives, our relationships, our happiness. Will you continue on with us, Twilight? For your friends, for Spike?"

The room fell into silence. Trixie waited patiently, the others anxiously as Twilight continued to sit there and cry into her hooves. Finally however, the purple Unicorn sniffled and removed her hooves from her face, turning to look Trixie in the eyes. "Con...continue on for Spike?" She wiped her tears away with a hoof. "Yeah, I think...I think I can do that. For Spike. My precious Spike..."

"Twilight," said Yellow Jacket, making all there look over at him. He stood with his hood down, the black blade levitated beside him and pointed square at Twilight's chest. "You can't do this to me. After all we've been through, everything we've done, you can't abandon me now!"

"Jack, please," said Twilight, standing back up and stepping towards the Pegasus. "I'm sorry but I just can't do this anymore. I did it to save my friends, and so far I've only-"

"SHE TOOK MY WINGS!" screamed Yellow Jacket, flicking the blade to point at Trixie a moment before aiming it back at Twilight. He retreated back to match her steps forward. "You can't grow those back, Twilight! The only things that made me something, made me something special instead of a filthy, worthless earth pony! I'm no better than a beast now because of

that rotten bitch!"

Big Mac's eyes narrowed at this. He stomped a hoof and started toward Yellow Jacket, before Rarity's hoof on his shoulder stopped him. "No, don't give that ruffian the satisfaction of getting a rise out of you." Big Mac hesitated, before sighing and settling for glaring at Yellow Jacket.

Twilight Sparkle was not so easily calmed down. "That what?! Jack I want to help you, but you will not so savagely insult my family like that!" From the corner of her eye Twilight saw Trixie softly smile. Twilight smiled back. "I may of only just gotten her, but family is family."

"Help me?" Something broke in Yellow Jacket's eyes. He screamed and twirled the blade around, until its movement was nothing but a blur to Twilight. "Fine then, help me! Help me the same way your pathetic friend Fluttershy did when I took her magic!"

Everything that happened next was a blur to Twilight Sparkle. She saw Yellow Jacket launch the dagger at her, watched it shooting through the air straight to her chest, but the only thing her mind could focus on were the words he had shouted at her, echoing again and again to her. The blade was just inches from piercing her heart, and all she could think on was that it had been Yellow Jacket all along she had wanted to protect her friends from.

Then a sudden shove from the side, and Twilight was sent stumbling over to the hard stone floor. A cry of pain from where she had stood snapped her head up, and she could only stare at the sight of Trixie standing there, Yellow Jacket's dagger buried to the hilt in her chest.

Trixie stared down at the weapon sticking from her chest, and then looked from it to Twilight. Their eyes met. "Twilight, I'm...sorry." Her legs buckled beneath her and Trixie fell to the floor.

"No!" Twilight ran forward, sinking to her knees and catching hold of Trixie's body before it could hit the ground. The whole room flew away from her, the shouts from Rarity and the others as they launched themselves at Yellow Jacket fading away to silence. All she could focus on was the Unicorn in her arms. "Trixie, why?! I could have taken the blade, I've taken worse!"

Trixie coughed, flecks of blood coloring her lips. She looked up at Twilight and smiled. "Sorry Twilight...had to. Big sister rules, heh." She coughed again and looked down at the hilt sticking from her. Twilight followed her gaze. "And no you couldn't. This is a royal guard blade...cuts off flow of magic in wounds...can't believe Jack was able to get his hooves on one..."

"No..." Tears filled Twilight's eyes and streamed down her cheeks. She had taken one when she had raided Canterlot. Reaching out with her magic she slowly pulled the blade from Trixie's chest, a shudder wracking her body at Trixie's cry of pain. Looking at the bloody blade she saw the runes that would indeed cause the effect Trixie had claimed. She screamed and with a mental flicker sent the blade flying away, before looking back down at Trixie. "Please, please just heal!"

"I, nnh..." A stream of blood leaked from Trixie's mouth, slithering down her cheek into a pool below the sisters. "I wish I could...I so wish I could..."

"Then do it!" Twilight pressed a hoof against the wound in Trixie's chest and began to pour her own magic into it, but it wouldn't hold. "Just heal, damn it!"

Trixie coughed and shook her head. Her eyes were clenched shut, her body shuddering in pain even as numbness began creeping up her limbs. "Twilight, t-tell me something..." Trixie pushed Twilight's hoof from her chest, and then directed her head to look her in the eyes. Trixie opened her eyes and smiled up at Twilight. "Was I...a good sister...the time we knew each other?"

Twilight sobbed, nodding her head. "You were the best sister I could have ever asked for. Oh Trixie..." She pulled Trixie's body closer, pressing horn to horn in the tightest hug she could manage. "I wish we'd known each other longer." No response came. Pulling back a little, Twilight looked and saw the light had left Trixie's eyes. Trixie was dead.

Twilight felt a hoof on her shoulder. Turning to look behind her Twilight saw Rarity standing there, her own cheeks wet with fallen tears. "Twilight, I am so terribly sorry. I can only imagine how you are feeling right now."

Twilight felt cold, and empty, and dead. Her mind was focused on only one thing. She looked from Rarity back down at Trixie's body, sliding the eyelids shut and then gently placing her onto the ground. Twilight stood up from the body, ignoring the blood staining her coat from holding Trixie close as she turned to face Rarity. "Where. Where is Yellow Jacket?"

Rarity withered beneath that empty gaze. Gulping she looked and pointed beside the Pandorica. Big Mac had Yellow Jacket pinned down there, while Ditzy looked through his cloak for any more hidden weapons. "We took him down while you...while you and Trixie had your last moments together. He went down incredibly easy, I don't think he's well."

Twilight turned to look at Yellow Jacket, and suddenly her eyes were no longer empty, but filled with absolute hate. "No, he's not." Her horn glowed, and with cries of surprise Ditzy and Big Mac were telekinetically flung away from Yellow Jacket. He had only a moment to look up at Twilight before he was seized by the same power and lifted into the air. Twilight screamed and smashed him back to the ground, smirking at his cry of pain.

"No, please Twilight! I'm-"

"Shut up." Twilight lifted Jack back up and slammed him into the ground again, a sickening crunch followed by a scream of pain as one of his legs broke.

"You don't."

Crunch.

"Get to."

"Twi-" Crunch.

"Speak."

CRUNCH.

"You only."

"St-stop..." CRUNCH.

"Get to."

CRUNCH.

"Die."

Twilight let Jack's body drop to the floor at the foot of the Pandora. He hit the ground with a wet smack, a pile of broken bone and flesh, glazed over eyes staring vacantly at nothing. Jack was dead.

Twilight Sparkle breathed heavily, though not from exertion. She stared at the body for several long moments, no thoughts surfacing above the rage that flowed through her body like an electric current. Then a small sound, a terrified gasp, made Twilight look behind her to her friends huddled near the staircase, looking as if they wanted so desperately to run down it.

"Rarity...Ditzy...Big MacIntosh...they're dead. Everypony is dying around me." Twilight looked from the others to the Pandora. But if I had enough power..."

A look of horror dawned on Rarity's face. "No, T-Twilight! You can't!"

Twilight ignored Rarity and began walking towards the Pandora, her horn taking on a purple shimmer. "Fold the space between seconds, not just travel back in time but reverse it completely. Make it so things never happened..."

"Twilight!" Rarity charged forward, but was repulsed by a wave of magic from Twilight. She was sent flying back, just narrowly caught from smashing face-first through a window by Ditzy. In the Pegasus's arms she shook the dizziness from her head and looked back at Twilight. "Don't do it! Spike and Trixie died to keep this from happening!"

Twilight turned to face them all and smiled. The green light from the Pandora shone from behind, lighting up her body as she began rising into the air with her wings. "Stop it from happening? Yes. Yes! With this power I shall make none of this have happened! We will have Spike back, and Trixie back, and EVERYTHING SHALL BE PERFECT!"

The Pandora slid open. The light of a hundred, a thousand, a million suns blasted out, sending Rarity, Ditzzy, and Big Mac to their knees. Six tendrils of red, grey, blue, black, white, and purple light streamed out from the device and wrapped around Twilight's body until she was hidden from sight in a cocoon of light and magic. None of the ponies there could see what was happening there, blinded as they were by the intensity of the light. The whole throne room shook, the glass in the windows shattering and cracks spreading outwards from below where Twilight floated.

Then, as suddenly as it had started, the room's shaking stopped. The blinding light faded away, and slowly the three ponies near the stairs lowered their hooves from their eyes and looked. The sight that met their eyes made them all gasp and their jaws drop. The Pandora was gone, no trace of it left. Where it had been stood a towering Alicorn, taller than Princess Luna, even Princess Celestia. Her coat seemed composed not of fur but of white-hot flame, roiling like the surface of the sun itself. Her mane and coat seemed as if they were fire and gas at once, burning a blinding neon purple that had the air around it shimmering from the contained heat. Her eyes shone red as rubies, and as devoid of emotion, and her cutie mark was a spiral of stars.

"T-Twilight?" Rarity stumbled a step forward, nearly dropping to her knees as those emotionless eyes turned to her. A terrible weight pressed down on her, the mere presence of the being in front of them upping the gravity on them. It was a struggle lifting her head up to look at her. "Twilight Sparkle..."

"THAT IS NO LONGER MY NAME." Rarity and the others screamed, covering their ears in a futile attempt to block off the awful voice, though it came not from the being's lips but directly into their minds. "I AM BEYOND THE SUN AND MOON. I AM BEYOND THE CHILDREN CELESTIA AND LUNA, AND THEIR SIMPLE PRINCESSHOOD. I AM THE EARTH ITSELF, AND THE STARS ABOVE IT.

The being that had once been Twilight Sparkle stepped towards them, over Trixie's body as if it was nothing at all. Where her hooves touched the floor the stone and metal melted, leaving glowing hot puddles in her wake. "I AM ABOVE ALL, AND SHALL HAVE A NAME BEFITTING IT. I AM QUEEN EOS."

"Ooh, we have a queen now? Cool, queens are cool."

Eos stopped walking forward, and all the weight that had been pressing down on Rarity, Ditzzy, and Big Mac lifted. They snapped their heads to the stairs, and Ditzzy jumped into the air from joy at the sight. "Doctor Whoof!"

Doctor Whoof smiled at Ditzzy as he trotted from the top of the steps over to them, his sonic screwdriver gripped in his mouth and a smile on his lips that did not reach his eyes. "Sorry I'm late Doo, Mac, Rarity. I had to make sure a mutual friend was all ready to go. And you!" He yelled, turning to face the towering form of Queen Eos. "Twilight Sparkle!"

"MY NAME IS-"

"You're name's Twilight bloody Sparkle until I say otherwise!" Doctor Whoof smirked. "And I'm not saying otherwise. Now then, I've got an old friend here who would like to say hello. Returning fully for the first time in 2,000 years! Planning to set right everything that's gone wrong, we have! The one, and only..." He turned to look at the stairs and whispered, just loud enough for the others there to hear. "Rainbow of Light."

With these words, light all the colors of the rainbow shone from the doorway. But this was not the same kind of light as had come from Queen Eos's arrival. It was soft and warm, like sunlight trickling through the leaves of a tree onto a sleeper's face. Like silver moonbeams falling through the window and driving away the terrors of the night. Like the tight embrace of a friend you had not seen in many years. To Rarity, the only one of the original group left to have faced Nightmare Moon, it had the exact same feeling as when she and the others had all used the Elements of Harmony.

Then the light coalesced into a form that made them all gasp, Ditzzy dropping back to the floor in her shock. "Rainbow Dash?"

The Pegasus was taller. Not as tall as Eos but as tall as Princess Celestia. Her coat shone as bright as a clear blue sky, little sparks of magical energy dancing over her like miniature lightning. Her mane and tail reminded them all instantly of Princess Celestia's, floating ethereally of their own accord, only in Rainbow Dash's shockingly bright hues. The cloud in her cutie mark was gone, and the rainbow in it had grown and

encompassed all the colors of the rainbow it had been lacking. Finally, she wore armor like Nightmare Moon had worn, yet not midnight blue but prismatic, its colors shifting with every movement she made.

At the sound of Ditzzy's voice, Rainbow Dash looked to her and smiled. "The one and only. Hang tight, I'll take care of this Twilight Sparkle in 10 seconds flat." To Eos she turned and advanced, her smile turning to a scowl as she passed her group of friends. "It's just you and me, Eos."

"NO, RAINBOW DASH. IT'S JUST ME!" Eos matched Rainbow Dash step for step, the wall to her left and right crumbling to dust as she advanced. Her wings flared out, still sky-blue, their tips grazing the walls before they crumbled. "IT WAS THE MAGIC I TOOK FROM YOU THAT MADE ALL THIS POSSIBLE. NOW I SHALL TAKE THE REST AND BECOME A TRUE GODDESS."

Rainbow Dash snorted and spread her own wings wide. Their tips had changed from blue to all the colors of the rainbow. "You want my magic that bad? Come and take it then! All of it!"

"Rainbow, no!"

Ditzzy made to lunge at Rainbow Dash, before Doctor Whoof grabbed her by the shoulder. "I wouldn't do that! Something like what's about to happen could fry even a Princess's brain."

Ditzzy struggled to escape the brown earth pony's hold. "But Doctor-"

"Ditzzy, listen," Doctor Whoof said, watching as tendrils of black energy streamed from Eos's horn and attached to Rainbow Dash. "It's all part of the plan, trust me. When we were getting ready for this, Dash told me about when Twilight removed the illusion spell from her. It took away most of her magic too, as well as copied a great deal of her MEMORIES." Doctor Whoof nodded as pulses of rainbow light began to stream down the magic tendrils into Eos. "Trixie told us all that the knights went bad because all that power took away their perspective. So Rainbow's giving Eos a new perspective, heh."

"Her own," Rarity mumbled in realization. Doctor Whoof grinned and nodded her way. Rarity smiled back. "I guess this time it paid off for you and Dash to be unfashionably late."

A sudden cry drew all their attentions back to Rainbow Dash and Eos. Rainbow Dash had fallen to her knees, a pained look of concentration on her face even while the brightness of her colors faded away. Eos had a similar look of struggle in her features, but as they watched it lessened more and more, a look of triumph replacing it. Ditzzy screamed and looked back at Doctor Whoof. "She's losing! Doctor, we have to help her, please!"

"I-I, she..." Doctor Whoof watched the two god-like entities with mounting panic. "She's trying, she's trying so hard to save her friend, but it's not enough! She's too young, too inexperienced, there's just not enough experience to affect Eos!" He squeezed his eyes shut, loosening his grip on Ditzzy as he did. "I'm thinking I'm thinking, I'm-I don't know what to do!"

Rarity and Big Mac held each other close as the struggle before them grew more and more in Eos's favor. Ditzzy watched her closest friend, the one mare in the world she would ever entrust her daughter Dinky to if something happened to her, struggle for all their lives. It was at this thought of Dinky that Ditzzy Doo knew what she had to do. She turned to look at Doctor Whoof. "Hey, I'm sorry."

He frowned. "What-"

Before he could say any more Ditzzy twisted and broke from his hold. Not sparing him, Big Mac, or Rarity another look, for fear that she would be unable to look away, Ditzzy leapt into the air and shot at Rainbow Dash and Eos. "Ditzzy no! It will fry your mind!" Screams and shouts for her to stop were ignored, Ditzzy's eyes focused only on the job ahead of her.

In the moments before she connected with the tendrils of magic connecting Rainbow Dash and Eos, an image came to her mind of her little daughter Dinky, laughing softly as she chased around a butterfly. A smile came to Ditzzy, and her eyes grew wet with tears. "I love you, my little muffin."

Ditzzy rammed her head into one of the tendrils, and the whole world exploded into light.

"Nnngh..." Rainbow Dash groaned and opened her eyes. She found herself sprawled out on the broken floor of the throne room, back in her normal form and very, very sore. Several feet away in front of her she saw Twilight Sparkle on her side, not moving. And closer, a bit to her right, Rainbow Dash saw another collapsed form, with a grey coat and yellow mane and tail. "Ditzy?"

"Rainbow Dash!"

Rainbow Dash looked behind her, blinking as Rarity, Big Mac, and Doctor Whoof ran to her side. She groaned and struggled to her hooves, before letting out a yelp as Rarity nearly tackled her to the ground in the ivory Unicorn's rush to hug her. "Oh darling, you were magnificent! Just magnificent!"

Rainbow Dash returned Rarity's hug, looking past her to Big Mac. Doctor Whoof had gone past them, to Ditzzy's side. "I did it? I really stopped Eos?"

Big Mac nodded. "Eyup. That was quite the light show you managed to put on."

"Well, I try." Rainbow Dash smiled, and then gently pulled Rarity off of her. She wiped away at the tears that had been falling down Rarity's face. "Hey, I'm okay, okay? Come on Rarity, don't get all soft on me."

"Oh, darling..." Rarity sniffled, daintily wiped a hoof beneath her eyes, and then grabbed hold of Rainbow Dash around the shoulders and began to shake her. "If you ever get me so worried about a friend again, I will have you model for an entire year's worth of dress, you understand?!" Rainbow Dash nodded and Rarity let go. "Good."

"Right..." The sound of humming caught Rainbow Dash's attention. She turned to where Doctor Whoof knelt by Ditzzy's prone form and waving his sonic screwdriver over her. Rainbow Dash frowned and hurried over. "Hey doc, everything's kinda fuzzy after Twilight...Eos...whatever, after she started doing her magic steal thing. What happened to Ditzzy?"

"Hm? Nothing, nothing at all okay that's a lie. She saw you were

struggling and jumped in to help." Doctor Whoof stopped scanning and slid the sonic screwdriver back into his jacket, before lifting Ditzzy up into a sitting position. "Come on Ditzzy, you brave idiot. Wake up and say something, anything!"

A groan came from Ditzzy. Rainbow Dash edged forward, taking one of her fellow Pegasus's hooves in her own and smiling as those honey-yellow eyes opened. Her smile vanished when she saw that those eyes looked in completely different direction. "Ditzzy?"

"Mnngh, butterscotch sundaes clopping in the sky..." Ditzzy blinked and shook her head, sitting up straighter in Doctor Whoof's arms. "Muffin slams down the pipe? Lightshow break away licor...licor...Rainbow Dash?"

"I'm here," Rainbow Dash said. She pulled Ditzzy from Doctor Whoof's hold into a hug of her own, nuzzling against her muzzle. "I'm here, I'm all right. Whatever you did, whatever happened, you saved all of us."

"That's...muffin to hike." Ditzzy smiled and returned Rainbow Dash's hug.

"Nngh..."

Rainbow Dash and the others looked up. Twilight Sparkle was stirring, opening her eyes and struggling to her hooves. When she looked over at them she stumbled and backed away, tears forming in her eyes. "I-I'm sorry, Rainbow Dash, Rarity, Doctor Whoof, Big Mac, Ditzzy, I'm sorry." Rarity took a step forward and Twilight screamed, backing away. "I'm sorry! Please, please I'm sorry!"

Rainbow Dash helped Ditzzy to her hooves, before turning back to Twilight and stepping towards her. "Twilight Sparkle."

"I'm sorry..." Twilight hung her head, looking from Rainbow Dash to where Trixie's body lay. The tears began dropping from her eyes to the floor. "She failed. I made her, and Spike, fail. I've ruined everything."

"Not quite everything, my loyal student."

A burst of sunlight shone in through the remains of the east wall to Rainbow Dash's left, quickly forming into Princess Celestia and Princess

Luna. Princess Celestia had one wing in a sling, and the top third of her horn was missing, but otherwise she seemed as radiant as ever. Immediately the group dropped down into bows, all except for Twilight Sparkle. She blanched and fell to her knees, quivering as the two princess sisters approached her. "How...how can you call me your loyal student? I attacked you, I set fire to Canterlot, I released Tirek and the Six Knights, I..." Twilight gulped, looking from Celestia to the stone-faced Luna, and then to the nearby body of Trixie. "I killed your sister's own student."

The look on Celestia's face grew sad, and she leaned down to gently nuzzle Twilight's cheek. "Oh Twilight, I can call you that because I love you, and because once again you put more weight on your shoulders than you deserve. You did not take your sister's life, she gave it willingly, as I would do in a moment for my own younger sister. As for attacking me, I will admit my own error for that. I should have talked to you, let you agree to having the magic of your ancestors that had been increasingly influencing you siphoned away, instead of springing it like a trap. And as for setting fire to Canterlot...I will be honest, much was lost that night. Penance will have to be made, someday."

Twilight nodded, and then looked up at Celestia. "But what of the Knights of Equestria?"

Here Celestia stepped back, and Luna stepped forward. Rainbow Dash and the other ponies joined Twilight's side as Luna addressed them all. "The release of the Knights of Equestria was a terrible event that has cost us..." Luna's gaze went for the barest second to Trixie's body. "Cost us all too much. But it has also revealed something even worse. That Tirek was not sealed with them."

The six ponies gasped. The color left Rainbow Dash's face and she took a half-step forward. "But how in the hay is that possible?! Trixie told us all you sealed those knights in with Tirek!"

"Yes," Luna nodded. "And so when Twilight unsealed the knights, you all would have been instantly obliterated by Tirek if he had been here. But you weren't, and he wasn't. I suspect that Tirek was gone long before any of this ever happened."

"The fires," mumbled Doctor Whoof. He looked up at Luna as if for

confirmation. "I always thought it was something other than Yellow Jacket."

"Your intuition served you well." For the first time since either princess had arrived, Luna smiled. It was small and weak, but a smile all the same. "And it shall continue serving all of you well. For with the renewed threat of Tirek, a new order of protectors must arise, granted the power of the old order."

Luna's horn lit up, and from the sky above descended six orbs of light to the group. Twilight's eyes widened in understanding. "The power of the Knights of Equestria."

The glow from Luna's horn strengthened, and the orbs separated, going to different ponies. "To Doctor Whoof I grant the element of Wonder, from the knight Onyx Rose." The orb of black light descended onto Doctor Whoof and formed a metal bracer on his left foreleg. "To Big MacIntosh I grant the element of Perseverance, from the knight Garnetia." The red orb formed a metal bracer on Big Mac's left foreleg. "To Rarity I grant the element of Diligence, from the knight Frosty Carnation. To Ditzzy Doo I grant the element of Sincerity, from the knight Ryanus Zane. To Rainbow Dash, incarnation of the Rainbow of Light, I grant the element of Love, from the knight Agape. And to Twilight Sparkle..."

Here Luna stopped and focused on Twilight exclusively. Their eyes met, and Twilight shivered at what she found. "I had hoped to give this element to my student, your sister. But you will have to do. And it is a fitting element for all that you have done. My sister may not punish you, but I do. The punishment is life. For the rest of your existence, no matter where you go or what you do, you shall remember every single second of all that has happened here. You will bear this..." The purple light descended onto Twilight, forming not a bracer but a cloak and hood. "The element of Justice."

Luna backed away, joining Celestia's side. Together they looked on as the six ponies before them bowed. Then, as behind the two sisters the sun crested over the mountains and bathed them all in light, the pair of Alicorns reared up and flared their wings.

"Rise, Knights of Equestria!"

Fluttershy opened her eyes. Early dawn light streamed through the windows above her bed, lighting the guest room up in a fiery glow. To her left at the bed's side sat Applejack, asleep in her chair, her hat fallen off her head to the wood floor.

Fluttershy rolled out of bed, ignoring as her beaten body screamed in protest at the movement. She staggered her way past Applejack to the desk on the other side of the room, being sure to stomp down on the Stetson as she passed it. The sunlight warmed Fluttershy as she passed through it, making her feel itchy beneath the bandages covering her. She stopped at the desk and looked at herself in the mirror.

Minutes passed with the only sound being Applejack's snoring. Fluttershy continued to look at herself in the mirror, until the door to her left opened and Pinkamena Dianne Pie stepped inside. The dull pink pony's mane fell in straight lines around her face, doing little to hide the vicious smirk stretching her lips. "Good, you're awake. I was getting tired of waiting."

"If I had known that, I would have made you wait longer." Fluttershy turned from the mirror and took the object Pinkamena held out to her. She slipped the rusty metal necklace around her neck and watched as a black jewel in the shape of a butterfly formed on the front. "Life is pain," Fluttershy whispered. "And any amount of kindness is simply the setup for the joke that is cruelty."

"Everypony is laughing and smiling at the joke. All smiles." From a saddle on her back Pinkamena took out a carving knife, gleaming clean and freshly sharpened. She looked past Fluttershy to Applejack, only just beginning to show signs of waking up. "Let's carve those smiles off their faces."

~ ~ ~
The End of
Knights of Equestria
~ ~ ~

Equestrian Knights: The Two Powers

Prologue

The world has changed. It is in the water...it is in the air...it is in the earth. Much that had once been is lost, because those charged to keep hold of it, have not. The world was not always so tame. In past eras there was cruelty, and hate, and outright malice. Once, the fate of the world was decided by gods and princesses. The woods were wild, animals free, and the great races lived in peace under the rule of King Cronus. The world was young and fresh, in its summer, and blood had not been spilt in hate or anger for a very long time.

A long time passed, and it came time for the start of King Cronus's eon slumber, and the handing down of power to his stewards. His war helm was given to the dragons, long-lived, fiercest, and loneliest of all beings. His crown went to the princesses Celestia and Luna, mothers of ponykind, great leaders, and his beloved daughters. And his mask. Cronus's mask went to the race of gryphons, who above all others desired knowledge and practiced deceit. For to each item was bound the aspect of leadership most suited to lead that race: Power, Magic, and Knowledge. And so ended the First Age of the world.

The Second Age of the World began in blood, and fire. The dragon-god Agni declared a war of conquest on the race of diamond dogs and chimeras, and with the war helm brought swift subjugation. The gryphons secluded themselves in their mountain fortresses, delving deep into the knowledge of the cosmos brought to them by Cronus's mask. It was they who opened the world to darkness. And so the Princesses Celestia and Luna, daughters of the king and stewards of the sun and moon, were left to govern and Shepherd the world on their own.

Centuries passed, and any ties of fellowship or kindred origins were lost between the races. To the dragons, ponies became little more than livestock to be hunted for at leisure. To the ponies, dragons became monsters to be feared, and hated. And gryphonkind faded away, locked in their mountains, almost myth to ponies. Whether they made dealings with the dragons and their client races nopony knows, though tales come down through the ages tell of strange sounds and forbidding sights through the mountain passes, at the darkest time of the year.

Celestia and Luna carved for themselves a great realm, rich with magic and resources for growth. There ponykind lived and flourished, first taking upon themselves the names Unicorn and Pegasi. In this realm they called Equestria they were protected from the hungry jaws and conquering claws of the dragons. At the northeastern border of the realm stood Castle Sunshine, later becoming known as the Castle of the Two Pony Sisters, and at the southern border stood Castle Midnight, mountain stronghold against the sand wyverns. Much of this time is now lost to the ages.

For 500 years into the Second Age this lasted, an uneasy stalemate of power. Then everything changed. The gryphons delved too deep in their search for deeper knowledge, and through some unholy experiment or act of utter foolishness, opened this world to the outer darkness, the Void beyond the world. And something from the Void came. The kingdom of gryphons was destroyed, and their surviving numbers scattered to the four winds, becoming wanderers and mercenaries ever after. Many sought refuge in Equestria, where they told tales of what they had unleashed: Tirek, Lord of the Outer Darkness and Enemy of all free beings. It is said Cronus's mask was destroyed in the event. Even if not, it has never been seen or heard of since, and has passed into legend.

A demon of metal and fire and shadow, Tirek desired not wealth or land or domination, but the simple destruction of all that lived and grew. His army grew swift and strong, his reach far. Soon all kingdoms felt his shadow fall upon them. It was at this moment that an alliance was struck between dragons, ponies, and gryphons. Together, under the combined banners of Princess Celestia and the dragon-god Agni, 500,000 ponies, 200,000 dragons, and 50,000 gryphons marched against the armies of Tirek, and on the Plain of Unending Ice they fought for their very survival.

The battle lasted for 200 days and nights, and many warriors of renown passed here into legend. It was here the dragon-god Agni fell, struck down by Tirek himself, and from his scales were forged the gems later known as the Elements of Harmony. It was here that Pegasi first learned to bend the lightning of the sky to their will. It was here that Princess Celestia, the Crown of Cronus adorning her head, struggled against the will of Tirek and lost. And so it was the crown fell into shadow, and was lost. Princess Celestia would never seek it, or the title of queen, again.

It was on the 201st day, when all hope was lost, that Princess Luna, younger sister to Celestia and Steward of the Moon, arrived with her six Knights of Equestria. Together they banished Tirek's armies to the deepest abyss of the earth, and forged an indestructible prison for Tirek. They called it the Pandorica.

Tirek, Lord of the Outer Darkness, was defeated. His prison, to be eternally guarded by the Knights of Equestria, was placed in Midnight Castle. And the world, in the wake of his defeat and the arrival of the earth ponies, was reordered. No longer a wild, dangerous place, it would be guided and cared for by ponykind at all times, lest another evil like Tirek slip through. Such happened 500 years later, with the sudden appearance and banishment of Nightmare Moon. And so ended the Second Age of the world, the Age of Darkness.

"And this is the Third Age we're in, right Professor?"

The black-coated, grey-maned Unicorn known as Professor Lovedraft looked up from the weathered book he was reading from. He scanned the small crowd of archeologists, linguists, architects, and University students that made up his expedition, until his eyes fell on one in particular. His prized student, Lyrica. The sea foam-green Unicorn sat across the small fire the group had started up, and watched him with admiring eyes.

Professor Lovedraft smiled and nodded, though in the darkness of the castle hall, with the fire the only near source of light, this slight movement was hard to tell apart from the elder stallion's regular shuddering. "Yes indeed we are living in the Third Age, or the Age of Harmony as it is also called. Named after the Elements of Harmony used by Princess Celestia to

banish her corrupted sister Nightmare Moon to the, hehe, moon, and then later by the Unicorn Twilight Sparkle and her friends to free Princess Luna from her corruption."

Another of the professor's students, a green Unicorn named Frosty Lime, wandered over from the field kitchen set up several yards away. "Professor, if the Elements could have freed Princess Luna, then why did Princess Celestia only banish her?"

Muttering from the crowd rose up on this. Lovedraft took off his glasses and began to clean them. "A fair question indeed. There are many theories on this, though here is mine. The Elements of Harmony, created as they were in the fires of alliance and friendship, require multiple users to unlock their full magical potential. Though Princess Celestia's divinity and part in their making allowed her to use them, there was nopony she could use them in 'harmony' with. Nopony alive can harmonize with our beloved princesses, except each other." Lovedraft sighed and leaned back in his beanbag chair. "The magic of friendship seems a truly wondrous thing."

Lyrice spoke up again. "Well, okay then Professor. But what's with the mythology lesson, sir?"

"Why, mythology? My dear Lyrice!" Lovedraft stood up from his chair and motioned a hoof to all the room around them. It was massive, some sort of indoor courtyard or meeting room, where many troops could stand at the ready. "Lyrice, everything you see around you was mere mythology until a year ago! Midnight Castle is a treasure trove of history, a literal time capsule from ages past, that Princess Celestia has so graciously allowed us to visit and study. It is essential that we understand, and even more APPRECIATE, the history behind it!" Here the elder stallion turned to face the entire gathering. "As a wise stallion once said, if you do not appreciate history, you will never become a part of it."

A floor up from Professor Lovedraft, Lyrice, Frosty Lime, and the rest of the Official Canterlot University Archeological Excavation Team and their camp, two Unicorns wandered through the hall of statues that just over a year previously, the TARDIS had materialized in. Their horns were alight with magic to let them see. The mare with a beige coat and blonde mane

and tail was Sandy, a Freshmare at Canterlot University. The stallion a few paces behind and to the left of her, his coat red and his mane and tail a spiky two-tone of yellow and orange, was Fiero, her senior by a year.

"S-Sandy, are you sure we should have just...left the group like that?"

Sandy rolled her eyes at the voice of her coltfriend, turning to look over her shoulder at him. "Of course I'm not sure, that's what makes all this exciting!" She turned back forward and stopped at the foot of one of the statues. "I mean just look at this!"

"It's not gonna be very exciting when Professor Lovedraft finds out we went on ahead without the group..." Fiero walked over and sat at Sandy's side. He looked up at the statue, towering over them like an oversized manticore. "Yep, it's a statue. A very big..." His eyes wandered over the mouthless face, the glaring ruby eyes that seemed to glow in the darkness of the room "very angry..." He looked at the fingers on the hands, each as long and sharp as the sickles he had seen ponies at farms use to gather wheat "Very dangerous-looking statue. Sandy..."

Sandy ignored him. Standing up on her rear legs she reached forward and began running her forehooves over the statue. She couldn't reach to even the mid-thigh on the thing. "The metal is unlike any that I've ever seen or heard of before. All the millennia and it's far below room temperature, almost freezing. Must be incredibly resistant to heat."

"Okay, no point trying to use it for firewood, got it. Can we go?"

Sandy tapped a hoof against the leg of the statue and listened. "Hm, I don't think it's solid...but it's not completely hollow either. It might be composed of interlocking layers, allowing its shape to be shifted. I had read that the Cons could change shape and size somewhat for disguise purposes, but why make an attempt to replicate that in the statues?"

"Sandy, what if they're not-"

"And why make statues anyway?" Sandy dropped back down to all fours and left that particular statue. Going to another, shorter but bulkier statue, she began to circle it. "These things were incredibly feared during the wars, more so than manticores and younger, smaller dragons. And why have no

other statues of these things been uncovered? This metal seems incredibly durable; there should be some remnants in other ancient ruins."

Before Sandy could say anything further, Fiero stopped her movement with a hoof on the shoulder. "Sandy..." Now that she was actually looking at him, she saw he had a genuinely frightened look on his face. "I-I have an idea."

"An idea?"

Fiero nodded. "Yeah, an idea. What if...um, well..." He glanced up at the statue they stood by, eeping when he saw that it seemed to be looking right at him. "Um, what if they aren't statues of Cons?" Fiero recognized the look that appeared on his fillyfriend's face when he said this and quickly held up a hoof. "Wait wait, I mean...what if these actually ARE Cons? Like...really really the monstrous machines of death Lovedraft always goes on about?"

Sandy sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose with a hoof. Giving a shake of her head she looked back at him. "Fiero, hunny, the legend goes that Princess Luna and her knights banished the Cons to the deepest abyss of the earth. Does this look like a deep abyss?"

Fiero looked around him, and had to admit, it did in fact not look at all like an abyss. "Well, no...I suppose not." He looked back at her. "But what if that bit's supposed to be metaphorical? Like 'cast them into the deepest abyss of the earth' really meant 'kill them' or something. You know, sending whatever they have for souls to...giant metal monster hell..." Sandy quirked an eyebrow. Fiero sighed again and hung his head. "Right, yeah, that sounded dumb even to me."

"And that," Sandy said, trotting past Fiero, patting him on the head as she went, "is why you should leave all that kind of heavy thinking to somepony like me. I mean, you are just a medical student."

"That makes me think. I wonder why Professor Lovedraft wanted a couple of medical students along on the trip." Fiero moved to follow her, but a sudden flicker of movement in the corner of his eye made him stop. He turned in the direction he thought he had seen the movement. "Hey, did you see that?"

Sandy didn't look up from closely examining a metal foot the size of her head. "See what?"

"I thought I saw something..." Fiero took a few hesitant steps in the suspicious direction. Moving around past a crouching Con statue he found himself at a wall of the room, looking up a dark tunnel going up. "Hey, I found another staircase!"

Fiero waited a few seconds, but no answer came to him. A sudden chill crawled up his spine, the feeling of being watched that he had been experiencing since the moment he had entered the massive hall surging forth. Thoughts entered his mind; thoughts of metal giants gliding silently through the room towards him, slowly closing in behind him, knife-like fingers stretching out towards him, ready to pierce his hide like a fork through a leaf of lettuce. Any moment, he thought, and he would feel the claws rake across his skin.

Then new thoughts came. Thoughts of those monsters with Sandy, HIS Sandy, torturing her, doing everything to her he feared them doing to him. With a cry he broke free of the fear-laced paralysis that had taken hold of him and spun around, horn flaring with magical light as he prepared to face whatever evil monstrosities stood between him and Sandy.

He promptly came face to face with Sandy. "WAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!"

"AAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!" Sandy slapped him, sending Fiero stumbling back. "Don't scare me like that! Why in Equestria would you just turn around and start screaming at me?!"

"I, I thought I was going to face an evil monstrosity!"

"So you start screaming when you see me?!" She slapped him again. "What is with that?"

"I'm sorry!" Fiero quickly backed away from her, stopping at the very foot of the stairs to rub his cheek. Already he could feel some bruises forming. "I just...when you didn't answer me when I said something, I thought something might have gotten you. Th-that maybe you needed saving, for once..."

The glare on Sandy's face softened somewhat. "Oh. Oh Fiero..." She walked over and sat down next to him. Leaning in she nuzzled the cheek she hadn't slapped. "I'm sorry. I was just walking over to you to see what you were talking about. I didn't mean to scare you."

"..." Fiero had looked over his shoulder while she spoke, squinting up into the shadows of the stairway. He thought he had seen the movement again. "What do you think is up there? More statues maybe?"

Sandy followed the direction of his gaze. "Maybe..." Up those stairs, there was something different, something both ponies could feel, even if they couldn't put it into words. The quality of the darkness was...thicker. Heavier. The shadows clung to the walls and steps, seeming to resist the light shining from their horns. Plus, down from wherever the stairs led to came a smell; the first smell either of them, or the others in Lovedraft's little expedition, had noticed since arriving in Midnight Castle.

Sandy took a sniff and wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Ugh, what is that awful stench? It smells like something died up there!"

Fiero frowned, standing up and taking a sniff as well. From where they stood at the bottom of the steps the smell was faint, but even then recognition of it hit the male Unicorn like another slap from Sandy. He had grown plenty familiar with it the two years he had been attending Canterlot University's medical school branch. "That can't be..." It couldn't be what he thought it was. Something like that was just unthinkable, it didn't make any sense.

Sandy looked over at him. "What can't be?" But her question went unanswered as Fiero went dashing up the stairs, the light from his horn quickly dwindling away in the darkness. "Hey, wait!" Sandy stood up and hurried up the stairs after him. For several moments all she could see of him was his magical light bobbing ahead of her, until she flared the power in her own horn to light up the stairway for several yards ahead. "Hey, hold on! What do you think it is?!"

Fiero didn't turn to look back at her, but his shout over his shoulder came clear enough, echoing along the stone walls. "You were right, something did die up here!"

A dozen more steps passed by beneath their hooves before Fiero spoke again, his voice beginning to sound labored, out of breath. There were a lot of steps. "That smell...I recognize from the university. It's rotting...flesh..." He could just imagine the look of shock and disgust that crossed Sandy's face at this proclamation, before shifting to confusion. He spoke again to interrupt the question he knew she was about to ask. "No, I don't know for sure what it is, but I have an idea-" the pair left the stairwell, entering into another grand hall. "-who."

The throne room of Midnight Castle had changed little since that night 14 months previously, when the Knights of Equestria had been released from their prison and the Rainbow of Light's avatar had revealed her presence. The roof and walls for over half the room were still gone, reduced to their simplest elements by the raw power that had bled off of Queen Eos's body, her mere presence warping the fabric forming some of reality. More of the room had been blasted when Eos's and the Rainbow of Light's powers had clashed, leaving craters and cracks littering everywhere else. On top of all this came exposure to the elements. Wind and rain and relentless sunlight had worked together to create the main difference in the room; molds and fungi of all kinds and colors, enough decay for 1,500 years all crammed into one.

Sandy stopped at the throne room's entrance, staring around her at all the destruction and decay that surrounded them. Fiero however ignored it all, advancing to the center of the room where the largest crater marred the floor. There lay the source of the stench they had noticed even as far down as the room below. He stopped at the edge of the crater and looked at the thing lying at the center. A moment later Sandy joined him and gasped.

"Dear Celestia, what happened to him?!"

Fiero remained silent. He carefully slid his way down the slope of the crater until it leveled out, taking the few steps remaining until he was at the corpse's side. The effects of 14 months of lying out exposed to the elements were clear. Most of the yellow hair covering the body had rotted away, exposing mottled grey skin in most places, decaying muscle and bone in others. Likewise, only a few strands of black hair remained of the mane and tail, and the softer tissues of the ears were mostly gone. The eyes were completely gone, leaving gaping sockets that to Fiero and Sandy were worse than the glaring ruby eyes of the statues below them.

The lower jaw hung loose, making the corpse seem in the middle of an unearthly shriek.

All this Fiero took in within a scant few seconds of observing the corpse. Looking at what little could be made out of the cutie mark confirmed his suspicions. "Dear Celestia, it's Yellow Jacket!"

A cold Northern wind began to blow across them, sending unseen pebbles skittering along the moss-covered ground. Sandy pawed a hoof nervously against the lip of the crater, glancing around them. "Yellow w-who?"

Any other time, Fiero would have smirked at the slight tremble in the filly's voice, glad it wasn't him allowing the fear to show. As it was though he turned away from the corpse at his hooves and looked up at Sandy. "It was over a year ago, before you came to Canterlot University. Yellow Jacket was an assistant to the head librarian, the only Pegasus to ever attend the University. I don't know most of the details, everything was supposed to be hushed up, but this guy found some really evil way to use magic. Killed a Unicorn, I think. Anyway he fled, enlisted the help of his friend Twilight Sparkle," the wind grew in strength, something neither Unicorn noticed "and somehow or other it all ended up with Midnight Castle's recovery, and the deaths of both Yellow Jacket and Trixie, Princess Luna's private apprentice."

"Now those are names I recognize. Twilight Sparkle was that crazy Unicorn that firebombed Canterlot, right?"

Fiero nodded, turning further away from the corpse. "Yeah, that's right. Twilight Sparkle, Princess Celestia's disgraced apprentice. Ya know, I heard the craziest rumor that she and Trixie were actually-"

A thundering boom echoed up from somewhere below them, sending both ponies stumbling. Sandy shrieked as she fell down into the crater, rolling down to the bottom where she lay on her side. At the same time Fiero fell backwards onto Yellow Jacket's corpse, and suddenly he felt a searing pain in his left ankle. "AHHHHHHH!"

"Fiero!" Sandy rolled back over onto her hooves and staggered over to Fiero. Her breath caught in her throat when she saw the state his ankle

was in. Somehow, when he had fallen backwards his ankle had gotten caught in the corpse's open mouth, and like a bear trap it had snapped shut. Broken, jagged teeth buried into the flesh, releasing rivulets of bright crimson that streaked down his hoof into the mouth. "Oh Celestia..."

"D-don't just stand there!" Tears filled his eyes, his forehooves digging furrows into the floor as he struggled to drag himself away from the corpse. "My leg's caught, help me! T-there could be all kinds of disea-AAAUGH!"

Fiero thrashed, his eyes bulging out as all of a sudden the jaws of the corpse snapped shut, severing his hoof completely from its leg. Sandy shrieked, stumbling back in horror as the corpse's eye sockets lit with a hellish yellow light. The thing shifted onto its hooves, Fiero's hoof falling from the corpse's mouth as the jaws opened, releasing a scream that had Sandy digging her forehooves into her ears to block it out.

"MERCYYYYYYYYYYYYY!"

"AAAAUGH, AAUUUUUUUGH!" Fiero sobbed and screamed in pain, his forehooves pressing desperately into the ground, dragging the bleeding stump where his left hoof had once been along as he crawled away from the horrible thing. The corpse looked in his direction, the head swinging limply on a broken neck. The glow of its eyes seared into him and he sobbed harder. "Sandy, Sandy help me!"

"MERCYYYYYYYYYYYYY!" The corpse began to drag itself after Fiero, its head dragging along the trail of blood left on the ground by the Unicorn's stump. Past the corpse, Sandy could be seen scrambling up the side of the crater and bolting for the stairs. "MERCYYYYYYYYYYYYY!"

"No, please, stop!" Fiero rolled over onto his stomach and tried to climb out of the crater. He made it maybe halfway up before again the feeling of snapping jaws and burying teeth, ripping flesh and tearing muscle. Through his leg Fiero felt the corpse pull, twist his head, and suddenly the sound of bone breaking for the briefest moment overcame the sound of screams. It was only a moment, and then Fiero was screaming all the louder, crying for Sandy, for Princess Celestia, for Princess Luna, for his mother. His rear legs thrashed about, now both hooves gone.

A pull on his tail, and Fiero was dragged screaming back to the bottom of the crater.

"MERCYYYYYYYYYYYYY!"

"What in blazes happened here?!"

Professor Lovedraft stood in front of what remained of the supply tent. Everything that wasn't food or already set up had been stored there. Parchment, ink, excavation equipment, medical equipment, spare sleeping bags, books and scrolls containing any relevant information to Midnight Castle; it had all been there. Had being the key word. What remained was a smoldering wreck, smoke still curling up from the rather impressive crater.

"Well, what happened here?!"

"I, I, I'm so s-sorry, sir!" The earth pony that had been placed in charge of the supply tent for that night quivered beneath Lovedraft's gaze. Her yellow coat was marred by ash from the explosion, a trickle of blood running down her forehead from where a piece of a shovel blade had hit her there. Teal eyes shone with barely contained tears. "I, I had just been s-sorting through things, lo-looking for somethi-thing, when I-I guess I accidently knocked over a water bag..."

Lovedraft and several of the Unicorns surrounding the area groaned. Lovedraft leant forward and smacked the earth pony hard on the head, making her whimper as her forehead cut opened up wider. "You stupid filly! You dumped water on our ammonium nitrate supplies! You could have killed us all!"

"I, I'm sorry!" The pony dropped to the ground and covered her head with her hooves to ward away any more strikes. For a moment Lovedraft seriously considered delivering another blow, but decided it wasn't worth it. He turned to walk away, not noticing those teal eyes hardening into a glare at his back.

"Professor," Lyrica said, hurrying to match his steps. "What do we do

now? Without those supplies we can't-"

"Quiet!" Lovedraft looked around them, saw that most of the other ponies were gathered around where the supply tent was or were at the medical pavilion, and quickly ushered his apprentice into the privacy of his tent. Once they were both in he turned to look at her. "We cannot allow any of the others to know the real reason we are here. Tonight's...accident, does not change that."

Lyrice nodded, but her eyes betrayed her thoughts to Lovedraft. "Of course. But professor, without those chemicals we might as well attack the Cons with our hooves!"

He sighed and removed his glasses, cleaning them as he did when upset. "I know my dear, I know. In the morning I'll send several students back to Los Caballos up the coast and purchase supplies there, out of my own wallet. Until then, all we can do is-"

A scream of animalistic terror came from somewhere in the distance. Lovedraft hurriedly put his glasses back on as Lyrice rushed to the tent door. "What in blazes was that?!"

Lyrice threw open the tent flaps and looked out. Practically every pony in the camp was rushing to the stairs going deeper into the castle, where she could barely make out a pony stumbling out from the darkness. "It's...it's Sandy!"

"What?!" Lovedraft pushed past Lyrice and looked to see where the ponies had gathered. The next moment he was off, galloping the several yards across the courtyard, and then pushing his way through the crowd to where Sandy sat, huddled against the side of the earth pony. The pair sat at the foot of the stairs, the earth pony brushing a hoof over Sandy's and whispering something to Sandy as she sobbed into her shoulder.

"What happened?!" Lovedraft rushed over, grabbing Sandy by the shoulders and pulling her up to look at him. The yellow-coated earth pony silently stepped away, disappearing into the crowd, but no pony there noticed. They were too enthralled by the sight before them. "What did you do?!"

"Professor-"

"Shut up!" Frosty Lime flinched away and his mouth snapped shut, and Lovedraft looked back to Sandy. "Sandy, what...what did you do?"

The scared filly's eyes focused on him, and Lovedraft could feel some of that terror leech off onto him. Her mouth opened, but for several agonizing seconds no sound would come. But then, "F-Fiero...two floors up...there was a corpse, somepony dead...but not dead...he is coming. He is coming..."

Lovedraft asked the question he already knew the answer to. "Who is coming?"

"Yellow Jacket."

Lovedraft jumped at the new voice and looked up from Sandy, to the earth pony suddenly standing beside him. She smiled at him, and then swung the pickaxe gripped between her teeth. It buried into Sandy's temple through the left side with a solid thunk, its sharp end stabbing out through the other side of her head. The earth pony then twisted around, dragging Sandy's corpse and flinging it several steps up the stairs.

Gasps and shrieks ran through the surroundings ponies, and all at once they turned and ran. The earth pony galloped past the still-kneeling Lovedraft, wading into the terrified, panicking group of ponies. The pickaxe whistled through the stale air of the chamber, cutting down Unicorns left and right. Frosty Lime went down silently, a single bloody hole just below his horn the only mark on his body. Lyrica went down screaming, forehooves clawing at where her lower jaw had been before a swipe of the makeshift weapon had removed it. The floor became slick with the blood of ponies, the dwindling numbers beginning to slip and fall, colliding with each other and hurting themselves before their attacker could get to them.

Amid all this chaos, Professor Lovedraft remained kneeling at the foot of the stairs, forelegs limp at his sides. His attention was gone from the room, gone from the killer massacring the ponies that had placed their trust and wellbeing in his hooves. His eyes were drawn up the stairs, to the corpse slowly descending them. It paused a moment at Sandy's body to lap up blood from what remained of her head, before looking up from her at

Lovedraft. Still there were no eyes in those black sockets, only orbs of yellow light. "Mercy."

Lovedraft climbed to his hooves, not for a moment taking his eyes off of the corpse that had begun staggering down the stairs toward him again. As it came farther out of the shadows into the light, he saw its body flowing with blood. The life fluid pulsed through veins, turning the grey skin a sickening shade of red, like a fresh scab. Worse still to Lovedraft was the smell of the creature, the metallic stench of the fresh blood dizzying.

"Mercy..."

"That was the last word you said before your death, wasn't it?" Lovedraft became aware then that all screaming had ceased. The soft clip-clop of hooves on stone approached him from behind. He did not have to turn to know that all of his expedition was dead, dead or gone. "I came here on secret orders from Princess Luna to destroy those statues up those stairs. I assume that's not happening now..."

"No..." The earth pony walked around from behind Lovedraft to in front of him. Before his eyes the image of her shifted, as if some sort of invisible veil was lifting. On her back a pair of wings appeared, and her blue hair lengthened and turned pink. Her teal eyes found his and she smirked. "Optical illusions are so rare, no defenses exist for them. All I need is a moment of eye contact, and to you I could look like Princess Celestia herself."

He nodded. "Of course. And you," he said, looking from her to Yellow Jacket above him up the stairs. "What are you waiting for?"

The corpse reared back, and then sprung forward, tackling Lovedraft to the ground. Its jaws bit down on his throat, allowing him a moment to scream in pain. Then a quick snap, a gurgled gasp, and he was gone. Death was instant but painful.

Fluttershy watched from the side as the corpse feasted on the late Professor Lovedraft's body. As she watched the yellow light swirled out from the skull's eye sockets, spreading over the corpse. It flashed to blinding levels, forcing her to shield her eyes with a hoof, before disappearing completely. When Fluttershy looked back, the walking corpse

was gone.

The earth pony dropped what remained of Lovedraft's corpse and began examining his newly-regenerated body. A rich blue coat of fur covered him from head to hoof where once there had been yellow. His black mane and tail were now yellow, much shorter and immaculately groomed. His eyes, once purple, were now light yellow. On each flank sat a familiar hourglass.

Yellow Jacket turned his gaze from himself to Fluttershy and smiled. "I live."

Chapter 1

Fourteen Months

The soft light of an autumn dawn shone through a window, falling square onto the bed of Twilight Sparkle. The purple pony groaned at this intrusion on her sleep, cursing whatever pony had been as horribly evil and cruel as to invent "early morning"; it was simply barbaric. She rolled over so that her back faced the light instead and her mind could be fooled with a few more minutes of darkness that it was still night. At first it worked, and Twilight's mind went back to the nonsensical refuge of the dream world.

But the light of dawn was persistent however, and where it could not drive Twilight from slumber it would coax her out.

"Mmm..." A smile grew on Twilight's face as a most pleasurable feeling began to spread over her back. It began as a light tingling, a gradual feeling of growing warmth as the sun's rays shone down on her and soaked into her back. She rolled onto her stomach, several pops ringing out as she stretched and cracked her spine. A sudden shift and the blankets were thrown off, her wings flaring to catch more of the sun's warmth. They were a royal blue, somewhere between the sky-blue of Rainbow Dash's coat and the purple of her own. Into the sunlight they spread, larger than a Pegasus's wings, yet not so large as to look awkward on her.

At the involuntary rising of her wings, Twilight sighed and cracked her eyes open. "Okay sun, you win..." she blinked as a yawn stretched her lips "win this time. But I'll be back, mark my words..." Another yawn, and Twilight was tucking her wings in and rolling to the side to climb out of bed. Her ears twitched at the clapping of hooves approaching her door. Without sparing a glance toward it she opened it with her magic. "Morning, Sweetie."

"Awww!" The young Unicorn stomped through the open doorway, a tray of covered in pancakes, syrup, and orange juice floating just ahead of her. She fixed Twilight with a little glare. "I was really thinking I was going to surprise you with breakfast this time! Dumb sun!"

Twilight chuckled, passing by Sweetie Belle on her way to the mirror and dresser on the other side of the room. "Sorry, I wanted to stay in bed, but my wings had other plans." Levitating a brush from the top of the dresser, she began to comb her mane into some resemblance of order. In the mirror she watched as Sweetie sulked over to the bed and set the breakfast tray down onto it. She smiled a little, noting as she always did in the morning how the young filly was really beginning to resemble her sister Rarity in looks. Although, she thought, if Ditzzy Doo was to be believed then Sweetie Belle had developed the same lanky proportions that Flu-

Twilight quickly forced that line of thought from her mind. Setting the brush back in its place she examined herself in the mirror a moment, before turning back around and trotting to her waiting breakfast. She leaned down and took a sniff at it, before smiling at Sweetie Belle. "It smells delicious. Thank you Sweetie. But what's the special occasion?"

"It's, it's nothing really." Sweetie Belle blushed at the praise, making the alicorn giggle. The Unicorn blushed harder and looked down, kicking a hoof idly against the wood floor. "I just...you know, wanted to say, um, thanks. It's been an entire year since you took me on as your assistant and apprentice, and I've just really learned a lot, I think." Twilight looked up from her meal at this. Finishing the bite of pancake in her mouth she swallowed and spoke. "Wow, it's been that long already? It just seems like yesterday when you came into the library for some song books and complimented me on my magic..."

"And then you offered to teach me a few things sometime," Sweetie Belle finished, smiling up at Twilight. "Only a little bit of flashy stuff for my shows you said, for when I hit it big."

Twilight returned Sweetie Belle's smile. Reaching forward she brushed a hoof through Sweetie Belle's mane. "I sure did, Sweetie. A whole year, well, I guess I managed to teach you a thing or two about flashiness. And you...you helped..." Twilight looked down into Sweetie Belle's olive-green eyes. In the early dawn light they shone brightly, like little diamonds. They were so different from, and yet so similar to...Twilight drew her hoof back from Sweetie Belle and returned to her breakfast. She would not allow herself to entertain those thoughts. They were nothing but trouble.

"So, Sweetie," Twilight ate an apple slice, then helped it down with a

gulp of orange juice. "From the size of this breakfast I'm guessing you have been up a while. What's the planned agenda for the day?" Leaving the job of planning the day's schedule to Sweetie Belle had been one of the filly's own ideas. She had figured it would be a useful skill to have when a big star. "Anything exciting?"

"Let me just check!" Sweetie Belle levitated a checklist and pen from the saddlebags she had started to wear everywhere. Twilight smiled at them, thinking back to the day she had given them to the filly. "Have breakfast," she looked up at Twilight's mostly-finished meal and nodded. "Check." She marked it off and went down. "Organize and re-shelve all the books Miss Sparkle left tossed around last night during another study binge," she giggled and smirked up at Twilight. "Check."

Twilight's cheeks lit into a blush. "There weren't that many books left out..." For some reason, a friendly little scolding comment like that was a lot more embarrassing to her when it came from a filly half her age than from a baby dragon.

To Twilight's relief, Sweetie Belle shrugged and continued on without further comment. "Well, that and cleaning those dishes take care of the morning stuff. For me anyway. When you can you need to head on over to the Mare's office. She wants to talk to you about tonight's festivities."

Twilight nodded in understanding to this. "Yes, of course." That day was indeed a special occasion, Twilight thought to herself. The most special event for the town of Ponyville since the Summer Sun Celebration it had hosted, so many years ago when she had come. It would be the 111th year anniversary of Ponyville's founding, though why this rather unusual date was significant had been a mystery to Twilight until a letter from Princess Celestia had answered it for her...

My dear Twilight Sparkle,

As you must know, ponies can be a joyously sentimental race, and the strangest things can hold significance. It was at the rather remarkable age of 110 that Marigold Took, founder and first mayor of Ponyville, passed away. All Equestrian towns great and small celebrate passing the age of their founder's death, as a sort of remembrance of them; that their town has prospered and their dream managed to at the least outlive them!

Hoping that you fully take part in this celebration as Ponyville's newest resident,

Princess Celestia

A smile crossed Twilight's face, a sad and defeated smile that made Sweetie's comments on Sweet Apple Acres' catering for the evening festivities die on her lips. She knew, deep inside, that the Princess's hope would come to nothing, as much as she had a good idea just what Mayor Mare was wanting to speak to her about.

"Twilight...are you okay?"

Twilight flinched and broke away from staring off into the distance. She looked back down at Sweetie and recognized the worry in her eyes. "Yes...yes of course I'm okay."

Sweetie continued looking up at Twilight, making the Pegacorn shift. "Teacher, are you okay?"

Twilight's eyes widened. Sweetie never called her that, in that tone of voice, unless...

Twilight looked behind her. Her wings were spread out, wisps of rainbow light floating off of them as the feathers bleached of color. Twilight snapped the wings back to her sides and began taking slow, steady breathes. The sound bled from the room around her, the bed, the walls, even Sweetie Belle fading into darkness. Twilight willed away all the memories of her life from birth to exactly that moment, and then brought to the surface other memories, from another life. Memories of two loving Pegasus parents, one white-coated and the other black-coated. She remembered her third birthday, how she couldn't manage to blow out the candles and her father did it with a flick of her wings. She remembered her first day of school, that it ended early when all the other students laughing at her eyes made fly home crying. Earning her cutie mark when she cheered up a crying filly named Fluttershy with a bubble blower. Entering the Equestrian military; leaving it after discovering her pregnancy; giving birth to her beloved child, naming the little Unicorn filly-

"Dinky." A mother's love rushed through Twilight's body and mind when she uttered this simple word. Not her own love, she recognized on an intrinsic level, another's, but it was this that gave the gift its power.

The room and Sweetie Belle returned to Twilight. She looked back and, breathing a sigh of relief at the sight, saw her wings had returned to their normal hue. Nothing of Queen Eos could be seen.

"Teacher, are you okay?"

Twilight looked back to Sweetie, her beloved student, and smiled. "Yes Sweetie Belle, I am okay. For now."

Twilight shut and locked the library door behind her, and once she had done that reached through it into the room beyond with her magic. A faint scraping sound could be heard through the thick wood, followed by a thunk as the chair she had dragged across the floor settled into place against the door, under the doorknob.

Beside her, Sweetie Belle sighed. "Is that really nece...necece...um, needed?"

"It's always better safe than sorry, Sweetie." Twilight threw up the hood of her purple cloak over her head, turned from the door, and looked around her at Ponyville. The place had healed well from the wound inflicted on it by fire, and if she had not been there to see it, Twilight might not have believed the fire had ever happened. For this, she was grateful.

It was late autumn, and while no snow had fallen yet she could feel that it would not be much longer before it did. The whole world was painted in shades of red and gold and brown, fallen leaves crunching beneath the hooves of ponies walking the streets and pathways. Excited chatter filled the air, many ponies talking in pairs or small groups about the momentous occasion before them, while other ponies, mostly Pegasi and Unicorns, worked to decorate the town. Somewhere in the distance came the laughter of children, fillies and colts chasing each other through the leaves, gathering them up into piles before diving into them and scattering leaves everywhere; pure child's fun.

"Ponyville, my home." Twilight took a deep breath of the crisp fall, before breaking into a swift trot. "Come along, Belle, we mustn't keep the mayor waiting."

Sweetie Belle giggled as Twilight assumed what she had affectionately dubbed the Pegacorn's "teacher voice", before trotting along behind her. Twilight smiled at the giggle, though it went unseen beneath her hood.

What did not go unseen, to neither Twilight nor Sweetie Belle, were the stares that fell on them as they passed by. Twilight could feel the other ponies stare at her as she walked the streets, a prickling on the back of her neck like a mosquito that just wouldn't leave her alone. Some were discreet, quick glances before returning to whatever they had been doing beforehand. Most were obvious, lingering looks that never quite ended even when something else forced their attention away from her. Discreet or obvious however, Twilight recognized and remembered the emotions behind the looks. She had helped put a stop to those same emotions when they had been directed toward somepony completely undeserving of them, Zecora.

Twilight let the stares pass unchallenged here. With her the unease, the expecting for a sudden burst of violence, was more than earned. And so she simply sank deeper into her hood and cloak, breathed a heavy sigh, and went on as if there were no stares at all. It was not until several more minutes had passed, and the town hall was within sight, that the moment she had been patiently waiting for since they had left the library came.

"Twilight, why do others look at you like that?"

Twilight came to a stop at a street corner, just across the road from her meeting with the mayor. She waited for her apprentice to sidle up next to her before speaking. "In what way do you mean, Belle?" She was still in her "teacher voice". "How do they look at me?"

Sweetie Belle frowned and looked around them. A few paces down the road Carrot Top was non-too-subtly hurrying away from the pair, pulling her carrot stand along behind her. A bit in the other direction and Caramel could be seen crossing the road to the sidewalk on the other side before continuing on. "They..." Twilight could almost hear the gears grinding in the

young Unicorn's head. "They look at you like..." Just beside them Snips and Snails strolled out of an alleyway, spotted Twilight and Sweetie Belle, and promptly turned around and went the way they came. Twilight swore she could see smoke coming from Sweetie's ears as she tried to work things out. "They look at you like...they're afraid of you."

Twilight looked up for a moment at the sun, noting from its movement in the sky that about five minutes had passed while she had allowed her apprentice to put her thoughts into words. She smiled at the improvement, though this went unseen beneath her hood. "That's right, Sweetie. They are afraid of me."

"But why?" Sweetie moved to in front of Twilight and looked up at her. "It all started just a bit after the town fire, but I don't understand. You saved everything from that fire. Did you do something after it?"

Twilight looked down at Sweetie Belle. Beneath her cloak her wings fluttered. "Rarity never told you anything?" Sweetie Belle shook her head and Twilight sighed. "I suppose that's for the best. Rarity is your sister and legal guardian; I won't overstep her authority on something like this."

Sweetie looked like she was about to say something, but Twilight held up a hoof to stop her. "I will tell you something though, if you promise not to ask me again, only your sister." Sweetie Belle nodded. Twilight put her hoof down, looked around them to check if anyone was listening, and then looked back at Sweetie. "I tried to take the good path, and made some very, very bad decisions. I messed a lot of things up."

Sweetie Belle frowned. "I remember...talking with Big Mac about something like this...I wanted to know how you made Rarity sad."

"And I'm sure Big Mac gave a good answer," Twilight said. "He is a good stallion. Anyways, I think we've kept the mayor waiting long enough, don't you think?"

Without waiting for Sweetie Belle's answer, which she knew would inevitably have been whole-hearted agreement, Twilight stepped around her and made for the town hall. Her thoughts dwelled not on the sound of hoofsteps on cobblestone behind her, telling her that Sweetie Belle had fallen back in line behind her, nor on the stares she still felt prickling the

back of her neck. She thought on the coming meeting with the mayor. Despite what she may or may not have told Sweetie Belle, she was not sure what the meeting could be about. It could be on the work she had done, helping organize the festivities that evening. It could be concerning the recent drake activity sighted to the west, past the southern borders of the Everfree Forest around the Drackenridge Mountains. Or, it could be concerning Sweetie Belle, who with the mayor's permission would be performing a live show for Ponyville.

At this thought, Twilight looked over her shoulder to Sweetie Belle behind her, allowing her mind to drift back to weeks previous. Ecstatic was the only fitting word to describe the young filly's reaction when, three weeks ago, Twilight had given her the news that mayor Mare wanted her to sing for the whole of Ponyville. Something like that would be an immense boost to a beginning singer's resume, and once Sweetie had woken up from fainting in excitement, she and Twilight had been practicing harder than ever to get her "show spells", as they had dubbed them, ready. Rarity, meanwhile, had even set to work on a new dress for her sister.

Then they were walking through the front door of town hall, working their way through crowds of ponies going about their daily business, and Twilight had no more time for reminiscing. The great hall around them was dressed up in orange and gold, the colors of autumn, and at the far end was set up a great stage, on which Sweetie Belle would sing later that day. It was on that stage Twilight spotted the mayor, giving out orders to ponies around her as final preparations were made.

Twilight trotted over to the stage. "Mayor Mare, I was told you wanted to speak with me?"

"Hm?" The older mare looked up from her clipboard to Twilight. When she saw who it was she gave a warm smile and trotted closer. "Oh, Ms. Sparkle, I am so glad you were able to make it. And you, young Sweetie," she looked to Sweetie Belle at Twilight's side. "I hope Ms. Sparkle has been teaching you well." Sweetie Belle nodded and the mayor chuckled. "Good. Are you excited about tonight?"

Sweetie Belle bounced in place and nodded so fast Twilight almost expected her head to fall off. "Yes yes yes! I can't wait until tonight, it's going to be so awesome! I've written a new song for the show and

everything!"

"Well, I for one can't wait to hear it! You are certainly a rising star for this town, Sweetie Belle, just like your sister!" The mayor smiled at Sweetie a moment longer, before turning back to Twilight. "And, Ms. Sparkle...how have you been?"

The simple care in that voice, concern from the governor to the one governed, for Twilight was more than enough to force away thoughts on the stares directed her way by the ponies outside. In return she lowered her hood from her head with a flick of her horn and smiled at the mayor. "I have been fine, Mayor. Busy, but fine."

"Good..." The mayor motioned her head, and Lyra and Bon-Bon, who had been nearby acting as her aides, turned and left together. She watched them go a moment before looking to Twilight. "I wanted to talk with you about this evening's festivities. The Cakes have produced a, simply put, magnificent cake for the event, and it is a tradition among small towns like Ponyville for the newest resident, who here is you, to cut and serve it."

Twilight knew what came next, knew the words before they came out of the older mare's mouth. In the mayor's eyes she could see the same recognition. And so Twilight closed her eyes and took a deep breath, and then opened them and smiled at the mayor. "Of course, ma'am. I would be honored to do that."

Most would have missed it, but her time spent at Princess Celestia's side greeting dignitaries and nobles in Canterlot had made Twilight quite perceptive in body language. The mayor flinched at Twilight's words, and for that Twilight liked her even more. "I know you would, Ms. Sparkle, however..." to her credit, the older mare did not look away. "I have to ask you to...not, participate this evening."

