

Cantering Death

By Scriber



Author's note: the edition of this story you are about to read is a gore-lite version, edited for those with a squeamish disposition in mind. If you are not offended by a bit of the ol' ultra-violence, please proceed to this [link](#) - otherwise, read on!

-Scriber

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Prologue

“...you’re sure of this?” the Royal alicorn asked of her most trusted advisor.
“The reports are one hundred percent accurate?”

“Without question, your majesty,” the General replied, muted sunlight glinting off of his polished golden armour. “There have been at least a dozen individual cases of infection in at least four metropolitan areas reported within the last half-hour. This is not going to be as simple as we thought.”

The royal alicorn, coat a brilliant white and adorned with a gilded rune of the sun as her cutie mark, looked absolutely weathered. Her mane, usually a glistening nebula of soft, pastel hues was nothing more than an occasionally flapping shell of its former self, colours deflated to match the hair-style. Celestia had not slept in at least six days - whereas the princess could usually go without sleep for at least two weeks at a time without any serious difficulty, the stress and anxiety of the few days that had just passed had worn at her very being; physically, intellectually and emotionally, she was quite simply exhausted.

While the leader of the royal guard might not have been inclined to comment on the princess’ condition - for fear of losing his rank (and perhaps head) - Celestia’s sister, Luna, had no such moral trepidations.

“*Tia.*” the blue alicorn addressed her sister in a tone that could only be afforded a blood relative. “You have to get some rest, sister. The last time I saw you this tired was... was...” the alicorn trailed off, not wishing to drag up old emotions or re-salt allegedly healed wounds.

“-Since you first became Nightmare Moon,” Celestia finished for her little sister. Luna could do little more than bow her head in remorse, images of those she slaughtered in her jealous rage so many, many years ago coming into the forefront of her mind more freely than apples from a wilting orchard. Just as tears began to well in Luna’s eyes, her sister offered the blue alicorn a gentle, yet reassuring wing, nuzzling her smaller sibling against herself.

"I know that you're sorry, Luna. Sometimes, I just...I just have trouble adjusting to the fact that you're really here. It's been so long...and believe you me, Luna, you're not the only one who has regrets." Celestia's eyes grew soft for a moment, as if remembering a sour memory in her greater than millennial lifetime. She stiffened, however, eyes hardening in resolve.

"But that, dearest Luna, is a conversation destined for another time. For the moment, we have much more urgent matters at hand. The situation throughout Equestria is...look, I won't lie to you. Any of you." She gestured to the half-dozen ponies gathered atop the rhinestone tower, the afterglow of sunset illuminating the rock and casting an almost mystical golden hue throughout the entire city of Canterlot.

"We have not had this sort of crisis in the entire history of Equestria. Not even the great plagues of the pre-Mare ages can begin to amount to the catastrophe which threatens our fair kingdom." She turned to General Rough Rider, commander of the Royal Guard.

"General. I want you to initiate a complete and total lockdown of all metropolitan areas of Equestria. Manehattan, Phillydelpha, Appleoosa, Ponyville, even the frontier lands beyond the Everfree - I want them all..." Celestia shut her eyes tight, holding in the tears.

"I want them all quarantined."

Chapter 1

Message

Twilight Sparkle stirred in her sleep. Dark visions of burning buildings and boiling flesh fettered her mind, gnawing away at her peaceful slumber like an untreated cancer. She inhaled sharply, her horn suddenly sparking to life. It glowed an almost translucent, whiteish hue before erupting into a brilliant maroon cone of pure arcane energy. Her eyes sprang open, oval-shaped orbs in her skull expelling a blinding white light.

She cried out, stirring from her un-restful slumber. The light purple unicorn sat up in her bed, sensing a powerful tingling sensation at the top of her head. She blinked, her eyes adjusting to the light of the room - the only illumination offered was courtesy of the waxing moon and glittering stars. Twilight knew immediately that something was wrong. The air around Ponyville, usually devoid of a background magical charge, was literally teeming with raw magical energy. She clumsily rose to her hooves and trotted over to the picture window, offering a clear panoramic view of the night's sky.

What she saw made her breath hitch in her chest.

As if encased in half of a gigantic bubble, Ponyville appeared to be enveloped by a translucent light blue orb. Twilight immediately recognized the spell, though she was in a state of disbelief as to how the spell could have actually been cast.

"The...the Barrier of Arcane Guard..." she managed to say, her tongue clicking dryly against her lips. "But...how..." Before Twilight was able to finish her sentence, another electrifying bolt shot through her horn, this time coursing throughout her entire body, as if raw magical essence was holding a pony race across every single individual nerve ending. Her pupils dilated, the will of the magic in the air encompassing her consciousness. She could hear a voice in her head - soothing, reassuring. Gentle yet firm.

"This is a message to all magic-using ponies throughout Equestria. This is Princess Luna, goddess of the Moon. A terrible virus has begun to break

out all across our fair kingdom. As far as we can tell, tens of thousands have thus far been affected - and that number grows by the thousands with each passing hour.

"The blue bubble that you can now undoubtedly detect encompassing your settlement, town or city is an ancient spell of Arcane proportions. It restricts access of even the smallest facet of an atom to the other side. This spell will essentially...quarantine your community from the rest of Equestria.

"Celestia and I deeply apologize for this coarse, unannounced action. It was done with only the best interests of all of ponydom in mind, and rest assured that it is only temporary. Canterlot's top scientists, mages and physicists are already working hard to discover a cure for this virus. May all of the cosmos guide them in their efforts.

"And, finally, I must warn those who are receiving this message of the nature of the virus itself. This virus, put simply, does two things - it causes uncontrollable, murderous rage in male colts over the age of 17, and it...somehow...re-animates dead tissue."

Twilight Sparkle swooned for a moment, the gravity of the situation beginning to take effect on her mental well-being.

"To all who have received this message: wake your loved ones, alert the pegasi and gather the earth ponies. You will all congregate in the mane area of your respective establishments and await further instructions. You will not - I repeat - will *not* attempt to make any contact with anypony who shows signs of infection, nor will you attempt to come in contact with anypony who has been so unfortunate as to perish as a result of this infection."

"Go forth, and may mine and Celestia's blessings be upon you."

Chapter 2

Gathering

“Big Sis, what did Princess Luna mean by, ‘re-animates dead tissue’?” the small white unicorn filly asked apprehensively, still blinking the sleep from her eyes.

“I’m...I’m not entirely sure, dear,” Rarity replied, mane disheveled to match her mental state. In the five or so minutes that had passed since Luna’s message, Rarity had woken up Sweetie Belle, secured her shop in case of an attack, and freshened up a bit - albeit hastily. Magic bubbled forth from her white horn as she levitated a hairbrush, hoof mirror and several other cosmetic essentials and worked to make herself presentable. “However, the most important thing that you can do right now, darling, is to go pack your things.”

“But Rarity -”

“No. Buts. I simply cannot leave the shop knowing that the two of us are unprepared, should an evacuation order come down from Celestia. Now, run upstairs and finish up. We leave in five minutes.”

“Yes, Big Sis,” Sweetie Belle managed, trying not to let the panic she felt growing in her chest manifest itself in her voice.

All around Carousel Boutique, Ponyville was beginning to come to life. Unicorns were knocking on the doors of earth ponies, hastily waking them from their otherwise peaceful sleep to warn them of Luna’s message as well as the situation at hand. Light switches were flipped, bags were packed and little ones were awoken as gently as possible, the strained - perhaps reluctant - tones of their parents’ voices bringing them to half-consciousness.

All the while, a dark presence stood on the shadows, looking on at the scene coldly. The stallion - name now irrelevant - drooled a viscous mixture of blood and saliva as he stood in the alleyway, alone. His cutie mark, a picture of discarded spectacles, was marred by several bite wounds. It did

not make a single bit of difference to the stallion, however; he no longer felt any pain. No, the only emotion - the only drive left in the empty husk of his former self - was an all-encompassing fury, a hatred and rage that boiled within like a toxic sludge. He shambled unnoticed in the nooks and crannies of Ponyville's architecture, lumbering about from shadow to shadow, just out of view of anypony. He moved away from the center of town; that's where everypony was gathering, but the raw, bestial urges and desires of his new, altered state seemed to have minds of their own, his body taking him wherever his instinct pleased with little to no argument.

The stallion, having distanced himself from the town center, walked slowly toward a lone cabin on a hill, just at the edge of the Everfree.

Twilight Sparkle, her number one assistant on her back and Owloicious in tow, galloped with all of her might toward Fluttershy's cabin. She knew that Rarity would more than likely alert the Apple family, and she knew that Pinkie Pie wouldn't be that difficult to wake - given that she was so close to the center of town, Twilight didn't doubt that Mr. and Mrs. Cake had already been awoken by good samareitans as well. That only left Rainbow Dash - who, more than likely, was not able to gain access to Ponyville from Cloudsdale - and Fluttershy, all alone at the very edge of the Everfree Forest.

Twilight gulped, trying in earnest to will her pace to quicken.

"Do you think Fluttershy's gonna be ok, Twilight?" asked the baby dragon, his voice jolting Twilight out of her internal dialogue.

"If I have anything to say about it, yes. Owloicious, do you think you could fly ahead and see whether or not she's awake already? Be on the lookout for anything unusual, too. I don't want any surprises when we arrive."

"*Hoo*," Owloicious nodded, as if to say, *I'm on it*. The owl took to the sky, wings flapping furiously against the cool night air. Twilight and Spike remained silent for a few moments as they made their way toward the cabin, when Spike finally asked,

“I’m not dreaming, am I? This isn’t some sort of...like...really, really intense dream, is it?”

“I’m afraid not, Spike. No, this is as real as it gets - and the situation is most urgent. I’ve only read about the most obscure references regarding the spell that was used -” she motioned with her head to the translucent blue bubble that hung over their heads, “but I don’t even want to begin to think about how much magic it would take to actually cast a spell of this magnitude. This is far, far beyond Celestia’s and Luna’s capabilities combined - and they’re the two most powerful alicorns in all of Equestria! No, they had to have had help...”

A scream rang out in the night. Twilight almost stumbled, instantly recognizing the frightened voice’s owner.

It was none other than Fluttershy.

Applejack, Rarity, all three Cutie Mark Crusaders, as well as Pinkie Pie were huddled together in a small group amongst the larger, still-growing crowd that had begun to gather in the town’s mane square, just outside of the Mayor’s office. The Mayor, usually composed and well-spoken, simply sat on the edge of the steps leading up to her office, mane all out of place and a look on her face that conveyed extreme worry and anxiety. A quiet, yet constant murmur spread through the crowd, sentences more often than not ending with an upward inflection. Some were staring into the sky in a mixture of fear, confusion and amazement at the new addition which hung overhead like an oppressive veil - others were talking amongst themselves in hushed, quick tones. Others still were eyeing their neighbours warily, eyes darting about in a nervous fashion, as if they expected to be accosted by one of these new “infected” ponies that had been the subject of Luna’s mass-message.

Pinkie Pie - usually a bright, cheerful avatar of laughter - was uncharacteristically silent; pensive, almost. Applejack too, normally a strong speaker and a bit of a leader merely stared down at the ground, the reality of the situation beginning to sink in and take effect. *We’re cut off*, she thought to herself. *If what Princess Luna said was true, then we’re really cut off*. Applejack wanted nothing more than for Rainbow Dash to be

present amongst them, but that appeared to be an impossibility; at least, for the time being, anyhow. There was no doubt a similar (or identical) bubble encompassing Cloudsdale as well, leaving Rainbow with no way to join her friends. *Damn it, Applejack...* the orange earth pony thought to herself, brow furrowed in frustration and perhaps a bit of nervousness, *there's just gotta be something that you can do.* The very beginnings of an idea began to take place in her brain, but her thoughts were soon interrupted by the combined sounds of surprised gasps and shouts of concern and fear.

The crowd parted to reveal a badly wounded colt stumbling toward the center of town, shoulder and flank bleeding heavily from what appeared to be a -

- "He's been bitten!" Applebloom cried, eyes shrinking to little pinpricks. Her strained voice rang out clearly in the crisp, cold evening air as ponies began to panic, some running about aimlessly, others headed for nearby buildings and unoccupied stands in the marketplace for cover. The three ponies and three fillies took off in the general direction of Sugarcube corner, before hearing a gurgled, almost pathetic whine and a plea for help that stopped them dead in their tracks.

"Please...p-please help me..." the colt managed to say before collapsing to the ground, chest heaving and a considerable amount of blood beginning to pool beneath him, staining his light brown coat a muddy, earthier colour. Sweetie Belle and Applebloom turned their heads while Scootaloo looked on in horror, body frozen in place by the amount of blood. Save for the occasional nosebleed and one particular scooter incident that scuffed her knees a bit, the orange Pegasus filly had never seen that amount of blood before. Eyes watering, she could only stand and watch as the colt bled to death before him.

"Hold on, dear!" a refined, cultured voice said from behind her. Scootaloo was shaken from her daze by the sights and sounds of Rarity dashing over to the mortally wounded colt, magic already working at levitating several articles of clothing out of her white saddlebags.

Rarity - using two designer sweaters and a few scarves - applied as much pressure to the gushing bite wounds as she could, but blood still continued to seep through the fabric as they became engorged in the colt's deep, maroon essence while he cried out in pain.

“Applejack! HELP ME!” Rarity shouted, spurring the farm pony to dash to her side and take over caring to the colt’s flank wounds. While Rarity was not nearly as prissy or girly as she may have acted, she simply did not have the strength and musculature that Applejack had, garnered from years and years of physical work on the apple farm. She managed to stop the bleeding, but the wound which Rarity was tending to proved to be too deep to remedy without urgent medical attention. Both ponies knew that Nurse Redheart could be anywhere, so there was little chance -

- “Guys! Guys! I found Nurse Redheart!” a shrill, bright voice belonging to a certain pink party pony said. Applejack and Rarity turned their heads in the direction of the sound, and sure enough, there was Pinkie Pie, bouncing up and down happily as Nurse Redheart, adorned in a nurse’s gown and carrying a black bag containing medical equipment galloped steadily beside her.

“Oh - oh my goodness, I...need to...catch my-” Nurse Redheart managed to pant, lungs taking in huge gulps of air in an attempt to soothe her screaming, overworked muscles. She had run clear to the other side of town on suspicion that she would need her medical supplies as soon as she had first seen the colt, and had run all the way back in mere minutes.

“Thank Celestia you’re here!” Rarity managed, straining to speak in the even tones everypony had been accustomed to hearing from her. “The bleeding, I can’t stop it-”

“You’ve done wonderfully, Rarity - but I need to you move aside now so I can see to him, ok?”

“Is he going to be-”

“Certainly not if we stand around here and keep talking,” she said, her voice becoming stern and eyes hardening in resolve. “Now, if you would please-”

“Of course, of course,” Rarity interjected, coming to her hooves and trotting quickly away from the fast-fading colt, still badly bleeding on the cold cobblestone.

Nurse Redheart opened up the medical bag and brought out various supplies - gauze, medical tape, sutures and the like - but she knew in the back of her mind that the colt was far beyond saving, especially on the street in this fashion instead of in a proper medical facility. She worked feverishly and managed to stop the bleeding, but it was already too late - the colt had just breathed his last, his eyes going dark and deader than the rest of him. Nurse Redheart hung her head while the Cutie Mark Crusaders looked on and silently wept in a queer combination of sadness, grief and terror-induced shock. Rarity looked away, partially blaming herself for not being strong enough to save the colt - Applejack, in a way emulating Scootaloo's expression not five minutes earlier, could do little more than stare at the scene, eyes glazed over in a sort of stupor.

"I'm sorry, there was nothing I could do-OOOO-" Nurse Redheart shrieked as she heard a stirring and a shuffling of hooves behind her as the freshly dead corpse twitched and began to get to its feet, eyes glowing a diabolic red and teeth bared. Redheart began to back away, but she was too slow - the infected colt lunged and managed to grab her hoof, knocking her off balance and sending her crashing to the hard stone with a sickening *thud!*

Chapter 3

Conflict

Twilight Sparkle galloped faster than she had ever galloped in her entire life at the sound of Fluttershy's panicked shriek, her hooves crashing down on the moist earth. *Wait...* Twilight thought to herself as she chanced a glance downward. What she saw nearly made her stumble again. As she began nearing the home stretch on the path to Fluttershy's cottage, the dark green grass was stained a darker hue - stained with blood, glistening and glittering black in the pale moonlight. She could feel a bit of bile rising in her throat as she saw the bodies of woodland critters strewn about, as if they were torn apart in a raw, animalistic rage. Several rabbits and squirrels were clearly the victims here, lying lifeless on the ground. Spike whimpered on Twilight's back, and he began to retch, the sight of the carnage proving to be a bit too much to handle.

"Just close your eyes, Spike. We're almost there." With that, Owloicious came swooping back into Twilight's line of sight, hooting furiously and wings flapping about animatedly.

"Inside? *Inside* her cabin?!" Twilight almost screamed.

"What? What did he say?!" Spike asked hurriedly, still unable to fully understand the owl's unique form of speech.

"We're out of time. Owlocious, Spike, hang on!" With a sharp report and a brilliant flash of bright purple light, the three were instantly taken to the lower floor of Fluttershy's cabin, which was in quite a state itself.

Most of the furniture in the cabin was shattered and lay in pieces, undoubtedly the same hoofdiwork of whomever had killed the woodland creatures. Bits of fabric and jagged planks of wood were scattered haphazardly amongst bent bird cages and holes in the floor. From the upstairs, Twilight, Spike and Owloicious could hear a steady, constant crashing sound.

"T-twilight? What is that?" Spike asked nervously, eyes shrinking to little pinpricks.

“Something we need to...” Twilight’s breath caught in her throat, unable to finish the sentence. *Am I really about to do this?* she thought to herself. Wordlessly, Twilight searched quickly around the wreck of a room for a suitable weapon. Eyes landing upon a particularly hefty looking plank of wood, her horn glowed and it was levitated into the air. The plank was still smooth on one end, but jagged and splintered on the other.

“Come on!” she cried. “Fluttershy needs our help!” The three took off up, bounding up the stairs two at a time, dodging broken glass and destroyed picture frames that littered the wooden steps. When they crested at the top of the stairwell, they froze at the image that immediately (and perhaps unfortunately) greeted them.

A stallion, perhaps in his mid-20s, was beating on the door leading to Fluttershy’s bedroom with his head. Clearly, the stallion felt no pain - there was a profusely bleeding gash that had opened up on his forehead, blood trickling down his face and leaving forehead-shaped imprints on the decidedly sturdy wooden door. Even still, the door itself had begun to crack under the strain of the repeated blows, and the sounds of slowly splintering wood filled Twilight’s ears.

The infected stallion did not, at first, notice the three new additions (or morsels) to his rear: he continued to pound on the door with his head, guttural grunts emanating from the very pit of his chest. “HEY!” Twilight shouted, causing the stallion to stop in mid-head butt and slowly turn toward the sound. “Leave her alone!”

“Twilight?! Twilight, is that you?” a muffled, frightened voice came from behind the door. “HELP!”

Much like the infected colt from the town square, the stallion drooled a syrupy mixture of blood and saliva, which fell to the floor in viscous tendrils. His eyes burned brightly in his rage as he began to lumber toward the three at the top of the stairs. Without warning, Owloicious flew on ahead of Spike and Twilight to accost the infected head-on, effectively distracting him as he darted back and forth across the infected’s line of sight, taunting him. Twilight’s knees began to knock together, horn still glowing as she brandished the jagged plank in front of her. The infected, clearly annoyed, swatted aimlessly at the air with his free hooves for a time before

connecting a head butt that sent the owl careening into a wall, smacking into it and instantly knocking him unconscious.

“Owloicious!” Spike cried out in concern for his friend. The infected colt began to advance on the feathered creature, and for Twilight, time froze.

I've never killed before, she thought. We defeated Nightmare Moon, but we didn't kill her. Even then, I hated using violence. What purpose does violence serve in this world? What benefit could it possibly have? There are moral and philosophical implications here that...perhaps aren't best to be dealt with at the time. Oh Celestia...Celestia forgive me, am I really about to kill? Am I really about to do this? she repeated the question she had asked herself moment earlier. *Fluttershy needs my help. Maybe there's a spell that can...I don't know...isn't there another way? Think, Twilight! THINK!* The events which transpired before her very eyes still seemed to move in slow motion as the adrenalin flooded her veins, pulse quickening, breathing becoming more abrupt and shallow. With frightened, excited eyes, she regarded the makeshift weapon which floated in the air in a bright purple aura not two hooves from her face. The splintered wood looked absolutely deadly, and she knew that with her knowledge of physics and with enough force, she could -

- “TWILIGHT! DO SOMETHING!” Spike screamed at her, jarring Twilight from her internal dialogue. Brows furrowing deeply, she steeled herself for what was to come next. The light surrounding her horn grew in brightness and intensity, and so too did the aura which enveloped the plank. The somewhat tenuous magical bond between the unicorn and the plank instantly stiffened, as if mere twine were suddenly replaced with hefty rope. As the stallion was just about to fall on the unconscious Owloicious, no doubt licking his lips in anticipation of his next meal, there was a flash of pure magical energy as Twilight hurled the jagged edge of the plank at the infected's head with all of the strength she could muster.

The plank hit it's mark dead-on (no pun intended), a particularly wicked looking splinter the size of a small novel crashing into the stallion's head with monstrous force. The stallion roared in fury, turning on his hooves and ramming his head into Fluttershy's door one final time, the combined damage from both impacts killing him instantly. Without skipping a beat, Twilight commanded,

“Spike, I need you to tend to Owloicious.” Before the baby dragon could fully formulate a response, Twilight teleported herself to the other side of the makeshift barricade, again with a sharp *pop!* and a flash of light that elicited a terrified squeal from Fluttershy. She quickly dove under the bed, tail sticking out and quivering in a fashion that, in any other given situation, would have been rather endearing.

“Hey.” Twilight said softly, not wanting to startle the frightened Pegasus any further. “Fluttershy, it’s just me.” The purple unicorn had to make a conscious effort not to let her voice become ragged, her head still a bit fuzzy and perhaps a bit more lightheaded due to the sudden exertion from the spells she had just cast in quick succession. Angel, Fluttershy’s oddly intelligent white rabbit friend, looked absolutely disheveled as he teetered precariously on the windowsill at the far side of the room. His eyes were wide as a creature of his small stature could possibly muster, whiskers bent outward at seemingly random angles with mussed-up, matted fur to match.

The butter-colored Pegasus pony was still sobbing profusely from under the bed, but she managed to get a few words out between them,

“T-twilight...oh, Twilight...”

“Shh. It’s okay, Fluttershy. That stallion can’t hurt you, or any of the animals any longer. I promise.”

“He...h-he...”

“I know, I know. Can you come out, now? Do you think you can do that for me?”

Twilight kept her voice as sweet as possible, despite grim visions of the atrocity she had just committed flashing before her eyes like a gruesome play-by-play. The pink tail that had been sticking out from under the bed slowed in its quivering ever so slightly as Fluttershy gingerly emerged, tears still streaming down her face, light yellow coat stained a darker hue with the liquid representation of her anguish. Twilight regarded her friend with a look of great concern on her face, taking a few steps toward her. Without warning, Fluttershy closed the gap between them with a few wing-assisted bounds, wrapping her arms around Twilight’s neck, tears beginning anew as she bawled her eyes out; her face pressed tightly

against Twilight's shoulder, Twilight could do little more than to rub her hoof along the grief-stricken Pegasus' back in an attempt to console her, speaking in hushed, gentle tones.

"I'm going to clear the barricade now, okay?" Twilight said, reluctantly releasing Fluttershy from their embrace. Unable to speak, Fluttershy nodded and kept her head facing downward, hot tears pouring out of her and landing on the brown, hardwood flooring in little droplets. Trying her best not to overexert herself (given that she knew she would need as much of her magic as possible in the coming hours), Twilight pushed the odd dresser and furniture that Fluttershy had hastily pushed up against the doorframe - no small feat for the petite Pegasus, given the heft and weight of some of the furniture. She must have been absolutely terrified, Twilight resolved. She reached forward and turned the door handle with her hoof, temporarily forgetting about the twice-dead stallion corpse which lay crumpled in front of her. Cursing silently to herself, Twilight said,

"Fluttershy, we need to go downstairs, but...it's not pretty, what happened in the hall," at this, Twilight strategically positioned herself so that her body was blocking most of the carnage, "as I'm sure you heard. I need you to go ahead and close your eyes for me, okay? You've been through enough tonight already." The gentle, even tones of Twilight's voice seemed to soothe the Pegasus to some effect, as her previously rapid sobs were now reduced to the occasional snuffle. "Here, take my hoof," Twilight gestured with her arm, locking it with Fluttershy's. Angel hopped down from the windowsill, his normally vibrant, expressive eyes dull as the events which had led to this point in the evening played over and over in his mind. He followed the two mares silently. As she guided the yellow pony in a fashion that circumvented the corpse as well as most of the blood, she noticed that Owloicious was just now beginning to come to, much to her and Spike's combined relief. "I'll be right back, Spike," Twilight told him.

"You got it, Twi," the baby dragon replied, turning and reaffixing his intent gaze on the stirring owl.

"You can open your eyes now, Fluttershy - just don't look back, ok?" Fluttershy nodded as the two approached the top of the stairs. Her eyes slowly opened, scenes of utter destruction again flooding her vision. Tears welled up in her eyes yet again, but she managed to keep them in as the

two made their way down the stairwell, being careful not to cut themselves on any broken glass or sharp pieces of wood.

“Twilight?” Fluttershy asked tentatively, her voice barely audible. “What’s going on?” Twilight bit her lower lip, knowing that she would be unable to sugar-coat the situation at hand in any way, shape or form.

“In a moment, Fluttershy. First - can you tell me what happened?” Fluttershy’s knees began to buckle as they reached the bottom of the stairwell.

“I - well, um...” she began, her voice wavering noticeably as she made her way to the stuffed couch on the far side of the room, one of the only pieces of furniture that was not completely destroyed.

“I put the critters to bed just before I went to bed myself. It was just a normal night...” she swallowed, and continued, “like any other, Twilight. I was fast asleep. I heard what sounded like a bunny in pain - it was awful! I’d never heard anything like that before; I didn’t know a bunny could scream like that! I flew downstairs and outside as fast as I could, and...and-”

“It’s ok, Fluttershy. Just tell me what happened next.” The pink-maned Pegasus sighed wearily, and continued.

“I saw a pair of big, red, glowing eyes. It was dark out - the eyes were under a tree, still in the shadows - but from the shape, I could tell that it was a stallion. I heard...noises,” the last word just barely managing to eek its way out of Fluttershy’s mouth.

“What *kind* of noises, Fluttershy?”

“...squishing.”

Fluttershy went on to tell Twilight about how the stallion had set about attacking any living creature in sight. Several creatures lie defeated on the ground. Angel was bravely assaulting the stallion with a stick, even going

so far as to lob a few rocks at him; this was to no avail, however, as the infected was focused on his gruesome meal.

“Angel!” she had cried, the sight of the rabbit’s valiant - yet unsuccessful - efforts finally jolting her out of her paralysis. The stallion paused in mid-chew and turned at the sound. The infected grunted a single, guttural syllable and began to lurch unsteadily toward Fluttershy.

Angel, negligible amounts of testosterone coursing through his little bunny veins, latched on to one of the stallion’s rear hooves, trying to slow his progress toward the cabin. Fluttershy’s heart was beating a mile a minute, hammering against her ribcage with feverish intensity.

