

A Rose is a Rose



By Space Brony

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Prologue

Darkness enveloped the figure like a cloak. What little light was given off by the stars seemed to be captured by its presence, never to be released again. The only luminescence within view of the entire mountainside were the stars and the brilliant white being that was dragged carelessly by the black silhouette of the figure.

Its progress was slow; its victim was heavy. But it had time. Years of waiting for this moment, of preparation, of brooding and mourning and plotting and hoping, made its arrival all the sweeter. True, the ultimate moment of victory was still to come... but the hardest part was over. After tonight, all there was left to do was wait.

It had time.

It dragged its captive on.

The years seemed to be wiped away as the destination came into view. It had all been worth it--every moment. The figure stood alone, overcome by the journey behind it, as well as what lie before it. After a moment, it grabbed its prey once more, dragging it for the final time. *I'm coming... I'm finally here, Laska. I'm finally here.*

The altar was exactly as it had imagined. Circular, like the chamber around it. The victim fit upon it perfectly, hooves at her side, wings extended, their tips just reaching across the diameter of the circle, covering several of the cryptic symbols that lined the edge.

Satisfied, the unicorn then moved towards the opposite side of the altar, where an apple-sized stone bowl rested upon its pillar of a base. Into this, the figure gently dropped a grey feather.

Turning back to the altar, the figure unsheathed a dagger, which floated slowly towards the unconscious alicorn, its jagged edges outlined by the black magic of the dark unicorn.

Blood slowly trickled from the incision made midway up the chest. It dripped down the alicorn's side, pooling on the cold stone altar.

The dagger finished its malicious duty. The wound itself was small; the blood already ceased escaping. The figure knew it needed its victim alive.

The deed done, the grim unicorn stood still, waiting.

Nothing.

Another minute went by.

Silence but for the whispering winds outside the large chamber.

The figure had unsheathed the dagger once more, preparing to draw more blood, when the cavern itself began to rumble. The drying blood on the altar glowed an impossible red and began spreading through the engraved symbols along the circumference, which now shone with their own blinding light.

In the quaking ancient cavern, the figure stood still, its heart beating not with fear or worry but with excitement. *Finally.*

The first pillar began to fall.

Chapter 1

Rainbow Dash fought her way through the crowd of pegasi ponies and slowly progressed through the bundle of tails and wings that had gathered around the form on the wall.

“Ouch!” cried one pegasus.

“Hey!” objected another.

“I was here first!”

“No, I was! I don’t see your name on it!”

“Actually, my name *is* on it. I just signed it.”

Dash rolled her eyes at the two quarreling ponies. It didn’t even matter that they sign up; she was clearly going to win. She continued shoving through flanks and wings until the coveted form was within her grasp. She noted with relief that there were still about ten lines left for her signature—though she had arrived hours before sunrise (which happened unusually late today), she couldn’t help but fear that somehow she’d be too late. It didn’t matter now, though. With a smirk, she grabbed the quill near the form and signed line number fifty-two, her mouth-written signature jagged yet skillfully inscribed.

She fought back through the crowd until she had room to spread her wings, and then took off vertically, already planning her routine. Several of the pegasi still waiting in the crowd glared up at her, their manes spread crazily across their faces due to the great gust given from Dash’s flaps—and she couldn’t help but notice that perhaps several of those glares contained jealousy. Any pegasus worth her wings knew of Rainbow Dash, who accomplished the Sonic Rainboom twice, saved the lives of several Wonderbolts, and won the Young Fliers competition in the process.

That isn’t to say winning *this* competition would be easy, though. There was plenty of stiff opposition. Many of the same contestants from

the Young Fliers competition were participating, most of which, she knew, had been training harder in the past few months than she ever had. Of course, much of that was because of her immense natural talent, but she likely only won the Fliers competition because of her Sonic Rainboom, and she had only accomplished *that* because Rarity and the Wonderbolts were in danger, and she wasn't sure she could pull it off again at will, and—

“Oof!”

Dash tumbled out of the air, landing on the cloud below, tangled with the body of a familiar pony. Rainbow already knew who it was, but couldn't believe that she had somehow been knocked out of the sky by...

“Fluttershy?” Rainbow was shocked, as the yellow pony was indeed Fluttershy.

“Oh, sorry Rainbow Dash, oh my gosh are you ok? I'm so sorry I ran into you, are you sure you're ok? Is there anything I can do for—”

She broke off when she noticed Dash was staring, dumbfounded.

“Are... are you mad at me, Rainbow Dash? I'm so very sorry, I didn't mean—”

“Fluttershy, what are you *doing* up here? You never come to Cloudsdale!”

“Oh... well... um... I'm here to... help out somepony's poor sick birdy. She lives up in Cloudsdale so I had to come visit to see the poor creature.” Fluttershy grinned nervously and looked away, and suddenly a very familiar expression snuck upon her face, but Rainbow Dash couldn't quite remember where she'd seen it before.

“Oh no, what happened to the bird? Do you think you can help it?”

Fluttershy looked away again, and suddenly Dash knew where she'd seen that face before: it was the same face Applejack wore when she was lying. The Spirit of Honesty makes for a horrible liar, and Dash could tell that Fluttershy was no better. She suddenly felt frustrated; she couldn't stand somepony lying to her, but *Fluttershy*?

“Alright, Fluttershy, you tell me what’s going on right now! First you show up in Cloudsdale, which you never do, *then* you fly into me, and I can swear I’ve never seen you fly faster than Granny Smith can run, and *now* you’re lying to me about it! What’s this about? You can tell me!”

Fluttershy sighed.

“Well... I’m here... because...” her voice dropped off to a squeak as she mumbled.

“What?”

“I’m here... because... I’m...” once again she trailed off into a nervous murmur.

“WHAT?”

“I’m here because I’m entering the Flyathalon!”

Rainbow Dash sat, mouth agape, staring at Fluttershy. Her wings were still extended from her ill-fated flight. Fluttershy looked around nervously in the silence, awkwardly rubbing her legs together. Just before Fluttershy began to think Dash was paralyzed by surprise, she burst out laughing.

“*You?* *You* are going to enter the Flyathalon?” She wiped tears from her eyes, appeared to gain control of herself, but then exploded once more into another bout. “*You?* The pegasus...afraid of heights...is entering...the Flyathalon?” Dash barely managed to say this through her laughter.

“Um... yes,” Fluttershy mumbled.

Rainbow flew up into the air, twirling from laughter, and then dropped once more onto the soft cloud surface, rolling on her back. The giggles finally began dying out, and stopped immediately once she noticed Fluttershy herself was also in tears.

“Oh, Fluttershy, I’m sorry! You know I don’t mean it. It’s nothing against you. You have such great talents. It’s just... flying isn’t exactly one of them.” She patted the yellow pegasus on the back.

“I know... it’s just that... I need to win.”

Rainbow Dash fought to avoid breaking into laughter again. She knew how sensitive her friend could be.

Half-joking: “Well, you’d better sign up fast. There might not even be any spots left.”

Fluttershy gasped, jumped up, and flew off towards the dwindling crowd of ponies gathered around the form. She was once again moving with a speed Rainbow Dash had never seen in her before. *Heck, maybe she would do well in the Flyathalon*, Dash thought, but then burst into laughter once more as she raced after her friend.

“Oh no oh no oh no oh no!”

Fluttershy arrived at the form just as the last signature line was about to be signed by a grey, blue-maned pegasus.

“Please let me sign up! Please!” Fluttershy was almost crying. She wanted so badly to sign up, but her selfless nature could hardly stand to ask something from somepony.

The blue-maned pegasus stared.

“I’m awfully sorry, but I was here first. You can enter next year!”

Fluttershy almost broke into tears—it was all over before it had begun, and it was all her own fault; if she had flown just a *little* faster, had left just a *little* earlier, she would have gotten a spot on the list.

The blue-maned pegasus stared at Fluttershy as if she was crazy, and finished signing the form as Rainbow Dash caught up.

“Fluttershy, will you please just tell me what this is all—”

“OH MY GOSH!” Rainbow Dash was broken off by the blue-maned pony. The quill was still in her mouth, muffling her jubilant shouts. “Are you Rainbow Dash? THE Rainbow Dash? The Rainbow Dash that won last year’s Young Flier competition? The Rainbow Dash that saved the Wonderbolts? The fastest flier out of Cloudsdale? The fastest flier in *Equestria*?” The pony was jumping with excitement, the apex of each jump accompanied by a little wing flutter that held her suspended longer than gravity would normally allow, as if her excitement was defying physics itself.

Rainbow Dash couldn’t help but smile with pride.

“Yes, yes, it’s all true, that’s me, the one and only! Now, Fluttershy, *please just tell me what’s—*”

“YOU know Rainbow Dash?” The blue-maned pony, whose signature, Fluttershy saw, read Thunder Clap, now turned her attention to Fluttershy.

“Um... yes.” Fluttershy, though still deeply upset, couldn’t help but be amused by the antics of Rainbow Dash’s fan.

“Oh my gosh Rainbow Dash you have NO IDEA how much you are my HERO! I was there for BOTH your Sonic Rainbooms! My cutie mark even matches yours!” She gestured towards her flank, where her cutie mark was obscured by a piece of paper with Rainbow Dash’s own cutie mark scrawled on it.

“Riiiiiight...” Rainbow Dash was beginning to become unsettled by this fan of hers. Of course, she *loved* fans, and though Scootaloo could be annoying at times, it was still nice having a worshiper around. This, however, was getting out of hoof.

“Hey, um—” Dash looked at the signature on the form. “—Thunder Clap. Do you know what’d make me really happy?”

Thunder seemed about to burst with joy; she couldn’t seem to decide whether she wanted to be dancing around with happiness, flying around

with happiness, or rolling around with happiness, so she attempted to do all three at once. Yes, this was beginning to get on Dash's nerves.

"Yes! Of course! Anything!"

"Ok. How about you let my friend here have your spot on the list? I can understand if you don't want to give it up; you seem very, um, enthusiastic about—"

"Ok!" The signature was already crossed off, and Thunder was staring giddily up at Rainbow Dash.

"Well," Dash grinned, "since you gave up your signature, I might as well give you mine." She grabbed the pen, but found it difficult signing Thunder's pretend-cutie-mark due to the excited fluttering of her wings. However, the deed was eventually done, and Thunder brimmed with happiness.

"Oh thank you thank you thank you thank you! I have to go show my friends! They'll never believe me! Thank you thank you..." The stream of "thank you's" trailed off as she flew away.

Dash, always glad to meet a fan (but also glad the experience was over), chuckled to herself, when she noticed Fluttershy was signing her name where Thunder Clap's used to be with a mad, impatient scrawl. The strangeness of the situation returned. It was time for answers.

"Alright, Fluttershy, that crazy pony is gone and you can tell me everything now. I want answers. What's going on here? Why would a pegasus afraid of heights want to join the Flyathalon? You can tell me."

"Well..." Fluttershy looked solemnly at Dash, then quickly looked back at the form as if to ensure her name was still there. She turned back to Dash, hesitating, trying to find a place to begin. After a moment of silence, she found the words, which came slowly at first and then more confidently as the story took over, needing to be told, needing to be heard.

As she spoke, Rainbow Dash listened, eyes growing wide, as a tale of love and loss unfolded before her.

The rose sat in a vase in her mother's bedroom. On more than one occasion, Fluttershy saw her mother stop and stare at it, lost in thought, with a sad smile gracing her face. She'd stand there this way for several minutes, until the spell was broken and she went back about her business. Fluttershy had always been afraid to ask why that rose was so important, why it stood alone on the table, the other trinkets dwarfed by its significance. She feared the answer would be sad or scary, too complicated for a young filly such as herself to worry about. It had stood there as long as she could remember, a symbol for something loved and lost but not forgotten.

One day, after ensuring her mother had left to run errands, Fluttershy stepped gingerly into her mother's spotless room. The evening sun shone beams through the window, illuminating particles in the air, which hung still as if suspended in time. The rose itself stood as always, catching and re-releasing light off its immaculate, glittering surface.

Fluttershy, whose most mischievous exploit to date was staying up eight minutes past her bedtime so she could sing to a bird standing on her windowsill (a rare occurrence at Cloudsdale's altitude), stood frozen, unsure of her next move. She thought of the other fillies in Cloudsdale Academy calling her a scaredy-filly (always the quiet one, she was an easy target for bullies) and of her mother staring at the rose, lost in thought. With this in mind, she carefully climbed the stool next to the little table, and was suddenly eye-height with the shimmering idol.

At first, she thought it was made entirely of diamond. After some consideration, she realized this was something more; though it glimmered like diamond, its edges and curves were perfect in design. No jeweler, no matter how skilled, could carve diamond so flawlessly—not even with the assistance of a dragon. And though it resembled diamond in appearance, it gave off not an aura of strength but an aura of fragility, as if staring too long would shatter it. Its entirety, from stem to leaves to petals, was composed of the incredible unknown material. Its petals were so red that they seemed to glow; indeed, as the sun set and the beams of light faded, the petals continued to emit a slight, beautiful red blush on the vase and the wall behind it.

Fluttershy simply stood and stared. She hadn't planned what to do beyond this point; in fact, she had no idea what her intentions were to begin with. All she knew was that her mother regarded the rose with extreme importance, even love, and though she had never been the most adventurous filly (far from it), she had a fierce curiosity that demanded satisfaction.

She reached out to touch the rose.

"Fluttershy!"

She jumped with a surprised scream, losing balance and toppling from her place on the stool, which also fell, landing next to her with a wooden thud.

When she looked up, she beheld a sight she had never seen before: her mother was standing there, spilt grocery bags about the floor, staring at her with anger. She had seen her mother upset before, had seen her displeased, but she had never seen her actually angry, as she was now.

Fluttershy burst into tears, certain that her mother would never love her again, that somehow by trying to touch the rose, she had broken an unwritten but sacred rule. She buried her face in her hooves, and then her hooves in her wings.

When she felt her mother's hoof on her shoulder, however, its touch was not filled with anger. It was gentle; lovingly so. The sobbing yellow pegasus' crying reduced to sniffles as she looked up at her mother, whose face had softened to a sad smile; the same sad smile she wore when staring at the rose.

Suddenly, Fluttershy was embraced in a warm hug, held tight by her mother's hooves and soft wings. Her tears finally stopped as she returned the embrace.

"I guess it's time I told you," her mother whispered. She unfurled her wings, but kept her hooves in their tight embrace around her filly.

“Your father was the kindest pony I’ve ever met. I never did tell you how we met, did I? I suppose there’s a lot you never knew about him.

“It was Winter Wrap Up in Ponyville. Just like every year, pegasi from Cloudsdale volunteered to help clear the skies and melt the snow. And just like every year, it was all a horrible mess. The snow was either melting too fast or not fast enough; the birds’ nests weren’t being built fast enough; the snow plows actually got lost after plowing in the wrong direction.

“Of course, I’m not the greatest flier (that’s where you get it from, dear). But I couldn’t pass up an opportunity to help out the nice folks of Ponyville. Unfortunately, I was only slowing everypony down. I couldn’t keep up with clearing the skies, and I kept bumping into ponies who were actually getting work done. I was making a bad Winter Wrap Up even worse.

“I didn’t want to quit, I wanted to help! But I wasn’t meant for the sky patrol. So they relocated me to the ground, where I could aid in waking the hibernating animals. I was slightly better at this than clearing the skies, but I still needed help. So I searched around to find somepony who seemed capable of teaching me how to wake the delicate creatures, when I saw another pegasus! He was the only other pegasus on the ground. He was guiding a prickly porcupine out of their winter home, guiding them with a loving care I can’t explain. He was your father, Fluttershy.

“We spent the rest of the day together, helping the animals find their place and fixing up their homes. He had a talent with the animals... almost as if he could talk to them. And while we were together, they seemed to listen to me as well. In the beginning he was very soft-spoken... I could hardly carry a conversation with him, though he kept smiling at me—the way he smiled, it was no wonder animals adored him. But by the end of the day, we were laughing together and joking and rounding up the last of the sleepy creatures.

“After the hubbub of Winter Wrap Up was over, we were able to enjoy the first spring night of the year together. He told me about himself; about his interests, about his family and home. That’s how we spent our first night together, Fluttershy: lying on the grass, still damp from the snow that covered it only hours earlier; staring at the stars, which had been hidden by

clouds for months; talking and laughing and living in the warm spring air; talking and laughing and living and falling in love.

“And at the end of the night, so late that Celestia’s sun was only just below the horizon, he gave me this, Fluttershy. He gave me this rose.

He didn’t say a word. We were lying together, and I was laughing and telling him about some silly thing or another, and while I was talking he was just lying next to me, smiling, when he pulled it out from under his wing. He pulled it out and looked at me and smiled and I lost my breath. I just stopped and looked at him. And I started crying and attacked him in a kiss.

“That’s how I met your father, Fluttershy. That’s how I got this rose.

“I broke it,” sobbed Fluttershy, as Rainbow Dash placed a hoof on her heaving shoulder. “I broke the rose.”

Chapter 2

“Fluttershy... I’m so sorry. Whatever you need me to do, I’ll do it! But... what does any of this have to do with the Flyathalon?”

“Well,” Fluttershy said, her sobbing now reduced to sniffles, “I was hoping I could use the prize bits to get it fixed.”

“But... *who* will fix it? Do you even know what it’s made of? And— wait a second. Why would *you* enter the Flyathalon? Why couldn’t I just win it and give you the prize bits to get your rose fixed? Because if all it takes to get it fixed is some bits, and all it takes to get some *bits* is for me to win the Flyathalon, than consider your rose as good as fixed!”

Fluttershy stared at Dash in shock. “You’d *do* that for me?”

It was Dash’s turn to be shocked. “Um, of *course*! A friend in need is more important than some bits, Fluttershy. And besides, there will be other races for me to win. Lots of them.”

“Oh, thank you, Rainbow Dash! You’re the best friend *ever*!” She squeezed Dash in a warm, tight hug.

“Aw,” Dash smiled, returning the embrace, “It’s nothing. But slow down. You still haven’t mentioned anything about just how in the hay you plan on getting this rose of yours fixed.”

“Well...” Fluttershy began, but then realized she had no clue how to go about repairing the mysterious heirloom. She wasn’t even sure what it was made of, where it came from, or how old it was. She knew only that it had been her father’s.

The tears drew dangerously close once more.

“Hey!” Rainbow Dash said quickly (she’d seen enough tears for one day... and maybe came a little close to tears herself, too), “Here’s an idea.

Why don't we go over to your place and take a look at the rose together? I'm sure we'll think of something."

Fluttershy glanced up at her friend, gratitude showing in her smile. "I'd like that."

As they trod off, side by side, Fluttershy placed a wing on Rainbow Dash's back, pulling her close. "Rainbow Dash... you're the best."

I know, Dash would have normally replied... but she stopped herself. After all that had happened, she realized, there was something else she'd rather say.

"Hey... Fluttershy?"

Fluttershy glanced inquisitively at Dash. "Yes, Rainbow Dash?"

"I'm sorry for laughing at you when you said you were entering the Flyathalon."

Fluttershy pulled Dash even closer. She turned to her friend, responding only with a smile that said more than any words she knew.

Off they trod, two friends, their problem forgotten, if only for a moment.

As they arrived outside the cottage, Fluttershy stopped.

"Rainbow Dash, I... I don't think..."

"What, Fluttershy?"

"... I don't think we'll be able to fix it."

Dash turned to her.

"Fluttershy," she said, with all the resolve of a competitive flier, "I am going to make you a promise. I don't care what your rose is made of, or

how many bits it will take to fix, or how many pieces it broke into. We're going to get it fixed."

Fluttershy's words of gratitude were interrupted as a familiar voice called out.

"Hi, guys! Whatcha up to? Fluttershy, could I borrow some—"

"Twilight Sparkle! Oh I'm so glad you're here!" Fluttershy exclaimed, jumping with delight. She ran up to Twilight and enveloped her in a great hug.

"Oh... good to see you, too, Fluttershy!" Twilight said, amused at this unexpected outburst.

Rainbow Dash suddenly realized where this was going.

"Twilight! Do you know a spell to fix things?"

Twilight's answer was muffled through Fluttershy's continuing hug. "Yes, of course. It's one of the first—ok, Fluttershy, you can let go now—first spells I learned."

"Well, we've got something that needs fixing," said Dash. "But first I think Fluttershy had better explain."

Fluttershy grew solemn, though the arrival of Twilight eased her mind considerably. After a moment to gather her thoughts, she began to tell her story once more. Unlike last time, she had no trouble finding her words. Rainbow Dash, who had heard the story not even an hour ago, found herself welling up once more; Twilight fared no better.

"Gosh... I'm so sorry, Fluttershy," Twilight said at the end, putting a hoof around her friend, who was staring sadly at the ground. "I'll do whatever I can to help."

"Do you... do you think you could fix it?" Fluttershy asked hopefully.

"Well, I've never really come across anything that an old Fixing Spell can't repair... so I suppose there's no harm in trying."

Rainbow Dash turned to Fluttershy. "See? No problemo! If anypony's gonna be able to fix this thing, it's Twilight. She probably won't even charge you for it," she joked.

"Well... let's give it a shot, then!" Twilight said... but an unsettling, ominous worry began spreading in the back of her mind. She thought about saying something... but it was probably nothing. "Let's see this rose of yours," she said instead.

It sat on the floor on a piece of cloth.

Rainbow Dash knew from Fluttershy's description that the rose was supposed to be beautiful, but none of her expectations could have prepared her for what she saw.

It didn't seem to reflect light so much as it seemed to *capture* it, holding it in an embrace, enhancing it, and releasing it once more. Dash could see her own disbelieving face in each petal just as well as she could see the cloth through them or the amplified reflection of Twilight next to her. Fluttershy was right, for it seemed to glow. No, Dash realized. It didn't *seem* to glow. It *did* glow. The cloth beneath it was colored by light of the purest red and green.

It was, simply put, the most beautiful thing Rainbow Dash had ever seen.

And it lay in pieces.

Fluttershy had each piece assembled so that, together, they made up a crude representation of the rose. Its petals were broken into three shards, the stem was broken into another three. And even in its disassembled form, it was mesmerizing.

"Ooooh..." Twilight was having the same reaction as Rainbow Dash. "It's... it's incredible..."

“Do you think you can fix it?” Fluttershy was standing on the other end of the cloth, peering anxiously up at Dash and Twilight.

Twilight broke her gaze free from the incredible object. “I guess... I guess I can try. But... something about this doesn’t seem right, Fluttershy.”

“Oh, come *on*, Twilight,” Dash said, frustrated. Hadn’t she heard how much the rose meant to Fluttershy? “I’ve seen you do *much* harder things with magic than fixing some antique.”

“Alright, then... well, here goes...” Twilight backed up, taking a stance several feet in front of the rose, a determined yet worried look upon her face. Her horn began emitting a dim purple light. “One...”

In the back of her mind, Twilight’s apprehension persisted. She was missing something... some detail wasn’t being examined...

“Two...” Twilight continued warily, the worry growing. *What am I missing?* The dull purple light was now a thick, violet glow. *Think, Twilight, think... your earliest lessons with Princess Celestia...*

Suddenly, realization. She tried to hold it back, but it was too late; the magic had built up inside her, and she had no choice but to release it.

“THREE!”

The force of the blast flung Rainbow Dash into a wall.

Twilight let loose a scream.

Fluttershy was thrown against a table, which collapsed under her weight. For a second, she saw the rose, fully assembled and emitting a brilliant white light. It swam toward her through the air.

“Fluttershy...” The voice, unrecognizable yet somehow so very familiar, emanated directly from the shining artifact. Lovingly, sadly, it spoke; its words dim, as if they traveled a great distance. *“Fluttershy... I hoped this moment would never come. But it seems some poor misguided soul has left us with no choice. What once was mine, now is yours, Fluttershy. I’m so sorry for laying this burden on you... you have wonderful*

friends, dear... they won't let you down. Always remember how much I love you... always remember..." The voice faded and the world dimmed as Fluttershy's consciousness slipped away.

Rainbow Dash, who had survived many a hard crash, was the first to regain consciousness. She slowly stood up, holding a hoof to her head. "Ugggghhhhh," she moaned. A fairly large bump had risen directly in the center of her forehead.

Heh, I'm a unicorn now, she thought humorlessly.

Suddenly everything came back to her. She flew like a shot to where Fluttershy lay, wooden table fragments littered around her.

"Shy! Fluttershy! Get up! Are you ok?" She nudged the unconscious pegasus, then rolled her onto her side, when she remembered Twilight. "Stay right there!" she said, though Fluttershy showed no indication of movement.

"Twi! Can you hear me? Are you ok?" Rainbow Dash was growing hysterical.

"Ughhhh... what happened? My horn is killing me..." Twilight slowly got to her feet.

