

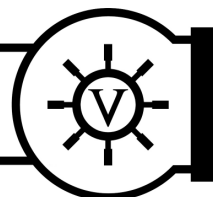
# Under a Luminous Sky

Jake The Army Guy

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**PONY FICTION VAULT**



The ponies sat at their bar stools in rapt attention, their drinks all but forgotten as they listened to the drunk mare before them. Berry Punch took a large swig from her mug before speaking again. “So I said, ‘Rectum? Damn near *killed* ‘im!’”

Peals of laughter filled the small bar as ponies fell off of their stools, gasping for breath. Berry gave a wide smile. The humble pub was a second home, a weekend getaway from the troubles of the work week. The other patrons were like family: friendly faces to share her problems with over numerous rounds of hard cider.

The gray earth pony behind the polished bar shook his head. He slid a full mug of cider to a mare across the bar before turning back to Berry. “You kiss your mother with that mouth?”

“No, Tap, but I kiss *your* mother with it,” she slurred.

Tap merely rolled his eyes as another wave of laughter filled the bar. “Okay, Berry, I think it’s time you headed home. I doubt Sheriff Shackle wants to deal with you again.”

“Aw, but the karaoke contest starts soon!”

“Oh, let her stay, Tap,” said a unicorn from the other end of the bar, pointing an orange hoof at a clock on the wall. “It’s barely midnight!”

“Yeah, the night is young!”

“Have a heart, Tap!”

The orange unicorn stumbled next to Berry and placed his foreleg over her shoulder. “Come on, Taaaap. I’ll even buy her next round!”

He shook his head, his shoulder-length blonde mane swinging back and forth. “And are you going to bail her out if she gets thrown in the drunk tank again?” He turned back to Berry with a small smile. “Sorry Berry, but I’m cutting you off. It’s for your own good.”

Berry rolled her eyes and blew him a loud raspberry. “You’re no fun,” she said as she turned to face her friends. “Sorry, everypony. Dad says I gotta go.”

Following a loud chorus of goodbyes, Tap led the stumbling mare to the door. “Never a dull moment with you, eh Berry?”

“Awwww, you’re just jealous. You *know* I’d win that karaoke contest,” she said with a lopsided grin.

“Yeah, you win every week. It’s only a contest if somepony else has a chance. Right, Brick?”

The bouncer grunted as he opened the door for her, his rippling muscles bulging underneath his black t-shirt.

Berry turned to face the two stallions. “*Winter Wrap Up, Winter Wrap Up! Let’s... uh, something, something, de, de dah, cheer!*”

Tap chuckled. “Okay, okay, enough! You gonna be able to make it home okay? Don’t want you getting lost again.”

“Are you kidding?” she said, puffing out her chest. “My sense of direction is spot o—” She tripped over a trash can, spinning around before finding her balance again. “Ah, I’ll be fine.” She turned and stumbled away, leaving the two stallions shaking their heads.

Brick turned to Tap. “Ain’t like you to turn away a paying customer.”

Tap just watched Berry stagger away, a warm smile on his face. “Hey, I may be a businesspony, but I’m a friend first.”

• • •

Something inside Berry didn’t want the night to end. Going home so early wouldn’t have been a fitting close to such a fun evening, so instead she stumbled through the quiet streets of Ponyville. The thatch-roofed homes that lined the cobblestone roads swayed gently in her vision.

*I love this town*, she thought, a grin still plastered on her flushed face. Sure, it didn’t have all the razzle-dazzle of bigger cities like Manehattan, but it didn’t need it; even after all these years its quaint, rustic charm never got old. Her juice business did well enough to keep her content, and there was her beloved bar. She wasn’t an alcoholic by any means; she simply enjoyed drinking with her friends.

Berry walked past the town square, rambling and enjoying the bright moonlight, gazing up at the stars. She caught a few ponies giving her sideways glances, but she didn’t mind. Gossip shared between ponies she didn’t know never fazed her; her friends knew she wasn’t a worthless drunk, and that was all that mattered to her.

Time escaped her as she stumbled, her tuneless humming occasionally interrupted by a hiccup. Berry hadn't lied to Tap; she had spent her entire life in Ponyville, and knew the town like the back of her hoof. Therefore she was perplexed that she eventually found herself not at her apartment, but on the outskirts of the Everfree Forest. The imposing treeline stood sentinel before her, an ancient wall marking the end of peaceful nature and the beginning of wild unknown. Treetops danced and swayed with the gentle wind, a quiet whistling coming from the leaves.

Turning around, Berry saw Ponyville in the distance, only the faint glow from streetlamps separating it from the dark night. Her addled mind couldn't judge the distance past a vague "too far" so she shrugged and turned back to the woods. Grinning widely, she stepped between the line of trees and left the dirt road.

The thick smell of vegetation filled her nostrils as she entered the woods. Heavy vines covered the trunks of trees, and brown, wilting tendrils of ivy reached for the canopy. The bushes surrounding her rustled with life; the glowing eyes of unknown animals peered at her as she stumbled through their territory. Berry was amazed that everypony was so scared of this place. The sights and sounds of nature were very calming to her, despite the occasional hissing of some unknown creature.

Berry stumbled through the thick trees, her soft humming sometimes interrupted by a drunken hiccup while she took in the beauty around her. Small slivers of moonlight illuminated her path, granting an ethereal grace to the lonely woods, accentuated by the gentle swaying of her vision. Getting lost in the Everfree was a very easy thing to do, but she didn't care. In fact, she didn't really even care if she made it home at all. The cool mid-autumn air made the outdoors a very appealing place to lay her head. It wouldn't be the first time she'd passed out someplace strange.

The sharp crack of a twig snapping nearby cut off her thoughts. She turned her head towards the noise, straining to see in the darkness. After a few moments, she shook her head and continued on. "Darn critters..."

A breeze cooled her alcohol-warmed face as she paused in a beam of moonlight that shone through a break in the canopy. She looked at the stars through half-lidded eyes. "You sure outdid yourself tonight, Pri—"

Berry's words turned into a quiet yelp when a shadow jumped through her peripheral vision. She whipped her head towards the movement. Once more, she stared intently into the shadows, her slightly bloodshot eyes scanning the darkness. "Wh-who's there?"

Leaves gently swayed in the breeze, and the shadows seemed to pulsate. Shuffling on her back hooves, Berry started walking again. The calm she had felt only moments before melted away, a sense of unease creeping over her mind. Shivering slightly, she picked up her pace, glancing over her shoulder as she trotted on. Nothing but leaves moved in the darkness, but she kept eyeing the nearby brush.

Berry finally came to a halt in a small clearing. Trotting around in a panic with no clue where she was going was not helping.

“Stay calm, Berry,” she said to herself. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Opening her eyes once more, she glanced around, searching for an escape from the darkness that surrounded her.

Her ears perked up, but all she heard was the faint rustle of wind between the leaves. The buzzing of life in the deep woods had stopped, leaving an eerie calm. “Celestia, get me out of here, and I swear I will never drink again... and this time, I mean it.”

A rustling sound came from behind a nearby bush. Berry spun towards the noise, her heart now pounding. She stared with wide eyes, sweat dripping down her face. The muscles in her legs tensed, adrenaline doing its best to counter the alcohol in her blood. Berry narrowed her eyes and peered into the blackness, her vision still swaying slightly. Then, she heard it: a heavy, snuffling sound, like somepony breathing hard after a long run. Berry took a few steps backwards, almost tripping over her own hooves.

“Okay, s-show yourself!” she cried. “I know you’re there! Wh-what do you want?”

For a moment, the only sound in the clearing was the breeze. Then, a gentle whisper wove through the leaves: “You.”

The bush exploded towards Berry, leaves and twigs smacking her in the face as something lunged from the darkness, tackling her onto the ground. The creature rolled on top of her and pinned her forelegs to the ground, one of its limbs holding a large knife. Berry’s shrill cry echoed through the trees as they wrestled, her hooves flailing at her attacker. The thing on top of her brought the knife to bear, aiming it for Berry’s chest.

“Ugh!”

Berry’s hoof connected with soft flesh, and her attacker fell backwards. At a speed that belied her drunken state, she stood up and stumbled away, the world spinning violently

around her. Vines and leaves whipped her muzzle as she ran through the cluttered forest, her legs pumping with a strength born of fear and panic.

“Help! Somepony help me!” she cried, bobbing and weaving through the trees. She could hear her attacker nearing over her heavy hoofbeats and ragged breathing. Sparks danced inside her adrenaline-fueled muscles, urging her tired legs to continue.

She turned to avoid a dead tree when her hooves slipped on a patch of wet leaves. Berry cried out as she skidded and fell. Before she could scramble to her hooves, a heavy weight pinned her back down. A loud gasp came as her breath was crushed out of her. The attacker grunted in frustration and wrapped a hoof around her foreleg. Berry twisted her body violently, managing to wrench her leg free, and stumbled back to her hooves.

The forest only seemed to grow thicker as she galloped. Her lungs burned and her legs ached, but she kept going. The heavy breathing from behind was growing louder, the hoofbeats of her pursuer thundering in her ears. Every nerve in her body was screaming; it felt as if an electric current was jolting through her muscles.