“ANGEL!” she shrieked, motioning for the rabbit to discontinue his potentially fatal assault and rejoin her. The small, white rabbit immediately dashed to Fluttershy’s side as she turned on the spot, trotting quickly with shaking hooves into the cabin. *Oh, hurry, Angel!*- her internal voice matching her external ululations in levels of panic as well as intensity. As soon as Angel was through the door, she nosed the door shut as tightly as she could and turned her neck to do the latch on the right-hoof side; it was too late! The stallion, still grunting and retching horribly, had broken into a brisk trot and barreled toward the door, sending the delicate Pegasus flying backward from the force of the impact. For the second of what would be many times to come that evening, she shrieked. Without even thinking, she scooped up Angel with her mouth and plopped him on her back, taking off into a full gallop up the stairs as the rabbit held onto his owner’s soft, pink mane for dear life. Fluttershy could hear the stallion raging behind her as she made her way up the stairs, the sounds of an absolutely livid monster crashing into furniture and the titters of breaking glass filling the enclosed space with a nearly deafening cacophony.

She ran to the bedroom as fast as she possibly could, tears of fear and anguish streaming down her face, hoof-steps sounding sharply on the polished oaken floor. Fluttershy slammed the door behind her and immediately rushed to the nearest heavy piece of furniture - a solid dresser taller than she was - and set about pushing it in front of the door. The heavy Maplewood dresser nearly didn’t budge as she threw all of her weight against it again and again, wings flapping furiously in an attempt to aid her effort. She grunted and strained under the pressure, and still the sounds of the enraged stallion drew closer - she heard a tumbling sound as

the infected surely tripped and fell down several of the stairs, eliciting an absolutely bestial cry of unparalleled loathing. Fluttershy cried out as the sound chilled her to the bone and sent icicle-like shivers coursing up her spine. She redoubled her efforts, and finally the dresser began to move - slowly at first as it groaned and scraped against the wooden floor, scoring it with lines littered with freshly-peeled wood shavings. With the help of Angel pushing alongside her (though it is understandably arguable how much strength the small rabbit actually lent to the effort), the dresser at last was nudged into place dead center (no pun intended) in front of the doorway. And not a moment too soon! Just as Fluttershy was about to collapse to the floor in a heap of exhaustion from the sudden exertion, the stallion began his full-frontal assault on the door, drawing out yet another shriek from the yellow mare's already taxed lungs. Angel leapt to the windowsill and looked out into the not-so-peaceful night, hoping to spy any remaining critters who could help them escape - or survive - but it was to no avail. Any woodland creatures that had been around before the infected stallion's morbid snack had now surely fled, lending the darkened landscape an eerily calm quiet, save for the constant pounding on Fluttershy's bedroom door.

Chapter 4

Mayhem

The last few sentences of Fluttershy's story brought fresh tears to both the mare's eyes. Spike and a very groggy Owloicious had rejoined them and listened intently - Spike, clearly traumatized by the combination of his sudden awakening as well as the gruesome sights he had just witnessed, sat silently at Twilight's hooves, absentmindedly sucking on his tail as he rocked back and forth in an unconscious effort to calm himself. Owloicious, still in the process of shaking out the cobwebs from his knock to the head, uttered a single, solemn *Hoo* as soon as Fluttershy was finished - as if to say, "I'm sorry for what you've been through." Sensing that her friend was on the precipice of another breakdown, Twilight quickly filled the void in the conversation with a quick, concise summary of all that she knew so far - Luna's message, the purpose of the bubble over Ponyville as well as some vague recollections of something she may or may not have read in one of her dusty old tomes.

"I swear, Fluttershy, something about all of this seems too...familiar. Where did I read-..." She trailed off in mid-sentence, temporarily lost in her thoughts.

"Twilight?" Fluttershy asked, her voice still barely above a whisper. Her tone spoke of strain, heartbreak and grief. Twilight shook her head and focused her gaze on her still very frightened friend.

"Yes, Fluttershy? What is it?"

"Do...do you think we could - um..."

"Think that we could what, Fluttershy?"

"Um...the animals that-that the stallion...the stallion..."

"...killed?" the purple unicorn offered, the word leaving a bad taste in her mouth as it rolled too effortlessly off of her tongue.

“Right. Do you think that I could...um...see that they get a proper burial?” Twilight’s heart broke at this. Fluttershy’s eyes betrayed no emotion. Unfortunately for her - and the critters that lay dead just outside - it would have to wait.

“I’m sorry, Fluttershy -” she began firmly, “but there just isn’t any time for that right now. This is an emergency situation, and I’m not sure if it’s even safe to be in the town square right now. This is bad. This is worse than the time Nightmare Moon returned to Equestria - hay, this is even worse than that, the bunny stampede and the Parasprite infestation *combined*.” Fluttershy’s eyes watered, but no tears broke free from the lower lids. “We need to get somewhere safe - all of us,” she said, motioning to the baby dragon, the white rabbit and the owl. “I read it in a book: *Dangerous Disasters - a Laypony’s Complete Guide to Survival*. We need to stockpile food, water and supplies, and wait for help to arrive.” Spike seemed to ease up a bit upon hearing his master’s quickly-returning tone of reassurance.

“More importantly, we need the Elements.”

“The-the Elements of Harmony? But what...” Fluttershy trailed off, her head suddenly dizzy as the full brevity of the situation swelled forth like an anxious scratching within her chest.

“I’m not sure what’s going on yet - I don’t even know if the Princesses know, either - but I intend to find out. And with the Elements at our disposal, there’s nothing we can’t overcome! ...right?” She turned to all others present in the room, but was merely met with hastily down-turned faces and unsure looks.

Taking a deep breath, Fluttershy took Angel gingerly in her hooves and set about hastily packing her saddlebags, making sure to only bring along the bare essentials. Twilight was likewise taking deep, controlled breaths, making certain not to swoon at the amount of additional magic it was now necessary for her to perform. Within a few short minutes, they were ready.

“Um, Twilight?”

“Yes?”

“Where are we going?”

"We're going to the library," Twilight stiffened in her resolve, a sudden rush of newfound confidence surging through her as her chest swelled at the thought of returning back to her (easily defensible) tree home.

"Oh! Um, well, how are we going to get there? With, you know, those 'infected' ponies running around...won't it be very dangerous?" Fluttershy turned and let out a small eep! as she noticed Twilight's eyes glowing.

"Not...if...you're a unicorn," Twilight managed through gritted teeth. In a flash, they were gone; all that was left was destruction.

With a final gurgle, she died.

For nearly a full minute, Applejack, Rarity, Pinkie Pie and the Cutie Mark Crusaders had watched in horror as the recently reanimated realization of their fears had absolutely ravaged Nurse Redheart. The infect colt, eyes ablaze, had straddled the nurse mare in the blink of an eye as soon as he had wrestled her to the ground, grunting and spitting unintelligible gibberish as he set about brutally killing her. Had they had the presence of mind to do so, young mares would have shielded the younger fillies' eyes from the depravity that had played out before them - unfortunately for the six of them, however, the suddenness of it all combined with the sheer terror that beset them plastered them firmly in place, unblinking eyes wide to the horror.

Three simultaneous, ear-splitting screams from the younger three of the six served three purposes; one, it jolted the mares out of their stupor; two, it focused the colt's attention on his next potential meals; three, it caused a veritable stampede as roughly two dozen mortified onlookers that had remained, some joining in the fillies' screams, took off in every feasible direction. Sweetie Belle, Applebloom and Scootaloo turned and ran faster than they had ever ran before, still shrieking as their little lungs strained to gulp in enough air to supply their muscles with the energy required for such taxing physical endeavour.

"Sweetie Belle! *Wait!!*" Rarity cried after the three, breaking out into full gallop as her two friends soon followed suit.

“Rarity! Applejack!! WHAT’S GOING ON?!” Pinkie Pie yelled as they pursued the Cutie Mark Crusaders, who were now headed in the general direction of Sugarcube Corner.

“Ah don’t rightly know, sug-” Applejack was briefly interrupted when she had to dodge a loose plank in her path, “but we need to catch up to them fillies ‘fore they get hurt!”

“Sweetie Belle! Scootaloo! Applebloom!” Rarity shouted ahead to the fleeing fillies as they were temporarily lost in the crowd.

The scene was absolute chaos: stands, carts and other marketplace items were knocked about haphazardly, some completely taken apart as jumbles of confused and frightened ponies ran into each other, sending tangled masses of arms, legs and heaving torsos barreling everywhere. A watermelon stand was ripped to shreds, sending bushels of the cumbersome green fruit spilling out into the cobbled market; some ponies were unfortunate enough to be felled by the new obstacles that lay in their paths. The orange cowpony turned to look behind her, and her heart sank - joining the infected colt was the freshly zombified Nurse Redheart, a nightmarish shell of her former self lumbering toward the fleeing crowd. Applejack could discern nothing remotely pony-like in her emblazoned eyes - all that remained was malice, peppered with murderous intent. She turned her head to look away as the infected nurse mare set upon a dark-green colored pony who had undoubtedly broken her leg, her screams and pleading falling upon deaf ears as Redheart fell to the cobble and greedily began to feast. As the three mares continued to pursue their charges, they could have sworn that they heard...kung-fu noises?...amidst the screams of agony and gurgled breaths of the infected bearing down on them. However, their focus remained on catching up with the Cutie Mark Crusaders, who were now easily discernible from the galloping mass of terrified ponies. Miraculously, they were still shrieking their nearly uninterrupted shriek as they sprinted away from the chaos which was taking place behind them.

A single, awful sound - much, much louder than any which comprised the din which assaulted everypony’s ears - caused nearly all to turn and look directly behind them. Another three infected had appeared, joining the infected colt and Nurse Redheart in an animalistic wail that sent nearly

everypony into conniptions. Applejack, Pinkie Pie and Rarity watched as the three new infected ponies converged in the center of the marketplace and took off at random, jaws snapping at anything that moved. A bright red Pegasus, with glowing eyes to match, managed to corner a mother and her two young foals, in an alleyway which separated two buildings off to their right. The mother could barely move, let alone call for help - much like Applejack, Pinkie Pie and Rarity just moments ago, she was quite literally paralyzed in fear. One of her foals, a cream-colored earth pony with a pine tree for a cutie mark merely whimpered as the infected Pegasus advanced, while the other - a light blue colt whose cutie mark was obscured by shadows, shouted angrily at the infected in a decidedly vain attempt to dissuade her from attacking.

Applejack knew that she had to act fast.

“Rarity!” she barked as she made a ninety degree turn to her right and galloped toward the cornered ponies. “You catch up with the fillies and take them to Sugarcube Corner! Pinkie Pie, with me!” Rarity nodded, brows low in newfound determination.

“But Appleja-” Pinkie Pie began.

“**NOW!**” Applejack cut her off, shouting perhaps a bit louder and more harshly than she had meant, caught up in the excitement (and terror) of the moment. The orange cowpony and pink earth pony made their way toward the alleyway while Rarity continued onward, quickly gaining on the fillies, closing the gap little by little. The normally well-mannered unicorn cursed loudly as she dodged various obstacles in her path - a toppled fruit stand here, a few scraps of wood there and the like. She was panting heavily at the sudden strenuous exercise; though Rarity could undoubtedly hold her own in a fight, as evidenced by a swift kick to the jaw of a certain Manticore a few months back, she was simply not used to any manner of extended physical activity. Her motivation, however, lay a few mere yards away - three fillies, somehow still screaming, galloping randomly now, threatening to be lost in the crowd once again. With a final burst of speed, she was finally within range: using the telekinesis magic which came so naturally to her from years of dressmaking, she picked up the three squirming fillies off of the cobble, reaching out with a lavender aura of magic as her horn glowed a matching color.

Though suspended in mid-air, the Cutie Mark Crusaders' arms and legs were still in full-gallop, still fleeing for their lives despite the fact that they were no longer actually achieving any distance. Scootaloo's wings flapped occasionally while Applebloom's red bow bobbed up and down; Sweetie Belle was the first of them to stop screaming and struggling, opening her eyes for the first time in nearly a full minute. How the three of them had managed to traverse the marketplace unscathed - with their eyes closed, no less - was something of a mystery. A still-huffing Rarity dashed in front of the three, her eyes positively ablaze with determination.

"You three! Follow me, NOW!" she commanded as she released her magical hold on the fillies, setting them down on the cold cobblestone.

"Big sis! Nurse Redheart! She's-"

"Sweetie Belle, I know. There's nothing we can do," Rarity replied as the four closed on Sugarcube Corner. "We need to get you girls inside as quickly as possible. Applebloom, Scootaloo, are you all ok?"

"Ah'm fine, Miss Rarity," an out of breath Applebloom said.

"Yeah, me too, Rarity," an equally winded Scootaloo chimed in.

"Good. Now, come on! We're nearly there!"

Applejack and Pinkie Pie arrived at the scene quickly, and not a moment too soon - the infected Pegasus was bearing down on the three trapped ponies, grunting and sputtering gibberish as she closed in for the kill.

"Hey, ugly! Leave them three alone!"

The Pegasus, clearly annoyed, turned to regard the two earth ponies which stood behind her. She was clearly not interested in five morsels - the three she had cornered would do just fine. Just as the infected was about to turn her head back to take a bite out of the mother's neck, there was a sharp *bang!* as her eyesight was temporarily obscured. Pinkie Pie, in her typical fashion, had somehow managed to produce roughly a dozen party poppers from seemingly nowhere, the acrid smell of gunpowder wafting into her

nostrils, stinging them slightly. Though her eyes watered, the effect on the infected was exactly as she had planned - it confused the hell out of it. Applejack was nearly about to ask her friend how - and more importantly, *why* - she had streamers with her, but that train of thought was effectively derailed once the dull thud of a body dropping to hard cobble filled her ears. In an attempt to free herself from the visual hindrance, the infected had tripped over the mass of multicolored thin paper that was hanging off of her body, tangled up in her bloodied wings and interspersed between her legs. Her eyes still burned bright through the streamers, obscuring the devilish glow ever so slightly, illuminating the makeshift blindfold.

Turning her fierce green eyes to the cornered ponies, Applejack commanded,

"Run!" The three looked at the orange work pony for a moment, dumbfounded. "Ah said RUN! Go on, git out of here!" Applejack charged the infected Pegasus as she began to collect herself, knocking her to the ground once again. The mare and her two foals took off, offering hurried thanks to the two friends as they made their way to safety.

"Be careful, Applejack!" Pinkie Pie chided shrilly, the infected once again stirring. "Don't let her bite you!"

"Ah know, sugarcube. Don't you worry 'bout me non-oof!" The air rushed out of Applejack's lungs as her own hooves got tangled in the mess of streamers, sending her clattering to the cobble mere inches away from the Pegasus, who had now cleared the obstruction from her vision and rolled on top of the other, knocking the farm pony's Stetson hat from her head.

"No!!" Pinkie Pie screamed, starting toward the entangled pair now struggling for dominance.

"You stay back, Pinkie Pie! Ah can handle myself!"

With that, Applejack managed to free her hind legs, planting them firmly under her assailant. She grunted and gave a mighty buck to the infected Pegasus' midsection, sending her careening into the adjacent brick wall. Applejack quickly leapt back to her hooves, ready for a fight. The infected snorted and clamored to set herself upright once more, regarding the two mares with unbridled fury. Lacking any skill or coordination, the Pegasus charged the work horse, a snarl escaping her lips as she gnashed her teeth

together in frustration. Applejack winced at the sound, but there was no time to get caught up in the unpleasantness of the situation: she had to act, and she had to act now. Timing her strike perfectly, Applejack - within the span of a half second - turned a full one hundred and eighty degrees and delivered a devastating buck straight to the jaw of the charging Pegasus, breaking it on contact. Applejack felt then delivered a second equally mighty buck in quick succession, instantly felling the infected as the sheer force of the blow snapped her neck.

Applejack stared, dumbfounded, at the Pegasus she had just killed. Her mouth hung agape as her chest heaved and retched; she felt the hot, acidic bile begin to rise in the back of her throat as she looked to her victim, dark maroon pools of blood beginning to gather under the body. Pinkie Pie, wearing a similar look of disbelief on her face, could only stare at her friend as she solemnly trotted to her side, eyes turned downward with tears already starting to flow freely.

“AJ, I-”

“*Don’t*. Just don’t, ok?” Applejack sniffled, her voice wavering. “Ah ain’t proud of what ah just done, and ah don’t wanna talk about it.” She picked up her hat and set it back on her head, adjusting it slightly with trembling hooves. “Now, c’mon. Let’s go find the others.”

Chapter 5

Rufus Divium

Five hours earlier

Rainbow Dash yawned, a particularly long evening of strutting her stuff finally beginning to take its toll on her. Though her wings ached from all of the exercise and her mane was perhaps a bit more disheveled than usual, the cyan Pegasus was content as she trotted back to her room, absentmindedly humming a tune to some song or another. It was just after sunset in the city of Cloudsdale - brilliant, vibrant golden hues intermeshed with soft purples and radiant pinks in the west, as if Celestia herself had painted the gorgeous landscape with the sky as her easel.

As current holder of the title "Best Young Flier in Equestria," Rainbow Dash had been invited back to her hometown to showcase her talents for aerial acrobatics as well as host a two-hour workshop on the finer points of flying for the Cloudsdale Flight School. When she first received the letter from the googly-eyed mail-mare just three days ago, she had been ecstatic; while it is true that she always loved to show off her moves (as was her nature), she was particularly excited at the opportunity to help out her alma mater while doing what she did best. It had been an exciting (if not somewhat tiring) day of loop-de-loops, mid-air pirouettes, careening corkscrews and saltatorial somersaults whilst young pegasi watched on in awe, eyes wide as saucers. Now that the day was finally over, however, Rainbow Dash was looking forward to a nice, relaxing bubble bath and much needed rest. Pushing through the revolving glass doors of Cloudsdale's finest hotel - the Cloudsdale Mareiott - the rainbow-maned Pegasus entered the ballroom-esque lobby, complete with pure crystal chandeliers and a beautiful array of many-colored clouds floating lazily in the rafters. Her entrance garnered a few hushed whispers from the half dozen or so pegasi lounging in the lobby, a few pointing in her direction as they recognized just who she was. Dash was positively beaming as she made her way to the gold gilded elevator doors, thinking to herself, *Best. Day. Ever!*

That notion, however, was soon to be trumped. Just as the doors were about to click shut, Rainbow Dash heard a familiar voice cry out,

“Hold the door, please!” Having no reason not to do so, Rainbow hastily stuck a light blue hoof in between the doors to hold them open, much to the chagrin of the dinging elevator. Though she wasn’t in uniform, Rainbow would recognize that distinctive orange and yellow mane anywhere - it was Spitfire, captain of the Wonderbolts! Rainbow could feel a fan-girl moment coming on, struggling not to break out into an over-excited litany of “Ohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh!” Taking a deep breath, though, she was able to maintain her cool, and as casually as possible, greeted her elevator companion.

“Hey, Spitfire - what’s up?”

“Hey there, Rainbow Dash! Didn’t expect to see you here; don’t you live over Ponyville these days?”

“Yeah, but the Cloudsdale Flight School invited me back to do a workshop with their first years. They even put me up in this sweet room! It’s got a mini-fridge and everything!”

“Wow, that’s pretty cool, Dash!” Spitfire replied, turning her head to the side briefly and producing a white card key.

“Hey, what’s that?”

“Oh, this?” Spitfire said as she swiped the card through a card reader that had been installed on the elevator panel. “It lets me into the VIP penthouse suites on the top floor. You know that the Wonderbolts are performing for this year’s vernal equinox ceremony, right?”

“Oh, yeah! Totally! Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Dash added.

“Yeah, the Rainbow Factory is sponsoring our performance this year - they paid for both squads to stay in some of the penthouses. You should come hang out! ...Dash? You ok?” Rainbow Dash was on the verge of hyperventilating, eyes glimmering wide as a big, goofy grin broke her too-cool façade.

“You...me...Wonderbolts...*penthouse suite?*!” she cried, her voice cracking as the last few words escaped her mouth. Spitfire laughed - the rainbow-

maned mare's enthusiasm had always been a source of amusement and mirth for her - and replied,

"Sure, why not? C'mon, it'll be fun! You've gotta check out the Jacuzzi!"

"...JACUZZI?!"

The night was young. The sun had set just over an hour ago, and twinkling stars glittered brightly over the cloud city. Cloudsdale had not known any real, tangible conflict since its inception centuries ago - save for the odd worker's strike or last year's parasprite infestation, it had always remained a peaceful settlement in the sky.

That long-held truth, however, was about to rapidly change.

One of the most popular nightclubs in Cloudsdale - the Icarus Club - was, as per usual, in full swing. The dull thuds of bassline-heavy rhythms could be easily heard even as the supposedly soundproof doors were drawn shut; indeed, the very windows of the club itself seemed to rattle and bounce in time with the electronic music that was so popular with the club's hip and young clientele. The club itself had a bit of notoriety to it, given that there were a few incidents in years past with underage ponies being served (read: over-served) alcohol, but the club's management had scurried to repair their establishment's somewhat sullied image, completely re-vamping the club's security and even hiring bouncers from outside agencies. One of these bouncers - a gruff, surly-looking Pegasus with a billiard cue and balls as his cutie mark - was on the clock tonight, arms crossed across his barrel-like chest with a bent cigarette drooping lazily out of the corner of his mouth. It had been a relatively routine evening for the Pegasus, already having to deal with roughly a half-dozen underage pegasi trying to gain access to the posh club. He almost relished in the wavering in their wide, shifty eyes and the obligatory gulps that he had come to associate with underage clientele when he asked for their ID. Indeed, he more often than not found himself chuckling inwardly as he turned them away, each fake ID more and more laughably fake than the last. As the night wore on, though, he found his mind wandering in-between new entries to the club. He was always a bit of a night pony: breathing in a great lungful of the crisp, cool air, he couldn't help but let the tiniest of smirks

creep across his stubbled face, taking in the scents and smells that had always put him at ease.

The bouncer Pegasus was jarred from his mild elation, however, when he spied a rather bony-looking colt staggering in the general direction of the club. Though the night was not entirely dark (the pale moonlight illuminated his silhouette, but nothing more), he could already tell that the colt had been dipping into the well this evening, so to speak. The Pegasus colt looked unsteady on his hooves, wobbling this way and that as he moaned softly, stumbling over himself more than once. The bouncer rolled his eyes and spat out his cigarette, the cherry having already reached the filter, sooty smoke drifting up into his face and stinging his eyes a bit. He sighed, already mentally preparing his pre-fabricated lines for denying a too young or too drunk patron access to the club. Still, the colt continued his zig-zagged gait toward the club's entrance, still moaning softly. The bouncer had to stifle a chuckle; he had a brief flashback to the days of his own youth, not having learned the proper way to imbibe alcohol, overindulging and more often than not waking up in an unfamiliar place with a foul taste in his mouth. He thought he caught a glint of something shiny dangling from the colt's muzzle as the colt swerved to regard the bouncer in full for the first time, moonlight dancing off of his face for an instant before returning to the shadows inherent to the night. The bouncer Pegasus raised his eyebrows, and called out to the colt, who was now roughly ten yards away -

"Hey, buddy. Why don't you head on home, huh? Yer mother's prob'ly worried aboutchya." If the colt had heard him, he offered no sign. He continued staggering toward the entrance to the club, now rapidly closing the distance between himself and the bouncer. As the colt stepped into the light, the bouncer felt a twinge of excitement - and perhaps concern - as he regarded him properly for the first time. The colt looked as though he had been in quite a scuffle: cuts and nicks littered his face, and clumps of his jet-black mane were torn out in places. Dried and drying blood clutched to his matted fur, giving the colt a disheveled, disgruntled look. What the bouncer took the most notice to, however, was the look in the colt's eyes - or lack thereof. There was no expression in those orbs as they hung dully in their sockets, sunken in and lifeless as the colt looked at the bouncer with a deadened gaze.

"You been in a fight or somethin' tonight, pal?" the bouncer asked. Still, the colt ignored him. Without warning, the colt collapsed, sending up wispy

puffs of clouds into the air. The bouncer froze for a moment, not entirely sure what to do. His areas of expertise were limited to breaking up fights and checking IDs, not tending to a gravely injured colt who cantered into his relatively dull evening. Thankfully, there was nopony outside the club to see the bouncer's lack of action - he knew that he would probably get bitched at by one of the managers, had they seen him just standing there, dumbfounded. He started toward the colt laying on the clouds; he looked to his chest, and noticed two things; one, there was a sizeable hunk of flesh missing from his side. Two, the colt wasn't breathing. "Oh shit," he said to himself harshly, immediately turning around and starting back toward the club to summon help. Just as he was reaching out with a front hoof to open the door, however, he heard the colt stirring behind him, yet another moan escaping his lips that gave the bouncer gooseflesh.

Slowly, the bouncer Pegasus turned back around to face the colt, who had now gotten back to his hooves. His eyes were burning red, so brightly that they cast a pair of muted sanguine-colored dots on the bouncer's chest. The bouncer blinked, his brain trying in vain to process what had just occurred. The infected colt took a few shaky, tentative steps toward the bouncer, not entirely like a newborn foal learning how to walk for the very first time. The same viscous mixture of blood and saliva began to drip freely from his snout, little flecks of the soupy liquid dribbling off of his chin and soundlessly falling to the cloud beneath him. The colt let out a cry of fury and charged the unready bouncer, hitting him square in the center of his chest with surprising force. As they fell to the cloud, the bouncer's fight-or-flight instinct finally kicked in, testosterone being released into his bloodstream and coursing through his veins, enlivening his extremities and willing his body to action. Before he could manage to buck the colt off of him, however, the colt sunk his teeth into the bouncer's shoulder, blood spraying rapidly as it began to stain the cloud beneath them. The larger Pegasus let out a cry of shock and pain. He managed to shove the infected off of him and sprung back to his hooves, eyes ablaze, ready for a fight.

"Oh, you're fucking dead, kid."

His final statement was not entirely incorrect.

Sound asleep amidst a veritable labyrinth of pillows and blankets, Rainbow Dash snored lightly, jostling a tuft of multi-colored hair that had fallen over her face with every exhale.

She had hung out with the Wonderbolts in the wee hours of the morning, lounging in the Jacuzzi with Spitfire, Soarin and a few others from the second squad, swapping stories and tantalizing tales of their experiences as Equestria's elite flyers. They had ordered room service: a few cases of Sarsaparilla and even a couple bottles of very expensive vintage Dom Ponygon, something which Rainbow Dash had never indulged in before. The bubbly drink tickled her nostrils with each sip and she savored the exquisite flavour that had washed over her taste buds. At half past one in the morning, though she was having the time of her life in the company of her childhood idols, Rainbow Dash had to excuse herself; the events of the previous day coupled with the generous amounts of spirits she had imbibed finally caught up to her. She stifled a deep yawn as she bade the Wonderbolts good night, trotting sleepily back to her room and settling in for the night. It was perhaps a sign of maturity that Rainbow had left the impromptu on her own accord, and she knew it; should the opportunity had occurred to hang out and drink with the Wonderbolts even a few months prior, she would have most certainly overstayed her welcome. As this was not the case, however, she drifted off to sleep with a sense of utterly all-encompassing complacency, a smile adorning her face even as she slumbered. She slumbered so soundly, however, that she did not notice the bubble that had manifested itself around the cloud city accompanied by a strange, ethereal grating sound and a series of muted flashes of arcane energies.

In her dreams, she was - as per usual - flying, the wind sailing through her mane effortlessly as she blinked her eyes against the torrent of currents that rushed up to meet her. She was accompanied by Spitfire and Soarin, and they were all dressed in properly pressed Wonderbolts uniforms, save for the customary goggles that the team only wore during performances. The three pegasi darted from cloud to cloud, tumbling and rolling in mid-air as they deftly dodged their floating obstacles, smiles on each one of their faces. In the dream, though, there was a sudden change - things began to get bright. Impossibly bright. It was almost as if they were all flying directly toward the sun, and Rainbow Dash shut her eyes against the brilliant light to no avail. It seeped through her eyelids, temporary images of clouds and companions burned into her retinas as those too were suddenly overcome

by the intense luminescence. Just as she was about to comment on the development, she heard a voice -

“Rainbow Dash.”

Confused, she shook her head and shut her eyes even tighter in an effort to diffuse some of the radiant glow that was now beginning to sting a bit.

“Rainbow Dash, wake up.”