"Please help me with Fluttershy! I think she's hurt!" As Dash said this, Twilight jumped to her hooves and sprinted to her injured friend, who lay still where Dash had left her.

"Fluttershy? Can you hear me? Are you ok?" Twilight's gentle prodding yielded nothing but a soft groan from her friend.

"Dash, can you fly her to the hospital? We need to get her care as quickly as—"

"Wait... don't go..." Fluttershy pleaded; though strained, her voice was clear of pain.

“Fluttershy, we’d never leave you! We’re taking you to get help!” explained Dash.

“Father... don’t go... Please...”

Twilight turned to Dash with concern. “She’s delirious. We need to get her help *now*.”

In the corner, forgotten in the panic, lay the rose. Just as beautiful as ever. Just as broken as before.

Its six shards now glowed with an intense luminance, as if a dormant force within them had awoken.

“Did she just move?”

Her mind drifted, a lost boat in the fog of the sea... in the distance, however, a beacon of light appeared.

“I think she’s waking up... oh thank Celestia...”

Slowly her thoughts began to form order from disorder. The beacon drew nearer, the voices clearer.

“Did she just say something?” A voice... the voice of a friend (*they won’t let you down*).

“I think she’s still delirious... she was talking to herself before we brought her here.”

Slowly she opened her eyes, the light unbearably bright at first, sending a jolt of pain through her aching head. As edges came into focus and her vision became clear, she realized she was in the bed of a care room of Ponyville Hospital. Any other attempts to explore her surroundings were cut short as she was grabbed in a six-way hug. A mixture of worried, relieved, and distraught babble surrounded her.

“I flew you here as quickly as I could—”

“—Oh, darling, let me fix your mane for you—”

“—’Ah baked ya everything I could find: fritters, pies, dumplings—”

“—Mr. and Mrs. Cake were soooooooo woooooorried!—”

“—How are you feeling? The nurse said you should recover just fine—”

The chatter slowed to a stop as her friends realized she was preparing to speak.

“What happened?” she groaned, feeling a tender spot on a leg.

Rainbow Dash informed her patiently. “Your rose, Fluttershy. Don’t you remember? Twilight tried to fix it. And... well...” She gestured at her own bruised self, letting her minor injuries tell the story.

Everything came rushing back. The rose, the explosion... her father...

Did I really hear that? Was it really him? A part of her couldn’t accept it, couldn’t believe that she had actually heard him. Somehow, though, she knew it to be true... he had actually spoken to her.

She was about to mention this to her friends when she realized just how heavily bruised Rainbow Dash and Twilight appeared to be. “Oh my goodness, are you two ok? Twilight... I heard you yell... and Rainbow Dash, you were the closest...”

Dash smiled, but the reassuring effect was ruined by a wince of pain as she felt the bump on her head. “I’ve flown into walls before. Nothing I can’t handle.”

Twilight smiled as well. “Your bed caught me. I was pretty lucky.”

Applejack took charge. “Fluttershy, Dash and Twi’ told us about your rose. You need to help us understand, Fluttershy. Why did this happen? Why was there this... this... accident?”

“I think I know.” Everypony gave Twilight her full attention. “Rarity... remember what I once told you about magic? About The Laws?”

Rarity suddenly understood. “Twilight... do you mean to say Fluttershy’s heirloom contains magic?”

Twilight nodded.

Pinkie Pie and Applejack stared at each other, puzzled. “What in the hay are y’all talkin’ about?”

Rarity explained. “Applejack, Pinkie Pie, what Twilight is saying is that magic generally repels other magic. It’s the first principle every unicorn learns. Twilight, I don’t understand the technical terms. The effect doesn’t usually come into play in my designs. Won’t you explain?”

Even in a morose situation, Twilight jumped at the chance to educate. “Rarity is correct. It’s the first Law of magic: magic repels other magic. The second is that magic *performs* work; it doesn’t *eliminate* it. So if I were to magically lift this bed, it’d require just as much work as if I were to try to physically lift it; that’s why unicorns must practice and strengthen their ability to channel magic. The third Law is that magic cannot be created or destroyed, only utilized. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

“Because of the first Law, it stands to reason that your rose, Fluttershy, contains a large amount of magic... which explains the huge outburst that occurred when I tried to mend it. When I cast the Fixing Spell, the rose’s magic repelled my own right back at us...” Twilight gingerly rubbed a bruise on her leg, “... magnified by quite a bit, it seems.”

Dash looked at Twilight, her face uncharacteristically deep in thought. “Twilight... if the rose contains magic, then how could Fluttershy break it? An object with that much magic inside it can’t break that easily, right? At least, that’s what I remember you telling me once, Twilight.” Twilight smiled at her, glad to know that some of her rants actually landed upon attentive

ears. "That's why the question right now is: just how did you break the rose, Fluttershy?"

All eyes turned to Fluttershy. "Oh... well... I..."

Dash sighed, exasperated. "Come on, Fluttershy. You've already told us this much. Out with it."

"Well," Fluttershy said, "... I don't really know."

Dash floated herself up above Fluttershy's bed, hovering there and looking down solemnly at her friend. "How do you not know? You told me you broke it."

For a second, the only sound was that of Dash's gently flapping wings.

"Well..." Fluttershy finally said. "I didn't break it... I just found it that way yesterday. I was in my cottage feeding Angel when I heard a horrible shattering sound from my room. I was so afraid because I thought somepony was robbing me. Then I realized that nopony in Ponyville could be so mean, so I waited a minute and then went into my room. Everything was just fine... except my rose wasn't in the vase! And then, when I walked up to it, I realized it was in the vase, at the bottom, in pieces." She finally said the only thing that had been on her mind since she woke up: "During the explosion... I heard my father. He spoke to me... through the rose..."

Twilight Sparkle walked closer to Fluttershy's bed. "Fluttershy... you're sure about this? You really heard him?"

Fluttershy nodded.

"Well, what did—"

The atmosphere of the serene hospital room exploded as the door was thrown open with a splintering thud.

"Which one of you is Twilight Sparkle?" demanded the pony who had burst in, clearly one of Celestia's guards (and a highly-ranking one at that, by the looks of his regalia).

“I am,” answered a bewildered Twilight. “What’s wrong? What happened?” She felt panic creeping in.

“Your presence is requested at Canterlot, by order of Princess Luna. It’s Princess Celestia... it seems she’s gone missing.”

As the pillar crumpled, the black figure grinned.

All there was left to do now was wait...

Chapter 3

There aren't many joys quite like a beautiful spring day in Ponyville, and this particular day was a testament to that fact. The park was crowded with ponies enjoying the sunny weather, the only objects in the sky kites and pegasi—not a cloud blotched the faultless air. Celestia's sun shone as bright and clear as ever; had this been a normal day, even the studious Twilight Sparkle wouldn't be able to resist its beckoning.

Twilight wished desperately that this was a normal day.

The guard left wordlessly as she and her five friends entered the throne room. Twilight realized she had never been in this room without Celestia—and how empty it felt without her. Worry swept over her like a fever.

Next to the throne stood Luna, her face a battle between grief and distress. "Twilight!" She ran to meet the group of friends in the center of the room, who immediately broke into a worried chatter.

"Luna, *tell us everything*," demanded Twilight. "What happened? When did you notice she was gone? Do you have any ideas where she went? Was she—"

"Ah'll do whatever Ah can to help, Luna, and Ah'm sure my friends here—"

"I've never been sooooo saaaad before! Even that time when I thought my friends didn't like my parties anymore and didn't want to hang out with me and—"

Pinkie and her companions broke off when Luna began speaking, her voice worried yet soft and firm. "Twilight, do you know where magic comes from?"

Twilight was not expecting this question. "Um... well... magic is a force that unicorn ponies can summon to perform work. When a spell is

used, the magic flows through the unicorn, with the horn acting as the focal point. Luna, please tell us—”

“Twilight, that is all true. But do you know where it *comes* from?”

Twilight was confused—what did this have to do with Celestia’s disappearance? How could Luna pursue such trivial topics when there was so much on the line? Even in a time of distress, however, she couldn’t stand to ignore a challenge of her intelligence. She shut eyes tightly and attempted to recall her earliest lessons with Celestia about the very basics of magic. “Well... I always thought... I just thought it was created inside the unicorn when he or she needed it. Luna, please tell us everything you know about where Celestia—”

“Twilight, what is the Third Law of magic?”

“Luna! We really don’t—” The determined look upon Luna’s face spoke for her. “Magic cannot be created or destroyed, only utilized,” Twilight recited.

Applejack, frustrated with the idle talk, interjected. “Luna, Ah’m sure your little trivia game can wait. There must be somethin’ we can do for Celestia. If Ah—”

“Twilight,” Luna began, ignoring Applejack’s outburst, “you said you thought magic was created inside the unicorn, yet the Third Law states that all the magic in the universe already exists, correct?” The darker portion of Luna’s mind was disappointed with Twilight’s lack of understanding; was this really the best pupil Celestia had ever taught? Her pure, reformed side, however, was too sick with worry to pay heed to her repressed cynical nature.

Twilight suddenly understood. “Luna... So, if the Third Law is true, and magic can’t be created, then that means... all the magic in the universe already exists? But if that’s true, then... then where does it all come from?” In the wake of this enormous realization, even Celestia’s disappearance became secondary. How had she never thought about this before? She had studied magic all her life, had honed her own skills with an incredible amount of talent; she never bragged, but even she knew that she was likely one of the greatest spellcasters to ever live. Twilight was overwhelmed...

her life's work, the subject of all her dedication, and she didn't even know where it *came* from.

While Twilight stared vacantly at the corner of the room, deep in thought, Luna explained to the others. "Do you see? Magic isn't conjured from thin air. There is a source. When a unicorn uses his or her magic, it is drawn from the source."

Rarity stared at Luna in shock. "Is this true? Somewhere out there is a whole pile of magic that just sits there while we use it?"

"In a sense, yes."

Applejack spoke up impatiently once more. "Princess, this has been a great lesson, but we've got a *HUGE* problem right now. Just think what'll happen when the sun doesn't come up tomorrow! All of Equestria will be like a cattle ranch with a rattler runnin' loose. Everypony'll panic. Not to mention that Celestia herself is in danger (though Ah can't even think of anypony who'd want to mess with her). So if you'll excuse my friends and I, we gotta go find the Princess. C'mon, Twilight, Rarity, Dash, Fluttershy, Pinkie." She turned to leave, looking back to ensure her friends were following, and then reluctantly returned when she realized they weren't.

Such an impatient, thoughtless moron, a small part of Luna spoke out. Who does she think rose the sun today? If it wasn't for me, there would be mass panic. This dark part of her was merely a reflex now, however, and was quickly quelled by her kinder, renewed temperament. She's only anxious because the Princess is missing, and she's probably still shaken from the outburst of the Guardian Rose. Be patient with her.

"Applejack," Luna explained softly (a trick she had learned from Celestia), "I assure you that I am as worried for Celestia as you are. Perhaps more so, because I understand the gravity of the situation. I promise that if you take a chance to listen, everything will become clear."

Applejack nodded reluctantly but respectfully, returning to her line of friends.

Twilight, who had been deep in thought during this exchange, finally came out of her contemplative isolation. "Luna... there's a source of magic

somewhere, correct? If magic cannot be created or destroyed, then... where'd it all come from? How was the source of magic created?" Her mind couldn't break free of the paradox. *Magic cannot be created. Yet magic exists. Therefore, magic must have been created. But magic cannot be created. But it exists, so it must have been created... but it can't be created...*

"Twilight, magic *wasn't* created. The Third Law holds true. Magic always was and always has been. Magic existed before Time, and will probably outlast the lifespan of the universe."

Pinkie Pie spoke out for the first time. "So Princess Luna, if there's just some big old pile of magic layin' around out there, then what if somepony uses it all up? Like, what if Rarity has to make a *reeeeeeaaaaaally* big dress, and it uses up all the magic? Just like when Spike took that *super* long bubble bath, and Ponyville didn't have hot water for days?"

Luna couldn't help but smile at Pinkie's curious logic. She grew serious once more, however, as she was near to making the point she had planned on making the entire time. If she didn't allow Twilight and her friends to come to the conclusion themselves, however, they'd never fully understand. "Pinkie, what you must first realize is that there is an enormous amount of magic in this universe. Yes, it is a finite amount, but it's so great that thousands of civilizations will come and go before it even shows signs of shrinking. Even an extremely powerful spell, such as group teleportation, amounts to less than a drop within a drop in an ocean the size of the sun."

"She's there, isn't she?" realized Twilight, amazed and terrified. "Wherever the source of magic is, that's where she is. That's how this all fits. Am I right, Luna?"

Luna nodded.

"But... but she didn't get there on her own, did she?" Twilight continued. "Somepony took her there. Somepony abducted her."

Luna nodded once more. "He lay in wait in her personal room, and made his move when she retired for the night."

“But how is that even *possible!*” Rainbow Dash shouted furiously. “What could anypony have against Celestia? She’s the reason we have everything we have! And even if somepony *did* want to harm her, how in the world could they get past her defenses? Doesn’t she have guards around her all the time?” Dash had worked herself into such an outrage that she was fluttering about the room with her wild gestures.

“He doesn’t want to harm Celestia,” Luna explained. “If anything, he needs her alive and well. And besides her guards, she doesn’t believe in high security. She has such faith in her subjects (and also her own abilities) that she’s never feared this kind of thing.”

“Luna, who in the hay is this ‘he’ you’re referrin’ to?” Applejack demanded. “If ya know who done it, why aren’t we doin’ something about it *right now?*”

“Because there’s more you need to know.”

Dash pulled at her face in frustration. “Well then just come out and *tell us!*”

“One of you six is in possession of a very important artifact,” Luna said.

Fluttershy, who had been silent the entire time, gasped. “My... my rose?”

Luna nodded. “It is said that, long ago, a love-struck unicorn happened upon the location of the Spring of Magic—the source of all magic. The power-hungry fool desired to become the greatest unicorn in Equestria. She hoped to control the entire Spring, utilizing all its magic at once—a stunt that could have harmed not only herself, but also the balance of all magic and life in Equestria. When she realized that such power could be hers, she decided to use it the only way a love-blinded mare knows how: to impress the colt of her affection. She invited him to the secret location and attempted the impossible: to maintain and control the entire store of magic in the Spring. Unfortunately, she underestimated the colossal amount the Spring contains, despite its size. Of course, the sheer amount of energy was far too great for her to control, and most of it

ended up escaping, seeking out the only living being nearby: her beloved colt. The power was too much for him; as a pegasus, his body wasn't even accustomed to the tiniest fraction of magic. He died, while the unicorn barely survived, heavily injured. She knew, however, that her time was very short. Using the last of the enormous power that had so tragically coursed through her, she chose the first object that crossed her vision to become the Guardian of the Spring—a safeguard intended to protect the Spring from foolish, dangerous ponies like herself. That object happened to be a lone rose growing in the shadow of the Spring. What became of the Guardian Rose after that, no pony can say. It is rumored that the weakening unicorn used her last ounce of strength to teleport away with the body of her perished love; she was so weak, however, that she couldn't designate a destination, and ended up near a cottage in a field furlongs away from any city. The pegasus of the cottage took her in, where, for the first and only time, she told her story. She handed him the rose, and despite his attempts to help her... she was too weak. She passed away."

Rainbow Dash's face filled with awe. "It's the *same Rose*? That cottage pegasus must have been some ancestor of Fluttershy, or something! It must have been passed down... over *ages*..."

"Ah, that's what Ah'm talkin' about!" exclaimed Applejack, happy that they were finally making progress. "It all makes sense now. Fluttershy, we just take your Rose to the Spring thingy, it does its magic, fixes the Spring, and then we take Celestia home. Ah don't see why we should hesitate for one more apple pickin' minute!"

Fluttershy burst into tears. "*But it's broken and now we won't be able to save Princess Celestia and it's all my fault because somehow it broke and I should have been more careful but I wasn't and—*"

Luna's calm demeanor crumpled apart. "It's *broken*? But... but that shouldn't even be *possible*... an artifact of such enormous magical magnitude... it can't simply *break*..."

"Here," Fluttershy sniffed, "look." She drew out a tiny box from between her primary and secondary wing. Luna anxiously lifted the lid, but before she had time to exclaim over the Roses's broken nature, brilliant light burst through the opening, as if it was a window to the sun.

The seven ponies in the room covered their eyes and gasped collectively in surprise. When the light faded several seconds later, they gasped once more.

“Ya know, somehow Ah knew this kinda thing was gonna happen,” smiled Applejack.

At the hooves of each of the six friends sat one of the six pieces of the Rose, pulsating gently with light, coloring the room a mixture of lucid red and green.

“Incredible,” exclaimed Luna.

“Nah,” said Applejack nonchalantly, “We’ve seen this kinda thing before.”

“Your friends won’t let you down,” breathed Fluttershy. When she saw everypony was staring at her, waiting, she explained. “That’s what my father said when he spoke to me through the Rose.” She recited his entire message for them; it had been embedded into her every thought, and she knew each word by heart and could still hear in her memory exactly how he had said them. *“Always remember how much I love you,”* she ended, the tears surfacing once more.

While Pinkie Pie embraced Fluttershy in a hug, Luna considered the implications of the Rose fragments. “I... I think you’re all supposed to go together.”

“Seems like it,” Applejack said.

Luna laughed grimly.

“Hold on.” Twilight was once more staring at the ground in thought. “Luna, I think there’s something you haven’t yet explained to us.”

Ah, so we’re finally here, she thought.

“Luna,” continued Twilight, “What is this colt trying to accomplish? What does he want with Princess Celestia? To control all the magic in the universe? To do what that unicorn attempted so long ago?”

“Twilight,” Luna began, “I have told you that the store of magic is so incredibly vast that even the most powerful spells have negligible effect, even over the course of millions of years.”

Twilight nodded, then realized Luna was hesitating. “Please continue, Luna. We want to know everything.”

“There is one spell, however, that requires an enormous amount of magic. Such a massive amount is required that nopony is even sure there exists enough in the universe.”

A soft wind rolled through the vast room’s rows of open windows, curiously lifting the tasseled corners of the embroidered carpet and brushing gently against the bodies of the seven ponies—six listening in dread and one speaking in sorrow.

“Our misguided colt is attempting to undo death,” Luna said. “He’s trying to return somepony to this world.”

Chapter 4

“Why are you here?”

Thade froze where he stood, poised for combat. The moonlight illuminating the castle bedroom seemed to avoid him; he appeared as a dark blotch among the long shadows.

This was not going as he had planned at all—without the element of surprise... No choice now but to continue, he thought.

He lashed out with a violent bolt of magic, head lowered, his horn aimed squarely at Celestia.

“Why are you here?” Celestia repeated. Around her shimmered a faint aura of light that dispersed his vicious attack like rain against an umbrella.

He thrashed forward, this time striking with both magic and a front hoof. The magic was once more scattered by the aura, while he himself sailed clear through it, his powerful hoof striking—thin air.

“I will ask you once more,” Celestia said patiently, now behind him. “Why are you here?”

He turned slowly to face her. “I’m here to recover what’s mine.”

“I can assure you there is nothing of yours here. Whatever it is that troubles you, I’ll do everything in my power to—”

*“To the paramount Spring
A relic you must bring
Of one loved but now lost—
Payer of ultimate cost.
To break through the wall,
First the Pillars must fall,
Retying the tether*

That binds worlds together.
To finish the deed,
To reveal the portal,
You will finally need—”

“ —Blood of an Immortal,” *Celestia finished for him. “I understand now. Child—”*

“Don’t call me that!” he shouted, the magical force of his fury slamming the door into splinters and smashing a tabletop mirror.

“We are all children so long as we exist on this world,” she explained softly. “The journeys we take here are few compared to those that await us in the next.”

“Shut up with your lies! You who will live for millennia can know nothing about death!”

Celestia sighed. “On the contrary, I know more about it than I ever wished to learn. If you really loved her, child, you would dedicate yourself to honoring her memory instead of tarnishing it with your treacherous actions.”

“I... I just want her back,” he whispered, more to himself than to the Princess. “I just want to see her again...”

“It would be cruel to impose upon one’s life by forcing them to return to this one,” Celestia continued. “With patience, lovers will always meet again, regardless of how many worlds lie between them. Upsetting the balance of life could have consequences far worse than you can imagine. Child, I am older than the oldest Equestrian mountain; do you think I do not miss the many friends I have met along my path? The friends who, in the span of my ancient life, amount to no more than a passing stranger in yours? I miss them, but I do not mourn because I know we will meet again, as all friends and lovers surely do.”

Thade broke down, his determination seemingly melted away by Celestia’s counsel.

“Laska,” he sobbed. “What I’d give to embrace you once more...”

Celestia approached the weeping unicorn, embracing him under a wing.

She crumpled to the floor as the hidden dagger's poison took effect.

Thade smiled. She performed better than I expected. If I believed any of that ridiculous 'other life' stupidity, perhaps it would have even been moving.

He held tightly to her dead-weight body, summoning the strength for a long-distance teleportation. Incredible, the power she has. I knew she'd best me, but her effortless defense... remarkable. As he reached the required level of magical buildup, he found himself thinking once more on Celestia's words. Complete hogwash. We're given one life, and we're expected to make every moment count. And when one life is cut short, tragically short—when it's stolen from the arms of he who loves her—it is his duty not to mourn and forget but to do everything he can to hold her once more. That is the true sign of love.

With a flash, the unicorn and the alicorn faded from the castle's room, now silent but for the occasional tinkling of a mirror shard falling to the floor.

(Excerpt from *Supernaturals*, Glossary of Definitions, pg 424)

Space

Space is big. Really, really big (...)

Sperunkles

Sperunkles are bothersome woodland creatures that mimic a voice crying for help (...)

Spring of Magic

The Spring of Magic is the fabled source of all unicorn magic. No pony has ever proved its existence, and its location remains unknown—in old mares' tales, it is found only by lost ponies trying to find their way home.

The story goes that one fateful day a love-struck pony happened upon the Spring (...)

Spurdnok

The Spurdnok is a fabled being that feasts upon dreams (literal dreams, not metaphorical dreams) (...)

“Ugh! Twilight, remind me again why you couldn’t just teleport us all to the Spring?” Rainbow Dash whined, wiping bug guts off a wing. The swamp was full of the pests, which had a knack for squishing against her flapping appendages.

Twilight rolled her eyes. What was it Dash didn’t understand? She’d only explained it six times. “First of all, Dash, the Spring contains so much magic that there’d be too much interference for an accurate teleportation. Second of all, and most importantly, nopony is entirely sure where the Spring is located. *Supernaturals* only mentions it once, explaining that we must get lost to find it. Of course, that sounds ridiculous, but they say it has no fixed location, and appears only when it chooses to appear. Which is why we’re *trying* to get lost right now.”

Applejack sighed. “Well, we’re certainly off to a great start. We’ve been walkin’ for hours and all we’ve seen is swamp and more swamp. And Ah hate swamps. Got mud in my nice galoshes.”

“Hey Applejack, can I pretty-please have another of those yummy yummy apple sandwiches you packed?” asked Pinkie Pie. “My tummy’s all a-grumbly!”

Applejack was very close to losing her temper. “For the *last time*, Pinkie, we need to save those! We haven’t even been gone one single day and you’ve already eaten half of them!”

“Ooooooh... so, what you’re saying is... If I *did* have some, you’d be mad, right? Well then I guess it’s a good thing I *didn’t* eat the rest of them...”

“Pinkie, if Ah open my pack right now and don’t see any apple sandwiches, you’re gonna have a lot more to worry about than a ‘grumbly tummy!’”

“Agh!” exclaimed Rarity. “Could you *please* stop your fighting! Pinkie Pie, next time remember that we don’t know how long we’ll be traveling, and we need all our provisions to last. Applejack, how could you threaten Pinkie Pie? If we don’t get along, we won’t make it to the end of day one!”

Applejack, ears lowered, turned remorsefully to Pinkie. “Ah’m sorry Ah threatened you, Pinkie. Ah was just frustrated, is all. We’ve been *walkin’* and seein’ nothin’ but *swamp* and we’re all tired...”

“Awww, it’s ok, Applejack, I know you didn’t mean it. I’m sorry for eating all the sandwiches... I promise that if we find anything to eat out here, I’ll cook it right up and make it nice and tasty!”

They carried on, all of them tired of travel and the monotonous swampy forest which loomed over them in every direction.

All of them but one.

“Oh, aren’t you the *cutest thing!*” Fluttershy said, hugging a tree squirrel. “We don’t have squirrels like you in Ponyville!” Every few minutes, Fluttershy was exclaiming over a new woodland creature. However, her excitement failed to spread to her friends; if anything, it increased the tension, as the only thing more frustrating than being lost in a swamp happens to be being lost in a swamp while somepony is constantly giggling.

