

Growing Pains

By Peroth



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Chapter 1

Growing Pains

Spike stared once more at the closed door to the room his boss was staying in. It was the beginning of a beautiful Saturday, which was an especially special day in Spike's book since it was the one day of the week Twilight granted him the entire day off to do what he wanted, whether it was sleeping all day, eating all day, bathing all day, or any mix of the three and then some. Twilight normally took the day off too, but there was something, well, off today.

Namely, Twilight wasn't up yet. It was closing in on noon and Twilight, the one person he knew who took her studies so seriously she put them before things as welcome and wonderful as sleep and food. At least Spike didn't understand it. Twilight was usually up before the young dragon, usually the one to wake Spike up in fact. So, either Twilight had another long night putting up with Pinkie Pie again and chose to just sleep the day away - again - or she was trying to astral-project herself through her dreams. Again. No matter how you cut it, it was unusual.

Maybe he'd surprise her. "Bet she'd love a breakfast in bed." He smiled at the thought of Twilight's wide eyes and gushing voice as he commandeered the kitchen, and proudly went to work. Nothing said good morning to a sleepy pony like pancakes and grilled asparagus stalks. With any luck, he might not have even drained the syrup from his last sweets binge.

He pushed open a window above the stove as the pans beneath him sizzled, and he took in the smell of fresh morning air and cooking food. Birds in the tree branches chirped merrily, and even the sound of bees seemed bright and optimistic as they gathered food from the flowers. It also let in the voices of an active town, all of Ponyville seeming to be fully alive. It was going to be a gorgeous day, and all signs were pointing towards a relaxing lay by the pond, or perhaps he could tag along with the girls on the day they'd no doubt spend on either another crazy scheme or maybe they'd actually relax for once.

Speak of the devil, there was a knock on the door. He made sure the food would be fine by itself for a moment and hopped off his stool. He opened the door, and found a pair of orange legs in the way. "Oh hiya Spike, was hopin' somepony'd be here." Applejack sounded a bit giddy, which was unusual since she was usually so wooden and laid back.

"What's up Applejack?" Spike invited her in, shutting the door behind her when she finished politely wiping her hooves and entered the library. "You're going to have to wait a while, Twilight's still asleep for some reason and I thought I'd surprise her with breakfast." The dragon came back to the kitchen to tend the meal, smiling at the sheer liveliness of the day. He was all for a couple of good omens.

"I dun' mind, I just need her help balancing' a checkbook. Big Mac's got it all figured out 'til Apple Bloom tried to turn housekeeper with a hose and washed all the ink off a page, an' Twilight's better with numbers than me or him so we figured we'd send them her way an' see what she turns out." She trotted around the house, abnormally restless.

"She shouldn't have a problem with that. Sweet day, huh? I could tell the moment I got up it'd be great."

Applejack knocked her back hooves together to make a clapping noise. "Like ya wouldn't believe! Even Fluttershy's hoppin' about like Pinkie Pie. Can't wait t'see Twilight's reaction to all this. If any pony would be a laugh to see this excited it'd be her. Huh, I hope paperwork don't soak her spirits none."

Spike gave a humored snort as he mounted the pancake stack, the accompanying asparagus, and the syrup all on one plate and proudly marched towards the door with it held above his head. "If anything it'll just make Twilight happier. Hey, can you get the door?"

"Not a prob' Spike." Applejack followed him to the closed door and opened it up, and squinted her eyes to peer into the dark room, all while smiling as she made her call: "Wakey wakey Twilight Sparkle! It's a smilin' sorta day!"

"KILL ME."

Applejack, for her part, did not even squeak at a voice that sounded so pained it could have gone through a cheese grater and sounded more pleasant, and was quick to reenter the room with Spike.

"Twilight, are you alright?" The dragon asked with clear concern in his voice as he set the plate down on a nightstand to be forgotten before climbing onto the bed with the still figure. It must have startled Twilight, since a quiver went through the lump on the bed.

"Hey, c'mon sugarcube, don't be like that. Are ya sick?" Applejack walked around to the other side of the bed and pressed her nose against what she thought was Twilight's face under the blanket. Part of the covered mass lifted, and a bleary, blood-shot, tear-slicked eye stared at the farm pony whose nose was practically pushing into Twilight's backside. The orange-maned girl shot back and grinned sheepishly before Twilight laid her head down on the pillow, uncovering most of her face with the blanket. "Not feelin' too ripe?"

"Uuuhnngh..." Applejack had dreams of a zombie apocalypse once. It was more of a recurring nightmare from when she'd overheard a ghost story from her brother when she was tiny, and hearing those imagined groans, even during the day could make her spine ice-cold. Yet none of them sounded as remotely terrifying as Twilight did. "Spiiiingnghhh... Spiiike..." She groaned ghoulishly.

Spike had left the room though, and was only just returning with a bag of medical supplies. From what Applejack could see, Twilight had not gotten a lot of sleep. Her pupils were puny, and the red veins around the edges were thick and numerous. Dark bags hung under her eyes, and whatever was ailing her was paining her enough to cause wetness to pool at the bottom of each lid. Applejack's fantastic morning started to feel more and more like a nightmare as Spike stuck a thermometer under Twilight's tongue and watched the monitor with impatience. His frown only deepened. "Your temp's fine, Twi. Need some pain medication?"

"Hay I think we could knock her up with morphine at this point. She looks like heck came and took a bite of her..." Applejack ran her hoof along Twilight's side as the unicorn murmured incoherently. "Speak up hon, you're whisperin'."

"Spike..." Her voice was small, and full of hurt and exhaustion. The dragon set the pain pills down. "Spike... Are you there?" She blinked one eye at a time, which was eerie to watch.

"You know I'm here Twilight, do you need water? Food? More blankets? Less blankets? I can read you Canterlot's Hygiene Standards if you need me to." The dragon joined Applejack in rubbing the calmly fidgeting body.

"Spike... You... You love me right?" The Unicorn asked, making the dragon squirm uncomfortably. She was getting mushy in front of company, but considering the circumstances...

"I love you a lot Twilight, why? Don't tell me you're dying!" Applejack's stomach pitted. She hadn't even considered that, and seeing Twilight the way she was now, every shadow started to look like skull or a scythe, waiting for a corpse. She sucked in a hissing breath to stop herself from screaming for help. It might not be as bad as it looked, but she really *really* wanted to go see a doctor.

"No... Spike, you'll do anything for me, right?" Spike nodded, rubbing Twilight's side vigorously to let her know he would. "Then, Spike, please, okay? Please please go to my cabinet and get me a quill. Please? Please get the sturdy enchanted one please? Please...?" She begged weakly as Spike ran to her cabinet and grabbed the requested quill, and on a second thought grabbed a few sheets of scroll paper.

"Do you want me to get Celestia?" Spike asked, the idea causing Applejack to calm down. Celestia loved Twilight dearly as her star student, surely if she heard her student was curled up on the precipice of death the Princess would be there in an instant with all manner of cures. But no, Twilight was shaking her head, and shifted it to get a better look at Spike. Applejack grimaced at the sight of such a tight, contorted face, caused by immense pain.

"No, Spike, take that pen, okay? I need you to follow my instructions very carefully..." The Unicorn somehow mustered the strength to raise her head level with Spike's. "Come here, okay? Hold the pen up horizontally..." Her voice was so soft as she gave the instructions while Spike, looking confused, did as he was asked. "Now I want you to point it at my eye..." Spike came a bit closer, and Applejack still wasn't sure what was happening. She knew Spike didn't have any greater understanding, as he

was still looking to Twilight for instruction. Twilight stared straight at the pen as best as she could, while something dawned on Spike.

"Twilight, your horn..." Applejack lifted her sight from the pen to Twilight's horn and gasped softly as she saw what Spike was staring at.

"Spike *please!*" Twilight grimaced and a tear slipped down her cheek as she stared at the quill, and the two immediately looked down at the tool as the Unicorn squirmed and stabilized herself, staring harder at the pen.

"Spike, listen carefully... I know you love me and I love you too, so please, just do as I say..."

"Anything Twilight." Spike frowned deeply, his eyes not flickering to the horn again.

"Okay, please, when I count to three I need you to do this. Alright? On three I just need you to take that pen, and don't hold back, drive it through my eye." The dragon fumbled with the quill in shock as Applejack's jaw dropped. "Make sure it goes deep, it has to get to the brain to **KILL ME** otherwise it'll just-"

"Twilight this is no time to be joking around! We need to get your horn looked at!" Spike threw the quill in frustration, and he had to push her down as she scrambled towards the item, looking desperately sad.

"But Spike, I need you to-"

"Twilight he's right." Applejack lifted herself onto the bed and tugged Twilight back down into a lying position with her teeth and the sorceress' mane, "Ain't nothin' so bad in the universe t'go makin' your friends kill you. You *need* t'get your horn looked at."

"Ugghnng..." Twilight's moan made the two wince. "What's so bad about my horn you guys won't let me just end the pain? What if I swear to put you two in my will? Spike, you can have my gems, all of them, Applejack, you can take my place as Celestia's student, you'll be such a good unicorn!" Twilight whimpered and squirmed, trying to roll over and cover her face, but Applejack kept her still.

"Quit talkin' yer nonsense, Twi! Yer horn is bleedin'!" Applejack sighed as she watched her friend with concern. The pain must have been bad. What

makes a horn bleed? Whatever it was, it was enough to send a sturdy girl like Twilight into wanting death.

"Bleeding!" Twilight choked out, trying to sit up, but was forced to lay down with a press of Applejack's hooves. On closer inspection, it wasn't the horn, just the skull around it. There was a tiny red ring around the base of the horny, and thin red lines were creeping down her forehead. "But I was done with that last week!" Applejack rolled her eyes while Spike gave out a noise between a gasp of disgust and a retch.

"Don't be so dirty sugarcube." She looked Twilight right in her strained eyes, and sighed. "Sorry fer bein' so rough but you ain't exactly in the right states of mind." She leaned down and gently touched her nose to Twilight's, an act so intimate looking it made Spike feel uncomfortable for just standing there. Twilight didn't seem to really notice. Well, at least until Applejack began to lick up the blood.

"Oh Celestia..." Spike and Twilight groaned for completely separate reasons. After that little tidbit of unwanted information earlier, Spike had to fight to keep his lunch down as he raced out of the library to go find a doctor. Getting a tongue bath from Applejack seemed to calm down Twilight, who was no longer trying to fight being bedridden, nor was she whimpering. Applejack reasoned it was either the mind tricking itself or somehow, she was taking some of the pressure off. Either way, she was damn glad Spike had left and no other pony was here. It was one thing to be caught standing on a pony in her bed, it was another to get caught licking her face.

It started like a tiny pebble dropping into a pond. Spike had barged into the doctor's office during their lunch break, shouting about bleeding horns and suicide, and clearing the air only after a nurse forced him to drink a glass of water to calm down. Spike lead the doctor and his nurse off towards a cottage near the edge of the woods, and they found to their annoyance he'd only stopped by to grab more medical help. Spike had been much more articulate when speaking to Fluttershy, but all he managed to get out was "Twilight's really hurt" before Fluttershy almost knocked him off balance to charge towards town. The group of four were shouting over each other to explain or get an explanation, not doing a thing to hide the situation from outside ears. Within twenty minutes news of Twilight Sparkle

being so horrendously sick she was crying blood and trying to jam sharp things into her head to make the pain stop due to a period had reached Sweet Apple Acres.

Big Mac silently thanked the Princesses he was born a male and took Apple Bloom and her friends aside to give them the big 'period talk' Applejack had been saving. If only to prevent the three from screaming about not wanting to lose all their blood.

"How would you describe the pain?" The doctor asked while keeping a clipboard and a quill handy. His nurse was carefully scooping soup into the suffering young girl's mouth, nodding her thanks to Applejack who had been quick to give the professionals space by replacing Twilight's pillow with her own body. Twilight hadn't recovered much from when Spike had left her, but she was no longer eyeing quills like they were salvation.

"... Bad." Twilight's answer was slow, methodical, and well thought out in its own way. The doctor shifted and cleared his throat. Applejack would have kicked the doctor for his rudeness if she hadn't been under Twilight, but a glare served to remind him his place instead.

"Twilight, I think he might mean 'how' does it hurt?" Fluttershy offered so gently and sweetly it made Spike's panicking fidgets quit. The Pegasus was careful as she wrapped a thin hand cloth dipped in herbs and solutions around the poor mare's horn. It took a few moments for the pain in Twilight's face to subside, and a few minutes more for her eyes to stop looking so ragged from the continued burn. Twilight blinked slowly, as if truly, clearly taking in everything around her for the first time.

"I think," Twilight began, her voice a little stronger. "I think whatever's in that rag is the best thing ever." Fluttershy's smile lit the room up a few notches brighter as Twilight more easily sipped at the soup. Now she just looked tired, but still, any movement caused her to wince and tear up again. "It feels like my forehead is getting stabbed right where my horn is. Like somebody took a big, hot knife and just-"

"That'll be fine Twilight." Applejack shifted, making Twilight sigh.

"What would do that though? I've never heard of a unicorn getting horn-pains before." Spike sat at the end of the bed and looked deep in thought. "I've never even read anything like it. I've heard of magical short-outs but nothing like, well, what you look like."

Twilight's smile was weak, and the change of muscles made her wince. "Is it that bad?"

"To be frank, miss Sparkle, in my long line of work, I've never met anypony look so absolutely agonized. I've seen dead ponies with eyes more alive than yours had been, if I may be so blunt." The doctor chewed the tip of his quill, making Twilight wince, which caused her to wince even more. "To be honest, when I walked in here, I was fairly sure you wouldn't survive for very long. Though seeing as you are now, I can honestly say it's probably not fatal, but as your companion has said, it's undocumented. Unicorns aren't my area of expertise anyways, a doctor from, say, Canterlot would be in a better position to make any sort of judgment."

The room was quiet as everypony considered his words. Twilight was the first to break the silence with tears in her eyes. "Did I really look dead?" She asked Applejack. The brave, honest, hard-working, athletic pony couldn't keep her body from shaking from the memory.

"Twilight, when ya first looked at me, th'only thing that kept me from screamin' my bloody head off was me bein' too frozen up with fright." The unicorn nodded solemnly. Spike had painted the picture for her, and she guessed she wouldn't have reacted any better if she walked in on anyone else with eyes like that. Heck, as sheltered as she was, she probably would have caused the place to explode from fear.

She felt something hot press against her forehead, and then saw Fluttershy roll the heat-soaked towel over her eyes. Soothing relief washed over her face, and Applejack let out a little breath as she felt her friend relax, even a little.

"Well that settles it then, doesn't it?" Spike asked, getting the attention of the others. "We have to go get somebody from Canterlot. I could send a letter to Celestia asking for a doctor, she'll understand. It's the fastest way after all, and you're in a lot of pain." Most of the room nodded in agreement, except Twilight Sparkle. "... Twilight?" Spike crawled up the bed and rubbed her side.

The unicorn was quiet, but breathing. Then Fluttershy, the doctor, and the nurse gave a tiny sigh of relief. "What? What's so nice?" Applejack asked, looking to their calm faces.

"Poor thing is finally asleep. Perhaps it's for the best. You do what you need to do, I'll go make a formal report. If you can't get a doctor out your way, stop by my clinic and I'll have a carriage sent for. For now, under no circumstances is Twilight Sparkle to be let out of bed. There is far too much pressure in her head for her to be coherent on her feet. And especially, this is vital, and you should already know this, but do not disturb her horn too much." The doctor packed his things while the nurse kept his notes and set the soup bowl beside what looked like a very good, if cooled down breakfast plate.

The two left as quietly as possible, much to Applejack's relief. Twilight finally looked calmed down after the whole incident. She wanted it to just be a bad dream but she felt, well, kind of motherly, sisterly, or just plain friendly to be here taking care of her. "I'll be honest with ya Twilight, even if it's a bit unfair that ye're asleep and all, but ya'll nearly scared my hooves off. Don'tcha worry, the Princess is gonna hear about this." She smiled, and Fluttershy carefully removed the hot cloths from Twilight's face.

"I can understand your distress at the situation sir, I really do." Celestia tried to act sincere, not wanting her subjects to let her know she was bored out of her mind from listening to this debate. "But I simply can't bring myself to allow you to take over a farm field for land alone." Equestria was not limited in land or resources in any way, yet day in, day out, Celestia often heard about land debates.

"But Princess if you'll take a moment to look at my charts-"

"We've been over the blas'ed things a hun'red times alrea'y! Her memory ain' tarnished none since five minu'es ago!" The business pony narrowed his eyes at what he assumed was a simple farm pony - rather than the organizer and defacto leader of the Agricultural Guild - and the farm pony repaid the stare in kind. Celestia sighed breathlessly. Every debate was the same. Somebody wanted somebody else's land, mostly out of jealousy from how well it was performing, often presenting proof some valuable thing was in or under the dirt. She tried to remain democratic about it, but

she was always a few steps from signing a form that would prevent the taking over of land.

"You'll find that the land is rich in Lunanium, if we took the land for drilling we could have a seventy-five percent increase in strength and durability of your average kitchen sink!" Oh, right, and usually it was for mundane things. Celestia hid a roll of her eyes with a flick of her magnificent hair. "An' I keep saying if you're so interested in wha's un'er my land I'll go dig it up myself!"

"That's not how it works at all!"

The squabbling stopped for a moment when there was a flash of green fire in front of the Princess. Celestia stared at the scroll rather melodramatically, inwardly feeling like bouncing in joy from the reprieve, but hiding it behind years of practice. "If you two will grant me just a moment of silence, my student has probably sent me her learnings for the week." If she could count on one thing, it would be Twilight's verboseness giving her a reason to read the scroll extra carefully, perhaps two more times to increase her break by a few needed minutes. It was nice to see what she was up to after all.

This letter was neither verbose, nor from Twilight. It was almost beautiful in its simplicity.

Twilight's dying.

Blood everywhere.

Send doctors.

Thanks to how she held the page, the two uncomfortably shuffling ponies before her never got to see what true fear looked like.

"Ye're positive the Princess will take priority of this?" Applejack watched the young dragon as he used a wet rag to so carefully clean the blood off of Twilight's face. The flow from the base of her horn was mercifully slow. Rather than pour out as Applejack had initially feared, small drops would

form at the very bottom and then pick a path down the mare's face to go sliding.

Watching Twilight sleep had been peaceful, but Applejack had been getting awfully sore and allowed Spike to hold Twilight's head up so the farm pony could slip out and push in a pillow. The three of them still gathered around her bed, with Fluttershy leaving intermittently to turn away nosy neighbors and tell them no, Twilight Sparkle wasn't dying, she'd probably be okay, yes there was some blood, no it wasn't because she was menstruating. Luckily, as easily as a rumor could be started, the honest folk of Ponyville could quell it, which would have been nice to know earlier because Big Mac now suddenly had a load of incredibly uncomfortable questions he needed to look up.

Speaking of looking up...

"Is that an air raid?" Rainbow Dash stared up at the sky as, among the clouds, she could spot the shapes of hundreds of Pegasi slipping in and out of the puffy white sea. Several of the ponies she'd been standing near watched the confusion on her face and took a look themselves, and slowly, carefully backed their way into their houses. The Royal Guard often sent overhead fliers to scout the land and map its shape, but always at highspeed. These Pegasi took slow, silent action as they perched in the clouds and watched below. There was something afoot, and only a few ponies correctly guessed what they'd come for.

Rainbow Dash wasn't one of them, having slept in late, not hearing an inkling of the rumor that Twilight was shooting blood out of her eyes like some sort of freak desert lizard. So, as far as she knew, there was nothing wrong in the town. Even then, the Royal Guard weren't the sort to just hang out above a town without explanation. She took to the skies and followed one particular shape upwards, righting herself horizontally next to the figure, who had a steeled face, golden armor, and tensed muscles like Dash had never seen. It took her a moment to realize he was staring at her. "... What's up?"

The Pegasus snorted and flew up higher. "Hey!" Dash gave chase, breaking through the cloudline only to find herself in the middle of a group of guards staring towards the center of a large circle of guards. It wasn't easy to tell because of the sun, but she realized that Celestia was standing

uncomfortable and restless in the middle of her private army, pacing wordlessly back and forth. Now Dash's confusion was reaching critical mass, her head cocking ever so slowly to the side as she tried to puzzle exactly why the Princess would be standing above Ponyville acting so worried. It must've made the guards restless watching their leader act so nervous, because they weren't doing their "silent and still" thing.

"Hey Dervish, you knew this Sparkle girl, right?" She heard somewhere behind her. Rainbow Dash turned immediately. There was a young guard standing should to shoulder with a much older colt, who was looking particularly sour.

"Heck I was there from day one, I was assigned to keep an eye on her 'til she got older." The Sparkle girl? It only just dawned on Rainbow Dash that they must've meant Twilight. Slipping between the ranks to get to the two, she poked her head up to put her nose to nose with Dervish.

"Hey, what do you guys think you're doing storming our airspace like this? What's this got to do with Twilight? Why is the Princess here, why does she look like something bad happened?" Dash demanded of the two, not controlling the volume of her voice, currently pitching high above their whisper. The two guards glanced to each other, and rather than answer, stood rigid and forward, facing the middle of the circle. "I'm talking to you two and I want answers! I live down there!"

"Then maybe you can explain what's happening?" She heard a voice so beautiful, she knew it could only have been one pony. She turned to stare at the Princess, whose eyes were placed down on her. Dash froze a little, stuck between wanting to bow and wanting to keep staring. The Princess shuffled nervously as the sky-blue pony gave her in barest terms a bow, then stood straight and worked her mouth uncomfortably. "You're Rainbow Dash, correct?" The Princess finally pushed, her patience over the edge already. The Pegasus nodded. "What happened to Twilight Sparkle?" She took two steps forward, bringing her nearly face to face with Dash, who lowered herself in fright.

"Wh-what do you mean what happened to Twilight? I have no idea, I just woke up!" Dash tried to explain, looking around nervously. Every guard on the cloud was staring at her, and the Princess, whose presence normally

soothed, caused every nerve of hers to be on edge. "Why? What's going on? What's this about?"

The Princess stared down at her own hooves in a rare display of weakness as she explained. "I got a letter less than an hour ago telling me that Twilight, my student, was dying."

The little rainbow filly sat stock still in the middle of all the attention, suddenly not caring for it at all. She then said, in the most high-pitched squeak she had in her: "*What!*"

The Princess didn't have time to react as the Pegasus dove through the clouds, spiraling down towards the town below. The Princess finally gave the word, and the guards followed.

"Sounds like a bit o' ruckus happenin' outside." Applejack stood alongside Fluttershy as the two watching the outside with concern. Ponies were rushing indoors and staring upwards, making the eerie feeling Applejack had feel even more ominous.

"It just started a few seconds ago. I can't imagine what's-" the two mares gasped. They saw Rainbow Dash, breaking the airspeed limit like no other, charging straight for the library, as well as over five dozen Royal Guards flying after her, straight towards the tree house. The two had to blink rapidly as they saw what they thought was the Princess was in fact the Princess streaking towards the house and gaining on Dash almost effortlessly.

The two mares briefly had the idea of what a castle siege would feel like against overwhelming numbers. And a door made of wood.

The front door exploded inwards from a kick and Dash zoomed inside, landing on her hooves and looking firm, but teary. "I heard Twilight's dying where is Twilight why is she dying what did you do to her the Princess is here and guys what's going on!" The Pegasus demanded, bouncing on her hooves with a pained frown as, glory of glories, in walked Princess Celestia. Fluttershy and Applejack both gasped, and bowed low.

"Girls, do not bow before me today. Where is Twilight Sparkle?" The Princess asked, her tone so overly polite that Applejack could easily pick up on the pain and discomfort in her voice. Guard ponies immediately

began to file into the room, taking a post in each corner, watching the room in dead silence as one opened a door.

"Wait! Don't go openin' doors, Twilight's sick in there!" Applejack called after the ponies entering the room. She was blocked by two more standing by the door, and Celestia entered the room herself. "Hold on, she ain't dyin'!" Applejack called into the room. Celestia paused before the bed, and turned to look to Applejack with an incredibly relieved expression.

"She isn't?" Her voice sounded so unsure and weak. This wasn't like the Princess at all.

Applejack shook her head, slipped past the Guard's wings, and entered the room. Fluttershy followed her, quickly followed by Dash. "But I heard she was dying just now! Why didn't anybody tell me-"

"For the love of all of Equestria and Celestia's sun!" No pony said anything as they turned to the figure in the bed. "Would everybody please shut up!" Twilight raised her head, bleary eyed, blood-shot, and teary again as pain reentered her forehead.

"Oh! Twilight I'm so sorry I forgot to change the rags I-"

"What is going on?" Celestia demanded firmly. Twilight turned her head towards the voice, and blinked slowly. She'd just woken up, again, and pain was slashing through her skull. Everything looked murky through the pain, but the voices she could clearly hear. Each twitch caused her horn to flare up painfully, and she had to grit her teeth to blink through it.

"Princess Celestia...?" The lavender unicorn reached a hoof out, but Celestia ignored it in favor of gently nuzzling her student along her neck. She spied blood on the girl's forehead and she froze for a heartbeat. She began to gently inspect it and the wound, which seemed to be coming from, of all things, her horn.

"I'm here my student. What happened? I just got a letter from Spike saying you were dying." Her voice took on a motherly tone as she calmly walked around the bed, using her nose and teeth to make sure Twilight had every bit of comfort possible from her current set-up, and Twilight's dreadful eyes tracked her progress.

"Spike!" Fluttershy looked to the dragon with an almost pained look, and the dragon, who had been pinned by a guard, just smiled apologetically.

"Well, we needed somebody out here fast, and it worked."

"And you scared me half to death!" The Princess grunted, looking annoyed for the first time in a very long while. "Twilight Sparkle, how do you feel?" She gently rubbed her nose against the mare's ear. The longer she looked into her student's eyes, the more damage she imagined. She looked like she'd been through some horrendous pain, but she was coherent at least. Twilight nestled into bed as Celestia tucked her, and it took Applejack a moment to spring to the unicorn's side and, to Celestia's confusion, covered her mouth with a hoof.

"Uh, well, y'see, s'far as Ah can tell she'd probably been up most o' the night. Something 'bout her horn's actin' up and causin' her a heck of a head pain. She ain't in no mood to be makin' choices of her own right now, isn't that right Twilight?" The unicorn turned to look to Applejack, who felt very small all of a sudden under her withered stare. She took her hoof from Twilight's mouth as Celestia began to dismiss the guards, apologizing for getting them up in arms for a false alarm. None of them looked particularly sorry about it though, and the one Dash recognized as Dervish took a long look in the room before heading off.

"Wait, so Twilight's not dying, right?" She asked, approaching the bed, cringing at the sight of her friend's face. She'd seen pain before, even on her own face. Especially when a nasty fall had snapped one of her back legs in two. She'd been put in the emergency ward and saw all sorts of pain, but there was something haunting about Twilight's look. It almost looked like she'd given up the fight against it.

"No, thankfully. I can only imagine poor Twilight's pain, so I've been doing everything I can to reduce it. Would you like another rag?" Fluttershy leaned down and held up another cloth that smelled heavily of nature and wrapped it around Twilight's horn again, as gentle as could be.

Dash looked indignant, and stomped a hoof as she spoke, "Well then what's with all the talk about her dying then, and the gloom and doom of the room?"

"Spike was jus' bein' overdramatic in his letter and turned it into a big boom."

"Sorry, guess I kind of was acting like a buffoon..."

"Stop that!" Everyone stared at Twilight, who was grimacing. "It's one thing to rhyme on purpose but that was just annoying!" Celestia let herself smile as she stared at her student's face. She finally seemed to be calming down, and her eyes were returning to normal, somewhat. "It's like you all caught Pinkie Pie or something and the last thing I need is wackiness! I really need to-"

"Come with me to Canterlot." Celestia concluded firmly. She was staring at Twilight's horn, using her magic to gently lift the rag and reveal the base so she could stare at it. "Something is clearly wrong with your horn and it needs to be looked at by some specialists."

Fluttershy looked up to the Princess with a small frown. "You can't do it Princess?"

Celestia shook her head while stroking Twilight's side. Twilight's face was calming, the soaked rag doing its job. "I could look and guess but that's the best I can do. I need an expert's opinion. We have all the necessary equipment and staff back in Canterlot."

"Well that's it then, right? We just take her to Canterlot and get her fixed. Then she won't be bleeding or dying or in pain, right?" Dash watched the egghead, partly annoyed at what happened but now concerned. At the very least Twilight was okay. If she had been dying, she wouldn't know what to do with herself.

"Ah s'pose it wouldnt hurt, but at least one of us should go with 'er. Ah'd do it but Ah can't abandon my farm if another pony can go instead." Applejack turned her eyes between her gathered friends.

"I can go." Fluttershy offered timidly, watching Twilight with worry. Twilight had fallen asleep again, she must have been up all night with this pain.

"Ya sure sugarcube? Don'tcha got some animals to keep an eye on?" Fluttershy lowered her eyes in thought.

"Guys, why don't I just go? I am her number one assistant." Spike finally interrupted the silence, and was met with more than one glare. "Or I can stay in the library, keep it all fresh and clean, and not cause any more trouble." He chuckled nervously and back away.

"No, I can do it. I'll just ask Rarity to keep an eye on things for me, I've shown her how to take care of animals. Besides, I know how to make the solution." She nodded to the bowl of herbs on a desk. Nobody refuted that.

"That's that then." Princess Celestia telekinetically lifted Twilight, keeping her wrapped in the blanket, and laid her student on her back. "Fluttershy, take as much time as you need. Bring more of this solution, it seems to be working wonders for Twilight. I'm going straight to Canterlot with Twilight, you'll find her in the hospital. I'll send word that you have royal access to the building." The group followed the Princess outside, and using magic to keep Twilight secure and comfortable, the alicorn began to lift off the ground, and started to fly away. Since a good number of citizens had returned outside, the sight was met with more than a few ooh's and aah's.

Fluttershy didn't even say goodbye as she ran to her cottage to gather some things, leaving Applejack and Rainbow Dash standing on the doorstep of the library. "Ah s'pose the right thing to do would be makin' sure nobody thinks Twilight's dyin' or some such." Applejack considered their options, and turned to Dash.

"And going and getting Rarity. Leave that to me, you make sure everyone knows Twilight's gonna be okay!" She lifted up, and was about to fly away, but she stopped herself and looked back to Applejack. "She'll be okay, right? Just a little horn pain is all. Like getting a crick in your leg or something', you can't walk but it won't kill you, right?"

Applejack stood in silence, thinking about the days events. It all seemed so incredible yet terrifying. Celestia hadn't even recognize what was causing the pains or the blood, but Twilight was incredibly tough for being so small. She couldn't think of any other pony, much less a frail little unicorn taking an anvil to the head and shrugging it off. She wondered how Rarity would have reacted in the same situation. Twilight felt like dying after all. "You don't worry none Dash, Fluttershy 'n the Princess'll be there, along with a buncha fancy-pants doctor types. Shoot with that much care, the reaper himself couldn't so much as take a peak at our girl."

Dash nodded, smiling at the thought, and shot off for the boutique. Applejack stayed in place for several moments though, considering her own words. Then, she stepped into town for a talk.

Chapter 2

Head Trauma

Fluttershy wasn't entirely sure how to sympathize with Twilight at this point. Growing up, she'd had her own fair share of blows to the head that kept her uncomfortable for a while, which sometimes lead to a lack of sleep, but she could see the unicorn was only walking through the motions now, more than likely asleep on her hooves when she wasn't trembling in pain. She'd done her best to keep her comfortable, but the doctors insisted she not wear the rags during testing.

Another cause for her discomfort was being so close to Celestia and not bowing, nor getting speeched at, nor was there any sort of special event. Standing near the worried Princess she could see just how much like every pony she truly was. Her emotions were written clearly across her face, and she sagged in an unroyal fashion as she watched through the glass window. The doctors had insisted only the patient and professionals be in the room as they ran her through x-rays and measured her horn while testing it magically and physically. It was found very quickly the unicorn did not like to have it touched, and nearly had a handful when the first yelp nearly sent the Princess through the door. Fortunately for them, one was not a proper ruling Princess unless you had restraint.

While it was only forty minutes or so of constant testing, from an outsider's perspective it felt like it just kept dragging on. The white-coated unicorns finally put Twilight in a bed though and gave her something to help her sleep, and a nurse invited them into the room from a different door. The tiny hospital room was a small, comfy cot, a window, a trashcan, a few monitoring machines, and a radio. Twilight was snuggled up in the bed, deep in sleep as a nurse used a small file to collect a few shavings, but they could see that even the slightest movement of the horn caused her to wince and squirm. The two approached the bed and the nurse bowed herself out after collecting the samples.

Celestia was quiet while she observed her student. She'd calmed down in the time she'd walked across the room, just happy to see her student at peace again. "Perhaps you should start mixing that solution again,

Fluttershy, she's restless." Celestia advised, watching Twilight's face twitched. She did her best to make her comfortable, fluffing the pillow, straightening the blanket, making sure she was warm with a glow of her horn. Fluttershy was carefully pressing cloth to Twilight's face to ease the pain and comfort her. While Celestia didn't doubt it'd make Twilight feel good, seeing most of her face wrapped up wasn't reassuring.

"Ah, Princess, glad you're here. The results were in quickly, the labs were very curious about this case." A doctor entered, a manilla unicorn with glasses and a braided brown mane. The woman calmly approached the bed and noted all the cloth on her face. "I've read about natural remedies like this, could never understand it myself. Then again, I suppose I don't spend a lot of time in nature."

"The reports, doctor." Celestia urged, causing the doctor to cough and nod slowly.

"Yes, right, the reports. Let's take a look at what we've found." She took the clip board resting gently on her hind quarters and lead them to a part of the wall where there were clips to hold papers and pictures. The doctor floated the first paper up, an x-ray, and let them look closer. It was a profile from Twilight's left, revealing her bone structure, and more importantly her horn. "Now, this picture was confusing at first because when we took our first look, something seemed out of the ordinary." Fluttershy squinted her eyes. She wasn't intimately familiar with the pony bone-structure but she could tell something was off. She stared harder at the head, and chewed her inner cheek slowly.

"It's in her head." Celestia spoke up. Fluttershy didn't know what she meant at first until she looked closer and realized it: Unicorn horns were attached straight into the skull, Twilight's horn dug into the skull and went through, stopping just in front of the brain. "What does that mean, doctor? Is it a growth?"

"That's what we assumed, until we took a look at some of the key factors in backwards horn growth." Fluttershy's wings stood on end just hearing about the name. That sounded unfortunately painful. "First, it wouldn't cause blood loss around the horn. Second, the pain wouldn't be this extreme until it was actually pressing into the brain, and even then she wouldn't have survived this long in that case. Finally, Twilight Sparkle's

magic isn't deterred in any way. In fact, since her last physical, she's conducting magic at an increased rate." She spoke in a casual tone as she pulled out the next sheet of paper.

"How much has it increased?" Celestia asked in very mild surprise.

"Does that make her horn grow backwards?" Fluttershy also asked.

"Around forty times her conductivity since before she left."

"Oh." Celestia's eyes widened in less mild surprise.

"And no, to your question miss Fluttershy. Though to be honest, during the opening exam the number was merely thirty-eight times the original. In a span of forty minutes, it increased twice. And yes, we've checked it repeatedly. The original calculation were correct, as were the new ones. We plan to do periodic testing." The doctor hung up the second sheet. Fluttershy and Celestia both read it, finding it to be the physical measurements of Twilight, with horn length and width highlighted. Six inches on the nose. "This was also her initial physical information. As you can see, her horn was half a foot in length, and half an inch in width on the base. Now, this is where it finally dawned on us."

A third paper was attached to the wall and the two began to read it quickly, getting straight to the bolded horn length. "That's-" Celestia stood rigid as she leaned in close. "This can't be right. She's nearly reached her full maturity."

"We know, that's why we had to keep her for so long. We had to dig up old pictures and measurements to make sure we were absolutely accurate. Low and behold, they were. Princess Celestia, I hate to make light of your student's pain, but you have an incredibly interesting case here. I've never seen anypony's horn grow two and a half inches in the span of sixteen hours." It wasn't just the length, the width had grown to eight-tenths of an inch from half.

"But what does that mean? Are you saying she's getting hurt because her horn's growing?" Fluttershy asked, checking back and forth between the charts. Nothing but the information on the horn changed, other than a small list of scars from her recent adventures in Ponyville.

"Precisely. Her horn is growing so rapidly it's not giving her skull time to completely recover. It's pushing aside skin and bone on it's way out." Fluttershy gasped at the thought, and instinctively covered her own forehead. The doctor chortled. "Oh I did much the same when I had that described to me. It's small wonder her vision has been so skewed as of late. That much pain as well as having your forehead reorganized can have its side-effects. Oh, but I'm not done. Other than having a continually growing horn, we've discovered more."

Fluttershy trembled as she watched the doctor put more charts on the walls, not sure if she could take any more of this painful sounding testing, but found to her minor relief she couldn't read the charts. They were graphs filled with numbers and lines. Celestia however found them very interesting as she read each one carefully, taking them all in, but pausing the longest on the last chart. "Doctor, you're going to have to explain this to me. It completely deviates from the other charts."

"Well, as you can see, from her birth to her last year attending the university, her magical growth has been constant and on one path." Fluttershy read the first few charts mapping the growth, a purple line representing the slow, upwards growth of Twilight's magic. There were two other lines, one blue and one green. "She never had any Earth pony connections nor Pegasus qualities, so her body never had to stemmy the growth of her personal magic." Fluttershy understood. The green and the blue lines must've represented the innate magics of Pegasi and Earth ponies. If she understood the charts right, the non unicorn-magics would probably be at one level once the pony reached adulthood and stay there. It would at least explain why she only had to visit a magical testing facility once in her life.

Then she read the forth chart. Twilight's magic was already reaching pretty high, but she noticed a new, yellow line. It went from the zero point of the graph and launched straight up until it touched the purple line, and at the point the lines combined into an orange line, which breached the top of the graph and just seemed to continue.

"From what we can tell, the yellow line is some sort of outside force. Tracing it in the body it doesn't form in the heart like unicorn magic, doesn't begin in the stomach like Earth Pony magic, and not in the wings and legs like Pegasi magic. Whatever it is, it's not in the body, she's collecting it from

around her." Celestia and Fluttershy shared a look of confusion, but they differed in reason.

"The horn can only focus the magic inside of you." She stated, as if from a textbook. She stood and lifted a hoof to her chin in thought, and took a closer look. The doctor said nothing as she let the princess stare. "It collects from outside the body and gathers inside of it like regular magic?"

"As far as we can tell, no, it's incredibly different. It intermingles with regular magic and as far as we can tell functions like it, but we can't measure it, it doesn't respond to most tests. The only way we could tell was when we tried to overload her with foreign magic to get her to force out hers." Celestia nodded expectantly. "We couldn't do it." Celestia turned to face the sadly smiling doctor. "We'd have more luck trying to move the stars. No matter how much we pumped into her it was like trying to bury the ocean in sand. There was just no end to the tunnel. We got a Line-Maker in here to map out her magical pool and found it to be the exact same size as it usually was, and we kept them there while we pumped the magic in. What he saw was that the magic wasn't filling up space or pushing out any of Twilight's own. It was dispersing in the air around her. We then took a shot in the dark and tested the whole room and found Twilight had a cloud of magic so thick around her she could practically glow in the dark."

"Meaning what?" Celestia prodded as a flurry of papers began to cover the walls from the doctor's magic. "Are you saying she, well..."

"Absorbs magic. At least magic you try to put in her, the machines all worked fine. Whatever is happening to your dear student is making her very strong. The only consequences I can see in the near and far future is tampering with her horn while it grows could cause deformations, leading to migraines and an off-center horn, and the sudden shift and expansion of her skull could cause similar results. Whatever this is could also stop her from casting any sort of magic whatsoever. While our tests draw out her magic, there's no real way to confirm she can still do the same. We will only be able to tell with time."

Something changed in Celestia's stance. Fluttershy looked up at her curiously, and the doctor seemed confused as a look of solid determination crossed the lord mare's features. "You are going to make sure Twilight Sparkle can continue to use her magic."

"Lady Celestia, I understand your concern but-

"I'm not sure that you do, Doctor. No offense, but unlike most Unicorns, Twilight doesn't use her magic to help with her job. Magic *is* her job. If she lost her magic for any reason..." Celestia sighed as she let the sentence hang in the air. Nobody had to finish it. Your passion in life created your cutie mark, what you were meant to do all along for as long as you pleased, to have it stripped away from you permanently...

"... I understand." The doctor finally concluded, gathering her papers. "Well, you know what you need to know, Princess Celestia. We will take every precaution we can in making sure the horn grows in properly. That much we can do. We'll have her cast her first spell once the pain subsides and she can focus. Until then, lots of bed rest." She moved to Twilight's cot and stared at the odd horn on her head. Something was definitely odd about this one.

"Um, doctor?" The two older ponies looked to Fluttershy, who stood at the foot of Twilight's bed. "Is it okay if I stay in here? Until she gets better I mean. I'd be going home with her. I just want to make sure she's comfortable."

"You did come all this way just for her." Celestia interrupted the woman before she could even speak. "Doctor see about getting an extra mattress in here. I want Fluttershy by her side at all times. Twilight needs her friends." Celestia knew that better than anyone. The element of Friendship withered without the people they cared for being nearby.

"Of course, Princess."

It had been a mighty long day. Applejack had spent the rest of the beautiful day letting her friends and the officials know that Twilight was in good hands. The panic the whole debacle had nearly caused made talk of war and assassins, words that didn't rest easy on anyone's ears, but it was a relief to hear that Celestia was just picking up her student. Town life returned to normal, but most conversations started with: "Did you see Celestia and the royal guard?"

"And the Princess honestly had no idea what was wrong with her? Oh, the horrors!" Rarity dragged her hooves down her face and shook her head. Applejack made it a point to visit her friends last, since she didn't want to bore them by dragging them around town to hear the same story again and again.

Applejack just nodded slowly, and gave her a hopeful smile. "There's no need to go worryin' yer mane off though Rarity, Princess Celestia and Fluttershy are with her right now. We're gonna see Twilight Sparkle right as rain soon enough, ya got my word." Applejack nodded, believing her own words sure enough.

"Oh I believe you Applejack but it's not just Twilight I'm worried about. A bleeding horn, this could *ruin* her as a unicorn!" Rarity stamped the wood floor beneath her feet and sighed deeply.

"Ruin her? What're ya on about Rarity, it's just a bit o' blood." Applejack followed the white unicorn upstairs to the creative part of her boutique, watching as she rolled out fabric. "... T'ain't just a bit o' blood, is it?" She asked, feeling worried again.

"Applejack, I know you're not a unicorn so it'll be difficult to understand, but bare with me while I paint you a picture. As an Earth Pony, when you stand on the dirt, how do you feel?" Rarity asked, turning to Applejack with a counseling look. Applejack didn't like that look, it made her feel like somepony wasn't acting like she wasn't intelligent.

"Y'know darn well I feel alive on the dirt. Feeling the grass under my hooves and smellin' the air, ain't a better feelin'." Applejack concluded with a smart bob of her head. It was the honest truth, Rainbow Dash would give a similar answer if asked if she liked flying in the air.

"And how do you feel up here on the second story, where the ground's not beneath your feet?" Rarity asked, measuring along a pane of cloth before taking a pair of scissors. Applejack thought about it and pawed the ground in thought, and took a deep breath.

"It feels like, well, it's hard to describe. Like a part of me went numb, or I'm missin' a leg or somethin' but it ain't really my leg. Just somethin' feels gone down below." She answered. Now that she thought about it, it was a dreadful feeling. She had the urge to go roll around in the grass suddenly.

"Well, a unicorn's horn is very similar. It's an extension of who we are, the focal point of our magic. Without a horn, we can't do magic, and magic is what defines a unicorn. It may sound strange but taking away our magic is like taking the dirt from underneath your feet." Applejack considered what she'd been told, and bowed her head.

"I guess I see yer point. What happens to unicorns who lose their horns? Or their magic?" Applejack asked. She hadn't been expecting the severity of the answer.

"CatASTROPHE darling, catastrophe!" Rarity pressed her hoof against her forehead and swooned at the thought. "I've heard many stories of unicorns losing their horns in some accident, or on a drunken binge. Exile and death is a more merciful alternative. Without a way to let loose the magic within them, all that energy stores inside of them, urging to be released in some way, some fashion. All that creativity inside of a pony and none of it can be let out! Many of them drive themselves into incurable depression, but a couple of the ambitious, powerful ones drive themselves mad trying to find a way to let the magic out!"

"But Rarity, a unicorn like you devotes herself to dress makin'. It can't be so bad for you, you could toil yer days away sewin' and stitchin' and the like." Applejack didn't want to believe that unicorns, known for their eccentricities, were just a close shave away from instability. Sure unicorn horns were tough, but like Rarity said, accidents and drunken binges had a tendency to disagree with what was difficult or not.

"Oh no no no no no dear Applejack, I use my magic to work. I lift the scissors, fold the cloth, but more than anything..." She approached a chest and lifted it, revealing a small mountain of gems. Applejack stared for several seconds before she realized Rarity was close to running out if all she had was one measly chest. "These. My magic lets me find and utilize these. Gems have always been my passion." She lifted a particularly sparkly ruby and stared at it in the light. Her horn was glowing softly, and Applejack could only stare as she watched the gem begin to shine brighter and brighter until it tossed off dazzling light in all directions. "I know it seems shallow but I love these things. I see a dress and I need to compliment it with gems. Without my magic, all I'd have is a small pile of pretty rocks."

Applejack could swear Rarity was having a moment of crazy. The way she waxed poetic about the gems, but she recalled Rarity was magically attuned to them. She could find them with a point of her horn after all, and no matter the number of gems in a stack she could lift them all with ease whereas a small suitcase of clothes could strain her. Then again, Applejack liked her farm and her apples. "Rarity, I can't say I understand you Unicorns any, but if it means so much to ya I can't really argue."

"I didn't expect you to Applejack, I'm just worried for our friend. Such drama always makes me feel so talkative." Rarity put her gems back and returns to the cloth she was managing, and soon had it cut into the proper shape to flatter a pony's flank.

"Well, like I said sugarcube, Twilight ain't in any trouble. 'Sides, I've seen her take blows to the head before, she'll pull through with more magic bristling' at the tip of her horn in no time." Applejack smiled triumphantly.

"That's it Twilight, just a few more sips and you'll be all full." Fluttershy didn't like to admit she took excessive pleasure in being a caretaker, but there was no greater feeling in her heart than watching something needy and weak grow strong again. Just knowing somepony or something needed her help gave her the warm and fuzzies. "There, all full. How do you feel?" Fluttershy set the empty bowl aside as she watched Twilight. Her horn was wrapped with a new rag, and Twilight's eyes looked a lot less empty.

"... Trashcan." Twilight whimpered as a growl came from her stomach. Fluttershy sighed, but still dove for the small wastebasket and turned her head away. Still, the retching noises were enough to make her own stomach flighty. "Uughh..."

"That's the third bowl today, Twilight. You have to be able to keep something down..." Fluttershy gave her friend a cup of water, and it was drained with relish. Anything to relieve the vile taste in her mouth.

"Maybe some dry bread." Twilight groaned as the bucket was taken from her and the rag was tightened around her horn again, causing her to wince. "Or maybe I can learn to photosynthesize before I die of starvation. I bet there's a spell for that..."

"No Twilight, no spell work. Not until your horn is fully grown again. If you stress it out before it's fully healed it may never work the same again." Fluttershy went to the intercom and placed an order for a plate of plain bread while before coming back to the bedridden unicorn. "Oh it's just like the birds I take care of. They want to go and fly so early but I keep having to say no until finally it's all fixed, and they spread their wings and fly, free and beautiful and unharmed." Fluttershy turned on the radio before opening the window blinds and staring out at the beautiful orange sky.

"Weather ponies are calling in a light rain for the next few days to make up for week-long down. They're assuring us there will still be sun between the showers, but to stick to the main roads to not muddy up anyone's hooves. Sports news has been scarce lately but the Manehattan Hotrods have-" Fluttershy watched as Twilight stretched a hoof out to click the radio to a different station. Soft classical began to play, and Twilight laid back with a tiny sigh.

"How do you feel after, well, eating?" Fluttershy stood alongside the bed again, watching Twilight's face. She'd slept for eight hours straight, waking up only because the smell of hot soup had disturbed her from her dreams. Fluttershy had ordered a second bowl for Twilight, but it turned out to be too thick for her, and it came back out. The same story for the second, and now the third bowl. It could have been worse Fluttershy supposed. If she'd ordered the baked and breaded celery sticks on onions and Twilight had wanted a bite, she'd bet it would have come out even faster, if possible.

"... Got a tummy ache." Twilight answered meekly. The strain on her stomach from trying to hold the food down was understandable. She just felt so oddly vulnerable under Fluttershy's oh so careful watch. She could see why the animals trusted her so much, Fluttershy had taken every precaution to keep her patient comfortable, even refusing a few curious interns at the door who had been wanting a strange case to crack. She'd been cautiously insistent at first, but after a few minutes of begging and then threatening, she'd turned the stare on. She herself had permission from Celestia to take care of Twilight, she'd show them what security threats could be answered with.

"I understand. Don't you worry a thing, some light, fresh bread will clear that up." Fluttershy smiled. There was a lot of innocence in it. Twilight had been at the academy long enough to see the difference between a world-

weary, tired professor and a bubbly new recruit looking to make her mark in the long list of magical history. Fluttershy had grown up timid, and she guessed only recently "came out of her shell". She still had that world-trusting innocence so many older students lost as the intensity of their studies, projects, and desire for jobs and fame weighed down the feeling of security that the world was happy and bright and accepting. One of the advantages of living among animals who didn't scowl behind a desk as they used your resume as a check-list of everything they didn't want in you. Twilight never wanted to see that smile weigh heavy with regret or cynicism of the world around her.

"Fluttershy?" The pink-maned pony looked to Twilight, who, since waking up, had always seemed to be staring at you and through you at the same time. It was the way the medicine played with her eyes. "Anypony ever tell you you're gorgeous?"

Fluttershy giggled quietly to herself. Twilight was sweet when she was drugged. She ran a hoof down the unicorn's side and sighed. "Thank you Twilight, and yes." She paused, and thought about how many times Rarity had used the word to describe a new look she'd put on Fluttershy. "But not that sincerely. Thank you. Maybe you should catch some sleep until the bread gets here?"

"No, I mean it. I mean, you look good. Well..." Twilight paused and stared at the ceiling for a few seconds. "As far as I know. I guess I haven't been everywhere to judge. I mean, really, the standards of beauty change with each passing culture, Zecora's little cut may be the height of beauty where she comes from where we prefer long and flowing manes. In her culture you may even be the ugliest girl ever!" Fluttershy bit her lip. Twilight didn't notice as she just kept rambling through her own clouded head. Twilight paused when she heard a whimper from the Pegasus. "Hey, Fluts, you alright?" She asked, and Fluttershy finally burst out laughing.

The unicorn stared at the laughing Pegasus, not sure what was so funny but she began to join in just for the kick of it. It hurt to laugh, but it didn't hurt bad enough to make her stop. Fluttershy's gentle giggles finally died down, prompting Twilight to stop abruptly and stare at her friend. "Twilight, you're so strange when you're in a hospital. Please get some sleep, and don't..." She snickered a little, "Don't call me Fluts. It makes me sound... Manly."

Twilight didn't say anything, but suddenly a broad smile crossed her face, as if the most brilliant idea entered her head. "Flutterguy!" She began to giggle to herself, and Fluttershy groaned at the pun.

"Now I know you need sleep for sure. Lay down and get some rest. Maybe the medicine will work its way out and we can have a real conversation." Twilight laid her head down and did as she was told, oddly enough, and turned over, away from Fluttershy. The unicorn smiled to herself. She'd made her laugh.

She still regretted joining in though; ow.

It was only through a combination of Fluttershy's tender care and a lot of sleeping medicine Twilight managed to push through the last of it. Periodic testing with the doctors had revealed only a trace amount of her horn was left to grow. It was her third day in the hospital, and by this time the horn was getting thicker and harder to bare the growth. Even with the solution-soaked rags and the medication, she was still in immense pain.

Fluttershy was glad that Twilight was under such heavy amounts of pain reliever because, watching her restlessly roll around, whimpering in agony while the Pegasus calmly stroked her head and whispered words of encouragement as Twilight worked through the pain. She hadn't noticed earlier due to not paying it much attention, but her horn was definitely longer. Her rag no longer wrapped around the full horn, exposing a near deathly sharpened tip that would cause quite a prick if rubbed wrong. On top of that, her hair didn't even hide the base anymore.

"The doctors told me she's in the final stages of growth." Fluttershy turned quickly and spotted Celestia approaching from the doorway. She'd never noticed before but the Princess had incredibly quiet hoof-steps. "Is she doing okay?" Celestia leaned down to Fluttershy. The two had grown accustomed to each other over the days, but Fluttershy still insisted on bowing whenever she entered, but when they spoke, they spoke as friends, not royalty and their subjects.

"It doesn't seem like it, no matter what I do I can't stop her from being in pain anymore. She does this even in her sleep, so I can't tell if whether she's awake or not." Celestia nodded quietly and nuzzled her student's

neck for a moment. "You two are very close." Fluttershy finally pointed out after days of watching Celestia care for young Twilight.

"I've been lonely for hundreds of years." Celestia spoke freely, not hiding the exhaustion in her voice. "When I'd seen Twilight's true magical prowess, I'd felt inclined to take her as my personal student more out of worry of what she'd do without proper training, but over time, she came to be a bright spot in my day. She was so eager to learn she often forgot my position, and treated me more and more like a teacher, then a friend. Honestly," the Princess chuckled, "until Luna came back, Twilight's been the only person I think I'd consider a friend. The guards are nice and grow used to me but never stop treating me like a Princess." Celestia smiled at that.

Fluttershy did recall that Twilight, upon seeing Celestia after Nightmare Moon's defeat, rather than respectfully bow, went in to greet the Princess, and shared a small snuggle. "I never thought a Princess could get lonely." Fluttershy admitted, a bit embarrassed.

"It's one thing to have people around you. It's another to have somebody who considers you, well, not really an equal but considers you as a pony rather than a Princess." They both turned when they heard a gasping noise, and watched with slowly deepening frowns as Twilight, in her bed, began to kick and squirm, thrusting her head forward in a bucking motion. Fluttershy and Celestia pressed against her to keep her still, trying to not hear the frightened and pained gasps, until finally it subsided.

Fluttershy didn't let go for what felt like a long time, worried that if she wasn't there, Twilight would go back to kicking and squirming. She let go only reluctantly when the Princess did so, and they took a close look at the Unicorn. She was no longer whimpering, and seemed to have finally settled down enough to take a long needed nap. Fluttershy removed the cloth, replacing it quickly to mop up a sudden gush of blood, and the two took a close look.

"As far as horns go, hers is quite magnificent. I don't think I've ever seen one like it." The Princess admitted. It was several inches short of two solid feet, and it looked awkward on Twilight's smaller body. "At least not on a unicorn. This is definitely strange. Fluttershy, go get a doctor, I think the horn may have finally reached its full growth."

Fluttershy nodded and stepped out of the room. In minutes, it had four doctors of varying jobs carefully measuring and studying the sleeping girl's horn. Fluttershy went almost unnoticed but the Princess was given a wide berth as they moved around the room. Fluttershy kept getting bumped up against until she moved to the back of the room.

"Well, we've done what we can." The lead doctor finally concluded, scanning his clipboard. "From six inches to a foot and nine inches, half an inch in width to a full inch and a half." The doctor reported to the Princess, who nodded while looking through the rest of the papers for her magic charts.

"The magic scans we got were interesting. They're no longer measurable by conventional means so we had to compare them to your's and Luna's charts. We've found her levels are at least a sixteenth of Luna's, and an eighteenth of yours Princess Celestia." The Princess did not hide the surprise in her eyes, and Fluttershy simply needed to know.

"Is that a lot of magic?" Fluttershy asked the Princess, who nodded down to the pink-maned mare.

"Your average Unicorn at the height of their power would be around maybe a five-hundredth of me. Twilight was closer to a four-hundred and fiftieth when her magic was unrestrained. This increase in power, do you have any idea why, doctor?"

The doctor could only shake his head, and let out a throaty sigh. "If I did we'd have a stack of papers on it being written already, but as far as we can tell, other than the foreign magic we got nothing. Until we can find a test that can detect the magic clinging to her, we have little reason to keep her once she wakes up. If I may suggest, Princess, spend a few hours having her cast spells as she would normally when she does, provided she still can and isn't too weak from the medicine. If she can't control her strength, I'll have to insist she stays in Canterlot."

Fluttershy's eyes widened, and she looked to Celestia with a large, disagreeing frown. Celestia didn't look down at her. "I have to agree. But if she can control it, I'm sending her back to Ponyville." The doctor didn't dispute this.

Fluttershy took a moment to press her nose to Twilight's neck, sincerely hoping Twilight would have the willpower to control whatever newfound strength she had.

"Ow." Twilight squeezed her eyes shut. She tried to open them again but was met with much of the same reaction. She was going to have a word with whoever set up this room and demand to know why they thought it would be intelligent to put the bed directly beneath the light. It was also really quiet. Wasn't there a radio in the room? She could barely remember. The past few days had been hazy and all she remembered was being sick and dazed.

Oh and there was Fluttershy. She vaguely recalled Fluttershy was there. She also thought of a funny new nickname for her but something told her that Fluttershy wouldn't like it. Pity.

"Nng, my head feels so heavy!" She groaned, not wanting to open her eyes again or risk facing the blinding light. She heard a soft gasp of surprise, and soon felt a hoof rubbing her side. "Is that you Fluttershy?" She asked, turning her head to the side and opening one eye. It was still really bright, but that's because she wasn't looking at the yellow coat of her softest friend.

"How do feel my student?" Princess Celestia asked, smiling kindly down on Twilight. Twilight finally opened her eyes fully, feeling awfully lazy. She yawned loudly, maybe she'd go loafing around a bit. Grab a nice book, curl up in front of a fire... Oh but she wasn't home.

"Dang..." She mumbled, getting off her back and onto her stomach, legs tucked underneath her body. "I feel tired. And hungry. And thirsty. I wanna go home." Something was pushed under her nose and she leaned down to eat. It was plain old bread, and she couldn't have been more grateful. Well, a carrot sounded good right now but beggars can't be choosers. Celestia took care while floating a glass of water to Twilight's lips and after she'd drained it and finished the bread, she curled up tighter and yawned.

"You can't go back to sleep Twilight, we need to send you home first." Twilight could hear Celestia's smile. She snuggled into herself tighter. "Oh don't be difficult Twilight, we just need to test a few things and we can send

you back to your library, and your nice warm bed and Spike and all your books..." Twilight muttered something she couldn't hear and stretched out, standing up slowly on her bed.

"Okay okay, you win. That sounds so good right now." Twilight blinked lazily at Celestia, before she noticed something odd. Something just out of sight above her head. She looked up, and blinked. It was still there! She twisted her neck and rolled her eyes and tried her best to see what was there, but never managed to get a good look. Celestia chuckled at her student.

"Here." A mirror pane popped into existence just in front of Twilight, who leaned in for a good look. She only needed a few seconds to see what had happened. Celestia watched her student's jaw drop. "Impressive, isn't it? That's what's been causing you so much trouble these past few days."

"My horn!" Twilight widened her eyes, blinked rapidly, and then rubbed them before she finally accepted this was no illusion. "My little horn is so... Big now! What happen-"

"We're not sure." Celestia answered, her voice losing a bit of its energy. "All we know is that it's connected somehow to the sudden increase of magic inside of you. And around you for that matter." She was staring at Twilight now with the spell the Line-Mappers used. It was like she was surrounded by an orange cloud, or highlighted by it. It did not obscure Twilight no matter which angle you looked at her from, and as Twilight grew more and more confused, the cloud seemed to match her emotion. It grew fuzzier, more ecstatic, roiling around her as Twilight was consumed with emotion. Twilight turned her head away, and the orange cloud lightly tapped the mirror, dismissing it. "Did you dismiss my mirror?" She felt the need to ask, since Twilight's horn hadn't even glowed to do so.

The little unicorn shook her head. "No, why, didn't you?" Celestia stared at her for a few moments.

"No. Come, we need to test your magical abilities. The doctors need to know if the change affected your control at all." Celestia turned and heard Twilight leap off the bed to follow her. The two walked side-by-side out of the hospital and straight into the castle.

"You mentioned something about my," she paused, thinking about what she'd been told, "magic increasing?" She finally asked as they navigated the white-washed hospital walls.

"Yes Twilight. Do you feel any different? Stronger?" Celestia asked her as they headed for the door separating the castle from the hospital.

"No, not really. I don't feel any different at all. Actually I feel kind of weak but I did just recover." Celestia nodded and didn't add anything, so Twilight didn't push it. She searched deep within herself, and felt no different magically than she could remember. When they pushed through the doors, her idle thoughts were interrupted by a wave of nostalgia.

It was everything Twilight remembered about her old home. The sun décor on the tapestries and streamers had been changed to show a moon as well, and the walls had no windows, preferring instead open archways and balconies to let the sun shine in. Guards were everywhere, but not just guarding. They straightened rugs, gave directions to other servants, watered plants, dusted corners and book shelves. Only a few were ever actually guarding anything such as the dungeon where old, forbidden books that only the Archivists could see, the throne room, the bedrooms. When Twilight passed by an open balcony, she could spy the gardens below. She saw with some excitement that Princess Luna was out and about, sniffing flowers and tending one section of the garden.

"Does it feel good to be back in the castle?" Princess Celestia asked her, and Twilight just smiled sheepishly. She hadn't been aware how much she'd been swinging her head around, not noticing how many people had to leap out of the way to avoid the vicious horn she was now sporting.

"I haven't been here in so long. I forgot how peaceful it could be when there weren't any guests." Twilight noted. She saw a few guards she recognized, and they seemed to recognize her back. A few nodded their heads in recognition, and one even openly waved and smiled.

"It's one of the few peaceful times of the day. I was lucky that you decided to wake up now rather than later. We should hurry, Fluttershy's expecting us in the training hall." Celestia urged her quietly and picked up the pace.

"The training hall? The old training hall?" Since Twilight had been under the direct tutelage of Celestia, she did not use the training hall since Celestia

granted her access to a place a little more private. The Princess nodded as they walked through several long hallways before reaching the magical academy. Celestia lead her to a large pair of open double doors, which opened into a massive gymnasium. Many students and teachers were inside, giving lectures over the nature of magic and urging their students to lift and change their surroundings. Fluttershy was watching with interest in a corner of the room, two guards sitting by her side. They bowed their greetings to Princess Celestia, Fluttershy doing so with a little less show and a big smile.

"You're finally awake." Fluttershy said with deep relief, moving forward towards Twilight. The two nestled against one another, and Twilight nodded slowly. "We've been worried about you. I'm glad to see you're alright."

"Agreed." One of the guards grunted, his younger partner turning to him in surprise. "We have a small course set up, basic spells only. The area's restricted advanced spells until sundown for Princess Luna's demonstration. We don't need any more misfires."

"Thank you sirs." Twilight bowed her head honestly, and Fluttershy skipped away before the horn could touch her, and Twilight smiled apologetically. "Thank you so much Fluttershy. I'm not sure how I would have gotten through this without you. Is there any way I can repay you?" They stepped past the guards, although Celestia stayed behind with them.

"Well, if you could pay a little more attention to where you swung your horn that would be nice." Fluttershy's smile was a bit joking, but Twilight nodded her head. "Well, okay, so, how do you usually start practicing?"

"You go by steps. You stack the weights," she pointed to a small pile of five metallic gray cubes, and one triangle "turn them a different color, and then fit them into the other pile." She pointed to another stack of weight that were in a pyramid shape, with five blocks missing, as well as a pointed top. "It's pretty easy but it won't hurt to humor everyone."

Fluttershy sat back as Twilight stacked the cubes. She was fast about it, not bothering with just one, getting them all stacked with the pyramid on top within the span of a few seconds. She then leaned forward to tap the tip of her horn against the stack, but didn't compensate for the new length of her horn. The stack tipped over, and Twilight frowned as it fell apart. "You really need to keep an eye on your new horn." Fluttershy pressed her body to

Twilight's and then leaned over to look at the pyramid weight in front of her. "Oh, oh dear. Looks like the fall chipped a side." Twilight looked over and yes, one of the pointed ends had been broken off. Twilight rolled her front legs in a shrug, and this time made sure she knew where the tip of her horn was before leaning down and tapping the broken point. The sides around it stretched and slowly formed another sharp end, and Twilight continued to complete the exercise.

Celestia turned to the older guard by her side. "You said Advanced spell work had been restricted?" The guard nodded, a suspicious look on his face. Repair work wasn't too powerful, but it still was qualified as advanced. Twilight completed the pyramid with her magic and smiled cheekily at the Princess.

"All done!" The unicorn announced. Celestia hid her suspicion, but nodded slowly.

"Very well. We'll have a sky chariot prepared for you soon enough. Until then, why don't we-" A guard entered the room from behind the Princess, yet the Princess turned immediately to face him.

"Princess Celestia, Candlejack is requesting an early meeting. He's insisting his supply of rope has been-" He leapt backwards to avoid a net that had been tossed a bit too far by a younger student, who tried to make up for it with an embarrassed smile. Celestia hung her head as she turned to Twilight.

"I can't keep my subjects waiting, but I promise you Twilight I'll be in touch soon. If you have any problems, never hesitate to seek me out." Celestia pressed herself to Twilight only briefly and walked away, pulling herself up royally. It was time to work.

"Miss Sparkle, if you'll follow us we can get you and your friend in a sky carriage in short time. Come along." Twilight watched her mentor leave with a sad look, and Fluttershy bowed her head as she followed along.

"Poor Princess Celestia. She needs a break from being a Princess someday." The yellow-coated Pegasus looked around the castle in all its finery. No wonder the Princess felt lonely despite the company, it was so big and empty looking when it wasn't in the midst of a party. Twilight

nodded her agreement, but the guard said nothing as he lead them towards the sky port.

Two guards especially made to retrieve and deliver people of importance were already harnessed and waiting patiently for Fluttershy and Twilight out on the extended platform near the top of the castle. Fluttershy entered first and sat on the cushion as Twilight stepped in, and the back of the chariot was closed and locked up. The guards that had escorted them before spoke shortly to the carriers before the two Pegasi up front announced they'd be leaving. They spread their wings and lifted up, and flew in the direction of Ponyville.

Twilight said nothing as she watched the passing country down below, but Fluttershy began to twitch in nervousness as the Pegasus continued to rise until they were passing through the massing clouds. They were white and fluffy, but as a Pegasus Fluttershy could smell the coming storm. She understood why they were being taken above the clouds but it still made her nervous. She didn't like to not be able to see the ground. "Um, sirs, the rain shower won't be for a little while longer, perhaps we could stay-"

"Sorry ma'am, but regulations require us to remain above the clouds until descent in the event of a coming shower. I'm very sorry." He said in a gruff tone, but he did sound like he meant it. Fluttershy sighed a little.

"Why go beneath the clouds anyways, we'll miss this fantastic sunset!" Twilight was staring out the back of the chariot and Fluttershy turned to watch. The sun was slowly setting below the cloudline. It would be down quickly, and Fluttershy, despite being unable to see the ground, was sighing softly at the beauty of it. She was a romantic at heart, not the lovesick sort like Rarity but all the fantastic sights and settings that just opened her heart. "To think, when I first came to Ponyville, I never really noticed the simple, pretty things in life." The unicorn admitted with a sad smile.

"Really?" Fluttershy looked to Twilight, who nodded. She knew she was self-sheltered but didn't know the extent. Twilight didn't talk about before Ponyville much, said there wasn't much to say about it.

"Yeah. It's kinda sad now that I think about it. I'm glad I can appreciate real beauty right now." Twilight eagerly watched the sun slowly get swallowed from view by the clouds, turning the sky a fantastic orange.

Something occurred to Fluttershy, something she remembered from just a day before. "Twilight, I know you were kind of out of it when you told me this but do you really think I'm..." She blushed at the thought and pawed the cushion of their chariot, lowering her voice to a whisper. "Pretty?"

"Yes Fluttershy, you're very pretty." Fluttershy peeked up. Twilight wasn't even looking at her. She sighed. Maybe it was a pipe dream, but Twilight had called her gorgeous once and pretty now. Maybe that was a good thing and she shouldn't get her hopes up.

"I think you're pretty too." She tried anyways, tilting her head to hide her face with her cotton candy mane.

"Thanks." Fluttershy sighed. Twilight hadn't taken her eyes off the sunset. Well, she tried. She watched the sunset until the sun fell beneath the clouds, and things began to turn dark. It was quickly replaced with moonlight as a full moon rose from the front of the Chariot and slowly turned the world around the dark and silver. It was also so quiet.

That was why they noticed the other Pegasi. A dark, winged-shape rose from the clouds slowly, level with them, matching their speed to their left. "Who do you think that is?" Fluttershy asked, turning her head to the right to notice a second, no third, wait there were four dark pony shapes behind them. Two to the back left and right, and two almost directly behind them, flying at a far enough distance they looked like shadows in the night sky.

"Maybe a friendly passing group? I read that some Pegasi take it on themselves to escort night travelers and protect them from bandits." Twilight pointed out, and the two heard an uneasy snort from the front. The two guards were watching four more pony shapes warily out in front of them, each in a similar position as the four from behind.

"Twilight..." Fluttershy turned in a slow circle. There were eight dark figures keeping perfect speed and position around them. "What if these are the bandits?" She whispered low.

"I didn't want to consider that..." Twilight whispered back.

"By order of Princess Celestia!" One of the guards finally called. "I demand you identify yourselves to her royal guard! Speak!" He shouted. The four ponies in the middle of the shadows' circle were tense. The guards began

to slow down to let them pass, but they merely slowed down with them. The guards tried to lower into the clouds, but the four mid-circle ponies flew in closer almost visible through the moonlight. Fluttershy and Twilight stared at the nearest one. The Pegasus was a dark gray, while the one on the other side was plain black. The guards snorted in agitation as they rose again, playing their game for now, well aware of the precious cargo they were carrying.

"Girls. Stay alert. We may have to do something drastic if they attack." One of the guards told them, his eyes shifting back and forth between their eight "escorts". The girls just nodded slowly.

Seconds crawled by like minutes, tense as could be. Any move the carriage made, the eight Pegasi matched. The moon was now above the clouds, barely. The light cast a disturbing image, as the silvered clouds contrasted with the dark shapes more sharply. Fluttershy let out a tiny, scared whimper.

"Twilight, can't you telepo-" Then the Pegasi, as one raised their heads and gave a powerful, piercing whiny that sent chills down both girls' spines, and the guards made a move to dive into the clouds. Then the sound of rolling thunder filled their ears, sending both girls to dive to the cushions, screaming as they covered their ears, and the world turned white.

When Fluttershy opened her eyes again, her body was one giant sore, like she'd been hit by lightning. Splinters surrounded her, and it took her a moment to realize she was falling. She gasped softly and looked to her left and spied Twilight, eyes closed and falling limply.

And the dark shapes dove inwards.

Chapter 3

By the Rhythm of Thunder

Her ears were ringing. Her heart was thumping powerfully in her chest. Every muscle in her body screamed for her to stop moving and let them rest, but a voice in the back of Fluttershy's head told her to give her body no heed. She twisted in the air, righting herself to put the clouds above her and dove towards Twilight. The eight shadowed figures were diving in faster than she could hope to match, but she was closer.

Tears in her eyes from the stress she shot downwards towards the figure, hooves extended to catch the unicorn, but something collided into her. Hard. Fluttershy yet out a cry of pain, feeling a strong pair of arms lock around her waist, and a face hovering near her ear. She thrashed in the air, throwing the pony's flight pattern around erratically, but a second pony slammed into her, knocking the air out of her lungs. She gasped for air, her body falling limp from pain as the two ponies began to dive for the ground. She stared upwards as the remaining six piled on top of Twilight and started to make off with her. Part of Fluttershy just wanted to let them go so she could rest, to end the exhaustion. That part of Fluttershy was ignored.

What little Fluttershy knew of aerial combat was put to use. The two figures clinging to her were strong, and her wings and front legs locked into place. Her back legs though were free, and she took a deep breath and she prepared herself. "Sorry..." She whispered, and brought both knees between the spread legs of her two captors. One gave a hoarse shout and fell off her, cradling his bruised groin, the other just grit her teeth. Fluttershy reared her head back as the female was distracted, and when the bandit turned back to glare at the girl she was met with a forehead to the nose. The grip loosened, and Fluttershy pulled herself free of the legs around her and caught herself in mid-air. She extended her wings and flapped them rapidly, gaining distance from the ground as she shot towards the now distant figures of shadows.

She did everything she could to speed up, lower her wind resistance, but the figures were getting farther and farther away. She whimpered softly, turning her head to see one of her former captors recovering while the

other struggled in mid-air, and she kept going towards the distant Pegasi. Despite their payload, the combined six of them picked up ground that Fluttershy felt she could never cover by herself.

"Twilight..." She whispered, hooves extended as she flapped her wings harder than she'd ever had before, a twisting knot in her gut as she realized, slowly, horribly, that she wasn't going to be fast enough. Tears streamed down her cheeks as her wings flapped so hard they were starting to go numb, yet she couldn't match the others' speed. She could do nothing for her friend.

Before despair had a chance to clench her heart, she heard the noise again. Distant thunder, rolling towards her, and she turned quickly. The other two had fully recovered, and she watched as sparks ran from their wings into the clouds, forming jagged currents of lightning, and a bright spot appeared in the clouds moving erratically towards her. Fluttershy had just a second to drop, and she watched the bright spot pass over her. The other two began to shout to the six making off with Twilight, but they were not heard. The six paused just long enough to see the glowing trail pause just above them, and immediately four of them fell from the sky to avoid it. The other two, still holding Twilight, weren't so lucky.

Fluttershy only stared in horror and fascination as the bright spot shot a bolt of lightning as thick as a tree downwards, slashing through the air for less than a second, and the two Pegasi fell away, screaming in pain as flames wrapped around their broken bodies. Fluttershy gasped to herself as a third figure began to fall straight down, and she saw it was her friend. With a shriek of terror, Fluttershy dove at an angle for the falling unicorn, well aware she was not alone in her attempt. It didn't matter, as long as she caught Twilight, as long as she could get her friend.

Twilight was falling fast, but Pegasi were lighter. Fluttershy flew close enough to fly almost parallel with Twilight, and in an instant had her in her arms. She grit her teeth and began to pull upwards needing to slow down, and judging by the wind underneath her hooves barely avoiding an assailant. She had that to be thankful for as she rose upwards, finally pausing in midair. She needed to get to the ground, but a glance downwards told her that was a bad idea. There were shapes gathering beneath her, staring up at her. Expectantly. She turned her head in a slow

circle, and noticed the six remaining figures were circling them slowly. They had every chance to dive in and grab them both, but they seemed hesitant.

If they were relying on her being the same, they were about to be disappointed. Fluttershy began to flap her wings and rose rapidly, which grabbed the attention of the Pegasi. Fluttershy squeezed Twilight to her chest and aimed for the clouds.

A quick glance downwards told her she wasn't going to make it. One of the Pegasi was closing in quickly, hooves extended to grab onto Twilight, and Fluttershy considered dropping beneath the attempt except one of the Pegasi was already a ways beneath her. She wished she knew all those aerial acrobatics Rainbow Dash was so good at, maybe then...

She glanced downwards quickly and saw the Pegasus was a few feet away, and she knew that, if he grabbed on, the rest would follow, and there'd be no chance of them getting away from this. Fluttershy wasn't sure what else to do. Luckily, her passenger did.

The Pegasus, so intent on Fluttershy, never saw the Unicorn's back hoof collide with his chin. The Pegasus fell away, spiraling away from the two as Twilight groaned. "Stupid... Bandits..." She hissed, obviously as sore as Fluttershy was.

"Don't worry Twilight, we're almost to the clouds, we might be able to escape them inside the clouds." Fluttershy shouted over the roaring air around them.

"Not a chance Fluttershy, that lightning thing they did would smoke us out the instant they got up there. I have an idea, get through the cloud barrier and I might be able to help." Fluttershy said nothing, but squeezed Twilight harder to her body. With renewed determination, she flew up, into the clouds.

Rainbow Dash was staring off into the distance again. A second roar of thunder, this one longer and louder than the last. From her balcony on her cloud-formed home, she tried to puzzle it out. The small rain shower wasn't supposed to happen for at least another few hours, and on top of that,

small rain showers often did not feature thunder and lightning. It was suspicious, but mishaps had happened before.

Part of her considered diving in to take a look herself, see if any young fliers were causing a ruckus and bucking clouds they weren't supposed to, but she also wondered if it was just theatrics for a traveling performance. It's happened before, and was actually pretty neat.

She sat on her balcony and watched the night sky, wanting to hear the thunder again.

"Drop me." Twilight ordered Fluttershy. The Pegasus looked down at her friend with a mixed look of shock and confusion, but Twilight gave her the pleading eyes. "Just trust me Fluttershy..." So Fluttershy did. Twilight landed on the clouds like they were solid, and Fluttershy joined her. Twilight laid on her stomach, prompting Fluttershy to do the same. "Hiding." Twilight nodded as six figures burst from the fluff around them and flew outwards, scanning the skies.

The two ponies laid still, but Fluttershy began to whimper. The two blows she'd taken earlier while being captured intermingled all too well with her sore muscles from the lightning strike. She buried her face in the cloud and tried to ignore it, but her position wasn't comfortable. She began to breath deeply, until a hoof touched her face. She opened her eyes to find Twilight's worried stare on her, and Fluttershy slowly calmed herself down.

"No sign of them." Twilight pushed her hoof into her mouth as her eyes widened in surprise. One of the Pegasus was right behind her, standing on her tail while he spoke to another of the Pegasus. "Think they're in the clouds?" He asked. The other snorted in annoyance.

"Skykite would had found them by now if they had. Search high, they might be using the shadows to blend into the sky." The two shook their heads and they turned, and one of their hooves hit something solid.

"Found 'em." The first one growled cockily. What happened next, Fluttershy was unsure, all she knew was Twilight began to glow, and there was a flash of lightning, and the male had disappeared. The other leapt high into the air, avoiding another blast of lightning as Twilight stood, her horn

glowing blue as electricity ran along her coat into the clouds below. There was an incredibly boom of thunder, and the second Pegasus whinnied in alarm. The four others turned and stared down at their companion before closing in using a circling pattern.

Fluttershy stayed low, whimpering as she stared up at Twilight who was crackling furiously with electricity. An orange glow slowly formed on the surface of her mane, and arcs of lightning sprang from the clouds and traveled along her body as the Pegasus, in turn, began to crackle back. The other four watched calmly, waiting for the slightest provocation.

"Twilight, what do we do?" Fluttershy whispered, getting to her hooves slowly, still staying low.

"We need to flee." Twilight's voice was deep, and flat. It almost didn't sound like hers. It was so low and confident it came out as solid monotone. "Or we need to fight." Fluttershy stared at her friend, who was beginning to crackle more. There was the sound of distant thunder, then another boom, then a third.

Fluttershy screamed as the world lit up with energy.

"All Pegasus ponies wake up!" Rainbow Dash shouted down towards Ponyville, flying as slow as she could bare as she repeated her line again and again. "All Pegasus ponies wake up! There is an emergency weather event! All Pegasus ponies get OUT OF BED NOW!"

She was joined lazily by other ponies, yawning and looking to Rainbow Dash curiously or in annoyance. "Sup Dash?" One asked as he closed in. Dash pointed into the distance, where there were several flashes of light, followed by the loudest series of thunder claps they'd ever heard at this distance.

"Holy horse apples." One of the Pegasus whispered, his eyes narrowing. "I saw the light, where's the lightning?"

"Could be in the clouds." One answered just above him.

"Or above them." Dash also pointed out. "Either way, this is weird. Let's go take a look, if some idiot thinks he's being funny by keeping the whole kingdom awake, they need some sense bucked into them."

There was another rolling of thunder, and this time they saw it. It was definitely above the clouds, and it was bright and vicious enough to set a few of the Pegasi on edge. "That ain't natural. No pony in their right mind would make a bolt that strong! They could burn the whole field if that hit the ground."

"And that's why the weather ponies are reporting in!" Somebody laughed as they flew towards the area.

There were hooves all around her, all purple, all crackling with energy. Fluttershy raised her head, and saw Twilight carefully stepping around her to watch the circling bandits. "Twilight..."

"You're alright?" Twilight asked, again in deep monotone. Fluttershy nodded slowly. "Then run. Run while you can. You can't be here for this. They'll hurt you." She advised darkly, her body tensing. At least one of the Pegasi in the sky were missing, the other four watching the two ponies like hawks.

"Twilight I can't just-

"Fluttershy!" An edge of command, of accusation entered her voice. Fluttershy realized this wasn't Twilight, Twilight was never this short with her. Never this vicious sounding with her words. "Go now! I'll fight them!"

"What about you!" Fluttershy shouted desperately as she heard another loud clap, and she screamed as lightning flashed around them, only to get sucked straight into the odd orange aura surrounding Twilight. "I can't leave you here Twilight! I won't leave until you come with m-" She was cut short. Twilight's legs had flashed, and Fluttershy felt numb. She realized she was rolling away from her friend. She'd been bolted by Twilight. Harmlessly, but the sting of rejection burned all the same.

"Go. Don't make me do that again." Fluttershy stood shakily, tears in her eyes as the four Pegasi circled in closer and closer, speaking to each other, planning while Twilight held the line. "I said go Fluttershy!"

"No." Fluttershy grunted, pushing into Twilight's side, feeling the energy along her. It was warm, it was powerful, and in her mind, it was unnatural around her friend.

"Fluttershy!" Twilight growled, twisting her head towards her friend. She was met with a look of quivering steel. Then she screamed as the four figures dove, slamming into the two ponies wordlessly, throwing them through the clouds. Fluttershy managed to right herself in mid-air just beneath the fluffy mass, despite the pains, despite the numbness, she caught herself. She spied Twilight standing on a free-floating cloud beneath the sea of white above them, sparkling with lightning while three of the Pegasi dove in, around her, keeping her attention and trying to hit her with a fresh bolt, but each shot failed as they struck her aura. Twilight returned each blast in kind, narrowly missing each time, but slowly gaining accuracy.

Fluttershy raced to join Twilight on the cloud, some strain of stubbornness telling her to be there. Maybe it was stupid. Maybe she should run. Twilight needed her though, whether she knew it or not.

She felt impact against her stomach and was knocked out of her flight line by one of the Pegasi. The Pegasus flew in, hooves straightened out and crashed into Fluttershy, sending her towards the ground as Fluttershy dazedly gagged for air, her chest burning with pain. She knew a rib or two was broken, but worse was the pounding headache from the second attack. She righted herself, just barely, still well above the ground. Above the swarming figures beneath her.

She stared with cloudy eyes as the figure swooped towards her, and she dropped suddenly, avoiding a third blow. The rational part of her mind told her that Twilight was right, they needed help, they needed Ponyville. Still, Twilight...

She turned her head from Twilight, a terrible sense of betrayal filling her stomach as she sped towards Ponyville. She didn't want to leave Twilight, but she couldn't do this on her own. She flew as fast as she could. Far above the clouds, she narrowly missed the help she so desperately sought.

"Give up!" One of the Pegasi shouted down towards the cloud-riding unicorn, diving below as a bolt of lightning nearly struck him out of place. The sound of thunder was constant now, echoing against the clouds and ground, a cauldron of booming noise and flashing lights. The rolling thunder got louder as electricity sprung from the clouds, missing their targets or getting sucked in by a quivering orange aura.

Twilight snorted at the words of "Advice" and shifted her stance to let a bolt surge from her cloud, striking just underneath the mouthy Pegasus. "Give up or we will be forced to hurt your little friend!" One of them shouted, dropping to avoid another bolt.

'That foal.' Twilight snorted in disgust. A part of her was screeching in disgust at the thought but she quelled it. No time to dwell on the distractions, she could reprimand Fluttershy for this later. 'If she survives.' She winced, her head burning with pain as something rebelled against that very thought. A moment later she was airborne when a Pegasus tackled her off the cloud. The headache was gone, and she stared in fury at the mare giving her a wide-eyed look of shock.

In midair, Twilight exploded with electricity, turning the offending foal to ash before landing on a newly-formed cloud, letting the charred remains drop off of her to the ground. That annoying part of her recognized that she'd just ended a life, but the queasiness was short-lived. The other two seemed more hesitant to attack her now, and began to turn tail. "No." Twilight whispered, willing the cloud forward. "You don't get off easy."

Rainbow Dash recognized the flashes were coming from beneath the clouds now. Her eyes had narrowed and she grit her teeth angrily at whatever idiot was now hitting the ground. The thunder never stopped now, and half of Ponyville and Canterlot must have been woken up. There was foolish and then there was just plain dangerous. "Below the clouds! Keep an eye out for whatever jerk is pulling this off!"

The entire troupe of forty lowered through the soft white, the flashes getting brighter and brighter as they got closer. Rainbow Dash picked up speed, leaving the rest behind before breaking through the clouds. She saw them, she saw the idiotic mule kicking up the ruckus, she saw...

"Twilight!" Dash shouted, slowly down as she watched the cloud-riding unicorn speed away from her. Then the sound of thunder crashed around her, and from the cloud she rode a lightning bolt branched out, and as her eyes followed the electric trail she spied a Pegasus. Dash froze in midair, soon surrounded by her equally stunned group as the odd Pegasus jerked unnaturally from the hit, and exploded into flames before falling towards the Earth.

They floated there for a few long seconds while Twilight came to a stop, and turned. Dash stared into Twilight's eyes. They were solid white, glowing as intensely as the orange around her, and there was a look of pure apathy on her face as she came to Rainbow Dash. The others backed away, frightened by the strangely glowing unicorn. "Rainbow Dash." Twilight nodded in small greeting.

Dash's eyes widened, and she grit her teeth. "What the hay is wrong with your voice! What is going on! Who was that!" Dash demanded, landing on the cloud next to Twilight. The only thing keeping her from fleeing in fear was the deep attachment she felt towards the Unicorn. She couldn't just leave her. Twilight must have had a good reason, right?

Twilight turned her head slowly, and stared at the burning heap on the ground fading from view. "An enemy. They chose to attack Fluttershy and I on our return. One is still after Fluttershy. Come." The cloud began to speed up towards Ponyville, and the Pegasi reluctantly followed.

"Enemy? Attack! Fluttershy! Twilight what is going on!" Rainbow Dash demanded, stomping her hoof dramatically. "No pony just attacks another pony like that! You killed somepony Twilight, what's wrong with you!" She was shouting through blurry eyes now, still shocked from what she'd just witnessed.

Twilight turned her head slowly towards Dash, and the blue Pegasus took a step back, then held her ground firmly. She did not like those eyes. "They hurt Fluttershy. Would you have let them go?"

Dash stood on the cloud, stunned. There was no sincerity in Twilight's voice, she was deliberately targeting a weak spot, and didn't even try to hide it. Despite this, Dash hung her head, her teeth hurting from how hard she clenched them. "Dangit Twilight... Let's go save Fluttershy." Twilight grunted the affirmative and began to crackle with electricity.

The citizens of Ponyville stared in the distance as the bright flashes of light and thunderclaps finally stopped. The mayor twisted her mouth from a frown into a hesitant smile. The weather ponies must have finally tended to the problem. A good thing too, there was so much activity in the past week it was spooking her citizens. First the librarian's sick horn, then Celestia's military appearance, and now this? At least things finally settled down.

"Fluttershy!" Pinkie Pie shouted from next to the mayor, and the eyes turned to the sky. Pink mane and yellow coat, it was definitely Fluttershy flying overhead. "Maybe she knows what all the hubbub is about!" The pink pony smiled, until she spotted the Pegasus behind Fluttershy.

Fluttershy landed hard in front of Rarity's boutique, a short distance away from the town square everyone was standing in. She barely caught herself on her hooves and it disturbed her cracked ribs, making her whimper in pain. Her hesitation cost her as the pursuing Pegasus smashed into her from behind, throwing her off her legs and onto the ground a short distance from the door. The Pegasus closed the gap quickly and stood over Fluttershy, raising his hooves to trample her where she lay.

Fluttershy tucked her back legs in, and kicked upwards, making the Pegasus grunt as he was tossed off her. She was sickened by the crunching noise, but the Pegasus hardly seemed to notice as he closed in on the standing, shaking girl. Fluttershy turned rapidly and thrust her legs out, catching the bandit in the chest again and tossing him into the Boutique's door right as the town came around the corner. The Pegasus stood, again, coughed up blood, and weakly charged Fluttershy.

The Pegasus girl stared in disbelief as her own body moved itself, and she head butted the pony in the chest, sending him back onto the ground. She raised herself up, and before she knew what she was doing, stomped.

The Pegasus beneath her wailed in pain as twice she struck his stomach and chest, before she was tugged backwards by her tail. Unable to take it anymore, she fell to her side and shook in agony and sorrow. She could hear voices, she could hear them calling her name but she just didn't hear them. She wanted to weep. She did what she should have, she knew, but still, the thought of harming another...

"Fluttershy!" A new voice shouted. She stopped twitching so violently and turned her head upwards, staring into the deeply concerned eyes of Pinkie Pie. "Fluttershy, it's okay, it's okay! Stop shaking, please!" She begged her, until Fluttershy slowly shifted onto her knees.

"Fluttershy!" The two ponies looked upwards as a cloud descended, and Rainbow Dash hopped off and ran to her wounded friend. "Did these... Did those guys do this to you!" Dash demanded. Fluttershy, bit her lip, but nodded slowly.

"Then they must be reprimanded." Came a frighteningly flat voice. Then everybody noticed that Twilight was standing on the cloud, passive, glowing. "I can make it quick." She offered, but was nearly thrown off the cloud as Dash charged her, stomping the cloud and forcing her face into Twilight's.

"Don't you even dare suggest that Twilight! I don't know what the hay is going on inside your head but you're not killing a second pony!" She shouted into Twilight's face. There was utter silence, except from Pinkie Pie, who was hyperventilating as she stared at the Unicorn she thought she knew.

"The numbers don't matter. He would be my eighth anyways, and are you suggesting we let him go after what he did to-"

"Don't go there! You..." Dash stomped the cloud again, her voice raising even higher. "You don't even care about Fluttershy! You're just trying to make me feel bad! Well I feel terrible but I don't even want to kill him!"

Twilight's eyes turned to narrow, glowing slits. "How noble." She hissed, venom dripping off the last word.

"That's not Twilight." They turned to Fluttershy, who stood, shakily. "That's not Twilight. Twilight's in there but that's not her. It can't be her." Fluttershy whispered, approaching slowly. Twilight was now glaring at Fluttershy.

"I don't know what you're talking about!" She snapped. Dash could finally see it. It was like Twilight was a whole different person. There were inklings of her, but they were distilled into pure apathy, anger, and violence.

"Twilight." Dash called, bringing the Unicorn's furious attention to her, only to hesitate. Dash had a deeply sorrowful look on her face. "I know I call you an egghead and make fun of you sometimes, but I really do think you're a good friend. If you're in there, come out! I don't like this you, she's not cool. She's just a bitch!" Everyone recoiled from the dark word, everyone but Twilight. Her face slowly fell into one of confusion, unsureness, and slowly, but surely...

"False... Gods..." The Pegasus on the ground had risen to his front hooves, and was staring at Twilight with a mixture of hatred and pain. "A lie... A lie given life by true royalty. An accident..." He coughed up more blood, and slowly crawled towards Twilight, his eyes glowering with accusation.

"What are you on about?" Twilight growled darkly, anger rising around her in the form of a swirling red aura. Dash watched her work, her words, become meaningless in an instant.

"You were a mistake!" The Pegasus shouted. "You were never meant to happen! There was meant to be one, and by some divine prank there's you!" He spat out blood and more blood, his anger never wavering. "I am just one of many! You'll be taken!" A crack of thunder, and the pony screamed as he was thrown off his feet against the wall again. He lifted his head weakly, grinning as if he'd won. "You can't... Fight us all!" He rose again, but on willpower alone. One step and he'd topple. "Your false power..." He began to laugh painfully through broken ribs and lungs. "Will not be yours for much longer..."

Twilight crackled with energy again, and Dash threw herself in front of Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy as the world around them roared when the next lightning bolt tossed the colt into the wall. He laid there, weak, agonized, but still smiling. "Lies die when the truth comes to light. TAKE ME GODDESS!" The third bolt splattered him across the wall, leaving nothing but a dark imprint of something that used to be alive.

The whole of the town was silent, every eye on the imprint, then the powerfully glowing Twilight. She stood there in all her fury, horn glowing blue as electricity jumped to the ground. Everyone whimpered softly in fear and began to back away. Everyone but Fluttershy.

"No, don't go near her!" Dash shouted urgently, but Fluttershy didn't hear her. She limped to the cloud, nearly falling on her way. Twilight had turned to watch her, daring her to make even the smallest slight against her. Fluttershy lifted her torso onto the cloud, which began to crackle dangerously as Twilight willed power into her.

"You're in there..." Fluttershy whispered as she pulled herself onto the cloud, ignoring the sparks beneath her feet. Twilight stared into the expression of sincerity and worry that Fluttershy held, and backed away, the sparks turning into arcs of raw power that singed the fur and stung the flesh on Fluttershy's legs. But she kept coming, until their cheeks touched. "Please Twilight... We love you so much, please come back out. Please come back out and stop this mare who thinks she's you."

Twilight hesitated, the lightning slowly stopping until all there were were two ponies. Her eyes still glowed, her aura boiling with intensity as her breathing deepened as something inside of her...

... Clicked.

The cloud disappeared along with the orange, and Fluttershy fell to her hooves, just barely catching herself before she fell over. She sat to keep her balance, and stared down at the limp, unconscious form of her newest friend. "Twilight Sparkle...?" She whispered, reaching forward with one hoof to touch her cheek.

"..."

Fluttershy rubbed slowly, and whispered again. "Twilight, are you in there?"

"..."

Fluttershy's lips quivered and her eyes grew misty, as she whispered one more time. "Twilight, you need to get up..."

"..."

Fluttershy hung her head.

"Jus'..." Fluttershy lifted her head and stared at the unicorn. "Few more min'u's Spike..."

Her heart swelling, Fluttershy finally allowed herself to collapse.

The infirmary only had two patients the next day. In one bed laid Twilight Sparkle, still unconscious. She'd been given a quick physical and it was found there were no problems whatsoever. As far as anyone could tell, she was just out of it.

That was why Rainbow Dash, Applejack, Rarity, and Pinkie Pie were spending their time next to Fluttershy's bed. She was wrapped in bandages, holding her ribs back in place and restraining her legs. Her head had a bandage around it as well. All in all, Fluttershy looked very much liked the patients she watched over.

"It's most certainly a terrifying development." Rarity murmured, watching Twilight from the other side of Fluttershy's bed, admiring her new horn with only slight envy. "Even for her this must be quite the shock. In and out of bed the past four days."

"It wasn't Twilight in control though. Well, some other Twilight maybe but not our Twilight. She spoke in a" Pinkie lowered her voice to a deathly monotone, which was all too convincing for Fluttershy's and Dash's tastes, "deep scary voice." It went back to normal quickly though. "And she didn't even care about Fluttershy or Dashie until they started talking to Twilight instead of Meanie-Pants!"

"Even then, ya'll reckon she's safe? If anythin' we should be contactin' the Princess." Applejack turned her firm eyes to Twilight. She didn't like that new horn when it was coming out, now she was fairly certain it was pure evil. "Ah'm not sure we can even trust her at this point. What if she flips out on us again?"

"How can you say that?" Rainbow Dash glowered at her friend softly. "Sure she had one freaky moment since getting that thing but that doesn't mean it'll happen again! That's still Twilight over there, she just has..." She chewed the words in her mouth and finally spoke again, "freak stuff inside of her!"

"Rainbow Dash is right." Fluttershy piped up softly, unable to speak at full strength less she risk stressing her wounded chest. "She didn't act like this

until we got attacked. She didn't even realize she had new magic until somepony told her."

"Speaking of magic." Rarity cleared her throat. "You did say that the Pegasi that attacked you summoned lightning bolts?" Fluttershy nodded meekly. "With their wings, in fact?" Another nod. "And you're positively sure they weren't unicorns?" Third nod. Rarity stared at her for the longest time. "You'll excuse me if I'm having a moment of disbelief."

"I don't believe it none neither. How the hay did Twilight even start shooting lightning herself? She told me herself she ain't got any spells to hurt ponies." Applejack asked suspiciously, her eyes not leaving Twilight's still form.

"She," Fluttershy winced and hesitated, slowing her breathing until she felt well again, "she, well, the orange around her did absorb the lightning strikes they kept shooting at her. She may have learned from there, the doctor's had mentioned she absorbs foreign magic." She then buried her snout under the blanket and squeezed her eyes shut. "It's probably why we survived and our escorts disappeared..."

Applejack frowned, finally turned towards Fluttershy to softly rub her forehead, "Aw shoot hon, I hadn't meant to make ya feel bad. If it makes ya feel better they found the guards, they were just tangled up in some trees and got them to a hospital lickety-split." Fluttershy's expression did soften, and slowly she calmed down. "See, nothin' wrong."

"Well..." Pinkie Pie started, but was nudged sharply by Dash. "Right! Nothing wrong." She smiled perkily, even as the memories of the screaming pony played in her mind. Mean Twilight would haunt her for a while, she knew.

"Visiting hours are coming to a close girls, say your goodbyes." The doctor called from his office. The five ponies sadly looked to each other, but quietly said their goodbyes. They left, one by one, except Rainbow Dash.

Fluttershy watched the Pegasus approach the cot with Twilight on it, and not-so-gently tug the blanket up to her neck. "Be tough Twilight. If you let Bitch take you over again, I'm going to personally knock her out of you. I promise you, I'll be so mad you can hit me with all the lightning you got and you'll just make me a madder pony. Hear me? Stay you, stay strong."

Fluttershy hid her face so Dash wouldn't know she watched as the Pegasus left the building and shut the door. She watched Dash walk into the sunset, and sighed quietly.

She opened her eyes only reluctantly. She'd been trying to get back to sleep for the past thirty seconds but even through her eyelids she could see the light. She let out a yawn, it didn't feel like morning, yet it still glowed like morning. Her eyes fluttered open and she stared out the window into the darkness. It was definitely not morning. Yet there was still light, to her left. She turned her head, and saw Twilight standing next to her bed, the tip of her horn lit up with soft light.

Fluttershy tensed instinctively upon seeing Twilight, but let out her breath as she saw she was seeing her friend, not the angry one. Her eyes were purple again, not blank, and she began to shake as she saw how sad Twilight looked. The two watched the other for a long time, staring at each other in the eye before Twilight finally broke the silence. "Everything that happened this morning..." Her voice broke, tortured by sorrow and disbelief. "Fluttershy I didn't mean to do any of that. I don't know what happened. It's like I was watching through the eyes of another person..." Tears rolled down her cheeks, and Fluttershy instinctively, this time with the right intentions, moved closer and wrapped a leg around Twilight's neck, pulling her close so the unicorn could have a good cry in her side.

"I know Twilight, I know. I could tell it wasn't you. Everything she did-"

"I killed somepony!" Twilight shouted suddenly, stopping Fluttershy. Fluttershy shifted, and despite the pains, held Twilight close with both arms. "I didn't even want to, I didn't try to, but I just watched myself kill them one by one! That last one..." She sniffled into Fluttershy's chest and the Pegasus tugged. Twilight, understanding, got into the bed and pressed herself against Fluttershy. "Why did I have to keep attacking! Why didn't I realize-"

"Twilight." Fluttershy's voice was firm. Twilight looked into her eyes weepily, and Fluttershy squeezed quietly. "That wasn't you. I don't know you as well as I know the others, but I know you well enough. You're a kind pony, you wouldn't kill another one on purpose. There was something else there, controlling your body and your magic, but you're stronger than them. You

just needed some help." Fluttershy tried to smile, but Twilight hid her snout against Fluttershy's chest and sniffled.

"I'm so sorry Fluttershy. I'm going to make it up to you, however I can." She squeezed, but not tightly. She knew the quiet pony was hurt, she knew it was her fault. She stopped Fluttershy from speaking again by talking first, "I don't care what you say about why I shouldn't. You took care of me and I hurt you. I'm going to take care of you, and make up for what I did to you."

Fluttershy didn't argue. They would talk in the morning when Twilight felt better. She wouldn't hear a no until they were both completely awake. She was consoled, at the very least, by the thought that Twilight was okay, she was back, and hated the other her. In away, the snuggling made the day feel worth it.

"The greedy queen was sitting upon her throne." He felt merry today! "Around sat everything she did own!" He hopped along, tailed by two nervously squirming guards. "Jewels and fineries and pets did rest!" The bells at the end of each tip of his fool's hat jingled with each hop, a solemn warning to those ahead of his presence, "Yet a deep scowl rest upon her crest!"

Two leather-covered guards up ahead were quick to open the doors to not interrupt his stride, "The greedy queen was greedy!" The chipperness in his voice could be heard even as the guards shut the doors. "One might even say she was quite needy!" The guards behind him slunk towards the shadows, trying to distance themselves. "One day a servant found her a magic lamp!" They spied the double doors at the end of the hallway, and looked to each other nervously. "She rubbed it and rubbed it and out came a genie with a mighty stamp!" The two guards at the door were trained well enough to show no emotion. "Genie, I command you, riches, riches, to fill every coffer, chest, and bucket!" Even still, their hearts beat harder as he bounced nearer and nearer. "I need jewels and gems everywhere you can tuck it!"

The throne room was magnificent, and full of unicorns, captains, a well dressed general, and of course, him. "The genie was tired of greed and pride!" Every conversation stopped. "So everywhere he could he put gold to hide!" Every eye turned to the cheerily bouncing figure. "From her nose

to her ears to her throat with gold she was rife!" He bounced once more, entering a line-up of several uncomfortable figures, landing hard enough for his stomp to echo across the room. "Let this be a lesson on the fine things in life!" He ended, smiling cheekily up to the top of the throne.

There was utter silence as everyone stared at him, and he felt absolutely gorgeous there. Here he was, where he needed to be, once again being given the attention he so deserved. There was a small cough from behind him as a guard spoke up. "Uh, may we be dismissed now? I have much to-

"

He flew quite neatly across the room, landing in front of the door with a choked gasp, a dagger shoved cleanly, horizontally into his throat, cutting his air supply. He bled messily, and many of the less important figures not before the great one pushed away from both him and the corpse.

The other guard, knowing better, left the room in an instant, dragging away the body of his body. "You really should hire less rude guards. You don't interrupt a fellow's silent audience." He smiled quite affectionately up at the gold-furred colt with the platinum blonde mane.

The colt in all his kingly manner, from his flowing red cape, his ruby-encrusted circlet, and silvered armor eyed the Jester in the same manner you'd give piece of charcoaled toast, and snorted softly. "We're not here to discuss your treatment of my royal servants Cloppin. May I remind you that each drop of blood you spill is another bit you cost me? You cost yourself?" He snarled, but the good natured man just bounced excitedly.

"Oh maybe so but it's nothing I can't give back give back! I hear there's excellent news concerning the double!"

Shallom the Pegasus growled low at Cloppin. He tucked in his angel-feathered wings tightly as the Jester giggled quietly to himself under the lord's glare. It wasn't the childish behavior nor so much the garish outfit this time, but to insult him in such a casual manner? The lord slowly rose off his haunches and composed himself, already a magnificent sight being taller than any other pony with the color of wealth adorning him, but when he stepped forward under the sunlight and began to glow, even the excitable idiot settled down. "Yes, it's true we have found her. The news is regrettably not 'excellent' as you'd know if you so much peaked at the mission statement you were given."

"Ah but I have I have! Do not underestimate my linguistics my lord, I read it again and again and again and again! Eight Night Flashers! Incinerated with lightning! Haha, the irony is what kills me lord!" The clown laughed happily, until he was shoved hard to the side.

"It'll be the iron that kills you if you do not respect my soldiers!" Shallom roared at the still bouncing pony. The bouncing stopped, and Cloppin closed the gap in an unseen instant, his white panted face nearly touching Shallom's blue. The Pegasus could not read the freak's eyes, as they were permanently black, and blended in with the black circles drawn around them. One large circle around the right eye, one half-closed eye drawn around the other. Then Cloppin grinned with all of his teeth.

He did not want to fall for it, but Shallom finally flinched at the sight of the grinning skull. "Now dear Shallom..." Cloppin whispered hotly, not losing that edge of joy. "I think we should calm down some, unless you think if I shaved those beautiful wings you would-"

"ENOUGH!" All eyes turned to the lord, who had his eyes narrowed, but showed no signs of anger. "I will not have these petty squabbles in my throne room! Least of all from any of you three! We are here to discuss the missions you will be partaking, not, NOT disregard the service of eight of my loyal soldiers!"

Shallom glared at Cloppin, who just saluted smartly. "'Kay!"

"Now, as you know we have located the false one." The lord slowly paced back and forth on his raised dais, his eyes taken from the gathered group below as he entered deep thought. "She proved to be powerful. She killed several of our finest. This set-back is minor though as we have gathered information that could have cost us hundreds more. As such, we will not hesitate in our pursuit. There is so much more to do, but as of now we have a new priority. Shallom, your services will be much more necessary in seeking the reawakened places. Rukafelth, it is your place to capture the false one now." The lord spoke, and Rukafelth stood, taller than Cloppin or Shallom, and bowed his head.

"As you say, Lord. I have heard." The heavily armored figure turned and marched towards the doors, leaving the room. Shallom followed suit, sharing a brief stare with Cloppin, and quelling his own anger before escaping the room.

"Cloppin, you will continue to gather information for me, and I demand of you, no more neck "games", I want as few deaths as possible." Cloppin just bounced in place, the fool's cap jingling ominously. "Do not mistake my leniency for generosity Cloppin." The lord snorted.

The Jester just smiled foolishly, and skipped out of the room.

Chapter 4

Too Many Questions, One Unicorn

She was awake before she'd opened her eyes. Light was filling her vision even behind her eyelids, and reluctantly she opened them up. The sun peaked in the room, flooding it with light, and filling her eyes with it. She noted that the view was absolutely fantastic, but it was slightly lessened by the whole being in a hospital bit.

All her legs felt sore, and breathing proved to be difficult. Her head also hurt, and when she twisted her head her neck felt so rusty and creaky. Her wings, despite the sheer amount of work put on them, actually felt fine.

"Mornin'." Fluttershy turned her head to the side and looked down, over the side of the bed. Twilight looked back up at her, a blanket laid on the ground as did a pillow. "You look lively, feel alright?" Twilight stood with a smile, but Fluttershy's trained eyes noticed she favored her left side. Probably the side she slept on the floor.

"Oh Twilight, why did you spend the night on the floor?" Fluttershy asked with a small sigh, still very much concerned for the pony. Three days with horn pains, one fight night of crazy, and this time she chose her own suffering. She really just needed to lay down of her own choosing and relax.

"You fell asleep while comforting me." Twilight admitted with a small, sheepish smile. "I wasn't sleepy so I got to the floor and noticed they had extra blankets and a pillow underneath along with this." Twilight telekinetically lifted a book into view, simply titled as: 'Cuts, Pains, and Sores: Household Remedies to Household Pains.' "I guess I just spent the whole night reading. I've never really looked at medical books before, they're quite fascinating! I know so much more about Pony anatomy and medical care." She smiled.

Twilight always did love to learn new things. It was a good thing she lived in a library, otherwise she would just visit every day. And live there anyways. Fluttershy smiled softly. "I'm very happy for you Twilight. But really, it's no

big deal, you can go home if you-" Twilight stomped a hoof sharply on the tile floor.

"No." Her voice was firm and her stare hard as she spoke, and then she softened. "I need to make up for everything that went wrong, for everything I did. I'm going to start by making you more comfortable." Fluttershy hid her nose under the sheets again while Twilight went to the bathroom and came back with several towels wrapped around something. Twilight pressed the cold packs and gently tied them around the sore area's of Fluttershy's body, and smiled at her handiwork. "How do you feel?"

Fluttershy shifted, thought for a moment, and smiled. "Good, thank you." Twilight smiled hugely as the door opened down the room. The two girls looked as Spike walked inside, carrying a big plate of food above his head. "Good morning Twilight! I brought you something to eat. Hi Fluttershy." Spike smiled at the two girls as he set the plate of pancakes and grilled asparagus on the nightstand.

"Hi Spike! Wow, this looks amazing, I wish I'd been in bed for this..." Twilight sniffed the meal, then floated it to set it on the bed by Fluttershy.

"Good morning Spike. I'd, uh, be a little louder but-"

"I understand Fluttershy." He hopped on top of the bed, and watched as Twilight carefully cut the food with a knife and fork, using her hooves to work through the pastries. She took a small section and held it to Fluttershy's mouth.

Fluttershy, despite her grace and elegance, couldn't stop herself from licking her lips. "I shouldn't Twilight... He made it for you..." She was met with a rough stare, and meekly she opened her mouth and took a bite, then whimpered at the taste. "Oh this is so good Spike! Fantastic even. " Spike smiled in triumph as Twilight ate a bite as well, and took turns presenting it to Fluttershy, then to herself.

"That's why he's my number one assistant. He can do anything." Spike hid a blush as the two girls ate breakfast. While Twilight ate, she wondered if Spike knew what had happened, if he'd reported it to Celestia, if he thought differently of her. She watched him carefully as she ate, but Spike seemed no different. When they finished, Twilight put the dish aside and used a towel to clean any mess off herself or Fluttershy.

"Oh, that reminds me." Spike turned to the unicorn. "Rarity stopped me on the way here. She was wondering if you knew anything about cleaning ash off a doorl." Twilight froze, and before either of them could ask, slipped into the bathroom. "Huh, you think she's-" He stopped when he faced Fluttershy. No mere mortal could face The Stare.

"You are not to make light of Miss Sparkle's condition Spike." She told him, still sounding deathly serious in a pained whisper.

"Alright alright!" Spike held up his little hands. "It's not like I'm trying to be mean, it's just..."

"It is a big deal." Twilight said, passing by, lifting up Spike by his neck using her teeth and set him by her side. She had a very passive look as she faced Fluttershy. "I'm going to be back as soon as I'm done helping Rarity. Actually, I'll visit Zecora and get some herbs to help you first, then I'll be back. Don't worry." Twilight took a step towards the door.

"Twilight, wait, will you come here?" Fluttershy asked, tugging the blanket up to her chin, suddenly shy. Her little heart was beating as Twilight approached slowly. "Look Twilight, what you did yesterday... It wasn't you, but you had the right intentions. Protecting yourself and me. Whatever that part of you was, it went overboard, but you were the one that saved us both. Thank you." Fluttershy leaned in, and planted the lightest kiss on Twilight's cheek, causing the Unicorn to leap back in mild surprise. The two stared at the other, Twilight with wide eyes and Fluttershy with happy ones, and the Unicorn slowly smiled.

"Okay. But I'm still coming back. I promise." Twilight smiled softly. Fluttershy nodded, but the unicorn leaned in. "I mean it. I'm gonna come back and make you nice and comfortable. I-" She paused, and to Spike's and Fluttershy's confusion, let out an exasperated sigh, "I Pinkie Pie Swear."

Twilight rubbed her sore eye through the lid as Spike escorted her to the boutique. She couldn't tell because of her eye, but Spike could see the looks in everyone else's eyes. Twilight scared them. Twilight was a stranger. Twilight was too dangerous. Only the ones that genuinely knew

who she was offered sympathetic looks, and the only ones that were spared a glare from Spike.

How couldn't he have heard about what happened last night? The deaths, the changes, the terror Twilight had become, but as far as Spike saw, she was the same old Pony, just with a big freaking horn now. Having been raised by the unicorn, he knew better. Whatever had happened, Twilight had a good reason, and if she wasn't in control, she wasn't to blame for her actions. He hung back a bit and rubbed Twilight's side. The unicorn gently hit his tail with a sweep of her own in kind. As they neared the boutique, she began to slow. Spike kept pace, and Twilight turned to look at him with a slightly worried face. He knew her thoughts, he pet her side. "You're the same old Twilight, I don't think you're bad in any way. Now c'mon, let's go look at the door."

On the door of the boutique was another painful reminder of the morning before. The pony had been thrown into the wall, and vaporized, leaving a shadow of his body slumped against the front door. The white unicorn was already standing there, staring at it closely.

Rarity was in a conundrum. Not about the door, it needed to be washed of course, but ever since she'd spied it this morning during her list of chores she couldn't help but start thinking about Twilight. A lot of rumors were flying around town and somebody had even protested her staying in the same hospital as Fluttershy, but the doctor was adamant to keep the two together. She had no doubt it was a good idea, Fluttershy would help Twilight when she woke up, and knowing Twilight she wouldn't leave Fluttershy's-

"Morning Rarity." Spike called, smiling hugely as he approached. "I enlisted some help in cleaning your door!" He smiled as Rarity turned to look to Twilight. Twilight stood tense, not sure what to do under Rarity's stare. As plain and unassuming as it was.

Rarity rubbed her chin with her hoof as she stared at Twilight. "Shouldn't you be with Fluttershy? I figured you'd be spending every waking moment by the poor dear's side." Rarity felt her stomach pinch at the look on Twilight's face. "N-not that you don't have a good reason to be here I'm sure. Helping with the door, right?"

Twilight nodded slowly. "I also wanted to say I'm sorry about what happened. If I was just not stupid and took control-"

"Not another word Twilight Sparkle. It wasn't you who ruined my door, it was that, how did Rainbow Dash put it so crudely? Yes, that b-word with the fancy lightning. From everything I've heard, your body was there, not the true you." Rarity turned back to the door in consideration while Twilight hung her head.

"See Twilight? Your friends don't think you're a bad person. Everything that happened wasn't your fault. Nobody will ever say otherwise." Spike smiled, but it was mystified at Twilight's continued frown. "C'mon Twilight, what's the problem here? You can tell your number one assistant."

"I feel like I'm responsible..." Twilight admitted quietly. Spike just grew more mystified. "It feels good that everybody trusts me but after all that happened I... I could have stopped it. If I stopped scaring myself and took a step forward. If I just tried..."

"Maybe so." Spike admitted with a shrug. "But it's not like we'll know unless it happens again, and I know pretty well that the moment you get to the library you'll do everything you can to research a way into controlling it. Face it Twilight, I know you in and out, you get cranky when something's out of order. Now c'mon, go help her clean that door so we can get to Zecora's."

Twilight hung her head and approached the door, while Rarity stared even more closely at the stain. "You, um, understand that I'm hesitant to clean it myself. Do you have any suggestions? Perhaps a hose from a distance? Splash some soap on it?"

"Don't worry Rarity, I'll get it." Twilight took the nearby sponge in hoof and dipped it in the buckets of water and soap and began to clean slowly, wiping away the pains of yesterday with each stroke.

"What are you doing darling!" Rarity demanded, pushing her leg down with an undignified snort. "Using your bare hooves to clean such a..." She looked to the stain and bowed her head in slight apology. "Don't you think you should use your magic?"

Twilight bit her lip as she pulled her leg away and shook her head. "No, Rarity. I'm not comfortable using magic right now. I'd rather do this manually." She made a move to clean again, but Rarity stopped her again.

Rarity stood there, gave a small, sad smile, and nodded. "I understand. But trust your magic Twilight, it is yours to control after all." Twilight gave a small sigh and kept cleaning. Rarity joined in a moment later, using her own magic to wash the door down. There was not a single comforting thing about the whole ordeal.

The news of the attack had sent the Canterlot castle into full red alert mode. An attack on a royal carriage was unheard of. Even bandits dared not disturb the guards no matter how many there were, and such crimes were quickly and easily brought to justice. Celestia did not use her magic to invade the privacy of others unless there was a sufficiently inexcusable crime.

Celestia knew she could not stand idly by, especially since two of her guards had gotten hurt in the process, and worse, their targets were the passengers. She'd spent hours in a trance, guards in every corner of the room to watch the Princess while she was unable to watch herself, and more than one of them was nervous staring at her. Normally she could identify the attackers and have them arrested in an instant, but she was spending far too long in her trance.

There was a knock on the door, and it was opened so three guards could enter, one in the lead, and one pushing the other on a gurney. Celestia drew herself out of her trance to watch the guards approach. The guards were blessed, many assumed, to see Celestia at all times. In public, in private, and in a way, they were right. They saw the Princess at all times, when she was happy, and especially when she was sad. Many commoners did not understand what she endured, but the guards did. The guards performed their duties and acted as a buffer between her and the world around her that, despite her very best, did not pacify itself and leave her subjects unharmed. If worst came to worst, they were there to share in her private moments of gloom, and do whatever she asked to ease the pains.

Since Luna had come, Celestia had been happier, having less moments to simply lay down in silence and consider the world outside the castle, as the

two preferred to sit and discuss it. They acted as friends, they acted as advisors, and they acted as comfort. The guards were happy to see the Princess in brighter spirits, but today they knew they'd be hard to come by. Nobody knew that better than the three guards who just entered.

"We come baring new information regarding the attack on Twilight Sparkle and Fluttershy." The lead announced, turning his head to the bed-ridden male who squirmed his way into a sitting position.

"You could not have better time. I regret to inform everyone that, despite my best efforts, I can't seem to find the attackers by any magical means." Her voice was shy, and very sorry. The guard waved it away, and sat before Celestia as he cleared his throat.

"I think I may be able to offer some insight into why, ma'am. We've been doing extensive work on the location of the attackers ourselves but have turned up short, until he woke up." He turned his head to the pony in the cot, who had finally gotten comfortable sitting. Celestia's ears flicked forward, and she watched the man carefully.

"..." He stared at the Princess with understanding eyes, and he finally spoke. "Princess, what I'm about to tell you is going to be hard to hear. When I'd fallen and hit the tree I was given the perfect view of everything that went on beneath the clouds. I cannot tell you all of the details, but I'll do my best to explain what I saw." Now every guard in attendance was listening in, and the utter silence of the statement caused the guard to squirm again. "If I am correct Princess Celestia, your sight requires a person as the focus. As in when you use it to find somebody, that person has to exist?"

"Correct." The Princess said immediately, now watching the guard suspiciously. Something didn't seem right with his tone. He knew of terrible things.

"Well, as far as I can tell, the reason you've turned up short is no fault of your own. The people you were trying to find, the attackers..." He worked his jaw slowly. "After miss Sparkle's work, I can safely say there was no possible way there would be any bodies left."

His words hung in the air, which had turned a few degrees colder as Celestia's surprise grew palpable. "Perhaps..." She started, breaking the

silence mercifully as she took a few steps closer to the guard. "Perhaps if you could explain more, sir?" The guard nodded his head quietly, and slowly closed his eyes in thought.

"When I'd landed in the tree, I was dazed for several moments, but when I came to I could see Miss Sparkle's Pegasus friend carrying her up to the clouds. What had brought me to was a flash of lightning, much like the one that had grounded me. The two broke through the cloudline and the attackers followed. I couldn't see anything then, but there was a lot of thunder and a lot of flashes. I don't know who was attacking, but I remember seeing the two girls fall. Their attackers followed, and Miss Sparkle had landed on a cloud. Her friend tried to join her, but was driven off and chased back to Ponyville by one of the attackers. The rest of the attackers attempted multiple times to secure Miss Sparkle." The guards and the Princess leaned forward for more information. The guard collected his thoughts, and finally spoke. "I don't want to accuse you of anything, Princess Celestia, but it had always been my understanding that the school does not teach spells made solely to harm others. Miss Sparkle's lightning spell was... Unmatched." The Princess' wings stretched their full length as agitation entered her limbs, forcing her to pace back and forth. "And unfortunately, equally non-survivable. The attackers..." The guard grimly felt his face sink. They were hardened, all hardened, but death not brought on by the years was unusual, and disgusting. "I can safely say you can't find them because there's nothing of them left. What wasn't immediately disintegrated was burned away."

The Princess stopped in front of her throne, staring straight at the sun just above where she would sit, the representation of who she was and what she did, her significance to the world and her care, the warmth she felt for it and chose to gave it, and she felt like ice. "Think back. Carefully." She chose her words wisely. "You're sure this wasn't a dream brought on by the attack?" Her tone her dropped very low.

The guard gulped visibly from the accusation in Celestia's voice. It was a tough thing to accuse the Princess' beloved student of something so drastic as murder. "Princess Celestia, I mean you nor your student any disrespect. I know I was awake for that full thing. For her part, when Rainbow Dash showed up, she no longer attacked. The only ponies she..." He had to be careful with this. He didn't want to wound the Princess any further. "Fought

off were her attackers. I've heard she and her friend are both safe in Ponyville."

"I know." The Princess turned back to the sun insignia above her throne. "Take him back to the hospital. And leave the room. All of you. I have much to think about." They complied, slowly, one by one exiting the room. The Princess hadn't asked for her guards to leave in many many years. They hoped, for Princess Celestia's sake, Twilight Sparkle had good reasons.

"Well, all washed up." Rarity stared at the freshly washed door with Twilight, who set the sponges to the side. The door stood fine, not a thing wrong with it, yet it still gave them both an uneasy feeling. Especially since the sponges sat there, blackened with ash. "What do you suppose we do with those?" She asked, pointing to the items.

"I was thinking of that..." Twilight sighed softly, apparently not wanting to think about it anymore. "I want to bury them. Give that guy a grave or something. It's the least I can do." She felt a leg around her shoulders, and found Rarity smiling at her.

"One make-up at a time then. Do whatever you feel you need to do Twilight Sparkle, but if I may give you some advice..." She leaned in and whispered to her, "Avoid Rainbow Dash for today. I don't believe she's given up on you yet but she's going to demand answers and explanations. You know how she gets if anything happens to Fluttershy." Twilight gave a slow nod.

"I wouldn't know what to tell her anyways. I couldn't control myself. It's like I was having thoughts that weren't mine either. Ones that just didn't care." Rarity nodded slowly.

"In time, you'll find the answers. For now, we just have to pick up after ourselves and look for them." Rarity noticed Twilight's little smile, and leaned down to get a better look, prompting Twilight to turn away from her in embarrassment.

"Where do you find this advice, Rarity? You don't seem like the sort who'd know." Twilight quickly added, "No offense."

"Comes with being an older sister. Sweetie Belle has so many questions and troubles, I was bound to have some good advice to pass around. It helps she can't cook to save her life, and the only thing Scootaloo seems to get attracted to is food." Twilight gave her a questioning look, and Rarity chortled. "Oh listen to me mouth off. Don't let me hold you up, and I'll help you dig the grave for the, uh, sponges. Just come by when you need me." Twilight nodded. She felt a little better now that it was done and she'd had a talk. She would definitely come get Rarity if she meant it.

As she nudged Spike to get him to follow, Rarity spoke up again. "Oh, uh, Twilight? I don't mean to steal away your friends but I have a big project I need to work on tonight and I need somebody to keep an eye on Sweetie Belle while I work. I was wondering if I could borrow Spike?"

Twilight looked down to the dragon, who looked back up to Twilight with big, round pleading eyes, and the unicorn sighed in amusement. "Alright Rarity. But just to let you know I will be going to Zecora's before I go see Fluttershy again. I should be with her all night." Rarity nodded at that and waved her off as Spike ran to join his crush.

Twilight wished she hadn't allowed it as she walked towards the Everfree Forest. With Spike there, she was always sure she had somebody to watch her back, somebody she could trust, but without him, as she walked through the town full of people now doing their best to avoid her, she felt more isolated than ever before. She'd gotten so used to the warmth of the town and friendship, hearing all the talking turn to whispers, the ponies avoiding her gaze... She wasn't welcome at her own home anymore.

Leaving the town had almost been a relief since she no longer had to see the accusing looks. Her tail even perked up a little as she stepped into the forest. It meant she was a step closer to getting to Zecora and getting some remedies for Fluttershy, and helping her, and making up for-

"Yo, Twilight!" Twilight paused and turned, staring into the sky and cringing as she saw the rainbow. Rainbow Dash slowed to a stop and landed next to the unicorn, and gave her a curious look. "What are you going into the forest for? I've been looking out all day to see when you'd finally take a step out of the hospital, grab a nap, and now you're going into the forest?"

Twilight chuckled nervously, and gave a slow nod, remembering Rarity's advice. Just don't talk about what had happened. "Well, yeah, I was going

to see Zecora and see if she had any herbs or remedies to help with Fluttershy's aches."

"Oh, right." Dash's eyes narrowed and Twilight began to walk, Rainbow Dash keeping up, ahead of her in fact as she looked back at her. "I've been wanting to ask you..."

'Oh no...' Twilight didn't want to answer any questions she didn't have the answer to herself. Or answer ones she'd already answered. "Rainbow Dash." She interrupted quickly. "Can we not talk about what happened? I kind of want to just move on and help everyone. Make up for what I did." She walked past the Pegasus, who stopped in her tracks, then sprang ahead of Twilight.

"No way, I have a lot of questions to ask you about what the hay happened! You can't just walk away and say no! This is serious stuff!" She tossed her body in front of Twilight, and to her surprise, took an incredibly aggressive stance, one that spoke 'one more step and you're going to the ground'. She wanted to be mad about this, to be absolutely furious that Dash didn't understand, but then it occurred to her that Dash wasn't afraid of her. That meant more to her right now than Dash's stubbornness.

Still, she wasn't in a talking mood. "No, Dash, I want to hurry back. I've left Fluttershy alone for too long." She tried to walk around the Pegasus, but Dash had charged her, knocking her to the ground, standing over her so Twilight couldn't get away.

"Look Twilight, I'm not too big on hurting my friends but I'm not letting you move until you start talking and answering. This is a huge deal, we can't just ignore it." The Pegasus stiffened her legs as Twilight began to squirm, and stared up at Dash with a mixture of shock and angered annoyance.

"Well I don't want to talk about it right now! I've been thinking about it constantly day in and day out, I dreamed about it all yesterday and watched myself kill them again and again without having the ability to care! I! Don't! Want! To! Talk!" She tossed herself and thrashed, but Rainbow Dash held her still between her legs and glared down into her eyes.

"I'm not talking about the deaths! If you'd sit down and think for a moment you'd realize there's something deeper going on. The others didn't want to talk to you about it yet but I just know if we don't something bad will happen

soon and there won't be any answers!" The Pegasus stomped the ground near Twilight's neck, not to intimidate but to show her frustration. It served both purposes.

"Well I don't know what to tell you! You haven't asked me anything and won't let me up!" Twilight's horn glowed for just a moment, considering pushing Dash off of her, but the blue Pegasus shrieked and tossed herself away at the sight of the glow, taking an even more aggressive stance when Twilight sat up. "Dash-!" She gasped at the look in her eyes. "I- I didn't mean to, I was just going to push-"

"How hard!" Dash shouted, taking an uneasy step back. "Fluttershy told us you got a whole lot more magic, how do I know you can control it? How do I know it was just a little 'push'?"

Twilight quivered as she got to her hooves, "Because that's all it was meant to be! I know I can do my magic without going overboard, I already did it in Canterlot. Dash you have to believe me, I don't intent to hurt anypony every again with my magic." She watched as the Pegasus slowly lifted from her crouched pounce, but her face never wavered.

"Fine." Dash softened her muscles and stood still, watching Twilight's every move. "Who the hay were those guys attacking you?"

A dragon in the sky was a rare and terrifying sight. Dragons rarely flew by day, and even if they were going anywhere at all, it wouldn't be far from their dens. If they were flying, they were searching for new dens, or perhaps a mate, both which could have destructive repercussions on the surrounding environment. But more than that, a dragon was not a social creature except with its mate and the occasional familial visit, and always flew alone.

"The Trelle are getting antsy, she's near." Rukafelth turned his head to the side, his Sky-Tracer barely paying attention to the direction of his mount as the dragon rocked back and forth in the air, trying to dislodge the spurs in its neck as he stared into his pack. "What's our direction, Captain?"

The Juggernaut calmly stroked the side of his powerful companion's neck before he stood, turning to his force of some twenty-three men and their

gently gliding beasts, and made a wave for their attention. "The three of you whom I've entrusted in the capture are to take the Trell-bag and let it guide you to her. The rest of you will come with me to our station. Laputa will wait no longer." He called, in his own throat, barely above his normal speaking voice, but to the riders he boomed with authority and power.

"Aye!" Three riders pulled up underneath the Sky-Tracer, riding smaller dragons that barely qualified as drakes themselves, but none-the-less served their purpose incredibly well. The Tracer closed the pack he'd been staring into and dropped it below into the open hooves of the lead Catcher. The three riders fell into seeking formation, dropping from the group of twenty-four as Rukafelth lead his squad far to the south.

"I have no idea Dash." She stared down at her hooves quietly, shuffling with agitation she had only just begun to experience. It was odd, she did not feel annoyed at Rainbow Dash, yet some sense of energy entered her, making her tremble. "We thought they were bandits until that one began to speak to me."

"Bandits who summon lightning?" Dash asked dryly, making Twilight wince.

"I honestly have no idea Dash, I've been in Canterlot nearly my whole life studying magic. If I'd known there was such a thing as a Pegasus that could command lightning, I'd have heard about it." Dash began to pace now, also agitated.

"Well I'd have too. Lightning's no easy thing to deal with, and making it without touching the clouds? Impossible without magic. What if they were just unicorns with that wing spell?" But Twilight was shaking her head.

"None of them had horns from what I saw, and you could tell if they started to glow. I saw them seem to summon it using their wings."

"Wings aren't magical, they're all natural." Dash spread her own pair, flapping lightly, not lifting off the ground, just doing so for show. "What about Pegasi with enchanted wings?" But again, Twilight was shaking her head.

"No glow." Dash worked her jaw in a circle as she thought about it, then stomped with a tiny huff.

"Well what the heck is it then? You don't just summon lightning! And that reminds me, that guy yelling at you, calling you false and lies, he certainly seemed to know you." She paused, then glared. "Yeah, that's why I asked you that, he knew you pretty well to call you a liar!"

Twilight twitched, but shook her head. "No no no no, I didn't know him, I knew nothing about what he was talking about. I guess he was talking about my horn or my increase in magic, but, I just thought he was crazy. Just babbling about things..."

"I don't know about that, he seemed pretty sure of himself. There's something about your horn, Twilight." Dash stuck her face in front of Twilight's, and glared. "And I don't like it, and I want it gone. It makes you weird and it caused bad ponies to attack you and Fluttershy. Get. Rid of it." She articulated, making Twilight glare back.

"If I could get rid of my new horn, don't you think I would have? It's caused me nothing but trouble for four days straight, and there's no way I'd get rid of my ability to use magic. Magic is my life! It's what I was meant to do, I'm not going to just go cut the entire thing off!"

"Not even if it keeps hurting Fluttershy? Or yourself? What happens if Pinkie Pie, or me, or Applejack, or Rarity gets caught up in it? You're just going to keep it around even if it's dangerous?"

"We don't KNOW if it's what's dangerous!" Twilight shouted. Normally there'd be a flock of birds flying in fear of the sudden outburst, but neither girl noticed it was too quiet. "It could just be that extra magic and I have no idea how to get rid of it, and I'm not about to chop my horn off just to make sure! This sort of thing requires study, testing, and more than anything, PATIENCE!"

"And look where study, testing, and PATIENCE got us! It got Fluttershy hospitalized!"

"That was because we didn't know what was going on! As soon as I figure out with all the PATIENT STUDYING I'll be doing, it will never happen

again, I'll even siphon out all that extra magic if it means safety, but I will not remove my horn!"

"It's just a dumb horn Twilight! Get it off and we won't have any more freaks attacking ponies who matter!"

Twilight narrowed her eyes to match Dash's, and they stared at each other for the longest time. "Only if you remove your wings." She spoke plainly. Rainbow Dash leapt back, wings extended, and wrapped around herself.

"No way! No way in heck! These are way too important to me Twilight! You don't just get rid of somebody's wings! They're my life! I can't live without th-" She froze in mid-sentence and stared at Twilight. Then her horn. She then looked back at her wings and flapped them. Magic was Twilight's life. Flying was hers. If she lost her own wings, she didn't think there'd be anything left. What else was there to do for her? Sure she was athletic but she was meant to be a Pegasus, meant to fly.

She looked to Twilight, who was staring at the ground with a very pained look on her face. Twilight spent her life studying and practicing magic. Sure she'd make a great secretary, perhaps even a good mayor, but that didn't interest her. Dash looked at her wings and then to Twilight's horn.

She approached, slowly, and lifted Twilight's chin with her hoof, and did her best to look as sorry as possible. "Twilight, I didn't mean it. I-... I was scared and not thinking. Twilight, I'm so-" The world turned into a blur as something grabbed her, and she was crushed against Twilight. Something tough and knotted pressed against her side, and she felt the ground leave them.

When she opened her eyes, she could see the sky through a criss-crossed pattern of rope, her snout stuck through one of the square holes. Up above them, she saw a masked pony in dark armor pulling them up while the dragon he rode turned, bringing them south.

Chapter 5

Dark, Wet, Sore

Each tug of the rope sent Twilight screaming into her ear as they swayed high above the ground. Rainbow Dash stared at the masked Pony, the mask being solid white with red war stripes drawn from the crown to the tip of the nose, and tried to shout over Twilight, over the roaring wind.

"Whoever you are you'd better let us go right now! You're with those bandits aren't yo-" she coughed as she was smacked against the side of the small dragon, and finally the Rider had them next to him. Dash couldn't fit her hoof through the net hole, but at least her snout could fit. She tried to clamp onto his tail hair, but he twisted, grabbing something from a bag. He pulled out what looked like a shadow with tiny red eyes and teeth, and tossed it onto them.

Dash nipped at the thing, but it didn't seem to notice as black tendrils slid around her neck. Dash bucked and kicked as much as she could but her movement was heavily restricted, and with a pained snort felt it begin to squeeze. She tried to gasp for breath, but it squeezed harder and tighter, each breath causing it to squeeze more until she couldn't breathe at all. Panic began to set in and she started to thrash as she choked, but the creature was relentlessly powerful in her bound state. Tears stung her eyes and her lungs burned with need for air as the little black creature slowly unwrapped one tendril, and grabbed Twilight's throat, causing her scream to waver. As Dash's vision began to tunnel she realized this wasn't something she could win or fight. For a moment she felt she was going to die.

The last thing she heard before losing consciousness was Twilight's screams choke out. The Rider, grunting with relief at the silence, hitched the two girls to the dragon's wing joints behind him.

Air.

She stared down her chest at her body, feeling weak and defeated. She heard the faint crackle of fire from the torches around her, and she shifted

to stare around the room. It was large, and in each corner were... Instruments. A large metallic coffin filled with spikes, a table with chains and wheels and ropes to hold and stretch the limbs, whips held by hooks on the walls, and chain manacles along each wall. Dash knew fear from angering a dragon, and she knew terror from seeing Nightmare Moon, but never had the feelings sapped her strength and will. Maybe it was the room, maybe it was having been strangled.

She shook her hoof, and felt resistance. Looking up, she saw she was in one of the manacle sets. No, it was her freedom. They'd taken her freedom. She couldn't move, she could only shake around a bit. She spread her wings and flapped, rising upwards, and outwards, but the only thing that gave her a glimpse of was Twilight's fate. She fell, smacking against the wall with a pained grunt as she stared into the middle of the room, almost hidden from the lack of light provided by the small torches, but there she was.

Twilight was laying on a table similar to the rack, but there were only manacles wrapped around her hooves rather than ropes around wheels. She looked helpless on her back. Dash could hardly bare to look at how weak Twilight seemed. They'd been arguing earlier, and as she hung there it just felt...

Pointless.

Where had it gotten them? What had they discovered? That ponies flying on dragons wanted them apparently. Part of her knew they had to escape, but in her weakness, in her lack of movement, another part was just defeated. The scared, lonely, afraid to lose part that made her the quivering wreck during the Fliers' Competition. "No..." She whispered to herself. She couldn't accept defeat. Applejack would never accept defeat, and Applejack was the only person worthy enough to be called a challenge.

She lifted one of her back legs back, and slapped it against the stone wall behind her, making a clapping sound. "Twilight!" She hissed. The figure began to stir, and slowly the unicorn's eyes opened. They widened, and she took a deep breath, then let it out slowly in relief. Dash sighed with her. "Up here Twilight!"

The unicorn turned her head and looked, and in an instant shook, trying to roll over, but getting caught. "Rainbow Dash!" She jerked again, and the

chains grew taut, "Ow! Rainbow Dash, are you okay? Where are we?" She called. The pony on the wall glanced around slowly, then shook her head.

"I'm not sure Twilight. Looks like a..." She looked around at all the instruments and thought back to some old shows. "A torture chamber?" She finally said. Then it hit her. It must have hit Twilight too, because now she was flailing violently, her horn glowing as she tried to blast off the manacles.

"Th-they're resistant! I can't get them off! Rainbow Dash you have to escape!" Twilight turned her neck and faced the Pegasus, who flinched as the horn flared with light, and shot a manacle. No luck. "What... What's going on here!"

"Quit panicking Twilight! Just... Let's sit and think for a moment, okay? You're a smart pony, you can do this!" Dash urged. Twilight stopped shaking around so much, but she could still hear her whimpering. Dash wanted to let out a good cry right now, but she was strong, she had to be strong. The strong didn't cry.

She just needed to calm down and think. That was all. She wasn't dumb, if she tried she bet she could escape this thing a hundred times in the next minute. She just had to be smart about it, like Twilight was being, meditating herself. Her horn began to glow and sparkle, and for a brief moment, Dash felt hopeful.

All too brief.

A heavy wooden door opened, and Rainbow Dash watched as six heavily armored ponies stepped inside, each wielding a vicious spike on their helmets and the front and back of their hoof-covers had small, but sharp spikes for trampling. The six ponies surrounded Twilight, who opened her eyes from the noise and looked around slowly. 'Don't panic Twilight, you were about to cast a spell, you can do it if you don't panic. I don't care if these ones die as long as we can be free!' She thought out loud. She grit her teeth in fear as Twilight began to scream again.

"Silence her!" A unicorn entered the room, covered in fine robes and looking at the screaming pony with utter contempt. He glanced to one of the guards, who pulled out a funnel from a bag she'd been carrying, and then a large glass bottle of something clear. The guard hovered the glass

over Twilight's gut, and Dash felt herself kicking the wall, trying to get near and smash the guard out of the way, but she'd already dropped the bottle.

Twilight let out a painful hack and lay still, tears pooling at her eyes as the guard took the bottle and began to open it. "Leave her alone!" Dash shouted from the wall, lunging forward, pulling the manacles, causing them to cut deep into her legs but she ignored it. "She's just an innocent girl! Leave Twilight alone! Leave her alone or I'll-" They ignored her as two of the soldiers pried open Twilight's mouth and jaw, and pushed the funnel into her mouth.

Dash figured it out all too late as the guard with the glass lifted the bottle and began to pour it into Twilight's mouth. The unicorn's weeping eyes bulged, and she gagged as the liquid flowed inside. 'Don't swallow it don't swallow it don't swallow it for the love of Celestia Twilight don't swallow it!' Her neck bobbed, and Dash screamed in fury as she kicked the wall and lunged again. They continued to pay her no attention as they poured the entire bottle's contents into Twilight's mouth.

The unicorn began to kick and squirm but was quickly held still by the other guards, and she was forced to swallow what was left. She let out a cough, coughing louder and louder, kicked and twisting her head around, but slowly she began to stop. Rainbow Dash stared for the longest time as her friend began to go still, the only indication she was alive was her slowly rising and falling chest. "No!" She shouted, feeling fur rub away as she pushed out again. "No you leave her alone! You sick monsters leave Twilight alone! She did nothing! The horn's not her fault! Get away from her she's-" hooves collided with her stomach, and she rose, her eyes wide with pain. The guard set his back legs down and nodded to the Unicorn.

Dash watched in wheezing silence as the Unicorn took out what looked like a series of small rings of various sizes and began to slide them down Twilight's horn. Each locked into place at a certain way down Twilight's horn, and when the forth was placed the Unicorn went digging for something else. He pulled out a small quill and glowing ink, and using both began to write on each ring. Twilight laid still, her eyes half lidded and mouth partially open.

The Unicorn put his things away and nodded to the guards, who unshackled Twilight. One shoved her roughly off the table, near Dash's

hanging legs, and she weakly pushed forward again, wanting to get to her limp friend. She drew blood, and the guards put the pony on a stretcher and hauled her off. "Well, that's one. Suppose this one will fight?" One of the guards asked, staring up at Rainbow Dash.

"Nah." A second turned and reared her back legs, and Dash began to shout until they drove into her stomach, causing her to hack up something vile into her mouth. She felt limp as they unshackled her and laid her on the table Twilight had just been on, still warm. They chained her hooves down, and the Unicorn gave orders Dash didn't hear. Two of them stood by her sides, each grabbing a wing she tried to weakly pull in, and pulled them out and laid them flat. "Quit moving Blue, or we'll start using nails to keep you still." The kicker threatened, making Dash stop twitching her wings. The unicorn dug into his bag and held something in his mouth as he walked by.

Scissors.

Rainbow Dash tried to kick, but only managed to weakly lift her leg and let it fall, the pain from her stomach running all over her body as the Unicorn carefully had one wing lifted, and starting at the edges of her beautiful blue wings, began to clip.

They'd hauled her forcibly down long stone passageways, brightly lit by large torches and hanging lanterns, revealing rows of solid wood doors. Each hallway seemed long and wide, and as she turned her head slowly to watch, she only apathetically noted that the place was fairly empty. Every now and then a guard or two, but for the most part the place was dead silent, and very still.

They dragged her across an atrium, and she noticed a pony standing with two others, with a white mask on, with two red lines down his face. The masked pony waved cheekily and turned back to his companions when Dash was dragged down another hallway. Her limbs hurt, her stomach was churning with pain, and she held back tears when she touched upon the burning sensation in her wings. Everything about her hurt, but more than anything her ego, her feelings, and her sense of self. Meekly she flapped the ragged things behind her, loosening a few feathers from the tips that hadn't been cut out, but a kick to her side told her to stop. She did.

They dragged her down a spiraling staircase, letting her bump painfully against each stair until they reached the bottom, where they dragged her across a floor with small piles of wet hay laying around. She turned her head to the left, and saw this was a prison. Two cells stood side-by-side. The one nearest to the door had a purple figure lying down in it. Rainbow Dash was thrown unmercifully into the one with no inhabitants, and the sliding, barred door was slammed shut.

She stood weakly as the guards walked out of the room and up the stairs, shutting the door behind them, leaving Dash to herself. There was water all over the floor, dripping from a few cracks in the windowless wall. It soiled the hay on the floor, making it soft, tasteless, disgusting. Gruel and floor water. In a far corner was an old, molded mattress, and across from it was a hole in the ground. She didn't need three guesses to figure out what it was for, judging by the smell.

She sat on the floor, pushing herself up on her front legs to stare across the far wall where there was a single torch. Here she was, the great Rainbow Dash, in a jail cell, weakened by beatings, wings clipped to an unusable state. The incident had been petrifying. The Unicorn didn't even try to exercise whatever medical professionalism he may have had, simply clipping away and magically tugging out the wonky feathers. It had stung, and she had finally started screaming since her capture. The one Pegasus guard who had been in attendance had to even look away.

You do not take away a Pegasus' wings.

A small thought occurred to her, and an argument that felt like so long ago sprang to mind. 'Only if you remove your wings.' Had they taken her horn? That's what they wanted, right? The horn? Rainbow Dash felt the pity for herself turn to concern for Twilight. Whatever they had fed her made Dash's gut wrench just thinking about it. She pushed her snout through the bars.

"Twilight?" She whispered, wincing at the pain and softness of her voice. "Twilight are you there? C'mon Twilight, speak to me..." She trailed off on the last word. She heard the slightest sound of straw shifting, and nothing else. Twilight wasn't with her.

She began to scream again.

Her voice grew ragged as she screamed and shouted, stomping her hooves against the ground, kicking the stone walls, throwing herself against the door until she bruised. The place was solid, even if she was at full strength her legs were just muscle and bone, the walls were all stone and the bars were metal. She kicked and screamed until every part of her hurt more and more, and only stopped when she couldn't scream anymore and couldn't kick anymore. She fell on her side near a wall, and shut her eyes. Time passed easily on the outside, and she slept until the sun fell and the moon rose. Restless, pained, and crying.

Rarity hated to admit it, but Fluttershy pulled off bandages very well. With her naturally soft personality and beautiful looks and face, the bandages around her head and chest looked good. The other citizens seemed to think so, extending offerings of help to the girl slowly padding up the street, at a much more precise pace.

"Should you be walking?" Rarity asked with worry, walking out of the boutique to greet the Pegasus in the middle of the street. "Really darling, you'll get those fresh bandages grungy and dirty! And there's no need to strain that graceful walk of yours. You're going to hurt yourself." Rarity fussed, stepping around Fluttershy who lightly turned her head to keep track of the fashionista.

"I'll be okay as long as I don't rush. The Nurse said I just need to avoid any strenuous activity for several days. With some care I may be able to move sooner." She smiled a little, and Rarity returned it.

"Well, if care will help, why not stay in the hospital? Nurse Redheart is a fantastic caretaker. When I cramped my hoof from sewing she took oh so much care to keep my pedicure perfect while examining and treating it."

"Well, that's just the thing, see, I want to be cared for but, see, Twilight promised me she'd help." Her smile disappeared as she thought. "She promised she'd be back from Zecora's soon and she never takes long. She should have been back hours ago."

Rarity rubbed her chin as she thought about it. She did recall Twilight saying she'd spend the night with the soft pony. "Twilight isn't the one to skip out on a promised engagement. Wherever could she be then?" Rarity

didn't want to consider Twilight skipping out on purpose but it was there. She figured she must have had a good reason, she really did care about her friends. After all, it's what let her break away from the angry self.

"Well, I was thinking, maybe we could get Rainbow Dash to go to Zecora's and ask for us? I hope she didn't run into another cockatrice." Fluttershy slowly turned her body, and faced the direction of the forest, and gulped quietly.

"Ya'll mention Rainbow Dash?" Applejack approach from the side, Pinkie Pie trailing behind her curiously.

"Yes, we were discussing Twilight not showing up to tend to Fluttershy, and were thinking about asking Rainbow Dash to go into the forest to see if she was there or on her way back." Rarity explained as Fluttershy slowly stretched her untouched wings.

"I'll go to her house and ask her." She gave a light flap of her wings and rose slowly, then landed with a tiny shake. "Or not..." She whimpered, squeezing her eyes at the throb her chest gave her.

