



# Order-naries

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# Order-naries

## Prologue

Dark clouds churned angrily in the sky as the Oder-naries approached the citadel of the demon Tau'rin. Despite the gravity of the situation and the fact that they were running short on time, the Spirit Master had to stop and admire the building before him. Whistling appreciatively, he said, "I have to hand it to him, he's really made a good one this time, and in rather short order."

"Come on," the Mage said, tugging his teammate's arm, "We've got a job to do, remember?"

"Yeah yeah," the Spirit Master said with a sigh, "round... what are we on now?"

"I lost count at ten," his sister said.

"This will be the thirteenth," the Mechanic said, "good thing we don't believe in luck right?" she added with a weak smile.

"Nope, just track records," the Mage said as the four approached the citadels' gate, which stood tall and solid before, mocking any who would think of breaching it, "and I don't need to remind you all how terrible ours has been." He pulled a spell card out of his pocket and pressed it against the gate. Orange light slowly spread out from the card for a second, only to retract violently and blast the Mage away from the gate.

"Ash!" the Spirit Master's sister exclaimed in horror.

"I'm good," the Mage said, picking himself up, "nothing broken." He reached up and moved the eyepiece of the computer on his head in front of his right eye. "Basic despell didn't work PC," he said in the computer's mike, "Any ideas?" Text flashed across the transparent eyepiece, and the Mage frowned in annoyance. "Well excuse me for preferring subtlety," he

gripped, reaching into the bag at his waist. He pulled out a flawless ruby slightly smaller than his hand and held it out toward the door, focusing his magic into it. The ruby glowed brightly before releasing a wide beam of light that hit the gate, causing it to explode in flames. Once the ashy remains of the gate crumbled away, the ruby was snatched out of the Mage's hand by an unseen force deep in the darkness of the citadel. "Skvetch!" the Mage swore, "Played right into his hand!"

"We've still got three of the others," the Mechanic pointed out.

"Truth," the Mage said, pulling out another spell card, "Well, no time like the present. Let's move!" The group ran inside, only to find themselves surrounded by a thick darkness. The Mage attempted several light-producing spells, only to have them swallowed up by the gloom. An evil laugh filled the air, followed by a deep, condescending voice.

"Come now, my persistent foes," it said, "Surely you can do better than this. It's just a simple shadow."

"Tau'rin," the Spirit Master said, "Show yourself!"

"Make me," the taunting reply seemed to come from everywhere at once. The Spirit Master reached out and found his sister's hand, gripping it tight as the two of them began to glow with a blue ethereal fire. The darkness retreated, but only enough to allow the Order-naries to see on another. The sister raised her free hand, and the flames around her began gathering on front of her palm, turning into a disc of energy divided into four colored quadrants. With a shout, she threw it out and directed it as it spun around the group and then spiraled out until it was swallowed by the darkness. Tau'rin laughed again as the Spirit Master and sister scowled in frustration.

"We don't have a choice, do we?" the sister said, reaching into her pack. She pulled out a large diamond that was quickly sucked away into the shadows.

"New strategy," the Mage hissed, "*Don't* bring out the others."

"Aw, now where's the fun in that?" The darkness vanished and the group found themselves standing before Tau'rin, the demon of chaos, grinning maniacally at them. At his feet sat the ruby, diamond, and three other gems of similar size and cut. "Of course, you'd hardly stand a chance anyway,"

he said, "Why don't you just give up? Time and again you've failed to stop me from gathering the Gems."

"We won't stop," the Mage said, "Not until we've brought an end to your march of destruction."

Tau'rin's grin faded. "Could it be possible that your attempts to stop me are what really brings down the destruction? Twelve worlds lost to the ultimate chaos under your watch, my adversaries. Does that not drag at you? Give it up, submit to my control, and I may let you live."

"Not now, not ever," the Mage said.

"So be it," Tau'rin said as his eyes began to glow, "then die now." The gems at his feet began to glow, and were quickly joined by those still in the Oder-naries possession. Tau'rin's face went slack as the glowing approached blinding levels.

"Ah, crap!" the Spirit Master said, "Not again!"

"Hold tight everyone," the Mechanic said, pulling the Mage in close to her as she plunged her hand into her pack to grip the Gem inside. The entire group gathered in close and squeezed their eyes as they and Tau'rin became enveloped in the energy of the Chaotic Gems. The ground beneath them began shaking as the combined energy began tearing holes in the fabric of reality. The last thing they heard before the ground gave way under them and they were swept into the numbing void between worlds was Tau'rin's emotionless declaration of "Ultimate Chaos."

# Chapter 1

It was a beautiful day, just as planned. The only clouds in the sky had been carefully arranged to break up the endless blue of the sky without imposing on the sun's light. Twilight Sparkle was walking down the main street of Ponyville, heading toward the Carousel Boutique to meet up with Rarity for lunch. Lunch was actually going to be hosted by Applejack at Sweet Apple Acres, but since Spike had disappeared about an hour ago, Twilight figured she could check the most likely place he'd go and meet up with one of her friends at the same time. Since Spike would do any chore Rarity asked of him, Twilight took a quick look around the outside of the Boutique to see if he was trying his claws at caring for the bushes. He was nowhere to be seen, so she went inside. The bell tinkled as the door opened and Rarity called out from another room, "One minute please, I'll be right with you." Twilight waited, looking over the outfits Rarity had on display, until the white unicorn came down the stairs. "Oh, hello Twilight," Rarity said, surprised, "What brings you here?"

"I'm looking for Spike," Twilight said, "I was wondering if he came here."

"Oh, I see," Rarity said, "He *did* come by to see me. He was getting underhoof, so I sent him off to fetch some things. He'll probably be back in a few hours."

"Ok," Twilight said, "So, are you still going to Applejack's lunch?"

"Of course I am," Rarity declared with a toss of her mane, "I wouldn't miss it. Just give me a moment and I'll walk with you." She trotted into the back of the boutique and returned with a pair of small saddlebags on her back. As she joined Twilight, the purple unicorn caught a whiff of fresh greens.

"Are you bringing food?" Twilight asked, a little surprised, "I thought AJ was providing everything."

"Well, yes," Rarity said, averting her eyes, "But knowing her, everything will be apples in some form or another. Not that there's anything wrong with apples of course," she added quickly.

"I get it," Twilight said with a smile, "Pinkie's definitely going to bring something anyway. Shall we go?" Rarity nodded and the two turned to leave. Before they took a single step toward the door, the sound of a loud bang ripped through the air followed a few seconds later by the thud of something landing just outside the building. "What in the world was that?" Twilight exclaimed.

"I don't know," Rarity replied, "The first one sounded sort of like the Sonic Rainboom, but that second sound..." The two ponies hurried outside and found a large green gemstone half-buried in a small crater in the ground. "Looks like this is the culprit," Rarity said, lifting the stone out with her magic. She looked it over and smiled. "Why, what a perfect emerald," she said appreciatively, "I simply must find some way to show it off properly." She ran back into the boutique.

"What about lunch?" Twilight called after her.

"Yes, yes," Rarity said, coming back out, "I can't create a masterpiece on an empty stomach. I've just put it away for now. Let's go." The two friends began making their way toward Sweet Apple Acres.

"I wonder where that gem came from," Twilight mused as they walked. A shadow fell over her and Rarity and the two looked up to see Rainbow Dash pulling a cloud through the air. "Rainbow Dash!" Twilight called out.

Dash released the cloud and looked down. "Hey girls," she called back, "Don't mind me. That blast knocked some the clouds out of position. I'll have them fixed in a jiffy."

"Did you cause that blast?" Rarity asked.

"Nope," Rainbow said, grabbing the cloud again, "There's no point doing a Sonic Rainboom if I don't have an audience, and I'd never do one over Fluttershy's cottage. Not without warning her first that is."

"Over Fluttershy's?" Rarity asked, worried, "Did... did you see what happened?"

"Nah, I was looking the other way at the time," Dash said, "It sounded like it came from somewhere around Fluttershy's place or the Everfree Forest though."



"We'll go check it out Rainbow," Twilight said, "sorry to disturb your work."

"Puh-lease," the blue Pegasus said, "I'll have this fixed up in fifteen seconds, flat." She zoomed away with the cloud in tow as Twilight shook her head in amusement for a moment.

"This is strange," Twilight said as she and Rarity resumed their walk, "A sonic boom unrelated to Rainbow, and then a big emerald lands at your doorstep Rarity. I wonder if they're connected?" She looked around as they walked through Ponyville. Many ponies had come out of their houses and shops when the blast had occurred, and most were returning to their normal activities since nothing else had happened. So far as Twilight could see, there were no other craters or gemstones anywhere. *I guess Rarity's emerald was the only one*, she thought, *But that still doesn't explain where it came from. If only someone had seen what caused that-* her thoughts were interrupted by a shout. She and Rarity, and everypony else nearby, stopped what they were doing and turned to look. A pale yellow pegasus pony was galloping down the road toward them, yelling for help.

"Fluttershy!" Twilight exclaimed, trotting toward the oncoming pegasus. Fluttershy skid to a stop in front of Twilight and took a minute to catch her breath. "What's wrong?" Twilight asked.

"Something horrible has happened," Fluttershy said in her quiet voice, "I was checking on my chickens before heading to Applejack's, when all of a sudden there was this big boom right over my head. I looked up and saw four ponies falling out of the sky. They almost landed right on top of me! I think they're alive, but they're unconscious."

Rarity and Twilight looked at each other. "Well," Twilight said, "looks like Rainbow's guess was right. Rarity, would you mind telling Applejack that I'll be late to lunch?" Rarity nodded and galloped off. "Fluttershy," Twilight continued, "go get the doctor. I'll run ahead to your place in case they wake up before you get back."

"Right," Fluttershy said. She ran off as Twilight headed in the direction of Fluttershy's house. *I wonder what happened? She thought as she galloped, mid-air collision? That wouldn't create so much noise unless somepony was trying a Sonic Rainboom. That's assuming they were all pegasi. Fluttershy didn't say what kind of ponies they were, so maybe they're unicorns caught in a failed spell...* Her thoughts continued in this

vein until she reached Fluttershy's place and saw the ponies lying in a heap just outside the chicken pen. She trotted over to take a closer look. Two of them were male unicorns, one dark grey with a red and orange mane that looked like fire and the other golden yellow with brown mane. The other two were a female pegasus that matched the second unicorn's coloring and a female Earth pony of pale brown body and mud-brown mane. Twilight did her best to untangle them from each other and lay them in a row, and then sat back and waited. A couple minutes later she heard the sound of hooves approaching and turned to see Pinkie Pie coming down the road at her signature bouncy canter.

"What are you doing here Pinkie?" Twilight asked when the pink pony drew near.

"Hi Twilight," Pinkie said, "I heard from Fluttershy that some new ponies just showed up and you know what that means for me, right?"

"Right," Twilight said with a small smile, "However, these four aren't in any shape for a party right now." She pointed to the unconscious ponies. Pinkie walked over and looked at each one in turn.

"Oh dear," she said, shaking her head, "This won't do at all! It's too nice a day to be sleeping right now, especially since there's going to be a party." Before Twilight could react, Pinkie ran inside Fluttershy's house, re-emerged with a pitcher of water in her mouth, and tossed its contents onto the ponies. The grey unicorn started to stir, so Pinkie dropped the pitcher and ran over to put her face close to his.

"Uh, Pinkie," Twilight said, "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"Sure," Pinkie replied, "You can't feel bad waking up to this face." She gave Twilight a broad, cutesy grin and then turned it on the unicorn. His eyes slowly blinked open, and then widened in surprise as he registered the sight of Pinkie Pie grinning in his face.

He closed his eyes quickly and groaned, "Ah, *skvetch*. I've fallen back into Sugar Land, haven't I?"

"No silly!" Pinkie said, "You're in Ponyville! Sugar Land sounds like a fun place though. Have you been there before? What's it like?"

The unicorn opened one eye and regarded Pinkie for a few seconds before speaking again. "You're serious," he said flatly, "Wonderful." He opened his other eye, turned his head, and spotted Twilight. "Small purple unicorn," he muttered, "Good. Sensible creatures, usually. Feh." With great effort, he picked himself up, trying to stand on only his rear legs. With a yelp, he lost his balance and fell forward onto his face. "Gravity feels normal," he said after spitting out some dust, "My center of gravity must be off. Why would that..." he trailed off as he looked himself over, his expression growing ever more disconcerted until he lay there as still as a statue, staring at his front hooves like he'd never seen them before.

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

"I have hooves. Again. Fantastic" the strange unicorn said with growing sarcasm. Twilight and Pinkie, unsure of how to respond, simply stared at him. With a sigh, the unicorn stood up properly and began to pace, muttering to himself. The yellow unicorn stirred, rolled himself on his belly and raised his head with a moan.

"Ash," he asked, "what are you complaining about over there? Where are..." he trailed off as he opened his eyes and looked at the grey unicorn. "No way," he said, "Seriously?"

"Seriously," the first unicorn said, "check out the girls if you aren't convinced." He pointed to the two female ponies, who were just now starting to awaken. The earth pony's eyes opened first, and her mouth dropped open as she caught sight of the other ponies around her.

The pegasus coughed a couple times as she came to, and then looked around in confusion. "Um... ok," she said.

"Good morning," the grey Unicorn said, trotting over and helping the pegasus to her feet while the yellow unicorn helped the earth pony. "Let's get some privacy and collect our bearings, shall we?" he finished, casting a glance at Twilight and Pinkie. The other three nodded slowly and followed him as he trotted away, somewhat clumsily, toward the Everfree Forest.

"Now what was that about?" Pinkie asked.

"I don't know," Twilight said, "But I'm going to find out." She ran to catch up with the ponies and said, "Excuse me." The grey unicorn glared at her and

lashed out with a back hoof in her direction. He missed by a mile, but Twilight came to a stop and let them run off. "Fine then," she said grumpily, "I'm only trying to help here." She walked back toward Pinkie Pie and saw Fluttershy galloping up the road followed by Nurse Redheart.

"Oh dear, where did they go?" Fluttershy asked when she arrived.

"They woke up and ran off," Twilight explained, pointing in the direction the strange ponies had gone.

"How did they seem?" Redheart asked.

"Confused and a bit unsteady," Twilight said, "I don't think they got very far; one of them said something about needing privacy."

"After taking a fall like Fluttershy described, the last thing they need is to be alone," the nurse said, "We've got to find them." She ran off in the direction Twilight had indicated, with Twilight and Fluttershy just a few steps behind. A few yards short of the entrance to Everfree, they heard pony voices off to their right and slowed to a stop. As they approached the bushes the voices seemed to be coming from, an ethereal blue glow appeared from behind the bushes for a few seconds, faded away, and then came back again briefly.

"Well, that's just not fair," the grey unicorn's voice said when the glow faded again, "you still have *your* powers while I'm stuck with next to nothing." Redheart, Twilight, and Fluttershy exchanged a glance and moved cautiously to peer around the bushes. The matching unicorn and Pegasus were sitting next to each other in a clearing facing the grey unicorn, who looked mildly put-out, while the earth pony sat off to the side with her back to Twilight's group.

"This is hardly an ideal substitute for our full power Ash," the yellow unicorn said, "We have to be in physical contact with each other, and we only seem to have access to Element Wheel. Besides, you wound up with a horn this time; that must count for something."

"Good point," the unicorn called Ash said, standing up, "Ok then, here are the facts: The Gems and Tau'rin are somewhere in this world, of course, we have no clues to their location and-" he stopped suddenly upon spotting the ponies in the bushes. "And clearly the concept of privacy is not

respected around here," he finished with narrowed eyes. The other three turned to see what Ash was looking at.

"Don't be so harsh," the earth pony said, turning back toward the unicorn, "We did just fall out of the sky after all."

Ash sighed and addressed Twilight and company, "Ok, I appreciate the concern and all ladies, but believe me, we've gone through worse; a simple fall's not going to kill us. Come on Team, we better get searching." He marched off and the others fell into line behind him; they were headed straight into the Forest.

"Where do you think you're going?" Nurse Redheart demanded, stepping out from behind the bush.

Ash stopped suddenly with a surprised look on his face. "That... is a very good question," he said in a low voice. He looked over his shoulder and regarded the ponies for a moment. "One's liable to get lost wandering about in unfamiliar lands," he said at last.

The yellow pegasus's stomach growled suddenly. "Ah," she said, giggle a little, "Food would be good too."

"Really?" Pinkie Pie practically exploded out of the bush, leaping over the startled ponies in front of it. "You should join Twilight and me and everyone else for lunch then!" she declared with unbridled enthusiasm. Ash and his companions just stared at the pink pony.

"I don't think Applejack would mind," Fluttershy said, "I'm sure she's made enough that four more ponies won't make a difference."

"I am a little hungry," the earth pony said, giving Ash a glance. The grey unicorn returned it and sighed.

"Fine," he said, "lead the way."

# Chapter 2

The group (minus Nurse Redheart, who had left after making sure nopony had a concussion) arrived at Sweet Apple Acres to find that lunch was barely getting started. A large table had been set out in the barnyard, courtesy of Big Macintosh, and covered with a variety of food. To Twilight's relief, only half the choices seemed to involve apples. Rarity and Rainbow Dash were already eating, and Applejack was reaching for a salad when she spotted the new arrivals. She turned the reach into a wave and called out "Hey y'all! I was startin' to worry ya weren't gonna make it! I see y'all brought some new faces."

"I hope you don't mind Applejack," Twilight said as her group gathered around the table, "These four just... showed up."

"We fell out of the sky," the brown earth pony said, "And we're quite all right, so don't worry about that."

"Ah," AJ said, looking worried and then forcing a smile, "Welcome to Ponyville, I guess."

"Thank you," the yellow Pegasus said cheerily, "This food looks good; did you make it all?"

"Most of it," Applejack said, "with a little help from my folks. Go on and help yerself Miss... uh, I didn't catch your name?"

"Come to think of it," Twilight said, "I don't think you've told *me* your names yet."

The yellow unicorn smiled, rolled his eyes, and nudged the grey one in the shoulder. "You can thank our leader here," he said, "Master of not letting conversations go where he doesn't want them to."

"You know full well I prefer to limit the number of introductions I need to make," Ash said, aiming a snooty expression at the other unicorn. His face softened into a smile that was reflected by the yellow unicorn and the two stepped back from the table a few steps, where they were joined by the

pegasus and earth pony. The grey, fire-maned pony opened his mouth to speak, but then shut it quickly and motioned his fellows into a huddle. They held a quick, whispered discussion before opening up again. "Right," the grey unicorn said, "you can call me Ashen Blaze."

"I'm Soul Mage," the golden-yellow unicorn said, and then pointed to the pegasus, "and this is Gold Heart, my twin sister."

"Sister?" Twilight and all her friends asked at the same time.

"What?" Gold Heart responded, confused, "You can't see it? We look exactly the same, except for these wings I guess..." she concluded, flapping her wings a little.

"That's the thing," Twilight said, "You have wings and he doesn't."

"Ah," Soul said with a face-hoof, "Right, forgot about that... This complicates things."

"Actually," Ashen Blaze said, "I think that helps." He approached the table and put his hooves up on the edge. "You see girls," he said, "My friends and I are not from this world at all. In fact, we're not actually ponies, but whatever flung us here decided we needed to look like the locals."

"If you aren't ponies, then what are you?" Pinkie asked.

"Uh..." Ash said as he looked to his friends. The earth pony and Heart both shook their heads. "That," Ash declared, looking back at Pinkie, "doesn't really matter. Suffice to say, where we come from, it's not strange that Heart and Soul are related." He got down as the other three returned to the table and started looking over the food.

"By the way," the earth pony said, "you call me Gale."

There was an awkward silence for a few moments, and then Twilight spoke up and asked, "So, uh, what brings you to Equestria?"

"Random chance, so far as I know," Ash said before selecting a plate of baked apples and dragging it closer to him with his mouth. "As to why we are here," he continued, "that is a long, repetitive, and rather depressing

tale if we told it in its entirety." He began munching on one of the apples, ignoring the stares being directed at him.

Soul rolled his eyes and cleared his throat. "Short version," he said once he had everypony's attention, "There's this monster called Tau'rin that we've been chasing and fighting with across many worlds. Tau'rin seeks to conquer each world we wind up in, and we keep getting in his way. Along with us and Tau'rin, there are seven gemstones that get thrown about every time we travel to a new world. These gems, actually, six gems and a pearl, are the most powerful sources of magical energy we've ever seen. At each stop, we race to gather the gems back together before Tau'rin does, because if he gets all of them, the world we're in... doesn't last very long."

"Just what do ya mean by that?" Applejack asked.

Ash swallowed the last of his apple and gave AJ a sad look. "I hate to be the harbinger," he said, "but if Tau'rin gathers the seven Gems before we can stop him, your world will be destroyed. Sad to say, we haven't had much luck in the past." Gasps of horror rose up from around the table and Rainbow Dash flew over and shoved her face into Ash's.

"What's the big idea bringing all that here?" she demanded to know, "what have done to you, huh?"

"I am truly sorry," Ash, unfazed by the pegasus's anger or proximity, "All we've been able to do in the past is hitch a ride when the Gems and Tau'rin move along. We can't control the destination, and we've yet to find something besides the Gems that can hurt Tau'rin."

Rarity and Twilight exchanged a glance as they recalled the emerald that had appeared outside of the boutique. "These gems," Rarity said, "Would one of them happen to be an emerald?"

"Yes!" Ash said, "Have you seen it?"

"A large green emerald landed outside my store shortly after I heard the sound of your arrival," Rarity said, "I was planning to design a hat around it, since it's far too large for a necklace or dress, but if it's yours, I'll gladly return it to you."



Ash almost leapt up onto the table in his excitement. "Madam," he said, "You have no idea how easy you just made my life! Let's go get it!"

Soul and Gale grabbed onto the grey unicorn and pulled him off the table. "Calm down," Soul said, "We've been here, what, an hour or so? Tau'rin's not going to be able to find and snatch it up so soon. I bet he's still getting his bearings like we are. Let's slow down for a bit, enjoy lunch, and get to know these girls's names."

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As Twilight observed the four newcomers as she and Rarity walked with them back to the boutique an hour or so later, she could see that they were definitely *not* ponies by nature. Their gaits were stiff and careful, as if they needed to think about moving on four legs. Many times during lunch they'd fumbled plates and bowls while trying to move them about, and neither unicorn has used his magic telekinesis at all. And although Gold Heart had shown she could move her wings, she remained as firmly on the ground as Fluttershy usually was. Twilight made a mental note to herself to try and teach them the basic tricks of being a pony after they'd retrieved the emerald. They wouldn't get very far if they couldn't do something as simple as lift an object with magic, after all. Heart and Rarity were discussing fashion while the two male unicorns and Gale were trading quips about things that only they seemed to understand, leaving Twilight to her own thoughts. As those thoughts traced their way back to earlier that day, she recalled that Spike was supposed to be delivering something to the boutique. "Rarity, when did you expect Spike to finish his errand?" she asked.

"Huh?" Rarity responded, caught off-guard, "Oh, let me think... Any time now I think."

"Who's Spike?" Heart asked.

"My assistant," Twilight said, "He's a baby dragon."

"You have a dragon for an assistant?" Ash asked, narrowing one eye at her, "A fire-breathing dragon?"

"Yes."

"You live and work in a library," Ash said, "which is built into a tree, with a baby *fire-breathing* dragon as an assistant?"

"He's very reliable," Twilight said, "And careful with his fire. He's only burnt up one book so far."

"I'll take your word for it," Ash said, deadpan. After a few seconds, he asked another question, "So, why's he be running an errand for Rarity then?"

Rarity laughed, a musical giggle really. "Oh, he's always trying to charm me," she said, "At least, when he's able to speak around me."

"And me and Heart being related is weird?" Soul muttered, giving Rarity a strange look. He smiled and shook his head when Rarity returned the look. "Never mind," he said, "I'm in no position to criticize."

"If you think I reciprocate his feelings," Rarity began with a glare.

"Ok, ok, sorry," Soul said, shying away, "forget I said anything." Rarity snorted, turned up her nose, and sped up a little to pull away from him. The rest of the walk to the boutique was accomplished in relative silence.

"Here we are," Rarity announced, opening the door, "the emerald's in the back, if you'll come with me." The group went inside and most stopped to look around as Rarity and Ash continued into the back. Rarity opened the door and paused until Ash motioned for her to go through first. "Why thank you," she said, pleased that at least one of the males was a gentleman. As the two entered the back room, their eyes fell upon a small purple dragon who was just about to bite into the large green emerald.

"Oh," was all Ash was able to say before Spike bit down. Ash and Rarity stared in horror for a split second, and then green light began spilling out of the now-broken gemstone. "*RUN!*" Ash shouted, whirling about and running through the door.

"Wha?" Rarity said in surprise. Ash stopped, came back, grabbed Rarity's tail in his teeth, and pulled.

"I said *run!*" he repeated before running for the front door. This time Rarity followed him, with the tendrils of green light right on her tail. As they

crossed the showroom, the ground began to rumble. "*Runrunrunrunrun!*" Ash shouted as Twilight, Soul, Gale, and Heart turned to look. They all took one look at the spreading light, which was now starting to flow into the ground as the rumbling increased, and followed Ash and Rarity in their full-speed retreat.

"How far?" Soul shouted over the din as they exited the boutique.

"Heck if I know!" Ash replied, "I just hope we can outrun it!" The earth began to rend behind them, with large rock and dirt spires erupting, collapsing, and spinning about in what could only be described as a maelstrom of earth that quickly consumed the Carousel Boutique and an ever-increasing area around it. Just short of the next closest building, the chaos ceased spreading, but the earth continued to churn within that area for several minutes. The quake threatened to topple other stores, but they managed to remain mostly intact. The six ponies stood a long distance down the road, panting as they watched the rocks finally settle as the earthquake came to a stop. Where the Carousel Boutique had once stood was now a forbidding tangle of jagged stones at least twenty feet tall.

"Muh... muh... my shop!" Rarity stammered in utter shock, "My house! Opalescence!"

Ashen Blaze's left eye began to twitch as he gazed on the mess, and then he reared up with front legs spread wide, threw his head up toward the sky and shouted "*Skveeeetch!* No!" He came back down with a thud and whirled on Rarity. "You!" he exclaimed, advancing on her, "You... you fool!"

"Ash," Soul Mage said, looking worried.

"How could you?" Ash continued, ignoring his friend. Rarity began to back away as Ash continued his slow advance. His green eyes had taken on an unnaturally bright color.

"Ash," Soul repeated in a warning tone.

"Did it not cross your mind to store the Gem more carefully?" Ash continued, oblivious to all except Rarity, who looked like she was about to faint, "That some stupid little *gemstone-eating lizard* might beat us to it?"

"Ashen Blaze!" Heart and Soul shouted at him in unison.

"*What?*" Ash whirled around to face his fellows. His coat had become noticeably darker and his mane and tail were waving about as if they were actual flame. Heart and Soul were standing together facing him; Soul was resting one hoof on Heart's shoulder, she in turn was pointing a hoof at Ashen Blaze, and both were wreathed in ethereal blue flames. Ash's pupils shrank as he looked at them.

"Element Wheel, Water," Heart said quickly, and a small blue disc of energy shot appeared in front of her raised hoof and flew toward Ash. It exploded over him in a spray of water, leaving him sputtering and madder than ever.

"How *dare* you!" he exclaimed, launching himself toward the matching ponies. Heart rolled to the side as Soul braced himself to take the impact, jumping up at the last second to wrap his legs around Ash. As the two of them hit the ground and began grappling with each other, Heart joined in.

"Hey," Twilight said, moving to intervene. Gale blocked her path and shook her head.

"Stay out of this," she said, "We've got this down to a science." She looked at the tussling ponies and added, "Well, almost." After a minute or so, Heart and Soul succeeded in pinning Ash on his back with Heart holding down his rear legs as Soul sat on his chest. Soul Mage flicked his tail toward Gold Heart, who grabbed it in her teeth, and the ethereal flames returned.

Soul raised one hoof, around which a large amount of the fire was gathering, and then struck Ashen Blaze across the face with it, crying out, "Snap out of it!" Ash coughed and sputtered a little as the yellow unicorn glared at him and started to lecture. "What is *wrong* with you?" he demanded, "We've been here only a few hours, and you expect some... pony we've just met to comprehend the power of a Gem she found before we told her about it and take precautions with it? And you've been doing so well with your temper up until now!"

"I lost it two worlds back," Ash said, averting his gaze. He sighed and looked toward Rarity, who was still on the verge of hysterics. "My apologies ma'am," he said sincerely, "I had no cause to explode on you like that. I hope you'll forgive me, but I understand if you can't." Rarity didn't respond, she just kept staring at the rocks in shock and finally fainted. Soul took one more look into Ash's eyes, and then he and Heart let him go. By this point,

a large crowd of ponies was gathering, throwing out questions and cries of lament left and right. Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy came flying over the crowd and landed near Twilight as Applejack pushed her way through to join them as well.

"What in Equestria happened here?" AJ asked, staring at the rocks.

"The Emerald broke," Ash said simply, shaking off the dust in his coat.

"And caused an earthquake?" Rainbow asked, incredulous.

"Each Gem represents one of seven elements," Ash said, "The Emerald is the Gem of Earth. As powerful as they are, though, the gemstones themselves aren't indestructible, just... very tough. If a Gem is destroyed, the energies will rush out in search of a new gem to inhabit, leaving behind, well, this." He waved a hoof toward the tangle of rocks. "Although," he said, thinking, "this isn't as bad as the last time a Gem was broken..."

"We were on a hillside, the Sapphire's what broke, and I'm pretty sure that underground reservoir was bigger than they thought it was," Soul said.

"Not fun..." Ash said distractedly. "Anyway," he said, shaking his head, "this is a bad start; not only are we back to square one, someone's house has been obliterated. As first impressions go..." he trailed off with a weak, embarrassed smile.

"Um," Fluttershy said, "Is everypony all right? No one was caught in that I hope."

"Every pony made it out," Ash said, "But there was that purple dragon, who I assume was Spike, and Rarity yelled something about an 'Opalescence' before she fainted."

"What?" Fluttershy said in the quietest horrified voice Ash had ever heard, "Oh no! We've got to see if they're all right!"

"Come on then," Dash said, zipping into the air before anypony could respond. Fluttershy followed at a slightly more sedate pace.

"Well, ok then," Ash said, "Not sure if they'll find anything..." He looked at Heart. "Want to join them Heart? You'll probably see something informational that they'd miss."

Heart looked at her wings and flapped them a little. "Yeah," she said uncertainly, "Let's see if I can..." She jumped up and flapped hard, achieving a hover. She looked around as a smile crossed her face. "Cool," she said, "Be back in a moment then." She flew up above the level of the rocks and then took off after Dash and Fluttershy.

The crowd of ponies was starting to get restless, so Twilight cleared her throat to address them. "Excuse me everypony-ack!" she said as Ash pulled her back a foot or so by grabbing her tail.

"Sorry," the grey unicorn said when Twilight glared at him, "but consider for a moment what you think they should know."

"You told us everything," Twilight said, annoyed.

"Not quite everything," Ash said, "More than enough, but not everything. Again, think for a second. How do you imagine this herd will react if you tell them the world's in grave danger?" He walked away and stood looking at the rocks as Twilight turned back to the crowd, feeling like a heavy burden had just been placed on her back.

*I hope Dash and Pinkie haven't been talking too much,* she thought. Looking out at the curious group, she cleared her throat and her thoughts. "Attention everypony," she said, "There's nothing to worry about. This quake was caused by a... magical mishap." That was true enough. "No pony was hurt, fortunately, and it doesn't seem like there's going to be more. So, you can go about your business." She gave them her biggest smile and the ponies began to disperse slowly, until only Pinkie Pie was left standing in front of Twilight.

"So what really happened?" Pinkie asked, "I mean, I can see that Rarity's shop got eaten by the ground, and that's really sad. Did something happen with the emerald they were looking for?"

"Very much, yes," Soul said with a sigh.

"Where's Gold Heart at?" Pinkie asked, looking around, "If everypony got out all right, why isn't she here?" Before anyone could answer, she spotted Rarity, still unconscious, and trotted over. "Wake up Rarity," she said, patting the white unicorn's cheek, "This is no time for napping!"

"Leave her be sugar cube," AJ said, "she's had a rough time of it, losing her house, her business, and maybe even her cat. She's probably better off asleep for the moment."

"At least while I'm around," Ashen Blaze muttered without taking his eyes off the rocks.

"What was all that about anyway?" Twilight asked, "You looked like you were about to change into something else."

"I have a temper," Ash said simply, still not moving. Twilight looked to Soul and Gale for clarification, but they both just shook their heads. "This is probably asking a lot," Ash said, looking back toward the group, "considering what we've put you all through in these last few hours, but we're going to need a place to sleep during our stay. The quest is going to take awhile; weeks at best, possibly months if Tau'rin decides to be subtle. Any recommendations?"

"Rarity's going to need a place to stay too," Twilight said.

"Well she ain't staying at my place, that's fer sure," Applejack said.

"I'll take her in," Twilight said after a moment to think.

"As fer y'all," AJ said to Ash, "Mah cow barn's not bein' used right now, so y'all can sleep there so long as ya promise not to break anything." She eyed the rocks meaningfully.

"I thought you weren't welcoming guests," Ash said, pointing at Rarity.

"No, I said I wasn't gonna let *her* stay," the orange earth pony replied, "And I know she'd agree whole-heartedly. Rarity won't have anything ta do with dirt if she can help it. 'Sides, I don't think anypony else had room for four new tenants." Ash looked like he was going to say something, but Fluttershy's return interrupted him. The pale yellow pegasus was cradling a dirty and very unhappy-looking Persian cat in her arms, which gave a pitiful

mew as Fluttershy hovered just off the ground. Rarity stirred, apparently called out of her faint by the cat's voice. She brought a hoof to her forehead in a dramatic fashion as she sat up, and then dropped it as she spotted the cat.

"Opal!" she exclaimed, jumping up to her feet, "Oh thank Celestia you're ok!" She ran over, but Fluttershy flew up out of reach.

"Sorry Rarity," she said, "Two of her legs are broken and I think she's in shock. I think I should take her back to my place for now. Uh, if that's ok I mean."

"Well of course darling!" Rarity said, concerned, "You know I'd trust you with Opal above any pony in Equestria." Fluttershy nodded and flew off as Rarity heaved a big sigh of relief. She dusted herself off and looked around. Ash gave a start and hung his head as she locked eyes with him. "As for you," she said, walking over to him.

"I have no excuse for my actions," Ash said, not meeting her eyes, "And I promise, if it's within my power, I will fix this."

"Thank you," Rarity said kindly, putting a hoof on his shoulder, "I forgive you for yelling at me." Ash blushed and looked up at the white unicorn without raising his head. Again as he tried to speak an interruption showed up.

"Make room," Rainbow Dash's voice came from just over the edge of the rocks. Everypony backed away a few steps as Rainbow and Heart flew into sight, carrying something between them. "We found Spike," the blue Pegasus said, "At least... I think so." She and Heart lowered their cargo onto the ground and landed on either side of it. Twilight took one look and gasped. Sitting between the pegasi was a stone statue of a baby dragon with a look of surprise on his face and an emerald with a large bite missing in its claws.

"What happened to him?" Twilight asked.

"Petrified, obviously," Ash said, moving in for a closer look, "Quite in line with the earth element, but surprisingly sophisticated for a raw elemental explosion." He walked round it a few times, giving it very close scrutiny, "Superficial scratches, no evidence of cracks, no chips or dings..." he



looked up at Twilight and asked, "anything seem to be missing? Wings or teeth or something?"

"He hasn't grown his wings in yet," Twilight said, looking closely at the statue, "No, he seems to have everything."

"A wounded cat and an intact petrified dragon," Ash said in a conclusive voice, "you girls have *no* idea how lucky we are."

"It's only lucky if we can fix Spike," AJ said, "So tell me Ashen Blaze, can we?"

"Excellent question," Ash said, not meeting the earth pony's hard look. He took another look at the statue, muttering, "This would be much easier if I could- aha!"

"What?" everypony asked.

"I think my..." Ash started to exclaim, looking up. His voice trailed off as a confused look crossed his face. He looked down at Spike, then back up at the ponies, and then all around him. "Oh, that's either annoying or good," he said, "and my money's on annoying."

"What's wrong?" Heart asked.

"I can clearly see the magic threads swirling around this," Ash said, tapping Spike with a hoof, "Green as moss and fern, but beyond that I've got nothing."

"What are you talking about?" Dash asked, "Can you fix Spike nor not?"

"Not without the Emerald," Ash said, "The Topaz might make a decent substitute, but I'd rather not risk that if I don't have to." He sighed. "It would seem I'm without magic in this world."

"Well, I doubt that," Twilight said. Her horn lit up as she lifted the Spike statue off the ground. "That horn on your forehead isn't just there for looks." Ash's eyes crossed as he looked up at his horn. "Come on," Twilight continued, "Let's go see if any of my books have a spell to undo petrification, and while we're at it I can teach you how unicorn magic works."

"Sounds good to me," Soul said. Ash simply nodded.

# Chapter 3

Ashen Blaze was always impressed by libraries. Truth be told, he wasn't much of a reader, at least compared to Soul Mage, but the sheer amount of knowledge that even a single book could hold was amazing. The fact that this world he'd been roughly thrown into was basically run by intelligent equines- not the most dexterous of structures- and still had books and libraries in a form he recognized almost blew his mind. It made sense that the unicorns, Twilight Sparkle and Rarity, seemed to be the most knowledgeable of those he'd met after seeing the delicacy Twilight was able to achieve using magic to hold a feather quill as she wrote a letter. "I don't know how I'm going to get this to Princess Celestia," she said after putting the quill down, "I always use Spike's magic fire to send it to her, but..." her gaze went to the petrified dragon on the table next to her letter.

"Fire to send letters?" Ash asked, looking up from the book he was reading, "That's interesting. Why not just throw into the fireplace then?"

"Because only Spike's fire works, silly," Pinkie Pie said. She was standing by a bookshelf, tapping her hoof to a beat only she could hear. Rarity was scanning another shelf, plucking out books that looked like they'd be useful and stacking them next to Ash, while Gold Heart was outside with Rainbow working on her flying technique. Gale was off exploring the tree.

Soul looked over Twilight's shoulder and read the first few lines of the letter. "*Dear Princess Celestia, I am writing to inform you of a potential disaster that has fallen upon us here in Ponyville.* You really think she needs to know about this?"

"Yes. The Princesses oversee everything in Equestria," Twilight explained, rolling up the letter and tying it up with a ribbon, "It's my duty, not only as a responsible pony but as her student, to inform her of anything that might threaten the peace of the land."

"That's us all right," Ash said grimly, "A regular quartet of trouble hunting out the most dangerous bits of magic this side of... something or another," he finished in a dull voice. "Ah, this book's worthless," he said, slapping it shut with a hoof and almost losing his balance.

"Speaking of magic," Twilight said, "I better teach you how to move things before you hurt yourself." She set the letter back on the table as Ash came over to stand next to Soul, both of them giving her their full attention.

"Right," she said, "you've seen Rarity and me doing this all day, so let's get into how it works. Unicorn magic comes from the whole body and is focused through the horn, and more advanced spells will tax your strength based on how much you're trying to change." Ash nodded his understanding. "Moving small objects is not that hard," she continued, "you just need to think. Focus on the object you want to move and where you want it to go." She demonstrated by picking up the quill and moving it around her head once before putting it back, not once taking her eyes off her students. "You don't even need to look at it if you know where it is in relation to you."

"And this is something every unicorn learns from... a very early age?" Ash asked, looking to Rarity.

"Yes," Twilight said, "although everypony has their own level of skill with it, whether it be with details, weight, the number of objects, or a bit of all three. Now, one of you try to move something on the table. Except Spike that is," she added quickly.

Ash looked at Soul, who smiled and said, "You're the real mage, you go first." The grey unicorn nodded and turned his attention to the quill pen. His eyes narrowed as he concentrated on making it move. "So *etching* powerful back home," he muttered, "The old guard would die of laughter if they saw me struggling like this..." Soul poked him in the side. "Focusing," the grey unicorn said before shutting up. His horn began to glow faintly, and the quill wobbled on the table. A very faint smile appeared to Ash's face and the glowing brightened considerably. The quill jumped up and floated a foot off the table.

"Good," Twilight said, nodding, "Now, try to put it down carefully." Ash gave the faintest of nods. The quill descended gradually halfway to the table, stopped, and then settled back onto the table as Ash's horn stopped glowing. "What did I tell you?" Twilight said, smiling, "Easy. With a little practice, you'll be a natural in no time."

"No time eh?" Ash said with a mischievous grin, "That usually means days or weeks." His horn started glowing again and the quill floated up again,

accompanied by Twilight's letter and a book. He took up a nonchalant stance as the objects flew to him, orbited once, and returned to their original spots after taking a detour around the now-surprised purple unicorn. "I take it literally," Ash said with a flourish of his right front leg, which upset his balance again. "You'd think I'd be more stable with four legs," he muttered, glaring at his front hooves.

You put too much weight on your back legs," Gale said from the second floor balcony, "You need to start thinking like a quadruped again." She smiled at Soul and said, "How about you Soul? I think it's your turn."

"Right," Soul mage said, turning his attention to the table.

He started to focus on the scroll, but Pinkie Pie suddenly sprang in front of him excitedly saying, "Biped? That means you walk on two legs! Is that your big secret 'real shape?' Because that's not so weird; lots of creatures walk on two legs, like birds. Are you really birds?"

"Not now Pinkie," Twilight said, pushing the pink pony away, "Sorry about that Soul."

"No... it's cool," the yellow unicorn said, still trying to process Pinkie's outburst. "Birds?" he asked, giving Ash a confused look. Ash poked him with a wicked smile on his face. Soul blew a raspberry at Ash and focused on the quill. His horn began to glow, but instead of the usual aura, the glow became an ethereal blue tendril. It stretched out through the air and wrapped itself around the quill.

"Well," Twilight said, blinking, "That's... unique." Soul gazed at the glowing tendril for a second, and then smiled and gave his head a slight tilt. The quill floated up from the table and wiggled about before returning to its place. The tendril unwrapped and moved toward the scroll. At the last second, it changed course and curled around Twilight's neck. "What are you doing?" Twilight asked.

"Stretching," Soul said as the tendril retracted back into a simple glow around his horn. "Now let's see," he mused, looking around. He locked his eyes on something and flicked his head. The tendril shot out toward a lantern and wrapped around it. "What?" Soul said, "Don't grab it!" He pulled the tendril back and lashed it toward another lantern, which was also wrapped up. "Dang it!" The tendril pulled back and hung down in front of

Soul's face. "What the heck?" he said, very annoyed, "It's not that big a difference between a lasso and a strike! Stupid... weird... pony-body rules." The tendril retracted fully and the glow faded.

"What was all that?" Twilight said, "I've never seen a unicorn magic be so... visible."

"Eeeh..." Soul Mage said, scraping at the ground with a hoof, "Let's just call it my own special brand of magic. It's not working quite like I'd like it to, but I guess I'll take what I can get."

"Aye," Ashen Blaze said, "No more 'one-trick pony for you', if you'll pardon the phrase," he added with a glance around the room. No one seemed to get it besides Gale, who rolled her eyes.

Soul nodded, and then blinked as a thought occurred to him. He turned toward a window and called out, "Hey sis! C'mere a minute!"

Gold Heart flew up to the window and poked her head in. "What's up?" she asked.

"Hold still a sec," Soul replied as his horn began to glow again. With a flick, he sent a tendril flying at Heart. It wrapped around her hoof, which she'd thrown up reflexively, and the two yellow ponies were wreathed in ethereal fire. "Ha ha!" Soul exclaimed, dancing in place, "*Soul beend!*"

Heart looked herself over, and then gave her brother a sideways look tempered with a smile. "Thanks for warning me," she said sarcastically.

"You're quite welcome," Soul said sincerely, pulling back the tendril. The flames vanished as Twilight, Rarity, and even Pinkie stared slack-jawed. "What?" Soul asked them, "Two of you have seen that before, at least. It's a rare gift that allows us to link our spirits and access special powers. And it looks like the link's really spirit-to-spirit, not through physical contact"

"Just like it should be," Heart said, nodding. She backed out of the window and returned to her flight practice.

"Super," Gale said, a note of sarcasm coming into her voice as she put her front hooves up on balcony banister, "The mages are making a comeback and Heart can fly. Where does that leave me?"

"I can't see a reason why your talent for machines or your aim would be affected Gale," Ash said, "you're wonderfully mundane."

"Pony, remember? No fingers," Gale said, holding out her front legs, "And even if I had them, none of my gear showed up here anyway."

"Oooo!" Pinkie exclaimed, suddenly bouncing in place next to Gale, "I know what fingers are too! Spike has fingers 'cause he's a dragon. You're really small dragons, huh?"

"How'd she get up there so fast?" Ash asked quietly, looking to where he last remembered seeing the pink earth pony.

"She's Pinkie Pie," Twilight said, "Most of the time, that's the only explanation."

"Uuh, no," Gale said, answering Pinkie's question. She got back down on all four and faced the pink pony. "So tell me," she asked, "what lets earth ponies stand out from the other types?"

Pinkie gave Gale a confused look for a second, but then smiled and started bouncing again. "Well I throw parties," she said, "and speaking of parties, we haven't had your 'Welcome to Ponyville' party yet! It'll be so much fun; I'll break out the balloons and streamers and candy from Sugar Cube Corner. Applejack can bring her apple pies; she's the best baker in the world you know." Gale had backed away a little under the onslaught of happy but was smiling despite herself.

"I... appreciate the thought," she said, "But I think we'll be ok without any parties."

"I can guarantee you'll be involved in at least one while you're here," Rarity said, looking up from the book she'd been reading since the magic lesson had begun "And you'll have a good time, trust me. Pinkie Pie puts on the most *fabulous* parties outside of Canterlot."

"It's true," Pinkie agreed. She threw a front leg around Gale's shoulders and said, "And don't you worry about your talent. I'm sure you'll find some way to use it."

"Thanks," Gale said, extracting herself from Pinkie's grasp. She trotted downstairs and went over to the pile of books. "Now," she said, "aren't we supposed to be looking for a way to fix Spike?"

"That we are," Ash said, levitating a few books and setting them up around the room.

A few hours later most of the likely-seeming books had been rejected, a few spells had been tried without success, Twilight had compiled a list of herbal remedies and potions, and Ashen Blaze had determined that he would need more practice with unicorn-style teleportation. He remained stuck on top of a bookcase for several minutes until Heart and Rainbow Dash could pull him loose and set him down on the floor. "That was fun," he drawled.

"Well, it's certainly not the worst attempt I've ever seen," Twilight said kindly, "You sure you don't want to try Soul?"

"No thanks," Soul said, looking up from a book on Equestrian fairy tales, "Teleporting's not in my regular repertoire and I see no reason to try and add it now. I'd probably end up embedded in a wall."

Any reply Twilight might have made was cut off as the front door flew open and a pair of young fillies ran into the library, one a white unicorn with a purple and pink mane and tail and the other a yellow earth pony with a red mane and tail. "Rarity!" the white one cried, running over and rubbing her head against the bigger unicorn's side, "Oh I was so worried! What happened to our house?"

"Oh, Sweetie Bell," Rarity said, nuzzling the filly, "I'm sorry, I meant to pick you up when school let out, but I must of lost track of time. I'll explain everything later."

"Who's this?" Heart asked, walking over.

"I'm Sweetie Bell," the small unicorn said.

"And I'm Apple Bloom," the yellow filly said cheerfully.

"Any relation to Applejack?" Ash asked with a curious tilt of his head.



"Yep," Apple Bloom said, "She's my sister. Nice to meet ya! Who are you?"

Once the four newcomers had introduced themselves, Rarity said, "Thank you for keeping Sweetie Bell company Apple Bloom. I know seeing what happened must have been a shock. It was terrible seeing it happen."

"Quite," Ash muttered.

"Yer welcome Rarity," Bloom said, smiling.

"Say, where's Scootaloo?" Rainbow Dash asked, "You three are never far apart from each other."

"Ah, she had to run home for dinner," Apple Bloom said, "And speakin' of which, I better get goin' afore the folks miss me. See ya tomorrow Sweetie Bell!"

"Hold up," Ash said, catching Bloom before she ran out the door, "Your sister was kind enough to offer us a place to sleep. Do you think she'd mind feeding us dinner as well?"

"I don't see why not," Apple Bloom said, "Come on. Maybe on the way you can tell me how you got your cutie marks!"

"Eh?" Ash asked, looking at Twilight for clarification.

"On your flank," Twilight said simply, pointing with a hoof.

The Order-naries all turned their heads to look. "Oh yeah," Soul said, speaking for them all, "Forgot about those... I honestly don't know."

"how'd ya forget something so life-changing?" Apple Bloom asked, giving them a hard look.

"We'll explain on the way," Heart said, "that's a story we can tell."

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Even after telling an abbreviated, kid-friendly version of the story multiple times, the last time over dinner with AJ's help, Apple Bloom still didn't seem able to wrap her head around the idea that the newcomers weren't always ponies. If Big Macintosh was confused, he didn't show it; he simply nodded

along with the explanation. "A mighty fine story," was all he said after it was finished.

"Can you at least tell me what your cutie marks mean?" Apple Bloom asked, "I mean, Miss Gale's got a wrench, so I guess that means she's good with fixin' stuff, but what about the rest of you?"

"Mine and Heart's aren't too tricky," Soul Mage said. They each had what looked like opposite halves of a roughly circular blue fireball on their flanks. "I think they symbolize how the two of us have to stick together to work our real magic."

"Okaaay..." Apple Bloom said, still confused, "What about you Mr. Blaze?"

"No comment," the grey unicorn said sourly. His mark was a strange symbol that looked sort of like a letter B stuck onto the side of an M. He hadn't been very happy when he'd discovered that, and had flatly refused to talk about it to anypony.

"Ok then," Applejack said, seeing that Bloom was about to press the issue and putting a hoof on her shoulder, "I think they've had enough questions fer one night. I'm gonna show them to the barn; why don't you help clean up here?"

"Fine," Apple Bloom said reluctantly. She picked her plate off the table and skulked toward the kitchen sink.

"Come on," AJ said, heading for the front door. As the four followed her, she tossed a few of the blankets stacked up by the door onto her back. Gale picked up the rest, and although her toss was a little clumsier, all the blankets landed more-or-less centered on her back.

"We could take those," Soul offered, starting to focus his magic.

"Oh please," Gale said, "we earth ponies aren't that helpless. Besides, how am I ever going to figure out my capabilities if I rely on you all the time?" She smiled coyly as soul blushed.

"R-right," he stammered, following the group outside. They headed out toward the barn, with Heart flying above the group. She hadn't spent much time on the ground since learning she could fly, except during dinner. It

seemed to Soul that her flapping was starting to get a little strained. "Come down sis," he said, "gravity's not that harsh a mistress."

"I'm fine," Heart said stubbornly, "Got to build up my endurance."

"Alright," Soul said, not in the mood to argue. They arrived at the barn and Applejack showed them to a rank of stalls along one wall.

"There's a cow herd that makes the rounds of Ponyville's farms," she explained, setting some blankets down in one stall and moving on to the next, "They stay at each place fer about a month or so, grazing the grass and payin' fer room and board with milk. I don't think they're due to come here for another three months, so don't feel y'all have to hurry on their account."

"Oh, we've got plenty of other reasons to hurry," Ash said, arranging the blankets in the stall he chose to suit his needs. "Thank you again for letting us stay here."

"No problem," AJ said. After making sure Gale had unloaded the blankets she'd carried, she bid the group goodnight and left. As soon as the earth pony had left, Heart picked up a blanket and proceeded to make a hammock out of it by wedging it between the boards on either side of her stall. The others settled into their areas in their own way; Ash simply lay down on top of the piled blankets while Soul rolled himself up in one and Gale slipped between a pair as she lay on her back.

They lay still for a few moments, and then Gale turned her head toward Ash's stall and asked, "That mark of yours, it's from your past, isn't it?"

"My cadre emblem," Ashen Blaze said, "As if I need a *skvetchte* reminder *branded* onto my flank!"

"Well, it's part of who you are, isn't it?" Soul asked, "Not a very nice part, I know, but we've all got things we aren't proud of."

"Oh, *that's* an understatement!" Ash said, with a chuckle in his voice. "So," he said after a moment, "What're everyone's impressions?"

"I like it here," Heart said, "Everyone's so nice. It seems like a real peaceful place. Too bad we had to wind up here."

"Here here!" Soul said, thrusting a hoof in the air, "Getting our spirit power to work is a pain in the rump though. That makes sense though; it's meant for human use not... this."

"You'll adapt," Gale said, "You and Ash mastered that telekinesis trick pretty quick."

"I'm not the *Thamul Meis* for nothin'," Ash said, "I hate the title, but like you said, it's a fact. As for Soul, he cheated."

"Ah, go to sleep ya arrogant magician," Soul shot back good-naturedly. The four friends continued to talk and laugh quietly until they each fell asleep.

---

The morning dawned bright and clear- there was still no rain in the schedule, although more clouds were going to be allowed in later in the afternoon. Ashen Blaze slowly came awake as the sun shone into the barn. His eyes blinked open... to reveal Apple Bloom's face hovering right in front of him. "Yii!" he squeaked, jumping up and back. "Geez, what is *with* the wake-up calls around here?" He composed himself as the others started to wake up. "Not that you aren't cute or anything Miss Bloom," he said, "In fact, you'd probably make a good alarm clock except-

"Really?" Apple Bloom said excitedly, cutting Ash off. She reared up, spun around, and started to gallop off. Ash quickly activated his horn and grabbed her, lifting her off the ground. "Hey! Put me down!" she yelled, struggling.

"What the sam hill's going on in here?" Applejack's voice shot through the barn. She came inside and glared at Ash. "You pickin' on mah sister?"

"I think I'm saving some pony from a rude wake-up call," Ash said, not letting Bloom loose, "I was joking about her being an alarm clock with no snooze button and I think she took me seriously."

"Is that so?" AJ said, turning her gaze to her sister, who gave her a sheepish grin. "Well good catch then. Ya can put 'er down now." Ash obliged and Apple Bloom scampered off, only to return a few seconds later pushing a serving cart laden with plates of pancakes drizzled with syrup and four bottles of juice. "Eat up," Applejack said as everypony gathered around, "You're gonna need your energy for chores."

"Chores?" Ash protested, almost dropping a piece of pancake, "We do have important things to do AJ. We can't spend all day working on your farm."

"And I ain't gonna have any freeloaders sleepin' in mah barn," AJ replied, "I'm not gonna ask much of you, just buck a few apples, pull a few carts, and keep yer living space clean. Shouldn't take more than a couple hours. 'Sides, most of them town-ponies are still asleep right now, and you obviously don't wanna ruin anypony's beauty sleep Ash."

"Botherment..." Ash muttered darkly around a bite of pancake.

After everypony had eaten, Applejack assigned the stallions to strip one tree of its apples and cart them to the apple cellar while she led Gale and Gold Heart off to handle some trees across the field. Soul Mage and Ash took turns kicking the tree as hard as they could, but after five minutes of that they were both sweating and only a few apples had come loose, none of which landed in the baskets. "Do you think she'd yell at us if we used magic?" Soul asked.

"She never said not to," Ash answered, moving the dropped fruit into a basket, "But she might assign us each our own tree tomorrow if we work too fast."

"I'm fine with that," the golden-yellow unicorn said, "We'll each take half and see who finishes faster."

"You're on," Ash said, snagging as many apples as possible and giving them a magic tug. Roughly a third of them came off and flew at him, pelting his face and back. "More control, less enthusiasm," he said dryly, picking up his mess.

"Duly noted," Soul said, grabbing two apples and pulling them loose. Ash finished picking apples off the ground, discarding those that were bruised, and took another, more conservative attempt at harvesting from the tree. At his coaxing, seven apples detached from the tree and settled into a basket. As the two unicorns continued working, it became clear that Ash was able to handle larger loads than Soul, although the latter wound up with fewer rejects over all. In the space of ten minutes, Ash had not only cleared his half of the tree but picked off a bunch from Soul's half too. "I admit defeat," Soul said with a bow, "I was no match for your superior harvesting skills."

"I thought you were doing pretty well Soul Mage," a familiar voice said, startling both of them. The whirled and saw Twilight Sparkle sitting in the shade of a nearby tree.

"Morning Twilight," Ash said, "What brings you here?"

"I was wondering what was keeping you from dragging me out of bed at daybreak," the purple unicorn said.

"And what makes you think we'd do that?" Ash asked.

"I've seen how intense you are about finding your missing gems," Twilight answered, "So I figured you'd be chomping at the bit to start looking for them."

"Yeah," Soul said, mildly surprised at Twilight's choice of idiom, "but the... uh..." He paused, searching for the proper phrasing.

"The what?" Twilight asked.

Soul gave up and simply said, "Applejack insists we lend a hoof around the farm a little. Besides, it's not like we've got much of a clue as to where they all wound up."

"Well, you're welcome to use the library if you think it'll help," Twilight said, "and, if you don't mind, I'd like to join you on your search so I can keep the Princess updated."

"Have you even sent that last letter out yet?" Ash asked, emptying one of the baskets into the apple cart.

"No," Twilight said, "but that's no reason not to chronicle what you do."

"What'cha say boss?" Soul asked, looking at Ash, "In the mood for a tag-along this round?"

"Why not?" Ash said with a shrug, "In fact, any of your friends that want to can probably tag along if they want to. We'll probably need some insight now and again."

"Thanks," Twilight said.

"Now, if you'll excuse us," Soul said, emptying the last bucket and helping Ash hitch himself to the cart, "We need to go see if the *Meis* of Apples is pleased with our work."

Ashen Blaze froze and glared at Soul. "*Excuse* me?" he said icily.

"What? Did I use it wrong?" Soul asked, surprised, "Everypony keeps saying AJ's the best when it comes to apples."

"Even if that's true, you don't have the authority to give that title," Ash said, still giving the other stallion a death glare.

"It's a joke Ash," Soul replied, rolling his eyes and walking toward the farm house, "Lighten up."

"There's *nothing* funny about *Meis*," Ash retorted, following Soul.

"That's because you're such a sourpuss about it!" Soul snapped. The two continued to argue as they walked away from an increasingly confused Twilight Sparkle.

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As Twilight walked back to the library, she was surprised to meet up with Rarity coming from another part of town. "Good morning Rarity," she said, "You're up early, aren't you?"

"I could say the same for you," Rarity said, "Sweetie Bell woke up not long after you left, I think, and woke me up demanding breakfast. After I took care of that, I decided to go to the post office and have them forward my mail to the library for the time being. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," Twilight said, "I don't much mail any...way..." She stopped and gave herself a smack on the forehead. "Silly me," she said, chuckling, "*That's* how I can get my letter to Princess Celestia! I'm so used to having Spike send my letters, I forgot we even had a post office in town."

"Why wouldn't we?" Rarity asked, "Really Twilight, you're still not getting out enough, are you?"

"Probably not," Twilight replied, rolling her eyes, "I'm going to run ahead and take that letter to the post office. If Ashen Blaze and his friends show up before I get back, tell them I'll be right back, ok?"

"You can count on me," Rarity said. Twilight ran on ahead while Rarity continued at a leisurely pace. By the time she got to the library, Twilight had come and gone. The sound of approaching hooves made her pause in the middle of opening the door. She turned around and saw Ash, who looked to be overcoming a sour mood, along with his three companions and Applejack, who was wearing a set of full-looking saddlebags.

"Howdy Rarity," AJ said while they were still a short ways off, "Lovely morning, ain't it?"

"It is," Rarity said, "Twilight had to go drop a letter off at the post office, she'll be back shortly."

"That's fine," Ash said grumpily, "What's another few minute delay?" He walked past Rarity into the library, followed by an equally sour-looking Soul Mage.

"Don't worry about those two," Gale said, seeing the look on Rarity's face, "they just took their usual banter a bit too far this morning. They'll be ok."

"Well, I sure hope so," Applejack said, "They're not very good company this way." They went into the library, and Rarity caught the scent of baked goods. She looked at Applejack, who was opening one of her saddlebags. "I hope y'all are still hungry," the orange earth pony said, "I brought some of my famous apple fritters."

"Oo! Oo! Oo!" Sweetie Bell said excitedly as she dashed down the stairs. She skid to a stop in front of AJ and said, "I'll take one please." Applejack smiled as she handed the filly a fritter. "Thank you!" Sweetie said around the mouthful and walked over to a table to enjoy the treat.

"Anypony else?" AJ asked, looking around, "I made plenty."

"I'll take one," Ash said, looking over his shoulder from his spot in front of a bookcase.



Applejack reached into her saddlebag, but then stopped at looked up at Soul, who was standing across the room from Ash. "How about you Soul?" she asked.

"Sure," Soul said dully, "All that work used up most of my breakfast anyway."

"Well then come and get 'em," AJ said to both stallions. They looked at her, then and at each other, back to AJ, and finally back to each other. Smiling, they came over to the earth pony at the same time and claimed their apple fritters.

"Clever," Ash said appreciatively as he went to join Sweetie Bell at her table. Gale and Heart also took a fritter each, but Rarity declined claiming she was still full from her own breakfast. Since Ash and Soul had obviously forgiven each other, the mood in the library lightened considerably and the ponies simply enjoyed each other's company and the food until Twilight returned. The first thing she encountered upon entering the tree was Applejack offering her a fritter.

"Oh, thanks," she said, grabbing it with magic as she walked to her desk, "I wasn't expecting to see you here Applejack."

"Well, I must admit I'm curious what these four plan to get up to today," Applejack said, "'Sides, if y'all wind up going out of town fer some reason, y'all are prob'ly gonna need lunch." She opened the other saddle bag and displayed its contents: a bunch of sandwiches and some apple tarts.

"You're the best Applejack," Twilight said.

"So," Gold Heart said as Applejack struck a proud pose, "what *are* we going to get up to today?"

"I'm hoping to find the Emerald again," Ash said.

"But, it got broken," Rarity said, "Rather dramatically."

"Truth," Ash said, nodding, "But, that doesn't mean the energy's gone. It will have sought out the closest suitable emerald to take residence in. That means our best hope to find it again will be to look for places where there

are a lot of gems. That's still a long shot; however it is our only clue at the moment."

"Oh, I know just the place," Rarity exclaimed, "There's a rock field not too far outside of town that's simply brimming with gems, although most of them are pretty deeply buried."

"Yer not talkin' about those Diamond Dog mines are you?" Applejack asked.

"Diamond Dog?" Gale asked.

"A most uncouth and dirty bunch of canines," Rarity said, putting on the drama, "They inhabit a sprawling mine under the field, always looking for more jewels. Less than a year ago they kidnapped me, hoping to use my natural gift for finding gems to speed up their search. I can't think of a larger collection of gems around here than those mines."

"You can track gemstones?" Ash asked, intrigued, "That would be a very nice skill to have."

Rarity smiled and gave her mane a vain toss. "Then I insist you let me guide you," she said.

"Wow," Applejack said, "I figured those mines'd be the last place you'd ever want to go back to Rarity. You know, what with all the dirt and mud and smelly, mean Diamond Dogs that might try and hitch you up to a cart again?"

"Oh please Applejack," Rarity said, smiling at her friend, "I had those brutes wrapped around my hoof the entire time, remember? And I think I can stand a little dirt if it means helping our new friends." He smiled coyly at Ash, who blinked a few times, and then cleared his throat as an excuse to look away.

"Right," he said, "Thank you Rarity. Anyone else want to come along?"

"I'm coming," Twilight said, beginning to gather writing materials.

"If y'all are goin' to those mines, your definitely gonna need lunch," AJ said, "And if those dogs try to get rough, yer gonna need all the buckin' power you can get."

"Ooo! Can I go? Can I go?" Sweetie Bell asked, bouncing in place, "I've never met a Diamond Dog before."

"No Sweetie Bell," Rarity said, "this is serious business, not a pleasure trip. Besides, you have school in a few hours."

"Awww," Sweetie Bell whined, putting on the most pitiable face she could manage.

"Now don't try that," Rarity said, "I'm not going to change my mind."

"Fine!" the young filly snapped, and she ran off up the stairs.

"Who wants to bet she's going to try and follow us?" Soul asked after Sweetie's hoofsteps had faded away.

"If she were Scootaloo or Apple Bloom, I could almost guarantee it," Applejack said, "Sweetie Bell's usually got more sense than to try that, not on her own at least."

"Hmm," Rarity said, "I should probably make sure she gets to school before we head out. Would that be ok?"

"Shouldn't hurt anything," Ash said with a shrug.

# Chapter 4

As the group headed out of town, each equipped with saddlebags just in case, Gold Heart asked Rarity to tell them about her first experience with the Diamond Dogs. "Well," the white unicorn said, "It all started when Sapphire Shores came into my boutique just after I'd finished a design incorporating my entire stock of diamonds. She was so impressed with it she decided then and there to use it in her next production. However, she also wanted five identical pieces with different colors."

"Sorry to interrupt," Gale asked, "but who's Sapphire Shores?"

"The Pony of Pop of course," Rarity said, "Oh, sorry, I forgot how new you all are. She's one of the most famous earth pony entertainers out of Canterlot. To be asked to design not just one outfit, but *six*, for one of her shows..." She trailed off with a sigh and a dreamy look on her face.

"Anyway," she said, coming back to the present, "Since I didn't have any more gems and a limited time to complete the order, I had to go out and find as many as possible. I took Spike along with me because he can dig faster than me, and I had just had a pony-pedi." She paused and glanced at the out-worlders in case they were confused again.

"I think I get 'pony-pedi,'" Soul Mage said. The other three nodded.

"Good," Rarity continued, "we didn't even know about the Diamond Dogs or their mines at the time, so Spike and I simply sought out the gems buried just below the surface. Unbeknownst to us, the leaders of the Dogs were watching us, and when we stopped for the day they pounced, dragging me underground despite Spike's efforts to save me. He escaped and ran to get the others to come rescue me. As for me, the dogs tried to insist that I do all the work- locate the gems, dig them up, and cart them around. I was not about to be an easy captive, but I was pleasantly surprised to see how easily I could turn the situation around. By the time the others showed up, the dogs were not only willing to let me go, but insisted I take all the gems I'd found with me."

"So, what was the secret weapon?" Ashen Blaze asked, "You said you had them 'wrapped around your hoof' the whole time."

"I simply demanded the treatment a lady like myself deserves," Rarity said, "and I taught them a lesson on the difference between making a proper complaint and *whiining*." Her voice shot up several pitches on the last word, causing everypony to wince.

"That... that would do it I guess," Ash said with an appreciative smile, "And they just let you go?"

"They may be rude, crude, and have no sense of personal hygiene," Rarity said, "but they are not all that violent."

"Speak fer yerself," Applejack said, "We had to fight our way into the mines and buck off some guards tryin' to make us into work-ponies as well. Of course, they didn't give us much trouble after that..."

"I'm just worried about how they'll react to you Rarity," Twilight said, "The send-off they gave us seemed to imply we weren't welcome back."

"Don't you worry Twilight," Rarity said, "I'm sure they can be reasoned with."

"If not, you could give a refresher course in 'Complaint 101,'" Soul quipped. He grinned despite the disapproving looks most of the group gave him. Shortly, they arrived at the rock field and Rarity pointed them in the direction of the mine entrances. When they reached the spot, they saw that most of the large holes in the ground were filled with mounds of dirt.

"Ah, look," Rarity said, pointing, "There's one of those mutts."

"Good," Ash said, spotting the canine head popping out of a hole, "Now we'll know how they'll react." He called out and waved to the dog. Its eyes almost bugged out and it ducked into the hole, which began rapidly filling with dirt. "And there's our answer," Ash continued, "Oh well, that gives me an excuse to try something." He walked over to the nearest filled-in hole and began scraping at the dirt next to it.

"You ain't tryin to dig in are you?" Applejack asked, giving the fire-maned unicorn a strange look.

"Just stand back and watch," Ash answered, etching a complex pattern into the dirt. When he finished, he placed a hoof to either side of it and began

focusing his magic. His horn began to glow, followed by the pattern, and Ash began to sweat with the effort of working his spell. After several tense seconds, the dirt in the hole suddenly erupted out of the hole and flew off into the distance. Ash began shaking as the dirt continued to fly away, and just before he collapsed the dirt dwindled into a trickle and ceased to emerge from the pit. "Too much... personal... juice," Ash gasped as his legs gave out.

"Are you ok?" Heart asked as she and everypony else rushed over to his side.

"I'll be fine," Ash mumbled, "Just let me catch my breath. And drink some water. And eat a... lot."

"Here," AJ said, opening her saddlebag, fishing out a sandwich, and holding it out to him. Ash grunted his thanks and ate it quickly.

As he lay recuperating, Twilight and Soul watched the hole for signs of Diamond Dog activity. "That was a really powerful spell for somepony with his level of training," Twilight said.

"You haven't seen him at his peak," Soul said, "He's used to using the energy of the world around him to power his spells, and I think he's not able to do that in this world. Back home or in most other places we've been, that sort of spell might've been child's play. I've never seen him use it before though, so I'm just guessing."

"A pittance of power," Ash said, struggling to his feet. Rarity quickly moved to support him. "Thanks," he said, eliciting a slight blush from Rarity, "I'll be fine in a bit." His knees threatened to buckle a few times as he continued to breathe deeply, regaining his strength. As Soul turned his attention back to the hole, he spotted a face peering up from around a bend in the sloped tunnel. He quickly shot out a tendril of magic and had it chase the creature as it tried to turn and run. The Diamond Dog managed to slip out of sight, but Soul somehow snagged it around a foot and started to reel it in.

"A little help here?" he grunted as the dog slid back into view, scrabbling at the dirt for all it was worth. Twilight activated her magic and with their combined strength the two unicorns pulled the dog up to the surface. "Sup pup?" Soul quipped, grinning at the dog and swallowing his surprise at the ape-like size of its arms.

"Grrr, why you ponies come here?" the dog growled at him, "We not kidnapped any ponies! Go away!"

"So sorry to bother you," Rarity said, walking over after helping Ash lay down again, "But we're looking for a gemstone and I couldn't think of a better group of... fellows to lend us some help."

"Geeems?" The dog exclaimed, "You're the magic gem-finding pony Rarity. You don't need help! Search on the surface, leave Diamond Dog mines alone!"

"As much as I would like to," Rarity said, a measure of disgust sneaking onto her face for a split second, "My friends are looking for a very *particulargem*."

"Soooo?"

"So," Ash said, now standing more steadily, "We have no idea where it is and we hear you lot have quite the collection."

"Our jewels!" the dog shrieked, "You can't have them, any of them!"

"How about this," Rarity said, fixing the canine with a stare, "If you let us look for the gem and keep it if we find it, you can keep whatever other gems we may find along the way. And I promise we'll stay away from you from now on."

