

# It's Like a Cake

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# Chapter 1

## So It Goes

The summer sun was setting over the coast near the quiet town of Withersdale. It's a beautiful place for a retreat with everything a pony could want: sand, surf and, more importantly, a bustling marketplace that houses loads of specialty items and everyday goods, as well as the occasional curiosity. The perfect place to take a vacation, Twilight and her friends had come to the town on a whim for a little change of pace, and so far it had been a great trip.

Upon first arriving, the group attempted to find things that they could all do together. There were a number of places they could go to and sights to see but, aside from eating together, there was little that they could actually agree on. In the end, however, after bickering for about an hour, they all agreed that the one thing they did want to do, more than anything else, was to have a good time. So, with that in mind, each one of them decided to go off and do what they wanted while the others did the same.

As their vacation drew to a close, Twilight was sitting outside of a café at the edge of the main business district of the town, quietly soaking up the summer sun. Rarity had picked up some lovely new fabric for her next line of fall fashions and was off trying to find just the right accessories for her summer wear before the look became dated. Rainbow Dash, true to her nature, had been kicking it back on the beach, enjoying all of the summer sports and the multitude of low clouds she could nap on. Applejack was on the beach as well, though her attention was more focused on the substantial apple-based spread that she had brought with her. Of course, most of her interest in Withersdale was scoping out the prices of the local competition in the marketplace, but that didn't mean she couldn't enjoy herself as well. Fluttershy had taken to the coastal fauna swiftly, as was to be expected, and had been collecting seashells and chatting with the birds

for the duration of their stay. Pinkie Pie, on the other hoof, had been bounding around town with her usual rampant enthusiasm, hitting the sweet shops and local hot spots in her endless quest for fun.

Twilight, however, was content to just enjoy the weather and sample a nice daisy sandwich as she gazed out over the ocean from her table on Withersdale's opulent boardwalk. The food was a little expensive for something so simple. Two bits for a banana? Ridiculous! But, it was well prepared and the taste made up for it.

Food, fun and friends; these were the important things, and though she occasionally wished that she could be back studying her magic a bit more intensely, she was glad that she had gotten a chance to just sit back and relax for a while. The Summer Sun Celebration had passed, and there weren't any holidays until the harvest time began in autumn, which meant that she didn't have to organize a thing until then. She only wished that Spike could have been there to enjoy the downtime with her, but he was off in Canterlot retrieving some books that she had ordered and wouldn't be back until well after they had arrived back home in Ponyville.

Still, she had been able to pick up a little souvenir for him. It was a small stuffed dragon toy, purple like Spike and humorously mean looking. He was a baby dragon after all and she felt that he could appreciate the gift.

Of course, Twilight wouldn't be herself if she hadn't at least brought *something* along to read. It was called *Movers and Shakers: A Guide To Rapid Transport for Magic Users*. It was a dusty old tome with a thick reed exterior that was browned from age and neglect, and had looked interesting, so she brought it with her and had been studying it intently all day.

As the sun began to set, the familiar violet-haired figure of her friend, Rarity, could be seen approaching down the boardwalk, the fashionista's jewel-studded saddlebags packed with various bric-à-brac and a few rolls

of dense fabric in autumnal colors. She had a new hat, a white affair that kept the sun off of her horn, and appeared to be in high spirits, having thoroughly enjoyed the market.

“Rarity!” she called, waving a hoof to her friend as she sat, leaning over the tome closer and closer as the light of the day gradually began to dim. Her unicorn compatriot smiled in return, trotting over to her.

“Twilight, darling! How lovely to see you, enjoying your...” She gave a glance down at the tome, then back up at Twilight with a flat expression, before it slowly began to quirk into a knowing smile. “...book. *Really*, Twilight Sparkle! We take the time out and come all the way to Withersdale for a little vacation-time... and all you want to do is sit around and read books? Why, you could do that back in Ponyville and we’re leaving tomorrow!”

“Well, that might be true, but I’ve enjoyed myself,” the lavender unicorn responded, “Besides, it’s always nice to get out and see new places.”

“I suppose you’re right, dear. But still, it’s not as if we can just come here whenever we like. It’s a full day’s trot for most of us, and then there’s the trip back, which takes just as long, if not *longer*. The roads are always so dirty and icky...” Rarity wrinkled her face in disgust. “I am not looking forward to it. It’s really too bad that you can’t just pop us back to Ponyville, but I expect that might be a bit beyond even your magical talents, Twilight.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Twilight replied with a smirk, her horn glowing as she flipped through the pages of her book.

Rarity gave her friend a sidelong look, quirking one of those pencil-filled eyebrows of hers at Twilight’s response. “Now just what do you mean by that?”

“What I mean is, I think I can get us all back to Ponyville in a flash, if this book is right.” She raised a hoof and pointed to a particular section of the

manuscript. “The book is an analysis on the theory of teleportation and the transmission of matter through space. It states that when someone proficient with magic teleports something, it converts its matter into magical energy which then surges through the vacuum in between the molecules in order to transport a pony and whatever else they may want to move. Once the initial magic applied to perform the teleport is exhausted, the transformed matter reconstitutes, displacing whatever was in the place that it reached.”

Rarity simply gave her a confused look, stamping at the boards with a hoof idly as she tried to wrap her mind around all the scientific gobblety-gook.

“Ooooookay, so—“ She paused a moment to try one last time to quantify it before giving up with a shake of her head.

“What does that mean, exactly?”

“It means,” Twilight turned to the next page. “Exerting a specific amount of magical energy will only get you so far. There’s a certain point where you simply can’t teleport beyond. You won’t be able to handle it. However, the book claims that if you lower the frequency of the magical energy used, you can travel longer distances with the same amount of energy. It takes longer, but since this is magical energy we’re talking about, it’s a difference of a few seconds rather than being absolutely instantaneous. No big deal!”

“So what you’re saying is that...”

“Is that, if this is right, I can just teleport us back to Ponyville and we won’t have to walk all the way back!”

Rarity’s eyes lit up. “Well, why didn’t you just say so in first place? That’s a wonderful idea! That way we won’t have to deal with that dusty old road back home, and I’ll be able to start on my new designs tomorrow without having to wait!”

“Exactly! And if it works out alright, then we might be able to visit far away places more often, without it being a big production.” Twilight shut her

book, levitating it up off the table and sliding it back into her saddlebag neatly.

“Should I go tell the others?” Rarity asked, combing her mane with a free-floating comb as she inspected the various materials she’d purchased.

“If you like, but I’ll explain it in detail to them in the morning.” Applying her saddlebags, Twilight got down from her stool. The moon was starting to rise up over the mountains as Luna shrouded the sky with her cool embrace, the sun disappearing down into the ocean.

“Fair enough! We’ll leave it as a surprise for the morning, then. I’ll see you back at the hotel! Ta-ta~” Rarity turned and began to trot away, moving with her customary fluidity and grace. Giving a small nod, Twilight proceeded towards the edge of the boardwalk, over to the stairs leading down onto the beach.

A little stroll was in order. There was much to think about and a lot of theory to go over, so she began down the beach with a head full of numbers, enjoying the cool night breeze as it came in from the ocean.

# Chapter 2

## Through the Loop

The next morning, Twilight and the other ponies had gathered themselves on the road leading out of Withersdale. The local pegasus ponies had made sure that the weather was as nice that morning as it had been the last few days. There was a shower scheduled for later that day, however, so it would be prudent to be getting a move on.

Twilight's friends were getting everything ready as she explained what she was about to attempt. Most of the explanation went right over their heads, of course, but they seemed to get the gist of it after a while. Rarity was immensely excited by the whole thing, not wanting to have to hoof it all the way back to Ponyville. The others, however, were a bit more skeptical about the proposition.

"So, what yer sayin' is that instead've havin' ta walk back ta Ponyville, yer just gonna pop us back all quick-like usin' yer magic?" Applejack was more than a little skeptical, giving Twilight a stern look as she adjusted her saddlebags. The purple unicorn returned a firm nod, confident in her plan as she trotted back and forth in front of the group, her tome open to the relevant chapter and floating half a length in front of her as she addressed them.

"That is *exactly* what I intend to do."

"So... why didn't ya just bring us 'ere like that in th' first place?" the orange mare questioned, leering out from under the brim of her hat, "It woulda saved us a lotta time an' effort."



“Because I didn’t know how at the time, but I was doing some reading while we were on vacation-“

“Like *that’s* a surprise.” A familiar rasp interjected. Rainbow Dash blew past them with a flat-toothed grin, pulling a loop in the air over the group as everyone glanced upwards. She made a corkscrew upwards before straightening out and fluttering down gently a couple of lengths away.

“Seriously! I’m surprised you didn’t bring the whole library with you, Twilight! Only *you* would take a vacation and spend the entire time doing something that you could have done just as well at home.”

“And just *who* was it that spent her entire time on vacation *napping*? Hmm?” Rarity slid up between Twilight and Dash with a hooded smile as she peered over at the boyish mare. She brought a hoof up idly to examine Rainbow’s mane, which was nothing but week old rainbow and split-ends. Dash pulled back a bit and gave the pomp a dirty look, swatting the well manicured hoof away with her own. Adopting an audacious smirk, Rainbow threw her mane back and dismissed Rarity with a wave.

“Yeah, well, but I was napping *at the beach*. *Totally* different.”

“Well... we did have a good time.” Fluttershy’s soft voice spoke as she approached the group from behind Applejack, a pleased look on her face, “The local animals are all very nice, and it’s a lot easier to swim in the ocean than it is in a lake, though I... I don’t know if I care for the salt very much. Still—“she gave a gentle nod and gazed about to all her friends as a group of animals began to gather in order to see her off, “It was very nice.”