“Glad *somepony’s* happy,” mumbled Rainbow Dash, forced to walk because of the pesky bugs that squished against her wings.

Twilight sighed. “Dash, it may not be a fun trip, but with so much on the line, we don’t have much of a choice. Luna is counting on us, not to mention Celestia... oh how I hope she’s ok...”

Dash peered around, ensuring she and Twilight were out of ears’ reach, and then moved in closer.

“Twilight,” she began, an expression of worry worn upon the face so commonly cocky, “do you... do you think everything will be ok? I mean... we’re bumbling about, lost in a swamp, while Celestia is out there somewhere... and who knows how dangerous that evil pony is? Luna says his hope of raising the dead is never going to work, and that the outcome can only be disaster for everypony... what if we don’t get there in time? What if we don’t get there at *all*?”

Twilight chose her words carefully. She could see the worry painted upon Dash’s face—Dash, who once kicked a dragon in the head. “Rainbow, whatever we’re doing, we’re doing it right. We wouldn’t have left without a plan. Sure, we’re lost,” she glanced around at the endless murky forest, “but we’re *supposed* to be lost. It’s the only way to find the Spring. *Supernaturals* says so, and that book was correct about the Poison Joke, wasn’t it? Also, we’re following Luna’s instructions. Would she have let us leave if she wasn’t sure we were on the right path?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right, Twilight. I just hope this swampy forest ends soon... not all of us are having as much fun as Fluttershy the Forest Friend.” She nodded towards Fluttershy, who appeared to be talking to a frog.

Twilight turned to Dash. After a moment, they erupted into laughter.

“What’re ya’ll laughin’ at?” Applejack had caught up to them.

“Nothing,” giggled Rainbow Dash.

They trod on, pushing through the dense swamp, every step pulling them further from any semblance of direction but also bringing them closer to the Spring.

“Um... Twilight... I *really* don’t like caves,” Fluttershy whimpered.

The one before them extended deeper than the reach of the evening’s dimming light, its mouth gaping and unwelcome.

“We don’t have a choice, Fluttershy. We’re finally at the edge of this swamp, but it’s getting dark and we need shelter. It’s this or sleep out here, and I’m sure the nighttime creatures of this swamp are a lot less adorable than those squirrels I saw you with earlier.”

Dash flew forward. “I’ll check this one out for ya!”

Before Twilight or anypony else could stop her, she raced off into the mouth of the cave.

“Her impatience is going to get us all killed one day,” sighed Twilight.

Moment’s later, a yelp echoed out of the rocky hole.

“Dash!” the five shouted in unison.

They ran to the mouth of the cave just as she reappeared, rubbing a bruised head. “I’m ok, you guys! Just flew into a stalagma-whatchacallit. The cave’s safe. Sure is dark, though.”

Fluttershy’s hug was caring, but her voice was angry. “Don’t scare us like that again, Dash!”

“Sorry. It’s just been so long since anything exciting has happened... I had to check it out.”

Applejack began walking into the cave. “Can we all just quit the drama and get some sleep? All this mucking about in the swamp has made me mighty tired. Not to mention hungry,” she added, glaring at Pinkie, who smiled guiltily.

The others followed, and soon they were all sitting around Twilight, whose horn illuminated the dank cavity.

“Alright, we made some good progress today. Once we’re clear of the swamp tomorrow, we should move even faster.” Twilight turned to Applejack. “We’re low on food, but there were some edible-looking berry bushes along the path we took, and I think I saw an apple tree or two near there, too. We’re most certainly very lost, so we’re off to a great start. How are you all feeling?”

Rarity sighed. "Dirty, but I've been worse. At least all that mud is good for my complexion."

Fluttershy smiled. "I'm just happy we're getting closer to Celestia, and that we're all together."

Applejack grunted. "Hungry and tired, but this ain't nothin' compared to a day of apple buckin'. I'll get us some food tomorrow mornin'."

"Pinkie-keen!" laughed Pinkie.

Rainbow Dash was fast asleep on a flat rock, her head resting on her front hooves. Occasionally her wings flapped gently, as if she were dreaming of flying.

"Well, then, tomorrow we set off again, so let's get a good night's sleep. Goodnight, everypony." Twilight's glowing horn dimmed until the cave was pitch black and echoed with the sounds of snoring.

Applejack slung her bag over her back and stepped gingerly over the sleeping Rarity (not an easy task, since it involved avoiding the multiple layers of blankets she had packed).

She made her way out the cave's entrance into the clearing, the sky already brightening from the sun just below the horizon. *Ah can see Luna's doin' her job*, she thought. *Alrighty, apple trees, where are y'all hiding?*

She wandered along a beaten path she discovered outside the clearing. After about twenty minutes she stopped and snacked on some berries from the bushes lining the trail. *Mmmmm! Ah gotta say, if apples ever go outta style, Ah'm gonna get into the berry business! But... then Ah'd have to change my name. Berryjack... nah, Ah think I'll stick to apples. Why am Ah always so funny when nopony's around to hear it?*

She trod on once more, enjoying her own company. Of course, she'd always prefer to be with her friends, but the farm pony knew the value of time spent alone. After another five minutes of walking, an apple tree

appeared just off the trail. She fought through the tough underbrush and had eight apples in her bag as quickly and easily as only an expert apple bucker can.

She turned back to the trail... or was it the other way? She retraced her steps around the apple tree, trying to orient herself. *Ah came from... this way... if Ah could just see the sun through these trees... but Ah remember that rock...*

"Applejack's been gone an awfully long time, don't you think, Twilight?" Fluttershy asked, trying to appear calm but failing miserably.

"I'm sure there's nothing to worry about. Applejack can take care of herself. And besides, she's only been gone for half an hour, I think. She's probably just slowed down from all the apples she's bringing back," Twilight said.

Rarity shifted uncomfortably, as if considering whether to speak or not. "Twilight... I think she's been gone longer than half an hour. She stepped on me on her way out, and that was at least an hour ago. I could tell because the sun wasn't even up yet."

"Oh no oh no oh no oh no! We have to do something!" Fluttershy was pacing around the cave.

"I'm on it!" Dash spread her wings and began running toward the mouth of the cave when Pinkie Pie stepped in front of her.

"Oh no you don't! We can't lose you, too. My granny told me that when somepony's lost, you should *never* split up, or everypony else will get lost, too! And you already scared us by flying into this cave last night."

"But Pinkie!" Dash reasoned, "I could just fly up above the trees and look for her! I'd have her back here in ten seconds."

Twilight walked up to the two friends, thinking. "Hmmm... Dash, I think the tree coverage is too thick for you to be able to see through. Besides, those apple trees I saw on our way here were very far away... it'd

take an hour or two to go there and back. And Pinkie's right; there's no way we're letting you run off, too. We either wait here for her a little longer, or we all go out searching together." She looked at her four friends, trying to muster up hope. "And besides, she's probably fine! She'll walk in here any minute with a bag full of apples for us."

The look on her friends' faces said enough.

"You're right. We'll head out looking right now. I hope she's ok..."

Applejack grunted as she forced herself through a particularly thick netting of branches. The clearing on the other side brought her relief, but only a little. She was still hopelessly lost, and probably even farther from the cave than when she was at the apple trees. She didn't think she could have wandered for more than an hour or two, but the terrain seemed to be drastically changing at an impossible rate. The thick forest was beginning to give way to cold, rocky slopes—almost as if she were in the mountains.

She sat down in the middle of the clearing, thinking while munching on an apple. *Ah should have listened to what Granny Smith always said... if you're lost, stay put. Darn you, Applejack. You're so stubborn. You just had to wander off and get even more lost, didn't ya?*

"Twiiiiiiiight! Rainbow Daaaaaaaash! Rarityyyyyyy! Fluttershyyyyyy! Pinkieeeeeee!" she called out, and immediately wished she hadn't. The echo of her yell was the most lonesome sound she had ever heard. A wind began stirring up the branches of the thinning trees.

In the clearing, she finally had a clear view of the sky. Could the sun really be that far down? How long had it been? Almost a whole day... was it possible? The moon had already risen, preparing for its nighttime solo.

The clearing also allowed her a clearer view of the area around her. In one direction, endless trees. That was the way she had come. In the other direction, rocky peaks... was there really a mountain range so near a forest? She hadn't remembered seeing any mountains along the journey yesterday. *Can't sleep in the forest... too dangerous. If Ah could find a mountain cave, perhaps—*

Her thoughts broke off as a brilliant red beam of light erupted out of the nearby mountainside, streaking vertically through the air into the endless heavens. Where it met the sky, the clouds swirled around it, as if trying to avoid the foreign intruder. The ground beneath her began to tremble, the surrounding trees creaking in their foundation as if groaning in protest.

Before she had time to process this, she yelped at a pain on her side. Her pack had grown incredibly hot. She quickly flung it off.

It began moving along the ground.

At first she could only stare, dumbfounded by the bizarre series of events that had occurred in the past ten seconds. She broke out of her bewilderment and started chasing after the bag, however, as it neared the edge of the clearing and almost left her sight.

“Aaaaapplejaaaaaaack! Aaaaapplejaaaaaaaaaaaaack!” Twilight called. “Rainbow Dash, now that we’re all out here together, go ahead and fly above the branches and tell us what you see.”

Rainbow Dash saluted and exploded up through the treeline.

“See anythiiiiiiing?” shouted Pinkie.

“Just lots and lots of trees!” responded Dash, who came back through the hole she had made in the canopy.

Rarity sat next to Pinkie, deep in thought. “Hey, Twilight, why not send up a magical flare? Maybe Applejack could see it and find her way back to us.”

“Excellent idea!” Twilight bent down in concentration, mustering up as bright a burst as she could achieve. She unleashed it all at once. The purple beam penetrated the treeline as though it were glass, and continued up into the sky above.

“Ooooh! Pretty!” exclaimed Pinkie.

Fluttershy looked up, but her expression never shifted from worry.

“Let’s just hope she saw it,” said Dash.

As the earthquake finally died out, Applejack caught up with the bag, which had entered the thinning trees on the other side of the clearing. She anxiously pinned it down with one hoof, unsure what to expect.

The end of the bag bulged as if protesting its entrapment. She could feel it trying to force itself on in the direction it had been going. Then, realization struck.

It ain’t the bag that’s movin’... somethin’ IN the bag is movin’!

She grabbed hold of the bag, which twisted in her grasp like a captured animal. She cautiously opened the flap, unsure what to expect.

Inside were the remaining apples. They were glowing.

No... ’taint the apples that are glowin’...

She took out each apple until the only item left in the bag was her fragment of the Rose, which pulsated madly with green light. She gingerly poked it, then rushed her burnt hoof into her mouth. It was still pushing madly in the direction of the thinning trees—the direction of the towering beam of light, which, though still visible, had begun to fade.

Applejack rubbed her burnt hoof to her head in thought. *Well, I ain’t got nothin’ to go on but this, so Ah suppose Ah don’t have much of a choice.*

She cautiously placed the Rose fragment back in the bag (pushing it in quickly to avoid the heat), then put the apples in on top of it to weigh the bag down. While gently gripping the thrashing pack in her mouth so as to let it guide the way without escaping, she continued off into the sparse

trees, heading in the direction of the mountains, the direction of the Rose, the direction of the beam.

Though she never noticed it, another beam of light, this one purple, erupted through the treeline far behind her, back beyond the thick forest through which she had come.

“Whew!” Applejack said, her voice muffled by the pack in her mouth, which was pulling her along in the direction of the fading beam. “Not sure where you’re takin’ me, but this better be good! I walked all day yesterday and all day today an’ now Ah’m walkin’ some more.” Suddenly, the situation seemed incredibly grim. “Ho boy... now that Ah’m thinkin’ about it, we sure walked a heck of a distance yesterday, and Ah think Ah’m goin’ even farther today... you’d better be takin’ me to civilization, Rose, or Ah’m in a heap of trouble.”

She sighed once more upon realizing she was conversing with an inanimate object.

It had been about twenty minutes since the enormous beam appeared. With the Rose’s guidance, she was nearing its source, though it had faded almost beyond the point of visibility. The forest had given way to mountains incredibly fast... *unnaturally* fast.

The Rose suddenly began tugging harder than ever. She clamped her mouth even tighter, following its lead. At this point she realized she was technically in the mountains, gaining altitude, the trees shrinking beneath her. The Rose seemed to be following a thin ridge of a trail that climbed along the mountainside.

She continued along this trail for another ten minutes, until she rounded a winding corner and finally saw the source of the beam—a mountain cavern. The dying glow somehow escaped through the cavern’s rock ceiling.

To alleviate the ache in her tired mouth, she quickly dropped the pack and slung it across her back, latching it tightly. The Rose was pulling with such force it seemed possible it would rip clean through its felt prison, and

walking with it attached to her was difficult, though it was still easier than holding it in her mouth.

The dark hole in the mountain seemed to glare at her as she approached it. She realized it was lit—dimly lit, but still: lit. *If Ah'm gonna find somepony to help me out, Ah suppose this is the place... but if Ah'm gonna find somepony who wants to cook me in a stew, Ah suppose this is also the place.* She gulped, suddenly feeling extremely uneasy, and carried on.

Almost there. Finally, almost there. Her previous estimation of distance had turned out to be horribly wrong; for about twenty minutes she traveled, though the cavern never seemed to grow closer. Eventually, though, with the guidance of the Rose fragment tugging from within the bag on her back, she reached the final stretch; a thick trail bordered by evenly-placed boulders sloped up before her, leading directly into the cavern, which was still lit—now she could see the light was a flickering red. The beam that had earlier torn through the sky had completely faded.

At this moment, Applejack realized just how hopelessly separated from her friends she had become.

What's gotten into me? Why'd Ah travel this far? Ah was only an hour or two away from our cave! And Ah go and decide to walk across half of Equestria! Why? To follow this good-for-nothin' Rose?

Though she hadn't shed a tear since she was a homesick filly in Manehatten, she could feel them coming on now. In fact, she felt almost exactly like that young filly in Manehatten—alone and isolated from everything she loved. *If only Ah had a sign like Dash's Rainboom to guide me back like I did then,* she thought.

Well... Ah suppose Ah came all this way... Ah don't have much of a choice but to finish what Ah started, do Ah?

She continued up the foreboding path towards the lip of the cavern. If she hadn't been a rodeo girl, the pack bucking urgently upon her back

would have knocked her down, though it had begun to calm itself. Eventually she reached the top and could see inside.

The cavern was smaller than she had expected—just larger than Twilight’s library. It was lined with six towering columns, though two had crumbled into mounds of debris—one of those mounds was still glowing faintly with a bitter red light.

The only other object in the cave was the altar in the center. A slight red aura danced along its edges like flames.

Applejack froze, paralyzed with horror.

Upon the altar lay Princess Celestia. Though she wasn’t visibly restrained, it seemed she could only move her head—a fraction.

“Run,” the Princess said. Applejack wasn’t sure if she heard this aloud or in her head, but she didn’t care.

“Princess!” It was all she could think to say.

Celestia turned weakly to her left. Applejack followed her glance, and noticed an open doorway along the cavern wall. Beyond it moved a shadow—clearly that of a pony.

“RUN.”

Applejack hesitated a moment, staring into the Princess’s pleading eyes. She could see in them fear, but also a glimmer of hope. Then she ran.

She ran out of the horrible cavern chamber.

She ran down the boulder-lined pathway.

She ran back along the cliff ridges that had brought her to the evil den.

She ran back through the trees into the clearing.

She ran and ran. At one point she looked back. The mountains were gone. Not out of sight, but actually gone—where moments ago there stood a towering mountain range now stood only flat forest. She continued running, the bag bouncing against her back. It no longer struggled.

“Oh, it’s no use,” Twilight sniffed, “She’s either too far away to hear us, or...” she couldn’t finish the thought.

Nearby, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, and Fluttershy were locked in a tight embrace. “I’m sure she’ll come back,” Dash comforted.

Twilight walked over to the group. “Dash... you said you’d leave and search for her? Are you... are you still willing to do that?”

Dash nodded grimly.

“Noooo!” Pinkie sobbed. *“We can’t lose you, too!”*

Rarity joined the group. “Twilight... one last try. Just once more. Please.”

Twilight nodded and gave herself some room. Her horn glowed as she mustered up the last of her strength, pouring it all into one final attempt.

The beam shot up through the trees, and for a moment purple daylight reigned for miles. Then it was over.

Applejack ran.

The world erupted in light.

Through the treetops, she saw the pillar of light, triumphing over the forest. Directly in front of her. Though her experience with beams this evening had been awful to say the least, the familiarity of this purple one brought her warm comfort.

She kept running.

After twenty minutes of waiting, Rainbow Dash trod solemnly to Twilight. “So, should I go now, or should we wait until daylight? I think—”

She cut off as Applejack tore through the treeline.

“*APPLEJACK!*” cried Dash and Twilight, as Rarity, Pinkie, and Fluttershy turned around in bewilderment.

Applejack collapsed to the ground and was immediately surrounded by her five friends.

“Give her room!” Twilight ordered. The others backed off reluctantly, Fluttershy last of all. Twilight approached Applejack, wiping a tangled mane from her eyes, which were still closed. “Applejack, can you hear me? Please get up!”

Though her eyes never opened, Applejack spoke as clearly as if she were conversing with Twilight about apple bucking. “There once were six, but now there are four,” she said. “The first two have fallen.”

Chapter 5

“Blank flank! Blank flank! Blank flank!”

The unrelenting jeers weighed down upon him, pushing him lower and lower to the dirt ground until his face was hidden beneath his hooves. The air wavered with the heat of the midday sun; beyond the field, the schoolhouse, which now seemed to be furlongs away and still retreating, could have been no more than a mirage.

One of the more vocal bullies stepped closer to the shrinking black unicorn. “The new foal still doesn’t have his cutie mark! Blank flank, no mark, flank’s as blank as he is dark!” The rest of the circle took up the chant.

“Blank flank, no mark, flank’s as blank as he is dark!”

Lying there on the floor of the schoolyard, surrounded by his new schoolmates, something broke within Thade. How could he lay there, cowering beneath his hooves, and allow himself to become the mockery of these awful fillies and colts? He would not let this become his first impression in this new town! Not after what happened in the last one!

*The neck, he thought, singling out the large earth pony who was clearly the ringleader. If I go for the neck, he’ll be down for good. That’ll show them. Just like that book you read. Don’t just hit back; hit back *hard*. Hit back so hard they’ll never cause you trouble again. Deep down, though, he knew he could never do it. Thoughts; meaningless thoughts, that’s all they were. Maybe if I just stay down like this they’ll get bored and—*

“Hey! Leave him alone!” The filly’s shout came from the same direction as the ringleader’s chant. Thade peered up from beneath his hooves. The jeering slowed to a grumbling stop, becoming excited whispers. He saw the circle of his tormentors split apart to allow room for the newcomer.

“Oh, look who’s here! We were wrong, new-colt, you’re NOT the only blank flank! We forgot about Crashka! Just like her parents did!”

“Oh, please, you think that still bothers me? I’d rather have no parents at all than have to go home to yours! Everypony knows about your father, Bucksaw. About what he did.”

Thade’s vision of his rescuer was blocked by Bucksaw’s large figure, which was now shuffling agitatedly from hoof to hoof.

“I... don’t know what you’re talking about!” Bucksaw grumbled, glancing around nervously.

“Oh, you don’t? Should I remind you? Maybe there are still some ponies in your crowd here that haven’t heard the story. Or you could apologize and maybe I won’t have to say anything.”

For a tense moment, there was silence. Then:

“... Sorry...” The word was filled with such monstrous anger that Thade’s head once more found itself beneath his hooves.

He listened as the crowd dispersed. After he was sure it was gone, he glanced up tentatively, curious to see his savior for the first time.

The grey pegasus was smiling slightly and looking directly at him. For a moment there was silence, though in no way was it awkward—within it, volumes seemed to be shared between them.

“I’m Laska,” the pegasus finally said.

Thade drew himself to his hooves, standing upright. There was another stretch of silence as he stared at her. He had been told about pegasi, about the cloud ponies, but had never actually seen one up close. She was a filly, probably the same age as he, and was watching him with concerned bemusement. As he stared, a slight breeze picked up. One of her wing feathers floated to the ground; he wasn’t sure why, but as he watched it fall, he was sure it was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen.

And her flank was indeed blank.

The quiet continued for another few moments. Finally: "Thade. I'm Thade."

Silence reigned once more, but if silence was this wonderful, Thade never wanted to hear another sound again.

The schoolbell rang. They both jumped, turning to watch as the rest of the young ponies filed into the building. Laska turned back to Thade. The smile between them felt like a secret.

She began trotting towards the schoolhouse. He followed... but stopped long enough to pick up the feather she had dropped. With nowhere to put it, he reluctantly teleported it off to his bedroom so he could cherish it later.

If anypony ever took the time to ask him how he could perform such complicated magic at such a young age, he would have stared back in confusion. He knew he was talented, of course he was talented. He had nothing better to do than practice when he got home from school. But he never suspected that he was more than talented, that imbued within him was a natural skill great enough to rival that of some of the most fantastic unicorns in history. No, in Thade's own mind, he simply had a lot of time on his hooves. And the power within him, though abnormally immense, was still mostly dormant, untapped, immature. Time would cure that, but for now, Thade was an extremely talented foal who didn't realize his own ability.

He picked up his pace, catching up with his new friend. They entered the schoolhouse side by side.

"What do you think, Fluttershy?" Twilight asked, anxiously watching as the yellow pegasi did her work. The cave echoed with the sounds of her every delicate motion. "Will she be ok?"

Fluttershy was hunched over the sleeping orange earth pony, applying a salve she had created from nearby plants and bandaging

several minor cuts. "She's scratched up and probably very sore, but with some rest she should be walking in no time."

Twilight breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness... do you think she'll wake up soon? We've got to get moving... but more importantly, we need to find out what happened to her."

Fluttershy stood up, still glancing protectively at Applejack. "I'm not sure when she'll wake up... whatever happened to her, she ran a long way. She just needs sleep."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Twilight begged.

Fluttershy returned to her kneeling position. "She just needs peace and quiet. Why don't you go outside and let the others know she's ok? I still have some work to do."

Twilight nodded. She began heading for the cave's exit, but stopped. She turned back. "Fluttershy?"

Fluttershy glanced up questioningly.

"Thanks for helping us with her," Twilight said. "We wouldn't know the first thing to do if you weren't here."

Fluttershy beamed. "Of course! I could never ignore somepony in need! *Especiallly* a friend."

Twilight returned the smile, then headed for the clearing outside the cave, where her friends awaited news.

Rainbow Dash was in Twilight's face even before the unicorn's eyes could adjust to the bright sunlight. "Will Fluttershy let us go in and see her now? Is she ok? Is she awake yet?" Rarity was right beside her, eagerly awaiting Twilight's response.

"She's going to be fine. She just needs sleep and peace."

“I knew she’d be ok! Applejack can overcome anything!” Rainbow Dash, her worry now melted away, laughed with relief.

Rarity wrapped a hoof around Dash’s neck. “This is *such* a relief! But I can’t say I’m surprised. Applejack is as tough as they come!” She bucked at an invisible tree behind her to express her friend’s strength. The odd spectacle tickled Dash into another burst of laughter. Rarity turned away haughtily, but then began chuckling herself, until both the pegasus and the unicorn were rolling around on the ground giggling.

Twilight smiled to herself. They may be surrounded by peril, their journey far from over, but being here with her friends, it was impossible to stay troubled for too long. Then she realized she was forgetting somepony. She glanced curiously around the clearing. “Where’s Pinkie?”

Rarity, back on her hooves and finally overcoming the giggles, leaned in to Twilight, whispering secretively. “She’s... having one of her moods. She said she just wants to be alone.”

Twilight gasped. “Oh, no! Rarity, Dash, you two should know that when she says she wants to be alone, she needs us more than ever! We have to find her *now!*”

Dash and Rarity looked at each other guiltily. “Twilight’s right,” Dash said. “You two didn’t see her back at her house before her surprise party... it wasn’t pretty.”

The split up, each walking along the perimeter of the clearing, searching for the path their friend had taken. After only a few moments, Rarity called out softly. “Psst! Here!”

Dash and Twilight arrived next to her. Before them began a fresh, hastily-beaten trail. The sound of sobbing could be heard in the distance. There was a silence as the three looked at each other with worry; Twilight bit her lip in distress. She began down the path, her two friends at her rear. As they walked, the sobbing grew louder. They were almost within sight of the source, when it suddenly stopped.

For a moment, the forest was quiet, save for a distant birdsong.

“What are *you* all doing here?” The bitter resentment in Pinkie’s voice cut through the brush of the forest like knives. Instead of responding, Twilight, Rarity, and Rainbow Dash took the final few steps. Suddenly she came into view.

