

# Corona Blaze

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# Chapter 1

Applejack hurried through the streets of Ponyville, trying not to let fear show on her face. Most of the other ponies hadn't noticed that anything was amiss yet, and she didn't want to start them worrying. Here and there, she saw a pony with a troubled expression that matched her own, but it looked like none of them were talking to each other yet. That was good; it gave her time to do something before panic set in.

Not that Applejack had any idea what to do about a problem like this.

She reached her destination and pounded on the door of the library tree. When there was no response for several seconds, she knocked again, harder. As she raised a hoof to knock a third time, Spike opened the door.

"Oh, hey there Applejack." Spike was yawning; the little dragon must have been napping. "What brings you here?"

"No time," Applejack said in a rush. "I gotta talk to Twilight right away."

"Twilight? She's not here, remember? Today's her big expedition with Princess Celestia."

"That's today? Consarn it, that's just what I need!" Applejack tossed her mane in frustration. "Send her my way when she gets back, alright?"

Spike nodded, and Applejack trotted off. She glanced upwards, confirming what she knew to be true. The sky was cloudless, giving her an unobstructed view of the sun. It was high noon, and the sun cast narrow shadows straight down.

It had been high noon for at least two hours.

It was impossible, of course. The sun couldn't get stuck. And yet it had.

Applejack returned to Sugarcube Corner to find four other ponies waiting for her. Dash and Pinkie had been more successful than she had in finding the others, it seemed.

“Bad news, y’all.” Applejack joined her friends at their table. “Seems Twilight’s out of town today. We’re on our own.”

“Not a problem.” Rainbow Dash looked around the table confidently. “There’s still five of us. We’ll get this fixed up before she gets back!”

“Um, excuse me,” said Fluttershy. “I think this is kind of a bigger problem than we’re used to. I don’t know how we can fix the, uh, sun.”

“Well I am a weatherpony,” said Rainbow Dash. “No reason I can’t fly up there and see what’s wrong with it.”

Rarity gasped. “Don’t be absurd, Rainbow Dash! No pony’s ever been able to fly that high. At least, none have ever come back from trying!”

Applejack frowned. “I gotta agree with Rarity on this one. A stunt like that sounds too dangerous even for you, Dash.”

“Well I don’t hear any other ideas!” Rainbow Dash wasn’t shouting, but she was close.

“Don’t worry, sillies!” said Pinkie Pie. “Twilight’s only away for the day, right? So she should be back super soon! She’s real good at figuring out weird things like this. So we just need to wait and she’ll tell us how to fix it all up!”

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. “Great. *Waiting.*”

“It *does* seem to be the best course, dear,” said Rarity. “I don’t see how we can accomplish much while she’s away.”

With a crash, something burst into the bakery. A small orange blur darted around, between, and occasionally over the five friends.

“OhmygoshRainbowDashIfoundyou!

Theprincessishereandshe’slookingforyouguysyougottagettothetownsquareandrunaway!”

“Whoa there, sugarcube!” Applejack caught Scootaloo mid-leap and held her still. “I can’t hardly understand you. Try that again, but slower.”

“Right!” Scootaloo squirmed her way to the ground, where she mercifully stayed still. “So the princess showed up a little while ago. She said there was some kind of problem with the sky. Now she wants to see Rainbow Dash and the rest of you guys, so she sent me to look for you!”

Applejack’s face lit up. Finally, some good news! “Princess Celestia is here?”

“Nope!” said Scootaloo. “Not that princess! The other one!”

Princess Luna was waiting for them in the town square, where a sizeable crowd was watching her quietly from a safe distance. The five ponies bowed as they approached. Luna gestured impatiently for them to rise.

Rarity stepped to the front of the group. “It’s delightful to see you again, Princess Luna, and in happier circumstances this time.”

“I’m not so sure about that.” The alicorn’s eyes darted to the crowd, then back to Rarity. “Is there somewhere private we can talk?”

“My boutique should suffice, I suppose.”

Luna nodded, and Rarity led the way inside. As soon as the doors were closed, Applejack spoke up. “Alright, Princess Luna, ma’am, how about you tell us what’s goin’ on. I’m guessin’ it’s got something to do with how the sun’s stuck and all.”

“You’re right,” said Luna. “I’m afraid this goes beyond the sun itself, though.”

“How’s that?” asked Applejack.

“You remember when I was... well, I’ll be blunt. When I was Nightmare Moon.”

“Of course!” Rainbow Dash burst out. “It wasn’t easy to forget!”

“Indeed not,” continued Luna. “And now the same thing has happened to my sister. If she is not stopped, Equestria will suffer from eternal day.”

“WHAT?” screamed Pinkie Pie. The others were simply shocked into silence.

“Why would she do that?” demanded Rainbow Dash.

“I don’t know, exactly.” Luna let out a mournful sigh. “Both of us have a primal side that reflects our true self, but without the slightest hint of restraint. It is constantly trying to break loose and tilt the balance of the Heavens to its own side. Part of being an alicorn is learning to master that aspect of ourselves and keep it in check. It’s often been... difficult for me. Celestia was always much better at it than I am. I can’t even imagine how this happened.”

“Hold on,” said Applejack. “How do you know that’s what happened at all?”

“When my sister stopped the cycle of night and day, I felt it. I can still feel it; the power she’s exerting hasn’t let up since it started three hours ago. Celestia doesn’t have the strength to do that without giving into her primal side. At least, I don’t think she does. But even if she could, she wouldn’t! The primal side would do it in a heartbeat, though. There’s no other explanation.”

“Three hours ago?” said Pinkie Pie. “That means you must’ve run here from Canterlot just as soon as it happened!”

"I did. The Elements of Harmony are the only thing that can save my sister now. But there are only five of you here. Where is Miss Sparkle?"

"I'm afraid she is away today," said Rarity. "We were waiting for her to return before we solved this problem, in fact."

"Yeah," said Applejack, "she's out explorin' with... oh no." Her face fell. "With Princess Celestia."

"That," said Luna, "is a problem."

Twilight winced as the door slammed shut behind her, leaving her alone in the chamber. For a moment, she was paralyzed by fear, but curiosity quickly won out and she began to explore her surroundings. Twilight found herself in a tastefully-decorated suite of rooms. The brick walls were hung with fine tapestries, and the floor was covered by a plush umber carpet. There was even a study packed with bookshelves containing a fairly impressive collection. All in all, it was the nicest prison Twilight had ever seen.

There was no mistaking it for anything other than a prison, however. The only way in or out was the single heavy wooden door, and those two guard ponies were surely still on the other side. There wasn't a single window; if they let her see out, she'd be able to teleport out. And Princess Celestia- no, Twilight reminded herself, it wasn't the princess anymore- *the queen* had made it clear that Twilight wasn't going to leave for a long time, if ever.

Twilight curled up on the suite's canopied bed and fought off the urge to cry. She was terrified and alone. She had watched the princess, her mentor, turn into something... else. All of Equestria was in terrible danger. Her friends were far away and probably unaware of the trouble they were in. The worst part was that Twilight knew it was all her fault.

In that case, she'd just have to put things right! She was trapped for now, but Twilight wasn't about to give up hope. She took a deep breath and started thinking. There had to be some way to get out of here, or to undo what had happened, or... or something!

Try as she might, Twilight couldn't think of anything. She couldn't do anything useful without the other Elements of Harmony. She couldn't contact them from inside her prison, and escape seemed impossible. Her mind kept drifting, replaying the day's events over and over...

Everfree Castle was much less frightening in the light of day, Twilight reflected. The last time she had come here, the dim moonlight had given the crumbling stonework and creeping vines a foreboding appearance, as though the ruins were some sort of slumbering monster. Now, it just looked like an old, abandoned building.

The time of day was only part of the reason for the change. Then, she had been on a dangerous quest to find the Elements of Harmony and confront the dreaded Nightmare Moon. Today she was accompanying her mentor on nothing more sinister than an archeological expedition.

Twilight trotted to keep up with Princess Celestia's long-legged stride. "I'm so glad we're finally doing this," she said. "I have so many questions about the Elements."

"So do I, my faithful student. Not to mention it has been far too long since we've been able to spend time together."

Twilight glanced over her shoulder to the two armored pegasi who were following at a discreet distance. The royal guards had barely spoken a word all day. Aside from them, she was alone with the Princess for the first time since she had moved to Ponyville. That was even more exciting than the thought of learning about the Elements.



“This looks promising.” Celestia’s words interrupted Twilight’s thoughts. The princess was standing in front of a wide staircase leading down into the earth. Moss and a few thin plants grew in the cracks between the flagstones as the stairs descended into darkness. “If there’s a vault or something similar here, it’s probably underground.” She looked at Twilight with a faintly amused smirk. “Shall we?”

“Of course, Princess!” Twilight concentrated and summoned an aura of light around her horn, illuminating the depths of the stairway. It continued downwards for perhaps twenty feet before it ended in a stone door.

Celestia turned to the guards. “Wait here, please. We should be down there for a few hours at least.”

“Are you sure?” asked one of the guards. “There could be something dangerous.”

“These ruins have been abandoned for six hundred years, Captain. I’m quite sure we’ll be safe.”

The guards looked like they wanted to object, but they stayed behind. Twilight was elated to be truly alone with the Princess. The two of them descended the stairs and began to explore. They found a network of tunnels far larger than the simple basement Twilight had expected. The only illumination was the violet light from Twilight’s horn. The tunnels were in perfect condition; down here, there was no rain to wear at the stones and no sunlight to let moss grow and erode them.

As they explored, the two ponies talked of many things. Twilight spoke of her life in Ponyville: her best friends, the other ponies she met, her progress in her studies, and a dozen other things. Celestia told Twilight the latest news from Canterlot and the School for Gifted Unicorns. And they talked about the wonders they discovered beneath Everfree Castle. They found a great stone table covered by fine vases in a style Twilight had never seen. They found a stack of tarnished silver plates in a room filled with crumbling ceramics. They found rusted suits of armor, chests full of unfamiliar bronze coins, and a statue of a phoenix with magnificent jewels

for eyes. But they had come in search of information about the Elements of Harmony, and nothing they found offered even the slightest clue. The ponies left the treasures for later and delved further into the catacombs. The hallways sloped downwards, taking them deeper within the earth.

At last, they came to a great stone door carved with ancient runes. Most of the writing was unfamiliar, but Twilight recognized one sigil: a five-pointed star with a circle in the center. It was an ancient symbol for the Elements of Harmony.

Twilight eagerly pushed the door open and stepped into the chamber beyond. She was in a long, wide hall with an arched ceiling high overhead. The walls were covered by frescoes in a variety of bright colors. The paint was badly faded in places, but Twilight recognized depictions of Princess Celestia and Nightmare Moon. She didn't study them in too much detail, however, as her attention was drawn to several upright stone tablets at the far end of the hall. These were covered in runes, but the writing was too small to read from this far away.

Twilight was halfway to the tablets when she noticed Celestia wasn't with her. In fact, the princess hadn't crossed the threshold into the hall. "What are you waiting for, Princess?"

"There's some sort of magic throughout this chamber," said Celestia. "I don't know what it's for, but if it's lasted this long, it must be powerful. The magic of the Elements is often hostile to alicorns. I don't want to set off any old defenses."

"But we came all this way to find something like this! I can see the symbol for the Elements of Harmony on those tablets. You can't turn back now!"

Celestia peered curiously at the tablets, but she stayed put. "I'll just have to hear about it from you. Ancient magics such as this can be quite strong."

"You know these runes much better than I do, Princess. I'm not sure how well I can translate them on my own. Besides, you're Princess

Celestia! Even if there is some kind of old trap, I'm sure your magic is more than strong enough to keep you safe."

"I suppose you're right about that," said Celestia. "It does seem worth the risk." She stepped forward.

The princess's hoof had barely crossed the threshold when Twilight felt a magical charge fill the air. It only lasted for a fraction of a moment before it faded-and with a tremendous *crack*, the ceiling caved in.

Twilight reacted instantly. As the ceiling broke apart and tons upon tons of stone fell towards her, she reached out with her magic and seized the largest block of rubble she could see. Twilight whipped the slab of rock into position several feet above her. The slab acted as a shield and kept Twilight from being squashed outright, but rock crashed down on all sides with a deafening crash. Twilight quickly divided her concentration and grabbed several more large chunks of rubble, holding them in place and preventing the walls of her makeshift cave from collapsing in on her.

The strain was terrible. Twilight was holding back more weight than she could easily imagine, and she wasn't sure how long she could keep it up.

"Princess!" she shouted. "I'm trapped! Help me!"

Twilight felt something touch her thoughts. It was a warm, comforting feeling, like a sunbeam stretched across the floor of her library. Words sprang into her mind: *Twilight! Oh, thank the Heavens, you're alive!*

In the midst of the noise, terror, and confusion, Twilight spared a thought for how *weird* telepathic contact felt.