"If she were at her house, Pinkie an' I'd know." Fluttershy walked over to Fluttershy and brushed against her softly for comfort. The Pegasus sighed her thanks, but looked to Applejack curiously.

"We took my balloon!" Pinkie Pie grinned. It was well known that, despite being an Earth Pony, Pinkie Pie liked to be in the air. "We rose up and up and floated straight into Dashie's door and I thought 'how rude!' so I knocked anyways but there wasn't an answer, not even shouting!" The pony rubbed her chin again in curiosity at the oddness of the situation, and Applejack turned to a passing pony.

"Hey, ya'll seen Rainbow Dash or Twilight Sparkle anywheres? Two seem to have gone missin'." She asked the boy, who turned his head towards the forest.

"Rumor has it Twilight Sparkle went into the forest and Dash chased her in." He said as he faced the forest with a suspicious stare. "I know you four are close to those two so I'd say go get them, fast if they haven't come back yet. And close your ears, a lot of people are saying things." He sped up and passed by. Fluttershy finally noticed the way people were acting.

They rushed everywhere, barely stopping to admire their surroundings as they went from place to place, the only ones staying outside were in large groups. The four of them watched the people around them act, of all things, inhospitable. "Ya think this is connected to Twilight?" Applejack asked, and Pinkie Pie skipped towards the forest.

"Only one way to find out! C'mon ponies, we have friends to find!" The four set off into the forest, at a slow pace to make sure Fluttershy could keep up. Applejack looked to the typically shy, scared pony with some worry, seeing her injury and pains, but she wouldn't be able to hold her back without force now. Their friends were gone, possibly in trouble. There was no way she'd stay back now, not when something needed help.

'I hope you're alright Twilight. I know you ain't the reason for this. Ya can't be. Ye're Friendship after all.' Applejack thought, walking behind the rest so they couldn't see the frown she wore.

Rainbow Dash could only assume it was morning because she'd woken up only fifteen minutes ago. Ten minutes?

Five?

She didn't know anymore. The only sense of time she'd had since she woke up sore and ragged-winged was the steady drip of water from the wall. She didn't get a whole lot of sleep last night. She remembered shouting and kicking and crying but the instances between falling asleep and waking up felt side-by-side, yet her sore flank was a clear indication she'd been asleep for some time on the hard, wet floor. She'd rubbed herself against the walls that weren't wet to dry off but she still felt soaked. It only added to the misery she was feeling and the misery of the cell.

The hay was old, and what was dry was dusty and made her cough, and what was wet was disgusting. She chose to stop eating after three mouthfuls and curled up on a mattress that smelled heavily of mildew, but it was better than standing around and laying in water. She'd wrapped her legs around her head and listened to the wall drip.

Was it twenty minutes now? Was it still only five? She hadn't been here long and already she felt like her sanity was slipping away. She was alone

in a cold, wet cell in a stone fortress who knew where surrounded by a bunch of people who decided to snip up her beautiful wings and make her a pointless show mare.

Her eyes pulled open and widened further than they'd had in a long while when she heard wailing from the next cell. She jerked her head up and listened to the pained crying, and stood up to her hooves quickly. She recognized the noise, it was Twilight. She walked towards the bars, her hooves slapping the water. The wailing died down to soft whimpers at the noise, and Rainbow Dash pushed her snout through the bars. "T-Twilight?" She called just above a whisper, afraid as if the noises would leave her if she spoke any louder.

"..." Dash cocked her ear as she heard shuffling. She could imagine Twilight's pained struggling, trying to get to her hooves, kicking water and hay away. She heard her get to her hooves and the slap of water. She'd fallen. Dash whimpered. She wanted to be there for her, to help her up, stroke her head, tell her it would be okay. She knew she hurt, maybe more than she did herself. "Dash..."

"I'm here Twilight." Dash whispered, the strength in her voice cracking. She winced at how weak she sounded, even to herself. It hurt, and Twilight couldn't have missed it. She looked back at one wing, which was now only a stub compared to what it used to be. "I'm here."

Silence, followed by more struggling. She heard uneasy steps, and winced as she heard another crash from Twilight falling. It hurt to just hear, reminded her of how useless she was. Another crash, another wince, until she heard something land against the wall separating their cells, sturdy as it was. Rainbow Dash walked over and did the same, and as she poked her snout out between the bars, she could see the tip of purple just outside her vision.

"How do you feel?" Dash finally asked. She knew the answer, but even a little normalcy was welcome.

"... My horn hurt more." Twilight admitted weakly. Her voice was tiny. "But my head and my stomach..." She heard Twilight take a few steps, and a few moments later there was an abominable retching sound. Dash began to feel pity. Whatever they'd fed her must have been terrible. All this crappy

hay wouldn't help anytime soon. Dash felt broken but Twilight was in actual pain.

Was there really a difference between the two?

"... Sorry..." Dash whispered, hanging her head and pressing it against the cool stone wall.

"H-huh..?" Twilight whimpered from the other side, groaning in pain as she tumbled to the floor again. Dash winced at the splash, and pressed her hooves against the wall, as if she could reach her.

"I said I'm sorry." She spoke up a little, and heard nothing. She heard Twilight land against the wall again, and heard a sigh. "Your horn's trouble. Not you. I shouldn't have been mad at you."

"..." Still silence.

"Twilight, can you hear me? Please say something, I said I'm sorry..."

"..." She didn't like how quiet she was. It reminded her of earlier, in the torture chamber, when she'd just laid there... "I am too..." The silence felt heavy and uncomfortable. If they intended to hurt the ponies they were doing a good job of it. Even the most meager of conversations stung.

"We'll get out though, right? We're gonna get free." Free sounded good. She listened, and heard nothing. She was almost sure Twilight was no longer listening after the few minutes of silence. "We're gonna go back to Ponyville and see all our friends. Pinkie Pie will throw us a 'welcome home' party."

"..." She wished Twilight would say something. She didn't want to think all she heard were answers in her own head. She got a small idea, a small one that made her heart twist. She stuck her hoof out of the space nearest the wall and a bar, and reached over the wall. She bent and twisted, sidling as close as she could to stick her leg around the wall. It must have nearly been a foot thick, but she felt the edge. Her hoof barely stuck around the edge, but she wiggled it. She heard unsteady steps, water shifting, and she wiggled her hoof again. She felt hopeful as she did, and it only bloomed as a nose touched against the hoof.

"You *are* there..." Dash whispered in very soft excitement, feeling the nose rub her hoof up and down in a nod. "Do you want me to be quiet?" A shake of the nose. No, she wanted to hear her. "Don't wanna talk?" Another shake. "... Why?" She had to ask. Quiet, no movement, and a thought occurred to her. "Hurts to?" A nod. "Sorry..." A soft nuzzle. She was forgiven. They stood there for a few moments, Dash straining to keep her leg up and Twilight nuzzling the presented hoof, and it seemed peaceful. It made her a little happy.

She heard, in the distance, the sound of an opening door, and then hoof steps. She apologized quickly and pulled her hoof from Twilight's head and retreated back into her cell as she heard the footsteps come closer. She began to tremble as she heard the door open. Four hooves in a row, there were two guards. "You saw the look on Rukafelth's face when he was told?"

"I would not want to be Belizio right now. He was fuming that they used up a whole bottle on her. Speaking of which..." Twilight's jail cell opened, Dash heard, and the two entered. "Yikes, she took it hard."

"You drain a full bottle of that and come out sunshine and flowers." Dash heard Twilight gasp in the next cell while the guards spoke, and squirmed to her feet, a sense of anger filling her. Her heart throbbed as she pushed her snout through the bars.

"Leave her alone!" She shouted, causing the entire room to go still.

"They weren't kidding about her voice. Hey, uh, prisoner number two. Quiet down."

"You're an idiot."

"At least I tried something, what would you suggest? A kick to the teeth? Rukafelth took the whip to Norlan for that." The guards stepped out in front Dash's cell, covered head to toe in the same vicious armor as the rest, ropes around their legs as Twilight meekly followed, both wrapped around her neck. "Listen blue, we don't got much against you but we can't let you out. Get comfy until we move and we may even give you a classy room to get locked in, and if you quiet down, you'll probably give hangover-girl here an easier morning."

"And what are you going to do to her! I don't care about a fancy room, what are you doing with Twilight!" She shouted, for the first time noticing the way Twilight cringed and quivered at her voice. Dash took a step back and fixed her with concerned stare. When Twilight looked, it was one full of hurt and apology and sweet Celestian sun her eyes looked awful.

"There, see? Quiet down and spare her some pain, eh?" The guard smirked, and the second snorted.

"Prick." Both him and Dash grumbled at the same time.

"Malta c'mon.." The first chased his partner as he turned tail and left, pulling Twilight along. "She knows better now, right? There's that!"

"Rukafelth is going to snap his leg off in your ass." Dash pressed her face to the bars and watched them leave, shutting the door behind them. Twilight had given her one last, longing look before the door shut, and again Dash felt alone.

The constant bickering was the hardest part, not the slow ascent up the stairs. Twilight closed her eyes multiple times on the way up and tried to block out the noises, each which sent a flash of pain to her head. Everything felt amplified through all five of her senses, and the two idiots dragging her up the stairs weren't helping the matter. One's voice was quiet and calm, if a bit on the sarcastic side, while the other chose to shout to get his points across and plead for some take.

Even worse was the ache in her chest. She wanted to go back, to talk to Dash, to get to her somehow. She didn't mind being alone in her big ol' library where everyone could visit and she could step out to see her friends, but she hated to be forcibly separated from them. She felt so frail without them...

The quiet one walked behind her as the loud one opened the door, and she was pushed through into a hallway. The light at the end of the hallway was bright enough to make her eyes force shut as she was lead closer and closer towards it, until they finally emerged in an enormous atrium. She knew it was enormous because a lot of voices had gone quiet, and she could feel eyes on her. She knew it was them, her captors and her

torturers, and she was being brought before them and presented to them for their entertainment, or whatever purposes they truly had.

The two guards stopped pulling and she collapsed on the floor in exhaustion. She held her head between her front legs and breathed shallowly. Nobody had said anything or made a move at all. Then there was a heavy step. Then another, and she heard what sounded like a giant approaching her. She squeezed her eyes shut as a hoof twice as big as her own rested on her back, trailed up her neck, nudged her ear, and rested on her forehead, just near her horn. Still. Silence? The hoof stepped down in front of her face, and when she opened her eyes she could see it was wrapped in a very light bronze metal. "I believe I had given my orders clearly." His voice was so low, yet it was so easily heard. He made Jazz singers sound like little girls when comparing their voice. "She was not to be harmed."

There was uneasy shuffling going on around them as the enormous pony above her began to walk slowly around her. "Sir Rukafelth, we brought no harm to the fake. She was like this when we retrieved her." The loud, whiny guard from earlier explained. It was quiet for several seconds, and she was almost sure he approved until there was an enormous smash as he pounded his hoof into the ground.

"So you observed her sickness, witnessed her pains, and saw her exhaustion, and you did not inform me she was not fit for audience? What sort of information will I extract from the sick and beaten?" She lifted a hoof to watch him, and hid her gasp. The pony, Rukafelth, was taller than princess Celestia, at least by a full head. His entire body was covered in shimmering, yellow-bronze armor that reminded her of a setting sun, and rather than be covered in vicious spikes like his darker-armored subordinates, each stud was small, thick, and tactfully placed where each joint in the armor would bend, the slightest, yet effective sign of intimidation. His coat was snow white, not as pure as Celestia's, with solid black hair that reminded her of a stream-lined lion's mane. It was his eyes though. His eyes that told her what a beast this pony was. No pony with eyes as clear, blood-red as his went down in history on good terms.

"I," the guard pony was lost for words for all of two second, "well I'm fairly sure Malta has no medical training and neither do I. Were we supposed to take her to the medic?" He asked with a soft laugh.

"If it really isn't too much to ask. Belizio, step forward." In her skewed vision she saw a few hooves unsteadily move inwards towards Rukafelth and Twilight, and a small glance up showed her it was the unicorn. She gasped and curled into a tighter ball at the recognition and hid her tears as the unicorn stopped by her. "Tend to her. I want her to be able to stand on her own when I speak to her and think clearly. If that's not too much to ask for." She could feel the venom in his voice, even if it wasn't directed at her.

"O-of course not Sir." The unicorn stepped towards the softly quivering form on the floor and leaned down, tapping his horn against Twilight's side. Twilight squeaked and curled up tighter, feeling heat surge from her ribs and spread to her nose and to all four feet. The heat filled her, and she began to kick and try to counter with her own magic, but despite trying she could not counter the heat until it dissipated. She laid still, wondering what he'd done, until she realized the throbbing in her head and twisting of her stomach had disappeared. She opened her eyes and looked up to the backend up the unicorn, who was retreating into the crowd quickly.

She heard, or rather felt the heavy step behind her and slowly turned her eyes upwards to face the giant. His eyes were piercing through her, as if he was staring straight through her confused face to see what else there was behind her wide, scared eyes. Twilight couldn't remove her gaze from his. It was so terrifying yet enrapturing, reminding her of Nightmare Moon all over again. Rukafelth watched her for a long time, and finally flared his nostrils as he lifted his head. "We are not to be disturbed." He announced, leaning his head down and grabbing an abandoned rope. He turned and pulled, throwing Twilight towards him with a grunt. "On your hooves, girl. I will pull you all the way if I have to, but I won't be gentle." Twilight took the hint and scrabbled to her hooves, and stood uneasily. They were all staring at her with mixed expressions. Some with confusion, some with curiosity, and some, she noticed, with outright hatred. One of them she recognized on stance alone as the female guard who'd dropped the bottle on her stomach.

She sped forward and placed Rukafelth between herself and the guard, drawing an interested glance from the enormous pony as Twilight watched the room disappear through his legs. They'd walked towards the head of the room where a simple throne had been, which did not look big enough for Rukafelth to sit. They'd walked around it, through a simple door, and entered a new room. It was wide and well-furnished, with red-satin

tapestries along the walls and an enviously enormous bed crammed hastily into the corner. In the middle of the room was a massively wide table, which Twilight had to look at once to notice it had a map of Equestria laid on it. The door shut behind her with a massive kick of the colt's leg, and he quietly went to the other side of the room, around the table. He kicked a cushion towards her underneath the table, and then came back around. This time, in his mouth, was a whip. He dropped it on the table and turned his attention to Twilight, who'd backed herself against the door.

Now, being alone with a pony that could sit on her to death, who apparently was terrifying enough to send those frightfully brutish guards into panic at the mere mention of his anger, she was willing to go back into the room and face the crowd.

"You have a friend with you, in that prison." He stated in a deep rumble. Twilight flicked her eyes back to his unrelenting stare. She could swear she'd never seen him blink. "A Pegasus with mutilated wings. Is she important to you?"

Twilight's mind raced in thought as she stared at him, hundreds of worries cycling through her head. This is what torturers did, right? Use information again you? "No, she's not." She said quickly. Rukafelth turned his head and picked up the whip. She pressed herself back against the door.

"Is that so? Then you would have no qualms should I choose to march her in front of my subjects and have her whipped?" He flicked his head, and Twilight screamed as she fell back, the tip of the lash snapping right in front of her, disturbing nothing but air. Twilight trembled on the ground as Rukafelth set the whip aside again.

"N-no! Don't you dare hurt her! She's done nothing wrong!" She took in a lot of dry gulps of air to calm her down, weeping as the giant snorted softly.

"No, she has not. I'd prefer to not have to put her in the line of fire but I do need you to answer my questions truthfully." The large pony shrugged his broad shoulders and leaned down to look her in the face. "You can do that, I assume."

"I could also lie." Twilight reminded him with a hardened stare that twitched too much.

"If that was the case then I'd have to torture you." He told her as if the consequence was so simple and minor she could have eaten ice cream without permission and that would be the punishment. "I'd have to do so until you were so broken up with pain the idea of lying will have left you. Until all you can speak is the truths I need to hear. Please don't make me torture you." He sounded sincere, and Twilight meekly turned her head away. She didn't understand Rukafelth. She didn't understand what was going on. "Are you ready to tell me the truth?" Twilight nodded quietly on the floor as Rukafelth calmly took the cushion he'd kicked over and rested on it, staring at the unicorn. "How did you get the magic around you?"

She turned to stare into his eyes. He wasn't staring at her or through her. He was staring around her, at whatever magic Celestia said she had. She stared at her own person in confusion and shook her head. "I don't know." She finally spoke. Rukafelth turned his head and his teeth slipped around the handle of the whip. "I don't know! I'm telling the truth, I don't know where it came from or how I can even access it! My horn just hurt one morning and-" The whip snapped just above her head, the cracking noise making her ears ring as she curled into a tight ball, babbling through a mouth that wanted to scream and tears that kept falling "- I don't know! I don't know! I just don't know! I don't know!" She whimpered on the floor.

It had been years since Rukafelth had seen somebody so very willing to show their emotions in front of him, or anyone in his home kingdom. This girl, Twilight had not known the hardships his kingdom had faced, and did not mask her feelings. A part of him felt guilty for sending her into these convulsions, but his duty left him with little choice. "So you woke up and your horn hurt. Then you had the magic?" He asked plainly, receiving a brief, sad nod. "What is the nature of your magic?"

She laid quiet and still on the floor in front of him, and he flared his nostrils again. "... I don't know..." She answered in a meek voice. He tensed his neck muscled and snorted.

"Yet you used it to incinerate my comrade's men. Turned their own weapons against them and commanded the skies while receiving no damage from any attack they dealt in turn. How?"

"I don't know..."

"You used the magic effortlessly to remove them. There was no pause to gather power whenever you attacked, just aiming and redirecting."

"I don't know!"

"You showed signs of a personality change. Aggression, wanton fury, manipulation, tyranny, why?"

"I said I didn't know!"

Rukafelth narrowed his eyes and stood quickly, and Twilight meekly shoved herself into the wall hard as a pair of legs crashed down in front of her, and her eyes were filled with Rukafelth's deathly red pupils, brimming with annoyance. "You don't know at all! You're just some magical filly who happened to get a God's-worth of magic, no idea how to use it, yet somehow against all logic fight off eight trained soldiers single-hoofedly without understanding its nature, origin, or reason!"

Twilight began to openly cry as she spoke. "Yes! Yes I don't know what's happening or who you are or why this is going on but I just don't know! All this is happening and I don't know why and-" she sniffled and curled up into a tight, quivering ball, "-people keep getting hurt and I don't know what's going on anymore..." She whimpered.

Rukafelth slowly backed away as he stared at the filly. Testingly he lifted a hoof and pressed it against her side, making her cringe and curl in tighter, waiting for a coming blow. She did not fight back, did not lash out, did not say anything. She couldn't see his eyes as they filled with concern. He turned away from her and walked away, leaving the unicorn to herself. When Twilight opened her eyes, she could see him staring at the map on the table. One hoof was nervously scraping at the ground. "Listen, girl, what is your name?"

She laid still and hid her eyes again, wrapping her legs around her face so he wouldn't see her. She heard him shift in front of her. "Your name, girl, what is it?" She gently uncovered one eye and saw he had turned his head to look at her, but she remained quiet. Then he turned his body and leaned down in front of her with an unreadable expression.

"... Twilight Sparkle..." She whispered, barely heard by the great pony.

He turned and went back to the map on the table, staring at it for a long time. "This land, Equestria, has it fought in wars? Does it have enemies? Conflicts?" He asked. Twilight wracked her brain and shook her head.

"We had an incident earlier this year when an old evil who was locked away for a thousand years returned..." She didn't want to reveal her part in it. He might get suspicious. "It was stopped, and the curse around the evil was broken, and the Princess was restored to her normal self and introduced back into Equestria."

"The evil was the Princess? And she was just..." He worked his jaw. "Returned?"

"Well, the evil wasn't her, it was something else. Like weird evil magic. The real her is really nice and pleasant and shy. There weren't any deaths and nobody got harmed." She added while closing her eyes at the memory, hearing that her quick work with her friends had kept all of Equestria safe and sound. "And we've had no wars with anybody for thousands of years, and the only deaths that weren't by old age were quickly dealt with, and murderers are kept far away, locked up until we're sure they can safely be released or just never released."

"And your enemies?"

"We have none." Rukafelth returned to his map and stared at the landscape of Equestria. "Where are you from?" The colt turned to the little girl on the floor, and grunted softly.

"The land of Golding. It's a ways away." He answered quietly as he considered all the information given to him. "Very far west." Maybe he shouldn't speak so openly to her, but he knew the girl was harmless. Especially with the inhibitors on her. She was quiet for several moments.

"Why are you here? Attacking me?" She asked. Rukafelth did not answer, and instead, walked to the door. He pushed it open and ducked under the frame to poke his head out of the room.

"Malta, Ziel, return Miss Sparkle to her cell. Provide her and the other prisoner with fresh hay. No questions." Twilight was forced to her feet as the large male tugged her up with the rope, and passed it to the two guards. Twilight shakily followed them out, glancing back to Rukafelth as

he went to his maps again. The atrium was completely quiet as she was lead past the many guards, all watching her disappear down the hallway and through the door.

She met no eyes, instead staring at the floor. On the way down the hallway towards the cells, she looked down a passageway on chance, and noticed at the end a door that stood out from the rest of the wooden doors. It was solid stone, two slabs pressed together to form a line, with a rock archway covered in runes. Two Unicorns were there, horns glowing, doing... Something. She didn't know what. She didn't care. All that mattered was, when she looked, a word popped into her head: "Exit."

Her back legs hurt severely. She was pretty sure she hadn't broken anything but she may have strained something badly. Dash gently rubbed her hurt legs while wincing at the sting in them. After they'd taken Twilight, something in her just snapped. Thinking about it made her shiver, as she'd remembered shouting out the bars at the door, screaming in anger and sorrow, kicking the bars, kicking the walls, throwing herself around the room impotently. Every part of her churned with anger, but she'd helplessly resigned herself to the old, dirty mattress in the corner of the wet cell.

The cell was too confining. She'd looked at every inch of it she could and found it to be solid. It was too small, too wet, and full of too much hay to effectively even run around, and worse yet, without her wings, an entire dimension had been cut off from her. She was feeling more and more claustrophobic with each passing minute, and already the walls looked like they were falling inwards, getting smaller and unhealthier. She closed her eyes to stop seeing it. Kicking herself raw had been an even worse idea, since now she didn't want to move.

She rested her head on her front legs and tried to not think, but she was worried. They'd taken Twilight from her, and doing who knew what. They were rough enough just attaching the rings to her horn, but now they'd try to pry information. Rainbow Dash trusted Twilight, but wasn't sure the unicorn wasn't hiding something. The horn? The magic? The weird evil Twilight? She knew Twilight was a smart pony, she had to know something. At least she wanted to know why they were captured. She knew they wanted Twilight, possibly her magic, but what for? Were they going to be killed? What if they never found out and-

"No no no no no no NO!" She hissed as she stood, pain shooting down her legs, but wobbly she made her way to the cell bars and stared at them again, trying to find some way out. "Not gonna stay forever. Not gonna stay forever..." She whispered. She pushed against each bar with her hoof, and found them to be completely solid. She looked down at her hooves as she lightly tapped one in weak fury, and happened to notice the way the water pooled around one bar. She kicked again and looked closer, and saw it disappear around the steel rod's base. She lightly tapped the bar, and noted, that despite the solidness, it shifted just a little. She stuck the tip of her hoof in the stone around the bar and scratched backwards, and watched the slightest bit of dirt tug away. Recognition hit, followed by a warm feeling in her chest, and then a cold pit in her stomach as she heard the door open. While she was busy she hadn't heard them coming down the stairs, and she backed away from the bars quickly, keeping steady as her legs strained to keep her up.

She watched one of the guards tug a rope, and heard a few unsteady steps while the cell door creaked open. "In." She heard in a dull voice, and heard Twilight grunt in response. "In, please?" The guard asked with a tiny sigh, and she heard the unicorn get pushed into her cell. It was slammed shut, locked, and the two left out the door into the prison. The lock clicked.

"Twilight/Rainbow Dash!" They whispered to each other through the bars, "I found a way out!" The two froze as they heard the other, but Dash was the first to break it. "Are you okay Twilight? You don't sound sick anymore."

"They healed me so I could answer a few questions from their leader." She admitted, and Dash noted the water Twilight's voice lowered.

"If those guys did anything-"

"They didn't. Their leader, Rukafelth, was... I don't know how to describe him. He's absolutely beastly. He's bigger than Celestia and has these evil looking eyes, but when I told him I didn't know anything that was going on..." She paused and walked to the front of the cell. "I think he started to believe me. He stopped talking to me though. He has this huge map of Equestria and-" her voice warbled as it lowered, "Dash, they're worried about my magic. They're looking for something in Equestria, and he called those eight ponies that I, well... He said they were his comrade's men."

There more of them Dash, and from what I heard him talk about, I think they're planning a war..."

"With EQUESTRIA!" Dash moved as fast as she could to stick her snout out between the bars and watched Twilight's mouth. "We have to tell somebody!"

"I know. I know that Dash but... First we have to get out of here. Then we go tell somebody, then I'm going to do a lot of researching. They come from this place really far West of here called Golding and-"

"Whoa whoa whoa, hold on. I don't care where they come from, why are they here?" Dash demanded.

"I don't know Dash... I just don't know. I don't know what's happening around here, I don't know what Golding is or who its people are, why they're here, why they want war, why they want me, why they want my magic, where my magic comes from, I just. Don't..." She hung her head, sliding to her belly, getting wet in the process. "I don't know Rainbow Dash. I don't know anything."

The silence was uncomfortable. Twilight heard shifting from the other side, and lifted her eyes to see a hoof a few feet above her outside the cell bars. "C'mon Twilight... You know lots of stuff. Way more than me... Like you said, you just have to look into it, right? But we gotta escape first. I found something." She pulled her hoof back, and Twilight cocked her ear when she heard a scraping noise. "Look at the bottom of the bars, the stone around it. I think all this water made it really weak. With a little bit of time we'll be able to loosen the bars some. Then if we kick it enough, maybe be able to knock it out of the roof." Twilight stood slowly, ignoring her soaking coat and reached out with a hoof, and tapped a bar. She watched it move in the stone, take water around it.

"..." She stared for a while, lightly scraping the stone until a few loosened bits came out. It would destroy her hooves and sting, she knew, but by Celestia it was a way out. "Dash, you're a genius! These holes for the bars couldn't have been molded around them to keep them permanently firm, not for a tiny prison like this, the holes have to be a little bit bigger, especially in the ceiling." She began to scrape more furiously, watching bit by bit, the stone loosen and make the hole around the lower bar bigger. Water slipped into the crack, and that made Twilight smile, just a bit.

She heard Dash working in the cell next to her, while Dash began to talk. "Hey, you said you found a way out too. What was your idea?" She asked, scratching at the ground. Her dedication began to come back. As a goal entered her mind, a direction of where to go, ideas of what to do began to fill her, and she devoted every ounce of her once constant energy into performing it. She stared at the space on the ground like she would the sky, and tugged her hoof along it, opening it slowly.

"Up the stairs is a hallway. In that hallway is another passageway, leading to a stone door covered in all these runes. Two unicorns were sealing it I think. If... When we get out of here, we just need to make our way upstairs. If we can avoid getting caught I might be able to open the door."

"With what?" Dash asked, scratching faster at the floor as she saw some more loosen.

"Um... Magic, what else?" Twilight answered, then it occurred to her. She leaned down and tapped her horn against the ground and... Nothing.

"I thought those ring things they put on your horn were supposed to prevent you from using magic?" Twilight stopped. She looked up, and just outside of her vision, saw the changes on her horn.

"What... No!" She hissed, and reached up with her hooves to remove them. They didn't budge, no matter how hard she tugged. She tried twisting and turning, but they were stuck fast. She attempted to use magic, but it wouldn't react. She could feel it inside of her churning as she tried to call it up, but the rings prevented it from escaping out of her horn.

"Twilight, what are you doing?" Dash called as she heard something striking the bars.

"Breaking the rings!" The unicorn called back, rearing her head to the side and crashing her horn against the bars, but to no avail. She rubbed her head and groaned, staring down at the floor, and began to dig again. "Look, Dash, I don't think I can get these off by myself. We have to try though."

"Yeah, who knows, maybe we can open it just by ourselves!" Dash smirked at that. Magic or not, she had something magic didn't: sheer, stubborn, bone-headed determination. All they needed to do was knock down the

bars and get out. Then she could put her wits up against fancy Unicorn magic.

The room had been darkened until all that could be seen were the small flames of four candles set in a line pattern against the far wall. Rukafelth, unable to see even his own hoof before his eyes, stared at the candles as he shifted his weight to his hind in discomfort as he pulled at the reservoir of energy in his stomach and felt it course through his body, down his legs and into the ground. He watched two trails of flame extend from each hoof towards the candles. Each candle lit up bright green as the flames touched the wax, and the flames began to rise to the ceiling and expand, until they were tall green walls with only the thinnest line of space between each one. In each flame was a face.

From his left to right, he saw Cloppin, Shallom, his lord and king Galio, and the court wizard, Balla. Cloppin's usual smile shown much brighter than usual today, Shallom was calm, Galio's expression continued to show royal reservation, while Balla watched them with interest. Her eyes were wide with curiosity as she considered all the men before her.

"I wish I could have you file reports in a more comfortable and formal manner but the circumstances require more immediate ways of discussion. Thanks to Balla's efforts we have been rendered untraceable. The shield will allow us free use of magic without warning the Unicorns of the land to our presence. You may speak openly about your efforts." Galio spoke, turning his head slightly. "Shallom, any discoveries so far?"

"Afraid not Lord Galio, though the search has been extensive. Even with the magic pulsing through the ley-lines, Atmos' legacies are surprisingly resistant to being found. Work is slow, though, my soldiers are not used to being so..." He cocked his head in thought. "Sneaky."

"You merely lack subterfuge Shallom." Cloppin's smile bloomed further, revealing rows of perfectly white teeth. "You float in, boasting full of hot air, but when you set your hooves on the ground you can't help but trip over them. If you took your head down from the clouds-"

"A lesson in stealth from Cloppin." Shallom snorted. "The hypocrisy is plain astonishing. Tell me, jester, what valuable tidbits of information have you

uncovered from Horshire?" The Pegasus snorted, and Cloppin's smile grew and grew.

"Oh so so much my dear bird. I'll have the data sent to you in the shadows soon enough, and I promise you'll see how I do my work." The two stared at each other with either contempt or amusement until Galio turned to face Rukafelth.

"That answers my question to Cloppin. Rukafelth, how has your search for the fake and Laputa been?" He asked the great colt. Rukafelth stood in perfect silence as every eye turned to him. He thought to himself carefully.

"We have found her, yes." Cloppin's face went from distractedly happy, and paid solid attention to Rukafelth. Shallom himself looked absolutely ecstatic, waiting to hear more. Rukafelth noted with some self-satisfaction that his success made his lord change from reserved royalty to excitement, and Balla was all but bouncing. "And she has been captured and questioned as well. I was careful during the interrogation. Every word she spoke was the truth."

"And?" Galio leaned in.

"What is the nature of her magic? Is it the same as ours?" Balla's head disappeared and Rukafelth heard the sound of paper shuffling. "How has she taken it?"

"How does she plan to impede us further? How did you even catch her with that much magic inside of her?" Shallom asked, smirking. Revenge.

"I will speak frankly and honestly. When I set my eyes on her, I did not see the bold-speaking tyrant your men saw Shallom. When she'd stepped into my room, she had no magic around her to be dispelled. She did not lie or hide. She was a simple, scared girl. I questioned her about the magic and she has no knowledge of how she got it or how to use it. She does not know how she killed your men and regrets it. She is entirely unaware of it other than that it exists around her." Balla looked severely disappointed and opened her mouth. "No, trust me, I understand Balla. She herself does not understand how she got it."

The five of them stood in silence, considering what they'd been told. Cloppin's interest merely grew and he disappeared to find some papers as

well, while Shallom fumed to himself. Lord Galio had his eyes closed in thought while Balla took notes. "So she knows nothing. Is that all you found?" He finally asked, reserved once more.

"No. Lord Galio, I'm uncomfortable with our military presence here, we spoke in short length about Equestria. They have not known war for thousands of years and all violent incidents are quelled peacefully and respectfully. These people are nothing more than peaceful farmers and crafts makers. If we aren't careful, we could seriously disturb the balance here." The silence following his words was harder than he expected. He knew he was challenging the Lord's wisdom but he had to know what consequences could be wrought. Cloppin had disappeared, but his reaction would have been hysterics. Shallom gave Rukafelth the quietest glare the Pegasus had ever offered anybody, while Balla looked unamused.

"I spend weeks preparing the shield and you want to just bring that down? There's lot of resources we'd lose if we brought it down to return the soldiers home. The magic could get disrupted unless we make it whole. Not to mention, even if we went through with this peacefully, the awakening would cause just as much harm to Equestria if not more. With us here, we can at least suppress it!" She reasoned, making Rukafelth sigh.

"I followed Miss Sparkle's information-"

"Sparkle?" Galio raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, the unicorn. I followed her information and did some reading. Their Princesses are more than capable by themselves but they have plenty of unicorns trained to non-violently protect the kingdom. They could dispel the aftereffects on their own with minimal casualties-"

"And risk the entire operation." Galio concluded, eyes closed. "We'll do what we can, Rukafelth, but Golding comes first. Equestria comes after. I understand your reluctance, but do not hesitate to do whatever you have to do to push forward. When you reach Laputa, call for our next meeting. And as for this Miss Sparkle..." He opened his eyes, and Rukafelth wilted a little under his firm stare. "Don't grow familiar with her. She is a risk, and will have to be an unfortunate loss later. I don't want you growing attached to an empirical traitor. Am I understood?"

Rukafelth stood in silence, his head hung low. He lifted it slowly, and gave a quiet nod. "Of course sir. I will keep her in her cell. I am afraid to station guards though, she is able to..." He gulped, recalling the feelings of defense and care he grew during their talk, "Gain favor quickly."

"Troubling. But do what is necessary. I'll be returning to my duties. Everyone is dismissed."

One by one, the flames went out. Rukafelth stood in the darkness and considered his place quietly, unable to dismiss the innocent clarity of Twilight's eyes in the face of danger. Could he remove that from an entire kingdom personally?

Chapter 6

Set Into Motion

Shadows seemed unnatural in the Court of the Sun, where even during the night a perfect full moon lit up the entire throne room with eerie white light that somehow highlighted its very magnificence as the yellow and orange stones set around the room in the shape of a sun glowed white and silver, reminding all who entered that even at night, this room would forever be held by the power of the sun. Tonight though, the torches of magical origin were dim, and dark shapes flickered about the walls as Celestia felt her kingdom around her feeling as dark as she did.

Even so, as Celestia paced about her empty throne, attempting to think, the softly glowing white images of her greatest responsibility brought back calm, peaceful memories.

'I never forgot about you.' Celestia heard her own voice in her head as she walked up towards her own throne, her head turning left and right as she took in the glowing white stones on the wall. 'When I'd sealed away Nightmare Moon, I took every step I could to remind myself that you are still a princess, and my sister. Whenever I was in here late at night, listening to my subjects,' she turned and sat on a cushion, staring down the long carpet that lead to the open double-doors that let her see out through a balcony to witness the rise of the celestial royalty, 'I would silence them for a few minutes to allow the moon to rise peacefully, so I could watch it, and hopefully you would see me, and be reminded that I am here, that I love you, that I miss you.'

'But the stones on the wall...' She heard Luna's voice now, young, shy, so full of questions about the new Equestria around her. How the land had changed in one-thousand years, how the people had shaped themselves under Celestia's guidance. 'Are they not suns? They're your symbol, sister.'

'Take a closer look.' She'd advised, and Celestia, heeding her own words, stepped down from her throne to examine one of the white suns on the wall. 'Look at what glows. Not my sun's robes, but your moon's perfect circle. What does it really look like?'

Luna had gone quiet and stared at the circle for the longest time, disbelieving her sister's words and her own eyes, but she saw what Celestia wanted to show her. The white light drowned the corona from the looker's vision, leaving a perfectly white glowing sphere. 'You kept my moon.' Luna had gasped softly.

'In your absence, I learned something, dear sister. Without the sun, there is no day to grant the plants, the animals, and the people energy and growth. Without the moon and the stars, the nights would be terrifyingly bleak, devoid of art and beauty, and it would feel as if nobody watched over the people. When I watch the moon rise, it's like your peaceful eye is watching me, guiding me to safety by the twinkle of your stars. I can only imagine the pony children, lost after dark looking to the moon, wishing for your help home, only to watch the stars twinkle where they need to go, and let hope fill them as you guided them to safety. I'd never considered how much effort you put into the beauty and comfort of your nights.' Celestia had explained.

The Alicorn mare smiled as she remembered her sister's blush at her words, and calmly the darker of the two explained herself. 'I remember my old nightmares. I remember pitch black, running in treacherous fields, unable to find my way back to home, constantly wishing for the day. I remember the nights back then, when I was making them, all they did was let a pony know when to sleep. But what if you were in the wrong place? I remember how people looked to your sun for guidance, east to west, so I made the moon to do the same. But still, up in the sky, it was one bright reminder of how terribly dark and ugly it was, so I began to...' she blushed and trailed off.

Celestia had smiled, and she was still smiling, 'Connect the dots? You were so proud of your little mare doodles. I still can't see Orion, even in pictures.'

Luna had scoffed, and Celestia giggled at the indignation in Luna's expression, 'That's because you can't appreciate night art! I can see the colors of the plants and leaves under your sun but you can't see the mightiest of ancient ponies in the stars? I guess I always was the art appreciator in the family.'

Celestia had snorted with laughter, causing her sister to firm up her haughty look. 'Please dear Luna, I've had a thousand years to learn art. If I can't see Orion, ME of all people, he must not be there!'

"Nuh UH!" Luna had started to bounce in place, fuming at Celestia's teasing, 'He's totally there! I'll fly you up there right now and show you!' Celestia had followed her sister that night into the stars, and Luna began to show her Orion. Maybe Celestia really didn't have the right eyes for art, but she could appreciate her sister's imagination, and the way she described him Celestia could imagine the mighty pony of hunting legend, clearing the lands of Equestria of its enemies with only his bow and arrows.

Standing among the field of stars, surrounding by softly twinkling light, as dust swirled into multi-colored patterns in the distance and the land of Equestria lay beneath her, she understood why Luna had been so unhappy nobody would venture out after dark. Whatever had molded her jealousy into a weapon of destruction had done a very sloppy job of giving Luna a reason to stay jealous. The night was still so fantastic even a thousand years ago. It was why she had enthused Twilight so much into looking at the stars and all the celestial bodies floating beyond the sky, because she knew somebody needed to look at the sky and see it not as a flying map, not as an extra bit of light, and definitely not as cold, encroaching terror, but as a beautiful landscape with Luna's thoughtful eye watching over you.

She believed her success had been total, as the few letters Celestia had insisted Twilight write to Luna quickly went into a discussion of Twilight's favorite constellations and curiosity about some of the less documented things in the sky. Twilight had even suggested a few shapes and offered diagrams to make it even more eye-catching, but Luna had reluctantly declined, explaining if she did, the night would be too bright for sleep. Celestia wondered if she should have tried and convinced Luna to go through with it, and toss a Moon Festival under the new sky. She knew the parties would probably be less active and quiet since all eyes would be in the sky, watching the beauty crawl across it.

Part of the idea thrilled her, since she had formerly been in control of the night for a thousand years. The days were full of activity and work and every now and then a bit of fun, but the nights were full of peace and quiet contrast. She began to even grow a little jealous of her sister's position as the artist of the sky, but there was little time to be petty over one's

positioning. Besides, the true beauty came on the rare nights they merged their creations and created a brilliant red moon, or a startling black sun.

"Princess Celestia?" The Princess' trance ended abruptly as she heard quiet footsteps behind her, and she turned with a tiny blush towards the few guards who had entered her throne room, the first of the day since she'd demanded alone time. "Are we interrupting you?"

"No, no, of course not. I was just thinking." She turned and stepped up to her throne, and sat gracefully on her cushion, erecting herself to full regal stature, and giving the guards a quiet, thoughtful look. "You have news of what's been happening?" She asked, watching as the guards sat, and the first approached.

"Yes, Princess, and we've discussed our findings privately in an attempt to connect them. We are afraid we have no good news for this night, other than total assured privacy. All lesser meetings for the next month have been cancelled as to turn our full attention to Equestria." He stated.

Celestia couldn't keep the surprise out of her voice as she answered, "For the next month? Is that absolutely necessary? There are so many matters to attend to daily, can my subjects last without me?" They understood she was asking herself more than anyone, it was rare Celestia had any amount of free time longer than an hour. A full month could cause enough political controversy to raise questions of her priorities in Equestria.

"We're not sure, Princess, but Luna has elected herself to take over your meeting duties as you attend to the real problems."

'Oh, excellent. This will be a good experience for Luna.' She trusted her sister. She'd been studying Equestrian history and economy since she returned, and due to being an all natural night owl, she was given plenty of time to catch up, although her wisdom would be more based on logic and gut instinct rather than experience. "Real problems, you say? Please explain."

"Ahem." He cleared his throat and took a scroll from his ankle pack and let Celestia take it. "The scouts have been busy lately, taking much longer on patrols and being more detailed with their reports. They are flying in in greater numbers as well, keeping themselves safe. Foreign ponies have entered Equestria without announcing themselves, performing suspicious

activities, appearing and disappearing at random, and with them they've brought many..." He took a deep breath as Celestia's eyes widened at the report. "Many mysteries. Eavesdroppers have heard them discussing magic, artifacts, Goddesses and lords, and more troubling they've discussed what they call 'the False One' or 'the Fake'."

Celestia picked up where he left off as she read his report out loud, "'The Fake', heard discussing 'The Fake' stealing the magic of their Goddess, said magic has not been detailed but is almost revered. 'The Fake' is said to have turned lightning against its wielder, and mercilessly killed eight soldiers without hesitation.'" She paused in thought, her eyes wide as she considered what she'd just heard.

"We believe, as I'm sure you have guessed, they are talking about Twilight Sparkle. This news is especially distressing because," he turned his eyes slowly to the next guard, who approached very weakly.

Celestia stared at the guard as he undid his own pouch and pushed the scroll to Celestia, who picked it up, dreading the information it contained. "There are reports in Ponyville that Twilight Sparkle has disappeared into the Everfree Forest with one of her friends, Rainbow Dash. Where they have gone, if anyone has taken them, or if they're..." He swallowed a very dry throat, "Still alive is questionable."

It would have been more merciful to shoot Celestia through the heart. The pain that crossed her eyes made the guard quiver, nobody had ever seen Celestia in such a state of despair. Celestia had been alone when she'd been forced to banish Nightmare Moon, so she could console herself. The guards watched the Princess squeeze her eyes shut to push the tears back, and her flowing, beautiful, shining hair began to lose its luster, and slowly it fell flat.

The third guard let the second step back and hide himself from view, and she carefully pulled her own report from her pack and rather than let Celestia take it, laid it flat before her. The Princess looked, but did not read, letting her hair hide her face. "The unicorns report unusual amounts of magic in Equestria, and it's disrupting all magical communication and scrying. All magic has been rendered undetectable as well. Two unicorns in the same room could cast a spell and neither would know it without seeing

the other. Even worse, any attempts to enter or leave Equestria have failed."

"Failed?" Celestia raised her head, revealing one softly tearing eye.

"Yes... A large shield has been placed on all paths in and out of the Kingdom. We hired the Wonderbolts to check the skyline and they've found there's no upper limit to the spell, but you still cannot go past the magical boundaries that have been placed. Any attempts to dispel them have been disastrous. The unicorns are still recovering from the magical shock they've received but other than pain and unconsciousness are unharmed."

"No..." She mumbled, standing up abruptly, the grace long associated with her as a Princess leaving as she felt things were spiraling out of her control, "No no, that cannot be. I'll have to look into that immediately. Twilight..." She looked past the guards to the moon, watching Luna's protective eye, and willed her to guide Twilight home, back to her, back where she couldn't be touched.

"We have investigations currently under way so we may retrieve Miss Sparkle and bring her to safety and to inspection where we can discover the connection between her and the strange soldiers. For now, we have one final report, and it may be the most disturbing of them." The soldier before her retreated as the final guard approached, and mimicking his comrades undid an ankle pouch to present a scroll to Celestia.

Celestia didn't want to hear more bad news, didn't want to know what more needed her attention. To her, nothing was more important than finding her student, the one being she could genuinely and affectionately refer to as a friend in the last lonely thousand years, the girl she saw her little sister's passion and affection in, and in a way, she saw Twilight as her own little girl. She knew Twilight's parents quite well, and they traded letters often to discuss the growing young girl, and to Celestia's embarrassment found out there was much she had to learn about dealing with a child and helping raise one, but it had been an exciting and fulfilling experience to personally raise a little mare to a blooming adult.

She wondered how her parents would react knowing their daughter had gone missing, and Celestia couldn't immediately help.

"Princess?" The guard asked as he watched the pony of the sun quietly sum up her pained thoughts, and Celestia opened her eyes, just a crack.

"Go ahead. I'm listening..." Just barely, but she was listening to the guard as he made his report.

"The patrol sent to Horshire has not returned. The next patrol sent to Horshire came back, and reported a ghost town. They'd landed and searched briefly, but left quickly. They claimed it was an emergency that had thrashed their nerves. Everyone in the town is gone, except one body."

"One... Body?" Celestia repeated in a slow, disbelieving tone, fear crawling into her voice. Horshire was a safe place, it had always been completely safe. It was the first all unicorn settlement in Equestria, and the forefront of historical and mythical information, and many unicorns were trained there in protection against some of the harsher elements of the land that surrounded it. If it had been attacked or evacuated, the spectacle of magic would have announced such an incident in an instant. But no, a patrol had been lost, and another scared out of town.

"They found a pony child who had been hung by gallows that formerly did not exist in Horshire. He was stuffed into a bad and strung by a rope around the neck. We're assuming it was to send a warning to all entering the town. We're sending an investigation as soon as possible, and to hopefully find a trace of the missing residents." The guard informed her.

"A pony..." The princess took a deep breath and closed her eyes, and breathed it out slowly, "Child..." She took in the information even more slowly, Twilight briefly slipping her mind as the impact of what happened hit her. "... Send Hero in to lead the investigation. The perpetrators, the citizens, everyone must be found. Quickly." She whispered, and the guards nodded. "I'll lead the investigation on the barriers and the cut of communication. Send everyone who can to find Twilight." The Princess began to walk towards the double-doors, towards the moon, every part of her feeling cool with uselessness.

"Of course Princess. We can promise you she will be found and returned safely. We promise." They all bowed low, and left the Princess to herself, all alone on the balcony.

She remembered now why she had so little time to think about art and possibly making the day more beautiful. Duty had a tendency to bite hard when she thought about such things.

Scratch. Scratch scratch. Tap scratch rustle.

(The following takes place right after Twilight and Dash were imprisoned)

"Ye're certainly dedicated, I'll give you that." Fluttershy smiled quietly at the compliment, her body moving like she had rusted hinges but never stopping. The entire time they'd been walking it had been mostly silent, everyone left to their own assumptions and predictions, but the sight of Zecora's twisted tree was enough to send relief through all four of them.

"I, um..." The shy Pegasus got a meek look as they stopped in front of the door. "I wasn't sure I'd make it all the way myself... Now that I'm here though, I feel kinda... Good. Don't stop on my account though, we need to find them." She nodded to the other three.

"While I understand your concern darling, there's no reason we need to turn an emergency for two ponies into one for three." Rarity looked to Zecora's home as the Zebra poked her head to see the noise. She waved politely to her visitors and stepped inside, leaving the door open. "We'll ask Miss Zecora to keep an eye on you until you can make the full trip again."

"No, I mean..." Fluttershy tapped at the ground with one paw, "I don't want to bother her..."

"We understand sugarcube, but your well-bein' is just as important right now." Applejack told her, making Fluttershy sigh. Of course they'd pick the end of their journey to tell her all this.

"Ahem." They turned to face the zebra mystic standing on her doorstep with a raised eyebrow. "Do you plan to stay out in the cold, or would you like to come in, if I may be so bold?" Zecora swept a hoof up, revealing the light and warmth of her home, and the four made the way inside.

Zecora always had a pot of something going, be it soup or potions, but not tonight. Her cauldron was empty, and instead her workspace was full of thin, shaved sticks, whittled from downed branches. "Sorry t'bother ya so late and all Zecora, but we have some..." She stared around. There was no other talking, just Zecora taking a sharp knife and gently scraping it along the wood.

"Our good bestest friends Twilight and Dashie came to the forest to find you and never came out! Since you live out here in the Everfree Forest, we were hoping you'd have seen a bit of mane or hair of them!" Pinkie Pie smiled, but was not her usual bouncy self.

Zecora continued to sharpen, even as she spoke. "Hide nor hair of your friends I have seen, but this and news of the forest have me feeling a little green." She held up a stick, which they saw had a fine, vicious point, which she dipped into a pot of some disgusting, semi-solid ooze, and then rest it light on a pile of similar sticks. "The animals are fearful and do not share your hope, but they spoke of two ponies and condemned them to the rope."

"Two ponies!" Rarity clapped her front hooves together at the news, but Fluttershy looked a tad suspicious.

"What do you mean: 'condemned them to the rope'?"

"Forgive me Fluttershy, I forgot how Equestria can be so quiet." She took up another branch and began to sharpen it. "Is merely an expression, whose meaning I hope causes no riot. In my old land a thick length of rope was placed around the neck of those found to be guilty, and they were dropped, their neck snapped, and as a cause the land was less filthy." She met their confused, uncomprehending stares, and she frowned. "What I mean to say is that the animals have seen two ponies taken suspiciously, they are afraid..." She gulped, heavily, and stared at her own hooves, "that they will be dealt with most viciously."

She watched all four of them slowly recognize what she meant, and as predicted, Applejack exploded first. "What in tarnation do you mean 'dealt with viciously'! You can't be saying somepony is trying to hurt Twilight and Rainbow Dash, could ya!"

"That is, I am afraid, the point of what I told you. I am sorry, I wish I could help, but I have much to do." The zebra turned and went back to the sticks, but was whirled around rather suddenly and forced to face Pinkie Pie.

"There has to be some sort of mistake! Twilight and Rainbow Dash have done nothing wrong, why would they be taken? Who would be so... So!"

"Mistaken!" Rarity finished with a deep frown. "I can't think of any reason for somebody to target them!"

"And what the hay do you mean there's nothin' ya'll can do!" Applejack seethed, baring closer to the Zebra, who took a step away from the enraged pony. "Ya'll know it happened and ya'll're sittin' here with a pile of sticks and spoutin' nonsense about rope and-"

"Applejack, please, I am worried, make no mistake." Zecora frowned at the ponies, stepping away from them to her pile of sticks. "But first and foremost there are many precautions I must take. The event of a dragon is terrifying sight, and before I can attend to others I must tend to my own plight." She turned lifted a stick carefully from one end, the non-stick side, and laid it where they could see it. "Litter the trees with dung soaked spears, when the dragons try to fly in they will strike their most vulnerable fears."

"Dung!" Rarity cried in disgust, and Fluttershy looked especially faint as the smell finally reached them. Applejack kicked it away, and Zecora placed it back in the pile.

"Filthy, disease-ridden, and nasty I know, but the look and the smell is not just for show. Poke it through and pierce your hoof, and the pain it renders will leave you unable to move."

"You said there were dragons." Applejack snarled, and Zecora bobbed her head. Fluttershy sat slowly at the news, staring in fright at her hooves. "Are you tryin'a tell us that Twilight and Dash... They was taken by dragons?"

"..." Zecora bowed her head low in apology. "The forest claims those dragons had riders, armored-ponies who were trained as fighters. I did not see them but the inhabitants claim that it's true, and the animals that can lie number in the few."

"You have to take us there Zecora, we need to see where they were picked up. Maybe we can find some clues..." Pinkie Pie offered, frowning deeply at the zebra. Zecora knew when she was beaten, and with a heavy sigh, showed them out.

They walked down the trail a long ways, slow again so Fluttershy could keep up. The girls recognized they were just turned around and heading back towards Ponyville, but nobody said anything. Zecora a short distance from exiting the forest, and perked her ears. "We are hear. The animals avoid this place out of their fear." The zebra stepped aside as the four girls examined the ground by the light of the moon.

It was flat, dirt, plain, and had only recently been disturbed by themselves, and all in all, looked like it always had. The five stood in silence as they searched, but turned up short. "Ain't no sign of struggle."

"And the tree canopies have not been disturbed." Zecora added.

"We're not exactly an investigation unit girls, maybe we should go find some professional help?" Rarity offered weakly.

"Speaking of 'needing help', where did Fluttershy go?" Pinkie asked, staring around the clearing. The other three joined her in staring around, and naturally stared down the path they had just come. "She was just here a moment ago."

"In the woods." Rarity pointed, and they followed the direction she pointed. They saw a flash of pink behind some brush and approached, and found the Pegasus talking quietly with a Doe. The creature looked unashamedly frightened of the area, but still made soft whimpering sounds in response to Fluttershy's questions. Frequently the deer pointed her nose in a direction, until it broke away from the conversation with a scamper. Fluttershy walked to her friends weakly.

"All I could gather is that we need to follow the south. She kept looking up and pointing that way, so..." She whispered, watching them with wide eyes.

"Then we don't got a choice." Applejack voiced, looking straight at Fluttershy, then the other three with a clear look of a reluctant plan. "Some of us need to go lookin' before somethin' terrible happens to those two. I

think it should be myself, and Pinkie Pie." The pink pony nodded, but Fluttershy and Rarity almost immediately protested.

"You can't expect us to just sit on our hooves and wait for you all day, do you? They're our friends too!"

"And I already promised Twilight I'd protect her. If she got attacked again and I just let her go..." Fluttershy whimpered, but Applejack shook her head.

"Rarity, ya'll have a way with words and know what the hay's goin' on, Fluttershy, you're still too hurt to be doin' much travelin'. I'm sorry ya'll, but Pinkie's fast when she wants t'be and I got the stamina to push through this. We'll be back though, ya'll can count on it. Zecora...?" She turned her head to face the zebra, who bowed her head low again.

"I will finish the defenses and keep my home protected, and when I finish, I promise my presence can be expected. We must hurry, for twilight and Rainbow Dash may be in grave danger." She turned on her hooves and walked down the trail, "Keep an eye out, we do not want to be caught by another mysterious stranger."

The other four looked between each other, Fluttershy and Rarity with a dejected stare, but Applejack gave them her best, comforting smile. "Girls, ya'll don't gotta worry any. Pinkie and I will be right quick. We'll find 'em safe and sound and bring 'em home. Ya'll need to get the word out quickly that they've been taken by dragon-ridin' foals." The two nodded reluctantly as Pinkie Pie bounced proudly.

"I'll be keeping an eye on Applejack so don't worry about a thing! C'mon girls, let's get to it!" She turned and began to charge south with Applejack on her tail, and Rarity urged Fluttershy to follow her.

Scratch scratch scratch scratch tink!

His steps were fueled by energy, each reach of his long gallop taking him closer and closer to his current object of interest. His speed was blinding, too fast to see, too quiet to hear, and far lighter than one would assume. It

was almost like a racing fog, just barely disturbing the surrounding flora while not snapping a single twig, despite the intensity of his steps.

He had to move fast if he wanted to see it, to see her, to see the thing that made Rukafelth indecisive, to see what made the mountain question where it stood, to see what made the Juggernaut quiver. Long long LONG had he waited this day to see even a hint of weakness, and he needed it NEEDED IT. She had Shallom stomping his hooves in rage and Rukafelth opening his heart, she could be the thing he wanted most.

And if Balla was right, she had enough magic swirling around her to make an Alicorn shake. Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes YES! It was just the upper hand he was looking for! The skull smiled viciously at the idea.

Even better, if Rukafelth was right, she was vulnerable herself, not used to violence, which made things all the better.

The forest echoed with the giggles of a poltergeist.

"Ow!"

"You alright?"

"Chipped a hoof..."

"You can keep it up. You have to!"

...

...

...

Scratch scratch scratch.

Nestled on the side of a low cliff, a shelf carved out from the bare rock to construct homes and a town hall, a lower ring pressed flat and bared for

buildings of business and pleasure, Horshire was the model of an updated, well-educated, technologically sound frontier town.

It was as much of a tourist hotspot as it was a center of information on old Equestria and the myths of the world around it. It was a center of archaeology, set up in an old mining town that uncovered an old cavern filled with ancient tomes and devices with enough history around them to make a librarian's jaw detach itself. Unicorns from all over Equestria moved in, tidying up what was formerly a little Earth Pony town and turning it into an industrious center of excavation.

Its value to Canterlot and Equestria as a whole had reached the upper limits when the small town had boomed with enough magic from its collective unicorn population to change the land around it. Formerly small, passive creatures began to grow larger, more aggressive, making things mysterious as objects not nailed down began to disappear, found later deep in the wilds among nests, usually chewed up and a bit sticky. Folk-Lorists and Biologists began to pay a visit and study the wildlife, and set up expeditions to discover the effect the magic was having on the untamed population.

Objects, books, and creatures of mythical legend and value did not go immediately to Canterlot. Horshire, far away and dangerous as it was to get to, unofficially had first dibs on anything historically, magically, or mythologically intriguing. That meant at all hours it was bustling with intellectuals, the handiworkers, the spouses, and the children, as well as the old scholars who have retired, but wanted a place of excitement and information to relay their wisdom and stories of intrigue to any who would listen.

Trade of tools and artifacts as well as objects of mere material value like gems and Old-Equestrian bracelets were always set up for sale in booths, and every now in then, in the back alleys, would be a few mystics looking for a quick buck who would magically align the stars in their payers favor... Or not. It was usually the latter, but sometimes you got lucky. Sometimes.

Hero Cloudbreaker, the inappropriately named but appropriately positioned super soldier of the Royal Guard landed gently on all four hooves in the middle of the town, thirty soldiers landing around him just as quietly, afraid to disturb the silence of Horshire. The blonde haired leader of the

investigation and initiation squad took several uneasy steps towards the middle of the town square where, hastily, almost without care about design or safety, a gallows had been built.

He took one step on top of it, pressed his hoof down, and sensing no danger, climbed on top. The raised platform offered no new perspective of the town. Not a local soul seemed to exist. The buildings were dark, quiet, and unlocked, with unbarred windows and doors held open by the wind showing no signs of anyone trying to hide. He turned his head quietly to the center of the gallows, where a bag was hung by a rope. He did not need to open it to tell what was inside. The shape was too distinctive, the smell putrid in his nostrils, and it took him a moment to realize he was quivering in anger.

A child. A child was in that bag. Lifeless. Taken from it needlessly, harshly. His men watched with mixed expressions as he circled around the bag, before carefully reaching up and untied the rope. He caught the corpse over his shoulders and walked down the gallows, to his men. "If the child's parents live, I want the body sent to them post haste. If not..." He stared back at the buildings with a tense expression. "I want them buried in their home town. It's the very least we can do."

There was a mumble of acceptance and one of the Guards took the body and laid it delicately out in the open ground. Hero returned to the gallows and stared at the arm that held the rope. He knew it was not this object's fault, it was just an unfeeling tool, but it was part of it none the less. He turned, and shattered it with a kick, throwing the splinters behind him like so many memories that would need to be unburied. He turned to his loyal men, and began to address them with a voice you'd associate with a wise king. "There will be no fancy speeches today. Whatever is responsible for this tragedy must be found and dealt with immediately. Princess Celestia does not wish for anymore deaths, but I am issuing a 'dead or alive' decree. Fifteen of you will investigate the surrounding woods for traces of the killers, the rest of you will be in town with me looking for much of the same, with the added objective of finding any of the historical documents and artifacts. They must be preserved. Go, in good faith and in Celestia's name, let us find our enemies." A motto that hadn't been uttered in seriousness for tens of years since their last serial killer. Equestria was changing, and Hero, the super soldier of the Royal Guard and proud defender of the land of the Sun and Moon, did not like it.

No. As half his men took to the forest and the other half began to search the buildings, he rapidly made his way to the Historical Society of Equestrian texts. Action meant trouble, trouble meant people, property, lives getting hurt. He'd become a guard swearing he'd protect these people under any cost, but that included the idealistic view of the world around him he once held. He opened the door to the library of old tomes, and found, to his deep dissatisfaction, that it was devoid of both life and text. All the books had been stripped from the shelves, all the old documents pulled out of glass cases, and even the check-out lists and library information had been lifted.

He'd become the legend he was through repeated acts of bravery, strength, honor, and intelligence, always remaining a moral pillar in Equestrian life and military, even if it was considered outdated and just for display. He'd become a legend by seeing the disgusting underbelly of Equestria in all its unholy glory, proving again and again that sometimes police work didn't just foot what had to be done. He'd seen Pegasus bandits attacking sky carriages, Earth ponies with a need for thrills and violence battering towns and wrecking the country-side, rogue Unicorns doing back-alley alterations, experimenting on the lives around them, and he found again and again that for every thousand friendly, lively, good-natured pony citizens there were, there was a rotten one taking advantage of the peaceful lifestyle.

Maybe it was why he found himself xenophobic and a tad racist to outside ponies, but a good number he caught hadn't adjusted to the Equestrian lifestyle. How little the citizens knew of the world outside Equestria, some of the violence that went on beyond the borders of their border countries, and the number of ponies fleeing for a better life... Or an easier profit. Yet in his time, murder was rare.

Outright removal was a new thing altogether. It made his gut churn as the unfamiliar situation settled in on him. He felt look a rookie walking in on his first raid again, and for all his wisdom and experience couldn't sum up his feelings. His gut told him, deep down, that the townies had befallen a terrible fate. His heart told him they could still be alive out there. He sincerely wanted to believe his heart.

"The Historical Society is empty. Clear of all books and papers." He informed one of his captains, who bowed his head low.

"The individual museums have been cannibalized as well. The libraries are empty, and all the crafts buildings are still full, but all papers have just gone up in smoke. Somebody's after the printed stuff here."

"I think we should look in the vaults. Some of the older, more delicate stuff is kept there. As well as some of the more dangerous information." He started to walk towards the town hall in order to retrieve the spare set of keys while his captain hurried up to catch up beside him.

"More dangerous information? Sir?" He'd asked.

"Equestria wasn't always Equestria. From what I gleaned, before Celestia's parents the land was war torn by other Alicorns. The vaulted stuff is information on Ancient Equestria, specifically old practices and weapon-making techniques; at least one has a ritual that can raise volcanoes on command. Things we don't want falling in the wrong hands." He explained as they walked up the wooden steps to the hall, and through the open door into a building full of tables and hastily discarded seat cushions. Not a scrap of paper in the place, and they walked towards the podium.

"Sounds pretty heavy. Why keep it in Horshire?" His captain asked as Hero searched.

"It's more safe than Canterlot. More unicorns trained in protection per square foot, access to arms and technology that have slipped the minds of the more current population, as well as being out of the way enough to not be immediately considered on a map. And since it's fairly easy to find out about Horshire, it's sneaking up on it that's difficult. When threatened, they can easily erect barriers strong enough to hold armies back, and the woods are so thick and full of potential problems, it's almost not worth it. A single artillery strike might get through if nopony is watching the sky, but the observatory eggheads rarely take their eyes off the sky. The cliff they're backed with is full of a lot of well-hidden holes and many sensors to warn the mining operations in town of cave-ins and rockslides. Fifty hooves would count as a 'rockslide'." He snorted in frustration and lifted his head up. No keys. "We may need a demolitions team to open the vaults."

They began to walk back towards the center of town, the captain watching Hero with a confused expression. "So how was Horshire raided?"

Hero remained quiet for the longest time until they stood back on the gallows platform. "That is going to be the question we'll be asked long after the perp is caught."

"Commander Hero!" The two pony guards turned slowly towards the rushing soldier, and Hero noted the haunted expression in his eyes. "There is..." He turned his head frequently in the direction of one of the vault buildings disguised as a local bookstore, gasping for air, eyes wide. "We've found them! We've found all of them. In the vaults. The citizens, the unicorns, the children..." He babbled until Hero stepped down in front of him and met his eyes.

"Take me."

The guard turned tail and ran, Hero and the captain following him kept up a brisk pace. They ran into the building, past the empty book shelves and into the storage room in the back. The cramped space had a panel slid back from behind a bookshelf, revealing a small passageway that lead to a stairway. Down the stairway was a massive metal door full of intricate locks and gears, opened wide to reveal a room that must have once held a dozen ancient items that had devastating potential. Instead, it all made Hero groan from queasiness. He was not alone, as his Captain had to step back out the moment he saw what it was.

The population of Horshire numbered in around the two-hundreds, with the less permanent wanderers bringing it up to around three-hundred daily, and each and every one of them had been heaped haphazardly against the walls, in stacks, one on top of the other. On the outside, nearest to Hero were the elderly, then the adults, and then the children. All except one, who sat with wide, terrified eyes as she stared at Hero.

Hero stared back. The smell of the place was almost overwhelming, and the floor had grown an unpleasant sticky coat as fluids from the corpses seeped across the floor, mixing and mixing and settling into a thin paste. Yet the little filly sat in the middle of it all, an expression that suggested she'd seen death itself laughing in her face written all over her. Hero, for the first time in many years, was at a loss for words.

Tink tink tink tink scratch tink.

Shallom wasn't sure what he found more aggravating about Cloppin's so called info-dump. On one hoof, the Jester hadn't lied when he said he'd found a lot of information in Horshire, meaning Cloppin didn't make himself out to be entirely useless. On the other hoof, as valuable as a majority of the information was, he seemed more concerned with gathering every single possible scrap of information there was, whether it was relevant or irrelevant. In his cloud-covered home base for himself and his men, he had stacks of papers on a desk blessed by himself to float on top of the sea of white fluff, and even larger stacks waiting on the floor.

He hated reading. Hate hate HATED reading. He was an action sort of creature, not to mention dyslexic, so he often spent several minutes on the same page again and again making sure he got all the right info, and the stupid clown decided to send him every single paper whether it was a child's essay on the activity of the moon or an elderly scholar's musings on the great power in whatever piece of rusted scrap he found in a dig. Yet, every few pages, locations were revealed to him and new ideas on the strength of the power he was seeking sent shudders down his spine. It was worth it.

Yet he'd been here for almost eight hours now, reading and sorting and burning whatever was irrelevant with a flash of his eyes, and it was starting to show in his stance.

There was a knock on his door, and he grunted what could have been a "come in" or a "leave the pizza by the door", either way, the door opened and one of his gold armored captains entered. "Pardon my interruptions, Skylord. The men are growing restless without orders. What have you been doing in here?" The mare glanced around the room carefully, and found stacks upon stacks of paper lining the walls. She raised a delicate eyebrow. "You've been reading?"

"Very important." He grumbled, tossing a paper in one of eight piles on the floor. The Pegasus walked over to that particular stack and lifted up the paper in one hoof. "Much to learn, much information to know. Very important."

The Pegasus stared at the paper he'd tossed for the longest time, "Why My Mom and Dad are the Best Parents Ever, by Daisy Digs; a B-, that's very

generous of you, sire." The captain smirked as Shallom shook his head and snorted.

"Knew most basic facts, good attention to detail. Very little research done, sloppy hoof writing." Shallom mumbled, and the captain approached delicately, and pressing her side against his, shifted him away from the desk. He did not look amused. "I am busy, Schola."

"You're delirious. Divide up the work and have us lowly captains work it through, we'll show you what needs to be read or not. Besides, some of us have been doing some research in our spare time based on your information. We've found some thing you might find interesting." Shallom watched Schola reach into a pack on her side and pull out a scroll. She unfurled it and gave it to Shallom, who read it carefully.

"You're doing research on... Twilight Sparkle?" He asked, the name registering in his mind, but barely. He recalled Rukafelth during their last meeting.

"Yes, the Fake. The False One. Twilight Sparkle of Canterlot, the Taker of Golding's Power." Her eyes narrowed as she spoke, and she watched all the right switches click in her leader's head, and Shallom began to growl.

"And what makes you think I care about the information on a thief? Rukafelth has her, all I know is that she'll be taken for her crimes and the power returned. What else matters?" He shook his head, looking to the piles of paper he hadn't gone through yet. Maybe he should just let the others sort it...

"Read it sir. We made it short, and it has the only information you need to know about her." Shallom sighed and turned back to Schola to read the report.

"Twilight Sparkle of Canterlot, the student of..." He trailed off, his eyes disbelieving the words written before him, "The student of Princess Celestia, Alicorn ruler of Equestria. Shown from a young age to have advanced abilities in magic, one of her first and most magical acts being the accidental polymorph of her parents and several staff members into potted plants. Taken as Celestia's student, she quickly advanced through school and showed an aptitude and understanding unmatched in the history of Equestria. While Spartan with her use of magic, her knowledge

and fast thinking combined with her excessive magical strength have deterred enemies many times her size, strength, and even age. Almost by herself she nearly defeated a crazed Alicorn of Eternal Night, Nightmare Moon." He turned his head briskly towards the door, marching at a pace one could equate to running.

"Sir! Where are you going? Should I rally the men?" Schola asked, watching her leader walk to the edge of a cloud and spread his mighty white wings. "Sir?"

"No, continue my research, I want detailed reports in two days. Do not try to skip ahead, I want all of them read closely and carefully. I am going to be flying to Rukafelth, he is dealing with a power he does not fully understand. I am the fastest here, so it will be the safest for me to go. I want no missions until I return. Dismissed." He dived off the cloud without waiting for confirmation, wings spread, and he lifted upwards, flapping rapidly as he sped south. Three seconds after his take off, there was a massive crashing noise, and rainbow-colored circles were all that were left of him as he lead a rainbow across the sky.

Scratch scratch scratch tink tink tink.

Stopping hadn't been part of the plan. Applejack watched the sun sit in the sky, and turned her head to scan her surroundings. The trees of the Everfree Forest had been passed what felt like a long time ago, and now they were in the woods of... Somewhere else. Each tree was straight and tall, of a light brown wood rather than the dark, knotted, creature-like figures of the Everfree Forest. It was certainly more welcoming, but also quite a bit hotter, and they'd been running for most of the night and day now. Applejack was feeling the strain of fatigue in her muscles, and looking to Pinkie Pie she saw there was a way to get all that bubbly energy exhausted.

'Took a while though.' She mused as Pinkie rested against a tree, panting heavily. Her hair hadn't flattened, a good sign she was still hopeful and energetic. Applejack glanced around their surroundings, then turned to her companion. "Hey, Pinkie Pie. Short break, find a good patch a' grass and

bushes and fill up, dunno how much further it's gonna be so we should get full."

Pinkie Pie stared at the grass on the ground and then to Applejack, and raised an eyebrow. "Ew, you actually eat this sort of stuff Applejack? I don't think I've ever resorted to eating grass before, it's so plain and icky!"

"Aww c'mon now sugarcube, t'ain't nothin' wrong with a little natural feed." She bent down and bit off the tops of a patch of grass and chewed slowly before swallowing. "Fills ya up if ya give it time."

"No thank you!" The pink mare got to her hooves wobbly-like, and glanced out in the forest. "I prefer my food to be a little more sweet! I thought I saw some berries earlier, so I'm going to go find them. I'll be back in a few shakes!" She began to bounce away from the farmer pony, who just sighed.

"Don' go gettin' lost now, y'hear? If you ain't back in two minutes I'm draggin' ya'll away from those berry bushes."

"Okey-doki-loki!" Was Pinkie Pie's response. Applejack calmly leaned down to graze again. She hoped Pinkie Pie would take longer than two minutes, berries would certainly liven up this feast.

Pinkie Pie skipped back towards the clearing she'd thought she'd spied earlier, seeing it again soon enough. With a smile, she hopped out of the bush blocking her path and landed suddenly. A few feet further and she'd have landed hooves first onto an old tombstone. She stared at it, bug-eyed for a few seconds, before she calmed herself down. It wasn't just one tombstone either, it was an entire, old gravesite, worn away by age and elements. Still, Pinkie Pie was the superstitious sort, and quietly she walked around the length of it, stopping only when one of the outer bushes she passed bore the fruit she'd been hunting for. "A-hah! I knew this was the right place! Er, sorry." She turned back to apologize to the graves, but froze.

She saw a skull, two black holes, a white face, wide, grinning teeth, and... A foal's cap? The upper-half of his body had a sheet thrown around it like a too-short rain poncho that stopped just above his back-half, and it was checkered black and orange, ending in long spike-patterns with tiny bells on the end of each one. His back half actually wore black pants, covering

his cutie mark, and letting his oddly thin tail poke out. She turned away from her bounty to stare at the strangest pony she'd ever seen. "What an odd thing to say in a graveyard of all places all places!" The skull spoke, making Pinkie jump. The Pony turned, the bells on the end of his cap tinkling softly as he looked past Pinkie at the bush. Pinkie finally saw it was all face-paint, even though the pitch black eyes were still a curiosity. "Oh, you mean your one of those sorts that lives off the land? What an interesting idea, could never do so myself self, far too unrefined for this court-tempered tongue of mine of mine, but to each their own, yes?" The jester took a step forward.

Pinkie Pie smiled nervously at the odd pony, and took an uneasy step back. "Um, yeah! I usually eat a lot of sweets and stuff because I live in a bakery and I need to test the sweets to make sure they're delicious but a friend and I are in a rush somewhere to help our friends and we stopped for food and I didn't want to eat icky grass and thought I saw some berries here and I did which is really lucky even though this is a gravesite but I'm being careful to be nice to the dead ponies - Celestia rest their souls and all! - 'cause I don't want ten years bad luck and, uh, now that I think about it I'm not hungry! So, I'll just be getting-" She turned her head towards the direction Applejack would be, only to find the skull-pony was standing there as well. She flipped her eyes back towards where he was a moment ago, only to find him still there. Then back to where he was, or would be - or should be? - now, and yes, he was still there. She slowly crept backwards until she could see both in her vision, yet there was only one, where he should have been. Between her and Applejack.

"You're the talkative sort, I can tell." The jester approached, rocking his head back and forth to make the bells jingle. Pinkie Pie quivered a little, her appetite gone as adrenaline began to fill her legs, telling her to flee, to get away from this dangerous thing. "I like to talk too, tell stories, sing songs, entertain my liege and my guests. They call me a genius when it comes to jestering, because even when they're in the greatest of agonies, my jokes will still knock 'em dead!"

Pinkie Pie twitched, one hoof sticking out at an angle for her to run past the slowly walking thing, but as her eyes looked into the dark circles of the pony's eyes, she felt herself freeze with terror as he came closer and closer, for all appearances harmless, but underneath that cheeky grin and flamboyant outfit, she felt there was something deeply disturbed about this

creature. She carefully began to back away, and he started to move faster towards her, his smile stretching sadistically until she could see all of his teeth. She felt her flank brush the leaves of a bush, and she pushed back inside of it until the approaching pony disappeared from view.

There was a flash of reflected light, and a rush of air as the jester flew through the bush, a stiletto held between his teeth cutting through the brush, nicking away leaves and twigs with a mere touch, and he emerged from the other side. He stood in brief confusion, seeing his blade was still glowing, not painted red with spilled blood, and he turned his head rapidly around. All he saw was a flash of pink dive out of the berry bush and in the direction he'd been keeping her from, and a hideous smile opened across his face. "Oh-hohohoho. Even Cloppin can appreciate a good trick." He began to give chase, humming loudly, lowly, his magical will stretching across the land as his personal soldiers were roused to action.

Pinkie Pie charged through the brush, turning her head to stare back at where the pony was still standing, and when she turned her head forward she could swear the shadows around her were moving. She stopped as a dark shape emerged from the hole of a nearby tree and she slipped around it quickly, but she watched as the shadows grew and mutated, growing beady red eyes, black tendrils slowly extending to grab at her, brushing her mane with deathly cold mist that made her scream. Something caught her leg, wrapping around it and squeezing, tugging her off her hooves and throwing her onto her face. She felt the sickly cold mist swirl around her, and watched the shadows close in, watched their beady red eyes as they gripped her limbs and neck and tail and hair, closing her veins as they tightened and choking her. The shadows grew thin, sharp white teeth, and made no noise as they held her still while hoof steps filled her ears. Tears streamed from her eyes as she gagged for air and felt her body go numb from lack of circulation, and she watched the gaily dressed pony approach while a sharp blade between his flat teeth.

"How the little mare ran. A tricky girl, but so easily lost in the shadows. A pity, but you were a thrill either way." Pinkie's eyes widened as he stood over her and leaned down, the blade pressing to her abdomen. "I can't wait to see..." He giggled, "I just can't wait to see..." He began to push slowly, making Pinkie give soundless screams as he drew blood, but he pulled away suddenly. Through misty eyes she saw his head turn, and then he

was gone. No puff of smoke, no flash of light, he was no longer there, and the shadows retreated to their corners.

Pinkie laid still, panting, feeling the blood flow back through her numb body as Applejack jumped over a bush and landed by her side. "Oh lordie, Pinkie..." The filly leaned down, eyes filled with concern as she stared into Pinkie's foregone eyes, and she began to rub her with a hoof. "Pinkie Pie what the hay happened, ye're cold as death..." Applejack began to rub her slowly with her hooves, massaging her legs to get the warmth and feeling back, pausing only when she spied blood.

"M-monsters..." Pinkie whimpered as Applejack stared at the wound, then began to glance around. Applejack listened as she grabbed some vines and a lot of sap-soaked leaves, the best she could come up with, "I-I found the berries in a graveyard, and then I s-saw a pony clown, really scary one..." She whispered, feeling Applejack apply the leaves to her stomach and wrap a few vines around her. "H-he chased me with a knife, and the shadows came to life and started to strangle me and-" she couldn't finish, too busy hiccupping in fear and drowning out her own voice with her tears.

Applejack pressed her cheek to Pinkie's and sighed softly. "I didn't see no shadows or clowns, but Pinkie ya probably just spooked yerself in that graveyard. Y'know it's bad luck to hang around those. C'mon, we gotta go save Twilight." She helped Pinkie stand up, and pressed her side against the shivering mare's. "I'll be with ya Pinkie, I'll keep them away from ya. Ya just gotta hang on with me. Let's go." Pinkie nodded slowly, the twisting in her gut never really leaving as they began to run again.

Overhead, they were shadowed by a sadistic wind.

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.

...

"Got it."

Every major unicorn in Canterlot had shown up in the Hearing Room. Celestia mused moodily that this was possibly the first time in a hundred

years that everyone chose to show up, and for what? Not to see the killer and hear his story and condemn him, not to discuss the distribution of Horshire's mythical collection, but to hear the story of a little unicorn filly Hero had found. The forty-eight unicorns who took the roles of overseeing the weather planning, crop placement, animal migration, economic chartering, and magical use and misuse sat quietly, twenty-four on one side of the room sitting in their risers, twenty-four on the other doing the same. Celestia sat at the head of the room at the end of a long carpet on a high-raised platform to oversee things while Hero, who had never once left the little gray filly's side, opened the doors and walked in, the tiny mare in front of him.

Celestia knew she shouldn't have been so harsh in her thoughts on the unicorns, many were busy with what they did, and word had only recently been passed around about Horshire's fate, and its sole survivor, the so called "Rubber Pony". As she watched the filly step up to the wooden hearing platform, her eyes never looking at anybody, she could see just how haunted the girl was. She did not smile, laugh, look amazed or dazed, look pleased with herself or nervous, she looked dead on the inside. An uncommon expression in Equestria, that made Celestia gulp. None of the other unicorns looked any better as they stared.

"Connie Torsion?" Celestia called to the young girl, who looked up meekly. Hero was behind her, standing on the steps, his large presence nearly on top of her. He had a look of pained determination while staring down at the filly. Celestia watched how her eyes rarely blinked. She was unnerving as much as she was unnerved. "Could you please tell us what happened in Horshire?" Celestia asked politely, the motions feeling so... Sick right now when pressed on the girl.

Connie looked down at her small hooves, and Hero gently stroked her back with his nose, making her shudder. "You can tell them Connie. That's Princess Celestia, our wise and kind Princess." Connie just nodded weakly, calmly pawing at the wood beneath her hooves. "You can tell her anything. She's a very nice pony and wants to help you. You just have to tell her." He spoke quietly, and fatherly, having never felt the urge to have a kid before, yet paternal instincts punted into overdrive at the sight of this little thing.

"Um..." Connie slowly looked up from her hooves to see the Princess had gotten off her platform and was a few feet in front of her, almost on level

with her. That seemed to calm her down. "I-it was... A nice day... I was practicing with mom in our backyard, our circus act was coming soon, and I had to get a trick right..."

"You're part of the circus?" Celestia asked kindly. Several of the unicorns padded nervously and in annoyance at the distraction, but nobody said anything.

"Y-yeah. I was a conto- contro- a bendy girl for the Skyhigh Unicorn Actors of Equestria. It was gonna be my first show..." Celestia approached slowly, resting her chin on the hearing stand's guardrail, and looked into Connie's eyes. "I-I'm really good at it. Momma says so and so did Mister Skyhigh." She paused, her eyes softening as she stared at Celestia. "W-wanna see?"

Celestia opened her mouth, and some of the Unicorns began to follow suit to get the hearing moving, but Hero interrupted them. "Yes, they would like to see it Connie. Show them 'The Pretzelator'." He advised her, and Connie nodded rapidly. Everypony was quiet as her horn flashed for just a moment, and Celestia noticed the way she began to sag around the middle. The filly turned, ducked her head underneath her torso, her tail meeting her face halfway through, and to Celestia's astonishment, she grabbed her tail in her teeth at the base. Nobody had that sort of flexibility, and there certainly weren't any spells to do that. Connie then flipped over onto her back, and balanced perfectly, legs straight out in the air before bending inwards to make a heart shape over her head and tail. She held it for a few seconds, before popping free.

Another flash of her horn, and she no longer sagged. Celestia watched her smile as a few of the unicorns began to praise the move, and the impressive magic she'd used, but saw very little joy in it. "That was very impressive Connie."

"Y-yeah. I told you I'm good." She wagged her tail a little, and Hero lightly nudged her flank. "O-oh, right," she took in a slow breath, and a little more confident, began to speak, "I was practicing with mom in our backyard when we heard a lot of people talking and shouting near the town square. Momma told me to stay but I followed her sneaky-like because I wanted to see. Some of our guards had put up a shield to keep out a really scary looking pony who looked like a skeleton clown. They were trying to get him to tell them who he was but he would just laugh and say stuff like 'It doesn't

matter who I am, just that you give me what I want'. Then he just kind of..." She paused in thought, her little face falling flat with emotion again. "Walked in..."

"Through the shield?" Somebody in the stands asked. Little Connie nodded softly.

"L-Like it wasn't th-there. They s-started sh-shouting a lo-ot. N-nobody coul-could use m-magic on him. Th-then he had a kn-kni- a kn-knife and..." She froze, her eyes wide. Hero gently wrapped a leg around her. "H-he p-put it in... In..." She began to hyperventilate, and Celestia could see where this was going quickly. The unicorns attending began to speak among themselves, understanding just as well as Celestia cast a little spell to calm her down. "And they fell... Just... All of them were... Like sleeping but... Dolls..." She said just loud enough for them to hear, and a small uproar had to be silenced before she could continue.

"The shadows..." She continued in a low voice. "They started grabbing everyone... And soon he had everyone there. I was in the front with a lot of my friends, all the kids were up front near the clown pony, and he was telling us to give him keys to the stuff we'd dug up, but nobody would give it to him so the shadows put together a big wooden arm in the middle of the town, and said if we didn't he'd hurt everyone. I don't think anyone believed him because they just started shouting more. Th-then he got mad at everyone and put a rope on the arm, and grabbed my best friend Molly. Then it got really really quiet because he'd put Molly on the rope, and the shadows squeezed my neck so hard I couldn't scream. But Molly could, Molly cried a lot until he dropped her." Connie laid down as the entire room went dead quiet.

Celestia couldn't move. She could only stare at the emotionless face of the little girl who'd watched her best friend die. "He told us if nobody would speak up, he'd do the same thing to us, and he tossed Molly onto the ground in front of us. I think somebody tried to tell him, but the shadows were squeezing our necks so we couldn't speak, so he grabbed another kid." She paused, and stared up at the ceiling in thought. "Yeah, it was Chaser. He was really good at sports back when he could move. After that I don't remember seeing much because I was crying so hard I didn't see who he got next. I think he was after us kids first, 'cause I don't remember seeing any adults until it was my turn. He dragged me up and put the rope

around my neck, and dropped me, but, see, I was smart!" She smiled wide at that, but her eyes never changed.

"I'd never let go of my spell, so when he dropped me I just flopped all over and got tossed onto all the other kids and the mean pony guy never noticed! So I was okay. I was too scared to move because I didn't want him to know I was alive, so I just watched as he finished the kids, then started bringing the adults up to be roped too, and when the adults were all done - there were a lot, I remember I was there long enough to see the sun fall - he took all the old ponies and put them on the rope next. And then when everypony but me was gone, the shadows went away and he started searching everywhere, but I never moved, 'cause if I did he might notice and use a knife on me. So I laid still, really still, until he started carrying out all this stuff with his shadows. I don't know where it went, I couldn't see, and then the shadows came back and grabbed everypony. They pulled us down into this big dark vault place and piled everypony up except for me." She gulped loudly, tears now appearing in her eyes as she thought carefully to herself.

Nobody made so much as a move that might disturb her train of thought, and she curled up weakly, Hero calmly rubbing her side with one hoof. "They put me in the middle of the room, not on the sides like the others, and then the mean skeleton-pony guy walked in and looked right down at me, and he told me, 'You can foal a rope but you can't rope the foal' and then he walked out and shut the door. And then after crying for a really long time, the door opened, and he helped me out." She looked up to Hero, and squirmed to her hooves so she could press her face to his chest. With a passive face he held her close, to let her know he would protect her.

No pony said anything for the longest time as the girl wept into Hero's chest, but nobody had to. The door had opened, and in walked a royal messenger. "We've just received word of Twilight Sparkle's possibly location from her friends. We've sent a team to investigate."

Chapter 7

Entering the Mouth

Twilight opened her eyes a crack as her body told her to wake up. Her leg was still sore from the constant scratching motions it had been going through last night and she still felt very cautious about the tip of her hoof. She briefly wondered how long she'd been sleeping, what time of day it was, and if she could go fast enough to finish today, but she pushed the thoughts aside knowing straight and simple she had to finish it today. She just had to.

She got up groggily and became aware there was no scratching noises in the next cell. Dash must have tired herself out and went to lay down like Twilight had. "Finally tired out?" She asked as she approached the cell bars. They only briefly got visited last night by the guards to get food, a rather dry, somewhat dusty dish of grain and seed, just barely filling but granting enough energy to give her some more time to work. They hadn't noticed her attempts to escape though, as the water pooling around the cell floor got sucked into the hole when she'd pushed away the straw barrier keeping it at bay while she worked. The combination of stone flecks, mud, and dust made it too cloudy to see the hole. Twilight spent a bit of time praying to the Princesses for her good luck.

"Nope." Was the response over in the next cell. Twilight blinked as she heard Rainbow Dash move around. "Just trying to find the right angle for this. The bar's all rusty in the ground, so I think if I aim this just right..." Twilight winced at the loud clang from Dash kicking the bar, and heard her grunt. "Okay, that wasn't right..."

Twilight pulled as much water out of her hole as she could and admired her work. She'd spent half a day chipping a water-logged stone block with only her hooves and so far had a fair hole. She predicted there wasn't too much to dig through, and using her other, more awkward hoof, continued to dig as Rainbow Dash kicked her bar again, getting another pained grunt. "Aww c'mon! You're all rusted up and crap, break!" The Pegasus shouted. Twilight had noticed since gaining a goal, Dash's vigor had returned. The vulnerable, meek pony from before was now back to normal.

"It's still steel, Dash. And keep quiet, what if somebody hears us?" Twilight whispered. Rainbow Dash silenced herself and seemed to toy with her cell bar for a while, probably trying to find weakness. "You put more pressure behind the back of your heel than the rest of your hoof. Just use your head Dash, you're a smart girl." The small encouragements they traded back and forth to each other since enacting the plan had been a minor, but welcomed morale boost. Their relationship together had been a standard jock and egghead deal, Dash being headstrong, unstopably persistent, and all about physical skill, and Twilight being incredibly cautious, over-prepared, nose in a book, and more concerned with her mind than her body.

They'd rarely been alone together before, and it always seemed to devolve into sniping at each other's lack of abilities. Here though... Dash trusted Twilight to be tough, Twilight trusted Dash to be intelligent. There was another loud clang, followed by a vicious crack. "Hah! That did the trick. Few more of those..." Twilight continued to dig, and after a few moments she could see she found the bottom of the bar. Elation filled her, and she began to widen the hole, offer it a little more room. She kept hearing Dash kick the bar, and finally she heard a sharp snapping noise. She listened and heard the rest of the bar fall out of the hole in the ceiling.

In the other cell, Dash was quick to catch the remains of the bar in her teeth before it could fall loudly on the floor, and carefully placed it in her cell. She stared at the gap between bars, and with a smug grin pushed her head through easily. She wriggled her body as it caught on the front of her legs, and she twisted to get her legs through, and carefully turned back and forth to get it around her ribs. The squeeze was tight, and she had to exhale to reduce her size just a little. She squirmed and wriggled, getting the bars past her chest and she slid through, now working to get her back legs out. When she turned her head, she could see Twilight watching her, and she smiled proudly. She kicked her back legs, twisted, and turned her body sideways to slide through the bars, and landed on the ground, outside her cell, one step closer to being a free filly. Twilight didn't say anything, but the look of relief that crossed her face, and the elated way she jumped in her cell told Dash that she was proud.

"You finished in there?" The Pegasus approached the cell bars and stared down at the bar Twilight had been working on and saw the hole was practically deep enough.

"Just about," Twilight checked the hole again and kept scratching. "I just need to widen it a little and-" she ducked as Dash's hoof connected with the bar, causing it to shake.

"Feels right to me. Help me." She kicked again, making it shake again.

"It'll be easier if you let me-"

"It'll be faster if you start kicking! I did it, so can you." Dash grunted, a third kick making a few pebbles fall from the ceiling. Twilight looked skeptical, but backed up, turned, and kicked. She did not have Dash's strength, nor quite her precision, and it ended sloppy. But she tried, and she tried again, and again, the two kicking the bar as hard as they could repeatedly, until finally the rusted end broke, letting the rest of the bar fall. It was caught, placed out of the way, and Twilight pushed her head through.

Like Dash, she'd been caught by her front legs, and with Dash's instruction pushed them through. Dash, being a Pegasus, had thicker muscle around her ribs to support her wings, so Twilight slipped through more easily than she had, but was caught by her stomach. "Nng!" She grunted, pushed until it had hurt. "Nng... Nng! Dash, I can't-" she turned and stared at her own stomach, trying to take a deep breath to slide through.

Dash stared, examining the way Twilight flexed her stomach, and grabbed the unicorn by her mane and began to tug. "You're too thick!" She grunted from between her teeth, "We might have to just... Pull!" She growled, making Twilight pause.

"Thick...?" She mumbled, then took a deep breath and wiggled around, slowly sidling herself bit by bit, only to get caught on her back legs.

"Crap, okay, lemme think, maybe we could use water to lube you up?" She offered as Twilight struggled to twist like Dash had to straighten her legs and pull through, but even when she'd matched her movements the bars still caught her flank and legs. "We have got to get you working out..."

"Not... Thick!" Twilight grunted, pulling herself as hard as she could. Rainbow Dash snickered at Twilight's insistence, then turned. Twilight continued to struggle, stopping only as Dash's legs struck out underneath her head, kicking one of the bars holding her still.

"Keep moving!" Dash hissed, doing it again as Twilight pulled herself. Slowly it began to work, letting Twilight squeeze out until she popped from her cell. Twilight landed on front with a groan, and looked up to find Dash smiling at her goofily. It was an expression Twilight matched as they'd realized they'd gotten out. It was short-lived as Dash turned her head to face the door. She grabbed its handle and tugged, but it stayed fast. "Locked." She muttered bitterly.

She looked to Twilight for any sort of advice, but saw the Unicorn's eyes were on herself. "Your wings..." Twilight whispered, having just seen the ragged, torn up state of the Pegasus' wings.

Dash frowned a little, looking back at the tiny, pathetic little excuses of what was left of her own former glory, and shook her head away from the despair that tried to slip into her stomach. "Not now, we need to get out of here, let's worry about it later." She told her, and Twilight only weakly agreed.

She watched Twilight turn and close her mouth around the steel bar they'd knocked loose from the ceiling and she carried it over. "I got a small idea. The lock should be pretty old, so if we line up this bar right and give it enough force we should jar the lock enough to open it up."

"Or we could bust it and end up permanently locked in here." Dash pointed out dryly as Twilight inspected the angle.

"No way, I've done this a few times before when I forgot my room key."

"... You've broken down doors."

"Uh huh. Usually with magic and a banister but a sharp kick to the end should get it right." Using her hooves, she held the bar up straight where Dash could kick it.

"They might not even be the same kind of lock!"

"Well, we can do this now or find something else for later." Dash opened her mouth to argue, but let it die on that logic. She turned, and angling carefully, gave the bar a nice, hard kick. The bar struck the lock, denting the keyhole and causing the whole thing to rattle. Twilight pulled the door

open. "Nothing to it!" She grinned at that, and Dash let out a tiny breath of relief.

"Alright fine, you're the smart one. C'mon, before they get mad at us for breaking their stuff."

"And escaping their prison..."

"That too."

Shallom stood quietly on the cloud, staring at the sight just below. He wondered how many ponies knew this place existed in Equestria, how many even tried to go this far south through forests so dense that the slightest misstep could have you turned around on your hooves, sending you barreling around aimlessly until exhaustion, hunger, and thirst overtook you? The only sign of correct progression is when you walked into the stone wall of a temple whose top didn't even touch the tree canopies? The only way Shallom even knew was because his legs felt incredibly twitchy above it, and his wings had begun to shiver.

It wasn't the most perfect of hiding places, but Rukafelth's report had mentioned it hadn't been touched in many many years. Shallom descended slowly, through the tree canopies to land on the stone roof of a building he was familiar with in text only. He walked along to the sloped side and leapt to the ground some twenty-five feet below. He turned towards the entrance, which was an arch made of rock with a pair of stone slabs serving as doors. He stared at the doors, and his wings began to twitch and quiver. A spark of blue lightning began to arc along the stone from his wings, between the stone slabs, and they began to glow blue. They shook softly, and slowly separated to create an entrance. He stepped inside, the doors closing behind him as the magical connection ceased.

He walked down a dark, featureless passageway until he entered a brightly lit atrium. There were ten of Rukafelth's soldiers gathered, eating on woven carpets, until there was a collective growl of their stomachs. The stood immediately and turned, facing Shallom. "Sky Steed!" One called in surprise, bowing low alongside the other nine as they recognized the Pegasus. "What brings you to us so suddenly Sir Shallom?" The same one asked. Probably a captain. Not that he could tell, Rukafelth insisted on one

standard outfit, so rank would show through intelligence and strength rather than flashy armor.

"I have information regarding The Fake that Rukafelth should hear. He hasn't connected to Lord Galio so I needed my own speed to deliver this information quickly. Where is he?" Shallom asked, holding himself proudly before the soldiers. They looked up to him quietly and then back to the throne room.

"He'd be in his quarters, Sir. We'll go ask him for audience."

"Do tell him that I'm here." The many soldiers nodded quietly and three approached the door to their leader's quarters. One raised a hoof and knocked politely, three times, and waited.

"I'm in my meditation, please allow me several more minutes." Was the deep response.

"Sir, Sky Steed Shallom is asking for an audience. Should we ask him to-" The door opened rather suddenly, and Shallom watched Rukafelth's mighty bulk emerge from the comparatively small door to step out into the room. The white-haired Juggernaut watched his winged counter-part, then he smiled.

"This is a pleasant surprise. What brings you Shallom? Care for some grain?" He asked pleasantly, and Shallom relaxed. The guards backed away from the two mighty commanders as they approached and gave the other a formal bow.

"Grain would be welcome, I've had a long trip and those Sonic... 'Rainbooms' the locals call them are quite strenuous." Rukafelth nodded to one of his men, who sped towards the kitchens to retrieve a fresh bowl. "I also have some interesting information regarding the Fake."

"A Sonic Rainboom..." Rukafelth lead Shallom to the carpeted seat of the throne, and the two sat. "Odd, those. I've read they're exhilarating to see. Odd they can only be performed in Equestria."

"Do keep in mind that the Princesses have surprised us before with their magic. It would almost be worth exploring it myself, except that it's all but useless."

"I've actually taken the time to read about it myself. The magic around here is fairly docile, serving more as a helping hand and a grand show rather than be made for such things as war. I read it's the ponies' duties in Equestria to even manage the seasons and the weather. I've never heard of such things elsewhere."

"Keeps them responsible and busy I suppose... Speaking of responsibilities, my information." Rukafelth bowed his head to apologize, and nodded to let Shallom continue, right before a bowl of fresh grain was pushed in front of the Pegasus. "Her name is Twilight Sparkle."

"I know, I've asked her."

"Right, but how much do you know about her history, where she comes from, what she's done?"

Rukafelth closed his eyes to think, and Shallom nibbled the grain before him while Rukafelth thought. Finally, his eyes opened. "She told me nothing of her history, just her name."

"Precisely. My captains decided to look into her history during their free time and found some halfway legitimately threatening information on her." Shallom stated calmly, studying Rukafelth's reaction. There was none.

"Shallom, all I saw in her was a scared. Warriors, anypony who's faced danger do not cower so easily or release tears as freely as she did. I highly doubt she's a threat." Rukafelth mused while Shallom shook his head.

"You're correct, she is not a warrior. She is Princess Celestia's personal student of magic."

A pause. Then, "We've placed magical inhibitors on her. No magic can be done through the horn. She does not have knowledge of the power she took either. She is aware of its existence, but not how to exploit it."

"Have you ever heard of Nightmare Moon?"

"I did some research on the ancient evils here, the former and current Princess Luna, correct? Twilight said she was stopped immediately and about incident."

"By Twilight." Shallom watched as Rukafelth's face fell, and began to work her jaw in slow circles. "Twilight and friends, I should say. There were five others."

"... So she activated the Elements of Harmony." At Shallom's confused look, he explained, "They're old artifacts, apparently associated with the sixth and final element, Friendship. They're powerful, powerful enough to defeat an Alicorn. And if I'd read correctly, they still contain each element within them."

"So she may still have an Element of Harmony inside of her... And we may not even know it."

The two stood abruptly, but Rukafelth suddenly relaxed, moving to lay down again. Shallom stared at him. "The sixth element can only be activated when present with the five other elements. She's alone with one filly downstairs. She can't activate her element, and the magic is useless right now."

"Fine then. So maybe she can't activate the element, maybe she doesn't know how to use the stolen magic, maybe she can't use her own magic, there is still cause for concern."

Rukafelth was growing an amused little smile now. "You make her out to be some multi-purpose tool. She can't use her power at all, what's left? She's weak. We feed her just enough to sustain her, and the water around the cell isn't exactly healthy. She'll be fine to move to Lord Galio's encampment after Laputa is opened."

"She's intelligent. Resourceful. She's solved several situations on wits alone. I don't understand it well enough myself but she can substitute resourcefulness for brawn. She's probably even considered several ways to get out of her cell, probably save her friend too. For all we know she could be acting on it."

"And to what end? Guards are stationed inside the atrium at all times, and thanks to our Lord's blessing they have excellent senses. Not to mention she wouldn't be able to open the front entrance for that matter. The only other way they could go is the door to Laputa, and if the ancient magics don't crush her soul before she gets a good look at it she would be unable

to open it. Behind every wall is a mountain's worth of dirt and their cells are positioned against the wall of the ocean."

Shallom thought to himself about what he was told. Something still irked him. He knew there was something... Maybe he was working himself up over nothing, but she had power dwelling in her that could rival a lesser alicorn, and he figured she had the smarts to get around without the power anyways. He stood up and finally spoke. "Alright, but I would still like to see her myself. I like to see the face of my enemy before they're executed." It wasn't some morbid thing. He wanted to see the face of The Fake, the girl that had stolen a healthy portion of their power. He wanted to know their enemy.

Rukafelth had joined him on his hooves, but looked uneasy, "It may not be a good idea. Two of my guards have expressed some... Reluctance at her living arrangements after two full minutes of escorting her. I myself felt... Lax around her. She is good at drawing sympathy. The less time you spend in her presence, the easier her passing will be for you."

Shallom wasn't listening though, he'd moved to the middle of the atrium and flared his wings in annoyance when Rukafelth didn't follow. Rukafelth let out a great sigh and lead him towards the cells.

(Several minutes before)

It was just a door. Two stone slabs surrounded by an arch covered in runes in a hallway with no doors. Rainbow Dash was watching down the hallway to make sure nopony had seen them. They were in the clear for now, but she doubted it would stay that way for long. Still, it was just a stone door with an arch.

So why didn't she want to approach it? She'd just slid into the hallway out of direct view of the atrium but still, when she looked at that simple stone door, she felt uneasy. Twilight was approaching it freely without caution, either ignoring or not feeling the same thing Dash was, and that worried her. She felt like she had to keep Twilight out of more trouble but at the same time they needed to approach the door if they meant to escape. Dash hated that door though.

She took a few steps closer towards it and shivered, feeling an ice cube slide into her tummy as she stared at the door. It took her a few seconds to realize Twilight was hastily calling for her to come forward, yet her hooves almost refused to move. "C'mon Dash, get over here! Quickly!" Twilight whispered.

"... There's something wrong with this door, Twilight." Dash whispered back, an oppressive force squeezing her from all sides, making her want to turn and flee, warning her that if she stepped any closer, it would not hold back. How Twilight didn't notice the thick, aggressive force in the hallway was beyond her, but the Unicorn approached Dash with an uncertain look. "I think... It's like I feel it... It wants to eat me..." She explained with a soft gulp, staring at the door with broad eyes as she felt it would open up at any time and swallow her.

"That's ridiculous Dash, it's just a door. There's nothing wrong with it, c'mon." Twilight grabbed ahold of the Pegasus' mane and began to pull her along, inching her closer to the door, but was stopped. She turned, seeing Dash's hooves dug into the ground as she stared at the door with a shocked face.

It was coming at her full force now. She had experienced magic-induced levitation only once and had never forgotten the experience, and the feeling of magic always felt so... Wrong. It felt like a tyrant taking ahold of her, shaping her the way *it* wanted, the way *it* felt like, taking her where *it* demanded. She'd humbly told Twilight one day to never ever touch her with a spell unless it meant to save her life, because she never ever wanted to feel like Twilight was that tyrant.

Yet before a cold, unfeeling door made of basic materials and held together by magic, she could feel the tyrant looming around her. She'd entered its domain, and whatever enchanted the door was well aware she was there and was daring her, encouraging her to step closer to be under its control. Before her eyes flashed yawning mouths that glimpsed into an inescapable abyss, mouths that had many tentacled tongues to grab its prey and tug them in, surrounded by razor-sharp teeth that would grind her like a saw blade, and into the cold, black serpentine eyes that hypnotized her into walking in. The pale white, slimy skin it had suddenly encircled her, and she could feel its massive tail tugging her closer and closer to the beast's maw, which widened to reveal the skeletons of the other creatures it had

consumed laying strewn among its teeth, not their bodies consumed but their minds and souls, leaving everything else to rot. Suddenly the great beast lunged, and Dash let out a silent scream as her eyes burst open into a blaze of bright light, to find herself staring into Twilight's white eyes.

"... You let it take you." She stated plainly in a familiar voice that made her stomach churn. Twilight scoffed as the orange aura around her pulled away from Dash, sucking away a black orb that had been tucked into her stomach where her heart had been. "Even the most foolish of Pegasi would know better. I was under the impression you were a fighter."

Dash stared at Twilight, whose voice was so calm and full of venom, her face tight with disappointment and bemusement at Dash's failure, and Dash let out a soft sob. Twilight reared back in surprise and Dash began to cry. "It was scary, okay! I didn't know... I'm not used to magic..." She whimpered, her eyes half-lidded, but she could see Twilight twitch in discomfort.

"Well..." Her slightly deeper, sarcastic voice slowly grew lighter as her white eyes faded. "Well maybe you just..." The orange aura stopped, the black ball of Dash's fear fading with it, and Twilight smiled sympathetically. "Maybe you just need me here with you... C'mon..." Twilight slid her front hooves under Dash's chest and lifted, helping her stand up. Dash smiled gratefully at Twilight, rubbing away the tears as her fear lessened. She trusted Twilight, and no longer felt so afraid of that door.

As they approached, neither noticed the other's neck, where a softly glowing necklace had dissipated from view.

"How are we gonna open it?" Dash asked, looking to Twilight. She noticed nothing out of the ordinary, just how she always saw her.

"Well, my magic is out of the question since it's blocked off... Or I don't know how to use it." She mumbled bitterly. That orange aura had given her so much hope during her frustration at Dash's weakness, but now all she felt was regret for doubting her friend's integrity.

Her eyes widened and her ears began to twitch wildly as she felt something nibble her horn. She finally realized that Dash was leaning up, mouth around the rings on Twilight's horn, and was tugging. Twilight was

too embarrassed to say anything until Dash pressed her hooves to her face and began to tug harder. "Ow! Dash! That really-"

"Jus'... One... Momen'!" Dash grunted with each tug and push, until Twilight felt her face had taken just about enough punishment and she pushed Dash off. "Those things are hard as hay to get off. We probably need another Unicorn to get them off." Dash mumbled angrily as she turned and approached the door. She began to inspect it closely, earlier fears forgotten with Twilight by her side, and she began to paw at it to look for weakness. "This thing is tighter than Rarity's jewelry box..." She stated in a soft sigh.

"Uh-huh..." Twilight murmured, rubbing her sore face and horn.

"This is no time to beauty up Twilight, help me!" Dash hissed, but her eyes widened in surprise immediately. Twilight watched the way Dash's face fell from determined, to very suddenly oh so very scared. She turned her head to follow her gaze, and found herself staring into the eyes of a Luna-sized Pegasus.

The enormous blue Pegasus slowly turned to face them, looking equally surprised, decked out in golden flight armor, with a sky-colored coat and a mane, tail, and wings the color of purest snow. His eyes were piercing gold, and he moved with the fluid grace of a prince. Yet that image shattered when they narrowed with such ferocity, Twilight knew death was on his mind. "*THIEF!*" He shouted, his voice a mighty boom as he reared back and stomped hard on the ground, his wings fanning outwards violently, and the entire building rumbled as a lightning storm was thrown their way.

Twilight watched in terror as the bolts jumped from wall to wall, with no possible way to judge where they would go, or how many there were. They were trapped between a rock and death. Her mind cleared as solid terror replaced all thoughts, and with a scream she forced the bolts back with an orange-colored barrier. It disappeared in an instant as the huge Pegasus flew through it unheeded, his gold eyes glinting with anger. Twilight turned, and tackled the equally stunned Dash towards the door.

In her maddened rush she'd felt no resistance, no pain, no anger, just terror. Fear was rattling her mind and vision and all she knew was she had to escape their certain death, and it was only when a solid something hit the side of her head did she stop.

"NO!" Shallom crashed his hooves into the stone door, flames leaping from his legs and wings, enveloping himself and the entire hallway with a menacingly bright fireball. He stared at the doors with grit teeth and narrowed eyes, and whirled around aggressively as he felt a presence nearby.

Rukafelth stared at the door, his face a mixture of shock, agony, and slight despair. It had opened. In an instant when the unicorn ran, it had opened in a flash of orange, and just as quickly slammed shut. The few unicorns he had working under him had been experimenting day and night with the door, but due to their limited understanding of how it worked had a time limit. All doors associated with Chell had this enchantment, and they had lost several mighty fine unicorns when they were first experimenting with them.

But on top of that, the girl was out of his hooves. He knew the irony was there that she'd escaped after reassuring Shallom, but he chose to ignore it. He knew Galio would be disappointed in him, and would step up all measures to recapture her. First it had been eight experts in live capture, then it had been himself, and he would have oppressed her, but at least kept her safe. The next step would be either the commander with the grudge, the sadist, or the Lord himself. He had to get her back if he wanted to keep her safe.

He paused and closed his eyes; he shouldn't think such things like that. Protecting her was a great risk, but at the very least he could treat her fairly. As fair as the situation could call for. He looked to see Shallom still staring at him, in full attack mode, ready to unleash himself on the next threatening thing that crossed him. "I am sorry."

"Sorry!" Shallom shouted, tossing his mane back in irritation.

"For doubting you. I'll gather the Unicorns, you take my riders over sea. They'll be heading for Laputa." Rukafelth turned away. He knew Shallom, and he knew the only thing saving himself from being chewed out was the quickly formed plan. As long as he had a mission, his fellow Commander could focus his anger into something useful.

"With any luck she'll die in Laputa as well." Shallom snorted as they briskly made their way to the atrium.

"Don't be so morbid, we do need her after all." Shallom stayed quiet, but Rukafelth knew he was fuming.

Rainbow Dash really hated to kick from an angle, but she didn't have a choice in the matter. Twilight picked herself up off the floor, rubbing her smarting cheek with tenderness as her wide, quivering eyes slowly calmed down. Dash shook her mane out of her face. What a rush, one moment certain that death would be coursing through her, the next being shoved into... Wherever they were by the normally calm, meek Twilight. "That was an epic freak-out." Dash said as she looked back the way they'd come.

She could see those stone doors a long ways off, up a dark, cavernous hallway. Twilight had bull rushed them through the door somehow, and down a steep cave that lead deeper underground. The entire place was lit up by weird white orbs that almost looked pearl-like, and cast the cave in a soft, blue light. That worked for her, better than stumbling around in the dark.

"Sorry..." She looked around slowly, taking in what Dash took in, then looking ahead. They were at one end of a wide cavern, standing on perhaps the one bit of dry land there. Most of the ground past the entrance had a layer of water on top of it, but due to the lighting and the griminess of the water, it was hard to tell just how deep it went. Along the sides of the wall were those orbs of light, that cast just barely enough of the light to keep most of the room lit up. There were some raised parts of the floor that weren't wet, and a good jump would probably be enough to cross them.

Perhaps most telling was that in the middle of the room, surrounding by a circular platform that wasn't wet, was a slightly submerged statue. Since the light clung mostly to the sides of the room it was difficult to tell exactly what the twisted, tentacle-like statue was. For some reason though, it was absolutely fascinating. As Twilight leapt from their dry land to the next, she continued to stare at the statue. Dash followed behind her closely.

Dash's instincts told her to take Twilight around another way, some place that didn't seem so suspicious or dangerous, to never trust what was

behind the oppressive door, but glancing around she knew that wasn't an option. They could only move forward and hope to emerge safely. Still, that statue in the middle made her chest scream to back away, to leave it alone, to never touch it, never approach it.

She was more cautious than Twilight as the Unicorn quietly stood before the statue. "Whatever this is, it's old. Really old. It may even be older than Equestria..." She mumbled, leaning forward to get a closer look. Dash jumped in close, her teeth grasping Twilight's tail and she tugged her back, away from the submerged thing. "Dash, what are you doing!" Twilight demanded, staring at the other filly incredulously.

"This thing gives me the exact same feeling as the door did. Whatever made this..." Dash whispered, staring at the statue. "I think it wants to eat us. I think it wants to eat everything. In the vision the door gave me I saw a lot of bodies." The former-Pegasus whispered as she recalled the enormous fishy thing that had so clearly intended to devour her.

"It's just a spell on the door to give you a pre-rendered hallucination Dash. It's an old spell only really paranoid Unicorns would use on a secret room or a drawer they wouldn't want anyone to go through." Twilight stated, staring at the statue again. She wanted to go see what it was, but it was so hard in the dark.

"That felt way too real and way too evil to just be a simple hallucination to scare us off! I could feel it trying to eat my soul!" Twilight didn't look like she believed her, so Dash continued. "And when you went all glowey on me that orange stuff around you pulled something black out of my chest!" Twilight's stare slipped a little as she thought back to what the aura had taken, and she chewed her lip. "Explain that to me!"

"... I don't know, okay. It might just be a really good spell. I have no idea what I did, its like everything was moving around on its own. My body, my thoughts, the weird magic..."

"That's because you let that thing take you over again. It seemed to know exactly what it was doing." Twilight lowered her eyes, remembering the powerful annoyance she'd felt towards Rainbow Dash for daring to show weakness, for letting herself get taken by a spell she felt so confident she knew. Maybe it did know what it was doing... "Anyways, I don't like that statue or the door or whatever made both. I don't want to mess with them."

There was a rumble above them, and the two stared upwards. Loose gravel fell as the ground shook softly, gradually increasing in viciousness and causing the light around them to waver. It stopped just as suddenly as it had started. Above them, there was a tiny spark of light, and then an orb that had gone out lit up, just above the statue. Twilight stared at the very odd statue now that she could see it.

It was of an Alicorn she did not recognize, unpainted and non-decorated, staring down at her and Dash with subtle intensity. It was like he was judging them from his skewed stone-throne, and it was almost... Daring them to move forward. Coiled around him in a circle but not obscuring the Alicorn's sight was an enormous eel like being. Its head and body were clearly eel-like, but it had long, thin arms that reminded her of Spike's hands, each ending in a four-fingered hand topped with hooked claws, and the body ended in multiple tentacle-like tails. The eel's face had wide, blank eyes, suggesting minimal intelligence, and its open mouth revealed many lovingly carved sharp teeth, and some ten tiny, thin tongues wriggling out of its open maw. She glanced down at the pedestal holding the two beings, and saw it was in a language she did not understand.

"Well, I got my wish. C'mon Dash." She started to walk around the statue, but paused when Dash did not follow. She turned her head. "Dash?" She looked to her friend, and saw her staring, stock-still at the statue, her face a mask of terror. Concerned, Twilight walked back towards her and gently bumped her with her side. "Dash?" She whispered.

"That's it..." Dash whispered, staring up at the enormous eel-like beast. Twilight noticed that before, it seemed like the eel had been staring at her. Now it was staring at Dash. "That's the thing that was going to eat me..."

"Dash..." Twilight whispered in worry as she looked to the statue. It was still staring at Dash, its little hands curled up into tight balls, every part of it looking ready to lunge, despite being only six feet tall or so. "Dash, snap out of it, it's a statue."

"We're walking into its lair..." Rainbow Dash whispered low, and Twilight's hair stood on end as her eyes began to roll back into her head. Like before when they'd been at the door, Dash's eyes showed solid white and red veins as she was pulled viciously into her own mind. It was something she'd only read about, spells powerful enough to force ones consciousness

inwards, often leaving the face and eyes blank. She had heard of the consequences, of losing your mind to the magic. All that was left was a blank shell, an empty mind, and a soul roiling in its own prison. "We admit the body of our fallen comrade to the depths-"

"Rainbow Dash!" Twilight shouted to her, but Dash's head rolled downwards, and Twilight started to shake her rapidly.

"-where illustrious Anemone may take them beyond the veil between ours and the underworld, where they may forever watch us in their Earthly wisdom-"

"Dash!" The unicorn shoved Rainbow Dash onto the floor, but the Pegasus lay limp on the ground, whispering loudly, rapidly, with passionate dedication to her words.

"-to advise us from beyond the veil through the whispers of the sea. Glory be to the grand Anathema, whose stare from beyond has rent our enemies asunder, open wide the jaws of hell and consume this offering of heathens we give you in place of the soul of our comrade-"

Twilight stared around in panic as Rainbow Dash continued to whisper, and an idea sprang to mind. It had only a chance of working but she just needed to shock her out of it. She grabbed Dash by her tail and began to drag her to the water's edge.

"-and forever grant us passage through your waters while dismaying our enemies of their ships. May our passage to the underworld be peaceful. Amen. We admit the body of our fallen comrade-"

Twilight held Rainbow Dash's head in her hooves, and with a soft apology, forced it under the water. Bubble sprang up rapidly, and she could hear Dash trying to articulate words, and she waited until the bubbles stop. Then Dash's body jerked, and Twilight pulled her up from the water to let her breath.

Dash sucked in a deep breath of air, her eyes wide and red as she tried to refill her lungs. Twilight watched with worry, holding her friend around the neck as Dash calmed down. She stared at her distorted reflection in the water, and then to Twilight, and gave a very soft whimper. "It was in my head..."

"It's okay Dash, it's gone now." Whatever 'it' was concerned Twilight. She'd figured the door had just been a defense, but now the statue? And it was a handsome, well made statue too. Unless the person who enchanted it to attack people's minds were truly vain, they wouldn't waste such a valuable image...

... Speaking of which, why didn't it attack her? She was just as foreign as Dash, no more special than her either since while she herself was an expert Unicorn, Dash was a professional flier. Unless...

"Anathema..." Dash coughed up some water, and Twilight's ear perked. She'd mumbled that word while being attacked. "Anathema was in my head... He was going to eat me, and send me beyond... But he saw you... Through my eyes he saw you... He wants us to come to Laputa..."

"No." Twilight said firmly in response. "Whoever he is, he attacked you twice and obviously isn't a great guy. We have more important things to worry about than him or Laputa, we have to go warn Celestia-"

"Laputa is deeper in the cavern. It's the only way to get out of here. It will lead to Anathema." Dash stood and stared down the cavern towards another door, her face very calm. She was still suffering the aftereffects of the attack on her head. Twilight gently wrapped an arm around Dash's shoulders, and the rainbow-haired filly turned to meet Twilight's eyes. They were heavy with concern, and it took Dash a few moments to calm down. "... It's not like we have any other choice."

"... I still don't like it."

"Well, I don't like a lot of things and live with them. I told you that horn was going to be dangerous. C'mon, while you still have that thing we should keep going." Dash continued forward and Twilight sighed quietly. She didn't know if she was okay or not. She would just have to keep an eye out for her.

The two walked towards the door at the far end, which luckily was just a stone door that needed to be pushed open. The two ponies worked together to get it wide enough for the both of them to walk past and entered a steep, narrow cave. The two walked down it slowly, watching their steps to keep from slipping down the long passageway.

It seemed to stretch on forever, and the only noises around them was the sound of dripping water and their hoof steps. Twilight turned to look at Dash, who still seemed unfazed. "Dash, are you alright?"

"... Fine, why?" The Pegasus answered. Twilight continued to stare with more worry.

"You just had your mind attacked, invaded, turned in on itself by a statue and got told to come meet some guy called Anathema, whom apparently opens the jaws of hell to consume heathens. Yet you haven't reacted at all since it happened." Twilight pointed out, stopping. Dash stopped with her and they stared at each other.

"Well... Okay, it was pretty freaky, but we don't have a choice, right? We have to go this way, and Anathema happens to be along the way."

"We *do* have a choice Dash. There's never just one way, you just have to keep your mind and eyes open. Why do you even care if we meet this Anathema guy?"

Rainbow Dash smirked a little. "Well duh, he can help us escape."

"How do you know that? Did he say it?"

"Well, no, but he saw you and wants us down there. That must mean he wants to help us."

"Or capture us, like those soldiers back there. What's going on Dash, why do you want to see this guy?" Twilight tried to look suspicious but it couldn't push out the worry in her eyes.

Dash's smile quivered a little, but she kept on walking before Twilight could get a good look. "I saw my little brother with him is all."

Twilight stared at Dash for a while before springing forward, letting her momentum and the slick floor slide her down to Rainbow Dash. "Your little brother?"

"Um, yeah. His name was Teller Pen, he really liked to tell stories and stuff, had a good imagination for it. He, um..." Dash quickened her walking pace, and Twilight did as well. "He would always go out looking for inspiration for

stories, even when he could barely fly. He had an accident though." She sucked in a deep breath and started running even faster, and Twilight kept up with grit teeth, barely keeping traction on this slick floor.

She could see Dash ahead of her, head lowered, not up to watch ahead, and she continued to talk, but not to her. "He was always off by himself!" Dash shouted as she ran. "I was supposed to watch him but I was so busy practicing my flying! I was supposed to be teaching him but I was too caught up in my own thing! So he'd run off without me! I should have been watching him but he fell! He didn't know how to stabilize and-" She stopped suddenly, sliding a good ways before catching herself. Twilight caught herself a little late, but took the effort to get by Dash again. "-and that was it..." Rainbow Dash let her hair hang around her face as she took in deep, pained breaths. "I could have spent that time showing off with the older kids to teach him to fly, to stabilize, but I didn't. So he fell."

Twilight watched Dash carefully, a cold feeling in her stomach. She knew Rainbow Dash was an only child but, never knew that it hadn't started that way. "Dash..." She reached out a hoof, but it was knocked away.

"Don't tell me it wasn't my fault! I'd been told to teach him to fly, but I didn't. He wasn't a natural like me, I thought everypony could fly as well as I did but... But Teller..." She sucked in a ragged breath. "He couldn't. Everyone tells me it's not my fault but I just kept a *damned* eye out for him... If I taught him how to fly..." She looked up to Twilight, her eyes wet, but no tears sprang forth. She wondered how many people knew this story... "Mom and dad told me he wouldn't want me to ever stop flying, he loved to watch me get better and better, so I got better and better at it for myself and for him. And right now he's with Anathema, and I'm going to see him again and beg for forgiveness. Okay Twilight? I don't care if I have to see those images again, as long as I can see Teller."

"..." Twilight didn't know what to say. Dash hated to show weakness, and didn't talk a lot about her childhood, only stories about her time at the Young Flier's Academy. Maybe this was why. Dash did seem rather helpful when it came to the Cutie Mark Crusaders, and despite being a braggart and consistently mocking her for not being athletic, never looked down on a pony younger than herself. Not to mention the big sister instinct she had around Fluttershy, and the constant attempts to get her to improve herself from a shy, small-voiced pony. "Alright. We'll go see Anathema."

She didn't want to point out that the dead didn't talk, but somehow, after her experience with the week, with Pegasi summoning lightning, ponies bigger than Celestia, and doors and statues that ate minds, she was finding it a little more credible. What concerned her more and more was Dash's mood as they traveled down the seemingly endless tunnel. She could tell she was on edge, probably regretting telling Twilight what she'd seen, but Twilight felt... Not good, nor comforted, but understanding.

She did want to tell Dash that it probably wasn't her fault, but the more she thought about it the more she thought about her own situation. She blamed herself for the deaths of those eight Pegasi, and began to think on it more and more... In a way, it was their fault. Not their complete fault but they weren't blameless. Despite this they'd been forgiven again and again.

Twilight knew she'd never forgive herself for not taking some control during that fight, like Dash would never forgive herself for what happened to her brother. Being able to analyze it in her head, rationalize their feelings and compare them, and see she wasn't the only one... It made it a little easier to forgive herself for what happened. But Dash... She had to try.

"Dash?" Twilight turned her head to Dash, and Dash turned her head to Twilight. Twilight's eyes were sympathetic, but she had a tiny smile. Dash had a look of annoyance, as she expected Twilight to start forgiving her for what had happened. But instead... "Tell me about Teller."

Dash slowed down, her annoyed look becoming confused. "Huh?"

"Tell me about him. All you remember. I want to know about your family." Dash's eyes batted rapidly, and Twilight smiled a bit wider. It felt good to watch Dash's face soften, and hear her start to talk. And talk. And talk.

Teller, like Dash said, liked to make stories. He was lively, and just as active as Dash, always running about, opening his mouth to tell anyone about his day in live-action detail with maybe some exaggeration thrown in, following Dash wherever she went to watch her fly and show off. It seemed to put Dash at ease to speak so freely, and the longer she spoke the more detail she put in. Dash seemed to even laugh a little at her own story when it got funny, and the smiles came easily.

"Do you talk about him often with anyone?" Twilight asked as the long path finally began to level out slowly.

"No. I don't like to. The memories hurt a lot. Sometimes when I'm up on my cloud, I try to think to him, y'know? Wherever he's gone I tell him about the day. I keep imagining him reacting and making it bigger and better, making Fluttershy transform into a huge dragon to fight off the other before it could devour us, or how I fell so fast during the Sonic Rainboom that I went through the ground and came out the other side. But I never told anyone, not even Fluttershy. It figures it's the smart one that would make me talk." Dash smirked a little, and Twilight matched it. She then took a deep breath, and sighed out loud. "But any chance to see him again, to tell the stories for real, and to apologize... I'm gonna take it. I'll look into the mouth of hell if I gotta, and just to keep giving him stories. I'll fight back out of it when I'm through. I'm his big sister, I gotta be strong and amazing for him." Twilight nodded at that simple fact.

"I don't think it's a good idea, but it means a lot to you, so let's go see what we can find. Oh, and if he's as good a storyteller as you say he is..." Dash looked to Twilight expectantly as the ground finally became flat, and they walked towards a light. "Put in a good word for me? Please?"

The two shared a small laugh as they entered a chamber. Other than the floor, it was perfectly cylindrical, and in the middle was an old carved column with stone serpents wrapping around it, their heads meeting at the top, mouths open to hold a brightly glowing orb of light. The two approached it with small amazement as it shown on them, and they looked around slowly.

"I don't see an exit." Dash frowned, and Twilight continued to stare at the orb. "Is this some sort of puzzle we need magic for again? Glow orange and be rewarded or something? Who even built this place?" Dash mumbled. "Some old kooks who feel like placing weird traps on doors? Big circular rooms to confuse us? Did we miss a path?" She turned to Twilight. "Hey, Sparkle, what's with the eyes?" She took a step back.

Twilight's eyes were glowing white, reflecting the color and the intensity of the orb sitting on the pedestal. Dash watched closely, waiting for that bitter, nippy side to come out, but Twilight continued to just stare. "Hey, Twilight... Um, it's cool but we need to go." She shook the unicorn, who did not respond. "Twilight? You aren't falling for the trap I did, did you? You can't just let this take us-"

"*TAKE US.*" Twilight repeated loudly, and Dash's eyes widened as a stone slab carved to match its curved surroundings slid over the entrance of the tunnel they'd just left, and above them, in the middle of the room, a hole appeared, and began to widen.

"Twilight?" Dash asked meekly, as Twilight blinked her eyes slowly, the brightness leaving them. Then, from the newly opened hole, sea-water began to pour in, coating the orb in a waterfall as it began to rapidly fill up the room, the hole in the ceiling widening still. "Twilight!" Dash shouted this time, leaping away from the pouring water with the Unicorn as the water filled up to their knees, then their stomachs, and then their necks.

The two of them took deep breaths of air and began to swim in panic as the water continued to fill, but the waterfall was growing as did the hole above them, letting in more and more water until the entire ceiling opened, pushing them away from each other into opposite ends of the room. The two took a last gasp of air before they were completely submerged, floating around helplessly in the submerged cavern. They stared at each other with wide eyes, until the glowing orb blinded them with a suddenly burst of light.

Rainbow Dash sucked in a deep breath, staring at Twilight, still floating across from her but not in water. It took her a moment to realize they were in the middle of an enormous bubble. "This... This can't be for real." She mumbled loudly.

"I think it would like to argue that with you..." Twilight stared at the glowing sphere as it lifted off its pedestal, the two ponies still hovering just around it. Twilight stared up at the hole where the water had filled the cave, and saw nothing but darkness. That did not deter the orb any as it, inside of its enormous bubble, began to steal Twilight and Rainbow Dash away, up into the darkness.

Chapter 8

Welcome to Laputa

Applejack drank slowly from the riverbed, savoring the taste of cool, crisp water on her dry tongue, filling her mouth again and again as she kept an eye on Pinkie Pie next to her. Whatever had actually happened to her so many hours ago was still haunting her. The way Pinkie Pie's ears twitched at any noise, her body eyes widening at any shift she could see, and she avoided shadows like a plague. Applejack had spent quite a bit of wasted time coercing Pinkie along, and though she was getting better she still whispered about seeing the shadows move, or seeing skulls.

Applejack didn't see what Pinkie saw, but she did what she could to help Pinkie grow confident again. It didn't seem too long ago that she'd been doing the same to Twilight, and the more she thought about the Unicorn the more determined she grew to find out where she went. She was hurting for a few days, had to defend herself against a couple of crazed ponies, and now she and Dash were who knew where doing who knew what, or had who knew what being done to them. It made her knees quake in anger that anypony would take her friends.

The only thing she had to go on though was that they had to go south, and so far they'd been running for hours and hours, never once spotting any sign of a dragon or pony. Few came so far south since it was uncivilized, and frontier towns hadn't even made it this far south. Small wonder, if Applejack didn't know how to travel by using the sun and the moon she would have lost herself in here a long time ago. The trees had grown extremely tall, the canopy so thick that Applejack had to rely on there being a small clearing just ahead to set up a sun dial and make sure they were going the right way.

Still, she knew she was lost, and she was pretty sure Pinkie knew it too. "Maybe we should turn back?" Pinkie asked as she swallowed the water, her body cooling down from it while Applejack pondered this, rubbing the water onto her body using her hooves.

"We made it so far... I'd hate to turn around now." Applejack didn't sound so confident, but she didn't want to admit defeat. At the very least they could go to the ocean and then turn around, but for all she knew, after the heat and exhaustion and hunger bore down on her for so long, they could be turned around. "We should at least go until we reach the water..."

"We're at water now though, and I'm so hungry and haven't had sweets and the forest is scary and this river is the best thing I've seen in a while..." The pony mumbled.

Applejack sighed softly, but it occurred to her that Pinkie was right. They did see water now, and though Applejack's knowledge on Geography wasn't perfect, she knew water usually flowed towards large bodies... Like the ocean. "Tell you what, let's follow along the river for a while, keep close to a cool place to drink. Maybe it'll lead us to the ocean. If it don't... We can go home."

Pinkie seemed to like that idea, and the two started down the riverside, unaware of the presence above them.

The cavern walls around them whisked rapidly by as they were taken by the orb of light through a long cavern, the air bubble around them perfectly sized to fit inside the cave. Twilight stared around at the cave but said nothing. She didn't want to risk the chance of their air supply being limited and had to quickly explain this to Dash before they could open their mouths to each other. She was worried they may even run out before the bubble had time to reach its destination... If it had one. For all she knew it was going based on the subconscious will of whatever possibly long gone thing made it.

The cave turned out into the ocean, and the bubble floated in the middle of the darkness down below, before descending and bouncing a little on the sand beneath the ocean. It then continued its journey away from the cliff wall where Equestria officially sunk into the ocean, along the dark floor. Though the light was bright, allowing them to see a good ways around them, it did little to remove the sheer gloom of the dark world around them. It was a drastic turn from the sunny, lustrous land of trees and grass, of blue skies and white clouds and friendly little neighborhoods. Down here there was only sand, stones, and black.

The bubble traveled for several minutes before Twilight felt a touch to her side. She looked to Dash, who had somehow made her way over to her, and pointed forward. Twilight squinted her eyes and saw it too. A slight glimmer, that was getting larger as they got closer. The bubble whizzed by, and Twilight severely regretted looking, because now she couldn't take her eyes off it as it swam alongside them.

The titanic kraken used its great fins to keep pace with the bubble, its oddly flat face, high, wide mouth, and dark black eyes only several meters from the light. Despite having arms that could crush a house flat in one blow, it made no move to attack or swallow the bubble. It only changed its motion when Twilight saw a long snake-like body travel over the kraken to swim to the side of the bubble, and she saw a great sea-dragon, its long serpentine body, its heavily whiskered, wide-eyed face, and viciously large teeth in all their glory. The two creatures ignored each other, focusing on the bubble. They swam around and about what looked like fallen ruins and rock piles, but on their third pass Twilight saw it was neither of those, they were the corpses of bigger, less lively sea beasts. The bubble began to accelerate suddenly, and the kraken and dragon, now joined by an octopus nearly the size of two Ursa Minors, several more sea dragons, and a small flock of smaller kraken.

Dash was staring at Twilight expectantly, but Twilight merely shook her head, her desire to communicate stymied by sheer awe. These many creatures traveled by them so closely, so easily, yet showed little desire to contact them. Part of Twilight figured they were just drawn to the light, but the more fantastical parts told her these creatures didn't care for the light, they cared for the occupants.

Perhaps... Perhaps they worked for Anathema? No, that wouldn't make sense, they were just beasts of the ocean, not belonging to anyone, but still, all the water, the connections to the ocean, all the words describing exhuming a body to the sea... The connections were growing more unsettlingly apparent, and Anathema did apparently devour heathens...

... Who were to say these weren't his kin, looking to do the same?

Twilight finally noticed they were alone again, the sea creatures having quit following them. The only difference she could see in their surroundings was that the sand was not rippled by the ocean currents, but lay flat, and their

were no rocks whatsoever to disturb the flat, almost unsettling land around them. Twilight and Dash looked to each other for several seconds before they turned to face forward, and saw what might have drove them back.

In the distance, they could see a massive, dark object that blended in near perfectly with its pitch-black surroundings. Twilight stared up at how tall the thing was, reaching near one-hundred feet tall, and as they drew closer she saw the thing was not in fact a creature like she'd feared. It was a castle.

The bubble closed the gap to the castle and as it drew near, high-lighted a pair of massive, intricately carved set of double-doors with clouds and Pegasi chiseled into its enormous frame. As the bubble approached, the doors opened up inwardly, sucking in the bubble and the light. When they passed by the double-doors, they were inside of a tall, but featureless stone room, and the doors closed behind them. The two floated in the bubble, looking around in confusion, wondering what would occur next, until the sound of water rushing filled their ears.

All around the water poured out of the room through seemingly no where, and when it was drained completely, the bubble popped. The sphere of light continued to hold above them as Twilight and Dash fell to the floor, and scrambled to their hooves. "Twilight did you see all of that back there! Right here! What was all of that!" Dash demanded, somewhere between breathless excitement and breathless terror.

Twilight stared at Dash, then the ball of light, then the huge double doors they'd come through, and let out a deep breath she'd been holding for what felt like the whole ride there. "... Legends..." She whispered softly. "Myths, legends, but... I saw them... A Kraken, a Sea Dragon..." She whispered, and Dash blinked long and slow.

"Twilight, I saw them too... I think they're real." Dash smiled a bit weakly.

"Oh Celestia..." Twilight whispered slowly. "When we make it back, I'm going to have made the discovery of the decade... This is incredible, Krakens and Sea Dragons..."

"Yeah, well, let's worry about getting back..." Dash nudged Twilight, who sighed, nodded, and followed her towards the other, smaller set of double doors opposite of the enormous, wall-filled set that they'd gone in from. If everything was as ancient as Twilight assumed it was, the doors should be

a complete hassle to open, if they would at all. She had a brief feeling of terror they'd be trapped here forever behind a few rusted doors, until Dash lightly pushed one open and walked through. It didn't even squeak...

Heavily disappointed that basic chemistry didn't seem to apply under the ocean, Twilight walked in after Dash, the orb of light following them both. The room they stepped into was pitch black until the orb of light flew past them and up to the ceiling, and nestled itself into what looked like a chandelier. As soon as it locked in, it lit up the room in soft moonlight, letting the two see they were in an enormous throne room. Or it at least somewhat looked like one.

They walked up a flight of steps directly in front of them and stood on the raised main floor of the room, in front of them a lavish, throne-like couch sitting two meters from the door. Possibly where royalty greeted guests? The red carpet beneath their hooves was dry and felt new despite having been here for maybe thousands of years. The golden candle-sticks that lined the room were equally fresh, not a speck of dust on them, and the same went for the cabinets and stands and vases that stood on the stands. All in all, the entire place was gorgeous. Especially cast in this soft moonlight.

"Twilight... What the hay is this place?" Dash finally whispered, almost afraid to disturb the peace of the beautiful room. They'd stopped in front of the throne-like couch, and looked all around before focusing on each other. This may have been the first peaceful moment they'd gotten since getting captured, and Twilight was again focusing on Dash's wings.

She knew Dash would get angry if she tried to apologize, or if she so much as pointed it out, but she felt she had to do something for her. Eventually. Dash's wings were her freedom, and seeing them gone... Well it hurt just a little. She recalled their conversation just before their capture, the passionate defense about her wings in response to Twilight's bet... It seemed kind of sick now, since they couldn't use either one.

Twilight glanced up at her horn, and tried to call even the simplest light spell to use, but her magic did not come forth, and the place remained dark. "I think we might be in Laputa..." She whispered, sighing with grief as Dash jumped up onto the throne couch.

"Looks fancy enough to be some mystical legend type place. Hey..." Twilight looked up to see Dash picking up what looked like a... Sword sheath? Dash stared at it in equal confusion, and batted at it with her hoof before sliding it around her torso. Twilight wanted to reprimand her for picking it up but, really? What was the harm? They were at the bottom of the ocean in a castle that shouldn't exist.

With some struggle, Dash managed to get it on, and found it perfectly fit her. The straps went around her wings like it was made for a Pegasus, and it was snug, but not uncomfortable. Dash looked at herself curiously, and then down to Twilight, who just watched. Then she struck a noble pose, smiling almost seductively until Twilight tumbled to her side, wriggling with laughter. "Worry not fair maiden! I shall guide us forth and fight off any beastly Kraken that chooses to wrong-do us!" She announced.

Twilight got back to her feet, and smiled up at her friend as she slipped off the couch and in front of Twilight. "Well, if we make it out, I got a souvenir at least."

Twilight shook her head and turned, walking around the couch with a small sigh. "At the very least... I'm gonna find a way out of here." Twilight turned and walked around the couch, Dash following her as they saw a grand staircase a ways beyond the throne. She whirled around suddenly to face Dash, a look on her face saying she had a plan. "Alright, I think if we're going to figure out our way out of here, or at least to Anathema, we should start making maps, at least in our heads. This will be our hub, so just visualize this place as the start."

"Right." Dash nodded, getting the gist of it as she looked up the stairs. She blinked. She could have sworn she saw a little flash of white.

"We don't know how big this place is so if we can find a floor map we'll at least have an idea of where to go, or where we are at least. Perhaps a kitchen would be nice too, we haven't eaten in a while and it could come back to bite us..." Dash wasn't looking at Twilight now. The flash of white was peaking from between the rails of the guard rail along the right stairway on the t-shaped staircase. As she stared closer she saw it was a face, a Pony's face.

The little face peaked up higher, and her blood ran cold. Teller smiled down at her mischievously, his brown hair mussed and his little eyes bright with life, and he began to giggle as Dash stepped closer, past Twilight.

"Dash?" Twilight frowned at the Pegasus, following her eyes to a blank spot on the staircase. "Dash are you okay? Is... Is Anathema back?"

"Teller..." Dash whispered. The little colt on the staircase turned and shook his rump teasingly, before charging up the staircase. Twilight stared between Dash and the empty spot on the stairs before Dash charged up at top speed.

"Dash!" Twilight shouted, giving chase. She did her absolute best to keep up with the blue mare racing upstairs but found herself losing ground fast. When they went upstairs they were in a long, wide hallway lined with boarded up doors, the soft moonlight seeming to spread up here and cast everything in a creepy, dim light that shot out many shadows, but neither paid much attention as Dash shot to the left when they came to a T-intersection, Twilight behind her.

Twilight tried to keep up as Dash ran faster and faster, slipping around corners nearly as fast as Twilight could catch a glimpse of her, and she saw that the hallways were getting shorter, the intersections more frequent, and it barely occurred to her that the layout of this place was impossible, having gone down multiple corridors that should have been the same but always different, but all she kept her eyes on was Rainbow Dash's retreating flank.

She turned and corner and found herself staring at a T-intersection, which she raced down and looked both ways. No flash of blue, no sign of Dash. She'd lost her. Twilight sucked in several deep, exhausted, pained, scared breaths as she ran down one hallway and looked around again, seeing nothing. She couldn't even hear Dash. She jerked her head around to look down the hallway she'd come from, which should have been a straight hallway with the one she'd come from along the right, but no, it was another T-hallway. She turned to look down the direction she was going and saw instead of a four-way intersection, it was one long hallway with a set of wooden double-doors at the end.

Taking one last breath, she made her way to the doors and pushed through them.

Her breath caught in her throat. She walked across the freshly polish linoleum floor to stand in the middle of the room and look up. The room she'd found herself in was enormous, completely cylindrical, and all around her were bookshelves, curved to match the roundness of the room they were in. She stood in the middle of a large circle, staring up at the multiple balconies and layers of the library she'd found herself in. She lost count of the number of balconies past twenty as it became too tall and out of focus for her to see correctly. A part of her went to heaven at the discovery of the many books.

But no, no no no no, she needed to turn bac- the door wasn't there anymore. Her eyes widened as just from where she'd walked through she saw more bookshelves, but no door. As she spun, all she saw all around her were books and shelves. She approached on and scanned the spines of the books, hoping for maybe a small hint of what this place was, but found the words were in a language she did not understand.

Adding to her fright, when she turned around, she'd found herself staring into the many spines of more books, on a book case that hadn't existed before.

"Teller!" Dash shouted, pushing open a door violently when she'd seen a flash of white close it. She charged inside but slowed to a halt in the middle of the circular room. She stared around slowly, confusion filling her face and causing her gut to churn as her many reflections stared back. The wall-height mirrors all around her showed her perfectly, numbering in up to the forties and being thin enough to make the room almost look completely circular. She turned to look back at the door, but all she saw was a mirror. There was no door in this room, just her many faces.

The quiet was deafening, almost too deafening, and it twisted her insides just trying to think as she paces the walls of the room and looked at herself again and again, seeing her stubby little winglets for the first time since they'd been cut, and finding just how terribly awkward she looked. There was no way she could fly, and as she stared at one reflection even closer she saw just how far they'd been clipped. Any closer and they would have been slicing the nerves, and that thought sent a chill down her spine. The cutting had been haphazard, no professionalism taken when snipping her

feathers away. She guessed, with how bad it looked and how little care was taken, her wings might not grow back to full use for another three months...

If they ever grew back again.

The thought made her whimper. She'd been so confined lately the idea of flying had been distant to her, but now that she reflected on herself she could see that, even if they did escape, even if they were free of these people, back in Ponyville where she could be with her friends and not worry about jail, about escape, about her brother... She'd never be able to fly.

This was the sort of thing magic couldn't even fix. The damage could be so extensive that it would be more merciful to cut off what was left and try to make her look presentable. Dreams of flying high, of joining the Wonderbolts, of shocking the world with her talent were suddenly childish delusions again. They were no longer within her grasp. She was no longer the best of the best.

She sat and stared at her own defeated image, then closed her eyes and let out a small sob. When she opened her eyes again, she saw the defeated mare she'd been at the Young Fliers Competition, but even less of a Pegasus now than before. She didn't have her wings. All that was left were her legs...

She looked down to her hooves and called back to the last time she'd used them so much. The Falling of the Leaves race with Applejack. The two had run so hard and so fast, and even though AJ was stronger and more used to her legs, Dash had tied with her. She was a strong pony even on her legs. If she couldn't fly, she could still be with her friends.

She looked into her reflection, and thought about working with Applejack. She could get a small job on the farm, spend her days kicking trees and laughing with Applejack. That actually sounds kind of cool, being with Applejack all day. And then at the end of the day she could rest up at Fluttershy's, since she'd no longer be able to reach her home...

They could live together. Maybe she couldn't fly, but as long as she had all the ponies in her life around her, it wasn't over. Heck, she'd never felt so close to Twilight. She'd been the first pony she'd ever told Teller's story to, and it felt kind of good. Twilight hadn't judged her, and hadn't been dumb

enough to try and tell her things weren't her fault. That meant a lot to her that she just wanted to know about Teller.

She smiled quietly to herself. Her life wasn't over, she could cope. She looked back up at her reflection, hoping to see her own smile, but what she saw behind her reflection caught her by surprise. She could see her reflection's reflection in the mirror opposite of the one she looked at, and a little something more. When she turned around, she saw herself, stared into her own eyes, then at the little colt tugging her reflection's tail playfully. She approached the mirror, and watched Teller bounce happily, then speed away inside the mirror.

Dash touched her hoof to her reflection, and slid through it like water.

The shelves never seemed to end. As Twilight walked down row upon row, looked every which way for an exit she'd constantly find herself surrounded by shelves that hadn't been there before. The maze was constantly shifting, and it just sent her confusion spiraling more and more out of control. She had started to run, sliding down row after row, trying to at least get a hint of the way out but only finding herself staring into the spines of more nonsensical books.

Terror was gripping her heart as she ran and got herself deeper and deeper, getting herself more and more lost and feeling her head and heart pound as confusion, anger, and sorrow welled up in her. She'd lost Dash. She'd lost herself. The plan was spiraling out of control rapidly, her need to escape swelling extensively, and she was quickly losing her own mind in here.

Nothing here made sense, the shelves seemed to shift, yet no book looked the same, and whenever she turned around to go back down a row the place had shifted without her noticing, adding more ways for her to go, blocking off old passages, completely destroying her mental map again and again. Every time she tried to climb the shelves she'd find that they were endlessly tall, and the more progress she'd made the taller and taller they'd get until she finally decided to climb down, finding she'd only gotten to about five feet no matter how many shelves she'd counted taking.

This place was utter chaos. There was no order imposed around here, and no way to impose her own order. The shelves were stuck firmly to the ground, they had extensive height, they constantly moved around her, the books made no sense, this whole place was one big headache, a maze you could never win.

She was going to die here. She was going to die of exhaustion, hunger, and thirst in the middle of this maze, alone. She'd had Dash before, but now she was gone, chasing who knew what to who knew where. As she sat in a four-way intersection with no direction, no place to go, and no idea what to do, she closed her eyes and slumped herself.

She needed Dash. She needed to escape. She needed to find her friend, she needed to get her help to get out of here. Dash had been the one to get them out of jail, surely she could get her out of this mess. This huge, chaotic mess.

She rarely ever relied on her friends to help her unless they approached her for help first. The Ursa had been her doing, she took it on herself to test Pinkie Pie's "Pinkie Senses", and she'd taken them all up to help remove the dragon but rather than make a group effort of it, she'd walked in to talk to it by herself.

She needed help here. Maybe not needed, she supposed, but she wanted Dash there to help her. Sure she was closeted and a lonesome mare, but she realized that the best days of her life had been in Ponyville when they pulled her away from her books and made her have fun. When she should have been writing an extensive research paper to Celestia, she'd be putting the finishing touches on the lesson in friendship she'd learned, and the one time she apologized for turning a paper in late, Celestia had rebuked her for trying to put her studies in front of being with the people who cared for her and having fun.

Celestia had been right, and had never been angry. Friends were the most important thing to ever happen to her. Even her defeating Nightmare Moon took second place in the list of things she was happy of. Being here, alone, lost, confused, and more than any of those - again - alone, it felt terrible. She'd been cut off from her many friends, trapped in a place she couldn't escape, and it occurred to her that she may never leave or see them again.