She was sitting with her back to them, her head hung low. To their horror, her hair was indeed completely deflated, hanging over her like a shroud.

“Let me guess,” she sniffled, her back still to them, her voice dripping with self-resentment, “you’re all here to yell at me for getting Applejack hurt, and to tell me that we’re not friends anymore after what I did. Because it’s all my fault. Because stupid dumb Pinkie Pie had to eat all the apple sandwiches, and so Applejack had to go get food, and then something terrible happened to her and it’s *all my fault*. Go ahead and yell at me. I deserve it. *Stupid Pinkie*. Stupid Pinkie had to—” She was interrupted as Dash enveloped her in a hug.

“Pinkie, if you’re being stupid, it’s only for thinking we don’t like you anymore. Come on, snap out of it. You know we’ll always be friends no matter what.” Pinkie just sniffed, her head still hung low. She didn’t return the hug.

Rarity joined in, adding herself to the embrace. “Darling, it’s not your fault. It was all just an accident, whatever happened. No pony blames you.”

Twilight’s turn. With her, the embrace became a group hug; however, Pinkie, though squished by her three friends, showed no reaction. “Pinkie,” Twilight said, “whatever happened to Applejack is over. It wasn’t your fault. And besides, she’s going to be fine. Fluttershy says she only needs some rest, and—” The three friends surrounding Pinkie were flung away as she leaped into the air.

“Twilight,” she said, her hair beginning to return to its familiar disheveled state, “did you just say she’s going to be ok? Is she really?”

Twilight picked herself up off the ground and turned to her pink friend, smiling. “That’s what Fluttershy said. And if anypony knows, it’s Fluttershy.”

Some of Pinkie's joy seemed to drain away again as she looked down at her hooves. "And... you guys really don't hate me?"

"Of course not, darling, you know we could never—"

"Oh, are you kidding, Pinkie? Rainbow Dash is loyal to the end!"

"Pinkie, we'd never ever hate you; don't *ever* think that."

This time it was Pinkie who grabbed her friends into a tight hug. "Well... thanks, guys."

Dash grinned. "That's the Pinkie Pie I know and love."

"Wait," Twilight said, "did any of you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Dash said. "I didn't hear—"

"Shhh!" Rarity put her hoof to her mouth urgently.

They sat frozen in their hug, listening.

"Twilight," Dash began, "I still don't—"

"Twiiiiiiight! Rainbow Daaaaash! Pinkie Pieeeee! Rarityyyyyyy!"
The distant yell was coming from up the path.

"Fluttershy?" said Twilight. "C'mon, girls, this must have to do with Applejack!"

Without another word, the four friends set off back down the trail.

"Twiiiiiiight! Rainbow Daaaaash! Pinkie Pieeeee! Rarit—" Fluttershy broke off as the four ponies burst out of the woods and into the clearing. "Oh thank goodness! Applejack's awake and she wants to talk to all of us! Where *were* you?"

Pinkie Pie turned away, embarrassed.

“Uh,” said Dash, “we were just going to pick Applejack some flowers. We didn’t find any, though. Now come on, let’s hear what she has to say!”

Fluttershy, confused, guided her friends into the cave.

Though Twilight’s eyes took a few minutes to adjust to the darkness, she found her way to Applejack with ease; the cavern’s layout had etched itself into her mind.

She was sitting up against the cold stone wall, covered by one of Rarity’s blankets. Her orange coat appeared to glow from the warm candlelight of the same color. Remarkably, her scrapes and bruises were already fading; it appeared as though whatever struggle she had overcome happened weeks ago. Twilight took a moment to reflect once more upon how lucky they were to have Fluttershy.

The moment Applejack saw her purple unicorn friend, she sat up urgently. “Twi! Ah was there! Ah saw her! And him!” She was nearly hysterical. “The Rose took me there and it was hot and the ground was a-shakin’ and that red beam of light meant somethin’ bad happened Ah just know it but *Twilight I saw her* and she told—”

“Applejack, slow down! We’re here for you. Just relax and tell us what happened.”

Pinkie, Dash, and Rarity finally made their way through the dark cave to where Applejack lay, with Fluttershy and Twilight at her side. The five waited anxiously while she took deep breaths and collected herself.

“Well,” she began, “yesterday mornin’ Ah woke up early to go get us some food. Ah went down the path to the apple trees we saw. Ah bucked some down and tried to make my way back to this cave. But Ah got lost...”

Her five friends stood around her, listening incredulously as she told her tale, beginning to end, never skipping a single detail.

Thade shuffled nervously from hoof to hoof as he waited for somepony to open the door. He had very little experience with this sort of thing... and something about her always made it difficult for him to think. In a nice way.

With a wooden creak, the door opened, and suddenly before Thade stood a red pegasus stallion. He glared down at Thade through square spectacles.

“Yes? What is it?” His voice was gruff and impatient, as if Thade was interrupting something very important.

“Is... is Laska home, sir?” It was just as awkward to make eye contact as it was to avoid it, so Thade compromised and met the stallion’s eyes only briefly and occasionally.

Instead of responding, the pegasus let out a burly yell. “LASKA. SOMEPONY’S HERE.” Then he shut the door.

Thade stood alone on the porch, uncertain how to proceed. The thud-thud-thud of the intimidating stallion’s hoofsteps died away behind the door.

Well, I guess... I guess I could just come back again later... or talk to her tomorrow during school... he thought, but I’ve been planning this for days, and I haven’t had a real conversation with her since that day in the yard... I can’t put off saying thanks for that long.

After another moment of thinking and waiting, he sighed resignedly, turning to leave, when once more the sound of hoofsteps floated towards him from behind the door. This new pattern was delicate and soft, not the thud-thud-thud of the stallion, but a hmm-hmm-hmm, as if the floorboards were sighing contentedly. The door opened.

“Oh, hi, Thade! Good to see you! How’d you find out where I live?”

Thade fought the urge to simply stare at her. “It was in the student directory. And... I was thinking... are you busy right now?”

She crossed through the doorway, closing it behind her and joining Thade on the porch. "Not at all."

"Well," Thade said, smiling at her, "follow me."

She smiled back inquiringly, and followed as he led her down the road. "So I see you met my Uncle Bale. He's very forward, but nice once you get to know him."

Thade laughed. He found himself laughing a lot more frequently since meeting her a few days ago. "Maybe I will get to know him."

"Maybe," Laska smiled. "So, you're new in town? Where'd you move from?"

"Um," Thade began nervously, "I moved here from a town called Martingale."

Laska waited for him to continue, but Thade remained silent. "Well, why'd-ya move?"

Thade turned to look at her. This was it; this was a fresh town, a fresh start, and he was speaking with the most amazing pony he had ever met. This was no time for lying or hiding his past. "I had some trouble in Martingale... I've never been very good at making friends. Other fillies and colts avoided me. And then I got into a fight. In the schoolyard."

"You got into a fight?"

"Well... no. I didn't do any fighting. There was just this bully and he..."

"He beat you up? And so your parents moved you here?"

Thade looked up to the sky, as if the answer to her question was in the wispy cirrus clouds. "Sort of... my parents... they don't really care about me. We moved because the school said I couldn't go there anymore. Because of the fight. But my parents still have to send me to school, so... we moved here."

"Oh."

They walked on in silence for several moments. The road became a path into woods of increasing thickness. The cool, damp air was refreshing after traversing the town's hot streets.

"You really should learn to stick up for yourself," Laska finally said.

Thade turned to her. "What do you mean?"

"Well," she said, "you have to learn to fight back. When somepony comes at you, you go at them twice as hard." She swung her hooves at the air in front of her, as if sparring with an invisible foe.

Thade watched in amazement.

"Fight your battles, Thade. I used to get picked on a lot because I don't have my cutie mark and because my parents... aren't around. But the bullies don't bother me anymore cause I learned to hit back."

Thade was saved the trouble of thinking up a response, for they had finally reached their destination.

"We're here," he smiled.

"This is what you wanted to show me?" Laska asked dubiously.

Before them stood a half-collapsed wooden shed. It stood just off the trail, almost invisible behind trees and bushes. Laska wouldn't have seen it if Thade hadn't mentioned it. It was about ten hooves tall, with enough room to hold perhaps two fully grown ponies. Laska could tell even from the outside that the roof was in the process of caving in.

Thade disappeared into the forest next to the hidden shack. "C'mon!"

Laska nervously struggled through a gap in the bush branches, making room with her wings. Once through, she discovered that the shack was on the border of a tiny clearing.

Thade was tugging with both hooves on the door handle. Laska watched, amused, as he lifted his hind hooves off the ground and began pushing them against the shack for assistance. An audible "creek" startled them both, but the door didn't appear to move.

Thade sighed. A look of concentration swam across his face, and his horn began glowing with a black aura. The same aura appeared around the door, which burst open with a thud. "There," he smiled. "Go on in! Don't worry, it's perfectly safe. I promise."

She looked at him for a moment, unsure. Then she smiled nervously, stepping through the doorway. Thade went in after her, magically closing the door with "crack" that sent nearby animals scattering.

Inside. "Thade, I can't see anything." A moment later, his horn glowed with a warm red light.

"Better?" he asked. Laska smiled and nodded.

"You're very good with magic," she said, clearly impressed.

Thade blushed, glad the red light would mask his heated face. "I got started at a young age," he smiled.

"Why'd you take me here? What is this place?" She looked around the cramped space. To her surprise, the dirt floor wasn't uncomfortable, and the place had a familiar, cozy feeling.

"This is just... a special place of mine. I found it the day I moved in to town. I like to come here to be alone and to practice magic. It's... quiet."

Laska nodded knowingly. She had a special place of her own.

"But this isn't all I wanted to show you," he said.

She turned to him in surprise. "What do you mean?"

He was silent for a moment, gathering his words. "Laska, we've only been friends for a short time, but you trust me, right?"

"Of course."

Thade smiled. "Put your wing around me." Laska stared at him for a moment in bewilderment, then wrapped a small wing gently across his back.

His horn began to glow. His face contorted with absolute concentration. To Laska's astonishment, the shack around them began to fade to blackness, ever so slightly. It returned, then began fading again, more so this time, until the world around them was a horrifying empty nothingness. Then they were in the shack once more, and then suddenly, with a burst of stars and smokey black sparks, the shack was gone.

A field. They were in a field... the most fantastic sight Laska had ever seen.

It was a field of roses.

They grew endlessly in every direction, upon rolling hill and sprawling flat plane. Each slight breeze caused flowing waves of red and green in every direction; petals danced through the air like vibrant snow.

The sound of the roses brushing against each other in the breeze was like the calm inhale and exhale of the ocean.

"Oh, Thade!" It was all she could say. He didn't respond. "Thade? Thade!" He was struggling to get off the ground to his hooves. She grabbed him gently and helped him up. "Are you ok?"

Thade groaned, finally standing on all fours. "I'm fine," he said, rubbing his horn. "I've never teleported myself and another pony before." He looked around, smiling. "What do you think?"

"It's... incredible..." They both marveled at the colorful sea.

"Sonselo," Thade said. "The Field of Roses. I read of this place in a book. I was just a tiny colt, but when I saw the picture... I knew I had to come here. So I began practicing magic. Teleportation. I got better at it... room to room in my house, one side of town to the other... farther and farther... just like any good unicorn, really. But to teleport somewhere, you

must know where it is. The book couldn't say. So I read others. I searched for this place in every library I could find. I finally found its location in an old book of legends." He chuckled at the memory. "Just above Spurdnok. I come here sometimes. When I feel like being alone."

She embraced him, pulling him close under a wing. "Thade... you're amazing."

This time, there was no light to cover his blush.

Hours passed. Or minutes. Laska wasn't sure how long they had been laying there, talking, watching the red waves roll in, watching the green waves roll out. Hearing the calm rustle of the roses.

Thade was saying something, but her mind had become occupied by a thought. "Thade, you can get us back, right?"

"Of course," he smiled. "It's not easy to teleport twice in such a short amount of time, but I've had lots of practice."

She grinned, relieved, nuzzling closer to him. Somehow, the sky was just as magnificent as the roses beneath it. The red snow of petals never ceased. The fragrance was that of the finest boutique. "What were you saying?" she asked.

Thade shifted nervously. "Well... you haven't yet told me about your parents. About what happened to them."

"Oh." Lying in this field, there was no secret she was willing to keep, nothing between them she would dare remain hidden. "They passed away. On a train. In an accident. I was at Uncle Bale's. I was very young. I don't remember it." She looked away so he wouldn't see the pain on her face.

"I'm so sorry to hear that." The sincerity in his voice brought tears to her eyes. She wiped them away, smiling weakly at the sky.

"Laska."

"Hmm?" She rolled on her side to face where he lay next to her.

In his hooves he held a rose, picked from one of the billions in the field.

She stared at him, her mouth agape, and then slowly and delicately took it from his hooves. She stared at it, transfixed by its perfection, its purity, its fragility.

She embraced him for the second time. No words passed as they lay together on the ocean floor, her hooves and wings around him, his hooves around her, the waves whispering indecipherable chants from every direction. After a moment, Thade gasped.

"Laska... look!" She followed his eyes to her flank, which was no longer bare. Where there was once only grey, there now was an image of a rose, as immaculate and beautiful as the one still held in her hoof.

She turned to him in wonder... and then gasped herself. Thade followed her eyes, and saw that his flank was also no longer bare. An identical mark, the everlasting rose, had appeared on his as well.

He pulled her close, squeezing her tightly; she returned the favor. She pecked his cheek with a kiss, and they lay there, two foals in love, young love, the purest love of all, while the fabled roses of Sonselo washed around them, sighing contentedly.

Rainbow Dash was the first to break the stunned silence. "You were actually *there*? You were actually at the Spring of Magic?"

Applejack nodded vigorously. "Ah know it sounds crazy, but it's true! Ah saw Celestia... and Ah saw *him*... that *twisted* pony." She spit the last words out with fiery anger.

Fluttershy spoke up softly but surely. "Don't worry, Applejack! We believe you!"

“Aw, thanks, Fluttershy. And thanks for fixin’ me up so good. Ah actually haven’t felt better in ages.” She winked at the yellow pegasus.

Twilight’s voice was sharp and serious. “Applejack, you said something after you fell over. Something about numbers. ‘There once were six, but now there are four,’ if I remember correctly. What did you mean?”

Applejack rubbed her chin in thought. “Well... Ah don’t recollect sayin’ that... ‘once were six...’ hmmmm...” She thought a moment longer, and then gasped with realization. “The pillars! That’s what Ah must have meant. I didn’t get a very good look at ‘em, but Ah saw the cavern was lined with six pillars. Except two of them were nothin’ more than piles of rubble.”

“Pillars...” Twilight mused. “I’m not really sure what—”

“First the pillars must fall,” Fluttershy mumbled. Twilight turned to her.

“What was that, Fluttershy?”

“Oh, um, it’s... nothing.” Everypony stared at her expectantly; she sighed and went on. “It’s... my mother used to sing it when I was a small filly. I think she heard it from my father. That’s why she liked it so much. I never did. I always thought it was such a horribly sad song. I think it went like this:” She began singing, her voice sweet and angelic. The melody was beautiful yet eerily haunting, like an old and worn music-box.

*“To the paramount Spring
A relic you must bring
Of one loved but now lost—
Payer of ultimate cost.
To break through the wall,
First the Pillars must fall,
Retying the tether
That binds worlds together.
To finish the deed,
To reveal the portal,
You will finally need*

Blood of an Immortal.”

Rarity gasped. “Don’t you see! We already know that pony is trying to raise the dead. This makes perfect sense. These Pillars of ours... they must be what stand between him and his goal. And he’s already destroyed two of them. And he needs the Princess for...” She couldn’t finish the thought. Pinkie Pie grabbed her in a comforting hug.

“I don’t know how I didn’t see it before,” Fluttershy said. “I guess it seems so obvious now... I never imagined the Spring in the song was actually *the* Spring.”

Twilight began pacing around her friends. “So... he’s trying to raise the dead. He needs Celestia... that’s why he took her. He probably already has the ‘relic’. And the Pillars have already begun to fall. And you, Applejack... you were there.”

Applejack nodded glumly, shuddering at the memory.

Twilight, asserting her role as leader, looked at each of her friends, one by one. “We should look on the bright side—Applejack managed to find the Spring, so we can, too. Also, it seems the Rose will help guide us. We know that Celestia is ok, and that there are still four Pillars left.” She smiled at the five friends before her. Though the sun was setting, its low position in the sky lit the cave more brightly than at any other hour of the day. “So what do you say? Tomorrow we’ll head out again. This time we’ll try a little harder to get lost.”

They shared a laugh, and Twilight instantly felt better... though something about Applejack’s recount caused her a flicker of unease. It was more than Celestia’s sorry state, more than the fall of the Pillars. She pushed the matter to the back of her mind. *We’ll be able to do it. I know it.*

Outside, the sky was painted a fantastic mixture of orange and red, and the forest became as silent as the twinkling stars that began appearing one by one.

"We can come back sometime, can't we?" Laska was staring longingly about the endless field.

Thade smiled reassuringly. "Of course. Here, put your wing around me."

She did so, brushing up closely against him. "I didn't know we needed to be touching for you to teleport me."

He grinned. "We don't."

She laughed. I think I love him, she thought, repeating the words in her head over and over, reveling in them. I really do; I love him.

Thade's face contorted with concentration; his horn glowed black once more, and the world began fading to dark nothingness.

I love him.

The field returned, and then dissolved once more, receding as the blackness took over.

I love him.

She turned to him, his features still absorbed in concentration.

She pecked his lips with a kiss.

His eyes burst open in surprise, and he looked at her, wanting to stare into her eyes, to stare into those eyes so brave, so independent, so free, everything he wasn't and everything he loved. To show her he loved her too.

And then everything began slipping.

He fought to regain control of the spell; he'd only had a momentary lapse of concentration, but already he could feel himself losing his grip. The black void lasted for eternity in every direction. He struggled to pull them back to Sonselo, struggled to get their hooves on the ground.

Laska glanced around nervously. "Thade?"

His horn wasn't just glowing with magic, it was enveloped in it. He grunted with effort, and the field began to return.

Come on, come on, come on! Oh dear Celestia, help me through this!

For a moment, the ground reappeared beneath his hooves, and the delicate scent of the roses surrounded them once more. But the void was stronger, its vacuum of nothing grabbed at everything it could. He felt Laska's wing begin to slide off from around him.

"THADE!" she screamed, though her voice was muffled, as if heard under water.

He couldn't waste energy returning her call. He pulled harder than ever, pulled with his entire being, pulled until he felt like he was being torn in two, until he could feel blood trickling slowly down his nose.

But she continued slipping.

"THADE!" Distant, getting farther.

Her wing slipped completely from his back.

His vision blurred, her yells fading, the ground grew eagerly to meet him. And then he knew nothing.

In the fabled field of Sonselo, the roses continued their ocean dance, the tide going in, the tide going out.

Chapter 6

“Just a little farther!”

“Dash, are you sure we’re going the right way?”

“Yes! Just trust me! Keep going!”

Twilight sighed, but continued along, Applejack, Pinkie, Rarity, and Fluttershy slightly behind her.

“You’ll love this!” Dash shouted down from her aerial position. She was out of sight above the leaves of the thick trees, but her voice was loud and clear.

“Oh, I do hope our surprise is the end of this awful forest,” Rarity groaned. “That or a jacuzzi. I’m not sure which I want more or which is more likely.”

Pinkie Pie giggled. “I hope it’s the jacuzzi!”

Applejack nudged Fluttershy. “Why don’t you just fly up there and tell us what Dash’s talkin’ about? This ‘surprise’ is just silly.”

“Oh, I don’t know... I’m fine down here.” She smiled. “And besides, if Rainbow Dash says it’s a surprise, we should probably keep it that way. Let’s just see what happens.”

Ahead, Twilight shouted up to Dash. “Are we almost—oh my!”

“Twilight?” Fluttershy gasped. “What is it?”

“Everypony come over here and see!” Twilight yelled excitedly.

The other four rushed up to her. As they grew closer, Applejack realized she could start to see beyond the trees, and then realized that if she could see *beyond* the trees, that must mean...

“Look, everypony!” Twilight gleefully declared. “The end of the forest!” The other ponies finally reached her position, where the trees cut off sharply, opening into a field. The wide open expanse continued until slight hills in the distance made it impossible to see farther. Patches of sunflowers were spattered here and there, but otherwise the field was nothing more than short green grass and rolling hills.

“Oh, thank *goodness!*” Rarity exclaimed.

Applejack smiled. “Good find, Dash. If ’tweren’t for you, we might have kept going deeper and deeper into those darned woods.”

“So... no jacuzzi?” Pinkie sighed.

“I told you you’d like it!” Dash said proudly, hovering several yards in the air. She gestured to the ground below her. “And look at this! A road!”

Twilight noticed for the first time the dirt road that extended through the field and beyond the hills at the edge of vision. “Hmm,” she thought out loud, “it seems like this road hasn’t been used in a long time; there are no hoofmarks at all. And isn’t it odd that it starts here, at the edge of this forest? Or it *ends* here at the edge of this forest...”

“Who cares?” Rainbow Dash landed on the dirt road. “We’ve been wandering through that horrible forest for days, and we were in a swamp before *that*. Let’s just let the road guide us for awhile.”

Rarity stepped between Dash and Twilight. “Let’s not forget we’re supposed to be *lost*, remember? Are we really lost if we’re following a road?”

“Ah sure think so,” Applejack commented. “We’re who-knows-where and we aren’t sure where we’re goin’ and we have no clue how to get back. Ah think we’re just as lost as ever following this here road. So why not?”

Twilight thought, face scrunched in concentration. “Well... I guess you’re right, Applejack. It’s settled, then. Let’s go.”

“Um, guys?” Pinkie smiled nervously while her friends curiously turned to her. “It’s been a long time... do you think we could stop and... I dunno...”

Applejack grinned. “Pinkie, do you wanna stay here a bit and have a picnic of sorts?”

Pinkie nodded eagerly. “I think it’d be nice, in this field and all. And we picked fresh berries and apples from the forest, so we should have plenty to go around. Can-we-can-we-can-we?” She hopped up and down excitedly.

“Well...” Twilight considered.

Applejack put a hoof around her shoulders. “Aww, come on, Twilight. We’ve got time. Who knows when we’ll be in such a nice place again?”

Twilight sighed but smiled. Her horn glowed as the pack of food around Applejack’s back lifted itself off and settled gently on the ground atop a blanket.

“Oh, how nice!” Pinkie clapped her hooves with joy. “Now *this* is a picnic!” She plopped down upon the soft blanket and pulled an apple from the pack. “C’mon, Fluttershy!”

Fluttershy grinned. “Well... I don’t see why not.” She sat down next to Pinkie, whose head was stuffed in the food pack—when she came back out, there was an apple in her mouth, and one in each hoof.

“Here ya go!” She handed the fruit to Fluttershy, who took a small bite. “And one for you, Rarity!” She tossed it to the white unicorn; just before it hit the ground it was enveloped in a light blue aura as it floated back up to its target.

“Careful when you throw those things, Pinkie!” She took a bite. “Mmmm... I’ve never favored apples—unless they’re cooked into something nice by Applejack, of course—but this is a very refreshing treat.” She took another bite, and her next words were muffled as she chewed. “And it’s vewy nife here in thif bootifuh fieldph!”

Dash, who was eating now herself, patted Rarity on the back. "Talking with food in your mouth? That's not like you at all, Rarity." She dropped down into a sprinter's running-line pose, giggling. "Next you're gonna tell me you wanna race!"

"Well," Rarity haughtily exclaimed, swallowing her apple, "we're not in Ponyville anymore, so I don't see why I shouldn't be allowed to live a little."

Pinkie giggled around a mouthful of berries. "Thafph's the sphiwit!"

Twilight smiled to herself, but a worrying thought wouldn't leave her alone. Her smile faded, and she frowned slightly as the nagging fear returned once more. *Enjoy this while you can*, it said. *You know what must happen. Enjoy this while you can.*

In the field beside the path they enjoyed each other's company, joking, laughing, inseparable.

As the group trod down the dirt path, Pinkie Pie groaned. "Ugh... I ate too many apples..."

Applejack laughed, patting her pink friend on the back. "Plenty more where that came from! We got so many apples we could have five more picnics like that one."

"Don't get any ideas," Twilight warned, her smile warm but her voice serious. "We won't have time to do that again. From here on out our priority is finding the Spring."

"At least we're on an actual road," Rarity opined. "This flat ground is wonderful after that horrible uneven forest floor."

They walked on in silence for a few moments. The path they took cut through the hilly field like ribbon around an unevenly-wrapped present. The treeline from which they had emerged hours ago was now a distant line on the horizon behind them.