"Princess Celestia! Is that you?"

*It is. Don't speak; I can't hear you, but I am reading your thoughts. I know everything that is happening to you. I'm not sure how much air you have, and you should not waste it talking.*

Behind those thoughts, Twilight could sense another mind. Although it was somehow distant, this mind felt hot and terrible. It was a searing bonfire too intense to approach. It was a white-hot forge blazing high enough to melt steel. It was the merciless sun of a cloudless summer noon. This mind also spoke, and it said **Set me free.**

*Princess?* thought Twilight, *What is that? Why is it in my head, too?*

*I'll explain later. Just hold on for now. I'm using my magic to dig my way to you, but there's a lot of rock. This will take some time.*

*I don't know how long I can hold on, Princess! It's so heavy!*

**Set me free. Only I have the power to stop this.**

*I have faith in you, Twilight. Be strong. I'm coming.*

The slab Twilight was using as a shield slid down several inches. She was tired, and the weight of earth piled atop the slab was too much. Even Twilight's powerful magic was only slowing it down now. The noise was tremendous as the massive rock ground against the other stones and crushed the smaller ones to gravel. Twilight redoubled her efforts, and the slab stopped its descent. The effort was too much to sustain, however, and after several seconds the slab began bearing down on her once again.

*Princess! I'm scared!*

*I'm coming, Twilight!*

**You see? She is doomed! Set me free or your pupil will die!**

The slab was only inches above her now. With a final, desperate effort, Twilight tried to halt it again. The rock barely slowed. Twilight threw herself to the ground to buy herself a few more precious feet. She heard some sort of distant rumbling. Perhaps it was Princess Celestia digging towards her?

Twilight felt the rock press down on her back. It crushed her into the floor, and she found she couldn't breathe. It was only a matter of seconds before she was squeezed into nothing.

*Celestia, please! It hurts!*

***You brought her here! You are responsible! She will die, and it will be your fault! I am the only one who can save her! You must set me free! Set me free! SET ME FREE!***

A savage white light abruptly filled Twilight's vision, dazzling her eyes. Instantly, the rubble around her ceased to exist. She gasped in lungfuls of air as the hideous pressure vanished from her back. It was at least half a minute before her eyes recovered and she could see again.

When her vision returned, Twilight barely recognized the hall. The walls had been smashed to pieces, and although the larger chunks of rubble had vanished, small stones and gravel were knee-deep in most places. The ceiling was an irregular patchwork of boulders, still glowing red-orange from where they had been welded together. Twilight gaped at the raw power required to do so much so quickly. She had never suspected that such might existed.

Standing in the midst of this was an alicorn. Her coat was a light yellow that shone faintly with its own harsh light. Her tail and mane were a violent red-orange, seemingly composed of a thousand tiny, dancing flames that drifted in a soft breeze despite the still air. She wore a light helmet and breastplate of gold. Both were covered in delicate filigree, and the breastplate was set with a single amethyst the size of a pony's hoof.

Twilight's hooves were shaking. She stared for several seconds before she found her voice. "Princess Celestia?"

"Not anymore, child." The alicorn's voice was similar to Princess Celestia's, but only to a point. Its voice was higher, richer, and more resonant. There was no trace of Celestia's tone of gentle humor and compassion. Instead it conveyed authority and terrible pride. "Celestia is gone. I am Corona Blaze, the Queen of Daylight!"

# Chapter 2

Applejack trudged along the path to the Carousel Boutique. She was tired down to her bones. According to the clocks, it had been six days since the sun had stopped moving. She felt as if it had been twice that long. Even if she hadn't been so busy, she couldn't sleep well with the sun in the sky.

Still, the town needed her, so Applejack kept going. Ever since what ponies were calling the Dawn, Ponyville had been on the verge of chaos. Mayor Mare had kept the panic to a minimum, bless her soul, but she had no talent for organizing the town in a crisis like this. Twilight would have been the natural choice for the job, but she was still missing. Most the responsibility had fallen to Applejack simply because she stepped up when she saw work that needed to be done. She wanted to be back on the farm, helping Big Macintosh finish the harvest before the constant sun wilted the apples more than it already had, but she had duties here in town.

"Hey AJ," came a voice from above. "I got good news and bad news." Rainbow Dash landed beside Applejack without her usual energy or poise. The two of them were equally exhausted, Applejack knew. Rainbow Dash had no trouble sleeping during the day, but she was as busy as anypony. The weather team was working day and night—well, working around the clock—to gather clouds and provide some much-needed shade.

Applejack stopped walking and turned to face her friend. "That's a sight better than anything else I've heard today. What's the good news?"

"Cloud Kicker and Lodestar found a storm front off to the west, and I've sent a team to bring it in. We'll have some rain in five, six hours."

"Tell them they did good," said Applejack. "All our crops have been drying up, and I've been worried they'll start dying soon. This oughta help a lot. What's the bad news?"

"I spotted another group of refugees headed our way, and it's a big one. Looks like twelve, maybe fifteen ponies coming out of the Everfree Forest. They'll get here real soon."

"From the forest? That's crazy! There ain't no reason for nopony to brave the forest just to move here. What do we have here that's so special, anyway?"

"Well," said Rainbow Dash, "we do have the best weather team in Equestria. That's a big deal, now that cloud cover is the only way to keep the sun off. I've seen what's happened to plants far from town, where we don't protect them. It's not pretty."

"That explains part of it. We've sure got a lot of refugees from homesteads and small villages, and I can see why they'd have to come here. But there's a few from Fillydelphia and Flankashire, too. Those are big cities with their own weather ponies. I don't know why anypony would leave *there* to come *here* because of this mess."

"Uh, yeah, Pinkie was telling me about that. I guess word's been getting out that Princess Luna is here. Pinkie thinks ponies are showing up because they expect Luna to do... well, something."

Applejack tossed her mane. "Yeah? / expect her to do something! When is she gonna get off her royal flank and fix this mess?"

"You're right, Applejack! I'm gonna go give her a piece of my mind! She's been sitting this one out for too long!" Rainbow Dash beat her wings and prepared to zip away.

Before she could go, Applejack clamped her teeth on the pegasus pony's tail and held her in place. "Whoa there, missy! Let's not upset her. The last thing we need is another crazy princess."

"I guess you're right," said Rainbow Dash. "So what do we do?"

"First thing is to handle these refugees. Tell Pinkie Pie to point their leader towards Rarity and get the rest of 'em something to eat. Then get ready to bring in this storm of yours. I'll let Rarity know what's coming."

“A dozen of them, you say? Well, it won’t be easy, but I suppose I can find places for everypony.” Rarity looked around the room that had once been her workspace. Along with the shop below, she had turned it into temporary housing for the refugees who had flooded into Ponyville since the Dawn. She had set up rows of cots and makeshift mattresses, then hung up lengths of fabric to give her guests something approaching privacy. “Now that the cabin for Berry Cream and her family is finished, we’ll have a bit more space to work with here. Do you know if it’s *exactly* a dozen? I’d like to have everything ready before they arrive, if it’s possible.”

“I’m not sure,” said Applejack. “Dash did the counting, and she’s not so much for details.”

“Oh, well. I can start preparing just the same.”

“Thanks for putting up with all this, Rarity. I know you’re hoping to get everypony moved out so you can have your shop back.”

“It’s fine, darling. I did offer the space, if you’ll remember. These ponies need *somewhere* to stay until they find something more permanent.”

“I just don’t want you pushing yourself too hard, is all.”

“An odd thing to hear from you, of all ponies,” said Rarity. “When was the last time you slept?”

Applejack sighed. “I guess we’ve all been a mite busy lately.”

Rarity looked up as Swift Breeze, one of her guests (as she called them), came up the stairs from the shop. “Excuse me, Miss Rarity,” she said. “There’s somepony downstairs to see you. She looks like a new arrival.”

Rarity looked at Applejack. “Do you suppose she’s the leader of this new group?”



“Reckon so,” said Applejack. “Let’s see how we can help.”

The two of them went down to the shop, then froze as they recognized the unicorn standing in the doorway.

“YOU!” cried Applejack. “You’ve got some nerve, coming back here after what you pulled!”

“Hello again,” said Trixie. “We need to talk.”

Twilight was so deep in concentration she almost didn’t hear the door to her prison open. She was trying to use her magic to pry a brick from the bedroom wall. It was extraordinarily difficult; the brick was part of the wall, and telekinesis tended to treat them as the same object. So far, the escape attempt did not seem promising. After nearly a week of effort, she had managed to remove all of nine bricks. She didn’t know how thick the wall was or what was on the other side. She kept at it, though. There was little else to do.

When she heard someone enter the suite, Twilight quickly and silently levitated the bed back into place, hiding the hole. She rushed out to see who had come. The guards who brought her food were her only company, but they were surprisingly friendly. They often stayed to chat and tell her the recent news. Corona Blaze had taken control of Canterlot quickly enough, and was establishing her authority in nearby cities and towns. Refugees were being welcomed into the palace. And the eternal day continued.

It was no guard who entered now, however, but Queen Corona Blaze herself. Twilight was overcome by conflicting emotions when she saw the alicorn. Fear, at the being that had destroyed the cycle of day and night; anger, that it had taken away her beloved princess; guilt, for her own part in creating the queen; and awe, at the sheer power she had seen Corona Blaze wield. Unsure how to react, Twilight froze.

“Relax, my faithful student,” said Corona Blaze. “I only wish to talk.”

“I’m not your student.” The words were out of Twilight’s mouth before she could think. She hadn’t meant to start the conversation like that, but hearing Corona Blaze lay claim to Celestia’s relationship with her was too much.

Corona Blaze ignored the bitterness in Twilight’s voice. “You could be, if you want. I can teach you so much more than Celestia ever did. There are powers she feared to share, even with you. I have need of ponies with your skill to help me in the work of reshaping Equestria.”

“Why would I ever help you? All you’ve done is try to destroy Equestria and throw me in this prison!”

“There is much you do not understand yet, child. I do apologize for keeping you here, but I saw no other way. I had to be sure you did not join forces with the other Elements of Harmony before we talked, and I had no time for that conversation. In the beginning, I had to move quickly to control the palace before chaos set in. In truth, there are duties I am neglecting even now, but I have kept you waiting here too long as it is.

“Know that I am here to save this world, not to destroy it. For too long, ponies have lived in fear. The manticores, harpies, ursas, and other creatures terrorize your kind, and Princess Celestia has done little to stop them. She gave you some aid, of course, but only what she could provide without disrupting her precious ‘natural balance’. But I have already ended the nights that sheltered these creatures and let them prey upon you! Soon I will take direct control of every town and city in Equestria and make sure nothing threatens you ever again! I can save *all* of you!

“Hear me, Twilight Sparkle. I am only trying to keep my little ponies safe, as I did for you beneath Everfree Castle. Will you help me in this task?”

Twilight thought furiously. Even if she was misguided, Corona Blaze seemed to sincerely want the best for everypony. There was a chance reason could work.

"I don't think what you're doing is worth the price," she said carefully. "Ponies need the freedom to decide certain things for themselves. Sometimes those decisions might hurt us, but not as much as it hurts to have the decision taken away completely. There's a good reason why Princess Celestia always stayed in Canterlot and let the cities decide their own business for themselves. If you try to control all of Equestria, even if it's to keep ponies safe, you won't make them happy."

Corona Blaze frowned slightly. "I am disappointed, Twilight Sparkle. I have heard these arguments before, but I expected better from you. They are mere rationalizations, meant to justify the way things were when nopony believed change was possible. In truth, when ponies are afraid or in pain, they cry out for help. Now there is someone who will answer. When I establish my rule over all Equestria, you will understand."

"I disagree. I won't help you do this."

"Very well." Corona Blaze turned to leave. "In that case, you will remain here indefinitely, where you are no threat to my rule."

"Indefinitely?" Twilight gasped. "You can't do that!"

"I am the queen of all Equestria," said Corona Blaze without looking back, "and there is nothing I cannot do."

"Alright Trixie," said Applejack. "How about you tell us why you came back here."

The three of them-Applejack, Rarity, and Trixie-were in Rarity's bedroom. It was the only private space left in Carousel Boutique, and Rarity had ushered them inside before things could get "heated", as she put it.

Trixie was no longer the immaculately-groomed pony they had last encountered. The cape and hat were gone, and her coat showed evidence

of her journey through the Everfree Forest. Nevertheless, Trixie's haughty bearing hadn't changed in the slightest.

"It's simple enough," said Trixie. "I was performing in the village of Connecticolt when the Dawn struck. Once the crops started to die, ponies started to leave. I convinced one group that Ponyville was the safest place to be, then escorted them through the Everfree Forest to get here."