She cried out again, her voice hoarse as she struggled to stay on her hooves. “Please! Somepony, anypo—”

Her cry turned into a loud grunt as her back hoof caught onto an exposed root. She tumbled head over hoof before hitting a tree with a loud thud. The sharp pain of the impact had only just registered when the world fell away, the darkness consuming her.

When Berry’s mind finally returned, a loud ringing filled her ears and her head throbbed painfully. She groaned and slowly opened her eyes, stars dancing wildly in her vision. As she gathered herself, she felt something against her back. Somepony was laying next to her, one foreleg wrapped around her midsection while a hoof softly stroked her mane. She tried to jerk away, but the stranger’s foreleg held her in place.

“A soothing voice, too soft to identify, whispered in her ear. “Shh, shh, it’s okay.”

Berry began to blubber to the unknown pony. “P-please help. Somepony was chasing me.” She bit her lip, trying to hold back her tears. “They... they tried to hurt me.”

The stranger’s hoof continued to gently stroke her mane, while the other left her chest. “I know,” the voice whispered.

“You know? But, then why—”

She felt a sharp point press against her chest. Berry froze and looked down; it was the same large, curved knife from before. Strange drawings covered the hilt from the tip to the ring that attached it to the pony's hoof, and the blade reflected the moonlight into her eyes. She tried to move, to run, to scream, anything, but her body refused to obey. Tears flowed down her face, mixing with the small trail of blood from her forehead.

"Please," she sobbed, "pl-please don't do this."

The hoof stroking her mane stopped its ministrations. "I'm sorry," the stranger said, the voice colder than the mid-autumn air as the knife pressed down. "But you serve a higher purpose now."

Far away, in the quiet town of Ponyville, no pony could hear the screams.

“... and so, as you can see, avians in Equestria are capable of navigating by magnetic fields,” Twilight Sparkle said, pointing a hoof at a formation of birds high above the treeline. “However, the cold air of winter can interfere with their senses, which is why we help them return north during Winter Wrap Up.” She turned, eager to see the bright eyes of the students she was instructing.

What she saw, however, was a sea of half-lidded eyes, drooping heads, hanging jaws, and severely arched eyebrows. Cheerilee smiled and trotted next to Twilight. “Thank you for that... *detailed* lesson on bird migration.” She turned back to the students. “Everypony thank Doctor Sparkle.”

“Thank you, Doctor Sparkle,” the students droned.

Twilight smiled sheepishly. “Please, just Twilight is fine. My doctorate isn’t enough to—”

“Now,” Cheerilee said with a warm smile, “I think it’s time we went back to Miss Fluttershy’s backyard. I believe she has some animals we can play with.”

“Well, I have a slide show about the dif—” Her words were lost under the chorus of cheers and a stampede of hooves as the fillies and colts raced around the cottage. As she watched the fleeing foals, Cheerilee gave her an apologetic shrug, then trotted after her students. Left alone, Twilight rolled her eyes.

*Foals these days. I just hope Applejack and Rainbow Dash are having better luck with their lessons than I am.* With an only slightly-annoyed groan, she stood back up and trotted over to the nearby picnic table. The sounds of excited foals echoed across the peaceful fields that surrounded Fluttershy’s cottage. The field trip was in full swing; students from Ponyville Elementary were scattered all around, learning about nature from various volunteers and, Twilight noted with a roll of her eyes, paying much closer attention than her group had.

“*Yee-haw!*”

A chorus of thunderous hooffalls came from behind Twilight. She turned, and her jaw went slack. A large bull with razor sharp horns was charging towards her, bucking and snorting wildly, a rope tied to its neck. Applejack stood atop the raging beast, the thick rope between her gritted teeth. Twilight felt the ground shake as the bull thrashed, trying to dislodge the farm pony, but Applejack held fast. A crowd of young fillies and colts cheered loudly as they watched the display.



The lumbering bull came to a stop beside the picnic table and Applejack jumped off. “Thank ya kindly, Bobby Ray! We sure gave them young’uns a show, didn’t we?”

“Anytime, there, AJ!” The massive bull cricked his neck to the side as he walked away. “Next time, just don’t tie yer ropes so tight, there. Ya almost gave me rope burn!”

“Heh, sorry. Say hi to Daisy Jo for me.” She removed her hat and wiped the sweat off her brow, turning to Twilight. “Shoot, I must be gettin’ rusty. That ol’ longhorn almost threw me that time.”

Twilight gave an irritated huff. “Well, at least you kept *your* group awake. How could you *not* care about the electromagnetic properties of avian migration?”

“Uh, the who of the what now?”

“Ugh, never mind.” Twilight slumped back down to her haunches, resting her head on the picnic table. “I just hope Rainbow Dash is having better luck with her flying lessons.”

Applejack let out a bark of laughter. “I kinda doubt that. She never even got off the ground.”

As if on cue, a loud retching sound came from behind a nearby bush. Several moments later, Dash stumbled out from behind, wiping bile from her lips. Spitting one last time, she stumbled over to her friends and plopped down on the ground. Twilight wrinkled her nose at the pungent smell of vomit that radiated off of her.

“Oh, my gosh, Rainbow!” Twilight cried. “Are you okay?” Dash merely grunted, not even lifting her green-tinted face to meet her friend.

Applejack grinned. “She’s been like that all mornin’. I told her she needs to go home and rest, but you know her.” She bent over Dash, the same smug grin on her face. “I’ll bet bits to bagels it’s all that dang junk food she eats.”

“Stuff it, hayseed,” Dash moaned, rolling over on her back. “I’m the best flyer in Equestria, a world-famous athlete; an upset stomach isn’t going to stop me from seeing my fans. Besides,” she said, looking up at Applejack with red-rimmed eyes, “it couldn’t be food. Mac cooked dinner last night, not you.”

“Hey, now, missy! My cookin’ is just as g—”

“So, Dash,” Twilight interjected, stepping between the two, “you spent *another* night at Sweet Apple Acres?” A sly grin graced her lips. “I wonder, when was the last time you even *saw* your house?”

“*Hey!* I don’t stay over *that* much! I’ve only spent the night twice this week!”

Twilight raised an eyebrow. “Rainbow Dash, it’s Tuesday.”

Dash shot a confused stare at Twilight while a cricket beneath the table chirped, unaware of its excellent timing. After a few moments, Dash’s eyes went wide before quickly narrowing. “So what? Mind your own business, egghead!”

“I’ll remember that next time you come to check out the latest Daring Do,” Twilight said with a slight smile.

At this, Dash finally stood and opened her mouth to reply, but all that came out was a loud burp, accompanied by an angry growl from her stomach. Putting a hoof to her mouth, she sat back down on her haunches, the green tint to her face growing darker. After a moment, she laid back down roughly. “Whatever, Twi.”

“Rainbow, it’s not some big shock that you’re staying over there. It’s been, what, a year now?”

“Ten months,” Applejack chimed, earning a glare from Rainbow. Applejack just shrugged her shoulders. “What? He’s *my* brother, and you’re one of my best friends! You don’t think I’d keep track of somethin’ like that?”

“All right, all right!” Dash said, finally rising to her hooves. “Can we please change the subject? We’re supposed to be helping Fluttershy with the foals, not gossiping.”

“Yeah, come ta think about it, I ain’t seen Fluttershy all mornin’,” Applejack chimed in. “I wonder if she’s doing okay.”

As if on cue, a loud bleating from an unidentifiable animal sounded from a swarm of students around the house. Above the din of laughter, a frail voice was barely audible. “Oh, um, please don’t... no, honey, you shouldn’t... oh, they really don’t like it when you... oh, dear...”

The three mares looked at each other for a moment. “Maybe you’re right, Dash,” Twilight said, already turning to walk over.

• • •

“Go, Hickory!”

Hickory Smoke charged forward, his face twisted in determination, and with a loud grunt he kicked with all his might, earning a satisfying slap as the rubber ball went flying. He looked up and saw the red ball sailing high into the air and over the group of foals that stood at the sidelines.

From behind him, a chorus of groans erupted. “Aw, come on, Hickory! It was only an eight-length shot!” yelled a yellow unicorn filly.

Hickory rolled his eyes. “Well, excuse me for trying to win the game, Pumpkin!”

“Quick! Somepony get it!”

Turning his head at the unknown voice, Hickory saw the ball hit the ground and continue to roll right towards the edge of the Everfree. Several ran, but none of the foals were fast enough, and it bounced right into the thick brush, its ending point unknown.

“Great job, *Hickey!*” said a tan pegasus. Pound Cake stepped next to his twin sister, both glaring at Hickory. “Now we can’t play anymore!” There was another round of groans from the gathered foals.

Hickory cringed at his nickname, looking back at his cutie mark, a smoking grill. His family had made the best barbeque in Ponyville for generations, but he still sometimes cursed his name.

Pumpkin turned to glance at Hickory. “No, it’s okay! It couldn’t have rolled far. Somepony should just go in and get it!”