The light was beginning to burn now, hot tears of pain beginning to leak from her eyelids.

“*Wake up.*”

The real Rainbow Dash’s eyes shot open, and she squinted. There was indeed an unexpected source of light in her room, no doubt the cause of her dream’s disturbance. Grumbling slightly and cursing once under her breath, she grabbed the nearest pillow and pulled it over her head.

“Good, you’re awake.” *That voice...* she thought to herself. Her eyes peeled themselves open once again as she started in place and sent pillows and blankets flying off of the bedspread, wings stiffening to full alert in surprise and confusion.

Standing at the foot of her bed was none other than Princess Luna, her elongated horn lambent in the absence of light.

“P-princess!” Dash managed to eek out, her surprise getting the best of her as she stumbled out of bed and tripped over a series of pillows that had been cast to the floor. Luckily, though the soft sleep items broke her fall as she thudded almost soundlessly to the floor. The farthest thing the cyan Pegasus had expected this evening was to be personally woken by royalty, and a barely discernable blush crept into her cheeks, reddening them ever so slightly. In any other situation, Luna would have found the sight somewhat amusing - she had always somewhat enjoyed surprises and pranks in her youth, but her face remained grim. Dash noted that the princess’ expression made her look older. As the glow surrounding Princess Luna’s horn began to fade, Dash started, “What are you-”

“-I apologize for pulling you out of your dream, Rainbow Dash. It certainly looked like a good one,” she interrupted, her normally soft and serene voice now carrying a discernable jagged edge to it. “However, we don’t have a whole lot of time, and I need to get you up to speed as quickly as possible.”

“Wha-”

“-We have a situation,” the Princess interrupted again. “Since you are an Element of Harmony, you are among the first in Cloudsdale to learn the information that I am about to share with you.” Luna walked over to the rather large window at the far side of the room, looking out at the deceptively peaceful night’s scene as the rest of the cloud city slept. She sighed, and continued. “There has been an outbreak of monstrous proportions; a virus, capable of destroying the peace and order my older sister has toiled for so many centuries to craft and maintain.” Dash reeled a bit at this, eyes widening in surprise. “This virus...it changes ponies. It transforms them into mindless monsters, enraged killing machines whom are only former husks of themselves. We don’t know how - or why - this virus has appeared -” Luna stopped herself mid-sentence before she said *again*, “-in our fair kingdom, but the most important thing that we can do at this present juncture is to maintain order and civility. It is also of equal importance that we prevent the spread of this virus any further - any contact with blood or saliva is absolutely lethal, and a bite from an infected pony will turn the victim in a matter of minutes.

“In just a few minutes, the Mayor of Cloudsdale will activate the emergency beacons.”

“Emergency beacons?” Rainbow Dash managed to say, brows raised slightly.

“Yes. Since you have only known peace in your time in Equestria, I do not imagine that you would know of this safeguard, as it has not been used in hundreds and hundreds of years. Given that there are no magic users in Cloudsdale - specifically, no unicorns - there is a system in place that ensures all citizens will be alerted to the presence or incidence of any semblance of danger or disaster. It is an artifact, made by Celestia herself, which allows the current Mayor of Cloudsdale to magically amplify his (or in our case, her) voice many times in order to deliver a message.”

“What is she gonna tell us to do, Princess?”

“She will order the evacuation of all residences and businesses, and order that all Cloudsdale citizens quickly and calmly proceed to the Cloudsdale Coliseum to await further instructions. That is where you come in, Rainbow Dash.”

“M-me? What am I supposed to do?” Dash answered, sounding unsure of herself. This sudden rush of seemingly impossible information was swirling around in her noggin like an untamed maelstrom as doubt crept into the forefront of her mind. The most subtle of smiles briefly betrayed Princess Luna’s terse visage, as the young flyer had reacted to the situation exactly as she had predicted.

“Now, now - where’s that courageous and *loyal* attitude that has made you famous throughout the land? That certainly doesn’t sound like Equestria’s Best Young Flyer,” she began, her voice assuming a chiding tone.

“Hey!” Dash interjected, forgetting temporarily that she was speaking to royalty. “What’s the big idea, huh? I’m the most loyal, most brave Pegasus around!” As Luna’s brows furrowed in an unmistakable display of annoyance, Rainbow Dash shrunk a bit and said, “Uh, I mean...sorry, Princess.”

“Think nothing of it,” the Night Princess replied dismissively, accentuating her point by waving a hoof in the air. “There are more important matters at hand, as I am certain that you are quickly realizing. There is not a much time left before the Mayor issues the evacuation order, so I will be brief: I need you to remain in Cloudsdale and assist the Wonderbolts in ensuring that the evacuation goes smoothly and calmly.” A smile now began to grow on the cyan Pegasus’ face at the thought of actually *working* with the Wonderbolts, but it was quickly replaced by a look of trepidation and frustration.

“Wait - I have to stay here?”

“That is correct.”

“What about Ponyville? What about my friends?!” Dash cried, the mere thought of abandoning them in the midst of this crisis nearly too much to

handle. It sickened her and made her stomach feel queasy as her mind began to run wild with possible scenarios. "I can't just leave them hangin'! What if they get hurt?!"

"I am sorry, Rainbow Dash, but that is the way it has to be for the moment. Come, look outside," she motioned with a hoof for Dash to join her at her place in front of the window. She trotted quickly toward the window and gasped at what she immediately saw. An absolutely gargantuan translucent blue bubble now hung over Cloudsdale, partially obscuring her view of the nearly full moon. It shimmered as the lunar rays penetrated the barrier, the pale yellow light being diffused and displaced as it shone through the powerful magic.

"Wha-what the hell is that?" Dash cursed, again forgetting that she was in the presence of royalty. The Princess chose to ignore this, and replied,

"A very powerful spell, one which has not been used for millennia. It is a barrier that effectively isolates Cloudsdale from the rest of Equestria. Even if you *were* to try and disobey my direct order -" at that, the Princess shot a hard sidelong glance at Rainbow Dash that made her gulp, "-you would find it quite impossible to do so. Nothing gets through that barrier."

Dash sunk to the floor, the brevity of Luna's words overwhelming her temporarily.

"But...my friends..." she spoke softly as hot tears began to well up in her eyes, threatening to burst forth as she realized that she was - for the moment - utterly incapable of helping them. Seeing this, Princess Luna softened a bit and knelt to come face-to-face with the cyan Pegasus.

"I know that you are worried about them, and I am truly sorry that you cannot join them. From what I hear from my sister, however, I am more than certain that Twilight Sparkle is more than capable of keeping your friends safe, wherever this night may take them. I have ordered all settlements within Equestria to come together in the main area of their respective establishments, and I have the utmost confidence that the rest of your friends are going to be together very shortly." Rainbow offered a snuffle in response, and, breathing deeply, rose to her hooves.

“Yeah...yeah, you’re probably right, Princess. Twilight doesn’t take any crap - I mean nonsense! She doesn’t put up with any nonsense,” Dash said quickly, not wanting to annoy Luna any further with her somewhat brash vernacular.

“That’s the spirit!” Luna replied, smiling softly; quite the feat, considering her raging inner turmoil about what she knew was approaching the castle back in Canterlot. “So now, Rainbow Dash, I ask of you - will you help me? Will you help your hometown in its time of need?” Dash paused for a moment, but in her heart of hearts, she knew that her mind was already made up. Being the walking representation of the Element of Loyalty meant dedication to a lot of things, and Cloudsdale was among the highest on that list.

“Heck yeah, I’ll help! What do I need to do?”

First Interlude

Lyra and Bonbon

“On your left!” the teal unicorn cried sharply as she dodged a lumbering mass barreling towards her. Her friend, a white-coated earth pony with a flowing purple and pink mane, cursed loudly and pivoted on point, delivering a perfectly executed sweeping kick with her front legs which knocked the infected to the ground. Lyra and Bon-Bon had to shout to hear each other’s directions to be heard over the din: unicorns, pegasi and earth ponies scattered in every direction around them, many screaming in terror as they fled the onslaught. Joining the cacophony were the grunts and groans of the infected, some spouting clipped, guttural gibberish as they lumbered after the fleeing townsponties. Outside of the occasional friendly spar between the two, tonight was the first night in years that they had actually fought with the intention of harming another pony, infected or otherwise.

The unicorn and the earth pony had met one another roughly a decade ago while overseas in Yokeyo. They studied under the same sensei at Yokeyo’s prestigious - and exclusive - Filly’s Dojo for Maretil Arts. As the weeks and months wore on, the two quickly realized through the intense regimen that they were without question the most gifted students at the Dojo; their skills remained unmatched by any of their peers, and the more often they sparred one another, the faster they became accustomed to each pony’s style and technique. They learned from each other, Lyra mimicking and eventually mastering Bon-Bon’s unique style of fancy hoof-work while Bon-Bon learned from Lyra how to efficiently strike at pressure points and weak spots on a pony’s body. The two friends had both graduated at the top of their class, a rather unusual occurrence given the simple fact that the Dojo never had two valedictorians before. They went on to become masters of hoof-to-hoof combat, living legends in their own rites as they traveled exotic, foreign lands together to compete and showcase their talents.

The fluid motions of physical combat quickly returned to the two ponies as they fought; though it had been a good few months since their last spar together, the long and rigorous hours of their extensive training had ingrained a muscle memory deep within the cores of their very beings that

was nearly impossible to lose. Lyra brought a tremendous chop down on the horn of a charging infected unicorn, snapping the enamel in half with ease. The infected unicorn's horn clattered to the cobble, jagged and broken. With a high-pitched cry that came more from within the pit of her stomach than the top of her lungs, she followed up with a dizzying flurry of punches to the midsection and neck of the infected, dazing it temporarily. Without missing a beat, she tucked her extremities into herself and rolled to the side, scooping up the severed horn in one continuous motion. Before the infected had a chance to recover, she sprang back to her hooves and drove the tapered tip of the horn through the top of her assailant's agape mouth. Sealing the deal, Lyra withdrew her front hoof from the teetering infected unicorn's mouth and did a backflip, striking the bottom half of the jaw once with each hoof, driving the horn through the top of the skull.

"Lyra! Behind you!" Bon-Bon shouted as the infected Pegasus she had previously engaged tackled the off-kilter Lyra, sending the two toppling to the ground. The earth pony dashed over to the two now struggling on the cobble and slid on her side, not entirely unlike a baseball player sliding home; back legs first, her back left hoof connected with the side of the Pegasus' face. The force of the blow sent the infected reeling, tumbling several times end over end as Lyra kicked her hind legs into the air and righted herself in an impressive display of athleticism.

Had they not been fleeing for their very lives, anypony who had come upon the scene would have surely stopped to gawk at the seemingly innocuous pony friends, masterfully taking on and taking down any infected that crossed their paths as they shrieked and cried wavering kung-fu howls. The sounds of hoof-strikes and snapping bones joined the swirling sounds which traveled freely through the cool night air as the infected continued their assault on the two martial artists, drawn to and enraged by the sounds of their efforts to defeat all who had the audacity to oppose them. As the virus and violence spread throughout Ponyville, the infected amassed in the market square as they grew in numbers. Where there were initially only roughly a half dozen that had been the source of the terror in the normally sleepy town, as more and more ponies fell, so too did the infected grow in numbers. Lyra and Bon-Bon were entirely focused on the two or so combatants that they each engaged simultaneously; as such, they only barely noticed the increasing volume of the groans and grunts which surrounded them.

“Heee-YAHH!!!” A roundhouse kick snapped the neck of an infected earth pony, its head swiveling nearly three hundred and sixty degrees from the impact.

“Hoooahhh!!!” A well-placed uppercut unhinged a Pegasus’ jaw, the lower half flapping uselessly as its owner staggered backward.

“Take *that*, you fucking monster!” Lyra cursed as a downward blow absolutely shattered the skull of one of her combatants, squishy brain matter punctured by sharp shards of bone. The infected collapsed to the cobble, unmoving.

“Lyra!” Bon-Bon chided, “Watch your language!”

“For Celestia’s sake, Bon-Bon, now’s not the-” she paused briefly to dodge another charging infected, “-time to reprimand a pony on her foul mouth!” Bon-Bon shot her a coy sideways glance, grinning as she stiff-armed the same infected that had turned and tried to charge the earth pony. She didn’t even wait for the infected to crash to the ground before she drove her two front hooves into its neck, crushing the windpipe.

“There, that takes care of that,” Bon-Bon said with an air of finality. The two friends, no longer seeing any infected ponies in their immediate field of vision, turned to look at one another and smiled briefly. They were back in their element: it had been far, far too long since they had been in any real danger, and the adrenaline junkies relished in the waves of raw energy that cascaded through them. Their smiles, however, were short lived as each pony saw what lurked behind the other’s back. The two ponies spoke two words simultaneously:

“Oh, shit.”

Chapter 6

Inspiration

“Where are Mr. and Mrs. Cake, Rarity?” Scootaloo asked. The four had arrived without much fanfare, quietly opening the front door and promptly locking it after them. Rarity had insisted that they keep the lights off, for fear of drawing attention to the gingerbread house-shaped confectionery shop, but had relented and lit a few small candles when she calmed herself enough to notice the terrified look in the three fillies’ faces.

“I imagine they’re still out there, somewhere...” Rarity replied, gulping. She hoped that Applejack and Pinkie Pie would join them soon; the rush from the excitement and physical strain that had kept her energized moments prior was now beginning to wear off. The white unicorn found that her knees had begun to knock together. Not wanting to scare the already traumatized fillies any further, she joined them in the center of the room and sat down amongst the lit candles. The flickering flame cast dancing shadows across the main area of the shop, and the Cutie Mark Crusaders couldn’t help but let their eyes wander to the dark shapes that their silhouettes cast against in the darkened room. Wordlessly, they scrunched even closer together, the warmth of their quivering bodies pressed against one another offering little to no relief from the overwhelming fear that continued to assail them. Outside, the dull and muted noises of mayhem could be heard through the wooden door of the shop- screaming, crashes, galloping and thuds sailed through the crisp night air like a grotesque symphony of terror.

Somepony, in their hurry to escape from the cantering death that was no doubt chasing them, had knocked over a lantern, shattering it to pieces. As the oil leaked onto the cobble and caught fire, the blaze spread to a few nearby bales of hay, which subsequently spread to two nearby wooden vendor’s carts. With nopony to put out the fire, the orange flame continued on its path of destruction, greedily swallowing up any nearby stand in the inferno. Fortunately, it had yet to spread to any major buildings surrounding the market and looked as though it would stay that way: the stands which were consumed in the fire were all in relative proximity to one another, but far enough away from the thatched roofs of homes and businesses that the

fire was contained within the market square itself. Though the buildings themselves were spared for the moment, one unlucky (or lucky, depending on one's interpretation) infected was not so fortunate: in his mindless pursuit of his next potential victim, the brown earth pony had blindly galloped through the flames, catching fire almost instantaneously.

As the earth pony flailed and thrashed about wildly, he happened to pass one of Sugarcube Corner's windows, the impromptu non-living light source illuminating the glass panes. Even as his flesh boiled, he managed to notice the four occupants gathered together in the shop. In a horrific display of rage, he began to beat on the window with his head in his final moments, trying desperately to reach the cowering fillies and startled unicorn inside. The effort was short lived, though, as the infected quickly succumbed to the flame that swirled around him. He collapsed to the ground, lungs charred and blackened to match his exterior condition. Rarity quickly and quietly trotted over to the window, intending to draw the blinds shut. She had not had the presence of mind to do so when the four had first arrived at the shop, and it had become frightfully apparent that their presence in the building was rather easily advertised via the dull candlelight within. When she looked out upon the chaos that was taking place just outside, however, she stopped in mid-motion and simply stared for a few moments, eyes wide and unbelieving. The lambent maelstrom of fire which was making short work of the marketplace sent flickering flames upward into the night's sky, smoke and ash wafting upward on the currents of heat. Several dozen figures, eerily silhouetted by the inferno, ran in every direction; a disturbingly large amount of pursuers, lumbering monstrosities with erratic gaits chased their victims relentlessly. In the distance, Rarity could just make out two or three ponies putting up a valiant resistance - though the sound of the conflict was masked by the din of the roaring fire and the screams of infected and non-infected alike, the battle looked intense enough even without sounds to accompany it.

The white coated unicorn strained her dark blue eyes to see clearly through the madness. Unable to spot her distinctive Stetson hat, Rarity noted with some dismay that there was no sign of Applejack and Pinkie Pie among the fleeing silhouettes that ran about the market. Shutting her eyes to the sight of yet another mindless infected catching fire, she drew the blinds shut and walked as evenly as she could to rejoin the Cutie Mark Crusaders in the center of the room.

“Big sis...why? Why is t-this happening?” a tearful Sweetie Belle managed, her whimpering little voice barely audible.

“I...I just don’t know, Sweetie Belle,” the unicorn replied. “I thought the incident with the Ursa Minor was bad, but this...”

“Rarity?” an equally meek voice belonging to the dark orange Pegasus rang out. “W-where’s my mom? I-I want my mommy,” Scootaloo sniffled. Rarity’s heart swelled as panic began to rear its ugly head within her: she simply could not speculate as to where the Pegasus filly’s mother could possibly be, let alone whether or not she had survived the ongoing attack taking place just outdoors.

“I’m sure she’s fine, dear,” Rarity said, her voice sounding quite a bit more confident than she actually felt. “Pegasi have a keen advantage over us non-winged ponies, you know. Perhaps when the attack started, she took off into the air, looking for you? Why, I’ll bet that she’s in the skies, right at this very moment, searching! And from what I have noted thus far...infected,” she cringed a bit at using the word, “pegasi do not appear to be able to fly.”

“Hey...hey, yeah!” Scootaloo chimed in, her voice picking up just a bit. “My mom won’t let any of those nasty ponies get her!” A thought crossed her mind, though, and her ears began to droop. “But what about Rainbow Dash? Isn’t she in Cloudsdale?”

“Hmm...yes, I do seem to recall her mentioning something to that effect,” Rarity noted.

“What if there are more zombie ponies up there, too?”

“Knowing Rainbow Dash, Scootaloo, I’m sure that there is nothing to worry about. She certainly isn’t one to shy away from any danger...though I am sure that she won’t be too terribly happy about being confined to the city, knowing that her friends remain down here in Ponyville.”

“Whaddya mean, ‘confined’?” Apple Bloom asked, not yet having the situation fully explained to her.

“Well, Apple Bloom, do you recall that odd looking bubble in the sky?” She went on to briefly fill the little filly in, speculating that if what Princess Luna said about the spell was true, then there was no doubt a similar bubble encompassing the cloud city as well.

“And if this outbreak is really taking place across all of Equestria, then...” Rarity finished, not wanting to frighten the already traumatized fillies any further.

“...then what, Rarity?” Scootaloo inquired, suddenly uneasy. The white unicorn paid no attention, however - her eyes had suddenly gone wide and then taken on a glazed-over look to them, as if she had suddenly gone into a deep trance. The chalk-white horn seated atop her forehead began to glow ever so slightly, sparkling lavender hues radiating outward with magic. Her left eyebrow twitched slightly, but her eyes remained unblinking. The three fillies instinctively began to back away slowly, not entirely sure what to make of the new development; Sweetie Belle, easily the most skittish of the three, let out a small, wordless whimper.

“B-big sis? Are you ok...?” she spoke softly, trembling.

Rarity remained unmoving for the better part of a full minute, when suddenly, the slightest of smiles began to creep across her face. She blinked several times, her eyes finally coming back into focus, expression finally returning to her visage. The glow around her horn began to fade back into nothingness as she regarded the Cutie Mark Crusaders, still in the process of backing away, their flanks nearly making contact with the wall on the far side of the room. She spoke, trying her best to put the fillies at ease.

“Don’t worry, you three - I think that we’re going to be alright. We have a plan.”

Another flash of brilliant pink-white light announced the return of Twilight, Fluttershy, Angel, Spike and Owloiscious to Ponyville’s library. The butter-colored Pegasus felt a bit dizzy after the spell: she had felt the magic entering her body and swimming about her, the tingling sensation not entirely unlike a very mild electric shock. *Is this what it feels like to use magic?* she wondered to herself as she shook her head a few times, blinking her eyes back into focus. The interior of the library was darkened,

but not for long - using her magic, Twilight lit a few of the candles that were situated here and there on walls and tables, the subtle illumination from the yellow flames joining the pale moonlight which poured in from the upper story windows.

“Spike, will you draw the blinds shut, please? It may not be safe to let anyone know that we’re here,” Twilight said, the small purple dragon nodding his head silently in compliance. He plodded over to the nearest window, gasped, stumbled backward and nearly fell on his behind at what he saw through the panes of glass.

“T-twilight? You’re gonna want to look at this...” he said anxiously, motioning for the purple unicorn to join him. Cautiously, Fluttershy joined Twilight as they walked over to join Spike at the window. Two equally timed gasped escaped the two mare’s mouths as they took in the scene which lay before them. There was blood - copious amounts of red-black liquid pooled in puddles on the streets and covered in splashes the surfaces of destroyed carts and vendor’s stands in the marketplace, which lay not one hundred yards away from the library.

“So...so much blood...” Fluttershy managed to say before another small eep! left her muzzle. She felt lightheaded again, swaying slightly on her hooves at the sight.

“But where are all the bodies?” Twilight asked, more thinking aloud to herself than inquiring an answer from her companions. “If there’s that much blood, surely there should be bodies...” Further off in the distance, just before the edge of their field of vision, the shocked observers could barely make out the figures of fleeing ponies, darkened figures seemingly dancing wildly against the backdrop of flames.

“How did the marketplace catch fire, Twilight?” Spike asked.

“I haven’t got a clue, Spike. This...this isn’t good. What if the fire spreads to the houses? The whole of Ponyville could be destroyed! And what about the barrier? If there’s too much smoke under the bubble, then...oh, Celestia. This is bad. This is very, very bad,” she swooned a bit, her mind racing a mile per minute as she weighed the possible structural and atmospheric implications that the raging fire carried. She eventually had to draw the blinds shut, no longer desiring to look at the destruction.

Spike followed suit, making his rounds about the ground floor, being absolutely certain that every window's blinds were drawn tightly shut. Fluttershy, eyes watering again, sat weakly down on the wooden floor, nervously wringing her hooves together. Angel, though normally a somewhat cantankerous and eccentric companion, hopped swiftly to the Pegasus' side, trying his best to console her. He wore a grim expression on his face as he hopped up and patted Fluttershy on the head lightly, soothing the sniffling Pegasus slightly as she smiled weakly at him and returned the favour.

"I-I need a moment to think," Twilight announced, beginning to pace about the library nervously. Her brows furrowed in concentration as she slipped into a deep internal monologue, her mind working overtime to consider their possible options. Owloiscious flitted over to Spike, who had sat down wearily on the stairs leading to the second floor, head in his hands.

"Hoo?" he hooted inquisitively, as if to ask, "*You ok, buddy?*" Though the baby dragon didn't have the slightest idea as to what the owl was trying to say, the expression of concern in his feathered friend's eyes conveyed the sentiment marvelously. He breathed deeply, and said,

"You know, that was pretty brave, what you did back there at Fluttershy's cottage. How's your head, anyway?"

"Hoo," the owl replied, as if to say, "*I've had worse. I'll survive.*"

Even with the door sealed tight and the blinds drawn, it was not a far stretch of the imagination for anypony (or owl, or dragon, or bunny) to surmise just what was taking place outside. The occasional scream or cry rang out clearly in the air, joining the crackling of burning wood and clapping of hooves against cobblestone. Owloiscious, possessing a more finely tuned sense of hearing than anyone else in the room, craned his head toward the sound of what was undoubtedly a conflict taking place somewhere outside, dull thuds of hooves against flesh just barely audible. He nearly commented on this new development to the baby dragon who sat at his side on the stairwell, but decided against it; Spike was the only one in the room who couldn't fully understand the owl's native tongue. Fluttershy, in an effort to take her mind off of the disturbing events which had just transpired, trotted quietly into the kitchen, holding a candle

sideways in her mouth so as not trip on anything in the darkness of the room. She set the wax candle down on a countertop next to the pantry and began to root through its' contents: there was a loaf of bread, several tins of fruits and preserves, and a few boxes of junk food - one of Twilight's guilty pleasures, apparently. Frowning slightly, she made her way to the refrigerator adjacent to the countertop, opening the door with her mouth. The Pegasus squinted slightly against the sudden rush of bright electric light that poured out of the appliance. Once her eyes adjusted, she found several food items that were better suited to what she had been looking for initially: several stalks of celery, a head of lettuce, and about a half-dozen carrots. Knowing that Angel was probably hungry after his encounter with the infected stallion, she settled on the carrots, knowing that everyone but Owloiscious and Spike would more than likely eat the orange vegetable.

"I wonder what Owloiscious eats?" she wondered aloud to herself. "Oh! Oh, my...I hope he doesn't eat...bunnies..." she gulped a bit at the thought. However, after a second glance at the contents of the pantry, she happened upon a bag of birdseed, which she then poured a generous portion into a bowl. A glint caught her eye, and she bent down to reveal a decent amount of semi-precious gems resting on the bottom shelf of the pantry - no doubt food for Spike. Fluttershy grabbed a few of them as well, setting the gems on the countertop.

"Spike?" she poked her head out of the kitchen, the light from the lone candle illuminating her from behind. "Would you mind helping me carry this food out of the kitchen, please? If...if that's ok..."

"Sure, Fluttershy," the dragon replied, hopping back to his feet. He, too, was eager to let his mind wander from the evening's occurrences, and was thankful for the brief reprieve. Guided by the candlelight, the two gathered the provisions and made their way back into the library's main floor, where a still-pacing Twilight was regarding a particular section of books warily. The yellow Pegasus set the bowl of birdseed down in front of Owloiscious, who hooted gratefully in reply and began to peck at his snack. Spike sat back down on the stairs and was taking thoughtful, paced bites out of the gemstones - he was trying his absolute hardest to keep the violence and death he had witnessed thus far that evening out of his mind, not wanting to spoil his considerable appetite. Angel, briefly resuming his typical demeanor, had initially resisted being coddled and fed by Fluttershy; after a rather sizeable grumble from his stomach, however, he quickly

relented and graciously accepted the carrots that the Pegasus had brought for him, nibbling on the vegetables voraciously. Satisfied, Fluttershy then turned and started toward Twilight, who had now begun to levitate several books down from their respective shelves, discarding a few that she didn't need with audible grunts of frustration.

"Twilight? Are you hungry?" Fluttershy asked softly, already feeling a bit guilty for disturbing the unicorn in the middle of her work.

"...What's that? Am I what?" a distracted Twilight said, still glancing at the titles of the increasing amount of books she had levitated down from their shelves.

"Oh. Um, I said...are you hungry?" Fluttershy asked a bit louder this time. Her train of thought effectively derailed for the moment, Twilight turned around to face her friend with a small sigh, then looking at the small pile of carrots the Pegasus had brought with her.

"Thanks, Fluttershy, but after all that's happened tonight...I'm just not sure if I'll be able to eat anything," Twilight spoke. With an uncharacteristically heavy sigh, Fluttershy walked closer to her clearly stressed friend, wearing a look of concern and genuine understanding.

"Twilight, I know that tonight has been tough for all of us. It's...it's just so awful! But - but I really think you should eat something. You've been using an awful lot of magic tonight, and you need to keep your energy up. I wouldn't want you to overexert yourself." Fluttershy's tone was somewhere between encouraging and stern; it was altogether convincing enough for Twilight to soften her expression a bit and relent.

"Fine. You're probably right, Fluttershy. I just...I have an idea of what might be happening here, but I'm not sure if I have the book anymore! It's just so frustrating! I can almost put my hoof on it," she explained, bending over to pick up a carrot with her mouth. She began to chew slowly, the squishy sounds of her teeth mashing the orange vegetable into pulp bringing back memories of earth soaked with blood and dismembered animals. Twilight gagged reflexively at her memories of the gore, but resolutely swallowed and managed to keep her bites of the carrot down.