"Any *why* did you tell them Ponyville was safe?" asked Applejack.

"Because of Twilight Sparkle, of course," said Trixie. "If anyone can save Equestria, it's her! The tale of how I helped her defeat the ursa minor is my most popular story, you know."

"But that wasn't how it happened at all!" said Rarity.

"Well, no," said Trixie. "But ponies need hope, especially in times like this. My stories can give them hope. Telling them I was a hero helped me get them through the forest in one piece."

"Well, you came all this way for nothing," said Applejack. "Twilight ain't here."

"Why not? Is she on some sort of adventure to bring back the night?"

"Dunno," said Applejack. "She's been missing ever since the Dawn. We think something happened to her."

"But that's not how this was supposed to happen at all!" said Trixie.

"What do you mean, supposed to happen?" asked Rarity.

"She's the most powerful unicorn in Equestria! She has to save us! Even her name is perfect-she's the hero who stops the unending day!"

"That ain't how this works at all," said Applejack. "Twilight's good, but she's just Twilight."

"Quite right," said Rarity. "She is skilled, to be sure, but on her own she isn't so far beyond any other pony. It's only as part of a team that she truly shines."

“And she’s been out on her lonesome lately…” Applejack trailed off. She had been too busy lately to speculate about what Twilight was going through, but the thought of her friend off by herself was difficult to stomach.

Trixie broke the silence before it became too uncomfortable. “So what am I supposed to do *now*?”

Applejack sighed. “Well, we’ve got a bunch of refugees, so we know what to do with you. Rarity can get you settled, I guess.”

“Indeed,” said Rarity. “I’ll find space for your friends and yourself, so long as you remain on your *best behavior*. I don’t want any more of your ‘stories’, understand?”

“Very well,” said Trixie. “But please don’t contradict what I’ve already told my companions. It does mean a lot to them.”

Before Rarity could answer, there was a knock at the door. “I’m sorry, Miss Rarity,” came Swift Breeze’s voice. “Someone’s coming to-”

Swift Breeze was cut off as the door opened and Princess Luna stuck her head inside. “Oh, good, both of you. You’re the last ones.” The princess entered the bedroom, followed by Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, and Fluttershy.

“Excuse me, Princess,” said Rarity, “but we’re in the middle of something. Can this wait?”

“I’m afraid not,” said Luna. “I’ve learned where Twilight Sparkle is.”

Trixie backed into a corner and managed not to gape at the alicorn. A performer was not supposed to gape.

“So how’d you find her?” asked Rainbow Dash.

“I have spent the last several days gathering information from the palace in Canterlot. It seems-”

“Hold on,” said Rainbow Dash. “How in Equestria did you do that? You’ve been here this whole time!”

"I have friends within the palace, and enough magic to communicate with them. It is difficult and time-consuming at this distance, but one of the first things I learned was that I am to be arrested if I return to Canterlot, so it seemed prudent to remain here until now. Are there any other questions, or shall I continue?"

Applejack gave Rainbow Dash an annoyed glance. "You'd best let her explain. This here's important."

"Yeah, yeah," said Rainbow Dash. "Go ahead."

"There are two things you must know," continued Luna. "First, it seems my earlier guess was correct. Celestia's primal side is indeed dominant. It has perverted her deepest desires to its own purposes. She styles herself Queen Corona Blaze, and she has made it her mission to protect everypony from all possible danger."

"That doesn't seem bad at all!" said Pinkie Pie.

"Please remember what Nightmare Moon did when she was motivated by the mere desire to be loved. Corona Blaze will be just as bad, if not worse. She intends to rule over Equestria with an iron hoof to ensure that nothing happens anywhere without her approval. And of course there is the matter of the eternal day." Luna sighed. "I knew my sister had an overprotective streak, but this... I never knew a part of her wanted to be a tyrant."

"Um, Miss Luna," said Fluttershy, "I don't think Princess Celestia actually feels that way. This is a different person, remember. Nightmare Moon wasn't you, and this isn't Celestia."

"That's... not entirely true," said Luna. "The primal side does not have desires of its own; it can only twist or magnify an alicorn's existing thoughts. I am sure there are things you want, but that you know are wrong, and so you never admit them... perhaps not even to yourself. Nonetheless these thoughts are a part of you. Being an alicorn simply makes that truth more dangerous."

“All very interesting, Princess, but now ain’t the time,” said Applejack. “You were gonna tell us about Twilight.”

“True. Now you know what you face. The only way to stop my sister is with the Elements of Harmony, which means we need Miss Sparkle. Now, she’s-”

“Hey, back up!” Rainbow Dash ignored Applejack’s glare. “What’s this about the only way? Can’t you banish Celestia if you need to? She did it to you, after all.”

“I probably could. But I will not.” Luna’s voice was tight and carefully controlled. “No pony deserves to go through that. It will not be necessary in any case. Twilight Sparkle is currently imprisoned within the palace, in the Alabaster Tower. As soon as I break her out, we’ll be able to restore my sister. I suggest the five of you come along to help me. That way, we’ll have all six Elements together as soon as we find Miss Sparkle, and we’ll be able to end this whole thing as quickly as possible.”

Applejack looked thoughtful. “It could work. I dunno if breaking into the palace is gonna be as easy as all that, though.”

“For me, it will not be too difficult,” said Luna. “The ponies of Canterlot fear Corona Blaze, but they do not love her. I believe few will stand against me. So long as we avoid my sister, we have little to fear.”

“That’s perfect!” Trixie stepped forward from the corner she had occupied, drawing surprised looks from the other ponies. “The Great and Powerful Trixie will create a diversion! Corona Blaze will be enthralled, and you’ll be able to save Twilight Sparkle!”

“Yeah, I was gonna ask,” said Rainbow Dash. “What’s *she* doing here?”

“Leaving,” said Rarity. “We’ll do quite well on our own, thank you.”

Applejack stepped in front of Trixie and glared at her from inches away. “That’s right. I don’t like you and I don’t trust you. No way you’re coming along on something like this.”

“Oh, come on!” said Trixie. “You need me! If I don’t slow down Corona Blaze, who will? And I’m sure you all know I’m *more* than strong enough to draw her attention.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Trixie,” said Luna. “I’m sure you’re quite powerful, but on a mission such as this, cohesion is more important than strength. If the others don’t trust you, then I cannot allow you to accompany us.”

“Fine! See how far you get without me!” Trixie stalked out of the room. “You’ll come back *begging* for my help, and we’ll see how generous I feel *then!*” She slammed the door behind her.

Fluttershy’s gaze lingered on the door. “Do you think that was a good idea? It sounds like she really wants to help.”

“Don’t worry ‘bout that none,” said Applejack. “She ain’t nothing but a showoff. A pony like that would just get in our way.”

“So what are we doing now?” asked Pinkie Pie.

“Now we prepare,” said Luna. “Finish your affairs here and gather what you need for the journey. We will meet here again in two hours’ time.”

Rainbow Dash grinned. “Let’s move, girls. We’ve got a castle to storm!”



# Chapter 3

The Great and Powerful Trixie muttered darkly to herself as she stalked through the makeshift refugee camp in the Carousel Boutique. How dare those ponies leave her behind? Why couldn't they see how much they needed her inimitable skills? Well, she'd show them! She'd show them *all*!

"Hi, Miss Trixie! Nice place they've got here, isn't it? It's not Manehattan, but it sure beats a hole in the ground. And I should know, after these last three days."

Trixie pulled herself out of her reverie as Golden Cob approached her. The light yellow earth pony had been the mayor of Connecticolt before that village was abandoned. Trixie had guided Cob and eleven others through the Everfree Forest to reach Ponyville, and she had grown to like him during the journey.

"It's not bad here." Trixie forced a thin smile onto her face. "Is everyone settling in okay?"

"Well enough. We'll feel better once we find a way to make ourselves useful." Cob paused and looked closely at Trixie. He had a way of looking at a pony as though there was nothing else in the world worth looking at. It was part of what Trixie liked about him, but just now she could do without it. "Is something wrong? You look a little out of sorts."

Trixie had originally planned to keep the day's events to herself, but Cob was just so easy to talk to. "Princess Luna is taking Twilight's friends on an adventure to save Equestria, and they're leaving me behind. Leaving *me* behind! It's infuriating!"

Cob frowned thoughtfully. "Why? After you helped Twilight Sparkle save the town from that urso, I'd think they'd want you along with them."

“Of course,” Trixie said, “but the princess wanted me to stay and guard the town while they were away.” It was an easy enough lie, and there was no way she would tell Cob what had really happened. His respect, and that of the other ponies from Connecticut, meant a lot to her.

“That seems reasonable,” said Cob. “Frustrating, though. You don’t seem like the type who enjoys letting others get the glory.”

“It’s not just that! They *need* me! Without the Great and Powerful Trixie, they won’t succeed. They *can’t!*”

“Is that so? Well, Miss Trixie, I’ve heard you tell plenty of stories about heroes. Did any of them stay behind when somepony needed their help?”

“You’re right! I can’t believe I just let them go! But they left less than an hour ago. I should be able to catch up to them if I leave now!”

Golden Cob grinned. “Now that’s the Great and Powerful Trixie I know.”

Fluttershy hurried along the mountain path, staying low to the ground as she made her way back to the group’s hiding place. Princess Luna and her friends were waiting behind a bend in the mountain path, just out of sight of the gates to Canterlot. Luna looked up as Fluttershy approached. “Did they notice you?”

“I don’t think so,” said Fluttershy. “At least, no one tried to follow me or anything.”

“Good work!” said Applejack. “So what did you see out there?”

“Oh, um. There aren’t too many guards. I saw four at the gate, but that’s all.”

Princess Luna looked thoughtful. "We shouldn't have much trouble getting past four, but I don't like the implications. We have only two ponies at the gate in times of peace."

"Let's look on the bright side!" said Pinkie Pie. "If there are more guards out here, then there have to be fewer inside!"

"Some bright side," muttered Rainbow Dash.

Luna adjusted her tiara and began walking towards the gate. "Follow me, please. Try to look confident but not threatening. I'll handle the guards."

Fluttershy hesitated as the other four fell in behind Luna. "Um, okay. I can do confident. Oh! Wait for me, please!" She scurried after the group and hid behind Applejack.

The gate came into view, and the four guards tensed as the group approached them. Princess Luna's identity was unmistakable. One of the gold-armored ponies stepped forward. "Halt, in the name of the Queen!"

Luna stopped. She was perhaps five paces from the gate. "Hello, Sergeant. You are Bright Stone, correct? You were my escort during my visit to Flankashire."

The sergeant hesitated. "Um, yes, your highness. I'm, ah, I'm afraid I've been ordered to place you under arrest."

"I see," said Luna. "I suppose that makes sense. If I were out of the picture, then Corona Blaze would truly be unopposed. With no one to stop her, the day would never end. If that is what you want, then by all means, arrest me."

Bright Stone opened her mouth to say something, then reconsidered and closed it. She was obviously conflicted, as Luna had expected. The sergeant glanced back at the other guard ponies, but she found no help there. Finally, she turned back to Princess Luna with a confused look.

Princess Luna leaned forward. Her face twisted into an expression of utter contempt that would not have been out of place on Nightmare Moon. "If you will not stop me," she growled, "then *get out of my way.*"

Bright Stone took a quick step backwards. The other three guards blanched and fled. The moment she realized she was alone, Bright Stone followed them without a backward glance.

Princess Luna smiled at her companions. She was back to her usual, tranquil self. "That went well. Now let's hurry. The faster we are, the less chance my sister will find out. Let's do this the way we planned."

The ponies formed themselves into a cluster around Luna, partially shielding her from view. It wouldn't fool anypony who was looking for her, but at least passers-by would be less likely to notice the alicorn in their midst. Following Luna's directions, the group made their way through Canterlot. They took a roundabout route through the less-traveled parts of the city. A few ponies gasped and hurried away when they recognized Luna, but none raised the alarm.

At last, they arrived at the base of a tall round spire of white stone. "Here we are," said Luna. "The Alabaster Tower. Twilight is being held in the suite at the top."

"Great. Small problem, though." Rainbow Dash pointed to the entrance to the tower. It was a set of heavy oak double doors, flanked by a pair of bored-looking guard ponies.

Princess Luna started towards the entrance. "This should go as smoothly as last time. Stay behind me, please."

The guards spotted her and leapt to attention. "Princess Luna! I am placing you under arrest!"

"Is that truly what you want? With me gone, there will be none to oppose-"

"Enough! Get her!" The two guard ponies charged.

Luna's horn glowed with a soft blue light, and the two guards collapsed in a heap.

"Oh, my." Fluttershy stepped carefully forward and examined the fallen ponies. "Are they hurt?"