A bluejay alit from the air onto Fluttershy’s muzzle, causing the pink-haired pegasus to squeak with delight. “Of course, I’d be happy to come back next year, though if any of you have any friends in Ponyville, feel free to stop by. It would be lovely...”

Twilight smiled gently, nodded to each of her friends before noticing an absence. Leaning off to the side, she quickly scanned the surrounding area, searching for a certain candy-colored equine.

“Pinkie? Where are you?”

“Heeey everypony!” An overly cheery voice responded from the exact opposite direction Twilight was looking and everypony turned their heads to see the perky, pink pony bound in from... somewhere. Her matching saddlebags were packed full of various items and she giggled merrily as she approached, stopping a few lengths away.

“This was a great trip, don’t you guys think! I got so many fun things from the shops, it was super! They had party hats and paper plates and punch bowls! I even got a set of shot glasses and a *really* big necktie! There were all sorts of different ponies selling stuff and I got a great deal on some *fireworks!*”

As if to punctuate her sentence, there was a multicolored explosion and all the ponies ducked down as a barrage of bottle rockets shot off in every direction, a few screaming over their heads and flying far off into the distance. Pinkie remained standing, apparently oblivious to being singed all over, with a manic grin plastered on her face. “Neato, huh?”

Rainbow just stared at Pinkie Pie, a front hoof up and her mouth wide open as she attempted to respond. A few seconds later, the bottle rockets exploded with a series of loud reports somewhere in the distance.

“So, now that everypony’s here,” Twilight continued on, writing off what had just occurred. “Let’s give this a shot. If my understanding of the theory is correct, all I have to do is turn down the frequency of my magic in the spell, and it will take us much farther than I would be able to normally. If everything goes as planned, then we should pop out right next to Ponyville!” Twilight beamed with pride and shut her book with a loud thump, levitating it back into her bag.

“Yeah, ‘bout that, sugarcube. What’s to say that yer not gonna pop us right in the middle of a rock, or somethin’? Or somewhere out in the Everfree Forest?” Applejack inquired. She was always straight shooter, and frankly, at the moment, she wasn't very comfortable with the whole thing. Apparently neither was Fluttershy, who swallowed hard and shrunk down a bit, looking rather frightened at the prospect of being dropped out in the middle of those dark woods.

“Now all of you *know* how good Twilight is with magic. I highly doubt that someone of her talent would allow for something that dreadful to occur. I have every bit of faith that we will arrive safely.”

Rarity smiling in a reassuring manner towards her friends, gesturing towards Twilight with her hoof as she trot over to lean against the other unicorn. “Isn’t that right, darling? You know more about magic than any pony I’ve ever met! I’m sure everything will be just fine.”

“Yes. I’m sure it will! Thank you very much for the vote of confidence, Rarity.” Twilight gave an appreciative nod in return and motioned with a hoof at the group, signaling for them to move closer together. “Don’t worry so much, girls. We’ll be fine. Okay, what I need is for everypony to group-up close so that I can get all of us in one shot, otherwise you might be walking back *anyway*,” she said with a smirk, her friends moving into a tight cluster in front of her. She took a deep breath and shut her eyes, beginning to concentrate.

Her horn began to glow. It started out as a dull light, encasing her horn in a faint liquid shimmer, but as she continued pouring her concentration into it, the light began to grow brighter and brighter. Soon the unicorn’s horn was lit up like a torch, shining with a bright white light as she strained to gather the required energy. She didn’t know exactly how much would be enough, but the equations she’d gone over in her head gave her a rough idea of what she needed.

Once she was sure she had enough power, she started in on the difficult part: lowering the frequency. It was strange, trying to hold onto the magic while relaxing it at the same time, kind of like trying to talk while holding something in your teeth. It had to be loose enough to work with, but tight enough that you didn't drop it.

Pinkie Pie gave a high pitched "Oooh!" Her eyes lit up as the group slowly became surrounded in an odd translucent bubble, light swirling across it like the colors on the surface of a soap bubble. Applejack and Fluttershy glanced to each other nervously, moving a little closer into the group. Rarity, of course, was transfixed by its simplistic beauty, while Dash looked on, mildly impressed.

"Cool." The tomboy said with her customary grit. The colors of the sky darkened, shifting first to a darker blue, then through green and into a yellow before snapping back to blue again and repeating. The clouds became translucent and the hue of the countryside warped around them. Dash gave a glance over to Pinkie. "Pretty neat light show! So what do you think is supposed to happen ne-"

There was a loud pop and then a rush of white light. Twilight trembled, alone in the middle of a great white void. The sounds of distant voices and the roaring of the world rushing past her at high speed assaulted her ears. It was an absolute cacophony. Teleportation was always loud, but it had never been this intense before or lasted this long. Still, she held together for a few seconds more and after a crescendo of noise, it terminated in dead silence. Everything went black for an instant and the trip crashed to a halt. Literally.

# Chapter 3

## Short Circuit

There was a great pop and everything flooded back into focus. Twilight's body hit the ground with a dull thump, which was followed a moment later by several more somewhere nearby. The world spun, around and around and around... The light came back first. The black and white outlines of the countryside seeping out onto the world around her as her vision began to return. The colors swirled about, a dull buzzing scratching around the inside of her brain as the life bled slowly back into the countryside. Ever so slowly, things began to settle.

It took a few moments, but eventually everything righted itself and she was able to slowly, if shakily, make her way to her hooves. Slinking to the side of the road, Twilight was finally able to steady herself against a tree. She turned her head slowly back towards where her friends lay, everything snapping into place when she terminated the motion. It dropped a sickness down her gullet and she shut her eyes, calling out to the others weakly.

"Is everypony okay?"

They all groaned in response, strewn about the road like the contents of an overturned apple-cart. The next one to make it to her feet was Rainbow Dash, wobbling a bit as she staggered across the road. Everything was humming, her eyes and ears aching horribly as she tried to gather her bearings.

"I think... I'm gonna hurl," she gurgled before falling forward and burying her face into the grass on the side of the road. Applejack was the next to her feet, creeping up into a standing position and methodically picking through the row of bushes that she had landed in to recover her hat and saddlebags.

“Land sakes, Twilight!” the roughed up apple-farmer exclaimed, “That was ‘bout the third most puke inducin’ thing Ah’ve ever had t’go through.”

“WooooooOOOooo...” Pinkie Pie was sitting in place, slowly rolling her neck around in a circle as she attempted to keep track of all the little stars that she saw whirling around her head. Falling onto her back with a thump, she broke out into a slurred fit of giggles, lying betwixt Fluttershy and Rarity who were both sprawled out in the middle of the road, their eyes cocked out of focus as the world continue to whirl all around them.

“Ah’priciate the gesture an’ all,” the disheveled farm-girl said, exhaling with a huff as she approached Twilight. She set a hoof on the magician’s shoulder, and faced her with a bleary gaze. “But next time, sugarcube... Ah think ah’ll walk.” And with that, Applejack strode on past Twilight and began down the road towards town. The lavender pony gave a heavy sigh of extreme disappointment. Everything seemed to go off without hitch, but she should have known that if normal teleportation was unpleasant, then attempting something so inherently difficult would end up being downright *painful*.

“Well... at least we landed on the road,” she murmured to herself. Her strength was slowly returning, so with no desire to wait for Dash or Fluttershy to recover enough to fly, she began to climb to the top of a nearby ridge to see just how far they still had to go. With any luck, maybe she had cut a couple of hours off their trip. That is, if she hadn’t totally exhausted everyone else with her stunt.

Stumbling through a row of low shrubbery, Twilight emerged into a little clearing at the highest point of the little mount overlooking the road back to Ponyville. The sun was fairly bright and in the clear weather it wouldn’t be a problem to get a good view of the-

Twilight’s heart jumped a little and a great big smile swept across her face.

“Yes! Yes yes yes yes!!” She chanted, hopping up and down in place. From the top of the ridge, shrouded ever so slightly by the morning haze was the outline of Ponyville! They weren’t but a stone’s throw away! Her spirits were lifted and after a small celebratory romp, she began to make her way down the ridge with confidence, back to the road and the

remainder of her friends who were finally beginning to recover from their magically induced stupor.

Sure, they hadn't gotten all the way there, but they had come really close! With a little more practice and refinement, who knew what could be possible? Nobody had gotten hurt, and they'd definitely shaved the lion's share off of their travel time. That was definitely a victory in her mind, even if the others didn't quite appreciate it yet...

# Chapter 4

## We Shall Go To Town

About half an hour later, the six friends trotted back into Ponyville. Stomachs had been calmed, grass had been consumed, and Twilight had been thoroughly poked by her companions about the overwhelming ‘success’ of her attempt.

“Yanno, I’ve been through a lot of loops in my time, and I’ve pulled a lot of *sick* moves, but nothing’s ever quite hit me in the gut like *that*,” Rainbow crowed, a teasing grin on her face as she gave a sidelong glance at Twilight. The amiable bookworm simply rolled her eyes.

“Hey, I did it, didn’t I?” the unicorn responded, “So it was a little rough. It was my first try and we made it here without a hitch. That’s pretty good, if you ask me.”

“And I agree.” Rarity chimed in, trotting up on the other side of Rainbow Dash, “Sure... it left us all a bit...” she swallowed hard and gave a nervous laugh, “...queasy. But, sacrifices *must* be made, and an upset stomach is a small price to pay for such fantastic service. Rapid transport, just like in the big city!” She let out a crystalline laugh. She may have been a little dusty, but at least she wasn’t all sweaty and tired. Two out of three wasn’t bad, after all.