"I don't understand what's happening, Twilight. How...how can the dead come back to life? It should be impossible!" Spike called from across the room. He had finished his semi-precious snack, and had begun to plod over to where Twilight and Fluttershy stood. "I mean, I thought zombie ponies were just an old mare's tale!"

"When I was studying in Canterlot, I had read some vague, obscure references to an ancient, forbidden magic that could temporarily bring the dead back to life...but I only came across it in a few books, and they were written during a time when ponies liked to write using metaphors as opposed to clear, concise fact. But that wasn't a virus! At least, I don't think it was...sure, there are dark forms of parasitic magic than can be manipulated to seek out a host-"

"Para...para-what, now?" Spike asked, brows raised upward in confusion.

"Parasitic magic, another type of magic that's use was forbidden by the Princesses long, long ago. From what I've read on the subject, it let the caster take control of another pony for a short period of time."

"Y-you mean, like...mind control?" Fluttershy squeaked. "T-that's terrible!"

"Indeed it is, Fluttershy. Magic like that is forbidden for a reason - it's evil, and no sensible pony should even *think* about using something so terrible."

"Do you think that's what's going on here, Twilight?" Spike queried nervously.

"I'm not sure, Spike...as far as I know, parasitic magic only works on living hosts, so it should be impossible. However, I can't rule it out as a possibility just yet - not until I have enough information." With that, Twilight turned back to the bookshelves, ready to begin her literary search anew.

"I just hope that Rarity and the others are ok..." Spike meekly said, consternation beginning to creep into his voice. Twilight started in place.

"The others!" she exclaimed. "Oh, Celestia, I hope they're ok...but it's too dangerous to go outside. We'd be outnumbered! Maybe they found someplace safe to hide..."

"I know I'd feel a lot better if we could talk to them, Twi'," Spike added.

"Oh, yes...I'm just so worried about them! What if they got hurt in the fire? Or by one of those - things..." Fluttershy piped up. Thoughts swirled around in Twilight's head, briefly resuming her internal monologue. Suddenly, a sparkle seemed to quickly glisten behind her eyes as inspiration struck her.

"Aha!" she cried, perhaps a bit too loudly as the others jumped a slightly at the sound. "Spike, can you grab me my copy of *'Telepathic Communications Made Easy'*? It should be under 'T'," she instructed. Spike's ears perked up at the all-too-familiar command, temporarily forgetting his anxiety and dashing off to retrieve the tome. Noting that he would need its' assistance, he ascended a nearby ladder quickly, perusing the alphabetically sorted assortment of books studiously, reading the titles aloud to himself softly.

"Teas for Tea Drinkers, Technical Teachings for Techies, Teenaged Teetotalism for Teetering Teens...what? Oh, here it is!" Spike announced triumphantly as he held the book out in the air, positively beaming down at Twilight and the others. His small victory was short lived, however, as Twilight hastily levitated the book - and Spike - down from the ladder, sending the baby dragon flying face-first into the floor with a *smack!*

"Oo-oops!" Twilight offered, sheepishly. "Sorry, Spike. Are you ok?"

"Ugh," a muffled voice rose up in response as the purple dragon slowly pulled himself to his feet, eyes spinning independently from one another. The purple unicorn stifled a laugh, but her mirth quickly died upon seeing the somewhat mortified look on Fluttershy's face. Not wanting to worsen the situation, Twilight turned her attention to the book, quickly skimming the table of contents for the section she needed. She flipped to the appropriate page, and absorbed the information in a manner of mere minutes.

"Right, then. Let's give this a shot," she said aloud to no one in particular. Setting the book down, Twilight closed her eyes shut tightly and began to concentrate, focusing her energy to the tip of her horn. She felt the electrifying sensation of psychic magic buzz through her skull, resonating inside of her with a not entirely unpleasant frequency. In her

mind's eye, she felt herself reaching out across all of Ponyville - searching, sifting through the inherent background magical frequencies and life signatures of all living beings within the town. She frowned slightly as the invisible magic happened to pass over several infected - their signatures were corrupt, blackened. They felt cold and dead, yet somehow malicious at the same time. Brushing off the brief encounter, she pushed onward, when finally -

“Aha!” she cried again, eyes still shut. The spell had found its mark. Inside of Sugarcube Corner, a certain white unicorn went into a trance.

Hello? Rarity, are you there? Can you hear me?

Initially, there was no response. She knew that the spell was working - why hadn't her unicorn friend replied?

Rarity, it's me, Twilight Sparkle. Can you hear my voice? Please say something!

...good heavens, first a viral outbreak, then the fire, and now...now I'm losing my mind! Could this night get any worse?

The white unicorn's ethereal voice sounded stressed.

Rarity, trust me, you're not going crazy. It's really me!

...Twilight Sparkle? How...how are you talking to me? How is your voice in my head, dear?

I'm using a spell similar to the one Princess Luna used to warn us unicorns about the infection - it's not nearly as powerful, but I think I managed to get it right.

Well, I should most certainly say so, my dear! Are you alright? We were with Pinkie Pie and Applejack earlier, but we got separated and I don't know where Fluttershy-

-Fluttershy's safe, she's with me. Wait, 'we'? Who's 'we'?

I'm inside of Sugarcube Corner, dear. Sweetie Belle, Apple Bloom and Scootaloo are with me, while Applejack and Pinkie Pie ran off to save a poor family that some horrid monster had cornered in an alleyway. They should be back soon, I hope...

Are you safe? No pony got bitten, did they?

Thankfully, no. But I'm not sure how safe we are here...the fire in the marketplace hasn't spread to any of the buildings yet, thank Celestia, but should the fire spread, Sugarcube Corner will likely succumb.

...that's not good. Ok, listen carefully, Rarity. There are a couple of things we need to do right now, and with that fire still burning, we're running out of time. One: we need to figure out a way to put out the fire. Two: we need to figure out where Pinkie Pie and Applejack are, and make sure that they're safe. Three: we need to gather everypony together - you, me, Applejack, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, the Cutie Mark Crusaders-

You do know that Rainbow Dash is in Cloudsdale, don't you, dear?

...shit. I forgot about that.

T-twilight! Watch your language, dear! I know that things are bad, but-

-sorry, sorry. Well, we **do need the Elements, so-**

The Elements of Harmony, dear? Why, whatever for?

The Elements are among the strongest magic known to ponydom, Rarity. Even if we don't quite know what we're up against just yet, I'm sure that with the Elements, there's nothing that we can't overcome!

...yes, I do suppose you are correct. But with Rainbow Dash in Cloudsdale...

-I know, I know. That...that is a problem, I'll admit. How can we bring Rainbow Dash to Ponyville with that barrier keeping us in? I would take the balloon, but...oh, Celestia...

...dear, couldn't you just teleport to Cloudsdale? After you cast that cloud-walking spell, of course! We certainly wouldn't want you plummeting to your death, you know.

Rarity, YOU'RE A GENIUS! I could kiss you!

...you could do what, now?

Uh, nothing. But that's a fantastic idea! I don't know why it didn't occur to me sooner! Thank you, Rarity!

Think nothing of it, darling. I do have quite the attention to detail, if I do say so myself!

The ethereal voice chuckled warmly.

Indeed you do. All right! Once I go and get Rainbow Dash, she can hopefully pull a few rain clouds together and put out the fire. I would ask Fluttershy, but...well...

Yes, we do know our Fluttershy. I couldn't think to ask anything like that of her - it's simply too dangerous outdoors! Rainbow Dash, on the other hand-

-right, danger is like a drug to her.

Interesting simile, dear. Well, what would you have me do from here? I'm afraid that there are still quite a few...infected...ponies running about at the moment, and there is still no sign of Applejack or Pinkie Pie.

Rarity, I need you to stay put for now and keep Sweetie Belle, Apple Bloom and Scootaloo safe. Wait for Applejack and Pinkie Pie while I go to Cloudsdale and find Rainbow Dash. I'm not sure what I'll find up there, or how bad the situation is up there, but I'll try to be as quick as possible. I promise.

I trust you, Twilight.

I need to cut off this conversation - this spell is taxing enough as it is already, and I don't want to use up too much of my magic.

I understand, darling. Stay safe, do you hear me?

I will, Rarity. Thank you. I'll see you all soon.

With the slightest of grunts, Twilight ceased channeling her magic through her horn and the spell faded away. Knowing that she needed the same book she had consulted to visit Cloudsdale a few months ago for the Best Young Flier Competition, Twilight galloped hurriedly to the section where she knew the book lay. She didn't want to risk injuring Spike any further, and she knew that she was in an excitable enough state to accidentally pull her number one assistant down from the ladder again. Instead, she located the book she needed a few shelves up from where she stood, flipped it open to the page with the information she needed, and read. Nodding with determination, she quickly cast the spell on herself: normally, she would begin to worry about the magical strain she was putting on herself, but she knew that the spell was elementary enough to not be a concern. Besides, her friends needed her to be strong! She couldn't let them down!

"Twilight? What was that all about?" Spike asked, still a bit confused about the minute or so that she had spent with her eyes closed, standing absolutely still with horn aglow.

"Oh, right. Sorry. I just talked with Rarity - she's fine. She's with the Cutie Mark Crusaders at Sugarcube Corner for now."

"How-"

"Because of that book you found for me, Spike. Thank you, by the way! Oh, and sorry. Again. I didn't mean to pull you off of the ladder like that."

"It's fine, Twilight. Don't worry about it," the baby dragon replied, absentmindedly raising a hand to his head and wincing as he stroked a sore spot.

"What was that spell you just cast on yourself, Twilight?" Fluttershy asked, curious.

"A cloud-walking spell. I'm going to Cloudsdale to find Rainbow Dash."

"C-cloudsdale? But...but there could be more of those 'infected' ponies up there! And besides, wouldn't that be disobeying Princess Luna's orders? You could get in a lot of trouble!"

"I'm afraid so, Fluttershy, but that's the nature of the situation. It cannot be avoided, and we need to gather the Elements of Harmony together." Her friends looked uncertain. "Don't worry about me, I'll be fine!" She did her best to reassure her companions.

"Promise me you'll be careful, Twilight?" Spike asked.

"Yes, please do stay safe..." Fluttershy added demurely.

"I promise. Fluttershy, please look after Spike, Owloiscious and Angel while I'm gone. I'll try to be quick."

"Of course, Twilight," the yellow Pegasus replied, sounding a tad more certain of herself.

"Right," Twilight said with determination, taking several deep breaths to prepare herself for yet another teleportation spell. She closed her eyes again, calming herself, willing a serene state of well-being to overcome her. Steadily, surely, she drew upon her decidedly expansive inner reserve of magic - she knew that his spell would be somewhat taxing to perform (especially after the psychic and cloud-walking spells), but her love for her friend Rainbow Dash and her concern for her well being seemed to unlock something within her. It was faint, at first; a feeling of raw, immense power began to blossom at the very core of her being, radiating outward in electrifying pulses and waves. Gasping slightly at the new sensation, her eyes shot open, again aglow with a blinding white light which illuminated the entire interior of the library as though it were high noon. Fluttershy, Spike, Angel and Owloicious could do little more than look on in awe, the former of the four having been the only amongst them to witness their purple unicorn friend unleash this caliber of magic before.

With a brilliant crescendo of energy and a surge of impossibly bright light, she disappeared, bound for the city in the sky.

Chapter 7

Pandemic

Two hours ago

Canterlot. The absolute zenith of culture and class in all of Equestria; an architectural amalgam of the rustic and chic, of modern and old. An eerie silence blanketed the city like an invisible fog – as the city slumbered, basked in slivers of muted moonlight obfuscated by the odd lingering cloud, not a sound could be heard. The usual creaks and chirps of late summer crickets was strangely absent from nature's subtle nightly symphony.

And yet, within the veil of the still darkness, something moved; several somethings, to be precise. Twitching, shuffling silhouettes stalked silently through the city, making nary a sound as they maneuvered through alleyways obscured by shadow. A stray cat, fur pitted with filth and grime, was unfortunate enough to meet its end at the hooves of a monstrosity; a sound not entirely unlike wet cloth being torn asunder just barely escaped a darkened passage in the space between two business, closed for the night. The orange tabby let out a final pained yowl before being silenced permanently. The sound wafted through the still air, falling dead on the ears of those who slumbered with open windows...save for one.

Not a half block away, a magenta-coloured earth pony filly with streaks of orange and gold in her mane stirred in her plush bedspread. The yowl had been just loud enough to gently jar her into consciousness. Breathing deeply as one does when one first becomes awake after hours of slumber, she blinked several times, bringing her vision into focus. A soft, yellow artificial light plugged into an adjacent wall cast warm, glowing hues across the room. The young pony sighed daintily, rolling over onto her side for a moment.

I simply cannot believe that it's happened again, she thought to herself. Another night of interrupted sleep. By Celestia's grace, this is growing tiresome. The filly allowed a few more moments to pass before sighing again, her mind and body reluctantly coming to terms with her undesired consciousness. Shifting her weight to her left, she rolled off of the rather

luxurious, plush mattress and swung her back legs over the side, allowing them to dangle in midair. With a small hop, her hooves made contact with the padded, navy blue carpeting that spread out across her bedroom, forelegs quickly following suit.

Perhaps a glass of water will help. Given that her eyes were still adjusting to the low levels of light in her room, she cautiously started to walk toward the door leading out into the hallway -

CRASH!

The filly, startled at the sudden sound coming from outdoors, jumped nearly three feet into the air, letting out a surprised yelp as she did so. Her shoulders hunched up instinctively as she swung around to face the window at her rear, now fully awake and alert.

“What in Equestria was that?” she asked nopony in particular, still firmly rooted in place. After several deep breaths, her heart rate slowed to the point wherein she felt able to move again; cautiously, she began to stealthily slink over toward the window, curious to learn the cause of the loud sound. The magenta filly was rather short-statured; just a half inch or so over three feet in height, the top of the young one's head just barely met in the center of most ponies' chests. As such, she planted her forelegs on the mahogany windowsill and balanced on her back two legs, managing to pull her chin over the ledge.

The sprawling abode in which the filly resided shared land with several other houses in close proximity; though her family had the luxury of their own front and back yards, the nearest house – belonging to a rather wealthy notary and his wife – lay a mere fifteen feet away from the window. The first thing she noticed amiss were the garbage cans on the side of her neighbour's house – the tin canisters had been forcefully knocked over, bags and their contents strewn about haphazardly. “Perhaps some animals got into them?” she mused aloud. As she took in more and more of the scene, however, more and more appeared to be out of place. For one, the gates of the white picket fence which encompassed the perimeter of her neighbour's yard was wide open; upon closer inspection thanks to a squinting of eyes, she noticed that the left half of the gate had been ripped clean off of its hinges while the right just barely remained attached, splintered wood and warped metal clear signs of formidable strength. Her

eyes traced a path of isolated destruction leading inward from the gates – trampled flowerbeds and upturned patches of wet earth were cast here and there at random. She glanced over at the trash cans a second time, and noted with some alarm that the tins themselves were not, as she had previously thought, merely toppled: no, the aluminum receptacles were pocked with deep dents and great gouges, as if somepony had mistakenly stumbled into them in the darkness and thrashed them violently in a fit of reactionary rage.

The filly started to turn back around to wake her parents – clearly, there was a prowler on the loose in the neighbourhood! The royal guard had to be notified! Before she could complete the motion, however, her ears perked up as the sounds of rustling and...grunting?...rose up to meet her. Now thankful that her window lay a good ten feet off of the ground, her eyes darted back and forth, scanning the landscape, trying to pinpoint the location of the disturbance. They finally landed upon an expertly trimmed series of bushes adorning the rear of her neighbour's house – they appeared to be shaking. The bush's sole occupant emerged, bursting forth from the foliage violently as branches snapped and leaves were torn away. Though the night's lack of light inherently obscured her view of the supposed prowler, she noted with some surprise that the ruffian was little more than a foal itself; judging from the figure's stature and shape, the magenta filly surmised that the intruder had to have been only a year or so older than herself, and was more than likely a female. She gasped softly as the figure's hooves got tangled up in several branches that had fallen to the ground, falling forward with a dull thud that was only barely audible, given the distance between them. She did hear, however, the enraged snorts and grunts that soon followed the unexpected trip, instinctively tensing up upon sensing the raw anger and fury that was clearly present in the figure's wordless litany of frustration.

As it would happen, the young pony was not the only one to notice the strange occurrences taking place just outside her neighbour's home. Muffled at first but quickly growing in volume, she heard a series of incessant yips that could only belong to the notary's pet dog, Scruffy. Though the interior of the house remained for the moment darkened, she could tell from the way the sharp, accentuated barks traveled through the air that the dog was no doubt situated just behind the pair of sliding glass doors that led to her neighbour's backyard.

The filly let a small wave of relief wash over her upon this revelation; surely, the small dog's constant yipping and whining would alert the notary and his wife to the presence of the intruder. Relief quickly turned to horror, however, when the intruder reacted to this new development. Now that the figure had regained its balance, it snapped its head toward the new auditory addition to its environment and snarled viciously. Amid unrelenting canine yapping, the figure let out a dull roar and charged, careening headlong into the glass-paned doors. They shattered instantaneously upon impact, the sound not entirely unlike several dozen glass vases being dropped at the same time. Though it may indeed have been the young filly's overactive imagination filling in the gaps, she could have sworn that she heard the sounds of shards of glass tearing into flesh.

The dog let out a small, startled yip, a sound that mixed in with the crunch of broken glass being ground to a pulp underhoof. There was nothing for a moment, save for a few muted crashes.

Then, the screaming.

The magenta filly did not know that dogs could scream; she quickly gleaned this shocking truth as the figure undoubtedly set upon its tiny, noisy adversary. Her own mind again filled in the blanks in the absence of light, but she was silently grateful for the lack of a visual counterpart. A cacophonous series of pained yips and strained howls rang out clear, causing the young one to wince a bit. Pops, breaks, squishes and tears amounted to the only logical conclusion that the filly could draw upon – her neighbour's dog was in the process of being brutally ravaged. For the better part of a minute, the filly could do little more than listen in horror as the assault went on, finally culminating in a resounding screech which sent shivers up and down her spine. There was silence yet again for just a few moments; then, the lights came on. Through the blinds, she saw the silhouettes of the notary and his wife quickly shuffling about in their upstairs bedroom. She followed their path across the room as the silhouettes briefly disappeared from sight, the hallway lights also being turned on in their absence. The two made their way to the stairwell, she assumed, and flicked on the downstairs lights, illuminating most of the lower floor and revealing the shocking extent of the carnage that had already taken place.

Several of the windows on the lower floor were spattered with blood, great red streaks and lines adorning the transparent panes. Her wide, unblinking

eyes moved toward the shattered sliding glass doors; blood pooled in between the thousands upon thousands of glass shards which littered the floor. Just beyond the majority of the broken glass lay what remained of the neighbour's pet dog – reduced to little more than several piles, the poor canine had quite literally been ripped apart. Her breath caught in her chest as waves of panic radiated outward, sending an unpleasant tingling sensation coursing up and down her extremities. A flash of movement to her left mercifully wrenched her eyes from the mutilated corpse. The notary, a tall (if somewhat gangly) middle-aged stallion, stood at the bottom of the stairwell, motioning frantically at his wife. He beckoned her with his forelegs to back away, turning his back on her as he did so and beginning to menacingly advance toward the depravity at the back of his kitchen. His wife, a rather plump mare with a green coat and cyan mane, stumbled a bit on her way back up the stairs, quickly reaching the top of the stairwell and stared unbelieving at what little remained of her precious pooch.

The notary began to shout angrily at the intruder; now that the lights were on in her neighbour's house, the magenta filly finally got a good look at her. She, too, was a filly, her ruddy white coat fettered with a multitude of nicks, scratches and cuts. Her muzzle was absolutely coated in blood, dark red drops cast in every direction as she twitched spasmodically. Broken and crushed shards of glass stuck out of her legs at random angles, black-red blood oozing from the wounds. The white filly regarded the advancing notary with an unreadable look on her face. Although she was not able to make out the exact words being shouted at the intruder, the magenta observer surmised that they were unkind and probably laden with profanity. The white filly stumbled a bit, and advanced toward her new foe.

“Oh, no,” she said quietly to herself – the notary was headed straight for her! Why didn't he run? With another guttural cry, the intruder charged at the notary, hitting him directly in his center of gravity with the top of her skull. Caught off guard, he fell to the ground with a thud, eyes wide with surprise. In an off-white blur of unimaginable ferocity, she was on him. As the notary screamed in pain and agony, the white filly tore into him, head bobbing up and down as she began her macabre feast. His wife had begun to scream in horror, and was unrelenting in her wails as the white filly greedily gobbled up bits and pieces of her victim. The animalistic attack lasted, mercifully, for a little over a minute - the wounds that the notary sustained proved to be lethal. His wide eyes lost their sheen as they grew dead, breathing his final breath. A hoarse, pained rattle escaped his chest.

His wife, still screaming in terror, took off at a gallop down the stairs, nearly tripping again as she did so. The catatonic magenta filly watched her as she burst forth from the front door, shrieking at unimaginably high frequencies. The sound of the panic-stricken mare's vocal expulsions finally shook the filly from her horrified observance; she, too, broke out into a gallop and quickly made her way to her parent's bedroom door, not even bothering to knock as she rammed the door open. Her unicorn father and earth pony mother stirred, the former sitting up with a bolt as he was the lighter sleeper of the two.

"Honey, what's wrong? Wha...what time is it?" a sleepy stallion asked, rubbing the sleep from his eyes with a hoof.

"Dad! It's Mr. Quill Stroke! He-he's...he's-" The young filly began to hyperventilate, short sharp breaths filling the room.

"Calm down, dear," her mother replied, her speech slightly slurred. She sat up in bed as well, then swung her hooves over the side, making her way to the filly. "Take a couple of deep breaths. It's ok." She placed a comforting foreleg over the side of the shaking young pony, drawing her close. The filly did her best to calm herself, to little avail; she was, however, able to get her breathing under control to the point where she was able to continue.

"Mr. Quill Stroke – he's dead! Somepony killed him and his dog! I saw it!" the filly shouted as she begun to sob. At that, the unicorn stallion rose to his hooves as well, his daughter's statement hitting him like a speeding train.

"What?! He's dead? Hon, are you sure about this?" he asked in a firm voice.

"Y-yeah! I woke up and I heard a noise outside, and I saw somepony in his back yard and then Scruffy started barking and...and then she crashed through the glass doors! And-"

"She?" her mother interrupted. "Who is 'she'?"

"The pony that killed him! She tore Scruffy apart and then killed Mr. Quill Stroke too! It was awful...oh Celestia, there was blood everywhere!"

"I'm going to go have a look," the unicorn stallion said.

"Are you *insane?!?*" his wife replied, regarding her husband incredulously. "If what Dewdrop is saying is true, then there's a killer out there!"

"Lemon Drop, we don't have time to argue. I am more than capable of looking after myself – I'll take a quick look outside, then I'll come back. Lock the doors after me and look after Dewdrop, ok?"

"But-" Suddenly, there came several loud banging sounds from downstairs. Somepony...or *something*...was knocking on their front door.

"*Stay here.*" the unicorn commanded, fixing a deadly serious gaze on his wife and daughter.

The unicorn quickly but quietly made his way downstairs, muffled footsteps masked by the constant pounding on the front door. Though obscured by the thick wooden door, the stallion instantly recognized the voice that came interspersed between the bangs – Regal Flair, the notary's wife. He trotted to the door with haste and unlocked it, just barely dodging the teary and hysteric blue mare that came crashing through the vestibule.

"Oh praise Celestia, thank you, Seeker! You're the first one who actually opened their door!" she sobbed, collapsing against his chest. He quickly reached up with a long foreleg and shut the door behind her; however, as the weeping mare pressed up against him shifted her weight, he nearly lost his balance as he fumbled to correct himself.

"Regal! What happened to you? My daughter, she said something about-"

"*He's DEAD! My husband is DEAD!*" she wailed, the timbre of her voice stinging the stallion's ears ever so slightly. "Some...some monster broke into our home and killed poor Scruffy! Quill Stroke tried to chase her out...*Celestia's sake, she was just a kid!* She tore Scruffy apart and then she did the same to my Quill Stroke!"

"C-calm down, Regal. I'm sure-"

“Calm down?! *CALM DOWN?! How in Equestria can you expect me to calm down?! I just saw my husband murdered, Seeker! Oh sweet Celestia, he's dead, he's dead, HE-*” Against his better judgment, he slapped her. It was a light enough strike to not cause any actual damage, but the hoof across the face certainly snapped her out of her hysterics, albeit temporarily. She stared at him with widened eyes conveying a potent mixture of shock, anger, revulsion and grief.

“Look, Regal, I'm sorry I had to do that. If the murderer is still out there – and I assume that she is – then it might not be safe for us down here. Go upstairs, first door on the left. Lemon Drop and Dewdrop are inside. Lock the door-”

“Seeker? What's going on here?” Lemon Drop called from the top of the stairs. Having heard the panicked exchange between her husband and her neighbour, curiosity had gotten the best of her. Seeker twirled around and angrily said,

“Goddammit, Lemon Drop! I thought I told you to stay with Dewdrop! Take Regal Flair up with you, and for the love of Celestia, *lock the goddamn door and don't open it for anypony*. Do you hear me?!”

“O-of course, Seeker. Regal, if you would please follow me,” the earth pony mare meekly said, beckoning her sobbing neighbour to follow her. The two met at the top of the stairs and disappeared from sight, leaving the unicorn stallion alone downstairs.

Looking around the room, Seeker's eyes fell upon a small end table at the side of a couch. Flipping it over with his snout, he clutched a leg in his teeth and smashed it against the wall – once, twice, finally breaking it apart on the third swing. Using his magic, he levitated the broken table leg into the air, brandishing the makeshift club in front of him as he cautiously trotted over to a window on the adjacent wall. He pushed a curtain aside with a hoof and peered out into the darkness; the lights were on next door, and he noted grimly that there was indeed a decent amount of blood coating several of his neighbour's windows. Driven by the unstoppable urge to protect his family, he debated with himself internally for a moment.

Given that he lived in a relatively upscale area of Canterlot, the royal guard did not necessarily make a habit of patrolling the streets that made up the

neighbourhood. He knew that the closest royal guard station was roughly ten blocks away from his house, and he knew that if he hurried, he could make it there in a little over five minutes – that, however, meant leaving his wife, child and traumatized neighbour alone with a killer on the loose. Begrudgingly, he admitted that this option was probably the least feasible. Racking his brain, he decided that he would have to make his way across the street and wake up Star Gazer, a long-time friend of his. If Star Gazer could go to the station and report the crime in his stead, that meant that he would be able to stay there and protect his family and neighbour; this course of action appealed to him, and with a nod, it was settled.

Making certain not to create any unnecessary noises, the table-leg wielding unicorn stallion unlocked the front door and stepped into the cool night air. His eyes darted back and forth, looking for any signs of movement. Seeker allowed himself to quickly trot into his backyard, placing himself in front of Quill Stroke's kitchen window; it wasn't pretty. The mutilated corpses of his neighbour and what had formerly been known as a dog were strewn about the kitchen floor – it looked like the inside of a butcher's shop. From what he could see, the murderer was not present: he didn't like that, the obvious implication being that the murderer could be literally anywhere. Again moving as quickly and as silently as he could manage, he exited his yard and trotted up to Star Gazer's front door. The unicorn rang the bell urgently. He didn't want to knock just yet – knocking would make too much noise, possibly alerting the murderer to his presence outdoors.

Ringling the bell several more times, he allowed himself to breathe a soft sigh of relief when a light came on upstairs. He glanced behind him, eyes still scanning for any movement. Just as he was about to turn his head back toward the door, he could have sworn that he saw something dart just beyond his field of vision: he positioned his body so he could get a better look in the direction where he thought it came from. He regarded the area for a few moments, but saw nothing. Seeker jumped a bit at the sound of a lock being turned behind him. The door slowly swung open – standing in the doorway was a very tired and somewhat annoyed Star Gazer, a robust dark-blue stallion unicorn with a jet-black mane.