"What?!" Sweetie Belle jumped forward, coming halfway between Twilight and the mayor. "But you can't do that! Twilight Sparkle's an amazing Uni, I mean Pega, um, pony! She deserves-"

"Belle, silence." The filly instantly shut up at those two words, but she still turned and looked up at Twilight with a pair of watering eyes. Twilight sighed and shook her head, and then motioned back to her side. Sweetie

Belle huffed and moved there, and Twilight looked back at the mayor. "I kinda expected this as soon as you brought up the tradition. May I ask why I am being treated like this?"

For a moment, the mayor looked as if she would not answer. Removing her glasses she carefully cleaned them against the scruff of her collar, before putting them back on. Only then did she meet Twilight's eyes. "Several Ponyville citizens, well, more than several...many Ponyville citizens came to me yesterday night, demanding that somepony else serve the cake. Actually, they demanded you not be allowed to attend the festivities at all, but I put my hoof down on that. No citizen of this town shall be THAT mistreated while I'm the mayor."

Here she looked away for a moment, as if speaking more to herself. "On an unrelated note, I think I might want to start looking for a new job come next election..."

Twilight felt Sweetie Belle start to move forward again and shot her a look. The filly stopped cold, but still managed a glare at the mayor. "Well fine, if those big, dumb...um...dummies, wanna mess with my mentor like this, then fine! If she's not going to be at the festival, then I'M not going to be there either!"

"Belle-"

For the first time Twilight could remember in the entire year of their mentor/student relationship, Sweetie Belle interrupted her while she was using her teacher voice. The little Unicorn turned around and directed her gaze at Twilight now. "Nu-uh, I refuse to stand for this! Something you always tried to teach me is to never let my friends get pushed around her hurt if I can help it! Well, I can help it! Or...or I can't help it...um..."

Despite the situation, Twilight felt her lips curve into a smile. She chuckled and messed up Sweetie Belle's mane with a hoof. "Oh Sweetie, of all the lessons you could have actually remembered, you chose that one?"

Sweetie Belle blushed and suddenly lost her glare, looking away from both Twilight and the mayor. "Gosh, um, wh-when you put it that way, Twilight..."

"It sounds like 'ole egghead got herself a student that remembers all the important lessons."

All movement in the room seemed to stop, none there having so much as noticed the new arrival. Twilight's eyes widened in shock at the sound of that scratchy voice, a bit softer than she remembered but still oh so recognizable. Those words that were spoken so cheerfully echoed through her mind, and she could only turn around and look to the speaker. "Rainbow?!"

The sky-blue Pegasus stood there, her front two hooves on the edge of the platform and her rear hooves planted firmly on the floor, her wings beating lazy arcs to keep her balanced. Around her neck was woven a dull grey scarf, its surface shimmering as if woven with metal. "Hey Twilight, did ya miss me?"

A rush of affection that was only mostly Twilight's filled her body, and with a joyful cry she flared her wings and leapt for the Pegasus. Rainbow Dash reared back and caught her in her forelegs, and together the two went falling back onto the floor. There Twilight pulled Rainbow Dash into the tightest hug she could muster, laughing all the while. "Haha, oh my gosh, Dash! When did you get back? How was Gildedale, um, any bad weather on the way back or anything? Have you been to anypony else yet?"

Rainbow Dash laughed with Twilight and returned the embrace, making the purple Pegacorn blush. After several seconds Twilight reluctantly let her go, allowing Rainbow Dash to look at her and smile. "I just flew in this morning, I don't think I've been back for even an hour yet. Gildedale was great, if a lot colder and less gold-looking than last I went. But it's later in the year now than then, so duh. The weather was fine on the way back, even the mountains were clear of snowstorms, which surprised me. And yeah, I flew by Flu...Ditzy's place first, to drop off my stuff."

Her smile slimmed into a smirk, and Rainbow Dash chuckled at Twilight. "Ya know, I'm almost getting the impression that you missed me."

Twilight could feel the flush spreading over her face, to the point she thought if he got any hotter she might explode. Shaking her head, Twilight

chuckled right along with Rainbow Dash. "Yeah, well, maybe I have." Stepping to Rainbow Dash's left side, Twilight held a wing out and used it to give her a wing hug like she had seen other Pegasi do. "Maybe I missed you a lot."

Twilight's eyes and Rainbow Dash's met for a moment, a very brief moment. But in that moment Twilight saw that, yes, the feeling was mutual. Then the very brief moment was over, and Rainbow Dash was pulling away from her and jumping up onto the stage. Twilight followed her up and watched the Pegasus give a little hug to Sweetie Belle before turning to the mayor. The two began speaking to each other, while Sweetie Belle turned and trotted over to Twilight.

"So, should I, um..."

Twilight jumped at Sweetie Belle's voice, focused as she had been on Rainbow Dash and the mayor's conversation, and looked down at the filly. "Yeah, yeah. Go on to the Carousel Boutique and tell Rarity I want to meet with her for a late brunch, the usual place. Then go meet up with Apple Bloom and Scootaloo and make sure you have tonight's routine perfect. And YES," Twilight said, holding a hoof up as Sweetie Belle opened her mouth to speak, "you WILL be performing tonight, no ifs, ands, or buts about it."

Right then and there, Sweetie Belle looked like she could burst out bawling. Twilight smiled and, kneeling down, pulled her apprentice into a hug. "Sweetie, I know you want to help me, and I know your heart is in the right place. But please, for me and your sister, perform tonight, okay? And not just perform, but really give it your all." A snuffle came from against her shoulder, followed by a mumbled acknowledgment. Twilight's smile softened as she pulled away a bit and looked into Sweetie Belle's eyes. "Hey, come on, cheer up. Just imagine the looks on the faces of all those neighsayers when my number one assistant blows them away with her singing. Then they can feel bad for this, right?"

This time Sweetie Belle giggled, nodding her head as she walked around Twilight and began walking for the door. "Well gee Twilight, I hadn't thought of it like that. I'll give them the performance of a life-" Thump. "Forgot we were on a stage...ow...I'm okay..."

Twilight rolled her eyes, thought that some things never changed, and then turned back to Rainbow Dash and the mayor. The conversation, almost an argument, was just breaking up, and Twilight sighed as the Pegasus stomped towards her. "No luck?"

Rainbow Dash shook her head, sending her mane flying. Twilight noted that she had grown it out some during her extended trip to Gildedale. "As much luck as a rookie on his first cloud-clearing assignment."

The mayor walked over and clarified. "I'm sorry Ms. Sparkle, but a majority of the town got together and signed a petition for keeping you from the festival. Here," she pulled a roll of paper from a bag hanging from her side and offered it to Twilight. "They all signed their names, it is without a doubt a majority. Though if it makes you feel any better, it's only just barely a majority."

Twilight Sparkle read through the names on the petition, the weight on her shoulders growing heavier and heavier with every pony she recognized. The Cakes were on it, which didn't surprise her; they probably blamed her for Pinkie Pie's leaving. There were also Carrot Top and Roseluck; this also didn't surprise her, as with Fluttershy's sudden disappearance much of the local wildlife had grown rather out of control for a while. Twilight could still remember Carrot Top's screams of horror as Angel led an army of rabbits into her garden...

Twilight returned the petition to the mayor and sighed. Almost unconsciously she drew her hood back over her head. "Well, it is about as I expected. Thank you mayor, for bringing this to me gently. And...for your name not being on here."

The older mare gave a small, sad smile. "Of course, Ms. Sparkle. It would be simply a travesty of my office to allow public sentiment to sway me from what I feel in my heart to be right and wrong. You are a fine mare, Ms. Sparkle."

"Yes...of course." Twilight turned from the mayor to the Pegasus beside her. Rainbow Dash was hovering upside down, seemingly making a game of flicking her mane around and trying to catch it in her hooves. Despite the most recent event, Twilight chuckled. "You ready to get going? Rarity's probably half-way to the café by now."

Rainbow Dash flipped right-side up and grinned a grin at Twilight that she honestly never thought ever be directed towards her. "I thought you'd never ask! Except..." Rainbow Dash gave her wings and extra hard flap and barrel-rolled above Twilight to her other side, lifting the Pegacorn's cloak up so that her wings were better exposed. "How 'bout we make it a race?"

Twilight Sparkle grinned.

Twilight Sparkle touched down in front of the Ponyville café just behind Rainbow Dash, who at that moment was attracting most of the outdoor diners' attention with a little victory dance. Twilight herself simply sat back on her haunches to catch her breath, the thought coming to her mind that she had never seen the rainbow-maned Pegasus ever have to do the same.

"Rainbow Dash, I think this will...be the...last time we race..."

Rainbow Dash stopped her dancing and chuckled, turning back to look at Twilight. Now Twilight was sure of it, Rainbow Dash didn't look tired or out of breath at all. "Heh, no worries, Twilight. The best flyer in all of Equestria gets that reaction all the time. Though you didn't do too bad, for an egghead."

"Oh dear Celestia, now she's referring to herself in the third person! Oh how much larger can your ego grow, Rainbow Dash?"

Twilight and Rainbow Dash looked to the direction of the voice. There at a table just a few feet away from them, under the shade of an umbrella and nursing a glass of carbonated raspberry juice, sat Rarity, with two more glasses set in front of the table's other chairs. When they were both looking at her she smiled and waved a hoof. "Hello darlings!"

"Rarity!" Twilight stumbled in the wake of air left by Rainbow Dash as she sped forward toward Rarity. Instead of bowling the ivory Unicorn over like Twilight, and every other remaining patron at the café, was expecting however, Rainbow Dash slid to a stop just as quickly as she had taken off

running and simply pulled Rarity into a hug with her forehooves. "I missed you sooo much! Traveling around Gildedale wasn't nearly as fun without you or Applejack."

"I can imagine any kind of trip being less fun when it lacks the kind of elegance that only I can bring." Rarity gave a small, polite titter as she returned Rainbow Dash's hug. Then she pulled away and looked the Pegasus over. "Why, Rainbow Dash, now that I really look at you I hardly recognize you!"

Rainbow Dash shrugged and took a seat at Rarity's table. Twilight took the third seat a moment later, content for the moment to let the others speak. "Yeah, well, running and working with the Dale Guard is bound to put a little muscle on your bones, hehe. Although it all got a little awkward when Bright Voice made his attraction, um, obvious to me."

"Oh, I can imagine!" Rarity sighed theatrically, putting a hoof to her forehead and leaning back in her chair. "Acting as Princess Celestia and Luna's personal representative to the other pony nations must be such an incredible life! Traveling the world, seeing all sorts of fantastic sights, trying all kinds of exotic foods!"

"Nine months of it and I already hate the job." Rainbow Dash released her own sigh, dramatically less theatrical than Rarity's, and took a gulp of her raspberry juice. "Being the Avatar of the Rainbow of Light sucks. Sure it's cool and stuff getting to check up on old acquaintances like Ashtail and Shield Maiden, or Niles Nigellus, or even old Lady Falalauria, even if she did seem really busy with something..." Rainbow Dash drifted off for a moment, her eyes seeming to be looking somewhere else to Twilight. Then she snapped back to the present. "But what I mean is, all this traveling keeps me away from the things that really matter to me. The, well, the ponies that really matter, and stuff..."

Both Twilight and Rarity smiled. Reaching out they each took one of Rainbow Dash's forehooves in their own. "We missed you too, darling," Rarity said. Then Rarity smirked. "And so has Ditzy."

A blazing blush consumed Rainbow Dash's face at these words, causing Rarity to break out into her trademark elegant titter, while Twilight just smiled. "Yeah," Rainbow Dash mumbled, sinking further into her chair.

"She kinda showed that to me this morning..."

Now it was Twilight and Rarity's turn to blush. Noticing the looks on their faces, Rainbow Dash chuckled and sat back up in her chair. "Anyways, I'm back now. How have things been in Ponyville while I was gone?"

"Actually, they have been perfectly fine," responded Rarity. "Ditzy and little Dinky together are almost as good with animals as Fluttershy was, so we haven't had any trouble with them lately. Diamond Dog activity in the old quarries has increased though, and there have been sightings of Drakes along the edges of the Everfree."

"Drakes?" Rarity nodded, and a frown crossed Rainbow Dash's face. "Those guys are almost never seen this far into pony territory. Heck, to get this close to a place like Ponyville they would've had to cross the outer edges of the dragon kingdom!"

"Hm, that is strange." Rarity took a sip of her juice, before shrugging. "Well, let those ugly, overgrown lizards do...whatever it is ugly, overgrown lizards do. They're in that rotten Everfree, and we are here. And besides" Rarity smirked and stood up from her chair, striking a dramatic pose Twilight thought would have looked more suited for Rainbow Dash. "If they try to start trouble, those ruffians will have to contend with the Knights of Equestria!"

Twilight and Rainbow Dash shared a look on this. "When did she get so gung-ho about all this knight stuff," asked Rainbow Dash.

"Big Macintosh started writing a book," Twilight responded, her focus remaining on the ivory Unicorn beside her starting some sort of meandering soliloquy on possible adventures they could go on. "He compared it to both those steamy adventure 'novels' she reads, and the quest you, she, and Applejack went on to the Archback Mountains, and for whatever reason she's been itching to go on another adventure like that ever since." She motioned a hoof towards Rarity. "It's kinda adorable, as long as she's not talking your ear off about it."

"Huh..." Rainbow Dash looked between Twilight and Rarity a few times, a sort of embarrassed frown growing on her face. She eventually settled back on Twilight. "Speaking of...how is Applejack doing, anyway?"

That stopped Rarity's shenanigans. Twilight sunk back into her hood, not allowing herself to look back into those rose eyes looking into her. "Applejack is..." Twilight worked the next few words around in her mouth, figuring out what was the best way to say it. "Applejack is better. She's doing better."

"The limp is almost gone," Rarity added, flinching as Rainbow Dash fixed her gaze on her. "I mean, it's barely noticeable...and the other day, I think she came this close to telling me a little white lie." Rarity held her forehooves about an inch apart to show what she meant.

A moment more of staring, and Rainbow Dash sighed and looked away from Rarity, back to the table. "I just wish she would go ahead and tell us what happened that day..."

"Probably something else the ponies of Ponyville would resent me for," Twilight muttered to herself, though it was loud enough for the others at the table to hear quite well.

Rarity perked up. "Oh, that reminds me." She looked over to Twilight. "Sweetie Belle told me what happened with the mayor this morning. Personal feelings aside, this simply doesn't feel right to me."

Twilight shrugged. "It's fine, Rarity. I mean," she motioned to around them. While they had been talking, all the rest of the outdoor tables had been vacated, leaving the three alone out in the street. "They have every right to treat me like this. No, even worse is how they should treat me. Full justice hasn't exactly been visited upon me yet, and they're resentful."

"Well I don't get it," said Rainbow Dash. "They accepted Princess Luna back with open hooves, and she threatened to bring about eternal night!"

Twilight looked to Rainbow Dash and lowered her hood, allowing the Pegasus and the Unicorn with her to fully see her. "Rainbow Dash, which would hurt more to you, getting betrayed and attacked by somepony you don't know at all, or somepony you have known for years, and have accepted as part of your community?"

"The pony I know, of course."

Twilight nodded. "Exactly. None of the ponies of Ponyville knew Princess Luna, so it wasn't personal when she did what she did. She was just a stranger who they had a new chance to get to know. It's different with me though. They might not know all the details of what I did, or why, but what they do know is enough. They know a trusted member of their society, somepony looked up to and respected, firebombed Canterlot and drove half her friends away."

Silence fell on the table. Rainbow Dash fidgeted in her seat, her wings tucked close to her sides. Rarity downed the rest of her raspberry juice, breaking into a coughing fit as some of it went down the wrong pipe. Twilight Sparkle looked away, away from her friends and the café to somewhere else. Some place that wasn't there. "I made things personal, and those kinds of wounds leave scars that never heal."

"Twilight..." Rainbow Dash leaned across the table and placed a hoof on Twilight's right shoulder. "We've already said a hundred times, we have forgiven you. I forgive you, and I don't hate you." Rarity remained silent on this.

Twilight sighed, looking over at Rainbow Dash, yet her eyes remained distant. "You've forgiven," she said, "but you can never forget."

"Eeeeeyah!" A pair of massive rear hooves shot out, impacting against the trunk of the apple tree with a deep, satisfying thunk. Green apples fell from the quivering branches, dropping down like rain into the several barrels set out under them. A few apples missed their baskets, hitting the gently sloping ground and rolling down, down to the bottom of the short hill to where the ground evened out. There they rested, waiting to be picked up by any pony wandering by.

Big Mac looked over his shoulder at the now empty tree, and after a moment nodded in satisfaction. Turning back he looked across the short yard to the front of the Sweet Apple Acres farmhouse. There Granny Smith sat in her rocking chair, doing some needlework on a ripped couch cushion. "That's the last of 'em, Granny!"

The ancient earth pony looked up from her work to Big Mac. "Hm? You

sure that's the last one?"

Big Mac looked around and did a quick scan of the surrounding apple orchard. He silently counted each and every tree, looking for any hints of red or green or gold amid the sea of brown. When he saw none he nodded his head and looked back to Granny Smith. "Eyup. The final tree for this year's crop has just been bucked."

"Good," spoke up Applejack, limping out the front door of the farmhouse. Crossing the yard she went over to where her brother stood and began collecting the baskets of apples. "Tomorrow we can start work on prepping the ground for next year's harvest. Maybe we'll manage ta cut some time off Winter Wrap Up next go-round." In the late morning light Big Mac could clearly see the crisscross of scars covering much of her right flank, though they had faded a good deal recently.

Big Mac nodded, deciding not to comment any on how Applejack really wasn't supposed to be doing any kind of heavy work like this, and set to work helping her with carrying the baskets to the cellar. Between the two of them it was a quick and easy job, even with Applejack's limp, and soon enough he was shutting the cellar door and putting its lock in place. The sound of retreating hoofsteps made him look up and see Applejack limping away to town. "Hey sis, you okay?"

Applejack stopped. She did not look back at him as he expected, but rather up into the clear blue sky. Being behind her, Big Mac could not see any of her face, but something about her stance, how she held herself, told him that she was smiling. And for some reason, this made him want to smile too.

"Big Mac," Applejack said to him. "When I was fixin' breakfast this morning, I saw a rainbow through the window." She looked over her shoulder at him, and now he could see her smile, not just hear it in her voice. "She's back, big brother. Rainbow Dash's back."

Big Mac walked over to his sister and wrapped a foreleg over her shoulders in a hug. His gaze went out to Ponyville, from where he could almost feel the excitement emanating. "Well then," he said, "I reckon tonight's going ta be a night to remember."

Chapter 2

A Night to Remember

Dusk descended onto Ponyville, bringing with it a crisp, chill breeze that sent tree branches shaking and ponies running for their scarves and hats. As the light of day faded away lanterns were lit along the streets and on the buildings, first in ones and twos, and then as the darkness advanced in bunches that sent the shadows fleeing. Soon the whole of the town was lit up, a beacon of light for wanderers and weary ponies on the road that matched the stars above.

With the glow of lantern light came the sound of voices on the wind. There was the laughter of fillies and colts running about, playing their games and having their fun at the many booths set up within the town square. There were the soft verbal caresses and whispered admissions of young lovers on benches, sharing the peace of the night and the excitement in the air. There was the excited chattering of grown mares and stallions walking about, gossiping to themselves and any who'd care to listen about the momentous occasion their small town had achieved. There was the dignified small-talk of the few elderly in the town, reminiscing of years gone by and things long lost. And above it all yet not above it; mixed in with it, pulling the disparate noises together into one unplanned yet wondrous song, were the heavy synths and rolling melodies of Vinyl Scratch echoing through speakers set up all through the town.

From a hill just on the outskirts of Ponyville, between it and the Everfree Forest, Rainbow Dash sat and looked out over the town; her town, her responsibility, in fact if not in title. To any random pony who happened to look up that hill and see her, they would perceive a silent guardian, a watchful protector, a mare ready to launch forward in a moment's notice at the slightest sign of trouble. Yet though those ponies looking up at her from a distance might technically be correct, that night her attentions were focused on something rather different than the fate of the town or its inhabitants.

"Mmm...ahhh, ahh..." Rainbow Dash pressed deeper into the kiss, her tongue sliding out and caressing the delicate lips of the Pegasus beside

her. Ditzzy Doo moaned in response to this, her wings almost painfully straight out as her hooves rubbed and pressed up and down the length of Rainbow Dash's back, curling themselves into those beautiful, smooth as silk rainbow tresses. Ditzzy's moaning grew louder as Dash's forehooves began stroking along her wings, ruffling the feathers in a way she knew the grey Pegasus loved, even if it was a pain to fix afterwards. The thought of THAT activity was enough to send both Pegasi into shivers.

"Mmm..." Rainbow Dash broke the kiss and leaned away some from the pony in her forelegs, looking at Ditzzy's eyes. They were the brightest, purest gold she had ever seen, rivaling even the endless fields of Gildedale she had run and flown through in her travels. Yet trying to look into those eyes as she was at that moment also filled her with so much pain it was almost unbearable. For she couldn't look into them, not really, just as she knew without being told that Ditzzy could not, would not ever be able to focus entirely onto her. Those wobbly eyes symbolized everything they had gone through, and all the pain they would endure.

Anger and resentment flared to life in Rainbow Dash's heart, the thought of Twilight flitting through her mind. Yet she crushed these thoughts and feelings down, refusing to allow them to reach her eyes.

Instead she smiled at Ditzzy and brushed her left forehoof across her cheek. "You're so beautiful tonight." And that was the truth. Ditzzy wore a sleeveless turquoise dress with gold trimming, similar in style to the dress Rainbow Dash had worn to the Grand Galloping Gala, the dress she wore that evening, at Rarity's insistence. The grey Pegasus had also tied her mane up into a short, spiky ponytail that reminded Rainbow Dash of something she couldn't put her hoof on. "Just beautiful."

Ditzzy smiled, a light blush covering her cheeks at Rainbow Dash's words. Leaning forward she pressed her muzzle against Rainbow Dash's cheek in a short, loving kiss, before pulling away. Then her face scrunched up in effort. "Rainbow in the sky houseplants...money honey dropped staircase I..." Her face relaxed, the beginning of tears glistening in her eyes. "Sorry...so sorry..."

Rainbow Dash said nothing, only pulling Ditzzy into a hug. Her hooves caressed over Ditzzy's back, her head moving to nuzzle her cheek to cheek. "It's okay, it's okay, it's okay. Ditzzy, it's okay. It doesn't matter to me. You

could not be able to talk at all and I wouldn't care any less about you."

Ditzy sniffled, squeezing Rainbow Dash close. "Sarsaparilla matters to the little muffin...bad eggs say yellow turnips, make little muffin...little muffin asparagus me."

Rainbow Dash had stopped her caressing at this. Pulling away and letting her forelegs drop to the ground she looked at Ditzy. She frowned as she interpreted those words. "Dinky...she's become embarrassed, no...a bunch of other kids have made Dinky be embarrassed of you?" Ditzy nodded and Rainbow Dash stood up. "Well that's just not right. I'm gonna go on down to town right now and find that filly."

"Rainbow, little muffin-"

"Ditzy," Rainbow Dash interrupted. Reaching a hoof down she helped Ditzy to her hooves, before looking her as straight in the eyes as she could. "Ditzy, somepony's gotta set that filly's ideas straight before they get stuck that way. Besides, no way am I going to let anypony get away with disrespecting the mare I lo...loooo...really like." Rainbow Dash grinned. "Even if it is her daughter."

That oh-so familiar blush colored Ditzy's cheeks, making Rainbow Dash laugh. Together the pair of Pegasi launched themselves into the air, ascending five, 10, 20, 40 feet up into the night sky before corkscrewing wing-to-wing into a dive that had them rocketing off toward the bright lights and sounds of Ponyville.

As Rainbow Dash and Ditzy Doo flew away, the woods of the Everfree Forest behind them rustled. A pair of sulfurous yellow eyes disappeared as the diamond dog hidden within the trees turned and began running deeper into the dark forest, to the rest of the raiding party it belonged to. This particular diamond dog, and the rest of its group, was thinner than the average diamond dog soldier, yet just as tall, built more for quick strikes and rapid dodges than the barreling tactics of its cannon fodder brethren. On its body it wore a mail hauberk, over which went a black surcoat emblazoned with a red wolf skull and tied tight around the waist with a black leather belt. A pair of leather and splint-mail vambraces covered its forearms, with similar armor over its shins. A foot and a half broadsword

hung from its belt, scabbard less and the blade colored a rusty red from lack of cleaning after use.

The forest was unnaturally silent that night, filled with neither the song of birds, nor the cry of cockatrices, nor even the wild roars of the manticore, out searching for its next meal. It was as if the whole forest sensed within itself the presence of a new predator, a predator far fiercer and more bloodthirsty than any it had ever contained in the thousands of years of its life. Somewhere away in her forest cabin, Zecora hastily boarded up her windows and barricaded her door, being sure to snuff out all lights as she whispered her native country's chants of protection. Deep in his river Steven Magnet stayed at the bottom, gazing fearfully up through the many yards of water to the world above him, ready to bolt upstream at the hint of a wolfen shadow. The green dragon Grougaluragran hunkered down in his cave, yellow eyes fixed upon the entrance and smoke curling from his nostrils. Beside him a letter disappeared in a wisp of green fire and flew away.

Minutes passed as the diamond dog ran through the woods, silent as the woods around it. It paid little heed to the quietness of the forest, only forcing itself faster and faster back to its dread master. Finally, it burst from the trees into a large clearing. Here another two dozen diamond dogs in matching armor milled about around several fires, sharpening their swords and axes with whetstones or feasting on whatever the hunters had gathered. Anticipation filled the air, bloodlust rolling off the beasts in waves. The first diamond dog, a scout, ignored all this as he moved at a slightly slower pace to the far edge of camp, where the only piece of equipment, a folding massive folding chair made of bone, more like a throne, had been set up.

"My lord," the diamond dog said, kneeling down in front of the throne and pressing his forehead to the soft earth of the forest floor. All activity in the camp ceased, the group turning to watch. "My lord, it is as you said. The ponies are all gathered together in the town square and hall. More importantly, there are no guards of any kind posted. They seem to place all their trust in their champions."

Silence arose as the scout finished his report, looking up from the ground to his lord and commander. Though several fires were lit within the camp, none of the light reached the figure in the throne, except for its eyes,

eyes which shone a brilliant green, like cat eyes. His fur was darker grey than the fur of the other diamond dogs, almost black. Instead of the black and red surcoat of his soldiers, he wore a multi-sectioned steel cuirass, colored black with ash and with the same red wolf skull painted on with something that was most definitely not red paint. Black spaulders covered his shoulders, full greaves his lower legs, and steel vambraces etched with gold his forearms. Across his lap sat a deadly battle-axe. Its wooden haft was a foot and a half long and bounded with thick brown leather, into which were etched words in the tongue of the wolf people. Its head was broad and flat, solid steel inlaid with silver forming spells of power and protection. Of all the weapons in the camp, it was the only one to show no signs of age or rust.

He was Nero, the Diamond Huntswolf, with his axe Blood Drinker.

"My...my lord?" The scout looked from the Wolf, brooding in thought on his throne, to several of the diamond dogs around them, before looking back. No change had come over his master's expression, so the scout gulped and tried again. "My lord, the ponies are defenseless, now is surely the time to-"

Before another word could pass from the scout's muzzle Nero shifted in his throne. Right arm lashing out faster than anyone there could perceive, he grabbed hold of the diamond dog scout's head and squeezed. The scout's life ended with one quick, pained whimper, many of the other dogs turning away at the squelching noise that followed. Then came a thump and clatter, as the dead body slumped to the ground and its sword bounced against its armor.

Nero gripped the shaft of his battle-axe with his left hand and stood up from his throne, letting the blood and brain matter drip off the claws of his right hand to the ground below. The sound of his pawsteps on the forest floor were as the beating of the drums of war, and as he advanced through the camp one by one his soldiers left what they were doing and joined in behind their leader, their lord. In the shadows of the firelight he stood over them all, a towering behemoth as great to them, and all the rest of the diamond dog tribes, as Celestia was to her little ponies. Low growling began to come from them, the promise of bloodshed in his presence working them into a berserker fever.

Then, as Nero reached the edge of the camp closest to Ponyville, he stopped, and the other diamond dogs stopped with him. He turned to look at them over his shoulder, raised Blood Drinker up over his head, and let loose a growl that made the fur on the back of their necks rise.

"Tonight," he said, "we shall feast on pony-flesh."

"And so there I was, standing at the mountaintop, a stiff cold breeze on my back and my very best friends to my sides. The world snake towered over us like something out of the darkest, most dreadful myths! It was miles and miles of scales the size of Ursa Minors, and fangs long enough to cleave Canterlot in two! Its four eyes locked onto us, filled with hate and bloodlust!"

Rarity made a sudden lunging motion and the gaggle of fillies and colts gathered in front of her all screamed and giggled. A few parents of the foals, also listening with rapt attention to the story of the "Quest of the Three" jumped as well, and Caramel simply bolted from the whole gathering. A smile crossed Rarity's face at these reactions, just the ones she had been aiming for. Settling back into her seat the Unicorn swept her gaze over the small gathering, before resuming her story.

"And so, the beneviolet was right on top of that foul beast's head, wedged between two ridges like some weird goal in the world's most dangerous obstacle course. But no dumb serpent will ever get the better of an Equestrian pony. And certainly none as fabulous as I, as solid and dependable as Applejack, and as daring Rainbow Dash!" A wild chorus of cheers followed this. "So I hatched us simply the most brilliant plan, if I may be so bold to say. First, I had Rainbow Dash-

Rarity's story continued, but Twilight Sparkle stopped listening to it. She had heard that tale many times before, had played a vital role in it near the beginning and the end, but for the moment at least she felt no desire for any more such stories. Something in the air told her the time for telling stories and the time for listening to them would soon be over. Not that she had the heart to tell Rarity this.

Standing up from her seat at the very back of the group listening to

Rarity, Twilight pulled her cloak close to her body and began to walk through the town square, lit up with lanterns and booths. She had no particular destination in mind so she just wandered, looking over any booths that caught her interest. Many ponies had come from all across Equestria for this celebration, so the best that could be said was that there was plenty of variety. There were food stands, and game stands, and stands seemingly devoted, as far as Twilight could tell, to the selling of the most inane, useless trinkets bits could buy.

It was the booths for this last kind of item that caught Twilight's curiosity the most, even though it was a morbid curiosity. There were plain wooden sticks that purported to allow any kind of pony to use magic. There were elixirs and salves, claiming to cure everything from horn rot to the common cold. There were jewels reportedly from the throne room of the dragon king Malachite, and pearls supposedly from the realms of the sea-ponies. Twilight scoffed at this last one. She had met several sea-ponies during her time in Canterlot with Princess Celestia, and they most certainly did not create pearls. Although, she thought to herself, she had never really pried into the matter...

A sudden flash of light and a sharp screeching noise from somewhere behind Twilight made her look up at the night sky. She did this just in time, as a multitude of fireworks burst into light and color above the town. Red and gold and blue and green filled the sky, momentarily overpowering the brightness of the lanterns below. A chorus of excited and wonder-filled exclamations arose from the town, Twilight no exception. She had not seen such a fantastic display since the night she and her friends had attended the Grand Galloping Gala. No, she thought, it was an even grander display above her then there was that evening so long ago. There was far more heart and simple joy put into these fireworks.

Twilight continued looking up, watching fireworks continue to explode above her. As she watched, a soft smile slowly grew on her face as she felt a familiar presence, one that she had not felt for many months, slide up next to her. "Well look at that, Sparkle, the sky's looking just about like you. All bright and fiery and...sparkly. That last bit sounded better in my head."

Twilight let out a giggle as she turned her head and looked at the earth pony stallion beside her. "Good evening, Doctor. You still have your way with words I..." Her words died on her lips as she looked Doctor Whoof

over. He looked the same as he always did, for the most part. He still wore that same tweed jacket, though the leather elbow patches seemed a bit more worn than they had been. His gold watch was still in place, as was that ridiculous yet strangely fitting red bow tie. But atop his head...

Twilight blinked and gave her head a short shake. "Right then, I have questions, but number one is this; what in the name of sanity have you got on your head?"

Doctor Whoof grinned and shot a wink at Twilight. "It's a fez, I wear a fez now." He winked again and reached a forehoof up, adjusting the red, conical hat perched atop his messily combed mane. "Fezzes are cool."

Almost before he had finished speaking a rainbow blur whipped by overhead. A pair of blue forehooves grabbed the fez from Doctor Whoof's head, followed by Rainbow Dash twisting around in a 360 degree spin and throwing it into the night sky. "Pull!" Rainbow Dash shouted.

Twilight lit up her horn. A bolt of red lightning shot from the end, blowing up the fez before it could even reach the end of its arc and begin its downward descent. A few smoldering tatters fell to the cobblestone ground, a few passing foals cheered at what they thought to be another show, and then that was that.

Twilight smiled innocently as Doctor Whoof looked from her to the smoking remains of his fez, over to Rainbow Dash as she settled down onto the ground, followed a moment later by Ditzzy Doo with a giggling Dinky clinging to her back, and then finally looking back to Twilight and her smile. He tried to frown, but as far as Twilight could see his eyes simply weren't in it. "Any of you make a move for the bow tie, and it'll be the worst day of your lives."

"We'll be sure to remember that." Twilight suddenly moved forward and, to the surprise of all there, especially herself, embraced Doctor Whoof in a tight hug, nuzzling her cheek to his. "I really missed you, you dang stallion."

A moment passed, and then Doctor Whoof was returning the hug, a rather dorky grin crossing his face. "Well, well uh, I missed you too. Because that's pretty much, pretty much what friends do whenever they're not together..." his smile calmed down, and over Twilight's shoulder he

looked to Rainbow Dash, Ditzzy, and Dinky. "I missed all of you a great deal. Traveling alone is no fun."

"Heh, tell me about it," responded Rainbow Dash. "Egghead and Beauty Queen told me how you went traveling yourself a couple months after I did. So what's a mad stallion with a box like you been up to all that time?"

Doctor Whoof and Twilight broke the hug, and he turned to look at Rainbow Dash and the others. "Ah, now that is a very good question. I can't wait to tell you. It involves three Pronghorns, the queen of the desert, and an overcooked croissant. Also I can never go back to Camel-lot."

Twilight blinked and shared a look with an equally as perplexed Rainbow Dash. "Now this I've got to hear."

"Excellent! But first..." he checked his watch. "I believe we have a concert to catch! Come along Sparkle, Dash, Doo, and...um...second Doo."

Twilight watched Doctor Whoof trot off to the town hall, Ditzzy and Dinky following him close behind just as the mayor's voice rang out over the speakers, announcing that Sweetie Belle's show would be starting in three minutes. It was good seeing him again, she thought. He was easily as smart as her, probably smarter, and could be as easily excitable as Pinkie Pie had been, plus he was so... "Hey Rainbow Dash? What was that word you used to describe me once?"

"Hm?" Rainbow Dash wandered over to Twilight, nudging her against the shoulder to get her moving. Twilight rolled her eyes but obliged, and the pair swiftly joined the crowd filing into the town hall. Several ponies they passed shot Twilight dirty looks, but both Twilight and Rainbow Dash ignored them. As they went along Rainbow Dash followed Twilight's gaze, finding her watching Doctor Whoof. Rainbow Dash snickered. "Oh, does Twilight find the good doctor adorkable?"

Twilight could almost feel the heat as her cheeks lit up in a blush, and she quickly looked away from Doctor Whoof with the pretense of looking for a place to stand. They were in the town hall now, and she hoped to get somewhere near the front so that Sweetie Belle could easily see her. "Well, well uh...maybe I do. A little." Rainbow Dash snorted, prompting Twilight to sigh. "Okay fine, yes. He's just so...what you said. Adorkable. Like a big

dork but all...it's that darn bow tie!"

Rainbow Dash let out a raucous bark of laughter, making several nearby ponies jump and look over at them in alarm. Twilight's blush deepened, to her utter embarrassment, but before any more could be said on the matter the sight of a white hoof waving in the air caught both hers and Rainbow Dash's attention. They broke into a trot in that direction, and once they got close enough they saw it to be Rarity. Standing with her were Big Macintosh, Applejack, Doctor Whoof, and Ditzy and Dinky Doo.

"I saved us all some space," said Rarity, indicating with the hoof she had been waving with to an empty space just beside her, enough for two or three ponies. Looking around Twilight noticed that they were right at the front of the crowd, just barely off the stage themselves. With this in mind she turned to thank Rarity, before a shake of the ivory Unicorn's head made her stop. "No no, no need to thank me. It is simply what friends are for. Besides, I somewhat doubt Sweetie Belle would be very comfortable performing if her mentor wasn't there to cheer her on."

"Yes, I suppose you're right." Twilight shared a silent smile with Rarity for a small moment, before she turned to face the stage and sat down on her haunches. She was just in time too, as not a moment later the lights throughout the hall dimmed, followed by several spotlights flicking on and aiming toward the purple velvet drapes hiding the half of the stage further from the crowd.

Doctor Whoof sat down beside Twilight, sharing a quick smile with her before looking back to the stage. "Well, this is nice," he said, loud enough for all of them to hear. "All the Knights of Equestria, the Elements of Balance, finally all together again. And now, SOMETHING is probably going to happen."

"Golly," Twilight heard Applejack whisper somewhere down the line of friends. "I hope this ain't a repeat of the last concert those three fillies tried to give."

Twilight chuckled to herself. Unlike her and Rarity, Applejack and the others had no idea just what was coming.

Around the crowd and over the stage, speakers crackled to life. "Fillies

and gentle colts," said the mayor's voice. The waiting ponies ceased any conversations and focused on the stage, eager for the show to start. "We have gathered here..."

Sweetie stood just behind the curtain, taking deep, lingering breathes to steady herself for what was to come. She understood that her whole life for the past 14 months, ever since she had discovered her special talent comforting her sister Rarity through music, had been leading up to this moment.

"Fillies and gentlecolts, we have gathered here to celebrate a momentous occasion, for when our humble town grows older than its great founder!"

Cheers and mild applause drifted through the curtain to Sweetie Belle following the mayor's words. She would have stomped her hooves in applause herself, if she didn't feel like it would make her stomach do back flips. As it was, she was beginning to think she had accidentally swallowed a butterfly at some point.

"As part of our celebration of this spectacular occasion, tonight we shall be having a special concert. Sweetie Belle, younger sister of Ponyville's very own Rarity, shall be performing for us this evening."

More applause. Sweetie Belle gulped, edging a bit away from the curtain, readying herself to bolt off the stage and head for the rear exit. There was no way she could do this. She could never compare to her big sister, never equal the kind of fame Rarity, the latest fashion designer genius, had brought to their small town. She could never-

A gentle hoof on Sweetie Belle's shoulder made her look behind and to her left. There stood Apple Bloom, in her simple red and black backup singer outfit, a comforting smile on her face. Sweetie Belle turned to her right and there she found Scootaloo in a similar dress but purple and black, a confident smile on her face. Confident in Sweetie Belle's ability. That was right, she thought. She had her very best friends right beside her, ready to help in whatever came next for her, whether it was fame or shame. She couldn't run, not if it wasn't for them.

"And so, I present to you what just might become the next big music group in Equestria, Ponyville's next pride and joy, the Cutie Mark Crusaders!"

Sweetie Belle smiled in utter confidence as the curtains parted before her, revealing her and her friends to the waiting crowd. Her eyes instantly found Twilight and Rarity at the very front of the crowd smiling up at her, even as she started the instrumentals for her first song with a flick of her magic. A strong piano and drums melody started as she stepped forward, her white and olive-green dress billowing out behind her in a gentle breeze. Scootaloo started up with her wings.

*"I walked across an empty land
I knew the pathway like my sister's clothe stand
I felt the earth beneath my feet
Sat by the river and it made me complete
Oh simple thing where have you gone
I'm getting older, I need something to rely on
So tell me when you're gonna to let me in
I'm getting tired and I need somewhere to begin."*

The music picked up in strength, and as it did Sweetie Belle jumped to her rear hooves and began to spin and twirl, earning a burst of surprised applause from the watching ponies. She felt Scootaloo join her side and gave a silent thanks to the Pegasus for teaching her dancing basics. The purple butterfly marks on Scootaloo's flanks were rewards enough, she had said.

*"I came across a fallen tree
I felt the branches of it looking at me
Is this the place we used to love?
Is this the place that I've been dreaming of?"*

*Oh simple thing where have you gone
I'm getting older, I need something to rely on
So tell me when you're gonna let me in
I'm getting tired and I need somewhere to begin.*

And if you have a minute why don't we go

*Talk about it somewhere only we know?
This could be the end of everything
So why don't we go
Somewhere only we know?*

Somewhere only we know..."

The music quieted for a bare moment, the spotlights dimming until they only illuminated Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo, and Apple Bloom. Then with another flicker of magic the music flared to new life. Sweetie reared back, releasing a torrent of lights like sparkling stars from her horn to swirl above the crowd, drawing gasps and sounds of amazement from them. Her eyes met Twilight's and saw only pride in them.

*"Oh simple thing where have you gone
I'm getting older, I need something to rely on
So tell me when you're gonna let me in
I'm getting tired and I need somewhere to begin*

*And if you have a minute why don't we go
Talk about it somewhere only we know?
This could be the end of everything
So why don't we go
So why don't we go*

*This could be the end of everything
So why don't we go
Somewhere only we know...oh...
Somewhere only we know?"*

The music faded away, leaving the town hall in silence, Sweetie Belle looking out onto the crowd. The silence lasted only a moment before a wave of sound and excitement hit the young Unicorn, nearly sending her stumbling backwards. Hooves thundered against the floor in applause, Pegasi flying through the air and letting loose wild cheers. Sweetie Belle felt the hot wetness of tears begin to form in her eyes, quickly blinking them away as she swept her gaze over the crowd. Her gaze was drawn down to the front row, to her sister and her friends. Rarity made no effort to hide her feelings, tears of joy streaming down her cheeks as she stomped her hooves against the floor harder than anypony else. Applejack and Big

Macintosh sat on the haunches, mouths gaping wide in obvious shock. Rainbow Dash had thrown a foreleg over Ditzzy's shoulders, pulling her close as the grey Pegasus held a cheering Dinky in her forelegs.

Then Sweetie Belle looked to her beloved mentor. Twilight sat there, a smile of pride and contentment on her lips, her hooves still against the floor. All her applause came through clearly in those violet eyes.

Then an insistent cough came from Apple Bloom behind her, and Sweetie Belle shook herself free of her euphoric daze. Moving back a few steps, she looked out over the audience and beamed. "And now for our next song-"

It all happened so fast, Sweetie Belle wasn't sure which happened first. One moment she was preparing the spell to start up for music for her next song, and the next everything changed. The windows throughout the large hall exploded inward, sending gleaming shards of glass flying towards her; yet at the same moment Twilight flew up onto the stage and landed at the center of the triangle formed by her, Apple Bloom, and Scootaloo. Sweetie Belle felt more than saw the shimmer that covered the Pegacorn's horn, when suddenly every single piece of glass simply froze in place. Sweetie Belle nearly fainted when she found herself at the center of a dome of razor-sharp glass.

Screams of terror began to fill the air. "Sweetie," said Twilight, making the filly look her in the face. "Stay close."

"Sweetie, stay close."

Twilight did not wait to see if Sweetie Belle responded to the command before turning her attention back to the battle that had suddenly erupted within the town hall. Diamond dogs, at least two dozen of them and all armored, had burst through the windows and doors, releasing ear-splitting howls as they set to work attacking the ponies inside. Twilight watched as all around her, her friends and neighbors were set upon by the diamond dogs. Jagged claws and gleaming fangs flashed in the darkness of the hall as readily as the swords and axes the wolves carried, and screams of agony began to join the cries of terror and howls filling the air in a chorus of

horror.

From where she stood on the stage Twilight could see Caramel drop, a dagger embedded into his left flank; Carrot Top screamed and flailed as a Wolf held her aloft by her mane, readying a swing of the sword to slice through her exposed neck; the mayor let out a hard grunt as she was slammed against the far wall, her Wolf attacker rearing back to crack her skull between his jaws.

Then, in the midst of the chaos, a rainbow cascading with lightning flared to life. A two-legged buck sent the Wolf looming over Caramel flying back, quickly followed by the knife pulled from the earth pony's flank. The axe, moments from decapitating Carrot Top, was stopped mid-swing by one forehoof, the other crashing into the Wolf's jaw with an audible CRACK, sending that Wolf stumbling back and dropping his intended victim to the ground. The mayor was grabbed and flown out of the way of her attacker's lunging bite, making that Wolf slam headfirst into the wall. Twilight watched all this occur in the span of a single second, a flash of time that made all other movements in the room seem frozen in comparison.

Twilight barely flinched as the mayor was dropped at her hooves, followed a moment later by Rainbow Dash landing down onto the stage and striding to the very front of it. Silence filled the hall as ponies and Wolves alike turned and looked up at the Pegasus, and Rainbow Dash looked back at them with hard, blazing eyes. Twilight could feel the magic radiating from her, just as it had when she had assumed her Rainbow Avatar form.

"Knights of Equestria," Rainbow shouted to the hall, rearing back before smashing her front hooves onto the stage, making the wood crack beneath. A wave of magic in all the colors of the rainbow spread out from the point of contact, sending Wolves it hit flying. "TO ME!"

Several blurs shot out from the crowd, Rarity and Big Mac landing to Rainbow Dash's right and Ditzzy and Doctor Whoof to her left, Dinky jumping off of her mother's back and hurrying over to Sweetie Belle and the others. On each of their left forelegs, including Rainbow Dash's, the greaves representing their Elements of Balance shone with an ethereal light. With a stomp of that hoof the metal extended out, moving up the leg onto the rest of the body forming full suits of armor. Full suits of MITHRIL

armor, shining like the purest of moonlit silver. Mithril greaves decorated with golden engravings of flowers and stars wrapped around their lower legs, seamless as if they had grown there. A thick mithril crupper covered their flanks, adorned around the edges with moons of silver and suns of gold; small gaps near the back allowed their tails to flow free. Plates over mithril slotted onto leather covered their sides and back, joining to peytrals of mithril over their chests; emblazoned onto each peytral were the ponies cutie marks. Mithril criniere's flowed up their necks, attaching to mithril champrons that covered their heads yet left their eyes and mouths exposed.

In all these ways their armors were identical, except for two. Over Rarity's horn went a crystal blade, like the ones used by wizard warriors in the ancient times, and the once she had worn in Gildedale to face the komagas. And atop Rainbow Dash's champron grew three gold spikes, forming a crown. It signified her place as the leader, and served the role of a beacon for her to be found by comrades in the field of battle.

The entire process had taken little more than a moment, before Rainbow Dash leapt into the air, flaring her wings out to her sides. A two foot long silver long-sword materialized beside her, a barely noticeable thread of rainbow light going between it and herself. "Rarity, Doctor, get all the ponies out of here. Twilight, stay there and watch the fillies, provide support where needed. Big Mac, Ditzy, you're with me." Unsheathing sounds filled the hall as similar swords appeared beside the others, and Rainbow Dash aimed her blade forward. "Now, CHARGE!"

The two dozen Wolves snapped from their frozen states of awe at the sound of Rainbow Dash's shout, meeting it with a deafening wave of howls as they charged forward, slamming aside any ponies caught in their way. Rainbow Dash, with Big Mac to her right and Ditzy to her left, met them in the center of the hall, and the battle was begun.

Ditzy, the only trained soldier among them, was as far as Twilight could tell the most efficient and methodical in her fighting. She ducked beneath the swing of a sword and buried her own blade into the gut of the Wolf before her, earning herself a grunt of pain from him. Pulling out she turned and blocked a sword strike from a Wolf behind her, at the same moment sending the first Wolf stumbling back with a buck of her rear legs. Once that was done she focused her full attention on the Wolf in front of her,

beginning a wild flurry of slashes and stabs. The soldier was forced onto the defensive, backing away from the blinding maelstrom of flashing steel in front of him. Then suddenly Ditzzy leapt into the air, flapping her wings to flip over her opponent. Her blade struck out, and a moment later the Wolf's head dropped to the floor, followed by his body. Ditzzy landed and immediately ducked down, watching the throwing-axe pass by harmlessly above her. Turning around she charged forward and rammed her helmeted head into her new opponent's gut.

Big Mac had little natural ability with the sword, but as Twilight watched the battle unfold that seemed to matter little. Nearly as big as the diamond dogs he was fighting, Big Mac barreled through them like a train, putting his full weight and muscle power to use. With every headbutt, every buck, every slam of the shoulder Wolves were sent flying back, smashing into tables or walls or each other. Sword and axe strikes bounced off or went unheeded by the red and silver figure of fury he had become, and it was not long before Wolves turned and fled when he set his eyes upon them.

And Rainbow Dash...Twilight almost could not take her eyes off of her, only able to remain aware of the rest of her surroundings because she had to guard Sweetie Belle, Dinky, and the others. Yet even so, Rainbow Dash was something incredible to see. The Pegasus had turned into a storm of battle, completely outclassing both the trained soldier Ditzzy and the wild berserker Big Mac. Lightning crackled around her form, lashing out and striking Wolves down as handily as the sword. And the sword, oh, what a sight that was in the darkened gloom of the hall. It shone red-hot, bolts of lightning arcing up and down its length as it sang through the air, cleaving through Wolf armor and flesh as easily as if through butter. In her wake was left the stench of burnt fur and cooked flesh, yet not the sickeningly sweet smell of blood; the wounds were cauterized almost the moment they were made. And if any Wolf looked into her blazing eyes, they would turn tail and flee, fearing the immediate fury of the Rainbow of Light more than the distant darkness of their dread master.

Rarity ran up to Twilight's side, once she had dispelled the glass frozen in the air. The blade over her horn was stained with blood, Twilight noted. "Darling, everypony else has been evacuated, Applejack and Doctor Whoof are guarding them. Let's get these fillies out of here!"

"Yes, of course." Twilight turned and, with Rarity, began herding

Sweetie Belle, Dinky, Apple Bloom, and Scootaloo to the rear exit. "Come along, my little ponies, let's get to saf-"

A howl, so much greater and darker than all the ones that had come before it, made Twilight stop. She turned to look, and at the sight that met her eyes her blood ran cold and her hopes of not having to join the fight died. At the front entrance to the town hall stood a Wolf, taller than the others, his form draped in shadow. His eyes glowed green, like emeralds in a black setting. Gripped in his left hand was an axe, the blade of which was as big as Big Mac's head was long.

Twilight's eyes broke from the towering figure, noticing finally the sign of the red wolf's head on all the soldiers. "Oh sweet merciful Celestia, it's Nero!"

Twilight broke away, ignoring Rarity's cries for her to stop and explain as she ran and jumped from the stage. She charged past Ditzy as she skewered another wolf, Big Mac as he caved a Wolf's chest in with a buck, and Rainbow Dash as she sent lightning coursing through a Wolf's body. As she passed each one she telekinetically took hold of them and flung them back, to where Rarity and the fillies stood in confusion. "Back, back all of you! This power is beyond any of you!"

Nero the Diamond Huntswolf let loose a deep, rumbling laugh as Twilight skidded to a halt two yards away from him, her cloak fluttering as her wings beat in agitation. "So you are the renowned Twilight Sparkle then? You are as intelligent and wise as I have been told, to warn your friends so. Tell me, does the threat of your death frighten you?"

Twilight's horn shimmered, preparing for any number of spells to be launched. "Not as much as the threat of my friends' deaths. Mutt, Monster, Scourge of all canine-kind. What are you and your savage ilk doing here? What has Ponyville done to earn the likes of you?!"

Again, Nero laughed, making Twilight's spine crawl with horror. Rather than charge her, or take a swing with his battle-axe, or any number of things she expected of him however, Nero surprised her by hooking Blood-Drinker onto his belt. "Be calm, little pony. I personally mean you no harm. I have a message I was bidden to give thee."

Twilight took her eyes off Nero for the barest moment, glancing around

herself. It appeared that all the other diamond dogs had been taken care of by her friends, leaving Nero the only one left. Perhaps, all of them together, they could take him. But he could have more soldiers hidden outside, waiting for that moment. But then, if he intended to kill them all he could have been in the fight from the start. But he hadn't, so did that mean he was telling the truth? That seemed to be the case...

Twilight narrowed her eyes at the Wolf towering over her. "Very well then, cur. What is your message, and who is it to?"

That rumbling laugh, that cackle, grew somehow more vicious as, with a sweep of his arm, Nero indicated to the whole hall. "The message is to your princesses, and it is all around us. The blood, the gore, the whimpers of pain. Look well, Twilight Sparkle, look at us. A small attacking force, at the doorstep of Equestria's capitol! Nay, we could have gone further if we wanted, to the very gates of Canterlot itself!"

Looking back to Twilight, the Wolf Lord jabbed towards her with an accusatory claw. "The age of ponykind shall soon come to its end, and it shall end in blood, and fire, and war. It shall be the greatest war in all the history of the world, as I demand it."

Before Twilight could make any sort of reply, Rainbow Dash landed beside her and pierced Nero with a fiery glare. "Hah, shows what you know, dummy! Look around you, see any pony bodies? Nope. We took down every single one of your shoulders without even breaking a sweat! What does a mangy mutt like you think you'll manage to accomplish?"

Nero stopped laughing. His eyes hardened and locked with Rainbow Dash's, and between them a silent battle of wills played out. To Twilight watching them, it seemed a literal clash of light against dark; Rainbow Dash, encompassing every color of the rainbow and shining like the moon on a cloudless night, pitted against this towering figure of blackness and shadow. And yet behind Nero, Twilight could almost see an even greater figure of darkness...

Rainbow Dash backed off a small, shaky step. Nero let out a bark of laughter, and then turned from the Pegasus back to Twilight. "You surround yourself with strong friends, Twilight Sparkle. But soft lives lead to soft wills, and that is the strength you will need most of all in the times ahead. A

thousand legions wait in the shadows for a single moment of weakness, Twilight Sparkle. Do you dare do what you have to? From what I've seen, I think not."

Nero turned his back to them and began striding out through the door. Rainbow moved to follow, but a quick shake of Twilight's head made her stop in place. "But Twilight-

"NO, Rainbow Dash." Twilight watched Nero leave, ponies scattering to their homes as he advanced down the main lane in the direction of the Everfree Forest. As she had expected, as he went the figures of more diamond dogs, at least another half-dozen, leapt from out of the shadows and from atop rooftops and joined him. "You wouldn't be able to do anything."

Rainbow Dash let out a shout of frustration and kicked a fallen shield. The other knights except for Doctor Whoof, who was still watching over the ponies from the town hall, joined Twilight and Rainbow Dash at the door, just as the figures of Nero and his soldiers faded into the distance. "Who was that," asked Rarity.

Ditzy slunk close to Rainbow Dash, pressing against her helmet to helmet. "Bad wolf, bad bad wolf."

Twilight nodded in agreement to this, and elaborated. "That is a perfectly succinct description, Ditzy. He was Nero, the Diamond Huntswolf. Probably the closest thing diamond dogs have to a king, though perhaps captain would be more fitting." She indicated to around them with a hoof. "A war, any war, would be just what he would want. ANY shed blood is a victory to monsters like him, even the blood of his own soldiers."

Something in her tone of voice, Twilight guessed, made Rainbow Dash look over at her with wide eyes. "Twilight, you're scared. No, terrified. But you're immortal, aren't you? How could you be scared?"

"I'm not nearly immortal enough, and there are many powers in this world that I have yet to be tested against." Twilight swallowed the lump in her throat, her eyes still glued to where the Wolves had gone. If she strained her eyes, she could almost make herself think she could see the trees of the Everfree Forest shaking with their movement. Abruptly she

pulled her cloak closer to herself and broke away from the group, to her library home. "I need to write a letter. The princesses must be informed of this attack immediately."

Princess Celestia's eyes opened wide, and she staggered up from where she sat on the cold metal floor. Before her the Magicahedron pulsed and glowed, the blue light of magic shining off of it casting everything around it in stark relief. Yet Princess Celestia paid this no heed so frazzled was she, the foreboding words the magical device had spoken to her still echoing through her mind, along with a deafening, metallic scraping noise, a noise she had tried for millennia to cast out of her memory. She turned and fled from the Magicahedron, racing across the half-mile distance from it to the door set into the wall in a flash and bang of light.

Princess Luna jumped out of shock when her sister crashed through the door to Nowhere. The library room she had waited in, watching the perfectly blank door in sheer boredom was dark, not even the light of the moon and stars reaching into it through the blanket of clouds stretching across the local expanse of night sky. In the darkness, Luna could see her sister's eyes like two shining beacons of light. Yet they were wild, unfocused; she had never seen the larger Alicorn like this before, not even when she had become Nightmare Moon.

Luna instantly stood up from her chair and approached Princess Celestia, though with the barest flicker from her horn she sent a telepathic message for the Captain of the Guard to come. "Big Sis, what is the matter? What have you learned from that...thing?" For a brief moment Princess Celestia did not respond, nor make any sign that she had heard her sister at all. Luna's frown grew, and she took a hesitant step closer, and then suddenly Celestia looked at her. The Regent of the Sun's eyes focused again, the wildness left them, and Luna even thought she recognized calm in them.

"Princess Luna," Celestia said, moving to nuzzle Luna against her cheek. Then she moved around and headed for the stairs. "We must send word for my student and the Knights of Equestria immediately. Something incredible and terrible has been revealed to me."

Luna hurriedly moved to follow behind her sister. As she went however she looked back over her shoulder, watching as the door to the Magicahedron slowly swung closed on its own. Before it shut, she could see the mysterious device called by Celestia the Magicahedron and pondered, as she often did, just how her sister had come to possess it. Then the door was closed, and she could do nothing else except follow Celestia.

AT LAST, THE BOARD HAS BEEN SET. SOON THE PIECES WILL BE GIVEN THEIR ROLES AND BEGIN THEIR MOVEMENT. AFTER OVER A MILLENNIA, SOON I SHALL BE FREE AND RETURNED TO MY FULL POWER. THEN SILENCE WILL FALL, AND ALL WILL KNOW PEACE. SOON... SOON...

Chapter 3

Many Meetings

Twilight Sparkle looked out from the shelter of her cloak. The dark world rushed by beneath and around her. It was silent save for the wind streaming past her and the steady beating of the wings of the Pegasi pulling the chariot she sat in. Rarity sat beside her to her right, also in silence, though Twilight paid this little heed. Her eyes were fixed upward, peering beyond the brim of her hood to the night sky above.

She had always loved the stars of the night, since before she had even become a student of Princess Celestia, and that had been when she was very young. They always twinkled above her, their pure light surrounded by the blue-black darkness yet always untouched by it. They were always there, even if smoke or clouds or the canopies of forests hid them from sight. Whatever happened down on the earth, they would always stay shining. Always shining, her mother had told her, and always watching over them. This thought had always brought a certain measure of peace to her heart. Looking up at them now, Twilight felt that peace return to her, welcome after the earlier events of that night. "High above us the stars do shine..."

"Hm?" Rarity turned to look at the other pony, blinking her tired eyes. It had been a long night, for all of them, and it was most certainly just the adrenaline from the fight that had allowed them to go on this long. "What was that, Twilight darling?"

Twilight turned her gaze away from the stars to Rarity beside her. "That? It was...nothing. Just a bit of Elkish lyric my mother taught me as a filly when I had trouble going to bed. Looking up at the sky brought it back to mind, I guess." Twilight's gaze returned to the stars above them, and if she could see from where Rarity sat beside her, she would see the light of the stars reflected back in her violet eyes. She coughed and cleared her throat. When she began to speak her voice rang clearly in the night, tall and strong as it reached past their chariot to the others around them, where her friends rode.

"High above us the stars do shine,
And I have not lost all that's mine.
It waits for me at journey's end,
So I must hurry past this bend.
Though our hearts may fill up with dread,
Heroes hold on to true love's thread.
Through shadow, through the Dreaming's wake,
Keep your hope, darkness will not take."

Twilight's voice faded away, and for a while she sat in silence. Then she looked from the stars again to find Rarity looking upon her with a new light in her eyes, like something of great beauty had awakened within her. Twilight remembered her mother telling her she had looked much the same when she had first heard it. "It is a small part of the "Lay of Farlendil", the last High King of the Elk folk, before their world war ravaged everything. It was one of many poems composed between the end of the war and before the coming of King Cronus and ponykind. What I have just sung to you is one of the little bits that have survived the many millennia through pony minds."

Rarity moved a bit closer to Twilight, looking up at the stars with her. "I see. It is very beautiful, even in its reduced state. It reminds me of a song I heard Lady Falalauria sing, the night Rainbow Dash, Applejack, and I stayed in the Shimmerwood, during our journey to the Archback Mountains." A wistful smile grew on her face. "I hope I get the chance to visit there again someday, to walk among those graceful trees with those mysterious deer and listen to the Lady's singing. It was...quite enchanting, you must understand."

"I can imagine." Twilight shifted into a more comfortable position, her gaze drifting not to Rarity or the stars, but to the distant horizon. There the sky had begun to lighten, the life and light of Equestria's capitol city never quite ending, even at the darkest night. It was still mostly shrouded in shadow, yet still, with her almost Pegasus-keen eyes Twilight could make out the beginnings of life moving about around the city and castle, more than usual for how late it was. She could make out the large scaffoldings and skeleton structures where the city was still rebuilding from her attack, repairs still going on 14 months after it.

But Twilight's mind did not dwell on this, but on more recent events. "You may have your chance to see deer again sooner than you expect, Rarity. Tonight's attack could only be the beginning of something far larger. Aggression like this from the diamond dogs has been unseen for the past 127 years. If what he said about war coming is true, then it will concern all races and peoples. Look down below."

Rarity did as asked, and let out a gasp at the sight she beheld. On the earth below streaked dozens and dozens of bolts of lightning. They lit up the ground like the stars did the night, and seemed to travel in all directions. After several quiet moments of watching, it became clear that the most seemed to be heading where the ponies were heading; Canterlot.

"Are they all...Pronghorns?"

Twilight nodded, also watching the trails of lightning as they passed along the ground. "Yes, though there probably aren't quite as many as it looks, they're just going that fast. With the roughly two hours it took for us all to gather our things and for our chariots to arrive, Princess Celestia seems to have called in as many Pronghorns as she can. Now she must be sending them out all across the world, contacting as many of our allies and friends as she can." She frowned, her countenance growing dark beneath her hood, worried. "Whatever reason she had for summoning all of us, it must be staggering, possibly catastrophic. We should be on our guard."

"Hmph!" Rarity gave a flick of her mane, puffing out her chest as she held her head high. "Indeed, this must be of the utmost importance! Why, perhaps it is related to the attack by those horrible diamond dogs on Ponyville? Oh! What if we noble knights must go on some sort of quest, braving terrible dangers and seeing incredible sights for the fate of Equestria! Oh I'm so glad I brought along my adventuring ensemble!"

Twilight looked at Rarity and quirked an eyebrow. "Rarity, if the you from 14 months ago could hear you talk, they'd swear you were a different pony. Not that I'm complaining, mind you. I just...maybe you should stop reading all those fantastical romance novels you blast your way through?"

Rarity gave another flick of her mane, this time accidentally smacking Twilight in the face with it and making her sneeze. "Why Twilight Sparkle, I

never thought I would reach the day when YOU, of all ponies, would suggest somepony not read as much. And besides," Rarity grinned at her. "I haven't read those old things in months. Why read about a romantic adventuring life when you LIVE it! WAHAHA!"

Twilight rolled her eyes and turned away. "Yeah, whatever. You and Big Mac go have your 'romantic adventuring life' somewhere else. I hope you'll be happy for the rest of your days and whatnot."

A silence grew between the two ponies, like a great distance. It was a silence Twilight would have been more than happy to have last the rest of the trip. The peace and calm she had cultivated through watching the stars was gone, replaced by a sickening agitation. It would have been easy to blame this feeling on one thing, but she could not. It had come from thinking about the earlier attack, and her encounter with Nero. It had come from seeing the Pronghorns and realizing the gravity of whatever situation they were entering. It had come from the Unicorn next to her seeming to have no concern at all for the gravity of the situation.

"Five minutes before we arrive, miladies," spoke the lead Pegasus pulling the chariot, breaking the silence. Twilight spared a glance toward him, and then went back to watching the stars. The moon had wandered into her vision by now, an ivory disc sailing through the sea of stars. Its surface was clean and unmarred, so different from how she remembered it as a filly, even as a young mare in the university.

Then Rarity shifted closer, and Twilight released a sigh she had not even noticed she had been holding. "Twilight," said Rarity, looking at her with eyes filled with worry. "Is everything all right, dear? Earlier you seemed...happy, dare I say it. Rainbow Dash and Doctor Whoof back in our lives, Sweetie Belle's singing extraordinary; oh, thank you for that by the way. But anyway, now you seem so...so withdrawn. Angry. Sad. I mean, you've never shown any sign of resentment towards me or Big Macintosh, but just a moment ago you could've cut diamond with your sharpness."

"Hmph, so sorry to cause you concern," Twilight growled. Then after a moment she sighed and lowered her head. "I'm sorry for that. You and Big Mac are a great couple, I meant no...well, I did mean to hurt a moment ago, but I shouldn't have. I simply...I..." Twilight shook her head and started again. "I'm not like you, Rarity. I have no desire for grand adventures or

epic quests, and I neither desire nor deserve romance or love. Nor do I deserve the forgiveness and mercy you and the others have shown to me. This isn't what I want."

"Then what do you want," whispered Rarity, though she dreaded the answer with all her heart. "What do you think you deserve?"

Twilight Sparkle looked to the moon and was silent for the rest of the chariot ride.

The three chariots touched down onto the designated landing platform, a large circular area of white stone and gold accents the size of the entirety of Ponyville. It clung to the side of the mountain a hundred feet above the Canterlot castle itself, 12 pillars as big around as Twilight's tree home connecting from it to the main body of the castle. Built into these pillars were stairways and magic-powered cargo elevators, allowing troop movement from the castle to the landing platform and vice-versa without soldiers once exposing themselves to the open where they could be attacked. More such passageways were built into the mountain itself, leading to storage facilities and housing areas, in which a group three times the size of Canterlot's population could hide away if worse came to worse. Yet with the Sun and Moon Princesses themselves guarding the city, along with the second-largest standing military in the world, those safe houses had never been needed.

Once both wheels had settled onto the cold stone and the Pegasi soldiers pulling the it had slowed to a stop, Twilight leapt from the chariot, steadying herself with her wings. This high up, winds strong enough to knock a pony off their hooves were not uncommon. She was followed right after by Rarity, who levitated their personal bags with her. From the chariot to Twilight's right came Big Mac, Applejack, and Doctor Whoof, while from the chariot to her left a single Unicorn soldier stepped off, levitating all the rest of their bags with him. Everything seemed accounted for to her.