She wished she could at least have one more party with Pinkie Pie and her friends, if only to say goodbye. A small smile appeared on her face. What would she do at the last party? Chat with her friends, dance with them all, say her thanks to everybody for being so close to her, for putting up with her studious tendencies. She imagined there being a huge cake, each bite sugary sweet and delicious, and each sip of the punch washing it down coolly. She imagined the games they'd play, like Pin the Tail on the Pony. If it was her last party with her friends, Pinkie would make her go first and make sure she won.

Eyes closed, she imagined the fake tail in her mouth, and she took a few steps forward, ready to attach it where she imagined the flank to be...

And tripped and fell flat on her face. She shook her head and opened her eyes with a rapid blink, and stared up the staircase that had materialized in front of her.

Rainbow Dash stepped onto the mirrored floor of the next room, taking a moment to look around and up, seeing many mirrors just like the first room, this time with a mirrored ceiling. Only this time, on the mirror above she started in the far left, and on the mirror below on the far right. Curiously, neither mirror reflected her reflections. As she stepped forward, her reflections matched her steps until she stood in the middle of the circular room. All around her she could see her reflections, but they were distorted, like carnival mirrors but... Different.

She didn't know how, but all that mattered was finding Teller. The first room she had to follow him into a mirror, so she began to scan for him. She turned in a slow circle, her eyes barely looking at her own reflection, instead trying to seek out the tell-tale white coat and brunette mane her little brother had, but as she looked, she could not see him. He was in none of the reflections.

Dash bit her lower lip softly as she thought, moving forward to one of the mirrors curiously to look in and see what was there. As she approached, she watched her simulacrum do the same. She stood in front of the mirror and stared at herself, noticing there was a difference but... She looked up and over her reflections body, but stopped again at the face. She didn't feel

herself smiling, but her reflection was; smugly at that. It was kind of annoying her, that cheeky grin. Her eyes then fixed on the real problem.

How had she not noticed it? She knew her body inside and out, why didn't it occur to her? She did not have a horn. The smirking reflection had a perfect blue unicorn horn, and no wings. The horn was long and sharp, pretty too. And it split her mane right down the orange stripe. It was odd to see. Especially with that smug, winner's smile.

She walked away from that mirror to the next one, and saw herself again, but no horn. This time she did quickly identify the difference: she still had no wings, but she had a muscular, thick body that suggested a lot of training, much like Applejack's, but more so. She fluttered her eyes curiously. This was her as an Earth Pony, and she was still smiling that winner's grin. What was with this room?

She looked into the next mirror and leapt back suddenly, away from it with grit teeth. She had not just seen what she thought she saw, she had not just seen- she looked in the mirror again, her reflection grinning back, lovingly spooning with a softly cooing Fluttershy, who seemed intent on pressing kisses to her chin and cheeks. Fluttershy looked absolutely gorgeous, so playful underneath her, her reflection's legs surrounding her from all sides to keep her safe. Dash couldn't help but stare, and quickly pulled her head away to look into the next mirror.

It was her and Applejack wrestling, in a hold she'd never seen before- not wrestling, moving on.

The next three mirrors showed much of the same, Pinkie Pie snuggling her back, bouncing excitedly with a dreamy look on her face, Rarity grooming her rainbow hair into absolute perfection while delivering kisses to her ear, and the next showing Twilight standing next to her with the biggest smile she'd ever seen, and it was almost normal other than their tails being wrapped around each other's.

She had to push on, not sure what to look for but knowing those were incorrect. The next showed her in a Wonderbolt outfit, posing even though Dash wasn't. The next in a Royal Guard's outfit, sitting next to Celestia as the Princess watched her through the mirror. In the next mirror she smiled in relief, seeing her way out, but before she pushed her hoof through, she saw she was incorrect. It was just a brutal reminder of what had happened.

She stared at the reflection of herself back when she was perfect. When her wings were whole, spread out, ready to fly at any time. She soaked in the picture of what she used to be for a long while, sighing heavily as she flapped the currently weak pair on her now. She would find that unicorn and make him eat her hoof, leg and all when she did. She'd make sure he paid for this.

She tugged her head away and walked around the circular mirror room, soaking in each sight, of a richer her, of a stronger her, of a more graceful and beautiful her. She saw what felt like a hundred scenarios of things she wanted, or good things that could happen, or what she could have been. As she walked, she saw no clue indicating which way she should go, and her opposite reflections on the floor and ceiling seemed to know just as much, then again, they were matching her from different parts of the room.

Was it what she really wanted? Did she have to pick what thing she wanted most out of all of these, or the thing she wanted least of all of these? Was it a test of character based on her greed or on her future? This whole room made no sense, and it was making her chest tighten and tummy feel fluttery seeing herself again and again, happy, proud, powerful, satisfied, in love, loved, in a handsome position, all of it reminded her that she was stuck at the bottom of the ocean, in a messed up castle, in a room full of mirrors, maybe thousands of miles from Ponyville. She felt sick in terror as she realized all of this, knowing she was so far from home, from the people she cared for...

No, that wasn't entirely true. She circled around the mirrors again, and found herself staring into the mirror where Twilight was by her side. She watched with mixed feelings as Twilight, looking bashful and a bit mischief, leaned over to kiss her reflection on the side of her snout, and she turned her head just slightly so her reflection would face Twilight, and she watched her reflection and her friend kiss deeply. It sent shudders down her spine just to watch. It was an interesting situation to put it lightly, but the context she saw Twilight in just was not that way. Still, she was with Twilight in that mirror, and she wanted to be with Twilight...

... Although, not *be* be with Twilight. She took a step back from the picture, again feeling it was nothing but wrong, and once again smacking herself into a dead-end. She closed her eyes to try and clear her head. She didn't know what she wanted. She didn't know what was right. All these pictures

showed things that were desirable but only a few of them were truly things she wanted. Her wings, the Wonderbolts, wealth, her brother, Twilight, but it did not show her brother, and it did not show her and Twilight in the way she wanted. None of these mirrors were right...

She opened her eyes and stared at the mirrored floor. She looked across the way and saw the floor reflection sitting like she did. She looked up at the ceiling and saw her ceiling reflection sitting opposite of the floor reflection. They were the only two that really seemed to match her in her current situation. Testingly, she walked to the middle of the exact middle of the room, and they followed her. She sat, they sat. They still faced different directions.

It was like they had no idea which way to go too. They watched different parts of the room, refused to walk along the same path, and watched the mirrors in the same befuddled manner she did. Yet, of all the mirrors in this room, they were the only ones that showed her true form. Just as herself, with her tiny, stubby, cut wings. She turned around slowly, and noticed that they moved in opposite directions of each other, like a clock with two hands that went in different directions.

Whenever one faced one way, the other faced the direction the first one if they were mirrored. It occurred to her that they were just as lost as she was because she barely knew what she was doing as well. None of the mirrors were right but these two...

... Except they were still wrong.

Switching her view from one to the other, she turned slowly in the exact center of the mirror room, and then turned opposite directions until they face the exact same direction she did. All three "correct" Dash's now faced one mirror. She looked straight-forward to see what it showed.

Teller smiled at her from behind her legs in a mirror, wiggled his butt mockingly, and ran off. Dash ran forward, her copies charging with her perfectly in the same direction, and into the mirror.

This was the twenty-seventh set of stairs Twilight had climbed, and looking up from the balcony towards the top, there were more than twenty-seven

more for her to climb. Her ears flattened as she stared up. The library had righted itself, not shifting to hide her deeper and deeper in an impossible maze, but it just rose further and further upwards. Now she could circle around and climb the stairs of each balcony to the next, but what did that accomplish? As she stared up into the darkness she could count more and more balconies, and it just seemed to stretch on forever and ever. The more stairs she climbed the more balconies she revealed, and when she stared down she couldn't see the floor past the ever-present darkness.

There was light, but from where it originated was a mystery. It let her clearly see everything, but made no shadows except for directly under her. The light seemed to come from directly above her, but there was no source. It merely illuminated what she could see and several stories above and below her. It let her see the books alright but they were written in gibberish as far as she could tell. She walked around the circular balcony towards the next set of stairs and climbed to the next level, which was every bit of identical as it was to the one below other than the books. Each and every book was different, unique, special in its own way, not that she could tell. They contained no pictures, but each had different characters and "words" on similar numbered pages. It perplexed her how so many different books could fill so much space but all be the exact same unreadable language.

It stretched her mind to its limits as she tried to encompass the sheer scope of knowledge that could be contained here. Not to mention she had to ask where all the material for this place came from, how it could all fit in one castle. She guessed this must be the largest tower on the building to be so tall, but she knew deep down she'd climbed several hundred feet already and was continuing to climb higher and higher. It was starting to exhaust her.

As she took to the twenty-ninth floor her mind began to wonder back to her predicament. She was still alone, isolated, in the literal middle of no where, in a strange castle, in the strangest library she'd ever seen and it was endless. Celestia had shown her several games that were impossible to win, Tic-Tac-Toe being her prime enemy even to this day since she and Celestia had played for ten hours straight without reaching a conclusion, and was then given five math equations that proved to be endlessly repeating. It had been a lesson in recognizing when to quit, and it was the

time Celestia realized her student's impressive stubborn streak, as well as creativity.

After all, Twilight was the first and only pony to successfully solve Alculus' Theory of Endless Division. Using chemistry. And explosives. Celestia still liked to bring it up to the math department whenever they were having trouble cracking a particularly difficult equation just to watch their teeth grind.

But even here she didn't have access to the labs back in Canterlot, nor the shops of Ponyville, or the guiding horn of Celestia, so she was stuck by herself with a lot of useless books around her.

Something occurred to her. Maybe they weren't so useless. She recalled the long, circular shape the balcony created, making a giant circular hole in the middle of the room. That meant there was a lot of empty space. She hastily grabbed a random book, thinking back to the many equations she learned over the years and finally remembering the one about using echoes to determine distance, and dropped the book from the side of the balcony. She watched it fall into the darkness, and hung by the edge of the balcony, ears cocked.

Thirty seconds passed. Then Fifty. And she never heard the book. The floor had been linoleum, which would have made quite a sound if something as stiff as a book landed on it. She pulled her head back, wondering if she should grab another book, when she watched the one she'd thrown fall from above and down into the black pit she'd dropped it in at first.

She stared at the open space with shock, then her eyes widened as twenty seconds passed and it fell by again. And every twenty seconds it fell again, and again, and again, and again. The same red-covered book kept falling, and repeating its fall from above.

That was impossible. That meant this place had to loop, or there was a teleportation enchantment at certain levels to let this repeat happen. That meant she could have been walking up the same flights of stairs again and again without realizing it, and even worse... What could she do about it? She stared up at the rings on her horn and felt her breath catch. Her heart began to beat faster as the realization she was stuck here filled her. There was so much going around her, the seemingly infinite books, the infinite

building, the infinite loop, this whole place was an enormous mass of impossible.

It went against all logic yet she was here, living it, recording it, and she was going to die in it. She stared down at her hooves as it hit her. This wasn't the endless maze of books, where every corner could bare a glimpse of an exit. She was in a looping spiral that meant she could go on forever, and she would never see an exit, nor was she destined to...

She had to hold her stomach as it gurgled ominously from all her terror. What could she do? What would she do? At this rate she'd never return home, never see Celestia again, never see any of her friends...

... What would they do in this situation? Fluttershy would be just as lost as her, as would Rarity, Applejack and Rainbow Dash would go until their bodies gave out, and Pinkie Pie would... Stay optimistic. In her world, there would have to be a way out, right? Something different about a floor, like a switch or button she missed. It wasn't over until you kicked it, it was like playing needle in the haystack, but the haystack was a potentially endless cycle of stairs and book cases. Still, Pinkie would try, Pinkie would continue, and Pinkie would sing the whole time while she did it.

Well, Twilight, unlike Pinkie Pie, couldn't turn out a lyric to save her life, so she just began to hum. That was it, it was like singing, in your head, and it wasn't as embarrassing. 'Finding my way oouu~ut. Finding my way oouu~ut. There's gotta be a place to go...' She thought to herself as she began to inspect the sides of bookcases, and pull books from the shelves. 'There's gotta be a place to go! Finding my way out will be easy, I just gotta try and make it... Peazy?' Was that a word? Who cared, Pinkie would use it.

She hummed to the words in her head while turning the whole section inside out and upside down, feeling her focus renew on her goal: getting out of here. No distracting thoughts, no wandering hooves, she was going to get out of here. Unfortunately, this balcony didn't seem to have a way out, so she marched to the stairs leading upwards. "Gonna find my way oouu~ut..." She mumbled, thinking about where a switch would possibly be as she stepped up and...

This was not a library balcony. She stared at the guardrails keeping her from walking forward further, noticed the distinct lack of bookshelves and

cases, and when she peaked over the side she could see she was at the top, near the mirrored roof, and could see the bottom, which was only ten stories down... That was impossible.

But then again, here she was. She turned around to see what there was left, and saw a mirror on the opposite wall.

She was floating again. It was like she was in that bubble all over again, except they weren't flying around in the ocean. And instead of being in a giant bubble, she was in an even larger ball made entirely of triangular mirrors. She was floating in the middle of the giant sphere of mirrors, and as she looked in each mirror she saw Teller. Each mirror had Teller in it, but not Dash. No, she was the only Dash, but there were many many Teller Pens.

She stared at them all with wide eyes, the short white coat, the brown, mussy mane and tail, the wide, all-seeing blue eyes, and the little smiles of excitement. She was surrounded by her brother. Teller was everywhere... "Teller?" She called curiously, her heart beating in excitement.

"Hi Dash!" They all called at once, near a hundred voices hitting her at once. It was deafening, and it made her head ring. No, this was another mirror room, there had to be something wrong here. Where was Teller? Or, rather, which one was Teller? Were any of them Teller? Were all of them Teller? She took in a deep breath and gulped loudly. Another puzzle. She hated puzzles.

She began to bat her tail slowly to propel herself forward like she had in the bubble, and swam to the side of the large sphere of mirrors. Each one was just barely big enough for her to fit through, and each one had a perfect copy of Teller staring at her. "C'mon Dash, you're supposed to be awesome at stuff." The Teller in the mirror-panel rolled his eyes, and Dash snorted softly, moving onto the next panel.

"Uh, duh, no?" The next one smirked at her in a sadistic manner, making Dash wince. She kept going.

"Why are you even trying me?"

"Are you even trying?"

"You didn't try very hard before, you kept letting me get away!"

"What's taking so long Dash? I thought you were the fastest flier in Equestria."

"Tch, look at those stubby wings! Who could fly with those!"

Each one spoke as she passed by them, each one sarcastic, cruel, sharp-tongued, and the more they spoke the more it twisted her stomach into knots. She could remember him clearly. At least she assumed she could... Her memories with him were always so light-hearted except for that last one...

"No wonder I fell, she can barely even float." She grit her teeth as one shouted in her ear, tears springing to her eyes as the memories flooded back to her, of him falling, of the news she received, of the self-blame.

"Who am I kidding? She can't fly, what was I hoping to learn from her?" She swam forward, scanning the images desperately as the tears began to flow. She was going to teach him... Everything she knew she was going to teach him...

"Are you crying Dashie? You were supposed to be the best!" The latest shouted.

"She's crying! What a wuss!"

"A complete loser!"

"You're not the greatest Dash, you're just weak!"

"You can't teach me to fly, you can't fly yourself, and you can't even keep yourself from crying!"

"Wait 'til the others hear this story! The Magnificent Rainbow Dash, in tears!"

She swam to the middle of the sphere, not wanting to hear more, but that didn't stop them. They all began to shout now, yelling, drowning out her

own thoughts and burying her in her fears and weakness. The hundred Tellers called and jeered at her, knocking against their mirrors to get a better look and laughing. It wasn't Teller's laugh, it was a cruel, mocking, twisted version of his boyish giggle when he got excited.

She remembered long before, amid the shouts that Teller had always looked up to her, seen her as his best friend and helper.

"Stop trying Dash! There's no point anymore! You're done for!"

"You'll go down as Equestria's biggest loser at this rate!"

He'd loved her, she'd loved him. But there were days where things were tough, where she couldn't be a hero, when her grades slipped and her performances dropped.

"Fall down!"

"Fall!"

"Fall! Fall! Fall!" They began to chant.

She would always avoid Teller. Teller would come looking for her when he knew something was wrong, always with a smile on his face.

"You're gonna smear like I did!"

"All across Equestria!"

"The great Rainbow Crash!"

He would usually find her, holed up in her room watching the clouds, sorting her thoughts and stamping her hooves. He would approach her with the biggest smile.

"Scream! Cry! It's all you're good for Dashie!"

"The skies don't need a loser like you!"

"You'd do the Wonderbolts a favor if you just crashed right now!"

And he would nestle against her side and start to whisper to her.

"You can do it."

"Just go ahead and get rid of yourself!"

"We'll watch to make sure you do it *right* you loser!"

He would always tell her that. Whenever she struggled, all she had to do was remember his words.

"You can do it!"

"Hey she's moving! Maybe she's gonna get rid of herself!"

"For good! What a waste of skin and wing!"

She lifted her head up and cocked her ear. She could almost feel his little snout pressing against her cheek as he whispered to her again and again.

"You can do it!"

"Crash Rainbow *Crash!*"

"You can do it!"

"You deserve it after letting me die!"

"You can do it!"

She glanced all around, his little mantra filling her head and her ears as his whispers grew louder and louder.

"You can do it!"

"You can do it!"

"Let's see what color you turn into when you hit the ground!"

"You can do it!"

She looked upwards, and amidst the jeering Tellers, she could see the one that didn't leap at her, trying to get to her, just watching her with a kind, loving smile while he whispered.

"You can do it!"

The other voices began to drown themselves out, but this voice didn't. She rose upwards, slowly, going towards the mirror Teller smiled at her from.

"You can do it! That's right Dashie, you're the best flier there is! You're the best pony there is! You can do it!"

She reached a hoof out, and so did he, and for a moment, their hooves touched, and she sunk in, the voices dying, except for one.

"You can do it!"

The mirror was three times her height and five times her width, but did not appear to be distorted, contorted, chemically changed, or at an angle, so it had no excuse to show the bloated purple pony it did.

Twilight stared in disbelief at what she assumed was her own reflection, despite its... Obesity. The purple unicorn she stared at that had her hair and horn and eyes must have weighed over three-hundred pounds, very round and thick, and looking incredibly tired. Twilight had to admit she felt winded but she didn't look anywhere as bad as this tubby thing!

She glared at the image, which matched her glare, but suddenly her reflection's eyes grew twice their size, looking comically over the top. Twilight's jaw dropped at the sudden change, and the reflection's hit the floor with an imagined 'clang'. Twilight shook her head in disbelief, and the reflection did as well, but when Twilight stopped, the reflection stared back with her mouth on her forehead, her horn coming out of her cheek, her eyes molded into one cyclopean nightmare on her other cheek, and her snout was now coming out of her mouth.

Okay. What the hay?

She turned away from the mirror. The place was playing with her again, only this time it was actively mocking her. Twilight was not unused to being made fun of, since when she was a little kid she was always the physically weakest and clumsiest. She just learned to take it in stride until Celestia took her in as a student, and few people ever made fun of her to her face,

not that she ever retaliated but it was considered bad form to insult the Princesses' handiwork. Her friends made fun of her sometimes now that she had them but it was always in good fun, so it never really bothered her.

Still, to be insulted by an apparently living mirror? This was new, not to mention very annoying. She had to find a way out, simple as that, so she rounded on the mirror to search its sides for a switch. Her image, now back to simply being an obese blowhard matched her movements, but every step she took, every raise of her hoof made her reflection wheeze in exhaustion, and by the time Twilight made it to the other side of the edge of the mirror she was growing steadily more and more short-fused as her obese double looked like she was about to die trying to match the real her.

So maybe she wasn't fit. So what? She wasn't thick, she wasn't fat, she ate right and thanks to the antics of her friends often got more than enough exercise. Yes she often had her nose in a book but that's just who she was, it didn't make her less of a pony than Applejack, who spent all day kicking apple trees.

Did it?

She stared at her own reflection in disbelief. It was no longer a disgusting, obese caricature, but now it showed her almost perfectly, with instead of her lean, stringy build, she was muscled, tough, strong, and had a look and air of disapproving. She took a step back, and so did her reflection, taking it with the grace Rarity would when climbing Canterlot's steps. She didn't think she needed physical training, did she? She could be pretty fast.

Well, not Dash or Applejack fast, and she didn't have their stamina at all. She relied on magic to do most of the weight-lifting, but Dash and Applejack could do all of that with their hooves and teeth without breaking a sweat. But they were meant to, right? They're athletes, and spent all day training their bodies for the rigors of physical activity, Twilight was supposed to be the smart one.

But... Couldn't she be smart and strong at the same time? She looked back at her muscled reflection and gave it a tiny glare, and it rolled its eyes. Twilight turned away with a grunt and tried to think. If she spent roughly three hours a day doing physical activity and another five doing studies, the changes could happen quickly, but still, she could use those three hours to do her research work. She wanted at least the extra sixteen for sleep and

goofing off, since she actually had been scheduling herself around the possibility of being sucked into something crazy now.

But two hours were below the recommended workout time, serving more as goal for the exceptionally weak, and she wasn't exceptionally weak. She was just a little below average. Right? She couldn't be that weak, not two hours weak, she could definitely do three hours of it. Though it sounded very... VERY exhausting. She doubted she could finish her five hours of studying after such intense training, but if she studied before she'd trained she'd lose track of time, and fast. She knew her habits well enough, she'd forget about her physical training and lose the groundwork she'd been setting up by herself.

... Though, she didn't have to do it by herself, did she? Dash and Applejack were strong ponies, they'd know what to do and what to eat. She looked in the mirror and saw herself standing next to Applejack and Dash, but the two of them were ridiculously huge next to her now skinny, meek looking self. Applejack was all muscle and strength, smirking uncharacteristically smug, while Dash was lean and fast looking, huge wings spread behind her while she flexed. Her reflection just looked nervous to be standing next to the two giants.

Twilight turned away again. This wasn't right, she could definitely ask them but she wasn't focusing. She needed to get out of here, to actually find Dash to ask her, not think about this goofy workout business. This mirror obviously wasn't the way out, so with a grunt she walked towards the stairs.

She heard the sound of shattering glass behind her, and she turned with a surprised look. The mirror was gone, and in its place a hallway. She stepped towards it carefully, inspecting it to make sure this wasn't a trick, and calmly walked inside.

The hallway was made of glass. The floor, the walls, and the ceiling. When Twilight looked down, she could see it was hovering over a seemingly endless pit of darkness, connecting to a cylindrical spire several meters away. To her left and right were no other hallways like this, just empty space, but when she looked up, she found herself staring into the eyes of Rainbow Dash.

"Dash!" Twilight shouted, leaping towards the ceiling with an excited jump. Dash matched her movement, shouted with her, and they stared at each other for a long, long time. "Dash can you hear me?" She called, but heard no response. She wandered, briefly, if this was another trick, but she didn't want to believe that. She'd found Dash. "I'll find you a way out, don't worry!" She charged towards the cylinder in the middle of the void and ran through the doors.

~!~!~!~!~

The hallway was made of glass. The floor, the walls, and the ceiling. When Dash looked down, she could see it was hovering over a seemingly endless pit of black, connecting to a huge pillar several meters away. To her left and right were no other hallways like this, just empty space, but when she looked up, she found herself staring into the eyes of Twilight Sparkle.

"Twilight!" Dash shouted, leaping towards the ceiling with an excited jump. Twilight matched her movement, shouted with her, and they stared at each other for a long, long time. "Twilight can you talk?" She called, but heard no response. She wandered, briefly, if this was another trick, but she didn't want to believe that. She'd found Twilight. "I'll find a way to you, don't worry!" She charged towards the column in the middle of the void and ran through the doors.

The room inside the cylinder was huge. It was massively wide, impressively tall, and had bookshelves lining the circular walls. Twilight stepped out onto a red carpet, lined with gold trim, and stared forward at the center of the room. There stood a tall, bipedal figure wearing a figure-flattering black robe with a high, royal collar. It had its long arms raised to the sides, fingers pointed out straight as it stared at... Something. It then began to emit an ugly, guttural noise before turning slowly to face Twilight.

Twilight, for her part, managed to keep her foot from covering her mouth as she suppressed a gasp. The creature was four times her height, and where the head would have been on the torso, was instead a small... Octopus? Its skull and cranium seemed relatively humanoid like Spike's if a bit larger, suggesting a large brain, and instead of a mouth were a lot of tentacles. It had two piercing yellow eyes, and it stared at her with...

... Relief? "The Soul of Magic has arrived, young mistress, you may call me Tanat. I am here to assist you."

~!~!~!~!~

The room inside the column was huge. It was massively wide, impressively tall, and had mirrors lining the circular walls. Dash stepped out onto a red carpet, lined with gold trim, and stared forward at the center of the room. There stood a tall, two-legged figure wearing a tight black robe with a high, royal collar. It had its long arms raised to the sides, fingers pointed out straight as it stared at... Something. It then began to emit an nasty noise before turning slowly to face Dash.

Dash cringed, taking a few steps back as she stared at the not-so-pretty thing. The creature was four times her height, and where the head would have been on the torso, was instead a... What the hay? It's head was big and round and bald, like Spike's if a bit larger, so it may have been pretty smart, and instead of a mouth were a lot of tentacles. It had two bright yellow eyes, and it stared at her with...

...Relief? "The Guardian of Souls has arrived, young mistress, you may call me Tanat. I am here to assist you."

"Tanat?" Twilight whispered. "Assist me? But why?" She asked, her eyes wide and confused.

"Anemone assigned me here long ago, understanding that his work would not be finished even after he disappeared. The world is soon to be embroiled in chaos, so he set up certain signs that would allow his creations to recognize when it was time to assist the world once more." Tanat explained, his voice deep, gurgling, resonating more in her head than her ears.

"I don't understand." Twilight whispered.

"I have figured as much, which is why I am here. You must have many questions-"

"Where is Rainbow Dash!" Twilight interrupted rather suddenly, looking up at the ceiling. She could see Rainbow Dash doing the same, staring at her while Tanat watched on.

Tanat made a strange noise that may have been a chuckle, "She is here."

~!~!~!~!~

"Tanat?" Dash raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean 'assist me'?" She asked, her eyes narrowed and suspicious.

"Anemone assigned me here long ago, understanding that his work would not be finished even after he disappeared. The world is soon to be embroiled in chaos, so he set up certain signs that would allow his creations to recognize when it was time to assist the world once more." Tanat explained, his voice sounding like he was gargling water in her head.

"What is that supposed to mean!" Dash demanded.

"It means that the pieces have been set into motion, that the world will need help once again. I am sure you have many questions-"

"How do I get to Twilight!" Dash interrupted furiously, looking up at the ceiling. She could see Twilight doing the same, staring at her while Tanat watched on.

Tanat made a strange noise that may have been a chuckle, "Worry not, you're already with her."

"What do you mean? I see her when I look up, but..." Twilight trailed off, staring at Dash, holding her hoof out as if she could reach Dash, before turning to Tanat, who had walked around a small podium holding a crystal ball. He tugged a curtain down from the wall to reveal a mirror showing Dash again, now staring directly at her.

"Anemone was a lover of mind-games and tests of character. You have passed his tests, and now have his blessings. First, we must rejoin you with the Guardian. Come forward." Twilight approached slowly, hesitant, but she stood in front of the mirror and looked to Dash.

~!~!~!~!~

"What are you talking about! Do you see her around here!" Dash pointed up at the ceiling while she shouted, pointing out to Twilight who was doing the same, before looking to Tanat, who had walked around a small podium holding a crystal ball. He tugged a curtain down from the wall to reveal a mirror showing Twilight again, now staring directly at her.

"Anemone was a lover of mind-games and tests of character. You have passed his tests, and now have his blessings. First, we must rejoin you with the Soul. Come forward." Dash didn't entirely trust the creature, but walked forward none-the-less, and stared into the mirror at Twilight.

"You see your friend in a separate place because the magic of Laputa has fractured your mind into recognizing the other as being in a separate place. In reality, you two have always moved together and been together, giving the other strength, and wisdom, even if you did not know it. We must cure this fracture with another metaphor." Tanat stood by the mirror and swept an arm in front of it, his reflection doing the same. "Trust the other as you would trust yourself, and meet without hesitation, and you will be together again."

Twilight stared at Dash and watched her eyes, but smiled softly. They could do this. She trusted Dash, and she knew Dash trusted her. She sprinted at the mirror at a full gallop.

~!~!~!~!~

"You see your friend in a separate place because the magic of Laputa has fractured your mind into recognizing the other as being in a separate place. In reality, you two have always moved together and been together, giving the other strength, and wisdom, even if you did not know it. We must cure this fracture with another metaphor." Tanat stood by the mirror and swept an arm in front of it, his reflection doing the same. "Trust the other as you would trust yourself, and meet without hesitation, and you will be together again."

Dash stared at Twilight and watched her eyes, but grinned softly. They could do this. She trusted Twilight, and she knew Twilight trusted her. She sprinted at the mirror at a full gallop.

There was a flash of white light, and Twilight kept her eyes firmly shut as she felt what she hoped what she was feeling. She could hear her own labored breathing, as well as another set, and could feel a head resting on her chest, and her own head was laying on a rising and falling chest. She opened her eyes just a crack and saw a bit of blue, and a smile stretched across her face.

"I swear..." Dash panted a little, shifting with a groan. "If I see another mirror anytime soon, I'm going to scream..." The Pegasus mumbled, and the two softly stood up, smiling at each other in relief and joy. Neither were very affectionate when it came to their feelings, but they still stood as close to each other as they could when they turned to face Tanat.

"The Guardian and the Soul have reunited. The tests have been passed. The messengers have been awakened." Tanat started, closing his eyes softly as he turned away and went around the other side of the crystal ball. "It is time to fulfill Anemone's final request."

Chapter 9

The Lords of Equestria

The Alicorn of the Sun watched the men before her as they went through the last of their mission preparations. They took turns inspecting the tightness of their partner's armors, made sure the horns on their heads were plenty sharp, and for the first time in many years, inspected the sharpness of the heels and fores of the pointed hoofshoes. They hadn't actually needed such weapons for thousands of years, training and keeping up with them based solely on tradition. In a way Celestia was glad they'd kept it up.

Over fifty guards had volunteered for the mission. While a missing pony was definitely considered high-priority, it took second to the suspicious activity happening all over Equestria. It was supposed to have a base of ten, with a volunteer option. Over forty had turned up, many of them being familiar with Twilight, having guarded her over the span of her stay in Canterlot. It warmed Celestia to see so many were concerned with her safety.

Hero approached Celestia from a side door, and bowed briefly before speaking. "Princess, all pre-mission inspections have been made. We are ready to sweep for Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash. We just need your order to begin the flight." Celestia nodded, and Hero stood in front of his men.

What few knew was that Hero did not join the mission solely to find Sparkle. He had an inkling that finding her would lead them closer to cracking the mystery of this whole ordeal. The more he thought about it, the less it made sense to himself, but his gut was absolutely sure that going to Sparkle would reveal everything he needed to know. When his gut was as knotted as it was now, he knew better than to question it. It had never steered him wrong before.

Celestia had taken her place at the top of her throne while Hero thought to himself. If Sparkle was truly the key to all of this, then perhaps she could guide him to finding the invaders and punishing them. She may have

learned something... "Men, I understand this is not something we're accustomed to." Celestia started, eyes opening again to look over the many soldiers under her. "The idea of invaders, of violence, of warfare and pony napping has long felt far away and impossible. We've grown used to the peace, and the citizens have long held you as symbols of honor, but relics of days gone by."

The men stood at attention as Celestia slowly paced in front of her throne. "I have honestly wished that I could disband the royal guard, as I never wanted to feel there was a possible attack ever aimed at Equestria, but through my many years and my exploration as a younger Princess I have seen not all are as peaceful as us. I've always hoped that the potential for war was just a distant nightmare, but we are being forced to play our hoof in this matter."

She sat again, her chin raised high as she stared down at her men, unaware her speech was being heard in secrecy. "You have been trained in combat and tactics for this purpose. You have been worked into peak form and master fliers for this purpose. You are to find the young ponies taken by the invaders, and to put a stop to the ponies making themselves our enemies. My trust in you is full. Know that though I cannot watch you, you have my blessings. Go, in good faith and Equestria's name, may you find our enemies."

A hundred and twelve wings spread in unison, and they turned to face the open door and balcony leading towards the rising sun. Their wings beat rapidly as one as Hero walked down the middle of the many rows of soldiers and took charge up front. He lifted into the sky and flew outwards, followed closely by his men. Celestia watched them go with sadness in her face, wondering if they were truly prepared for potential combat.

She watched the black specks disappear into the distance and shut her eyes, hoping this war could be stopped before it started. In the absence of her vision, she did not notice another black speck make its way towards the sun.

She did not see Luna with a most determined look on her face.

The pillows, though obviously old and unused, not broken in by weight and softened by bodies, were comfortable enough. Tanat had insisted that before he begin his speech, Dash and Twilight were to get comfortable. There was much he had to do, he had to explain, before he could begin. As far as Dash could see, that involved standing behind the crystal ball on the stand with his eyes shut and not move a muscle.

Twilight was softly chewing on what looked like a fruit and a slug at the same time. The big octopus-headed thing had pulled all of these out of seemingly no where, setting a bowl of flesh-colored "Pony Food" as he'd called it before them. Honestly, they looked disgusting, and Twilight's face didn't really inspire any confidence.

"It tastes like..." Twilight stared at the fruit. "Like an orange and an apple soaked in sea water..." She mumbled, sniffing the bite she took. It was crunchy at least and had a layer of fuzz on its hull, and the inside looked like it had layers.

"Ugh, can I pass?" Dash grumbled, her stomach growling heavily as she stared at what amounted to food.

"This is our first opportunity to eat in who knows how many hours. Look, it's not great but you might as-" Dash shoved one of pieces of fruit into Twilight's mouth, making her shut up and chew slowly in annoyance. Dash just smiled quietly.

The distraction was nice, it really was, knowing they were officially in a safe place despite the creature just feet away from them, but really, she was brimming with questions and demands. She had seen her brother everywhere here, so where was he? Was he just an illusion like the other tests? Her stomach on top of feeling hungry felt very low as she considered the possibility. To be tricked like this, thinking she'd see Teller again, it angered her...

But being back with Twilight was sort of worth it. The unicorn was trying to push one of the fruit into her hooves but Dash avoided it, even leaping off of her cushion to avoid it, making Twilight giggle as she chased with the fruit in her mouth. "Keep that nasty thing away from me Twilight! Don't make me pounce you!" She shouted.

No enemies. No danger. No constantly having to push forward or think her way out. Just had to play keep-away-from with Twilight. Yet her body wouldn't let her relax. This was the most comfort they'd had since this whole trial began yet her nerves were set on the edge, nearing the fraying point. She was expecting at any moment for Tanat to turn around and try to eat them, or to find herself in another mirror puzzle, or to find Twilight was fake...

She stared at Twilight as the pony took a pouncing stance, ready to spring in any direction that Dash chose. Dash watched her carefully. She looked very much like Twilight, and she'd certainly felt real, but somehow this place knew about her little brother too, knew about his words, his death, what really hurt her... Who knew what else it could do?

Rather than springing to the left or the right, or backing into the shelf behind her, Dash slowly crept forward, matching Twilight's stance. The two stared at each other for a long while, both getting ready to attack the other. Twilight was acting odd. She was rarely this playful or this aggressive. In a way it felt more... Real? The place was getting her all wrong, rather than trying to make her calmly reason with Dash, Twilight was acting like a happy little filly.

Well, she supposed she should be happy. She was out of prison, out of this place's tests, and was back with her friend. Dash felt a little more calm as she thought about it. This wasn't the Twilight she was used to, what Laputa would have made to give her a test.

Dash sprung forward and Twilight squeaked as she was tackled, dazing her long enough for Dash to grab the fruit and march away in triumph. Twilight had to blink her eyes rapidly before looking up to watch Dash eat. "Ugh..." Dash mumbled after swallowing and glancing to Twilight. "I think I'd prefer plain old bread..."

"It's not that bad..." Twilight insisted with a tiny smile as Dash finished the fruit and grabbed another. The two shared the bowl, eating each one and filling their bellies before returning to their cushions. Despite the taste, it had actually filled them up as promised. It felt good. To be full, that is, since the past few days she'd been living off old grain or wet straw.

Dash made sure they while they rested together that their sides would be touching. She needed the comfort, and she knew Twilight would want it too.

"My preparations are complete." Came Tanat's guttural voice in their head. Twilight had been the first to notice his tentacles never moved when he spoke. She had the feeling Tanat did not talk through his mouth. "And my thoughts have been collected. I am ready to tell you the history of Equestria." He lowered his arms, and with a wave of his finger, the two ponies and their cushions were pulled forward, as if on puppet strings.

They stared at him in slight shock, before Dash broke out of it, "Wait wait wait, what do you mean you're going to tell us the history of Equestria? We know the history, we learned it every year as kids and hear it every year from Canterlot's storytellers during Celestia's Sun Ceremony. It started when Princess Celestia and Princess Luna-"

"It did not start with Celestia or Luna, as the storytellers say. It did not even start with their birth. Rather, my story ends with their birth." Tanat interrupted, and the two glanced at each other before back to Tanat.

"You're not making much sense. What about Anemone's 'final request'? What does that have to do with us?" Twilight asked as Dash's ears flattened. Celestia was thousands of years old, right? As far as she knew, Celestia was the beginning of Equestria.

"Anemone's wishes tie in with the history of the world as you know it. Before I can ask, you have to understand. It is relevant to the present as well, and it will tell you much about the mysteries left behind by old times. Now, the story begins with-"

"Hey!" Dash jumped up suddenly, making Tanat open his eyes. "What about my brother? What about Anathema? I came this way to find Anathema since he had my brother, and I've been seeing Teller all over during those 'tests'. He was in all those mirrors!"

"As I said, all the mysteries will be revealed in the story. Now, my story begins long ago, well before the birth of-"

"You had mirrors?" Twilight whispered, but Tanat stopped anyways and opened his eyes again.

"Uh, yeah, why?"

"My tests were in a library. Do you think it might have some symbolic meaning? Some physical representation of ourselves? Like mine was a library and yours were mirrors, so maybe-"

"-mine was a test of like... How I see myself?" Dash continued.

"Probably! And mine was a library so maybe it was a test of intelligence? Or it was a lot of mazes to, so confusion? No, maybe my wandering in my mind... Perhaps mental clutter?"

"A maze of bookshelves? That is so you, egghead."

"Wow, an ancient magical spell cast on an entire castle to test the inner qualities of a pony... That is some intense magic. If only I could read some of the books here, I bet the knowledge is fantastic." The two smiled at each other briefly before turning to Tanat. "Oh, sorry, did we interrupt?"

"It is no worry, Mistress, tests of the mind and soul often send the participants to a realm beyond discomfort. Settling back in is often an," He blinked, and squeezed his hands together, "interruptive process."

"Okay, well, we should be done. Please go ahead." Twilight nodded.

Tanat nodded and rose himself up, raising his arms above his head, "My story begins thousands of years-"

"Hey!" His arms fell and his face scrunched up as Dash pawed the food bowl. "You got anymore of this fruit?"

"*NO. Thousands of years ago long* before the birth of your Princess Celestia and Princess Luna, the predecessors of the land, the great Alicorns who created the soil beneath your feet, the sky above your head, and the oceans and rivers providing the soil and the inhabitants with nourishment, had finished perfecting the world we live in." Tanat opened his yellow eyes wide and stared at the two ponies, as if daring them to interrupt, but the two remained quiet. He untensed slowly, and continued to speak.

The two ponies sat uneasily as he started up again, "It was a prosperous time, as the Alicorns were viewed favorably and loved by all. Terraria, the uncompromising gargantuan Alicorn of the Earth and his mighty castle

among the canyons of the east, Atmos, the swift and proud Alicorn of the sky with his mighty flying home Laputa," Twilight's and Dash's ears perked, and they glanced around the room curiously, "And helpful, peaceful Anemone, who rested at the bottom of the ocean rather than live in finery."

"The three had powerful magic that they used to carve the planet with, and seeing that their subjects would need the magic themselves to carve out their homes and help gather the things they needed to live, dug out the leylines of the world. The three Alicorn brothers spread their powerful magic around the planet to grant all who inhabit their world power. Those of the Earth could master the soil like none other, those of the sky could find peace and rest at all times among the clouds while transporting heavy good with ease, and those of the ocean, those who had horns, were granted the greatest magical power of all: manipulation of the world around them, to make up for their frail bodies."

"The leylines were not spread equally though, as the brothers felt there needed to be a core, a center of the world's magic where the three brothers may stay and continue to keep the lines healthy. They chose the spot where all the leylines crossed, where the most magical power was held; they chose Equestria." He raised his hands and the crystal ball began to glow, and a full map of the world and its lands showed above them as a magical hologram, with lines stretched across the lands in patterns, at times crossing each other, but there was one spot where they all crossed: the land they knew best.

"Each brother chose to make their home in Equestria. Terraria in the canyons of the east, Atmos in the skies to the west, and Anemone, in the oceans to the south. It was peaceful for several years, until the debates began. Terraria was powerful, stubborn, and liked to be acknowledged for the effort he put into everything he did. Atmos was proud, arrogant, and basked in the admiration of his many subjects, but withered without them. Anemone was quiet, and shy, and disliked attention, so rather than make himself visible to his followers, he hid. This proved to be a wise choice."

"'Terraria, the mighty Alicorn of the Earth gave us the ground we walk on, the soil we plant in, the plants we eat and the trees that provide us fruit. He of all the Alicorns deserves the most of our prayer and offerings.' A majority of the Earth ponies would argue. 'How can you say it is Terraria who deserves all that? Atmos provided us with the sky, the light, the coming and

going of seasons and the wonderful weather we bask in, without Atmos there would be no fertile soil or plants to grow, he deserves the most of our prayers and offerings.' Many of the Pegasi argued. The Unicorns did not have Anemone to argue for, and their kind were typically split among the two sides."

"There was much heat from both sides, threatening to grow into a raging firestorm to consume all. It was only when Anemone had heard wanderers on his shores that he would appear to provide a solution: 'You talk about praise and gifts for my brothers without asking their opinions, you should ask them who should be praised.' Anemone trusted his brothers, Anemone thought he knew his brothers, and Anemone, in his belief that his brothers were above such trivialities, thought they would settle the arguments as brothers rather than lords."

"As I had stated, Terraria was stubborn and wanted acknowledgement, and Atmos was proud and wanted admiration. When asked who should be praised and given to, the brothers, rather than settle the dispute as foolish talk of wealth, became involved in it. Terraria and Atmos both felt they deserved more than the other, refusing to acknowledge they could not do without the other, and soon seeds of bitter hatred were planted within both as they left the other in disgust. The debate had not been settled, in fact only worsened by the Alicorns' hot-headedness, and fueled by the brothers' resentment of the other the two sides, claiming the names Earth under Terraria, and Sky under Atmos, began to openly feud across Equestria."

"Earth took on the symbol of the deep canyons, Sky had chosen the clouds as their symbols, and they openly displayed them on their persons and objects to show their allegiances so their allies would know who they were. Unfortunately, it also identified the other as enemies. It started as arguments, scuffles, provoked attacks on the roads and in towns. It soon turned into ambushes, raids, mercenary bands crossing the hills and skies, seeking out their 'enemies'. Then it became war. Armor was hammered out, weapons smelted, and hearts filled with anger and hatred towards those who may have formerly been neighbors or even family, and soon they marched towards open fields to fight, wanting blood to settle their differences."

"It had been almost... Honorable, at first. They fought in the fields, and kept themselves separated afterwards, not touching the innocent villages, but as

the fighting became more furious and emotions ran high, they struck at each other where they were most weak, where they got their supplies. Villages were destroyed in furious retribution, innocents slaughtered for showing the wrong symbols, and all the fineries were gathered and sent to their chosen deity as gifts. Terraria and Atmos saw this happen, and rather than look at the terror and bloodshed committed caused by their pettiness, they saw the potential for power, wealth, and praise. Using their mighty magic they fueled their subjects with power that could crack the Earth and bring the skies to fall, giving them weapons and armor and tools they had meditated on that proved to be so strong that a single usage could wipe out entire platoons of their enemies. The rampaging war soon consumed what little peace there was, and the only safe havens were the personal homes of each lord."

"In this time, many died. Hundreds of soldiers and innocents spilled across the land, their bodies wrecked by anger and hatred. There were no graves wide or deep enough, so rather than give them to the land, they were taken to the ocean, and tossed to Anemone. It became practice to beg Anemone to commit their soldiers to an afterlife where they could live peacefully, and still provide wisdom from beyond, but they twisted it just as quickly, and begged for a place to send their enemies, a torturous place where they would not taint their own beyond.

"Anemone, kind and compromising, created an afterlife where the souls would rest, and hesitantly complied in creating a hell. He knew he could not banish the subjects he'd made the world for to such a terrible place himself, so he crafted Anathema, the Mouth of Hell to do so for him. He condemned nobody at first, feeling they all deserved a place of peace and kindness in death, but as the prayers became less about honoring the dead and more about condemning their enemies, he became bitter. Rather than give their allies paradise and their enemies torture, he did the opposite. He condemned the beggars to hell and put their enemies in paradise for being so cruel-hearted, but as more bodies were tossed to his domain, he became enraged."

"Poor Anemone, always so kind and peaceful and compromising, was driven mad by the constant calls for damnation, for filling his once peaceful waters with death and blood. His madness began to show as the waters became dangerous with beasts of great power and greater hunger, and his magic became tainted with insanity and terror. It seeped across the land

and began to give birth to monsters that knew no mercy or pleasure, just hunger, anger, and death. Behemoths, devourers, demons, and monsters roamed the land, interrupted wars, and tore apart anyone they found to be condemned to hell. The bodies honorably given to him were all sent to Anathema, Paradise closed off to everyone."

"Atmos and Terraria should have noticed, but they were too busy planning a final, destructive battle to establish dominance. They took it to the formerly peaceful neutral zone of the Oceanside, their thousands of followers suited for war, given artifacts and spells of the mightiest power that would surely sunder themselves, their enemies, and the land apart. Terraria lead the attack by land, and Atmos lead the attack by air on his flying castle Laputa. The followers of Sky came from the clouds, the followers of Earth waited on the beaches. Then, before the first blow could be struck, a great scream ripped through the air, driving all present to panic and fear."

"From the depths of the ocean rose the great serpent, the almighty, the all terrible, the unforgiving Anathema rose to the land, his mighty gaze condemning all he saw to a terrible fate as he began to devour them all one by one. His stare drove all to madness, and in the chaos and confusion Anemone rose as a great Alicorn made of seawater, allowing his shocked brothers to see his anger in its full as his magic penetrated Laputa's defenses. Atmos abandoned his home, watched as quiet, kind Anemone grabbed his great castle and forced it into the sea, killing and feeding all inside to Anathema. The great Alicorn of Death sent his mightiest creation onto the land to begin consuming the rest of the soldiers while his brothers fled back to the canyons of the east. Anathema, so terrible and judging, devastated the land in his search for Anemone's bitterest desire."

"Atmos and Terraria, seeing Anemone would not stop with just the soldiers or Equestria, drove Anathema back to the ocean together. They confronted their brother at the height of his madness, entering his realm themselves, for the first time as brothers, and found him raging in the depths. He tortured the souls themselves with visions of malice and destruction, turned the ocean into whirlpools of blades and death, poisoned the waters with the blood that had spilled, and screamed agonizing cries that made ears bleed. It took both of the older brothers' passions to calm him down and allow him to rest. In that time, the two emerged from the ocean, realizing what their greed had cost them, and caused to those around them."

"Together they reformed Equestria, wiping away the poison of death and restoring it to its whole, former beauty. They did this with heavy hearts, and when their subjects asked for orders, they ordered them all to weep for Anemone, and give him hope. Their many subjects went to the oceans, offering little but their tears and regrets, standing as one rather than two. Though asleep, Anemone felt the tears and heard their mourning, and the oceans calmed once again. The violent beasts he'd unleashed disappeared, and Anathema settled at the ocean floor to sleep alongside his master."

"Atmos and Terraria knew their own faults, and knew that overcoming them would be a great task. More than that, they knew they needed a quick solution to never fall from grace again. They chose to, after curing the land of its violent scars, seal themselves away in their respective domains to monitor the land, but at peace. Though, even with the regret and the apologies, Atmos was proud, Terraria was stubborn. Terraria became the mountains to forever be an unmoving obstacle in the sky, and Atmos became one with the clouds, so he may at times fall to the Earth and invade the land."

"When Anemone awoke, he found the world his brothers had left, and their followers left in confusion. Who would change the seasons? Who would know when to change them? What should they plant and where? All the farmers had been soldiers, devoured by Anathema and leaving little more than children, the elderly, and the few adults that knew better than to get involved, or merely could not get involved. With only the weak and the sick to till the land, Anemone knew he must do something great."

"Using his magic and the remaining citizens, he had the artifacts, the scrolls of destructive spells, and the texts of war buried deep underground. Using his magic of manipulation he gave the Pegasi the power to shift the clouds and weather, and the Earth subjects the power to grow and plant wherever, whenever they needed. To measure the days, he created the sun, to give the world day and night, so they would know when to sleep and when to work, to measure the coming months and years as they saw fit."

"He knew he could not stay on the world, as his own magic had grown tainted with blood and anger, and staying among the mortal subjects could drive them mad or violent or sick. But he knew the world could not be left to fend for itself, it needed noble leaders who saw reason, who loved each

other more than themselves, who wanted peace and cared for the land. The many subjects of the ground already saw the sun as a magnificent gift of warmth and courage, and the night as a time of peace and reflection, and he knew his answer."

"P-Princesses Celestia and Luna!" Twilight gasped, speaking for the first time since the story started. Tanat may have smiled, but as far as they could tell he merely bowed his head in a nod.

"The dualities of the Princesses, the warmth, the love, the courage of Celestia, and the aloof quietness, the understanding of loneliness, and the comforting presence of Luna were what Equestria needed. From the sun he brought Celestia to the world, and Equestria praised her as their leader. From the night when it came he presented them with Luna, whom they praised as their leader. With the two new Princesses, just babies at the time, left in the hands of a comforting, loving population, Anemone became one with the sea, joining his brothers in self-imposed, non-physical exile. Before he had left though, his final act was to release all but the most deserving from Anathema, and take them with him to a place of paradise, peace, and brotherhood."

"Years passed, Celestia and Luna growing slowly, Celestia proving to be adventurous and praise-worthy, yet humble and at times mischievous, and Luna being gentle and artistic, yet at times powerfully loving and envious. Anemone could see and hear his work, and felt good that he had done the right thing. But he was troubled, as he knew he'd forgotten much in his final years as a physical being. He scanned his past mistakes, and knew there was much he had not considered coming out of his madness."

"The world outside of Equestria had felt the deep upsetting of the land of the lords, and with Terraria and Atmos too focused on their petty squabble, the world outside Equestria became feral. Vegetation began to recede, animals became larger and predatory, and it soon became not a rich world of love and comfort, but a cycle of carefully managed life, and unplanned death. Wars began outside of Equestria, resources not regenerating like they used to becoming precious valuables to fight over."

"The ancient artifacts and spells he'd hoped to hide began to resurface ever so slowly thanks to Terraria's shiftings and quiet angers, and he knew with time they would be discovered again, and quite possibly used for

violence again. He had not calmed his brothers down completely either, and knew they would begin to feel restricted, and hidden away, and forgotten. Atmos is proud, Terraria is stubborn, and they would grant power to any who asked if it meant being acknowledged."

"Worse still, he found that the souls of the many dead weren't all as peaceful as he hoped, and many still brimmed with magical power put in them by their Alicorn lords. Any who found a way to bring the power back had the chance to bring back the violent souls, and if the power was released to the world again, the dead would rampage in their lords' name."

"He was troubled, and knew that precautions had to be set up. Using an old temple that had been created to bring the dead, he connected it to a long series of tunnels where he set up his tests of character. He created a passage to his grave, to Laputa, and he made Laputa the final trial to weed out those who could protect the world, and those who would destroy it. He left me, one of his last servants born out of magic and madness, to watch for those who are deserving, and present them with the story of the world, and his final request."

Tanat opened his eyes, and watched the two slowly, reading their shock-stricken faces as they digested the information he gave them. He knew they were noble, he knew they were powerful, and he knew they had no idea what was going on, or what they would have to do, or the acts they may have to commit. But they were the ones Anemone trusted. "Anemone gives his final request to you, Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash: take the gifts of Anemone, take his wisdom and his knowledge, and settle Atmos and Terraria before they do anything foolish. Take his generosity and his love, and inspire peace through the world. And take his anger and his power, and destroy the last remaining pieces of magic that threaten the world again."

Chapter 10

The Rise

Tanat's hand calmly stroked the crystal ball on the podium like a loving pet as he let the two ponies before him let the weight of his story settle on their shoulders.

Twilight sat in passive thought, the information sitting in her mind, filling in a hole she'd never noticed or even considered. What they'd just been told was not only huge, but virtually unknown. Celestia had mentioned several times that it was an Alicorn that had brought her into the world, but never why, not even a when. She'd never given her a name either, but then again she'd never asked. It also told her more about Unicorns; they're water-based ponies, and she knew then and there she had many experiments to run and old records to pull up to try and connect the theory. Even more than that Anemone's madness infecting the land and his followers could explain the eccentricities and sometimes sociopathic actions and feelings of some unicorns, right down to Rarity ignoring everything in existence when she was 'in the zone, as it were'.

But no, she was derailing herself again, this story, Anemone's request, the more she realized what she was being asked to do, the heavier this whole situation began to feel. She was already running away from a group of foreigners who didn't like her and wanted her magic, had a close friend nearby being asked to join who'd had her pride and joy literally clipped away, and, if Tanat was right, an entire world that needed help. She turned her head to look to Dash.

The former Pegasus was sitting stock-still, her eyes wide and her mouth very small. It must have been just as heavy on her. "So..." Dash broke the silence, and Tanat opened his eyes. "You want us to... Calm down Terraria and Atmos." A nod. "And help the world get better?"

"In a way." Tanat nodded. "The leylines from Equestria to the rest of the world are either dead or tainted with the dead. Reopening and purifying the leylines will bring back the Lords' generous magic, and bring peace."

"Hold on." Twilight interrupted as she stood. "Tapping into the leylines is impossible unless you're an Alicorn. Only two Alicorns are known to exist: Celestia and Luna."

"There are other methods. You will learn them, soon, but your manipulation of the leylines will be limited, as you are but a mere unicorn." Twilight quieted and frowned a little as Dash stood up next to her.

"You're asking us to do all of this by ourselves?" She asked. Twilight turned to face her, hearing the hint of fear in her voice, and saw the near panicking look in her eyes. She agreed, this was too much, this was far too much for them both. They weren't warriors or adventurers, they were simple ponies with simple jobs. Even if that did mean moving a dragon once. Twilight gently wrapped her tail around Dash's, an incredibly affectionate gesture that made Dash stop looking so worried. "We're just two ponies..."

Tanat's face stretched in what could have been a smile. "You do not have to be alone. You two by yourselves, even with Anemone's gifts would have a long, painful road ahead of you. You have an entire country, an entire world that, thanks to Equestria's invaders, may be torn apart if they tap into the leylines. Danger is powerful in bringing together the people, as the Brothers have proven."

Dash calmed further, and her tail flipped at Twilight's... Until the memory of her test came back, and she slipped away with a nervous jump. Twilight smiled in embarrassment, causing her to turn back to Tanat. "Well, okay, even then... We're chosen because we passed the tests, we can go in with people and with 'gifts', we'll keep the world protected... Is there more?"

"Dash!" Twilight asked in astonishment. "Don't you think protecting the world is kind of a good reward in itself? So we don't, y'know, die?"

Dash shook her head. "I've been following this entire trail to find my brother. Is this just some big set-up letdown for me? Have you just tricked me into coming this whole way thinking I can meet my brother? Was that just what I wanted to see? My brother being happy, being nice, loving me still?" She hung her head, so Twilight wouldn't see her eyes through her hair. "Is he not actually here?"

Twilight wanted to approach her, comfort her, tell her it would be okay, but she knew it wouldn't help, and Dash had every right to be angry, deserved

to be mad and sad, didn't need a friend to tell her that it was okay. It wasn't okay, Dash had been toyed with. She looked to Tanat.

Tanat said nothing. When Dash looked up to him, to be mad at him for tricking her, she saw his arms raised silently, and his eyes glowing blue. He lowered his arms, and his eyes stopped glowing. "I have conferred with Anemone directly. What you saw was not images taken from your mind, your Teller Pen was there the whole time, guiding you." Dash's eyes widened, and her stance changed completely into one of excitement. "Anemone wishes you to know, Rainbow Dash, that you will be rewarded appropriately. You will see Teller again, and you will have all the time in the world to speak to him."

It started with her tail, flipping with agitation, then Twilight watched the shivers run up from her hind to her torso, and went up her neck to her head. Twilight didn't know how else to describe it, other than excitement and energy so powerful that it paralyzed her. "I'll do it." Dash whispered, pawing the floor rapidly.

Tanat nodded low, and turned to Twilight. "What about you, Soul? Your guardian has agreed to it." Twilight turned to Dash, who was now eagerly pacing the room. She would have to talk to her later about this, about Teller, about this whole ordeal. When they were comfortable again, when they were in a situation that could bare to waste time.

"I'll do it. For the sake of the world. Speaking of which, the amount of help we'll need-"

"Has been measured and provided for accordingly. Anemone has had a long time to prepare for this event, do not think otherwise." Tanat told them. "Now please back away while I prepare the Guardian. I myself do not have the privilege of giving you your gifts."

The two stepped away as Tanat swept his hand. The crystal ball and the stand it sat on were swept away in an instant, into seemingly nothingness as Tanat looked to Dash. "First, an explanation." He made his hands into fists, and then opened his fingers as if holding something. He closed his eyes, and slowly his robe swirled around him. "All Ponies, Earth, Pegasus, and Unicorn have magic. The Unicorns have the most proficiency as they have direct access to their inner talents. Mastering them and gaining more is a matter of experimenting and practice."

Twilight nodded in agreement while Dash thought about it. Sounded like flying tricks, just had to be brave and be willing to face the danger of your consequences. "Pegasus ponies and Earth ponies do not tap into magic like Unicorns do. Theirs' is natural, and comes with age rather than practice. Whereas a child Unicorn would be unable to cast even the most basic of spells without constant practice, an equally young Earth pony may grow a seed with care and tenderness at an adult's rate depending on their personal magic. There was a time though, when this was temporarily rendered untrue."

His hands began to glow white, and his tentacles worked and wriggled as he seemed to be casting a spell. "During the great war, and even now, Pegasi and Earth ponies were being given access to magic. While it was never as potent as the magic given to Unicorns, it worked the same, nonetheless, and could manipulate specific things, rather than a whole slew of time and space. If a Pegasus was given lightning..." A triangular piece of glass appeared in his hands, "they were expected to work solely with lightning, but that lightning could get more powerful if they practiced and became creative."

"... Okay." Dash nodded, understanding yet... Not. She recalled the huge Pegasus that had hurled lightning at them. He had been given magic... Like back in the war Tanat described. She remembered with some unease that Tanat had told them non-Unicorns had been given very powerful magic that could devastate the land and lives of many... Like the huge Pegasus.

"Rainbow Dash, Guardian of the Soul." Tanat spoke, and approached Dash, holding the prism. "Your test was not only the greatest reflection of who you were and how to show it, but it was also the greatest test of what magic you would be most powerful with. You're constantly looking to yourself for advice, for flaws, for perfections, you prefer to be with close and competent allies, and you hate to fly alone, so I grant you this."

He held out a prism. Dash and Twilight both stared at it quizzically, and Dash approached it carefully, staring at it closely. She could feel the power coming from it. She recognized the feel of magic from when she'd first become the Element of Loyalty and helped pacify Nightmare Moon. It was a brilliant rush of solid energy, like the wind whipping around her, pressing into her body, but without the wind. There was the heat and the almost static-filled air around it that tickled her snout. It was powerful, she knew,

and possibly dangerous, but it was a gift from Tanat, from Anemone, the Alicorn that promised to let her see her brother.

So, with her teeth grit, she stopped resisting in her mind and body, and felt the pressure push into her body as she drew it in. The prism glowed softly at first as it raised from Tanat's hand, and slowly moved to Dash's chest. Dash didn't dare look, but Twilight watched with surprise as she saw the magic glow intensify around it.

It pressed itself to Dash's chest, and sunk in slowly, making the Pegasus wince in discomfort as it became a part of her. She could feel it, the massive amount of balled energy right where her heart would be, and she felt it slowly uncurl itself and shoot up and down her body. She could feel the power in her snout, eyes, and ears, every time she took a breath it felt like a sugar rush in her throat, her legs wouldn't stop shaking and heart was pounding. She was suddenly aware of every single part of her body at once.

Twilight watched with wide eyes as Dash's eyes slid upwards into her head, and her mouth hung open as she began to shake violently. A white glow began to appear around her, slowly becoming tinged with a ring of rainbow, which only grew brighter and brighter. The whole room began to glow with the six brilliant colors of the rainbow, and then everything went white.

Dash was looking at Twilight now, and she felt safe. She was also looking at Tanat and felt indecisive. She couldn't make heads or tails of the writing of the book in front of her. She thought having her tail one solid color was kind of a bland look for her. Also, she was staring into her own eyes while she stared into her own eyes. She blinked. Then she, or rather the other she, or the other other she that she was because honestly, she didn't know anymore, blinked back.

"So... This is weird." She told her green-haired counterpart.

"... I feel dizzy." Her green-haired counterpart told her.

"Twilight, you look... Off." She told Twilight a few feet away.

Twilight turned and looked at the one that just spoke, then all around the room. Dash did the same from all directions, and then found herself staring

at five copies of herself... From six perspectives. Twilight watched the six Dash's get confused, then rapidly understand what was happening. Twilight counted several times and found that yes, there were definitely six Dash's, no she was not going mad, and she found it easy to tell which one was which since they all had exactly one hair and tail color. They also all shared the sword harness Dash had pulled on in the throne room.

The red-haired one sat next to the green-haired one. The green one was pawing the floor in confusion. The blue one sat next to a book shelf. The purple one backed away from Tanat. The yellow one went back to staring at the orange one's tail, and the orange one just kept an eye on Twilight. "Twilight, you're getting that weird twitch in your right eye." The orange one said, on her left. The twitch was a sign that something was frustrating her.

"How would you know that!" Twilight demanded, having enough of not knowing what was going on, and was frankly about to kick all six of Dash's collective rumps into line if it meant righting the situation.

"I think I know from that one." The orange one pointed to the blue one, who waved awkwardly from Twilight's right as she watched Twilight's eye. It clicked. The prism had split her into six Rainbow Dash's, and they apparently shared knowledge.

"The Prism of the Many is an awkward item to use for those it's not suited for." Tanat explained with a slight chuckle. "You are six reflections of yourself, each no better or worse than the other. Gather your energy back into your soul." Tanat ordered.

Each of the Dash's looked from Tanat then to each other. "What number am I thinking of!" The green one shouted.

"You aren't thinking of a number, dolt!" The yellow shouted back.

"Don't insult me!" The green one shouted again, and then they all began to shout. Twilight wanted to appreciate watching Dash effectively insult herself, but honestly, she was still fixed on the idea of kicking them.

"*ENOUGH!*" Twilight shouted. The Dash's froze and the red one looked at her directly, but she understood just enough of what was going on to know that meant they could all see her, the exact same way, just fine. In fact, the

rest froze in place. It was really weird to see. "Do what Tanat says. Gather all that energy, the magic in you, into one place." She ordered.

The red one nodded slowly, and closed her eyes. Twilight watched her tiny wings flair as she tried to do what she was told, watching her take several deep breaths before finally, in another flash of white, there stood the original Rainbow Dash. No, that was wrong, because she only had red, yellow, and orange in her hair. The second Rainbow Dash, with green, blue, and purple, sat right next to the more brightly colored one.

"Ugh..." Bright Dash panted a little. "Only place I know where to use any sort of 'power' is my wings."

"Which explains why there's two of you..." Twilight mumbled, her fascination kicking in as Dark Dash turned towards Tanat.

"This is seriously my gift? This is stupid!" She grumbled, while Bright Dash nodded her agreement.

"For now, it is a confusing object. But with much practice, you will find it has many practical uses. But no, practice putting yourself together while I retrieve your next gift." Tanat explained and began to focus his hands again.

Dash wasn't a very good listener. She was more of the "I'm going to fix this" mindset than "I'm going to sit and listen to it", which was probably why the only thing she ever managed to do was trade a color stripe between her two selves. Dark Dash was growing more and more increasingly annoyed while Bright Dash grit her teeth and concentrated while Twilight tried to talk her through it.

"You just have to pull it together, rather than split it in your wings." She insisted again while Dash's eye popped open as she concentrated.

"Am... Trying... Not... Easy!" She grunted, her yellow stripe turning purple as Dark Dash's purple stripe turned yellow.

Twilight stared for a couple seconds, then pushed Dark Dash towards Bright Dash. "Okay, now, brace her and try to help." Twilight instructed. Dark Dash raised an eyebrow, but carefully wrapped her hooves around her reflection, and concentrated. As Twilight watched, it seemed like a

valiant effort was being put into this, but it did little to make it look like more than the weakest wrestling match in history.

"I think..." Bright started, her tensing decreasing as the twos' eyes began to glow. "Just a little more..." Dark whispered, and there was a brief flash of light, and there stood Rainbow Dash. "Omigosh I did it!" She grinned cockily, counting the number of colors in her hair and tail.

"Congratulations Dash. How does it feel to have magic?" Twilight asked curiously as Dash confirmed her hair was six colors again.

"It's like trying out a new flying style... Like switching away from Cloudsdale style to Fillydelphia style. But... Without flying." She shrugged, not really knowing what else to call it. They both required effort, focus and practice, but magic didn't require her physical abilities. It was felt like she had to focus her mind and very essence just to get it to work with her. She could still feel it inside her, circulating through her like her own blood.

While Twilight nodded and began to explain the boring basics of magic, she tested it inside of her. She wanted it to flare up so it did, and she could feel it brimming inside of her, threatening to spill out if she didn't keep it on the hair-thin edge of useless and useful. As Twilight continued to speak and be ignored, she let a bit spill out.

She hadn't intended to at first but she could feel it as it spread through her body, and could feel herself splitting, both physically and mentally. It did not hurt, but what she knew and what she saw was now in two places. What she knew what that Twilight hadn't noticed, since she'd let the bare minimum through and found it had cut down on the flash. Twilight was still talking mindlessly, looking up to the ceiling as she spoke about a lesson she'd learned from the academy.

What she also knew was that Twilight had a pretty skinny set of hind legs. Bright walked around Twilight's side and looked at her body in full as Dark did the same. Her mind and eyes were split, and she could see everything they both saw and knew what they did. She didn't even have a body to call her own, she was literally two bodies and minds.

... Oh she could cause a few messes with this. Bright grinned hugely as Twilight continued to talk. Twilight hadn't noticed, since the front of her hair was always red, yellow, and orange anyways.

Twilight felt something on her ear and it twitched. "-and the sharpest focus gives the best results, which is why Celestia trained me to be able to cast magic while I'm running or being chased and-" her eyes flicked upwards as something wet touched her ear, and she flicked it again, "-generally just a really good idea to-" she turned her head, and stared into Dark's grinning face and outstretched tongue.

"Keep talking Twilight, I'm just grooming." Twilight's shout managed to draw both Tanat's attention and send both of the Dash's tumbling to the floor with laughter.

"Oh man, I take back what I said, this is awesome!" Bright giggled loudly. Twilight just glared poisonously.

Dash finally began to listen to Twilight some and was walked through using her abilities. Twilight was right, absolute focus and a basic understanding of magic made it easier and easier to create the six copies of herself. Twilight also took the time to test some of the more interesting parts of having six identical copies that shared a mind.

Tanat interrupted them after several minutes with his presence alone. Twilight stopped quizzing the green Dash on what the orange Dash was looking at, and all seven of the ponies looked up to Tanat. "I am glad you are growing more used to your abilities, but I have the next gift." The Dash's nodded, and took the better half of a minute to become one again.

Twilight waited in apprehension. So far Tanat had, under Anemone's orders, given Dash magic. Not just any magic either, very powerful magic. Sure she could only use it as the item allowed her to, but it was still incredible. The uses of it were practically endless! She could get chores done with such amazing efficiency, the amount of research that could be performed in the most minimum of time spans could stretch across several books per copy, though the amount of data you could retain was still in question, but even in the short term...

And of course, dealing with those ponies who were chasing her...

Twilight remembered Tanat saying that it was not his "privilege" to give her her gifts... She wondered who would, and why Tanat couldn't? She wondered what sort of gifts were waiting for her...

Tanat leaned forward, holding out the next gift to Dash, who stared at it for a long while. Twilight edged closer to see what it was, and found herself staring at a short sword, one with two edges and a sharp tip, a circular pommel with wing-shaped guards, and a hilt shaped like a mouth bit for grasping. The pommel had a symbol on it, one of a cloud with a three-part lightning bolt. Twilight glanced at Dash's flank and saw it was a match of her Cutie Mark.

"Um..." Dash stared at the sword and touched it lightly with her hoof. She then leaned down and picked it up in her teeth, and held it as Tanat drew away. She turned her head and swung it gently into open space, testing its weight, and then looked back at the sheath she still wore. With a little mouth work, she managed to fit it in and slide it into place. It was the exact, perfect gift. She looked up to Tanat with an unsure look.

"A Guardian, and a pony of action must be prepared for any danger they fight. Whenever you cannot run, or solve a problem through diplomacy or magic, there are times when you must solve a problem with blood. It is not pleasant, but it is better to go prepared." He explained, as Twilight politely took the blade and examined it. It was too heavy for her, but for somebody like Dash, it'd be perfect. "You may use it as you wish. It was a gift from Atmos to his most loyal and brave of soldiers. It is enchanted to be unbreakable, and to always remain sharp. In the presence of old magic, it also grows even stronger." Anemone bowed his head slightly, and Dash took it back.

She backed away from Twilight, and began to swing it around slowly. Twilight watched with a mixture of awe and hesitation. A powerful, useful gift for sure, but it was clearly intended to take lives. Dash was not a killer. She was a fighter, but she knew Dash had never personally killed anyone. Dash didn't even seem to be too happy with it, but she kept it close.

Her two gifts, a good blade and magic... As she became six of herself, all eyeing the sword closely, she began to feel... Powerful. Twilight sensed it too. Dash looked like a genuine warrior, even if she did lack the armor, but she now had the senses and the numbers to make up for it. Curiously, she noted, only the red one had the sword.

"Your gifts as a guardian will grow in power and utility as you become more familiar with them, and you will find yourself in a good position to protect

the Soul. As for the Soul, it is time to bring you to your gifts." Tanat turned suddenly, and walked towards the mirror they'd met each other at.

Twilight and the Dash's looked to each other briefly, and watched as Tanat moved the mirror to the side with a wave of his hand. He beckoned them, and went through a door that had been behind the mirror. "Man," Yellow Dash whispered as they followed him through the door, up a spiraling staircase, "If I got magic, what crazy thing could be waiting for you?"

"You're 'the Soul' after all." Blue Dash said from behind, and the Dash's nodded in agreement. Twilight had to admit, having so many of them around her, behind her and beside her felt comforting. It was like being in a crowd. She didn't feel like she stuck out so much, even if technically six of them did look the exact same...

"I don't know." Twilight hummed as they saw Tanat swirl his hands, and two stone slabs blocking off their route were pushed to the side, and he walked upwards. They emerged from the staircase, and could only stare in awe. Twilight didn't notice at least four Dash's walking past her and around the platform to stare.

They were on top of the tallest tower of Laputa, surrounded by a faintly glowing bubble of magical air. The entire top had no features other than a raised dais in the middle with a softly glowing blue sphere floating above it. There were no guard rails, no statues, no mirrors or walls or bookshelves, and when the stone door to the staircase closed, there were no lines to indicate there was an entrance or an exit.

All around them was pitch dark. They couldn't see beyond the veil of black, out into the sea, but every now and then they swore they could see something float by in the blackness. It was horrifying, it was awe-inspiring, it was mystical and at the same time they knew it was real, and knew it was something entire centuries-worth's of ponies had never experienced

"Twilight?" Twilight turned to the Red-Haired Dash, who gulped heavily. "You see that?"

Twilight followed her eyes, and saw an enormous mass of tentacles hidden cleverly in the shadows, and the creature they were attached to watched them with dull eyes. "... I hope I really don't." She admitted, shuffling uncomfortably.

"Twilight Sparkle." All the ponies turned to face Tanat as he stepped up onto the dais and beckoned her to follow her. Twilight approached the raised platform, and two of the Dash's started helping her up. The whole thing was about her height, and could hold her, maybe ten others, and Tanat.

Stepping into the middle of the platform she found her eyes immediately going to the glowing blue sphere just slightly above her, which Tanat watched with a look of great reverence. The Dash's climbed on with her, but kept to the edges as they watched her. "So," Twilight finally broke Tanat's concentration, and chuckled meekly, "is this my gift?"

Tanat shook his head and looked back to the sphere, his face falling into deep relaxation as he did. "No, what you are staring at is your benefactor." His voice was deeper, softer, a whisper in their heads as he raised a hand as if to touch it, but he pulled it back to his chest just as quickly.

It took Twilight several seconds to understand, and she looked back to the orb with wide eyes. She took a step back, and bowed. Dash watched her, then the orb, and finally it clicked, and the six Dash's all awkwardly bowed before the sphere.

"Lord Anemone never really left the world, but he has been isolating himself from contact with the land for fear of tainting it with his magic. You have a strong mind and strong magic, Twilight Sparkle, you will be able to meet the Alicorn of Life and Death, the Alicorn of Hell, the Alicorn of Water personally." Tanat held his arms out, and his hands seemed to cup the air around the soul as he gently lead it towards Twilight's face.

Twilight stared into the glow with wide eyes, while Dash pawed the ground nervously in all six of her reflections. Twilight looked into, and swore she could see...

.. Joy.

Her eyes opened lazily. She didn't want to wake up. She was so warm and comfortable, the soft pressure around her swirling her about aimlessly as she floated through what felt like water. It was so nice, so peaceful, so

restful. She wanted to stay here forever, and close her eyes and slee~eeep...

She felt a mouth close around her tail, and she was about to pull away from it when it suddenly started to chew. Of all the indecent things a pony could do! She opened her eyes and turned her head angrily at the source, and found herself looking into wide, bright, baby-blue eyes, the longest horn she'd ever seen, and a magnificent pair of scaled wings. On a pony.

She had to blink twice. Was she being chewed on by a-... An Alicorn?

"Hi." The Alicorn finally said, before chewing her tail again.

Twilight screeched and suddenly hit the sandy floor of wherever she was and hopped up to stare at her "attacker". The Alicorn had beautiful blue eyes, but the most devilish looking black scarlet coat she'd ever seen, being the color of a deep scar except for his hair, which was blood red. He smiled kindly, hopefully.

Twilight looked around herself. She was standing in an opening of a coral reef. The ocean around her was the most beautiful blue, but when she looked up it swiftly became too bright to see any further. All around her was coral of all colors, teeming with fish, and octopi, and eels. A shark passed by, chasing very quick fish. It was almost pretty... Almost, because the sand beneath her hooves was a rusted red color, which made it clash garishly with its surroundings.

"Um... So..." The Alicorn nervously scraped his hoof along the sand, and smiled nervously. "I'm..." He then began to chuckle a little, like a little foal with a crush. "I guess I should start talking. So, you're Twilight Sparkle, right? My daughter's student?" He asked.

Twilight's ears flattened against her head as she stared at the Alicorn. "Anemone?" She asked breathlessly, her eyes going over his coat and his hair.

"Oh! Yes, sorry for not introducing myself, I'm not used to having company that doesn't already know my name." He laughed, then smiled cheekily, "And floats about wagging their rears at me, then again, I suppose you wouldn't be used to Comfort Currents."

That ever so pleasant pressure and feeling of floating went away suddenly, and Twilight felt... A bit sad, but she felt less sleepy. "Um... Sorry I guess." Twilight blushed a little. Shaking her rump at royalty... Maybe she'd leave that part out of her explanation to Celestia.

"Don't apologize. It was kind of funny." Anemone nervously kicked some sand and bowed his head. "I haven't had company in a while so my manners aren't really up to par too..." He then lifted his head and shook it. "No no no, I mean, not that yours aren't! We all make mistakes, I understand." He insisted, making Twilight blink.

He was incredibly shy, much like Luna was. Luna hadn't said a word the first five minutes Twilight had spent with her out of Nightmare Moon, and only began to open up when they started talking about Spike. Like Fluttershy. Odd, that. "Well, I'm still sorry. And it's okay."

They stood quietly, staring at each other. Anemone looked both nervous and excited, but Twilight could tell he was desperately trying to keep calm so he wouldn't frighten her. He was Celestia's height at the very least after all. Twilight wasn't sure how to feel. Awed? Happy? Angry? She felt a little bit of all those. She also felt confused. She wouldn't consider red a color of the ocean.

"So..." Anemone rubbed his forelegs together as he tried to spark up a conversation.

"You don't really look like I pictured you." Twilight finally said, making Anemone stiffen, then relax immediately.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I figured you'd be shades of blue, not red. Maybe even a manilla color due to the sand but red? Other than the coral and the fish I can't think of anything red about the ocean, it was always so blue in my opinion." Twilight mumbled, looking embarrassed.

"Ah, yes, well, see... Uh, Tanat told you the story, did he?" Anemone asked, and Twilight nodded. The Alicorn of the Sea smiled sadly. "Well... Madness can do strange things to ones' complexion when they, uh, lose it. I was blue, once, but then when my brothers..." He took a deep little breath, and let it out slowly. "Well, when their armies began to let blood spill

into the ocean, I began to feel that it was apart of me." He paused, collecting his thoughts, while Twilight looked down at the red sand. "There was so much it would often turn my waters my color. When I lost myself to the violence and anger, I took this color to be what I thought I represented. 'I was the Alicorn of Death, wasn't I?' I told myself. I never changed back." He admitted quietly, staring around slowly at his surroundings, looking at certain things as he did. "I can never forgive myself for allowing my anger to get ahold of me, so everything you see around here is my constant reminder of my rage."

Twilight followed his eyes to the corral around her, and she noticed with a tightened gut that the ends of the coral, which should have been circular, tube, straw shapes ended in the shapes of pony heads, the openings being gaping mouth. The corral heads had faces twisted in agony, and suddenly she didn't like standing on the red sand. She could see the coral heads everywhere, and even the teeming life around it just added a new layer of terror to it. They were thriving here, in a grave of tortured souls.

"Ah..." Twilight answered, focusing back on the Alicorn before her.

"I don't mean to be startling, but you deserve to know the truth. I am asking you to do quite a bit after all, which I apologize for." He bowed his head politely. "What I'm asking you to do is no light thing, I understand. I have been waiting for a long, long time for somebody as moral and powerful as you to come by. I'd been watching those who are invading Equestria. None but one would have come past the final tests." Anemone calmly looked up into the brightness above them, and sighed.

"I understand." Twilight answered.

"Do you?" Anemone asked, for the first time sounding old. "Do you know what it's like to ask a perfect stranger to do what nobody has ever dreamed of doing? Sending two innocent little fillies into danger for a mistake that you made and due to your own short-sightedness cannot repent alone? Do you understand Twilight?"

Twilight stood speechless. She could see it was tearing him apart, but did she understand? "I... I guess I don't. I mean, after everything I learned today I can see why you need me to do this, but I guess I don't see it from your eyes."

"Very few do. None do, in fact, as my brothers wouldn't understand the heartache. They've already sent many of their own to fight each other and each death toughened their spirits until the deaths reported merely became numbers. That is why I apologize, I don't want to come off as callous or cruel, but-"

"It's the only way, Anemone, I know. It's okay, I forgive you for this." He reared back just a bit as Twilight interrupted him, and she smiled a little. "I feel good to be in the loop. This whole dilemma saddens me for sure, but I know what's happening. The invaders are trying to get into the leylines, right? If they do, it'll screw up the world. Somebody has to stop them, and it might as well be me, right?"

Anemone stared at her for a few moments. "You truly do forgive me?"

"Yes." Twilight bowed her head at him.

"Twilight?" Purple Dash whispered as her friend sat, immobile, doing little more than breathing as she stared at the ball of light.

"She is with Anemone now, speaking to him. She will be fine, Anemone is benevolent and kind." Tanat assured her, watching Twilight with... Was that jealousy?

Dash wasn't sure what to do or say. She couldn't talk to Twilight, or help her at all, and she was alone with the tentacle guy. Even with so many of her around she felt alone. They all calmly stood around her, watching her body, just in case.

Then Orange Dash gasped, and watched one of the three rings on Twilight's horn crumble away.

"When they had asked me to create a place to put the 'undeserving' soldiers, I did not know what to do. In part, I understood their plight: They did not wish to share an afterlife with their enemies, and they wanted a reward for being on what they assumed was the right side. I created Anathema and a hell, but I was worried. I was terrified, in fact." He closed his eyes and breathed in deep, then opened them again. They were wide

with fear. "Anathema was a terrible terrible creature, a direct line to a place of torture and pain, a creature so ghastly that merely looking into his gaze seals your soul to a damned fate. Anathema was a loyal and valuable friend though. He was never hungry for souls, but he enjoyed the few truly vicious souls I gave him, and thanked me with his companionship. At times I felt he was less of a hellgate and more of a close friend, but he was still made to be a hellgate, first and foremost."

Twilight listened as Anathema walked the perimeter of the coral reef's open spot, and he smiled quietly to himself. "I remember..." He chuckled darkly. "I remember the first time I'd felt angry. Earth's faction had a priest dedicated to me, and he was an enthusiastic supporter of Terraria and a wild speaker. He would stand on his platform and bring a crowd to tears with his speeches of their dead soldiers, but then he would drive them to riot when he spoke of the enemies' perceived heresy. He would cast their bodies in himself, calling them mean names, trampling them before throwing them, soon letting the crowd trample them themselves before casting them in. I watched him defile loyal dead again and again, and I would grow angry. In secret, just to spite him, I fed the so called 'noble warriors' he blessed to Anathema, for being so cruel."

Twilight stared at Anemone, and felt the need to shrink away as she watched his bemused face as his head swung around slowly in agitation.

"He never knew, it did not deter him. He sent more of his side to Anathema than his enemies without knowing it. It felt good to enact revenge for the poor bodies he abused, and I'd forgotten what it meant to send a soul to hell. The day came when he died, hit by a bolt of lightning while escaping Sky soldiers. They tossed him to me, and we met face to face." His own face lit up, as if recalling a fond memory. It frightened her.

The sand suddenly swelled up, and Twilight took a few steps back as Anemone waltzed around the sand-figure of the old priest. "Anemone! I have finally made it to you, and I am ready to accept my place in the afterlife." The figure said with triumph.

"Good." Anemone answered in a low voice. "I am glad that you understand your sins."

Twilight watched the priest leap back in fright, as if something had emerged from the depths. "B-but lord Anemone! I served my people so well! I don't-" he gulped, "I don't deserve Anathema's wrath!"

"And who were you to say that Sky did? Were they not as noble and loyal as you to their Lord? You would defile their dead, spit curses at them and you prayed - you *prayed!* - to me to give them to Anathema, and you consider yourself a good, generous man? If you are so loving and generous, then share the pain of your enemies."

Twilight started to shiver as Anemone's face was consumed by peaceful pleasure as the sand figure screamed, and was suddenly a cloud of dust. "I felt so... Happy then and there. He had deserved it, for being so cruel to the dead he was supposed to shepherd. I don't know what came over me. It was some form of glee, that I now know was true Sadism. I never thought I would take such happiness from it, so I suppose my madness started well before then, probably when I first had to watch the deaths. It hurts to see today."

It was hard to tell because they were in the ocean, but Twilight could see that Anemone was crying. Anemone regretted condemning that cruel priest, Anemone was terrified that he was capable of enjoying it. Yet what little sick pleasure Anemone still took from it made a smile on his face. "You were a victim of circumstance." Twilight told him, trying to sound sure of herself.

"A victim?" Anemone began to chuckle. "Twilight Sparkle, you're so kind and loving. You forget that, despite my emotions I am a god to these people. I was a living idol of power and change, that could better or worsen lives on a whim. I was like the great god dragons of lore, who had grown so big and strong the weak worshipped them since one flap from their wings, or a sneeze in their direction meant disaster. I am an intelligent being, I should have known better than to create a hell. I was an idiot, I deserve to be isolated from the world for even imagining the concept." His great wings spread, and the red sand was pushed around him.

Twilight stared up at the powerful imposing creature, the great Alicorn of Water and Death, and all she could feel for him was pity. He was not a disgusting monster, he was not a cold tyrant, he was an Alicorn who had grown angry. "It's okay, Anemone."

"Is it?" Anemone snorted.

"We all have a part of ourselves we don't like. A cold, dark, sociopathic bit of our minds and souls that drive us to do bad things when pressured. You were watching the people you loved die again and again, because of your beloved brothers. You lashed out at them because of anger and sorrow, driven mad by wanting to please everyone, but to do so you had create a terrible place. It's okay Anemone, you were a victim of the circumstance. You weren't in the right state of mind." Twilight approached him, slowly, staring up at him quietly. She reached a hoof out and touched his leg, causing him to shake as the tears flowed free from the Alicorn's eyes. "You're just a pony like the rest of us, even with all your power. You have feelings, and more pressure than anyone else. It's okay, your people would forgive you."

"And you?" Anemone turned his head away and grit his teeth. "You saw my madness and how pleased I was to hurt him."

"I forgive you. You're trying to make up for it, aren't you? That's all that counts. You realized your mistakes, you're trying to make up for them, to everyone. You still care for Equestria, the world, and its people." She smiled reassuringly, causing Anemone to stop shaking. "I do forgive you, okay? So don't beat yourself up over it."

Anemone stared down at her, and managed a real smile as the red sand faded to very light yellow, and the horse heads became shapeless coral once again.

Dash stared at the dust left behind from the ring that had dissolved off Twilight's horn, while still staring into her face. Her eyes were blank, and her mouth closed tightly, while her horn still had two more rings.

What was going on? Was she actually talking to Anemone or was this some freaky spell? She wasn't sure she trusted it. She didn't trust magic. Heck, she hardly trusted her own, which was odd since the reflections were agreeing.

She looked to Tanat, but he had closed his eyes and seemed to drift off into a trance. She hated when unicorns did that in public, and this just felt rude leaving her all alone like this. It had better be one really good-

The second ring suddenly turned to dust, and fell to the ground.

The world around them seemed so much less terrifying as Anemone was forgiven. Thousands of years of isolation, and all this time his guilt had been so maddeningly powerful that it altered his realm, essentially his soul's resting spot, his own individual afterlife. It was a mixture of both paradise and hell, with the things he loved swimming around him, and his guilt morphing the environment to match his pain.

All that had changed. The coral was plain coral again, the sand was yellow, and it was more beautiful than Twilight had thought it would be. He just needed forgiveness, from both a subject of his land, and himself. It felt good to give him that, to put his mind and soul at ease. There was no more pain in his voice or in his steps. No, she shouldn't say that, there was just no guilt; there was still a hint of pain though whenever he looked at her...

Twilight watched Anemone casually walk around the area again, this time not stricken with energy and sadness, but rather a pace to clear his head. "I'm going to tell you some things about what I need you to do." He spoke, "It's going to be a long, very dangerous path, and there will be many trials along the way. Like myself, my brothers protected themselves with powerful wards and defenses. Fortunately, they have been deactivated for a long time." He smiled as Twilight sighed in relief. "To get to them, you must reactivate them."

He chuckled a little at the look she gave him. It was a look that was appropriate. The sort of look that one gave when asked to do the absolutely unthinkable, when the best solution was also the most insane, when what must be done sounded like it was completely void of all logic and reason.

It was also the greatest wtf face he'd ever seen. She had very flexible eyelids to pull that off. "Would you like a little more detail?" He asked, making her nod very slowly. "Every lock has its key, but the locks to my brothers' prisons require the ancient magic to unlock them. The invaders have somehow come across the magic necessary to do so. While they

seem lost for now, they are picking up ground quickly. What we must do, to ensure my brothers' safety while you seek them, is repower their old tests. You are capable, intelligent, and stronger than you think. You and your friend have passed my tests, I have little doubt that you will pass theirs'. There will be a certain amount of danger you must inform my daughter of once the old magic is circulating through the leylines naturally again."

He was a reassuring sort, but Twilight wasn't sure what to think. Sure she had passed his tests, but there was a certain amount of luck that went into them, weren't there? If she'd known what they were, or stopped to consider harder where she was, how impossible it was, what it could have meant, she was sure she would have stopped dead in her tracks. Besides, what sort of tests had he put them through? Tests of the mind, tests of the soul? Logic had not applied to any of them, merely her clarity and dedication. What about Terraria, the Earth Alicorn? Would his tests involve physical might? Twilight was not a strong filly. Applejack and Rainbow Dash were strong. If she had to face those tests alone again, she would be stuck there. She was worried.

All of Equestria was in danger, and nobody but herself or Dash knew what was happening. There were ponies around that would not hesitate to draw blood, and if they stayed hidden then who knew how much damage they could inflict before Celestia responded? And Anemone thought reactivating the old magic was logical? She hoped the effects weren't as bad as she assumed.

"What sort of dangers are we talking about? Equestria's already in a lot of danger with the invaders, how much worse can it get?" Twilight asked. She knew it could get a lot worse, but she had to ask.

Anemone paused, looked to Twilight, then stared off into the distance, as he sighed out loud. She did not like that sigh. "The creatures I had made will come to life, as well a good number of old artifacts of war. Each made to be an absolute engine of destruction. Each an unfeeling, unthinking, uncompromising monster meant to take all they encountered to Anathema. Their hibernation will leave them dazed and underpowered for a day or so once the magic is brought back, so word must spread immediately."

"How will we even get home after all this?" Twilight asked, her eyes looking down to the sand.

"Do not worry Twilight. For your pains and aches, I plan to make it more than up to you. Returning to you Equestria will be an easy task with the gifts I plan to impart on you. Speaking of which, I suppose I should quite wasting time." He approached her, standing directly in front of her as he took in a deep breath of the water, the first time Twilight noticed she was actually breathing underwater unaided, and he smiled.

"You've seen the books in the library, correct? And that they're incomprehensible?" He asked. She nodded quietly as his horn tip began to glow. "They are books gathered far and wide across the land, my knowledge of the world turned into a long series of books, and in a language nobody has ever heard or written. I made them that way so no visitor could ever simply walk in and read my thoughts unaided. You, however, are deserving." His eyes began to glow a soft blue along with his horns, and Twilight stood very still as she felt absolute power radiate from him.

Then it hit her mind with what felt like a hammer, yet there was no pain, even as she buckled from the pressure of such power filling her up. Lights flashed before her eyes and she gasped as the memories of that weird language came to surface and she realized she could understand the few symbols she memorized. She twisted and jerked until the power settled, and Anemone politely helped her stop twitching so much.

He leaned down, and smiled. "For you, Twilight Sparkle, I give you Comprehension. If there is a written language written to make any amount of sense, you can read it. You can speak it. When you hear it you can understand it. I have given you the power to go anywhere and know what to say, what you're hearing, and read their books. There will be no barrier between you and the world's knowledge now. Speaking of which, my second gift somewhat involves the first one..."

Her stomach twisted as she felt - felt! - Twilight radiating power that seemed to foreign yet familiar. She had experienced a few of Twilight's spells, and her magic always felt so direct, controlling as it guided her, yet it had a friendly familiarity about it, much like Twilight did. Was it because it was Twilight it felt so pleasant? She did not know, but the amount of it she felt in her wings and hooves was making her squirm as she watched the unicorn's horn glow a soft blue.

In an instant, the third and final ring melted away, and Dash let out a small sigh of relief. Their last bond of imprisonment, gone. What did it mean though? Could Twilight perform magic again? What was happening with Anemone?

All six of her were pacing uneasily. She wanted Twilight out of there soon. She wanted to talk to somebody.

She was also wondering who left a stupid book in some weird language laying by Twilight's side.

"That's..." Twilight gasped as Anemone presented her with a piece of paper with many varied symbols written on it, but as she looked it over she saw she could not only understand it, but perfectly. It wasn't like translating old Equestrian where she converted the old words into new ones, she *knew* the language, knew the sentence structure, and knew what each symbol meant in their language and hers. "This is amazing Anemone..." She whispered softly.

Anemone smiled, and looked down on her as the paper disappeared. "I figured you would like it. It will also become useful in your coming journey to find my brothers. Now for my next gift, I'm going to do something kind of odd." Twilight watched him move in closer, and she felt her legs quiver as he began to lean his head down. What was he doing? What was he planning? Was he really going to-

The tips of their horns touched, and she leapt back with a shout as her entire body began to suddenly glow and burn with energy. She shivered where she stood and grit her teeth, feeling immense power circulate through her body as that strange orange glow appeared again. "That ancient power that you've been carrying is now fully in your grasp. You may access it as you would your typical magic, but I would advise you to not be too showy with it, it can be absolutely devastating if precise control is not exercised."

Twilight felt her body calm down, and she gasped heavily as her heart beat a new power throughout her body. It felt as old and strong as Anemone did before her, but it was running through her leylines now. She could even feel it circling around her, and in a way, felt it begging to be used. She hadn't

cast and magical spells in a while, she felt a little dry because of it. "How..." She gasped and lifted her head. "I've been meaning to ask, how did I even get this power?"

Anemone stared at her calmly, looked up, thought carefully, and hummed. "When the foreigners reactivated the ancient magic, it sent out a pulse of energy that touches all whom are sensitive to it. This includes old objects, ancient lands, mythical beasts, and any unicorn who may be capable of absorbing it. You are different from other unicorns, as you did just that, you absorbed the magic. You did not have access to it because you lacked the knowledge of how. This is my theory at least, the truth you'll have to find for yourself. Anyways..."

He sat down in front of her, and she looked up from her hooves as she thought to watch his wings spread, his eyes close, and his horn glow. "Twilight Sparkle, for your service to me, the Alicorn of the Sea and the Alicorn of Death, Anemone, I give you the blessings of the sea, the land, of the afterlife, and of the beasts." His voice resonated with a power she had not heard since Nightmare Moon's passionate speeches of anger and revenge, and she felt his strength closing around her. "I give you my blessings to ease your journey, and to give you access to places in the world long sealed by our magic. Take my blessings, as a gift, and go forth to protect Equestria, the world, and all of its inhabitants." The strength that held her so tightly, suddenly pushed into her.

Again, she gasped, but there was no burning magic, no more magic circulating her body than usual, and she didn't feel the need to collapse. She felt unusual though, but she could not explain how. "What did you do?" She asked, holding up her hooves to stare at them.

"Gave you the blessings of an Alicorn. It is considered a great and rare gift, as it often offers the given pony a certain enlightenment to the world. You may notice a connection to the land and beasts around you that you did not have before, as well as the ability to access any area sealed by our magic. You will see its benefits in time." He bowed his head politely and smiled.

She did not feel that connection or much more enlightened like he said, but he said 'in time'. Anemone seemed to know what he was doing though, and did seem like he was actively looking out for her. She would just wait and see, it was the best she could do after all.

"I have one final gift to grant you. It is my way of saying 'thank you' in all that I can, and I hope you appreciate what it is. Understand I do not give this away lightly, as it is old, and is an artifact of my brother Atmos' cruelty and pride, but you deserve it, as I have no doubt you'll need this in time for personal and protection reasons." He closed his eyes, and from his chest, where his heart would be, a sphere of energy came out. It was small, tightly packed, and glowing bright red as it passed to Twilight. Twilight stared at it, unsure she was happy having so much energy shoved into her at once, but before she could ask, it pushed into her heart.

She grunted loudly, and felt it almost immediately disappear. She paused in her cringing, and carefully felt around inside of herself for some sort of indication where it went, but it was gone. She froze up, and gave Anemone a panicked look. "It's gone!"

Anemone smiled, and shook his head. "It is there, but you simply cannot feel it. What I have given you is direct control to the most spectacular artifact in my brothers' history, one of the most shining examples of power, pride, and wealth. Twilight Sparkle, from this day forth, I deem you the master and queen of Laputa."

Silence. She heard his words. Well she assumed she did. Maybe his blessing was messing with her head now and she was actually unconscious, because she swore he said he was giving her the castle. She had to confirm what he'd said. She had to ask. She needed to pick her words wisely for this, she didn't want to offend him after all, it was a grave mistake to offend an Alicorn, especially when giving you a gift, and not just any gift but an entire castle. So, drawing upon the deepest reaches of her vocabulary, she articulated out the best answer she could manage without hurting his feelings: "... Uh!"

Anemone grinned. "You heard me right. I am giving you control, and ownership, of Atmos' grand flying castle, Laputa." Twilight's eyes were still huge. He snickered. "Of course, I'll take out all the tests and put the normal rooms back. No point in giving you a castle that makes sure the ponies inside get lost and stay lost. You don't have to worry about losing yourself again, as soon as you come out of our meeting, the castle is yours, and you will have absolute control over it. Any who say otherwise will have to face the castle's trials themselves until they know better."

"... Uh!"

"Exactly. That is the last of my gifts." He stood up to his full height and sighed as he looked her over, and held out his hoof. Twilight stared at it, shook her head free of confusion, and then gently accepted it with her own. They shook. "Twilight Sparkle, you carry my hopes and dreams for this world. Were I still apart of Equestria, I would have happily accepted you as my grand daughter. Your morals, your mind, and your heart is strong, and your spirit is unstoppable. You have my blessings and my gifts, as does your friend. I suggest as soon as you get a little time to yourself, you look through the book I gave you. It will be very beneficial." He smiled down at her quietly, and Twilight frowned just a little.

"I'm still so confused though. Will you still be there in Laputa to help me? What if I have questions?" She asked, looking desperate.

"If we speak again, it will not be in Laputa. As for your questions, your Princesses are wise and intelligent, and you are all but destined to find your answers. Please go forth Twilight, and protect this world from itself." He leaned down, and softly nuzzled her, making Twilight freeze up and blush at the comforting affection the Alicorn of Water offered her. "I trust you. When I return you to your body, Tanat will assist you in reactivating the magic of the world. Be careful, and good luck."

All the Dash's launched to their feet as they heard a loud gasp, and they turned to Twilight as she came to. Tanat ended his trance and stared down at the Unicorn, while Twilight stared around slowly. She was aware of a book underneath her hoof, but right now she was still brimming with questions and confusion. She stared at the Dash's, and the blue-maned one approached. "Are you okay?"

"How was your visit to Anemone?" Tanat asked behind her.

"I'm fine, just a little off, and Anemone was..." She stared down castle beneath her. "Amazing." She whispered in slight awe as she began to move around a bit, feeling stiff. "He gave me all this weird," she worked her mouth slowly as she tried to find the words, "I don't know how to explain it. Knowledge? He said he gave me access to the magic around me, and gave me his blessings."

Tanat's tentacles wiggled a little as he tried to smile. "Glorious. He has not given his blessings in a long time. Even when he was alive he blessed only one other pony."

"And then he gave me Laputa." Twilight shrugged, making Orange Dash jump.

"Whoa whoa whoa whoa whoooooaaa. Hold up. He's giving you a dead, sunken castle that tried to eat our minds with mirrors? Are you sure he's on our side?" All six of them raised an eyebrow as they nodded in agreement.

"He said he'd change it back to normal and give me control of it. I'm not sure how to control it though." Twilight admitted with a little shrug.

"Then allow me to help you Miss Sparkle. Laputa is instrumental in resurrecting the ancient magic in the leylines, so merely do as I ask." Tanat approached the softly glowing blue sphere, and cupped his hands around it like there was an invisible barrier around it. "Stand before me and point your horn at the lord."

Twilight nervously did as she was asked, and glanced to one of the Dash's. "We'll be okay, we have plenty of allies." She whispered, but the nods she got were as nervous as she was. She pointed her horn at Anemone's floating soul.

"Now then, use the magic around you. Gather it inside of you, and focus it out of your horn. Point out the Lord, and wish us to rise." He told her in his guttural tone. Twilight gulped, and did as he asked.

It took her a moment to feel the magic all around her, as until now she had never sensed the magic. It was odd, since now that she could detect the enormous amount of power around her she couldn't ignore it. It swirled around into her as she drew it in, and she could feel her body get pumped with energy that defied any amount of power she previously knew. Her eyes began to glow orange, as did her horn, and Dash watched as the glowing blue sphere began to glow orange as well. Then all around them, the castle began to glow.

She jumped as she felt it shift, and all of them glanced around, unsure of what happened, until the ocean began to slowly brighten around them.

They were rising.

The river was running faster beside them as they walked. Pinkie stood by her side, never once leaving her for a moment as they walked. Even when Applejack had offered to let her go find some berries, Pinkie stayed firmly next to her and ate the grass with her, never once complaining. She barely spoke more than a peep in fact, which was terrifying since this was Pinkie I'm talking about.

They followed the river around a hard corner and found themselves staring at the beach. The river poured into the ocean while the trees stopped just before the sand. It was a gorgeous sight, but Pinkie hadn't said anything. Applejack was now firmly believing whatever happened to Pinkie was not a figment of her imagination. Either she really believed an evil clown attacked her, or one did actually do so. Pinkie was excitable but not crazy. "Alright Pinkie, we're here." Applejack said with a small sigh as they stared out at the ocean. She'd never been this far south before, and this whole adventure had been both pretty and a bit terrifying. She was far from home, she knew, and here they were, at the very end.

They didn't see anything as they walked along the river towards the beach, but Applejack gasped as Pinkie suddenly pushed her into a nearby bush, back into the trees. She looked to her pink friend with surprise, but Pinkie was staring at something intensely down the shore. Applejack followed her eyes, and immediately covered her mouth to hide her gasp.

Dragons. There were a lot of dragons, each maybe twelve feet tall from foot to head as they stood in a raptor-like fashion, each covered in bronze, silver, gold, or in the case of the biggest, most elaborate one, black armor. There were ponies down with them, wearing armor as well, fitting what must have been saddles on the bored-looking dragons while a huge Pegasus pony, and an even bigger Earth pony shouted orders. They were gearing up for something.

"You think that's them?" Pinkie asked, speaking for the first time in what felt like hours. Applejack stared. Dragons, ponies getting ready to ride them, all of them looking ready for war... She had no doubt.

"Yeah. That's gotta be." She whispered, her voice dropping a few octaves as her fury grew. She was aware they were outnumbered and they were probably more dangerous than anything she'd ever faced, but she was going to find Twilight and Dash and drag them out of there alive, no matter what it meant. "You see 'em?" She asked in a low voice.

Pinkie shook her head as she scanned along all the dragons, taking note that one at the far end was struggling with the pony trying to ride it, preferring to throw him off than be ridden. Nobody paid them much attention. "No Twilight or Dashie..." She whispered sadly.

"Well, we gotta keep lookin'. C'mon Pinkie, let's go-" She was interrupted as the world around them began to shake.

Chapter 11

Battle Over the Blue

She could see them. All of them. Everywhere, all over the place, criss-crossing almost randomly across the landscape. She could see the energy, the immense concentration of power and magic that ran through them, and the amount that was hiding away, unseen. So much wasted potential lying beneath the surface. She could feel Tanat beside her, guiding her with his sweeping hands as she carefully, surgically pressed the tiniest scalpel of her magic into each mote that needed to be tapped, unleashing magic back into the leylines.

He guided her as they worked to open the leylines, even as they made Laputa rise.

Rainbow Dash shifted uneasily, all six of her as she felt such intense magic around them. It felt like the tyrant, the same powerful force directing her, yet at the same time she felt the love and care in it. She felt Twilight in there. She was directing for sure, but she was doing it not out of a need to oppress her. It was comforting, and at the same time terrifying knowing she could do nothing to help.

That wasn't entirely true, she could protect her. She was the Guardian of Souls right? Twilight was *the* Soul. It was in their names, she had to protect Twilight, not that she never felt that before. But looking on her now, pulsing with enough power to make her wings try to stand at their full height, she felt that need even more. There was something odd about Twilight now, something that told her to guard her, to guide her, and to be close to her.

What was happening to them?

Hero wasn't unfamiliar with the southern ocean. He had done fly-overs for the Forest of Tranquility before, and usually spent a little time admiring the shore if he had the time. More than one pony on the lam had attempted to use the forest's notoriety of never letting go of the people who enter it to try and elude their pursuers, but only once had Hero actually witnessed one

come out unaided, exhausted, thirsty, and starving. Maybe some did escape, but where to? Seclusion in the forest? The furthest settlement to the south was Ponyville, with the Everfree Forest acting as a barrier between the town and the peaceful sea of green below.

He found it ironic that the one piece of land nobody had any amount of control over was considered less dangerous than the Forest, since it was common knowledge you simply lost yourself when you went into the forest. You could fly out for sure, but that meant getting seen by the law. The few attempts to actually map out the place by Pegasi failed spectacularly, as no matter how they marked it, whenever they returned the forest seemed to shift itself to keep the pony lost. Hero was under the impression the place was just as untamable as the Everfree Forest, even if they did have to send weather ponies to change the seasons around it.

"We're approaching the end of our destination. Keep flight noise low and eyes open; remember, we're looking for dragons, so hold your counter-formations and watch for the signs. Do not get separated from your partners and keep within spitting distance of the other." Hero ordered, just loud enough for them to hear. Everypony behind him reduced how much they flapped their wings, and carefully scanned around themselves to watch their assigned groups.

The quietness always got to Hero. The whole 'calm before the storm' bit always tightened his gut, not just because it was uneasy to have it so quiet when they were prepping for combat, but because it meant as soon as the fertilizer found its way into the air conditioning, they might be entering a war. He had never been in a war. Battles? Sure, but against thugs using Equestrian armor and weaponry, more commonly known as clothing and chairs. He had picked up and swung a sword before, but never had somepony else doing the same to him. Much less on top of a fire-spitting, carnivorous dragon.

The tension was thick as they finally flew out to the ocean, staring over the startling blue. He had no idea if they would find anything. He wanted to find something for the sake of Equestria, but he was seriously concerned with his men and himself. They had sent away singular dragons before, but the letter sent by Twilight's friends made it sound like there was more than one. Dragons were not pack animals, so this was going to be a very

unpredictable situation, especially if the dragons were Equestria's intelligent variety.

His men understood the danger, but it still concerned him. Would their ranks be cut down today, or would they could out of this unscathed? He could only hope it was the second, as he knew most of the men and women around him. He knew their families. Heck, he knew most of their kids' names, even the ones that weren't even born yet. He grit his teeth as the thought came to him, but he pushed it out of his head. He would have no deaths today. He would do his best to make sure of that.

He became aware of the sound of beating wings. Large beating wings. Too large to be pony wings. He turned his head, saw his soldiers, and behind them, saw exactly what they were looking for. His eyes widened, and his soldiers began to beat their wings faster as over twenty dragons being ridden seemed to simply appear behind them. "Follow." He ordered tersely.

He was unfamiliar with open air war, but seeing so many dragons, instinct kicked in. Unlike Ponies, dragons were most dangerous from the front. Their eyes were aligned to stare down their target, their fire came from their mouths, their teeth were *in* their mouths, and their claws arms were made to scratch forward. They burned their target, tackled it, and devoured it, and if it was too big, cut it down to size. That meant they had to get around and surprise them. Somehow.

"Dragon formations everypony, and," He folded his wings up, and suddenly fell. His entire team of fifty-six trained Pegasi did the same and fell with him as the dragons began to close in, close enough to smoke out the ponies bringing up the rear. The dragons and their riders watched and began to dive downwards after their prey.

Shallom flew near the middle of the pack of dragons, and had a long history of air warfare. Watching the ponies dive after their leader as one, he could tell despite their peace, they were incredibly well-trained. Props where they were due, but it was not enough. He watched his team of dragons begin to dive down after them, and suddenly, before their leader hit the ocean he split off, as did teams of four from the mass of Equestrian soldiers.

That was unexpected, he was used to fighting battalions, not teams, and none of the fourteen teams of four went the same way. When the unexpected happened, one had to hold back to evaluate the situation. He

lifted upwards and out of the formation of dragons, and watched as each rider split to chase a target.

The Equestrians were swift, and daringly acrobatic, avoiding blasts of fire and each other constantly, never once breaking formation. It was an impressive feat, and he watched as one dragon got particularly close to its targets as they rose upwards. The three ponies behind the lead of the team suddenly broke formation, lifting up and over the pursuing dragon with ease, and went into a dive as a moment later, so did the leader, who was within breathing distance of the dragon behind him. The dumb beast opened its mouth, attempting to swallow the pony rather than burn it.

The three that had broken away caught up quickly, and Shallom watched with surprised eyes as two flew directly beneath the beast's wings and lifted upwards, forcing the dragon's wings to stop flapping as the dive continued. The third grabbed onto the dragon's tail and held it still, causing the beast to screech as the pony it chased flew off.

The dragon tried to turn left or right, to lash out with its claws and tails, to blast its attackers with fire, but there was no luck as the pony on top tried to get his spear beneath the wings to jab the Equestrians, but the dragon was squirming too much. The five creatures hit break-neck speeds, and unable to rise or turn, the Equestrian soldiers suddenly dove away and caught themselves in the air as the dragon hit the sea with enough force to toss its rider a good few meters away.

These Equestrians weren't fighters, but damned if they weren't smart.

Shallom flew in, watching as the team that just finished a dragon peeled a second off another team, and the two flew into the air to repeat the ocean tactic. He kept his eyes on the first team, as the three from the back broke off, and began to force the dragon into a straight flight as the fourth got away from its mouth.

Hero was breathing hard. This was dangerous, this was insane, and even as he dived beneath a charging dragon and kicked it squarely in its unprotected throat, he knew this may have been the most exciting thing he'd ever done. Dragons were filling the air, his teams of Equestrian soldiers never once losing their cool as they swarmed and dived around the

dragons, avoiding spears, teeth, flames, and wings as they tried to determine the perfect moment to strike.

The dragon he kicked flew away awkwardly, roaring in pain as its rider tried to regain control, and pulled it around to face Hero. Hero was watching the battle, watching his teams, trying to watch for danger, and the dragon dove forward, its rider screaming a war cry as he readied a spear. Barely shifting, Hero suddenly twisted, spiraling in the air as he flew over the dragon's blast of flame, hoof extended, knocking the Rider out of his seat and to the deep blue below. The dragon watched its rider fall in confusion, and dove in after him.

Hero did not watch the dragon catch its rider with its arms, instead, he watched as a Pegasus he did not recognize flew towards one of his teams. He felt his heart beat, and he was charging in an instant as the sound of rolling thunder filled the air.

The battle slowed down as the noise echoed through across the ocean and clouds, and heads turned to watch as a Pegasus turned into a bolt of lightning and streaked towards one of the team leaders, and crashed into the Equestrian with the force of sledgehammer. The sky lit up as the lightning leaped everywhere, driving away pony and dragon alike, and the soldier began to fall, turned into a ball of hot flame as he fell for the ocean.

Shallom watched for just a moment, but just a moment long enough to see an incredibly speedy Equestrian catch the ball of flame in mid-air to slow the fall, and dump it into the ocean to put it out. Then that speedy thing turned upwards, and Shallom snarled as he raced for the leader of the Equestrian soldiers, lightning sparking around him.

The leader noticed him, but kept his course as Shallom shot in with unmatched speed. Even if this Equestrian was fast, Shallom was the fastest in the world. With the power of Atmos in his blood, his natural talent and his superior training were amplified. Nothing could match the lightning king.

Hero suddenly twisted in midair, turning into a ninety-degree angle while barely breaking a sweat. Shallow shot straight upwards, turning aggravatingly slow due to his impressive speed. He dived for Hero, this

time watching his subtle movements as Hero once again went straight downwards at ninety degrees. From his high point, it was easier for Shallom to launch downwards, watching the point of interception, and he began to spark. His speed picked up, and he carefully started to turn upwards as he knew the leader would keep his distance from a stronger opponent.

Imagine his surprise when Hero suddenly twisted and dove underneath Shallom, pushing his back hoof into the Lightning Cloud's chest. Shallom grunted, feeling his breath get kicked out, but he kept his wits and smoothed his flight as he sucked in a deep breath and tried to turn. That leader had disappeared.

"Damnit." Shallom grunted. He wanted to find that soldier. He didn't know if he wanted to kick his ass or shake his hoof for that.

That had hurt. Hero stabilized his flying just above the water, letting the spasms from such close contact to the electricity work themselves out of his body, and his body went numb as the burn went away. He was lucky his wings hadn't taken the brunt of it. He'd be luckier if he could use his left back hoof again for this fight though, he couldn't even feel it anymore.

"Quite a feat. I don't think I know of anypony striking Shallom before." Hero jerked his head to the side. Damnit, he was too distracted. He hadn't even noticed the great black-armored dragon pull up beside him just below, its rider being the single biggest pony he'd ever seen. Hero began to turn, and the dragon followed.

"Yes, well, lucky me." Hero grumbled. The pony on the dragon laughed.

"Give yourself some credit. It takes true wit to trick Shallom in the air."

"Shouldn't you be out there helping?" Hero asked with a raised eyebrow as he turned towards the fight, the enormous earth pony still keeping up, not raising a hoof to attack.

"I am more suited to the land myself. Besides my dragon, I'm all but useless up here. I prefer to observe when I cannot fight." He rolled his

great shoulders, and delicately pulled the reins so the dragon would go up with Hero.

"Do you want to share such information with the enemy? I could take you down right here." Hero pointed out as he upped his speed.

"And I could have had you eaten twenty seconds ago. One for one." The dragon began to slow, and angle downwards as Rukafelth started back to observing. "Best of luck."

"You too, I suppose." And the two separated.

The dragon riders were getting more intelligent. They would deflect their attacks from their dragons with their spears as they tried to dive back and get beneath the wings, and started to risk moving around their mounts more to get a better angle to stab their opponents. They relief less on their mounts to do all the work and were relying on their own hoof work to protect said mounts.

They were rapidly changing their tactics, both Equestria and Golding, spinning around each other, using the fire as smoke-screens so the dragon could dive for a better angle and avoid being caught, twists and turns becoming more rapid and commonplace.

Applejack watched all of this with eyes that just grew wider and wider as both sides became smarter. So far, seven Equestrians had been knocked out of flight and were scrambling towards shore, their wounds keeping them from going back to the air. Four dragons and their riders had been taken down in turn, and both sides were now not using power to get themselves through the battle, but a lot of deceit and quick wits.

She had never seen a battle like this. She had seen mock fights and kicked a few ponies herself, but she had never witnessed something so aggressive, so strong, and so deadly. The violence was as shocking as the intelligence of the fighters, both sides showing greater and greater strength as their tactics varied.

Pinkie Pie shook beside her, not able to comprehend the animosity from both sides as they fought. They had seen Equestrians skewered, the

enemy get bucked around, the dragons burn some and take a number of hits themselves. Despite this, the teams of four never broke, even when they started to lose their numbers they kept together.

The pink pony watched the one enemy soldier still struggling to rein his dragon in, and an idea came to mind. "Applejack, we need to stop that guy." She whispered, pointing to the one pressing his spear to the struggling dragon's wing joint as he tried to grab ahold of the reins, but the dragon bucked them away, even as the spear drew some blood.

"Yeah." Applejack agreed. They had to do something, anything to reduce what was happening here. The two started for the dragon carefully.

Each kick was measured and aimed for the vitals. Years of training, practice, and some personal experience made Hero a force to be reckoned with, even alone. Some of the less obedient dragons began to actively avoid facing him alone, while Hero used said dragons to keep himself out of the sight of the lightning pony.

He knew he was being hunted for because - Shallom? - wasn't trying any more tricks against his soldiers, he was diving around the battlefield, kicking away anyone who got in his way in his search. Hero knew he was in danger, but a part of him found it thrilling. To be hunted by such power, to have struck enough of a blow to be considered worthy hunting material, and to still not be caught.

He was extremely careful as he spied the pony, and dove just above a dragon, socking its rider in the mouth as a spear narrowly missed his stomach, just as Shallom dove beneath the dragon. He had never been 'prey' before, and through his fears, his worries, and his adrenaline, he found himself above and beyond excited.

He had to be careful though, one wrong misstep meant death. Maybe not for him, but he needed to protect his team. If Shallom got bored, that meant trouble for everyone he was trying to defend.

He shot away from Shallom, flying underneath a dragon that recognized him, and pulled up. He dove between one of his teams and a pursuing dragon, causing it to hesitate just long enough to let the team get beneath it

and score a few strong kicks to its stomach. He circled in the air once, and spied Shallom. He'd been spotted.

He circled once more, and then fell into an impressively fast deathfall towards the ocean, his eyes firmly on the blue beneath as he heard rolling thunder. He knew Shallom wouldn't be any easier this time around, Shallom knew he simply wouldn't just run, dive, and keep him distracted.

He suddenly twisted, just barely in time as a bolt of lightning shot by him, the air around him turning static. Yes, just like the reports on Sparkle's battle. This was impressive, but now that he was the target he knew the danger. If his gut wasn't guiding him he would have been out of it.

He twisted up from his dive, right as a noise not unlike the castle collapsing on itself filled his ears, and the entire ocean shivered beneath him. The sound of rolling thunder stopped, and he pulled up. He looked back to Shallom, but Shallom had stopped chasing him. In fact, all around him the entire battle had come to a halt. He rose, and watched as the ocean some distance away began to swirl.

"It can't be." He heard Shallom whisper. Nobody moved a muscle as an enormous whirlpool, easily one-thousand feet across began to form, sucking water in deeper into the depths as it rapidly grew faster and faster.

It was like nothing Hero had ever seen, as the middle of the whirlpool began to actually open, revealing a hole that began to widen as the speed of the whirlpool picked up. "Surround it! *SURROUND IT!*" Shallom roared, charging for the whirlpool as his dragon army went after him, trying to keep up as they surrounded the swirling water.

This was unexpected, and Hero had a feeling that this was also very bad. "Follow them and take them down, whatever they're after, we need to get to first!" He shouted, and his soldiers charged in. A mistake.

The dragons turned slowly, their limited mobility making them slow, but they had formed a wall in front of the charging Equestrians. It took Hero half a second to understand, and was shooting down. His soldiers weren't so lucky. A wall of flame shot from the huge dragons, creating a cloud of fire that threatened to swallow everything in its way. The soldiers tried to dive, but the cloud of heat drew closer and closer, and finally consumed them.

Hero stared up in despair as his entire team was confused, and he watched, expectantly waiting to catch the first to fall, to try and help. No bodies came. The cloud of fire passed, and showed a shimmering black sphere surrounding where his men and women had been. He could only watch in awe as Princess Luna emerged, eyes blazing white as the decision to fight was finally made.

"For your crimes against Equestria!" Luna shouted, her voice no longer meek and quiet, but clearly unused to shouting, "I deem you the enemies of the night! I will stifle your flames and dull your spears and I will protect this land and its people! If you dare to face the power of an Alicorn, then I invite you to come forward and try to harm my Guards!"

There was no hesitation. She was instantly surrounded by some forty Pegasi, just as ready to fight. The dragon riders were still for just a moment, but when Shallom emerged from behind, white fire surrounding his body, they roared in unison. The two sides dove towards each other, Luna and Hero charging towards Shallom, now blazing with an all consuming fire.

Hero collided with his foe, and felt nothing but hooves as they connected.

"Enough of this!" The soldier shouted, grabbing his spear and turning around to face the disobedient beast he was intended to ride. "I have had enough of your attitude you stupid lizard, you will not be missed!" He shouted, charging towards the dragon as it reared back, wings raised, a blast of fire coming from its mouth. The soldier rolled around it easily, and the dragon leapt in surprise as the pony got underneath it, and lunged.

The spear never connected. A solid kick tossed it against the dragon's tough inner thigh, and the dragon stared in confusion as an orange pony pulled her legs back and kicked the rider in the face again, sending him sprawling onto the ground. "Ya'll just gon' mistreat your pets like that ya'll deserve a kick to tha head!" She shouted to the soldier, who brought himself up.

"You stupid little filly! Thank Galio, I've been wanting to let some steam off!" He snarled, lunging forward, armored hooves raised to bring down onto the orange filly, until something massive smacked him across the beach. The

dragon lowered its arm and roared as it lifted itself off its massive haunches and stalked forward, mouth extended as a fireball filled the back of its throat.

The little orange pony was there first, her front hooves stomping on the soldier's head, knocking him unconscious. The dragon swallowed the fireball, and leaned down, sniffing the little pony.

Applejack leapt back, and stared at the massive creature as it sniffed her. "Uh... Hi. Ah'm Applejack." She said nervously, now completely aware she was standing by a big, tooth-filled dragon. "Um, sorry 'bout him, not all us ponies are so bad. Y'know?" She shifted nervously, and watched the dragon closely.

The dragon turned its head as Pinkie Pie came along, with a small patch made of leaves and sap. The little pink pony gave the dragon and sympathetic smile as she looked to its hurt wing. The dragon raised a scaled eyebrow and turned, extending its wing carefully so Pinkie could apply the patch to the wound.

"Well, there ya are big guy. So, uh, we cool?" Applejack asked, chuckling nervously as the dragon checked its first-aid. It then turned around, and slowly lowered itself onto its haunches, staying completely still as its wings spread. Applejack and Pinkie Pie stared up at the saddle in shock, and looked to each other.

"I think that means we're cool..." Pinkie whispered, slowly climbing the dragon's back to sit in its saddle. Applejack followed her after a moment, and settled in.

"Well, I think this tops the 'cool things I've done today' list..." Applejack mumbled as she settled onto the saddle. The dragon lifted its wings, and began to flap slowly before lifting into the air.

Luna shrieked as she brought a shield of pure magic up right in time to block a bolt of lightning, her breathing labored as she flew downwards, trying to avoid the furious Pegasus as he barreled down onto her, and she tried to slip to the side but Shallow intercepted quickly, forcing her to make

another shield to repel him. He bounced off only a little, then blasted the shield with fire hot enough to make her sweat behind it.

This magic was *unnatural*. This magic was too powerful and too violent to be natural, it most certainly did not feel Equestrian or like it even came from a ley line. This came from pure rage and the need to kill, which in itself was a terrifying concept. Sure her magic was strong but she was no fighter, and though she could handle the dragons, this Pegasus was proving to be too strong for her.

Her only saving grace struck Shallom in the stomach as he tried to pull off of Luna's position, sending him falling to the ocean for a few seconds before recovering and launching himself at Hero. Luna bounced him off another shield, but he merely caught himself and flew over it, now flying in a corkscrew pattern which he changed up to keep Luna guessing.

She wasn't used to casting magic so rapidly, and her focus was starting to waver as the battle around her became more and more intense. She was not used to this. She was used to having time to think, here she had to perform magic without think, putting up shields, barriers, getting actually assaulted by their leader again and again.

She watched Shallom suddenly twist off Hero as they flew nearer, and dive straight towards Luna with a look of determine fury in his eyes. Luna shakily gathered up her strength as Shallom sparked with lightning, and she watched in surprise as he turned suddenly, avoiding her barrier completely and aiming straight towards Hero head-on.

Luna flapped her wings rapidly and charged forward, magic leaping off her horn as the two veteran leaders were milliseconds from colliding with deadly force, and she didn't know what else to do. She squeezed her eyes shut and felt the energy leap off her horn as the bolt of force shot towards Shallom, colliding with him like a fist and disrupting his lightning, tossing him into Hero. The two struggled in the air to catch themselves as they fell, and Luna dove. She caught Hero on her back and fired one more bolt of force at Shallom, but he avoided. He flew upwards rapidly, getting some distance and turned, and stopped.

"Princess Luna?" Hero asked, getting back in the air as he stared at the Princess. "Princess Luna!" He shouted. Her eyes had gone wide, and she

was staring hard at the whirlpool beneath them. Or what had been a whirlpool.

The hole in the middle had consumed the entire pool, meaning there was an enormous, thousand-foot hole in the ocean. He stared with her. He couldn't feel what she did, but he could see it. There was a castle in that hole, and it was rising, out of the hole in the ocean.

"NO!" Shallom roared, charging towards the hole suddenly. Hero watched in surprise as he dove for the hole, and he could barely see what made his enemy freak out so much. Standing on the tallest tower of the castle were eight things. Six blue ponies that looked exactly the same, one strange bipedal *thing*, and in front of the thing, was a small purple unicorn.

"Twilight!" He and Luna shouted as one, diving for her. She was glowing bright orange, throwing light off everywhere as her magic actually tugged the castle out of the sea. Shallom was going to make it first though. He charged, his eyes flaring as he dove towards the tower, sparking with lightning and fire as he prepared his magic.

It never happened. He slammed into a large, hexagonal magical barrier, and the lightning backfired, sending him off into the air in smoke. He pulled himself out of it, barely, and floated and stared. He watched Hero and Luna pause in their charge. They knew the barrier was there, meaning they couldn't get the Fake either. He just needed some time, Balla would no doubt sense this happening.

He charged rather suddenly, trying to pull up his lightning, but it would not come. He could feel it was being blocked off. That meant he had to rely on skill. Interesting. As The two others finally turned their head to look at Shallom, he slammed into Luna unheeded, and kicked her as hard as he could manage in the stomach.

She could see the sky. Through twelve eyes she stared up at the sea of blue that *she* preferred. Through twelve eyes she witnessed the beautiful, fluffy white clouds hanging overhead, and through twelve eyes she saw a war raging above them.

Seeing freedom she spread her wings, and she bit back a scream of rage as she realized she could no longer fly. She felt like her hooves were full of lead, knowing she could no longer fly again. This was the first time she'd seen sky since her wings were clipped, and this was the most torturous thing they could throw at her. She turned to twilight, and saw her pulsate with power. Whatever she was doing was important, she knew, but still, she was completely unaware of her surroundings.

They were in danger. There was some sort of fight going on and she was the only one awake for it here. She was the only one who knew anything about the dangers ahead that could actually fight back. Something about it angered her. She again felt so alone. She narrowed her eyes and watched dragons and Equestria's Royal Guards fight up above. She couldn't tell who was winning, but she did not like the odds for Equestria.

One of her turned to Twilight, and gently pressed her nose to her cheek. "C'mon Twilight, hurry it up. I don't know what to do here." She whispered. She knew they'd become a nice big object of interest once they came from the ocean if they weren't already.

They slid out of it slowly, and as she stared around, she saw the entire battle had gone silent. The dragons and their riders were staring at them with wide eyes and anger, the Equestrians watched in absolute shock. All six of her working together counted the number. Thirty-nine Equestrians, Princess Luna of all ponies, and thirteen dragon riders. All staring at Twilight.

"NO!" One of her turned her head towards a voice she felt she recognized, and she took a step back as she saw *him*. The Pegasus was diving for them at top speed, crackling with lightning. He was going to attack them, he was going to kill Twilight. Yellow Dash leapt over to Twilight.

"Twilight, we're about to get hit!" She shouted, and Twilight's ear twitched. Dash turned her head and unsheathed her sword, preparing for the attack, until a large orange shield appeared in midair, throwing him off, exploding him in fact and sending him away. She sighed in relief, Twilight was paying attention. She turned to look to Luna, preparing to shout something to her, when the Princess was slammed into by the enormous Pegasus.

Dash stared, Hero stared, the entire Equestrian battalion stared, and as one, they screamed in fury. Luna was falling, and Dash knew, just knew if

she had her wings she could save her, but no, no they were cut short. She screamed in impotency and stomped her hooves. They had attacked one of their beloved rulers, and that one pony was about to feel unmatched anger.

She watched as what looked like the Equestrian leader tuned into his own explosive emotions and slammed into Shallom. Shallom turned to deliver a kick but received a hoof to his snout, then another, and was then tackled hard, throwing him into the shield. Shallom bounced off it, not receiving the explosive backlash, but he righted himself, shooting underneath Hero who executed his stop-point turn and grasped onto Shallom's back as the Lightning King tore towards Luna.

Hero wasn't going to stop him in time, but he had to try, he needed to do something...

Right before Luna crashed into the unforgiving surface of the sea, a dragon swooped beneath her, catching her. His eyes widened. Those weren't enemy soldiers, those looked like regular little fillies on that dragon.

"Who the hell was *that*?" Shallom shouted in rage, twisting and tossing Hero off him as he shot towards the dragon. The dragon turned upwards rapidly, and flew through the barrier as Shallom bounced off it once more. He floated there, panting heavily, watching the dragon with an evil stare.

And then he got kicked in his face.

"Holy horse apples!" Applejack shouted over the roar of the wind, her hat string struggling its hardest to keep the hat firmly attached to her head. "Did ya see that!" She shouted, her heart beating with excitement and terror.

She was flying up the castle now as it emerged rapidly from the ocean. It was a beautiful glowing white, with purple, violet, and pink banners with what she swore was Twilight's cutie mark on them. There were what must have been hundreds of windows, balconies, and platforms built onto it, all leading up to one central tower where she had seen her goal.

"Barely..." Pinkie groaned underneath Luna. Luna was unconscious from the hit, and was heavier than Pinkie expected. "Is she alright?"

"She looks fine to me." Applejack yelled back, finally getting above the tower at the top. She directed the dragon to land on it, and smiled down as she saw- "Wait." Her eyebrow raised as she stared into Dash's equally confused eyes.

"Where the hay did you get a dragon?" Rainbow Dash demanded. Or she thought it was Rainbow Dash. She had solid purple hair, and was surrounded by other Rainbow Dash's, all with mono-colored hair.

"Nevermind my dragon why are there *six* of you!" Applejack shouted in confusion.

"Help?" Pinkie whimpered, finally getting their attention. The six Dash's climbed the rather calm dragon and helped carry Princess Luna onto the tower, and laid her on the stone. "Thanks so much Green Dashie, she is really heavy on the spine." Pinkie shook her hair out and sighed softly.

"No problem Pinkie." Green Dash said, then finally turned and looked at her. "... Pinkie Pie!" She tackled the mare, and hugged her close. Pinkie yelped at the sudden display of affection, as did Applejack when the yellow-haired one grabbed ahold of her. "Oh my gosh guys!" She wheezed through pained breaths as she squeezed the both of them, revelling in the warmth and familiarity.

"It's great t'see you too Dash." Applejack whispered, trying to keep her smile small and failing. "You must have been through a lot..." She stared at Dash's tiny little wings sadly. She wouldn't ask about them yet. Happy thoughts.

"They didn't hurt you did they Dashie?" Pinkie asked as the six Dash's gathered around and they sat.

"... Yeah." The Red Dash extended her tiny little wings, and Pinkie's eyes widened, near bugging point. "They took my flying from me, kicked my pride around, and this castle tried to eat my mind."

"... Look Sugarcube. I'm real sorry about all this." Applejack offered her a nuzzle, and three accepted it. It was awkward being under so much Rainbow Dash. "But look, we'll have a nice long talk and a visit to an expert on this later, right now we have to get out of here. Like, now, so go wake up Twilight."

"Can't." Blue Dash shrugged and looked to Twilight, making Applejack and Pinkie Pie stare at Twilight fully for the first time. She was definitely gone in that trance. "She has to do this to save Equestria. I don't think Anemone was expected a fight during all of this."

"Anemone? No, wait, nevermind, save Equestria? What's going on?" Applejack asked, causing Pinkie Pie to nod rapidly in distress.

"Look, Twilight didn't tell me all the details, but from what I picked up we've been picked by a super Alicorn older than Celestia to basically keep these foreigner guys from screwing up the world's leylines. If they do that, everything is basically going to *die*. Twilight's doing something, I don't know what, but simply put it's going to help."

Applejack and Pinkie Pie stared at her for a long time, and she sighed in annoyance. "And there are six of me because Anemone wanted there to be. I'll explain this when we have some time..." She nodded, and they nodded back. Then her eyebrow raised. "Who the hay is that?"

They turned their head to follow her eyes. Standing on top of the unconscious dragon was a pony with a fool's cap, a checkered outfit, and skull face paint. "Oh, I'm sorry if I interrupted, but it's not polite to kill a pony during their conversation."

Applejack's eyes widened as the six Dash's took an aggressive stance, one holding a brilliantly bright sword. Pinkie stared, and began to back away slowly, shadowed by one of the Dash's.

"So you're done then? I can start then? Really?" Cloppin's smile widened as pleasure and glee filled his bouncing steps. "Goodie!"

He disappeared in the same instant Applejack felt a streak of pain run across her side, and felt fresh blood weep from an open cut. She gave a shout of pain, and heard Pinkie scream, turning in time to see the knife flash downwards.

It sailed away as the clown was shoved back by a rough kick from the orange Dash, and she charged him. He was gone again, and the dagger swept across Orange's Dash's front leg, drawing a scream, but the green-maned reflection kicked Cloppin squarely in the side of his neck as he

raised up to bring the dagger down, throwing him, but he disappeared in mid-air.

The dagger flashed down onto Applejack's ribs, but Cloppin was thrown as another pair of legs struck him in an instant. He was back on top of the dragons, staring at the eight ponies. The one in the hat wobbled slightly, but continued to glare at him viciously. "Ya'll're the monster clown that attacked Pinkie Pie!" She shouted, grimacing in pain.

"Maybe I did. You would have saved her some of that fear if you hadn't come by, you know, a few more seconds and, uh oh, no more Pinkie!" He giggled, causing the Dash's to roar in anger as two launched forward, one with a sword that began to crackle.

Cloppin appeared again next to the pink mare, a hoof roughly forcing her off her hooves and onto the floor, but before he could bare in on her and strike her stomach a blade flew through the air and struck his hind leg. Cloppin's eyes grew wide as an unfamiliar feeling went through his leg as it spasmed, and he saw red.

Red...

His smile grew. His smile twisted. It was not happy. It was the twisted, angered, pissed off smile of a pony that had been wronged. "You'll pay." His voice shook as his entire body quivered in pain and anger.

"That's for Pinkie Pie." The Red Dash snarled. The snarl turned into a gasp as suddenly the rest of her blue coat turned red, and Cloppin forced the dagger deep into her throat until the reflection stopped twitching and gagging. Then in a flash of light, the copy was gone, as was the blood.

"Where. Did. You. Go?" He asked low, turning around as the others backed off slowly. Then he saw it. The green one now had a red stripe in her hair. Oh, he understood. He had to kill them all. Well that's what he had been planning anyways so it was time to

The orange one's eyes widened as Cloppin appeared in front of her, the dagger going straight for her eye, and he drew red, but was thrown again as a kick struck his face. He disappeared and appeared again, drawing a jagged line down the purple one's back, savoring her scream until he grew winded from a sharp kick to his stomach.

The yellow one took nothing as he appeared, getting struck again, the red and green one getting in a stare as he missed as another one sent him sailing back. It's like they knew his every move. Wherever he appeared they knew and were prepared. His eyes flicked towards the blue one and drove his dagger into her heart, but was knocked aside as his dagger was slapped from his mouth. He rolled across the ground in confusion, so sure he'd driven it into the blue one as she stood over him, sword in mouth.

"Heh." Cloppin stared up at her. His Trell couldn't follow him. Not across the water. He should have been able to handle this alone. No, not just glancing wounds, he had to have killed them all. "Hehe." But no, he couldn't, they kept kicking and slashing, and he watched the mare hesitate to drive the sword down. "Hehehe." He disappeared.

"Hahahaha!" He had his knife. "Hehehehehaha!" He stood over their precious Princess. "HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!" He drove it downwards. His dagger came down, and he heard their screams of terror. He had never killed royalty before, much less an Alicorn. "HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH-" He stared into a pair of yellow eyes.

"You will not harm the daughter." The octopus said, his skinny fingers holding the dagger as he dripped black blood. Cloppin felt shock as a hand grabbed his neck, and the tentacles on the thing's face opened and wrapped around his head. He felt the tentacles try to pierce his eyelids and enter his ears, he felt them go into his mouth, and with one final laugh, began to stab.

His hooves held the dagger tightly as he stabbed the octopus repeatedly, even as his eyes popped as they were pushed aside by tentacles, even as his ear canals were ripped apart and his throat and sinuses were widened, trying to rip his head to pieces. The octopus was slowing, and the pain was so immense nothing felt real anymore.

Cloppin kept laughing as the creature's tentacles tickled his brain, and then he disappeared.

The world was bright. Oh so bright and shiny. She felt heat on her body, something that felt unusual compared to the past few days. As Twilight cleared her eyes, she stared at the orange orb floating above her, and

watched it explode. She was nearly thrown back as a wave of force shot out of it, and watched as all around them, ponies from Canterlot's guard and dragons from Golding's army were thrown from the air.

She panicked, and felt her own magic extend as she grabbed ahold of each of the all of them, pony and dragon. She didn't know how she did that, she'd just wanted it to happen and suddenly she was holding them. The amount of power needed for a spell that strong should have been out of her reach, yet here she was, keeping them from falling.

She watched them squirm and struggle as she slowly brought them to her, and watched in surprise as one suddenly flashed in lightning and took off. She thought she recognized him, but couldn't tell.

"Miss Sparkle!" One Equestrian Pegasus shouted. "This is Hero Cloudbreaker speaking. Please put us down immediately!" He paused. "Just us! Keep the foreigners suspended!" Twilight meekly did as she was told, and Hero flew towards her, slowly, but encountered no resistance as he landed. "We've been looking for you." He stated with a low nod.

"Oh." Twilight blinked, and stared into Hero's eyes. "Oh! Hero. Um, hi..." She lowered her head in embarrassment. He nodded slowly as a large group of the Pegasi landed around them, filling the platform.

"Yes, hello, as soon as we're done gathering our wounded, we're going to talk. Is that heard?" he called to his surrounding soldiers, and they all nodded. They flew off towards the ocean to do just that. "As for the soldiers... I don't know, bind them?" He suggested with a shrug, turning to go to Luna's side.

Twilight blinked, glanced to the soldiers and their dragons, and in a moment had them bound in ethereal chains. Anemone had unleashed the magic around her. It finally made sense.

During the confusion, nobody had seemed to notice the creature bleeding out, resting against the dais with closed eyes. Nobody noticed Rainbow Dash dismiss all her reflections as she approached the creature quietly, and gently nudged his leg. "Tanat?" She whispered.

"Guardian." She heard in her head. Tanat's eyes opened, and he may have smiled. "You performed well."

"Um... Thank you. Tanat, you're really hurt, okay? So try not to move much." Dash whispered, pushing his hand down as she stared at his bleeding chest. Sweet Celestia, she had never seen such grievous wounds. She had never seen so much blood. It made her stomach quiver.

"Heh. Vigilant. No, Dash. I see Anemone." His voice was quiet in her head. Calm. Relaxed. Accepting.

"No no no Tanat, there's no Anemone around here, that's Luna." She whispered, nudging him again as his face crinkled in a bigger possible smile.

"No, I see Luna. I see Anemone too. He's welcoming me." His voice was elated. "I get to go home." His eyes closed again, and Dash whimpered.

"C'mon Tanat, you know what's going on, please don't leave." Dash whispered. He was dying. He was going to die on her watch. He had saved Luna's life at the cost of his own. He was suspicious, but he was loyal.

"You know more than enough. The two of you." He raised a hand slightly, as if to gesture to Twilight. "You can protect this world. I know you can. Anemone cares for you. You are his chosen. Good night, Rainbow Dash."

"Wait, Tanat!" A lump filled her throat as he stopped moving. "C'mon Tanat." She nudged him gently, but he did not respond. She hung her head in saddened defeat as his body began to glow, and slowly disappear.

Her freedom, her ego, her wings, everything. She felt useless. Tanat was gone, a creature that just wanted to help whom she hadn't trusted. She could have been better, but... Tanat had completed his mission, right? That's all that counted, right? He was with Anemone now. There was that.

She lifted her head as Applejack and Pinkie Pie drew close. "He was a friend?" Applejack asked in a low whisper. Pinkie Pie was biting her lip hard.

"Yeah. He was the only guy to help us around here, and the only one who knew what was going on. Bye Tanat." She watched the last drop of blood disappear, and she sighed heavily. "Sorry I couldn't do more."

"You..." Pinkie Pie swallowed heavily. "You did your best. That's all that matters."

"Yeah. He's with Anemone now anyways. That'll make him happy. C'mon, Twilight's up here." She climbed the dais. Twilight was standing in the middle of it, looking unsure and confused. "Hey Queenie, you alright?" She asked.

Twilight turned her head to Dash, her eyes a little wide. "Is he really-"

"Yeah. Some Clown... Thing got him. He said he's with Anemone though. How did you know that anyways?" Dash asked, watching Twilight's eyes shift to sadness.

"I don't know. I just felt him go." They were quiet for a moment, until Twilight saw Applejack and Pinkie Pie. "Oh my goodness, Applejack! Pinkie Pie!" She gasped, leaping forward.

Applejack actually felt the hug before she was hugged. It was like the air just squeezed her happily, right before Twilight did. She winced, her wound still stinging, but she returned it, even as Twilight took Pinkie Pie into the hug. "Hey sugarcube." She whispered in quiet happiness.

"You were right Applejack, this whole thing was worth it." Pinkie sighed, snuggling into Twilight's neck as they embraced. Twilight opened an arm and smiled to Dash, who stepped in to join the hug.

Dash herself winced as she still felt the wounds from the jester's attack, even if they weren't there anymore. It hurt pretty badly, but she was still able to move around. As they hugged, they all felt warmth seeping into them as Twilight's magic surrounded them. "We have," Twilight's chest heaved, "so much to tell you when we get back." Twilight whispered.

"I guess ya'll do. Wanna give us the short version now?" Applejack asked with a tiny smile. Soldiers and dragons were gathered and the castle's aerial launch pads were soon filled with the wounded and the dead. There were many burns and plenty of blood, but there were very few deaths. It

was somewhat peaceful as the combat medics tended to the wounded. The prisoners were all given a single balcony of their own, guarded by the Equestrian soldiers, while the dragons...

They chose to hang around up top. They did not attack, did not fight, did not even mind being captured. They seemed pretty happy to be near the top of the tower, several even landing there, watching Twilight intently as she told her story. Hero and Princess Luna had joined in, both keeping their composure as Twilight summed up what happened. "... and after getting our gifts, I was told to raise the castle and unleash the magic. It's the best way to protect the leylines for now."

"I think I understand where, um, father is coming from." Luna gave a tiny smile, nursing bruise on her chest that was visible even through her dark fur. "But what about during your capture? Your travel here?"

"That will have to wait until later. Right now, we're almost ready to leave. We'll need a lot of carriages unless the dragons remain cooperative." Hero interrupted, and Twilight smiled.

"Oh! I can take us there myself." She stated, and Dash nodded.

Nobody seemed to inclined to believe her. "Um, your teleportation spells are cool and all Twilight but maybe you shouldn't try everyone here?" Pinkie chuckled nervously.

"Not teleportation Pinkie, she can fly the castle there." Dash said, looking to the nodding Unicorn.

"Fly the castle?" Luna raised an eyebrow. Even if her magic had gotten stronger, the sheer weight of the castle would be incredible. It would strain anything but an Alicorn.

"Yeah, uh, one of my gifts was Laputa. Like I can control it." Twilight nodded rapidly.

"Yeah, and Queenie here also owns everything inside, which is worth crap if Anemone didn't change it all back." Dash added. Everypony simply stared.

"... Uh?" Luna finally responded.

"Hold on. You, Twilight Sparkle, own an enormous flying castle probably full of ancient treasure and knowledge long gone." Hero asked, and Twilight nodded slowly. "... I'm going to go ahead and inform Princess Celestia her student got kidnapped and came back with a castle. Begin moving this thing immediately." Hero leapt upwards, beat his wings once, and then was gone as he flew into the distance.

They merely stared after him, until Twilight sighed. "Alright guys, let's get this moving." Twilight whispered. She stood rigid on the dais, and tapping into the castle beneath her, it began to fly towards Equestria.

Chapter 12

Take a Breather

Night Brigade wasn't entirely sure why he was required to report to a simple farm pony. It had made sense up until now. Captain Hero, which he totally thought the Captain should change his name to, left to fly to Canterlot in order to inform the court. That had left their Second In-Command Silly Cupcakes in charge, but she realized she should go get word out in Ponyville since the two ponies that had reported the kidnapping information needed to be present as they were the concerned part looking for Twilight, which left Maize Picker in charge, except Maize was currently in the hospital balcony so that left Night in charge.

Yet here he was giving a report to Applejack, "-twenty-seven bedrooms and fifteen guest rooms, a total of four kitchens, one throne room, one formal throne room, one even more formal throne room, a royal bedroom behind the more formal throne room, one library in a spiral pattern that takes up the entire middle of the forth floor and beyond, a working elevator system, several dining rooms of varying qualities, a green house, treasuries, treasure rooms, armories, basements-"

"On a flying castle?" Applejack raised an eyebrow. Sensing her bemusement, Hayseed left out a hot snort behind her and closed his slit eyes again while Pinkie changed out his nature-made bandage for a more proper one.

"I'm not sure what else to call a room beneath the, uh, ground it's stationed on, but it includes cellars, wine cellars, a whole prison compound, and wine cellars."

"You said wine cellars twice."

"I like the wine cellars." Night turned his head to Twilight. "Hey, think this can go any faster, ma'am?" He called curiously.

"Unfortunately no. I'm trying to keep it at a reasonable speed that won't disrupt the local air currents and will be easier to compensate for when I need to make a stop, on top of that I'm trying to be careful about-"

She continued to ramble as Applejack turned to Night. "Anyways, good findin's, is that all?" She asked, while he shrugged.

"Only other thing I can say is that this castle is full of the finest materials and décor imaginable. Soft silks, expensive metal-ware, gold all over the place, heck, I don't know what magic your friend has but every statue is of her, everything's in her color scheme, and all the plaques in the place are dedicated to her and somepony called Atmos. As far as we can tell, she *owns* the place in every sense of the word."

Applejack blinked at this bit of info and turned to Pinkie Pie as she gave Hayseed a tummy rub. "Hey Pinkie, I'm gonna explore the castle a bit. Wanna come?"

"Sure! Rainbow Dash, you wanna-"

"I'll stay up here, thanks. Last time I went down there were mirrors. If I see another mirror in the next week I'm going to head butt myself through it." Dash waved a hoof, sitting firmly next to Twilight as they flew.

"Uh," Pinkie and Applejack blinked, "Okay, well, if you wanna stay, it's your choice!" Pinkie nodded as they walked towards the staircase leading down into the castle.

"Darn right it is."