“Ugh...Seeker? Do you know what time it is? ...why are you levitating a table leg?” he asked drearily, yawning slightly.

“Apologies, Star Gazer, but this is an emergency. Quill Stroke has been murdered,” he replied quickly. Star Gazer's eyes widened, then narrowed. He looked past Seeker across the street and saw the lights on in Quill Stroke's house.

“Murdered?! Are you sure?”

“Unfortunately, yes. I got a look at it, and trust me – it isn't good. Poor Quill Stroke was torn to pieces,” he answered, lips tightening into a pained grimace. “Star Gazer, I need your help.”

“M-me? What can I do, Seeker?”

“I need you to go and alert the royal guard. You and I both know that they don't get out this way without good reason, and I can't risk leaving Lemon Drop, Dewdrop and Regal Flair alone. It's too dangerous.”

“Regal Flair? What is she doing in your house?”

“She was pounding on the door – what was I supposed to do, leave her outside? Look, we're running out of time, here. The killer could be anywhere. You and I both know that you're a faster runner than I am-”

“-quite. I always did come out on top when we were in track and field together back at University.”

“Ha, ha. There's always time for gloating later, Star Gazer. Right now, I need you. This neighbourhood needs you. Can you do this for me?”

“Look, Seeker, I can understand where you're coming from – however, if what you're saying is true, then how can you expect me to leave my family alone at a time like this? You said it yourself, it's too dangerous. What if the killer breaks into my house, too? What of Moon Dancer and the foals?”

“You raise a very good point, Star Gazer, but I...um, what are you looking at?” Star Gazer's eyes had casually drifted beyond Seeker's head and were affixed on something behind him. His mouth hung open, his voice failing to work for him as he was only able to motion weakly with a hoof. Seeker twirled on spot, saw what his friend was looking at, and managed a rare, “Oh, fuck.”

Quill Stroke was lumbering slowly toward them, moaning as he did so. His eyes burned red, lambent pinpricks glowing devilishly in the darkness. The infected steadily closed the distance between himself and the two unicorn stallions, who looked on in horror. Without warning, their horns began to simultaneously glow; their pupils dilated as the raw magical energy shot through their bodies, rendering them immobile. Seeker's makeshift club fell to the ground as he lost his telekinetic hold on the table leg. Now mere yards away from the infected stallion's first victims, the Seeker and Star Gazer heard a voice in their heads:

"This is a message to all magic-using ponies throughout Equestria. This is Princess Luna, goddess of the Moon. A terrible virus has begun to break out all across our fair kingdom..."

Present

"Applejack, there's another one!" Pinkie Pie's shrill voice cried out, motioning to her right with her head as the two galloped.

"Consarnit, where do they all keep comin' from?!" Applejack asked rhetorically, adjusting her gallop to dodge yet another attacker. After saving the mother and her two foals from the infected pegasus, the two earth ponies had been slowly making their way to Sugarcube Corner. They had met little resistance at the beginning, but were now almost constantly accosted by an alarming amount of infected ponies that seemed to pop up out of nowhere. Amidst the overturned carts and spilled produce, the two ponies dodged and weaved their way through the destroyed marketplace, constantly vigilant. Though they were mere blocks away from Sugarcube Corner, a substantial group of infected stood between them, blocking the immediate path ahead.

"Pinkie, ah don't know if we can go in through the front – not with all them infected in the way!"

Pinkie Pie had seen the growing group of adversaries as well, and was already formulating an alternative rout in her head. Looking left and right, her eyes finally fell upon the alleyway that she had envisioned.

"This way, AJ! Follow me!" the pink pony shouted over the din, suddenly breaking off to her right. Applejack followed suit, deftly jumping over a series of watermelons that littered the path. The alley that the two earth ponies darted into was narrow, no more than two yards wide. Garbage bins and various refuse adorned the left side of the alleyway, making the going that much more narrow in places. Applejack cursed silently as one of her back hooves caught a trash can and tipped it over, sending the metal bin crashing to the ground. The sound reverberated off of the walls in the enclosed space, amplifying the sound by several orders of magnitude. Within seconds, Pinkie Pie and Applejack reached a split in the alley; one path curved off to the left while the other sharply turned to the right.

"Which way do we-" Applejack began.

"C'mon, over here!" Pinkie interrupted, taking the path that wound to the left. As the sounds of the carnage going on in the marketplace began to fade with distance, Applejack asked,

"Pinkie, where're we goin'?"

"This path'll lead us to the back door at Sugarcube Corner. That way, none of those mean nasty zombie ponies will know we're in there!"

"Ah sure hope you're right, Pinkie Pie."

"Left!"

"...no, ah said ah hope you're right."

"Turn left!" Pinkie shouted, following her own advice. Applejack, who had been looking sideways at her companion, just barely had time to adjust her gallop – she had nearly crashed headfirst into a brick wall that signaled the end of that particular path in the alleyway.

"Heh...gotta pay more attention, ah suppose," she said aloud. As the two ponies traversed the twisting back alleys behind Ponyville's shops, Applejack's mind drifted to what had happened no less than ten minutes prior. The confrontation with the infected pegasus played forward in her mind, flashes of the atrocity she had committed burned into her memory.

*Ah can't believe ah really killed somepony...she thought to herself.
Ah'm...ah'm a murderer. Ah'm nothin' more than a no-good, filthy-*

"It's not your fault, AJ," Pinkie Pie said. Applejack blinked.

"Huh? What?"

"I know what you're thinking, and you did the right thing."

"Pinkie, how in tarnation do you-"

"Because you look sad! And when one of my friends is sad, I get sad, too! And besides, I got a burny eyebrow when I looked at you just now."

"Burny what, now?"

"Pinkie sense!" she replied, though her voice was decidedly lacking in its usual cheer. "When I get a burny eyebrow, it means that one of my friends is guilty about something. You shouldn't feel guilty, Applejack. You did what you had to – and besides, you saved that family!"

"Yeah, but you helped..."

"I distracted, AJ. You did all the work, trust me. Don't feel bad about it, ok? They're not ponies anymore. They're zombies!"

"...yeah, ah suppose yer right, Pinkie Pie." Though there was conviction in her voice, Applejack still felt uneasy. It would definitely take some quality introspective contemplation for her to fully come to terms with what had happened, and she knew it. Unfortunately, the situation which herself and her pink friend found themselves in did now allow for any manner of introspection.

Pinkie Pie slowed to a trot.

"We're here," she said quietly, motioning to the lime green door just ahead of them. Indeed, this was the rear of Sugarcube Corner – the alley behind the store was slightly wider than the twisting path that had led them there. A lone dumpster sat to the left of the back door, its contents overflowing onto the cobblestone below.

“Sheesh, Pinkie Pie. When's the last time the trash ponies have been through to collect this stuff?” Applejack asked as she scrunched her nose at the smell of rotting garbage.

“You know the garbage ponies, Applejack. They're a pretty lazy bunch,” she said. The two advanced toward the door, minding the various refuse scattered about. Pinkie Pie produced a key and inserted it into the lock, turning it to the left with her mouth. The deadbolt slid out of the divet in the door frame with a click, and Pinkie pushed the door open with her muzzle. Though it was quite dark in the alley behind Sugarcube Corner, the interior appeared to be even darker; squinting, Pinkie Pie could just barely make out the light switch on the wall. She reached up with a foreleg to flick the switch, before Applejack blocked the motion, shaking her head slightly.

“Ah don't think that's such a good idea, Pinkie. We don't want nopony outside to know that we're in here.” Pinkie Pie nodded in agreement.

“Grab my tail, AJ. I think I can get us through without bumping into anything, but we need to be quiet.”

“Right, just lemme shut this here door,” Applejack said. She turned and closed the door as quietly as she could, fumbling around in the darkness until she found the deadbolt. She turned the lock, and the reinforced steel slid back into the divet with another click.

The orange earth pony bent and gently clutched a length of the pink pony's tail in her mouth, trying her best to move in time with her friend. In the deafening silence of the back room, the sounds of their hooves against the wood flooring seemed to echo ever so slightly before falling flat, the sound dying just as quickly as it came. Pinkie Pie felt the right side of her flank brush up against a cardboard box; she quickly corrected her course to make certain Applejack didn't do the same – or worse, knock the thing over. After a full minute of a nearly blind trek through Sugarcube Corner's back room, Pinkie felt her nose make contact with the door that led into the main area of the shop.

“Ok, here's the door,” she whispered, prompting Applejack to release her tail. She turned the knob with her mouth and pushed the door open, wincing slightly as the creaky hinge pins groaned as the door swung outward. The soft flow of several candles filled the room; regaining their

vision was a welcome relief for the two earth ponies. As they trotted silently into the room, however, they noted a distinct lack of...well, anypony.

"Where'd you think they got to?" Applejack whispered, still keeping her voice level to a minimum.

"I dunno...maybe they're in the-" A sudden whimper, followed by several shushes met their ears. Craning her neck to the right, Applejack said,

"Ah think that came from the kitchen." She took a few steps in that direction, tensing up instinctively. "Hello?" She raised her voice a tad, just loud enough for it to travel into the kitchen. "Anypony in there?" Several sighs of relief came from the darkened kitchen.

"Applejack? Is that you?" a voice belonging to a certain white unicorn rang out.

"Yeah, it's jus' me'n Pinkie, Rarity. What're y'all doin' back there?" The white unicorn, three young fillies in tow, emerged from the kitchen with reserved looks of abatement on their faces.

"Well, Sweetie Belle thought she heard something in the back room, and I didn't want to take any chances, so-" She was interrupted by a flying pink mass of fur which ran into her, embracing her in a tight squeeze.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're ok, Rarity! And the Crusaders, too! You kept them safe!"

"P-pinkie Pie...t-too tight!" Rarity managed, speaking with obvious strain.

"Oops! Sorry," a bashful Pinkie Pie said, releasing her friend who promptly hunched over and drew several deep breaths.

"Applejack! Ah knew you'd make it back!" Apple Bloom cried, running up to her big sister and wrapping her forelegs around the orange mare's neck.

"Ah wouldn't leave my little sis' alone at a time like this," she affirmed, returning the hug in earnest.

“W-what's it like out there, Pinkie Pie?” a clearly nervous Scootaloo inquired. “Did you guys see my mom anywhere...?” Applejack let go of Apple Bloom, shaking her head.

“Sorry, Scoot, but Pinkie and ah didn't see anypony flying around out there. Ah'm sure she's ok – ah mean, she's a pegasus after all, right? Soon as things started to get back, she prob'ly took off into the air, ah reckon,” she assured the tearful pegasus filly, placing a comforting hoof on the little one's head.

“But what of her other question, Applejack?” Rarity asked. “Just what is going on out there?” Applejack thought for a moment, then shook her head.

“Not in front of the fillies, Rarity.” she said in a hushed tone. Resuming her normal speaking voice, she added, “Pinkie Pie, would'ya mind takin' them three into the kitchen an' makin' them somethin' ta eat? Ah'm sure that all this excitement has built up quite an appetite, am ah right, girls?”

“Yeah, I guess...” Scootaloo replied.

“Ah'm starved!” added Apple Bloom.

“I guess I should try to eat something,” Sweetie Belle answered.

“That the spirit!” Pinkie Pie said cheerfully. “C'mon, girls, follow me! I'll make you some of my super-duper special lemon bars!” The three fillies followed the bouncing pink pony (who had been temporarily been overcome with joy at the prospect of cheering up a few very frightened fillies) into the kitchen. Applejack waited for a moment, ensuring that the children were out of earshot. She then trotted wordlessly over to a table at the other side of the room, sitting down wearily. She took off her hat and ran a hoof through her mane, sighing slightly as she did so. Rarity followed, and sat down across from her.

“Applejack...you don't look so well. What happened?” Rarity asked. Her well-tuned attention to detail allowed her to read minute changes on her friend's face, and she didn't like what she saw. She sensed...grief. Regret. Perhaps a bit of shock.

“Ah...ah had to kill somepony out there,” Applejack spat, though the her flat tone of voice was devoid of anger. Rarity gasped, raising a white hoof to her mouth.

“Oh...oh goodness, Applejack. I'm so sorry.”

“Yeah, you'n me both, Rarity.” She briefly told her unicorn friend about the encounter with the infected pegasus, and how she and Pinkie had saved the cornered family. Rarity sat in stunned silence for a moment, absorbing the new information.

“Ah'm a monster, Rarity,” Applejack lamented softly, tears beginning to form in her eyes. “Ah'm no better than them 'infected' ponies runnin' around.” She cast her head downward, looking but not really looking at the table beneath her. A white hoof lifted her chin; Rarity's brilliant, dark blue eyes stared at her incredulously, as if she didn't believe what she had just heard.

“Now look here, Applejack. I will *not* allow any friend of mine to say that she is a monster, *especially* when she did what she did to save three lives.”

“But-”

“-no, no. No. Let me finish.” Applejack closed her jaw, tears now flowing freely from her green eyes. “Everypony has demons, Applejack – proverbial 'skeletons in the closet', if you will. I have them, Pinkie has them – why, I imagine even Princess Celestia has regrets, living as long as she has lived. The most important thing to remember, however, is this – *you cannot allow your demons to define who you are*. If everypony with skeletons in their closet carried them around and allowed them to burden themselves, what would that make them? I'll tell you: that would make them weak.” Applejack blinked; she had never heard her friend talk like this before.

“Weakness...put it this way, Applejack. You simply do not have a weak bone in your body. You are one of the most honest, trustworthy, strong-willed friends a pony could ask for, and I think that I am rather privileged to call you my friend. Do you remember when you and I were caught in that nasty storm, and we stayed at Twilight's house for the evening? Do you remember how we bickered and argued the entire evening? You see, there

is a difference between strong-willed and stubborn: you were strong-willed. I was the one who was being stubborn. When you accidentally pulled that tree through the window, you were the first among the two of us to apologize. I respect that, Applejack.

“Now, as far as what you had to do to save that poor family is concerned, allow me to ask you this – did you kill that pegasus with malice in your heart? Did you end that monstrosity's second, depraved life out of spite or hatred, or was it out of necessity? In your heart, I am absolutely certain that you know honest truth – you did what you did because it was *necessary to do so*. Had you not put that poor infected pony out of her misery, she may have hurt other ponies; she may have hurt you, or Pinkie Pie! From what I have seen thus far this evening, these 'infected' ponies are merely shells of their former selves...they are monsters, put simply. What you killed – though she may have looked like a pony in every way, shape and form – was not really a pony anymore. Ponies are good – if somewhat misguided – creatures at heart. Ponies don't kill other ponies just for the sake of killing, which is, unfortunately, what is occurring just outside the door.

“Applejack, I know that you can get through this. I *know you can*. Though it is a regrettable and painful aspect of the situation in which we now find ourselves, you may need to kill again.”

“...ah didn't wanna kill anypony. Ah don't wanna kill any more.”

“I know...I know, Applejack. This is a dark time for all of us, but the reality of the situation is this; amongst the five of us, you are the most physically capable. Pinkie Pie is...Pinkie Pie, your sister, mine and Scootaloo are just children, and myself...well, suffice it to say that I would only kill if it were absolutely necessary, to protect those whom I love. Now, let me ask you another question, Applejack. Do you love your sister?”

“Wha-whaddya mean, 'do ah love mah sister'? 'Course ah do! I love'er with all mah heart!”

“Do you love your friends? Do you love the ponies of this town?”

“Damn tootin', ah do,” the orange pony replied, wiping tears from her face.

“Are you willing to fight for those you love?”

"Absolutely!" she cried, accentuating her point by slamming a hoof down on the wooden table. Rarity was positively beaming.

"Now, that's the Applejack that I know!" She allowed her smile to fade a bit, before adding, "Look, Applejack. I know it wasn't easy, what you did out there. But you must remember this, above all else: *they. Are. Not. Ponies.* Not anymore. Although it may go against every fibre of your being, although it may go against your very nature, I ask you to prepare yourself for the likely inevitability that you will have to kill again. A great pony once said that extraordinary situations call for extraordinary measures; this is, indeed, such a situation."

"...ah know it is, Rarity. T-thank you fer talkin' to me like that. Really, thank you. That's exactly what ah needed to hear, and ah know it came from the heart." Rarity smiled again, nodding firmly.

"Think nothing of it, Applejack. After all, what are friends for? Now, if you should need anypony to talk to in moments like these, you know that I will always be there to listen." The orange earth pony, no longer tearful and looking much better than she did before, re-affixed the brown Stetson hat to the top of her head.

"Why don't we see what Pinkie Pie's up to in the kitchen? Ah just realized that ah'm positively starvin'," Applejack suggested, vacating her seat at the table.

"Capital idea."

Chapter 8

Motion Frenzy

“Attention. Attention. This is Lofty Heights, your mayor. This is an emergency broadcast to all of Cloudsdale. A deadly viral outbreak has been detected throughout Equestria. We have reason to believe that several pegasi within the city may have been infected. Infected ponies will walk or fly erratically and have glowing red eyes. Do not attempt to make any contact with infected individuals. Everypony is hereby ordered to calmly evacuate their residences, proceed to the Cloudsdale Coliseum and await further instructions. The city guard as well as the Wonderbolts will be overseeing the evacuation: follow their orders and do not question their authority. Remain calm and we will get through this together. May Celestia and Luna protect us all. This message will repeat. Attention. Attention...”

“Ugh. That's gonna get old real fast,” Rainbow Dash said aloud, making her way through the crowded lobby. Everypony in the posh hotel – as well as the city beyond – had been awoken by the impossibly loud sirens and klaxons that had sounded prior to the repeating broadcast. The mayor's magically amplified voice boomed throughout the city, reverberating against marble floors and window panes, causing the latter to shake and rattle with each accentuated syllable. The growing group of pegasi, some still in the process of waking up, moved in the general direction of the doors at the end of the lobby. Many were trotting on the ground, hooves clip-clopping against the white marble; others had taken to the air, wings beating rhythmically and keeping them aloft.

Moments prior to making her way down toward the lobby, there had been a knock on Rainbow Dash's door. She was in the process of getting ready, sucking down three cups of coffee that had been hastily brewed after the Princess' departure. The cyan pegasus mare flew over to the door and opened it, reeling instinctively upon seeing a Wonderbolt in uniform. “Spitfire! Did the Princess-”

“Yeah, she brought us all up to speed. We need to move quickly, but I just wanted let you know that I've got a little surprise for you.”

“A surprise? What kind of surprise?” Dash asked gleefully, trying her best not to squeal. Spitfire's face remained neutral – the responsibilities, coupled with the new information that Princess Luna had given her, weighed heavily on her mind.

“Just wait at the end of the lobby for us, next to the front doors. You should go – we'll all be down in a minute.”

“Y-you got it, Spitfire. See you soon!” The Wonderbolt merely nodded, turning to leave. She took to the air, expertly maneuvering the somewhat narrow hallway before disappearing behind a corner at the far end. Rainbow Dash quickly finished the last of her coffee, then stopped – *Will I need any of my stuff?* she thought to herself. She regarded the luggage that she had placed on the far side of her bed previously, but shook her head. *Nah, if I put my saddlebags on, they'll probably just slow me down. I gotta be fast out there, in case any of those 'infected' ponies show up!* She paused again, gulping. *What if they do show up?* Shaking her head as if to clear out any lingering doubt, her eyebrows lowered in determination as a cheeky grin began to grow on her face. *So what if they show up? Cloudsdale needs me! They'll be a sorry bunch of ponies if they've got the balls to try and take on me and the Wonderbolts!*

That particular grin more or less remained on her face the entire time she was walking through the lobby. Reaching the end of the cavernous room, she turned on the spot and extended her wings, rising up in the air to get a better look at the crowd. As she scanned the living mass of winged ponies, Rainbow Dash noticed just how *scared* everypony looked. There was a lack of resignation on their faces; rather, now that Dash was actually paying attention, she noted the varying degrees of trepidation and unease irreparably plastered to their collective visages. The cocky grin melted from her face, a worried frown rushing in to replace it. *These ponies need me right now*, she reminded herself. *Yeah, it's gonna be awesome working with the Wonderbolts and all, but I need to get serious. I can't let them down.*

A familiar pegasus sporting a yellow and orange mane rose up into the air at the far side of the room. She was dressed in a blue jumpsuit, goggles dangling from her neck; accompanied by five other identically dressed pegasi, the Wonderbolts made their way across the lobby in a flash. Several onlookers in the slowly moving crowd gasped in recognition as a hushed murmur spread throughout the room. A few pointed in their

direction. Rainbow Dash suppressed the urge to grin, remembering just how serious Spitfire had looked just minutes ago.

“Rainbow Dash - good to see you again,” Spitfire remarked with a lack of any discernible feeling in her voice. The cyan pegasus let her eyes glance over the six uniformed pegasi hovering in the air before her. A few wore looks of dull shock, while others betrayed no emotion. She did see, however, a look of reserved determination on a certain light blue pegasus’ face. Additionally, she noted that Soarin was wearing a small saddlebag, affixed to his flank with a thin strip of fabric.

“Yeah, good to see you. Even though we hung out just a few hours ago, I forgot to thank you for saving my pie at the gala,” Soarin said cheerfully enough, his tone of voice a stark contrast to his body language. The light blue pegasus stallion’s muscles twitched underneath his fur-tight jumpsuit; it looked as though he was spring-loaded, ready for action at any moment’s notice.

“No prob, Soarin. Anything to help a Wonderbolt.” Spitfire cleared her throat, eyes narrowing ever so slightly. A barely visible look of annoyance crept into her face before she banished the notion.

“A-hem. Soarin, I think we’ve got bigger problems tonight, right?”

“Right. Sorry, Spitfire.”

“Don’t sweat it. Just keep your head in the game, ok? The Princess is counting on us - all of us - to make sure these ponies get to the Coliseum safe and sound. Soarin, would you mind giving Ms. Rainbow Dash that little gift we talked about?”

“Oh, sure.” Soarin turned and bent his neck, opening the saddlebag he wore with his teeth. Rooting around for just a moment, he produced a neatly folded item of clothing. Rainbow Dash recognized it all too well, and felt her heartbeat double.

“Rainbow Dash, I hereby present to you an official Wonderbolts jumpsuit, to be worn on a trial basis. We need to be the authority in the sky tonight, and the sooner ponies recognize that authority, the better.”

The fabric, folded into a neatly pressed rectangle, was none other than a genuine Wonderbolts outfit. Jagged yellow bolts of lightning adorned the area just above the fetlocks, with a large zig-zag of a lightning bolt running from the midsection up to the neck. With shaking hooves, Rainbow Dash gingerly accepted the gift, a look of reverence on her face. As the cloth became unfolded, her eyes were drawn to the seamlessly stitched symbols situated on each flank; a vibrant lightning bolt, with light blue pegasus wings stretching outward on either side. Dash could hardly believe that she was holding the costume in her hooves.

“I-I...a uniform...” The cyan pegasus fluttered back to the ground, lightheaded. Spitfire and the rest of her team followed suit, allowing Rainbow Dash to hyperventilate for a few seconds before continuing.

“I know that this means a lot to you, Rainbow, but I need you to focus. Put it on, and we’ll get started.”

“T-thank you! Oh my gosh, thank you, Spitfire! I promise, I won’t let you guys down!” A wide, manic grin spread across her face as she delicately accepted the uniform, slipping into the tight jumpsuit with relative ease. As the impossibly light fabric conformed perfectly to every contour of her body, Rainbow Dash felt enlivened. Though she knew in the back of her mind that she was not truly a member of the Wonderbolts just yet, the feeling of the uniform alone was like a crescendo on its own, a veritable orchestral swell of emotion as anticipation was alleviated. In the back of her mind, she knew that she was only being given the outfit because it was a necessity that the situation warranted; a less dedicated pony would have allowed herself to become slightly downtrodden with this glaring fact looming, but not Rainbow Dash. Regardless of the specific ‘whys’ and ‘hows,’ all that mattered to her was that she was finally wearing the uniform that she had dreamed of wearing for years. She stretched her wings and legs, breathing deeply.

“The fabric of a Wonderbolt’s uniform is hoof-woven, made from the highest quality materials,” Spitfire spoke. “Additionally, the fabric is filled with thousands of tiny perforations, cutting down on drag, which allows for the highest order of aerodynamic efficiency. It can handle high-altitude flights and repels moisture...and it can handle velocity far beyond what is needed to produce a Sonic Rainboom, in case you were wondering.” Spitfire allowed herself to smile, albeit briefly.

"I've put mine through the ropes - you better believe it!" one of the pegasus mares from the second team added. "Even flew right through a typhoon over the Zebrican ocean once. Didn't even get a scratch!"

"Basically, anything you can throw at it, that uniform can take," Spitfire finished. "Wear it with pride."

"Y-yes, ma'am." Dash meekly replied, still marvelling at the jumpsuit. She again took to the air, feeling lighter than a feather; she did a few cursory loops and twirls, getting an idea for how it would feel to fly with the uniform on. Surprisingly enough, it felt as though she wasn't even wearing it - the air offered almost no resistance as it seemingly parted the atmosphere around it, allowing the rainbow-maned pegasus to float with the greatest of ease.

"Alright, Rainbow Dash. I'm glad you like it." Spitfire sounded amused. "Well...let's get started. Everypony, follow me." With that, the six Wonderbolts extended their wings and kicked off of the ground in perfect sync, rising roughly six feet into the air as they followed their vibrantly yellow leader.

A significant portion of the hotel crowd had already made their way outdoors. Roughly two hundred pegasi stood uneasily on the clouds below their hooves, looking around, clearly seeking some manner of direction. Though it didn't occur to Rainbow Dash before, she supposed it made sense; the vast majority of guests staying at the Cloudsdale Mareiott were more than likely out-of-towners, perhaps visiting Cloudsdale on business or for a vacation. The Mayor's blaring looped message seemed significantly louder outside the walls of the hotel; clearly, the spell behind the emergency broadcast system was designed to make the message loud enough to wake the dead.

Ooh... Dash thought, ...bad analogy.

As if on cue, several shapes stirred in the background. Though they were yet undetectable to the still-gathering crowd and the seven uniformed pegasi that hovered above, they watched maliciously.

“All right, Wonderbolts. Since we our numbers have temporarily grown from six to seven, I’ll be splitting up the usual squads for tonight. Soarin, you and Rainbow Dash are with me. Flash Flood, you take Thunder Cloud and scout ahead to the Coliseum - I want the two of you back here in ten minutes, tops, with a report.” Though Dash had only been properly introduced to Flash Flood from the second squad, she recognized the latter from the various performances she had attended in her years. “Amarillo, you and Hot Streak need to set up a perimeter around this crowd. Delta formation, twenty meter height, two minute intervals - you see *anything* out of the ordinary, you tell me.” The four nodded, and they were off without any hesitation - two took off in the direction of the Coliseum while the second pair flew up into the night’s sky, fanning out and encircling the crowd, intently scanning the ground below.

“Let’s keep a tight V-formation over the crowd. Rainbow Dash, I assume you know what a V-formation is?” Spitfire asked.

“Damn straight. Flight School taught me a lot of things...and trust me, I’m really familiar with the formations you guys use.”

“Really?” Soarin chuckled. “Well, how ‘bout a inverted cascading quadruple helix formation?”

“A...inver-...what?!” Dash asked, suddenly panicking.

“Soarin’, quit fuckin’ with the newbie. Dash, there’s no such thing,” Spitfire added, shooting Soarin a dirty look.

“What? C’mon, Spitfire, aren’t I allowed to have at least a little fun?” Spitfire suddenly rounded on the grinning pegasus stallion, eyes ablaze.

“*Not. Tonight.* Soarin, this is serious. The Wonderbolts are only loosely associated with Canterlot’s military division, and you and I both know that *Princess Luna herself* wouldn’t teleport into our rooms and ask for our help if the situation wasn’t completely and truly fucked. Know what that means? That means that if there’s a major foul-up tonight, and we could have done something to prevent it, then *I’m responsible*. I’ll be damned if I let this city down tonight, and I’ll be double-damned if one of my subordinates thinks that this is a fucking game. If you can’t get your shit together and keep your

attitude in line, I swear to Celestia, *I will buck you so hard that you'll wake up in the next country.* Do I make myself clear?"