Rainbow Dash and Ditzzy swooped down out of the sky into trots as they landed in the center of the gathering group. Rainbow Dash trotted over to Twilight. "So hey, we're in Canterlot, now what?"

"I'm not entirely sure." Aside from the Pegasi soldiers that had arrived with them, pulling the chariots, the platform was almost entirely devoid of life. The only other ponies there were more soldiers stationed every couple of yards along the perimeter of the area, acting as lookouts for expected and unexpected arrivals. Other than them, the area was deserted. "I was expecting somepony to be waiting for us." Twilight turned to the closest of the Pegasus chariot pullers, waving to him to get his attention. "What are we to do now?"

The Pegasus pointed a hoof past them, to a set of buildings of the same white stone as the landing platform. "The stairs and cargo elevators open up there. From there you can travel down to the castle itself. From there, I suppose you proceed on to the royal audience chamber. The princesses have secured themselves in there since early this evening."

"Oh, well thank you then." The Pegasus nodded and turned away. Twilight turned back to the others, taking in their expectant looks with a steady gaze. "Well then," she said. "We have some choices. We can either walk all the way over there," she indicated with a hoof over to the structures, easily a quarter-mile away from where they stood "and then take a couple hundred flights of stairs down to the castle. Or I can teleport us and our stuff down to the entrance hall myself. Anypony feel like walking?"

A round of "no's" and shaking heads followed this question, causing the ghost of a smile to flit across Twilight's features before she returned to her placid stance. "I figured as much. Okay then everypony, gather close and hold still. Also be quite, a teleport this distance is going to need a lot of concentration."

Once the others had done as she asked, Twilight closed her eyes and felt for the core of magic inside her. It was something easy enough to find, as closely connected to magic itself as she was. In her mind's eye it became visualized as a burning sphere, a core of energy like a molten ball of shifting metal. Then she began to concentrate on the castle's entrance hall, imagining-

[Greetings, Twilight Sparkle and friends.]

Twilight's eyes shot open, her concentration breaking at the sound of another voice in her head. It was a powerful voice, deep and soft, elegant

and wild, incredibly ancient yet young, like the ringing of crystal; the closest Twilight had ever heard to it was Princess Celestia's voice, yet even this comparison did not do it justice. Looking around her Twilight saw matching looks of surprise and confusion...except for three. Rarity's, Rainbow Dash's, and Applejack's faces had lit up in seeming recognition of the voice, a sudden light in their eyes as if upon the return of a long-missed friend. Rarity especially, Twilight noted, had a look of utmost joy.

"It...can't be," Rarity said aloud, though Twilight had no doubt whoever had spoken in their minds could hear her. "My Lady, is that you?"

Their answer came in a sudden shifting of space around them. One moment they were standing atop the landing area for Canterlot's air forces, bodies huddled close as they braced themselves against a fierce mountain wind; the next moment they stood at the center of a magnificent stone hall of white and gold, red and purple banners depicting stylizations of the sun and the moon respectively adorning the walls around them. Just ahead of them were massive steps, leading up and away deeper into the castle. Twilight recognized two things immediately. First was that this was the Grand Hall of Canterlot, the accursed place she had suffered the hoof-shaking of easily a hundred Grand Galloping Gala attendees. Second was that they had just experienced Deer-style teleportation, and that could only mean one thing.

"Welcome, brave knights, to the great capitol of Canterlot."

That same voice echoed through the hall, not in their heads but instead coming from just behind them. The group turned around, and Twilight could not help the gasp she released at the sight they all saw. There before them, flanked by two Deer in elegant leaf-green armor, stood a beautifully massive Deer. She was nearly as big as Princess Celestia herself, though larger if counting the enormous antlers sprouting from her head. For indeed, they stretched as broad across as the average pony was long, and from the antlers streamers of white silk draped down almost to her hooves. Atop her head sat a crystal circlet, and all about her there seemed an ethereal glow, the source of which Twilight could only understand to be the Deer herself. There before them all stood the great Lady Falalauria, of the Shimmerwood.

Twilight, Rainbow Dash, and all the others sank down into a bow to the

Elkin Lady, all except for Rarity, who broke from the group and ran to her. Twilight watched in amazement as the ivory Unicorn and golden Deer pressed necks together as if old friends, and for a moment wondered if this was how other ponies felt whenever she expressed her informal familiarity with Princess Celestia. She did not wonder this for too long, as Rarity quickly began to speak.

"Lady Falalauria," Rarity said, her voice barely above a whisper yet loud enough for all to hear. "It is simply such a pleasure to see you once again! Our last meeting was so brief, and under such terrible circumstances. Although, I must confess to some level of surprise. I had believed that, well..."

"That we Deer are private creatures," said the great hind, finishing Rarity's thought and smiling with warmth enough to dispel any feelings of embarrassment the Unicorn might have felt. "That we stay secluded in our forest homes, content to allow the larger world to pass by as it will? Feel no shame, Rarity, for you were correct in your thinking. Yet I Looked to the future, and Saw a great shift in the world coming. Ponies will not stand alone when they face it."

As Falalauria finished speaking the ponies stood up from their bows. Rainbow Dash darted forward to Rarity's side, followed soon by Applejack, limping along. Falalauria turned her star-filled gaze to them and smiled, though this one was markedly less happy than the smile she had given to Rarity. Twilight thought she could guess the reason for that. "Rainbow Dash, Applejack," the hind said, nodding to each of them. "I am grateful to see you both as well as you are. You especially, Applejack."

The cowpony nodded to this. "Yes, milady. Though...I wish I had your gifts, sometimes. I reckon some things would've been quite a bit easier ta handle if I'd known they were coming."

Though these words were said as politely as necessary, it was impossible not to detect the hard, bitter edge to them. All ponies present shifted uncomfortably at them, and even Falalauria's light seemed to fade for a moment. Gazes pointedly did not go to the scar across Applejack's flank.

"Yes," said Falalauria, slowly and sadly. "It is a curse of knowing things,

to always think on what could have been. Yet not all alternatives are better than the reality we have. Do not dwell too much on what you could have done differently with Fluttershy, Applejack, or you will not even notice as all the many things you still have are lost to you."

Applejack bowed her head, the nod she gave barely perceptible. "I'll try, milady."

Falalauria's smile brightened at these whispered words, and then she turned to Rainbow Dash hovering beside her. "And yes, I was just as surprised as you were to learn you are the avatar for the Rainbow of Light."

The rainbow-maned Pegasus shut her mouth, having just opened it to ask, and folded her forelegs across her chest, sticking her bottom lip out in an utterly ridiculous approximation of a pout. "No fair, answering questions before I ask them is-"

"Cheating?" finished Falalauria. She and the others present broke into fits of laughter at the face Rainbow Dash made at this. Rainbow Dash simply huffed and dropped to the ground, where she remained sitting on her haunches with her forelegs folded.

"Cheater," she said.

Falalauria brushed a delicate hoof over Rainbow Dash's mane, and then turned away. Her eyes fell on Twilight, and the purple Pegacorn could feel herself being examined. Not just physically, with those eyes like the night sky, but her mind and soul as well. It felt as if her whole being were laid out for Falalauria to see, without even the most insignificant detail being left out. To the forefront of her mind came images, scenes from her past all the way back to when she was just a young filly seeing Princess Celestia for the first time. The images went by in a blur of thought, steadily progressing in time toward the present. Fear arose in Twilight, and with a cry of effort she wrenched her mind from the reach of Falalauria, the effort required sending the Pegacorn to her knees.

A look of surprise passed over the golden hind's features. Rarity and Applejack stepped out of the way as she walked toward Twilight. "You are afraid of me," Falalauria said. It was not a question; it was a statement of fact. "And I have never met any pony capable of hiding their thoughts and

mind from me. You are as powerful as your teacher has told me."

Doctor Whoof approached Twilight to help her up, but she shook her head. She climbed back to her four hooves and looked up at Lady Falalauria towering above her. Their eyes met, but only for a moment before Twilight looked down. "Of course you scare me," Twilight said. "Your ability to see the past and future defies almost everything I understand about magic, and if it wasn't for Rarity I wouldn't even believe in your ability. But even more than that, I'm scared of you because...because you are so bright, so GOOD. And I am so..."

"Twilight Sparkle," whispered Falalauria, but not aloud. Twilight's head jerked up, her eyes open wide as that voice echoed through her mind and hers alone. "Many Powers reside in this world for both good and evil, both great and small. Do not trouble yourself about it now, for it is only at the end of a life when all things are revealed and good or evil are decided. When the time comes, you will know where you stand."

Then Falalauria's voice quieted in Twilight's mind, and the Lady looked up and past the group. "That is enough idle chat for now, I think," she said, looking towards a wide set of double doors. They were the doors to the Royal Audience Chamber, Twilight recognized. "Princess Celestia is finished speaking with the other arrivals that came with me. I must confess I think I made them rather uneasy with how I brought them here."

"Huh?" Twilight and many others looked at Falalauria in confusion at this seemingly random statement. But then Twilight looked around her and saw Applejack with a strangely excited look on her face. "AJ, do you know what she-"

The doors slid open, gliding silently on enchanted hinges. From the room strode Princess Celestia and Princess Luna side by side, followed close behind by a pair of earth ponies Twilight did not recognize. One was a mare, with a medium grey coat, white mane and tail, and green eyes. Her mane was long and loose, falling down around her shoulders. Her cutie mark was a red and gold heater shield. The other pony was a tall stallion, at least a head taller than Twilight and the others. His coat was dark red, his mane and tail light grey with streaks of charcoal coloring through it. His eyes were deep blue, deeper than Rarity's, and had a fierce light to them. His cutie mark was an arrangement of three pieces of golden wheat.

"Ashtail, Shield Maiden!"

This time it was Applejack who broke from the group, followed close behind by Rarity. The dark red stallion, who Twilight now recognized to be Lord Ashtail, the prince of Gildedale, smiled and quickened his own pace, meeting Applejack between the two groups. There they paused for a moment, either unsure of what to do or embarrassed, before simply giving each other a very close and, Twilight noticed, friendly hug.

Rarity meanwhile had met up with Shield Maiden, and conversed in excited tones about all manner of things. They were soon enough joined by Rainbow Dash.

Then Ashtail and Applejack ended their embrace, and he looked down her body to the scar across her flank. The look of pain that crossed his face left no confusion to those watching as to how he felt. "I had heard from Rainbow Dash what happened when she came to visit, but seeing your wound for myself is much worse."

"Aw shoot, don't worry none about it." Applejack turned her head to look at the scar, turning her body a bit to the side so Ashtail could more easily see it. "Most days it don't even hurt, and I can still push myself to a gallop if I have ta. And 'sides, you should see the other-" Applejack stopped. Her eyes went distant, and then she returned. "I mean, it don't matter none."

Ashtail nodded in acceptance at this, and moved forward to neck hug Applejack again. "Very well then, we will speak no more of that. Besides, it is foolish to get lost in the past when the present requires seeing to."

"Well said, Lord Ashtail," said Princess Celestia, drawing the attention of all the ponies to her. Princess Luna stood to Princess Celestia's left, her expression one devoid of emotion, cold and distant as a winter's night. To the Sun Regent's left had moved Lady Falalauria, calm and serene as a moonlight lake. Princess Celestia herself stood tallest, her eyes filled with warmth and love for all those she looked at, yet also with the faintest amount of carefully hidden worry. It was not much, but Twilight had known her long enough to recognize it.

"My little ponies," continued Princess Celestia. "We have all been

gathered here by the tides of fate; yes, even I and my sister. Though once more envoys arrive from the more distant lands I will give a fuller council, I will tell what I must to you all now. This evening both Lady Falalauria of Shimmerwood and I were granted a vision, a revelation of the present and future; her through her natural magic, and I through the Magicahedron, a powerful magical device connected to the Dreaming itself."

Gasps and murmurs ran through the gathered ponies at this. Twilight's eyes narrowed and a chill ran through her body. She remembered her brief use of that infernal device quite well.

Princess Celestia waited for the murmurs to quite down before proceeding. "A terrible vision was shown to us. The Crown of Cronus has revealed itself." She quickly raised a hoof to prevent any questions. "I understand that many of you have no knowledge of what that is. Know this. Thousands of years ago, after the Deer wars had ended and the world lay in ruin, a being from beyond the Outer Darkness came in the form of a mighty Pegasus stallion. He called himself King Cronus, though never did he desire or make attempt to rule the people, only help them. It was he who taught the Pegasi to control storm and sky, saving all from death. It was he who set new stars into the sky to replace those lost in the wars. And, many centuries after he arrived, he mated with a Unicorn mare, leading to the birth of two Alicorn foals. Myself, and Luna."

Here Princess Celestia stopped speaking and lowered her head. Princess Luna moved closer and pressed against her. Lady Falalauria took over. "It was soon after Luna and Celestia came into their own Cronus left the world, returning to wherever he came from. To help govern the world, he left three artifacts of incredible power. To the gryphons he left his mask, with which they could advance the world with wisdom and knowledge. To the dragons went his helm, with which they could protect the world and put an end to war with strength and courage. And to his daughters, Cronus gave his crown, with which they were meant to lead the world, and preserve it."

"What happened," asked Rarity.

"Everything," answered Princess Luna, taking over. "The gryphons retreated into their mountain fortresses, delving deep into both the knowledge granted them by the mask of Cronus and leaving the world to its

own devices. Without that wisdom to stop them, the dragons launched a campaign of conquest over the world, using the power from the Helm of Cronus to full them beyond the strength granted them. It was all Celestia and I could do to create Equestria, a safe haven for ponies and any others that sought refuge. This state of things lasted for five hundred years, until somehow the gryphons, perhaps trying to find Father, created a rift in the world to the Outer Darkness, the Void, from which came Tirek."

"Oh, oh, I know the rest of this" shouted Rainbow Dash, waving a foreleg about. "Luna and the original Knights of Equestria kicked Tirek's butt and sealed him away!"

"Indeed," spoke Princess Celestia. "Yet there is more to those years than that. Tirek's war on us lasted for many years before the final battle. Much was destroyed or lost, including all three artifacts given by my father. The mask was never seen after Tirek appeared. It is probable he destroyed it, or took it as his own. The helm was worn by the king of the dragons, Agni, into the final battle, and with it he managed to fight Tirek for a time. But eventually he was overcome and killed, and the helm ruined. Actually it does continue on in some fashion, for it was from Agni's scales and the helm's remains that the necklaces for the Elements of Harmony and the Elements of Balance were forged."

"And the crown, your majesty?" Doctor Whoof took a half-step forward and looked up at Princess Celestia. "What happened to that, to make it possible to come back?"

The elder Alicorn's countenance darkened, the light in her eyes fading and the ethereal wind leaving her mane. It only lasted a moment, but it was a terrible moment to those assembled. "I am afraid...I lost it. I was there that day, that moment when the king of the dragons fell and the power and pride of that race was broken. My rage and horror at this blinded me to reason, and I did the one thing none were to ever do. I set the crown upon my brow, intending to seize all its power for my own and claim the title of Queen Celestia to destroy Tirek. But it was not a moment later that the crown burned me, and disappeared, and I was left powerless against the full might of Tirek. Were it not for my sister arriving just then, I would have been destroyed."

A deathly silence filled the hall. Princess Celestia sat down, her head

hanging low. A few unbidden tears fell from her shut eyes to the floor. "I sought more power, more control, than was allotted to me. And for that all the power was lost to me, at least for a while."

Twilight lowered her head, her own hot tears wetting her cheeks and dripping down. She heard her teacher's story, burned it to her memory, and found she already knew it by heart. Only the story she knew did not star Princess Celestia but herself, Twilight Sparkle. The irony was terrible.

"Then," spoke Ashtail, breaking the silence and reminding Twilight that there were others present, "the crown has come back now because...you have learned from what happened?"

Princess Celestia looked to Ashtail when she answered. "Perhaps, but I think not. Rather, I think it might sense that it is needed. A new darkness has begun to move in the world, whispers of a nameless terror to the east, rumors of a dark specter to the south. Now to the north comes word that the frost giants have begun to mobilize their forces, and Twilight," here she indicated to the Pegacorn with a nod of her horn, "sent word mere hours ago that Ponyville was attacked by diamond dog raiders. That Nero led them, and that he promises war."

A cry of anger and dismay came arose, and all attention turned to the main entranceway. There stood a cloaked figure, though his hood was down to reveal a scarred Zebra, his grey mane wild and his yellow eyes surrounded by scars.

Princess Celestia took a step forward and looked at the new arrival in confusion. "An envoy from Zebrica? But I only sent Nigel with my message less than an hour ago."

The Zebra shook his head and strode closer to the gathering. "A message from Nigel? Nay, I've been on my way for a while. I come with word from King Luu, but it seems there is also one from you. Weeks ago, you should know, Nero launched an attack on Cape Hope. Now we Zebra people are at the end of our rope."

Rainbow Dash hovered close to Shield Maiden. "This guy's rhymes suck."

Princess Celestia frowned. "If what you tell me is true, then things are worse than I feared. Nero's reach has grown long indeed if he thinks he can attack the Zebras. The intent is obvious, to draw our forces out, stretch them thin so that he can strike a mortal blow. And yet...." Princess Celestia turned and shared looks with her sister and Lady Falalauria. "We cannot leave our friends and allies on their own. We face this growing threat together, or not at all."

"But sister," said Princess Luna. "It will take days to send out calls for full military mobilization, and weeks for all our forces to be ready and an expeditionary force prepared, not accounting for the time it would take for our army to actually arrive at Zebrica."

"And there are far fewer Deer than there once were," spoke Lady Falalauria. "We cannot commit to multiple fronts and still be able to guard the Archback Mountains. Except...." She looked at Princess Celestia and half-closed her eyes for many moments. "Ah, I see. My Sight has waned of late, yet I see no better choice than this."

Princess Celestia nodded, before returning her attention to the Zebra and gathered ponies. "Much has been revealed to all of us, and now a decision has been reached. I myself shall journey to Zebrica with their envoy, and assist in the battles there while my sister Luna watches over Equestria. Lady Falalauria shall rejoin her people in Shimmerwood. Lord Ashtail, Shield Maiden, I ask that you return to Gildedale and have them prepare; war is upon us."

"A moment, your Majesty." Applejack strode to right in front of Princess Celestia and looked her in the eye. "If it's all right with you ma'am, I'd like ta, er, I mean if it's okay...I'd like ta go with Ashtail and Shield Maiden. To help them prepare and...stuff."

All ponies there shot surprised looks at Applejack, none more surprised than the two Gildedale ponies. Princess Celestia merely shared a knowing look with Rarity, before looking back to Applejack. "If that is what you want, then go with my blessing."

Applejack bowed and gave thanks, before returning to the crowd. She sidled up next to Ashtail and Shield Maiden and smiled at them. Princess Celestia then drew all attention back to her with a heavy tap of her hoof on

the hard marble floor. "One final assignment is to be made, and it is quite likely the most important of them all. My brave, my loyal knights; Twilight Sparkle, Rainbow Dash, Doctor Whoof, Rarity, Ditzy Doo, Big Macintosh, I charge you with this quest. Find and secure the Crown of Cronus. Everything, absolutely everything, hinges upon this."

The named ponies exchanged looks between them, the gravity of the situation clear to them all. Rainbow Dash stopped hovering and dropped down to her hooves. She looked to Princess Celestia and nodded. "We won't fail you."

The moon was full in the sky, just beginning its downward descent to the western horizon, and Twilight Sparkle watched it from the balcony of her room. It was one of the smaller guest rooms in the castle, not much

Twilight watched the moon, but her mind was elsewhere, the events of the evening playing out again and again before her mind's eye. After the meeting had ended arrangements had been made by Princess Celestia. The various groups would be leaving at first light the next day, right after the sun was finished being raised and before the daily court began. From Canterlot Ashtail and Shield Maiden, with Applejack, would be going west and a bit south, cutting through Ponyville on their way to the Drackeback Mountains and then on to Gildedale. With this Applejack would be able to tell Apple Bloom and the others where and why they had all gone in such a hurry.

"I'm glad Applejack's going with them," Twilight said aloud. No one else was in the room, but a response came all the same.

"Yes, seeing old and familiar sights, and being near the stallion she fancies, will be good for that earth pony. She shall perhaps even escape the unjust punishment she has suffered at those called her friends."

Twilight nodded in acceptance of these words, and then turned her mind back to the plans. Applejack would not be the only Equestrian leaving tomorrow. At the same time as Applejack and the Daleponies headed west, she, Rainbow Dash, Rarity, Big Macintosh, Ditzy Doo, and Doctor Whoof would be heading north. The Magicahedron's vision to Princess Celestia

had indicated one thing in the way of directions; the old fortress of Khaza Rim. Named for an infamous dragon military hero, the fortress was the northernmost Equestrian outpost, just barely within the realm's boundaries in the region of Gallopfrey. Only a small contingent of soldiers, barely more than a hundred, kept watch there; a small but highly trained guard for in case the frost giants ever tried invading again.

"That will be a long, dangerous road fraught with peril" said the Voice again. "Other forces will learn of your quest, Twilight Sparkle. You will face diamond dogs again, for sure; you will face dragons, and gryphons, and their accursed spawn drakes. There will be dark sorcerers seeking this power for themselves, and perhaps things...so much worse."

"I know all this," replied Twilight. She looked down from the moon to the castle grounds, spying walking through the royal gardens Lady Falalauria and Princess Celestia, deep in conversation. Twilight watched them a while, the distant sound of their occasional laughter rising to her ears. The moon had moved a visible amount in the sky before she spoke again.

"It's probably selfish of me, but I can't stop thinking about what it is we're going after, and what it has done." Twilight's body sunk down and she rested her head on the windowsill. "I can't stop thinking about what Princess Celestia told us. It seems like every pony given a measure of power or authority gets taken in by it."

"Yessss, this does seem true. Just look at Luna, and her turn to Nightmare Moon to end what she thought an injustice. Just look at your Celestia, and her attempted taking of the Crown's power to stop Tirek. Just look at you-

"I will not," said Twilight, silencing the Voice. "I know what I have done, the pain I have caused, and the reasons it happened. I will never forget what I've done, even if I wanted to. And I don't, I really don't."

"You're lying to yourself," said the Voice, and then it went silent. It would trouble Twilight no more that night, she could tell. Sometimes it would go hours without a word, other times days; the only constant about it was that it always ended the conversation with the same statement.

"You're lying to yourself." Twilight didn't know what that was referring to,

and she didn't care. She didn't really care at all for the Voice, or anything it told her. She never talked back to it, at least not out loud. No one else knew about the Voice as far as she knew, and she had no desire to appear crazy to any other ponies. She knew she wasn't crazy, as deeply as she knew the Voice wasn't some fractured part of her psyche or a foreign mind invading her own. She simply...knew it.

"Whatever." Twilight turned from the window and began trotting over to the bed. She only wished the Voice didn't use the voice of her sister.

"All you have to do is take a cup of flour, add it to the mix. Now just take a little something sweet, not sour, a bit of salt, just a pinch!"

Pinkie Pie danced through the sterile white kitchen, singing her own little song at the top of her lungs. She bounced and slid from counter to counter, mixing batters at one, arranging ingredients at another, sliding trays of batter into ovens at yet another. The forth counter in the rectangular room, exactly the same dimensions as the kitchen she remembered from Sugarcube Corner, went unvisited. As she danced about Pinkie's hooves squeaked and skid on the white linoleum floor, her mane and tail bopping and swishing around to a tune that was only in her head.

"Baking these treats is such a cinch, add a teaspoon of vanilla. Add a little more and you count to four and you never get your fill of..."

A steel door set into the southern wall of the room opened with a rusty screech. Pinkie Pie stopped her singing and dancing and looked over at it, her bright blue eyes growing wide in barely contained excitement. Happiness seemed to pour off her, coloring the whole room in pink as, with the slow clop of hoofsteps, a new pony walked into the room, a Unicorn. This new pony was a bit taller than Pinkie, and thinner. Her coat was a deep purple, with a few streaks of grey running horizontally along the sides. Her mane was long, reaching down to the middle of her chest, and with a very slight forward curve to it. It was yellow as the sun, with a strip of purple going from her temple down to the end. Her tail was the same. Her left eye was the same purple shared by many Unicorns throughout Equestria, while her right eye was honey-yellow. Her cutie mark was a pair of white stars one over the other, surrounded by several smaller stars in a random

pattern.

"Hi, Dusk!" Pinkie grabbed a tray of pink and green cupcakes from the counter and hopped over to the Unicorn, who after shutting the door behind herself had immediately materialized a chair to sit in. Pinkie rammed the tray at her. "Want a cupcake? I just made them and I'd so love to share them with a special pony like you!"

Dusk gave a weary smile to Pinkie, one that the pink pony readily returned, and levitated a green-frosted cupcake from the tray. "Thank you, Pinkamina." One, two, three bites, and the cupcake was entirely finished. Dusk wiped a few crumbs away from her mouth and took another cupcake, this one pink. "Has Fluttershy arrived back with Jack yet? I have news."

Pinkie gave a short, fast shake of her head, making her mane flop about wildly and Dusk giggle. "Nope, sorry Dusky-Wusky. But it's a long trip from Midnight Castle to here, so I betcha they won't be here until tomorrow. Ooh, maybe even the day after tomorrow. Buuuuut..." Pinkie leaned in close and placed a quick little kiss on Dusk's cheek. "I bet telling ME the big news you've got all bottled up inside will make you feel better. Then we could tell Fluttershy and Jack together!"

"That sounds good." Dusk finished her second cupcake, but instead of going for a third she turned the chair into a couch with a flicker of her horn and patted the spot beside her with a hoof. Pinkie Pie let loose a high giggle and jumped onto the spot, snuggling in close to the Unicorn. Dusk smiled and wrapped a foreleg around the earth pony's shoulders.

"Well," the Unicorn began, "everything proceeded at Princess Celestia's meeting as I remembered. I think Princess Luna might have sensed my presence, goddess of subtlety and illusion that she is; Lady Falalauria definitely knew I was there, but that doesn't matter. The rest were all clueless. The Knights seemed in good shape. Rarity and Rainbow Dash were overjoyed to see the Lady of Shimmerwood again, and Applejack was more than overjoyed to see Lord Ashtail. She's healed fine from the wound you and Fluttershy left her. Not fully, but fine enough for our purposes."

A look of pain crossed Pinkie Pie's face, before she gave a little smile and nod. "Good, that's good. So she'll be going to Gildedale where she'll be out of the way of our daaaaark plans, right?"

Dusk nodded. "Right, she'll be out of the picture for a good while. So will Princess Celestia, because she's going south to help the Zebras. I had...forgotten that." Sadness entered the Unicorn's eyes, an indescribable pain that only comes from loss. "It seems my dreams of that meeting are not as accurate as I thought. Still, they shall have to do. They're all we have to go on."

"Oh, but that's not true!" Pinkie giggled and kissed Dusk again on the cheek. "We'll have Jack and his magical mumbo jumbo stuff to go on too! Why, I bet he's gonna have all kinds of cool stories to tell from his time, um...not alive. Then maybe we could take a break from our evil plotting to have a little get-together, tell some jokes, eat some cupcakes. Oooh, it's been over a year since he had a cupcake!"

"Hmm..." Dusk put a hoof to her chin, making a show of thinking over what Pinkie had said. After a few seconds she shrugged. "Well, I suppose you're right on all accounts. Anyway, it will be a while before Twilight Sparkle, Rainbow Dash, and all the others reach this point in their journey to the north. Leave the heroes to their questing and our villains to their plotting. No need to hurry or stress out or anything while I have..." the hoof around Pinkie's shoulders slid lower, caressing down the pink pony's side to her flank. "More important plots to focus on right now."

Pinkie Pie giggled, a light blush almost invisible on her cheeks. She fell backwards onto the couch as Dusk Nox leaned forward into her.

Chapter 4

Evil and Good

The dawn rose early on Canterlot that day, worry putting speed to Princess Celestia's magic. The sun's golden rays found the small group of adventurers gathered near the north gates of the castle, preparing themselves for what all expected to be a long, hard road. Travelers headed to the north and to the west mingled freely, drawing from each other, through their bonds of friendship, the strength they needed. In the distance echoed the faint cry of birds.

Rarity sat upon some steps, slowly and with the greatest precision born from many nights spent practicing, put on the armor given to her by the Deer so long ago, on the Quest of the Three. The wild green steel of it shimmered in the dawn light, turning a multitude of hues as each piece was slid onto her form. She did not yet have the absolute perfect combination of power and precision that allowed Lady Falalauria and the other deer to simply have the armor appear over them, so each piece had to go on at a time. First came the flanchard sweeping over her shoulders, thin lines of crystal tracing through it to mimic the veins of a leaf. Onto this was attached the peytral, the advanced metalworking of the deerfolk leaving no visible joints, yet it allowed her the grace and flexibility to dodge blows as if she wore no armor. Then, onto her lower legs went the four greaves, shaped like long, thin leaves wrapping around her limbs. And then finally the helmet, its crystal crests and metal cheek plates curving gracefully over her head. The whole ensemble was as much a work of art as it was equipment for war.

Shield Maiden walked over to Rarity and watched the Unicorn secure the final pieces of armor. She herself was garbed in the dark red leather armor of Gildedale, with a spear resting in its holster at her left side and a hoof-axe strung to her right foreleg. "You look like one of the deerfolk, and I mean no insult with that. That armor fits you."

Rarity finished adjusting her helmet so that it did not mess up her mane too badly, and then looked over at Shield Maiden and smiled. "Thank you, my dear. I must say, you truly pull off the leather look well."

Shield Maiden nodded, smiling, and then turned her head to reach into a saddlebag on her right side. "Well, Rarity, I think I have the missing piece to your ensemble." She turned back around and set something onto the cobblestone ground in front of Rarity. "You just might find this useful."

It took Rarity a moment to recognize it as the horn blade she had briefly used in Gildedale, but when she did her face lit up. "Oh!" She levitated the elegant crystal blade up and onto her exposed horn, the inherent magic in the blade adjusting the hollow base to fit snugly in place. She swung her head up and down a few times and then side to side, the blade whistling as it carved through the chilly morning air. Rarity looked to Shield Maiden and gave a small smile. "Perhaps this time I shall be worthy of this pretty jewel of death."

Shield Maiden nodded, and then sat down beside Rarity. "I am going with you," she said.

Rarity stared at her a moment, working her jaw, trying to say something, before she blinked and shook her head. "I'm sorry, but wha? You mean that you're coming with us...to find the crown? You're not returning to Gildedale with Applejack and Ashtail?"

Shield Maiden shook her head, and then looked away. Rarity followed her gaze to across the courtyard, where Ashtail stood. From the looks of it Applejack was introducing him to Big Macintosh, though from this distance what they were saying could not be heard. "Ashtail talked about it last night, before retiring to bed. We both feel that since the safety of all nations, and not just Equestria, hinges on this quest, more than Equestrians should go on it." She turned back to Rarity and smiled. "We stand together, Rarity. Forever."

"And always," said a voice above the two ponies. Rarity and Shield Maiden looked up, and there stood one of the deer warriors that had been with Lady Falalauria the other night. The buck's helmet was gone, and over the rest of his armor was wrapped a grey-green traveler's cloak that Rarity imagined would allow him to blend in rather well in woods.

"You must not remember me," said the buck after several moments of silence. The smile on his face told them he wasn't offended by this. "I'm

Diogo, the rookie from when you and Rainbow Dash and Applejack passed through Shimmerwood, and I will represent the deerfolk on this quest. It is a pleasure to meet you all again, and I hope I can be of some help on this journey."

A sudden multicolored blur stirred the wind around the small group. Rainbow Dash hovered above the buck, making him eep and jump. "Oh hay yeah! I remember you Diogo, and I can't wait to see what you can do!" She pumped her forehooves in the air. "This is gonna be the best quest ever! Nananana, goin' on an adventure, nananana, havin' some fun, nanananana, with my best friends, nanananana, yeah!"

"Rainbow Dash," called Rarity, snapping the rainbow-maned Pegasus out of her little jig. "Stop moving around and let me get a good look at you!" Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes and dropped down to the ground. Rarity smiled and began looking over. "Oooh, my my Rainbow, you certainly look the part."

Rainbow Dash looked down at herself, grinning after a moment. "Heh, yeah, I suppose I do." Wound around her neck was the silvery scarf she had received from Lady Falalauria, glinting in the morning light. In sharp contrast to the others around her she wore no armor, except for dark red leather greaves wrapped around her lower legs. Onto each was emblazoned the sun and moon. More eye-drawing were the special lightweight blades fitted to the fronts of her wings. Joints in the metal allowed them to bend and sway with the movements of the wings in flight. "I do look really cool, but could somepony explain why we aren't simply using our Elements armor?"

"Lady Falalauria explained it to me early this morning," spoke up Diogo, making Rainbow Dash and the others turn to him. For a moment he shrunk down beneath all their stares, but then gathered himself up and continued. "While discovery by the enemy is inevitable, our Lady and your princesses want to hold it off for as long as possible. The magical signatures your elements release would be an easy way to track us."

"Oh." Rainbow Dash sat back on her haunches, lifting a forehoof up to scratch at her chin. "Ya know, that was really expository magic junk, which suddenly has me thinking. Where's the other guy responsible for expository magic junk?"

As if actually waiting for this to be asked, at that moment the doors to the castle were thrown open and a stallion strode out. All the others stopped what they were doing and looked at him, gaping. The stallion wore a heavy grey robe, so oversized it nearly dragged across the ground. Around his chin was strapped a white beard, and atop his head sat a big wizard's cap, like the one Trixie had worn for her show, its brim so wide it nearly hid his face.

"I am a servant of the sun's fire, wielder of the Screwdriver of Sonic. Dark magic shall not avail him, Nero of the diamond dogs!" Doctor Whoof gave the sonic screwdriver gripped between his teeth a little twirl and smiled at the others. "So yeah, I wear a wizard's hat now. Wizard's hats are cool."

Silence followed, as everyone there, even the guards assigned to guard the gates, just stared at him. Doctor Whoof's smile faltered as the seconds stretched on into minutes, before finally he grunted in annoyance and threw off the robe and fake beard. "None of you are any fun! I refuse to associate with anyone who's never read Lord of the Wings! That is just...wrong!"

As Doctor Whoof stalked off to sulk in the corner, Rainbow Dash turned to look at Rarity. "Wait, was that supposed to be Gandelk?"

Rarity shivered. "Oh bleh, I hope not. Though he got the look right, forcing the sonic screwdriver into the quote just messed it all up. Plus he simply doesn't have the coat color to pull off an all-grey ensemble like that. Ooh, perhaps if he'd tried out Gandelk the White...."

To himself, Diogo softly mumbled "Ponies are weird."

As things seemed to quiet down once more, the assembled ponies resumed checking their equipment and waiting for the final few members of their parties to arrive. As they did, Shield Maiden stood beside Rainbow Dash and looked over her armament with a warrior's interest. "Those wing blades are very interesting. I have seen a few Pegasi soldiers whenever Princess Celestia has visited Gildedale for any reason, yet none of them had those. And the greaves seem similar in style to those worn by us Daleponies."

Rainbow Dash grinned and gave her wings a flap, ascending into the air and doing a little twirl. "Yeah, they're pretty cool. And it's no surprise you haven't seen anything like them before. These babies are the specialized weapons of the Equestrian Royal Marines, who're separate from the royal guards. They mostly deal with problems along the borders Equestria has with aerial countries, like Carcosa, the dragonlands. No amount of heavy armor's going to be much use when dealing with things that could bisect you in one bite, so being nimble in the air is the best defense."

Shield Maiden nodded in understanding. Yes, I can understand the thinking behind that. That is one of the reasons warriors of Gildedale utilize lighter armor when fighting komagas. Or at least we did, before Applejack and the rest of you showed us a better way. Thank you for that again, by the way."

A smug grin that could blind lesser ponies flashed across the Pegasus's face. "Heh, thanks."

"Although, I wonder," said Shield Maiden, continuing. "Where did you get that armor?"

"Bubbles fall from the sky and strike the unwary muffin!" Ditzzy Doo dropped down beside Rainbow Dash and Shield Maiden, sending both ponies jumping back. The walleyed Pegasus grinned at them and struck a pose, showing off the full suit of Equestrian Marine Pegasus armor she wore. It was indeed, as Shield Maiden had noticed, very similar in design to the armor of the ponies of Gildedale, perhaps even inspired by that armor in closer times between the two countries. The outfit Ditzzy included the same sort of greaves and wing blades Rainbow Dash wore, along with a leather peytral and crupper, though the crupper was significantly shorter than the Gildedale variant to allow greater range of bucking. It was however missing any flanchard, allowing her wings their full mobility, and no helmet covered her head, allowing her golden mane to flow freely.

"Feels great to be back in the saddle," Ditzzy said, turning to smile at Rainbow Dash. "This just might be a good adventure yet, if the celery flies and crows mind their tails!"

With this arrival, Rarity stood up and swept her gaze over all there. "Hmm, who does that leave...it appears we are just waiting on Twilight

Sparkle now. And the princesses, of course."

"And you shall wait no longer," said a voice above them all. Rarity and the others turned and looked up the stairs they stood before, seeing Princess Celestia, Princess Luna, and Lady Falalauria descending those steps from the castle entrance. Twilight Sparkle followed along behind them, her cowl over her head as it always was. All there, pony and deerfolk alike, broke into bows as the four approached, all except Doctor Whoof, who watched Twilight Sparkle with a smile. She felt his eyes on her and looked towards him, giving him a small, embarrassed smile in return. He simply laughed and grinned wider.

Once the group reached the foot of the stairs Twilight broke from them, going to stand beside Doctor Whoof. From there the departing groups began drifting apart. Rainbow Dash, Rarity, Twilight Sparkle, Shield Maiden, Diogo, Doctor Whoof, and Big Mac stood in the right area of the small courtyard, while Ashtail and Applejack took the left side. Princess Celestia herself strode between the two groups to the opened gate, turning to look back at them all.

"Travelers from different lands, from this land, now is the time for us to begin our journeys. The future of many things hangs in the balance, with only what we ourselves do deciding salvation or destruction. I have faith in all of you that you will do your duty. And remember, though today we may be going our separate ways, we all fight for the same goal; peace, and happiness."

Looking away from the two groups of travelers, Princess Celestia looked to Princess Luna. Lady Falalauria and her one remaining deer guard had already teleported back home. "Princess Luna, my beloved sister, I leave Canterlot and all of Equestria to your care until I return or it is destroyed."

Princess Luna bowed her head to the Sun Regent. "I accept the responsibility, big sister. Though, um, let's hope it doesn't come to that second option."

"Indeed." Princess Celestia then turned to Rainbow Dash, standing at the front of her group. "Rainbow Dash, if your knights are ready then this is where we part. The best of luck on your quest."

Rainbow Dash grinned up at the Alicorn. "Princess, with friends like these with me, I won't need luck." But then her grin faltered as she stepped past Princess Celestia and strode to the outermost part of the gate, where one step further would be out of Canterlot and into the world. She paused and looked out there with her Pegasus eyes, where the fields and hills rolled by for hundreds and hundreds of miles, their old green blending together, broken here and there by patches of forest or lakes or rivers. And then farther off into the distance, rising into the sky like grey sentinels, stood the Greyridge Mountains, and beyond them the cold, dead region of Gallopfrey, and their destination. It dawned on Rainbow Dash, then, that she was leading her friends on that journey. That their safety, their survival, rested foremost in her hooves, and if she failed them, if she faltered in her strength for the smallest moment...

Rainbow Dash turned at the sound of hooves stopping beside her. There stood Rarity, a smile gracing her armored form. "Rainbow dear," she said, "We are all behind you. Lead us."

Rainbow Dash looked back behind her, and saw Rarity to be right. There stood Ditzzy Doo and Twilight Sparkle, Doctor Whoof and Big Mac, Shield Maiden and Diogo. They all waited behind and beside her, trusting looks in their eyes as they waited for her, Rainbow Dash, to take them where she would. Then she looked up at Princess Celestia at the gate, and the princess smiled and nodded. "They are behind you, lead them."

Rainbow Dash looked back ahead. A grin formed on her face as she looked back at those hundreds and hundreds of miles of fields and prairies, those towering mountains promising a wasteland for them, and found that they weren't that big a problem after all. Though the weight of her responsibility still hung on her shoulders, it was lighter than before, reduced by the thought they all trusted in her. And if they could trust in her, who was she to not trust in herself?

"Okay guys," Rainbow Dash said, striding forth from the gate onto the northward road. Together the other knights and travelers to the north followed. "First we make for the Bridge of Brelagrose!"

High, high above Canterlot, high above the fields and forests

immediately surrounding the great city-castle, carrion-birds flew. The great black birds wheeled and dove through the air, their shrieks and caws echoing for miles in all directions, coming in faint to the ponies in Canterlot below. Their sharp eyes scanned the world below them, looking for the sight they waited for. They listened to the world below them, listening for the sound they waited for. Their simple animal brains could not understand why they did this, or what it was, but they did it anyway, commanded to by their winged mistress. They could never fail her, never her.

Then, finally, there came the sound they had been listening for and the sight they had been watching for. "First we make for the Bridge of Brelagrose!" And down below, from Canterlot moved many ponies, most of them clad in armor and weapons. They moved up, to The Place of Home, and the carrion-birds filled the air with their screeches. Their flying grew frenzied as they wheeled around, taking off in a massive cloud black beak and black feather, speeding ahead of the departing ponies to The Place of Home.

To ponies on the ground they appeared as a black cloud or drifting smoke moving against the wind, so large and thick was their flock. Their shadow skimmed over the earth, keeping pace with them over fields and hills and rivers as they flew. High above them the sun passed, inching inexorably through the sky to the western horizon; and still they flew, without stop. The sun passed over the horizon and the moon rose, and the first day passed.

It was at first light of the second day of flight, when the carrion-birds reached the edges of the Hatchling Forest, and by mid-day they had reached the other side and to their destination. Before the flock lay a sprawling pony city, its buildings climbing up the sides of the Darkling Mountain itself. Squat buildings of grey stone beyond count covered the land, smokestacks rising from them into the air. From them spewed forth thick black smog, rising up above the city where it stayed, buffered into place by the weatherwork of surrounding pony settlements. None wanted the factory smoke of Stalliongrad marring their skies, so there it stayed above the northern city, casting it into an unnatural and hateful perpetual dusk.

Below these clouds of smoke and ash the flock flew, past the factories to the stone and metal citadel at the far end, built into the mountain itself.

They flew to the very top of the highest spire, where they found their mistress perched like a statue and waiting for them. Their screeches filled the air once more as they circled around the Pegasus, relaying to her their news. "First we make for the Bridge of Brelagrose! Bridge of Brelagrose!"

A dark smile spread over Fluttershy's face, and she dismissed the birds around her with a wave of her hoof. They screeched and retreated, flying away to their dens for rest. Fluttershy meanwhile spread her wings and leapt from the spire, coasting down until she came to an opening in the flat stone surface and flew into the tower. From there she went down, her hoofsteps echoing along the corridors of stone, the sole noise in a deserted tower. But Fluttershy paid no heed to how alone she was there, or how dark it was. The shadows danced around her in the flickering light of torches set into the walls, forming wicked shapes and reaching claws. But Fluttershy noticed none of it. She was a part of it now.

Reaching the bottom of the tower, Fluttershy passed through a door into the main citadel beyond. She strode through a tall hall, the walls lined with deep blue drapes all depicting one thing; a red skull, equine-shaped, with two horns like a bull's horn rising from the top. Through the hall were lined up long tables, at which sat dozens of diamond dogs. Their growls, barks, and laughter filled the hall as they feasted, the floor strewn with the bones they did not eat. They dogs she passed howled and shouted foul words at Fluttershy, promising all sorts of sick, filthy, and lewd actions if they were to ever find her alone and away from the protection of their shared master. She always responded with a smile and a promise to think about it before she went to bed.

Across the large hall from where she had started, Fluttershy passed through a wide archway and up a short flight of stairs. At the top she entered into a new room and shut the door behind her. This room was significantly smaller than the hall she had been in moments ago, no larger than her old tree home on the outskirts of Ponyville. This room was much more dressed up than the rest of the citadel, the stone floor covered in thick rugs from Los Arabias and the walls covered in golden draperies and paintings worth more than all of Ponyville combined. At the center of the room was set a massive mahogany table, covered in all sorts of food fit for omnivores like diamond dogs.

Fluttershy was not the only person in the room. Sitting so he faced the

door, Nero ate of the food on the table. The sounds of tearing flesh and breaking bone made Fluttershy feel like heaving, but she willed her stomach's contents to stay down. Silently she approached the table and leaned into a bow. Not to Nero, but to the thing sitting across the table from Nero, its back to the door. "Master, word has arrived from my bird spies. A company of ponies have left Canterlot, heading north. They are heading for the Bridge of Brelagrose."

Nero stopped eating and looked at Fluttershy. Grease dripped from his muzzle as he grinned. "Taking that bridge over the Mearas River will set them on a path straight to here. Either those fools have no idea what we have done here, or they are in quite the hurry. Either way, I look forward to encountering them again. Especially that purple one, Twilight Sparkle. Her fear smelled delicious." He sat up straighter and glared at Fluttershy. "She was in the group, right?"

The butter-yellow Pegasus shrugged and sat down at the table. Taking a roll from it she took a bite before looking at the deep blue pony beside her. It was something difficult to do, something about him made it hard, almost painful to look directly at him. Not just him either. The black suit he wore, appearing over his body moments after he had fully regenerated, seemed not so much merely the color black, but seemed to suck the light and color from the room like a black hole. The red tie around his neck was the color of blood, a matching stench rising from it as if it was made of the life fluid. "Master, remind me, wasn't that the road we took on our journey back from Castle Midnight?"

"...." The Master turned his head and looked at her, and Fluttershy felt a little bit of that old fear, that simpering terror she had lived with almost her whole life, crawl back into her. The way the thing, the...Master, looked at her, was the same way she had seen some ponies regard an empty container, or a cracked mirror, or a broken quill. He looked at her not as a person, but as a useless object. Perhaps, she wondered, if everything in the world was simply a useless object to one who had returned from the Dreaming.

"Bridge...of...Brelagrose?" The Master's gaze drifted away from Fluttershy, to her relief. Standing from where he sat by the table, the Master began to pace around the room. Fluttershy, and Nero to a lesser extent, could only watch him in disgusted fascination. He did not look like a

normal pony, and what had been hidden in the darkness of Castle Midnight was clear to see in the bright lights of Stalliongrad. His eyes were bloodshot and sunken into his skull, surrounded by deep shadow. His coat had an unhealthy pallor to it, as if caught in the twilight moment between health and beginning to rot. Worse were his hooves, yellow and clacking as if with disease. His teeth were the same. Yet even worse was that he did not move as normal ponies did. There was no particular motion that could be pointed out as wrong. It seemed more like watching an expert imitation of normal movement, as if an outside force were simply maneuvering the limbs through the correct motions. It reminded Fluttershy in a way of a puppet show she had once gone to as a child, watching the Unicorn magic moving the puppets along.

Then the Master stopped his pacing and looked in her direction. "Ah, the Bridge of Brelagrose. Yes Fluttershy, that is along the particular path we took." He stalked back towards the table, like a predator stalking his prey. A smile grew on his face devoid of mirth or joy. "Hm. I hope they enjoy their time in that quaint little village by the water. I know that I certainly did. Enjoyed my time there."

"Hmm..." Nero leaned across the table and looked at the Master with hard, inquisitive look. "Why is it, I wonder, that even when I know what I am hearing is the truth, everything you say sounds like a falsehood?"

The Master shrugged, still smiling. "I don't know. Maybe you're just hearing wrong. My words sound just fine to me."

Anything else that would have been said on the topic by either Nero or the Master, it was broken by the sudden sound of wild, jubilant laughter, followed a moment later by Pinkie Pie bouncing up the stairs into the room. Gripped in her mouth was a large plate covered in what looked to be a dozen fresh blueberry muffins. Fluttershy smiled as she watched the bright pink filly bounce around the room, and wondered how she could possibly laugh so hard while holding something in her mouth.

Pinkie Pie went two full circles around the room before coming to a stop by the table. "I made sweets," she shouted around the plate in her mouth. She turned first to Fluttershy. "Have one?" Fluttershy took a muffin and took a bite, smiling at the delicious taste. Pinkie Pie next turned to Nero and offered the plate to him. "Have one?"

"I...suppose I could have something to wash all this meat down. Food is food, after all." The massive Wolf grabbed a muffin from the plate and popped the whole thing into his mouth, chewing it just a couple times before swallowing. "...this tastes good." He took another from the plate.

The smile that grew on Pinkie Pie's face at this comment seemed to literally light up the room. Turning she hopped around table to the side the Master sat on and offered him the plate. "And how about you, Mr. Big Bad Evil Master guy?" She set the plate down on the floor beside him and smiled even wider. "Would you like a muffin?"

The Master looked down at the plate of muffins beside him, and then up at Pinkie Pie's beaming face. He smiled back at her and lifted his front right hoof, and slowly and with the utmost precision began stomping on the muffins, grinding each one beneath his heel before moving to the next. A whole minute passed in silence before he was done, and the nine remaining muffins had been reduced to little more than crumbs and blueberry smears. Still he smiled.

Pinkie Pie didn't bat an eye. Picking the plate with the ruined muffins back up she gave a little eye smile and began bouncing for the door. "Okay then, if you don't like muffins I can make you something else to keep you energized while doing your evil plotting! As my Uncle Ruckus always says, if at first you don't succeed, feed 'em steamed rutabaga!"

"Pinkie, wait." Pinkie Pie stopped at the door and looked back at the Master. He had sat back down at the table and was staring off into nothing. "Before you return to cooking, go to your sorceress friend. Tell her to go to the northern end of the Bridge of Brelagrose and play with the heroes there. We don't want them getting lax in their journey after all."

"Okey dokey lokey!" And then Pinkie was turned back around and hopping down the stairs two at a time.

The Master turned to Nero. "Return to your Wolves and set them to their combat drills. The time approaches when they will see the greatest combat of their lives."

Nero nodded and stood up from the table. Tearing off a final piece of

meat from a barbecued rack of lamb he strode out of the room. A few seconds afterwards a chorus of howls rose from the grand hall beyond, signaling he had called the eating diamond dogs to him.

Finally, the Master looked to Fluttershy. She stayed silent and averted her eyes, not wanting to meet his gaze. But then her head snapped up as the door slammed shut and locked, a chair sliding over to block it. She looked to the Master and found a terrifying smile on his face. The very sight of it made her stomach flip, barely resisting the urge to vomit up the contents of it onto the floor. Only the thought that such a thing would have amused the monster staring across the table at her.

"Fluttershy," the Master said, standing up. "I am going to hurt you now. If it gives you some comfort, turn off the lights."

Fluttershy turned off the lights.

Their third day of traveling had dawned cold and wet. A heavy mist had come up sometime during the night and lingered, making all their equipment uncomfortable to wear, at best, and forced them to eat a cold breakfast of grass and a few oats each, made all the colder by the lateness of the year and the lack of a fire. After that they had fixed up their campsite and started back on their long trek. The mist hung in the air, reducing visibility to mere yards in all directions. At Twilight Sparkle's insistence Rainbow Dash and Ditzzy stayed on the ground with the rest of the group, to reduce the chances of getting lost in the mist. Even then, outside of a few feet even the nearest members of the group from each other appeared only as ghosts, figures in the mist.

It was over an hour before anyone broke the deafening silence. "I don't like this," said Shield Maiden, walking along at the head of the group next to Rainbow Dash. Her armor had been kept in her pack that morning, both to keep the leather safe from the choking moisture in the air, and as she explained because she did not need her helmet reducing her peripheral vision any more than it was already suffering. "Thick mists like this are rare in Gildedale, as are overly deep rivers, so most of our equipment isn't treated to resist water. Plus I can barely see anything in this."

Rainbow Dash looked over at Shield Maiden from the corner of her eye. "It's not all bad, you should know. Mists like this are common this time of year around the Mearas River. We can't be much longer than a few minutes away from Brelagrose at this pace. In fact..." She jumped once and tested how her hooves fell. "The ground's begun to incline. Where we're going is right past this hill I think."

She smiled and turned her attention back ahead of them. "Then we'll finally be able to get out of this dang mist and into somewhere warm! There's this one tavern near the heart of the town, serves the best mead in all Equestria! I've heard stories of Pronghorns stopping by there just to pick up a few cases to deliver to foreign lands."

Rarity trotted up to Rainbow Dash's other side and joined in on the conversation. "Why if I'm not mistaken, you sound as if you've been to Brelagrose before, Rainbow Dash."

Rainbow Dash shrugged, slowing her pace some. "Eh, a couple of times...okay, more than a couple. It's a common stop for the Wonderbolts on their tours, so there's that. It was also a real happening place for flight school punks like me to take on for the weekend." A smile crept onto Rainbow Dash's face. Her mind filled with old memories of wild nights and painful mornings, plentiful food and drink and daring games. "Eh, Gilda and I'd always get into all kinds of trouble. Not that kind of trouble," she quickly added, seeing the look of reproach beginning on Rarity's face. "Just, you know, harmless, slightly inebriated pranks. Oh and singing. Lots and lots of singing."

At this a thought occurred to Rainbow Dash and she stopped walking. Behind her Twilight didn't see it coming and collided with her rump, but Rainbow Dash hardly noticed. "Hmm," she scratched her chin. "Ya know, if singing's the result, I wonder if Pinkie Pie wasn't simply always drunk off her a-"

"Darling," Rarity interrupted while helping Twilight back to her hooves. "Pinkie Pie didn't quite strike me as the sort of pony to drink, period. Why, that'd be like you willingly getting a makeover!"

"Hey!" By now the whole group had come to a stop, some looking annoyed at the stop, some thankful for a rest after what had been

becoming a rising incline, and Doctor Whoof amused by the conversation. Rainbow Dash frowned and turned to face Rarity. "I can get makeovers when I want! Like when we went to the Grand...Gallop...!" Rainbow's flicked, and she began to scan around them. The sight of this immediately sent Shield Maiden and a nearby Diogo to scanning the mist around them as well. "Gala...."

Rarity didn't notice the sudden shift in the mood. "Oh, well of course you did then, Rainbow Dash. You were hoping to impress the Wonder-"

Rarity was then the recipient of Big Mac's hoof on her mouth. He leaned in close to whisper and nodded over to Rainbow Dash. "Shhh, somethin' ain't right."

Rainbow Dash turned her head this way and that, ears perked for the slightest sound. Twilight stepped close to the blue Pegasus. "Rainbow Dash," she whispered, "what is it? What do you hear out there?"

Rainbow Dash stopped her turning, her mind racing to figure out all the possible reasons for what she was hearing. She didn't like any of them. "I hear...I hear nothing." She took a few stumbling steps further up the hill, straining her head forward for the slightest sound. "We should be hearing Brelagrose by now. Even on misty days like this the town's busy. Something's wrong!"

With this shout Rainbow Dash plunged ahead into the mist, parting it around her with quick flaps of her wings. From the cries for her to slow down and many hoofsteps behind her she could tell the others were following, but she paid them no mind. They could catch up with her easily enough if they just kept to a straight line. Then the ground beneath her fell away as she came to the top of the hill. Beyond it the mist began to part and fade away, broken up by the forlorn figures of buildings. They had come arrived at Brelagrose, and not a sign of life was to be seen.

Rainbow Dash charged forward down the hill, the sounds of her friends falling away behind her. Then she was all alone in the mist. Her wings beat at it as she ran, keeping the mist had bay but not dispelling it. All around her the ghostly figures of buildings glided by in the mist, shadows hanging over them, dripping down them like some physical, liquid mass. Rainbow Dash called out as she passed the buildings by, calling out for anyone,

anything to respond back. The only responses that came were the echoes of her own voice, sending chills racing up and down her spine.

Then she tripped and fell. Rainbow Dash rolled head over heels once, twice, before coming to a stop on her back, her wings pinned down beneath her. For a few seconds the world spun about around her, until she shook her head and stood up. She trotted back a few paces to see what she had tripped over, thinking it had been a rock, or stray can. It wasn't.

Rainbow Dash cried and jumped back from the sight of the body, a bright red mare with a white mane and tail. Her mint-green eyes stared lifelessly up at the sky, a look somewhat like surprise frozen on her face. A cheap pearl necklace hung around her neck.

"Rainbow Dash, where are you-GAH!"

Rainbow Dash's attention was torn from the corpse by the scream. Looking up she saw her friends had caught up to her, and were looking down at the corpse with differing looks of shock and horror. It had been Rarity who had screamed. The only one of the group who didn't seem affected by the sight, or at least hid it well, was Doctor Whoof. Rainbow Dash saw he had immediately sat down next to the body and started examining it. Good for him.

Ditzy fluttered over to Rainbow Dash's side and helped her back to her hooves. Rainbow Dash looked at her and opened her mouth to say something, but as if in some kind of cruel, monstrous prank the mist chose at that moment to begin to dissipate, and the living saw the rest of the dead. The bodies were everywhere. They lay fallen in the streets in singles, pairs, and small groups. They lay slumped against buildings and street-side objects like fruit stands and mailboxes. They hung halfway out second-story and third-story windows, staring down at Rainbow Dash and the others with dead eyes. A young colt, barely more than a foal, sat near a street sign, the baseball bat gripped in his mouth the only thing keeping his body from falling down. Beside him lay a filly that looked about the same age, her mane done up with a bow just like Apple Bloom's and her right hoof gripping the young colt's left hoof.

"They didn't even have their cutie marks yet," whispered Shield Maiden,

looking at them. Walking over to them she slid a hoof over their wide open eyes, closing them. "What...what sort of evil could have done this?"

Twilight slunk deeper into her cloak, her head hanging low as tears dripped down her cheeks onto the ground. Diogo was the only one who saw, and chose not to say anything in front of the others.

"It...Could have been that brute Nero, I suppose," said Rarity, looking about them. "But no...He seemed to me the sort that would make a game of this kind of slaughter. Plus, none of these bodies have wounds on any sort...."

"I don't reckon it was a plague of any sort," said Big Mac next. "I ain't ever heard of any disease that could wipe out a town so fast ponies drop dead where they're standing."

Rainbow Dash listened to the others talk, until it simply became too much. She turned away and began walking off, deeper into the town. A moment later she felt many presences around her and looked up. All the others were walking with her, Ditzzy to her left and Rarity to her right. Ditzzy leaned in and nuzzled against her cheek. "No more rushing off, bright Rainbow. Flock stays together for now on, face horrors like bad chills together."

Rainbow Dash nodded in understanding and continued on. She led them along the main town road, more bodies everywhere they looked. Big Mac's comment rang in their minds; it did seem like every single stallion, mare, filly, and colt in the town had simply dropped dead where they stood. As they went they also found other kinds of bodies. Trees had turned to broken husks of their former selves, grass had shriveled up brown and dead; not even wildlife like squirrels and birds had been able to escape whatever horror had descended on the town and robbed it of life.

Up ahead of them all, a small two story building emerged from the mist, set apart from the other buildings. It was a plain wooden building, with no fancy paint jobs or detailing on it except for a stylized green dragon over the front entrance. Rainbow Dash walked to the swinging doors and pushed through them into the building. The others followed her in, except for Diogo and Big Mac, who both stayed outside to keep watch.

The inside of the building proved it to be a tavern. Set to Rainbow Dash's right were around half a dozen circular tables, all bare. Along the wall to her left and running all the way to the opposite side of the building from the door she had come in through was the bar itself, and it was here that the only body in the building lay. Slumped forward onto the counter was a Pegasus stallion. His fur was an icy blue color, a wild contrast to the bright green of his mane and tail. He wore a bartender's uniform, and in his hooves were a half-cleaned glass mug and a dish rag. A little baseball cap several sizes too small lay nearby, as if it had fallen off when he fell.

The world rushed away from Rainbow Dash as she started toward the body. Her hoof falls on the wooden flooring sounded dull and hollow to her, and a sickening numbness filled her chest, threatening to spread outward. She leaned on the bar stool directly across the counter from the body just to keep from falling over. She looked over at her friends a moment, seeing their questioning, concerned looks, and then turned back forward.

"His name was Frosty Lime," Rainbow Dash finally said. "I owed him a bar tab of 379 bits, for two whole years of drinks before I dropped out of flight school and went to Ponyville. He dropped out of flight school the same year I started. Whenever I came in he joked about asking me out, but he never did. The hat was his younger brother's, who drowned in the Mearas River during a freak storm and the riverbanks flooded. One night I drank too much and passed out, and when I came to I was back in my bedroom, with a note taped to my forehead telling me to be more careful next time. I owed him another 200 bits for...for crashing through his window...once..."

Rainbow Dash's strength finally broke. She fell to her knees, pressing her face against the side of the counter as she cried. The tears streamed down her cheeks, hot and horrible against the cold mist lingering around her. Rainbow Dash felt a pair of strong arms wrap around her shoulders and pull her into an embrace and she returned it, burying her face into the other's chest. "Why? Wh-why would an...anyone do this? I...I don't understand...."

Ditzy hugged Rainbow Dash all the tighter as the other Pegasus's words degenerated into more sobs. Ditzy stroked a hoof through her mane, whispering soft words of comfort into her ear. "It's okay. It's okay. It's okay, my rainbow. It's okay...."

Twilight staggered out of the tavern and emptied the contents of her stomach onto the cobblestone road. Both Big Mac and Diogo moved forward toward her but she motioned them back with a wave of a hoof.

"I'm fine, I'm fine, I just...I couldn't stay in there any longer."

"Miss Sparkle," Big Mac began, stepping toward her anyway despite her efforts. The soft sounds of Rainbow Dash's crying drifted through the door to them. "Twilight, what happened in there? Hay, what happened out here?" Twilight lowered her head to the ground, hiding it from the large stallion. Big Mac's eyes narrowed and he moved even closer. "Twilight Sparkle, what-"

"We have work to do," Twilight suddenly said, interrupting Big Mac. She stood back up and turned to him, while motioning Diogo to come over. "We should...we should do something with them." Twilight's gaze swept around them, taking in all the bodies lying around. She couldn't count them all, and even if she could she dared not try. That would just be too much for her. "These ponies deserve more than to be left out to rot until someone else comes along. Big Mac, I want you see if you can scrounge up some shovels for us. Diogo, find a barren plot of land, preferably this side of the river."

"But Twilight," said the deer, stepping forward. He glanced about them at the bodies, and then up at the sky above. The sun was just barely visible. "What you are asking could take the rest of the day. And we still have so far to go on our journey."

Twilight looked at Diogo, and then past him, back to the tavern. They followed her gaze and saw the rest of the group coming out, Rainbow Dash leaning on Ditzzy for support. The rainbow-maned Pegasus's tears had stopped but her eyes still shone with wetness, ready to begin again at the slightest provocation.

Rarity met Twilight's gaze and nodded to her. Twilight nodded back and looked back at Diogo. "This is a delay we have to do. We simply...have to."

"And when we find the evil that did this," whispered the voice in Twilight's head, as the others turned away to do their duties and she was left standing alone in the mist. "We shall bring justice to it."

Somewhere above her in the mists, a lone crow cawed.

The whole sordid business indeed took the rest of the day. Diogo had found a large space of empty land several yards to the east of town, an empty field that looked like it was being prepared for new farming. This made it easier to dig into the soil, but still it had taken many hours of Big Mac, Doctor Whoof, and Shield Maiden working before there were enough graves for every single body. Even Rarity joined in on the digging, using two shovels at once with her magic. It was the most depressing work any of them had ever done.

While those three had worked on the graves, Rainbow Dash and Ditzzy had gone through town, collecting up the bodies they could find. There had been some disagreement at first on letting the distressed Pegasus work, but Rainbow Dash had insisted that she was fine. In the end the others relented only if she and Ditzzy stayed together while working. The two Pegasi both agreed to this, and had set to work. It was the most sickening work either of them had ever done.

This all left Twilight to construct the coffins. The job was easy, with her plentiful magic and intense focus, but still terrible. She didn't have any experience in woodwork of any sort but had found all the material she needed at a wood yard down river from town. Her coffins were incredibly crude, little more than straight slabs of wood fused together into one piece with magic, but this didn't matter. They all hoped to return as soon as they could after the quest, and make sure all the ponies were accounted for by family or friend. Still, she tried to make sure the boxes were sturdy enough, and would keep out any bugs or dirt once the lids were shut. It was the most horrific work she had ever done.

Afternoon came. Once all the graves had been dug, the bodies placed in their makeshift coffins, and the coffins lowered into their graves, Rainbow Dash forced everyone else away.

"I need to do this," she said to them. She met their worried looks with one of, if not confidence, self-assurance. "I was the pony with a connection to this town, to these ponies, even as weak as it was. Just please, let me do this."

And so Rainbow Dash set to work, alone, filling in the graves her friends had dug. She could have used her rainbow magic to wield the shovel, or her Element of Loyalty, or her Element of Love, but she didn't. She wielded the shovel with her hooves, her wings beating at her sides so that she could balance on her rear legs as she worked. She dug furiously, relishing the physical exertion of the work as if the blood and sweat and tears shed in it, every blister and splinter, would in some way justify her presence before the dead.

Afternoon bled into evening, the last of the mist was long gone, and on she worked the dirt. She could not bear to think on what evil, what terrible monster had committed this atrocity. Hate and anger towards it could not enter her heart and poison her work from an act of compassion into one of spite. The elements of Loyalty and Love burned in her, keeping back the darkness and putting strength to her body when it threatened to falter. All she could think was that the ponies in those graves deserved better.

And then, as the sun began to sink down beneath the far horizon, the last grave was filled in. Rainbow Dash threw the shovel down and fell to her knees, her ragged breathing the only sound breaking the silence. In the fading light she looked around at her work, the rising mounds of dirt marking where each coffin lay. 113 such mounds met her sight, the entire population of Brelagrose in four long rows.

The sun was almost fully down beyond the horizon by now. Rainbow Dash stood back up and moved to where he back was facing it and she was looking out over the graves. She raised a hoof out to the graves, while at the same moment opening herself up to the magic within her. Rainbow light poured out from her body, briefly turning the field as bright as mid-day. The rainbow magic arced out over the field, splitting into 113 streams that shot down to each mound and earth. Rainbow Dash then closed her eyes and began to murmur softly into the magic, directing it with her voice.

"A golden rose, a pitcher of water, two pens leaned against each other, a pair of headphones, three green fish, a basketball slamming into a net,

four stars arranged into a square, pieces of clockwork...."

Night had long since fallen by the time she had finished. Rainbow cut off the magic and looked out over the field one final time. Set above each grave was a cross of wood, and engraved onto each cross was the cutie mark of the pony buried there. Those that had not received their cutie marks yet...Rainbow Dash would never be able to explain it, but she had simply felt through the rainbow magic what cutie mark to put. And so she had given it to those fillies and colts, theirs to have in death if not in life.

Rainbow Dash looked at her hoofwork a minute longer and then turned away, walking from the new graveyard back to town. In the distance, she could make out the lights of the tavern, her friends waiting for her return.