Twilight glanced at the sun. Midday. Plenty of time to walk before finding shelter for the night. And how nice it would be to sleep beneath the

familiar stars, instead of the monotonous leaves and tree branches of the forest.

Pinkie Pie began humming. It was an old familiar tune, and soon Fluttershy was humming softly along as well, shaking her head to the upbeat tempo. Twilight, smiling, picked it up, too. Rarity was surprised to find herself joining in. Applejack and Dash entered together as their friends began a new phrase.

With everypony humming along, Pinkie began singing the words, her voice as light and perfect as the noon air.

*“Winter Wrap Up, Winter Wrap Up!
Let’s finish our holiday cheer!
Winter Wrap Up, Winter Wrap Up!
Cause tomorrow Spring is here!
Winter Wrap Up, Winter Wrap Up...”*

Everypony else joined in for the chorus:

*“Cause tomorrow Spring is here!
Cause tomorrow Spring is here!”*

“One more time!” Pinkie shouted.

Dash glanced down the road to the horizon and, a curious look upon her face, lifted off from the ground, hovering ten yards above her singing friends.

“Winter Wrap Up, Winter Wrap Up!”

“Hey, everypony, I think I see—”

“Let’s finish our holiday cheer!”

“Wait, hold on, look over—”

“Winter Wrap Up, Winter Wrap Up!”

“I’m pretty sure I see—”

*“Cause tomorrow Spring is here!
Winter Wrap Up, Winter Wrap Up!”
Cause tomorrow Spring is here,
Cause tomorrow Spring is—”*

“HEY, EVERYPONY!” The singing stopped as her five ground-bound friends turned up to where she hovered indignantly in the sky. “You’ll never guess what—”

“Dashie, what was that for? We were singing!” Pinkie glared irritably up at her friend.

Dash pulled at her face in frustration. “Pinkie, I’m *telling* you why I interrupted! Up ahead is an ocean!”

Fluttershy gasped and flew like a shot to Rainbow Dash’s height. She shielded her eyes from the sun with a hoof and peered into the distance. “Ohmygosh it *is* an ocean!” She clapped her hooves in delight. “Oh I’ve *always* wanted to see an ocean! I’ve seen lakes and swamps and bogs and rivers and fish tanks and ponds but I’ve never seen an honest-to-goodness *ocean*! I’ll bet there are all kinds of fish and birds and little turtles and oh Twilight can we go there *please*?” Suddenly she was out of the air and directly in front of Twilight, pleading with her eyes.

Twilight giggled. “Of course! If it’s straight ahead, this road should take us straight to it, right, Dash?” Dash nodded, landing beside Fluttershy. “I’ve never seen a true ocean, either. This should be an experience for all of us.”

“A big pond?” Applejack asked, unconvinced. “Ah don’t see what’s the big deal with this ocean. Just a whole lotta water, right? Why go out of our way?”

Rarity grinned. “It’s not out of our way, Applejack. We’re just as lost as ever, right? And don’t you see how excited Fluttershy is? I’m sure it will be nice. Have you ever seen an ocean before?”

“Pffft! Ocean smoocean! It’s all water to me. But if y’all are excited for it, Ah guess Ah am, too.”

Fluttershy hopped around her friends in a ring, prancing with joy. "Tonight we can sleep in the soft sand and listen to the tide and see the stars!"

"Calm down, Fluttershy," Twilight giggled; it was a rare sight to see Fluttershy so animated, and whenever it happened Twilight couldn't help but share her joy. "We still have to get there. Dash, can you tell how far it is? Can we make it by sundown?"

Dash, still hovering in the air, rubbed her chin in consideration. "Well, it's hard to tell with all this flat ground... but I *think* we should be able to make it there before sunset. Of course, yours truly could fly there and back a hundred times by the time *you* slowpokes got there. Should I go check it out and come back?"

Pinkie Pie shook her head frantically, her hair flinging about in an explosive blur. "No way, Dash! We can't separate. Remember when we lost Applejack? We can't have anypony go off on her own."

Twilight nodded. "Pinkie's right. We go together. But perhaps we should pick up the pace a bit if we're going to get there before sunset. Just in case."

They carried on at a brisker pace, trotting quickly down the dirt road. There were several minutes of silence; the only sounds were Dash's gently flapping wings and the soft chatter of hooves pushing hastily against the road. Then Pinkie Pie spoke.

"Hey... guys? Does anypony know what day of the week it is?"

Dash peered at her curiously. "Um, Monday, I think. Why does it matter?"

"Oh, it doesn't. It's nothing."

Silence for several seconds.

"Actually, it *is* something. Thursdays are the days I take Gummy for a walk. But I can't do that today because I'm *here*."

Applejack rolled her eyes and moved so that she was trotting alongside Pinkie. “Pinkie, ain’t Lyra walking Gummy for you?”

“Well, yes, but I don’t think she knows how to walk Gummy the way he likes it. He only likes when we walk leading off with the front-right leg. I don’t think I told that to Lyra. And he’s afraid of trampolines, and I never told Lyra to keep him away from trampolines. The bouncing gives him a headache. And—”

Dash landed in a puff of dust beside Pinkie. “Hey, didn’t you say he gets walked on *Thursday*? I told you today is Monday.”

“Well, it *feels* like a Thursday. If it was a Monday my knees wouldn’t be so achy. That only happens on Thursdays. And if Gummy doesn’t get a proper walk, who *knows* what’ll happen!”

Twilight sighed. “Pinkie, he’ll be fine. Besides, Lyra’s a good friend. She’ll take good care of him.”

Pinkie considered, then smiled. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. Gummy can be picky sometimes, but usually—”

Fluttershy gasped and stopped in her tracks. In less than two seconds, Applejack collided with her, sending them both sprawling into a pile, which Dash then tripped on, adding herself to the heap.

Fluttershy was instantly back on her hooves, apologizing and babbling giddily at the same time. “Oh gosh I’m sorry—do you guys hear that?—oh goodness let me help you up—I can hear it!—next time I’ll be more careful when I—listen! I can hear it! The ocean!”

Dash shakily got to her hooves, rubbing a bump on her forehead. She grabbed hold of the heap of Applejack on the ground, pulling her up with a grunt of effort.

“Thanks, Dash.” She glanced at Fluttershy, who was hovering just above the ground, performing a jubilant dance in the air. “Ya know, Ah can’t think of a time Ah’ve seen her so happy before. And for an *ocean*? Ah just don’t get it.”

Rarity, who had been smiling and watching Fluttershy's dance, turned to Applejack and Dash. "Oh, just let her be happy. Besides, I too have always wished to see an ocean. Blue is my favorite color."

Fluttershy landed gently on the ground. "I think we should be able to see it just beyond this hill! It sounds so close!" She began jogging to the hill, slowing down as she began climbing the sloped side. "Oh I hope it's as beautiful as they—" She broke off as she reached the peak. There she stood, stock still and silent.

"Well?" prompted Applejack, who began making her way up the hill. "What's it like?" She reached the top and stood beside Fluttershy.

"Great Johnny's appleseeds," she exclaimed in wonder. In the distance, either ten miles away or fifty yards away (it was impossible to tell), was blue. The horizon, from end to end, start to finish, was an azure so vast the sky itself seemed tiny and bland. Along it amazing patterns of white swirled aimlessly but in tandem, painting a portrait that changed from one moment to the next, always more incredible than the last. The sound of the crash and fall of the waves was a constant hum that could be felt more as a presence than as a pitch. The entire body seemed to sigh contentedly, a wise eternal being confident in the balance of life and nature.

Twilight, Dash, Pinkie, and Rarity reached Applejack and Fluttershy's vantage, and were engulfed by the same wonder and awe.

For an uncertain amount of time they stood in silence. Then Twilight blinked and turned to Fluttershy. "Come on," she said, breathing the words more than saying them. "It's getting darker. We'll set up for the night along the beach... however far away it is."

They began moving down the hill towards the magnificent body before them.

Fluttershy pushed her hooves gently into the wet sand, which was somehow warm and cold at the same time.

The distance to the shore, which was impossible to determine from the hill, turned out to be about two miles, which they made quickly and with ease. They now stood before the advancing and retreating water as the sun painted the sky and the ocean horizon every shade of red and yellow and orange and purple.

“Fluttershy, Ah changed my mind; you were right. The ocean is quite a sight.”

“The sunset makes it look like cotton candy!” Pinkie exclaimed.

“It’s marvelous,” Rarity said.

Dash stepped closer until the waves washed around her hooves with every swell of the tide.

“Right here,” Fluttershy said. “We should set up for the night right here. I want to be as close as possible, if that’s ok with you all.”

Dash returned from the water’s edge. “Won’t that be dangerous, though? Like, what if there are... I don’t know... sharks?”

“I don’t think so,” Twilight said. “We haven’t seen a single creature since exiting the forest, and somehow I doubt sharks will evolve to climb out of the water overnight, Dash.” She yawned and suddenly realized how tired she was. “I don’t know about you all, but I could use some sleep. Where’s Rarity? She was in charge of bringing the blankets, right?” Twilight glanced around.

Applejack smiled. “Um, Twi’? She’s way ahead of you.”

Rarity and Pinkie were curled up against each other in the sand, both snoring. Next to them was Rarity’s bag, still full of blankets.

Dash laughed. “Aww, I wish I had a camera.”

“Well,” grinned Twilight, “they seem perfectly comfortable sleeping on the sand, so I guess we don’t need the blankets, either.” She lay down atop the smooth grains, which she discovered was more comfortable than

any bed she'd ever used. The pliable soft sand shifted to match her body perfectly. "Goodnight, everypony."

"Wow, this sand is as soft as a cloud!" Dash marveled as she, Applejack, and Fluttershy followed suit. Soon they all lay in a line of snoring bodies just outside the reach of the ocean tide.

For a few minutes the only sounds were snores, an occasional shift or murmur, and the soothing sighs of the waves across the sand. Then a hushed whisper called out.

"Twi'? You awake?"

"Unfortunately, yes," she whispered back, sitting up, careful to avoid shoving Rainbow Dash, whose wings were fluttering gently in her sleep. "What's on your mind?"

Applejack sat up as well. "Ah was thinkin'... about when I happened upon the Spring."

This is it, Twilight thought sadly. *She must know, too*. She got slowly to her hooves. "Here, let's go somewhere else so we can talk in private and not disturb anypony."

Applejack stood up and together they walked slowly along the shore. She stared at her hooves, watched as they made their imprints in the sand, right alongside Twilight's. "Remember what you told us, Twi'? About how... how only 'lost ponies' find the Spring?"

Twilight nodded. She already understood, she realized shortly after Applejack returned from her episode with the Spring, but she wanted to hear Applejack's own conclusion.

"Well... Ah was thinking about how we've been lost for days but we haven't seen hide nor tail of the Spring. But then Ah got lost for twenty minutes, and... suddenly there Ah was."

Here it is, thought Twilight. "Go on," she said.

“Ah guess what Ah’m tryin’ to say is...” Applejack struggled to find the right words. Twilight realized sadly that she had never seen her friend so upset and conflicted—Applejack was normally as sure and confident as they come. She finally found the words she was looking for. “Granny Smith has a saying: ‘home is where your friends are.’ And, Twi’, the truth of the matter is, when we’re together, we’re... home. When we’re together, we can’t ever be lost. Even a million miles from Ponyville, even if we travel through another endless forest for months, we’re still together. Ah only found the Spring because Ah was truly lost... Ah was separated from y’all. Ah was separated from my friends.” She sniffed, suddenly aware she was crying. “Don’t you see, Twilight? Together we’re never lost. We can’t find the Spring together. We can’t stay together.”

Twilight sighed, then pulled Applejack close in an embrace. “I know,” she said, speaking softly into her friend’s shoulder. “I knew from the moment you told us you found the Spring. Perhaps even before that. I just couldn’t... I couldn’t tell anypony. How do I explain that to Fluttershy? Or Rainbow Dash, the most loyal pony I’ve ever met? Could she willingly see us separate? Applejack, I may have been the leader throughout all of this, but I don’t know what to do anymore. I don’t think I can handle it.”

Together they stood, embracing, along the shore of the ocean.

“Twilight, don’t you ever think for second you’ve done anything other than an excellent job. We’d never have made it this far without you. If it wasn’t for your flares I never would have found my way back to y’all when Ah was lost. Ah’m sure we’ll get through this together... even if it means separating for a little bit.” She smiled morosely. “Besides... Ah’ve actually done some of the work for you. Ah think Ah know a way we can get through this. It won’t be easy, but if our friendship is as strong as Ah know it is, we can do it.”

Twilight stared at her, sadness giving way to curiosity. “Really? What’s your plan?”

Applejack told her, and at the end they embraced once more.

“Applejack, that’s wonderful idea. You’re right—I think we can do it. It will be the hardest thing we’ve ever done... but we can do it.”

The shore was lit by the pure white glow of two moons, one that hung in the sky and the other that floated upon the water. One of the two was a reflection, a clone, but the ocean surface was so clear it was impossible to determine which was which. In the glow of these moons the two friends began walking back to their sleeping companions.

“Twi’, do you think we should wake them and tell them?”

“No,” Twilight yawned, “let them sleep. Tomorrow will be hard on all of us. We’d best approach it well rested.”

Twilight’s infectious yawn spread to her friend. “Your right,” Applejack said. She looked at her friends, napping comfortably next to each other in the sand. She would have thought it impossible that sleeping only on sand could be comfortable, but somehow it was; Rarity, Dash, Fluttershy, and Pinkie Pie looked as peaceful as the ocean expanse that nearly reached their sleeping bodies. Would this be their last night together? Could they really separate, if only for a short time? Applejack pushed the thoughts out of her head. “G’night, Twilight.”

“Goodnight.”

They settled back down amongst their friends, and soon the entire group was sleeping and dreaming in the soft ocean sand. The two moons became one as they merged at the horizon, and soon the east was glowing warmly with the first messengers of the new day.

“Oh, I don’t want to have to choose,” Pinkie sniffed. “Are we sure we really have to do this? What do you mean we’re not really lost? We’re a million bajillion miles from Ponyville! Of course we’re lost!” She punched the ground in frustration.

“It’s not for very long,” Applejack said calmly, hoping to sooth Pinkie’s fears. “When Ah got lost it took me not even twenty minutes ’till Ah was there. Just follow your Rose. It helped me, and it’ll help you, too. We’ll see each other again in no time.”

“Well,” Pinkie grumbled reluctantly, “I’ll take you, then, Applejack.”

“Sure thing, Pinkie. How about you, Rarity?” She turned to the white unicorn, who was pacing back and forth anxiously.

“I don’t like this business one bit. Are you sure about this, Applejack? Are you really, absolutely sure?”

Applejack nodded. Rarity saw the solemnity in that nod, and was finally convinced. Perhaps she was dreaming... but the sand felt much to real beneath her hooves for this to be a dream. She sighed. “I’ll take Twilight.”

The sun was approaching high noon, and the cool ocean breeze was refreshing in the hot air.

Applejack nodded. “Dash, that leaves you and Fluttershy.”

“Oh, this is just dumb!” Dash flew over to Applejack and hovered before her, their faces inches apart. “Why do we have to split up? This is a horrible idea. You remember what Luna said! We have to find the Spring *together!* How is it ‘together’ if we split up? And why in pairs of two? How is that supposed to make it any better?”

“Well,” Applejack began calmly, “we already explained it. We each have to find the Spring alone, just like Ah did. And we’re splitting off into groups of two because it’ll be easier to go off alone if we do it together. Ah know that sounds silly, but it’s true. We do everything together... even breaking up for a little bit. We’ll go off with the pony we chose, and then from there we’ll go on alone. It’s the only way.”

“It’s still a horrible idea! If we—” she broke off as she felt a hoof on her hovering shoulder.

“I know it’ll be hard,” Fluttershy said, “but Applejack is right. Come on, Dash.”

Dash sighed, defeated. She dropped to the ground. “Well,” she said, “this must be goodbye, then.”

For a moment they stared at each other, the only sound the rise and fall of the ocean tide. Twilight and Rarity. Applejack and Pinkie Pie. Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy. The lines drawn, the groups formed.

“It won’t take long,” Applejack said weakly. “We’ll be together soon. Ya’ll will see.”

They stared at each other a moment longer. Then:

“See you... see you soon,” Rarity said, turning to Twilight. “Well? Shall we?” Her voice quivered slightly. Twilight nodded, and they turned and began walking up the shore. The others watched as they departed, watched until the two were no more than a speck in the distance. Then they turned back to each other.

“You said it doesn’t take long, didn’t you, Applejack?” Pinkie asked. Applejack noted with pride how her fellow earth pony maintained a degree of calmness and control. She had been afraid that the other side of Pinkie would show itself, forced into the open by the pain of the separation. Her mind was fragile, delicate, and would invent for itself pretend situations in which her friends would abandon her. And now, in a way, they *were* abandoning her... for a short time. But she remained strong, and Applejack felt a tear come to her eye from her friend’s unexpected resolve.

“No, sugar, it doesn’t take long at all.” She dropped her knees in a curtsy, inviting Pinkie to lead the way. Pinkie turned back to Fluttershy and Dash, who watched sadly; Dash flashed them a meek smile. Then she was off, Applejack just behind her, heading away, in any direction, for in that direction lay the Spring—when it chooses to be found.

Thade smiled humorlessly as the light escaped from the penultimate Pillar. It cracked, the lines of hundreds of fractures ran across it, and through these fissures red light flowed like water, fleeing the collapsing structure like mice flee a sinking ship. The previous two fell faster than those before it—Thade imagined that as each one fell, the extra weight caused even more stress on those remaining. Not that he bothered to think about it. They were falling, that was all that mattered. And as they fell... oh, as they fell...

He could feel it. He could feel it in the cold stone floor. He could feel it in the very *air*.

He thought back to the fable of the first pony who found the Spring. That foolish moron. Did she really think she'd somehow be able to channel its full power? Even he, Thade, surely one of the most powerful unicorns to ever live, wouldn't dare try. No, he had no desire to own the Spring. He simply wanted to borrow from it. The Pillars will fall, and the worlds, the worlds of Life and Death, usually connected only by a one-way path, will merge for a moment. A moment is all he would need; at that moment, he would control a portion of the Spring's magic, using it to accomplish what so many have called impossible. She'll return to him, and then the moment will end, the chain will be broken, the magic will fade... but she'll still be there. He'll have her once more, he'll be forgiven for ever letting her go, balance will be restored, and he can be at peace.

In an explosion of red light, the Pillar shattered. Up shot the red beam, as had happened with the previous four. Thade suspected it was some kind of signal, a plea for help, perhaps. But the Spring wouldn't be getting any help. The Rose disappeared ages ago; no pony knew what happened to it after it was given to the field pegasus in the old fable; no pony was able to prove its existence. As for the "disastrous consequences" that old alicorn warned about? Absurd. Thade didn't know what would happen if something went wrong, but he never thought about it because he knew nothing *would* go wrong. He had absolute faith in his abilities, which had never failed him before.

"Oh, they haven't?" The voice startled Thade out of his thoughts. He turned furiously to Celestia, who remained captured upon the altar.

"SHUT UP! You know nothing of me or my power!" Her words frightened him... not their meaning, but the fact that she had somehow penetrated his *thoughts*.

"The Spring speaks, Thade. You may not hear it, but it speaks as clearly as I am speaking to you now. Perhaps I hear it because I am an alicorn, and therefore closely bound with it and its magic. Or perhaps I hear it simply because I know how to listen, while you foolishly ignore those

who are trying to save you from your quest of futility. It spoke and told me. It told me of you, of Laska, of—”

“I said SHUT UP!” Tendrils of black light spilled from his horn and wound themselves around Celestia’s body all the way up to her head, where they clamped her mouth shut. “You think you are some omnipotent goddess? Some all-powerful being? THEN WHY ARE YOU THE ONE ON THE ALTAR WHILE I AM HARNESSING THE POWER OF THE SPRING?” The tendrils pulled tighter with each word, though Celestia showed no sign of pain. “I could end you *right now* if I wished! I keep you because only a living Immortal’s blood can reach the dead!” He grinned. “Ah, that’s a funny term, isn’t it? ‘Immortal?’ I’ve always wondered if it truly meant unkillable. I don’t think it does. Perhaps after all this we will find out?”

“It’s not too late to turn back now, Thade.” Thade stepped back in surprise, alarmed; he had not anticipated this. Her voice, Celestia’s voice, echoed throughout the chamber, though her mouth was still bound by the black magic.

“There is still time. The final Pillar remains, and with its support the other five may be rebuilt.” He tried to identify the source of her voice but could not. *“Your conscience is weighted with guilt, Thade. The Spring has told me. Your first mistake was to blame yourself. You seek redemption. But you will find none here. You think you will somehow bring her back, but you will only reopen the wounds of the past. Ask yourself this, Thade: if she could see you now, would she take you back? Would she love the monster you’ve become the same way she loved the defenseless foal in the schoolyard?”*

“ENOUGH!” He unsheathed his poisoned dagger and held it up before her. “Perhaps somehow you are connected to the Spring, but your body must still follow the natural rules of this world!” He pricked her side with the dagger’s tip, then turned to look into her eyes. He wanted to see fear in those eyes, fear as she passed out from the paralyzing toxins. But all that stared back at him was a pitying sadness. After a moment, though, the poison took effect, and she slumped back down across the altar.

Alone in the cavern, Thade stood still, trying not to think of what she had said. Who is she to say Laska wouldn’t love him again? She knew

nothing of the connection they once shared! When the final Pillar falls, when the worlds join for that brief moment, when she crosses back to him, where she belongs, everything will be as it was that fateful day in Sonselo. Everything will be perfect, because they will have each other, and nothing else will matter.

His mind turned to her once more, to the one he loved, and all doubts slipped away. This is what she would want. Surely, this is what she would want.

“This is probably far enough.”

Twilight looked around. They had walked along the shore for some unknown amount of time. Then they had headed through a short field of daffodils, which was now a tiny line on the horizon. Around them now was green grass and an occasional tree—almost, but not quite, dense enough to be considered a forest.

“You’re right,” Twilight sighed.

Rarity paused, realizing there was something that needed to be said, but not sure how to say it. “Twilight, thank you. For what you’ve done.”

Twilight tilted her head, confused. “Oh, it’s nothing. I’m sure Applejack could have been just as good a leader; she’s so confident, and—”

Rarity shook her head. “No, Twilight, not for that. Well, I suppose for that, too, but what I mean is... thank you for bringing us together. Do you know what my life was like before you came to Ponyville? I was the local seamstress, talented but hardly successful, and, for the most part... alone. The day you showed up my life changed, and I know four other ponies who could tell you the same thing. We’d never have met if it wasn’t for you, this friendship of ours never would have existed.”

“Oh,” Twilight blushed, “well, it was fate, really; Dash’s Sonic Rainboom meant we had a connection even before we met, and—”

“Oh, hush. It may have been fate, but you *sealed* that fate, Twilight. Where would we be if you never came to town? I’d just be the local boutique-owner. Applejack would be the apple farmer. I’m not certain where Pinkie would be—probably just the goofy pony at Sugarcube Corner. Dash would be the Wonderbolt-wanna-be, and Fluttershy would be the quiet pony who lives just outside town. Sure, we’d all be happy. But we’d all know something was missing, and we’d never understand what. I’m sure we’d know each other, maybe Fluttershy would even stop by the boutique for an outfit now or then, but we wouldn’t have *this*—this friendship you gave us. That is a favor we could never return.”

Twilight grabbed her in an embrace. “Oh, but you *have*. You all have. Where do you think *I* would have been? Alone, studying, in some empty room in an empty wing of the castle in Canterlot. You can’t thank me for giving you friendship, because you can’t just *give* friendship, you can only share it. And you were all there to share it with me. We all created this friendship, and well all share it, and we’ll still share it even when we’re on our own.”

They held their embrace in silence. Then, Twilight spoke.

“We’ll see each other soon. I promise.”

Rarity squeezed her friend even tighter. “If there’s *any* problem at all, send up a flare and I’ll do my best to find you.” She was crying but made no attempt to hide it.

“Same goes for you,” Twilight sniffed.

Rarity tried smiling. “‘Not even twenty minutes,’ that’s what Applejack said.”

Twilight nodded. “Well,” she said weakly. “See you soon.”

“Soon,” Rarity solemnly replied.

Twilight took the first step, turning away from her friend and towards the horizon behind her. She set off, knowing each step was taking her farther from her friends, but at the same time bringing them closer to

meeting again. She wanted desperately to turn back, to run back and hug her friend once more, but knew that if she did, she'd never be able to leave.

Rarity, too, began her journey alone. For about five minutes she walked, fighting every urge to look back, telling herself with every step that she was getting closer to her friends. Finally, after an intense tug-of-war with will, she lost, and looked back.