"Hrrrm," the dog said, thinking. "Fine," he said at last, "but you better be quick and no making the whining noises."

"Ok then," Ash said, "Let's go. Soul, Twilight, I think you can let him go now." The two unicorns cut their magic and the Diamond Dog dropped down into the tunnel. "Down we go then," Ash said, jumping into the hole. The other ponies exchanged a few glances before following him. As they slid down the dirt tunnel, Rarity decided that as rough as the dogs had been, she much preferred being carried down into the mines. Her coat was simply covered with dust by the time she landed next to her friends in one of the many intersections of the mines.

"Oh, this will take hours to fix," she said, looking to her mane. The Diamond Dog gave her a hard look. "I was just making an observation," she told it

before turning to Ash. "Now, how do you propose we conduct this search?" she asked.

"Well," Ash said, looking around, "I assume that since the Diamond Dogs are such avid gem hunters, they've got at least one big stash of gems laying around."

"Yes," the dog hissed, "*Our* gems."

"Which may hold what we need," Ash continued, "However, there's no guarantee the Emerald has been dug out yet, if it's even here. Therefore, I propose we split up. I'll lead one team to sort through the stored gems, while another accompanies Rarity around these tunnels looking for any possible candidates that are still buried. Remember, the Gems are about as big as my hoof, perfectly symmetrical, and flawless. Anything else is Diamond Dog property by default." Rarity seemed mildly disappointed for some reason. "So," Ash said, turning to face their reluctant guide, "Would you prefer finding us another helper to guide one group around the caves, or will you take us all to the storehouse and then lead the mining group?"

The dog's eyes rocked back and forth as he mulled the ideas over, and then marched off down a tunnel. "This way," he said. The ponies followed in his wake as he moved through the tunnels at a fast jog. Every so often, one of them noticed a large, helmeted Diamond Dog staring at them from another tunnel as they passed by, but no one stopped them until they came to a large cavern, where a pointy-eared Dog in a red vest stood in their path, glaring at the guide.

"What is this?" he demanded in a dissonant voice.

"Uh, these ponies are looking for a gem," the guide-dog said, starting to sweat.

"And you let them in?" Red-vest exclaimed, "What is wrong with your head?" Rarity stepped forward into the dog's view, giving him a smile tempered with a mildly scathing gaze. Red-vest's hands flew to his ears as he scrambled backwards shouting, "And you let *this one* in?"

"*This one*?" Rarity said, affronted, "Surely you haven't forgotten my name, have you?"



"N-n-no, uh, Miss Rarity," Red-vest said, "But why are you back? You *hate* us!"

"Like your friend there said," Rarity replied, waving dismissively at the guide, "We're looking for a certain gem which may be somewhere around here. I assure you I won't stay here longer than I must, but we can't conduct our search if you curs keep getting in our way. So, either help us, or go somewhere where I don't have to smell you."

"You're not going to get to us twice," Red-vest retorted, "Cry, whine, make any noises you want, I will not do what you- eep." He suddenly found himself floating up near the ceiling.

"I think you're confusing us for gentlemen.. er, gentlecolts I guess," Ash said, stepping forward with his horn aglow, "We've struck a deal with your buddy here already: we get to look around for awhile. If we find what we're looking for, we get to keep it. Either way, you keep all the other gems we unearth in the process. You know how good Rarity is at finding them, so I think this is to your advantage. Opinion?"

"Put me down!" Red-vest begged, "Put me down!" Ash brought him down, but kept him just off the ground, giving him a determined look. "All right, fine!" the dog said at last, "Do what you want, ponies." Ash nodded and released him. "Just leave us alone after you leave, please!" He ran off down a tunnel. Ash glanced at the guide, who flinched and began jogging along again. Within a few minutes, the group arrived in a chamber piled to the ceiling with gemstones. "Very nice," Ash said appreciatively.

"Uh, thanks," the guide said cautiously.

"All right," Applejack said, "How're we dividing up? I'll go with Rarity."

"Me too," Heart said.

"And our guide makes four," Ash said, looking at Soul, Gale, and Twilight. "Would you three mind staying with me? That'll give us three unicorns to speed up the sorting and three ponies who know exactly what to look for."

"Fine by me," Gale said as Soul nodded.

"I guess that's ok," Twilight said, looking to Rarity.

"Don't worry about me," Rarity said to her friend, "I'll be fine. A little digging won't hurt me. Much." She prodded the guide with a hoof. "Lead the way if you please," she said. He plodded out of the chamber, followed by Rarity and Heart.

"Here," AJ said, opening one of her saddlebags, "Y'all better take half the food in case you get hungry before we return." Soul transferred the food into his saddlebags, and then Applejack trotted off to catch up with her group.

"Ok folks," Ash said, lifting a bunch of gems out of the pile, "let's start sorting."

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After several minutes of sorting, Twilight started to get a feel for the general shape and size the others were looking for, and had managed to collect a small pile of them. Ashen Blaze, Soul Mage, and Gale weren't stockpiling their gems; each time they found a candidate they stepped on it briefly before shoving aside as a reject. Twilight was about to ask for an explanation, but was cut off by the arrival of Red-vest and another, bigger Diamond Dog. "Sup pups?" Soul asked them flippantly. The two dogs didn't answer; they simply sat down by the wall and watched the ponies with suspicion. "Ok then," Soul said, getting back to sorting, "glower away."

They worked on in silence for another few minutes until Twilight's curiosity got the better of her. "Something's been bugging me," she said, "I'm not an expert of transformations or anything of course, but it seems like you three and Gold Heart have adapted rather quickly to being ponies."

"This isn't our first pony world," Ashen Blaze said, "We wound up in a world similar to this one a few jumps ago. I'll spare you the details, but it was probably the worst and shortest episode of our quest, and only partially because I wasn't a unicorn there and thus had no magic whatsoever." He caught the lavender unicorn's eye and added, "From what I've seen so far, I have higher hopes for this version of pony-land."

"Equestria," Twilight said, "It's called Equestria."

"The other one wasn't," Gale said. She dug out a gem, looked it over, and then kicked it into the reject pile.

"Oh. So, how many worlds have you... tried to save so far?" Twilight asked.

"This is the fourteenth, counting our own," Gale said, "Two pony-worlds and twelve like home in some way or another. All in all, I think we've been chasing Tau'rin for... close to four years now."

"Wow," Twilight said, completely forgetting about the gems for the moment, "How'd you four end up being the ones to try and stop Tau'rin? No, wait, let me guess. You discovered a prophesy about him being released from some ancient prison and took on the challenge of stopping it, and then stopping him?"

"That's not a bad guess," Ash said, "Completely wrong, but perfectly reasonable. No, I think Tau'rin and Gems have actually been jumping around from world to world much longer than we've been involved. Soul, Heart, Gale, and I had met up years before Tau'rin appeared in our world and devoted ourselves to fighting evil and chaos. We called ourselves the Order-naries."

"Ordinaries?" Twilight asked, "That's a weird name for a team of heroes."

"No, Order-naries," Soul said, pronouncing it slowly, "As in mercenaries for the cause of Order, opposed to Chaos and whatnot."

"It was luck alone that got us involved with Tau'rin and gave us enough time to figure out how to use the Gems effectively." He rolled his eyes as a wistful smile crossed his lips. "And it was sheer, dumb, once-in-a-lifetime luck that we figured out we could hitch ourselves to the energy of the Gems and get pulled along after Tau'rin unleashed the Ultimate Chaos." His smile faded as he hung his head. "After that, it's been a horrible cycle, and all we've learned is that there's not much besides the Gems that can hurt Tau'rin, but bringing all of them together has always resulted in failure on our part."

"Then why bother gathering them?" Twiligth asked, "You're only speeding things along by finding them."

"If we don't find them, Tau'rin will," Ash said, looking at Twilight with a grim expression, "Once, we tried staying hands-off. We barely managed to catch a ride on the out-bound Gem energies before that world collapsed on us."

Our only options are to claim the Gems and fight, or die." Twilight stared speechlessly at Ash as he turned back to sorting through the pile of Gems.

"Sorry to put all that on you," Soul Mage said. Twilight just looked at him for a second before pulling out a sheaf of papers and began writing on them.

"I hope the Princess has some advice," she muttered, "And I hope I hear back from her before it's too late."

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The guide dog led Rarity's group down a maze of twists and turns, and they stopped every so often when Rarity's horn lit up in the presence of hidden gemstones. At the end of a half hour, they'd filled both of Heart's bags to capacity, forcing the usually airborne Pegasus to walk, and Applejack's empty bag was close to full again. "This is not what I was hoping for," Heart grouched.

"No, this is good," the guide said, visibly happier at the haul of gems they'd acquired, "They'll all be so happy with me for letting you in."

"Glad to help," Heart replied with undisguised sarcasm.

"I think this tunnel's cleared," Rarity said, looking around, "I'm not sensing any more gems."

"Come come then," the guide said, running off, "We try this way next!" Heart heaved a sigh as she followed the group down the tunnel.

"You ok sugar cube?" Applejack asked, looking over her shoulder at the golden-yellow pegasus.

"I'll be fine," Heart said, her gloomy term giving lie to her words.

"Don't like it underground much I take it?" AJ asked.

"Well, maybe a little," Heart said, "But it's more... let's just say I'm not used to walking everywhere I go." She muttered something else that Applejack didn't quite catch. She was about to pry when Rarity came to a sudden halt, her horn glowing and pointing down a side-tunnel they were passing. The guard continued on for a few steps until he realized the ponies had stopped.

"What is wrong?" he asked.

"There's a gem down there," Rarity said, nodding toward the tunnel.

"Not possible," the Diamond Dog said, "we dug that out completely months ago; no gems are left."

"The horn doesn't lie," Rarity said, walking into the tunnel.

"Are you sure there's nothing down there?" Heart asked the dog.

"Yes," he answered, "Can't dig there anymore anyway- too unstable, unless gems are in the floor."

"Hmm," Heart said, looking at the retreating figure of Rarity. A wry smile crossed her face and she galloped off after the unicorn.

"Guess we're goin' that-a-way," Applejack said, following them.

"Crazy ponies," the dog muttered, sitting down at the tunnel entrance. Heart pulled up even with Rarity and began looking around wildly in the light of Rarity's magic. When Applejack caught up to them, Heart thought she saw the light glint off something in the distance and ran ahead.

"Whoa there," Applejack called out, "Don't go too far! Ya might get lost." Silence was the only response for several seconds. All of a sudden the tunnel was flooded with light, leaving Rarity and Applejack blinking as their eyes adjusted.

"Rarity, Applejack," Heart said, flying back with a large diamond between her hooves and a distinct lack of saddlebags, "This is the Diamond of Light."

"Wow," Rarity said, staring in awe at the diamond, which was glowing with an internal light, "Can... can I get a closer look, please?"

"Go ahead," Heart said, dropping the gem in front of Rarity, "You should probably carry it anyway- I can't handle it and my bags at the same time." She flew back down the tunnel and returned a minute later with her saddlebags hanging loosely from her back. Rarity picked the Diamond up with her magic and looked it over.

"Simply perfect," she said with admiration, "Oh, the outfits I could build around this..." she smiled sheepishly at Heart's look after she said that. She cleared her throat and asked, "So, how does it work?"

"You concentrate while touching it," Heart said, walking toward the tunnel entrance, "but be careful- if you overdo it you might blind someone."

"Say," Applejack said, "Since you were makin' it glow, does that mean any pony can use it, or is that only 'cause y'all are... special?"

"Anyone can do it," Heart explained, "The Gems are so powerful that anything capable of thought can use magic if they hold one. However, that magic would be limited to the Gem's element."

"Interestin'" Applejack said simply.

"Do you want to try Applejack?" Rarity asked, moving the gem to float in front of the earth pony.

"Nah," AJ said, shaking her head, "I've been getting' along fine without magic mah whole life. I don't need to start dabblin' in it now, 'specially since I ain't going keep it, right?" Heart just nodded as Rarity put the Diamond into her bag. When they came out into the main tunnel, their guide gave them a quizzical look. Rarity pulled the Diamond out and showed it to him.

"Pretty," the guide said, entranced by the diamond.

"It's what we came to find," Heart said, "Here, you can take these." She pulled off her saddlebags and tossed them at the dog's feet. "I'm tired of carrying them, so if you want them, you carry them." She jumped back into flight and hovered until the dog slung the bags around his shoulders and began leading them back to the storage chamber.

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Back in the storage chamber, Ash's group had sorted through the entire pile, rejecting almost all the gems out of hand. When Rarity's group arrived, Ash had turned his attention to the line of ten gems Twilight had picked out which hadn't been tested yet. Soul waved as Rarity, AJ, and Heart entered. "Hey girls, how'd it go?" he asked.

"We may have found something," Heart said guardedly, eyeing Red-vest, "How about you?"

"About to finish up," Ash said, "mind lending a couple hooves?" Heart nodded and flew over to the line. Soul and Gale also walked over, and each of them placed a hoof on one of two gems. Heart kicked away the diamond under her left hoof, prompting Ash to discard the one he had and each took one of the remaining two. They all focused for several seconds, but nothing happened. "Welp," Ash said, kicking his two gems back toward the pile, "That's disappointing. So, where's the Diamond, Heart?"

"Rarity's got it," Heart said, going airborne again. Ash looked at Rarity, who pulled out the Gem. Ash grabbed it and put it into his own saddlebag.

"No offense," he said, "but the last time you held onto a Gem..."

"I understand, believe me," Rarity said, "Now, may we leave this wretched mine? I am in dire need of a full spa treatment."

"I'll pass on that," Applejack said, "but a simple bath sounds good to me."

As the ponies walked back to Ponyville, Rarity tried to talk each of the girls into letting her treat them a spa session and dropped some hints that she'd consider doing the same for Ash and Soul. Applejack stuck by her earlier statement that all she wanted was a bath, or even a quick dip in the lake to rinse off the worst of the dirt, while Twilight readily accepted. Gale declined, taking AJ's stance until Heart talked her into accepting a warm bath and pony-pedi.

"The baths are really quite nice," Rarity said, turning her attention to the stallions.

"I'm fine, really," Soul said, brushing off a little dirt.

"If I were you," Ash said, not taking his eyes off where he was going, "I'd be cautious with my money since my source of income has been replaced by a bunch of rocks."

"Oh, pish-posh," Rarity said, "I can certainly afford one round of pampering for everypony here. And if I ever do wind up short on cash, I could always sell a few gems. There's always a market for them in Canterlot."

"Pardon my uninformed opinion then," Ash said dryly, "I guess I shouldn't say no to washing off the aromas I've picked up today."

"Very well then," Rarity said with triumph, "To the bathhouse! Step lively!" She picked up speed, taking the lead.



# Chapter 5

The boys and Applejack finished their (private) baths rather quickly and met up outside the spa, having nothing else to do other than wait for the others.

"So," AJ said, breaking the awkward silence, "I guess that's one down, six to go?"

"Basically," Ashen Blaze said, pulling out the Diamond and looking it over, "Although, if we stick with the average, Tau'rin will have two or three of Gems by the time we locate him."

"What's this Tau'rin like?" Applejack asked.

"Evil," Soul Mage said, "loves Chaos, and hasn't needed to change his basic plan much in all this time. He'll try and find some pocket of darkness or underground overlord-wannabe to attach himself too, hunt the Gems as quietly as possible, and then try to launch some all-out, world-conquering plan once he can come up with one."

"And that points us right to him," Ash said, "Usually, by the time we meet, all seven Gems are in play, there's a big fight, and the combined energies fling us along just as the power of the Gems overwhelms Tau'rin's limited sanity and reality starts breaking down. It would be tedious if each world didn't give us a new set of people to rope in and different rules to work around. And even then..." His voice trailed off, and he gave the Diamond a spin with his magic, then stopped it and stared intently at it. The Gem began to glow faintly, and then a beam of light shot into the sky.

"What was that?" Gale asked, coming out of the spa, followed by Twilight.

"Just seeing if I could activate the Diamond through unicorn power," Ash said, stowing the gem away, "Where are Heart and Rarity?"

"Still in there," Gale said, inclining her head toward the door, "The two of us decided to forgo the mud facials and whatnot."

"You look good anyway," Soul said, "You should clean up more often Gale."

"Thanks," Gale said in a deadpan, giving the yellow unicorn a slight smile.

"Let's head over to the library," Twilight said, "They said they'll meet up with us there when they're done."

"Sounds good," Ash said, walking off.

As they walked down the streets of Ponyville, Twilight noticed that there weren't very many ponies out about their business, which was strange for the early afternoon. The weather was partly cloudy, but it looked like the weather pegasi were sticking to the schedule of no rain. There weren't many reasons Twilight could think of that would leave the streets so empty, and a glance over at Applejack told her that the earth pony was having similar thoughts, and both of them were probably coming to the same conclusion. The Order-nary ponies were taking in the sights but didn't seem to realize that things weren't quite normal. Twilight took the lead as they neared the library, but as she started to grip the door handle with her magic, she heard a soft "excuse me" to her left. She turned to look and saw Fluttershy peering around the side of the tree. "Sorry Twilight," she said in her soft tone, "But, could I have a word with you? Oh, and you too Applejack. If you don't mind." Twilight and AJ exchanged a look.

"You three go on ahead," Twilight said to the Order-naries, "We'll be right with you." She and Applejack walked over to the shy pegasus. Ash spared them a glance, and then walked up to the door and opened it. Before he could think, he was hit in the face by a mass of confetti accompanied by the sound of party horns.

"What the *skeb*?" he exclaimed in surprise. He and his friends walked into the library, which was full of ponies and decorated with balloons, streamers, and a banner declaring "Welcome to Ponyville!"

As the three ponies looked around, Pinkie Pie popped up in front of them and yelled, "Surprise!" Ash yelped and backed up into Gale. "Do you like it?" Pinkie asked, smiling broadly as she leaned forward toward Ash, "I usually hold parties at Sugar Cube Corner, but I figured you were more likely to come here." She dashed over and threw a front leg around Soul's shoulders, gesturing to all the guests with the other. "And just look,

practically every pony in Ponyville's here to meet you! Now you'll have lots of friends."

"Uh, thanks," Soul said, forcing a smile onto his face, "This is... quite the surprise."

"Not too unlike my first party," Twilight said from the door. The Order-naries turned around to look at her. Fluttershy was standing behind her, hanging her head shyly.

"Sorry," she said, "Pinkie insisted I make sure that one of you opened the door instead of Twilight."

"Yep!" Pinkie said, releasing Soul and starting to bounce in place, "It's always best when the guests of honor spring the surprise. Now come on, I'll introduce you to everyone!" She bounced away, and then stopped and looked back, "Oh, and don't worry about Spike Twilight, I put him up in his bed so no pony knocks him into something by accident." She resumed her bouncing, heading for the nearest group of ponies.

"Well," Gale said, "If she went to all this trouble, let's enjoy ourselves." Soul nodded, grinning, and the two of them followed the bouncing pink party pony. Ash followed them at a slower pace for a bit, and then veered off toward a table of refreshments. He loaded a plate with a couple of muffins, then plucked a few books off a nearby shelf, and worked his way through the crowd and up the stairs into the living area.

"Oh dear," Fluttershy said, watching him go, "I don't think he likes this."

"Reminds me of me," Twilight said, "Which is strange; he seemed so outgoing up till now, if a bit grim."

"What should we do?" Fluttershy asked.

"I don't know," Twilight asked, "Let's give him some time, maybe he'll come back down on his own soon." Fluttershy nodded and the two friends went to join the party.

When Rarity and Gold Heart showed up about an hour later, the party was in full swing. Having missed the introductions, Heart went to find Gale, which didn't prove too difficult since she'd gathered quite a crowd around

her at the Bean-bag Buck game. Bean-bag Buck involved launching small bean bags from a line on the floor and trying to get them into one of the buckets arranged against the wall. Most ponies would toss the bag with their front hooves, or with magic in the case of unicorns, but Gale had decided to take the name literally; she had her back to the baskets, sparing only a brief glance at them now and then, and would then kick a bag into the air with one rear leg and buck it toward the baskets with the other. She never missed the smallest, highest-value basket. Heart watched her with a smug smile for several minutes, and then flew over the crowd to join her friend.

"Hi Heart," Gale said, making another perfect kick, "I like your mane."

"Thanks," Heart said, bouncing her now slightly-curved brown mane on one hoof. "Say, shouldn't you give some other pony a chance?"

"Maybe," Gale said, prepping another bean-bag, "but no pony wants to challenge me."

"You could try to be less perfect," Heart said, watching the bean-bag sail into the basket. Gale rolled her eyes. "How about this then," Heart said. She spun around and pointed a hoof at a random spectator, a brown-on-brown stallion with an hourglass cutie-mark. "You sir," Heart said, "pick a basket, any basket, and we'll see if Gale here can hit it."

"Uh," the pony said, pointing to a mid-sized basket on the right, "That one." Gale looked at her new target, and then looked away, kicked up a bean-bag, and bucked it straight and true into the mid-sized basket.

"Anypony else want to challenge the unerring accuracy of Gale?" Heart asked, flying up to look over the crowd. Several hooves went up.

Meanwhile, Rarity found that Soul and Pinkie Pie had acquired a small audience of their own. The two of them were holding a conversation which had started with Soul being confused about the origin or morality or something ridiculously deep about the game of pin-the-tail-on-the-pony, but which had quickly become a sort of game where Soul tried to follow Pinkie's meandering and often abrupt changes of topic without getting "thrown." He seemed to be doing remarkably well, although he broke down into laughter shortly after Rarity joined the group. "Excuse me," Rarity said

after the yellow unicorn had caught his breath, "but has anypony seen Ashen Blaze?"

"He went upstairs almost the moment he got here," Twilight said, walking over from the food, "I think he's still up there."

"Well," Rarity said with a toss of her mane, "That simply will not do. I shall go have a word with him right now." She walked away with a determined and regal air in her posture.

"OOOoo," Pinkie said, eyes wide and sparkling, "I think she *likes* him!"

"What?" Soul asked, giving the pink pony a look of total confusion.

"One point for Pinkie," a lime-green, white-and-blue maned pony said.

"That doesn't... you're keeping score?" Soul sputtered, transferring his gaze to the speaker. "Never mind," he continued, shaking his head and looking back at Pinkie, "what do you mean she *likes* him?"

"Exactly that, silly," Pinkie answered, "Our little Rarity has a crush on Ash!"

"Oh," Soul said, looking worried, "That's not good. Ash has never been good with... closeness, the girls and I notwithstanding."

"Should we stop her then?" Twilight asked.

"No," Soul said after some thought, "If she really has feelings for Ash, he'll be the one to set her straight."

Rarity found Ash lying next to Twilight's bed reading a book. He glanced in her direction when he heard her hoofsteps before returning to his book. Rarity stood in silence, not quite sure how to address him. Part of her wanted to scold him for ignoring her and the party, but another part was afraid of angering him, and yet another didn't mind being alone with him. Finally, after a few tense minutes, Ash put the book down, closed his eyes, and said, "I am starting to wonder about what language I'm speaking."

Rarity blinked. "Excuse me?" she asked, confused.

"Barring a few logical changes to common expressions," Ash continued, "The words I hear register as English, and my team and I have had no trouble speaking to anypony. However," he lifted the book and turned it so Rarity could see the spine, "I can't decide if this script is English, Imperial, or something else entirely. And yet, the words make perfect sense to me. Quite the riddle."

"I... I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about," Rarity said as Ash's words swam about in her head, trying to find something familiar to latch onto.

"That's what you get when you walk in on my studies," Ash said. He opened his eyes slightly and smiled. "Don't let it bother you Rarity, confusion does not suit your face. Although, you may need to get used to it while my team and I are around." He stood up and set the book on the bed. "Am I correct in assuming you were chosen to convince me to join the party?" he asked.

"I came on my own," Rarity said, "The others seemed content to let you be alone."

"My team knows me, and the rest made a good judgment," Ash said, walking over to the basket-bed holding the petrified Spike, "I'm really a solitary critter at heart."

"Is that so?" Rarity said, "Well, you certainly had me fooled. Up until now you've been nothing but a gentlecolt to me and my friends, apologizing for every little inconvenience you think you're causing." Ash snorted in amusement, "Ok, my house being destroyed is a *big* inconvenience," the white unicorn continued, "but never mind that right now. You even seemed eager to have us along on your search."

"Did it ever occur to you that I'm simply using you?" Ash asked, looking up from the stone dragon, "You in particular with your gem sense, but also Applejack for her simple hospitality, Twilight for her knowledge of magic, and the pegasi for Heart's sake. Haven't you considered that if we weren't in such need, we wouldn't have much to do with you?"

"Your friends are having a good time downstairs," Rarity said, "and you get along with them so well."

"I need them," Ash said, "first and foremost they are my team, my anchors to reality and the only ones I can count on to quench my temper. They're my friends as well, but that's something we've grown into."

"Oh, I see," Rarity said, eyes narrowing, "You think you're too good to spend the time making new friends."

"Ha!" Ash laughed sardonically, "Good?" He walked over and looked Rarity right in the eyes. "If you knew me even a little, you'd hesitate to call me..." he trailed away, eyes suddenly going wide with surprise. His horn began to glow and he vanished from sight in a flash. A loud yelp cut through the party noise downstairs and Rarity ran down the stairs, reaching the ground floor just in time to see Soul run out the door with Ash hanging onto his back like a scared cat. Everypony stopped what they were doing to watch the undignified exit, and then several sets of eyes turned to look at her. Rarity was used to having lots of eyes on her, but this was entirely the wrong kind of attention. She felt her cheeks grow hot as the desire to run and hide grew strong in her chest. Fortunately, Fluttershy flew over to her, giving Rarity a reason to not give in to the fear.

"What happened?" the yellow pegasus asked, concerned only for her friend.

"I honestly don't know," Rarity said, seeing that Twilight, Heart, and Gale were also coming over, "I tried talking to him, but he was being so negative that we started to argue. For a second I thought he was going to explode again; he was staring at me so intently, but then he just teleported away."

"Wait," Gale said, "staring? He was looking you in the eye?"

"Yes," Rarity said, not sure where the brown earth pony was going.

"For how long?"

"A few seconds," Rarity said, "At least three, maybe four?" Heart and Gale exchanged surprised looks.

"What's the record again?" Heart asked.

"Two, not counting berserkers," Gale responded. The two ponies glanced at Rarity and then dashed out of the library, leaving the others with various expression of confusion.

"All right," Twilight said after a second, "There is no way I'm letting that go without some sort of explanation."

"Me too," Rarity said, joining her lavender friend as she headed determinedly for the door. They paused briefly upon encountering Pinkie Pie, who looked like her hair was about to deflate. "Don't mind us Pinkie," Rarity assured her, "It's a fabulous party, and we'll be back to enjoy it as soon as possible."

Pinkie was silent for a few seconds, but then her smile returned and her mane poofed out more. "Okie dokie loki!" she said and bounced off to brighten some other pony's day.

Twilight and Rarity left the library and walked into the middle of an argument between Soul and Ash, which Heart and Gale were standing well away from. "Are you *insane*?" Soul was shouting, "How could you possibly think alienating the only creature we've met who can come close to filling PC's role was a good idea?"

"Do I question your decisions about who to let close to you?" Ash retorted.

"If you think it's interfering with the mission, yes!" Soul said, "You have before and you know it, so don't get all high-and-mighty on me!"

"Well, what would you have done? I swear, one more minute and she'd have..." Ash's rant was cut short as he saw that Twilight and Rarity had shown up. He blew out a long breath and dropped his head a little.

"Botherment," he muttered.

"Hi girls," Soul said dully, "Sorry you had to hear that." He looked at the expressions of worry and confusion on Rarity's face and the determined set of Twilight's eyes and gave Ash a smirk. "Looks like you've got some 'splaining to do," he said. Ash just glowered at him.

"Oh, you boys," Gale said, stepping between them, "I'll take this, you two go off and cool down." The male unicorns shared a quick, stony glance and walked away. "Ok," Gale said, looking at Twilight and Rarity, "first, I think



Ash owes you an apology or two Rarity. Just make sure one of us is around when you try to get it."

"I just want to know where that melancholy came from," Rarity said.

"He... hasn't had an easy life," Gale said slowly, "He doesn't really open up to people very easily, and even then it takes incredible circumstances to make him say anything about his life before meeting us. The real problem is he never really forgives himself for his mistakes unless he can completely reverse their consequences. If it weren't for Soul, Heart, and me supporting him, I think he'd lose the will to keep going."

"Oh my," Rarity said, looking over at Ash, who was engaged in a quiet, and apparently civil, conversation with Soul.

"So, what was the big deal about his eyes?" Twilight asked.

"I'll answer that," Ash said, coming over with Soul to rejoin the group, "Ordinarily, nothing can meet my gaze for more than a few seconds, except for those under some sort of mind control. However, it seems that detail wasn't included with this pony shape. Soul here actually beat me in a staring contest just now." A smug smile crossed the golden-yellow unicorn's face for a moment. Ash turned to Rarity and gave her a small smile. "It wasn't the way I'd have preferred to learn the fact, but I guess it did spare you from a full-on tantrum from me." He bowed his head. "Forgive me my foul humor."

Rarity regarded the penitent unicorn for a few minutes, and then said, "Think nothing of it. Now, there is still a party in your honor occurring; will you attend it?"

Ash raised his head, a ghost of a smile on his lips. "I'll give it a try I guess."

"Very well," Rarity said, moving to stand beside him, "Then let us go."

# Chapter 6

While Ashen Blaze was not the greatest party guest ever to attend a Pinkie Pie party, he did manage to last through until Twilight insisted that everypony clear out of the library so she could have some peaceful study time before bed. Applejack had stayed behind to help clean up, so the Order-naries were walking back to Sweet Apple Acres on their own. Gold Heart was flying overhead, pulling loop-de-loops and spins and other simple tricks to use up the excess energy from all the sugar she'd ingested over the course of the afternoon. "Today was awesome!" she shouted, "Finding a Gem, a trip to a spa, meeting new friends, and a party! With food! Food made by ponies, of all things! That tasted *amazing*! Best day ever!"

"You're starting to sound like Pinkie Pie up there," Soul Mage said, smiling, "Or Rainbow Dash."

"Don't care!" Heart responded, turning upside down and giving her brother a huge grin, "I'm on a sugar high." With a whoop, she flew off ahead of the group.

"So Ash," Gale said, watching the pegasus fly off, "did you enjoy yourself?"

"Meh," Ash replied, looking straight ahead.

"A c'mon," Soul said, "just because a few ponies laughed at your dancing..."

"That's not it," Ash said, "besides, they laughed louder at you." Soul stuck his tongue out at the grey unicorn. "It's just that we could have used that time to figure out how we're going to locate the rest of the Gems," Ash continued, "Unless you just want to wait for Tau'rin to find them all first."

"Not on your life," Gale said with an accusing look. By this point, the group had caught up to Heart, who was mimicking Pinkie's bounce-trot, in place, about six feet off the ground, to the confusion and amusement of a couple passers-by. She stopped when she saw the others and resumed flying above them.

"So," Ash said, blatantly ignoring Heart's antics, "How do you propose we find the rest of the Gems?"

"Oh!" Heart exclaimed, causing everyone to look up at her, "I was talking to a bunch of ponies about what happened when we warped in. A few of them saw something flying toward that forest near Fluttershy's place. One of them, I think it was the mail-pony; you know, the wonky-eyed one? Anyway, she said she saw *two* things fly that way after the boom."

"Ok, go easy on the sugar next time sis," Soul said, trying to keep up with Heart's train of thought. Heart gave him a quick salute as she nodded.

"Well done," Ash said, "Tomorrow let's get some information on that forest and organize a search pattern. With luck, we can probably head out after those Gems, if that's what they were, right after lunch."

"You're including the morning chores in those calculations, right?" Soul asked.

Ash slowed down slightly, blinking, and then his eyes narrowed slightly. "Ah *skvetch*."

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The next morning, to Ash's joy, Applejack told her tenants they would not have to buck any apples that day. That joy turned into disappointment almost instantly when the orange earth pony then instructed Ash and Soul to hitch themselves up to a pair of fully laden carts of apples. "It's my day to mind the stall at the market," AJ said, "and Big Mac's gonna be apple-bucking for tomorrow's stock, so y'all are gonna help me get these apples into town."

"What about Gale and Heart?" Ash asked darkly, eyeing the two mares.

"Somepony's got to help me set up the stall," Applejack said simply.

"I guess we'll see you there then," Soul said, backing into the harness of the first cart. Ash grumbled as he slipped into the second one. Applejack just smiled after making sure they were both ready to go and then galloped off toward town with the girls in tow.

"I'm sick of this," Ash said, watching them go.

"We haven't even started yet," Soul commented, heaving forward to get his cart started. "Besides, a little manual labor in the morning gets you in shape for the rest of the day."

"I'm a mage," Ash grouched, plodding along behind Soul's cart, "physical effort isn't my thing."

"Poor thing," Soul said, voice dripping with sarcasm, "That cart too heavy for you? Here, let me help." He reached out with his magic, plucked an apple out of Ash's cart, and put it in his own. "There you go," the yellow unicorn said with a mischievous grin. He accelerated to a fast trot as Ash yelled protests at him. "Speed it up," Soul shouted back, "you'll never catch me at that rate!"

"*Skvetchte* little..." Ash growled, but the corners of his mouth twitched upward, threatening to spoil his façade of outrage.

By the time the two unicorns arrived at the market, only slightly winded and in good moods, AJ and the girls had just finished preparing the stall. Setting the apple baskets out was the work of a few minutes. "Thanks y'all," Applejack said, "That's all I need ya for today, so go ahead and do whatever ya need to."

"No problem AJ," Gale said, "See you later." With that, the Order-naries made their way to the library. When they arrived, they saw Sweetie Bell trotting away toward the school house as Rarity closed the front door and turned a key in the lock.

"Is Twilight out?" Ash asked as they approached.

"Yes," Rarity said, "She's out shopping for whatever she can find for those potions we found a couple days ago. After that, she's going to Zecora's place to get her opinion on those potions."

"Then where are you off to?" Heart asked.

"Over to Fluttershy's," the Rarity said, "I want to see how my poor Opalescence is doing with her recovery. Did you four need something?"

"We were hoping to get some research done on a lead we've discovered," Ash said, "But if Twilight's not here, that might take too long. We'll... just go see if we can find her in town."

"Very well," the white unicorn said with a nod, "have a nice day." She walked away, seemingly unaware that Ash was watching her with a curious look on his face.

"Do my eyes deceive me?" Soul asked light-heartedly, giving the ahs-grey unicorn a playful push, "or do I see attraction in your eyes Ashen Blaze?"

"You need glasses," Ash said flatly, turning back toward the market, "Come on, we've got a librarian to find." Soul exchanged a satisfied smile with Heart as they and Gale followed their *de facto* leader.

As they walked past Sugar Cube Corner, they heard a familiar cheerful voice chatting away inside. Heart, Soul, and Gale all smiled and rolled their eyes, only to have those smiles chased away by a big gasp. "Ash! Hey Ashen Blaze! Hold on a second!" The four ponies turned to see Pinkie bounding out of the bakery toward them. "I've got something I absolutely have to give to you right now!"

"What is it Pink...ie?" Ash asked, voice trailing as he saw that Pinkie Pie was wearing a familiar-looking thing on her head. It was a metal device shaped like the right half of a helmet, held in place by a padded wire that went over the left side of her head. From the helmet protruded a small microphone that hung near the corner of Pinkie's mouth, a transparent green screen over her right eye, and what looked like a tiny speaker in her ear. "What... how... where'd you find that?" Ash sputtered, completely surprised.

"This?" Pinkie asked, tilting her head, "Isn't it cool? Guess what? It lets me talk to some pony far, far away from here. He's kind of a mean, sarcastic snarky-pants, but I think I'm helping him brighten up." She paused as a sound the others couldn't quite make out came out of the device's speaker. "Oh, right," she said, "He says I need to give this to you Ash, so here you go!" She pulled the thing off her head, somehow maintaining her balance on her hind legs alone, and held it out. Ash snatched it up with magic and settled it onto his head, a genuine smile of glee on his face as he adjusted the eyepiece, mike, and speaker.

"PC, old buddy!" he said, "Somebody must like me a lot to let me have you this time. You've just made this second pony-world so much easier..." His face fell into a longsuffering expression as the device spoke to him. "No, I'm not," he said, "You just got done spending time with Pinkie Pie and you think I'm the crazy one? Ok, you know what? Shut up and start scanning. Usual signatures, minus the Diamond. We'll settle the sanity issue later." He strode off purposefully in the direction of Fluttershy's cottage, leaving an amused trio of friends and a briefly befuddled Pinkie Pie in his wake.

"A pony and his computer,' Soul quipped, "It's a wonderful thing."

"Where did you find it Pinkie?" Gale asked.

"Umm..." Pinkie said, making a show of thinking, "Well, after you guys landed by the chickens and were all 'ohmygoshwherearewe?' and ran off and Twilight and Redheart followed you, I got this pinchy-twitchy feeling telling me there was something hiding in a bush so I went to look and found that thingy. I was curious about it, but then I heard you talking about lunch and I was all '*gaaasp* I need to invite them to lunch!' so I forgot about it and came over to you. Then yesterday I got the pinchy-twitch again and found it again and-" Soul put a hoof over the pink pony's mouth to give himself some time to process the story.

"And then PC decided he'd acknowledge you and began pestering you to return him to Ash," he said after his head stopped spinning, "Which you have done, and he's grateful beyond measure. That sum it up?" Pinkie nodded and Soul removed his hoof. "Now, if that's all, we'll be going." He and the girls hurried to catch up with Ash before Pinkie could properly respond. Pinkie watched them go until her brain reminded her that she had cookies ready to put into the oven.

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When the Order-naries arrived at the gate to Fluttershy's yard, Rarity was just stepping out of the cottage and thanking the pegasus for taking care of her cat. Fluttershy's acknowledgement of the thanks was cut off by a gasp from Rarity when she spotted the group. "Ashen Blaze," she said, "what is that thing on your head?"

"PC," Ash said simply, "Short for Portable Computer." Ignoring the confused looks on Rarity's and Fluttershy's faces, he turned toward the forest and set PC to scanning for Gems again.

Gale decided to come to the rescue. "It's basically an intelligent tool," she said, walking over to the two ponies, "Ash uses it to locate the Gems, analyze spells and things that stand in our way, and is frequently insulted by its sarcastic sense of humor."

"I don't get insulted, I get annoyed," Ash said, "PC loves to heckle me whenever I ask for his help." The eyepiece flashed and he glared at it. "I know you can hear me," he said, "You're on my head! How could you *not* hear me?"

"Stating the obvious isn't going to help your case Ash," Soul said.

"You be quiet," the unicorn said to Soul, "you're only getting half the conversation anyway."

"Well, excuse me," Soul said with a snort, "Have you two found anything yet, or has your little debate distracted you?"

"Um..." Ash said uncertainly. The eyepiece flashed again, and the unicorn smiled. "As a matter of fact," he said smugly, "Yes. Two distinct signals- the Ruby and one other that's too far out to identify yet. Both are that way." He pointed toward the Everfree Forest.

"In... in there?" Fluttershy asked quietly, shrinking back a little, "but... that's the Everfree Forest! You don't want to go in there."

"There are two Gems in there, so I think we do," Ashen Blaze said, "What's so spooky about a forest anyway?"

"Oh, it's a horrible, scary place," Fluttershy insisted, her voice gaining some strength even as she began to quiver in fear, "Nothing there works like it should. The weather changes, the even the little animals don't listen to you, and the plants grow *all by themselves*." Ashen Blaze, Soul Mage, Gold Heart, and Gale simply stared at the meek yellow pegasus slack-jawed for a few seconds until one of them cracked out a chuckle and all four fell to the ground in uproarious laughter. "Wh-what?" Fluttershy asked, looking at

Rarity in horror, "did I say it wrong? I... I don't understand." Rarity just gave her a confused look.

After a few minutes, the Order-naries recovered enough to stand back up, although they were all still chuckling and giggling. "Hahahooo," Ash said, wiping tears from his eyes, "You... you're serious, aren't you?" He looked at Fluttershy and almost broke down again. "Ho boy," he said, catching his breath, "Ah, c'mon team, let's get moving. Those Gems are waiting." The four ponies turned and galloped into the forest, ignoring Twilight, who had just arrived with a set of saddlebags and the petrified Spike strapped to her back. The lavender pony watched the Order-naries run off laughing into the forest and then went over to Rarity and Fluttershy.

"I missed something, didn't I?" she asked.

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Soul Mage and Ashen Blaze were still laughing as the Order-naries walked deeper into the Everfree Forest, but Gold Heart was beginning to feel bad about it. "Fluttershy seemed so scared," she said.

"Pah, she's the type to be scared of her own shadow," Ash said off-handedly, "Heck, I think that statement might be literal truth." He reared up and waved his hooves menacingly at a random tree. "Oh no," he said in mock horror, "No pony had a hoof in planting this tree! And it's grown up big and strong without any attention at all! How terrible that nature should work unsupervised!"

"Well," Heart said, "I know for a fact that the pegasi manage the weather around ponyville. Rainbow Dash showed me how she moves clouds around and kicks them away if they're not needed."

"Weather control I can accept," Ash said, "Every magic-based society worth its spells dabbles in the weather."

"It's the animals that get me," Soul said, "I know Fluttershy's a true blue animal lover and all, but the way she was talking about 'the little animals taking care of themselves' makes me think she's coddling the lot. How's the world supposed to work if you feed and protect every single little rodent, bird, and other prey species that you live around?"



"Truth," Ash declared, "and as forests go, this isn't that bad. Sure, the sun's light isn't filtering in through the canopy like I think it should, but I don't see anything scary." A sudden rustling of a nearby bush gave the unicorn a start, but he laughed it off saying, "Ah, it's nothing. Probably just a little critter we scared off." The bush rustled again and a white feathered bird head popped out. "Or a chicken..." Ash said, giving it a strange look, "Must be one of Fluttershy's." The "chicken" crowed as it raised itself out of the bush, and then kept going upward revealing its scaly body and long, serpentine tail. Ash's irises shrank as the cockatrice's eyes glowed red. "Oh, *skve*-" was all he could manage before he turned to stone. The cockatrice sneered in triumph, which was quite a feat considering it didn't have teeth or lips, before turning on the other three ponies. They all averted their eyes quickly, trying to come up with a plan.

"Heart," Soul said in a low voice as the cockatrice slithered around the trio, looking for an opening in their defense, "Think you could hit it with a blind shot?"

"Possibly," the golden-yellow pegasus responded, covering her eyes with a wing, "The odds aren't good though."

"What do we do about Ash?" Gale hissed, trying to watch the monster's movements without actually looking, "How do we reverse a petrification without magic?"

"I don't know," Soul said. The cockatrice lost its patience at that point and charged the ponies, knocking them into each other so that they went sprawling and left their eyes briefly exposed. The monster locked eyes with Gale and clucked evilly as it readied its stony gaze. Just as its eyes turned red, it was distracted by a loud, angry voice.

"And just *what* are you doing?" the stern voice demanded. The cockatrice visibly gulped and turned around slowly. The three Order-nary ponies looked up to see the monster quailing under the intense gaze of Fluttershy's Stare. Their jaws dropped as the pink-haired pegasus walked toward the cockatrice, which was making small, terrified noises as it tried to back away. "Oh yes," Fluttershy said, "you're the same one, aren't you? I thought I'd made myself clear last time; you don't go around turning ponies or innocent creatures to stone. This is your second warning young bird. Don't let me catch you doing this again, or I *will* tell your mother!" Soul's left

eye began twitching in response to reaching a level of confusion he'd never imagined possible. He couldn't even *begin* to describe what was wrong with that logic, and it seemed to be working! Fluttershy kept her gaze on the cockatrice until the thing snapped and tried to run away. "A-*hem*," Fluttershy said, "Aren't you forgetting something?" The cockatrice hung its head in shame and slithered over to Ashen Blaze. It turned its gaze on the stone unicorn at full power and Ash quickly returned to normal, wobbling on his feet as his eyes rolled in disorientation. "That's better," Fluttershy said in a calmer voice, her eyes soft and kind once again, "now run along." The cockatrice didn't need to be told twice. It fluttered away into the depths of the forest as fast as it could. After it had disappeared, the Order-naires looked back at Fluttershy to see that she'd been joined by Twilight Sparkle and Rarity.

"What... just happened?" Ash asked, still a little dizzy, "Where's that... uh..."

"Cockatrice," Twilight supplied.

"Thanks," Ash said with a nod, "What happened to it?"

"Fluttershy happened," Gale said simply.

"What?" Ash asked.

"Fluttershy got rid of the cockatrice," Gale said with admiration.

"*What?*" Ash repeated, incredulous.

"Fluttershy gave the cockatrice a scolding and a hard look, and it changed you back before fleeing."

"What," Ash said flatly, utter disbelief on his face, "Fluttershy, you... stared down a cockatrice?"

"Yes," Fluttershy said humbly.

"You *stared down* a cockatrice."

"Y-yes."

"You. Stared down. A *cockatrice*?"

"I think we've established that fact Ash," Soul said, annoyed, "Thank you." Ash just kept staring at Fluttershy like he'd never seen her before. The Pegasus blushed and tried to hide behind her mane.

"Uh..." she mumbled, "Could you please... stop staring please... if you... if you don't mind. I'd really like it."

Ash flung himself at Fluttershy's feet, eliciting a squeak of surprise from her. "Oh, I am truly in the presence of a master," he said, prostrating himself, "I beg of you, oh *Meis* of the Stare, teach me your secrets!"

"Ok," Soul said as he and Gale moved to pick Ash up off the ground, "You're now officially broken, Ashen Blaze. Take a few breaths, drink some water if you can find it, and stopping freaking the poor pegasus out."

"I am fine," Ash declared, taking advantage of Gale and Soul's support to strike a dramatic pose pointing in Fluttershy's direction, "I am merely begging this wonderful creature to bestow her secrets upon me."

"You called her a *Meis*," Gale said, "You never do that. You're broken."

"She deserves it! Far more than any being I've ever met!" Ash said passionately. Gale and Soul exchanged a glance, and then dropped the unicorn with a collective sigh. Ash picked himself up, re-adjusted PC, and brushed off the worst of the dirt, suddenly sober again.

"You're right," he said, "We're wasting time here. Onward!"

"Hold up," Twilight said, "You're not thinking of going off alone after what just happened."

"I'm not alone," Ash said, "I've got three other ponies and a snarky computer with me." He tapped PC a couple times and tried to walk away again.

"You have no idea what you're getting yourselves into," Twilight said.

"Well, we know there's a cockatrice out there now," Gale said.

"There are also manticores, hydras, Ursa Majors, and cranky, full-grown dragons among other things," Twilight said, "and that's just the animal life."

"You've seen all this then," Ash said, giving the unicorn a measured look.

"I've traveled through the Everfree Forest many times," Twilight said, "Mostly to visit Zecora, but my friends and I have gone all the way to the ruined castle at the forest's heart."

"Could you guide us then?" Heart asked, "We could use somepony with experience." She gave Ash a meaningful look.

"I'd like to," Twilight said, indicating the stone dragon on her back, "but I need to stop by Zecora's place and see if she can do anything about Spike."

"Which way is this Zecora?" Ash asked. Twilight pointed and the grey unicorn turned to look. "PC," he said, "where are... oh. Ah, that's convenient." He turned back to Twilight and said, "It seems the closer of the two Gems is in that general direction, so we'll go with you, if you'll have us."

"Sure," Twilight said, smiling, "Follow me. And don't step on any blue flowers."

"So," Gale asked after they'd been walking for a while, "If this forest's so... weird to you, what kind of pony would make their home here?" Twilight opened her mouth to answer, only to close it again as a cloaked figure emerged from behind a tree.

"Seven ponies I see," it said, "four of which are strangers to me."

"Hello Zecora," Twilight said, smiling, "How are you today?"

"I am doing well," Zecora said, "From your burden, I see you have a tale to tell. Before we go to my home, will you make these newcomer's names known?"

"Does she always rhyme?" Ash asked in a low tone. Twilight nodded. Rolling his eyes, Ash stepped forward and nodded to Zecora. "I am Ashen

Blaze," he told her, "and these are my friends Soul Mage, Gold Heart, and Gale."

"It is good to meet you," Zecora said, "Now come, I have prepared stew." She turned away and led the group through the trees to her hut.

"Ooo, tribal," Soul said appreciatively as he stepped inside, looking around at the masks, rugs, and the simmering cauldron in the center of the room. "Am I right in guessing you aren't from around here?"

"Your guess is correct Soul Mage," Zecora said, removing her cloak, "You seem rather learned for a Ponyvillager your age." Soul would've adopted a smug look if he hadn't been taken aback by the revelation that Zecora was a zebra.

"Uh... thanks," he said.

Zecora turned to Twilight, who was in the process of setting Spike on the floor. "Tell me of the burden you bear," she said, "He seems to be the victim of a cockatrice stare."

"Actually, he's not," Twilight said, "This happened from a magic... accident."

"That hardly does it justice," Rarity said, "He tried to eat a magical gemstone, but when he bit down the energy rushed out and did this to him, along with destroying my shop in an earthquake."

"This is a magic I do not know," Zecora said, looking closely at Spike, "Although I can see around him a green glow..."

"Oh really?" Ash said, surprised, "Not many have the sight to see elemental energy, at least in my experience. If you can see it, maybe you can find a spell to fix him."

"Magic and spells are not my talent," the zebra said, "It lies in potions, teas, and unguents." Heart, Soul, and Gale all looked impressed at that particular rhyme.

"I was hoping to make use of that talent," Twilight said, pulling out a sheaf of papers and floating them over to Zecora, "I've put together a list of

potions and salves that I think might undo the spell. I even looked through *Supernaturals*, although the best I could find was cures for cockatrice petrification." Zecora took the papers and leafed through them, tossing most of them aside.

"Your diligence in research is to be praised Twilight," she said, "Although most of these simply are not right. There are only two here that may cure Spike, but to try them both will require many nights."

"If you need ingredients, I brought as many as I could find in town," Twilight said, removing her saddlebags.

"Again I applaud your devotion," Zecora said with a smile, "But I will need Everfree herbs to complete either potion." She stuck her nose into each bag and sniffed. "Oh," she said in surprise, "I have underestimated your Ponyville stores. With all of these, I require but two plants more."

"Will you need help finding them?" Rarity asked, not looking too eager at the prospect. She hid a sigh of relief when the zebra simply shook her head.

"Welp," Ash said, "I don't think there's any more reason for me and my team to stay here. It was nice to meet you Zecora. I hope you don't mind if we take a pass on the stew."

"Fare you well new friends of mine," Zecora said with nod, "come again when you find the time."

"We'll be going too," Twilight said, "Let me know when you've done what you can." Zecora nodded and saw the ponies to the door.

# Chapter 7

After they left the clearing around Zecora's hut, Ashen Blaze took a moment to re-orient himself in the Gem's direction. "Definitely the Ruby," he said, grinning, "my personal favorite."

"Which element does it house?" Rarity asked as they began walking.

"Take a guess," Ash said, tossing his head to make his mane dance like the flames it resembled.

"Fire," Rarity said.

"Bingo," Ash said, grinning again, "Not the most constructive of elements, but not the most destructive either. It fits perfectly with my style of battle magic."

"You have an entire set of spells just for fighting?" Twilight asked, "Why?"

"Why not?" Ash replied, "You've got to be ready to defend yourself, and sometimes your opponent just won't respond to gentle persuasion. Tau'rin's the perfect example." He looked at Twilight out of the corner of his eye.

"Keep in mind, we Order-naries will be facing Tau'rin at some point in the future. If you aren't willing or able to fight him, don't be around us when the showdown happens."

"When will that be?" Fluttershy asked.

"No idea," Ash said, "Once all seven Gems are accounted for, it will be a matter of days at most. If today goes well, we'll have three of them in hand. Make of that what you will." Fluttershy whimpered but kept up her pace.

After about a half hour of walking, Ashen Blaze began to grow excited as the energy signature of the Ruby drew closer. He was so focused on the data displayed on PC's eyepiece that he didn't see the cliff until Heart flew in front of him with front legs spread wide as Soul snagged his tail in his mouth and pulled the ash-grey pony back from the precipice.

"Congratulations," Soul said sarcastically after dropping Ash's tail, "you're an idiot."

"Oi," Ash said crossly, glaring over his shoulder, "That was uncalled for."

"Sorry," the golden-yellow Pegasus said, and then narrowed his eyes and said, "Congratulations, you're blind," in the same tone as before. "Actually," he said after thinking for a second, "that doesn't work as well."

"No, it doesn't," Ash said in a deadpan before turning his attention to the cliff. "It's down there, isn't it?" he asked, and then rolled his eyes as PC responded. "A simple yes will do," he told the computer, "Now... huh? No, no I am not going to argue with you right now. Make yourself useful and find me a way down or switch off." The eyepiece went dark and Ash groaned as he put a hoof to his forehead. "Botherment..."

"Why do you use that thing if it's so rude to you?" Rarity asked.

"I don't have much choice," Ash said, "PC developed that personality on his own, and I don't exactly have the means to replace or alter him right now. He's not usually so bad; I think he's still adjusting to whatever changes were forced onto his hardware... Anyway, how do we get down there?" He looked over the edge of the cliff, and then stepped back as a wave of acrophobia hit him. Twilight approached the cliff and looked down.

"This looks familiar," she said, "I think this is the cliff we fell off while looking for the Elements of Harmony."

"You're right," Fluttershy said, joining her friend, "I can see the place where we encountered that poor manticore."

"Poor manticore?" Soul asked, giving the pale yellow pegasus a weird look.

"He had a thorn stuck in his paw," Fluttershy explained, "It made him very irritable, but when I pulled it out, he calmed right down and let us pass."

"Tames manticores and stares down *skvetchte* cockatrices," Ash muttered in amazement, "you're just full of surprises Fluttershy."

"Oh," Fluttershy said modestly, "It's nothing, really. I'm just good with animals."



"You said you fell off this cliff Twilight?" Heart asked, looking down, "How'd you survive?"

"Well, there was an outcropping of rock," Twilight said, pointing off to the right, "It turned out that the weight of six ponies was too much for it, so it gave way. Applejack managed to stop herself from sliding off and held me up while Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy caught Rarity and Pinkie. After those two were safely on the ground, Dash and Fluttershy brought me down."

"How'd AJ get down?" Gale asked.

"She hopped down," Rarity said, "there should be a series of boulders we could use to do the same." She walked along the edge, and then hopped down after finding a promising ledge. "Follow me dears," she said as everypony went over to check on her, "This doesn't appear to be too difficult." She worked her down as the other unicorns and Gale exchanged glances and followed her. Fluttershy and Heart took to the air and flew alongside the others to insure their safety. Within a minute the seven of them were on the canyon floor and Ash was trying to coax PC back into activity.

"I said switch off, not power down," he muttered, removing the computer and looking it over. With a snort he pressed a button he found near the eyepiece and put it back on his head as it booted back up. "Recall our last conversation?" he asked it, and text flashed across the eyepiece in response. "Get scanning then; it's close." He looked around slowly as the computer worked, and then nodded toward the passage leading out. The ponies followed him out into the trees again, where he made a hard left and followed the cliff for a while. He slowed as they discovered a cave in the distance and began looking around again. "Something's coming," he said, "big something." The relative silence of the forest was quickly shattered by a roar and the ponies scattered as a large scorpion tail swung in their direction from a shadowy clump of trees. The tail's owner, a manticore, stepped out into the light and roared at the group again.

"Friend of yours, Fluttershy?" Soul asked. The pegasus just squeaked as the manticore growled threateningly. "I think I'm going to vote for a retreat," Soul said.

"No way," Ash said, activating his magic, "We're too close to let some beast get in our way." His saddlebag opened and the Diamond floated out to hover near his head. "Let's see how it likes bright lights." He charged forward as the Gem began to glow, only to be swatted back by the manticore's huge paw. Soul caught the Diamond as it flew out of Ash's magical grip.

"My vote still stands," the golden-yellow unicorn said. Ash just glared as he regained his feet and grabbed the Diamond again.

"Wait," Fluttershy said suddenly, "don't hurt him. I recognize this manticore now." She spread her wings and flew cautiously toward the beast. It growled and raised its tail, but hesitated as Fluttershy made reassuring noises. It sniffed her a few times, and then settled back as recognition registered in its eyes. "Oh good," Fluttershy said, smiling, "You do remember me. I'm so sorry that we've bothered you, but we're looking for something important and deep." She had tried to fly past the manticore, only to be met by an upraised paw with extended claws. "Sorry," Fluttershy whispered, backing away, "but, why? Are you protecting something?" The manticore's eyes shifted briefly in the direction of the cave and Fluttershy flew up a little to get a better look. She saw movement in the mouth of the cave, and then another manticore, female by its lack of mane, stuck its head out. "Oh, I see" Fluttershy said, "You've found a lady friend. That's nice." She looked again and gave a tiny gasp of understanding as a couple little felines also emerged, only to be ushered back inside by the female. "And kittens too," she said, coming back down to look the manticore in the eye. "You're protecting your family, aren't you?" she asked, receiving a nod in response. "I understand," she said, "but we really need to look around here. I promise you we won't hurt your babies." The manticore didn't look convinced, and Ash started focusing his magic again before Heart shoved him with a shake of her head. Fluttershy glanced back at the group, trying to think. "There are too many of us," she mused, "what if... would you let just me go look around? You know you can trust me, right?" The manticore tilted its head left and right as he regarded the little pegasus, and then stepped back and sat down. "Oh, thank you," Fluttershy said, "Just give me one moment." She flew back to the group and landed in front of Ash. "So," she said, suddenly shy again, "I... I hope this is ok with you."

Ash smiled and patted Fluttershy on the shoulder. "It's fine," he said, "just look for a red gemstone the size of your hoof. Don't worry if it glows or gets

warm when you touch it; they react to some people more readily than others." Fluttershy nodded and turned away. She walked past the manticore, who watched her closely as she began to hunt about in the brush and rocks. Ash watched her for a few seconds, and then consulted PC. "Any chance you could narrow things down?" he asked it. The computer worked for a while before giving a response. "Ground level," he called out to Fluttershy, "Somewhere to your right."

"Maybe you should have given PC to her," Twilight said.

"Are you kidding?" Ash retorted, "She's a real charmer, but I doubt she'd be able to put up with PC's sarcasm. Believe me, he can be real rough." He rolled his eyes as PC displayed a comment.

Fluttershy lifted her feet off the ground as she continued her search to allow herself a little more maneuverability. With occasional help from Ash whenever she went too far in one direction or another, she began flying in tighter and tighter circles until she was hovering over a thick, tangled bush. She landed next to it and lay down to see if she could see anything under the branches. She saw something red just within her reach and extended a slightly quaking hoof toward it. When she touched it, it gave off a brief flash of red light that made her pull back for a second. "I... I think I've found it," she said, not quite loudly enough for the others to hear. Wiggling forward a little, she was able to grab it between her hooves and pull it free. Like Ash had warned her, the Ruby grew warm in her grasp, but didn't become too hot to the touch. Making sure she had a solid grip, she spread her wings and flew back, dropping the Gem at Ashen Blaze's feet. Ash picked it up with his magic and coaxed another glow out of it.

"Well done Fluttershy," he said, putting the Ruby and the Diamond into his saddlebag, "You've been a great help."

"It was nothing," Fluttershy said meekly. She turned toward the manticore and said, "Thank you. You can go on back to your family now. We're going to leave soon." The giant creature nodded and walked away, casting glances over its shoulder at the ponies.

"So, where to next?" Gale asked Ash, "You did say there were two Gems in this forest."

"Ash nodded, already checking on the location of the next energy signature. "Out the other end of the canyon," he said, "and pretty deep into the woods. By the way, what time is it?"

"Hard to tell," Twilight said, looking up at the sky, "I think it's the middle of the afternoon."

"Oh dear," Rarity said, "I should be getting back to town soon; Sweetie Bell will be getting out of school soon."

"Head on back then," Ash said, "I'd rather not have to come into this place twice if I can help it."

"Well, I'm not going to walk through these woods all by myself," Rarity declared.

"I... I think I should stay with you," Fluttershy told Ash, "You know, in case you need my help with any more animals. Uh... if that's ok I mean..."

"I'd be glad to have you," Heart said. Soul nodded in agreement.

"Sorry Rarity," Twilight said, "but I'm going with them. I've got a funny feeling I know where the next Gem will be close to."

Rarity gave a long-suffering sigh. "Oh, very well," she said, "I should have known it was a bad idea to follow you and Fluttershy in here..."

The seven ponies walked for a good long while, encountering nothing unusual except for a grove of dead-looking trees that, to the Order-naries's confusion, seemed to give Twilight, Rarity, and even Fluttershy a case of the giggles. A scan from PC revealed nothing magical or remarkable about the area, so they just shrugged it off and moved along. A short time later, Rarity turned to Twilight and said, "I think I know where you're expecting the next Gem to have landed."

"Actually, there are two," Twilight said, "we should be coming up on the first one soon."

"Yes," the white unicorn replied, "I wonder if that sea serpent will be there this time?"

"Sea serpent?" Soul Mage asked, "What's a sea serpent doing in a forest?"

"He's technically more of a river serpent," Twilight said, "Rarity helped him out the last time we came this way."

"Helped him how?" Heart asked.

"I supplied him with a replacement for his ruined moustache," Rarity said, and then grew excited. "Oh, I do hope he's around. I simply must see how well it has grown back in." She sped up, leaving a quartet of confused ponies and two amused friends in her wake. When they caught up to her, they found her staring at a deep, dry riverbed cutting across the path.

"Good heavens!" Rarity exclaimed, "What has happened here? Where's all the water?" A sniffing sound from the left attracted her attention and she trotted off to investigate. The others followed closely, coming upon a very sad-looking purple sea serpent with a moustache, half of which was purple with a distinctive curl, laying his head upon the banks of the former river. He looked up when the ponies approached, and a slight smile came to his mouth upon seeing Rarity.

"Well, hel-/o," he said, "If it isn't the little pony who saved my moustache! How are you?"

"I'm doing well," Rarity said, "but if I may say so, you don't look well at all."

"Oh, I am most certainly *not*," the serpent said, "not only has fabulous moustache failed to grow back in after all this time, but... well you can see." He gestured toward the dry river with one arm.

"Your stache looks fine to me," Soul said, "even though its... hold on." He looked at the purple half of the moustache, and then to Rarity. "That... is that half from your tail Rarity? The color and style are a perfect match."

"It is," Rarity said, "although, it's worrisome that your natural hair hasn't grown back yet. It's been over a year." She walked closer and gazed intently at the purple hair. "Oh my," she said, "Perhaps I did too good a job attaching it. I think my tail's taken root in your moustache's place."

"Oh?" the serpent asked, stroking the hair a little, "I suppose you're right."

"Let me fix it," Rarity said, "If I cut this purple half off and graft in part of the other half, that should restore the color. Of course, your moustache won't quite so good for a while..."

"Go right on ahead my dear," the serpent said, "I'm sure you'll make a good job of it. Here." He plucked one of the scales off his body and handed it to Rarity, who took it in her mouth with grace and proceeded to use it to slice off the former tail.

While Rarity worked, Twilight looked up and down the riverbed and asked, "So, what happened to the water?"

"Something very strange," the serpent said, holding as still as possible while Rarity measured out his moustache, "just yesterday, it all just *jumped* up and started flowing through the air deeper into the forest. If you were to keep going upstream, you'd see where it's still happening. I can't get around as well on dry land, so I've been stuck here all day."

"Rivers don't just jump their banks," Twilight said, "even here."

"The Sapphire," Soul said, "I'd bet anything that's what's behind this. However, that also means somebody's using it... You girls don't have any other... acquaintances living in this forest, do you?"

"Not that far in," Twilight said, "All that's left beyond here are the ruins of the ancient Castle of the Princesses. They're... more or less that way." She pointed across the river and off to the left a little.

"Hmm..." Ash said, looking, "Twilight Sparkle, you just pointed toward the Gem signature. We need to get over there."

"Allow me to help you," the serpent said, "I can at least give you something to walk across on."

"Not quite yet," Rarity said, moving the freshly cut moustache half to the other side of his face, "I'm almost finished." She positioned the hair with her magic and then, with a tilt of her head, made it fuse onto the purple roots, changing them to the serpent's natural orange in the process. "There," Rarity said, stepping back, "A little brushing, and that will look just fine."

"Wonderful!" The serpent said, straighten up and admiring his new look for a moment. "Now, allow me." He turned around and stretched until his head lay upon the opposite bank. "Cross away my friends," he said, "I'll wait here for your return."

"Thank you good sir," Rarity said, leading the ponies along the serpent's back. Once they'd all crossed, the serpent rose up and bowed to Rarity, who smiled and bowed back. "Come along," she said, turning toward the path, "let's get this over with."

# Chapter 8

"Ok, question time," Soul Mage said. The group had arrived at a rope-and-plank bridge spanning a deep chasm and Twilight Sparkle was checking its ability to take weight.

"Still in good shape," she said, "come on." Rarity, Ashen Blaze, Gale, and finally Soul Mage followed her as she crossed while the two pegasi flew alongside them. "What's your question Soul?" Twilight asked.

"You, Rarity, and Fluttershy are all familiar with this part of the Everfree forest," Soul said, "and yet Fluttershy tried to warn us against coming in here earlier today. What would cause you three, along with AJ, Rainbow Dash, and Pinkie, to come so far into the forest if you fear it so much?"

"We needed to come here to find the Elements of Harmony," Twilight said, "My research had told me they were hidden away in the old castle, which is where we're going right..." Her voice trailed off as she came to a stop, staring at the sight that had just become visible through the last of the trees. The ancient Castle of the Princesses was before them, and was engulfed in a thick shell of water shaped roughly like a fortress covered in spikes and crowned with two horn-like towers. A river of water flowed through the air into the side of the fortress, obviously stolen from the sea serpent's river.

"Oo-wee," Ash said, "That's got Tau'rin written all over it."

"Already?" Gale exclaimed, "but, there should only be one Gem here, right?"

"There is," Ash said, pulling the Ruby out of his bag, "Looks like we stumbled upon his hide-out early. He's only got the Sapphire to work with, hence all the water." He smiled triumphantly as the Ruby began to glow in his magic grip. "This is an opportunity we can't miss."

"We've only got two Gems ourselves," Gale pointed out, "One of which isn't the best for attacking, and I have nothing."



"Here," Ash said, pulling out the Diamond and flinging it at the brown earth pony, "Improvise; it's what you're good at, right?"

"Yes sir," Gale said sarcastically, trying to figure out how to carry the Gem. Soul extended his magic tendril and put it on Gale's back. "Thanks," she said.

"So, is this it?" Twilight asked, "The big fight you've been worried about?"

"Not exactly," Soul said, "not all of the Gems are here, so there won't be any reality breaking or world-hopping involved."

"There will be a fight though," Ash said, "So if you three want to stay out of it, don't follow us inside." He turned his gaze to the in-flowing water and tilted his head to tap the Ruby with his horn. Several thin streams of red light shot out of the gem and struck the river in several places, causing it to tremble and then collapse, spilling out onto the ground. Ash turned toward the fortress and sent out more light, which began dismantling the walls of water blocking access to the ruins. As the water fell and flowed away, a cry of surprise and rage rose up from inside. "Now that he knows we're here," Ash said, "Let's go say hello. Order-naries forward!" He and his team reared up and began to charge forward, only to skid to a stop as a large creature vaguely resembling a winged bull straight out of a nightmare with a large sapphire embedded in its forehead, came running at them from the ruins entrance.

"Order-nares!" it bellowed, "You'll regret finding me! Die!" The Order-naries, Twilight, Rarity, and Fluttershy dodged as the beast thundered past them. It skid to a stop and spun around, steam blowing out of its nostrils as it glared at the ponies.

"Tau'rin?" Heart asked, incredulous, "That's... a new look."

"It is an inconvenience," Tau'rin snarled, "I'd gladly destroy this world just to be rid of this body. Your forms look even less useful; surely you agree it would be better if we left?"

"Not at your price," Soul retorted, extending his magic toward Heart. The tendril wrapped around the pegasus's midsection and the two golden-yellow ponies became covered in ethereal flames. Heart took to the air and brought her front hooves close together as a disc of energy began to build

between them. Tau'rin's Sapphire began to glow, and two tentacles of water shot out of the fortress to knock the linked pair down.

"*Skvetch*," Ash muttered, glancing between the demon in front and the water behind him, "We're surrounded."

"What should we do?" Twilight asked.

"The Sapphire's not much use without a lot of water around," the ash-grey unicorn said, "I can take out this supply he's built up, but not if he's trying to stop me." He shoved Twilight aside and blasted the water tentacle Tau'rin had decided to send at her, canceling the magic out with the fire element. "Help Soul and Heart," he said, "keep Tau'rin distracted. Either that or try to find a way to get to safety."

"Don't waste your time," Tau'rin said, "I can just draw the water out of the ground if you break down my construction. Behold." The blue gem glowed as water rose out of the ground around him, beginning to form into a ring above his head. Gale charged forward, the Diamond on her back aglow with power. Tau'rin sneered at her and tried to hit her with a lash of water, only to be blinded by a sudden blast of focused light in his eyes. The Diamond slid off Gale's back as she spun around to kick the bull-demon in the leg with all her might before retreating to a safe distance. Tau'rin lost control of the water around him as he flinched in pain, shaking his head to try and clear his vision. "Cursed little..." he muttered.

"Our turn," Heart said, in the air and charging her attack again. The energy took on the form a disk colored red, blue, yellow, and green, which Heart threw out with a cry of "Element wheel!" The disk spiraled and grew in size as it flew, aiming for Tau'rin's head. The demon recovered just in time to try and dodge, losing a horn as the disk cut through it and dissipated. "Dang it," Heart hissed, beginning to charge another disk. Tau'rin began to prepare another attack of his own, and then noticed the Diamond lying on the ground near him.

"Ah, how nice of you to leave this here," he said, creating a claw of water that reached toward the Gem. He paused and blinked in confusion as he suddenly found himself surrounded by colored lights and illusory shapes of all kinds, including a few copies of the Diamond. The real one jumped off the ground and joined the illusions, flying around randomly.

"Not so fast you brute," Rarity said. Ash and the others turned to see her glaring at the demon, her horn lit up with intense magic. "You think you deserve such a beautiful thing?" she asked, "Can you even pick out the real one?" Tau'rin snarled at her and began focusing his power through the Sapphire, only to have the bolts of energy he shot out blocked by a red barrier from Ash's Ruby.

"No cheating," Ash said in mock severity. Tau'rin growled and turned his attention back to the milling Gems, extremely frustrated now that he'd lost track of the real Diamond in the shuffle. The lights and other illusions from Rarity's spell added to his distraction, and finally he squeezed his eyes shut and lashed out with a hoof, disrupting an illusory diamond.

"Sorry, wrong," Rarity said, tilting her head back quickly. The real Diamond flew out of the mess and came to a stop next to the white unicorn.