Chapter 5

Ouch

Sometime during the night it had started to rain, as when Twilight woke up the next morning she could hear the rainfall still coming down. It pattered against the glass window set in the wall beside the bed she had taken, an aimless yet somehow calming rhythm that filled her ears, a gentle background noise that seemed to call her back to the peace of slumber. The thick mattress and soft cotton sheets of the bed, so much better than the simple sleeping bag she had used the previous night in the wilderness, did not help any.

Twilight struggled against the urge to go back to sleep, instead sitting up in bed and yawning. Blinking the sleep from her eyes Twilight looked at the room around her. The group had taken shelter in the small tavern for the night, using the shower and upstairs guest rooms to their advantage. There were three beds to each room, and as she looked Twilight saw one of the other beds in her room to already be vacant, the sheets thrown to the floor. Rarity still slept in the other bed, her dainty snores barely audible over the rain outside. Twilight smiled at the sight, before as quietly as she could manage climbing out of bed and tiptoeing across the room to the door. It was cold so she made sure to wrap her cloak tightly around her before slipping out of the room to the hallway beyond.

Twilight walked down the hallway to the stairs at the other end, listening as she passed by the other rooms. She could hear snoring still coming from one of the other rooms the group had occupied, so at least she and Rarity weren't going to be the last getting up, she thought to herself. The room closest the stairs, which Big Mac, Diogo, and Doctor Whoof had taken for themselves, was entirely silent. Twilight hurried past it and down the stairs to the main room of the tavern. It was down there she found the three males of the group, gathered around a table and talking.

"Wow, I'm surprised to see you all awake," said Twilight as she left the foot of the stairs and approached the table. "I've always imagined guys to be late sleepers, based on Spike."

"Who, us?" Doctor Whoof waved a hoof at Twilight and rolled his eyes. "Nah, that's just silly! Of course we can get up early on a quest to save the world from becoming a diamond dog's chew toy! I mean, not like we had to sleep through a massive clod shambling about the room at 5 in the morning!"

By the time he'd finished speaking Doctor Whoof had switched the pony he was looking at from Twilight to Big Mac. The red earth pony shrugged and adjusted the bit of hay in his mouth. "What can I say? When ya live on a farm it becomes a force 'a habit ta get up early. Lot of work to be done and only so many hours in the day to get to them, you know?"

"No, I don't," replied Doctor Whoof, smirking. "I've got a time machine. Or at least I did," he hastily added when he noticed the shocked look on Diogo the deer's face. "I kind of...took a lot of it apart to make it work better and never quite got around to putting it back together. So we definitely couldn't have used it to finish this quest thing lickety-split, if that's what you're thinking. And I know it is."

Diogo continued to glare at the brown earth pony for a few seconds longer, before sighing and shaking his head. "There's probably some kind of test during the journey we will have to complete to reach the crown anyway. That's how these things usually go. Speaking of which..." Diogo looked back over at Twilight. "Since we're all waiting here for now, it is probably a good time to plan our next course."

Twilight nodded in understanding and, reaching into her cloak with her magic, drew out a long, rolled up map. Near the start of the journey she had been entrusted with it and most of the "lore stuff", as Rainbow Dash had so eloquently put it, because she was "the biggest egghead of them all"; again, Rainbow Dash's eloquent words. Still, Twilight could understand the reasoning behind the decision, and even somewhat enjoyed her role. It didn't hurt that the map was very well made.

Walking over to the table Twilight set the map onto the bare wood and unrolled it. Before the three ponies and deer was revealed a highly detailed rendering of Equestria and the lands immediately surrounding the pony country, such as Gildedale and the Shimmerwood to the west, and the great sea known as Eternity's Crossing to the south.

"Here we are," Twilight said, indicating a small stylized town an inch or so above Canterlot. "A day and a half's journey north of Canterlot, and just on the southern bank of the Mearas River." At this she indicated a long line of blue running through most of the map, from the northern reaches of the Drackenridge Mountains to the west, all the way to Germaney to the northeast. "And Khaza Rim, our destination, is all...the way up...here." The others followed Twilight's hoof as it trailed up the map, passing over a massive forest area, up further to what looked like a veritable plain of mountains. They all flinched when they noticed her hoof had nearly reached the uppermost edge of the map. "This is going to be a long journey," she said, drawing their gazes back up to her. "Going straight like that, which we can't, would still be weeks-long at best."

"But it seems the straight journey is the only logical way to go," said Diogo. The deer edged closer to beside Twilight and began pointing to the map. "After crossing the river here we simply go through this forest." He placed his hoof on a drawing of many pine trees, covering a good several inches of map. "It looks like it continues all the way to the foot of the mountains, so that will provide us good cover in case of spies or attacks. Then we continue on into the mountains, going between them when we can."

As soon as Diogo finished Twilight sighed and shook her head, feeling rather disappointed with the deer. "Seeing as you're not actually from Equestria, I guess I can understand why you think we can do that. But we can't."

"Not unless we want to have a very painful, very arrow-filled death," added Doctor Whoof. Twilight shot him a look and he shut up.

"Okay then, what am I missing," asked Diogo.

Twilight looked back down at the map and pointed to the picture of a forest. "You see this? This is called Hatchling Forest. Years past, when the peace between ponies and gryphons was first struck, this forest was given to the gryphons as a sign of friendship. While most adolescent and adult gryphons become wanderers, mercenaries, and hooligans, these woods are their ONE truly centralized place of living. It is where nests are built and eggs kept safe, hence the name." Twilight looked up from the map, not to Diogo but to the table in general. "And absolutely no non-gryphons are

allowed to step hoof or claw beneath those branches, not without express permission from a gryphon ranger captain."

"Unless you want to have a very painful, very arrow-filled death," Doctor Whoof once again added.

Twilight frowned at Doctor Whoof, but did not dispute his point. Instead she returned her hoof back to Brelagrose. "Our best bet would be crossing the river here and then heading northeast along its northern bank..." she drew her hoof in the direction she spoke of, following the blue line representing the Mearas, "for about two days, until the Hatchling Forest comes to an end. Then we leave the river there and cut north through the plains." Her hoof left the blue line and went up, moving to more miniature paintings of buildings set on a few mountains. "To Stalliongrad."

"That...is really far out of our way," said Diogo, leaning down to look closer at the indicated city. "I will be honest; I know little of Equestria beyond Canterlot. What is this Stalliongrad place like?"

"Oh, it's great!" said Doctor Whoof. The sardonic grin on his face said otherwise. "As long as you don't mind much oxygen in the air you breathe. I've been there a couple of times; well, I've everywhere a couple of times, but that's not important right now. Maybe later, but not right now. Anyway, Stalliongrad's a major manufacturing city for Equestria. I'd say half the city is nothing but factories, endlessly churning out everything from refrigerators and farm equipment to military arms and armor. The air is thick with smoke and ash from the foundries, quite permanently casting the whole place in a sort of eternal twilight. Not our favorite Twilight, but whatever. The ponies and diamond dogs that live there are hardy and strong, not nice but dependable if you get them to like you."

"That sounds like no place a member of the Apple Clan should ever find themselves." Big Mac frowned and turned his heavy, thoughtful gaze to Doctor Whoof. "But hold on now a moment. Did you just mention diamond dogs living in Stalliongrad? Ain't that going to be a problem for us?"

"Nah," said the bow-tied pony, waving a hoof at Big Mac. "Or maybe, I don't know. The diamond dogs that live and work in Stalliongrad live and work right alongside ponies, and have done so since the place was founded. It's why I like Stalliongrad so much; a place where two groups, normally so against each other, coming together to eke out a living."

Beautiful. And I don't see Nero much liking diamond dogs that willingly socialize with ponies. We should be fine. Probably."

"It's a risk we will have to take," said Twilight, ending the discussion by rolling the map back up and sliding it back into her cloak. "At Stalliongrad we'll be able to replenish our supplies, as well as get better mountain gear for when we reach the lands of Gallopfrey. Plus, it'll be nice to hear news on what's happening around Equestria. If Nero has attacked somewhere else, I'll feel better at least knowing about it."

As Twilight stepped away from the table, her attention was drawn upwards at the sound of muffled steps. Someone or ones in the rooms above was moving around. "Well, it sounds like the rest of the group is waking up. That reminds me, Rainbow Dash was already out of her bed when I woke up. Where did she go?"

Big Mac indicated past Twilight to the back of the tavern, to a door set behind the bar. "She headed that way soon as she came down the stairs. I reckon that's some sort of kitchen, as she poked her head out after a bit to ask if we preferred buttermilk biscuits or cornbread."

"Wait, Rainbow Dash cooking?" Twilight quirked an eyebrow at this odd tidbit. Turning from Big Mac and the others Twilight walked to the counter, around it, and then down the length of it to the door. Opening it with a flicker of magic she entered the room beyond, closing the door behind her with a soft click.

Big Mac had been right in his assumption, it was a kitchen. It was a small room, barely half the size of the kitchen back home in the library, but well-stocked all the same. Stacks of corn meal and wheat, apples, syrup, sugar, hay, and other kitchen necessities lined the wall to her left, while set against the wall to her right was a medium-sized refrigerator, filled Twilight supposed with more kitchen staples like milk and eggs. Against the wall across the kitchen from Twilight were the oven and stovetop, and it was here Rainbow Dash stood, working several pans at once.

Twilight Sparkle walked deeper into the kitchen toward Rainbow Dash, her hoofsteps loud enough for the rainbow-maned Pegasus to hear her coming and look over. "Oh, good morning Twilight."

"Good morning, Dash." Twilight stepped to Rainbow Dash's side and looked down at what she was doing. Pancakes dotted with bits of grass and hay cooked in the pans, and now that she was closer Twilight noticed a large plate set on a nearby table, already covered with about a dozen pancakes. "I didn't know you can cook."

Rainbow Dash shrugged and flipped a pancake onto the plate, moving the pan it had been using into the nearby kitchen sink. "Nothing too special. Just a few things I learned from the Pronghorns when I visited them again. I'm not really good, but it still makes me about 20% cooler than I was before, right?"

Rainbow Dash looked to Twilight and grinned. It was a weak grin however, and it did not last long before the Pegasus sighed and turned back to flip another finished pancake onto the plate. "Besides, it doesn't feel right letting all this stuff go to waste. I think Frosty Lime would have wanted us to use it. At least, I hope he would."

"You're the pony who knew him, Rainbow," said Twilight. She stepped closer to Rainbow Dash and placed a wing over her back in a comforting gesture. "I'm sure you're right. And you should know, we are all here for you if you want to talk about this or, I don't know, anything."

Another weak smile crossed Rainbow Dash's face. She flipped the final pancake onto the plate and turned the stove off, and then leaned against Twilight. She placed one of her own wings across Twilight's back in return, and there the two friends stayed for what felt to Twilight hours, but in reality could have been no longer than minutes at most. Twilight sighed, contentment in the moment filling her up. Then Rainbow Dash said "But you never talked about it."

Twilight frowned and pulled away, looking at Rainbow Dash. The contented feeling inside her vanished, replaced by a rising feeling of confusion and. Even more, fear. She tried to keep this out of her voice though, as she put on a smile. "I'm...sorry, but I'm not sure I know what you, uh, what you mean. Hehe...."

Rainbow Dash shot her a flat glare, piercing through that painfully fake grin like a knife through paper. "Twilight, I really, really appreciate the support you're offering, but I'd appreciate it even more if it wasn't so

hypocritical."

"I'm not sure what-"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about," said Rainbow Dash, making Twilight shut up. "You never came to me, or Rarity, or any of the rest of us who were there when you went bad. When you got Spike and Trixie killed. When you MURDERED Yellow Jacket. You never came to us for help or comfort, when we would've offered it at a moment's notice." Rainbow Dash stepped away from the stoves, advancing toward a rapidly backing away Twilight. "So just tell me one thing; why?"

"..." Twilight hung her head, wiping a hoof over her eyes to get rid of the tears that had begun to gather there. The seconds dragged by and she looked back up at Rainbow Dash. The Pegasus was still glaring at her expectantly, though the glare had softened some. Twilight quickly looked back down. "I know what killed these ponies. And you do too, or at least suspect it."

"What?"

Twilight nodded, keeping her head mostly down. The tears had returned to her eyes. "Yes. I recognized it all instantly. The life and magic had been sucked out of everything."

"Like what you did to remove that horror illusion from me," said Rainbow Dash. She narrowed her eyes. "Like what happened after you attacked Celestia and we had to go stop you. I remember now. The whole Whitetail Wood was dead, along with Sweet Apple Acres. Everything from trees to creepy bugs was dead."

Twilight backed up a few more feet and sat down on her haunches. "It's an old bit of healing medicine, from the time when illusions and curses were more common. Since those sorts of things feed on the inherent magic of the victim to continue, a technique was created to draw out the corrupted magic from a pony, to help them. It was meant as a spell of healing...but I corrupted it, using it to gather from nature the raw power to bend time and space to travel to Midnight Castle. And now..." Twilight looked up, her eyes shining and cheeks wet with tears of guilt and self-loathing. "Now someone has taken what I did and amplified it into a weapon of mass destruction."

"I killed those ponies just as much as who or whatever performed the spell."

For the longest while, Rainbow Dash was silent, her brow furrowed and her eyes narrowed. Twilight shifted nervously and stood back up, preparing to leave the room on her own. But then Rainbow Dash turned and took the plate of cooling pancakes in her mouth, turned back around, and without a single word pushed her way past Twilight to the door. Twilight held back a sob and turned to follow her.

By the time everyone had eaten and gathered their equipment back together the rain had stopped, the skies above drifting away to reveal blue skies and a shining sun. A fierce wind had picked up, quickly dispelling any mist that attempted to form. And so when the group made its way onto the Bridge of Brelagrose and the rest of their journey, the scene they left was a far cheerier looking one than the scene they had arrived to. Only the deep silence, the lack of any sound indicating life, revealed the lingering horror of the dead town.

The Bridge of Brelagrose, named for the city it was part of, was a grand structure, the greatest suspension bridge in all of Equestria. It stretched across the entire width of the Mearas River, a length that would take most ponies a good 40 minutes to cross at a trot. Rainbow Dash pushed them to cross it in 20.

Rainbow Dash took the lead in the group, running ahead of the others with long hurried strides, her silver scarf fluttering in the north wind and her eyes trained forward. To her right and a pace behind flew Ditzzy, one eye trained forward on the path ahead and the other eye watching Rainbow Dash in concern. Behind her ran Shield Maiden and Diogo, back in their full armor and on full alert, carefully watching their surroundings; a bridge would be a good place for a sneak attack, as it left little room for escape other than a plunge into the water. Rarity and Big Mac ran together behind them, Rarity fully suited in her deer-made armor and Big Mac carrying the bulk of their provisions with his mighty frame. Between them and Diogo and Shield Maiden ran Doctor Whoof, going on about the wonders of the bridge and how awesome the bridge builders had been for building it. Twilight

Sparkle brought up the rear of the group, her purple cloak flapping about around her as the wind caught it. Together they ran, a sudden sense of urgency overcoming them after nearly a whole day spent in the town.

Halfway across the bridge, Ditzzy flew up to Rainbow Dash's side and focused both eyes on her as best she could. "Rainbow muffin? Saddlebags weigh heavily on the shoulders. What passes the kumquat to the caboose?"

Rainbow Dash stayed silent a few moments, continuing to look ahead at the northern shore of the river gradually growing closer. Ditzzy frowned and flipped over Rainbow Dash to her other side, preparing to ask again. Before she got the chance to however, Rainbow Dash sighed and glanced over at her. "Don't worry Ditzzy, I'll be fine. Brelagrose was...not as I'd hoped or expected to find it, but there's nothing we can do to change it."

She then looked forward again, her eyes narrowing as a righteous anger, held in control the day before by grief and her desire to honor the deceased, ignited in her chest. Her irises flashed every color of the rainbow at once for a split moment, before she reined it in again. "What we can do is kick the tail of whoever did all that clear across Equestria. Like Twilight said yesterday, we can make them pay."

Another minute of silent running passed, and then Rainbow Dash glanced back over to Ditzzy. The other Pegasus was frowning, her brow furrowed as if she was thinking on something and not liking it. Looks like that were rare for Ditzzy, at least in the time that she and Rainbow Dash had been together. Worry wormed into Rainbow Dash's gut, and the thoughts that had been troubling her before Ditzzy spoke, thoughts on her conversation with Twilight earlier that morning, were pushed aside for the moment by feelings much simpler and much more powerful; concern for a loved one.

"Hey Ditzzy, is something wrong?" A thought of how things had just been reversed from a moment ago with those words made Rainbow Dash grin and chuckle. "I mean, besides worrying if I'm okay or not?"

Ditzzy chuckled along with Rainbow Dash at this, the troubled frown leaving her much to the blue Pegasus's relief. Ditzzy looked over at her. "Don't go west to retrieve southern birds, rainbow muffin. The caboose of a

train arrives last at the station, how should things proceed toward her benefit?"

"Caboose of the..." Rainbow Dash looked behind them, past Shield Maiden and Diogo and Rarity and Big Macintosh, to a purple Unicorn just barely bothering to run and keep up with all the rest of them. Rainbow Dash frowned and looked back to Ditzy beside her. "What, Twilight? You're worried about Twilight?" Ditzy nodded and Rainbow Dash made a dismissive noise. "Nah, that little egghead's tougher than she looks. Plus, she's always quiet. She's fine."

Ditzy hit her suddenly with a look that clearly said "I don't believe you". Then Ditzy moved to in front of Rainbow Dash and turned around to face her while flying backwards. "Egghead, exactly as it says on the tin. Nicely shaped, but fragile shell that easily breaks to pieces if hit the right way. Put down the hammer and think for your rainbow."

And with that, Ditzy slowed down her flying, falling past Rainbow Dash as she continued running and moving further back in the group. Rainbow Dash watched her go over her shoulder and mulled over what her lover had said. It sounded surprisingly coherent for the wall-eyed Pegasus, except for one line that Rainbow Dash couldn't quite get over.

"Wait, Twilight Sparkle's nicely shaped?!"

Further back in the group, Rarity blinked and slowed down her running just a bit as Ditzy Doo drifted down the line to fly even with her. A few seconds of silence passed as the two mares just looked at each other, or at least one golden eye managed to focus on Rarity. The ivory Unicorn smiled somewhat awkwardly as the moment stretched longer and longer, before finally... "Yes, dear? Can I help you with anything?"

Ditzy glanced ahead of them, to where Rainbow Dash was running ahead with seemingly wild abandon, and then behind them, where Twilight was lagging farther and farther behind. "Pretty dusk pony, egghead, fragile like an eggshell, right?"

"Um..." Rarity followed Ditzy's gaze to Twilight. The Pegacorn herself

kept glancing about behind and around them, though at what Rarity couldn't tell. "I'm not as good at understanding you as Rainbow Dash is, but are you worried about Twilight Sparkle?" Ditzy nodded. "And it has something to do with Rainbow Dash herself?" Ditzy nodded again, and Rarity frowned. Looking forward again, she saw the Pegasus in question did seem rather...agitated about something. So did Twilight Sparkle, for that matter.

Rarity looked back to Ditzy and frowned. "Well now that you mention it, they do seem rather upset. But Ditzy dear, I think we all are. Why, after the utterly horrible things we found in Brelagrose, I'd be more worried if one of us WASN'T acting upset. I myself have had the lingering need to vomit since we got to this horrid place, and I dare say I'll be needing to for some time longer!"

"But Rarity-"

"EVERYONE BACK!" At the same instant this cry came from Rainbow Dash, the Pegasus spreading her wings and leaping backwards, a purple glow suddenly enveloped everyone there. Without a grunt of effort Twilight yanked Rarity, Big Mac, Ditzy, Doctor Whoof, Shield Maiden, Diogo, and Rainbow Dash backwards, dropping them back down onto the bridge behind her non-too-gently. She did this not a moment too soon, as just seconds after they were all out of the way a fireball slammed down in front of Twilight. The whole bridge shook, sending everyone on it to their knees as chunks of melting metal and concrete showered in every direction. Twilight hastily pulled a magic barrier up in front of the group, flinching as molten bits of metal splattered onto it, chunks of concrete the size of her head crashed against it, and white-hot flames licked hungrily at it. Twilight spread her legs out and poured more power into the barrier, actively pushing back at the fire and material raining down onto them, pushing it away from her friends.

Seconds passed by, and as the roar of the fire lessened and the last of the debris fell Twilight lowered her magical barrier and looked about ahead of them the fire from the blast still raged, reduced in intensity from white to yellow but still blocking their way forward for several yards. The bridge itself now sported a crater down its center, and many of the suspension lines near the site of destruction were gone completely or hanging limp, disconnected by the force. The road beneath their hooves shuddered, an

ominous groaning of overstressed metal filling the air around them.

Twilight looked behind her at the other climbing back to their hooves. "Hey, are you all okay?"

They all gave groans and various forms of acknowledgment. Rainbow Dash fluttered over to Twilight's side and looked ahead at the fire. "Holy guacamole. We'd have all been vaporized by that. Damn. I only caught a flash of black on the bridge ahead of us for a moment, before I looked up and saw the fireball coming."

Twilight nodded at this, her gaze focused on the flames. "I felt the buildup of magic and just reacted. That tells me this wasn't a dragon, whose fire doesn't require magical buildup."

"So it was a what? A magician or sorcerer or wizard or something?"

"Yeah," replied Twilight. Her eyes narrowed and her wings fluttered at her sides in nervousness. A purple charge of magic enveloped her horn. "And here they come now."

Twilight carefully positioned herself in front of the others as from the fire strode a figure. The flames parted around the figure, flowing around them as if little more than water in a pool. From this Twilight recognized the pony as a natural adept with fire. And it was a pony, a Unicorn of course, tall and thin. She wore a cloak identical in style to Twilight's, except black as pitch instead of a royal purple. The hood was up, hiding the facial features except for two glowing eyes, one purple and the other gold, and long blonde hair with a purple stripe reaching down to the chest. What could be seen of the body beneath the cloak was wrapped from neck to hoof in white bandages that created an image that was slender yet elegant.

The Unicorn came to a stop several yards from Twilight, who in turn stood several feet out from Rainbow Dash and the others in a protective gesture. For several seconds they stood there staring at each other, no word passing between them as the bridge groaned and the flames crackled. Then the mysterious stranger's eyes flashed, and Twilight perceived her smiling. "You are Twilight Sparkle and friends, yes? The fabled Knights of Equestria and a few tag-alongs?"

Twilight's eyes narrowed even more than they were, silently swearing at how this stranger knew who they were. More than that, there was something incredibly familiar in that voice, a haughtiness she had only heard one pony reach. Twilight stepped forward and lowered her horn towards the stranger. "Yeah, we're them. Though these are friends, not tag-alongs as you so rudely suggest. Now, perhaps you'd like to tell us who you are, and why you sent a fireball at us?"

A chuckle rose from the strange pony, as she reached up a hoof and lowered her hood down to her shoulders. Her blonde mane catching in the wind and whipping about. The dark purple fur of her head and upper neck seemed to an insane contrast to such a light mane. Her hood down hiding her features, the Unicorn mare smirked at Twilight. "What's the matter, Twilight? Are fireballs off-limits when you're not slinging them around? Or maybe I should have aimed at the innocent city behind all of you instead. Would that have been acceptable, Twilight?"

Rainbow Dash let out a growl and sped forward, only coming to a stop in front of Twilight's outstretched wing. Still she glared at the stranger. "Hey, don't you dare badmouth a friend of mine like that! Do it again and I'll shove my hoof so far down your throat it'll come out your-"

"You still haven't told us who you are," said Twilight, cutting off Rainbow Dash's threat. While she kept her own gaze relatively even, inside she couldn't help but feel her heart swell at how quickly the rainbow-maned Pegasus had come to her defense, especially so soon after their conversation in the tavern kitchen.

The stranger, for her part, seemed only amused by the attempted threat. "Rainbow Dash, demonstrating your legendary loyalty. It's true; I haven't answered who I am." With a flurry of motion the mare threw off her cloak, revealing to them her whole bandaged body in its entirety. A crack of thunder rent the air, and to the left of her head a blade crackling with electricity materialized. "I am the end of your days..." A sudden roar of fire, and to her right now floated a blade flowing with blue flames. "I am the end of the light..." A third blade materialized above her head, a thin stabbing instrument of ice. "I am Dusk. And these blades," she said, raising them high above her as if preparing to strike. Then she put on a grin that reminded Twilight and the others that knew her uncomfortably of Pinkie Pie. "These blades are only a distraction."

Shadows fell on Twilight and the group. Her head snapped up, her eyes widening at the sight of a half-dozen tendrils of water, as thick around as her tree home, towering over the bridge. With a roar as if wild beasts they drove down, hurtling towards the group to crush them beneath tons upon tons of water.

"NO!" Twilight leapt into the air and placed herself between the others and the oncoming pillars of water. Her cloak flared out behind her as she opened her mouth and screamed. Her eyes shone white, and a moment later a gout of flame burst from between her lips, making everyone else cry out in pain from the brightness and sheer heat coming from it. It was as if the sun had decided to touch down onto the earth for a brief moment. Twilight's screaming took on a new quality, her mane and tail bursting into flame from the heat. But still she poured more power into the attack.

The pillar of flame shot up, lancing through the six pillars of water. All at once they exploded, steam billowing out in all directions. Twilight fell back to the bridge, ignoring the scorch marks left on her fur and skin where her burning mane slapped down onto her head. Instead she ducked, a bolt of lightning sizzling through the space moments ago occupied by her head. Jumping back a step a blade of ice stabbed down in front of her, piecing the concrete of the bridge. Dusk grinned at her from the other side of the blade. "Okay I lied, these blades AREN'T just distractions!"

Before Twilight could say anything to this, a leather clad blur leapt past her at Dusk. Gripping the haft between her teeth Shield Maiden stabbed forward with her spear, aiming to skewer through Dusk's head. The dark purple Unicorn blocked the stab with the lightning-covered sword, flicked the blade around so the spear was shunted out of the way, and slashed at Shield Maiden with the fire sword.

A barrier of green magical energy sprung up in front of the Gildedale pony, the fire sword breaking apart as soon as it came in contact with the energy. Diogo teleported to Shield Maiden's side and with a flicker of his antlers the magical barrier went flying towards Dusk. A resounding crunch filled the air as it smashed into her, sending her flying yards back, through the dissipating flames to the ground beyond.

"My friends," said Diogo, forming another green shield in front of him.

"I'm not normally one for killing, but I think if we don't take care of this sorceress now...."

"I have to agree with Diogo on this one," said Rarity next, moving herself to the deer's side and lighting up her horn. The blade on it shone, bolts of power crackling over it. "I somehow doubt this 'Dusk' is willing to back down."

"She's not," spoke up Twilight, striding to the front of the group. Magic sizzled over her body, her burns and gashes already healing and her mane and tail already growing back. Twilight summoned a sword of ice from the water dozens of yards beneath the bridge and held it before her. "But I want you guys to. Whoever she is, she's too strong for most of you. Let me handle her."

"No way Twilight! We can-"

Twilight turned to look over her shoulder at Rainbow Dash, locking eyes with the Pegasus. No words passed between them, but through her eyes Twilight tried to pour out all her feelings, all her thoughts, to explain herself. In her eyes, Twilight tried to say to Rainbow Dash "let me make up for Brelagrose. Please."

Twilight didn't know if her silent plea was caught by the others, but if it was it went ignored. Rainbow Dash flew over to her side, quickly joined by the others. "No can do, egghead. You wouldn't let us fight that Nero jerk, so this will have to do!"

A high, mocking laugh came in response to this, snapping everyone's attention forward. A tendril of water rose up from the river below and splashed down onto the fire, quenching them. When the resulting steam cleared there stood Dusk, seemingly no worse for wear and grinning at them with that Pinkie Pie grin. Her eyes were wide and shining. "I like your spunk! It's exactly what you'll need if you want to succeed on this quest of yours. Now, come at me!"

Twilight and the others needed no further prodding than that. With a shouted battle cry they charged forward, racing over the yards of bridge separating them from Dusk. Diogo sent another magical barrier flying at her, copied a moment after by Rarity. The two attacks flew at Dusk, who

smiled and brought up a wall of purple magic, absorbing the two magic constructs into it. A moment later the two attacks shot back out, slamming into their original casters and sending them flying.

Before Dusk could press the attack, Ditzzy flew over the magic barrier. She circled around Dusk to behind her and flipped around, bucking at the Unicorn with both rear legs. Without Dusk even turning to look behind her another magical barrier materialized over her back, blocking the attack. The kinetic force of the blow rebounded back at her, and like Rarity and Diogo before her, Ditzzy was sent flying back. At this Rainbow Dash instantly broke off from her charge toward Dusk and sped off to catch Ditzzy.

"Big Mac, with me!" Her horn glowing with magic, Twilight charged towards Dusk and her magical barriers, Big Mac following close behind. At the last possible moment before Twilight ran into the barrier a beam of pure magic shot from her horn and pierced the barrier, followed a split-second later by the barrier exploding in a flash of light. Her momentum unchallenged Twilight kept going, blasting her way through the second magic barrier before smashing her head into Dusk's chest with a wet thunk, accompanied by the feeling of hot blood oozing out around her horn. Dusk let out a gargled wheeze, a shot of blood spraying from her mouth out onto Twilight's cloak. The blood felt hot and sticky against her skin, and Twilight barely repressed the urge to vomit, pulling out of the dark Unicorn and jumping back.

Before Dusk could recover from the blow Twilight flapped her wings and shot into the air, giving Dusk a second to clutch at the gaping hole left in her chest by Twilight's horn before the rippling train of muscle and anger that was Big Macintosh filled her vision. She looked up at the stallion bearing down at her and sighed.

"Well crap."

The crunch that came next was far louder than the one Twilight had managed. Watching from above in the air Twilight cringed at the look of complete agony that crossed over Dusk's face, unable to keep her from imagining the results of such a body slam from the towering stallion. Bones shattered, ribs shoved back until they crushed the organs they were meant to be protecting, blood vessels ruptured from the sudden pressure; unless Dusk was made of sterner stuff than meat and bone, that impact would

surely kill her. And if it didn't, the voice in Twilight's head whispered, what was about to come next would. Because as Twilight watched Big Mac kept going, Dusk's limp body stuck to him by through sheer momentum. He ran down the length of the bridge for one yard, two yards, three, before turning aside and coming to a sudden stop. Dusk went flying back first over the side of the bridge and over the water, her body limp as a rag doll's and her mouth open in a silent scream of terror.

But even as Twilight hovered in place and watched, that mouth curved up into that grin again. A magical glow surrounded Dusk's horn, before with a flash of light she disappeared. Twilight only had a moment to gasp in shock at this, before a matching flash of light above her made her look up. Then Dusk's forehooves smashed into her face, sending Twilight's head snapping back. Dazed, Twilight fell, landing on the unyielding bridge surface with a resounding snap, one wing caught beneath her bending unnaturally. Twilight's eyes widened in pain and she screamed.

Dusk was not finished. Teleporting again she appeared beside Big Mac and smacked him with a hammer of pure magic, sending the large stallion tumbling end over end. The next instant she was in front of Rarity, sidestepping a stab of her horn blade before slamming a magically-infused hoof against her flank. Rarity collapsed to the ground with a cry of pain, limbs twitching erratically as sparks flew across her metal armor. Then Dusk was gone from there, appearing at Ditzy's side on the other side of the bridge to telekinetically grab hold of her and slam her into the ground.

A roar of fury ripped through the air, and Dusk barely managed to teleport out of the way of a blast of rainbow energy. Before Rainbow Dash could ready another shot Dusk teleported in the air above her and blasted her with a bolt of frost magic from her horn. Ice spread over her wings, and with a surprised yelp Rainbow Dash fell from the air and landed on Diogo, knocking the air from the deer's lungs. Before either could recover a purple glow surrounded them and smacked them against each other. Hard.

Dusk teleported back onto the solid ground of the bridge and let out a wheeze, collapsing to her knees. A forehoof reached up and pressed against her mangled chest, working to stem the flow of blood pouring out from where Twilight's horn had punched through skin and muscle, straight into one of her lungs. Her eyes clenched shut as a wave of pain passed through her, a ragged cough sending blood spurting out onto the concrete.

The sound of galloping hooves striking the concrete caught her attention, and without looking up she telekinetically pushed a charging Shield Maiden away, slamming her twice against one of the suspension bridges towers before dropping her unconscious body to the ground.

The sound of cautious hoofsteps, however, did make her look up. There stood Doctor Whoof, a wary look in his eyes. His sonic screwdriver held in his mouth and aimed at her. "I'm not a fighter like all those others, but I am clever and I hate seeing people, ponies or whatever, getting hurt. So try anything other than letting me heal you and you will regret it."

Dusk's lips turned up into a smile, her white teeth stained red by the blood leaking up her throat. "Hello sweetie."

Doctor Whoof quirked an eyebrow at this, before activating his sonic screwdriver. Rather than some kind of horrific green ray beam of painful death or anything however, the pain in Dusk's chest began to fade bit by bit, and the blood loss radically lessened. "I don't think we know each other quite well enough for that sort of thing." He stopped his sonicing her for a moment to look around. "I mean, first you beat most of my friends into unconsciousness, then you stop before getting to me and call me sweetie. As far as first dates go, I'm getting mixed signals."

A laugh left Dusk's throat, quickly turning into a hacking cough that splattered more blood onto the bridge. Doctor Whoof quickly resumed sonicing her, but a shimmer of magic from her horn sent the sonic screwdriver spinning from his mouth to land several yards away. She grinned at him. "No need for that, I'm quite alright. Well, I'm going to be anyway."

Dusk groaned and shuddered, and as Doctor Whoof watched wisps of golden light drifted out of the wound on her chest. Still she chuckled and looked away from him to the others. Big Mac was staggering back to his hooves, and Rainbow Dash had sat up and begun chipping away at the ice covering her wings. Twilight was the most recovered, slowly stumbling over towards them with one wing, her left, hanging limp at her side. Doctor Whoof followed her gaze, and then looked back at her. "What?"

"You're not ready," she said, looking back to him. "None of you are ready to face the trials ahead. If I'd been aiming to kill, we wouldn't be

having this conversation." A shudder ripped through her and Dusk choked back a wheeze. "You all n-need to...step up your game...Nero won't be so merciful...and neither shall the Master."

"The Master?"

Dusk smiled, and a brilliant purple light surrounded her horn. "Spoilers, Doctor." Then with that she was gone, teleported away.

Doctor Whoof sat there for a moment, staring at the spot the mysterious Unicorn had been. The gathering commotion behind him told him that the others were all in various stages of getting back up, but he didn't move to join them quite yet. He was...thinking.

Twilight staggered up beside Doctor Whoof, setting his sonic screwdriver down beside him before looking to where he looked. Behind them, Rainbow Dash succinctly expressed just how they were all feeling.

"Well that sucked."

Pinkie Pie was just fixing up a meal for her pet Gummy in the kitchen when an explosion of light and sound behind her sent her flying into the wall. Pulling herself out of it Pinkie shook some loose tiling from her mane and turned to see what had happened. She shrieked at the sight. It looked as if a bomb had gone off at the center of the kitchen, a crater several ponies wide dug into the center of the floor and all the cooking instruments and assorted baked goods scattered around the room or destroyed. What made her blood run cold though was the dark purple Unicorn at the center of the crater, gasping for breath and clutching at a wound in her chest.

"DUSK!" Pinkie Pie galloped over, jumping down into the crater and landing at the older mare's side. She could feel tears stinging her eyes, threatening to fall as she sat down on her haunches and took one of Dusk's hooves in her own. "Oh Dusky, what happened?! You were only supposed to play with them a little!"

Dusk let out a half-laugh, half-cough and smiled up at Pinkie. "Your friend Twilight didn't quite see the playing in it. Besides, the dreams...don't

always show quite every detail...every memory...I should've been prepared for something so painful to h-happen."

Pinkie Pie sniffled, clutching at Dusk's hoof all the tighter. As she did so however her attention was caught by a growing glow. Looking from Dusk's face Pinkie gasped at the golden light beginning to seep out from the Unicorn's chest wound. In fact, as Pinkie watched Dusk's whole body began to shine gold, as if an inner fire was growing and working to consume her.

"Dusk, is this...?"

"Yes, yes it is," said Dusk, before pushing the pink party pony away. "Ba...back up. Last time was...rather explosive...."

Pinkie Pie gave a nod and obeyed, climbing back out of the crater before turning to look back at Dusk. The tears continued, lessened just a bit, and she could not keep the fearful tremor from her voice as she spoke. "Pr-promise you won't forget me?"

"Who, the world's best party...party pony?" Dusk grinned around the pain and shook her head. "Never."

With that, Dusk threw her head back and screamed as her body erupted in golden light.

Chapter 6

Amon Mearas

It was a bruised, battered, and beaten group that finally reached the end of the Bridge of Brelagrose. The sun was just reaching the middle of the sky. Rainbow Dash trudged in the front, her head hanging low and wings tucked in close to her sides. She moved with a slight limp, grimacing each time she put weight on her right rear hoof. She had landed hard on that leg in the fight against the Unicorn Dusk Nox earlier that day, but aside from a brief check from Doctor Whoof she refused any sort of help, simply telling him to check out the others.

The others. They walked along somewhere behind Rainbow Dash, she wasn't sure how far or how close. They walked huddled close together almost unconsciously, as if that might provide them better protection in case of another attack like Dusk's. All of them were at various stages of beaten. Rarity and the deer, Diogo, were the worst off, both of them having been tossed around for most of the fight. This was especially bad for Diogo because he was not as solidly built as the ponies; one of his legs had actually been dislocated, and after it was reset by Doctor Whoof he was forced to stay on Big Mac's back and keep wait off his leg for a while. Rarity meanwhile had gotten a shock straight through her body, messing up her muscle control for nearly half an hour and heating her metal armor enough for it to char some of her fur.

The rest of them had gotten off relatively easily, compared to those two. Ditzzy was bruised all over like the others, and a cut above her left eye had required some bandaging up. Big Mac was able to force his way through any pain he felt, so he was fine. Twilight Sparkle meanwhile had been even quieter since they had started moving again than Rainbow herself, which made the Pegasus worry. The Pegacorn's left wing was in a sling at her side, to keep the bones in the right shape as they healed on their own, which according to Doctor Whoof would only take till sunrise the next day. More lingering were the numerous cuts, scratches, and burns littered over the purple pony's body, a result of her own attacks as much as Dusk's. As nonthreatening as they were for her life, they would heal at a much more natural rate.

Doctor Whoof and Shield Maiden were both more or less unhurt. Shield Maiden thanks to her thick leather armor and battle-hardened body and Doctor Whoof because he was the only one not to get attacked. He was also, Rainbow Dash imagined, the only one in the group with his eyes not trained on her back. She could feel them all staring at her, silently, perhaps unconsciously, accusing her. She had been their leader, their Captain, and she had been as useless in the fight as any of them. More useless even, as it had been Twilight who had kept them all from getting pummeled by those massive streams of water, and Twilight with Big Mac's help who had struck the blow that made Dusk eventually retreat. It had all been Twilight.

Rainbow Dash hung herself lower, her mane draping around her head and obscuring most of the world from her. She walked and watched the hard concrete of the bridge abruptly change to the hard-packed soil of a regular road, marked by grooves from carriages and free of grass. It was wide enough for three carriages as large as the late Trixie's old show wagon to move along it side by side, with room to spare for a pony or two walking along them.

Rainbow Dash stopped walking but continued following the road with her eyes. It stretched on ahead of them for many, many yards. Perhaps half a mile, she reckoned. As it went a gradual curve grew, until it veered off to the right and went up the course of the Mearas River to the northeast. From examining the map Twilight carried Rainbow Dash knew the road would cut away from the river about three days up it to head toward Stalliongrad. The river though would continue on for many miles, past Germaney and to the farthest reaches of Equestria to the Unknown North. That was not a path Rainbow Dash ever wanted to travel.

Leaving the road entirely, Rainbow Dash looked straight ahead. There, hovering mere feet from the road itself, the Hatchling Forest sat, a great wall of green and brown pines. Rainbow Dash's sharp vision could not pierce the trees for more than a few feet on the outer edges so thickly were the trees grown together. Knowing how large gryphons grew however, and that they were flying creatures like her or Ditzzy, Rainbow Dash figured the trees must thin out somewhere deeper into the forest. Otherwise they would have barely enough room to fly in a straight line.

Shield Maiden wandered up beside Rainbow Dash and looked at the

forest with her. "What are you thinking, Rainbow Dash?"

At the sound of her name Rainbow Dash looked at Shield Maiden beside her a moment, thinking, before sighing and looking back to the trees. "I'm just thinking about how much easier this would all be if we could just go through that forest." A thought occurred to her, making put on a wistful smile. "You know, I used to have a gryphon friend called Gilda. We were best buds in flight school, but when she started treating my Ponyville friends like trash I told her to get lost. She sure would be nice to have around right about now though...."

Shield Maiden put a hoof on Rainbow Dash's shoulder and squeezed. "If she was as you say, then she most likely wouldn't help us anyway." The armored earth pony looked to the forest, and to Rainbow Dash's surprise slipped into a frown she could only call...frightened. "Besides, I don't particularly like the look of those trees. They are too close together, you could trot into an ambush and not even realize it until they enemy was upon you."

Rainbow Dash nodded. "Yeah, I suppose they're a lot different than those golden plains you call home in Gildedale. You could see something coming for miles there." She grinned and gave her friend a friendly shove on the shoulder. "But of course, then somepony could see you coming a mile away too. Must be pretty hard to sneak up on anything there."

Shield Maiden shrugged and stepped away from her. "Yes, I suppose. Anyway, I believe it is time to get moving?"

At that Rainbow Dash looked around her and realized that, yes, all the others had stopped upon reaching the spot she stood at. They were all either drinking from their canteens, taking the moment to sit down and rest, or were simply staring at her expectantly. Diogo had slid off of Big Mac's back, refusing any further help from the work stallion as he nibbled on some grass. Rainbow Dash blushed in embarrassment at having held everyone else up and turned her eyes back to the road ahead. "Uh, right. Come on everypony. Let's try to get some miles under our hooves before the sun sets."

Faster than Rainbow Dash had expected of them, those resting or eating quickly finished with what they were doing and began falling back in

line. Rarity and Twilight moved closer to where Rainbow Dash and Shield Maiden stood, Rarity shooting a small smile to the Pegasus, though for what Rainbow Dash couldn't figure out. Meanwhile Diogo moved to the back of the group where Doctor Whoof was. Rainbow Dash liked that, it meant the doctor could keep an eye on the deer and help if he began to fall behind.

A few seconds longer and everyone had sorted themselves out and were ready. "Let's move out!" Rainbow Dash shouted. With this command the seven ponies and one deer launched themselves forward into a light gallop, naturally falling into two rough lines with Shield Maiden and Rainbow Dash at the head as they ran. Though their bodies cried out in resistance to the sudden increase in speed, sore and hurting from the recent fight, the group powered their way through it and pushed themselves had hard as they dared. They veered to the right as soon as the turn in the road came until they were aiming northeast, a direction they were to hold for the next three days as they followed the river upstream.

Minutes passed, dragging into hours where the only sound to be heard was their ragged breathing and the fall of their hooves like thunder on the road. Rainbow Dash felt pain lance up her leg with every step she ran, but she dared slow down or stop. A sense of urgency filled her at the feeling of the sun on her back, slowly inching its way down to the western horizon. Now that they were moving again, really moving, it hit her all at once how much time had been lost, first in Brelagrose putting the dead to rest, and then later in the fight against Dusk. She felt no guilt for taking the time in the city, but that did nothing to lessen the inexplicable fear worming its way into her gut. Anything could have happened that day in Brelagrose, and so Rainbow Dash pushed herself on harder and harder. The pain from her ankle, at least, served as a distraction from her thoughts....

It presently occurred to Rainbow Dash that she could just make out her name being called. Coming out of her thoughts she looked to her left where Shield Maiden ran, but the warrior's face was set into a focused frown and her gaze was trained to the woods beside them. Turning her head to look over her shoulder, Rainbow Dash spotted Rarity looking at her, worry etched onto her features.

"Rainbow Dash," she shouted over the wind and the pounding of their hooves. "For Celestia's sake, get off that ankle before you break it! You

have wings, fly you idiot!"

Rainbow Dash looked back ahead and thought on this. The idea of simply flying along with the others had come to her, and she knew it was not helping any to keep abusing the hurt ankle as she was. Even at that moment pain spread from it through her leg, a throbbing pain that made it hard to think on anything else. But a glance behind her showed that everyone else was running together, even Ditzzy. Flying then almost felt like cheating to her, taking the easy way.

Rainbow Dash was saved from having to try to explain this to Rarity by Shield Maiden drawing close. "Rainbow Dash, perhaps you could fly up and scout the area around us? An eye in the sky might help us avoid another ambush like the one Dusk pulled on his!"

That was all the convincing Rainbow Dash needed. Turning her head to look behind her again, she found Rarity's eyes and locked with them. "Rares, you're in charge until I get back. If I'm gone longer than an hour, assume the worst and panic accordingly."

Rarity nodded in acknowledgment of the order, and it was definitely an order, not a request. Rainbow Dash returned the nod before in one swift motion spreading her wings wide and leaping up. Without losing any of her speed or momentum she switched from running to flying. In another moment she tilted her body and shot off into the air like a rocket, a rainbow trail left in her wake. Rarity picked up the pace to fill the spot Rainbow Dash had been in.

As Rainbow Dash climbed higher and higher into the sky, the fear, guilt, and anxiety that had been bubbling within her slowly receded. Up in the sky, among the clouds, it could all be left behind on the ground, with all those other ponies and their troubles. Rainbow Dash all too eagerly welcomed this feeling of freedom that flight gave her. For the first time since that mist-filled day, where she had spilled her pain and sorrow out to her friends and discovered a true evil had set itself against them, Rainbow Dash smiled. Not a weak smile, or comforting smile, or a smile of false bravado to hide the pain she was in, but an honest to goodness grin of joy. The sky was her domain.

Tucking her wings in close to her sides, Rainbow Dash went into a rolling spin, corkscrewing to the side and slid her way through a cloud the size of the Sweet Apple Acres barn. Her rainbow trail flared out in her wake, and slowly the cloud split in two down its middle and began to drift apart. Before the two pieces could go far she spun down and circled around, slicing through again through the bottom; now it was four pieces of cloud that were drifting apart, spreading out around a shimmering field of rainbow light.

Rainbow Dash peeled away from the fractured clump of cloud and flew straight for another. Tilting to the side some, angling her approach just right, she flared her wings out and skimmed over the surface of the miles-long cloud. The very tip of her right wing dragged along the misty substance, sending cloud spraying out behind her in a thin sheet. The sunlight caught it, and Rainbow Dash grinned as the land beneath her was bathed in rainbow light that for once wasn't her own making. Well, not directly her making.

Her wings went back to her sides, and releasing a shout of joy Rainbow Dash turned at a sudden 90 degree angle, piercing into the cloud. A split-second later and the other side exploded out in a widening circle of color. A level of joy beyond laughter filled Rainbow Dash as her Sonic Rainboom obliterated the cloud she had flown through, the circles of light spreading through the air. There was no doubt that they could be seen for miles, and Rainbow Dash imagined that they might even be visible from Canterlot.

Rainbow Dash looked behind her a moment to admire the brilliant stream of light flowing behind her, before looking back ahead and seeing the rapidly approaching blue of the Mearas River. A grin crept onto her face, and maintaining her speed Rainbow Dash threw her legs forward, the sudden shift in weight distribution making her body spin. This was something she had to time absolutely, completely perfectly, or else she would risk winding up a red stain on the river. Rainbow Dash didn't feel a moment of hesitation though; in fact, it was the danger of the stunt that made it so worthwhile.

She sped closer and closer to the river surface, reaching the point where her entire field of view was dominated by blue. At the last moment before she slammed into the water Rainbow Dash stopped her spinning

with a kick of the legs and shifted her momentum from vertical to horizontal, and quite suddenly she was galloping over the surface of the water at supersonic speeds. Each tap of a hoof against the water sent a pressurized wave of water shooting out behind her, only for a moment before getting bisected by her rainbow light trail.

Rainbow Dash couldn't keep up this trick for long; even the momentary touches of her hoof on the water made her hurt leg ache. Reluctantly she lifted up from the river, dropping out of supersonic flight as she drifted up towards the clouds in an almost lazy manner. For this final trick she wanted to pull she would not need speed so much as precision, some luck, and a bit of...artistry.

Her eyes scanning the sky above her, it didn't take long for Rainbow Dash to spot what she was looking for and smirk. There, about a hundred feet above her and to her left, two clouds sat perfectly spaced beside each other. She quickly changed her course until she was below them, and then turned up to fly toward them. Her eyes narrowed on the closing distance between her and the clouds, mentally working out the sort of flying math she bet the others, especially Rarity and Applejack, would never imagine her being able to do, something which suited her just fine. Once she thought she had the timing down right, Rainbow Dash began to spin as she flew up, her wings stretched out to her sides and tilted ever so slightly. She passed between the two clouds and the tips of her wings passed through the edges of the clouds, catching the fluffy white substance on them. She passed the clouds and continued flying up, and as she spun the cloud matter came with her, trailing behind in two trails that twisted together into a flowing helix of white. The effect was that, to any observers, the split colors of her mane and tail had flowed together into a single, blazing white.

Soon enough Rainbow Dash felt the cloud on her wings run out, and she ended the trick with a little loop. She had climbed up pretty high during the flight, and all before her the land spread out, little patches of green and yellow in varying shades mixed together, with one thick band of blue cutting through it. To the north and northeast she could see mountains in the distance, hulks of dark grey topped with white where snow fell. To the west, behind her, the sun had just reached the horizon and begun to slowly sink beneath it.

Feeling a tad winded from her impromptu aerial show, Rainbow Dash

flew down and perched on a low hanging cloud to catch her breath. 200 feet below her the rest of her group moved, little specks of color against the dull brown of the road. She watched them down there and smiled again. It was good to see them safe, for once.

A shadow fell on the cloud Rainbow Dash sat on, followed by a gust of wind, a flapping of wings, and a shift in the cloud's tilt as something much heavier than Rainbow Dash settled onto the cloud behind her. She sighed and rolled her eyes. "Well, that'd be a properly dramatic entrance..." she turned around to look at the newcomer. "If I didn't know you lot were watching since before I began having fun."

Sitting there before Rainbow Dash was a gryphon. The largest gryphon she had ever seen in fact, nearly a head taller than Gilda had been the last time Rainbow Dash had seen her. The main color of his body was a rusty red, like the shade leaves turn in autumn. Over his chest and shoulders was thick leather armor emblazoned with the insignia of a feather inside a circle, and at his left side was strapped a short sword in its sheath. On his back, nestled between the wings, was a bow and quiver full of arrows. His grasping claws were unencumbered, but strapped onto his lion paws were boots fitted with metallic claws, fit for slashing through flesh and bone.

"Pony...." The gryphon slid off a pair of goggles off his head and glared down at Rainbow Dash with a pair of forest green eyes. "Your 'show' was impressive. I had a very hard time restraining several of the younger gryphons under my command from flying out and trying to teach you a lesson about flying so close to OUR territory."

Rainbow Dash smirked and gave her wings a shake. "Yeah well, it's a good thing you did, 'cause I would've kicked their butts so hard they'd be wishing they were back in their eggs!"

The gryphon gave a very jerky, very unwilling nod. "That's why I restrained them. You are obviously an incredibly skilled flyer. I doubt you came here just to show up my gryphons, most ponies are too...nice, for that sort of petty act." His eyes flicked to the greaves on her shins and his frown grew. "Plus, you were the equipment of my equivalent in your Equestrian military. Explain yourself, now."

Once the gryphon had finished speaking, Rainbow Dash smirked and

stood up. She knew, having dealt with Gilda for many years, that gryphons were a proud, brash, and boastful race, and as such expected those same qualities in those they dealt with. "Explain myself? You want me to explain myself?"

Rainbow Dash puffed her chest out and strutted over to the gryphon, who narrowed his eyes at her. She stopped nearly chest to chest to him, if his chest weren't at the same level as her head, and smirked. "Perhaps you've heard of the great Pegasus warrior, knight of the Equestrian crown, ambassador to all ponykind, and best flyer in the world...Rainbow Dash?"

The effect of her announcement was immediate, and just about as Rainbow Dash expected. The gryphon's eyes widened in surprise, flicking almost imperceptibly fast to her mane, then her cutie mark, before returning to her face. He took a quick half-step back so he wasn't so close to her. "Oh...oh yes, I've heard of you, Captain Dash. You've made quite an impression on the gryphon people." The gryphon bowed his head to her. "I am Altair, Second Captain of the 8th division Gryphon Rangers. It is...interesting to meet you."

"Right back at ya." Rainbow Dash gave him a little half-serious salute. "I'm with that group of ponies down on the road you undoubtedly noticed; the Knights of Equestria, you see. We're on a mission from Celestia, to-"

She was silenced by Altair's upraised hand. "Wait, stop. I'm not the one to have that conversation with. I'm just the Second Captain; you want to speak to the First Captain."

"Okay...." Rainbow Dash cast her gaze about, but she did not see any more gryphons anywhere in the skies. "So...where the heck is this First Captain?"

Altair indicated to the Hatchling Forest. "She...is one of the gryphons that to be restrained. She doesn't like ponies very much. But listen. Ahead on the road your group travels sits Amon Mearas. Make camp there for the evening, and my captain will visit you there when her temper has cooled and I've managed to talk sense into her."

"Yeah, I know of the place you're talking about." Rainbow Dash looked west to the sun, and started estimating the time until it had fully set. "I think

we'll manage to get there before night hits. Okay AI, you have yourself a deal."

Rainbow Dash spit on her hoof and held it out for him to shake. Altair regarded the dripping wet hoof with a raised eyebrow for a moment, before looking up to her grinning face. "That is disgusting. For now I go, before any of your pony weirdness infects me like my captain warned me about."

Before Rainbow Dash could say anything Altair spread his wings and leapt from the cloud, disappearing in a blur in the direction of the forest. She watched the gryphon fly for a moment, before shaking her head and matching his action. Instead of the Hatchling Forest though she flew down to the road winding between it and Mearas River, coasting along above it for nearly a minute before spotting her friends in the distance. Slowing down some she pulled up to them and landed in the vacant spot behind Rarity.

"Okay guys, we've got a new plan. Let's go a bit more before stopping for the night at Amon Mearas, okay?"

Rarity continued galloping, looking over her shoulder at Rainbow Dash. "Why, what's come up?"

Rainbow Dash jumped and flipped over Rarity, to where she was flying backwards and facing the ivory Unicorn while keeping pace. "Well after I got done showing off how absolutely awesome I am, a gryphon captain flew up to me from the forest. They want to meet with us tonight to discuss our quest."

"Can we trust gryphons?"

Rainbow Dash looked over to Shield Maiden, who had asked the question. "I guess we'll find out tonight, won't we?" She spun around so that she was facing forward again. "Now come on ponies! Um, and deer I guess. We've got a bit more ground to cover before the day ends, so let's pick up the pace!"

With Rainbow Dash's command, the company put on a fresh burst of speed they had not expected themselves to be capable of. Soon the pounding of their hooves against the ground echoed along the river to their

right and through the woods constantly to their left. Rarity moved back a space, allowing Rainbow Dash to once more assume her position at the front beside Shield Maiden. She did not run with them, but flew just fast enough to keep up.

Minutes passed by. Behind them the sun slipped further and further down beneath the horizon, and as they passed around a bend Rainbow Dash spotted a hill growing in the distance. "There it is!" she shouted. "Just a bit further!" As the hill grew clearer as they neared, a few gasps rang out from the company, the loudest of all from Shield Maiden. Rainbow Dash chuckled and grinned. "Yeah, it gets that reaction a lot."

The hill sat on a peninsula into the Mearas River, stretching nearly halfway into the river from the shore. In stark contrast to the natural green and brown hues of the fields and forest around it, the hill was a massive and barren slab of rock, looking more as if it had been planted there than being a natural part of the area. Layered on the upper reaches of the rock were pillars and broken walls, worn down by time and weather. The whole thing towered above everything else nearby, a black silhouette in a dark blue sky.

The company slowed, and then came to a stop as they reached the foot of the monolithic hill and looked up at it in awe. Doctor Whoof glanced around at the sides of the hill, frowned, and trotted over to Rainbow Dash. "Right, it's a very nice rock, you should be very proud. Now for the matter of scaling those sheer stone sides about 500 feet to the top of the thing, eh?"

"That won't be a problem at all," said Rainbow Dash, still looking up at the hill. Diogo, you and Rarity can teleport up to the top. Just so you know, the top is made of real big, flat stone slabs, if it makes it any easier. Meanwhile, Ditzy, Twilight, and me can carry you earth ponies up there by flying. See? Easy as pie."

Rainbow Dash flopped onto her belly on the stone top of Amon Mearas with a pained groan. Her chest rose and fell, her heart and lungs working feverishly to draw in enough air so that she wouldn't die before she could slap Twilight and Ditzy. "Why...did I have...to carry up...Big Mac?!"

The sound of hooves clopping on stone made Rainbow Dash tilt her head up, only to see a giggling Ditzzy Doo trotting over to her. "Because, rainbow best flyer in the soup! Big apple not radish enough to slow the time!"

"...shut up, Ditzzy."

After a few more minutes of lying there and regaining her breath, Rainbow Dash worked her way back onto her own hooves, gave her mane a shake to get rid of some loose pebbles that had gotten in it, and then looked around. From what she could see, camp was already mostly made for the night. The area she stood in was a perfectly circular stone slab built into the top of the hill, measuring about seven yards across all around. Pillars surrounded the edges of the circle, supports for a roof that was no longer there, only a clear view to the stars above. The circle itself was littered with debris and chunks of stone, though the worst of it had recently been moved to the side to make room at the center of the circle for a crackling fire and several sleeping bags.

Rainbow Dash approached the fire, sitting down next to Diogo and staring into it. The deer was currently in the process of removing his armor for the night; the sun had finally slipped beyond the horizon, and stars had begun to appear in the dusk.

"Big Macintosh is on the other side of the fire," he said, indicating toward it with an antler. "Making supper. Rarity, I think, is going about the area laying on some early warning spells in case anything approaches while we're asleep, Doctor Whoof is by the pillars, going on about how awesome they are, and I'm not entirely sure where Sparkle, Doo, and Shield Maiden are."

"Eh, they're probably exploring the grounds." Rainbow Dash spread her wings out to let the heat from the fire better soak into them. "Gosh, you guys got this thing set up fast!"

Diogo shrugged. "It was mostly Rarity. The moment we teleported here she already had her magic acting and her packs open to start work. Did you know she knows a spell to make wood burn slower?"

Rainbow Dash blinked and looked at Diogo in surprise. "No, I didn't.

Yeesh, when I got back from my travels she was going on all the time about how much she wanted to start traveling, but I never imagined she would actually start learning for it. Hmm...."

Rainbow Dash returned her gaze to the fire, where it stayed for several minutes. Then she stood up and stretched. "Well, I should probably start a lookout. No knowing when those bird brains might show up. Call me when the food's ready, okay Diogo?"

The deer nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

The next moment Rainbow Dash bopped him on the head. "Hey now, none of that! I told you, ma'am is my mom's name!" Then with a laugh she flared her wings and flew off into the dark.

From the southern section of wall surrounding the flat hilltop, a set of stairs descended a third of the way down the hill. It was at the bottom of these steps, on a hidden plateau built into the rock face, that Shield Maiden stumbled upon Ditzzy Doo. The wall-eyed Pegasus had stripped from her armor, and with her back to the stairs was bathing herself in a clear pool that Shield Maiden figured must have formed from rainwater dripping down the rocks. It was wide enough for two or three ponies to stand in together, and deep enough to lap at their bellies.

Shield Maiden went over to where Ditzzy had piled together her Equestrian armor, sat down, and set to work removing her own armor. At the noise Ditzzy's ears perked, only just then noticing the other mare, and turned to smile at Shield Maiden. "Oh, hello lady of the golden plains! We grey ponies have to flap out of the syrup together, right?"

Shield Maiden paused in removing her peytral and looked in confusion at Ditzzy. "Syrup...you mean stick together?" Ditzzy nodded, her smile dimming somewhat, and Shield Maiden looked down at herself. Then she looked back up at Ditzzy and gave her a small smile. "Huh, well what do you know, we are both grey-coated. Almost the same shade too."

Removing the rest of her armor, Shield Maiden set it in a pile next to Ditzzy's pile and stepped closer to the pool. Ditzzy had resumed washing, dunking her head down beneath the surface to get her mane wet. Shield

Maiden regarded the surface of the water for a moment, and then carefully slipped a forehoof into it. The water was cold, almost shockingly so, but she steeled herself and waded in until she was all in. Then she took a deep breath and, following the other pony's example, dunked her head in. And then almost immediately she pulled it back out, her eyes wide and teeth bared. "C-Cold!"

The next moment Shield Maiden was forced to eep again when Ditzzy stood up on her hind legs and began scrubbing across Shield Maiden's back. "H-hey, what are you doing?!"

For her part, Ditzzy giggled and scooped a hoof-full of water onto the earth pony's back and kept scrubbing. "Personal experiences says, full bowl of running in komaga hide armor funnels into a glass of soreness! One hoof for another makes the world go shiny!"

"...." Shield Maiden glanced over her shoulder at Ditzzy, looking at her vacantly-smiling face for several seconds as she thought over what had been said. "So...you...sympathize with how sore I was wearing that armor all day because YOU were wearing similar armor...actually now that I think about it I remember Dash mentioning you were in Equestria's military, so you perfectly understand what I'm physically feeling. And now you want to help me out so that I can help you out?"

Ditzzy nodded her head, before shaking it. "No, Rainbow Dash will be fine for me later. I just want to be friendly by massaging you."

"Oh...." Shield Maiden turned back forward, accepting the help. Her eyes closed and she sighed in relief as Ditzzy's hooves shifted from her back to her sides. "W-well, I must admit, this feels so good after today...that fight sucked...."

A moment later her eyes shot open and she turned to look at Ditzzy, something the Pegasus just said catching in her thoughts. She swung her neck around so fast it cricked. "Wait, Rainbow Dash will be fine for you later? What, um, what exactly did you mean by that?"

Ditzzy's massaging hooves slowed, and then stopped. Ditzzy dropped back to her four legs and took a step back from Shield Maiden. The smile had dropped from her face, replaced by a look of worry. Though Shield

Maiden couldn't think of anything she had to be worried about. "Uh, be, be fine as in, uh...it's like...." Ditzzy's face scrunched up in a supreme effort of concentration. "We're like...Rarity and Big Mac. FINE."

Shield Maiden blinked. "Oh. Well uh...oh! Oh. Huh." She sat down on her haunches, raising a hoof up to her chin to scratch at it in thought as she regarded the pony before her. "We don't have any...ponies like you two in Gildedale." She saw Ditzzy's face drop and could have slammed her head into the stone wall at her stupidity. "No no, don't think that! I don't...personally have anything against that, I guess. Um, you seem happy, and Dash seems happy, and this conversation is really awkward and I think I'm rambling now. Anyway, I just don't get it, I guess. Gah, this is frustrating!"

With a huff Shield Maiden slammed her forehooves into the water, inadvertently splashing Ditzzy. The Pegasus's face broke into a grin in response to this, which in turn made Shield Maiden smile. She edged a bit closer and looked into Ditzzy's eyes as best she could. "Listen, I mean no disrespect or anything. It's just, we don't have any of that in Gildedale. There, marriages are encouraged not just for our love, though that's important, but for children. And I don't get how you can stand to, well, not have a kid of your own. That seems the second-most important thing about a coupling to me and why are you giggling like that all of a sudden?"

Rather than answer, Ditzzy walked past Shield Maiden, motioning for her to follow. The two ponies stepped out of the pool, and after a moment where Ditzzy dried them both off with a gust created with her wings, Shield Maiden followed the Pegasus over to their armor piles. Ditzzy dug around in hers for a moment, before pulling back with a photo gripped in her mouth and a smile on her face. She set the photo down on the pile so that they could both look at it. "My muffin!"

Shield Maiden walked over to the photo and looked at it. It depicted what looked to be a warm spring day, in a park or forest meadow. At the center of the photo sat a little Unicorn filly with a violet-grey coat and yellow mane and tail. She was sitting there smiling at the camera, her eyes lit up in excitement over something.

Looking back and forth between the filly in the picture and the mare beside her, the resemblance was obvious to Shield Maiden. She motioned

to the photo with a hoof. "Your daughter?"

Ditzy nodded her head hard enough to send her mane flopping about. "Yep! That's my little muffin, Dinky! The bestest filly a mommy could question for!"

Shield Maiden smiled, and stepping away from the photo approached her own pile. "Well, she is certainly a cute little filly, but I might have to disagree with you on her being the best." Bending down Shield Maiden rummaged through her discarded pack a moment, before pulling out her own picture, setting it atop the pile much like Ditzy had done with her photo. Ditzy trotted over close to look. It was a charcoal painting, depicting a light grey filly with a dark grey mane and tail "That there is my daughter," said Shield Maiden, smiling. "She's MY little muffin."

Silence fell between the two ponies, the two mothers, as they took this chance to leave, for a little while, the danger of the quest they had undertaken. They shared stories about their children and homes, their friends and lovers. Shield Maiden did most of the talking, something she did not mind too much. Ditzy was a good, sweet listener, whose occasional comments, once Shield Maiden listened past the nonsense words to the meaning behind them, always brought a smile or laugh to her lips. It was as if, in the nonsense, there was no room for exaggeration or deceit, only sincerity. It did not take long for Shield Maiden to understand why Rainbow Dash loved her.

Presently a lull came to the conversation. Shield Maiden sat beside Ditzy Doo, looking out from the rock shelf to the dark of the night. "You know," she said, "this is the farthest I have ever been from home. Actually it's the first time I've ever even left Gildedale. I hope everything is going okay. Ashtail and Applejack should have reached there by now, perhaps even made their way to Thatchholm if nothing waylaid them."

Ditzy turned her gaze south and sighed. "Dinky is good girl. Bet muffin has all the animals straight-laced. And her friends too. Ponyville must be boring as a ball bearing. Mustard seeds-" the sound of shifting pebbles came from nearby. Immediately Ditzy looked to the stairs and grinned from ear to ear. "Twilight!"

Shield Maiden looked to the stairs a moment later and nearly jumped

out of her skin at the dark form on the steps. The next moment the figure stepped forward into the moonlight, resolving into the shape of Twilight in her dark cloak. Shield Maiden sighed and smiled, mentally berating herself for getting so jumpy. "Oh, it's just you, Twilight Sparkle. You...kinda startled me with that robe of yours. In the dark you look a bit like Dusk in it."

The purple Pegacorn looked down at herself, before quickly lowering her hood to her shoulders. "Oh! I'm sorry for that. I suppose I must've looked rather intimidating on the stairs there. Hehe...." Twilight walked closer to them, and Shield Maiden saw her eyes, shining violet in the night, go from her and Ditzy to their armor piles, then to the pool of water, and then back to them. "Taking a bath?"

Shield Maiden shook her head. "No, already did, so the pool is all yours if you need it. Careful though, the water's really cold when you first get in."