Soarin gulped, ears drooping noticeably. "Yes, ma'am. Sorry, ma'am."

"Good. V-formation. Now. I'll take point - Rainbow Dash, on me."

"*Holy shit,*" Rainbow Dash inaudibly muttered to herself as she fell behind and to the left of Spitfire. Very rarely had she ever heard a pony tell off another pony like that, no less one of her idols to another. And the language! Admittedly, Dash had a bit of a foul mouth, herself, when the situation warranted it - to hear a Wonderbolt curse like that, however, filled her with a strange combination of awe and fear. Any lingering giddiness or gaiety that had been lingering within instantly evaporated, quickly replaced with a cold sense of determination. After that brief, yet intense exchange between the two Wonderbolts, the gravity of her role in tonight's evacuation hit her with the force of a speeding carriage.

As she felt the sharp claws of panic once again dig into her sides, Dash took several deep breaths in an attempt to banish the feeling, with mixed results. Her mind was racing, but she knew that he needed to focus. If she offered anything less than her complete and undivided attention to the situation at hand, she knew that the results could be disastrous; for one, her lifelong dream of becoming a member of the Wonderbolts could be forever compromised; for another, she would be letting down her birthplace. Further still, she would be letting down Princess Luna and - by proxy - her friends. If she didn't do her absolute best to keep the citizens of the cloud city safe, then what point would there be in being a bearer of an Element of Harmony?

Spitfire looked back as the three uniformed pegasi fell into formation roughly three meters above the crowd. She noticed the look on Rainbow Dash's face, and offered, "Look, Dash, there's nothing to be nervous about." Dash shot her a barely contained look of disbelief. "...well, ok. There's plenty to be nervous about. You've been training your whole life to become one of us, and you're probably a little bit put off by the suddenness of tonight's events. Let me say this - don't worry about it. No, seriously, don't worry. You're still one of the most realistic candidates out there - isn't that right, Soarin?"

“Uh, yeah. That stunt you pulled at the Young Flier’s Competition was really something, Dash.”

“If it’ll make you feel better, just know that what happens tonight holds no weight in our decision-making process. We’re here to make sure as many of Cloudsdale’s ponies as possible make it safely to the Coliseum - I’m sure you know that Canterlot has a division of the royal guard stationed here, so if there’s going to be any fighting tonight, I think it would be wise to leave it up to them. That is, unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

“Believe me, Spitfire, I’m not afraid of getting into a fight - especially if one of those dumb ‘infected’ ponies tries to fuck with us.” Dash’s voice swelled with confidence that was just barely beginning to return, brilliant maroon eyes glittering softly. “Just tell me what I need to do, and I’ll do it.” Spitfire allowed herself to smile.

“Glad to have you with us, Dash.”

Several minutes passed, the mayor’s warning message continuing its incessant loop. The crowd of pegasi that had gathered outside of the hotel had swelled to roughly four hundred strong - Spitfire asked Dash to check the lobby for any stragglers. Dash nodded, offering a quick salute as she took off, rainbow-coloured tail streaking swiftly behind her. About a half dozen ponies were idly chatting in the lobby, casting shifty, nervous glances here and there as they made small talk in an effort to diffuse the tense situation. Dash gently but firmly suggested that they make their way outside and join the rest of the crowd; upon seeing the fresh blue uniform that the cyan pegasus was dressed in, they offered no objection as she silently exited the building. Rainbow Dash sped back to the formation, falling back into place as Spitfire nodded approvingly. The bright yellow pegasus mare cleared her throat, positioning herself in front of the bulk of the crowd. A scarcely audible whimper just barely escaped her lips as she began.

“All right, everypony, listen carefully. My name is Spitfire, and these are my comrades, Soarin and Rainbow Dash,” she motioned to her partners with her hoof, making sure the motion was not lost on the crowd. “As I’m sure you’ve all heard, we will be assisting with the evacuation. I’d like to ask anypony with any questions to get them out of the way swiftly so we can begin our trek to the Coliseum.” There was silence for a moment, a dull

murmur rumbling through the crowd. "Anypony? Anypony at all. Come on, now, don't be shy."

"You guys aren't even military," a haughty voice finally rang out. "What can you do to protect us?" Though Spitfire could not precisely pinpoint the source of the neighsayer's voice, she was interrupted by a youthful, brash voice before she could reply in earnest.

"Who said that?!" Rainbow Dash commanded, the fiery intensity of her gaze causing a good portion of the crowd to take a step backward instinctively. "I said, *who said that?* C'mon, show yourself!"

"It was I," a dry voice rang out, its owner stepping forth. A well groomed pegasus stallion in an expertly tailored suit and hat regarded the newest addition to the Wonderbolts with a single eye, his gaze conveying a mixture of contempt and disbelief. "Young lady, I don't believe that I recognize you - surely you are not a Wonderbolt. Are you certain that there isn't a costume party someplace nearby that you're missing?" His remark elicited a few nervous chuckles from the crowd, but little more. The vast majority of the pegasi remained silent, watching the exchange intently.

"Why you-" Rainbow Dash began, her wings beating furiously against the air. If this were any other night, Dash would have no reservations about giving the heckler a good thrashing - especially when he had the nerve to talk trash about the Wonderbolts! In a rare moment of clarity, however, she stopped; muscles still tensed, she hovered down to the cloud below, hooves soundlessly alighting the puffy stuff. She knew that beating on this jerkbag would lend little to no constructive value to the situation at hoof, and as much as she wanted to tell him off as loudly as possible - as much as she wanted to wring his neck and watch him squirm for having the gall to go against the mayor's orders and insult the immediate authority...she knew that she could not. Still with a small inferno raging behind her eyes, Rainbow Dash trotted as calmly as she could manage over toward the stallion, who looked at the approaching uniformed mare curiously. She stopped just inches from the pegasus, nearly nose to nose as she cast her gaze into his unwavering eyes.

"Look, buddy," she began, initially only softly enough for him to hear. "I know you're scared. Shit, I'm scared, too. But the last-" she held up a hoof to silence the cultured heckler as he stirred, about to interrupt, "-the last

thing we need right now is a pony like you riling everypony up. Look at their faces, dude. Just look!" She seized his head in her hooves, despite his monosyllabic protests, turning it so he got a better look at the winged ponies around him. "*They're fucking terrified,*" she whispered into his ear. He gasped softly, the smallest of cracks beginning to form in his once-hardened facade. Leaning back, she continued, "They're panicked, and you aren't really helping things calling me and the Wonderbolts out like that, y'know? I'm sorry that all this is happening - really, I am - but this is the way that things have gotta be for a while. Everypony's in the same boat here...like it or not, we're in this together." The stallion hung his head slightly, which would have been amusing under different circumstances - a mare easily half of his age was talking down to him like his mother. "Think you can get it together, buddy?" He paused for a moment, apparently lost in deep thought, then simply nodded. He lifted his head, giving Dash a somewhat apologetic look (or some bastardization thereof). "Good." She raised her voice, just loud enough for everypony to hear. "Now, just keep it together, and we'll get through this." With that, she turned and took to the air once more, joining two very surprised uniformed in the sky.

"Whoa, Dash. What did you say to him?" Soarin asked incredulously as he looked at the stallion who, just moments prior, had been a problem. The stallion's ears were pinned against his head as he silently rejoined the crowd, body language conveying the notion that he just been scolded.

"Just told him what he needed to hear, I guess," Dash shrugged sheepishly, a rather light blush creeping into her cheeks. Spitfire regarded Dash with an almost unreadable look on her face - admiration, perhaps? Approval? Whatever it was, she quickly shook her head, clearing the look as she did so.

"Ok...anypony else have any questions?" Silence. "No? Right, then. If everypony could please follow myself and my comrades, we'll begin. We will be skirting the outskirts of the city proper, since this is such a large crowd - stay close together, and speak up if you see something out of the ordinary. We should reach the Coliseum in a little over a half hour, if we move quickly. Now, c'mon! Let's move!"

It took a bit longer to get the crowd moving as a whole than Spitfire would have liked, but within moments, the group of hundreds was in motion, obediently following the three pegasi that led them. Amarillo and Hot Streak

expertly held their formation, encircling the group as their well-trained eyes scanned the clouds below for any sign of disturbance.

Still, the dark figures followed; deftly leaping from shadow to shadow, they remained just out of sight.

Roughly ten minutes passed without incident. The dull murmur that had previously permeated the crowd had escalated to idle chatter, their voices strained and overly polite. Though the situation undoubtedly sunk in, it was as though they were all doing their best to ignore the inherent dangers which could feasibly beset them at a moment's notice. The crowd had fallen into an state of almost hyper-awareness, keenly in tune with their environment. Shifty eyes and sidelong glances were the order of business for a pegasus amongst the crowd of hundreds. At that point in the walk, Dash glided forward a few meters with a few wingbeats, temporarily breaking formation.

"Um, Spitfire?"

"Yes, what is it, Rainbow?"

"If you don't mind me askin'...how come we're making everypony walk? Wouldn't it be easier for them to be flying, like us? We'd probably get to the Coliseum faster, too."

"Let me ask you this, Rainbow - do you know what five hundred sets of wings flapping at the same time sounds like?"

"Uh...no?"

"Me neither, but I'm sure it'd be anything but subtle. Since this is such a large crowd, the last thing we want to do is draw attention...plus, if everypony were in the air, it'd probably...no, it'd definitely be too loud for me to give commands to my team or the crowd as necessary." She squinted her eyes shut briefly, bringing a hoof to her forehead and rubbing it gently. "Celestia damn it all, my head hurts. I drank too much of that Dom Ponygon."

“Yeah, you look a little...” Dash trailed off, suddenly realizing that she was probably getting a bit too familiar with a pony who was, in effect, her superior.

“A little what, Dash?”

“Uh, it’s nothing. Forget I said anything.”

“No...no, please. I insist. One of the reasons the Wonderbolts are the premier show team in all of Equestria is because we are able to communicate so well with one another. If there’s something on your mind, please, don’t hesitate to say it.” Spitfire offered a meek smile in an effort to encourage the rainbow-maned pegasus mare to loosen her tongue a little.

“Well, it’s just...you seem kinda stressed out, that’s all. And tired. Are you all right, Spitfire?” The bright yellow pegasus sighed, the exhalation of air carrying a note of relief to it.

“To be honest...no, Rainbow Dash. I’m not. I’m sure you were surprised when Princess Luna just popped into your room like that, but at least you’ve met her before! For me, it was like...I dunno. It was like meeting the night itself. She’s calm, she’s cool, she’s collected, but holy shit is that mare *scary*.” She chuckled a bit, feeling a weight beginning to slowly lift itself off of her shoulders. Dash joined her, laughing for a moment before replying,

“Yeah, I totally get what you mean. She’s like a serious Celestia, honestly.”

“That’s a good way of putting it, I guess.”

“Almost shit myself when she came into my room!” Soarin chimed in, chuckling to himself. Spitfire rolled her eyes as Dash hardened a bit, putting on a more serious face as she said,

“Spitfire, don’t worry. I know that you’ve probably heard this line hundreds and hundreds of times before, but you’ve seriously been an inspiration to me - you and the Wonderbolts both! I’ve dreamed all my life about working with you guys, and even though I wish it were under better circumstances, I feel honoured to be flying alongside you guys. Princess Luna wouldn’t have asked for your help if she wasn’t confident in your leadership, y’know,”

Dash added, her eyes expressing nothing but sincerity. The yellow pegasus nodded, appreciation clearly visible on her face.

“Thanks, Dash. Like I said, we’re glad to have you with us...and you’re right. With my team and your speed, I’m sure there’s nothing we can’t hand-”

A roaring sounded off to their left, the noise terrible and shiver-inducing. Several pegasi screamed.

Amarillo swooped down from her patrol with blinding speed, wings flapping swiftly as she approached the V-formation at the front of the crowd.

“Spitfire! We’ve got contact, 8 o’ clock!”

“*Shit*,” Spitfire cursed loudly, her head snapping to the left as she scanned the now-abandoned houses. Though they were lit by the occasional streetlamp that sporadically adorned the cloud sidewalk, she could see little more than shadows in the crevices and crannies between the homes themselves.

“How many?”

“Three, ma’am, all moving in our direction.”

“Range?”

“Twenty meters and closing, last I saw.”

“On hoof or in air?”

“On hoof, thank Celestia. I really hope these things can’t fly-”

“-Duly noted, Amarillo. Regroup with Hot Streak and form up on the rear, Hot Streak takes point. Try to keep everypony calm, do you understand? If they scatter, we’re gonna have a fucking bloodbath on our hooves.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Amarillo quipped, not bothering to salute as she took off once more into the sky.

Rainbow Dash felt her pulse quicken as the adrenalin kicked in, her heart hammering against her chest like a jackhammer. Her wings, unfurled and erect, quivered in anticipation as she struggled to calmly maintain her altitude. She then shifted her eyes from house to house, looking for any signs of movement. Spitfire rose up several meters into the sky, turning about a full one hundred and eighty degrees as she tried her best to keep her voice calm.

"All right, everypony - we hoped that this wouldn't happen, but it would seem that we've got some bogeys closing in on our position. My scout reports that there are only three of them, so there's no reason for everypony to panic and take off-"

"Look out!" Rainbow Dash warned her comrades as three lumbering forms suddenly jumped out from behind a pillar. A colt, a stallion and a teenaged mare - eyes burning maliciously - trotted and stumbled their toward the uninfected. Short clips of vocalized rage escaped their muzzles as they eyed their victims greedily, believing in their unthinking rage that the large group of now-fleeing pegasi would be easy meals.

"Everypony, listen up!" Spitfire commanded, her authoritative voice rising shrilly over the growing din. "Fly to the Coliseum as fast as you can! Follow Hot Streak up front!" She motioned to the Wonderbolt who had just that moment fallen into place at the front of the crowd. "We'll hold them off, but you need to hurry in case there's more of them! Stick together, don't get separated!" The crowd which had been corralled together had no need of any further instruction, many already taking flight. The two Wonderbolts and the cyan pegasus mare glided quickly to the ground below.

Spitfire, Soarin and Rainbow Dash positioned themselves strategically between the civilian pegasi and the infected, wings flared outward. The Wonderbolts pawed determinedly at the clouds beneath them as they prepared themselves for the fight to come; Rainbow Dash lowered herself into an attack position, maroon eyes narrowed down to horizontal slits, carrying the resolve of protecting the citizens of Cloudsdale across her face. With three simultaneous roars from the infected (which, despite her resolve, still sent icy shivers down Dash's spine), the monsters charged forward mindlessly, shaking their twitching heads back and forth mindlessly as they chomped and bit at anything that moved.

For creatures that were supposed to be dead, they moved fast.

Rainbow Dash did not bother to wait for a command from Spitfire - she was running on pure instinct as she darted forward, immediately engaging the closest infected. Though she had not been in a proper scuffle since her days at Flight School, she found that the ins and outs of fighting came back to her with relative ease. She lunged at the infected pegasus mare, connecting a quick right jab to the jaw of her opponent. The infected barely registered the blow, snarling with rage as she snapped her jaw at the offending hoof, which Dash just managed to draw back in the nick of time.

"Rainbow Dash!" Spitfire shouted, galloping forward to engage the first of the two infected stallions. "You can't just leap forward like that!" She sounded irritated, but would likely be more angry with the cyan pegasus were she not concentrating on engaging her own assailant.

"Don't worry, Spitfire - I know what I'm doing!" Dash shouted back, rolling to her right to dodge a sequence of snaps. The infected pegasus mare was only able to bite at the air, seemingly enraging her further. She snorted, kicked her forelegs outward, and charged.

Meanwhile, Soarin had already been accosted by the second infected stallion, their struggle quickly spilling into the front yard of a nearby house. Given that the house was - much like the rest of the city - situated on a sprawling bed clouds, there was an inherent lack of foliage or vegetation; crudely fashioned bastardizations of shrubs and plants made from the puffy substance were scattered here and there, vanishing into thin air as the two stallions crashed into them. A buck from the infected stallion connected with Soarin's midsection, temporarily knocking the wind out of him as he was sent careening to the side. He fell to the cloud below, but managed to tuck his legs into himself and roll with the momentum, deftly springing back to his hooves in one fluid motion. As the infected mindlessly charged him, he lifted three of his four legs off of the ground and spun diagonally on one hoof, delivering a roundhouse kick to the infected's jaw that shattered the bone with a sound not entirely unlike breaking porcelain. The stallion's head snapped back forcefully, the sound of vertebrae grinding forcefully against each other causing Soarin to wince.

A few meters behind him, Rainbow Dash had begun to launch an aerial assault on her assailant, circling the infected pegasus mare with dizzying speed. The lumbering zombie pegasus quickly became disoriented, allowing Rainbow Dash to set upon her with a quick series of jabs and punches aimed at the midsection, stunning her temporarily. Unfortunately for Dash, however, her barrage of blows didn't appear to even register any pain response from her opponent; with another snarl, the infected tossed her weight at the cyan pegasus, a headbutt connecting with her flank which sent her spiraling out of control. Dash flipped end-over-end in mid air, landing hard on the cloud at an awkward angle which made her grit her teeth in frustration. She was back on her hooves in a flash.

"Oh, it's on now, bitch," she said menacingly through clenched teeth, quickly shaking her head to clear any lingering cobwebs.

The crowd of civilian pegasi, led by the two remaining Wonderbolts, vanished into the distance. Amid the struggle, the three living combatants hardly registered the fact that the mayor's broadcast had suddenly cut out as an eerie silence befell the cloud city.

Spitfire cried out in pain as a lucky hoof came crashing down on the side of her head, sending her reeling. The infected stallion, sensing an opportunity, lunged at the dizzied Wonderbolt; thinking quickly, Spitfire reared her back legs and bucked wildly at the rapidly advancing infected, knocking him off balance just long enough for her to take to the air. She rose roughly three meters into the night's sky, absentmindedly lifting a hoof to the stinging spot where the stallion's hoof had connected and winced. Her eyes narrowed as a nasty look came over her face, brows furrowing in anger. *Time to end this*, she thought to herself.

"Soarin! Dash! Try to get them close to one another and get into the air as quick as you can!" Soarin managed to glance back at the Wonderbolt captain, his eyes widening as his mind registered the move she was about to pull off.

"*Fuck*," he cursed aloud, galloping toward Dash and her assailant. "Rainbow, didya hear that?"

"Yeah, I-" she dodged another series of bites, "-I got it. What for?"

“Don’t ask, *just do it!*” Spitfire commanded, wings beating powerfully against the cool air. Soarin led the second infected stallion toward the remaining five grounded pegasi as Dash corralled the first stallion towards the mare, shoving him in the right direction as he snarled and roared in protest. Once the five were gathered in roughly two meters of one another, Soarin suddenly unfolded his wings and jumped into the air, calling back to Rainbow Dash and imploring her to do the same. Confused and somewhat reluctant to leave the fight unfinished, Dash begrudgingly followed suit. Soarin and Dash quickly put a fair distance between themselves and the three cloud-bound infected, sailing thirty meters outward in a manner of seconds.

“Soarin, what’s Spitfire thinking? She can’t take on all three at-” Soarin held up a hoof, silencing her. He turned back to where Spitfire hovered in the air, pointing in her direction.

“Just watch.”

Noting that her two comrades were now safely out of harm’s way, she began. Leveling herself out horizontally, she began to fly a tight circle around the three slobbering infected as they attempted in vain to leap up at her, eyes burning bright. Spitfire’s distinctive orange and yellow mane trailed out behind her as she picked up speed, her bright tail becoming a blur as it flapped in the air currents she was creating. With blinding speed, the Wonderbolt captain continued to encircle the three ensnared infected, flying a half of a meter off of the cloud below. As she quickly became a blur, her aerial stunt began to blend together; a glowing began to form within the semi-solid circle. It was faint at first, barely discernible and glowing with the intensity of perhaps a few lit candles. Within the span of ten seconds, the glowing had morphed into a burning white-hot light, brightly shining as it banished the night’s darkness with a brilliant array of oranges, yellows, reds and whites. The circle collapsed in on itself further, causing the confused and enraged infected pegasi to back into one another, undead flanks brushing up against the other as their eyes were rendered useless from the proximity to the light. Without warning, Spitfire increased her altitude, forming a sort of cone as she took the light with her as she ascended; now burning as bright as a raging fire, yellowish sparks began to crackle and fizzle as the light suddenly erupted in flame. The towering inferno set fire to the infected almost instantly as they cried out in surprise, hair withering away and reduced to ash in the blink of an eye. Their flesh

skipped boiling and was sublimated as it melted away, steam rising from their charred skeletons as it too was vapourized in the unthinkable extreme temperatures. Even the very bones themselves were soon nothing more than ash. The infected were completely immolated.

Soarin, a queer mixture of approval and horror on his face, silently started toward the Wonderbolt captain. Rainbow Dash hung in the air for a moment, unable to comprehend what she had just seen; her jaw hung open, mouth agape, eyes wide and unbelieving.

“Wha...what the hell was that?!” she cried weakly. Such power! Such grace! Dash had no idea that Spitfire could pull off a move like that...and she wasn’t entirely sure how she felt about it just yet. Snapping her jaw shut, she took off after Soarin, trailing behind ever so slightly as the two Wonderbolts and their companion regrouped.

“It’s been so long, Spitfire...I kinda forgot how awesome that move was,” Soarin offered meekly, rubbing the back of his head with a hoof. Spitfire retorted,

“There’s a reason why I’m not allowed to do that one at shows any more, you know.”

“Trottingham, right. Did they ever end up fixing the rest of the stadium?”

“Beats me,” Spitfire shrugged nonchalantly, clearly trying to downplay her role in the infected’s demise. Even still, an internal maelstrom was brewing within, slowly but surely gnawing away at her.

“S-Spitfire...” Dash began, “...what...how-”

“I call it a Flamenado, Dash. Last time I tried that stunt, well...let’s just say that the Wonderbolts aren’t really welcome in Trottingham any longer.”

“But h-how? How did you do that?!”

“That’s kind of a secret, kid. Sorry,” she shrugged, not entirely willing to let that bit of information slip. Seeing the dejected look on Dash’s face, however, she sighed and relented, “Same principle as cloudmaking, like we do in our shows. That’s all I really want to say.”

“...holy shit, Spitfire.”

“Yeah, I know.”

The three stood in silence for a moment, surveying the isolated swath of destruction that their brief struggle had wreaked on the suburban neighbourhood. A street lamp, held aloft by a hollow metal tube, now sported a hefty dent toward the bottom, causing the fixture to sag slightly. Soarin, amidst the brief chaos, had lost his footing and crashed through a wooden fence, leaving jagged bits of wood strewn about. A few trash bins lay on their sides here and there, bits of refuse littering the cloud below; indeed, it would appear that only the clouds themselves remained unscathed.

Rainbow Dash cast a sidelong glance at the Wonderbolt captain, eyeing her briefly. Her face conveyed no emotion, a decidedly unreadable expression having set in like stone. Soarin, eyes still slightly widened and nostrils flared as the adrenalin worked its way through his system, pawed anxiously at the ground.

“We should probably catch up to the others, Spitfire.” She paused for a moment, then simply shut her eyes and nodded.

“Resume formation. I suggest we cruise at a higher altitude this time - I want to get a better look around.”

“Yeah,” Rainbow Dash agreed. “Plus, if any more of those freaks try to sneak up on us again, we’ll have the advantage.” Spitfire said nothing.

In an unspoken synchronicity, the three uniformed pegasi crouched, flaring their wings outward as they pushed off of the clouds, once again resuming flight. Once they fell back into the V-formation, Spitfire began to pick up speed, wings beating rhythmically as she tucked her legs into her body to reduce drag. Her compatriots followed suit. The towering form of Cloudsdale’s coliseum loomed in the distance, surrounded by a dull yellow glow as a plethora of lanterns even then continued to be lit. At roughly twenty meters above the clouds, Rainbow Dash and the Wonderbolts levelled off, halting their ascent. Dash strained her eyes to survey the cloudscape below; as she took in the scene, her previously neutral

expression morphed into a pained grimace. Tiny pinpricks of lanterns and torches glittered soundlessly as they weaved in between the forms of fleeing pegasi. Some were in tightly-knit groups as they made their way toward the coliseum, while others still were in sporadically formed clusters. Dash perked her ears up as to take in any sounds that may have wafted upward, but found that, over the beating of three sets of wings combined with their altitude, the city below was eerily silent. The faintest hint of a thousand lit torches floated into her nostrils, an invisible scent that danced around and flitted back into the air in less than a second.

For the first time, Dash noted the lack of any discernible breeze. *Makes sense, I guess*, she reasoned. *What with that barrier keeping us all shut in like this.* Despite the lack of breeze, though, she shuddered. Every pegasus pony living in Equestria has an inherent adoration of the open sky; some, like the rainbow-maned mare, were adamant about their passion for open air while others were somewhat less apparent. The pegasus race had been living in the clouds for as far back as written history can document, and for good reason - what better place would there be for a creature who loves to sky to live than in an abode fashioned from the sky itself? Though it remained unspoken between the three as they flew over the distressed metropolis, one undeniable reality about the evening remained, a subtle malice scratching away in the back of their minds in the manner of all unpleasant and unsavory thoughts; that see-through blue barrier that obfuscated their view of the night's sky was simply not *natural*. Their only saving grace in the matter was the fact that the sheer size of the city itself allowed ample room for maneuverability. Should they have found themselves enclosed in a town as small as Appleloosa, however, their virtual imprisonment would have undoubtedly been a more pressing issue.

Lost in her thoughts, Rainbow Dash continued her cursory scan of the cloudscape. To her dismay, one particularly large cluster of pegasi traversing a wide street below suddenly scattered like frightened field mice - squinting, she was able to make out roughly a half dozen forms moving erratically. One of said forms happened upon a poor soul that was unable to flee in time; in a matter of seconds, large, dark splotches stained the clouds as a shriek finally loud enough to cut through the unsettling silence rang out. It was a pained, frightened yowl, a vocal feat that caused the three uniformed pegasi to instinctively tense up. They froze for the slightest of moments before diving wordlessly in formation, gaining velocity as they plummeted in sync with one another toward the source of the scream.

The sights and sounds of another frenzied attack came into sharp relief as their hooves alighted the cloud, the impact sending puffs of the fluffy white stuff outward before disappearing completely.

“Spread out!” Spitfire yelled, again readying herself to do battle. Soarin and Dash put a few meters between themselves, surveying the situation at hand. A few scattered clumps of the previously well-knit group of uninfected pegasi ran screaming from the seven or eight infected that tore mindlessly down the street. So blind were they in their animalistic fury that one stallion, a slightly pudgy pegasus with a short-cropped mane and scraggly tail, careened headfirst into one of the many stone columns that lined the street on either side. A sickening crack signalled the break of his skull as he slumped to the clouds, leaving behind a spattered red streak of red that ran down the column. Off to the right, an infected mare was busy attacking a small pegasus filly, her high-pitched shrieks intertwining with her assailant’s guttural grunts and roars as her mother looked on in horror, frozen in shock. Seeing this, Dash immediately galloped over to the scene as quickly as her hooves could carry her, hot tears of rage and disbelief streaming out of the corners of her deep pink eyes as she gritted her teeth to suppress a scream.