Fluttershy didn’t look all that pleased, however, her eyes cast down at the ground in a vacant stare. She was dragging behind a bit, only slightly ahead of Pinkie Pie who was bouncing along a few lengths behind the group, as upbeat and oblivious as always.

“I... I don’t know,” said the pegasus after a long silence, “that was kind of... scary. With the bright light... and all those *awful* noises.” She began to shudder just thinking about it.

“That happens normally when you teleport from place to place. It’s the distortions of the world around you as it moves past. The thing is, it’s



moving too fast for you to really comprehend it, so the sounds are distorted to begin with and everything you hear piles on top of itself in a sort of “audio feedback loop”. It’s just that ponies don’t normally spend that long in a teleport. It’s usually instantaneous, but since the distance was so large, we experienced it for a few seconds rather than it going by in a flash.”

“Frankly, Ah’d have rather not’d experienced it ayt’all.” Applejack said, walking ahead of the group. She still looked mighty tired and the whole experience seemed to have taken a good bit out of her. “Ah don’t mind y’all unicorns and yer magic. Ya’ll know that, but that was jest a bit much fer this little-old farmgirl, here.”

“Applejack...” Twilight gave a soft sigh and shook her head. Applejack didn’t respond, a stubborn glower set on her face.

At that moment, Pinkie suddenly came to a dead stop, her head swinging back and forth as she looked from shop to shop, her eyes wide. Fluttershy noticed first, stopping to look back at Pinkie Pie before hopping forward and tugging on Twilight’s tail with her teeth to get her to stop. Dash and Rarity took notice of this and looked back to see what was the matter. Only Applejack continued on, walking a few lengths before realizing that there weren’t any hoof-falls behind her and glancing back to see what was going on.

They all just stood there, staring at Pinkie as she did double and triple and quadruple takes, her eyes zipping from one object to another. Then, sitting straight up with enough force to make her entire mane flex like a riding crop, she blinked one time and gave a gasp before shooting off in a random direction like a great pink blur. The others stood there for a moment in dumbstruck confusion as confetti fluttered to the ground where Pinkie had been just a few seconds earlier.

“What the...” Rainbow Dash began.

“Oh, y’all don’t be worryin’ about her,” interjected Applejack, “y’all know that one’s plow is missin’ a few teeth. She probly left the milk out’r somethin’ and jest now remember’d it.”

Applejack smiled a bit, finally relaxing a little now that she was definitely home.

Passing by Sugar Cube Corner, the girls said their goodbyes and separated, each one heading back to their respective homes. Twilight was a bit tired, to be truthful. Magical exertion like that didn't just take a lot of concentration; it also burned up a lot of energy. Consequently, she was pretty worn out. Still, this sort of thing could revolutionize the way ponies got around if applied in the right manner; the technique just had to be refined. It was an exciting prospect. It was a wonder no pony had ever thought of it before. Maybe it just required too much magical energy. Who knew?

Twilight gazed up at the sky as she thought about it, taking in a breath of the warm summer air. The morning haze was completely gone now, and the sky was clear, save for a few scattered puffs. It was a vibrant blue and it seemed somewhat darker than it usually appeared, though that was probably due to the lack of clouds and its effect on the ground's albedo. Twilight thought about this, idly trying to remember the different cloud shapes that the pegasi were trained to produce as she made her way back home. She bet it took a lot of training to get them just right.

Soon, the library that acted as Twilight's home was just up ahead, and as she approached the old, hollowed-out tree, she began to make a mental list of all the things she wanted to read up on. Clouds, weather systems, magical frequencies, motion sickness... My, she had a lot of reading to do! Of course, it was an excuse and she knew it, but if more people actually made excuses *to* read, instead of excuses to avoid it, then the world might just be a little bit better of a place. At least, that's how Twilight saw things.

Once inside, she set her saddlebags down by the door and procured the old tome she'd been carrying. Setting it upon the table, she then turned her attention back to the shelves, scanning the titles intently. Pulling a few choice selections from them, one at a time, she stacked them neatly in midair, arranging them in the order that she wished to read them and lowered them gently down onto the table. Opening the first book, she took to the text with childish glee, leaning forward with both elbows upon the table. There was nothing better than relaxing after a rough spell with a good book.

Just then, something caught her ears and she gave a glance back towards the loft where her bed was. A voice? She could have sworn that she had heard someone talking just then.

“Spike? Spike, is that you?” Twilight asked softly, “Spike? Spike!” She called louder and, after a moment, proceeded to trot over towards the ladder leading up to her bedroom. Scaling it, she found that everything was neat and in order; Spike’s bed was still made, just as she had left it before leaving for vacation. Nothing had been disturbed and there was no sign that the little purple dragon had returned from his trip yet.

...There it was again. She could swear that she had heard someone talking. This time, however, it was back down on the first floor. Returning to the ladder and glancing over the railing, she scanned the room slowly for any sign of another pony or creature. No Spike. No Owlicious. No one.

She managed a short hop, her horn sparking as her magic came to life. A thick, translucent blanket caught her in midair and slowly lowered her down to the floor, letting go just above the surface. Landing on all four hooves with a loud clomp, she shook her head and proceeded back towards her books before stopping dead in her tracks just short of the table. There was another whisper. This one was behind her, somewhere towards the back of the building. Hesitantly, she turned around and saw a hint of motion disappear into the other room.

“S-Spike! This isn’t *funny*,” the unicorn stated, as she began to make her way towards the back room. Peeking around the corner, the voices became audible again, slowly getting louder as she stood there. The room was full of old books, stacked all the way up to the ceiling and covered in varying degrees of dust. She had been organizing these by alphabet and was writing them down in the catalogue so that she knew just what she had in stock at the library the library. The dark columns stood against the back wall, giving no clues as the whispers continued in the room.

“I mean it. Spike! I know you’re hiding in here!” Twilight began to sweat, looking for any signs of movement. A shadow, a flash of purple and green, anything. The voices grew louder by the moment, coming from nowhere in particular, as if they were swirling around the room itself. She could hear them clearly, but it was impossible to make out anything discernable and she slowly began to back into the main room. She swallowed hard, sweat running down her forehead as she scanned the room. There had to be some sort of explanation for it... something!

She felt a cold touch on her flank and the lavender unicorn let out a high shriek, whipping around and readying a burst of magic in her horn, the white light bathing the room. Her stool fell over with a loud clatter, rolling about in a circle before coming to rest. Taking a few deep breaths, Twilight closed her eyes and slowly let the magic dissipate.

There was an explanation for it. She was probably just tired. That spell had beat her flank pretty hard and she had a bit of a headache from it anyway; her horn was feeling kind of fuzzy as it did after all of her really big spells. It was a sort of strain, like a pulled muscle or pinched nerve, but nothing terribly important or problematic. She was just getting a lot of static from it, that's all. Nothing to worry about...

Returning to her reading, she dove into her books, wading through the pages on meteorology and the weather. It was pretty interesting stuff, actually, with long paragraphs describing how the pegasi tracked what rain was needed and where, diagrams of all the different cloud-building techniques, and tables displaying the difference in chemical composition between rain clouds and regular old fair weather clouds.

Before Twilight realized it about an hour had passed and she was suddenly wrenched from her literary bliss by a knock at her front door. It was loud and frantic, continuing incessantly as she placed a bookmark between the pages of her book and shut it. Sauntering over to the door, she willed it open, and found that on the other side was Applejack, who quickly stepped in as soon as she could, shutting the door behind her.

Something was definitely up. There was a look of total desperation in her emerald eyes; her blonde mane let out of its bindings, falling every which way, mussed with dirt and soot; and she was sweating profusely, both visibly and... well you could tell. She had been exerting herself something fierce.

"Applejack. What's wrong? You look terrible!" Twilight leaned in close and put a hoof on her friend's back. Applejack was panting heavily, her muscles tense as bound rope...

"Twilight. Ah..." She swallowed hard, trying to force the words up out of her throat, pushing them out one at a time, slowly and surely. "Ah..."

Ah can't find Apple Bloom. ...or Granny Smith. ...or Big Macintosh." She looked as if she was on the verge of hyperventilating.

"What?" Twilight blinked and shook her head, not understanding.

"There's no note, an' no sign of them leavin'. Th' front door was unlock'd. Th' barn was open. Ah. Can't. Find. Them! An nopony Ah've walked up to, will *talk* t'me!"

"What do you mean 'they won't talk to you', Applejack?"

"They won't talk! Ah ask 'em, but they don't say nothin'! They jest look at me and walk away..." The straight-laced country-girl shook, just for a moment, and looked Twilight in the eyes, pleading silently. "Somethin' is wrong, Twilight. Bad wrong."

"I'll say it is!" Their pink pony friend's chipper voice permeated through the door, causing Applejack and Twilight to both look to the window. Sure enough, outside was Pinkie Pie, dressed in an old beaten up trenchcoat and a hat that looked like it had been run over by a tractor. Twilight opened the door again.

"Pinkie, what are you doing?"

"Well I was looking around town and I couldn't help but overhear what you two were talking about, on account of me leaning up against the door after I saw Applejack walk inside. So I was listening and I think there's a big problem, too!"

"Okay..." Twilight responded, motioning for Pinkie to come inside. She shut the door behind the pink pony, turning the lights up a bit so that it was a little homier inside as Pinkie Pie carried on.

"Well, when we got into Ponyville, I noticed something was strange, so I ran around town as fast as I could to see if I could confirm my *suspicions*! Then I got back to Sugarcube Corner and sure enough, no Mr. or Mrs. Cake! I couldn't even find Gummy! I knew something was up. See remember when I first saw you, Twilight, and I went- GASP! -because I'd never seen you before, and if I'd never seen you before, you must be new! Because I know everypony, and I mean *everypony* in Ponyville! And if you

were new, that means that you needed to meet ponies, because I didn't want you to be lonely-

"Pinkie." Applejack interjected wearily.