"I just put them to sleep," said Princess Luna. "It's a power that comes with dominion over the night. Nothing in Equestria will be able wake them up for several hours."

Rarity frowned thoughtfully. "I don't think they listened to you at all, even though you're the princess."

"I know." Luna sighed sadly. "It seems at least some ponies are truly loyal to Corona Blaze. That never happened with Nightmare Moon."

"That don't matter." Applejack approached the Alabaster Tower, stepping around the guards as she went. "We've almost got Twilight, which means this whole mess is just about fixed." She threw open the doors to the tower.

Beyond was a single enormous room. A staircase curved upwards along one wall. Fine furniture was carefully arranged throughout the room. It was empty, save for a phoenix perched on the edge of a table.

"Philomena!" Fluttershy was through the door before anypony else. "How are you? I haven't seen you since-"

She was interrupted as the phoenix gave a shrill, piercing cry. The bird abruptly lifted off and flew away, out a window on the far side of the tower.

"This is bad," said Princess Luna. "The phoenix is a creature of the sun. It will warn my sister of our presence as soon as it finds her. We must hurry!" She spread her wings and flew up the staircase. The other ponies struggled to keep up.

The marble doors swung open. Braeburn swallowed nervously and stepped into his queen's audience chamber.

It wasn't as big as he expected. It was unspeakably rich, of course, decorated with delicate golden sculptures and stained glass windows. Nevertheless, it was small enough to feel intimate.

Corona Blaze stood on a small red-carpeted dais at the far end of the chamber. The unicorns standing guard outside pulled the doors closed, leaving them alone in the room. Braeburn removed his hat and bowed.

"Rise, Braeburn of Appleloosa. I am most pleased with your service thus far."

"Pleased?" Braeburn was torn between relief and confusion. "You mean you ain't mad?"

"Of course I'm not mad. Whatever do you mean?"

"Well, there's all them ponies who left when the town chose to follow you. I mean, you lost a quarter of your subjects, and I just let 'em go! You've got every right to be mad."

Corona Blaze chuckled softly, but it was a harsh laugh, without compassion. "And where will they run? My domain grows swiftly. Eventually they will be mine once more. In the meantime, your efforts have convinced most of Appleloosa to join me without strife. This is a great deed, and it deserves recognition."

"Oh!" Braeburn felt as though a great weight had lifted from his withers. He had been worried about the queen's reaction, of course, but he had also been second-guessing his decision to let Sheriff Silverstar and the others leave almost from the moment he had done it. When Corona Blaze put it like that, though, Braeburn felt confident he had done the right thing. "Well, I was just trying to help, is all."

"You have certainly done that. Is there any boon you desire for this deed?"

“Thank you, your majesty, but no. I weren’t thinking of a reward or nothing when I convinced everypony to follow you. Well, almost everypony. I just wanted to do what was right.”

“You are a remarkable pony, Braeburn. I shall grant you a reward anyway, although I fear it may not be to your liking. I am naming you the first captain in my new Royal Expeditionary Force. You will help bring the rest of Equestria under my control.”

Braeburn gaped. “A captain? Me? I don’t know if that’s such a good idea, your majesty. I’m just a regular earth pony! I never wanted to tell nopony what to do, or nothing like that.”

“I know. And precisely because of that, there is no one I trust more in this position. Your loyalty and humility do you credit.”

“Your majesty... I don’t know what to say...”

The doors to the audience chamber burst open, and a magnificent flame-colored bird burst in. Braeburn marveled. So the legends were true! Phoenixes were real!

The bird flapped about the room, too agitated to land. It let out a high-pitched cry that set Braeburn’s teeth on edge.

“What?” shouted Corona Blaze. “HERE?” She broke into a gallop and dashed out of the audience chamber, leaving behind a very confused Braeburn.

Rarity gasped in air as she galloped up the stairs. “How long... can this... go on?” she sputtered out between breaths.

“Ooh! Is this a guessing game? I *love* guessing games!” Pinkie Pie showed no sign of fatigue as she bounced her way up the stairs. “Three more floors! No, wait! Eight more floors! No! *Forever!*”

The Alabaster Tower had looked tall from the outside, but from the inside it seemed positively unending. The stairway curled around the inner edge of the circular tower as it rose higher and higher. Rarity had been climbing for what felt like hours (although part of her knew it was probably just a few minutes). Princess Luna had flown up the stairs without regard to the slower ponies, and all of them except Rainbow Dash had fallen behind.

“Do you hear that?” asked Fluttershy from where she flew above the others. “I think something’s following us.”

Rarity listened. It was difficult to make out... but yes, she could hear something below them. It sounded like wings beating at the air, and it was gaining on them.

“Horseapples!” cursed Applejack. “This could be trouble. Let’s get a move on, y’all!”

The ponies put on a burst of speed. Two floors up, they came to a large, open chamber the width of the entire tower. Rarity noticed faint marks on the marble floor where furniture had been removed in the not-too-distant past. The staircase continued upwards, but it was blocked by a heavy steel door. Rainbow Dash was flitting about impatiently as Princess Luna, horn shimmering with a deep blue light, pushed at the door with her telekinesis. The doorframe was slowly warping under the strain.

“Princess!” gasped Applejack. “Somepony’s coming!”

“I see.” The door gave way and collapsed with a tremendous crash. “If it’s my sister, we won’t be able to defeat her without all six Elements of Harmony. You five continue ahead. Find Twilight Sparkle and return here. I’ll delay the pursuit until then.”

“Yeah, right!” said Rainbow Dash. “Like I’m gonna let you face her alone.”

“There’s no time to argue! Go, while you still can!”

“Hold on there,” said Applejack. “It don’t take all five of us to-”



“LUNA!” Corona Blaze burst forth from the stairwell, wings spread and horn glowing with a harsh white light. The five ponies scattered before her, instinctively running to put their backs to the wall. Only Luna held her ground.

Corona Blaze landed gracefully in the center of the room. “Your coup has failed, little sister. Leave Canterlot now and never return, and I shall leave you be. You will live as the last remnant of the world as it was before my reign. I offer you this mercy in token of the affection I once felt for you.”

Luna glanced at the ponies huddled against the wall. “Go.”

Rarity and Pinkie Pie galloped up the stairs. Corona Blaze screamed and loosed a wide beam of light from her horn at the two ponies, but Luna raised a wall of blue magic to block it. The wall flickered briefly as the beam struck, but did not break. Rarity and Pinkie Pie were soon past the remains of the steel door and out of sight.

“You would stand against me?” Corona Blaze was incredulous. “I defeated Nightmare Moon with a fragment of the power I have now! You will barely slow me down!”

“You forgot something, Princess!” shouted Rainbow Dash. “This time, she’s not alone!” The pegasus leaped into the air and flew directly at Corona Blaze. Simultaneously, Luna conjured a shimmering tendril of magic and lashed out with it, while Applejack broke into a headlong charge.

Corona Blaze raised a hoof, and a broad, curved shield of white light appeared in front of her. Rainbow Dash plowed headlong into the shield and ricocheted away. She was flung to the floor several yards away, where she collapsed in a heap. Luna’s tendril struck the shield with a shower of blue and white sparks. Applejack changed direction to circle around and attack from an unprotected angle.

Corona Blaze summoned two small orbs of crackling energy and launched them at her sister. Luna flew out of the way, but the orbs shifted their trajectory to follow her. Luna quickly seized one of the orbs in a

telekinetic grip and slammed it into the other. The orbs annihilated each other with a blinding flash.

Applejack rushed at the queen's unprotected flank. Corona Blaze whirled and fired a thin beam of light at the earth pony. Applejack leapt to the side, neatly avoiding the attack but losing her momentum and spoiling her charge.

In the commotion, nopony had noticed Fluttershy as she flew directly over Corona Blaze. She let herself drop and landed heavily on the alicorn's back. As Corona Blaze bucked, Fluttershy wrapped her hooves around the queen's chest and held on for dear life.

The noise of the fight faded somewhat as Rarity and Pinkie Pie hurried through the doorway Luna had shattered. Beyond they found a short, richly decorated hallway that ended in a sturdy wooden door. Two earth pony guards in full armor blocked their way.

"You there!" called one of the guards. "Who are you and what's all that commotion?"

Rarity took a step forward and gave the guards an imperious look. "I am Rarity, one of the Elements of Harmony. Princess Luna has sent us to retrieve Twilight Sparkle and restore Princess Celestia to her true self. You will release her to us at once!"

The guard ponies glanced at each other. "Seriously, what's all that noise out there?" asked the guard who had spoken before.

"The princesses are fighting," Rarity said gravely.

Pinkie Pie popped up between the guard ponies and put a hoof around each of their shoulders. "Come on, guys, it's getting really scary out there! We need Twilight so we can make Celestia all better and the princesses can be friends again! You'll help us, right?"

"I don't know anything about the princesses," said the talkative guard. "That's way above my head. All I know is that my orders are to make sure Twilight Sparkle stays in here, and I follow my orders. Now please, get out of the tower before something dangerous happens."

Rarity stomped on the ground, and her horn glowed with power. "I tried being nice," she said, "but if you want the hard way, we'll do this the hard way!"

Rainbow Dash struggled to her hooves as Corona Blaze shook Fluttershy loose, sending her tumbling across the room. Not a moment later, Corona Blaze raised a shield to block a blast of raw power from Luna's horn, deflecting it moments before it struck. Before the queen could launch an attack of her own, Applejack rushed in and bucked Corona Blaze in the side, sending her staggering for several steps. Applejack charged again, but Corona Blaze struck her with a powerful blow from her wing, sending the earth pony sprawling.

"Enough!" shouted Corona Blaze. "This ends now!" She turned back to Luna and fired a blindingly bright cone of energy. Luna saw the attack was too wide to dodge and too powerful to stop directly. With an effort of will, she teleported to the far side of the chamber before the cone reached her. The blast struck the wall and shattered the stone. Chunks of masonry flew outward, leaving a perfectly circular hole in the side of the tower that was nearly the height of two ponies.

Rainbow Dash plowed into Corona Blaze from behind. Both ponies tumbled to the floor. Corona Blaze shrieked in rage and turned to deal with the pegasus, but Luna conjured two tendrils of magic which grabbed her sister while her guard was down. Corona Blaze thrashed against her bonds, and horn glowed brightly as she gathered magic for a counterattack. Luna launched a small dart of magic. It struck Corona Blaze's horn, and the energy she had been gathering dissipated harmlessly.

Corona Blaze stopped struggling. She slumped against the tendrils holding her and hung her head in resignation. "You have beaten me, sister. I cannot escape these bonds before you finish the spell to banish me from Equestria." She sighed. "It is a fitting end, at least."

Luna concentrated, and several more tendrils grew from the floor and bound Corona Blaze's wings and legs. "I will not send you to the sun. No pony deserves to suffer through a thousand years of solitude. Not even you."

"You foal!" Corona Blaze grinned, and her horn radiated power once again. "You cannot hold me for long. If you will not end this, then I will!"

Luna's horn glowed, and she grit her teeth in concentration. Corona Blaze looked briefly confused, then laughed. "Are you trying to put me to sleep, sister? You should know I am far too strong for that!"

"Yes," said Luna softly. "But you can't fight me off and focus on your magic at the same time."

"Hah! This won't slow me for long. You're getting desperate!"

Fluttershy helped Applejack and Rainbow Dash to their hooves. The three battered ponies leaned on each other as they watched the alicorns struggle.

"This ain't good," said Applejack. "It don't look like Princess Luna has much left in her."

"So what?" asked Rainbow Dash. "If that evil princess gets loose, we'll just take her down again!"

"I don't know," said Applejack. "I'm pretty beat, and you two look as bad as I feel. This here might be our only chance."

"Then our friends need to get back with Twilight soon," said Fluttershy. "I hope they're okay."

Rarity's horn shone with power as she advanced towards the guards. "Please, miss," said the guard. "Don't do anything you'll regret."

Rarity's eyes narrowed. She telekinetically grabbed a tapestry off the wall and dropped it over the two guards, then quickly wrapped it into a ball, imprisoning the two ponies. They struggled to escape the heavy fabric, but Rarity kept her hold on the tapestry, sealing them inside.

"Perfect," said Rarity. "Pinkie, get the door, please."

"Right!" Pinkie Pie leapt to the solid wooden portal and tried the handle. "Um, it's kind of locked."

"Of course it is. Now what do we do?"

The tapestry tore open, and one of the guards struggled out of the entangling fabric. She let out a shout and tackled Rarity, bearing her to the ground. With her concentration gone, the tapestry went limp and the other guard forced his way free as well.

There was a bright flash from the end of the hall. The guards looked up to see a pale blue unicorn approaching them. "Who DARES assault the companions of the Great and Powerful Trixie?"