“*GET THE FUCK OFF OF HER!!*” she hissed through a clenched jaw as she dove into the infected mare, knocking the zombie off-kilter. The white filly crawled with all her strength toward her unmoving mother, crying out for help. The filly’s pained voice grated against Rainbow Dash’s eardrums like sandpaper as she went blind with fury, dark corners appearing at the edges of her vision as she began to pummel the life (un-life?) out of the monster that had effectively cut the child’s life tragically short. Dash straddled the snapping, sputtering mare as her hooves crashed into the infected’s face, over and over and over again. *Bam*. A blow that dislocated the jaw, sending it askance as several red-stained teeth flew to the side, glittering dully in the muted pale moonlight. *Bam. Bam. Bam. Bam*. The cyan pegasus mare’s eyes were shut now, pressed together so tightly they burned as she struck again. And again. With an enraged cry that caused even the nearby infected to snap their heads toward the sound, she brought both of her forehooves together above her head and sent them crashing down on the mare’s forehead as hard as she possibly could, splitting the skull with a sickening *pop!* She didn’t care. All logic, any semblance or ghost of thought process was absent as she continued her

brutal assault, hooves colliding with the mare's head, strikes continuing long after the infected was dead.

When she finally opened her eyes, she noted with a lack of remorse that the mare's head was almost completely gone; little remained of her face. Dash, panting like she'd just flew a marathon, cast her eyes downward, noting the clumps of blood that stuck to her hooves and forelegs. Somewhere, in the back of her mind, a little voice was screaming. She ignored it, paying it little attention as she rose to her hooves as the filly's mother cradled her dying foal, looking at the cyan pegasus with the same horror in her eyes as she had when she first lay eyes on the monster that had ravaged her daughter. Their eyes met for an instant, and Dash almost froze; she knew that she should say something, try to offer what little comfort she could, but a fire raged within, hotter than the center of the sun, filling her body with raw power the likes of which she had never fathomed. Her eyes darted down to the dying pegasus child, and - impossibly - her rage thickened. She turned on the spot and screamed at the top of her lungs,

"You. Fuckers. Are. GOING. TO! PAY!!!" Without even knowing what she was doing, she took to the air, taking in the scene before her. She felt like her senses were kicked into overdrive...no...into *hyperdrive* as she identified at least six more infected, some feasting on dead or dying pegasi, some locked in combat as the two Wonderbolts deftly maneuvered this way and that.

Soarin, having been backed against a wall by a gaunt mare and a stallion, flared his wings outward just before he charged. He firmly planted his back legs on the wall to his rear and kicked outward, easily sailing between the two advancing attackers as he flared his hind legs apart to deliver a pair of precise bucks to their heads. He turned on a dime, knowing that the attack would stagger at least one of them; the mare, having less body mass keened to the side as she stumbled, and in a blink, he was on her. With a set of strong teeth and a jaw like iron, he firmly bit the mare's tail and hefted her off of the ground. The taste of blood and grime washed over his tongue as he suppressed the urge to vomit. The light blue stallion took off down the street, travelling twenty five meters in a manner of seconds. Again, he turned on a dime, eyeing up his target and calculating his trajectory. With the aid of a firm, fearless muscle memory that came from years and years of exercise and training, he flew as swiftly as he could

toward his destination, the snapping and snarling infected suspended in mid-air, trailing off to his side. Just as he was about to impact the solid stone column, he banked hard to the left and released the filthy tail from his mouth at precisely the right moment; the mare flew into the stone pillar with a monstrous velocity, the impact breaking nearly every bone in her body with an audible *crunch!* She impacted so hard that she literally bounced off of it, tumbling end-over-end as she crashed hard to the cloud below in a heap.

Spitfire, meanwhile, had the “luxury” of taking on her assailants one at a time. She, too, had taken advantage of her environment and was aptly utilizing the hardened stone columns, strategically positioning herself so that each buck of her hind legs sent infected skulls cracking against the pillars. Snorting in determination, she quickly disposed of two infected stallions one after another; that was when a third, larger than the rest, rushed her from behind, pinning her against the column as he snapped his jaw eagerly, the blood dripping from his muzzle spattering against the Wonderbolt mare with each twist of his neck. She struggled against his weight with a grunt, trying her best to wriggle free before -

“*Aaaahhhhh!!!*” she screamed as his teeth sunk into her shoulder, a chance bite that sent a white-hot shock of pain through her body. Her eyes narrowed against the sharp, incredible pain as the stallion lunged again, mercifully missing her jugular by mere inches. The mindless monster crashed with the full force of the lunge face-first into the stone pillar, and Spitfire heard a snap that she knew could only mean a broken nose. She ducked, cursing loudly through the pain as she rolled to the side, mistakenly catching one of her attacker’s forelegs and taking him with her. The two tumbled briefly on the cloud, and Spitfire felt a pang of regret and a wave of fear wash over her as she realized that she was about to die. She took in a lungful of air to scream in terror, but the sound never escaped her lips: what did come out, however, was a surprised gasp as she expended the breath, a blueish blur with a shock of rainbow colours passing through her field of vision in a fraction of a second. Startled, she rolled to her side and righted herself, rising to her hooves shakily as the blood continued to drip from the open wound.

Rainbow Dash was screaming, her vociferous vocals matching her physical attacks in intensity, accentuated and broken up with each pound of a hoof. Much like the infected mare just moments ago, she had managed to roll her

way on top of the large infected stallion, pinning him temporarily beneath her as blow after blow came crashing down on Spitfire's would-be executioner. Her attack clearly staggered the male, but only briefly; with a roar, he bucked his legs about wildly, a chance blow catching Dash square against her jaw with such force that it sent her flying off to the side. She skidded a few yards against the cloud before rising again, not missing a beat; the stallion likewise was back to his hooves, and was already beginning to charge her. Spitfire visibly recoiled when she caught the look in Dash's eyes; it was not the look of a mare in a fight for her life. It was not the look of a seasoned pugilist or a weathered combatant. No; it reminded her of the look in the stallion's eyes as he chomped down on her shoulder just moments prior, a wild, piercing, bloodthirsty gaze that was more monster than pony. The stallion roared again as he closed the distance, and Dash followed suit, shrieking like a banshee as she rose two meters into the air in a heartbeat. Spitfire could hardly keep track of her motions as Dash, utilizing her uncanny gift of agility and riding waves of raw, powerful fury, struck at the infected from mid air. She circled him, leaping at every opportunity to strike, delivering a dizzying flurry of punches and bucks that left the orange-maned Wonderbolt breathless. A potent mixture of shock, admiration, disbelief and horror welled up within her as Dash continued the furious assault, wincing despite herself as a well-placed buck to the stallion's midsection shattered ribs. Rainbow, unsatisfied, finally landed on the somehow still-standing stallion's back and - reaching forward - wrapped her forelegs around both sides of his jaw. Spitfire gasped as Rainbow twisted, a throaty roar emanating from the cyan pegasus' throat that grew with intensity as she applied more and more pressure. Veins stood out on her neck as sweat poured from her brow, and with a primal scream, the stallion's neck gave way with a loud *snap!* The infected fell loosely to the cloud, his head sticking to the side at an angle.

Spitfire felt weak. Her knees began to tremble as an unpleasant lightness washed over her. She turned about and surveyed the carnage in a haze: a mare, laying off to the side, her head reduced to a pile of useless flesh. Another, her body twisted and broke, lying to the side of a pillar. The two she had just dispatched, their heads cracked and bleeding, lying motionless on the cloud. Soarin, fighting with feverish intensity as two mares viciously attacked him. A colt, no older than a young teenager, advancing on her with a malice in his eyes that broke her heart. Rainbow Dash, forelegs coated in clotting blood, advancing and beating the thin zombie to death in a matter of seconds.

And just as suddenly as it had began, it was over.

The three were left alone, still spread slightly apart, the bodies of the vanquished littering the street. Even the mother and the dying foal had somehow escaped through the madness. Blood stained the clouds red and coated cracked pillars; it covered their uniforms and streaked through their hair. They simply stood for a moment, all panting heavily, recovering. Soarin was the first to move - at a pace faster than a trot but slower than a gallop, he rounded on Rainbow Dash; she was hunched over, sobbing silently with a look on her face that conveyed nothing but rage. Spitfire took a few deep breaths and tried to ignore the stinging pain that radiated outward from the bite in her shoulder. She steeled herself and pushed through it as she started toward the two, wincing with each step as the open wound tore and contracted with the motions. Soarin, noting the Captain's condition with look of muted horror, was the first among them to speak.

"Spitfire, holy shi-"

"Yeah, fucking stings." She laughed bitterly. "I suppose I should be thankful, in a way. Least I'm not a stallion, right? I'd probably be one of those fucking *things*," she spat out the word with unbridled hate, "by this point. How 'bout you, eh, Soarin? You didn't let any of them bite you, did you?"

"Nah. One of 'em caught me pretty good in the gut, knocked the wind out of me. Other'n that, I'm fine. How bout you, Dash? You ok?"

Silence.

"...Dash?" Spitfire asked, ignoring her own pain for a moment. She started toward the pegasus mare, but hesitated - her mind briefly replayed the look in Dash's eyes moments prior, causing her to shudder involuntarily. Soarin, however, had no such reservations.

"Hey, Rainbow, talk to me," he started, putting a hoof on her shoulder. In a flash, she was on him, having knocked the foreleg away and pouncing on him with a speed that startled Soarin and Spitfire alike.

“How many more, huh?!” she screamed, convulsing and shuddering with each haggard breath. “How many more of these fucking monsters do I have to kill to make up for what just happened?!”

“Whoa, Dash, take it easy!-”

“TAKE IT EASY?! DID YOU FUCKING SEE WHAT THEY DID TO HER?!”

“Did to *who*, Dash?” Spitfire shouted, genuinely concerned for Soarin’s well being. Dash leaped off of the stunned pegasus stallion, advancing on the wounded Wonderbolt.

“The filly! The little filly that died because I WASN’T FAST ENOUGH!! Me! Rainbow Dash! NOT FAST ENOUGH!!! She was crying for her mother and she was screaming while that fucking *monster* tore her apart and now she’s dead and it’s *MY FUCKING FAULT!!!*” Tears streamed from her eyes as her shaking intensified. “I-...I...oh, Celestia...” She wavered, her eyes going fuzzy for a moment as she leaned to the side and vomited. The choked sounds of retching and heaving mixed in with her pained sobs, and she cursed as she emptied the contents of her stomach; she the mare that had killed the pegasus filly; she cursed herself; she cursed Princess Luna and Princess Celestia and the Wonderbolts; she cursed the fact that the same fate had probably befallen her friends, the friends she had sworn to herself to *never let anything happen to*. Rainbow Dash collapsed on the ground, bawling like a lost foal. Her sobs racked her sore body as the adrenalin faded and a lingering emptiness rushed in to take its place, filling her mind with a despair that seemed, at the time, inescapable. Soarin and Spitfire exchanged worried glances, yet allowed themselves the smallest sigh of relief; as cruel as it may sound, a broken and remorseful Dash was infinitely better (and safer) than an enraged and violent Dash.

Silently, the two Wonderbolts approached and gently offered any meager comfort that they could. They let her cry every last tear out of her system, and even the injured Spitfire couldn’t help but keep her focus on the bawling young mare before her. Within a few moments, the bawling gave way to intermittent sobs, and even those gave way to the occasional snuffle. The three sat in silence before Dash spoke.

“I wasn’t quick enough...” she weakly insisted. Her voice was weak, a dead ringer for Fluttershy in its lack of volume.

"Shh," Spitfire shushed, absentmindedly running a hoof through her rainbow-coloured mane in consolation. "It wasn't your fault, Dash." Rainbow tensed, looking like she was about to protest, but relented. Spitfire continued, "There's nothing any of us could have done. Look, I know it might sound harsh, but what happened, happened. That's the reality of what's going on here tonight. I don't think I've ever heard of such dark times in Equestria...no, I'm sure that I haven't." Soarin shot Spitfire a quizzical look, as if to say, *Is this really helping?* Spitfire glanced back, only offering the slightest of nods as she went on. "You know something, Dash? Given the situation, I think that you've handled yourself just like a Wonderbolt should." Rainbow gasped in mid-breath, her drooping ears perking up ever so slightly. "The way you charged in there, before we got separated from the rest of my squad...the way you just jumped right in, no hesitation, no second thought...that's a degree of bravery I could never hope to have. Remember when we were talking earlier? Before the first attack?" Dash sniffed, nodding.

"...yeah."

"Remember how stressed I was? How surprised I was that the Princess showed up in our room so suddenly?" Dash nodded again.

"Yeah."

"Well, to tell the truth, Dash, I wasn't just stressed; I wasn't just nervous. I was fucking *terrified*." Both Soarin and Dash sat up at that, their eyes turning to meet hers. "I'm just a showmare. I'm no hero. Sure, ponies look up to me and my team as a source of inspiration - you said so yourself - but I'm no hero. What you've accomplished so far this evening - from putting a snob in his place to protecting hundreds of ponies to *saving my life* - I think...I think that you're a hero, Dash." In spite of it all, Rainbow's heart skipped a beat. Soarin remained silent as he twitched, once. "You've handled yourself remarkably so far, and I'm truly, truly proud of you. And before you ask - no, I'm not just telling you what I think you need to hear. I really, really mean that. And even though this night isn't over - far from it - I feel a whole lot better knowing that somepony was brave enough to stand up and fight." A silence hung over their heads for just a moment. Dash breathed in deeply, letting go the last of her doubts.

"Thanks, Spitfire. That really means a lot, coming from you. I just...I just wish I could know if my friends are okay. I don't know how bad things are in Ponyville, y'know?" Spitfire nodded somberly.

"I hear ya." She clambered to her hooves, the other two slowly following suit. She winced as she felt the sharp pangs of pain return in her shoulder. "Hey Soarin, think you could tear a strip off of your uniform or something? I need to stop this thing," she motioned to her bite wound with her head, "from bleeding." Soarin, not meeting her gaze, twitched again. Rainbow Dash looked at the pegasus stallion curiously.

"Uh, Soarin? Buddy? Are you-"

Pop! A brilliant flash of purple and white light poured over them, causing their pupils to contract as they shielded their eyes. Rainbow shook her head, blinked once. Twice. *How in the hell...?!*

"T-Twilight? Is that really you?!" Dash asked breathlessly, the beginnings of a goofy grin already beginning to form on her face. Spitfire, having blinked as well, looked absolutely stupified.

"H-how...wha...what?!" The purple unicorn mare allowed herself to smile, too, and trotted over to the three uniformed pegasi. Unable to restrain herself, she threw her forelegs around the stunned cyan pegasus mare, not caring in the slightest as she felt the wet presence of drying blood rub up against her stomach.

"Oh, Rainbow! I'm so glad you're okay! I just *knew* that locator spell work!" She released the pegasus from her embrace, smiling warmly as she regarded the orange-maned Wonderbolt, whose mouth was hanging agape. "Oh, Miss Spitfire! A pleasure to see you, too! And...um...Soarin, was i-" she turned her head and stopped mid-sentence. The smile instantly faded from her face, a look of horror creeping in to replace it.

"Twilight?" Rainbow asked. "What's up?"

Rainbow didn't even need to turn her head. A snarl rang out, an all too familiar snarl that made her feathers stand on end.

Interlude 2

Trixie

Two hours before Luna's message

"I'm sensing a recurring theme, here," the blue unicorn muttered to herself. Darkness and shadows prevailed all around her, warping the landscape into some manner of menacing bastardization. The sun had barely set a half hour past, not that it mattered; even under a mid-day's sun, the canopy of the Everfree Forest blocked out most, if not all light. A few pinpricks of starlight, though, managed to poked their way through the thick mass of leaves and branches overhead.

"Take the shortcut through the forest,' they said! 'It's the fastest route from Hoofington to Ponyville,' they said! How convenient of them to leave out the part about the unhappy manticores and the...ugh...mud!" Trixie lamented aloud to nopony in particular. Hoofington had been, overall, a bust - she had been unable to draw the crowd that she had so greatly desired. Indeed, after word of the fiasco in Ponyville a few months back circulated from town to town, the Great and Powerful Trixie was widely regarded as more of a passing oddity rather than a proper showmare. Less ponies at her shows, inevitably, led to less income (not to mention less ego); both of these aspects were shown through her rickety, second-rate used cart and her overall dejected demeanor. Trixie had planned on being out of the Everfree hours ago, but luck was not on her side that evening. A chance run-in with a mother manticore and her two cubs had sent her fleeing aimlessly through the brush, clacking cart trailing in tow: said cart may or may not have lost a wheel at some point, forcing the unicorn to retrace her frenzied fleeing path in search of the damnable thing.

Strange, muffled noises swirled around her as she struggled to haul the cart through the increasingly muddy terrain. *Just what have you gotten yourself into?* she asked herself.

"A rhetorical question, no doubt," she scoffed in reply.

There you go, talking to yourself again...

“And just *whom*, do you suppose, *should* I be talking to, hmm? The throng of adoring fans in tow, waiting with bated breath for The Great and Powerful Trixie’s next fantastic feat? The wide array of gnarled and garish looking foliage? Oh, I know - perhaps the friendly lion-bat-scorpion monstrosities from earlier? They seemed *ever* so talkative-” She stopped in both mid-sentence and mid-step, realizing that her voice had risen from a spiteful mutter to an angry shout.

“...this isn’t getting me anywhere,” she admitted with a sigh. She unhitched herself from the cart, taking inventory of things that would need repaired. Calling upon her magic, she levitated out a length of parchment paper and unrolled it, checking the map for a best guess of her location.

Right, she thought. *You just need to get out of this stupid forest, get a good night’s rest, resupply in Ponyville and move on. No shows, no fanfare, no revenge...though it would be nice to put that insufferable Twilight Sparkle in her place.* Her body hunched up instinctively at the mere mental mention of the unicorn’s name. She shook her head, quickly dismissing any wandering thoughts or inklings trying to affirm her latter-most notion. Trixie trotted to the front of the carriage, re-affixing herself to the hitch and trudging onward. She concentrated solely on the movement of her hooves - one in front of the other. Repeat. Repeat. Don’t think about Twilight Sparkle. Don’t think about the Ursa Minor. One in front of the other. Repeat.

It was like this for some time; Trixie kept her head clear, for the most part. Every now and again, a critter would scurry into the underbrush just out of sight, causing the already jumpy unicorn magician to shriek. Though Trixie was wholly unfamiliar with the inner workings of the Everfree itself, she found herself thinking more than once that the place was unnatural. After a while, though, a dull glimmer of hope through it all - the brush began to lighten. The canopy overhead seemed to thin out with every step, now allowing more than just a passing glimpse of the shimmering pale moon.

“Finally!” she cried, paying no attention to who - or what - may have heard. Just ahead, there it was; a clearing! She practically galloped toward the edge of the Everfree, exhaling a sigh of relief when she was through. Despite her recent shortcomings, despite her trepidation for returning to the very town that was the source of her failings abroad, a small, muted smile

crept across her face. She breathed in deeply, looking upward to the night's sky and relishing in the plethora of whites and blues spread throughout with the grace of an artist's brushstroke. Now finally able to survey the landscape sans the obfuscation of thick trees and the like, she noted a small, homely-looking cottage in the distance.

Must be a nice place to live, she thought. A short, sharp breeze blew past, eliciting the slightest of shudders; it was the sort of breeze that had the faintest twinge of a chilly note to it, a wispy harbinger of the winter to come. As the chill swept over her body, she became acutely aware for the first time that evening at just how *tired* she was - in mind, body and spirit, The Great and Powerful Trixie was exhausted. Keen on putting a good distance between herself and that wretched forest, she trotted onward at a good clip, absentmindedly humming a soft, solemn tune to herself as she did so.

She came upon a small brook, the crisp, cool water gently cutting a swath into the rolling landscape. A sizeable Oak stood tall on the bank closest to her, and she instinctively made her way towards it. A yawn escaped her lips as she rested herself under the tree.

"To think that I'd want anything to do with another one of these so soon," she chuckled softly. "Right, then. Just rest here for a moment, then set up camp. Get a proper night's rest, resupply, then this town will be a distant memory." She yawned again. "Just gonna...rest my eyes."

Thrum. Thrum. Thrum.

A rolling vibration coursed through the very ground, resonating with the thick earth. A powerful, powerful energy sprang into life all around, diffusing the background magical energies that lie latent throughout all of Equestria and rending them apart for a time. A line - ever so slightly curved - drew a path across the landscape, appearing from nowhere; not bothered by mere trifles such as hills and brooks, it flew through the land with lightning-like speed until it connected with itself, forming a perfect circle. As the connection was made, the line glowed a bright bluish-white with the intensity of a newborn star. *Thrum. Thrum.* The vibration grew and grew in frequency until the stillness of the night was split by a muffled boom that was more felt than seen, like the aftershock of a great explosion or a rolling shockwave following a massive impact. A translucent blue wall shot upward from the ground, almost as if a great, cosmic curtain were being guided by

some unseen rope and pulley. The final connection was made as the great wall converged on a single point high up in the sky, drawing Ponyville and its outlying lands closed.

Trixie, having dozed off under the Oak, was harshly yanked out of her slumber. Her eyes shot open as her horn resonated with the incredible force that swirled around her. A maelstrom of magical energies was raging, invisible to the naked eye but fully revealed to the unicorn via her honed attunement to the inner workings of magic itself. She scrambled to her hooves, setting herself upright as she regarded the shimmering translucent wall of magic that had sprung to life mere meters away. Her eyes grew wide and unblinking as the silent but ever-present *thrum* that the Barrier of Arcane Guard radiated seeped into her very being, her ragged, thready breath shakily being drawn inward and outward.

“What...” she managed, eyeing the barrier with the highest order of incredulity. “*What in the name...*” she tried again, not fully noticing her hooves taking her closer and closer toward the wall. A muddled mixture of awe and incomprehension flooded her senses as she gingerly reached forward with a hoof, wanting to touch the structure, to feel the energies flowing within...

...and she found herself back under the tree. Still in the same position, foreleg stretched outward, she was back under the very same Oak from which she had been awoken not a minute prior.

Did you... she thought.

“...just *teleport?!* ” she finished aloud. Feeling a bit dizzy, she sat down on her haunches, trying her best to keep her breathing under control. A chipmunk, clearly undeterred by the magical anomaly which lay before it, scurried past Trixie as she sat, straight toward the barrier.

“Wait!” she called out, unsure of what would happen if the critter came into contact with the barrier. Sure enough, though, the chipmunk met with the same result; just before the furry little animal made contact with the barrier, a barely visible flash of white light carried it backward several meters, whereupon it stopped in mid-scurry and lay prone on the ground, seemingly baffled. The chipmunk and the unicorn exchanged equally dumbfounded for a moment, the former’s eyes seemingly asking, *Just what the ever-loving fuck was that?*

“A fair question, to be sure...” Trixie answered, somewhat unaware in her current state of mind that her temporary conversant had no means of replying. “It’s...it’s a shield of some sort. Or a wall. Definitely not naturally occurring...and definitely not like anything I’ve ever seen before.”

Right, a mental voice chimed in, what with your expansive knowledge on the subject-

“-hush, you. I’ve no time for another one of our little ‘arguments’,” she chastised herself. She began to pace back and forth, making certain to keep a fair distance from the wall. “Well, it does seem to share some properties with a ward of *some* sort...but a ward that teleports physical objects? Not very practical. Impressive, no doubt, but not very practical at all.” She shook her head resolutely. Just as she was about to test another theory, a different energy enveloped her completely; it was unlike the wall in that it was not subtle in the slightest. It was almost as if the night itself had collapsed inward and now surrounded her in her own personal cocoon. Had her mind not been elsewhere at that very moment, she would have no doubt noticed her horn glowing as the two great external magical energies clashed with one another.

She heard a voice in her head.

This is a message to all magic-using ponies throughout Equestria. This is Princess Luna, goddess of the Moon. A terrible virus has begun to break out all across our fair kingdom...

As the message played out, she remained paralyzed. She shared the condition with tens of thousands of other unicorns throughout the land as they were made to listen to Princess Luna. Luckily for the Great and Powerful Trixie, she was quite alone at the shores of the small brook in the outskirts of Ponyville, save for the occasional nocturnal critter or three. Her widened eyes drooped a bit as the not so subtle energy of Luna’s message faded from her, and Trixie gasped as the implications of the message sent her brain into overdrive.

“Virus? Re-animates dead tissue?! Good heavens! Oh my goodness...oh, this is not good, not good at all! Am I safe here? Should I get to the center of Ponyville? Perhaps they have a plan in the event of a catastrophe such

as this...no! No, I can't I can't show my face in Ponyville again - can I? I just wanted to hit a couple vendors bright and early, avoid a big crowd of ponies, slip in and out unnoticed and get on the road! Why? Why is this happening to me?!" she wailed, trotting back and forth frantically.

"And what a brutish telepathy spell, as well! I mean, fine, the Princess has been away for a thousand years, but surely she's been made aware of the advances in the field of psychic magic? A full-body paralysis is a rather...inopportune side effect, I should say! But no matter. I'm fine. I'm fine, and I need...I need..."

She dashed over to her cart and began rooting around in the back, tearing through assorted boxes and crates. "No...no...not there, not there either...oh, where did I put - aha!" A soft, pink glow formed around a set of piled garments as they were whisked out of the cart with a bit of her magic. She dressed herself quickly and with little fanfare; a form-fitting, deep blue cloak hugged her midsection, thin fabric on the back end billowing outward to cover her pair of cutie marks. It was adorned with a pattern of pale white threads that matched her mane, interlaced throughout like a series of stripes that gave the ensemble a two-tone look to it. A series of six jet-black elastic bands around her tail drew the hair together into a tightly knit mass, allowing for easy movement. Her white mane, streaked with highlights of the faintest blue, she wore pulled backwards to keep the locks out of her eyes.

"There," she said with an air of finality. "Hopefully that will keep anypony with an exceptionally sharp memory from recognizing me."

You're really going back, aren't you?

"I've no choice in the matter," she answered. "Conventional wisdom states that safety lies in numbers, right? Besides, should Ponyville be accosted by those monstrosities the Princess described, it would be an excellent chance to redeem myself. Just think!" She cried, her voice momentarily taking on her showmare's demeanor. "The poor, paltry citizens of Ponyville, saved by none other than The Great and Powerful Trixie! Why, the sods would probably worship me! They'd erect a statue in my honor!" Then came a roar in the distance, haunting and absolutely inequine. "...but perhaps Trixie is getting ahead of herself." She shuddered.

Trixie decided to leave her cart behind; it would only get in the way, and her possessions were more than likely safe on the outskirts of town. Though she did not want to admit it to herself, The Great and Powerful Trixie was terrified. Her scare earlier with the unhappy manticores had done enough to shake her, but learning of undead monster ponies potentially roaming about was the proverbial cherry on top of the screwed-up cake. As she trotted, her ears stood on full alert, picking up every minute shuffle and rustle that the night brought to her. She thought she heard a grunt and craned her neck in the direction of the sound; upon hearing nothing further, she was just about to continue onward when she again noted the cottage she had seen earlier. There did not appear to be any lights on in the home.

Hmm. If the resident or residents are not unicorns, one would do well to imagine that they are unaware of what's happening. Perhaps you should go and inform them?

"Right," she scoffed indignantly. "Help Ponyville. Just what has this two-bit town ever done for Trixie?"

Stop that. You know that the situation at hoof is far more dire than the petty resentment you still harbor for this town.

"...petty?!"

Petty, indeed. Come now, Trixie. Drop the showmare act for a while and be a decent pony for once. You and I both know that it's the right thing to do.

"Ugh, fine!" she shouted, perhaps a bit louder than intended. "Why do you always have to be right, you incessant, damnable voice?"

I'm your conscience, remember? It's my job.

"Hmph." With a feigned reluctance, Trixie turned and started toward the cottage. She didn't get far - a few steps, at most - before the grunt came again. Closer, this time. She froze, dropping to the ground and making as little noise as possible. Just ahead, the form of a stallion came into view.

Oh, thank Celestia! she thought. *Now at least I won't be alone.* She straightened herself and was just about to call out to the stallion when a long, throaty howl sounded from his lips. Trixie was not the only thing to

freeze this time: a raccoon, out and about looking for a bite to eat, stopped mid-step, paw dangling in midair as it turned to regard the stallion. In a flash, the stallion bounded toward the raccoon, paralyzed in fear. He snarled maliciously as Trixie finally noticed something very, very wrong about him - the glowing red eyes, hot little pinpricks of pure hate that were a horror to behold. The stallion made short work of the raccoon, tearing muscle from bone as the creature yowled in surprise and pain. From scattered bushes and the like, more woodland critters popped their heads up, curious as to the source of the sudden noise.