"Why you little-" Tau'rin bellowed, only to be cut off as a fireball struck his face.

"Don't finish that sentence," Ash said dangerously, "Now, having lost the game, you forfeit your pretty little Sapphire."

"Spare me your humor, little magic *pony*," Tau'rin said

"I'm sorry, was that supposed to be an insult?" Soul quipped, "I think you're just jealous because you're a cow." Tau'rin bellowed and lowered his head in preparation to charge, only to take a glancing blow from Heart's second Element Wheel that left a gash on his forehead and took off his other horn.

"You cocky brats," the bull-demon hissed, "This is not over yet. The rest of the Gems are mine, and once I have them, we'll see who- *argh!*" He recoiled in pain as a white aura surrounded the Sapphire in his forehead.

"I won't let you destroy my world," Twilight Sparkle said through gritted teeth, focusing her magic on pulling the blue Gem loose, "So I'm not going to let you keep that gem." As she continued to pull, Tau'rin collapsed to the ground, writhing in agony that seemed to go beyond the pain of the forcible removal of the Sapphire. With a final pull from Twilight, the gem came free with a 'pop' and rocketed over to the ponies. As soon as Twilight brought it to a halt and set it aside, Ash let loose a wave of fire in Tau'rin's direction. He maintained it for several seconds and then forced the flames to die

away before any trees caught fire. The spot Tau'rin had occupied was now vacant.

"Did that do it?" Gale asked, "Is he finally dead?"

"No," Heart said sadly, pointing upward. Everypony looked up and saw a dark figure retreating into the sky, yelling incoherent curses in their direction.

"So. Close!" Ash snorted in frustration. His breathing grew heavy and ragged as he stamped the ground, and his mane tail began waving of their own accord.

"Is he...?" Twilight asked, backing away.

"Losing it again? Yeah," Soul said.

Rarity shot the golden-yellow unicorn a concerned look. "Aren't you going to do something?"

"He's angry at Tau'rin," Soul said, "I'll let him have this one unless he goes overboard."

"*Skvetch!*" Ash howled. His mane and tail burst into true flames as the Ruby and his horn began glowing with almost blinding red light. He reared up and punched at the air, sending a veritable stream of fireballs after the retreating Tau'rin, all of which fizzled out long before reaching him. Ash unleashed one final blast of fire before coming back onto all fours and dropping the Ruby. His mane and tail returned to normal as he took deep, calming breaths.

"You ok?" Heart asked after a minute.

"I'm good," Ash said, "Thanks for letting me get that out of my system." He turned to Twilight and smiled. "Good work pulling that Sapphire off of him," he said, "I was starting to worry we'd have to let him keep it." He picked the three Gems up and passed the Sapphire to Soul Mage as he put the Ruby and Diamond into his own saddlebags. "Let's head home everypony."

Twilight and Rarity nodded, but then Twilight realized something. "Where's Fluttershy?" she asked in alarm.

"Over here," a timid voice said from behind a boulder. Fluttershy stepped out into view and smiled shyly at her friends. "I'm so glad you're all ok," she said.

"Same to you," Twilight said, going over to hug the pegasus. She turned back and looked at the ruins, which were still half-covered in a watery shell. "You should probably take that down guys."

"The spell's already degrading," Ash said, "That water will be gone in an hour or less. We should probably make sure the river gets back into its old course though."

"Well, lead on," Soul said, "I'm starting to get hungry."

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After restoring the river's flow, and surviving the sea serpent's rib-cracking hug of thanks, Soul Mage and the others made their way back through the Everfree Forest. They stopped by Zecora's hut to find that not only was the zebra at home, but she was willing to share her supper with them. With sated appetites and elation at the successful day, the Order-naries, Twilight, and Rarity bid farewell to Fluttershy at her house and continued on to the library. When they arrived the Order-naries scattered to lounge around in their own fashion while Twilight began another letter to Celestia chronicling the day while Rarity sorted through the mail that had arrived. She found an envelope made of fine parchment with Twilight's name written on it and held closed with the royal seal. "It seems the Princess got your first letter Twilight," she said, floating the envelope over to the lavender unicorn.

"Oh, thanks Rarity," Twilight said, taking the envelope and opening it. She pulled out the letter, read it quickly, and then set it aside with a small smile. "Well," she said, "I'm now officially required to follow you four and report what happens."

"Great," Ash said with a hint of sarcasm, "It's always nice to be at least somewhat legitimate." He resumed his browsing of the bookshelf, stopping as a particular book caught his eye. He pulled it out and read the title, "*The Elements of Harmony*. You mentioned this back in the forest Twilight. Didn't you say they were in those ruins?"

"They were," Twilight said, "but they haven't been there since last summer. If you're worried that Tau'rin might use them, don't worry; he'd never be able to activate them- especially not by himself."

"What are they anyway?" Ash asked.

Twilight put down her quill and thought for a few moments. "I can show you," she said, "but first, tell me more about yourself Ashen Blaze."

"Excuse me?"

"I've seen you 'lose your temper' twice in the three days you've been here," Twilight said, facing the ash-grey unicorn, "both times I've felt a dark power coming from you, and you seem to become an entirely different pony. If there's a story behind that, I'd really like to know it so I can understand you better."

Ash looked away and scuffed at the floor with a hoof. "I'd rather not revisit it," he said.

"Oh, come on Ash," Soul Mage said, "It's not like you'll summon your old buddies here by talking about them."

"Confession's good for the soul," Gold Heart added.

"Very well," Ash said with a sigh, "but I'm not going into details." Twilight nodded and produced a fresh sheet of parchment. "I don't know if my temper is part of my basic nature," he said, "or if it's a product of the powers I once wielded. Back home, my earliest memories were of being *Meis Thamul*, which roughly translates to Greatest Mage, but which really meant I was one of the leaders of an army of darkness. The overlord I served had his sights on ruling multiple planets, and I was one of his best agents for years, harnessing darkness and fire to spread fear and chaos before me. One day, however, I witnessed an assault by one of the resistance groups on my old master's headquarters. He decided to deal with it personally to showcase his power, which was above and beyond my own. The leader of the resistance was quick to realize his assault was doomed to failure, and so he sacrificed his own life to give his soldiers time to retreat. Such respect and love for those of lower positions was unknown to me before that time, and it struck me to the core. Keeping my crisis hidden, I eventually decided that I could not hope to defeat the overlord on

my own, and I doubted any of the resistance would welcome me, so I fled to the far side of the galaxy, where the war I'd known had not yet reached. I made a new home on a peaceful-looking planet and swore an oath I would try to protect that peace. A few years later, I met Soul, Heart, and Gale, and we eventually joined forces to become the Order-naries. You know the rest after that."

"Oh my," Rarity said quietly. Ash looked over at her, expecting to see shock or horror on her face, and was surprised to see admiration instead.

"I'm haunted by the fact that I never worked up the courage to go back and try to right the wrongs I'd committed," he said, turning his face away from everypony.

There was an awkward silence for several minutes before Twilight cleared her throat and said, "Well, I guess it's my turn then." Ash remained where he was as the other Order-naries gathered to hear the story of Nightmare Moon, the Elements of Harmony, and how Twilight made her first real friends.

# Chapter 9

The next morning, after grousing his way through his apple-bucking – he was working a single tree alone this time, as he'd feared – Ashen Blaze planted himself on the observation deck of the library, hoping that the increased height would help PC pick up the energy signatures of the remaining four Gems or clues to Tau'rin's new hide-out. As lunchtime neared without so much as a blip, he lay down with a groan and considered taking a quick nap before lunch. He put PC on standby and stowed it away and started to close his eyes.

"Hey," a voice said from slightly above him.

"Geez!" Ash said, startled. He looked up to see a blue Pegasus with rainbow-striped mane hovering in front of him. "Rainbow Dash," he said, "Can I help you?"

"Nah," Dash said, "I just thought I should tell you we're going to start a little rain shower in a moment, so you might not want to take a nap here." Ash looked past the pegasus and saw that the sky was almost filled with grey, heavy-looking clouds.

"Thanks," he said, standing up, "That's quite considerate of you."

"No problem," Dash said as Ash walked toward the stairs. "Say," she said, following the unicorn inside, "Is it true you guys beat up that bad guy you were talking about?"

"I wouldn't say beat up," Ash said, "We did send him packing though, without the Gem he had when he showed up."

"Dang," Dash said, "I was kind of hoping he'd show up somewhere around here so I could a few hits in him myself."

Ash gave the pegasus an amused glance. "Don't you have rain to... whatever it is you do to make it rain?"



"Ah, I've done my part already," Dash said, nonchalant, "Now, tell me, what was this Tau guy like? Gimme all the details so I can help you out when he shows his ugly face again." Ash chuckled as he headed for the stairs to the second floor, only to end up with a magazine in his face as Rarity came running up the stairs and stopped an inch short of colliding with him.

"So sorry Ash," Rarity said, "but you have to see this!"

Ash backed up a couple steps so he could read the magazine's cover. "Haute Couture Weekly. Why are you pushing a fashion magazine into my face, Rarity?"

"Look," Rarity insisted, "See what the Pegasus in the corner is holding?" Ash's eyes scanned the cover until he found the photo. It depicted a deep lavender pegasus mare with burnt-orange hair holding up a large yellow gemstone that complemented her daisy-yellow outfit.

"You're kidding me," Ash said, taking a closer look, "If I didn't know any better, I'd swear that was the Topaz, the Gem of Air and Wind."

"It might just be," Rarity said, pulling the magazine back and opening it, "Listen to this: 'Star fashion designer Lavender Sunset has just announced that she has come into possession of an amazing yellow topaz that she intends to use as the inspiration for her next year's line of spring fashion.' It says later that she found the topaz just a couple days ago as she was flying through a wildflower field, the same day you showed up."

"Interesting," Ash said thoughtfully, "It could be a coincidence, but I should probably investigate. That'll be better than sitting around here all day at least."

"You're going to try and get a fancy gem away from Lavender Sunset?" Rainbow Dash asked, "Good luck with that!"

"You know her?" Rarity asked, incredulous.

"Of course," Rainbow said, "She's one of the biggest names in Cloudsdale outside of the Wonderbolts. And she happens to be married to one of the best weather ponies in Equestria, after yours truly of course."

"Have you actually met her?" Rarity asked critically.

"No," Dash said, rubbing her neck, "But I grew up in Cloudsdale you know, and even back then you couldn't go a day without hearing about Lavender Sunset at least once. Apparently she's one of the best designers for pegasi."

"That she is," Rarity said as a dreamy look came into her eyes, "To have chance to meet and exchange notes with her... Idea!" She flung the magazine away and grabbed Ash by the shoulders. "This will be the perfect opportunity for both of us," she said, "Hopefully my reputation precedes me, and together we can talk her into giving us, er, you the Gem!"

"Uh, you know she lives in Cloudsdale, right?" Rainbow asked.

"Oh," Rarity said, deflating, "That's right... Well, if I can go into the depths of the Diamond Dogs's territory, I can certainly manage a few hours up in the clouds. I'll just make sure Twilight uses the walking-on-clouds spell on me this time..."

"Dumb question," Ash said, looking from Rarity to Rainbow, "but, this Cloudsdale place, it's in the sky, isn't it?"

"Duh," Rainbow said, "It's only the biggest pegasus city in Equestria, and the place where all the weather is made."

"Super," Ash said dryly, "the other Order-naries would kill me if I didn't at least ask them to come along. Can I assume you'll be joining us Rainbow Dash? We could use a pony who knows her way around."

"Of course," Rainbow said, "I'll go see if I can convince Fluttershy to come too." She zoomed away before anypony could react, faltering for a second as she exited the building and flew into the rain that she'd completely forgotten about. Ash moved past Rarity and began descending the stairs.

"Twilight has to come of course," he said, continuing his list.

"Where am I coming?" Twilight asked from downstairs, having heard Ash.

"Cloudsdale," Ash told her, reaching the ground floor, "There might be a Gem up there."

"I see," Twilight said. She walked over to a bookshelf with a thoughtful look and looked through it, eventually pulling out a book and opening it. "We'll need the cloud-walking spell then," she said, "Pegasi are the only ponies who can stand on clouds naturally. Who else is coming?"

"My team of course," Ash said, "assuming I can find them in this weather."

"Try Sugar Cube Corner," Twilight said, "they were headed that way a little while ago. Anypony else?"

"Rarity here," Ash said, pointing behind him at the white unicorn, "along with Rainbow Dash and maybe Fluttershy, but they won't need your spell. Nor will Gold Heart now that I think about it..." Twilight gave Rarity a surprised look, but didn't say anything to her.

"Right," she said, turning back to her reading, "After the rain clears I'll go see if the mayor will loan us the hot air balloon for the day. Meet me at the town square by the pavilion when you're ready."

"Right," Ash said, "better go get my crew then."

"Would you like some company?" Rarity asked as Ash headed for the door.

"I'll be fine," Ash said, a trace of annoyance creeping into his voice, "If I get lost, I'll just listen for the sounds of Pinkie Pie." He opened the door to reveal the pink earth pony herself standing just outside with an umbrella hat on. "Speak her name and she shall appear," Ash muttered in amazement.

"Hi Ashen Blaze," Pinkie said, her normal cheerfulness surprisingly subdued, "I've got a teensy-tiny favor to ask you."

"What?"

Pinkie took a big breath and launched into story at a rapid-fire pace to rival Apple Bloom's best, "You see, I was giving your friends a tour of Sugar Cube Corner and Gale looked at the taffy-pulling machine and went 'Ohmigosh can I try it?' and I said 'sure, have fun!' so she put some taffy in and turned it on and watched for a second before saying 'this is inefficient;' inefficient's a big word isn't it? Anyway! She found Mr. Cake's tools for fixing stuff and started taking the taffy-puller apart, although she was a bit clumsy with the screwdriver for a minute. She looked like she was having

fun so I didn't want to stop her, but it's been a while and she hasn't put it back together right yet and we *reeeeally* need to make more taffy soon because we're almost sold out!" She took several breaths and then asked, "Can you help?" at a more normal speed.

Ash blinked several times as he processed the story and then sighed and shook his head. "Sounds like Gale's entered her mechanic zone," he said, "I'll see what I can do Pinkie, but I can't promise much."

"Great!" Pinkie said, "Let's go!" She spun around, paused, and then spun around again and produced another umbrella hat from somewhere and placed it on Ash's head. "There we go!" she said, "You gotta stay dry!" With that, she spun around again and bounced off toward the bakery.

"Ok..." Ash said, looking askance at the hat as he followed Pinkie.

After the library door closed, Twilight turned to Rarity and asked the question that was burning in her mind, "Are you feeling ok Rarity?"

"Perfectly fine darling," Rarity said, surprised, "why do you ask?"

"Well," Twilight said, "ever since Ash and his friends showed up, you've been acting a little out of character. First you willingly went back down to the Diamond Dogs, then you followed us into the Forest without any reason beyond keeping us company, and then you took part in that fight with Tau'rin."

"You did as well," Rarity pointed out, "Unlike Fluttershy, I couldn't just fly away from there, so it was either help defeat that beast or just stand there in everypony's way."

"Ok," Twilight said slowly, "but, now you're going back to Cloudsdale, and eagerly. After what happened there last time, you said you'd keep your hooves on solid ground from then on. Why are you suddenly so casual about going to places that hold such bad experiences for you?"

"I've just moved on," Rarity said, "Sometimes you just have to get over yourself and give things another chance. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must prepare for our trip." She walked back upstairs as Twilight watched her with growing concern. There was something else making Rarity do these things, but Twilight couldn't quite put her hoof on it...

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The storefront room of Sugar Cube Corner betrayed no signs of the chaos in the kitchen except for the strained expression on Mr. Cake's face, which relaxed only slightly when Pinkie Pie and Ashen Blaze entered the store. "We're back," Pinkie declared, "don't you worry Mr. Cake, we'll have that taffy machine back together in no time!"

"Hopefully," Ash added. Pinkie led him into the kitchen, which was a proper mess of machine parts with a brown earth pony in the middle of it all, hopping about on three legs with a pair of pliers in her mouth and a look of manic frustration in her eyes. Gale was hopping about because she'd taped a Philips-head screwdriver to one hoof in such a way as to prevent her from putting weight on it without putting holes in the floor. Soul Mage and Gold Heart were standing at the periphery of the mess with looks of defeat and embarrassment. They looked over as Pinkie bounced in with Ash following slowly in her wake.

"Hi Ash," Heart said.

"Hello," Ash replied, "What's the situation, beyond the obvious?"

"Gale's gone crazy," Soul said, "She keeps muttering about friction and mechanical inefficiencies and other stuff I can't understand thanks to that tool in her mouth. She won't respond to anything we say."

"Hmm," Ash said, watching Gale hop about, "Didn't her teacher have some sort of code-word or pet name he used to break her out of these states?"

"Kara Mello," Heart said with a nod, "we tried that, but it seems it was as much his voice as the words that did it. Neither of us can fake it well enough."

"Nor can I," Ash said, "I don't even remember what the old man's voice sounded like..." He sighed and approached the manic earth pony. "Gale," he said calmly, "What are you doing?"

"It's so inefficient," Gale said, dropping the pliers, "I could hear it, all the rubbing metal and scraping... so much energy lost to heat..."

"Gale," Ash said, firmly but quietly, "It's a taffy-puller." Gale didn't respond as she continued hopping about, picking up a piece of metal only to drop it

somewhere else. A thought occurred to Ash and he spoke again, "It's a taffy puller Gale, you don't need to overclock it."

"Overclock?" Gale said, stopping, "Overclo-" She stared at Ash like he'd just said the dumbest thing ever uttered by man or pony. "You don't... You *can't* overclock a taffy-puller!" she exclaimed.

"Then what *do* you do with it?" Ash responded hotly, narrowing one eye at Gale.

"I..." Gale said, stunned. Her jaw worked for several seconds, but no sound came out. Her eyes began wandering around, taking in the scene she was in the middle of as the mania drained out of them. "Oh... dear, what have I- ow!" She'd tried to bury her face in her hooves, only to jab herself with the screwdriver. Grimacing, she tore the tape off with her teeth and let the screwdriver drop to the ground. "Oh man," she groaned, "I've really done it now. This is what happens when I don't have my own gear to toy with." She spotted Pinkie and fell into a begging posture. "I'm so sorry Pinkie Pie," she said, "I can fix it, make it just the way it was. I promise!"

"Are you sure?" Pinkie asked solemnly.

"If she goes nuts again, just say the word 'overclock,'" Ash said with a grin. Gale shot him a sideways glance.

"You did that on purpose," she said, "You knew how stupid that statement was. Overclocking a taffy pulling machine? Really? Was I *that* out of it?"

"Eeyup," Soul said in a fair impression of Big Macintosh.

"I'm so pathetic," Gale moaned.

"Aw, it's ok," Pinkie said, "Everypony has bad days. I had a really bad one once, when I thought all my friends weren't my friends anymore, so I made new friends out of rocks, turnips, lint, and a bag of flour. And Gummy, but he's always my friend." A smile crept onto Gale's lips as she cast an odd look at the pink pony. She stood up and began taking stock of the damage she'd done.

"Well," she said, "At least I'll be used to working with hooves by the time I'm done with this."

"Any idea how long it'll take?" Ash asked, "Because I think we've got a lead on the Topaz."

"Where?" Soul asked as he and the girls looked attentively at Ash.

"Cloudsdale," Ash said.

"Oh, I love that city!" Pinkie said, and then her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper, "Don't taste the rainbows- they're reeeeealy spicy."

"I'll... keep that in mind," Ash said, "Anyway, we're leaving once the rain clears and Twilight gets a hot-air balloon prepped."

"I'd like to come," Gale said, "but don't bet on me being finished with this before then. I'll just be another body up there anyway; here I'm actually doing what I'm good at."

"All right, if you're sure," Ash said, and then turned toward Heart and Soul. "We'll meet at the town square. Shouldn't be too hard to find- just look for the big balloon."

"Ok," Soul said, "what are your plans in the meantime?"

"Uh..."

Soul walked over and threw a front leg around Ash's shoulder. "You're hanging with us then," he said, "And since I'd rather not go out in the rain, we're going to enjoy ourselves here."

"Woo hoo!" Pinkie shouted, rushing to the pantry, "Let's make muffins!"

# Chapter 10

A few hours later the rain had stopped, Gale had managed to get the taffy-puller half put together, and Ashen Blaze found himself gazing at more muffins than he thought were possible to bake in that space of time, and that was after accounting for the appetite-killing number he, Soul Mage, Gold Heart, Pinkie Pie, and Gale had consumed as "taste-tests." At least they'd made a wide variety of flavors, so Ash figured he'd had a more-or-less balanced supper and dessert already.

"I've never been one for muffins," Heart said, "but those all came out really good."

"Thanks," Pinkie said cheerfully.

"We better get going," Ash said, "Twilight and others will be waiting for us."

"Have fun," Gale said around her screwdriver, waving at them off-handedly as she reattached another piece of the taffy-puller.

"We should do this again some time," Pinkie said, "Only, I think next time we'll make cupcakes."

"We'll... see," Ash said diplomatically, "Soul, Heart, let's go." The golden-yellow ponies nodded and followed their ash-grey leader out of the bakery and toward the town square. When they arrived, they saw that Twilight, Rarity and the mayor were in the process of spreading out a hot air balloon in preparation for inflating it. Or, rather, the two unicorns were spreading out the balloon while the earth pony mayor waited to ignite burner. As the three Order-nares approached, the mayor glanced in their direction and abandoned her post to walk over to them.

"Hello," she said, "You must be the new ponies Twilight was telling me about. I'm the mayor of Ponyville, and please let me apologize for not giving you a proper welcome to town before now."

"We got a good enough welcome thanks to Pinkie Pie," Ash said, "Besides, we prefer to stay low-profile. Speaking of which, what has Twilight told you



about us?" He shot a questioning glance toward the lavender unicorn in the distance.

"Only that you're new, you have business in Cloudsdale, and that there were four of you," the Mayor said, a confused look coming onto her face as she spoke.

"Gale's not joining us," Soul said, "She's busy at Sugar Cube Corner."

"I see," the mayor said, "Well, welcome to Ponyville. I trust you to pass that along to your friend." Ash, Heart, and Soul nodded.

"Pardon me Ms. Mayor," Rarity called, "but we're ready over here if you are."

"Ah, very good," the mayor said, "Just a moment." She ran back to the balloon and fired up the burner. The balloon began inflating and rising up as the air inside heated up.

"Couldn't you just use magic to lift that thing?" Soul asked, walking over to the balloon.

"Probably," Twilight said, "but that would get tiring after a while."

"Interesting how it's the one with the less legitimate claim to the possession of magical ability between the two of us is the one who always suggests magical solutions, isn't it?" Ashen Blaze asked with a cocky smirk at Soul Mage. Soul blew a raspberry at him in response.

"Mind explaining that?" Twilight asked.

"It's just an old debate between them," Heart explained, "Ash has always claimed the soul link my brother and I can form doesn't count as real magic."

"And I say he's narrow minded," Soul said, "If he can't duplicate it, it's not magic so far as he's concerned."

"I bend the very flow of the elements to my will," Ash said, "you and Heart power your abilities with your combined spirits. Our skills belong to entirely different classes, and mine is magic."

"Boys," Heart said firmly, stepping between them. "Sorry," she said apologetically to Twilight, "I didn't mean to set them off."

"Well, I did ask," Twilight said with a slight smile. Ash and Soul eyed each other over Heart's back for a few seconds and then let the issue pass.

As the balloon continued to fill, Rainbow Dash arrived, pushing a reluctant Fluttershy along the ground as she flew. "Come on Fluttershy," Dash was saying, "you haven't been back to Cloudsdale in forever. This will be fun, trust me."

Fluttershy was in a seated position, digging her front hooves into the ground just enough to make her point without inconveniencing her friend too much. "I can't just leave all my animals alone again," she said quietly, "I mean... I spent all day away from home yesterday. They need me."

"It'll just be a few hours at most," Dash insisted as she pushed Fluttershy the rest of the way to the group, "Besides, you told me they all had their lunch already, Rarity's cat is sleeping, and Angel practically runs the place for you half the time anyway."

"Well..." Fluttershy whispered.

"I'd love it if you joined us Fluttershy darling," Rarity said.

"You're going Rarity?" Fluttershy asked, surprised, "Well, I guess it will be ok if I go for a little while."

"Wonderful," Rarity said joyfully. She looked at the balloon and, seeing that it was almost ready said, "Into the basket everypony and let's be on our way!"

"Hold on a second," Twilight said, pulling out her spellbook, "Let me set the cloud-walking spell first."

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Once the balloon was in the air, Rainbow Dash guided it toward the cloud city while Twilight Sparkle managed the burner to give them the proper altitude. Gold Heart and Fluttershy flew along behind the balloon, leaving plenty of space in the basket for the four unicorns. Soul Mage kept his eye resolutely inside the basket to keep his stomach from flip-flopping. He

wasn't afraid of heights per se, but he wasn't fond of flying. He seriously hoped that Cloudsdale wasn't peppered with too many gaps in the clouds, but considering it was a city populated entirely by flying ponies...

Ash watched the scenery pass by below him for a while before turning his attention up to the sky. "Hey Dash," he said, "when you say all the weather is made in Cloudsdale, what exactly do you mean by *all* the weather?"

"Well, I guess it's not *all* the weather," Dash said, rubbing the back of her head, "They don't do anything with the sun of course, besides making clouds to cover it. If it has to do with clouds though, it's mass-produced in Cloudsdale's factories- snowflakes, rainbows, hailstones if they're really needed, and clouds themselves. Any pegasus with weather control training can make small clouds and stuff, but if weren't for Cloudsdale we'd be working our tails off day and night just to make a fraction of what they can produce. It's pretty cool, but not something I'd ever want to do."

"That is quite... I don't know how to feel about that," Ash said, a look of grim confusion on his face, "Such a degree of control over your world..." He shook his head and fell silent, ignoring Rainbow's impatient requests for him to complete his thought. Finally she gave up and turned her attention back to steering the balloon. Shortly the balloon moved around a particularly large cloud and Cloudsdale came into view.

"Wow," Heart said, taking in the vast city of clouds and rainbows, "It's beautiful. Gale's going to be upset she didn't get to see this."

"I'll bring her up some time," Rainbow said, "You know, when we're not busy." She looked at the approaching city and glanced back toward Twilight. "Bring it down a little Twilight," she said. The lavender unicorn released the burner and opened the vent to let a little hot air out. The balloon descended as Dash guided it toward a clear area of cloud near the edge of the city. Twilight brought the balloon down further until it rested on the clouds and the three pegasi alighted around the basket. "Welcome to Cloudsdale," Rainbow Dash announced. Twilight hopped out of the basket and landed on the cloud, followed by Rarity.

"Well, come on," the white unicorn said to Ash and Soul, who were looking doubtful about putting their hooves on the fluffy, white, vaporous-looking stuff, "the cloud-walking spells works perfectly, see?"

The tow unicorn stallions looked at each other. "On three?" Ash asked. Soul nodded. "Ok. One... Two... Three." They jumped out, eyes screwed shut, and landed softly on the clouds. They opened their eyes and cast embarrassed looks at Twilight, who was quite unimpressed at their lack of faith. "Uh... right, ok then," Ash said, trying to recover, "Let's, uh... let's see where that Gem is hiding." He fished around in his saddlebag and pulled out PC.

"Oh, put that away," Rarity said, causing Ash to pause, "We've already have all we need to find it." She turned her gaze toward Rainbow Dash. "I imagine we could find it at Lavender's store," she said.

"What, you expect *me* to know where it's at?" Dash scoffed.

"No," Rarity said bluntly, "but if you take us to the business district, I'm sure I'll have trouble at all finding-" She cut off as she picked up a quiet "Um" from Fluttershy. "Yes dear?" Rarity asked the yellow pegasus.

"Oh," Fluttershy said, surprised to have been noticed, "You... you're talking about Lavender Sunset, right? I..." the rest of her sentence was intelligible as her voice dropped into a mumble.

"Come again?" Rarity asked, stepping toward the shy pegasus expectantly.

Fluttershy stared nervously at the very attentive unicorn, and then took a deep breath and squeaked out, "I know where her shop is."

"Oh, wonderful!" Rarity said, clapping her hooves together in glee, "Please, take us there, at once!"

Fluttershy nodded rapidly and began to walk. "T-this way," she whispered.

Gold Heart was completely enraptured by the architecture of the cloud city. As Fluttershy guided the group around, Heart kept resisting the urge to rush about and take a closer look at the columns, rainbow buttresses, and the many eye-catching shapes the cloud buildings had been molded into. *I'm a pegasus*, she kept telling herself, *I can't go looking like a star-struck tourist, but ooooh...* As they neared the marketplace, she finally gave in enough to discreetly brush a wall with a wing, sending wisps of vapor spiraling off of it. Suppressing a giggle, she caught up with the rest of the group.

"You do so much with so little," Ash was saying appreciatively, "I mean, it's all made of water, air, and..." He poked a rainbow that was framing a shop window and came away with some of it on his hoof. "...sticky, fluid light of some sort?" he finished uncertainly, looking at his hoof. He felt tempted to lick it, but remembered Pinkie Pie's warning and scraped it off on the ground instead. "The point is," he said, "I'm amazed at how easy it is to tell each building apart." He nearly stumbled into Fluttershy as he looked around. The yellow pegasus had come to a dead stop.

"What's up Fluttershy?" Twilight asked.

"It's right there," Fluttershy said, pointing at a store a good ways down the road. It had been molded into the shape of a square-cut gem with a large phoenix perched on top.

"Great!" Rarity exclaimed, "Come on then." She ran off toward the store, barely holding in her excitement.

"Yeah" Ash sighed, "Let's get this over with." He, the golden-yellow ponies, and Twilight began to run after Rarity, only for Twilight to slow and look back at her pegasus friends.

"I'll just stay here, if you don't mind," Fluttershy said, sounding unusually confident.

"Yeah," Dash said, "Me too. I'd rather not have to put up with Rarity trying to charm Lavender." Fluttershy cast a thankful glance at the rainbow-haired pony. Twilight nodded and ran to catch up with the others. She arrived at the store to find Rarity blocking the doorway as she searched through her saddlebags for something. The Order-naries were standing off to the side; Ash had a long-suffering look on his face while Soul was tapping a hoof in visible impatience.

"Oh, I just know I packed a sample of my work in here somewhere," Rarity said, so distracted that she didn't notice that a deep lavender Pegasus mare with burnt-orange hair who stood about half a head taller than most of the group had appeared in the doorway and was glaring at her.

"Excuse me!" she said indignantly, "You are in my way!" Rarity looked up, and whatever her reply was going to be died on her lips as she realized whose path she was blocking.

"Lavender Sunset!" she gasped, prancing out of the way, "My apologies."

Lavender snorted and then looked at the ponies gathered around her door. "What are unicorns doing here?" she asked.

"Cloud-walking spell," Twilight said simply.

"Yes," Rarity said, still rummaging in her pack as she shifted her gaze between it and the Pegasus designer, "I am Rarity, of Ponyville, owner and renowned designer of the Carousel Boutique."

"Can't say I've heard of you," Lavender said, giving Rarity a condescending look, "now, if you will all excuse me, I am late for an appointment." She ignored Rarity's look of shock as she stepped out of the store, closing the door behind her. Without another glance, she began walking down the street.

"Wait," Rarity called, abandoning her search for whatever she had in her saddlebag as she trotted after the Pegasus, "You must have heard of me," she said, "I've designed dresses for Hoity Toity, and Sapphire Shores!"

"What proof do you have of that?" Lavender asked stuffily, "I admit I'm impressed at the effort you took to come up here, but so far as I can tell you're just..." She trailed off as her gaze fell upon a pair of pegasi who were standing at a store window looking at the items on display. One was blue with a distinctive rainbow-striped mane, and the other a pale yellow with long pink hair. Rarity, caught between insulted and dejected, stood speechless as Lavender came to stop and looked at the two pegasi as they turned away from the window. They both gave a start when they saw Lavender, and the yellow one's eyes shrank as they locked with the lavender designer's. "Fluttershy," Lavender said in amazement, "My, what a surprise to see you here." Twilight and the others had caught up in time to hear this, and Twilight's face took on a look of surprise to match the slack-jawed looks on the faces of Dash and Rarity.

"Fluttershy," Rarity said, "you... know Lavender Sunset?"

"Well..." the meek pegasus began, only to be cut off by Lavender.

"Of course she does," the designer said, "She's my daughter."

# Chapter 11

Lavender Sunset allowed the fresh round of shocked silence to hang over the ponies for a moment before breaking it. "Now Fluttershy," she said with a not-exactly-sweet smile, "don't be rude. Why don't you introduce me to your friends?" Her smile vanished as Fluttershy tried to make her voice work and her friends glanced about uncomfortably, unsure of whether or not to come to her rescue. Finally, Rarity and Soul Mage both tried to speak up only for Lavender to cut them off with an aggrieved sigh. "Still lacking confidence I see," she said. Something in Fluttershy clicked at that point and she looked up to meet her mother's eyes. In a flurry of words, she identified each of her companions, including the Order-naries, and brought up Rarity's desire to talk shop with Lavender. "Much better," Lavender said in approval.

"Pardon me Ms. Sunset," Ash said, starting to step forward, only to be interrupted by the lavender pegasus, who was still focused on Fluttershy.

"You must go see you father," she said, "And, as luck would have it, I was just on my way to meet him for a late lunch at home. Join me. Your friends can come too." She wrapped a wing around Fluttershy and began guiding her down the street. Ash cast an annoyed glance toward the closed fashion store before joining the group in following Lavender.

"Rainbow Dash," Rarity said in a quiet but accusing tone, "Why have you never mentioned that Fluttershy and Lavender sunset were related?"

"I didn't know myself," Dash hissed back, "And even if I did, you never asked." She looked thoughtful and added, "This explains her freaky knowledge of sewing though."

"How could you not know?" Rarity asked, "You knew each other as fillies."

"Only from summer flight camp," Dash said, "I only got to know her well enough to feel obligated to protect her from those bullies. We never talked about our families."

"I think I can see why she wouldn't want to talk about it," Gold Heart said, motioning with her head toward the lavender pegasus, who was determined not to let Fluttershy slip away from her. Rarity watched them for a moment before nodding sadly.

"Yes, I suppose I can see why myself," she said.

Lavender Sunset led the ponies out of the business district and to a surprisingly modest-looking house near the edge of the city. Well, it was modest-looking in comparison to the mansion-like houses it was nestled amongst and after taking into account the general degree of auspiciousness inherent in cloud-based architecture. They were met by a butler pegasus who took their saddlebags (much to Ash's reluctance) and then flew off to warn the kitchen to prepare additional food for the meal. Lavender had released Fluttershy out of necessity and the poor yellow pegasus was standing stiff-legged as far away from her mother as she dared: two short steps.

"This way," Lavender announced, "We will talk in the parlor until lunch is ready." As she led them down the hallway, Ash hung toward the back, grumbling about wasted time and the risk of leaving his stuff unguarded. As they passed an open doorway, something caught the ash-grey unicorn's eye. He looked inside and saw what appeared to be a sewing room. A number of winged pony mannequins stood around the room wearing outfits in various stages of completion, along with tables covered in well-organized piles of material. What caught Ash's eye, however, was a large yellow gemstone inside a glass case sitting on the center table. His surprise was quickly replaced by a satisfied smile.

"Ash!" Heart called out, bringing him back to reality.

"Coming," he called back, running to catch up. They were waiting for him in front of another door down the hall. "My apologies," he said to Lavender, "I just saw that lovely topaz in your workroom." Lavender regarded him neutrally before turning to the door and opening it. *Dang it* Ash thought, *Strike two*. The group filed into the lounge, which was furnished with not quite enough cloud couches for everypony, especially since one was taken up by a strong-looking, navy blue pegasus stallion with black hair and a storm cloud for a cutie-mark.



"Stormchaser," Lavender said, pushing Fluttershy ahead of her, "look who's come home."

"Fluttershy," Stormchaser said flatly, "It's been far too long."

"Hi Dad," Fluttershy said dully.

"And who are these?" Stormchaser asked, looking at the rest of the group.

"Friends of our daughter," Lavender said, motioning to each pony in turn  
"This is Twilight Sparkle, Rarity, Rainbow Dash-"

"Rainbow Dash?" Stormchaser asked, looking surprised, "Last year's Best Young Flier champion?"

Dash's cool demeanor faltered for a second at the recognition from one of the world's best weather ponies. Recovering, she put on her best proud look and said, "That's me!"

"I was quite impressed with your performance," Stormchaser said, "to think I'd be witness to the first ever Sonic Rainboom-"

"Second actually," Dash said, "I earned my cutie-mark while pulling off the first one." She turned slightly to display her flank to the navy-blue pegasus.

"Amazing," Stormchaser said, "I think Fluttershy could learn a thing or two from you."

"Yeah," Rainbow said, her inflating ego making her blind to Fluttershy's growing distress and the disapproving look Rarity was shooting her, "I've tried helping her building up her confidence in flying, but not every pony can be like me." She finally noticed the sad look on Fluttershy's face and realized what was happening. Trying to salvage the situation, she added, "Besides, she doesn't need to be the world's best flier to take care of her animals." Fluttershy winced, confusing the rainbow-haired pegasus for a split second before Lavender spoke.

"Animals?" she asked, giving Fluttershy a dirty look, "Is that what you've been doing with yourself? That's earth pony work!"

"What's wrong with earth ponies?" Rainbow asked, coming to her friend's defense.

"Nothing," Stormchaser said, "But pegasi are ponies of the sky. For one to spend her life caring about little, scampering, ground-dwelling animals... It just isn't done."

"I care for birds too," Fluttershy said, the beginnings of a Stare coming in her eyes.

Ash had watched this exchange waiting for a chance to step in and change the subject. Seeing that an argument was looming, he leaned towards his teammates and muttered, "I'll be right back." He slipped out of the room without waiting for a response.

"Where's he going?" Twilight, the only pony besides Heart and Soul to notice Ash's exit, asked quietly. Soul shrugged.

"I always wondered why you never came back home after that summer at camp," Stormchaser said to Fluttershy, "and why you never mentioned your cutie-mark or job in the few letters you wrote to us. You *do* have a cutie-mark, yes?"

"Yes," Fluttershy said, displaying the trio of pink butterflies on her flank, "It shows how well I can care for animals and-" The sound of breaking glass interrupted her, and her confidence shattered with it.

"What was that?" Lavender exclaimed.

"Three guesses," Soul muttered to himself as he preceded everypony out into the hall. "The first two don't count," he added upon seeing Ashen Blaze dash out of the sewing room with his saddlebags lying sloppily on his back and a large topaz floating along behind him.

"Stop thief!" Stormchaser shouted, shoving his way through the group to pursue Ash. With sighs and rolling eyes, Soul and Heart made chase as well, followed by Twilight, Rarity, Rainbow Dash, and Fluttershy. Once they made it out the front door, all the pegasi except Fluttershy took flight for extra speed. Oddly, it didn't help; Dash almost fell out of the sky when she saw Soul was somehow keeping pace with her.

"What?" she exclaimed.

"Don't know," Soul said, "If I had to guess, Ash is moving the clouds under him to speed his retreat, and they're still moving for us."

"That's cheating."

"Perhaps," the golden-yellow unicorn said flatly.

Ash led them on a chase through the streets toward the edge of Cloudsdale. When Heart saw that the unicorn was making a beeline for the end of the clouds, she moaned and said, "Oh, please tell me he's not."

"Oh, he is," Soul said flatly.

Ash ran to the very edge of the clouds, leaped off into a forward somersault, and dived into the air crying, "*Kemo Kiyaski!*" The pursuers skid to stop and looked down at the rapidly shrinking figure of Ash.

"Wow, he hasn't done that in a long time," Soul said.

"What, jumped to his death?" Rarity exclaimed.

"No," Soul said, "that battle-cry. Come to think of it, the last time he used it was just before an impromptu sky-dive as well, so I guess you're right."

Rainbow stared aghast at Soul's casual attitude for a second before diving off the cloud, making sure to clip Soul as her wings spread. She flapped her wings as hard as she could to gain speed. *Rainboom number three* she thought to herself, *and I'm using it to save another idiot unicorn from falling to their death.* She gritted her teeth and held her legs out straight to cut the wind resistance. Gradually she grew closer to Ash as the air began to bend around her in a tighter and tighter cone. "C'mon, c'mon," she muttered as she neared the breaking point. All of a sudden a grey blur shot up past her, and over the sound of the wind she thought she heard something like "HiDashbyeDash." Startled, she lost control for a crucial second and then had no choice but to brace for the catapulting rebound she knew was coming. The mach cone snapped back, flinging her upward at an incredible speed. She prayed she didn't hit anything important before she could regain control, and then suddenly felt herself decelerating faster than she expected. Once she was going slow enough, she righted herself and

opened her eyes. She saw Ashen Blaze floating nonchalantly in mid-air, the glowing Topaz hanging next to him. Rainbow tried to ask how that was possible, but her tongue refused to work from the surprise.

"Topaz of wind and air," Ash said, explaining the obvious question, "I'm no expert with it, but I can use it to produce enough upward-blowing wind to cancel gravity's effect on me, or slow a pony down."

"Oh," was all Dash could say. Ash looked up and then sighed. Dash followed his gaze and saw several pegasi dressed in city watch uniforms flying down toward them.

"Sorry about this Dash," Ash said, "I don't want you associated with me on this." Before Rainbow could react, the grey unicorn summoned a tornado from the Topaz that knocked her away from him and threw the watch ponies into confusion as it rocketed Ash toward the surface of Equestria.

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Gale wiped her brow and sat back. It had taken her a bit longer than she expected, but the taffy-puller was finally back together. "All right Pinkie," she said, turning to the pink earth pony who was sitting nearby with blocks of taffy by her side, "Let's give it a try."

"Okie dokie," Pinkie said, picking up a taffy block and carrying it to the machine. She dropped it inside the bowl and gave Gale a nod. The brown earth pony returned the nod and switched the machine on. The two sat back and watched the taffy-puller go to work, and Gale hid a smile as she noticed fewer discordant sounds coming from the machine. She'd managed to tweak it just a little as she put it back together, and her itch to tinker and upgrade was finally gone. "Good job," Pinkie said, "It's as good as new."

"Thanks," Gale said proudly, "Nothing less than the best. That's my motto." A crashing sound from upstairs cut off any response Pinkie was going to make, and the two earth ponies shared a glance before running up to investigate. They arrived in Pinkie's room to find Ashen Blaze sprawled out on Pinkie's bed, which was basking in the light of a new, roughly pony-shaped skylight. A large yellow gemstone was laying on the ground near the bed, being gummed by Gummy. "Ash!" Gale exclaimed, rushing over to his side. Ash moaned and stirred a little.

"Aig," he said, "I can't feel my toes."

"You don't have any toes, smart guy," Gale deadpanned.

"Oh, right," Ash said, eyes opening, "By all rights I should be paralyzed right now. Next time I try to make a tornado while I'm in mid-air, stop me. That being said, these pony bodies seem to be much more resilient than human ones."

"Ha! So that's what your secret not-a-pony species is called!"

Ash winced at the high pitch of the pink pony's voice. "Oh, great," he moaned, "Hello Pinkie Pie."

"Hello," Pinkie said, shoving her face into Ash's view, "Soooo, you 'humans' walk on two legs and have fingers. What else?" Ash cast a pleading glance at Gale, who tapped on Pinkie's shoulder to get her attention.

"Come with me and I'll explain," she said, "give Ash some time to bounce back." Pinkie nodded eagerly and Ashen Blaze breathed a sigh of relief as Gale led her out of the room.

Left to himself, and figuring it would be a while before he would have to answer for his actions in Cloudsdale, Ashen Blaze brushed most of the debris off the bed, rescued the Topaz from Gummy, and lay down to reflect. *Four Gems in almost as many days, he thought, one of which we took from Tau'rin himself! This already blows away our record by a landslide. ... Note: never say that aloud around Soul Mage. Anyway, that's worrisome; we've barely had time to settle in and get the lay of the land, let alone come up with a new strategy for fighting Tau'rin. Hmm... Twilight and Rarity were useful last time, but I don't think I want to count on Tau putting up with illusions and games again. We can't slow down though- if a Gem shows up and we don't grab it, Tau'rin will. I wonder... what would happen if we got all seven Gems and Tau'rin had none? Dare I even imagine that possibility? He really didn't like Twilight's magic pulling the Sapphire off of him... maybe...* His thoughts began to lose coherency at that point as his much abused body demanded sleep.

# Chapter 12

"You are not allowed back into Cloudsdale Ashen Blaze." Several hours had passed before the group returned from Cloudsdale, and it hadn't taken them long to track down Ashen Blaze, since the hole his fall had punched in the roof of Sugar Cube Corner was still present. None of them were particularly happy when the ash-grey unicorn greeted them, but it wasn't until the Order-naries were walking back to Sweet Apple Acres after dinner that he found out why. Soul Mage had apparently drawn the short straw, and so it was he that had broken the news.

The ash-grey unicorn with the fire-like mane shrugged. "Meh," he said flippantly, "It's not like there's another Gem up there anyway."

"I'm serious Ash," Soul Mage said, looking straight into Ash's eyes, "It took us hours to convince the city watch not to arrest us as accomplices to your petty theft."

"Petty theft?" Ash said, insulted, "I stole a hoof-sized, flawless topaz from a famous fashion designer's house in broad daylight. Surely that qualifies as Grand Theft, or at least a felony."

Soul glared disapprovingly at the grey unicorn in silence for several seconds before continuing. "Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash got off easy," he said, "Dash because she tried to catch you, and Fluttershy because... well, she's Fluttershy. The watch didn't even think for a second a fragile-looking, nervous waif like her could've had anything to do with a theft. Twilight got off because of her connections to Princess Celestia, and Rarity made an excellent case for herself. As for Heart and myself, we only got off if we swore an oath to turn you in if you ever set foot in Cloudsdale again."

"Again, meh," Ash said, "It's not like there's another Gem up there."

"You're in hot water," Soul said, "It won't be long before the story spreads across the world. Cloudsdale weather ponies do a lot of traveling you know. Step out of line again..."

"Step out of-" Ash started to protest, but then thought better of it and sighed. "You're right," he said, "It won't do to lose the trust of Twilight and her friends. Especially since Applejack's letting us crash at her place."

"So you'll behave yourself?" Soul asked, "No more stealing Gems, no matter how easy it may be?"

"You have my word," Ash said solemnly.

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"Pardon me Fluttershy." The pale yellow Pegasus almost dropped the carrot she was holding in surprise. She set it down gently in front of Angel Bunny before turning around to face her surprise visitor. Angel picked the carrot up and scampered off to eat it in peace as soon as Fluttershy's back was turned.

"Oh, hello Ashen Blaze," Fluttershy said, "What brings you here?"

Ash took a few steps past the gate around Fluttershy's yard before stopping, not quite meeting her eye. "Where," he said hesitantly, "where do we stand, you and I?" Seeing Fluttershy's confused expression, he tried again. "What I did yesterday," he said, "I can make a lot of excuses about it, but the fact stands I stole from your parents. You didn't seem to be having a good time with them, but they *are* your parents..."

"Oh," Fluttershy said, "Uh... you don't have to worry about that."

"Yes, I do," Ash said, "You didn't have to come with us. You didn't want to come, but we made you, and that led to, well, everything that happened. We shouldn't have involved you."

"No, no, it's ok," Fluttershy said, adopting the soothing tone she usually used on her animals, "You didn't know, and I could have kept quiet about knowing where... mother's store was. To be honest, I was hoping, just a little, that if I had my friends around me, my parents might be..."

"More approving?" Ash asked.

Fluttershy nodded. "Father was right," she said quietly, "My talent's not what you'd normally expect of a Pegasus, especially one born in

Cloudsdale like me. I'd never been to the ground before that day when I got my cutie-mark." A happy smile came to her face as she thought back.

"Really?" Ash asked, "No offense, but with your apparent weakness in flight..."

"Oh, you can walk just about anywhere in Cloudsdale," Fluttershy said, "It takes a few years for Pegasus wings to get strong enough for flight. Summer Flight Camp's purpose to help train your wings, but even considering that, I was one of the weakest fliers attending that year. There were some colts that were making fun of me, and Rainbow Dash stood up for me and challenged them to a race. They had me wave the flag to start them off, and their speed left me spinning and I fell off the cloud I was standing on. A swarm of butterflies was nice enough to catch me and..." She trailed off upon seeing Ash's incredulous reaction to that sentence. "What?"

Ash shook his head and muttered something. "Never mind," he said, "continue, please."

"Ok," Fluttershy said, trying to regain her train of thought, "Uh... when I landed, I met all these cute little animals - squirrels, raccoons, birds – and fell in love with all of them. Just a few moments later, Rainbow Dash pulled off her first Sonic Rainboom and the sound sent all the animals running in fear. As I tried to calm them I realized that was my special talent, and my cutie-mark appeared." Ash nodded as he looked at the pink butterflies. Fluttershy's face fell a little as she spoke again, "I knew my parents wouldn't approve, so I didn't tell them anything about my cutie-mark or the animal-tending job I found here in Ponyville. I write them occasionally, just to let them know I'm still ok, but yesterday was the first time I've actually seen them in years."

"Sorry again," Ash said, "I guess things will be a bit tougher for you now."

"Oh, I'll be ok," Fluttershy said unconvincingly, "Besides it was..." she blushed deeply. "What you did shocked them both so much, and I..."

"Felt a little satisfaction from it," Ash supplied. Fluttershy's blush deepened and she turned away from the unicorn, ashamed. "Twilight told me you embody the Element of Kindness," Ash said, "So I guess it's hard to admit when somepony's misery makes you happy. I admire that Fluttershy, such



purity's hard to find. Don't ever change. Somebody has to balance me out." He smirked at the confused glance Fluttershy gave him. "Well," Ash said, preparing to turn away, "it was nice talking to you. I'll let you get back to work now." A sudden rumbling of the ground coincided with his turn, throwing him off his feet. Fluttershy squeaked in alarm and shrank to the ground until the shaking stopped.

"Oh dear," she said, looking around at the chaos breaking out amongst the animals in her yard, "Oh dear, please calm down everyone!" She stood back up and began running around, trying to corral and calm her charges.

Ash tried to get to his feet, only to be knocked down by another tremor. "Ponyville's not given to earthquakes normally, is it?" he asked, standing up at last.

"N-no," Fluttershy said distractedly.

"That bears investigating then," the unicorn said, "I'll be going then, if you don't need any help?" Fluttershy was too busy gathering her animals to respond, so Ash shrugged and headed back into town at a gallop.

He arrived at the town square to find the entire town gathered in front a large stone stage complete with a curtain of earth. He worked his way through the mass of ponies until he found Soul Mage, Gold Heart, and Gale standing toward the right-hand side a third of the way from the back. Applejack, Twilight, and Rarity were a short ways off with Rainbow Dash hovering over them. "What's all this?" Ash asked.

"Dollars to donuts it's somepony using the Emerald," Soul said, "This stone wagon of some sort rumbled into town and turned into that. We've been standing here trying to figure out what it is, but most of the ponies here seem to be expecting a show."

"Well, it is a stage," Heart pointed out.

"If the new Emerald's involved," Ash said, "Whoever found it would have had three days at most to master its use. That's impressive; I'd like to meet them."

"I think we're about to," Gale said, pointing. The dirt curtains were shaking violently, and then collapsed in a cloud of dust that was quickly sucked into

the stage. In their place stood a blue mare with silvery-blue hair wearing a purple, star-studded cape and a matching pointed conical hat. Murmurs went up from the crowd as she grinned sardonically at them.

"Her?" Rarity exclaimed, "She's got a lot of nerve showing her face here again."

"You can say that again," Applejack said sourly. Rainbow Dash was just glaring at the mare. A large portion of the crowd seemed to share their sentiments, but the pony on the stage wasn't deterred.

"Yes," she said in a loud voice, "your eyes do not deceive you. The Great and Powerful Trixie has returned, and this time her power will not be denied."

"Who's this?" Ash asked, lifting his voice to carry over to Twilight's group.

"Just watch," AJ replied, "You'll catch on in a moment, I'm sure."

"All of you," Trixie said, "you who doubted the Great and Powerful Trixie and laughed her to scorn, behold her power!" She raised her front legs into the air and the stage broke free of the ground and flew up several feet. Jaws dropped all around as every pony craned their necks to look up at the sight. "I am the master of the very ground!" Trixie declared, bringing the stage back down, "Is there any pony who can doubt the Greatness of Trixie now, Ponyville?" She scanned the audience, and located Twilight, who was as awestruck as the rest. "But perhaps a better demonstration is in order," she said, "I challenge the pony who shamed me to match her power against mine."

"Don't," Ash advised Twilight, fishing around in his pack for PC, "She's using a Gem, and she's good at it."

"I wasn't planning to," Twilight said, "I don't use my gifts to show- *eeep!*" The ground beneath her suddenly rose up, turning into a floating platform that carried her over the crowd and dumped her roughly onto the stage.

"Stand," Trixie ordered. Twilight got to her feet and tried to speak, but Trixie cut her off. "Show Trixie your power again," the blue unicorn demanded, "Let us see how you do without an Ursa Minor to lull."

"No Trixie," Twilight said, "I'm not going to play your game. I never wanted to compare my talent with yours; my only thought was to protect Ponyville."

"That's right!" Rainbow Dash shouted, flying to join her friend, "She doesn't have to prove anything to a braggart like you!"

"Braggart?" Trixie said, insulted, "Could a simple braggart do this?" She stamped the stage and a stone wall shot out of the ground to block the Pegasus. Dash tried to fly around it, only to find herself caught in a tiny tornado of rainbows that spun her around and threw her back into the crowd.

"That's it," Ash said, placing PC on his head, "We need to take action before somepony gets injured." He started to push through the crowd, only to find his progress stopped by a tug on his tail. He looked back to see Heart holding his red and orange tail in her mouth. "What?" he asked.

"You shouldn't go up there," Soul said, "Promise or no promise, I don't think you can keep your temper if you confront her."

"You have a better suggestion?" Ash asked, "We need to get the Emerald away from her."

"Soul and I will handle this," Heart said, dropping Ash's tail, "All we need to do is pull off a stunt she can't top."

"And you think your skills can do that?" the ash-grey unicorn asked, "What are you going to do? Tear up the stage with Element Wheel?"

"We can use the Gems too you know," Heart said, "Even Gale can. Just..." She looked to her brother. "Actually, what *could* we do?" she asked. Ash scoffed and turned away again.

"Wait," Soul said, "I have a plan. Ash, where exactly is she keeping the Emerald?"

Ash narrowed an eye at the golden-yellow unicorn before turning to look at the stage and made PC scan it. "Embedded in the stage," he said, "near the surface at center-stage. She's tapping its power with her magic."

"Ok," Soul said, "we'll need the Sapphire and Ruby to pull this off. Heart, you take the Sapphire and follow my lead."

Ash gave the pair a questioning look as he produced the two Gems and gave them to Heart and Soul. "Good luck, I guess," he said.

"Come on," Trixie said impatiently, "I know you have the power. Show it to me, and see if it can match this." The stage morphed around Twilight, creating part of a cage around her. Twilight gulped and glanced about nervously, but held her ground.

"No," she said, "I won't be bullied."

"Come on!" Trixie howled, "Ever since that night, I've dreamed of this day, and you will not deny me of it! Show Trixie your power so she can show you how weak it is now!"

"Oi! Arrogant and Obsessive Trixie!" The two mares looked toward the shout and saw a brown-haired, golden-yellow pegasus carrying a matching unicorn through the air, followed by gemstones. Gold Heart dropped Soul Mage onto the stage and landed next to him as Soul completed his challenge, "You want a contest, we'll give it to you."

"Who are you?" Trixie asked.

"Soul Mage," said, striking a pose, "and this Gold Heart, my... partner. You don't object to a team effort do you?"

"...No," Trixie said, eyeing the ponies suspiciously, "now, what makes you think you are better than the Great and Powerful Trixie?"

"I could go on for hours on that," Soul said, "but, you only care about our skills. I can tell you this with certainty: we know where your power's coming from, and we can use it better than you."

Trixie blinked in surprise, her eyes darting briefly to the gems floating around Soul's head. "Is that so?" she asked, "Well, prove it then."

"Just a moment," Soul said, holding up a hoof, "I'm in a betting mood, so let's make a wager. If you win this contest, you can have one of these Gems here, your choice. Each has power equal to the one you're using,

but in different elements. If we win, we get your Gem." Out in the audience, Ashen Blaze facehoofed. *Don't risk our Gems!* he yelled mentally, forcing himself to give Heart and Soul a chance.

"Trixie is intrigued," the blue unicorn said, rubbing her chin, "Do you have a specific challenge in mind?"

"Yep," Soul said with a confident nod. He turned to the audience and shouted, "Back away ponies, we'll need a lot of open space to work." As the crowd slowly moved back, Soul turned back to Trixie and said, "The challenge is this: we'll each use the power available to us to create a stone statue. The more impressive one wins. For fairness, Heart here will create a veil of mist to hide our work until we're done, and the audience will decide which one wins."

Trixie mulled that over for several minutes before nodding. "Trixie accepts your challenge."

"Great," Soul said, "Heart, if you will?"

"Are you sure about this?" Heart asked him a low voice as she took flight and grabbed the Sapphire.

"Just stay in link range," Soul muttered back, "I might need your help managing the power." Heart nodded and flew up higher, activating the Sapphire as she went. A heavy mist rose up from the nearby river and flowed toward the stage, creating a thick curtain that separated the audience from the contestants and the contestants from one another. A heavy rumbling shook the ground as the two unicorns set to work.

"I really hope this works," Ash muttered.

"What, yah don't trust them to do a good job?" Applejack asked.

"I trust them to do their best," Ash replied, "But I've never known Soul to be an artist. Not that we ever had much opportunity to share hobbies with each other..." He sighed and sat down to wait, the only pony not even slightly upset by the shaking ground.

Several minutes went by, and then the ground settled and Soul's voice rang out from within the mist, "You ready over there Trix?"

There was a pause before Trixie responded, "Ready." The two unicorns stepped out of the mist and turned around to face the curtain.

"Show us the first one Heart," Soul said. Gold Heart nodded and began circling as the right half of the mist curtain flew up to gather around her before flying back into the river. Sounds of awe and polite clapping greeted the first statue, which was a nearly perfect likeness of Trixie rearing up with her cape billowing out behind her, only three times the size of the real thing and stone-grey throughout. Trixie couldn't keep the pride out of her posture as Soul gestured for the audience to voice their opinions. "Number two now," he called out once the noise died down. Heart quickly removed the rest of the mist, and a collective gasp went up from the crowd. Trixie stood slack-jawed at Soul Mage's creation, which looked like a phoenix preparing for flight, wings spread wide and with its head cocked to one side as if regarding the audience. The amazing thing about it, however, was that it was glowing. Embedded in the Phoenix's visible eye was the Ruby, which was heating the statue's wings and body under Soul's command, causing the rock to glow in numerous shades of red and orange in a pattern that gave the stone phoenix the illusion of subtle, life-like movement. "Well?" Soul asked the stunned crowd, managing to keep a neutral tone in his voice. The response was almost deafening.

"You... you cheated," Trixie yelled at Soul over the noise.

"Not so," Soul responded, "I told you, whatever power we had available was eligible for use. It's your own fault for not thinking to try and use the Gems I brought up with me." Trixie fumed, but she knew she'd been beaten fair and square. She couldn't talk her way out of this humiliation, just like the last time...

"Fine then!" she shouted as the cheers and applause died down, "Take your prize." Twilight barely had time to jump off the stage before it and the Trixie statue collapsed. A large emerald flew out of the remains of the stage, wrapped in Trixie's magic, and flew toward Soul Mage. Soul reached out his magic to take it, only for it to be snatched away by another. Ash, who had worked his way to the front of the crowd during the fanfare, looked the roughly-cut Gem over critically before placing it in his saddlebag.

"You surprised me Soul," he said, "I never knew you were so creative."

"I have to be," Soul said with a smile, "As you're so fond of pointing out, I have a smaller set of tricks I can use, so I have to put more effort into making them work for me. I got the idea for this from the buildings in Cloudsdale. I figured that since the Emerald lets one mold the earth like... well, wet clay, I could easily copy those cloud sculptures."

"Clever," Ash said, smiling back, "The fire glow was a nice touch." Soul nodded appreciatively as Ash turned to Trixie. "You have quite the gift girl," he said, "It's a shame you're wasting it."

"What do you mean?" Trixie asked testily, "I am the Great and Powerful Trixie. I have the power to amaze and astound, and you must admit I did that here."

"For the wrong reason," Ash said, "quiet the ego for a second and let me give you some advice: the livelihood of the performer depends on the audience's reaction to them. Please the audience first, yourself second."

Trixie mulled that over for a second, and then turned her nose up and said, "Hmph, what would you know?"

"He has a point Trixie," Twilight said, coming over to the group, "And by the way, I don't blame you for what happened last time. You didn't have to run away; we would have helped you fix yourself up."

"S-shut up," Trixie stammered, backing away, "Trixie does not need your help!" She activated her magic and created a burst of light and smoke and ran away while everyone was blinded.

"Pleh," Ash said once his vision cleared, "Drama queens..."

"Hey, at least we're up another Gem," Soul pointed out.

"Yeah," Ashen Blaze said, "Five out of seven. This is going way too well."

# Chapter 13

The first thing Soul Mage and Ashen Blaze did with the Emerald was to clean up the mess Trixie had left and take down the phoenix statue to retrieve the Ruby. Several ponies, including the mayor, were upset at the wonderful piece of art being dismantled, but the two unicorns were insistent on making the town square just like it had been before. Once the rocks and dirt were back where they belonged, or at least close enough, they went to rejoin Gold Heart and Gale and found themselves being set upon by Applejack, Rarity, Rainbow Dash, and, seemingly from nowhere, Pinkie Pie.

"That was so awesome!" Rainbow said, clapping Soul on the back.

"Great job showin' her up," Applejack said, "She ain't gonna show her face round here again now I reckon."

"That statue was just darling," Rarity said.

"And you got another of your Gems!" Pinkie declared, "I'm going throw you a party!" She dashed off before anyone could respond.

"Girls, please," Ash said, trying to get himself and Soul out of the press, "Give us some space." The trio backed off and Soul slinked over to Heart and Gale while Ash turned to Rarity and pulled out the Emerald. "It's time I fulfilled my promise to you," he said, "And to Twilight, if Zecora hasn't been able to fix Spike."

Rarity blinked in confusion before she remembered. "My house!" she exclaimed happily, "Right! You must get to that, immediately!" She began pushing Ash in the direction of the tangled stone mess where her shop had once stood. Ash chuckled as he let himself be herded. The others followed them at a distance. They arrived at the site, and Rarity sat back, looking expectantly at Ash.

"Ok," the ash-grey unicorn said, moving the Emerald onto the ground in front of him, "Stand back a little folks, and brace yourselves; this might get a bit crazy." He placed one hoof on the Gem and another on the rock in



front of him. Closing his eyes, he began to concentrate as his horn took on the same green glow that began to come from within the Emerald. A similar glow began to spread from his outstretched hoof into the rocks, which began to quiver with power. With a resounding *Crack* they began moving, slowly but surely untangling where possible and breaking apart when they couldn't move past each other. The ground began to shake under the ponies's hooves as the rocks slid back into the ground, and a small crowd began to gather to watch the show. After several minutes, the last of the rocks vanished beneath the ground, leaving a flat, featureless circle of dirt that showed no signs of ever being disturbed. Ash released the Emerald and swayed slightly as he regained his balance and rubbed his forehead at the base of his horn. "There," he said weakly, "No more rock pile. Pardon me."

"Wait, is that all?" Rarity asked as Ash tried to walk away.

"Were you expecting to find your shop all put back together?" Ash asked sourly, looking over his shoulder at Rarity, "The earthquake obliterated it, remember? There wasn't enough left over to build a decent table. So, unless you want a copy made entirely of stone, which would take days of painstaking detail work if I recall the place's appearance right, I've done all I can. Now, please excuse me; I need food." He began to walk away again, only to stop next to Twilight and say, "I need money for food, don't I? *Skvetch...*"

"Here," Rarity said, walking over to him and holding some bits out to him, "I'm sorry I expected too much from you."

"Keep your money," Ash told her, "You're going to need it more than me. I'll be fine."

"I insist," Rarity said, pushing the money at Ash.

"Calm down Rarity," Applejack said, "He's got a point; yer gonna need a lot of bits ta pay fer rebuildin' yer store. How's about I pay for lunch, fer all of y'all?"

Rarity sighed and put her money away. "Very well," she said, "Thank you Applejack."

"No problem," AJ said. As the group walked off, the orange earth pony leaned toward Ash and said, "By the way, I'd be willin' ta pay if ya do some extra chores 'round the farm." Ash just shot her glance and kept walking.

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During lunch, the topic of conversation turned toward Soul Mage and Gold Heart. "I haven't seen you two use your special powers very much," Twilight said.

"There hasn't been much reason to," Heart said, "They're more suited to fighting than anything else."

"And," Soul added, "For some reason I can only guess at, our powers are more restricted in these pony bodies. What you've seen us do is about the extent of it: our spirits link and allow us to lend each other energy, Heart can create the Element Wheel spell, and I can focus the energy into my hooves. I used to be able to form a whip out of the energy, and both of us could fire small blasts of energy. Tau'rin finds those rather painful, so not having access to them is a pain."

"That is an understatement," Ash said. Soul gave him an odd look. "What?" Ash said defensively, "Just because I keep giving you grief over calling it magic doesn't mean I don't think it's useful. Anything that'll help save the world is ok in my book. Not that that's worked out so well up till now," he finished in a mutter.

"What's the matter Ash?" Rainbow asked, "You've got, what, five of your gems now? That Tau'rin guy's not going to stand a chance against you."

"It's not a question of who holds which Gems," Ash said, "So long as all seven are nearby, Tau'rin has the chance to activate the Ultimate Chaos."

"Why not leave a Gem or two behind when you go to fight him?" Rainbow suggested, "If you're fighting him, he can't sneak around behind you and steal them, right?"

"That's not a bad idea," Gale said, "The Diamond's element isn't that useful for fighting. We don't need it."

"If Tau'rin gets the Amethyst, we'll need it to counter the Dark element," Soul pointed out, "And that Gem has a habit of winding up in Tau's hands."

"One of the others then," Gale said, "We've got the entire Classic Element set now, so we don't need to worry about canceling any of those out. Leave the Emerald in somepony's care."

"Last time we did that, somepony's house got *eaten by rocks*," Ash said with a narrowed eye.

"Simple solution," Soul said, miming spreading out a banner, "Store it under a sign saying 'do not eat under pain of petrification' with a big flashy arrow pointing to it. Modify the text a little and we could leave one of others behind if you're so intent on crushing Tau'rin with a cave-in." Ash just gave his fellow unicorn an unamused look.

"We can't leave any Gems behind," Heart said, "You haven't forgotten about my vision, have you?"

"What vision?" Twilight asked.

"Back when we found the Gems for the first time," Heart explained, "The Diamond did something to me when I picked it up. I was given what I'm sure was either a vision of the future or a prophesy associated with the Gems and Tau'rin. Whatever it was, I distinctly saw all seven Gems being present as Tau'rin was engulfed in their energy and destroyed."

"We've tried to fulfill that thirteen times already Heart," Soul said, "Not once have we accomplished anything besides giving Tau'rin the fuel to destroy another world. It might be time for a new tactic."

"We'll help you," Rainbow Dash said, thumping the table for emphasis, and then looking at Twilight Sparkle, "We do have the Elements of Harmony after all; that ought to count for something."

"I guess so," Twilight said uncertainly.

"Tau'rin seemed to like the touch of your magic as much as he does Soul and Heart's power Twilight," Ash said, "I'd be happy to have you by our side if you're willing. And," he turned toward Gale, "I'll think about leaving a Gem behind if you can find a way to insure it won't get chomped by some random dragon or something."

"Speaking of dragons," Rarity said, "I wonder if Zecora has had any luck restoring Spike."

"I think we should give her one more day to try," Twilight said.

"Why?" Soul asked, "We've got the Emerald now. With it Ash can un-do the petrifying in no time."

"It'll be easier than pie," Ash said when Twilight gave him a curious look, "I shouldn't need anything more than a stick or a piece of chalk to scratch out a simple spell-weave, the Emerald, and half a minute."

"Well then," Twilight said, standing up, "What are you waiting for? Let's go! Oh, and thanks for lunch Applejack."

"Yer quite welcome sugar cube," AJ said with a smile, "Now go get that rascal Spike fixed up." The group waved as Ash and Twilight exchanged a quick nod and galloped out toward the Everfree Forest.

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On their way to the forest, Ashen Blaze and Twilight stopped to check on Fluttershy. The meek pegasus was fine, having suppressed her own anxiety over the numerous tremors from Trixie's show that had been felt even at the cottage by keeping her pets and animal neighbors calm through all of them. She was very happy to hear that Ash and Twilight were on their way to restore Spike, but declined their invitation to come along. They left her as she began to administer to the still-frazzled nerves of her chickens. Twilight led the way into the Everfree and down the path to the zebra's hut. No sound came from within, and after Twilight's knocks went unanswered for the second time, Ash went to peer through the window.

"Doesn't look like she's home," He said, "the fire's out and the cauldron looks like it's just been cleaned out."

"Is Spike in there?" Twilight asked.

"Not where I can see," Ash said. He walked back to the front door to see Twilight holding a piece of parchment up against it as she wrote on it.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Writing a letter to Princess Celestia," Twilight answered, "Once Spike's back to normal I'll have him send it to let her know that he's ok."

"So I take it we're just going to wait here?" Ash asked.

"Zecora should be back soon," Twilight said, "she's probably just out collecting ingredients."

"Still," Ash said, glancing around, "Wouldn't it be a bit... safer to wait at Fluttershy's?"

"We'd just have to walk back here to check if Zecora's home," Twilight said, and then a slight smile crossed her face. "You're not scared are you? You were quite confident about the Everfree two days ago."

"We had the *Meis* of Glare with us," Ash said, not denying Twilight's playful jab, "And I'd rather not meet another cockatrice. The irony would kill me."

At that moment, Zecora strode into walked into the clearing, a smile evident on her lips as she tossed the hood of her cloak off her head. A satchel full of various flowers and plants was hanging around her neck, evidence of a very fruitful foraging session. "Monsters have learned to avoid the sight of my home," she said, "I have taught them it is not a fun place around which to roam. If you are here about Spike, he is still made of stone. I was about to start the second potion, and I hope it is the one."

"Isn't it hard putting a rhyme into every statement?" Ash asked, "That last one seemed a bit weak to me."

"I am used to speaking in rhyme," the zebra said, "It is the way of my people; a tradition from ancient time."