As they turned, Hayseed opened his eye and gave a sorrowful rumble, causing Applejack to pause, and approach. She rubbed his tummy. "Aww don' worry Hayseed, we'll be back, we're jus' gonna explore Twilight's new digs. You keep an eye on 'er?" She asked, and the dragon rumbled contently. "There's a good boy." She turned and walked down the stairs.

Oh right, *that's* why Night reported to Applejack. You didn't mess with the filly who owned a dragon.

"Hey." Malta stared at the enormous tapestry beside him, having been counting the thread count and finding it impressively high. But he'd lost count. "Hey Malta." Malta turned his head towards his partner, who was

laying on the stretch of light purple carpet that covered the middle of the stone floor of the take-off deck. "Hey, we're like, captured, right?"

"..." Malta stared down at his hooves. "Popular opinion points to 'yes'." Other than Ziel, pretty much every captured pony was moping around. One of the female ones, that really bitchy one had even gone so far as to break out into tears for failing Lord Galio. Freaking drama queens.

Ziel rolled onto his hooves and remained on the floor, watching Malta. "Well shoot. I mean, I had to ask, they're not doing a hard job of keeping us here." Only one guard was stationed at the exit of the flight deck, and even he spent most of his time exploring the outside of the multi-sectioned castle.

"Twilight has the place shielded. And none of us can fly either." Malta hummed, then immediately cursed himself in his head for using her name. He wasn't supposed to get used to her, but the short time he'd spent watching her cell he'd reported to Rukafelth with concerns of their health and hygiene.

"Oh yeah, the almighty 'False One' and all that. What do you think's gonna happen to us?" He asked, standing up. "Think we'll get home eventually?"

"Doubtful. We're prisoners of war." Malta shrugged. Ziel was new to the military, Malta was a seven year veteran. He'd mostly held down cushy jobs of non-action but every now and then he got put out there to fight and proved to be capable. "That means they're probably gonna take us straight to their heavily fortified castle, have us strung up, tortured, interrogated, and if we're lucky, put to death."

"Well," Ziel paused, "crap, I can't get tortured or killed. I promised Lahmia I'd be okay."

"War likes to break promises. Anyways, if we're unlucky, they'll probably keep us around for a few years and take turns torturing us depending on how bored they are. That's what I heard Coltriella does to its prisoners." Malta prattled on, reupdating his memory of the thread count.

"This isn't Coltriella though." Ziel pointed out idly.

"What's Coltriella?" They turned to face their guard. He was an older pony, his mane graying, but he looked tough, and very curious.

Malta couldn't hide all the surprise from his eyes, but he minimized it some. Standard procedure should have been to not say anything, but right now, he wanted to reduce his future pain. "Coltriella is a foreign country near Golding." The guard blinked. "Golding is really far west of here."

"Ah. We don't hear much news outside Equestria." The old guard admitted, shifting to face them.

"Probably for the best. Not every where's as happy as it is here. Coltriella's kind of this barbarian waste land that used to be an agricultural empire until its ruling class ran it into the ground. Now it's kind of the ultimate hotspot for sin."

The guard blinked once, "I don't understand."

Ziel butt in, "Oh, you know, gambling, whores, slaves, assassinations, it's full of the 'finer pleasures' and such. We've been at odds for a while because those cocky bunch of foals don't even try to hide it. Their king practically lives off it, in fact. It's really a shameful place."

"Very shameful." Malta nodded darkly.

"... Surprising. And you tolerate your neighbors doing such things?" The old Equestrian asked.

"Heck no! We've been at war with them for the past twenty-eight years!"

"Thirty-eight." "Thirty-eight years! Some slavers snuck into our country and were caught trying to kidnap a few maidens, so our Lord put out a war order. The only thing stopping us from knocking them flat is they use slaves as cannon-fodder, and our Lord doesn't want to kill slaves."

The Equestrian looked out to the sky, and flapped his wings a little, then looked back to the Golding ponies. "I'm afraid I don't understand you ponies at all."

The floors of every room was a nice white marble, with a dark violet carpet stretching across the middle leaving only the edges exposed. The walls were also a fantastic white, the same with the ceiling, each a well-polished stone that was smooth to the touch. The hallways were hardly boring to traverse, what with the gold candles, gold chandeliers, all encrusted with jewels with a perfectly formed candle lit in each spot. There was a column in the walls every ten feet, all with the shape of Twilight's cutie mark chiseled in and filled with gold.

There were banners and tapestries and artwork, the banners and tapestries being dark blue, purple, light violet, and pink, with the paintings being professionally done in various styles from water-color, to acrylic, to oil based, and all of them depicted Twilight in some form or fashion, all looking her absolute best wearing dresses, or on thrones, or sleeping soundly, or sitting on a sun-lit rock, or playing in a field, or surrounded by thousands of books, or performing magic. Some of them had Rainbow Dash in them, looking noble and powerful, sword in mouth and sometimes with multiples of her with their mono-colored hair. There was never a similar painting no matter how many they passed by.

Inside of each bedroom was a fancy canopy bed, with plenty of pillows, numerous layers of blankets, wrap-around blinds perfect for a noble between each bed column. There were wardrobes full of Twilight-colored clothes, all with star motifs and there was an outfit for just about everything: nightwear, comfort, casual, comfort casual, comfort formal, formal, super formal, and of course saddle-wear. On top of that there were blankets, extra pillows, towels, belts, and even girdles.

The bathrooms for each bedroom had a wide bath with several towels, all Twilight-themed, with bath soaps, conditioners, shampoos, tooth-brushes and tooth-pastes, mouth-wash, and to Pinkie's everlasting glee, Twilight Sparkle brand bubble-bath. Star shape guaranteed!

Coming out of the bedrooms they entered the grand hall, which connected to the library, to the throne rooms, to the bedrooms, to the kitchens, it was the central room of the whole place. It was a super multi-leveled traveling place, with elevators in four areas to go to each level of the castle. There was even more artwork, more gold fineries, plants growing everywhere and soft music coming from seemingly no where. In the very middle at the bottom was perhaps the most interesting thing in Applejack's opinion.

It was a true testament to Twilight's vanity, and how she really thought of herself. It was a fountain, with Twilight sitting in the middle, surrounded by Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, Rarity, Fluttershy, and herself, all proportionately tall, all smiling and happy, as if staring at a camera. Sure it was made of solid gold, but Applejack had the feeling this had been drawn from Twilight's thoughts and feelings of herself and her friends.

"Wow. Twilight really is like a Queen." Pinkie Pie whispered as she stared around at how fancy this place was.

"I need to go find me some fancy ancient Alicorns. Maybe they can get me a new barn." Applejack mumbled as they walked into the elevator again, this time taking it to the very top floor, Twilight's personal throne and relaxation room, as well as her bedroom. The glass elevator showed them go through the main room's ceiling and up a library that was just as tall as the central room, full of books. Twilight would adore this place.

When they reached the top, they entered a circular room with a large lay-down couch with comfortable cushions, with several more couches and comfy chairs as well as cushions laying about. Along the walls were bookshelves with, what else, books. On top of that though were games, coolers for food, and a large, picturesque magic window to stare at the clouds from. There was also an informal painting of Twilight on one wall simply reading, and all around it were pictures of her friends. Just above the pictures of Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, Applejack, Fluttershy, and Rarity were pictures of Princess Celestia and Princess Luna.

Applejack stared at the pictures as Pinkie settled on perhaps the most comfortable cushion she'd ever sat on. Applejack was truly, affectionately touched at the pictures. Twilight clearly cared for them, loved them, put them on an equal level with her, and even more clear was that they'd made a huge impact on her. It made her feel good, knowing she really did help somepony's life so much.

The two moved on into a door hidden behind a tapestry, and found themselves in a smaller circular room. Directly across from them was a room with Twilight's name on it in solid gold. But around it were other doors. Each one had a different name for each friend. Applejack stood before her room's door, and opened it slightly.

Inside, it smelled like apples. Her bed was not as large as the guest bedrooms', but Applejack didn't mind. It was comfortably sized in her opinion, and all around it were pictures of her family. All of them, from the Apples to the Oranges, either in a small picture frame or resting on the walls, and everything was a shade of orange, yellow, green, or red, and there were plenty of apple shapes everywhere. Even a basket of fresh apples laying on the night stand by her bed, and a small bowl of cool, fresh water on the other side. Her bathroom had more than the regular bedrooms had though, a massager for sore hooves, and deep-scrubbing brushes to get dirt out of her fur and hooves. The bath was even a hot tub, which would feel amazing on her muscles.

Pinkie was bouncing excitedly in her room, with balloons floating around her pink and pink as well as white-ish red room, with bowls of candy and cakes and pastries laying around, as well as sugary juices and water, a party planner on the wall already filled in with birthday dates and events around Equestria, and a small cook's kitchen. It smelled so sweet and tasty, just like a bakery. Inside her bathroom was a bowl of chocolate mints, many scented candles, bubble-baths, each a different variety. All around it were pictures of her family, having the times of their lives at her parties, smiling and enjoying themselves.

Both their closets were full of the same ensemble the other bedrooms had, but this time, besides the Twilight theme, they had their own personal themes thrown in. It reminded them both of Rarity's dresses if Rarity had spent weeks on each dress. Not that Rarity's dresses were bad, but these dresses were made by ponies who glued themselves to the sewing machines.

Pinkie Pie came out in a sweeping dress that looked like it was made of groomed cotton candy with icing on the edges, with red spirals sewn into the pattern that resembled various candies. Applejack came out with a styled hat, embroidered with darker leather ties with a red apple-shaped jewel in it, as well as some very fancy leather boots. She also wore the saddle cover to match it.

"Ya get the need ta hug Twilight?" Applejack asked, looking rather dashing in her outfit, as Pinkie looked very casually formal.

"More than *ever*! Her castle knew my favorite type of crescent!" Pinkie Pie happily licked her lips and grinned.

Applejack smiled a little, and got a small idea. She slipped into Twilight's bedroom, and came out with a stuffed pack. "A Queen's gotta look formal at all time, yeah?" Applejack winked as Pinkie poked her nose into the pack. Pinkie dove back into Twilight's room, and came out with another stuffed pack and a grin.

"Definitely!"

It had been a very long week. The Mayor sat quietly at her desk, eyes closed as she simply let the peace relax her. She had been running around everywhere it felt like. She tried to keep things calm and orderly, to keep the whole of Ponyville operating as it should have and keep gossip down, but she knew she couldn't keep it quiet forever.

Dragon-riding ponies had nabbed two of their most well-known residents, the weather pony Rainbow Dash, as well as Celestia's student herself, Twilight Sparkle, and this was directly after the whole "under attack" incident. No pony knew precisely what to do, not even herself, but she knew she had to calm them down and let Celestia sort it out. Rarity and Fluttershy had sent information that could possibly bring them back, which was what she tried to explain to her citizens but some were insistent on panicking.

Things did calm down at least. Of all the ponies, Applebloom had been the one to really calm everyone's nerves. She and the other "Crusaders" had taken her speaking platform by force and very politely reminded everyone that Celestia could do anything, then immediately started chewing everyone out for not trusting their Princess or Dash or Twilight. Truly a gift, that one.

She was not looking forward to filling out documents for this though.

"Mayor?" She opened her eyes to see her door opened just a crack, and she let out a slow breath of exhaustion. "One of Celestia's Royal Guard is here to see you. A miss Silly Cupcakes."

The Mayor groaned. She didn't need this right now, she was tired, and honestly didn't feel like dealing with *that* stiff. She put on her best smile though and sat up. "Alright Butler, show her in." Her secretary nodded and opened the door. In walked a mare that was solid muscle and bone, and with a stare hard enough to crack ice.

"My apologies for intruding, Mayor." Cupcakes grunted out politely, staring straight into her eyes. "But this is urgent. I bring good news, and I feel you should be the first to be informed. Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash have been found and are being escorted to Canterlot."

The Mayor felt the tightness in her chest leave as a breath of relaxation came out, then in. "That is absolutely fantastic news! Oh but I hope they're unharmed, I'll have to call a town meeting immediately to let the citizens know."

"You do that. For now I have several orders to issue on behalf of Canterlot business and Equestrian safety."

"O-of course miss Cupcakes." The Mayor nodded slowly, pulling out a piece of paper to record the orders.

"Order One: by direct order of Canterlot we must have all relevant ponies associated with Twilight Sparkle, Rainbow Dash, Applejack, and Pinkie Pie in Canterlot. That includes you, Mayor, their families, and their friends, meaning Miss Rarity and Miss Fluttershy. You are all to be taken immediately to Canterlot and will be escorted within the hour. The meeting to discuss what has happened will begin in just under six hours. There will be *no* delays whatsoever, is that clear?" She asked in a low, demanding voice, and the Mayor nodded rapidly as she wrote.

"Yes Miss Cupcakes, loud and clear, you have my word."

"Perfect. Order Two: inform Ponyville to keep the skies clear for seven hours. Air traffic will be heavy sometime within the next six hours, and it's advised that nopony gets in its way under punishment of a heavy fine. Is that clear?"

The Mayor nodded rapidly, scribbling furiously. "Yes miss Cupcakes, of course."

"Perfect. Order Three: inform Ponyville that, no matter what they see, hear, or feel, there is no reason to panic."

The Mayor paused after writing, and looked to Silly. "If I may ask, what will be happening that could incite panic? An informed town is a prepared town, after all."

Silly Cupcakes sighed heavily, and shook her head. "Just tell them not to panic. It's not like the dragons aren't tamed or anything, nor is the giant flying castle unstable." The Mayor dropped her quill. "Also, *if* any Pegasus are in the airspace within the next six hours and happen to somehow misconstrue that Twilight Sparkle is in fact now a Queen and attempt to spread the word that Twilight Sparkle is a Queen, they will be taken to Canterlot and reprimanded harshly as well as fined heavily for spying on and spreading Equestrian secrets. Please inform your town that *nopony* is allowed in the skies at all for the next six hours, as we do not wish the information of Twilight Sparkle of being a Queen to spread, is that clear?"

The Mayor did not respond. Silly Cupcakes merely read the answer in her eyes. "Perfect." Cupcakes turned, and grinning widely to herself, checking Step One off her list.

Somewhere on a giant flying castle to the south, Night Brigade was high-hoofing the next in command.

"I'm not looking forward to this." It had taken Dash several minutes to respond. Twilight understood completely as they flew over the Forest of Tranquility. Since they had reached land, birds had been flocking from the treetops to land on the castle, a majority of them around and on top of Twilight, despite the enormous dragon and many attempts to shoo them away. "I want to just go lay down for a while." Dash sighed heavily.

"I know what you mean." Twilight whispered, keeping her eyes forward towards the horizon. "But if we don't, there won't be a place to go lay down. This is something we really gotta do."

"I just think it's too much. It doesn't even feel real, does it? Here we are on a flying castle, surrounded by dragons and *freaking birds!*" She shouted, but the birds didn't move. "I barely even believe there's six of me." She

glanced around at the reflections she'd made. They were calmly pacing the top of the tower, leaving the red-maned one by Twilight.

"Heh. It's all real though, isn't it? It's like a nightmare." Twilight smiled weakly, and felt Dash rest her head on her back.

"Sorta. But it got kinda good in the end, even if Tanat's, well," she gulped quietly at the memory, "and you got the castle for your trouble, and for mine I got a... Sword." She mumbled. Twilight broke her concentration for the first time, the castle slowing as she leaned over to gently kiss Dash's forehead.

"Dash, magic is a great gift, but I agree. You deserve more. You deserve a lot more for what they took from you. I'm going to make it up to you." Twilight smiled a little as she resumed the castle's flight.

"I don't want any part of the castle or any money Twilight." Dash grumbled a little.

"Okay. I understand." Twilight continued to stare forward as Dash yawned, nuzzling Twilight's back. "I'm going to find some other way then." Twilight whispered as she felt and saw the Dash's pull back into one form, and curl up by her side. Subconsciously, she wanted to comfort her friend, and a cushion placed itself under the sleeping Dash.

She flew in silence for a few minutes. She liked the silence right now. It meant Dash was calm, it meant she could be calm. There was no danger. No foreigners trying to attack them on huge dragons, no puzzles or tests, no history to learn and missions to get, she was just flying a castle home. She reveled in it.

"Hey Twilight."

She smiled to herself. "Applejack, Pinkie Pie. How did exploring go?" She asked, curious. She hadn't seen the castle herself, she'd been up here the entire time.

"Twilight, I ain't one t'say this without good reasoning', but I gotta say, I'm jealous." She heard Applejack say with a little chuckle. "You claim an Alicorn gave all this to ya? Land sake's girl, luxury ain't even accurate to describe watcha got down there."

"Really?" Twilight asked in surprise, keeping her head forward.

"No kidding! This whole place is made around you! You're *everywhere*! Your colors and your face and paintings and statues and your Cutie Mark are on everything!" Pinkie Pie bounced beside her, and Twilight became aware she was wearing something fluttery.

"That ain't the half of it. Castle's built entire rooms around ya, like the library is crazy big. Hey, what's with the birds?" Applejack walked through a flock, which immediately landed back where they'd been.

"I have no idea, probably Anemone's weirdness, or maybe birds like castles. You guys aren't pulling my leg are you?"

"Nope! This place is incredible Twilight, it even had rooms and dresses for us!" Pinkie Pie walked around to Twilight's front, who nearly bugged out as she saw the beautiful, comfortable looking dress Pinkie wore. Applejack did the same, and grinned at Twilight's stare.

"Oh, speakin' of dresses." Applejack went behind Twilight, and Pinkie Pie did the same. Twilight couldn't see them, but heard them working on some backpacks. "Don't go movin' none, ain't nothin' but some clothes." Applejack told her as something comfortably breezy yet warm was pulled across her back. It was her formal dress, not that she knew. It was a dark blue, like the night sky, and covered in glowing white star spots that seemed to shift whenever they moved. She shifted uncomfortable as it was fitted around her, and Pinkie had her lift each leg to put on slippers.

She glanced around nervously, unable to see them or herself as they put silver bands in her hair, giving her a beautiful - heh - ponytail, and she felt jewels get clipped onto her ears, followed by a tiara. Then around her neck a silver necklace was put with a dark purple jewel in it, as well as beautiful jeweled leg bracers.

"Well land sakes..." Applejack whispered, walking around Twilight slowly. "Ya'll really do look like a Queen in all this."

"Guys I'm not a Queen, I just have the castle." She mumbled a little in embarrassment. She felt heavy now in all of this. No wonder Princess Celestia just wore the slippers, the necklace, and the tiara.

"Well you're going to live in it, right?" Pinkie asked as she gently adjusted each piece of jewelry on Twilight to make it perfect.

"I was thinking about donating it to Canterlot..." Twilight admitted with a mumble as the Tiara was reset on her head.

"Well ya'll can still live in it. It's a big, pretty place. Also it's pretty magical, I don't think anyone'll complain if you decide to keep yourself around it..." Applejack chuckled a little. "Oh, Luna's in the kitchen and wants to know if ya'll're hungry."

"Actually, yeah, Dash and I could both use a nice meal." Twilight remained mum on living in the castle. It didn't seem like it was such a fantastic thing to do, even though it was a nice castle. She had a home already, with Spike, this was just a lot of extra space she didn't need.

Although... When did one get the rare chance of indulging oneself to the 'royal treatment'? She tried not to consider it too hard, but even Applejack seemed to have enjoyed the luxury. Maybe just a little using it for personal needs.

It was a gift from Anemone after all. There was that. Anemone probably wanted her to use it to her own leisure. Would he? He seemed like he wanted to give her some material reward for this, but maybe it was another test. What if she grew too used to it and didn't donate it? Or didn't come out of it at all? Or she actually hired *servants*? Celestia would be mad if she just fattened up in the castle. Maybe she should just hand it over, she wasn't sure if she was ready to test her own will that way.

Though if she didn't, would she ever know? If you didn't try you wouldn't be able to tell, and she did have friends who could keep her in line. Applejack would certainly be nice and honest about what she thought of Twilight if she really started acting like a jerk. Maybe she'd ask about it. Later though, there was a swan trying to rest on her back.

"Excuse me, but I'm very busy, could you all *please leave me alone!*" She shouted. There was a mess of wings, feathers, and squawking as the birds all tried to leave at once into the same airspace and left the castle. "Wow, did that actually work?"

"Yes indeedy! You really have a way with birds." Pinkie giggled as she groomed Twilight's mane and coat with a few brushes. "Oooh, you're going to look all fancy for this Twilight. I think even Princess Celestia will be jealous!"

Twilight's thought process paused; would she really? "Um. Before we get there, can you take all this-"

"Nope!"

A short distance away, Night Brigade landed on the rooftop, next to Hayseed who offered him one second of interest before falling back to sleep. He glanced up to Twilight for a moment, and had to bat his eyes rapidly to see if the sun was still in them. He stared at her once he was sure he was seeing this right. "Ooo-ho-ho-ho-hooo, perfect!" He grinned brightly, turning to launch off the tower.

"What's perfect?" Applejack asked, poking her head around her dragon. She had an eye raised.

"..." Night stopped, turned, and kept his face flat. "The number of dragons has not diminished, meaning they're staying here rather than simply leaving. I'm assuming this has something to do with Qu- Twilight Sparkle." He stated plainly, nodded to Hayseed. "Twenty-one dragons are currently roosting on Laputa."

Applejack raised an eyebrow at Night's change in tone, but nodded quietly. "Alright then, that's good news I suppose. Where are the dragons roostin'? Hayseed's lookin' a little lonely." She looked up to her dragon, who had opened its eye to look to Applejack. He extended an arm and wrapped it around Applejack gently. "See? He's so lonely thinkin' I'm kin!"

Night Brigade and Hayseed both snorted in amusement, "Well, from what I've seen the smaller ones have taken to the larger balconies for rest, the larger ones are on the castle-" he peaked over the side at the bottom of the castle, at the floating island of land carrying the castle, along with the gardens and courtyards it had, "-grounds I suppose you could call them. Several have been seen burrowing into the grounds from the bottom to set up a nest cave. They are remarkably non-hostile, even allowing us to strip them of their saddles and refit them after inspection. Several soldiers are requesting your expertise on how to ride them."

Applejack's turn to look at him blankly. "What, really? I'm no expert, I just hopped on Hayseed and told him where to go and what to do and he listened."

"That implies a level of mastery no pony else has. Then again, Hayseed does seem to simply just plain like you." He watched as Hayseed yawned, turning his head to avoid breathing on Applejack.

"Yup. Two peas in a pod, me 'n Hayseed." Applejack rubbed the dragon's arm and then sighed. "I still have no idea what to do with 'im when we get home. Not sure the farm life is for a dragon."

"If it's any reassurance, if it meant staying with you, I would happily live on a farm." Applejack opened her mouth, closed it quickly, and stared at Night as he turned and walked to the edge of the tower. "I need to go check preparations for our latest mission, please try not to lose the 'Queen'." Night dove off the tower to the levels below, while Applejack just raised one dainty blonde eyebrow. Maybe she should lose the fancy clothes.

"I ain't ever flyin' again." The tiny filly groaned as she wobbly walked out of the carriage, a sympathetic Fluttershy by her side while Scootaloo all but bounced out.

"Are you kidding me!" The tiny Pegasus shouted in excitement, drawing attention from some of the mayors, administrators, and nobles filing through the open doors of Celestia's castle. "The wind going through your coat, the sound of it going by, being so high up, not stopped by stupid rocks and trees and houses! That was amazing! Oh man oh man I hope we do that again, that was so cool."

Applebloom meanwhile heaved herself over to a bush and retched dryly, Fluttershy rubbing her back. "It's okay Applebloom, not everybody is suited to flying. I prefer the ground myself and I'm a Pegasus."

"At least ya'll didn't get sick on the way over!"

"Speak for yourself," Sweetie Belle walked out of the carriage just behind theirs, "when Rarity heard Princess Celestia was inviting her to the court and she didn't have time to prepare herself she nearly shook herself to

pieces on the way over." Sweetie Belle herself was shaking as she waltzed over.

"Are you alright?" Fluttershy asked the quivering unicorn filly.

"She held onto me the entire way there like some sorta teddy bear." She finally stood still, and focused intently on Fluttershy. "I still see two of you!"

"Pfft, you guys are lame. It's just a little air travel. As soon as I'm old enough, Rainbow Dash is gonna give me lessons herself!" Scootaloo grinned assuredly as Rarity came out of the carriage, staring around at everyone with low eyes.

"Did you at least have a nice flight?" Fluttershy was tempted to ask, and Rarity sighed heavily.

"It is to be expected that my beauty is tested on a day I have no time to prepare it." Rarity sighed again, casting her eyes around at the passing ponies, each in their casual wear, or with formal wear hastily pulled on, manes rapidly groomed, and make-up shakily applied. "At least I don't seem to be alone."

"Why did the Princess invite us again?" Applebloom seemed to have righted herself, and was finally facing the group. "I heard it was somethin' 'bout Applejack." She watched Big Mac help guide Granny Smith inside.

"Yes, we would like to know as well." Came a highly cultured, concerned voice from behind her.

They turned to face a pair of older ponies, both with a shade of yellow for their coats, and the male had mint-green hair while the female's was orange. "Aunt and Uncle Orange! Ya'll got called here too?" Applebloom stared at them both curiously, approaching after a brief moment of hesitation.

"All we got was a knock on the door during our brunch with the Jewelries and one of the Royal Guard demanding we come post-haste, as we needed to be present for something concerning Applejack." Aunt Orange explained, looking perhaps the best of all the ponies present since she'd prepared early for formal company.

Fluttershy and Rarity looked to each other, hiding their concern as the three family members spoke. "Well Applejack had to run off to find Twilight and Dash back in Ponyville, maybe they found them and there's a celebration?" Sweetie Belle offered.

"She never could keep herself from being an active little thing, could she?" Uncle Orange turned to his wife, who nodded.

"Let's hope for that. Come, let's go find places to stand." The Oranges lead the way, talking their way through the crowd. They were apparently somewhat well-known, as more than a few ponies recognized them and greeted them. They insisted on pushing ahead though, wanting information as much as everyone else did.

The formal greeting hall was packed to the walls with ponies. The middle red carpet was clear of guests so Celestia could pace freely, for once not acting as the hostess and more as a filly who lost her puppy. Hero was still dropping by villages to gather ponies of importance, and he was the one with all the information. It twisted her to have to wait but she understood the importance. His initial message had just been "It's bigger than we thought, we need everyone" and he'd left. No word on Twilight, no word on Rainbow Dash, no word on anything.

She turned her head to stare at Twilight's parents up near the top of the stairs she would making her announcements from later, both absolutely rigid with nervousness and terror. She had personally delivered the news of Twilight's disappearance, and bore their sorrow and fears. They had been the first to receive the news and the first to arrive.

She stopped when a few familiar faces were spotted in the crowd. "Fluttershy, Rarity." She called quietly, and watched the two pause as she approached. This was drawing a good amount of attention, but she didn't care. "I'm so glad you could make it, and I'm so thankful for your help. I'm sorry it was such short notice." The seven of them bowed, except Fluttershy who did so only awkwardly. After spending a few days in her company caring for Twilight, it had slipped her mind that there were formalities inside the castle.

"It's quite alright Princess Celestia, even if I'm not at my best right now, all that matters is that Twilight and Dash are okay." Rarity nodded, smiling sadly.

"Have you been alright Princess Celestia?" Fluttershy quipped curiously.

"Oh, dear Fluttershy I've been so exhausted lately. I think I've seen all of Equestria in detail in the past few days, not to mention I've been worried sick about Twilight and Luna being gone." The Princess sighed, causing them to nod.

"Oh..." Applebloom groaned. "Please don't say 'sick', I'm just barely comin' off that carriage ride." She squeezed her eyes shut as Celestia smiled just a little.

"My apologies. I do hope that news is good news, the guard captain was very unhelpful on if it was or not. He should be here soon though." She then added very low, "I hope."

They seven of them nodded quietly. Fluttershy explained who Twilight and Dash were to the Oranges while explaining their relationship to Applejack, and Rarity was trying to keep the Crusaders near. Celestia stood up at the top of the staircase to observe the crowd once more, noting that everypony must be present.

Twilight's parents stood close by, watching the Princess, then the crowd in concern. The wait went on for another twenty minutes before he appeared.

He flew in through a balcony, and landed quietly on all fours, and walked boldly into the hall. The room quieted down as Celestia sighed with relief. "Hero, you've made it." She sighed, staring at Hero. The entire crowd did so as well.

"M-my daughter." Twilight's mother spoke up, a few feet from Celestia. Her voice was shaking. "I-is she okay?"

Hero closed his eyes slowly, collected his thoughts after this hectic day, and opened them again. "Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash," he sighed heavily, and smiled softly, "are perfectly fine, if a bit battered."

The mood of the room shifted to relief and slight confusion. Most of the ponies here did not know who Twilight or Dash were, but those who did were at ease. Fluttershy was actually quietly clapping as Rarity quivered in excitement. The Crusaders smiled between each other as they hopped about, having a small party. Princess Celestia's whole body quietly calmed,

her muscles relaxing immediately. Twilight's mother buried her head into the father's neck as she cried happily, and her father didn't bother hiding his look of relieved pleasure.

"But that is only part of the news I bring. I myself do not know the full details, Sparkle and Dash do, and they have insisted on telling their story. The news they bring is not good, and is in fact why I have summoned so many of you here." He explained, his smile turning into a flat line as his voice lowered.

"What," Celestia paused, her mind blanking for just a moment, "what do you mean, Hero?"

"Twilight Sparkle will inform you when she arrives, as my information is limited." He noted Celestia's eyes as they went from him to behind him, and he turned. "Cupcakes?"

The tall mare entered the building, her stare flat and not to be questioned. Silly Cupcakes approached Hero and stood just a foot from him. "Captain."

"You were supposed to be guarding Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash during their escort." He spoke, his eyes narrowing.

"With all due respect, I had a few mission-based errands to run and I left Night Brigade in charge, and the guard seems to like him better anyways." She rolled her shoulders. Celestia raised an eyebrow at the mare's direct attitude, but Hero calmed some.

"Is there any trouble? Any updates?" He asked rapidly, somewhat concerned.

"They should be only two hours away by now. Everything is still organized and no sudden happenings have occurred. Only problem I foresee is parking but Night claims to have a solution. Maize is finally conscious again as well, but he'll be out for a week." Cupcakes said with a small shrug.

"But everything is still okay?" Hero asked, and Cupcakes nodded, turning to leave.

"Fine, just came in to inform you of the time."

"Everything including my daughter?" Twilight's mother called from the top of the stairs. The whole place was dead silent. The intrusion of the guard pony was a little odd, not to mention still official. It was a little odd when Silly began to shake a little as she turned.

Hero's blood froze as he actually saw Cupcakes smile with mirth. "Ma'am, you have nothing to worry about. The Queen is doing fantastic." She then immediately sprinted out the doors and took off from the balcony.

Everypony stared out the doors with wide eyes, Celestia, her parents, Rarity and Fluttershy, and the Crusaders included. "What did she mean by 'the Queen'?" Celestia asked Hero after ten seconds of silence.

"... D-..." Hero panted. "Damnit Night..."

Chapter 13

Back to the Old Castle

"..." Twilight smiled nervously. "...?" Twilight cringed a bit as an eyebrow was raised. "You took a liking to this whole thing quickly." Dash finally stated, having been roused by a plate of fruit-and-frosting covered pancakes delivered personally by Princess Luna.

"I say she looks rather dashing. Like true royalty, with a touch of flavor." Luna walked around Twilight slowly, inspecting her. Twilight wasn't sure she appreciated the attention. She felt kind of puny being admired by the Princess of all ponies. She squeaked as a pair of hooves began to straighten her legs, tighten her stance, and hold her head up. "Now lift your tail like as if you were prancing." Princess Luna ordered.

Twilight did so hesitantly, using her hind muscles to make her tail lift high. Luna then took a brush to it, and Twilight began to wince as Dash sighed. "I would have expected this from Pinkie Pie at the very least but Applejack's got the crazy hat now and you're actually accepting all this? Isn't it a bit early to celebrate all of this?"

"Well, it's not like I could have stopped them, I have to fly the castle!" Twilight mumbled childishly, making Dash snort.

"You took the time to comfort me but not stop people from dressing you up? Seems like it'd be a pretty easy thing to stop for. Hay, you could take it off right now if you spared a minute or so." Dash leaned over and stared at the jeweled bracers around her legs and rolled her eyes.

"We can't just stop. We have to go to Canterlot and tell Celestia and everypony else about what's happening. Y'know, before those creatures Anemone warned me about pop up." Twilight insisted, only to receive a slight knock on the head from Dash.

"Just let Princess Luna do it! She's literally right behind you!"

"I-" Twilight paused and felt Princess Luna curl her tail, giving her a much more royal look. "I guess that could work."

"Afraid not." Twilight heard Night Brigade to her side, and saw Dash turning to look at him. "We absolutely need witness testimonials and to show you two are doing fine. Do not stop this castle Miss Sparkle, the sooner we get there the sooner you can do whatever this Alicorn guy wants you to do." He stated simply, easily, and Rainbow Dash began to grumble some very unpleasant things under her breath.

"It's not so bad Dash, I'm not planning to stay this way." The reassurance made Dash sigh and roll her eyes.

"Oh fine, I believe you, but if you start expecting a 'your majesty' and a 'yes sire', I'm going to kick you." Dash warned her with a raised eyebrow, making Twilight giggle a little.

"Nothing of the sort. Hey, stay in front of me for a moment." Twilight told her, and Dash promptly sat down as Twilight raised her voice. "Princess Luna, could you do me a big favor and go find Applejack and Pinkie Pie? They said they were going to explore even more so they're probably way downstairs."

"Of course Twilight." Luna walked to the staircase and went down.

"And Night Brigade? Could you please leave us alone for a while? Dash and I need to talk."

"What, you can't find a better excuse for me to leave, my Queen?" He smirked, but saw Dash's flat stare. Yeah, he wasn't about to mess with Sextuplets anytime soon, so he turned and wisely chose the stairs, rather than his wings. "Fine, fine. Just don't interrupt her flight Miss Dash."

Dash nodded quietly and turned back to Twilight. The unicorn sighed heavily as she kept her focus on flight. "I want to thank you."

"... Shut up."

"I'm not kidding. I want to thank you for putting up with all of this. It's my fault this-"

Dash interrupted her with an annoyed grunt. "Twilight, seriously, shut up. I don't want to hear any "thanks" or "sorry"s or anything."

"But I want to-"

"Look, Twilight, I don't care. All that matters is that you and me are safe. You're my friend, I was just doing what any friend would do for each other." Twilight blinked. She had an entirely, carefully worded speech for all of this. She'd been intending to make big promises, loving speeches, and promise a reward somehow, but Dash just had to go and derail another perfectly laid out plan. "Look, I know you feel all guilty but, y'know, don't. I don't blame you."

"You don't?" Twilight blinked rapidly as Dash shook her head.

"These Golding guys aren't your fault. You and me, we were both scared fillies with no idea of what was going on, getting attacked by ponies who we didn't know for no reason it seemed like. That day we were captured I was frustrated. There's something wrong with you, and I wanted to know what it was. Now I know, now I don't care. All that matters is that, during this whole big thing we gotta do now is that I keep you safe. Not because I have to, if it had been that Brigade guy I would have let somebody else volunteer themselves for suicide, but it's not him, it's you. I'm going to keep you safe, so I'm going to be practicing my magical powers a *lot*. So don't get a big head about your new magic, I'm going to race you to who's the best magic user here." Dash's smirk was both reassuring and toughening.

Twilight stared into Dash's eyes for what felt like minutes. Her carefully planned speech had suddenly become Dash's carefully planned speech. She'd figured Dash would be scared, terrified of all this happening; losing her wings, gaining some freaky power, being asked to go on a quest to guard her newest friend who she barely got along with to protect the world, it freaked Twilight out. She wasn't ready to have new magic, or ready to save anybody, but she knew she couldn't say no. Her wants didn't matter right now, she had a world to protect.

But Dash was willing to go the extra mile. Sure she was probably scared and didn't want to, but she still had a duty to perform. She was insisting on being strong too. Heck, she was challenging her, Twilight Sparkle, Princess Celestia's personal student and the group's master of magic, to a race to be the better Unicorn! That was some very serious confidence. It made Twilight begin to smile. Then she started to laugh.

"No no, go ahead, it's okay to laugh the doubt away. I'm serious though, by the time we're done with this you're going to have to trade over your spot for 'Ponyville's Premium Wizard'. That spot's reserved for me now that I don't have anything else to occupy me." Dash smirked, and Twilight's smile wavered. She knew what she meant. She was proud she wasn't going to let it stop her from doing something with her life though. She just hoped it was a decent substitute.

"Fine then. Rainbow Dash, I formally accept your challenge. May the best magic user win." Twilight extended a hoof and, remembering Applejack's and Dash's nasty little ritual, spit on it. Dash did the same, and they shook.

The castle never wavered or slowed. In fact, some of the more attentive of art lovers currently in the castle would say Rainbow Dash was appearing in more in the pictures.

His chest stung a bit. He could still feel the power of those hooves connecting against his chest again and again. A lot of his beautiful mane was singed and blackened by the electrical feedback, and he was starting to glide more as he started to feel exhaustion. He had never fought such an air battle. He had faced foes with years of experience against him that simply failed to owe up to that *one's* standards.

It occurred to him that maybe Equestria's greatest strength wasn't its magic, it was the intelligence of its ponies. A ninety degree turn at near top speed was considered countless times to be impossible, but he had seen it. The closer he examined his memory the more he saw the split-second acrobatics he'd performed. An aerial twist, a spin that required a shift of your body that would require extreme training as well as flexibility. But still, to change his momentum so quickly, the way he bucked his hind legs...

"The clouds." He finally said to himself, staring at the fluff beneath him. "That tricky little-" he muttered to himself as he forced himself through the barrier guarding his base of operations. He flew through an endless sea of clouds, the cool moisture feeling good where he'd been hurt and he started to fly towards the sound of rolling thunder.

Your average, intelligent Pegasus avoided thunder like a mouse avoiding an owl, or an oddly dressed baby-dragon, as flying through a thunder storm

meant forcing ones self into the face of danger. He flew towards it bravely though, and finally emerged into an open area in the clouds, appearing in a small dale in the clouds hidden well among the fluff, with the buildings being as irregularly shaped and low as possible. His soldiers peaked their heads from the clouds as they saw him, and flew towards the middle of the makeshift village.

His many Pegasus soldiers directly working around him stood by quietly as he landed on a raised platform of cloud. Silence filled the air as they took note of his once formerly perfect handsomeness diminished by burns, by bruises, and by exhaustion. An uneasy feeling of shock filled the air as Shallom stretched his wings and sat with a groan of relief.

He understood their concern. Shallom rarely exerted himself, even in battle. He was powerful and fast, and always seemed perfectly invincible. Yet he sat before them, looking like he himself had taken quite a few hits. His face was flat as well. They understood. He did not succeed.

"Sir?" Schola whispered from the crowd, his second in command stepping forward, looking heavily concerned. "Sir are you alright?"

"The False One has escaped us again, and has depleted our numbers, yet again." He spoke strong, but deep, and several of his soldiers looked a bit woozy. "I am afraid her strength has reached its climax. She gave pause to, and took away Rukafelth's riding dragons as well as their riders."

He watched their eyes widen, and glance back and forth to each other in surprise, wondering if this was real or not. "That is not all. Equestria's soldiers are powerful. Intelligent. More so than I've ever seen. They had well-trained methods of bringing down the dragons non-violently, and their leader..." He sucked in a breath through his teeth. "He was like nothing I'd ever seen. The situation is much more difficult than I'd imagined. The few blows they landed on me may have hurt, but I am back here alive, wiser, and stronger because of it. We'll not be caught off guard. We're returning to Lord Galio to deliver the news, and our training scheme is being boosted by twenty more hours each week." The news made them all stand straight and tense, and he nodded quietly.

He liked the ponies under him. They were dedicated and strong, not full of slackers. Nobody could be in Galio's army, or they'd walk a very fine edge of pleasure and being reprimanded by an angry king, and Lord Galio was

one king you simply did not make angry or disappoint. Shallom had failed, but he could explain himself to Galio and at least reduce his punishment. Rukafelth was probably doing the same now.

He would tell his full story there, to Lord Galio. He idly wondered, though, how he would take the death of Cloppin. A particularly nasty way to die, he mused, thanks to whatever that thing was. Either way, as his team began to prepare themselves for launch he wondered around thinking about how this day could have gone different... Or worse.

"- though with a very creative mind you can do a lot more. Tanat said your powers were based around mirrors and reflections, so knowing what your powers can specifically do, see if you can't get more creative with it." Twilight spoke as she propelled the castle along. They must be over the Everfree Forest by now, she couldn't tell because she couldn't see, but very vaguely she could see the Canterlot castle far into the distance. Not that that was an accomplishment, seeing as the mountain it was built on was fairly huge.

Rainbow Dash was now actually listening to her, focusing on the words and how they applied to her current situation rather than self-experimenting. She still had what little she picked up from the basic magic lesson, but Twilight had also mentioned it would not apply to her too much since she wasn't a Unicorn, and the magical differences could be astronomical. Of course, she'd said, she could have been exaggerating since all they really had in difference was a horn and wings.

"So, as long as I think with mirrors, I can do, uh..."

"Pretty much anything." Dash looked up with a cocked eyebrow. "Provided you're thinking with reflections and mirrors. Other factors though are your control, focus, and the amount of magic available. With the amount available to me now, I'm not having too much trouble lifting the castle because I'm focused, and controlling, but before I wouldn't have even been able to lift a house."

"Says the girl who lifted up a water tower." Dash snorted.

Twilight smiled awkwardly. "Well, see, it wasn't as heavy as a house. Houses are usually full of stuff, and ponies. Not to mention it's attached to foundation, which is stuck in the ground, so I-"

"Yeah yeah, complicated stuff. So I know I can reflect myself six times. What should I try next?"

Twilight blinked, then rubbed her chin with her hoof. "Well, see, I think you should try and come up with it. It's your magic after all and you know your limits."

"Yeah but you're more practiced and stuff with magic. I wanna know what you think. You know what's hard or not."

"Well..." Twilight paused in thought, and realized she was correct. She knew the ins and outs of magic like crazy. "Well, using magic on yourself, an organic being, is generally harder than using it on an inanimate object, if only because the materials are more basic."

Rainbow Dash nodded and walked in closer. Twilight watched with unblinking eyes as Dash carefully undid the necklace around her neck. Dash narrowed her eyes and politely took her time as she undid the clasp, and finally slipped it off. "You don't mind, do you?" Dash asked, holding it carefully in front of Twilight.

"Not at all." The unicorn shook her head, and Dash took it to the side. She laid it out on the ground a few feet from Twilight and stared at it. Twilight watched those puny wings extend, and she gulped down a small lump of misery as they began to flap, as if wanting to fly again. Dash did not lift up, but the necklace began to shift a little.

The Pegasus stopped, took a closer look, and grinned in triumph. "I did something!"

"What did you do? Lemme see!" Twilight tried to lean in closer for a look.

"I made it move a little!" Dash bounced excitedly. Twilight opened her mouth to tell Dash, a nearly fully grown Filly, that making it move just a bit with magic wasn't all too impressive, but she had to remind herself that Dash was just stepping into the kiddie pool where magic was concerned, especially since Dash was so used to being able to rush into something

and get results. Twilight supposed that was where flight had its advantages: if you were doing something right, you typically knew immediately. Not that that didn't apply to magic sometimes, Celestia's amazing blazing coat coming to mind during a particularly bad screw-up on a complicated spell. Good thing the Princess was immune to heat. The same could not be said for her white coat. Twilight was perhaps the only pony alive to ever see Princess Celestia "naked".

"Very good Dash. When you were trying to use magic on it, what were you thinking about doing to it?" She asked curiously.

"Um." Dash looked down to the necklace and pushed it gently with one hoof. "I was just thinking about making it do *something*. I didn't really have anything in mind." She'd put quite a bit of power into it, and all it did was twitch. What more was there for her to do to it?

"Well, you need to focus on what you want it to do. If you just ask it to do something, you're not going to get any results, especially if your powers are limited."

"Well, okay..." She hummed to herself, and focused on the necklace again. She supposed that made sense. Like with flying and performing tricks, you had to figure out everything you were going to do. If you just let everything naturally take over, you were going to do a few loops and corkscrews, but nothing too amazing. Or crash, there was always that. So she focused on the necklace again.

She felt Twilight's eyes on her, but didn't feel judged or rushed. It reminded her of her dad when he was teaching her how to fly. No matter how long it took, he patiently sat by, offered pointers, gave advice when prompted, and when she finally learned, joined in. She felt good about it. She could do this, especially with Twilight's help. She paused in thought. She felt really comfortable with the unicorn now. She didn't know much about her past but she knew Twilight was trustworthy, and honest, and caring. She glanced up to the unicorn, who smiled back at her, then back to the necklace. She'd lost her wings, but she'd gained more than that. A shot at seeing her brother, something else to at least focus her attentions on, and a pony she could easily call her best friend.

It felt weird being so comfortable with someone. She guessed telling her biggest secret and sharing those pains and tragedies could bring her

together with somepony. She just didn't know it would feel this easy. She accepted it without hesitation. The heart and mind were weird things.

She raised her little stubs of wings and focused on the necklace again, thinking about mirrors, about reflecting it. She was going to reflect Twilight's necklace. Who knew what would happen? Who cared? You didn't find out by just standing there.

The Brehmin Canyons laid just below. Atmos did not like the Brehmin Canyons, or any canyons for that matter, as they were inevitably hot spots for dragons and low-flight zones. But it was mostly the dragons he hated, especially these enormous, speaking Equestrian dragons that found something incredibly offensive about being conscripted into a foreign invading army and responded about as well as Shallom expected.

Dragon tamers or no, not all dragons liked the taste of sheep. And not all dragons thought such an offering was polite. No, rather, the Equestrian dragons found the slaughtered sheep offering rather disgusting and promptly toasted the offending dragon tamer, then went back to chewing on gems. They were bigger, meaner, less pack-minded, and were essentially vegetarians.

Equestria was stupidly weird. They'd have just as much luck blindly throwing darts and guessing where it landed as they would figuring out what the creatures of Equestria were like. It made for some interesting stories at least.

Sailing among the high mountain ranges of the east while his men and women glided behind him, matching his every move as he flew through the snow without worry. He began to dive as he saw the only landmark he knew, a large completely circular cave in the side of a mountain, and lowered himself into the darkness below.

The canyon line was wide but it was thick with danger. Drakes and dragons roosted in the gem-rich canyon walls and took action against any intruders poking around. Their first appearance had stirred the dragons into action, but Golding was not a war-state because it avoided dragons. He could still feel his wings twitching as he sensed the magic they had used several

weeks ago to clear their new base, the power behind it setting him on the edge immediately.

Ruthless efficiency. That was their battle policy.

He and his team flew beneath the canyon walls, the sound of wind blowing being replaced by overwhelming silence as they flew down the correct paths. A left, a right, another right, straight forward, left again... It was engraved in his memory.

Finally they flew into a dead-end that had a single brass doorway in the middle of the opposing wall. There was not an ounce of hesitation as Shallom flew through it, activating every silent alarm and magical trip-wire there was, and as he flew through the narrow, rune-lined tunnel he saw the unicorn guards step out of invisibility to watch him fly by and wave him down. At the last one to his left, he slowed and flew level where he stood on his raised perch. "We've come to report."

"We suspected as much, Rukafelth informed us you'd be flying in soon. Please go through Sire, Lady Balla has prepared remedies for your aches." Shallom nodded his head to the bowing unicorn and lead his Pegasus team into the enormous cave Terraria had built his kingdom.

The cave itself was dark and unimpressive, but the massive brass palace that had been built in the middle, that stretched to each wall with its bulk, its courtyards, and its streets, shown like a candle in the dark. Long enchanted to glow with might, and engraved with runes and sigils of accomplishment and power. There was activity all over the outer walls as the bulk of Galio's personal guards, Rukafelth's non-dragon-riding soldiers, Balla's many unicorns, and Shallom's own army he'd left behind swarmed about, moving quickly to get jobs done, to deliver this and that, or to watch Shallom make his entrance. Of the grand temple's many entrances, one opened solely for Shallom. It was to Balla's quarters.

He dismissed Schola and his squad, and they flew to the Pegasus quarters at the towers that rose to the very roof of the cave, and Shallom flew through the doorway, landing squarely and easily in a room decorated with urns, treasures, and metal. Terraria, unlike Atmos, preferred his fineries to be metal decorations and artwork. Before Shallom stood a unicorn, hardly taller than her own mages.

Balla had an incredibly soft purple coat, barely tinged with any color at all, but a majority of the purple was in her incredibly dark mane that she let grow much longer than she should have been allowed. A good part of it fell over the ruined half of her face, the rest gently resting along her back, on the white silk robe, embroidered with gold, peacefully. The half of her face Shallom could see, the left side, lit up with joy. "Shallom! You finally made it, Lord Galio's been worried sick."

Shallom stood awkwardly, and gave Balla's two guards a glare as they began to snicker when the unicorn ran up to cuddle his front legs.

"Rukafelth told me you got hurt. I didn't believe it at first but this is terrible! Burn wounds all over, severe bruising on your chest, several cracked ribs." Balla whispered, what little was left of her horn glowing weakly as she scanned him medically.

"It's nothing too severe. They had a captain who proved to be an impressive opponent. Given time, I'll be fine." Shallom stated easily, wanting to go report to Galio, but he knew not letting Balla treat him would just stress her.

"Yes, but the pain could affect your flight and combat capabilities, and if you tried to fight again you could aggravate your ribs and cause even more damage! I won't be long, just some bandages and a poultice should be enough." Balla walked around the medical ward, horn glowing as bandages, herbs, and a bucket of warm water were lifted and carried behind her.

He supposed it was for the best. The quicker he got himself healed up, the better condition he'd be in to fight the enemy Captain. It would also let him get back into training faster, so he could try and work around that ninety-degree turn. "So." He turned his head back to Balla as she approached, the bandages slowly circling around him. "Did you see *her*?" Balla asked, failing to keep all the venom out of her voice.

"The False One? Yes. My assumptions were correct in that she'd find a way out." He spoke watching the herbs form a small ball of green before getting dipped in the bucket, then grunted as the poultice was tightly pressed against his chest, and the numbing feeling of the herbs kicked in before the healing process did. The bandages squeezed around him snugly.

"And the magic she stole?"

"Accessed, activated, in use. She stopped dragons dead in flight." Balla snorted softly, but placed the last bandage before checking him over once.

"Well, that should do it. Is it working?" She looked up to Shallom, who flexed his legs.

"I can't feel anything above my knees."

"Goodie!" Balla smiled brightly, and Shallom sighed. "Yes yes, you can go make your report now. I'll be escorting you in fact, I was barely there for Rukafelth's report."

Shallom gave a brisk nod and stepped out of the herb-filled room, Balla pacing quickly by his side to keep up with his long steps, the two guards directly to their sides. The palace was as glorious as Shallom had imagined. He'd been here only briefly before when receiving orders, and now he was getting a closer look at an Alicorn's vanity.

Gold, bronze, brass, colors of the Earth everywhere, lit by glowing orbs lining the hallways revealing old treasure that stood in pristine condition. Beautiful urns and treasure boxes, decorated chains and jeweled furniture laid all over the hallway, and it gave Shallom a sense of the sheer presence Terraria would have had.

Balla, whom was used to all this, kept her eyes forward as they walked to the staircase that would lead them to the throne room. They went down two flights, and emerged in wide hallway filled with guards and researchers, who stood aside immediately the moment Shallom and Balla came into view. They walked to the grand doors and the guards opened them, allowing them passage.

The throne room had several levels. The lowest, where they stood, was the entrance, which raised to another level a few feet higher, where a majority of the lower-rung guards were resting in provided pillows. The level up had two doors, one on each side, where the Unicorns were passing to and fro, as the doors lead to extensive libraries of information and artifacts that yet to awaken. As they kept climbing, they went past the royal guard's level, where, despite resting up, they remained alert and tense, ready to spring

into action. Finally, Shallom and Balla stood one level below the top, where nobles and royals were to stand.

Shallom saw Rukafelth rise from the side and approach, bowing his head in greeting, and then Shallom looked up and straight, at the mighty throne, where Lord Galio in all his glory sat with his eyes closed, the gemmed-circlet on his forehead glowing softly. They dared not interrupt him.

"I have explained most of what had happened to Lord Galio. He knows about Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash, as well as your fight over Laputa. He was impressed when I told him about the Princess." Rukafelth smiled softly, but Shallom's face did not change.

"I still failed the mission."

"It was inevitable with a Princess and Twilight being in the mix. I have accepted a bulk of the punishment for allowing her to slip away under my nose. I imagine you'll receive none." Rukafelth told him, then stood straight and watched his lord as Galio's eyes opened.

"Shallom." His voice was easy and low, but teemed with a sense of command and sheer manliness that made Shallom's wings and legs straighten a bit more. "Rukafelth told me you had the most uncanny timing in showing up to deal with the False One."

Shallom cleared his throat once as he met his lord's eyes and nodded. "I had come to inform him of Miss Sparkle's intelligence, problem solving skills, and magical prowess even without the magic she took. It was during this time Miss Sparkle and her companion chose to enact their escape."

Galio's silver eyebrow rose as he stood up on all four legs, his red cloak laying on him elegantly as his golden fur gleamed under the artificial light. "Somehow you and Miss Sparkle are on name-basis?"

Shallom chewed himself out quietly as he grit his teeth, Balla tapping his leg slightly in playful disappointment, while Rukafelth spoke up. "In all fairness lord, people who spend even a short amount of time in Twilight Sparkle's presence typically find themselves being endeared to her. I can only assume it's because of the magic."

"Troublesome." Galio answered, looking back to Shallom. "Rukafelth tells me that you fought hard and fought well, but were distracted by the enemy Captain. Tell me about him."

Shallom closed his eyes in thought, and reflected back on it, then spoke. "He was fast, he was intelligent, and he had aerial capabilities I have never seen before. He was dangerous, and spent a good amount of time in the fight wounding the dragons and removing the riders single-hoofedly. I deemed him a priority target and treated him as such."

"As you should have. I must say, hearing that you met somebody even a fraction of matching you in the air surprises and impresses me. How will you remedy this situation, Shallom?"

"I have boosted my team's training hours during the week to a total of thirty-two, which will be my own personal goal as well. I plan to copy the enemy's abilities as well as I can, and find their counter-measures." Lord Galio nodded quietly at this.

"You are gifted Shallom. Your extra training hours will be punishment enough in my opinion, but I am giving you new orders. This goes for you as well Balla, please step forward."

Shallom looked down in surprise as the little Unicorn around his legs stared up at her lord with an open mouth, then slowly walked forward into perfect view. "Yes my Lord?" Balla asked, gulping heavily.

"This situation has gotten out of hoof. The False One has escaped," Galio began to pace in front of his throne slowly, lowering his eyes to Balla, "she is aware of our presence and I imagine her Princess will soon, they possess Laputa and all it's knowledge, and now she and her companion have fairly powerful magic."

"Cloppin is also dead." Shallom spoke up, and Galio whirled towards him quickly, Rukafelth's eyes wide at Shallom with a look that said, 'you shouldn't have said that.'

"Cloppin is dead?" Galio repeated, watching Shallom nod. "How?"

"Strange two-legged creature with tentacles on its face. Pushed the tentacles into his mouth, nose, ears, and eyes and, well, as far as I could tell, that would be enough to kill a pony." Shallom recited.

Galio looked passive, as Balla clearly tried to hold back her stomach from thinking about it too hard. "That's all then? Then I'm not worried. Back to Balla." All the attending ponies stared in surprise as he simply disregarded the death of one of his lead officers, "As I said, things are well out of hoof by now. I know I have never fielded you before, and I know we're in a strange, foreign land, but Balla, you are powerful, and I trust you to find, capture, and drain Twilight Sparkle." He looked to the staring Unicorn, who was slowly trembling, "I mean the False One."

Balla stared down at her hooves and nodded rapidly. "Yes my lord, of course my lord, whatever you ask I shall do. I will capture the False One, sir." She whispered, her long hair touching the ground as Shallom gently set an arm over her back in comfort.

"Shallom, you shall resume your search for the locations of Terraria and Atmos, and I would like you to play advisor to Balla. She is new to this after all." Shallom nodded slowly, Balla glancing up to the pony over her.

"You both have my promise that I will help her however I can."

Galio seemed pleased with this and turned to Rukafelth. "Rukafelth, your orders no longer have to deal with Twilig- the False One. I imagine she will be telling the Princess of what has happened, and they will inevitably scramble their soldiers. I need your expertise and your men to get ready for a potential war."

Rukafelth bowed his head low. "Of course my lord."

"You are dismissed for now." Lord Galio sat down quietly once more, and the three of them walked out of the throne room, thinking about what needed to be done.

"-which is partially my fault I suppose, but Celestia had her phoenixes so I thought it might be cool to make night-themed bears. Turns out I'm not too good with animals though, since they got a little aggressive." Princess Luna

smiled a bit shyly as she, Applejack, and Pinkie Pie all walked upstairs together.

They'd been found exploring the courtyards, which was made of evenly cut stone sidewalks lined with lampposts, a few statues of Twilight or one of her friends, well-trimmed hedges, and whole lot of pretty flowers, plants, and trees. There were a ton of birds roosting about, making it feel very much like a wilderness experience. It was so calm, peaceful, and pretty that Applejack had nearly lost her breath just staring at it all. She really had to get over this place or she may consider moving in.

"Well they were kinda cool when they weren't getting all mad at everyone and trying to stomp on things but I guess anything is like that. I bet I'd be pretty ferocious if I got all angry!" Pinkie Pie smiled brightly.

"Ya'll have no idea." Applejack rolled her eyes and smirked at Pinkie Pie as they reached the top step. All the birds were gone, which was a nice change of pace, but when they looked onto the dais... "What the hay is going on up there?" Applejack called in with a surprised stare.

"Shut up! Concentrating!" Dash growled, staring directly into Twilight's eyes, their snouts practically touching as they focused.

"Hey, if this is some Stockholm thing then you two had better-"

"Sh." Luna, gently rested a hoof on Applejack's back as they watched.

"Luna, what's-"

"Sh!" She insisted more loudly. Applejack frowned, but quieted down as she watched. Their lips were almost touching, and Twilight hadn't said or done anything. She tried to get a closer look, but she ended up touching a barrier.

"What's going on?" She whispered as quietly as she could, and Luna pointed up at the two.

"It's a focus test. Twilight's probably in her mind seeing what Rainbow Dash is seeing. It's a standard test in the academy, to focus on just the eyes and cut off everything else. If you can do that, then you are typically allowed to start in teenage school." Luna explained, tensing as she saw Dash lean in

further. Their lips were practically touching, but there wasn't a single romantic or sexual thing about it. Twilight wasn't even there, and Dash simply didn't care.

"Alright, this has gone too far." Applejack grumbled, pressing her hooves to the shield. "Princess Luna can ya'll break this? I need to go split this up before tongues get involved."

"They probably won't. It's best if we just let them practice their focus."

"Focus on what? Magic or kissing?" Pinkie asked, circling around for a better look. They stared at each other so intensely it was like they were having a staring contest.

"Don't be dirty. My sister taught Twilight focus this way, the teachers teach their students this way. Though, normally, they aren't so close." Luna mused, watching them as Twilight finally gasped.

"You did it!"

"Really!" Dash's eyes opened in surprise, and they realized they could feel each others' breath in their mouths. Dash leapt backwards, as Twilight blushed hugely, and cleared her throat.

"Yes, really, you did good Dash. Um. Try again!" Twilight grinned in embarrassment as the shield around them fell. The three other ponies in attendance climbed onto the dais to watch as Dash hastily backed up and calmly stared at the necklace on the ground.

"What's going on?" Pinkie asked curiously, getting under Dash's nose to stare at the necklace.

"Aww c'mon Pinkie! I was so close!" Dash sighed heavily in annoyance and gently pushed the pink mare away, but she popped back up. "I'm trying to do a little magic here, quit that!"

"Ooooh! Lemme see lemme see lemme see!" Pinkie bounced in place as Dash stared at the necklace, then her lips curled in annoyance.

"Neither of us will see anything if you keep interrupting me like this!"

"Interruptin' ya from doin' what?" Applejack poked in, staring at the necklace. "... Appraisin' jewelry?"

"Girls, you need to let her concentrate, it's absolutely imperative that she focuses her full attention on the necklace and nothing else. She's trying to practice magic and one slight mix-up and there might not be a necklace anymore." Twilight insisted. Applejack and Pinkie Pie glanced to each other, then to Dash, and backed away.

Luna watched with careful eyes as Dash's little wings lifted and began to flap rapidly, and she could sense the magic coming from her. It was hard to describe exactly what it felt like compared to regular magic. In a way, it was stronger, but it also felt more volatile, like one wrong shake...

The necklace twitched, then twitched again, and everyone leaned forward to take a closer look. It flashed white, and then disappeared. Twilight stared for a while, then her jaw dropped. "Okay, I wasn't being serious when I said it might not be a necklace anymore."

"Then what happened?" Pinkie Pie asked, looking to Twilight. Applejack and Luna did the same and simply stared. The necklace was wrapped around her neck, but it was much lighter than the original silver-color it had been, almost blindingly so.

"I polished your necklace?" Dash asked, and she heard a slight jingling around her neck. When they looked, she had a silver necklace too, but it was dark silver. It was still beautiful, and very valuable looking.

"You reflected it." Twilight corrected, staring at the necklace on Dash's neck, and then tried to get a good look at her own. Luna herself took a few steps forward to get a better look.

"Dash, when you were focusing on the necklace, did you think of it as anything more than a necklace?" The Princess asked curiously, touching one and then the other. Same weight, same density, same composition, just differently colored.

"Well, I figured that it's Twilight's necklace, so..."

"So it appeared on Twilight as that's how you chose it to appear. It must have appeared on you as a side-effect. It needed somepony to reflect on

after all." Princess Luna rubbed her chin and smiled. "It's quite a curious power you have Rainbow Dash, I would love to study it if we have the time."

"Which we don't." Dash pointed out. Twilight nodded in agreement.

"Oh, right." Luna sighed quietly, then turned her head like everypony else did when several of the guards began to lift off and fly away from the castle, towards Canterlot.

Every guard that still had flight capabilities was leaving, except Night Brigade. Night Brigade had landed on the castle's tower instead. "We're scrambling to prepare Canterlot for your eventual arrival, we need to set up roosts for the dragons, prepare a parking zone, and report to Captain Hero. So, other than maybe two of us, you five are going to be alone. Miss Sparkle, I trust you can do this without us?" Night Brigade smiled in amusement, and Twilight nodded her head.

"Of course I can sir, no need to worry." She smiled, and Night Brigade turned his head to the Princess.

"Princess, as the soldier in charge here, I must ask you to take over during my leave. You won't have to do much more than make sure Miss Sparkle holds true to her word. Applejack." He turned to the farm pony, who stood straighter as he looked over her. "... Eh, I'll ask later. Keep Hayseed under control."

"Wait, ask me what?" Applejack called as his wings spread and he lifted up.

"Later! TTFN!" He grinned and shot forward, towards Canterlot. Applejack watched after him. They all did. But only Princess Luna was smiling.

"Ah, to be young again. Twilight, you keep doing your job, Rainbow Dash, how about I give you a few more lessons in magic?" She offered, and the former-Pegasus nodded quickly.

It felt good to be practicing something again. To take her mind off the past few days' events.

"Please be Night Brigade." Cupcakes murmured as she watched out the open set of double doors, Hero joining her side. It had been a tense hour and half, as Celestia had been very insistent on hearing what Hero knew, but Hero kept telling her that it would make more sense coming from Twilight.

He himself didn't know all that much about what the hay was going on, having gotten the shorthand version halfway through as Dash explained a brain-eating statue, but even still, Celestia was relentlessly questioning.

Speaking of Celestia, the tall and proud Princess was leaning forward tensely as she watched the figures from the sky outside speed towards Canterlot. The whole court was buzzing with chatter and excitement, many ponies demanding to know what was going on, but so far no information had been passed. Twilight's parents were practically bouncing from their nervousness, and her friends were occupied keeping the children in line, although once Spike arrived they let him have the corralling job.

Rarity watched as many of the royal guard soldiers flew into the hall, regal and beautiful as they folded their wings and smartly entered, one-by-one, bowing before Hero each as they took their places on the sides of the red carpet. "Twilight Sparkle and Princess Luna are fine then?" Hero asked, and one of his subordinates nodded.

Night Brigade entered several seconds after the last soldier touched down, and sat before Hero as the captain sized him up. Night had been giddy the whole flight over here and it showed, his black-feathered wings weren't all straight and in place, his eyes were wide with excitement, his smile a little too suspicious... And only now did he realized that Hero might not be amused by what he had planned.

Yet before he could say anything, Princess Celestia spoke up, "Is this all of you?" She asked in surprise, staring at the twenty-something guards on the carpet. "I could have sworn I'd released at least twice your number for this mission."

The court quieted down so the conversation could commence, "Ah, well, see, this is all of us who can still fly. We left behind anyone too wounded to do so to be carried by the Qu- Twilight." Night Brigade explained perkily.

"Wounded?" Celestia's eyes opened wide. She felt like she'd been doing that a lot lately, she needed to stop being so surprised by this news, but she could feel her heart breaking some at the thought that her land was changing so much.

"Yes, Princess. We encountered heavy resistance while recovering Miss Sparkle. We were fortunate enough to lose minimal numbers considering the odds. It was all in the military report?" Hero raised an eyebrow.

"Ah, I'm... Sorry, I must have been distracted, but-"

"I understand Princess. Night, how far are they now?" Hero turned to Night Brigade, who had been winking at a secretly smirking Cupcakes.

"Thirty minutes. Tops. I left behind Mister Sir and Blue Watcher to take care of some extra things."

"Such as?"

"Well, parking, for one."

Hero just nodded sagely as Celestia blinked her eyes rapidly.

"Alright, everypony, my name is Blue Watcher." All the ponies and the dragon present turned their heads slowly to watch as a dashing pink-coated soldier walked slowly around the dais. "I am here to guide the dragons to a proper roost as well as set up a parking zone for you Miss Sparkle."

"Well, alright, makes sense and all but how do ya plan to lead the dragons?" Applejack spoke up, and Blue clapped his hooves together. Twilight stopped watching Blue to turn to Rainbow Dash, who was quietly toying with her reflected necklace and tiara. Dash learned quickly. Probably in part due to the magic itself, but Dash was dedicated and confident. She'd been pulling stuff apart and pulling them together the entire time, getting more and more complicated as she did. Even an apple meant for Hayseed had been split, and both reflections had been eaten. Not at the same time even, even though one side got destroyed, the other was perfectly fine.

"It's simple, really. Miss Applejack, I am going to ask you to help guide the dragons, seeing as you have the special draconic touch." He explained with a confident smile. Rainbow Dash glanced to Twilight and gave her a smile, and Twilight smiled back. Applejack, one of her oldest friends and competitors was present, and she still felt more attached to Twilight. They'd shared more emotions and pains in the last few days than Rainbow Dash had shared with anybody else. She did not like what they had to do, but she liked Equestria, she liked the world, and she knew Twilight would go through with this with or without her Guardian, but her Guardian liked Twilight. Well enough at least to try and help her.

"Um, look, no offense, but the only dragon I have ever ridden was Hayseed and that was for a real short time. I don't think I can lead a whole mess of 'em." Part of Twilight was happy, part of it was scared. She was going home, but once there she would have to explain everything to Celestia, to the whole court, and then she'd have to set off to perform Anemone's task. As she stared at Dash, she felt a little confidence kindling inside of her. Dash would be there at least, maybe even more of her friends.

"Try. You're a farm filly, use your herding skills." Blue advised, and Applejack sighed heavily. Both Dash and Twilight looked away from each other as they heard a high-pitched whistle. They saw Applejack standing there, Hayseed getting onto his feet quickly, and the air was filled with the noise of flapping wings. Suddenly they were surrounded by the entire pack of dragons, each making a soft whistling noise in answer to Applejack.

"... Uh." She gave a sharp, short whistle, and they all slipped into a formation ring around the castle. "Okay..."

"If you need help, I'm sure Princess Luna can come along. I'll be marking where the roosts will be, then making a parking zone. We will then report immediately to Princess Celestia and wait for Twilight's arrival. Clear?" There were a few nods, and Bleu grinned. "Alright! Applejack, you get on Hayseed, Princess Luna, you come along to keep the dragons in line, everyone else-"

"I want to go with AJ." Pinkie Pie waved her hoof. "I need to go tell Fluttershy and Rarity that everybody is okie-dokie, hunky-dory." The pink filly smiled, and Blue shrugged. Applejack carefully climbed Hayseed's back and sat in the saddle while she took ahold of the reins, Pinky Pie

sitting behind her with her front legs wrapped around the farm pony's chest. Hayseed flapped his mighty wings once to lift off, and then shot into the sky.

Princess Luna lightly pecked Twilight on her horn, then flew off after Applejack as the blue mare whistled high, and the dragons fell in line behind her as Blue lead the way.

Rainbow Dash and Twilight looked to each other quietly, then forward as the mountain of Canterlot rose, and Twilight began to shift it up so they would go through the clouds to the palace itself. "All alone again." Rainbow Dash mumbled quietly, nervousness setting in. She reflected herself, just for the sense of security as she stared at all corners of the sky.

"But we're home now. Closer to safety." Twilight sighed softly in peace. She was looking forward to that, even though it may not last so long.

"True." Red Dash quietly stood next to her, watching forward as they flew. "Closer to a warm bath and bed."

"Closer to actual land food."

"Closer to friends."

They both sat there for a second, then spoke up at the same time, "Cllllloo~ooosseeerrrr to Hooo~ooommme~ee!" They sang, paused, glanced to each other, then began to laugh.

"I don't think I understand what exactly you mean by parking. Carriages?" Celestia raised an eyebrow. Hero and Night both opened their mouths at the same time, but were interrupted by a loud, piercing whistle. Everyone turned towards the door at the sound of the whistle.

"Hey!" Applebloom stood up straight, as did Big Mac and Granny Smith a few feet away. That noise! It couldn't be anypony else. "That was Applejack's whistle!" She began to bounce a little as she ran to the door. She sucked in a deep breath, Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle right behind her, and whistled loud, piercingly, making Hero's eyes widen.

"Oh crap." He said in realization. That was a herding whistle, he knew. What would Applejack be herding in the sky? "Girls!" He shouted, Night springing forward to grab them. "Away from the doors! *Now!*"

"What?" Applebloom squeaked as she was pushed aside by Night Brigade, Silly having the guards standing further from the middle carpet.

There was a series of similar whistles outside, followed by one incredibly frantic one that was most likely Applejack. "No! No no no no ya'll stubborn thing stop that! That ain't at all where ya need ta- follow *me* ya no-listenin' lizard!"

"Window!" Came another shout.

"Pinkie Pie?" Rarity spoke up at the sound of the voice. Fluttershy had perked her ears up as they heard another series of whistles. "What's going on?" Rarity turned to Hero, who immediately charged up the stairs and stood next to Celestia, followed by Night Brigade and Silly Cupcakes.

"Night, if this is your fault-"

"No I swear it's not! I had plans for the castle is all!" Night interrupted frantically as the whistles got closer.

"So you *do* have plans." Hero snarled, right as he turned and watched a dark shape shoot up from beneath, covering the window for a moment before looping in the air.

"Hero...?" Celestia squeaked as she saw *it* land. There was now a *dragon* sitting on her window balcony, and it whistled high and loud. The entire court had gone completely still as the dragon ducked its head and stepped into the room.

"Hayseed, ya'll best be gettin' out of here!" Applejack grunted as the dragon stared around slowly.

Fluttershy's scream died in her throat. Rarity wavered from near fainting. The girls stopped squealing in fear as they looked up at the top of the dragon. All the adults in the audience just *stared*.

Applejack slid off the back of the dragon as Pinkie Pie followed, but while Pinkie Pie stood to the side under the folded wing, Applejack walked around to the front of the dragon. "Hayseed!" She snapped, and the dragon looked down to her. "I don' care watcha hear, ya'll just don't go followin' strange noises! What if that was a Whistlin' Toothy Snapper? Ya'll coulda gone and gotcherself hurt!"

The dragon's eyes lowered, as did its body as it got level with Applejack and...

Whimpered.

"Now ya'll see here Hayseed, ya gotta have a bit of discipline or ya'll could just go get called by any old pony who knows a whistle or two. Am I clear?" She asked, gently rubbing the dragon's snout as it nodded slowly, making soft growls and squeaks that sounded like it was definitely whimpering.

"... Applejack?" Applejack perked up, and finally seemed to realize where she was. She saw Celestia staring at her with huge eyes. She smiled nervously, but looked to where the voice came from. Big Mac, for the first time since she'd nearly fell down the ravine trying to retrieve a lost Frisbee, looked absolutely shocked and terrified. "Ya'll... What's going on?"

"Oh, uh, hey Big Mac. This is my new friend. Uh, his name is Hayseed." She turned to look at the dragon, which pressed its big snout to her side and nuzzled, seeking forgiveness. "Oh quit bein' a big baby, I ain't mad..." Hayseed began to coo.

"So you finally showed up!" Night Brigade walked down with a smile, and Hayseed sniffed in amusement as he stood and sat back on his haunches. Hero was behind him, a little more slowly to follow him towards a dragon. "What about the rest of the dragons you were herding?"

"... Uh?" Celestia shook her head in disbelief.

"Well, Blue started whistlin' like mad to get their attention so they all went to follow him, but Hayseed was dead-set on comin' here. Who was the foal that was whistlin'?" She glanced around, and Applebloom was gently nudged forward.

"Uh... Th-that'd be me Applejack." She tried to look very small, and succeeded.

"Well that explains it. Hayseed musta thought yours was mine or somethin'. That it Hayseed?" She looked up to the dragon, who nodded his big head, leaned down, and Applebloom squirmed as it stared at her.

Applejack jumped, and a majority of the crowd screamed as the dragon reached out and picked up the squirming filly, then rested her on the crook of his arm, and cradled her quietly. Applejack just stared as Applebloom just laid on the dragon's arms, frozen in confusion. "Uh, Hayseed, that's my little sister Applebloom." She explained, and again the dragon nodded, cooing quietly. "... Good dragon."

"Hold on *just* a minute!" Applejack's eye twitched as she heard that tone. Rarity slowly walked out of the crowd towards Applejack, staring up at the dragon. "You come barreling in on a *dragon* of all things, which may I remind you, you did not have when you set out to find Twilight, and now you have these fancy-" she waved her dainty hoof at Applejack's person, at the clothing she was wearing, "-these fancy *duds*? I demand to know what is going on!"

"That makes two of us." Celestia's eyes narrowed, and Hero began to feel a little small. Wisely, he hid behind the much less dangerous fifteen-foot fire-breathing mega-reptile.

"We picked up Hayseed when we protected him from some jerk of a pony!" Pinkie bounced merrily, rubbing Hayseed's side. "And as for our fancy clothes? All Twilight's work!" Everyone looked to Pinkie now, who was wearing a sweeping, envy-sparking little number.

"Tech-nick-ally," Applejack rubbed her chin, "It wasn't her, it was Laputa."

"Oh right, but it only did that because of Twilight. If it wasn't for Twilight, Laputa wouldn't have made the clothes." Pinkie Pie pointed out, and Applejack shrugged.

"I guess. Man, magic makes everything complicated. Hey, speakin' of Twilight and Laputa, they shouldn't be too far behind. Maybe we should go lookin' for 'em. Escort 'em. We already screwed up this much." Applejack mused as she tugged on a rein, and Hayseed set the quaking Applebloom

on the ground, leaned down, and allowed Applejack and Pinkie Pie back on.

"Wait!" Celestia cried out, frustration in her voice.

Applejack did not. Hero felt himself get exposed as the dragon turned and took off.

"None of you have *explained anything!*" Celestia shouted, the entire crowd just watching with shock.

"No worries Princess! By the end of the night, everything will make perfect sense. Sort of." Night Brigade smiled in promise as he stood next to Hero, who was grumbling loudly.

Applebloom finally stopped shaking as she watched the dragon leave, and turned to Rarity and Fluttershy. Fluttershy was on her back, twitching ever so slightly as Rarity had a very quiet tantrum with an enormously cocked eyebrow. Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle just stared at the door. "Dude." Scootaloo spoke up. "Your sister is *awesome*."

"Children grow up so fast." Uncle Orange mumbled quietly, trying to calm himself down with a few deep-breathing exercises.

"One moment they run off to work on a farm, the next they're invading palaces on top of dragons." Aunt Orange had the stiffest smile anybody had ever seen on her.

It was quiet outside the palace. The open-air garden was, for the first time, in a long while, completely quiet. Hayseed, the elderly gardener whistled softly to himself as he worked, nervous as he stared all around his grounds as he trimmed hedges. The animals were dead silent, and a good number of them were sitting out of their hiding places, staring off at the fenced cliffside, towards the clouds.

They sensed something. He knew this much, they reacted much the same way when they'd felt Nightmare Moon coming, but they seemed more peaceful. They weren't tensed, as if waiting for the end of the world to come, they weren't shaking as if they were about to be subject to judgment,

no, the little animals waited with expectancy. They scooted every closer to the edge of the cliff and stared, noses twitching.

He had never seen them this calm before. Even when Celestia entered the grounds they never just gathered around and waited for her to come by. Something was happening. Possibly something big. Hayseed was careful as he worked around a rose bush, having nearly cut off one of the dainty flowers. Heck of a way to start a shift.

He knew there was a meeting going on in the hall, he didn't know how big or important it was, or what it was about at all, he just heard the chatter earlier while tending to the Palace's potted plants. Was a pretty big meeting though, perhaps they were planning a party?

He idly wandered what it could have been while working in a slow circle. Then he heard it. One of the rabbits let out a squeak, followed by the rest of the rabbits, then the bears roared, the birds squawked, and monkeys chattered and bounced, hitting the ground. He turned his head towards the deafening noise, hearing them all make as much noise as possible, bouncing around like an earthquake had hit and watching the cliff. He didn't see it at first, he was concentrating too much on the how much the loudness hurt his ears, but then he spied it. A dark shape among the reddening clouds. It was a weird dark cylinder.

The animals were cheering at it. Surely stared at it for several long seconds, and the more he stared the more he noticed the soft, easy purple glow around it. The longer he stared, the more he felt his old bones ease up. The wariness of his wrinkled, tired body began to dissipate, and the itching throat he'd been developing from years of working through this pollen was forgotten. No, not forgotten, it was no longer there. He did not see the wrinkles on his body fade, nor the tired bags disappear under his eyes.

His gray hair began to turn black again, and his brown fur quickly regained a lot of its luster. His body was unstrained as he stared at the light, and he knew, just knew it was something big. He turned quickly, and faster than he'd run in the past twenty years, he charged towards the palace.

He shot through doorway after doorway, down the halls and finally towards the open throne room. He leapt inside, staring up at Celestia as he took a

deep breath, his lungs not needing any more sustainment than that one breath. "Princess Celestia!"

The Princess stared at the intruder. She stared at his hat, his pipe, his clothes, and she raked her memory. This was her gardener of around fifty years. This was Hayseed, yet he looked as he did when she'd first hired him. And he was glowing *purple*. "Hayseed?" She whispered in surprise. Today was just one big smorgasbord of shock and surprise and it was making her more and more frustrated.

"Yes!" He cried out, his voice young and powerful again, "Princess Celestia you have to come out back! The cliff garden, oh goodness it's amazing!" He whispered loudly, unaware of all the eyes on him. "A great tower rising out of the clouds! It was glowing purple, I could feel it just," he stomped his hooves rapidly, "it was healing me Princess! The animals went mad when they saw it, they just started cheering and hopping around like crazy! Something amazing is happening Princess!"

Hero took a step forward, but Night Brigade was already charging forward, "Twilight's here!" He sang happily, rounding the corner quickly. Hero facehoofed, but heard the hooves around him begin to move.

"Was he being serious? Twilight's here?" Celestia asked, Twilight's parents already rushing towards the door.

"Completely. Everything will make sense when she tells *her* story. Come." He ran towards the door, and heard the stampede behind him.

Fluttershy was the closest behind him, Rarity just inches behind her, the CMC under their legs as the Oranges were almost just keeping up, but couldn't. Spike was pumping his little arms and legs to keep up, but he was overtaken by the crowd as they followed. Celestia was technically ahead, as she was flying just outside the windows as she aimed towards the cliff garden. She landed, and waded her way through the mass of cheering animals who barely moved on her appearance, and stood by Night Brigade and Twilight's parents.

In the distance, she saw it. She felt Fluttershy, Rarity, the Crusaders appear right behind her to watch, Hero leaping over them to stand in front of them as they watched the rising figure in the distance. The entire crowd showed up behind the animals.

Hayseed stared at the dark figure coming from the clouds, moving towards them. The cylinder was wider, taller, and was moving towards them rapidly. Several of the royal guard flew out over them, and began to hover in certain places. His new and improved eyes saw it, and he gasped. "There's a little unicorn up there." He pointed out. Celestia and the parents just watched with wide eyes as they saw it.

"That," Twilight's mother whispered, "that's her?" She looked to her husband. He nodded slowly as the Cylinder came above the clouds, and soon there was a whole new mass rising above it, which they began to recognize as an entire structure.

"Is that a castle?" Somebody from the crowd shouted over the loud animals, and they saw it was. An entire castle was coming above the crowds, glowing purple, and all who witnessed it felt their maladies and twinges leave as they stared at the glowing castle.

It grew taller and taller, until it towered above the Canterlot castle, a large, flat plot of floating land holding the castle. They could see it in all its glory, its multiple stories, the enormous multi-colored banners with Twilight's cutie mark adorning them, the giant Twilight statue gracefully caught in mid-leap above the enormous main entrance.

From the Palace behind them, an enormous mountain horn blared, followed by three more as they called to announce the castle's arrival, and soon every servant, guard, noble, and attendant in the castle was at their windows, staring as the floating castle drew near.

It hovered maybe ten meters away from the cliffside, the edge of the land that held the castle just above the cliff itself. Then it stopped moving.

Every pony stared open-mouthed at the castle. Fluttershy couldn't move, its magnificence holding her still as she tried to take in every bit of its glory at once. It dominated the sky, the landscape itself, and dwarfed the Princesses' palace in both beauty and size. The horns around them stopped blaring.

Rarity's entire body quaked and she forced herself to sit, watching the banners and the statue. It was Twilight on this castle. This castle somehow had Twilight all over it. It was absolutely glorious, and filled every vanity a

pony could ever have. It mesmerized and terrified her to watch it. The silent castle sat still, the purple glow leaving it.

"Hero." Celestia called out weakly, staring at the grand building above them. "What... In all of Equestria, what is going on?"

"It's very hard to explain. I wasn't sure you'd believe me if I told you." Hero mentioned idly. The setting sun behind the castle made it look both grand and fearsome. He and the Princess sat and watched with mixed emotions as purple, star-specked magic stairs appeared between the castle's island and the cliff.

Celestia, in all her life, had never been so worried, so nervous, so scared, yet with such a strange sense of relief. Did this feel right? Not at all. It scared her so much to see her student's sign all over this weird, floating thing, but that could only mean she was at the very least safe.

Night Brigade climbed the steps and stared at the castle for a few moments in full view of everyone, then turned to face the crowd. "Now presenting, the Queen's personal guard: Rainbow Dash!" He roared to the crowd, his Thespian training kicking into high gear as excitement filled him. At the edge of the island, Rainbow Dash appeared. Then another Dash. Then another. All in all, six Dashes stood at the edge of the island, all wearing holsters, all with mono-colored hair.

The six of them surveyed the crowd as Fluttershy's heart beat rapidly. She could feel Rarity next to her, see her mouth just dropping as they watched the six nearly identical Dash's, all looking passive, happy, and pleasant. There was no way to describe how it felt, especially as two Pegasi stepped forward from the crowd.

"Rainbow Dash?" The female whispered just high enough for everyone to hear.

"... Hi mom." The yellow Dash called back, the red one's head turned as if watching something. Then the purple one spoke up. "I need everypony to listen, that includes the animals. If you are not Princess Celestia, Fluttershy, Rarity, Hero, my parents or," she stared at two ponies standing closest to the stairs, "Twilight's parents, I think, then stand back and give us some space."

The crowd obeyed, even the animals, who were now quiet. The red one called back behind her, "Alright Twilight, I think we're okay."

The entire crowd tensed as Night smirked. "And now presenting the grand Queen of the Sky and the Sea, Queen Twilight Sparkle." He edged away from the stairs as more than one gasp filled the air.

The Two middle Dash's had split, and down came Twilight. Still in full royal regalia, with a stride that spoke ages of wisdom and a gaze that had seen many sights. She looked equally passive, though tired, and somewhat relieved. The only sound was her footsteps mixed with the six Dash's as they walked down the stairs, and stood on the grass in front of the castle. Behind them, at the top of the stairs, Hayseed the dragon and his two riders landed, watching the crowd.

It hit them.

One by one, all but everyone nearest to them began to bow, while Twilight stopped at the foot of the stairs, the Dash's stopping with her. Twilight looked around at everyone, her face never changing as she felt her heart beat. They were bowing to her. She did not want them bowing to her. The shocked looks she'd expected, but this was all...

Night Brigade. She would have a word with him later.

Everything was silent as Twilight considered herself, the Dash's waited for Twilight, the crowd waited to be relieved, and the ponies up front simply stared in absolute awe and shock. All but Hero, who turned his head as he heard little feet.

"*Twilight!*" The heads turned as a small purple dragon emerged from the crowd, and without hesitation charged towards the pony who had raised him. There was not a single bit of hesitation as Twilight's smile grew absolutely massive, and she tugged Spike into the biggest hug she could manage.

It felt so good, all this relief and joy, that it hurt. After days of pain, confusion, jobs, and fear, she had Spike back in her arms. The little dragon pressed his head to her chest, ignoring the necklace, and they both let out a breath of relief.

All in all, life felt right again.

Chapter 14

Blessings of the Sky

He felt like a teenager again ten years ago, standing before the crowd, watching their gaping mouths at his stylish, amazing performance, watching their awed eyes as he stood before them and performed in a most exceptional manner. It felt good to tap into his player roots, even if being a royal guard was his calling. He loved how good it felt to see a plan go just right. And the best part was he could easily just slip away and-

Before he could take a step, Night Brigade was lifted easily into the air. "Oh-hoo-hoh crap." He whispered, his smile turning a little more frightened as he felt himself easily hoisted over in front of the little miss star queen. He was set down easily, yet he couldn't move as he was forced to look at Twilight's frustrated face.

"You set all this up!" She accused him, the little dragon she'd been hugging sitting on her back. "I was coming to talk, not for all of... This!" She waved her silver-clasped hoof at the whole crowd. Spike look equally unamused.

"Yeah! How dare you do..." He stared around slowly, "Whatever it is we're mad at you about! Don't you think she's suffered enough from the past few days?" Of course Spike had no idea what had happened, but he knew Twilight well enough to tell that, judging by the look in her eyes, she had seen a lot of trouble.

"Of course I did!" Night narrowed his eyes at the accusation. "Why do you think I went to the trouble of setting all this up? For my own personal amusement? Honestly my Queen, I felt that you deserved the royal treatment after what had happened to you, so I set all this up!" What she didn't know was that it *had* been partially for his own personal amusement.

"We have a lot more important things to do than get the royal treatment! We demand an apology!" One of the six Dash's announced.

The entire time, Celestia, Fluttershy, Rarity, and the parents were just staring. Not just at Twilight and Dash but everything that adorned them. The enormous castle, the royal ware, the holsters and of course the shiny

sword the Red Dash had in her holster, along with the enormous dragon and its riders. The CMC?

"Twilight, are you really a Queen now?" Applebloom asked, and Twilight turned her head to see Applejack's little sister admiring her silver. Twilight sighed heavily, and her elongated horn began to glow as she unclasped all the jewelry and the cloak on her. She didn't even glance as a stone mannequin popped up from the ground, and wrapped it around the simulacrum.

"No, Applebloom." Twilight smiled softly at her, rubbing her head. Scootaloo was watching Rainbow Dash closely, noting the way she held herself. Originally Rainbow Dash held herself with a cocky sense of superiority, of power, like she knew she was the fastest, strongest pony around hands down, and few people could refute that. It was what made Scootaloo see inspiration in her. Now, the way Rainbow Dash held herself around Twilight, it was hard to describe. It was like how the guard did, all regal and with duty in mind, like she had a really important mission. All six of them did this, and they all watched Twilight, or the crowd.

"But all this stuff!" Sweetie Belle whispered, staring at the mannequin curiously. "It looks really royal."

"I can explain it!" Twilight insisted with a little smile, feeling incredibly nervous now. How *would* she explain this? She didn't even get this until later in the story, but Celestia was wise, and calm, and patient. Or she used to be, right now she looked like she was ready to chew somebody out.

"Twilight, my student." The Princess called, approaching slowly, flanked by - oh boy - her parents of all ponies. Yeah, this was going to be hard to explain sufficiently. "I don't know what happened in your time away. I don't know what you went through. But I would like to hear it. Now please." She kept her voice calm and level. Part of her wanted to be angry at Twilight, but she knew she had to keep calm. She had been kidnapped, there was a reasonable explanation for all of this, she knew, she just needed to hear Twilight tell her. Soon.

Twilight frowned softly and nodded. She could tell they weren't too happy. They knew something was wrong here, and frankly, all she wanted to do was just hug and cuddle everypony present and lay down for a while, but

she knew her duty. She knew what she had to do. She took a deep breath to collect her thoughts. "Alright. You're alright Dash?"

Dash nodded quietly. "Let's go inside. We'll tell you there." The Dash's surrounded Twilight, and lead Twilight through the crowd of gathered ponies, towards the palace. No pony argued, but starting with Celestia, followed by the parents and the friends, they followed Twilight and Dash inside. Applejack and Pinkie Pie left Hayseed to watch Laputa as they followed.

There was talk, of course, and more than once somepony tried to get close to Twilight, but with her "personal guard" so closely surrounding her it was hard. Not to mention the Dash's got edgy no matter who got close. She had the very air of royalty, especially being at the head of the group and surrounded.

As Twilight walked down the halls of Canterlot, she realized how incredibly tense she was. It had been days since she was somewhere familiar, comfortable, and safe. Walking down the halls, going in a direction she assuredly knew was the right way, in a place she knew like the bottom of her hoof. Staring around at the sun and moon motifs, the familiar carpeting and stone structure, the lovely decorations laying about...

Dash pressed herself to Twilight as she wavered, slowing for a moment, the whole crowd pausing to stare as Twilight shook a little in place. "You alright Twilight?" Dash whispered in worry, and Twilight sucked in a deep breath.

"We're safe. We're safe we're safe we're safe. We're okay. I'm just so tired..." She groaned, closing her eyes. She had been flying the castle for six hours, lifting the whole bulk for twenty minutes from the ocean floor, and since then had not gotten any sleep since she'd been in her cell. Every part of her began to ache as the adrenaline wore off.

"I'm tired too. C'mon, let's keep moving though. You can take an awesome nap once we tell them." Dash whispered, and Twilight nodded slowly. She opened her eyes, and slowly began to walk again, the Dash's now standing closer than ever to keep her steady. "That's a good girl Twilight. Just keep walking." Dash whispered soft encouragement the entire walk to the throne room.

Fluttershy watched all this with a concerned look. This wasn't right at all. Dash wasn't zipping everywhere, active and excited and proud and boastful. She was quiet, and was very gentle while handling Twilight. Dash would usually order her to just man up and bare it, but she wasn't, she helped her along the way. She turned her head to face Rarity with a tiny frown. "Something bad happened." She whispered.

"How can you tell it was bad?" Rarity whispered back, taking a closer look at the girls ahead of them. She could see they were tired and probably more comfortable than they have been in a while, but other than the general closeness the six Dash's - six Dash's! She still couldn't believe her eyes - there didn't seem to be anything wrong.

"Rainbow Dash is too quiet. So is Twilight. They're both thinking very hard about something." Fluttershy whispered. Celestia nodded beside her. She had to agree. Twilight normally did not waste time. She normally didn't let a little tiredness keep her down.

"Need some water Twilight? Any food? I can go get you a nice thick book if you like." Spike offered above the filly who he'd been with all his life, rubbing her ears softly.

"All those but the book. No books please. I am sick of books. Never wanna see a book again." Twilight murmured, making Spike's jaw drop.

"Okay, now you're just being difficult, egghead." Dash smirked beside her.

"Says you." Twilight snorted. "You plan to break every mirror in your house when you get home."

"I was tortured by mirrors." Dash pointed out, making everyone behind them nearly trip up.

"I was tortured by a library. I'll deal with books in the morning." Twilight sighed, stepped into the meeting hall. She sat down in the middle of the carpet, the Dash's doing the same as everyone took their places around the carpet again. Celestia watched Twilight as she walked past her and stood in front of her, her parents doing the same. None of them approached Twilight, not while the six Dash's sat around her, keeping her mostly from view.

Fluttershy and Rarity quietly approached the seven ponies in the middle of the room, and sat next to them cautiously. Green Dash turned and smiled at them quietly, but never broke formation, even as Applejack and Pinkie Pie sat next to them as well. Luna, free of her dragon-handling duties, came in last, and sat next to Celestia. "The first thing I'd like to do," Twilight said, her horn glowing softly as her voice filled the entire room easily, "is apologize for being informal. I am short of time, patience, and energy, so I'll try and remember all the details."

"And if anybody gets to rowdy, they're going to have to deal with me." Dash spoke up. "She's not kidding about the energy part, and if you make her repeat herself I'm kicking you out of here."

"And who," every head turned to face the white, blonde unicorn Prince Blueblood as he stared at her with half-lidded eyes, "are you to give us orders? We have all been waiting here very patiently for your arrival, and I think we have every right to know exactly what is happening, in detail. You, the purple one in the middle." He approached slowly, and the Dash's rose as one. "I demand to know exactly what makes you think you can show up li-" no more words.

Twilight's horn stopped glowing as she stared at him with a very flat glare that spoke volumes of impatience. The entire attending audiences' jaws dropped as they saw Prince Blueblood no longer had a mouth.

"Annoyances aside, I'm ready to give my report." Twilight spoke low and unamused.

Dash's smile just grew as she sat back down, and looked back up to the Princess. "I-..." Celestia froze. Twilight must have been very short on nerves. Then again, Blueblood was a very difficult pony to put up with. "Go ahead. No pony will speak up."

Twilight took a deep breath to collect her thoughts, and looked back up to the Princess. "It all comes back to the day my horn grew out. Alright, so after the lightning Pegasus attack..." She closed her eyes to keep her mind focused. "Rainbow Dash and I were captured by dragon-riding foreigners. They took us to some sort of old holy place I think, built before Equestria was modernized. They had us both tied down and suppressed us. They attached inhibitors to my horn to keep me from using magic, while Dash's wings..." She turned her head and stared sadly at Rainbow Dash's back.

There were a few quiet gasps from the crowd. They could see she'd been clipped. It was a cruel thing to do, everypony knew it. Clipping a Pegasus' wings, removing a Unicorn's ability to do magic, it wasn't so much a punishment as it was condemning them. Fluttershy squeezed her wings tightly around her while she stared at Dash's back and grit her teeth.

Anypony who knew Dash knew the implications. Dash had been cut from the skies. "I was interrogated, and I'd met one of the ponies in charge, a large earth pony named Rukafelth. He was solid white, had a black mane, and red eyes, and was taller than you, Princess Celestia. He was unusually soft once he realized I knew nothing about what he talked about. He asked about my magic, my power, how I came about it, and I knew nothing. When he realized that, I managed to get him to talk about his home. He came from a place far west, called Golding."

There was not a hint of recognition among the audience other than the Princesses, who quietly looked to each other, then back to Twilight. She kept her story going. She described their journey to Laputa, the enchanted door, the enchanted statue, traveling in the bubble going into the castle itself. She avoided mentioning Teller, much to Dash's relief as they spoke, and she finally reached the point where they met Tanat. "He was the only help we'd had since we'd been captured. He brought us back together and fed us, then told us the bulk of what is happening."

Twilight took a second deep breath, and looked up as she felt a hoof on her shoulder. The Dash's had shifted, and Rarity, Fluttershy, Applejack, and Pinkie Pie had come in closer. They understood how tired she was. She breathed easier. "Princess Celestia, do you know the story of Terraria, Atmos, and Anemone?"

Celestia, for her part, managed to keep herself reserved. "The three Alicorn brothers who shaped the world, and dominated by their flaws, nearly destroyed it. I know the full story, father made sure we both knew what lead to Equestria's near destruction." She admitted with a soft look. The crowd was deathly silent, even Blueblood, despite his mouth being restored. "This Tanat fellow told you the story?"

"Yes Princess. I was wondering, if you don't mind me asking, why haven't I ever heard of this story? Or the three Alicorn brothers?" Twilight asked curiously.

Celestia gave a very apologetic smile as she answered, "There are still remnants of the story in modern times. Orion the mighty bow hunter, the Everfree Forest never healed from the massacre that Anathema wrought there, even the Wonderbolts were named after Atmos' most powerful military unit. I never had it written or recited in full for the simple reason that father wanted it to be a forgotten time. To him, all that mattered was a future of peace. We had taken a vow to not spread the tale because he was afraid of what less than virtuous ponies would do if they knew there was possibly still a remnant of their old power laying around. I don't think he trusted anypony in his final year of rule, he spent a majority of his time teaching me and Luna about Equestria and its ponies, as well as safe magic. With his help we set up a lot of barriers and inhibitors to keep terrible things from being done with magic by the unicorns, and then he left. He was more concerned with keeping Equestria as safe as possible than anything else. Before now, it never really mattered. Please continue, what does it have to do with your story?"

Twilight took a deep breath and glanced to one of the Dash's, who nodded quietly. "Tanat was a servant of Anemone, left behind to lead the right ponies to him. Dash and I were the right ponies as far as Anemone was concerned, and he's asked us to help him tie up some loose ends he left behind." She smiled very nervously as Celestia's passive look became very cold.

"What loose ends?" She asked, hiding her tenseness as much as she could. Twilight looked back to Dash, and they stared at each other for far too long as far as Celestia was concerned. Celestia was famed for her patience, her good sense of humor, and how easy-going she was. "Twilight Sparkle, *what. Do. You. Mean?*" Twilight practically withered under the accusation and anger in the Princesses' voice. Luna looked no better, not seeming to agree with Celestia's tone, but she did not argue or stand up to her. Twilight remembered the tense smile Luna gave her when she described Anemone. Did they not like their father?

"H-he wanted us to see Atmos and Terraria and make sure they haven't been relapsing, and to protect the leylines from being accessed by the ponies from Golding. He wanted us to refill the leylines first to activate the old magic to let us get to Atmos and Terraria. It was to also release some... Of... The old... Princess?"

Celestia had her eyes closed. Everypony watched as she paced back and forth at the top of the steps. She was breathing deeply, the torch flames surrounding the room rising and falling with each breath, reaching their climax when she finally stood still. Luna was gently stroking her older sister's mane, whispering soft words to calm her down. "Just had to pick her, didn't you father?" Celestia murmured, just barely loud enough for the room to hear.

"He saw the potential you did, sister." Luna whispered.

"Yes but he picked *my* student, Luna." Celestia turned to look to her sister, concern written across her face.

"You know better than anypony what she's capable of. You told me what she can do, she's strong, she's able."

"To talk to two former tyrants? To walk into dangerous foreign lands we know nothing about because of his mad mandates? To keep tabs on the sole power-source of the world and not get overwhelmed?"

"You think she can't do it?"

Celestia did not answer immediately. She sat down, tossed her mane out with a flick of her hair, and took another deep breath. "I don't want her getting hurt..."

"She's survived being captured and sent to face father already." Luna murmured, pressing her cheek to her sister's chest. The gesture of affection was not lost on the crowd as Luna comforted her older sister.

"There's going to be more beyond just that though. The things she'll see and experience..."

"Celestia. Just look into my eyes, please?" Luna begged, and Celestia did as she was asked, looking into Luna's eyes. "If we really are in trouble, then we wouldn't be able to protect her, and all of them all the time anyways. This is better for her, for them. They won't be forced to witness the war, they'll be finding a way to circumvent it."

"I don't know, Luna. I can't, in good faith, just let them go by themselves. There's only two of them..."

"Technically, there's seven of us." Dash spoke up, drawing their attention. Celestia sighed. She was sort of correct, she would have to ask about that later.

"Eight of us." Applejack nudged the nearest Dash.

"Nine." Pinkie Pie nodded.

"I believe you mean ten." Rarity interjected.

"Um, no, eleven." Fluttershy whispered softly.

The entire room watched the eleven ponies in the middle with surprise, and Twilight herself felt herself glancing all around at the faces of her friends.

"Twelve." She heard from her back, and felt Spike squeeze rub her neck. It felt so good it hurt.

"I," Celestia finally spoke up, looking choked, "girls, I can't, I just can't, let you go. No, no no no that would be insane. No, Twilight has her magic, Rainbow Dash has those copies, but the rest of you-

"Have each other. If I may say so myself, we've gotten through some very thick situations together. It's not about our individual strengths, every seam works together to keep the group strong after all." Rarity smiled softly, and turned to Twilight.

"Girls... I..." Twilight quieted down and lowered her head. Truly blessed.

"Sides, you can't expect us ta just sit around while our friends go out and risk themselves. We've worried ourselves sick already when we first let them outta sight. We ain't just gonna let them go unsupervised."

"If we did, we'd just be the worstest, meanest friends ever! We got to go to help them and support them. They've suffered enough by themselves after all, we should be there to keep that from happening again."

"We can't let them go alone. If we did, some bad thing could, happen and then, well, we have to be there and, um, it's important we help them however we can."

Celestia lowered her eyes quietly to her gold-clasped hooves as Luna smiled reassuringly. "See? Twilight won't be alone, she'll have the support and talents of all her friends with her, and she *is* the element of friendship. With her best friends by her side, she won't need anything else."

Celestia looked up back, her lip trembling as she tried to come up with an argument to keep her student here, to keep her safe, but she knew whatever she said, nothing would stop Twilight. She turned her head to face the filly's parents, and saw their concern, but they did not step in. She never knew her parents to be indecisive. "Moon, Eclipse, what are you thinking?" Celestia asked them.

The two unicorns looked to each other, and then to Celestia. Solar Moon took a deep breath, and then she nodded to her husband as he spoke up. "Twilight." He calmly walked towards the middle of the room, and the girls split to let Twilight face her father and mother. "Twilight Sparkle, you know you're our little girl, and that will never change, right?"

"Y-yes dad." Twilight nodded as she felt him press his snout to her cheek for a small kiss.

"We love you more than anything. You are more valuable to us than any amount of gold in the world. We always knew you were destined to do something amazing, but this has gone beyond our expectations. Please please *please* keep in mind that you have two ponies who will be very sad if you don't return in one piece waiting at home for you." Celestia felt her legs tremble as Twilight pressed herself to both of her parents, and they shared a very deep breath as they gently snuggled.

Celestia turned to Dash's parents, which were now walking to the center of the room. Sunlight Dash and Cloudskate Dash quietly got their daughter's attention, and in a moment the clipped Pegasus flashed white, and stood before them with her multi-colored hair, looking tense, and worried.

"Rainbow Dash..." Her father, Sunlight, quietly sat before her, his eyes worried, but stern, where as her mother was fretting with the girl's mane already. "You were the greatest thing to come into our life, and even if you have been distant, we've never stopped caring for you. Cloudskate, give your daughter some space, you're embarrassing her."

"Oh but honey I can't help it, she's going to be so far away doing such dangerous things." The woman whimpered, calmly brushing out her daughter's mane as she stood there, stock still.

"You... You guys don't mind?" Dash whispered, staring into her father's eyes for what felt like the first time since she told them she was going to Ponyville.

"We realized from the day you started to fly there'd be no chance we could ever cage you from anything. You're determined, stubborn, and kick and scream until you get the chance to be free. Not to mention you typically charge into whatever obstacle there is ahead of you without thinking, giving us little time to catch up. No, we knew letting you be would make you happy, and it has, but we also knew that you were smart and kind when you stopped and allowed yourself to be. We also knew that your sense of duty towards the people you care about are unstoppable. If we said no, you'd be gone in the hour. We won't keep you from protecting your friend."

"Just please," her mother whispered into her ear, "please please be safe, for us? For your friends? And please keep them safe, you've lost so much already to these ponies, I don't want you getting more hurt." Dash winced as she felt her mother nudge one of her tiny wings, and she sighed.

"I can't promise that I'll be safe." She gently turned her head, and slowly tugged out the magnificent officer's sword, and rested it gently in one hoof, "I gave my word to protect Twilight under any cost, because she's the key here to keeping the world safe. I won't go jumping into danger as an excuse to keep her safe, I promise I'll be smart about it."

Her father rested his hoof on the sword, and kissed his daughter on the nose. "That's my girl."

Celestia turned her head as she felt Luna gently touch her leg, and saw her sister's smile. "They have the support of their family, the support of their friends, the support of the entire country, and on top of that the blessings of three Alicorns. Celestia, sister, it's okay to worry, but they will be safe."

Celestia stood quietly for a moment, and the entire room turned to look at her. She opened her eyes to stare down at the six pony friends, and took a deep breath. "Rainbow Dash. Step forward." The entire room now looked to Rainbow Dash, as she meekly glanced around, then left her parent's

embrace, and let them nudge her to the bottom of the steps. She flinched as she watched Celestia's massive wings spread, and hold themselves up. "You are going to help protect the world?"

"I'm going to protect Twilight. She is the one that will protect the world, I'm just there to keep her absolutely safe." Dash answered without hesitation, feeling her heart pound as she saw Celestia's eyes begin to glow white.

She spoke. Celestia's voice rose in a manner that even Twilight was unfamiliar with it, and it radiated power, strength, and trust. It was the sort of voice that would make a long time foe freeze in their attack. "Rainbow Dash," she began, and suddenly a flood of white light fell around the blue Pegasus, making her jump as power began to circulate around her, "for your service to the lands of Equestria, for your unheeding determination in the face of future danger, and for being a true friend in a time that desperately needs such a thing, I give you the blessings of the Alicorn of the Sun, the blessings of the land, of the wise, of the defenders and of the loyal." Luna took a step back as she realized what she was seeing, and the entire audience just stared in awe as the sunlight began to focus on Dash's heart, and Twilight could feel herself smiling. "I give you my blessings to help protect you and help you protect your allies. Take my blessings, as a gift, and go forward to protect Equestria, to protect the world, and to protect your friends. When times are dark and things seem bleak, always remember that the guiding light of the sun blazes brightest just beyond the darkest shadows, and that from its rays spring forth new life and new hope." She spoke.

In Dash's mind, all she could see was light. All around her, brightness. The world had no shadows through her eyes, just beautiful color. Under the loving power of her ruler she felt no regret, no doubt, and no fear. She felt the strength of her body surge as she turned to face Twilight, Rarity, Applejack, and Fluttershy. There was no doubt in her mind: nothing would stop her from protecting the ponies who mattered most in life.

Twilight just watched in awe as Rainbow Dash shed golden light as the blessing ceremony ended, her white eyes slowly turning back to their normal Rose-colored eyes. The golden light was covering her whole bulk, except, she noticed, the tip of her wings. Dash quietly turned back to face Celestia, and merely nodded. Celestia nodded back, smiling only slightly. As Dash returned to her group, she was mobbed by her friends, excitedly

whispering about having Celestia's blessing. Twilight knew that Celestia practically never offered her blessing except to those with the best ideals in mind, and the willingness to take themselves beyond the limit to defend everything they knew and love. Twilight glanced to Hero, who was watching Dash was approving eyes.

"Ahem." Celestia turned her head, as did everyone else as Luna approached. "I think it's my turn. Pinkie Pie, Rarity, Fluttershy, Applejack, please come forward." Dash stood to the side, the bright golden glow slowly dissipating as she sat next to Twilight and watched the four approach slowly. Pinkie Pie was the first to reach the foot of the stairs, Applejack coming a moment later, Rarity having trouble walking due to trembling so much, while Fluttershy had to force herself into the spotlight with her friends as Luna gazed down at them all.

The Princess took a deep breath, and smiled affectionately at each of them as she spread her purple wings and then let the breath out. The torch flames flickered out, leaving them all in total darkness, until the walls lined themselves with stars and planets, of floating gas clouds and entire galaxies, slowly spiraling around the only five ponies that were visible, Pinkie Pie, Rarity, Applejack, Fluttershy, and Princess Luna. "You'll have to forgive me if I do this wrong, I've never blessed anyone before. Alright, here it goes."

She sucked in a deep breath, and her eyes glowed a bright purple as she spoke with a voice as deep as Nightmare Moon's, but bathed with affection and adoration, "Pinkie Pie." She smiled to the pink mare. "Applejack." She looked to the farm pony, beaming. "Fluttershy." The shy pony sat a bit straighter when Luna's loving gaze fell over her. "And Rarity." The fashionista stopped shaking at Luna's smile. "You have chosen to defend your dear friends rather than protect your very lives. Your selflessness, your kindness, the joy you bring, and your honesty are all virtues you share among yourselves, despite who possesses what element. Your loyalty to your friendship is a truly beautiful, magical thing, especially since you wish to protect it more than anything. A dark night is a terrifying and lonely time, but when given small spots of light, hope can peak through. My little stars, it is not your given duty to give the lost and afraid hope and direction during the lonely night, but you have chosen to do so anyways. Please accept my blessings, which will forever let you act as beacons of hope, and let you guide the scared to safety. The night is a time of peaceful reflection, a

prelude to the bright days ahead, but it in itself has spots of beauty and light all around it. In a dark time, you are the beauty and the hope people see to calm their fears."

The stars began to peel themselves off the walls, and the four girls gasped as spots of light, the light of the stars themselves began to coat their bodies and fill their limbs. Their eyes glowed soft white light as their coats turned a darker color, covered in bright white spots that moved across their bodies slowly. The entire crowd stared as the four ponies, now physical images of the sky turned to stare at each other, seeing their bodies covered in the beauty the night brought. As they turned to rejoin Dash and Twilight, Dash began to glow a golden light again, motes of sunlight sticking to her friends and adding new stars, while Twilight began to glow purple, the misty-aura attaching to her friends' bodies and giving them further definition and background on their star-speckled bodies.

The room began to fill with light again as the torches relit, and their auras began to disappear, leaving them looking perfectly normal, but anypony attentive enough would notice, and feel the energy they created just as they stood there. The six of them were smiling as they stood together, watching the Princesses.

"I understand there is still more to the story than just receiving orders from my father." Celestia sighed softly, staring at them. So young, yet already receiving the blessings of power. This world was losing the kindness and peace her father had tried to bring. "Let us speak of your gifts, and your mission."

"And always remember you have our blessings. All of ours." Luna whispered, the entire room bowing their heads in quiet respect.

Twilight spoke freely about what they had gained and what trials they, as well as Equestria should expect to face. But she did so without fear, without fatigue, and without worry of the future. Her friends would be there with her. Her sun to ward away the shadowy fears, and her stars to guide her.

Chapter 15

Calm Before the Storm

"Twilight Sparkle, your time has come. Your thieving ways are coming to an end! I have been personally charged to take you back to my Lord Galio, dead or alive using any manner I deem fit. If you give up and hand yourself over, I will not be forced to harm you or your precious country, but if you try to fight I will not hesitate to burn this place to ash! Make your choice now, Sparkle, or suffer!"

Balla glared hard at herself in the mirror, her eyes narrowed until it hurt, her mouth twisted into a growling grimace, her stance not that of a pampered little court unicorn but of a warrior, ready to spring into action at the slightest provocation. Then she let out a high pant, her legs trembling as she steadied herself and watched her reflection with worry. "No no no that simply won't do, far too long. She could retaliate!" The purple unicorn slowly paced around her well furbished room, muttering to herself rapidly. "But all such information is relevant. If I don't warn her then that might be dishonorable, although she is a nasty little thief..."

"I guess I could cut some of it out." She looked to herself in the mirror, in the silk gold and bronze robes she wore, a sapphire-laden circlet sitting on top of the stub of her horn. "But how can I do so without coming off as brutish?"

She whirled around and stared in the mirror, holding herself tall, fashionable, beautiful, her one exposed eye narrowed in disinterest, displeasure, and impatience as she sized herself up. "Twilight Sparkle, you will come with me to atone for your crimes or I shall personally turn all of Equestria into a smoldering crater!" She stared for a moment longer, then slunk back around her coffee table and sipped from her cup.

"No no no, what if I can't back that up if she doesn't come? I'll look like a laughing stock! Oh Shallom, Rukafelth, what would you two say?" She paused, turned to her mirror, and jumped towards it viciously, landing with a face contorted with rage and persecution. "*Drop your weapons or die!*" She roared at her reflection, then sat up with a squeak, covering her

mouth. "No no no, too vicious. Unicorns don't use weapons often anyways. Hmm..."

She turned around, stood up straight, took a deep breath to puff out her chest, then turned back around to stare at her reflection with passive interest. "Twilight Sparkle, if you would please come with me I would like to present you to the law so you may repent for your crimes, resisting will force me to use drastic measures. Do not make me hurt you Miss Sparkle."

She eased herself into her normal stance and shook her head. "No no no, far too nice! Twilight Sparkle must understand that Balla will never compromise. What about you Lord Galio?" She rubbed her chin in thought as she lifted her coffee cup to her lips and drank idly, then set it down quickly. "Of course! You always said the best way to defeat your opponent is to disarm them or to surprise them!"

She leapt towards the mirror and shouted, "*Twilight Sparkle I love your hair!* And that's when I set her on fire! Hm, but it might not surprise her enough, just scare her into raising a shield. I need to say something really surprising." She went back to her coffee table and looked over her notes. "Studious, seems sheltered, magic reveals intact hymen, seems uncomfortable around colts... Hmm, perhaps she's never had a relationship. Or she has but it's only been with Fillies! That's," she paused, and coughed, "kind of kinky. Perhaps if I surprised her with sexual flattery, or appealed to her innate love of mares..."

She charged over the table again, stomping her hooves down, "*Twilight Sparkle, I wanna slap that hot flank of yours!*" She stared at herself in the mirror, and blushed heavily. "No no no far too stupid far *far FAR* too stupid." She mumbled and began to pace furiously.

She then paused, looked to the ceiling, and sighed. "What if I just shot her? Quick, easy, one dead thief to be harvested for later. She wouldn't even have to see it coming. An arcane bolt infused with elemental lightning fired at Sonic Rainboom class speeds between a twenty-to-eighty degree angle from cloud-level should be enough to sever her spine immediately, if not just cripple her, then she'd be easy to collect. Ah, but there's no honor in that..."

She approached her window and stared down at the bustling activity below, watching as thousands of soldiers gathered in the courtyard of Brehmin.

"Maybe it will come naturally." She mused, but then shook her head. "But I'm no good if I don't think ahead," she thought back to the last whim she'd followed mindlessly, "ah those poor pasta dishes! Maybe if I tried combining them..."

"Sleep well?" Twilight felt a blanket drop on her back, and she chuckled a little as she watched the sunrise from the top of her tower. Below her, Laputa hovered quietly, completely motionless. It made for a calm, peaceful sight just next to Canterlot's palace. She'd been introduced to her own personalized bed just last night, and found it had been *perfect*.

"Perfectly. How about you?" Twilight turned to face Rainbow Dash, who had an easy, calm look and a good amount of syrup on her face. Breakfast had been provided for them when they woke up. For Twilight, celery sticks in peanut butter dotted with raisins, with a thin layer of honey coating the bottoms. For Dash, it appeared to be lot of pancakes.

"This place has its good points. I'm not wearing any of that frou-frou stuff though, all I need is my holster." Dash nodded to the sword holster she was wearing and sighed a little, watching the sun with Twilight. Last night had been exhausting, long than they had expected. They had to finish the story, they had to show off their gifts, they had to answer dozens of questions of what to look out for and how to get prepared if they even knew *how* to get Equestria prepared, and it had taken hours before Twilight and Rainbow Dash finally began to beg to be let go so they could go rest. Celestia had understood and dismissed them and the court immediately, but there were still many questions hovering through the air, but it could wait. Twilight had chosen to go back to Laputa, and her friends had followed suit. The moment she got to her room, she collapsed on her bed and fell asleep, with Dash doing the same in her room. She imagined the others either did the same or hung out in their little break room. She had to admit, this place knew how to provide for them and keep them comfortable, but she was already feeling lazy.

"Yeah, good luck making me wear all that royal stuff. I looked in my closet this morning and it looked like it went on for miles. There must have been a ton of dresses to choose from." Twilight chuckled a little as she snuggled into the blanket dropped on her. "It's getting me accustomed to comfort that I can't afford right now."

"I bet Rarity's just *marveling* over how *marvelous* everything is. I bet she actually reconsidered going once she got a good look at her room." Dash joked, stretching out on the stone and yawning loudly.

"Oh don't be so tough on her. You know she's not like that, she's a good girl." Twilight watched the clouds beneath them. They looked fantastic in the golden light. It felt like the dawn of a new era, but the rational, understanding part of her knew that a new era was not a good thing in the already peaceful, prosperous Equestria.

"Maybe. I'm just not sure they know what we're getting them into." Twilight turned to face Dash as she smacked her lips. "We have actually seen and dealt with the enemy, we had to escape by ourselves, and I felt the sort of magic we're up against. We saw the creatures that Anemone was talking about floating around the ocean floor and we dealt with those screwed up mind games. They just heard us talk about them. I can defend you Twilight, but I'm a little afraid of having to save them too. I can only make so many copies and can only give one to each of you guys and that might not be enough." The Pegasus sighed, holding herself up straight as she stared down at her hooves. She turned her head as she felt a leg wrap around her shoulders, and saw Twilight's smile.

"I understand Dash. I thought about it this morning and I'm scared for them, for us, but they aren't children, they're capable, mature adults who can take care of themselves. I'm certain we can depend on them." Twilight assured her, making Dash look up at the blue sky.

"I guess. I just don't want anypony getting hurt. Not like we did." Twilight nodded and pressed her cheek to Dash's neck. Dash had suffered the most, and she wanted to protect her from getting hurt again, even if she was assigned to be her Guardian.

"I plan to keep that from happening. Somehow, someday, I'm will make sure we walk out with as few bruises as possible." Twilight kept her smile, and Dash tenderly wrapped a leg around Twilight's back. Twilight was too kind for this. Dash felt like she might be able to go through with it, maybe, but Twilight was just so soft, her body weak. A strong mind was a good thing - probably - but the future didn't look like it would have any astronomy tests anytime soon.

"Have you two slept well?" Both the girls nearly flew away from each other as they turned to face a voice that everypony in Equestria knew. Princess Celestia had a very small, easy smile on her face, but Twilight could see the hesitation in her step. She didn't know how to approach her student, and in a way, it stung a little.

"Great. This stupid castle is big and weird but it has really soft beds." Dash answered, offering the Princess a bow. A hoof touched her chin, lifting her back up.

"Please do not bow. You are a guardian of this world, much like myself, apart from our age, I see us as equals." Dash stared at her with a surprised look as Twilight's jaw dropped a little.

"Equals? But Princess, we're just-"

"I said Rainbow Dash and I are equals, Twilight." Celestia's smile turned into a naughty little grin. "You are still my student, and I expect you to act as such."

"Act as such? Princess Celestia, you can't be serio-"

"Tsk tsk Twilight, are you taking a tone with the Princess? I'd keel you over my knee and spank you myself if I wasn't afraid of dirtying my hooves with your peasantry." Dash held herself tall and straight, an expression of cocky pride all across her grin.

"Dash! What are you saying!"

"Twilight Sparkle!" Celestia admonished in mock surprise. "Are you questioning the intentions of my fellow guardian! I thought I taught you better, to treat your superiors with the respect they deserve!"

Twilight's jaw fell, and her eyes widened in confusion as she glanced back and forth between them, her lip quivering as they glared at her... And then began cackling. "You-!" Twilight gasped, stamping her hooves like a child. "You're both jerks!"

"I dunno, I think I kinda like being higher and mightier than her." Dash snickered, nudging Twilight's side while the unicorn pouted.

Celestia cooed quietly as she stroked her student's mane with one hoof, while Twilight's ear flapped in annoyance. "She's adorable when she gets all flustered, isn't she?"

"What, with the big bottom lip stuck out and her eyes getting shaky?" Dash clung to Twilight as the unicorn began to tug away.

"You guys are mean! I'm going back to my room!"

"Don't let the door hit your rump on the way in, Queenie!" Dash barked out a sharp laugh as Twilight left with her nose and tail high in the air with what little dignity the unicorn could scrape together.

Celestia smiled down at Dash as the rainbow-maned mare bounced in amusement. "She'll be back in a few moments." Celestia chuckled, and turned around to watch the rising sun with Rainbow Dash at her side. "You're rather friendly with her." She chatted idly, not sure what to say to one of Twilight's friends. She had only heard about them through Twilight's letter, but had never personally interacted with any of them but Fluttershy. It was a little awkward, she felt, as while she knew everything about Rainbow Dash, Rainbow Dash probably knew next to nothing about her.

Dash stood stock-still for a moment, wondering if this was another test. Of course she was friendly with her, she'd gone through the most trying moment in her life with her and it was only going to get worse. Was this a test of her friendship with Twilight? She'd always said that Celestia liked to make little tests of everything. She'd heard so many things about Celestia, but what would Twilight have told Celestia about her? Princess Celestia probably knew nothing of her, she had much more important things to do than hear about one of Twilight's friends. "Well, of course I am. She's a good friend."

Celestia nodded slowly, and glanced to the Pegasus' wings. "I'm having several doctors look into ways to regrow your wings. They may be restorable."

"They're not. The cuts were too sloppy, the nerves were probably destroyed." Dash sighed, staring back at what was left of her wings with a frown. Celestia nodded quietly.

"You can get prosthetic replacements grafted on. Leather wings with plastic joints?" Celestia offered, looking up to Dash, who sighed.

"No."

"No?" Celestia raised an eyebrow.

"They took my wings, they took flight from the greatest flier in all of Equestria. I remember what it was like to fly so fast I could shave off the stray and loose hairs just by moving. Doing loops, dives, corkscrews, spinning the clouds away, making little tornados..." She gave a deeper, angrier sigh. "Sure I could fly again with fake wings, but not even close to how I could before. I wouldn't even be able to get stronger or better, and they'd break so easily. It's just a bad reminder, you know? Besides, I have magic now. Magic I can practice with and get better at."

Celestia understood now. Dash was all or nothing, she was a trainer, she worked hard to make herself better. If she couldn't improve it, there wasn't a point in using it. She gently stroked Rainbow Dash's back and sighed quietly. "I think I understand, but the option will always be there. It may improve too. Sometime in the future. What about magic? There are several restoration spells that are a simple step from working with wings, the modifications wouldn't be diffic-

"No."

Celestia stared at the girl next to her as she narrowed her eyes at the sunrise. "Dash, I'm offering to give you your wings back."

"No."

"Why not?" Celestia raised an eyebrow in surprise, feeling there was something she was missing. She watched Dash squeeze her stubs tightly to her body and tense up.

"Just no. I don't want you to." Dash answered simply, trying to not look at the Princess.

"Dash..."

"Just no. Please Princess Celestia, it's not that I don't trust you," she didn't, "I'm just not comfortable with the idea yet, okay? I don't want anypony else to touch my wings."

Celestia stared at the Pegasus, not understanding this time. Hadn't it always Dash's goal to become the best flier? Wouldn't the best way to accomplish this be to get them back as soon as possible? Was it possible she didn't actually trust her Princess? None of the options made sense until she considered it from Dash's perspective; she had been taken against her will, her wings tampered with without her consent, cut up, abused, hurt... Maybe she just didn't feel comfortable letting other ponies touch them? Still, it was a very selfish, silly reason, but this wouldn't have been the first time a phobia prevented her from taking logical action. It was only after several moments of hesitation she answered, "Okay Dash, I won't try just yet, but we will bring your wings back one way or another. And we'll do it nicely." Celestia bowed her head slightly.

Dash just nodded quietly, still very uncomfortable. She just denied the Princess. Was that a sin or something? She couldn't remember, but it made her feel guilty. Still, she had her reasons for this, reasons she planned to address soon. Her ear cocked when she heard hoof steps, and turned to see Twilight sulkily coming back, trying hard to glare. Dash smirked, and Twilight screamed as she was tackled and tickled.

Celestia just sighed quietly, glad the awkwardness was gone. Not to mention it was cute watching Twilight try to wiggle away as Dash roughhoused with her. Celestia decided to slip away at this moment, let them have their fun. She might just go see Twilight's castle itself, and maybe puzzle out Dash's wing predicament.

It took several moments of wrestling, shouting, and tussling for the two to finally notice Celestia was gone. Dash glanced around slowly, her wings flapping softly as she looked down to Twilight. "Hey, Twi?"

Twilight was panting heavily, but she cracked open an eye to look into those of her friend while squirming a little. "Y-yeah I give up. Just, enough, please? Lungs burn..." She mumbled, and Dash slid off her to watch as the girl stood up.

"It's not that. I was wondering, do you think you could try growing my wings back? The Princess and I were talking about it, and she said magic might be able to do something for it..."

Twilight got to her hooves, and shook a little as she took a few deep breaths. "Well..." She stared at Dash's wing stubs, and finally got her legs to stop trembling. "I've never worked with nerves or feathers before, but with a few minutes of study and some testing, possibly." She looked to Dash's wings, then paused. "Why not ask Princess Celestia or Luna to do it? They would know more about wings."

Dash gave a slow blink, then glanced down at her hooves in shame. Twilight frowned, something was bugging her. "I don't trust anypony around my wings. They can look at them, I don't mind that, but I just don't know if I trust them to use magic on them. My wings were clipped by that Golding jerk. I don't know what he did with those scissors or if there was more to it. What if Celestia's magic doesn't react well to whatever happened to me? What if it's not enough?" Dash slowly approached Twilight with a completely honest and somewhat frightened face. "You understand the magic, you understand what happened to me, and you're the smartest girl I know and the only pony I trust to try anything with them. I want you to look at them before I have to ask the Princesses."

"Dash..." Twilight took a step back as Dash let all her feelings out, and she grit her teeth a little. "I don't know anywhere near as much as they do..." Maybe their magic wouldn't be enough, maybe it *could* only be counteracted with old magic, but that was only if it wasn't a normal clipping, and there was no reason to believe it was.

"We were too busy for me to ask you before, but now we have a while before we leave. Please look? Please try?" Dash turned, presenting her wings. "You're my best friend, and you know what it was like, and what happened to me. Use that friendship magic you have. I trust you." She smiled a little, and Twilight knew there was no way in the whole world that she could ever turn her down now. She stepped forward and sighed as she studied the painfully small, painfully jagged wing just in front of her.

"Only for you Rainbow Dash." Twilight murmured, her horn glowing as she began to scan the wing. She fought every instinct she had telling her to go find the Princess to do this. To her, it was more important that Dash was

comfortable, and that she kept her trust. She smiled slightly to herself at the thought, since, deep down, she knew Dash would do the same. "Now hold very still, if you can." She challenged playfully.

Dash smiled hugely, and stood for, perhaps the first time in her life, excited *and* still at the same time. She waited patiently as Twilight looked close at her wings, and her horn glowed brilliantly as she did.

And she stood there for a while with her horn glowing, staring at Dash's wing. Dash remained as motionless as she could manage, certain that Twilight could do this. Twilight was the smart one, the magic one. Nothing to worry about.

"..." Twilight straightened up to look Dash in the eyes. "Dash, are you using any magic?" Twilight asked, leaning back down to study the wing again, her horn flaring brighter.

Dash frowned a little and shook her head. "No, you told me to stay still, so I figured I shouldn't do anything. Why?" She didn't like the confused look on Twilight's face.

Twilight stayed quiet for a moment, and gently rubbed the wing presented to her. "It..." She lowered her head again, her horn's glow slowly disappearing. "It's like... I can see your wing, but my magic can't..."

"Twilight Sparkle, turn that hot, nasty piece of flank over to me before I burn it off of you!" Rukafelth, using the many years of his training at the monk's monastery, kept a stoic expression and did not change the speed of his stride as he walked under Balla's room's window towards the announcement balcony that graced the Brehmin Palace's front, above the mighty armored double-doors that served as the front doors of the enormous building.

The stone structure around him calmed him. It wasn't just an Earth Pony thing, though a majority of Earth Ponies didn't even like to be below the ground, it was a monastic thing. It reminded him of a peaceful time before Lord Galio had found him. The hard stone floors, the isolation from the world, surrounded only by his kin whom all subsisted on what they built or grew. It made him regret enjoying the fineries of things like cushions, beds,

and servants, but as a Captain that much was expected of him. Still, the morning rituals served as a healthy reminder of where his fighting prowess had come from.

He pawed quietly at the stone beneath his hooves while in thought, before realizing the silence wasn't him tuning out the world, the entire courtyard was lined up and quiet. He looked up, smiled sheepishly at his lack of attention, and stared down at his many soldiers, his many allies. He knew only a few in the line-up beneath him, did not know who had a family or not, and couldn't pick them out from where he stood, but they all looked identical in their armor, and they numbered in the thousands. He was still not used to such a cold, informal stance on leading an army, but he didn't have much of a choice in the matter. He wished he could go down and shake each one's hoof personally before he sent them to fight in their Lord's name, but time was a valuable commodity when snooping under the noses of a suspicious foreign kingdom.

He took a deep breath, and raised his hooves to the top of the stone guardrail and lifted himself high, making his imposing presence seem all the larger. The army before him watched him with rapt, absolute attention. "There is a reason failure is what it is. When you do not succeed, when you fall so far below expectations that your mission falls flat, the results can be disastrous, especially during a time like this. Once. Just once I have failed Golding. I have failed Lord Galio, I have failed my oldest friend Shallom, and I have failed you, my people." He let the words hang in the air, and the soldiers seemed to tense.

Down below, many of them were uncomfortable. Not with his abilities, but with him blaming himself. Rukafelth had never been anything but a dedicated community-minded man who lived to make the ponies around him live comfortably, long lives, and he always blamed himself the hardest when something went wrong. They stood straighter, ready to show their Captain they were still ready and willing to serve under him.

"This failure has cost us the secrecy we had been so careful to maintain, but even worse it has cost us one of the ancient Alicorn lords. Restoring Golding does not need all three of the brothers, but my failure has given the youngest of them to Equestria. They are aware of our presence here, and now they are aware of the nature of our power. It is unfortunate, but war is now an inevitable factor. Equestrians are not like the Coltriallens, nor the

Steedests. They are unused to war, true, but they have intelligence and power on their sides. Despite their lack of experience, they have proven to be exceptional opponents. This is why we all must be prepared to face unpredictable, intelligent opponents. We cannot focus on just raw offense, we must practice a mobilized defense and prepare for the unexpected." He spoke loud and clear, and there was a ripple of nods of agreement from the crowd below. "We must practice all stages of our martial tradition, and prepare all the weapons available to us. Shallom's soldiers will no doubt draw attention now, and a counter-force will be sent to find them. That is why we must prepare to step in, protect, and if need be, conquer, in Golding's name, in Galio's name."

"*WE HEAR!*" The shout was deafening, and Rukafelth closed his eyes. These ponies had been training for years and years, and had been fighting on many fronts to protect Golding and smite their gluttonous, greedy neighbors. They were nothing short of determined to fight for their land and their king.

"I do not expect us to use our military presence to suppress the simple trades towns, but we must be ready to do whatever it takes. That said, I must request each one of you to show restraint in the face of our enemies. Equestria does not understand our mission nor our plight, Equestria is not sinful land, nor is Equestria a violent land, they are unfortunate victims between us and our true goal. The citizens are innocent peddlers, their soldiers are loyal men and women trying to defend their peace. If we have to fight, aim to intimidate, not kill. If we must take residence in one of their towns or encounter their citizens, do not bring harm to them. We must hold our honor, even during the darkest times and during our darkest deeds."

"*WE HEAR!*" They answered as one, the standard of Golding's morals slipping off the guardrail to bow his head to his soldiers in respect as they did the same.

"Then, for ourselves, for our citizens, and for Lord Galio, let us bring honor and plenty back to Golding." He shouted, and the courtyard briefly erupted into a storm of noise from the cheers of agreement and national-pride. When it died down, Rukafelth smiled quietly. "Then let us begin our practices. We will not start with the spearhead assault, if you remember your training, then enter the Snapping Turtle formation."

Each block of soldiers below him turned into mess of movement as they worked their way into their war stance.

Dash took several deep breaths as Twilight scanned again. Then again. Then once more, but stood up straight, looking confused. "What do you mean Twilight? My wings are right there. Don't play with me, okay?" Dash began to paw at the ground nervously.

"I'm not playing." Twilight whispered, watching Dash with a confused look, only to remember last night. The tips of her wings were the only part of her that hadn't glowed...

"Dash, I'm going to try something. I'm going to coat you with magic. It'll be harmless but it may feel strange. I want you to tell me what you feel in your wings." Twilight ordered. Dash held still again, trying to not panic as she considered what she was told. She did not mind the magic surrounding her, she did not mind the grip of this "tyrant", it was careful and worried, if somewhat claustrophobic.

Twilight stared closely at the tips of Dash's wings. No magic went around them. The aura of purple light covered Dash's body all over except around the tips, where it simply cut off and did not stray past. She tried another scan with the magic all around her. "What do you feel in your wings?"

"Um... Warm." Dash answered, carefully bending and unbending her wings. "Except the tips. They feel really cold for some reason."

The scan didn't show any magic being conducted through Dash's wing tips. They were bare, cold, completely blocked off from magic. She stood there for a moment, a moment of terror passing her as she turned around. "Dash, stay here, I need to go get the Princess."

"Wait!" Dash cried out, catching up in a small bound, "What's happening? What's wrong? What do you mean your magic can't see my wings?"

Twilight waited, bit her lip, and looked into Dash's eyes. "Dash I... I think that unicorn did more than just clip your wings. They can't be touched by magic. The Princess needs to take a look, she'll know better than I will

about what's going on." She rushed downstairs, leaving Dash standing alone on the tower. She turned slowly and stared at the sunrise.

She couldn't blame Twilight for this. She was angry at herself for nearly doing so, she had tried. She was still trying. Still, she didn't want anypony else involved. It made her feel twitchy just to think about anypony touching her wings. She pulled them tightly to her side and grit her teeth. She just had to tell herself it was the princess.

"You're a farm girl, Applejack. Ya'll don't need the fancy life." The orange-coated pony told herself as she walked out the front door of the massive castle. Wearing a sweeping morning gown with comfortable leather boots and saddle, all adorned with apples. Her hat from yesterday was even changed out to a floppier gardener's fedora, though she still had the remnants of apple tarts on her chin. She had been in sort of a rush since during the time she'd been escorting Twilight to bed and she'd laid down herself, she forgot all about Hayseed!

She quietly told herself she didn't need to be in Laputa anymore, no matter how comfy, attentive, and fancy it was. She'd left Manehattan because the fancy life wasn't for her, she'd get bored of Laputa too. Eventually.

She stood on the floating island's paved walkway, in front of the statue of Celestia that graced the front courtyard, and she sucked in a little breath. "My, don't we look dashing?" Applejack's whistle shorted out as she turned quickly, spotting Rarity just behind her with an easy smile on her face. "I always knew that everypony had some sense of taste, I just always figured yours would take some digging."

Applejack snorted, and looked back at her fancy clothing, unable to deny she was actually wearing them what with Rarity being right there. "I just figured that if Twilight's gonna provide 'em for me, I could at least show my appreciation some." She blushed, slipping the hat off her head to hang around her neck.

"Oh Applejack..." Rarity giggled in amusement, walking closer to reset the hat on her head, making Applejack mumble something in embarrassment. "It's certainly not a bad thing to enjoy having some fancy, er, duds as you would put them. They certainly look appropriate for farm work, even the

gown is thick enough to stand some wear and tear." Rarity walked in a slow circle around the farmer pony, who just sighed heavily.

"I ain't gonna be takin' this home to work in it, I work just fine without clothes and just my hat." Applejack waited just a moment after realizing it to point it out as she looked over Rarity with a highly raised eyebrow.

"Although I don't think ya'll got an excuse. Ya'll probably have a closet full of the best stuff there is, why ain'tcha wearin' any of it?" Applejack asked with a highly confused look.

"Oh it was all very nice." Rarity admitted, then her smile grew just a little bit too wide as her eye twitched. "Really really *really* nice. But I can't bring myself to wear what I haven't made myself. It feels like cheating, especially since I didn't pay anyone to do it. That said, I'm not above taking a few outfits home and basing a few designs off the," she gulped loudly and sighed, "*marvelous* designs this castle has made. When the time allows for it of course." Rarity wiggled her hoof as if dismissing the issue.

"If ya say so. Why are ya up so early anyhow? Ya'll think we're leavin' today?" Applejack's tone sounded curious, as if she didn't know herself. She never got a memo if there was one, and she hadn't seen Twilight all morning. Something to go poking around about after getting Hayseed.

"I couldn't sleep too easily." Rarity's smile was a bit tense, and Applejack nodded. "After hearing first hand what happened to our dear friends and learning what we're going to be going up against, I just couldn't stop twisting and turning. I'm kind of scared..." The unicorn seemed ashamed to admit it, but felt a hoof touch her back.

"Look Rare, ya'll ain't the only one. I know we're all puttin' on our brave faces but I'm feelin' no better. I've never wanted to leave Ponyville, much less Equestria and I never planned on ridin' no dragons or nothin'. Then I know Pinkie Pie's actin' all cute and fluffy as usual but she nearly got herself gutted by some monster clown in the woods on the way there and she only got better after somethin' tore its face open." Rarity winced, but Applejack continued, "And o' course there's Fluttershy. Looked in on her this mornin' and she wouldn't come out from under the covers, but she's still insistin' that she wants to go. Lastly, there's Twilight and Dash. I mean, sure they've done more than us by now, but they're volunteerin' to go straight from the pot and into the oven, not even waitin' to tell everypony

that they're goin' out. Ya'll think they could stand t'wait a week, but they're riskin' themselves again."

Rarity sighed quietly, nodding as she followed Applejack to the edge of the island, the star-specked transparent stairs still connecting the island to the Palace garden. Animals still stood out on the grounds, watching Laputa as if they couldn't believe it was here, but none dared come up. "Oh I know. It's just so hard to believe this is actually happening." Rarity watched Applejack raised her snout to the air, and let out a sharp, high whistle that made her wince. "What exactly are you herding this morning, Appleja-"

She jumped, in front of Applejack as there was a heavy smash behind her, and she turned her head to stare wide-eyed at the big, curious looking raptor-dragon that landed behind her. "Mornin' Hayseed, didja miss mama?" Applejack smiled as she approached the big reptile, which leaned down and bowed its head for Applejack to rub. "Oh yes you did my big boy, you're just all sorts of lonely ain'tcha?"

"... Good lord Applejack, that's a dragon, not a child. Or a tree, for that matter." Rarity took a few uneasy steps back as Applejack snuggled her dragon. "I still can't believe it just picked you to let you ride him."

"Well, it's like Fluttershy always said, sometimes it just takes a little bit o' kindness to turn a big beastie into a new friend. Ya'll hungry? I'll bet you are. Some nice juicy gem stones sound good right about now, don't they?" Applejack cooed in adoration as Hayseed nodded his enormous head. "That's right my big boy. Let's go get you some breakfast."

"Honestly Applejack, you choose to adopt the strangest things." Rarity shook her head, staring as the dragon turned, spread its great wings, and lowered its haunches to let Applejack climb aboard.

"Oh he's just a big friendly lizard is all. Ya'll wanna come with? Saddle can chaff a bit but the flight's smooth and relaxin'." Applejack scooted up, opening some space on the saddle.

"No thank you, I was just about to go back inside and take a look for some sort of storage shed to prepare for our journey. Besides, chaff my inner thighs? Please, if I was desperate for some coat removal I'd go get it done with precision, not with leather." Rarity walked around the dragon, giving it a wide berth as Applejack chuckled.

"Whatever ya want princess. Alright Hayseed, giddy-up!" Applejack took the reins and gave them a sharp snap, the noise making the dragon leap into the air with a flap of his great wings, turn, and fly towards the tip of the mountain Canterlot was set it, where the dragons were making their nests.

Rarity watched with a sigh. Applejack was a different sort of pony. She supposed that was a different sort of dragon as well. She needed to busy herself before she thought about what she was to get herself into. No need to panic on such a bright, fine morning such as this.

He heard the sound of slicing air all around him, followed by the rush of wind pushing him from behind as Schola swooped overhead, followed closely by six other Pegasi in an arrow-head formation, before they quickly flew upwards and looped, diving into a cloud and slipping in cleanly, disturbing it only a bit without destroying their cover as they flew around the airfield they had taken as their base.

Shallom took a deep breath and opened his eyes. He had a lot to learn about Equestrian weather, he realized. He stood easily on the cloud, but he stared down at it carefully. Golding never had to change its own weather, the seasons came and went by themselves and Golding adjusted to it. He stomped on the cloud, and his hoof fell through like there was nothing there.

How did the Equestrians do it? He assumed it had to do with the innate magic every Pegasus had in them, but Golding Pegasi never used that for more than standing on top of the clouds. He hadn't seen anypony push clouds without the old magic until he came here. He had done some scouting work around Cloudsdale and had found entire teams of Pegasus adjusting the weather in seconds, knocking out clouds, or pushing them over areas to rain, it confused him when he tried to imitate it.

He stood on the cloud and concentrated on his hooves. To him, it felt like he was walking on marshmallow, but whenever he tried to push downwards he would just sink through. That meant, in order to imitate the turn the Captain had used, he had to tap into the innate magic nopony outside of Equestria had ever learned since the world shifted itself into a self-caring entity bent on survival of the fittest.

"Alright." He approached a small, free-floating cloud carefully, feeling another sweep of air as team eight practiced the Sparrow-Beak dive just above him. He pressed his hoof to the soft thing and felt it catch him, then he pushed. He sunk through it, and pulled out. It stayed solid up until the point he tried to control it. He pressed his hoof to it again, and lined it with the old magic, and pushed. His hoof entered the cloud, which began to light up with sparks of lightning, until it discharged onto the cloud below him.

Was this really so complicated? The Equestrians controlled the weather easily, so why couldn't he, a disciplined soldier, a master of his personal magic, get a cloud to move? He silently cursed just how offensively based said magic was. Sure he could smoke out and burn away anypony who crossed him, but he couldn't move. A. Stupid. Cloud!

He watched a pair of hooves appear in his vision as somepony landed on the cloud he was currently attempting to boss around. "Any luck, sir?" Schola asked with a pleasant smile. Shallom sighed, and shook his head.

"It's easy enough to stand on a cloud. Moving them? Effort." He stated. Schola looked down out the cloud she was on, raised a hoof, and pushed it clean through the fluff with a blink.

"You'd think it was easy." She stated, her team landing several meters away to get some water.

"You would think, but no. We're out of touch with our inner talents." Shallom hummed, pressing his hoof into the cloud again, but he fell through easily.

"Not that we've ever needed them." Schola pointed out.

"While true, watching that Captain use them to turn so quickly has inspired me some. Any way to increase my capabilities in the air is worth looking into. I would just very much like this cloud to move for me." He mumbled, pushing his hoof into the cloud.

Schola blinked as she was scooted away from her now surprised Captain. "... You did something." She stated, looking down at the floating cloud. Shallom approached, pressed his hoof against it, and pushed, but found his hoof going through it again. "Now you didn't do anything. Do something again."

"Have I ever told you how unhelpful you are Schola?" Shallom snorted, taking his hoof out. What had he done right? All he did was ask it to... "You have *got* to be kidding me."

"What?" Schola blinked, looking down at the cloud as Shallom approached it.

"Move for me." He ordered, and pushed at the cloud, but sunk through. "Okay, would you move for me please?" He pushed it again, and it scooted away.

"Would you move for me pretty please with a cherry on top and a lot of cuddles?" Shallom groaned as Schola pushed the cloud, and grinned as it fell into the clouds beneath them. "Aww, you just have to be nice to the pretty clouds."

Shallow stared at another cloud and gave it a push, in his mind asking for its assistance in allowing him to move it, and it did so. He groaned out loud, and Schola began to snicker at her Captain's annoyance. "C'mon Captain, it's kind of funny."

"It's stupid is what it is. Clouds are stupid. Equestria's stupid." He snorted, stamping his hooves indignantly. Schola just giggled as she pushed a cloud into one of her surprised subordinates.

Celestia could not form a valid explanation for what she was seeing. Her horn glowed softly as she scanned Dash's little wings, but though she could perfectly see what was happening with her eyes, her magic touched the wings and... Nothing. She stood up straight and passed her hoof to her chin as she stared.

Dash stood, trying to stay still but she was shivering as Celestia came so close to her wings. She didn't like this. The attention was humiliating, and the amount of magic Celestia was putting out made her wings stand on edge and every nerve in them was panicking.

She had to focus on Twilight's eyes to keep herself from leaping away from Celestia's attention. "I think I see what you mean, Twilight. The tips of her wings just aren't there..." Celestia hummed in thought, frowning to herself

as she tried to consider what it meant. She thought she remembered hearing something like this before, but she couldn't place exactly where.

"O-of course they're there!" Dash said in a panic, staring back at her small wings, while Twilight gently pulled her head back to face her. How couldn't their magic "see" her wing tips? What did that even mean?

"Dash, that unicorn did something to your wing tips. I don't know what happened but..." Twilight paused, and sighed, staring at her wings carefully before speaking again. "They have some sort of anti-magic, I don't know, shield around them I guess."

'Anti-Magic Shield...' Celestia thought to herself, then froze as it hit her. The report of what happened to Horshire, its attacker, some sort of evil thing that wasn't affected by magic. Celestia sucked in a slow breath, then let it out as she realized this wasn't an isolated thing. Golding was using anti-magic against them.

All of Equestria was magic. Anti-magic could easily destabilize the land around them. "Twilight, I believe you are right. If you'll excuse me, I need to go make a report to the court unicorns, and I think it would be best if you left for your mission soon. This anti-magic shield is not the first one I've heard of." Twilight and Dash stared to Celestia as she actually ran towards the edge of the tower. "Go. If you lost your magic, we'll lose our shot." Celestia whispered, then took off towards the palace.

The little yellow mare opened the door softly, stepping inside only to peak as she continued to hear the rattling noises. Fluttershy stared as she saw Rarity standing next to a small pile of saddlebags while going through drawer after drawer, pulling things out like ropes, knives, and canteens. The packs, Fluttershy could see, were overstuffed as it was but Rarity still had a pile of things she seemed to want to bring laying next to them.