Twilight Sparkle nodded her thanks and began to approach the pool, unclasping her cloak with her magic. Shield Maiden, with Ditzy in tow, turned to gather up her armor to leave. Her eyes fell on the drawing of her young filly, set beside Ditzy's photo of Dinky, and a sudden, insatiable curiosity burst to life inside her. Shield Maiden turned back to Twilight. "Hey, Ditzy and I were just talking about our fillies. Are you a mother, Twilight?"

As soon as the words left her mouth, Shield Maiden felt something was wrong. Twilight had frozen stepping into the pool, facing away from Shield Maiden. Ditzy looked between her and the purple pony, an expression of worry where there had once been a warm smile. Shield Maiden felt a horrible, freezing magic fill the area, unlike any she had ever felt before. She gulped and took a hesitant step away from Twilight, toward the stairs.

But then Shield Maiden's fear shifted to concern as Twilight sat down and hung her head, still facing away from her and Ditzy. "I...I had a child once. He wasn't mine by blood, but he was my little son all the same. I fed him and changed his diapers, I rocked him to sleep and sang lullabies when he needed them. I, I..." in the dark, Shield Maiden could barely see Twilight's shoulders begin to shake. "I taught him how to walk and talk, how to read and write. I taught him right from wrong and proper manners at the table and...and...." Twilight shuddered, the rest of her words beaten down by her sobs.

Shield Maiden shared a look with Ditzzy, who simply shook her head, tears gathering at the corners of her own eyes. This was enough to tell Shield Maiden what had happened to Twilight's son. Horror filled Shield Maiden, horror that she, with her daughter alive and safe in Gildedale, simply could not relate to the pain that Twilight must experience every day. What was it like to lose a child? What did the pain do to a pony? These thoughts burned in Shield Maiden's mind. A sense of guilt overtook her as she watched Twilight cry before her. "Twilight, I'm so, so sorry. Just...just forget I said anything, okay?"

Silence for a moment, before Twilight sniffled and turned to look at them. Tears still fell from her eyes, but the sobbing had stopped. "No, no you don't need to apologize. You didn't know." A shudder ran through her body, and Twilight's face scrunched in pain as the flow of tears strengthened again. "I just...oh Celestia I miss him so much. Spike, my precious Spike...."

A brush of wind against Shield Maiden's side, and suddenly she found that she was alone outside the pool. Ditzzy had flown over and pulled Twilight into an embrace, hugging her close and speaking softly into the younger mare's ear. "It's okay. It's okay. It's okay. It's okay. It's okay. Twilight Sparkle, it's okay. It's okay." Twilight pressed into the embrace, and her sobs began to slowly weaken.

Shield Maiden watched this display for a few seconds, before the feeling came over her that she was intruding on something intimate. An aura seemed to emanate from the two mares, a feeling of closeness that most of the time could only be felt between siblings, or life-long friends. Shield Maiden could not explain, but she felt it between them all the same. Even more, she felt her presence was not needed. Quietly gathering her things she slipped away, going up the stairs to the fire and warmth. But even as she left, Shield Maiden heard Twilight speak through tears, and the words she said filled Shield Maiden's chest with an icy fear. "In the name of my mother, my father, and my sister, I swear that you two shall return to your daughters. Even on my life, I swear it."

Shield Maiden ran up the stairs, a panic overtaking her. Her mind whirled in horror at what she had heard. The Family Oath, a pledge both great and terrible, binding its maker through a magic deeper and older than

Unicorn magic, even older than elk magic if the myths were true. Stories of those who made that oath existed in all cultures around the world, even Gildedale, though Shield Maiden had only heard of three Daleponies to make it. All the stories Shield Maiden had heard ended in tragedy for those who failed their oaths, and she had heard many. And Twilight Sparkle, a mare Shield Maiden barely knew but had already gone through so much pain, had just made that oath.

More screeching broke Shield Maiden from her thoughts, and she realized that she had made it to the top of the stairs, and now stood at the outer edge of the circle of pillars on the hilltop. The screeching came from within the pillars, followed by a pony shouting and the sounds of a scuffle. Shield Maiden gasped. "That's Rainbow Dash!" Shield Maiden dropped her armor, not having time to put it on. Grabbing her hoof-axe from the sack she strapped it to her hoof and charged past the pillars into the hilltop circle.

Almost immediately Shield Maiden ground to a halt, gaping at the sight that met her eyes. The gryphons had arrived.

Chapter 7

Gryphon Diplomacy

Rainbow Dash sat atop one of the broken pillars that lined the hilltop, staring out at the night sky as she ate. Set beside her was a small platter of apple slices, roasted and sprinkled with Big Mac's "special mix of spices." From what Rainbow Dash could tell, this special mix was cinnamon and sugar tossed around in a bag. It was simple, but combined with the hot apple cider Big Mac had mixed up with it Rainbow Dash was feeling nice and warm. Not that the cold night really bothered her any, being a Pegasus, but there was a fine line between not feeling cold, and feeling warm. And Rainbow Dash really rather preferred staying on the warm side of that line.

A buzzing noise caught Rainbow Dash's attention. Finishing the apple slice she had just plopped into her mouth she tossed the now-empty platter away and peaked over the edge. A green light caught her eye, and she watched as Doctor Whoof wandered around the bottom of the pillar, aiming his sonic screwdriver through the air at random, at least as far as she could tell. At first Rainbow Dash was content to just sit there and watch, but her curiosity finally got the better of her when the brown earth pony stopped sonicing everywhere, walked right up to the pillar she sat on, and licked it. "Hey professor, what in Equestria's name are you doing?"

Doctor Whoof looked up at her as if just noticing that she was there. "Oh, Dash, fancy meeting you here. Lovely night, isn't it? Nice and perfectly freezing. So I just thought I take a stroll and, smell a few flowers..."

"Lick a few pillars," Rainbow Dash chuckled, tapping against the stone pillar with a hoof.

"Exactly!" Doctor Whoof reactivated his sonic screwdriver and whirled in a circle, waving it about. "I mean this place is just filled with all kinds of energies, just whizzing about in a big ball of uh, of whizzing energy! Not just Unicorn magic too, I'm detecting Alicorn magic, deer magic, dragon magic, and, and...hm, some magic I'm not very familiar with." His spinning slowed, the green light of his sonic screwdriver gravitating to the pillar.

"Some magic that..." he licked the pillar again and smacked his lips. "Magic that reminds me of Neapolitan ice cream. Well that's weird; I don't think they'd even invented Neapolitan ice cream when this place was made. For that matter they hadn't really invented ice cream as we know it at that point. It was more of a cold, nasty thing of ice from the mountains mixed with honey or crushed berries or-"

"Doctor!" shouted Rainbow Dash, finally losing her cool at his scatter-brainedness. "Focus!"

An embarrassed blush colored Doctor Whoof's cheeks. "Um, right, of course. Anyway, I was just saying that the magic reminds me of Neapolitan ice cream, or maybe something else multi-colored, like...." He stopped and stared at Rainbow Dash, a look of understanding dawning on his face. "Oh. Oh hey, that's really cool!"

Rainbow Dash perked up at this statement. Stretching her wings she flew down to Doctor Whoof and looked at him. "What, what's cool? Is the multicolored magic from Tirek? Is it the original Knights of Equestria? Is it the Crown or the Helm or maybe...." Rainbow Dash stopped talking. Understanding dawned as she recognized the way Doctor Whoof was looking at her with that confident grin, as if taunting that he knew more than she did, and what he knew was really, really cool. There had been only one other time he had grinned at her like that, 14 months ago in the TARDIS...

"It's rainbow magic, isn't it?"

"Bingo!" Doctor Whoof gave a barely-noticeable adjustment to a slider on his sonic screwdriver, and then activated it. Rainbow Dash was for a moment blinded, unable to grasp what she saw. Along with the green glow and buzzing that she had grown to associate with Doctor Whoof's little device, the hilltop all around them was suddenly ablaze with light of all colors of the rainbow. Wisps of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet floated all around, undulating in thick ribbons or simply pulsing in translucent clouds.

Several shouts of alarm rang up through the camp, loudest of which was Rarity's scream. Doctor Whoof shut off the sonic screwdriver and blinked, stumbling a step before sitting down. "Okay, I did not expect it to be quite so bright. Ow. Next time I'll be sure to close my eyes before doing that."

"Doctor...." Rainbow Dash and Doctor Whoof turned and saw Rarity approaching them, her right eyes twitching ominously. A few paces behind her followed Big Mac and Diogo, less annoyed looking and more curious. "Darling, what, precisely, do I have to blame for nearly BLINDING ME?!"

Rainbow Dash eeped as Doctor Whoof pushed her forward, between himself and Rarity. "Rainbow Dash has been here before!"

"What?! No I haven't!" Rainbow Dash flailed her hooves and pointed at Doctor Whoof. "It was him, he was doing weird magic science stuff like he's always doing! Besides, I've never been to here before! Heck, I've never wanted to be here before!"

"Only technically," said Doctor Whoof. All eyes moved to him, and he seemed to thrive in the spotlight. "Our Rainbow Dash may've never been here before, but she has, but she HASN'T. Everyone here seems to be forgetting their myths and legends, which, since we've dealt with Nightmare Moon, world snakes, and technically ARE the fabled Knights of Equestria, we should definitely regard as our history. Probably. Now then, Rarity, what hill are we on?"

"Why, Amon Mearas, the hill of Mearas!"

"Excellent! Seems like somepony's been brushing up on their elkish! Now then," he turned and pointed next to Rainbow Dash. "What big 'ole river did we just cross?"

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. "Duh, the Mearas...River...." A click resounded in her head. "Hey, wait a minute-"

"Yes, precisely! You're beginning to think! And finally...." Doctor Whoof jumped up onto his hind legs and pointed to Diogo. "And what is the connection between them?!"

"The Unicorn Mearas," answered Diogo. "The first of ponykind the deer encountered, millennia ago when we were still the ruling race. He led his people to the aid of the deer in our ancient battles with the elephants. All deer are taught his name, and owe our close friendship with ponykind to him. But I don't understand, what does this have to do with Rainbow

Dash?"

Doctor Whoof groaned and rolled his eyes. "Honestly ponies, it's like Rainbow Dash being the latest physical avatar for the Rainbow of Light doesn't mean anything to you. Mearas was the last such avatar!" He activated his sonic screwdriver, and again the streams and clouds of light were visible. "All this, this is remnants of rainbow magic left by him! A burst of power, so great it left an imprint on the physical world! So cool!"

Rainbow Dash looked at the light around her, feeling her own power flare inside her whenever a stream touched her. It made her feel...smaller, yet bigger at the same time. As if she were just discovering there was so much more to her than the years of her life she had lived, the experiences she had. It made her realize just how little she actually understood about the Rainbow of Light; about herself. "Y-yeah, cool...."

Doctor Whoof turned off the light and grinned at Rainbow Dash. "I can't wait to see whatever you do to trump this!"

"That just might be acting like an ambassador," interrupted Rarity, breaking the conversation. She hurried to the middle of the group and pointed past Doctor Whoof and Rainbow Dash to the sky. "Look!" The others followed Rarity's hoof, and after several silent seconds of scanning the dark skies they spotted what she had seen. Gryphons, 10 to 12 of them, flapping their way towards them on the hilltop.

Rainbow Dash set her legs and stood her ground. "I don't want anypony doing ANYTHING when they get here! Let me handle this, their leader-"

And then the gryphons were upon them, and Rainbow Dash's words were swept away in the turbulence of their beating wings. Bird cries filled the air as the gryphons landed all around the ponies, perching on the pillars and forming a tight circle around them, forcing the ponies and deer into a back to back huddle to keep them all in sight. More kept to the air, circling around in a close watch on the area. Each of them wore armor identical to that worn by Altair earlier that day, thick leather covering all the vital parts of the body. In the dim firelight their weapons glinted; long spears tipped with thin blades, longswords made for stabbing through armor, armored gauntlets to crush bone, small blades wrapped onto the tips of their tails for slashing passing enemies. And in addition to all this, each gryphon carried

a bow and quiver full of arrows.

Rainbow Dash moved to the forefront of the group and scanned around them. Predatorial eyes in gold, green, and brown looked back at her, several of them glaring impudently. Rainbow Dash ignored them. She noticed Shield Maiden, with Ditzzy and Twilight close behind her, off to her left beyond the pillars. Making eye contact with the earth pony Rainbow Dash signaled that she was to remain there, before taking a step further and raising herself as tall as she could manage. "All right, nice show, very dramatic! Now which one of you bird brains is the First Captain Altair told me about!?"

"Rainbow Dash," whispered Rarity in horror. "I don't think we want to agitate a dozen heavily armed, flight capable warriors twice as big as Big Mac!"

"Oh, they're not the ones I'm aiming to agitate," said Rainbow Dash, grinning from ear to ear. She looked up at the gryphons still circling above them, causing Rarity and the others to follow her gaze. "She is."

An ear-splitting screech followed this proclamation. From the flock of gryphons circling above them one dropped down, slamming to the ground before Rainbow Dash in a thick plume of smoke. From the dust sent up from the landing stalked forward a gryphon, smaller than the other gryphons around them but no less dangerous looking. Her fur and feathers were the brown and white combination typical of most gryphons. Her leather armor featured strips of steel embedded into the chest and flank pieces, and over her head was a solid steel great helm, covering all features except for her beak and yellow eyes. Unlike virtually all other gryphons there, this one carried no weapons, but had blades fixed to the tips of her primary wing feathers.

Rainbow Dash faced this gryphon with a smirk and confident gait. "You're the First Captain, I assume?"

The Captain growled, standing up on her hind legs so that she towered over Rainbow Dash. "Damn right I am, little pony. And you're somewhere you aren't wanted. I suggest you-"

"You know, there's something I've never understood," continued

Rainbow Dash, talking over the gryphon captain. "Why does everything always call us ponies 'little ponies'? Seriously, everyone does it! We're not little, you're just way big!" Rainbow Dash went from looking the captain in the eye to looking at her hips. "Especially in some places, hehe."

The Captain screeched and swiped at Rainbow Dash, claws sharp enough to slice through stone whistling through the air. "I'M NOT FREAKING FAT!"

Rainbow Dash jumped over the wild slash. She then sidestepped its follow-up slash before turning around and bucking the Captain in the chest. The clang of hooves striking metal rang over the hilltop, but the attack served its purpose of making the Captain stumbling back. Rainbow Dash flipped back around to face her. "You're right, you're just dumb."

The Captain ran forward and punched Rainbow Dash in the face, sending her flipping head over heels backwards through the air. "Well you're so lame and unremarkable, even your lame blue coat blends into the background because it doesn't want to be noticed!"

Rainbow Dash flared her wings to stop her flipping. She landed hoof-first on the side of a pillar and kicked out, flying right back at the Captain. "Well you're so unremarkable, nopony even noticed you were the only gryphon in Junior Speedsters!"

The two continued battling each other around, slinging insults as savagely as punches and kicks. None of them except for Twilight and Doctor Whoof could quite believe what they were witnessing. Diogo wandered up to Rarity, standing beside her and unable to take his eyes off the fight. "I...feel like I am missing something. What exactly am I looking at?"

"Gryphon diplomacy!" said Doctor Whoof, trotting up to Diogo's other side. The earth pony had a silly grin on his face. "The greatest spectator sport in the world! This is why it's a requirement for all pony ambassadors to have at least a first degree black belt in hoof-fu!"

Diogo turned and stared flatly at Doctor Whoof. "You're making that up."

"You call me a flip-flop? You can't even decide if you're a bird or a kitty-

cat!" Rainbow Dash flew at the Captain, swerving down at the last second to dodge a claw swipe and slide between the gryphon's legs. Keeping her momentum up she grabbed hold of the Captain's tail with her teeth and pulled. The Captain let out a screech as she was yanked off her paws, twirled around, and slammed into a pillar.

"Ooh, that looked like it hurt!" Doctor Whoof looked around. "Hey, anyone have any popcorn? Anyone?"

The Captain growled and picked herself back up. She turned to the pillar and raked her claws across it, cutting the thick stone in half. "Yeah, well what do I call you, Miss Pony+Bird? Bony?!"

Picking up the fallen pillar the Captain hurled it at Rainbow Dash. Rather than ducking or flying out of the way however Rainbow Dash met it head on, slamming through it hoof-first in an explosion of dust and chunks of rock. Continuing on with her speed barely slowed, Rainbow Dash slammed into the Captain, sending them both careening backwards off of the hilltop. Their wings flared and they flew up, trading punches and insults faster and faster.

"Lamebrain!"

"Bird brain!"

"You used that one already, idiot!"

"Yeah, well...you're wings are tiny for a gryphon!" Rainbow Dash body slammed the Captain, ignoring the shock of pain that passed through her as slamming full-force into a leather and metal chestplate. While the gryphon was still winded Rainbow Dash grabbed her by the shoulders and headbutted her.

CLUNK.

"Ow...." Rainbow Dash let go and drifted a few paces away from the Captain. For several seconds all she could see were stars, and not the ones in the night sky above her, and all she felt was a ringing pain in her head. "That's going to come back to hate me in the morning...."

"You idiot...." Rainbow Dash gave her head a shake to clear the stars and looked ahead. She saw the Captain had also been thrown off by the slam to the head, if her erratic flying was anything to judge by. "Did you really...just headbutt someone...wearing a helmet?!"

"...maybe...but hah!" Rainbow Dash flew right into the Captain's face. "I still managed to hurt you, so there!"

"Yeah, 'cause your head's denser than rock!"

"Well maybe if your head wasn't so soft you wouldn't need a helmet in the first place, so there!" Rainbow Dash stuck her tongue out. The next moment she was flailing about, tears springing to her eyes as the Captain clamped her beak onto the soft bit of flesh. "AAAH! LETH GTHO! LETH GO!"

"It's...like watching a pair of children," remarked Shield Maiden, gazing up in awe at the increasingly juvenile insults and attacks the two flyers threw at each other. From the corner of her eye she saw movement, and looked to see Twilight Sparkle turning to head back down the stairs. "Twilight, shouldn't we all stay in case things turn for the worse?"

"You have a stupid scarf!"

"Well your mother was a hamster, and your father smelt of elderberries!"

Twilight stopped walking. Looking over her shoulder she watched the aerial fight a moment longer, then glanced around at the gryphons surrounding them and watching the fight, before finally looking back to Shield Maiden. "No, I think things can only take a turn for the better for those two. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a call to make." Twilight turned and continued down the stairs.

"Twilight, wait!" Shield Maiden made to follow the purple Pegacorn, before the sound of two bodies hitting the ground behind her made her jump and turn back to face the circle. Rainbow Dash and the Captain had returned to the earth, much more bloodied and bruised than they had been when they left it. They paced, slowly turning in a circle, their eyes locked and bodies tensed for another movement from the other.

"You...have gotten a lot better, flip flop."

Rainbow Dash grinned at this, giving a brief nod. "Yeah, so have you." Then with a groan she stopped her circling and sat down, mimicked a moment later by the Captain. She was just too hurt, and too tired to keep that up. She felt like her whole body was a bruise, and looking at the gryphon five feet in front of her, she felt so too.

"But ya know," Rainbow Dash continued, "I never expected an arrogant, selfish bully like you to become a captain of the gryphon rangers. Never seemed possible for a gryphon like you."

"Oh yeah?" The Captain reached up and removed her great helm, dropping it to the ground so that she could more recognizably half-grin, half-glare at Rainbow Dash. "I never expected a loser flip flop like you, who'd embarrass her oldest friend in front of a bunch of lame-o ponies and force her away without a goodbye, would ever be some famous knight or whatever. Hmph, Captain Dash...."

"Gilda...." Rainbow Dash stopped talking at one raised hand. She watched the gryphon Gilda turn away from her and go back to the other gryphons that had gathered, and suddenly more than her body ached. All this time, over two years, and Gilda just refused to talk to her in any way beyond yelling insults? Was that all that they could do, even after so long?

No. That couldn't be all. Rainbow Dash would not accept that. Stepping forward she kicked the discarded helmet, hitting Gilda in the middle of the back. Instantly two of the waiting gryphons sprung forward between her and their captain, spears aimed at her, but Rainbow Dash ignored them. "Hey, Gilda! Don't turn your back on me! I'm...I'm sorry!"

Gilda stopped walking, but did not turn back to face Rainbow Dash. Taking another step forward, warily eyeing the way the two gryphons blocking her from Gilda tensed, Rainbow Dash kept herself focused on one thing; not letting her friend go again. "I know we parted on bad terms last time, but I never wanted to throw our friendship away. I didn't like how you treated my other friends, and I didn't like your definition of friend. But I don't abandon mine, no matter what you might think."

Gilda turned her head, just enough for Rainbow Dash to see a hint of

her yellow eyes. The other ponies waited with bated breath, watching to see what would happen next. Even the other gryphons looked to their captain with concern. Rainbow Dash slipped between the two spear-wielding gryphons, who both did nothing to stop her, and approached until she was a mere two feet from Gilda. Every step made her exhausted body twinge with pain, and there was nothing more she would like to do than lie down and sleep, but she had to do this. "Gilda, please, talk to me. I want to be your friend again so much, but even if you refuse that, then talk to me captain to captain, gryphon to pegasus."

"...." Gilda sighed and turned to face Rainbow Dash fully. "You've changed a lot, Dash. You've gotten even lamer than I remember you being." Rainbow's heart broke at these words. But before she could cry, fly away, buck Gilda in the beak, or any combination of those, the gryphon continued. "But somehow, you make that kind of lame...almost cool."

"Does this mean...?"

"It means," said Gilda, "that we'll talk. About important things, like diamond dogs and mad sorcerers, not your lame-o stuff like friendship and hearts and junk. In case you haven't noticed Dash, there's a war brewing on the horizon, and I don't do miracles."

"Yeah, yeah of course." Rainbow Dash grinned, relieved to be hearing this at least. She had wanted her old friend back, wanted it so much, but if an ally was all she could get, well, it could do for the moment. And the gryphon was right. War was coming, and the gryphons were in as much peril as anyone else. They needed to get to work.

"Come on," said Rainbow Dash, turning away. She began to walk to the fire set up at the center of the hilltop, where most of her group waited. "I have representatives from Gildedale and the deer of the Shimmerwood traveling with me, both comparable in rank to us. I guess you'll want to talk with them too?"

Gilda nodded. Rather than immediately follow Rainbow Dash however, she briefly turned and motioned her Second Captain Altair over. "Take everyone else back to base. I'll be fine alone with these ponies, so there's no need for them to lose too much sleep."

"As you command, Captain." Altair turned to execute his instructions, but paused. He turned back to Gilda. "Captain, are you...sure that you want to be alo-"

"I said I'll be FINE, Altair." Gilda shot him a glare that made him wither. "Don't get lame on me, just do what I tell you."

"O-of course." Without another word, Altair turned and took to the sky, calling the rest of the waiting gryphons to him. Within a few seconds the pillars and skies were all clear of her soldiers, and Gilda turned to rejoin Dash.

Rainbow Dash, meanwhile, looked around at her gathered friends. Shield Maiden and Ditzzy had hurried over from where they had stood outside the circle, but there was one more pony Rainbow Dash didn't see.

"Hey, where's Twilight?"

Twilight Sparkle came to a stop at the foot of the stairs leading down to the pool. From somewhere above her on the hilltop the sounds of Rainbow Dash and Gilda fighting echoed down, but the voices and crashes were distant. She would not be distracted from her work that night.

Twilight advanced to the pool, her cloak billowing out behind her as a sudden wind came in from the side. Softly beneath her breath she began whispering ancient words of magic, a violet light emanating from her horn. Slowly the darkness around her deepened, the shadows lengthening and the light of the stars dimming. Their reflections in the water, however, stayed as bright and constant as they had ever been. In the unnatural darkness of the cave, Twilight thought, they seemed even brighter. She barely felt a tug on her reserves of magic, the spell requiring little more than perfect concentration.

That was something she never got over about this spell, one of the few lunar spells taught to her by Princess Celestia. The difference in feel between lunar and solar magic, between the Princesses Luna and Celestia. Solar magic was direct and forceful, great in what it could accomplish but requiring deep magical reserves; Twilight had, naturally, excelled at it when

Princess Celestia taught it to her. Lunar magic however was as subtle and, Twilight dared to call it, elegant as the night sky. Rather than loads of power it required precision and great concentration. Twilight fondly remembered endless nights spent on the highest balcony of the castle with the Princess, working on the lunar magic as a way to grant her the self-control needed to insure she wouldn't randomly turn ponies into potted plants when she walked down the street. She was not an expert at it by any means, but she was good enough to do this.

Maintaining her concentration, Twilight carefully pushed just a small amount more power into her horn, before stepping into the star-filled pool of water. In an instant the world inverted, the water rushing past and over her body in a shock of cold. Then she found herself standing on the surface of a crescent-shaped pool of water, staring down at the rocky plateau she had just left. Turning her eyes up, Twilight gazed first at the field of stars high above her head, and then around at towering trees of a forest ancient and dark. The smell of soft grass and freshly fallen pine needles filled Twilight's nose, a calming scent that eased some of the tension that had built up in Twilight's body.

Twilight finished looking around her and set off at a trot for the broad curve of the Lunar Pool's back. Each step of hers on the water sent ripples spreading out, but the image of where she had come from remained constant. It was not a minute before her hooves touched down on grass. Twilight took a moment to enjoy its softness after the hard rock of the hilltop and the unyielding, glass-like surface of the water, before turning to look back at the yards-long pool.

Across the Lunar Pool from Twilight, Princess Celestia sat with her legs tucked in beneath her body, returning Twilight's gaze with a gentle smile. "My most loyal student, it is a pleasure to see you again, and to see that you have not let the skills I taught you in my sister's magic have not gone to waste from lack of use."

"Princess Celestia." Twilight bowed, and then mirrored Celestia's position. "I am simply glad I caught you at a moment of peace. How go things in Zebrica?"

"Both better and worse than I feared," answered Celestia. "The diamond dog armies are thousands-strong, but little else. It has made it easy for me

to rally the separate zebra tribes together to repel these invaders of their lands, but it makes me fearful that Nero has only sent the weakest of his soldiers, the sick and the fresh recruits. I fear what he could be planning, to keep his strongest legions in reserve."

Celestia closed her eyes and lowered her head, appearing deep in thought to any who did not know her well. Twilight, however, did know her well, very well. She could recognize the weariness hanging over the alicorn princess like a heavy cloak, and felt her heart ache for her. Twilight knew Celestia was a pony of peace above everything else, and abhorred violence unless absolutely necessary. Twilight could only imagine the pain she must be going through then to have to go to war, even if it was to protect the lives of their zebra allies.

Presently, after several moments of silence Celestia lifted her head and opened her eyes. The smile she sent toward Twilight only looked slightly forced. "But I am not the only one with news, I believe. Tell me my student, how goes your que...Twilight, what is that with you?"

"What?" Twilight looked over her shoulder to where Celestia was looking, and blinked at what she saw. Behind her and to her right rested a tiny pegasus foal. The filly's coat was a plain grey color, and her mane and tail were lemon blonde. The gentle rise and fall of the filly's chest revealed that she was sleeping, or at least in some form of unconsciousness.

Twilight gaped for a minute at the sleeping foal before her brain managed a coherent thought. "Oh, well uh, I didn't expect it to look like that. Or...to have any form, for that matter."

"Twilight?"

"Oh, r-right." Twilight coughed and cleared her throat, looking back to Celestia. For 14 months she had managed to keep this quiet from the princess, and this was certainly not the way she would want to confess, if she had to. But from the growing frown on Celestia's face, Twilight knew she had little choice. She steeled herself for whatever would happen next.

"If you remember, I was broken from my Queen Eos state through Ditzzy Doo's intervention, flooding me with thoughts and memories that forced me to recognize how horrible I had become." Celestia nodded. Twilight gulped

and continued, ducking her head down so she wouldn't have to look at her mentor. "Well, the thing is, Ditzzy didn't give me just some of her thoughts, her memories, or her emotions. What you see behind me is...a little shard of her soul."

The silence that came after this proclamation stretched on into minutes. Twilight shifted uncomfortably, her mind in its fear filling in the silence with thoughts of all the things that could happen now. Screaming she could stand, simple and crushing disappointment, but this silence was just too much.

"What?"

That word sent shockwaves through Twilight. She looked up, and the expression of horror on Celestia's face made her panic. "B-but I didn't mean to do it! It was an accident, magical backlash that severed the magical connection between us!" Before she had realized it, Twilight had stood up in her panic and started pacing. "And, and I don't want to keep it! Every spare moment I had before this quest began I spent researching and experimenting, working to discover a way to transfer the shard of soul back to its rightful body! But it's been so much work! Studying pony biology, chemistry, metaphysics, advanced theories in magic, dozens of esoteric theories on the workings of magic I could never have dreamed of...journals detailing the mad ramblings of ancient pony alchemists about things I would never look at otherwise. Theories on life creation, transmuting elements, golem construction, anything I thought could help me. Help me fix Ditzzy...."

"This explains the many book requests you've made of the royal archives," said Celestia, making Twilight pause in her pacing and pleading. The alicorn let out a sigh, motioning with her horn for Twilight to sit. Once she had Celestia met her eyes. "My student, I believe you understand the seriousness of what you have unintentionally done to Ditzzy Doo, and the danger in the magical knowledges and practices you have begun to immerse yourself in. Were it anypony else I would immediately forbid them from further pursuing pony alchemy and the workings of the soul, knowledge I have expressly forbidden any research into. But for you, Twilight Sparkle, for only this occasion, I will make an exception."

"Thank you, my princess." Twilight bowed her head, sniffing some. She

brought a hoof up to wipe away the tears of relief that came to her eyes. "I will treat this with the utmost care, and wipe my mind of all that I learn the moment it is no longer necessary."

Celestia nodded. "If you think that is wise, then very well. I must ask though, Twilight. Why have you not asked for access to the Magicahedron in all these months you have been doing this work? As a single, semi-sentient container of all known magical, historical, and scientific knowledge, surely it would have been invaluable to you?"

At this question Twilight ducked her head down further, letting her mane hide her face from Celestia's questioning gaze, though it did nothing to weaken it. For the next few minutes she pondered that question in silence, trying to decide on a way to put words to her reasons. "The reason is...I guess...." Twilight sighed and looked back up to her mentor. "I understand that you use it often, Princess; to refresh your memory on historical matters to better make decisions while holding court, as well receive visions and portents of the future, which is how you found out about the Crown of Cronus resurfacing into the world. So please don't take it as an insult towards you when I say that I hate that thing. Ever since I used it that once 14 months ago, learning all there was to learn about the original Knights of Equestria and discovering my lineage to them, I have felt hate towards it."

Twilight sighed again and shook her head. "Perhaps only alicorns like you and Princess Luna can withstand the intense condensed magic in the device and the strain it puts on the mind, but I get physically sick whenever I think back to the time I did use it. I guess I'm just afraid to use it again. All I know is that I will stick with books and scrolls unless I have no other option left to me."

"I understand, Twilight, you have no need to fear my disapproval. I was merely curious. And speaking of curiosity," Celestia smiled grimly at Twilight. "I believe there is still the matter of your quest to discuss. How has been your progress?"

"Our progress has been as well as could be expected, I suppose," answered Twilight. She was grateful for the change of topic, and didn't care if her relief showed on her face. It did not last for long though, as her thoughts turned to the recent events of the journey. "We made it to the town of Brelagrose after a few days of travel, only to find the town...dead."

"Dead?"

Twilight nodded, wiping the tears from her eyes and refusing to allow more to appear. She had done enough crying that day. "Yes, dead. We found the mist-filled town devoid of life. Everypony, mare, stallion, filly and colt was dead, scattered all over as if they had dropped dead were they stood. Their...magic had been completely drained from them."

"Oh...oh dear...." Celestia shifted her sitting position, before standing up completely. The coolness of the ground was no longer a comfort to either of them. "I shall have to inform my sister soon, have her send teams to collect the bodies and alert next of kin. I...I trust that you and your friends took care of them?"

Twilight nodded. By this point she was feeling more numb than anything else. "We built coffins and buried the bodies in a field near to the town. The graves are marked with their cutie marks for identification; I know records are kept in Canterlot of cutie marks." She pawed at the ground with a hoof. "Princess, do...do you blame me for-"

"No," cut off Celestia, almost shouting. Twilight flinched at the sudden noise. "I blame whoever or whatever drained their magic and killed them, not you for weaponizing the magic drain spell. That's something anypony can do, so don't let the guilt eat away at you any longer, my student."

"I'll try, Princess Celestia."

"Good. Now then, what else since then has happened?"

"Um, well...." Twilight coughed and scratched the back of her head. It was going to be embarrassing talking about the next bit if she didn't word it just right. "Well, as we were crossing the Bridge of Brelagrose earlier today, a strange unicorn sorceress appeared and attacked us. She put up a hay of a fight, but working together we managed to drive her off with a mortal wound."

"Oh my goodness, really?" Celestia quirked an eyebrow. "What was this pony's name? If she was great and powerful enough to fight all of you, she would have to be very tricky for me not to have heard of her."

It didn't take long for Twilight to remember the strange unicorn's name. It was so much like hers, after all. "Nox, Princess. She called herself Dusk Nox."

Celestia closed her eyes in thought, resting her chin on a forehoof. "Dusk Nox...well, I do recall a young unicorn who called herself Dusk, about...five or six years ago, I think. She came to Canterlot, calling herself a traveling scholar from Germaney and requesting permission to peruse the royal archives. She was very polite and friendly. I recall a very stimulating conversation with her on the magic of friendship, actually."

Twilight blinked...and then blinked again. "That doesn't really sound like the Dusk my friends and I met. She was tricky, and just felt arrogant."

"Hm." Celestia shrugged. "Well, it was many years ago. Ponies change. And you've told me you mortally wounded her, so I suppose it doesn't matter anymore. So then, what happened after the fight?"

Twilight was glad to continue on and leave that sore spot in her narrative behind. "After we picked ourselves back up we continued on our journey. We've stopped for the night on Amon Mearas, so that Rainbow Dash could meet with a gryphon Captain. Hmm, now that I think about it," Twilight glanced down to the Luna Pool, and the image of the plateau it revealed. "She and Gilda should be just about finished with the opening acts of gryphon diplomacy."

"Gilda," asked Celestia, curiously. "So you already know the captain?"

Now it was Twilight's turn to shrug. "Sort of. She was an old friend of Rainbow Dash's, before they had a falling out a couple years ago. And yeah, it didn't take a genius to figure out we'd be meeting her with the gryphons on the quest. We just have that sort of luck."

Celestia nodded, and then looked to the pool. "Well Twilight, it has been good to hear from you, but you should probably get back to your friends. Gryphon diplomacy, as you know, can get pretty rough."

"Yes, my princess."

Twilight stood, and after shooting one more look at Celestia, and then at the piece of Ditzzy's soul behind her, Twilight looked down at the pool and concentrated. She stepped onto it, and once again the world inverted, and Twilight was back on the hidden plateau, looking down at the field of stars that now occupied the surface of the pool.

"Twilight, darling?"

The sound of hoofsteps crunching daintily across rock caught Twilight's ear. She turned and saw Rarity stepping down the stairs, looking back at her. "Oh, hello Rarity. Have Rainbow Dash and Gilda made up yet?"

Rarity blinked at the sudden question, walking further down the steps onto the slab of rock. "Oh, well sort of. Best we could hope for with those two, I suppose. Rainbow Dash, at least, expressed wanting to be friends again."

"Well, that's big of her." Twilight looked up at the roof of the area and frowned. Stepping off of the pool of water she walked over to Rarity. She wrapped her cloak close to herself. "So, what has been going on while I was away?"

"Away to..." Rarity waited a minute for Twilight to elaborate, but Twilight remained silent. Rarity sighed and shook her head. "Very well, be all dark and mysterious, the stallions will love it. Anyway, at least walk with me while I talk."

Walking side by side, the unicorn and the pegacorn turned and began up the stairs. Twilight listened as Rarity began speaking. "Well, after the fight had died down and introductions were made, everypony got down to business. It seems that Gilda and her company were in the general area because they too have been suffering some diamond dog incursions. Nothing quite as serious as what happened in Ponyville, but it has a lot of gryphons reaching for their bows, as it t'were."

"So they're supportive of our cause then?" Twilight looked to Rarity. "Because it would be really, really helpful if they let us pass through their woods straight to the mountains. We could easily cut a week, maybe more, off our journey doing that."

Rarity sighed. "I don't know, I'm afraid to say I left while Rainbow Dash and the brute Gilda were still argu...discussing it. Though surely, as allies facing a common enemy, surely we will be allowed certain...privileges? Twilight?"

"Well, we're about to find out," said Twilight. They had reached the top of the stairs. Walking side by side into the circle of pillars, Twilight and Rarity approached the campfire at the center, where Rainbow Dash, Gilda, Shield Maiden, and Diogo stood gathered together over a map Diogo held before them. Big Mac stood a few paces farther out, washing the implements he had used to cook dinner. Farther out still, among the pillars on the other side of the campfire from Twilight and Rarity, Doctor Whoof could be seen, waving his sonic screwdriver around seemingly randomly but in what Twilight just assumed to be the best way. And up above, without looking, Twilight could feel Ditzy Doo hovering about, keeping watch.

Rainbow Dash looked up from the map at the sound of their hoofsteps and motioned them to come over. "Twilight, am I ever so glad to see you. Listen, as Princess Celestia's personal student, please tell this BIRD BRAIN to let us cross through the Hatchling Forest to the mountains of Gallopfrey. Or else...or else Celestia will drop the sun on them or...something."

Twilight sighed, shook her head, and went to Rainbow Dash's side. "Dash, I've told you before, being the Princess's student is not some kind of military, royal, or political position! I'm just a pony who the Princess likes. And a knight, I suppose, but that doesn't matter. Technically, in the order of rank, you, Shield Maiden, Ditzy, and even Gilda are higher than me."

Silence rang out as Rainbow Dash gaped at Twilight, eyes wide. Then she slapped a hoof to her face and groaned before glaring at Twilight. "Well she didn't need to know that!" Rainbow Dash shouted, pointing at Gilda. "I mean for Celestia's sake Twilight, haven't you ever heard of a bluff before?!"

Twilight stared hard at Rainbow Dash a moment, before turning away. Telekinetically taking the map from Diogo's hold she looked at it, and then over at Gilda. "You're a captain of a gryphon ranger company, meaning you should have the authority to allow non-gryphons to travel through Hatchling

Forest under armed surveillance. So if you're refusing to do that, either you're an incredible jerk, secretly a traitor of your kind and are looking to make our quest harder without being obvious about it, or something's happened to change gryphon policy. Something recent, recent enough for news of it not to have arrived at Canterlot before we set out on our journey. So, what happened?"

Gilda snorted and grinned, looking at Rainbow Dash. "Wow, she's a smart one. Smarter than you anyway, Dash. Why isn't she in charge of your little group of knights?"

"Because," said Rainbow Dash, returning Gilda's look. "Just because. Now, answer her question. Um...please." She pointedly did not look over at Twilight.

Gilda rolled her eyes, but did not argue further. She drew their attention to the map, pointing out several locations along the borders of the forest. "For the past several weeks, there have been raids from diamond dogs into the forest here, here, and here." She pointed to places along the border between the forest and the stretch of plains leading to Stalliongrad. "Our kinds have never liked each other much, but they've mostly left us alone. There are many mines deeper into the forest, near the roots of the mountain, but no gem mines, just metals for our weapons and coal for our forges."

"So what have been the purpose of these attacks, if you do not have anything the dogs would want?"

Gilda glanced over at the speaker, Shield Maiden. "No damn clue. No food's been stolen, no eggs taken as hostages, just a bunch of slashing and burning. For all any of us can tell, they're attacking simply for the sake of attacking. Like they want us to fight them."

"And have you?" Again, Shield Maiden. Probably the one among them with the most military experience, Twilight realized.

Gilda seemed to realize this as well, as she began to face the earth pony more and more, directing her answers to her. "Mostly, yeah. In the last week I've gotten word of three more companies of gryphon soldiers arriving at the eastern and southern borders of the forest, from our northern

border. Nothing ever happens up there anyway, so it's not a defense problem if that's what you're thinking."

At this point Rainbow Dash made her annoyance at how things were proceeding known. "Okay, this is all fascinating and junk, but what's it got to do with not letting us go through the woods? Twilight said something really big must've happened recently to make you change, so what...oh."

"Yeah."

"What?" Shield Maiden looked between the pegasus and the gryphon, both having suddenly gone quiet. "What, what is it?"

A moment later Rarity went pale. She figured it out as well. "Oh, oh my. Of course."

Twilight hung her head, telekinetically lifting her hood up. "Yeah...."

Before either Shield Maiden or Diogo could express their frustration at being the only two to apparently not figure out what had happened to change things, Gilda pointed to the map. Specifically, she pointed to Brelagrose. She looked at Rainbow Dash. "Just because our friendship broke up didn't mean I stopped going to pony-related places. Hell, moving into the Hatchling Forest made visiting Frosty Lime's tavern easier, I got to take my gryphons with me."

Gilda paused, and then shook her head. In the flickering firelight a few tears dripping down from her face could be seen. "From Canterlot...you must've passed through Brelagrose on your way here, must've seen the dead bodies lying everywhere. Well, I can top that; I had just been flying over the bridge to visit the tavern. Heh, if I'd been five minutes sooner I'd be dead with everything else there."

The look of horror on Rainbow Dash's face was heartbreaking. She staggered over closer to Gilda, hesitantly placing a hoof on her shoulder. Gilda ignored it. "Then, then Gilda...did you see what did it? What killed everything?"

The gryphon nodded. "Yeah, I did...." She looked at Rainbow Dash. "It was a pony, Dash. A pony killed Frosty Lime and everything else. But it

was unlike any pony I've ever seen before. His coat was blue, a deeper blue than yours, Dash. His mane and tail were...sort of an orange-yellow, like wheat ready to harvest. But his eyes...oh his eyes...they were like two black pits."

"You mean really dark, like black?"

"NO!" shouted Gilda, making Twilight, the asker, flinch. "I mean there was nothing there! There were no eyes, no face, just...two gaping pits of nothing! And his smile, his horrible smile! It was hateful and cold, and mirthless! There was nothing in him, Dash, nothing! He was empty, and he took everything to fill himself up but it didn't fill him up so he took more! And he's only going to keep taking more until there's nothing left! HE'S GOING TO TAKE EVERYTHING! HE IS NOTHING! NOTHING! NOTH-"

Rainbow Dash smacked Gilda in the beak, sending the gryphon tumbling to the ground. The surrounding ponies all gaped at this, and then up at Rainbow Dash. The blue-toned pegasus knelt down beside Gilda's prone form and helped her up into a sitting position. She noticed everyone looking at her. "W-well, I had to stop her screaming...."

Gilda groaned and rubbed her beak where she'd been hit, and then glared at Rainbow Dash. It was obvious her heart wasn't in it. "I'd be mad at you if I wouldn't do the exact same thing to knock you out of it."

Rainbow Dash grinned. "No problem. So, you were saying?"

Gilda shook her head. "No, I'm not talking any more about that...thing, that empty thing. But I will tell you this. He saw me, and he told me that a group would be following behind him in a few days. Your group, Dash. And he told me that if I let you pass through Hatchling Forest to Gallopfrey, he would make the forest his next stop. That's why I can't let you pass through here, Dash. I just let you go through to the mountains."

"I...I understand, Gilda." Rainbow Dash sighed and stood up. "I'd do the same thing, if it meant Ponyville, or Cloudsdale not getting destroyed. My friends and I will just follow the river, right?" She looked up at her surrounding friends, and they all nodded in agreement. She smiled and looked back at Gilda. "See? You don't need to worry about the other gryphons, we'll...why are you grinning like that?"

The others looked, and Gilda was indeed grinning, grinning like she'd pulled the biggest fast one ever. "The empty thing told me not to let you guys pass through the forest to the mountain."

"Yeah?"

Rather than say any more, Gilda pointed to the little hill representing Amon Mearas on the map, and then dragged her talon up, in a straight line from where they were at the moment, through the southeast corner of the forest, and then to Stalliongrad. Rainbow Dash grinned. "He didn't say anything about passing through the woods to anywhere else. Hah, this is great!" She looked from the map to everyone else. "This'll cut days off our trip!"

In the skies above, Ditzzy Doo frowned at the sight of several crows taking off from the hilltop in the direction of Stalliongrad. "Trouble trouble trouble...."

Chapter 8

Meanwhile, Back to the Young Bunch

It was late in the morning, the sun well into its course across the sky. Scootaloo flew through the skies of Ponyville, kicking a few clouds in frustration as she went. Her mane and tail were swept behind her by the wind, her wings practically buzzing as she sped toward Sweet Apple Acres. Her expression was set in a frown, troubled thoughts filling her head.

One week. It had been one week since a pack of diamond dog soldiers had attacked Ponyville, sacking several businesses and injuring about a dozen ponies, including the mayor of Ponyville. It had been one week since Twilight Sparkle, Applejack, Big Mac, Doctor Whoof, Rarity, Ditzy Doo, and Rainbow Dash, her personal idol, had left Ponyville in the middle of the night, probably to go on some sort of dangerous quest related to the diamond dogs attacked. In that week no news had come back to Ponyville concerning the reason for the attack or where the town heroes had gone to.

And so, rumors spread. There were rumors that war had been declared between ponies and diamond dogs; rumors that legions of wolf raiders were pressing on Equestria's borders, threatening to swarm in at any moment; rumors that Princess Celestia had abandoned Canterlot, retreating to the safety of the zebra lands; even rumors of rebellion in the north, and a nameless terror.

However, something did come from Canterlot. Three days after the attack, a force of 200 soldiers from Canterlot's own reserves had arrived, sent by Princess Luna's orders for the purposes of guarding the town from further diamond dog attack. So far though they hadn't seen any use in this regard, as since the attack all diamond dog activity around the area had ceased, with not a single canine being seen at all. Even scouting parties into the Everfree Forest and Whitetail Woods had come up with nothing but abandoned camps and days-old tracks.

Seeing that she had begun to fly over rows upon rows of trees, Scootaloo banked and lowered her altitude. Many of the pegasus soldiers had complained about her getting in the way of practice drills if she flew too

high, so at that moment she was just skimming the trees, her hooves barely brushing the topmost branches. She briefly thought about practicing some of her mid-air dancing atop the trees, but decided not to after a moment. She didn't want to listen to any more soldiers complaining she was showing off either.

"Not that they're all bad," Scootaloo thought to herself. "Just...serious. Nice but serious." The orange pegasus filly thought about this. Though their actual purpose for being in the town was mostly a moot point, many of the soldiers had been more than happy to be of service in other ways, something the mayor of Ponyville and the commanding officer for the soldiers, Colonel Skydancer, happily encouraged. The soldiers had been divided up, half set to work helping repair damages to the town by the diamonds dogs and other myriad things, and the other half set with the task of constructing a wall to encompass Ponyville, to help ward off potential attacks. From what Scootaloo had heard, this was turning out to be a harder job than expected. Not from lack of resources or help, but because there was some controversy on what exactly "Ponyville" encompassed.

Scootaloo was broken from her thoughts by the sounds of shouting somewhere up ahead and below her. "Ah, there's the controversy right now."

The field of trees ended below her. Tucking her wings in close to her body as her teachers had shown her, Scootaloo dropped down into a four-hoof landing a couple yards from the porch of the Sweet Apple Acres homestead. It was from there the sounds of shouting came from. On the front steps of the porch stood an earth pony soldier with a dusty red coat. His mane and tail were hidden by his golden armor, and at his side was a short sword. He was not the one doing most of the yelling.

"WHAT DO YA MEAN MAH FARM AIN'T PART OF PONYVILLE?! THAT IS JUST THE DUMBEST THING AH'VE EVER HEARD!"

"W-well ma'am, I just, the farm-"

Apple Bloom cut him off with a bang on his helmeted head with the hammer gripped in her mouth. "THE FARM FEEDS THE TOWN, YA DUMB TIN CAN! HOW LONG DO YOU THINK THE TOWN WOULD LAST WITHOUT A STEADY SUPPLY OF OUR APPLES, HM?! OR MAYBE YOU

WANT THOSE GOOD PONYFOLK TA STARVE!"

"N-no!" The soldier stumbled back, nearly tripping down the steps as he retreated from the mad pony before him. Scootaloo had to bite back her laughter at the sight of the fully armored soldier quivering and stumbling over his words in fear of a filly barely half his size. "I don't want the ponies of Ponyville to starve!"

Apple Bloom clanged him on the helmet again, sending a sound not unlike a ringing bell throughout the surrounding farm. "WHAT WAS THAT?!"

The soldier cried. "I don't want those good ponyfolk to starve, ma'am! Please don't hit me with your hammer anymore!"

Apple Bloom growled and raised her hammer menacingly into the air, making the soldier cringe, before swinging down and burying it to the shaft into the wood of the step right beside him. "Good! Now then, what're you goin' to do about it? Hm?!"

"I'm...I'm gonna...I'm gonna talk to my commander about it!" The soldier backed up until he was fully off the porch of the house, and then turned and ran, zooming past a watching Scootaloo in a blur. Scootaloo, who had spent many a day watching the fastest flyer in Equestria practicing, was impressed by how fast the earth pony managed to move while wearing his armor, already being a distant spot on the road leading back to Ponyville.

"Although, I'd probably move that fast too, if I thought Apple Bloom was behind me with a hammer, hehe." Scootaloo chuckled.

"And just what is that supposed to mean?"

Scootaloo eeped, the orange filly almost putting her previous statement to the test. Turning back around from the road to Ponyville Scootaloo found Apple Bloom had left the front porch of the house and had come up to meet her. "Apple Bloom, jeez! Don't sneak up on ponies like that!"

The earth pony filly put on a look of mock indignation. "What, you accusing me of being a sneak? Why Scootaloo, how could you say such a hurtful thing, when ah was just coming over to greet one of mah oldest and

dearest friends. That's not mentioning at all how said friend didn't announce her arrival at all, just sitting back and watching." Apple Bloom paused and grinned, drawing the last word out. "Sssnnneeeaaakkk."

Scootaloo rolled her eyes at her friend's antic. "Yeah yeah, I get it, I'll just start crashing everywhere I go, ponies will always know when I've arrived then. But anyways, just what was that all about, Apple Bloom? I was sure you were going to jump that guy!"

Apple Bloom huffed, shot a look down the road the soldier had gone, and then turned and began walking to the farm set a ways away from the house. Without having to be told, Scootaloo followed along behind her. The earth pony filly talked as they walked. "Oh, that was just some no-brains colt coming to tell me stuff ah already know. Talking about the wall, and protecting Ponyville, and how Sweet Apple Acres is too big and too detached from the rest of the town to be on the right side of the wall. Hmph, like that's fair at all! I mean, we Apple family ponies have been proud members of the Ponyville community for generations, that big...big um, dummy. Then you caught that he said he'll talk to his commander'."

Scootaloo sped up to stay by Apple Bloom's side and looked at her in concern. The other filly was looking worse than Scootaloo had seen her since before they had gotten their cutie marks, her mane limp and unwashed, and bags developing under her eyes. "And do you think that will help any, your ranting and him talking to his commander? I mean, you did bring up a pretty good point about feeding ponies...."

Apple Bloom sighed as the pair entered the barn. The whole room of the barn rang with the idle chatter of the cows inside, talking the time away about this and that, or lazily munching on stacks of hay. Scootaloo stayed by the entrance, watching Apple Bloom trudge over to a work bench over to their right in the barn. Apple Bloom set down the hammer onto the table before grabbing a bucket. "Of course ah don't think it'll help any, Scoots. They're a bunch of fancy city slickers from Canterlot; no way do they get the importance of a farm like this."

Apple Bloom turned and looked at the cows in their stalls. "Anyone need milking?" One cow near the far end of the barn raised a hoof, and so with the bucket gripped by the handle in her mouth Apple Bloom began trotting over.

Scotaloo followed, returning any hellos from cows she passed by. She didn't know any of them that much, but they seemed familiar enough with her, probably from Apple Bloom. "So what are you going to do then, Apple Bloom? You can't just lie down and let them trot all over you, get angry! Come on, show some more of that hammer-wielding I saw earlier! I mean, it's your cutie mark and everything"

Apple Bloom slid the bucket beneath the cow, letting the cow take care of herself. The earth pony filly sat down on a chair, letting out a huff and slumping. As Scotaloo watched, everything about Apple Bloom, even bow in her mane, seemed to wilt. "It ain't as easy as that, Scoots. They're a whole bunch of royal guards, real soldiers who've been in all kinds of serious situations, faced down all sorts of fearsome foes! And I'm...I'm just a filly, who hasn't had her cutie mark for even a year. Ah might get a few of them scared of me, but the commander? All of them as a group? Peh, they've been nice enough to listen to me as much as they have." Somehow, Apple Bloom seemed to slump down even more. "Ah can't...ah...ah'm all alone out here right now. Ah don't have Big Macintosh's calm, simple way of reasoning, or Applejack's honest, persistent arguing. Ah...grrr!"

Scotaloo flinched as Apple Bloom shot up and bucked her chair away, letting it smash against the far wall. All chatter in the barn died off as the shattered pieces of the chair clattered to the ground, before all eyes turned to Apple Bloom. The earth pony stood panting, deep shuddering breaths that made her whole body shake. Twin streams of tears fell freely from her eyes, splattering down onto the hay and dirt floor.

"I-It's not fair!" she cried, stomping at the ground. "Applejack and Big Mac left me all on my own to watch Sweet Apple Acres while they went off on adventures! How...how can they just leave me here all alone like this? Ah can't do this on my own...ah'm just a little filly, like they were always telling me ah am...at least before they left...."

Apple Bloom went quiet except for the sound of her crying. Scotaloo stood a few feet away, looking at her friend with new eyes. She had often seen the earth pony filly frustrated during their days crusading for their cutie marks, downbeat when various attempts of theirs to earn their cutie marks failed, but never as depressed as she was at that moment. Scotaloo

wasn't one for mushiness and getting emotional, but she couldn't just stand by and watch her friend suffer like this.

"Hey, come on Apple Bloom." Scootaloo stepped forward, sat down beside her friend and wrapped a foreleg around the earth pony's shoulders. With a hoof she tilted Apple Bloom's face toward her and gave her best, most confident smile. "You're an awesome filly, Apple Bloom, who is totally better than you're putting yourself up to be! I mean, who always got us back on our hooves when a crusade failed?"

Apple Bloom sighed. "Ah did...."

"Right! And who always helps fix my scooters when I break them?"

"Ah do...."

"Right!" Scootaloo squeezed Apple Bloom tighter. "And who helped Sweetie Belle get over her stage fright so that she could actually put her rad singing talent to use?"

"Ah..." the earth pony blinked, no longer needing Scootaloo's hoof to make her look up.

"Ah did."

Scootaloo's grin grew. She recognized she was making progress. "And who helped get Zecora accepted in town, when nopony else wanted to even speak to her?"

"Ah did!"

Now Scootaloo was grinning like mad. Standing up she jumped to in front of Apple Bloom and pressed a hoof against her chest. "Good! Now, who did Applejack and Big Mac trust enough to look after Sweet Apple Acres while they're gone?!"

Apple Bloom batted Scootaloo's hoof away and jumped up to her hooves. All the self-doubt was gone from her face, her eyes filled with burning determination. "Me! Ah'm trusted to look after the farm while Applejack and Big Macintosh are away, and ah ain't gonna manage that if

ah'm sitting around here moping!"

"Right!" Scootaloo high-hooved Apple Bloom, before spreading her wings and rising a several feet into the air. She grinned down at her friend, glad to see her back to normal. "Now then, final question! Who's going to race me down to Sugarcube Corner and eat her own weight in baked goods?"

"Me!" Apple Bloom pawed at the straw-strewn barn floor, before pausing and looking at up Scootaloo. "Wait, why are we going to Sugarcube Corner when there's half an apple pie in the house?"

Scootaloo shrugged and did another little flip in the air. "Well, I don't know. Sweetie Belle just came by my house earlier and asked me to get you and meet her there. She didn't really go into any detail, but I would've been surprised if she had, the mood she's been in."

"Hm, yeah. She has been really sulky since those dang diamond dogs ruined her first concert and Twilight and her sister left without a word, leaving her to watch over the library and the Carousel Boutique on her own."

"...."

"...." Apple Bloom coughed and scratched at the back of her head. "Uh, maybe ah oughta stop looking at how bad ah might have things and think about how bad my friends might have things."

Scootaloo rolled her eyes. "Gee, ya think?"

Apple Bloom shrugged and resumed her racing position. Scootaloo joined her on the ground a moment later and tucked her wings tight to her sides, making Apple Bloom grin. "No wings then? Good enough for me. Let's do this!"

Apple Bloom dragged herself down the street to Sugarcube Corner. Her mane was limp and stuck to her head with sweat, her chest heaved with the ragged breathing she was doing just to survive, and somewhere

between there and Sweet Apple Acres she had lost track of her bow. Her body ached from head to hoof, and she couldn't feel her legs quite as well as she would've liked. "Let's...not do this...ever again!"

A foot to Apple Bloom's right, Scootaloo groaned in acknowledgment, similarly dragging herself down the road in utter exhaustion. She could feel the strange looks they were getting from passersby, but she couldn't manage to even get embarrassed. "Trying to run at full gallop from your place to Sugarcube Corner is totally not a good idea...."

Apple Bloom paused a moment to try to stand up, her legs screaming in protest at the movement. She almost made it all the way up to full standing position before a stray breeze knocked her shaking legs out from under her and sent her flopping back down to the ground. With the wind knocked out of her, Apple Bloom groaned and went back to dragging herself along. "Ah bet Applejack could do it...."

Scootaloo let out a grunt and flapped her wings, lifting herself up off the ground and floating along beside the earth pony. She hadn't used them nearly as much as her legs during the trip, so they only loudly spoke to her in protest. Her hooves dragged along the ground beneath her. "Yeah, well I bet Rainbow Dash could do it...."

Apple Bloom huffed at her friend's usual idolizing of the rainbow-maned pegasus and, pausing again, grabbed hold of Scootaloo's tail and used it to pull herself to her hooves. She ignored the pegasus's squawk of protest and spit out the purple tail, nearly gagging at the taste of a few stray strands she could feel left in her mouth. How Applejack could do that all the time with Rainbow Dash, she couldn't understand.

Spitting out the hairs, Apple Bloom sighed and looked over at Scootaloo, who floated in the air beside her, nursing her slightly frayed tail in her front hooves. Apple Bloom had to chuckle at the look on her friend's face and shook her head. "Scoots, you look like somepony just kicked yer puppy."

Rather than verbally respond to this Scootaloo stuck her tongue out at Apple Bloom, before letting her tail go and looking around them. As it turned out, the pair had come to a stop not three yards from the entrance to Sugarcube Corner, the smell of freshly baked sweets and the sounds of

laughter drifting from the open door. Scootaloo blinked. "Look at that, we're here. Heh, guess I was too busy thinking about my awesome not-flying to notice where we were."

Apple Bloom stopped messing with her bow-less mane and looked up at Scootaloo's words to the bakery. "Ah think the word you're lookin' for is awful, not awesome. No pony runs better than an earth pony."

Apple Bloom started forward toward the bakery before getting stopped by a hoof on her shoulder. Scootaloo shook her head. "Hold on a moment, we should wait for Sweetie Belle, she's the pony who wanted to meet here."

"No need for waiting, I have arrived."

Apple Bloom and Scootaloo turned around and saw their friend Sweetie Belle trotting down the road from the library towards them. The unicorn wore a pair of violet saddlebags with her cutie mark of a musical note inside a purple heart emblazoned on them, and telekinetically held a pen several papers in front of her. As she drew closer to them though Sweetie Belle opened the bag on her left and slid the pen and papers in. Probably a new song, Apple Bloom suspected.

"Howdy, Sweets, how're you doing?"

"Oh, all right I guess. I-" Sweetie Belle came to a stop in front of the two ponies, both of them still panting from their recent race, and frowned. "Oh girls, look at you two. You do realize that the Running of the Leaves isn't for another week, do you not?"

Apple Bloom shared a look with Scootaloo, before looking down at herself. A fine sheen of sweat covered her body from head to hoof, scuffing her coat here and there, while the whole front half of her body was dirty and mussed up from her dragging herself along the last dozen yards or so. Looking over at Scootaloo she saw the pegasus wasn't much better off, her whole face covered in dirt from when she had face-planted into the ground. Apple Bloom shrugged and looked back at Sweetie Belle. "Eh, me and Scoots worked up a healthy sweat, what's the harm?"

"Oh, no harm at all, other than having the smell of our cupcakes messed

up by your...pungent, odor. Hold on a minute girls, I think I have a spell for this."

While Sweetie Bell pulled out a leather-bound book from the bag on her right side, Scootaloo blinked and looked to Apple Bloom. "Um, is it just me, or is Sweetie Bell acting kind of...Rarity-ish?"

Apple Bloom shrugged, glancing at Sweetie Belle, who at that moment had her face buried in the book she had pulled out. "Ah don't know, ah reckon she's acting more like Twilight, seeing how she could be kissing that book right now and we'd never know."

"Hey!" Sweetie Belle slammed her book shut and glared daggers at the two of them. "Do you want to have a nice, happy, stink-free brunch with me or not? HM?"

Apple Bloom opened her mouth to say something, but paused at the look on Sweetie Belle's face. Instead she shared another look with Scootaloo, gulped, and nodded to Sweetie Belle. "Um, sure Sweets, do whatever you want. Scoots and ah will just...see how things turn out here."

The lanky white unicorn smiled and dove back into her book, her horn taking on a slight glow. As she did Scootaloo leaned over and whispered into Apple Bloom's ear.

"Rarilight Sparkity."

Apple Bloom had to stuff a hoof in her mouth to keep from bursting into laughter, though her eyes watered and the corners of her lips turned up into a grin. That was just too perfect, she thought. Then something else occurred to her, and Apple Bloom took her hoof from her mouth to whisper back to Scootaloo. "Wait, doesn't that make you Rainbowshy, and me-"

"Apple Pie!" Scootaloo collapsed to the ground, legs kicking in the air as her laughter rang through the streets. Apple Bloom's face lit up like a beacon in embarrassment, her hooves moving to hide it from the ponies passing by that paused to gawk at the trio of fillies. It was heard to tell which was worse, the name or the laughing. "Scoots, sometimes you are just a right pain in the-"

THUNK. "Augh!"

Scootaloo suddenly stopped her laughing, everything going silent as death, except for whimpering that hadn't been there before. Apple Bloom dropped her hooves and looked up, gasping at what she saw. Sweetie Belle lay on her belly, tears of pain falling from her eyes as she clutched at the back of her head. The book lay forgotten on the ground in front of her, and beside the unicorn rested a large rock, one edge of it spattered with a hint of red.

Apple Bloom's vision went red. A scream tore from her lips as she ran forward and grabbed the rock, throwing it away in some random direction, not caring where it landed. "WHO THREW THAT?" None of the adult ponies around answered her, only continuing on their way with hurried steps and nervous glances toward the scene. Apple Bloom spotted Carrot Top hastily packing up her stand and growled, tackling the older earth pony to the ground.

"Did you do it?"

"N-No, I didn't!"

While Apple Bloom was doing this, Scootaloo knelt down by Sweetie Belle's side, pulling the saddlebags from her back and pulling her up. Very gently she pulled Sweetie Belle's arms away from her head. "Here, let me take a look at that. Everything's going to be okay, right Sweetie?"

Sweetie Belle gave a short, jerky nod, wincing when Scootaloo's hooves began pressing down around her mane, checking for the wound. "T-Twilight's not a bad pony, she's not. She just did some bad things...."

"I know, I know." Scootaloo touched at a spot on Sweetie Belle's head, quickly pulling back when the unicorn whimpered in pain. She looked down at her hoof, seeing the very faint red on it, then she looked to where she had pressed, near the top of Sweetie Belle's head, and then up into the air. "The dumb rock came from almost straight up. Guh, I can't believe a pegasus would do something so uncool!"

Sweetie Belle got up on shaky legs with some help from Scootaloo, her eyes moving up to glance at the sky. Then she bent down to grab her

dropped book and slipped it back into her bag. "Am...am I going to have to go to the hospital?"

Scootaloo shook her head, putting on a grin as she helped Sweetie Belle put on her saddlebags. "Nah, it's not that serious, just a scrape, like skinning your knee on the pavement. I've gotten worse than that riding my scooter. It'll heal up just fine on its own."

"That's mighty fine to hear." Apple Bloom wandered back over to the two, nuzzling Sweetie Belle on the cheek and then looking around. "well ah think ah traumatized Carrot Top, but she didn't have anything to say. Ah guess whoever dropped the rock flew off real quick afterwards, coward."

Apple Bloom meant to say more, but was stopped by a shake of the head from Sweetie Belle. "Please girls, let's not talk about this anymore. Can we just go in to Sugarcube Corner?"

"But Sweets, why would somepony want to drop a rock down on-"

"Apple Bloom," said Sweetie Belle, walking towards the entrance of the bakery, her head held high. "I would very much appreciate it if we could drop this subject now. I came here to enjoy some cupcakes and have a good time with my friends, and I will not let some ruffian with a grudge against my mentor ruin that! Come along, girls!"

Scootaloo chuckled and leaned in close to Apple Bloom as the two moved to catch up to their friend. "She used about three words I don't know, but I'm liking this attitude!"

Apple Bloom smiled and nodded, looking ahead of her at Sweetie Belle. Her smile softened as her mind wandered to the past. She could still remember them as three little fillies, running around town and getting into all sorts of fun, crazy hijinks to find their cutie marks. It had been fun, simple times, when the worst to be feared was getting insulted by Silver Spoon and Diamond Tiara. After they had actually gotten their cutie marks though, things had changed, for all of them. They were still friends, life was still fun, thrown rocks notwithstanding, yet...simple was gone. Apple Bloom couldn't decide yet if that was a good thing or not.

The trio entered the bakery. "So anyway Sweets, Scoots, who's payi-"

They ran into a wall of sound, only barely registering it as somepony talking, fast. "So yeah, it took me like, forever to really get started up there, but once people started coming they never stopped! I always knew it would be a super great idea to set up shop in a place like Stalliongrad, but it's such a relief to have it actually come true! I mean, you both know what I mean; it's why you get ponies to taste-test new products! I know it's going to taste good and you know it's going to taste good, but it only tastes better when other people know it tastes good! Am I right or what? Plus it's been soooo much fun coming up with unique baked good for the diamond dogs up there, oh but that's probably a sore spot for you two, sorry!"

Apple Bloom blinked, shaking her head and looking back at the scene she and her friends had walked in on. There at the main display counter across the room from the door stood Mr. and Mrs. Cake on one side, and on the other... "P-Pinkie Pie?"

The sound of three jaws hitting the floor was followed by the pink pony turning around and smiling at the three fillies. "Oh hi there girls! Long time no see!"