"Ok then," Ash said, giving Zecora a strange look for a second. "Anyway, we're here because we've got a foolproof way to fix Spike."

"Only a fool calls a plan foolproof," Zecora said, "There is always a way plans can get out of..." she trailed off as Ash pulled out the Emerald. "An mighty aura of magic surrounds that," she said in amazement, "To the aura around the dragon, it is a perfect match!"

"This is what stoned him," Ash said, "Or, rather, the power in it did... Spike tried to eat the old housing and- never mind, it's complicated. Point is, I can harness the power and reverse the spell."

Zecora stared in awe at the Gem for a second, and then shook her head and walked toward the door, Twilight stepping out of her way.

"Come," Zecora said, opening the door, "I will get Spike so you can set things right." She trotted inside and went over to a cabinet as Twilight and Ash walked in. Zecora opened the cabinet, revealing the petrified Spike nestled amongst stopped bottles filled with various colored liquids and jars of crushed plants and unidentifiable powders.

"You're keeping him in a cabinet?" Twilight asked, looking a bit upset.

"I preferred to keep him out of my way," the zebra said, removing Spike and setting him gently on the floor, "I have other tasks to accomplish throughout my day."

"Well, he won't have to go back in," Ash said, walking over to the petrified dragon and setting the Emerald down near him. "Do you have chalk or something I can use Zecora?" he asked, "I'll need to draw some stuff and I don't think you'd like having your floor permanently marked." Zecora gave the unicorn a strange look before fishing a small piece of charcoal out of her fire pit and holding it out to him. "Thank you," Ash said, grabbing the coal with his magic. He turned his attention to the stone dragon and began to focus his magic. The Emerald twitched and began to glow green, matching the color around Ash's horn as he began to sketch a pattern on the ground. He muttered to himself as he drew, eyes darting between the pattern to Spike, the charcoal never lifting up until Ash dragged it across the pattern a final time with a bit of flourish. He tapped the edge of the sketch with his hoof and the black lines took on a green glow. Lines of green energy became visible, wrapping around Spike like creeping vines and reaching out to connect to the Emerald. "No. Problem," Ashen Blaze said, grinning, "One little tug here and..." One of the lines around Spike seemed to snap and then began to unwrap itself from the dragon, taking the other lines with it until they had all flown off the statue and into the Emerald. A sigh escaped Ash's mouth as the glow around his horn, the Emerald, and the pattern on the floor all faded away. Color began to spread across the grey statue, and within seconds the stony texture had changed

to scales and tissue. Spike's eyes spun as he wavered slightly on his feet, a clawed hand going to his temple.

"Whoa," he said, "What... what happened? Where am I- aaack!" Twilight had rushed forward and caught him up in a rib-crushing hug.

"Welcome back Spike," she exclaimed happily.

"Twi...light," Spike gasped, "Can't... breathe." The lavender unicorn loosened her hold a little, smiling sheepishly. "Why are we at Zecora's?" Spike asked, looking around, "Last thing I remember, I was at Rarity's about to enjoy this luscious looking emerald she'd set out for me."

"That wasn't for you," Ash said flatly, "but I'm guessing Rarity should've put more thought into where she put the thing."

"Who are you?" Spike asked, giving Ash a suspicious look.

"Ashen Blaze," Ash said with a slight bow as he stowed the Emerald in his saddlebag, "leader of the Order-naries, mage extraordinaire, and Cloudsdale exile."

"You've missed an interesting few days," Twilight said in response to Spike's confused expression, "We'll explain on the way back to town, but for now," she produced the letter she'd written, "Do you think you could send a letter to Celestia?"

# Chapter 14

"Princess Celestia wants to meet you four." The Order-naries, Twilight Sparkle, Spike, Rarity, and Sweetie Bell were gathered at the library eating dinner. About halfway between Fluttershy's cottage and Mane Street, Spike had, to Ash's surprise, belched up a response to the letter he'd sent before he, Twilight, and Ash had left Zecora's. Twilight had perused the letter quickly and then invited Ash and his team to eat dinner with her so she could break the news to all four Order-naries at once.

"I'd ask why," Ash said dryly, "but I think I know the answer already: she wants to meet the ponies who've made such a splash around town in the course of five days and decide if it's worth the risk to let us continue running around."

"Uh," Twilight said, pulling the letter out and reading it again, "That's... another way to put it I guess. She's going to send a carriage for us tomorrow around ten AM."

"Us?" Soul Mage asked.

"Spike and I will be going with you," Twilight said, "We're from Canterlot originally, so we know our way around."

"Yep," Spike said around a bite of hay fries, "Maybe after we're done I can show you my favorite donut shop."

"Wow, you guys are lucky," Sweetie Bell said, "I wish I had a chance to meet the Princesses."

Rarity chewed her food thoughtfully for a second before swallowing and saying, "Sweetie, how would you like to go to Canterlot with me tomorrow?"

"Really?" Sweetie said, eyes shining in excitement.

"You're going to Canterlot?" Twilight asked.

"Don't worry, I'm not planning to impose myself on you and the Princess," Rarity said, "I just need to shop around to see how much it will cost me to



rebuild the Carousel Boutique and replace all my equipment. Once I know that, I may need to see if I can talk Hoity Toity or some other designer into hiring me part-time or buying jewels from me to cover the cost. And don't you start to apologize again Ash," she added, seeing the guilty expression on the unicorn's face, "You've done more than enough of that already."

Ash sighed and looked down at his plate like it had just insulted him. "Royalty," he muttered darkly. "I'll tell you this right now," he said, looking up at Twilight, "Political leaders make me testy. Most expect you to answer to them without doing anything to deserve your respect, and 'royals' are the worst in my opinion." He looked around at the disapproving looks coming from Soul and Heart and the appalled expression on Rarity and Twilight's faces. "I'm not refusing," he said, "but you might want to warn your Princess that I may be less than pleasant company." He stood up suddenly and said, "And now that I've made this situation very awkward, I'll take my leave. Thank you for the food Twilight. Good night."

A silence hung over the group for a moment after Ash left the library. Finally, Soul cleared his throat and said, "He's... actually that way with everyone. When you first meet him, you can only gain his respect, pity, or grudging tolerance. He doesn't take reputation or the opinions of others into consideration- the way you treat him is what he'll build on. I don't think he's met a leader yet that was able to put up with that."

"Princess Celestia's a very kind pony," Twilight said, "but... I should give her some fair warning I guess."

"After dinner," Spike said, "I'm still eating here."

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Ash was having a dream of some sort when he was roughly shaken awake by a pair of hooves. Mumbling, he opened one eye to peek sleepily at what looked to him like a brown, pony-shaped blob. "Wake up Ash!" the blob shouted with Gale's voice.

"What?" Ash asked grumpily, rubbing his eyes to clear them and looking around. "Geez Gale, it's still dark out," he said.

"I know," Gale said, "Get up."

"Why?" Ash's annoyance was clear, "What's so important it can't wait until proper daybreak?"

"Well," another, country-accented voice said as Applejack's head slid into Ash's range of vision. The orange earth pony was wearing a gold necklace bearing a red, apple-shaped crystal. "The *Celestial Almanac* said sunrise is supposed ta be at 5:47 AM today," she said "Right now, it's eight o'clock."

"That... That is a problem," Ash said, quickly coming to full wakefulness.

"No duh," Soul said from his stall.

"Any idea why?" Ash asked, still not happy about the wake-up call, "No wait, I've got it: Princess Celestia slept in." To the surprise of the other Order-naries, he actually quailed under the glare Applejack gave him.

"I woke y'all up 'cause I thought you'd offer ta make yourselves useful," she said coldly, "If your just gonna make jokes about this here *dire emergency*, then just go back ta sleep. I'm gonna go see if Twilight needs me ta help her get the Elements of Harmony gathered up." She galloped off toward town, leaving a humbled Ashen Blaze in her dust cloud.

"Smooth one Blaze," Soul deadpanned, "There's a reason *I'm* the comic relief on this team."

"Let's just follow her," Ash said, returning to his normal emotional state, "Let's parse out the Gems; anyone have a preference?"

"Topaz," Gale said, "As usual." Ash nodded and slid the gem into the saddlebag Gale was putting on. Soul grabbed the Sapphire for himself and Heart decided on the Emerald. Ash moved the Ruby to his left-side saddlebag to balance out the weight of the Diamond.

"Huh," Soul said as the four ran after the quickly shrinking form of Applejack, "The earth pony takes the Air Gem and the flying pony takes the Earth Gem. Ironical." Ash rolled his eyes as the girls chuckled.

Applejack was pleasantly surprised to see that Twilight Sparkle, Rarity, and Fluttershy were gathered outside the library, each wearing their Element of Harmony necklace, or tiara in Twilight's case. "Hey Applejack," Twilight

called to her as she approached, "I was expecting you to show up a bit earlier."

"I'm used to getting' up with the sun," AJ explained, "Took me a couple minutes to even start thinkin' somethin' was up. I really hope you got a different reason for this than I do."

"I can't think of anything besides Nightmare Moon," Twilight said sadly, "Although I can't even begin to guess how that's possible; Celestia would've warned me if Luna was starting to backslide."

"Dang," AJ said, hanging her head for a second, "Well, we're gonna need Pinkie and Dash if we're gonna do anything about it."

"I'll go wake up Rainbow Dash," Fluttershy said, spreading her wings.

"Good luck dear," Rarity said as the yellow pegasus flew up.

"I'll get Pinkie then," AJ said, turning to gallop toward the bakery. As she ran off, the Order-naries showed up and AJ gave Ash another hard look.

"Order-naries reporting for duty," Soul Mage said with a salute toward Twilight, "specializing in monster slaying, restoration of the status quo, and sarcastic in-fighting." Ash almost jabbed him in the ribs with an elbow before realizing that doing so would rationalize Soul's quip. The golden-yellow unicorn grinned at him anyway. Sobering, he looked back at Twilight and said, "But seriously, we're willing to help if you want us."

"Thank you," Twilight said with a smile, "once the others get here, we're going to Canterlot and see if we can find any clues as to what happened, assuming Nightmare Moon's behind this and that she's set up somewhere else."

"So, we're operating on something slightly better than a wild guess," Ash said dryly, "Lovely." He fished PC out of his bag and put it on. "PC," he said when the computer turned on, "maximum scan range, look for... night magic." The computer responded with a combination of text and audio, all of it sarcastic. "Darkness with a magical undertone then," Ash replied, rolling his eyes, "straight ahead and narrowed, if that'll give you more range and... hold a second." He turned to Twilight and asked, "Canterlot's that castle on the mountain, right?" The lavender unicorn nodded, bemused,

and Ash turned his gaze in the proper direction. "Scan." After a few moments, he looked dubiously at the output on the eyepiece and sighed. "There *might* be something out there," he said, putting PC away, "but it's too far away to be sure."

"So your information is just as speculative as Twilight's," Gale said, "That's a great help Ash."

"Feh," Ash replied.

"How are we going to get there anyway?" Heart asked, "It's a long way to walk from the looks of it."

"That's a very good point," Rarity said, "We had to leave here at noon to get to the Grand Galloping Gala on time. It started just after sunset," she added for the Order-naries's benefit.

"It's only half an hour by air," Twilight said, thinking, "But we only have two, no, wait, three pegasi and no air-coach big enough for... seven, which would probably be beyond the pulling capacity of three pegasi..." She started to pace, thinking hard.

"This is probably a dumb, dead-end idea," Soul said, "but what about teleportation?"

"I could move ten ponies," Ash said, "provided I had a way-point established in Canterlot. Which I..." he trailed off as Soul gave him an "I know that already" look.

Twilight shook her head. "I can teleport myself and anything I'm carrying, and only across town at best," she said. "I guess we're walking then," she added with a sigh.

"What, and leave these guys with nothing to do?" Everypony looked up to see Rainbow Dash hovering in front of a quartet of Pegasus stallions in gold armor harnessed to a large white-and-gold carriage. The rainbow-maned Pegasus had her front legs crossed as she smiled smugly down at the surprised ponies below her. She fluttered to the ground as the royal pegasi flew over their heads to land a short way down the street. As the group trotted over to the carriage, Fluttershy stuck her head out the window and smiled at them.

"Where'd this come from?" Twilight asked, amazed.

"The Princess-" one of the harnessed stallions began, only to be interrupted by a loud gasp.

"Oh wow!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed as she bounced down the street toward the group with a smirking Applejack on her heels, "A royal carriage! This will make our trip to Canterlot soo much easier!" Several ponies opened their mouths, only to shut them upon deciding not to question Pinkie's intuition.

"As I was saying," the Pegasus stallion said, eyeing Pinkie with trepidation, "The Princess, Celestia, managed to get a message to us before she... disappeared, ordering us to retrieve you at all costs. However, we were only expecting there to be six of you..."

"I could fly alongside you," Heart suggested.

"Me too," Dash said, "and Fluttershy, if she's up to it."

"The carriage can fit eight," one of the other teamsters said, "it'll be a bit tight though..."

"I'll fly too," Fluttershy said quietly, slipping out of the carriage, "I... I don't mind, really."

"Let's load 'em up then," Applejack said, leaping into the carriage over the startled Fluttershy's ducked head. The yellow pegasus quickly moved aside as the other non-winged ponies worked their way into the carriage, with Ashen Blaze being the last to squeeze in, shutting the door behind him before simply laying down on the floor between the benches. The carriage jolted a little as the pegasi galloped down the street before taking flight and orienting themselves in the direction of Canterlot.

About fifteen minutes into the flight, Ash got off the floor and squeezed between Soul and Applejack to look out the front window at the teamsters and the approaching mountainside castle. "So," he said, "You guys wouldn't have some idea of what's happened, would you?" he asked.

"No," the lead pegasus said, "All I know is that we had to scramble to stay ahead of a wave of dark magic that started spreading out from the castle as

we left." Ash grimly turned his gaze to the castle, ignoring the discomfort he was causing to the ponies on either side of him. Soul slid onto the floor with a sigh to relieve the pressure, knowing that Ash wasn't likely to move for a while.

A few minutes later the carriage slowed to a stop and hung in the air as the teamsters backpedaled into a controlled hover.

"What's going on?" somepony asked.

"Barrier," Ash said simply. The ponies scrambled over each other trying to look out one of the windows. The entire city of Canterlot and a large part of the surrounding mountain and airspace was encased in a barely visible bubble of blackness. "Pardon me," Ash grunted, trying to get his saddlebag opened, "I need to test its- no!" He'd managed to get the Diamond out, only for it to slip out of his magic grip and go flying out the front window.

"Again?" the unicorn exclaimed, watching helplessly as the Gem flew toward the barrier. A rainbow blur cut across his vision as Rainbow Dash flew out and grabbed the Diamond in a tight, four-legged grip against her belly and tried to fly back to the carriage. She was failing.

"Rainbow!" Twilight exclaimed, flinging out her telekinesis to grab the blue pegasus. Rarity, Soul, and Ash all added their power and together they managed to drag Dash back toward the carriage. As she drew near, Ash wiggled out the front window and climbed to the top of the carriage.

"Bring her to me," he said, "We've got to get the Diamond put away." Dash angled her wings to gain the necessary altitude as the unicorns pulled her up alongside Ash. Transferring his grip to the Gem, Ash helped Rainbow transfer it back into his saddlebag and closed it up tight. "Oh no you don't," Ash grunted as the unseen force continued to pull at the Diamond, "It's mine!" He stared intently at his saddlebag, and then quickly swung his head to sever an invisible thread of power, ending the pull. "Ok," he said, turning his attention back to the barrier, "The Gems do not come out into the open under any circumstances until I find out where Tau'rin got that attraction spell."

"Tau'rin's in Canterlot?" Rarity exclaimed.

"Yep," Ash said, "This barrier and that attempted Gem theft both have his signature underlying them. Somehow he managed to take control of your capital in one night. He's been a sneaky little meeper..."

"How do we get in?" Gale asked, "I mean, I'm sure you could take that barrier down with the Diamond, but if you can't even pull it out..."

Ash stuck his head over the edge and smiled at Gale through the window. "I don't need to pull it out," he said, "I've only been doing that out of habit. So long as I can touch a Gem with my magic, I can use it."

"Ok," Heart said, "so that lets you and Soul use your Gems, but what about Gale and me?"

"I think you're out of luck," Ash said, "Sorry." He pulled his head up and looked at the barrier again. *Hope I'm right*, he thought as he focused his magic again, splitting his attention between establishing a link to the Diamond and looking for a weakness in the barrier before him. His horn glowed brighter as the Diamond's energy flowed into it, and Ash allowed himself a small smile. *Have to keep it small and focused, but looks like I can do this*. He fired a beam of light from his horn, which pierced through the barrier. With a toss of his head, Ash sliced the beam through the darkness to create a large hole in the barrier. "Go!" he shouted at the pegasi in the harnesses as he threw himself flat on the roof of the carriage.

"Uh, sir," one of the pegasi said, "shouldn't you get back-"

"GO!" Ash shouted. The teamsters whinnied and began flapping their wings hard, quickly picking up speed as Ash grumbled under his breath. As the carriage neared the hole, Ash carved at its edges to keep it open until everypony made it through. "That'll be the easy part," Ash said, looking back, "count on it."

# Chapter 15

Contrary to Ashen Blaze's prediction, the flying carriage and its pegasus escort didn't have any trouble covering the distance from the darkness barrier around Canterlot to the landing area attached to one of the castle's towers. Ash leapt off the top of the carriage as Twilight and the other five non-winged ponies got out. "Ok Twilight," Ash said to the lavender unicorn, "This is your old territory, right? Where should we go?"

"I don't know," Twilight said, "I'm not even sure who we're up against anymore, Tau'rin or Nightmare Moon."

"My money's on both," Soul said, "That barrier was apparently Tau's work, but he's never been able to mess with the rotation of a planet."

"Different rules here, remember?" Gale said.

"Ok," Soul said, rolling his eyes, "but he's only got two Gems at most, and I doubt that'd be enough to take down two ponies with enough power to move the *sun and moon* without assistance."

"I suppose we should try the throne room then," Twilight said, "If Luna has become Nightmare again, she'll want to be where ponies can come bow to her. Follow me." She trotted toward the door leading into the tower, glancing in cautiously before entering with the others close behind.

"Good luck," one of the pegasus teamsters called after them.

"Oh," Fluttershy said, stopping and looking back at them, "What about you? What are you going to do?"

The four pegasi glanced at each other. "Uh," one of them said, "we'll... we'll be ok." Fluttershy didn't look convinced, but when she saw that the others were leaving her behind, she squeaked and ran to catch up. As she disappeared through the door, the four pegasi began to unhitch themselves from the carriage, just in case something jumped out at them as they went to look for shelter. They'd barely finished, however, before they found themselves caught up in a pool of paralyzing dark magic that began



seeping up through the ground, part of which branched off into a tendril that stretched toward the tower door in pursuit of the ten would-be heroes.

The group was crossing a landing two stories down when the darkness caught up to them, the tendril springing out of the ceiling to grab Gold Heart. She struggled for a second before the power froze her movements and began to carry her away as more tendrils appeared to attack the rest of the group. Applejack and Rainbow Dash were captured before the others could respond. Soul Mage threw his magic around Heart, weakening the tendril slightly as the aura of spirit power engulfed Heart but not enough to loosen its grip. Ash pushed his limits sending out several lancing bolts of light to sever the tendrils coming for him and the ponies around him. Taking advantage of the cover, Fluttershy and Rarity did their best to prevent AJ and Dash from being dragged away while Twilight tried to free them, pouring her magic into the darkness ensnaring them. Pinkie Pie bounced around, her Pinkie Sense allowing her to predict the movements of the tendrils chasing her so she could dodge them effortlessly until Ash could spare a moment to reduce their numbers.

Soul struggled against the force of the tendril that was trying to kidnap his sister, but he was starting to lose ground. As he felt his hooves begin to slide on the floor, he began to panic. "No," he grunted, trying to get a more solid stance and slipping a few more inches, "You are not taking her. Let. Her. Go!" His horn flared and three ethereal bolts of blue energy shot out in a curving path to strike the tendril just behind Heart. The darkness around the golden-yellow pegasus dissipated and her limp form flew toward Soul from the strength of his pulling. Soul yelped as Heart crashed into him and the two rolled across the floor. Untangling himself, he shot a quick glance around the room before shaking Heart gently. "Wake up," he demanded weakly. Heart moaned and stirred, eyes blinking open slowly. Soul breathed a sigh and relief and stroked Heart's cheek. "Rest," he said, "I'll protect you." He straightened up and stood over Gold Heart in a defensive posture, soul aura aflame as he linked to her spirit. "We need to end this," he said, channeling his magic into his horn and firing out bolt after bolt of it at the tendrils coming from the ceiling.

"That we do," Ash replied, smiling as he saw that Soul had recovered one of his old skills, "Any suggestions?" He nullified three of the tendrils Pinkie was baiting before taking out one that was about to snag Gale.

"Something with a larger area of effect would be nice," the brown earth pony said. She ran to add her strength to Fluttershy's efforts to keep Rainbow Dash in the room.

Twilight finally managed to break Applejack free of her captor and sat back to clear her head. "Will a big flash of light do?" she asked.

"It'd help at the least," Ash said, starting to tire himself. More tendrils were coming his way, preventing him from doing anything to help Dash, who was dangerously close to one of the walls the darkness was taking over.

"I'll handle it Twilight," Rarity said, "Catch your breath and then get Rainbow." The lavender unicorn nodded as the white one's horn began to glow brighter and brighter until she released the magic in a blinding flash of light. The darkness retreated up to the ceiling and about half the tendrils withered away, including the one surrounding Rainbow Dash.

"Please to be doing that again," Soul said, blinking rapidly. Rarity obliged, and the dark magic was reduced to a small spot on the ceiling that Soul quickly blasted away. Everypony waited tensely for a few moments, but when no more tendrils or shadows showed up, they breathed a sigh of relief and began to take stock of their situation. AJ and Dash were still mostly paralyzed, but Heart had recovered enough to stand up.

"That was intense," Heart said, "thanks for saving me Soul."

"Hey, I couldn't just let them have you sis," Soul said, "I'm worthless without you."

"Do you think that darkness got anypony else?" Gale asked, "It seems like a pretty effective way to take control of a place."

"We won't know until we explore further," Ash said, lying down, "for now, I recommend we take a break. Unicorns, we'll trade off keeping an eye out for a second attack and hoping it doesn't come."

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Once Rainbow Dash, Applejack, and Gold Heart were ready to move, Twilight led the group down a few more flights of stairs and then out into the castle proper. "The throne room's this way," she said, "We just need to get through this hallway and the antechamber." The group proceeded

cautiously, organized with the four unicorns split between the front and back and the pegasi on the ground in the middle of the procession and everypony on edge, watching for any signs of an ambush.

"So," Applejack said, trying to ease the tension a little, "We've got five of yer magic Gems- Light, Fire, Water, Earth, and Wind. What are the two Tau'rin'll have?"

"The Amethyst of Darkness," Ash said, "which we've already seen plenty of evidence for. The last Gem is the Pearl, and I must admit it's a mystery to me."

"How so?" Twilight asked.

"Well," Ash said, "It tends to stay out of play until near the end, and we've only had it in our possession in about half of the worlds we've been to, so there hasn't been much time to figure it out. I know that it can summon lightning, but I suspect its actual attunement is to Aether, the only magical element without a known opposite. Mastering the use of Aether beyond controlling lightning is a feat few were able to achieve back home, and I'm not one of that group. I don't think even Tau'rin knows the full capabilities of the Pearl, and his fate is tied as closely to it as to the other six Gems."

"Sounds to me like he's going to be push-over," Dash said smugly, "You magic users can beat back the darkness, and with a weather pony like me around you won't have to worry about any lightning."

"Don't get cocky," Ash warned, glancing back at the pegasus, "It won't be natural, cloud-born lightning like you're used to. Besides that," he added in an angry tone, "we've already lost our chance to keep one of our Gems out of the equation."

"Couldn't you just hide one somewhere around here?" Pinkie asked.

Ash shook his head. "Tau'rin and Nightmare Moon have this place filled with Darkness, and that element's quite useful for finding hidden things, and that Gem-stealing spell's probably still active anyway."

"But... if Tau'rin can get at all of them..." Fluttershy said, ears flattened in worry. Ash glanced back at the yellow pegasus and slowed to a stop,

unsure of what to say. The others also stopped, the weight of what they were walking into hanging over them like a dark storm cloud.

"We'll just have to do our best," Gold Heart said at last, nuzzling Fluttershy reassuringly, "Who know? Maybe the Elements of Harmony will tip the scales in our favor this time. Or maybe we'll be able to deal with Nightmare Moon first and free Princess Celestia so she can help."

"Yeah," Pinkie said enthusiastically, "Just think about what could go right!" Fluttershy smiled thankfully at the pink pony. She looked at Ash and gave him a confident nod, which Ash returned before gesturing for Twilight to lead on again. "Hey, how about a song?" Pinkie asked. Without waiting for a response, she added a bit of bounce to her gait and Gale could've sworn she heard music starting to play...

"How about no?" Ash said, "You'll give away our position."

"You really need to have more fun," Pinkie said, still bouncing with each step. Ash just shook his head slowly, feeling his patience starting to wear thin. He prepared to snap as Pinkie started to sing, only for both song and reprimand to be cut off as the group rounded a corner and discovered a stretch of hallway full of ponies frozen in place, many in poses indicating that they'd been trying to run away.

"Ok then..." Soul said slowly as they walked cautiously toward the statuesque ponies.

"I think they're still alive," Applejack said, leaning her head in close to one as they passed by, "They're warm at any rate."

"This would be us if we'd lost that last fight," Ash said, "This isn't a pure Dark element spell though..." He stopped to take a closer look at one of the ponies – a tall white unicorn stallion with amber hair and wearing a very stylish tuxedo and large bow tie. "Yeah," he said at last, "basic stasis spell, enhanced for duration. Breakable, but it should wear off on its own once the one who cast it is incapacitated. How much further Twilight?"

"Just past these poor ponies," Twilight said, pointing down the hall to a pair of large doors. Ash nodded and the group made their way down the hall, although Rarity paused for a second to smirk at the expression on the tall unicorn's face. They came to stop in front of the doors, which Ash and

Twilight both looked over, searching for anything unusual. "Looks clean to me," Twilight said, "Maybe they didn't expect us to get this far?"

"Not enough resistance for that," Ash said, "One of Tau'rin's biggest failings, if it can be called that, is he prefers to take us on personally once he knows we're around. Let's go." Focusing his magic he flung the doors open to reveal a waiting room containing a few more frozen ponies. Disappointed, Ash walked to the next set of doors and flung them open as well. The throne room spread out before him- a large, open room broken only at need by stone columns with more arched windows than walls. At the far end was a high dais topped with a golden throne. Occupying that throne was a tall, elegant black alicorn with a mane and tail that rippled in some un-felt wind and resembled the starry night sky. She narrowed her eyes at the intruders, an expression matched by Ashen Blaze as he strode purposefully into the room ahead of the others.

"Well, well," the alicorn said, "It would seem you have made some more friends Twilight Sparkle." She spread her wings and glided down to the floor, landing a short way away from the dais. "I've made one myself, and I think you've already met him." A vortex of darkness formed next to the alicorn, out of which stepped the winged bull demon Tau'rin. His horns were still gone, and he still bore a mark on his forehead where the Sapphire had resided. A large amethyst and an equally large pearl were embedded in the remains of his horns, and both were glowing with power.

"This ends here Order-naries," he said in a growl.

"Agreed," Ashen Blaze said as Soul Mage, Gold Heart, and Gale formed up beside him, ready to fight.

# Chapter 16

"I'll give you this final chance to think," Tau'rin said, "I can tell you've brought all the Gems. Thirteen times we've done this, and every time it has ended the same way."

"We defeated you once," Ashen Blaze said, channeling his magic through the two Gems in his saddlebags, "It may not have ended the way I would've liked, but I know we can beat you. By the way, have you told your new girlfriend just how dangerous you are?" He turned his gaze toward Nightmare Moon. "If the stories I've heard about you are true, all you want is a little appreciation, maybe some loving worship. Tau'rin here will destroy the world, and what will that leave you with?"

Nightmare sneered at the ash-grey unicorn. "You know nothing, outsider," she said, "I have seen the truth. I shall never have the love and respect I deserve from this world, so if it must be destroyed, so be it. I and Tau'rin will simply find another more deserving of our control."

"No!" The Order-naries turned to look behind them for the source of the cry. Twilight Sparkle was glaring daggers at Nightmare Moon as the starburst gemstone in her tiara took on the glow of her horn. Around and above her stood the other five Elements of Harmony, their necklaces aglow as the six mares were surrounded in an aura of magic. "You are not even the Nightmare Moon that Celestia banished to the moon, let alone Princess Luna! Remember the lesson you learned!" Twilight closed her eyes as the magic around her grew in intensity. Nightmare Moon gasped as Twilight levitated up into the air and then opened her eyes, now glowing white from the power she was channeling. A rainbow of magic shot out from her and her friends, arcing over the heads of the amazed Order-naries and zeroing in on Nightmare Moon. The alicorn flinched and screamed as the rainbow neared... and splashed harmlessly off a black barrier that sprang up.

"Hahahaha!" Tau'rin laughed, the Amethyst in his head glowing with a nearly black light, "Foolish little ponies. You think we'll be defeated so easily, by such... lovey magic? Behold, *this* is true power!" Both of his Gems glowed and a trio of black lightning bolts fired toward the group.

Ash reared up and thrust his front hooves forward, creating a red-tinged barrier that spread out to cover his teammates and friends, blocking and deflecting the bolts toward a window on his right. "This is two different fights," he said, focusing his magic again, "Let's stop getting in each other's way. Order-naries, with me." He dropped back to the ground, lowered his head, and charged toward Tau'rin. Trusting their leader to have plan, Soul, Heart, and Gale followed him, the two golden-yellow ponies establishing their spirit link as they ran.

"Foals," Nightmare Moon said, preparing to answer the charge with one of her own. Ash side-stepped around her at the last second, distracting her long enough for Soul to knock her down with spirit bolt and allow him, Heart, and Gale to join Ash between the alicorn and the bull demon. Ash quickly reached his magic into Gale's saddlebag, activated the Topaz, and unleashed a blast of wind that blew Nightmare closer to the Elements of Harmony and Tau'rin and the Order-naries to the other end of the room. A wall of flames sprang up from the floor, dividing the room in half. As Twilight and friends took in this spectacle, Nightmare Moon regained her feet and glanced between the fire and the six ponies.

"Princess," Twilight said, "I know you're in there."

"Silence!" Nightmare shouted, mane swirling around her, "There is no more Princess Luna, only me!"

"We'll see about that," Applejack said, "You ok fer another try Twi?"

"I think so," Twilight said, still a little dizzy from the previous blast.

"No," Nightmare said, as Twilight began to build up power again, "You can't. I won't let you stop me again!" She transformed into a vortex of swirling night mist and flew at Twilight, intent on interrupting the spell. She struck just as the aura surrounded the Elements again and was thrown back by the power, collapsing to the floor. "No," she said weakly as the Element Bearers floated upward and Twilight's eyes began glowing again in conjunction with the rainbow's appearance. The magic swirled around Nightmare Moon, rooting the anger and darkness out of her and sealing it away once again. With a final flare of power the spell came to an end and the seven ponies fell to the floor, momentarily exhausted from the effort. Twilight was the first to come to, followed by Rainbow, Pinkie, and then the

rest. Princess Luna, smaller in size and lighter in color now that she was free of Nightmare Moon, was curled up on the floor looking pitiful.

"Princess!" Twilight exclaimed happily, running over to the purple alicorn, "Are you ok?"

Luna sniffled and avoided Twilight's gaze. "I'm so sorry," she said, "I... I don't know what came over me."

"Shh," Fluttershy said soothingly, coming over, "Don't you worry, we don't blame you. Everything will be ok now."

"No, no it won't," Luna said, "That... creature, Tau'rin. He'll destroy Equestria if he's not stopped."

"Our friends are dealing with him," Twilight said, her gaze going to the wall of flame, "But I get the feeling they'll need our help."

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Being the one who'd cast the wind spell, Ashen Blaze was the only one still on his feet when it stopped, and he quickly followed it up by creating a flame barrier to prevent the two fights from coming back together. Maintaining that barrier required him to divide his attention, so he wasn't expecting to be very useful in the upcoming fight. He leaped back from a wildly shot lightning bolt from Tau'rin and proceeded to help his teammates to their feet. "Gale, try to keep your distance," he said, "Keep the Topaz as far away from him as possible. Soul, Heart, You'll have to lead the offense; I'll cover you."

"Stubborn fools," Tau'rin said, standing up, "You just don't get it; you'll never destroy me. Someday you'll be unable to maintain this-" He ducked his head just in time to avoid taking an Element Wheel to the face, and the energy disk barely missed clipping the Pearl as it spun past.

"Yeesh, that was close," Heart said with a grimace.

"Careful," Ash warned unnecessarily. Heart rolled her eyes and tried to bring the Element Wheel around for another go. Tau'rin shot the disk with a darkness bolt and it disintegrated. As Heart concentrated on forming another Wheel, Soul sent out several spirit bolts, only one of which hit Tau'rin before he could erect a barrier. Spreading his wings, Tau'rin turned



the barrier into a wave of magic that Ash was barely able to deflect and then took to the air.

"The one thing I like about this form," Tau'rin said, "Is the flight. Now come on, where are the Gems? If you're so sure they're the key, *use them!*"

"If you insist," Ash snarled, sending a barrage of fireballs at the flying bull. Heart sent out her second Element Wheel alongside the fireballs and managed to carve a gash in Tau'rin side as he tried to dodge the fire. A few fireballs also found their mark before Tau'rin forced Ash back onto the defensive with a dark lighting strike. The fire wall wavered as Ash's stamina began to run low. Tau'rin laughed at the panting unicorn, and then noticed Gale trying to stay out of sight next to the throne dais.

"Poor little mechanic," he said mockingly, "Not so useful without your precious weapons, are you?" He laughed at Gale's defiant glare and created a vortex of darkness. "Die," he said, sending the vortex toward the earth pony.

"No!" Dropping his hold on the wall of fire, which quickly vanished without a trace, Ash threw himself between Gale and the incoming attack. He tore open his saddlebag and, fighting against the magic that tried to steal it from him, pulled out the Diamond and unleashed all the power he could get from it. The blast of light consumed Tau'rin's attack and continued upward, knocking the surprised bull demon out of the air. He landed hard on the floor and struggled to his feet, one wing hanging limp and useless.

"Give me that Gem," he growled, and Ash felt the pressure on the Diamond increase. Grunting, he pulled it toward his body and threw himself down on top of it to prevent it from reaching Tau'rin. "*Give it!*" Tau'rin roared, and Ash began to move as the Diamond slid across the floor. The unicorn tried to retaliate, but couldn't muster the energy for an attack while keeping his grip on the Gem. Soul Mage was preparing to fire a spirit bolt when Rainbow Dash zoomed in and delivered a fierce two-legged kick to the back of Tau'rins' head. Concentration broken, the attraction spell died and Ash was able to, tentatively, relax his hold on the Diamond.

"Hey guys," Rainbow said, pulling a tight loop to bring herself back above Tau's head, "Need a hoof or two?" Without waiting for an answer, she dropped down and caught Tau'rin in a choke-hold.

"Little wretch," Tau'rin grunted, "*Get off of me!*" The Gems on his head began to glow, and Soul and Ash barely managed to pull the pegasus to safety before she was fried by the lightning that arced over the bull's head.

"Stick to hit-and-run," Ash advised as he released Dash.

"Fine," she said grumpily. She flew up toward the ceiling as Tau'rin tried to decide who to go for next.

"This is becoming very annoying," he growled, "you're ponies; you shouldn't be this tough to destroy."

"They're not just ponies," said a voice behind Tau'rin. He turned to see Princess Luna hovering behind him, front legs raised high in preparation to strike, "They're friends." She brought her hooves down hard, one smashing Tau'rin's head down onto the floor and the other striking the Amethyst and taking a big chunk out of it.

"Oh no..." Heart said in absolute horror.

"Run, yes?" Soul asked, casting a glance at Ash as purple-black energy began to flow out of the damaged Gem and over Tau'rin's body. Luna backed away in horror as the bull-demon began to bellow in pain, more or less frozen by the darkness that was starting to consume him.

"We'll never make it," Ash said, "At least, not me." He put one hoof on the Diamond and screwed his eyes shut as he concentrated. A white bubble of light formed around Tau'rin, containing the energy that was starting to expand out from him. "Go!" he shouted to Luna and the Element Bearers, "Get out of here; I'll hold this in as long as I can!" He glanced to his teammates and said, "you three-" he was cut off by a resounding crack inside the bubble that briefly drowned out Tau'rin's cries. The Order-naries gaped in horror as the purple-black maelstrom inside the light barrier began to turn to a purple-grey streaked with electric blue and white.

"And there goes the Pearl," Soul said. He pulled out the Sapphire, placed it next to Ash, and stood on it, focusing his magic. A watery-blue barrier sprang up around the first barrier.

"What are you doing?" Ash asked, "Aether doesn't have an opposite. If Light can't hold it in, Water certainly won't."

"I know," Soul grunted, "but together, they're stronger." He spared enough power to reach a tendril into Ash's bag and pull out the Ruby, "And three are stronger yet." He set the Gem down and put his other hoof on it. A red barrier appeared around the chaos, which was starting to wear away at the first layer.

"I see your three and raise you another," Gale said, running over to place and activate the Topaz, creating a fourth barrier.

"And Earth makes five," Gold Heart said, adding her Gem's power.

"Guys... thanks," Ashen Blaze said. He released the Diamond for a split second and reformed his barrier around the other four. "It's been an honor to have you as my friends."

"Ash?" Rarity said worriedly. The ash-grey unicorn looked up, surprised and angry that Luna, Twilight, and the rest were still there, watching the Order-naries try to contain the energy of two destroyed Gems.

"What are you still doing here?" he exclaimed, "I said run!" He wanted to sat more, to explain that this containment was temporary, that the energy would destroy at least part of the castle before it dissipated, that he wanted as few casualties as possible, and the hope that those ponies out in the hallways were mobile again. He couldn't spare the effort though- his barrier was the most important, since it was holding the others in place and was the only one with an element that could reliably reduce the power of the chaos it was holding at bay. He didn't even take a moment to see if his instructions were being followed.

After about three minutes or so, the light suddenly went out of the Sapphire and the innermost barrier collapsed. Before Soul could react, the blue Gem slipped out from under his hoof and flew toward the roiling, Aether-charged, screaming darkness, moving through the barriers like they didn't exist and being swallowed up by the chaos. "Oh, you have got to be *skvetchte* kidding!" Ash exclaimed. To everypony's surprise, however, nothing changed about the mass except for it expanding to crash against the next barrier. A few minutes later that barrier collapsed as well and the Ruby was torn from Soul's grip to be absorbed to no visible effect.

"What... why?" Soul asked, flabbergasted. He sat back for a minute before slowly making his way away from the group. Gale's barrier lasted for

another five minutes and Heart's held up for six, but finally Ash was left alone to hold back the violent storm with the Diamond, the last Gem still intact.

Soul approached Ash, who was visibly shaking with the effort of maintaining his spell, and tried to touch the Diamond and lend his strength. Ash brushed him away, telling him to leave in a strained voice. "Minimize... casualties," he panted. His back legs gave out and the barrier began to waver. Growling, Ash tried to coax more power into the barrier, and then collapsed. The bubble of light thinned and stretched as the darkness began to break out, and then came to a stop as an aura of magic surrounded the bubble followed by the swirling rainbow of Harmony magic. Ash and Soul looked to see Princess Luna and the six Ponyville friends adding their power to the new barriers. Smiling, Soul reached toward the Diamond to refresh the light barrier, only to pause as the screaming from within the roiling chaos suddenly stopped. Seconds later, the darkness collapsed in on itself and vanished, leaving nothing behind except the now unnecessary barriers, which were quickly taken down as Luna relaxed her magic and the Elements of Harmony released their six bearers from the magic. The ponies stood looking at each other in silence for several moments as they caught their breath.

"Is... is that it?" Gale asked, "Is it over?"

"I... I think so," Ash said. He looked down at the Diamond and prodded it a few times before stepping down firmly and focusing his magic. The Gem didn't respond. "It's dead," he said, shocked, "All of its magic is gone."

"The other Gems are gone too," Soul said, "besides the Amethyst and Pearl, none of them reacted to being sucked into that... thing."

"They're purpose has been served," Heart said. Everyone turned to look at her, confused. "I think I understand that vision better now," she said, "The Gems and Tau'rin were linked by fate; so long as Tau'rin existed, the Gems were there as a means to stop him, if used right. Now that he's finished, there's no need for the Gems."

"So, that's it then," Ashen Blaze said, "Fourteen worlds and uncounted years, and we've finally ended the nightmare. Uh, in a manner of speaking," he added, looking at Luna.

The alicorn princess smiled at him. "I'd say that's a very appropriate way to put it," she said. She looked at Twilight and bowed her head briefly. "My sister will be quite grateful to you and your friends," she said, "As I'm sure she'll tell you once she finds her way out of the dungeon Tau'rin had me stick her in."

"Which, while appropriate, was a disappointingly uninspired location to wake up in," a kind, regal voice with a trace of humor said from the throne room door, coinciding with the flood of morning light from the eastern windows. The Order-naries's jaws dropped as everypony turned to see Princess Celestia walking into the throne room. She towered over the ponies, all of whom bowed except for Luna, who ran a short distance toward her sister before stopping and hanging her head, and Ash, who simply regarded the giant among ponies. Celestia met Ash's gaze and arched an eyebrow, but then turned her attention to her penitent little sister. "Dear Luna," she said, nuzzling the smaller alicorn's neck, "Whatever the reason for your transformation this time, I doubt it was your fault. And in any case, you're back to your old self again, and that's what matters the most." Luna looked up, smiling gratefully at her sister. "Rise, all of you," Celestia said to the ponies as she and Luna walked toward them. They obliged, and moved aside as Celestia walked straight to Ashen Blaze, whose face was virtually unreadable. "You must be Ashen Blaze," Celestia said with a hint of a smile, "Twilight has had much to say about you."

"I hope it was accurate," Ash replied neutrally.

"That remains to be seen," the Princess said, "On behalf of myself and all of Equestria, I thank you for your heroic efforts to save us."

"Feh," Ash said, "Heroic? All I've done is be stubborn and obsessive. If you want heroic, look to them," he motioned toward Twilight Sparkle and her friends, "They had no reason to follow me and my team when we showed up unannounced, and many reasons to abandon us along the way. When you get down to it, we caused as much trouble as Tau'rin, and they fixed it all."

Celestia regarded Ash for a moment, and then laughed. "As I understand it," she said, "You have nowhere to go now, and no means to get there if you did. I look forward to getting to know you and your friends better."

Ash regarded the great white alicorn for a second, and then smiled. "I'll try not to make you regret that Your Highness," he said.

~~The End~~

# Order-naries: V'nai

## Chapter 1

Canterlot was a busy city, with ponies always trotting hither and thither heading to appointments, browsing the many stores with their high-class wares, delivering goods from one place to another, and nodding amiably to the guards who patrolled the streets. The sun shone down, filtered gently by the clouds the weather pegasi were constantly rotating through the area. The great castle of the Princesses, Celestia and Luna, glimmered in the light, a landmark of peace and harmony to all who gazed upon it. The courtiers, staff, and Celestia herself went about their daily tasks inside the castle, blissfully unaware of what was occurring in a large chamber deep in the dimly lit lower levels of the castle. There were two ponies that did know what was happening, and were already on their way to do something about it.

They were almost a matching set these two, both of golden yellow coats and brown manes and tails with cutie marks shaped like complementary halves of a blue fireball. The differences were that one was a male unicorn and the other a female pegasus. Many called them the Impossible Twins, since they were out-worlders, truly brother and sister yet made to inhabit the bodies of two distinct pony breeds when they'd been brought to Equestria. They moved quietly down the hallway, ears open for unusual sounds. Pausing by a door, the unicorn Soul Mage leaned his ear against it and listened. After a few seconds he nodded to Gold Heart, who landed next to him as he gripped the door handle with his magic. It was time to make their move, and to try out a new name for their team. Soul flung the door open and the two ponies charged inside, stopping a few steps inside as Heart took to the air again while Soul wrapped a tendril of his unique ethereal blue magic energy around her. The pair of them were quickly covered in ethereal blue fire as they shouted, "Soul Foals unite!"

Facing them with surprised looks was another pair of ponies- a male unicorn with an ash-grey coat and a mane and tail patterned to look like fire and a brown female earth pony wearing goggles, a protective coat, and holding a screwdriver in her mouth. Next to the earth pony was a machine as tall as one and half ponies, studded with gemstones, and topped by three large diamonds. "So," the unicorn said, "you found us. Good job getting this far, but this is the end."

"Yes it is," Soul said, "the end of your plotting... uh..."

"Smoldermo," the unicorn offered helpfully.

"Smoldermo..." Soul said, picking up steam again, "so, we'll give you this one chance to surrender."

"I think not," Smoldermo said, "Turn it on Gale, let's see how they handle it."

"Aye aye," the earth pony said, pressing a button on the machine. Whirring and electrical sounds came from the machine and the gemstones began blinking until the three diamonds lit up the entire room. Smoldermo laughed as the golden ponies backed up half a step.

"Impressive light show," Heart said, putting on a brave face.

"Oh, it's more than that," Smoldermo said as his horn began to glow, "as you're about to find out." He reared up and two bolts of light shot out of his horn toward the Soul Foals. Heart dodged one while Soul cast a barrier that the other splashed harmlessly against. "Not bad," Smoldermo said, charging another spell. Fireballs materialized around him and flew toward his opponents. Soul and Heart dodged and blocked the attack, never breaking the link of magic between them until a fireball slipped past Soul's defenses and grazed his flank.

"Are you ok?" Heart asked.

"I'm fine," Soul grunted, extending another tendril toward her, "I think it's time to go on the offensive. You ready?"

Heart nodded as the tendril wrapped around her again. She rolled away from another fireball and pointed both front hooves at Smoldermo. "Our



turn," she said, "Element Wheel, Fire and Wind!" An energy disk, colored red and yellow, formed between her hooves and shot out toward the grey unicorn. Smoldermo responded by calling up a barrier of his own. The energy disk hit the barrier but remained intact, spinning and flaring as it tried to push through. Blaze reared up and put his hooves against his side of the barrier, starting to sweat with effort.

"Come on, come on," he grunted. Gale simply stood by her machine, watching with bated breath.

The stalemate held for several seconds, and for a moment it seemed like Smoldermo was going to redouble his effort and push the disk away when a voice from the doorway rang out, "What is going on here?"

"Whu?" Smoldermo exclaimed, his concentration broken. His barrier began to buckle, so with a loud groan of effort, he twisted to the right, shifting the barrier and deflecting the disk away from him, sending it in Gale's direction. The earth pony gave a squeak of alarm as she dodged to the side and the disk sailed past her to cut clean through the machine. The gems began flashing erratically as sparks flew out of the breaches.

"No no no!" Gale shouted, running back over and punching a large button. The machine whined as it powered down and the sparking stopped.

"Whew, that was close," Gale said. She leveled a silent glare at the ash-grey unicorn, who didn't respond due to staring at the dark purple alicorn who was standing in the doorway looking cross. Soul Mage and Gold Heart broke their link and executed quick bows in her direction.

"Do I need to repeat myself?" Princess Luna asked.

"No Princess," Ashen Blaze said, bowing his head, "I'd say this isn't what it looks like, but I'm not sure what you see."

"I think I'm seeing four friends and heroes fighting amongst themselves," Luna said.

"Then it is indeed not what it looks like," Ash said, "We were simply making a game out of testing this." He pointed toward the ruined machine with a hoof.

"Ah yes," Luna said, looking at it, "Your little experiment with magic fields. How is it going?"

"It's working," Gale said, casting another glare at Ash, "but it would go much faster if *somepony* would stop bouncing spells into it."

"This is only the second time," Ash retorted, "I told you, I always deflect to my right so placing that machine to my left is the best guarantee for its safety."

"I did place it to your left," Gale said, "You turned around keeping those two in your sights."

Ash looked around himself. The golden-yellow ponies were indeed on the opposite side of the room from the door now. "Ah, so I did," he said, and then gave the earth pony a sheepish grin.

"Well," Luna said, "so long as nothing else is broken?" She looked around, nodding after seeing that the machine was the only damaged item around. "I came down here to tell you that it's almost sunset. My sister and I would like to invite you attend us as we make the change to night."

"It would be an honor," Soul said, "but may I ask why? It's not like you need us around."

"This dusk promises to be particularly beautiful," Luna said, "thanks in part to the clouds in the western sky. Besides, I know how you enjoy seeing us work," she added, nodding to Ash.

"Truth," he said simply, bowing, "We'll join you momentarily, but please don't wait on our account." Luna nodded and left the room. "So, can you fix it Gale?" Ash asked the earth pony.

Gale raised her goggles onto her forehead as she looked the machine over. "Of course I can," she said, "the question is, how hard will it be?" She bent down and picked up her screwdriver and proceeded to remove an access panel. "Let's see," she said, sticking her head inside, "Fortunately you didn't hit any of the critical juncture gems. Heck, you didn't hit *any* gems in here, only the wiring. I can patch that up in a jiffy once I get the materials."

"Great," Heart said, "That just leaves one question for me." She turned to face the grey, fire-maned unicorn, "Smoldermo? Really?"

"They can't all be winners," Ash said, "What about you two?" His gaze took in Soul as well as Heart, "'Soul Foals?' You two aren't that young."

"Hey, it rhymes," Soul said.

"It's inaccurate!" Ash protested, "I'll admit you can't use 'colt,' 'filly,' or whatever, but you can't call yourselves foals."

"What do you suggest?" Heart asked, "because I'm a bit tired of 'Impossible Twins.'"

"Hmm, 'Soul Siblings,'" Ash said, "then you've got alliteration on your side, which flows better than a simply rhyme."

Heart and Soul exchanged a glance. "Po-tay-to, po-tah-to," Soul said, "but we'll keep working on it if you insist."

"Thank *you*," Ash said, "now, let's go watch the Princesses do their thing."

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The Oder-naries had witnessed the changes between day and night from the lower, public viewing area before, so that was where they made their way after climbing out onto the terraces around the castle. As they neared the viewing area, a pegasus in dress armor stepped into their path, causing them to stop and Ash to prickle slightly. "Come with me," he said, "The princesses have requested your presence in the Night Tower." The four ponies blinked in surprise- the Night Tower was where the Princesses stood while ushering in the night, standing across the castle from the Day Tower where the morning ceremony was accomplished. To witness the ceremonies from either location was a very high honor indeed.

"Ok," Soul said. The guard nodded and led them toward the tower. "So, we save Equestria from an evil we never quite understood," the golden unicorn continued, "and *now*, a few weeks after the fact, we're invited to the Towers?"

"Hey," Gale said, "The Princesses have been very good to us. They've given us the time and resources we need to find ways to make ourselves useful. That's quite the thank-you, I think."

"Sure," Soul replied, "you and Ash have managed to find your niches working around here, so you can appreciate it in hindsight. Heart and I... not so much."

"You'll find something," Ash said, "If nothing else, I could always use a guinea pi... uh research assistant."

"Har har har," Soul said, completely deadpan. Heart and Gale chuckled, coaxing a smile out of Soul. "You're right," he said, "something will come my way eventually." A pleasant silence fell over the remainder of the walk up to the Night Tower. The top of the tower had a very simple layout- no plants, statuary, or any sort of decorations that could draw the eye away from the two alicorn princesses standing side-by-side in the center, or the third, lavender pony who ran over to hug the first non-guard pony to enter the room: Ash.

"Whoa, hey there Twilight," Ash said, surprised, "what are you doing here?"

"Princess Celestia invited me to watch the sunset with her," Twilight Sparkle explained, "I wasn't expecting to see you four here."

"I thought it would be nice if the five of you had a chance to catch up," Celestia said, coming over to the group. She leaned her head in close and said in a low voice, "Also, you four have been very diligent lately and you should probably take a break. Go spend a few days in Ponyville and relax."

"Yes ma'am," Ash said smartly.

Celestia smiled at them. "Very well," she said, "let's get this night started." She walked back to Luna and asked, "Are you ready sister?"

"I am," Luna answered, "Let's begin." She walked toward the eastern side of the tower while Celestia went to the west. Both of their horns began to glow, almost too bright to look at, as Celestia lowered the sun below the horizon, spreading reds, oranges, and purples across the sky as it passed behind the clouds.

"The day is over," the white alicorn Princess announced.

"And the night begins," Luna responded as the moon rose into its position in the sky and the stars started to appear. Celestia's horn ceased glowing as she nodded to the ponies gathered on the viewing platforms, but Luna continued working until the last of the stars was visible. Scattered cheers rose from the crowds as she stopped her magic and joined her sister at the western window. "I thought you'd asked them to stop doing that," Luna said, "I really don't need such displays of appreciation."

"I did," Celestia said, nuzzling her younger sister's head, "but a lot of them seem to enjoy cheering for you anyway." A small smile crossed Luna's face.

"That was amazing Princess Celestia," Twilight said, "It was easily one of the most beautiful sunsets I've ever seen."

"Thank you Twilight," Celestia said, "now, I'm sure the five of you have a lot of catching up to do. Run along and have fun." The five friends bowed and headed for the exit.

"Oh, before I forget," Gale said, pausing at the top of the stairs, "I'm going to need some more copper wire."

"You know where it is," Celestia said. Gale nodded and ran to catch up with the group.

"So," Twilight was saying, "I haven't heard much from any of you since you decided to live here in Canterlot. What have you been up to?"

"Ah," Ash said, brightening up, "so very much."

"He's become an unofficial student of Celestia's," Gale cut in.

"I am an independent researcher," Ash said, looking down his nose at Gale, "My studies are being supported by the Princesses at the moment, but I could be doing them just as well with different sponsors."

"What are you studying?" the lavender unicorn asked.

"Magic," Ash said, "The only thing I'm good at besides getting into trouble. Specifically, I'm trying to figure out how to adapt this world's latent magic into a form I can use."

"What do you mean?" Twilight asked, "You're a unicorn, you've got a store of personal energy to use."

"That's how y-" Ash started to say, reaching one hoof up to point at Twilight, but since he was still walking he lost his balance and went tumbling down the stairs, slamming the wall at the next turn and ending up on his back, eyes rolling. "Quadruped," he declared as the others ran down to check on him, "still not entirely used to that. I'm fine, nothing broken." He rolled over and stood up, groaning slightly as he discovered a couple bruises and an aching knee.

"You need to have your head checked or something," Heart said, "you were never this clumsy before."

"Bah," Ash said, resuming the downward walk, "As I was saying, that's how you work, not how I work. And not quite how Soul and Heart work for that matter... Anyway, I..." He, Twilight, and Gale slowed to a stop, realizing that the golden-yellow ponies had stopped and were sharing a look of inspiration. "Uh, what's up with you two?" Ash asked.

"Heart and Soul," the twins said at once, smiling. "It's so simple and obvious, yet perfect," Heart finished.

"O...kay..." Ash said, blinking, "congrats, I guess." He caught Twilight's confused look and explained, "They've been trying to come up with a team name for themselves for weeks." Twilight nodded in understanding and the ponies resumed their walk again, nearing the bottom of the tower. "As I was saying," Ash said, "I'm used to drawing power from my environment to fuel my spells, with only a little of my personal energy. For some reason, here in Equestria the land's latent magic won't respond to me and I've barely got enough personal energy for a short-range teleport spell or telekinesis."

"That can't be right," Twilight said, "I saw you throw some pretty impressive attack spells at that Tau'rin demon."

"I had help during those fights," Ash said, "Thanks to the seven Gems I was able to get around whatever's blocking my magic sense, to some degree."

But, they're gone now and I'm locked out again. Right now I'm working on a device that can simulate the effect of the Gems, and Gale here's helping me keep it in working order."

"Speaking of which, I should probably go fix it now," Gale said. She ran off into the main castle, heading for the rooms where her materials were produced.

"I'd like to see this device of yours," Twilight said, "If only to better understand what you're trying to do, Ashen."

"It's not wholly selfish," Ash said, "Every time I make a breakthrough, I learn something new about magic and the world in general and supply that information for other researchers to play with."

"Gale's been able to turn some of the failures into useful machines," Soul said, "She's come up with a line of magically-powered adding machines that are in high demand throughout Canterlot, for example. Any pony can use them and they work for months on a single magic charge."

"Wow," Twilight said, impressed, "I could use something like that."

"I'm sure you could talk Gale into getting you one at a discount," Ash said with a smirk.

"How about you two?" Twilight asked, looking at Heart and Soul, "What are you doing with yourselves?"

"Freeloading," Soul said flatly with a grumpy look on his face, "AJ'd kill me if she knew."

"Gloomy Gus," Heart scolded him good-naturedly, "We're still figuring out what we can do. I guess that makes us sort of like the Cutie Mark Crusaders."

"Except we *have* our cutie marks," Soul said, raising an eyebrow at Heart, "they're just next to useless. So far as I can tell, we're just good at fighting stuff, and that's only if we're together, and I don't like the idea of being a full-time soldier no matter how good the pay and benefits are. No offense," he added, nodding at a guard as they walked past him. The guard simply nodded in reply.

"Well, that research assistant spot's still open," Ash said. Soul just glared at him. "Or, with that Element Wheel of yours could be pretty good lumberjacks or stonecutters."

Soul opened his mouth to protest, but snapped it shut as he processed the idea. "Actually, that's not too bad," he said, "Add that to the list sis."

"Sure, why not?" Heart said, rolling her eyes.



# Chapter 2

When the group arrived at the research chamber, they saw the rear half of Gale sticking out of the machine's access panel. "We're here," Soul Mage said.

"Yep," Gale said, backing out of the machine, "I heard you walk in. Everything's connected up again if you want to try it again Ash." As she replaced the access panel, Ashen Blaze noticed she was wearing a familiar-looking device on her head- like a telephone headset that covered a large portion of her head with a clear green screen positioned in front of one eye.

"I see you're borrowing PC," the grey unicorn said.

"I hope you don't mind," Gale said, "I wanted his input on how I can improve this thing. Besides, you haven't used him much lately, and he's made his annoyance about that very clear."

"Let me see him," Ash said, levitating the device off Gale's head and placing it on his own. "Now, where's that infinite computer patience of yours PC?" he asked, and then flinched as a response was blasted into his ear at an uncomfortable volume. "One moment," he said to his friends, and then left the room. He came back a few minutes later and put the computer back on Gale's head. "You can keep him," Ash told her, "he insists you're better qualified to use him at the moment." Gale smiled as text flashed across the eyepiece, apparently confirming the unicorn's words.

"Cool," she said, "Now, let's fire this thing up."

"Pay attention Twilight," Ash said as Gale started the machine up, "let me know if you feel anything weird." Twilight nodded and watched the gemstones flash. As the diamonds on the crown lit up, she felt a subtle shifting of something inside of her that she couldn't quite indentify or locate. Ash seemed to perk up slightly at the same time and began scraping a pattern on the floor with a piece of chalk he levitated from a nearby table. After finishing it, he tapped it as his horn began to glow. The pattern began glowing and a ball of light appeared above it. As Twilight watched, the light

began morphing into various shapes: a rose, a horseshoe, a black gear, and finally split into seven lights in a rainbow of colors. "And that's about it," Ash said as the light faded away from his horn, "Not my most impressive display, but I didn't want to break anything."

"I thought it was pretty good," Twilight said, "rather like Rarity's light shows, on a smaller scale."

"You're too kind," Ash said modestly.

"Mind if I try something?" Twilight asked.

"By all means," Ash said, "Who better to test how this field affects natural unicorn magic than you?" Twilight smiled, and then began concentrating. Light began swirling around her, slowly at first but growing faster and faster until she was obscured from sight. After a few seconds, the light flared and then faded away, revealing that Twilight's mane had changed to a solid sky-blue color. "Now that's impressive," Ash said.

Twilight looked at her mane and blinked in surprise. "I was trying for gold and purple actually," she said, "I know I was doing it right, so how'd this happen?"

"Interesting," Ash said, taking a closer look at Twilight's mane, "Are you sure nothing felt... off while you were casting the spell?"

"Something felt odd when you turned that machine on," Twilight said, thinking, "and... yeah, I thought my magic was falling out of line a few times during the spell, so I tried to compensate." Ash nodded slowly.

"The local magic field's definitely being affected," he said, "It enhances my power but sets you off-balance." He turned to Gale. "If we're ever going to make this portable, we'll need to try and make the area of effect as small as possible."

"What about power?" Gale asked with a raised eyebrow, "You barely held off a half-strength Element Wheel earlier. Once that wouldn't have given you any pause."

"Do you honestly want me, *me*, at full power Gale?" Ashen Blaze asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Good point," the earth pony said, "portability comes first then. Mind if I turn this off now?" Ash nodded and Gale turned the machine off. Twilight breathed a sigh of relief as the strange feeling inside her went away.

"How does that work anyway?" she asked, walking over to the machine.

"Take a look inside if you want," Gale said, opening the access panel again, "It's pretty much a bunch of crystals and gemstones linked together by wire."

"The idea is to mimic what the Gems did for me," Ash explained as Twilight stuck her head into the machine, "Gemstones are particularly good focal points for magical energy, so I've been trying to find a way to bounce magic through a series of them in a way that creates... waves you could call them, which interfere with and change the flow of energy in the immediate area into a pattern I can tap into. The problem is it takes a lot of gems and a large amount of stored magic power to kick-start the process."

"See that large diamond near the center?" Gale asked, "That's where the magic reserve is stored. It took us three days to charge it up and another week for me to find a way to direct leftover magic back into it to extend its lifespan, so to speak."

"That's amazing," Twilight said, pulling her head out and looking at Ash and Gale, "I've seen crystals used to hold spells before, but I've never heard of connecting a bunch together like this." The grey unicorn and brown earth pony both smiled proudly. Heart opened her mouth to make a comment, but a yawn came out instead.

"Oh my, sorry," she said, "I guess it's getting close to bed time."

"You're probably right," Ash said, suppressing a yawn of his own, "Sun's down, and I'm starting to feel the cost of that spell. Time for sleep"

"I'm still raring to go," Gale said, "I'm going to get busy on figuring out what I can afford to remove or shrink to make this thing smaller."

"Don't stay up too late," Heart said, "I'm going to put out the lights and lock our door in two hours, so if you don't want to sleep in the hall again..." Gale just waved a hoof at her, putting her full attention on the magic manipulator. Heart sighed and left the room, followed by Ash and the others.

"Say, aren't you going to fix your hair Twilight?" Soul asked as they walked.

"Huh?" Twilight asked, looking at her still-blue mane, "Oh, right. No, I made the spell temporary, so it should wear off during the night."

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Most of the next morning was spent packing, making sure everything was going to keep for at least a week unsupervised, and general hustling around in preparation for the trip down to Ponyville, which required catching the eleven o'clock pega-shuttle. Only when the group met up at the shuttle dock with fifteen minutes to spare did they have a moment to talk.

"Everypony ready?" Heart asked, dropping her saddlebags for the moment.

"Wouldn't be here if I wasn't," Ash said pragmatically, "I notice you don't have PC with you Gale. Did you pack him away? He's not fond of that"

"No," Gale said, "I left him behind." Seeing Ash's dumbstruck face, she continued, "Last night we figured out how to link him into the machine, giving him an inside look at the magic circuitry. He's currently figuring out how to talk to the thing and calculating potential upgrades and refinements. It'll probably take most of the week, so he won't be bored."

"That's good," Ash said, "A bored PC is a very, very annoying PC."

Soul rolled his eyes. "I'm always amazed that you were able to put up... with..." he trailed off as Twilight showed up and walked over to the group. "Twilight, your mane's still blue," Soul said, staring.

"That's not all," Heart said, pointing at the unicorn's hindquarters, "Your tail's starting to turn blue as well."

"I know," Twilight said with a sigh, "Princess Celestia didn't say anything about it when I showed up to ask to use her magic fire to send my letters, but I could tell she was trying not to laugh. I'll have to look up a reversal spell when I get home. I just hope Rarity doesn't see me before I can fix this; she'll either have fit or try to dye my hair. Or both."

"Sorry," Ash said, "I honestly had no idea what the field manipulator would do to your spells."

"Don't worry about it," Twilight said with a smile, "Sometimes you have to take risks in order to learn." The conversation lapsed into a comfortable silence for several minutes.

"Say Twilight," Gale said, breaking the calm, "the boys told me you were interested in my adding machines."

"I am," Twilight said, intrigued.

"There's quite a demand for them," Gale said, as if to no pony in particular, "the company in charge of building them can't quite keep up, so if you were to order one you'd probably have to wait for months to get it."

"Oh, I see," Twilight said, slightly disappointed.

"However," Gale continued, "being the inventor and owner of the trademark, I have quite a bit of say in who sits where on the waiting list." Twilight's ears perked up slightly. "And, of course, I can have them build one for me free of charge."

"Could you... I mean, would you mind getting me one, please?" Twilight asked, almost begging as her eyes began shining, "It would make calculating for potions, astronomy, and so many other things so much easier."

"Well, I could," Gale said, "After all, you are a very good friend. However, I can't let you have it for free; I am entitled to a portion of the profits after all."

"How much?" Twilight asked, her excitement hardly dampened at all.

"Thirty-five bits," Gale said, holding out a hoof expectedly, "Right now if you please."

"Really?" Twilight asked, suddenly suspicious, "That seems... cheap."

"They do sell for a couple hundred normally," Gale said, "but most of that's eaten up in production costs, and I only see a portion of what's left over: thirty-five bits for each adding machine sold."

"Well, ok then," Twilight said, opening one of her saddlebags, "I didn't bring much money with me, but..." a bunch of coins levitated out of the bag and

moved in front of Twilight's face. She counted them up in her head, and then smiled and dropped several onto Gale's hoof. "Thirty-five bits," she said.

"Thank you," Gale said, putting the money into her bag, "I'll send them a letter as soon as we get into Ponyville. They should have it to you by the end of the week, give or take a day." Twilight's cheers and thank-yous were quickly underscored by the sound of wings, heralding the arrival of the pega-shuttle. Except, this wasn't the usual pega-shuttle approaching the landing platform, rather it was a royal carriage pulled by a team of Celestia's personal pegasus charioteers, assisted with a little unicorn magic to make their load lighter.

"I guess that's for us," Soul said as the carriage opened and the pegasi looked their way, "I could get used to this royal treatment." Heart and Gale rolled their eyes as the five ponies got into the carriage.

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When the carriage landed in the town square in Ponyville, it was met by a small group of ponies, five in all, and one baby dragon. The five passengers were greeted with a chorus of "welcome back," as they stepped out.

"Hello everyone," Heart said, smiling at the group, "It's nice to see you all again."

"How's the palace life treating you?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"I think it's spoiling Soul here," Heart, giving her brother a playful push, "but I'm still holding strong." Dash chuckled as Soul gave Heart a sideways look.

As soon as Ash had moved away from the carriage, he found himself caught up in a hug from a white unicorn with a fancy purple mane. "Hello Rarity," he said with a longsuffering look on his face, "I take it you missed me."

"Of course I did darling," Rarity said, "I was starting to think you were-" she cut off with a gasp as she saw the last pony to exit the carriage. "Twilight Sparkle!" she exclaimed, "What have you done to your mane?"

"Spell mishap," Twilight said, self-consciously.

"I like it!" Pinkie Pie declared. Rainbow Dash and Applejack both looked like they were holding in laughter, but Dash seemed closer to bursting.

"It certainly is... unique," Fluttershy put in quietly.

"I simply cannot let that remain!" Rarity declared, releasing Ash. The grey unicorn heaved a sigh of relief as Rarity dragged a protesting Twilight toward the Carousel Boutique.

"You really don't have to do this," Twilight was saying, "I can probably fix it with a spell."

"I think they're gonna be late to the party," Applejack said with smirk.

"What party?" Gale asked. She laid on eyes on Pinkie, who was wearing a bigger smile than usual, and said, "Oh, right. Silly me."

"You know it!" Pinkie said, "Come on, we're all set up at Sugar Cube Corner!" She started moving away with her signature bounce as Ash shook his head sadly.

"Do we have to do this?" he asked.

"Lighten up," Heart said, "Pinkie parties are fun and you know it."

Luckily for Ash's peace of mind, the party was a small one- just the six Ponyville friends, Spike, and the four Order-naries, along with the Cakes who were in charge of the food, were invited. Things got off a relatively slow start until Rarity and Twilight finally showed up about an hour later. Twilight's mane was still very sky-blue, although well-styled, and Rarity was looking quite disheveled and frustrated. "This is absolutely infuriating," she complained to no pony in particular as she walked into the shop, "I tried all my dyes and none would stick for more than a few seconds."

"I'm really sorry Rarity," Twilight said, "I appreciate the effort though. Like I said, a simple spell should fix it."

"You might want to get to that soon," Ash said, "it's overtaken half your tail already." Rarity heaved a dramatic sigh and made her way over to the refreshments.

"How in Equestria'd you manage to bungle a spell like that anyway Twilight?" Applejack asked, "I don't know much about magic, I'll admit, but a color-change don't sound that complicated."

"Ashen Blaze there developed this machine that alters magic," Twilight said, "It's supposed to make him better at it, but it messed up my spell when I tried to cast it."

"All in the name of science of course," Ash said as everypony turned to look at him.

"What good is a machine that makes most unicorns bad at magic?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"Not much, unless you use it around a unicorn you don't like I guess," Ash replied, "It does enhance my ability though. Gale and I are going to try and adjust it so it only affects me when we go back."

"You're helping him?" Fluttershy asked the brown earth pony, "That's nice of you."

"He'd be helpless without me," Gale said, "He can theorize about magic all day, but I wouldn't trust him to fix a broken door, let alone build a complex machine."

"Hey," Ash said, "I'm not that useless at detail work. I built PC you know."

"So you say," Soul said, "He was already operational when we met you."

"Hey now you two," Heart said, stepping between the two stallions, "This isn't a time for one of your ridiculous quip-battles. This is a party; let's try to have fun *without* the sarcasm."

"Whatever you say dear sister," Soul said, rolling his eyes.

"Yay!" Pinkie said, jumping up as high as she could, "All right everypony, you heard her, lets party!"



# Chapter 3

During the next few days, Soul Mage, Gold Heart, and Gale tried to make the most of their week off by exploring the town, meeting new friends, and lending a helping hoof wherever possible. Ash kept up with them for a day or so, but soon stuck to hanging out at the library trying to continue his research. Twilight and Spike put up with him as best they could, but his habit of replacing books in the wrong spot on the shelves started to wear on them by the third day. On day four, he arrived to find the library locked and Gale waiting for him by the door. "What's up?" he asked her.