"-so I decided to throw a big surprise party and invite the entire town, because there's no better way to meet people and have fun than a party! So I got up all the streamers, ribbons and balloons I could and started decorating up the library, because nopony lived there and I had heard-

"Sugarcube..."

"-so I got a cake and punch, and we got my record player set up in the corner and I knew it was going to be the biggest, bestest surprise party for any pony in all of Ponyville. I mean what better way to welcome a new pony than-

**"PINKIE PIE!!! AH DON'T HAVE TIME FOR THIS!!! Get to the consarn'd POINT, already!!!"** Applejack screamed, wheezing through her teeth as she glared at the stunned pink pony. Of course, it only took Pinkie a second to recover. Popping up the collar on her coat, she leaned in close to Twilight and Applejack, glancing around as if someone was watching them.

"See... the weird thing is... since we got back, I haven't seen anypony that I recognized, and I've been all the way around Ponyville today! I don't know *any* of these ponies!" Pinkie Pie glanced about one more time before turning back to Applejack and Twilight once more, speaking in a guarded whisper.

"I don't know any of them *at all*."

# Chapter 5

## Breaking Glass

Rarity gave a frustrated huff, peering under her bed for any sign of her wayward cat. Where was she? She had looked in the closet, under the bed, in her studio, in the kitchen... pretty much everywhere the little fur-covered ball of pain could be! On top of that, Sweetie Belle was gone too and hadn't even had the good mind to lock the shop on the way out! Perhaps the little filly had taken her cat over to Fluttershy's for some reason and hadn't left a note. Considering that she wasn't exactly supposed to be back yet, it seemed like the most likely explanation.

She was about to head out and see if what she had surmised was true when she heard a shout from outside her window.

"Rarity! Hey! Rarity!"

Twilight, Pinkie and Applejack stood down below, in front of their good friend's carousel styled boutique as the violet haired unicorn appeared in the upper window.

"Girls! How goes it?" she greeted them with a flourish, folding her forelegs on the windowsill as she leaned out to look down to them. "Tell me, have you seen Sweetie Belle? She doesn't appear to be home and I can't find Opalescence *anywhere*! I thought she might have taken her over to Fluttershy's or something, but..."

"We know, and it seems that you're not the only one having a problem, either." Twilight interjected, "Something strange is going on, and we're not exactly sure what, but it seems like it's affecting all of Ponyville. Applejack went back to her farm right after we returned, but she can't find any of her relatives. However, there's no sign of anything amiss, and no indication that they've actually gone anywhere." Twilight pointed to her disheveled friend who just gave a weak nod, pushing her old Stetson up away from her eyes, "Not only that, but Pinkie Pie says that she doesn't

recognize *any* of the ponies that she's seen around Ponyville since we got back. Gummy's gone too, along with Mr. and Mrs. Cake, but the bakery itself is completely intact. All of the wares are still on the display stands and nothing's been put up. The doors weren't even locked. It's as if they just... left."

"Something smells *fishy* around here!" Pinkie appeared from behind Twilight, tilting her hat over one eye with her hoof. "And I don't like it!" She disappeared back behind Twilight for just a moment, only to pop up right next to Rarity on the second story of the boutique. "Not at all!"

The prim unicorn nearly jumped out of her skin with a brief, frightened shriek, pressing herself against the window frame as Pinkie leaned against the sill a length or so away from her. "Pinkie, don't *do* that!" Rarity exclaimed, but Pinkie paid no mind.

The pink mare drew a small brightly colored pipe from her coat and placed it in her mouth, blowing a series of bubbles from it, all the while trying to look thoughtful. "What pony would just get up and leave like that without even leaving a note? That's not the Mr. and Mrs. Cake / know! What if someone wanted a cupcake? Crêpes don't fold themselves! And the turnovers! The *turnovers*! It doesn't make any sense!"

Reaching over with a hoof, Rarity examined the brim of Pinkie's hat. It was absolutely atrocious... The poor thing looked like had been lit ablaze and then dropped in the middle of a stampede. And the coat was even *worse*, such a mangled mess of— Pinkie leapt on to the windowsill, posing with a single hoof out towards the horizon.

"But, I'm going to figure out what's going on! I'll solve this mystery, or my name isn't Pinkie Pie!" And with that she leapt out of the window of the boutique, a thump like a sack of bricks resounding below a moment later as the pink mare belly-flopped onto the grass. She just giggled, face down on Rarity's lawn.

"Whatever you say, darling," Rarity laughed in spite of herself, delightfully bemused as always by Pinkie's behavior. "Alright then, let me just brush my mane back into place and I shall be right down~"



“Now don’t take yer sweet time, fussbudget! Ah’ve got kin to find, an’ we can’t be wasting any time on no frou-frou nonsense!” Applejack gave Rarity a stern look, the unicorn’s expression souring for a moment before it softened a bit. She knew that Applejack was concerned, and a gentle smile returned to her face as she gave a nod to her anxious friend before disappearing back into her boutique. “Ah hope they’re alright,” Applejack said weakly, her eyes heavy with worry for her own.

“I’m sure they’re fine, Applejack. We’ll get to the bottom of this, but first we should round up Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash, so that we have hooves in the air just in case.”

A moment later, the prim unicorn appeared at the door, strutting out to her friends as they stood by the tree outside of her boutique.

“Well then, I suppose we’re off,” Rarity spoke, looking rather unconcerned at the moment — there was surely a reasonable explanation for all of this.

Proceeding across town towards the edge of the Everfree Forest, the four passed through the center of Ponyville again, glancing warily at the ponies mulling about in the streets around them. It seemed that Pinkie was indeed on to something. All of the ponies they saw were... indistinct, to say the least. They couldn’t place any of them having ever been in Ponyville, nor could they recall really what one looked like after losing sight of them. Any efforts to approach one simply caused them to walk away sullenly and even shouting after them produced no response. None of the usual vendors were at their stands, and all of the buildings were strangely quiet for the middle of the day. Something was amiss in Ponyville for sure.

As the group approached the house of their timid yellow pegasus friend, they noticed that much of the equipment that Fluttershy kept for tending to her animal friends was scattered about in relative disarray; tools were tossed about the garden, and the hutches and coops that she had for the various animals seemed still and deserted.

Suddenly, a shadow shot across the path in front of them and a moment later, Rainbow Dash descended from the sky in a streak of prismatic color, stopping abruptly in midair a length or so ahead of them.

She looked a little bent out of shape, panting heavily as she put her hooves up, beckoning them to stop.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t go in there right now if I were you.”

“What? Why? What’s wrong.”

Rainbow Dash took a deep breath before explaining the situation, “All of her animals are gone. Just poof, like they were never there in the first place. Her annoying rabbit, Angel. Her chickens, too. Not to mention all the ones she was keeping downstairs for recovery.”

“All of them?” Rarity looked honestly surprised, chewing on her lip as her thoughts went back to her sister and pet.

“All of them. Apparently Lyra and Bon Bon were supposed to stop by every day while she was gone to keep tabs and make sure they were all fed, but I don’t know what happened with that.” Dash shrugged, sinking in the air a bit, “So anyway, she came over to my place to ask for help and I’ve been looking around for clues out here while she searches her house.”

The blue pegasus smiled uneasily, flying up and over the group before landing between Applejack and Twilight, putting a foreleg over each of their shoulders. “But... she’s kind of having a *moment* right now, so I *really* wouldn’t go in there.” Rainbow gave a nervous chuckle and shook her head.

“Well, it’s kind of bigger than that, Rainbow... Applejack can’t find any of her relatives. Sweetie Belle and Opalescence are missing, too, not to mention Gummy and the Cakes.” With that, Pinkie Pie popped up behind Rainbow Dash, and set her chin down on the top of Dash’s head.

“It’s spoooooooooooooooooky~! What we’ve got on our hands, gang, is a mystery! The Mystery of the Pilfered Ponies! ...and Pets!” Performing a rather adroit backflip, Pinkie landed in front of the rest of her friends and put a hoof into her coat. “But we’ll get to the bottom of this, see? Nothing’s gonna stop us from figuring this out and getting everything back! First, though, we’ve got to interview Fluttershy and see what she knows! She might be hiding something!”

“*Why* would Fluttershy be hiding something?” Twilight asked, slightly confused by Pinkie’s typically meandering logic.

“I dunno, just seems like what you’re supposed to do. You’ve got to question ponies to get clues!”

Twilight gave an exasperated sigh, and pushing past Pinkie Pie, made her way up the little hill to Fluttershy’s home, knocking on the door gently with her hoof. There was no response. After a few seconds, Twilight knocked again, a bit more forcefully and called to her friend.

“Fluttershy? Are you in there?” She said, trying to sound as friendly as she could manage, being as concerned as she was. After a few seconds of silence, a crash emanated from somewhere inside the pegasus’ house. Leaning against the door, Twilight tried to gaze in through its window at the interior of the house. Everything was strewn about: cage doors hung open, cushions lay turned over, and various other effects were scattered all over the floor.

Twilight pressed herself against the door to listen, but it hadn’t been closed completely and when she put her weight against it, the door came unstuck. She fell forward, just managing to catch herself right before she faceplanted into Fluttershy’s living room.

She could hear some quiet mumbling coming from the kitchen, just beyond the living room itself. The sound of cabinet doors being opened and slammed shut in quick succession followed a moment later. There was a brief repose as Twilight began to move through the living room, carefully stepping past the toppled bird cages to avoid making any noise.