To the west of Ponyville and north of Sweet Apple Acres, sandwiched between the town proper and the Everfree Forest, Fluttershy's cottage and the meadow around it was fairly quiet, as fitting the time of year. Many birds had already flown south for the coming winter, and those that had not were snuggled deep into their homes to escape the chill in the air. Squirrels scampered up and down tree trunks and hopped about the ground, looking for any last bits of food to put in their stores, while down beneath the bridge the weasel family splashed through the water in search of a mid-day meal.

Suddenly, there was a twang of string getting released, the zip of an arrow cutting through the air towards the Everfree Forest. The arrow slammed into a red and white target nailed to the middle of an oak tree trunk, sending leaves and squirrels scattering. THUNK THUNK went two more arrows to the left and right of the first, close enough for the fletching on the arrows to touch along the edges. Onto this makeshift fletching bridge landed a single red-brown leaf. The whole field and surrounding trees went silent.

Her horn glowing with magic, Dinky Doo lowered her longbow from its position by her head, letting it rest for the moment as she looked out across the field to her handiwork. From 40 yards away, shooting from the chicken coop near the house, Dinky had managed to sink her three arrows all almost right on the center of the target, piercing the red circle.

"Well, my grouping can't get better, unless I want to start trying to pierce one arrow with the next arrow." Ditzzy frowned, sighing as she reached into her quiver with her magic. She lifted the bow back into position beside her and slotted the arrow, being careful not to mess up the arrow's fletching with her magic, and brought the whole thing to eye level. For several seconds she stood still, the faint breeze blowing wisps of her silver-blond mane against her face.

"Patience and focus." Dinky sighted down the shaft of the bow, squinting to focus on the target. "Patience...and...focus...." She slowly drew the arrow back, the creak of the yew wood music to her ears. A smile grew across her face. "Patience...and...ca-"

Before her eyes appeared the sneering face of the Witch, its shark-like fangs, its gleaming eyes, its sparking and flaming mane filled with malevolence and hate. Dinky's focus broke, her grip on the bow slipping as the string snapped. The shot went wild, her arrow streaking somewhere to the right and deeper into the trees of the Everfree than she dared to go.

Dinky stood there in silence for a while, staring down at her broken bow, before shouting and tossing it to the ground. "Dumb bow! Stupid, stupid! Augh!" Her hoof flew out, kicking the bow out of her way. Then she fell to the ground, knees digging into the soft soil of the meadow as tears fell from her eyes. Ahead of her, unnoticed, the face of the Witch faded away.

"I hate her. I hate her so much. She stole my mommy away from me...." Dinky's words were weak, but the venom in her declaration was clear. And she knew, too, that it was something horrible to feel. But her young mind couldn't help it. Her mother had been her whole life for as long as she could remember back, just the two of them living as well as they could. And her mother, her mother's friends, Rainbow Dash; they were always trying to tell her that it wasn't the Witch's fault. That the Demon was confused, the Witch was scared, the Witch was trying to do the right thing. But she couldn't

understand that, she tried but she couldn't. It went against everything she had been taught by teachers and the community.

"Doing good things make you a good little filly," Dinky remembered her teacher Cheerilee once telling her, after she had stayed late after school to help clean up the classroom. Cheerilee had praised her, offering a little piece of caramel. "Good deeds make for good ponies."

Dinky reached out with her magic, taking hold of her discarded bow and drawing it back to her. "Good deeds make for good ponies." She took off the pieces of broken drawstring from the bow, stuffing them and the bow into the arrow quiver for safekeeping. Then the quiver went onto her back. She would get a new string for the bow later, the day was still young. "So bad deeds make for bad ponies. Even the Witch thinks that. Why can't Mommy and Rainbow Dash?"

Turning, Dinky Doo left the chicken coop, silent and empty of the chickens Fluttershy had once kept in it, and started trotting back to the house. The whole area was quiet, so much quieter than she remembered it being when she and her mother had first moved into it. She remembered the angry little bunny, Angel, and the family of mice that lived in the walls, and the birds in their bird houses along the walls. They were gone now. All had lingered for a while after Fluttershy left, and for a while she and her mother had cared for them, but eventually the animals had just started disappearing. It was as if the yellow pegasus had been the only thing keeping them around. Angel had been the last to leave, disappearing just the previous summer. The little bunny had lasted just long enough for her to grow attached to him; enough for her to cry when she found his bed empty one morning....

Dinky was broken from her musings by a sudden sound from up ahead of her. She turned a corner around the house and spotted a pony in a cloak standing before the front door, knocking at it with a bandage-wrapped hoof. A covered basket sat beside the figure. For a moment Dinky thought it was Zecora from the Everfree Forest, come to borrow something or other, before remembering that the zebra wore a brown cloak and hood, and this pony was in black and white.

"Excuse me, can I help you?"

The pony jumped as if startled, before turning to face Dinky, allowing the filly to get a good look at the pony's face. She was a unicorn like her, a bit younger than her mother Ditzy, with her left eye the shade of purple common among unicorns and the right eye a honey yellow that for a moment was strangely familiar to Dinky. She couldn't make out the mane color from within the hood, but what she could see of the mare's coat it was a deep purple.

For several seconds the two unicorns just stood there and stared at each other, nothing passing between them but silence. There was something about the way the strange mare was looking at her, Dinky thought, that was unsettling. Like she was surprised, shaken to see the filly, which would only make sense if they had met before. Only Dinky had never seen this mare before in her life, or at least she didn't remember ever seeing her.

Then, before Dinky's eyes, the strange mare's face twisted into a look of pain, those two mismatched eyes shining with tears as she began to snifle. "Darn it, you said you wouldn't cry like this...."

"Uh...ma'am?" Dinky took a step, edging forward toward the mare as she sat there sniffing and wiping at tear-filled eyes. Dinky had no idea what had the older unicorn upset, but that didn't mean she couldn't try to help. A pony was hurting, after all. "Ma'am, what's wrong?"

"Nothing!" The mare's head shot back up, all trace of sadness gone from the eyes now focused on Dinky. The mare shook her head and sighed a moment later, looking from Dinky to the house. "Sorry, just lots of memories came and crashed down on me for a moment there. See, I knew a pony who lived here, a pegasus, and-"

"You mean Fluttershy? Sorry ma'am, she hasn't lived here for over a year now. She just kind of...disappeared one day." Dinky got a weird feeling from all this. A friend should've known at this point that Fluttershy was gone.

The mare sighed again. "Yeah, I know. I was told by my marefriend, another old friend of Fluttershy's. She's over in Ponyville right now, saying hi to some friends of hers. I'm...well...." The mare's horn glowed with red magic, and the basket beside her levitated up. The cloth covering lifted

away, revealing an assortment of muffins. "I wanted to come by and say thanks to whoever lived here now. You know, for taking care of the place and...stuff." She set the basket of muffins down in front of Dinky. "So, thanks...muffin?"

Dinky flinched as if struck by that last statement. She frowned, looking down from the mare to the basket that had been set before her. Banana nut, blueberry, oatmeal, wild berry; all of her mother's favorite muffin flavors were in this basket. The mare must have done some asking around in town before coming over. That someone, a complete stranger even, would go through this much effort for a simple thank-you brought a smile to Dinky's face. This mare...she was a good pony, for sure.

Dinky looked up from the basket and smiled at the mare. "Thank you very much for these muffins, ma'am. My mom would really enjoy these if she were here. Would you, um," Dinky turned and lit up her horn. The door to the cottage opened. "Would you like to come in for tea?"

The mare's eyes widened at this invitation, and she looked from Dinky to the cottage. "Oh, well sure, I would absolutely love that. Some tea, perhaps with those muffins, sounds lovely." She took a step toward the door before pausing and lifting a hoof up. She pulled her hood back, letting her blond and blue mane to fall free. Then she continued on in. "My name is Nox, by the way, Dusk Nox."

"Dinky Doo, pleasure to meet you." Dinky giggled at her little rhyme, before taking hold of the muffin basket with her magic and following Dusk Nox into her home. Once inside Dinky shut the door behind her, setting the muffin basket down on the den table and her quiver against the wall. "So how did you know Fluttershy anyway?"

"So Pinkie Pie, how did you meet this Dusk Nox pony anyway? And what have you been up to?"

Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo, Apple Bloom, and Pinkie Pie trotted down the path from Ponyville to the former Fluttershy cottage. Well, Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom trotted and Pinkie Pie hopped, while above them all Scootaloo flew, doing an occasional loop-around. Apple Bloom trailed a few

paces behind as Sweetie Belle and Pinkie Pie talked. Each of the ponies on the ground carried a basket of baked goods from Sugarcube Corner on their backs.

"Weeeell...", said Pinkie Pie, holding a hoof up to her chin while somehow managing to keep hopping. "Duskie and I've known each other since we were cute little fillies. One day while I was wondering around the rock farm, trying to think of some super neat way to throw a party with nothing but rocks, when suddenly I found this filly on the ground! Oh, she looked so sad; I just had to take her home with me!"

Scootaloo swooped down to Sweetie Belle's ear for a second. "Is this Dusk chick a marefriend or a pet?"

"Scootaloo!"

Pinkie Pie giggled and waved a hoof at the pegasus filly. "Oh you! Well anyway, little Duskie ended up staying at the rock farm with us (though I really shouldn't call her little, she's two years older than me!), and we all got along like a big family! She even moved to Ponyville with me, though I never really got to know where she was staying. But that's not important, hehe."

Sweetie Belle's eyes shone, and she hopped a bit closer to the older pony. "And was it here where you two fell in love?"

"Sweets!"

Pinkie Pie giggled and waved a hoof at the unicorn filly. "Oh you! But no, not really. After a bit I developed maybe the teensiest little crush on Dusk, but we never went on dates or anything. So after a few years she went off to travel the world, and I settled in as Ponyville's Premier Party Pony!"

Apple Bloom rolled her eyes. "Hmph. So ah guess you met up with her again up in Stalliongrad. You know, after you hurt my Big Sis and ran away."

Sweetie Belle almost tripped over her hooves in shock. Scootaloo stopped flying around and shot an aghast look at her friend. "Dude, Apple

Bloom, totally not cool." However...

Pinkie Pie just giggled and waved a hoof at the earth pony filly. "Oh you, Rule of Three! That whole thing with me stabbing a big butcher knife into Applejack's flank and almost carving off her cutie mark was a big misunderstanding. I tripped while walking over to her! And she forgave me for it months ago, silly filly!"

"..."

"..."

"...." Sweetie Belle coughed and looked away from Pinkie Pie, the whole walk to the cottage suddenly getting very uncomfortable. Truthfully, that was the first time she had heard exactly what had happened between Applejack and the pink party pony. Rarity had refused to tell her, and whenever she had asked anyone else the only answer she ever got was that there had been an accident between the two, and they were no longer speaking to each other. Then, two weeks afterwards, Pinkie Pie quit her job at Sugarcube Corner and, with bits she had saved from her job and gotten from friends wishing her well, left Ponyville to set up shop in Stalliongrad.

Looking over her shoulder, Sweetie Belle glanced back at Apple Bloom. She didn't like the look of the scowl that had taken over her friend's face. It made her look ugly, and not physically. Sweetie knew she would have to talk to her later about this.

It was finally Scootaloo that broke the silence. "So then, uh, what's brought you back to Ponyville?"

Pinkie Pie's smile brightened some and she picked up her pace. "Well, I was feeling really homesick, so Dusk teleported us to Ponyville to visit some! Wasn't that sweet of her?" Sweetie Belle nodded enthusiastically to this, her eyes shining, while Scootaloo and Apple Bloom both rolled their eyes. Pinkie Pie beamed. "Yeah, I thought so too. I was kinda hoping to meet up with the others, but I guess they're all off on some big awesome adventure, just like the good old days. Ah, nostalgia."

Pinkie Pie eeped as she nearly missed a turn in the road, almost running face-first into a tree. Correcting herself she giggled and caught up

with the others. "Thanks again girls for helping me with all this stuff. I want to throw the ponies taking care of Fluttershy's old cottage the most awesomest 'Thanks for taking care of my friend's cottage' party ever!"

Sweetie Belle shook her head in amusement at Pinkie Pie's antics. "Oh Pinkie, I don't think that there have been many of those, uh, parties. Also, remember, Ditzzy Doo's gone off with the others, so it'll just be Dinky at the house. All on her on, with...no...friends...."

All four ponies shuddered. Scootaloo dropped down to walk beside Sweetie Belle. "Gee, thanks Rarilight Sparkity, now I feel bad for only just barely knowing her name."

"Heehee, Rarilight Sparkity, oh, I'm going to have to tell D-Dusk that one."

Apple Bloom picked up the pace to walk along Sweetie Belle's other side. "Ah don't often say this, and it really hurts to, but ah have to say that Scoots has a point. We've never really hung out with any other fillies our age since we started the Cutie Mark Crusaders. 'cept Twist anyway."

"Well then crusaders, I think we've found our next crusade." The trail corned a corner, and before them across a small field and a bridge appeared Fluttershy's cottage, now Ditzzy and Dinky Doo's cottage. Sweetie Belle trotted to the front of the group, shooting Apple Bloom and Scootaloo a grin. The two grinned back at her, and then, leaping into the air, the trio of fillies brought their forehooves together.

"CUTIE MARK CRUSADERS FRIENDSHIP STARTERS, YAY!"

Chapter 9

Nightmares and Portends

Twilight, so brave and good, she turned away from violence....these words have no meaning to me, but I can't stop thinking them.

Tick, tock, tick, tock.

The clock beats to a rhythm but holds no time. The timeless beats tell me time is still flowing though. As little as time means to me, there's no need to know. But it's nice to know anyway.

Tick, tock, tick, tock.

Something is different though, something has changed. The clock is an old friend; though I don't always know he's there he is always waiting for me. It's comforting to know he has the patience to wait for me to need him. He'll still be here, waiting for when I need him again. But I'll be leaving him again soon, I'm sure he understands. He can't help but understand.

Tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock.

I rise. It's time for me to wander. My friend will wait once more as I begin my walk. And yet...I sit back down. Something is different, something has changed. It isn't time for me to wander yet. The seconds pass by tick by tock, tock by tick. I feel something new. I feel that it is me who must be waiting now. What am I waiting for?

Tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock.

I have never not wandered before. I have so many places I visit too: the forest, the old and rotten bench, the city with all its ponies, the gates with

the gods and the food. The change in schedule excites me. My chest starts to hurt; is, is my heart racing? My heart has not raced since the visit from the pink one and Princess Celestia all those...I don't know how long ago it was. Time matters little to me. I wonder what her name was, the pink one. It's something...obvious. It's on the tip of my tongue, I'm sure I can figure it out. It was something pastry related. Cupcake...Cake...Strudel...oh, that's right. Pie. Pinkie Pie. How embarrassing, I should've remembered the name of my only visitor that wasn't a god better. At least her cutie mark. Balloons. I like balloons.

I wonder what she is doing now. She told me she throws parties with friends. I hope she's still doing that. Parties are always fun, and the games such a joy. I hope she took my cupcake recipe to heart. I remember being the only pony to know that lovely recipe, and it would be a shame for it to not be enjoyed.

Tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock.

WWEEEEEEEE-ERRRRRRRRR WEEEEEEE-EERRRRRRRRRRR.

Another thing is different, another thing is changed. There is a new sound now. I can barely hear the ticking and tocking of the clock through it. It sounds like an alarm or a...a siren? Oh yes, I recognize this sound now. It brings back such happy memories to me, I can only smile. It sounds just like the siren that would go off every time after I partied with a friend back home. Oh the townsfolk would always get so excited when they heard it, running about and calling for my most recent part guest. Such excitement, such joy, I would always join in, running about and calling names out, celebrating with the rest of them at the completion of another successful party.

Tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock.

WWEEEEEEEE-ERRRRRRRRR WEEEEEEE-EERRRRRRRRRRR.

The siren's still going. I wonder if Pinkie Pie really has taken my parties to heart. That would be nice, because they are such fun parties. Yes, I can hear the shouting now. Ponies calling names. Only...yes, they're calling lots of names. There is so much shouting out there, it must be an incredible party. Perhaps Pinkie Pie has come to have a party here? That would be interesting. I always only had my parties in my special party basement, but I suppose Pinkie is a different pony. Oh, children these days, they can be so unpredictable.

Now I feel a strange compulsion come over me, one I am unfamiliar with. Following the compulsion I leave my home, traversing through the familiar woods for only the briefest of time before I reach the edge of the dark realm. I sit down. Before me sit the gates of the gods, separating me from them. It is here that I wait for the times that the gods visit me, and it is here that I hear the shouting and screaming the loudest. It comes from beyond the gates. Only...the screams are weaker now. I think perhaps there are fewer friends left to have fun with, and this makes me sad.

Then, suddenly, the brilliant light that signals the arrival of a god flares up. Only this time something is different. The light is my favorite shade of red, and it doesn't banish away the darkness around me, but seems to make it twist and ooze like a living thing. I have never seen light do this before. And still, louder than all the distant screams and laughter, because now I do hear laughter, that siren still blares.

The siren stops. The red light grows brighter and I am forced to raise a hoof to shield my eyes, as on the other side of the gates a god makes itself known, its shadowed silhouette hiding its true nature. Except...this god is different than the ones that have come before to give me food and light. This god...I like this god. I smile at the god, dropping my hoof back down to the floor. The red light does not hurt my eyes as much as the light I am accustomed to, and so I do not have to squint as much. It might be different, but a god is a god after all.

Then, as I smile at the god, something that has never happened before

happens. This god smiles back at me, a great big Cheshire grin appearing in the shadowed silhouette, and a pair of yellow eyes appear and look down at me. It seems to me...I can't help but think...the shadowy form is this god's true nature. To be revealed something to incredible I feel is an incredible honor.

But then I think, and with thinking I suddenly feel doubt. I must ask. I open my mouth to speak. At first no sounds come out, and then only a painful creak that makes me wish for a glass of water or a nice rain, and then finally, words. "Are...are you a god?"

The shadowy silhouette's grin spreads wider, and the most wonderful feeling of having pleased this being fills me. I see the god lean in closer to the bars of the gate, before to my surprise it passes through them and enters my little world. The darkness forms then, drawing itself up into the form of an unfamiliar pony. He is unfamiliar to me. His coat his blue and his mane and tail are some shade of orange. I like the shades of his colors. I would like to party with this pony if I could, only I'm not able to hold parties anymore.

But then this blue and orange pony, a cutie mark of an hourglass on his flank, says something that makes my heart soar.

"I'm not a god, I'm a devil. And I would like you, Colt, to party."

Rarity jerked awake on the forest floor, gasping for breath, her body shuddering in a cold sweat. Her heart pounded in her chest, beating a fearful rhythm. She had not experienced a dream like that in a long time, a long, long time, not since her trip west to find the beneviolet with Applejack and Rainbow Dash. And then, none of those dreams had felt so...so...invasive. And those things, those ponies; she had no idea who or what they were, but even in the dream they had instilled in her a fear she had only felt twice. Once, when Nightmare Moon had first appeared at the

Summer Sun Celebration years ago, and the other time when the Lady Falalauria had revealed her overwhelming power to the unicorn. This was more than a mere dream, she feared. This was a vision. A vision of the past, the present, or the future, Rarity couldn't tell, but something told her to remember what she had seen.

As the fear from her dream faded and she grew more awake, Rarity's gaze drifted around herself at the campsite they had established at the base of a large oak. Rainbow Dash and Ditzzy Doo lay curled up together a few feet to Rarity's right on a bed of gathered cloud, both looking incredibly peaceful together, their armor and weapons laid out near to them in haphazard piles. Near to them snored Shield Maiden, her dark red armor piled up much more neatly off to one side, her spear propped against it. Off to Rarity's left she saw Diogo resting on a bed of leaves and grass, his cloak wrapped tightly around him. And immediately beside her....

A smile crossed Rarity's face as she lay for a while and watched Big Macintosh sleep. He looked as peaceful and calm sleeping as he did awake. A small smile graced his face, and Rarity wondered what he was dreaming of. Even in his sleep the big workpony kept a piece of hay in his mouth. It was cute, Rarity thought. She slid up close against him, resting her head against his chest. But as she did this one of his forelegs lifted up, wrapping around Rarity's side to pull her closer. His breathing changed, growing ever so slightly faster and heavier.

"Mmm...Rarity, you're awake. Something the matter?"

Rarity chuckled to herself, slowly shaking her head side to side. Something she loved about Big Mac most of the time, ever since they had gotten together, was that he had a gift for telling when she was feeling off. Better, she thought, was that he also knew just how to talk to get her to talk, not through his words but his tone, his emotions in his words. She wondered a moment if it was perhaps a special talent similar to Rainbow Dash's ability to inspire, before deciding that it didn't matter. He was her Big Mac, and that was all.

As Rarity thought all this, she rolled herself around until she was facing toward Big Mac. He lay there wide-eyed, used to odd hours from living on a farm, staring at her with a simple and calm look, as if just her well-being was all he needed. Rarity couldn't not respond to that look. "Oh, no darling, nothing is the matter. Or at least, nothing is the matter yet. I just had some sort of dream, a vision, like the kind I had on the trip to the beneviolet."

Big Mac nodded to this, staying silent, letting her speak when she wanted to. After a moment of thinking back on what she had seen, Rarity did. "In the dream I saw two monsters. Simply horrid things, just awful. And one was visiting...no, freeing the other monster from some sort of prison, or punishment. And that one monster, the one freeing the other...I felt like I had encountered it before, somewhere, but the occasion escapes me."

Rarity finished speaking, sighed, and looked to her coltfriend. Big Mac looked deep in thought, his eyes closed and his brow furrowed. Minutes passed as Rarity waited for the other pony to finish and say something. She knew that he was not a quick thinker, but a thorough one, and he would not say something unless it was really worth saying.

Finally, after some time he opened his eyes and looked back at her. "Well now, I don't know much about visions or monsters, but I reckon if one of them monsters was in a cell, somepony put them there, so somepony will know that they've escaped. And with the monster that seemed familiar, well, if you met him once and made it out okay, you can do it again. At least, that's how it seems to me."

By now the pull of sleep was beginning to overcome Rarity again, and from the drop in Big Mac's eyes she could tell that it was the same for him. Still however she smiled at his words, leaning in to place a kiss on his cheek. "Hmm, I can always go to you for the best advice."

He smiled tiredly, returning the kiss with one to her lips. "Well, I try my best."

"Mmm, I know you do." She yawned. "That's why...I love you...." Her eyes slid shut, her head slumping down to rest on one of his forelegs. Her breathing evened out into that of sleep.

Silence fell again between the two lovers. Big Mac watched her sleep a moment, fighting back his own tiredness for long enough to just appreciate the beauty of the mare beside him. She was simply incredible, he thought to himself, admiring her. Even then, after days of hard running, fighting, and lack of the shampoos and conditioners she had spent hours using back in Ponyville, she was a rarity in the world. If there were an element of Beauty, he thought, she would be it.

Then, with a final soft kiss to just below her horn, Big Mac closed his eyes and slept.

Many miles from the campsite the travelers had made for themselves, on the far edge of Hatchling Forest, the night was lit only by the stars and moon. Twilight Sparkle stood at the top of a short hill that straddled the forest, the trees of the forest close behind her and miles upon miles of grassland before her. A northeastern wind caught her mane and cloak, blowing them out behind her. She was silent, simply listening to the grass and leaves shift in the wind, branches cracking and dried leaves rustling. Her gaze was turned to the stars above. In front of her floated a thick leather-bound book, engraved with a yellow J on the front, something she had kept safe and secure in her saddlebags the whole journey.

"The Dreaming contains all things that are, have been, and will be. It has always been and always will be. From it the gods were born, who then created the world. All creatures, mortal and immortal, are of the Dreaming, though we may spend a measure of time in this world. Remember however that even then we are of the Dreaming, and can touch upon it when we sleep. There is no death in the Dreaming. There is only life, and a passing

from one realm of it to another. The Dreaming is all happiness, all joy, all riches and all that is good in this temporal world. As such, there is no use for this temporal world except as a barrier, a hurdle that we must pass before finding pleasure in the Dreaming. The purpose of all beings is to achieve the greatest pleasure and happiness. This occurs after the end of life here. Therefore, it is for the greatest good of life to end."

Twilight frowned and turned to the next page. Here the style of the writing changed, going from the elegant cursive of some magic user to the messy, cramped scrawling of somepony using their mouth to write. It was hoofwriting Twilight was familiar with. "So wrote Ar-Pharazon, 15th King of the gryphon kingdom of Nunemore. He was the third king of the gryphons at the time, and began their seclusion in the mountains after the departure of King Cronus. His writings and decrees paved the path the gryphons took in their study of the Dreaming and use of Cronus's Mask, the legendary fount of endless knowledge (see: Items of Myth: Knowledge, p. 360-400). Ancient accounts recovered from Deer palace ruins and Pronghorn records paint a picture of an intelligent, polite, merciful figure, a far cry from the violent, brash, and thuggish figures most ponykind know modern gryphons to be. Unfortunately most original gryphon documents from the time of their seclusion were destroyed by the summoning of Tirek, if this mythological event actually occurred, and so an accurate picture of gryphons during this time can be made. What is known however, from accounts given by gryphon refugees, is that before whatever event occurred, the gryphon leaders had become what can only be called death worshippers."

Twilight turned the page again, but before she could start reading again a voice rang out. "You in the habit of reading out loud to yourself in the middle of the night, egghead?" There came the rush of wings, and then a body larger than Big Mac landed to Twilight's left. "Most of you pony dweebs are sawing logs by this point."

"I couldn't sleep, so I decided to do some reading." Twilight's magic flickered, and the light from her horn doubled, illuminating the top of the hill. She closed the book and set it on the ground, then looked over to her

visitor. "Gilda. I don't think we ever got around to talking when you visited Ponyville. I really apologize that things didn't work out for you and Rainbow Dash on that visit."

"Yeah, whatever, dweeb." Gilda was bare of the armor she had worn over the course of the two-day trip through Hatchling Forest, her only armament at the moment a yew bow and quiver of arrows tucked between her wings. She twisted her head around to preen at a wing, before looking back over at Twilight with a scowl. "And no, I couldn't sleep either. Something about a bunch of crazy ponies running off to danger to save the world from a bunch of overgrown mutts and another pony just sets me off, ya know?"

After thinking about this for a moment, Twilight found that she could only sigh and nod. "Yeah, I know, I know. You're lucky though, you have your gryphon brothers and sisters. I have to be one of those crazy ponies."

Gilda laughed and clapped Twilight on the back, sending the pegacorn to the ground in a huff. "Hah! That is a good point! You're not too bad for an egghead unicorn. Er, pegasus...whatever. I bet I could introduce you to a few gryphon friends if you ever get, heh, curious."

Twilight groaned from where she lay flat on the ground. She was sure that if she checked she would find a faint imprint of her body in the soil. With a grunt she stood back up on her hooves, reaching one hoof back to rub at the spot she had been "patted". It was going to be sore in the morning. "Gee, thanks. Please, don't hold back in showing your approval next time. And no, I don't think I'll ever get 'curious' in that regard."

Gilda chuckled again, making Twilight frown at the gryphon's apparent amusement at her annoyance. With a flick of her tail Gilda flipped the book up into the air, then grabbed it a movement almost too fast for Twilight to see. "Well, it was worth a shot. I'll just have to go back and tell Altair better luck next time. He's always wanted to have a hippogryph for a kid." She flipped the book open to a random page and stared at it. "So what is this

then? Some kinda spell book or something?"

Twilight decided to ignore that one particular comment about Altair. That was a conversation NOPONY was interested in. "Well first off, if Dash were here right now she would ask if you can even spell book." Twilight chuckled at her own little play on words as she telekinetically pulled the book from Gilda's grasp, while the gryphon just rolled her eyes. "And secondly, no it isn't a spell book. Far from it actually. This is a history book. A collection of writings from various gryphon lords and priests from the time there was still a gryphon kingdom, all translated and with commentary added. The writer was...a very close friend of mine, before he passed away."

Twilight looked down at the book to see what page Gilda had flipped through, and saw it was one she had not come to yet in her own readings of the tome. It and the page next to it were covered in drawings of the Magicahedron, some with it in its simple dodecahedron form, others presenting it in different configurations, but all with the level of detail that required first-person observance of it. For him to have actually seen it. "That's strange...."

Gilda seemed not to notice this last remark. She lounged on her back, arms crossed behind her head as she looked up at the stars. "Gryphon history stuff, huh? Wow, I'm a gryphon and that sounds so boring. Unless we were, like, totally awesome overlords of everything, or something. That would be pretty sweet."

"Uh...." Twilight closed the book and set it down on the side of her that Gilda was not on. "I'm sorry to break this to you, but back then gryphons were the, um...."

"What?" Gilda sat back up, looking at Twilight with equal parts curiosity and apprehension on her face. "We were what? Come on, talk to me, egghead, I can take it!"

Twilight readied her teleport spell, just in case. "Gilda, back when you guys had a real kingdom, you were the...well, the eggheads of the world."

"...." Gilda stumbled back as if physically struck, her eyes clenching shut as if in pain. Twilight figured a gryphon like Gilda probably was feeling pain from information like that. Then, with her wings flared Gilda reared up onto her hind legs, throwing her arms above her head as she screamed to the heavens. "NNNNOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Twilight grit her teeth, kept her lips tightly pressed together. Her body tensed, her face taking on a strained expression as she tried...so...hard...but it was no use. She couldn't hold back, not with the sight of Gilda before her, falling to her knees and pounding her fists on the ground while continuing to scream "no". Twilight just had...to... "Hahahahahahahahaha!" She fell over on her back, wings to the sides and legs kicking up into the air as she laughed, just laughed, harder than she had laughed for as long as she could remember.

"Heh, hey, what's so funny, dweeb?" Gilda had stopped screaming and pounding at the ground. She put on a scowl at Twilight, but it was obvious to anyone looking that she was trying hard not to join in the laughing. "I, I mean it's not, hehe, not as if something completely ridiculous is, hah, going on."

"Haha, no, you're totally right." Twilight's laughter subsided somewhat, even at least for her to roll over onto her stomach and look over at the grinning Gilda. "It's just an egghead pony and a roguish gryphon spending the night together under the stars, each talking about stuff the other has absolutely no interest in. Yeah, definitely nothing funny here." With this comment made the pair fell into a comfortable silence, the moment too funny to spoil with laughing. Above the stars twinkled like little diamonds, the full moon shone like a plate of silver. The grass rustled in the gentle wind.

The moment of peace was disrupted suddenly by a flash of light and heat, followed second after by a bang like a clap of thunder. Twilight leapt to her hooves, horn sparking to life with power, while beside her Gilda

swept the bow from her back and fitted an arrow to it in one smooth motion. At any other moment Twilight would've appreciated the practiced precision the gryphon had just demonstrated, but at that moment she only appreciated the deadliness it promised. That would be needed.

"Hey, egghead, what the heck was that?" Gilda turned about, scanning the hilltop around them with bow drawn back and ready to fire. "I could feel that, I tested when joining the Rangers, I scored exceptionally WEAK at feeling magic, and I could feel that!"

"Yeah, well it was like a hammer to the forehead for me." In reality it had been worse than just feeling it; Twilight recognized the sound of that spell. "It was a teleportation spell, like what I use. Keep sharp." She turned so she was back to back with Gilda. Together the two turned in a slow circle, keeping an eye out in all directions. As she looked Twilight recounted to herself the offensive magic she knew; the number of spells was short. She had spent most of her time the past year researching the deepest depths of magic to help Ditzzy, along with learning a few defensive spells and teaching Sweetie Belle. Fighting had certainly been the last thing she had been expecting or wanting to do before this journey. It was an oversight she intended to correct as soon as possible.

As the minutes passed and no more sign of an enemy beyond the teleport spell came, Twilight felt Gilda relax a hair. "Well, this is getting silly. I don't see anyone else here, and you said that was a spell you use, so it was unicorn magic, so the caster would have to be on the ground."

"You've done your homework, I see."

Gilda scowled, relaxing further. "Yeah, well, we share a border, and I lived in Equestria for a while. I think I've learned a thing or two."

"Gilda...." Twilight turned to face the gryphon, at the same moment the gryphon turned to face her. "I didn't say that."

"What? But I...." Remarkably, Gilda's face paled even through her white feathers. "Egghead, are there spells to allow flight?"

"...."

As one, unicorn and gryphon looked up. A dozen feet above them floated a mass of shadow, from which peered a pair of eyes, one gold and the other purple. A toothy grin appeared in the mass. "Evening, ladies. I was wondering if you'd ever notice me up here."

"AAAHHHHHHHH!!!" Twilight shot off a ball of fire from her horn and Gilda aimed and released the arrow from her bow. The mass of shadow sped down out of the path of the two attacks, slamming down into the ground between Twilight and Gilda and sending them flying back. Twilight slammed hard back-first into the trunk of a tree, eliciting a grunt of pain from her, while Gilda was sent tumbling down the other side of the hill to the grassy plains beyond.

Twilight groaned and slumped to the ground beneath the tree she had hit, a towering oak. She looked up to the top of the hill, and saw there the shadow resolved into a familiar pony in a black cloak. "Wait...you're Dusk Nox, from the bridge!" She clambered back to her hooves, horn crackling with magical energy as she glared up at the sorceress. "We fought you! I thought I had...had...." She faltered, the light from her horn dimming as she remembered back to that fight. She could almost feel the other pony's blood on her horn again.

"You thought you had killed me, I know." Dusk lowered her hood to her shoulders and smiled down at Twilight. "And I'm sure you are glad to find out you didn't. After all, you aren't a killer."

"Well I am!" Gilda leapt into the air from behind Dusk, firing off three arrows at the unicorn. The arrows flew through the air with blinding speed, letting off a sharp whistle noise. For a moment Twilight thought the sudden attack would catch Dusk, or at the least force the unicorn to move. But

instead Dusk's horn took on a reddish glow, the same as Twilight's, and a flat plane of magic, circular like a plate, appeared between Dusk and the arrows. The arrows disappeared into it and the portal of magic disappeared. Another portal appeared beside her, pointing down, and the arrows flew out and embedded into the ground.

Gilda dropped to the ground, her face set in numb shock. Dusk closed the portal and looked at the trio of arrows that stuck out of the ground beside her, each as long as Twilight's body, and then over her shoulder at Gilda. "Thank you, gryphon, for the most excellent opportunity to show off. It was fun." Ignoring Gilda's squawk of protest Dusk then looked back forward to Twilight, who throughout all this had stood there and watched. "And now we all know that you're not a killer."

At this statement, delivered as if Dusk were simply commenting on the weather, a strange annoyance arose inside Twilight. She grit her teeth and spread her legs for balance, a shimmer of heat around her horn showing she was readying another fireball. "Oh really? And how would you know that?"

Dusk picked the arrows out of the ground with her magic and then with a flick of her head sent them tumbling back to Gilda's paws. "Because you never joined in on the attack here, never shot off a fireball or a lightning bolt while I was taking care of this gryphon's cute little sticks."

Gilda growled and fitted a fresh arrow to her bow. "Little? The draw weight on this bow is enough to send an arrow through dragon hide! How'd you like one up the a-"

"I attacked you on the Bridge of Brelagrose, I injured you." Twilight took a step toward Dusk, doing her best to look determined. Yet the magic in her horn wavered, unsure. "I...I protected my friends."

"Right, of course you did, very commendable." Dusk sat down, still keeping up her smile toward Twilight. "And I was on the attack that day. I

suppose that blast of fire and those pillars of crushing water weren't the best way to say hello, but I doubt any of you were in the mood for a plate of freshly-baked muffins."

At this Dusk looked distracted a moment, lost in some thought or another. Only this time did Twilight have the presence of mind to realize that she did not want to attack the unicorn. A second later and the moment ended, as Dusk shook her head and went back to smiling at Twilight. Only now the smile was strained somewhat. "Anyway, there it was a real fight, kill or be killed, or so it seemed to you at the time. But I'm not attacking now, certainly not sending any more fireballs or pillars of water at you. I've just come here to...talk."

"Talk?" Twilight and Gilda shared a look. Gilda started to aim her bow at the back of Dusk's head, but stopped at Twilight's signal. She let the magic fade away from her horn, no longer feeling a spell might be needed. "Talk about what? Who are you exactly?"

"Me? I'm Dusk Nox, the most great and powerful unicorn in all the lands of the earth. Maybe, I don't know." Dusk pawed a hoof at the ground and shrugged. "Anyway. I want to talk to you about your quest. About the future of your quest, to be exact."

When this was said Twilight at first perked up in excitement, taking an unguarded step towards Dusk. But then the step faltered, her eyes narrowing as she actually thought about what had been said. "If you know of the quest...then you are either an ally like Gilda or an enemy like Nero. And considering you've attacked us before...."

"Awww, I was hoping that could just be...water under the bridge! Hehehahah!"

To the side, Gilda facepalmed. "Oh, that was bad."

The frown on Twilight's face lessened some, a chuckle escaping from

her as once again she thought of the absurdity of the moment. She figured she should be use to the absurd by now. "Okay...if there's anything I learned from my friend Pinkie Pie when I knew her, it was that anything with a bad sense of humor can't be all bad. Not counting Discord." Dusk chuckled. "Of course."

Twilight sat down in front of Dusk, facing her. Together, with the wind still and not blowing their cloaks about, the pair were almost mirror images, slight differences in coloring marking them apart. "Well then, sorceress, tell me what you have to tell. What do you know about the future of our quest?"

Dusk closed her eyes, yet through the lids Twilight could see a faint white flow shining through. "I can see all possibilities within the stream of time. I can see what is now, how the now could have been if any small thing had been done differently. I can see how something in the time stream should be...and how something in the time stream should never be. You've heard of another being with similar abilities, haven't you?"

Twilight took a moment to answer. "Yes, I have. Or, not very well. My friends Rainbow Dash, Rarity, and Applejack know her better. Lady Falalauria of Shimmerwood. I never experienced her powers myself, but I trust in my friends' descriptions of it." Twilight thought for a moment more. "And from time to time Rarity has prophetic dreams."

Dusk nodded. "Yes. My power pales in comparison to Falalauria's, but I can still see more than the average pony. Your quest is to go north to the fortress of Khaza Rim, where you believe you will find the Crown of Cronus. I tell you know, before your friends see another full moon, they will reach Khaza Rim."

Twilight's eyes instantly shot up to the sky. There the moon hung unobscured by any cloud. Looking at it she calculated the amount of time until the next full moon. "10...14 days. Just two weeks? Really? That can't be right, it will take us nearly that long simply to get to Stalliongrad and then up to the mountains of Gallopfrey."

"I tell you the truth. I have traveled much, and learned fire magic from the Antelope Tribes. And they have a custom, down there in Zebrica. The truth must always be given to those soon to die."

Gilda twitched in alarm. Twilight sat there, looking at the solemn-looking Dusk in confusion, her mind trying to work out what she had just been told. "I'm sorry...but what?"

All trace of smile or good humor was gone now from the unicorn's face. The light no longer shone through her eyelids. "It is true, and I'm so sorry. Your quest will succeed, Rainbow Dash will lead the others to Khaza Rim through darkness and danger unimaginable, but in order for this to happen YOU must die. You will die, alone and in pain."

"No, shut up!" Twilight jumped back, staggering away from Dusk. She did not feel the tears falling from her eyes as she shook her head, her mane whipping about her face wildly. "I refuse to believe that I will have to die like some sort of...some sort of sacrifice! How can you even say that?"

Dusk opened her eyes and looked at Twilight, and Twilight nearly flared her wings and took flight to escape the pain in those purple and yellow eyes. "Because I am there when it happens. I have seen it in a dream. Twilight will fall when the question is asked, in the mountains of Gallopfrey when all hope is dashed."

"The question...." Twilight swallowed the lump that had arisen in her throat. She moved toward Dusk again, her mind working to figure a way, some way to deny or get around this. "What...what is the question? And how can I believe you?"

Dusk stood up and returned her hood to over her head. "The question, the oldest question. You will know it when the time comes, because you will be the one to ask it. As for how you can believe me," She smiled. "Soon, one friend will tell another friend of a monster. At that moment listen, and

you will have no choice but to believe me. And now, goodbye."

"No, wait!" Twilight lunged forward, forehooves out to grasp Dusk, but it was too late. With a cheerful wave she teleported away, and Twilight fell to her knees in the spot the unicorn had just a moment ago stood. A breeze caught her cloak, sending it whipping about her shoulders. "Why do I have to die...?"

After a moment in which there was nothing but silence, Gilda came trudging over and sat down beside Twilight. Twilight ignored the look the gryphon gave her, her eyes and thoughts lost to the distant horizon. The faintest edge of light had begun to appear, dawn a few scant hours away.

"Egghead...are you really going to believe anything that weirdo tells you? I mean, for all you know she's working for the enemy, doing some psychological crap on you!"

"...heh, heheh...." Gilda blinked, confused as Twilight looked down from the horizon to her front hooves. "I don't know. Perhaps, just perhaps, it would be better if I did die now and on this quest."

"What?" Gilda's eyes grew wide in alarm. "How can you WANT to die?"

Twilight sighed. Almost unconsciously she drew up her own hood to hide her face. "I can say that because, through a bloodline and a series of horrible events I completely brought upon myself, I am immortal. The more serious the wound the quicker I heal from it, short of something like losing a limb. It would require decapitation, or something rendering more of my body damaged than healthy, for me to permanently die. My regeneration extends even down to my individual cells, to the natural process we know as aging."

She looked up then at Gilda, to see growing horror in the gryphon's expression, something she never expected to see there. "So you see, through everything my tremendous magic will keep me. I will be preserved,

like some museum display, as around me all my loved ones are taken from me by the ravages of time. And there will be no comfort for me, no comfort to ease the pain of their passing. Rainbow Dash, Rarity, Doctor Whoof, even someday the two Princesses, their resting places images of the splendor of the realms of ponies before the breaking of the world. But I...I will linger on, in darkness and in doubt, night falling until it comes without a star. And here I shall dwell, bound to my grief under the fading trees and withered plains, until all the world is changed and the long years of my life are utterly spent.

"And so, Gilda...." Twilight looked away from Gilda, back down to her hooves as tears streamed unchecked from her purple eyes. "How then can you ask me why I might want to die? What can you say that my friends, my mentors, my apprentice, haven't said? You, who will get to live a normal life of friends and family, reconciliation with Dash, perhaps great glory in battle? What can you say?"

"...." Gilda stood, towering over Twilight. The gryphon flapped her wings and rose into the air, turning toward the forest. "I'm, I'm going back to camp. I don't care if you come with me or not, just be here tomorrow for the rest of your friends to find. Goodbye, egghead."

"Goodbye, Gilda."

Twilight sat in silence a while, listening to Gilda's wing beats as they grew quieter and quieter, until finally she had flown beyond the range of hearing. Then she stood up and turned toward the forest waiting behind her. She would lean herself against a tree and rest there until whenever the others arrived.

But as she turned, she felt a hoof hit something. She looked down and saw it was the journal she had been reading earlier, before Gilda and then Dusk showed up. Somehow it had been missed by the stomping pony hooves, the flying arrows and fireballs, and lay almost exactly where she had put it down. There was something different though. Twilight could see

something sticking out of the book like a bookmark, and she knew she hadn't put it there.

"Perhaps Dusk did it at some time, when I wasn't looking. Though what would she slip me?" Opening the book revealed it to be a folded piece of plain parchment, similar to the kind she had used to send friendship reports to Princess Celestia, back when she...when she still had all her friends.

Twilight shrugged away these darkening thoughts and levitated the parchment from the book before setting the book back down. She had no idea what Dusk could have written or that the unicorn couldn't simply say while there, but it had to be important somehow. And so Twilight unfolded the parchment and began to read.

"Twilight Sparkle, do not let my proclamations of your death get to you, to deter you from your path or hamper your ability in your quest. Let me tell you why. I have just finished a trip to Ponyville, visiting some old relations. While there I spent some time with your apprentice Sweetie Belle, her friends Scootaloo and Apple Bloom, and Ditzy Doo's daughter Dinky. They are all doing well, mostly. Sweetie gets hampered on occasion by the ponies of the town for being associated with you, Apple Bloom is having troubles with the soldiers sent by Luna to guard the town, and little Dinky seems to hate you for rendering her mother brain-damaged, but they are all in good health. Those three are trying to be Dinky's friend, though so far she isn't having any of it. Give her time.

"Safe, and in good health. Because of you and the others with you. So don't get all scared about the future ahead. As a wise friend once told me, facing death is easy if the alternative is your friends facing it. And even if you don't believe me about your death approaching, and I haven't done anything to make you believe me, I know that you believe that. So remember these words: Twilight will fall when the question is asked, in the mountains of Gallopfrey when all hope is dashed."

Twilight refolded the piece of parchment and placed it back into the book. Then she laid the book back onto the ground beside her. She regarded the book, and the message she had found in it, in silent thought. She did not believe the prophecy of her death. Or at least, she refused to believe it without proper proof. One truth, at least, Dusk had spoken, and that was that she had said and done nothing to earn Twilight's trust.

The light on the horizon had grown somewhat stronger, but it was still a faint line in the dark of the night, and Twilight could still easily make out the stars above her. The stars; as always they brought a feeling of peace to her. No matter the darkness they would always shine. Even when the clouds or the brightness of daytime hid them from sight, the stars would always be there, shining.

"High above us the stars do shine,
And I have not lost all that's mine.
It waits for me at journey's end,
So I must hurry past this bend.
Though our hearts may fill up with dread,
Heroes hold on to true love's thread.
Through shadow, through the Dreaming's wake,
Keep your hope, darkness will not take."

"Journey's end...."

"Twilight? Twilight, come on now, wake up. We're all here."

"Mmmm...mmmh?" Twilight slowly felt herself return to consciousness. She could feel herself getting shaken by a pair of hooves, and hear a scratchy voice saying something.

"Hey Ditzy, go get a pail of water, we don't have time to wait around all day here."

Twilight groaned and roused herself awake. "No, no need for that, I'm awake. I'm...awake...." She opened her eyes and flinched at the sudden hard light that hit them. The sun was shining down brightly upon the hill, banishing the shadows and doubts of night. She lay slumped back against a tree trunk, her cloak folded behind her head to act as a sort of pillow. Meanwhile, all her friends stood around her: Rainbow Dash, Rarity, Big Mac, Doctor Whoof, Ditzy Doo, Shield Maiden, Diogo, and farther back Gilda and Altair.

"Twilight, darling, I never took you as the kind to go off sleepwalking."

Rainbow Dash chuckled. "Heh, she was probably just trying to get away from Shield Maiden's snoring."

"Hey!"

"Oh, Rainbow Dash! How can you be so rude to our friend? Shield Maiden's snoring wasn't that bad."

"Hey!"

"Eh, I wasn't too troubled by you, Miss Maiden, ma'am. Compared to my sister Applejack's snoring, you were plenty tolerable."

"Hey! Come on, guys!" Shield Maiden's face flushed. "All of you are just terrible!" The whole group, minus Twilight but especially Shield Maiden, all started laughing at this, their happy voices echoing through the woods behind them and the plains that stretched out before them. The laughter sounded, if anything, defiant of the cold and gloom of the hard road that they faced on the way to Stalliongrad.

Twilight looked around at them with a smile tugging at her lips, though

confused all the same. She had expected them to be worried for her, worried about Dusk, worried about their mission. She wouldn't even have been surprised if Rainbow Dash had ordered her to turn back to Ponyville just to stay alive. But then she looked past her friends to Gilda hanging near the back, seeing the gryphon just standing there. Their eyes met and Gilda smirked, nodding, and Twilight understood. Gilda hadn't said a word to the others about the events of the night before; any of them, Twilight figured, because anything would have caused the ponies around her to act different than they were.

And so, Twilight flashed the most appreciative smile she could towards Gilda, before standing up onto her hooves. The laughter and joking wound down around her into a comfortable silence as she smiled at them all. "Well, as fun as this seems to have been for all of you, I think it's time we get going. We still have a long way to go."

Rainbow Dash nodded, and Twilight had to blink to keep from staring at the pegasus in awe. She hadn't noticed before, but something about Rainbow Dash was changing. It seemed like she was...filling out, as it were, but not in a physical sense. The colors of her mane shone brighter, she stood taller, portraying the same confident calm she did when flying. Twilight liked it.

"Twilight's right guys, we've gotta get going. I want to not be able to see this forest by the time lunchtime rolls around." Rainbow Dash paused and then looked to Gilda. "Uh, not that there's anything wrong with the forest. It's a great forest! Very nice, uh, trees."

Gilda rolled her eyes but grinned. "Yeah, whatever, dweeb. The sooner you get out of here, the sooner I don't have to see that multi-colored tail of yours, so get going." A moment went by, before she sighed and play-punched Rainbow Dash on the shoulder. "Take care, you flip-flop." Rainbow Dash just smiled soft, nodded, and turned away.

Then Rarity went over to the Gilda, ignoring the way Altair's eyes turned

to hearts when she got near. "Well, if Rainbow Dash won't do it, then I suppose it is up to me. Thank you for your most gracious help to us on our journey, Captain Gilda. Please, don't be a stranger around Ponyville, I have some gown ideas that I would simply love to try on a gryphon!"

She held out her hoof to shake. Gilda regarded the offered hoof with an arched eyebrow, checking for any joy buzzers or anything, before shrugging. "Well, if it means seeing ol' Dash over there in some kind of frou-frou dress, then you can count me in." She reached out and grasped the hoof...and then quickly pulled back, taking a step backward and looking at her claw in confusion. "Must have been...static electricity...."

Rarity frowned and looked at her hoof, before shrugging and turning away. The rest of the group went up to Gilda and said their goodbyes in various ways, before going over to join Rainbow at the crest of the hill. The final one to say goodbye to the gryphons was Twilight, looking as embarrassed as she felt. "Uh, goodbye, I guess. Thanks for...you know...."

"Yeah, sure." Gilda shrugged, looking away. "I figured all that junk was lying mumbo-jumbo anyway, don't make such a big deal out of it. Just come see me in a year or two when you're still alive, maybe I'll teach you a thing or two about flying. Lord knows Dash over there ain't gonna make you a decent flyer."

"Hey, I heard that!"

Twilight chuckled, shook her head, and turned away. She joined her friends waiting on the hill, where she put on her pack that she had left at the campsite and that Ditzzy had made sure to bring for her. Then, as one they started off down the hill, Rainbow Dash leading the way as they began their journey across the windswept Plains of Valdemar, towards the city of Stalliongrad. And all the way until the Hatchling Forest was well out of sight behind them, Twilight could feel the eyes of Gilda and the other gryphons watching them.

In her mind, the Voice spoke for the first time in days.

*"Twilight, so brave and good
She turned away from violence,
When she found out about
Her final fall to silence."*

Chapter 10

Traversing the Fields of Trenzalore

"The Dreaming...many know of it as only an old mare's tale, fit for children and those exceedingly silly. Others, academics, consider it an intriguing philosophical thought experiment, a myth dreamed up to give thinkers an easy out to discuss such things as life after death, free will, and destiny, without invoking any possible heretical thoughts toward Princess Celestia. Still others, such as the elkfolk and Pronghorns, know it as a real realm, the realest realm, the true life of which life here in this...physical world, is but a shadow. It is in the Dreaming, they say, that all life comes, and to which all life returns when its time here is spent.

Accounts of ponies and other creatures that have been successfully resuscitated from death seem to corroborate this idea, with claims of meeting old loved ones and favored famous figures. All accounts have these figures as being happy and content, and the Pronghorns, the race that regularly interacts with the Dreaming as part of their life work, are all the nicest beings you could ever hope to meet. Though little pony research into this mystery exists, what has been done finds similar results. Surely, the Dreaming is a lovely existence, a realm of true goodness and happiness.

"And yet...this raises a question. The Dreaming is a realm of Life, pure and simple and good in its totality. Evil does not come from it, evil is a result of Life meeting life. The trials and tribulations of this physical realm create want, need, greed, hate, and all the vices. It is obvious this corruption does not go with dying creatures into the Dreaming, because then it would be virtually indistinguishable from the physical realm. As such, when beings die and return to the Dreaming...what happens to the evil in them? Is it "cured" like some base disease? Is it burned away like a metal smith would burn away impurities in a lump of metal? Does it fade away as if it were never there? Most prevalent in modern times is the idea that evil as a thing does not actually exist, but is instead the absence of good. Much like cold is the absence of warmth.

"However, even in the example of warm becoming cold there is a

physical, quantifiable reaction, something that can be examined, measured, and harnessed for the good of all. The refrigerator is such an example. Magus V. Darkart spoke some in theory on this transfer of energy, though unfortunately few examples of these original works still exist. He theorized, based on descriptions of the Dreaming and of the Outer Darkness described in Elkfolk legends, that there is a separate realm apart from the Dreaming, a net if you will between it and this physical realm, to catch and hold the "evil" energy. Taking a dream-viewing spell of Merlin's making, he refined it in hopes of finding a way into this realm, this realm unknown to life, this...Silent Realm."

—excerpt from journal of Yellow Jacket, pegasus from Gallopfrey

The drumming of dozens of hooves on hard soil echoed far and wide across the Fields of Trenzalore, as over it the nine travelers ran, around hill and through dell, making as straight a line as they could manage. The plan of travel, as far as Twilight and Rainbow Dash had worked it out, was to head straight from the edge of Hatchling Wood to Stalliongrad, a trip they estimated to take a full day, if they managed to keep up a good pace. Rarity, for her part, wasn't sure about this. She hadn't participated in that discussion.

'Oh I so hope so though. Traveling like this has been fine, but I could do for a long soak in a hot bath. But then, I could settle for just resting my aching hooves after this horrid land.'

Running across the Fields of Trenzalore, Rarity had realized soon after the group had started, was a far different experience than running across the golden plains of Gildedale, or the lush green fields of home. The grass here was a dull shade of grey-green, brittle and just tall enough to scratch at the skin just above their hooves. Stunted trees dotted the landscape, their gnarled trunks grey and their leaves, the ones that had any, black as ink. Where there weren't trees there were boulders, great big rocks ranging in size from her little sister Sweetie Belle to Big Mac or bigger. Even the sky above the travelers had turned grey with clouds, rendering everything grey, grey, and grey. Rarity liked to consider her vocabulary more sophisticated than the common pony's, but here it failed her, and the only word she found

to fit was, simply, ugly.

'Not to mention tiring. Three hours of this constant pace and no sign of stopping in sight! Ugh, I know I have been wanting adventure, but I very well can't delve a dungeon with crampy legs.'

Rarity assured to herself that she was simply complaining, DEFINITELY not whining, but chancing some looks ahead and behind her at the others, to see how they were faring with the run. Rainbow Dash was in the lead, as always, running with the rest of them instead of flying. At her side flew Ditzzy, a few feet up to keep a lookout for anything. A yard behind them ran Shield Maiden in all her armor, the blade of the spear at her side gleaming in the faint sunlight, while directly behind her the deer Diogo kept a sharp, but definitely nervous, lookout. Rarity couldn't exactly blame him. This was probably the most open area the forest-dwelling creature had ever found itself in.

Then there came herself and Big Mac in the line. They ran together side by side each keeping pace with the other for different reasons. Big Mac was the slow and steady sort of pony, who at that moment seemed to be examining the plains with a farmer's eye, while she was...well, she was a lady, not a track runner. Still, the position at his side did give her a good position to watch his mane streaming back in the wind and admire his...muscles.

Hey, even a lady could be shameless sometimes.

Rarity would have chuckled to herself, if she didn't fear what the interruption to her steady breathing would do to her running. So instead she looked behind her to check on the final two members of the group. Doctor Whoof gave her his usual grin when he caught her looking, though it was obvious he was feeling the running even worse than she was. That made sense, Rarity mused. He was an academic after all; an adventurous academic, but still an academic. Still, somehow he managed to keep the blasted fez he had picked up from the gryphons perched snugly atop his head.

Rarity rolled her eyes at this, before turning her gaze past Doctor Whoof to the end of the line. Now the only pony left was- "Oh good heavens! Stop, everypony STOP!"

Somehow, the brittle grass managed to produce a quite impressive screech as everyone ground to a halt at Rarity's shout. Rainbow Dash yelped as Shield Maiden collided with her rear, sending both ponies tumbling to the ground in a cloud of dust. Diogo staggered, barely avoiding running into the pile himself. "Hey, what's the big ide-"

He was quite suddenly silenced by a grey, wall-eyed pegasus cratering him into the ground by landing on him. "Plains, trains, and stagecoaches! Rainbow, bring out the celery, we've got a live one!"

"Ugh...." Rainbow Dash none-too-roughly pushed Shield Maiden off her, taking a long moment to climb back up onto her hooves. Tiny Scootaloos circled around her head, but she quickly shook them away and stepped around Ditzzy to glare at Rarity. "Rarity, what's the big problem? We were making good time there!"

Rarity huffed and whipped her mane behind her head. "Well pardon me, oh great Captain Dash, but not all of us are great athletes like you! And some of us," here she gestured to the rear of the group with a hoof. "Some of us need to rest a while!"

Everypony followed the direction of Rarity's hoof, and immediately any objections Rainbow Dash had about stopping were gone. Twilight was stumbling toward them, not yet coming to a full stop like the rest but looking like she could collapse at any moment. Her body shook, her cloak clung to her back with sweat, her sides seemed lathered in foam from her exertion. All this, combined with how hard she was panting and that she was still trudging forward, made for a pathetic sight.

"No, p-please, no need to ssu, stop on my account...." Twilight passed by a stunned still Doctor Whoof, stumbled past a gawking Rarity and Big Mac, before dropping face-first in front of Rainbow Dash with a resounding thump. "...okay, forget what I just said. Pleeaaaase stop on my account."

Rainbow Dash grimaced, moving a few steps closer to Twilight. With a hoof she prodded at Twilight's side and only got a muffled groan in response, on account of the pegacorn's face still being pressed to the ground. Rainbow Dash coughed and looked around at the others, taking in all their worried expressions. That more than anything else made up her

mind. "Okay then, I uh, I guess we can stop for a little while."

Shrugging off her pack Rainbow Dash began giving out orders. "Big Mac, take five big guy. Rarity and Doctor Whoof, make sure Twilight's okay. Shield Maiden, you uh...you do something. Diogo, you do something too, only as a deer. Ditzzy, you get off Diogo so he can do something but like a deer, then fly up high and see if you can spot a river or something. I'm sure some of us," here she very pointedly did not look over at Rarity, "would like some kinda bath."

"Righti-o, Rainbow!" Ditzzy squatted down and then pushed herself off Diogo into the air, the force of her takeoff pushing the deer deeper into the uniquely deer-shaped hole he had formed. Ditzzy went up, a dozen feet, two dozen, before coming to a stop at 30 feet up. She turned in a circle, scanning the area north to south, before suddenly stopping and pointing a hoof to the southeast. "Birds surfing the wind! Circle around clockwise for something refreshing!"

Rainbow Dash quirked an eyebrow and looked in the direction Ditzzy was pointing. Sure enough, a half-mile or so off could be barely seen some birds flying about a large grove of trees. There were at least a dozen of the thin and twisted trees, reminding Rainbow Dash somewhat of the smaller trees around the edge of the Everfree Forest. She looked back up at Ditzzy and nodded. "Yeah, there could be a pond or river or something over that way, feeding the trees. Go check it out!"

Ditzzy gave a lopsided grin and salute, before taking off at a somewhat leisurely pace towards the birds. Rainbow Dash watched her go a moment, before turning away in the opposite direction. As she did she nearly ran face-first into Big Mac's broad chest. "Gah!" Caught off her guard, she flapped her wings and backpedaled a few feet. "Hey, watch it Big Mac! I almost flattened my...Big Mac?"

The earth pony was standing stock still, just staring with wide eyes off to the north. Rainbow Dash frowned and followed his gaze to a bluff some distance away, and there she could see some sort of figure standing on top of it. She couldn't tell what it was exactly, the bluff was too far away, but she could tell it was vaguely pony-shaped. Her frown grew and she elbowed Big Mac hard in the side. "Hey, Big Mac! What the hay is that thing?"

"I ain't exactly sure. I-" Big Mac turned to look at her, and as soon as he did he stopped talking. He blinked once and shook his head. "I'm sorry, what were we talking about?"

"That thing, Mac! That thing on the-" Rainbow Dash turned to glare at him as she spoke. Only, she suddenly found, she couldn't quite remember what it was they had been talking about in the first place. "I...uh...." She looked back at the bluff, but didn't see anything there. She honestly couldn't tell herself why she had expected something to be there. All around them were plain, ugly fields of grey. Anything coming would be seen from miles away. If anything the bluff was a nice break from the monotony. Maybe, Rainbow Dash thought, she would fly over there and see if there was anything interesting. It had to be better than just standing there.

"Yah know, Miss Dash, I'm not liking this place that much, eenope."

"Hm?" Rainbow Dash looked to see the big farm pony glaring down at the grey-green grass, moving in a small circle and kicking and stomping at the ground. She had no idea what to make of this. "Uh, you okay there, big guy? I think everyone here would appreciate it if you went somewhere way far to do your business."

Big Mac stopped his kicking and stomping and looked over at Rainbow Dash. Though he seemed as calm as ever, she had gotten to know him well enough to notice the slight narrowing of his eyes that indicated he was annoyed or anxious. "Miss Dash, the only business that needs doing around here is moving on. I don't much care for these fields, not at all. Something ain't right with the ground. Something ain't right with the dirt."

Rainbow Dash couldn't exactly argue with that. Big Mac was the farmer of the group after all, so if anyone was going to feel something it would be him. More than that though, she felt something wrong too, something wrong with the air. "I don't like the air here. It feels weird, and dirty. It kinda reminds me of when that dragon was smoking up Ponyville." She sniffed the air, frowned, and shook her head. "Ah, it's stupid. I'll ask Whoof about it later. Right now Big Mac, why don't you get some grub out for us? I wouldn't take a bite of this grass unless I had ANYTHING else to eat."

"On that we agree on. I'll get out the last of our apples, that'll last us

a'while."

"Oh, apples again, yum." Rainbow Dash gave Big Mac a grin to show that she was joking (for the most part), and then turned from the earth pony and the two yards from him to the next few ponies she wanted to talk to. Twilight Sparkle sat on her rump, her chest still rising and falling like a bellows as she worked to catch her breath. Rarity sat to Twilight's right, brushing a comb through her mane and tail, while at the same time a towel ran over the pegacorn's body, wiping off the foam. To her left Doctor Whoof had his sonic screwdriver out and on, the green light shining and whirring as he scanned it over her body.

"Yeah, that's it, deep breathes in and out, in and out." Doctor Whoof looked up at Rainbow Dash's approach. "It's perfectly safe, by the way. The grass that is. Well, unless you really have a problem with eating something that tastes nasty. And tasteless. And has been known to cause constipation in ponies that eat too much of it okay never mind, don't eat the grass. Grass is bad."

Rainbow Dash chuckled. "Yeah, I thought you'd say that. I'm pretty most of us here have the good sense not to eat it anyway though." Then her smile dropped, and she looked at Twilight in concern. "Hey, you okay, Twilight? You should have said something if you needed a break."

Twilight gave a fairly unconvincing grin and shrugged. "Sorry, Dash. Like you said, we were making good time. Besides, I really can't afford to be a mere librarian, not when all of you are so much...more, for lack of a better word."

Rainbow Dash shared a look with Rarity, giving a quick nod to her. Rarity sighed and resumed cleaning Twilight's mane. "Oh darling, don't ever think like that. You'll always be wanted and we'll always be thankful for you. You're smart, you have incredible magic that I could never match, and you're our Ms. Exposition when Doctor Whoof isn't available!"

Doctor Whoof shrugged and adjusted his bow tie. "It's true. I certainly can't be clever all of the time. Never getting showed up would just be boring."

They all shared a laugh at that, and then Rarity pulled Twilight into a

tight hug. "And besides, darling, even if you were just a silly librarian, we would still count ourselves lucky to have you here with us on our journey. That's just how friendship is, don't you dare question it, or I'll give you a makeover like you wouldn't believe!"

Twilight nodded, and then smiled at them all. "I won't forget, I promise. Friends are there for each other, always."

"Now you're talking sense!" Rainbow Dash slapped Twilight on the back, before turning away from them. She was beginning to feel hungry herself, and expected Ditzzy to be back soon with news on that water. "I'll just go check on Big Mac and those apples. Wait here a second, I'll-"

"Could you hold on a moment, Rainbow?"

Rainbow Dash paused mid-leap into the air and dropped back to the ground. She turned a curious gaze to Rarity. The unicorn looked worried all of a sudden, and not in the overdramatic fashion Rainbow Dash knew her for. Although this look of worry was lessened somewhat by the embarrassment mixed into it. "Hm? What's up Rarity?"

The unicorn did a good job of looking hesitant, Rainbow Dash thought, though she knew Rarity well enough by now to recognize some of it as an act, something to add some "dramatic flair" to the moment, as Rarity would say. Rarity kept the brush going through Twilight's mane as she spoke. "Well, I have been looking for a good time to talk with you about this, and now seems like the best time. I think this is important to the quest we're on."

She sighed and continued. "Last night I had a strange dream. A vision, like the kind I had journeying to the Archback Mountains. In it I saw two monsters, one caged and one free, and both being LIKE ponies, but yet not. I don't know what any of it means, but...the free monster seemed...familiar, somehow. By this I mean it seemed familiar as if we had encountered it before, or like you think you recognize a face in a crowd. Frankly, it was terrifying. Oh, what do you think, Rainbow Dash?"

"Who, me?" Rainbow Dash blinked, surprised at being asked about monsters and stuff when ponies like Twilight and Doctor Whoof were literally to the left and right. They would be the ponies she would ask,

anyway. "Well, uh, I guess that...I don't know, Gilda kinda described the pony that killed Brelagrose as a monster. I suppose that could be related? I don't know, what do you think, Twilight?"

"...."

No answer came. Rainbow Dash, Rarity, and Doctor Whoof stopped what they were doing and looked at Twilight, all of them having been expecting some kind of idea from the pegacorn. Instead she was simply sitting there, head hanging and mane low enough to hide her eyes. But after a moment she seemed to feel their gazes on her, because just as Rainbow Dash got fed up of waiting and opened her mouth to say something Twilight looked up at them. She was smiling, though if Rainbow Dash didn't know any better, she'd say her friend had been on the verge of crying, with how shining her eyes were.

"Yeah...yeah Rarity, I'm going to agree with Rainbow Dash. We've already faced one monster, the diamond wolf Nero, so it seems rea...reasonable to me for the second monster to be the one Gilda saw in Brelagrose. At least, I hope those are the only two monsters we have problems with, hehe...."

Doctor Whoof shook his head. "Sorry to disappoint you Sparkle, but Rarity said that both monsters were like ponies. Unless Nero can shape shift, which would be incredibly cool, he's not our monster..." he held a hoof to his chin, thinking. "Wolf to pony metamorphosis...nah, the mass shift would be all over the place...."

Twilight chuckled and hung her head again. "Yeah, you're right, I did forget about that. How silly of me to forget something like that."