“Yeah! Somepony just needs to go get it!” Pound added. “Go get it. From the Everfree... F-Forest.” The foals collectively turned their heads to the line of dense brush. Around the schoolyard, the dangers of the wild forest were known more from myth than fact, but everypony knew the stories: tales of wild dragons, ravenous timberwolves, and giant Ursas all waiting to gobble up any unsuspecting foal who dared enter their domain. Slowly, all eyes turned back to Hickory.

He gulped. “Oh, come on, guys. Recess is almost over anyway. Let’s just head back to the animals.”

“What’s the matter, *Hickey*? You scared?” taunted Pound.

“N-no! I-I just don’t think I could find it before recess is over.” Hickory attempted a grin, hoping to escape his fate.

“Hickey’s a chickey! Hickey’s a chickey!” Pumpkin jeered. The chant grew louder as more and more foals joined in.

Steeling his resolve and setting his jaw, Hickory shouldered past the group of taunting foals and marched with determination towards the row of trees. That determination faltered along with his hoofsteps as he approached; the line of trees was so thick that he could not see past the first few hoof-lengths. A clear line of shadow was visible just a few pony lengths in front of him, a barrier marking safety and doom in the little colt’s eyes. His knees began to rattle, and he turned back to the group. Their taunts had grown silent, replaced by a sense of fearful respect.

“He’s actually going to do it!” whispered somepony.

Turning back to the trees, he took a deep breath and ran forward. He was afraid that if he hesitated, his nerve would break.

He charged forward, eyes glued to the ground just in front of his hooves. A chill seemed to wash over him the instant he crossed the line of shade. His hooffalls echoed loudly in his mind as he ran for a good few seconds more before finally slowing and opening his eyes. Almost immediately, he wished he hadn’t. Jagged shadows obscured his vision, and strange animal noises came from behind the rows of vegetation. Beads of sweat fell from his brow, but he pressed onward. *I will not be a chicken!* He looked around him but couldn’t see the ball anywhere, so he traveled on, scanning the forest floor. Dead leaves crackled under his shaky hooves as he walked. Trees towered over him, making him feel even smaller than he was.

He let out a loud yelp when a bush next to him shook. Jumping sideways, he turned to face it. “Wh... Who’s there?”

The small bush shook harder, the crackling of leaves getting louder. Hickory bit his lip, his hind legs tensing to run, as the sound grew clearer. He cringed away instinctively when a small, furry head poked out of the shrub. The fox looked up at the colt, its head cocked to the side inquisitively.

Hickory let out an annoyed sigh. “Go on, get outta here!” he said, waving his hoof at the fox. It let out a quiet yip and ran away. He watched the small creature run away, then continued his search.

As he crested a small hill, he weighed being labeled a chicken against being gobbled up by some creature. *Okay, that’s far enough. I’m not going any fur—*

His thoughts were cut off as his front hoof caught on a root, and he fell head over hoof down the hill, finally landing with a dull, wet slap. He groaned, his knees aching from the tumble. *Great. I’m a chicken, I’m hurt, and I’m covered in mud.* He spat, the foul-tasting mud causing him to retch. Hickory opened his eyes to see a pair of purple eyes staring at him, unblinking.

*What the—*

• • •

“Feeling better, Dash?” Twilight asked.

After helping Fluttershy with the wild foals, Dash had run back to the bushes again. She had emerged a few minutes later, her mane still unruly, but her face no longer carried the deep green tint. “Yeah, yeah, it’s just a bug or something. Fluttershy is making me some herbal tea she says will help. I’ll be fine.” She turned to Cheerilee with a sheepish grin. “It’s a real shame I didn’t get to those flying lessons.”

Cheerilee just smiled. “Oh, it’s okay, Rainbow Dash. I didn’t expe—”

A chorus of shrieks interrupted her. Turning their heads, the mares saw a stampede of young foals running and screaming in terror. They dashed over to the group, blocking their path. “My little ponies, what’s wrong?” Cheerilee asked.

“Hickory Smoke is hurt!” one of the fillies cried.

Twilight looked behind the filly and saw a small colt walking very slowly towards them. His movements were slow, as if his body was moving on instinct rather than thought. Cheerilee and Twilight ran over to him, while Dash and Applejack stayed with the panicking foals. Twilight reached the colt first, but the sight caused her to take a half-step back, gasping loudly. The young colt was a mess: half of his face was covered in blood, the right side of his blonde mane was plastered to his head, and his fur was dotted by dark splotches of red.

“Hickory!” Cheerilee knelt down to help, but the colt didn’t acknowledge her. He stood rooted to the spot in front of her, staring ahead at some distant point. “Somepony get a doctor!”

It was then that Twilight noticed the look on his face. His lower lip was quivering, but what stood out were his eyes: they stared ahead, unblinking, with pupils drawn in to pinpricks. Twilight waved a hoof in front of the foal, but got no response. “Hickory?” When the colt still failed to answer, she took hold of him by the shoulders and shook him gently. “*Hickory!*”

The colt slowly turned his eyes to Twilight. “I found the ball,” he said with a tiny voice. “Behind the tree.”

Twilight felt bile rise in the back of her throat as she studied him. *There’s so much blood.* She ran a quick scanning spell over the foal, trying to find the source of his injuries. After a few moments, she could find nothing wrong, save a few scrapes on his legs. She glanced back at Hickory’s face. “Hickory, where are you hurt?”

“I’m not.”

“What?”

“It’s not mine.” A strong tremble spread through the colt. “It’s not mine! *It’s not mine!*” He fell to the ground sobbing, his body shaking violently. Cheerilee hugged the colt close as Fluttershy landed next to them, a first-aid kit held in her mouth.

Twilight stood back up as she took in the colt’s words. *But, then who—* She looked up and saw a trail of small, bloody hoofprints leading from the forest. Curiosity taking over, she left the quivering colt with Cheerilee and followed the trail. She could hear the chaos behind her growing quieter, the panicking cries of the foals blending in with shouts from her friends desperately trying to calm them down. A small break in the row of foliage appeared before her, but deep shadows were all she could see beyond it.

She ducked her head and entered the tree line, the dangers of the woods far from her mind. She had to suppress a shudder as she thought back to the blood-soaked colt. Twilight had never been particularly squeamish; as a young scientist, she had taken enough biology classes that the insides of a small creature were nothing new to her. The more she thought about it, though, the more her stomach would turn. *There’s no way that much blood came from a frog.* The trail of crimson began to grow thicker, the path clear even in the dark shadows of the Everfree.

Twilight followed the smears of blood further, and a small hill came into view, the tops of a few trees visible above the crest. Twilight started up the hill but jerked to a halt. She wasn't very deep in the forest, but in the wild woods of the Everfree Forest, it was deep enough. Already she could barely see the path that she had followed; tall trees with broad leaves blocked out the sun, casting eerie shadows across the forest floor.

A low thrumming sound came from across the hill, and an odd, pungent stench wafted into her nostrils. Twilight shuffled back and forth on her hooves. Whatever the colt had found had scared him half to death. *It was probably just some dead animal*, she reasoned. *This is the Everfree Forest.* The thought did little to comfort her; her eyes darted back and forth at every sway of the trees around her, the dull humming from before growing louder. Eventually, her curiosity won the battle over her nerves, and she crept forward to the top of the hill and looked down.

As she looked, her brain could only process flashes of the scene: the loud droning of a swarm of flies; a large pool of congealed blood; a pile of grayish viscera, faintly glistening in the midday sun, laying on top of a light purple frame; a face trapped in a look of pain, tongue hanging limply to the side.

And somewhere far away, a pony screaming. A scream that, to Twilight's confusion, sounded very much like hers.

The city of Canterlot had been called many things, but the most common was The Shining Beacon of Peace. Once a humble unicorn trading post, it was transformed into its current splendor after Princess Celestia declared it her new home following the tragic events of The War of The Night. Where once stood meager thatch-roofed huts and cobblestone paths now stood towering parapets and bustling businesses of all kinds. The city was home to the most elite of ponykind, bureaucrats and celebrities, influential businessponies and brilliant scientific minds all calling the bright city home. However, all of massive buildings were dwarfed by the most stunning structure of them all: the Royal Castle.

From high atop ivory towers gilded with gold, the Celestial Daughters ruled over all of Equestria with benevolence and grace. Their keen sense of right and wrong and ability to see all sides of all arguments allowed them to broker harmony between even the most deadly of enemies. Royal Court was a tradition dating back to the days before Equestria, but under their rule, the Royal Sisters allowed all grievances be heard. No matter was deemed too trivial for an audience with them.

Currently, Princess Celestia was giving serious thought to rescinding that order. Her near eternal mind was focused on hiding the severe boredom she felt while listening to, what she had decided, was the single most unimportant thing she'd ever heard.

"...and so you see, Your Highnesses, it is simply *horrid* how those ruffians from the Gryphonian envoy treated my *darling* wife! I'm afraid I must *demand* recompense!" Jet Set spoke with an air of dignity that did not match his words, his voice slightly nasal with his nose upturned even in the face of royalty.

Luna rolled her eyes and cast a glance at her sister. Celestia simply smiled at Jet Set: a fake, political smile, practiced over centuries of hearing such matters. Only one who knew her as well as Luna could see the crushing boredom hiding behind her eyes.