The soft clatter of dishes being shuffled around emanated from around the corner as she approached it. She had gotten halfway through the ransacked den before she caught a barely audible gasp from the kitchen, and a moment later a single, crisp noise broke the silence – the sound of a single piece of porcelain shattering on the floor. The quiet returned for just a second more before a low, guttural roar welled out of the next room, pitching up to a shrill scream of rage as a chorus of exploding finery rang out upon their impact with the floor. Twilight stopped in place as she heard it, her heart leaping up into her throat. She slowly began to back

away from the kitchen door as the screaming continued, a series of dull thumps playing out on the wall next to her.

After a few long moments, the vitriol flowing from the kitchen began to subside and relative peace fell over the household once again. Twilight took a deep breath, steeling herself and creeping up to the doorway so that she might peek around the corner into the kitchen itself.

Fluttershy was leaning against the counter, panting as she stood amidst the debris of what *were* several dozen very nice plates, cups and saucers. She looked horrible: her pretty pink hair a tangled nest and a dark shadow cast over her expression, a desperate look in her eyes as she tried to take stock momentarily. The pegasus hadn't caught sight of Twilight yet, and the unicorn decided to take a step back and compose herself before gently calling for her friend.

"Fluttershy? Fluttershy, are you in here?" Twilight said as calmly as she could manage, pressing her ear to the wall to see if she elicited an audible response. She was glad that she hadn't been able to see the little rampage that had just occurred, but simply hearing it had been enough to shake her up regardless.

"T-twilight? Is that you?" She responded, her voice resonating with a hopeful tone. The unicorn slowly peeked out into the kitchen doorway, a timorous smile on her face as she slowly stepped around the corner and through the doorway. The pegasus relaxed visibly, an almost pained expression on her face as she approached Twilight, stumbling through the wreckage of her kitchenware and toppling onto her knees at her friend's hooves. Reaching up, she put her forelegs around Twilight's shoulders and drew herself up level.

"Oh, Twilight, it's awful! Just awful... All of the animals are gone! Mr. and Mrs. Mouse, the Robin twins, Mr. Bandicoot and Miss Woodchuck, not to mention all the chickens! I can't find any of them! I've searched everywhere!" She took a deep breath through her snout, snorting loudly as tears began to well up in her eyes. "Where could they have all gone? What if something *happened* to them?! And not only that but... Angel's missing too... oh my poor little..." With that she screwed her eyes shut and began to shake Twilight bodily, much to the poor bookworm's chagrin.

“You’ve *got* to help me find them! You’ve just **got** to! They might be scared or lost or even *worse* and they’ve got no one out there to protect them or feed them or **anything**, and if any of them got hurt I just don’t know if I could live with myself!!”

“F-F-F-L-L-L-U-U-U-T-T-T-E-R-R-S-S-H-H-Y-Y-Y!!!” Twilight persisted, being shaken back and forth repeatedly until she managed to get both hooves around her and pull the panicking pegasus pony promptly into a powerful... hug.

Fluttershy honestly looked like she was about to collapse into a quivering mass at this point, her eyes clouding with tears as Twilight held her. The unicorn looked her friend in the eyes, a stern expression on her face, and without faltering she spoke to her in a calm and collected voice.

“Don’t worry, okay? We’ll find all your little animal friends, and Angel.” Fluttershy bit her lower lip and Twilight just gave her a gentle nuzzle to the cheek, a smile slipping onto her face, “*Especiall*y Angel. But what I need *you* to do, is calm down and get yourself together so that we’re all thinking straight. Your animals aren’t the only ones missing.”

Fluttershy perked up, her expression changing to one of surprise.

“They’re not?” She asked, now looking even more concerned, though the emotion began to channel itself in a completely different direction.

“No. Rarity’s cat and Pinkie’s alligator are missing as well, along with an entire plethora of ponies from the town. Something strange is going on, but if we’re going to figure it out, I need you to be at your best. Okay?”

Fluttershy gave a soft nod in response, Twilight squeezing her softly before letting go and dropping back down onto all four hooves. The unicorn gave a reassuring smile and put a hoof to her heart.

“We’ll find them, don’t worry.”

Fluttershy’s quiet smile began to return in spite of her darkened eyes and she trotted out into the den. Twilight gave a sigh of relief, slowly scanning the remains of what was once a rather pleasant kitchen. Of

course, Fluttershy wouldn't even think of asking her or any of the others to help her clean up. That was just her way...

She wondered about Fluttershy sometimes. So warm and kind, so dedicated to others, but sometimes, if very rarely, all that frustration of grinning and bearing it slipped out from behind her heart and made itself known. And when it did...

It was kind of scary. What was it keeping her hooves on the ground, so to speak?

"Twilight?" Her friend's soft voice spoke from behind her in the living room, breaking her from her introspection suddenly. She looked back over her shoulder to see Fluttershy smiling sweetly at her, the yellow pegasus dropping eye contact as soon as Twilight made it.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks..." Fluttershy's smile grew just a little bigger and with a turn, she fluttered over the clutter on the living room floor to the door. Twilight shook the thoughts from her head and with a smile, followed her friend outside.

# Chapter 6

## Into the Void

Outside, the other four were discussing what they could do to find the missing townsfolk.

“Well, if we split up, we could cover more ground that way. I know I can make a circuit of the town in no time. If I searched from the air, all of you could check out the buildings,” Rainbow Dash remarked, putting her forehooves together with a loud clomp.

“We could look for clues!” Pinkie beamed, hopping up on her back legs.

“Yes. Clues,” the pegasus responded flatly, “You can look for clues.”

“Ah dunno, girls. Ah don’t think we should be splittin’ up, especially if we don’t know jest what we’re dealin’ with here. Ah mean, what kind of thing takes an entire town of ponies an’ replaces them with... other... strange ponies. It jest ain’t natural. An’ what sorta power does that kinda thing imply, anyway? Ah think it’s best we stick together.” Applejack was looking a little better now that all of her friends were present and accounted for, though the worry for her family gnawed away at her in the back of her mind. Still, the six of them together could get through just about anything as long as they stuck together...

“Applejack’s right.” Rarity replied, giving her mane a toss. A little smile alighted on her face and she looked to each of the girls. “What I think we should do, is, as a group, go to a location, perhaps Sugarcube Corner or Sweet Apple Acres or one of the shops in town, and scour the building to-“

“Look for clues!” Pinkie popped up behind Rarity, throwing a hoof into the air with great exuberance. The unicorn gave a sigh and nodded in affirmation to the pink pony.

“Yes... look for clues, Pinkie. That way, we can see if we can find any information regarding what happened to all of the other ponies in Ponyville while we were gone.”

“Alright girls,” Twilight announced as she approached, walking just behind Fluttershy as they entered the little semi-circle of ponies, “We need a plan.”

“Wonderful!” her horned compatriot replied, a little bit to Twilight’s surprise. As she listened, Rarity recounted what they had just been discussing. It seemed logical enough and after seeing two of her best friends just a length or two from having nervous breakdowns, she really didn’t want to have them split up again. Their strength was in numbers and that’s what they had to go on.

“Okay, then we’ll go to Sugarcube Corner first. I know you already looked there, Pinkie, but six pairs of eyes are better than just one.” The other five ponies each replied in affirmation and turning back towards town, they set out for the bakery.

The path back to Ponyville from the outskirts where Fluttershy lived was pretty open and there was a nice view of the town from the buried ramparts that surrounded it. The sun sank down closer to the hills on the other side of the town as they walked along; they were all a bit apprehensive, but together it was easier to forget about how uneasy they felt, at least.

“What sort of thing do you suppose could cause so many animals and ponies to go missing?” Fluttershy inquired to the others, looking around at the landscape as they went. It was pretty, but also eerily quiet, save for the sound of the warm summer winds blowing across the valley.

“Maybe it was something out of the forest,” Rainbow Dash mused as she hovered above the rest of the group. “Some big and scary, that came out and scared everypony off.” She said as she leaned down into the group with a smirk, “Or worse.” Fluttershy gave a gasp and shrunk down a little, shaking at the thought of it.



“Rainbow Dash!” Applejack snapped at her, looking downright peaked. “Consarn it! Don’t be sayin’ stuff like that! Some of us have family that we’re concerned about, in case ya didn’t notice!” The blue pegasus backed off a bit, looking as if she’d been slapped in the face. Applejack gazed up into the sky, a despondent gloom set on her expression. “Oh... Ah jes hope they’re safe...”

“I’m sure everypony’s fine, what we need to do is find out where they went.” Twilight stated before Pinkie Pie popped up between the two of them, wedging herself between their bodies.

“I know!” She declared with an overbearing amount of glee, “Maybe there was a big **party** in Canterlot and they all went to it so now there’s nopony home!” Fluttershy glanced past Twilight to the pink mare and gave her a skeptical look.

“Well, what about the animals then?” The yellow pegasus enquired. Pinkie looked down, stopping for a moment and tapping her chin with her hoof.

“Well,” she hesitated for a moment, “Maybe they brought them along to share in the festivities?”

“Yeah? Well what about all them weird ponies hangin’ around town?” Applejack glowered over to Pinkie, who smiled back to her apprehensively.

“Well... maybe the Princess hired some ponies to keep watch on Ponyville while everypony was away so that no pony had to worry about anything!”

“Ah seriously doubt that, sugarcube.”

Pinkie, looking a bit put off, simply shrugged and without another word, bounded on ahead of the group with her usual degree of bounce, stopping at the top of the next hill to wait.

“Well...” Fluttershy spoke up, if just a little, getting Applejack and Twilight’s attention as the others pulled ahead just a bit to catch up with Pinkie. “What about a spell, or something magical?” Twilight thought on it for a moment. It was possible, though if it existed, she’d never read about

such a spell in any of her books before. Applejack chewed on a thought, looking over at her unicorn friend silently for a moment before it worked its way out of her mouth.