"Twilight told me to tell you two things," Gale replied, "One: you're not allowed into the library until you promise not to try and put books back- just stack them up for Spike to sort. Two: she thinks she's got an idea about whatever it is you've been wasting time on this week – those are my words by the way – and she wants to talk to you about it."

"Ok," Ash said slowly, "so, is she home?"

"Nope, Rarity's putting her through another attempt to cover that blue hair with dye," Gale said, "I'm starting to get worried that she hasn't found a solution for that yet, and it's claimed her entire tail now."

"She'll sort it out," Ash said, "So, I guess I'll go find something to do until she gets back." He started to walk away, but Gale stopped him with a hoof on his flank.

"Nah, I think you should get this over with now," she said, and then pointed dramatically, "To the Boutique!"

"No, no, I'm fine with waiting," Ash insisted, trying to walk away again. Gale snorted and moved to block the unicorn's path.

"You're just avoiding Rarity," she said, "I don't get why. She likes you, and while she may be a bit too fancy at times, she's a good person, er, pony. There's no reason you can't be around her and be nice."

"But..." Ash said.

"No arguments," Gale said, giving Ash a push in the direction of the Carousel Boutique, "Just walk." Ash glowered at her as he allowed himself to be herded toward Rarity's shop. Along the way they encountered Heart and Soul, who were just finishing extracting Ditzzy Doo from a tree and picking up her scattered mail. Once the wall-eyed pegasus was straightened out and back on her route, the golden-yellow ponies joined their friends on their walk.

"Why is she a mail-pony?" Ash asked.

"She's normally good at it," Heart said, "that was only her third upset this month."

"Month's only half over," Ash muttered.

"Well you hardly ever use the mail service anyway," Gale said, "so don't complain."

"I'll complain about whatever I want to," Ash snapped, "And on that note, I don't want to go see Rarity!"

"Well, you're not," Gale replied, "you're going to see Twilight Sparkle, who happens to be with Rarity right now." Ash's eye started twitching, but he simply grumbled to himself the rest of the way to the boutique. When they entered the store, they were greeted by a low but audible moan of aggravation from the back room and a bored-looking Sweetie Bell lying on a cushion by the stairs.

"Hi Sweetie," Soul said, "No crusades today?"

"Nope," the filly replied, "I have to watch for customers while Rarity's working with Miss Twilight. You're not customers, are you?"

"Nope," Heart said, "we're here for Twilight."

"Oh well," Sweetie sighed, "I guess you can head on back then." Ash grumbled a bit more as the four ponies headed into the back. Rarity was in the process of removing strips of foil from Twilight's stubbornly sky-blue mane, and there were empty bottles of purple, pink, and slate blue hair dye scattered everywhere.

"Going for the 'no kill like overkill' approach I see," Ash said in a deadpan.

"I give uh-uh-uup!" Rarity sobbed, throwing herself onto Ash's tense shoulder, "I've tried every method, every formula, every brand of dye I know and none of it will *stiiick!*"

"There, there," Ash said, very uncomfortable but not crass enough to remove the distraught unicorn, "It'll be ok... eventually." Rarity just kept sobbing. "So, Twilight," Ash said, trying to ignore the tears soaking his shoulder, "You wanted to talk to me about something."

"Yeah," Twilight said, removing the rest of the foil from her mane, "but it can probably wait until Rarity's calmed down." Ash shot a meaningful glance at Gale, who returned the look with extra narrowed eyes.

"Here," Heart said, "Let me..." She nudged Rarity a few times and, not receiving a response, lifted her off Ash and led her over to a cushion. The white unicorn lay down facing the wall, her sobs fading to sniffles.

"Thanks," Ash said, brushing lightly at his wet shoulder. "So," he added, looking at Twilight.

"Right," Twilight said as her horn lit up. A scroll levitated out of a bag in the corner of the room and flew over to Ash, opening up when it reached him. "I was reading over some of my old notes last night when I came across some tests I'd done on the Elements of Harmony. I'd discovered that the necklaces and my tiara are able to focus and enhance magical power and natural talents. Of course, each Element only works for the pony it belongs to."

"Uh huh," Ash said, reading the notes, "What's your point?"

Another sheet of paper flew over, showing a sketch of a necklace made of gemstones. "I recalled what you said about that machine of yours being a substitute for your magic Gems and I thought, 'would it be possible to make an artificial Element of Harmony?' What I came up with was this: a series of gems strung together with gold and copper which may, if built right, focus and strengthen any magic used by the pony who wears it."

"Wow," Ash said, blinking in surprise as he took the paper into his own magic grip and looked it over, "For someone with none of my research to

work with, this is incredible. I'll have to go over your calculations and fill in the gaps, but this might just work! Twilight Sparkle, you're amazing!" Twilight blushed and smiled. Ash found a pencil and began pacing slowly as he looked over the sketch, occasionally stopping to write something down or scratch something else out. Gale noticed that Rarity had stopped crying, although her eyes were still red, and she was watching Ash at work.

"Say, Ash," the earth pony said.

"Hm?"

"You're going to need gems and other materials to put that together, aren't you?" Gale asked with a sly smile.

"Obviously," Ash said, not looking up from the paper, "When we go back to Canterlot I'll requisition everything we'll need."

"Why wait?" Gale asked, "I think I know one way we can get it all right here in Ponyville."

"What are you..." Ash asked, finally looking up and trailing off as he met Gale's gaze. His eyes slid over to Rarity and then snapped back to the earth pony, who subtly tilted her head toward the white unicorn. Ash blew out a sigh, forced a smile, and turned back to Rarity. "Rarity," he said, "You wouldn't happen to have some gemstones I could use?"

"Why yes, I do!" Rarity said, jumping to her feet, "And I'm sure I can scrounge up some old gold wire and whatever else you might need."

"Wonderful," Ash said, partially sincere, "now, I don't have much, but I should be able to compensate you for-"

"Oh, no," Rarity said, "I couldn't take your money. Just think of it as a gift, a donation for the cause of science." She started dancing in place as ideas for the necklace began running through her head. "Come on, let's get started!"

"Yeah!" Gale shouted, just as eager.

"Now hold on a minute," Ash said, backing away from the two mares, "I-I'm not even-" the two ponies grabbed him and carried him out into the front

room and up to Rarity's workroom as he continued his protest, "I still need to correct these blueprints girls! Put me down!"

Heart and Soul watched the scene with amusement clear on their faces. "I honestly never thought I'd see the day," Soul said, "that Rarity the fashionista and Gale the mechanic would get so excited over the exact same thing."

"I actually feel a little bad for Ash," Heart said despite her smile. She kicked a dye bottle that was on the floor next to her and said, "Well, they're going to be awhile. What do you say we clean this place up for Rarity?" Soul nodded and began gathering trash together.

"I'll go get some bags and a mop," Twilight said, heading into boutique's kitchen.

As the three ponies worked to clean up the remains of the failed mane-dye job, the sounds of discussion and the occasional disagreement between Gale and Rarity filtered down from the second floor. In what seemed to be a surprisingly short time, an argument ended with the sound of hooves clattering down the stairs. Heart, Soul, and Twilight stuck their heads out into the main room to see Ash, now wearing a crude necklace of small gems, bolting down the stairs with an upset Rarity waving a pincushion hot on his heels. "That thing is an affront to style!" Rarity was shouting, "I demand you bring it back and let me fix it!"

"It's fine you crazy filly," Ash retorted, heading for the back room. Twilight and company moved back to let him inside. Ash ran through the door and took shelter behind Soul Mage. "Look, Rarity," he said as the white unicorn stood glaring at him from the doorway, "We can pretty it up later. Right now it's just a prototype; I have to make sure it's going to work before we make any adjustments."

Rarity stood in silence for several seconds, sides heaving as she caught her breath, clearly trying to find a balance between Ash's words and her own drive to fix what she saw as imperfection. "You... are not... a... judge... of proper... fashion," she finally panted out. The fashion designer was obviously winning.

"This isn't a Gala dress, Rarity," Twilight said, "I know this is hard for you to accept, but function has to take precedence over form this time."

"Yes, listen to the sensible Mage," Ash pleaded, "Just let me try a couple of spells and then we can go back upstairs and try to make it look good. Please."

Rarity's eye twitched several times and her mane started to frizz, but finally she sighed and said, "Very well, if you must."

"*Thank* you," Ash said to nopony in particular. He trotted out into the main room and looked around. He looked back toward the back room and lit up his horn. A full bag of trash levitated and flew slowly across the room, out the front door and to the left, and landed gently a good ways out of sight. "Telekinesis, slightly but noticeably easier," Ash muttered, and then concentrated harder. With a flash, he teleported to the top of the stairs, then to the front door, and finally back to his starting position. He was breathing a little harder as his horn ceased glowing, but a smile crossed his face. "Three teleports in rapid succession," he said, "That's a new record." He turned toward the group and announced, "The concept's sound. Artificial Element of Magic is a go."

"Great," Rarity said, "now, let's go make one that's actually worthy to see the light of day!" She grabbed Ash by a hoof and started marching him back upstairs. They were about halfway up when the front door swung open and Spike came jogging into the boutique.

"There you are Twilight," he said, "Some peagsi just showed up with a big package for you; I think it's that adding machine you were talking about. I hope you don't mind, but I already signed for it."

"Thank you Spike," Twilight said, and then looked at Rarity, "You're done with me for today, right? I'd really like to try the adding machine out."

"Go on, play with your new toy" Rarity said, "there's nothing I can do for your mane anyway it seems."

"I'll come with you," Ash said, trying to come back down, but Rarity restrained him.

"I need you," she said, "I simply won't be able to get that... thing to look right on you if I have to work from memory." Ash shot a pleading look down to his friends.

"Sorry pal," Soul said, "you did promise she could 'pretty it up' now that you've tested it." Ash grumbled and climbed the stairs. Spike climbed onto Twilight's back and the lavender pony headed out of the boutique and toward the library at a speed close to a full-on gallop, eager to get back home and try out her new adding machine. Soul and Heart followed her, chuckling at Twilight's excitement.

Just as the group reached Mane Street there was a flash of light and Ash was suddenly running along beside them, looking quite smug. "Teleport range vastly improved," he said, ignoring the looks being aimed at him.

"Ashen Blaze," Heart said with a mild rebuke in her voice.

"Ah, Gale knows what she's doing," Ash said dismissively, "I made sure to lay out the calculations in a way that she can follow, so they don't really need me at the moment." Soul and Heart both rolled their eyes but didn't press the issue. The four ponies reached the library a few minutes later, and Twilight flung the door open in her excitement. They looked around, briefly confused by the lack of a box or other shipping container, but then Soul pointed to a desk that was now taken up with a large contraption similar in appearance to a cash register, but made of wood and with several small gemstones in place of the normal buttons and no visible display.

"That's it," the golden-yellow unicorn said.

"That's odd," Spike said, jumping off Twilight before she dashed over to the adding machine, "I could of sworn it was still packed up when I left, and the delivery ponies flew off before that."

"How does this work?" Twilight asked, with her front hooves up on the desk in front of the machine.

"The ruby in the top-left corner turns it on and off," Ash said, "The rest of the gems are etched with the number or symbol they're used to input. The numbers will show up as a hologram above the machine. From the looks of it, Gale gave you the most advanced model- it can do trigonometric functions, allow you to program in formulas you use frequently, and I think it comes with some basic geometric formulas pre-programmed. Just keep it charged or you'll lose whatever you've stored in it."

"All right," Twilight said, "let's try it out." She reached out a hoof and tapped the on-off ruby. There was a faint hum as the gems began to glow softly and a big zero made of light materialized above the top-right corner of the machine. Twilight giggled slightly as she tapped in a simple arithmetic problem:  $3 + 4$ . When she tapped the '=' gem, the holographic equation suddenly warped into a tangle of light and something black shot into Twilight's chest, knocking her backward several feet where she collapsed on the floor.

"Twilight!" Spike shouted, running over, only to be knocked back by a black shadow that sprang out of the unicorn's side and retracted just as rapidly. He hit a bookstand and landed on his tail, still conscious but completely shocked.

"What the *skeb* is going on here?" Ash asked, moving cautiously toward Twilight.

"Careful Ash," Heart warned. Another shadow emerged to take a swipe at Ash, but he stopped just outside its range, staring at it intently. The shadow pulled back and Twilight suddenly twitched, and then levitated off the ground, hanging limply in front of the increasingly worried ponies. A strange sound came from Twilight's mouth, almost laughter but more like the buzz of electricity mixed with guttural growling.

"Identify yourself," Ash demanded, taking a firm stance and beginning to focus his magic. The possessed Twilight gave another not-laugh and opened her eyes. Everyone gasped, but no one louder than Ash. Twilight's irises and pupils were gone, replaced by a strange symbol vaguely shaped like a capital Y made of tiny concentric circles and curved lines. "No," Ash whispered in horror, backing away a few steps as his horn faded, "I-it can't be. How? How can you be *here*? How could you possibly be in *her*? Impossibility... *Skvetchte* impossible creature. Begone!" His expression hardened again as he channeled his magic through his necklace and fired a bolt of light at the possessed unicorn. She responded with a smirk and swatted the bolt aside with a hoof before charging bodily at Ash. "Restrain her!" Ash shouted as he rolled to the side, "Do not let her leave this tree!"

"What's going on?" Heart asked as Soul extended a link toward her.

"Explanations later," Ash said, prepping another spell. A pair of magical ropes appeared and tried to ensnare Twilight, who snapped one out of



existence with her own magic and floated around just out of reach of the other, heading for the stairs. Ash snarled in frustration as he conjured more restraints and Heart and Soul threw out bolts of their ethereal blue magic, all of which were dodged. As the possessed Twilight continued to float up the stairs, she beat back all attempts to attack and restrain her and retaliated with bolts of darkness and flashes of lightning. Ash took one bolt to the neck and tumbled backwards, stunned, taking Soul down with him as he fell down the stairs. Heart continued to pursue, stretching her link with Soul to its limit as the stallions recovered and ran to catch up. Spike also recovered, but he simply cowered under a desk, completely bewildered by what was happening to his closest friend, mentor, and surrogate mother.

The fight, if it could be called that, continued as the possessed Twilight made her way around the library, laughing as she continued to frustrate all attempts to contain her. Eventually they wound up in Twilight's room, and in the act of dodging another stun bolt from Ash, the possessed unicorn collided with the bookshelf by the bed, knocking several books and other objects off it, including a tiara with a large, starburst-shaped gem set in it. Twilight laid her odd eyes on it and paused, seemingly attracted to it. Ash tried to take advantage of the lull by charging in for tackle, but was brushed off by a shadow tentacle. Twilight descended toward the floor, reached out with her front hooves, and grabbed the tiara, the Element of Magic.

"Oh, crap," Soul said, "Heart! Stop her! Now! Any way possible!"

"R-right," the yellow-gold pegasus said, reluctantly charging her ultimate attack. She was too slow; Twilight had already placed the Element on her head. She cackled as she turned toward the ponies, and her horn began to glow with unnatural dark light. Suddenly, the false light faded as she gave an unearthly shriek that no living creature could possibly have made and collapsed to the floor. A shadowy something rushed out of her and zoomed down the stairs. Soul Mage took off after it and watched as it retreated back into the adding machine from which it had originally come. He stopped at the foot of the stairs, keeping both eyes on the machine as he tried to hear what was happening upstairs.

Ash simply sat where he'd landed, staring into space as he muttered to himself in a strange tongue. Heart approached Twilight with caution and, when she wasn't attacked, gently touched her with a hoof and then leaned in close to listen for breathing and a heartbeat. Both were present, to

Heart's relief, and Twilight came too within a few minutes, her eyes normal-looking again. "Ow..." she moaned, putting both front hooves against her forehead "What in Celestia's name... why am I wearing my Element? What happened?"

"You were possessed," Ash said simply, standing up and heading for the stairs, "It didn't seem to like what the Element was doing to it, so it fled. I just wish I knew where..." Heart and Twilight followed him, confused but not willing to ask any questions yet. "Did you see where it went?" Ash asked Soul when he reached the bottom floor. Soul just pointed to the machine. "Good," the fire-maned unicorn said, "Let's keep it there." He scratched a quick pattern into the floor and an orange barrier sprang up around the adding machine, only to be sucked into it a second later, accompanied by a discordant chuckle. "Ah *skvetch*, I just fed it, didn't I?" Ash asked nopony in particular, "Although by all rights, I shouldn't have..."

"Ok," Soul said with an emphatic stomp, "that's enough enigmatic musings out of you Ashen Blaze. Tell us, what is that thing?"

Ash didn't seem to hear him. "Inhabiting a magical contraption..." he mused, "possessing a living being, a very magical one at that, at such a low stage... Absorbs regular magic but balks at the Element..."

"*ASHEN BLAZE!*" Soul shouted, tensing up as if to give the ash-grey unicorn a solid kick.

Ash whirled on Soul, and then gazed about at Twilight and Heart. "Gather the Elements of Harmony Twilight Sparkle," he said, "And somepony find us a way to get to Canterlot ASAP. We've got a serious emergency on our ha- er, hooves, and I'm sorry to say I had a hand in causing it."

"Wha-" Twilight began.

"I'll explain when everypony has gathered," Ash said, his cold, green eyes brooking no argument, "just go!" The ponies, and Spike, scattered to fulfill Ash's request. "Wait," he called before they left, "Twilight, put that adding machine inside a magic bubble, will you? It shouldn't be able to get out if the barrier's made by the Element of Magic. I hope."

# Chapter 4

Forty-five minutes later, the six bearers of the Elements of Harmony and the four Order-naries were loaded into the Ponyville hot-air balloon and flying toward the mountain-side city of Canterlot. Well, only seven of them were actually in the balloon's basket; Fluttershy, Gold Heart, and Rainbow Dash were hitched to the basket and pulling it to speed their journey along. Even considering that, it was a bit cramped in the basket.

"You finally gonna explain' what's going on Ash?" Applejack asked, speaking for everypony.

"Yes," Ash said, turning away from the side of the basket, over which he'd just dropped the possessed adding machine into a large lake. He was sporting a new necklace that Gale and Rarity had presented to him when they showed up. It was both more aesthetically pleasing (although still not up to Rarity's standards) and increased his magic threefold over what the old one had been capable of. He still wasn't too hopeful about the outcome of this mission he had drafted everyone into, though. "This goes way back for me," he said, "Into that part of my life I wish I could erase from my memory. What we are facing are the creations of one of my old... compatriots and rivals. They are an artificial life-form, self-aware computer viruses in essence, called the Z'nai."

"Whats-it viruses?" AJ asked.

Ash sighed and rubbed his forehead for a moment. "Oh, I can't think of a good parallel you lot would understand," he said, "Just go with me on this. They live inside machines, often spending years in a dormant state where they are extremely hard to detect. When they're active, their primary purpose is to spread, making copies of themselves that infect other machines and whatnot, causing death, destruction, and general mayhem along the way. They derive joy out of turning whatever they inhabit into weapons or instruments of death. The big problem with them being here is that they have nothing to do with magic. And yet, the one I just disposed of – hopefully – was living inside a magically powered machine and had possessed Twilight for a short time, and then proceeded to absorb my attempts to seal it up after it was forcibly evicted by the Element of Magic.

Somehow, these Z'nai, and I'm sure there's more of them all over Canterlot by now, have changed to thrive off magic instead of data."

"But, if they're from... back then, how'd they get here?" Gale asked, looking nervous, "That one was inside one of my adding machines, so... I... I didn't make one, did I?"

"Oh no," Ash said reassuringly, "The Z'nai are far too complex for one to be created by accident, let alone from something like a simple calculator." He sighed, becoming very sober. "I'm afraid I'm the one to blame for their being here, although I can't imagine *how* it could have happened. The Z'nai came from PC. The design I used to build him was originally meant to be a means of inserting Z'nai into a society under the guise of advancing technology. PC's artificial intelligence borrows heavily from the Z'nai's code."

"PC is a Z'nai?" Soul exclaimed.

"No," Ash replied emphatically, "the Z'nai in him is, or so I thought, sealed behind multiple firewalls and security barriers to prevent it from awakening and growing. PC is a separate entity even though his basic code is derived from the Z'nai in him."

"Well, I'd say this throws that assertion into question," Soul said.

"Truth," Ash said sadly, "The only way to know what happened is to find PC and see what kind of state he's in. After that, we'll need to find a way to destroy the Z'nai."

"And just how do we do that?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"And do we have to?" Fluttershy asked meekly.

"Yes we do, and I'm still working on that," Ash said, "Under normal circumstances, a single Z'nai is not a problem once you know of it- you'd simply have to isolate its host system from all other electronics and then wipe the system clean to delete the thing. The problem is that there's never just one, and just because you clear a system of one doesn't mean another can't move in to replace it later. I'm hoping these ones work on a similar principle- we'll have to isolate them from the magic they can feed on and hope they wither away. Oh... there wasn't anything magical in or about that

lake back there, was there?" He looked back toward the lake he'd dropped the adding machine into.

"No," Fluttershy said, "Just, you know, fish and turtles and frogs, and all kinds of other animals that go there to have a drink of water." Her eyes had taken on an unusually hard glint as she spoke. Ash gulped and laughed nervously.

"I'm sure it'll be fine then," he said, looking away from Fluttershy, "Assuming Twilight's barrier's still active, it won't be able to go anywhere, and hopefully the machine was smashed by the impact with the water, which would leave the Z'nai without a proper housing and even if the barrier didn't hold, the thing should die before it finds a proper host."

"So, we've just got to break all the adding machines and other magic contraptions in Canterlot?" Rainbow asked, partly serious, "That shouldn't be a problem. There's probably only hundreds of them throughout the entire city!"

"That would certainly be a good start," Ash replied flatly, "However, the Z'nai can possess unicorns as well and we can't very well go around breaking *them*."

"What about pegasi?" Heart asked.

"What *about* pegasi?" Ash asked in turn.

"Well," Heart said, pointing into the distance, "Something's coming at us. It looks like a pair of pegasi, and they don't seem friendly." The ponies in the basket all followed the golden-yellow pegasus's hoof until they saw the approaching figures. As they drew closer, the group saw that they did look like pegasi, but only vaguely. They were actually shadowy facimilies of pegasi wearing full sets of royal guard armor and each was being followed by a spear. "Z'nai," Heart said.

"Yep," Ash said, looking at Twilight, "I guess this means the armor the guards wear is magical?"

"Yes," Twilight said, "They're enchanted with simple barriers and spells that make it easier for earth ponies and pegasi to hold and use their weapons. I take it that's enough for the Z'nai to take it over?"

"So it seems," Ash muttered darkly, "Twilight, Rarity, this is going to have to be your fight for the most part; they can absorb my spells and I don't think we want them close enough to engage hoof-to-hoof."

"I never did land a hit on the first one," Soul said, "What say we try again Heart and see how they respond to our magic?"

"I'm all for that," Heart said. Soul wrapped the linking spell around Heart, who began charging the Element Wheel between her front hooves. "Get ready," she said, looking over her shoulder at Twilight, "If this just ticks them off, we're going to be in big trouble." Twilight nodded and pulled a book entitled *Spells for Self Defense* out of her saddlebags. Heart turned her attention back to the Z'nai, who had spotted the balloon and were moving in with spears extended. Heart reared back into a vertical position, holding the charged energy disk off to one side, and then threw it with a cry of "Element Wheel, Full!" The disk spiraled toward the Z'nai on the right, expanding slowly as it flew. Unlike the one from the adding machine, these Z'nai didn't try to dodge until the Element Wheel cleaved the first creature's breastplate in half and then curved down to take a chunk out of the rear leg greaves. The damaged Z'nai's unnatural shriek of pain assaulted the ponies's ears as the broken armor fell off and the shadow dissipated, leaving the remaining armor and spear to hang unsupported in the air for a second before gravity kicked in. The second Z'nai came to a stop, looking around wildly for the source of its companion's demise. Under Heart's control, the Element Wheel arced back upwards and came at the Z'nai from behind, catching it off guard and bisecting its helmet. Damaged but still mostly intact, the shadowy pony shrieked and flew toward the balloon, not stopping even after the Element Wheel spent the last of its energy destroying its spear. Fluttershy squeaked in terror, trying to take cover under the basket as the Z'nai approached. Heart backed up until her rump hit the side of the basket. Rainbow Dash, however, stood her ground, so to speak, and spun around at the last second to buck the creature in the breastplate. It was knocked back, a pair of sizable dents visible on the breastplate, but the Z'nai was still alive.

"My turn," Twilight said, pushing her way up to the front of the basket, her horn shining with unreleased magic. She waited until the Z'nai resumed its charge toward the balloon and then released a focused beam of purple energy from the Element of Magic that pierced the center of the breastplate and continued on through the shadowy Z'nai. Another ear-piercing shriek

filled the air as the Z'nai dissolved and the armor fell to the earth below. "Wow," Twilight said, panting slightly, "That actually worked. Good." She slumped to the floor of the basket, catching her breath.

"Well done everypony," Ash said, "So, we know we can fight them, but let's try not to bring a whole army of them down on our heads."

"Where do you think they got that armor from?" Pinkie asked, looking over the edge to watch the falling pieces.

"Oh dear," Twilight said, very worried, "If they got into the royal guard's barracks, they might have gotten to the Princesses!"

"Don't panic," Ash said, "Yes, that is likely, but I'm sure we can handle it. Let's just take this a step at a time. Step one: getting into Canterlot despite whatever resistance the Z'nai might give us. Step two: get into the castle and find PC to learn what happened. Step three: use that information to come up with steps four and beyond. Any questions?"

"Seems simple enough," Rarity said, and Applejack nodded in agreement. Fluttershy simply whimpered from her spot under the basket.

"I've got a question," Dash said, "Am I the only pony who's noticed Twilight's legs are turning blue?"

"Huh?" Twilight said, looking at herself. The sky-blue color of her mane and tail had somehow found its way onto her hooves and was starting to reach up to her knees. "That's... a little disconcerting." Ash sighed and turned his attention toward Canterlot.

"Is it too much to ask for a creeping color change to be the *worst* of my problems?" he asked the unheeding sky.

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The ponies noticed two things as the balloon approached the castle: first, there were no Z'nai guards above the roof level of the city proper and those guards never looked up, and second, the sun had not moved in the entire time they'd been traveling. By Twilight's calculation, it should have been late afternoon, but the sun was still near its zenith. The implications of the sudden halt in the normal cycle chilled everypony to the bone. "Bring us to the upper viewing platform," Ash instructed the pegasi, "That'll get us in

over their heads and into the castle. Don't let yourselves get separated from the group- especially you three," he looked to his compatriots, "The Z'nai should only be able to possess unicorns, but I'd rather not take the risk and we don't have the Elements of Harmony protecting us."

"Sure you do," Pinkie Pie said, "We'll stick right by you and protect you from those nasty shadow monsters."

"That's not quite what I meant, but thanks Pinkie," Ash said, smiling.

"You're welcome!" The pink pony reached up and pulled at the cord to open the top of the balloon as the pegasi brought it to a halt over the upper viewing platform. They landed with a soft thump and leapt out of the basket and harnesses, keeping several eyes out for Z'nai or possessed ponies. The coast seemed clear, so they ran inside the castle and headed for the nearest staircase.

"Gale," Ash said when they stopped near the stairs, "You said you left PC connected to the magic manipulator, right?"

"Yeah," Gale said, "He was supposed to be calculating ways to improve its performance."

A thoughtful expression crossed Ash's face for a few seconds. "Ok, so that means he'll be down in the lower levels in the room I was using as a workshop. Follow me." He moved down the stairs as fast as he safely could, only to skid to a halt half a flight later when he encountered a Z'nai possessed unicorn that looked very unhappy. "Yipes!" Ash yelped, backing away and causing a slight jam among the ponies behind him.

"Move!" Twilight yelled, struggling to lift herself above the press. She focused her magic and struck the unicorn with stunning spell. The poor thing collapsed, but the Z'nai inside didn't seem to leave. Ash poked at it with his magic a few times and then tip-toed past it, followed by the others.

"A simple knock-out's not going to free them," he said glumly.

"Poor thing," Fluttershy said, nuzzling the unconscious pony as she passed by. Her Element flashed as her nose touched the unicorn's side and the Z'nai sprang out of it with a shriek. It flew around, trying to possess one of the ponies and rebounding off the Elements of Harmony several times



before fleeing. Once it was gone and everyone calmed down, they all looked at Fluttershy and smiled. The pale yellow Pegasus blushed and tried to hide behind her mane.

"Kindness in action," Twilight said, "That makes sense I guess."

"Oo! Oo! Oo!" Pinkie said, bouncing in place, "Does mean I can laugh them out? That would sooooo cool!"

"I guess it's worth a shot," Twilight and Ash said at the same time. They glanced at each other and shared a quick smirk. "Let's go ponies," Ash said, starting to head down the stairs again. Fluttershy hesitated for a few seconds, checking on the unconscious former possession victim, and then took flight to catch up with the group. Their trip down into the lower levels of the castle was interrupted only a couple more times- once by a Z'nai armor that Heart and Soul managed to break apart at the cost of a few disk-shaped holes in the wall, a chunk of railing, and part of Dash's tail, and once by a scared but clearly not possessed earth pony trying to find a hiding place. Fluttershy and Rarity managed to calm the poor mare down and Twilight cast a charm over her to protect her from harm until she could reach the relative safety of her home. Ash was not happy about the time lost to accomplish all of that, but he kept his complaints to himself. Eventually they reached the right floor and increased their speed. Their progress was halted a short time later by a large group of Z'nai-controlled armor mixed with a few unicorns. "Took you guys long enough to put the welcoming party together," Ash quipped, falling back behind the group to be out of the way.

"This doesn't look like much a party to me," Pinkie said.

"How astute of you Pinkamena Pie," said a hauntingly familiar voice underscored with an electric hum and a deep growling noise. The crowd of shadowed pony shapes parted slightly as a large shadow descended from the ceiling into the cleared space and resolved itself into a large pony-like shape. As the ten ponies watched, the shadows fell away, revealing a tall, regal, white alicorn wearing a golden crown and a matching collar and hoof shoes, and pure white eyes bearing the sign of the Z'nai. Its posture was somewhat limp and unnatural, but still managed to command a measure of fear and respect. "You all know who this is," it said, its voice coming through unmoving lips, "And since I control her completely, I know you all

as well as she does. I know your strengths and, more importantly, your weaknesses."

"Get out of her!" Twilight screamed, horn glowing as tears welled up in her eyes. She stood there, charged with magic but unable to bring herself to attack her beloved mentor.

The Z'nai laughed. "Your love for the Princess is your weakness Twilight Sparkle; I fear nothing from you."

"You ain't our Princess!" Applejack shouted, pressing up against Twilight to support her, "We'll stand together and put a stop to you, right girls?" She looked around and received nods of agreement from Rarity, Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash, and Pinkie Pie. Gale and Gold Heart nodded too for good measure.

"Talk all you want Applejack," the Z'nai said, "You may hold an Element of Harmony, but you are worthless when up against me and my kind. Buck and kick all you will, you'll only hurt your precious Celestia, or one of our other hosts. The same goes for you, Pinkamena, and Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy, and even you Rarity. If your friend Twilight can't bring herself to unite your Elements, you have no hope. And she won't, now will she?" Twilight shuddered as the possessed princess turned her alien eyes toward her.

"I... I..." she stuttered.

"Bravo," Ashen Blaze said, stepping forward, "Most excellently played. And may I say how impressed I am you've developed to such a degree in so short a time; this new connection to magic must be doing wonders for the Z'nai." The Z'nai's head swiveled to face the cocky ash-grey, fire-maned unicorn. "You must be the Prime of these Z'nai, or at least the Beta, since I suspect the Prime isn't able to leave its original host. You do use those terms, yes? Prime for the original, Beta for the first copy..."

"You're the one who brought us here," the Z'nai said, forcing a smile onto Celestia's face, "The Prime told me of you, fallen from your place of glory and always on the run from your shame."

"Yes, although I prefer to see it as having risen out of the darkness," Ash said, "And although I try to hide from my shame, I do so by fighting tooth

and claw to keep it away from me and my friends." He fired several bolts of magic from his horn, all of which the possessed Princess and the Z'nai around her absorbed. Barely cocking an eyebrow at that, Ash turned to look at Twilight expectantly, only to be disappointed to see that she was still in wide-eyed shock. "Ah *skvetch*," he groaned, face-hoofing, "Twilight! That was your cue to pull yourself together and blast the Z'nai right out of her! All that posturing and bravado, wasted!" The Z'nai laughed in triumph, only to be cut off by another, more natural laugh from the hero's side. Everyone turned to look at Pinkie Pie, who was lying on her back and laughing her head off, apparently at Ash's performance and its utter failure. As she laughed, Pinkie's Element necklace began to glow brighter and brighter. The possessed princess flinched back, trying to shield herself from the light with a wing, and then finally gathered shadows around her and fled up through the ceiling. Among the remaining Z'nai, most of those possessing guard armor fell apart and all those possessing unicorns abandoned their hosts and fled, some dissipating before they could get away. Heart and Soul linked up and took out the remaining armor Z'nai, all of which were more or less stunned by the Element of Laughter. "I shall never underestimate the power of comedy again," Ash said, his deadpan delivery threatened by the infectious nature of Pinkie's laugh.

Even after the hallway was cleared, it was several minutes before the ponies could continue, since they had to wait for Pinkie to stop laughing so hard that she couldn't move and for Twilight to come back to her senses enough to walk. As they walked along, Pinkie came as close to bouncing as possible without actually doing so, humming "Giggle at the Ghostly" as she went. Twilight's dour mood lightened somewhat as the music brought back memories of her first real adventure with her friends. The rest of the group was also in high spirits thanks to the pink pony. "Say Ash," Soul said, in the mood for banter, "You almost seemed to be enjoying yourself with that speech of yours."

"If I was," Ash said, putting on a superior air, "it was only because I knew how important it was to get that Z'nai's attention off of Twilight. By the way, I do forgive her for not taking the opportunity, since Pinkie provided a most satisfactory Plan B." Pinkie just nodded, her humming transitioning to a new tune. "Hold up," Ash said, slowing to a stop, "I'm pretty sure this is the place." He trotted over to a door and looked it over.

"That's it all right," Gale confirmed, joining him. She pressed the latch, but the door refused to budge. "That's not good," she said.

"Let me at it," Ash said, focusing his magic on the latch.

While he was working, Soul continued with his banter. "If I didn't know any better," he said, "I'd say you are actually having fun dealing with these Z'nai."

"Ha!" Ash said, "As if. Consider this Soul Mage: if I had a choice between the Z'nai and Nightmare Moon I'd-" The door suddenly flew open to reveal a midnight-black alicorn with a starlight mane wearing a light purple helmet. "Oh, you have *got* to be kidding me!" Ash exclaimed, eyes twitching as the other ponies gasped, "I was being flippant!"

"Out of the way," Twilight ordered, beginning to focus her magic as Ash and Gale moved to comply.

"Wait," Nightmare Moon said in a perfectly normal voice- Luna's voice at that, "It's not what it looks like, I promise. Come in quickly before they find us."

# Chapter 5

The ten ponies were understandably cautious as they walked into the workroom and Nightmare Moon closed the door behind them, locking it with magic. However, since it had been Luna's voice to come out of the alicorn's mouth and not Nightmare's more arrogant tone nor a Z'nai buzz-growl, they were willing to give her a chance to explain herself. After making sure Nightmare was well-watched, Ash took a moment to look around the room. The magic field manipulator machine was where he'd left it, and stuck into the side of it he found his now-suspect computerized assistant, PC. He probed the machine a few times with magic before approaching it slowly and looking it over, keeping an ear open to hear Nightmare Moon's story.

"It happened less than a day after you all left," she said, "These Z'nai creatures seemed to come out of nowhere and began attacking the guards down here and ponies throughout the city. My sister managed to trace their source to this room and tried to deal with it personally. Most of her escort was taken over or killed, except for one pegasus who managed to report to me, telling me that ordinary magic was like food to these monsters. I was the only one who could face what my sister had become, and only if I allowed myself to use my power as Nightmare Moon. I managed to contain Celestia in this room and took on her duties over the daytime while I tried to find a permanent solution and stop the spread of the Z'nai. Just a few hours ago, my seal was broken and Celestia broke free. This time our battle ended with the Z'nai inside of her attempting to possess me, only to find itself trapped in the same corner of my mind where Nightmare Moon is held. Another Z'nai took over Celestia and I used the time to escape to this room. I've tried to find a way to exterminate the Z'nai, but it's all I can do to keep it contained and my Nightmare powers under control." She sighed and hung her head.

"Interesting," Ash mused.

"She's tellin' the truth," Applejack said, "I can feel the honesty in her voice." She tapped the gemstone in her necklace as her friends turned to look at her.

"So," Rainbow Dash said, "That means we're locked in a room with a pony who could go crazy in two completely different ways at any moment."

"That's one way to look at it," Luna said glumly.

"Ah, it'll be ok," Pinkie said, optimistic as ever, "If you go crazy we'll just knock it right back out of you again." Luna smiled faintly.

"Personally, I'd rather that not happen," Ash said, removing PC from the machine. He looked it over and went to put it on his head. "Girls," he said, pausing, "If you aren't at the ready, get there. This might go bad." Without waiting for a response, he settled the computer on his head, adjusted the mike and eyepiece, and spoke into it, "PC? Are you still in there?" The eye piece flashed as garbled text ran across it. "Whoa, slow down," Ash said, "Your output is... oh. Oh, I see... Can you spare time for a quick explanation? Keywords will do, but try not to skimp." He fell silent for several seconds as he read the display. "So," he said when the text vanished, "The Z'nai Prime in you slipped a copy past a firewall hole created by interfacing with the magical system in the manipulator which you didn't detect in time and now it's fighting you for control over your system, correct? All right, good luck buddy, I know you can do it- there's only one of him." He removed the computer, put it into his bag, and looked at the group. "Anything you girls, and Soul, didn't catch from that?" he asked.

"Is there a Z'nai in that machine or not?" Heart asked, indicating the manipulator.

"There was," Ash said, "the one I'm now going to dub 'Magic Z'nai Prime.' It jumped out and took over Celestia, but now it's inside Luna and Celestia's being controlled by a later copy, most likely the Beta. PC doesn't know how his Z'nai adapted a copy to work inside the manipulator, but he's making sure it can't put another one in, so the manipulator's clean. Probably the only magical item in Canterlot that isn't." He grew silent, gazing at the machine contemplatively.

"I take it we've reached step 3 of your master plan?" Twilight asked him.

"Use the information we've gathered to concoct a master plan, yes," Ash said with a brief smile.

"So?" Dash asked impatiently.

"This will take time," Ash said, "Talk amongst yourselves, brainstorm if you wish, just give me time."

"You weren't this slow to act the last time you came to save everypony," Luna said, a bit of Nightmare Moon creeping into her voice.

"Last time we were fighting a foe we'd grown accustomed to," Ash replied, "I haven't seen a Z'nai in years, and this is the first time I've actually tried to root out an infestation of them. The big hurdle we must overcome is how to pull the Z'nai out of all the unicorns, Celestia, and the objects they've inhabited quickly enough to insure none of them have a chance to reproduce. What we need is some sort of bait, something they'd rush out en masse to get to."

"Well, there's that thing," Applejack said nodding at the manipulator, "You said it's empty, and from the looks of it I'd say it's something a Z'nai'd pay good money to get into. Y'know, with it being so big and all, they'd have plenny of room to stretch."

"That's not likely to be attractive to them AJ," Ash said, "They don't really take up any space; they're just magic energy that can think. However..." He walked around the machine a few times, and then smiled, "It is a pretty potent source of magic, and their Prime did inhabit it. At any rate, the simple fact that it's unoccupied makes it darn near irresistible. I bet the only reason they aren't rushing in and fighting for the right to get inside of it is because the Prime's the only one who's been near it since the infestation got started. Heh heh." He patted the machine. "The only problem is once a Z'nai gets inside it the rest will lose interest and go about their business. With the right kind of spells, though, we can prevent the Z'nai that get inside it from escaping or broadcasting their occupancy of it, keeping it attractive until every single Z'nai in Canterlot is stuffed inside."

"What do we do with it then?" Luna asked, "Destroy the machine?"

"No, that would just let the Z'nai out again," Ash said, thinking hard, "We'll have to burn that bridge when we come to it. Just getting the Z'nai out of the ponies is good enough for now. Questions or comments anypony?"

"I assume we'll have to use the Elements of Harmony to cast the spells you mentioned," Twilight said.

"Of course."

"Which means you'll need to tell me what they are and teach me how to do them."

"Truth," Ash said. His brow furrowed as he looked at the machine again. "You know," he said, "this might work a little better if this thing were in a more... prominent location. I'm thinking the Day or Night Tower."

"Well, just how are we gonna move it without bein' spotted by any Z'nai?" Applejack asked.

"I can handle that," Luna said, "Although I won't be able to take it and all of you."

"Once it's up there, it's sure to be spotted by the Z'nai," Ash said, "If any of them get inside before we can set the spells, we're sunk."

"Well then, set the spells first and then I'll take it," Luna replied. Ash shook his head again.

"The spells I have in mind will need near-constant attention," he said, "especially once some Z'nai get inside and start trying to get out. However, a spell to make it invisible might do in the meantime. Think you can handle that Twilight?"

"Probably," Twilight said, "I just hope I can find the spell in the books I brought." She dug out her books and began flipping through them.

"I know this is important," Rarity said, "And I don't wish to come across as a whiner, but must we go all the way up to the top of the towers? That's such a long climb."

"And those creatures are probably going to do everything they can to get in our way," Fluttershy put in.

"I'm with them," Soul said, "Maybe we should set up on one of the viewing platforms."

"Upper one then," Ash said, "Although, that's where we parked the balloon..."



"Balloons can be replaced," Gale said pragmatically, "Heck, I'll pay to replace the thing if it gets destroyed or whatever. We should try to minimize the risk if we can."

"Celestia and I will replace the balloon if need be," Luna said, "It'll be the least we can do if you can fix this."

"Found it!" Twilight said, tossing all but one book aside and holding the last one open in front of her face, "It's a bit complicated, but with all the Elements I should be able to do it without draining myself too much." Her five friends arranged themselves behind her as the other ponies moved to give her room to work. Twilight closed her eye as her horn began to glow, followed by her Element tiara and each of the necklaces in turn. A rainbow of colors swirled out from the six gemstones and spun around the magic manipulator several times as it quickly faded from sight. When the spell ended Twilight gave her head a quick shake and then smiled. "No problem," she said. Gale walked over and extended a hoof toward the invisible machine and tapped it a few times to make sure it was still there.

"Your turn Princess Luna," she said, walking away again.

"Wish me luck," the black alicorn princess said, taking a deep breath. She dissolved into a sparkling mist that flew over and surrounded the invisible machine before shrinking down and flying away through the wall. "I'll see you at the viewing platform. Good luck, my little ponies," Luna's voice rang softly through the room.

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The group made it up to the ground level of the castle before running into trouble. First, there had been a large group of possessed unicorns blocking the stairs, forcing the group to detour out into the hallways. Second, they encountered a small cohort of Z'nai in guard armor while crossing the entrance hall to find another staircase. Soul sighed as he and Heart formed their link, "You think they'd have figured out a new way to come at us by now. That armor can't be the only magical stuff in Canterlot." As if in answer, the floor shook and a large alicorn statue broke its way through a door way and lowered its horn to charge the group.

"Happy now?" Heart asked sarcastically.

"Oh yes," Soul replied with just as much sarcasm.

"Hey," Rainbow Dash said, "That's the statue from the Gala! I didn't know it was magic!"

"I don't think it is," Twilight said, "They probably just enchanted it."

"Either way, it's coming at us!" Ash shouted, throwing fireballs at it. They splashed harmlessly against the stone, but weren't absorbed. "Goody," Ash said, changing to slashing bolts that scored the legs of the statue. He was unable to stop it, and the ponies were forced to dodge out of its way at the last second. The Z'nai Armors began to charge into the fray, brandishing spears and blades. "Physical fighters, help me take the statue down," Ash said, "Twilight, help Heart and Soul with the Z'nai. Whoever's left, find a way to be useful or get to safety." Fluttershy immediately took off, flying up to the ceiling to hide behind a chandelier. AJ and Rainbow Dash followed Ash as he charged the statue, which had stumbled in its attempts to stop and turn around. Rarity took a quick look around before closing her eyes and using her magic to pull a tapestry off the wall onto a bunch of Z'nai near the back of the group. She winced at the sound of their weapons tearing at the nearly priceless art in their attempts to free themselves and tried to block it out by running through ideas for a dress worthy of Celestia in her head. Pinkie Pie... bounced around improvising a song and somehow managed to stay out of everypony's way.

"Typical Pinkie," Soul said, shaking his head and smiling as he jumped away from a Z'nai's swinging sword. "Sis, they're getting a little close for comfort here."

"Working on it," Heart said, hovering above the mass of Z'nai as she directed an Element Wheel through their ranks, "This would be easier if I could make two of these things at a time."

"Work with what you got," Soul responded, focusing his magic into his rear hooves as he spun and bucked his assailant away, cracking the breastplate in several places and disrupting the Z'nai's form. Twilight finished it off with a spell that widened the cracks until the breastplate fell apart.

"Why do they bother with the rest of the armor if their entire being is linked to the breastplate?" the lavender unicorn asked.

"No idea," Soul said, diverting part of the link tendril to pluck off a Z'nai's helmet. Its "head" wavered and vanished and the creature dropped its weapon as it tried to reorient itself. "I'd guess the rest's there to let them take on a shape, but why they'd want to do that is beyond me."

"Soul!" Heart shouted, "I'm losing control here! Put that link back together!"

"Sorry," Soul said, complying. Heart snorted and let the Element Wheel disappear, forming a new one and throwing it out as she dodged several thrown spears.

Over at the animated statue, Applejack was dangling from a rope after her attempt to hold the thing down by the neck with a lasso failed due to a lack of something to brace herself against. She considered letting go and dropping to the floor, but since the alicorn chose that moment to rear up and prepare for another trampling charge, she bit down harder and silently begged Rainbow Dash to see her plight and come to the rescue. She started to panic as she felt the rope begin to fray in her mouth, only to find herself being supported and lifted from behind. She glanced over her shoulder to see Dash wrapping her legs around the earth pony's torso. "I've got you," the blue pegasus said.

AJ spat out the rope and said, "Thanks sugar cube," as Rainbow carried her out of the way of the statue, which came down with a crash and began charging, heading straight for Pinkie Pie, who seemed oblivious. "How do we stop this thing?" Applejack asked as Dash set her on the ground next to Ashen Blaze.

"Your rope trick was on the right track," Ash said, running along side the statue as he untied the lasso from its neck with his magic, "We just need to reposition it." He brought the rope down and tied it around one of the legs. "Grab a hold!" he shouted as he brought the other end to his mouth and bit down on it, digging in his hooves as he tried to stop. Applejack and Rainbow Dash hurried over and joined him. With their combined weight, they managed to stop and pull the rope tight, causing the statue to trip and fall forward. Pinkie stopped bouncing and looked toward the mass of stone that was falling toward her. She took two steps backward and reared up on her hind legs as the statue hit the ground in a cloud of dust and broken stone.

"Pinkie Pie!" Dash cried, unsure of what had happened to the earth pony. The dust cleared to reveal Pinkie standing a mere inch in front of the statue's head. She gave it a light punch, giggled, and bounced away. Dash breathed a sigh of relief, only to gasp in surprise as a chandelier fell onto the statue's head, breaking the horn off and apparently ending the enchantment. All fighting stopped as everypony and half the remaining Z'nai looked up to see Fluttershy hovering by the broken chain that had held the chandelier until just recently.

"Oops," she said, "Sorry. I tried to land on it and it just... broke."

"No worries Fluttershy," Dash said with a laugh.

"Oh, ok," Fluttershy said, and then squeaked and fled as the Z'nai tried to throw spears at her.

"I think it's time we finished this," Ash said, nodding at the Z'nai, who were engaging Twilight, Soul, and Heart again.

"Right," Rainbow said as AJ nodded. They galloped into the fray, bucking and kicking to drive the Z'nai into small groups that Heart could decimate or Twilight could zap. In short order the foes were defeated, either destroyed or in retreat to the nearest unoccupied magical item. A couple tried getting into Ash's mind, but a blast of magic from Rarity drove them away, leaving the ash-grey pony a little dazed for a few seconds. Besides that, the worst injury they'd sustained was a shallow sword wound on AJ's flank from the same blow that had separated her from all but a few inches of her tail.

"Ah phooey, I liked that tail!" she said, glaring at the pile of blonde hair on the floor while Fluttershy applied a bandage to her wound, "It'll take forever to grow back out."

"Really?" Rarity asked, acting surprised, "I would have guessed you'd be happy to have a short tail now- it would be one less thing to get caught in something while you're working after all."

"If I wanted a short tail, I'd have cut it myself before now," Applejack retorted, "and I certainly wouldn't cut it *this* short. This ain't a tail, it's... I dunno, but I don't like it."

"Girls, this isn't a good time," Soul said, "We can't keep Luna waiting much longer."

"Just give me one more moment," Rarity said. Her horn glowed and the severed tail floated off the floor, flew over to AJ's rump, and reattached itself to her.

"Hey, thanks a bunch!" AJ said, giving her tail an experimental flick, "It's good as new."

"Hey," Rainbow Dash said, "Why didn't you fix *my* tail when it got cut back in the stair-well?"

"You didn't complain about it," Rarity said, "So I assumed you were ok with it."

"Oi," Ash said, impatiently, "Princess and valuable machine, out in the open, virtually unguarded. Let's *go*!" Rainbow shut her mouth with a disgruntled snort and followed the group as they galloped to their destination.

When they reached the next staircase, a terrible laugh echoed through the castle, bringing the group to a halt as they prepared for trouble. "Run and fight all you wish ponies," the buzzing, growling voice of Z'nai-controlled Celestia rumbled around them, "There are more of us than you can possibly imagine, and even if you destroy every piece of enchanted armor in the entire land, we still come for you in numbers beyond counting."

"Come on," Twilight said, gritting her teeth and trying to force back her tears, "She's just taunting us. We can do this, we can save Princess Celestia."

"That's the spirit," Ash said encouragingly. The ponies resumed their run, heading up the remaining flights of stairs to the floor that housed the upper viewing platform.

As they ran, the Z'nai continued trying to break them. "I thought you should know," it said, "we're getting much more powerful now. A few of us have managed to take control of the flying ponies. You thought we could only take the ones that can use magic, right? Turns out the flying ones have quite a bit of magic potential in them, just not as much as the horned ones."

I bet the 'earth ponies' have some magic too, so it's only a matter of time before we can worm our way into their minds."

"Oh I hope that's not true," Ash muttered, "if they can do that, there's probably nothing in Equestria they won't be able to possess. Still, it took them the better part of a week to get into pegasi, and only just. If it's telling the truth."

"We'll stop them," Twilight said, eyes hard and full of fury, "We have to." A chorus of agreement and a "Woo!" from Pinkie Pie greeted her statement. They reached the right floor and galloped toward the viewing platform. As they burst through the door and out onto the platform, waves of shadow began creeping toward them. Fluttershy squealed and shut her eyes as she somehow found the energy to speed up, beating the rest of the ponies to the hot-air balloon, which she dove into. Princess Luna was nowhere to be seen, and the ponies were forced to stop as the shadows gathered in front of them and formed up into the possessed Celestia.

"Trying to escape are we?" she buzzed, "I don't think so." Her horn began to glow with dark purple light as the group tried to back away. Celestia's spell and laugh of triumph were cut off as a sparkling mist came up from behind her, wrapped a tendril around her neck, and resolved into the midnight-black Nightmare-form Luna straddling her sister's back and pulling her head back in a choke-hold.

"You will not force my sister to kill anypony," Luna snarled, "Least of all her favorite student." She looked at the group and said, "It's in the center of the platform. Hurry!" The nine ponies nodded and ran past the two alicorns as Celestia tried to shake Luna off.

"Center of the platform," Ash mused as they neared the spot, "but how exact is-" He was interrupted by the sound of Pinkie Pie smashing into something mind-bounce. He looked to see her sprawled out on something he couldn't see.

"Found it!" Pinkie declared happily, hopping off. Twilight's horn glowed as she undid the invisibility spell, revealing the magic manipulator.

"Ok," Ash said, "Twilight, I need you to pay close attention. We've only got one shot at this. Come stand by me." The lavender-and-blue unicorn did so as Ash fished a piece of chalk out of his pack. "I'm going to trace a pattern

on the ground," he said, "I need you to focus your magic and follow it with your eyes as closely as you can, and try not to blink if you can help it. Once I'm finished, tap the pattern with a hoof and turn your attention to the machine, willing it to have a barrier that will let Z'nai in but not out. Once we get that in place, I'll cast a spell to advertise its presence throughout the city. You ready?"

"I... I think so," Twilight said, "Though that seems like an odd way to do a spell."

"That's how I do them," Ash said, "You've seen me. We don't have time to translate this spell into a format you're familiar with, so let's hope you can do it my way." Twilight nodded and began focusing as her friends arranged themselves to facilitate the flow of power through the Elements. Ash put the chalk to the ground and began tracing, going as slow as he dared to give Twilight a chance to keep up. While they worked, Gale, Soul, and Heart turned to watch the fight between Luna and Celestia. Luna was holding onto her sister's neck for dear life as the possessed Princess jumped and bucked and pestered Luna with magic. This went on for several minutes until Celestia finally broke Luna's chokehold and threw her toward the center of the platform. The three Order-naries caught the black alicorn and settled her gently to the ground. The sound of Luna's cry startled Twilight, but Ash quickly snapped out, "We're almost done- just a few more seconds. Focus!" Twilight gulped, forcing herself not to look away from the chalk line Ash was laying down. A few tense seconds later, Ash lifted the chalk and gave Twilight a quick nod.

"Here goes," Twilight grunted, reaching out to tap the pattern. As she did so, the chalk began to glow purple, and then each of the other colors of the rainbow as the Elements of Harmony activated. With a brief smile, Twilight looked up at the machine and unleashed her magic. The machine was quickly coated in a translucent rainbow aura that swirled about randomly. "Did I do it?" Twilight asked.

Ash smiled and nodded, horn glowing as he said, "Far better than I could ever do. Keep an eye on it- it may need an energy boost now and again." He etched another pattern on the ground with his chalk, tapped it, and wrapped the machine in another spell. The machine turned on, and Celestia gasped and fell to the ground, groaning as darkness seemed to leak out of her coat. Luna spasmed briefly, and then changed back to her

normal form as a black shadow flew out of her and into the machine. A few seconds later, another shadow flew out of Celestia, struggling as it was pulled into the machine as well. A shriek that threatened to shatter eardrums rose up throughout the castle and the city below as a wave of shadows rose up and began converging on the machine, some of them dragging pieces of royal guard armor with them.

"Something tells me you made that machine more than 'attractive' to the Z'nai," Soul shouted over the noise.

"On the contrary," Ash replied, "I made it as attractive as a magnet, and the Z'nai are the iron!" He laughed as the shadows reached the platform and began pouring through the barrier into the magic manipulator, the tag-along armor bits bouncing off as they hit it. The rainbow barrier began bulging in places, and Ash instructed Twilight, "Give it more magic, and expand the radius if you can. Tap the tracing again if you have to." He quickly rubbed out the one he'd used to avoid confusion as Twilight channeled more magic into the barrier.

Princess Luna had regained her feet and was watching the scene with a mixture of awe and horror at the amount of pure darkness flowing into the machine when a groan made her turn around. She ran over to her sister and helped her stand up, checking to see if Celestia's eyes had returned to normal and sighing in relief when she saw they had. "Ugh..." Celestia moaned, "What... what time is it?"

"Long past time for the sun to sleep," Luna said, looking up at the sky, where the sun still hung on the western side of its zenith.

"Oh dear," Celestia said, looking around her and then up at the sky, "I'm still weak. Will you help me set this right, dear sister?"

"Of course," Luna said, rubbing her head against Celestia's chin. The two alicorns focused their magic, and the sun sped across the sky to sink below the horizon. Celestia's light faded as Luna quickly turned to the east and brought the moon up to light the sky.

"Wowzers, that was trippy," Soul said after he reclaimed use of his dropped jaw.

"Wowzers?" Gale asked incredulously. Soul stuck his tongue out at her.



"What is going on here?" Celestia asked, seeing the Z'nai being sucked into the manipulator as Twilight expanded the barrier again, "The last thing I remember is fighting one of those shadow creatures. After that... just flashes and foggy... Oh dear..." Luna leaned up next to her as her legs threatened to give out, "What did I *do*?" she demanded.

"You didn't do anything," Gale said as Celestia allowed herself to be helped into a laying position, "You see..." she then proceeded to summarize the events of the day and what they knew of the Z'nai invasion.

"How many of them are there?" Twilight yelled as she expanded the barrier yet again. The manipulator was barely visible through all the shadows roiling around inside the rainbow cage. Here didn't seem to be an end to the waves of Z'nai flying from the city, and there was an impressive-looking pile of armor around the barrier.

"A lot," Ash replied simply, "These things propagate as quickly as they find new places to inhabit."

"They're like shadowy parasprites!" Pinkie said, smiling at the realization, "Except, these things probably don't like music so much."

"Probably not," Ash agreed, "How are you holding up Twilight?"

"I'm starting to feel the strain," Twilight responded, "If this keeps up much longer I'll either collapse from exhaustion or go ballistic from magic overload. If we're lucky, the latter one will just result in this barrier becoming dramatically larger, but I can't promise that."

Ash looked out over the city. Straining his eyes, he thought he could make out a thinning at the edges of the waves. "Keep it up as long as you can," he said, "I think I can see the end of it." Twilight nodded and took a more solid stance. After several minutes, she began to shake and her eyes began to glow faintly white, but the waves finally began to peter out and the shrieks ceased rending the air as the last Z'nai was pulled into the machine. "We're good!" Ash shouted, thrusting a hoof into the air.

"Great," Twilight grunted, "Now what? They're pushing against that barrier so hard, it'll collapse if I let it go."

"Oh... uh," Ash said, thinking, "Great... we've got to put these things somewhere where there's not enough magic for them to feed on. But where in Equestria..." He trailed off as his gaze went to the horizon. His expression went stoic as his eyes hardened and he turned to face the machine. He strode purposefully forward and stopped just short of entering the barrier. Everypony's eyes were on him as he picked up his chalk and etched a spell pattern onto the ground.

"Ash," Soul Mage asked, getting worried, "what are you doing?"

The ash-grey unicorn with the fire-like mane ignored the question as he finished his pattern and placed a hoof firmly on it. As his horn and the pattern began to glow, his gaze went up until it settled on the pale moon above him. "*Destulf feryp*, lunar surface, Transport!" he shouted. There was a bright orange flash and Ash, the machine, the Z'nai, and the barrier all vanished from sight.

"No!" Gale and Heart both yelled, running toward the vacated area. Soul simply stood where he was, stunned.

"What... just happened?" Fluttershy asked as the magic around the Elements of Harmony faded away and Twilight's legs gave out.

"*Destulf*," Soul muttered, "set destination. *Feryp*, large area of effect, I guess, or line-of-sight." Everyone turned to look at him as he shook his head sadly. "The moon," he said, "he took them to the moon, using the only spell he knew could handle the load- personal transportation."

"Why though?" Rarity asked.

"He needed a place where there's little to no magic," Soul said, slumping to the ground, "Barring that, some place the Z'nai can't get back into Equestria from. Either way, the moon seems like a logical option."

"But he had to trap himself there as well to do it," Heart said glumly, "Idiot. He always seems to find a way to sacrifice himself to put an end to his problems..."

"Not this time!" Luna declared. A sparkling mist surrounded her as she grew to match her sister's height and her coat turned midnight black. "He's done nothing to deserve that," she insisted, her voice now that of

Nightmare Moon. She vanished from sight as the mist flew away toward the moon.

"Can she do that?" Soul asked, looking at Celestia, "why'd she stay there a thousand years if she can just-"

"I sealed her to the moon," Celestia said simply, "That seal's gone now, so she can go wherever she wants. I just wish she didn't have to become Nightmare Moon to get that far."

"I second that, Princess," Applejack said.

Any further comments were cut off as the mist returned and deposited Nightmare Moon and a very upset Ashen Blaze onto the platform. "No no no!" Ash was shouting, and then smacked his face with a hoof when he saw where he was. "*Skvetchte...*" he muttered, and then pulled PC out of his saddlebag. "PC, status," he said as he put the computer on his head. He nodded as text flashed across the screen and then began slowly rotating in place. "Scan for Z'nai," he said, "And... no, I can examine myself, thank you very much!" He completed a few revolutions and then pulled PC off his head and gave Nightmare Moon a hard look. "You," he said slowly, "are so lucky I can't even begin to describe it. Do you realize that, in your haste to get me, you could have brought a Z'nai or two back with us? You didn't, and so I guess I can say thank you." He bowed his head, and continued in a sincere tone, "Thank you Princess Luna for bringing me back from my self-imposed exile. I suggest you don't do anything fancy with the moon for a long while. Moving it shouldn't affect the Z'nai much, but I'd be careful." He turned to walk away, but then looked back and said, "Are you going to put the Nightmare away, or do you need some... assistance?" Luna shook her head and changed back into her normal, purple shape. "Now, if you'll excuse me," Ash said, "I am in dire need of some food." He galloped off before anypony could speak.

"Ash! Wait up!" Rarity called, running after him. Gale watched the white unicorn leave with an amused look on her face.

"Well," Soul Mage said, looking around, "I think that's it everypony. The Z'nai are gone. We win."

"So it seems," Princess Celestia said, "Well done, all of you." Her words seemed to break the tension still hovering over the group, and shouts of

celebration broke out as the ponies leapt about and hugged each other in joy.

"Yeee-ha!"

"Yeees!"

"Woo! Party time!"

"Yay."

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Rarity had somehow managed to lose Ashen Blaze somewhere between the front gates of the castle and the city of Canterlot proper. She wandered about, watching as ponies began to emerge from their homes and shops and gather in small groups to gossip and speculate about what had just happened. Rarity fought the urge to join one of those groups and tell them the whole story; it was going to be up to the Princesses to inform the citizenry and decide how much to tell. If Rarity were to try, she'd either be laughed at as one of the more outrageous rumor-makers, or her story would be expanded and changed beyond recognition as it spread through the city. Rarity loved being the center of attention, but this was one time when staying out of the spotlight was the better choice. She blocked out the voices of the rumor-mongers as she searched for Ash, trying as he probably was to find a café or restaurant that had opened for business.

She found him at a diner trying not to lose his patience as he explained his desired order to the waiter. "It's not that complicated," he was saying, "It's like hay fries, only you use sliced potatoes instead of the hay. I know you've got potatoes back there because you offer them baked and mashed and even raw with a side of... Ok, there, you see how the raw potatoes look? Cut them up like that and stick them in the fryer for a few minutes until they're golden-brown and crispy, then put them next to my sandwich and bring them out. Think your cook can handle that?"

"I think so sir," the red-on-cream unicorn waiter said, scribbling furiously at his notebook.

"Good," Ash said, "and get me the blueberry smoothie to drink if you please." The waiter finished writing, took the menu, and headed back into the kitchen.

"Um, Ash?" Rarity asked, spooking the ash-grey unicorn.

"Rarity!" he exclaimed, whirling around in his seat, "H-hi. What are you doing here?"

"I came to see if you were all right," Rarity said, taking the seat across from Ash, "You ran off so quickly..."

"I've spent all day running around up and down castle stairs, avoiding creatures I couldn't properly fight, coming up with a plan to fix everything as I went, and topped it all off with a pair of very powerful and draining spells. I am *starving*." He chuckled as Rarity gave him an empathetic smile and sat back. "You know," he said, "I am amazed you ponies don't have the concept of the French fry. I'll forgive you the lack of processed soybean patties and whatnot, but how could a society make it so far without coming up with deep-fried potatoes?"

"I... don't know," Rarity said, somewhat confused. Ash smirked, and then his face fell into a melancholy expression. "Ash, what's wrong?" Rarity asked.

"Why do you like me so much Rarity?" Ash asked, "Not even my own teammates are so quick to check on me when I go off on my own. Of course, they're used to me doing this, and going places they can't follow me..." He shook his head. "I'm trouble," he said, "Nobody should want to have anything to do with me. My team sticks by me out of loyalty and because they know I can't be left to my own devices, but you? Your friends, the Princesses, every pony in Ponyville and Canterlot and beyond, none of you should want me around. Trouble always finds me: Tau'rin, Nightmare Moon's second return, and *I brought* the Z'nai here! I caused this!" There was a clatter as the waiter, who had arrived with the food, dropped the platter, stared at Ash, and then ran into the kitchen. "See, he has the right idea!" Ash exclaimed, "Now, I'd better get out of here before they try something." He got up and ran out the door.

"Ash!" Rarity called out, running after him. She caught up a couple streets later and imposed herself into his path. After he skidded to a stop, she grabbed him and pushed him up against the wall of the building they were next to. "Now listen to me," Rarity said, "You'll never be able to forgive yourself if you keep thinking so negatively! You know what I see when I look at you Ashen Blaze? I see a hero. I see a pony who has looked

danger in the face and laughed. A pony who refuses to back down no matter what stands in his way. A pony who knows who he can trust and how he can work with them to accomplish what needs to be done. I also see a pony who has a bad habit of claiming responsibility for every bad thing that happens around him." Ash opened his mouth to protest, but Rarity put a hoof over it and continued, "I don't know all of what you've done in the past, and honestly I don't think I care to learn, but I know this: nothing that happened since you and your friends dropped out of the sky into Fluttershy's chicken run has been your fault, not even the Z'nai. You didn't know they could get out through your machine. What's more, as often as you claim responsibility, you act to fix the problem. You don't cause trouble- you clean it up. If that's not the definition of a noble hero, I don't know what is." She released Ash and stepped back.

Ash stood in silence for several seconds, head hung low. Finally, he looked up and met Rarity's eyes, appreciation shining in his own. "I've been told something like that before," he said, "Thank you for reminding me of it. You truly are a great friend Rarity." The white unicorn blushed, and then chuckled as Ash's stomach rumbled. "Come on," the grey unicorn said, "Let's see if we can find a restaurant that hasn't heard I'm the big bad mastermind behind the Z'nai. I'll pay." Rarity laughed as the two of them walked side-by-side down the street.

# Epilogue

A few days later, after Princess Celestia had fully recovered from her possession and life was starting to return to normal in Canterlot, a ceremony was held to honor the ten ponies who had saved the city, and the world, from disaster once again. The Princesses sat in the throne room, Celestia on the throne itself and Luna to her right. The six holders of the Elements of Harmony were bowed before the dais as Celestia praised their strength, courage, and most of all their friendship. Ashen Blaze, Soul Mage, and Gold Heart waited at the other end of the room for their turn, and they were looking around anxiously for their missing member. As Luna took her turn thanking the six ponies before her, Gale slipped quietly through the chamber doors, quite out of breath but smiling. "Where have you been?" Ash asked.

"Checking the inventory at the production house for my adding machines," the brown earth pony said, "After we'd cleaned out Canterlot, I realized we only knew there was a problem here because of the Z'nai inside the machine Twilight got."

"Oh... crap," Ash said, "If any other infested machines got out of the city..."

"Don't worry," Gale said, "I personally compared the inventory of unfinished machines and parts to the shipping records. The only machine that left Canterlot after the Z'nai broke out went to Ponyville's library." Everypony breathed a huge sigh of relief; there was no way they could deal with an Equestria-wide infestation. A round of cheers and hoof-stomps told the four that the Princesses had finished with Twilight and company, and now it was their turn to approach the thrones. The six Element bearers stood in a line off to the side, and the four noticed with pleasure that Twilight's natural coloring was back. The six nodded pleasantly as the Order-naries arrived at the dais and bowed.

"Ashen Blaze, Soul Mage, Gold Heart, and Gale," Princess Celestia said, "We owe you as large a debt of gratitude as we do to the Elements of Harmony. They have told me, and as I recall from the glimpses of reality I had while under the control of the Z'nai, that you four were instrumental in the successful eradication of the shadows, none more so than you Ashen

Blaze. We commend you for your unwavering drive that united these ponies and kept them going despite the obstacles placed before them. I recall the speech you made when my controller first confronted you, and I must say it was a truly valiant effort. However, it is true that the Z'nai could not have attacked if it weren't for that... device of yours, PC."

"That is true Princess," Ash said, "The Z'nai that spawned the rest came from PC and in fact is still inside of him. We cannot eradicate it without destroying PC's personality and most of his functions in the process. I can honestly say I never imagined the Z'nai could make the leap from a computer like PC to items and creatures of a magical nature, so if I am to be held at fault, I plead for leniency on the grounds of ignorance to the danger."

"And I was the one to link PC to the device the Z'nai spread from," Gale added, "So I am just as guilty as Ash."

"Then you are both innocent," Celestia said kindly, "You are both honest ponies and your actions to clean up the mess prove you would never unleash such horrors upon my subjects willingly." There was a cheer from Pinkie Pie that spread quickly through part of the room and died away just as quickly.

Princess Luna stepped forward and spoke, "For your efforts, there must be a suitable reward."

"Oh please no," Heart said, "We were only doing what we had to. We don't need any fanfare or parades or anything."

"Very well," Luna said, "Although there must be some sort of celebration, since that's inevitable anyway." She smiled at Pinkie Pie, who winked back with a huge grin on her face. "I for one simply can't let you four go on with your lives unrecognized in some manner. For Ashen Blaze, we will continue to support your research into the nature of Equestria's magic."

"Provided you don't stick that PC of yours into anything else you build," Celestia put in.

"Of course," Luna and Ash said at the same time. "For Gale," Luna continued, "we'll compensate you for anything you may have lost in terms of designs, tools, or essential equipment to your inventing needs."



"I'm not lacking for anything expensive," Gale said, "The Z'nai seemed strangely unwilling to try and build more things to take over. However, I did promise Twilight there an adding machine, but since we had to dispose of it..."

"We'll pay for the replacement," Luna said with a nod. "As for you two," she said, looking to Heart and Soul, "Just what is it you do again?"

"Nothing much," Heart said, "Our talents aren't the most... constructive."

"Yes," Celestia said, getting a mischievous glint in her eye, "I saw what you did to those Z'nai. Between the two of you, more than half of the royal guard's stock of armor has been destroyed- especially the breastplates. It will be months before the smiths can make enough to outfit all the guards on duty, let alone those that are off-shift at any given time. Until then, our defense is going to be quite weak." The golden-yellow ponies cringed, not because they feared Celestia's wrath, but because they had an idea what kind of "reward" she was leading up to with this, and they didn't like it. "Therefore," Celestia continued, "until such time as the guard is back to full strength, I will grant you two the positions on my traveling honor guard."

"Traveling Honor Guard?" Soul asked hesitantly.