The room they were in seemed to be a big supply closet, but it didn't have just needles and thread and spare blankets, but it had things like grappling hooks, spare cotton sheets, carving knives, rulers, Space Ace, and pillow cases. It had everything they needed for any situation they'd encounter. It was a strange thought, but the castle itself was already a head case and a half to figure out. When she'd woken up, she'd found herself holding an

armful of little dressed pony dolls, that looked just like her old favorite doll, Alice. She thought she'd put Alice away years ago in her closet to give to some lucky little foal.

Then again, when she was young and she was scared, she'd always hold Alice so tightly to her chest for a sense of comfort. Finding the dolls in her arms wasn't as scary as you'd assume though, not in this time when she felt so nervous and scared, so unsure of what the future held. She was scared for Twilight and Rainbow Dash and the pains they'd endured, she was scared for Applejack and Pinkie Pie and Rarity and for herself because they were going to be following Twilight and Dash into something that could be beyond dangerous, more so than an adult dragon, or a manticore, or... Maybe not more dangerous than Nightmare Moon, but she was still terrified. She was also scared for Equestria, for the danger that it would be in soon.

Yet when she'd woke up holding the Alices, when she took a bath and heard Rainbow Dash shouting at Pinkie Pie for trying to steal her pancakes, and when she saw Twilight peacefully leave her room looking well-rested and even a little happy, she knew better than to be scared. She had friends to look after, and a world to protect. The thought of that responsibility was heavy, but surrounded by the five ponies she cared about most, it felt so much more easy.

Watching Rarity just soothed even more of the stress, because she felt that Rarity had all the best intentions, yet was still stressing enough to make a few silly mistakes. It made her want to hug the graceful Unicorn just for sharing the same feelings. "Um, I think you may be packing just a little, uh, little too much." She said with a shy smile as Rarity whirled around, a machete in her mouth.

"Oh!" She dropped the large knife with a clatter, and chuckled nervously. "You surprised me Fluttershy. My apologies, I was just thinking about the things we might need and after taking a look I just figured all of it looks like it could be useful at many points. I found medical supplies and exploring supplies as well as spare paper and thread and blankets and pillows and so on and so on. What do you think?" Rarity opened a pack by its clip, causing the top to spring open as the over-packed materials erupted out.

Fluttershy covered her mouth with one hoof while Rarity gave an embarrassed grin. "M-maybe unpack a little?" Fluttershy offered, making Rarity gasp. "Sorry..."

"I can't unpack any of this! What if we need this!" Rarity held out what appeared to be a crescent scoop with a bit for the mouth, and Fluttershy hid a little giggle.

"That's an ice cream scooper, Rarity."

"But it could double as a shovel if we needed it to do so!" Rarity insisted, waving the scooper around as she stared at the packs with a downed expression.

"Surely there must be a trowel in here somewhere. Maybe if we just looked-"

"I *did* look!" Rarity interrupted, nodding rapidly.

"Oh..." Fluttershy rubbed her chin in thought. "Um, okay, so if there aren't any trowels-"

"There *were* trowels." Fluttershy looked up with a raised eyebrow. "Only seven of them though! We only have one replacement between the six of us, we have to take the scooper!" The fashionista insisted, trying to stuff it back into the pack.

Fluttershy walked over, and with a kind smile pushed Rarity back, away from the packs. She took the scooper and went and shoved it into a drawer. "Come now Rarity, let's step back and think carefully about this, alright? Will you let me go through the packs and take out what we probably won't need?" She asked, and Rarity took a deep breath.

"That would probably be for the best. Oh I'm just so worried. Maybe I shouldn't go, maybe I'd hold everypony back. I'm just acting so foolish and I know nothing of adventuring." Rarity mumbled, and Fluttershy just smiled understandingly as she unloaded four frying pans and a wok.

"You read all those romance novels, you know more than I do. If anypony would hold everypony back, it would be me." She paused in her movement,

and kept unpacking. "I-I'm so shy and hesitant and, I would freeze up and get scared..."

"Oh sweetie, you're perfectly fine. Other than Pinkie Pie, you're one of our best cooks, and you can mend a wound, and communicate with the wildlife, and you're the most terrifying one of us when given half the chance..."

"But you're much better at preparing for the worst and you wouldn't even think of holding back what somepony needed, and you can perform magic and would know just what to say or do, and you're so precise..."

"Please Fluttershy, I'm a fashion designer, I stitch and sew and hope Canterlot is wowed enough by my designs that I can make up for the lost materials. I can lift something forty pounds at best and my precision is with a needle and thread, something I'm sure you're used to doing anyways since you can stitch a cut on a rabbit's soft little arm..."

"And I'm just a veterinarian, I can reset and cast bones and stitch cuts and take care of you until you're not sick, but the most I can do is hold it still and wait for it to get better. I'm not a doctor like my dad, I'm more of a nurse. I get so nervous at the sight of blood and bone I have to have a pot of tea ready just to calm my nerves, and if I get so much as a little blood on me I end up at the sink for so many minutes when I'm finished trying to wash it away. I'm confident I can help a little animal but another pony? If I saw Dash or Applejack or you looking at me the way my little animals do I would just *cry*..."

"That doesn't make you a bad pony Fluttershy, you're worried about your friends, that's what matters. Besides, you're a marvelous young mare, and so careful in your treatment. Maybe you get nervous and scared, but that's natural, even for a professional, but you push through it. I go through the same thing every time I get an order that seems utterly impossible, but once I stop fretting and get to work, I end up with plenty of free time."

"See Rarity? You're so wonderfully confident once you work past your fears. Even past all mine I'm still so shy and nervous and-"

"Absolutely monstrous?" Fluttershy looked up, her face a mask of shock and surprise. "You used *the Stare* on me once, and only once. You've only ever had to use it once on me. And when the chips are down you will stare down... Oh what was that creature's name? Ana-something, you will stare

down the very gate of hell itself until it gives in. A cockatrice, a dragon? When pressed against anything that has harmed the ponies you love, you become an absolute monster. Nothing on this world is scarier than you are."

"What about you?" Fluttershy asked, smiling quietly as Rarity's eyes widened. "When something threatens your beautiful image you attack it until it leaves you alone. You made an entire scene in front of Princess Celestia to protect your dress at a small party to keep it safe, and you tore a scale from a sea serpent with your bare teeth to get something to cut off your tail just so the serpent would have a part of his moustache again."

"Oh please, a melodramatic sea serpent is one thing, but a dragon?"

"To be fair, he seemed rather cowardly when an equally powerful force presented itself, backing him down, most likely as a result of an inferiority complex that was tripped when I showed no fear." Rarity blinked twice, and Fluttershy blushed. "I-I did some studies in psychology to help a mouse deal with his marital problems and an owl with a fear of the dark. I try to not let it get in my way when I talk to you guys."

Rarity snickered. Then she chuckled. Then she began to laugh, unheeded, as Fluttershy began to smile a little at Rarity's joyous laughter. "Oh Fluttershy..." Rarity sighed, wiping her eyes with a smile. "Maybe neither of us are suited for this. Not alone. But you know what, we have each other and the others. We have Twilight's intelligence, Applejack's strength, Rainbow Dash's speed, Pinkie Pie's joy, your care."

"And your attentiveness." Fluttershy offered, blushing at Rarity's wide smile.

"Altogether, as long as we stay as one, and give it our all, nothing can stop us." She leaned over and pressed her cheek to Fluttershy's, and the two smiled. Fluttershy felt comfortable once again. Rarity was right. "Now, um, are you sure we don't need the hedge-trimmers?"

Fluttershy giggled, and snuggled more. "Positive."

His stride was long and measured, every bit as beautiful and graceful as he himself was, but it held that very sense of unfaltering sense of duty he

brought to hearts and minds of the men and women, young and old, naturally born or adopted to his rule. He was tireless, which was not the same that could be said for the two red-adorned guards that stood by his side every waking moment of their lives and loved it, knowing it was the most important thing to be asked to do in the entire kingdom, that his safety hinged on their alertness.

The professionally trained red-cloaked unicorns kept to their Lord's side nearly every waking moment, spending their few off hours training their swordplay, or testing their senses. The moments they weren't with Lord Galio were rare and few, but judging by the direction he was going, they were about to be granted a short reprieve.

The staircase they were walking down was dimly lit and deathly silent. The door was insulated by an old enchantment, and even when open no sound entered or exited the stairwell. It had come to their understanding quickly that this was a path to a torture chamber, as no reasonable pony would ever come down here for any sort of pleasure. It far too unsettling.

Though a torture chamber may be useful in the future, it served a better purpose for now. As Galio approached the door, he looked to his two gold-masked guards and gave a slight nod. "You may return to your rest spots for now." He told them kindly, and the two guards saluted quickly, and head up the stairs. They heard him open the door, and heard the screaming and shouting of what laid beyond until it was shut tightly.

"Direct. On time. No waste. To be expected. Hello." Galio turned his head away from the figure on the table in the middle of the room to stare at the hooded old mare that sat surrounded by books at a desk that had, as far as anyone could tell, never been there before she had.

"Good morning, Wrexial." Galio bowed his head quietly to the old mare, who merely shifted one of her old books to pull out a new one, trying to drown out the noise coming from the middle of the room. "I trust things have been well."

"Adequate." She answered tersely, sweeping her hood back to look up to Galio, her milky white eyes baring no pupils but many red veins, and her twisted, gray hair falling short of the chair's seat. She wore a circlet on her forehead, much like he did, but it had a ruby in it. "You came for her?" Wrexial pointed a hoof towards the middle of the room, and Galio nodded

rapidly. "Can't. Not cured. Soul in turmoil. Still in requirement of the False One."

Galio sighed softly and stepped towards the middle of the room, towards the strapped down mare with a coat as gold as his, with a mane as snowy as his was, and eyes that blazed with rage as she kicked and struggled as hard as she could against the manacles. "You said you were looking into a way to improve her condition without getting the Soul back."

"My apologies, Lord Galio. Sellina is resilient. Magic difficult around her. Resists, counters, attacks every attempt made. Need the soul to complete her. Need her to access the leylines." Wrexial explained rapidly, pushing aside another book. "Information found by Shallom proving useful. Perhaps a soul completion spell soon. Unlikely, mostly offensive, little utility, foresight of Alicorns lacking."

"Of course." Galio looked down at the mare in the table as she screamed angrily at him, spitting curses and jangling her binds as she tried to lunge at him. He took a deep breath and let it go. Things would be fine. They would retrieve the Soul, and they would get it in Sellina again. His army was competent, powerful. If they weren't enough, he himself would personally retrieve Twilight Spar- the False one.

It was all that mattered. If they did not access the leylines soon, everything they had been working for for the past ten-thousand years would perish in an instant. He sucked in a deep breath, and let it out while resting his hoof on little Sellina's forehead. The mare stopped, blue eyes wide with confusion, and then she lunged. Her teeth did not hurt, but knowing his little girl was so intent to hurt him stung him elsewhere.

Pinkie Pie finished placing the basket at the end of the bed and smiled as she stood back to see exactly how her reorganized room looked. In her mind, everything was perfect now, except for the kitchen but that would come later. Her bed had been shifted into the corner along the wall where the door was, the table that held the bowls of candy and snacks was now in the middle of the room, easy to walk in and just grab a few. Her dresser was now at the foot of her bed, and best of all, Gummi's bed was right on top. When she put him to bed and slipped in herself, all she'd have to do is open her eyes to see his little cushioned basket and him resting in it.

The thought brought a little smile on her face. Gummi would like it here, she knew it. He did not like being out in the open like Ponyville was, so being inside a palace would make him the happiest little gator ever! They just had to complete this one little quest before she could bring him here.

Except... It wasn't so little, was it? Pinkie walked to the bathroom to wash the sweat off, and the entire time she stared at herself in the wall mirror set up on the side of the shower that did not have the showerhead. As she stared at herself, her head cocking back and forth as she evaluated everything she was, she allowed the weight of the situation to hit her.

She had seen first hand the power and the brutality the enemy had, between that insane clown thing that had hunted her all the way to Twilight, that had nearly gutted her and used the shadows to keep her down, the dragons they had tamed and rode over the water, unashamed of trying to kill their opponents, and the big Pegasus had knocked out Princess Luna...

She covered her eyes and grit her teeth as dark, mixed emotions curled into her stomach, fear clawing at her chest, threatening to choke the air out of her, but she sucked in a breath involuntarily when the burn became too much to bare. She played happy for her friends, for Twilight and Dash since they had gone through worse, but deep down, she was a scared, sad little filly. She had volunteered to come because they were her friends, and if she just let them go she would never be able to forgive herself.

But she was terrified, she was absolutely petrified at seeing her own image. She couldn't see herself going through with this. If she met another clown monster, what would she do? She had frozen up twice both times she'd been attacked by the first one, and was nearly killed both times until Applejack and then Rainbow Dash intervened.

"*Damnit.*" She hissed, smacking a bottle of shampoo against the wall, ignoring the mess it made as she climbed out of the shower. She shouldn't think like this, or say such harsh words, she had to get out of the shower, out of that tight confined place.

Back in her room, she was still shaking with fright. She was lucky, that was it. That was all it was, lots and lots of luck. It was her friends who did the heavy lifting. When had she ever actually done anything useful? Lead the Parasprites out of town? Celestia was literally seconds away from fixing it herself. The hydra? She'd let Twilight go distract it by herself. Even

handling Gilda all she'd done was hurt Dash's friendship with the Griffon. Even when helping them deal with Nightmare Moon all she'd done is help them laugh at an illusion. She didn't fix a Manticore, she didn't push away her greatest dreams, she didn't help a sea serpent, she didn't catch a falling friend, all she did was help them get rid of an *illusion*. It was scary but *harmless*.

What could she do on this trip? She was not a fighter or a thinker, she just made them laugh and smile. Two totally useless skills on a journey that promised to be incredibly dangerous. She could go talk to Twilight. She could talk to her about leaving. She couldn't do this, she couldn't handle this sort of trouble. But the pain would come back and haunt her, knowing she'd let her friends down, let them go alone. She wanted to be there to assure herself they'd be okay. But she would just drag them down, wouldn't she? She was useless. Cupcakes and pies wouldn't help them on their journey, jokes and songs wouldn't save them from the shadows, parties wouldn't stop the dragons from attacking.

Nothing would save them from the jester.

She turned and charged towards a mirror on the wall, leaping up to press her hooves against the sides so she could see her stomach. The mark, the blood, the wound, all gone. No reminder of the fear and pain she bore. Somehow it scared her even more, like it had been a trick of her imagination, like she had dreamed of seeing the clown slice up all the Dashes when Luna had fallen on her, but she knew it was true. It had to be true.

Right?

She lowered herself from the mirror, and slowly walked her way out of her room. She padded up the staircase that would lead to the top of the tower, to Twilight, where she could make her pathetic excuses to get out of this, go home, and beat herself up daily over not knowing if her friends were alive or not because she was too scared. Too scared of herself to help her best friends in the whole world, the girls who she partied with all the time, who always had the best intentions in mind when avoiding her, who accepted her strangeness as it was...

Her legs shook as she climbed the steps, wanting to weep at her own weakness, wanting to scream at her own fear, wanting this whole situation to just stop and get better...

"I guess I am kind of scared..." Pinkie Pie looked up. She was on the roof of the tower now, well at least near the top steps. She could have sworn she heard Rainbow Dash... But why would Dash be talking about being scared? Dash wasn't scared of anything.

"I'm so sorry..." She walked around the dais, and stopped when she saw Twilight holding Dash close. "I should have looked sooner, I should have done more..."

"It would just be the same story, Twi. I still wouldn't have my wings..." Dash had nestled her head into Twilight's chest, and looked woefully pained. Pinkie's heart clenched. This was the sort of thing she'd been scared of, seeing her friends hurt, with her unable to do anything.

"I'm so sorry Dash..." Twilight whispered, stroking her back, stroking her little wings. Twilight had her eyes closed, and looked like she was kicking herself over something.

"It's not your fault." Dash whispered.

"It is." Twilight shook her head a little. "If I'd just stayed close to Ponyville, If I hadn't gotten this magic or this *stupid horn*..." Twilight choked out the last two words, and grit her teeth as she squeezed her friend.

"They wouldn't have stopped just because you were in Ponyville. You saw those guys, they were ruthless. I was with you at least." Dash sighed, opening her eyes as she flapped her stubby wings. A chance at flight again, swept from beneath her hooves. Nothing else would do. She would just have to dedicate herself to magic for as long as she had it.

"I think you were the only one that pulled me through that whole thing. If I was alone, they probably would have-"

"Don't finish that." Dash squeezed her eyes shut. "I don't want to think about anything bad happening to you. After everything we've been through, it's scary thinking that you could get hurt." Pinkie stared at them, and considered slipping away. This was a private moment...

"I know how you feel..." Twilight sighed, letting her face relax. "I don't want you or the other girls getting hurt. You all mean so much to me." Pinkie's lip quivered.

"You and I both have to go, they don't you know..." Dash whispered, looking up into Twilight's eyes.

"I know. They'd be safer here, in Equestria, but, well... I think I want them all to come with us..." Pinkie sat as slowly and quietly as she could, watching the two as Dash gently tugged out of Twilight's hug, and sat next to the unicorn. "When I'm around all of you at once, I feel so safe, and like we can do anything."

"Is it the elements?" Dash asked, touching Twilight's chest. Pinkie's fear alleviated as she watched them. The two had grown so close since they'd been kidnapped. It made sense, but she never knew Twilight or Dash to be the physically cuddly sort. They liked to talk, and compete at what they were good at. Hugs were one thing, but cuddling was something else.

"Sort of. It's more like they inspire me. Fluttershy is so quietly strong, Applejack is so powerful and stubborn, Rarity is dedicated and efficient, and, y'know, I think of all the ponies I'd want with me on this sort of journey is Pinkie Pie." The pink mare sucked in a deep breath, glued to the spot. Why? Why her? Why was she the important one? She was a scared, useless little-

"Why's that?" Dash asked, letting Twilight stroke her wings gently.

"She's so insistent on being happy and optimistic. Whenever I got stuck back during Anemone's tests I just thought of her and pushed through. She makes me smile and laugh and forget about the stressful things." Twilight sighed. It came back to her being a happy pony. Well she wasn't happy now. She knew she was useless, of no help...

"She can also do a lot. You can count on her to do just about anything. Did you know she actually helped me settle into Ponyville? She got me all the right paperwork and walked me through each step of it, helped me count out the amount I owed the town and even loaned me some bits I needed to pay off the airspace with." Pinkie Pie remembered that. Dash had looked so lost that day that she'd done everything she could just to see her smile.

"Applejack told me she learned to trust the Pinkie Sense since she sometimes gets Pinkie out to help with a harvest if it stormed the day before. Said she worked hard, never complained, and always made picking lively. I helped her buck a field once and oh Celestia that took stamina. I had to start using magic twenty minutes in, but Pinkie helped clear the whole field without magic. So she's smart *and* strong."

"So we wouldn't have to worry about her. She can take care of herself and anything we asked her to do."

"And she'd keep us happy and looking at the silver linings. If the rest of this adventure is like the past few days have been, that's going to be real important..." She murmured. Pinkie Pie sat still, not sure what to say, or even to think. Did they really rely on her that much? Think of her as being that useful? No, she couldn't be, she was weak, she was scared...

And already her friends were smiling just thinking about her. "What if she gets hurt though?" Dash asked suddenly, and Pinkie Pie leaned forward, alert. Yes, what then? She couldn't be happy or strong or smart if she was hurt...

She watched Twilight's face slowly twist to an expression of pure, stony determination. She did not hesitate to speak, "Nothing will hurt Pinkie Pie. Nothing will dare touch my friends. If they do, they'll have to answer to me and I will make them pay for it. Then I will make sure she's okay, and do everything I can to get her back to health. *Nothing* will hurt you guys."

Pinkie stared at Twilight as she made this declaration, she stared as Rainbow Dash's smile stopped when she saw Twilight wasn't kidding, and she felt so... Blessed. Nothing would hurt them. Twilight would help them. No, they'd help each other. That was what made them the elements, they all worked together...

Dash turned her head quickly as she sensed movement, and Twilight's head followed after. The two stared as Pinkie Pie slowly walked around the dais towards them both. "Pinkie...?" Dash whispered as the pink mare, with the most serious, honest expression they'd ever seen, came forward.

"..." Pinkie hesitated, stopping just a foot away from them. She turned to stare at the floor, and they watched as she worked her jaw. Then there was a flash of pink as they were suddenly pulled into a hug. "I love you guys..."

Pinkie whispered so softly. "I wasn't sure I could make it, but as long as I have you guys and the other girls, I think I'll be okay. I think I'll make it." Pinkie whispered, trying to hold back the sobs, but they came freely. She didn't want to hide it anymore. She was scared. She was so scared. But they wanted her, no they needed her. She couldn't make them happy if she wasn't there, if she wasn't happy herself. She had to let the pain out somehow.

"Pinkie...!" Twilight and Dash whispered together as they felt the normally happy, laughing mare shake. They wrapped their legs around her instinctively, holding her close as Pinkie openly sobbed.

"I'm so sorry guys, I'm so sorry... I was going to ask to leave! I was going to abandon you guys because I'm scared, I'm just so scared of what's going to happen. B-but I'm sorry, I'm so sorry I heard you guys talking and I listened and... And you're right!" She was pressed between them, held quietly as she began to cry. "We all need to be there, it's important. I didn't think you guys were scared but... But we're all scared I guess... Not just me..."

Twilight gently pressed her snout to Pinkie's ear and sighed. "You're right Pinkie. I'm scared to death. I've been scared since I woke up, I've been scared since I was told what I needed to do. The only time I wasn't scared was when you guys were up here with me, or when we were all together in the palace. But I have all of you with me..."

"I don't think I've ever been more scared, y'know?" Dash admitted, rubbing Pinkie's back slowly. "But I need to protect this place. Equestria. I need to protect you guys too, and of course..." She cast her gaze to Twilight, and smiled softly. "I need you guys too though. We can count on you for anything after all."

Pinkie Pie shook between her two friends, and pulled them into a tighter hug. They held her, stroked her hair and back, and whispered encouragement, and she let out all the fear and sadness she'd been hiding.

When she was empty, she could fill herself up with happiness again.

"Oooh!" He leaned down and sniffed the tin bowl, and lifted his head up. "Pineapple and oranges *and* sweet sauce? I think we're getting spoiled.

What'd you get?" Ziel leaned his head over towards Malta, who had what looked like a bowl of white liquid filled with mush.

"Potato soup." He said through a mouthful of the stuff. "I taste herbs." He mentioned idly. "Grain and hay for two months straight and we finally get real food from the enemy. Something's wrong here." He hummed after swallowing the soup and glancing around. Everypony present was currently unarmored and had their faces in their bowls. Each one had a different meal, which was apparently their favorite.

"Please Zoloa, just take a few bites. You need your strength." A male in the back insisted as the tall female he stood next to lifted her nose and snorted.

"I will accept no fineries from the enemy. This is a trick, an attempt at flattering us to make us more amiable to speaking on their terms!" Zoloa sniffed, even as she did everything she could to ignore the apple-crumble cake sitting just in front of her.

"Unless they're trying to kill us. It could be poisoned! Go on, at least you'll die in Galio's name." The male insisted. Zoloa's stomach growled loudly.

"Absolutely not! I won't take the chance of it *not* being poisoned and living with the guilt of accepting the enemies' flirtations! I will wait to watch the rest of you *heathens* keel over under the weight of your sins before I dare ingest even the *slightest* amount of-"

"Shove a blade down it Zoloa!" Somepony else called, while Zoloa snorted.

"Surrounded by *heathens* and *sinnners* and betrayers of Galio's vision!" She snorted again, pushing the cake away.

"Typical women. Get them all righteous and passionate about something and they start ranting and raving until we bow down." Malta snorted.

Ziel chuckled. "Of they're not that bad. Only thing my lady ever got in a tizzy about was what to name the kid." He grinned at the memory.

"Oh right, you were planning to name him *Galio* weren't you?"

"Galileo, actually, sounds cooler, more artistic. Lahmia started freaking out because she thought I was trying to show up the Lord. Took me two days

and a half to convince her I was just, uh," he paused, blinked, then frowned, "wait, I forget what I told her."

"*Inspired?*"

"That's it! I was *inspired* by Lord Galio. No way, no how was I trying to show him up." Ziel smiled in triumph.

"And she went for it?"

"No, that's our informal name for him. She picked his true name on a whim, she said. I like it, it's kind of fancy."

"And it is...?" Malta raised an eyebrow.

Ziel cleared his throat, and then spoke it with a perfect accent, "*Il'nut'a'yomun.*" He smiled with pride, up until Malta snorted. "What?"

"..."

"*What?*"

"I think I love your wife."

"*What!*"

"That name is Coltriellian."

"Okay, yeah, so?" Ziel raised an eyebrow as Malta began to snicker.

"It means 'son of an idiot'."

"..." Ziel narrowed his eyes at Malta, who burst out laughing. "Not. Cool. Lahmia."

A shadow cast down the take-off balcony, and all heads turned to face a golden armored Pegasus. All ponies present stood up slowly, watching their guard warily as he surveyed them. "First point of notice, we apologize for delivering you food so late. We have been trying to figure out the kitchen and only today did it turn up all this food. We will attempt to be more on time in the future."

The Golding ponies glanced to each other hesitantly. "Is this guy serious?" Malta whispered, narrowing his eyes at the pony guard as several more joined him, carrying chains and manacles, or spears and swords. One by one they were hooked up.

"Why, what's wrong?" Ziel asked with a quick blink, even as he held out his hooves one by one to be bound. "Just sounds like he's trying to be nice."

"You normally don't try to assure your enemy that you'll be taking good care of them." Malta explained while Ziel rolled his shoulders.

"The second point of notice, we will be transporting you to a more secure location. Please do not attempt to fight us, you may get the dragons curious." Malta narrowed his eyes further, but then his ear perked up as he heard... Nothing.

The activity behind them had stopped. "Do *not* touch me, Equestrian." They heard Zoloa growl. They all turned to look as the gold-armored guard held up a handkerchief, and Zoloa reared back, snarling.

"Are you sure ma'am? Your mouth is a bit of a mess." Everypony stared closer. Her mouth was speckled with crumbs, and a bit of applesauce.

She stared around at everypony, quickly pushed her face into the handkerchief, and looked around while mustering all of her dignity up. "Which one of you thieving foals *stole my cake!*" She shouted.

She was met with silence.

Then the guards leapt away from the crowd of Golding ponies as they all nearly fell over laughing.

The old cells of the Equestrian palace had never seen use. They were surprisingly well lit, and the stones had recently been cleaned. The bars were firm, sturdy. They were also enchanted, nothing short of a close-range sunblast would disturb the bars. The cells themselves had comfortably mattresses beds with blankets, a simple toilet, a table that would not break, was stuck where it was, and was soft as rabbit fur when it

sensed hard enough pressure being applied to it. Each table had a deck of cards, and there was a small bookshelf full of books of all genres.

While Hero wasn't particularly proud that they had to use the cells, he could at least feel better about knowing they were tough and efficient. The Golding Ponies were put in two to each cell, most partners picked by the prisoners themselves. He wasn't sure giving them that sort of free reign was wise, but none of them possessed any amount of magic, or the strength to break the cells, and a majority of them seemed to just accept they were prisoners. Of course, getting them to talk was going to be the hard part.

"Pardon." He turned his head to his left. One of the prisoner's was holding a red pillow. "This pillow is too bright for me to sleep on, may I trade for his blue one?" Hero turned his head to see another prisoner holding a blue pillow. Hero took the presented edge of the blue pillow and pushed it through the bars of the first prisoner's, then did the same to the red pillow for the other cell. "Thanks."

Hero just nodded slowly. Was this what taking prisoners was like? It felt less like ending their free lives and more like giving them a comfortable hotel stay with limits. He felt incredibly out of his element. Then again, these ponies were soldiers, disciplined, trained, and sharpened individuals rather than common filth peddling Dust in a back alley.

It *still* made him feel uncomfortable. He stepped out of the cell block and went up a series of stairs that allowed him to pass through the door above, rather than send him through an endless loop of staircases that never seemed to end. The technicians who made it seemed content to call it "The Loop", but some of the younger ponies were more inclined to call it "The Bowser Staircase".

He stepped into the long, guarded hallway of the guards' block, situated just underneath the Equestrian palace that exited into the well-guarded inner sanctum, that was essentially a long hallway that eventually connected to the only slightly less guarded Block Entrance. He was now sort of glad it took them forever to get from the palace itself to the Guard Block, if anypony somehow, someway escaped, they had quite a fight ahead of them.

He turned his head as he heard hoof steps approaching, and saw Silly Cupcakes and a now very healthy looking Maize Picker approaching. "We have two pieces of news Captain. Both good and bad." Maize announced.

Hero grunted slightly, and turned to show them his full attention. Silly started first. "I'll tell you the bad news first. The guards that died during the battle were announced to their families." Hero grit his teeth, not visibly, but just enough, and he nodded. "We're holding a formal ceremony this afternoon, where they will be put to the earth in the cliff garden."

"Sounds appropriate. How did their families take it?" Hero watched Silly's face. It did not move, but she did not say anything. He felt his heart hammer for a few moments, but showed no emotion before letting out a great sigh. "I will apologize to them personally for this incident."

"At least you'll be able to reach them on a personal level." Maize smiled quietly as he held up an ankle pack with a scroll in it. Hero stared, his eyes widening a little. "We just got the papers now to be delivered, and she herself is being readied to be picked up. Little Connie Tortion-Cloudbreaker is waiting for you." Hero did not waste any time in grabbing the adoption papers and rushing out of the building.

Silly kept her composure the whole time until he was out the door, then she sighed softly, her face breaking out into a dreamy look. "I love a dedicated father."

"Don't be creepy." Maize shivered at the look on her face.

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Awake. Air. Breath. No vision. Blank blank everything so blank so blank
and white. Air. Breath. Awake.

Alive.

Alive.

Awake. Air. Breath. Alive. No vision. Everything blank.

Hooves. Feel them. Yes, yes they are there. There are the hooves. On the ground. Grass. Grass everywhere. All over. Smell it. Feel it. Can't see it. Awake.

Alive.

No vision. But grass. Water. Hear it. Hear the water. Go to the water. Forward. Forward. Left forward. More left forward. Forward. Hear it. Feel it. Water. Then taste.

Life.

Water. Grass. Awake. Air. Breath. Alive. Once more. Water. Grass. Awake. Air. Breath. Alive.

Alive.

Vision coming. Black and white. Shapes of things. Leaf? No. Flower. Column. No, tree. Forest. In a forest. See the trees. Flowers. Leaves? Yes, leaves. See it. See the leaves. See the trees.

Color! Green, so much green. Green everywhere. Brown now, brown too, trees. Tree are brown and green. Flowers are red. No, purple. No, blue! Red, purple, blue. Different flowers. Different colors. Grass is green. Leaves are green.

Alive.

Water. Thirsty. Find it. Water is blue. Water is shaking. Watch it. Watch it.

Stopped shaking. What is seen? See the skull. Know that skull. Smile.

The skull smiled back.

Chapter 16

Takeoff

"I know it's not really your style but you look so elegant when your hair is straight." Twilight ran the brush through the pink mare's hair slowly. Dash watched as Twilight scooped water from the bath and ran it down Pinkie's unfurled mane.

It was so surreal. Pinkie was smiling and hiccupping out the remnants of her sadness at the same time. Pinkie Pie was actually sad. You never said 'Pinkie Pie' and 'sad' together in a sentence unless it was 'Pinkie Pie is never sad', or 'The ultimate cure to sadness is to sit next to Pinkie Pie for four seconds', or 'Pinkie Pie stole all the cupcakes in the whole house and built an enormous mountain in the middle of town made of all the cupcakes in Ponyville and invited everybody to share the cupcakes and music and punch and that made Nasty Greed really really sad.'

She had seen Pinkie Pie angry before, and looking back on it maybe she was sad back before the invasion, but more angry than anything else. She had never actually seen her cry out of sadness though. It was absolutely depressing to watch, yet at the same time it gave her a sense of relief. She felt like she was the only one freaking out over the whole trip. Twilight managed to keep an air of cool and control around her no matter what she said, always acting as the comforter to her. Her wings being all but incurable, finding out about Teller, when she nearly had her mind eaten... She didn't like being the weak one, but the sense of comfort and love Twilight brought her made up for some of the role switching.

Knowing she wasn't the only way breaking down right now, that she wasn't the only one absolutely petrified with sadness made her feel a bit more sane. But of all the ponies, it had to be Pinkie Pie, happy, fun-loving, optimistic Pinkie Pie was the one who was breaking down. Not that she didn't have a good reason, which just made the situation that much worse knowing something so bad had happened to Pinkie. She was glad that clown thing was dead. Even if Tanat didn't know it, he'd gotten them some revenge for what that monster had done to Pinkie Pie.

"When I was a little foal, mom would tell me that if I would just smile and let the light into my hair I could be a model. When I saw the Sonic Rainboom it made me so happy, I couldn't stop my hair from getting all whooshy and curly." Pinkie smiled and lowered her head. "I wish I could say goodbye to her before I go." She whispered.

"Dangit Pinkie..." Dash sighed, her heart feeling so heavy from how sad the little mare was making her. She wasn't just a master of happiness, if she was sad, you were going to feel sad with her, not because she wanted you to but because you couldn't help it.

"Oh Pinkie Pie, we still have some time before we leave. We're going to be leaving at noon, and Celestia did promise to get everypony here for goodbyes. I know my parents would kill me if I left without a hug." Twilight chuckled, and Dash nodded her agreement.

Pinkie let out one more tiny little snuffle, and nodded her head as Twilight set the brush down. The bath had been a good idea. The warmth and the steam comforted the mare, while her friends being nearby and understanding only made her feel better about telling them how scared she was. She was happy they thought of her as a never ending stream of joy, and were so confident in her optimism. It made her happier that they accepted her joy wasn't endless.

"I'm sorry..." The pink mare whispered as she was helped out of the bathtub. "I never even should have thought about abandoning you guys. You're my best friends and-"

"Don't worry yourself." Dash waved her hoof as she tossed a towel onto Pinkie. "We've all thought things we might not be proud of. But you didn't go through with it, that's the important part." Twilight nodded, and helped Pinkie dry off. When she took the towel off, her hair was no longer straight. It was curly, kinky, fluffy, and looked just like cotton candy. Twilight and Dash smiled, and so did Pinkie.

Pinkie took a deep breath, and turned sharply towards the door. "C'mon everypony, let's go find everypony else!" Pinkie hopped out the door, and Twilight and Dash sighed to each other in relief as they followed her.

The elevator ride down was what gave Twilight a feel of how big Laputa was. She hadn't paid attention at all yesterday both times she'd used the

elevator since she was so tired or putting all of her attention elsewhere. She stayed quiet the entire time as she watched the library go by, memories resurfacing, the mazes, the mind tricks, the loneliness...

Had it really only been yesterday? Or was it the day before? She didn't remember, it felt like one giant blur from sun up to sun down, like time had stood still just so that entire escapade could go by unheeded by time or exhaustion. She touched her horn lightly in thought, while Dash and Pinkie spoke amongst themselves about something involving cream-filled donuts. Twilight wasn't paying them any attention, her mind was somewhere that didn't involve delicious sugary snacks.

She wondered if Pinky was truly okay. She wondered if Dash would ever be okay. She wondered if she herself was okay. She felt okay, like she knew what she was doing. Did she know? Go check on the other Alicorn brothers, there was that. Then... Ask them for help in protecting the leylines. Then return home. Easy three step plan, find brother, protect leylines, go home. There. She liked it simple.

Speaking of which, there were twelve dragons in her throne room. Dash's jaw dropped as she stared at the dragons, who slowly turned to stare back. One of them waved. The three ponies waved back. "Now the lot of you had better turn your massive hides around this instant and get out of here right now! This is no way to treat a throne room!" Rarity yelled from a corner, not getting much attention as she stood on shaky knees, Fluttershy just behind her with her eyes covered as the twelve dragons chewed on cushions, stuck their heads through doorways, and laid out lazily all over the floor. One swallowed a whole pillow, and was hacking it back up in the middle of the floor. "No! No no no *no no!* You nasty things, cough that up elsewhere!" Rarity shouted, once again getting nothing more than a glance.

Twilight stared at the dragons, then back to Rarity, and could only wonder how, why, and when this happened. It made her head swirl some just trying to consider why twelve Golding dragons would be in her castle. It also took her a moment to realize that all she was doing was standing there watching twelve Golding dragons investigate her castle.

"Hey!" Every head in the room swiveled to stare plainly at Rainbow Dash, who rubbed her forehead in bemusement while sighing in frustration. "Alright, look, enough messing around. Anything that is *not* a pony better

get out of here right now! Yes I'm looking at you! And you!" Dash swung her head back and forth, watching the dragons.

Nothing happened at first. All the dragons merely stared at Dash who stared back, while Rarity stood still, her breath held as Fluttershy lifted a hoof off her eye to watch. She saw the twelve dragons eyeing Dash, and immediately her little heart began to beat faster. Dash did not back down, and Fluttershy stood up slowly. "Y-you'd better listen to her! Please leave right now!" Fluttershy called out to the dragons. Rarity stared back at the timid pony with a surprised glance, but turned back to see the dragons slowly slinking backwards, away from the two Pegasi. Rarity watched with some surprise but even more relief as they slipped out of the building, leaving behind only a very nasty-smelling pillow. "... Th-that worked?" Fluttershy stared in surprise as Rarity just smiled.

The two ponies of grace moved to meet Pinkie, Dash, and Twilight halfway, all three smiling. "Nicely done, the both of you. Drawing on experience, Fluttershy?" Twilight smiled nicely at the shy Pegasus, whose face turned beet red as she rubbed her leg with one hoof and smiled to herself.

"Meh. They're big lizards. Shout loud enough and you can make any lizard run away." Dash rolled her shoulders as she quietly popped, Dark Dash appearing next to the dragon's ingested pillow with a disgusted look. "Oh that's just wonderful." Bright Dash sighed heavily, her face crinkling as Dark Dash wisely went to go grab a towel.

Rarity, Fluttershy, and Pinkie Pie just watched in small awe, looking back and forth between the two Dash's before focusing on Bright Dash as she gagged a little when Dark Dash wrapped the pillow up. "I still can't believe my eyes." Rarity rubbed her eyes gently with one leg, then blinked rapidly as she watched Dark Dash disappear beyond a door.

"I still can't believe all four of mine." Dash smirked as Twilight gave a small chuckle.

"Is it easier or harder when you have twelve total?" Twilight asked with a smile as they walked out of the castle, the other three ponies' eyes shifting to Dash quickly as the dark streaks in her hair returned.

"To believe?"

"Yeah."

"Yes."

Twilight shared in everypony else's confusion as Dash proudly strode past Twilight. The dragons had not left Laputa. A majority of them were resting around the front door, though two or three were exploring the upper reaches of the castle, at least until a sharp roar sent them back down to the ground.

Everyone's eyes, dragons' and ponies', looked to the sky as a familiar dragon slowly descended. Hayseed landed as softly as possible to not jostle his rider, and Applejack dismounted with as much grace as less than a day of practice granted her. That is to say, Rarity was shocked at the amount of dirt and grass stains now clinging to Applejack's castle-provided morning gown as Applejack spat and coughed before standing up straight. Hayseed nudged her gently with the tip of one finger, and Applejack waved him off. "I'll be alright you big ol' worrywart." Applejack assured him, shaking herself clean of some of the dirt.

"Applejack!" Rarity cried out, trotting closer. Applejack turned to the Fashionista and smirked.

"Shucks Rarity, nothing to be worried about. A little fall won't hurt me!" Applejack smiled in triumph, but it quickly fell as Rarity began to scan the hem of her gown with the softest whimper. "Uh," Applejack raised an eyebrow, "Rarity?"

"You," Rarity whimpered, holding the cloth delicately between two hooves, "this isn't machine washable! This is going to require at least a good hour of hoof-scrubbing and then sun-drying!" Applejack sighed heavily in annoyance, and between her hooves and teeth had the outfit off and in Rarity's hooves in an instant.

"Well, I was up visitin' the dragon roost and gettin' Hayseed moved in until it occurred to me: Twilight, we're goin' out of Equestria, yeah?" Twilight just nodded smartly, and Applejack let out a deep sigh. "Right, well, do you know how we're gettin' out of Equestria? I ain't no Cart-a-graphicer or whatcha call 'em but Equestria is big, and we're technically wanted women right now."

They all turned to look at Twilight now, Dash calmly nudging her with her shoulder. "Well go on, what's your plan?" They watched her expectantly. Twilight stood still. Easy three part plan, go find the brothers, get their help, go home. Easy. She opened her mouth, closed it, gulped loudly, opened it again, then began to chuckle very nervously as Applejack and Dash gave her flat looks, Pinkie, Fluttershy, and Rarity now looking between each other. "Aww c'mon Egghead..."

"We've been busy and I haven't had a lot of planning time! At least we're getting this solved *now*." She pointed out, trying desperately to deflect the annoyed stares.

"Right," Dash sighed heavily and turned to Applejack, the other four paying attention to the two now, "so Twilight knows where to go, how do we get there?"

"Been thinkin' on that some. We can't go flyin' the castle around, we're too big of targets to do that. Not to mention its speed ain't exactly the greatest." Dash nodded in agreement while glancing around slowly.

"Walking is out of the picture too. Even slower, even if it is a lot more stealthy. Twilight, exactly how far are we going?" Dash turned to Twilight, whose eyes began to glow. They watched as her pupilless traveled along the ground and pointed west, off towards the horizon.

"Far. Beyond Equestria and over an ocean. The ocean is wider than Equestria is by more than three times over. Beyond that, the closest brother is Terraria, and the continent he's on is wide. We're going to be going around maybe a fourth of the world to get there." The unicorn answered, her glowing eyes fading as her pupils came back.

"A fourth of the world." Fluttershy repeated quietly in wonder. She knew Equestria was wide, she had to fly the distance once to grab medicine when she simply couldn't wait for the bureaucracy of the mailing system. The flight, non-stop, had taken her three days by herself. With the girls, especially since they couldn't fly, the time would take quite a bit longer. Unless... "Can we teleport?"

"That's quite a bit of ground, and water for that matter, for us to cross. Teleportation would be incredibly efficient and even more than that,

comfortable." Rarity smiled at Twilight, who was now very shyly pawing the ground. Rarity's smile slowly became nervous. "It can be done, right?"

"Well, um..." Twilight's face turned red, and she coughed politely. "See, I've never actually learned group teleportation, and even if I did I wouldn't know where exactly he is. I just have a trail leading to him. On top of that, the entirety of Equestria has been carefully enchanted and maintained by professionals in teleportation to remain safe. Outside of Equestria we have no reassurances that we wouldn't end up in tree trunks or off cliffs or under a house, and of course there's a chance of splinching..."

Rarity was aghast at the word and shivered, while Pinkie finally asked, "I followed you all the way up to that last word! What's splinching?"

"Well, dearie think of it like," Rarity gave a tiny, nervous laugh, "it's something every Unicorn learns about when they're learning about magic. In the olden days, only the real pros could ever teleport as proficiently as Twilight could because they mastered it to the point where they could easily transport their whole body without leaving behind, well, bits..."

"... Bits?" Pinkie repeated, her expression slowly changing to one of unease as Fluttershy shivered in terror at the thought. Dash made a gagging expression while Applejack just groaned.

Rarity nodded rapidly, her beautifully curled mane bouncing as she did, "You know, like a few strands of hair, a hoof clipping-"

"-a leg-" Twilight interrupted with an idle wave of her hoof.

"-perhaps your head even." Fluttershy had her mouth covered at this point and Pinkie looked like she seriously regretted asking.

"Hey now! If there's that much danger in teleportin' before all this protection stuff was set up then why would *anypony* be dumb enough to try it!" Applejack demanded, looking utterly flabbergasted at the thought of somepony risking themselves in such a way. Dash was looking away now, staring at something...

Rarity and Twilight looked to each other briefly, then back to Applejack, and as one spoke in agreement: "Lazy."

"Very lazy."

"Incredibly so, it was a period when they were discovering most of our modern day utility spells."

"Washing, carrying, creating doorways, grooming, making moustaches."

"It was truly an age of discovery in magic, but it came with its accidents. It eventually became more of a race to create the protection necessary for newer Unicorns to practice without fear. They were so incredibly necessary that more research was being poured into the protection than finding new spells. It takes a lot of practice and licenses nowadays to try and research a new spell, and must be performed in a very specific place with a lot of professionals ready to take action."

"Guys." Dash called from the side.

"I always sorta wondered why I never see you tryin'a create your own spells. Seems like somethin' that you'd do. And hold up, you're supposed to have this buttload of magic now, why wouldja be worried about castin' somethin' new?" Applejack raised an eyebrow. Dash tried calling out again, got ignored, and turned around with a sigh.

"Casting new spells can require intense focus. If anything, Twilight having more magic power available to her would increase the risk since she has greater chance of affecting more than herself if she cast it right on the fly. Sure she's more powerful but there's a learning process in every part of it and-"

The five ponies were bowled over by a nearly ear-splitting roar just a few feet away, and they turned to stare at the dragon Dash was standing on top of. "*Girls.*" Dash smirked a little and pat the dragon's head. "Let's take the *dragons.*"

"... Pardon?" Rarity stared up at the tall, smug looking lizard.

"You heard me. They're small, we only need three, and they're fast. On top of that they seem to like us, or at least you." She pointed to Twilight. The dragon cooed a little, making the unicorn chuckle nervously. "... And you." Dash pointed to Applejack who just smirked in pride.

"Yeah, but..." They turned to Pinkie Pie, who stared up at the great lizard with a small, nervous expression. "Are they trustworthy? I know Hayseed is nice, what about the rest of them?" Pinkie whispered. There was a brief moment of silence as Twilight calmly rubbed Pinkie's back, and Dash looked down at the dragon she stood on.

"They seem pretty cool with us. This one's letting me stand on him." The dragon snarled. "Her." The snarling stopped. "Who's the say they won't let us ride them around? We just need two more of them." Dash glanced around at all the dragons sitting in the courtyard, who lazily looked back.

"Well..." Applejack rubbed her chin, glancing to the others.

"It's the best idea we have so far." Twilight agreed, walking towards one of the dragons. It hopped onto its legs, and watched her with intense curiosity as she approached. It leaned its great head down, and Twilight touched its nose gently. It sniffed, and as if sensing what they wanted, turned around and presented its broad, saddle-free back. "This one seems compliant."

"I think they're all pretty easy goin'. Anypony else have a problem with the plan? Dragons seem like our best bet. We just need ta gather them the saddles and supplies." Applejack stared from Hayseed to the two dragons Twilight and Rainbow Dash had climbed on.

"Now hold on just a moment." Rarity spoke up. "Dragons would still cause quite a stir if one of those Golding ponies noticed them!" She squeezed her inner thighs together, suddenly very afraid of her finely groomed coat. Fluttershy nodded rapidly, staring at the nearest dragon with a terrified expression, even as it made soft cooing noise from Twilight rubbing the muscle around its wing.

"A-and dragons are really temperm-mental an-nd a li-litt-le prob-blem could s-s-se-set them o-off." Fluttershy whimpered.

"Not these ones." Applejack smiled as Hayseed leaned his head over as he saw the six ponies' eyes go to him. "They're military trained. S'long as you don't mistreat 'em they're nice. Hayseed here wouldn't go haywire unless I tried t'start buckin' him around." Applejack tried to reassure them as she rubbed Hayseed's large nose with affection.

"I don't know, this seems really," Pinkie rubbed her chin quietly, "I don't know..." Her voice lacked its usual enthusiasm. Fluttershy took a moment to look to the pink mare, a worried little expression on her face. She was acting incredibly cautious. Normally she'd be bouncing to get a chance to fly on a dragon, but right now...

"The dragons are fast anyways. By the time anypony spots us we'll be well out of sight by then. We're leaving Equestria after all, and everything they want is in here." Dash waved a hoof around, then paused. No, that wasn't true. She looked to Twilight, who was carefully sitting on her chosen dragon's back, then cautiously scanned the area around them.

"I suppose, but, I don't know..." Rarity's arguments died out, Fluttershy was still looking at Pinkie, and Pinkie stayed silent.

"It's decided then." Twilight nodded, slowly climbing down to the ground and walking towards the middle of the group as the dragon turned around to follow. "It's not the safest but it's the fastest choice and it's not as noticeable as a flying castle. Let's ask some of the Guards to fit the saddles while we pack-"

"Already done." Rarity interrupted.

"-alright then let's gather it up and say our goodbyes. I'd like to leave as soon as possible." She stared around at the gathered ponies, and felt the energy of the group slowly drain as Twilight made the order. "If nopony minds..."

"Well..." Applejack and Pinkie Pie mumbled quietly.

"Twilight's right. We can't put this off. The faster we do this, the faster we get things back to normal and the faster we can go home. The longer we put this off, the worse the wait is going to be. Twilight, let's go tell Celestia. Everypony else, do what you gotta do but be back here ASAP. I *don't* want to wait." Dash stepped towards the stairs, and felt the rest of the group follow slowly.

"Wait, Dash?" The blue filly stopped and turned her head to watch as Twilight approached. She had a small, sad smile. "I have something important I need to go do before I can say goodbye to anypony else. Will you please go talk to Celestia for me?"

Dash hesitated to answer but finally nodded, earning a small nuzzle from Twilight before she ran inside the palace and took a left rather than a right. Dash sighed heavily, but felt a tap on her shoulder. "I'll go with ya Dash. I need to keep an eye out for Applebloom anyways and I don't think they've left yet."

"In that case I should go too." Rarity walked forward. "I need to find Sweetie Belle and give her some instruction on what to do with the Boutique. And, well, I need to tell her I'll be going." Rarity grimaced. Applejack nodded in understand as they turned to look at the other two.

"I need to go say goodbye to Mister and Misses Cake, then goodbye to my family." Pinkie's smile looked a lot more forced now.

"We can take a carriage together." Fluttershy gently touched Pinkie Pie's leg with her own. "If we go inside together I can ask Big Mac to watch my animals for me, then I need to stop by my cottage and tell Angel what's going to happen." Fluttershy whispered as the two moved forward to join the five. "We'll follow you guys then, then catch a carriage home and be back soon."

Dash just nodded quietly. This all felt so unreal. Each step she took felt like it took every ounce of willpower and energy she had. Glancing side to side, to her quiet, heavily thinking friends, she knew they felt the exact same way.

It wouldn't take long to find him. Having lived in Canterlot for a grand majority of their lives meant they have their favored places to visit and it was easy to find the other. Twilight walked down the familiar pathways of the old Magical Academy, crossing through the wide yard full of unicorn students.

Memories resurfaced. How little time had she spent out here? She was almost never outside back then. She crossed the yard and that was all. Point A to Point B, no stopping to consider the fine architecture, no looking at the finely kept flowers, no sitting among the shaded trees or saying hi to anypony in passing...

She was an isolated little thing. She could barely recall names of ponies she had been in class with almost all her life, and those were just the ones she recognized even a little. She remembered getting a party invite her last day here and ignoring it. How many party invites had she ignored all this time? How many ponies did she blow off over the years?

How many times did she miss the opportunity to make a friend?

These days she couldn't imagine not having friends. The sense of relief, comfort, warmth, and fun they brought, even at the end of a long, hard day where they were the problem, but that was part of it. You took the good with the bad, and the bad rarely lasted. Not to mention the things they taught her, the strength they brought her, the wisdom they'd shared with her...

She stood on the bridge over a small stream, and stared down into the water. Crystal clear. The grounds were absolutely gorgeous. She didn't remember them being this pretty. If only she could go back and kick her younger self's rear end and tell her she should be out enjoying life as well as studying it.

"Twilight Sparkle? Is that really you?" Twilight raised her eyebrows and turned her head. She stared at a white unicorn, with bubblegum pink hair. She recalled this Unicorn, from the day she had left...

"Glamour Dancer." Twilight spoke, feeling the other unicorn's eyes go straight to her horn. That's right, most of the unicorns here knew what she used to look like. "It's been a while."

"No kidding. I'm surprised you even remember my name, I always figured you were too busy..." Dancer waved her hoof back and forth idly, moving forward to eye Twilight's horn even closer now. "They weren't lying."

"We did a research project together before, I think. Lying about what?" Twilight asked. This felt awkward. It wasn't like meeting new ponies, who didn't go to school with you and work with you for most of your child life.

"Things. This and that. You gaining a few inches for one thing." Dancer snorted in amusement, and Twilight blushed. "So, is it true that you're a Queen now?"

Twilight opened her mouth, and the day finally caught up with her. Oh yeah. That's right. She'd been letting ponies call her a Queen and never bothered to correct them. Wow, she *still* did not pay any attention. "No no no no, see, that's just a joke. Ha ha joke, you know? No pony is actually serious when they say that-"

"I beg to differ. Solstice claims to have seen you flying a giant castle and even used a memory spell to show us. You were even introduced as a Queen! What sort of things have you been hiding from us this whole time?" Dancer accused with a smirk.

Twilight sighed, and made a beckoning gesture so Dancer would follow her as she walked to the Gyms and Crystals building. "It's a very long story, and kind of painful to recall, so I'll sum up the parts that answer your question: I own a giant flying castle, no I'm not a queen, and I'm actually going to be leaving for a while today."

"And why is that? Going back to Ponyville?" Dancer walked by Twilight, finding her surprisingly sociable. In her experience with Celestia's student, she was reclusive, a short and direct talker, and had a tendency to lose herself in thought in mid-conversation. She was always a fairly distant, though bright filly. She was still a short and direct talker, but she didn't speak so awkwardly and didn't phase out halfway through their talk.

"No, I'm not sure how to explain this, I'm sure Celestia will make the announcement once everything pieces together, but I'm going to be leaving Equestria temporarily." She stopped when Dancer jumped in front of her, wide-eyed.

"Tell me you're *kidding*."

"No, I'm not." Twilight smiled apologetically, as well as sadly. She let out a heavy sigh. "It's for a mission of national interest, I can say that much."

"But Twilight, no pony leaves Equestria! We barely know what it's like out there! Celestia hasn't permitted anypony to leave, nor has anypony wanted to leave! It could be dangerous!" Dancer insisted, frowning deeply as Twilight nodded.

"It will be, but I'll have some of my closest friends next to me, and the support of all of Equestria." She paused, and smiled warmly at Dancer, who could feel herself blush at how genuine it was. "I hope?"

"Twilight, I," Dancer reached back and rubbed the back of her head. Was she actually flustered by this? Silently cursing her sexuality, she nodded, "I don't know what you're doing out there, I don't know who you're going with, but I trust you'll make it back okay Twilight. Yeah, you got me behind you."

Twilight smiled, and bowed her head silently in thanks, and Dancer did the same. "Thanks Dancer, that means a lot right now." She turned and opened the door. "I'll be back. And..." She chuckled a little. "When I do, we should hang out some. Make up for old times." She smiled again.

Dancer nodded her head rapidly, and Twilight gave her one more smile and walked into the building. The door shut, and Dancer stared. She began to walk away a few steps, then rubbed her head. "Aww!" She smacked her forehead, just below her horn, "And I *just* got over you!"

"Spike?" Twilight stepped into the room. It was empty until you reached the counter wrapping around the room. Beyond that, there were hundreds of gemstones and crystals lining the walls of all sizes and shapes, waiting to be bought or borrowed for magical purposes and beyond. There was an elderly unicorn with enormous, thick glasses behind the counter with a bag of gems sitting on top of it, a certain purple dragon standing next to it eyeing each piece with speculative eyes.

"Sorry boy, prospectors have been getting better about not sending in flawed gems. Don't have much waste to hand over." The old unicorn stated with an apologetic shrug, and Spike grumbled in annoyance to himself.

"But I have a big journey to make today! Are you sure you don't have a pile sitting in the trash somewhere? It would be reeeeeeaally helpful!" Spike smiled big and wide, and the Unicorn sighed and shook his head. Twilight walked up as Spike tossed over a few bits and took the sackful of worthless gems in hand and turned around. "Oh hey Twilight. Just grabbing some rations for the old dusty trail. Speaking of which, when are we leaving?" Spike hoisted the small bag over his shoulder as Twilight tried to smile, but

ultimately just grimaced into a sad look. Spike calmly dropped to the floor and looked up to Twilight with a serious expression. "What is it Twilight?"

"..." Twilight quietly beckoned him with her hoof, and Spike followed quietly. Something was deeply, terribly wrong. For a moment he was fearing for the worst, but she was alive, he'd seen them all alive. Something was seriously dragging Twilight down, and he could see it eating at her the entire time they walked towards a secluded, tree-covered area of the grounds. The silence up until then had been absolutely dreadful. "Spike..." Twilight finally spoke up, stopping suddenly under a tall tree.

Spike walked around to her front and dropped the gems behind him, and he stared up into Twilight's eyes. "What is it Twilight? What happened?" He demanded softly, trying to keep his voice as level as possible as he spoke.

"..." Twilight nervously rubbed one leg with the other hoof, then took a deep breath. "Alright Spike." She started slowly, firming herself up after closing her eyes for a moment. She stared down at her assistant with a very serious look. "Spike, I want to get this off my chest since I have no idea what's going to happen once we leave Equestria."

"Well duh." Spike interrupted. "We're going to find these Alicorn brothers and keep the leylines safe, right? That's what we're all going for." He watched Twilight's firm face soften, and she cast her eyes down. He didn't like this. He reached up and touched her chin and frowned. "Twilight?"

Twilight closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She let it out a moment later, and spoke. "I love you Spike." Spike felt a pain in his chest. He rubbed his chest softly while he stared up at the unicorn. It was so rare they shared these sort of words. There was trouble ahead. "From the day Celestia gave you to me to raise to this very day, I've always loved you. You've always been the best assistant anypony... Anything could ask for. You're loyal, you're kind, you tell me your honest opinion but you look out for me, and-"

"Alright alright I get it!" Spike waved his little hands frantically. His chest really hurt right now. He didn't like this at all. He stared up at Twilight with a pained look. "What's going on Twilight? What's happened?"

Twilight glanced to the left and right, behind her and ahead of her, and then stared down at her hooves. "I don't want you to come with us." She finally

admitted, not wanting to see his expression but she did anyways. It hurt to see his dejected eyes.

"No, Twilight, you can't be serious, can you? I need to come! I'm your number one assistant, remember? If I don't come-" His eyes were wide, and the pain in his chest made every word he spoke sting as Twilight turned her head away from him.

"I'm not negotiating this with you Spike." Her voice was low and level, extremely controlled to hold back the emotion welling up. "I can't let you go. It's going to be dangerous and you're just a baby dragon." She looked back to Spike, her eyes wide and shining with moisture. "Not just that but, Spike," her voice cracked, "you're *my* baby."

Spike shook his head rapidly. No, he couldn't be hearing this right. This was all wrong. Twilight wouldn't do this to him, they were friends, they were family, he was his... Did she actually acknowledge that he was a son to her? No, they were always brother and sister right? Just, she raised him... "Stop..." He told her, holding his hands out to hold her head still. "Stop talking like this, okay? I'm going with you. I have to. I'm your assistant, if I don't go-"

"If you do go I'll spend every waking moment worrying my head and hooves over you. I don't want you to get hurt Spike, you're young, you're easy to tire, your scales are tough enough to handle needles but not the elements..." Twilight whispered, and found Spike suddenly clinging to her leg with his eyes squeezed shut.

"Stop that Twilight! I'm going and there's nothing you can-" he found himself gently pulled off her by an unseen force, and lightly set in front of her as Twilight sighed.

"Spike, I'm pulling guardian law on this. As the pony who raised you," she paused, then gently lowered her head and her voice, "as your mother," she could have just bolted him and it would be less painful to hear, "I'm barring you from coming with us."

Spike's little legs trembled and he finally fell onto his backside, barely keeping himself up with his arms as his eyes trembled as he stared into Twilight's. Twilight resisted every maternal instinct inside of her firing off at

this very moment to embrace him, apologize, and take everything back, but she held herself. "Twilight..."

"I love you Spike. More than anything or anypony or, heck, anyone you are the most valuable thing there is in my life. If anything at all happened to you, I think... I think I'd just lose it. You're not a target here. You'll be safe with Celestia."

"But what if you need to send her a message...?" He whispered, and Twilight finally let herself crack a little. She approached and embraced the dragon to her chest.

"Not with this magic field over Equestria." Twilight's voice wavered as she held him tight. It took him a moment to hug back. The hug meant accepting defeat, something that made Twilight sigh.

"I'm going to miss you though. I'm going to worry so much..." He murmured, seeking the safety and warmth of Twilight's bosom as he tried to handle the feelings welling up inside of him.

"It's okay Spike. I'll be worried too, but I'll be able to sleep at night knowing you're with Princess Celestia." Spike turned his head up to look into Twilight's eyes as she smiled down at him with tender care. "And you never have to worry about me Spike. I have the best team in the world backing me up, and the old Lords of Equestria guiding me, as well as Celestia's teachings to keep me safe. What Princess Celestia will have is the greatest assistant in the world helping her through this crisis."

"... I'm going to miss you." Spike mumbled, burying his face into her coat again. Twilight understood. They had never been apart for more than a few days, and only once during something so incredibly dangerous.

"I'll miss you too, my number one assistant." Twilight sighed softly, keeping him close.

Spike mumbled something very soft, something that may have been "mom", and Twilight had to summon up everything she was, all her strength, stamina, and will to resist putting him on her back and never letting him go.

"-and ya'll had better brush your teeth and hooves 'fore ya'll get to bed. If I come back and found out any of ya'll have had cavities I'm gonna start brushin' ya'll myself!. *Again.*" She narrowed her eyes at Applebloom, who began to laugh nervously as she nodded furiously. "That's my girl."

"And Sweetie Belle, I trust you to make sure they keep not just themselves clean but our homes clean as well. We won't be around to watch them and clean them for who knows how long, and I would like to not come home to a mess." Sweetie Belle nodded a little more slowly as Rarity quietly stroked her pink and purple mane. "You're a good girl and I know you can keep yourself and your friends out of trouble."

"But Rarity." Sweetie Belle stared up at her sister with big, sad eyes that made Rarity more quivery than she dared show. "Who's gonna keep an eye on you?" The fashionista sighed, nodded slowly, and stroked little Sweetie Belle's mane some more before answering.

"Well I have my five friends to make sure I'm fine and dandy, so I have no need to worry, but I need you to be a big girl and keep Applebloom and Scootaloo in line." Rarity smiled as Sweetie Belle sniffled.

"Hey!" Scootaloo stomped her little hooves in indignation. "I don't need anypony to keep me in line! I'm a perfectly capable little mare!" The small Pegasus insisted. Applejack looked to Rarity, Rarity looked to Applejack, and they both quietly nodded.

"Of course dear. Have Sweetie Belle keep an eye on you anyways so you don't try to build anymore..." She sucked in a deep breath and grinned, "Tables..."

"None of us weren't meant to be carpenters anyhow! All we'll be doin' is try and find our Cutie Marks. We promise that by the time ya'll get home we'll know our lot in life!" Applebloom smiled in pride, the other two little fillies joining in. Applejack joined in with Rarity for the nervous laugh this time.

"Listen girls, I know we've been tellin' ya'll this a bunch but it ain't somethin' ya'll can just hunt down and find. It's about findin' your true callin', not just watcha like ta do." Applejack said with a small smirk.

Rarity nodded her head rapidly. "It may not always be as powerful or special as ours was thanks to Rainbow Dash," Scootaloo grinned, "but to

you personally that moment will be special. Even if it's just a tiny revelation of who you truly are."

"We've heard this a million times, sis." Sweetie Belle wiggled her little hooves.

"And it's not gonna stop us! We're gonna have our special moments during our adventures as the *Cutie Mark Crusaders*!" Scootaloo held up one hoof, and the other two foals did the same, touching them together. "We'll travel to the highest peaks and swim along the lowest, uh..." Scootaloo paused, "Lowest lakes?"

"Depths." Sweetie Belle corrected, and Scootaloo nodded rapidly.

"Right! Lowest depths! What's a depth? Anyways, to find our cutie marks and nothing's gonna stop us! And the first thing we're gonna try?" She turned to the other two, and Applejack and Rarity prepared their ears...

"*GUARD DUTY!*" They shouted together, whooping and cheering as they hopped and flipped around on the floor, stopping only when a dainty white leg touched down on the lowest step of the nearby staircase.

"I don't think I've seen this much enthusiasm since I told Twilight about her advanced magic courses. What's this I hear about you young girls on guard duty?" Princess Celestia asked, Rainbow Dash stepping down from the staircase to join Applejack and Rarity.

"Did the Princess say anything?" Rarity whispered as the three Crusaders bouncily informed their Princess of their plan to protect her from the evils of the world forever (or until they got bored).

"She isn't sure about the dragons." Dash said in a low voice, very flat. She had felt awkward during her entire talk with the Princess. Her eyes. The Princesses' eyes had been on her wings the whole time, and it made her squirm. It just reminded her that she would forever be crippled, that she would never fly by herself again, that she would never race the winds, start a little tornado, or even hit the Sonic Rainboom again. It reminded her that she didn't trust the Princess. It reminded her that, right now, she barely trusted anypony. A rational part of her told her that her friends wouldn't care, but the proud part told her that had no reason to know that she was grounded forever. "But she agrees that it's the best chance that we got.

We're going to take three of them, two ponies to each one, and leave once everypony's here and the dragons are loaded up."

Both Applejack and Rarity nodded as they watched Celestia chuckle as the Crusaders merrily explained what their little club was all about. Applejack watched Applebloom leap up and salute the Princess with a small smile. At least the family's trademark strength and loyalty was running through her little sister's veins. "Then, this is actually happening then." Rarity whispered, sitting with as little noise as possible. "Soon..."

"Very soon." Applejack nodded slowly, and Dash pet the Fashion pony on the back.

"We'll be fine." She said. Rarity didn't feel very relieved by her words, but she could tell something was on Dash's mind. Something that was keeping her back.

"Of course we will." Rarity nodded, taking a deep breath.

Fluttershy never understood why anypony hated long goodbyes. Short goodbyes were the worst, short goodbyes left so much unsaid, so few hugs made, so few tears spilled and so few promises made. Short goodbyes felt weak, rushed, unprepared and left her aching for more. Long goodbyes had all the emotion she needed, and let her say everything she wanted to say, and cling as long as she wanted or until she had to leave. That was why she felt so empty.

Angel, her lovely little bunny and one of her best and closest friends sat and listened to her story attentively, understanding perfectly this was no joke. The little bunny did not hesitate to run into the rooms and grab her her things, and with one final hug pushed her through the door. She'd wanted to stay, to say goodbye some more, to hug him and kiss him and all her little animal friends, but he insisted she go. So she did. She missed her bunny already.

She sighed quietly over the side of the chariot. The ride was so silent. The two ponies guiding the chariot flew as smoothly and noiselessly as possible, heads turning rapidly to watch for invaders as they took their only,

and possibly last chariot on a casual trip for perhaps the last time in a good while. Beside her, Pinkie Pie was still, and silent, and lost in her thoughts.

She'd been there when Pinkie Pie had said goodbye. Pinkie Pie had smiled, or at least put one on when they visited her parents. Her parents, Fluttershy had seen, were nothing like she'd expected. Pinkie was all bright and perky and full of joy, her parents were old, slow and cautious, and very soft-spoken. They had brightened up for sure on seeing their daughter, but somehow they could sense something was wrong. They were very loving and handled her with much care, embracing her and speaking soft encouragement to her when she explained what was happening. They did not argue, did not question, but they simply understood and encouraged.

Fluttershy could see where Pinkie's love and understanding came from. The party part of the pink pony, though, seemed to all come from inside of her. Yet by the end of the visit, Fluttershy could see something was clearly wrong with Pinkie. She frowned. She actually frowned. She thought a dragon was scary and disturbing, but nothing terrified her as much as seeing Pinkie frown. She didn't know what to do, or what to say to the pink mare as they flew towards Canterlot, the bright sun above them making the world seem so normal despite the pressure they were under.

Fluttershy turned her head to Pinkie Pie again, but froze as she saw Pinkie watching her as well. They stared at each other for several long seconds, before looking away with nervous blushes. "Hey." Pinkie whispered, sounding strained.

"H-hi." Fluttershy whispered back. Deep down they were still friends though, she had to remember that. Pinkie wouldn't get mad at her for looking. She didn't get mad at Pinkie after all. They sat quietly for a moment, before Fluttershy turned back to look at Pinkie. "Are... Are you okay?" She asked in a meek whisper, afraid of the answer.

Pinkie Pie stared down at her hooves. Fluttershy could tell. She bet the rest could tell too. Her smile and words were empty. It was hard to feel that old joy again. It felt wrong. It felt out of place. Her parents... Sweet Celestia did she love them, they cradled her, knowing there was a problem, waiting for her to open up, but she never did. She was scared to. Scared to admit that she was, what, scared? Was this pride? No, it was definitely fear. She

didn't want anypony to know that she was scared. "I-I'm fine." Pinkie whispered.

Fluttershy stared, and frowned softly. This wouldn't do. This wasn't the Pinkie she knew. This wasn't the premier party pony of Ponyville. This was a pony in need. Fluttershy calmly looked ahead to see the guards busy watching the skies, and leaned over.

Pinkie froze as a pair of warm legs wrapped around her in a hug. "P-please d-do-on't l-lie to me P-p-pinkie." Fluttershy stuttered in a low voice, finding it so difficult to believe that she was being assertive, but pushing hard to be strong. She couldn't be weak, not if she was going to ride a dragon.

Pinkie squeezed her eyes shut and said nothing. She shifted in Fluttershy's gripped, and squeezed her soft, quiet friend hard. Fluttershy squeezed back. "I'm okay Fluttershy. I will be okay."

Fluttershy silently stroked her friend's back, and sighed softly. "You can tell me." She told Pinkie, but Pinkie just sighed.

"I will. But later." She relaxed the hug and made a move to tug away, but thought better of it and stayed in it. "I just need some time to think about it myself." Fluttershy just nodded and stayed quiet.

She understood. That was why she just snuggled Pinkie Pie.

Pinkie Pie snuggled back, slowly feeling a bit of peace come back.

"Lotion?" Rarity twisted her head quickly to the side to meet Applejack's hard stare, and looked down at what Applejack was holding out. A bottle of simple lotion. Leg lotion to be specific. It promised a lack of chafe and sweat and a smooth, clean coat after it was washed off.

She smiled up at Applejack hugely. "Ah-hehe, why yes, lotion. You know, for the, uh," she glanced to the sky, "the sun! So the sun rays don't give us sunburn, you know how it is, working those long, hot days in the-"

Applejack cleared her throat, and with a voice graced with elegance and class, with a deep hotness that could send colts into a panic attack, with a smooth whisper that just *dripped* with whimper-inducing sexuality, "*Laddy*

Bo~ores' promises not only a pleasant smelling and dry coat in the folds between a delicate filly's legs and torso~, but it serves a dual purpose of keeping your hairs sssuh-LICK and FIRM so those oo~ooh-ssoo~oo bo~otherssome leg harnesses won't rub the fur right off your legs, leaving no~ unssightly bald spotss for those ssweet young colts to ssee." She then dropped the voice, "Not intended for work purposes, merely casual travel and light chafing." Applejack stared back up at Rarity with a flat look, while Rarity stared at the farm pony with her jaw nearly on the floor.

"How-? You-," she stammered, shaking her head, "Your accent! Your voice!"

"What? Ya'll thinkin' jus' 'cause Ah'm awn a farm awll the teime ah can't not speak classy none?" Applejack accused, eyes narrowing, daring Rarity to challenge her.

"I-! but-! I just-! it's not-! Applejack I-! you just-! *Triple! Negative!*" She stammered, rigid as a board as Applejack tossed the lotion off of Laputa, but not onto the cliff gardens.

"We ain't taken the lotion, takes up space where we could put an extra apple. Or ointment." Applejack turned back to the six bags sitting on the stone ground just outside the castle's entrance. Rarity continued to babble in confusion.

Applejack turned her head when Hayseed lifted his up, and they both watched as Twilight walked upstairs with a tiny, sad smile on her face and a big kiss-shaped lipstick mark next to her left eye. "Hey." She called quietly.

"Howdy Twilight. Are things alright?" Applejack asked, noting the sadness in her eyes. Twilight nodded her head slowly, and Applejack could see she was. Sad, for sure, but she was alright.

"I said goodbye to everyone. Mom left this." She pointed a hoof to the lipstick mark. "Princess Luna and Princess Celestia nearly crushed me when I stopped by to say goodbye. Your sister and her friends all wanted taking turns riding my back before I left. Spike..." She sighed heavily. "He'll be okay."

"Yeah, everypony- everything's gonna be okay. 'specially Spike." Applejack smiled sweetly, and Twilight's eyes lost some of their sadder edge. "Right Rarity?"

"Do the sexy voice again."

"No." Applejack turned back around as she buried her head in one of the packs. "Bird whistles?" She tugged out the four small thin tubes, and laid them on the ground. "What the hay? No no no, nothin' just for, I dunno, entertainment." Twilight chuckled a little as Applejack built a small pile of unneeded objects, then she paused.

She nearly forgot something. Something important! "I'll be just a moment." She ran up into the castle while Applejack muttered to herself and Rarity continued to stare at Applejack.

"Are those bird whistles?" Applejack turned her head, and stared at the green, blue, and purple-haired Dash sitting next to her with a raised eyebrow.

"Ee-yup. Some foal tried packin' 'em in. Lightenin' the load some. How ya holdin' up?" Applejack saw Dash smile a little as she lightly kicked a whistle. She knew that smile, something got her all bashful.

"Dad's getting, hehe, dad's getting sentimental on me." Dash chuckled quietly. "He keeps threatening to go hunt down my wing-cutter and knock him around, then he switches to demanding if I'm okay and if I need a smoothie or somethin', and mom won't let go of me..."

Applejack sighed heavily, and nodded slowly. "If ma and pa were still kickin' I imagine they'd do the same for me. Think they'll be lettin' go anytime soon? Pinkie and Fluttershy are comin' in." Applejack watched in the distance as a chariot pulled into a landing platform.

"Doubt it. I can try to speed it up but dad will just hold me tighter. I kinda realized I miss them." Dark Dash sighed, and Applejack gave a slow nod as she handed Dash a sunhat. "... Hat."

"Yep. Ya never really appreciate watcha lost 'til ya lose it, and ya never wanna let go once ya get it again. Or somethin' like that. How's it go Rarity?"

"The voice. Do it."

"Will ya get off it Rarity? It wasn't that great."

"It made me tingle in places I didn't know could tingle!"

Applejack made a gagging motion and put the pack's lid back on.

"Anyways, Twilight's gonna be down soon, she's just grabbin' somethin'. I picked out our two other dragons by the way." Applejack looked up the castle. The dragons were roosting on the wider sections of the castle, wings tucked in tightly as they softly growled, purred, and whistled to each other, being strangely quiet for, y'know, dragons. Dark Dash followed Applejack's eyes and saw Hayseed sitting high at the tower's top, and below him was a pair of larger dragons, one with an incredibly long, flowing tail, the one that Dash had stood on earlier to get the girls' attentions, the other possessing a dark spotted pattern on his scales, the one that allowed Twilight to climb on him. "The snake-tailed one's name is Rattler, the spotted one is Dick."

"... Dick?"

Applejack nodded slowly. "Gots kind of this snooty, high and mighty attitude, and I swear he's snarkin' at me whenever I turn my back and do somethin' 'cause he kinda stares at me with this *smirk*." She snorted, and Dash laughed a little.

"Then why pick him?" Dash asked, staring up at Dick.

"I didn't. He volunteered himself. After I picked Rattler for the second, Dick kinda backed the other dragons down and got himself in there. I couldn't tell him no, he was just so insistent." Applejack watched as the three dragons, outfitted with saddles, slowly floated to the ground. "How do ya argue with a dragon anyhow?"

Twilight leapt off of Dick's back, a book in her mouth. Dash recognized that book. It was the brown-covered, gibberish filled book with no illustrations that she kicked around a bit while Twilight had tranced out when speaking to Anemone. Wow, that felt like forever ago. "Aww, Twilight, I told ya'll, no entertainment." Applejack grunted, and Twilight shook her head as she dropped the book onto a pack.

"It's not entertainment, it's a gift from Anemone." Twilight explained, opening the pack and slipping the book in. "I can't just leave it behind. It may have some very valuable information."

Applejack groaned heavily. She really did not want any extra weight but if it was an Alicorn's gift, it would be a mistake to *not* take it. Alright, they can have it their way. "Fine, fine, bring it. But I ain't carryin' it." Twilight just nodded, and began to fix the pack to Dick's saddle.

They started attaching the rest of the packs to the dragons when Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie walked up. Dark Dash turned to watch Pinkie closely as Fluttershy stood so close by their normally cheery friend, and could make out a smile. It was tiny, it wasn't grabbing for attention, but it was an honest to goodness smile. "Hey girls!" Dash waved, beckoning them to come join.

"Do it!"

"No!" Applejack huffed loudly, and Rarity made a small whining noise while Pinkie and Fluttershy approached Dark Dash. It took Pinkie exactly a third of a second to realize this was not entirely Rainbow Dash, and it took Fluttershy ten times that to figure it out.

"We've picked the dragons." Dash explained, the colors in her hair doubling as she suddenly grew three streaks of brightly colored hair. She was blushing a little too.

"Oh, well, that's very good. It's two ponies to a dragon, correct?" Fluttershy asked, glancing to the spotted one, the whip-tailed one, and then Hayseed. They were all kind of terrifying looking, all sharp angles, all scales, all teeth and claws and corded muscle and membrane wings; it made her shiver some until Pinkie touched a hoof to her leg.

"Right." Applejack tied the last pack to Hayseed's saddle and slipped to her hooves as all six of them moved in to talk. The three dragons, by themselves, began to compare wingspans. "So, all that's left is to decide who rides with who on what dragon. I'm obviously on Hayseed."

"And *I'm* going with you." Rarity interjected quickly, drawing some curious attention from the others. "She has the most experience riding one of these things and I would like an experienced pilot, thank-you-very-much."

"Ya'll realize my whole 'experience' is basically a few hours?" Applejack raised an eyebrow, and Rarity shook her head.

"Still better than the rest of us combined. With that settled, I'm going to go prepare Hayseed's saddle for myself." Rarity trotted off towards the dragon, with Applejack narrowing her eyes just behind her.

"Now hold your mouth-bits for just a moment, what ya'll mean by 'prepare his saddle'?" Applejack demanded, leaving the other four ponies to talk out the rest of the issue.

Twilight glanced between her three friends. She looked to Dash first, and saw Dash's eyes on her. They smiled to each other, already knowing their choice, but it took Twilight a moment to notice Fluttershy had been watching her as well, and had quickly turned away when Twilight turned to meet her stare. "Pinkie Pie, would you, um, you know, like to ride with me?" The shy mare asked the pink mare.

"That sounds fine to me. Hey, since this trip is going to take a while, we'll probably have to stop for rest every now and then, right?" Pinkie Pie asked, some of the enthusiasm back in her voice. Strange the wonders a hug could work on a pony were.

Applejack turned her head to answer, "Ya'll know it. S'why we got tents and sleeping bags packed and- aww Rarity, ya'll got to be pullin' my leg!" She pleaded heavily in exasperation as the fashion pony turned her head and scoffed.

"I assure you I am pulling nopony's leg! This will ensure both my comfort and the safety of my coat the whole trip!" Rarity smoothed out the thick, baby-blue blanket over the saddle while Hayseed watched curiously, touching his nose to one of the edges to sniff. "Yes Hayseed, this is genuine Equestrian cotton weave. Softest in all the land. Go ahead, admire all you want." And Hayseed did.

"Well, if we stop, we can switch partners in the morning. Me and Fluttershy for now, then tomorrow it can be me and Dash, and then it can be me and Twilight, and then back to me and Fluttershy again." Pinkie offered, and Fluttershy began to nod her head with enthusiasm as Dash shrugged.

"Well, alright, as long as you two keep Twilight safe I'm okay with it." Dash agreed with a touch of her hoof to her chin. Twilight smiled quietly at that.

"*Rarity!*" Applejack grunted in annoyance. "You are not embarrassin' my dragon with that frilly thing! Hayseed is a strong, tough man and you're just-"

"Making him a *comfortable* ride. Maybe you're okay pressing leather between your thighs all day but a mare like myself needs a lighter, softer, more loving touch." The unicorn laid on the blanket with a pleased sigh while Applejack fumed.

"Aren't you forgetting about Rarity and Applejack?" Twilight asked, turning away from the two feuding ponies.

"No, but you know Rarity won't ever switch away from Applejack as long as she has the most flight hours." Pinkie snickered, watching as Rarity and Applejack began to tug at the blanket, back and forth.

"Unless Applejack pushes Rarity off. Or hay, if they don't kill each other right now."

"You're! Ripping! It!" Rarity tugged, using Hayseed's side to tug backwards harder as Applejack used gravity to pull downwards.

"Then let. Go. Ya fussy. High-strung. Pesterin' little-"

Hayseed reached up, and picked up the blanket. Rarity and Applejack both fell with a grunt as they watched the dragon drop the blanket on his face, covering his eyes. He snorted, and laid his head down. "Hayseed, this ain't no time t'be nappin', we have flyin' t'do soon!" Applejack pushed him a little, but Hayseed made an exaggerated snoring sound.

"At least the dragon can keep an eye on them." Twilight could barely hide her chuckle as she hid her mouth behind her hoof. "So, who is 'driving' and which dragon should we take?"

"Dibs on taking Dick." Fluttershy's jaw dropped, and Pinkie Pie hid a squeak as Dash blinked, then sighed. "I mean the dragon! Applejack named the spotted one Dick." Fluttershy closed her mouth and shook her head, blushing while Pinkie began to giggle. "So that means *you two dirty*

little fillies can have Rattler." Rainbow Dash snorted, walking towards the spotted dragon with Twilight just a few feet behind her.

Dash approached Dick, who turned his head away from sniffing some tea leaves to look at her. He glanced to Dash, then Twilight behind her, bowed his head, and straightened his back and haunches. Dash climbed on first to get in the front of the saddle, and soon felt Twilight awkwardly sliding in behind her, hooves wrapping around her midsection. Dash smiled a little at that as Dick stood up and walked towards the other dragons.

Applejack had managed to rouse Hayseed awake, and Rarity got her blanket back, much to Applejack's eternal grumbling annoyance as she spread it out beneath her to protect her precious coat. She stopped grouching so much when she felt her front legs lock around her chest, and she just sighed. She'd put up with it for now. Hayseed stood up, and turned to face the other dragons.

Rattler had spent a few seconds sniffing both Pinkie Pie and a quivering Fluttershy before turning to present his saddle, his long tail sitting still behind him to not hit the two ponies as they carefully climbed him. Pinkie, being the more confident of the two, took the reins as Fluttershy held her friend from behind. Rattler stretched his legs first before getting up, and turning inwards to watch his comrades.

Twilight, Fluttershy, Dash, and Rarity had never felt so awkward before. The three dragons were so calm, quiet, even pleasant, yet they still knew they were dragons. Of the six of them, only Applejack had actual flying experience, but Pinkie Pie had ridden on Hayseed as well. She'd watched Applejack give the commands, and felt she knew what to do. She just hoped Dash could figure it out and keep up.

"Alright girls, this is it." Twilight announced from behind Dash, peaking her head around to face them all. "We've packed, we've said our goodbyes, and we're ready to leave, so let's not waste any more time. Let's go find the brothers and settle them, and let's get home as soon as we can." There was a small cheer.

Dash nodded vigorously and spoke up. "Keep safe. Eyes peeled, ears open, packs checked regularly to make sure nothing's fallen out. It might not be friendly out there, so keep an eye out for anything everypony else

isn't paying attention to. Let's get this over with, and let's get Equestria safe again." Another small cheer, and the three dragons turned to face the west.

Twilight turned her head to look at Canterlot one more time before she left, and in the windows, saw them. The two Princesses stood at the steps leading to the gardens, smiles bright and hopeful, stances proud and regal. Her parents were near them, eyes full of tears but smiles full of trust. The Cutie Mark Crusaders stood in front of the Princesses and were saluting smartly, proudly, and finally...

She saw Spike, standing in front of them all. He stood relaxed, and he smiled, small and honest for her. He raised an arm and waved, and Twilight blew him one last kiss before Applejack's voice got her attention. "Alright fillies, take-off's rough but once they smooth out it's easy goin's. So on my mark, hold on tight and try not to swallow any bugs on the way up."

"Bugs?" Rarity asked out loud, in surprise.

"Mark!" Applejack gave a sharp whistle, snapped the reins, and the dragons charged towards the edge of Laputa and extended their wings. In a moment, Twilight, Dash, Applejack, Rarity, Pinkie Pie, and Fluttershy felt everything in a rush. The wind ripped past their ears as the dragons leapt from the island and spread wide, catching air and gliding high. The clouds beneath them raced by, and Canterlot and Laputa were left behind in their wake.

Twilight offered one last look to the two royal palaces, then turned her head forward, facing west, her eyes glowing as she sought to sense Terraria's power source. The dragons leveled out, as promised, and the wind stopped being so loud in their ears. Twilight squeezed Dash tightly, and rested her chin near Dash's neck.

"We'll be back." Dash whispered in promise, the world seeming to open up before them as they flew towards an unfamiliar horizon.

Chapter 17

Quiet Flying

"Aside! Move aside, quickly!" The Courtyard of the Brehmin Fortress slowly quieted as a Pegasus charged inside from the small entrance. From the top of the steps, Rukafelth watched as the scout tore forwards, his soldiers standing aside to let the pony through as he raced towards the Fortress' entrance. Rukafelth calmly stood aside as the pony ran by, through the doors. "Out of my way! I have important news!" He heard him shouting.

The scout, small, thinly muscled, sleek and fast galloped down the halls at top speed, giving the more lazy guards little time to react as he bowled them over. He continued to shout for room as he made his way upstairs, and finally, panting, knocked frantically on the door of the Lord's Wizard's room.

There was the sound of a pony leaping to their hooves, followed by papers flying everywhere as the door was quickly opened. The scout took in several deep breaths as Balla stared at him with a wide, curious eye. "Is it news?" She asked, and he bobbed his head.

"My Lady Balla," he sucked in a deeper breath, "a soldier on duty in the western skies of Equestria has spied three unauthorized Golding dragons flying West-bound, carrying two ponies each. He claims to have seen," he slowed his breathing down, "he claims to have seen a purple unicorn with an unusually elongated horn. He is most assured that it was the False One."

Balla's bright eye widened further in understanding, and she marched into her room. "This soldier is absolutely positive it was the Fake?" Balla demanded, putting her papers together and shoving them into a pack. The Scout leapt forward quickly to put it on his back before Balla could even attempt to burden herself with it.

"Complete. He reports light purple coat, dark blue mane with a pink and purple stripe in it, an especially long horn, and a star-patterned cutie mark. On top of that, she was seen riding with a blue-coated Pegasus with a

rainbow-patterned mane and a cloud/lightning-bolt cutie mark. They match the descriptions Lord Rukafelth gave us. I was told to report directly to you on the matter." He began to follow Balla out the door.

"Well you were told right, Lord Galio gave me the honor of hunting her down." The diamond in the circlet set around her head began to glow white as she channeled a goodly amount of magic, and through each and every room of the Fortress her voice was heard clearly: "I need all Horn Breakers, Sky Engineers, and Terratmos Adepts to report to Sky Bay, the False One has been found, and retrieval orders have been issued." She said firmly.

"You won't be telling Lord Galio personally?" The scout asked curiously as they padded down hallway after hallway, until they entered an absolutely enormous chamber. Sitting directly in the middle, in the shape of an enormously elaborate boat with two enormous, long purple crystals imbedded in the sides, was Balla's vehicle of pursuit.

Ponies in all sorts of armor began to enter the chamber, carrying bags and weapons, the Horn Breakers in their elaborate steel armor which formed a semi-sun shaped headdress, the Sky Engineers in their thickly padded, heat-proof uniforms, and the Adepts wearing... Well, their coats. She didn't understand Rukafelth's monastery at all, but she supposed clothing could be seen as a form of wealth.

The long wooden ship, with its silver edges and ornate runed carvings, had its loading ramps lowered, and the colts and mares boarded the ship quickly. "Lord Galio will have heard and will understand if I'm in a rush. Go deliver your report to him and please tell him I said goodbye." She floated her pack off the scout, and landed it on her own back. She started for the ship, "and best of luck sir."

"Y-you too ma'am." The colt gave a small, sharp salute as he watched the Archmage get on the ship. He turned and ran towards the throne room as Balla got on deck.

Like your typical sea-faring boat, the deck was flat, with thick, tall guardrails. Unlike most ships, it had no masts, but it did have several telescopes on all sides. The Engineers, suited up and looking like tubby plush dolls, were already evaluating the day's weather, wind speeds, and predicted magical power. In her mind, Balla knew it didn't matter. Technically, all the ship needed was herself to power it, since she was

practically a living conduit of the old, powerful energy, but it was considered better to not test to see if she had limits while several thousands of feet in the air.

The head engineer, an aging unicorn with a straight, short-cut mane approached her, moving easily in her thick suit despite how heavy it must have been. If Balla had read correctly, this mare pretty much lived and breathed her work. "Lady Balla, preliminary tests show that today will be a fine day for flight, current scans are warning of a coming storm."

Balla glanced upwards at the open shaft above them, a square hole dug straight into the ground, incredibly difficult to see from above due to the impressive snow drifts. "A coming storm?" She blinked. The weather reports spoke of clear skies all week...

"Coming storm of ass-kicking is what I'm talking about!" Balla turned sharply to the grinning Engineer, eyes big and confused. "C'mon Lady Balla, lemme show you to your quarters." She offered, Balla sputtering in surprise but following obediently. "Any final orders ma'am?"

The loading ramps lifted and locked into place on the ship as the great vessel's crystal engines began to glow. The ship lifted slowly as the crystals hummed with power. There was no hesitation or wait. In short time, they were lifting off into the sky, aiming westward. "No," she stated, then paused, "actually, just one: let's find the False One." Balla nodded, hearing the crystals begin to hiss as the power in them was boosted, allowing them to rise faster.

"Bye bye Equestria." Pinkie heard Fluttershy just behind her whisper. The shy young mare watched the land they called home slowly get smaller. Pinkie wanted to look back, wanted to say something that fit the situation, to alleviate Fluttershy's feelings, but right now, she was concentrating on keeping Rattler part of the close-knit flight group they'd made.

Even though Rattler responded easily to her command, both vocal and physical, he had a tendency to try and fly above the other two dragons, which Pinkie had to correct constantly with a gentle nudge of her hooves and a slight redirection with her reins. She wanted to remain within easy

shouting distance of all the girls, and while being above them would allow her that, it would also mean she wouldn't be able to hear them as well.

So she kept perfect formation right alongside Hayseed's left. She could easily slip over to Twilight and Dash if she needed to, which she was heavily considering just so she could tune out-

"Ya'll're squeezin' me to tight!" Applejack shouted back to Rarity over the sound of rushing wind, sucking in a deep breath helplessly as a tiny quiver made Rarity pull her hoofs in tighter.

"Too tight! I'd dare say not enough! I feel like I could fall at any-" Hayseed suddenly began to shake, and Rarity screamed in Applejack's now ringing ear while Hayseed compensated for the turbulence. "What was that! I nearly fell!" Rarity shouted.

"Y'all most certainly did not! It's just a bit of, I dunno, an air-quake! Yeah! Air's shakin' up a bit but Hayseed can handle it! Will ya'll stop squeezin' me so hard now!" Applejack slid her elbows down to try and push Rarity off a little but the unicorn would not budge.

"Um, Applejack?" Fluttershy called gently. The farm pony didn't hear, and Fluttershy sucked in a deeper breath, "Applejack!" Applejack turned her head to face Fluttershy. "I-it's called turbulence! It happens sometimes, just keep Hayseed stable!" She shouted, and Applejack looked back to Rarity.

"Hear that? It's just tur-buh-lints, ain't nothin' a big ol' dragon like Hayseed can't-" Hayseed began to shake more violently, and this time Applejack couldn't hear Rarity's, Twilight's, or Pinkie's screams over her own.

"Would everypony *settle down*?" Rainbow Dash shouted as soon as the shaking stopped. Applejack blushed heavily as Rarity rather politely jabbed her elbows with her hooves. "We're getting the backlash of a thunderstorm a mile or so that way." Rainbow Dash pointed to her right, and sure enough there was a large amount of dark clouds converging a mile away. "It's not gonna mess with the dragons' flight unless we get closer. It's easy aeronautics, guys, dragons are good fliers for a reason."

"You guys deal with this sort of thing *regularly*?" Pinkie Pie asked Fluttershy curiously, who nodded slowly. Pinkie couldn't believe there was

this much violence involved in just simple, straight flying. Small wonder somepony as delicate as Fluttershy preferred the much less rough ground.

"All the time. You learn to handle it very early in flight, more than a few early Pegasus injuries seen in hospitals are caused by inexperience with turbulence. That's why being a weather pony is such a necessary and dangerous job, the turbulence caused by being in a storm is tremendous. It takes a very sturdy sort of mare to face a storm dead on." Fluttershy was staring at Rainbow Dash, who was talking quietly with Twilight. Dash looked passive, but every now and then she smiled and chuckled at something.

"Is it why the Sonic Rainboom is so hard to pull off?" The party pone asked, glancing downwards at the sea of golden grass beneath them. The land beyond Equestria was simply so beautiful in a different way. It looked sort of wild and untamed, with no roads or buildings in sight.

"Yeah. There's also the of pressure associated with going so fast. You shake so much once you hit an unfamiliar speed, and even if you beat the turbulence going too fast can cause you to become light-headed and even lose consciousness due to the pressure. It takes a lot of willpower and durability to handle it." Fluttershy explained, and Pinkie Pie glanced to Rainbow Dash across the skies, holding a little more respect for the athlete now. (Somebody check me on this, I'm probably goofing it up somewhere)

"I always thought flying was a little more..." Pinkie rolled her shoulders around a bit.

"Simple?" Fluttershy answered, and Pinkie nodded. "Well, it's just one of those things you have to experience to understand."

The leylines were still strong beneath the earth here. Twilight could see they were incredibly bright, and pouring out a ton of energy, feeding the land magic and life. Sure beyond Equestria the magic was poured out wildly, not hindered by spells so the grass could grow as crazy as it pleased, or the weather could storm whenever it felt like, but it was still powerful. It gave her somewhat of a sick feeling knowing that she was now beyond the protection of the Princesses, that they were now at a wild world's mercy, but that sick feeling was matched easily by the energy she got from seeing a world Equestrians weren't familiar with. The gold grass beneath them, even up here, smelled delicious, and she was not a grass

eater. Though the idea of natural-eating disgusted her some, she couldn't deny how healthy the grass looked below appealed to her right now. More than a mint and cherry truffle did. Crap, she was hungry now.

Dash turned her head quietly as she heard Twilight rifling through their pack, only to pull out a wrapped up bushel of grapes. "Hungry already? I thought you were a *little* pony. Breakfast not enough for you?"

"All this travel and magic is making me hungry." Twilight insisted, making Dash snort as she popped a grape into her mouth and chewed with relish. "I've been doing so much thinking since we left Equestria. It's absolutely incredible... Not to mention ridiculous. Leaving Equestria, can you believe it?" She asked, holding a grape forward. Dash took it in her mouth and chewed on it slowly in thought.

"Yes." Dash answered, Twilight readjusting her grip on Dash as she leaned around her to stare her in the face. It didn't matter they were getting stared at now. "What?" Dash asked, seeing Twilight's odd stare.

"You can?"

"Well yeah. I always figured I'd be leaving Equestria. Just not out the sides." Dash explained with a knowing grin that made Twilight's ear twitch.

"You're going to have to explain. I'm a *little* lost."

"I always thought I'd leave Equestria through orbit. Up up and away and all that. Though, I guess, now..." She sighed softly, and felt Twilight nudge her.

"Hey now... You're still gonna do it." Twilight whispered, and Dash sighed. "I don't care what happened to your wings, somehow you're going to break out of orbit. Even if I have to be there with you." Twilight squeezed her hooves around the Pegasus's chest, and Dash smiled a little.

"You're a good pal Twilight." Dash leaned back, wrapped a leg around Twilight's neck, and squeezed softly. Twilight chuckled between tiny coughs from Dash's strong leg. Dash let go eventually. So much about riding the dragon reminded her of flying by herself. The rush of the wind, the turbulence, being so high above the ground that absolute freedom wasn't just a dream it was a possibility. There were no restrictions up here,

no can-do's or can't-do's. No pony would complain if you decided to be acrobatic up in the air, no pony got mad if you accidentally moved too close, the only danger was reentry. With three whole dimensions in her grasp, Dash was unstoppable. The only thing just out of reach was being a Wonderbolt, and even that had been within a nose-hair's possibility. "When I was eight, I went and saw my first Wonderbolts show."

Behind her, she heard the chewing slow. Her cue. "Back then I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I could barely fly, thunder and lightning scared me, and I hated to be upside down, or twist around too quickly, and I loved the clouds, and didn't like getting rid of them. Then my parents got Wonderbolt tickets." She smiled at the memory. "When they took me there and sat me down in the arena, I had no idea what to think. I thought it would be one of those boring air ballet things my parents loved to see every month. I tuned out until a loud voice told me to look up, and when I did, I saw the most amazing thing." She sighed heavily, the memory crystal clear in her head. "I could feel the energy pouring off them when they performed, doing the most amazing tricks at high-speed, as close together as they could be, and they never once stopped. It was this constant feel of awesomeness, y'know? They didn't pause or break, none of them did, they kept doing more and more amazing things like that was their life. It *was* and still *is* there life. From that moment on I knew what I wanted to do. What I was *destined* to do, and I wouldn't let anything get in my way. I practiced every second of every minute of every hour of every day that I could. I would become fast, flexible, and strong. I became a weather pony volunteer as soon as I could to conquer the weather, conquer my fear of lightning and thunder. Teller was always there. He would always cheer and clap and laugh and give me ideas for new tricks to try." Dash's eyes softened, and Twilight could feel the tenseness in her, so she squeezed gently. Dash let out a sigh and relaxed. "He was my crowd. He was the only audience that mattered to me, even when older kids showed up to watch. Not every pony believed I could be a Wonderbolt but he did. After he died, I stopped. I stopped for two days. I didn't fly, and never wanted to fly, until I found a drawing he did. It was me, in a Wonderbolt outfit. He believed in my dream as much as I did and I knew, from then on, nothing would matter more than becoming a Wonderbolt. I had to fulfill my dream, because that's what Teller would want of me. Up until we were captured, nothing mattered more. I know he would understand, I think he does, actually. I think, after seeing him guide me, he wants me to protect you and save Equestria. It's a little more cool than being a Wonderbolt, just a little

so don't give yourself too much credit. So for Equestria's sake, for our friendship's sake, and for Teller's sake, I'm going through with this, no matter what I've lost or gained."

Twilight understood Dash well enough to know that pouring out like this, that showing off her hopes, emotions, her motivations, and dreams wasn't a comfortable thing for her. She felt the same way, she wasn't the vocally emotional sort of filly some mares were, the only thing she opened up to so easily was Spike. And now she felt she trusted Rainbow Dash in that same way. That was why she put the grapes back in the bag again so she could hug Dash from behind with both legs, and let her know that she appreciated her opening up. Dash couldn't stop herself from smiling. It felt good to let loose and let Twilight know. It felt good to not worry about Twilight thinking she couldn't do what she was destined to do. There was no judging in her.

"So, um..." Dash grinned as she rubbed the unicorn's front legs. "I told you all about my past and stuff. What about you? Tell me *your* story." Dash turned her head to listen.

"Eh? My story? Heck no, that would be gay." Dash craned her head around, her eyes and mouth open in pure shock, as Applejack and Rarity turned their heads to stare as Twilight squealed with laughter until she could barely hold on.

He glanced up at the sky. The day was gray. The clouds, the air, everything was covered in a shroud of gray. He didn't like overcast days, they made him feel lazy and slow. It was not the attitude a pony like him should have with a job as physically rigorous as apple bucking was. He wasn't the depressive sort, but whether anypony paid attention or not he had moods of his own.

Big Macintosh sighed heavily. He didn't feel like working today. It was gray, the chill wind was a bit too chill, and something didn't feel right. Of course something didn't feel right, he was out here kicking apple trees while there was a potential war coming on, but the official announcement to slow down work wouldn't be called until the next day. For now, Celestia insisted everypony work some stress off with one last, normal day, but after weeks of sun, this day felt far from normal.

He also sensed something was just plain off. He didn't like it. Every time he turned his head around he expected to see an army standing behind him, or an Ursa Major or something. He wouldn't admit he was scared outloud but he couldn't get his mind off Applejack. He was worried about her. Fluttershy too, that poor mare was obviously so broken up asking him to watch the cottage for him. He promised he would. The rest he felt worry for, but not as much as his sister and the shy little mare who spoke exactly one word to him the first time they met: "meep".

Still, he had work to do. Still, he did not feel like working as something felt off. He was concerned. He knew he didn't have much right to be, Granny Smith and Applebloom were in Canterlot, the safest place on the planet it seemed, but still. The cows were locked up, the sheep would be napping by now, and the chickens would be nesting and clucking their little... Heads...

He listened. Dead quiet. He lifted his head up and cocked his ears. The wind whistled, the tree branches creaked, the leaves shook, but there wasn't a bird calling, or a squirrel chattering, or little animals rooting around for scraps. He was all alone in his apple field. Cautiously he turned himself around and stared at his surroundings. All he saw were trees and dirt. The animal sounds and sights he'd grown accustomed to had left him. They sensed something was wrong too.

Big Mac calmed himself down and took the wagon, and began to push it towards the next apple tree pasture. The squeak of the wheels sent shivers down his spine, but it reminded him that things were normal. They should have squeaked, they hadn't been oiled in a while, and joints would need replacing soon. Perhaps he'd stop by in Ponyville later and grab some new wagon parts, then he'd come home, fix the wagon, look at Blueberry's sticking door in the barn, then he'd take a look at Applebloom's closet handle, and finally catch a few-

The fur on his back stood straight. His spine was so tense it hurt. Every joint in his body screamed for him to screw the wagon and run, but Big Macintosh was not a quitter, he was not a scared, shaky little colt. He was big, strong, and wise. Big Mac turned his head slowly to the right, and saw nothing. Then he turned his head slowly to the left, towards an opening in the field, and he felt his mind, body, and courage stop.

Slimy, unhealthily gray skin sagged around its form, its joints, the elbows, the ankles, the knees, the hands, pooling around its thick-toed feet like the skeleton had stopped growing when it shouldn't have, or the skin wouldn't stop growing when it should. It was pudgy with fat and some muscle, like a great big toad. One three times Big Mac's size, standing on two legs, with thick, long arms that reached to the ground with long, thick fingers ending in pudgy round pads. Its head had melded with its torso, its face sticking out, frog-shaped, with six endlessly deep black eyes, two of which sat prominent and huge at the front just above a tiny pointed snout, just above a frown that was two feet across and a foot and a half tall, loose skin hanging about its neck like a sick necklace.

The thing stared at Big Mac, completely still except for its nostrils, which flared rapidly, suggesting the otherworldly thing was breathing. Big Mac did not stop staring into those soulless black eyes, even as its mouth opened to reveal a void. It was a mouth made to swallow ponies whole, a mouth bigger than Big Mac, a mouth that took up half its height and revealed layers upon layers of teeth set in a circle around its inner maw and throat, sharp, jagged points turned outwards, meant to eviscerate its prey as it was swallowed by the mouth of hell. Deep in the pit of black, Big Mac saw what lay beyond this world. In its very stomach, in the belly of the beast, Big Mac saw hell waiting for him.

Then came the voices. Tens of hundreds of thousands of millions of voices, all collecting into one deep tone as the thick beast let out a guttural bellow made of the screams of the dead, the fat around its neck stretching and straightening to make room for a mouth that would not stop opening, to let Big Mac stare deeper into the depths of eternal torture, to allow twenty tentacle-like tongues to spring out to search the air, wiggling rapidly, inviting Big Mac to eternal damnation as blood-colored saliva dripped from their tips, from the lips of the monstrous gatekeeper of the underworld to the ground below, turning the once sweet, green grass into twisted black strands.

With what appeared to be great struggle, the massive mouth lifted one short, fat leg and took a step forward, but the crashing noise was lost on Big Mac as the screams of a million dead played in his mind.

It was only luck that an apple, old and bothered by the wind, fell from its branch and onto Big Mac's head as slime-coated fingers reached for him.

The wagon's pull-handle fell as Big Mac ran. He did not feel any fatigue, nor any regret, nor anything as his long legs battered the ground again and again, ignoring dirt paths, trampling tripping roots. He could hear it. He could hear crashing noises, the wet slap of a moist bag of flash being brought down on a hard surface again and again, hear its gurgling, watery, hungry moans as it tried to chase him, wanting to consume him, wanting to fill itself with his skin and blood.

Terror fueled every step he took, terror fueled the jump he made over the fence, but it was duty that sent him straight to the barn. He ran uphill towards the tall red-painted building, barely hearing the shredding noises of tearing wood as the hell-beast pushed itself through the fence, and then he jumped, he turned, his thrust his legs out behind him and felt the barn door buckle like it was rotten. Inside, the heads of dozens of cows turned as Big Mac, from the entrance, his eyes wide, tears streaming down his normally passive, strong face, and with great pains he cried out one word: "*RUN!*"

No hesitation. Stalls exploded as cows pushed their entire bulk through the wood, and they turned to look past the great pony that cared for them and saw hell itself lunging towards their very door. They turned and smashed themselves against the opposite wall, again and again, until finally the wall gave way, and with frightened cries charged out of the barn, Big Mac right behind them.

He turned his head once to see the beast's torso at the door, then the air filled with splintered wood, falling about his face as the obese hulk drove its thick head and shoulders through the barn. Big Mac froze as it lumbered closer, raising one long, thick arm above its head, fingers splayed wide in the air as it carelessly knocked out supports above it. Big Mac heard the building rumble around them, and with a shout of terror fled out of the building as it fell inwards on top of the massive thing.

Big Mac ran. He ran to the chicken coops and turned to smash the locks off, one by one, shouting, screaming, demanding the chickens to flee, and it took the simple-minded creatures one look to know there was no arguing. Big Mac watched the pile of wooden rubble explode as the massive gray creature stood, staring at the sky, arms thrust in the air as it roared in rage, its enormous sickly yellow belly shaking as it screamed.

He whirled around and charged for the sheep pens next, vaguely hearing the creature charge after him, its feet and the thick, loose skin around them filling the air with wet slaps, like a wet towel striking the wall with its broad-side over and over again. He could hear his heart in his ears as he used his own massive bulk to crash through the stable doors, frightening the demure, fluffy inhabitants awake. Big Mac panted heavily, trying to get air in his lungs to yell, but he had no need to. They took one look at his taut, twisted, tear and blood covered face and fled, bawling in terror as they sped out of and around the building as they saw the enormous terror step closer and closer.

Big Mac charged into the back of the stalls, towards the blank wooden wall, and watched it disappear as enormous gray, loosely-flesh arms swept the roof off the building. He jumped as high as he could over the shorter wall, felt the wooden splinters dig deep and draw blood all down his abdomen, but he didn't care. He felt the air from the giant's hand crash just behind him, slapping the ground in a desperate grab, but Big Mac was already rushing to Ponyville.

He could make the trip in twenty minutes if he walked, but if he ran, maybe he could make it. Maybe there was enough time.

Slap. Slap. Slap. Slap.

Behind him, the beast was using its great upper-weight to throw itself forward, slowly but steadily gaining momentum as it used gravity to drive itself forward, its short fat legs moving faster as it willed them to, charging towards its prey, towards the delicious, scream-filled little creature that would end thousands of years of hunger, and wash away the taste of rustic old blood with fresh liquids.

Slap slap slap slap slap.

It beat a steady noise of horror in his mind, and he could feel himself crying again, so sure he was dead, so sure it would devour him, suck him down into the realm of the mad, the tortured, the vile, the evil. Crushing despair tried to drag him backwards to the monster, the assuredness that he would *die*, that he would be sucked into hell itself for the simple reason that was what this beast *did*. He was going to die.

He was going to die. Going to die. Going to die.

He saw the buildings grow larger.

slap slap slapslapslap

He was going to die. He was going to die.

He could see Ponies milling about in the middle of town square.

slapslapslapslapslapslap

An eternity in hell, kicking and screaming for mercy that would not come.

He could hear their voices as they waited for Mayor Mare to make her speech. He could feel their lack of concern.

SLAPSLAPSLAPSLAPSLAPSLAPSLAP

Writhing in torment, bled dry, bones crushed to dust, skin turned into a mass of thick-crust, dried, post-mortem leather yet he would not be allowed the mercy of death.

One of the cows had taken center stage, pushing away the Mayor as she screamed for the Ponies to look behind them.

SLAPSLAPSLAPSLAPSLAPSLAP

He would twist and scream in agony yet his voice would be dead in his throat, as his soul was pulled from his body with iron hooks and blood-soaked chains and given to the monsters that tortured him.

All of Ponyville went silent as Big Mac threw himself out of range of the creature as its great arm crashed down, smashing a hay wagon into pieces, grabbing the debris and throwing it furiously across town, splinters and hay falling over the stunned crowd as Big Mac flung his body through the door of the hardware store, half-blinded by tears and his own blood as his hoofs sought the one thing he trusted more than Applejack's word.

The building crumbled around him as slime-coated, fat arms knocked the wood aside like rice paper, and the screams filled his ears once again as Ponyville, as one, panicked. He turned, the sharp-bladed plow he'd been keeping his eyes on for months now in his hooves, and his vision went dark

as an enormous, sticky hand crushed him against the floor. He felt the fetid mucus that coated the creature cling to his coat while large fingers wrapped around him, crushing his legs to his body as the air was squeezed out of him. His body left the ground, and he was lifted high into the air as the enormous mouthed creature opened its maw of teeth and tongues, tentacles springing from its throat as Big Mac was brought downwards, brushing against him, wrapping around his neck and legs.

An eternity in a realm he did not belong. A hundred-thousand lifetimes of pains he did not deserve.

Fresh pain entered his body as he was crushed into something, stars filling his eyes as he opened them wide, air filling his lungs again as he sucked in from pain. He stood quickly, completely numb and light-headed as blood seeped from his open wounds, but still he saw. Four ponies, one maybe a little taller than his knee, had driven the plow into the monster's bulging yellow stomach, sick juices pouring out as it warbled in pain, lashing blindly at the ponies shoving the metal blade in and knocking them aside if they weren't sticking to the backs of its hands.

It quickly brought the small one, limp, stuck to its arm to its mouth, twenty flailing tongues wrapping around the small pony, drawing it into a world meant for the cruel and the ruthless, but it stopped. The ponies that had taken Big Mac's plow stirred, turning their heads to face the still beast as it retched violently, blood pouring from the gaping, saw-filled hole that served as its mouth, as Big Mac drew the plow back and drove it into the monster's stomach and chest again and again and again.

Blood drenched his mane and his coat, but he did not care. He took the plow and forced it through the beast's thick stomach, into what served as its guts, shredding them, letting the lifeblood flow out around him, all over him. The warmth sickened him, the smell made him retch, but the motions never stop.

The tip broke off in the beast's heart.

Big Mac never stopped swinging.

The cloud spell was holding nicely around the ship. For several hundred feet in all directions there was a normal looking cloud, racing across the sky, shrouding the airship Balla flew.

Well, not her to be exact, she just gave the orders. The Engineers though were doing a magnificent job of keeping the vessel straight and steady, keeping the vessel from rocking. It was perfect. The steady hum of work around her, the solitude she was given, the small, comfortable room she lived in up here, knowledge that she was perfectly safe and hidden high in the sky giving her the perfect environment to do her work.

Papers covered the tiny table she was given, all baring one picture, one profile, one set of possible strengths and weaknesses and evaluations. You could call Balla obsessed with Twilight Sparkle, but she had every right to be; Twilight Sparkle was her mission, and her mission was her life, meaning her entire life right now was about Twilight Sparkle, no ifs, ands, buts, or ors about it. That meant that by the end of the day she had to know everything there was about her, from her height and weight to her colorations, her education, her family, friends, teachers, likes and dislikes, past, current, and possibly future relationships, but more than any of those she had to know where she was going, what she was doing, and where she was vulnerable.

An entire hour of flight she had spent locked in her room with nothing but a bowl of watermelon slices and her research. The entire crew was under orders to not bother her unless it was absolutely important, just as she would have it.

"Four feet, seven inches..." She took a long, slow bite of her favored snack, chewing through the black seeds without worry as she went over her papers for the twelfth time. "Light purple coat, starry-sky cutie mark, twenty-one inches, tutored personally by Princess Celestia..." She whispered to herself, hardly looking at the numbers now that she knew them by heart, repeating them again and again, digging them into her memory. If this unicorn was as tricky as some claimed, being able to pick her out immediately in a crowd, or in a disguise, would be impressively helpful.

Her ear twitched as she heard a polite knock on her door. "Lady Balla?" She didn't recognize the voice, but it was a stallion, and he was interrupting her concentration. She didn't answer, hoping he'd just get the hint and go

away. She turned to her next paper, and the knock came louder, a little more frantic. "Lady Balla!" She sighed.

"Yes, what is it? I'm very busy in here!" She called back in annoyance, glancing to the bottom of the door to see his hooves padding around frantically. She heard him say something, "Speak up!"

"N-not t-t-talking to ma-ma'am. I'm sorry!" He called, and was suddenly sprinting away from her door. Balla growled quietly to herself in annoyance. What was this about? She wanted to ignore it, she wanted desperately to just return to work, but she knew she would be allowed no such reprieve. If there was even the slightest chance it was important...

She saw the door handle twist, stopping short when the lock obstructed it, and she saw it jiggle a bit. She hopped off her cushion and walked to the door with a haughty stride, unlocked it, and shoved it open. "WHAT! Oh good sweet lord..."

"Been a while." The jester smirked down at the suddenly horrified Archwizard, then stepped past her as her knees knocked. "Good company you keep up here! So polite, quick, and quiet! I asked for you and they said 'how soon?', I asked them to jump and they asked 'off which end?' Cute." Cloppin lounged back on the cushion Balla had just occupied, and Balla's jaw began to shake as she tried to form words. The clown watched her, then his head turned down, implying he was looking at her papers, but she couldn't tell because of his solid black eyes. "Twilight Sparkle, eh? The thief herself."

"Y-you're dead..." Balla whispered, drawing his amused attention. He was, for the first time in her life since she'd actually met him, the most relaxed she'd ever seen. He wasn't bouncing with energy, wasn't threatening the nearest thing that bled with a knife... "I heard the reports! Your skull had been torn apart by some *thing*! Cloppin you had better start explaining yourself!" She realized her mistake an instant after it happened, and her hoof went to her throat as she tried backing up, but Cloppin didn't move.

In fact, he just smiled. "I have nothing to tell you, dear Balla, and don't be so troubled, you are *far* too important to be killed by me, that position is reserved for Twilight Sparkle. Besides, Lord Galio would have my wings if I killed you." Cloppin lifted up paper as Balla immediately glanced to his sides, the tight black bodysuit offering no space whatsoever for wings. "Oh-

ho, trained by the Princess then? Figures a newbie would get the fun jobs. I probably still have to report back to the Lord, which is a pity, the second he knows I'm alive he'll be hunting me across the planet to tell me to, I don't know, go read some more dusty old books and pretend I care what some old codger wrote." Balla watched him take a piece of her watermelon and bite into it, never stopping that smile.

"It would be best if you did, Cloppin." Balla advised, wanting to do whatever she could to get the harbinger of chaos out of her hair and out of her sight, but he made no fast move to leave.

"Oh, perhaps, best for Golding, best for the leylines, best for Sellina, but I've been working hard for Golding lately, I died after all." From his front right ankle Cloppin tugged a stiletto free of its holster, and Balla backed herself up, glancing to the open door quickly, evaluating her escape route as the jester scraped remnants of watermelon from the rime a licked his blade clean. "I think I deserve a little vacation, self-imposed of course, I can't catch myself working too hard or who knows? It may stop me from having *fun*." His teeth clenched the blade after hissing out the last word, and Balla seriously considered just running.

"Y-yes, that would be an *awful* thing for you Cloppin. I'm sure a few days of actual discipline would be just good old-fashioned *murder* for such a fellow like you, so why don't you take it up with Lord Galio and-"

"Actually, Balla, I had a proposition for you." He flicked his dagger, and Balla leapt back half a foot as it struck the ground in front of her, sticking to the wooden floor with the rime halfway stuck on it. "The pretty bird you're hunting is flocking with a few bothersome pigeons that I'd like to see trimmed up a bit. I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine." He picked up the knife in an instant, sheathing it as he suddenly stood just a few inches from her. "Don't say a word to anypony, tell them I'm already off to see the Lord, and let me follow. I can hide in the clouds and keep out of your hair, let you do business as you see fit with no interruption or bother. In return, I'll get to skin a few more hides for my next coat, and you get the peace and glory of hunting the world's loveliest little unicorn."

Balla stood still as she stared into Cloppin's eyes, those soulless pits that had no hint of mercy or regret, and she forced herself to think. His idea wasn't the most desirable, he was actively defying their lord and practically

flaunting it in her face, but if she said no she had little doubt the consequences would be dire. If the damn clown wasn't completely untouchable with magic she would have just teleported into Lord Galio's throne room then and there, but for now she'd just have to say yes, bide her time, get creative, and dispose of him some other way. Perhaps she could trick another tentacled-beast into munching on his skull... "Fine then, Cloppin, it's a deal. Stay out of my business and I'll have no reason to file a report for yours." Hesitantly, she extended a hoof, not sure she trusted what the clown would do in response.

He grinned, leaned down, touched his nose to her hoof almost in worshipful thanks, which disturbed her more than his smile before disappearing. She was alone in her room again. With a feel that this whole room had been violated, she considered asking the Lead Engineer if her room had an available bunk...

The little gray filly sat nervously on the wooden table, staring around at the many eyes that watched her. She was surrounded by smiles and peaceful looks, but one in particular stood out. "-and Connie, this is my team. Say hi." Hero ordered gently, the white haired filly turning from him to look at the rest of the guards around her with a small look. The tiny pony whimpered shyly, and immediately leapt off the table and hid behind her new adoptive father's legs, drawing cute-induced coos from the surrounding guards ponies as they kindly backed away and lowered their heads to give her loving looks. "C'mon Connie, they're not so bad." Hero stepped back over the girl, placing her in front of him. "Say 'hi'."

"... mmnnnhhi..." The little thing muttered out, turning to bury her face into Hero's legs and hide herself. Hero sighed heavily, and gently rubbed her back with one hoof.

"Connie, I want you to say hi. Please?" He tried to get her to turn around, but Connie immediately rubberized and slipped between his legs and hid behind the back pair this time. "Connie..."

"Captain, you can't treat her like one of your subordinates, you have to treat her like a child." Maize smirked from the back of the room. "You're crowding her with a lot of tall, strange ponies."

Hero sighed. He supposed that made sense, in a way. He wasn't familiar with kids, he knew they weren't developed but he didn't know what that meant specifically. He guessed they would be a tad immature, but how was he supposed to know how they'd react. "Well, what do you suppose I do then Maize?"

"Introduce them one at a time. Everypony back to your posts, you'll get to meet the Captain's daughter in time." Maize waved his hoof, and the crowd calmly went back to their various desks or work-out equipment. Maize strode forward, and smiled as Connie quietly poked her head out from behind Hero. "Hi, I'm Maize. I'm a daddy myself." He extended a hoof, and Connie watched it carefully.

"I-I'm Connie. Um, Connie T-tortion... Hi..." She gently touched her little hoof to his, and he smiled when she shook gently.

"Nice to meet you. I hope to see more of you around here Connie, everypony here is incredibly nice." The door flew open, and Connie leapt behind Hero again as Cupcakes entered.

"I have been looking for *five minutes* for a *quill* and *no pony* thinks to stock the shelves at all! I have incredibly important business to tend to and I can't find *one little quill* because I'm surrounded by a bunch of *slackers!*" She roared, making the guards in the room, steel-willed, stead-fast, and iron-minded, whimper. "**EVERYPONY OUT IN THE YARD NOW OR I WILL BE KICKING SOME TAIL ALL OVER THIS ROOM!**" She shouted, neck-muscles bulging with veins as her voice sent everypony sans Hero and Connie charging out the room, desperate to avoid her wrath. "**ONE HUNDRED PUSH-UPS! IF YOU'RE NOT AT FIFTY BY THE TIME I'M OUT THERE IT WILL BE TWO-FIFTY!**"

Hero stared at Silly Cupcakes with a half-amused stare before turning to lift up little Connie and place her on his back as she shivered. "Connie, this is my second in command, Lady Silly Cupcakes. Silly Cupcakes, this is my daughter, Connie Tortion."

Cupcakes cast her annoyed gaze over to the shaking little filly and snorted. "I thought I smelled weakness." She walked over with a sense of duty in her steps, and Connie tried to hide behind Hero's neck. "Listen up girly, you may be rubber but you're gonna need a little thing called *muscle*. Stick around and I'll have you whipped into shape in no time, I personally turned

this entire team of-" she turned her head towards the door, "-*SLACKING PRETTY PONIES*-" she turned back to Connie, "-into halfway competent guardponies. Nice to meet you kid." Cupcakes turned and walked out the door, and was heard sprinting away.

Connie waited until she couldn't hear the steps anymore, and finally spoke up. "She was scary..." She whispered, and Hero nodded his head slowly.

"She's my second in command for that very reason. We'll meet the rest of my team later and I promise you don't have to deal with her much, she doesn't like to be around kids too much anyways." Hero walked out the door, Connie still on his back. "How about I show you around the castle? I'm the Captain of the Guard, I can get you in just about anywhere." The stallion smiled softly as Connie clung to his neck.

Ever since officially becoming a father, a knot of discomfort and worry had entered his stomach. He was, on paper, this girl's father. What was he in her mind though? Was he just a big strong door against the pains of the world? Was he just a strange colt to her? Even worse is he wasn't sure what to do. He'd planned on having dinner with her at six o' clock like he usually did but her caretaker while he was busy mentioned that five o' clock would be better so she'd get that final boost of energy in the latter of the day and have an extra hour to burn it off. Then he planned for her bedtime to be at ten but Maize said nine would be a better bet for a filly her age.

Then he had to know what to feed her. His diet was strict and carefully planned each week, as were the other guards, to balance out fatty foods, vitamins, protein, sugar, salt, every part of it maximized and minimized to deliver the best possible performance, but kids were different. They were smaller, they digested different things more easily or even worse, they needed more of this vitamin, less sugar, and so on and so on. Thank goodness most of the colts he worked with were loving fathers, so he had somepony he could turn to to ask questions.

"I know, I'll show you Laputa." He told the little filly with a small smile. He hadn't seen the whole thing himself, but he was definitely interested. He'd heard some amazing stories about the place and was looking forward to seeing the sort of things Twilight had brought to Equestria.

"That sounds nice..." He heard, and felt her rest her cheek on the back of his neck. He smiled easily. Even if he was worried about being a father, these little moments made him feel it would be just fine.

He stepped out of the guard's quarters and turned to walk towards the cliff garden, but he heard a voice first. "Sir?" He paused, and let out a deep sigh.

"Yes?" He turned his head to face the guard, who was watching the young filly on his back curiously.

"There are reports of unauthorized Pegasi flying towards the south-west landing platform." He spoke softly, and Hero lowered his head, before turning it back to face Connie. He opened his mouth, but she gently tapped his nose.

"You have to go dad." She reminded him, and he nodded. He began to gallop with the guard, Connie clinging to his back until he left her with a nearby pair of door guards, and Hero ran.

"How far are they?" Hero asked, the guard by his side doing everything he could to keep up.

"They're approximately three miles away five minutes ago. They're carrying something, a wagon I believe. Near five miles behind them is a larger group of Pegasi carrying an enormous tarp with we-don't-know-what inside of it. All we know is that both objects are *bleeding*." He couldn't keep up with Hero this time.

He emerged on the walkway moments later, Princess Celestia already standing at the platform's edge, surrounded by the annoyingly obstinate "Cutie Mark" something something somethings and even more guards. The little fillies by the Princesses' legs watched with intensity that suggested they were trying too hard to do their jobs, but the Princess and the guards had passive looks, preparing for the worst as the distant Pegasi came closer.

"Ain't them the weather ponies?" A quick glance down revealed the speaker was Applebloom. The little yellow filly took a few steps forward and squinted her eyes. "Yeah, the one up front helps at the farm sometimes, I wonder what they're here for."

"I dunno. Looks like they're carrying something though." Sweetie Belle pointed out. Hero watched them closely, and began to back up the crowd from the platform as they neared.

"What's the call, Princess?" Hero asked, the guards present extending their wings to intercept.

"They aren't attacking. Let them land, it must be something importantly urgent or else they would have sent a message ahead of them." Celestia stated softly, horn glowing with golden power as the ponies came near.

Seconds ticked by, and then they heard one of the Pegasi shout: "We need a doctor! We need a doctor quickly! Please!" She shouted, trying to tug the cart faster. "We have two wounded, one's just a filly! Please, we need a doctor!" The Pegasus called.

Hero's eyes widened a little, and he turned to the Princess who was already pointing at a nearby Pegasus. "Get help, now. Fast. Hurry." She ordered, short and terse. The guard flew off quickly. Hero watched the Pegasi with a growing sense of dread, and he glanced to the girls at his legs.

It occurred to him they were just children. Just little fillies about to deal with something they shouldn't have to. He wouldn't want Connie to see this, so the girls shouldn't see it either. "Girls, you need to leave." Hero ordered, watching drops of something dark slip through the wood of the wagon and fall.

"Uh uh, we need to protect the Princess so that's what we're going to do. No stopping us!" The little orange Pegasus piped up. Hero narrowed his eyes.

"Girls. This is not up for debate. Leave, *now*." He stood a hoof in front of them, and they hesitated in response. "*Now*." He heard the Pegasi touched down, and then he heard Celestia gasp. He turned his head for just a moment to see, and his mind blanked.

Inside was a large red stallion, covered in blood. He was breathing, barely, looking half-conscious. He could see the many deep red lines of cuts and tears. He had never seen such wounds. No he had, but not so many. Not so deep. Even worse was just beside him.

She was gray, much like Connie, though her hair was more silver than white. It was filled with red streaks from wounds. On her flank was the mark of a small silver spoon. Her body was a mess, mangled, bones broken and her coat was streaked with strips of fur ripped cleanly off. Those bare places had oozing red sores, looking positively infectious, and smelling rancid. It took him a moment to realize the colt had those same sores, and it took him another to realize they were *rotting*.

"We need-" the mare pulling the cart panted. "We need doctors... We need doctors they're dying, please, we need doctors..." She gasped for air.

"We have doctors coming right now. What happened? Who are these ponies? *Girls*." He pushed Applebloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle away as they tried to climb the cart and look. Several of the guards held the girls back.

"The colt's name is Big Macintosh, he was the one that saved Ponyville and, and... And... Oh Celestia he hasn't said a word since he killed it, we can't get him to move, please, he's dying!" She shouted frantically.

"... Big Mac?" Applebloom's voice was tiny, and she stopped fighting for just a moment as her mind tried to comprehend what she was hearing.

"The little one, I have no idea what she thought she was doing but she was helping save Big Mac when that *thing* grabbed him. Her name is Silver Spoon, she's just a little filly, please please *please* we need doctors!" The Pegasus insisted in absolute hysterics.

"Hey!" A guard shouted, and Hero just had a moment to see the little farmer pony with the bow he'd been keeping back run forward without a care. He dove, but she was already up the cart when he grabbed her. He froze up as he felt her breathing. It was rapid, tiny breaths as she stared at the bleeding mess of two ponies she actually knew.

"..." Hero glanced around frantically. Celestia was frozen in shock at actually seeing this. The guards had no idea what to do. The Pegasi carrying the cart were pleading for doctors to the shocked crowd. The other two Crusaders could only watch as Applebloom began screaming for help. Hero stood, sat the earth pony on his back, and grabbed the cart. He barreled into the palace without hesitation, charging for the medical wing.

He didn't wait to see what the other Pegasi brought as he raced to the hospital.

Father's old work.

She could smell his despair and insanity well before she actually saw it. The smell of a rotting sea, of decaying life, of fish oil and blood, of seawater and ammonia. The Pegasi who landed unhitched themselves from the tarp quickly as all present stared at the gutted, half-alive thing they'd brought.

It gave one tiny gurgle of pain, and Celestia watched a finger twitch. Then she raised her head high and blasted the hellgate with the cleansing force of the sun until all that remained was a smoldering tarp. She turned her head sharply towards the palace and walked, ordering the girls to come with her for their own safety.

It was necessary. It had to be done. They had to be released to fix the leylines.

His work had nearly introduced a child to the depths of hell.

"I spy, with my little eyes, something that-"

"Ocean." Applejack grunted flatly, causing Rarity to sigh.

"Honestly Applejack, if you aren't even going to try, I don't know why I bother trying to suggest these games." Rarity mumbled to herself, her legs wrapped tightly around the farm pony as she stared around slowly at the surrounding environment.

Yep. No matter which way you looked, ocean. The deep blue spread far and wide, and according to Twilight they were still going the right way. It was a little hard to believe since as far as she could see the ocean was endless, but Rarity wasn't about to start doubting the only compass they had. The living, magical, currently dragon-riding compass they had.

The thrill of dragon-riding, and the terror that went with it, had washed off some three hours ago as soon as they broke over the coastline and started traveling over the sea. Then suddenly it couldn't have been more boring. Well she supposed they could have been walking, well, swimming, but at

least she wouldn't be locked into position hugging Applejack from behind. Not that that was a bad thing, mind you, she was just getting sore and sweaty from all this constant close contact.

"It ain't the games, Rarity, it's the lack of things to spy. There's water, dragons, and ponies up here and that's it. Well, a few clouds too I guess." Applejack glanced all around them, and nodded her head.

"Well I was going to guess something starting with an 'H'." Rarity replied haughtily. She knew she had Applejack there because now the pony was looking around curiously. "And if you don't guess it, I'm taking it for myself."

"Huh." Applejack began to scan the skies, to the other two dragons. She saw Fluttershy resting her head on Pinkie's back, snoozing peacefully, gracefully, even a hundred feet in the sky at dragon-speed Fluttershy managed to look completely elegant and adorable. Pinkie had a content smile on her face, either enjoying the flight or the pony sleeping on her or both. Most likely both. It was surprisingly peaceful to watch. She then turned her head, scanning the- the horizon? Nah, Rarity can't take the horizon.

She turned her head to the right to look to Twilight and Rainbow Dash, who were playing a game of their own. They were shaking their hooves in time with the other as they counted: "One, two, three, shoot!" "Rock!" Twilight called. "Paper!" Dash called. "UGH!" Twilight threw her arms out in disgust, then crossed them in front of her chest and pouted. "This game is so stupid! I can never tell which sign is which!"

"Uh, that's 'cause you suck at this game."

"I do not suck at this game!"

"You do too! You lost eighteen times in a row! *That* takes skill in a game of luck!"

"It helps that I can't make any sign other than rock! You shouldn't be able to make paper for that matter!"

"Oh? Why? Because it's *unfair*?"

"*BECAUSE WE HAVE NO FINGERS!*"

Applejack stared straight forward for a bit, then glanced downwards as an idea struck her. "... Is it Hayseed?" She asked with a confident smirk.

"Nope!" Rarity said with an excited grin, and Applejack raised an eyebrow in confusion until Rarity's hooves lifted her hat straight off her head, and tugged it down around her own well-coifed mane. Applejack worked her jaw slowly in annoyance as Rarity grinned. "I bet I look lovely in it."

"That's a work-mare's hat Rarity, it don't go with you at all!" Rarity wagged her hoof and blew air between her lips, making a little hiss of disbelief. "Think I'm lyin'? Ya remind me of Applebloom after Sweetie Belle gave her that *make-over*."

"Ugh!" Rarity rolled her eyes. "Please, one hat does not go so far as to make me look like a clown!" Applejack shuddered suddenly, making Rarity paused. "Something wrong, dearie?"

"'Clown' makes me think of that one pony thing that tried cuttin' me, Pinkie, and Dash apart. If it weren't for Twilight's magic bein' powerful stuff I'd still have that mark up my side." She felt Rarity loosen her grip and lean backwards, probably to get a better look at her back. "Is there still a mark there? Nopony made mention of it." She felt Rarity's hoof touch just below her neck, and shuddered as she slowly ran her hoof down to a few inches before the base of her tail, in a jagged line.

"There's a spot where the fur hasn't grown in right yet, nothing too noticeable unless you look for it, but there's definitely a line. You poor mare, it must have hurt something awful..."

"... Y'all remember when I'd near snapped my knee when the applecart fell on me?"

"How could I forget? The noise you made was so ghastly, I freeze up just imagining it."

"Remember when I said it was the worst pain I'd ever felt in my life? Like I kept cryin' 'cause I thought it was so bad it'd need cuttin' off?"

Rarity shuddered. "Please refrain of reminding me of such things, you had me so worked up I nearly chewed through one of my pedicures when the doctor made the announcement. Err, go on though."

"Well, this was worse. Let it be known that sharp things meant fer cuttin' ya *hurt*." She nodded promptly, shuddering as she remembered the feel of cold metal parting her skin like butter.

The hug around her tightened, and she sighed softly at the feel. "I'm so sorry you had to go through such a terrible experience dear. Is there anything I could possibly do to drive it out of your mind?"

"... Gimme back my hat?"

"Oh ho ho ho ho! Dearie, don't be so silly, I won this fair and square. Not about to give my prize back. How about when we touch down, I stew you up something delectable and delicious, and you alone?" Rarity offered with a noble grin.

Applejack thought about it, rolled her eyes slowly as she smiled, and nodded. "Sounds like a date to me."

Rarity could not have pushed the hat back onto Applejack's head faster.

She heard tiny whimpers, small sounds of panting, whispers and pleadings for help next to her. She squeezed her eyelids tighter. The voice grew more frantic as she began to drift off, her breath slowing down, and the voice just grew louder until she couldn't sleep at all. She opened her eyes wide, and stared straight into the surprised, tear-filled eyes of a filly she spent a good amount of time antagonizing. "Can you shut up for just a *minute* blank flank? Unless you're trying to get a cutie mark for being *annoying*." Silver Spoon growled, squeezing her eyes shut.

Then they popped wide open as pain exploded along her body, two legs grasping her. "Ya'll're awake!" Applebloom shouted, letting go quickly as Silver Spoon began to chant 'ow ow ow ow'. "Are ya... Are ya okay?" The little farm filly asked, getting another annoyed groan.

"*Peachy*. Thanks for that, I think I actually felt my spine shift. What are you even doing here blank flank? Don't you have other ponies to bother?" Silver Spoon asked, narrowing her eyes so she could see. She hated not having her glasses. Not only did they make her look a hundred times cuter, but they actually let her see.

"W-well..." Applebloom sniffed. Silver Spoon's hardened expression softened just a little. Her classmate was actually worried about her, even after all the stuff she put her through. "B-Big Mac ain't awake yet, they still have him all hooked up in another room but they said he'd be alright. I can't visit him since they're so busy with him, so I thought I'd, I dunno, come see if ya'll were okay..."

"... I'm fine. Now get out, I have beauty rest to catch up on, I need a lot of sleep to-" she froze up at Applebloom's suddenly sad look. Silver Spoon quietly glanced down at her body beneath the covers and with the one leg she actually had feeling in, uncovered herself. She was wrapped in a lot of bandages. A lot of blood-soaked bandages. Oh, that's right, what she'd done...

... And that thing...

That big, ugly, disgusting, hungry, ravening, bottomless pit of a thing, with the mouth that opened up to a place. A different place. A terrifying place. "U-um... Some of the ponies who broughtcha here said you acted real brave and all, savin' my brother. They told me about the thing and watcha did..." The blank flank sniffled a little, and Silver Spoon winced in discomfort, unable to squirm.

"W-well, it wasn't like any other pony was doing anything. We could all see what he was going for, what he was trying to do! I was just the only one smart enough to actually try and help him before that thing ate him! That got other ponies to start helping me at least." What had she been thinking at that moment? When she first saw it, like everypony else she had frozen up. She'd seen Big Mac dive into the store and saw the building get smashed as he grabbed a sharp plow, saw Big Mac get grabbed, nearly get eaten...

She had no idea what came over her. She remembered rushing over to the plow, grabbing it, lifting it with difficulty, staring at the monster wrapping its tongues around him. Then other ponies joined, grabbed the plow, and together they'd rammed the monster with it. She remembered the stench, she remembered the feel, the way its round stomach shook as they pierced it with the plow. She remembered wanting to vomit, and then she remembered the world going black.

She rubbed her eyes slowly, the memories resurfacing, the fears, the smells, the feeling, the disgust, but it was the fear that somepony was going to die around her. It wasn't courage that spurred her to get closer to the beast. No she hadn't felt brave at all, she hadn't felt anything to be honest, just the ground beneath her hooves and the plow she was picking up.

"I think ya did the right thing. If it weren't for you..." Applebloom murmured. Silver Spoon sighed heavily.

"Quit getting emotional on me, okay?" Silver Spoon asked, most of the cutting edge in her voice gone, drained by the painful memories of earlier. "I was just bein' a good- *being a good* - see what you're making me do! - pony."

"The best." Applebloom agreed with a bob of her head. Silver Spoon frowned deeply, but a part of her felt alright with this. "I'm gonna go grab you a nurse, I think they were gonna getcha somethin' ta eat." Applebloom hopped off the stool by the bed and walked out the door as Silver Spoon watched.

Why did that little country bum even care? It wasn't like she did anything that great. She got herself crushed pretty badly by that thing and a little torn up but nothing that great. Not really. Even though every other pony couldn't do it. Why *had* she run forward like that? Without caring what happened to her?

She'd put herself in danger, heck she was *broken* right now. What little of her body she could feel hurt, and she still couldn't puzzle out why exactly she'd thrown herself to Big Mac's aid. Every time she flashed back to that moment, all she could remember was running for the plow, she couldn't recall her thoughts or her feelings, just the sensations of touch, smell, taste, sight, and hearing. She stretched out her one good leg and stared at it. It was coated up in bandages, where the thing's tentacles had touched her. She could barely remember getting grabbed, just that her body suddenly began to get sore and sting wherever she was touched. Laying here without her fineries, covered in blood, bandages, and full of broken bones, she felt wretched, and ugly...

And now that stupid little... Applebloom was running around acting like she was some big hero. She was no hero, she was just an ugly little filly who

had done something stupid. Should she be crying right now? Should she be mad? Sad? Should she be *happy*? She didn't know, she couldn't tell anymore. Maybe once she got some food in her stomach...

"Land!" Pinkie cried out suddenly, making the girl resting on her back perk up immediately, batting her eyes awake as she sniffled and rubbed her face. "Over there!" Pinkie called to Applejack, who followed the direction of her pointed hoof towards a dark shape in the blue landscape. The sky was getting so dark she nearly missed it, but Applejack spotted it when she narrowed her eyes.

"Um... Uh... Pinkie?" Fluttershy whispered, getting the mare's attention. "I think... I don't mean to offend you but I think you're supposed to say 'land ho'." She whispered.

Pinkie's eyes widened, and she jumped up, using her legs to stand steady on top of the dragon as Fluttershy squeaked, barely avoiding pressing her face to the earth pony's flank. "*LAND!*" Pinkie shouted, leg pointed outwards dramatically, "*HOOOOOOOOO!*"

"Does this mean we're landing?" Dash called from the other side of Applejack, Twilight once more glowy-eyed and watching the ground as Applejack waved her hoof.

"Ya'll know it. Just follow my lead and bring it in easy! These big boys-" a snarl from the right, "- and girls may be tough butcha need ta treat 'em right." Applejack snapped the reins and Hayseed sped up, Rattler and Dick in hot pursuit. The ponies relaxed. They were all feeling a bit sore from riding all day, or hugging or being hugged all day, and as Rarity had feared they were all sweating fiercely. The heat had been vicious. The sun had been on them squarely since they'd set out, and the canteens had been passed back and forth many times.

Rarity was looking forward to some rest. Today, while it hadn't been absolutely dreadful, had been nice, slow, and tough. She never thought a day spent literally moving as little as possible would be so rough. Glancing around, she could barely see Twilight paying rapt attention to the island in front of them, probably just as excited as she was for a chance to get out and stretch.

It took them several minutes, but they were finally slowing, lowering down to the island with soft beats of the dragons' wings, and Rarity, Twilight, Fluttershy, and Dash tensed up as they landed. They jostled a bit, but were a-okay. Applejack dismounted first, slipping off Hayseed onto the beach. Light was waning quickly, already past sundown, and what little twilight they had left was slipping away.

Rarity was extra careful climbing down Hayseed's side, taking her blanket with her as Twilight and Fluttershy took similar caution, Dash and Pinkie just hopping off and landing easily, stirring up a little sand as they looked around. "I've seen pictures of the tropics before." Dash stated when Twilight walked up beside her. "I always wondered where they came from, I've never seen them in Equestria."

"There are two islands off the southeast coast of Equestria with some tropical elements to them but not as extensive as this place." Twilight whispered, eyeing the palm trees with a curious smile. "I wonder where we are, if it has a name..."

"Man, it's weird being out of Equestria. This place feels," Dash chewed her inner lip some, and glanced down the coast both ways, then sat back, "sort of lifeless?" She looked to Twilight for confirmation.

"It's the lack of magic. Equestria is full of magic, the air, the clouds, the ground, the trees, even the animals. Magic is energy, magic is power, magic can even be life. This place doesn't have magic." Twilight stared down at the ground, eyes glowing once more as she frowned. "None at all..."

Dash watched Twilight's face carefully, studying the tenseness and the lines of her face. She nudged the unicorn quietly with her shoulder. "Hey, what's bugging you?" She asked softly, glancing to the other four. Pinkie and Applejack were "safety netting" with their arms out for Rarity to fall into, though Rarity was taking her sweet time. Fluttershy looked to be considering trying to walk down Rattler's ridiculously long tail.

"They leylines are so *weak*. We're directly on top of the one leading straight to Terraria, AKA the biggest land line on the planet, and I can barely see it. There's almost no magic coming from it at all. It's surprising this island is so green and tropical as it is, it has so little energy to pull off from." Twilight whispered, and Dash frowned quietly.

"Hold up. We aren't even that far west yet. We haven't even gotten to where Terraria is, and I seriously doubt we've passed up Golding, and the leylines are dying out?" Twilight nodded slowly, and Dash touched a hoof to her chin.

Twilight's eyes then widened a little. "You don't think that's why they're in Equestria, is it?"

"... It makes sense, doesn't it? It also explains why they're trying to get to the leylines, and why they want to capture you so badly." Dash frowned, and Twilight glanced down to her hooves in thought.

Then there was a yelp, and the two ponies looked up to see Rarity picking herself up next to Applejack, who was just staring in disbelief as Pinkie's jaw dropped. "... Why didn't you catch me!" She asked, her hair frazzled, her coat full of sand.

"..." Applejack just stared at the pretty pony, then slapped herself in the face and groaned. "Rarity... I never doubted your skills... Before now..." Pinkie fell to the ground laughing as Fluttershy calmly padded up. "Ya got down?" Fluttershy nodded.

"I just flew." The Pegasus shrugged, going into Rarity's pack to grab a coat brush as Rarity whimpered over the state of her coat.

"Then why didja wait 'til now ta get down?" Applejack raised an eyebrow as Fluttershy approached her vain friend and began to rub the brush the sand out of her coat with the brush.

"Because, um..." Fluttershy smiled shyly as she gently ran the brush down Rarity's back, "Well, I remembered I can fly a little like the dragons..." She explained with a small voice as Pinkie finally picked herself up long enough to help Rainbow Dash and Twilight unpack the tents. When Rarity finally had the sand brushed out and Applejack got over her severe disappointment they also joined in and helped.

Between them they had three tents and six sleeping bags, so the predicament of who went with who was essentially the same. Applejack shook the last tent a little with her hoof to check its stability and nodded before glancing back towards the others. Twilight was floating their sleeping bags into the squat green tents while Dash lit the way with a

lantern. Fluttershy was putting the finishing touches on Rarity's hair while Rarity used a trowel to dig a small pit in the sand several meters away from the tent. Pinkie Pie was getting something from a saddlebag.

"Well, I think that about settles it." Twilight pushed her head out of the tent, the flaps framing her neck almost perfectly. "Tents are up, bags are laid out, that should just about do it." She looked around. She could only really see Rainbow Dash right now since she was holding the sole light source of the camp, but with the light she could just make out Applejack, Rarity, Fluttershy, and Pinkie Pie standing around something a bit away. Then she saw a tiny flame as Pinkie Pie lit a match, tossed it into the pit, and Rarity's horn flashed.

Twilight had to bat her eyes rapidly as light suddenly spread across the beach as a well-sized campfire lit up in the sand pit, lacking any support but the air itself. Rarity's glowing horn died down, and she sighed heavily. "It's been ages since we've needed that spell. I must say, stretching your magical muscles so to speak feels quite good."

"Heck yes! Campfire!" Rainbow Dash flicked the lantern off and set it just inside the tent, then sprung to join the other four. Twilight stared for a few moments before Pinkie beckoned her over.

"Join in Twilight!" She encouraged, smiling softly as Twilight slowly walked forward and sat between her and Applejack. She felt like she was missing something. She glanced around slowly at the gathered ponies and realized this must have been something they'd done before. Maybe they used to go camping before she arrived? Why would they stop?

"Anypony remember which bag the s'more stuff is in?" Applejack asked. Rainbow Dash suddenly blinked, six of her appearing where she was a moment before, and they started going through the bags on the dragons, who were now lazing about on the sand getting some rest. They offered Dash only the slightest bit of notice before closing their eyes again. All except Dick, who grumbled in annoyance as Dash searched his bags.

"I believe I was told we should only bring the essentials? No entertainment as you put it?" Rarity raised an eyebrow as the Dashes returned with marshmallows, graham crackers, and chocolate bars. "Was *this* what we were making room for in the bags?"

"Ah lay off me Rarity, I figured since we were goin' out we might as well pack for the trip. We already had the sleepin' bags and tents so I thought this might complete the get-up." Applejack smirked and took the various bags and started opening them. Twilight watched as they started taking the foodstuff and passing them around. She watched them melt the marshmallows and make little sandwiches out of what they were given, then turned her head when Rainbow Dash, now whole, sat down beside her.