"Oh no, egghead, you aren't still hung up about having to make us stop, are you?" Rainbow Dash brought a hoof to her face and groaned. This kind of attitude was getting them nowhere, fast. Done with it, she walked right up in front of Twilight and forced her to look up at her. "Hey! Stop being all mopey like this, it doesn't fit...Twilight?" Face to face like this, Rainbow Dash could see quite clearly that Twilight was crying, could see the utter despair in her eyes, as if all hope had been taken away. "T-Twilight, what-"

But before Rainbow Dash could finish Twilight suddenly was gone,

teleporting to behind the pegasus, closer to the rest of the group. "I think something's wrong. Ditzzy's been gone for way to long. I think we should all go check on her."

Rainbow Dash shared a look with Rarity, finding this sudden change in demeanor disconcerting. Doctor Whoof was already trotting over to Twilight's side, calling out to the others. "Macintosh, Diogo, Maiden dear, we might possibly have a missing pony! Let's saddle up!" Then he was at Twilight's side, looking at her with the most intense expression any of them had ever seen him wear. "And when this little crisis, if it actually is one that is, is settled down, you and I are going to have a little chat. Because remember Twilight...."

Diogo, Shield Maiden, and Big Mac hurried over from ahead of Twilight and Whoof, their packs hastily restuffed with their contents but ready to go. From behind Rarity and Rainbow Dash came, one staring at Twilight in concern and the other looking off to where she had sent Ditzzy. "You are not alone."

"Twilight will fall when the question is asked, in the Mountains of Gallopfrey when all hope is dashed."

"You aren't alone...you aren't alone...not alone...."

Twilight hadn't known what to expect to find when they all set off to the wood thicket in search of Ditzzy. She had expected to find the pegasus battered and bloody, surrounded by enemies. She had expected to find her playing in a pond, her injured mind forgetting the others in excitement. She had expected to find her with her head stuck between two close tree branches, struggling to escape and with the most embarrassed grin on her face. They would all shared a laugh, rest in the shade a moment, and then be on their way to almost-certain doom. What she would never have expected to find, not in a million years, was Ditzzy Doo on her knees, tears in her eyes, holding a half-dead diamond dog's head in her lap and comforting it.

"Ditzy, I...what is this?!"

Ditzy flinched at Rainbow Dash's harsh shout, but wrapped her forelegs protectively around the diamond dog's head. "He's dying hard, pretty Rainbow. Dying hard and alone."

Rarity stepped forward from the group, going to Rainbow Dash's side. A look of undisguised disgust was on her face. "Yes, we can see that, darling. But why waste your comfort on a mutt like...I..." Rarity swallowed, putting a hoof to her mouth as she looked, really looked, at the diamond dog Ditzy held. Her face took on a green tinge. "Oh...oh Celestia, the poor creature...."

It was easy for Rainbow Dash to see how Rarity could say that. The diamond dog was a complete mess. His legs were pretty much gone, nothing but charred stumps below the knees and the rest covered in blisters and patches of roasted flesh. The burns continued up the left side of the dog's body all the way up to the shoulder, where again there was nothing but a stump remaining. What wasn't burned up was bruised, battered, and bloody, tattered remains of clothing and armor only seeming to accentuate the injuries. His left ear was gone from his head, revealing muscle and the barest hint of bloody white skull, and over his right eye was a strange metal eye patch.

Ditzy went back to gently holding that bloodied head, stroking a hoof over the uninjured side. She continued on as if Rarity hadn't spoken. "I followed the carrion crows to their carrion. Dog...found dying, couldn't..." Ditzy's face scrunched up as if in great effort. Rainbow Dash realized she was trying with all her will to give a coherent sentence. "Just...couldn't let...d-d-die alone. Not alone."

Rainbow Dash groaned in frustration. It was great how Ditzy could be so caring sometimes, but other times, like right at that moment, it could be just as much a pain in the rump. Plus, she didn't like how he was bleeding all over the other pegasus. "Yeah, okay, but Ditzy, he's a diamond dog! He's you know, our enemy!"

"And he was also a son, perhaps a brother, perhaps a husband, perhaps a father." Doctor Whoof walked past Rainbow Dash and Rarity. He kneeled beside Ditzy and the diamond dog, looking over the wounds with a

sad eye. "His sense of duty was no less than yours." He looked up to the diamond dog's face, taking it in. "I wonder what his name is...where he came from, and if he was really evil at heart. What lies or threats led him on this long march from home...and if he'd have much rather stayed there, in peace."

The grove of trees had gone silent. None of the surrounding ponies or deer dared to speak, all thinking on what the earth pony had said. Rainbow Dash shifted from hoof to hoof, suddenly uncomfortable. Her mind went back, years ago, to the frontier town called Appleoosa, and the ponies and buffalo that nearly killed each other through refusal to understand each other. That crisis had been resolved by compromise, by finding some common ground between the two groups.

'But there is no common ground here,' thought Rainbow Dash, frowning. 'Unless considering Rarity's whining as a weapon of mass destruction counts. And besides, I've met the leader of the diamond dogs. Nero doesn't want peace.'

While Rainbow Dash thought this, Doctor Whoof took out his sonic screwdriver from his jacket pocket and scanned the burns covering the diamond dog's body. This made the diamond dog groan, his eyes creaking open. Ditzzy gave him the best smile she could muster through her tear-streaked expression, stroking a hoof over his undamaged side. "Be calm, poor doggy. Company will be kept while the light lasts."

The diamond dog said nothing, but through the pain on his face a faint glimmer of a smile could be seen. Rarity had to turn away from the scene, Big Mac wrapping a foreleg around her shoulders, while Shield Maiden bowed her head and gave a warrior's prayer and Diogo began to sing softly in elkish. Only Rainbow Dash noticed the strange look of fear on Twilight's face.

Doctor Whoof continued scanning a moment longer, before stopping and looking at the readings. "There's faint magic left in the burns. Traces of volatile gasses, slight crystallization of the bone...." He put his sonic screwdriver back in his jacket and looked at Rainbow Dash. "This was definitely, probably caused by a dragon, a young dragon, one whose diet still mainly consists on gems and hasn't moved on to...squishier things." Everyone grimaced at that.

"Right, right, sorry." Doctor Whoof glanced at Twilight before looking at the diamond dog's face. "Hey there. I can numb the pain some, but I can't save you. What's your name?"

Twilight looked at him. "Doctor, I don't think he can-"

"Max...M-Max...." The diamond dog coughed, his face scrunched in pain. The rise and fall of his chest, already weak, was beginning to slow. "Why...why would you...."

"Because," Doctor Whoof smiled, sweeping over the burned areas on Max's body. "I'm the doctor who's here now."

"Doctor...the Doctor...a pleasure to...me...meet...." Max's body shuddered, a horrible, choking rattle sound slipped from his mouth, then his whole body relaxed as his eyes glazed over.

"He's dead." Twilight spoke for the first time since they had gotten there. She removed her cloak and unfastened the hood so that it was all just one long, flat length of purple fabric. "Ditzy, set the head down." Ditzy obeyed, but not before closing the diamond dog's eyes. Twilight stepped forward and draped the cloak over the body, lingering a moment with a hoof on its chest before stepping away. Then came a pulse of magic, and a flame leapt from her horn and consumed the body. "He's dead."

"Twi, don't you need that cloak for your Element of Justice?"

Twilight shook her head at Rainbow Dash's question. "The element isn't in the item, it's in the pony. It can't be taken or lost, only given, like trust or friendship or love." She gave her wings a flap and frowned. "I'll just have to get a new cloak in Stalliongrad. Perhaps not so much purple."

Silence a moment longer, and then Rainbow Dash turned to the east and began walking. "We should go. The day isn't going to wait on us just because one dog died."

No one said anything to this as they followed Rainbow Dash, out of the grove of trees and once more onto the Fields of Trenzalore. There was nothing to be said. Behind them the flames of Max the diamond dog rose

into the air.

The sun touched the western horizon behind Twilight and the others, beginning its slow slide down past it to the rest of the world. Ahead of them the world was turning to night, a blue-black canvass spreading over the sky like spilled ink, glittering pinpricks of light filling it with a beauty more refined and graceful than that of the day's beauty. The moon was bright and calm, seeming larger than any of them had seen it before, shining a silver light down onto the travelers and lighting their way before them. Their pace was slower than it had been the first half of that day, just above a jog rather than the gallop they'd had going. After that noon, none of them really felt like running. Several times Doctor Whoof, or Ditzy, or Rarity tried to start up a conversation to break the overbearing silence over the group, but it never lasted for more than a few responses. None of them really felt like talking either.

This, however, had never stopped Rainbow Dash in the past, and it certainly would not stop her now. "Ya know, I've been doing some thinking."

"Oh darling, you know what we've said about overexerting yourself like that."

A chuckle ran through the group, while Rainbow Dash shot Rarity a glare that despite its heat contained no real spite to it. "No, really, I have been thinking. I've been thinking about...well, life. Our lives, the lives of our friends, our families. Just...the things we love, you know?"

Rarity, who was walking a few paces ahead of Rainbow Dash, let out a ladylike huff. "Oh, I see. Well, your list must not have taken very long. Your friends, Equestria, and winning, in that order?"

"Hey, come on!" Rainbow Dash quickened her pace just enough to get level with the unicorn. "I love those three things yeah, my friends more than anything else, but that's not all I love! I have hidden depths, depths none of you could ever fathom."

Before Rarity had the chance to respond, Ditzy floated by above them, upside down so that their eyes could meet. "She likes me to brushie

brushie her mane in the morning!"

Rarity and the whole group laughed at this, while Rainbow Dash's face flushed red. "D-Ditzy! That's private!"

"Aw shoot, don't you worry none 'bout that, Miss Dash. We've all got our little embarrassing things we like. Like how the good Doctor over there likes fezzes, or how Rarity writes-"

Rarity cut Big Mac off with a clearing of her throat and a glare. The big red stallion rightly shut his mouth. The unicorn huffed again. "So anyways! I believe you were telling us a little something about things you love, Rainbow Dash?"

Rainbow Dash shrugged, a small smile playing off her face as she looked north of them, where the southernmost mountains of Gallopfrey were hidden by the dark. "Oh, you know, stuff. I love the mountains."

Silence a moment. Then from the rear of the group Shield Maiden cleared her throat. "I love the clear blue skies."

Beside Twilight, the Doctor looked over his shoulder at Rainbow Dash. "I love big bridges."

Ditzy floated by upside down again. "I love when Rainbow flies!"

Diogo joined in. "I love the whole world."

Then Rarity and Twilight next the whole group joining in, "And all its sights and sounds."

"Boom de yada boom de yada

Boom de yada boom de YADA!"

"I love the ocean,

"I love real dirty things

"I love to go fast!

"I love to keep things clean.

"I love the whole world,

"And all its craziness,

"Boom de yada boom de yada

"Boom de yada BOOM de yada!"

Rainbow Dash sped off ahead, swirling in circles until a cyclone of air formed around her. Then she let it go off spinning away as she grinned back at the group. "I love tornadoes!"

"I love bright comets"

"I love hot magma"

"I love Steve Magnet"

"I love the whole world,"

"It's such a brilliant place!"

"Boom de yada boom de yada"

"Boom de yada boom de yada"

"Boom de yada boom de yada"

"Boom de yada boom de yada"

The group fell silent as they reached the foot of a hill and began a brisk trot up it. The sun had been fully gone for a while now, since they had started singing, and above them the stars and moon were being blocked out behind a growing curtain of black. It was a comfortable silence, a far cry from the previous one.

Then Shield Maiden laughed. "I had thought Rainbow Dash was joking or exaggerating when she told me of the times you Equestrians would randomly burst into song. It seems however that I was mistaken."

"Seconded," added Diogo. "Though in my case I thought Lady Falalauria herself was trying to pull a prank on me. Which, to be fair, is not something unheard of for her. Ohhh, now I will have to admit to her that she was telling the truth when I go back to the Shimmerwood...."

"Hehe, pranking, yeah, that's another thing I love." They began to crest the hill as Rainbow Dash flew up into the air and turned to face them all. "But of course, not as much as I love all of you. You guys are great." The others reached the top of the hill. All at once their mouths dropped, their gazes drawn to something beyond Rainbow Dash, down the hill. Curious, she turned around to see what they saw. When she did her mouth dropped too. "Wow."

There it was, laid out before them at the foot of a mountain. A city unlike any other, all thick concrete and gleaming steel, towering skyscrapers to rival those of Manehattan interlaced with sprawling factories glowing red from the furnaces and belching out endless streams of black smoke. Elsewhere, at the far end of the city from the industrial park, neon lights in all colors shone into the night, advertising entertainment and pleasure of all kinds. And farthest back from the heroes on the hill, built into the mountain itself, the City Citadel rose above all else, its upmost reaches enshrouded by the curtains of smoke and ash.

Twilight sighed in awe at the structures. "Stalliongrad."

Rarity gazed in admiration at the lights. "Stalliongrad."

Shield Maiden gaped at the sheer size of everything. "Stalliongrad."

Then Ditzy chimed in. "It's only a city."

"Shh!" Rainbow Dash dropped back to the ground, giving Stalliongrad ahead of them a look before turning to address the others. "You guys know what else I love? A race. Come on gang, let us ride...to Stalliongrad!"

Pinkie Pie slowed as she walked down a hallway, her pink ears tilting around in curiosity. "How strange, I feel like I'm missing a perfect opportunity for a musical number about Stalliongrad."

Ahead of her, Dusk bit back a knowing smile and nodded. "Yeah, you did...." Her eyes got lost in memory for a moment...A door opened in front of them, filling the hallway with the sounds of techno music and a cheering crowd. Dusk snapped from her reverie and turned back to Pinkie Pie, her smile growing wider. "Well then Pinkie, it sounds as if the club is in full swing. Let us go enjoy ourselves being away from the Master for a little while longer, and wait for our friends to arrive, shall we?"

Pinkie Pie giggled and bounced up next to Dusk. "Okie dokie lokie! Come on, the party awaits!"

"Yes," continued Dusk as the pair walked through the doorway. "Twilight Sparkle's going away party, hehehe...."

"So gang, where do we go first?"

The group was gathered around a map on a visitor's kiosk, set in the center of a large open area nearly twice the size of the town square back in Ponyville. Despite the relatively late hour of 10:00 pm the square was crowded with earth ponies and uni going this way and that, in singles, pairs, and small groups, going to their night shift at work and leaving for an evening of relaxation at the couple of bars listed in the kiosk. Scattered through these crowds were diamond dogs, though in far fewer numbers than the ponies, and dressed in simple worker garb. Even a gryphon or two were to be seen in those crowds.

Shield Maiden answered Rainbow Dash's question. "First, it's late, so we should find a place of rest for the night first. We can refresh our equipment and head out tomorrow." She indicated a spot on the map a few blocks east of where they were. "I think...this is where this city's traveler's inns are, right?" She looked to Rarity for confirmation.

Rarity smiled and nodded. "That's right. Although," she looked around

them. "A city this size is liable to have full-blown hotels. Ooh, I wonder if we could find one with a Jacuzzi? Mmm, that would feel so good after all this traveling and dirt and sweat!"

"Don't get yourself too excited yet, Rares." Truth be told, Rainbow Dash liked the sound of a hot soak in a tub as much as any of the others. But, being in Stalliongrad, there was something else she wanted even more than that. She pointed to a place in the entertainment district, closer to the citadel than most of the places on the map. "We need to go here sometime before we leave Stalliongrad."

They all looked at the place Rainbow Dash pointed at. Twilight raised an eyebrow and looked at her. "The Three Balloons Party Club. Rainbow Dash, isn't that the place Pinkie Pie opened up here?"

"Uhh...yeah, yeah it is." Rainbow Dash looked away from Twilight, scratching the back of her head. "I just thought, since we're here, and we probably won't ever be here again afterwards, it'd be cool to go see her, you know?"

All there except Shield Maiden and Diogo shot worried glances at Big Mac. If the work stallion felt anything negative at the mention of the pony that almost crippled one of his sisters, he didn't show it. "Well, I reckon that a bright, fancy place like Miss Pie would have would be a good place ta get some news. I do recall getting some news on the rest of Equestria as part of the plan, weren't it?"

Rainbow Dash smiled at Big Mac, silently thanking him for not objecting. She wasn't an idiot, she knew how potentially problematic mentioning Pinkie Pie could be, so having the one pony in the group most directly hurt by Pinkie be on her side meant so much to her. More than any of the others could ever know.

Rarity, however, still looked worried. "I don't know...Pinkie seemed rather off when she left Ponyville. I don't think it would be very prudent for us all to drop in on her, and unannounced at that!"

"Oh pshaw!" Rainbow Dash took to the air, hovering a few feet above them. She undid the straps for her saddlebags and let them drop from her body to be caught by Rarity's magic before they hit the paved street. "It's

fine if none of you guys want to go, don't worry about it. You can just go find us a hotel to stay at for the night while I zip on over to Pinkie's place for a bit. Hear some news, crack some jokes, maybe have a drink or two...."

"Ah-HEM!" Everyone turned at the noise, to see Ditzzy hovering there at the back of the group, her arms folded over her chest and a dead-serious expression on her face. The seriousness of the look was such that Rainbow Dash eeped and flinched back a bit when Ditzzy flew over to her. The pair looked into each other's eyes for a moment, before, "One. Drink."

Rainbow Dash gulped and quickly nodded. "Y-yeah, sure, whatever you want, Ditzzy honey."

Some not so well hidden snickering came from the group. Ditzzy immediately brightened back up, hugging Rainbow Dash before moving to her side. "Okey-dokey then! Let the flapping commence to the palace of pies!"

Before any more could be said by anyone the two were gone, Rainbow Dash dragged off by her marefriend in a grey and blue blur. Shield Maiden looked at Rarity. "Is it really a good idea to let them go off on their own like that?"

Doctor Whoof finished writing the name of a hotel from the map down onto a notepad, slipped it into a pocket, and shook his head. "Nope, not a good idea at all. But isn't that what makes it so fun? Besides; two lovers, alone together after a long journey, in a place with stiff drinks, music and dancing, and Pinkie Pie. Do you really want to be there with them?"

"...understood. Though you know, I don't honestly know much about this Pinkie Pie character all of you keep referring to. I'd love to hear some stories about her, if you care...."

The group of ponies and one deer drifted away from the kiosk, working their way through the crowds toward the nearest hotel. The diamond dog spy watched them go until he could no longer hear them, before turning and starting toward the citadel. Nero would be pleased with this news.

Chapter 11

The One Where the Readers Go "HOLY SHI-"

*"Tick Tock, Goes the clock,
Tick Tock, Goes the clock,
Tick Tock, Goes the clock,
Twilight, Brave and Good,
She turned away from violence.
When she understood,
Her final fall to silence.*

"I have turned these words over and over again in my mind, but no matter what I haven't the foggiest idea what they mean. The Magicahedron spoke them to me as I consulted it this morning. I was seeking wisdom for a land dispute with the northern gryphons. A young dragon, barely a child, requested to start a lair in the mountains bordering Hatchling Forest with Gallopfrey. Spikara, I believe his name was. Suffice to say, the gryphons are not too thrilled with the prospect of a new neighbor. I feel though I might be able to convince them otherwise....

"I digress. The words. They remind me of a simple song, or a child's poem. Despite its apparent simplicity however, I simply don't understand it. I do not know of any pony, gryphon, dragon, or deer with the name of Twilight. I believe 'silence' refers to death; perhaps a reference to the Silent Realm of Magus V. Darkart? I shall have to review the works of Merlin then, for any reference to twilight.

"Oh, how I miss my sister at times such as these. She was always a clever pony at figuring out riddles and rhymes like this. My mind wanders to what will happen, so few yet so many years from now. The children of today will be young adults by the day of her return. I shall have to face her again. I can only hope the bearers of the Elements of Harmony will have revealed themselves by that point.

"There is going to be an examination for my school for gifted unicorns tomorrow. I think I might visit it, if I have the time. I need something to take my mind from all this."

Twilight Sparkle was greeted by heated arguing that late morning as she stepped from the elevator into the hotel lobby, disrupting what had otherwise been a nice stay in a nice hotel. The whole lobby was a cacophony of noise in fact, filled with shouting and well-manicured hooves clacking on smooth tile as staff ran to and fro in a panic. Across the lobby from the elevators Twilight watched as unsuspecting guests entered in through the front doors, froze at the sight of the chaos, and swiftly performed u-turns right back out.

The loudest of the noise though came from over to the left of the elevators, at the lobby desk. Twilight worked her way over there, spotting Shield Maiden and Big Mac. It was the Gildedale pony making most of the noise, shouting thunderously at the beleaguered unicorn behind the desk. Big Mac simply looked out of place and uncomfortable, trying but failing to keep his fellow earth pony calm.

"Now Mrs. Shield Maiden, there ain't nothin' gained from all this yel-"

"This is outrageous, absurd, and an utter insult to your guests! Have none of you any honor or sense of responsibility?" Shield Maiden raged, and the desk attendant looked ready to cry. "If this were to happen in the halls of Thatchholm, the pony responsible would suffer the utmost shame!"

"What in Celestia's name has happened, ponies?" Twilight looked from the terrified attendant, then to Shield Maiden. Up closer, without the grey earth pony's usual armor on her, Twilight recognized not just great anger, but awkwardness as well. "What's going on?"

Shield Maiden took two deep breathes to reign in her anger, before turning to meet Twilight's gaze. "This...hotel staff has somehow misplaced all our equipment we gave to them for safekeeping last night."

Twilight felt the bottom of her stomach drop out of her at this. It was too early to be dealing with problems like this; outside the sun was barely halfway over the horizon. "Oh no...you mean everything?"

Shield Maiden nodded, her mouth set in a grim line. "Our weapons and armor, at least; everything but what we took to our rooms with us." She turned a stern glare back toward the hotel staff. "If I did not know better, I would say our equipment was taken, rather than lost."

The unicorn at the desk let out a squawk of protest; letting out a string of objections and pleas that there had been no foul play on the part of the hotel staff, and that as many personnel as could be spared were searching for the lost items. "Just please, please don't give us a bad review when you return to Gildedale. As our first costumer from your country we endeavor to give you the best stay possible."

"You have failed at that," said Shield Maiden, before turning from the desk and starting to walk away. Twilight frowned at the dalepony's aggressive behavior, giving the hotel pony what she hoped was a far kinder look before moving to follow Shield Maiden. Big Mac followed behind her.

"Shield Maiden, did we really need to be-"

Shield Maiden stopped, forcing Twilight and Big Mac to stop too. For several seconds the three ponies stood in the middle of the hotel lobby, none of them looking anywhere, their mutual silence hidden by the bustle of their surroundings as other ponies hurried past them. Twilight opened her mouth to say something, to ask what had been going on a moment ago with Shield Maiden's anger, but Shield Maiden beat her to the punch.

"I apologize for the show I seemed to have put on." The grey earth pony turned to look back at Twilight, her ears flattening. "It is just...in Gildedale, the proper keeping of arms and armor is considered an essential task, for if our warriors cannot ready themselves in time, anything bad could happen. Lives can depend on this sort of blunder. But...I remember too late that this is Equestria, a country far more used to peace than Gildedale. Or it once was, at any rate."

Twilight smiled in understanding at this, though she was disturbed some by Shield Maiden's last comment. Despite whatever attacks from diamond dogs and mysterious pony monsters had occurred, Equestria, her home, was still a land of peace and harmony...right?

It seemed Twilight let some of her sudden worry show on her face, as the next moment Shield Maiden came forward and rested a hoof on her shoulder. "Keep your spirits up, Twilight. No storm lasts forever, even without Pegasi to control it."

"Well, I suppose you're right." Twilight hesitated a moment, before moving in and nuzzling Shield Maiden's cheek, a show of affection the other mare returned. She then stepped back and looked around them. "So, where are the others?"

Shield Maiden indicated behind her with a quick jerk of the head. "That's where I was leading us, actually. Rarity, Diogo, and Doctor Whoof are all waiting in the mess hall having breakfast. Ditzzy Doo and the Captain are still in their room, we think. Too late a night out."

"Captain?" Twilight took a moment to get what Shield Maiden meant. "Oh! Rainbow Dash, of course, she is...a captain. Huh."

"You have a problem with your friend being in command?"

Twilight quickly shook her head. "No! No, of course not. Dash can be a very good leader when she's focused on the problem." She ducked her head down, ears flattening to her head. "It just...never dawned on me before. You know somepony for so long, you get an idea of how they should be, you know? So when they start not fitting that idea...I'm happy for her, I really am. Her dream has always been to join the Wonderbolts, the best flying team in all of Equestria. I think, for her, this tops that though."

"Why, Miss Twilight," said Big Mac, joining the current conversation for the first time. "You sound almost nostalgic. Somethin' bothering you?"

"Nostalgic?" Twilight thought on that for a moment, just a moment, before giving her head a nod. "Yeah, I suppose. Things change." The simple and happy days when she was new to Ponyville, when Rainbow Dash was always napping or practicing for the Wonderbolts, when Applejack was always a reliable source of advice, when Pinkie Pie's parties and afternoon tea with Fluttershy could always be looked forward to, when a simple visit to the Carousel Boutique could swiftly change to an hour of trying on new clothes with Rarity while Spike admired the white unicorn; those days were dead and gone. There was nothing left to be nostalgic

about.

"Anyway," said Twilight, changing the subject. "We should go, we don't want to keep the others waiting. We have a busy few hours before leaving, so let's get to breakfast."

With Twilight leading, the trio moved through the crowds and across the lobby to a door on the far side, which exited out into the hotel's café area. All three of their stomachs rumbled and growled for food, their worries over the misplaced equipment fading for the moment as they went to enjoy a warm breakfast.

After breakfast plans were made and the group split up. Diogo stayed at the hotel to help however he could with the search for the saddlebags and equipment, and also to tell Rainbow Dash and Ditzzy what was going on when they left their room. The rest left the hotel in two groups; Big Mac and Shield Maiden went to get rope, cold-weather tents, wheat bars, and other supplies necessary for trekking through the coming mountains, while Twilight went with Rarity and Doctor Whoof to buy cloaks and clothing better suited for the cold of Gallopfrey.

"The winters of Gallopfrey are like nothing any of you will have experienced down in Equestria proper," the earth pony had said to Twilight and Rarity as they wandered through the shopping district of Stalliongrad, searching for the right clothing store for their needs. Several times Rarity had to be pulled away from the fancier, high-profile stores, before they all finally found one to their liking, a mid-range place by the name of Harkness's Hoods.

"It's all mountain up there, hard and sharp for the hardy folk. Most of the soil is too thick for trees to dig in their roots, so the wind will roar across the craggy plains like a starving beast. There are gorges so deep and narrow the wind coursing through it can funnel tight enough to cut you on a bad day. Whole lakes of ice lay scattered about, and you can skate across them all day without leaving a single remarkable scratch. Oh, it's all beautiful, in a wild and deadly way."

"Yes...beautiful...of course...." Twilight kept herself from remarking that

no, the way Doctor Whoof described Gallopfrey did not sound beautiful at all, or even safe for that matter. Rather than hurt his feelings and say this however, she looked down and in front of her, where Rarity was kneeled down. "Is this really necessary? I'm sure I could just grab something off the rack here...."

"Nonsense, darling!" Rarity pulled her head back, a silver thread clenched between her teeth, and suddenly the black pleather vest Twilight had been put in tightened around her chest and shoulders. "If your clothing doesn't fit perfectly the air could seep in under it and chill you!"

Twilight rolled her eyes in exasperation at her friend's antics, but gave no struggle as the unicorn went to and fro from the aisles to where Twilight stood at the back of the store, in front of a full-body mirror. In all honesty she had been beginning to feel the chill of the coming winter on the way there from Brelagrose, and that had been with her original Element of Justice cloak. Without it...Twilight wouldn't complain about new clothes anymore.

"It's great watching someone do what they love, isn't it?"

Twilight looked over at Doctor Whoof's reflection in the mirror, a look of real admiration on his face. "What do you mean? Rarity?"

Doctor Whoof grinned, his grin only growing as he looked to Twilight. "Well Rarity of course, but really anyone, pony or gryphon or diamond dog or what have you, doing what they love, what they have a passion for. There's nothing grander in all the universe than a Rainbow Dash flying, or a Rarity dressmaking, or a Applejack apple bucking."

"Or a Doctor Whoof doctoring," added in Twilight. She chuckled and nodded her head. "But I think I know what you mean. It all comes back to our cutie marks, doesn't it? We're at our best when we are doing what we love?"

Rarity went bustling by, briefly checking Twilight's hoof size before trotting down the aisle, humming some tune or other. Doctor Whoof grinned while watching her go. "Yes, like when I'm...'doctoring', which I'm not sure is a real word, but I like it. Doctoring. I'm the doctor that helps others achieve their best. The...doctor...."

Twilight watched his grin turn into a frown in thought in the mirror. Before she could say anything about this a cry went up from somewhere several aisles down. This was soon followed by Rarity trotting from that aisle over to them, a box held aloft beside her with magic. "Oh Twiii~liiight! I've found the perfect winter boots to go with that vest!"

Twilight and Doctor Whoof shared a look, both fighting back a laugh. Twilight smiled and lifted her hooves up without complaint, allowing Rarity to slip the boots on. When this was done Twilight took a few steps around and tested them out. Rarity was right, the boots she had picked out were a good match for the vest, fitting snugly and made of the same black artificial leather. Twilight looked up at her old friend and smiled. "You're right, they're great. So are we done here?"

Rarity beamed at the praise, but shook her head. "Why, not at all! We still need to find you a fitting cloak, plus finding something for the good doctor. Now of course I've kept an eye out for myself while doing all this running around, so it won't take more than a moment to find my own outfit."

As Rarity had been going on Doctor Whoof had been slowly edging away. Now he quickly turned and began trotting off. "Well it sounds like you two are plenty busy, so I'll just go and dress myself, thank you. Have fun!"

"We certainly will," Rarity called back, not looking up from her work adjusting the boots. "And no fezzes!"

Twilight giggled, joined a moment after by Rarity. The two friends stood there for several seconds, laughing good-naturedly at Doctor Whoof, before Rarity shot a knowing look at Twilight. "You fancy him, don't you darling?"

Twilight stopped laughing abruptly. "I-what?"

Rarity giggled, smiling at Twilight. "Oh Twilight, there is no use in hiding it from me. I am, as it were, an expert on this sort of thing. And really, despite his...eccentricities, he really is a good catch. A bit roguish, yet at the same time so lovably adorkable in that silly bowtie of his. Plus, I'm sure it doesn't hurt that he's the only pony in Ponyville who can keep up with you in an intellectual discussion."

"You've...been putting a lot of thought into this." Twilight gave Rarity a flat look, one the unicorn lacked the grace to meet. "So what, now that you've got your romantic dreams fulfilled, you're focusing on everypony else's?"

"Well, several of us did sing a song about getting you two together...."

Twilight facehoofed, groaning at her friend's antics. It was sweet, really, that her friend cared for her enough to try to make her happy this way, though Twilight would have preferred some more time to figure out her own feelings first, before dealing with everyone else's feelings regarding her feelings.

Removing her hoof from her face, Twilight noticed Rarity seemed to be waiting for some kind of answer. Twilight sighed. "Listen...yeah, you're right about all that stuff. And I guess, maybe, that I could slightly like him like that...but there's no future there."

Twilight hung her head as Rarity frowned. "Twilight, darling, what do you mean there's no future there?" Twilight couldn't bring herself to look her in the eye. Rarity's frown deepened. She moved closer and put a hoof on Twilight's shoulder. "Darling, what's wrong? What aren't you telling us?"

Twilight gulped, doing her best to fight back the tears threatening to rise in her eyes. She had wanted to not tell her friends about her future. She had come to realize that foreknowledge was a terrible burden, and if they knew, they would do anything they could to stop what was to happen to her, even at the expense of the quest. And Twilight couldn't allow that. Deviating from the known future could change it; she'd learned that much from Doctor Whoof, and changing it to save herself could result in her friends dying. Above all else, for the safety of her friends, Twilight would not let their path deviate. She would die.

"Rarity, I'm just-"

"So then, how do I look?" Doctor Whoof came from around the corner, sliding on the tiles and skidding to a stop next to the two mares. "Pretty cool, eh?"

Twilight and Rarity looked, the fashionista pony surprisingly nodding in

approval. Doctor Whoof had traded in his tweed jacket for a dark-green greatcoat going down his back clear to his tail. "I must admit, it is quite nice. Matches your mane very well."

Doctor Whoof beamed. "A fashion compliment from Rarity. Hah, my life is complete. Anyway, Rarity, I dropped off your new wintry, coldy outfit and some cloaks for the others up front. Yes I know what you would pick out for yourself, no you won't find any fezzes waiting for us and yes, I did, in fact, find Sparkle's new cloak. Check it, yo."

Doctor Whoof turned and presented the box placed on his back. As Rarity told him quite firmly that he was never to say "Check it, yo" or anything like it again, Twilight levitated the box over and opened it. She brought the cloak up into the light where she could examine it. It was a simple cloak, exceedingly so, made of a pitch-black material Twilight couldn't identify but looked and felt like a mix between silk and wool, as smooth as silk to her hooves but not so reflective. It had a hood like her purple cloak, but unlike that one, this had sleeves for her front legs.

"Well then, Doctor," said Rarity, examining the cloak with a dressmaker's eye. "It seems you are embarrassingly unfashionable only when you want to be. Go on then, Twilight, try it on."

Twilight did so, slipping her forelegs through the sleeves and letting the hood rest on her shoulders. The cloak fit her quite well for something grabbed off the rack by a pony who didn't have any reason to know her dress size, and with a few quick adjustments from Rarity it was as good as perfect. She turned to the mirror and looked at herself, taking the moment to forget any troubles about the future and just admire herself from a few angles. "It's simple...it's practical...."

"It's absolutely you." Rarity came up to Twilight's side and smiled. However, as she looked at Twilight's reflection, Twilight noticed the unicorn's smile turn thoughtful. "It will also do a good job of hiding your wings. As beautiful as they are, they might attract attention would prefer not to have."

Twilight nodded in agreement to this. As she did the hood flopped forward onto her head, covering her right eye. She froze, staring at her reflection in mute shock. She couldn't help but notice that in this black

cloak, with the hood hiding her right eye like it was, she looked remarkably like another pony....

"But that would be ridiculous."

Twilight looked at Rarity. "So you noticed it too?"

Rarity nodded, frowning. "Yes...but of course that's a very practical cloak, surely common this time of year. And purple eyes are rather common among unicorns, and your right eye certainly isn't yellow. The resemblance is...merely coincidental."

Twilight gulped and nodded again. Coincidental resemblance, that was as far as Twilight was willing to let that idea go.

Doctor Whoof checked his watch. "Hm. This has been fun, but we should probably go before Macintosh puts out an all-points bulletin for Rarity. Dash is surely pacing about the hotel lobby, impatient for us to get going."

This got some giggles from Twilight and Rarity. The trio of ponies went through the store to the checkout at the front, where the earth pony clerk seemed more than happy to check them out; Rarity especially, before she made a veiled threat regarding her horn and his cutie mark. Soon enough they were out on the street, huddled in a close group to avoid the late-morning traffic. Doctor Whoof spoke up. "So then, should we try to find the others around here, or head back to the hotel? Or we could do something interesting, like get lost and see the city's seedy underbelly!"

Twilight shared a look with Rarity, and then shook her head and looked at Doctor Whoof with bemusement. "That doesn't sound very interesting at all, only dangerous. Besides, we don't have time to waste on...on...."

Twilight looked away from him, away from Rarity, her ears perked and eyes wide as a haunting song drifted from somewhere in the crowd toward her.

*"Tick Tock, Goes the clock,
Tick Tock, Goes the clock,
Tick Tock, Goes the clock,
Twilight, Brave and Good,
She turned away from violence.*

*When she understood,
Her final fall to silence."*

"Twilight, what's wrong?"

Twilight ignored the question, too focused was she on that song. Thinking she heard it slightly louder from the right she turned and went that way, pushing her way through the crowds with barely a muttered apology to the ponies and diamond dogs caught in her way, leaving her two companions to do nothing but follow her. The song was the key, she was sure of it.

*"Tick Tock, Goes the clock,
Twilight, Brave and Good,"*

If she could find that song, understand it, then perhaps she could understand how to stop what it was about.

*"She turned away from violence.
When she understood,"*

Twilight turned a corner right and, the sidewalk relatively clear compared to earlier, broke into a run. The cries from Rarity yards behind her went unheeded by Twilight. She would die if it was the only way to insure the success and safety of her friends, but nopony would say she didn't look for every alternative.

"Her final fall to silence."

Twilight turned a left and was there. A small playground was laid out before her, a place perhaps for parents to let their children go play to get out of the way of shopping. It was mostly empty at the moment; a young colt on the swings, another on the slides, and, near the entrance to the playground, a trio of fillies playing jump rope. It was they who were singing.

Doctor Whoof came to a panting stop beside Twilight. "As...As a doctor I was recommend a vigorous jog for your health, but...but well, there's a time and place for everything you know!"

Twilight shot him an apologetic smile, as Rarity came to a stop on her

other side. The unicorn was looking away from them, and when Twilight followed her gaze saw she was looking at the fillies. "Twilight my dear, what are they singing there? What do they mean by 'fall to silence'?"

Twilight didn't know how to answer that. Now that she was there, she didn't know what to do. She had expected to find Dusk Nox singing it, or some enemy she could beat up, not mere children. What she did know was that she had to get to the bottom of this.

"Excuse me, girls?" Twilight called out to the fillies and approached them, followed a few steps behind by Rarity and Doctor Whoof. The three fillies stopped their jump roping and looked up at Twilight. "Excuse me, but where did you hear that song you're singing?"

The one that had been jumping, a brown-coated filly, pointed over her shoulder. "That stallion over there taught it to us."

Twilight looked where the filly had pointed. Far to the back of the playground a unicorn stallion sat at some benches, watching the children play. His coat was royal blue, his well-groomed mane and tail a rusty orange, and he wore a black, wrinkled suit. His eyes were the same shade as Ditzy's, and the cutie mark on his flank was an empty hourglass."

"Twi...Twilight." The dawning horror in Rarity's voice was palpable. "That's one of the monsters that was in my dream! That's the monster that freed the other monster!"

Not seconds after Rarity finished saying this did Diogo teleport into their group, his eyes wide his body covered in a thin sheen of sweat. "Oh thank goodness, I've been looking all through Stalliongrad for you three! I checked Rainbow Dash and Ditzy Doo's room, but neither of them were there and the bed didn't look slept in. I don't think either of them came back last night!"

New-found terror surged to life inside Twilight at this. Equipment missing; friends missing; an apparent monster sitting across a playground from her, teaching children to sing about her coming death; the rest of their group scattered throughout the city. Things had gotten out of her control before she realized anything could get out of her control.

"I think...coming to Stalliongrad was a bad idea. I...." Twilight steeled herself for what she was about to do. She pushed the fear back, back where it couldn't interfere with her thoughts. "Diogo, take Doctor Whoof back to the hotel with what we've got and get ready to leave. Rarity, find Big Mac and Shield Maiden and get back to the hotel. I'll meet you all there in a bit."

Doctor Whoof shot her a sharp look. "What are you going to be doing?" Twilight gulped again and took a step forward, away from her friends and toward Rarity's monster. "There are some questions I need answered."

"Sparkle-"

"Doctor." Twilight turned around and stared him in the eyes. Silence as the two waited with bated breath, before she broke her composure and lunged forward, wrapping her forelegs around his neck in a hug. "Thank you for caring."

Twilight figured she must have given something away in her voice, something hinting at the emotions of sadness and fear swirling inside her, as after she spoke she felt him stiffen up within her arms. She let go and looked up at him, seeing him frown back down at her. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but for once, Doctor Whoof seemed not to have anything to say. He stepped back and looked at Diogo. "Get me out of here."

The deer complied, leaving Twilight alone with Rarity. Twilight looked to her old friend. Rarity looked back. Neither said anything, they just both took a step forward and wrapped their necks about in a hug. Twilight sniffled, unable to keep her tears from dripping down onto her friend's shoulder, but Rarity only hugged her even harder. At that moment, in that city so far from home, Twilight thought she loved the white unicorn more than she ever had before.

"Stay strong." Twilight felt Rarity place a small, soft kiss on her cheek. Then came a feeling like a cold breeze against her body, and when Twilight pulled away Rarity was gone. Teleported away.

"I wish I'd had the chance to learn the deer method of teleportation. It seems interesting." Twilight stared a moment longer where her friends at a moment ago stood, before turning back to the blue unicorn across the

playground from her. At some time an earth pony had come to collect the children, a parent she assumed, with three red balloons for a cutie mark. She and Rarity's monster were alone in the playground.

He stood up and began to walk toward her. "Twilight Sparkle. Did you get my message?"

She gave a nod, moving to meet him in the middle of the playground. Now that he was standing and near her, she noticed how tall and slender he was. "If you mean Brelagrose, then yes. And you are a monster."

He came to a stop two yards from her, his face a full of arrogance. "Well good. I wonder. Surprised to see me?"

Twilight shook her head. "No. I don't know who you are."

"I didn't expect you to. There was a time when I loved you, Twilight Sparkle, but that ended when we ruined each other's lives. It might have begun even the day we met at the University; you the bright, rising star, and I the beleaguered senior out of his place."

Twilight gasped as realization hit her. The body was different, the voice was different, but only one pony she had ever known had ever referred to himself like that. "Yellow Jacket...Jack...you're alive?"

He nodded. If he felt any new emotion after she said this, he didn't show it. "I am the Master, now. I don't fully understand how it happened. Blood magic like what I used to gain magic is notorious for unexpected developments. My soul being caught between life and the Dreaming is not hard to imagine. It is at this point irrelevant. What matters is that whatever happened, happened for a reason, and that reason was something I learned about Life and Death."

Twilight wanted nothing more than to close the distance between her and him and embrace him, beg for forgiveness, cry her sorrow for having killed him in the first place. Yet, the way he stood there, the way he looked at her, made her stay where she stood. His new name for himself didn't help. All she could do was listen to what he said. "And... what did you learn?"

The corners of the Master's lips turned down into the slightest of frowns.

"You killed me, Twilight Sparkle, you crushed me into meaty pulp; with a certain amount of justification, I must admit. But then something happened, something my studies in the darkest tomes and most vile of ancient practices had warned me of. I got caught in the web that separates this world from the Dreaming...the Silent Realm, as you'll remember me going on late at night about."

She remembered those nights well. The animated way he spoke, the warmth of his gaze toward her, the way his smile would make her smile. Sometimes she wished that was all she could remember of his.

"And so, for a while I went along with the rules of that world, I struggled and bled and...suffered. I knew what I was supposed to do, but I didn't. I was compelled to delve to the very bottom, to dredge up the most hateful, the most vile and cruel...and that's when I discovered it. The truth. The reason why we're here."

He began to walk toward her with slow, leisurely steps, like a beast stalking its prey.

"The reason why we're here is because there is no reason why we're here. There's no applying reason, there's no escaping the chaos and utter pointlessness of life, because as we both know without chaos...there would be no life."

Twilight looked to her left at the sound of a door opening and saw another Master walking toward her from an apartment building. "It is chaos that created us."

Another sound to her right, a Master walking through another playground gate. "Chaos that divides us."

Another Master, behind her. "Chaos that kills us."

"Chaos that loves us,"

"That drives us."

The Master in front of her finally smiled, revealing rows of shark-like teeth. "We are here to teach you what the Silent Realm taught us: the

pointlessness of all this."

Twilight stared around her in horror as the six identical unicorns surrounded her. "I don't understand, how is this possible? Only deer can master duplication spells to this degree."

"Yes, we know," the Master in front of her replied. He dropped the smile and moved until he was just a foot apart. "And I must say, your friend Diogo's life magic was delicious."

"No...."

A rush of wind came as Doctor Whoof teleported into the hotel lobby with Diogo, sending the earth pony stumbling to his knees. He groaned, blinking to make the spots in his eyes disappear. "Oh...wow, better work on those landings, yeesh."

"I'll be sure to do that, my brother Gallopfreyan."

Doctor Whoof froze. His heart thudding in his chest, he looked up from the floor to find himself surrounded by diamond dogs in full armor, a forest of spears aimed toward him. A few feet ahead of him lay the body of Diogo, a look of horror on his face.

"But...I don't...." Then Doctor Whoof understood. He looked to his right where the fake Diogo stood and watched as the illusion ended, revealing the blue unicorn from the park. "Of course...why would Diogo ever know to look in a playground for us?"

Then a hoof smashed into his face, and all Doctor Whoof knew was darkness.

"Please...I'm sorry..."

Lightning slammed into Twilight Sparkle's gut, blasting a hole straight through her, her cloak, and into the wall behind her. She staggered, wings

flapping and a fountain of blood spurting from her mouth. Even as the hole was disappearing from her healing factor the Master grabbed her mane between his forehooves and slammed her into the ground.

"I'm so...so...sorry...."

His telekinetic hold lifted her into the air and slammed her through the playground's monkey bars, the metal twisting around her body from the force of the impact. She struggled to stand up, crying out in pain as a pole that had speared through her right flank shifted.

"Sorry to hurt you, s-sorry to kill you...."

The Master screamed in rage. Rearing back on his hind legs he fired bolts of electricity from his forehooves, reducing the bars around Twilight to metal slag. She teleported out of the mess, reappearing at the entrance to the park. Before she could do anything two Masters slammed hoof-first into her from the sides. Loud cracks rang through the area, and Twilight suddenly had trouble getting a full breath.

"I-I-I...."

A Master swept her legs out from under her. Before she could fall a pillar of rock shot from the ground slammed into her side, sending her flying through the air into a brick wall. Not a second past before three blasts of fire and three of lightning struck the pile of bricks collapsed on her, sending dust and stone flying in a blinding explosion.

"Ffff...forgive you f, fu, for killing her...." The six Master's turned from the smoking crater Twilight had been in a moment ago to see her collapsed against the swings behind them. Her body shook from fatigue, her clothes were scratched up and burnt in a few places, yet her gaze toward him was steady. "Trixie...my, my sister...I forgave you for killing her. It was all my fault, all of it, and I'm so s-sorry for killing you...."

The Masters stopped moving, each with one hoof up and crackling with electricity. The Master in the center of the group tilted his head, seeming to Twilight as if he was curious about something, before lowering his limb. The others followed his lead, before suddenly collapsing back into him. Then only one Master stood in the ruined playground.

"Twilight Sparkle, before the end, you shall not even be able to be sorry."

Chapter 12

The Day Evil Won

"Dark Tirek Suíonn ar a ríchathaoir dorchá. Weaves sé a olc thar an aigne na tíre coitianta, casadh orthu dá riachtanais. Is iad a chuid hallaí dorchá, dorchá iad a chuid ábhair, tá dorchá an neamhní i gcás nach bhfuil aon chroí. Beidh sé ag briseadh Paradise, agus an shining boglaigh cathracha rotten saoire. An tine báisteach spéartha, an boil haigéin, agus cnoic reáchtáil dearg le fuil a chuid naimhde. Gach atá marbh sa Tirek dorchá. Tirek eagla dorchá.

"The words I have just written down are Old Gryphon, one of the few remaining known fragments. It dates back to the first few decades after Tirek's war on the world, when gryphonkind was still given refuge within Equestria, before their final scattering and devolution into vagabonds and wanderers. From what I have been able to gather from the restricted section of the University archives, this is meant to be half-prayer, half-prophecy. It is said to have been chaos in those times, the world full of discord among the races as they tried to rebuild. Only our own Princess Celestia, Lady Falalauria of Shimmerwood, and perhaps a few older dragons could accurately remember those times. Regardless, I believe some remnants of the death-worshipping royal family of gryphons survived Tirek's arrival, scattering into the world where they could...wait and plan, perhaps.

"As focused as I am on my studies, I have still seen the signs. Unexplained, uncontrollable fires ravaging the smaller villages, reports of monster activity in the wild areas of the world increasing, and growing discontent among some of the earth pony commoners over the official story for Gallopfrey's destruction. As well, I have studied the stars. Four new ones, drawing close to the moon. I fear that a possible Tirek cult is not the only danger Equestria will soon face. Yet of the two, I fear the cult more than I fear the fabled Mare in the Moon.

"And yet...perhaps I am putting too much stock in old myths and half-remembered fables. If Twilight Sparkle were to read these words and find me putting so much stock in curses and prophecies, she would tell me I am

being ridiculous. Twilight...oh, my sweet Twilight. My Twilight. Mine. Mine! No pony else's, mine! She's...she is as good as a princess to me. Her looks, so beautiful; her magic, so powerful. So powerful...so much magic. What I would do with all that magic if I had it. Yes, that's it. I shall drop work on this cult nonsense and return to researching ways to grant magic to non-unicorn ponies.

"Surprisingly, my gryphon cult research has helped in this. Some of the ancient blood rituals I found in these tomes describe 'transference of power'. If I understand 'power' to mean magic, these rituals could be adapted for my purposes. Yes, residual magic could reside in a creature's blood...with the correct harvesting procedure...."

—excerpt from journal of Yellow Jacket, pegasus from Gallopfrey

"Hey, I think she's waking up!"

"Big Mac, lay her down on the floor there, gently. Doctor, hurry up with those bandages!"

"Something like this...staying asleep would have been merciful."

Twilight groaned at the sound of voices. She flicked open her eyelids and found herself lying on the cold, concrete floor of some kind of prison cell. The ceiling was cracked and dripping water, small rivulets of it trickling down the craggy walls. Standing in a close circle above her, or at least what she thought was close, stood Rarity, Big Mac, and Shield Maiden. Their faces wore a mix of concern, fear, and in Rarity's case, barely hidden disgust. The sound of shuffling hooves all around her, outside of her strangely hazy field of vision, told Twilight there were others there as well, perhaps the rest of her friends.

"Is..." Twilight coughed, squeezing her eyes shut at the pain that came from the mere act of speaking. Inside, she could feel her throat, raw and near-tearing from the hours of screaming it had been put through. "Is...everyone...ok-k-kay?"

The three above her exchanged glances, none of them seemingly

comfortable with saying anything. Finally, Shield Maiden sighed and spoke. "Not everyone. When they brought Doctor Whoof in, he told us he saw that deer, Diogo's, dead body. But other than him, we're all safe at the moment. We're all together, finally."

"F...finally?" Oh merciful Celestia, it felt like her throat tried to tear itself apart whenever she spoke. Everything did. Her body, her head, her face, ached with a terrible pain. Twilight couldn't understand why her healing factor wasn't fixing it.

Rarity picked up the conversation. "You were the last of us to be brought in, just yesterday. You slept through the night; something I personally never thought could be possible on such a horrid floor as this. Rainbow Dash always figured you were on the run, using your 'awesome magic' to keep from being captured like the rest of us. Oh darling, what happened to you? It's been four days since we last saw you! Four days of being left to rot in this dirty dungeon!"

"What happened to me...." Twilight could remember what happened to her. She remembered the her limbs pulled taught by clinking chains; the buzz of the electrodes on her hooves as electricity coursed through her body until the smell of burnt hair filled the darkness; the blazing pain of branding irons; knives digging in until they scraped bone; the needles, the endless needles injecting her with strange liquids that made her feel like she were on fire, or freezing solid, or drowning; and that Colt, that Colt with the red eyes doing it all, laughing that he'd never had a playmate who could keep it going so long.

"T-torture." Though her body ached, Twilight tried to sit up. Her vision swam, the edges of it dark, and she smacked face first into Shield Maiden. Though the earth pony seemed okay, and even to have been expecting it, Twilight stilled looked at her in confusion, a feeling of dread beginning to rise in her chest. "I-I'm sorry...I didn't...think you were that close."

Shield Maiden shook her head. "It's fine, don't worry about it. Just keep calm."

"Calm?" Twilight tried to get up again, prompting the others to move away as she got to her hooves. "Wh-what do I need to stay calm about? What's going on? Why does everything look near and far and just...I

can't...."

"Sparkle." Twilight turned around, stumbling and nearly falling as she did so. Behind her stood Doctor Whoof, an unusually solemn look on his face. Gripped between his teeth by the handle was a small mirror. Behind him Rainbow Dash and Ditzzy lay cuddled against the wall in a fitful sleep. Only now, in the back of her mind, did Twilight briefly notice that they had all been stripped of their clothes and equipment.

"Sparkle," said Doctor Whoof again, leaning his head out to offer her the mirror. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

It took Twilight three tries to successfully grab the mirror with her magic, which she noticed felt weaker than it should have. She brought the mirror up to look at herself, expecting a chipped or cracked horn at the worse, something affecting her magic. What she found instead made her legs turn to jelly. She slumped down to the floor, unable to tear her gaze away from her face. Her left side was fine, almost as if it had been kept unhurt on purpose. But the right side...was covered in scars and fresh cuts, lines of red radiating out from a gaping, empty socket.

"My eye...my eye...." The mirror slipped from her grasp and shattered on the stone ground. Her hooves shot up to her face, nearly stabbing out her left eye as they felt about for what she knew was not there anymore. "They took it. No no no nonononono...." She'd been told that she was going to die. She could almost stand dying. But such a simple, barbaric act, devoid of any amount of decency or even use, was too much.

Silently, Doctor Whoof stepped to Twilight's side and began affixing bandages around Twilight's head to cover up the empty socket. "There's still some bleeding left from the area, though that should stop by tomorrow. I'd just been readying fresh bandages for you when you woke up."

Twilight nodded along, more than willing at that moment to let Doctor Whoof take care of things. In all her life she had never met anyone, pony or otherwise, missing an eye. She had never even read anything like this. She tried to take her mind off it by looking, with some difficulty from her decreased peripheral vision, to Rainbow Dash and Ditzzy. At some point the two had woken up, and Rainbow Dash looked back at her with the most tired look she had ever seen from the rainbow-maned pegasus. "Hey

egghead, good to see you."

"Yeah, good to see you too...as well as I can see, at least." It took all of Twilight's will not to reach a hoof at to her new bandages. There were more important things to focus on at the moment, she told herself. Her disfigurement could wait some. "How...how did you and Ditzzy get captured? I can't imagine it had been easy."

Rainbow Dash sighed and dropped her gaze from Twilight's. Standing up she moved toward the thick, iron bars that made up one wall of the prison cell. "It wasn't easy, at first. We'd been at Pinkie Pie's club for a while, just catching up with her and partying and stuff. It'd been...nice. But then Pinkie went all psycho and stuff, yelling about not putting faith in friendship anymore, and a whole bunch of diamond dog soldiers burst in and started attacking us."

A bit of the Rainbow Dash they all knew and loved returned for a moment in a chuckle and a grin. "Even that was pretty easy. A dozen or so of those mutts might be trouble for your average soldier, but Ditzzy and I ain't average."

"Boy isn't that the truth."

Rainbow Dash didn't react to Doctor Whoof's comment. The moment passed, and Twilight watched as the normally brash, confident pegasus seemed to deflate, a strange despair filling her eyes. "But then, just as we decided to book it out of there, out of nowhere Pinkie jumped in front of us with Fluttershy...with a knife to her throat. And she threatened to slit Fluttershy's throat if we didn't surrender."

Shield Maiden shifted. "And you did?"

"Butterflies and cupcakes don't mix. Rainbow bubbles couldn't let the wicked blade pass through the butter."

Rainbow Dash nodded. "What Ditzzy said. Fluttershy is my oldest friend. There's simply no way I could risk her life like that."

Rarity finished brushing the shards of glass from the mirror to a corner of the room with her hoof, and then looked over at Rainbow Dash. "None of

us would be able to take that risk either, Rainbow Dash. The same dirty trick was pulled on Shield Maiden, Big Mac, and myself when we went to the club looking for you. Although, I believe I noticed something very strange that you might've missed."

She paused, making sure she had their undivided attention. A part of Twilight felt it was a bit overdramatic, but she said nothing. "I am more than experienced in the reading of eyes and body language from my dealings with customers, suppliers, and the rich folk of Canterlot. And what I saw in Pinkie Pie's eyes was that she DID NOT want to do what she was doing."

"What?" Rainbow Dash stared at Rarity in disbelief, before sinking to her knees and slapping a hoof to her forehead. "You mean I didn't have to surren...hey wait! Then why the hay did you three surrender? What gives?"

Rarity sighed and shook her head. "Because I saw in Fluttershy's eyes that she DID want it to happen. Don't ask me how, but I just knew that if we didn't surrender, she was going to bury that knife into her neck herself."

"...well...damn it."

"Dash, watch your language." Doctor Whoof turned to Twilight and shot her a look. "And you. Don't even think of saying that this is your fault. Yes, it really is completely your fault, but none of us are going to be helped any by you saying it."

Rainbow Dash looked back and forth between Doctor Whoof and Twilight. "Wait, how's it her fault again?"

Twilight stood, nearly stabbing her horn into Ditzy's side before she managed to spread her wings to keep herself steady. She staggered over to the bars and sat down next to Rainbow Dash. "It's because of who's behind all this. Not Nero, he's just a pawn. You see, that blue unicorn I stayed behind with at the park, the monster from Rarity's dream, he's the mastermind behind all this. And it's all my fault because that was Yellow Jacket, somehow back from the dead."

A chorus of gasps came from the other ponies in the room. Shield Maiden, who had been filled in on their past adventures on the journey there, frowned and took a step toward Twilight. "Hold on, so this is all some

sort of revenge thing?"

Twilight shook her head. "No, it's worse than that. So much worse. While he was...dead, somehow Tirek got a hold on him. He's corrupted, crazy; barely recognizable as the pony I once knew."

"To be fair Sparkle, ol' Jack wasn't all there the first time."

"No, he wasn't. But he at least seemed to believe he was doing the right thing. Now though...." Twilight sighed. "Now there's just something twisted about him. Something gone wrong."

Before any of them could say any more on the subject there came the sound of ear-splitting screeching as a heavy metal door somewhere outside the cell was forced open. Twilight jumped back to her hooves and backed away from the bars, quickly joined by the others. They all were forced to huddle close together, for as the steps grew closer the air around them grew colder. Twilight and the others with wings whimpered as frost began to envelop their feathers.

Then a trio of ponies came into view, and Twilight felt her heart seize.

"Ah, a pleasure to see you all awake." The Master smirked, his gaze only for Twilight. To his left and right stood Fluttershy and Dusk Nox, the latter's hood lowered and looking anywhere but at Twilight. "I do hope the accommodations have been satisfactory, Twilight. I'm sure you can appreciate the Magilyrium steel used in these bars to suppress your magic. It was very difficult to secure enough of the rare material."

Twilight broke from the huddle, going to stand across the bars from the Master. She looked him in the eye, her mind a mess of conflicting emotions that could only come out in a strangled "why?"

"Why what? Why have I captured your little group of heroes and imprisoned them here? Why have I allied myself and my associates with the diamond dogs in their plans for war with Equestria and their long-held foes, the dragons? Why have I bent your pathetic friend here" he indicated to Fluttershy "to my will?" He smiled and pointed a hoof to Twilight's face. "Or...why did I remove your eye..." he pointed the hoof to his face "...and take it as my own?"

There, in the Master's right eye socket, rested a purple eye in violent contrast with the gold eye in his left socket.

"I can answer that last one. You're a sicko jerk!"

The Master turned his attention from Twilight to the sudden speaker. "Ah, Rainbow Dash, the Rainbow of Light. An honor to meet you again. Sadly however, you are wrong. I am not a mere 'sicko jerk', but a pony with a plan."

"Oh yes, we're sure you are." Doctor Whoof trotted over to Twilight's side. He looked the Master over. "Quite a change though from your last plan though, isn't it? What was it you were trying to do then...wipe out earth ponies, wasn't it?"

The Master smiled at Doctor Whoof. The next moment a beam of red magic burst from his right eye and hit the earth pony, slamming him into the opposite wall. "And that is why I took Twilight's eye for myself; to gain some of that potent magic of hers. As for my...old ambitions, let us say that Tirek opened my eyes and expanded my horizons. That, and I learned how...natural, the earth ponies are."

Rainbow Dash leaned in close to whisper in Rarity's ear. "I bet the idiot watched his first Heart's Warming Eve play."

The Master's smirk turned into a frown, and Rarity visibly braced for a blast of that red magic. Instead however the Master turned and, in one fluid motion, drew a dagger from his suit and stabbed it into Fluttershy's right side. Her scream of pain echoed off the walls.

"Bastard!"

"Get away from her!"

"Shy, get away from him!"

"Scoundrel!"

The grin on the Master's face as he listened to the outraged shouts

would have given Discord pause for concern. He twisted the blade, sending Fluttershy to her knees, before yanking it out and sliding it back into his suit jacket. Immediately Dusk was at Fluttershy's side, her horn flowing with her red magic as she healed the wound. The monstrous unicorn spared this a glance before turning back to Twilight and the others. "You can prepare yourself to bear all the pain you need to, but to see friends...loved ones, suffer...ah, that is the sweetest agony of all."

Anger and sorrow in equal measure filled Twilight. She could feel that part of her that was still Queen Eos, buried deep down inside her, begin to burn with a righteous fury. She could feel the piece of Ditzzy's soul inside her trying to calm the awakening beast down, and failing. Twilight didn't want to keep that part of herself down, she wanted to use it, to crush the monster in front of her into dust and scatter him to the wind...but she couldn't. Even as she became aware of the power rising within her it began to falter, dissipating back into the well of magic from which it came. A new feeling arose in Twilight; horror, as she felt another magic at work inside her, forcing the power of Queen Eos down. Twilight fell to her knees, tears welling up in her remaining eye as she wondered what else the monster her old friend had become had done to her.

A glow from beside her made Twilight look up. Rainbow Dash apparently wasn't suffering from the same weakness Twilight felt, as she began to shine with an inner light, her mane and tail crackling with bolts of multicolored energy. She seemed to tower over everyone else in the cell as she glared at the Master. "We're heroes, you think you can hold us here forever? When we escape from here and complete our quest, the first thing I'm gonna do with the Crown of Cronus is shove it so far up your rump you'll cough it up!"

The Master's reaction was not what Rainbow Dash, Twilight, or any of the others had been expecting. He smiled, chuckling at some hidden joke. "Oh, but you see, Rainbow Dash...there is no Crown of Cronus to be claimed in your quest."

It felt as if the floor had dropped out beneath Twilight. She shared startled and disbelieving looks with the others, while Rainbow Dash just flew forward and hammered at the bars. "You lie!"

"Oh, I'm afraid that I don't." The Master began to pace, looking each of

them in the eye. Behind him Fluttershy and Dusk watched, one emotionlessly, the other with conflicted feelings playing out across her face. The Master continued. "That the Crown of Cronus has come back to this plane of existence was simply a clever ruse of mine, to stretch Equestrian forces thin and get all of you, with some unexpected additions," here he focused briefly on Shield Maiden, "all in one place, far enough away to keep help from saving you, yet close enough to insure it would be YOU Celestia sent, instead of a Pronghorn."

"But...how, Jack?" Everyone turned to Twilight. "Princess Celestia learned about the Crown coming back through the Magicahedron, and Lady Falalauria had a vision about it!"

His grin grew malicious. "Falalauria only foresaw Celestia announcing to all of you that she had learned about the Crown. And as for that, hehehe..." The Master went right up next to the bars, staring down at Twilight, taunting her with his mismatched eyes. "Have you ever asked yourself where the Magicahedron came from? Where it derives its power?" He leaned in through the bars, ghosting through them as if they weren't there, and stared past Twilight's remaining eye, into her soul. "And whether you can really, really trust it?"

Silence, and then, almost as one, understanding dawned in the captured ponies.

The door slid open. Princess Luna stepped into the holding chamber for the Magicahedron, her flowing mane and tail whipping about in the force of the raw magic that filled the air. Behind her a trio of royal guards made to follow her, but she motioned for them to stop.

"Cease, and stay here. The incredible amount of magic in this room would shatter thy meager constitutions if thou were exposed to it for even a moment. Guard the door, and maketh sure none follow us in here. What we must do in here must be done alone!"

The guards nodded their understanding and drew back from the door. Princess Luna nodded back and shut the door, and then turned to look about her. The chamber she found herself in was enormous, far larger than

Canterlot Castle itself. The result of a dimensional shifting door, she figured, opening from the University in Canterlot to whatever remote, undisclosed location this was.

She began walking, her armor-like shoes clanking on the black marble floor. Lightning arced and crackled through the air, shooting out from the massive crystal dodecahedron in the center of the chamber, as large as the library home of her friend Twilight Sparkle. Princess Luna strode up to this and looked up at it. She had never used the strange device before, but she had seen her sister use it, and in all honesty it freaked her the heck out. She didn't trust any kind of magic or power she didn't know the source of. Yet she trusted her sister, which at the moment she figured would have to do.

"OH MAGICAHEDRON! I, PRINCESS LUNA, SEEK WHAT WISDOM THOU MIGHT PROVIDEST! RULING IN OUR SISTERS' STEAD WHILE SHE IS AWAY IS FAR MORE CHALLENGING THAN WAS EXPECTED, AND SEVERAL MATTERS OF STATE REQUIRE BETTER KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM THAN WE CAN PROVIDE! HELP US!"

Princess Luna finished, wondering for a moment if her use of the amount of force in her voice had been a bit much. But then, from the Magicahedron images began to appear in her mind, flashing by in a blur. Faces past by; dragon, manticores, phoenix, deer, diamond dog, before finally stopping on a pony with a red coat and blue mane, and two horns sprouting from his head like bull horns.

Princess Luna opened her mouth to speak. "Magicahedron, we-"

PRINCESS LUNA. IT HAS BEEN AN ETERNITY.

Her eyes widened in horrified recognition of that voice. Before she could do anything a construct of magic the size and shape of a full-grown dragon's claw and arm sprouted from the Magicahedron and batted her away like a fly. Luna flew through the air a dozen yards before slamming chest-first into the wall with a sickening crack.

"AAAAUUGH!"

The magic construct hit Luna again, keeping her pinned to the wall. All

the air was knocked from her lungs, leaving the dark alicorn gasping for breath, the life being slowly pressed out of her. She could feel her bones bending under the force of the assault.

"T...Tirek...."

I HAVE HAD 500 YEARS TO PLAY WITH YOUR SISTER. LET US SEE WHAT CAN BE DONE WITH YOU IN FIVE MINUTES.

Luna screamed.

"Okay then, so what's the real reason for naming Khaza Rim?"

The Master, as well as everypony in the room except for Dusk Nox, looked in confusion at Doctor Whoof. The Master's look quickly turned into a smile as he advanced upon the earth pony. "And just what makes you believe that I am not being honest with you?"

Doctor Whoof rolled his eyes. "Oh, come off it, you're not fooling me with this 'almighty' routine you're trying to pull. Why have us all sent out to the most remote Equestrian fort in the world just to have us not get there? Why not have your lapdog Nero kill us in Ponyville while he was there, in front of friends and family? Like you said, the suffering of loved ones is the sweetest agony and blah blah blah. Hay, if you really have the control over Celestia you say you do, why didn't you just have her reduce us to ash stains on the floor with a great big blast of sunlight?"

Silence reigned as the group looked back and forth between the two Gallopfreyans. Twilight bit her lip, scared that at any moment the Master would stop smiling and attack Doctor Whoof, or worse, hurt Fluttershy again. In the state she was in, Twilight knew she couldn't do anything to stop him if he did something. Yet at the same time, the librarian pony couldn't help but feel a measure of admiration for the brown-maned earth pony for keeping his wits about him in such a situation.