“Ya don’t suppose that tomfoolery of yers this mornin’ has anything t’do with it, do ya, Twilight?” Her lavender friend rolled her eyes in reply, looking at her over with a serious countenance.

“I don’t see why. It was just a simple teleport, and according to the related theory it should have gone off without a hitch. All I did was misjudge the amount of energy needed to get to Ponyville and we came up short. That’s all.”

“But ya said it yerself, it was a ‘theory’. Doesn’t mean it’s true, and it doesn’t mean that things’d necessarily work out jes like you’d think they would. What if somethin’ went wrong and we jest didn’t know it at the time?” The farmgirl replied forcefully.

“She’s got a point.” Fluttershy said, shrinking back a bit after finishing her sentence. However, Twilight took the jab stoically only giving a sideways glance to Fluttershy before stopping in the middle of the path and pointing a hoof towards Applejack.

“I highly doubt it, Applejack, and frankly, I think you’re getting way too hung up on this. You’re usually just fine about me using my magic, besides when it comes down to tradition and stuff like that, but that aside, it’s not really something that comes up. What’s the big deal?”

The weary farmer shook her head, sitting down on the road with Twilight, their pastel pegasus friend stopping a length or two away to listen.

“Ah don’t mind yer magic, Twilight, an’ Ah got full confidence in yer ability t’do the things that ya know well. But Ah don’t like bein’ experimented on or nothin’ like that an’ when you go pullin’ me into messin’ with things that ya haven’t ever dealt with before, well Ah get nervous. Ya learn from experience, after all, and if y’all ain’t experienced it, then how do ya know it’s gonna work? Books ain’t gonna tell ya everything, Twilight, and if there’s one thing Ah’ve gonna tell *you*, it’s that little trip this mornin’ scared th’ livin’ bajeibus outta me.”

"I understand... but I'm telling you, it worked out *fine*. This is just a coincidence, and regardless of what's causing the current weirdness in Ponyville, I'm sure it's nothing we can't handle... I hope."

"Real reassurin', honeybunch."

A loud whistle pierced the air around them and the three ponies turned to look at the others that were waiting for them at the top of the next hill.

"Hey! Slowpokes!" Rainbow Dash shouted, motioning for them to come over, "Come on! I could have flown around town three times by now!" The pegasus crossed her forelegs as her friends approached, tapping her foot in midair.

"We really do need to get moving. It's almost sunset and the more time we waste out here, the harder it will be for us to figure out exactly what is going on here." Rarity threw her hair to the side and turned to face Ponyville, starting down the hill as Twilight and the other two arrived. Twilight looked a bit puzzled.

"That's... odd. It shouldn't be more than three o'clock now. It wasn't long past noon when we got back to Ponyville and it can't have been but two hours or so since then, so even at the latest..." Twilight's gears began to turn as she tried to figure out why the Princess would be bringing the sun down so early. Maybe her sister needed the practice? Was she taking the rest of the night off?

"That... is kind of weird." Looking to Twilight, Rainbow shrugged before scanning the road for Fluttershy who was still lagging behind. She stood near some bushes, looking into them as if searching for something.

"Fluttershy! What are you *doing*? Come on!" shouted Dash, beckoning to the other pegasus with her hoof. She didn't respond, still searching the bushes for something. Twilight and Dash both shot each other a look.

They both sauntered over to her, Twilight peering into the bushes as Dash sat down on her flanks, her forelimbs folded over her chest.

"What are you looking for?" The unicorn inquired, looking into the dense brush where Fluttershy was searching as the weary pegasus pushed away branches and foliage.

"I... I saw something. Something small, in the bushes here. I thought it might be a bunny or a squirrel or a marmot or something. So I was calling to it, but... I don't see it now. I wonder where it went. Everything's so... quiet. I don't even hear any birds chirping. Do you?"

Twilight hadn't thought about it. The hills had been entirely silent the whole way to Fluttershy's house and back. Usually the air was filled with birdsong this time of year.

"We'll worry about that later. Right now, we really have to get back to Ponyville. It's getting dark and..."

And it was. The mountains behind Fluttershy's house and the adjacent forest seemed to grow dark as the sun began setting. It was a little odd since the sun should have actually been shining onto them, but as Twilight watched a dark blanket descended over the mountain tops, flowing down the mountains themselves and into the forest.

Twilight took Fluttershy's tail in her teeth and gave her a gentle tug, pulling her back a length or so from the bushes. "Come on, let's get moving..."

"But... I know I saw something. Are you sure? I mean... what if it's scared and alone and..." Fluttershy glanced back at the bushes as the long shadow fell across the forest before them. The interior of the woods grew darker and darker until the row of trees became completely impenetrable. As they watched, an inky blackness began to seep from the bushes just a few lengths away, crawling onto the road before them. Fluttershy's eyes widened as she tried to speak, but nothing aside from muffled and panicked squeaks made it out of her as she dropped onto her flank, scooting herself backwards with her front hooves as the shadows slithered towards them.

"Ooooh boy." This was trouble. Twilight knew it was trouble. Things associated with darkness and shadow tended to *be* trouble and she was suddenly **very** uncomfortable being where she was. Fluttershy, on the

other hoof, was rooted to the spot, shaking like a leaf as the black mass approached.

"What are you two doing?" Dash said, turning around as she heard Twilight speak again. Her eyes snapped wide as she caught sight of the encroaching darkness drawing itself out of the forest, and half a second later she was off her flank and into the air.

"Fluttershy, we need to move. Now!" Twilight yelled as she ran past Fluttershy, skidding to a stop when she realized that her friend had yet to budge. Both her and Dash returned to the pastel pegasus, Dash taking Fluttershy's pink mane in her teeth while Twilight took a step back and flung herself bodily at the yellow pegasus, dislodging Fluttershy from her spot and sending the three of them tumbling down the hill just as the wave of shadow began to pick up speed.

Dash was the first to recover, pulling a flip in midair to steady herself and hovering as she watched the other two roll down the hill past her. Looking back, she caught sight of the darkness cresting the top of the hill behind them. It began to pour down the ridge and looking beyond, she could see the shadow consuming the entire countryside as night fell over it. She didn't stick around to watch it for more than a second, though, and with a flap of her wings, she was back up to speed and burning down the path towards Ponyville.

Down at the bottom of the hill, the path curled around a small pond before proceeding over a creek and down a straight road into the middle of Ponyville. Applejack, Rarity, and Pinkie Pie had just made it to the edge of the pond and were proceeding around when the blue pegasus blurred past with a hard gust of wind following in her wake.

"Everypony! RUN!!!" She shouted back over her shoulder, arcing through the air over the pond as the others turned around to see what they exactly should be running from. It didn't take more than a moment for them to figure it out. Screaming in unison, the three broke into a gallop, running for their lives toward the bridge on the other side of the pond.

Back at the bottom of the hill, Fluttershy and Twilight came to rest beside each other, a little scuffed and bruised from the trip down. Disoriented, they got to their hooves as the wave of darkness came

crashing down the hill, splashing against the road not a few lengths away and starting to pile upon itself like a great river of living tar. Fluttershy gave a frightened cry, staggering back away from the muck as Twilight shook herself out of her momentary daze. Giving her cowering friend a hard nudge to get her moving, they began to flee for the pond, their other friends having already made it to the bridge, calling to them and urging them on.

"Move it! It's right behind you!!" Dash yelled, calling out between her hooves from her position over the pond. The sun was dipping down below the horizon and as the last bit of it disappeared behind Ponyville, a green flash flickered across the sky. Below, the lake began to ripple, an oily sheen appearing on the water, flickering and whirling with all the colors of Rainbow's mane as it spread to cover the entire surface of the pond.

As she watched, the surface began to churn and a long, thin tendril of clear lake water drew itself up out of the pond, flailing around a bit before turning its attention to the nearest pony.

"Rarity! Look out!" Dash took off towards the bridge, but it was too late. The unicorn looked towards Rainbow's shout, her face contorting in alarm as she caught sight of the huge tentacle snaking towards her.

Her scream caught the attention of Applejack and Pinkie, who whipped around just in time to see the clear arm coil itself around their friend's neck and mouth. The thick band of water cut off her scream abruptly, the shriek replaced by a loud gurgling as her muzzle became wrapped in a thick casing of living water.

Pinkie squeaked loudly, the pink mare and farmgirl springing in vain for Rarity as the tendril whipped her straight off the bridge into the air. Then, just as it was about to draw the struggling unicorn underwater, Rainbow Dash cleared the last bit of distance to the surface a bare second before Rarity was pulled underneath. The pegasus caught Rarity's long, curly tail in her mouth and wrenching hard, drew her back up out of the water, thrashing about in midair as the pegasus struggled against the power of the lake itself.

Applejack leapt again, grasping Dash's tail and drawing her down to the bridge. She pressed herself against the side rails in order to keep from

being pulled off her hooves and held on for dear life as Dash's wings continued to struggle against the pull of the water 'serpent'.

Twilight couldn't believe her eyes. This was quickly becoming insane. A bright spark leapt from her horn, both her and Fluttershy disappearing in a flash of white. A screeching like twisting metal filled their ears for a brief instant and they both reappeared behind their friends. Pinkie put her forelegs around Applejack tightly, holding onto her as best she could.

"Don't worry! I won't let you go!" The pink pony smiled brightly, just a bare second before the darkness crashed into the pond, kicking up a large wave on the far side. The whole thing seemed to contract all at once and there was a sudden jerk, wrenching Rainbow Dash forward and down towards the water, taking Applejack and Pinkie with her as the guardrail on the bridge splintered and gave way under the sheer force of the motion.