Trixie could do little more than merely watch as the stallion became a one-pony whirlwind of death, attacking anything and everything that fell into his line of sight. A squirrel was bitten clean in half. Two chipmunk heads were gone in a flash, leaving tiny twitching bodies in the wake. The stallion set upon a weasel, greedily gorging himself on its flesh and entrails as the small mammal was brutally torn apart. Horrible pops and squishes mixed in with the cries of the dying; suddenly, a white rabbit willfully threw itself into the fray, deftly leaping atop the stallion in a fit of rage that would be somewhat cute in other, less grim circumstances. The rabbit scrambled onto the top of the stallion's head, clawing at his burning red eyes, giving the wounded a chance to scurry away to the best of their ability. Trixie, meanwhile, seized the opportunity and darted into a nearby bush, trying her absolute best to keep from shaking. Through the branches, she saw the stallion shake his head violently, casting off his small, white tormentor: he snarled and started toward the dazed rabbit when the door to the cottage opened, the slightest of creaking sounds causing him to stop dead in his tracks. Trixie could only make out the most minute of details - a yellow coat, a pink mane.

"ANGEL!" the pony in the doorway cried. The rabbit came to his senses, quickly hopping toward the pony as the stallion gave chase. The pony from the cottage tried to slam the door shut just seconds after the rabbit was safely indoors, but to no avail - the stallion barged his way through, ramming the door with his skull. Trixie gasped as panicked squeals and the sounds of upended furniture escaped the open doorway. Spurred into action, she hardly noticed the form of a small, brown owl swooping downward, surveying the situation before flying back into the calm of the night. She emerged from the bush, cursing silently as one of her rear legs became ensnared in a few branches; she freed herself easily enough, but the brief moment of hindered forward progress gave her pause for thought.

What do I do? Oh, by Celestia's mane, what do I do?! I can't fight that thing! It tore those animals to pieces! How do I fight something like that?! What...can I use magic? I know levitation, object manipulation, cloud summoning...would any of those do me any good? Oh, that poor pony! I hope she's ok! I've...I've got to do something. I've got to do something!

Against her better judgment, defying both selfish and self-preserving aspects of her mind that were screaming at her to flee, she galloped toward the cottage. The bodies of dead and dying woodland critters lay before her, and she tried her best not to gag; broken forms of mammals and birds alike were scattered about with little care. As she neared, she slowed her pace and tried to move as quickly but as silently as possible. Trixie ducked down when she reached the front of the home, then craned her neck upward to peer into the cottage itself. The inside was a mess; an upended table here, some broken chairs there. From what she assumed was the second floor, she could hear a rhythmic, dull pounding. She shuddered as her mind tried to fill in the blanks.

Maybe...maybe she's already gone... she thought to herself. Oh, who am I kidding? I'm no hero! I-I can't...I can't...I can't do this! I'm so scared! Skittish as she was, the sudden flash of white light accompanied by a sharp *pop!* did little to help matters. The Great and Powerful Trixie clasped her two forehooves over her mouth to stifle a scream as she ducked her head back down, shrinking against the exterior wall. Her heart had leapt right into her throat and was threatening a full-scale emergency evacuation. She sat still for a time, then gasped as she drew a lungful of air, having temporarily forgotten how to breathe. She repeated the motion; breathe in, breathe out. In, out. In and out.

There...there. Much better. Much, much better. She strained her ears to listen, and heard what sounded like a mare crying out, followed by several bodies galloping up the stairs. Trixie chanced a glance inward, and saw through the window a flash of purple tail disappearing up the stairwell. Some far corner of her mind sprang to life as the visual clicked; it did not, however, make its way into the forefront of her mind at that moment. She found herself reaching outward with her magic, a sort of testing of the waters as she mulled over the unique energies that had now been blended in with the rest.

Who could that have been...and how did they get inside without me noticing? Perhaps there's a back door, maybe some sort of side entrance...but that energy signature! I know I've sensed it before...but where? And when?

With eyes furrowed in thought, a sudden series of noises emerging from the second floor jarred her out of her introspection - specifically, a roar, followed by a squish, then a thump. Cautiously, she righted herself and peeked in through the window once more. There was nopony to be seen on the main floor. Trixie shifted her weight nervously, uncertain of what action - if any - she should take.

Perhaps...perhaps that monster got them all...

And then, they emerged from the top of the stairwell - the same yellow pegasus from moments before, accompanied by that small white rabbit and...her. The mare whom had been the very source of her recent misfortunes. The mare whom she had silently sworn revenge upon, so many months ago.

"Twilight Sparkle." she spat aloud, not caring in the slightest if anypony heard her. Her face carried the expression one might expect after one steps in something unpleasant. "What is she doing here?" The question, rhetorical in nature, of course went unanswered. Trixie made certain that she could not be seen and silently observed the scene playing out before her. The pegasus had sat down on a rather comfortable looking couch, which was one of the only pieces of furniture not destroyed from the madness which had transpired moments ago. The pegasus was clearly shaken; tears streamed down her face as she spoke, and Trixie - despite the shock of seeing her arch-nemesis - couldn't help but feel a slight pang of guilt for not helping. Twilight Sparkle appeared to be merely listening to the pegasus as she spoke, offering a comforting hoof here and a few kind words there. Try as she might, though The Great and Powerful Trixie was unable to make out what was being said indoors. Movement from behind the pair seated on the couch signalled the arrival of a small, purple dragon - no doubt Twilight's assistant - and a rather woozy-looking owl. The yellow pegasus mare spoke for a few more minutes, then fell silent. Twilight Sparkle nodded her head, beginning to speak to the group. It was maddening, not knowing what she was saying, but Trixie read the expressions on their faces and tried to fill in the gaps on her own. The

expression worn by the purple unicorn grew into a hardened resolve, interspersed between notes of anger and...remorse, perhaps? It was the sort of feature that was, in its very nature, undefinable. She noticed the yellow pegasus mare for what would be the last time in the next few hours, not quite looking at the purple unicorn, who appeared to be in some sort of trance. Her eyes began to glow an ambient hue - subtle at first, as if the pale clouds themselves had gently kissed her eyelids, growing into a spectacular array of lambent light beams that streamed from those glowing orbs. Trixie gasped as her horn began to hum in tandem, a not entirely unpleasant pitch resonating within her skull. A wispy, nebulous white light enshrouded all left alive inside that humble cabin - and in a flash, they were gone.

“Wha...”

Trixie was absolutely dumbfounded.

“I’m sensing a recurring theme, here.”

Chapter 9

(re)Collection

“W-when do you think she’ll be back?” Spike asked. Fluttershy sighed softly.

“I’m not sure, Spike. I’m...I’m sure she’ll be fine. I’m sure they’ll both be fine. It’s probably not as bad in Cloudsdale as it is here!” the yellow pegasus answered with a certainty that wasn’t exactly felt. Spike made a face that conveyed the same notion. Fluttershy reached over with a hoof and gently stroked the spines on his head.

“There, there,” she cooed. “Don’t worry, Spike. Twilight always knows what to do when things get really bad. She’ll be back soon, I just know it!”

“What about...Rarity? Rarity and the others? Do you think they’re ok, too?”

“I certainly hope so, Spike.”

She sighed. *Girls...where are you?*

“...ah don’t like the look o’ that fire.”

Flames danced and wood crackled as what had once been Ponyville’s commercial center was plunged into a burning miasma of destruction. It had been a little over an hour since Pinkie Pie and Applejack had braved the hordes of the undead outside to reach Sugarcube Corner. After a light snack, served by the aforementioned pink earth pony with a noted lack of her patent carefree flair, the six ponies had separated themselves into groups of three; the Cutie Mark Crusaders fell into a hushed conversation at the far end of the room closest to the rear entrance whilst the other three had gathered around a single table near the front.

Pinkie Pie and Rarity trotted up alongside Applejack and chanced a glance outdoors, the ebb and flow of the inferno casting flickering light across their

faces which poured inward from the barely-opened curtain.

"I don't suppose anypony is around to put it out..." Rarity mused, frightened eyes betraying her calm, analytical tone of voice.

"What about the weather team, guys?" Pinkie asked. "Couldn't they just pull a few rain clouds together and start a shower or something?"

"I don't reckon that they're in any condition do be doin' anything of the sort," Applejack replied dejectedly. "What with 'em having wings an' all, they probably flew up inta' the clouds and hid when this mess all started. Can't say I blame 'em." A structure on the far side of the square had caught fire moments prior, the thatched roof feeding the greedy blaze as the flames hungrily devoured all that stood in its path. As far as the three could tell, there were none left alive in the marketplace - now that there was a lack of mortified, screaming pony victims to attack, the trotting dead shambled aimlessly to and fro, apparently wholly uninterested in the fire that threatened to consume the entirety of the square.

"How long do you suppose we'll be able to remain here?" Rarity asked her two friends. Even though they were indoors, the air within Sugarcube Corner had a slight, smoky tinge to it.

"Don't rightly know," Applejack replied. "S'hard to tell, really. Maybe another hour, hour and a half, tops 'fore that fire spreads and we need ta' find someplace else to hide. Say, Pinkie, come to think of it...just what *is* this here building made outta, anyway? It ain't really made o' gumdrops and candy canes an' the like, is it?"

"Oh, Sugarcube Corner? Nah, it's just wood painted to look like candy and treats and stuff. I mean, duh! A building made out of candy? The architectural implications for erecting a structure from such materials are staggering!"

"...arch-a...what?" Rarity and Applejack stared at the pink pony incredulously. Pinkie shrugged.

"Twilight gave me one of those 'word-a-day' calendars. It's making my vocabulary adjective-iriffic!"

Meanwhile, on the other side of the room, three small fillies sat in the muted glow of a few lit candles. The dull roar of the fire that raged just outside served as a constant, niggling reminder of horrors already transpired. Scootaloo sniffled occasionally under the comforting hoof of Applebloom; Sweetie Belle stared blankly at a corner, having tried and subsequently failed to make sense of the situation that they now found themselves in.

"Don't worry, Sweetie Belle. Applejack was right - I'm sure yer mom's doin' ok out there." Applebloom offered, softly breaking the tense silence that had besetled the three. Scootaloo gulped, suppressing a whimper that threatened to escape her pressed lips.

"I know, I know...but what if she's wrong? What if something *did* happen to her? A-after...after dad left, she's the only family I have. If something happened...if she got hurt, or turned into one of those *things*...I'd be all alone." Sweetie Belle's ears perked up as she turned and looked at the other two.

"Scootaloo..." she began hesitantly, "...you never really told us about your family or anything like that. What...what was he like, your dad?" Scootaloo's eyes shrunk down to little pinpricks, as if recalling a sour memory. "I-I mean, you don't have to tell us if you don't want to! I was just curious-"

"No, no...it's fine, Sweetie Belle." Scootaloo gently shrugged off Applebloom's foreleg and rose to her hooves. She took a few steps away from the two, took in a deep breath, and let it out.

"It's not really something I like to talk about, but I guess there's no harm, right? I mean, what else are we gonna do, just sit here and feel sorry for ourselves?" She laughed bitterly, a mirthless sound that had a harsh tone to it. "My...dad. My dad. Right." She paused for a moment to gather her thoughts, then began.

"I was born in Cloudsdale, and for the first few years of my life, that's where I grew up. My parents both worked at the weather factory - my mom worked there during the day making snowflakes, and my dad had the night shift. I remember asking, once, why they both didn't work during the daytime so that they could both come home for dinner; mom said it was because he was a janitor, and janitors only work at night. The first few

years before I was old enough for flight school were happy enough...mom wasn't really around a whole lot, and I missed her sometimes, but dad was always there to keep me company when she wasn't at home. Plus, mom always made me get up really early to see dad when he came home from the night shift - not that I minded or anything. No matter how tired he was or how tough his night had been, he'd always have a smile on his face when he came through the front door. He'd bend down and pick me up, give me a big hug and a kiss, and ask, 'How's my little Scoot this morning?' That's what he'd call me, his nickname for me...'little Scoot.' I remember giggling; I think I liked that name, at the time.

"My first year of flight school, things started to change. Mom had to work more and more shifts during the daytime, and I had to stay after school for these stupid afternoon programs until she was able to come and pick me up. Sometimes dad would be able to come and get me right after school let out, but he was working longer and longer hours at the factory that year. I asked my mom why the two of them had to work so much all of a sudden, and I remember her saying something like, 'It's just big pony stuff, it's nothing to worry about.' I did worry, though - one time, I overheard her gossiping with one of our neighbors about how 'Cloudsdale is getting too damned expensive these days' and how the family was 'barely getting by'. She wasn't as happy as she used to be...neither of them were, really. They started to fight a lot. At first, they tried to keep their arguments away from me by going into their room and locking the door, but I still heard them. Clouds aren't exactly the most soundproof stuff in the world, I guess.

"Eventually, things started to get really bad. I hardly saw my dad anymore, and only got to greet him when he came home from work maybe once or twice a week. Mom said it was because he got a second job, but I knew that that was a lie; one of the fillies at flight school was teasing me and called my dad an 'alkie,' which I guess means alcoholic. When I asked my mom about it, she got really quiet and started to cry. I felt awful...I didn't mean to upset her or anything, so I started crying, too. I said I was sorry, but she told me that it wasn't my fault. We had a long talk about dad after that, about how he had started to go out with some friends from work just as the local bars were opening up for the day. He'd get really drunk and come stumbling home at two or three in the afternoon while I was still at school and mom was still at work; then he'd sleep until his next shift began, and start the whole thing over again.

“At that point, all my parents did was fight with each other. Sometimes I’d hear them going at it after they put me to bed...it was awful. I remember being scared all the time, but I didn’t really know exactly *what* I was afraid of...until it happened. He left. One day, he just left. He packed his things and walked out of our lives without so much as a good-bye. After the shock wore off, I hated him for it. I still do. I’ll never forgive him for what he did to me and my mom. After he was gone, mom couldn’t afford to keep the house in Cloudsdale anymore, so she got a job on the weather team here and we moved to Ponyville a couple of years ago. And...well...that’s it. My whole...sad...”

She was unable to complete the sentence with “story,” as she found herself overcome with emotion. Scootaloo didn’t even realize that she had begun to cry; the tears blotted out her vision, obfuscating the pastel figures of her two best friends as she collapsed and buried her head in her hooves.

“Damn it...d-damn it...” she choked out, trying her best to keep herself calm.

Applebloom and Sweetie Belle sat in stunned silence for a time, unsure of how to react. Their friend’s sobs, however, jarred them from their inaction; the earth pony and unicorn filly looked at one another, understanding apparent in each other’s eyes as they simply nodded, walking the few steps it took to reach the sobbing orange pegasus. Gently, they embraced their friend as her sobs intensified, wordlessly offering as much comfort as possible as Scootaloo unwillingly relived the darker parts of her fillyhood. Sweetie Belle began to brush Scootaloo’s dark purple mane absentmindedly, doing her best to calm her friend.

After a while, the three withdrew from the embrace as the pegasus filly’s sobs finally began to die down.

“I’m so sorry, Scootaloo...” Applebloom said. “I had no idea.”

“That’s really rotten, how your dad just left like that,” Sweetie Belle added. “I can’t even imagine what it must have been like for you...”

“What’s done is done,” Scootaloo replied. “Mom has a saying, one of those prayers to Celestia...I can’t really remember the whole thing, but it’s something about having the peace of mind to accept the things you can’t change, being brave enough to change the things you can, and being

smart enough to know the difference.’ I never really used to know exactly what it meant, but after dad left, I think I began to understand. He’s gone, and the smartest thing I can do is be brave enough so my mom and me can have a happy life here in Ponyville.” She stopped short, her train of thought derailed once again as the horrors of the evening seeped into her mind. “Mom...”

“Scootaloo, I think that you’re really brave.” Applebloom said. “And I know that your mom thinks so, too. But, ‘member that thing you said earlier? About your mom being the only family ya got? Well, I reckon that’s where ya got it wrong, sugarcube.” Scootaloo, shocked, turned to look at Applebloom. Sweetie Belle, sensing the look in the earth pony’s eyes, nodded, catching on.

“Even though we’re not related, even though we’re not pegasi...you’re our sister, no matter what. The three of us have been though so much together, and I think that we’re much, much more than friends. We’re always there for each other. We’re always hanging out together, trying to find our cutie marks. We’ve shared our deepest secrets with one another, we’ve laughed, we’ve played, we’ve cried...through it all, we’ve been together. That’s what a sister is. That’s what a sister does.” Applebloom nodded in agreement.

“You girls...t-thank you. Thank you so much. I’m proud to call you my sisters...I know we’ll get through this. Together.”

“Sound familiar t’you, Pinkie? Rarity?” Applejack asked. The three fillies were so caught up in the moment that they hadn’t noticed their audience. There was not a dry eye in Sugarcube Corner at that point; every now and again, a moment comes to pass that shocks and awes with its purity.

“I am so proud of you three...” Rarity began, “...you have a very special friendship.”

“Yeah!” Pinkie Pie chirped. “It’s really, really sweet. Maybe even sweeter than my super special double sugar sugar cookies!”

“Ain’t nothin’ more honest than a friendship like that. Gives me hope that maybe something good can come outta this.” Applejack said, soberly. The six enjoyed the moment for just a little while longer, before the inevitable question was asked.

It was Sweetie Belle who stepped up to the plate. "Big sis? What are we supposed to do, now? We...we can't keep hiding here, can we? I can smell the smoke."

"It stinks," Scootaloo assented.

"Well, accordin' to Rarity, Fluttershy, Spike, Angel and Owloiscious are hunkered down in the library. Twilight's went to Cloudsdale to find Rainbow Dash and bring 'er back here so she can put out the fire."

Rarity nodded. "She told me that we will more than likely need the Elements of Harmony to combat this horrific virus, whatever its origins may be. She wasn't entirely certain just what we're up against when we last spoke, but reminded me that the Elements are among the strongest magics known to ponydom."

Pinkie Pie, with a reserved tone to her voice, asked, "What could be so awful that it turns ponies into monsters like that? Nightmare Moon wanted eternal night and that big meanie Discord wanted chaos, but who could be so...so *evil*? Ponies have died..."

"We're not even sure if it's a *who*," Applejack said. "For all we know, it's probably somethin' worse than them two, whatever it is." The six thought on that for a moment.

Scootaloo spoke. "That still doesn't answer the question, though. What are we supposed to do?"

"We can't stay here, that's fer damn sure," Applebloom offered.

"Applebloom! You watch yer language, missy!" Applejack scolded. The filly rolled her eyes.

"I think we got bigger things to worry about 'n bad language, sis." Applebloom deadpanned.

"Huh. That's the second time that's been said tonight," Pinkie remarked to nopony in particular.

“Huh?” three fillies and two mares asked in unison. Pinkie shrugged.

“Well, then. I, for one, don’t fancy the idea of staying here much longer,” Rarity said. “As much as I hate to admit it, we need to go out there once again.”

“But where will we go?” Sweetie Belle asked.

“What about Sweet Apple Acres, Applejack?” Pinkie offered. “It’s far enough from town that it’d probably be safe, right?” Applejack shook her head.

“I really wanna find out how Mac and Granny Smith are doin’, but I reckon it ain’t safe for all of us to be travelin’ so far.”

“Agreed, unfortunately,” Rarity said. “The library is probably the safest place for the six of us at the moment - it’s relatively close, easy enough to defend, elevated upper floors for surveying the situation, away from the fire...plus, I’m certain that Fluttershy could use the company, the poor thing. Besides, we cannot reasonably expect her to come to us, so...so, I suppose we’ll just have to come to her. That way, at the very least, four of the six Elements will be gathered together in one place.”

“So, our options are stay here and eventually burn to death, or go outside and risk getting eaten by zombie ponies?” Scootaloo asked flatly.

“...yep. That sounds about right,” Applejack sighed. “It ain’t gonna be easy, but as long as we all stick together, we’ll make it. We gotta make it. Together.”

“*Together,*” the Cutie Mark Crusaders whispered in unison.

“Okay!” Pinkie cried, trying to keep everypony’s spirits up. “To the library, girls! Uh, which way do you think we should go?”

“Well, you and Applejack used the back entrance, did you not? I’ve not been in the back alleyways behind the shops, so I don’t know the way...was it safe? Were there any-”

“-we didn’t see any, nah. Them things don’t seem to be the shiniest apples

in the bushel, iffn' ya catch my drift. S'long as we move quickly and quietly, we should be safe enough. Pinkie, do you know any shortcuts that'd get us to the library quickly?"

Pinkie thought on that for a moment. "Well, since we're going in that direction, the back alleys are gonna end as soon as we hit Roseluck's flower shop. We could probably cut through a few backyards, skirt around the edge of the park, and it'd be a short gallop out in the open to the library from there."

"Hmm...out in the open, huh? Are ya sure there ain't a way to avoid that?"

"Not unless we wanna take the roads, nope. Sorry..." Pinkie said.

"It sounds as though it cannot be avoided. We'll have to be very, very careful," Rarity mused.

"Don't worry, you three!" Sweetie Belle cheered. "The Cutie Mark Crusaders will look after you! Right, girls?" She glanced sideways at her smiling surrogate sisters.

"Yeah!" Scootaloo cried. "We'll be like...like..."

"-protectors!" Applebloom said.

"Defenders!" Sweetie Belle added.

"How 'bout...uh...escorts?" Scootaloo tried.

"Hey, yeah!" Sweetie Belle and Applebloom agreed.

"I'd cover your ears, girls," Pinkie warned.

"Huh?" Rarity and Applejack asked.

"CUTIE MARK CRUSADER ESCORT TEAM, GO! YAY!" The three fillies cried out in ear-shattering unison. An empty vase on one of the tables fell to the floor and shattered, having been blown backward by the concussive force of the shout.

After taking time to re-adjust her hat, Applejack suggested, "How 'bout the 'Exceptionally Quiet and Faithfully Obedient Cutie Mark Crusader Escort Team, hm?"

"Yeah...sorry about that. Won't happen again," Scootaloo apologized.

"I should certainly hope not!" Rarity scolded. "Listen carefully, girls. You need to stay close to the three of us, all right? Do *not* wander off, be as quiet as possible, and be certain to obey our every instruction without hesitation. We'd never forgive ourselves if anything happened to the three of you." The three fillies nodded soberly.

"Ok," Pinkie said. "Here goes nothing, girls. Are we all ready?" She was met with a few murmurs of consent.

Rarity, having been the only one among them to bring along anything but the fur on their backs, gathered up her saddlebags and situated them on her flanks. The six made their way to the door at the rear of the room, Pinkie gingerly nosing it open. Faint candlelight spilled into the open doorway, but it wasn't much to go by - the flickering light barely illuminated the interior of the storage room. A few softly whispered instructions later, and the six formed an impromptu caravan as they made their way single-file through the dark room, Pinkie taking the lead with Applejack bringing up the rear. Pinkie cautiously opened the door leading into the back alley, glancing quickly to the left and right and nodding to the other five when she saw no immediate danger. They silently shuffled back into the night, the pungent tinge of smoke stinging their nostrils. Though they were a good thirty or forty feet away from the center of the marketplace, the grunts and groans of the living dead could still be heard over the fire, with the occasional scream in the far distance interspersed throughout. The Cutie Mark Crusader Escort Team gulped in unison, knowing that they had to remain brave. Pinkie Pie, Rarity and Applejack were having similar thoughts.

The six, true to their plan, moved quickly and as silently as they could manage. At one point, a stray hoof accidentally brushed one of the many aluminum trash cans lining the sides of the alley. A sharp *bang!* rang out, stopping them temporarily in their tracks. Rarity cursed silently, berating herself for not paying attention to where she was stepping. They strained their ears to listen, expecting a series of shambling hoofsteps accompanied

by those inequine murmurings...but they heard nothing. Sighs of relief were in order; after the brief scare, they pressed onward. Every block or so, the alleyway opened up on their right, revealing little snippets of the ruined marketplace. More than once, the silhouetted forms of zombie ponies could be seen in the distance, shuffling haphazardly to and fro while everything burned around them. After roughly five minutes, the narrow alley widened before them. Just ahead, an unpainted picket fence stood in their path, temporarily blocking further progress.

"This is the rear of Roseluck's shop, is it not?" Rarity asked.

"Yup," Pinkie nodded.

"How're we supposed ta climb over that fence?" Applebloom whispered. Pinkie, saying nothing, simply walked ahead and reached forward with a hoof. There was a tiny clicking sound as the hoof found a hidden latch, and a well-hidden gate swung forward, opening up into the yard.

"How'dya know that there was a gate?" Applejack asked quietly. "Was that yer Pinkie Sense or somethin'?"

"Nope, it was a convenient plot device!"

"Wha-?"

"-c'mon, we should keep moving," Pinkie interrupted. Applejack just shook her head, once again starting forward.

The far end of the yard was lined with well-maintained rose bushes, marking the border with the backyard adjacent. There were spaces in between the shrubbery that made for a tight squeeze, but the six managed to fit through without so much as a scratch. As they made their way further and further from the marketplace, an eerie silence washed over them, the only sounds being the dull thuds of hooves against grassy earth. Nights in Ponyville, the small town that it was, were usually pleasantly quiet; this silence, however, was unsettling. There were no crickets chirping, no gentle breeze rustling the grass and the trees...it was almost malicious.

"Why's it so quiet?" Scootaloo asked, taking notice.

"It may have something to do with...whatever *that* is," Rarity answered, motioning upward toward the translucent blue barrier.

"Just what the heck *is* that thing, anyway?" Applebloom asked.

"Before this all started, before the attack, Rarity and I got a message from Princess Luna." Sweetie Belle said.

"What, y'mean like a letter or somethin'?"

"No, it was more like...a voice. Like she was talking in our heads. It was strange - it woke me up, and I couldn't really move or anything. Princess Luna said that Princess Celestia qua-, uhm...quar...what's the word again, Rarity?"

"Quarantined, dear."

"Right, what she said. Princess Celestia ordered all of the major towns and stuff all over Equestria sealed so that the virus that causes all of this can't spread."

Applebloom scrunched her face. "That don't make any sense. I mean, it's here, yeah, but what if there's a town somewhere that don't have the virus? Why cut 'em off from the rest of Equestria?"

"Maybe it's so they stay safe," Scootaloo offered. "Maybe some of 'em got out before the...whatever that blue thing is went up."

"But it also keeps ponies that aren't sick - ponies like us - from getting out!" Applebloom said harshly, trying to keep her voice down.

"Simmer down there, lil' sis," Applejack shushed. "I'm sure th' Princess had a good reason fer doin' what she did...but ya make a good point, I reckon. There are a lotta things 'bout tonight that don't quite add up."

"Maybe Twilight knows?" Pinkie asked.

Rarity said quietly, "I suppose we'll find out when we get to the library - that is, if she's made it back from Cloudsdale with Rainbow Dash by now."

The next few minutes of their trek was made in a tense, contemplative silence. Few obstacles stood in their way; the backyards of Ponyville's residences more or less blended together, allowing for easy access. Still, that uneasy quiet persisted - it put the six more on edge than anything, eyes constantly scanning for any signs of movement. Finally, the tree that served as Ponyville's library came into view. Before them lay a wide open area that served as the edge of the park, the green grass separated by a small hoofpath that itself bisected with the road which lay directly outside of the library.

"All right, everypony," Applejack said, "we're nearly there. Stay alert and-"

Suddenly, a white flash of light poured through the library's windows, bright as day and illuminating the surrounding area for a fraction of a second. The flash was so intense that, despite the distance, the six were temporarily blinded by its sheer brilliance.

"What the hay was that?!" Applebloom cried loudly, forgetting to keep her voice in check.

"C'mon, girls!" Pinkie shouted in reply, already galloping toward the tree. "Fluttershy might be in trouble!"