"Of course, Jet Set." Luna had to stifle a laugh at Celestia's over the top delivery. "I feel simply *awful* about how Upper Crust was treated. Being asked to move down a row so they could properly see the Wonderbolts Derby. How *dreadfully* rude."

Jet Set beamed with self-importance. "I'm so glad you see it that way, Your Majesty." His horn took on a dim glow as a stack of papers levitated out of his saddlebag. "Now, I've taken the liberty of preparing a list of dema... er, that is to say, ways in which the ambassador could repay me."



Celestia sighed inwardly. She opened her mouth to speak, when a high-pitched whine came from above them. Looking up, she saw a telltale trail of smoke coming in from an open window above the courtroom. The contrail flew towards her before swirling around in a circle. The faint smell of brimstone emanated from it, a sign of its sender. In a tiny shower of sparks, the scroll popped into existence only to be enveloped by a soft golden glow from her horn. Her lips turned up in a relieved smile. *Saved by the scroll.*

Celestia stood and stepped down from the dais. “How thoughtful of you, Mr. Set. Sadly, a matter seems to have come up, and I must take my leave.” She walked past the somewhat stunned unicorn. “I do apologize, but don’t worry. I leave you in the capable hooves of my sister.” A faint gasp came from behind her as she approached the exit. “I assure you, matters of numbers and legal such-and-so are her bread and butter.”

The doors swung open, propelled by the two unicorn guards beside them, and she turned back towards the throne with a playful smile. “I’m sure Luna will help you resolve the situation.”

Jet Set smiled, and the two monarchs shared a pair of looks that could only be understood by somepony with siblings.

*I will destroy you.*

*Love you, too, Lulu!*

The doors slammed shut behind Celestia, cutting off Jet Set’s self-important rambling. She opened the scroll as she walked, smiling widely. While she was happy to have an excuse to leave before her brain shut down from boredom, she was genuinely thrilled to receive a letter from her star pupil.

In the years since she’d sent her to Ponyville, Twilight’s letters had begun to come less and less frequently, which was to be expected. As she learned more about the magic of friendship, she had less to report to her teacher. Still, over the years, the letters had become less about reporting her findings, and more about simply talking, which suited Celestia well. Even before that fateful Summer Sun Celebration all those years ago, when Twilight and her friends saved her sister from darkness, Celestia had come to view Twilight as less of a student and more of a dear friend.

Celestia unfurled the scroll, inhaling its scent. The traces of dragonfire had evaporated, leaving only the clean, musty scent of parchment and old books. When she finally looked at the letter, however, her walk slowed to a trot.

*Something is wrong.*

The first thing that jumped out at her was the hoofwriting. This was not the practiced, flowery writing that she came to expect from Twilight. The writing seemed rushed, pained. She began to read, and came to a standstill.

*Oh, no.*

*Oh, Twilight, my poor student. I'm so sorry.*

She sat there in the quiet hall, only the slight breeze from an open window beside her sounding while she read the grim contents of the letter. Finally, Celestia looked up from the parchment, a heavy weight on her ancient heart. She looked around, ensuring she was alone, and knelt down in the hallway. She knew that what she was about to do should be done in private, but concern for her close pupil overrode any desire for decorum. Celestia closed her eyes, and soon her horn was aglow, a soft golden aura filling the hallway.

A slow, quiet breath came from her mouth as she focused. A feeling of weightlessness overtook her, her mind separating from her body. At the speed of solar winds, her consciousness left the castle and flew towards Ponyville. Muted colors flew under her, green grass and brown and golden leaves from trees blurred together as her mind soared over the forest. She just wanted, no, *needed* a quick peek at her pupil. She had to know if Twilight was all right.

The blurry lines softened as she approached her destination: a tall tree, hollowed out by magic years ago, standing proudly in the middle of town. A slightly faded sign stood beside the large door: *Books and Branches Public Library*. The pleasant smell of oak and the sound of wind whistling through the leaves was lost on her non corporeal form. With a mild push, her projection flew through the door and looked at the scene before her. *Oh, my poor ponies...*

Twilight, her dear Twilight, sat motionless on a large chair, a long-since cooled cup of tea sitting forgotten on a table next to her. Rainbow Dash flew lazy circles above them, her usual speed and enthusiasm gone, but not her restlessness. Fluttershy sat in a chair next to Twilight, holding her hoof tightly. Applejack stood next to a very worried looking Spike, quietly trying to explain what had happened. Even Pinkie Pie, whom Celestia had never seen without a smile, sat motionless next to Twilight, her normally bright eyes red and puffy.

Rarity began to speak to Twilight. Though she could not hear the words they spoke, their bodies spoke volumes. Rarity's brow was furrowed, apparently searching for the right words to comfort her friend. Twilight's normally bright and inquisitive eyes now looked dull, gazing into space with a thousand-yard stare, her face a blank, unreadable mask. As Rarity continued, Twilight's face betrayed no emotion. She mumbled something in response and stood up, walking towards the stairs. Fluttershy stopped her slow, plodding walk, gazing into Twilight's eyes before pulling her into a deep hug. Soon, all five mares and the adolescent dragon embraced her. As Twilight was held by her friends, Celestia could see a single tear fall down her cheek; her heart ached at the sight.

Deciding she could take no more, Celestia turned her projection away and flew through the closed door. She rose up before angling towards the Everfree Forest. Slowly she flew over the thatched roofs and cobblestone streets of the quaint town, passing over ponies who looked just as shocked as Twilight's friends had. In such a small town, the death of one pony must have hit very hard. A small herd had gathered outside what looked like a pub, placing flowers at the foot of a large picture of a purple mare.

The humble homes and street vendors tapered off, giving way to light brown grass and dirt trails as she neared the Everfree Forest. A small chill ran through the Princess' glowing body as her consciousness weaved in between the thick trees. After that horrible night so many years ago, Celestia had done her best to avoid the wild woods, and it had been a long time since she had set hoof inside. *Too many bad memories...*

She finally reached a small clearing, where few ponies were mulling about. One in particular looked very distressed: a short, portly stallion with a sandy coat and a badge for a cutie mark, whom she guessed was the sheriff. He paced back and forth, doing his best to avoid looking at the grisly scene beside him. Occasionally he would mutter words to the skinny mare following him, most likely his deputy.

Since she could not understand what he was saying, her projection rose above and looked down. That's when she saw it: a small white sheet, covering a lumpy shape beneath, laying in the middle of a large pool of dried blood.

Back in Canterlot, Celestia's body shuddered. She was no stranger to death; in the many centuries of her life, ponies she knew and loved had come and gone. This was different. She had seen death, but knowing that it had affected her precious student was unbearable. While she was relieved that Twilight was unharmed, no pony should have to come upon what she did. True, death was a natural part of life, and Celestia was confident that Twilight, the young scientist that she was, could handle it. However, it wasn't just death she saw in the forest; it was cold, brutal death.

Suddenly, Celestia gasped as something shook her mind back in the forest. Something was wrong. She couldn't place what it was, but it was there; a bad taste in her mouth, an oily feeling in her mind. Focusing her mind, she stared harder at the scene.

The solid shapes and defined colors melted away. As she poured more of herself into the spell, wavy lines emerged from the muted gray of the now skeletal forest. Shimmering strings of magic connected every living thing, the ley lines that bound all life dancing and arcing together. The sheriff and his deputy shone brilliantly, ghostly outlines of the two ponies, inside of which floated orbs of pure magic. Innumerable ley lines shot from both of them, like the rays from the morning sun.

Celestia looked down towards the body, and almost lost her concentration. The magical conduits extended from every blade of grass around the body, snaking out to connect with lines from others. Through the now invisible sheet, she could clearly see the outline of the poor mare, but that was it. No lifelines came from it, and none went to it. Even the magic from the surrounding forest bent around her form, the ley lines being repelled like rain from an umbrella.

Back in Canterlot, Celestia snapped her eyes wide open, her mouth slightly agape. Rising to her hooves, she tucked the letter beneath her wing and trotted off.

Celestia strode down the hallway, her golden horseshoes clacking loudly against the marble floor. Servants watched and whispered to each other as she walked, wondering where she was going with such a grim expression on her face. She navigated the maze of hallways and breezeways with practiced ease, occasionally slowing before shaking her head and continuing. She knew where she needed to go, but some part of her still did not want to accept it.

The idea of involving *them* was unpleasant, to say the least. While she bore no ill will to the ponies themselves—they served a sadly necessary function, and did a fine job of it—the mere fact that they *were* necessary made her stomach turn. Still, the reality of what she saw in the woods could not be ignored.

Even in death, life remains. Bacteria breaks down the body to return it to the ground from whence it came, thus beginning the cycle of life again. The residual magic from a pony returns to the natural ley lines that run throughout the world, feeding the magic that everypony used. Something—or, she realized, some*pony*—had done something to that poor mare to sour her magic. Not even the forest itself would take her.

Celestia darted through the maze of hallways, quicker now that she had come to her grim conclusion. Heinous acts like this were the reason *they* existed. When she reluctantly formed the organization over three centuries ago, she had hoped to never have to use them. Sadly, even in a peaceful land like Equestria, bad things sometimes happen. Still, some part of her mind wondered if the organization was worth the trouble. Even when they won the day, somepony always ended up hurt.