Pinkie Pie let out an oddly gleeful squeal as she took to the air, and with a horrified expression on her face, Fluttershy dove after her friends, grabbing a hold of Pinkie's tail just as the other three hit the water. Without thinking, Twilight went in after them, the consuming wave of tar overrunning the bridge a few seconds later.

The pond was dark and murky, and it became completely impossible to see as the light from the surface faded. Only little flickers of a pink tail ahead of her gave her anything to go on as she dove deeper, chasing desperately after her friends through the befouled waters. Her mind was spinning, bringing up every possible scenario she could think of in order to deal with this.

She knew how to swim, of course. She knew CPR. She knew that this pond wasn't deep enough to give her the bends. She knew that she could probably hold her breath for about two minutes, three if she really pushed it. None of this made her feel any better. At all.

She followed the shapes of her friends deeper until the last flicker of color that she could make out disappeared into the darkness. There was a great rush, the water itself pushing her back upwards as she fought to dive down further and as the current increased she only became more determined, even as the pressure on her eardrums became more and more

painful. She approached the bottom, which appeared to be nothing more than a writhing wall of shadow below her, and reaching the spot where she saw Fluttershy's tail disappear, she thrust out her hoof, plunging it into the dark tar below.

The membrane broke, and the tepid water of the pond gave way to the warm, humid air of summer as she broke through to the surface. The glaring radiance of the sun filled her eyes as she took a deep, choking breath, filling her lungs with air as she plowed into the thick layer of silt at the edge of the pond. The mud in her eyes and ears clouded her senses as she tried to wipe it off with her hoof, vaguely discerning the panicked ramblings of five familiar voices somewhere in the distance.

Her friends had made it. Thank Celestia...

She scraped the last bit of mud out of her eyes and blinking it away, looked up from the edge of the pond. Her eyes grew wide and she slowly got to hooves before clambering up the bank to the edge of the village. She was in Ponyville...

...but it wasn't the one she knew.



# Chapter 7

## Ghosts

The air was thick and humid as a heavy fog rolled over the town, and Twilight could hear the voices of her companions in the distance, indistinct and muffled, as if she were listening to them through a pane of glass. After dragging herself up out of the muck at the edge of the pond, she trudged through the reeds, re-emerging back into Ponyville proper.

The town was quiet. Still. A warm summer wind was blowing through the empty streets as Twilight entered into the town square, gazing silently around at her surroundings. Everything was... faded. It was as if time had come through and piled several years onto the town itself. Everything was in the exact same place as before, but the paint on the buildings had begun to crack and peel, and the windows had become clouded from sun and weather. Weeds had begun to overgrow the finely grazed streets, flower beds and gardens throughout town, and even the banners above the stands had become faded and brittle. The whole town *seemed to be* possessed of an otherworldly decay as Twilight walked alone, her friends' voices carried on the wind as she searched the lonely streets of Ponyville.

*What... happened? The town's an absolute wreck! Did that... thing do this?*

"Girls? Hello? Is there anypony there?" Twilight called, walking down the main street. Voices spoke, all throughout the town around her, but none were particularly close or distinct. She couldn't tell who was talking, where they were, or what they were saying, and as she moved throughout the town, the sources of the voices seemed to move as if carried on the wind from some distant location.

*This is crazy. There's no one here! I'm chasing after ghosts! ...No. There's no such thing as ghosts! Shadow monsters... maybe... What was that thing, anyway?! Some sort of spell, or an entity of some kind? Some demon... or... could it be Nightmare Moon? No, we banished her. But... it*

*seemed similar some how. Perhaps, and if that's the case, then... we have to tell the Princess.*

Concerns about the safety of her friends (not to mention her own) began to gnaw at the back of her mind. She also noted that, every once in a while, she would catch a bit of movement out of the corner of her eye. It was just a flicker of white, disappearing as soon as she looked at it, but somehow it seemed to be steadily luring her about the village in slow circles as she wandered in search of her friends.

*Remember, Twilight. No such thing as ghosts...*

"Girls! Where *are* you?!" Twilight called again, panting a bit as she picked up her pace, jogging through the streets at a brisk canter as she looked from shop to shop, house to house. They *had* to be around somewhere! The voices continued and every once in a while she could catch what she thought was one of the other's voices, hidden amongst the malicious, mumbling drone that was steadily growing in intensity all around her.

Rounding the next corner, she stepped into an alleyway behind a row of shops, stopping dead in her tracks as she looked down the narrow lane. In front of her, not more than a few lengths away, was an apparition. An ephemeral projection, taking the shape of a young pegasus mare, cast onto the haze in front of her like an inverted shadow. Lacking any depth, it stood, turned away from her, flickering in and out of existence as she looked on.

Perhaps it was her innate curiosity, or her scientific mind, she didn't know. However, *something* compelled Twilight to get a closer look, and against her better judgment, she began to approach it. As she did, the image began to glow clearer, the voices pushing themselves into her ears, merging into some sort of abrasive static that began to slowly crawl its way into her head as she got closer. The muscles in her neck and shoulders began to tense involuntarily and the world around her seemed to pull out of focus as she neared the spectre, all her attention being drawn to it and it alone.

Her proximity seemed to carry with it the threat of physical pain, but just as she was about to turn away, the apparition slowly turned its head

around to her. It was the mailmare, Ditzzy, looking at her with wall-eyed confusion. Slowly counter-rotating, the mare's eyes met in the middle and focused, the spectre blinking before raising a hoof and issuing a slight wave to Twilight...

There was a rush, the wind hitting her like a tram, Twilight having not even noticed its absence in the first place. Staggering to the side, she barely managed to keep on her feet, steadying herself against the renewed gale. The image was gone, and the voices had subsided, replaced by the lonely howling of the wind as she quickly withdrew from the alleyway back onto the main road.

"...I hope we find them soon... it would seem that this whole place has gone *completely* mad, and it will *not do* to be separated..."

*Rarity?*

"Rarity. **Rarity! I'm here!**" Twilight reared up, shouting into the wind as she tried to figure out where exactly her fellow unicorn's voice had come from. She couldn't see her around anywhere, so running across the center of town, she made her way over to a group of produce stands and began to search around them for any sign of her violet-haired compatriot.

"Where *are* you? I'm over here! Rarity! Anypony! Can you hear me?!"

Twilight listened carefully, straining to hear any sound that could even be interpreted as a response: a shout, a cry, anything.

... ..

Nothing.

Twilight wilted a bit, giving a heavy sigh. Where could Rarity have gone? Her friends had to be around here somewhere... and then the static returned. The coat on the unicorn's back stood on end, a cold chill running up her spine as the caustic noise crept into the back of her head. Stepping away from the produce stands cautiously, she turned back towards the square only to be greeted by a wall of phantasmal ponies. They were

present just as Ditzzy had been before, but Twilight had their full attention and they were glaring at her, their eyes looking on judgmentally.

The unicorn screamed.

Recoiling in horror, she leapt back away from the spectres, crashing into one of the fruit stands and spilling its dusty contents across the grass as she tumbled over the stacked baskets of oranges. Disoriented, she crawled away as quickly as she could manage. It was only after finding her hooves again behind one of the stands, that Twilight was able to take a deep breath and steel her nerves. After several moments of internal debate, she opened her eyes, half expecting something to be waiting for her/looming over her, when she did.

There wasn't. Just a bunch of bundles of browned old begonias.

Slowly peeking out from behind the fruit stand, she saw that she was once again alone. Twilight drew ragged breaths, slowly scanning the immediate area for any presence, friendly or otherwise. Once again, nothing.

*I can't take this. This is ridiculous! This has to be some sort of... dream or nightmare or **something**. Maybe I'm still in the road... maybe the teleport spell knocked me unconscious and I'm still out in a field somewhere. But what about earlier...? Was that all a dream? It seemed so real. And rolling down that hill.*

Twilight felt her muscles tense, the sore spots from her tumble down the hill near Fluttershy's house still quite fresh. Her coat and mane were getting rather stiff from the wind as well, and the muck from the pond was causing her to feel rather grimy all over as it settled throughout her fur.

*Not to mention the pond. I couldn't have dreamt all that! What if...*

"...it's all so wrong. There's nothing here... I... I... please, we have to find the others..."

Fluttershy's soft voice whispered in Twilight's ear, causing her to whip her head around towards its apparent source. Spying the top of Rarity's boutique above the roofs of the nearest line of shops, she didn't waste

another moment. Breaking into a gallop, she ran for the Carousel Boutique, bolting through the streets of Ponyville at full speed. The whispers began to return, but she didn't dare look around, keeping her eyes ahead of her at all times.

After what seemed like several minutes, she arrived at the boutique. There wasn't anypony in the yard and the building seemed to be locked up, which was unusual, but Twilight had to see if either of her friends were around.

With a gentle spark, Twilight coiled her magic around the door handle on the lower portion of the stable-style door and pulled, causing the door to flex a little, but not open. She looked around the yard carefully, turning back towards the door once again before another slight flicker caught her attention out of the corner of her eye.

*Ignore it, Twilight. Just ignore it.*

Her nerves were deteriorating rapidly, the lavender unicorn attempting to pull the door open once more. Nothing. Frustrated, she began to wrench violently on it, with her magic at first and then physically, pressing her hooves to the door and pushing on it forcefully, causing the whole thing to rattle loudly. However, it was no use and finally giving up, she fell back onto her flank, sitting down in front of the door with an exasperated sigh.