"Yes," Celestia said, suddenly looking a bit tired, "After what has transpired, both Luna and I feel entitled to a little vacation. Of course, we can't both go off at the same time or the cycle of day and night would stop, so we've decided to take turns. Next week I will leave to travel across Equestria visiting some of my favorite relaxation spots while Luna stays here to keep things running. I'll be gone for a week, and then it will be Luna's turn. While we're out, we'll need some ponies to help protect us, and since we can't spare many guards at the moment due to the equipment shortage, the two of you will fill in for a couple of them. Once we've had our breaks, we will call on you from time to time as duty demands that we travel to other places."

"So," Heart said, her eyes starting to shine, "We'll get to see all of Equestria?"

"Yes," Luna said simply, "And if you wish to remain on the guard after your term of service expires, I hear the pay and benefits are to die for."

"And on our off-time?" Soul asked.

"Just keep out of trouble and stay where we can contact you," Celestia said, "That should allow you live anywhere in Canterlot, or Ponyville if you so wish."

Heart and Soul exchanged looks for a few seconds, and then looked back at the Princesses and said, "Thank you so much," at the same time.

"Wonderful," Celestia said, standing up and addressing the entire throne room, "Once again, our thanks to these wonderful ponies. Now, go your way and make this day better than the day before!" The gathered ponies stamped their hooves and then began to clear out of the throne room. "So," Celestia said as she and Luna descended from the dais, "did I hear somepony mention a party?"

# Order-naries: Vacation

## Prologue

Canterlot was as pristine as ever. To be anything less would be an affront to the city's status as the political center of Equestria and the land's foremost unicorn city. The streets were clean, the sky was being cleared after a refreshing rain shower had finished its work, and the sun shone down on a perfectly arranged gathering of upper-crust ponies waiting on the castles' upper viewing platform for the chariot bearing Princess Celestia on her return from a week's vacation. In the midst of this glamorous company, dressed in their finest gowns and suits, stood an ash-grey unicorn who had refused to do more than comb out his red-and-orange mane that ordinarily looked strikingly similar to real flames and wear the gemstone necklace he always had with him. Ashen Blaze was not a happy pony.

If there was one thing Ash hated (and there were actually quite a few things, most of them reasonable), it was pomp. He'd be the first to admit he had a flair for the dramatic and a tendency to dominate the scene, but he tried to avoid "fancy" and "eye-catching" like the plague. The problem was that the few months he'd been in Equestria had been punctuated by disasters that not only required him to take action to preserve his own life, but had resulted in him and his associates saving the Royal Sisters and Canterlot as a whole at least twice. One does not rescue royalty without rewards and admission to high society, and although Ash wouldn't turn down a reward, he could do without the society. He didn't have much choice this time though; Celestia wasn't the only pony about to arrive.

A few gasps and muted cries brought him out of his brooding and directed his attention to the sky as the orchestra situated on the edge of the platform began to play. Off in the distance he saw light glinting off shining gold armor as two ranks of pegasus guards flew into sight preceding a chariot bearing the great white alicorn princess and two other guards – one of

them a golden-yellow, brown-maned unicorn – and pulled by yet another pair of armored pegasi. The guards landed and trotted off to either side as the chariot approached and settled softly onto the platform amidst a crescendo of music and cheers. Ash's stoic expression softened as he caught the eye of the golden unicorn guard, but he didn't join in the noise. Celestia stood up as the chariot came to a stop and raised a hoof, gaining instant silence from the crowd. *Now, that I can respect*, Ash thought.

"My beloved subjects," the princess said, "It is good to see you all again. My time off was most rejuvenating and I look forward to resuming my duties, assuming my dear sister is willing to relinquish them." The quiet cheers that greeted her first sentence died away, except for a few nervous, short-lived giggles.

A genuine, lady-like laugh turned everypony's attention to the platform entrance, from which Princess Luna emerged and walked toward her sister. "I will gladly give you back the day," she said, stopping in front of Celestia, "In fact, I'll give you the night, since it is *my* turn for a week off." Celestia laughed, inspiring some affected chuckles from the crowd, and leaned down to hug her younger sister with her neck.

"I'd wait a day or two before you leave," she said, "just to make sure the transfer of power goes smoothly." Luna nodded and the two separated. Celestia regarded her subjects again and said, "I will begin court in one hour, after I've had a chance to freshen up from my ride." She strode regally from the platform with Luna at her side, surrounded by her guards. Ash caught the golden one's eye again and the two exchanged a nod before the procession passed. Ash slipped out of the crowd and followed them at a respectable distance, and then turned aside as he entered the castle and sat down to wait near the staircase. A few minutes later, the golden unicorn trotted over to him, looking relieved.

"Oh man," he said, removing his helmet, "That was certainly an experience. How was your week Ash?"

"Probably boring compared to yours Soul," Ash said, "Just continuing the research." He reached up a hoof and nonchalantly fiddled with the gemstone necklace he was wearing.

"Figures," Soul Mage said, and then did a double-take, "Hold on. You updated that thing. It actually looks like a Rarity product now."

"She'd probably smack you for saying that," a voice said from behind them. They turned to see a female pegasus guard who, besides the obvious differences, was an exact match for Soul. She came over and sat next to Soul and heaved a sigh. "I'm not pulling the chariot for Luna if I can get out of it."

"I'd gladly take your place Heart," Soul said, "but..." Gold Heart rolled her eyes smacked him upside the head with a wing as he grinned at her.

"That new necklace does suit you better Ash," the pegasus said, "But does it measure up?"

"Marginally," Ash said, "I think Gale and I have hit the cap on how much these gems can enhance my magic."

"Where is Gale anyway?" Heart asked.

"Honestly, I have no idea," Ash said, looking slightly cross, "It hardly seems fair that I get roped into attending the homecoming and she somehow slips away from it... She's probably holed up in a workshop working on a new invention. Now, what say we go get lunch? I've finally found a place that can make decent fries."

"Sounds good," Soul said, "just give us a few minutes to get out of this armor." Ash nodded and the two guards trotted back down the hall. He turned toward the stairs and began climbing down. He'd have to find Gale before heading to lunch- the four former mercenaries of order only had a couple days before they had to go their separate ways again.

# Chapter 1

It was nearing sunset in the big city of Manehattan, the city of skyscrapers, high fashion, and home to earth pony sophisticates who preferred to develop their own culture separate from the ponies of Canterlot. Unlike most population centers, Manehattan did not concern itself much with the work of sustaining itself; there was no farming area, no mines, and few factories. The city's lifeblood came from the deep pockets of high-seated business ponies who preferred to live away from the places that made them money, and from the cultural centers that tried to cater to said business ponies and the tourists. At least, that's the impression Heart and Soul had got when they'd escorted Princess Celestia through the city. Right now, the only thing on Soul's mind was that he deeply regretted going with Heart to investigate the sounds coming from Luna's penthouse suite ten minutes ago when she was supposed to be napping. Now he was well above most of the buildings, front legs wrapped loosely around the Night Princess's neck for stability as she flew through the darkening sky, making her escape from the majority of her honor guard. The only consolation was that Heart was flying right beside Luna, and she seemed as divided as he was over the wisdom of this flight.

"Why did you bring us along?" he asked the princess, "We are part of your staff after all. Kinda defeats the purpose of running away, doesn't it?"

"Unlike the rest of the guards," Luna said, "You have not had years of training and duty drilled into you, so you are capable of lightening up and having fun. Besides, I need somepony to show me around to all the good sights."

"We've only been here once before ourselves," Heart said, "And that was with your sister last week. It was a one day, whirlwind tour of spas, parks, and the history museum that involved a lot of standing outside doorways watching for trouble that never came."

"And it was all done at ground level," Soul added. Luna took the hint and angled into a downward glide, alighting on a street corner near what looked to be the theater district. Soul rolled off Luna's back as Heart landed, and

the two ponies stood next to each other as they looked up at the purple alicorn. "Thank you," Soul said, "now, any ideas of what you'd like to do?"

Luna looked around, and then shrugged. "All I know is I'm on vacation, and to me that means doing something I don't normally get to do," she said.

"So," Soul said slowly, "No meetings, no answering petitions, no fancy, drawn-out meals with high-class, cultured ponies..."

"And what, pray tell, is wrong with cultured ponies?" a cultured, vaguely familiar voice said from off to Soul's left.

"Uh, my apologies, miss..." Soul trailed off as he turned to face the speaker, only to have his jaw drop as he saw a freckled, orange earth pony with a tied-back blonde mane and tail and a Stetson hat on her head. "A-applejack?" he stammered, "Wha..."

"What am I doing here?" Applejack asked in a clear Manehattan accent, "Why, I am visiting some relatives of mine who happen to reside in this fair city." She laughed at Heart and Soul's dumbfounded expressions and switched back to her normal drawl. "Big Macintosh and Apple Bloom are here with me. We just got finished with one of those fancy, drawn-out meals y'all were talkin' 'bout and let me tell you, those two almost blew poor Aunt 'n Uncle Orange's guest's minds with their way of talkin', 'specially since I can fake the Manehattanite voice so well. What brings the two of you here?"

"There are three of us actually," Luna said, stepping around the corner into AJ's field of vision.

"Whoa nelly!" Applejack exclaimed, dipping quickly into a bow, "Princess Luna! G-good evenin'. Sorry fer babblin' so much. If I'd a known you were there, I'd-"

"Calm yourself," Luna said, "And please stand up." Applejack complied, reaching up to straighten her hat as she did so. "You said your brother and sister were with you," the Princess continued, "Where are they right now?"

"Well," AJ said, "Bloom kinda wore herself out at the dinner, so Mac's takin' her to the Orange's place. Myself, I was thinkin' of checkin' out the theaters

to see if there's any shows they'd like ta go see tomorra before we head back home."

"That seems like a good idea," Luna said, "We will join you on your search."

"Oh, well if you insist," Applejack said, "it'd be an honor Princess. Follow me y'all, if you please." Heart, Soul, and Luna moved aside to let AJ take the lead as they walked toward the theaters.

"Say AJ," Soul asked as they walked, "who's tending the farm if you're all out here?"

"Granny Smith stayed behind," Applejack said, "She's a mite old for travelin' these days. We hired a couple stallions ta mind the place for a few days, and Rainbow Dash promised to keep the orchards well watered. Although knowin' her, she'll spend most of her time nappin' in mah trees and eatin' mah apples... Still, she does keep her promises, one way or another." As they walked along the street, the sun sank below the horizon and the lights of the theater marquees and street lamps took over the job of making visibility possible. Heart and Soul exchanged glances and the occasional muttered quip of surprise as they looked at the plays and other shows being advertised by the theater signs. From what Luna and AJ could catch, they seemed to be comparing those shows to ones they were familiar with from their old home. As the group reached the end of the first street and turned onto a less well-lit cross-street to reach the next line of theaters, Heart's gaze went up to the sky, and she slowed to a stop as a look of confusion crossed her face.

"What's up sis?" Soul asked.

"I'm not sure but..." Heart said, "Princess Luna, do the stars look right to you?"

Luna looked up and swept her gaze across the sky. The street lights washed out a lot of her stars, but those she could see... "No," she said, "They are all out of position." She looked back down and resumed walking, looking very unconcerned.

"Princess?" Heart asked as the three ponies ran to catch up with her.



"I'm on vacation," Luna declared, "Celestia's in charge of the night this week. She'll have to fix it." She continued on her way, rounding the corner into a crowd gathered around the front of a theater.

"Hold on," Applejack said, catching up thanks to the crowd parting around the Princess, "Ain't you the least bit concerned that..." she trailed off as her eyes landed on the theater's marquee. Her eyes went wide and her mouth dropped open slightly as she read the words. Heart and Soul glanced at her, looked up, and also froze in surprise. Luna paused in her march, looked at the stunned ponies, and then up at the marquee, which read: *The Great and Powerful Trixie: Live at the Silver Halter*.

She glanced at her escort, back up to the marquee, and then back to the ponies. "I don't get it," she said.

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"Spike, do you know where my astronomy notes are?"

"You stuck a few into *Skies of Equestria*."

"Those are about the mistakes they made regarding the south-western winter sky."

"Then I guess they're under your notes on herbs and potions."

"Which are where?"

Spike sighed and went over to the proper desk and started digging through the stacks of paper. He pulled out what felt like half a book's worth and carried them up to Twilight Sparkle, who was making some adjustments to her telescope. "Here," he said, holding up the papers, "Do you want all of them?" Twilight looked over from her work, scanned the top sheet, and then pulled it and four others off with telekinesis.

"Thank you Spike," she said, "Sorry to make you work so hard, but this thing's being so stubborn right now..." She gave the telescope stand a light kick and then caught it as it started to tip over.

"No problem," Spike said, taking the rest of the notes back downstairs, "I'll just put these somewhere less difficult to get to."

"Thank you," Twilight said again, and then gave a brief laugh of triumph as she managed to force the telescope into the right angle. She lifted it gingerly with her magic and carried it toward the stairs leading to the observation platform on top of the library.

"What are you looking for tonight?" Spike asked, coming back upstairs.

"I'm going to look at the Small Griffon," Twilight said, climbing the stairs, "I think the star on it's right leg might be changing into a white dwarf and I want to see if I can observe the change." She reached the platform, settled the telescope into place, and then looked up. She blinked several times, rubbed her eyes, and then rushed back inside, almost running into the baby dragon. "Spike," she said in a panic, "take a letter!" Spike started to reach for a piece of paper and pen, but then stopped as his stomach rumbled and he let out a burp of green fire that transformed into a scroll sealed with Celestia's seal.

"Uh, let's see here," he said, grabbing the scroll and opening it. He cleared his throat and read, "Dear Twilight, I'm sure you've noticed by now that the stars are not where they belong in the sky. I hope this letter reaches you before you have Spike send one to me, because there is no reason to panic. My sister has started her week of vacation today, and it seems I may be more out of practice with organizing the night than I thought. I apologize if I've spoiled any astronomic studies you were planning for tonight, but I'm already in the process of fixing my little hiccup. Sincerely, Princess Celestia."

"Out of practice?" Twilight asked, incredulous, "She ran the night for a thousand years; how can she be out of practice?"

"Well, she hasn't done it for over a year," Spike said, setting the letter aside, "You're always telling me you can lose skills pretty quickly if you don't use them regularly."

"I guess you're right," Twilight said, and then brightened up. "Hey, this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance!" she declared, running back up to the platform, "When else will I get a chance to see the stars rearrange themselves at a visible speed?" Spike smiled as he joined the very excited lavender unicorn on the viewing platform. Twilight looked like she was either going to burst or break out into a Pinkie Pie bounce as she watched the night sky intently. They sat there for several minutes, but nothing happened. Twilight's

excitement started to drain and Spike gave a huge yawn before standing up to leave. Suddenly, Twilight grabbed him and pointed a hoof toward a red star, which looked like it was wobbling. With a jerk, it moved out of position, followed by one, and then two, and finally all of the stars, which began whirling and zipping around the sky seemingly at random. Both Twilight's and Spike's eyes shone with amazement at the unprecedented display. The stars stopped moving suddenly, but the arrangement was still unfamiliar to Twilight. A couple seconds later the stars went into motion again, stopping in another incorrect layout. This repeated four more times, and finally several minutes passed without any stellar movement. Twilight wasn't sure, but she was willing to bet that *some* of the stars were in the right place now... A couple minutes later Spike burped out another letter from the Princess.

The two of them went inside to read the letter. Spike unrolled the scroll, cleared his throat, and began, "Dear Twilight, my most faithful and capable student." *Uh oh*, Twilight thought, a feeling of dread settling into her gut. "I don't wish to alarm you," Spike continued, "but I fear there may be something wrong. I cannot get the stars to fall into their proper alignments, no matter how I try. I have even attempted Fluttershy's approach of asking politely and begging. In order to ascertain the source of this problem and resolve it as quickly as possible, I need you and Spike to come to Canterlot at your earliest convenience to assist me and others I can trust in our research into this issue. Trustingly yours, Princess Celestia." Spike looked up from the letter to see Twilight rushing about stuffing books into her saddlebags. "I take it we're leaving now?" he asked.

"We have to!" Twilight said, "This is a disaster!"

# Chapter 2

"Ah'm seein' it, but I don't believe it," Applejack said, "It can't be *her*."

"You know any other ponies calling themselves 'The Great and Powerful Trixie?'" Soul Mage asked with a raised eyebrow, "But still, she's got herself a main-stage production? I'd never have guessed."

"A-hem," Princess Luna said, "I would be pleased to know what has the three of you so shocked."

"Oh, sorry Princess," AJ said with a quick bow, "Y'see, several months ago this unicorn callin' herself The Great and Powerful Trixie showed up in Ponyville, claimin' to be the greatest magician in Equestria. Most of it was an act, but her attitude and the way she humiliated anypony that tried to outperform her kinda rubbed us the wrong way. Her biggest boast was defeatin' an Ursa Major, and so when we kept questionin' her story a couple of foolish colts that were caught up in her act decided to lure an Ursa into town for her to defeat. Twilight had ta step in and calm the thing down, and Trixie ran out of town totally humiliated."

"Ah yes," Luna said, "I recall Celestia mentioning an Ursa Minor had attacked Ponyville."

AJ nodded and continued, "That's not the end of it though. A few days after these fellers," she pointed to Heart and Soul, "dropped into town, Trixie found one of their old magic Gems and came rolling back into town with a new act built around the thing."

"She was actually pretty good with it," Soul cut in, "But we had to get it back. Heart and I challenged her to a contest and won the Gem from her fair and square. When she left that time, I think she was vowing never to return to Ponyville again."

"Ash gave her some friendly advice before she went," Heart said, "From the looks of things, she might have actually listened to him."

"Hmm," Luna said, looking up at the marquee, "I think I would like to see this Trixie perform. What do you say?"

"You're the Princess," Soul said, "and it's your vacation; we're just along for the ride."

"What about you Applejack?" Luna asked the earth pony.

"Eehh," Applejack said, looking off to the side, "I dunno. I've had my fill of her magic, even if she has cleaned up her act. Besides, it wouldn't be fair to Macintosh and Apple Bloom if they didn't get to attend as well. Thank you for the invite though."

Luna nodded and then walked over to the box office. The attendant, a slate grey earth pony with a blue mane and glasses, stood riveted with shrinking irises as Luna gave her a warm smile and asked, "How much for three tickets?"

The attendant stammered for a few seconds before getting her voice under control enough to say, "I'm sorry your highness, but tonight's show is completely sold out. However I'm sure we could find somepony who'd be willing to give up their seat to you." There was an instant clamor as several of the ponies in the crowd volunteered. Luna silenced them with a snap of her spreading wings.

"That. Will not be necessary," she said, looking around, "All of you have paid to attend already, and I wouldn't dream of denying anypony their seat tonight." She turned back to the box office and asked, "Are there seats open for tomorrow?"

"Well," the earth pony said, sweating as she shuffled through the papers in front of her, "aside from the reserved seats, those tickets won't go on sale until tomorrow, but I can make an exception for you."

"Wonderful," Luna said, smiling.

"Uh, Princess Luna," Soul said cautiously, "You're, uh... supposed to be heading to Fillydelphia tomorrow..." He snapped his mouth shut as Luna leveled a glare at him.

Luna noticed that Applejack was still nearby, watching, and called her over. "If I were to pay for you and your family, would you reconsider attending?" she asked.

"I... I'd have to ask them," AJ said, "And then Aunt and Uncle Orange may want to come as well, although I'm not sure."

"So, that will be three for sure, and up to five additional tickets later," Luna told the attendant.

"I'll set five aside for you then," the earth pony said, "The rules say I have to put them back up for sale if you don't claim them by thirty minutes to show time."

"That will be fine," Luna said before the attendant could continue.

"Ah, then... that'll be 75 bits for three tickets then, Princess Luna." Luna nodded, produced the money, and then took the tickets the attendant held out and moved them over to Soul. The golden-yellow unicorn blinked a few times, and then stashed the tickets into the pouch attached to his breastplate straps.

"All right then," Luna said, turning to walk away, "This has been a productive outing, but it is time I returned and put an end to my guards's worrying." She walked out to a clear spot, plucked Soul off the ground and placed him on her back, and then spread her wings and took off, with Heart struggling to catch up with her.

"Shoot," Applejack said, watching them fly off, "Now I'm all curious. I just hope this don't turn into another fiasco..."

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"Slow down Twilight!" Spike shouted as he tried to keep his balance on top of the galloping unicorn. He'd barely had time to give Owloiscious a list of things that needed to be organized before Twilight had plunked him onto her back and shot out of the library, and he was amazed at how quickly Twilight was approaching the town square. "I don't think the pega-shuttle even runs this late," he said, "so how are we going to get to Canterlot anyway?"

"Uh..." Twilight said, finally slowing down, "That's a good point Spike. Maybe I could teleport us there?"

"No thank you," Spike said, "That'd take more jumps than I'm willing to endure."

"Well, if you have a better idea, I'd love to hear it," Twilight said, "We've got to help the Princess!"

"I know, I know," Spike said with a sigh. The pair fell silent as they pondered until they reached the town square and were brought back to reality by the sight of Pinkie Pie, who was up on her hind legs spinning around in circles as she moved randomly around the area. Rarity and the mayor were standing near the pavilion watching the scene in bemusement. "Pinkie, what are you doing?" Spike asked as the pink earth pony twirled past him and Twilight.

"Well, I was dancing with the stars," Pinkie said, still spinning, "but then they stopped and so I thought about stopping too but then decided, you know what? This is too much fun, so I'm gonna keep on doing it! Wheee!" She spun away as Twilight and Spike exchanged a glance. Pinkie started moving towards Rarity and the mayor, and then tripped and fell on her back. Everypony ran over as she looked up with her rapidly spinning eyes and said, "Hey! The stars are dancing again! How awesomely awesome!"

"Pinkie darling," Rarity said, "I think you're just dizzy."

"Really?" Pinkie said, "Ok." She stumbled back to her feet and began to spin in the opposite direction.

"Now what are you doing?" Twilight asked.

"Well," Pinkie said, "I'm all dizzy left-to-right, so if I make myself dizzy right-to-left, the two dizzies will cancel out and I won't be dizzy anymore!"

"Does that actually work?" Spike asked.

Pinkie stumbled to a stop, very unsteady on her hooves, and then her face turned green and she squeaked out, "no," before her cheeks bulged out and she ran off to find a bush to hide behind. Rarity watched her go with a faintly disgusted expression and then turned to Twilight.

"You don't happen to know what's going on do you?" she asked, "I was on my way home from a late spa session when I noticed the stars were all wrong. And then I saw Pinkie Pie..."

"Princess Celestia's having... problems with the stars," Twilight said, trying not to sound too worried, "She asked me to go help her figure out what the problem is, but I'm not sure how I can get to Canterlot at this hour."

"I'd offer you the use of the hot air balloon," the mayor said, "but it's not safe to fly it at night."

"You could have those guys take you," Pinkie said, appearing as if from nowhere next to Twilight and pointing back toward the library. Twilight turned around to see a royal pegasus-drawn chariot coming in for a landing next to her.

"Miss Sparkle," one of the pegasi said, nodding to her, "The Princess sent us to pick you up. We went to your house, but when we saw that the door was open, we figured you'd rushed out..." Twilight laughed nervously and blushed as she climbed onto the chariot.

"We should probably go back so I can lock up properly," she said, "My second assistant is there, but he just uses the windows to get in and out." The chauffeurs nodded and began to turn the chariot around.

"Um, wait a moment," Rarity said. The chariot came to a stop and everyone turned to look at the white unicorn. "Since you're going to Canterlot," she said, unusually hesitant, "I... Hoity Toity's been asking for me to come and give my input on next season's line and..."

"You just want to visit Ashen Blaze, don't you?" Spike asked flatly, looking cross as he thought about the ash-grey unicorn. He ignored the look Twilight shot him.

"Well, it would certainly be nice if I were to run into him," Rarity said, feigning innocence. Spike didn't seem convinced, but he didn't want to act mad toward the white unicorn either, so he simply pouted.

"We can probably carry one more pony," the lead pegasus said, "but we need to return as quickly as possible."



"Thank you," Rarity said, leaping daintily up onto the chariot and sitting down next to Twilight. "We can go now," she declared.

"You don't need to pick anything up from your place?" Twilight asked, knowing how reluctant Rarity was to go anywhere without at least two full saddlebags of hygiene and beauty products and basic sewing equipment.

"No, Ash-, er, Hoity Toity will be quite understanding if I show up with only the ideas in my head." Twilight hid a smile as the chariot began moving and took off into the air, while legions of sarcastic thoughts ran through Spike's head.

# Chapter 3

The chariot dropped Twilight, Rarity, and Spike off in front of the castle.

"Thank you ever so much," Rarity said to the pegasi, "I really do appreciate your generosity in allowing me to ride with you."

"Think nothing of it," the lead pegasus said, blushing slightly, "we'll be taking our leave now, if you don't mind." The chariot took off and flew away toward the guard barracks in another part of the castle.

"Well," Rarity said, motioning toward the castle doors, "shall we?"

"Shouldn't you be heading into the city to see Hoity Toity?" Spike asked.

"At this hour?" Rarity asked, appalled, "Oh, certainly not! This is hardly a good time to drop in. No, I'm afraid I'll have to accompany you for the time being."

"Hmph," Spike said, hopping off Twilight's back as they entered the building, "If you say so. Excuse me ladies, but I've just thought of something I must attend to." He ran off deeper into the castle. Twilight cast a glance at Rarity, and then lead the way toward the castle library on the assumption that Princess Celestia would meet them there.

"Spike is jealous, isn't he?" Rarity asked.

"Huh?" Twilight asked, looking back at her friend.

"Jealous of Ash," Rarity clarified, "It was cruel of me to insist on coming, and using such a piebald lie to justify it."

"It was," Twilight said bluntly, "but Spike will grow out of it eventually. I think he likes you only because you're so pretty, and for the gems you give him."

"Well, at least he's a good judge of beauty," Rarity said with a dignified air. Twilight smiled as she turned her head back toward where she was walking.

The royal library was one of the jewels of the Princess's castle, having held at least one copy of every truly worthwhile book ever written at some point throughout its history. The precise definition of "worthwhile" was hard to pin down; it of course contained both first editions and more modern, and thus publically available, copies of the works of every classic author, poetic genius, and scientific researcher to live under Celestia's sun, but it also had a section devoted to romance novels of... less than timeless quality, student theses on a variety of topics, and picture books aimed at little foals. Although never as busy as the city library or the one at the unicorn school, the royal library still saw small crowds of ponies browsing about at various points during the day and night. This was not one of those times. The only ponies present were Ashen Blaze, who had been dragged out of bed shortly after settling into it, and a brown earth pony mare who was moving up and down the aisles of books just slowly enough to read the titles. Ash watched this mare from a soft, but not actually comfortable, couch situated along the southern wall. "How on earth are you still so energetic Gale?" he griped.

"I thought you liked the night," Gale responded.

"Whatever gave you that impression?" Ash asked, "Just because I get along a little easier with Luna than Celestia, and my more powerful spells tend to have shadowy undertones does not make me nocturnal. Why are we in here anyways?"

"I don't know," Gale said, "my escort told me everything would be explained once the other researchers showed up."

Ash snorted. "Well then," he said grumpily, "wake me up when they get here." He lay his head down and closed his eyes. Just a few seconds later, his head jolted back up in response to the sound of the door opening and a voice calling his name in a sing-song manner. A myriad of expressions crossed his face as he turned to look, settling on a pleasant smile as he saw a white, purple-maned unicorn trotting over to him with a big smile on her face. "Rarity," he said, surprise mixed with a little apprehension in his voice, "what a surprise. And Twilight Sparkle," he added, tilting his head to look around Rarity at the lavender unicorn.

"Hello Ash, Gale," Twilight said, nodding to the unicorn and earth pony in turn, "What are you two up to?"

"I am seriously debating whether it is worth losing sleep to learn why I'm here, in this room, at this decidedly sleep-inducing hour," Ash said.

"Same here, but without the sleepiness," Gale said, "or the desire to leave."

"Which is not the same at all," Ash said, rolling his eyes.

"You're not here about the stars?" Twilight asked, confused.

"What about them?" Gale asked.

"The Princess is having trouble with them," Twilight explained.

"Did they not all come out?" Ash asked, "I haven't looked outside since lunchtime."

"Oh, they're all there," Twilight said, pointing toward the library window, "They're just not in the right places."

"Say wha?" The ash-grey unicorn got up from the couch and went over to the window, "But, they're stars," he said, "suns in their own right, for the most part, just very, very far away. Surely their positions are more or less fixed?"

"No, actually they aren't," Twilight said as Ash looked through the window and his jaw dropped.

"Well," he said, staring at the night sky, "there goes my entire concept of life, the universe, and everything." He turned away from the window to look at Gale, who had joined him at the window. "Gale," he said, "After I've mastered the intricacies of Equestrian magic, we're starting a space program. I must make sense of this."

"Aye aye Galileo," the earth pony said with a wry grin. Ash just gave her a weird look and went back to Twilight.

"So," he said, "the goddess of the day is having issues with the heavenly bodies of the night. No offense, but that doesn't seem all that strange to me."

"For a thousand years I controlled both the day and the night," said a voice from the library door. Everypony turned and bowed as Princess Celestia strode into the room, with Spike close on her heels. "This is the first time I have ever had trouble arranging the stars into their proper alignment," she continued, "even that first night after I was forced to seal Luna to the moon went by more or less perfectly. I need this mystery solved as quickly as possible, and the four... oh, five of you. Hello Rarity."

"Hello your Highness."

"Well, on more set of eyes can only help," Celestia said with a smile, "Anyway, I believe you have what it will take to not only find the source of the problem, but fix it."

"Question," Ash said, raising a hoof, "I'm not much of a book researcher, so am I really qualified for this?"

"You have a talent for creating spells," Celestia said, "We might just need you to modify a spell or invent an entirely new one to fix me."

"Tall order," Ash muttered, but then nodded with a determined smile, "but I welcome the challenge Princess Celestia."

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The head of Luna's honor guard found himself in a pickle: the Princess had fled and absconded with the two newbies for a couple hours, breaking all sorts of protocols and simple common sense, but one did not lecture royalty. She had been very determined that the guards she'd taken with her, the so-called Impossible Twins, were not to be blamed or reprimanded for anything. Furthermore, the entire week's schedule was tossed out the window, quite literally, and the Guard was told to go off and entertain itself until the Princess felt like going to another city because tonight she was going to a magic show (put on by a no-name filly...) and was only to be accompanied by Heart and Soul.

Really, the whole idea that the Princesses could take time off from ruling Equestria and moving the sun and moon blew the guard captain's mind. Sure, a lot of unprecedented events had occurred in the year or so since Princess Luna had returned and the guard had to adapt to working for two princesses, but still... What was he going to do with himself? He'd

been expressly forbidden from attending that magic show, and so avoiding the theaters altogether was probably a smart idea. One of his fellow guards had recommended a couple dance clubs, but he wasn't much of a dancer...

The guard's plight was the last thing on Luna's mind as she walked toward the theater district with her two escorts-turned-friends. They were walking because Soul Mage had humbly suggested that sitting on the Princess's back while she flew was awkward on many levels, and Luna decided that the night would be better if she tried to reduce how awkward ponies felt around her. Gold Heart had flown for a short time, but eventually came down to the ground, feeling it was unfair to fly when Luna was restricting herself to walking. The atmosphere around the group was rather light despite the concerns each held about appearances.

"You're quite sure the patrons won't be expecting some... adornments?" Luna asked.

"Beyond what you usually wear?" Soul asked, indicating the hoof shoes and neckpiece Luna was wearing. Heart and Soul had left their armor behind, considering it to be mostly ornamental anyway. "Honestly, you're probably over-dressed. The Silver Halter didn't look like one of the highest-class theaters in town, so we'll probably be fine."

"Besides," Heart said, "you're Princess Luna. No pony in their right mind would turn you away from anything for any good reason." Luna's smile took on a smug undertone.

As they neared the theater district, Heart spotted Applejack approaching from another street, accompanied by a large red stallion and a small red-headed yellow filly. "AJ!" the golden-yellow pegasus called out, waving the group over. The two trios met up and the Apples bowed, except for Bloom who simply stared at Luna until Applejack nudged her into a bowing posture.

"Good evening Princess," Applejack said.

"It is, isn't it?" Luna asked, looking up. A frown briefly crossed her face. "Except that Celestia's messed up the stars again... No matter. I take it these are Big Macintosh and Apple Bloom?"

"Eeyup," Mac said with a sedate nod, "Mighty pleased ta meet ya yer Highness."

"Wow, are you *really* Princess Luna?" Apple Bloom exclaimed, "That is so cool! Sweetie Bell and Scootaloo are going to be so jealous when I tell them I've met you! Oh, and maybe I'll tell Silver Spoon and Diamond Tiara too, just ta humble 'em a little."

"All right," Applejack said, smiling, "Keep goin' on like that and we'll miss our show."

"Ok Applejack," Apple Bloom said, still staring at Luna, "I'm just so excited. Come on!" She ran off down the street, forcing AJ to pursue her so she wouldn't get lost.

"She's quite the ball of energy," Luna said, hiding a smile.

"Eeyup," Big Macintosh said, "I reckon we better follow them." He gave another quick bow and led the group toward the theater. They quickly caught up to Applejack and Bloom and arrived at the Silver Halter a few minutes later. Once again there was a small crowd gathered outside, and a short line for the box office. Murmurs and gasps rose up as Luna approached, and the ponies in the line tried to move aside, but the Princess waved them back and took her place at the end.

"Say," AJ said to Heart and Soul, "Y'all were with Celestia on her vacation week, right?"

"Yeah," Soul said.

"Was she as... considerate as Luna here?"

"I couldn't say," Soul replied, "with her, everything was set up ahead of time, organized, and frankly boring from our perspective. Luna's determined to be spontaneous, and probably wants to prove something."

"She wants to show everypony that she's not Nightmare Moon," Heart said with certainty, "Maybe that's why she's acting so unconcerned about the stars- Nightmare was apparently obsessed with the night, so Luna's trying to be casual about it."

"I'm not concerned about the stars because I'm on vacation," Luna insisted, rejoining the group and passing three tickets to Macintosh, who took them in his mouth, "Celestia will straighten out the problem. Now come on; they insisted on letting the six of us in early to claim out seats and take care of other matters." Soul fished out the tickets for Luna, Heart, and himself as the group walked into the theater. There were two ponies inside the door- one green-on-orange earth pony who checked and marked their tickets, and a tuxedo-clad mahogany unicorn with an half-open stage curtain for a cutie mark who grinned spectacularly at Princess Luna.

"Dear Princess Luna," he said with a courtly bow, "it is truly an honor to welcome your patronage of the Silver Halter this evening. My name is Proscenium Arch, owner and executive manager of this establishment of the arts." Heart and Soul exchanged a look over the pony's name but managed to keep their expressions blank.

"Thank you Mr. Arch," Luna said, "may I say, your theater looks very nice." It really did. The lobby they were standing in was carpeted in a lush red fabric that was gentle on the hooves and complemented the wood paneling and gilded trim of the walls and ceiling, the door into the theater itself were of solid oak carved with an artful pattern over which was hung a framed poster of the show depicting a pale blue unicorn with even paler blue hair wearing a conical purple hat decorated with silver stars and a matching cape that happened to cover her cutie mark. It was obviously Trixie; her somewhat arrogant expression and dramatic pose amid stylized smoke and sparks gave her away. Applejack had to shush Apple Bloom before the little filly blurted out a critical comment, feeling a bit hypocritical as she did so.

"You are too kind," Mr. Arch said, "This is merely a humble venue for up-and-coming performers like the one you will be seeing tonight. Speaking of which, I must inform you we are planning to announce your presence in the audience before the show begins, and of course you may have any seat you wish, although I'm sad to say we have no private boxes to offer you."

"Think nothing of it," Luna said, "and please, I would rather you not draw any extra attention to me. That may detract from the show and the star's attention to her act."



Proscenium looked disappointed, but he bowed and said, "As you wish Your Highness; enjoy your evening." He turned and walked off into the backstage area of the theater.

"Nice guy for an executive," Soul said.

"Eeyup."

After much discussion of factors like Luna and Mac's large sizes, the Princess's desire for a low profile, and the theater's shape and acoustics, the group settled into seats a few rows behind the center of the seating area, with the Apple family situated in front of the Princess and "guards." As the other attendees filed in several minutes later, Macintosh talked Apple Bloom into giving Trixie a fair chance and Luna briefly considered casting an illusion spell to hide her identity but discarded it upon realizing everypony coming in had already seen her outside. Once the theater was mostly filled up and the sounds of conversation began among the theatergoers, Soul leaned toward Heart and asked, "So, when does this start again?"

"Eight o'clock," Heart answered, "Why?"

"Just curious," Soul said cryptically, looking around for a clock. He frowned in disappointment when he couldn't see one, and then shrugged and settled into a more comfortable position.

Twenty minutes later the lights dimmed and Proscenium Arch stepped through the curtains up on the stage as the crowd fell silent. "Fillies and gentlecolts," he said, "Welcome to the Silver Halter for tonight's presentation by the Great and Powerful Trixie." A round of applause rose up in response and Mr. Arch smiled as he waited for it to settle back down. "To insure the safety of our performer and so as not to ruin anypony's experience," he said, "we ask that you do not take pictures- an especially not with flash cameras. Thank you. And now, it is my pleasure to introduce The Great and Powerful Trixie!" He galloped off to stage-right amid applause, and then the curtains rose upon the darkened stage. A mist rolled in from both sides of the stage, and after a few tense moments, a spotlight flared on as a whistling firecracker went off, sparking a spinning wheel of light that framed The Great and Powerful Trixie as she grinned out at the audience. The applause rose up again, more enthusiastically.

"Thank you," Trixie declared over the noise, "Prepare yourselves, Manehattan, to be amazed by the Grreat and Power Trrrixie, the greatest unicorn magician in all of Equestria."

"She ain't changed a bit," Applejack muttered.

# Chapter 4

Trixie began with a series of illusions, creating images of dragons, a manticore, and an Ursa, each more impressive and life-like than the last, out of nothing but smoke and light. With each figure went a story that Trixie would act out, and even Luna and AJ found themselves impressed when an illusory dragon seemed to pick her up off the ground before she could vanquish it with a lightning bolt from her horn. The orange earth pony had to bite her lip when Trixie conjured up the Ursa image, especially since Trixie had set the scene in Ponyville.

"Trixie is ashamed to admit this was not her greatest hour," the pale blue unicorn said, looking up and covering her eyes with a front leg as the image reared up and began smashing smoke buildings, "After all, she knew that although Ponyville lies so close to the dreaded Everfree Forest, the monsters inside it almost never come out. The Great and Powerful Trixie had expected to simply spend a day or two regaling the ponies there with tricks and tales of her adventures, and she was well-received." AJ and Bloom both snorted. "However, that very night an Ursa Minor came rampaging out of the forest, probably scared by some nightmare or another."

"Eh, close enough," Applejack muttered.

"Oi," Soul hissed, "Save the commentary for later please. I'm enjoying this." Applejack looked back and gave Ash a bemused look.

"Trixie was shaken out of bed by the rampage," Trixie was saying, unaware of the commentary, "And being so tired meant she was not at her full potential." She turned toward the smoke-and-light Ursa and affected a sleepy wobble as she sent two weak-looking bolts of magic at the thing. The Ursa turned toward her and swung a paw at her, and Trixie jumped back and rolled across the stage as if she'd been sent flying by a powerful blow. Regaining her feet, Trixie's horn took on a purplish glow and the image of a purple unicorn trotted onstage from behind her. "Luckily for her," she said, resuming her narration, "there was a unicorn in Ponyville who, although not as Great and Powerful as Trixie, knew how to tame an Ursa Minor. By working together we calmed the beast and sent it home to its

cave." The purple unicorn image raised its head and a flute appeared above it playing a soft melody as Trixie "lifted" the Ursa off the ground and rocked it gently before moving it off stage. The audience applauded as the illusions vanished and Trixie took a bow.

"What a load of cow patties," Apple Bloom said, just a little too loudly. The applause came to an abrupt halt as Trixie looked up from her bow, looking briefly annoyed before putting a smile back on her face.

"It would seem there is a neigh-sayer in the house," she said, and a second spotlight came on and swung out into the audience. It centered on Applejack, and Trixie's smile faltered again briefly before she regained her composure. "You question the truth of my story, do you?" she asked.

"Yeah," AJ said, "On account of me being there when it happened. Yer still all talk."

"I see," Trixie said, "Well, as luck would have it, we have reached the next part of the show, where The Great and Powerful Trixie welcomes any pony in the audience to try their hooves at outperforming her. Do you accept the challenge?"

"I'd rather not," AJ said with a wry smile, "Besides, I didn't bring mah rope this time."

"A pity," Trixie said, "Anypony else? How about... you?" She pointed and the spotlight shifted to focus on Princess Luna. To her credit, Trixie handled this third and easily biggest surprise of the night very well; her face barely twitched. "Yes," she said, her voice no longer sounding as confident, "The Great and Powerful Trixie is even willing to match spells with one of our fair leaders, Princess Luna."

"Do you think I should?" Luna asked, turning toward Heart and Soul, "I wouldn't want to embarrass her."

"She's willing to risk it," Soul noted.

"Go easy on her though," Heart advised, "All she's really got is illusions and bravado."

"Go show her what real magic's like!" Apple Bloom insisted.

"You're sure you want me?" Luna asked the magician.

"Come, come," Trixie said, "no challenger will be turned away."

"Very well then," Luna said. She vanished into a mist of stardust and reappeared on the stage to the right of Trixie. "You don't need to try and match that," she told the unicorn.

Trixie just looked up into Luna's eyes, activated her horn, and then teleported to the left end of the stage. "Easy," she said, "What else do you have?"

"Let's see," Luna said, thinking, "How about this?" Her horn glowed as several tiny balls of light materialized around her and began flying about the theater in various patterns, ending as a crown encircling her head. Trixie responded by snatching control of the lights and doing her own routine with them before extinguishing them disdainfully.

"Pathetic," she said, "You insult both yourself and the Great and Powerful Trixie with such simple parlor tricks. Come on, show us what you're capable of."

"I don't wish to upstage you," Luna said, "Besides, some other pony may wish to take your challenge." She turned to leave, but Trixie teleported in front of her with a hard glare.

"Prove yourself," she demanded, "Are you Princess Luna or not?" Luna stepped back, insulted.

"You disrespectful little... Fine. You want a display of my power? How about *this*?" The light of her horn was blinding as magic energy began to swirl around her. Trixie stood her ground even as the energy began creating a real whirlwind and Luna's coat started to become gradually darker.

"Uh oh," Soul said, "This is not good. Come on Heart!" He leapt out of his seat and ran for the stage with Heart flying close behind him. The wind from Luna's spell began shaking the room, and as Soul jumped up onto the stage, the energy exploded outward and knocked him out of the air. As he lost consciousness, he thought he heard Big Macintosh's calm voice over the screams of the evacuating ponies.

"Poor filly can't seem ta catch a break, can she?"

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The ponies researching Celestia's problem with the stars hadn't caught a break either. Like the Princess had said, the problem was unprecedented, so looking for instances even remotely related to scrambled stars was next to impossible. Twilight, Spike, and Gale had turned the library upside-down and come up with no leads, not even from the fiction section. Ashen Blaze had lost the fight with sleep after an hour and half of tracing out spells that would allow him to look Celestia over and detect abnormalities. The only thing he'd found before his vision became too blurry from fatigue was a variety of pollens and powders in her coat, which he figured were simply the results of moving about through a perfectly normal atmosphere on any given day. After that he'd curled up on a couch and slipped into unconsciousness. The others kept working until the Princess insisted that they stop and get some rest at midnight.

The next morning, Ash awoke with a number of cramps and decided to go for a walk to work them out before breakfast. Rarity went with him, declaring a need for some fresh morning air after spending all night in a dusty library. They ended up getting breakfast out in the city and spending fifteen minutes at a salon fixing Rarity's bed-head. As they returned to the library, Spike noted with displeasure that Rarity was laughing at Ash's satirical commentary. "I mean really," he was saying in an affected snooty voice, "how could you even *think* of leaving your home with less than your entire make-up kit and a set of hairbrushes?" He caught Spike's eye and grew more serious. "Excuse me a second," he said. Rarity nodded and trotted over to talk to Twilight and Princess Celestia. Ash walked up to the purple dragon and simply said, "Finish your breakfast, then let's take a walk." He walked away without waiting for a response, and Spike began eating his food a little more slowly.

There was a tense silence between the two males as they walked through the halls of the castle. "Doesn't this seem just a little silly to you?" Ash asked at last.

"What?" Spike responded, glaring up at the unicorn.

"Here I am," Ash said, "a battle-hardened, blunt, subtly disrespectful, and downright aggravating mule of a pony, and yet somehow I catch the eye of the jewel of Ponyville. Hardly seems logical, does it?"

"No, it doesn't," Spike said simply.

"I don't understand it either," Ash said, "I'm not trying to lead her on, and I don't see our relationship as anything more than a friendship." He stopped and looked Spike square in the eye. "Therefore," he said, "I'd appreciate it ever so much if you'd quit giving me the evil eye. I can't help what anybody feels about me, but I'll nurture whatever relationship they insist on, even if it's antagonistic. You don't want to be my enemy." Spike simply stood where he was, speechless. Ash smiled and patted him on the head. "Well," he said cheerfully, "now that we've cleared that up, let's get back to work, shall we? The Princess is counting on us."

"R-right..."

Gale slammed the book she was reading shut with a growl of frustration. "I am about ready to give up," she said, "The histories are useless, the astronomy books even more so, and I am having a very hard time believing nopony ever imagined this was possible, let alone cooked up a fanciful solution to it."

"Well, what other places do we have left to look?" Twilight asked, pulling another novel off the shelf and reading the synopsis.

"I dunno," Gale said, "Maybe... maybe the Princess is just sick or something?"

"Sick?" Rarity asked, poking her head out from around the end of the aisle, "Do you honestly think the Princess is the sort of being who could get sick?"

"Well, she's not perfect," Gale said, "After all, if Luna could become Nightmare Moon, why couldn't they catch a simple illness?"

"There's a big difference between illness and a rage-induced rampage of darkness," Ash said, looking up from his latest spell, "Believe me, I know. Besides, I haven't found any infections or malignant microbes in the

Princess's system. At least... none that I recognize. Which is a rather small number... We need PC."

"That's a good idea," Gale said, "but, he's down in my apartment in the city. It would take while to fetch him."

"Well, we're not getting anywhere with this," Ash said, waving a hoof at a bookshelf.

"I would prefer if you did not use that thing on me," Celestia said, "The evil it houses got into my head once already and I do not wish to repeat that experience."

"Nor would I Princess," Ash said, "but I assure you-"

"No," Celestia said, giving the grey unicorn a rare hard look. Ash returned it, and the two stared at each other for several seconds before Ash turned away with a frustrated sigh.

"Royalty..." he muttered.

"Ash!" Gale and Rarity both exclaimed.

"I'm not needed here," Ash said, heading for the door, "Adieu, ladies." There was silence in the library after he left and slammed the door shut behind him.

"Oh dear," Rarity said, concerned.

"I'll follow him," Gale said, "He's up to something; I can feel it."



# Chapter 5

When Soul Mage came to, the first thing he saw was Gold Heart's face looking down at him with a look of relief in the process of replacing concern. The second thing he saw was that he was no longer in the Silver Halter's theater. He took a guess that he was in a backstage room, and from the pointed hat on the vanity and the posters on the wall, he narrowed that guess down to Trixie's dressing room. He moved slowly, knowing from experience that revival from unconsciousness usually came with a side order of nausea. He wasn't disappointed in that regard- his head spun and his stomach protested as he moved from his side onto his belly. He closed his eyes and took deep breaths until the world stopped moving, and then took a look around. He was definitely in Trixie's dressing room, but the only pony in the room besides him was Heart.

"What happened?" he asked.

"The Princess almost let her emotions get the better of her," Heart said, sliding a bowl of water over to him, "She pulled it back at the last second, but you and Trixie both took the brunt of her magical discharge. Trixie woke up a little while ago, and she's in Mr. Arch's office with Luna right now. They're probably talking about insurance and Trixie's future."

Soul took a few sips of water before asking his next question, "The audience?"

"Everyone got out all right," Heart answered, "AJ and Mac helped to move you and Trixie in here and then left for home, rather reluctantly, but they do have responsibilities."

"I understand," Soul said. He picked himself up, trying to move his head a little as possible until he was sure of his footing. He looked up and gave Heart a weak grin. "And here I was thinking a ticked-off Ashen Blaze had the strongest magic punch." The sound of the door opening made him swing his head around and then put a hoof to his forehead as his vision began swimming again. "Agh, bad Soul, no fast movement," he muttered.

"Are you ok?" he heard Luna ask.

"I'll live," the golden-yellow unicorn said, "What about you Princess?"

"I'm very sorry," Luna said, wrapping Soul's head in a spell that calmed his disorientation, "I've arranged to cover the costs of any damage I may have done, and Proscenium Arch assured me that Trixie's contract with him is still valid, so she can keep performing."

"No, Trixie can *not* go on again," the pale-blue unicorn said crossly as she entered the dressing room and walked around Luna to face her. "I've just taken a look at the stage, and my smoke machines are completely shot, a spotlight is broken, and one of the curtains is torn nearly in half. On top of that, I think you've done something to me- Trying to lift anything bigger than an apple gives me a splitting headache."

"That's probably just a temporary symptom of head trauma," Luna said, "It'll pass."

"Well, until it does, and everything gets fixed or replaced, I have no show! Thanks a lot, your highness!" Trixie snapped, seething.

"Hey!" Heart snapped back, "Show some respect, you! You're the one that goaded her into it!"

"No," Luna said, "It is partially my fault for letting her get to me." He looked down at Trixie, who struggled to maintain her angry expression. "I've already paid for the damage to the equipment," she said, "Perhaps there is something I can do for your lack of magic."

"They should be able to replace the drape and spotlight by the next show," Trixie said, looking thoughtful, "but it will be a day or two before the smoke machines can be fixed or replaced, and that means two shows will have to be canceled. And just how long will I..." she trailed off as a mist began filling the room. Everypony looked up to see that Luna's horn was glowing.

"I am the Princess of the Night," Luna said, "darkness, starlight, moonlight, mist, and the illusions they can create in the minds of ponies are all under my control." Trixie's eyes went wide as she realized what Luna was implying.

"I... I..." she stuttered, and then fell into a half-bow as she stared up at the Princess with shining eyes, "You would truly work the spells in Trixie's

place? I... don't know what to say!" Luna just smiled and nodded. "Oh, thank you!" Trixie exclaimed, hugging Luna's legs.

"I think I know what the other guards will say when they hear about this," Soul muttered.

"I wonder what *Celestia* would say," Heart replied quietly.

"Come back here tomorrow morning," Trixie said, releasing Luna and switching back to her stage persona, "We must work quickly if the Great and Powerful Trixie is to teach you her amazing tricks."

"I look forward to it," Luna said, "Come Soul Mage, Gold Heart, I think that's our invitation to leave." She walked out of the dressing room with Heart on her heels, but Soul stopped as he walked by Trixie and fixed her with a hard look.

"I'd be careful with that 'Great and Powerful' stuff if I were you," he said, "don't you dare forget who she is." He snapped his head back to the front and strode purposefully after the Princess.

---

Gale's income from the adding machines she'd adapted from Ash's research rejects had fallen considerably after the Z'nai attack, but she still made enough to afford the one-room apartment she rented on the south side of Canterlot. The entire industry of magically-enhanced items had taken a similar nose-dive, but was starting to recover as ponies began trusting the claims that the Z'nai were well and truly gone. Not that that interested Ash as he crouched on the roof of Gale's building, trying to locate her apartment and contrive a spell to gain access to it. The difficulty was increased by the fact that Gale lived on the third of the four residential levels with a fifth one dedicated to extra storage space. Getting inside wouldn't be a problem if he could see through the window, a simple teleport would do, but he'd have to see it with his own eyes. Personal levitation spells had never been easy for him, and even with his false Element necklace enhancing his available power they were outright impossible now. He could do a wall adhesion spell on his hooves, but he wasn't used to moving on vertical surfaces and he'd have a heck of time explaining himself if he was caught. Of course, the same would be true if he could levitate himself... Invisibility would remove that issue, and he could maintain two

spells at once if he moved fast. With a confident smirk, he sketched out the spell patterns and activated them. After testing the strength of the adhesion spell, he took a breath and stepped over the edge of the building. He descended rapidly to the third floor and checked the first window, blessing his luck when he saw the unmistakable sign of Gale's occupancy- crystals, metal, and half-finished contraptions littered a designated work area and crumpled notes lay around an overflowing trash bin. Releasing the invisibility spell to run its rapid course to dissolution, Ash focused his energy on teleporting inside.

He landed next to the bed and dispelled his magic before beginning his search. He knew a bit about Gale's organization habits, which did exist despite the apparent chaos of the work area, but he wasn't sure where'd she'd keep such a valuable, and opinionated, piece of equipment. On a hunch, he started with the work area, discovering a desk underneath the largest collection of items. His target wasn't visible on the top of the desk, and Ash knew Gale would never bury it under anything, so he began opening the drawers. In the second drawer down he found it- a metal device that looked like a cross between half of a thick skullcap and a telephone headset, with a transparent green eyepiece thrown on for good measure. "Hello PC," he said, starting to pick it up with his magic. He was distracted by a tap on his flank, and he mentally slapped himself even before he finished turning around to catch a glob of yellow goo with his face. "Aiiigh!" he screamed, falling to the floor as he scraped the offending substance out of his eyes. The goo seemed to travel up his face and congealed around his horn, and he hissed as he felt his magic energy being sucked out into the stuff. He rolled onto his back as he cleared his eyes and looked up to see a very disapproving Gale glaring down at him. Ash opened his mouth to yell at her, but all that came out was an inarticulate growl of frustration.

"Serves you right," Gale said, "You're lucky we're friends, or I'd have you arrested for breaking and entering."

Ash wanted to argue that he hadn't actually *broken* anything, but by the time he could speak again, a more important question sprang to mind. "Where'd you get magebane?" he demanded.

"There's a plant in the Everfree that's used to help young unicorns deal with magic-overload illnesses," Gale said, holding up a jar full of the goo, "Turns

out the active agent in that plant is a dead-ringer for magebane, once concentrated. Now, I know what you're planning. Don't do it."

"Can't we talk about this after this stuff's done with me?" Ash asked.

"No," Gale said, dabbing some fresh magebane onto Ash's horn, "You'll just overpower me, grab PC, and run for it." She ignored Ash's glare as she wiped her hoof off on his chest and then fixed him with a stare of her own.

"I know you've got a serious problem with authority," she said, "But you must have realized that Princess Celestia is not the kind of leader you should mess with. For one thing, she's powerful enough to move the stinking sun and moon! Even at your peak you couldn't match that, and you're nowhere close to that right now."

"You've never really seen my peak," Ash muttered.

"Item two," Gale said sharply, "She's a genuinely good person who deserves respect. You yourself have pointed how nice she's been after all the crap that's happened in connection to our being here. Heart and Soul are part of the royal guard for heaven's sake; she trusts us."

"Not enough," Ash pointed out, "Your points are valid Gale, and believe me when I say Princess Celestia's one of the few leaders I've met that I actually like, but she doesn't trust us enough to let PC do a simple, harmless scan on her. I'm trying to cover our bases here; the books are useless, I'm probably missing the source because I can't interpret half of what my spells have shown me, and there's a small possibility this is the forerunner of a much bigger issue."

"Can't you just tell PC what you saw?" Gale asked.

"Sure," Ash said, rolling his eyes, "I'd be able to give him maybe a tenth of what there is to examine, and a lot of that will be colored by my perceptions. He needs unfiltered input if he's going to be at all useful."

"If you're so sure of that," Gale said, "Then talk to Celestia about it. It won't be easy, I'm sure, but maybe she'll see reason if we talk to her about it together." She turned away and put the magebane jar back on the shelf she'd grabbed it from. "Well," she asked, turning back, "Are you going to get up? It's all worn off now." Ash looked up at his horn, which was now clean of any yellow goo.

"Actually," he said, his sarcastic humor returning, "I'm quite comfy down here. I think I'll take a nap."

# Chapter 6

The captain of the honor guard was dumbfounded. He'd heard rumors about the magic show the Princess had attended, and how it had ended in disaster, but to hear from Luna herself that *she'd* caused that disaster... And she was going to work for the showmare for the next few days? Throwing protocol to the wind - after all, those two new recruits were getting away with being casual – he decided to voice his objections. "Princess Luna, you simply can't do this," he said.

The dark purple alicorn gave him a measured, unamused look. "Why ever not?" she asked icily, "The poor mare is recovering from a magical blow to the head that has temporarily crippled her ability, and I am responsible."

"But," the captain stammered, "Couldn't you just... give her some money to cover for the nights she'll have to miss? We should have been in Fillydelphia by now."

"There will be other opportunities to visit Fillydelphia," Luna said, "I am obligated to relieve any suffering I may have caused to the best of my ability. Besides, the idea of running a magic show sounds like fun, and this *is* my vacation, right?"

"Y-yes you highness," the captain said, shrinking slightly under Luna's gaze.

"Good, I'm glad you understand" Luna said sweetly. She turned to leave, but the captain built up his courage for one last question.

"And just what do you expect me to do with myself?" he asked.

"I hear that many of the productions in the theater district are quite good," Luna said, "And you may attend my performance tonight, if you wish. Of course, that's assuming I'll be prepared for it. Good-bye." After the Princess left the suite, the captain threw his helmet to the ground and flopped down next to it, rubbing his eyes with a groan. He was never going to volunteer for the night shift after this; Celestia had never given him a head-ache.

"Have you considered just sending the rest of the guards home?" Gold Heart asked as she and Soul Mage walked with Luna.

"Briefly," Luna said, "But then I realized at least one of them would tell Celestia what I'm up to and I'd miss out on seeing her reaction." She smiled mischevously.

"You don't think she'd approve?" Soul asked.

"Oh, she'd probably enjoy hearing about it," Luna said, "but she'll be quite surprised at first. I haven't been this spontaneous since I was released."

"By the way," Heart asked, "How are you going to help Trixie out without revealing your presence?"

"Good question," Luna said with a thoughtful look, "She'll most likely have an idea. This is her area of expertise after all." Heart nodded and the three ponies continued their walk in relative silence. They arrived at the theater district and walked into the alley behind the Silver Halter. Luna reached out and rapped on the back door three times. The door opened a moment later and Trixie stuck her head out.

"Well timed," she said, "Trixie is pleased with your punctuality. Come in, we have a lot of ground to cover. She moved aside as Luna walked in, and then moved to block Heart and Soul from following. "You two are not part of the show," she said, "Be off with you."

"We're her guards," Soul said, annoyed, "Where she goes, we go."

"You will only get in the way," Trixie said, staring down her nose at the upset unicorn, "But Trixie is not a petty pony. She will make sure you have free tickets to each show that includes the Princess." She slammed the door before Soul could respond.

"I don't like her anymore," Soul muttered. He extended his magic to try and force the door open, but stopped when Heart nudged him in the side.

"If Luna wants us to go in with her," she said, "she'll make Trixie let us in. Be patient." Soul snorted and pulled his magic tendril back into his horn. The two ponies waited for several minutes, but the door remained closed. "I guess not," Heart said, "Looks like we're on our own for the day."



"Pardon the Ash-ism," Soul said, "but, *skvetch*."

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It took all of Ashen Blaze's willpower not to let any expletives escape his mouth. Princess Celestia was in a bad enough mood as it was, and venting his frustration in any manner would only make things worse. He and Gale had arranged a private audience with the Princess in her study to argue their case for scanning her with PC. Ash had given up early on and let Gale handle the discussion, but even now Celestia refused to budge. "It does not matter how long it served you without releasing the Z'nai," she said, "The fact that it did so once, and that those creatures proved capable of taking over my will, makes it far too risky to trust it not to do so again. This audience is over." She turned away and walked out of the room before Gale could form a protest.

"Sorry Ash," the earth pony said, "At least we tried."

"She's making a judgment based on fear," Ash muttered darkly, "What's worse is that there's a bit of rationality to that fear. I'd just need twenty seconds..."

"Just forget about it Ash," Gale said, "We'll find the answer some other way. It'll take a lot longer, but I'm sure it's there." Ash looked at her for a second, and then sighed.

"Fine," he said, "Let's get back to work then."

The ponies and Spike had been through nearly all of the books and were starting to get into the ancient scrolls stored in a back room of the library and only loaned out for brief periods under close scrutiny. Ash spent a few minutes reading, but then seemed to grow bored and went to stand by a bookshelf, idly scratching at the ground as he thought. Rarity, who was having a difficult time staying focused herself, went over to keep him company. "Is everything all right?" she asked.

"Things could be better," the grey unicorn muttered distractedly. He looked up as a thought occurred to him. "Twilight," he said, "This library doesn't have every book ever written, does it?"

"No," Twilight said, "But if the answer isn't in any of the astronomy or history books here, I doubt any other, less comprehensive books will."

"I was thinking more of fiction," Ash said, "Gale made a good point yesterday; it's ridiculous to think that there hasn't been a single pony who felt the urge to put pen to paper who thought about what would happen if the stars wouldn't line up right. I think I'll go peruse one of the other libraries around here; maybe they'll have the right story."

"Good idea," Gale said, "But you're not going alone. I can still see that defiant glint in your eye Ashen Blaze. You're up to something and you shouldn't be left alone to pull whatever stunt you're planning." Ash gave Gale a hard look but didn't deny her accusation.

"I'll go with you Ash," Rarity said, "I'd much rather spend my time reading a good story than these dusty old scrolls. No offense Twilight."

"No, I'll go with him," Spike said, "I know this city inside and out, so I can get us there in no time."

"Thank you Spike," Ash said with a knowing smile. The baby dragon gave Ash a measured look in return as he walked over and jumped onto his back.

"Plus," he said as Ash adjusted to the added weight, "from up here I can make sure you don't run off." Ash cast an unreadable glance over his shoulder and then walked out of the library.

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Soul's mood remained bad as he and Heart wandered the streets of Manehattan. Their first stop had been to buy a map of the city to prevent them from getting lost as they sought out famous landmarks and places of recreation. Heart had tried to talk her brother into visiting the history museum, but Soul rejected the idea, saying that getting to work in close proximity to the God-princesses was enough historical exposure for him. At the moment they were wandering around downtown, munching on roasted carrots slathered in mustard and wrapped in sesame seed buns as they window-shopped. "How'd they come up with this?" Soul wondered, looking at his food, "It can't possibly be a substitute for hot dogs, but it might as well be. It's uncanny." He blinked and looked up when Heart didn't respond and spotted her standing behind him at a newsstand. "What'cha find?" he asked.

"Hold on a sec," she said, picking up a newspaper and dropping some bits on the counter. "Keep the change," she said to the pony minding the stand. She tucked the paper under a wing and walked over to Soul. "Hold this up for me please," she said, passing the paper to her brother. Soul wrapped his magic around it and unfolded it so he and Heart could see the front page.

"What am I looking... oh," Soul said as his eyes fell upon a small headline in a column to the left of the main article. "Misplaced Stars- Royal Prank or Terrible Omen," he read, "That's not a good title." He fell silent as he and Heart read the article, which continued on the fourth page.

### **Misplaced Stars- Royal Prank or Terrible Omen?**

As most of our readers are by now aware, the night sky has been in a state of confusion and turmoil for the past couple of nights. Our astrologers confirm that none of the stars that accompany Princess Luna's moon in lighting our skies at night are situated in their proper locations. Experts are at a loss to explain the cause, and no report or response to our letters has reached us from Canterlot regarding this mystery. (cont. pg 4)

(cont. from pg. 1) While some ponies have not expressed concern, most are divided into two camps of opinion. One camp believes the scrambling of stars is the result of a prank or domestic squabble between Princess Celestia and Princess Luna. They believe the stars will right themselves eventually once our beloved leaders have had their fun or settle their differences- hopefully without either being banished to the moon. The other common opinion is less optimistic. These ponies, including many of this paper's astrology staff, believe the stars are out of alignment because something has happened to the Princesses which is interfering with their powers and may grow steadily worse. A small portion of this camp subscribes to the theory that the evil shadows that were rumored to have taken over Canterlot a short time ago have returned, but since the original attack has not been confirmed to have actually occurred, this theory is regarded as crack-pot.

"Wow," Soul said, deadpan, "The Z'nai have become an urban legend. Guess we can add 'created the next Bigfoot' to our list of accomplishments."

"Goof," Heart said, smirking as she gave Soul a cuff with her wing, "This could be serious. If the stars don't get fixed soon, there's going to be a panic."

"What can we do about it?" Soul asked, "Luna's made it pretty clear she's not going to do a thing about the night until her vacation's over, and she's got three days after today. Plus, if Trixie's not ready to go on by herself again by then, she might put off fixing things until she gets back to Canterlot."

"We'll show her this," Heart said, grabbing the paper and folding it up, "Maybe if she realizes what the average pony's thinking, she'll act."

"It's a long shot," Soul said, "But, I guess it's worth a try. We'll tell her after tonight's show."

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"Hey Spike, could you do me favor and grab that book down there? The one with the blue dust jacket."

Spike looked at the book in question, and then down at Ash with a distrustful look. The grey unicorn was focusing on properly replacing the books he'd just finished looking over. "Not without getting off your back," Spike said.

"Oh come on," Ash said, "I promise I'll stay put."

"I don't think I can trust you," Spike said.

"This isn't about Rarity is it?" Ash replied, "I already told you, I don't have any intentions of getting involved with her."

"No," the dragon said, "This is because Gale thinks you're up to something, and if your own friend can't trust you, why should I?"

"Because I always keep my word," Ash said, settling the last book into place. His horn didn't stop glowing though, and Spike suddenly felt himself being lifted off the unicorn's back. "The thing is," Ash said nonchalantly, "I never promised anypony, or any dragon, that I'd go right back to the royal library when I was done here. Thank you so much for volunteering to come with me Spike; this would be harder for me if I'd had to do it to Rarity."

Spike tried to open his mouth to call for help, but the force of Ash's magic forced it closed and then spread out until the baby dragon was completely immobilized. Ash levitated him up and placed him on top of the bookcase, just barely out of sight. "Don't worry," he said, "That spell will wear off in about twelve to fourteen hours. I should have completed my mission by that time. Ta-ta, Spike!" He trotted out of the library with a smug look on his face, headed for his next destination: Gale's apartment.

# Chapter 7

As the sun set over Manehattan and the stars came out in an all-new, wholly incorrect configuration, Soul Mage and Gold Heart made their way to the Silver Harness. They encountered the honor guard captain and another of the guards outside the theater, but kept their distance after their friendly greetings were met with a cold glare from the captain. "Sourpuss," Soul muttered as he went up to the box office to claim their free tickets.

"Yeah," Heart agreed, "I hope they don't try anything."

"You think they'd be that stupid?" Soul asked with a raised eyebrow. Heart shook her head. "Got the paper?" Soul asked.

"Do you want to hold it?" Heart asked testily as she raised a wing slightly to display the folded newspaper underneath it.

"No, no," Soul said, "Just checking. Come on, let's go find our seats." Heart rolled her eyes and smiled as she followed her brother inside.

The very fact that there was a show that night was a good sign, and the golden-yellow ponies waited eagerly to see how Trixie had modified her show to incorporate Luna. When Proscenium Arch stepped out to welcome the audience, he made no mention of any major changes other than to thank an "anonymous patron" for paying to repair the main curtain and broken lights from the previous night's accident. He bowed and moved aside as the lights dimmed and the curtain opened. The mist that flowed across the stage prior to Trixie's entrance had a slight but noticeable sparkle to it which added to the overall effect when the spotlight landed on Trixie and the pyrotechnics went off. As the blue unicorn went into her opening speech, Soul cast glances toward the sides of the stage, trying to catch a glimpse of somepony standing just out of sight, but couldn't see a thing.

"She's off to a good start," Heart whispered as Trixie transitioned into her first story, the vanquishing of a dragon that terrorized a small town. The dragon appeared on cue, and looked just as good as it had the previous night, although the illusory scenery looked a little wobbly and there were

only two pony images running about at any one moment, whereas Trixie had managed four the last time. When it came time for the "dragon" to pick Trixie up, the aura of magic was visible around her, and the lightning bolt that vanquished the creature came from above rather than Trixie's horn, a fact that Trixie worked into her narrative without a hitch. The manticore story went smoother, since it required fewer special effects overall.

"Luna's a quick study, huh?" Soul whispered with a smile. Heart just nodded. Trixie finished chasing the manticore illusion off the stage and the scenery shifted to the Ponyville set. "Ursa time," Soul muttered.

"No comments this time," Heart said, giving him a sideways glance.

"That was Apple Bloom's fault," Soul hissed back.

"Still." The story proceeded as they recalled, with Trixie bemoaning her poor luck, blaming the attack on a bad dream, and admitting that she was unable to calm the beast by herself. However, when she mentioned the second unicorn, instead of an illusion, a tall lavender unicorn mare with black hair and a gibbous moon cutie-mark stepped out onto the stage, horn aglow as a pair of illusory flutes floated along behind her playing the lullaby. Trixie brought her story to its conclusion, pretending to concentrate as the Ursa floated into the sky, rocked gently until it fell asleep, and floated away. As the audience applauded, the illusions faded and the two unicorns took a bow.

"Thank you," Trixie said, "The Great and Powerful Trixie would like to introduce her special guest, Stella Moon, who has provided tonight's effects." The tall unicorn took another bow to more applause. "Now," Trixie said, "Ordinarily the Great and Powerful Trixie would take this time to invite you to test your mettle against her amazing powers, but sadly she is unable to do so tonight. Instead, Stella has offered to display more of her talent for your entertainment. So sit back and enjoy." She bowed and walked off stage.

"Wow," Soul said impressed, "That was... big of her."

"Changing your opinion again?" Heart asked with a chuckle. Soul just glanced at her and turned his attention back to the stage.

"Stella Moon" wowed the audience for a solid twenty minutes with her illusions. She produced bunnies out of thin air that transformed into doves as they hopped away. She created doppelgangers of herself and challenged the audience to pick out the real pony, and then transformed herself into various famous ponies, including a slightly imperfect Princess Luna for a few seconds to Heart and Soul's secret amusement. She crowned the performance by filling the theater with a panorama of stars and summoning an illusion of the full moon to fill the stage and throw herself into silhouette. When this illusion vanished, so did Stella. She emerged from off stage with Trixie by her side and the two ponies took one final bow before bidding the crowd good night. Heart and Soul cheered as loudly as the rest of the audience before making their way out into the lobby. They were met by a theater employee who escorted them into the backstage area.

"I feel I must apologize for Trixie," he said to them, "She's so determined to make her shows just the way she likes, she's very picky about who's allowed backstage. Princess Luna managed to talk her into letting you back here once the show was over."

"Thanks," Heart said.

"It's no problem," the employee said, leading the pair to a dressing room. He nodded to them and left. After sharing a glance with Heart, Soul knocked on the door.