"Go on Twilight, go ahead and make a s'more!" She held out the bags, and Twilight looked down at them. Carefully she took them out one by one with her magic, one cracker, one mallow, one chocolate bar, and did as they did, carefully snapping the cracker and bar in two. Dash's chewing slowed down before she swallowed, watching her. Twilight levitated the marshmallow over the campfire, let it cook some, and then brought it back to put on the graham cracker and the chocolate bar. "So, when we're done with the s'mores, what should we do next?" Dash asked, looking specifically to Twilight.

Twilight opened her mouth at Dash, the s'more just a few inches from being eaten, when she turned her head to look at everypony else. They were also watching her. "Um... I dunno..." She finally spoke, still smiling a little.

"There's gotta be something you like to do when you're out camping Twi, I like to tell scary stories, Pinkie likes to invite random animals to join us, Rarity likes the make-overs..." Rainbow Dash slowly spun her hoof in an 'and on and on and on' motion.

"Oh! So camping's just like a sleep-over then?" Twilight asked with a much more understanding smile as she thought back to the many activities she performed with Rarity and Applejack during that big storm.

Dash didn't answer. Dash stared at her for a few moments. Dash finally opened her mouth with half-lidded, almost accusing eyes, "'Just like a sleep-over'? Wouldn't this be something you'd know? I mean, haven't you gone-" she paused, her eyes widened, "-have you *ever* gone camping before?"

Twilight glanced around slowly as she saw her friends' surprised faced, and she gave Dash a very nervous smile. "Well, I mean, it's just that," she waved her hoof like it was no big thing, "we don't really have forests or any

good camping spots in Canterlot, and I've never really left Canterlot before, so-"

"Whoa whoa whoa, hold your reins girl, I'm getting a vibe from you right now. A vibe that says 'I'm making bad excuses as to why I've never actually gone out and lived a little'. You," Dash poked Twilight in the chest, "Twilight Sparkle, queen of book smarts and the sky and sea," Dash waved her hoof out at the ocean, her voice raising, "have never ever gone camping?"

Twilight just stared as if the blue mare had gone completely nuts, and slowly shook her head. "Never."

"... Nnnnggghhaaaaauuuuggggghhhh!" Dash rubbed her temples with her hooves, looking pained. Twilight got the impression this is what it felt like to talk to her and be the dumb one of the conversation. "Just!- Just some *things* about you make my blood pressure rise! You've never been in a hoof race until the Running of the Leaves," Twilight nodded, "you've never had or been to a sleep-over until you came to Ponyville," a slower nod, "and you've never been *camping*!"

Twilight winced, glanced around slowly at the other girls, her eyes pleading for help, but they quietly backed away. Smart sons of-

"Next you're going to tell me you've never, I dunno, been swimming before! Or something crazy like you've never kissed somepony before!" Dash froze suddenly, eyes wide, mouth gaping, and Twilight took a step back as the Pegasus turned to face her. "*You haven't* have you?"

"Th-that's not true! I have to!"

"On the lips?" Dash raised an eyebrow. Twilight turned beet red, even through her fur, and Rainbow Dash groaned heavily.

"Now this isn't fair! How do you know *they* haven't kissed a pony before?" Twilight demanded, pointing to the other four, who looked between each other.

"Because, sugarcube, our first campin' trip we all shared kissin' stories. Rarity here kissed her first coltfriend goodbye when he left to Manehattan to become an actor." Applejack pointed to the nodding fashion mistress.

"And Applejack's first kiss was from a colt helping her family on the farm that caught her eye." Rarity looked to the nodding farm mare.

Twilight looked bug-eyed to Fluttershy, who smiled shyly. "Even you Fluttershy?"

"I-it was Pinkie. When we first met she was so excited about my hair color she just... Well she just..." Fluttershy let out a tiny, cute giggle.

"And yours too?" Twilight glanced to Pinkie Pie, who shook her head.

"Nope! Mine was at a party for a filly my age who lived nearby back on the rock farm. Her name was Mistletoe so I put mistletoe up in a doorway, and she happened to walk by as I was stringing it up and kissed me when I was finished." Pinkie smiled at the memory, and Twilight glanced around rapidly, feeling very very inexperienced, and perhaps a bit exposed.

"You're just hopeless Twilight. I have a whole world to show you, don't I? Camping, kissing, preparing and throwing a surprise party, hooking your friends up with cute ponies, have you even seen a Wonderbolt performance?" Dash stared accusingly at Twilight, who suddenly grinned.

"Yes! Yes I have! Princess Celestia bought me a ticket for my birthday! I saw the Wonderbolts when they were performing!" She crossed her front legs over her chest and smiled in triumph as Dash rubbed her chin.

"Was it Team Spitfire performing or Team Shade Duster? What sort of trails did they leave behind when they flew around?" Dash asked with a small hum. She watched Twilight's smile slowly fall into a horrified grimace. "You-!" Dash gave her the most hurt look of betrayal, "*You didn't even pay attention!*"

Twilight shrunk back slowly as Dash tossed her head back. "I had to study-!"

"On your birthday! During a Wonderbolts Performance! That is *it!*" Dash grabbed Twilight by her cheeks, making the unicorn squeak. "When this is over, when we get home, when the Golding guys are gone, I am going to take you out of that stuffy library and rub your nose into every activity you've ever missed as a filly! We will *not* go back to Ponyville until we have at least gone through the first half of the Dangerous Guide to Fillies activity

section, and number one is a *kiss*! So somehow, someway, I am going to make you-" Twilight leaned forward and planted her lips firmly on Dash's, then pulled away after two seconds.

The group just stared as Twilight smiled confidently. "There, check one, *done*."

"You-...." Dash's eyes were enormous until she shook her head and glared at Twilight. "That wasn't a kiss! There wasn't even tongue involved!"

Twilight's eyelids bat quickly, and she made a disgusted face. "*Tongue*? That's disgusting! When did a kiss need *tongue*?"

Dash just stared at Twilight, agape once more, and the dragons rose quickly, staring around frantically as Rainbow Dash screamed in frustration, holding her own head like it was about to come off. "Some things about you Sparkle!" She shouted, shaking her hoof at the mare. "I will *learn you* to this world!" Dash snarled and stomped off towards the tents, leaving a very confused unicorn behind. "I'm going to sleep! If little miss Knows-Everything admits to not doing one more thing I'm going to have to hit her!" Dash called, slipping inside the middle tent indignantly as the rest of the group just stared from her, then to Twilight.

Twilight stood, staring after Dash, completely flabbergasted. "She's mental!" Twilight turned to the rest of the group, looking for agreements.

"... Says the pony who's never tongue-kissed." Pinkie pointed out, and Twilight whimpered as the rest of them broke down laughing.

Ten minutes later of quiet conversation that Twilight took no part in, the fire was extinguished and the lantern was relit so the pony friends could pack away the food. Twilight carried the lantern, not in a talking mood as they went back to the tents. She set the lantern down and was about to enter the tent when she hesitated. Right, Dash was in there, and Dash was mad at her...

She wasn't sure she wanted to just walk in right now with Dash being angry at her for stuff. She wasn't even sure why Dash was angry! Sure she hadn't done some things, but that didn't mean anything. She came to Ponyville to discover the things about friendship she missed, right? So in a way, Dash

was getting mad for no reason. Maybe if she just walked in and talked to her about it, sorted out their feelings, make some plans for the future...

"Twilight?" She turned her head to face Fluttershy, who was standing at the opening of her tent flap. Pinkie sat between them. Fluttershy made a tiny coughing noise, then glanced to her tent, then put on a nervous smile as she turned to Twilight. "Since we're going to be flying together tomorrow, would you like to sleep with me tonight? I mean in my tent?" The shy pony offered, and Twilight looked to the tent Dash had entered.

"That would be nice. At least until Dash stops acting so weird." Twilight chuckled, smiling to Pinkie in thanks as they passed by each other to enter the other tent. Things would be alright in the morning. Dash just needed to cool down and then they'd be just fine. Fluttershy smiled brightly as she opened a tent flap for Twilight to enter, and she nodded her head in thanks as she slipped inside.

Fluttershy came in right after her, and the lantern outside went out. Feeling around with her hooves, Twilight found a sleeping bag and slid in, sighing as her head rested on the makeshift pillow. She could barely make out Fluttershy in the darkness, but she heard her shuffle around a bit and slide into the next sleeping bag. Twilight let out a small yawn, and heard Fluttershy shuffling some more, and she realized the Pegasus was shifting in closer. She felt their legs touch soon enough, and she realized Fluttershy's face was probably just a few inches from her own.

"So... Was that actually your first kiss?" Fluttershy whispered, as if afraid to break the silence. Twilight understood. It was so still outside. She heard Applejack say something in the other tent but didn't hear what it was.

Then she remembered the question and blushed. "Well, no, not really. I mean, it's like Dash said, there wasn't any tongue or anything. But I think I won't have to do that first one anytime soon now." Twilight chuckled. Fluttershy joined in.

"Yeah. I guess so. Um... The tongue part isn't as disgusting as you think... It's kind of... Nice." Fluttershy whispered, fidgeting unnoticeably in her bag as Twilight chuckled. What a strange thought. Then again, she'd never kissed a pony before... Well, not with her *tongue*.

"I'll take your word for it. I'll find out some day." Fluttershy bat her eyes rapidly, and felt herself frown as Twilight snuggled into her sleeping bag until her head was hidden.

Drat.

... Oh!... Sorry...

Chapter 18

Flying High Cockeyed

Twilight woke up to the sound of very light breathing. She had to flutter her eyes a few times to make sure she wasn't dreaming anymore, to get all the gunk out of her eyes as she woke up, and carefully she opened them up. She stared at the top of her tent, noting light was pouring in through the open flap. She smiled up at the ceiling and took in a deep breath. It smelled nice. So tropical, so beachy, so much like... Fluttershy. She stared down her bag curiously and noticed a pink-haired head resting on her chest, then she sniffed again. Yes that was definitely Fluttershy's smell. Then she smelled another familiar scent.

It smelled like...

She turned her head rapidly to her left and stared straight into Rainbow Dash's furious eyes. Twilight gasped quietly, realizing what this must have looked like, and quickly slid down into her bag until it hid her snout. She could not take her gaze from Dash's, it was just so intense, and part of her felt extremely guilty.

"What's going on?" Dash asked in a harsh whisper, glancing to Fluttershy briefly as the daintier Pegasus snoozed. Twilight could feel her stomach grow heavy with guilt. She briefly remembered why she'd chosen to tent with Fluttershy last night rather than Dash but she felt kind of bad about it right now. What had she been thinking? She could have at least told Dash...

Wait, why did she feel guilty about this? It's not like anything happened, and they were going to be riding together when they set off this morning... "I'm just sleeping with Fluttershy." Twilight stated. She watched Dash's eyes widen in shock and dismay, and that guilt returned immediately. "In the same tent, with her, not in her bag or anything like... Um..."

Dash calmly narrowed her eyes, turned towards the exit and walked out. Twilight watched in panic, and quickly squirmed out of her sleeping bag. Fluttershy's head rocked as Twilight climbed out, and finally she opened

her eyes and looked around curiously. "Twilight?" She whispered curiously as she watched the unicorn quickly tame her multi-colored hair.

"I'll be back later, Fluts!" Twilight whispered, running out of the tent quickly.

"But I told you I didn't-!... Okay..."

The world was *bright* outside the tent. The sand was nearly blinding until she blinked her eyes as rapidly as possible and glanced around quickly, getting a feel for her surroundings. The dragons were diving into the ocean, catching fish by the mouthful, Applejack was out and about, looking at supplies, and Pinkie Pie was going for a little swim. And Rainbow Dash's narrow flank was retreating into the tropical forest.

"Mornin'-! Twi?" Applejack watched the unicorn charge into the trees, and turned to face Pinkie Pie, who was shaking herself dry. "Huh, must need to make a little pit-stop." The farm pony shrugged.

Twilight's head swiveled rapidly as she ran into the trees, pushing through the green, leafy bushes and trampling grass as she avoided tree trunks. She could see flashes of blue at every step, retreating further and further into the green. Then as she started going uphill, she lost the blue. She stood in the middle of a small clearing, glancing uphill, then downhill, then left and right, and saw no blue.

Her heart was pounding rapidly, she knew she'd really angered Dash this time. Or was she not angry? What if she was just disappointed? Disappointed in what, that she hadn't spent the night with her? She slowed her searching as she realized they didn't ever really have some sort of system. She never said she couldn't spend the night with somepony else, she was well within the boundaries of friendship to stay with Fluttershy last night. Dash could be mad all she want, she didn't care.

Twilight whirled around to walk to camp, then immediately turned around again and started rushing deeper into the forest. Yes she did *yes she did*. "Dash!" She shouted, hoping for an answer, but she didn't hear one. She called again, turning sharply as she met a cliff wall, going back into the forest. She ran for what felt like forever, looking for a flash of blue, a little rainbow, *anything*.

"*Dash!*" She called again, pushing through a clump of bushes until she emerged in a small clearing, and saw it. A flash of rainbow colored hair behind another bush, sitting there, waving some. Twilight sucked in a deep breath, and quickly pushed the bushes open.

Dash was squatting, her face a mask of pure terror, and Twilight stared back. They watched each other for a moment, before Dash's eye started to twitch. "*OUT!*" She shouted, pushing Twilight out of the bush and onto her back.

She waited this time, until Dash finally walked out, looking incredibly embarrassed and a little annoyed. "You couldn't have waited until I finished my morning business?" The blue pony asked with a heavy blush, thighs squeezed together tightly as Twilight lowered her eyes in shame.

"I was worried you ran off because you were mad at me." Twilight admitted, her hoof softly scraping the grassy floor in embarrassment as Dash turned her head slowly to the side, still looking annoyed but also looked somewhat relieved.

"I'm not mad at you." Dash sighed, leading the way back to camp with a slow gait, obviously taking her time to walk. "Well not anymore. I guess I was at first but I was thinking about it and... It doesn't really matter. I mean we're all supposed to be your guardians and stuff, I just got it in my head that I was, y'know..." Dash turned her head away to hide her face from Twilight, who circled around her back to see what was wrong, but Dash just turned away again.

"No, I don't. You can tell me Dash..." Twilight whispered, sighing as she stopped trying to look at the Pegasus's' face.

Dash hesitated in her next step, but continued forward at the same, slow pace. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment as she tried to wave it off. It was nothing. It really was. So why did it embarrass her so badly? Why did it make her so jealous of Fluttershy?

Wow, was she actually jealous of Fluttershy? Just because she'd shared a tent with Twilight? It didn't mean anything. They just shared a tent, and somehow woke up snuggling. That happened all the time. Maybe? She'd never slept next to Twilight before. She bet it wasn't that great. She was probably a still, quiet sleeper, so she wouldn't snore or twitch suddenly.

Unless she was the sort who pulled you into cuddles in your sleep. That sounded... Warm.

"Well, I mean, when we started out on this with the others, I always kinda felt they weren't so... Well, Anemone picked *us* to go talk to his brothers, so I always thought we were the... Y'know. The ones in charge, the important ones, the strong ones... I feel like we gotta stick together, and that, maybe, I guess I think I'm that one of us whose... Well... Um... Like..." Dash stumbled between words, and Twilight did everything she could to hide her amused smile. "I always thought, like... I'd be the... Of us and... Maybe..."

"You can tell me Dash..." Twilight whispered encouragingly.

"It's embarrassing!" Dash stomped her hooves a little in the grass, making Twilight smile some. "Okay, look, it's like this: just, do what you want. Okay? I mean, we're all here to protect you, even Fluttershy, so you're gonna be safe no matter what. Just... I guess... I-" Dash drooped her head and kept walking.

Something was bugging her. A lot. Twilight watched with a tiny frown, and tried to approach, to say something, but Dash was a difficult girl, no matter what she said... Unless... "Would you like me to find you some pineapples?" Dash's head perked up, and she glanced back to Twilight with some surprise. "That's your favorite, right? Pineapples? We're on a tropical island, there's bound to be a few here if I'm correct. I don't know what's wrong, but you'll tell me eventually. Until that happens, I'll go look for pineapples. You stay by the beach, okay?" Twilight smiled at that.

Dash stared at her for a few seconds with a surprised look, then opened her mouth a little, "... Holy hay Twilight, you need to stay out of my head. I'm serious, I'm feeling like you're magicking at me or something." Twilight grinned more brightly at that. "Alright, but be quick. I want to leave as soon as we're all ready to..." Dash gave in after a moment of reluctance, and Twilight quietly nodded before bounding off with a happy little trot.

Dash watched her leave, seeing the purple slip away into the bushes, and she began to mutter to herself. "Good job Dash, send the important one off on her own..." She grumbled, dragging herself back to camp. Why did this frustrate her so much? She was perfectly fine with Twilight when the

unicorn was around her, but now that she was speeding off to gather her pineapples she felt really... Really...

Really...?

She was at a loss for words with herself. It felt like she was happy and sad at the same time, and her heart felt very heavy with both. She walked down until the slope evened out, and she took a seat on the sun-warmed grass. The world around her was absolutely full of life, yet she couldn't shake this feeling that it was all some trick, one big undead puppet beneath her hooves and all around her. Twilight was right, it wasn't brimming with the energy she was used to, it kept it all for itself almost selfishly, like it couldn't give any out.

The leylines were dying out here, and she realized this whole island was fighting to keep as much energy as it could, that was why it didn't so freely give the open air the excess. It was a haunting thought to think, outside of Equestria, the world was failing. Well...

She and Twilight would do something about that. She frowned, no, *Twilight* would do something about that. She was just along for the ride as a guardian, like the other four. Even if they weren't picked to be Twilight's guardians, they were basically doing the same thing she was. She wasn't that special to Twilight in that case. She grit her teeth. That hurt to think about.

That couldn't be true, she had to be important to her, right? Everything they'd experienced over the past few days, their heart-to-hearts, the stories they shared, the pains, the worries, the tears, Twilight even gave her forehead a kiss on top of the castle and promised up and down to make up for her... Wings...

Was that all this was about? The loss of her wings? Was that the only thing Twilight cared about concerning her? *Was it?* She just wanted to make things right in her own mind, was that it? Dash sucked in a deep breath at the revelation, and suddenly had the very strong desire to hunt down the unicorn and demand to know the truth, to know her feelings and intentions. Twilight had come to Ponyville to discover friendship, but she always had her nose buried deep in her books until somepony dragged her out...

Did she even care about them?

Dash's eyes widened, and she ran to the nearest tree and smacked her forehead against it again and again, growling impressively dirty curses to herself as she fought the feelings of betrayal. Twilight was not like that. She was a good filly, who just didn't have a lot of experience. She was not manipulative or mean like that, she'd even remembered Dash's favorite fruit and was taking her own time to go get it for her!

She slowly made her way back to camp, a large, lovely red mark on her forehead as she stepped out onto the beach. Pinkie Pie looked up from the crab she'd been watching, smiling brightly at Dash, but it fell as she saw her face. "... Your face is all red." The pink pony pointed out as she slowly approached the sulking Pegasus. Applejack looked up from the bowl she'd been greedily devouring from, as did Rarity just next to her, looking pleased with herself. Fluttershy had been slowly approaching Hayseed, but turned, distracted as Dash came out.

"Eh? Yeah." Dash mumbled, rubbing her forehead where it was still red, having difficulties feeling embarrassed about it. "I was out talking with Twilight and, well, somethin' or other." She looked up at the sky quietly in thought.

"Twilight *hit you*?" Fluttershy asked, her eyes suddenly wide with terror. She wasn't the only one jumping to conclusions, with Applejack dropping her bowl suddenly and Rarity squeaking in shock. They gathered around Rainbow Dash quickly, who stared at them with bewilderment.

"*What?* No! I hit myself on a tree branch! She's just out getting me pineapples!" She explained quickly. The tension deflated quickly, and Fluttershy blushed heavily in embarrassment as Rainbow Dash rubbed her forehead as her anxiety just skyrocketed as her friends idly shifted around her. She covered her eyes, feeling like taking a deep nap until this blew over.

"Oh, um, okay, I'm-" Fluttershy started, but Dash pressed her hoof to the shy little pony's mouth.

"Save it, I'm fine." Dash sighed and wandered into her tent. The other four stood around awkwardly, watching Dash disappear. When she was gone, Rarity turned to face the others.

"Twilight did something to her. Dash is never this distant." She mumbled, and the other three nodded slowly. "What do you suppose she did? Do you think they got into a fight?"

"When Twilight left, I figured she was going to go apologize to Dash for... Something... Dash seemed a little huffy about something..." Fluttershy whispered lowly, staring down at her hooves. Was this her fault? Was it because she let Twilight stay in her tent? Should she have just ignored her sudden courage?

"Would explain why Twilight went to get her pineapples. Dash never frowns around those things..." Applejack touched her hoof to her chin in thought while Pinkie turned to go to the tent.

"You guys can figure that out, I'm going to go have a talk with Dashie and see if I can't get her out." She slipped away from the group and walked to the tent. The other three watched as she poked her head in, then walked inside.

Inside, Dash was moving the sleeping bags around. Pinkie watched for a moment as the mare set the bags across each other and folded them slowly, soon making a little nest out of the bags to curl up in. She turned her head sharply to face Pinkie the moment she noticed her. "Can I help you?" The pony asked with an annoyed tone in her voice.

Pinkie put on a good smile, showing all her teeth. "Well, I've been thinking!" She walked in a bit closer and sat down. Dash, having just got comfy, tensed up. When Pinkie thinks, that means nopony rests. "You want to be a good guardian for Twilight, right?"

Dash nodded without hesitation. Of course she did, they were best friends... She thought. No, of course they were, even if weird things were happening, even if she wasn't her most important guard...

"Well, I want to be a good guard too, so I was thinking to myself: 'Pinkie you outrageously good-looking, magnificently intelligent, and all around amazing pony, how would you go about getting two ponies including yourself to become good guards?' Then it came to me!" She pointed a hoof to Dash's side, and Dash glanced to the sword in her harness. She calmly took it out, and Pinkie nodded rapidly. "We need to learn how to use that sword!"

Dash raised an eyebrow, staring at Pinkie closely while examining her sword again. The coin-shaped pommel, the wing-shaped guard that was shaped to curve around the mouth holding it, the short, straight blade extending a good foot from the pommel with the wickedly sharp edges... Pinkie had a point.

She didn't know how to use a sword. Back when she lived with her parents she went to a Theater Camp once and got to use a play sword back then because she was a bandit in one of the scenes. She remembered how awkward fighting with it was, not because of its weight or shape, but because she didn't know how to use it at all. This was the same case. The sword swung effortlessly for her, but during her battle with the jester she'd relied on kicking the clown simply because that was reliable. When she'd stabbed the thing it had left a mere flesh wound. She turned to Pinkie Pie and saw her smile a little. "That's a pretty good idea..." She mumbled, sighing as she stood.

It would take her mind off her concerns too. She stood up slowly, and followed the bounding pink mare out of the tent. "Alright everypony! If you aren't busy then clear out and start packing up! Dashie and I have some training to do!" Pinkie called as Dash set her sword on the sand. Applejack took one look as Dash's wings fluttered intensely as she concentrated on the sword, then nodded to Rarity.

"Training?" Rarity asked, watching as Dash made her sword flash, and then watched her smile in satisfaction as she lifted up one sword and handed the other to Pinkie Pie. Rarity then took her thick, leather holster, disconnected it from the belt, and also copied it. She tossed that to Pinkie to, and they slid their swords in the soft-edged sheaths. Better than hitting each other with the sharp edges. "They can't be serious! Practicing sword fighting by themselves with actual swords!" She glanced to Applejack, who smirked.

"Dash is a tough gal. Pinkie... Boy howdy I doubt she'll even get poked." Applejack reassured the unicorn, hoping the two knew what they were doing. The two ponies were joined by Fluttershy, and they stared as Pinkie and Dash stared at each other, swords in mouths.

"So," Dash spoke up after a few seconds, "do we just start fighting each other or what?" She asked, glancing around slowly. The other girls merely shrugged, and Pinkie then set her sword down.

"I know! We need to do stretches! Like push-ups, and sit-ups!" Pinkie bobbed her head, and Dash began to nod. She understood that. She did that every morning before she went flying back when she... Right. "So how many should we do?"

"If you don't exercise a lot, maybe start with thirty-five or somethin'?" Dash suggested, and Pinkie nodded rapidly. Dash had no problem with thirty-five or the full seventy, in fact, finishing when Pinkie did. Then they began to do their sit-ups, all while Rarity, Fluttershy, and Applejack began to pack things up.

When they finished the stretching and did a short jog up and down the beach, they went back to their swords and took them in mouth, and quietly stood apart. "So... Shall we?" Dash cocked her eyebrow, and Pinkie nodded rapidly. The two slowly, carefully started forward, and Dash made the first swing at Pinkie's sword.

Fluttershy squeaked as she heard the first clatter as her friends began to fight. She tried to not look as she nervously rolled up the sleeping bags as tight as they could be and strapped them to the traveling bags as she heard the next hit. "Dashie you can't aim for my sword, you have to try and hit me!" Pinkie urged, making Fluttershy wince.

"At least they're taking it seriously." Rarity tried to joke, but her eye twitched as there was another clatter. The sound of the swords sheathed in the thick cloth was a steady dull thump behind the working ponies. As Pinkie and Dash got more settled into training, the sound of practiced combat intensified.

For Rainbow Dash, each swing was a test. What angles brought the most power? How hard of a swing could her grip handle before she was forced to loosen from the tension? Where was a pony, and in this case Pinkie, most vulnerable?

For Pinkie, it was like learning the steps of a dance. Each move was invented, and each move had to be countered. Dash was swinging randomly thought, pacing her swings to not strain herself or her energy.

The two quickly realized the other's strategy. Dash took her time, watching for perceived opening before diving in recklessly, blade swung in exaggeration towards the opening, where as Pinkie would skip back and bring her sword to block the hit. More than once the two had to spend several seconds reaffirming their grip on their swords.

Already they could see that would be a problem. They needed to work on keeping their hold tight and firm, or else lose several precious seconds regripping. Dash had already seen that problem when an attack through her grip off, allowing Pinkie to dive in since she hadn't lost hers. Dash had to back away rapidly, hop, skip, regrip, block the next blow, and pushed Pinkie very politely with her front hoof.

Dash attacked, Pinkie countered, Dash recovered, Pinkie waited, or if she had an opening, attacked. Dash found the dance interesting. Pinkie had an advantage, waiting and watching, planning her steps, never making the first move. Dash found it to be annoyingly effective, but whenever she waited, to try and get Pinkie to attack first, she always ran out of patience too quickly. Something to work on.

Twilight pushed the pineapple lightly. It rolled a bit. She was pretty sure it was ripe. It looked like the pictures of pineapples, green with a lot of yellow and brown. She was no expert, but she figured she'd find out once she cut it open, they had to have a knife sitting around somewhere or else she would be deeply disappointed in her friends' ideas of what 'being prepared' meant.

She glanced up the tree she'd found, and using telekinesis, twisted off two more of the spiny fruits and levitated the them all in front of her as she made her way to the beach. She tried not to stray too far but she'd been so busy taking in the sights that she'd probably passed up more than a few pineapple-bearing trees along the way here. The tropics were so lush and refreshing, but boy were they hot. Sticking to the shade was nearly a must for her, though luckily they still had more than half of their canteens still full of water back at camp. She'd been careful to not drink too much, but probably already had more than she should have.

Still, the world was full of water, finding some that was fresh and non-salted shouldn't be too hard, she figured. Though to be safe, she should take a

look through her books and see if there was a water-finding spell. The books she learned magic from since she was little. The books that she didn't bring. She somehow managed to keep her smile, despite attempting to throttle herself mentally.

She pushed through some lush green brush and glanced up quickly as she noticed a flock of brightly colored birds now watching her. She paused as she stood under them. They were many bright, neon colors that in Equestria wouldn't have fit in so well. Their birds were more simply colored, not the elaborate reds, greens, blues, yellows, and oranges each bird was pretty much a mix of. They were incredibly curious creatures, and they all noted her with an equal amount of curiosity.

"Hello." She finally spoke, smiling friendly-like. She then screeched as all the birds dived from the branches and attempted to land on her. She ran about, the pineapples laying in the middle of the clearing unharmed as Twilight ran around and kicked and bucked, but the birds seemed unconcerned and unharmed by her wild leaping. She finally slowed down as she began to tire out some twenty seconds later, and she panted heavily as she realized just how out of shape she was.

The birds, now cooing among themselves, began to nip at her coat and mane as Twilight stood there and panted, biting at her sweat. Well this was stupid. She reached back with a hoof, and had to strain just to try to wave a few away, but they just hopped out of reach. Were they mocking her? They were mocking her! Those little jerks! She reached back and wiggled her hooves some more, but they avoided her easily. She jumped, and they hopped, but landed back on her easily. She growled in anger and finally just sighed. "Guys, can you give me some space?" She finally asked, and the birds suddenly lifted off in a flutter of wings and squawking, leaving her with a very mussed back and covered in feathers.

She blew a feather off her face in annoyance, and picked up the pineapples and trudged off. She stared at the objects of her conquest, feeling more than a little accusatory of them just for leading her into this, but she kept forward. They were for Dash. She managed a smile. They were for Dash to apologize for... Well, she was getting them because she said she would, because Dash was in a bad mood, and because she screwed up somehow so she wanted to do something nice for her.

She kept her spirits up as she walked alone through the brushy woods, weaving her way along the erratic path she'd taken. She probably could have saved some time by not sight-seeing, but where was the fun in that? It was her first, and possibly only time out in the world, out of Equestria. Seeing what was new, what was different, what was possibly dangerous was exciting. So far she had seen lots of birds, but little else.

She heard the creak of a branch and looked upwards again. Up, high above her, sitting in the leafy boughs was a funny little creature. She widened her eyes a little to get a better look as it began to move along the branch, outwards, towards her. The way it moved, she knew immediately it was a monkey, but she had never seen a black monkey with white around the face and chest. It stared down at her when it reached the tip of the branch, then it hopped up and down a few times, making an excited call before leaping from the tree to another one. She noted its tail was ringed with white stripes as it dove into the forest.

"Neat!" Was Twilight's only response before she continued forward, mentally sketching the little creature. It's a good thing Applejack had considered quills and parchment important, she needed to take notes on what she was finding. Princess Celestia would find the information interesting. She walked for half a minute before she heard a thump by her side. She yelped, leaping away as she stared at the thing that had landed by her. It was a brown, hairy coconut.

She blinked her eyes rapidly and looked up. The monkey was back, watching her, holding a coconut above its tiny head. When her eyes met its eyes, it tossed the coconut away, and scampered off in the same direction as before. Twilight tracked it until it disappeared, then huffed quietly. She half considered walking after it, but decided it was more important to deliver the pineapples and go. She kept up the pace, glancing upwards to keep an eye out for more "falling coconuts".

It was because of this she didn't see the monkey run out of the brush, screaming wildly, making her leap back as it jumped up, grabbed two of the pineapples and flung them furiously at a tree trunk, splattering them. It immediately grabbed the last pineapple, making Twilight's jaw drop as it did just the same as the first two. "H-hey! What the hay do you think you're doing!" She demanded, leaping towards the rapidly hopping monkey as it smacked its hands together, screeching at her some more. That was it!

Those were *gifts* and the stupid thing was interrupting her! With a little growl she charged forward, and it tore into the forest.

Twilight used her magic as subconsciously as she always did to bend back branches and bushes, keeping an eye on the monkey that ran away from her. She leapt over bush after bush, adrenaline allowing her to ignore her fatigue as she tried to catch the monkey in her magical grip, but it was fast and dodgy.

The forest around her grew thicker as she went deeper, her unfocused mind allowing her to wonder without worry after the feisty little creature that destroyed her presents. She caught glimpse after glimpse of black and white fur, and dove towards it, fully intending to make the monkey apologize and possibly get her more pineapple.

Even on such a gray, cloudy day the skies and the land were still beautiful. Despite the mournful filter the land was still lush with color and life, and as always, Derpy Hooves was humming loudly, happily, and peacefully to herself as she fluttered among the clouds. It had been a good delivery. Sure she may have gotten lost on the way hunting down a particularly pretty colored bird she'd seen but she managed to make it to Cloudsdale before the deadline. All around her, the world seemed the same as ever, just a bit more gray than usual but sometimes a little darker weather was nice.

Sure she wasn't aware that it was an ominous sign set up under the orders of Princess Celestia to prepare the towns' leaders all over Equestria to receive some bad news, but all she knew it meant was that it was going to be a cool day when she got home, perfect for a little outdoor playtime with Dinky, and once it started to rain they could start their baking inside.

She dipped and dived among the gray clouds playfully, going between the gray filtered world below and the sunny day up above, giggling playfully to herself as she enjoyed the heat, then the cool, then the heat, then the cool, again and again.

She began to slow down, little by little, as a knot formed in her tummy. She kept her smile, but despite her apparent outward joy, and the off, kooky look she had, she could tell something was wrong. She couldn't tell what. It

was just a feeling that somewhere, something bad was about to impact her life.

Her thoughts immediately went to Dinky. She had gotten this feeling only once before while she was out, and when she'd returned she'd found her little girl splayed across the kitchen floor running a burning fever, having caught the flu in her several hours of absence. The panic in her stomach made it bubble as she willed herself to go faster. She had not taken to finding her daughter so pained very well, as Ponyville's doctor soon found out when she'd broken into the hospital at night to get medical attention.

Dinky was fine now, of course, but Derpy still never forgot the fear that had slid down her throat like an ice cube, cold, numbing, making it difficult to breath... Suddenly the cloudy day didn't seem so fun anymore. Suddenly she didn't want to go make muffins and go play hide and seek. She wanted to find her daughter and keep her in her embrace until the bad things went away.

She sucked in a deep breath, and her wings batted more quickly as she picked up speed. She was going to get home as quickly as she could, find her baby girl and keep her bundled up, no if's, and's, but's, or or's. She wouldn't have anything bad happen to the greatest thing in her life. She wouldn't let anything hurt her again.

She extended her front legs out, and began to pick up speed. She dared anything in the world to stop her now.

In the back of her mind, she was aware of the faint whistling sound behind her. In the back of her mind, she knew she should turn and look. But it wasn't until there was a violent hiss that made her ears ring did she actually turn and look.

Deep beyond the black pit of teeth and hunger was a realm where the damned reached out to drag her into the depths.

"Now where did you go...?" Twilight whispered to herself, quietly walking as she scanned around slowly, waiting for some sort of hint of black or white, some little monkey figure to appear. She kept her voice and hoof steps low as she stared around the clearing.

She lifted one hoof up, and was about to take a step forward until a pineapple came crashing down directly in front of her. She froze up, and stared straight up as she saw the ring-tailed monkey bounce on the branch twenty feet above her. She narrowed her eyes at the thing as it ran along the branches to the left, and she followed him quickly. She telekinetically picked up any rock she passed by and tried chunking them at the little creature, but she always hesitated and it ended up sailing too short.

Now the monkey would glance back at her every now and then, as if watching to see if she was following, and it saw she was. She was a mite bit angry at the little creature, especially now that her front legs were covered in pineapple debris. She stared at it as it leapt from branch to branch, leading her deeper and deeper into the forest.

Mentally she was losing track of where she was and where she was going, she was just focused on following the little creature in the trees. It soon leapt to the ground, and continued as the trees ended, giving way to rocky terrain and the steady rise of a mountain. If anything, this made Twilight more bold since the monkey now stood out among the gray stone, and she galloped upwards, leaping from stone-rise to stone-rise as the monkey did, slowly gaining on it until the ground sloped up sharply and it leapt, climbing up onto a ledge.

Twilight jumped up after it, struggling, legs kicking to catch herself, and she pushed herself onto the ledge. The monkey leapt to another ledge, then another, Twilight in rapid pursuit. It leapt to the final ledge available, a completely flat ridge that was just a several foot jump away. Twilight made the leap and landed right after the monkey as it scampered into the cave. She was about to chase, when she watched it slow its run down. It didn't look back at her, it stopped several feet in the cave and made a loud cry.

Twilight watched for a few moments, then made a sudden leap forward, causing the monkey to hop onto a raised rock, a broken piece of the roof that had rested in the middle of the cave. Twilight knew she had the monkey confronted, as it was no longer moving away, just staring at her. "Alright you little punk, you have a lot of trouble to make up for." She informed the little creature.

It stared at her quietly, and then she became aware of movement. From the darkness of the cavern, she watched over a dozen shapes emerge, all

small, all black and white little monkeys, some baring the ring tail, some just solid black, some with puffs of white on the tip. They all stared at her silently as she felt her advantage slip away.

The sixteen or so monkeys watched her quietly, and she made a move to step back, but they went absolutely wild with shrieks and howling until she came back forward. She stared at them with wide eyes until she saw one more monkey approach from the back. It awkwardly approached her on two legs, and in its arms was a very tiny ball of white and black. It walked towards Twilight slowly, heavily, as if the world's misery sat on the little animal's shoulders, and it laid the puff right in front of Twilight.

The unicorn stared for a moment, then leaned down. It was a baby monkey. A miniature of the ones surrounding her, and as she watched its little chest rise and fall rapidly, watched mucus run from its tiny nose and ears, she could tell it was incredibly sick.

The monkey on the rock made a long, mournful cooing noise, and watched her with wide, pleading eyes. She knew now why it attacked her gifts and let her keep close. It was leading her. "I..." She whispered, gently rubbing the little monkey with her hoof. Its breathing softened, and its eyes opened a crack. "You want me to help your baby?" She asked the monkey on the rock. It beat its tiny hands against the rock beneath it as it bobbed its head rapidly.

She thought back to the birds. All the birds and the animals. The way they trusted her, and had worshipped her. They knew they were safe around her. Did they really think she could help them though? "I don't know how to cure illnesses..." Twilight whispered in half shame as she stared down at the tiny monkey in front of her.

She couldn't help but feel pity, feel sad, feel useless. It was just a tiny baby, and its caretaker had gone so far to find her to get help. Not to mention it was saddening seeing the little thing so ill. It terrified her, having already witnessed pain and death... Its breathing grew rapid again. Twilight quietly looked up to the monkeys.

They all stood on their hind legs, as one, and had their arms held out. She could only stare as they brought their hands over their hearts and made tight fists in front of them. Then they turned their little hands outwards and their fingers spread out, as if blossoming, and they clasped their hands

together again, pointed their fingers upwards, and slowly their hands rose above their hands as if making a line. Just above their foreheads, their hands spread, their fingers stretched out like a blooming flower.

Twilight watched them do it again, silently, as one. It was like they were telling her something. She watched them perform again, and noticed their fists started in their hearts and blossomed, like love, like care, like friendship...

... Magic.

She stared more intently as she watched their motions. Their hands spread like blooming flowers, like life coming forth, and then they concentrated it into a line, and moved it upwards, out of their forehead, where it bloomed again. They performed once more, and Twilight finally stared down at the baby monkey. In her heart, in her pool of magic, she touched her own feelings, and slowly spread it out like they'd showed her, pushing her feelings of care and love into it as she then quickly concentrated it into a line, pushing it up the direct path to her horn, which she leaned down and touched to the babe, and when her horn sparked as magic ran up it, she spread the magic quickly over the monkey's shivering form. She squeezed her eyes shut as she felt heat in front of her face, as she surrounded the monkey in magic charged with her love and care, and then let out a quiet gasp as the magic she'd charged finally gave out.

She looked up slowly, watching as the seventeen monkeys surrounded the baby. The one that had brought the baby forward reached a hand out slowly to touch the child, and a tiny hand reached out and grasped it back. Twilight felt the pity turn quickly to relief as the tiny monkey rigidly got itself off the floor, its surrounding family bouncing and chattering wildly as the tiny monkey climbed into its mother's arms. Before Twilight knew it, she was mobbed, being held and climbed all over by the excited little creatures, who pet her and hugged her while she chuckled softly. "I'm," She gulped, and they quieted down and stared up at her, the one that she'd followed grooming her mane with his tiny fingers as he listened, "I'm very happy I could help you, and thank you so much for teaching me that spell, but you kind of took my gifts to a friend away from me, and on top of that I-" she glanced out the cave. Where the hay was she? "Oh dear." She whispered. "I think I'm lost..."

The monkeys glanced to each other, then began to chatter again as they took hold of her tail and mane, and lead her out of the cave.

The world felt cold. So very cold. So very numb and cold. Hundreds of eyes, demented, violent, blood-thirsty, seeking another to put through the very same hell they experienced. She could see them. She could see them rising from the pools of frigid water, stiff with frost as they reached forward from the hell mouth, screaming at her, commanding her to join them...

She went totally numb, her mind blank, and her wings stopped flapping. She felt like a rock as the gate soared overhead, and all she could see was the world spinning and flipping rapidly. Her head her head sweet Celestia *her head*. She heard the screams, the accusatory roars of pain, the pained shrieks of ponies she had never met who hated her and wanted to devour her simply because she existed in a world they could no longer be apart of.

Their rage and their hatred had no place in this world but she could feel it more clearly than she could feel her own screams in her throat. She felt her heart constrict, her stomach squeeze in pain, she felt the urge to vomit and cry at the same time, she felt the need to simply die and relieve herself of the anger they'd directed at her. She could hear them, she could feel them, she could imagine the chilled waters and the frigid stares of multi-mouthed beasts as they ripped her apart, offering no ounce of mercy.

Even worse she could hear them. She could hear from her past. She could hear their mocking insults, she could hear their soft, sadistic whispers behind her back, she could see their pointing hooves and cruelly grinning faces, she could see every pony that had ever hurt her in some way, all their faces, laughing, pointing, shouting, insulting, belittling, shoving, hitting, spitting, all the ponies who had ever made her sad, all the ponies who had driven her to a point her life before her wonderful daughter, before Ponyville, a point in life where she'd go home, and consider just putting the pain to an end...

Just nestle up in a good corner and drain the bleach, slash the neck, throw herself into the fire pit and be taken to a peaceful world where having one bad eye didn't draw so much negative attention, where the odd things she would say went unnoticed, where nopony sought her out just to hurt her...

These emotions, these memories, they swirled in her head with the screams, the accusing stares, the icy water, and when she stabilized she saw the ground rising rapidly.

Yes...

... Relief...

No more pain. No more suffering. No more names or shoving or pushing or shouting and screaming and cold and pointing and staring and laughing and hitting and Dinky and bullies and hell and... And Dinky... And Dinky...

"Dinky..." She whispered to herself, her voice working through a cracked, choked throat, filled with nausea and self-loathing, and the screams began to die. No no no no no no no no no no no no no no no *no no nonononononono*.

No...

No she couldn't die. She could never die. She had a little girl. A baby girl that needed her. That loved her. That didn't judge her or make fun of her. She had a little baby girl she loved more than anything at home. No, she couldn't die...

'Derpy, you really need to work on those corkscrews. I know you see funny but they get the clouds out of the way the easiest.' She heard the voice in her head as she saw the ground rising ever closer. 'Just watch me and follow my lead. It's not so hard!' Rainbow Dash insisted.

'Y'all need a place to stay and work for a bit 'fore ya get started here, we got some room in the barn loft. Cows're quiet, pretty friendly too.' Big Mac had offered idly upon seeing her consider a 'For Sale' sign on a house.

'I don't give a crap if your eye is off or not! You can still see out of it so you should be able to spot a dropped package!' The post office boss had reprimanded her, acting like there was nothing wrong with her eye and it was solely her at fault, not the eye, just her, as a pony.

The screams stopped, the tears stopped flowing as the memories were pushed aside by Rainbow Dash, and Big Mac, and her boss, and all the other ponies who welcomed her and her daughter to Ponyville

shamelessly. No, she couldn't die. She couldn't die, they needed their post-mare. Dinky needed her mother, Rainbow Dash needed Winter Wrap-Up help, Big Mac needed apples carried into town, her boss needed his hardest worker on the job.

She rolled slowly forward, wings and legs extended, and she felt herself catch air and begin to slow. She flapped her wings several times, catching air, and she caught herself two-hundred feet above the ground. She sucked in a deep breath, her body regaining its energy, and she flew forward, wiping the tears from her eyes as determination filled her once more.

Yes, she needed to go be a good mom. She needed to wrap Dinky up tight in her arms. She began to flap rapidly forwards, rising up again, head swiveling frantically as she recovered enough to understand that what she'd been through was unnatural. Had that been some sort of cruel spell? She remembered a hiss, and whistling noise...

That whistling noise...

Derpy turned her head rapidly around, ears cocked. She heard the whistling more clearly now. It was behind her, up in the clouds, and it was coming for her.

From the clouds emerged fifty full feet of vicious predator. It was long, tube-like, like an enormous flying snake, its head having a solid bone plate with no eyes that could be seen, the bottom half dirty brown skin. Its whole body was one enormous muscle, covered in murky dark blue scales, with two great brown tentacles coming from just beneath the bone-plate that made the top half of its head, each antennae topped with a bush of brown hair. All along the top of its body were air-slicing spines, and the bottom looked like it was covered in bony hooks, pointed towards the direction it flew.

The enormous leviathan opened its mouth wide, revealing an endless throat full of razors and knives, and from the very depths of its stomach it let loose thousands of screams, thousands of angry, terrifying screams. Derpy stared for several long seconds, and her mind blanked as the enormous monster made that violent hissing noise, its scales lifting from its main body to release a spray of cloud-stuff that propelled it faster towards its prey.

No, she could not die. She could not be food. She had to stay. There were ponies who counted on her. One in particular, the most beautiful, the cutest, and most loving of them all, needed her.

The nausea building in her was threatening to erupt outwards as the thing flew closer, and the barest of seconds left she threw herself above the creature with a rapid flap of her gray wings, narrowly avoiding the creature as it flew beneath her, its wide, twelve-foot wide body racing underneath herself as she tried to catch herself, smashed against the leviathan's body, felt pain shoot up her body as the thick, spined scales scraped across her body before she was thrown off as it thrashed its body, forcing her to catch herself again before she fell.

She bat her eyes rapidly, and out of her one cocked eye she saw it turned rapidly, mouth opening to swallow the fluff hanging above them, and its body grew thick and expanded as it devoured the clouds. It then turned rapidly towards her, lunging down as she sped back towards the direction of home. She could hear the whistling behind her as the wind slid along its spined body. It screamed again as it chased the tiny pony that would ease its hunger, and Derpy felt her body shudder as the scream reached her in full, the images of laughing, mocking ponies filling her head until she flushed them out as she tried to remember Dinky.

She *tried* to remember Dinky, but the screams seemed to darken the picture in her head, numbing her mind to the happy memories. She felt so cold, so so cold as she was dipped into the ice-waters, only to be ripped out again and impaled again and again with a sharpened splinter of bone, as a creature twice her height watched her with a mocking smile made only of teeth and no lips-

She could vaguely hear herself screaming in agony as she thrashed in the air, falling again, the enormous sky-snake diving downwards with its mouth open, intending to swallow her whole and send her to its master's domain, but Derpy felt her own hooves smash into her forehead, blinding her for a moment and making her ears ring as the images and memories were driven out. The need to crash, to die, to throw herself into the beast's maw disappeared as she caught herself again, forcing her wings to flap despite how little she felt through them.

She trusted her own body and instinct to guide her as she flew, fighting the feeling of worthlessness and avoiding the suicidal thoughts that filled her mind. She had to remember there were ponies who needed her... She did not need to die, she did not want to die, she had to go to her daughter, that was all that mattered.

She spun left, wincing as she felt one of the creatures large antennae crack her across the back, sending painful spasms up her body before she opened her eyes to watch it twist, turned, angling towards her, climbing the skies rapidly as it kept its mouth wide open to swallow her. She kicked herself off its still flowing body, sending her not into its mouth but in the battering-ram like plate that made the front of its head. She avoided the scream, but as it crashed into her, spots filled her eyes as she felt her front left leg explode in pain. She began to fall again, but she flapped her wings hard to race away from the beast as her leg flowed underneath her limply, unresponsive and pulsing with blinding pain.

Derpy Hooves could still hear it as it corrected itself in the air and began to fly after her, cutting through the air with phenomenal ease as it aimed for her. Her stomach roared with sickness as the pain in her leg seeped into her panic, poisoning her with fear, with the terror of knowing it was going to catch her, hurt her, eat her, drag her to that place...

No... No... She needed to get to Dinky... She couldn't allow herself to die. She could never die. She had to get to Dinky, she had to be there to protect and love her daughter. She couldn't stop the tears from flowing though. The monster behind her cut beneath her, angling upwards to swallow her from below, but she started diving to the left, narrowing missing being eaten or hit again.

Her leg sang with pain as new pressure was put on it and she had to twist her head to gag and retch, holding her stomach back for now even as the leg told her it hurt and did everything it could to get her to stop and fix it. She couldn't fix it, not now... She had to get home... She had to get to Dinky...

Sweep. Straighten. Lunge. Twist. Kick. Sweep back. Block.

Pinkie's eyes were hardened as she examined Dash, watching the dance as their moves slowly became less slow and awkward. Their attacks and movements were growing more and more practiced as they swung and countered, Pinkie growing more aggressive as her grip on the handle became more firm, surprising Dash at a turn or two whereas Dash was learning how hard to swing, where to swing from, what angles work best...

Low and sweeping were her preferred strikes, they didn't strain the neck as much as overhead attacks, though the power was lost in the swing since she fought gravity. She'd made three hits against Pinkie, all three gently dragging, hardly painful hits that would leave a nice cut, but against a trained, armored warrior there wouldn't be enough to stop them. She needed to practice more, get used to more powerful hits rather than rely on low, wide, easily blocked hits.

She was also getting tired. The both of them were. Pinkie more visibly, even despite being a near endless reservoir of energy, the training and unusual movements were exhausting her now. She blocked another swing and stepped back, raising a hoof. Dash stopped her forward push, and shook her head a little when Pinkie dropped her sword and began to pant.

"Goodness, are you two finally done?" Rarity asked with a heavy sigh of relief as Dash dropped her sword as well. The two swords glowed, and pressed into one, sheath and all, and Dash reattached it to her harness. "I should have said something earlier but really, *practicing sword-fighting with actual swords*? What if your sheaths slipped off?"

"Oh poo, you worry too much." Pinkie waved a hoof to blow it off, panting heavily before she rolled onto her back and groaned. "I'm a tiiiired pony..."

"Yeah," Dash agreed, laying down immediately, "my neck hurts. My jaw hurts. Sword-fighting's tough..."

"Looks like it works the muscles somethin' fierce. That actually looks like it makes ya pretty tough, maybe I should join in." Applejack mused quietly as Rarity shook her head rapidly at the thought.

"Don't go encouraging them! Somepony could end up really hurt!" She insisted, even as Applejack sighed.

"Rarity, if we get into a fight with anypony who don't like us, who might also probably be armed, we'd still end up pretty hurt. At least this way we can prepare..." Applejack pointed out. Rarity fluttered her eyes, and opened her mouth to argue, before turning to face Fluttershy for support.

"*Please* tell them they're crazy!" She whispered. Fluttershy had been listening the whole time, and calmly pawed at the sand.

"Um, I'm sorry Rarity... But when Applejack puts it that way," she glanced upwards to the farm pony, whose eyes widened a little in surprise, "I think maybe I should learn too? Any way I can help..." Rarity's jaw dropped as she stared at the mare who slowly shrunk in on herself at the surprised looks she was getting.

"Um, Sugarcube? I don't mean to offend none but, Fluttershy, combat ain't exactly where a pony like ya'll should be." Applejack gently nudged Fluttershy, who lifted her head up quickly.

"B-but that's why I should learn! If I ever get caught, or get us in trouble, and, um, I need to... Be there... I can with a..." She trailed off and stared down at her hooves. Applejack sighed softly, not entirely sure how to comfort the poor pony as she glanced to Rarity, looking for help.

They all yelped as the blade landed between them, Rarity and Applejack jumping back as Fluttershy completely froze up. Dash stretched and groaned, twisting her neck to make it crack. "Hey, anypony who wants to give it a try is free to. But later. Right now we need to go now that we're done." She then paused, and glanced around slowly. "Oh Dash you *idiot*." She hissed, turning to face the jungle, her eyes widening in panic as she started to move towards the treeline.

"Dash?" Applejack watched her friend grumble as she tried to make her way to the forest.

"Good job Dash!" The Pegasus' tone took a cutting edge as her friends joined her side, "Let the savior of the world go off by herself! In weird, dangerous land no less! Wonderful Dash!" The blue mare hissed as she popped her neck as she tried to gallop faster. "*Twilight!*" The girl shouted as loud as she could, preparing her aching body to bound forward.

"Yeah?" The five of them turned their heads rapidly as they spotted a familiar unicorn walking down the beach towards them, joined by a small troupe of fuzzy little friends, four of which sat on her back, all holding pineapples.

Fluttershy loudly gasped, and galloped the distance to meet Twilight to smile down at one of the little monkeys that was walking by Twilight. It made a rapid chittering noise, and Fluttershy squeaked happily as several of them climbed onto her back, much as they did Twilight. "Oh Twilight, these little friends are wonderful! However did you find them?" She cooed longingly as one of the monkeys on her back cradled a pineapple to its chest to squeeze one of her ears.

"They actually found me. This one right here-" she leaned back and her ear flicked, whacking the one sitting closest to her neck in its face, making it screech and playfully grab for the offending appendage, "- found me. He needed help."

"Aww," Fluttershy whispered, touching her nose to one of the curious monkey's hands, "what sort of help did the little guys need?" Everypony but Dash joined in to meet the monkeys as Twilight told her little story. Fluttershy was absolutely horrified to hear one of the monkeys had been near death.

"That's just awful! What did you do? Is the little thing alright?" She asked, and Twilight bobbed her head rapidly. Dash listened from the distance, oddly quiet.

"He's just fine. I had no idea what to do at first, but somehow these little guys," the monkeys all glanced towards Twilight as she mentioned them, "I have no idea how to explain it but they knew the exact motions I needed to take to use a healing spell." The monkeys began to chatter some, and Rarity's jaw dropped a little.

"That's impossible! They're simple animals! Only unicorns can use magic!" She heard a harsh cough, turned, and gave a meek smile to Rainbow Dash. "And a certain few of us who have been picked by Alicorns..." Dash nodded at that.

"Besides, Twilight," Dash finally spoke up from the back, "you said it yourself, there's no magic here. The leylines here are pretty much gone.

There's no way they could know what magic is much less know how to use it. How could they have-

She reared back as one of the monkeys leapt forward, a pineapple held out in its tiny hands. She stared at it for several seconds, then past it to Twilight. Twilight smiled softly and the rest of the monkeys leapt forward, each dropping a pineapple right in front of her. Dash was now sitting in front of a pile of eighteen pineapples. "I, um, found your pineapples." Twilight blushed a little.

Dash leaned over and gently sniffed the pile of pineapples and looked up to the unicorn. Twilight spoke up again, "I think it worked out in the end, got you six times as many Pineapples as I meant to thanks to these little guys."

Dash calmly took a pineapple, and pulled her blade out. The group watched her slash open the pineapple. "Fresh." She noted as she eyed it. Using the sword, she began to carve it, messily, and core it. When she finished cleaning it up, she took a bite, and the edge in her stance calmed. She sighed heavily, then gave Twilight a calm, grateful smile. "It's good."

Twilight smiled proudly, and approached her guardian with a happy gait. "Good. I'm still sorry." Dash shot up, eyes widened when she felt the tip of Twilight's snout touch her neck just below her jawbone, in the barest hint of a kiss, and she sat down to join in on nibbling the pineapple. Dash lowered her head to watch and mumbled something that was probably not understandable in any language.

It took several minutes to cut up and clean up the pineapples so they could be transported more easily, but with Pinkie Pie helping out things went by easily. Dash was surprisingly quiet the entire time, spending a good amount of time watching Twilight and Fluttershy get climbed around on by the monkeys. Pinkie Pie didn't draw any attention to it, she wasn't feeling talkative either due to being so tired, but she was at least humming.

After several minutes, Twilight dismissed the monkeys, realizing they were wasting time just standing there. The monkeys hopped away, all giving Twilight one last little rub of thanks and got to the trees. Fluttershy smiled them off as Applejack and Rarity brought the dragons around, and using a few spare containers they packed whatever pineapple they could manage.

When they were finally ready to take off, Twilight began to walk over to Rattler. The dragon and Dash watched her curiously. "Twilight, aren't we riding Dick?" Rainbow Dash asked, making Twilight turn to face her with a slightly confused expression.

"Oh, right." Twilight suddenly nodded. "We were thinking about rotating flight partners between each landing." She explained, then paused. What had she just learned today? She looked back to Dash with an apologetic expression, but the Pegasus had already turned away and was walking towards Dick. Twilight couldn't see her face, but Fluttershy, next to her, looked concerned.

Fluttershy looked to Twilight longingly for just a moment, then fixed her expression and approached her slowly. She knew what she had to do. She had to be a good friend. She had to be a good girl in this. What mattered was that her friends were happy, safe, and taken care of. "Twilight?" She whispered, getting the unicorn's attention. "I think you should go with Dash."

"But I promised I'd ride with you..." Twilight whispered back, making Fluttershy sigh heavily.

"I know Twilight, and that's very sweet of you, but I think you should be with your Guardian." Fluttershy wished she could be in Dash's position, but she returned Twilight's gentle smile as she ran up to catch to Pinkie and tell her about the change in plans. Fluttershy watched a sad smile as Pinkie nodded enthusiastically, running back over to Fluttershy as Twilight nudged Rainbow Dash from behind.

"Hm?" The blue mare turned to face Twilight with a somewhat dull expression, which quickly changed to one of semi-annoyance. "Aren't you riding with Fluttershy?" She asked with a tiny sigh, and Twilight shook her head slowly.

"Change of plans, she wants me to ride with- well, she wants to ride with Pinkie Pie. She said, um," she didn't want to point out that Dash had been acting moody about this, she didn't want to get her angry or defensive, so she had to think fast, "she said we should all learn to fly the dragons and I should learn from you since you know how to fly Dick, and she's going with Pinkie since Pinkie can fly Rattler." She explained in a speedy tone with a semi-nervous grin that made Dash raise an eyebrow.

"I guess that makes sense. We are pretty tired from sparring anyways." Dash murmured, making Twilight nod rapidly, trying to hide her enthusiastic nervousness.

"That actually sounds like a right good idea." Applejack called from on top Hayseed. Rarity, sitting behind her, suddenly perked up, and not happily. "It'd be good for the lot of us to all learn how to fly a dragon. Rarity, switch with me." Applejack set the reins down and turned, but was held still by Rarity's front legs.

"Absolutely not!" The white pony spoke in part horror, part nervousness. "I certainly don't mind riding the beast but I am a fashion-designer! My experience with animals goes as far as a domestic cat, a toothless alligator, and a baby dragon with a short attention span with lazy eyelids!" Twilight snorted in amusement, covering her mouth with one hoof. "I trust you to fly Hayseed because you've had experience with animals well before you met with your precious dragon, and then of course he sees you as his best friend. I am not trading seats and that's final!"

Applejack stared flatly at Rarity for what must have been twenty seconds before she turned, wrenching Rarity's grip off her, and she fit her hooves under Rarity's arms, making the fashionista sweat nervously. "We're trading and that's final." Applejack growled in a low voice that made Rarity squeak.

"I'm not angry you know." Dash sluggishly climbed up Dick's back, her whole body aching. She shouldn't have started cutting those pineapples, it just aggravated her neck further. On top of that she still felt weird about Twilight riding with Fluttershy. Or when she was about to. She still felt weird, and it was incredibly difficult to explain...

"Well, I," Twilight sat in the saddle, nervously taking ahold of the reins. Dick turned his head to look at her curiously, and she could have sworn he was smiling when he turned away, "it's like... Um, well, do you want to ride with me?" There, successfully passed it on. Wait, did that make her mean?

"..." Dash calmly slid behind Twilight, and the unicorn could have sworn her companion was deliberately brushing her sides with her legs as Dash hugged Twilight from behind and calmly set her head on the back of Twilight's neck. Twilight froze up immediately, holding the reins tightly as Dash sighed. "I want you to be safe." Dash finally admitted, letting her body

relax against Twilight's. It was comfortable. It was warm. "I shouldn't have let you go into the forest alone."

Twilight frowned softly, and turned back to look to Dash as best as she could. "I'm a big girl Dash, I'm alright..." She whispered softly. Dash was being surprisingly soft. Maybe it was because she was so tired from... Sparring she'd said?

She wasn't just tired. Rainbow Dash felt drained. Between the sparring and figuring out her own emotions, she just wanted to take a nap. Lucky her, Twilight was surprisingly soft. Yeah, they'd need to beef her up some if they planned to do physical work. "I could have sent a clone with you. I'd forgotten this isn't Equestria, that it isn't as safe... Nopony can go out alone, especially you, but I was the first to make the mistake..."

"And nothing bad happened! I helped save a life, I got you your pineapples, and-"

"And what if you got attacked!" Twilight froze a little at Dash's hiss. "I'm supposed to guard you and keep you safe! If something had happened, I wouldn't have been there." The hooves tightened around her, and Twilight sighed softly.

"Dash... Listen?" Dash lifted her chin to face Twilight with a glare of self-loathing, but it melted away as Twilight stroked her hair, and sighed again. "Nothing happened. That's the point, something bad may have happened, but nothing did, and you're right, I may have been hurt if you weren't there... But we thought of it now." Twilight smiled as Dash just looked unsure. "So, yeah, you're right, I need to stay safe, and what better way than to have my guardian by my side?" She ran the hoof down Dash's back and squeezed her into her side gently.

Dash winced a little, but managed a little smile. "Okay. But I'm not going to leave your side. I freaked out enough with you gone, and Pinkie was the only thing here keeping me from rushing off to find you, but from now on I'm going to stay nearby and keep you safe." The Pegasus whispered and gently snuggled into Twilight's back. Twilight smiled softly and turned to look at the rest of the group.

Applejack was smiling as she whispered instructions to Rarity, using her own arms to hold Rarity's up as the white unicorn trembled, taking ahold of

the reins. Hayseed was looking back at her, making soft, comforting cooing sounds as Rarity just whimpered quietly. "Okay okay Rarity, you can do this. You're a strong young mare, strong and beautiful. You can tame a broken sewing machine, you can tame a dragon." She whispered to herself.

"Right then, ya just gotta be firm with 'im. He's got tough skin meanin' he ain't gonna feel ya tappin' him around. If you wanna go somewhere, ya gotta tug. Got that sugarcube?" Applejack asked, moving her hooves to cling to Rarity now.

"Darling, right now I'm all ears and nerves, you don't need to tell me twice." Rarity whimpered.

Beyond them, Fluttershy was holding the reins carefully, examining them as if they were ancient artifacts written in a different tongue, all while Pinkie talked her ear off, "-which is why I thought giving more gradual tugs was a good thing but then I realized that I need to be heard *now* which is why I started making sure to tug harder but you can't tug too hard or it annoys her and I can tell when she's annoyed because she starts to growl and get really shaky which might have just been turbulence but I noticed it only happen if I tried tugging really hard so-"

"I'll try and learn quickly, Rattler." Fluttershy whispered to the dragon, who made a growling noise that was either a purr of pleasure at having such a sweet pilot or a rumble of hunger because *somedragon* stole some of her fish!

"Okay, so, Dick responds pretty quickly. Just be sure you tug hard enough for him to feel it, otherwise you won't get anything." Dash explained, using her hoof to guide Twilight's arm back to tightly tug the rein, causing Dick to turn until he was facing Rarity and Applejack. "Right. And if things start to get shaky, just slack the reins and he'll straighten himself out, or a part of the sky that isn't so turbulent." Dash explained, and Twilight nodded. "So, since you're kind of the leader here, you wanna, y'know, lead the charge?" Dash asked.

Twilight looked forward, her eyes glowing until her pupils disappeared, and she stared down the coast towards the west. She tugged Dick's rein until he faced the direction she did, and she turned to the others. "Okay, is everypony ready?" She asked, and got a few nods from Fluttershy, but

Rarity was shaking too hard to tell. "Alright, on my mark, we lift off. Three," She held up the reins, "two," she heard the others behind her get prepared, "one," there was a whoosh of air, and Rarity was screaming as she took off on Hayseed, Fluttershy and Rattler right behind her. "I-I didn't say mark! *GUYS!*" Dash grabbed the reins quickly as Dick watched the others in confusion, and snapped them. In a moment, they were launched into the air, chasing after the others as Twilight retook the reins. "It was worth a try."

"Those jerks." Twilight huffed as they started to catch up, Fluttershy trying to talk Rarity into stopping screaming as Applejack tried covering her mouth with a hoof.

His flight began to slow as he heard it again. His ears lifted up high, turning rapidly to listen in on the high, keen noise he'd heard twice now over the past ten minutes. As he stopped his flight to land on the cloud he'd been aiming for, Schola quickly joined him. "So I'm not the only one hearing that?" She asked him curiously.

His closed his eyes and perked up his ears, ignoring all the activity around him of his team of fliers training, taking a deep, meditative breath to clear his mind as Rukafelth had taught him. He heard it again, and he turned his head sharply in the direction it came from, Schola now watching too. "It's one of Anemone's beasts." Shallom stated, low, his voice a whisper of imminent danger as Schola quickly turned and signaled for all their troops to quiet down and gather around.

It took less than a minute for the whole flight team to gather, and watch their tense leader as he sucked in a deep breath. "Schola, we're going to go take a look. If it's too close, we may have to drive it away or kill it. Get Blaze Squad prepared for scouting and possible combat." He turned his head to face the gathered colts and mares, and gave a sharp snort through his nostrils. "I don't think I need to tell you what sort of danger we're in right now. If you see the creature, *hide*. Do not listen to it, and do not attract its attention. Chances are low that we'll even have to engage it, but if we do and it somehow finds its way in here, under no circumstance are you to join us. No pony deserves the fate it will deliver to you." He explained quickly, sharply, and every ear in the crowd turned up as they heard the scream.

Shallom was quick to leap off the cloud and head towards the edge of the cloud valley they had taken, standing at the ready as he felt his wings flicker and twitch, agitated by the high amounts of magic they were sensing. He turned his head as Schola approached, four armored ponies next to her, each with a flame symbol on their helmets and the sides of their armor. He gave them small nods of recognition, nothing fancy, nothing spectacular, this was a mission, not a briefing. "Let's get this over with. I do not want to spend more time than I have to handling hellgates."

Beyond their temporary home, Shallom could see the world had gone oddly gray. He did not know the signs of Equestria, but he was familiar with the concept of an "omen". They flew south, listening to the screams of the great beast they were looking for. It was not difficult to track, it was a noisy thing, but seeing it forced Shallom to lock his muscles to stop himself from shuddering. The massive beast was unlike anything they had ever seen. They were used to their own relatively small dragons, they'd even handled the intelligent dragons here rather well...

But this was a mindless, ever-hungry portal to the dark place they were currently watching. No heed for morality, no base instinct beyond "devour", no intelligence beyond predation. This was just a thing meant to hurt the inhabitants of the world, specifically engineered to cause fear and pain.

And even worse was that it was dangerously close. These were the sort of things that sensed civilization and hunted it down, meaning it probably knew where Shallom's entire squad was right now. That meant that they could be breached at any moment, and a good number of his soldiers could wind up dead flying blind through the cloud-field.

He could not have that. He narrowed his eyes and stared intensely as it suddenly dipped downwards, mouth wide open as it emitted another horrifying shriek, and it was only his sharp eyes that saw it was chasing something. A pony... A little Pegasus. He narrowed his body and flew faster, Schola and the Blaze Squadron matching his pace. It was not a Pegasus he recognized, unarmored, flight erratic, looking somewhat pained...

"It's trying to get that Equestrian Pony!" Schola gasped beside him. What else could it have been? The only Golding Ponies here were soldiers, all in

their stations. This was just a lost Equestrian pony. "Sir, what should we do?" Schola asked, watching the scene carefully as they slowed.

Shallom chewed his lower lip slowly. On one hand, it seemed like if they just let this go on, one of their enemies would be dead and the monster would be distracted. On the other... Nothing deserved such a fate. Not to mention he had some admiration for the Equestrian's craftiness, which he assumed was how this one managed to stay alive... The Pegasus's flying was incredibly erratic, and would have been exhausting to do in full armor, but it didn't seem to stop them as they dipped low and immediately shot up, avoiding the great mouth before it turned upwards, only to dive once more to avoid a scream, twist to the left, and completely slip down its side. The leviathan wasn't fooled though, and turned quickly to chase, knowing where the pony was...

"We're going to kill the beast. Whether the Equestrian lives or dies is in its own hooves. Stay close to each other, and watch for weak points." He ordered, and in a moment the color-barrier was shattered as he turned into a living lightning bolt.

He watched through the observation window calmly, easing his queasy stomach by remembering Celestia's words. He had to repeat them to himself constantly when he first stepped into the room to watch just to keep himself from running. He'd heard the others talking about this male endlessly, calling him a true hero, calling him brave, saying he thought about the others before himself in the face of pain and death.

They say he'd faced a monster.

What did it mean to face a monster? What was the appropriate way to face a monster? He'd heard them talking about him like he had, despite Celestia being the one to burn it off the face of the planet, slain the monster, he had killed it and brought it to its knees, that yes he may have had help from a couple of the other Ponyvillers, but he had been the one to release the cows and the sheep and the chickens, to run straight to town to warn them of the danger, and turn around to land the crippling blow on it.

What if he hadn't released all the animals? Would they have still lived, since the beast was focused on him? What if he hadn't taken it to town, had

used the instruments he'd already had to slaughter the creature? Would he still be as much of a hero? That was a question that couldn't be answered now.

There was no doubt this stallion on the operating table had been brave in not thinking solely of himself. Already being called a hero... Would more ponies be heralded as heroes for facing these monsters? What about in the war? What would make them heroes in war? Slaying one enemy? Slaying five? Slaying twenty? Were numbers even a factor? If five Equestrians took down one heavily armed opponent, would the five Equestrians be heroes or would they just be soldiers? What if one heavily armed Equestrian took down five unarmed enemies?

What made you a hero? What made you brave?

Did it even matter? Did personal glory have a place in a country-wide war? If what the Twilight girl had said was correct, then they weren't just fighting for personal reasons, for money, or even for personal freedom, they were fighting for the very existence of Equestria itself. Was it selfish to want renown in a war that could mean life or death for Equestria? For the world?

What had Celestia said? 'The world is much bigger than you that you think. You may be used to having such a carefree, taken-care-of life, but keep in mind that etiquette, manners, and expectations are not beneath you. You've hurt somepony tonight, have you ever thought about the other ponies you may have hurt? Made them angry, or sad, or disappointed?' It took him a long while to let that sink in. He didn't want to think he had done anything wrong, he still didn't want to think such a thing, but looking into his past, looking at the way ponies stood around him compared to, say, a heavily armored, stern-faced guard, he could see no pony was relaxed around him.

"It seems like I keep catching you at the wrong moments." He turned his head quickly to face the softly smiling Princess Celestia. She walked into the room and shut the door behind her, joining him at the window to stare at the figure on the table below. "I've been catching you thinking more. Is that a good thing?"

"I'd dare say not." He answered with a weary sigh, turning his head away from the window when fresh blood leaked onto the table. "It's been keeping me too preoccupied to enjoy myself lately."

"Enjoy yourself how?" The Princess asked with a soft nudge. She was the only one who could get away with that with him. Well, she was the only one who could. Now he held his tongue more often and let it brush off, no matter how completely undignified it made him feel when any other pony did it.

"I've been turning away company more and more now that I've been seeing they're only interested in my furniture and food, parties feel much less entertaining now that I'm letting other ponies talk about themselves, and I can't quite shake the feeling that no pony has any real interest in me." He admitted, watching the doctors and nurses work quickly to set bones and tie up stitches after he was closed up.

"I'd say I have an interest in you." Celestia smiled gently.

"You have an interest in everypony. Everypony else avoids me like the plague unless they want a favor." He sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Letting his pride down had hurt more than stubbing his hoof. He felt a lot wiser, but he wasn't sure he liked the pain that wisdom came with. He missed the days of simply not caring.

"You've changed."

"Into a depressing, agitated, highly annoyed unicorn that can't stop reading. I've never been so bookish looking into these humility and friendship concepts. I spend most of my time wishing you hadn't given me that talk and that I was in the concert hall right now catching up on Ray Starlight's latest opera, but thanks to you, I'm down here considering heroism." He smirked in amusement at that. He felt more hollow than anything, now that he looked in on himself. It felt like the only pony he could talk to on a personal level was Celestia, and that's because she knew why he'd gone through these mood swings.

"Oh dear Prince, you're just like a little caterpillar, give yourself time and-"

"- I'll bloom into a handsome and wonderful butterfly, I know *I know*. I've never felt this way before and it's been one uncomfortable pitfall after another to 'discovering myself' as you put it again and again. Do you feel like this all the time?" He asked her curiously, and Celestia let out a deep, heavy sigh.

"At times, but most especially now that all this is happening." She stared at Big Mac as they gently cleaned him of blood and pus, the doctor now washing his hooves.

"All this?" He repeated.

"The attacks, the wars, my student running off..."

"Speaking of Twilight," they both turned to face the small dragon entering the room, holding a clipboard and a quill as he shut the door, "she asked me to be your personal assistant and, no offense Princess, but you haven't exactly been using me to my fullest. I get that you're almighty and all powerful, but you could at least throw me a bone or somethin'." Spike walked in, standing next to Celestia, opposite of Prince Blueblood.

"My apologies Spike, I've been having difficulties coming up with tasks for you. If this were any normal day I'd have you booked solid for a week, but until I know exactly what I need to do..." Celestia left it at that.

"Ergh, an entire week? Maybe not then, I need to practice pumping up for Rarity." Spike grinned at the thought. Blueblood glanced to the little dragon in surprised. Yes, he was Twilight's assistance, and Twilight was Rarity's friend, he'd most certainly know her...

"How is Miss Rarity since she last threw cake all over me?" He asked, his tone not losing its royal, that is to say, snooty, edge.

Spike raised an eyebrow at the Prince, "Not that it means anything to you, but she's been doing great. You've actually inspired a lot of her more, uh, 'gothic' designs." He smirked a little, but Blueblood didn't notice.

"Hm, well, happy endings all around then." He watched them wheel Big Mac out of the operating room, and he quietly went back to his thoughts of heroism. He pushed the sore point that was Rarity out of his mind as he wondered about his place in all of this. Did he even have one right now? He would be considered a civilian at the very least, but then again, even Civilians worked to support the army, and he hadn't worked a day in his life...

"Oh, Spike, there is something you could do for me right now." Celestia spoke up, and Spike immediately pressed his quill to the parchment.

"Whatever you want Princess!" He answered enthusiastically. Even the tiny dragon had a place as Celestia's scribe. He was a Prince, a royal, he wasn't meant to do anything and not expected to do anything. People looked at his royal body, saw his royal blood, and ooh'd and aah'd, but at the end of the day, he realized, he had done nothing, and would continue to do nothing during the war but hide because he was important somehow.

"I want you to write a draft for the Equestrian Scribes, so copies can be made and delivered across Equestria. Ahem," she closed her eyes, and collected her thoughts, "Due to the circumstances around us, due to the invaders, the war, and the recent attacks, I must have the displeasure of expanding our military. Any and all ponies above the age of fifteen may join the Equestrian Royal Guard by traveling to Canterlot. All traveling fees will be suspended during this time. Those who enlist can expect steady pay, but be aware of the dangers they will face. If you are unsure, then please do not be pressured to enlist, the effort will require civilians as well, performing their jobs and supporting our army."

"Supporting our army... Got it." Spike nodded, and presented Celestia with the paper. She read it slowly as Blueblood turned to watch them both. Soldiers went and risked their lives every time they were set to march. Did that constitute heroism? Maybe not the level Big Mac would be considered a hero, but individually, they all had strength, willpower, and a love of the land they lived on...

"You misspelled 'enlist'." Celestia pointed out with a small smile. "It's an e, not an i." She told him, and he grumbled to himself as he used the enchanted tip of the quill to erase the letter and replace it. They had families to care about and friends who would miss them, but they made kinships with their fellow soldiers, put trust in each other that was so hard to find outside of a military unit, they trusted each other to watch each other's backs, to not run in the face of danger, to hold the line and stand by their side... It was the sort of trust he had never experienced.

"Figures. Twilight never uses that word in writing anyways. So, this is it?" Spike turned to face Celestia, who nodded. "Alright, we'll have all of Equestria informed in no time." He scampered out of the room. For a few moments, Celestia smiled at the door, but turned her head sharply as she noticed Prince Blueblood walking past her.

"Off to somewhere?" The Princess asked, and Blueblood nodded slowly as he opened the door. "Where to?" She asked curiously, turning towards him and the door.

"I've been thinking about some things, and I've decided that the best way to serve Equestria right now is to learn and experience what it means to put your head on the block, so to speak." He turned to face Celestia, noticing her mystified stare. "I mean I'm going to go enlist."

Derpy was barely aware of the direction she was going now. Half blinded by tears of pain she weaved through the sky randomly, knowing she had to stay away from its mouth and its voice, exhausting herself making wild movements. The thing behind her wouldn't stop screaming at her. She was doing everything she could to avoid the noise, to avoid the pain it inflicted on her mind, to avoid bringing back the memories of the colts and mares of her past...

Wildly she dove, past its mouth, and slipped underneath its worm-like body, but the great snake was not fooled. Its flexible body allowed it to follow easily, without hesitation, and with a wince she turned quickly, leaning into her broken leg's direction to avoid another scream. She squeezed her eyes shut, ignoring the screams passing behind her while her leg stung.

The creature behind her was relentless as it swerved and dived towards her, again and again, no matter how she turned the monster was closing in on her from behind. She was tiring, she knew that, and the creature was gradually catching up. She sucked in a deep breath, batting the blinding tears out of her eyes as she tried to think, just tried to think of a way to escape, to avoid death, to see Dinky again...

"I'm sorry Dinky..." She whispered softly, trying to dive again, but it was too late. She heard the scream, and she waited to feel the crippling depression wrap around her so the creature could catch up, swallow her, take her to frigid waters...

The scream went to her ears, but it did not freeze her to the soul. Instead, it sounded like the creature had just experienced pain... She dared not to look, she had to flee, it could be a trick...

"Mornin'!" She turned her head rapidly as a blur shot past her, straight back to the creature, and this time she did look. A Pegasus in armor that she did not recognize, wielding a thin, light spear flew towards the monster, which had turned and was currently pursuing what could only be described as living lightning, which weaved around its mouth and smashed into the beast again and again, making it shriek with each blow. The Pegasus flying past her was suddenly surrounded by four other ponies, each armored as well, each holding a long sword in their mouths as, Derpy was wondering if her eye was acting up on her, they set themselves on fire. "Aim for the tentacles first!" The female Pegasus shouted, flying along the beast's body as the armored, blazing Pegasi flew in to comply.

Derpy watched with wide eyes as the lightning bolt avoided capture, smashing into the creature's back halfway down its length, the burning Pegasi latching onto its thick antennae, letting the flames soak into the appendages as the female seemed to just observe its body closely, every now and then jabbing her spread into its body.

The leviathan bucked and twisted, lashing and flailing madly as it was grabbed, poked, and assaulted again and again, its screams growing more and more wild, angrier as it viciously bucked, tossing the bolt and the female away with a twitch of its body. Now she could see the lightning more clearly, it was a Pegasus, a huge, handsome Pegasus, and he looked absolutely livid. "Anything?" He asked the female, and she shook her head.

"It's solid. I can't even lift up the scales- *watch it!*" She shouted as the large flying beast twisted its antennae together, forcing the burning ponies to let go or risk being crushed, but one that had grabbed onto the bushy hair at the tip struggled to get free. Its allies closed in with the blades, trying to slash him free, but then the tentacles began to spark.

Derpy moved her one good front hoof to her mouth to hide her gasp as all the ponies were thrown off the flying monstrosity, lightning and thunder filling the sky as electricity exploded from its body, black clouds leaking from underneath its scales as the flaming ponies were tossed off, the female getting grabbed by the huge Pegasus to prevent her from being tossed away, and the electric Pegasus hardly flinched.

The leviathan turned its head to face Derpy, a scream erupting from its mouth as it charged her, only to be crashed into by the great Pegasus. The

burning ponies were no where to be seen, but glancing closely, Derpy could see a sword stuck in the tangled tips of the antennae. Whoever these ponies were, she had to do something...

She flapped her wings, getting closer to the female Pegasus who was tailing the beast as it thrashed, flying after the bigger Pegasus before it dipped upwards, great mouth open as it swallowed the clouds in the sky and dove back down towards the huge pony. Derpy was not fast right now, but she just barely managed to get within shouting distance of the female. "Its scales!" She called, drawing the mare's attention. "When it spits out the clouds to go fast its scales lift up!" She called. The mare stared at her for a few moments, then began to nod rapidly as it flew forward, past the beast, trying to get to her leader.

Derpy stared around, hoping the other four ponies would appear to help, but she saw no sign of them. They must have been...

No no no. No she couldn't think like that, she had to be hopeful. They had to be somewhere, still alive, just recovering... Until they came back, somehow she had to help... This thing wouldn't stop until it killed her saviors and then her... Then where would it go? Three ponies wouldn't satisfy such a big creature, it would keep eating...

"Dinky..." She whispered to herself. This creature would want to eat her baby. As long as it was alive, Dinky was in danger... No. No no no no no *no*. Not her baby... She grit her teeth tightly, ignoring the pain shooting through her body as she flew up the creature's body, avoiding its bucking as she shot over the armored female, going straight for its antennae as they began to spark, launching a lightning bolt towards the big male running from it.

"What do you think you're doing!" She heard behind her, but she ignored it as she charged towards the gleam of metal tangled in its tentacles. She latched onto one of the tentacle hairs carefully, and felt it begin to twitch, try to wrap around her, but she slipped away as fast as she could. Her hooves grasped the handle of the big blade, and she tugged it free, getting flung off the tentacle as it suddenly bucked. The pressure put on her leg as she tried to hang onto the sword made her scream, but she had it. She had the sword. "Are you insane!" The female demanded, Derpy opening her eyes

to find herself in the Pegasuses' arm. They stared into one another's eyes, and she could see the shock in her face.

"It's gonna kill my little girl..." Derpy whispered, using her good hoof to push the blade's handle into her mouth. Maybe it wouldn't, maybe it would avoid Dinky, maybe Dinky would never even know about the creature... But Derpy could never take that risk. She needed to do what was best for her little girl, and right now it meant killing a beast.

"... What?" The female mare whispered, then shrieked as teeth sunk into her leg, making her let go. The blonde mare was shooting off towards the creature again, sword in mouth, and Schola growled in pain. "... Stupid girl."

She shot after the mare, not even close to sure of what she was doing. "Where can I hurt it?" The cock-eyed mare asked, and Schola shook her head.

"It has no weak-points! Get out of here you little foal, this is more than you can-" The mare sped up, leaving her behind. She cursed her armor's weight, trying to keep up but losing the mare.

This was insane. What she had in mind was the sort of thing they put you into a special school for even considering. It had no weaknesses on its hide, it shot lightning, it devoured you whole, and it was amazingly agile as it twisted and turned, making it difficult for the lightning bolt to get around its mouth, only to keep twisting and ducking away from its screams. But there was something nopony had tried yet. That was because it was insane.

But nothing was beyond a panicking mother.

Shallom turned his head sharply as he felt a presence, and for half a second all he could see was a Pegasus approaching him from behind rapidly, sword in mouth, and he immediately cocked his hoof for a hard strike to the face, to shatter the teeth, make them drop the blade, fracture the skull, let the pressure of flying and the brain damage drop them, but he held his hoof back when she came alongside him, several feet away, out of range. "E-excuse me, I need to ask a favor!"

Shallom sharply turned his head to face to mare, eyes squinting angrily at her as the two dove suddenly, avoiding another scream. "Are

you *insane!*" He demanded loudly, and he watched her panicked look as she glanced backwards again and again.

"I-If I don't survive," she called, glancing back, "tell my daughter I love her. Her name is Dinky Hooves, she looks like me but as a unicorn and has two good eyes. She means the world to me!" She called, the two turning up sharply, her teeth clenching around her sword as she put it there.

"What in Galio's name are you babbling about you stupid mare!" He saw her turn her head back to the creature, then look to him one last time. He grit his teeth. This stupid mare... "Fine! I promise that in the off chance that you actually live, I won't stand your daughter on your grave and tell her what an idiot you are! Sound good!" He shouted.

He felt even angrier at her simple nod that yes, this was in fact just fine with her, and highly considered knocking her out to keep her out of the way so he could concentrate on flying while Schola searched for weak points, but his anger turned to confusion as she slowed suddenly. "Tell her mamma loves her!" She called out, turning to face the monstrosity.

"What are you doing! Move! Get out of its way!" He shouted back to her. She was wounded, heavily, he could tell, yet still she held the heavy blade, and turned to face the monster. Was she losing her mind through blood loss? He considered turning to get her, but no, it was too late.

He could only watch as the great maw opened, then closed around the cock-eyed Pegasus. "Stupid stupid *stupid* mare." He began to pant heavily, hastily putting the name Dinky Hooves in his mind and keeping it there. He had a little girl to show how *not* to prove your love to your children now. He sucked in a deep breath through his teeth and tried not to think about what had just happened.

The screams were tearing her mind to shreds. She could see them, their red eyes, their gaping mouths, their pointing hooves at the end of the beast's tunnel, but she turned her head away from the frigid death and looked all around her. The inside of the beast's tunnel was lined with sharp teeth, angled outwards to spike anything dazed by its maddening scream, but Derpy, for the moment, was conscious, and sane, despite the terrifying

cries, and managed to keep herself in the middle, barely avoiding the surrounding teeth as she held the bit of the blade in her teeth.

She slowly descended, avoiding the rows and rows of blades with careful guidance and a bit of luck. The surface of the creature's insides were slick, offered her no traction, but by wrapping her good front leg around one of the teeth's bases she stayed. She bit the grip tighter and squeezed her eyes shut, trying to drown out the screams by bringing the blade up high, and then swinging it down against the creature's inner hide.

She did not see her work, as the monster had shut its mouth, cutting out her light. She slowly pulled the blade up, squeezing her eyes shut as the sounds of the screams grew louder in the darkness, echoing across the closed area, the red eyes piercing her shut lids as she brought the sword down again, and this time heard the squelch of metal against flesh. Something wet splashed her hoof, something very warm and wet, and she held her stomach back as she brought the blade up and brought it down again. Another squelch, more wetness on her hooves, and suddenly there was light again.

The creature had opened its mouth, and she could see what she was hitting now. It wasn't the creature's tooth-lined innards, it was a corpse. She stared at it for several seconds, the pale white, coatless body, with three slashes across it, its eyes bright red as it stared up at her, mouth yawning, gaping, and then screaming...

From the depths of the creature's stomach, she saw them. A coldness like she'd never felt pierced her skin as she felt one latch onto her good front leg, and immediately her vision exploded with spots as its teeth sunk into her flesh, sending pain all over as the coldness spread, numbing her body and her mind, filling her ears with fresh screams and taunt, drowning out all logic and reason as self-doubt, self-hatred, and anger filled her mind...

She kicked it away, half-aware of her own screaming as she scrambled backwards, her broken leg burning in agony as she allowed pressure on it, but she ignored it, just to escape the cold and the hate, weaving among the teeth as more of the corpses began to crawl from the depths, slowly, their back legs useless as they let out angered shrieks, their glowing red eyes showing even when the leviathan closed its mouth.

Derpy couldn't find the sword, she had lost it when she was screaming, and panicking she was crawling back towards the entrance. Both front legs hurt, one from blazing pain and one from cold infection, each numbing step making her stumble as she passed between the teeth, trying desperately to escape...

She couldn't stand the screams anymore. The looks, the bites, the hatred, it left her feeling dazed and exhausted, her entire body one big sore, her feelings and mind in an even worse shape. Why was she here? What was she doing in here? There was no sound reason to kill it... This was all so pointless... It was fate she should die here, she knew that now. She would never see her baby girl again, that was that. She'd never know if she was okay or never be able to protect her again. She was to die to this monster, she was to get sucked into hell...

She pressed herself against one of the large teeth, her eyes half-lidded as depression-induced exhaustion began to take her over, and she just didn't care... She could escape all this pain if she just died and let them take her... She would never have to worry...

Her glazed eyes slowly passed over an open space in the gaps of teeth. She hadn't seen an opening between teeth before... Then her eyes found the tooth. It laid on the ground, several feet away, within easy distance of her. She stared at it for several seconds, and the light shown brighter as the creature broke through the clouds, letting in sunlight...

A spot of hope. She lunged forward, grabbing onto the tooth, panting heavily as she took hold of it. Somehow this tooth had gotten dislodged. Something had knocked it aside long ago. Whatever it was, she didn't care. She just latched onto the tooth, and turned to see the corpses slowly making their way forward. She might die here, but she could take the creature down with her... She raised the tooth, and brought it down.

Schola yelped, slamming her spear into the beast's hide and just barely managing to hang on as she felt it thrash beneath her, suddenly losing its stream-lined dive towards her captain, jerking upwards and letting out a pained scream. It thrashed again, rolling her off before turning downwards quickly as it began to roll in the air, as if trying to throw something off before it let out another cry of pain, twisting and turning, falling rapidly with

determination before it bucked again, letting out a more gargled scream as blood poured from its mouth.

She twisted in the air and caught herself, watching as it shook and cried out as it sailed to the ground, crashing harshly against the ground with earth-shaking impact. On the floor it squirmed and thrashed, a giant snake in the final struggles of life as it bled rapidly from its mouth. It screamed out, again and again as Shallom fell from the sky, aiming towards the big, thrashing monster, and all around him white fire appeared, swirling, gathering, intensifying until he stopped in midair, releasing the flame around him into a harsh blast. The flames struck the writhing creature, surrounding it in a maelstrom of white fire, making it scream one final time, the noise dying in its throat as it ceased moving.

Shallom landed on the beast's exposed stomach hard, the flame around him dying quickly as he dismissed it with a simple flap of his wings, and Schola joined him in short order. "How strange." His second in command whispered as she tapped her hoof against the creature's stomach. "What do you think made it up and die all of a sudden?" She seemed hesitant to jinx their situation, especially as they were both forced to move as it began to dissolve underneath them.

They landed to its side, the length of the beast turning solid black, bubbling once it was completely taken over, and then the black began to turn to black wisps in the air, disappearing piece by piece rapidly, the wisps turning to nothing once they reached high enough. In the bottom portion of the black mass, the gray Equestrian Pegasus laid very still. "That idiot." Shallom sighed, stepping through the black mass, which spread around his hooves and harmlessly disappeared as he approached the Pegasus.

He checked her over real quick. She was alive, but severely damaged. Broken bones, one of her front legs was turning black, but perhaps even more disturbing was that she was hugging what appeared to be the tooth of the damned gate. He wanted to just roast the piece away, but this was her kill, he had no doubt. She deserved the trophy. "What should we do? We can't just leave her like this, she's probably bleeding internally." Schola gently touched the Pegasus around her body, feeling the tenderness at every point, before glancing to her Captain.

"What I'm more concerned with is finding Blaze Squad." He stated, the last of the black disappearing. Yes, these Equestrians were crafty... Or brave... Or just plain stupid, maybe a mix of the three. Going inside the mouth to kill it though? That required a lot of bravery or an even bigger mess of stupid than he thought. Go inside the hellgate to kill it...

"Well we can't just leave her here!" Schola pointed out, knowing her Captain was right, but still, she frowned down at the Pegasus. "She served a duty to us as well as Equestria in getting rid of the beast. Isn't there anything-"

Shallom lifted his head high in the air, and from his mouth shot a small, concentrated ball of white flame. "Let's go." He said quickly, shooting away from the scene as Schola watched the ball for a second, only to see it explode in bright light. The explosion lingered, the light flashing rapidly as smaller explosions went on in the light. She ran off after her Captain, the two flying off to look for their missing Squad.

As they flew, Shallom looked back briefly, closed his eyes and sighed deeply before looking forward again, making Schola glance over in curiosity. "Whoever that pony is, she is one hell of a mother."

Chapter 19

Desert Bloomings

"Is there any question of what else could have attacked her?" The doctor asked the Princess, who stood quietly in thought as she examined the charts. The second attack. Twilight had warned her things would come quickly, but she hadn't expected the attacks to be so vicious. Glancing through the one-way window, she watched the gray Pegasus use her snout to nuzzle her daughter, both forelegs in a cast, one from broken bones, the other still cold and lifeless, yet a recovery was expected as long as a source of Celestia's power was nearby to heat it. "We have reports of disturbances, of the sounds of ponies screaming coming from the sky, much like how Big Mac's been describing the beast that attacked him. On top of that, there's the souvenir she got, as well as the chill Princess Luna felt while investigating with the men."

"Lunie would know father's work as well as I do." Celestia mused, staring at little Dinky as she started drawing all over her mother's casts with a given marker, filling it with pictures of bunnies and butterflies, the words "I love you" slipping in once, twice, or a couple dozen times. Of course, she had to work around the signatures already there, the Ponyvillers still in Canterlot had come by to visit immediately and had written all over her wing casts, and when they ran out of space on the wings, used her arm casts. "It's just so hard to believe she ran into something and survived. She even managed to get a tooth out of it..."

"She didn't have much information on the ponies who helped her, but one of them must have been a unicorn in order to make that flare and leave no traces of residue." The doctor opened the door, and Celestia froze as the smell hit her. It wasn't the scent of fresh-baked muffins the little girl always seemed to have about it that got to her, it was the smell of dead flesh. Dinky hadn't even batted an eye when entering the room, simply too excited to see her mother alive and safe to pay attention to the smell coming from the blackened leg. "Anyways, I need you to come in and set up the sun source to drive away the necrosis." He explained, allowing Celestia to walk inside.

She took idle steps, hoping she wasn't interrupting as Dinky ran her hoof all over her mother's face. "Ahem." The three ponies in the room turned sharply towards the doctor, who smiled politely and shut the door. Celestia turned back to face the two ponies on the bed, and snorted as she bit her lip. Even as Derpy struggled to rise a bit, to bow, while Celestia gently pushed her down, she couldn't help but giggle at the pony's face.

"You have quite the artistic daughter." Celestia managed between giggles, drawing a smile from the blonde pony as Celestia's gentle hoof ran alongside one of the marker trails. "Has your mother always looked so handsome with a moustache?" Celestia asked Dinky playfully, who shook her head.

"No! Momma just looks extra pretty today!" The tiny filly said with a matter-of-fact tone that made Celestia beam just a little more. Her horn began to glow as she quietly began to remove the marker trails. "Watcha in here for Princess Celestia?" Dinky asked while watching as Celestia washed her mom's face off.

"Now Dinky, what did I say about addressing royalty?" Derpy asked, watching her daughter gasp loudly, and suddenly bow low and deep.

"Most revered Princess!" Celestia groaned out loud, rolling her eyes in amusement. "If I might partake about in the happening of the chance to question yourself being in this room that of contains with my mother has!" Celestia stared at the filly for a few moments, then began to giggle again, having to close her eyes this time to not stare at the exaggerated bow anymore.

"Please please! Stop!" Celestia begged, covering her mouth with one hoof as she continued to giggle. Dinky got up, and Derpy nodded to her daughter with a "good job!" wink before turning to face the Princess.

"Why are you here, Princess? Are you gonna ask more questions? Because I already answered the doctor guy as much as I could and I don't think I have anymore answers in me." The bed-ridden Pegasus asked, trying to focus her one wonky eye, but relaxing as the Princess stroked her cheek with her hoof again.

"I'm here to help you with your hurt leg..." The Princess answered, her knee gently touching the cast-ridden black leg, making Derpy wince. "Does

it still hurt?" Derpy shook her head, then used her eyes to point to Dinky, who was staring at the leg, unaware of what was beneath it. "I see. Dinky Hooves, correct?" The little filly looked up quickly, and bobbed her head enthusiastically. Celestia politely lifted her up with one hoof, and brought her to a chair against the far wall. "Stay here, I want to speak to your mother alone about some unpleasentries. Think you can stay in this chair for a few minutes?" Dinky looked thoughtful for several long minutes, pursing her lips, staring at the ceiling, making a long, loud 'hrmmmmmmmmmm' as she did, and she finally smiled to the Princess and shook her head 'no'. "... I see. Here." Princess Celestia summoned up a marker board, making Dinky squeak happily as she took her marker to it happily.

With that done, Princess Celestia turned around to face Derpy, and join her by the side of her bed. The smell of her leg was lessening in her nose now. Getting used to it she supposed, she just didn't get how Dinky handled it... "So, how are you going to fix my leg?" Derpy asked, curiously staring down at it with a somewhat dejected expression. Celestia calmly lifted her chin with a touch of her hoof, and Derpy felt her heart flutter. So this was what it was like to be around the Princess. She began to feel envious of Twilight.

"The sun drives away even the most persistent shadows and bathes the land with its life-giving rays. Through my connection to it, I can remove the evils that have befallen your leg." Her horn began to glow a soft gold color, and she smiled as she began to unwrap the cast around the Pegasus' leg. "You've been touched by hell..." Celestia whispered, staring at the hairless, solid black, completely limp stump that served as her limb underneath the gauze. Her gut tightened as she scanned it, and sensed the barest hint of activity going on beneath the dark, brittle flesh.

"It happened inside the flying worm thing." Derpy whispered, her voice low, looking to Dinky as the filly scribbled messily on the board, then wiped it away with her gray-haired leg. "I saw into a big, cold pit, where a lot of coatless ponies began to crawl from. One bit my leg and turned it all black. I can't really feel with it, only pain, and it always hurts when it starts to move." Celestia nodded quietly, leaning her head down to gently touch her horn to the limb.

"The damned, pardon my language, are infamously jealous of the living. The only ponies that go to hell are the ponies who have performed the

darkest deeds without regret, and went to the grave stained with sin. The damned often never see the hurt they've spread as a result of their actions and unfairly use the living as a scapegoat, they use us as an excuse for their deed. This is why I have done my very hardest to keep the two worlds separated. Unfortunately, an ancient power has the ability to bring beasts that connect directly to the underworld, and it's rising again." Celestia said in a low voice, sweeping her horn slowly over the blackened limb, the healing light and warmth causing the darkness to recede slowly. As she spoke, she could see Derpy's face fall into passive thought.

"B-but..." Derpy whispered, her leg twitching in a test. She winced and held still. "You can stop it, right? You're strong, you can do anything." Derpy glanced to her daughter. It was like Dinky knew her mother was uncomfortable. She was using the marker board to hide her face, but every now and then she would look up to see what was happening.

"It can be stopped, most certainly." Celestia lifted her horn up, but the glow around Derpy's leg remained, keeping it bathed in a glowing golden nimbus, that gently flowed around her arm like it was giving her a relaxing massage. "But that is not my job. My job right now is to keep Equestria safe now that it's been invaded. I think you might know the ponies involved in stopping the beasts, Twilight Sparkle, Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy-"

"-Applejack, Rarity, and Pinkie Pie." Derpy nodded slowly, eyes glinting in happy recognition. "I've delivered loads of things to them! Rainbow Dash even helped me with my flying! Oh, and I also have to deliver a really big box to Twilight as soon as I can. It's the next shipment of library books." Derpy hummed to herself, mind always on Dinky and on her job. It was how she grew familiar with ponies.

"That will have to wait. Twilight won't be available for a while, and your job is going to be put on hold for a while." Celestia explained, lifting the arm as carefully as she could to not hurt Derpy as she slid it underneath the blanket and tucked her in. "It's too dangerous to be traveling around Equestria now."

Derpy nodded slowly, staring down her own body before glancing up sharply to the Princess. "What about all the other ponies not in Canterlot? Won't they be in trouble too?" Derpy asked, glancing to little Dinky, who

had stopped drawing, her ears cocked. Derpy made a sign for Celestia to keep her voice lower.

Princess Celestia moved her face closer to Derpy's ear, and began to whisper. "We have plans. We're doing a mass relocation project right now, but we're trying to keep it somewhat quiet. We're going to be moving everypony in Ponyville to the slopes going to Canterlot and to the base of the mountain. We can't have any more incidents like this happening away from home."

"And you'll keep us safe?" Derpy whispered, staring at Dinky longingly as the tiny unicorn slowly lowered her drawing board to see what was happening, only to quickly bring it up as she saw her mother watching her.

"Me and Luna both. We won't be the only ones, we're going to be raising an army." Celestia closed her eyes, but she could feel Derpy's panic. She slowly ran a hoof up to the gray mare's cheek and smiled sincerely. "But I'm hoping it will be just for show. I intend to encourage as little combat as possible, and allow Twilight and her company to complete their mission so they may return to an undamaged home. I have no doubt they'll keep us safe, we just have to place our trust in them."

"So," Derpy gulped loudly, and thoughtfully stared to her daughter, "the army won't have to do anything? They'll just be there? No fighting in Equestria right? No fighting at all?" She asked in a low, shaky whisper. Celestia closed her eyes and let out a weary breath.

"I can only hope." The Princess whispered, and Derpy realized the Princess was powerful, the Princess was old, and the Princess was just a pony, with all the emotional weight that went with being a pony. All the emotional weight of several thousands of years.

Derpy fidgeted uncomfortably for a moment, letting the healing magics of the hospital soothe the burn in her broken leg as she considered what all this meant. An Equestrian army implied a lot of things. Bad things were happening, it needed protection, even with the Princesses there. That meant the ponies weren't all that safe. Not safe from things like what had attacked her. The thing that nearly killed her, took her from her baby girl...

"Princess Celestia?" Derpy whispered, making the beautiful white mare look up with a little bat of her eyes. "Can I make a weird request?" The

Princess straightened up, and gave Derpy her full attention. "Um, first, a question, will the army be using weapons?" Celestia gave a small, slow nod. Derpy gulped. This was a strange, unusual, and possibly painful thing she was about to ask. "Do I still own that tooth thing?"

"Well," Celestia rubbed her chin quietly, "If it belongs to anypony it would be you. Why?"

"..." Derpy calmly contemplated the bulge of her back hooves beneath the blanket. "It's really tough and is what let me kill the big flying snake. I was wondering if I could get it, I dunno, whittled down into a sword or something..." She asked idly, slowly rolling her hoof in a circle like it was no big deal, but she could instantly feel Celestia's displeasure.

"Why, Derpy?" Celestia whispered in a low voice. Derpy looked over to her daughter, who slowly lowered her marker board to meet her mother's eyes. Derpy gulped loudly again as unpleasant thoughts filled her head. She turned back to Celestia slowly, a mother's determination filling her face.

"Well, we're gonna have an army to help protect Equestria and its ponies and Dinky, and I won't have a delivery job, so I wanna enlist."

"Hey Sugarcube, ya'll awake?" Twilight opened her eyes slowly, but only saw darkness. She waved a hoof in front of her face, barely able to see it directly in front of her, making her smirk a little. She hadn't caught a wink of sleep, despite what felt long hours of being alone with her thoughts in absolute silence, with only the sound of the blowing breeze and the shifting sands brushing against the rolling dunes surrounding their campsite.

She turned her head to the side, and winced as she watched a lantern flare up. Applejack, in the bag next to her, turned the knob down slowly, reducing the flame to a flickering wisp, barely sustained by the miniscule flow of oil, and when the glare left her eyes, she turned to meet Applejack's green eyes. "Guess I am, haven't been able to sleep all night."

"Make that all week." Applejack stood and stretched, giving Twilight a good look at her well-muscled form. Applejack had always been the heavy lifter, the mover, the worker, and the years of it showed. She was a tough mare, and had a noticeable thickness of well-earned muscle about her. "Been

what, five days since we left?" Applejack asked as she sat down near Twilight, who sat up to join her.

"It should be morning already, so yeah, I'd say five days." Twilight shook her mane out of her eyes, and cocked her ear. She could hear Pinkie snoring in the next tent, but other than that, the ponies were still. "What's been keeping you up?" Twilight asked, shaking the protest in her muscles out.

"Just been thinking' a lot lately. We've had so much time to do that, not a whole lotta action, just flyin', campin', trainin', then flyin' again." Applejack was nervous about the whole deal, Twilight could tell. She'd been nervous for the past few two days or so. She was getting restless and irritated. Twilight had volunteered herself to be Applejack's tent partner last night just because she knew if Applejack spent another night with Rarity's detail focus, she's probably chew the poor unicorn's head off even more than she already had after the tent's protective cover debacle. "I kinda figured we'd be there already, I never realized the world was so, well..." She spread her legs out in a wide circle, and Twilight nodded rapidly.

"I know," Twilight whispered in a small sigh, "It didn't seem *this* far away when I'd first looked. Every day I keep thinking it'll be right around the corner, just over the horizon, but it only get a little bigger. I think today might be the day though, I took a good look and did a few equations."

"Not knockin' yer fancy mathematics fer nothin' Twilight, but this ain't Equestria, this ain't some classroom or special test or some sorta experiment. Can we positively trust that?" Applejack asked. Twilight sighed a little. The farm pony was right, things were different outside Equestria. Animals were feral, the weather was sporadic, everything felt uncivilized and untouched, yet Twilight knew things weren't going so well. The leylines were gone this far out. They were there, yes, but there wasn't a drop of magic to spare.

They're already passed over what little remained of a forest near the edge of the ocean as they flew over land, and rapidly entered desert. Looking down and all around, all they saw for miles and miles was sand, not a bit of green. Every now and then they saw what they thought was a town, but when they got closer they saw ruins, either just destroyed buildings, abandoned buildings, or simply scorched to the ground. It was becoming

disconcerting, all this travel, not a sight or sound of another pony... "I believe I have it right. You can hold me to it though." She smiled, and Applejack simply shrugged. "... So what have you been thinking about so much?"

"Oh, y'know, home. Big Mac, Granny Smith..." She trailed off, her eyes lowering. "Applebloom more than them. Just keep wonderin' if she'll be okay without me."

Twilight smiled kindly. She was pretty familiar with the little Crusader, having baby-sat her and her friends more than once. Applejack had warned her that Applebloom could become the little sister of anypony caring for her pretty quickly, and she hadn't lied, she already felt that sort of affection for the lovely little pony. "She's with Celestia and her friends right now, in the safest place on the planet, there's no need to worry." Outside, the wind began to wail softly, like a ghost in the back corner of a dark room making the girls shiver. "Things are picking up outside..."

"I know she's safe, and I know she's a big girl, but I still can't help but worry and miss 'em. Also miss work a bunch too, was just so relaxin' some days. Right about now, I'd do anything for a fresh, juicy apple." She opened her pack in the corner and pulled out a red, beautiful looking apple. She took a bite, the crunch sounding more dry than it should have, then chewed slowly, and finally swallowed. "These are goin' stale. Never really liked a stale apple, get broken in enjoyin' the ripe ones of the crop back home."

"I think I can relate." Twilight chuckled a little, taking the apple as Applejack tossed it over. She took a bite, and found that it was going dry. A pity. "I wake up every morning having to remember I'm in a tent, not in a tree. Then I keep wanting to call for Spike to bring my day's agenda but Spike's not here." She sighed heavily, deeply, but she did not regret her decision to keep him with Celestia. She felt a leg around her shoulders, and looked to Applejack's smile.

"Well, I ain't the right pony to ask to judge Spike's character, but I think he'll be okay. You two separated on happy terms at least, I threatened Applebloom I'd scrub her teeth if I found them rotten when I came back..." She noticed the way Twilight's ears drooped. "Ya'll alright, Twilight?"

"..." Twilight sucked in a deep breath, and shuddered as she smiled ever so tenderly. "The last thing Spike called me was 'mom' before I left." She

reached up, rubbing her eye to rob it of the moisture building up and threatening to spill out. Applejack could only stare in silent shock. "I never really thought about it until I told him he was my baby, but I guess it's true. I hatched him and raised him, even if we treat each other like siblings. Then he went and ruined it by calling me mom..." She sucked in a sharp breath.

"Ruined it how?" Applejack asked carefully, watching Twilight's smile as she sat and shivered in quiet, happy sadness. An odd mixture for sure.

"Well, you raise the animals on your farm from babies, right?" Twilight asked, and Applejack nodded. "Well what if they started calling you 'mom' for it? You raised them, fed them, sheltered them, and for nothing but the profit they happen to turn out at no cost to them."

"I... I mean I don't know. It's an odd situation Twi. How are ya feelin' about Spike then if everything's so ruined?" The farm pony asked curiously. She wasn't very good with the touchy feely relationship stuff, and thinking about the mother-son bonds that could grow between a pony and a dragon made her want to stick her head in a hole and pretend the world wasn't *that* strange, but then again, she knew Pinkie Pie...

"Like I want to just scoop him up and keep him safe, I guess. I just have the need to protect him now, and make his life better and happy. Is that weird?" Twilight turned to Applejack, shaking out the rest of her sudden emotional outburst. She really needed some sleep, all this tired, boring monotony was making it difficult to keep ahold of herself.

"It sounds like you're a mother Twi. I ain't gonna tell you how ya should feel 'cause I don't know, but you and the li'l guy are closer than most ponies, so you just gotta nurture those feelin's." There. That sounded wise. She bobbed her head, and watched Twilight smile at that. The two sat in silence, Applejack with her arm around Twilight's neck. It was awkward now though, and Twilight was stuck in her thoughts. Maybe a nice little change of subject... "So... That really was your first kiss?"

"... Huh?" Twilight glanced up to the smirking mare with a surprised look.

"With Dash that first night. First kiss?" Applejack began to snicker.

"I-it-!" Twilight shook her head hard, pulling herself out of her own thoughts to listen better. "No no no! What is with you ponies! That wasn't even a

kiss, it had no tongue!" She stuck her tongue out as if to prove her point, and Applejack started to laugh.

"Aww, li'l Twilight and Rainbow Dash always wantin' ta bunk together, talkin' about kissin' and the dangerous things mares can do?" Applejack held her sides as she began to laugh. "Betcha ya'll get up so late 'cause ye're too busy spendin' the night swappin' spit!"

"... *I'm going to bed.*" Twilight's growled, shoving her head underneath her sleeping bag's blanket as she wriggled in, only her rump exposed. She could feel Applejack staring at her backside.

"Smoochin' or playin' yer flank like a drum. Yowch, that's a pretty behind." Applejack dove back, laughing her head off as she avoided the sharp kick where her chin would have been. "Ya'll two are like two peas in one tight, cuddly li'l pod, ain'tcha? One's all brains and the other's all brawn." She laughed, Twilight poking her head out with a devilish glare.

"Well... Yeah!" She asked, snorting in bemusement. "What about you and *Rarity*?" Applejack froze, and Twilight smirked. "Rarity's always wanting to ride with you, and you think she's a priss but you keep putting up with her!"

"Hey now, she's a close friend and she thinks I'm the best pilot-"

"I bet she also thinks you're the *strongest* most *powerful* most *rich* pilot there is, what with those big muscles and that strong accent!" Twilight grinned almost sadistically, and Applejack grit her teeth angrily.

"Ye're one to talk li'l miss book smarts! What with all that powerful stuff goin' on aboutcha, you're so soft and sweet and cuddly, I bet Dash is just waitin' for the right moment ta-"

"Don't you start with that! Dash wouldn't want anything to do with me. We're best friends, she wouldn't be interested in me." Twilight sat, legs crossed triumphantly, smiling in victory. Then her eyes opened. "No interest at all..."

Applejack noticed, but decided to take her chance, "Oh please, Dash has been a horn-licker since I met her! She's probably gagging over that monster of a horn! Then there's you, li'l miss Cloud-Stuffer - and don't say ya aren't 'cause I've seen how ya look at wings!" Applejack smiled less

biting more inwardly when she saw the steel in Twilight's eyes return, "Bet ya saw the big ol' strong pair Dash had and just went cross-eyed in want! Heck, maybe even li'l Fluttershy's wings gotcher-"

"Whoa whoa *whoa whoa WHOA*. Hold your steer cow-girl, what's a Cloud-Stuffer?" Twilight asked, the tension of the whole debate deflating like a balloon as she stared at Applejack curiously.

Applejack blushed a little, then gave a tiny, nervous chuckle. "Okay, well, ya'll know how Pegasi deal with clouds a bunch? Well, among mixed couples involvin' a Pegasi, a common thing was ta let the Pegasi bring a cloud down ta rest on while ya, y'know..." Applejack grinned nervously, "Copulated." Twilight blinked her eyes rapidly. "Anyways, non-Pegasi ain't too good with dealin' with clouds and get the stuff all over, so sometimes durin' the motions they could go, y'know, in..."

"..." Twilight's jaw had dropped, and Applejack idly entertained the idea of her breaking the smart mare. "... Ew." The unicorn finally said, a look of disbelief on her face. "... Eeeew. Ew! *Ew! Really!*"

"Well, I wouldn't know but Big Mac had said-"

"You think I want to- that sounds so- I mean that can't be sanitary! No!" Twilight rubbed her face rapidly. "No no no no *no!* Never on a cloud! That sounds horrible!"

"... Ye're just worried about the cloud part?" Applejack watched Twilight nod her head rapidly. "But you're a-okay with foalin' with Dash?"

Twilight froze up, "I never-! I mean it's just you kind of caught me off-guard, what I mean to say is..." She swallowed a lump in her throat, and began to laugh loud and nervously, forcing her to cover her own mouth as she glanced around everywhere *but* at Applejack.

Applejack, for her part, couldn't keep the massive smile off her face. "Now hold on there Twi, slow yerself down just a moment. I ain't gonna go implyin' nothin', but it sounds like, t'me that is to say, nopony else has to be thinkin' this, ya'll got a bit of a thing for our little Rainbow Dash?"

"It's just-"

"Slow," Applejack raised a hoof, and slowly lowered it, "down."

Twilight's breathing slowed, and her eyes went back to normal, no longer looking like she'd been caught with her hoof in the cookie jar, and then she took a deep breath, "Okay..." And then her mouth ran off without her, "Ever-since-the-whole-Laputa-thing-we've-been-talking-and-learning-about-eachother-and-I-feel-like-I-*really*-trust-her-and-I-really-want-to-help-her-and-make-her-happy-and-I-don't-think-that's-love-but-I-feel-I-can-trust-her-with-anything-no-matter-what-it-is-and-I-don't-know-sex-has-always-been-weird-and-disgusting-to-me-but-I-feel-I-can-trust-her-you-know?-so-I-guess-I'm-worried-about-the-clouds-because-I-don't-trust-them-like-I-trust-Dash!" She sucked in a deep breath, several of them actually, while Applejack's eyes rolled in circles as she tried to keep up with the fast-paced information.

After recovering, Applejack raised a hoof. "Okay now hold up, stop talkin' so quick and lemme get this figured out. Ya'll and Rainbow Dash are best buds." Twilight nodded in confirmation. "To the point ya'll trust Rainbow Dash more than a simple little sky cloud." Twilight nodded, and Applejack touched her chin, then shrugged. "Well alright then." Twilight smiled at that. "Still don't change the fact you wouldn't mind foalin' with 'er."

"*Gah!* What is with you ponies!" Twilight demanded, quickly slipping back into annoyance. "When did kissing somepony and trusting somepony enough that you wouldn't mind doing," she shuddered and shook, grumbling before finishing, "*things* with them if you so had to or we got curious about it become so important! We've never talked about this sort of thing before!"

"Ya set yerself up for it! Ye're just so naïve 'bout some things Twi. It's cute, really, and honestly, any pony ya pick to be yer first is a lucky little thing." Applejack shrugged at the end of her speech, and looked to Twilight with a smile. The little unicorn suddenly became so shy and blushy that Applejack began to giggle again.

The two mares were interrupted when a roaring noise ripped through the air, and their tent began to shudder violently. Twilight suppressed a scream as the roar grew louder, the tent shaking so hard that it knocked the lamp over, extinguishing it. "*Applejack!*" She called out as the farm pony suddenly poked her head outside, tugging it back in quickly.

"The wind's kicked up somethin' fierce!" She shouted over the noise, and the two glanced outside as they heard a scream, and a flapping sound that could only be a loose tent. "C'mon!" Applejack ran out, Twilight in hot pursuit. With only the moon and the stars giving them light, the two stepped out into the bowl of sand they had chosen between four massive dunes. All around her, Twilight could only hear the sound of the wind blasting around them, kicking sand around. She had to squint her eyes, and could barely see Fluttershy's and Rarity's tent flapping in the wind, held down only by two stakes as Rarity held it telekinetically, fighting the wind for control as the tent whipped around in the air violently.

Twilight could barely see, sand was everywhere, it was dark, but she crawled her way to the noise and her horn started glowing as she helped Rarity. "Hey!" Twilight called, Rarity looking to her panicked. "Good morning!" Twilight strengthened her hold of the tent and lowered it as Fluttershy came back with the sleeping bags, sitting behind the shuddering cloth and clanging rods with her friends.

"Good! This is what you'd call good!" Rarity shouted, deeply unamused as she saw Twilight smile. "All I hear is a roaring noise and the next thing I know the tent is ripped out from on top of us and I'm covered in sand! How can you call this good!"

"I learned something today! That's good!" Twilight shouted over the wind, using her smile to quell the quaking fear that the wind had brought on, slowly calming herself to handle the situation better.

"I do hope it has to do with controlling the wind!" Rarity shouted, Applejack coming by with three Dashes and a Pinkie Pie. Two of the Dashes and Pinkie Pie used each other as stepping stools to grab the whipping tethers in the sky and tug them down while the third Dash, the green-haired one, stood by, looking alert, but obviously tired.

"Nope, just learned what a Cloud-Stuffer is! Weird what you learn at this time in the morning!" Rarity sputtered through what may have been a speech while Green Dash's eyes widened hugely.

"Where did you learn that!" The Dash shouted as the tethers were brought down. They were forced into the loose sand, and Twilight focused on squeezing the sand around the tethers, compacting it into heavy sandstone to keep it still.

"Applejack told me! I forget how we got around to talking about it!" Rarity continued to sputter, Applejack and Pinkie Pie ignored the conversation as they went and secured the other tents, but both Fluttershy and Dash now looked heavily interested.

It took twenty minutes for the sandstorm to pass. By the time it did, enough sand had been moved that they had to dig the tents out of the sand, but with Twilight's increased magical power, she had little trouble helping tug them out once somepony found them. With six Dashes working about alongside Applejack and Pinkie Pie, everything was found in no time while Twilight, Fluttershy, and Rarity wrung the sound out of their supplies. "Holding up alright Fluttershy?" Twilight asked idly while carefully placing several jars of preserves in their bag, having carefully checked them for cracks or chips that could let sand in.

Fluttershy looked calmly to Twilight, and smiled pleasantly, using a brush to comb out a wool blanket strung up on a pole taken from the now broken tent laying several yards away. "I'm okay. It's just been a troubling morning. At least something interesting happened." She spoke softly. That honestly surprised Twilight, and she did glance back to meet the smiling Pegasuses' eyes.

"Really now? I didn't think you'd like having such an exciting morning." Twilight mused quietly in her head that even Fluttershy, the quietest, softest, non-confrontationist pony there was in Equestria, perhaps even the world, was actually getting bored of the peace and quiet.

Fluttershy giggled sweetly, remembering what she'd heard this morning. Cloud-Stuffer, huh? She wondered who or what it was directed at. "Well we have it under control now. It's not so bad knowing your friends are nearby to help." Twilight nodded in agreement as Rarity approached, looking very unhappy. They could see why immediately. As Fluttershy approached to stand next to Twilight, they could see the massive amounts of sand in Rarity's mane. Poor Rarity had gotten full blast of the sand, Fluttershy managing to avoid a grand majority of it by having slept behind Rarity when the sandstorm hit.

"Well..." Rarity sniffed, looking around slowly, her head hung low. "The damage has been assessed..." She sniffled again. "One tent is broken but Applejack thinks she can fix it, other than that, damage is min... Damage is

minim... Minimal..." She sniffled again, rubbing her sand-filled mane. "But at *what cost!*" She finally wailed, making Fluttershy take her gently into a hug. "Don't hug me Fluttershy! I'll ruin you! *Ruin you!*"

Twilight could only smile in apology as Fluttershy stroked her pretty friend's back, and they both got brushes.

Off in the distance, over a newly-sized sand dune, Applejack stood with the six Dashes and a Pinkie Pie as they stared at the bottom of the dune. "... You don't suppose they got blown off?" Pinkie Pie asked, glancing to the skies. Applejack felt a small hint of worry, but brushed it aside.

"Three fifteen-foot dragons? I'm gonna go ahead and say 'no'." Red Dash began walking down the slope with Applejack right behind her, followed by the five other Dashes and a Pinkie Pie.

"Alright Hayseed, ya'll can stop playin' now." Applejack spoke up, and glanced around slowly. The Dashes began to dig, Pinkie Pie pursing her lips and blowing through them ineffectively. "Hayseed!" Applejack shouted now, running her hoof around as if to feel through the sand. "Rattler! Dick! Where are ya'll! Somedragon better answer me!" Applejack turned to face Pinkie Pie as she made another wheezing noise through her mouth. "What're ya'll up to?"

"I'm trying to do that neat whistle of yours!" She pursed her lips and blew, then frowned. "It's harder than it looks." Applejack gave a quiet sigh.

"Just bite your lower lip, tense 'em together, and blow through your front teeth sharp-like." Applejack lifted her snout to the air, and gave out the sharp herding whistle. There was no response. "C'mon Hayseed! Where are ya hon, ya'll gotta be close..."

Next to her, Pinkie did as Applejack told, getting a sharp tone, but not the whistle. Applejack tried again and so did Pinkie Pie, all while Dash kept digging. Applejack felt a pang of sadness at the lack of response. She was so used to her dragon answering her immediately... Then Pinkie Pie gave a sharp whistle, and she gasped happily. "I did it! Let's go get those dragons!" Applejack sighed heavily, and together, the two whistled, as one, making a louder, sharper whistle that made Dash freeze, and wince.

"What was *that!*" Yellow Dash demanded nearby. Her ears were ringing, and every other Dash was rubbing their ears as well. "Are you two trying to find dragons or blow out my-" she was suddenly up in the air, a mound of sand falling around a draconic figure that raised from the sands. Around it, the other Dashes backed away as two similar sand pillars rose.

"Hayseed?" Applejack gasped happily, running forward to the figure until the land of the sand was swept off by the blowing wind, leaving the figure in perfect view of them. Applejack stopped, stared, and grumbled. "Oh, it's you." Dick snorted, and stretched himself out before walking past her, up and over the dune as Hayseed quickly approached, and gently lowered his great head to Applejack's level. The farm mare smiled, and began to rub his snout with both front legs. "There ya are boy! Ya had me worried for a bit there, how ya doin'?" Hayseed closed his eyes and made a few soft, confirming noises as Rattler turned down to greet Pinkie Pie with a gentle stroke of one large hand.

Yellow Dash tugged herself out of the sand and snorted a little, staring around as the dragons shook themselves clean, and with an annoyed huff, she flashed back into one Dash. So far, today had been annoying. Not your typical "miss-breakfast-and-have-to-skip-the-shower" annoying, but "get-buried-in-sand" annoying. On a larger scale.

She returned to camp with a somewhat sour look. She did not like the sand, she did not like the dark, and she did not like missing sleep, and here she was inbetween all three. She walked down the sand dune, watching Dick scratch around in the sand, as if hunting for something, and turned her head to watch as Fluttershy lovingly combed the sand out of a miserable Rarity's coat. Looking a little longer, she noticed she couldn't see Twilight...

"Hey." Dash jumped a little and turned quickly to meet Twilight's eyes, seeing she looked alright. More awake than she herself felt at least. "You're jumpy. Everypony else seems okay, and the sand storm's dying down, so I guess everything will be going according to schedule..."

"Awesome." Dash didn't sound too enthused, but Twilight could tell she was just tired. "Probably won't be getting any sword-training in today..." The rainbow-maned mare murmured, closing her eyes slowly and opening them again. "Too bad, was gonna be working on Fluttershy's stance today."

She unconsciously leaned against Twilight. Twilight did the same, to keep Dash up.

"You not get any sleep either?" Twilight asked with a slightly embarrassed smile, her ears flattening a little.

"No, here's the thing, I got *great* sleep before the sandstorm started!" Dash groaned, rolling her head around slowly as Twilight turned to her with a curious stare. "I was having the weirdest dream though, and you know how those long, weird dreams stress you out when you wake up?" Twilight nodded slowly. "Yeah, I had one of those."

"Okay, you had a stressful dream and woke up tired...?" Twilight summed up as Dash nodded rapidly.

"And if wasn't just 'kinda' weird, it was 'totally' weird. I had a dream I had a horn and was going to some weird magic academy where I was learning to make ice cream cake using lobster and old rusty paint cans." She missed the face Twilight made that had made Anemone smile so broadly. "Except I was partnered with that unicorn Trixie jerk, but her magic wasn't working and she had the best magic of us both so she suggested I start *licking* her horn."

"... *WHAT!*"

Applejack strolled up the hill towards the shouting, intending to go take one more look at the equipment now that she knew Hayseed was okay. She walked past Twilight and Dash, "-which started spewing all over my face and she was so excited she started using her tongue-"

"Are ya'll tellin' the Sorority watermelon party story again?" Applejack asked curiously, noting the absolutely horrified look on Twilight's face as Dash turned away from the unicorn. "The one with the mare poppin' out of the 'closet' all over your face?"

Dash narrowed her eyes at Applejack. Applejack began to smirk as she figured out she had just interrupted, and quietly went along, whistling to herself as she heard Twilight speak up. "What about a Sorority watermelon party?" Her voice sounded nervous.

"Oh don't let Applejack fool you, see, it started when I shoved her face into the watermelon and started licking-" Applejack just beamed to herself proudly as she joined Rarity and Fluttershy, and soon enough Pinkie Pie.

"Everything's tip-top?" The farmer-pony inquired, glancing around carefully at their collected equipment before turning towards Rarity, who would no doubt have all their inventory in mind.

"No!" The unicorn cried out, stroking her incredibly sandy tail as Fluttershy oh-so delicately ran her brush through it. "Everything is *awful* and it's this *horrible horrible* place's fault!"

Applejack glanced to Fluttershy, who frowned and lowered her head. "I couldn't save one of the preserve jars," she whispered, combing the tail, "I'm sorry but it had splattered all over the sand and the jar was in three pieces..."

"That's alright, we still got plenty of food left. All we're missin' is the Queen and her escort." Applejack looked up to Dash, who was by now should have been in the juicy part of her story. Knowing Twilight, she would be absolutely sickened... Except she had a look of very serious interest instead. She couldn't tell from this distance, but the unicorn was blushing beneath her coat. "And they look about ready to wrap things up. In that case, let's get breakfast going and maybe do a little training. We can even get started early, cover some more ground. Alrighty, Fluttershy, can you-" Applejack paused when she looked back over, saw Fluttershy carefully brushing out the sand from Rarity's tail, and then looked to Pinkie Pie, "You can get the dragons their breakfast. I'm gonna start on ours."

The pink party pony saluted, and began to dig through one of their packs and pull out a large amount of apples and fruit that was starting to go a little downhill, and approached the dragons to let them have their fill. The dragons ate the fruit gratefully as Applejack got a campfire going without the panicking Rarity's help. She glanced up to the top of the dune again, and noticed the two ponies were gone. "Huh." She rolled her shoulders and turned back to the fire. "Those two better finish up fast if they want some."

Beyond the four dunes the girls' had temporarily made their home, where the dragons had spent their night, there was some flat land. No rises or falls. A nice place to have a slow walk. "That's a, er, nice story Dash..."

Twilight smiled softly as they walked across the featureless sand, "You make it sound like you were really wild back then."

"I kind of was." Dash admitted, watching the stars for a moment, before they started disappearing as the sun peaked over the horizon. Twilight continued to watch her, so Dash continued, "I was pretty wild about being the greatest there was, and the best way to tell if you're the best of the best is to make sure you're better than every pony around. That's why I challenged and got challenged a lot to flying contests. I won most of 'em." Dash grinned.

"I'll bet. Is that common at a flight academy? 'Cause I never really thought about it until now but there were a *lot* of rivalries in Canterlot's magic school." Twilight recalled back to the old day, where she just barely picked up on the animosity a girl she got along well with showed when Twilight wore an orange and gray sweater representing the Prestigious Mares of the Dragon Sorority. That took some very uncomfortable explaining to get out of.

"Like you wouldn't believe. Between Ponies and Griffons, the students of the different flight teachers, the power racers and the artistic fliers, then you got the different houses and guilds and sororities and fraternities and blah so blah so very blah." Dash smirked a little as she remembered her old times.

"And of course you had your wild little parties?" Twilight smirked a little, then thought about it some as Dash began to nod. "So that was just one party with the watermelon and the excessive kissing, what about the other parties?" She asked, Dash catching on to the hint of worried curiosity in her voice.

"Well, I mean, I guess I shouldn't lie." Dash sighed, and the two slowed down to a stop a good distance away from the dune hiding their small camp. "Like I said, I was kinda wild. I dated a lot of ponies, mares and colts, but the most we ever did was hug and kiss. That was all it was, a couple of flings. I'm not, well... I had my limits is all."

"So it never went further?" A tone of relief in Twilight's voice.

"Nope." Dash answered with an honest nod. Twilight smiled softly, and the two continued their walk. Dash watched her, curious as Twilight accepted

this so easily, and she caught up to her side. "So what about you? Any wild party stories of your own?"

Twilight slowed a little as she thought about it, and she shook her head. "Honestly, Pinkie Pie's parties are kind of the only ones I ever went to when it wasn't a birthday party for me, for family, or for Princess Celestia."

Dash snorted in amusement, making Twilight blush a little as her guardian gave her an amused look. "Really? Honestly? You've never been to a party bigger than six ponies?" Twilight shook her head, blushing and smiling in embarrassment. "I really do have a whole world of things to show you, don't I?"

"You aren't about to yell at me again, are you?" Twilight snickered, earning her a small shove from Dash, who just rolled her eyes.

"Ever been on a shopping spree?" Dash asked.

"Nope."

"Ever get a pedicure?"

"No, I just kind of try to not do dirty work..."

"Not the same thing. Ever go frog-catching?"

"Not unless it was for a class."

"Not the same thing! Rarity's given you dress-montages, but have you ever gotten the full spa treatment?"

"Well, I've been in the spa's bath before..."

"Not even close to the same thing! Mud-wrestling?"

"That sounds uncomfortable."

"Ever binge at an arcade?"

"Do we have those in Ponyville?"

"We have like three! Ever fall asleep in another pony's arms?"

"Um, well-"

"Family doesn't count."

"No."

"Hmm... Ever have your opinion expressed in a newspaper?"

"Uh? No, where did that come from?"

"Just trying to remember all the stuff in the Dangerous Guide to Fillies..."

"You mentioned that before." Twilight pointed out as she turned with Dash, heading back towards camp with a tiny smile.

"It's only the greatest book ever. It has all sorts of tips and tricks to doing anything from tying knots to washing clothes without a machine, and look stylish while doing it. It's practically tradition to get that book when you're five and do at least ten of the things in the suggested activities section a year. Guess you never got one?"

"I..." Twilight paused, and thought back on it. "What did it look like?"

"Bright red cover, green letters, written by Madam Adventure?"

"A: That is the most conceited name I've ever heard that isn't including a title, and B: I think I may have seen it, but I never picked it up at the library... And C: I have a lot to catch up on in that case. That's... One-hundred and forty things I'd need to do to catch up."

"One-hundred and forty? There's only one-hundred-..." Dash trailed off suddenly, narrowing her eyes as she worked it out in her head before turning to face Twilight. "... How old are you?"

"Well, if I should have started around five, and I have one-hundred and forty things to catch up on, then that means I'm fourteen years later than five." Dash just looked hugely surprised. "Is something wrong? Is... Is nineteen too late?" She asked, looking genuinely worried.

"... No, it's just that the oldest one of us is Applejack. She's seventeen. I'm sixteen, so is Fluttershy and Rarity, and Pinkie Pie's fifteen... You missed

an entire childhood!" Dash accused, making Twilight rear back as a hoof stuck out towards her face. "C'mon! I think we have the book in one of the packs, if Applejack didn't pack it, I'm gonna kill her!"

Twilight glanced to the sword on Dash's sword as she gave chase to the running Pegasus, and sincerely hoped Applejack packed the book. Over the dune, the four ponies sitting around the campfire turned up as Dash came racing over, followed closely by Twilight, and with a small flash, six Dashes were now going through the bags, Twilight bringing up the rear with a curious, watchful stare. "Huh." Applejack drained the last of her soup and set her bowl down, "Guess I was wrong."

"About what?" Rarity asked, delicately sipping from a spoon, feeling, and looking much better now that her tail and hair had been properly combed out. Applejack just gave a shrug and a grin.

"Alright everypony, let's get morning practice done and be on our way. Dash?" Applejack turned, only to leap back as three swords landed right in front of the mare. Twilight raised an eyebrow, impressed. She had barely looked when she'd tossed the sword and had split it while it was moving. "There's only three swords here, Dash." Applejack called, and Dash nodded.

"Yeah, I'm not joining you guys this morning, had cruddy sleep." Orange Dash answered nearby, moving aside some things in a bag before leaving it alone. "Ah-hah!" She called, Purple Dash approaching proudly with a red book in her mouth.

Applejack stared in confusion as the rest gathered around, Blue Dash bringing by a blanket and laying it careful and flat on the sand. "'The Dangerous Guide to Fillies'?" Rarity asked curiously as the Dashes flashed into one, holding the book and laying on the blanket. She nodded a little.

"Twilight's never read it. C'mere." The other four ponies could only watch as Twilight happily settled in next to Dash, and used her elongated horn to crack open the book. "First couple of pages are chapters and section finding, then you got the opening guide for younger fillies just getting the book, then you get to the first part which is looking good no matter where you go." Dash explained as Twilight's eyes shifted back and forth across the pages as she slowly turned them.

Applejack approached, getting their attention as she stared down at them. "Uh, Dash, don't mean to butt in on your picnic here but I think Twilight can read." She pointed out, drawing a nervous smile from Rainbow Dash.

"Well, yeah, I mean, of course, but-"

"We want to read it together." Twilight explained in a distracted tone as she reached the first chapter. "Fillydelphia Stylish, finding the sort of mare you are, want to be, and will be. Beauty and grace in one small chapter." She read, Dash turning her head back to the book, nodding eagerly.

"This is the chapter I learned to style my hair from. Used to be really frizzy, but it gives tips to Pegasuses-"

"Pegasi." Twilight corrected without really thinking about it, reading carefully, "in the zone" as it were.

"- whatever, on how to keep your hair flat and straight in the air. Turned out to be real useful. Maybe you'll find something you like." Dash offered, and Twilight snickered.

"Right. I like my hair but I doubt I'm going to get into something new. I like it how it is: manageable." She stated, starting to read again as Dash leaned her head in closer to read with her.

"No way, you could do some cool things with those strips. Like a braid maybe..." Dash hummed, staring at her hair as Twilight rolled her eyes. Applejack stared for a few moments, and shook her head.

Applejack began to smile to herself as she turned and picked up a sword. Twilight was brushing off on Dash. Normally the Pegasi would jump at a chance to *not* read, no matter what the book was. The alternative was even learning to swing a sword better and she'd prefer to sit with Twilight and read. "You certainly look pleased with yourself." Rarity mentioned, watching as Applejack pushed the sword through the sand blade-first to give them some room to exercise.

"Just thinkin' about somethin' funny is all. Watcha think about the bookworms over there?" Applejack asked, cocking her head in their direction as Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie got their swords, set them in the

sand, and began to exercise while watching Twilight and Dash as if they'd both sprouted two heads.

Rarity turned her head to look, observing how close they were next to each other, how they didn't mind practically pressing cheeks against the others' when they needed to get a closer read. "I think Dash has gone mad, Twilight's the influence on her, and they look adorable. You think they might start rubbing off on each other?" Rarity asked with a curious little smirk.

"I hope no-time soon, I want to be out of the room when the love starts flyin'." Applejack snickered, laying down to start doing push-ups as Rarity finally caught up.

Her eyes widened, and she recoiled in disgust. "Oh! Applejack you little-they're mares!" She groaned, and Applejack began to giggle as Rarity lowered her head. "You should be ashamed! Bringing that sort of low-brow farm-humor around me."

"We're friends, ain't we? I can say what I like 'round ya." Applejack pointed out, raising and lowering slowly, Rarity's eyes bobbing to match her motions.

"I am a mare of poise, grace, and class, I do not appreciate such dirtiness!" Rarity insisted, making Applejack collapse suddenly, laughing as she rolled over. "What is it *now* you perverted little filly?"

"T'ain't nothin'!" Applejack squirmed as she laughed, getting back on her hooves to continue her activity. "Just thinkin' 'bout that one joke ya told me 'bout the fashion mistress and her, uh, 'rear assistant'." Rarity turned her head away from Applejack, blushing hard as the farmer giggled uncontrollably.

Pinkie sat up, Fluttershy getting up with her when they finished their set of thirty-five, and they both watched as Dash got excited about something in the book, and as Applejack had to slow down just to keep laughing. Pinkie turned to face the shy mare. "Wow, so is this what it feels like to be the normal one?" She asked.

Fluttershy smiled softly to her friend as they waited for Applejack to finish laughing. Finally when the farmer girl had settled down long enough to

finish her work-out did she get up and pick up her sword. "Okay everypony, let's do a little practice."

Flight started early that morning. The sun was just above the horizon in the distance, rather than slowly making its way to its zenith. The dragons were a little more stiff and slow to get moving, but they were handling themselves just fine. Fluttershy, on the other hand, felt like a cluster of squeezed nerves.

Everything about this morning had felt like things were just going wrong again and again and again. The sandstorm woke them up early, Rarity's coat was nearly ruined, the jar of preserves broke, the dragons had gone missing for a moment, and then of course she was now wondering where Dash stood with Twilight. Seeing the way they cuddled up and so enthusiastically read together, listening to them laugh and joke as Applejack did what she could to refine her swordplay - which wasn't bad, it just lacked any sort of aggression whatsoever - she began to suspect, and wonder...

She was now questioning the authenticity and the moral-issue of having these feelings for Twilight now. What had started off as a tiny crush developing from somepony having so much faith in her to rely on her while moving a dragon, what had grown into genuine affection and care for a pony that devoted herself eagerly to her friends to throw herself into danger again and again if it meant protecting the ponies and the dragon that meant so much to her, was now being called into question.

Watching Dash on the other dragon, she couldn't help but have some mixed feelings regarding her. On one hoof, Dash was one of her oldest friends, they grew up in Cloudsdale together, they went to flight school together, they watched out for each other, but on the other hoof, she felt the teeniest, tiniest bit of resentment towards the other Pegasus, and it hurt her so badly to feel it. She should be happy for Dash and for Twilight, but she just felt a tightness in her stomach whenever she thought about them being happy together. She felt it was terrible of her to feel so greedy, but was it so wrong to want another pony, even if they were off limits?

She felt unsure, terrible, and wrong... But embracing Twilight from behind, and resting her head gently on her newest friend's back as the unicorn

guided Rattler along the airlines, she felt a sense of peace as well. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath as she considered her feelings. She didn't want to think anymore, it just made things worse, but she couldn't stop...

She tensed as she felt a hoof on her back, and felt it slowly rub her back up and down. She opened her eyes slowly, and shivered as she felt the leg drape around her. "Hey." She looked up into Twilight's concerned look. "Are you okay?" The unicorn asked, gently holding the Pegasus closer. "You're really tense? Are you sick? Should we land?"

Fluttershy gulped dryly, then pressed her head into Twilight's side again and smiled behind her hair. "I'm okay. Don't worry about me." She whispered, and felt the arm gently squeeze.

"Are you sure?" Twilight persisted, smiling while she saw Fluttershy peek up between her bangs. "We can stop at any time, roll you out a tent and a sleeping bag, get you some of those preserves in you... Hey, I could finally make up for you taking care of me after I got my horn." Twilight chuckled, and Fluttershy felt herself blush so hard. Even if Twilight and Dash had something, she wasn't entirely escaping Twilight's notice... "I bet you look adorable when you're being spoon-fed."

Fluttershy squeaked in embarrassment and nestled into Twilight's side harder, making the unicorn giggle. She wished she could do this more, but that meanie-head part of her didn't want to share it. She glanced to Dash quietly on the other dragon, and tried to figure out what she should do... What could be done? She loved Dash so much, she was one of the greatest ponies she'd ever met but...

"Know what Fluttershy?" Fluttershy looked up sharply, and gasped as she was suddenly tugged from her seat, and pulled over Twilight's lap, and sat in front of her. Twilight pressed against her back, holding the reins and resting her chin against Fluttershy's neck. Fluttershy was simply too shocked, and as she felt Twilight's legs around her, felt very very warm. "You're starting to scare me, so you're staying where I can see you." Twilight smiled as Fluttershy shivered a little in her grip. "Is this okay?"

"..." Fluttershy quivered some more, and blushed enormously, refusing to look back at Twilight as she finally whimpered out an answer. "P-... Perfect..." She smiled to herself as she slipped into happier flights of fancy.

It had been two long, sun-blasted hours. The sun sat high in the sky, the gold sand beneath them turning into a brilliant mirror that stung the eyes. Beneath them, another sandstorm was going on, but they were flying just above it, out of range, out of danger. Still, the noise, the monotony, and the heat was starting to rag on several of the girls.

Pinkie in particular was feeling restless. She clung to Dash closely, feeling tired now. None of them had gotten enough sleep. Twilight and Applejack powered through it because the two had never even dropped off, but they were starting to show signs of fatigue in the bored sky. The problem Pinkie was having though was she couldn't shake a feeling of foreboding danger.

She couldn't explain it exactly, it was a feeling in the back of her mind, a small hole in her gut, a small ice cube slipping down her spine or a lump in her throat. She looked behind herself again, and saw nothing in the distance but sand and blue skies. Facing back forward, she hoped she was just being paranoid again...

Then the storm beneath them passed. It was sudden, but one instant there was an enormous cloud of sand, and the next there was empty desert. No, wait, not empty... "Is that...?" Applejack whispered in front of her, shifting in between her forelegs as she tried to get a closer look.

"I think it's a town!" Pinkie's eyes widened, leaning in for a closer look, using her excellent eyesight. "And there's ponies in it!" She called loudly, the other girls turning their heads quickly to watch.

They drew closer, getting a better look of the town. It wasn't very large, maybe twelve buildings, and the ponies were few, but what drew their attention was the large assortment of green. It was built on top of some muddy, brown land, possibly the only land like it for miles, and there was cactus everywhere, all budding with red spots. "Think we should land?" Applejack called, looking to Twilight and Fluttershy.

Twilight shook her head. "No, we're getting close to Terraria." She called back, her eyes glowing again, watching the distance. "Wherever we're supposed to go to see him, it's closing in fast." She called, making Applejack nod.

"Closin' in." Applejack mumbled, and it took a few moments for her to realize they had absolutely no idea what they were doing. They were passing over more and more villages now as they flew in closer as Applejack considered what they'd be facing. They were no where close to being any good in a fight. So far Dash was the only pony with any sort of fighting ability on a military level with the sword and her copies, but she had no idea about Twilight. Sure she had the hard-headed stubbornness to turn and charge a foe if it meant buying time, but as far as Applejack was aware she had no real combat-suited spells, unless you counted the time she freaked out with the lightning...

And of course, she herself was only used to kicking, and never to kill, only to incapacitate. Fluttershy was far too soft, and not at all aggressive, and against an opponent that would actually intend to harm her Applejack was frightened she would freeze up and become an easy target. Rarity would give a much better fight if riled up, but she was still soft. And Pinkie Pie... Applejack wasn't sure about poor Pinkie Pie. Ever since her run in with the clown, Applejack got the feeling Pinkie had a deeper respect for a fight, and wouldn't treat it like a game. What that meant though was Pinkie Pie could be more easily scared into submission, or she could become deathly serious and perhaps... Dangerous. Applejack found both ideas to be abominable, but a dangerous Pinkie Pie with a sword would at least have a chance of surviving. If Pinkie froze up...

Applejack squirmed uncomfortably, and frowned back at Pinkie Pie as the mare watched another village pass beneath them. She wouldn't want anything else bad to happen to Pinkie, or to anypony... Heck, these ponies were practically her family away from her family. The thought of Pinkie, or anypony she loved becoming targets terrified her. She hoped this Terraria guy was the pleasant sort...

"*THERE!*" Applejack hopped up immediately, Pinkie Pie squeezing her tightly in surprise. Fluttershy was just so lucky Twilight's forelegs were holding her, or the surprise may have dislodged her. Everypony turned to Twilight with wide eyes as she suddenly stood on her rear legs like Pinkie had, her smile wide and her eyes blazing with renewed determination. "He's so close I can see it! Directly ahead!" She called, point with one hoof. Applejack looked. They all looked.

On the horizon was a dark smudge. It could have been a mountain. It could have been a city. It could have been a giant, lazy Alicorn, but nopony knew and nopony cared. They each let out small sighs of relief, all but Applejack, who was still concerned about the trials to come. At least, she reasoned, they weren't on a wild goose chase and were actually within sight of their goal.

It took another twenty minutes just for them to see what it was, and it was enormous.

A city.

An enormous, circular city, with massive outer walls, and equally massive walls forming gigantic rings on the inside of the city, and a brief count revealed seven walls, the middle holding a high, beautiful looking spire just above it. Each outer ring, including the smallest outside the palace, looked like it could hold the whole of Canterlot and then some, and each wall was spaced further out from the last wall. The buildings were placed alongside the walls except in the outer ring, where a few market stalls were placed along the middle. As they got closer and closer, they could see that the closer a ring was to the palace, the more beautiful the buildings were. On the outer ring, they were mostly stone and sun-baked clay, with occasionally wooden stalls, while the innermost ring had buildings made of marble, with sloping shingle roofs and gold trimming. The roads of the outer ring were non-existent, so there was sand and dirt to walk on, but the inner ring had paved stone roads with working lampposts.

They could barely see the far side of it it was so enormous, and down below they could spot hundreds of thousands of ponies milling around inside the rings, possibly reaching the seventh digit since a good number of them were probably inside as well. The three dragons swooped around the city slowly as they took in the sights, staring at thousands of years of work beneath them. "This is where Terraria is?" Fluttershy asked in a hushed voice, with big, wide eyes as she took in the sights.

"Twilight!" Applejack called, drawing the Unicorn's attention before she could speak. "Don't tell me this ain't it, 'cause this is kinda fit for a king!" The farmer pony shouted. Twilight then put her eyes back on the palace, which was glowing with such powerful ancient energy that she could feel the excitement in her bones. This was it.