A sudden wave of voices descended around Twilight and a horrible, demeaning laughter broke out amongst them, swirling around the unicorn as she sat. She wrenched her neck to the side, her joints popping loudly as she did, glaring down the road before whipping her head to the other side to look in the opposite direction. The laughter continued, growing in intensity until Twilight got to her hooves and spun around to face the invisible peanut gallery, her hackles raising as her face twisted with rage.

"**What?!**" She screamed at the top of her lungs, her voice echoing throughout the deserted town. The laughing was silenced, leaving Twilight alone once more with the sound of the wind.

*It's... It's **mocking** me!*

"**Leave... me... alone!**" she screamed at the top of her lungs, a series of electric sparks arcing down her spine from her horn and into the ground. A second later, the dirt around her hooves erupted like a long string of firecrackers, sending up columns of disturbed topsoil into the air all around her. Twilight hissed at the hiding malevolence, gritting her teeth as she scanned the yard of the boutique. But there was nothing there, and as the anger drained from her, so did her resolve.

*I can't **take** much more of this...!*

"...Ah... Ah don't know jest how much more a' this Ah can take. Ah've got to find th' others before Ah go bonkers out 'ere."

Twilight perked back up at the sound of Applejack's familiar drawl. Was it another trick...? Did it matter? The unicorn took a few cautious steps out into the yard, trying to pinpoint where her friend's voice had come from. It was time to get serious...

Twilight shut her eyes, and drawing her energy together, her horn began to shimmer as she drew her power into it. A bright white ball began to coalesce on the end of her horn, and once it was of sufficient size, she opened her eyes again, her violet irises replaced by an unbroken white glow.

Shifting her perspective to the orb, it began to rise into the air above her, looking down upon the town to get a bird's eye view of the whole thing. Everything seemed to be in the correct location, if dilapidated. The sun was slowly heading towards the horizon, its gaze a hot white and somewhat uncomfortable at this point, casting suspicious shadows along the streets of Ponyville as its position gradually lowered.

Still... the town itself seemed to be completely deserted. No life. No motion. Nothing, save for the occasional windblown object rolling across the grass.

"...oh no. No no no. This is *not* good. Not good at all!"

*Pinkie Pie?*

"First everypony goes missing! And now things have gotten reaaaaally ugly! If I didn't know better, I'd think this was a bad dream! But I don't feel asleep... Oh no, does that mean they're *here*?"

*They?*

Twilight's gaze scanned the town below. No luck yet, but she could hear Pinkie Pie as clear as day.

"I've got to get back to Sugar Cube Corner, and fast!"

The orb turned around to look down at the bakery, a flash of pink disappearing inside just as its gaze alit upon it. Perfect.

She felt her control begin to waver, her perspective faltering a bit as Twilight struggled for control over the spell. Her vision flickered, going out for a moment before returning to find another pair of eyes directly in front of her, black as night and twice as deep. The spectral pony roared with the fury of twisting steel and in response Twilight let out a loud shriek, a jolt of energy running up her spine as the spell's magic snapped back into her body, snuffing her vision out like a candle. Screaming, she stumbled back onto the dirt, crawling backwards as she pressing her foreleg to her face to cover her eyes. She could swear that they were melting out of her skull, but in spite of it, she tried once more to open them. She blinked; once, twice and again, her senses finally returning to her after a moment as she cleared the tears out of her eyes. Once again, she was alone.

Without a second to lose, she rose to her hooves and bolted off towards Sugarcube Corner. That's where Pinkie was, and if past experience had been any indication, that's exactly who she wanted to talk to. Pinkie always knew something, however obtuse it might be, and at this point she just wanted more than anything not to be alone.

Galloping to the bakery, she stopped just short of the door, noticing that it was slightly ajar. A sigh of relief escaped her muzzle and trotting up, she pressed a hoof against the door, pushing it open.

"Pinkie Pie, I'm so glad that you're here, I've been looking *everywhere* for somepony to—"

A jolt of electricity forced itself down Twilight's horn into her brain, causing her to screw her eyes shut as the shrieking white noise from before tore into her mind. She collapsed onto the floor, her hooves pressed against her temples as she tried to fight away the pain. When she reopened her eyes, she quickly wished she hadn't. The inside of the bakery had taken on a nothing but a vague representation of its contents: on her right there were lumps that could be cakes, pastries or little pieces of flesh for all she knew, set on what might be tables or perhaps conveniently shaped piles of garbage; the non-descript physical presence of the counter and cash register sat to her left, huddled in fear against the side wall with what were presumably a set of shelves cowering behind them; and ahead, an open doorway with twisting, turning hall beyond that seemed to stretch onwards into eternity. Everything around her was devoid of color or proper form, all of it flickering in and out of existence, vibrating furiously and refusing to be focused upon as the phantasms from before stared at her from every corner of the room. They looked as if they were screaming— shouting at her with some sort of unexplainable, unbridled hatred.

A great pressure began to push in on Twilight's mind, constricting it as she began to writhe on the cold floor, the horrible noises taking little bites out of her nerves. Her vision began to turn red, crimson seeping out of the monochrome static to start to cover the inside of the room as it began to contract and close in upon her, the specters begging to walk towards her as their faces bled, black and red seeping from their eyes and mouths like deep necrotic wounds.

She felt her muscles twitch involuntarily, knotting up and coiling angrily in protest. She wanted to scream, but her throat simply wouldn't respond. Either that or she already was and she just couldn't hear herself over the noise. It didn't matter, at any moment the pressure threatened to crush her and—

There was a sudden pop and Twilight's muzzle broke the water, the mare gasping for breath as she collapsed onto the bank of the pond.

*W...what? No... I'm back here...? But how? I...*

Slowly standing once more, she dredged the silt out of her eyes with a hoof. The voices of her friends danced on the howling gale once more as



she crawled up out of the pond, a very alarming sense of déjà vu overtaking her as she emerged once more into Ponyville. The thick soup of fog rolled across the town, obscuring her view of the main road as the white gaze of the sun made it glow.

"...that just leaves, Twilight. Knowing her, she's probably hanging out in her library or something. You guys stay here, I'll be back in no time!"

Dash's voice spoke somewhere off in the distance. That was all five. There was no time to waste. Without a second thought, Twilight took off towards her home, running off into the fog as pond water and muck trailed off of her onto the ground. They *were* looking for her, Thank Celestia! Dash was heading back to her library right now, and knowing that particular pegasus, she had probably already arrived. She had to be there to meet her, before Rainbow's patience ran out and she left again.

Booking it through town, she was rounding the last bend when she came face to face with another creature. It was almost a blur, shooting towards her at a blinding speed. Its rose eyes were not more than half a length from her own as she skidded to a halt, letting out a frightened shriek as it stopped dead in the air before her. It responded in kind, falling backwards into a cart of hay as Twilight turned around and scrambled to get away once more.

"Twilight!" A familiar rasp called out after her.

The unicorn skidded to a halt, blinking and turning around to face the voice. Much to her relief, the pony crawling out of the pile of hay was none other than Rainbow Dash, looking a little disoriented as she batted the loose straw off her person with her wings, dusting her coat off like an old leather jacket.

Good as new.

Twilight's heart soared and she rushed back over to her friend to assist her.

"Oh Rainbow! Is that you?" She looked the mare over, poking her with a hoof to check for corporeality and general believability. That is, at least, until Dash started giving her odd looks. Noting this, Twilight stopped

her prodding, taking Dash's mane and drawing her up out of the hay before smiling broadly. "Oh it IS you! Thank the stars... Dash, you have *no* idea how glad I am to see you!" she said, her horn flickering to life and drawing the remaining hay off of Dash in one large wad and depositing it back into the hay pile behind her. The pegasus gave a short nod, her wings flapping and pulling her off of the cart and into the air in front of Twilight.

"Same here! I've been looking for you *forever*! Where have you been, anyway?"

"I have no idea, I could hear the rest of you, but... Listen, I don't want to talk about it right now. It's just that something's *really* wrong here, Dash. ...Are you, okay? I didn't mean to scare you."

"Oh I'm fine, I just— scare? What? No. You didn't scare me! I was just... *startled*, that's all. I didn't expect you to come tearing around the corner like that." Dash's ever-present smirk settling back on her face. "I didn't think you could move so fast, Twilight. You get spooked or something? You should have seen the look on your face!" Twilight glared at Dash, not amused by the pegasus' comments. Still...

"Well... I've been having a rough time, so *excuse* me if I'm a little shaken up!" The unicorn gave a huff and began to trot past Dash towards the library. Her friend simply rolled her eyes and took to the air, floating lazily after her. It was only a few more seconds, though, before Twilight's analytical demeanor returned.

"Anyway," she began, "you said that you and the others were looking for me?"

"Yeah." Dash responded as she came up beside Twilight, hovering about half a height off the ground next to her as she walked along towards the Library. "See, I figured that you'd be here, so I searched around for a bit, but then I got kind of bored so I figured I'd head back to Sugarcube Corner. That's where the others are." Dash pulled a flip in midair and fluttered down in front of Twilight, causing her to come to a stop. "I'm surprised you didn't head there. I've been flying all over town to try and find you! I was just heading back to tell the others that I hadn't seen you when I ran into you. Well, *almost* ran into you." Dash broke into a bit of a grin, but Twilight just gave her friend a firm nod in return.

"I don't know how I managed to miss you, but I could hear everypony's voices once in a while. I kept following you around, hoping I'd find you but... it just wasn't working out."

"Tell me about it," Dash huffed, "Anyway, we should probably get back to the others."

Gazing around her, Twilight took a moment to catch her bearings before nodding to Dash and turning to head off back towards the center of town, new theories beginning to form in her mind.

"Yeah... once we're back together with the others, we can try to figure out what's going on, and what to do about it... things seem to be getting worse.

...and if that's the case we're running out of time."