"Come in," a voice said from within, and the two ponies did so. They found themselves in the presence of the dark-haired lavender unicorn. "Hello Soul and Heart," she said, "Did you enjoy the show."

"Oh yes," Heart said.

"You were quite impressive, Ms. Moon," Soul said with a wry smile.

The unicorn laughed as her form faded away to be replaced by that of Princess Luna. "Thank you," she said, "but I know there are still some areas where I need to improve."

"You could start by not being quite so impressive," Trixie's voice said from the door. Heart and Soul made way as she walked up to the unicorn. "While



it was awe-inspiring," she said, "That final act threatens to undermine Trixie's image as the Greatest and most Powerful."

"My apologies," Luna said, "I got rather caught up in the act. I'll come up with something less spectacular for tomorrow."

"No, you can keep it," Trixie said, "Just... tone it down a little; not so many stars, a smaller moon, and put a little hesitancy into it. Just as a suggestion of course," she added, shooting a glance at Soul, who kept his face impassive.

"How's your head?" Heart asked.

"My head feels fine," Trixie said, "My magic is coming back, but slowly. I plan to have myself checked out tomorrow to get a professional guess on how long I must work with a partner."

"That's good," Heart said, and then turned to Luna with a serious look on her face. "Princess," she said, "we have something you should see." She pulled the newspaper out from under her wing and handed it to Luna with a gesture toward the article about the stars. Luna read through the first part, and then opened the paper to read the continuation, and then folded the paper back up and gave it back to Heart.

"Thank you for letting me know," she said. Heart and Soul looked at her expectantly, so she shook her head and added, "It's only rumors so far, and I trust Celestia to find a solution without my help. I won't act until my vacation is over or my sister sends me a letter asking for help. I'm sure she'd expect the same from me." The two golden-yellow ponies sighed, each wishing they had Luna's confidence.

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Gale started to get suspicious when Ash and Spike didn't return after several hours, and Twilight grew worried when they weren't back in time for dinner.

"Spike never misses a meal," she said, eyeing the bowl of rubies on the food cart, "Especially when there are gemstones on the menu."

"Perhaps they're just wrapped up in their reading," Rarity suggested, "I know that sometimes I get so wrapped up in a book the hours just slip by unnoticed."

"Ash doesn't read that much," Gale said around a bite of daisy sandwich, "I bet he's up to something, the little troll."

"If he is," Twilight said, "He'd have to have taken Spike along with him."

"Not necessarily," Gale said, "He can be very slippery when he wants to be. Dang it!" She pounded the cart with a hoof, rattling the dishes. "More of us should have gone with him!" She dropped the rest of her sandwich and marched toward the doors.

"Where are you going?" Rarity asked.

"My place," Gale said, "I suggest one of you go check the library he went to, and somepony should warn Celestia that Ash may have gone rogue." She flung the door open and ran out into the hall.

"I'll take the library," Twilight said to Rarity, "you go find the Princess."

"Right," Rarity said as her friend teleported away. As she ran out of the library, the white unicorn found herself caught in a dilemma. On the one hoof, she had her duty as a loyal Equestrian to warn the Princess of any threat she knew of, but on the other she felt he knew Ashen Blaze well enough to trust him not to do anything he knew would put anypony in danger and all he wanted to do was use PC to get another opinion on Celestia's problems with the stars. However, PC did hold a dangerous creature inside of him... The debate raged on in Rarity's mind as she sought out Princess Celestia.

Twilight searched the city library high and low and quickly found Spike lying immobilized on top of a shelf in the fiction section. After carefully bringing him down to the floor, she began to examine him. He was being held by a spell that froze his voluntary movements but allowed him to breathe and blink occasionally. Twilight knew the basic formula for the spell, but it had been cast using Ashen Blaze's method of weaving energy instead of the traditional style of focusing it through a horn while visualizing the desired effect. "Sorry Spike," she said to the baby dragon, "I'm not sure I can undo what he's done to you, but I'm going to try my best."

Gale arrived at her apartment to discover she was far too late. Nothing was broken or missing at first glance, but Ash wasn't one to be stopped by physical barriers. Cursing under her breath and wishing she'd had enough magebane to seal her apartment against teleportation spells – even though it would've taken her months to prepare that amount – Gale went straight to her desk and pulled open the top left drawer. Reaching inside, she pressed the button that opened a secret compartment on the underside of the desk. She looked inside and cursed again. The compartment was empty; the head-mounted computer she'd hidden there after Ash's first break-in was gone. "Darn it Ashen Blaze," she muttered, "You're going to get yourself banished to the moon, and that's if you're lucky!"

Ashen Blaze normally came across as impatient, preferring action to sitting around, but when it came to stealth he could wait for hours. It probably helped that Celestia ordered a city-wide search for him after his plan had been discovered. He hadn't counted on Gale realizing the mistake of letting him leave her sight with only a featherweight of a dragon for company as quickly as she had, but he'd still had more than enough time to grab PC and begin planning his next move. After the guards were sent out, he split his time between muffling his mirth as they fell victim to his subtle misdirection spells that kept them from looking at his hiding spots, changing said hiding spots when the guards had gone, and investigating the security measures being placed around Princess Celestia. Gale had donated her meager supply of magebane to line the door into the Princess's study and the balcony outside her bedroom on the thought that Ash would wait until Celestia went to sleep before making his move. They weren't wrong about that, but they hadn't counted on the Princess's own magical aura being slowly absorbed by the magebane until it broke down around 2:30 in the morning, at which point Ash slipped into the bedroom and aimed PC's scanner at the sleeping alicorn.

Another thing Ash hadn't counted on was that Celestia was a very light sleeper. The moment he stopped moving, Celestia's eyes flew open and she raised her head to regard the intruder and his fire-like mane. Ash kept his face neutral as Celestia's eyes narrowed at him. "Evening," he said, "Don't mind me, I'll be gone in a moment."

"Leave this instant," Celestia said, "And take that thing with you."

"Sorry your highness," Ash said, "but no." Celestia's horn began to glow with magic and Ash began to feel a pressure shoving him in the direction of the door. He responded by teleporting to the other side of the room and saying, "PC, widen the scope. I'll need to be on the move."

"Do you really think you can defy me?" Celestia asked, standing up and facing the unicorn.

"In my life, I have only met three people I cannot stand against," Ash said. He teleported as Celestia flung a magic restraint in his direction. "The first is Soul Mage," Ash said as he rematerialized to the Princess's left, "Because his power has always been able to strike me right to the core of my tainted soul." He teleported again as Celestia whirled to face him. "The second is Gold Heart, because she is Soul's sister and you can't have one without the other." Teleport. "The last is Gale because of that awful magebane she always seems to be able to find the ingredients for, no matter where we've wound up."

"What makes you think you could defeat my power?" Celestia said, growing more annoyed as Ash teleported away from her spells again.

"I never said I could defeat you," Ash said from his new position, "If we were to go at each other with all our strength, I'm sure you'd overpower me. Oh." He teleported again and reappeared next to a vase of flowers. "Need to borrow these for a sec," he said, "See you in the library" He grabbed the vase and blinked away again before Celestia could react.

Ashen Blaze made sure his arrival in the royal library was particularly noisy by creating a simulated thunderclap after materializing; he needed witnesses for his next move, and was glad to see that Twilight Sparkle, Rarity, Gale, and Spike were all present and had been awakened. "Answer might be in here," he said, placing the vase of flowers next to Twilight as he ran past her, skidding to a stop by a bookcase as Celestia teleported in, her eyes aglow with fury. Ash saluted the princess and said, "Princess, I am honored you chose to grant me the funds I required for my studies into magic, but I must now inform you I am no longer in need of your grants, so I humbly request you remove my name from future considerations. Adieu." He stamped the pattern he'd scratched into the floor earlier that day, which began to glow along with his horn and gemstone necklace. With a cry of "*Destulf juri cosh*, transport!" he vanished in a flash of orange light. The

ponies and Spike watched the scene in confused silence, and then turned as one to look at Celestia.

"Where did he go?" Celestia demanded, turning her gaze on Gale.

"I... don't know," Gale admitted, "Soul has a better knowledge of Ash's magic words. I think that was a way-point transport though. Somewhere there's a spot that he set up as a way-point he can teleport to from anywhere. I didn't know he even had one set up, so I can't guess where he went."

Celestia snorted in frustration. "He can't have gotten far," she said, "He's hardly left Canterlot since starting his studies. Did he say anything to you before I got here?"

"He just gave me this," Twilight said, looking at the vase. She took a closer look at it and began sorting through the blooms with a hoof. Suddenly, she gasped and backed away from the vase.

"What?" Gale, Celestia, and Rarity all asked, worried.

"Poison Joak," Twilight said, using her magic to lift a blue flower out of the arrangement, "Princess Celestia, somepony slipped Poison Joak into your flowers!"

# Chapter 8

"Poison Joak?" Rarity asked, incredulous, "That couldn't be the culprit. Could it?"

"What's Poison Joak?" Gale asked.

"It's this blue plant that grows in the Everfree," Spike explained, starting to fight down laughter, "It... heh, sorry. When it gets on you, it does something inconvenient and funny to you." He chuckled for a while as Twilight and Rarity both rolled their eyes.

"It's only funny if it doesn't happen to you," Twilight said, "My friends and I all got it the first time we met Zecora, and it did something different to each of us. It made my horn limp and useless for magic, turned Rainbow Dash's wings upside down, gave Rarity a very... interesting coat..." The white unicorn shivered at the memory as Spike's laughter increased. Twilight glared at the dragon and then looked back up at the others. "Anyway," she said, "as I looked back afterward, I realized each of us had been affected in a way that poked fun at what we held to be important, but wasn't particularly dangerous. Except to Rainbow because she insisted on trying to fly anyway, and it made AJ tiny..."

"But, could it really make Princess Celestia unable to set the stars right?" Rarity asked.

"It makes sense to me," Gale said, "I mean, when you get right down to it, the exact positions of the stars aren't vital to the well-being of Equestria, right?" Celestia nodded slowly. "And of course making the sky look right is very important to both Celestia and Luna," Gale continued, "So, if she did wind up getting some Poison Joak on her, what better way to poke some harmless fun than to mess up the stars?" Everypony thought this over and seemed to agree.

"If that's true," Celestia said, "How do I fix it? Will it just wear off?"

"Let's see," Twilight said, walking to the books. She looked for a few minutes, and then said, "Ah ha, here it is! *Super Naturals*." She pulled the

book out and brought it back to the group. "The cure's in here," she said, flipping through the pages, "Zecora showed it to me after showing us how wrong the rumors about her were." She blushed for a second as she found the right page and showed it to Celestia. "The cure is an herbal bath using certain herbs from the Everfree Forest. Zecora should have what we need, and if she doesn't she can find it."

"Well," Celestia said, looking at the book, "It won't hurt to try. Twilight, go see Zecora and get the herbs." Twilight nodded and trotted off with Spike on her heels. "Now," Celestia said, "Somepony needs to find Ashen Blaze. I... may owe him an apology."

Zecora regarded her guest, who'd arrived rather suddenly a short time ago, with some trepidation as she poured tea for the both of them. She set down the kettle and said, "Although your face is always a pleasure to see, what brings you the Everfree?"

Ashen Blaze smiled as he picked up the cup and sipped the tea. "I needed to get away," he said, "and the only teleport way-point I established outside of Canterlot is way out here."

"You're not fleeing, are you?" Zecora asked, "That is not something you're known to do."

"I don't usually tick off a physical goddess," Ash retorted. Zecora stared at him speechlessly, trying to determine if he was serious.

"Surely you jest," she said at last, "If the Princess is angry with you, to run now would be best."

"You're quite right," Ash said, and then gulped down his tea, "Even though I can't really hide anywhere, I'm sure, I'll leave now to keep Celestia from your door." He smirked at Zecora's critical reaction to his rhyming. A knock at the door stole the smile away and he leapt into the empty cauldron in the middle of the hut.

"I hear you at my door," Zecora said as another serious of knocks sounded from the door, "You do not need to strike it anymore." She opened the door and smiled as she saw Twilight and Spike standing outside. "My dear friends Twilight Sparkle and Spike," she said, "what can I do for you this late at night?"

"Sorry if we woke you Zecora," Twilight said, "but Princess Celestia is in need of your Poison Joak remedy."

"Ah ha!" Ash said, popping up from the cauldron and scaring the daylights out of Twilight, Spike, and even Zecora, "You figured that out from the clue I gave you, didn't you?" he asked in a triumphant voice.

"Ashen Blaze?" Twilight exclaimed, "How in Celestia's name?"

"Answer the question," Ash demanded, pointing a hoof at the lavender unicorn.

"Y-yes," Twilight said, still reeling from the shock.

"Ha! Justified!" Ash shouted in triumph, throwing both front hooves in the air. His back hooves slipped on the interior of the cauldron and he fell inside, banging his head against the side. "I'm ok," he announced, his voice echoing inside the cauldron, "nothing broken."

Zecora stared at the cauldron for a moment before turning back to Twilight. "I can get you the cure within a day," she said, "I hope the Princess will excuse the delay."

"Thanks Zecora," Twilight said with a smile. She turned to leave, but then stopped and glanced at Ash, who had poked his head out of the cauldron again. "Do you have any paper?" she asked the zebra, "I should probably let Celestia know we found the renegade Ashen Blaze."

"Feh," Ash muttered.

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Soul Mage and Gold Heart once again found themselves barred from the theater while Luna and Trixie worked out that night's performance, so they went back to wandering the city for a while before returning to the suite, finding the honor guard captain lying on his back, bored out of his skull. "Ok Cap'n," Soul said, "you need to get some air."

"Don't talk to me," the captain said, "This entire week has been a disaster for me, and you two are part of the problem."



"In our defense," Soul said, "Luna kidnapped us that first night. We've just been tagging along with her because she wanted us. And now she's dumped us for the Great and Powerful Trixie."

"I see that," the captain said, not moving from his spot, "That Stella Moon from the performance, that was the Princess, wasn't it?"

"Yep," Soul said.

"She was having such a great time up there," the captain moaned, "She'll never want to go back to Canterlot now! I'm going to be stuck here in this stupid suite for the rest of my life because I can't go back home without Princess Luna! I'm doomed!" The poor guy was on the verge of tears.

"Ok," Heart said, walking over and pushing the captain onto his side, "You're hysterical; probably suffering from cabin fever or something." She dug her head under the captain's side and tried to lift him. Soul went over to help and the two of them managed to get the captain on his feet, although he was quite unsteady. "You are coming with us sir," Heart said, fixing the pegasus with a stare, "we are going for a walk so you can clear your head and loosen up a little."

"But..." the captain protested weakly.

"Luna's only helping Trixie until her magic comes back," Soul said, moving to stand on the captain's left side, "just keep that in mind." Heart moved to the captain's right and the two of them guided the wobbling pegasus out onto the street.

After walking for a few blocks and listening to the Impossible Twins chat amiably, the captain started to calm down and think rationally. They were right, he realized, this was only temporary. Luna was having fun, but she'd go back to her duties at the end of the week. Unless that Trixie filly wasn't done with her by then... the captain shook that thought away and focused on his plans for the future. He probably wouldn't ask for time off when he got back, but he did have some vacation time coming up soon. Sadly, his reverie was broken as they passed a newsstand and Soul noticed the headlines.

"Oh... that doesn't look good," the golden-yellow unicorn said, taking a closer look. The stand owner cleared his throat and Soul tossed him some

bits before grabbing the paper. The three ponies moved out of the way of the other pedestrians as Soul held the paper up for them to read. "Panic reported due to mis-aligned stars," he read aloud and then continued down the page in silence. The article reported on an outbreak of rioting in Trottingham as a result of an outspoken advocate of the "terrible omen" theory ranting about his fears loudly in the middle of a crowded park. The reporter seemed to be of the opinion that this was only the first of what would be a series of panics if the stars were not restored to their rightful places.

"The Princess has to act soon," Heart said, worried, "She can't possibly ignore this."

"Yes," the captain agreed, "we must tell her at once!" He ran off before the others could stop him.

"What do you think his chances are?" Soul asked.

"You have the paper," Heart pointed out, "So, not good. We should probably go after him." Soul nodded and the two ponies galloped after the captain.

They found him banging on the front door of the Silver Halter, demanding entrance in the name of the Princesses. The door opened and he went in, only to walk out several minutes later with a hopeless look on his face. "She didn't believe me," he said as Heart and Soul joined him, "She told me to go bother somepony else."

"We'll talk to her tonight," Soul said, "for now, let's go get you something to drink." The captain nodded, or was that just hanging his head in defeat? Either way, he allowed himself to be lead away to the nearest restaurant, where he spent the rest of the day hovering over a series of malts.

Gold Heart and Soul Mage debated for a while over whether or not to watch that night's performance and ultimately decided to go for it since they had nothing else to do and most of the other shows they considered let out much later than Trixie's. Plus, the show was still free for them. The performance went much like it had the previous night, although Luna's skill with the illusions during Trixie's act had improved considerably. For her part, Luna put on a smaller-scale version of her premier performance, including a reduced version of her starlight and moon finale. The whole

thing was still amazing, but Heart and Soul weren't as impressed. As Trixie and "Stella" took their final bows, it took every ounce of Soul's will to stop himself from bolting up onto the stage to shove the newspaper into the taller pony's face. Once the house lights went up, the two ponies didn't even bother to wait for an escort to take them backstage. They ran straight to the Princess's dressing room and met her coming from the stage.

"What's the matter?" Luna asked, seeing their expressions. Soul simply held out the paper. Luna read the article and then, to their horror, tossed it away and laughed. They stood slack-jawed as she went into her dressing room and stayed there until Trixie showed up.

"Move aside," the blue unicorn said impatiently, "I must give Luna her notes for the night." She walked into the room and closed the door.

"What," Soul said weakly, staring at the door, "what is wrong with her? She doesn't care. How could she not care?" Eye twitching in suppressed rage, he walked to the dressing room door, stared at it like he expected it to run away from him, and then kicked it open and ran inside.

"You've done something to her!" he shouted at Trixie, who stared nonplussed at the crazed unicorn, "I don't know what, but you have! Hypnotism, mind control spell, *something* to make her care more about your stupid show than the fact the stars are out of position and it's making ponies go crazy with worry!"

"How dare you!" Trixie shot back, "The Great and Powerful Trixie can barely lift a stack of books right now, and you accuse her of using mind control on Princess Luna, of all ponies?"

"How do I know you're not lying about not having your magic?" Soul asked, "You're an actress, a... an illusionist! You could make any claim you want and make it hold water for a short time! Well, that time is up Trixie! Your time is up!"

Trixie opened her mouth to retort, but closed it again when Luna stepped between the two ponies, her Stella disguise gone and her mane billowing out with the appearance of a starry sky. "That's quite enough you two," she said gently, "There's no need to argue. I am quite in control of myself."

"But, the stars," Soul protested, "There's panic in the streets of Trottingham."

"There was panic," Luna said, chuckling, "but not anymore. The stars are back where they belong."

"Huh?" Soul said, not comprehending.

"Come," Luna said, walking out of the dressing room, "I'll show you. You too Gold Heart. And you can come as well Trixie, if you want."

"I will stay here," Trixie said huffily, "I have had quite enough of that stallion for one night." She shot Soul a glare, causing him to hang his head in shame.

"Sorry," he muttered, turning to follow Luna. The Princess and her two golden-yellow escorts went outside, and Luna lifted Soul onto her back.

"Hold on," she said. Soul threw his front legs around Luna's neck as she spread her wings and took off. Heart followed, flapping hard to keep up as they ascended above the level of the buildings, above the haze of light cast by the street lights and theater marquees. "Look," Luna said, pointing with her horn. Heart and Soul looked up. Neither was very familiar with the night sky, but as they looked at the stars spread across the sky, something told them what they were looking at was the way things should be. The sky was perfect.

"Well, I feel like a jerk," Soul said glumly.

"Don't worry," Luna said, "you were concerned about me and the peace of Equestria. I can't guarantee Trixie will forgive you, but I do."

"Trixie's a drama queen," Soul said, "So long as she doesn't try to get back at me, that's forgiveness enough. Can we go down now please? I'm getting queasy." Luna and Heart laughed as they spiraled down to the street.

# Epilogue

Trixie's full power came back two days later, but she allowed Luna to spend her last night in Manehattan helping with her magic show anyway. Soul kept away from the backstage area for the rest of the week, and was surprised to find a letter from Trixie in his pack as he prepared to leave for Canterlot. The letter was written in Trixie's flamboyant stage persona and the meaning was hard to decipher, but Soul managed to unearth an admission of forgiveness from the midst of it. "Aw, she likes you," Heart teased him when he showed it to her. Soul just rolled his eyes and packed the letter away.

Luna arrived home to slightly less fanfare than her sister had, but she didn't mind. She and Celestia spent several hours in private telling each other of their weeks and finding much to laugh about. By the end, they agreed it had been for the best that Luna hadn't intervened with the stars, since that had allowed Celestia to learn of her Poison Joak infection. The flower was eventually traced young florist who had unwittingly picked it while gleaning inventory and added it to the bouquet Ash had swiped. Luna also talked Celestia into holding a talent night for the castle staff, to be headlined by a Stella Moon and her amazing illusions.

Ashen Blaze was allowed to return to Canterlot, although he kept himself scarce for several days out of a feeling of self-preservation. Celestia had not made any statement, official or otherwise, regarding his standing in her eyes beyond an acknowledgement that his idea to scan the Princess with PC had been right. After a while, he began to relax and go about his usual business, although he decided out of the blue to get himself an apartment in the city proper rather than continue to stay in the castle's school wing. He moved in next to Gale, whom he gave PC back to with the solemn promise to ask before borrowing it again.

One morning, a week or so after Luna's vacation, Gale emerged from her apartment to find Princess Celestia lurking by Ash's door. Swallowing her surprise, she executed a quick bow. "Stand," Celestia said off-handedly, her attention devoted to the door in front of her.

"What are you doing here Princess?" Gale asked.

Celestia shushed her and stifled a giggle. "Just wait," she whispered. Curious, Gale sat down and watched. A short time later there was a solid thud from within Ash's apartment, followed by sounds of confusion and frustration. Gale could hear something dragging on the floor and thumping occasionally in time to muffled "Ows" as Ash's hoof-steps neared the door. There was a sound of scrabbling as Ash struggled to open his door. Gale's confusion grew; why wasn't he using his magic? She got her answer as Celestia took pity on Ash and magiced the door open. Gale gasped as she saw Ash half-lying on the ground due to an enlarged head that looked quite heavy and uncomfortable. Ash's eyes rolled up and shrank as he saw Celestia, who was sitting very regally, her amusement almost totally hidden.

Ash gaped at her for several seconds before finding his voice. "You," he said, "This... Poison Joak?"

"Poison Joak," Celestia said with a sedate nod, a wicked smile crossing her face.

"Why?" Gale and Ash both asked, the former through giggles.

"Consider it payback for going against my wishes," Celestia said, "While you were right in your approach to my problem, you still went against my wishes and direct orders. I can't really punish you for being right, but I can't let you get away with defying me either. I think this is happy medium."

"You put Poison Joak pollen on my bed to teach me a lesson?" Ash looked like he was going to burst. Celestia just smiled. "Gale!" Ash pleaded, "Help."

"I'll send a letter to Zecora," Gale said, stifling her laughter.

"Thanks," Ash said grumpily, dragging himself back into his apartment and slamming the door.

"Well, that was fun," Celestia said, standing up, "I'll have some of the cure sent over right away- Zecora made more than enough for me." She walked to the window at the end of the hall and flew off toward the castle, back to her royal duties. All was right with the world.

~~The End~~

# Summer Sun, Dawning Chaos

## Chapter 1 Enter the Thespians

On the last day of spring, the sun shone from its late-morning position, its light filtering around a seemingly random distribution of white clouds that floated between it and the town of Ponyville. On the edge of the town's territory, a cyan pegasus with a rainbow-striped mane and an orange earth pony walked between the trees of a vast apple orchard, each bearing a pair of baskets full of early-ripened apples to a cart parked on the main path leading out of Sweet Apple Acres. The earth pony was smiling slightly, but her eyes betrayed some confusion as she looked at her friend. "I'm grateful to you fer helping me gather these apples RD," she said, "But I have to admit, this is probably the last way I'd have expected you to offer to help around the farm."

"Hello," Rainbow Dash said, "Element of Loyalty, remember? I'll never leave a friend in need if I can help it."

"Yeah, but I didn't exactly ask," Applejack pointed out teasingly, "You ain't by chance trying to avoid clearing the skies are you?"

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. "Please," she said, "You, me, and Twilight all know I can have the sky cleared out in no time. I'm going to keep the clouds up for shade and resting spots until everypony else is done with their jobs." She smiled at AJ and added, "I was kinda hoping I could get first crack at your pies."

Applejack chuckled as she gave Dash a sideways glance. "You'll have to race Pinkie Pie fer..." she trailed off as her ears picked up the sound of raised voices out on the main road. "Huh," she said, "I ain't expecting the clan fer a few hours yet. Wonder what that is." She caught Rainbow's smirk and the pair broke into a gallop for the farm gate, the farm-pony expertly bucking most of her load into the apple cart as she passed it while the pegasus ignored the occasional apple bouncing out of her basket. Big Macintosh paused in his approach from the farmhouse as he saw the two mares streak by and then followed them at his normal sedate pace, picking up spilled apples as he went.

Applejack beat Rainbow to the gate by a nose, but the pair's normal debate over the victory was set aside as they watched a large caravan wagon being pulled by a mustard-yellow earth pony with a mane and tail striped red, green, and blue, and whose cutie mark appeared to be a mask, although it was obscured by both distance and the angle of his body in relation to the mares. Sitting on the riding board of the caravan was a slightly heavy-set caramel-cream pegasus with a grizzled kelp-green mane and wearing a salt- and oil-stained jacket. The earth pony was whining dramatically. "This is torture is what it is!" he exclaimed.

"Quit yer belly-achin' already!" the pegasus snapped, "I've had it up to here with you. Be quiet and pull, or I'll lay a lash in yer sorry hide!"

"We don't have a whip, smart-flank," the earth pony replied snarkily.

"I'll improvise," the pegasus shot back, "I'm sure Cabbage has enough ribbons fer me to braid into a whip or somethin'. You've barely been pulling for two hours; what do you have to-"

"I'm bloody *hungry* is the problem!" the earth pony shouted.

"How can you be hungry after all you ate this morning?"

The earth pony stopped in his tracks and looked back at the rider with an icy glare. "So that's it," he said, "I break my fast with one old pear and suddenly I'm a glutton? Where do you get off- Oh wait, that was the *last* pear, wasn't it, old salt? You're just sore because I beat you to it!"

"Quin, Barnacle!" a female voice shouted from the rear of the wagon, "Both of you cut it out and get this thing moving or I'll make *both* of you pull!"



Big Macintosh arrived at the gate in time to catch the end of the exchange and gave his wheat stalk a thoughtful chew before saying, "If I were them, I'd have had them both pulling from the get-go. Two ponies workin' together can go three times as far."

Applejack looked askance at her brother. "What kind of mathematics are you using now Mac?" she asked, "That just don't add up at all."

"Don't make it any less true," Macintosh replied calmly.

Rainbow shrugged the baskets off her back and flew toward the wagon, her curiosity sparked by the feeling that she'd heard the female voice several times before. The stallions didn't notice as she flew over them and alighted behind the wagon, startling an azure unicorn mare with silvery hair and wearing a purple cape covered in stars. "Well," Rainbow said with a smug look, "If it isn't Trixie the Boastful."

"Hello Rainbow Dash," Trixie said in a level tone as she recovered from the surprise and brushed past the pegasus, "Surprised to see me?"

"Yeah," Dash said, turning to follow Trixie, "But I'm even more surprised to see you with... uh... other ponies."

"They are friends," the showmare said, giving Rainbow a small smile, "We're all just a little cranky because we haven't had much to eat lately." She came to a stop as she found herself nose-to-nose with Applejack.

"Howdy," the orange pony said flatly, "Hope you don't mind me askin' what yer business is here?"

Trixie backed up a couple steps and returned AJ's flat look. "The Summer Sun Celebration is tomorrow," she said, "and among the festivities will be a performance by us," she gestured dramatically at the wagon and the stallions, "The Great and Powerful Trixie's Traveling Thespians."

"Thespi- what now?" Applejack asked.

"Thespians," Trixie repeated, rolling her eyes, "Actors, in a more common way of speaking. Allow me to introduce Harlequin," the pony in the harness put on a goofy grin and waved, "and Captain Barnacle Salt."

"Former captain," the pegasus clarified, "I ain't sailed in near half a dozen years."

"Sailed?" Rainbow asked, flying up to Salt's level, "Like, on the ocean?"

"Aye ma'am," the grizzled pony said.

"Wow," Rainbow said, impressed, "I always thought sailing was more of a unicorn thing."

"Ah, ya get ponies of all stripes," Salt said with a twinkle in his eye, "Not to mention zebras of even more stripes. But don't start askin' fer any tales missy. I save those fer the stage." Rainbow's mouth worked a little as she thought over the other pegasus's words, and then face-hoofed with a groan when she realized the pun. Barnacle chuckled.

"Y'all are really gonna perform tomorrow?" Applejack asked Trixie, eyeing her suspiciously, "This is the first I've heard of it."

"Same here," Dash said, alighting next to her friend, "Of course, neither of us is in charge of the entertainment, AJ."

"Could you tell me who is?" Trixie asked politely, "Is it Pinkie Pie by chance?"

"Nah," Applejack said, "She's with me, Carrot Top, and a few others taking care of the food. You'd best head into town and find Twilight or the Mayor; they'll point you in the right direction. Oh, and one more thing," she added as Trixie nodded and turned away to return to the back of the wagon. The showmare gave her a curious look as she twisted to present one of her apple baskets. "I might not like ya much Trixie, but it wouldn't be right ta send you and yer buddies off without something ta eat. I can spare a few apples."

"Thank you very much," Trixie said, levitating four apples out of the basket, "I hope you'll give our show a fair chance. I promise you it will be quite unlike anything you've seen from me before." She gave one apple each to Harlequin and Barnacle Salt, who both munched on them gratefully, and carried the other two back into the wagon. Once she was inside, Harlequin threw his weight into the harness and began hauling the wagon down the road into town.

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With food in his belly, Harlequin's steps had a happy spring as he pulled the wagon through Ponyville, whistling an aimless tune every so often. Barnacle sat proudly on the riding board, waving to the ponies who stopped to look at the large conveyance. He was nearly thrown off when Harlequin reared back in response to a sudden burst of light and a pair of ponies materializing less than a foot in front of him. One, a brown earth pony mare with a darker brown mane, blinked in surprise at the yellow stallion, and then turned to look at her companion, an ash-grey unicorn stallion with a red-and-orange mane and tail styled to resemble flames. Both were wearing saddlebags that looked well-filled. The unicorn was grinning broadly and danced in place for half a second.

"Ha ha," he said, "It actually held up! Now, where to first?"

"How about apologizing for almost teleporting us onto this poor guy?" the earth pony asked, motioning behind her with a toss of her head.

"Hm?" The ash-grey unicorn looked over at Harlequin. "Oh. No worries; fail-safes in the spell would've moved us away from his position. They actually might have at that... Onward and outward Gale, let's get busy."

"Ash!" the brown earth pony shouted as she galloped away in the unicorn's wake. Harlequin exchanged a glance and a shrug with Barnacle and prepared to move on when a sliding window opened behind the pegasus and Trixie glared out.

"What is the hold up now?" she asked.

"We barely avoided a collision," Barnacle explained, pointing at the retreating pair. Trixie strained to follow Barnacle's hoof, then raised her eyebrows in surprise.

"I think I know those two," she mused, but then shook her head and said, "Never mind. Let's get going. Look for the tall pavilion in the town square. I'm pretty sure that'll be the center of the preparations."

"Aye aye ma'am," Barnacle said. Trixie closed the window and Harlequin put his weight into the harness again.

There were fewer ponies in the town square than anypony in the wagon expected there to be, and those that were there continued the earlier trend of pausing in their work for a few moments to watch before resuming their tasks. Harlequin parked the wagon to the left of the stairs leading to the pavilion's porch and unhitched himself while Barnacle knocked on the sliding window. "We're here," he said when Trixie opened the window.

"Finally," Trixie said with a sigh and closed the window. Barnacle jumped down from the riding board and joined Harlequin in walking around to the back. They waited patiently as they heard a quick, muffled conversation come from inside before Trixie threw the door open and stepped out into plain view wearing both her trademark hat and cape and a long-suffering expression on her face. "Quin," she said, "keep Cabbage company if you please; the poor thing is *still* overcome with butterflies. Barnacle, with me." Harlequin, grateful for a chance to get off his hooves, rushed into the wagon as soon as Trixie moved out of his way while Barnacle fell into step next to the showmare. The pair entered the pavilion to find some of the crowded activity they'd missed outside. Unicorns and pegasi were milling about hanging ribbons, banners, and tapestries emblazoned with the Royal Sun under the direction of a white coated unicorn with an elegant purple mane standing on the balcony at the back of the room. Trixie paid her and the others no mind as she made her way across the floor toward a low stage below the balcony.

"My word. Trixie, is that you?" Trixie and Barnacle paused and looked up at the balcony to see Rarity looking back down at them. "Well of course it's you," the white unicorn said, "I can't think of a single pony other than yourself with the conviction to wear such a distinct ensemble, especially this season. And who is that rugged stallion with you?"

"Oh, I like this town," Barnacle muttered to Trixie with a cheeky grin, "They got charmers 'cross the whole of pony-kind."

Trixie rolled her eyes and said, "Rarity, Barnacle Salt. We're looking for Twilight Sparkle or your Mayor."

"I see," Rarity said, thinking, "They were in the Mayor's office reviewing the preparations last I saw of them. Just head through those curtains in front of you and it'll be the first door in front of you to your left."

"Thank ye kindly fair lady," Barnacle said with a bow that made Rarity chuckle demurely, and then he trotted to catch up with Trixie as she passed through the curtains at the back of the stage area. They found themselves in a hallway that stretched around the perimeter of the building to their left and quickly terminated in a staircase on their right. The door to the mayor's office was easy to pick out, since it had a small brass plaque reading "Ivory Scroll, Mayor" on it. Barnacle raised a hoof to knock, but Trixie just grabbed the latch in her magic and opened the door.

Inside, an old tan earth pony mare and a lavender unicorn looked up from the clipboards spread on the table between them to see who was interrupting them. "Trixie!" Twilight Sparkle said in surprise, "What are you doing here?"

"Can't you guess?" Trixie asked, taking a proud stance and closing her eyes, "I am here to inform you that The Great and Powerful Trixie's Traveling Thespians have arrived and are ready to discuss our placement in tomorrow's festivities." She held her pose for several seconds and then cracked one eye open when neither Twilight nor the Mayor responded. She saw them both giving her blank looks and dropped out of her stage persona. "What?" she asked.

"Well," Twilight said levitating a clipboard and flipping to the third sheet of paper on it, "No offense, but given your reputation in town, don't you think it's a little presumptuous to just roll into town out of the blue and expect to be given a spot? We've already got a lot of local talent to choose from for the entertainment..." She trailed off when she glanced up and saw the confused look on Trixie's face.

"I sent a letter ahead of us to inform those in charge of planning that we would be coming," the showmare said, and then looked at Barnacle out of the corner of her eyes, "Which I was assured made it to the post office?"

"Dropped it off and paid the postage myself," the pegasus said.

"Was it addressed to any pony in particular?" Twilight asked. Trixie shook her head. "Then it should have ended up in your box Miss Mayor," the lavender unicorn said to the old earth pony.

The Mayor pursed her lips in thought. "I don't recall receiving anything from out of town recently besides the announcement that Princess Celestia will

be in Fillydelphia this year and that Ponyville is to host the celebration for ponies who can't or don't want to travel across the country to see her." She gave Trixie an apologetic smile. "It seems your letter got lost I'm afraid."

Trixie sighed and rubbed her head. "I swear," she said, "There must be a curse on this town that makes me look like a fool every time I set hoof in it..."

Twilight looked at her clipboard again, and then nodded and said, "I'll tell you what Trixie. I was just about to check on Lyra, she's in charge of organizing the music and acts for the after-sunrise party. Come with me and we'll see if we can talk her into giving you a chance to try out for a spot"

"You're more than welcome to stay and enjoy the celebration either way," the Mayor put in.

"Thank ye kindly," Barnacle said, "We're bound to stay here for a spell anyway. We're not exactly shipshape for moving on to another town at the moment anyway."

"Come on," Trixie said, giving the grizzled mariner a light shove as she went back out into the hallway, "Let's get this sorted out before the sun goes down, shall we?"

"This way," Twilight said as she left the office and went out into the main room. After a brief pause to praise Rarity and her helpers for their work, Twilight led Trixie and Barnacle outside and stopped again to look at the stage wagon. "That's new," she said.

"There are four ponies in our troupe," Trixie explained, "my old wagon could fit two comfortably, so we had to pool our resources to get this one. I plan to decorate it with our names once we can afford to."

"Are you doing ok, money-wise?" Twilight asked with some concern as the trio resumed walking again, heading toward the fields near the school house.

Trixie snorted and started to shrug the topic off with a flippant comment, but Barnacle cut in with a frank admission: "We've been short on coin for the last week or so. It doesn't help that Harlequin didn't have a bit to his name

when Trixie recruited him. The name's Barnacle Salt by the way, former sailor out to share the marvels of the sea with all the landlubbers of Equestria."

"Nice to meet you," the lavender unicorn said, "I'm Twilight Sparkle." She looked over at Trixie with a concerned frown. "Is there anything I can do to help?" she asked.

"Just help me get permission to perform tomorrow," Trixie said, "Once I've proven once and for all that the Great and Powerful Trixie is an act worthy of Ponyville's approval, I'll be able to negotiate a short series of full-length, ticketed shows to refill our cashbox."

"Can do," Twilight said, glad to hear the confidence in the showmare's tone.

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Twilight and company found Lyra reclining on a bench rubbing her eyes with her front hooves with a pained grimace on her face. The source of her stress was easy to locate, for on the small stage that had been erected down the street from the school, and which the green unicorn's bench was situated in front of, the trio of fillies known as the Cutie Mark Crusaders were evidently taking another shot at earning their cutie marks by acting out some sort of play. The scene apparently called for lots of movement, and Trixie's face was a picture of bemusement as she watched the little ponies repeatedly trip over one another and succeed in knocking over most of their impromptu set pieces. "Local talent you said?" she asked Twilight sarcastically as Applebloom tried to arrest a fall by grabbing the curtain and pulling it off of its rings.

"OK!" Lyra shouted, throwing her hooves up before sliding off the bench onto all fours, "Girls, thank you for that... interesting show. I'll have to get back to you on my decision, so run along."

"Thanks Ms. Heartstrings!" Sweetie Bell responded as the fillies ran off.

Lyra heaved a deep sigh and muttered something to herself before spotting Twilight. "Ah heh heh," she said with a nervous smile, "Don't worry Twi, I won't be letting them do anything... Assuming I can think of a nice way to let them down... Anyway, Fluttershy's bird chorus is doing well, Vinyl's got

her mixes ready for tonight, and why do you have Trixie with you?" She gave the caped showmare a suspicious look.

"Trixie is here," the azure unicorn said, stepping forward purposefully, "to request your consideration for including The Great and Powerful Trixie's Traveling Thespians as part of tomorrow's shows."

"Traveling Thespians?" Lyra said incredulously, "As in more than just you?"

"Are you surprised that there are ponies capable of working alongside the Great and Powerful Trixie?" Trixie replied, and then pointed back at Barnacle Salt, "There is one, and two more wait at our stage." Lyra looked at the yellow pegasus, but her frown remained in place.

"Just give her, er, them a chance Lyra," Twilight said, stepping forward to stand next to Trixie, "Ponies can change for the better, and I for one am curious to see how Trixie's improved her act."

Lyra gave Twilight a curious look, but then sighed and said, "Fine. Show me what you've got and I'll try to keep an open mind about it."

"You won't be disappointed, I promise you," Trixie said with a bow and flourish of her cape. "Barnacle," she said when she stood up, "Run on ahead and tell Harlequin to set the stage for a preview."

"Aye aye Trixie," Barnacle said, snapping a salute, "What about Mar? Should I...?"

"Hmm," Trixie said, looking at Twilight and Lyra appraisingly, "Yes, there's no reason to hold anything back. Get her prepared." The seafarer nodded and took flight, whirling around to head back into town.

"Who's Mar?" Twilight asked.

"Oh, you'll see," Trixie answered with a coy smile.



# Chapter 2

## Exposition ex Deus

The sun had not been on its daily journey for very long when Gale arrived at the gates of Canterlot Castle. The guards took one look at the summons she held in her mouth before waving with their wings for her to enter. Gale gave them a thankful nod before stashing the paper in her ever-present saddlebags and trotting into the castle. Once inside, she walked with purpose and determination up the foyer stairs and into the hallway of the royal residency wing. Wearing only her saddlebags and with her relatively short mud-brown mane left to fend for itself, the earth pony was quite out of place in the courtly setting, but her attitude combined with her history and connections meant that none of the guards or castle staff that she passed paid her more than a glance. Up ahead, a door opened, and Gale adjusted her course to veer around whoever was about to step out, only to find herself forced to stop as Blueblood emerged, saw her, and imposed himself in her path with a look of clear disapproval and disgust. "What is this?" the unicorn noble asked, "Who let you in?"

"I don't know their names," Gale answered, "but they were admirably quick to admit me when they saw this." She pulled the summons back out and held it at an angle to prompt Blueblood to grab it in his magic and free up her mouth. "As you can see," she said when he took the bait, "you're about to make me late for a meeting with Princess Celestia."

"Oh," Blueblood said, giving the paper a quick read, "You're one of the Order-naries. Hmph. That does not excuse the fact that you are in the royal castle, about to approach royalty Herself, and you look like something that crawled out of a tunnel." He flicked the paper toward Gale, who waited for it to drift to the floor before picking it up and putting it away.

"I don't make a habit of presenting myself as anything but what I am," she said, "and what I am is down to earth. I invent, build, and repair things, which is no small feat when all you have is four hooves and a mouth to work with. I am not nobility, a courtier, or the least bit inclined towards 'classical training.' The Princesses – both of them – know and respect that when they ask for me, *this* is what they'll get. Now excuse me, I'm late."

She brushed past the noble before he could respond, then looked over her shoulder and added, "Besides, Ashen Blaze can get away with talking back to them. My appearance must be trivial compared to that."

Blueblood sputtered as Gale trotted down the hall, head and tail held high. "Now... now just a moment you," he said, trotting after her.

"I don't have the time, nor am I in the mood to talk to you anymore, your lordship or whatever your proper title is," Gale said, not even looking back, "Feel free to complain to Celestia, *after* my business with her is finished."

"I believe I shall," Blueblood said. Gale didn't reply, and the two walked in tense silence until they reached the door to Celestia's suite. Sitting at their posts on either side of the door were a rather distinct pair of Royal Guards. Rather than the traditional matching set of grim-faced white pegasi, they were a golden yellow color that nearly matched their armor, and one was a unicorn stallion while the other was a pegasus mare.

"Soul Mage and Gold Heart," Gale said, "What did you two do to earn this post?"

"What did you do to score Prince Blueblood as an escort?" Soul Mage replied, quirking an eyebrow.

"I showed up," Gale deadpanned, "Is it ok for me to just head in?"

"I dunno," Soul said, acting thoughtful, "What kind of guards would we be if we just let anypony from off the streets walk past us?" His smirk wavered slightly when Blueblood gave him an approving look while Gale waited patiently for the inevitable follow-up to a Soul Mage quip.

Never one to shirk her role, Gold Heart rolled her eyes and gave Soul a playful slap to the back of his head with a wing as she moved to open the door for Gale. "Go on," she said to the earth pony, "she's expecting you."

"Thanks," Gale said, nodding to both guards before walking through the door and into Celestia's study. Blueblood made to follow her, but Heart shut the door and took up her post again.

"Sorry, your relatively-moderate-highness," Soul said, "Private audience." Blueblood looked at the unicorn with a mild glare for a moment, and then sat down next to him.

"Then I shall wait here," he said simply.

Within the study, Gale found Princess Celestia lying on a large plush cushion, her legs tucked under her body as she perused a scroll, making an occasional mark on it with a levitating feather quill. The alicorn's pastel mane and tail flowed off to her right in their private breeze, the tail coming dangerously close to touching the ashes in the nearby fireplace but always curling away at the last second. Gale came a stop a respectful distance away, bowing her head when Celestia glanced her way.

"One moment," the Princess said, looking back at the scroll. She finished reading it, signed it with an elegant flourish, and then rolled it up and set it aside. "Gale," she said, brushing her forelock aside to look at the brown earth pony with both eyes, "How are you? Out of the four Order-naries, you are the one I seem to have spent the least time getting to know."

"I'm doing fine Princess," Gale said, "Don't worry about my feeling neglected. It's been more my own choices than anything else that keeps me out of the castle. I've always been a little separate from the others; they're all magical in some way while I specialize in technology. I'm used to not being seen in the same light, and that made me, if anything, as unique and valuable to our efforts back home as Ash was."

"That is good to hear," Celestia said, "As it turns out, Ash is the reason I called for you."

"What's wrong?" Gale asked, growing serious, "Should I go get Heart and Soul, so they can help?"

"It's nothing drastic," Celestia assured, "I just think Ash has become too wrapped up in his work lately. Not just his attempts to identify the block on his natural magic, but also guarding Discord against... something that wishes to free him." The princess's expression darkened for a moment, but then she shook her head and continued, "Anyway, as his friend, I want you to make him take a break and attend the Summer Sun Celebration in Ponyville."

"Relaxation and a change of scenery?" Gale asked, tilting her head to the side slightly, then smirked and said, "The latter will be a piece of cake, but getting Ashen Blaze to relax is a herculean task. I think I know of a few tricks that'll work though." She bowed deeply to the alicorn. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention your highness. With your permission, I'll go corner Ash right away and drag him down the mountain by his tail if necessary."

"Go," Celestia said with a nod. Gale stood up from her bow and turned to leave as Celestia got up and followed her with the scroll floating along beside her. After informing Heart and Soul of her plans, the earth pony ran down the hall at a fast trot to find some stairs that would take her down to Ash's workroom in the castle's underground levels. As Celestia left the room, she found herself confronted by the tall, white, blonde-maned unicorn who bore the title of "prince" by virtue of inheritance from an ancestor and by being the most vocal advocate of courtly manners. "Good morning Blueblood," she said warmly.

"My dear princess," Blueblood said, "I must speak with you on a most urgent matter."

"Every one of your 'matters' is urgent," Celestia said, "Can you please be more specific? I must be on my way to Fillydelphia shortly."

"It is a matter of protocol," Blueblood began, but then stopped with his jaw hanging when Celestia brushed past him and started down the hall, heading deeper into the residential wing.

"I know what you're about to bring up Blueblood," she said, "and that can certainly wait until after the Summer Sun Celebration is concluded. Try to enjoy yourself today. Heart, Soul, come with me please." The two golden-yellow ponies quickly left their spots and fell into place on either side of the princess. Blueblood watched them walk away for a bit, then closed his mouth and returned to his apartment in a foul mood.

Celestia led her guards down the hall and in to another suite, this one arranged in a stiffer, more impersonal manner than Celestia's, giving it the air of a museum display rather than a living space. The white alicorn sat down on a dark blue cushion that was a little too small for her, and then her horn lit up and Heart and Soul's helmets jumped off their heads. "Officially,

you two are relieved of duty for the day," she said. The pair exchanged a look and began removing the rest of their armor.

"I get the feeling there's an 'unofficially' line coming up," Soul said, "What do you need us to do?"

Celestia chuckled. "If I remember the date of your arrival in Equestria correctly, this would be your first Summer Sun Celebration, correct?" she asked.

"It is," Heart said, shifting slightly as Soul used his magic to undo the clasps on her chest-plate.

"It's also the first for somepony else," Celestia said, and then turned her head toward the door to the next room and called out, "We're here."

"One moment Celly," a voice said from behind the door. Precisely one moment later, the door opened under the influence of magic and a tall, dark lavender unicorn with night-black mane and tail and a gibbous moon for a cutie mark entered the parlor. She smiled at Celestia, who stood up to go stand next to her, and then at Soul and Heart, who were looking at her with confusion.

After a second or two, Soul's eyes widened in recognition of the mare. With a wry smile, he said, "It's been a while Ms. Stella Moon, or should I say Princess Luna?" Heart blinked in confusion for another second, and then her eyes went wide as well, only to be squeezed shut as she smacked her forehead with a hoof.

"You will refer to me as Stella," the disguised princess said, "The two of you will join me as I visit Ponyville incognito for the next two days."

"Wait," Soul said, "I'm confused. How can this be your first Summer Sun celebration Princess? Isn't it an ancient yearly tradition?"

"The first Summer Sun Celebration was held in response to... Nightmare Moon's banishment and the return of that day a thousand years ago," Celestia said, instinctively putting a wing across Luna's back and hugging her close, "The following year I instituted it as an official holiday to try and remind my ponies of the tragedy that had stolen my sister from us, but over the years it became more and more about my control over the sun and

moon. I never stopped counting their passage though, as I waited patiently for the one-thousandth anniversary and the chance to get Luna back."

"Wouldn't that make last year's Luna's first?" Heart asked.

"This year is the first where I'm not trying to bring on eternal night," Luna clarified, head hanging slightly in shame despite Celestia's comforting, "This is a chance for me to see the Celebration as it is intended to be."

"So why the disguise?" Soul asked.

"This is Celestia's day," Luna said, "And the fear of Nightmare Moon is still fresh in many ponies's minds. I'm afraid that trying to take part in an official capacity will only cause grief. Instead, I'm going to disappear for a while and Stella Moon and her two friends," she gave Heart and Soul a meaningful look, "are going to enjoy the festivities in Ponyville. I feel I can trust you two to help me stay in character, and the three of us can share the experience of learning."

"Sounds like a plan," Soul said, smiling broadly, "and a date." He winced as Heart's wing-slap connected with more force than usual. "Geez," he hissed, rubbing the back of his head as he glared at his winged sister, "what?"

"A date?" Heart replied in a low voice, "Seriously Soul? Don't forget who you're talking to."

"I believe I'm talking to and about a unicorn named Stella Moon," Soul said for all in the room to hear, and then gave the dark-maned unicorn standing under Celestia's wing a conspiratorial wink and smile, "Correct?" "Stella" returned the smile as Celestia chuckled and pulled her wing back to her side.

"I'll leave the three of you to that then," the white alicorn said, walking toward the door to the hallway, "Have fun, and I'll see you when I return from Fillydelphia." Heart and Soul dipped into quick bows until the Princess had gone, and then stood up and faced Luna.

"So," Heart asked, "Public pega-shuttle, or can we pull some strings for a private coach?"

"I am not without means to pay," Stella Moon said, producing a large coin purse filled to capacity with bits.

"You should know better by now sis," Soul said, giving Heart a playful poke, "We *never* end up using public transit."

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Within half an hour, the disguised princess and her golden-yellow companions were flying through the air in a pegasus-drawn coach. Stella's horn was glowing as she set up a spell to guard against anypony hearing their voices from outside. When the spell was in place, her horn faded and she gave Soul, who had requested the spell, a curious look.

"Right," the unicorn said, "if Heart and I are going to help you stay in character, we need to know that character. Just who is Stella Moon?"

Stella opened her mouth to answer, but then closed it again with a concerned frown. "Is my appearance not sufficient?" she asked, "It was all I needed when assisting the Great and Powerful Trixie in Manehattan."

"No, no it wasn't," Soul said, "The show you put on, all those tricks and illusions, made ponies believe you were who you said you were."

"Not to mention the talent night you put on after we got back from that trip," Heart added.

"That gives us a good launching point," Soul said, "Stella Moon has a knack for stage magic and illusions. However," he added when the tall lavender unicorn opened her mouth to comment, "She has not been seen on stage since, so you have a different day job, preferably one in Canterlot that's low-profile so we don't have to worry as much about ponies wondering why they haven't met you before."

"Do you have a suggestion Soul Mage?" Stella asked.

Soul and Heart exchanged a glance. "Uh," the golden-yellow unicorn said after a moment, "This may sound dumb, but if you weren't a functionally immortal alicorn who commands them moon and night sky, what would you want to do with your life?" The disguised princess just stared at him blankly. "Never mind," Soul said, tapping his head with a hoof as he tried to think.

"I enjoy art," Stella said, pondering, "painting especially. The night sky is like a canvas for me, or rather Princess Luna I should say. Perhaps I am an artist..."

"What kind of artist though?" Heart asked, "Painter, sculptor... something that wouldn't clash too much with stage magic... Oh!" She turned to Soul with excitement and inspiration lighting up her eyes. "She could be in our old line of work!" she said.

"What? Mercenary?" Soul asked, giving his sister an odd look.

"No, not quite," Heart replied, "Freelancing, remember? The spirit is willing..."

"...the flesh can be trained," Soul added, starting to smile.

"So the only question remaining," the golden-yellow pegasus said as she and Soul scooted closer together and threw a leg across one another's shoulders.

"Is what does the job pay?" the two finished together, grinning broadly at Stella. They broke down in laughter for a minute or so at the disguised princess's confused look.

"Sorry Princess," Soul said after he'd calmed down, "just remembering home. Freelancing was a common way for young adults to find their niche in society, especially if their talents didn't have obvious applications. Much like mine and Heart's spirit bond. We can just say you're experimenting with different jobs, and then maybe pick one that'll give you a good reason for asking questions about the Celebration."

"A... newspaper writer," Stella said, "I'm attending to write about Ponyville's traditions."

"A freelance reporter, I like that," Soul said with a nod. The group spent the rest of the journey discussing smaller details of the Stella Moon cover story, and by the time the coach landed in Ponyville, all three felt confident enough to put it to the test.

"Thank you sirs," Stella said to the coach pegasi, slipping a small tip to them before walking away. "Now, where shall we begin?" she asked Heart



and Soul as the two fell into step next to her, keeping a careful watch on her gait so the relatively shorter ponies didn't need to trot to keep up.

"Well," Soul said, looking around and noticing the dominant flow of traffic was pointing toward the center of town, "It looks like everypony's getting geared up to start preparations. Let's find one who's not so busy and ask for a tour."

"Do you have a particular pony in mind?" Heart asked, looking around.

"Twilight Sparkle," Stella said, turning in the general direction of the library.

"I think she's likely to be caught up in the middle of all this," Soul said as he and Heart both gave the tall unicorn a questioning glance, "What with being a super organizer and Celestia's protégé, I'd be surprised if she wasn't in charge of everything."

"All the more reason to speak with her," Stella said, not breaking stride, "She'll know exactly who can be spared to answer our questions."

"Can't argue with that logic," Heart said, giving her brother a cheeky smirk.

"I concede," Soul replied with an exaggerated roll of his eyes.

At the brisk pace set by Stella Moon, the great tree containing the Ponyville library soon came into view. As the trio approached it, they saw Twilight Sparkle stepping out the front door, her back laden with saddlebags full of clipboards and a baby purple dragon with green spines and a thick scroll clutched in his claws. Twilight had a distracted look about her as she trotted in the group's direction, and it seemed likely that she would pass by them without noticing until Spike waved and said, "Soul Mage! Gold Heart! Long time, no see!"

"Huh?" Twilight said, slowing to a stop a few feet past the golden-yellow ponies and their companion. She looked back in surprise, and then gave them a smile. "Hi," she said, "You weren't looking for me by chance were you? I don't have time to chit-chat right now; I have to get to the town square to organize the set-up for tonight."

"Actually, we were looking for you," Stella Moon said, taking a couple steps toward the lavender unicorn, "I'm Stella Moon. I'm trying to write a

newspaper article about Ponyville's Summer Sun Celebration, and I was hoping you could point us to somepony who can show us around."

"There's not much to see right now," Twilight said, "We're just going to be setting everything up and organizing events for a festival tomorrow. The party doesn't start until sundown."

"So you do stay up all night," Stella said, getting a far-away look in her eyes.

"Yep, just like everywhere else," Twilight said, "Sorry, I'd love to talk to you, but I really must be going. Ironically enough, since the Princesses aren't going to be coming to town this year, there's even more things that need to be scheduled and organized, and I'm the best pony for the job." She turned away just in time to miss Stella mouthing the word "princesses" in confusion and lifted a leg to start walking away.

"Can you think of anypony who'll have time?" Soul asked, and then glanced at Stella, "I mean, it would be nice to get all the background information now so we can focus on the fun when it actually starts."

"Well," Twilight said, thinking.

"How about me?" Spike suggested, "All you really need me for is going over the checklist, and you're probably going to be with the Mayor most of the day, so she can fill that task, right?" Twilight gave him a disapproving look. "Ok," the dragon admitted, "I just want to avoid getting another bad claw cramp, all right? Have you seen this thing?" He held up the scroll.

"Spike," Twilight said in mild rebuke, but then sighed and said, "You know what? No time to argue. Go ahead."

"Thanks Twi," Spike said happily as he jumped off her back. Twilight relieved him of the scroll and galloped away. "All right," the baby dragon said, rubbing his claws together, "Where do you want to start?"

# Chapter 3

## Pies and Spices

Pinkie Pie had bitten off more than she could chew. Never one to be daunted by such trivial obstructions to enjoying life, she simply allowed the red velvet cake with vanilla frosting and chocolate shavings sit on her tongue for a few moments before swallowing it whole and moving on to the mint ice cream cake with chocolate frosting. She picked up the cake and opened her mouth to shove it in, only to pause when she heard the oven timer go off, followed by Mr. Cake calling her name. Her blue eyes darted between the kitchen and the cake several times as she weighed her options. Deciding that giving herself a brain freeze by gulping down a cake made of ice cream wasn't the best thing to do just before helping to extract hot cupcake pans from the oven, she set the cake back down, gave it a hard look to dissuade it from trying to escape, and then bounced cheerfully to the kitchen. Halfway across the room, she paused in mid-bounce to glance around the Sugar Cube Corner storefront. "Hmm, still needs more streamers," she said, and then resumed her movement.

Ponyville's premier pink party planner had taken a heavy load upon herself in preparation for the upcoming Summer Sun Celebration. Not only was she filling her usual role in helping the Cakes cook their share of the party food, she was also the Official Taste Tester – courtesy of Twilight's incredibly smart role-giving of a few hours ago – of every kind of sweet, treat, and baked good that would be available for consumption over the next two days, and was in charge of setting up and coordinating all the party locations for the nighttime vigil. Besides Sugar Cube Corner, there would also be a party at the town pavilion, where everypony would eventually gather to count down to the dawn, an accelerated party at the schoolhouse for young ponies who couldn't stay awake all night, and a super-special, not-really-a-surprise-but-we'll-pretend-it-is party at Twilight's house to mark the anniversary of her first day in Ponyville. Even for Pinkie Pie, the prospect of setting up and running so many parties all at the same time was a little overwhelming. *If only there were more of me*, she thought idly as she set a tray of cupcakes on the counter to cool. Her ears perked up to their maximum perkiness as she heard the tinkle of the bell by the front door. "Oh, customers!" she said, setting the pot holder aside before

zipping out to the sales counter. "Hi! Welcome to Sugar Cube Corner! What can I-" she cut off her cheery greeting with a long dramatic gasp as her eyes finally managed to get a message through to her brain about what they were seeing.

Standing in the middle of the room, their attention shifting from the tables laden with food to the pink pony behind the counter, was a pair of greyscale earth ponies with matching straight mane styles. One was a dark purplish-grey in coat and light-grey in mane with brown eyes and a polished lapis lazuli for a cutie mark and the other was lighter in coat than mane with purple eyes and a bronze balance scale over a half-rolled scroll for a cutie mark. They both gave Pinkie nervous smiles as her eyes widened and began to sparkle and her mouth curled up in a huge smile. "And... brace," the lighter-coated one muttered.

"Maggie!" Pinkie squealed, "Shoo Fly! You made it!" Over the counter she pounced, crossing the distance between her and the pair almost faster than the eye could see and caught them both up in a rib-straining hug. "You have no idea how happy I am to see you! Well, maybe you do because we're sisters, and nopony knows you better than family. Oh, this is going to be great, getting to spend the Summer Sun Celebration with both my bestest friends *and* my bestest sisters. I can't wait to introduce you to everyone; I wonder who we should start with?"

"Pinkamina," the dark-coated mare said in a strained voice, "breathing issues."

"Oh, sorry Shoo Fly," Pinkie said, letting her sisters go. She looked past them at the door and asked, "Did Mother and Father come too?"

"No," the lighter sister, Maggie, said, "Mother's not feeling too well, and Father stayed home to care for her."

"That's too bad," Pinkie said glumly.

"Pinkie? Is everything ok in here?" The sisters turned to see a motherly-looking blue earth pony entering the room from the kitchen. "Oh," she said, "well, this is a pleasant surprise. Hello girls."

"Good day to you Mrs. Cake," Maggie said, "how's business?"

"It's as good as ever," Mrs. Cake said, "Thanks for-" She was interrupted as the front door flew open with a wild chiming of its bell. The four earth ponies turned as one to look and then pranced out of the path of the ash-grey unicorn who had come charging into the bakery with a manic grin on his face. Right behind him was a brown earth pony who looked to be quite irritated. With a strong leap, she closed the distance between her and the unicorn and caught his red and orange tail in her mouth, hitting the ground in a seated position and digging her hooves in to bring him to a stop near the middle of the room. Spitting the tail out of her mouth, the brown pony walked around to the unicorn's front end.

"Don't get me wrong," she said, "It's good to see you loosen up, but this is not normal for you Ash. You're on something, aren't you?"

"Hm, maybe I am," Ashen Blaze said, cocking his head to one side, "Can you honestly argue with the results though? Pinkie Pie!" he changed the subject without missing a beat, "how are you this fine day?"

"Super-duper," The pink pony replied, her own natural enthusiasm increasing slightly in response to Ash's unusual cheerfulness, "This is turning into an unexpected visitors party."

"You invited us here sister," Shoo Fly pointed out.

"Yeah," Pinkie said, rolling her eyes, "but I do that every year and this is only... the third time you've been able to make it, so I wasn't *exactly* expecting you to show up. Oh, we need to do introductions." She placed herself between Ash and Gale with a single bounce and threw her front legs around their necks. She was about to speak again when another oven timer went off in the kitchen and Mr. Cake stuck his head out of the kitchen.

"That's the Summer Berry pie," he announced, "and the cupcakes are ready for frosting Pinkie."

"We can handle introductions on our own Pinkamina," Shoo Fly said, seeing a conflict arising in Pinkie's eyes, "Don't let us stand in the way of your job."

"Okie dokie lokie Shoo Fly," Pinkie said, releasing Gale and Ash and bounding toward the kitchen.

"Shoo Fly Pie?" Ash asked, tilting his head slightly to the side with a smirk, "That's cute."

"I suppose," the dark-grey pony said, rolling her eyes, "but Pinkamina is the only one I will tolerate using that nick-name. You may call me Susan, Susan Fidelity Pie."

"I'm Margaret," the lighter sister said, extending a hoof, "but Maggie's fine if you want."

"Carmil- er, Gale," Gale said, extending a suddenly hesitant hoof to shake Maggie's. She cast a glance at Ash, who returned it with a shrug and a raised eyebrow. "Sorry," she said to the sisters, "Your names just... threw me off for a moment."

"No offense taken," Susan said, "Father's side of the family has a tradition for unusual names."

"And yet you don't like to be called 'Shoo Fly,'" Ash noted dryly.

"Just because my name makes little sense is no reason not to bear it with pride," Susan said haughtily, "and you are?"

"Ashen Blaze," the grey unicorn said, "Ash for short." He held out a hoof to Susan, but before she could take it, Pinkie dropped in between them with a platter of cupcakes balanced on her head.

"I just remembered," the pink pony said to Ash, ignoring the startled reactions to her entrance, "If you and Gale are here, does that mean Heart and Soul are too?"

"They aren't with us," Gale said, "The last I saw of them, they were standing guard outside Princess Celestia's room. She might have plans for them, but I couldn't begin to guess what."

"Maybe the Princess is taking them with her," Pinkie said, "She's raising the sun from Fillydelphia this year you know. I'd be jealous if we weren't doing so many awesome parties here." She walked over to a table, slid the platter onto it, and then flipped a cupcake into her mouth. After giving it a contemplative chewing, she swallowed it and proceeded to the ice cream cake. Mr. and Mrs. Cake and Gale winced as the pink pony gulped down

the slightly melty cake and then licked the frosting off her muzzle before putting a hoof to her head and wincing slightly. "Woo, glad I waited on that," she said.

"Are you ok Pinkie?" Maggie Pie asked.

"Yep," Pinkie said, recovering, "That wasn't so much a brain *freeze* as it was a brain *chill*. Anypony want a cupcake?" She picked the cupcake platter up in her mouth and held it out to her guests enticingly.

"Yes please," Maggie said as she and Susan each took a cupcake.

"Now Pinkie dearie," Mrs. Cake said, "be sure not to hand out all the treats too quickly. Or eat them all," she added in a murmur. Pinkie smiled at the older pony with her eyes, which did little to address her concern.

"I'll pass for now," Ash said, "but I wonder if I could ask a favor of you."

"What'cha need Ash?" Pinkie asked after setting the platter down. In answer, the ash-grey unicorn's horn began to glow with magic, followed quickly by the gemstones he wore around his neck and the flap of his right saddlebag. The bag opened and a smaller, clear plastic bag filled with sticks of tightly rolled bark which looked like cinnamon at first glance but upon closer inspection turned out to have thin white stripes breaking up the warm brown coloring.

"Ash," Gale said, giving the bag a scrutinizing, incredulous look, "is that... what I think it is?" Ash opened the bag and pulled out a stick, and Gale covered her nose with a hoof as she caught the spicy and unpleasantly pungent scent it was giving off.

"Dear heavens," Susan said, her nose curling, "what is that? And has it gone bad?"

Ash frowned slightly as he looked around and saw similar looks of mild disgust on everypony's face, Pinkie's included. "I guess it truly is an acquired preference then," he said with a sigh, but then smiled and brandished the stick dramatically. "Friends and new acquaintances, I present you with what is arguably the greatest spice ever: *stinim*."

"Very arguably," Gale said, taking one deliberate step away from Ash, "How in blazes did you get that? Isn't it technically extinct?"

"The trees grew on only one planet, under the light of a Shadowstar," Ash replied with a nod, "However, it's similar enough to cinnamon that, with a little help from PC on the chemical changes required, I have been able to create a spell to synthesize it."

"It's supposed to smell like that?" Susan asked.

"It's a delicacy where I'm from," Ash said, putting the *stinim* stick back in the plastic bag and giving Gale a sideways look, "and I'm told the 'stench' is less offensive when it's mixed with other things. And that brings me to the favor. Pinkie, Cakes, I would like to make some *stinim* sweet rolls; can I make use of your kitchen?" Seeing the doubtful looks being exchanged between the bakery owners, he added, "It'll take twenty minutes in the oven, tops, and I should be able to keep out of the way of your work."

"Well, I was going to call for a break in a few minutes anyway," Mr. Cake said, "So I guess it would be ok."

"Wonderful. Thank you," Ash said, bowing his head. He then turned to Gale and held out an expectant hoof. "You brought PC like I asked, right?" he asked her.

"What do you need him for?" Gale responded, raising an eyebrow.

"He has the recipe," Ash answered, gesturing for Gale to fulfill his request. Gale looked Ash in the eyes for a few seconds, and then reached into a saddlebag and pulled out a device that resembled a cross between a microphone head-set and half of a helmet. "Thank ye," the unicorn said, taking the head-mounted computer and settling it onto his head. Grinning with excitement, he all but galloped past the counter and into the kitchen.

The silence that hung while everypony stared at the kitchen doorway was broken by Susan, who leaned her head to the side in curiosity and said, "He's a strange one."

"That might be from the *stinim*," Gale said, "I've often suspected it has a drug-like effect on his mind."



"Not that," Susan said, "not his behavior. I mean his aura; something about it is very... alien." She turned toward Gale and leaned in close, closing one eye. "Yours is a little strange as well, if you don't mind me saying so."

Gale leaned away slightly from the grey earth pony, but gave her face conveyed intrigue rather than discomfort. "You can read personal auras?" she asked.

"Well, 'read' might be the best word for it, but yes," Susan said, "I assume you're aware of Pinkie Sense?"

"The predictive twitches?" the brown earth pony said, "Yep. Are you saying your ability's similar?"

"They're both unusual gifts, especially for an earth pony," Susan said, "and I apologize again if I've made you uncomfortable."

Gale blew a short raspberry and rolled her eyes. "No worries Susan," she said, "I've seen my share of quasi-magical talents, and sensing auras is pretty normal by comparison. Pretty dang useful too."

"Quasi-magical?" Maggie asked, giving Gale a confused look.

"It's something that could be confused for magic, but really isn't," Gale explained, "At least, not according to Ash's definition of magic." She smirked and raised her voice so she could be heard in the kitchen, calling out, "Right Ash?" Her smile faded and was replaced by concern and annoyance when Ash didn't respond. "Ash," she called again, but got only silence in return. "He can't be that caught up with baking," she said, walking toward the kitchen. She poked her head through the door and was quickly joined by Pinkie, Mr. Cake, and Susan. The kitchen showed all the signs of being in use: cakes, cookies, pies, and other treats were set out to cool while others waited for their turn in the ovens, the sink was filled with used mixing bowls that needed to be washed before being used again, and the air was filled with the hot fragrance of baked goods. It was also lacking the presence of one ash-grey unicorn stallion. "Ash?" Gale said, growing more concerned. Pinkie slipped past her to check inside the pantry and the cellar while Gale and the others looked around for any sign of Ashen Blaze.

"I can't find him anywhere," Pinkie reported when she returned from the cellar, "But I found Gummy." She turned her head to display the small toothless alligator attached to her mane.

"The back door's ajar," Susan noted.

"We cracked it open to get some cool air in here," Pinkie said.

"So he could have walked out without anyone noticing," Gale mused, and then spotted a plastic bag on the counter next to an empty mixing bowl. She walked over for a closer look, and her frown deepened. "Ok, this is troublesome," she said, "He's wandered off somewhere."

"Is that unusual for him?" Susan asked, "Or something he's prone to?"

"He'll go off on his own every now and then," Gale said, "but he normally has a good reason to, and he would never leave in the middle of making *stinim* buns unless there's an emergency. If there was an emergency, he'd come and get me. And under no circumstances would he just leave his *stinim* behind." She grabbed the bag off the counter and stuffed it into her bag. "Sorry to run off," she said, her nose still in the bag as she searched for something, "But I need to... oh." She pulled her head out of the saddlebag and face-hoofed. "He's got PC!" she said, "Dang it. He could be anywhere and I have no way to track him down. This is not how I wanted to spend my day." She heaved a huge sigh and started toward the back door.