Behind her was the field, the trees, but nothing more. Not even a hint of her friend.

She sighed, trying her best not to cry.

She carried on, wandering as aimlessly as she could.

"Be strong, Pinkie. It won't be long."

Pinkie sniffed, blinking back tears. "Are you sure?"

Applejack smiled, trying her best to seem calm and confident. "Of course! Why, when Ah was lost in the woods, it didn't take even twenty apple-pickin' minutes afore the Rose was pullin' me to the Spring!"

"I just can't!" Pinkie sobbed, grasping her friend's shoulder.

Applejack was only able to hold back her own tears by reminding herself she must remain strong for Pinkie's sake. "Pinkie, Ah know what'll make this easier," she said, wrapping a foreleg around her friend, pulling her close. "Ah want you to tell me a story."

Pinkie wiped at her eyes. "A story?"

"Yep," Applejack smiled. "Remember Gummy's after-birthday party? I want to hear that story again."

"Oh, I remember it, alright," Pinkie said, shuddering at the memory.

“Ah want you to tell it anyway. But Ah want you to close your eyes tight and remember it as clear as possible.” She released Pinkie from their embrace and sat across from her in the clearing. They had walked for about twenty minutes when they discovered the forest; unlike the nightmare of a jungle they had all fought through days ago, this forest looked peaceful, inviting. The trees, though they bore no fruit, reminded Applejack of apple trees. Naturally, she and Pinkie choose this spot for their farewells.

Pinkie stared at Applejack curiously, the sadness melting away from her face in the wake of this new game. “Ok,” she said, unsure of Applejack’s purpose. She closed her eyes tightly and began. “We all had so much fun at Gummy’s very first birthday party that I thought we could have even *more* fun at an after-birthday party, so I invited all my friends the next day. But none of them could go.”

“Why was that?” Applejack asked.

“Well, Twilight said she had to study. Rarity had to wash her hair. You had to pick apples. Fluttershy and Dash had to house-sit for a vacationing bear. It was all very strange. And *then* Twilight started sneaking around behind my back... all my friends were avoiding me because they didn’t like me and they didn’t want to go to my parties and they didn’t want to be my friends anymore.”

“But was that really true?”

“No,” Pinkie smiled, her eyes still shut tight as she began to remember the day with such clarity that it was like living through it once more. “I thought you had all abandoned me. I thought we’d never be friends again, and that we’d never see each other again, and that you all *hated* me. But you didn’t. Rainbow Dash fought me tooth and wing to get me to go to your barn... I thought it was for my going away party. I thought you were going to send me off for good. But it wasn’t a going away party. It was a surprise for me. For my birthday. Because you didn’t really hate me or want me gone or never wanted to see me again. You all just avoided me because you wanted to keep it a surprise, and the whole time I thought we’d never be friends again... but we were, because even though you had to avoid me for a while, in the end we were still best friends, all of us.” She smiled at the memory, opening her eyes.

Applejack was gone. On the ground where she stood minutes ago was an apple. The ground around it was pattered with faint teardrops.

Somewhere, deep inside, Pinkie had known all along. She didn't cry. Instead, she smiled sadly and picked up the apple. She stared at it for a few moments, then sighed and began walking.

Thanks, Applejack, she thought to herself. She understood now why she picked her—Applejack always knew exactly what to do and how to do it, and their parting in the clearing was no exception. Pinkie realized she never would have been able to say goodbye... and so Applejack left her, but she didn't *abandon* her. No, Applejack left her fondly remembering a time when she realized her friends would always be there for her, even if they needed to separate for a time.

Alone but somewhat encouraged, Pinkie wandered the forest, longing for the moment when she'd see her friends once more.

"I think this is probably far enough."

Fluttershy just nodded. The gentle ocean breeze felt refreshing across her mane—under other circumstances, she would have closed her eyes, facing the ocean, letting the cool air wash over her. The sea was, in many ways, like every friendly animal she had ever met: a thinking, living being with feelings and stories to tell. If she could, she would sit and listen for hours, hear its tales, drink from its ancient wisdom. But today she could not.

"Do you think we should have left the shore? I'll bet that's what everypony else did," Dash remarked.

"No," Fluttershy said. "It's nice here. This is a good place." She opened her eyes and turned to her friend. "Rainbow Dash..." Words failed her, and she began to cry.

Dash wrapped a foreleg around her. “Fluttershy, I know it won’t be easy. But we’ll see each other again soon. By the end of the day, probably. It won’t be long.”

“I know,” Fluttershy sniffed. “I know it’s true, but I still can’t convince myself it’s *true*. What if it doesn’t work, or what if the last Pillar falls before we meet again? Will we all just be stranded out here, separated, alone?”

Dash held her friend in front of her so that they looked directly into each other’s eyes. “Fluttershy, do you remember what your father told you? When you heard his voice?”

Her face lightened a bit. “*“Your friends won’t let you down.”*”

“Exactly!” Dash smiled. “Don’t ever forget that. This isn’t goodbye, not at all. Maybe twenty minutes, if it happens the same way it did with Applejack. We’ve gone longer without seeing each other back in Ponyville. It’s no big deal. And I would *never* leave you if I wasn’t sure we’d see each other again in no time.”

Fluttershy returned the smile, though the tears still flowed. “Thanks, Rainbow Dash. You really *are* the best. Remember when I first told you about my mother’s Rose? Back before I knew what it *really* was? It seems like so long ago, now.” She pulled Dash close in a hug. “Goodbye,” she whispered. “See you soon.”

“Yeah, see you soon.” Dash had proven strong during all this, had shown nothing but her famous self-confidence and determination. Now it became a struggle to hold up that demeanor, as she realized soon she’d be alone... but even worse than that, for *Fluttershy* would be alone as well. The thought of her meek friend wandering by herself miles and miles from home was so sad it was sickening. But she knew if she failed now, if she showed weakness or uncertainty, they’d never be able to separate. She desperately fought back the tears.

The embrace ended.

Dash flashed Fluttershy a faint smile, one that said *Funny how things end up, isn’t it?* Then she turned away.

Rainbow Dash, the fastest flier in all of Equestria, began walking slowly up the ocean shore, her hoofprints in the sand trailing back to where her friend stood alone.

Fluttershy watched as she grew smaller, smaller... gone. She began crying again, gently at first, but soon began weeping as she stood alone in the sand, the sun setting quietly beyond the water.

I'm so sorry for laying this burden on you...

She wiped her eyes and noticed the sun disappearing beyond the ocean's edge, refracting a kaleidoscope of colors across the sky.

You have wonderful friends, dear...

What now? Where was there to go?

They won't let you down...

Oh, this was such an awful idea! She considered running down the shore after Rainbow Dash, following her footsteps until they were together again.

Always remember how much I love you...

Then she broke down once more, realizing it was too late, she was alone, for the first time in her life she was *alone*, even when she was by herself in her cottage her friends were always nearby, but this time she was completely and truly *alone*. She sobbed into her hooves.

Always remember...

She jumped in pain. Something had bitten her wing, something with very sharp teeth. In a panic she jumped aside, hiding under her hooves, rubbing the injured zone. After several moments she peeked up cautiously, hoping to spot her tormentor. They way it felt, probably a snake, but she'd never been bitten by a snake before because normally they were so nice to her, and why—

She gasped. On the ground where she had stood seconds before was her fragment of the Rose. It was pulsing wildly with reddest light, wobbling crazily on a jagged corner. Her sorrows forgotten, she approached it, poking it gingerly with a hoof, then rushing the hoof to her mouth, sucking on the burn. She must have forgotten it was tucked away in her wing-folds, and it must have grown hot somehow, and—

Suddenly it began sliding along the ground, parting the sand before it like a snowplow during Winter Wrap Up. The trail it left was a perfect line in the sand... but it was no longer sand. Shining glass lay in the wake of the Rose, which was so hot that the grains fused into a path glittering with every color imaginable and several others.

For a moment Fluttershy could only watch as the tiny immaculate gem made its way across the shore. Then she began following it, walking along the glass carpet it laid out for her in the sand.

Part Seven

Alone Together

Thade entered the village in the dead of night. Though there were no ponies in sight, he melted into the shadows, sliding elusively down the street. Could it really be here, in this simple little town? Two years of searching, two years of leads, of dead ends, of false trails, of lost hope, only to discover it has been here this whole time? The idea was ridiculous, absurd... but his last source had seemed so confident—as confident as one can be whilst under fear of death, that is.

He paused for a moment, glancing to the stars. The full moon hung in the sky; from her lunar prison, Nightmare Moon seemed to glare down at him. Thade was familiar with the myth of the Mare in the Moon—after all, one cannot dedicate his life to searching for one myth without learning of many others along the way. Banished to the moon by her sister Celestia, it was fabled that at the end of her thousand years of imprisonment, she would return once more, casting Equestria into eternal night. Thade wasn't sure if the legend was true or not, but suspected he would find out in a decade or so, when the thousand years come to a close... that is, of course, according to the many books he had read on the subject—none of which contained the information he truly sought.

He carried on, craftily hugging corners and making no sound. He turned onto another desolate road, made a left at the next street, and there it was. Once more he began to doubt. Could the book really be here, in this library within a tree? Years of searching dank caverns, abandoned castles, impenetrable forests, for the book to be in a library, of all places? Nevertheless, he was here, and had no choice but to carry on.

With a nearly-silent whisper he teleported to the library balcony above a tree branch. The window opened with a faint glow, and he slipped inside. It was empty, just as he had expected. Shelves of books lined the walls; he walked to the nearest one. Elements of a Successful Meal, read the spine of the first book he saw. He moved to the right, scanning the leather-bound texts. There is no possible way, he thought. This is too easy. It would never be kept—

A noise outside. He reacted instantly, slipping into the darkness under the nearby staircase. He glanced to the window, searching for the source of the rustling. For a moment, he saw the silhouette of something—the bird hopped through the window, the same window through which he himself had entered. If Thade wasn't so skilled in the art of silence, he would have breathed a sigh of relief; merely a bird! With a malicious grin he hit it with a quick Paralyzing Spell, and it dropped to the ground. He walked up to its motionless body and frowned. Dead. I must have used too much force. I do often underestimate my own abilities—his thoughts were cut off as he noticed the view out the window for the first time, noticed the castle in the distance: Canterlot. Of course.

The pieces fell together. The book was here, beneath the watchful eye of Celestia. Thade wasn't sure why she would prefer to keep it here instead of under the defenses of Canterlot Castle. Years of searching, to end up in a library; to find a book in a defenseless library... but perhaps that was it. Yes, it had to be. Thade couldn't help but marvel at the genius of it... the object of his desire was hidden in plain sight. This library, this simple tree, was the last place he chose to search—he had come here in desperation, as a last hope, one final effort, precisely because it seemed too easy. That's why it was here. Who would look for a fabled, hidden book in a simple library? This did mean, however, that he could not take it with him; the book must stay, or Celestia might grow suspicious. Thade had no reason to believe the alicorn was guarding the book or even aware of it, but if she was, stealing it could only mean drawing attention to himself.

A mixture of emotions overcame him. Frustration that he had wasted so much time when the answer was so obvious. A flood of relief that the first part of his journey was finally over. Jarring nervousness that perhaps the book wasn't here. But there was a deeper fear, one that he tried but failed to ignore... what if the book was there, but did not contain the spell or the instructions he sought? How could it be that even the fabled text Magic of the Damned, which was thought to be destroyed until his searches unearthed it, did not contain the spell, while an insignificant book from his childhood did? The last time he held it was long long ago, and he sought it now only because he had no remaining options. It was a desperate grasp, a wild guess, but maybe it was also something more than that... intuition, perhaps. With anticipation he returned his attention to the bookshelf.

The Dead and the Free. Not even close. He continued sliding to the right, searching through the alphabet. Flame of the Phoenix... Monsters and Ghosts and Other Scary Stories... The Quest for Night's Edge...

He impatiently shifted through several more books, and then... there. There it was.

At first he could only stare, overcome with surprise, eagerness, and... fear? Yes, still the fear that the book didn't contain what he needed, of course.

It slid gingerly off the shelf, enveloped in a sharp black aura—his magic was no longer brilliant red, as it was in his youth. No, that had changed soon after he began this quest. He saw it as a sign of strength—or at least that is what he told himself.

The worn leather book dropped gently into his outstretched hooves. He read the cover, and then read it again. Here it was. Supernaturals. How long since he last held this book, flipped through its pages, inhaled its dusty old scent? What happened after that fateful day in his youth, when he used it to discover the location of Sonselo? How did it arrive here, on this bookshelf within a tree? He supposed that was a tale that would never be told. Not that it mattered—it was his once more. That is all that counted.

For a terrifying moment, he had the urge to throw it, to bash it through the window, to expel it from his presence. He imagined himself do it as if in a dream... how easy it would be to destroy years of hard work, to make useless years of searching, to ruin this ancient binding, and to break the promise he had made to himself—to her. He could end it all here, if he wanted; he could turn back, turn away...

These thoughts cut off sharply as he noticed for the first time the book's subtitle. He blinked in surprise.

"Natural Cures that are Super", it read.

His brain stuttered to a halt; he didn't even have the capacity to consider the meaning of this. His eyes scoured the title once more.

Supernaturals: Natural Cures that are Super.

He threw the cover open, hastily flipping to a random page in the middle of the dusty relic, reading the first words he saw. "Using milk-grass to cure stiff wings: first, be sure the milk-grass is in season—soiled milk-grass will not work. Squeeze the milk out of the grass as if it were toothpaste—"

With a feral roar of frustration, Thade grabbed at the brittle pages and yanked them out; in a puff of dust, shredded paper floated to the ground like autumn leaves.

"Where IS IT?"

The room suddenly became unnaturally dark, as if a tarp had been placed over the moon. With a hectic rustling books began flying off the shelves like startled bats. The air became a swirl of swooping pages and dust. The window shutter burst open, clacking loudly against the wall. Then it was over.

Thade stood alone in the library, which now appeared to have fallen victim to a tornado. Books and pages were strewn about crazily. He was breathing heavily, his head slightly lowered.

I must clear my mind, I must gain control, he thought. It is here. I know it is here.

Slowly, like a snake rising out of a basket, a black tendril of magic slid from his horn. The Seeking Spell danced blindly through the air, feeling its way along the field of fallen books. Suddenly it shot up, as if it had noticed some otherwise undetectable signal. It dashed across the room, felt across several more books, and then stiffened as if in excitement. The tendril began pulsing slowly with a gray light. It had found its target.

Thade shoved books from his path, trying not to allow his excitement to get the better of him. He traced the glowing tendril to its source: a pile of dust and torn leather, amidst hundreds of other piles of dust and torn leather.

Thade, you fool! *he thought to himself.* You've gone and destroyed it!

His first thought was to use a Repair Spell, but he chastised himself before making such a mistake—if the book was as powerful as he hoped, such minor magic could cause it damage, even destroy it; magic repels magic: the first lesson every unicorn learned. His horn glowed instead with a Revealing Spell, a complex one he had learned from his distant travels. While the Repair Spell would directly influence its target, and therefore potentially do it harm, a Revealing Spell would act as a catalyst, a slight nudge, a magical instigator. He smiled slightly at his own ingenuity, his horn glowing even brighter.

The pile began glowing with the same aura... suddenly the torn leather lifted from the ground, floating before Thade. The dust particles, which were paper only minutes ago, swirled before him. They began reassembling, faster and faster, and the book began to fill once more with pages, the leather began to melt back together, the binding began to take its familiar shape. Thade stared, eyes wide, as the book rebuilt itself before him. Within moments, the dust was gone, the pages were filled, the leather cover was whole. It turned to face him. The title glowed as if each letter were a crack through the walls of Hell. As he watched, though, part of the title began to disappear, its light began to fade. Soon, the book was no longer titled Supernaturals: Natural Cures that are Super. It now read simply Supernaturals. The one solitary word slowly grew distorted, then shrank, then grew distorted again—the effect was nauseating, but Thade was soon spared, for the floating book opened before him, the pages flipping as if by a soundless wind. Then they stopped. There was a flash, a tingling sensation, and then Thade was no longer in the library.

Snow-capped mountains towered around him. He was flying with incredible speed through the rocky slopes and canyons, though he felt no sensation of motion, not even a breeze. It was as if he were stationary, floating motionless in the air, while the world rotated below with great velocity. In the distance, the highest peak of all; soon it was right before him. He slowed to a stop, and saw that in the mountainside was a gaping cavern, dimly lit with flickering red. Then he was inside the cavern, saw a glowing figure laying on an alter in the center; saw the columns, the Pillars, crack and being to topple. Indecipherable symbols lined the circular wall; between and behind the two farthest Pillars the stone wall was carved

beautifully with the figure of a rose. There was no sound but his own quick breathing.

Something tiny near the alter rose into the air. Though Thade was almost close enough to touch it, he couldn't tell what it was—the world seemed to glow slightly, resulting in a dream-like blur that clouded his vision. The object began floating towards him, and suddenly he recognized its shape. With a soundless burst of light the object disappeared; in its place was a small disk of pure white. The entire cavern was trembling around him, cracks raced through the ceiling, shattered debris were flung in every direction. Still, the only sound was his breathing.

The small white disk was now a larger white disk, and it continued growing; soon, it filled nearly his whole field of vision. The trembling lessened, the cavern stabilized, the white portal stood silently before him. He watched in wonder, staring intently into the vast empty whiteness, not shading his eyes lest he miss something. As he floated in the air, his shadow floated upon the ground.

An unknown amount of time passed, and then... did he see something? Was that a silhouette? A hint of gray in the white oblivion? Yes, it must have been! And it grew larger, walked nearer, became more defined; the blur began to form the shape of a pony, a most familiar pony, and even before he could see her mane or her coat he knew it was her. In his mind flashed every moment they spent together, however brief, along with every trial he had overcome for her, every obstacle, all to see her again, to undo unjust fate. He was unaware he was crying, sobbing, and also unaware he was slowly gliding backwards. Only a few more steps, that's all it would take, and he would truly see her again, finally stare into those eyes once more...

His slow backwards glide began accelerating.

"No," he said, eyes still locked upon that sharpening blur. Faster, now.

"NO!"

The disk shrank before him, the cavern receded, he was flying back through its mouth now, faster and faster, and soon the gaping hole was a spot in the distance, the tallest mountain became a tiny hill.

When he finally looked back up, the vision was gone; around him was the library, the ground still littered with destroyed books. He was exhausted, too drained to express his frustration, too tired to even wipe his tears. But he could still think... and there was much thinking to be done.

He picked up the book once more. It felt warm in his hooves.

That was undoubtedly the Spring of Magic I just saw. So it is real. Then what is the next step? Perhaps the book explains how to find it—

The thought was cut off by another, more powerful thought, one originating from deep within his mind and soul.

That was her. That was her, and she was there, and so was I. *For a moment this thought flowed through his mind like a river through a meadow. There used to be fear—fear that his obsession had eclipsed his love, that he would bring her back only to discover that things had somehow changed between them... this fear was washed away, and the reassurance was exhilarating. For the first time in years, Thade felt truly happy. Then another part of his mind began to speak.*

“Don’t be stupid,” *that other half said.* “That was merely a vision from the book. It wasn’t really her. It was the book’s projection of what you wished to see.”

Thade frowned slightly. Even so... it may have been merely a vision, but it proves I still love her. If I can love the vision of her, surely I could love her true self even more.

“Yes,” *the other half replied, its voice taking malicious pleasure in this wicked thought,* “but could she still love you?”

Suddenly the book jumped out of his hooves and fell to the floor. Thade staggered backwards in surprise, then stepped cautiously and curiously towards where it lay open on the ground. Its pages flipped hastily, glowing slightly with the full prismatic spectrum. He stood just over

it, peering closely at the ruffling paper, waiting for them to stop. They did, finally, but before he could read anything, he was thrown back with a powerful thrust, landing on a pile of books and book ashes.

He slowly got to his hooves, rubbing his aching jaw, and turned once more towards the book. The blow had been strong, and it took a moment for his vision to clear. Then he saw that, floating in the air above the book's open pages, wavering slightly as though with great heat, was a single word. It was written in an unfamiliar language, with characters he had never seen before. Still, he understood it perfectly. The temperature in the room seemed to have gone up; it was uncomfortably hot, almost unbearably so. Thade thought he heard voices, though that may have been the wind outside; if there really were voices, so many spoke at once that it was impossible to follow any individual speaker in the midst of the low, chant-like chatter.

In the corner of the room, a rustling. He somehow forced his attention from the floating Spell and entered a fighting stance, prepared to ward off—

The bird. With incredible vitality it hopped as nonchalantly as a bird could possibly hop, across the floor, then up out the window with an indignant ruffle of wings.

Thade watched it go in amazement. Then he turned back to the word in the air, staring with an intensity that could have meant either fear or reverence or both. The longer he stared, however, the more uncomfortable he became; his head began to ache, he heard a ringing in his ears, stars began clouding his vision. He turned away, violently shook his head to clear it, and turned back. The word was gone. All was quiet.

Legs shaking, he approached the open book. Cautiously he lifted it off the ground with his hooves—he feared touching it with magic.

The page that greeted him was inscribed with only twelve lines. He recognized them from his youth, but as he read, a new meaning dawned upon him.

Thade began to read aloud:

*“To the paramount Spring
A relic you must bring ...”*

“Pinkie, are you sure this is a good idea? Ah have a bad feeling about this...” Applejack glanced nervously to the enormous mixing bowl, then to Pinkie, then to Rainbow Dash, who hovered above the giant bowl holding an equally-gigantic wooden spoon.

“Of course it’s a good idea!” Pinkie giggled. “Haven’t you always wanted to break a world record?” She looked up to Dash, who smiled and adjusted her safety goggles. “Ready?”

“Ready!” Dash replied, taking a sprinter’s running-line stance in mid air.

“Great!” Pinkie turned back to Applejack. “Now, when I give the thumbs up, you start throwing in the chocolate, and then Dash will start mixing.”

Applejack sighed. “Well, if you say so, I don’t see why—wait, what did you just say?”

“Dash will start mixing!”

“No, before that.”

“You’ll throw in the chocolate!”

“No, before *that*.”

“When I give the thumbs up, you guys will start!”

“‘Thumbs up?’ What the hay does that mean?”

“Don’t worry about it! Ready?”

Applejack shared a confused shrug and a grin with Dash—sometimes it was just best to let Pinkie be Pinkie. “Ready!” she said.

“Same here!” shouted Dash.

“Now!”

Applejack began tossing apple-sized chocolate chips into the bowl, first throwing them in one at a time, then bucking in two or three at once. Meanwhile, Dash swooped down with the spoon, spinning around the top of the bowl, faster and faster, until she was nothing more than a blue blur amidst a hurricane of batter and chocolate. After almost a minute of this, Applejack ran out of chocolate chips, and Dash slowed to a stop, panting heavily, but smiling crazily.

“Perfect!” Pinkie said, hopping up and down in that strange way of hers. “Now I’ll add in the final ingredient!” She reached into a bag and brought out a large jar of vanilla extract. Carefully she climbed a ladder to the rim of the bowl, where she prepared to pour the liquid.

“Not too much,” Dash warned. “This is a huge bowl, but that stuff is strong.”

Pinkie stuck her tongue out in concentration, and slowly removed the lid. Then she leaned over the edge of the bowl, tilting the jar slightly. The first drop nearly fell...

But the jar flew out of her hooves. Not into the bowl, but down to the ground, where it began rolling around crazily.

“Ah!” Pinkie yelled in surprise.

“Catch it! Quick!” shouted Applejack.

Pinkie jumped down off the ladder and tackled the jar. “I got it!” she cheered victoriously. “I got—” The jar fought from her grip, almost getting away. She started sliding slowly along the ground, holding onto the flailing jar as tightly as possible. “Guys, help!”

“Pinkie, hold on, I’m coming!” Applejack shouted.

Suddenly the jar grew incredibly hot. She let go with pained surprise. Then she woke up.

With a gasp, she glanced around in confusion. “Guys?” After a moment, everything came back to her. She sighed dejectedly. After Applejack left her, she caught sight of a butterfly and decided to follow it. It led her deeper into the woods, but then, amazingly, it managed to bring her right back to the clearing where Applejack had left her. When she first realized this, she was incredulous. “Are you *joking*? I can’t even get *lost* properly in the *woods*? How am I supposed to find the Spring and meet up with my friends if I can’t even get *lost* in the *woods*?!”

This realization, along with all the walking, had made her tired (and hungry), and she dozed off. And now here she was, after a most curious dream, all alone... even the butterfly was gone now.