Rarity tried to stand, but the first guard roughly forced her back down. "I've got this one," said the guard. "Get that unicorn!"

The guard charged. Trixie grinned, and her horn glowed. The guard's golden breastplate detached from his armor and smashed into the side of his helmet. The pony stumbled and fell.

The second guard leapt up and ran at Trixie, leaving Rarity behind. Trixie telekinetically tore a strip from the now-ruined tapestry and wrapped it around the charging guard's legs. She too clattered to the ground in a heap.

Rarity slowly stood up. "Trixie! Whatever are you doing here?"

“The Great and Powerful Trixie does not stay behind when ponies are in danger! A simple cloaking spell was all I needed to follow you unnoticed.”

“Great!” said Pinkie Pie. “So you can get this door open for us too, right?”

Trixie hesitated. “I’m... not sure.”

“The guards must have a key,” said Rarity. “Help me search them, quickly!”

The two alicorns glared at each other while they concentrated on their respective spells. Luna’s horn glowed faintly as she pressed the attack on her sister’s mind. The strain was evident on her face, and she was clearly tiring. Corona Blaze, on the other hand, appeared as fresh as she had at the beginning of the fight. Her horn glowed ever more brightly as her spell grew closer and closer to completion. Although Luna’s tendrils still held her, Applejack and Rainbow Dash took up positions on opposite sides of the fallen queen and prepared to leap into action.

Finally, Corona Blaze shouted in triumph as her horn let out a wave of light that washed over the tendrils and blasted them into insubstantial wisps of magic. The wave struck Applejack and Rainbow Dash, knocking them back several steps before they recovered and lunged forward again. Corona Blaze beat her wings and took to the air before the ponies could reach her.

Rainbow Dash veered upwards and collided with Corona Blaze. Both ponies were knocked off balance. Luna conjured another tendril, attempting to catch her sister off guard a second time. However, she was exhausted and slow to complete the spell, allowing Corona Blaze the time to recover and fly away from the grasping tendril.

Rainbow Dash righted herself and flew at Corona Blaze once again. The alicorn fired a thin beam of light from her horn. It struck the charging

pegasus in the chest with great force and knocked her backwards and to the ground. Rainbow Dash tried to pick herself up, but collapsed in pain.

Corona Blaze launched another beam, at Luna this time. The princess conjured a flat plane of magic to protect herself. The beam shattered the shield, but most of its force was expended. It hit Luna with barely enough strength to knock her back a step.

“Hey!” called Applejack from below. “Come on down here and face me, if you ain’t scared!”

Corona Blaze glanced briefly down at Applejack, then whirled around just in time to see Fluttershy coming in from behind. The pegasus’s eyes were tightly shut as she imitated Rainbow Dash’s charge. Corona Blaze easily flew above the clumsy attack and kicked Fluttershy in the back as she went by. The pegasus cried out and fell to the ground.

Luna panted with exertion as she gathered the power for another spell, but Corona Blaze was faster with her own magic. The floor itself flowed up Luna’s hooves like water, covering her lower legs in a thin sheath of stone. Luna lost her concentration and struggled to break free, but to no avail. When the stone reached her knees, Corona Blaze released the spell and the stone abruptly solidified, freezing Luna in place.

Corona Blaze landed in front of Luna. “You have lost, sister.”

“Not hardly!” Applejack shouted as she charged forward. Corona Blaze sighed, and her horn glowed once more. The floor beneath Applejack’s hooves crumbled to dust, leaving nothing but air between her and the chamber below. She fell from view with a short yelp.

“Is that all?” Corona Blaze looked around the chamber. Luna was exhausted and imprisoned, without enough strength left even to teleport away. Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy lay where they had fallen.

“Now what happens?” Princess Luna asked. Her voice was steady, but her face betrayed her fear. “Even you don’t have the power to kill me.”

Corona Blaze turned back to her sister. “If I wanted to kill your little band, your friends would be dead already. But I must ensure you won’t threaten my new world any longer. I will return you to the moon. Perhaps you will be more reasonable in a thousand years.”

“What? No—don’t!” Luna thrashed in a vain attempt to escape the solid stone that bound her legs. “It isn’t—you don’t understand how long a thousand years can be, all alone! Please!”

“This is your own doing, little sister.” Luna tried to shrink away from her sister’s calm stare. Nightmare Moon had been cruel, even pitiless, but the terrible resolve she saw in Corona Blaze’s eyes was somehow worse. “I offered you a chance to live in exile on Equestria, but still you defied me.” Her horn blazed with a light so brilliant, Luna had to look away. “This is the fate you have chosen.”

Fluttershy limped to Corona Blaze’s side. “Wait, please! I know you love your sister. You don’t need to do this!”

The light grew until nothing else could be seen. There was a rushing sound, as of a great wind. The light and the noise faded, revealing the chamber once again. Princess Luna was gone.

Corona Blaze looked coolly at Fluttershy. “Love is a luxury I can no longer afford.” She walked to the stairs up and followed after Rarity and Pinkie Pie. “I will deal with you once Twilight Sparkle is secure,” she said as she disappeared up the staircase.

Fluttershy painfully made her way over to Rainbow Dash and gently shook her friend’s shoulder. “Are you hurt?”

“I’ll be fine.” Rainbow Dash curled into a ball. “Just give me a minute.”

“Can you walk? We need to go now.”

“Fine. I think I can move.” Rainbow Dash slowly picked herself up, refusing Fluttershy’s offered hoof. “Ugh. Alright, let’s go rescue Twilight.”



"I... I don't think we can, Rainbow Dash. We need to go. Princess Luna is already gone, and we're too hurt to do much."

"That doesn't matter! Our friend needs help, and I'm going after her!"

"Applejack needs help too! She fell and I think she might be hurt! If we don't get her out of here, who knows what could happen?"

Rainbow Dash sighed. "AJ... fine. Let's get going."

The two ponies limped down the stairs to find their friend.

"I can't find this key *anywhere!*" Rarity said. "What are we going to do?"

"Rarity? Is that you?" The voice was muffled by the thick door, but it was unmistakably Twilight's.

"Twilight!" Rarity rushed to the door. "We're here for you! We'll get you out of here. Um, any minute now."

"Oh, thank Celestia! I was so worried about you!"

"Found it!" Pinkie Pie held up the key in triumph.

"Wonderful!" said Rarity. "Let's get this door open."

Pinkie Pie unlocked the door. Twilight rushed out and wrapped Rarity and Pinkie Pie in a tight embrace. "It's so good to see a friendly face! But where's everypony else? And what's Trixie doing here?"

"You can thank me later," said Trixie. "We need to hurry back to the others."

"You are too late." The ponies looked up fearfully as Corona Blaze entered the hallway. "You were brave, but I have defeated your friends already. Princess Luna is gone and the Elements of Harmony are scattered. It's over."

Trixie forced a confident grin onto her face. “Fear not, my little ponies! Make way for the Great and Powerful Trixie! Her magic will defend you from this abomination!”

Skeptically, the other ponies let Trixie stride to the front. Corona Blaze scoffed. “What do you hope to accomplish, little trickster?”

“This.” Trixie’s horn flared. The ponies disappeared from view.

“You think mere cloaking magic will stop me?” Corona Blaze’s horn pulsed with light. “I’ll tear your spell apart!”

Trixie looked back at her companions. Within the cloaking spell, they could see each other without interference, so they could clearly make out the look of near panic on Trixie’s face. “If anypony else has an idea, now would be a good time!”

“We just need to get past her,” said Rarity. “Once we rejoin the others, we’ll be able to use the Elements of Harmony.”

Twilight pondered. “She can’t see us or hear us. That applies to our magic too, right?”

“Yes!” said Trixie. “I think.”

“Okay. Everypony close your eyes. Be ready to run.” Twilight’s horn shone brightly, then brighter, then brighter still. Trixie found the light uncomfortable even through her closed eyelids. Twilight’s magic was clearly as strong as she remembered.

“There!” shouted Corona Blaze. “Now you’re-AUGH!” As she dispelled the cloaking magic, Corona Blaze was stunned by the sudden appearance of the previously-hidden light. She was looking straight at it, and was completely unprepared for its blinding brilliance.

“Go!” shouted Twilight as she snuffed the light from her horn. The four ponies galloped past Corona Blaze while she was recovering and tore down the stairs to the chamber below.

Pinkie Pie pulled to a halt and looked around the empty, blasted room. “Where did everypony go?”

“We have to keep going,” said Rarity. “Without the others, we can’t stop her!”

Pinkie Pie looked aghast. “But what if they need our help?”

Trixie’s ears perked up as she heard hoofbeats from above. “She’s coming! We need to do something *now!*”

“Over here!” Twilight was standing in front of the giant hole that had been blasted in the tower’s wall. She was looking out, to the mountain beyond. “Everypony grab onto me!”

The other three rushed over and did as they were told while Corona Blaze’s hoofsteps came closer. “What good is this, Twilight?” asked Rarity. “None of us are pegasus ponies! We can’t get down from-”

She was cut off as Twilight teleported them to the mountainside below. Corona Blaze arrived just in time to watch the ponies disappear with a soft flash.

# Chapter 4

Corona Blaze glared at the ponies assembled in her throne room. The space was small, forcing the dozen soldiers and officers she had summoned to stand uncomfortably close to each other. That was just as well; they deserved to sweat a little.

"I am disappointed in all of you," Corona Blaze said coldly. "I rely on you to keep Canterlot safe. You have failed in this. My sister's coup was thwarted, but the Elements of Harmony have reunited. This is a grave threat to Equestria, and I will do what I must to ensure that my army is capable of dealing with this threat."

A unicorn stepped forward from the group. "Forgive me, my queen," he said, "but my ponies did all they could to hold off the attackers. They were overwhelmed by Princess Luna's magic, yes, but surely you can't expect a handful of guards to stop an alicorn on their own."

Corona Blaze narrowed her eyes at the unicorn. "Captain Steel Mane. You were responsible for Canterlot's defense when the coup occurred."

"Yes, your majesty. My troops-"

"I read your report. Two of your trained soldiers were defeated by a common showpony. This is unacceptable. You are hereby demoted to sergeant. My guards must be led by somepony better able to train them."

Steel Mane stifled the urge to protest. "Yes, your majesty."

The queen scanned the assembled crowd. "Lieutenant Ebon Shield. You were the first of my officers to respond to the attack, even if you were still too slow to stop the invaders. You are now the captain in charge of defending this city. I trust you are equal to the challenge."

"I won't let you down, your majesty."

Corona Blaze turned her glare to a pony at the rear of the group. "Sergeant Bright Stone. Explain to me how the invaders bypassed your post without raising the alarm."

The sergeant cast her eyes down. "It was Princess Luna. She ordered us aside, and, well, I figured she outranks a sergeant. I mean, she's still a princess of Equestria and all."

"I have made it quite clear that the old regime is no more. In fact, your orders were to arrest Princess Luna on sight."

"Yes, your majesty, I know. But when she was right there in front of us... I guess I just couldn't do it." Bright Stone swallowed nervously. "I take full responsibility for my squad's actions."

Corona Blaze sighed. "I had hoped the transition to my rule would be simple and bloodless, yet despite all I've done, it seems that some ponies remain bound to the old regime. This will not stand. Ponies must accept the new reign if Equestria is to progress." Her horn began to shine brightly with power. "I will no longer tolerate disloyalty. An example must be made."

Bright Stone backed away hurriedly. Her eyes were wide with fright. "I'm sorry, your majesty! It won't happen again!"

"That's right," said Corona Blaze. "It won't."

There was a horrible scream.

There was a horrible silence.

Rarity was more exhausted than she had known was possible. The journey to Canterlot had been tiring enough. The race up the tower, and the struggle atop it, had been worse. Coming immediately after all that, the return trip was absolutely miserable, but fortunately it was nearly over. Rarity could see the tops of Ponyville's buildings not too far ahead, which

was good, because she was on the verge of collapsing. Even Pinkie Pie was looking subdued.

Still, it was all worth it. She was returning alongside Twilight Sparkle, and that meant everything was going to be fine.

She was also returning alongside Trixie. Rarity wasn't sure how she felt about that. True, Trixie acted as insufferably full of herself as ever. On the other hoof, she had saved Rarity twice, first from the guards outside Twilight's prison and then from Corona Blaze herself. She'd have to sort it out later; now Rarity just wanted to find a bed and sleep for a week. If weeks still meant anything, now that the day lasted forever.

"Hey, look!" Pinkie Pie was too tired to bounce with excitement as she usually did, but her voice was as bubbly as ever. "We're at Fluttershy's house! We should see if she's home. She'll want to know you're safe, Twilight!"

*If she made it out of Canterlot*, thought Rarity. They had no idea what had happened to the rest of their friends, save that Corona Blaze had managed to get past them.