*Still, it must be done. Forgive me, Twilight.*

• • •

The Royal Court wasn't the only important room in the Castle of The Royal Pony Sisters. Throughout the confusing jumble of hallways and multiple wings lay offices that were home to the many branches of the Equestrian government. Nearest to the co-monarchs was the Royal Guard wing, where Generals Cloudhammer, Shining Armor, and Stone Wall presided over the Pegasus, Unicorn, and Earth Pony Corps respectively. Further towards the east end of the castle, the Department of Weather and Resources coordinated with the weather factories in Cloudsdale to ensure proper rain and sunshine year round.

Other less important branches littered the castle, assigned the tasks of carrying out royal edicts sent from on high. In a very discreet corner of the westernmost wing lay a humble, nondescript series of offices, home to most seemingly dull, yet enigmatic branch of them all: the Royal Investigative Service, the R.I.S.

Most ponies knew of the R.I.S. for their more public, and mundane, service: tax collection and accounting. While most of the ponies employed there did indeed handle the royal coffers, a select few were charged with a much more dangerous mission.

Director Top Notch sat in his humble office, his greyed mane coiffed neatly on his head as he eyed a stack of papers with disdain. The office was small, but the patchwork-colored unicorn had made it like home. A shelf filled with medals, plaques, and numerous commendations for bravery from the Princesses sat on the left side, a monument to his long service to the crown. A colorful rug, a present from a Camelonian dignitary, lay on the floor, covering most of the muted beige floor tiles.

Upon his desk, surrounded by a few knick-knacks from various countries and pictures of his grandfoals, a chaotic pile of papers mocked him, demanding his attention. He grumbled lowly, a quill held by his magic moving deftly across the pages. He longed for the days of fieldwork, having gave them up long ago for the added responsibility of

running the R.I.S. *Nopony told me that responsibility was synonymous with paperwork. What I wouldn't give for a bomb or a—*

A quiet knock broke him from his musing. Top released the quill from his magical grip with a sigh, grateful for the distraction. “Come in.”

His eyes widened as the door was enveloped by a golden glow and swung open. “P-Princess Celestia!” He rose quickly and bowed before her on the rug. “So lovely to see you again.”

Celestia smiled warmly at the old stallion. The smell of his cologne filled her nostrils, a strong, musky smell, mixing with the spicy scent of incense from a bowl on his cluttered desk. “Rise, Top. How many times must I tell you that you don't need to bow to me?”

Top slowly raised himself back up, his tired bones creaking quietly. “Too many for my old mind to remember, Your Highness,” he said with a grin, his Trottingham accent adding a slight clip to his words. “And as I have said numerous times, once you have finally forced me to retire, I shall gladly offer you a hoofshake.” He sat back down behind his desk. “But until that day, I will greet you with naught but a humble bow.”

A small laugh came from Celestia as she sat down on a cushion opposite him. “Fifty years of service, Top. Isn't it time to let somepony a bit,” she paused, giving him a sly grin, “*younger* take the reins?”

Top let loose a loud bark of laughter. “Your grace, I do hope you're joking! Foals these days couldn't calculate tax rates with a calculator the size of Whitetail Woods!”

Celestia's face fell, the warm smile abruptly replaced with the mask of duty. “Actually, Director Notch, I'm here because of your... *other* function.”

His expression darkened. Without a word, he stood and walked to the open door, closing it quietly. He walked back, his horn glowing briefly before a brown aura surrounded the door. Satisfied that the room was secure from prying eyes and ears, he sat back down and faced Celestia. “So, what seems to be the trouble, milady?”

Celestia was silent for a moment, choosing the right words. “An... incident has occurred in Ponyville involving my star pupil.”

Top leaned forward in his chair, rubbing his chin with his hoof. “What kind of incident?”

“A body was discovered in the Everfree Forest. A pony.”

“I see. It’s not...”

“No, no,” Celestia said, shaking her head. “Twilight is fine. Though she was the one who found the body.”

“Well, that’s a relief. I met her once, a few years back. Bright young filly, that one.”

“You have no idea,” Celestia said softly, a distant gaze filling her eyes.

Top cleared his throat, breaking the spell over the princess. She shook her head and turned back to him. “Anyway, I want you to send somepony to investigate this as soon as possible.”

The room was silent for a moment, the only sound being the clock in the corner ticking. The two old ponies looked at each other, each trying to guess at the other’s thoughts.

Finally, Top spoke. “Your Majesty—”

“Please, call me Celestia,” she said.

“*Princess*,” Top said pointedly. “You know that the R.I.S. is always at your service. You command, we obey. However, I’m hesitant to dispatch an investigator on something that, if you’ll pardon me, sounds so,” he paused, trying to find the right words to not offend his princess, “so... trivial.”

Celestia opened her mouth to speak, but Top continued before she could. “It’s just that, well, it *is* the Everfree Forest. Tartarus knows how many wild, bloodthirsty creatures call that place home. I’d hate to pull an agent in just to find it a simple case of somepony running afoul of a cockatrice. You understand, Your Highness?”

Celestia nodded slowly. “I wholeheartedly understand, Top. However, I’m afraid I must insist.”

Her words were met by a raised eyebrow. “Anything in particular to prompt your... *insistence*?”

She closed her eyes, and spoke softly. “Call it a hunch.”

Top sat back in his chair, rubbing his bright blue eyes with his hoof. After a few moments of silence, he spoke again. “Very well, Your Highness. Consider it done. I’ll have an agent in town as soon as possible.”

Celestia looked him right in the eye. “Now, Top, this is my most faithful student. I want your best pony on this one.”

It was Top’s turn to give a knowing smile. “I already have the perfect stallion for the job. He’s a bit... *eccentric*, we’ll say, but he’s the best I’ve got.”

He stood up and walked over to a large filing cabinet next to his desk. With a quiet squeak of the hinges, he pulled out a large manila folder. “If memory serves... Ah, yes. He’s just returning from an assignment in Las Pegasus. If I redirect his train, I can have him in Ponyville within the week.”

Celestia stood again. “Director Notch, I can’t thank you enough.”

Top beamed at her and bowed once again. “Your grace, your mere presence and allowing me to serve you is thanks enough.” His horn glowed once more, and the barrier around the door disappeared with a slight crackle. Celestia bowed her head and turned to leave.

“Uh, Princess,” he said. She turned back to see him. His eyebrows were quirked slightly. “If memory serves, and at my age it may well not, but isn’t Ms. Sparkle General Shining Armor’s little sister? Won’t *he* want to handle this?”

Celestia shook her head. “Don’t misunderstand, General Armor is one of the best military ponies to have ever served me, but the last thing I want is a brigade of Royal Guards invading the town and spreading panic. Shining is a fine officer, but he can be a bit... protective of his baby sister.” Her voice dropped. “Besides, I’d rather this stay under wraps for the time being.”

“He’s going to find out eventually, you know.” His expression darkened slightly. “And he probably won’t be too happy about an R.I.S. investigation involving his sister going on without his knowledge.”

Celestia turned back to the door, swinging it open with her magic. “I’ll handle General Armor. You just ensure your agent gets there soon.” She walked out the door, but paused before shutting it behind her. “Oh, and Director Notch?”

“Yes?”

“Make sure he keeps a close eye on Twilight,” she said softly.

Top once again bowed his head. “Of course, Your Grace.”



As the door shut with a quiet click, Top sat back behind his desk, shoving the mountain of paperwork aside. If he was going to reroute his agent, he needed to do it fast, but something she said caused him to sit for a moment.

*Call it a hunch.*

In all his years of service, he had never known Celestia to directly request R.I.S. intervention without good reason. While he and Celestia shared a colorful past together, and Top was considered a close friend by both her and Luna, Celestia in particular had never been shy about voicing her discomfort with the R.I.S. She believed—very naively, he thought—that such a thing should be unneeded. The last time she had had a “hunch,” Canterlot was nearly overthrown by Changelings. Her calm demeanor had left a bad taste in his mouth. She seemed awfully certain something was wrong, yet she refused to say what.

Still, he was but a humble servant of the crown. Where his Princesses commanded, he went. He stood back up and trotted to the door, trying to remember where in the maze of hallways was the Department of Transportation.

He had a train to reroute.

*Okay. Now focus.*

Twilight squinted her eyes, her brow furrowed in concentration as a soft lavender glow surrounded the rock sitting on the table before her. With a deep breath, she slowly forced magic into it.

The rock vibrated slightly, a quiet hum emanating from it. The machine next to her whirred to life, the thin wires attached to the rock glowing as well. She glanced at the display with a smile, the needle slowly rising into the green-marked area. *Yes, it's working!*

A soft wind blew through the basement laboratory, carrying the faint smell of ozone and the light crackling of magical energy. The dirty dishes and take-out cartons that lay in small piles on the floor rattled as well. For the past five days, Twilight had buried herself in her research. Numerous projects had come and gone, all ending with less than desirable results. The faint smell of ash and pile of crumpled papers by the waste basket attested to her success rate.