Suddenly, a familiar (and detested) voice began speaking out in her head. *Maybe they tricked you. Maybe they didn’t split up at all... maybe it was just a ploy to get you out of their way. And you fell for it. They’re probably all together right now... laughing...*

“Oh, you shut up,” she said aloud. She thought about how Applejack had left her, how she had asked her to remember Gummy’s after-birthday party, and how her friends would never abandon her. She grabbed the apple that Applejack had left for her and took a bite. “You shut up. You know as well as I do why we all split up, and I’ve got enough problems without *you* bothering me. So go away.” And, amazingly, the voice was silent.

Encouraged, she got to her hooves. “Well, enough sitting around! I’ve got a Spring to find, and some friends to meet up with! What did Applejack say, again...? ‘The Rose will lead you there,’ or something like that. I guess I should—hey! Hold on a minute! Where the hay did that thing go, anyway?” She glanced around desperately in search of the Rose fragment, growing more frantic every second. It was nowhere to be found.

“Oh, no! This is *not* good! This is the *opposite* of good! This is almost certainly the *worst* possible thing that could possibly *possibly*

happen! Oh where did I have it where did I have it... I dozed off... but it was in my hooves when I dozed off, I'm sure it was..."

Thoughts of her friends reuniting somewhere near the Spring. Thoughts of them wondering what happened to her... and then forgetting about her. Thoughts of them saving the Princess and fixing everything without her and then laughing and hugging and the Princess would probably commemorate them and the whole time Pinkie would be lost forever in this forest all because she was so stupid that she had to lose her Rose piece and maybe it was a *good* thing that her friends will never see her again because it's not like they needed *her* to save the Princess or—

"No! I said shut up!" She rubbed her forehead with her front hooves as if to push the thoughts from her mind. In that moment of silence, she heard something. A rustling.

She gasped, then slapped a hoof to her mouth, listening intently. Silence... and then there it was again. Almost directly in front of her. She lunged forward, looking around wildly. The rustling again, closer this time. She honed in on the noise... and snatched her green Rose fragment from where it was flailing about in the underbrush, right at the edge of the clearing.

"There you are!" she shouted in triumph. Once it was in her hooves, it seemed to take on a new energy, glowing and shaking about even more, always tugging in the same direction. Its pull became so strong that it began dragging her forward. She thought back to her dream and grinned, then gasped in surprise when it grew extraordinarily hot in her grip. She dropped it, keeping a close eye on it so she wouldn't lose it again. It pulled itself along across the ground, hopping occasionally to pass over a rock or fallen log.

With a happy hum and a light bounce, she followed the shining fragment out of the clearing and into the forest, already thinking about how wonderful it would be to see her friends again.

Applejack wasn't certain what to do. Hopefully Pinkie understood the message, and realized that their separation was only temporary. But there

was that other side to Pinkie... that unpredictable self-loathing. What if Applejack left her and that other side took over? She weighed her options. She doesn't go back, and Pinkie turns out fine. That's the best ending. But if she doesn't go back and Pinkie *doesn't* turn out fine? Then Pinkie's alone and depressed in the woods, and there was a chance she'd never motivate herself to find the Spring—which is why Applejack now sat on a log in the forest, biting her lip and torn between two very bad options.

Going back would mean facing Pinkie again... and she knew that if she went back now, she'd never be able to leave her friend again. It was hard enough the first time. If she went back now, neither of them would be lost enough to find the Spring. It would all be over, and the other four would meet up and wonder what happened to them.

Ah can't go back... Ah have to trust that she's okay. She can do it, she's stronger than she looks. If Ah go back now, Ah'd be doubting the strength of our friendship. Ah know she'll be fine.

This thought didn't ease her mind as much as she had hoped. Even so, she hopped off the log and headed off once more, walking several paces, then stopping suddenly.

Ah can't. Ah have to at least peak in on her. Just to make sure she's okay. Ah won't even let her know Ah'm there.

She knew the way back; when she left Pinkie, she took care to remember how to return—she must have understood subconsciously that she'd decide to go back. After about ten minutes of trotting past memorized landmarks, the edge of the clearing came into view. *What if she's not there? What if she left? Ah didn't even think of that! Ah suppose she'd be lost, then... hopefully her Rose would be guiding her already...*

Her thoughts were cut off when she heard a slight snoring coming from the clearing. *Ah'd recognize that sound anywhere*, Applejack thought with a smile.

Suddenly the snoring became a shout. "Guys, help!"

Oh no! She's in trouble! "Pinkie, hold on, I'm coming!" She charged for the wall of shrubs and branches that created the wall of the clearing.

“Guys?” a surprised-sounding Pinkie said from the other side.

Applejack halted, stopping herself just before she broke through the edge of the clearing. Between two branches she could make out the form of her friend staring glumly at the ground. *Thank goodness! She was only dreaming!* She continued observing Pinkie carefully and with concern.

There were several minutes of silence as Pinkie sat alone. A variety of expressions swam across her face, from sadness to surprise to an anger that frightened Applejack. Then, suddenly, she spoke. “Oh, you shut up!” She took a bite of Applejack’s apple.

She must be talkin’ to...

“You shut up. You know as well as I do why we all split up, and I’ve got enough problems without *you* bothering me. So go away.” From her hiding spot beyond the clearing, Applejack threw a hoof in the air triumphantly. *You show her, Pinkie! Ah knew you could do it!*

Pinkie began talking to herself once more, but Applejack was distracted by a sound from the other side of the clearing, which was getting closer every second. Applejack glanced down from between the branches, trying to locate the source of the rustling. Whatever it was, in a few moments it would break through the shrubby wall of the clearing and bump right into her.

Pinkie was searching about madly. “Oh, no! This is *not* good! This is the *opposite* of good...”

Applejack began to panic. *Ah can’t break my cover... if she sees me, she’ll never let me go again, and I sure wouldn’t be able to let her go, either. But if she loses her Rose... or worse, if she looks around for it and finds me...*

The Rose fragment broke through the wall of the clearing, bumping right into Applejack’s front-left hoof. Without thinking, and acting upon pure intuition alone, she did the only thing that happened to come to her mind: she kicked it. With a thud it landed nearly in the center of the clearing. Pinkie turned around in surprise at the sound. Applejack bit her lip

nervously as the Rose fragment began sliding towards her again. *That darned thing just don't give up, does it?* She considered backing away from the clearing's edge, but realized that would make too much noise; with Pinkie listening intently for the sound of the Rose, she would surely hear Applejack making a ruckus in the bushes.

Instead she stayed perfectly still. Pinkie began heading towards her, following the rustling sound of the Rose. Closer, closer... she was a hoof's reach away now. The only thing between them was the thick branches and bushes of the clearing's edge. Applejack held her breath. *Did she just see me? Ah swear we just made eye contact...*

"There you are!"

Applejack nearly gasped, certain she was caught. "Pinkie, we can't get back together! If we do, Ah know we'll never be strong enough to separate again!" she was prepared to say. Luckily, she hesitated—long enough to realize Pinkie was addressing the Rose and not her. She began backing quietly away from the clearing's edge while Pinkie was preoccupied with the Rose. She moved faster and faster as she got further away, and just as she managed to get behind a fallen log, the glowing Rose fragment burst through the bushes where she had stood only a minute ago. Pinkie followed in its wake.

Applejack watched as her friend shrank into the thick of the woods, suddenly filled with the urge to call out to her, to call her back and apologize for ever leaving her... but she knew she had no other choice but to watch her go.

As her friend shrank into the distance, she suddenly felt incredibly alone—just as alone as she had felt in Manehattan; just as alone as she had felt when she got lost picking apples only a few days ago. It's true, Applejack was a pony who could normally appreciate solitude. Some days she enjoyed entirely alone, sitting against a familiar rough-yet-comfortable tree trunk and watching the sun glide across the sky, as she drifted in and out of sleep and gave thanks for such a beautiful world... not to Celestia, but to the trees and the apples and the grass and the blue sky and the clouds and everything beneath them. But this was different than that peaceful isolation; it's not even fair to call it that, isolation, because her

friends were always a holler away. This was more. This was alienation, complete and utter separation.

She thought of her friends, who were all so far away from her, and who were all undoubtedly feeling the same way, and a teardrop fell to the dirt below.

Something twitched against her side. It was her pack. She had forgotten she was wearing it. It twitched again, but from experience she already knew what was happening, and with a smile she wiped her eyes and shrugged her pack off her back and onto the ground.

She followed as it slid across the dirt floor of the forest, in the exact opposite direction that Pinkie had traveled. For some inexplicable reason, she began to chuckle. After a few seconds she was laughing, though she hardly knew why, but she was laughing just the same, and she saw no need to question it. So she kept laughing, while her pack, with the Rose glowing faintly inside it, traced a path through the dirt and to her friends.

The last time Rarity was this muddy was either her last mudbath or the Sisterhooves Social. This was much more unpleasant than either of those, however. She looked like she had been dipped in a vat of melted chocolate. *That actually sounds quite nice*, her mind wandered. *When this is all over with, perhaps I should create that... chocolate baths... it could be the next big thing. All the benefits of a mud bath, plus the aroma and taste of the finest chocolate! This could be the next yellow! Or was yellow out this year? Maybe that was orange...*

Her thoughts darted every which way. It was just so *boring* alone out here in this field, and if she didn't keep thinking about every idea that flew into her head, she'd get to thinking about how dirty she was, and she'd go crazy—or, even worse: she'd start to think about her friends, all of them alone.... She adamantly detested the decision to break up. She knew it was necessary, but there *must* have been a better way, a way to stick together, if only they had thought it through more. It was too late now, of course. Now she was alone. And muddy.

In reality, the mud hardly bothered her. Yes, she hated being filthy, but even she knew that there were times when one simply must get dirty, when a little grease or mud or dust is necessary for a pony to meet her goal. But preoccupying herself with her appearance—even if there was nopony around to see her—was comforting somehow. It helped her pretend that nothing had changed, that everything was as it should be, that Princess Celestia was at home in Canterlot and Twilight was in her library (*probably studying, that bookworm*, Rarity thought) and Fluttershy and Rainbow and Applejack and Pinkie were all at home and at peace.

She trudged through the grassy field, unable to enjoy the magnificent view because she was alone, and what good is a beautiful view if it can't be shared? *Goodness, I am muddy*, she quickly thought—for a moment there, her mind had accidentally ventured dangerously close to The Thought again, that Thought of being seperated. *Muddy, muddy, muddy...*

Suddenly she stopped. She had spotted something in the distance. *Finally!* she thought, and began trotting even faster towards her new destination: a distant pool of water. Minutes later she was there.

It was almost perfectly circular and had the diameter of a wishing well. The water was a flawless blue, though she couldn't determine the depth; it could have been up to her tail, or it could have been deeper than three of her stacked on top of each other. Either way, she was a confident swimmer (she loathed swimming, but her parents had forced her to take lessons when she was a filly), and the mud was beginning to dry and get crusty and itchy. With a splash, and not a second thought, she jumped in.

The water went only up to her leg joints, but with majestic skill she did a swift roll, submerging herself for a moment and scrubbing off the caked mud in the process. The water was cool and refreshing, sweet tasting. She finished and got back to her hooves. *Good as new!* She lifted a hoof to get out.

Something was wrong, though. The hoof wouldn't lift. It was as if a powerful grip was holding her back. She grunted with effort, and tried to lift her other hoof. Stuck as well. In a flash, part of her realized: she was stuck, she was caught, she would be trapped for hours until somepony came along and helped her.

Now now, let's not panic, she thought, panicking. I'm sure if I just relax and loosen up, I'll be out in no time. She became perfectly still, closed her eyes, and exhaled gently. Then she slowly and tentatively began raising a hoof up to leave the shallow water. It lifted almost an inch, but then the downward pull overcame her efforts and the hoof would budge no more. The sand beneath the water had sucked her down, and all four hooves were trapped, submerged almost four inches.

Rarity frantically searched the filing cabinets of her mind, scouring for advice, instruction; something, anything about her predicament. *Surely Twilight must have said something about quicksand at some point.* But she could not recall any such instance. *When I relaxed, I lifted this hoof a whole inch. If I could do the same thing again, I could free myself. You've been through worse, Rarity—remember those Diamond Dogs? Those ruffians were far worse than this, and you handled the situation all on your own. You can do this.* Her confidence bolstered by her self-conversation, she relaxed, loosened every muscle, and cleared her mind. It was easy—she was a regular at Ponyville's spa.

She lifted the same hoof. Another inch. *There! We're on our way out!* Then she noticed something awful: she had just raised her hoof another inch, but it was even farther trapped in the quicksand than before. With gut-wrenching panic she realized she wasn't just stuck... she was *sinking*. Her state of loose-muscle calmness disintegrated as she panicked and began madly thrashing and pulling with her hooves, pulling to break free, because she was separated from her friends and there was nopony for miles and Ponyville was so very far away and she knew her fate was not to get stuck and starve in some awful pit of sand; she pulled because her friends needed her and she needed them and it was getting dark and what would happen when her friends reunited and she wasn't there? So she pulled. And sank further.

She stopped, exhausted. The sand had now swallowed her to her leg joints, and the water was up to her belly. She closed her eyes for a moment... she was so tired. *Am I really going to fall asleep here like this, alone and stuck in some stupid sand? Maybe if I do, I'll wake up again and it will all have been a dream... not just this, but the Rose and the forest and losing Applejack and... splitting up...*

...

She dreamed. “Applejack, that is ridiculous. You can’t cover apple seeds in taffy and expect to grow taffy-covered apple trees.”

...

And dreamed. “Mother, I refuse to take these ridiculous swimming lessons. They’re embarrassing and useless. What, do you expect me to wake up in the middle of the ocean one day?”

...

And dreamed. “If there’s *any* problem at all, send up a flare and I’ll do my best to find you.”

...

When she woke, the sun was already nearing high noon. For a moment she had no idea where she was. She brought a hoof to her eye to rub away the sleep, but the hoof would not budge. In fact, her whole leg would not budge. Suddenly, she remembered, and the panic swept back with full force. To her horror, she realized that she had sunk even further in her sleep—the sand had absorbed each leg up to her body, and the water was halfway to her neck. Even her pack was submerged, and her pack contained food, and she was hungry...

Her horn glowed, and she lashed out at the sand with flashes of azure magic. For one exciting moment, she thought it was working. She pulled magically at the sand around her legs, digging down to free them. But every dig she made was immediately filled back in with the surrounding sand, and every time she began to dig in a new location, the last one disappeared. There was no way to dig everywhere at once.

She remembered what she had told Twilight before they split up. How long ago was that? She had slept through the night... it must have been twelve hours ago. *Please don’t be too late... if she’s too far away...* She mustered up her remaining strength and channeled it all into her horn, which brimmed with a light blue aura that jumped and hopped like electric sparks. *Will this be visible in the daytime?*

She let it loose, straight up into the air. Any doubts that it wouldn't be visible were wiped away. The bolt shot from the ground to the sky like reverse lightning, and for an instant the world seemed to be masked by a blue filter. Then it was over, and she could only sit and wait for help, if it ever came.

Twilight wandered aimlessly through the field. It was noon, and she was scared. *Applejack was at the Spring within twenty minutes of getting separated. Why is this taking so long? Did we do something wrong?*

She was hungry, and her stomach let her know this as she passed a patch of delicious looking flowers. But she didn't feel like eating.

Her mind kept returning to memories of her first day in Ponyville, when she met her friends for the first time. For some reason an old saying of her mother's swam through her thoughts: "There's a first time for everything, but there's never a second first time." This used to confuse her, but now she understood.

Suddenly, an idea occurred to her. *I'm not very good at getting lost in real life, but I'm particularly good at getting lost in books.* The pack on her side glowed purple as the flap unsealed and opened. She felt around for a book and grabbed one at random, bringing it to hover before her eyes. *The Yellow Book of Riddles.* She had finished the *Blue* and *Green* editions with ease, and had brought the *Yellow* edition for the journey in the hopes that it would provide a greater challenge. She surveyed the field before her, saw no obstacles in her direction of travel, and began to read as she walked. The book bobbed up and down in the grip of her magic, but she had grown used to this; after years of experience she could navigate all of Ponyville with a book in front of her face, so a field should prove no trouble at all.

I am big as a dragon though I soar without sound. On some quiet cold mornings I visit the ground. A farmer is glad to have me around, though too many of me and his plants I will drown. What am I?

Twilight rolled her eyes. A cloud. This was so easy it was almost embarrassing.

The answer to this question isn't everything except the opposite of what isn't 'yes.'

Trickier, but the answer was “yes”. Though she thought this was a dumb question that left too much information unaccounted for.

I have a mouth but never speak—

Not *this* riddle again. A river. Was there *any* riddle in this book that was worth her time? The more challenging questions were at the back. She flipped to the very last page.

*You have made it this far! Congratulations to you!
But have you really solved all, or is there more you must do?
One last question, I beg, to you my dear reader:
What fun is there really in being a cheater?
Yes, I know what you've done,
You've skipped to the end!
And in doing so missed the most fun, my dear friend!
Life is worth living, the entire way through,
And by cheating the order, the real loser is you!
So go back while you can; let's try this once more.
You flip to the beginning,
And I'll open the door.*

Twilight stopped walking. That was the *last* thing she expected to find. She read it once more, a thoughtful expression upon her face, which then erupted into a grin. *What an interesting little book*, she thought. *I suppose it speaks the truth. I will flip to the beginning. I'm sure I could make it to the end fair and square in—*

Just then she felt a tug against her side. She dropped the book in surprise. It felt as if a small animal had crawled into her pack and was now thrashing about. She flung it off, then walked cautiously to where it hopped about crazily on the ground of the grassy field. Through the gap in the pack's covering flap she could see pulsating red light. *Of course! How could I have forgotten?* With an excited (but nervous) grin she began walking after the pack, which was now sliding in a direction to the right of where she had been heading—but first she made sure to grab *The Yellow Book of Riddles* off the ground.

As she followed the sliding bag in amazement, a faint blue bolt flashed up into the clouds behind her. It was so distant, and her attention was so preoccupied with the Rose, that she never even noticed.

Fluttershy dutifully pursued the Rose as it slid through the sand. When her legs grew tired, she flew. When her wings grew tired, she walked. There was no time to think; her entire consciousness was devoted to staying with the Rose, to never letting it leave her sight, to following it through sand and dirt and more sand.

Because of this dedication, she didn't notice when the temperature dropped drastically. Or when the sand began to slowly give way to rougher terrain. Or when the Rose was no longer melting sand but evaporating snow (if Twilight were there, of course, she would have explained that the snow was actually sublimating).

So she kept on, drawing nearer to her friends, drawing nearer to Celestia, the cavern, that dark pony, and the one remaining Pillar.

"She's doing well."

"I know. I'm very proud."

"Does she know?"

"Know what?"

"Of her friend. The trapped one."

"No. I don't think so."

"What will happen? She has the Rose piece, and if she is stuck, the process can't be complete. Not if a piece is missing. Right?"

"You are right. But our daughter... her friends have something. I'm not certain what it is, but it is strong. It will be alright."

"Are you sure?"

"Their friendship is—"

"Are you sure?"

"No. I'm not sure about anything. But I have faith. In our daughter, in her friends, in the ability of the universe to weed out the bad and nourish the good."

"Do you remember the night you gave me the Rose?"

"Of course."

"You knew what it really was, even then?"

"Yes."

"Why give it to me, then? What could I have done with it?"

"My time with the Rose was through. I never had to use it, thankfully. No one has ever had to use it. And I knew that, if the time ever did come, the Rose alone would not be enough. The one wielding it would need a certain quality, some unnameable form of love, an indescribable sympathy. For the Rose must be used to defy the malicious intent of another, but the wielder of the Rose must not hate or fear or despise that other. The wielder must love that other. That is what the Rose needs, and that is what I saw in you. And that is what lives on in our daughter."

"Do you feel it? The instability? The quaking and groaning?"

"Yes. The tethers are already snapping. Our world is drawing nearer to theirs. In their world, in the Spring, the tethers are seen as Pillars. Only one remains. And it grows weak."

"But they can do it? They can use the Rose in time?"

"I do not know."

"You said you knew."

"I said I have faith."

"I have faith, too. Our little filly... I'm so proud."

"I am, too. She got it from you, you know."

"Her strength? Don't be silly. That's from your side, not—"

"No, not her strength. Her spirit. Her sympathy and love."

"She's so brave."

"She is."

Part Eight

Promises

Rainbow Dash lay on her belly in the sand. The tide rose and fell calmly as an inner struggle consumed her. One half of her mind pulled her on, pushed her forward, towards the Spring and the end of this whole mess. The other half tugged her back, urged her to return to her friends, to fly back the way she had come as fast as she could. Perhaps a sonic rainboom would convince them to return—they'd see it and follow it back to her, and they could go to the Spring together, just as they always should have. This half of her mind tugged just as hard as the other half pulled, creating two enormous, contradictory forces that cancelled each other out. So Rainbow Dash lay on her belly in the sand.

Memories began to emerge and drift around her imagination like a flurry of film strips. The Running of the Leaves competition with Applejack. Fluttershy yelling at a dragon. Pinkie Pie's birthday party. These thoughts shuffled about unbidden, and an intense loneliness came over her. She always put on a confident exterior, and for the most part it was legitimate; even so, it crumbled when there was nopony around to see it. Normally this wasn't an issue, but normally her friends were only a quick shout away. Though her friends never knew it, Rainbow had much in common with Pinkie and her occasional bouts of depression; of course, Dash's bouts were never as bad, and they were fewer and further between. Even so, there were always great horrible clouds looming in the distance, waiting for the moment she was alone and vulnerable—perhaps after she lost a race, or on a day when her friends were too busy to spend time with her. In moments like these, the clouds would rapidly roll in, clouds she couldn't easily kick away. All she needed was some attention—some recognition, an approving nod, a shoulder to lean on, somepony to boast to (in good fun, of course). Without that, and with the knowledge that her friends were all dealing with the same loneliness, she could hardly function.

They think I'm a lot tougher than I really am, she thought. They probably think I'm already there—wherever 'there' is. The Spring? What does that even look like? Will I know when I'm there? She shifted in the sand, got off her belly, and sat up. Her features shifted as well. Who am I? A pony, or a mouse? I can handle this! I'm Rainbow Dash! I could clear the skies of Ponyville between a lightning strike and a thunder clap! I could fly through Ghastly Gorge eight times with my eyes closed. I can get up off this stupid sand and get to where I'm going, even if I don't know where or what it is.

With new determination she stood up and set off without hesitation, heading the same way she had been going before the clouds had swooped in and darkened her thoughts and spirits. She lifted into the sky, and even performed a simple trick or two, looping through the air. This attempt to cheer herself up only made her feel even worse, however, when she realized there was nopony around to marvel at her talent. She finally realized just how alone she really was.

At cloud level she hung in the air, head lowered. *Stop your sulking, she thought. How do you expect to see them again if you can't go ten lousy minutes without stopping and feeling sorry for yourself? Get over it! For Celestia's sake, I—*

A searing pain bit into her right wing. She gasped, and the world teetered and spun around her while wind screamed across her ears. As she fell, spiraling, one of the several objects she kept tucked under her inner wing fell with her. The ground grew larger and larger, and then she was looking back up at the sky, then at the ground again, now a wall of green, then back at the sky; she spun and spun and could hardly breathe. The sky was Dash's domain, the air was her playground, and she was able to keep calm only due to the experience of hundreds of freefalls and drops just like this one. Moments before the ground took up her entire vision she spread her wings, skillfully curving her downward spiral into an upward drift. Her heart raced as she slowed to a stop. She was accustomed to falling,

but that had been far too close. After stabilizing herself and checking her wing for injuries, she peered curiously and cautiously to the ground, searching for whatever it was that had attacked her.

A glimmer. She flew to the ground faster than gravity could have pulled her, halting to a stop just above the gleaming object.

“Yes!” she shouted, her voice cracking in excitement and a hoof thrown in the air.

It's the Rose! Rainbow Dash, you've done it again! See, that wasn't so hard! Nothing I couldn't handle. I knew it would do this all along! I guess I follow it now? It isn't moving very fast... am I supposed to walk on the ground next to this slowpoke? She rolled her eyes. The shard inched its way through the grass. In the distance, the ocean murmured contentedly. *At this rate I'll be lucky to reach the Spring by the time I'm old enough to join the—*

Her thoughts were cut off as an enormous blue bolt seared through the noontime sky. She knew that blast; she recognized the azure color. Her eyes widened with worry. *That was Rarity's flare! She must be in trouble!* She prepared to blast off in the direction of her friend. Then she remembered the Rose.

What do I do about that thing? The worry was growing, but along with it came another emotion, one that felt odd and out of place: relief. Rarity might be in trouble, but saving her meant *seeing* her, and seeing a friend was exactly what Rainbow Dash needed. The more she thought about it, however, the more she realized that seeing Rarity again, talking to her, laughing with her, would make leaving her impossible. She could worry about that later, though; the most important issue was that a friend was in danger.