From Twilight's worried expression, she was thinking the same thing. Nevertheless, Twilight gave Pinkie Pie a tired nod before walking up the path to Fluttershy's house and knocking on the door.

The door flew open almost immediately, and Fluttershy leapt out and embraced Twilight. "Oh, Twilight! I'm so glad you're safe. I thought Corona Blaze caught all of you!"

Twilight looked at her friend in shock. "What happened to you?" Fluttershy was wearing bandages around her body, both forelegs, and one wing.

Fluttershy glanced down as if noticing the bandages for the first time. "Oh. Um, it's from the fight in the tower."

"Fight?" Twilight frowned. "How are you feeling?"

Fluttershy suppressed a shudder. “Oh, it was so scary! I never want to do anything like that again. I’m... I’m not too hurt, though. I’ll be fine.”

“What about the others?” asked Rarity. “Is anypony else hurt?”

Fluttershy hesitated a moment before speaking. “Applejack fell. Granny Smith says she sprained her foreleg. But, uh, she should be able to walk again in a few days. We had to carry her back to Ponyville, though.”

“Yeah, how *did* you get out of there?” asked Pinkie Pie. “Weren’t all those mean old guard ponies trying to catch you?”

“Oh, um, no. They were still asleep from when we got inside.”

“The important thing is that we’re all back in Ponyville,” said Twilight. “As soon as Applejack is better, we’ll be able to turn Corona Blaze back into Princess Celestia. Let’s all get some rest, then we’ll meet with Princess Luna to plan our— oh, Fluttershy, please don’t cry! What’s wrong?”

It was almost a minute before Fluttershy recovered enough to speak. “It’s Luna. She was— Twilight, she’s gone!”

“I appreciate the help and all,” said Applejack, “but I’m sure I can manage on my own.”

“Not likely,” said Golden Cob as he set the plate of apple turnovers on the table in front of Applejack. “You’ve got to stay off that leg. Unless you plan on hopping around on three hooves, that means you need somepony looking after you and helping you move around. Your brother’s still busy with the harvest, so you’re stuck with me.”

“I reckon you’re right.” Applejack glared at the sling that held her foreleg immobile. “I just hate to be a burden, is all.”

“Not at all! I was at loose ends when I showed up in this town. This gives me something useful to do. A fellow farm pony like you ought to understand how much that means.”

“I guess I do, at that,” Applejack said through a mouthful of pastry. “When did y’all get here, anyway? I don’t think we met before I woke up here.”

“Yes, I’m quite new. I’m part of the group Miss Trixie led here through the Everfree Forest.”

“I gotta say I’m surprised that pony could make it through the forest at all, let alone lead such a big group.”

“Are you kidding? We never would’ve made it without her! That lady kept our spirits up the whole trip. Plus she defeated a gargoyle that got in our way.”

Applejack raised an eyebrow skeptically. “Really? And did you see that for yourself?”

“Oh my, yes. I’ll be a happy pony if I never get that close to a monster again.” He paused. “I’m surprised. I thought you’d know how powerful she is, after she helped save this town from that ura.”

“Is that what she told you?” Applejack sighed. “Settle down for a story, Mister Cob. You ain’t gonna like this, but you need to know what really happened last time Trixie came here.”

Rarity hummed contentedly to herself as she walked back to the boutique. She had been in a good mood ever since she woke up. She had just inspected the progress on the new houses being built to take in the refugees currently sheltering in her store, and everything seemed to be moving along perfectly. Rarity was looking forward to having her shop to herself once more. More than that, it felt good to work on a straightforward



problem for a change. The mess with Corona Blaze was nerve-wracking and frustrating, but when Rarity helped the refugees, she *knew* she was accomplishing something.

As she walked, Rarity noticed the town around her was livelier than it had been since the Dawn. Ponies were beginning to adjust to the unending day. Although everypony was working harder to compensate for the ill effects of too much sun, their worst fears had been avoided. It was clear that Ponyville was going to survive, and the ponies Rarity passed looked as though they were starting to enjoy life once again.

“Rarity! Hey, Rarity!” Rainbow Dash swooped down from above and hovered in front of Rarity. She flew backwards, facing Rarity as she matched the unicorn’s pace towards the boutique. It looked like a difficult stunt, but Rarity decided not to acknowledge her friend’s showboating. Rainbow Dash still looked battered from the fight in Canterlot, and the last thing she needed was more encouragement to take risks in her current condition.

“Hello, Rainbow Dash. Are you feeling well? I heard you were injured during the rescue.”

“Yeah, I’m good. It takes more than that to keep me down! So what comes next? Did Twilight say when we’re gonna finish the job?”

“I don’t know,” said Rarity. “Certainly not before Applejack has recovered. Even then, getting to Corona Blaze won’t be easy. Without Princess Luna...” Rarity trailed off. “It’s still hard to believe what happened to her. In any case, the six of us will have a hard time getting into Canterlot again on our own.”

“The seven of us, you mean! We’ve got Trixie with us now, too.”

“Perhaps. I’m not certain she’s, ah, reliable.”

“Come on, Rarity, I heard what happened in the tower! She saved you, remember? She saved Twilight! I mean, she’s kind of a jerk

sometimes, but now she's *our* jerk. No way we can ditch her after what she did."

"I suppose there's something to that. She's earned a second chance, at the very least."

"Are you alright, Twilight? You don't look too great."

Twilight looked up from the tome she was studying. "I'm fine, Spike. I'm just a little tired. Can you get me that copy of *Reading Rare Runes: A Reference?*"

Spike nodded and dashed off to find the book. Twilight grew thoughtful as she watched him go. The dragon was too young to fully understand why Twilight had been gone. She was grateful for that. It meant he hadn't worried very much during her absence.

Twilight forced her attention back to the book. It was difficult to focus; she was more than a little tired. In fact, she had barely been able to sleep at all, despite the comfort of finally returning to her own bed. Partly it was because of the sunlight streaming through the windows, since she hadn't been able to grow accustomed to the constant day while stuck in her windowless prison. Mostly, though, it was thoughts of Princess Luna that kept Twilight awake. To be exiled again so soon after she returned and repented... the sheer unfairness of it sat in Twilight's stomach like a rock. What was the princess feeling, in her otherworldly prison? Twilight could only hope she would eventually return as Luna, not as Nightmare Moon.

Spike returned with the reference book. "Found it! What do you need this for, anyway?"

"Thanks, Spike. I'm trying to learn more about what happened when Nightmare Moon first arose. So far I've been relying on legends and old ponies' tales. I've finally tracked down some primary sources, but they're written in the old runic alphabet. This will help me translate them."

“More history stuff? What are you looking for?”

“I don’t know, exactly. There are pieces of this that don’t fit. When Princess Celestia used the Elements of Harmony a thousand and one years ago, why did she banish Nightmare Moon instead of turning her back into Luna? How did Corona Blaze banish Luna this time, if she didn’t have the Elements? I know I’m missing something, and whatever it is, it might be something we can use.”

“But those books are ancient! Do you really think they’ll be able to help us today?”

“I hope so,” said Twilight. “With Princess Luna gone, we need every advantage we can get.”

“So I kicked the dragon—pow!—right in the face! That doesn’t stop him, though, ‘cause he was so huge. Like, *so huge*. So the dragon’s all, ‘RAAAH!’, and he knocks me back out the cave, but I wasn’t about to give up!”

Trixie smiled to herself as she listened to Rainbow Dash tell her story. The two of them were relaxing atop a small ridge just outside Ponyville. It had been a long time since Trixie had enjoyed herself as much as she did now, trading stories with her new friend. If the grass beneath them weren’t sparse and withered from too much sun, it would have been perfect.

A voice came from the bottom of the ridge. “Miss Trixie! Can we talk for a minute?”

Trixie looked down to see Golden Cob climbing the ridge. He wore a determined expression that seemed out of place on his normally cheerful face. She turned to Rainbow Dash. “I should take care of this. Can you finish your story some other time?”

“Sure thing, Trix.” Rainbow Dash lifted herself into the air. “Catch you later!” she called as she flew away.

Golden Cob had reached the top of the ridge by then. “What brings you out here?” asked Trixie.

“I was talking to Miss Applejack the other day. She got to telling me the story of your first visit to Ponyville. It was... different from what you told me.”

Trixie’s heart started beating like a hammer, and she got a queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach, but she managed to keep her expression neutral. “Really? Different how?”

“What do you think?”

“I have no idea.”

“Well, she told me that you didn’t help save the town at all. That you ran away after Miss Sparkle showed you up.”

“You hardly know this pony! I can’t believe you’d trust her story over mine.”

Golden Cob sighed. “Please, Trixie. Don’t make this harder than it has to be.”

“I’m serious! I bet Applejack is just jealous. She doesn’t like the fact that some outsider helped save her town.”

“That’s what I thought at first, so I asked a few other ponies what happened. What do you think I heard?”

“I, I... Cob, look. I just needed everypony to know how powerful I am so you’d let me lead you through the Everfree Forest! I got all of you here safely, so you know I’m strong enough anyway!”

“I don’t care how powerful you are, Trixie, that’s not what this is about. It’s about trust. You told me a lot of things I’d like to believe. Now it

turns out at least one of those things is a lie. What am I supposed to think about everything else you told me?"

"The rest of it is true, I swear! Come on, Cob, you can trust me. You know me!"

"I thought I knew you," said Golden Cob. "I thought you were a hero, that you were better than all this. I should've known better. There are no ponies like that. They just make for good stories."

"That's not true! Okay, so I made up the thing with the ursa, but I really did save Twilight Sparkle from the Alabaster Tower. You can ask her about it yourself!"

Golden Cob shook his head. "I can't go asking somepony else every time you tell me something important. That's not how friendship works. I'm sorry, Trixie, but I can't do this."

Trixie had nothing to say to that. She could only watch as Golden Cob turned his back on her and walked away.

Braeburn hated being a captain. His queen had given him an important task, so he did his best and never complained, but he hated it nonetheless. He hated wearing the golden armor. It was heavy and uncomfortable, and he missed his hat. He hated giving orders. He had always preferred to listen to other points of view and find common ground, but now his every word was law. He hated the responsibility. When he tried to sleep, his mind would focus on the many, many ways he could fail and ruin his queen's plans.

Most of all, he hated the terrible things he would have to do for the greater good. He had asked to be allowed to take control of Ponyville peacefully, as he had done with Appleloosa. Corona Blaze had been adamant, however. Capturing the Elements of Harmony was the first priority, and peaceful talks would give them a chance to slip away. Not only

was she his queen, she was also right, and so Braeburn would have to take Ponyville by force.

“Hey!” one of Braeburn’s soldiers shouted at the pegasus they had captured. “Quiet there, if you know what’s good for you!” The prisoner flinched away, huddling deeper into the corner.

“That’s enough of that,” said Braeburn. “We’re here to capture these ponies, not scare ‘em to death.” He approached the prisoner where she sat. “No pony’s gonna hurt you, I promise.”

Fluttershy said nothing. She just stared back at him with fear on her face and contempt in her eyes.

Braeburn sighed. He really did hate being a captain.

He turned back to his troops. There were thirty of them, and they filled Fluttershy’s cottage from wall to wall. “This place will make a good headquarters. It’s close to the town, but not too close. We’ll leave three guards here, then send five teams of three to go after the other Elements of Harmony. When you catch ‘em, bring ‘em back here and keep watch. That leaves a dozen of you to go after the town itself. March to the town square and take control. Don’t use force unless you got to, but if it comes to that, do what you need to do. Lieutenant Steadfast, you’re gonna be in charge of the big group.”

“Yes sir,” said the lieutenant. “But shouldn’t you command the largest detachment?”

“Nope,” said Braeburn. “My place is with the team heading to Sweet Apple Acres. This is family business, and that means I got to see to it personally.”

# Chapter 5

Rainbow Dash flew in through the bedroom window of her house of clouds. She was tired, but happy. It was the good kind of tired that came from a hard day's work. Weather patrol was a lot harder than it had been before the Dawn, but Equestria's fastest flier was up to the challenge!

She flopped down on her bed, a sprawling pad of soft cumulous fibers. The one good thing about unending day was that nopony could berate her for napping at odd hours anymore.

Shortly after she drifted off, Rainbow Dash was awakened by the sound of somepony moving through her house. She groggily forced herself to her feet. Was it Fluttershy coming by for a visit? Maybe a fellow weather pegasus with a work-related message? It sounded like more than one pony, and they weren't keeping quiet.

Rainbow Dash stretched briefly, partly dispelling the fog of sleep. She pulled open her bedroom door to find herself face to face with a pegasus pony in gold armor. The intruder shouted "Found her!" and leapt forward to tackle Rainbow Dash.