"This is it everypony!" Twilight shouted, drawing several excited whoops before Twilight jerked Rattler's reins to steer her outside the city. "Let's set down outside!" She called, her body shaking as she was forced to leave the warm, glowing energy in the middle of the massive city. It made her feel energetic, and powerful, and happy. Whatever this energy was, she wanted to curl up in the middle of it and stay there for eternity. Leaving the comfort zone made her shake a little, but she ignored it as they flew over the last wall, and towards a dune outside the enormous gate of the city.

There was a trail of migrating ponies heading towards the gate, baring caravans of goods, but as they passed over, Dash saw them suddenly speed up. She narrowed her eyes, keeping the spotted dragon on course as she saw them rush into the city all of a sudden, like a barrier had been lifted. They landed with hearty thuds on the sand, and they slid off, one by one and stared at the great outer wall of the city. It was a beautiful, awe-inspiring sight it was so big. They must have been half a mile away and they could see the walls must have been one hundred feet high. This was both a city and a fortress.

Twilight stood at the peak of the dune to stare at the city, while Applejack quietly soothed her dragon. "Listen close Hayseed, I'm gonna be gone for a bit. I dunno how long but I'm hopin' not long. Can ya manage by yourself for a while? Ya'll and Dick and Rattler?" She asked. The great dragon merely lowered his head and gently nudged her with his snout, his long, pink tongue slipping out in half a moment to give her a lick across the neck before standing, glancing to his draconic companions as they kept their eyes on the ponies. "That's what I thought." Applejack smiled, and turned to face the rest of the group.

"So what's the plan?" Rarity asked as soon as Twilight turned and stepped in to complete the circle. The six ponies glanced around to each other, then finally to Twilight. "You're leading this little expedition, any ideas?"

"Well..." Applejack could see Twilight hesitate to continue. Just like herself, the unicorn had little idea of what waited for them, but also like herself, Twilight knew when to improvise a plan. "It's a city, so it has to have intelligent and sophisticated ponies in it. I'm thinking we try and get an audience here with Terraria... No, wait, he's supposed to just be a soul, so their Princess. Their Princess would probably know about Terraria and how

to get to him. He may even be under her control." Twilight mused, rubbing her chin with her hoof until Dash wiggled hers in front of her.

"Plan, Twilight, plan!" The rainbow-haired Pegasus reminded her.

"Right right, okay, the plan. We go in and ask their Princess." She stated with a brief nod, causing her long horn to nearly tap Rarity's. Pinkie Pie giggled a bit as the rest merely nodded. "With any luck, we might even get this done with today." She chuckled.

"I hope so." Applejack agreed, Fluttershy nodding beside her. Dash lifted her head up to bob, but froze. She turned her head quickly around in a circle, something in the back of her mind sending alarm bells throughout her body, making her tense up as adrenaline flooded her limbs. "Ya'll alright Dash?"

"Dashie must be hyper! She didn't get any training in whatsoever!" Pinkie Pie pointed out as Dash turned in a quick circle. The giggling stopped when Dash sat up and cocked both ears.

"It's not that... I don't know what it is..." She whispered, staring past the dragons, then behind herself. "I just got this weird feeling. I can't explain it. Like just before a big race but worse."

"And ya just got it? No reason or nothin'?" Applejack raised a curious eyebrow, joining Dash in scanning. It was then Dick calmly peaked over the sand dune they were sitting on the slope of, towards the city.

"Nothing! It's like it just-" something slipped under Dash's feet, and she was flying through the air, Fluttershy screaming in her ear, Twilight and Rarity screaming beneath her, and they hit the sand right as Dick leapt forward, baring down on them with a tense, predatory face, and Dash stared up right as his head came down. She felt the alarm bells raise, and in a moment thought the great lizard was about to eat her, until his wings wrapped around them.

Dick groaned as a series of loud thuds happened around them, and as Dash stared around, helping Pinkie to her hooves as the others slowly got up, they heard the noise. The sound of a stampede. Hooves trampling the sand as Dick used his great wing to throw the ponies again and turn

around, wings raised up, joining Rattler and Hayseed as they roared terrifying roars, their stances intimidating. The stampede never stopped.

"What's goin' on!" Applejack shouted, on her hooves the quickest as she stared at the dragons, and had to hide a queasy moan. Dick's back had several spears lodged into it, drawling a tiny amount of blood.

Rattler gave off a sharp shout, leaping back as several ponies in sand-colored armor covering nearly every part of their bodies but the joints stormed over the dune, spears in their hooves as they jabbed at the dragons, who tried to knock back the spear-points with their claws but were driven back by sheer numbers. The dragons were quickly being pushed back, and even as they opened their mouths to release a blast of flame, globs of something gray were quickly launched into their open maws, sticking to their teeth and tongues and blocking the flames.

"Hayseed! Dick! Rattler!" Applejack shouted as she rounded the ponies back, sending them scurrying towards the desert, Fluttershy halfway through tears as Dash and Pinkie Pie pushed her along from behind, Rarity behind them, Twilight in the back trying to drag Applejack away. "Lift off! Get outta here! Go!" Applejack jumped forward and grabbed Hayseed's tail and tugged, "*NOW!*"

The dragon looked at her sadly for a half second, saw she was serious, and flapped, flying away from the attacking soldiers, Rattler and Dick joining him in the sky after much hesitation. The soldiers charged the ponies unheeded, gaining speed across the shifting sands beneath all their hooves, while the dragons tried to harass from above until nets were shot up high, the weights tugging the ropes around the dragons, bringing them to the ground after several awkward flaps of their wings. Several guards broke away and tugged the dragons to the ground.

Applejack could only watch in despair as she ran, until a hard head butt to her flank made her misstep, and then the soldiers piled onto her, the rest of the stampede going after the other girls.

"Applejack!" Twilight screamed, losing sight of the orange pony and slowing for just a moment. The soldiers came down on her, and she realized her mistake. With a deep breath, she disappeared, and reappeared next to Rainbow Dash, tearing up. "They got Applejack!" She shouted over the

noise, her stomach twisting in terror, her mind clouding as she realized she had no idea what to do... They had Applejack...

They still ran, but it not fast enough. They all stopped as they heard a terrified scream, and looked to see Fluttershy being wrestled to the ground, and in a moment they were set upon. Twilight felt a twist in her gut as the plan, as their mission, as everything just seemed to fall apart...

To Dash, it felt like everything was going in slow motion, from the terror and anger rising from her gut to the way the armored ponies moved. They surrounded the group quickly, hooves reaching out to grab and shove them to the sand, the screaming around her... What was happening? What was going on? Why were they being attacked?

Thousands of questions, and as her snout was pressed to the sand, she had no answer. She squeezed her eyes shut as hooves pressed her to the sand, and she summoned every bit of strength she could to try and become six again, but a sharp kick to her stomach made her lose her concentration. Bleary eyed, she looked up, and saw a forest of legs and a flurry of activity. Rarity was being shackled, Fluttershy clasped in iron as she was held down and weeping, Pinkie Pie dragged away from clutching Twilight neck, shouting and screaming, but worst of all were the tears. Dash tried to fight the pain in her stomach and get up, but as she leaned for her sword it was ripped from her body. She reached for it, but a harsh shove sent her back.

For a brief moment, when she opened her eyes, they met Twilight's. She grit her teeth, fighting her own emotions as she saw the fear in Twilight's, and she tried to move, tried to crawl over... "Dash..." The unicorn whispered, before a hoof shoved her snout into the sand. Dash reeled back in shock as Twilight was dragged away from her, and then the manacles came to her...

In her mind, Dash could see the table again, the cold metal around her legs, the bile-taste in her mouth, the smell of a room that was far too clean with too many chemicals, the table, the unicorn laying on it, the ponies surrounding her, forcing her to drink, taking her magic away, kicking Dash in the stomach, holding her down as scissors were brought to her wings...

Stemming from her bruised gut, the feeling of terror was slowly replaced by one of anger. They were going to hurt her again, hurt her and Twilight, they were going to be thrown into a wet cell again, beaten and broken... That

first day... All the hatred and anger she'd felt was coming back. Never again. She was not going to that cell. And Twilight, poor Twilight, she would not be woken up screaming again...

Not her, not Fluttershy, not Applejack or Rarity or Pinkie Pie... She wouldn't see that pain again. She wouldn't let their reasons for getting up every morning ripped from them like they had to her. She was the Guardian. She had to do something.

The legs holding her down suddenly lifted away as she grit her teeth, every bit of strength in her body igniting at once as the feelings of keeping her friends from such a grim fate overwhelmed her uncertainty, shouts filling the air as soldiers, too stunned to do anything just watched as light filled Dash's eyes.

All around Twilight, the guards shot back, away from her, manacles half on as a powerful light, and more heat filled the air. Twilight shook her forelegs, gritting her teeth as they slid off and she pushed herself up. Her back legs were still trapped, but she had more to concern herself with. She turned her head quickly, seeing guards scattering away from the light nearby, and she turned to face whatever it was. She had to use her hoof to hide her gasp.

Dash was standing slowly, the sand around her slowly turning to glass as the living flame that now made up her body melted the particles of earth together. It was clearly Dash, with her rainbow hair, her blue body, and she had a pony look, but the way her body flowed she looked like colored flame come to life. Gold light permeated from her very presence, the glare of the sun driving the soldiers back to their abandoned weapons as Dash's rainbow stripes turned into very light pastel colors, her hair flowing from the heat.

"Twilight!" Twilight just stared as Dash came forward, sword retrieved and in her mouth. The blade was no longer there, in its place a solid stream of bristling, angry flame, twice as long as the original blade. Dash ducked her head under her body quickly and slashed the chain holding the manacles around her back legs together, and lifted up quickly. Dash was hot, but her flames did not burn her. Twilight stared dumb-struck as the Pegasus worriedly looked her over. "C'mon, we need to get the others." There was presence in her voice. A presence that sounded... Celestial. In Twilight's ears, it sounded like Celestia herself was whispering sweet nothings,

promises of protection and care, and to her very core, despite the situation, she felt the intense power seeping into her, and a sense of courage, bravery, the need to protect and the knowledge she'd be protected calmed her mind.

"You're right." She answered, glancing towards where the guards had dragged their friends. They were being pulled back by the crowd, and she sucked in a deep breath, her horn flashed as a wall made of compact sand rose up from the ground, tossing guards everywhere and blocking off the path they were dragging their friends down. "Do you think you can scatter them without hurting the girls?" She asked, her horn flashing once more as several guards bore down on them, and were suddenly thrown back by a wave of force.

"Nothing will hurt my girls." Twilight turned to stare at Dash, and in her rigid stance, could see the aura of sunlight around her forming an Alicorn she was so familiar with. "Keep an eye out for me," Dash whispered, her form blurring as the heat grew, steaming the air around her, yet never once harming Twilight with her intense presence, "and I," she grew brighter, and five more Dashes appeared. The six of them were each a very light color of the rainbow, with solid white hair, "will keep them distracted." They all spoke as one.

Their blades were drawn, gold-flamed streams crisping the air as Twilight glanced around rapidly at the soldiers. They stood around her dear friends, spears drawn and pointed towards their new foes as a wave of heat passed over them, the warm wind coming from the six Dashes as began to sprint outwards, away from Twilight. The Golden and Sapphire Dashes charged together towards the soldiers surrounding their friends, causing them to back off, hesitate just for a moment, and then charge.

The two Dashes met the twelve soldiers, and their golden auras turned into blazing gold fire as their swords slipped easily through the shafts of the spears, melting the metal points as together, surrounded by a wave of heat, they began to push the shocked soldiers back, or the soldiers fell and were leapt over. The heat was amazingly intense, and though wracked in pain, the soldiers bore no mark as the flames lashed them, driving them away.

Blades of fire cut apart the manacles binding Rarity, Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy, and Applejack, and quietly they stood and stared at the two burning

Dashes in small awe. "Get to Twilight." Sapphire Dash ordered, before sprinting off, Golden Dash leading them back to the unicorn.

Twilight stood in the middle of all this, Emerald Dash keeping a close eye on her as she observed. Several of the soldiers were being intelligent and not getting into scuffles with the blazing Pegasi and were choosing to charge Twilight instead, but found themselves blocked by sudden walls, blown back by harsh, sand-filled winds, and several even getting to meet Emerald Dash face to face. "Are you girls alright?" Twilight asked quickly, breathing deeply as she cast spell after spell at a rapid pace, all while Ruby, Amethyst, Amber, and Azure Dash fended back the hordes.

"We'll be okay." Rarity insisted, looking around rapidly as the fighting continued, "Provided we can leave soon. We need to get to the dragons."

"Agreed." Applejack answered quickly, her tone low and dark as she glanced around rapidly for Hayseed. She was still plenty bitter, and it showed.

Pinkie Pie stood frozen now that she wasn't being urged to move, watching the violence happening around them with wide, pained eyes. Next to her, Fluttershy was doing no better. No matter where she turned, there was shouting, screaming, blades and furious movement. All the while, the Dashes grew more and more ferocious, the fire around them get more and more violent as she began to lose herself to the action.

So this is what Celestia had been wanting to protect them from...

The soldiers quickly realized this was a battle they weren't going to win and began to back off. The Dashes saw this, and slowly backed away themselves, towards the group in the middle, burning blades held firmly in their mouths as they watched all movement. Twilight stood high in the middle of the group, horn raised, glowing, ready to shift the sands, move the wind, raise the walls, anything she had to do...

And all in a moment, it was gone.

The walls around them began to crumble. The wind stopped acting up. All around them, the Dashes' fire began to burn itself out. The backed-up soldiers stayed away, as from over the dune came ten unicorns, eyes and horns glowing as they stared passively at the surrounded girls. "Wh-

what..." Twilight whispered, that confidence swiftly draining as confusion took its place. She couldn't feel her magic anymore. All of it was just...

... Gone...

"Twilight?" Emerald Dash... No, just Green Dash now, whispered to her, wide-eyed as there was a flash of light, and all the Dashes were now one. The walls down, the fire gone, the Dashes were one, the soldiers stared them down, and took an ominous step forward. The six girls slowly walked back, eyes watching their slowly impending doom, and the soldiers began to charge again, spears raised.

"Stop."

The soldiers froze where they stood, and Twilight turned to stare at the approaching unicorns. At their head was a brilliantly green, elderly unicorn, with royal purple hair in teased curls laying across the red cloak she wore. Her horn was no longer than any other unicorns, but Twilight, Rarity, and Dash could all feel the power coming from her. She radiated magic more powerfully than any other average unicorn. She came to a stop in front of them, the other unicorns' horns still glowing with power as they suppressed the mares' magic. She lowered his head, and quietly stared at Twilight's horn with bright blue eyes.

"Curious. You are a dangerous sort of monster, aren't you?" She asked, simply musical words far from the Equestrian language rolling off her tongue easily as she spoke, and it made Twilight rear back at the accusation. **"Yet without magic you are as impotent as a gelding servant. Has Golding retracted its deal in the treaty? Is that why you bring dragons?"** The elderly unicorn sneered right in Twilight's face, making her quiver.

"Is she speaking in tongues?" Rarity asked, her ears flitting as she stared at the unicorn, doing her absolute best to keep herself from shaking in terror as the soldiers uneasily laid their arms down, but then they began to pull out chains...

The unicorn turned her head to stare at Rarity, eyes narrowed in suspicion. **"That is not Golding speech. What is this? Are you allies, mercenaries, or some upstart nation looking for territory?"** Twilight just

quietly shook her head and took a step back as the unicorn's narrowed eyes twisted in anger.

Dash began to growl as the unicorn started to walk Twilight back, but the purple unicorn took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm not catchin' a word she's sayin'. I don't think that's Equestrian." Applejack whispered.

"It's not." Twilight answered, glancing back to the glaring unicorn quickly.

"Unless you have a death wish, I suggest that you'd start talking in something a little more common." The elderly pony whispered in a deathly quiet voice, causing them all to shift nervously.

"Okay..." Twilight answered, drawing shocked stares as the language flowed easily from her mouth. She didn't know why it came so easily, not right away, but the right words, the right sentence structure, and the right answer came along easily. **"We're, erm, not from Golding, nor are we allied with them. Or hired by them."** She answered nervously.

"Twilight...?" Fluttershy whispered, confused beyond all belief, all the rest sharing matching faces. Twilight's ears flattened. "How are you speaking like them?"

Twilight turned her head to face her, **"I don't know, I think it might be..."** She trailed off, then shook her head, "It has to do with one of Anemone's gifts. Comprehension..." She whispered to herself, then looked back to the oddly staring unicorn.

"So you're upstarts then? No doubt riding on some power granted by a heathen beast wanting to sew a little more chaos in the world, what granted you your power, Star Bear? Daemon Wyrms? The Golding witch?" She hissed to Twilight darkly, but the purple unicorn shook her head rapidly.

"No no! None of those things!"

"Then what! That horn is unnatural, that flame around your Pegasus companion didn't come from any sort of natural source, what sort of explanation could you possibly have for your power!" The unicorn was shouting now, making Twilight shake.

"Alicorns!" She answered quickly. The old unicorn stopped, her eyes widening as she took a step back. Her eyes narrowed slowly as the soldiers suddenly halted in their step. **"Anemone, Princess Celestia, Princess Luna, they granted us power! We have good reason to be here, we didn't mean to cause trouble, we took the dragons from Golding because they invaded us, Anemone tasked us with keeping them from harming the leylines and we need to speak to Terraria-"**

"ENOUGH. Do not speak of Terraria!" The unicorn glanced around quickly, the soldiers standing around in confusion before the unicorn leaned in and whispered, **"Not out here. You'll speak of this to our king."** The unicorn lifted her head, and called to the surrounding soldiers, **"Bind them! Comfortably. They're to be fit and ready to speak to the king personally. Belezians,"** she turned suddenly to face the unicorns and began to whisper, **"wipe the name Terraria from the common defenders' minds."**

Twilight stared in confusion, less so than her friends at least, as the unicorns began to walk in slow circles around the perimeter, horns glowing as the Soldiers closed in. Dash turned for her sword, but Twilight held up a hoof. "They're taking us to their king, they know about Terraria." She whispered. Dash frozen, and Applejack quietly averted her eyes from Twilight to stare at her hooves as the soldiers came forward with manacles.

"I hope you know what ye're doin' sugarcube." The farm-pony whispered, moving close to bring Fluttershy, Rarity, and Pinkie Pie in front of her as the three softer ponies shook in confusion.

"I don't," she admitted, making Fluttershy whimper, Pinkie recoil, and Rarity stared in shock while Applejack and Dash glared, "but right now, this is our better option. We can explain ourselves to the king personally, get our story out, if they understand what we're doing then we can get some help."

"Twilight." The purple unicorn turned to face Dash, who for, perhaps the first time in her life, took a deep breath to calm herself down, and think. She closed her eyes as she felt the iron slip around her legs. "I trust you. Just please be right about this." Twilight felt her heart drop a little on seeing the worry in Dash's face. She understood.

She knew this wasn't a very favorable situation, she knew she was basically walking them straight into a fire pit and asking them to pretend

they weren't getting burned, but she had to do something, anything to get them out of this situation, and anything to speak with their king... 'I have to be right.' Twilight thought to herself as she allowed the soldiers to clasp the manacles on, not as tightly as she was used to manacles being, but she wouldn't be going anywhere fast. 'I can't let the girls down.'

The elder unicorn called for a line formation, and soon the soldiers formed a row on each side of them, long, blocking off all escape paths, the girls between them, Twilight in front behind the unicorn, Applejack directly behind her, Fluttershy and Pinkie making up the middle in that order, and Rarity walked in front of Rainbow Dash. "I don't suppose you could use that fire trick again?" The unicorn asked behind her, a soldier swiftly using his shoulder to keep her turned forward.

"Probably not, those unicorns are still here." Dash answered, keeping her ears forward as Rarity answered without turning her head.

"You could try. You could burn, split, and probably throw them all off, then we could escape and find a diffe-"

"Not happening." Dash stopped Rarity's train of thought as they were lead towards the open gates, a wooden wagon waiting for the girls to haul them off.

Rarity wanted to turn and stare her in the eye, but she could only flicker them around nervously when one of the guards turned to stare at her through his faceless helmet. "Why ever not! We're in a bit of a predicament, don't you think?"

"I don't like it either, believe me, the last thing I want to do is be in chains and be a prisoner of a bunch of blade-happy foreigners *again*." Dash's tone darkened, and Rarity bit her tongue at her own loose-lips. "But Twilight thinks we should go with them, and I'm gonna go ahead and trust her with this." She was still conflicted, she didn't think this was the right way to go about this Alicorn business, but Twilight thought it was a good idea, and Twilight hadn't failed her yet.

"You're going to get in and be quiet." The elder unicorn ordered as they approached the wooden stockade wagon, heavily supported by steel, Twilight translating in kinder words, **"Our subjects tend to get riled up when invaders appear, and look for executions. Don't give us a**

reason to rope your necks." She ordered, and Twilight gulped heavily. Her friends could tell it was something bad, she refused to translate.

The heavy door to the wagon was opened, and the girls were pushed inside. Inside the dark little wagon, they sat quietly on the hay-lined floor as the door shut, and the wagon began to rumble as it was wheeled along.

Twilight sat closest to the wall, in the corner, observing her friends with a stiff expression. Anypony who paid attention could tell it was a very weak attempt at hiding her emotions, and so far everypony in the wagon knew she was not at one-hundred percent. "Well..." Pinkie Pie spoke up in a small whisper, "It's not going to plan, but at least we're going to see the king."

Rarity spoke up, also whispering, "Do you suppose he's the wise, kind sort of king, or the," she peaked out the barred window at one of the guard ponies, and looked back, "erm, other sort of king who's less than benevolent?"

Twilight opened her mouth to try and quiet them down, but Applejack spoke up first, "Well, story-tellin' ain't my strong point but he's locked up in the middle of a big ol' fortress city in the middle of a desert and the first thing they do is send soldiers chasin' our tails just 'cause we flew over 'em. I'm thinkin' he may not be the most friendly of ponies." Her tone wasn't very trusting.

"But he did make a prosperous city in the middle of a desert. As large as it is, he might be a very kind king, looking out for his subjects." Fluttershy whispered, staring down at her hooves shyly. Next to her, Dash 'pbbt'ed at the notion, but didn't say anything more.

"I want to believe that but..." Rarity sighed quietly, calmly wondering how her life managed to take her here.

"We just have to look on the bright side guys." Pinkie Pie insisted, standing up with a small smile. None of them looked particularly ready to do the same, "Things don't look good right now, but we've been in bad places before. We beat Nightmare Moon after all!"

"Nightmare Moon never had us in chains and in a cage." Applejack pointed out, staring at the wall.

"But she kept trying to hurt us and we never gave up. Not when the cliff gave out, or when we saw the big sea serpent, or during the scary tree illusion, or-"

"We're not in Equestria anymore." Rarity pointed out with a soft voice. "Things aren't so harmless out here. There are ponies with weapons, who haven't lived so peacefully. Even Nightmare Moon had been raised on peace."

The cart was silent, and Pinkie slowly lost her smile. Twilight stared, and realized nopony here was happy. They were captives, in the middle of danger, and the chances of escaping, or even knowing what to do... All slim. But she couldn't let their spirits down. Especially not Pinkie's. Quietly she stood, and walked over the pink pony. Heads turned to watch her as she sat in front of Pinkie, who glanced up. If all they could have was hope, then in Celestia's name and under her sun, she would not let that hope go.

Twilight held her head still by the chin and started brushing back her hair with her hoof. "We're not in Equestria, but we're still being handled by ponies. Even the Golding ponies could be decent when they chose to." She spoke, gently smiling as she rubbed Pinkie's head playfully, like towards a little sister. "We may be in chains, but we *are* kind of dangerous, and we *are* being brought to explain ourselves to the king. He may not be a kind pony, but I doubt he's cruel and bloodthirsty. And since we are trying to reactivate the leylines, who knows? Maybe he'll help us if it will bring life again. Where we are has lost its fertility, and our job is to return it. There is not a king alive foolish enough to turn that proposition down."

Pinkie Pie, in her hooves, smiled a tiny, grateful smile and nuzzled Twilight's neck in thanks, and Dash quietly approached, laying a hoof on the pink pony's back. "How can you stay so cheery Twilight? What if we end up like we did before?" She asked with a small frown, her gut still wrenching at the thought of being confined again... Twilight smiled a little, but it slowly began to grow as she suppressed a giggle, all the while dragging Pinkie into a tight hug as she started to laugh. "What?" Dash narrowed her eyes a little, the others staring on as Twilight began to shake as she tried to hold back the laughter.

"Same way I got through Laputa's tests." Twilight finally answered, rubbing Pinkie's back with a sad smile. "I just have to ask myself, 'what would

Pinkie do'?" In her forelegs, the party mare froze, and buried her face into Twilight's neck, pushing and nuzzling until Twilight began to have to take steps back. "I'm not kidding." She glanced around slowly. Applejack was leaning forward some, eyes off the floor, eyes a little brighter now. Rarity was even smiling a little, and Fluttershy moved in closer to be part of the group. Dash couldn't keep herself from joining in on the little smiles traveling around. "We just have to believe that these ponies have good hearts too. We have to believe that a little love, a little fun, y'know, a party, might bring out the best in these ponies." Twilight shrugged.

"Yeah..." Pinkie sighed, finally sitting back on her own, smiling again, despite their troubles. "Everypony has to have some good in them. We just need to show them all we want to help." She bobbed her head, growing a bit... Fluffier as her enthusiasm returned.

"I guess..." Dash sighed softly, looking out the tiny, inch-high window to see the palace come into view. "Yeah, you're both right. We just have to show them we're up to good things."

Applejack stepped in, Rarity by her side. "I think we can manage that. 'Course, you'll be doin' the talkin' Twi. Think ya'll can put in a good word for us?" She asked with a gentle nudge to her side.

"If only we had time to pick out outfits. We might make a better impression with some decent threads. Oh, but would that come off as too self-involved? We want to show we are genuinely trying to look out for *their* needs." Rarity mumbled to herself.

Twilight smiled as their spirits began to lift, and felt a gentle brush against her side. She turned, met Fluttershy's smile with her own, and rested a leg on the Pegasus' back. "As long as we're working together." Fluttershy concluded. The six of them nodded, and then sat in peaceful silence.

Chapter 20

Coltriella

The road was filled with an unbroken line of travelers from all over Equestria. The old, the young, and everypony inbetween was walking towards Canterlot. The declaration of potential war was enough to set even the oldest, creakiest of individuals at the steady pace, but few ponies actually believed this was the cause of the travel. Why would Celestia send out the notices by mail? Why not just use her communicative magic to spread the word?

Many of the non-unicorns were entirely unaware that communication by magic was now impossible, though only a few more actual unicorns knew, or sensed the silencing shell placed around the whole of their country. But orders were orders, and no pony disobeyed an official statement from Princess Celestia. Though if it was an elaborate prank, the number of guards ponies watching the travelers certainly gave it a more authentic feel.

Though it wasn't just the guards ponies there making sure everypony was safe and secure. Trails of sparks and smoke followed Soarin as he kept to the skies and scanned the roads beneath him, watching all the ponies carefully to make sure each individual one was a-okay. Some called him laid-back, some mistook his coastal-accent as a sign of immaturity and a lack of intelligence, but the truth was that his training made him amazingly perceptive and responsive to any sign of trouble, and he could be very good at spotting trouble.

He wasn't the only one of course, all the Wonderbolts were on duty escorting civilians. It wasn't a publicity stunt, the Wonderbolts were simply as much into public service as the guards were due to their superior skills provided the country was in a dire time of need. There was little time to show off when ponies were in danger, and as such, the Wonderbolts had a long, outstanding record of public service when they were on their royal duties.

Of course, they had to earn that as a team, and if *some* ponies weren't being team players then there was the slight chance that maybe, just

maybe something could go wrong. That was why, when they were passing through a town, Soarin had to land. He walked slowly and agitatedly forward to poke the side of one of his closer friends. "Spitfire, you're zoning out again." The golden mare blinked rapidly, turning her head away from the guard she'd been speaking to and faced Soarin. "C'mon, you're supposed to be up there with me." It was hard to tell with the goggles but he was giving her a firm, level glare.

"Mm?" She answered, and Soarin sighed, honestly wondering why people tied him to the inattentive, laid-back role of the group. "Oh, sorry Soarin." The Pegasus finally apologized, nodding to a guard in thanks. Spitfire was up in the air, followed closely by her teammate. "Sorry, I've just been hearing rumors lately and I've been checking in on them."

"About the war?" Soarin asked as they began to scan the road beneath them. He didn't want to think about war. The idea of war, the potential for war, the glory of war, it all seemed so chaotic and against everything Equestria stood for, yet the more he saw the more he was seeing signs. Ponies in armor were being spotted everywhere, the evacuations were sudden and the guards weren't taking any leeway with it, but even worse he heard from a reliable source that Horshire was... Gone. Not a single pony was there, yet everypony's valuables were still there. Word hadn't gotten out yet about the fate that befell Horshire.

Celestia was still readying herself in explaining where over three-hundred ponies went to.

"Not just the war." Spitfire answered, stopping to watch one particular pony acting a little oddly, though it turned out she only had an itch. "I'd been hearing the guards talking about it for a while. They say they'll be expanding the military for the coming war." Soarin slowed in the air, prompting Spitfire to do the same. "Something wrong?"

Soarin sighed, and sped up again, "Can we not talk about 'the war'? The war that's probably not going to happen?" He sincerely wanted to believe himself. "It's probably just a bunch of hubbub over nothing. Just some ponies wandering in with armor in, confusing the guards." He stated, making Spitfire turn up her mouth in a contemplative manner.

"There has to be more to it. War wouldn't just be randomly declared because armored ponies started appearing. Unless there were attacks, or

somepony had information," she pushed a passing cloud forward to keep it moving with the crowd and landed on top of it, leaving room for Soarin to do the same, "I can't see it just being a big hoax. Celestia's not that foolish."

Soarin grumbled softly as he sat, knowing she had a point, "Okay, so Celestia wouldn't call war unless she had a serious reason to do it, but what if she's just overreacting? I mean, expanding the army all of a sudden without giving us any information seems a little odd to me."

"She'll probably tell us once we get to Canterlot, she just wants everypony to hear it." Spitfire reasoned, using her wings to propel them along in the air at a reasonable speed so they could keep close watch. "I mean, it's kind of win-win for her, she keeps us close and safe and gets us together to tell us what's happening. Not to mention no pony will be traveling far so it'll be easy to get the army going quickly."

Soarin grumbled heavily again, staring down as he tried to focus on watching, but he just couldn't get the whole situation out of his head. He was angry and terrified this sort of thing was happening, and he desperately wanted to just stop hearing about wars. "Why are you asking around about it anyways? We'll be doing service in Canterlot too."

Spitfire rubbed the back of her head, and quietly contemplated her navel. Soarin turned his head to stare at her, and finally she spoke up, "I was thinking about enlisting."

Soarin turned so sharply that Spitfire reared back in instinct, and his face got so close to hers, she could see through his goggles, "Enlisting!" He nearly shouted, but he kept his voice low enough he wouldn't disturb the ponies passing below, "Tell me you're kidding! We already help the citizens out and we have a full time job practicing for our performances anyways!"

"And how long are we going to practice for?" Spitfire demanded, frowning as Soarin snorted. "This is a war, Soarin, this isn't us practicing, this is actual war."

"We don't know that!" He retorted, getting some looks from below.

"We have a really good bet on it! We can't just ignore this and pretend this isn't happening, we have to be prepared, that means we have to make

uncomfortable choices. Practice has been suspended, Soarin, you saw the memo, and no way the manager is repealing it anytime soon." Soarin snorted, but Spitfire continued, "The airways all over Equestria have been restricted outside buildings, Cloudsdale is even being flown to Canterlot and it's being repurposed for the military! You can keep pretending this isn't happening but we have to think ahead. I'm going to be joining the Royal Guard, at least my skills will be put to use there and I won't be sitting around pretending I'm doing something because the Princess says we are." Spitfire crossed her forelegs.

Soarin stood there, trying to form words and sentences, but he just kept twitching, opening and closing his mouth, and working his face muscles angrily as he tried to answer. Finally, he stomped on the cloud petulantly, "Well, y'know what? Maybe I don't trust you going to war!"

"Oh?" Spitfire huffed, "You think I'm too weak or something?"

Soarin answered immediately, insistently, almost as if he was covering for something, "You're a team flier, you're at your best around ponies you know, who know your moves and can match them, ponies as experienced as you."

"Meaning what? I won't make friends in the military? I won't have a unit I'm trained with?" Spitfire just grew more and more annoyed at how childish Soarin was being, "You think I'm just rushing in without looking, don't you? Think I'll get myself killed?" She accused, aggravating feelings mixing in her stomach.

"No!" Soarin answered loudly, making several ponies below stop walking to stare up. Soarin carefully untensed himself, his body shaking as he lowered himself to a sitting position, all while Spitfire watched him with a confused stare beneath her goggles, "Because..." He panted, and pawed at the cloud. "Because I'm going to be there to make sure you're okay."

Spitfire stared at him passively for a moment, and wordlessly approached him. Soarin tensed, but then his long time captain, and equally long-time friend hugged him. It was not gentle, it was rough and very clingy. "You're going to join with me?"

Soarin blushed beneath his mask and stared at his hooves, looking half-ashamed, half-embarrassed when Spitfire let him go. "We're a team, aren't

we? We eat, practice, perform, and hang out together. The only thing we don't do is sleep together." He paused, Spitfire just stared. "In the same room. Separate beds. Platonically." Spitfire rolled her eyes and groaned, "Look, it only makes sense that if you go into this, I should too. I can keep an eye on you and you'll have a familiar pony on your team, right? It's..." He lowered his head, "Win-win..."

Spitfire gently stroke his back, and smiled earnestly, "Soarin, you don't have to. I'll be okay by myself, I promise I will be." But even as she spoke he was shaking his head, almost angrily at that.

"No, no way. I'm not gonna leave you hanging. If you go, I'm going, as your teammate. Whatever everypony else on the team picks is their own decision but I've made mine." He said firmly, lifting his head up as he watched the crowd below, sighing heavily as he tried to settle his beating heart with duty.

Spitfire rubbed his back quietly, and just smiled to herself. "We're gonna be a great team out there."

Rarity was the first to pick herself up as, outside, she could hear talking, and the caravan had come to a stop. They may have been passing through another check-point, but still, she was curious. On the floor at her feet, Fluttershy shifted her weight from having been leaning on Rarity to leaning on Twilight, who returned the pressure as well as she could while doing the same to Rainbow Dash, who had her eyes closed and was in her thoughts. Pinkie Pie laid next to Dash, unusually quiet, but she was smiling at least, and on her other side, Applejack was doing her absolute best to stay awake. "Uhn, the city would have to be so very big, wouldn't it?" The farm-girl yawned.

Rarity stared outside through the tiny little slit window, then glanced down to her companions. "If I'm not mistaken, I actually think we're at the palace." She narrowed her eyes as she stared at the monumental structure's... Courtyard. She couldn't see the front after all. Though what she could see was a marvelous series of statues and pillars, though curiously, not a hint of green in sight...

Applejack lifted off the floor, shaking the sleep out of her eyes, and stretched. Dash opened her eyes to watch as Applejack peaked out a window. "Certainly looks sorta Palace-y from this way." She nodded quietly.

"Their décor is certainly questionable. I don't see even a small spot of green! What sort of palace doesn't have an intricate network of flowers and plants for its courtyard?" She asked, narrowing her eyes. "At least they took time with those pillars, but a bit of gold and silver does *not* make up for lazy gardening!"

Twilight lifted her head curiously, but didn't want to leave the winning position of being between both Dash and Fluttershy during their relaxed state. Pity the universe didn't want to keep her there. The door to the cart opened suddenly, letting the dark wagon fill with sunlight. Twilight grit her teeth and shut her eyes, and heard Dash groan right next to her in pain as they blinked away the pain. Through the dark spots, Twilight vaguely made out the shape of the unicorn that had captured them. **"Get out. Don't make too much noise, don't ask questions, just follow me. We've interrupted the king during his lunch, he will not be happy."** She said tersely, and Twilight nodded.

"Follow me guys." She whispered to her friends as they all stood up slowly and began to walk out of the wagon, following Twilight into the light. "And stay quiet." She took the first step off the wagon and onto the ground in front of the unicorn. All around them stood guards, but not the same ones from before. These ones didn't have face-concealing helmets, just ones that guarded the cranium, and their legs were visible from the inside. None of them looked entirely happy, but then again, her own group didn't look too satisfied either.

"Move." One of the guards, rather than wearing the traditional bronze-colored armor, wore silvered armor, with a red flag draped over one of his sides with a white star on it. Twilight guessed he was the leader of the guards here, and quietly went around the wagon as the captain lead them. What she could see of the castle courtyard was fairly impressive. Sun-baked bricks of clay, large enough to hold an entire pony on top of were laid flat in the standard layers pattern, though the road leading straight up to the palace steps were a brighter gold color. Other than on the main road, there were pillars that were cut to have a tall, thin, pyramid shape, with symbols carved into the middles that said things like "Wealth", "Power",

"Honor", "Reason", on each side, though the word was different for each pillar. It wasn't entirely impressive for a palace, though the sheer number of steps made up for the lack of decoration.

"Please don't tell me we have to climb those in this heat..." Rarity whimpered, standing just behind Twilight as they all stared up the staircase. Applejack and Dash looked impressed but not perturbed, nor did Pinkie, though she herself, Fluttershy, and Rarity were notably less than pleased.

"How many steps are there?" Applejack had to ask, glancing to Pinkie for some reason. Twilight glanced over to the pink mare and watched her eyes move up and down the steps over and over again before answering.

"Two-hundred and seventy-nine." She said without fault, making Rarity groan. No pony disagreed with her, but Twilight was cocking her eyebrow oddly.

"How would you know that?" The unicorn asked, staring over the gently smiling pink mare. Twilight nudged her with her side, and Pinkie brightened up some. She was still troubled, confused, scared, that made sense, but she still wanted to see Pinkie smile that never-ending grin of glee. "Lemme guess, your Pinkie sense told you that?"

"Nope! I just used my eyes." Pinkie blinked rapidly as if to prove her point. "Like this! You have four legs, Applejack has six freckles, there are a total of twenty-eight guards around us, and there are seventeen birds in the air!" Pinkie looked mighty proud of herself as Twilight looked up, and saw the barely visible birds flying around up ahead, then looked down to Pinkie.

"She's got a gift." Rarity explained with a tiny shrug as Pinkie began to hop up the stairs, the girls just behind her. The guards around them kept a good distance from them, their blades hanging by their sides close to where they could easily twist and unsheathe them. The Belezians walked behind them, observing carefully as they held up the spell that prevented magic. "I wonder if invasion is standard for them..." Rarity mused in a low voice to all her friends as they climbed the steps at a brisk pace. The guards wouldn't let them slow down, usually giving small growls if one of them paused for even a moment.

It certainly added to the tenseness of the situation. Even with Twilight's rousing words fresh in their minds and the relative comfort they'd found laying among each other, the number of ponies assigned to keep them moving, the clanking of their equipment, and the darkness in their stares left the six feeling small and quiet. At the very least they were confident they might not immediately be put to death.

Twilight hoped.

Twilight made it to the very top, stepping off the last step with a little less grace in her step due to being winded, and stood in front of a pair of magnificent brass doors, with mighty brass handles, and enormous brass knockers, and it was being guarded by great metal dragons, made of brass! Already she could see the theme: brass. Lots and lots of brass. It fit with being in the middle of a desert but glancing to the look of bemusement Rarity had she could see that Rarity had also been expecting a little more... Variety. Maybe toss some silver in? But no, brass! Everywhere there was brass. If you weren't walking on it or being defended from the elements by it, it was made of brass.

Except for the captain. He was silver.

Twilight licked her dry lips. Yes she was feeling dehydrated right now. She turned her head to glance to her friends, as well as the Unicorns stepping past them to approach the doors, and got one good look at the city. The palace steps were raised higher than the already tall walls of the city, and staring outwards she could see the rings of the city expanding the further and further they were. In her eyes, the place just never seemed to stop stretching. It was somewhat awe-inspiring that this vast city sat in the middle of a desert with a little of itty bitty towns and outposts laying around. She wondered what else lay in this land...

"Don't stop moving. We're nearly there." The head of the guards said, oddly reassuring as he used his hoof to smash the knocker into an indent. It sounded like smashing large, flat-bottomed pots together again and again through a microphone pointed directly into her ear, and she imagined her friends didn't like it any better than she did.

The doors opened without the slightest creak, the yawning entrance revealing a long hall with multiple doorways to the sides and tall pillars, along with paintings and artifacts such as urns, old swords and spears, and

several intricate sculptures, all made of brass of course. Twilight heard a loud 'harumph' by her side, "Do you think it would kill them to add something other than a shade of *brown* to this dustbowl they call a kingdom? Maybe some reds or blues, or we could go for broke and try *green*." Most of the group began to snicker as the purple-maned unicorn stopped behind them.

"I'd advise your party to keep quiet while they retain audience with the king. They wouldn't want to be made examples of, would they?" The elder unicorn snarled, making Twilight pipe down immediately, and signal for her friends to do the same.

"They're pretty gung-ho, let's just be quiet and keep ours head down." Twilight whispered as the unicorn stepped around her, walking towards a set of equally large double brass doors at the opposite end of the wide, fanciful hallway. As they walked, the guards suddenly closed in around them, forcing them into a tight group, Rarity and Dash at her sides brushing against her with each step. **"What are you doing?"** Twilight whispered, but the guards did not even turn to acknowledge her as the Unicorn turned to face them.

"From here on out, I must rob you of your sight. You will not be allowed to see the passage." She told them in a hushed whisper. Twilight could only watch uneasily as black cloth was passed to the Belezians, and Twilight turned to reassure her friends and calm them down as they began to wrap the cloth around their eyes. Blinded, the guards kept the moving with gentle nudges of their knees, directing them to turn by pressing against their sides as they went left, then right, then downstairs, then right again, then left then right then down then right then up and Twilight began to lose track of the directions they were going as they started to be rushed along, stopping only when the unicorn called for them to.

Twilight twitched her ears to listen, and then the blinds were removed. Panting softly from the short work-out, they stared up and saw they were in front of a door, more ornate than the entrance itself. There were golden and silver symbols all over it, most of them just meaningless shapes, but there was a straight string of symbols going across the middle of the door above the handles in the foreign language. **"Thrones are Built for Tyrants'?"** Twilight whispered to herself, again, the strange language

rolling off her tongue simply. The elder Unicorn gave her an... Interesting look to say the least as the door was opened.

The guards finally separated and moved along to stand alongside the walls of the long, wide room, and when they got their first good look at it, the pony girls gasped. The room was absolutely different from every other part of the castle. Waterfalls from the opposite side of the room coming out of the walls filled two deep, glass-covered basins around a red-carpet covered pathway in the middle that was wide enough to hold the six of them abreast to each other. On the far sides of the pools of water were actual growing plants. No vegetables or fruits, but flowers, bushes, vines all the colors of the world in this simply lit, marble-made room. Hanging from the ceiling were clay troughs filled with more vine and flower-covered plants, while water dripped from pipes above each planter at key points. The room was positively gorgeous, with more green and red and yellow and white than the girls had seen since they entered the blasted desert. Up the pathway was a tiny staircase, merely two platforms, each smaller than the last, sitting on top of each other, covered in red carpet, and against the far wall grew a tree. Genuine wood and leaves, and growing along the branches were actual red apples...

"Celestia's mercy..." Applejack whispered, staring at the fine apple tree that sat where a throne should have been. "Civilization, at last!" She whispered, nearly tearing up in the eyes as she stared at the beautiful tree while she took her hat off and held it over her chest in respect.

"The color!" Rarity sighed, pleasantly pleased as she walked up and down the pathway, staring at the plants, bumping into Fluttershy as the demure Pegasus sniffed at the flowers with a small smile.

Twilight just watched the whole room with wide eyes, listening to the trickling of water, staring at the plants, taking in the strong smell of life... These plants had magic in them, not just having it in them but sharing it. They fed off each other, off the water, off the soil, but the magic was also there to sustain them! Twilight couldn't activate her magic to stare at the ley lines, but she could simply feel it all around her. This one room had magic, this one beautiful room still had the power of life... "W-..." She whispered, briefly awe-struck by the magnificence.

Then she heard a collective gasp from the guards around the room, and blinked herself out of her trance as Dash suddenly appeared in front of her, a hoof-picked dandelion in her hoof. "Allergiessaywhat?" She asked speedily.

"... What?" Twilight blinked, then Dash pursed her lips, and blew sharply on the dandelion, making the seeds take flight into Twilight's face. The little white fuzzies stuck to her face-coat, tickling her nostrils, and she sneezed sharply. "Dash!" She shouted, sneezing again and turning her head so the spray would land elsewhere. She sneezed again. Then again. Then Dash fell over giggling as Twilight began to sniff and sneeze. The other girls watched as Twilight reared back, again and again, sneezing sharply and shaking her head, all while Dash kicked her legs with laughter on the ground.

Twilight couldn't hear the whispering around the room, just the constant laughing of her friends as she kept sneezing again and again and again. Finally she managed to slow herself down, panting heavily as she rubbed her face with her hoof.

Dash was still laughing on the floor, but stopped when she felt somepony over her. She opened her eyes slowly, and found herself staring into a picked dandelion... And then the face behind it blew, coating her face with the fuzzy seeds. Dash briefly got a glimpse of curled, golden hair and a mischievous smile, before having to turn her head to sneeze. Once. Twice. Three times.

Twilight could only watch as a colt a head taller than her skipped away from Dash, wings flapping merrily as he danced around the mares, who slipped away from the colt to stand next to Twilight and stare at the male, with a blonde, curled mane, and a very soft pink-colored coat, wearing two layers of cloaks designed to free his wings, one red, one blue, and a dark brown, gold-embroidered suit. The tips of his curled mane were dyed very light pastel colors, from pink, to purple, to green to red, each a different color, and looking absolutely... Well...

Rarity's jaw was nearly on the floor as she stared at the colt. The others looked no better as they simply stared at him. "... What *is* that?" Rarity asked, dumb-founded by the pony's hairstyle. "What was he *thinking*!" She demanded, managing to somehow, somehow, keep her voice level. "Did he

just let Spring sit on his head for a few hours! Did he jump *into* the cotton candy machine! I deplore you Twilight, tell me this is an illusion."

"..." Twilight turned from the colt to Rarity, then back to the colt. "... Maybe?" She answered with an uneasy shrug, Dash finally standing up, rubbing her nose.

"**Oh-ho, what's this?**" He spoke elegantly, his voice soft as silk, entering Twilight's ears and making her tremble. Sweet Celestia she wanted to melt... *Melt*.

"Twilight?" Dash whispered, watching Twilight whimper as her little purple knees began to knock. "Twilight are you...?" She whispered, waving her hoof in front of Twilight's face. She really did not like that oh so dreamy face she was making.

"Ponies that speak in an unknown language. Soft and tender as a newborn, girlish as a four year old filly. Refreshingly lovely." He spoke sweetly, looking cheerful as he approached the six with grace. Twilight could see he was older by at least fifteen years, but he was still amazingly handsome. Then he began to caress her chin, giving her the goofiest smile as his mere touch made her heat up in places she never knew could be warm. **"And such an impressive horn on this one. So many questions, so many-"**

"*HEY*." The colt took a step back, and every guard in the room had their blades unsheathed, closing in as Dash suddenly knocked away his hoof, looking enraged at the colt's intrusion, but it wasn't just her, Fluttershy was now standing between him and Twilight with narrowed eyes. "Hooves off our Twilight!" Dash held up her angered stance, Fluttershy equally peeved as Twilight rapidly blinked her eyes, snapping herself out of the daze while the guards snarled and held their blades close.

The colt, for his part, looked amused, **"What's this? Two winged guards?"** He asked curiously, slowly approaching again as Twilight smiled nervously, taking a few steps back, Applejack and Pinkie Pie facing outwards by her sides, glaring at the guards as Rarity held up the back, giving one of the guards a very good stare down. **"Or they're all your guards? Mighty curious. Let's talk, one to one. Colts, mares..."** He waved his hoof, and the guards hesitantly backed away.

Twilight glanced around slowly, "Girls, you can calm down, he's calling them off." She whispered. It took them several seconds, but they all lowly slipped to Twilight's side to watch the well-dressed mare walking up the dais to stand before the tree. It took her exactly four and a half seconds to figure it out right before he introduced himself. **"Wait,"** She whispered, staring at him with wide eyes, **"You're-"**

"To'Ao'Coltriella (The King of Coltriella)." He said, a hoof placed over his chest as he gave Twilight an almost smug look with his gray eyes, **"Though you may simply refer to me as Ao as long as we're in the same room. I must say, it's not often we get such cute guests."** The elder unicorn behind the six snorted as Twilight just mumbled quietly and blushed, making both Fluttershy and Dash growl softly, and the green-coated unicorn began to walk forward, **"My sweet Sul, you surely must have a good explanation for interrupting my luncheon?"** Twilight noted the way that even he spoke such sweet words, his face told a much more saccharine story concerning his feelings.

Sul stood before the king with a nearly neutral face before she turned to face Twilight, with an uneasy stare, then she glanced back to the king. **"These six mares you see before you, my king, were witnessed flying Golding-bred dragons above the city."** She stated firmly. The king's pleasant composure dropped immediately, and a very sour look took over instead. The bubbly joy Twilight had gotten from staring at his sweet smile was instead replaced with a feeling of meekness.

Twilight gulped, and jumped forward, making Ao step back with a hard glare, **"It's not at all what it sounds like, we were-"**

"Be quiet." Sul ordered sharply, giving Twilight a very stern look before turning to face her completely, her mouth near her ear. **"I will give him every bit of information I have gathered so far, you will stand there and try not to look aggressive. Fail to obey and I won't remain neutral for long."** She warned in a low hiss, making Twilight take a few steps back as Sul turned to face the king.

"Well then," Ao spoke, watching Twilight with a very displeased look, **"Chain them, jail them, kill them, Sul, don't bring this war-mongering filth into my palace! This is not a matter that needs my judgment."** Then he narrowed his eyes further, glancing to Sul

suspiciously, sneering out, **"Unless you're suggesting I dirty myself with concubines?"**

Twilight reared at the word, understanding it perfectly in correlation to old stories, but the thought never occurred to her that she and her friends could be degraded to such a thing. She glanced around the room slowly, the guards looking much more interested in the conversation now as their eyes roamed... Sul had waited until he was finished, and then began to speak, **"Not at all, Lord Ao, I had meant no disrespect to Quo. When they landed outside the city, the guards were sent to apprehend them. We had not expected the resistance they put up; the rainbow-maned mare had the ability to ignite herself and split into six and fought with blades, while the mare with the elongated horn fought more defensively using wind and walls. It took the intervention of the Beleziens to deactivate their abilities and pacify them. Without their magic, they were unable to defend themselves during my field interrogation."**

She paused, as if to collect her thoughts, and turned to watch Twilight some more. The little purple mare glanced watched passively, looking very worried, terrified even. She was not the sort of pony with war training, and judging by the uncomfortable looks of the other five, neither were they. **"And?"** Ao asked, slowly stepping forward to take a closer look at Twilight.

"They speak an unidentified language, though the purple-mare is able to understand, speak, and presumably read Coltriellan, as she was able to read the message on the throne-room door unaided. They claim they stole the dragons from Golding while invading them-"

"No no, they invaded us, not the other way around." Twilight chipped in. Sul and Ao stared at her quietly, and Twilight slowly backed down again. Fluttershy gently opened her wings and laid one across Twilight's back for comfort.

"Either way, they claimed to have stolen the dragons."

"That does not explain the magic. From what I know about our neighbors, this is no ordinary magic, what is their explanation for that?" Ao demanded, staring at Twilight stiffly.

Sul stared back at Twilight with Ao, another uneasy expression on her face, and quietly she glanced back to her lord, opened her mouth, and spoke in something entirely different, **"If I may, I suggest we switch to old Coltriellan to discuss this. She knows of entities that do not concern the common folk."** She turned to face Twilight with a curious expression, **"I assume you know what I'm saying?"**

"Perfectly." Twilight answered, then shook her head, and opened her mouth again, **"Perfectly."** She felt strangely confident with this, maybe it was just Anemone getting to her head...

Ao just narrowed his eyes further. This wasn't right. Only three ponies here would understand a word of what was going on. His guards wouldn't be able to react to idle threats, but he supposed he just needed a small wave of his hoof to inform them of what needed to be done. **"Very well. We'll speak in the language of my bloodthirsty father if it so pleases our invader."** He snorted at Twilight in open disdain as the guards just looked on in confusion.

Fluttershy very much did not like what was going on. She couldn't understand a word being said, and the colt in front of them did not look at all happy as he'd had before. Even worse, Twilight looked like she'd been struck by his words, and had her head hung. "What's goin' on sugarcube?" Applejack whispered behind them, but Twilight gently shook her head.

"She knows of Terraria." Sul said. Ao's face changed slowly. At first, it fell into dispassionate stare of thoughtfulness, and in the next second his eyes widened, his nostrils flared, and even Sul took a step back as the veins along his neck and jaw became visible with his rage.

"SHE KNOWS WHAT!" He roared, making Twilight tremble as she tried to become very small, all while Ao began to toss his head around angrily, stamping around the dais, ears twitching angrily as he turned to stare at Twilight again, **"A simple foreign *witch* knows about Terraria! What possible explanation could she have for knowing royal secrets!"** He grit his teeth and approached rapidly, making Twilight back up as her friends closed in, but Sul gently stepped into his path.

"My apologies for interrupting, Ao, but please listen, it's not just Terraria." Ao restrained himself from pushing past her, but never took his angry gaze off Twilight. Fluttershy and Dash quickly put themselves in front

of her again, staring the very king down as Twilight shivered behind them. **"She knows of Anemone, and the fabled Celestia and Luna as well. She knows of the leylines, and claims Anemone sent her to speak with Terraria."**

"Anemone is *long* gone." Ao snarled as he turned to face Sul, their faces nearly touching, **"He committed himself to asylum in the sea thousands and thousands of years ago. Everypony who knows the legend knows of this, so,"** he glanced to Twilight with a hard look, **"bring her forward, away from her guards. I want to question her personally on these adorable little lies she brings before my court."** He turned, starting for the dais as Twilight seized up for a moment, glancing around to her friends slowly. They were her comfort, her pillars of strength, and he was asking her to be taken from them. Sul turned to give the orders as Twilight turned, and slowly slid out from under Fluttershy's wing.

"Twilight?" Pinkie asked in quiet confusion, stepping after her, staying close to her back as Dash immediately moved to stand in front of Twilight again, acting as a wall. The guards closed in, but did not start grabbing once Applejack, Rarity, Fluttershy, and Dash stood their ground around the unicorn. Pinkie Pie gently nosed in closer to her, snout next to her ear. "What's going on?"

Twilight took a slow, deep breath, and then whispered her answer, eyes closed to avoid Pinkie's tense look. It just seemed so wrong on the wonderful little mare that inspired her. "He wants me to stand in front of him, alone." She answered, and immediately felt her friends press closer to her. The guards began to move forward, "He wants to know how / know about Terraria and Anemone. He's going to start questioning me, I think. You girls need to back away, just for a moment, so this can happen." She then gave them each a small smile as they somewhat relaxed, and turned their head to look at her. "We'll be okay, I would never do anything to get us hurt."

"..." Applejack stood up, calm, collected, looked around slowly, and turned to face Twilight. "I trust ya Twi. We know ya'll wouldn't get us hurt." She lightly nudged the unicorn with her hoof. "Give 'em hell." Twilight smiled broadly, and the entire group of them turned inwards to give her a brief group hug before backing away.

Both Sul and Ao watched this passively. The genuine affection they showed so shamelessly. They were not the hardened Golding soldier that demanded strict discipline in emotion. They weren't like any soldiers, or foreigners they'd ever seen. Sul turned quietly to face her king. **"What are you thinking, my lord?"** She whispered.

Ao watched, eyes narrowed, and calmly shook his head as the girls left their friend, standing a few feet back, the guards retreating as their orders were finished, **"Strange, for sure. Suspicious, definitely."** He whispered. He didn't know. They weren't the invaders they were used to, violent, lying through their teeth, begging for mercy or bartering information, they wanted to *talk*. About *Terraria*. There was trouble abound.

All the purple unicorn's friends had stepped back. All except the blue one, who was keeping an eye on the king closely. Ao narrowed his eyes. **"When I said we were to speak alone, I meant *you* and *me*. Not you, me, and her."** He stated in a low voice, and Sul nodded. They could tell this one was obstinate. Most likely her primary guardian. She was decorated enough, and she had the sword and the abilities...

Twilight turned to speak to the sky-blue Pegasus, but Dash merely raised a hoof. Everypony watched as she extended it to point at Sul, then Ao. Then she lowered it, raised her other hoof, and pointed to herself, and then Twilight. "I don't care what he says. As long as that mare is up there, I'm staying here, it's only fair." She stated obstinately.

"Of all the times for ya'll ta get hard-headed." Applejack stated, but with an approving smile.

"She's right, Twilight." Fluttershy added, making the unicorn squirm uncomfortably. No, this was not what she had asked, this was not the time for Dash to get loyal on her, even if having her there *did* make warm up a bit.

Sul turned to face Ao, who was sighing deeply in frustration. **"It's only fair."** Sul shrugged, and Ao said a few choice words that gave Twilight a very nervous smile and an ear twitch. With Dash by her side, feeling the weight of her safety, and her friends' safety on her shoulders, Twilight walked forward to sit before the raised platforms, Dash remaining standing just behind her. Ao paid closer attention. The blue one followed the little unicorn out of loyalty, she kept a close eye on the unicorn, as if checking

her over repeatedly, and watched around her carefully, as if making sure nothing would approach them. Paid guards sat around waiting for action to come to them. Loyal guards checked every room at every moment to keep it safe in an otherwise bad situation.

After several moments of uncomfortable silence, Twilight turned to face Ao and Sul once again. The two sat passively, Ao more noticeably than Sul, looking calm once more, "... **You are no soldier. No warrior. No Golding pony at all. Who are you? Where do you come from?**" His voice seemed unusually tender, but he tried to recompose his detesting look as Twilight closed her eyes and gathered herself, opening them to look as honest as she possibly could while speaking through the tightness in her chest.

"**O-okay,**" she finally whispered, feeling Dash brush against her gently in comfort. Ao noticed. Not even his guards were that comforting, "**My name is Twilight Sparkle, and I come from a far away land called Equestria.**" She answered finally,

Sul approached Ao and they began to whisper to each other, neither taking their eyes off Twilight as they spoke. Twilight watched them with a timid expression as they conversed, and finally broke apart so Sul could approach her.

"**You mean...**" Sul calmly started, then pressed her front legs together in obvious anxiety, "**The Equestria? Home of Celestia and Luna?**" Sul asked, watching as Twilight slowly nodded her head. Ao and Sul stared at each other again quietly with unreadable expressions, then back to Twilight in quiet awe. "**But Equestria is... That cannot be right, Equestria is cut off from the world, a sanctuary for Anemone's chosen. No pony has ever gone to Equestria, or ever sought it and returned.**" Twilight stared at them. What did the world know about Equestria?

"**I don't know what to tell you,**" Twilight whispered, staring down at her hooves uncomfortably, "**Equestria has been my home since my birth. It is certainly wonderful, yes, but it's not cut off from the world. We flew here after all.**"

"Ahem." Both ponies turned to look to Ao, "**If I may, if you are Equestrian, then relate to us Celestia's and Luna's significance to it.**" He ordered, actually fairly calm, though he still seemed very uneasy.

Twilight just blinked in confusion. Their significance? To Equestria? How were they *not* significant? Twilight quietly glance around back to her friends, then answered, "**Princess Celestia, Alicorn of the Sun, and Princess Luna, Alicorn of the Moon, are sisters,**" she started, piecing together all the history she knew, "**and they are the daughters of Lord Anemone, Alicorn of the Sea. Every morning, Princess Celestia raises the sun to grant the world its light and its life-giving rays, and at night, Princess Luna raises the moon and the stars to grant ponies direction, peace, and a time of day to rest or to enjoy the sky's beauty. They work together, side-by-side, to never grow too powerful or the ponies too reliant on one or the other to avoid the conflict Terraria and Atmos had created.**" She answered, watching as Ao and Sul glanced to each other again, and Ao quietly bowed his head in thought.

She was correct. More than correct, she was accurate, completely and thoroughly. This was the sort of knowledge only the most trusted and powerful of individuals knew. These were secrets being related that were thought only to be unproven myths, for treasure-hunters and glory-seekers and snake-oil salesmen, but with no fabrication, and correct. She knew their names, she knew what they controlled and represented, she knew their family tree and why there were two Princesses...

"**So perhaps you are Equestrian.**" He started, his eyes now looking over each and every one of them. These little creatures were Equestrians? Other than being so colorful, they seemed surprisingly normal... "**Why does Equestria have an interest in Coltriella? More than that, what would draw Golding to invade it? I knew the war-mongers liked trouble but I never thought they'd attempt to shed blood in the land of the Lords.**"

Twilight attempted to access her magic to show him the image of the world's leylines that Tanat had showed her and Dash, but it was still restricted. She sighed softly, "**I was drawn to Anemone by what I can only assume is fate. This horn *is* unnatural, I had gained it due to Golding releasing the ancient magic of the Alicorn brothers, and Golding immediately sought me out to drain me of it. During my capture, my friend, the blue mare and I escaped and made it to Laputa by accident. There we were greeted by a creature of Anemone, left behind to wait for the 'soul of magic', and the 'guardian of souls', who explained what was happening: the leylines of the world are draining,**

and Golding is tapping into the main point beneath Equestria in order to refill them, but in doing so they have the greater potential of destroying the world. I spoke to Anemone's soul, and he explained much the same and gave me the ability to speak and read any language, as well as track down Terraria and Atmos. I'm to speak with them, to make sure they're still secure, and I assume deal with the leylines through them."

"I don't understand. What about the leylines draining?" Ao asked with narrow-eyed curiosity, Sul nodding as back-up. Twilight glanced to Sul, and then realized they may have not actually known. Not a whole lot of Equestrians did, mostly just unicorns that precisely studied magic, and nopony gave it too much thought since it the leylines did its job and nopony ever thought to look closer...

"The leylines provide magic to the world, they're a theoretically endless stream of power that gets its strength from the world and its inhabitants. It sustains all life, and its power can regrow resources, and I've been taking a look, and all that magic is starting to recede back to Equestria. I don't know if it's running out or-"

"The great End Harvest..." Ao whispered to himself, rubbing his chin in thought as Sul lowered her head. **"And you claim you're here to try and refill them. Anemone tasked you with such a... Powerful request?"** He asked, and Twilight nodded slowly. He closed his eyes, then opened them, **"Fine then. All present are ordered to leave immediately. You are to take the unicorn's guards to the waiting room as noble guests. They are to be unharmed and treated with the highest of priorities. Eavesdroppers will be severely reprimanded."**

"What are you doing, my king?" Sul whispered, and Ao quietly watched the guards approach the middle of the room, looking confused but doing as they were ordered.

"I need more details, and I feel foalish speaking in my father's tongue. You claim you and all your friends are on this mission?" Ao asked, while Twilight slowly nodded her head. **"Then I want this room empty of everypony but the six Equestrians, myself, and Archmage Sul. This conversation is to be private and eavesdroppers will be severely punished. Understood?"**

The captain, the silver-armored pony from before, walked forward with a hesitant step, **"But... Sir, we are here to protect you, what if they-"**

"Sul will be more than enough in handling these six if they grow unruly. They are clearly not soldiers. I want everypony but those requested gone right now." He waved his hoof, and hesitantly the guards obeyed. Dash gave Twilight a curious look, and Twilight gave her a little smile.

"I think we're going to be okay." She said to her guardian, who just quietly watched the guards leave, single-file, including the unicorns. The very unicorns that dampened the magic. She raised an eyebrow and turned her head to face the elder unicorn. She could feel that cold-feeling in the air, the cold-feeling that put out her flames and stopped her from cloning herself leave. She could feel her magic again. Twilight turned to face all of her friends, "We're being kept here to tell the king our story."

"Tell him *our* story?" Rarity asked with a raised eyebrow, slowly, daintily making her steps towards Twilight and Rainbow Dash, "You mean the story only you can tell because only you get the language?" She smirked a little, good-humouredly patting Twilight on the forehead. "It's not like we can just copy your 'comprehension'." Dash lifted her head up quietly to stare at Rarity with a bit of surprise in her look while the remaining three moved to reform their little bubble around Twilight. As they settled around her, the warm, comfortable confidence she'd established since first affirming her friendship began to return.

Dash quietly slipped from her side though. Twilight gave her a half-glance, but Dash had a curious face on her. She moved from her side to the back, slipping behind the group and out of sight while Ao cleared his throat again. **"If we may, I would like to begin going over the fine details of your story."** Twilight gave him her full attention. Any way she could help their situation, she would answer truthfully and honestly. **"You were captured, correct? Where? How?"** He asked.

Her friends stayed quiet as Twilight gave a tiny sigh, recalling the memory. The forest came back into view, as did the argument she and Dash had been having. She winced softly. **"I'd gone into a forest with my friend Rainbow Dash - the blue mare - to visit a friend who had medical knowledge on sores and breaks. While we were walking-"** She froze up

immediately as she felt warm, orange energy grasp her body. The grip of a soft, gentle giant slipped around her, squeezing not her, but something inside of her.

"What does she think she's doing!" Sul shouted, leaping from the dais to land, horn glowing in warning as Twilight twisted her head quickly to spot Dash, tiny wings flapping rapidly as an orange-colored aura flooded from her body as she focused on Twilight.

"Dash, what in Celestia's name-" She gasped, feeling the magic pinch at something in her chest, and it felt like she was starting to divide down the middle as the orange energy began to make a white glow appear just over her heart.

"I don't know what ya'll think ye're up to," Applejack growled, throwing her forelegs around Rainbow Dash's middle to pull her back, "ya'll're really getting' us in hot water Dash and if ya'll don't-" she paused, the orange aura now sliding around her, and the white glow from Twilight's chest appeared on Applejack's as well, then Dash's.

"Have you lost your mind!" Rarity shouted, suddenly grasped by the orange as well, Fluttershy and Pinkie both gasping as they were held. The white glow appeared on their chests as well, and Sul and Ao both took a step back as a screen of magical light appeared between them and the six to serve as a barrier.

The magic around the six friends slowly twisted, turning into spiraling funnels of orange energy as Dash pulled her aura back inside her, the white glows slowly slipping into each girl. Twilight could only stare at Rainbow Dash in disbelief. The other four had mixed expressions, Rarity and Applejack of anger and Pinkie and Fluttershy watching the king and the elder Unicorn with fright.

Twilight turned her head towards Ao, and her voice came out in a low whisper, **"I'm very sorry about that. I don't know what she was up to but I'm going to go talk her ear off-"**

"Don't apologize for me, I knew exactly what I was doing!" Dash retorted suddenly, in absolutely perfect Coltriellan. Twilight slowly turned back to face Dash, the most bewildered expression on her face as Dash

gave her a smug grin. **"Don't give me that face! I was tired of being out of the loop. I'm pretty sure we all were."**

"Um." Applejack glanced back and forth slowly, from Dash to Twilight, **"I hate to interrupt but what the hay is going on?"** The farm-mare's eyes widened, and she covered her own mouth as if something very dirty came out of it.

"I understood that!" Pinkie exclaimed, her frightened expression turning to excitement quickly, **"The premier party pony of Ponyville prefers potpourri and pumpernickel!"** She frowned a little, touching her own chin, **"It isn't anywhere near as alliterative but I'll make due!"** She began to mouth off with random words as Rarity and Fluttershy glanced to each other curiously.

"... I don't think I understand." Sul spoke up first as Ao just stared at the blue Pegasus with palpable shock. He assumed that this little creature was a Pegasus and *solely* a Pegasus. Clearly Equestrians were much more than they appeared to be.

"So, like, I have this magical ability to mirror things. Something about reflections and all." Dash responded while holding up both fore hooves to show her example. **"At first I thought it was just myself and random objects, but then I remembered Twilight telling me I had to get creative with my powers to get good with them. So, when Rarity mentioned copying her Comprehension I thought 'why not?' and gave it a try.** Turns out I got the skills for it!" She never left the local speech, which was smooth and incredibly beautiful, if a little rough due to Dash's voice.

"Dash that's..." Twilight started, watching the rainbow-maned girl in admiration. "That's *really* good." She finished off, making Dash smile hugely, more than a little red in her cheeks. "I'm proud of you! That's amazingly creative, you really had me worried but that's just so-" Twilight fumbled for words, "- so - !"

"Amazing? Incredible? Awesome? I'm all of those and more. Told you I'd be working on this. I'm gonna be the best spell-slinger in all of Equestria if you don't step it up Twilight! Honestly, you've been way too easy of an opponent. I was expecting a, I dunno," Dash's grin became very smug, and Twilight smirked right back, "a challenge? Maybe? No? Maybe I should be

Celestia's student then." Fluttershy snorted, drawing Dash's attention, who gave her a questioning look as Fluttershy just shook herself and chuckled. "Don't believe me? I'll show you guys! One day." Dash continued holding herself proudly, before another clearing throat got their attention.

Sul stared at them with one high raised eyebrow, and calmly pointed to Twilight, "I believe we were discussing the details of your journey. Afterwards, I have many questions to ask you concerning your home and your friend's magic."

"Right." Ao nodded in agreement, eyes glued to Rainbow Dash now. Everything about even the myths were adding up, that there was so much magic in the land and its ponies that they themselves could shape the weather and the animals. He had a number of questions he wanted to ask now, but kept them to himself for now. He'd have plenty of time for questions after their story was told.

"Alright," Twilight took a deep breath to gain herself a non-awkward moment to recollect her thoughts, and started again, "While we were walking in the forest, we were suddenly grabbed in a net from a dragon-riding pony..." Close detail after detail spilled from her mouth as she explained each and every step she and Dash had taken to get where they currently were. They were paused at several points to go even further in depth on certain ponies or environments.

When Twilight first spoke of Rukafelth, Ao did not hesitate to demand precise descriptions and actions, and when Twilight explained them, Ao seemed... Abnormally reassured, but when Shallom was mentioned? She had wished her friends had not had her comprehension now. There was not a single good thing Ao had said in regards to Shallom, and Sul did not help when she reminded her king of a few other choice insults.

However, as they described Laputa, it was Sul who interrupted them. She asked many questions concerning the area, the lighting, the way things worked, the way things felt... Dash helped chip in, but the two ponies did not mention Teller Pen at all. Rather, Dash easily replaced any mention of Teller with her father, who had always acted as a guide to her as she grew up. When they reached Tanat, they had to put their heads together to remember every bit of conversation, every piece of history, the details of their gifts, and Twilight had to describe what meeting Anemone was like in

absolutely excruciating detail. Despite how taxing this was, each word made Ao and Sul more interested, and they had them wrapped around their hooves by the time Applejack and Pinkie Pie joined in to talk about the battle with the Golding dragons and how they managed to turn one to their side. Ao once again had a cursing fit when they told him about Shallow attacking Princess Luna, but Sul calmed him down to have them continue. Then they got to the bit on the castle...

"-and after we'd set Princess Luna down, we went and snuggled Dashie after seeing her for so long but we were really confused because there were six of her but she said she'd explain later, and then she was like 'who the hay is that?' and we turned around and there was this really scary jester pony with-" Pinkie was forced to stop as the room dropped twenty degrees. Twilight turned her head from Pinkie up to Sul and Ao, and saw the dark looks in their eyes.

"So you met *him*. How did you survive?" Ao asked curiously, slowly stepping down from the dais to give them a closer look, as if they'd somehow become unreal in the past few minutes.

"We weren't doin' too well, I'll tell ya what. Gave us a good slashin' that one did. If there hadn't been so many Dashes we'd'a been in a heap o' trouble." Applejack explained, and Dash quietly sat and lowered her eyes.

"Tanat killed it. He pushes his tentacles into the jester's face and tore it up, but the jester was stabbing him and... And," Dash took a deep breath, and Twilight quietly pressed her shoulder to Dash's, "they killed eachother. The jester disappeared after his head was pulled open and Tanat finally got to rejoin Anemone.

Ao and Sul remained deathly quiet, eyes narrowed as they slowly glanced to eachother, then back to Dash. "So he's dead then?" He finally asked. The cold feeling the room gave off made Twilight shiver. Dash could only give Ao a confused look.

"That's what I said, didn't I? Tanat literally died taking out that thing's head. He's *dead*. He has to be dead, or Tanat..." Dash just shook her head, and Ao nodded quietly.

"In that case, continue." He ordered, and Twilight picked up the rest of the story, up to coming here. She was very careful to apologize about flying the

dragons around above Golding, but Ao merely waved it off. When they finished, the six sat quietly as the king as his Archmage came up to the dais and sat before the great apple tree, and spoke quietly to each other.

Several very long minutes passed as they two spoke. First five, then ten, then fifteen minutes Ao and Sul spoke, and the six remained awkwardly quiet. To Twilight's right, Fluttershy stretched her wings, then shut them, then opened them rapidly, flexing them as she blinked her eyes to try and keep awake. Just behind her, Rarity was leaning on Applejack for support, trying to stay up as the peace of the room, the smell, the general warmth got to them, making her sway as she tried to keep herself straight. Dash, out of boredom, was chewing on the green stripe of her own hair, but kept a close eye on the two Coltriellans the whole time. Pinkie was batting at the curly bit of mane dangling in front of her eyes with her hoof, watching it sway as Applejack stared at the magnificent apples growing on the tree in front of them.

They snapped to attention when Ao stepped down from the dais, flanked by Sul, and stood in front of Twilight with a somewhat amused face. She wasn't sure if that was good or bad, but he didn't seem to be inclined to shouting right now. "I have heard many fantastic tales over the years as king here. I have spoken to hundreds of way-farers, several of which have claimed to have traveled to or from Equestria, and all of them having the knowledge of a gnat about the Princesses and their kingdom." He sat, and Twilight let out a breath of relief. He was *relaxed*. He wasn't about to order them imprisoned anytime soon. "We've discussed our beliefs on the matter, and Archmage Sul and I choose to believe your story. You've shown no reason to warrant our suspicions other than a general lack of courtesy concerning your mounts. As the King of Coltriella, I welcome you six to my kingdom." He cocked one leg's knee out and bowed his head in quiet respect, prompting the six before him to duck into neat, practiced bows that would normally grant only one of the Princesses.

When they stood straight, Ao had retreated to the dais once more, and stood on top of it with a small smile. Sul paced in front of him, her attentions to the air around her as Ao spoke. "I am also granting you permission to speak to Terraria." Dash let out a loud, relieved 'YES!' as Twilight felt the tension in her body dissolve, but they caught themselves when he held up a hoof. "But it will have to wait. Don't give me those

shocked looks, trust me, I understand how it feels to have your kingdom in peril, but this is a matter in which I personally have no choice."

"And how is that?" Rarity piped up curiously, emerging from behind Fluttershy to be seen. "You are the king here, what's keeping you from letting us go straight to Terraria? Is he the lonesome sort?"

Ao began to chuckle, a noise that was musical when he was happy, and he shook his head. "No, for you see, there's only one pony here both Terraria and I must bow to in terms of power. Terraria's current residence is blocked by old magical seals that nopony but one specific sort can open: a unicorn of royal blood." To emphasis his current inability, his wings slid out from beneath the cloaks on his back, and flapped twice. "I am no unicorn, but as luck would have it, my daughter, Sadi'o'farrosun'o'eropafaniquehuomla (Princess of the flowing sands of the prosperous and magnificent homeland), is." The six stared at him once he was finished speaking the Princess's name. Dash's eye twitched. "She is the only pony in all of Coltriella able to access the way to Terraria's keep. As," He interrupted any questions, "as for why you must wait, my precious daughter has been ill for several weeks now, and even the slightest bit of magic will strain her. The doctors are working around the clock to keep her healthy, and I do believe a recovery is being made." He bobbed his head confidently as Fluttershy took an uncharacteristic step forward.

"I, well, um..." The adrenaline wasn't boosting her confidence anymore. There was no danger here, not anymore as for as Fluttershy could tell, "I hate to possibly make light of your daughter's situation, but Twilight," she smiled confidently to her unicorn friend, "has learned a healing spell on our travel over. Perhaps if you let her-" The room went icy-cold once more as the king raised an eyebrow.

"I *trust* you to talk to Terraria, but under no circumstance are you to visit my daughter while she's ill." His tone had gotten very violent, sending Fluttershy scurrying back behind Twilight as the six just stared at him in shock.

"Sir-" Sul tried to start, but Ao gave her a stare that commanded her to be quiet.

"I understand your quest as well as the implications, but my precious daughter is one of the few things I would sacrifice everything for. I have

little doubt you are all good ponies, but on the off-chance you are on some foreign warlord's pay roll, I cannot allow you to see her."

"Sir this is *highly* disruptive and unli-" Sul tried to interject with a pleading look in her eyes, but Ao once again stared her into silence. "We could have her show us on some patients in the hospital..." She offered quietly, and Ao shook his head.

"We have the best doctors there are tending to her as we speak. What little Twilight can do our doctors are sure to be able to replicate with ease." He stated with confidence, his eyes not focusing on anypony's though, instead choosing to watch the ceiling. Something was agitating him. Twilight looked to Sul for some help, but the Archmage just sighed and leaned over to whisper into Twilight's ear.

"He is in no mood to speak of this. I am sorry, I will try to convince him to let you have a try later. For now, we'll work with what we have." She stood back up, and signaled to Ao for attention. "If they are going to be waiting for the Princess to regain her health, then we'll have to find them a place in the city."

The king paused for a moment, then began to nod his head, surveying the six with a smile. "Of course of course! I am nothing if not a gracious host!" Twilight reached over and pressed a hoof to Dash's mouth. "Homes homes, yes, you will definitely need homes, I should have no trouble granting you such permissions. Ah! I know the perfect place for six lovely young mares. Sul, if it would be no trouble?" Sul had already pulled out a piece of paper from a pack underneath her cloak, along with a thin wooden tool with a sharpened black tip, as well as a pair of reading glasses. "From the Royal Court of To'Ao'Coltriella, by my decree, the six mares known as Twilight Sparkle, Rainbow Dash, Applejack, Fluttershy, Rarity, and Pinkie Pie are to be given housing in the First Housing District in the available Gardet Home. Similarly, for living purposes they are to be given access to use of the royal treasury," each of their six jaws dropped as Sul continued to write, and Rarity's eyes began to glimmer, "but their purchases are to be regarded closely. If you have any questions on why they are being given such fineries, please direct a personal letter to myself, To'Ao'Coltriella. Signed by Yours Truly." Ao wrapped up with a triumphant smile.

"Access-access to the royal treasury?" Rarity repeated in a whisper. Sul narrowed her eyes at the unicorn suspiciously while Twilight was just plain surprised they were actually being given so much help. It beat camping for another day though, it was sort of fun the first two nights but then it just became a pain in the flank.

"*Limited*. Limited access to the treasury." Sul corrected, but Rarity seemed to ignore her. Sul snorted quietly while Twilight took a few tentative steps forward. "You will be granted several other bonuses as well, I suppose I should mention. Since you'll be made residents of the First Districts, you will have unrestricted access to the rest of the cities outer rings."

"As well as," Ao stepped down from his dais, an apple from the apple tree in his hoof as he took several slow bites, "some benefits for helping Coltriella in your quest. I assume Equestria is not suited to war?" He asked, his eyes calmly scanning over the six girls to inspect their physique. They certainly did not look suited to it. Skinny, gentle, soft, hard-workers, true, but not fighters. The blonde one was staring at his apple oddly though. He shrugging tossed her a second and... "She likes apples." He stated, watching the almost savage display as her five friends backed away.

"You have no idea." Pinkie answered between snorts and giggles as Applejack relished the flavor of the fruit. Rarity calmly began poking Applejack's side to try and remind her where she was.

"Anyways, Coltriella is a nation of mostly Earth-bound ponies, but we do have a stellar number victory in the history of our warfare. In the interests of both Coltriella and Equestria, I think it would benefit the six of you, in your spare time as my daughter recovers, to visit our standing army's General. She has been one of our greatest assets in these many years, possessing a brilliant mind and abilities on the battlefield. Those among you that fancy yourselves warriors should visit her, while the rest should learn tactics and strategies, and possibly some magic." Ao glanced to Sul, who stood quietly, then glanced to her king and raised an eyebrow.

"I do have other duties to attend to, my King. Teaching magic to unicorns who *already know magic* might be a waste of time." She pointed out, but the king glanced to Twilight, who shrugged softly.

"I don't really know any offensive spells, and I would absolutely love to study that anti-magic spell you displayed." Twilight casually mentioned,

causing Sul to sigh. "I'm more of a utility Unicorn, but anything I can learn to help would be appreciated." Her eyes sneakily moved to stare at Dash's wings, before glancing ahead once more before her friend could notice.

Sul let out a small sigh, but nodded her agreement, giving Twilight a somewhat amused look. "If you're going to be so insistent on interrupting my daily duties then I suppose I can't turn you down." Twilight smiled. Rarity considered herself. She wasn't necessarily a warrior, Applejack and Dash were those, but she couldn't remain totally useless in a fight...

"If..." Several eyes turned to Rarity as she approached, looking a little meek, "If it's not too much a bother to ask... Would it be alright if I learned some 'offense' as well? Nothing big, just something that can, well, y'know, prove useful in a fight if one break out..." Applejack nudged her affectionately.

"Don't hesitate to ask, little one." Sul answered immediately. "I don't see how it could be any more bothersome if I'm already training one new recruit. We'll discuss times at a later date, for now, may I lead them to their new home?" Sul turned to Ao, who nodded rapidly.

"I will most certainly keep you girls in touch, just try not to cause any trouble. If you have any questions, please come ask." Ao waved his hoof as Sul moved forward, nudging each girl along the way to get them to follow her. They did so, following her to the ornate doors and pushing through. They closed behind them almost as soon as the last of them were through, leaving Ao in his room alone. Along the walls stood the many guards that had been sent out, watching the girls somewhat darkly until Sul spoke up.

"Since you'll be staying within the city walls, you must grow accustomed to the culture here. For one, there are exactly sixteen unicorns in all of Coltriella. Eighteen, now, including you." Sul paused, and turned. Twilight and Rarity glanced to each other in surprise, then back to Sul, who was now looking them over. "It would be for the best if we taught you an illusion spell now in order to hide your horns. We don't want ponies making wild assumptions about your appearance here. Second of all, your friends' wings." Everypony turned to stare at Dash and Fluttershy. Fluttershy immediately pulled her wings in tightly, glancing around nervously as if she was already being judged, whereas Dash's just twitched. "We have several

Pegasi here in Coltriella, around three-hundred and seventeen during our last head-count, out of a total population of two-million, four-hundred and thirty-six thousand, eight-hundred and ten (2,436,810). They are primarily working for the crown as guards and scouts, unless they are the crown itself, whereas the Unicorns all work under me as the Anti-Magic Squadron, except for the Princess. That means every single non-Earth pony in Coltriella right now has their entire life dedicated to this very palace and everypony inside of it, sans a select few Pegasi who instead study the weather. I am going to sneak you two," she pointed to Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash, "into that department. You won't have to do anything, but if anypony asks, that's your job."

"Hold up." Dash raised a hoof, and Sul paused, "You can do *that* for us so we don't have to hide our wings, but you can't do the same for Twilight or Rarity? You can just make something up."

Sul let out a low, dark chuckle, and shook her head as if Dash was being amazingly dumb, "No, trust me, this is for the better. Your horned friends *cannot* be seen with horns outside your home. I won't go into why, yet, but a little digging of our unicorn history will tell you why." She glanced over to Twilight and Rarity. "My apologies, but it's not something I'm proud of. Now, that illusion spell..."

The First Ring, as Sul had called it, was primarily made up of, and made for, the wealthy, noble, or just plain lucky citizens of Coltriella. Twilight glanced upwards, unable to see the familiar sight of the feature that made her a magic-wielder just above her eyes. That illusion spell had really done the trick, she couldn't even feel it when she tried to touch it, but Sul had told her it was a very thorough spell until its dismissal.

"You're absolutely sure I look alright?" Rarity whispered worriedly behind her to Fluttershy. Rarity had treasured each and every inch of her own body, and Twilight understood completely that it felt so wrong to have your horn missing.

"You look as wonderful as ever Rarity." Fluttershy reassured her with a tiny smile, making Rarity squeak softly.

"You mean my horn was never noticeable before! Oh..." Rarity hung her head, and Fluttershy gasped, and shook her head. "Was I truly so plain a unicorn even my precious horn could be looked past so easily? Oh my poor horn, I am so sorry..." She whispered, staring upwards where it used to be.

"I-I didn't- not like that! I was just- I mean I wanted you to know that it-" Fluttershy stumbled a bit, both in words and in body as the group paused. Everypony shifted to the left as a carriage pulled by two ponies in armor meant more to look good than to protect rolled by, decked out in jewelry, precious metals, and the window curtains, as Rarity pointed out, were silk. "I've never seen a carriage that pretty..." Fluttershy whispered as it continued down the path.

"Anypony with money here is almost obligated to flaunt it. I don't know why, but if they can, they will waste it on looking as fantastic as possible. That was the local Bank Master, I wouldn't go messing around with him, he's the panicky sort." Sul actually smirked a little, at a tiny little inside joke.

Even on ground-level there was practically no green in Coltriella. In the first ring though, there were plenty of other colors though. Houses decorated in golds and purples, silvers and whites and blacks, reds, oranges, just about everything *but* green. The designs were also intricate. The houses reminded them of home, with the shingled roofs, large wooden doors, big windows, but they often had brass-engraved designs in them. Not words, just figures. They usually had ornate gates in front of them, leaving the streets somewhat cramped, but five of those carriages could easily pass by side-by-side and be just fine.

Brass statues also dominated most of the yards, whether they were symbols of wealth, power, honor, or intelligence, of the ponies living inside, or a few had guts to have a statue of the King himself on the front yard. From the gates to the doorway there were flagstones, intricately carved and laid out, some with symbols marked in them, some without. Banners also hung from the houses with family crests on them, each more intricate and more indistinguishable from the last. The amount of detail and ego that went into each house was almost staggering, even if they didn't have the non-standard, architect's dream designs that went into each of the mare's own personal homes.

All but Rainbow Dash could admit simply moving into a pre-built house, and Dash herself got off the hook since other than the furniture, she built her own cloud-home with the stuff just laying around the sky. Here, ponies paid to have other ponies build to their very designs and desires, doing their best to look *the* richest and *the* most prestigious. Of course, Twilight had to hold her tongue when thinking about these ponies and their designs. After all, she had an entire flying castle dedicated straight up to her...

In a very strange contrast, the ponies they saw were actually conservatively dressed. That is to say, they wore no clothing at all. Sure their coats were obviously dyed, varying colors that had no connotations to the earth itself, gold, silver, purple, and red being popular colors, though a few managed to pull off a light blue. Their manes were also well taken care of, dyed and teased into lovely white curls, to straightened and braided, then made a very pleasant blue color. These were ponies who took *serious* pride in their appearance, and apparently did not like the sun, since most of them were in the shade of houses, the houses' front porches, or umbrellas.

The entire time though, something kind of unnerved Fluttershy as she glanced around and stared at the many rich-looking ponies, smiling smugly, not a thought in the world on what the hard life felt like. It felt like something important was missing...

"Here we are." The mares turned to look at the house Sul was leading them into. Compared to its neighbors, it was rather... Plain. Made from basic, though pleasant stone, with shingles cut to look like wood, a door with a genuine wooden door, two windows, a simple gate with an equally simple locking mechanism, and flagstones that hadn't been walked on in quite a while. "The Gardet Home, former residence of the Golding diplomat Gardet." She stated, making several of the girls openly twitch in discomfort. "Don't be like that, it's a rather nice home and he left for his home country a year ago." She reached into a pouch on her side and pulled out a finely rolled up parchment. As she lead them onto the front porch, she laid out the parchment and unrolled it to reveal a map, and with a small red marker, circled a tiny little house in the ring just outside the palace stronghold. "This is going to be your place of residence for the time being. Be sure to memorize its location, we've had ponies getting lost in the city before and it's never a pleasant experience." Twilight's eyes scanned over the map as the items on it in some of the outer rings... Shifted. "This map is enchanted to forever show the city in its exact present. The construction of new

buildings is a common sight, as is the destruction of old ones. If you ever get lost, speak to the guards and they can help you along."

"This is a really impressive enchantment." Twilight stated, honestly awed as she watched the map, like it was a screen showing her the entirety of Coltriella from a bird's eye view.

"I would hope so." Sul snorted. "It took me a decade and a half to come up with it." Twilight glanced up to her as Sul continued to speak, describing the checkpoints between each ring and passed out several papers that would serve to show them as residents of the inner ring, granting them pass to almost anywhere. A decade and a half to make an enchantment? There were several spells at home that a master unicorn could spend several hours simply converting to create this enchantment, but fifteen years? Sul was supposed to be the Archmage! Surely she must have...

She was only one of sixteen unicorns. The best unicorn of those sixteen in fact. Glancing around slowly, she could tell everything, even in the richest part of the city, was hoof-made, no magic used at all in its creation. All the unicorns worked for the King. Working for the king probably meant being used for war... Twilight realized that Archmage Sul, leader of the magic-wielders in Coltriella, probably had absolutely no formal magic instruction outside casting fireballs, lightning bolts, and anti-magic shields. Part of her desperately wished she'd brought her magic books just to show Sul what all a unicorn is capable of doing... "It's a very good enchantment." Twilight stated again, a bit meekly.

"Well, for the time being, this map is yours. I have plenty more back in my quarters so don't feel bad about taking it." She looked to the door, then tugged out the key she'd picked up on the way here, and laid it in front of the six mares. "This is the key to the Gardet House. I would suggest getting copies made as soon as possible. Make yourselves comfortable, but be ready. You may get a messenger at your doorstep at any time delivering news of the Princess." The girls smiled hopefully at that, and Sul turned away from them and started walking towards the gate. "Word of advice, don't go stirring up trouble. I can say this from experience: the worst thing you could possibly do in a foreign land is get jailed there." She called, before stepping out of the gate. She began to walk back towards the palace, the six girls watching after her.

"Well ain't she a ray o' sunshine?" Applejack muttered when Sul was out of earshot, glancing around slowly as several neighbors stepped out of their homes to watch the six girls. She couldn't read their expressions, but she was very thankful when Fluttershy picked up the key and opened the door. The girls slipped inside and shut the door, Fluttershy locking it the moment she could.

All at once, as a single unit, they let out a collective sigh of relief. They were finally somewhere alone, out of the eyes of ponies who weren't judging their every step. "Sweet sun of Celestia," Rarity sighed as she rubbed her forehead, "and I thought my very own fashion shows were stressful." She began to walk into the middle of the room. In the middle was a table with a single candle in the middle, covered in a small layer of dust from a lack of use. Everypony followed her to the table, where cushions that hadn't been used for a long time were placed around it to be sat on, but merely stood.

It was kind of awkward. They were in a house simply handed over to them out of generosity but it obviously belonged to somepony before them, and was designed by that pony for themselves. Sure the pony had left, but it was hard to shake the feeling that they were little more than strangers taking over another pony's home. It was not at all helped by being in a completely foreign country at the same time. Twilight had to take a deep breath to remember what she was doing here and why she'd made this trip. Every bone in her body was telling her she needed to go home and stuff her face in a pillow and let out a big scream.

Despite everything she managed to accomplish today, she still felt like she had done so little. Five days flying, inching steadily closer to Terraria. For the sake of Equestria she had readily left the land she'd called home, with no knowledge or idea of what the world outside would be like. She'd seen some interesting things, even picked up a spell and met a few new friends, and they'd reached their destination, only to hit another wall... A very stubborn and overly-protective father.

They had to *wait*. Twilight simply couldn't conceive that after coming this far, they would have to wait. Part of her despaired, feeling that every second lost was another tick off Equestria's lifespan, but she knew, *knew* she couldn't press her luck. 'Patience,' she heard Celestia's voice in her head telling her, 'can overcome a mountain and traverse the

deepest sea. But patience is the hardest thing a pony can ever keep.' It had been a particularly frustrating evening she'd been told that. "The hardest part about patience is knowing when to act and when to hold back..." Twilight whispered to herself tiredly.

"... I just know I wanna kick that king guy's butt." Dash mumbled, drawing several worrying nods of agreement.

"Now girls," Twilight straightened up a little, "let's keep our heads together." Twilight glanced around, and was met with silence. "Even if I want to do the same..." She finally admitted. Dash let out a playful laugh and gave Twilight a good nudge.

"That's my girl." The Pegasus stated, making Twilight smile some, pleased with the compliment. "So, we got a few days. What should we do? Other than go talk to those ponies that Sul mare pointed us out to. We're going to need stuff like food." Dash glanced around a little.

"I would actually like to look into their library here if we get the chance. If they have a library." Twilight stated, hoof rubbing her chin in thought as Dash snorted.

"Of course you do egghead. We can go ask a guard about it, or Sul when you go see her."

"Y'know, I get we're in a new country an' all but I don't think we gotta go speakin' their language all the time, especially in private." Applejack pointed out.

"Goodness, you're correct." Rarity had immediately switched over to Equestrian flawlessly. Twilight noted how easily she processed the change in languages, and how her mouth practically adjusted to speak in her common tongue again. "For all we know they could be spying and listening in as we speak."

"You don't think they'd really do that, do you?" Pinkie asked, suddenly walking along the walls, curiously inspecting the interior of the house for nooks and crannies. Twilight noted that, despite being in the desert, this house had wooden floors. Nicely cut and laid wooden floors at that. She figured they must have been imported. "That seems really rude to go poking around a pony's business!"

Fluttershy giggled softly, nervous as she watched Pinkie Pie search about, and Twilight's forehead began to glow with magic as she scanned around the house. She started walking into the other rooms as the others waited. From a short exploration, she found there were two hallways on each side of the house. They ran parallel to the living room itself, keeping the house compact, but what separated them were thin, white-cloth screens with wooden frames. In the two hallways, at each ends, was a door leading to a bedroom. The four bedrooms each had two beds, a dresser, a shared bathroom between the two closer bedrooms, and a closet. Across from the front door, on the other side of the main room, was a simple kitchen. All in all, it was a fairly large one-story house, but for six ponies it was somewhat cramped. The only real question Twilight had was why did one stallion, a diplomat at that, need four bedrooms?

She reentered the main room. "No pony's here but us. Nothing unusual other than the design. We'll each at least have a bed though, and some spares." She sat back down next to Dash, and then calmly waited.

"Right, so anyways," Dash began again, rolling the map out onto the table, "we're going to need food. We got shelter and stuff already-"

"- and there's a water pump in the kitchen -"

"- yeah, so we should probably also look into ways of enhancing our skills."

"And when we ain't busy, we should all find a way to occupy ourselves." Applejack stated, glancing around slowly, "Good ponies can go stir-crazy pretty fast with nothin' t'do. Now I ain't sayin' we should go wild out there, but a look around the city definitely wouldn't hurt us none. Just keep yer heads low and eyes open, I don't wanna lose any of ya'll."

"That said, we should start taking a look. Soon." Pinkie began ominously. Everypony glanced to her as her eyes shifted, and immediately glanced over to Twilight. "You!"

Twilight blinked, rearing back as a hoof was shoved into her face, "Me? What?" Twilight stared around as her friends watched her expectantly.

"Any second now..." Pinkie whispered, ear cocked. The other four slowly leaned in as Twilight began to sweat. Any second now what? What was Pinkie going on about? Did she know something she didn't? "Three, two..."

Pinkie paused, "*One.*" Twilight opened her mouth to argue, but then her stomach rumbled. Twilight's jaw quivered as she tried to formulate an argument, as she tried to make sense of Pinkie once more, as logic once again took a backseat with a box of popcorn and just *watched* itself get defied, then slammed it shut. "Food time! Let's go!" Pinkie began to skip towards the door, everypony but Twilight and Dash followed within moments.

Dash gently poked Twilight, then turned her towards the door. "C'mon Twilight, dinner sounds good." Twilight hung her head, and slowly followed her rainbow-maned friend.

Chapter 21

Shopping Trip!

A pony who spent their life on the road was typically a pony who didn't get official news straight away. They weren't there for town meetings, for speeches, to see the memos posted on the notice board, didn't get the newspapers or the letters from the mail, only the ones who bothered to take radios with them got any sort of news.

Trixie was not prone to listening to the radio. She didn't even own one of the infernal devices, mostly for practices' sake. She did not practice well without total silence and isolation, and the only time she had to listen to the radio was during practice times, when she needed to be sleeping, or when she was being admired by other ponies, and in those cases, she did not need a radio.

That was why she was alone on the road, making her way to Canterlot. She certainly wasn't the last pony to get the news, but she was close to it. It wasn't *her* fault, not entirely, she was a traveling show pony, and this whole *war* thing started up while she was on the road, not in town. Oh well, she was on her way now, under direct orders of the Princess. She had performed in Canterlot before. Twice in fact, but neither time did the Princesses attend. Not that it mattered to her, she got to perform in Canterlot, to fully sold stadiums of scores of unicorns that came to watch her performance. This wasn't just joining the big leagues, this was being something the big leagues looked up to! Having the Princesses there would have just been icing on the cake.

She entertained thoughts of performing once more in Canterlot, while a grand majority of Equestria was there, where she could be seen and admired by every pony directly in the kingdom's province itself. Of course, she could have to get there first... She took another sip from her water canteen and gently lifted the wagon she used as her on-the-road home, rolling it after her along the long, empty road towards the great mountain a few miles away. She was used to the loneliness, but there was something terrifying about it this morning. A foreboding since that maybe...

It surely wasn't some drill. It was being taken far too seriously to be a simple drill. She would know when she got there she supposed, but for now, the idea of war in Equestria was a distant thing. She had greater things to be worrying about now, such as getting her and her wagon to Canterlot. So, maybe she wasn't the broadest thinker when it came to planning ahead, she preferred to go along with the fine details rather than take a look at the conclusion, but most especially when she didn't have a plan in the first place. So far, all she knew was she needed to go to Canterlot, and there was the possibility of war. No big thing, really, she'd handle it when it came along.

She set the wagon down again, took another drink from her canteen, wiped the sweat off her brow, and waved her cloak to let the wind cool her sweaty back, then considered putting the extra clothing in the wagon to save herself some of the stress of heat. Normally she planned her routes so she could arrive in each town in a matter of hours, rather than spend sixteen hours going from the far-end of Equestria to Canterlot. Her magical limits were being tested, but each and every bit of strain was extra experience, was more strength. She knew this, so she kept going rather than give up and wait for her focus and energy to return.

It was due to being a bit scattered, to being hot, sweaty, and tired, that she managed to not notice the only other pony on the road. "Are you having trouble, friend?" The thick, female voice asked. Trixie, lost control for a moment, and the wagon halted in its movement. Grunting in annoyance, she turned to face the mare that interrupted her.

The pony wore a brown cloak that easily hid the upper half of her face, though the lower half showed she was no commoner. A dark gray muzzle, with lighter gray fur around it. Her eyes seemed to glow yellow, a frightening look, until Trixie realized it was a simple trick of the light. With her long, striped legs, she stepped forward, and took a look at the wagon Trixie had been pulling. "The Great and Magnificent Trixie needs no help!" Trixie answered, taking ahold of the wagon again to move it.

To her eternal annoyance, the cloaked figure, carrying two packs of her belongings, took the wagon's tug rope and wrapped it around her torso to help pull the wagon along. "Ah yes, The Great and Magnificent Trixie, I've heard much about your exploits, so I know you're no simple pixie." She tugged, and the wagon rolled more easily. With a sniff of annoyance, Trixie

released her grip on the wagon, and watched with further irritation as the strange pony continued on unheeded. "But we both have the same destination and goal, to refuse help in such a time would make you out to be a foal."

Trixie watched the pony and the wagon pass by, and she took a few steps forward, keeping up with the brisk pace the odd pony was setting up. "Are you calling the Great and Powerful Trixie foalish?" She asked, almost as if challenging the unicorn to answer, right or wrong. The proper response, the one that would have saved the foreign pony any of Trixie's ire, was silence and an apology.

Zecora had other ideas: "No, child, I meant you no such harm." The zebra-mare tugged her hood off her head, revealing her striped Mohawk-mane, as well as her dark, mysterious blue eyes, "I merely meant it would be problematic to turn away any help in a time of such alarm." The zebra slowed down as Trixie's eyes roamed her, taking in the mare's gold finery and color-pattern, then the striped pony spoke again, "My name is Zecora."

Trixie was not prone to holding her tongue when something was on her mind, but something about this mare made her stop and think. It was the strange pattern she had, it was the odd jewelry, it was the wise, gentle way she spoke, but more than that it was the implication that this mare had experience beyond her years. Trixie harrumphed quietly, still, "If you are so insistent on intruding on my peace for your own safety, then the Great and Powerful Trixie supposes she can allow you to pull her wagon." Secretly she boosted the wagon with her magic, lightening the load on the other mare. She wasn't totally heartless, but if this Zecora woman dared to point it out...

She didn't. They traveled along quietly, together, towards the mountain that dominated the skyline. The rate at which they walked was much more steady than Trixie's, Zecora didn't have to pause for a drink every minute or so, which, Trixie hated to admit it, was much more efficient. At least the other mare was quiet, probably thinking to herself.

... Thinking about what, exactly? No doubt about her, the Great and Magnificent Trixie... Unless she wasn't, in which case she was thinking about what to do at Canterlot. She didn't know what the striped-pony did for a living, but it didn't really matter, it wasn't like they were going to be

spending much time toge- "I have heard from reliable sources that Celestia plans to bolster her military forces." *Again* with the rhyming?

Oh well, small talk wasn't her big thing, unless it was about herself, but that was an interesting rumor... "Oh? Well I did hear there was a war," everypony must have heard about it by now, it was enormous news, "so of course she'd bolster the military. She'd be a foal not to."

Zecora calmly turned her head to face the unicorn traveling nearby, noting the way she held herself as she spoke. She didn't seem to understand at all the impact, or perhaps even the concept of war. It seemed to the zebra that this unicorn was removed from the world on her own terms. "True, a foal she would be, but an army needs recruits, from the greatest stallion to the simplest pony, including me." She glanced back to Trixie, and noted how... Distant the unicorn seemed.

"Well I guess an army needs numbers as much as it needs powerful warriors." Trixie shrugged a little, and Zecora gave a tiny sigh, trying to not roll her eyes.

"Do you not see the trouble brewing up ahead? There will be peace in Equestria no more, and the soil will soon be stained with red..." Zecora, being a traveler from a land far east, was not completely unused to war. Only as a foal had she ever witnessed it, though seeing the effects before her very eyes was what drove her towards her life as an herbalist.

Trixie kept up her steps, but did hold back and think a little harder on the subject. She had never ever considered war an actual thing, more like a story element, like the hero and the love interest, though she supposed it had to have its origins somewhere. "I'm sure everything will be perfectly fine. Princess Celestia is watching over Equestria after all."

Zecora frowned as she thought about this. Of course Trixie had a point, but as long as she'd been around, she'd never ever heard of any amount of bloodshed turning out to be 'perfectly fine'. "I will not ask about what sources from which you have heard about war, but I assure you that from what I have seen there is plenty more. Nothing good and nothing sacred ever comes from such an unholy thing, the only beauty coming from the graveyard bell's ring. This will not be easy, even for the Princess, I suggest to you to give your opinion redress."

"Now see here!" Trixie stared at the zebra-pony in great offense, completely dropping the wagon in anger. "Perhaps the Great and Powerful Trixie is not as 'worldly' as you make yourself out to be, but the Great and Powerful Trixie is not called 'the Great and Powerful' because she is ignorant. The Great and Powerful Trixie is merely stating that this so called 'war' will no doubt be handled with the utmost professionalism. Trixie will *not* be surprised if this war is called off before it even begins."

Zecora slowed her steps until she stood still, and gave Trixie an honest look of uncertainty. The unicorn stared back, face hard, but she did feel some concern over the way Zecora's eyes fell to the dirty floor. "I can only hope that it is the truth you speak, though if not, this time I will not be so weak." Zecora started to move again, the wagon coming along behind her as Trixie also continued walking.

"You can't be telling the Great and Powerful Trixie that you've seen a war before. Equestria hasn't had a war in..." She thought back to her knowledge of history. She began to wrack her brain for the great conflicts of past; Nightmare Moon was settled twice without a need for an army, Discord was settled by the Princesses alone, but beyond that... Beyond that, things got hazy. Before Discord, there wasn't a whole lot known. Equestria had never had a war before. "In never." She realized to herself. War was just some sort of fabricated concept made by writers for tension and interest. It had never been a thing in Equestria... Right?

"That is," Zecora's own voice felt thick in her throat, "that is part of my concern, you see. Nothing in Equestria has ever gone so blown out of proportion, no matter who disagreed."

"That didn't exactly rhyme..."

Zecora waved her hoof as if it was no big deal, "I can only hope that the Princess has enough wisdom to handle a war, or she may see a bout of pain and horror like never before." Again, Trixie felt somewhat unsure about this news. Okay, she knew war was *bad*, but this Zecora woman looked utterly depressed by the idea. She personally had never been affected by much tragedy, other than an utterly painful and *humiliating* confrontation with a large bear and a weak-willed little unicorn...

"Okay, well, you intend to enlist, correct? In that case, you'll be doing what you can for Equestria. The Great and Powerful Trixie trusts that you will no doubt be a great asset for this war." Trixie nodded to herself. There, she could talk the talk, walk the walk, and was also an amazing therapist now. Truly she was the greatest-

"Hah, I am old, child. I am a healer, and simply can't go wild. I will see the greatest of wounds and pains, it will be others who are taking the reins. If I had an ounce of power such as you do, perhaps I could be more of use during the battles that will ensue." She sighed deeply, despite her words, carrying the wagon very well despite not having Trixie's help. The unicorn immediately got back to picking the wagon up, and helped the mare roll it along.

But her words did more than remind her that her newfound companion was tugging a fairly heavy wagon behind her. "You really think the Great and Powerful Trixie would be useful in this 'war'?" She asked curiously. She was an entertainer, but she knew a variety of spells, not too many that could handle her in even the most basic of bar brawls without a lot of creativity, and sure she was creative, but not a lot beat levitating a table into somepony's head when the situation *really* called for it.

"I have little doubt that a pony with as much presence as yourself would be quickly hailed as heroic." Zecora answered with a nod of her head, not knowing what interesting little ideas and fantasies she'd planted in Trixie's head. The blue unicorn looked skyward, and an almost naughty smile cross her face as she thought about it. She, the Great and Powerful Trixie, the greatest entertainer Equestria could ever hope to witness, the most magnificent unicorn to walk the planet, a *hero* in a time of great need.

"Well, if the Great and Powerful Trixie would be of such amazing use to the war," she said almost idly as the decision was made in her head, Zecora glancing to her in surprise, "then perhaps the Great and Powerful Trixie will join you in enlisting in it."

The fourth ring of Coltriella, the famed Market of the Sands, open to and visited by any and all citizens, no matter their class, rank, or reason. To the merchant, it smelled like a profit. To the inquisitive, it smelled like

adventure. To the hungry, it smelled like an open buffet... And of all the things a pony could be here, Twilight was the hungry one.

"Again, Twilight?" Rarity glanced to her friend, who stared up at the sky with a scowl, as if silently blaming *it* for her talkative stomach. By her side, Dash snickered, but quickly shut up and began to whistle when Twilight turned to glare at her. It wasn't *her* fault she was hungry! Okay, so maybe it was, but it didn't excuse her stomach being the only one to growl!

"Think we could use the world bein' near endin' as an excuse t'make these checks go faster...?" Applejack asked as the guards between the third and fourth gate slowly, meticulously went through the belongings of a merchant they'd been following from the first ring out, found he was clear of anything hostile, and let him through.

"Certainly not something I'd try and risk..." Twilight grumbled, drawing her eyes from the *very* unsuspicious whistling by her side. "I don't think we should even tell ponies about what we're doing."

"Actually, yeah, keepin' outta trouble sounds plenty good." Applejack shrugged, then gave Twilight and Dash a curious look. "Though ya think word could pass forward that we ain't got nothin' on us other than some papers..." The six stepped forward, and Rarity presented the paper that would allow her through. Each mare presented the papers granting them residence of the first ring and access to the other six and the guards nodded them through, seeing they had nothing on them but small neck pouches for documents.

Stepping through each gate felt like they were walking into a whole new world. The first ring had been sparsely populated, with ponies keeping to the cool shadows and staying in their homes or businesses, but the second ring was different. While it wasn't as ornate as the first, ponies walked the streets together and spoke. From what they picked up, lawyers, jewelers, the really good cosmetic-creation ponies, every upper class job and business was in the second ring, including some of the better restaurants. There was apparently a small living district in the second ring as well, construction on the way to expand the living distract for citizens who were more upper-class than third ring citizens... Yet not upper-class *enough* for first-ring.

Stepping through the third gate, and as far as they were concerned the last gate they needed to see, they found themselves facing another change in scenery: the walls were separated enough for market stalls to be comfortably placed in the exact middle of the road. Crowds of ponies wandered all over, mostly comprised of individuals who happened to be going the same way, but the noises and the sights of the crowds made the girls a little... Afraid. Or energized.

"Sweet Celestia..." Dash took a step forward, stepping aside as several ponies walked up the slightly raised ramp leading to the checkpoint behind them, and stared over all the heads she could see. Twilight joined her in a moment, staring at the great cultural clash happening before their very eyes.

Intermingled with the various ponies with dyed coats and manes, the wealthy showing off as they traveled between shadow to shadow, usually surrounded by others from the same ring or servants were ponies dressed from flank to neck in desert-resistant clothing. Big cloaks, multi-pocketed jackets and belts, wide-brimmed floppy hats, several even wearing eye-liner around their eyes. A majority of their ears had some sort of black material painted on, and they did not mind standing in the sun's rays so much. The market stall ponies were generally in the nude or wearing something... Exciting, selling their wares enthusiastically while fans attached to hoof-pedaled devices kept them cool.

The energy of the city was here, they could tell. Thousands of ponies filled this one small chunk of the ring, and this was supposed to be the market ring, for just about everything you wanted to buy. They were looking at a mere fraction of the population in a fraction of the ring.

Then Twilight's stomach growled again. Twilight glanced down to her hooves in embarrassment as Dash gently nudged her. "Alright, alright, I get the message." Twilight squeaked as Dash's nose leaned over and lightly nudged her stomach, "Ya hungry? Ya feelin' hungry?" Dash asked in a teasing coo, making Twilight blush as Rarity and Fluttershy covered their mouths as they watched, "Yes you are! C'mon, let's go getcha full." Dash began to trot away, along the side of the inner wall.

"Could you be any more embarrassing?" Twilight murmured from behind, keeping her head low as Applejack began to giggle. Despite how... Red

she was beneath her coat, it had felt oddly comforting. She was starting to see the old Dash again, which was wonderful.

Dash turned her head, smirking almost cockily at Twilight, "Want me to *try*?" Dash asked, eliciting a whimper from the mare. Dash kept them moving with a confident smile, Twilight distracting herself with the shape of Dash's flank as they walked alongside the inner wall of the fourth ring. While keeping herself behind Dash, every now and then Twilight would look up to where her horn was supposed to be, as if expecting it to return while she wasn't looking, but found that wasn't the case. She sighed heavily, glancing forward again to watch Dash, and found herself watching the stubs of the Pegasi's once great wings. 'Stop it.' She ordered herself, affixing her gaze onto the back of Dash's head. She didn't want to make Dash feel self-conscious, or more so than she already was. *If* she was. She seemed pretty proud walking along, and Dash was the sort of mare who wore her heart on her sleeve... Though she had only recently found out her new best friend had a lot of deeper, more complicated emotions. Maybe it was one of those things she'd never be able to tell until she got the mare alone.

They walked until they were no longer in the central shopping area, and were greeted by the smells of food. Less ponies crowded the area now, allowing them to maneuver more towards the center of the road. The food market was actually quite long, and as far as their eyes could see there were stalls competing to sell a variety of foods, spices, and dinnerware. The merchants in the stalls typically were nice and round, probably from their own cooking, the cooks in the back usually dressed in heavy aprons as they tended to a newer batch of cooked delights.

Twilight didn't know it, but she was drooling a little as the scents filled their nose. They walked down rows of stalls with cooked food ready to be bought and eaten, and she had to swallow the build-up just to breath. It all looked so wonderfully delicious, and her stomach growled louder than ever now...

She blushed when Dash turned back to look at her with a slightly raised eyebrow. "You really are hungry ain'tcha?" Twilight chose to glare at the sky again, even as her stomach growled hungrily. Dash glanced to the other four, and jerked her head, an indication for them to keep moving. "I'll

keep with Twilight and to find her something to eat, you guys go on and get stuff to stock the house."

"You think that's a good idea?" Twilight asked in surprise. Twilight would have figured Dash would be against splitting up at all right now, but Dash was nodding at her.

Applejack nosed forward, standing next to Twilight, "I ain't sure we should be splittin' up. We're already in a mess a' trouble, it seems like it'd be a li'l..." Applejack frowned, "Dangerous to go seperatin'."

"I'm not saying it's not." Dash gave a tiny, half-hearted shrug. Applejack raised an eyebrow at Dash's little 'I'm about to give a pretty bad excuse so please just roll with it' tell. "But I'm just saying if we get split up we can get back to the house faster, and Twilight and I can go look in on these ponies who are gonna be training us, like that general mare." Dash smiled as best as she could, while Applejack glanced from her to Twilight.

The farmer-pony rubbed her chin softly, and glanced around. There were plenty of guards standing around, keeping watch, and nopony she could see among the massive crowd seemed too shady. Then again, only a fourth of them wasn't covered from head-to-toe, but even those ponies didn't seem too dangerous. A little odd, sure, since the black eyeliner made it look like they were squinting a bunch but she doubted one of them was about to start busting out swords. "... Alright, ya'll take Twilight for a snack, but don't ya'll leave this area. If ye're done and lookin' fer us, let's meet... Uh..."

"If we're going to let them go alone, we might as well just say 'meet at the house' if we don't run into eachother." Rarity interrupted, glancing between everypony with a somewhat suspicious look. "If anything happens though, you are to scream. *Loud*. If we won't hear it, the guards certainly will." Rarity ordered.

Pinkie Pie stepped forward, and nudged Rarity. "They'll be fine! They have that awesome fire trick going on for them, right Dash?" Dash gave a somewhat nervous nod, as Pinkie gave them a reassuring smile. Twilight was happy to see her optimism back, and gave her an appreciative grin as they nodded to eachother. Fluttershy gently brushed against each mare, patting their backs comfortingly with her wings as they wandered off towards the market where they'd find stuff for the kitchen.

Twilight watched the other girls leave with slight trepidation, and turned to face Dash as soon as they'd left. Dash flinched at the look she was being given. "Is something up?" Twilight asked, while Dash gave a somewhat uncomfortable smile. She didn't trust that smile at all.

"Well, you see, it's just, uh..." Dash looked around slowly, avoiding Twilight's eyes directly. Twilight turned and twisted, trying to catch her, but Dash finally just settled for staring at her hooves. "Let's go!" She insisted, suddenly walking into Twilight, pushing her. "I saw a stall selling honey-sauce celery! Sounds really good!" She talked before Twilight could complain, and Twilight struggled to keep upright as she was shoved.

"Dash!" Twilight growled, trying to turn to face the oddly acting mare, but was failing spectacularly as Dash kept juking around her, keeping her moving just by shoving. It was somewhat embarrassing as they were no doubt causing a scene with their constant grunting and pushing, especially with as brightly colored as they were. Many of the clothed Coltriellans simply stood out of the way to watch with interest as Twilight tried to struggle and get her footing, yet Dash kept nudging her forward.

Twilight finally found the chance to turn around and face Rainbow Dash when she was cleanly pushed into an alleyway between two buildings. She was very understandably peeved-looking as Dash carefully scanned the alley entrance behind her, then turned to face Twilight. "I need to ask you-"

"You pushed me!" Twilight accused, making Dash blink. The two stared, Dash in slight surprise, Twilight in accusation. Dash glanced behind her, then back to Twilight. The unicorn never blinked. Dash rubbed her hoof against her leg nervously. She *still* wasn't blinking! It was like one-hundred even in the shade and she wasn't blinking!

"How are you *doing* that?"

"A *lot*!" Twilight stuck her hoof in Dash's face and finally blinked, making Dash let out a slow breath through her nose. "What is this all about! First you separate the group, then you get all shovey on me for like no reason and you bring me into this dark little alleyway and now you're acting all innocent! Dash, what the *hay* is going on!" Twilight demanded.

Dash quietly, and awkwardly glanced behind herself again, then straight forward, head hung a little as she tried to smile, but it came out very

nervous. "Look, it's kind of weird but I have a question for you. I don't want to freak out the others with it." Dash calmly glanced around again, then took a few steps forward, head lowered before lifting it, nearly an inch from Twilight's snout.

"What?" Twilight lost the angry edge in her stare, replaced now with discomfort as Dash came so close to tell her. She seemed nervous to speak up. "C'mon Dash, what's bothering you?" Twilight asked, gently settling into a sitting position. Dash gave the entrance one final look, then lowered her head.

"How do you use your... Blessing?" Dash asked, pawing at the ground with her hooves, teeth grit at her admittance as Twilight's eyes widened a little. "Like, you have your language-thing and control of the castle, how do you tap into that?" She looked up to Twilight with an earnest desire to know, and Twilight could only stare, uncomprehending.

"As in, 'how do I control the castle'? Or how do I change languages?" Dash nodded rapidly, leaning her head forward to hear more clearly. Twilight frowned softly. "It's hard to explain Dash, but I just do. For the language at least, it comes to me as naturally as breathing. To fly the castle, I just tapped into my magic and it moved how I wanted it too. That's it, no real trick or-" Twilight paused, and began to rub her chin. "Celestia's Fire..."

"I've been thinking about it ever since we were given that house. I remembered how I felt at the time, that I could take anything and do anything no matter what if it was for you guys. I never doubted myself once, I never felt scared until it was taken away, I just knew I'd win." Dash gulped, and rubbed the back of her neck unconsciously as she recalled how she'd acted towards Princess Celestia when they'd last met. She would defend the Princess from anypony, yet she'd been so uneasy and untrusting... Of Princess Celestia of all ponies! "I could feel her right next to me, talking to me, telling me we could win, that we *would* win. I didn't think about it until now, but, Princess Celestia was actually speaking to me. I've been trying to, I dunno, talk to her again, maybe get all flamed-on and everything, but I can't get to it! It's like, I search and search and try to find the fire, but all I find is mirrors."

Twilight understood. It was a phenomenon associated with most artistic unicorns who had difficulties accessing their magic through sheer

manipulation and force; you would visualize something associated with your magic in place of the pool of power you pulled from, and manipulated it in your mind, in your personal magical pool until you got the picture of what you wanted, and projected it in front of you, imposing the image of what you wanted rather than manipulating it directly. It was generally considered a beginner's technique for new wizard-wannabes, as it allowed for limited transformations and didn't draw on the complete power you held. By pulling out the deepest reserves of your strength and bending it to your will rather than let it freely coalesce around your target with the vaguest picture of what it was meant to make, a unicorn went from blinking a few flowers several different colors to changing an entire garden into a completely different crop. Not without consequences of course, as the environment around it would also need careful managing to keep the change relevant, or the change itself could harm its surroundings but it was a bookmarked step in every new wizard's training when their sapphire became a diamond, not just a clear sapphire.

"If I may..." Twilight began slowly, carefully rub her hoof along Dash's neck to comfort her. "Could I look at your magic?" Twilight asked. She didn't know what she'd be looking for, but she assumed an Alicorn's blessing, especially from an Alicorn as flashy as Princess Celestia could be, would be discernable from standard magic. Well, the standard magic in a Pegasus. *Given* to a Pegasus.

"Only if it doesn't turn into somethin' weird..." Dash calmly turned to the side and stared at the wall. Twilight watched the alleyway's entrance carefully, making sure nopony was watching, and lowered her head to dismiss the spell hiding her horn. It flashed once, and her eyes began to glow, allowing her to see Dash's lines.

Dash's magic lines were incredibly intricate compared to your average Unicorn's. Looking close, she could see that Dash's magical pool was not where her heart was, but it was an odd double-set of pools interconnected by a small stream just where her wings were. The small lines of power spread all over her body, but a vast majority of her ley lines went through her legs, then spread along the rest of her body. Though her lines weren't the part that interested her, what *did* interest her was the fact that, with her magic-detecting sight activated, it looked like Dash was currently on fire.

"Ah-hah..." Twilight stated, keeping her head low enough that she could hide her horn behind Dash's body from the entrance of the alleyway. "I see what it is. Princess Celestia's blessing is separate from your magic powers." She said, her eyes roaming along the golden flames that surrounded Rainbow Dash. She hadn't seen it before though... Did it decide to appear when Dash used it, or was there some other explanation? Either way, staring at it reminded her of her much loved mentor. "It's like it's... Around you, rather than inside you. That's probably why you can't access it." Twilight turned her eyes off, and immediately hid her horn with the illusion spell.

"Why wouldn't I be able to access Celestia's gift?" Dash asked, turning to face Twilight with a curious stare, while Twilight thought about it. Why did Celestia even grant her such a violent ability? It didn't seem like Celestia to have even a bit of violent potential in her.

"If I would have to guess, it's so it isn't abused." Twilight murmured, thinking carefully about what Celestia would want, and what Celestia would do... Yes, making sure Dash wouldn't abuse her abilities would be a high priority, but the problem was, how were they supposed to train said abilities? Twilight frowned, and shrugged. "I was kind going to ask about what had happened, but if you don't know..."

"All I know is that the moment I knew I couldn't let you guys down, everything began to get really warm..." Dash raised her shoulders idly, all while Twilight thought to herself. One of the most useful steps in learning new information was organizing it. Of course, she just had to get paper and quills for that... They were in the market district after all. She immediately narrowed her eyes and grunted in annoyance when she felt her stomach rumble. Dash just began to snicker softly.

"Let's really go get you something to eat now." Dash chuckled, inviting her along with a small wave of her hoof. Twilight followed behind her, trying to ignore her embarrassment and think clearly about what she knew about Celestia's blessing. She needed to organize it in her mind, then on the paper. She went through a mental checklist all about it, staring up at the sky as she did, trying to puzzle out its mysteries... She had known about blessings before, but almost nopony knew anything about what they did, or how they affected the blessed. Very little study had gone into it due to how little was known. No books were written on it, almost nopony had the

blessing (and those that did weren't showy with it, the only ponies who got it were too humble to reveal it), and Celestia, having already blessed so few, remained mum on what exactly it did. As far as Twilight could tell, she had a way with animals, and Dash could set herself on fire.

They were interesting, for sure, but surely there must have been more... Otherwise a blessing wouldn't need to be given so sparsely, especially if the Princess could regulate when and how the fire was activated... Unless she couldn't. That would make a lot more sense concerning why she gave it out rarely... Though how was one supposed to activate it?

Plenty of possibilities went through her head as Dash lead her along. She really wanted to get some paper... Actually no, she wanted to get some food, and maybe some paper later...

"Make way!" Somepony shouted from the courtyard. Sul quietly lifted her eyes from the large book she'd been reading and bookmarked it, standing quietly as she walked to her tower's window. She noted with some amusement her body actually creaked as she moved. Even with her magic sustaining her she couldn't suppress her own age from showing now. Ah well, Ao had at one point insinuated that two-hundred years was too much for anypony, even her.

Still, she had quite a bit of time left to kick around, so she didn't let the tiniest sign of her waning youth stop her from getting nosy. She peaked down into the courtyard curiously, watching as a messenger pony cleared a path through some of the visitors down below, making sure there was wide space leading from the gate of the courtyard to the Sanctum of Horns. When the path was cleared, the messenger approached a wagon that had backed up to present the door to the yard, and began to open it.

Sul was curious now. Guests weren't rare here, they usually approached to get help from one of the Belezians available, whether it be for advice on crop-growth or a cure for impotency, but not even the rich dared ride one of their carriages in here. Doing so showed remarkable disrespect to some of the wisest and oldest ponies in Coltriella. If a carriage was here, that could only mean royalty was visiting.

From the back door of the carriage, Sul watched as slowly widening eyes as a face she had not expected to see for many years appeared. With a circlet about her head, long, royal purple hair covering one side of her face, and a red cloak embroidered with gold, the Archmage of Golding stepped out into the sun, blinked rapidly, and walked after the messenger with no more than two horn breakers behind her.

Sul turned sharply at the sound of a knock on her door, and shook her head as she realized she'd gotten tense. She let out a soft breath, "Come in." She called out, and the door opened a crack. She saw one of the service mares poke her head through, and nervously spoke up.

"Lady Sul, my apologies for interrupting you but the good Lady Balla wishes to see you." She glanced around nervously as Sul approached without a word, and opened the door. The service mare stepped away so Sul could walk through, and down the spiraling staircase they went.

"I've heard no word of Golding coming to our walls. What's the event?" Sul asked, her tone neutral. If it was just Balla, that was understandable, they could sneak her in and out without Ao noticing easily, she wasn't the showy type. Not that the Juggernaut was, but his size and coloration weren't necessarily his fault.

"We do not know." The service mare said, no louder than a whisper as they stepped out into the hallway leading to the main room of the Sanctum. Sul briefly looked over the guard-railed balcony down below to see Balla entering just behind the messenger, briefly stopping to speak to a curious Belezian, before the unicorn walked away. "She arrived at the front gates quite suddenly, saying her airship was parked over by one of the dunes, requesting to speak to you."

"Has Ao been told?" They went to one of what was considered the most remarkable aspect about the Sanctum: the magically-powered elevators. As they descended, the girl shook her head.

"No, he is entertaining guests currently, and if I'm not mistaken you did not want him to hear about the arrival of any Golding ponies without first interviewing them yourself?" The girl looked to Sul as they stepped out of the elevator.

Sul bowed her head in a nod, and pointed to the door of the service ponies' room. "That is correct, go ahead and take lunch." Sul quietly slipped the surprised service mare a card from her pack, an indication Sul herself would be paying for the meal, and started towards the meeting chamber Balla would be taken to.

The unicorn in question had just barely gotten comfy on a cushion when Sul entered the small, circular chamber. The two Archmages' eyes met briefly, an unknown message passing between the two of them, and Lady Balla turned to face her guards. "You may exit." She spoke, though in Golding language. Balla's Coltriellan wasn't perfect, but she was still so young compared to Sul. The guards hesitated for only a moment, but left the room.

The circular meeting chamber was low-lit, with candles lit along the walls, and cushions placed all around the central rug. The whole chamber was meant to have a mystical feel. In reality, it was all show, talk and no fluff, but it had the desired effect on most non-unicorns concerning what was said about the Coltriellan Unicorns' power. Balla though didn't seem impressed, more curious with Sul as the elder unicorn settled on a large cushion, and faced Balla from across the carpeting.

"Lady Sul'o'Amnitanus (Soul of the Animated)." Balla managed a friendly smile that after a few moments Sul matched. "My biggest sorries for the sudden of my visit. I think my disrespect is not interrupt." She tried, looking a little nervous as Sul's smile grew.

"Ah, Lady Balla, you've improved since we last met." Sul gave a small, low chuckle as she willed several empty cups to fill with fresh, hot tea, ready from several full pots in the kitchen. She sipped from her cup, as Balla gently sniffed her own. She continued in perfect Golding, "Though I'm afraid we must cut the formalities short. As much as I'd love to trade stories, above all things I need to know the reason you've come to Coltriella."

Balla gave the tiniest smile of amusement, though Sul could sense the strain behind it. She sipped her tea before speaking, "You don't think I'm not just visiting? It's been a little while after all, and it's only me and my guards - and flight crew - coming."

"True." Sul nodded slowly, staring over Balla as she recalled Twilight. She found Twilight to be a little like Balla; they shared enthusiasm and dedication, though she imagined Balla was a slight bit more world-weary. The courts did that to you. "But there was no warning of the visit, and since becoming the Archmage of Golding you've told me you have little time for common comforts. Not to mention I was under the impression that Golding was occupied..." Sul looked into her tea cup contemplatively for a few moments, "Elsewhere."

Glancing upwards to Balla, she briefly saw the glimpse of a young mare who had been caught red-hoofed, but it was replaced quickly with a blasé smile. "Well, you aren't entirely incorrect. I..." She paused to sip her drink, "I suppose we haven't been the most invested of neighbors since the treaty was finally signed," which was putting it lightly. It was almost as if Golding had completely lost interest in Coltriella, "we have been very busy. And... Yes," Balla hung her head a little to hide her eyes in embarrassment, "I do have a reason to be here other than simple visiting." Sul calmly lowered her tea cup and gave Balla her full attention, fixing her with a calm, but intrigued stare. Balla pushed her tea to the side, and stared Sul straight in the eye, "There are enemies to Golding hiding in Coltriella, and I've been tasked to find them."

'Figures.' Sul thought to herself. Internally, she'd always known that was the most likely reason she was here, but she could always pretend Golding had better intentions in mind. "If I may ask, how do you know they are in Coltriella, and why you? Why you specifically, Balla? I assumed Lord Galio kept you so close by because of how useful you are to him." Balla straightened herself a little in pride, but kept her face neutral as she answered.

"We've been tailing them for several days, and one of our watchers saw them get dragged in by your guards. You personally relinquished them of their power," Balla nodded her head in respect, "as for why I was sent, Rukafelth and Shallom are busy."

Sul raised an eyebrow, "And Firago?"

Balla actually winced, setting Sul a little more on edge, "In-... Indisposed currently."

"Still?" Sul raised both eyebrows this time in confusion, "I'd assumed eighty years would have shifted his disposition more favorably." Balla shook her head sadly, slowly, "My apologies, please give him my best when you next see him."

"I certainly will." Balla bobbed her head rapidly, perhaps a little too rapidly, "Anyways, as for Golding's enemies, we would very much appreciate it if you turned them over so we may return and have them face the consequences of their crimes-"

"Sorry, Balla," Sul raised a hoof, and softly took a breath, "but if I may ask, would your enemies' names happen to be Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, Rarity, and Applejack?" She asked. Balla paused, thought it over, then began to nod. She hadn't hit her mark, as she feared, none of them were the ones that interested little Balla. "Ah, pardon me, but my age seems to be catching up to me." Sul gently rubbed her forehead, and continued before Balla could point out how unlikely that was, "I nearly forgot, what about Twilight Sparkle?"

The change in Balla's manner changed almost immediate. Where she was calm and almost shy before, there was none of that in the aggressively standing mare before her, eyes narrowed in deep, angry dedication. "Th- that's the one. Her. She is our greatest opponent at the moment, if you could turn her over, we would be most-"

She was paused again when Sul raised a hoof. "Balla, please understand I mean no ill-will to Golding, but it simply cannot be done." Balla's eyes widened, and her face fell gently in despair, "Twilight Sparkle has informed us of her reasons to be in Coltriella, and she has never once lied to us about it. To'Ao'Coltriella has seen to it personally, and has felt that their mission has the interests of Coltriella included." Balla's face went from sorrow to horror, and Sul sighed again as she disappointed her young friend. She did not like this entire ordeal; she had the choice of harming relations with their neighbors and possibly inciting another fight, but she simply couldn't bring herself to simply give over what amounted to six legends, especially ones who were being legitimately good ponies in a bad situation. "My apologies Balla, I do not know what you intend to do in Equestria, but they are being treated as honored guests here. I cannot, for the sake of Coltriella and for the mystical lands, turn them over to you."

"But..." Balla hissed, clearly trying to get ahold of her emotions as she pleadingly looked to Sul, "Sul, this is important! She's an enemy to Golding! We have to get her back."

Sul stared her in the eye, then calmly sipped her tea again. She had a small idea. "I'll make you a deal. Twilight Sparkle is obviously very important to you. I don't like to pry, but Golding must have gone to great lengths to enter Equestria, which may I remind you is a land of Gods," Balla gulped at the accusing tone Sul took on, "now from what I've gathered, it seems that whatever Twilight Sparkle could have possibly done to earn herself the ire of Golding would most likely be related to the defense of her home, which Golding is currently invading, so while politically I can see the reason you want her, morally I can't find a reason to simply give her to you for defending her home." Sul stared straight into Balla's eye, and found the young mare looking back with an argument on her lips, but it wouldn't come out. "If you can justify to me your invasion of the sacred lands, the targeting of a singular, scared mare, then perhaps I can reconsider."

"W-we're trying to restore Golding." Balla said firmly, but even she felt a bit weak. Sul gave her a firm stare as she drained her tea and set the cup to the side. Balla hated to be in this position, but how could you argue with Sul?

"To restore Golding, you have to encroach on an Alicorn's domain. Not just any Alicorn, but the daughters of Anemone." Balla lowered her eyes a little as Sul lectured her.

"It's dirty business but we must restore Golding. We're taking steps to-"

"Coltriella has been in a similar plight since the second to last ruler, and we aren't so bold as to stage any sort of hostility against Equestria." Sul lowered her eyes to her hooves in thought.

"We're simply taking steps to-"

"Our royalty has been plagued with greed, gluttony, and wrath for the past eight generations and we are accepting our punishment willingly, we wouldn't dare try to think this was any other pony's fault."

"It's *not* our fault, we're-"

"Whatever reason your kingdom is failing may not be so deserved, but starting *another* war isn't going to solve anypony's problems. Twilight Sparkle, Rarity, Pinkie Pie, all those girls have done nothing to Golding, and whatever crimes you're accusing them of can't possibly be so terrible as to send the Archmage to capture them." Sul spoke quickly, eyes narrowed the whole way as Balla shrank from intimidation.

"They have our Princess-"

"Furthermore, from the stories they've told me your occupation has been as gentle as you have *ever* been with foreign lands, and it appears that you still haven't learned any manners in dealing with foreigners. Coltriella has been in a state of famine two and a half generations now, and we haven't gone so far as to-"

"Maybe Coltriella wouldn't be in the middle of a desert if its ruler wasn't such a self-obsessed puss and actually got off his royal rump to do something that might *tarnish* his oh-so-blessed image in the eyes of the people!" Balla shouted, eyes squeezed shut. When she got no answer, she opened her eyes slowly, and looked to Sul's face. Sul was far from amused. "S-Sul... I'm so-"

"For as long as I've known Lord Galio, he's been wise and fair, yet ever since Firago fell ill, he's been lashing out. Your faith in your lord is admirable, but you've gone beyond taking simple orders, you're allowing yourself to follow his words blindly. I don't know what he thinks he's doing or if he knows it will accomplish nothing, but *you* Balla, you're young, you have potential. I want you to think, I want you to put together the facts, and I want you to find the real truth on your own. Don't let that witch cloud your mind."

Balla was quiet. She looked down to the floor, ears drooped. "I..." She sucked in a deep breath, "I cannot disobey my lord..." She finally whispered. She looked up to meet Sul's eyes again, for any hint that she was making the right choice, but Sul remained impassive. "I can never," Balla sucked in another breath, "I can never disappoint him..."

"..." Sul let out a slow breath through her nostrils, and shook her head. "I am sorry, Balla. I truly am."

She turned her head as a beam of light split the dimly-lit peace, and stared as a servant colt holding a scroll in his mouth entered. He stepped in at Sul's nod, and set it before her. "Lady Sul, I am so sorry to interrupt, but there are reports of magic happening in the forth ring." Balla looked up from her hooves to look to the servant as Sul scanned the scroll's contents, "A fight has broken out, and several attacks have been made."

"This place look alright?" Dash took her eyes from the sign hanging overhead and glanced to Twilight, who had busied herself looking at a menu posted on the wall by the door. 'Gailpine's Bar and Grill' was the place's name. After wandering the stalls for a good while trying to find the right place to eat, a nearby pony had been helpful enough to point out that a pair of 'classy mares' like them should try one of the restaurants nearby. Of course, Twilight being hungry, was all for a full on meal, turning the tables on Dash almost easily to get her going.

Dash didn't really like formal restaurants. She preferred little pizza eateries or a buffet, not the sort of place you were expected to dress up for and wear the napkin over your lap, but Twilight had made a beeline for the first place they'd seen with a picture of food on it. "This place looks perfect!" She whispered. Dash rolled her eyes. Twilight probably never went a day without three solid meals, though there was the question of how much stamina using magic cost you... Because Dash felt peckish, but not as hungry as Twilight seemed to be. "Let's go get a table." Twilight walked straight in, between the thin curtains serving as the door to the outside, and Dash followed just behind.

Even if she was only a little hungry, she had to admit the place smelled delicious. The grill in the back was working full time as the whole place was filled with customers. Dash noted most of them weren't the classy aristocracy but a lot of the lower class having a good time eating and drinking. Mostly drinking though, there was usually only one plate per table. The interior of the building was mostly stone, but the floor had carpeting and the walls bore elaborate tapestries. The chairs were also made of a much lighter stone but were well-cushioned. The only wood there seemed to be were the kegs in the back at the bar.

"So..." Twilight started, looking around hastily, "I guess we just sit down wherever?" She asked, taking a few steps forward towards an empty table. Then a good part of the bar went quiet to stare at the two. The clothed, black-eyed ponies watched the two with great interest, and a steady racket of whispers began to fill the room as Twilight froze in mid-step, and Dash slowly looked around as she approached Twilight, and quietly placed herself between her friend and the rest of the ponies.

It was just a mite uncomfortable how much attention they were getting, which is why it felt like a godsend when somepony cleared their throat. Dash turned quickly with Twilight to stare at a mare wearing a white showgirl's outfit, one eyebrow raised high as the mare glanced around slowly. "Well come on boys, not the way to go around greeting our guests." She called.

Dash and Twilight stared as the men each looked to each other at their tables, took their glasses and clashed them together, and cheerily announced "HAI'YAY!" and downed them quickly, turning back to each other to keep laughing and talking. Dash's eye twitched as the show mare quietly nodded.

"Gonna have to forgive this lot, haven't ever had High-Ring Ponies come in for a visit." She explained, beckoning them with a wave of her hoof. Twilight and Dash followed after a brief look to the other, and were taken to a very clean, empty table near a small stage where a few other show mares were strutting, singing, and dancing. "So what brings you two in?" She asked after seating them both.

"Looking for something to eat. Queenie's stomach here wouldn't stop whining." Dash smirked at Twilight, but the Unicorn (horn hidden of course) was distracted. Twilight was very uncomfortable with the spotlight. Glancing around slowly she could see she and Dash had never really left it; ponies still stared at them and whispered among each other, and it took Twilight a moment to think of why: these ponies were all wearing clothing, all had simple earth colors. A majority of whom were Earth ponies. Twilight and Dash were brightly colored, "naked", and Dash had her wings. This was probably a hang-out for the non-wealthy population, and for all intents and purposes, Dash and her looked very well off standing next to the common pony in Coltriella.

"Well you're in luck, we have some of fresh stuff set on the grill right now waiting to be ordered." The mare grabbed a few menus and set them in front of the girls while Dash reached over and pulled Twilight's attention back to them. "We have basic stuff: pick your favorites and set them on the grills, but we also grill our foods on onions, use honey-sauce, sprinkle some peppers on it, got a small selection of spices to pick from. We can even get you rice, and if you don't mind spending big we have some egg and milk." She paused and let the girls look over the menu, her ear twitching as Twilight's stomach rumbled. "We also have a chef's special, available for the weekend only. Got some pineapple-"

"All I need to hear." Dash set her menu down and grinned brightly as Twilight snickered softly. "Pineapple in that honey-sauce." She paused and thought, the mare waiting with her that odd little stick with the black and pink tips. "The honey-sauce is sweet, right? Good. And put it on top of celery."

"Grilled together?"

"No." Dash paused again, "No *thank you*." She nodded, feeling satisfied with herself as Twilight cocked a tiny smile.

"Alrighty, and for you, miss?" The showgirl turned to Twilight, who was looking close at the menu.

"Onion-grilled artichoke in tomato gravy, with a side of that mint and carrot soup." Dash looked somewhat surprised at the last choice. Twilight had to admit it sounded like an odd combination, but if it was a foreign delicacy, it was worth a try. The show mare turned to face the grill in the back.

"Hey, Banqoe, got another contender for your mint and carrot soup!" She called, writing the orders down.

"If she likes it, you owe me fifteen bits!" A gruff voice from the back called, and the show mare snorted.

"Alright, pineapple and honey-sauce on celery, onion-grilled artichoke with tomato gravy and a side of - snrrk - mint and carrot soup, for the brave mare." The mare continued to snicker, while Twilight just glanced around in confusion, as if hoping somepony would help her understand the joke.

"Can I get you two any alcohol? Beer, wine, or are you looking to peel paint off the walls?"

"Err," Dash rubbed the back of her head, "we don't really drink. There's not a lot of alcohol back home." The show mare looked genuinely surprised by this, but Dash continued quickly, "Not that we don't! It's just only real classy places sell it." Twilight calmly waved for attention.

"My parents let me drink a few sips of their wine before I became-" she hastily remembered Sul's warning against Unicorns, "- a student under the, uh, head scholar." Dash opened her mouth to say something, but Twilight continued, "I remember actually liking it, had a little kick to it."

"Little, hm?" The mare hummed to herself, setting her pad and pencil down. "Well if you aren't used to alcohol, then let's start you off low. How about nice white eighteen-proof wine in shot glasses?" She asked, pointing to the middle of the table where several tiny, inch and a half high glasses were in a rack designed to hold these glasses.

"Eighteen?" Twilight asked, rubbing her chin, "I remember the wine I tried was six-proof." She nearly shrank away as the show mare stared at her somewhat wide-eyed. "Do you, err..." She chuckled nervously, "Do you have that?"

"Miss, uh, I'm not sure what to tell you, but we don't really sell the pussy-stuff here. Eighteen's the lowest we got. But hey, maybe it'd be funny to get you the one-ninety-proof stuff." The show mare walked away chuckling as Dash simply stared after her, then glanced to Twilight.

"I didn't know you drank!" Dash seemed genuinely surprised, while Twilight shrugged.

"Just little sips! I was only about nine when they first let me try it. They wouldn't let me have more than a mouthful." Twilight blushed. They'd gotten a bottle of wine from a family friend after her father had helped him with some of his research notes. She recalled her parents drinking from small glasses and enjoying it. She remembered asking to try some, and her father had filled up one tiny glass about half-way and let her drink it. The bitter kick it had was pleasant, waking her up some, and warming her all over. Over the course of a month, they'd polished it off, letting Twilight have one small half-glass each night they'd brought it out.

"Well if it was just little sips, I *guess* that lets you off the hook." Dash smirked, and Twilight smiled back, nervously though. "I was worried you were secretly channeling Berry Punch behind our back and spending your nights in a bar." Twilight twitched.

"Ugh..." Twilight groaned, rubbing her forehead as the show mare came back with a bottle of simple, milky-goldish liquid, uncorked it with a little drill-shaped device, and filled them both up one shot glass each.

"Alright, here's your wine ladies, give it a sip and tell me what you think." The mare ordered. Twilight took her glass, as did Dash, and they lifted it to their mouths, but Twilight paused, causing Dash to slow down too.

"Don't we toast or something?" She asked the show mare curiously, glass still raised as the waitress thought about it, and shrugged.

"Usually you only toast for something special, but if you'd like, tap your glasses together - *lightly* please - and just announce 'Hai'Yay'." She informed them, and Twilight nodded rapidly as she turned, smiling at Dash, who grinned back. They leaned over to tap their glasses together.

"Hai'Yay!" The two girls announced, much more quietly than the rest of the noisy patrons, and then Twilight and Dash began to drink. On her first mouthful, Twilight began to shiver. The wine was cool, but it had that dark, bitter kick she remembered, just as strong as it was ten years ago due to age differences. The way it flowed down and settled in her stomach made her twitch, but after a few moments began to feel pleasant.

For Dash, the bitterness made her nostrils tighten and face crinkle, but she made no indication of discomfort as she slugged it back. It tasted odd, and she wasn't sure she liked the way it felt going down, but like Twilight, she began to feel a little euphoric. When they set the glasses down, they both let out a hissing breath of comfort and relief, and smiled to their waiter friendly-like. "I liked it." Twilight announced, glancing to Dash.

"It wasn't *bad*." The Pegasus shrugged, the warmth in her tummy spreading a little to her limbs. Maybe Berry Punch was on to something...

... Nah, that chick was a *loon*.

"Glad you do. Maybe after a few shots of these I can grab you some of the tougher stuff. Got a good red wine in a few nights ago, got a good bit more booze in it than what you just enjoyed." She poured two more shots for them, and Twilight was quick to do the cheer with Dash to drink it down, while Dash took a little more time considering it.

"That sounds nice." Twilight smiled, setting her empty glass down as Dash polished hers off. The warmth increased, and Dash couldn't help but grin a little stupidly. It was nice and warm in here, surrounded by nice ponies, they had a little time off... Man, what was she so intense about earlier?

"Alright, I'll go grab you the bottle as soon as I seat these gentlecolts." The show mare nodded, and Twilight gave her a quick nod as she poured their third glass each and wandered off towards the door. Their eyes followed her as she greeted three ponies. Twilight drank her wine, not giving them a second thought, but Dash watched the three quietly.

Two of the colts wore armor, golden armor with head-pieces that looked oddly like a rising sun on the horizon, the rest being intricately carved to fit them all over, guarding the joints and soft spots. The one in the middle was the odd one though. He was light-manila colored, not a single hair in his mane or tail, and he had deep red eyes. They were conversing quietly with the show mare. "Hey Twilight. Get a load of the company." Dash pointed out the three ponies, and Twilight set her glass down to look.

Twilight watched them calmly for a moment, but immediately set Dash on edge when her face froze in panic. That warmth, the devil-may-care feeling, was gone as Twilight turned from the three quickly, and glanced to Dash. "Don't draw attention." She whispered, nervously rolling her cup between her hooves as she glanced to them again and again, awkwardly trying to remain calm.

Dash stared a moment longer, but quickly turned to look Twilight in the eye. "What's the matter?" She whispered, one hoof nervously touching the hilt of her sword, to assure her it was still there. Twilight lowered her head, and began to whisper.

"The two colts in the armor," she whispered, as the show mare began to lead them to a table, "after Sul put up that field, I started to recognize what anti-magic *looked* like through magic. They're cold as ice." She tipped her empty cup to her lips as Dash's eyes showed understanding. "That

maneless one in the middle, he reminds me of Rukafelth. Dash, I get this bad feeling but-" she quieted down when the show mare walked by, the three colts right behind her.