In truth, however, she was just trying to keep her mind occupied. Anything to keep out the images of—

*No. Stop it.* Despite her best efforts, her mental coaching did little to stem the tide of images that ran through her mind. Grisly snapshots of that horrible scene flew through her mind, the remnants of what the local sheriff had deemed “a rogue timberwolf attack.” Even in her dreams, all she could see was a patch of forest smeared crimson. *And those eyes, staring at me, begging for help.*

An angry buzzing filled the small laboratory. Snapped out of her trance, Twilight looked down to see the rock spinning wildly, the soft glow from before now an almost blinding light. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying desperately to control the reaction. The machine connected to the rock gave out a series of harsh beeps as the needle shot to the right. Sweat ran down her forehead as she fought the massive influx of energy cascading into the rock. The stone began to pulsate, the buzzing now a roar that echoed in her ears. Gusts of wind tipped the shelves on the far side of the lab, the books upon them rattling almost loose.

“No, no, no, no, no!” Small sparks shot from the stone, the smell of electricity strong in the air. Small fissures appeared on the rock, gushing white light. Twilight turned her

head away just before the stone exploded with a loud crack. Small bits of gravel pelted her body. Twilight grimaced at the impacts.

She looked back to see a small scorch mark on the table in front of her, a thin trail of smoke floating up from where the rock had been. The wild bleating from the machine was now a constant, dull tone. Twilight groaned loudly before her head hit the table, the dull ache from the impact not even registering.

A pattering of steps came from above. Spike flung open the basement door and surveyed the carnage before him. “Oh, my gosh!” He clambered down the steps on all fours, snapping back upright as he hit the floor, his angular face twisted in concern. “Twilight, are you okay?”

Twilight answered with an affirmative grunt. She trudged up the stairs, brushing past him without another look.

“So, I take it the latest experiment didn’t go so well?” he asked, following her upstairs.

“Gee, what tipped you off? The explosion or the scorch marks?”

Spike gave a small smile. “The scorch marks. You broke another expensive thing, didn’t you?”

A book flew off a nearby shelf, propelled by a lavender glow, and hovered before Twilight. “No, it was just a rock. The thaumatic sensor read at acceptable levels, but the rock’s lattice couldn’t handle the transfer rate.”

“Um, what were you doing with a rock?”

She continued to flip through the book. “Trying to test my theory that an ordinary rock can store magical energy just as well as a gemstone. If I can pull it off, it will revolutionize the way ponies powered everyday objects, from streetlights to stoves. Entire new industries would be created! Cheap, affordable energy for all!”

Spike rubbed the back of his neck. “Oh... okay. So... what happened?”

“I thought for *sure* that the hollow structure of pumice would make it capable of containing the energy, but the trade-off of storage space with structural integrity was too much, I guess.” She began pacing around the table in the middle of the library.

“Uh, Twilight.”

“I’m thinking about trying pyrite next. Sure, it’s not as porous as pumice, but it’s less malleable than gold, which *might* mean it could maintain its shape long enough for the thaumatic energy to permeate into it completely.”

“Twilight.”

“Of course, even if it can retain the energy, there’s still the problem of achieving the even power distribution needed to power devices. Maybe if I rew—”

“*Twilight!*”

A flash of heat and green light covered Twilight’s vision. Before her eyes, green flames consumed the book. It turned into a thin wisp of smoke, but instead of dissipating, it took on a life of its own and dove towards Spike’s open hand. He jolted as the book re-materialized in his grasp. Twilight stared slack-jawed as he snapped the book shut.

“Since when can you do that?”

“Spend a few years burping up scrolls, you get good at it.” He looked at her, his eyes soft and gentle. “Why don’t you take a break? You’ve been hitting this... pretty hard, don’t you think?”

Twilight flashed him a nervous smile. “What do you mean?”

“What I *mean*,” he said, stepping closer to her, “is maybe you should go out, get some fresh air.”

She stepped past him and trotted back to the bookshelf. She gazed intently at it, running a hoof over the spines of a few novels. “Why? I mean, I’m fine.”

A heavy sigh escaped Spike. “No, you’re not.” He stepped in between her and the bookcase. “I’ve been your friend long enough to know you’re not.”

“What do you mean?”

“Twilight, I’m worried about you,” he said, his voice thick with concern. “You haven’t opened the library in days. We’ve *never* been closed on a Sunday before! You’ve blown up more sciencey... things in the past three days than you have in the last three *years!* Seriously, you got out more back when we lived in Canterlot!” He gently placed a claw on her shoulder. “You didn’t even go to Berry Punch’s memorial.”

Twilight shrugged his claw off. “Why would I go? I didn’t even know her! I think she checked out a book once, but that’s it! I barely remember talking to her.” She turned her face to the ground, shuffling her hooves. “Besides, what would I say to her family? ‘Hi, I’m Twilight Sparkle. I found your daughter’s cor... body.’”

“Look, I’m just saying you need to deal with this. Last night was the first night you didn’t wake up screaming.” His claws drummed on the book he still held. “Your friends are here for you.” Spike took a step towards her, looking her right in the eye. “*I’m* here for you.”

Twilight looked at the ground. He was right, and she knew it. The whole reason that she had come to Ponyville in the first place was to learn about how friendship made everything better. *And here I am, shutting out the ones who care for me the most.* She glanced back up at him with a wry smile. “When did you get so mature?”

“Probably”—a loud yawn overtook him—“probably around the same time I outgrew my old basket.”

She smiled at him and took hold of the book, but he jerked it away. “I can get it,” he said, puffing out his chest. “Don’t even need the ladder anymore.” He grasped the book in his tail and climbed up the bookcase, his lithe reptilian body slinking up to the highest shelf.

“Spike, I asked you not to do that! I’m getting tired of fixing the claw marks.”

Placing the book back where it came from, Spike chuckled and climbed back down. “I think you’re just jealous that *I’m* faster than you on four legs now.” He blew a raspberry at her, his tongue extending nearly a hoof-length out from his mouth. As he turned from the bookcase, he grunted in annoyance and scratched at two small lumps on his back.

Twilight clucked her teeth and magically yanked his arm away. “Spike, stop picking at them.”

“Ow! Hey, leave me alone. They itch.”

“And if you irritate them, they might not grow in properly. You don’t want to be a flightless dragon, do you?”

Spike opened his mouth to reply when his eyes suddenly screwed shut. His cry of protest turned into a mighty burp, a scroll landing on the floor from the stream of fire. He patted his scaly stomach and picked up the parchment, opening it and reading a little. His

slitted eyes rolled upward as he tossed the scroll to Twilight. “Twilight, will you please tell Shining that I’m not a post office? That spell is for official use only.”

She took the scroll from him. “And using it to steal a book from a friend counts as ‘official business?’”

“When it keeps you from having a breakdown, yes.” He grinned and walked towards the basement door.

Twilight laughed lightly and began to read the scroll.

*From The Desk of General Shining Armor:*

*Hey, kiddo, how’s it going? Just wanted to drop you a line and see how you’re holding up. I hope Spike doesn’t mind me using him like this.*

Twilight smirked at that.

“So, what does he have to say?” Spike yelled up from the basement.

“Not much,” Twilight said, scanning the letter. “He hates being a general, too much paperwork.” She walked towards the kitchen, the letter floating just in front of her face. “Princess Cadance is on a peace tour of Canidae, negotiating a trade dispute between the Diamond Dogs and one of the Wolven packs.” She chuckled. “Shiny’s losing his mind trying to take care of little Dusk by himself. Apparently, he’s already started flying.”

The rest of the letter was typical Shinning being worried. He’d tried to convince Cadance to call off the tour, but she refused. “*Strife doesn’t take a day off just because I’m pregnant.*”

Twilight reached the refrigerator when she came to the last paragraph of the letter.

*Well, that’s about all the news up here. Look, Twiley, I’m sorry I couldn’t come down and visit. I know you said it was okay, but I still feel bad. I’ve seen some bad things in my time in the Guard, but I’m supposed to, I’m a soldier. What you saw, well... Tartarus, I don’t know. I’m bad at this. Can you see now why Cadance writes my speeches? Look, I have to go, but when the new foal comes, I’ll be able to take a few weeks of paternity leave. I was thinking Caddie, the foals and I could come down to Ponyville. Let the new one meet his/her Auntie Twi, you know?*

*Just know I’m always here if you need me, Twilight. Love you, little sis.*

*Your BBBFF,*

*Shiny*

Twilight put the letter down and smiled. The events of that day in the forest were still fresh in her mind. Still, just knowing that he was concerned gave Twilight some small comfort.

A deep rumble came from her gut. Now that the adrenaline from the failed experiment had worn off, she realized just how long she had been down there. *Maybe Spike is right. A diet of take-out hay fries and pizza can't be too healthy.* As was the norm for her, once she got invested in a project, everything else fell by the wayside, and that included trips to the grocery store. She opened the door, and was shocked to see it fully stocked with fresh fruits and vegetables. "Spike, when did you go to the market?"

"Earlier this afternoon," he said, emerging from the basement with a dustpan in claw. Small bits of still smouldering rock stuck out from the pile of ashes and dust. He brushed past her and dumped the pan into the trash can. "Also restocked on quills and parchment, mailed off the latest overdue notices, and did an inventory. You're welcome."