Rainbow Dash came fully awake as she fell. She hit the floor on her back, and the soldier landed heavily on top of her. Rainbow Dash kicked out with her back legs, knocking the soldier away, and struggled back to her hooves. Two more ponies in identical armor forced their way into her bedroom.

Three on one was bad odds, Rainbow Dash knew, even for her. Fighting wasn't an option, but these soldiers couldn't match her speed. If she could get into the open sky, she could easily put this trouble behind her.

Unfortunately, her path to the door was blocked. There was only one window in the bedroom, and she had kicked the first soldier right in front of

it. He had already regained his hooves, and his two companions were edging closer by the second. Rainbow Dash knew she had only one chance to get past them.

She lunged for the window. The soldier moved to block her. Rainbow Dash feinted left, and the soldier rushed the wrong way as she dodged to the right. Success! She was almost—

The other two ponies hit her from the side. Rainbow Dash fell to the ground, hard. She reached desperately for the open window and freedom as all three soldiers fell upon her.

When the door crashed open, Twilight Sparkle was deep in her research. She had three books open on her reading table and five more in a haphazard stack beside them. Loose sheets covered with half-legible notes were scattered across every flat surface within ten feet. As the intruder barged in, Twilight started and spilled a large drop of ink across a blank sheet of paper.

“Hiya Twilight!” Pinkie Pie bounced into the library, wearing a set of saddlebags stuffed full to bursting. “What are you doing?”

“I *was* studying,” grumbled Twilight. “Is this important, Pinkie?”

“Of course it’s important! I was baking all day because there are so many hungry ponies because of the Dawn and then I realized I spent too long baking and I needed a break! And then I thought, Twilight’s been in the library forever, I bet she needs a break too! I mean a break from studying, not from baking, because you can’t bake in a library.” Pinkie Pie gasped. “I’ve got it, Twilight! You should take a turn baking and I’ll start studying!”

“Thanks, Pinkie, but I can’t take a break. I need to finish this research as soon as possible. You’re welcome to help me, though.”



“Absoposilutely!” Pinkie Pie zipped to Twilight’s table and pulled a quill and parchment from her saddlebags. “What are we doing?”

“I’m trying to figure out how the Elements of Harmony work.”

“But we know how they work, silly filly! We used them to make Nightmare Moon happy again, remember?”

Twilight nodded. “I know what we did, but not how we did it or why it worked. I’m looking at other uses of the Elements to see if I can figure it out.”

“Did you find anything?”

“Some. I dug up some primary sources to confirm the old mare’s tale about Nightmare Moon. It seems Princess Celestia really did use the Elements of Harmony to banish her for a thousand years, except *those* Elements weren’t ponies who embodied the six virtues. They were physical objects that Celestia wielded during the fight. Here, look.” Twilight flipped a book open to reveal an illustration of six stone orbs.

“Those look like the things we found in Everfree Castle!” said Pinkie Pie. “Except we only found five.”

“I know. And Princess Celestia used these to banish Nightmare Moon, not to restore Princess Luna like we did. I know the princess wouldn’t send her sister into exile unless she had no other option. I think those Elements must be different from the ones we used.”

“Different how?”

“I don’t know. This can’t be the whole story. Also, if this is true and Princess Celestia needed to use these Elements to banish Nightmare Moon, then how did Corona Blaze banish Luna without them?”

“Hey! Luna said she could banish Corona Blaze too, and she didn’t have any Elements! Well, she had the five of us, but five isn’t enough.”

“She did?” Twilight frowned. “Are you sure? If she had that power, she would have used it.”

“Nope! Luna said she wasn’t going to be mean to her sister like that, even though she could. And Dashie said Corona Blaze thought Luna was going to banish her during the fight, so Luna must’ve really been able to do it if she wanted to.”

“Argh!” Twilight slammed the book shut. “This makes no sense! I’m missing something big, and I don’t know where to find it!”

For the second time, the front door burst open. Twilight sighed without looking up. “Who is it this time? Let me guess: Rainbow Dash?”

“Twilight Sparkle, you are under arrest in the name of Queen Corona Blaze!” Three unicorn ponies in gold armor rushed into the library.

Lieutenant Steadfast allowed herself a small smile. She was galloping through Ponyville with eleven armored soldiers behind her. The shocked civilians hurried to clear the streets as her force tore through the town. A small part of Steadfast felt badly about frightening them, but it was drowned out by the part that was simply having fun. There was something immensely satisfying about watching everypony get out of her way.

The lieutenant burst into the town square and reluctantly pulled to a stop. “Fan out,” she called to the soldiers. “Surround the square!” As her troops carried out their orders, Steadfast approached the closest civilian, a cream-colored earth pony with a rich red mane. “You there! Who’s in charge here?”

“Um.” The civilian glanced around, taking stock of the soldiers moving into position. “You are.”

“That’s cute,” said Lieutenant Steadfast. “I was told there’s a mayor in charge of this village. Where is she?”

“Here.” A gray-brown mare approached Steadfast from outside the ring of soldiers. “I’m the mayor of Ponyville. What is it you want?”

“I’m here to bring this town under the control of Queen Corona Blaze. If you cooperate, this will go smoothly for all of us.”

The mayor stiffened. “Ponyville is loyal to Princess Celestia. We won’t take orders from anypony except her or Princess Luna.”

“The princesses are gone. Corona Blaze is the only pony left who can protect Equestria. You *will* recognize her as your ruler and turn over the fugitive Twilight Sparkle and her companions.”

“I am not about to give up my ponies to some thug in gold armor!”

“Then we’ll take them ourselves.” Steadfast realized she was attracting a crowd. Perhaps a dozen townspies had arrived and were watching from outside the cordon. Added to the seven civilians still trapped at the center of the square, they could be real trouble if a riot broke out. “Troops, form up on me!”

The soldiers broke the cordon and regrouped behind the lieutenant. Three of the ponies who had been stuck in the town square fled, but the other four joined the mob at the mayor’s back. Steadfast frowned. This was going to get ugly.

Swift Breeze threw open the door to Rarity’s bedroom. “Miss Rarity, come quick! Something’s happening outside!”

Rarity put down the cape she had been mending and cantered down the stairs after her guest. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know! A big group of soldiers just went galloping through town!”

“Soldiers in Ponyville? This can’t possibly be good.” Rarity emerged into what had been the front room of her shop. Eight or nine of the refugees who occupied it now were clustered around the windows. “Where were these ponies going?”

“Towards the center of town, I think,” said Swift Breeze.

Trixie stepped forward from the crowd of her fellow refugees. “That’s towards Twilight’s library! Obviously they’re here to recapture her. It’s up to us to stop them!”

“Sounds likely,” said Rarity. “Do you have a plan?”

Somepony started banging on the front door hard enough to shake it in its frame. “Open up,” came a gruff voice, “in the name of the Queen!”

Swift Breeze shied away from the noise. “Why are they here? Miss Rarity, you have to get upstairs!”

“Nonsense, darling. I’m not about to abandon all of you to that ruffian. Now be a dear and open that door before it breaks.”

Swift Breeze made her way to the door and hesitantly pulled it open. A trio of soldiers barged inside. “Which one of you is Rarity?” demanded the first one through the door.

“I am. What are you doing in my home?”

“You are under arrest by order of her majesty Corona Blaze. Come along now.”

Rarity narrowed her eyes. “Oh, I don’t *think* so.”

“Quietly or no, you’re coming with me. There are three of us and one of you.”

“No,” said Swift Breeze. “There are two of us.”

“Three,” said Trixie.

The crowd of refugees shuffled forward. “Four.” “Five.” “Six.” The soldiers quickly found themselves surrounded on three sides.

The lead soldier scowled. “This isn’t over.” The three of them turned and cantered out of the boutique.

Rarity let out the breath she'd been holding. "Thank you all. You didn't have to do that."

"Of course we had to!" said Swift Breeze. "After everything you've done for us, I wasn't about to let them drag you off to who knows what."

"This is touching and all," said Trixie, "but we need to get moving. If they came after you, they'll be sending ponies to get your friends too, and probably me as well."

Rarity nodded. "You're right. The rest of you stay here. I won't have you getting hurt." She cautiously stepped into the street, with Trixie close behind.

Twilight leaped to her hooves as the three soldiers rushed at her. The attackers were between her and the door, so Twilight ran the other way, up the stairs. Pinkie Pie followed close behind. Twilight reached out with her magic, grabbed several of the ladders scattered among the bookshelves, and dumped them in a tangled pile on the stairs behind her. As the soldiers struggled to climb over the obstacle, Twilight and Pinkie Pie reached the top floor.

"Now what do we do?" asked Pinkie Pie.

"We leave." Twilight grabbed Pinkie Pie, ran to the window, and began focusing her magic. There was some sort of commotion in the town square below, but it couldn't possibly be worse than getting stuck in a room with three angry soldiers. With an effort of will, Twilight teleported them away.

There was a bright flash as the two ponies reappeared in the town square. They found themselves staring at a dozen angry soldiers. The soldiers were facing Mayor Mare, who was in the middle of saying something unflattering. Everypony turned and stared at the new arrivals.

“Oh,” said Twilight, “this isn’t good.”

“It’s the fugitives!” cried the lead soldier. “Get them!”

Mayor Mare put herself between Twilight and the soldiers. “You’re in my town, and you will leave my ponies alone!” A couple dozen onlookers rushed to the mayor’s side and glared at the soldiers.

The leader of the soldiers snorted and stomped at the ground. “Fine. We’ll do this the hard way. Charge!”

The soldiers thundered forward. The townsp ponies shouted and rushed to meet them.

Twilight watched in horror as the two groups of ponies crashed together in a chaotic mass of kicking legs and flailing hooves. The soldiers’ leader bucked Aloe, sending her sprawling. Lyra and Pokey tackled a soldier from both sides, bearing him to the ground under their combined weight. Two more soldiers charged at them from the side. Lyra got out of the way, but Pokey was knocked to the ground and trampled.

The town square was filled with cries of rage and pain. Neither side had a clear advantage. The soldiers were badly outnumbered, but they had armor and training. Twilight backed away from the scene of horror in front of her. She forced herself to watch as her friends and neighbors suffered in an attempt to defend her. “Everypony stop!” she shouted, but she could barely hear her own voice over the din.

Twilight concentrated, and her horn began to shimmer. She *had* to stop this, no matter what! She released her magic in a blinding flash of light, then cast a quick spell to amplify her voice. “STOP FIGHTING!”

The brawl came to a halt as ponies looked over, more in surprise than anything else. Twilight stepped forward. “Please stop. I surrender.”

“What?” Mayor Mare was incredulous. “Twilight Sparkle, you can’t give in to these bullies!”

"I'm sorry, mayor," said Twilight, "but this fighting has to end. I just... I can't let anypony get hurt because of me!"

"A wise choice," said the leader of the soldiers. "Sergeant Steel Mane, take two ponies and escort Miss Sparkle back to headquarters."

As the soldiers grabbed her, Twilight scanned the town square. The townspenies were still glaring at the soldiers, but the two groups had untangled themselves. If nothing else provoked them, Twilight thought they wouldn't start fighting again. There was no sign of Pinkie Pie, so at least her friend had managed to disappear in time.

Rarity and Trixie were rushing towards the town square and what sounded like a lot of angry ponies when Trixie pulled to an abrupt halt. "Look!" She pointed through a narrow alley to a parallel street. "They've got Twilight!"

"It looks like they're taking her out of town," said Rarity. "And they've blindfolded her! Those brutes!" Twilight and her three guards passed behind a house and out of view. Fortunately, the soldiers hadn't noticed the two unicorns watching them.

"I'll bet that's to keep her from teleporting," said Trixie. "She can't teleport anywhere she can't see. Come on, let's go set her loose!" She stepped forward, horn glowing.

"Hold on." Rarity barred Trixie's way with a hoof. "Those ponies are clearly taking her somewhere, and I'd like to know where. It may be Twilight isn't the only one of us they've captured."

Trixie settled back. "You've got a point."

With Trixie's invisibility spell, following the soldiers proved easy. Rarity began to worry as she noticed the path their quarry followed, and her fears were confirmed when Fluttershy's cottage came into view. Two

soldiers kept watch outside the door. They stood aside as Twilight's escort hustled their prisoner inside.

Trixie led Rarity behind a low rise, out of sight of the cottage. With a sigh of relief, she let down the invisibility spell. "Okay, we found them. Now what?"

"That's easy!" said Pinkie Pie. "Now we get Twilight out of there, and Dashie and Fluttershy too!"

Trixie leapt away. "Where did you come from?"

"Well, when a mare and a stallion love each other very much-"

"Not now, Pinkie Pie," said Rarity. She had long ago ceased to be surprised when her friend showed up at the oddest times. "Did you see what's inside the cottage?"