"- a fine selection of Golding sherries for you colts. Just in luck too, we're on our last case and it would be a pity to waste it on somepony that can't appreciate authenticity." She said merrily, one of the armored ponies speaking up.

"Oh we definitely appreciate the offer." He said in perfect Coltriellan, but his partner by his side spoke in a more simple, direct language, to the first guard. "Ah, my friend would like to know if you have any of your city's famed honeyed shot-glasses?"

"Of course we do!" The mare scoffed at the notion, "We wouldn't be a bar in Coltriella without them! Pardon me ladies." The mare slipped around their table to grab an extra chair to be taken to a table with only two. The girls looked to the show mare, then to the three guards.

The two armored ones smiled in a friendly manner, nodding their thanks, but the bare pony watched them with quiet intensity. He held out a hoof as the show mare passed by. "Wait." He spoke, his voice low, but powerful. He turned his gaze slowly from the show mare to Twilight, and immediately every nerve in her body was screaming for her to run, to escape, to dive under the table and back out. She could see Dash, tense and nervous out the side of her vision, leaning her head slowly to her sword handle. "Would it be too much to ask for us to join you?" He asked Twilight, his face remaining impassive while the guards stared to him quizzically.

"Beau, let's not be impolite." The guard that spoke Coltriellan insisted, smiling in embarrassment to the Twilight and Dash. "Please forgive him, he's sheltered. See, he comes from a sect of monks-"

"**Obien.**" The monk interrupted the guard gently, his red eyes widening as he looked up and down Twilight. Twilight was shaking as the colt quietly took the chair the show mare was taking, and set it at one side of the table. "**If I am not mistaken, this mare,**" Twilight slowly began to back away in her seat, "**I believe Balla would like to meet her.**"

The guard sighed, and stared at Twilight, "**Beau, why would Lady Balla be interested in meeting with-**" he trailed off as he glanced over Twilight.

The second armored guard was already staring at Twilight, and the mare quickly pushed herself away from the table.

"Thank you for the wine." Twilight bowed curtly to the show mare, who was watching in confusion, slowly backing away as she sensed the unease. "Rainbow Dash." Twilight nodded to her friend, who quickly leapt out of her seat. The two started for the door, when one of the guards rounded on them quickly, blocking off their escape. "Let us through please." Twilight ordered in a stern voice, doing her best to not quake, so tense she was actually starting to ache.

"... Twilight Sparkle." The guard spoke, lowering his gaze to meet hers. By her side, Dash tensed up further, and glowed a tiny bit, getting ready to do something. "In Galio's name, you are to come with-" he was suddenly bowled over to the side as a table slammed into him, and Dash, baring only her three bright colors, shoved Twilight forward, Dark Dash shouting as she kicked another table at the other two.

The show mares screamed, the other customers standing abruptly, watching, jaws dropped as the light-coated monk swiftly flipped over the table and charged towards the fleeing mares, the second guard ducking around the furniture as the first began barreling through the bar. Twilight turned, shouted an apology, and the front of her face flashed purple as tables, carrying occupants and everything, were suddenly tugged around the door as the girls fled, barring it off.

It held off their pursuers for several seconds.

"Hel-lo ladies!" Fluttershy squeaked, slipping behind Rarity immediately to hide herself from the loud, enthusiastic voice coming from the stall they just passed by. Rarity turned her head to stare at the colt in the stall with the frankly *ridiculous* hat, a short-brimmed, but tall, floppy stove-top hat made of some sort of felt. He wore a thin, light cloak that tossed about as he moved around, sweeping his forelegs back and forth as he invited them closer. "What a beautiful pair of young mares you are, certainly one of the sweetest things I have ever viewed in this desert."

Rarity fluttered her eyes at him in a confused "excuse me?" manner, one dainty purple eyebrow raising as the grinning merchant leaned forward to

meet her eyes. "Well I do suppose my friend and I are some of the most beautiful mares around." She agreed in a manner suggesting she was only listening to the words she cared to hear for. It was usually only taken to drive off colts that were creeping her out, or to make them calm down enough to have a slightly more intelligent conversation.

"Aye, true, sweet as honey, but not the sweetest thing I've seen." The merchant nodded his head slowly. Rarity paid a little more attention to him, an offended look on her face. Behind her, Fluttershy lifted her head to peek out, also looking a little insulted, but more in a "you hurt me" way rather than a "you're a jerk" way.

"Pardon me?" Rarity glanced back to Fluttershy and then to the merchant again. "Not the sweetest? I'd dare say you haven't traded more than a few words with my friend here." Rarity wrapped her foreleg around Fluttershy's neck, and the Pegasus blushed a little, and squeaked again as she hid behind her bangs.

The merchant went on though, "Ah, but I don't need to trade words with anypony to know that, in my possession, I bare the sweetest thing in all the desert- nay, all the lands themselves!" He grinned enthusiastically, waving his hooves about wildly as Rarity's eyes narrowed, and she glanced over the many jars that surrounded him. Even Fluttershy was staring curiously between the strands of her hair. The merchant whisked off the lid of a short, fat jar sitting in front of him, and using a small shovel dipped it in, and slowly lifted out what looked like sand, but caramel colored. "A rare, valuable, and utterly delectable spice from the great Valley of Fingers, past the all-consuming Sand Sea outside the very walls of Coltriella itself, and beyond the Canyon of Lions. Harvested from the mines the deadly scarabs dug centuries ago, inhabited by bandits of the lost wastes, this fantastic spice is surely worth the effort. They turn anything sprinkled with it into a delicious confection, and any delicious confection dipped into it becomes ambrosia." He pushed the jar forward, and Rarity instinctively stepped back, but then hesitantly stepped forward. "Don't be shy dear mares! Take a sniff."

The two mares gave each other an odd look before approaching the jar and taking a sniff. The scent coming off the spice tickled their noses gently, but not before giving them the most soothing feeling in the world. It was a gentle sweetness that teased their snouts, one that didn't hammer in just

how sugary it was, it was the sort of sweetness that you caught on a vague draft of air, and remembered your favorite pie or cake, the nostalgic scent that made the next few minutes pleasant and bearable thanks to that one little whiff of confectionary beauty.

Then the merchant was holding a long piece of bread. He dipped the tip into the pot, and presented it to Fluttershy. The normally shy mare, still on a little high from just how good that spice smelled, hesitantly took a nibble. She closed her eyes, worked it around her mouth, and let out a low, tiny moan of joy.

Rarity gently nudged her friend's side. "Is it good, dearie?" She asked, watching the way Fluttershy began to beam as she opened her eyes to meet her beautiful friend's.

"Oh Rarity it was wonderful! I can't believe something so delicious could be as simple as a spice." She whispered, the merchant grinning hugely as he began to line up jars of his product, from the small six ounce one to the large eighteen ounce one.

"We'll take six ounces." Rarity stated, presenting the merchant with the small card Ao had given her to put their purchases on, when Fluttershy took that small piece of bread, dipped it in the spice, and let Rarity have a nibble. The fashion-extraordinaire chewed on it slowly, eyes slowly closing as memories of lazing about Sweet Apple Acres, Granny Smith's signature pie sitting on the windowsill cooling, its mouth-watering scent spreading across the fields, filled her mind, and she immediately shifted her position. "Make that sixteen ounces."

Down the row of stalls, Applejack walked sourly alongside Pinkie Pie, staring at the ground murderously as Pinkie happily chewed on a red fruit. "T'ain't apples." Applejack grumbled darkly, kicking at a rock on the ground. "Lies is what those are." Applejack glared at Pinkie Pie, who stopped and stared back. "Ye're stuffin' yer face with lies!"

Pinkie Pie chewed for a few seconds, swallowed, and grinned. "They taste pretty real to me! You just have to give them another try!" She held one of the small red fruits up, and Applejack snorted harshly.

"I don't care *what* any dang old merchant says they are or why they're called that, *them's ain't apples!*" Pinkie Pie quickly pulled the cactus apple

away from Applejack as the latter tried to swipe it away, and began eating it again, smiling to herself as she did. "Lies and imposters and terrors..."

Carrying several bags on their backs, the two walked towards a small clearing where the stalls didn't make the roads so thin, and Applejack hiked herself up onto a bench and glanced around, looking for Rarity and Fluttershy. She waved her hooves when she spotted the two in the crowd, and quickly the two beautiful mares joined their friends. "Girls!" Rarity started as they approached, smiling hugely as Applejack's dark look softened on seeing her friend's excitement. "You will not believe what we just bought! It is *the* greatest thing I have ever tasted!"

Pinkie Pie and Applejack both froze, fixing Rarity with a pair of wide-eyed looks, the softness and joy in their faces gone. "The..." Pinkie Pie sucked in a deep breath, and let it out slowly, her pupils getting huge as she stared Rarity in the eye, "The *greatest* thing you've ever tasted?" She repeated.

Rarity stood still, glancing back and forth between the two earth mares, then to Fluttershy for support, but the quiet Pegasus looked equally frozen up. Apparently she'd been thinking the exact same thing. "Err, well, I mean, *unbaked* of course, it's one of the most marvelous spices I've ever tasted."

Applejack stuck out her bottom lip and sniffed. "Better'n my crisped apple spice?" She asked, her eyes getting watery.

Rarity tried to smile big, and glanced left and right slowly for some sort of escape. "It's... Uh... Well... Um... Weeee... Fluttershy and I will... Bake you both something and show you and you can judge yourselves!" Rarity said with a triumphant smile. The sad looks quickly turned to very dedicated glares, and Rarity began to sweat.

"We'll see about this super-special-'wecial' spice of yours." Pinkie huffed, sitting on the bench with a plop and an angry pout. "And if it's better than my super deluxe special triple-double chocolate cake tarts, I will eat my hooves!"

"Um..." Fluttershy's eyes widened with worry, and she quickly stared at the pot of Spice they'd bought, and then back to Pinkie, "Please don't?"

"An' if it beats out my spice," Applejack spoke up, pointing to Pinkie Pie, and the two earth ponies nodded to each other, "She can eat my hooves too!"

Rarity simply stared between the two as Fluttershy began to whimper vocally, and Rarity began to chuckle nervously at the absurdity of the situation, and smiled to Fluttershy, meaning she would need a lot of help to make this taste bad. The two shared a quick nod, and glanced back to Applejack. "Weeeelll, alright then. We'll just go ahead and... Yes..." Rarity began to chuckle again, sweating now.

The tenseness passed the moment Pinkie spoke up again, "So we're all fine and dandy on food, right?" She asked, gently bouncing her pack of sweets and fruits, while Applejack nodded to her own pack.

"We've gotten what we were looking for." Rarity nudged her own pack, as Fluttershy calmly checked hers and gave a brief nod. "Now we just need to find Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash." Rarity turned her head to face down the rows of stalls again, and sighed. "At least they'll be easy to pick out."

"Y'all sure we should go huntin' fer them right now?" Applejack asked as she hopped off the bench to join the three on the ground, and they started walking back towards where they came. "I mean," she rolled her eyes idly, smirking to herself, "it's pretty rude to go interruptin' a date."

Pinkie Pie began to snicker, whereas Rarity sighed heavily. Fluttershy kept quiet. "Honestly Applejack, I don't know why you insist on teasing them so. If anything, you're just pressuring them. Let them realize each other on their own terms."

"There's no fun in that though!" Applejack and Pinkie said at the same time, and without pausing, Pinkie went on, "What's the fun of watching a relationship blossom if *you can't be apart of it!*" Pinkie stared at Rarity as if she was the crazy one, and narrowed her eyes. The fashionista blinked rapidly as Pinkie Pie continued on alongside Applejack. "We get to watch all the stages of," she took a deep sigh, and with the cheesiest, heart-meltingest grin, "**LOVE.**"

"Honestly Pinkie, I thought I was the romantic..."

"Y'all ain't never seen Pinkie's video collection." Applejack snorted.

"No, I *did* see it, and honestly I still can't wrap my mind around it. You still haven't explained to me how one mare can make use of a full vegetable garden and four buckets of butter..."

"No, Rare." Applejack rolled her eyes as Fluttershy turned and gave Pinkie a wide-eyed look. The party mare just smiled proudly. "And it's a li'l somethin' called 'imagination', that's how. Anyhow, 'neath her TV in that cabinet. We always called her the master of terror 'cause of all the horror movies she owns, right?"

"That and last Nightmare Night..."

"Right. Well, turns out she owns a lot more romantic movies, enough to give y'all a run fer yer money." Rarity looked honestly surprised by that, but Pinkie just looked pleased with herself. "An' I like seein' my friends happy whether they want me to or not, so we've been teaming up all these years to watch the love happen." The two earth ponies high-hoofed, and Rarity just sighed heavily.

"Well..." Fluttershy spoke up, wavering a little as she walked along, forcing her eyes to the ground so they wouldn't quiver, "At least it'll be a more calm adventure than this..." She mumbled softly, drawing a few nods of agreement.

The four paused as they walked up to a crowd of ponies standing quietly, watching the sky it seemed like as their heads slowly turned to follow something. "What are those ponies doing?" One pony in the crowd whispered questioningly.

"Not sure." Another whispered back, "Causing quite a stir though. I wonder whose guards those are though."

Applejack blinked as the crowd gasped, and heard a clatter above her. By her side, Fluttershy gave a short, high-pitched shriek, and the farm mare immediately stared upwards with her friends. Above them, there were some wooden scaffolds. The building they were pressed against was being painted, half-finished, the painters probably on break. And on top of them, she saw Twilight and Dash running for dear life, just behind them two

guards in full armor, as well as one manila-colored pony with no armor or mane whatsoever.

Her blood ran cold as she stared, and she felt her leg twitch, but she couldn't move as terror flashed through her for the second time that day. Twilight and Dash reached a scaffold wall and were now charging up a ramp, the armorless pony leaping out of the side of the scaffold to grab onto a bar and tug himself up to the next level effortlessly, blocking off Twilight and Dash's escape. Dash ran ahead of her friend and slid forward, trying to knock the acrobatic pony off his feet, but the chaser shifted his stance and let Dash get close enough that he could give her a sharp kick to the face. Rarity shouted something abnormally obscene and charged away, "Drop your things! Go help them!" The fashion-mare shouted, heading towards the back of the crowd.

Applejack glanced after the purple-haired beauty, her words registering only a moment later as she watched Twilight actually tackle the manila-coated pony and with a tiny twist get him to shift off of Dash while the Pegasus quickly gave his side a sharp kick, sending him off the scaffold. By this time, the two armored ponies were on the same level as them, and the two mares began to run away, Dash bleeding from her nose while the armorless pony caught himself on the side, pulled himself up, and leapt up to the next level: the building's roof.

"C'mon, let's go." Applejack growled softly, eyes narrowing as she, Fluttershy - who's eyes were slit in anger - and Pinkie Pie - eyes narrowed, teeth clenched - pushed through the crowd, trying to find a way up.

"Hold yourselves." Dash and Twilight stared across the gap between the building they were on and the next a good twenty feet away. Dash stared down hastily, but noticed Twilight turning her head. She moved to stand stiffly in front of her unicorn, ignoring the smell of her own blood in her nose as the guards and that monk closed in. "Abandon yourselves, or we will be forced to kill you." The monk said in that cool, calm voice. The air above Twilight's forehead sparked a little, and Dash swiftly unsheathed her sword.

"Forced huh?" Twilight snorted, taking a defiant step forward, feigning confidence to curb her own terror. She brushed against Dash for

reassurance, for the both of them, and the monk focused his unblinking eyes on her.

"You have intentionally defied the laws of Golding and have been deemed an enemy of the state. You are to be taken, alive *or* dead as we see fit before the courts and tried for your theft." The guard Twilight recognized as Obien stated in a powerful tone, and began to move forward, slowly drawing a blade.

Dash tensed up, snarling as she flashed, two more Dashes appearing, and an instant later, swords appearing in their mouths. "She didn't do crap and you Golding ponies are liars!" She shouted around the thin hilt, while Obien gave her a dark glare, "I don't care what you made up for her, touch Twilight and I'm going to split you in half with my bare hooves!" Dash roared.

"You have bravado." The monk did an easy flip over the armored guard, and before Dash could bring her blade up, the monk slapped it out of the middle one's mouth, making Twilight gasp at the crunch noise of bone that followed, and the clone disappeared. The Dashes both winced as they felt the echoes of the shattered jaw, but the right Dash was already lunging with the sweeping blade, only to fall short as the monk back-pedaled. The Red and orange haired Dash pushed him a bit further as the yellow and green-haired Dash turned to Twilight.

"C'mon, I have a stupid idea." She whispered, and the unicorn followed her to the edge of the building as the other two guards charged, trying to skewer the two mares as Dash leapt, and Twilight followed. Below, the crowd gasped aloud as Dash plunged into a cart of hay, shattering the wheels as she landed, but she hopped out of it easily, allowing Twilight to land. Dash sheathed her sword as all the colors in her hair returned, and she grabbed Twilight's hoof and tugged her out. The two turned, ignoring the shocked mare standing nearby as the monk leapt down, landing almost soundlessly as the two guards climbed their way down, blocking off the alleyway with their bodies.

"... No offense Dash, but yeah, that was a stupid idea." Twilight grumbled, trying to ignore the ache in her neck the fall had given her, while staring down the ponies blocking them off. A million ideas ran through her head but none of them would seemingly work. The monk was too difficult to hit with

anything, able to react almost instantly to everything she'd thrown at him, and the two guards had found their center points and weren't easy to bowl over anymore, even worse was that simple magic didn't work on them.

"Well..." Dash mumbled, glancing left and right. "Any ideas from you?" Dash asked, and Twilight slowly stared around as they were backed into the wall of the alleyway. She couldn't see any good ways out. She could try a levitation spell but the monk would probably be faster... Though she did still have that lightning spell...

Around her, an orange aura began to permeate from her body, sparks of electricity leaping off her coat as an electric current began to run down her mane and tail, and the three Golding ponies tensed instinctively. Then the monk took a step forward, and from the orange aura a lash of electricity flicked from her body, completely missing the guards and snapping harmlessly against one of the stone walls of the alley. Dash looked to her with a terrified, almost disbelieving look, and the three ponies moved in.

Until the wall crumbled.

Dash's look of shock quickly turned to one of rapid glee, and Twilight felt it through a sharp nudge to the side. The two mares quickly ran to move over the debris in the middle of the alleyway, but as the dust settled it was apparent they weren't alone.

The monk's gentle composure was lost, and now he was glaring daggers at Twilight. With an irritated whinny, the colt charged forward as Twilight and Dash froze up in the middle of the alleyway, only for his body to get blocked by a thick brown cloak that was swiftly wrapped around him. He struggled for a moment to pull it off, long enough for Dash to pull her sword out, but before either one could charge, the Coltriellan mare they'd rudely fell in on leapt off the pile of debris, and smashed a rock against the monk's head. The colt fell like the rock that had been crushed against his skull, and the mare regarded the two girls she rescued for a moment.

There was a moment of silence before Twilight spoke up, "Thanks." She finally said, and the mare gave them a tiny smile. Then there was a small group of moans, and the alleyway debris exploded upwards as the two armored ponies, seething with anger stood, teeth grit as they laboriously made their way forward, the monk struggling to his hooves as the three fixed the mares with intense displeasure.

"... Follow me." The Coltriellan girl shot between Dash and Twilight, towards the alleyway wall. With little other choice, the two mares stuck to her flank as the three colts charged after them, down the alley that Twilight just noticed sloped as a downwards ramp. The mare suddenly ducked, losing her wide-brimmed hat in the process as she slid into what appeared to be a storm-drain at the bottom of the wall. Dash lunged, sliding on her stomach as she followed the mare through the hole, and Twilight finally threw herself to the ground, sliding towards Dash's wiggling hooves, grabbing hold of one as the other gripped her leg, and pulled. Twilight sucked in a deep breath, and let it out, flattening herself as much as possible as she was yanked through without a problem.

Until she hit the ground that is. With a tiny shout, she landed in cool, running water. She stood slowly, shakily, having to ground herself with what little traction she could find beneath the running stream. She glanced to Dash, who was shaking the water out of her hair, and then to the other mare.

It was hard to tell in the dim light, with what little poured through the storm drain's opening, but the mare had a look of pure, bright-eyed, friendly curiosity on her face, but their meeting was interrupted when a voice came through the drain: "Run all you like Twilight Sparkle, the time will come for you to stand before Golding!" One of the guards shouted. The alleyway mare looked to Twilight, eyes shining with worry, and Twilight gave her a deep 'I'm not guilty' look.

"Move aside." The monk said outside, his voice remaining impressively calm, despite the strained anger in it. The Coltriellan girl gained a panicked look as the lower half of the colt began to slip through, and nudged Twilight and Dash.

"Move! C'mon!" She whispered, and following the stream of cool water, they began to run and slide their way down the incline. There was a splash behind them, and hooves began to approach rapidly. The monk was getting closer, and Twilight twisted her head to look, seeing him bowling down on them. Just behind him, the two guards had slipped their way into the water system and were following at as brisk a pace as they could manage without losing their footing.

"Where are we going?" Dash asked in a low whisper as Twilight's currently disappeared horn glowed, and the water began to bow as wave of force shot from her towards the monk. The monk easily glided around it, and one of the guards intercepted it without even twitching.

"Just trust me hun." The mare whispered between panting as they ran down the dark tunnel. Even if they had little choice, Dash was feeling twitchy. The stone walls, the darkness closing in on them until a storm drain let a beam of light through, the water at their feet, being chased by angry, foreign ponies...

"Feels like prison again." Twilight whispered as she sped ahead suddenly, sliding on the slick floor after shooting another fist of force in the direction of the monk, who soundly dodged it as Twilight kept sprinting again.

"Good times." Dash said through a swollen tongue as she quelled her rising phobias and shuddered. The mare ahead of them didn't even hesitate as she heard this, but Dash saw her head move just a little so she could look at them.

"Few more." The mare announced. Twilight was now rapid-firing the blasts of air, but the monk was easily slipping around them, but every movement to the left or right slowed him just enough. The two armored ponies simply plowed through the spells but their armor was forcing them to keep their distance.

Dash glanced to the mare by their side, passing one, then two, then three more storm-drain openings, and the mare suddenly dived to the right. "In here!" She announced, slipping onto a stone platform that was above the streaming water, diving into a hallway Dash wouldn't have noticed before, and the Pegasus swiftly grabbed Twilight's tail and pulled her in. The dampness never left the floor but at least she had better traction here, and she followed the mare up a stone staircase lit by torches. The patter of hooves behind them told her that the Golding colts had found their way into the hallway as well, and were gaining speed.

The Coltriellan jumped the final step to shove open a door, allowing Dash and Twilight in before leaping in after and kicking the door shut as hard as she could. As soon as she was through, a glowing, floating desk pressed itself against the wooden door and held it fast as the door twitched from a hard kick.

The door continued to shake as Twilight caught her bearings, staring around at the small office they'd entered, with a single window and door serving as portals to another alleyway outside. The mare rested against the desk, adding her weight to it as the door quivered harder. She let out a slow breath, as did the other two girls. Then the mare glanced up, and stared straight at Twilight. "... So what's your story?" She asked with a curious stare, and Twilight winced, and smiled nervously.

"... Would you believe it's a show?" She asked, and Dash sighed and rubbed her forehead. The mare didn't look convinced, but they didn't have time to argue.

"In here!" Somepony shouted outside the door. "I felt the magic inside here!" The three girls quickly looked to each other fearfully, and the door turned to splinters as an enormous, dark armored Golding pony plowed through it. Twilight stared wide-eyed, seeing his body was cold like the others, and the big soldier growled. "In here!" He roared again, "I've spotted the false one!" The window shattered, and Dash, splitting into six, stood around the mare and Twilight, shaking as they all took their swords to the ready as two more of those maneless, tailless ponies leapt through the window.

"We can be sure of this?" One of the monks asked, and the guard nodded his head rapidly.

"She has just the right magic. Get her." He growled, and while one monk charged forward, dancing her way around the blades the Pegasi were wielding, knocking them aside with sharp jabs of her hooves, the other sailed overhead as he kicked off a wall, landing by Twilight and the girl. A swift punch sent the mare sprawling, and another knocked Twilight to the floor with a shriek.

"Twilight!" One of the Dashes turned their heads to stare as the monk wrapped its foreleg around Twilight's head, and Twilight began to squeal in pain as the monk started to *twist*. In a rush, she felt it again. The power. The strength. The courage. *Her* unicorn was being hurt. The monk barely had time to look up as he was knocked off Twilight by a very hard kick wreathed in flames, an uncanny growl of rage filling the air as Rainbow Dash's blazing magic unfurled about her, her coats turning white, her manes becoming brightly colored, licking flames, and now baring the

strength of the sun. Twilight blinked through the tears to see that the six Dash clones were now pushing back against the monks as the heat in the room filled. Twilight turned her head swiftly as the monk who had had her leapt off the wall, aiming a kick square for yellow Dash's back, but a blast of force instead sent him flying through the window again.

The second monk found herself surrounded by blades, and she held stock still as she glanced around at the blazing Pegasi holding their swords to her body. The mare who had lead them here slowly stood, blinking rapidly, and glanced towards the door. She gave a shout, and the other mares turned as the armored soldier kicked the desk away, and the door flew open as the next two soldiers and the monk entered, joining the fray without hesitation.

"Dash!" Twilight shouted as the magic-immune colts started tackling her rainbow-maned friend, the fire only increasing in intensity as the situation began to get more dangerous, and as they fought the female monk and the monk from before slipped over to Twilight, grabbing her around the neck and middle, and they began to squeeze. A bolt of lightning hit the ceiling as Twilight gasped for air, and the monks ignored the painful sparks leaping off her as they constricted her. The Coltriellan leapt onto the back of the monk holding her neck and bit his hide deep, but other than a shout of pain he kept a hold of Twilight.

Three of the Dashes managed to dog pile one of the armored soldier, and several good hits to the head kept him from getting up anytime soon. The two remaining ones threw their full weight into throwing the Pegasi away, one knocking away the female monk by accident, and making her screech as scorching flames surrounded her before the Dashes stood up, giving her a good knock on the head to ensure she stayed down.

Blades flashed, and two of the Dashes disappeared as the soldiers began to draw their weapons, and they charged through several blasts of flame, impeded only as they tried to swing when the force of the oncoming fire knocked the blades from their teeth. The remaining monk immediately cracked one of the Dashes' necks, causing her to disappear in a flash of light while a kick sent one Dash into the other, knocking them down as the remaining Dash backed up to her friends, sword in her teeth, eyes narrowed, but glinting with fear and confusion as danger bore down on

them. Her flames lashed futilely at the guards, but the monk stayed out of reach as the two Golding soldiers approached with angered stares.

The Coltriellan mare began to quake while pressing against the wall as Twilight stood in front of her defensively, body glowing with magic as she tried to consider something that would stop the Golding colts without hurting her friends in the process.

A huge vase flew through the window, and one of the guards fell as it shattered against his head, knocking him to the ground. The other guard stared to the window incredulously as Applejack charged through the splintered door entrance, throwing her full, heavily muscled weight into the second armored soldier, knocking him into the wall harshly. "Applejack!" Dash shouted, excitement and relief pouring through her body as Twilight untensed, watching the farm-pony give the guard a very hard hoof to the face. The monk leapt after Applejack, but through the window flew a yellow Pegasus, who landed on the monk's back, grasped him by the jaw, and with a mighty twist and a terrifying crack, sent him to the ground. "... Fluttershy?"

The four other mares in the room turned to stare at the blushing Pegasus as she gently let go of the limp head in her arms and backed away. Then the monk gently lifted his head and blinked rapidly at Fluttershy, "... You're a very good masseuse." He spoke, right as Pinkie Pie dropped a second heavy vase on him from the ceiling. The pink mare dropped down easily, and Twilight let out a long, low sigh of relief as her friends gathered in front of her.

Her heart was still pounding, sure, but she managed to turn and nod to the Coltriellan, a little gesture to tell her everything was okay, and the mare smiled shyly, leaving the safety of the wall to join the girls. "Alright." Applejack spoke up, walking forward. Twilight stepped to the side and the mare froze up as the well-muscled pony that had rather easily conked out a soldier began to inspect her. "So y'all three want ta start explainin' what happened?"

Twilight began to quietly explain what had happened as Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie both walked forward to take a look at their wounds. Dash put her flames out and became one, Twilight held still as she was looked over. Twilight had a few bumps and bruises, but Fluttershy was especially

worried about Dash. Having thrown herself rough and tumble into their attackers had given her a good number of scrapes, cuts, and bruises, a little blood mixing into her sky-blue fur. "Dash, we need to get you looked at."

"Hm?" Dash looked curious, seeming to ignore her own injury. "Is it that bad? My face stings a little but-"

Twilight gently touched Dash's chin, and made her turn her head so she herself could look. The unicorn calmly scanned her features, and nodded, the air in front of her glowing as she gently tapped her forehead with her invisible horn. Dash winced, and the bruises shrank a little, and the cuts simply sealed themselves. "There. A little clean-up and some disinfecting and you should be alright."

Fluttershy nodded her thanks. "We can do that when we get back to the house. I'll warn you," Fluttershy smiled a little bit, "I'm going to be using a cold-pack."

"Aww!" Dash groaned, closing her eyes. "Really? I mean, after what Twilight did?" Dash glanced to Twilight, who just nodded in agreement, "Oh fine. If you insist..." She hung her head with a pout.

The girls quickly turned their heads as Rarity ran in with a loud pant, staring at the six of them back and forth as, from behind her, several guards jogged inside, took one look to all the unconscious soldiers and monks on the floor, and looked surprised. "Well..." Rarity began as the guards slowly picked around, inspecting the lying ponies as Twilight and the rest gathered around her. Rarity took a few steps forward, "If I'd known you were going to handle this yourself I wouldn't have made such a ruckus."

"I didn't think we were going to do so well at first, but then we actually turned around the fight..." Twilight smiled a little as Rarity began to smooth out her electricity-frizzled mane.

"It was *awesome*." Everypony's eyes turned to the excited Coltriellan mare, who was bobbing her head carefully to not let her hat fall, "I don't know about half the stuff you did but if you guys are uni-" Applejack silenced the mare with a hoof on her snout, and looked to the busy guards. From the entrance, the red-caped captain in silver armor strode inside, took one look to Twilight, and sighed heavily.

"I had high hopes you wouldn't be a trouble-maker, ma'am." He approached slowly, and Dash shook her hair out the moment Rarity had straightened it to go stand in front of Twilight, getting between her and the guard captain. "I promise I don't mean harm. Archmage Sul has tasked me with bringing you to her." He paused as he saw her concerned look, and tried to shrug beneath his armor, "She didn't seem particularly angry, if that's any help."

Twilight frowned slightly, but felt a hoof on her back. Applejack began to walk past her. "Y'all didn't do nothin' wrong sugarcube, y'all got attacked and y'all fought back. We'll just explain it to her like we did with the king." Twilight began to smile, she paused as the Captain turned to lead them on.

She followed hesitantly, recalling their the situation back at the bar. They did get attacked, of course... After they'd struck the first blow with that table. Twilight's steps slowed, but a nudge from Pinkie Pie kept her moving. They were evading capture of a foreign country, but Coltriella was going to help right?

Or, morally that's what would happen. No, morally, since they'd struck the first blow while the guards were being diplomatic they'd be in the wrong... Except the guards were trying to capture them for a crime she hadn't pulled, but they might not have known that... Still, Twilight couldn't just be captured, she did have an incredibly important mission to attend to.. Which they couldn't right now since the Princess was sick, apparently.

Lawfully they were in no better shape, they still struck first, but they couldn't just wait, they had had to leave. If the fight got started in the bar, other ponies may have gotten hurt. Well, there was a more likely chance than if they'd taken it outside like they had done, since it was more cramped.

Still, lawfully and morally, they'd attacked first, there was no getting around that, and Sul seemed like the type to obey law to the strictest of letter. After all, how else could you keep order in such a large city if you *didn't*? Leniency was probably even a problem around here, alongside the huge population and the potential for much crime. There was no way she could explain this to Sul without coming off as the troublemaker in this case.

But... She did what she had to do at least, right? She couldn't just let herself, and especially not let Dash get dragged off, it just wouldn't be

right!... Would it? What would Sul think? She didn't seem to like Golding but she was only helping them because she had to, right? Would she even care? They've been here for maybe an hour and already they nearly started a riot, she would certainly view them as troublesome and try to remove them as quickly as possible.

"My lady, the foreigners are here." The captain called quietly through a door as the seven girls stood just behind him, Twilight in the back staring at the wall like it was about to collapse down on her. She quickly turned her head as the door opened fully, and the captain ushered them inside.

They were in some sort of meeting room it seemed, with a big, long table and plenty of chairs. At the very head, Sul sat, glancing to a mirror on the wall... Or... That wasn't a mirror was it? That was a viewing window, they were in some sort of interrogation room! Sul thought it was their fault, she was going to believe they were the trouble-causers, throw them into jail, have them executed, have them tortured, and call them mean things all the while! She knew it!

Sul's eyes quietly scanned across the seven girls. Six of whom she'd just been talking about with the unicorn tasked with capturing them. They looked confident, though Twilight seemed a tad mesmerized with the table. It was the lack of guilt that told her it all she needed to know: they believed themselves not guilty, and looking over the report from the bar and grill, she found that a reasonable assumption. They were lucky they had so much room to move in Coltriella, trying to flee from a pair of tanks and one of the monks was brave enough, but succeeding was something very few unicorns could admit to. Though this one had the odd Pegasus with her, didn't she? In the span of a few hours this Pegasus managed to hold off well-trained soldiers from two nations solely by herself, with the help of the unicorn. Yes, she could tell Vega would be interested in meeting her.

"So," Sul set her papers down and immediately fixed her eyes on Twilight.

"*I'M SORRY!*" Twilight squealed, her friends nearly falling over in shock as Dash's tail stuck straight up, on fire as she stared to the mare. Sul blinked her eyes rapidly in surprise.

"I'm... Huh?" She glanced to Twilight as she trembled.

"Are you okay?" Dash stared at Twilight, mystified.

"We hadn't meant to do anything bad!" The unicorn insisted, while Dash calmly touched her hoof to her forehead and sighed loudly. "We just didn't want to be captured and-" her snout began to glow blue as it clamped shut, and Sul shook her head slowly.

"Right then. I do happen to know what happened, your waitress was most helpful in pointing out the colts antagonizing you." Sul calmly flipped between her papers, "And several eye-witnesses have pointed out that you managed to make the first surprise attack." Twilight's eyes widened, here it came. "An impressive feat, I must admit. Using your, ahem, 'twin' as they called it to knock them over with a table, an interesting use of your skills." Twilight's ears lowered as she glanced to the smugly smiling Rainbow Dash.

"Stop sweating Twi, we're *fine*." Dash insisted, staring back at the Archmage. "Yeah, well, Twilight said those armored guys couldn't be touched by magic, but tables-"

"Yes yes, it was impressive." Sul cut her off with a wave of her hoof. "Now, I've read the reports, I've met with the leader of the Golding squad in Coltriella, and I've come to several decisions: you six are obviously more important than I'd originally suspected. Yes I know you told me that Golding was after you, but I didn't think so quickly, so I now understand the urgency, as well as the lengths they're willing to go to in order to capture you. Since we have no reason to *not* believe you, we're going to be keeping you secure in Coltriella by removing unregistered Golding ponies currently within the city walls."

A soft clearing of a throat drew her attention away from Twilight and Rainbow Dash. Dash looked enthused by the idea: no Golding? No problems! They'd be clear here in Coltriella, that meant while they spent the next few days waiting for the Princess to recover, they'd wouldn't have to worry about a thing. While Twilight agreed that it was a safe decision, she did kind of wonder what sort of presence Golding had here. They must not have been too buddy buddy, at least, if the decision was so easy to come to... "Just out of curiosity, don't mean to pry," the Coltriellan mare spoke up, looking down at the other girls curiously, "but what exactly have you come to the city for? I may be able to help out."

"..." Sul quietly considered her. The other six glanced down to the mare who's name they'd never caught, and then looked between each other. The same question was being asked in all their glances: 'Should we let her know?' Sul interrupted them though. "While I understand you had a part in this Sabine, this is a matter of *royal* intrigue, a *common* pony such as yourself would not presently be allowed to this sort of information. I may have to ask you to leave, we may get into more sensitive topics soon."

"More sensitive than they already are?" Sabine raised an eyebrow, and Sul bobbed her head slowly. "Well, still, they're my friends, and-"

"Friends or no, this is still a *royal* matter, and it's staying between only the highest ponies of Coltriella. As the Archmage, I am not allowed to distribute classified information." Sabine didn't answer, just glance down the row of six girls, and then to Sul again. "It's doubtful you'll be able to pry such information from any other pony as high up as I am either." Silence swallowed the room as the six mares digested this odd conversation, and as soon as Sul had her papers sorted again, she glanced back up, "You may wait outside though, as long as you don't try to eavesdrop."

The Coltriellan mare, Sabine, quietly looked to the others for help, but only got a shrug from Applejack. "Sorry sugarcube. Just wait for us outside fer now, hopefully we ain't gonna be too long." Applejack gave her a hopeful wink, and Sabine nodded, quietly walking out of the room and shutting the door.

As soon as the door was shut, and when they'd made sure it wouldn't open again, Dash spoke up, "You know her?" She asked Sul curiously.

"Of course I know Sabine." Sul said with an almost amused tone, "Who in the sands doesn't? Continuing on, with Golding out of the way, your safety in Coltriella from abduction is almost assured. But that leads me to my second point: you may have Coltriella's protection for now, but there will be a time in the future where we won't be there to watch you." Though the air was suddenly tinged with a bit of cold truth, Sul seemed unphased, "That is why I've taken the liberty of scheduling your combat practice as soon as I could."

"Pardon." Sul looked to Applejack, "I don' mean t'be rude or nothin', but we'll only be in yer mane fer a few more days 'til the Princess feels up ta helpin' us."

"Which is why we'll be teaching you basic self-improvement techniques and grant you scrolls on what more you can learn. It will be difficult without a teacher, but time and dedication always shows results. We're going to begin tomorrow; we'll send you messengers, one for the magic I'll be teaching, and one for Ha'Jin'Vega, who will show you genuine swordsmanship."

Twilight smiled a bit, thrilled she'd finally get a chance to ask about anti-magic. There was a chance now, something she could finally look into to try and reverse her friend's affliction. On top of that, there was a chance to learn more magic. About non-Equestrian magic even!

"Now, you'll learn more about your lessons tomorrow. For now, I something else to bring up to you." Her tone dropped from mildly casual to instantly serious in but a few words. Twilight straightened up, and did not dare look away. "Your mission. You intend to fill the leylines again. With life? With magic?" The elder unicorn asked.

"Well of course!" Rarity chirped almost immediately, prompting several nods.

"It's something that needs to be done." Twilight agreed.

"And it'd be really *really* mean if we didn't! We gotta do what any pony *should* do!" Pinkie Pie confirmed with a shake of her fluffy pink mane.

Sul regarded them for a while quietly. She was thinking intently, or perhaps remembering something deep. She pushed her papers forward as she stared the ponies in their eyes, one by one, looking for truth, lies, guilt, innocence, anything she could to understand. "Anemone had asked you to do so?" Dash confirmed that yes, once again, Anemone was the one who gave them the mission. "Did he ever once tell you that doing this for him would turn the invaders back?"

Twilight opened her mouth to speak, but her words caught on the skin of her teeth as she recalled the conversation. She closed it quickly, and stared to Dash for an answer. Dash seemed equally confused, and the other girls, who were watching them, came to realize the answer. Sul rested her chin in her hooves as she closed her eyes in thought. "... I see." She went silent again, letting the girls stew on this.

Rarity leaned over and whispered to Rainbow Dash, "You didn't know if it would send Golding away?" She asked in confusion. She hadn't been there, didn't know all the details, implications, or subtle cues Tanat or Anemone displayed, but they did not depart the details with cold indifference. They were optimistic and encouraging.

"I..." Twilight answered from the other side of Dash, as the latter pony contemplated her hooves. "I guess... Well, I just assumed it would fix everything..."

"Speaking of fixing," they turned their heads sharply to face Sul. She flipped her royal purple mane over her neck, and let her gaze bore into Twilight's, "Do you have any idea why Golding is in Equestria?"

"We have theories." Twilight answered uneasily, looking over to Dash, who nodded back. Sul didn't answer, she just gave a quiet nod for them to continue, "When we'd first noticed the leylines draining, we came to the conclusion that possibly they're trying to refill the leylines themselves, somehow. We think Golding might be dying out..."

"A well-made deduction." She went quiet again, while Twilight nervously scraped her hoof along the ground. "And you would most likely be correct from what I have dug up. When you restore the leylines, you realize you will be revitalizing Golding as well as Coltriella, as well as Steedest, as well as Equestria, as well as every other nation on the planet?"

Twilight had... Briefly considered the possibility before, but hearing it laid out in front of her... "But we'd control the leylines, right?" Dash offered up, "I mean, we could just cut them out."

"We can't just do that!" Fluttershy gasped. Twilight stayed quiet, staring at the floor. That was true, they *would* be refilling the life of the ponies attacking the, and they could also control the flow...

"Of course we could, we could control it and teach those hot-headed foals a lesson!" Dash huffed, eyes narrowed as the mere thought of Golding angered her.

"You realize what that would mean, of course?" Sul asked from the head of the table.

"Well obviously as a nation they can't just be an army." Rarity pointed out, "There must be some citizen class, they probably have farmers, tailors, and lawyers and so on themselves. *They* aren't attacking us."

"But they'd be supporting the ponies who are." Twilight said in a low, quiet voice, her tone level, but unsupportive.

"Twilight!" Pinkie stared at the unicorn in surprise.

"And nopony seems to like them anyways! Nopony in Coltriella, or Equestria, everypony seems to think they're a bunch of violent jerks!"

"Kind of..." Twilight half-heartedly agreed while Sul stared on.

"That don't mean an innocent pony simply supportin' their king needs ta be targeted, hay, the only reason they're even in Equestria is *because* they're be dyin' out. All we'd be doin' by cutting' 'em off is just make 'em more desperate! I ain't sayin' I think they're great ponies but we can't just let 'em suffer!" Applejack argued.

Dash snarled softly, "You don't think they deserve it after what they did to us? What they're doing to Equestria? Twilight and I survived because they went easy on us, they aren't gonna be so easy on the rest of Equestria after that, especially now that they know we're gone! Who's to say they haven't captured any other innocent Equestrian and is putting them through the same thing! They could be clipping wings left and right while we're bumming around here in the desert! Just a *wild* and obviously *crazy* thought, but what if *you* were the one they captured?" Her eyes narrowed tightly, "What if they have your sister right now?" The air turned absolutely frigid, and Pinkie, Rarity, and Fluttershy could only stare at Dash in dumbstruck horror.

"Don't." Applejack hissed as her eyelids tightened sharply, "Don't y'all even suggest somethin' like that!"

"Then tell me why you think they deserve us to go easy on them after invading us, torturing us, and possibly doing *worse* now! Who knows who they've hurt since we've been gone!"

"Dash." Twilight quietly spoke up to her side. The Pegasus turned to face her friend while Twilight stared at the ceiling, "... Let's burn that bridge

when we cross it. We don't know anything about them." She looked Dash in the eye. There was no clear indication of how she felt, but Twilight felt... Conflicted. She didn't know what the right thing to do was. She knew what the moral thing to do was, she just didn't know if that was the right thing... "I think we should learn more about Golding before we do anything."

"Ah," the mares turned their heads sharply to face Sul, who looked a little warmer, "Just what I was waiting to hear. In Coltriella, you are going to hear a lot of bias against Golding. We have spent many years at odds with them, and the peace treaty we'd signed with them has done little to levy the attitude. In my time, I have seen Golding at their best and their worst, and I can assure you there is a deeper story here." She stood slowly, once again feeling the creak in her back left knee, and tried not to smirk. Figures her body would start to feel the strain when things got interesting. "There are a few ponies in Coltriella that know Golding as well as any Golding historian does. If you find one, you may come to understand Golding a little better." Though her tone was vaguely neutral, Sul did not offer her own knowledge. She approached the six mares, who stood stiffly. "I trust that you will make the right choices when the time comes, Anemone would not choose anypony too cruel to seek his brothers, but too light to squander and die. You are dismissed for now." Sul walked to the door and pushed it open, and stepped out of the room.

The six friends glanced to each other awkwardly. Dash still looked a bit peeved, but had lost steam. She didn't feel like arguing it anymore, she'd just do as Twilight said: burn the bridge when they crossed it. They'd have plenty of time to figure this out later.

They turned to leave the room wordlessly. Fluttershy was glad Sul had dismissed them so quickly. She was afraid of what sort of conclusion it would have come to otherwise. Dash wasn't easy to back down, and had a tendency to... Escalate, and Applejack wasn't much better. They stepped out of the room, and into the hallway.

Twilight, now paying attention, found they were in a hallway of a local guard station. She could see several armored ponies going in and out of doorways, or milling about the lobby. Even more interesting was the mare they'd been with for the past few minutes was approaching then from the wall. "So, hey, how'd your 'secret meeting' go?" She asked curiously.

"It was..." Rarity began, glancing to Twilight and Dash as they gave the ground a guilty look. "Informative." She rubbed her neck slowly, avoiding messing up her purple mane any further as she looked back to the mare. Then she gave a tiny gasp, and put on a small smile as she extended a hoof, "I'm sorry, hello. My name is Rarity, thank you very much for your help earlier." She said, clearly pleased to distract herself.

"Sadine. Err, my name that is, Sadine." The mare smiled, and felt a leg wrap around her neck.

"Pleasant ta meetcha. I'm Applejack." The behatted pony smiled to the other behatted pony, and the two shook hooves as soon as Sadine let go of Rarity's. "Gotta tell ya, real happy ta meetcha after helpin' out Twi and Dash."

"Well," Sadine smirked a little, "If I hadn't, I'd have been in trouble too. What with lightning and swords being tossed all over the place." She turned to face Twilight, and stuck a hoof in the surprised girl's face, "You still have to explain to me how all that happened. The both of you!" Dash just gave a tiny snort, but it didn't sound annoyed. She even smiled some.

"Is there even a point to hiding it anymore?" Dash nudged Twilight gently, trying to break her out of her staring contest with the bricks in the ground.

"I... Guess not..." Twilight murmured, looking up. Sadine smiled at her. She couldn't help but smile a little back. She was thankful they'd ran into her. "Hi, I'm Twilight Sparkle..." She glanced around slowly, saw no other pony, and then looked back to Sadine, "I'm a unicorn."

"Called it!" She called triumphantly, reaching out to touch Twilight's bare forehead. "Though, aren't you supposed to have a horn?"

"It's a little spell..." Twilight explained with a small shrug, and the mare accepted it easily.

Quietly, Fluttershy approached and raised a hoof, letting Sadine take it and lead in the shaking. "Thank you. That was very nice of you to help." Sadine nodded back.

"No kidding!" Pinkie Pie happily joined in the avid hoof-shaking, her smile bright and energetic, "I'm Pinkie Pie!"

The seven began to move along, Sadine standing next to Rarity as the two quietly talked. Getting a better look at her, her coat was a light brown, but it was smudged with some dirt and sand. She had sharp chocolate brown eyes, with a matching mane that was conservatively cut and kept short. She wore a simple, pocketed vest and a very wide-brimmed hat that sat just above her eyes. From what little Rarity knew about Coltriella, she could tell she definitely wasn't one of the aristocratic sort.

They stepped out of the building without being troubled, out into the sandy streets of Coltriella. The steady flow of its citizens hadn't stopped once, despite the trouble that had happened not so long ago, and business continued on as usual. It wasn't that surprising, it was a big, powerful city, one little incident wouldn't cause much ruckus in the other parts of it. Twilight stepped out to the side with Dash by her side as Sadine spoke with the rest of the group enthusiastically. She tugged out the map Sul had given her, and found the indicator of where they were with her hoof. "Not too far away." Dash grunted, sitting down as they traced a route back to the house.

A minute later, they felt a gentle nudge on their backs. They turned to watch as Applejack leaned over the map, pretending to read it. "That Sadine gal is nice, but to how far should we trust her?" She asked. That made Twilight look up in thought, as she hadn't considered what they could or should tell her beyond that she was a unicorn.

"She already knows we can do magic, we just have to make sure she stays shut up about it so nopony else knows beyond her." Dash stated as she glanced back. Sabine was defending her hat from Pinkie Pie at the moment, while Fluttershy and Rarity watched and chuckled.

"But what about the mission? I'm thinkin' we don't go sayin' a word on it. We're here ta talk to their Princess is all." Applejack watched the other two nod their heads in agreement.

"Sounds about right. Sul sounded pretty serious about keeping it a secret from, uh, common ponies." Twilight glanced around slowly, but very few ponies gave them more than a few seconds worth of curious stares, then went about their business. At least they weren't that nosey around here.

"Right. I'll go tell the other gals. 'Member, not a word about it." Applejack nodded slowly. She turned around and walked towards the other girls and spoke briefly to Sadine.

"... Is it weird that the Element of Honesty is leading the whole secret keeping thing?" Twilight asked Dash, who shrugged and gave a tiny 'meh'.

"She's the Element of Honesty, not the Element of Blabber-Mouthing, and she can keep her secrets." Dash looked back down to the map as Sadine approached, looking chipper.

"Hey, so I was thinking..." The mare spoke up, causing Dash to look up from the paper. "You guys are new to Coltriella - just a guess," she waited for Twilight to finish nodding, "Well, I've been all over Coltriella and I know a lot of ponies here. Our city can be pretty disorienting for first timers what with all the hustle, so maybe I can show you guys around, show you the best places to eat, introduce you to the right ponies, maybe get you up to date on some of the customs 'round here. What do you say?"

Twilight glanced down to Dash, who glanced up to Twilight, and the two smiled to Sadine, "Sounds good to me. We actually do have a few questions to ask you about the city, and a few ponies we need to meet." Twilight nodded slowly to Sadine while the other girls came over to join them.

"Why don't we talk over a bite to eat then?" Sadine offered. She internally knew she'd hit the right button there, Twilight was bobbing her head like mad.

Chapter 22

Onward into History

There was not a colder day in Manehattan than the day Big Macintosh decided to put the pipe down for good. You could say a lot of bad things about Pipe Hash: how it rot your lungs, how it blackened teeth, how it stung the eyes, but the thing about it was that in these cold, Winter months, with snow driving down your mane and the wind threatening to scoop you up, it kept you warm.

His office wasn't much better, just a cold-cut freezer without the warm air to circulate through it. The force had been good to him before, a collection of medals and awards, complimenting his value as an officer, but tossed back into his face during one big screw-up. A few dead civilians did that to a record, no matter how long. Becoming a private detective was a step forward from the bars at least, but it couldn't afford him any air conditioning.

Buried to the neck in bills with only enough paychecks to barely count as kindling, he needed a big case like a fish needed water, or he'd be belly up. That was why Big Macintosh was quick to his hooves when there was an overly polite knock on his office door. "Come in." He called. His voice ruffed up from the smoke. He could hardly hide his energy when the door opened, and in walked a mare that deserved a spot in a pin-up calendar.

She had a body that flowed like silk when it moved, legs that went on, thick and tender near the top, a definite curve along the front of the body, but thinned into a tight, narrow flank. She had a sweet face and wide, curious eyes, the sort that melted your heart if they so much as moistened with sorrow. She was a soft blue color, with a dark blue mane, two stripes in it, one white, one gray. The horn on her head stuck out next to the gray stripe, and she came forward with tender care, like she was afraid to offend the detective. She could not have been more than twenty-four years old, mature, but that child-like softness still there.

"Are you detective Big Macintosh?" She asked, her voice all but a quiet whisper.

"I am." Big Macintosh answered, staring her over as he invited her in with a wave of his strong hoof. She sat in the chair cautiously, and Big Macintosh waited for her to make the first move. She swung her lower hooves nervously, broken up about something.

"I need your help." She stated simply, staring Big Macintosh in the eye. "My name is Daylight Star, and I have a big problem."

He almost could not keep in his seat. He had to lock his legs together just to stay still. "Tell me." He gruffed, his voice strong and deep. His voice had that effect on pretty mares, like the finest cologne money can buy. Her lower lip shook, and her big eyes sparkled with primal emotion.

"I," her voice fell flat, and Big Macintosh knew she was feeling guilty about something, "I'm afraid I'd have no way to pay you. I could if you succeed, but only when it's finished."

He knew this scam well, but this girl was not a liar. She was looking for money from somepony or somewhere, but did not have any means to get it, not a bit to her name. But she was a pretty thing, "That might not be a problem, as long as there's money at the end of the deal."

"I would feel so terrible being unable to pay you though!" Her voice was full of grave emotions, and he realized just how honest this sort of mare was. He wanted to raise a hoof and tell her it was okay, that he would hear her out, but she went on, "I'm desperate, so please, I'm willing to do anything to get your help!" She said, as her legs, those lovely, thick thighs slowly spread, showing the sweet marehood hidden between.

"Ma'am..." His voice trailed off as he stared. She was good looking, but he could hardly believe she would offer him, a simple detective, that. "Ma'am, I don't think that's necessary."

"Please," she whispered, the tip of her hoof spreading herself just a little to let the honey-sweet scent reach his nose, "I need help, and I'll do anything."

Big Macintosh stood. He was a good colt, but it was rare a mare of such beauty gave such an offer. It had been so long though, he could stand to be a little selfish. "If you are willing to do anything, then maybe we should

test what you mean by 'anything'." He walked around his desk, and Daytime Star did not even flinch when he leaned in. She leaned forward to meet his lips, and while their tongues danced, her exploratory hoof slipped between his own legs, rubbing the soft spot there until his sheath began to open and-

Big Macintosh's ear twitched at the sound of the door opening, and he turned around to meet the eyes of his nurse. "Hey, Big Mac!" the nurse chimed from the hallway. She paused for a moment, before turning around and dragging a food cart into the room, rump wiggling in his direction as she backed up. Big Macintosh did not miss the unnecessary display, and it did not go unappreciated.

"I brought you your lunch. Oh, I hope I didn't interrupt anything..." Her gaze drifted over to the writing board resting on his blanketed legs and the unfinished manuscripts that lay on top.

"Just a bit o' writin', ma'am. Nothin' big." Macintosh sedately replied. He shifted his large bulk up to rest more easily on the pillows as the nurse levitated a tray of food over to him. Steamed carrots, a side of peas, and a cookie, Macintosh thought. Not a big meal today, but they're rationing for a reason... "Mighty fine lookin' meal, ma'am." This earned him a coquettish little smile from the nurse.

"Well this was prepared especially for you..." she told him, and snuck a bit of parsley onto the plate. Big Macintosh smiled a little at the silly little decoration while the nurse stood by the bed. "So, when are you going to let me read that little collection of stories you've been writing? You always look so focused and emotional when you're writing them..." she tilted her head, eyes sparkling with interest.

Big Mac grinned even wider at that as he took a carrot and bit into it, chewing slowly as he considered what she'd said. They were emotional alright, just not the touchy-feely sort.

Okay, maybe they were touchy-feely, but it was a completely different sort of touchy-feely. What could he say? He was bored and had a life-dream to test out here. "Tell y'all what. If I get the nerve ta try an' get these published, y'all will be the first pony on my mailing list." He hid a chuckle behind his strong resolve and swallowed.

That seemed to excite the pretty mare, and she waited contentedly for him to finish eating. Silence settled, and Big Mac turned to stare out the window of his room. Outside, there was a tree, and in that tree was a birds nest. He tried to entertain himself by watching the baby birds chirp whenever he wasn't writing, but whenever he had even a moment of peace, his thoughts inevitably drifted to his sister.

She'd left a good while ago, and because of his intermittent bouts of unconsciousness and post-surgery nausea he had been unable to keep track of the days. All he knew was that it had been a good while since her departure. He knew better than to worry and fret though. She was with her friends, and they wouldn't let anypony lay a hoof on her if they could help it. It was unlikely that they would even be able to get her into such a situation. He just wished there was a way to know for certain.

When he finished his meal, he let the nurse take the tray away. "Pardon, nurse." He called as she began to leave, making her pause mid-step, her tail still raised high. "I was just a'wonderin', did th' doc say anythin' 'bout when I'd be gettin' out?"

He looked on hopefully as she smiled widely, "Ah, yes! The doctor probably wanted to deliver the news himself, but I simply can't say no to you," Big Macintosh's heart began to beat a little harder at the promise of that statement. "After you pass your last physical evaluation today, you'll be free to go and join the small encampment gathering at the base of Canterlot's mountain."

His mind snapped back to reality, and he quietly gestured to his own chest. "What about work?" He asked. The nurse touched her hoof to her chin and paused nervously before answering. This wasn't the first injury he'd encountered that had kept him from working. Even if they'd said he was free to go around and do what he wanted. He wasn't sure that he really liked his "vacation" days. If he wasn't being productive, he felt useless. The last few days were a bit difficult in that aspect, but at least he got to try his hoof at writing.

"If I had to guess, you could probably get back to work in less than a week." The nurse shrugged, and Big Mac sighed heavily. Thank Celestia for that, he thought. He had big plans. "If you don't mind me prying, though, what exactly is it that you plan to work on? The farms have been picked clean by

now, and all the food is stockpiled in Canterlot. And all of Canterlot's farmlands are already full of workers."

"Mm, true." Big Mac nodded, and calmly pondered to himself. Being bedridden gave you plenty of time to think, and having stared death in the jaws as you jabbed a steel plow into its stomach gave you an unavoidable moment to reflect on your life. He had very few regrets, but he still had quite a few ponies to live for. One of whom visited him every day with a few apples in tow. He'd refused to make peace with death that day out of fear, but right now, the thing that frightened him most wasn't that he would have been killed, but that he would have left behind his two precious sisters, his grandmother, and his friends.

He had argued with himself that he wouldn't dare try and put himself in that sort of danger again unless he absolutely had to, and that if he had a choice in the matter he'd back down. However, a visit from a strange unicorn who'd wanted to discuss heroism had forced him to reconsider. Blueblood had been his name. It had been an odd confrontation. Blueblood was also abnormally tall, and was clearly not used to talking to other ponies on such a philosophical level. Big Mac was just as inexperienced with philosophy as Blueblood, so it eventually turned into a discussion about the war. This Blueblood fellow had decided to enlist, and right then Big Mac had to make a choice."

At first he was against it. He'd had his brush with death on both ends of the stick already, and he wasn't prepared to throw himself into another mouth or run another living thing through. But then he was left alone again, and he thought about it. He *thought* about it. What was more important to him: his own life or everypony else's? It seemed like an easy question: he didn't want to die. He could live with himself if somepony else went in his place, but then he thought about it... All of Equestria was in trouble, not just Ponyville, not just Canterlot, all of Equestria. That meant Applejack and Applebloom, Granny Smith, Caramel, Carrot Top, Derpy Hooves, even his distant family, Braeburn...

If there was any chance he could defend any one of them, he would. Then it occurred to him there were the Princesses as well. He had nearly been furious with himself for even being the littlest bit of a coward when his country, his Princesses, heck his entire way of life was being threatened. This Blueblood had imparted on him a small idea of what he thought about

heroism: facing danger despite your fears. Big Macintosh didn't show much outwards, but inwards, the idea of a war terrified him. The idea of dying, the thought of pain, of being back in this room, possibly worse for ware... But there was too much at stake. Sure he could let another pony take his place, but...

"Was just thinkin', ma'am, that I might do my home a service and enlist." He drummed his hooves on his legs, avoiding the nurse's stare as he did. It was... Powerful stuff, a mare's eyes on you. It was like being caught looking through a peephole, but without having done anything bad.

While he expected a lecture, he instead got a tiny touch to his foreleg from her snout. He glanced over to her, and regretted it immediately as she put on the big, pretty doe eyes. When she spoke, her voice quivered with powerful sorrow, and it made him groan in pain just to hear, "Are you sure?"

He rolled his head back and tried not to give a guilty smile as she nudged him, pressing for an answer as he tried to figure out a way to justify this to her. "Yes'm. Know it may sound strange, but it's somethin' I gotta do. Can't just sit back and relax while dangerous happenin's are sproutin' up."

The nurse looked conflicted. Internally, she felt just as she looked. She was definitely concerned about Big Mac's health, especially out in the field where he'd be facing plenty of danger, but on the other hoof, with such a deep, handsome voice, how could she possibly say no to those honest, beautiful eyes? It made her back legs quiver just to think about the heroic deeds this magnificent colt would commit to. And that bright red coat in Equestrian golden armor? ~Swoon~ "I... Suppose you have a point." She finally admitted, trying to sound hesitant, trying to make him worry and care about her opinion. He was looking guilty. Success! "But before you do anything dangerous, just think about poor little me having to mend your sick, broken body again. Please?" She pleaded, clapping her hooves together to beg.

Big Mac groaned, and closed his eyes as he rested his head on his pillow. "Gonna be hard tryin'a get myself out of here with that image. Y'all been a big help." He winked at her, and the nurse squeaked in joy.

It had been a good, long while since this sort of thing had to happen. Actually, he reminded himself, he was fairly sure this sort of thing had never happened before, which was why it was taking place in an interrogation room that hadn't been used in twenty years. The stone room was small, but brightly lit. There was a tiny table shoved in the corner of the room that was covered in donuts, but they'd been picked off one by one like a carrot patch next to a rabbit warren. Cursing the day they were born soft and doughy, covered in chocolate and sprinkles, slowly being gnashed between the jaws of-

Right, anyhow, the ponies inside the room weren't being interrogated exactly. No, they had a better reason to figure out how to fit a five-foot-wide table through the doorway without breaking its legs. At least that's what Night Brigade assumed. "-which is actually how we learned we can set hay on fire with friction alone. That was hard to explain to the Pear family, but it did have a happy ending." Maize Picker finished by him.

"Babies ever after, eh?" Night Brigade smirked. It was boring waiting for the Captain. He used to be so prompt, but the moment he got Connie, he always was late trying to make sure she was comfortable without him. Not that that was a *bad* thing, but it really lowered some expectations.

"Yep. It was a good honeymoon." Maize wrapped up, right as the door swung open. Captain Hero strode inside, a bored Silly Cupcakes in tow. "Ah! Captain." The two colts stood and saluted smartly as Cupcakes designated a corner of the observation room her seat while Hero glanced into the interrogation room.

"My apologies for being late-"

"We know Captain, we know." Night Brigade interrupted, and Hero bowed his head in thanks of their understanding before straightening up. He turned to glance beyond the one-way glass at the ponies assembled beyond, and then back to Maize and Night.

"I'd asked for seven ponies. I'm only counting six." He looked them over for explanation, and Maize cleared his throat.

"The seventh is on his way, or should be soon. He is to be discharged from the hospital soon. For now we have the others assembled." He explained, prompting an annoyed grunt from Cupcakes.

"And here I was hoping for something to go right today! We're the Royal freaking Guard, I think we have the authority to discharge a pony early!" She paced in her spot for a few moments and glowered at a wall.

"Calm yourself Cupcakes, it's important that he is fully recovered first, but I do agree, we need to be a bit more strict on picking up the slack. These are trying times and we can't have anypony being lazy." Hero nodded his head, and Cupcakes grew a worriedly excited look at the idea. "Yes Cupcakes, I'm giving you punishment duties."

"*Damn.*" Night Brigade hung his head as Cupcakes silently congratulated herself and did a little dance to celebrate.

"Anyways, do they know what they're being assembled for?" Hero asked, staring through the glass at the six ponies beyond.

"Nope. No word has escaped us to the lower ranks." Night answered, and the three colts watched beyond the glass quietly.

"Ugh! The Great and Powerful Trixie is getting impatient! For an army, the Royal Guard certainly is slacking in keeping Trixie's attention!" The blue mare paced the back of the room almost violently, her eyes boring a hole into the stone walls wherever they passed. She had many problems with what was going on. For one, almost no pony recognized her without her hat and cape. For two, they took away her hat and cape! For three, food and board had been meager at best: two dinner rolls, mixed vegetables, a block of cheese with a single cupcake for desert. Boarding consisted of a simple rock-hard mattress in one of the wooden apartments being set up rather than the fluffed specialty she was used to. For four, they had taken the costume she had used along with her moniker to gain the attentions, respect, and admiration of everypony that attended her show. *They'd also taken her hat and her cape!*

"I may have to agree with you." Prince Blueblood yawned where he stood, trying to look at the dark window where they were no doubt being observed. His legs were getting sore from standing around for so long. What was taking these ponies? He didn't dare dirty himself by lying on the floor. He'd spent an extra-special hour grooming his mane to perfection since he'd been given the instructions to come here last night. He needed

to impress, and a dirty stomach or flank showed impatience and a lack of cleanliness. "If they're going to insist on wasting our times, I don't know why I bothered even signing up."

"It's like they're out to waste an important pony's valuable talents!" Trixie huffed, turning around to continue her pacing in the opposite direction.

Rather than watch the two unicorns agree with what amounted to themselves, Spitfire took her time to check her hooves again for chips or flaking, flexing her wings, closing them again, keeping herself from yawning. She was used to being more active, it came with the job, but this was a new job and it had new requirements. She supposed things would get more... *Activesoon*, which, on reflection, was a somewhat scary thought. Her only consolation was Soarin going through donuts like tissues in cold weather next to her to fight his own nervousness. "Soarin, you're going to be perfectly fine." She assured him with a tiny smile as she reached over to gently wipe away the chocolate around his mouth.

Soarin let Spitfire tend to him as he tried very hard to relax himself. This was different, this was difficult, and just thinking about why they were doing and what they were about to be doing made his stomach spin. Eating calmed him some, but he was quickly getting sick of donuts... "If we're going to be fine, why are they taking so long to get here?" He asked as her glanced to the black glass, and sighed heavily. "What are they making us wait for? We should be out on the grounds with the rest of the initiates. They're doing actual stuff right now while we're in here waiting around for no reason and-"

"Soarin, Soarin, c'mon. Calm down." Spitfire smiled reassuringly, and Soarin took a moment to take a few deep breaths. They slowed down as they both turned their heads to face the pony that had approached them.

"Soarin and Spitfire?" The grey, blonde-maned Pegasus asked, her one good eyes focusing on them curiously. "You guys are the Wonderbolts!" Derpy Hooves said with a broad smile as she looked them over slowly. Spitfire was all smiles as she nodded. "You guys look a lot different without your outfits." Her voice was ecstatic, somewhat awe-filled. She was standing next to two living legends!

"As we should. I'm not blue all the time." Spitfire extended a hoof to the cock-eyed mare, who took it with a beaming look. "Can't say the same for

Soarin here, but that's not entirely his fault." She looked over to him. He had taken another donut, but Spitfire confiscated it quickly. "And what's your name?" She asked, offering the mare the treat.

"Derpy." Derpy answered before taking a grateful bite. "Derpy Hooves."

"Nice to meet you." Spitfire and Derpy both gave tiny nods as Soarin fidgeted nearby. Again, silence, other than the two unicorns in the room grumbling and growling about this or that. Derpy looked to the ceiling, then to the floor at her hooves before the last and most curious occupant approached.

In all their lives of flying in multiple cities for crowds of fans, shaking hooves, signing autographs, donating their time to charity events, neither of the two Wonderbolts had seen anything quite like Zecora. The older zebra mare had come over and sat down next to Derpy, but had not made a sign to speak up. The four glanced between each other. Somewhat awkwardly, a tiny smile formed on Soarin's lips as he started to chuckle, and he slowly held up his own hoof. "Uh, hey there... Fellow soldier!" He nodded at that, and Zecora gave him a pleasant hoofshake.

"A fine hello to you too my new friend, but your assumption I must amend." Zecora turned a little, revealing an old, brown pack that looked well-used, and smelled a little foul, "My name is Zecora, not a soldier but a medic, I mend cuts, cure diseases, reconfigure disfigurements, and for infections I carry antiseptic." The zebra smiled proudly.

Soarin stared at her for a few seconds, while Spitfire gave a tiny clap. "She can also rhyme on a dime!" Derpy nodded her head rapidly, smiling at the piece of fact she presented.

"No kidding. How do you do that?" Soarin asked, and Zecora just smiled hugely.

"If I had to guess, several long years with a dictionary, a book of rhymes, and little else." From across the room, Trixie had slowly gravitated her way towards the other four, looking a bit sour. *No pony* made the Great and Powerful Trixie *wait*. "I'd assumed signing up for an army entailed less waiting!" She pouted heavily.

"I cannot speak for Equestria, but in my homeland it was common for a war to be called where you very stand." Zecora rubbed her chin slowly as she thought, "You could be conscripted while you were busy cobbling a shoe or giving a customer a trim, but if you were called you would trudge on, no matter how grim." She quietly seated herself, and even Prince Blueblood had moved closer to listen. "I was lucky that our leaders tried to remain non-violent after the first war, but the affects were lasting and skirmishes often happened; petty reasons, they were often for."

"So," Blueblood spoke up, and the zebra turned her head to face the Prince. "Call it a hunch, but you're experienced with war then?" Zecora gave a brief nod. "Yet you're troubled by it. Why join the Royal Guard then?" This was one of those situations he found interesting. There was nothing forcing this mare to join the efforts, and she seemingly did not like war at all... Yet here she was.

"When something you value is threatened, do you not want to keep is safe? My homeland is falling to harm, so I refuse to sit and watch like any other frightened waif." Zecora's voice was low, and as Blueblood noticed, a tad sorrowful. He doubted the others caught it but judging by her voice she very much did not want to be here.

"Tell it sister." Spitfire smiled as she calmly rested a hoof on Zecora's back, and the older mare couldn't help but suppress a small smile. "It's still really hard to believe though..."

"Not really. Foreign ponies are attacking Equestria." Trixie spoke up. She had a flat, self-assured expression, "It's not that difficult." She earned herself several glares from Spitfire, Zecora, and Soarin each.

"It's not difficult to say, no." Soarin snorted a little, making Trixie's eyes narrow.

"Oh? And you believe you know more than the Great and Power Trixie?" The unicorn accused. Blueblood took a calm step back, having never heard of her before, and found himself bumping into the one Pegasus he didn't recognize, the one with the odd eye.

"Oh, I thought I recognized that voice." Spitfire mumbled, unimpressed and displeased with the company, but Trixie merely huffed the scorn away.

"I think I'm doing a pretty good job of grasping just how *terrible* the situation is." Soarin pointed out with a small bite in his voice, and Trixie was quick to start growling.

"Stop that." All heads in the room turned to face the newest mare, a female guard in full armor giving Trixie a narrow look from the open doorway. "Line up against the back wall, the Captain's making his way in."

Trixie turned back to glare straight into Soarin, both of them gritting their teeth. "Not until Trixie has a word with this-

"Oh, I'm sorry," Cupcakes walked directly between the two, quite rudely in fact, and stared Trixie in the face. "I was under the impression you were interested in joining an *army*. If you want to go check in on Equestria's precious debate club, I'd suggest tucking your tail between your legs and wobbling that bloated ass of yours to the buffet table and join the rest of your lazy bitch-party while the *real* ponies get the ball rolling."

Cupcakes turned away and stared Soarin straight in the eyes, daring him to so much as move his lips as the entire room stopped to just stare, jaws dropped. Soarin gently raised a hoof, and pressed it over his mouth, making Cupcakes grunt in acceptance.

"You-..." Trixie took several shallow breaths, eyes wide, and fire entered them again as she took a step towards Cupcakes, who slowly, almost terrifyingly turned to meet Trixie's stare. "You simply cannot-"

"Did I stutter?" Cupcakes hissed, pressing her snout to Trixie's and filling up the startled unicorn's eyes with her own vicious gaze. "If you want to talk bitch-shop, get. *Out*." Cupcakes somehow managed to punctuate the final word with a hiss, and that made Trixie take a few steps back and sit next to the wall, her pupils contracted in shock as she trembled.

Cupcake's eyes slowly softened and she nodded, but stiffened up again at a whistle. "Impressive job, I wish I had that sort of... Author... ity...?" Spitfire slowed down as Cupcakes turned to level that gaze on her. With a meek smile, Spitfire nudged Soarin and the two sat against the back wall. Zecora kept quiet and joined the rest as Derpy popped her head out from behind her to fearfully watch the almighty Second in Command.

Blueblood carefully glanced to the wall, then to Cupcakes. "So, the Captain is assuredly coming in?"

Cupcakes looked ready to say something, but caught herself and kept her voice level, "Of course Prince Blueblood. Whatever business you have with him may be settled when he enters." Trixie and Spitfire both looked appalled at the calm statement she gave Blueblood, and the stallion smirked in pride at his success. At least until she raised an eyebrow, "What sort of business do you even have here? I'd figured you'd be busying yourself in the Gathering Hall."

Blueblood's prideful smile grew. "Ah, well you see, I figured that a colt of my standing would do little to help in Equestria's struggle and I thought I may come and join in the standing army in an attempt to-... Are you okay?" He stared as Cupcake's face broke out into an expression of complete glee as she suddenly sped to the door, grabbed another guard, a dark-coated colt, and fixed that glee on him.

"Night Brigade!" She spoke his name almost caressingly, which seemed to unnerve the poor guard. "Is it true? Is Prince Blueblood really joining the army?" She asked in a hot, sensual whisper that made more than a few hairs stand on end.

"Um... Yeah?"

Cupcakes did another little dance of glee and without warning was in Blueblood's face, her grin dripping with sadistic confidence. "Well *soldier*, I guess you should get yourself *to the wall*."

"W-what the hay is wrong with you all of a-"

"**NOW.**" Blueblood backpedaled until he was pressing his flank into the brickwork. Cupcakes settled peacefully in the middle of the room, her face serene and relieved, as if a large burden had been pulled off her shoulders. The other guard just sat in the doorway, watching as the six recruits stared into the middle of the room as Cupcakes just basked in her own pleasure.

The awkward silence ended when a voice called to Night Brigade from the next room. The stallion poked his head through the door and spoke briefly with somepony, then pushed the door wide open to allow a new pony in.

Derpy gasped happily, but shut her trap the instant Cupcakes glanced to her as Big Macintosh lumbered into the room.

He walked with a sort of slow limp. Zecora could tell he'd been lamed earlier, and knew the story, whereas Derpy was entirely unaware and only recognized it by knowing Big Macintosh personally. Big Mac and Blueblood looked to each other, recognizing the other, but saying nothing as the stallion turned to face Cupcakes and give her a short nod before moving to join the other six on the wall. He greeted Zecora and Derpy with a half nod and stood next to them.

Night Brigade then cleared his throat to get everypony's attention, then sat by the doorway and saluted smartly as in walked a pony that held himself almost as regally as the Princesses. Large, only slightly smaller than Big Macintosh, blonde mane that was short and straight, chocolate coat that was groomed to perfection, a stare that was instantly judging though incredibly careful, and bulging muscles that even Trixie was having difficulties pulling her eyes from. To his side was a regular sized pony with an almost opposite color scheme, his coat sandy, his hair oaken-brown and teased into small curls, and unlike the larger stallion, was smiling brightly, but he was about as thick in muscle as the blonde pony. *These were army-ponies.*

The large, blonde-maned male silently inspected each of the recruits, before clearing his throat to make sure everypony's attention was on him. The noise alone showed his was *not* the type of pony you disobeyed. "Cupcakes?" Captain Hero looked to the happy mare, who finally deflated with a sigh.

"I'd love some!" Derpy suddenly found herself in the middle of the room's attention, and it took her a moment to blushinglly slink back behind Zecora. "Um, may I please have some?" She asked, the rest of the recruits looking to Hero with confusion.

"... Ah." Hero cleared his throat as Cupcakes good mood soured instantaneously. "Recruits, my name is Hero Skybreaker, captain of the Royal Guards of Equestria." He said, his wings flaring a bit dramatically behind him. The seven of them hesitantly took a much better stance before him, and he nodded. "This," he raised his leg and pointed to the scowling female, "Is my second in command, the formal trainer, armorer, and

disciplinarian for the army, Silly Cupcakes." There was a loud snort from the row of six, and Cupcake's eyes tightened as she glanced up and down it. No pony owed up to being the one to make the noise. "To my left here," he nodded his head to the curly-maned colt, "Is our head field intelligence officer, my third in command, Maize Picker, and finally, the squad formation and squad tactics officer, my fourth in command, Night Brigade." The dark-maned pony waved idly from the back.

The six ponies against the wall continued to remain quiet and attentive, mostly because they were too busy glancing at Cupcakes to see if she was still glaring them down, so Maize stepped forward, "I am sure the lot of you have many questions to ask about why specifically you seven are in here. We know perfectly well that the standard army recruit training is happening, but we've come to realize that we have assets that would not be utilized properly if given a simple field job." From the Captain's side he read from the clipboard. "Each of you has earned special attention from me while going over your enlistment papers. Not because you are a celebrity or negatively unusual, but you have each shown exceptional qualities that we believe would best be put to use outside of the main force."

"Ahem." Now everypony was looking to Trixie, who had raised a single, delicate eyebrow. "While the Great and Powerful Trixie is no stranger to being exceptional, she is curious as to what her talents will be used for, and why the Great and Powerful Trixie is even in the same room with the rest of these ponies." She missed quite a few flat stares as she glanced to Maize, who read the clipboard again.

"Among you are two of the most exceptional fliers Equestria has ever been blessed with, with the bonus of already having been trained to work as a team, as well as, as a team, you have one of the highest concentrations of magic and general knowledge of magic in and out of nature, and on top of that," He seemed quite proud as he named the next one, "The seven of you together have the highest recorded kill count of the so-called 'Anathemic' Creatures."

"Pardon?" Trixie raised the other eyebrow as the opposite lowered. Soarin leaned over and whispered to Spitfire, who just shook her head, but Big Mac finally spoke up.

"T'ain't one to point out the problems much, but I ain't that special. I've only been part of the, uh, slayin' of one o' them beasts..." He murmured. The other ponies on the wall gave him a curious look.

"Um, yeah, I've only helped k-kill one of those mean thingies. If you're talking about the big flying snake thingy..." Derpy murmured, her one good eye lowering as she scraped at the floor gently with her hoof.

"Right." Hero confirmed with a nod. "Among the seven of you, you have the highest confirmed kill count of the Anathemic creatures: two." Trixie just began to sputter in disbelief as Zecora turned to stare at the two ponies she knew in the room with surprise.

"Congrats." Cupcakes rolled her eyes.

"Hold up." Soarin raised a hoof. "I haven't heard much about these things. I haven't seen one or met a pony who *has* seen one, and everything is in pretty hushed whispers. You're saying because these two," he pointed to Big Macintosh and then Derpy, "killed one of them each, that qualifies them as experienced?"

"It's simple to explain, really." Night Brigade smiled brightly. "We're facing an unidentified enemy that comes in many shapes and sizes. They are not only amazingly large and powerful, but they are dedicated in their cause to eat things. Surviving one is an accomplishment, killing one? So far, we've only heard of this happening twice. Killing one requires guts, wit, and an impressive level of dedication. Big Macintosh here killed one with a field-plow, nearly got crushed while doing so, and spent several days here recovering. Derpy Hooves, however, willingly gotten herself swallowed, broke off one of its teeth, and killed it from the inside out. Now, who can admit to that?"

Soarin was silent, but obviously brooding as Spitfire quietly shook her head. "I have never heard such strange tales, I feel my own skills in comparison, pales..." Zecora mumbled, watching the way Big Mac and Derpy humbly just shuffled and avoided eye-contact.

"Do you expect us," Trixie reared back, almost in disgust, "to regularly fight these pony-eating things? If that's the case then-"

"No." Maize interrupted, "We are in a war with Golding, not with these creatures, and they seem to loosely stay out of populated settlements until they find prey. Now as I was saying, there is exceptional talent among you. Prince Blueblood and the Great and Powerful Trixie, the two of you both have vast quantities and control of magic, as well as a large array of spells. Spitfire and Soarin, as Wonderbolts you two are already exceptionally talented Pegasi, and with a minor tweaking will be combat-ready. Zecora, you took some digging to learn about, but your knowledge of nature, of magic, ailments, and cures has given me reason to place you with the rest of these ponies. Each of you, separately, are powerful. Together, I have no doubt your talents will make you legendary." His brief nod and simple smile revealed just how confident he was with his deduction, though Cupcakes had different ideas...

"Of course, that's assuming you can get your lazy flanks off the ground. I'm seeing *maybe* three of you with any idea what actual work is." Cupcakes began to pace back and forth in front of the seven, all whom watched a bit sourly, "which means if we want to turn you into a crack squad of specialists, I'm going to have to whip your hides into gear and rub some salt in the wounds." She sat in front of them, front hooves pressed together. "I will be your physical trainer, and I have a few simple, easy rules: One, my word is *law*. Unless the Captain contradicts me, what I say goes. If I want you showing up in tu-tu's and high-heels, by Celestia you'd better do it or I will start tanning your hides with how much you'll be hitting the dirt."

"This is highly impractical, unsatisfactory and-" Blueblood didn't get to finish.

"*Rule two*," Cupcakes interrupted with an very happy smile, "I am *not* unfair, I am, however, harsh. So keep in mind, whatever I have you ponies do has its reasons." No pony trusted that grin...

"*Rule three!*" Cupcakes paused and turned to face Night Brigade, who was now sporting an over-exaggerated glare. "I'm an over-compensating hard-ass! Get on your knees and stroke my ego some more. I can't make it through the day without working a pony until they draw blood!"

The seven on the wall actually stared at Night with fear for his well-being as Cupcakes began to sport the most sadistic snarl any pony in the room had ever seen, even as Night Brigade snickered.

"*Rule four.*" Maize spoke up, making Cupcakes glance to him in surprised fury. "If you don't show up with your own scrapes and bruises, I will be forcing them onto you during our work-out session. Pain builds character, and by character I mean I want to put you in a dish-washer set on 'high'."

"*Maize!*" Cupcakes barked, "I'd expect this sort of childishness from Night but *you*? I'd had you figured to be much more mature and-"

"*Rule five.*" Now everypony was staring as the Captain continued, "As fascinating as you three bantering over who has the biggest pair is," Spitfire actually began to choke on her own spit to hide a laugh, "I have business I need to tend to and some shopping that needs to be done. Cupcakes, be *harsh*, but I like my recruits alive and happy." They continued to stare at him, and he sighed. "Oh, right, sorry, 'something something something Cupcakes is a big fat jerk'." He walked out of the room.

"... *Captain...*" Cupcakes whimpered, chasing after him in a little trot that, in all of their years, neither Maize nor Night had ever seen her use before.

"Is it scary that I find her cute when she's being a little girly?" Night asked, massaging his own chin with his hoof.

"Very, but I see what you mean." Maize nodded, and turned back to face the seven ponies on the wall. "Now, with the sideshow over we can get down to business. Training won't start immediately. We're going to be issuing you armor first since we need to get you used to it and movement as soon as possible. That will take, at most, two hours, so I'll be introducing you to your team's quarters. That said, any questions?" Seven hooves went up, "Yes? Good! Then follow me." He turned and began to walk out the room, Night following him.

The seven hooves slowly went down, and mostly grudgingly the ponies began to follow. "I *hate* this place." Trixie sighed. No pony argued.

" - however, there's a point when wearing clothes *does* become something a rich pony does, namely if you're in a good position, like the Archmage and To'Ao'Coltriella wear clothes *because* they're so prestigious." Sabine gulped down the last of her whiskey and gave an enthused sigh of relief. "Clothes are an indication of a pony who works very hard, and while I can't

say much for To'Ao'Coltriella and his parties, it's a sign that he, in his life, and his continuing life, is going to be at much harder work than the unclothed nobles."

Across from her, from her left to her right, sat Rarity, who was calmly chewing an after-dinner mint, her atrociously expensive glass of water half-empty in front of her. Applejack had sat next to her, listening while still debating with herself over trying the shot of whiskey she'd gotten from Sabine's bottle. Pinkie Pie, with an empty plate and an empty glass stared out the tall window they were seated next to, blinking rapidly. Fluttershy sat with an untouched shot-glass of wine, listening attentively. Twilight was seated next to her, all ears, with an empty glass in front of her. Dash at the end of the table downed the bottom half of her glass of whiskey while sporting some nice bandages on her face. She then pressed her cold-pack against her forehead once the glass was set down.

"I see." Twilight nodded slowly as the waiter came by and began to refill cups. "Clothes really aren't a big deal from where we come from. You wear them or you don't, it all depends on where you live."

"My home town in particular isn't very large on clothes," Rarity spoke up, "but I am the only fashion designer there, so I get frequented by outsiders, and inner-town ponies that have a special event coming up."

"Ah, yeah, here? You would get visited a lot. I don't know a thing about your skills, but you'd see all sorts of ponies. If you were more lower-tier-" Rarity huffed at the thought, "- you'd see a lot of ponies wanting sun-shading hats and coats, and if you were higher-tier, you could expect visits from musicians, mayors, even ponies from the palace." That seemed to please the unicorn more as Sabine sipped at her whiskey some more. The waiter came by again to take the empty plates.

"So, out'a curiosity, we've been told that bright coats 'n such 're signs of a rich pony." Applejack pointed out, drawing a nod from the Coltriellan. "What about the lot of us? I noticed we were gettin' some looks while we were out. Pinkie in particular." Applejack nudged the other earth pony, who quickly turned to stare at her and blink a lot. "I dunno what ya fed 'er though, she hasn't been this quiet in ages."

"Booze is fun like that." Sabine smirked, and Twilight gave a confirming hiccup. "Anyhow, yeah, Pinkie is super unusual around these parts. Having

your coat dyed pink is considered messy, since pink coat dyes are really *really* ugly, so it's easy to tell she's natural-born pink, and being any color other than brown, orange, or sandy is weird enough, pink is the strangest of them all." She drank again, and smacked her lips, "Well not the strangest, but one of the more prestigious."

"Now why is-"

"Looking at you six, the most 'prestigious' among you would probably be you, Rainbow Dash." Dash lowered her cold pack to look at Sabine curiously. "You have a fantastic coat color, and a six-part mane-coloring is very expensive as well as difficult to manage through dyes but you pull it off beautifully. After you, it would probably be Pinkie Pie due to being pink," Pinkie hiccupped, and began to giggle, "After that would be you, Rarity," even though she was being placed third, the unicorn did look pleased with this, "most Coltriellans focus more on color rather than styling your mane, but purple is considered highly magical, and that you took the time to style it means you care just as much about how good you look alongside status."

"Oh?" Rarity raised an eyebrow, and Sabine began to snicker.

"You should see some of the High-Ring ponies who first get their money. Colors everywhere, no sense of taste or style. They make clowns look beautiful." Rarity nearly gagged at the thought. "You look like you want to show your status *through* your beauty, rather than the other way around. Next I'd say is you Fluttershy." Fluttershy blushed the tiniest bit, "The pink mane is unusual, but well-cared for and very pretty, and of course there's your grace and Taminka-personality." This earned several curious stares, "Shy but approachably warm. Then there's you Twilight. The multi-colored hair looks good, as does the coloration, but your mane is rather flat. It's apparent you don't really take care of it. And lastly," Sabine turned to Applejack, "No offense meant-"

"None taken."

"- but orange and straw colors are the norm around here, and your hat would suit a lower-ring worker. The only thing really making you stand out is you showing your body so openly, as well as being slightly brighter coated than normal. Many will probably assume you've just gotten money and haven't used it to go change colorations."

"Eh, it don't bother me none. I like how I look." Applejack smiled proudly.

"It definitely suits you, you pull it off very nicely." Rarity nodded to the farm pony, who beamed all the more. Rainbow Dash managed to hide a snort and a giggle in her cold pack. "Though if you'd let me at those loose ends in your mane-"

Applejack held up a hoof and gave Rarity a flat look. "They'd just get tangled up again while I work."

"Well if you managed it regularly then you would always look fantastic *and* still be workable! It wouldn't get in your way!" Rarity insisted as Applejack shook her head.

"It's just time wasted when I could be out workin' the fields or visitin' y'all or bakin'!" Applejack crossed her forelegs obstinately.

"A *waste of time!* I guess I shouldn't expect you to understand the intricacies of the hard work that goes into true beauty! Split-ends are just the surface of what I could improve on *you*."

Applejack turned to give Rarity a harsh glower. "Is that right? Well what about you miss 'don't expect any *real* hard work if it gets my hooves dirty'? There's certainly some improvements I wouldn't mind hammerin' int'a ye're prissy mind!"

By now, Twilight had to nudge Dash several times in the ribs to get her to stop laughing while Fluttershy tried to whisper about how she thought they were both perfectly fine. Before the fashionista could protest, Pinkie Pie downed Rarity's water and shook her head clear of the dizziness. "Wowie, that stuff makes the room spin!" The party pony giggled, wobbling her way back to her chair to sit.

"The more you drink, the more you can handle. This stuff is easy compared to what I drink on my nights off." Sabine grinned as she drained her glass for the second time. She then glanced over to Twilight, "Now, my turn to ask *you* a question. Where are you guys from?"

Twilight was downing the last of her drink and nearly spat it out at the question. She managed to hold her reflex and polish it off before wiping her mouth and glancing to Applejack, who gave her a look that said 'no'. "Well,

we aren't really allowed to say. That secret 'high-up' royal stuff and all..." Twilight rubbed the back of her head. Okay, that sounded kind of lame...

"Hm." Sabine inspected the bottom of her glass and then glanced back up to Twilight as the table went quiet. She didn't appear to be buying it. "Okay then. Why are you in Coltriella miss mysterious foreigner?"

Again, another slight shake of her head from Applejack, and Twilight shrugged, "We came here to speak to the Princess is all. She's supposed to be a powerful Unicorn, so we thought we'd ask her for help?"

"Help with what?" Sabine gave them a very curious look as she bridged her hooves in front of her and looked Twilight over with deep curiosity. Twilight smiled nervously.

"Ah, well, it's-"

"Pardon." The seven ponies turned as a waiter approached, balancing a serving tray on his back with a single, brown cup on it. He walked around the table until he stood next to Fluttershy. "Excuse me ma'am, but a cup of our special cactus juice, courtesy of those gentlecolts." He nodded his head in the direction of the bar. Fluttershy peaked up, and spied a pair of colts watching her, both of whom smiled and nodded to her. The shy mare blushed heavily as she shakily took her drink and smiled back.

The rest of the girls at the table watched this happen with curiosity and a bit of suspicion, especially from Rainbow Dash as Fluttershy leaned down to sniff her drink. "It smells odd." She noted as she carefully took her cup and took a tiny sip. She shivered slightly.

"Any good?" Rainbow Dash asked as the colts at the bar watched carefully. Fluttershy gently took another sip.

"It's not bad..." She began to drain it slowly, unknowingly making a show of it before setting the cup down, smacking her lips a little, and staring at the bottom of it. Describing the taste was hard. She'd never had anything related to cactus before. The rest of the girls watched her eyelids droop a little, but then she forced them open, blinked several times, and took a deep breath.

Noting the lapse in attention, Twilight took her chance, "So..." Sabine looked up as Twilight spoke with a smile, "We have some more questions to ask you." Twilight smiled cheekily.

"... Alright, shoot." Sabine crossed her forelegs and watched the six with scrutiny. It was a bit, well... They all felt like they were hiding secrets now, except Fluttershy.

"We were advised to learn the history behind Golding. It's supposed to be really enlightening." Twilight looked hopefully towards Sabine, who awkwardly began to rub the back of her head.

"Oooh, the history of Golding..." Sabine smiled, but they could see the shakiness behind it. "There's a smoking barrel of black powder if there ever was one here. Alright, let me tell it to you straight: folks here don't like Golding. Golding doesn't like the folks here. We have our reasons, they have theirs. If you want to find somepony that's *neutral* on the subject you're gonna wanna look outta town..."

"Out of town?" Rarity asked, sighing softly, a frown coming to her face. They were in enough of a pickle being stuck in Coltriella as it was, waiting for the princess to recover. It was just luck that the Coltriellan leaders liked them more than the Golding ponies.

"You seem like you know a bit." Dash pointed out, pointing to Sabine. The mare shrugged, and just frowned.

"I know some, I guess. I mean I did go through school and did research and stuff but, well, I mean... It's kind of a boring story is all." She tried to pass off. It was at this point, Dash realized Sabine may have been hiding a little as well.

"Is that right? Boring?" Dash shook her head and chuckled as Twilight sighed.

"We don't need entertainment, just information. I mean, really, anything on Golding's history would be great." Twilight pointed out as Applejack waved for attention.

"We could go lookin' for your library, Twi. We could just go poke around the palace, see if they got one on history, find Golding's, and give it a good

read if she ain't gonna get help." The farmer mare nodded. A candle flared up in Twilight's head, and she began to nod rapidly.

"You guys know I'm still here..." Sabine almost sounded peeved, but the alcohol was making it difficult to be too angry.

"Well yeah, but you don't want to tell us-"

"I never said I didn't!" Sabine interrupted hastily. "I'm just saying I'm not a very good story-teller. I mean, I could tell you what I know and all..." She calmly tapped the tips of her front hooves together, her face looking a little flushed.

"And we can find out what you don't know at the library." Pinkie finished with a confident nod, making Sabine look up again.

"Hey! I know a lot about their history, I bet I can out-tell any book in any dumb old library!" The Coltriellan huffed, looking a bit offended that they were so intent on a library over her.

Rarity chuckled a little, "You don't exactly sell yourself very well dear. If you want to be our informant you should take a little more charge rather than try and direct us out of town."

"Well!" Sabine set her hooves on the table, "I just don't want you asking the wrong ponies, you could get yourself hurt! I know a good bit about Golding. I know a good bit about Coltriella too! As soon as we find a less open place, I'll tell you everything you ponies need to know."

"Why not now?" Twilight asked with a tiny frown. She would have very much preferred to learn as much as she could as fast as possible. Being forced to wait more would just be frustrating.

"Well for one, the moment we start discussing Golding history, the whole bar is going to start offering their personal opinions." She glanced around slowly, nopony was paying attention. "For two, some of us are kind of drunk, and it's not good to do serious stuff drunk. I mean, it's *hilarious* but not productive."

"Just because some of us are drunk doesn't mean the rest of us are though." Dash pointed out, smirking a little. She had to admit, the whiskey

was doing a number on her ability to stay serious, but she was focused enough to stay on the task at hoof. It also helped to dull the ache on her face.

"That still doesn't solve us being in public." Sabine rolled her eyes. "Besides the pony asking, your little girlfriend seems a bit distracted." Sabine pointed to Twilight as Rainbow Dash began to sputter, possibly in fury.

"Th-that's not true!" Dash shouted, a notably loud blush spreading across her face. Applejack, Rarity, and Pinkie Pie watched how Dash fretted, her clipped wings spread out as far as they possibly could extend. Twilight was busy watching Fluttershy stare at the table in awe, while moving her forelegs in a sort of dance. "Tell her Twilight!"

"Hm?" Twilight didn't even look as Fluttershy leaned forward, eyes wide as she stared at absolutely nothing of interesting and gave a tiny gasp, and corrected her odd dance.

Sabine began to giggle as Dash frantically waved her hooves. "Tell this liar-liar hat's-*gonna-be-on-fire-when-I-get-done-with-you* that we're not girlfriends!" Dash ordered as Twilight slowly raised her forelegs and began to imitate Fluttershy's dance. Those two refills may have been a bad idea...

"Nmhm." Was Twilight's answer as she smiled a bit, Fluttershy staring frantically around the table as she moved her legs more jerkily, as if trying to keep up with... something.

"Twilight!" Dash sighed in exasperation, grabbed Twilight's shoulders, and tugged her back so she could whisper directly into her ear, the unicorn now resting against her side. Dash's antics didn't get past Sabine or the other three currently stifling grins or laughter. "Tell her we're not girlfriends!"

Twilight snorted, rolled her eyes, and turned sharply to face Sabine. "Rainbow Dash and I *are girlfriends*." She turned and stared into Dash's stunned, nonsense-gibbering face, "*Happy?*" She turned back to watch Fluttershy as Sabine collapsed onto the table, laughing. Dash's wings were so far out they looked like they must've hurt.

"You guys know better!" Dash turned to face Rarity, Applejack, and Pinkie as they just smiled as hugely as they could have. "Twilight and I aren't

girlfriends! You guys know that! We've never been girlfriends!" She shook her head. "Never-ever-ever! Not once!"

"This coming from the mare who just *lovesto* read books with her." Rarity began to snicker between her teeth.

"Dashie and Twilight, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-"

"Pinkie's got a point. If there were trees around and about..." Pinkie continued her little song as Applejack hid her face behind her legs and Dash started to growl in warning...

They were interrupted when Fluttershy let out a loud, saddened wail and wrapped her head up in her forelegs and let out a loud sob. "I'm sorry-I'm sorry-I'm sorry!" She chanted between rolling tears, her chest rising and falling rapidly as panicked breaths escaped her. She opened her legs again and reached across the table, knocking Pinkie Pie to the floor.

"Fluttershy!" Dash slipped out of her seat without hesitation and was by the Pegasus in an instant as Pinkie recovered from the floor and got up to worriedly console the yellow Pegasus.

Fluttershy bawled her eyes out into her hooves. Twilight, oblivious, danced to a beat of her own. "The little dancing ponies left because I couldn't keep up!" She wept, making Dash and Pinkie pause. They both turned to face Sabine as she just shrugged in amusement.

"What the hay did those colts feed her?" Dash mumbled as Fluttershy calmed down, turning to watch as Pinkie started to do a little dance next to her. Meekly the Pegasus began to imitate her, waving her forelegs around and shifting her body like Pinkie did.

"Cactus juice." Sabine smiled brightly. "It's *good*stuff." The mare just grinned perkily. "Alright, so, how 'bout this! We'll head to your place, mine's kinda small, and get your friend some bed rest until the juice wears off." They glanced back to Fluttershy. Pinkie looked like she was having fun teaching Fluttershy a dance, while Fluttershy was all energetic glee in imitating her, even taking the front of the dance. Twilight imitated Fluttershy with a happy giggle. The three mares twisted and moved, while Sabine began to laugh again. "Then we can begin."

Things settled down, sort of. Dash did a good job of keeping Fluttershy safe from the other ponies in the bar while Rarity took Twilight out back. The seamstress came back with a much more sober unicorn, who looked deeply confused. Applejack and Pinkie lead the way out of the door, conveniently completing the circle that surrounded Fluttershy. Applejack brought them to a stop in front of a large statue of the king in the middle of the road to face Sabine, "So where does this story start, exactly?" Sabine opened her mouth, but then glanced to a large clock up high on the wall, nodded, and turned back to Applejack.

"Not now, actually." She snorted in amusement, glancing back at Twilight, "Lost track of time thanks to these two." Next to her, Dash bat her eyes rapidly, and began to glare.

"Please tell me you're kidding." Dash groaned, while Sabine shrugged. Twilight bustled forward, eyes narrowed.

"You promised you'd tell us the history!"

"And I will! Just not right now. I promised CYU I'd be helping them tear down an old building in the sixth ring, need to put a playground there." Sabine began to step away, eyes glancing upwards as she noticed the yellow Pegasus standing on top of the fountain statue of Ao, boogying her little flank off.

"CYU?" Dash asked dryly, clearly unaware of what was happening behind her.

"Coltriellan Youth United'?" Twilight asked with a blink, trying to remember exactly how she knew that. Sabine looked at her oddly, but nodded in confirmation. "Can't you postpone it or something?"

"Nope, irresponsible. Not a lot of ponies around here are into the whole charity business, but I try to help out where I can. It has its perks, ponies tend to know me and like me." Sabine gave a tiny shrug as most of the crowd around them began to notice the drunken pegasus dancing on their king's head.

"Look," Applejack approached, standing between Sabine and the others. "I think it's sweet 'n all you're doin' this, so go ahead with it. We can get ya directions later, we won't be movin' 'round much. Do watcha gotta do, but

come find us soon as ya can." Applejack gave Sabine a very tense stare, and Sabine nodded quickly.

"You guys have my word, and a promise from Sabine is unbreakable." She looked up again. Fluttershy was still shaking it happily on her perch, looking like she was having the time of her life. Around them, the crowd of foreign ponies was happily matching her movements.

"I told you this would happen." The shadow of the speaking pony paced just on the edge of her vision, telling her he was behind her. She tried harder to focus the complicated spell to a point on the wall that wouldn't immediately burst into flames when she ignited her magic. She bit her lip and ignored him as he continued his walk. "That mare," his sigh was worshipful, and the deep breath he took foretold... Infatuation? "She's so good at making friends. You'd think she *embodied* it or something." The irony was thick in his voice.

"Shut up Cloppin." Balla finally spoke up, her concentration having wavered just enough to miss the focal point, causing her to start again. She had never been so clumsy with magic to actually miss the first shot, least of all with a communication spell.

In front of her, the shadow paused in its movements for just a few seconds before continuing its long, gangly stride. "I bet she and Sul are chatting it up right now, chewing the good ol' rag." Balla began to quiver, but she froze as a clothed foreleg rested on her back. The snout of a skull entered her vision as the jester, deathly cold even through his clothing, kept speaking. "Maybe they're learning *magi* together. I bet that sweet little mare is better than you at it too."

Balla's eyes glimmered with anger, her concentration shattered. She let out a gasp as the fireball hit the floor. Cursing loudly, a fire suppressant spell flashed from her sapphire circlet, coating the embers before it had a chance to spread. Cloppin's chill grip still felt around her back from the cold he'd left there. The jester chuckled as he went back to pacing in the back of the room.

"It's sweet that you thought so highly of Sul though." Balla turned to glare at Cloppin as his hind-quarters, lacking any sort of hair to make a tail, shook

and shifted ever so slightly in mirth. "I bet she was so agonized to tell you to screw off, to see her little friend whimper in betrayal when she gave the order for Golding ponies to be removed. Doesn't that treaty mean anything to her? Don't *you* mean anything to her?" He sighed deeply, pressing his head against the wall. "It's sad, really it is, that she would choose to side with complete strangers, your enemies in fact, the greatest and grandest of your enemies, over you... because they're *nice*."

Cloppin twitched, his head jerked to the side after Balla's hoof connected, but that grin never slid off his face as the unicorn twisted back to face the wall. "Shut up." She said in breathless anger. Her eyes squeezed shut as she tried to compose herself. Behind her, she didn't feel the flaring rage that had come after the hit, the gritting teeth, then harsh tenseness of the muscles, the manic desire to respond in kind...

It slipped away as easily as it came as Cloppin slowly approached her. His hooves pressed against her cheeks, surprising her as the coolness of his touch made her mind blank, her anger, her frustrations briefly forgotten. "Golding is by itself, dear Balla. We can't expect ponies who pretend they're our allies to help us. We can't expect the Coltriellans to make our jobs easier. They aren't worth mixing yourself up with, let Golding ponies take care of Golding problems..." Cloppin whispered into her ear, the Archmage twitching as a hoof ran down to her chin, "And let us annihilate any and every thing that dares stand in our way." His voice was soft and sweet, dripping with seductive promise, and it made Balla seize up as those dark ideas slipped into her head. She shook it rapidly, and quietly wrest herself from his grip. "We have to do our own jobs."

He chortled in amusement as Balla stared at the wall she'd been trying to magic at for the past ten minutes. "Leave me Cloppin." She ordered, her voice soft. She did not even look to see if he was gone, but that perpetual chill running down her spine was gone, so she knew he'd left. She focused on the wall and closed her eyes again, her sapphire circlet flaring with magic as a spot of fire appeared on it, and focusing, spread it out in a circle.

In the middle of the flame she saw Shallom's face, which eased from a look of annoyed impatience to relief. "I was worried." He said, and Balla delicately hung her head. That would be two mentors she's disappointed

today. She wondered if she could possibly get on Galio's bad side as well before the sun went down.

"I'm sorry." She sighed. She truly was, she was never late, but with Cloppin, with her anger and disappointment, it had made the spell difficult to perform. She was supposed to be the Archmage, and here she was fumbling about. "My emotions have been running a little high. I'm sorry I didn't contact you sooner."

"That is fine." Shallom watched her closely, making note of her body language. With a small, worried look he spoke. "You are troubled, Balla." Balla didn't answer immediately. Rather, she lowered her head. "Please tell me what's the matter."

Balla looked up at him, the one eye she wasn't hiding wide and full of sorrow. Shallom stayed quiet, she couldn't see the dark thoughts of revenge circling in his head. "Shallom... I have tracked the False One to Coltriella." She said slowly, speaking around a thick tongue, "Sul..." She stared down at her hooves, "My good mentor has... She has betrayed me..." Balla closed her eye, and Shallom squirmed in impotent rage, his teeth grit tightly. How he wanted to fly into Coltriella and introduce that high and mighty wench to his back hooves. "She has chosen to protect the False One in Coltriella rather than give her over... I..." The unicorn hung her head in shame, "I don't know what to do, Shallom! I've failed Lord Galio, I can never-"

"Balla." The unicorn stopped, and Shallom calmed himself. It took every ounce of his willpower to do so. He took a deep breath, and kept speaking, "Balla, I want you to listen to me, listen to my words. Okay? Don't cry, don't break down, listen closely..." Shallom whispered softly. No pony dared hurt Balla in any way. Golding's Little Sister was one of those things you did not touch in or out of Golding, any pony that so much as made her frown was often subject to a very harsh retaliation... Maybe not physically, but the pony would regret it either way. On top of that she had been guarded by Shallom all her life until reaching her position as Archmage of Golding. She was one of the few ponies whom he would dare open up to, and be comfortable with it. She was not just Golding's little sister, Shallom all but saw her as family as well. "You have not failed. You have merely exhausted an option. You can't stop when you have had a single failure,

you must keep pushing forward." He whispered consolingly through the open communication.

"But what do I do, Shallom? I can't go in there at all, and I don't have the hoof power to take it down with one airship..." She sniffed, looking to him for advice. She had never been part of a battle, much less a war. Shallom knew this. Shallom knew she was far too inexperienced for such a job, but what she was... was intelligent, and an excellent problem solver. A smirk crept across his face. He just needed to push her down the right path.

"Well, Balla, you will merely have to muscle your way in some other way. You are not out of options. With your powerful magic, and with Golding nearby, there must be something you can do to crack Coltriella open..."

"..." Balla stared down at her hooves, then to Shallom, "Perhaps..." She whispered. She thought about it. She thought carefully about it. She closed her eyes and Shallom watched her mind go to work. He was correct, of course. She couldn't be held back by a single failure. She couldn't let the seven walls stand in her way. She couldn't let one betrayal stop her march towards the False One. She had to keep going, and show her pride and tenacity with unstoppable will. She had to retrieve the False One. Between Golding and her magic, the magic that Coltriella barely knew about, there must be other options. "Perhaps..." Her eyes lit up when she opened them, and Shallom smiled as she stared into his eyes. "Yes... that would work."

"Tell me." Shallom ordered.

Balla did.

"Okay, I'll be absolutely honest. When finding a proper room to designate at your barracks our options were limited to what's around the Royal Guard's quarters and the best we could do was an old, disused Janitor's rec room." Maize tried to smile reassuringly as he opened the door to the room. "We have refurbished it as much as we physically could in order to make it amiable to your needs and comforts *bu~u*fit's kinda small for seven ponies."

He stood aside as Spitfire walked inside the room slowly, and glanced around the room. It was... okay-sized. It had a small kitchen, a microwave, a stove and an oven combo, and a refrigerator. It also had two couches

and a single comfy chair for the seven of them and a coffee table in-between them all. There were two doors on each of the side walls, each leading to a different bedroom. "It's kind of..." Spitfire bit her bottom lip and smiled awkwardly at Maize.

"Yeah, I know, it's not up to standards for a specialist squad but it's the best we can do." Maize said with a tiny sigh, the rest filing inside to stand around and stare. It barely so much as fit eight of them comfortably, and seven would still be pushing it. "But as we fall into order and get used to the motions, things will become more comfortable and-"

"There's mold in here." Seven heads turned to face Zecora, who was standing at the open fridge. "Non-edible, poisonous, I fear." She shut the fridge with a look of disdain. Maize's smile grew even more uncomfortable, if possible.

That may have been the last straw, unease was spreading across their faces. "We have been waiting hours to start our training." Soarin pointed out, frowned unhappily.

"Not to mention these conditions are barbaric." Blueblood sniffed in disgust at the kitchen area and the small room. "We are confined."

"Surrounded by *mold*." Trixie groaned, tapping a couch with her hoof, causing a small puff of dust to puff upwards.

"And have been told next to nothing." Spitfire felt compelled to point out. So far, things had been less than what she expected. She had thought she'd be among a regiment of soldiers-in-training, learning side-by-side with ponies, becoming family with them through sweat and hard-work. So far, she'd done a lot of standing around.

Maize stood quiet and still in the middle of them, working his mouth slowly as they all watched him for some sort of excuse or explanation. Finally, with a defeated sigh, he visibly sagged. "We have no idea what we're doing." The room went quiet. "We don't have a real strategy, any set of rules, or even standards to follow, we're making this up as we go. We have the average ponies out there working hard right now, doing our regular routines because that seemed to make the most sense. You seven have showed skills and aptitude above average. We can't just treat you like normal ponies. I won't lie." He moved in front of them all, letting them all see him.

"The reason we're doing this is because of how hard we'll be working you and that includes getting you suited to your armor. Endurance, strength, tactics, you will be running the damned gamut. What we're waiting on is your personal armors to all be completely hammered out, and we should be an hour or two from finishing. When it's done, we're going to suit you up and throw you head-first into the training. It will be *rough*, especially with Cupcakes acting as your trainer."

He glanced around slowly. Each of their eyes wide, now worried, somewhat unsure now. They'd been promised hard work. They deserved to know exactly how hard it was going to be. The Captain had given Cupcakes free reign of their training schedule, and he had managed a quick look at it. By the end of this month, they'd either have no specialist squad or *the* specialist squad, two unicorns with magic normally seen in academy elders, two Pegasi who were at the peak of aeronautic skill, a healer who knew remedies and mixtures that confounded most doctors, and two ponies with the bravery and the wits to face down *hellgates*. If they could apply all their skills together and work as a team... he felt confident that this could work. He had felt confident when he'd pitched his idea to Hero, and confident when he had to defend it.

"But I know you all can do this. We're getting some of the best teachers here: for combat magic, for combat flight, and anything else we can possibly muster up. We act relaxed and joke around but when we get started we won't hold back on you. Good effort will be rewarded, using your wits will lighten your load, and working together will bring in exceptional results. All of this comes down to you seven though. You asked to enlist, that means you can ask to leave..." He closed his eyes and slowly met each and every one of their gazes. They understood the gravity in his voice, and were quiet. "I ask that you give it a try. The training will become easier, and you will find yourselves becoming stronger. That said, I have overstayed my welcome and must report to the armory. Your things will be delivered in short. There are four bedrooms, each with two beds, so that means one of you will have a bed to yourself. How you divide up your rooms is up to you." He walked around the group and left the room.

Outside, he closed the door, sighed heavily, and high-hoofed Night Brigade. "See? Guilt trip: accomplished." Night grinned, and the two merrily trotted down to the armory.

Back inside the room, the seven ponies carefully looked among each other, evaluating their... what? Their worth? Individually? As a group? They didn't all know each other, two being loners, two knowing only each other thanks to their team, and three being in the same village. Maize's words still hung about, and their confidence went both ways at once. They were all in the same boat, to save Equestria from a destructive force they were unfamiliar with, but they were promised a *very* difficult road ahead of them.

Quietly, Spitfire nudged Soarin. The two pegasi being the first to separate to gather in the makeshift living room. "So I'm thinking we divide it up by mares and stallions." Spitfire nodded in agreement as she opened a door to her room. Regular, run of the mill mattress on springs, a small dresser for each bed, and that was it.

"Sounds about right. Who'll room with who though?" Spitfire stuck her head out of the room to stare at the other six, who all looked among each other. It was a pleasant distraction. "And who gets a room to themselves?" Spitfire pointed to the smaller side room, which looked like it may have indeed been a closet.

No pony spoke up, not right away. Shifting uncomfortably, one hoof slowly lifted up. "I... I- well..." Blueblood closed his mouth and looked to the ceiling with a tiny frown. "If we must, I certainly wouldn't mind-"

"Neither would the Great and Powerful Trixie." The showmare interrupted, her eyes fixed on Blueblood, who returned her stare. The rest of the group shifted uncomfortably as the tension began to suck the air out of the room.

"Um..." Derpy Hooves spoke up with a small whisper, "I wouldn't mind having a roommate. Colt or mare doesn't matter to me." She smiled, and Spitfire nodded.

"Sounds good to me. You're my roommate." Spitfire watched the wall-eyed Pegasus' face turn surprised for a moment, and then break into a huge grin.

"I'll be the best roommate ever!" Derpy announced, flying through the open door with a little whirl. Spitfire smiled at her enthusiasm. "I'll share my popcorn and let you touch my stuff and I'll help you make the beds and I'm gonna be cleaner than ever!" She landed on a bed. While Blueblood and

Trixie continued their stare down of epic proportions, Soarin glanced at Big Mac.

"You-"

"Sure."

"Cool." Soarin looked away with a tiny blink. Direct sort of colt. Big Mac walked to an empty room and stepped in. Soarin's ears flatted against his head as Prince Blueblood and Trixie's stare down turned into a heated argument. While the two were distracted, Zecora took herself to the room just beyond Derpy and Spitfire's, leaving Soarin alone with the two feuding unicorns. He stared at them while thinking back to the first time he'd stepped into the Wonderbolts' barracks.

Spitfire hadn't been Captain yet, but she was most definitely next in line. Everypony there looked up to her for advice and she was more than willing to lead the team. Her capabilities had impressed young Soarin, and the fact that they'd hit it off so quickly... but the point was, when he first entered the barracks, he'd been told by the current Captain that the Wonderbolts shared everything, not just sleeping quarters, food, and chores. They shared each other's pains when they flew, and more than that, they shared each other's emotional troubles when they brewed. It was okay to compete with each other, but you had to remember that when one Wonderbolt was having difficulties, it was up to the other to help.

The question was: how?

"Fah!" He turned his head as Zecora stepped into the rec room, looking somewhat annoyed until he noticed that, in attempting to maneuver around the tightly packed living room, she'd banged her shin on the coffee table. "This room is too small for any pony to rest, even the bedrooms are larger by half at best!"

Soarin rubbed his chin as Spitfire walked out. "Yeah, I don't see how we could all use the same room at once. Perhaps if we maneuvered it ourselves?" Spitfire offered.

"Doesn't seem like we'd be able to make much of an improvement to the set-up..." Soarin mumbled as he looked around the small, cramped room

slowly. Zecora, tired of squeezing between the chairs and coffee table, chose to stand on top of it.

"Anymore widening would be an improvement, though if we can't afford the space I may consider a tent." Zecora turned as Derpy and Big Mac stepped out of their rooms to join the cramped team.

"I may join you." Spitfire admitted with a sigh, making Derpy's eyes widen enormously in despair. "Not that I'd leave you behind. You could come join us. We could all fit in one tent."

Soarin smirked a little at the thought of the three camping out rather than stay indoors because of a lack of room. Out of curiosity he poked his head into one of the bedrooms, took stock, and signaled to Big Mac to follow him. At the same time, he nudged Blueblood, who turned to give him a smoldering look of "how dare you touch me," but it was ignored and Soarin beckoned him as well.

The three males entered one of the bedrooms as Soarin's idea formed. He could think his way around this one. "Okay, so we need room for the couches and chairs and stuff, but there's also the big 'who gets the room to themselves' debate."

"It will be a dry day in hell before that upstart little foal-"

"I ain't much fer solvin' problems but perhaps we can knock out two trees in one kick?" Big Mac interrupted, Blueblood's fuming slowly wilting.

"Pardon?" He glanced to Big Mac, who nodded slowly. "I don't think I- wait." Blueblood held up a hoof and looked around the room slowly, his lips tightening as a thought occurred to him. "You don't mean the three of us share one room, do you?"

"I didn't necessarily say it was the three of us." Big Mac shrugged.

"But we're dividing the rooms by colts and mares."

"Mm. Yeah." Big Mac nodded as Soarin started to lift a bed.

"These are nice and light. With some maneuvering-" Soarin squeaked and nearly dropped the bed as Blueblood lifted the object up with magic.

Blueblood easily levitated it out of its original position as the other two watched him set it near the door. "Well let's not go making this look easy for the rest of us." Soarin watched, partially jealous at the casual ease Blueblood displayed carrying the bed.

"Please, I am a unicorn. I was born to make my own life easier." The Prince grinned smugly, causing Soarin and Big Mac to look to each other with raised eyebrows. Soarin didn't take it too personally, it wasn't as if Blueblood was insulting them, and he was honestly expecting a little more gloating than that. Big Mac kept quiet as he helped turn the bed in mid-air to fit it through the doorway, the girls watching curiously as the bed was floated into a different room, Blueblood and Big Mac leading it there.

"Do I wanna know?" Soarin grinned as he heard Spitfire's voice while tugging the other bed out with his bare hooves. He turned and heaved, pulled the bed through, and glanced to his friend.

"Just knocking out two trees with one kick. If you ladies don't mind, I'm going to dispose of this, could you start moving the couches and stuff into this room?" Soarin gestured to the open doorway, ducking just in time before Trixie could clobber his head with the single pony-seat.

"Do be quick, you're getting in the way of whatever you have planned." Trixie carefully walked past him, oblivious to the glare Soarin was giving the unicorn. Spitfire patted his back and shook her head at him.

It was impressively quiet in the Gardet house. Rainbow Dash was pretty surprised. Normally when she hung out with Pinkie she couldn't hear herself think. Right now, Pinkie was keeping things down to a dull roar.

"- and we'll definitely need some sort of music." Pinkie mused, moving a stool she'd found in one of the bathrooms rapidly between two corners. Rarity watched, hoof touched to her chin.

"Pinkie, sweetheart, if you're going to be using a stool to hold the phonograph you should at least keep into consideration the design of the room." Rarity nodded, about to lift the stool with her horn before sighing, deciding instead to push it away from the atrocious corner with her forehead. "A round stool does not belong in a sharp corner, it clashes!"

"But..." Pinkie took the stool. As she dragged it backwards she felt her hind hoof hit something. Applejack groaned, moving out of the way. "If it's alongside the wall, then we have a much easier chance of bumping into it! A party requires *Maximum. Available. Space.*" Pinkie spoke each word as if she were biting into them.

"Yes, well how about this!" Rarity shoved the stool into the corner, which clattered as it struck the wall. She stared at it, Pinkie turning from Rarity to do the same, and they both watched it. Rarity's face was rapidly squinting in disapproval. The room was then oddly silent.

It was then Rainbow Dash realized everypony was *bored*. No skies to clear or fly through... or now, she couldn't practice her magic for fear of getting caught - by who she didn't know. There were no apples to pick or sell, no dresses to be made, parties to be had, and conversation was little as the taxing day left them all to their thoughts. No pony felt like leaving the house. The furthest any pony had gotten was-

"Okay everypony," Twilight announced from the hallway, Fluttershy happily at her side. "Stock has been taken, bags have been separated and dispersed, what we don't need is gone, and the only decision we have to make now is who rooms with who." She had a small spring in her step. Of course she'd be happy, she had a chance to *organize*. Dash hid a small laugh. It was those little things that could keep Twilight happy. Dash mused that if she ever needed to cheer her up, she could just switch all the books in the library around if the unicorn was bored. Actually, no, that would just freak Twilight out. Oooh, the pranking possibilities...

"Well, as per usual, I suppose I shall board with Applejack." Rarity spoke up, clearly glad to have a distraction from the outrageously atrocious game of a *round stool* in a *sharp corner*. Rarity hadn't expected five stares she was now getting. Her confident smile slowly began to wilt.

"... Why?" Pinkie was the first one to ask. Rainbow Dash lifted her head to help join in on the stare. It wasn't as if she hadn't noticed it before. She found it amusing more than anything, and it let her take her mind off certain other mares whose feelings she was concerned with. Besides, if it really actually turned out the way she expected it to, she could rub *so much* into Applejack's face.

"Well, I mean, no offense Pinkie but you snore..."

"Y'all realize I snore too?" Applejack raised an eyebrow, a smirk growing on her face.

"Well, yes..." Rarity nervously stared down at her hooves. "But you snore *manageably*."

"Oh as if that makes sense!" Applejack snorted, grinning from ear to ear as Rarity fumbled with words, something the orange mare found irresistibly funny.

"I don't snore Rarity." Fluttershy reminded her gently, her cheeks turning a very slight red. "Why don't I room with you? I know you like to fall asleep gossiping and I don't mind listening." Fluttershy slowly stepped forward, nodding her head.

"I-I guess that's- yes that's very true, but it's... Well... Applejack has some very interesting things for us to talk about, and... Erm..." Rarity rolled her hoof slowly, her white coat slowly turning red as she heated up, and finally let out a deep sigh of defeat. "You know, maybe that'd be for the best. Let's room together Flutter-"

"Hey." Applejack grunted, grabbing their attention. "I never said no, or that I didn't wanna!" A smirk crept upon her face as Rarity began to stutter, "C'mon Rare, I know what room I wanna get." The farm pony trotted down one of the parallel hallways and picked out a room. Rarity stood still for a few moments, caught with the others watching her closely. She stumbled over herself, face heated, and rushed after Applejack.

Pinkie Pie snorted out a giggle, whistling *to herself* while walking off to their now stocked ice box. "Hey egghead." Dash spoke up from the floor. Twilight looked over with a curious blink. Fluttershy opened her mouth as to say something, but after a moment, closed it and went to follow Pinkie. "You 'n me? Same as always?" She asked. Twilight gave a bright nod and smile.

"Of course!" Twilight hopped excitedly. The two took to the back left room to settle on in. The two-bed rooms were actually fairly comfortable. They were big enough for two ponies each to settle in without spilling over onto each other, and to Twilight's eternal delight, even came with a desk. Dash was more interested in the bed, which proved to be much softer than the floor.

Other than having belonged to a Golding pony, it was quite the comfortable place.

It was nice and peaceful for a good while, the sun slowly lowering in the sky, and the lazy feeling was just plain perfect. The six mare-friends were quick to their hooves though as a knock came from the front door. Fluttershy opened it a crack, peaking out into Sabine's smiling face, and opened it wider for the mare. "Hello Sabine, come on in." She welcomed her with a warm smile, and Sabine whistled quietly as she peaked past her. "I hope you didn't get lost on the way here." Fluttershy smiled invitingly before moving out of the way.

"Not even a little, been living in Coltriella too long." Sabine trotted inside and paused. She couldn't admit to knowing Rarity or Pinkie Pie very well, but she assumed there was a very good reason they were taking a carpenter saw to a stool. "Fancy digs. I live down in the fifth ring. You guys may motivate me to work my way up." Sabine walked to a cushion and glanced to Fluttershy, who merely nodded for Sabine to lay down.

She looked around slowly and smiled to herself. Fluttershy went around the rooms to gather the rest of the ponies while Sabine quietly considered her surroundings. She couldn't get the feeling out of her even as she was helping set up the play park. These mares were hiding something, but for the life of her it didn't even feel a little malicious. They were obviously foreign but *from where?* They were bright and colorful, two of them had wings, and on top of that, she had never seen tattoos that detailed and unusual on anypony's flank. Yet they spoke magnificently perfect Coltriellan, and they were even being supported by Sul of all ponies. They were cool, but they were also incredibly mysterious...

Which was just even more cool.

"Ah, good, Sabine's here." Twilight emerged from a hallway. Dash appeared moments later, looking rather crossed. "Just take a seat Dash, you can nap when she's finished." Twilight sat down across from Sabine. Dash followed, opting to sit next to Twilight. The Coltriellan gave them both a friendly smile. Twilight tried to return it, but it faded Rainbow Dash let her head fall to the table. Looking the sleepy pony over, Sabine realized she really did like that mare's hair.

Moments later, Applejack emerged from her hallway. "Thought I heard ye're name. Welcome to our home." Applejack extended a hoof for Sabine to shake, and sat down a foot or so from Twilight. "Rarity, Pinkie, y'all comin'?" The farmpony turned her head. Rarity was holding a section of the stool seat as Pinkie's forelegs rapidly moved back and forth while wielding a large metal hoof file.

"Just a moment! We have a few finishing touches to make!" Rarity called back before turning back to supervise Pinkie's work. Fluttershy, who had been quietly preparing tea, finally sat down. She snuggled between Applejack and Twilight, getting an affectionate smile from both as she pushed out a tray full of teacups. Everypony accepted one as Rarity and Pinkie finished with the now sharp-edged stool and joined the group. The six all watched Sabine expectantly as they drank.

"..." Sabine was quiet, humming to herself as the two sides observed each other. Finally she set her cup down. "So, I'm assuming you want me to go ahead and start?"

"We have been waitin' patient-like." Applejack nodded to Sabine.

"Alright, alright." Sabine squirmed, getting herself comfortable as Twilight stood to put out a few candles to dim the lights. When she seated, Sabine spoke. "So I'm not going to immediately start with Golding, what you need to know interlocks with Coltriella's history. The land of Coltriella wasn't always a desert...."

Chapter 23

Coltriella and Golding

"So I'm not going to immediately start with Golding, what you need to know interlocks with Coltriella's history. The land of Coltriella wasn't always a desert. When it was being settled on, it was green hills, forests and woodland animals and all of that. Fast forward a good few hundred years and you have the central city of Coltriella rising up from the ground, housing the first Ao'Coltriella. Something I have to mention is that Coltriella once prided itself on extreme personal freedoms. If you paid your taxes and didn't step on the wrong pony's hooves, you were free to do just about anything; restrictions were few and often specific, stuff like don't kill anypony or take from them. Other than that, if you chose to do something and somepony else followed along, that was your business. That was why Coltriella attracted so much foreign fare, you could trade using money. By bartering, you could trade slaves, hallucinogens, favors, and so on. It was cool for a while, everypony loved the city, everypony made vacations to the city, it was freedom at its finest and Coltriella prided itself on that. There was a problem though, the cash flow into the city was enormous, and certain trade goods took certain routes through the city to sell their wares, a lot of very bad ponies saw how they could take advantage of this. In short time, gangs started to spring up, gangs who controlled the routes and offered protection, or they would buy the foreign goods just outside the city to save them the walk and then sell the stuff at inflated prices. It didn't start out so terrible, but as more and more ponies got in on the business, conflicts began to spring up, gangs started to attack each other, control over the routes, over the merchants, over the shopping areas became such a huge deal that it's been called the Inner-City Wars."

"Getting more on topic, around the same time, Golding was being built from the ground up by a pair of very ambitious brothers and their followers. These two brothers had an amazing history together, not seeming to have any home country but traveling among the warring nations surrounding Coltriella - which was the only neutral zone on the continent at the time - and leading whatever state they occupied to unparalleled victory. The eldest brother, Lord Galio, was cited repeatedly for his tactics and his

inspiration, while his little brother Firago took care of the nation behind the war with his vast medical knowledge and empathy. Together, the two won the hearts and minds of many ponies and gathered-

"Hold up." Dash interrupted suddenly. Everypony turned to look at her as she rubbed her own chin. She looked to Twilight with a bit of slight worry and hummed thoughtfully. "Okay, you said Galio was doing this around the time Coltriella was becoming cruddy, right?" Sabine nodded. "But that was like... A few hundred years ago?"

Sabine nodded again, "Yep." Dash just frowned more deeply, and Twilight froze as she realized just what Dash was getting at. Glancing to Sabine, she could see the mare wasn't worried at all about this. She wasn't lying, Galio was around hundreds of years ago.

Looking among the others, they could see they were equally confused... and worried. It was Applejack who popped the question, "So, just how old is this Lord Galio fella?"

The answer was... surprising... "He's been around since before Coltriella. No pony knows exactly how old, all we know is that he's old, real old. He's practically legendary on this continent. There are paintings and artifacts dating several thousand years back depicting him and Firago. It's generally known that a pony can live for a very long time with magic but even the Archmage is stumped by how long the two have lived, it's just become accepted that Lord Galio and Lord Firago may very well be..." She paused, and looked up at the ceiling, "Well, it's rumored they're either Alicorns or Gods, or perhaps both. They've been worshipped by ponies for as long as any pony can remember, it's entirely possible they work by personal magic or even faith by itself."

There was not a sound as Sabine finally closed her mouth. She was met with twelve wide eyes, and more than one of them looked absolutely terrified. Sul had said they were in danger concerning Golding. She hadn't heard why and it somewhat concerned her that they knew nothing about Galio. Yes, they were most certainly foreign, more foreign than any pony who have ever visited Coltriella as far as she knew. This was a level of ignorance she wasn't used to, everypony on the continent had to know about Galio and Firago by now.

In her head, she tried to theorize precisely how far or where they could have come from, but she couldn't think of any place on a map that didn't know Lord Galio at the very least by name alone. But there were lands across the seas they sometimes got visitors from...

"Anyways, Golding was on the rise with their power and influence, and the two Lords were determined to lead by example a state that was as noble as its rulers. It was highly militaristic and planned to the tee: where towns could and would go, the best planting areas, the best mining cities, where trade would go through. Within the span of several years, Golding was born. Everypony watched it closely since they knew Galio and Firago were heading it, but nopony dared try and attack in case they lost the brothers' favor. Golding's ponies were a very pleasant, proud group. They knew who they served and were happy to follow their every order. With Galio and Firago heading the planning, Golding quickly became a super-power despite being so small. On top of that, their honest, independent, and non-violent approach to gathering allies and trading partners quickly had other nations trying to follow the same example. It was a peaceful, strong place."

"As I said before, it was around this time that Coltriella was losing itself to its own hedonism. It wasn't just the gangs and their leaders now, the city was being controlled in sections by the nobles. With the nobles on their paychecks, the gangs were free to run around and do as they pleased since the city guards were basically being paid to not do a thing about it by the nobles, who, at the same time kept the former Ao'Coltriella in blissful ignorance. The former Ao was pretty well-known for being ignorant, gluttonous, and gullible, easily swayed by the nobles with a few glasses of wine to give them a bigger cut of territory, or to pass some arbitrary law to hinder their competition, but none of them had the sway, the money, and the highlife like the noble who had married the former Ao's niece."

"Being married to the niece meant the noble was part of the royal family, which meant he had unrestricted access to the Coltriellan palace. The noble, known as Elmirus, could walk in and appeal to the former Ao for whatever he pleased. This made him one of the most dangerous and most powerful ponies in Coltriella, and had a lot of gangs vying for his attention."

"Elmirus was surrounded by wealth, mares, and whatever fineries he damn well wanted, but he forgot something: he was still married to the former Ao's niece, and his niece was not as corrupt as he was. Many ponies in

Coltriella were honest, hard-workers who felt obligated to their city and country but were oppressed by the corrupt higher-ups. Golding, which had just opened its borders to ponies interested in looking for a new home, became a wonderful option to escape the city and settle somewhere where they wouldn't be afraid."

"Among the Coltriellans that migrated to Golding was the niece. According to Coltriellan law, a Coltriellan royal who does not sign several official documents does not count as a royal outside of Coltriella. The niece had not signed these documents and, by law, was not a royal until she was back in the city, which meant that Elmirus was no longer a royal. He had lost all of his influence with the former Ao, and lost practically all of his power in a single day. The noble, and the gangs he lead, were understandably angry by this, and hired several slavers to go after the niece."

"The niece had settled into an outlying village in Golding, having been granted citizenship by the mayor of that little village without so much as a question. She was at peace for several days, but one night the slavers came. They had broken into her house noisily and captured her and her hand-maiden, but as they set to return, they were confronted by a good portion of the villagers, armed with farming equipment. The slavers were disposed of, and Lord Galio was informed of the attack. The niece revealed who she was and why she had come to Golding to the Lord, who took it upon himself to see the former Ao and demand an explanation. The former Ao, as I said, was pretty stupid, and did not see the threat Galio posed. He even went so far as to insult Galio for trying to 'restrain the freedoms of Coltriella'. When Galio returned home, he had been insulted, spat on, and nearly struck by the former Ao. The decision for war was made, and the very next day, Golding marched on Coltriella."

"Coltriella was not ready for a war. Its standing army was under-prepared and lazy, and though the gangs understood they needed to work together to repel Golding, they weren't at all experienced with dealing with armed and armored targets. Coltriella never had a very large population of Unicorns, while Golding did, and with their help, they easily melted through the first few walls of Coltriella. Battles were usually short and favored Golding easily, but the closer the battles got to the palace, the more desperate things became. The former Ao deployed every anti-magical practice they had while the gangs quickly forgot their differences and

banded together as one army to fight for what they had, and they started employing their most monstrous strategy: marching slaves in front of the armies to take the brunt of the attack. Golding detested slavery and slavers, but were very careful with the slaves themselves. Golding was slowing down."

"During this entire time, the former Ao had a son, a young colt with big dreams and a love for reading stories about heroics. Little was known about the colt, and there were rumors his father was not very proud of the child. Nopony knew why until the day of Coltriella's loss; his son was idealistic, and very much against what Coltriella prided itself in: the hedonistic freedoms that were so easily taken advantage of. He saw the corruption from where it started and for what it really was and gathered a lot of the ponies that believed the same thing, whether they were guards, citizens, or merchants, the true noble Coltriellans stood underneath him when he saw the opportunity to march into his father's throne room, kill all the attending nobles and gang leaders, and finally the former Ao's son himself slew the king and took his throne. With all of Coltriella's leaders gone, Golding took the palace in an instant. The son, now the newest Ao, met with Lord Galio and a treaty was formed between Coltriella and Golding. In this time, the newest Ao informed Lord Galio what he intended to do with Coltriella, his plans, his rules, his remaking, and Lord Galio was so impressed he gave the newest Ao a title in Coltriella's own language: To'Sivo'Coltriella (The Savior of Coltriella)."

"With Sivo in command, order was soon returned to Coltriella, the walls and buildings rebuilt, and trade was slowly coming back to Coltriella. At the same time, those things that had made Coltriella so desirable were being taken away. Hundreds of laws were passed to restrict certain substances, to prevent merchants from being hoof-handled through the city, and to keep anypony and their mother from selling whatever they pleased at whatever prices they wanted. The gangs and nobles that had once held power tried to reclaim it but failed under the city's new laws and with increased pressure from the new guards. With Coltriella blooming again, Sivo was soon an icon as much as Galio and Firago was."

"There were two things that weren't accounted for though: the first was that the gangs would not stop. They were persistent in thriving in their old business and began to operate around the city of Coltriella, not just inside it. They still managed to control the merchant and cash flow, although at a

much more limited rate, and still managed to sneak protection rackets and prostitution all around the city. On top of that, slavery was still a big issue in the outlying villages since Sivo's hooves could only reach so far. All of this factors into the second thing: To'Sivo'Coltriella was medically insane."

"He had grown so used to the violence, to the underhoofed businesses, to the blatant disregard for pony decency that it began to influence him. As kind and fair as he was, and as much as he looked after the common Coltriellan as well as their foreign allies, he detested the criminal element more than anypony you would know. He was not even the slightest fair with the gangs, with thieves, with assassins, and even small-time gamblers. He was vicious. On the outside, everypony saw a lawful city with booming opportunity. On the inside, they didn't see the creeping corruption, and the crazy pony with the axe chasing it."

"If you could be proven you were part of a gang, there was no question as to what would happen to you. You were first interrogated, if that didn't work, tortured. Not simply torture either. Sivo brought mutilation into it and sometimes even headed it himself. He was a royal noble, he had experience with blades and had the knowledge to use them very effectively on a pony's body, and in his time, he pioneered not only a lot of the inner-state territorial practices and court law practices, he was also on the forefront of engineering new torture methods. *Very effective* torture methods."

"If you revealed any incriminating information or evidence about your gang, you were given a swift death in public, either by hanging or by the axe, an incredibly merciful thing compared to what would happen if you did not. If you stayed quiet, or revealed no pertinent information, you were put in a tiny iron cage and hung up on the top of the forth wall to starve to death under the hot sun. As horrifying and intimidating as this sounds, the gangs, as I said, were persistent. They continued to thrive, and Sivo did not know how. Angered, concerned, and paranoid from the many assassination attempts set on him, he decided to crack down harder."

"The short years of prosperity began to dwindle as new laws were put in place, more guards and soldiers were hired, and given free reign on what to do with law-breakers. You could have been taking an apple to show your mother nearby when you were gut by a guard who hadn't heard the conversation, or you could be walking on the street twitching your ear in a

certain way when you were hauled off for interrogation. It didn't stop just there, the outside town... There used to be many more, many of them associated with gangs, but not all of them. Sivo would lead raids on these towns on the barest rumor, often massacring the town and burning it to the ground as he did. Trade began to dwindle again, cages lined the forth, fifth, sixth, and seventh walls, sometimes stacked up on each other, executions lost scheduling and went on almost 24/7, and through it all, through all that blood, violence, and desperation, Sivo was *losing his mind*."

"Golding knew of this. Word traveled fast through the surrounding nations, but no hoof was picked up to stop it. Sivo was obeying his treaty by keeping his delusions within the borders of Coltriella, and despite Firago's insistence, Galio left Sivo to his own devices so he could keep an eye on the peace in Golding. Golding had changed little other than growing, its ponies were still proud, noble, and strong. Crime amounted to petty thievery with jails being small and stays usually only lasted for a few weeks at the most. In the thirty years Sivo ruled Coltriella, Golding lived happily."

"That happiness was short-lived, however, as with little explanation Firago, one of the so-thought Alicorn Gods grew ill. It was not your common illness though, it was the sort of thing that turned the body in on itself, left it reeling in pain while your mind slowly slipped away from the pain and hallucinations. Despite Golding's best efforts, Firago was irreversibly sick. Desperate, Galio turned to medical histories and myths for an answer. What he found lead him to Coltriella. There is an incredibly rare plant that grows only in Coltriella, a special herb that can survive in only such specific conditions that the royal palace keeps it out of the publics' hooves to preserve it. It is rumored to have advanced healing properties that put even an Alicorn to shame, and Galio needed it for his brother."

"Reports of the day are sketchy, but there is one thing that was agreed upon: Galio, high, mighty, noble, and powerful, took to his knees and begged To'Sivo'Coltriella for the plant so that he could revive his beloved brother, humbling himself to such a degree that everypony who watched this legend was moved. Everypony except Sivo. It is thought that, if Galio had been just a few days earlier, before an act of gang violence had destroyed a bakery Sivo frequented, he may have gotten his wish granted, but Sivo had long left his right mind. Sivo was pissed at Galio for intruding on his kingdom, did not listen to a word he said, more angry that he was distracted from his snipe hunt than being asked for the rarest of all

Coltriellan plants, and had Galio all but kicked out of the city. Galio pleaded again and again, but Sivo grew so enraged by Galio's repeated interruptions that he made a very dangerous move: he declared that if Galio was going to keep bothering him, he'd have Firago killed to end this whole debate."

"The second Coltriellan-Golding War began when Galio marched into his palace quietly, and announced to his hopeful population that he was going to have Coltriella obliterated. His story, mixed with Firago's condition, turned the entirety of Golding and a few allies against Coltriella so quickly that trade stopped the day after Galio's return."

"The first attack was made when Sivo was just returned from a raid: the unicorns of Golding had turned the seventh wall to dust, released and fed the prisoners, and started for the sixth wall. In the time between the former Ao and Sivo, the walls had been reinforced, giving them some resistance to the unicorn attack. It did little to protect against Pegasi and dragons though, and the initial fire-bombing run left a good part of Coltriella destroyed before the anti-air defenses were set up. Sivo, cunning as he was, used all his wits and resources as well as a good number of his secret weapons to fight the angry onslaught Golding brought. Black powder kegs were lit and thrown into the Golding ranks, napalm was flung into the air, incinerating Pegasi, and despicable acts of war were thrown about mindlessly. Prisoners were taken, beaten, used, killed, experimented on, and even forced to turn-coat."

"Eventually, the unicorns of Golding became creative in disposing of their enemies, using magically crafted diseases and flames to obliterate portions of the enemy army. However, Golding was eventually forced out of Coltriella when the massive army found their own diseases and weapons turned against them."

"The war raged for years, Coltriella rebuilding itself slowly in the time to undo the initial damage dealt while meeting Golding on the battlefield time after time. There weren't too many entries on this in the stories, but I've heard that the Golding Unicorns became infamous for being near unstoppable on the battlefield, Godly to some and Anathemic to others. The magic they used was almost always senselessly cruel experiments in how painful or *interesting* they could kill a pony, each and every one fueled

by their hatred and anger towards the Lords' treatment, but quickly just giving into devilish sadism."

"The war lasted for many many years, so long that Sivo even began peeking into his hundreds and still going strong. The reports on how Firago was holding up were few, but he was most certainly not dead, though very close to it. Galio was still desperate to break into the palace and take the plant, but Sivo turned his own craziness towards the war effort, soon matching the unicorns in just how violent a pony could be. Due to the war soon losing any sense of nobility or honor, it was not entirely uncommon for captured mares to be... used. This is important because this gave way to the first generation of Coltriellan unicorns. Sivo, and a good amount of the Coltriellan population already saw unicorns as evil-incarnate, so the ponies born with horns were quickly exiled from Coltriella if not outright killed. The exiled unicorns were sent who-knew-where, usually left in the wild to fend for themselves at even newborn ages, but there was a single spot of hope for these unicorns that proved to be the downfall of Sivo: Belezia, the unicorn exile of Ardennian, a country several thousand miles northwest that had deep suspicions about magic."

"Belezia had traveled to Coltriella as she'd heard of its freedoms when she was nearly murdered in her home country for her practice, and had lived in relative peace until the war broke out. She was no soldier so she did not fight, but she was famous for being highly magical and was run out of the city."

"She did not move on. As she saw the other unicorns the country had abandoned she decided to gather them. Belezia lead the unicorns to safety, but when word spread that this group had appeared, that a group that designated itself as the 'Belezians' had popped up, Sivo ordered their execution. Though the struggles were comparatively small, it showed the amount of power the Belezians truly had, Belezia herself being a magnificent battle-unicorn, and having imparted such knowledge on her followers."

"With Sivo too focused on the war, he could barely keep an eye on his own city... or his own son. In a twist of irony, his son saw the exact same thing Sivo did in his father: the source of the city's corruption. He knew Golding and Coltriella were both degrading themselves with this war and making horrible decisions, among them was Coltriella kicking out the unicorns and

forcing them to fend for themselves, and in them he saw a way to stop the war."

"For many long years the Belezians had been exiled from Coltriella, staying within its borders as, traveling elsewhere they got equally hostile responses for being savage Coltriellans or cruel Golding ponies, and the other countries wanted no part of either of the warring sides, with too many conflicts spilling into their borders already. The Belezians, lacking a home, were surprised to get a visit from To'Sivo'Coltriella's son. Belezia was a wise, wonderful mare, and invited the son in to hear his story. Sivo's son was idealistic, and felt there was only one way to stop the mindless fighting. He did not see Belezia or her followers or any unicorn as monsters, he saw them as powerful allies. Belezia, wanting to find a place for her and her kin to settle, especially after the many grueling attacks that left their numbers so few, agreed to help him stop the war."

"While Sivo was in his war council, his son opened the secret passage-ways inside Coltriella and lead the Belezians through the water system to the palace, where they met up with the rest of the son's forces. Vega, the daughter of a retired general was among them, helping lead the ponies that the son trusted to let in on the plan, and while initially suspicious, the Belezians were greeted into the ranks. They snuck into the palace as Sivo planned the war in his throne room, and was understandably surprised when the wall of the room melted. The generals and the nobles were quickly dispatched by Vega and her soldiers, while the Belezians burned through the royal guards and fended off the soldiers as Sivo's son, in front of the heads of Coltriella, drove a blade through his father's heart and declared himself the ruler of Coltriella."

"None could refute him, and by law he was made To'Ao'Coltriella. In about a day, the war stopped. All the soldiers turned their eyes to the palace to see what To'Ao'Coltriella would do. Ao, the one heading our city, our country at this very moment, gathered his soldiers and marched out into the field of battle, stood before Golding's forces with Coltriella's soldiers, with the Belezians behind him, and declared the war done with. Coltriella returned to Coltriella, and Golding quietly held back to hear orders from Galio."

"Ao was already facing complications, even with Galio making his trip to Coltriella. It had gone unnoticed at first, but near the end of the war the

farmers began to report that the land's vegetation was receding. Desert was quickly taking over, even in untouched farmers' fields the crops were dying out. Ao quickly called for every available crop to be harvested before they could die out, starting what would be known as the Great End Harvest. Even worse, the real reason for his sudden uprising came to light: his late wife, To'Quo'Coltriella (You can figure it out, I believe in you!), was deathly ill, wracked with pain and delusions, a sickness that left her on the very brink of death. Even worse was she was pregnant with Sadi'o'farrosun'o'eropafaniquehuomla, and if something wasn't done, Quo and Sadi would die. When Galio approached, once again to ask for the plant... Ao, knowing there would be trouble, denied him. The plant would be used to save Quo and Sadi, and since there was only enough to do just that since the depleting of the land, he had to, for his family's sake. He told Galio as much, without insulting him, hoping he would understand... But Galio, tired of Coltriella and watching his brother sit within inches of death, grew enraged. The two shouted, fought, and argued for hours as, in the hospital, the sacred plant was given to Quo."

"No pony attacked the other, but the arguments grew heated and intense, Lord Galio losing his calm composure while Ao went from defending himself to insulting Golding's recent war policies, but it came to a stop when they were interrupted by Quo's doctor. The plant had been used, but despite this, Quo had died. But in her place, Sadi had been saved. Galio, furious with the fight, with his own fear, and with Ao's denial, left with a very heavy threat of another, even worse war."

"Ao spent the next few months rebuilding the city, dismantling or changing the laws to act more fairly, freed up the trade even to attract more foreign fare. With Coltriella once again being rebuilt, with trade slowly trickling back again with the war temporarily called off, Coltriella began to calm down again. Ao kept an eye on Golding though, the threat of Galio's words still heavy in the air, yet Golding was oddly quiet. No pony knew much except that Galio had taken on a new pony in his court, merely called the Golding Witch due to her appearance, and the only pony who knows anything about her is Galio. Rumors sprung up about her, many claiming she could grant mighty power in a pony, and Ao feared the power this witch could grant would be used against Coltriella. Years began to pass, but nothing came of it. Coltriella breathed a sigh of relief when Galio came forward to hastily create an official treaty, but some are still worried it is just a ploy. Little is

known about Firago nowadays, some think he got better, some think he died, nopony knows."

Sabine reached for her cooled cup of tea and began to drink it down, and happily went for the other ponies' tea cups to get some moisture on her now dry tongue. The six of them were quietly thinking about the story they'd been told, and somewhere, deep down, Sabine felt proud that she got through that whole thing. She even get all wordy somewhere through it! "That is the history of Golding and Coltriella together. That is the story you wanted." She spoke up again, grabbing their surprised attentions. She grinned a little and drank the very last of the tea. "All that's left is your story, my friends."