She smiled at him. "Thanks, Spike."

Spike shrugged. "Yeah, yeah. What wou—" He stopped speaking as a loud yawn overtook him again. "What would you do without me?"

A small pang of sadness struck Twilight. *I guess we'll find out in a few—*

"Anythin' on timberwolves?"

"Ahh!"

Twilight spun around to face the new voice, her jaw slack. Standing by one of the shelves of books was a very tall, very thin earth pony with a brilliant white coat and a well-coiffed blonde mane. Immediately, Twilight was drawn to his eyes: one was a dull gray, the other a bright yellow, slitted vertically like a reptile's. They were currently inspecting Twilight, a casual look on his face.

Twilight stared at him. "Wh... how... "

The stallion continued to observe her. “Timberwolves. I require information on timberwolves.” He spoke with an odd, almost musical accent. “No idea? Very well, I’ll continue to look.” He turned back to the shelf, scanning the spines of the books.

Twilight’s mind finally came back to her. “Where did you come from?” she yelled.

“Well, I’m originally from New Horseleans, but lately I’ve been abroad,” he said without turning his gaze from the books.

Spike leaped towards him, thin wisps of smoke rolling from his nostrils. “That’s not what she meant! How did you get in here? We’re closed!”

“The front door. It *was* open. Ah-ha!” He reached a hoof to the shelf and pulled away a book. “Here we are. *Tremor Tail’s Terrifying Tales of Timberwolf Temperament.*” He took the book in his mouth and walked to the nearby table, brushing past Spike without another word. He set the book down and began to read.

Spike spun around and glared at the stranger. “No, it wasn’t! I locked the door myself!”

The stallion looked at Spike in confusion. Although Spike was a head taller than Twilight the pale pony still towered over him. After a moment, he raised his eyebrows in understanding. “Ah, allow me to clarify. It was open after I picked the lock.” He gave a small smile to Spike before returning to the book.

At this, Twilight ran up to him and slammed the book closed with a hoof. “You *what?*”

“I picked the lock. Although the lock on your door is so crude, one could hardly call it ‘picking.’” His face bore no expression as he turned back to the book, opening it back to the page he was on. “Besides, the sign in front of the library says you are open seven days a week. If you close on Sundays now, I suggest you update your sign so as to avoid this problem in the future.”

Twilight’s face twisted in frustration. Her horn began to glow, preparing to restrain this intruder. “It’s *my* library, and *I’ll* decide if we close! I’m Twi—”

“Twilight Sparkle, age 27,” he said, again not even glancing up from his book. “Born in Canterlot to esteemed astronomer Night Light and Professor Twilight Velvet, and brother of General Shining Armor, commander of the Royal Unicorn Corps. Graduate of Princess Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns, holding several advanced degrees in magical studies, specializing in Thaumatic Energy Manipulation and Natural Magical



Phenomenon. Personal student of her highness Princess Celestia, and bearer of the Element of Magic. Oh, and your favorite food is daisy sandwiches.”

For the second time in minutes, Twilight’s jaw hung open. “How... Who are you?”

The stallion turned to face her, an impassive look on his face. “Oh, my apologies, how rude of me.” He reached into the expensive-looking black suit coat he wore and pulled out a small felt case, flipping it open to reveal a gleaming badge and picture ID. “Special Agent Bentgrass, of Their Majesties’ Royal Investigative Service.”

The case glowed with a purple aura as Twilight held it closer. Underneath the Equestrian seal was the logo of the R.I.S. What truly caught her eye, though, was the small print under his picture.

*A. Bentgrass, Special Agent, Grade 13. Division Six.*

Spike looked at Twilight. “The R.I.S.? But I mailed off your tax form months ago.”

“Indeed, and as I understand it you have a sizable return coming to you,” Bentgrass said, still reading the book.

“No, Spike,” Twilight said, a chill running down her spine. “He’s not here about taxes. This says he’s from Division Six.”

The confused look on Spike’s face slowly melted away as the realization struck him. “Wait, Division Six?” He turned back to Bentgrass, the corners of his lips beginning to curl upwards. “I’ve heard of them! They say they deal with all kinds of freaky things, like aliens and stuff!”

Twilight rolled her eyes. “Oh, come on, Spike, aliens? They’re special police, not the Illumanenati! Division Six investigates unexplained phenomenon, that’s it.”

“Unexplained phenomenon like *aliens*,” Spike said indignantly.

“Spike, you can’t believe everything you hear, okay?”

“Actually, I *do* believe everything I hear,” Bentgrass said as he absently flipped through a few pages of his book. “I find it makes me a better investigator.”

“What?” Twilight shot him an incredulous look. “That doesn’t make any sense!”

He looked up from the book, the same impassive look on his face. “Doesn’t it?”

The room was silent for a moment. Bentgrass continued to read his book, Spike staring at him in awe, and Twilight glaring at the agent, her left eye twitching madly.

Spike stared at Bentgrass. “So, you *do* work with aliens? That’s so *cool!*” He let out an annoyed grunt as his adolescent voice cracked at the last word. “What do you know about Trotswell?”

Bentgrass put a hoof on the book, tracing the words he was reading. “Not much, I’m afraid. Ahh, here it is!” He accentuated his words with a light tap on the pages. “It says here that unlike other species of wolf, timberwolves are primarily diurnal, due to the magic wood that makes up their bodies needing photosynthesis to help give them energy. Also, during autumn and winter months when the air is drier, they are largely inactive, rarely attacking anything larger than a cockatrice.” He closed the book and looked at Twilight. “Puzzling, isn’t it, Ms. Sparkle?”

Twilight stomped her hoof and threw his badge at him. “The only puzzling thing here is why a strange pony from some obscure government agency is trespassing in my library!” Her horn flared, and she yanked the book from the table and sent it flying back to the shelf in a purple blur. “I don’t care *who* you work for! You had no right to break in!”

“As I said before, I did no such thing. Since the sign says you are open today, and it *is* business hours currently, I merely fixed the problem of the door being locked.” He took a step towards her. “And I’m quite curious as to how one as sagacious as yourself hasn’t noticed it yet.”

“Noticed *what?*” she shrieked.

His calm demeanor never faltered, those odd eyes still looking directly at her. “Why would a lone timberwolf attack a full-grown mare in the middle of the night at this time of year?”

“Wait, is that why you’re here?” She shot him a confused glance. “Why does the R.I.S. care about an animal attack in Ponyville?”

He looked at her, the eyebrow over his yellow eye raised. “Why, indeed?”

Twilight gritted her teeth. “Are you ever going to answer my questions, or are you just going to answer with *more* questions?”

His eyebrow remained in place. “What do you think?” With that, he brushed past Twilight, his hooffalls surprisingly light for a stallion of his stature. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m off to the hospital. I wish to read the coroner’s report on Ms. Punch.” He paused, tapping his hoof to his chin while eying Twilight thoughtfully before appraising her with a small smile. “Say, I have a capital idea! Why don’t you come with me?”

Silence once more reigned. Twilight was sure she misheard him. “Wait... you want *me* to come with you?” She turned her eyes briefly to his cutie mark, an open eye, before looking him dead in his mismatched eyes. “Why?”

“Well, I’m new to the area, and I’ll need somepony who is in the know to point out local landmarks, ponies of interest, and the like. Besides,” he said, the corner of his mouth raising slightly, “if my files on you are accurate, you might be an immense help in unraveling this mystery.”

Spike stepped in between them, glaring at Bentgrass. “Look, buddy. Twilight’s dealing with this just fine. The last thing she needs is somepo—”

“I’ll go.”

Spike whipped around and stared at Twilight. “Wait, what? Twilight, I thought you didn’t wa—”

“I don’t,” Twilight said. “But I *also* don’t want this crazy stallion wandering around town breaking into ponies’ homes.” She turned an angry glare at Bentgrass. “*Somepony* needs to keep an eye on him.”

He smiled at her. “Splendid! Well then, let’s be off, Ms. Sparkle.” He turned and trotted to the door.

“Okay, then,” Spike said. “I’m coming, too.”

Bentgrass turned his head and eyed him curiously. “Two’s company, three’s a crowd, my young dragon friend.”

Spike’s upper lip curled, a faint green glow from his mouth reflecting off his sharp teeth. “I’m *not* your friend! I’m hers,” he said, gesturing to Twilight.

“It’s okay, Spike. I can take care of myself.”

Bentgrass nodded his head at her. “Very well. I shall wait outside.” He stepped out the door without another word.

When Twilight moved to follow, Spike stepped in her path, blocking her with a claw. “Twilight, what are you *doing*? Why are you going with that creep?”

“I don’t have much of a choice.”

“You have a *big* choice! He *broke into the library!* And that line about ‘Two’s company?’” He shuddered. “You actually are okay with being *alone* with that weirdo?”

“Look, I don’t trust him either, but he’s here, and I’m not letting him out of my sight until he leaves.”

“Are you sure about this, Twi?” Spike was wringing his hands behind his back.

She closed her eyes.

*Those eyes, staring at me, begging for help.*

“Yes.”

She walked out the door, closing it behind her and leaving Spike behind. Bentgrass was waiting beside a nearby bush, staring intently at something down the street. Twilight approached him cautiously.