"Yup! Our friends, plus four of those mean ponies. Seven of them, now that the three new ones are here."

Rarity frowned. "With the guards outside, that makes nine. I don't see how the three of us can win against so many."

"We don't have to win," said Trixie. "We just have to make them *think* we won."

"Ooh!" Pinkie Pie would have jumped with excitement, but Rarity held her down before she could leap up and give away their position. "You're going to put on a show!"

"That's right," said Trixie. "With nine of them, though, this isn't going to be easy. What I wouldn't give for a good cape..."

"I'm afraid I can't help you there," said Rarity. "We don't have time to go back to the boutique."

Pinkie Pie pulled a violet cape embroidered with stars from her saddlebags. "Will this do?"

Trixie stared. "Where did you get that?" she demanded.



“You left it behind last time you were in Ponyville, remember? It fit so nice, I decided to keep it! But then you came back and I remembered I had to give it back to you so I brought it with me and then our friends were captured so I forgot about it and then you asked for it and I remembered again!”

“Alright, alright,” said Rarity. “Let’s get to work. What’s the plan?”

“That depends,” said Trixie. “Do you have the rest of my old things in those saddlebags, Pinkie?”

Braeburn led three of his soldiers through the rows of apple trees at his cousins’ farm. He wondered if it had been a mistake to come here personally. Sweet Apple Acres was a fair distance outside of Ponyville, so he would almost certainly be away from his troops for most of the mission. The plan could go wrong in any number of ways during that time, and he wouldn’t even know.

He forced himself to put such thoughts out of his mind. Lieutenant Steadfast was a competent officer with far more experience than Braeburn himself. She would be more than able to handle things in his absence. More importantly, he was here now. The rest of the mission was out of his hooves.

The rows of trees ended and the farmhouse came into view. “Here we are,” said Braeburn, breaking into a canter. His squad fell in behind him.

As they neared the farmhouse, the front door opened and the hulking form of Big Macintosh emerged, chewing on a stalk of wheat. His eyes widened as he saw the four ponies bearing down on him. “Cousin Braeburn,” he said. “You went and joined the army.”

“Macintosh,” said Braeburn. “I sure do wish I’d come here at a happier time. I’m here to take Applejack.”

“I’m sure I didn’t just hear you say you’re gonna arrest your own kin.”

Braeburn sighed. “Wasn’t about to sit back and let somepony else do it. Stand aside, now. Last thing I want is to have to hurt you.”

Macintosh shifted the stalk of wheat from one side of his mouth to the other. “You don’t have to do anything. If you try to hurt me, I figure that’s your choice.”

“Come on, Macintosh. One of you against four of us just doesn’t add up. I promise we ain’t gonna hurt her, and this really is what’s best for Equestria, and...” Braeburn trailed off as he watched Macintosh’s unflinching expression. “You’re gonna make me do this the hard way.”

“Eeyup.”

The fight was short and one-sided. Big Macintosh was no pushover, but neither was he a match for four ponies at once. It wasn’t long before he was dazed and lying flat on his back.

“Braeburn Apple! Just what in the hay do you think you’re doing?”

Applejack limped out of the farmhouse, one foreleg in a sling, leaning on a light yellow earth pony whose cutie mark was a corncob. The look on Applejack’s face could have curdled milk.

Braeburn calmly met her gaze. “I’m arresting you. I’m sorry about this, but it’s the only way to be sure Corona Blaze stays in charge.”

“And why in Equestria would you want that? She’s done imprisoned everypony who doesn’t like her, even her own sister! Don’t freedom mean anything to you?”

“I thought you of all ponies would understand,” said Braeburn. “You saw what happened when Celestia let everypony do whatever they wanted in Appleloosa. You were there for the battle. It was the worst thing I’ve ever seen, but we were lucky that day, Applejack. If things had gone one tiny bit differently, ponies would have *died*. Can you imagine that? Ponies dying

because of some stupid argument over land? If that's what freedom leads to, I want no part of it.

"Celestia couldn't stop that battle from happening, but Corona Blaze is different. Where she's in charge, she makes sure everypony behaves like they ought to. Once she takes over all of Equestria, there won't be any more fighting, anywhere. If I have to get rough to make that happen... well, it'll be worth it in the end.

"I hope I'm getting through to you, but you're coming with me either way. You're in no condition to run. We're not gonna hurt you, we just need to keep you away from the other Elements so you don't try anything." He looked at the pony supporting Applejack. "You're not about to give us any trouble, are you?"

The stranger thought for several seconds. "Not against four of you," he said at last.

"Smart move," said Braeburn. "Alright, troops, grab her. We've gotta get back quickly, now."

Under the protection of the invisibility spell, Trixie climbed on top of the rise that shielded her companions from view. The two soldiers in front of Fluttershy's cottage looked bored—hardly ideal audience material. Well, that would change soon enough.

"Let's go," said Trixie.

Behind the ridge, Rarity's horn flared, and dozens of pale blue beams of light radiated from it. Trixie saw the guards look over. They could see the lights, if not their source, and they were curious.

Trixie positioned herself so that Rarity's searchlights would frame her perfectly, then slowly released her invisibility spell. The guards saw her fade into existence in front of a brilliant halo, cape fluttering in the breeze.

“Who DARES stand before the Great and Powerful Trixie?” she shouted.  
“Move aside, foals, or you’ll wish you had!”

One of the guards pounded on the cottage door. “Sergeant! I think we’re under attack!” Seven more soldiers quickly spilled out of the cottage.

Trixie smiled. Perfect.

“You cannot defeat me!” cried Trixie. “My magic is unstoppable!”

A unicorn soldier—the sergeant, presumably—gave a curt gesture. Two pegasus ponies launched themselves into the air and flew at Trixie.

(“Now?” asked Pinkie Pie.)

(“Not yet,” said Rarity.)

Trixie conjured a gust of wind that caught one pegasus and tossed her bodily against the other. The two of them tumbled to the ground, more embarrassed than hurt. Nevertheless, the other soldiers looked nervous now. They hadn’t expected real opposition.

“Now you see what folly it is to oppose the Great and Powerful Trixie! All your worst nightmares are about to come true!”

The sergeant’s horn sparkled as he levitated a net from his saddlebags, then launched it at Trixie. With a quick burst of telekinesis, Trixie untied several key knots in the net and gently pulled on the ends. The net split down the middle, and the two halves passed harmlessly on either side of Trixie.

“You poor, doomed morons!” Trixie bellowed. “I am invincible!”

“This is ridiculous,” said the sergeant. “Everypony get her!” He charged. The soldiers hesitated a moment, then uncertainly followed after him.

(“Now?” asked Pinkie Pie.)

(“Light it,” said Rarity.)

Half a dozen fireworks exploded behind Trixie, outlining her silhouette with their harsh glare. At the same moment, a quick illusion spell sheathed Trixie in what appeared to be an inferno of blue flames. She reared up on her hind legs and shouted, "THE GREAT AND POWERFUL TRIXIE IS *HERE FOR YOUR SOULS!*"

That was enough. The soldiers broke and ran.

"Argh! Dangit!" Rainbow Dash thrashed futilely against the ropes that bound her legs. "Fluttershy, help me out here!"

Fluttershy edged towards Rainbow Dash, one eye watching for the soldiers' return. She hadn't struggled, and so nopony had bothered to tie her up. That would be useful now, if she could get to Dash before—

The door flew open, and Fluttershy darted underneath a table.

"Twilight! Rainbow Dash!" Rarity cried as she entered the cottage. A quick burst of magic removed Dash's bonds and Twilight's blindfold. "Are you okay?"

"We're fine," said Twilight. "It's good to see a friendly face. I was getting pretty worried there."

"What about those soldiers?" asked Rainbow Dash.

"They've been dealt with," said Trixie as she entered, followed by Pinkie Pie.

"Really? Awesome! You girls are the best."

"What do we do now, Twilight?" asked Pinkie Pie.

Twilight hesitated. "I hate to say it, but we've got to get out of Ponyville. It isn't safe here anymore. We'll go to Zecora's to plan our next move. The path there is safe, but the soldiers will have a hard time finding us in the Everfree Forest."

“Wait a minute,” said Rarity. “Where are Fluttershy and Applejack?”

Fluttershy poked her head out from under the table. “Um. I’m here. I haven’t seen Applejack, though.”

Rainbow Dash leapt into the air. “Then we’ve gotta find her!”

Twilight nodded. “Dash, you go look for her. You’ll move quicker without the rest of us along, so we’ll wait here. If Applejack is safe, bring her back here. If not... if not, get the rest of us before you do anything, okay?”

Rainbow Dash saluted. “I got it, Twilight!” She zipped out the door in a multicolored blur.

Braeburn was doing his best to hurry his troops back to headquarters. Every second they delayed was another second before he could take command of the mission again. Despite his best efforts, it was slow going. Applejack refused to move, so two of his ponies were forced to carry her along, slowing them down considerably.

They were close to headquarters when Braeburn caught sight of another group of soldiers. There were nine of them, and they were heading in his direction in an undisciplined mass. Braeburn frowned. This couldn’t possibly be good. He waved, and the soldiers galloped over.

“What in the hay are y’all doing out here?” demanded Braeburn. “This weren’t in the plan.”

One of the soldiers spoke up. “It was crazy, captain! We were guarding the headquarters with three of the prisoners when this wizard attacked us! We tried to stop her, but nothing we tried could touch her. Then she exploded! Twice! And she was still coming at us! We had no choice but to retreat, sir.”

“Hah!” crowed Applejack. “See? You won’t get away with this!”

Braeburn ignored her. "Sergeant Steel Mane, what's it like in the town?"

"Sir, when I left, the situation was tense, but Lieutenant Steadfast was in control."

"And which three ponies did you have before this wizard got you?"

"Sparkle, Fluttershy, and Dash." The sergeant took a deep breath. "Captain, I'd like permission to retake headquarters. With the addition of your squad, we should have the numbers to do it."

"Not gonna happen," said Braeburn. "That wizard will have freed our prisoners by now. If one of them can take nine of us, then thirteen of us against four of them don't sound like good odds, especially if they've got Twilight. That mare's supposed to be something else. We're gonna fall back to Ponyville and link up with the rest of our troops."

"With respect, sir, Her Majesty won't be pleased if any of the targets escape."

"I reckon she won't, but she'll be safe. Right now we've just got one, but that one is enough to keep them from doing their hocus-pocus and getting rid of the queen. If we tangle with the others, we could lose everything. I ain't gonna take the chance. Let's move, everypony!"

Twilight had just managed to coax Fluttershy out from under the table when Rainbow Dash burst back into the cottage. "We gotta hurry!" cried the pegasus. "I found AJ, but a bunch of soldiers have her, and now they're taking her back to Ponyville! If we go now, I bet we can catch them before they get there. They're moving pretty slow."

Twilight beamed. "Good work! How many soldiers were there?"

"I dunno. A dozen, maybe?"

“A dozen!” Twilight blanched. “That means they’ll outnumber us two to one! There’s no way we can get Applejack away from that many ponies!”

“Not really,” said Trixie. “Three of us got past nine of them to save you, remember?”

“This is our best chance, Twilight,” said Rarity. “If they reach the town, they’ll get to that big group of soldiers. Beating that many really would be impossible.”

“Yeah!” Rainbow Dash was too excited to stay still, so she flew in circles above the other ponies. “We need to go now!”

“No!” Twilight shouted. “No no no no no. We’re outnumbered and they can get help from their friends. I want to save Applejack too, but if we try, we’ll probably all get captured. I won’t take that chance! The six of us here are Princess Celestia’s only hope!”

“What?” Rainbow Dash’s jaw dropped. “We can’t leave her! I mean, we came for you when you were in Canterlot, and look what happened then!”

“Exactly! You saved me, but that was with Princess Luna on your side. She would’ve been able to save Applejack, but now she’s banished because of me and now I’m the one who’s free and, and, and I don’t know how we can get Applejack back! If we try to save her now, things could get even worse, just like last time. We have to get out of here while we can. We’ll hide in the Everfree Forest and then... and then I’ll figure something out.”

“No way!” Rainbow Dash turned to face the door so the other ponies couldn’t see her tears. “If you’re too scared then you can run away. I’m not gonna leave AJ, though! I’ll save her alone if I have to!”

“Rainbow Dash, please.” Twilight walked up behind her friend and put a hoof on her shoulder. “The rest of us have to stick together. We need you with us. I need you with us. If you got captured too... I don’t know if I could go on.”



“I... fine. I’ll go with you. But I don’t like this! It isn’t right!”

Rarity shook her head sadly. “It seems nothing’s gone right since the Dawn. Now let’s go. If we’re going to leave, we’d best get moving quickly.”

Twilight led them out of the cottage. Every one of the six ponies looked back as they fled into the Everfree Forest.