The Master did not stop smiling, nor did he attack Doctor Whoof or Fluttershy. Instead he turned to Dusk Nox, his purple and gold eyes meeting her gold and purple eyes. "Go. Tell Nero the time has come. We

will be there in a moment."

The sorceress nodded, placed her hoof on Fluttershy's shoulder, and with a flicker of light teleported away. The Master then turned back to Doctor Whoof. "You are as clever as I remember you being, Doctor. For a while, I was beginning to wonder if your doctoral degree was in the art of cheese making."

Doctor Whoof smirked. "Well one of them is."

The Master ignored this remark. "Regardless, my use of Khaza Rim as your destination was...a slip of mine, something I couldn't keep myself from doing. You see, there is something there I want, kept beneath the ice and rock of the fortress. And soon, my pawns will take it for me. None of you, however, will be alive to stop me."

Twilight and the others only had a moment of notice as the Master's horn became enshrouded in an inky black magic, before the bars separating him from them came alive and shot out of their slots. Twilight cried out as several of the steel bars wrapped around her legs and body, one wrapping itself around each leg and a fifth around her middle to restrain her wings. From the corner of her eye she could see this happening to her friends as well.

At the sound of hoofsteps Twilight turned and watched the Master step into the cell with them, glaring down at them all with the most hateful smile she had ever seen. It caused her insides to twist and her heart to thud hard against her chest. Darkness began to spread from him, covering them all, hiding her friends from Twilight's sight. "I hope you all appreciate the amount of effort I have put into making your deaths...spectacular."

The absolute darkness disappeared, and Twilight suddenly felt a horrible sense of vertigo. They had been teleported up, far up, nearly to the very top of the Citadel that loomed over Stalliongrad. It was a massive courtyard-like structure, similar to the landing platform she and her Ponyville friends had landed on in Canterlot so long ago, though what sorts of flying creatures it could be meant for she hadn't a clue. From there Twilight could look out over the whole city and beyond, though the entire scene was cast into an ugly orange-red light by the mid-morning sun filtering through the smog and smoke from the factories.

Twilight's attention was drawn to her more immediate surroundings by a sudden outburst of noise. She and her friends were not alone in the upper courtyard. Diamond dogs, a hundred at least, filled the courtyard, all watching the ponies with barely contained bloodlust. Off to Twilight's left left Dusk Nox, Fluttershy, and Pinkie Pie stood in the shadow of the mountain. Twilight herself, she noticed, stood atop a stage-like platform set in the middle of the courtyard along with her friends.

"Oh no...."

Twilight looked at Rarity questioningly, and then followed the unicorn's gaze. Her heart stopped, a flush of fear coursing through her as she recognized the wooden contraption, the noose of rope hanging from the end swaying in the freezing breeze. This wasn't just a regular wooden platform, Twilight realized. It was a gallows.

"Now then, who shall be first?" The Master strode back and forth in front of them, his gaze sweeping over them. A pair of diamond dogs climbed up onto the gallows and hurried to ready the noose. "Who shall be first to hang? It should be noted that the first to hang will experience some mercy. They will not have to watch the others die one by one."

The group was silent. Twilight looked around herself, looking at them. Rainbow Dash sat struggling, trying to get the metal bars twisted around her limbs off. Beside the rainbow-maned pegasus sat Ditzzy, trying to help her marefriend as best she could in the futile. Rarity and Big Mac were huddled close together, Rarity crying against the red farmer pony's chest while he held her as best he could. Doctor Whoof was looking away, toward Dusk and her group. Shield Maiden stood slightly apart from the rest of them, tears falling silently from her eyes as she looked to the west and the distant Gildedale.

~"In the name of my mother, my father, and my sister, I swear that you two shall return to your daughters. Even on my life, I swear it."~

Twilight remembered the oath she had made to Shield Maiden and Ditzzy. She had sworn that they would get back to their children even if it meant her life. And then another memory came to her, more recent.

~"Twilight will fall when the question is asked, in the mountains of Gallopfrey when all hope is dashed."~

Understanding flooded Twilight, her thoughts beginning to whirl. The mountain the Citadel and Stalliongrad were built on was a southern spur of the mountain ranges filling Gallopfrey; she had promised to die if it meant protecting her friends, and here they were being asked who would die first; and the gallows...she would definitely fall. It all fit together, Twilight realized. This is where she had to die.

(Start listening to "No Prisoners, Only Trophies" from the Transformers: Dark of the Moon soundtrack here.)

"I'll...I'll go first." The Master stopped his pacing. He, the gathered ponies, and the milling diamond dog crowd around them all looked at Twilight. She gulped, limping forward as best she could. "I'll die first...to protect my friends."

"Egghead, no!"

"Don't do it!"

"Let me go, not her!"

"Coward!"

Twilight fought hard not to turn and look at her friends as their shouts hit her. She kept her gaze on the Master as he strode toward her, an unreadable expression on his face. "You want to die because you love them, because you have promised to protect them, because they mean so much to you?" Twilight nodded and the Master smiled. "Very well then...we will hang the grey pegasus first."

A cheer rose from the crowd. Twilight's eye snapped wide. "No! Take me first!" She lunged forward as best she could, aiming to stab her horn through the Master, to hurt him at least enough to make him angry and want to kill her first. But before she could reach him a beam of black magic from his horn sent her smashing back to the wood platform, the wind knocked out of her.

"Get away from her!"

At the shout Twilight forced herself to look up from where she lay. She watched as the two diamond dog soldiers advanced toward Ditzy, Rainbow Dash standing between them with a fierce snarl. The rainbow maned pegasus leapt forward, tackling one of the dogs to the floor where the pair began to roll back and forth, paws and hooves flying in a deadly blur. The other dog lunged forward to grab Ditzy by the mane, receiving a buck to the gut for his troubles. The next moment he was sent flying off the platform by a double-leg buck from Big Macintosh.

More soldiers crowded onto the platform. Big Mac kicked two more away before getting dragged down under half a dozen of them. Rarity let out a battle cry and charged, headbutting a dog from the pile, but then was yanked back by her mane and punched in the gut. The white-grey unicorn fell with barely a wheeze. Then Shield Maiden leapt over Ditzy and crashed into a dog, sending both over the edge of the platform onto the hard concrete below; a crack resounded and then silence, neither dog nor pony coming back up. Doctor Whoof didn't manage anything before a sudden axe to the shoulder downed him. All the while Twilight lay there, dazed and pinned to the floor by the stream of black magic the Master was unleashing on her. She could do nothing as Ditzy ducked under a swung spear and slammed her head into the attacker's groin. She could do nothing as Rainbow Dash leapt up and took an arrow to the gut that would've lodged into Ditzy's temple. She could do nothing as a dog punched the yellow-maned pegasus into the ground, the wood splintering from the force of the blow. She could do nothing as another blow snapped the wall-eyed pony's head back, blood and spit flying from her mouth. The librarian pony could do nothing at all.

"Please...not her...."

Rough, uncaring paws dragged Ditzy toward the gallows by her mane.

The Master turned to Twilight. "Why?"

Rainbow Dash crashed to the ground, limbs flailing as she tried to beat off the dog pinning her there.

"She's a mother...she has a little daughter waiting for her back home...."

The roar of the watching crowd washed over them, savage and filled with bloodlust. Rarity tried climbing to her hooves, before a smack to the face sent her reeling.

"Then when I am done here, I will parade your corpses through Ponyville and listen to the lamentations of the children."

Bloodied tears streamed from Ditzzy's eyes as she was hoisted up into the air by her mane. A diamond dog fitted the noose around her neck, cruelly dragging a claw across her cheek so it bled red.

Twilight could say no more. Her head fell back to the floor with a clunk, tears welling up in her eyes. The violet-coated pegacorn sobbed, body aching as despair descended on her. "Ditzzy...Ditzzy, I'm sorry. I'm sorry!"

"DITZY!" Rainbow Dash thrashed and struggled, throwing one dog off her before getting jumped by two more. DITZY! DITZ-

SNAP-CRACK. The grey pegasus spasmed once, twice, three times, then went still, her head twisted and her neck bent at an odd angle. Her legs hung limp at her sides as the rope swayed in the wind. Ditzzy's eyes stared off blankly into the distance, growing dark.

"No...NOOOOOO!" Rainbow Dash collapsed to the floor, the color leaving her mane. Her sobs rang out louder than the cheers of the diamond dog crowd, infinite loss and sorrow for the briefest of moments overpowering the hate and fury around them. Twilight cried with her, feeling as if a part of herself had just died as well. Already she was imagining the rest of her friends being led to the gallows one by one, joining the wall-eyed pony there before her eye.

Then an arrow buried itself in the Master's neck, piercing straight through and sticking out his throat. He fell to his knees choking on blood, the magic holding Twilight in place wavering and then disappearing entirely. Even so, she could only lie there in shock as dozens of gryphons swooped down from the clouds above and around the tower courtyard, scattering the diamond dogs with volleys of arrows and spears.

A deafening screech filled the air, followed a moment later by an earth-

shattering thud as Gilda landed on the gallows, fully armored from beak to tail in steel and leather, a sword gripped in her left claw and a spear in her right. She swept the sword around, slicing the head off the diamond dog keeping Rainbow Dash to the ground. "Get away from her!"

As soon as she was free the rainbow maned pegasus was gone in a flash, racing to get her lover free from the noose. Meanwhile Gilda continued her rampage, tearing apart the dogs holding down the ponies with sword, spear, and occasionally, beak. All around them the gryphons fought with a ferocity Twilight had never seen before, carving bloody paths of carnage through the unprepared and underequipped diamond dog soldiers. Yet even so, the dogs began to recover from the gryphon surprise attack, calling in for reinforcements to crush the rescue attempt with superior numbers. More soldiers were already beginning to pour in from the tower, and gryphon bodies started to join the dog bodies on the ground. From where she lay, Twilight could see Gilda already hard-pressed by the number of dogs she was fighting off on her own.

Doctor Whoof hobbled over to Twilight, his whole left side covered in the blood pouring from his shoulder wound. Despite this he bent down to help her up "Sparkle, come on, get up! We need to go!"

A howl behind them drew Twilight and Doctor Whoof's attention. They looked back in time to watch a diamond dog raise up an axe, before Altair swooped in and sent the fierce canine off the platform. "Back, mutt!" The gryphon then turned and helped both the ponies up, going a step further and swinging them over onto his back. "There's no time to let any of you ponies fly or run on your own. We must all escape from here before the dogs get organized enough to release their drakes!"

"Drakes? They've got d-drakes?" Now Twilight could understand the need for such a large courtyard so high up on the tower.

Altair turned, and Twilight could see Gilda carrying a struggling Rainbow Dash away from the fallen body of the blue pony's lover. More gryphons flew around them carrying the unconscious forms of Rarity, Big Mac, and Shield Maiden. She could feel exhaustion creeping in herself, the adrenaline of the moment the only thing keeping the darkness swirling around the edges of her vision from claiming her.

But then that swirling darkness coalesced into two massive tendrils and began swatting gryphons out of the air left and right. Gilda, Altair, and the other pony-carrying gryphons screeched in alarm and took off, flying desperately away from the courtyard and hopefully out of reach of that groping darkness. Twilight twisted around, looking behind them. There she saw the Master standing upright once more, the arrow gone from his neck and a look of rage in his features. From his shining horn sprouted the tendrils of darkness, yet even as Twilight watched they drew back into the villain's body. A moment later they burst from his sides as draconic wings and the Master was airborne, his features morphing into something monstrous and dark, flame and smoke and lightning.

"MY REVENGE SHALL NOT BE TAKEN FROM ME!"

They were over the city itself now, distant cries rising from the streets as ponies and civilian diamond dogs looked up and watched the terrible pursuit. Twilight looked ahead. The other gryphons were beginning to pull away, Altair the only of the rescuers carrying two ponies. She could hear the male gryphon panting, the flaps of his wings starting to falter. She looked right, and found Altair's other passenger returning her gaze. In his eyes she could see that he was reaching the same conclusions as her, and then going one step beyond.

"Doctor..."

"Sparkle."

A brief kiss born of fear and despair passed between the two of them, before the earth pony pulled away and stood up. Altair turned to see what was happening on his back, but Twilight ignored this, looking only at Doctor Whoof. His mane and tail whipped about his face, and blood flew in an ever-thinning stream from his shoulder wound, yet the stalwart earth pony ignored all this as he turned to face the oncoming all of blackness that the Master had become.

"Well then...Geronimo."

Doctor Whoof jumped. For a moment he hung, suspended in the air like Ditzzy only minutes before. Then wind and gravity swept him away, and he was lost to Twilight's sight. The mare, hurt beyond imagination, cried as

Altair put on a fresh burst of speed and caught up with the others. The escape had been made, yet so much was lost.

Chapter 13

Picking Up the Pieces

The gryphons did not stop or slow down their flight until they had made it back to Hatchling Forest, the smoke and shadow of Stalliongrad and its master a distant and ugly smudge on the darkening horizon. The dozen or so surviving gryphons touched down in a large clearing a mile into the woods, all gasping for breath and giving silent thanks for still being alive.

Twilight rolled off of Altair's back before he could remove her own his own, falling to the soft, grassy floor of the clearing with a 'thump'. There she rolled over onto her back and lay, staring up at the forest canopy and beyond it. She neither noticed nor cared when the magic-draining bars were removed from her limbs and side, allowing her limp wings to flop out lifelessly to the ground. Night had fallen during their flight, the stars twinkling half-seen through the trees and a cold winter wind beginning to blow. They brought no comfort to the defeated mare, no feeling of peace or hope as they had when she was a child. She could not even remember the Elkish song her mother had taught her.

The lavender-hued pony's one eye was beginning to ache, her vision blurring with the tears that refused to stop, and so she closed it. In the darkness she had no strength to do anything but listen to the others.

"Come on birds, we're not out of trouble yet!" Gilda stalked through the clearing, barking commands left and right and taking stock of where the company stood. The brutish gryphon had discarded her helmet as soon as she had landed, and in the dark of the night her yellow eyes seemed to glow with an aura of command. "Brennus, see to the ponies' injuries! Guntram, Wolfram, secure the perimeter and get a fire going, I want some light here! Altair, take Aderyn and get word to-"

"Gilda," Altair interjected, taking a step toward his commanding officer. "Aderyn didn't make it. He is dead."

"What?" Gilda stopped in her tracks, turning first to look at the red-feathered Ranger beside her, and then all around her at the battered

remnants of her command. No more than 13 gryphons looked back at her, a drastic decrease from the 37 she had chosen for her rescue mission of Rainbow Dash and the other ponies. "So few...so few made it back...."

Silence reigned in the clearing, broken only by the sound of the yellow gryphon twins Guntram and Wolfram starting up a large campfire in the center, and the soft crying of two ponies. Twilight opened her eye again and turned her head to watch the proceedings. A small part of her identified with the young gryphon at that moment. They had both lost an incredible amount in an incredibly short length of time. Diogo, Ditzzy Doo, Doctor Whoof; those three might not have been as many as the dead gryphons who had come to their aid, but they were enough to fill the pegacorn with the pain of sorrow. It was a pain they shared.

Then the campfire finally roared to life, and the whole clearing was lit up in an orange and yellow glow that threw shadows all around in stark relief. Gilda visibly started, snapping out of her sorrowful state at the sudden light and returning to her hardened exterior. "Fine then. Guntram, Wolfram, continue setting the perimeter; I don't want any canine surprises. Brennus, I told you to start fixing up the ponies! They need to be ready to move by the morning. Altair, take everyone else and go to the Eyrie. Tell those damn Elders to get off their fat tail feathers and start calling in gryphons. I think I got us into a war."

"At once, Commander." Altair turned to go, flaring his wings out to take flight, but paused. He turned back around and looked at Gilda. "But what will you do then?"

The gold-eyed gryphon huffed and turned to the eastern edge of the clearing, swinging a bow and quiver of arrows between her wings as she went. "I'm going to keep watch for our ally in this little rescue operation. He should have been here before us, as fast as he runs. If I'm not back by morning, assume I was stupid and got myself killed or captured."

Gilda looked around the clearing a final time, and then shook her head and left. Twilight watched her disappear into the darkness of the forest beyond the light of the fire, silently wishing for the steel-clad gryphon to stay safe. Then, as Altair and the majority of the remaining gryphons took flight, their airborne course deeper into the woods and angled north towards the gryphon capital city, Twilight returned her gaze to the sky and watched. She did not notice when her eye finally finished crying, drained

fully of tears.

For a while the clearing was quiet and relatively calm. The two golden-feathered gryphons Guntram and Wolfram stuck to the edges of it, circling it with their sharp eagle-like eyes trained on the woods around them. Despite what Gilda had ordered they went without torches, to keep their night vision from suffering. Brennus, an older gryphon with grey feathers and an old limp in one of his hind legs, moved about the clearing from one pony to another to clean, dress, and bandage their wounds, starting first with Rainbow Dash and the thick diamond dog arrow buried in her gut. The rainbow-maned pegasus yelped and grit her teeth as he pulled the shaft of wood out of her, before settling into an uneasy sleep with the anesthetic the wizened gryphon gave her.

When the time came and the gryphon named Brennus came to her, Twilight shook her head and motioned him away. "There's nothing you can do for me." He looked at her dubiously, glancing toward the bandages covering a quarter of her face. The indigo-maned mare shook her head again. "The eye's gone, and everything's already healing up. Any other wounds I might have are purely emotional."

Brennus shrugged and sat down beside her anyway, ignoring Twilight's weak protestations as he dug through his bag of medical supplies. "Perhaps, but your bandages require changing anyway, and the area may require cleaning to prevent infection. Plus, little pony, there are medicines for even emotional wounds."

He set a glass bottle of a honey-brown liquid down beside her. Twilight looked at it, and then back at him, even as the experienced medic began removing her bandages, being careful so as not to cut her with his claws. "Alcohol."

Brennus chuckled. "Colovian Fire Whiskey, from the grain fields west of Hatchling Forest. This'll make you feel good and happy for a while, and then make your head hurt enough to block out whatever was originally hurting you. Gryphons have...relief on this for a...a very long time. Lots to forget, you know."

The last of the bandages was removed. Brennus looked at the empty socket as if he had seen a thousand like it before, which was possible

Twilight thought, reaching into his bag without looking and bringing out a fresh roll of bandages. "The wound itself is clean and expertly dressed. Whoever worked on you before me was good. Real good."

"Doctor Whoof is the bes...was the best doctor I knew." Twilight could feel the sorrow beginning to rise up in her again at her slip. Without thinking, not even wanting to think, she uncorked the bottle of whiskey with her magic and took a deep drink. She nearly gagged at the burning sensation running down her throat, blinked through a suddenly blurry eye, and looked at the gryphon sitting beside her. "This was my first drink of alcohol ever...you're a terrible doctor...."

Again the grey-feathered physician chuckled, shaking his head as he covered the socket back up, this time with some pads to prevent irritation. "That's because I am not a doctor, I'm a medic. Doctors heal people; medics just make them feel better while they die. Which, in the end, is really all that matters. What's all that morality and ethics junk worth if your alone, unhappy, and suffering for it? Better to feel good and let everyone else worry about that stuff, I'd think."

"Maybe...." Twilight took another drink of the alcohol, this time managing not to cough as it burned down her throat. Already she was beginning to feel weird. She couldn't tell yet if it was a good weird or a bad weird, but it was definitely better than the bleak despair that had filled her before. "Maybe none of it's worth it after all. Everything...everything I've done up to this point only seems to have made things worse. I used to believe...and I mean really believe, that with friends, and loved ones, any problem could be overcome."

She took another drink, and finally she could identify the weird feeling as a warm, pleasant buzz. She found herself able to smile again. "I used to believe friendship could overcome any issue, as long as my friends and I stuck true to...to ourselves. But now...how could I be so naïve, you know? What does friendship mean in the face of all that reckless hate? What good are ideas like kindness and honesty, loyalty and laughter, when you...when you have to watch, helpless, as a friend you've known for years is hanged right in front of you? Killed just for the pain it'll cause others? It's like...it's not enough anymore...."

"Ah, these are some hard questions you are dealing with, little pony."

Brennus stood up from where he sat, grunting as he stretched and cracked his back. "Questions that will cause you no small amount of headache if you keep thinking them, especially now. Drop them, and just let the rest of the world get on as it is."

Brennus left the whiskey with Twilight as he walked away, joining the gryphon twins as they retired to the campfire for the night. Twilight watched him go, her heavy mind struggling to keep track of the words the wizened gryphon had said. The battered traveler turned her gaze back to the bottle of alcohol she now gripped between her front hooves, its pungent scent wafting into her nose and bringing fresh, stinging tears to her one eye. All of a sudden it didn't seem as appealing as it once did, feeling Twilight's stomach with a strange, twisting, sick feeling. She quickly set the bottle aside and turned away from it, rolling over onto her side so she wouldn't be able to see it if she tried.

For a while, Twilight listened to the crackling of the campfire, the soft snoring and whimpering of her sleeping pony companions, and the sounds of nature all around them. But soon enough the events of the past few days, the alcohol in her system, her physical exhaustion, and her emotional trauma all overcame whatever resistance she had left, and Twilight fell into a deep, restless sleep.

Dusk Nox watched from the highest parapet of the Citadel, watched as the Master took flight after the retreating gryphons and their precious pony cargo, and then turned to the pink party pony standing beside her. "It's time. Go find Fluttershy and make sure she's got what she needs packed. We will be leaving soon for colder climes."

"Okie dokie lokie!" Pinkie Pie leaned in and planted a quick kiss to Dusk's cheek, before twirling around and hopping down the stairs. Though the earth pony did a good job of hiding it, Dusk still caught the glint of tears in those bright blue eyes, just barely held back by the plastered-on fake smile.

"I am sorry for all of this," Dusk whispered, though the one she would have said it to was already gone. The dark pony sighed and turned from the stairwell into the tower back to look out over the edge. The sun had left

its smoke and cloud cover and begun to inch below the horizon, casting the whole scene into colors of rust and bronze. A dozen or so feet below where Dusk stood diamond dogs scrambled about the ruined upper courtyard separating the wounded from the dead. The former they took to the medical wing of the Citadel, and the latter to the dungeons for cleaning and burial preparation. Even the diamond dogs had sacred rites for their dead.

The sound of padded paws on stone caught Dusk's ear. The dark purple-hued unicorn turned and regarded Nero the Diamond Huntswolf with a detached expression. "Evening, Nero. It seems the Master's desire for cruelty has cost us victory and the lives of several of your dogs."

The hulking brute growled, one cruelly-clawed hand clenching at the axe strapped to his side, the other pressing a rag soaked through with blood to a gash on his shoulder. "My dogs died on their own. Where were you, sorceress?"

"I could ask you the same thing." Dusk moved toward Nero, her horn lighting up with her red magic as the older mare started up a healing spell. "I didn't see you anywhere in the courtyard during the execution. Not during the brief battle either, so how did you get injured? Fall down the stairs? Slip while sharpening your axe?" Nero growled and snapped at Dusk's face, making her jump back to avoid getting her face torn off. She watched the diamond wolf warily as he glared at her, showing off his gleaming fangs. That evening, she noticed, those fangs were gleaming red with blood.

Finally Nero spoke. "I was on my way there when I received word of a disturbance in the lower storage rooms. I went there and found...an intruder." The brute's eyes burned with a terrible hatred, and Dusk had to suppress her smirk. "It was a filthy, depraved dragon!"

If she hadn't already known what the intruder was, she might have been afraid of Nero at that moment. As it was she quirked an eyebrow and feigned some level of surprise. "A dragon, here in the Stalliongrad Citadel? Do you think he was helping the gryphons rescue the prisoners?"

Nero began to pace, hands clenching and unclenching as if he wanted to strangle something. "He must've been! I found the dragon stealing the equipment we took from the ponies, burning them up in his flame to transport them elsewhere."

Dusk nodded, feeling no small bit of pride for that dragon. Surviving a fight with Nero, even injuring him, was no small feat. She turned from Nero so that he would not see her face, looking out instead over the courtyard again, and past it to the western horizon. "Transport through fire is a skill many dragons can learn. Most use it to move their gathered hoard quickly in times of emergency. Other, crueller dragons will use it to kill intruders gruesomely. Transporting them miles into the air and letting them fall to the earth below for example, or transporting only certain parts of the body away. It can get rather gruesome...I believe a dog like you would enjoy the spectacle, if it didn't involve dragons."

Tilting her head back, looking up at the smog cover that no starlight could penetrate, the dark unicorn watched as a shape darker than all the rest began to grow in the distance. The Master was returning. Dusk idly lit several torches placed along the perimeter of the balcony. "Hmm...I seem to recall one of those ponies you failed to kill, Twilight Sparkle I believe, used to have a dragon familiar to send letters with. I don't know what happened to the baby dragon though; I wasn't in Equestria when it happened."

"I don't care about lost dragons or gruesome carnage!" Nero finally lost all patience. Stalking forward he slammed his fist down on the gut-high stone parapet keeping the two of them from falling over the side of the balcony, leaving cracks spider-webbing through it. "What I care about is that those miserable ponies got away, diamond dogs died, and our precious 'Master' has been-"

"Silence, mutt."

The Master appeared standing atop the parapet beside them, materializing out of the darkness of the Stalliongrad night as if he were a part of it. Though the blue-furred unicorn seemed as real and solid as either the wolf or the sorceress, his black suit shifted and flowed over his body like shadow, its edges fading into the night as if not quite detached from it. His eyes burned with a hateful intensity at Nero, glowing purple and yellow. The events of the evening, Dusk surmised, had made the Master slip, hints of his real nature showing forth. "From your wound and attitude I surmise that this dragon intruder escaped you, making you a failure. Worse still, your soldiers have failed me."

"Don't you lay the blame for this disaster on me, Gallopfreyan!" Nero advanced a step toward the shadow pony, but Dusk, stepping back a step to watch from the sidelines, knew the wolf wouldn't try anything. He was furious, not stupid. "If you hadn't insisted on your petty cruelty those ponies would be dead already, and food for the drakes!"

The Master glared at Nero for a moment longer, before turning from the brute to Dusk. It seemed the shadow pony was reclaiming control over himself, as the glow in his eyes had faded, and the suit returned to resembling physical. "You, sorceress. Why did you do nothing to stop the gryphons? Unlike the mutt beside me, you were there in the courtyard."

Dusk made sure to bow as low as she physically could, all the while not taking her eyes off the monster of a diamond dog she was being forced to share a castle with. "I am sorry for that, Master. But as you know, I am not half as strong as the pegacorn Twilight Sparkle, and even she was severally weakened in the presence of that magic-draining metal you bound them all with, and near your own unique affect on magic."

She looked up and smiled at him, knowing that in the state the Master was in, the right amount of flattery could mean the difference between life and death. "It was only through my vastly superior skill and experience that I was able to do what little I could, teleporting and low-level healing spells. Skill and experience that your enemies are sure not to possess, my Master. Leave the inevitable hunt for them in my hooves, and you can be sure they will not escape me."

Silence. From the corner of her eye Dusk saw Nero openly gape at her forwardness, while in front of her the Master regarded her with a thoughtful expression. His eyes flicked over to the wolf a moment, and then he nodded. "Very well then, you shall hunt them. Take as many dogs with you as you need, just don't let them interfere with my plans anymore."

From the side Nero let loose a growl, this time loosing his axe from his belt. "Gallopfreyan...."

The Master turned and cast a dismissive look at Nero. "Quiet, mutt. I haven't forgotten the arrangement made for your loyalty, and I assure you, it will be fulfilled even despite your failings."

The wind gusted across the balcony, and miles away Twilight Sparkle was drinking her first whiskey. The Master moved to the very edge of the area and looked out over the parapet to the courtyard a dozen yards below. It had been cleaned up by then, emptied out of all evidence of the execution and rescue. "I provide your factories and mills here with the advanced technology, particularly the advanced warfare technology, of my long-gone people, the Gallopfreyans. With it you will destroy your hated enemies, the dragons. In return you and your dogs will fight for me. You will secure the northern fortress of Khaza Rim and break the back of Equestria. We each have our revenge, and more. I have already given the plans for the war machines and weapons to your designers; all they have to do is build it."

"If they're up to it of course," said Dusk. The cloaked mare smirked at Nero. "After all, diamond dogs aren't the most intelligent of creatures. Cunning, yes, ruthless certainly, but not intelligent."

Nero looked ready to pounce Dusk. He had already pulled his axe free when the Master stilled him with a look, and then turned to Dusk with a strange smile, one that made her truly nervous for the first time that evening. "Oh but Dusk, that won't be a problem at all. For you see, the dogs will have assistance...from somepony who knows and understands Gallopfreyan technology as well as I do."

Then, before Dusk's very eyes, the Master exploded into blackness and shadow. The temperature dropped dramatically, frost spreading out from the epicenter of darkness over the whole balcony and began to creep down the stairs. Then the Master was back, but not alone. Dusk could not escape the gasp that escaped her at the sight of the new form lying slumped unconscious on the ground, half his side covered in dried blood and ice.

"Doctor!"

The morning dawned cold and grey. Twilight awoke to find that she had been moved at some point during the night, and was now lying on a thick, well-worn sleeping mat, an itchy but warm blanket wrapped around her body. The indigo-maned mare was thankful for this, as when she shifted

around on the mat she heard a distinct crunch-crunch sound. It had snowed while she slept. Opening her eye confirmed this, revealing a wintery landscape of white, the only color to be seen the brown and grey of the forest's trees.

From somewhere behind Twilight came the sound of voices, some she thought she recognized as belonging to Gilda and the others. Rolling over onto her side showed them all gathered together around the campfire; Gilda, Rainbow Dash, Rarity and Big Mac, Shield Maiden, and the gryphon medic Brennus. The two twins Guntram and Wolfram were nowhere to be seen.

Gilda spotted Twilight watching them and called her over. After a moment Twilight obeyed and stood up, groaning as her muscles protested the movement. She hobbled over to the campfire and slumped down onto a log, well away from anyone else in the vague circle. She wondered briefly if she could get away with not eating any of the mucky porridge the others were eating, neither her stomach nor her heart feeling up to it. But then a bird claw jammed a bowl of the grey stuff at her, and Gilda glared.

"Eat, or I pry your mouth open and pour it down your throat."

Twilight took the offered bowl and started eating, letting the gryphon return to her seat beside Rainbow Dash. The gunk was as tasteless as the lavender-hued mare had been expecting, but once she started eating Twilight found it easier to keep going. It was something she could use to take her mind off things, at least for a moment.

Rainbow Dash was looking at her. It took Twilight a few minutes to notice it, but once she did it was all the pegacorn could think about. She looked up from her porridge and met Dash's gaze from directly across the fire, one violet eye meeting two dark pink. The pegasus stopped eating when this happened, drawing the attention of Gilda and Shield Maiden beside her; soon enough all eating had come to a halt, everyone looking back and forth between Twilight and Rainbow Dash. An ugly tension filled the air, cold as the snow around them.

"Dash...I'm so, so-"

The rainbow-maned mare silenced Twilight with a look. "I don't want to

hear that you're sorry. I...It doesn't matter. I saw you yesterday...and I know that you lost somepony really important to you too...."

Twilight listened to her old friend as Dash spoke, honestly at a loss for words. She had expected rage, despair, perhaps even feelings of hatred from Dash, not this quiet sadness. Hatred and despair had certainly been the emotions roiling within Twilight the previous night, during their flight from Stalliongrad.

The turquoise pegasus, unaware of Twilight's thoughts, continued, her eyes beginning to shine with tears she would not allow to fall. "Two ponies that have lost as much as we both have...well, I think we can understand each other without words. I loved Ditzy Doo more than I've ever loved anything else, and I will never be able to forgive those who took her from me." For a brief moment Twilight felt as if she was pinned to her seat by Dash's gaze. But then the feeling passed and the pegasus continued. "Last night was my time to grieve, and this morning before you woke up, and when we make it back home to Ponyville, and Dinky will need comforting. But now...right now, I need to stay strong. It's what...it's what Ditzy would want."

Twilight hung her head, hiding behind her mane as tears fell from her eye. She wished she could be that strong.

There came a soft cough from the side. Twilight and Rainbow Dash looked over at Rarity, the white-grey unicorn fiddling with her spoon and looking for all the world like a scared child. "On the subject of Ponyville, Big Mac and I have decided, together...to go home now."

Twilight's bowl slipped from her hooves and shattered on the ground. The lavender pegacorn hardly noticed this as she stared at the unicorn, feelings of hurt and betrayal arising within her. It wasn't enough to lose Ditzy and Doctor Whoof; she had to lose one of her oldest, dearest friends as well?

Rarity was not finished. "You must understand, I'm just a dressmaker, a fashion designer, not a warrior or adventurer. And Big Mac is just a farmer...we love each other too much to dare risk it...we couldn't bear to watch what happened to D-Ditzy happen to one of us. Plus I have Sweetie Belle to look after back home, and Big Mac has Apple Bloom and

Applejack. There's simply nothing to gain and everything to lose if we continue. Try to understand Twilight, please."

Twilight understood better than Rarity thought. More that, she agreed with the fashion designer. "Go then, both of you. Return home to your loved ones while you still can. They need you more than I do. You too, Shield Maiden. You have a husband and daughter waiting for you back in Gildedale. The quest is over for all of you, go back."

To Twilight's surprise the dalepony shook her head. "It is...tempting, to go back home. I miss my family, and I don't want to die. But this is bigger than my wants. Before, the Master mentioned that there was something at Khaza Rim he wanted. Whatever it is, I'm sure it would be terrible for a monster like him to get it. So if it means keeping my husband and daughter safe, I'll take those risks you mentioned, Rarity. Rainbow Dash?"

The leader of the group looked down at the ground for a moment, thinking, and then nodded. "I've never backed down from a challenge before in my life, and I'm not going to start now. Besides, I still have a score to settle. The Master has to pay for what he's done."

It was at that moment that Twilight realized that, though Rainbow Dash would keep herself from grief until the quest was over, rage was still very much on the table. She could see it burning in the other mare's eyes, tainting the usual mischievous glimmer into something approaching malevolence. It was not a look Twilight liked, not one bit. Yet there wasn't anything the pegacorn could do at the moment to fix it, and she knew it.

"Well, I guess that's it. Rarity and Big Mac will return to Ponyville. Rainbow Dash, Shield Maiden and I will-

A deafening roar nearly knocked the ponies and gryphons to their knees. Twilight had just a moment to look around and shout "dragon!" before the great beast was upon them. It dropped from the sky like a boulder, sending out a rush of air and snow from its crater-creating landing. An arm as thick as a tree trunk and covered in purple scales the size of dinner plates sent Gilda flying, the gryphon landing with a crunch in a snowdrift. There she stayed, motionless, soon joined by Brennus after he tried to fly away.

The five ponies were suddenly left on their own to face the dragon. He towered over them, as tall as the library back in Ponyville; smaller than the other dragons Twilight had encountered, but tall enough. His jaws were big enough to swallow any one of them whole, each gleaming tooth as big as a dinner knife. These paled in comparison to the claws tipping each of his fingers, each of which looked capable of slicing through hard rock and steel with little effort, and surely able to make quick work of the ponies. Even the creature's tail was a weapon of death, covered in spikes and ending with a serrated spade tip.

Not a bit of this registered to the ponies as they leapt into battle to defend the fallen gryphons. Twilight ducked beneath a claw swipe, hitting back with a bolt of lightning that left little more than a scorch mark on those diamond scales. The dragon roared. His head shot out on its serpentine neck, jaws outstretched to snap the lavender-hued pony in half. Twilight teleported out of the way, in time for an element-empowered Big Mac to leap into her spot, twist around, and bucked.

The sound of the two unstoppable objects striking resounded for miles. The dragon's head snapped back, broken teeth and a splash of blood flying out from his mouth. Big Mac flew back the other way, smashing through three trees before hitting the ground. "Big Mac!" Rarity shouted and teleported to his side, quickly going to help her coltfriend to his hooves.

Twilight couldn't check to see if the brick-red pony was okay; already the dragon was recovering from the blow to his face. Charging forward toward him she telekinetically grabbed one of the trees knocked down by Big Mac's flight and swung it at the dragon's head. The tree was reduced to ash by a blast of fire before it could connect. This served to distract the dragon enough for him not to notice the crackling ball of magical energy forming in the air over him until it rocketed down and impacted against the purple beast's back. A blinding explosion of energy swept out, nearly blowing Twilight off her hooves before she managed to use her wings to steady herself. When next she looked at the spot the dragon had been she saw only a crater a dozen yards across and a rising pillar of steam from the melted snow.

"Well, that was a random drago-"

It was instinct more than anything else that made the indigo-maned

pony teleport away. The next instant the spot she'd been in was awash in white-hot flames, blinding to look at as they evaporated every inch of snow in the surrounding area. The dragon lurched to all fours, growling his anger at the ponies. With one arm he ripped one of the few remaining trees in the area from the ground and tossed it at the first ponies he saw. Rarity just saw it coming in time and threw up a shield of magic. The tree hit the shield and shattered. Before the jagged pieces hit the ground Rarity snatched them up and threw, hammering away at the dragon's touch hide.

"You are the most abhorrent dragon I have ever had the displeasure to meet!"

The dragon, ignoring the little bits of woods hitting his diamond-hard scales, mimed Rarity's yelling with his hand for a moment, before suddenly turning. His tail whipped around at Rarity, forcing her to stop attacking to put up her shield again. Even with the shield however, she and Big Mac were sent flying, landing with hard thumps against a tree.

The dragon roared in triumph and stepped forward, his mouth beginning to fill with flame. Just before he shot at the prone couple Twilight flew down from above, slamming all four hooves down on his head. The jaws slammed shut, forcing the fire back in. The dragon stumbled, a pained expression appearing on his face for the first time in the entire fight, and he gripped at his stomach as if suffering from indigestion. Almost lazily he flicked Twilight off his head with a finger. The look of pain quickly changed to one of anger as the dragon turned to face down the pegacorn.

Before the massive lizard could turn his fire breath on Twilight a rainbow blur crackling with electricity slammed into him from behind. A blinding flash of light, a cry of pain, and suddenly the dragon was flying forward, sailing over Twilight and heading toward Big Mac and Rarity. The unicorn teleported them out of the way just before the dragon crashed, a rumble like the eruption of a volcano filling the air as his massive body plowed through the earth. By the time the dragon came to a halt a trench a hundred yards long had been carved.

Ignoring the dragon for a moment, Twilight teleported to Rainbow Dash's side and helped her up from where she lay. "What in the world did you just do?"

The avatar of the Rainbow of Light groaned and shook her head to clear it of the ringing filling it. "Supercharged myself with Knight magic and lightning, and then Sonic Rainboomed him from a mile away. Ow, I think my ancestors are going to be feeling this headache...." Rainbow Dash shook her head again, and then looked around Twilight at the prone body of the dragon. "Huh, I expected him to go farther than that. Something stopped him short I think."

"Well then, let's see what that something is." Twilight teleported them over to the dragon, narrowly avoiding splicing herself with Rarity and Big Mac as they teleported in.

Then Shield Maiden climbed out from under the rubble surrounding the dragon, cracked her back, and walked over to them with a smile. "Good to see that Standing Firm is still relevant these days. So, anypony have any idea why a dragon would be trying to kill us?" Big Mac shook his head, Rarity sighed, and Rainbow Dash shrugged. Twilight frowned and started to limp toward the fallen dragon, looking him over carefully. Something seemed familiar about him, something in the back of her mind, but she couldn't place it. "I'm not sure. I seriously doubt he's working for the Master; dragons and diamond dogs hate each other with a passion, you'd never see them working together. I doubt he was trying to defend his cave or anything either, because we're nowhere near the mountains. He's young, can't be any older than 300, so perhaps he was flying pass overhead, spotted us through the trees, and his teenage hormones got the best of him."

"Oh Twilight, you were always so adorkable when you got analytical like this." The ponies leapt back in shock as the dragon rolled over onto all fours, his gargantuan jaws spread wide in a grin as if they had all not just been fighting to the death. Those massive wings, as wide across as the grand hall at Canterlot Castle, folded over and draped across his shoulders like a cape. The dragon's green eyes, moments ago filled with manic bloodlust, now shone with barely contained amusement, and a strange joy that left Twilight's heart thumping in her chest. "But how you looked never bothered you. What mattered was getting to the bottom of whatever mystery or problem you faced. Such strength."

Rainbow Dash growled and charged the dragon again, but was stopped by Twilight grabbing hold of her with magic. The pegacorn frowned at the

dragon's words. "Who are you? And why did you attack us?"

The dragon stood up on his hind legs, head held high as he gazed down at Twilight and the others from his full height. "I attacked you to remind you. To remind you that you are all stronger than you think; that together, there is little that can stand against you. You, you friends, all share a bond that can only be broken by beings like the Master if you allow it. It's a bond that lasts even through distance...and time."

Twilight froze. The dragon kneeled down before her, a soft glow and the feeling of magic surrounding him as he shrunk down to just a bit larger than Gilda. "My name is Spikara. But to you fine ladies, I can be Spike."

Chapter 14

Trek Toward Darkness

"Dear travel journal,

"Rarity here. It has been three days since we began our journey through Hatchling Forest toward the Mountains of Gallopfrey. More importantly to all of us, it has been two days since Spike, our dear Spikey Wikey, returned to us from what we all had thought to be his death. He tells us that he hadn't been killed, but flung off 250 years into the past, well before any of us had been born. Oh the poor darling; separated from all friends and family for centuries, a mere baby dragon all alone in the world! He tells us he had to scavenge the mountains for food, carve out his own tunnels to get to gems or fight diamond dogs for theirs. Last night he told us of a winter when he was 17 and nearly froze to death because his cave was too shallow, and then a spring when he nearly drowned in the thawing ice.

Yet despite all these hardships, somehow Spike has stayed the same brave, noble dragon I remember from Ponyville, exemplifying all the lessons of friendship Twilight, myself, and the rest of our friends learned. I wonder, perhaps, if it has to do with the strange friendship he has struck up with the gryphons; particularly, Gilda. It was both of them together who came up with that fight. I wonder....

"I'm digressing, how silly of me. Spike is back. It doesn't matter how it happened or why, only that it did. He brought with him all our lost weapons and equipment from Stalliongrad, for which I am grateful, as well more news on what precisely that beastly Master is planning. I couldn't understand all the details as he, Twilight, and Rainbow Dash discussed it, but it seems that Khaza Rim was built as more than just a first defense against Ice Giant aggression; it also houses something of great power, something the Master wants to...complete himself. It is all so confusing, and not even Spike understands it all very well. He tells us his mentor in these matters is the only pony who understands completely, and that we will meet her when the time is right.

As it is, I couldn't care less about great mysteries. The quest to Khaza

Rim is back on. Gilda and Spike are leading us to an ancient gryphon entrance into the mountains, a shortcut to Gallopfrey, while that old gryphon, Brennus I think his name was, goes to prepare a gryphon host to meet us at Khaza Rim. Spike gave us...me, my courage and hope back. Now it is up to us to be diligent and see it through.

"I shall finish this entry with something strange I dreamed last night. Or perhaps a prophetic vision, like the one with the two monsters. I dreamt a voice singing a song. I'd never heard the song before in my life, but I'm sure the singer was Twilight. Here are the words, best as I can remember them.

"Tick tock goes the clock
Why has summer gone away?
Tick tock goes the clock
Now winter's here to stay.

"Tick tock goes the clock
Wait until you all see
Tick tock goes the clock
Soon you will...

"And that's all I can remember....."

--Rarity

The sun was high in the sky when the group of travelers broke through the upper edge of the Hatchling Forest and stepped onto the foothills of the southernmost mountains of Gallopfrey. Here the snow fell harder and deeper, obscuring landmarks and making Twilight and the other ponies all incredibly thankful toward Spike for rescuing their cold-weather cloaks and boots. Spike led at the front of the group, his fire breath clearing out the worst of the snow ahead for the ponies following him when his great bulk was not enough. Up above Gilda flew, circling in lazy arcs to make sure they were going the right way. The unacknowledged reason was to keep an eye out for pursuit. They all knew that eventually someone, perhaps even the Master himself, would come after them.

Twilight came to a stop as she crested the top of a ridge and turned,

gazing back the way they came. The winter air was crisp, cold, and clear, and the Ponyville librarian could see for miles as her black cloak stirred to life in the wind. Behind the group stretched the great forest of the gryphons, a white and green landscape that went all the way to the horizon. For a moment she fancied that she caught a shimmer of light reflecting off the River Mearas, but soon discarded that notion. The ground had begun to have an incline, but they hadn't climbed up enough yet to see that far over the forest.

"It's quite the beautiful sight, isn't it" said Rarity as she came to a stop beside Twilight. It was more a statement than a question. "Good ol' Ponyville is beautiful enough in its own right, but there's nothing there I could ever call grand. Not like this. Whenever I see Whitetail Wood from now on, I think my heart will ache as I remember the time I walked beneath the broad branches of Hatchling Forest."

Twilight nodded. She would never get as poetic as her friend did over these sorts of things, but she could understand the sentiment just fine. "Yeah, it's quite the sight. I would've liked to have seen more like it before the end."

The grey-white unicorn looked at her oddly, and Twilight realized what she had said. She turned away as Rarity stepped closer. "Twilight, what did you mean by that?"

"...nothing, nothing at all." Twilight hated lying to anyone, especially her friends, but she couldn't let them know. Foreknowledge, she had come to understand, was a terrible burden. She turned back in the direction they had been going and started trotting to catch up with the rest of the group. "Come on, we have a long way to go yet."

As the day went on and the sun edged to the west, the truth of these words became more and more apparent. The ground sloped up beneath them, growing rockier as they moved deeper into the mountains. More than once Twilight slipped on a loose group of pebbles or ice and nearly fell, only managing to right herself with a quick flap of her wings or a sudden helpful hoof from Rarity beside her. The unicorn said nothing during the pegacorn's quick moments of weakness, and for this Twilight was thankful. Her magic and ability to heal herself were both coming back slowly to her.

The sound of grunting and rock crunching against rock ahead caught Twilight's attention. She looked ahead and saw Spike pushing at a massive, ice-covered boulder strewn across the path. With a growl and flap of his broad wings the dragon threw the stone out of the way, watching it roll and crash down the mountainside for a moment before turning and moving on.

That was something that continued to amaze Twilight. She had always known that someday her faithful dragon assistant, her son in all but blood, would grow up into a great beast like the kind read about in stories. She had even seen a brief glimpse of it when he had let his greed get the better of him once. But to really see it and acknowledge it Twilight was a different matter. The change was so drastic from the small, chubby baby dragon; she had almost not believed it was really him at first. Yet the stories he told them of their adventures living in Ponyville, and going further back to when he and Twilight had lived in Canterlot under Princess Celestia, had convinced her. It truly was Spike returned to her.

A bend in the path came, and then another, and another. Soon enough the path the group trod was nearly winding back on itself over and over; the only sign of progress was that they were still moving up. Somewhere off in the distance could be heard the distinct roar of a waterfall. It only seemed to emphasize the fatigue Twilight was beginning to feel at the climb, her legs and even wings aching from the constant exertion put upon them. A quick look around showed to the lavender-hued pony that Rarity was suffering as well. Shield Maiden also looked like she was beginning to feel the strain, which made sense to Twilight. This sort of climbing effort was far different from the rolling plains the earth pony would be used to.

As if sensing how the group behind him was starting to feel, Spike broke off from the path they had been on, motioning for the rest of them to follow. A few minutes of walking relatively straight in a northwestern direction brought the group to a large clearing dominated by strangely small, blue-barked evergreen trees on one side, their presence hidden on the journey up by a great outthrust of rock from the mountain. A second side of the clearing was nothing but a small ledge and open sky, allowing uninterrupted view of the landscape beyond, while the side opposite that was the sheer rock of the mountainside, with one massive cave entrance at the bottom. The sound of the waterfall was louder here.

Spike stopped in the center of the clearing and turned to address the group. "Well uh, this here's my cave and stuff. We'll rest here for a bit and then continue on. There's a small waterfall past those trees if you need to refresh yourselves, and I think I might have some dried fruits left in the cave."

"Ooh, a quick little wash sounds heavenly, darling." Rarity set down her packs and traveling cloak, grabbing only a small bottle of shampoo and body wash before trotting toward the trees. "If anypony wants to join me, they know where to find me!"

Big Mac and Shield Maiden both went to join her, leaving their saddlebags next to Rarity's, though the warrior from Gildedale took with her a small hoof axe. Gilda said something about checking around for the easiest pathway and flew off, the steel of her cuirass and spaulders glinting in the sunlight. Twilight noticed Spike watching the gryphon leave, a small smile on his face.

Rainbow Dash broke the short silence with a cough. "Spike, do you have any writing materials in your cave? I need to write a letter." Though she spoke to the dragon, the rainbow-maned mare wouldn't look at him or Twilight.

Spike put a hand to his chin and thought for a moment. "Let me think...yeah, there should be a few spare scrolls and some ink inside the cave, right side, next to the giant diamond carved into the shape of giant headphones."

"Okay, thanks." Rainbow Dash turned to go into the cave. After a few steps she paused and looked back at Spike. "Wait, why would you have a giant diamond carved into giant headphones?"

Spike shrugged, giving his claws a little flick. "250 years is a lot of time to get bored. Studying dragon magic aside."

"Right...well, whatever. Thanks again." Rainbow Dash turned around and continued on, quickly disappearing from sight in the darkness of the cave.

Spike watched the pegasus go, frowning. "If she really needed to write

something though, why wouldn't she just ask Rarity for help? I've seen that unicorn writing in the mornings and evenings since I joined up with you guys."

Twilight hung her head. "I think she's writing a letter to Dinky, to tell her that her mother...that Ditzzy is dead. That'd be uncomfortable enough for Rainbow Dash without her having to ask Rarity for help." When she said this a thought occurred to Twilight, making her look at her dragon companion with some curiosity. "By the way, 'that unicorn'? Was 250 years enough time for you to get over your crush on Rarity?"

To his credit a blush came to Spike's cheeks, and the great dragon paused in sharpening his claws with a boulder. He glanced in the direction Rarity and the two earth ponies had gone, a look of melancholy coming to his eyes. "In a way. When I first came to in the past, far to the southeast, a storm was raging. I was wet, cold, completely alone, and scared for my life. I knew though that you all would come to save me as soon as the others had saved you...but you didn't. It wasn't even until the third year of my new life that I learned the actual date from a caravan of friendly camels. That adventure was fun for a while, and I always make a point of visiting their descendants every once in a while."

Spike frowned and shook his head. "Sorry, losing track of myself. It was around...my 100th, 105th birthday when I finally had to admit to myself that, even once I met up with all of you again, a relationship with Rarity wouldn't work. I'd outlive her by hundreds of years, even taking into account that my species of dragon is relatively short-lived. So...really, she's just a good friend to me now."

In the distance the sounds of Rarity and the others talking and laughing could be heard over the roar of the waterfall. Twilight nodded at this, thinking back to the smile Spike wore while watching Gilda fly off. "I'm glad that you managed so well on your own...I mean, I'm happy just that you're alive when I thought you were dead, but I mean more than that. I'm glad that you have friends of your own now. Those camels, gryphons...Gilda."

Spike's claw slipped, cutting the boulder he was holding in half. He quickly set these pieces of rock down and coughed. "Yes. Friends. Good to have them. Um...." Spike ducked his head low, clasping his hands together nervously. For a moment Twilight saw the baby dragon standing there. "Do

you think Dash...hates me and Gilda for not getting there in time to...to save all of you?"

That was a question Twilight had no answer for. More than that, Twilight wasn't entirely sure she could handle the answer, whatever it might be. "I think...I think that she's hurt, and she doesn't know what to think or feel anymore. I think she could hate you for it, is somewhat justified in hating you for not coming in time, but..." The pegacorn tried to think of the right way to put word to what she was thinking. "Rainbow Dash is the element of Loyalty and, if Princess Luna is right, the element of Love. I don't think she has it in her to hate someone with all her heart. She can get angry, furious, vengeful, but Rainbow Dash-

Gilda rocketed down into the clearing, kicking up a cloud of snow and rock as she landed hard right in front of Twilight and Spike. "We've gotta go, punks. There's two dozen diamond dogs a mile behind us and closing, all armed to the teeth. There's some purple unicorn with them."

"Dusk Nox." Twilight looked to Spike. "Go get Rarity and the others back here and ready to go. I'll get Rainbow Dash from the cave."

"Don't bother" said the pegasus in question, hurrying out of Spike's cave with a piece of folded parchment tucked into her silver scarf. The steel blades fixed to her wings glinted as harshly as the snow the group stood on. She wasn't striding toward Twilight and Gilda however; her destination was toward the path they had come on, and the nearing pursuit. "Let's just kill them all here and be done with it."

Gilda held a foreleg out to block Rainbow Dash's path. "That is really not a good idea, pal. If it was just the dogs then I'd be all for it, but I. Hate. Fighting. Unicorns. And this is probably one of the worst possible places to fight one too."

"Gilda's right." Twilight swept a foreleg out to indicate all around them. "Trees, rocks, even the snow could all be used at a moment's notice as a weapon by a unicorn. With that ledge there all it would take is one telekinetic shove and Rarity, Big Mac, or Shield Maiden are goners. I know, it's what I would do. And don't even mention the ice spikes she could make from the waterfall."

Spike returned with the others. Big Mac and Shield Maiden hurried into their gear, the earth pony of Gildedale taking her armor from her bags and putting that on. Rarity did the same with her deer-made armor, skipping the usual way and just putting it on with a flash of magic. "Spike explained. How much time do we have?"

"A few minutes at best, so we've got to go now!" Gilda turned back to Rainbow Dash. "Come on man, I know what you're wanting. But now isn't the time."

Twilight and the others stood waiting, watching as the rainbow-maned pegasus gritted her teeth and stared off in the direction the dogs were coming. Her wings flexed, a hoof stamped at the ground. But after a second of tension she stood down. With a growl of frustration Rainbow Dash turned and strode away in the opposite direction. "Later, then." Twilight let out a breath she hadn't realized she had been holding in, and looked at the others with a nod. It was time to go.

"Tick tock, goes the clock...."

"The timber wolves have the ponies' scent, my mistress. They are less than an hour ahead of us, and moving northwest."

Dusk Nox nodded in acknowledgment to this news, slipping the scroll she had been reading a moment before into a sleeve of her cloak. Around her milled a full hundred diamond dogs and their larger, more feral timber wolf cousins. The dark armor they all wore contrasted sharply with the whites and dull greys of the snow-covered hillside the tracking company camped on. "Very good, Commander Conri. Inform the soldiers that it is time to move out. It is time."

The commander, a young and lean, silver-furred diamond dog with gold pauldrons to denote his rank, did not go to inform the soldiers. "Mistress, there's more. A tracker of mine is familiar with these mountains. He tells me that the path our quarries take will lead them soon to...to a place of evil. An entrance into the mountain itself!"

Several of the closer diamond dogs and timber wolves looked over at

the pair in curiosity. Dusk nodded to this, taking another rolled up parchment from her cloak and sending it away with a small breath of green fire. That done, the sorceress turned to gaze at the mountains ahead of them. She contemplated on those steep cliffs and craggy faces before responding. "You call it a place of evil, and of course you're right. But tell me Commander, what do you know of those mountains and their tunnels?"

"Just...stories, passed down through the tribes. Tales of dark things hiding in crypts of stone, and a beast of fire and shadow."

Dusk nodded as the diamond dog finished. "You would do well to heed your old tales and traditions. Let me tell you what the ponies are walking into. Those tunnels are the remains of the vast gryphon empire, abandoned out of fear when the gryphons summoned Tirek to our world millennia ago. Many gryphons, tens of thousands, were twisted and corrupted by Tirek, turned into the bestial drakes we know of today. But hundreds of other gryphons...the royal family, the priests and their retainers...they were made into things much worse. The deadliest, most powerful, most malevolent life forms ever produced; Tirek's Lonely Assassins. Your General Nero may fancy himself a demon of war, but acknowledgment of this level of evil would send him allying with even the meekest of ponies."

Commander Conri did a terrible job of hiding the fear these words caused in him. "And we...have to track ponies into such a bad place?"

"No." Dusk Nox turned from the mountains, marching through the troop toward the Hatchling Forest and the south. "We don't need to concern ourselves with those ponies any more. I have a new mission for you to help me with for the good of the diamond dog cause."

"But...."

The dark-cloaked unicorn paused and looked over her shoulder at Conri. "Will you oppose me?"

The diamond dog looked at her a moment, a wide range of emotions playing across his wolf-like face, until finally he sighed and shook his head. "No, mistress. My soldiers are prepared to fight flesh and blood, not monsters like you talk about. Whatever you say is good for diamond dogs, diamond dogs will do."

"Good." Dusk turned away again, looking one last time at the mountains of Gallopfrey where, at that very moment, she knew Twilight Sparkle, Rainbow Dash, Rarity, Big Macintosh, Spike, Shield Maiden, and Gilda were heading toward the most terrible moment of their quest. "Good luck, knights."

The sun was nearing the southwestern horizon when the group came to their search's destination. Twilight lit up the tip of her horn with a pulse of magic to help her see in the lengthening shadows around them, the mountains growing dark as the sun began to slide out of sight. A few feet away Rarity did the same, while Spike lit a torch with his flame breath. Now they could all see clearly what lay before them.

"That is the biggest door I have ever laid my eyes on."

Twilight could only nod in agreement with Rarity's statement. The door stood a dozen feet wide and twice as tall, forged out of a jet-black metal and inlaid from top to bottom in silver runes, the ancient and lost gryphon language. It was carved into the mountainside itself, without scratch, dent, or any sign at all of the passage of time. Beside the door, to the left and right, stood a pair of gryphon statues. They stood on their hind legs, their wings flared out to the sides and their claws covering up their eyes, as if weeping. In the light of the newly-risen moon, the silver inscriptions shone with an ethereal light.

Shield Maiden trotted up to the door and tapped it with her hoof. "It can be as big as it wants to be, as long as we can get through it." The earth pony looked over her shoulder at the others, focusing on Spike and Gilda. "We can get this open, right?"

"Hey, don't look at me," said Gilda, glaring back. "I fell asleep during the 'really freaking ancient gryphon language' class. Just didn't catch my attention back in high school."

Spike snorted and stepped forward, joining Shield Maiden by the door. "Gilda my dear, your sarcasm is as appreciated as always." Reaching into a bag hanging from his shoulder, the dragon searched around for a few

seconds before pulling out a book bound in dull red leather. He flipped it open and started scanning through the worn, yellow pages. "Few translations of the original gryphon language exist anymore, but I own one text. Hmm. This is different from the common tongue though. Looking at it I'm seeing a different way of structuring sentences, and the syntax is all messed up."

Once she got over her shock at someone like Spike speaking so scholarly, Twilight found what he was talking about sounded somewhat familiar. She trotted over to Spike's side and looked at the runes with him. Are you sure you're approaching from the right direction? The ancient gryphons were a class-based society, each with unique vernaculars. I think this is the royal tongue."

Spike let out a grunt of frustration. "I was hoping it wasn't that; I'm less-versed in the ancient royal speech. Hold on, let me get a new book out."

Twilight looked at Spike, her Spike, as he dug through that bag of his, and felt a feeling of pride grow inside her. It was nice to see that whatever affect she had raising him had stuck during the 300-plus years he had been on his own in the past. It made her wish that she had gotten a look inside his cave earlier, to see what sort of library he had gathered up over the centuries. She figured it had to be impressive for the dragon to claim that the bag he had with him, easily large enough to fit a full-grown pony inside, was only enough to hold a small sample of his collection.

Just as Spike pulled a new book from his bag, Rainbow Dash growled and took to the air, drawing the whole group's attention. "Okay, that's it; I've had enough of this egghead business. Someone call me when the door is open. I'm going flying."

Twilight started forward. "Rainbow Dash, wait a mo-" but the pegasus was already off, leaving a rainbow trail in her wake as she flew up, straight up, into a roving cloud bank. Twilight spread her wings and took to the air to follow, calling out to the rest of the group as she did. "Keep working on that door, you guys! I'll make sure Rainbow's ok-ahhh!"

Gilda had swooped in and grabbed Twilight around the midsection, flying the pegacorn up far faster and smoother than she would have flown on her own. "Yeah, screw that, egghead. I'd rather not wait around all night

watching you CRAWL your way up to those clouds."

Twilight's cheeks burned in embarrassment, but she kept herself from saying anything. Gilda was right about how weak a flyer she was, Twilight could admit that. More than that, the lavender-hued pony reasoned to herself, the gryphon was one of Rainbow Dash's oldest friends; if anyone could help the pegasus, it was her.

Soon enough the pair broke through the cloud barrier. All around and below the pony and gryphon the clouds spread out like floating islands, shining silver-grey in the light of the moon. It was nearly full, Twilight noticed, before her attention was drawn by Gilda removing a hand from around her and pointing ahead and to the left. A dozen yards away Rainbow Dash lay on a large cloud, face buried against her forelegs.

"Rainbow Dash!" Twilight squirmed out from Gilda's hold and flew over to her friend, Gilda following close behind. As soon as she landed on the cloud Twilight went to the other mare's side and kneeled down. "Rainbow Dash are you-"

The hit came out of nowhere. Rainbow Dash reared back at Twilight's touch, her eyes lit up with rage as she slammed a hoof into Twilight's face. Twilight fell back, hooves clutching at her broken nose as it erupted in blood and pain. Before she could understand what was happening the enraged pegasus was atop her, punching away at her face, chest, sides; any bit of vulnerable body Twilight couldn't get her legs up to protect.

"Stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid! Freaking stup-"

Gilda grabbed Rainbow Dash by the throat and threw her off Twilight. Immediately she curled up into a ball to protect herself, blood and tears streaming down her battered face. Somewhere else, seemingly far away, she could hear Rainbow Dash and Gilda arguing, screaming at each other, and she couldn't stand it. She just wanted to be back home; back in the seclusion of her Ponyville library, teaching Sweetie Belle a new spell, or having tea with Rarity, or helping Cheerilee form a new lesson plan for the school. She wanted a party from Pinkie Pie, a few soft words of kindness from Fluttershy, a friendly joke and poke in the side from a baby Spike. Her heart yearned for everything to just be how it used to be.

"Just what the hell is wrong with you, Dash?" From the corner of her one eye, blurry with tears, Twilight watched Gilda pick the pegasus up by the neck again and lay into her. "She's your friend, I thought you're supposed to be Loyalty or whatever?"

Rainbow Dash growled and squirmed in Gilda's grip, kicking at her a few times. When this accomplished nothing the pegasus settled down and just glared. Twilight could feel that glare hitting her. "Loyalty to what? To the...the dumb, weak...d-dumb egghead over there? What's she need my loyalty for, she's got plenty from others!"

Twilight sniffled, wiped some tears from her eye and looked up, sharing a confused look with Gilda. "W-what?"

While Gilda was distracted Rainbow Dash smashed both rear hooves into her gut, forcing the gryphon to let go with a grunt. Dropping back to the cloud the pegasus lunged forward and tackled Twilight, sending her to her back. Rainbow Dash stood over her. "Fine, it's not fair! Why should a pony like you get Spike back, and I not get...g-get Ditzy back?! I'm the Rainbow of Light, I should be able to save them! I-I should have been able to save her...." The rainbow-maned mare slumped down, no longer screaming, only crying softly into Twilight's chest.

"Oh...Rainbow Dash...." Twilight understood now. Twilight understood, and accepted it. She at least had Trixie's body to bury, to give the respect it deserved. But Rainbow Dash had been forced to leave Ditzy's body behind, for the diamond dogs to do whatever with. "I understand, my friend. Really, I do. And you have to know that...well, I would do anything if it meant fixing my mistakes. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. But there's something I only just now came to understand. We can't always blame ourselves for the evil others do."

Rainbow Dash sniffed and climbed off of Twilight, rubbing a hoof at her eyes to clear them of tears. "Yeah, I know...I'm sorry for beating you up like this. It was just really hard seeing you and Spike working together like that, being all geeky and happy and stuff together. It hurt me."

Gilda interrupted with a cough. "Hey, sorry to ruin whatever bonding moment you two might be sharing up here, but we should probably get back down to the others. Not safe splitting the group up like this for too

long."

Twilight and Rainbow Dash agreed, the anger and sadness of the moment dissipating as they remembered their companions below and the urgency of their situation. While the diamond dogs tracking them had stopped hours before, drakes controlled the skies around them. Quickly the three took wing and left the clouds, flying back down to the group before the door.

They landed just as Spike was spreading his wings and crouching down to take off. "Oh, I was just going to get you guys. Twilight, you were right about it being royal and JEEZ what happened to you?"

Twilight could feel the cuts and bruises from Rainbow Dash's assault beginning to heal even as Spike asked, so she just shrugged. "Nothing important. You said you found out how to open the door?"

Spike looked at Twilight a moment longer, a suspicious and worried gleam in his eyes, but to the pegacorn's relief didn't press her. Instead he turned his attention back to the door. "Yeah, I figured that out. The language is actually a variant used by the priest guild, about 3,000 years ago. The door requires a...distasteful payment in order to open. Gilda my dear, would you kindly come over here a moment?"

"Yeah, sure, whate-OW!" In a blur the purple reptile lunged forward, making the whole group jump back. Gilda yelped, clutching at her right hand and hissing at the dragon. Blood oozed from a large gash in her palm, streaming down her wrist and arm. "What the heck was that for?"

Spike spit out a glob of the gryphon's blood, grimacing at the taste of it. "Sorry for that. I figured it would be easier if I just did it quickly, without any buildup. You know, like pulling out a thorn."

"You freaking nearly bit my claws off, you idiot!" Gilda hobbled forward and slapped Spike with her uninjured hand. "Why would you even do that anyway?"

Spike rubbed his slapped cheek, and then faster than Twilight's eye could follow grabbed hold of Gilda's blood-covered arm. "Sorry Gilda, I'll have Twilight heal it later. But the inscriptions on the door are clear." Before

Gilda could say anything Spike yanked her forward and placed her bleeding palm against the cold metal of the door. "Blood sacrifice."

It happened in an instant. The runes covering the door flared to life on their own, a deep red the color of blood, and then the whole door began sinking into the ground with the grinding shriek of gears long unused. A gust of stale air unbreathed for millennia rushed out to meet them, making Twilight cough and hack in disgust, clenching her eyes shut. When she reopened them a black pit yawned open in the face of the mountainside, the darkness inside darker, deader, than anything she had seen before.

"My friends," spoke Spike, stepping toward the great darkness of the opened door. "Welcome to the ancient kingdom of the gryphons; Tambelon!"

"Tick tock goes the clock
Why has summer gone away?
Tick tock goes the clock
Now winter's here to stay.

"Tick tock goes the clock
Wait until you all see
Tick tock goes the clock
Soon you will bury me.

"Tick tock goes the clock
See how the years they fly
Tick tock and very soon
Oh how I must die.

"Tick tock goes the clock
It's time to say goodnight
Tick tock goes the clock
Even for good Twilight.

"Tick tock goes the clock
You'll cradle me forever

Tick tock and soon you must
Make peace with my killer."