Her mind raced as she tried to find a way to get to Rarity without leaving or losing the Rose. “I can't bring that thing,” she thought aloud.

“It’s hot, and it’ll keep pulling me back. Maybe if I wrap it in—” She glanced to the gem in question and cut off. It was right where it had been before, but now it wasn’t glowing with the same ferocity. It wasn’t moving, either. Cautiously, she prodded it with a hoof. It was warm to her touch, the searing heat as suddenly absent as it had appeared.

She tucked it under her wing, her face a mixture of surprise, worry, and confusion. In a powerful gust that flattened the grass below, she took off to save her friend. As she flew towards the weakening streak in the sky, however, it became increasingly apparent that the more time she spent with Rarity, the harder it would be to leave her again.

Rarity was beginning to panic. When she had first realized she was trapped, she had been merely annoyed. The quicksand was an inconvenience, a short obstacle, a bump in the road. She couldn’t accept for a moment that she was actually in danger—such things simply don’t happen to ponies like her. The world could never be so cruel; fate wouldn’t allow it. She would be stuck for twenty minutes or so, then she’d squeeze her way out, or somepony would come help her. That’s how it always worked, and this should be no exception.

That’s what she thought three hours ago. Now the sand was up to her neck, and the water above it was almost to her chin. She couldn’t lie to herself any longer: she was stuck and there was no escape. Halfheartedly she squirmed and flexed in an attempt to shift herself out of the indifferent sand, but the result was the same as always; the moment she gained a centimeter of room, more sand filled the gap. “Agh!” In frustration she thrashed out as powerfully as she could, heaving with as much force as she could muster between each word. “Stupid!” A heave. “Sand!” A thrash. “I don’t have...ugh!...time to...grr!...deal with this! I have...arg!...friends who need me! AH!”

She screamed as she sank another inch, and the tragedy of her situation finally dawned upon her. This was worse than being stuck. This was *sinking*. She couldn't wait until somepony rescued her. By the end of the day, there would be no pony to rescue—only a shallow pool of muddy water with a sand floor.

The world spun around her. The sand pressed in from all directions. Strangely, though, it wasn't uncomfortable. The soft sand's touch was gentle, and it fit every contour of her body perfectly, warm and tight, like a full body massage everywhere at once. The sensation was lulling and—would she dare to admit it?—yes, even pleasant, in an absurd kind of way. Thoughts of her regular visits to the spa slipped into her mind, and suddenly she wasn't trapped in the ground but in a jacuzzi in Ponyville with cucumbers over her eyes and mud on her cheeks.

“Do be a dear and give my shoulders a rub,” she said to the blue spa pony. “I’ve been walking for days and I haven’t even had a proper bed to sleep in.” She smiled. “That’s *much* better. And would you mind turning the heat up? The water is getting cold by my toes.” She laughed as if she had just said something incredibly funny.

Suddenly she remembered something. She turned to the spa pony, who was busy giving her a back massage. “Could you send in my friend Fluttershy now? I’ve been waiting for her and she said she would show up.” This thought felt urgent, imperative, though she wasn’t sure why. The spa pony looked back blankly and said nothing.

“Please?” Rarity asked again, growing more and more concerned. “Send her in. She should be right outside.” The pony stared straight through Rarity, unblinking, like a deactivated robot.

“What kind of service am I paying for here? I want you to send in my friend Fluttershy this instant!” The blue pony didn’t even blink. She just kept staring. It was unnerving. Frightening. Like she wasn’t even there.

“Fine! I’ll get her myself!” Rarity began to leave the jacuzzi, but after moving an inch, the water became thicker, like a gel. She couldn’t even pull her legs to the surface. “Hey, what is this?” she exclaimed, surprised. Her company stared and stared and said nothing. “Don’t just stand there, help me out!” She had already lost hope in gaining the blue pony’s attention. Instead, she turned as best she could to the curtains that led to the reception area where Fluttershy was undoubtedly waiting. “Fluttershy!” she shouted. “Fluttershy, I’m stuck in this jacuzzi and the spa employee has turned to stone! Could you please come help me?”

She stared expectantly at the curtain, but there was no response.

“Fluttershy?” She began to panic. “Fluttershy, are you there?” With grunts of struggle she turned every which way, her eyes wide with fear. Suddenly the room itself felt sinister, like a trap that she had unknowingly sprung. The employee kept staring that stare, and the curtains remained silent. The quiet was maddening, and she was still trapped, and she felt like even if she pulled the curtains back with magic, beyond them would be nothing but empty blackness.

“Let me *go!*” She fought with every ounce of her strength. The thick water would not give, except now it was thick sand, and she was no longer in the spa but back in a wide and empty field. With a gasp she returned to reality, but was only allowed a brief visit, because in her weariness and shock she passed out into a comforting void of half-sleep.

She drifted in and out of consciousness.

...

“Leave me alone,” she mumbled. The blue spa pony was staring a hole through her. “Leave me alone...”

...

“The Pillars... there’s only one...”

...

“What... what are you doing? Put me down...”

...

“Let me go...”

...

Slowly and wearily she opened her eyes. She was being dragged. Strong hooves looped under her legs and were pulling her forward. She felt numb all over. The colors of the setting sun seemed pleasantly unreal, as if she had escaped the harsh reality in which she was stuck in the ground to an imaginary land where she was free; however, the hooves that dragged her felt too real, the ground beneath her felt too soft for this to be her imagination.

The dragging halted, and she was gently lowered to the ground. “Who...” she mumbled weakly, glancing up. She smiled. “Dash. You saw it. You came.”

The blue pegasus returned the smile, though there was a sadness in her eyes that Rarity found frightening. Dash turned around and began walking away.

“Wait!” Rarity tried to get up, but everything below her neck felt numb and weak. She could only raise a hoof to her friend, who looked down, kept walking, and didn’t turned back. “Rainbow Dash... wait...”

Dash unfurled her wings and lifted off, gaining speed until the only trace of her was a rainbow ribbon that trailed off into the distance.

Rarity stared at that colorful trail for some time. She didn't know what she should feel. With a little effort, she finally managed to get to her hooves, though she wasn't sure if she could walk yet, and if she could she didn't care. All that was on her mind was Rainbow Dash, who had come to save her but had left so quickly. She was alone again, and she would have given all her possessions just to talk to Dash, ask her where she was going, why she had left, why she hadn't said a word.

She glanced up to the fading rainbow trail one last time, and the world exploded in a burst of color. Every ounce of the spectrum flooded the sky in complete silence. It spread from the end of Dash's rainbow trail until the air itself seemed to glow with alternating red and blue and green and every other color. In the distance, a line of grass began bending away with the force of the sonic rainboom, growing closer and closer until suddenly it hit her and broke the still air with the sound of a rumbling wind and a breeze that felt cool and refreshing across her coat and mane. The red of the setting sun was blotted out by blue and green and orange. The grass became greener, the sky became bluer, and the appearing stars twinkled not with white but with purple and indigo and yellow.

Somehow, Rarity suddenly understood everything. She smiled into the comforting breeze, which cooled her aching body and dried her tears. Then she gasped in surprise as her pack began to thrash against her back.

As Dash turned away from her friend, fury rose within her.

Why does it have to be this way?

"Wait!" Rarity shouted, too weak to chase after her. "Rainbow Dash... wait..."

Dash was absolutely heartbroken. To leave her friend weak and alone was against everything she had ever known. She felt like a betrayer. But she couldn't look back, she couldn't run to her friend and embrace her like her heart kept screaming for her to do. She could only walk on and hope that somehow Rarity would understand that going back now would make finding the Spring impossible. She spread her wings, and with a gentle puff of air, drifted up into the sky.

It was all she could do to not look back; if she did, her resolve would crumble. So she flew on, the anger rising—anger at herself for not being strong enough to stay with Rarity for just a little longer; anger at—what was his name? Thade?—that dark pony who had caused this mess in the first place; even angry at Celestia for allowing herself to be captured. As she became angrier, she flew faster, pumping her wings furiously.

What self-entitlement does this pony Thade have, anyway? She thought bitterly. What makes him so special that he decides he can cheat death? Does he think he's the only one who's lost somepony they cared about? Her anger translated to speed as she flapped faster and harder. And he gets to risk the balance of all life in Equestria just because he thinks he deserves more? Because he's too weak to deal with loss? Her growing fury seemed to have unlocked a part of her that saw everything as clearly as the sonic cone that was beginning to form in front of her outstretched hooves. When I finally meet this Thade, I've got a thing or two to say to him, and when I'm through he's gonna need somepony to bring him back from the dead.

She thought of Rarity lying weakly on the ground, outstretching a hoof for help, and saw again the look that had come over her face when she realized her friend was leaving for a second time. With a final grunt of righteous fury she tore through the sound barrier, too caught up in her emotions to even notice the enormous spectacle she had just created behind her.

You don't know it, but we're coming for you, Thade. This has to end. That's a promise.

The time was drawing near. Thade couldn't yet see the cracks in the final Pillar, but he could feel them. The entire rocky cavern seemed to groan around him. It seemed as if the entire mountain were being held up by nothing more than the final Pillar.

He nervously twitched an ear. Patience was a skill of his, or he never would have made it this far; patience, however, could only last so long, and now it was being replaced by anxiousness. His cloak, which he already detested, became too hot. He felt like a young colt waiting nervously by the door for his first date to arrive, peeking out the window ever few minutes. Everything had gone smoothly so far—everything except the alicorn. He should have expected trouble from her. Even now, while she lay unconscious upon the altar, she worried him. She was unpredictable, an uncontrollable variable, the only force that could impede upon his progress. His only choice was to keep her perpetually paralyzed; he had tried to come up with a better solution, but it was too risky to leave her awake. She had already served her part by unwillingly donating a drop or two of blood, but he couldn't release her and he was too afraid to attempt to kill her. Besides, he was not a murderer, despite his earlier threats. In fact, if anything, he considered himself the *opposite* of a murderer; he was attempting to *restore* life, not end it.

An enormous tremble ran through the construct, and stumbled perilously to the side, scrambling to regain his balance. A puff of rocky dust fell over him, and he instantly recognized the danger from above. He had seen the falling rock powder many times in the past few days. They signaled a shift in the structure of the hard cavern ceiling, and were almost always followed by falling rocks that had shaken loose after millennia of stability. Without thinking he teleported himself somewhere to his left—he had so little time to react that he couldn't even specify his destination with

certainty. The cavern shook once more, this time with the skull-grinding crack of rock against rock. The repercussions traveled through the stone floor like a shockwave, kicking him harshly into the air. He landed heavily upon his side, gasping as the wind was knocked out of him. For several moments he lay on the ground in silence, unable to breathe or groan, capable only of wheezing painfully. The echo of the impact faded within the cavern, but he could still hear it in his head, even after sputtering out a cough and finally regaining his breath.

He shakily turned to the site of the collision, the very spot he had stood upon moments ago. Half embedded into the rock ground was the boulder that had almost flattened him, a spider web of fissures growing out from the center.

I should be more careful, he thought. Imagine coming this far, only to be squashed like a bug. Then I wouldn't be here, and the ritual would go unfinished, and there would be no justice. The life that was taken from me... from her... would never be replaced, and that would be the greatest tragedy of all.

Then, from the depths of his mind and heart, another voice spoke: *Perhaps it would have been best if you had been erased by that boulder just now, it said. The last Pillar would still fall, but without the Word, the Spell, the ritual would never complete, and the risk you are taking (yes, you are aware of the risk, though you pretend you are not) would never be realized. And if you were dead, you'd be there... in the next world... with her...*

No! he thought, his rather handsome face twisted in an ugly scowl. Tricks! Celestia's tricks! Those thoughts can't be my own—she must have planted them in my head! There are no worlds beyond this one! There can't be. She lies unconscious upon the altar, but she must be faking! Those thoughts can't be my own...

But they are, the voice continued sadly. Are you so naive? Has no part of you been left uncorrupted by grief? Think. If you don't believe in the worlds beyond this one, from where are you bringing her back? When she steps through the portal, what is on the other side? Think.

But, he thought, *but...* “No,” he said aloud. “It’s too late. I can’t stop. Not after I’ve come so far.” However, as he walked back to his quarters, he was met by a realization, a revelation that stopped him in his tracks. The chamber reverberated with the sounds of his hooves against the hard rock floor even after he froze, staring at the curved wall but seeing nothing, lost in thought.

The voice in my head... the thoughts were mine... but the voice was Laska's.

He stood perfectly still a moment more, his expression unreadable. Then he ran off to his chamber.

Dash was exhausted, sweating and weary from what felt like hours of flying. The whole time, her thoughts had been a hurricane of worry, anger, fear, and a horrible fury. Her wings were sore, her ears hurt from the wind, and she was starving. The sun had long since shrunk behind the horizon, and the evening stars drew patterns in the sky. The reflection of these patterns was disturbed as Dash drank heavily out of a clear river.

She stopped drinking to catch her breath, and her reflection stared back intently. Her blue coat was ruffled and unkempt, and her eyes were wet—whether from crying or from the high speed of her flight she did not know nor care. She closed her eyes while she wiped them, but opened them again when, behind her eyelids, she was greeted with an image: Rarity, her hoof extended, eyes pleading yet also thankful, then the look of confusion as Dash turned away...

Get over it, she thought. She's probably past that now, and you should be, too. You'll see her again, and you'll explain everything. Don't keep her waiting. Keep moving.

She began to set off, but realized from experience that it was better to be prepared. She opened her pack and felt around for her canteen, pulled it out, spent several frustrating minutes fighting the lid open with her mouth, then plunged the item under the gently flowing tide of the river. After the bubbles stopped, she capped it and put it back in her pack, but not without bumping her hoof against a familiar, hard object. She pulled out the Rose fragment and placed it on the ground before her.

She stared at it expectantly for a silent moment. "Well," she said, "lead the way!" The stream murmured behind her, the wind whispered gently through the grass, but the fragment stayed put. Dash growled with frustration.

"Come on!" Her voice cracked on the second word. "You were doing it earlier! Get moving!" She nudged it with a hoof. It rolled onto another of its intricate edges, but otherwise remained still.

"Ugh! You no-good gem! You start moving when I need to help my friend, but you won't move again when I need you to." She chuckled defiantly. "I could probably find the Spring without your help, anyway."

She put the infuriatingly immobile rose back into her pack and laced it shut. Heading out to find the Spring without its help seemed like the only option. Her wings were still sore when she spread them, but she had dealt with worse before, so with a mighty, painful flap, she took to the sky.

Is this really a good idea? a voice spoke out in her head. Dash hovered still in the air, considering. *You can't find it without the Rose. You'll only cause trouble for yourself.* The voice was Twilight's. *Think of what happened to Rarity. What if something similar happens to you?*

Except you can't send out a magic flare, and even if you could, who would see it?

Ah agree, spoke another familiar voice. Bad idea. Wait for the Rose. That's what Ah did when Ah got lost. It'll work for you, too.

Yes, Fluttershy added. What Applejack said.

Don't end up like me, Rarity warned.

Hey, it sure is echo-y here in your head, Rainbow Dash! Pinkie said. Helloooooo! Haha! Echoooo... echooo.... echo... Ha! Oh, and don't go off without the Rose, pleeeeeease, Dashie. We need you. Please don't.

Dash lowered herself to the ground. They had only been voices in her head, but they felt so real, like her friends were actually right beside her instead of somewhere miles away in this strange far-off land.

She began thinking of them, each of them, and was so lost in memories and emotions that she almost didn't notice the gentle thumping of her pack against her side. She shook her head, clearing it of times long passed, and unlatched the pack.

She peered inside and grinned.

He was close, and he knew it. The book he sought, the book with the answers, was almost within his grasp. Supernaturals. How long since he had last held that book? A decade?

In the mirror, his reflection stared back at him. "Soon," he said to himself.

Then he noticed something peculiar. His eyebrows rose in surprise. It must have been his imagination. What he was seeing was not possible. He stood up, got a closer look.

“No,” he said, incredulous. “That can’t happen. That doesn’t ever happen.” He stared fearfully at his reflection, then rotated before the mirror. “That’s not possible!”

From that day forth, he never removed his cloak, lest he see his own reflection and become reminded of a change within himself that he could never accept.

Fluttershy couldn't help but remember her previous experience with mountains, when she and her friends had traveled together to evict the smoke-emitting dragon that plagued Ponyville and the surrounding areas. She had been terrified of dragons, terrified of heights, terrified of all the other terrifying things that took place in mountain ranges, like avalanches and freezing cold and thin, nearly unbreatheable air. In the end, however, she had confronted her fears to protect her friends. Now she was alone, with no friends to protect, and every five-inch gap in the ground seemed a mile wide, every fall seemed to be a million feet down, and every howl of the wind seemed to be the roar of some nearby monstrosity. Despite this, the Rose continued, and so did she.

With a gentle hiss it pushed across the snowy ground, seemingly floating across the white fluff, for it was so hot that the snow around it was instantly vaporized, creating a warm, easily traversable path for its lone follower. Fluttershy found its presence comforting. When she saw it she saw her mother, and through her mother she saw her father, and though she had hardly known him, she felt as if he were watching over her. In the Rose she also saw her friends; it was split six ways among them, six parts of a whole, separated for now but not forever. She felt safety in its warm

glow, protection in its persevering journey. The deathly cold of the fierce altitude hardly touched her in its presence.

So she carried on. Every once in awhile she would become tired, and, perhaps sensing this, the fragment would slow nearly to a stop. Then she'd be off again, the wind howling but somehow not biting her, the cold everywhere but somehow not chilling her. Eventually she found herself walking along a narrow ridge, and when she looked down she nearly fell over from dizziness. She was no longer traveling *near* mountains; now she was finally *in* the mountains, the pine trees far below like thick green grass. Onward still.

After several more minutes of ascending along the path that was not truly a path, the Rose stopped. Fluttershy watched curiously as it remained still, glowing but no longer moving. It had stopped suddenly and jarringly, as if it had run into a wall. She looked around—mountain to her right, widening ridge beneath her, open air and a deadly fall to her left. Applejack had given her a slight idea as to the appearance of the Spring, but clearly it was nowhere near here. The sudden stillness of the Rose worried her; she wasn't sure why, but it had always seemed so confident, like it knew exactly what to do and would never lead her astray. Now it seemed unsure, confused, almost.

Fluttershy stared, distressed. Then the world became red; the snow became maroon, the mountain became ruby, the air became violent carmine. It crept across every surface, so that even the shadows stood out in terrifying relief. She turned fearfully, afraid but determined to find the source.

An enormous tower of red light ascended to the sky. Every inch of the giant monolith was crackling with arcs of maroon and crimson and blood red. The howling wind began to scream. Where the beam met the sky the clouds swirled around it as if trying to avoid touching this impostor of their celestial haven.

Flutteshy watched in terrified awe, her face glowing slightly from the intense luminosity of the red pillar. The air around her felt charged, energized beyond its natural capabilities.

This must have been what Applejack was talking about, she thought. When she was lost and saw a beam... this must be the same thing.

The earth began to shake. Fluttershy shrieked and reached blindly for the rocky slope to her right, groping for a crevice to grasp and trying not to think about the dizzying drop to her left. As she found a hold, the earth trembled once more, and the thunder of stone smashing against stone rumbled past her as rock from above broke loose and tumbled down the mountain on both sides of her precarious grip.

She shut her eyes tightly and waited for it to all be over.

Is this really happening? Am I really about to do this? His earlier thoughts, those spoken in Laska's voice, had forced open a new perspective, a new outlook. With the conclusion of his journey rapidly nearing, implications that he had never considered before were forced to his attention, and details he had deemed unimportant now seemed essential. The point of no return was at hand, and a decision, *the* decision, had to be made. Once the portal opened, she would have to step through. Thade was certain it would not close until a transfer took place.

Before now he had been closed-minded, unseeing, bent on his one and only objective. With her so near, however, he became obsessed with her free will, her choice, her decision. What he felt for her was love—he knew this for a fact. Love. Not infatuation, not obsession, not a foal's crush. Celestia might not believe it, but he truly loved her, and nothing would ruin him, break his spirits, and crush his hopes more than if she hated him for bringing her back. So with great deliberation he asked himself: *would she want to come back?*

Of course she would want to come back. Why wouldn't she want to come back? Who would choose death over life? That day in Sonselo, I remember what she asked me before... before she slipped away. I remember the way she looked across the field as she said it, until her eyes met mine. The memory enveloped him, drew him in until it wasn't a stone wall he was staring at, but an endless field of flowing crimson and green. And there she was, across from him, just as always, with a feather on her right wing bent slightly out of place in a way Thade found beautiful. The memory was the same this time as it had been the first thousand times.

"We can come back sometime, can't we?"

Thade smiled reassuringly. "Definitely."

"Do you promise?"

"Of course."

Do you promise... do you promise... promise... promise...

Applejack had seen this before. The red beam. The swirling clouds. Another Pillar had fallen. But something was different, this time. Something was worse.

The last time she had seen this awful phenomena, the Rose fragment had begun to move. Now the opposite happened, and her fragment lay motionless. This beam was larger, brighter, louder. Instead of fading, like the first one she saw, it seemed to be growing stronger.

A creaking from above. She looked up in time to jump out of the way. A tree landed where she had stood. Then it burst into flame, the heat

nipping at her astounded face. One moment it was a fallen tree, the next it was an inferno.

Oh no, Applejack thought. It was all she could think. *Oh no. We're too late. Oh no.*

The creaking sound again, like a sorrowful wail. Then again, and again, and again. Trees fell behind her, before her. Along the side of a neighboring mountain, down before the treeline ended, row after row fell, like rats abandoning a sinking ship. Then each and every one burst into flame. It began to hail.

Applejack found cover under the burnt trunk of the tree that had fallen before her. The fire had burnt out unnaturally fast, leaving a blackened husk of a tree. From underneath its safety she listened to the thuds of hailfall, watched the beam grow brighter, and hoped and hoped that her friends were all right.

So this is it, then, Thade thought. The final Pillar was a crumbled pile of ancient stone, glowing faintly and dimming by the second. The cavern was in a state of constant rumbling, and the chatter of falling pebbles carried on incessantly. Celestia lay on the alter, unconscious as ever. With the last Pillar gone, the structure holding the worlds together, but also holding them apart, was destroyed. Every universe was in free fall, all tumbling down to the bottom, where, for one short moment, they would intersect. That was the moment the portal would appear. After that moment, the worlds, intangible as they are, would simply pass through each other. After that, Thade wasn't sure what would happen. And he didn't care. He'd have her back and she'd look him in the eyes and tell him she forgave him, that it wasn't his fault, that she still loved him. The rest of the world could burn or rot. That was all he needed to hear.

She spoke in his mind. *Would I want to live in a world that was burning and rotting?*

If you love me half as much as I love you, he thought, the world wouldn't matter.

He approached the altar where Celestia lay. Placing both hooves upon her, he closed his eyes in concentration. For a moment his horn glowed, and the alicorn glowed the same dark hue. A faint shimmer of light, a low hum. Then it was over, and the altar lay bare, with nothing but a stray white wing feather to indicate the sun goddess had been held captive there. Supposedly teleportation was impossible to and from the Spring, but with the Pillars gone, Thade could finally access that endless store of magic, that bottomless well of strength. Sending her off had been easy, like blinking. He felt like he could teleport an entire city, summon a hurricane, turn back time. He knew better, though. Becoming power-hungry was a fool's game. His intent was more precise and more personal, and now the one thorn in his side was gone.

I hope I sent her near enough to Canterlot. It'd be a shame if something happened to her and Laska and I could never enjoy another sunrise. The last Pillar had fallen, the Spring's powers were beginning to course through him, and there was nothing Celestia could possibly do to stop him; he had no fear freeing her.

You're contradicting yourself, Thade. You said the world could rot, and now you say you want to enjoy a sunrise with me? You have no idea what you're doing, no clue what might happen now that the Pillars are gone... what happened to you?

"You're not really her," he said aloud. "You're just the voice of my fears. Somepony very dear to me once told me to fight my battles. Consider this a battle I'm about to win."

With Celestia gone, there was only one last task, a final step, and the portal would open. All he had to do was say one word.

He checked to ensure the relic was still in the bowl—indeed, the feather, the piece of her, from the first day he met her, was right where he had put it. He looked around, examining the scene. The Pillars were dust. The altar glowed slightly, infused with the power of the Immortal's blood. The grey feather that he had saved so many years ago was in the bowl, which was eye-level and attached to a small column. He adjusted his cloak, took a breath, and closed his eyes. In the darkness he saw her, saw her as she had been when they were young and innocent and in love in the field of roses.

...Do you promise?...

He closed his eyes, took a breath, then said the Word.