"Would you like some help?" Susan asked.

Gale paused and looked at the dark-grey earth pony. "I'd appreciate help," she said, "but I wouldn't want to take any of you away from your work."

"Don't worry about that," Pinkie said, sidling up next to her sister, "We're all friends, and friends help each other. I need to head out and get started on setting up parties around town anyway, so I can keep an eye out for Ash."

"Maggie and I are just visiting town," Susan said, "And since the festivities don't really start until this evening, I wouldn't mind spending a few hours tracking down a pony. I've seen his aura, so it will be easy to locate him once we get close enough."

"Yep," Pinkie said, "Shoo Fly's the world champ at hide-and-seek. You two will find Ashy in no time!" She pushed Susan and Gale closer together and then bounced toward the door to the front room, finding her other sister standing just inside it. "Want to come with me Maggie?" the pink pony asked, "We'll head to the pavilion first to see if Rarity's ready for the snack tables." She looked back at Gale and said, "Be sure to introduce Shoo Fly to anypony you recognize Gale, ok?"

"Got it," Gale said with a smile and a salute. She turned to Susan and motioned for her to lead the way. "Thanks," she said as they left the bakery.

"Don't mention it," Susan said, "you can repay me by telling me where you come from, where sensing auras is not considered unusual." Gale chuckled nervously and shook her head slowly.

"It's a looong, crazy story," she said.

# Chapter 4

## Upstagings

Pinkie Pie was humming a little ditty to herself as she pranced down the street toward the town square. Maggie Pie walked beside her, smiling slightly at her sister's boundless and infectious cheerfulness. Both mares were bearing saddlebags packed with party supplies, quite possibly more than anypony except Pinkie could physically stuff into a bag if Maggie knew her sister. The light grey earth pony bucked slightly to jostle her load and get a better feel for the weight. It didn't seem exceptionally heavy, but that wasn't always an indicator of certainty. Pinkie had once had Maggie carry a bag that had turned out to contain a number of rather large rocks, but which had felt like it weighed only a few pounds.

She was brought out of her ponderings when Pinkie came to a sudden stop next to her. Looking up, Maggie saw a small crowd of ponies gathering in front of a large caravan wagon parked near the pavilion. "What's going on here?" she asked.

"I don't know," Pinkie said, "But I think I see Twilight up at the front. She'll know what's up; she's in charge of knowing what everypony's doing today. Come on." The pair made their way across the square and around the crowd. As they approached, they saw an azure pony in a purple pointed hat and cape slink around to the back of the wagon, eyeing the crowd critically. Pinkie's eyebrows rose a little at the sight, but she stayed focused on reaching her scholarly friend. With a minimum of jostling, she and Maggie made it past the ponies circling around the front of the wagon and came up next to Twilight, who was looking nervously out at the growing herd of spectators, and Lyra, who was focused on the wagon. "Hey girls," Pinkie said, grabbing their attention, "Was it my imagination, or did I just see Trixie around here?"

"Hey Pinkie," Twilight said, and then looked curiously at Maggie.

"Twilight, Lyra," Pinkie said, "This is my sister Maggie, from the rock farm. Maggie, this is Twilight Sparkle and Lyra Heartstrings."

"It's nice to meet you," Maggie said, nodding at the unicorns.

"Charmed," Lyra said distractedly, "Not to be rude, but we're a bit busy right now Pinkie." She nodded at the wagon, "Last minute applicant for tomorrow's entertainment."

"Oh, okie dokie," Pinkie said. She took a few steps toward the crowd and took a seat, waiting expectantly. As Maggie and Twilight went to sit next to her, the wagon began to unfold into a stage as a fanfare of trumpets played.

"Come on, come all," a sonorous voice called out as thick lavender smoke billowed up, "Come and witness the greatest show to ever travel the roads of Equestria!" The silhouette of a pony in a tall pointed hat and a flared cape became visible within the smokescreen, and large silvery stars materialized and began to swirl about through the air, slowing drawing together to settle upon the figure's hat and cape. "Fillies and Gentlecolts, we present to you The Great and Powerful Trixie's Traveling Thespians!" The smoke parted and blew away to reveal the infamous showmare herself, head held high to soak in the praise and applause that was sadly lacking among the audience. Pinkie Pie's hoof-pounding and whistling tried to make up for the lack, but succeeded only in drawing attention off the stage and onto the party pony.

Having expected a lackluster welcome, Trixie was only mildly disappointed. Swallowing a sigh and reminding herself to stay patient, she turned her gaze downward to look at Lyra and continued her spiel, "You will stand in awe as Trixie performs amazing feats of magic never before witnessed by pony kind!"

"Can you make yourself disappear?" a voice called out from the audience, garnering a laugh. Before Trixie could formulate a response, she saw a tomato wrapped in a magic aura floating upward out of the crowd.

*Not this time*, she thought with a smirk. Keeping her eye on the red vegetable, she backed up three steps and raised her right rear hoof in expectation. "Disappearances, illusions, tran-" she cut off her speech and stamped down as the tomato began flying toward her. On cue, an earth pony dressed in a full suit patterned in yellow, green, and red and wearing a black mask over the top half of his face bounded through the curtains behind Trixie, leaped over her in a forward flip, caught the tomato in his

mouth, and landed squarely on his back hooves while holding his front legs out to either side. The audience stared in silent surprise for a moment, but then a smattering of applause and appreciative murmuring broke out. Trixie gave a satisfied smile behind the cover of Harlequin's body, but then the stallion lost his balance and fell with an exaggerated yelp onto the magician. The crowd laughed as Trixie lifted Harlequin off of herself and dropped him onto the stage next to her. He landed in a tumble that brought him to his hooves and then bowed deeply, tomato balanced on his head. "Yes," Trixie said, gesturing to the garishly dressed pony, "you will laugh as the Harlequin storms the stage with his strange clumsy agility. But that is not all." She brought her legs together in a stiff stance and lowered her hat to cast a shadow over her eyes. "Citizens of Ponyville," she said darkly, "You think you know the Great and Powerful Trixie as nothing more than a teller of tales. Many of you were impressed by her claim to have vanquished an Ursa Major. That was a lie, the telling of which I have more than paid for. But now, I present to you a pony with even wilder and more unbelievable stories than even Trixie could imagine. What's more, he comes with proof of the validity of his stories." She grasped the curtains in her magic as she and Harlequin moved to opposite sides of the stage. "Ponyville," Trixie said, "The Great and Powerful Trixie is proud to present Captain Barnacle Salt and his greatest catch: Mar the Seapony!" With a grand wave of her hoof, Trixie parted the curtains to reveal the caramel-colored pegasus standing proudly next to a large glass tank filled with water. Inside the tank floated a creature that looked to have the front half of a sea-green pony mare with a blue mane and the tail end of a sea-green fish. Around her neck hung a thin necklace with a small pearl pendant that shone in the sunlight. Her wide golden eyes swept across the audience as she attempted to give everypony a smile. Everypony stared back in amazement.

"Incredible," Twilight said, "A real-life hippocampus." She turned to Lyra and said, "You have to let them have a spot now!"

"I don't know," the green unicorn said, "The seapony is impressive, but Trixie still seems to be all talk."

"Well, you can't expect me to display my entire routine now," Trixie said, tilting her hat back to its normal position, "not with a crowd this big; there will be no reason to watch us tomorrow. However, I suppose could demonstrate one more trick." She rolled her eyes back in thought for a

moment and then looked out at her audience. "For this trick, the Great and Powerful Trixie requires an assistant. Are there any volunteers?"

"Oh, pick me!" Pinkie Pie said instantly, sticking a hoof up in the air as high as she could.

"Very well then Pinkie," Trixie said, smiling and gesturing with a hoof, "hop on up here." Pinkie took the instruction literally, jumping from her seat and landing squarely next to the showmare with her face out to the audience. "Captain," Trixie said, turning to look back at Barnacle, "Trixie needs the box. Fetch it will you?" Barnacle gave a quick salute and walked backstage. He returned a moment later pushing a large black box decorated with silver stars and blue wands that matched Trixie's cutie mark with four wheeled legs that brought the top up to Trixie's shoulder. He parked it behind Pinkie and went back to stand next to Mar's tank, the seapony looking relieved to have him next to her again.

"What'cha gonna do Trixie?" Pinkie asked, turning around to look the box over as Trixie walked behind it and undid the latches holding the front panel in place.

"Move aside for a second," Trixie instructed. After Pinkie complied, Trixie levitated her hat off of her head and flung it aside. "Somepony asked for a disappearing act," she projected out over the audience, "The act of rendering a pony invisible is a simple thing for a unicorn of Trixie's ability." Her horn flared and she vanished from sight for a second. "Personal teleportation is trickier, and teleporting another object without moving oneself trickier still. All of these you would expect from a pony as Great and Powerful as Trixie. If Trixie is to truly impress upon you her power, she must do better even than that. Trixie shall make this mare vanish *without using her horn*." She reached up and tapped the pointed protuberance on her forehead, noting with pleasure the looks of skepticism on the faces of her audience. Even Twilight looked unsure, and Trixie was willing to bet the lavender pony was already trying to puzzle out the trick. It was time to weed out the obvious. "Climb inside the box Pinkie," the showmare said.

"Okie dokie lokie." Grinning from ear to ear, Pinkie wiggled her way into the box, which was just big enough to contain her and her puffy tail when she tucked her legs underneath her.

"Now," Trixie said, ducking down and crawling under the box before flipping the front panel back into place and locking it, "As you just witnessed, there is nothing between the box and the stage. My horn is not aglow," she tapped her head again, and then pushed the box around in a three-sixty spin, "and the box is complete on all sides. There is no means short of outright magic of removing Pinkie Pie from the box without- ack!" Out of nowhere arose a cloud of thick red smoke that obscured most of the stage, save for the far end where Harlequin could be seen staring at the smokescreen with a mixture of shock and anger. Over the sound of Trixie and Barnacle coughing, Twilight caught the distinct sound of a teleport spell on the stage, and then she grabbed Lyra with her magic and pulled the unicorn back when the box containing Pinkie came rolling off the stage. It landed on its end and broke open, sending Pinkie tumbling head over hooves onto her back.

"Hey!" she exclaimed, leaping to her feet, scowling at the stage, "What was that for?"

"Sincerest apologies madam," a new, clear baritone voice said as the smoke began to thin, "But I had to act in haste." If the speaker was going to say anything more, it was cut off as a blast of wind launched the smokescreen into the sky and scattered it. The Great and Powerful Trixie's horn was glowing brightly as she glared daggers at the crimson unicorn with a stylishly short and oiled purple mane and tail who was suddenly on the stage with her, giving her a disgruntled look.

"For the love of..." Trixie muttered, and then raised her voice, "Where did you come from this time, Trouble? I thought we'd finally given you the slip in Oat Grove."

"You're not as slippery as you think you are Trixie," the stallion replied smugly, "As I tell you every time we meet, you cannot escape the amazing tracking skills of *Tremolo*!" He reared up in a dramatic leg-pedaling, only to pause and look around the stage curiously.

"We ditched the fireworks, if that's what you're looking for," Harlequin said in a level tone.

"Why would you not have fireworks?" Tremolo asked Trixie, "you always have fireworks. Your ego demands it."



"My ego demands that I do what it takes to keep the audience's attention," Trixie said, "But my stomach made a very strong case for selling what was left after *your* last interruption of Trixie's show." She turned away from him and walked over to where her hat had landed. "And if The Great and Powerful Trixie is bound by ego to use pyrotechnics, what does it say about the Troublesome Tremolo that you've used twice as much as I have since we met?"

"This isn't part of the show is it?" Maggie Pie asked, mostly to herself.

"It most certainly is not," Trixie said curtly, turning to look at Maggie and explain. Tremolo stepped in front of her before she could begin.

"My friends," the crimson stallion said in loud declaration, "My name, as you have heard, is Tremolo. I have come here with a mission to expose and denounce." The crowd broke out into murmurs, wondering what he could possibly mean. At the back of the stage, Barnacle rolled his eyes and started to walk downstage to confront Tremolo, but stopped when Trixie waved him back, answering his questioning look with one that requested a short period of patience. His attention fully on the ponies in front of him, Tremolo didn't notice this exchange as he continued his speech, "I am here to warn you against the lies and chicanery of the so-called Great and Powerful Trixie!" Silence fell like a stone, as the audience to a pony gave the crimson unicorn a flat, disappointed look. Tremolo had expected gasps and more murmuring, so the reaction caught him off guard.

"Lies?" Trixie asked in a scandalized tone after a moment, walking around to bring herself into the audience's view, "Chicanery? Such horrid accusation you've made against Trixie!" She switched to a mockingly flirtatious voice as she smirked at Tremolo, "Do you have any examples to present to these ponies?"

Tremolo looked out at the herd, and then narrowed his eyes and whirled on Trixie. "I get it," he said, "You've got these ponies on your side already. This is your hometown isn't it?"

"Hardly," Trixie said with a laugh, "That would be *Hoofington*. No, these ponies would love to have another excuse to ride me out of town. Are you going to give them one, or just stand there like gasping fish?" A small wave of chuckles rippled through the crowd as Tremolo snapped his mouth shut and glared at the azure mare.

"You've claimed to have save Hoofington from a rampaging Ursa Major single-hoofed," he said at last, "When in fact you-"

"She couldn't even handle an Ursa Minor," Lyra said, rolling her eyes, "We know. That incident happened here."

"Oh," Tremolo said, surprised into uncertainty, "Uh... well then! Now that I've refreshed your memory- agh!" Having finally had enough, Harelequin had taken a small bite from his captured tomato and then chucked it at Tremolo's head, where it splattered spectacularly.

"Give it up already," the costumed earth pony said, "You're just going to make a bigger fool of yourself."

"You're one to talk, clown," Tremolo shot back.

"I am," Harlequin said as he sauntered over to the crimson stallion, "See, the thing is, it's my *job* to be a fool. What's yours?"

"My job?" Tremolo asked with a snide grin, "Didn't I make that clear before? It is to pursue the truth and expose the frauds. You play the fool indeed Mr. Harlequin, one who cannot keep an honest bit in his purse when the merchant offers you a deal." He turned away from the glowering Harlequin and began to walk upstage toward Barnacle and Mar. The grizzled pegasus stepped between the seapony's tank and the unicorn, wings spread in a protective stance. "And you with your so-called-" Tremolo began, only to be cut off as a rope snaked its way onstage under the influence of Trixie's magic, leaped up to tie itself around the crimson pony's muzzle, and then tugged him roughly around to meet Trixie's glare.

"Your quarrel is with me, troublemaker," she said, "You came here, as you have come to many of Trixie's shows recently, to try and discredit Trixie and undermine her show. You say that Trixie is not so Great and Powerful? Prove it." She commanded the rope to untie Tremolo and cast it away backstage. "The Great and Powerful Trixie does not take challenges often anymore, but for you we'll make an exception. Anything you can do, I can do better. How about it?"

"Nice try," Tremolo responded, "I will not give you any means to humiliate me again. If you're so great, come up with something original."

Trixie gave the unicorn a bemused look. "You must be joking," she said, and then looked out at the audience with a shake of her head. "Twilight," she said, pointing at the broken wheeled box on the ground, "Could you lend me a hoof and fix that please?" Twilight looked over the box before nodding and activating her magic. Pinkie stood up with a happy, expectant look in her eyes as the box came back together and floated up onto the stage, and Trixie waved for her to come up.

"Yipee!" Pinkie squealed, bouncing up onto the stage and squeezing into the box again after pausing to stick her tongue out at Tremolo.

"Now," Trixie said, doffing her hat again to expose her horn, "Before Trixie was so rudely interrupted, she had established that there are no hidden panels, mirrors, or illusion spells on this box. Without tapping into her magic, the Great and Powerful Trixie will now make this pony disappear." By hoof and mouth, she closed and locked the box, spun it around once, and then stood behind it with her front hooves resting on top. Tremolo watched the display with lidded eyes. Trixie tapped the box with her left hoof once, twice, and then reached across and undid the locks with a cry of "Behold!" The front panel fell open, and Tremolo's jaw dropped when he saw neither hide nor hair of the pink earth pony. The audience broke out into amazed gasps and applause that Trixie basked in for a moment before holding a hoof up for silence. "We're only half done," she announced, "for what has been taken away must be returned." She raised her right hoof high in the air and cried, "Vanished pony, I command thee, return to us, now!" She swung her hoof down and Pinkie Pie came cartwheeling out from behind the upstage curtains, rolling down the stage until she crashed into Tremolo, sending the crimson unicorn sprawling off the stage to land in an undignified heap in the dirt. Laughter, cheers, and applause rang out as Pinkie stood up, beaming, and then took a bow alongside Trixie. Twilight went over to Tremolo and tried to help him up, only to be brushed off.

"This isn't over Trixie," he muttered.

"I don't doubt it," Trixie said with an aggrieved sigh, and then straightened up and looked at Lyra. "Are you convinced now?" she asked.

"Yes," the green unicorn said with a smile, "I'll give you a spot in tomorrow's show, on one condition."

"What?" Trixie asked.

Lyra pointed a hoof at Tremolo and said, "Make sure this guy is part of the act."

# Chapter 5

## Searches and Secrets

"Well, that was certainly exciting." As Trixie's crew closed up the wagon and the crowd dispersed to return to their work, Twilight, Pinkie, and Maggie Pie were approached by Rarity, who had a refined look of satisfaction on her face. "I'm not sure if I completely approve of Trixie's methods, but I can't fault her for standing up to that rude interruption. Pinkie, you were marvelous up there," she added, smiling at the pink earth pony.

"Thanks Rarity," Pinkie replied, "It was actually way more fun than I expected. First I was in the box and then... Oh, I probably shouldn't tell; a magician never reveals her secrets!" She made a zipping motion across her mouth.

"It certainly was impressive," Twilight said, "And that seapony they had... I'll have to see if Trixie will be willing to talk about it once I'm done with everything. Speaking of which..." She looked at Rarity expectantly.

"The pavilion decorations are finished," the white unicorn reported, "Thanks to all the volunteers I was able to recruit." Her gaze slid over to Pinkie as she concluded, "It only needs Pinkie's... personal touch and it will be the most fashionable party location in town. You are only going to add a few things, right Pinkie?"

"Mph mm," Pinkie said with a nod, not opening her mouth. Twilight rolled her eyes in amusement as Pinkie passed her hoof in front of her mouth again and then said, "Check this out." She stuck her face into her saddlebag and came out with a dark blue balloon in her mouth. She inflated it with a single breath and tied it off before holding out for inspection. "Ta da!" she exclaimed.

"I'll probably regret this," Maggie said, "but why does that balloon have a moon on it? This is the Summer *Sun* Celebration Pinkamena."

"I know that, silly filly," Pinkie giggled, starting to bounce the balloon on her head, "But the best part is staying up all night and holding parties until the

Sun comes up. And since Princess Luna's free of the moon and isn't all dark and scary anymore, I think it's time to start giving her a little thanks for doing her part." She turned and started walking toward the pavilion, still bouncing the balloon expertly.

"For Pinkie logic, that made a lot of sense," Twilight said, scratching her head, "Maybe I should try to work some official recognition of Princess Luna into the ceremony? Spike," she looked around for a moment before remembering that the dragon wasn't with her, "Er... I'll go talk to the mayor about it."

"Darling," Rarity said, "You have more than enough to worry about without trying to squeeze in more last-minute changes. If Princess Luna wanted to be a part of the Celebration, I think you of all ponies would have been informed about it."

"Yes," Twilight said, relaxing a little, but then she tensed up and her irises started to shrink, "Oh, but what if they sent a letter after I let Spike go off?" She reared back to turn and run off, only to be grabbed by the head and pulled back down to earth by Rarity.

"Twilight Sparkle, listen to me," the white unicorn said, "Everything is fine, our preparations are ahead of schedule, and most importantly *there is no Princess coming to town this year*. Now calm down and go back to checking things off your list like a good little event organizer." She turned the lavender unicorn around and gave her a gentle push in the direction of the pavilion. Twilight trotted away, her posture growing more relaxed and natural with every step. "Another crisis averted," Rarity said with pride and then looked over at Maggie. "I do apologize for taking so long to speak to you Margaret," she said.

"Don't worry about it Rarity," the light-grey pony said, "When Pinkamena's your sister, you learn to just go with the flow of conversation. To be honest, I'm surprised you remember who I am; it's been a long time since we last met."

"Of course I remember," Rarity said, "I never forget a face, and you haven't changed a bit. Tell me, how is your family? Did they not come with you?"

"Susan came," Maggie answered, "but she's off helping find a lost pony right now."

"Dear heavens," Rarity gasped, "Who's gone missing?"

"A... unicorn stallion," Maggie said, trying to remember, "I think he was from out of town, but Pinkamena knew him. His name matched his coloring pretty well... Ashen Blaze I think it was."

"Ashen Blaze?" Rarity exclaimed, eyes widened to their fullest in surprise.

"You know him I take it?" Maggie asked.

"You could say that," Rarity said coyly.

"Maggie!" Rarity and Maggie both jumped in fright when Pinkie Pie was suddenly next to them, with several dark, moon-emblazoned balloons tied to her tail. "If you're done catching up with Rarity, I could use a hoof getting all these balloons in place. There's still a lot of party spots to set up."

"I must be going anyway," Rarity said, averting her gaze, "Lots of... work to. Getting a head-start on displaying the summer designs. Nice to see you Maggie, have fun, bye." She whirled around and walked away quickly but with proper decorum.

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"Confound that Ashen Blaze," Gale muttered darkly as she rested her head on the café table in front of her, "Where is he hiding?"

"Nowhere that we've looked obviously," Susan Fidelity Pie said from across the table. She ignored the withering glance that Gale angled up at her and said, "He'll turn up eventually, I'm sure. He can't get very far, can he?"

"That's part of the problem," Gale said, "He has a couple of teleport spells. One of them is line of sight, so he can't get too far with it normally. The other one, though, is based on established way-points and is virtually limitless. He could easily have slipped back to Canterlot if he wanted to, but for the life of me I can't think of a reason why. He was actually excited to come here today, if only to showcase the *stinim*."

"Excuse me madams." The two ponies looked up to see a cream earth pony stallion with a slicked-back navy blue mane, a small mustache, and a

white shirtfront collar standing by their table. "Have you made your decisions?" he asked.

"Um," Gale said, glancing at the unopened menu in front of her, "I'll have the house salad I guess, raspberry vinaigrette dressing if you have it."

"Daffodil sandwich please," Susan ordered. As the waiter nodded and left, the purplish-grey pony turned her attention back to Gale and said, "I'm not sure that I understand why you're worried. Ash is a full-grown stallion who can take care of himself, and if I understand what you've told me, you consider him the leader of your group."

"That's mostly because Ash can't *help* but be a leader," Gale said, "It was fine when Soul Mage, Gold Heart, and I had just started working with him and he had all the experience, but it's been several years and numerous dimensional hops since those days. Ash respects our opinions and all, but sometimes we have to literally beat some sense into him." She sighed and put her head back on the table. "To honest," she said, "I'm scared for him. This isn't our world and I'm not sure if he's ever going to fully adjust."

"A-*ha!* I should have known." Gale looked up to see Rarity approaching the table, looking like she'd just uncovered a great secret. "Good day Gale, Susan," she said sweetly as she took a seat at the table between the earth pony mares, "I take it the search for Ashen Blaze has not borne fruit?"

"You've heard about that?" Gale asked in surprise, "I know word tends to spread fast in small towns, but I've been getting the feeling that the Summer Sun Celebration's gummed up the rumor mill for the day."

"I just came from speaking with Pinkie and Maggie," Rarity explained, "And watching that surprisingly entertaining act of Trixie's of course."

"Trixie?" Gale asked, "As in the Great and Powerful Trixie, braggart and arrogant bully extraordinaire? She's back in town?" Rarity's reply was interrupted by the arrival of lunch, and the waiter gave the white unicorn an expectant look after setting the plates out.

"Some tea and a spinach salad if you please," Rarity said to him.

"Very well," the waiter said primly and walked away.



"Trixie is not quite the same pony she used to be," Rarity said, returning to the topic at hand, "She seems to have a more realistic idea of her own abilities and the confidence to let them speak for themselves rather than inventing stories to pad her ego."

"That doesn't sound at all like the crazy pony who tried using the Emerald to get petty vengeance," Gale said, "although, I think I remember Heart mentioning something about Trixie having a successful show in Manehattan during that week with the screwy stars..."

"Yes, she was performing there for a while," Rarity said, "but it seems she's gone back on the road and picked up a few other ponies to share the stage with."

"Huh," Gale said, sounding impressed, but then sighed and transitioned to melancholy, "Glad to hear that *somepony's* doing better in life."

"How- Oh, thank you," Rarity cut herself off as her food and tea arrived and then turned her attention back to Gale, "How has Ash been faring lately?"

"I'm not sure," the earth pony said, "I've been seeing less and less of him over the last few months. Without any big disasters or monsters to fight, he's been withdrawing into his studies and guarding Discord. When I barely had to press to convince him to come here today, I thought he'd finally made a change for the better." She chomped down on some her salad and chewed it slowly. "And then," she said after swallowing, "then he disappears without a trace!"

"You poor dear," Rarity said, looking Gale over, "You shouldn't have to be so stressed at this time of year. I insist on helping with your search."

"Oh no Rarity," Gale said, "I'm already imposing on Susan here. I can't go dragging every pony I meet into this search. You probably have a lot to do to prepare-" She stopped as Rarity held up a hoof and smiled.

"My task for the day is done," the white unicorn said, "and I assume he has his necklace?"

"As always," Gale said with a nod.

"I can keep an eye and a spell out for him," Rarity said, "If we each go our separate ways, we can cover more ground and track our errant unicorn friend down much faster."

"Thanks Rarity," Gale said, "If you find him, drag him to your boutique." She finished her salad and started to reach for her saddlebags to pay, only for Rarity to wave her off and place some bits of her own on the table. "You're doing more than enough," Gale protested.

"I insist," the unicorn said, "and may I recommend a trip to the spa once this matter is resolved?"

"If I take you up on that, I'm paying for it," the brown earth pony said firmly, but with a grateful smile on her face. She stood up and looked at Susan, asking, "You ready to go?"

"I believe so," the Pie sister said, pushing her plate away and standing up, "We haven't tried down by the farms yet." Gale nodded and the two mares trotted away, leaving Rarity to finish her lunch.

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The sun was a good distance beyond its zenith when Twilight Sparkle found time for a break. Between Pinkie Pie's boundless enthusiasm and Rarity's skillful use of charm to gather the greater part of Ponyville's idle population into a decorating committee, the basic preparations for the Celebration were well ahead of schedule. With nothing left on her schedule besides getting on Rainbow Dash's case about the clouds in a few hours, doing the last-minute triple-check checklist just before sundown, and stopping by to visit Applejack before going to the "surprise" party at the library, Twilight decided to locate Trixie and see how the showmare was doing. The fact that she was bursting with curiosity about Mar the Seapony was also a big motivator, if she had to be honest with herself. Like any pony, she'd been fascinated as a young filly by the legends of the half-pony, half-fish creatures that were supposed to live in kingdoms under the ocean. She was skeptical of the legitimacy of this particular seapony, but between Nightmare Moon, Discord, Pinkie Sense, and the minor disaster magnets that were the Order-naries, Twilight had learned that skepticism was best applied with an open mind.

She found the stage-wagon on the outskirts of town near Whitetail Wood, completely closed up and parked in the shade of an old oak tree. Trixie, Harlequin, and Tremolo were standing a short distance away, looking like they were about to come to blows with one another while Barnacle stood next to the wagon with one wing wrapped protectively around a sea-green earth pony mare with a blue mane and tail who looked vaguely familiar to Twilight. She was too far away to make out the words of the conversation, but she could tell by the body language and the sparks forming on the end of Tremolo's horn that things had long since reached the point where an interruption was needed before somepony got hurt. "Hey everypony!" she called out in affected cheerfulness, waving a hoof at the performers. She trotted over to the wagon once they all turned to look at her.

"Twilight Sparkle," Trixie called back as the lavender unicorn approached, "Trixie must speak with you and-" she cut off as the sea-green mare suddenly bolted from under Barnacle's wing and ran into the wagon, slamming the door behind her. Trixie sighed and shook her head sadly. "My apologies," she said, "The poor filly has the most horrible stage fright Trixie has ever seen."

"Reminds me of Fluttershy when I first met her," Twilight said, "Who is she anyways? She looks familiar."

"She should," Tremolo said, "That was none other than these hustlers's counterfeit seapony!"

"Really," Twilight said, quirking an eyebrow and looking to Trixie for confirmation. The showmare hesitated, and then gave Tremolo a sideways glare and nodded. "Well, I'm impressed," the lavender unicorn declared, "her costume was flawless and it looked like she was actually floating in water inside that tank."

"The water's quite real," Barnacle said, "Did ya notice the necklace she was wearin'?" Twilight nodded, looking curious. "That's a charm I came into possession of many years ago," the pegasus explained, "It lets a pony breathe underwater for a few hours at a go. Saved my life a couple times when I got shipwrecked."

"And now you use it to scam ponies," Tremolo said accusingly. Trixie and Barnacle both opened their mouths to retort, but the crimson unicorn held

up a hoof and then turned to leave. "I should have taken my leave of you already," he said, "so I'll rectify that now. Adieu until the next time."

"Oh no you don't you pedantic troublemaker," Harlequin said, pouncing and pinning Tremolo to the ground, "It pains my pride to say it, but we need you if we're gonna have a show tomorrow."

"Let him go Quin," Trixie said with a dismissive wave of her hoof, "We would have better luck vanquishing an Ursa in single combat than convincing him to assist the Great and Powerful Trixie in anything."

"No can do Trixie," the mustard-yellow earth pony said, getting Tremolo in a headlock and preventing him from getting his balance, "I'd rather put up with this nuisance for another day than travel for a week with an empty larder."

"That so?" Tremolo grunted, his voice dripping with unmistakable sarcasm, "Well, I'm... moved. Your passionate plea and this lovely closeness have caused me to see the errors of my way!" His horn lit up and knocked Harlequin's rear legs out from under him, causing both stallions to collapse into a heap, but the acrobatic clown managed to keep his grip as the two struggled for dominance.

"Ok, that's enough," Twilight said, throwing her own magic into the fray to try and separate the pair. She eventually settled for teleporting Tremolo out of Harlequin's grasp to a point a foot or so above the ground and then holding the unicorn there in her magic. "Why can't you be nice to each other?"

"Honestly Twilight," Trixie said, rolling her eyes, "Is it your life's mission to try and establish friendship between every pony in Equestria?"

"I want you to have a fair chance to succeed Trixie," Twilight said, setting Tremolo on the ground and switching to a less strenuous holding spell to keep him from leaving, "I'll talk to Lyra about letting you perform without Tremolo tomorrow, provided he gives me a good reason why he can't put aside whatever grudge he's holding." She fixed Tremolo with a determined, expectant stare, waiting for him to speak.

"I don't see why I should bother," the crimson unicorn said after a moment of silence, "You are clearly on her side, and I will not be party to any plan that allows her chicanery to continue."

"Way I see it," Harlequin said, "he's a pony that Trixie humiliated once and could never let it go."

"So why wait until now to start chasing her?" Twilight wondered aloud, "Where was he when Trixie made her first appearance in Ponyville?"

"I had nothing," Tremolo muttered, "It would have been her confident boasting against my humiliation at her hooves. I was ecstatic when I heard the rumors that her lies had finally been exposed, but then..." He glared at the azure unicorn mare. "You recovered," he said, seething in anger, "after all you did, the falsehoods you told, you should've been left on the streets to beg. It's not fair!"

"I... see," Twilight said, becoming a bit disturbed. She sidled over to Trixie and said in a low tone, "We need to talk, in private."

"Very well," the showmare replied after a moment of trying to read Twilight's expression. She led Twilight over to the wagon and knocked on the door. "Cabbage," she said, "It's Trixie. I'm coming in with a friend, ok?"

"I said *private* Trixie," Twilight said.

"Cabbage won't say anything," Trixie said reassuringly, and then became slightly irritated when she heard a lock sliding into place behind the door, "She can barely stand to be around anypony she doesn't know anyway. It took me two weeks to get her to say more than two words to me or Harlequin." She gave Twilight a sweet smile as her horn lit up and she cast a spell to undo the lock and open the door. "Perhaps your vaunted expertise can help her come out of her shell?" she suggested demurely.

"Fluttershy might be more helpful there," Twilight said as she followed Trixie up the steps and into the wagon. She looked around as Trixie closed the door behind them and almost didn't see the sea-green mare, who was trying to hide under a basket of ribbons and cloth scraps. "Hello," she said, giving the pony her most friendly smile, "I'm Twilight Sparkle. It's nice to meet you." Cabbage simply stared at the lavender unicorn and gave out a tiny squeak that put Fluttershy's most terrified utterance to shame. "So,"

Twilight said, trying awkwardly to break the ice while Trixie fetched some cushions to sit on, "I was really impressed with your... performance earlier. Have you been doing it long?" Cabbage shifted uncomfortably under her cloth and wicker shell, opened her mouth with some difficulty, and finally just dropped her gaze and hugged some ribbons to her.

"Barnacle's version of events is that he found her as a homeless orphan," Trixie said, gesturing for Twilight to sit, "He took pity on her and earned her trust by buying her a meal with his own meager funds. By giving her the underwater breathing charm and dressing her up as a seapony, he was able to attract more listeners to his storytellings, and they were making enough to live on when the Great and Powerful Trixie came upon them." The showmare chuckled for a bit and then continued, "He and I got into a contest of tall tales in which I was soundly beaten. As the price of losing, I had to buy the both of them dinner, by the end of which Barnacle had expressed a desire to take his show on the road since the locals had heard most of his stories and I offered to take him and Cabbage with me when I left. We met Harlequin in the next town and..." She trailed off and shook her head. "But never mind the rest," she said, "You had something to tell me?"

"Something to ask actually," Twilight said, "What exactly did you do to Tremolo? I haven't seen anypony get that obsessed over being shown up, not even when Rainbow Dash got a swelled head about being a hero."

"Trixie made fools out of many ponies before Ponyville," Trixie said, "What I did with Applejack, Rainbow Dash, and Rarity will stick in my mind forever because of what happened later, but the vast majority of the others just blur together." She paused and thought for a few minutes. "I think I remember a red pony with a music-related talent," she said at last, "but I don't know what exactly he did or how I threw it back in his face... It was just another successful performance for the Great and Powerful Trixie. And to be frank, while I've encountered many who are still angry at me, Tremolo's the only pony to chase me down for vengeance, and he's annoyingly good at showing up when he can cause the most damage."

"Ok then," Twilight said, standing up, "I think I know how to resolve this."

"What-" Trixie started to asked, only for Twilight to shush her.

"Just play along," Twilight said, and then opened the wagon door and hopped out. She saw Barnacle reared up between Harlequin and Tremolo, using his front legs to keep the other two stallions out of each other's reach. "Ok," Twilight announced, getting their attention, "As the head coordinator for the entire Summer Sun Celebration in Ponyville, I declare that the show will go on tomorrow whether or not Tremolo agrees to take part. So either start getting along or... run off," she finished with a smirk as Tremolo did exactly that, disappearing into the forest.

"Thank you for that ma'am," Barnacle said, dropping back onto all fours.

"If it was that easy," Harlequin said darkly, "why didn't you just overrule that Lyra pony's choice earlier?"

"Because I couldn't," Twilight answered. The performers all gave her an odd look. "All Lyra wants is something similar to the battle of wits you had with Tremolo earlier," Twilight explained, "and he's determined to mess up your show, right?" They nodded in answer. "Just perform like you normally would and stay ready for him to pop up," Twilight said in conclusion.

"And if he realizes that we're counting on him showing up and doesn't?" Trixie asked, her head leaning out of the wagon.

"You'll have put on an uninterrupted show," Twilight answered confidently, "Lyra won't be able to stop you once you've started, I'll make sure of that. By the way, there's going to be a party at my library just after sundown. I hope to see you, all of you, there."

"You're too kind Twilight, you really are," Trixie said.

# Chapter 6

## Down on the Farm

As the lunchtime hours flowed along, Stella Moon and her entourage were meandering toward the agricultural corner of Ponyville as their tour guide Spike regaled them with an account of the previous year's Celebration and Nightmare Moon's return. "I've got to say it was a little weird," he said from his spot riding on Soul Mage's back, "When I fell asleep – which I tried so hard not to do, but after the partying and staying up so long... anyway, when I fell asleep we were facing eternal night at the whim of a crazy scary night pony, but when I woke up the sun was up and there's a celebration and I find out that Nightmare Moon was Princess Celestia's sister! I honestly wasn't sure what to think."

"Yes," Stella muttered sardonically, "that was made quite clear when- oof!" Gold Heart had hopped up and poked the dark lavender pony in the ribs, giving her a warning look. "Er, that is," Stella said, raising her voice a little, "I could well guess how confusing it must have been for everypony." Spike didn't show any signs of noticing the disguised princess's near slip-up, but Stella decided to play it safe by changing the subject. "I'm feeling a bit hungry," she declared, "perhaps we should find some place to have lunch."

"I know just the place," Spike said, "Sweet Apple Acres isn't too far from here, and if things are like they were last year, they'll have plenty of food to spare."

"Lead on young dragon," Stella said with a nod. Spike gave Soul a light kick in the sides and the unicorn obligingly trotted ahead on the path leading to Applejack's farm, giving a playful whinny and snort as he did so. Heart rolled her eyes and smirked at the display.

"The Apple family holds a large family reunion during the Summer Sun Celebration," Spike explained as the group approached the entrance to the farm, "They try to have it wherever Princess Celestia is, but Applejack said the farm near Fillydelphia isn't big enough to support the whole clan, so they're gathering here this year."



"So where are they?" Soul asked, looking around the seemingly empty fields and apple orchard he could see from the gate.

"Check the house, check the barns, search the orchard," Heart said, taking the lead, "Unless you've got a better plan?"

About halfway down the path, the sound of hooves impacting a tree off to the right grabbed the group's attention. Going to investigate, Soul nearly bumped noses with Applejack as the farm pony came trotting toward the path with a pair of apple baskets strapped to her back. "Well, I'll be," Applejack said, smiling, "Soul Mage, I ain't seen you in well over a season. In town fer the Celebration I take it?"

"Indeed we are," Soul said with a nod, gesturing with his head at Heart and Stella, "Ashen Blaze and Gale are elsewhere in town, probably getting into mischief, but I'd like you to meet a new friend of ours, Stella Moon."

AJ ran over to the tall unicorn and grabbed a leg with both hooves, shaking it vigorously. "Well howdy there Ms. Moon, I'm Applejack," she said, "pleased to meet you."

"Charmed," Stella said, taken aback by the earth pony's enthusiasm.

"Now," Applejack said, releasing the other pony's hoof and taking a step back, "what can I do y'all fer?"

Stella just stared blankly for a second until Heart gave her a light nudge. "I'm from Canterlot," she said, "A reporter for a newspaper. Er, I mean I'd like to be one. I'm writing a piece on Ponyville's Summer Sun traditions. I heard from the dragon there that you're an important pony to know when it comes to the food."

"You got that right," AJ said proudly, giving Spike a brief smile, "Sweet Apple Acres is the biggest producer of apples, and other assorted crops, round these parts. I'm also noted fer being one of the best bakers in town. Speakin' of food, y'all are just in time for taste-testing the first round of the Apple Family's Summer bake-off. Come on." She began trotting away toward the farmhouse without waiting to see if anypony was following her.

"She's... energetic," Stella said as she and her escort began to follow Applejack. *Quite unlike her behavior around the real me*, she added to herself.

"She's doing pretty much the same thing she did when Twilight and I first met her," Spike said, "She's quite proud of her apples." Applejack led them to a long table in the yard in front of the farmhouse and placed Stella at the head with Heart and Soul on either side and Spike next to the golden-yellow unicorn. As she left them there to go ring the triangle on the porch and drop her baskets, Spike leaned in and cautioned, "Prepare yourselves; there's going to be a *lot* of ponies in-" He was cut off as the triangle clanged loudly and rapidly.

"Bring 'em in everypony! We got guests!" Applejack shouted. The ground rumbled under the impact of innumerable hooves as ponies colored in just about every conceivable combination of reds, yellows, oranges, and greens emerged from the farmhouse and various paths leading into the orchard. Many were bearing pans, plates, or bowls filled with food on their backs or in their mouths. The controlled stampede came to a stop, leaving the table and its occupants at the focus of a semi-circular crowd of ponies. "Everypony," Applejack said, stepping up behind Stella Moon and rearing back with a hoof on the chair for balance, "This here's Stella Moon, Soul Mage, and Gold Heart. Let's give them an Apple Family welcome!" That announcement set off another flurry of movement as the food-bearing ponies ran up one by one to the table to deposit their offering while AJ rattled off names. In a matter of seconds the table was covered in apple-based foods of all kinds and the guests were reeling in bewilderment, except for Spike who was looking quite amused at the show.

"Merciful..." Stella muttered, eyes rolling as she swayed slightly in her seat.

"Uh..." Soul said, at a loss for words until his gaze swept across the table. His confusion fled as his logical mind made a few connections and then readied a good-natured quip for him to use: "I'm sorry, were you introducing the clan or laying out the menu?" His words snapped Heart out of her daze and she started to lift a wing before realizing she couldn't reach him from across the table, so she settled for rolling her eyes and smirking. AJ and her relatives chuckled appreciatively. "Seriously though," Soul said, grinning at the orange farmpony, "This all looks great. I don't know where to start."

"Well I do," Spike declared, grabbing several caramel apples off a plate and taking a huge bite out of one. With that, the meal officially began.

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"Hoo-wee," Spike said, leaning back in his seat, "That's the best apple pie I've ever had Applejack." The majority of the Apples had gone back to their business after eating their share of the food, leaving only Applejack and Big Macintosh to entertain the visitors.

"Thanks sugarcube," Applejack replied dryly, "but I didn't make that one. Heck, I've been so busy makin' sure there's enough apples for everypony else's projects that ain't had time ta start bakin' anything myself."

"It was a most satisfactory meal," Stella said, "Although I must say I'm surprised at just how many apples you've used. Apples normally ripen around autumn, do they not? Summer has not even officially begun, so where did all this come from?"

Applejack and Macintosh chuckled and the farm-mare tilted her hat back as she explained, "Well, a fair amount comes from the leftovers of our winter storage, but we've got a little section of the orchard where the apples grow and ripen in no time flat just so we can have fresh apples fer the summer."

"That's.... amazing," Gold Heart said, "How did you manage that, if you don't mind me asking? Are they bespelled to mature faster?"

AJ snorted disdainfully. "You've been livin' round those Canterlot unicorns too long," she said. Macintosh gave her a look and she cleared her throat and smiled apologetically at Stella. "Er, no offense ma'am," she said, "but us Apples have a long tradition of relyin' on our own earth pony ingenuity rather than magic to solve our problems."

"I understand," the dark lavender unicorn said, "I would hope most earth ponies have similar convictions."

"Strength in diversity," Soul said with a nod.

"Eeyup," Big Macintosh said, nodding sagely.

"The early ripening apples are something my family's developed over generations of careful cultivation," Applejack said. She glanced up at the sky and blinked in surprise. "Speakin' of apples-"

"That's all we've been talking about," Soul muttered with a smirk.

"I need ta deliver a basket to Fluttershy," the orange earth pony continued, ignoring the unicorn, "Sorry to skedaddle, but-"

"May we join you?" Stella asked, "I was really hoping I would get to meet this Fluttershy."

"That so?" Applejack said, giving Stella a curious look, "Not that she's a nice pony and friend of mine, but what's got you so eager to meet her? Is it 'cuz of her modeling career?"

"Uh... yes," Stella said, grinning broadly.

"Well alright then," AJ said, "Meet me out by the gate in a few minutes." She got up from the table and walked to the porch where she'd left her apple baskets. The group got up as well, made their good-byes to Macintosh, and headed for the gate. Applejack caught up to them a minute later, her back laden with apples again, and took the lead as they started down the road toward Fluttershy's cottage. When the tree-covered hills of the farm began to fade into the background and the four ponies and single dragon were alone, AJ slowed down until she was walking next to Stella and asked, "So what's the real reason you're in town?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Yer not a reporter," AJ said, coming to a stop, "I've met my share of newspanies, and even those from Canterlot don't talk as fancy as you do. And you two," she shifted her gaze to Heart and Soul, "Y'all should know better than ta try and get a lie past *me* of all ponies."

"Honesty..." Soul muttered, facehoofing. Stella opened her mouth to try and reply, but Soul shook his head at her and fixed his gaze on Applejack's eyes. "AJ," he said in a serious tone, "We're here to experience the Summer Sun Celebration and have fun. Sure, 'Stella' has some secrets she doesn't want to share, but don't we all?"

The suspicion drained from Applejack's face and she pulled her hat down over her eyes. "You're right," she said with a sigh, "I shouldn't be pryin' into business that ain't mine, and if y'all trust her, that's good enough fer me. My apologies Ms. Moon."

"I..." the tall unicorn said hesitantly as Applejack started walking again, with Soul and Spike right behind her. Heart started to follow as well, but Stella stopped her with a hoof on her shoulder and leaned in to confer with the golden-yellow pegasus. "I am starting to feel guilty about this deception," she said quietly, "Applejack is a pony who knows the real me, so why should I hide from her?"

"The point of this is to see the Celebration like a normal pony, remember?" Heart replied softly, "But I know how you feel, you're caught between achieving your goal and being honest. Personally, I'd-"

"Hey, what's keeping you two?" Soul called out. The mares glanced up to see him and AJ standing at a bend in the road, looking back at them.

"Short version," Heart whispered to the disguised princess, "Think of a compromise between the two. We're coming," she called back to Soul as she trotted toward him.

*Compromise?* Stella thought as she started walking, *How? I could ask questions about myself, drop hints, but what do I do if somepony actually figures it out? No, I can't keep this masquerade up. Applejack's been treating me like any other pony, more or less, since Nightmare Night. I can trust her to keep a secret, right? But then there's Twilight Sparkle's little dragon...* She shook her head and moved from a walk to a canter to catch up with the group. *I can deal with him,* she concluded. "Fair Applejack," she started to say as she pulled up even with the farm pony, only to be interrupted by a shout from farther down the road.

"Heart! Soul!" Two earth pony mares were racing up to the group. The one in the lead was brown with a darker brown mane and tail and the other was a dark purplish-grey with a straight light grey mane and tail.

"Gale?" Soul said in surprise as the pair came to a stop in front of them, "What's up? Isn't Ash supposed to be with you?"

"He *was*, yeah," Gale said grumpily, "He disappeared a while ago and I have had *no* luck finding him. You haven't seen him by chance?" She looked hopeful for a second, but then shook her head sadly. "No, he'd be with you if you had... Oh, this is Susan Pie, Pinkie's sister," she added, waving a hoof at the pony beside her half-heartedly.

"Good to meet you," Heart said pleasantly, "Call me Gold Heart, Heart for short. This is Soul Mage, Stella Moon, and... do you know Applejack already?"

"I'm sure Pinkie's told her about me," AJ said, "but we ain't had the pleasure of meeting before. Howdy." She went over and shook Susan's hoof and then gave Gale a serious look. "Now what was that about Ashen Blaze going missin'?"

"We went to Sugar Cube Corner," Gale explained, "just so Ash could bum an oven and ingredients to make rolls with this batch of *stinim* he suddenly had."

"*Stinim*? How?" Heart and Soul exclaimed simultaneously.

"No idea," Gale said, "Anyway, just a few minutes later he's gone without a trace and he left the *stinim* sticks behind."

"That does *not* bode well," Soul said, "Where have you looked?"

"Just about everywhere," Gale said, "We've got Rarity trying to get a trace on his Artificial Element necklace on the chance he's slipped past us and Susan here can see personal auras, so she's been helping me in lieu of using PC. Oh, did I mention Ash took PC with him? Ugh..." She sank to her haunches in mild despair. "Well, we can probably skip Sweet Apple now," she said after a moment, "so if he's not back in town he must have... Argh, I don't know! He can teleport. He could be *anywhere* between Zecora's hut and Canterlot! Why me?" She dropped fully onto her belly, breathing raggedly through clenched teeth as her irises slowly shrank.

"Is she... trancing?" Soul asked worriedly as Heart leaned down to look into Gale's eyes, "Has she seriously sent herself over the edge over *Ash*?"

"Are you not concerned about his well-being?" Stella asked, giving the golden-yellow unicorn a hard look.

"I am concerned," Soul snapped, "But Gale usually trips out over machines, not people, er, ponies."

"Gale," Heart said, patting the earth pony's cheek gently, "stay with us girl. Slow breaths. Don't make me sic Soul's faulty logic on you."

"I'd take offense to that if I weren't trying to think of an appropriate paradox," Soul said.

"No," Gale moaned, thrusting a hoof into the air in surrender, "No idiotic whatevers. I'm functioning, I'm... good." She heaved herself to her feet and tried to give the ponies around her a smile, but her wobbly, pin-point eyes made it look less than reassuring.

"Oh, you are definitely not alright sugar," Applejack said, walking over to lean supportively against Gale, "You look like me after five days of non-stop apple-bucking. You need to take a break and get yer marbles sorted back out. Why don't you come with us ta Fluttershy's? She's probably got some tea ta help you relax a little."

"We still haven't checked around there," Susan pointed out as Gale began to protest.

"Fine," the brown earth pony said dejectedly, "let's go." Head hanging low, she plodded down the road.

When the meadow around Fluttershy's little hill-cottage came into view, Gale was still in a dour mood despite her friends's attempts to distract her. "So," Soul Mage said, abruptly shifting his focus to Spike, who was now riding on Applejack's back, "does Fluttershy normally have a role for the Summer Sun Celebration?"

"I think so," the dragon said, "Last year she was in charge of music. She's got this little choir of songbirds that perform at parties and big events, and I'm pretty sure they were on Twilight's list of possible entertainment." Soul nodded and was about to suggest to Gale that they ask to listen in on a rehearsal when he noticed Susan had slowed down and was gazing intently in the direction of the Everfree Forest.

"I think I sense your friend," the dark-grey earth pony said. Gale's head shot up and turned to look hopefully at Susan. "There's another strange

aura alongside it," Susan said, "but I'm pretty sure it's him, and he's headed in our general direction."

"Finally," Gale said with a snarl, "he's going to suffer for the trouble he's caused me."

"Easy there magebane girl," Soul said as he and Heart followed the earth pony as she stalked toward the forest, "At least make sure he'll be able to explain himself afterward." Heart cast a sideways look at her brother but didn't comment. Stella, Susan, and Applejack followed the Order-naries at a distance, concern over many things crossing their faces. When they reached the point where the path split between Fluttershy's yard and the Forest entrance, they saw an equine shape walking out of the misty woods. Once she entered the sunlight, the figure's stripes and golden jewelry became recognizable, as did the ash-grey pony she was dragging on a makeshift stretcher behind her.

"Ah," Zecora said, "I am glad to see you all here. Poor Ashen Blaze is not well I fear."

"What happened?" Heart asked as she, Soul, and Gale ran over to check on their friend. He didn't appear wounded and his gemstone necklace was present, but his eyes were nearly closed and unfocused and his horn bore a faint shimmer of magic. PC lay beside his head, a single yellow light indicating that it was operational but asleep.

"The full story is a mystery to me," the zebra said, shrugging out of the stretcher, "I found him like this in a dangerous part of Everfree. His horn glows as if casting a spell, and he was muttering, but about what I could not tell."

"Ash, you awake?" Soul asked, giving the unicorn a gentle shove. Ash grimaced and mumbled incoherently before going still again. Soul put a hoof to Ash's forehead and frowned. "Too warm. I think he's either catching something or straining his magic too much. Heart, let's douse him." Heart nodded and Soul began to channel his spirit magic toward her.

"Wait." Everypony turned to see Fluttershy standing behind them in the gateway to her property. The shy pegasus shrank back under the attention but then steeled her nerves and said, "I'm sorry to interrupt, but if you need water, you could use some from my stream. If you want to that is."



"Thanks," Soul said, completing the link between him and his sister, "but we've got this covered. Give Heart some room folks." The two golden-yellow ponies became wreathed in ethereal blue flames as Gold Heart jumped into a low hover and pointed her front hooves toward Ash. The flames around the pegasus began to flow into the space between her hooves and formed into a spinning blue disk of energy.

When the disk reached the proper size, Heart pulled one hoof back and then thrust it toward Ash with a shout, "Element Wheel, Water!" The energy flew toward the dopey unicorn and exploded wetly over him, dousing him with water and snapping him out of his daze.

"What's the-" Ash exclaimed, sitting up suddenly and looking around. "Order-naries present, one zebra, other ponies and I'm..." His gaze slid up to his horn and he groaned. "Ah *skvetch*," he swore, standing up and shaking the water from his coat, "not to sound unappreciative, but you guys just made me drop the barrier I was holding."

"What barrier?" Gale asked, giving Ash a suspicious look.

"A barrier to try and hold back... Uh where's— oh there you are." He picked and switched on PC before settling the computer on his head.

"Hold back what Ash?" Soul prompted, "What's in there?" As if in answer, a pair of small round fuzzy creatures, one blue and one brown, came buzzing out of the forest, their large compound eyes and silly smiles making them look oddly adorable. Applejack, Fluttershy, and Susan Pie stared at the bug with horror ranging from mild to paralyzing.

"Parasprites!" the purplish-grey earth pony exclaimed. She and AJ both leaped forward, grabbed a parasprite each, and flung them unceremoniously back into the trees.

"Yeah," Ash said dully, rubbing his head, "Those are just the forerunners. When my barrier collapses in... a minute or so, we'll up to our knees the little meepers."

Susan Fidelity Pie stared in open-mouthed shock at Ashen Blaze, an expression that was shared by Applejack and Fluttershy, and to a lesser extent Zecora. "Tell me yer jokin' Ash," Applejack said after a second, her voice weak and pleading. The grey, fire-maned unicorn shook his head

sadly. "Shoot!" the farmpony exclaimed, "I gotta protect the apples!" She spun around and galloped away at full speed. Fluttershy also fled, heading into her house and starting to barricade everything.

"They're that bad are they?" Soul Mage asked dryly.

"A single parasprite can spell a town's doom," Zecora said, "Ponyville must be warned, lest their stores be consumed."

"Ugh," Ash grunted, shaking his head again, "We'll barely be ahead of the wave if we run, but I'm near to burnt out on magic. No teleports for a while."

"You're not the only pony with such a spell Ashen Blaze," Stella Moon said, power beginning to radiate from her whole being, "gather close my little ponies."

# Chapter 7

## Face the Swarm

Twilight Sparkle was standing on the veranda of the town square pavilion, looking around at the orderly, innocent comings and goings of ponies either putting the finishing touches on their decorations or simply hanging out. The skies were finally clear, save for one cloud that Rainbow had brought down close to the ground to relax on after almost breaking her speed record for cloud kicking. To Twilight left, Pinkie Pie's hooves were drumming up a rapid staccato rhythm as her entire body shuddered uncontrollably. "You're absolutely sure the doozy's going to happen here?" the lavender unicorn asked her friend, looking skeptical.

"A-a-a-as s-s-sure a-as I can be-e-e abou-out a d-d-doozy," the party pony stammered through her vibrations. The queen of all Pinkie Sense twitches has struck not long after Twilight had stopped by to check on the preparations for the school-house party and had increased in frequency when Rainbow Dash happened by and the group made their way to the center of Ponyville. Like the previous time it had struck, Pinkie was at a complete loss as to the doozy's nature and Twilight was trying her best not to panic over the uncertainty.

With a flash of light, six ponies and a baby dragon appeared in front of the pavilion, creating a large crack of displaced air that brought all activity in the square to a halt as ponies turned to look. Pinkie's jitters increased to the point that Twilight was worried she'd start punching a hole in the veranda. Before anypony could ask what was going on, an unsteady-looking Ashen Blaze separated himself from the group and walked up onto the veranda and came over to the lavender unicorn. "Lucky coincidence seeing you here," he said with a grin, and then spotted Pinkie and wondered aloud, "or is it?"

"What's going on Ash?" Twilight asked.

"Ah, now... how do I say this?" the ash-grey stallion mused.

"As quickly as possible," Soul Mage snapped at him, coming up onto the veranda himself, "Twilight, there's about to be a sudden influx of parasprites." The moment the word left his mouth, a chorus of screams rose up from the west side of town as a veritable wave of multi-colored furballs rose up above the rooftops and came flowing toward the town square. Pinkie was hit with a number of odd spasms, her body inflating like a balloon for half a second at one point, before settling back onto the veranda jitter-free but wide-eyed in shock.

"That's a doozy all right," she said.

"Oh no," Twilight said, irises shrinking and mane frizzing as the parasprites began to descend on the town, "No no no no! Not now! This can't be happening!"

"We're doomed!" a cream-colored mare with a rose-red mane wailed. The crowd broke out into panic, running every which way to find cover to try and protect something. The parasprites milled about as well, searching for edible substances or some sort of mischievous fun. A bunch came for Rainbow Dash, who took off from her cloud and led them on a chase around the square.

"That could've gone better," Gale said dryly.

"Somepony needs to take charge here," Ash said, giving Twilight a meaningful look that the panicky unicorn failed to catch. Ash rolled his eyes and sighed. "All right, how do we-"

"**BE STILL AND SILENT!**" All motion in the square came to a stop; even the parasprites paused where they were under the influence of the Royal Canterlot Voice. All eyes turned to Stella Moon, who was standing tall and regal with a look on her face that commanded instant obedience. Her night-black mane was flowing behind her in an unfelt breeze, until Gold Heart recovered her senses and discreetly pointed it out to the tall unicorn.

"Princess Luna?" Twilight asked, gazing in surprise and confusion at the disguised alicorn, "What are you-"

"There are more pressing matters Twilight Sparkle," Luna said in a low voice, "Have you the means to take control of this situation?"

"I... yes," the lavender pony said, looking to the pink pony standing next to her. Pinkie returned the look with uncharacteristic seriousness. "What do you need?" Twilight asked.

"Time," Pinkie replied, indicating the parasprites that were starting to move about again, and then looked around the square. "Pie family!" she shouted. Susan ran over to stand in front of her sister and Maggie came galloping over from another part of the square. "Shoo Fly," Pinkie ordered, pacing on the veranda as she looked down at her sisters, "You're on rhythm duty. We need cymbals, a drum, and a metronome. Maggie, you get the flute, tuba and harmonica. I'll handle everything else. Are we ready?"

"Yes!" the two ponies replied smartly.

"Then let's go!" The Pie sisters dashed off in separate directions. The Order-naries and Luna looked on with expressions of confusion and were about to ask for an explanation when Twilight stepped up to the railing and called for everypony's attention.

"You all know what they're up to, I think," she said, "Anypony with a musical instrument to spare go get set it out where Pinkie or her sisters can find it. As for the rest of us, lock down all the food and try to corral the parasprites into groups. Remember, they can't hurt you and they're only after food. Don't let them have it. Go!" Emboldened by Twilight's take-charge attitude, the Ponyvillagers resumed running about, but this time with clearer purpose. To Gale, it didn't look much better than the panicked stampeding. "So, Ashen Blaze," Twilight started to say, only to pause for a moment as Rainbow Dash buzzed past with a small cloud of parasprites almost riding on her tail. Twilight grabbed the insectoids in her magic and pulled them down to the ground, keeping them immobilized under a dome of lavender energy. "What do you know about this?" she asked.

"And where have you been all day?" Gale added, glaring at the fire-maned unicorn.

"I assume I've been in the Everfree Forest," Ash answered, "Everything between when I started working on the *stinim* rolls and roughly an hour and half ago is just a foggy blur in my mind. Whatever was influencing me sent me to a remote part of the forest where I found the Fountain of Eternal Grapes."

"Fountain of what now?" Soul asked incredulously.

"I kid you not," Ash said sincerely, "There was a stone fountain the likes of which you'd find in a Canterlot garden, except it was spewing red grapes like there was no tomorrow. They were really good quality grapes too, putting last year's best crop to shame."

"That makes absolutely no sense," Twilight said, "and that means it could only have come from one place: Discord."

"But Discord remains sealed in stone," Luna protested.

"That is true Princess," Twilight said, "but even after we ended his short stint of freedom, we kept finding little remnants of his handiwork here and there. I thought we'd finally got them all a couple months ago though... Anyway, what does this have to do with the parasprites?"

"As I presume you already now, one parasprite plus food equals more parasprites," Ash said, "So, what does two parasprites plus an ending source of grapes equal?" Twilight's jaw dropped and her hold on her captives weakened, allowing some to make a break for freedom. "I threw up a barrier around the fountain to keep the buggers away from the food," Ash continued, "but one of them ended up on the inside, so it wasn't long before I found myself and my poor excuse for unicorn magic trying to keep a stopper on... well, the present circumstances as I tried to make my way out of the woods to warn somepony. I must have blacked out from the effort because the next thing I knew I was outside the forest with this lot," he gestured to his companions, "and my magic wasn't active, leaving the barrier to run out its very short battery life. And now we're here, apparently waiting for Pinkie and her sisters to throw together an orchestra?"

"Parasprites are mesmerized by music," Twilight said, "or at least certain kinds of music. Last time the parasprites got into town, Pinkie's one-pony band was the only thing that got them to leave for good." She looked around with unusual calm for the circumstances at the square, which was becoming thick with parasprites as unicorns, pegasi, and earth ponies worked together to keep them bunched up, but then her face fell. "Wait," she said, "if there are still parasprites around that fountain, even Pinkie's music might not be enough to stop them from coming back. We'll have to cut off the source. Rainbow!" The cyan pegasus, who had been busy

bucking off another batch of overly-familiar bugs, gave one last spin to dislodge them and dove down toward the group.

"Kinda busy here," she said grouchily as her "friends" caught up with her. Luna grabbed the swarm and added them to the bunch Twilight was still holding, taking over for the lavender unicorn.

"There's a Discord remnant behind all this," Twilight explained, "round up the girls and meet up outside the Everfree."

"I'm on it Twi," Dash said with a salute. As she flew off, another band of parasprites tried to tail her, only to be blown aside by some other pegasi.

"Can you lead us to this grape fountain Ash?" Twilight asked.

"Twilight," the grey unicorn said with a flat look, "I was more or less unconscious going to *and* from that spot."

"Zecora found him," Gold Heart said, "Assuming he didn't get too far before blacking out..."

"PC's bound to have a record of the magic surrounding the thing," Ash said, floating the head-mounted computer toward Twilight and flopping down onto the ground, "Get close enough and he'll guide you the rest of the way. If you don't mind, I'll be staying here and recharging."

Soul Mage grabbed the computer in his own magic and set it on his head. "Count me in," he said, "the more ponies we have traveling through those woods together, the better." Gale and Heart nodded in agreement.

"I shall remain here," Luna said, "Ponyville still needs protecting until this infestation can be removed."

"Yeah," Ash said lamely, "that too..."

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"Argh! Why are you so attracted to me?" Rainbow paused in her flight to once again shake off the parasprites that were forming a chain attached to her tail, delivering a kick to the face of the lead bug that left it dazed. While the voracious furballs regrouped, the cyan pegasus put some distance

between her and them, keeping an eye out for her friends. She spotted Pinkie Pie galloping down the street a few blocks away, an accordion bouncing up and down on her rump with surprisingly musical rhythm. "Pinkie! Wait up," Dash shouted, speeding over to fly above the pink pony.

"Hi Dashie," Pinkie said, "You seen a banjo anywhere?"

"No," Rainbow said, "List-" She stopped as her pursuers caught up with her and bunched up on her head. She shook them off and then gave a defeated sigh as they formed a belt around her middle instead. "Listen," she said, "Twilight needs the six of us to meet up at the Everfree forest as soon as possible."

"Why?" Pinkie said, barely slowing down, "What could be more important than getting rid of the parasprites?"

"Apparently there's something Discord-y in the forest that's making all these things," the pegasus said, brushing the parasprites off of herself.

Pinkie frowned in thought for a few seconds. "Ok," she said at last, "I'll meet you there."

"Don't forget your Element necklace," Rainbow called as she veered away, aiming toward Sweet Apple Acres. Pinkie watched her go, and then huffed and changed her gait a little, drawing a tune from the accordion that began to draw the attention of the nearby 'sprites.

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Sweet Apple Acres was a veritable warzone when Rainbow Dash arrived. A trio of weather pegasi had managed to scrounge up clouds from somewhere and were using them as a barrier to keep the parasprite swarm from getting too high above the road for the earth ponies lining the fences to reach. The Apple clan was armed with brooms, shovels, mops, sticks, and anything else they could fit their mouths around and use to try and beat back the multi-colored bugs. Rainbow, sporting a parasprite beard, came to a stop and surveyed the battlefield, looking for her orange, blonde-maned friend and rival. She spotted her near the gate, running behind the main defense line calling out encouragement and orders as the parasprites tried to exploit holes in the defense. The pegasus shook the parasprites off her face and started to dive toward Applejack when she saw Apple Bloom, who



had been perched on the fence wielding a butterfly net, lose her balance and fall to the ground, opening a hole that the 'sprites quickly moved to take advantage of.

"Oh no you don't," Rainbow said, zipping over to head off the flow. She reached them just as they began to fly up toward the apple-laden branches of the trees closest to the fence and forced them down with powerful wing strokes.

"Great timing there Rainbow," Applejack said as she and Big Mac came galloping over, "Keep it up."

"No problem," the pegasus said, backing up slightly to sweep up a parasprite that was threatening to slip out of her downdraft. AJ and Mac flanked the swarm while Apple Bloom trotted over to do her best helping Rainbow push them back toward the fence. Once the enemy was pushed back and Bloom was back at her post, Applejack gave Dash a thankful smile and turned to leave. "AJ, hold up," Rainbow said, "There's something in the Everfree Forest that's responsible for all these parasprites. Twilight needs all of us to take it out."

"Shoot, really?" Applejack said, looking around with concern, "I don't want ta leave the farm like this, but..."

"I think we can spare one pony," Macintosh said, "With the whole of the Apple Family here, ain't nothin' gonna get to our crops."

"I do hope yer right big brother," AJ said, and then nodded to Rainbow. "I'll be there in a jiffy."

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The parasprite swarm hung like a pastel-colored fog over Ponyville as Twilight, Heart, Soul, Gale, and Rarity arrived at the edge of the Everfree Forest. The group had found the fashionista at her boutique after picking up Twilight's Element tiara from the library, and she had been hesitant to leave until Twilight threw a hat out into the street to prove that the parasprites weren't going to eat Rarity's work. Zecora and some of the braver animal tenants were defending Fluttershy's herb garden from a surprisingly small number of parasprites, so all that was left to do was to get the shy pegasus out of her house and wait for the other three Element Bearers to arrive.

Twilight walked up and knocked on the door and was instantly answered by a panicked shout from within, "NO! Go away! You'll let the Parasprites in!"

"Fluttershy," Twilight started to say, and then paused and activated her magic, creating a dome of energy around her and the door. "Open up Fluttershy," she said, "I won't let them get past me." Silence greeted that declaration, so she tried again, "There's something in the forest feeding the parasprites. If we don't get rid of it, they'll never go away." After a tense moment, Twilight heard the sounds of objects being moved around and the cottage door finally cracked open. Fluttershy peered out and her eyes widened in understanding when she saw the tiara on Twilight's head.

"I'll be right out," the yellow pegasus whispered, "don't let them in."

While Twilight waited by the door, maintaining the shield, Soul Mage made his way over to the herb garden, firing short bursts of spirit magic from his horn to stun the parasprites flitting around the area. Zecora gave him a thankful nod as he took down the last one and then turned her gaze toward the forest expectantly. "I have to say," the golden-yellow unicorn said, "I'm surprised there aren't more parasprites around here." No sooner had he finished speaking than a thick cloud of parasprites came pouring out from the trees. Most passed by the cottage, heading for town, but a few held back to try their luck at getting to Fluttershy's herbs.

"As you can see, they come in waves," Zecora said as she swatted the insectoids away, "But even with the lulls, the situation is grave."

"No kidding," Soul said, "if the town's not eaten out of house and home, they'll be smothered under all this fuzz. Ash told us why they're multiplying, but he can't remember where exactly the source is."

"Parasprites will leave nothing edible in their wake," Zecora said, "Barren trees and stripped bushes should mark the path you should take." She smacked a parasprite with her tail and then pursed her lips in thought. "It is strange how they go straight for Ponyville," she said at last, "It's as if they have a purpose beyond eating their fill."

"Well," Soul said, "if we're right about where the..." he trailed off as the sounds of polka music drifted in from the direction of town. The parasprites that were still mobile stopped and turned as one toward the music, starting to bob in time with the beat. Fluttershy emerged from her house with her

Element necklace on and joined the others in watching as the multi-colored swarm encompassing Ponyville began pulsing with the rhythm and congregating toward the source. A few minutes later, Pinkie Pie marched into view, her two sisters three steps behind her and innumerable parasprites bouncing along behind them in perfect formation, six columns wide and seemingly endless in length. Pinkie had a banjo hanging from her neck, an accordion balanced on her haunches, and a pair of tambourines tied to her rear legs, all sounding off from her high-stepping gait, while she played the melody line on a harmonica. Susan was playing a tuba while keeping the beat with a set of cymbals on her front legs and Maggie was balancing a drum on her back with a drum stick rigged to her leg so that it struck on every other step while somehow managing to play the flute. A ways down the line of parasprites, Rainbow Dash and Applejack could be seen walking along the side of the road toward the cottage, their respective Element jewels adorning their necks.

"Boy, I tell you," the farm-pony said as she came up to the flummoxed Order-naries and the less bewildered other ponies gathered at Fluttershy's gate, "This is no less mind-blowing than the last time, and I was expectin' it this time around!"

"Is it that specific march they're playing, or does music in general work?" Gale asked, watching the parade of 'sprites bouncing by and heading into the forest while the Pies took up positions on either side of the path.

"Dunno," AJ said with a shrug.

"Well, either way, cheers for the Pie Pipers of Ponyville," Soul said with a big grin.

"Pie Piper..." Heart muttered, and then groaned, face-hoofed, and smacked Soul upside the head with her wing. "I almost didn't catch that one."

"Please sis, anyone could've pulled that one," Soul said, rolling his eyes, "Anyway, let's see here. Six Elements of Harmony, three Order-naries, one Zebra, two back-up musicians..."

"Hey now," Susan said crossly, leaving off the tuba playing for a second.

"Pardon, just a jest," Soul said with an apologetic wave of his hoof, "Shall we press on?"

"Yes," Twilight said, stepping out onto the path and joining the flow toward the Everfree Forest, "Let's go everypony. You too Pinkie Pie." Pinkie nodded, not taking her mouth off the harmonica, and then gestured for her sisters to stay put and keep an eye on the parade. When they nodded their agreement, the pink pony turned and began marching into the woods, with her friends running to catch up with her.