“Okay, Special Agent Bentgrass. Lead the way.”

Twilight Sparkle was a pony who didn't mind silence. Even before her tenure as a part time librarian, the lack of noise never bothered her. Growing up, her nose was almost always stuck in a book; talking had always been a distraction from her learning. As a student, the same applied. Small talk was a distraction, nothing more. Say what you must, then move on. Only since her move to Ponyville had she begun to see appeal in filling the silence.

However, this was one of the few times in her life she had found silence aggravating. For the past twenty minutes, she had walked beside Agent Bentgrass, and not a word had been uttered. Twilight had long, informative speeches ready for when they passed local landmarks: the recent expansion of Sofas, Quills, and Parchment; the history of Equestria's first hydroelectric dam; the string of corruption charges leveled against Mayor Mare. Her speeches went unused, however, as the pale stallion beside her remained annoyingly silent. He merely looked around every now and then, not even flinching when Twilight would clear her throat pointedly or let out an aggravated sigh. Finally, she could take no more.

“Well?”

Bentgrass flicked his eyes towards her. “Hm?”

“We've been walking around for almost twenty minutes, and you haven't asked me anything!”

“Oh. I wasn't aware that you wanted conversation.”

Twilight flicked her tail in annoyance. “I *don't!* You dragged me out of my library so I could answer your questions about Ponyville! So, *ask!*”

The air was silent once more, save for the clip-clop of their hooves on the ground. Twilight opened her mouth to shout at him when he finally spoke.

“Why did you turn down the position in Canterlot?”

Twilight jerked to a halt, her hackles rising at the abrupt question. “What?”

Bentgrass stopped and turned to her, once more studying her with his mismatched eyes. Twilight withered slightly under his gaze. “Oh, come now, Miss Sparkle. Her Majesty's School for Gifted Unicorns is *the* most esteemed center of learning in all of Equestria.

Stallions and mares have worked their entire lives and never achieved what you were offered, and turned down, at the age of twenty-five.” He arched his eyebrow. “I’m curious as to why.”

“My whole life is in Ponyville. All my friends. You know, the Elements of Harmony? I can’t break that up to go be a teacher.” Her tail twitched slightly as she offered the most genuine smile she could muster. She hoped that Bentgrass didn’t hear the mechanical, rehearsed way she’d said it.

Silence descended once more as Bentgrass continued to regard her. Twilight felt very small under his stare. His face seemed as calm as ever, but there was an intensity to his gaze that shook her. There was no way to tell what he was thinking; his eyes betrayed no emotion. The effect was compounded by his serpentine right eye, a soft amber glow seeming to come from it even in the bright sunlight. If eyes were the windows to the soul, Twilight had decided, then this mysterious policepony didn’t have one.

Twilight shook her head and glared at Bentgrass. “Besides, why do you care? You said you had questions about Ponyville, not my private life!”

He held her gaze for a few more moments before looking away. “Merely curious. Anyway, we’re here.” He motioned to the sign next to him with a hoof: *Ponyville General Hospital*.

Twilight brought a hoof to her face. She had been so lost in thought that she’d missed the giant, gleaming white building before her. With a small sigh, she said, “Thank goodness.” Turning away from him, she trotted to the door.

They strode through the sliding glass doors into the reception area. The polished floor tiles reflected Twilight’s face back at her, still looking very annoyed. The wall to her left was covered in photos of various ponies, each with a small nameplate underneath. Ponies sat in rather comfortable-looking chairs along the walls, a few appearing worse for wear. A mare with a screaming foal sat in one, gently rocking the little colt while muttering soft words of comfort. Twilight nearly sidestepped into Bentgrass when a particularly green-looking stallion just about coughed right on her.

In the middle of the lobby was a large, round desk, varnished wood displaying a similar polished sheen as the floor. Behind it sat a rather bored looking mare, her slightly graying mane tied in a tight bun. Her hind legs were kicked up unceremoniously on the desk as she read a magazine.

“Good afternoon, miss,” Bentgrass said. “We’re looking for a Doctor Fulton Well.”

The mare looked up from her magazine. “Do you have an appoi—” She stopped when she looked at Bentgrass. “What’s with your eye?”

Twilight gasped at her brashness. She thought a nurse would have some sense of tact.

For his part, Bentgrass didn’t seem to notice. He simply looked at her, his eyebrow raised. “Eye? What eye?”

She stared for a few more moments before shaking her head and returning to her magazine. “Second floor, third door on the right from the stairs.” She gestured lazily towards the stairwell with her hoof.

Bentgrass simply nodded and walked away. Twilight shot a glare at the nurse, who still didn’t look away from her reading.

They trotted up the stairs in silence. Once they got to the second floor, the smell of antiseptic and bleach assaulted Twilight’s nostrils. Here, the luxuries of the reception area were gone, replaced by cold functionality. The floor wasn’t nearly as polished the one in the lobby, and the overhead lights were the same harsh florescent that she had seen in countless government buildings before. Unused stretchers sat randomly against the walls. Twilight’s hoofbeats echoed surprisingly loud in the empty hallway.

*For a place dedicated to saving lives, Twilight thought, this floor seems really... dead.*

After a few minutes, they reached a heavy wooden door, Bentgrass knocked firmly, the sound resonating loudly in the empty hallway.

“Come in,” came a gentle, baritone voice from behind it.

Twilight followed Bentgrass through the door to find a mustard yellow unicorn sitting behind a small desk. His thick, brown mane was combed neatly into waves that hung down to his neck. The wall behind him held numerous degrees from various schools, the largest of which hung in the middle. Twilight squinted her eyes, reading the flowery hoofwriting. Her eyebrows raised slightly in admiration when she read the words *summa cum laude* beneath his name.

“Are you Doctor Fulton Well?” Bentgrass asked.

The doctor looked up from a file on his desk and smiled warmly at them. “Please, call me Fully.”

Bentgrass ducked his head and removed his badge case from his saddlebag, placing it on the desk. “Well met, Doctor. Special Agent Bentgrass, R.I.S. This is my associate, Miss Sparkle.” He nodded towards Twilight, who smiled and gave a small nod.

Doctor Well shot a puzzled look at the two of them, his horn lighting up as he picked up the shield. “R.I.S.?” He gave a small smile. “Who forgot to pay their ta—” His face fell as he squinted to read the fine print on the ID. “Oh.”

“Oh?”

Twilight felt a chill as the doctor’s warm face turned into a deep scowl, staring directly at Bentgrass. “You’re from Division Six,” he spat.

Bentgrass’ face remained as calm as ever. “Ah, I take it you’ve heard of us?”

The doctor sneered and threw the badge back at him. “You could say that.” He rose from his seat and glared at Bentgrass. “I was the doctor on-call the night Nightmare Moon returned. Some of your cohorts were... less than thrilled when I refused to let them see the injured guards while they were still being treated.” At this, he strode up to Bentgrass and stared into his eyes. Though the doctor was taller than Twilight, he still had to look up to make eye contact with the slim Bentgrass. “I was detained and nearly stripped of my medical license!”

Bentgrass didn’t flinch, standing as calmly as ever. “Yes, well, when a vengeful goddess returns and threatens to end all life as we know it by casting the world into eternal darkness, one tends to get a little... flighty.”

The air practically vibrated with tension as the two stallions stared each other down. Doctor Well looked up at Bentgrass with contempt, while the agent simply looked down with the same impassive gaze as ever. A muted call over the hospital intercom came from outside the door, but other than that, all Twilight could hear was her pounding heart.

Finally, she cleared her throat. “So, Doctor Well, you graduated *summa cum laude* from Princess Luna’s School of Health and Healing?” She gestured towards the large diploma. “That’s quite impressive. I recently received my Doctorate in Thaumatic Energy Manipulation from Princess Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns.”



After a few more seconds of silence, Doctor Well turned from Bentgrass and looked to Twilight. He studied her for a moment before his gaze softened slightly, his more genial nature showing through once more. “Ah, yes. You’re the Princess’s protégé, aren’t you?”

Twilight blushed slightly and nodded.

“Aren’t you also friends with that crash-happy pegasus I’ve treated a few times?”

Twilight chuckled. “Rainbow Dash, yes.”

“Ah yes, the former Wonderbolt.” He glanced at Bentgrass before huffing and turning back to his desk. “My oldest son was a huge fan of hers. Broke his heart when she quit the team.” Sitting back down, he motioned his head towards Bentgrass, never looking away from Twilight. “What are you doing with *him*?”

At this, Bentgrass stepped forward and reclaimed his badge. “She’s helping me with an investigation, which is why we’re here. I wanted to ask you a few questions about the death of Miss Berry Punch. You *do* serve as the hospital’s coroner, do you not?”

Doctor Well slouched when he spoke. “Yes. Not my favorite part of the job, but somepony has to do it.” He leaned forward in his chair. “Wait, is the R.I.S. investigating her death?”

“No. I was brought in merely as an advisor. Sheriff Shackles asked me to talk to you, see if I can glean anything new from your report.”

“I see.” He looked at the two of them with a raised eyebrow before leaning down and pulling a manila folder from his desk drawer. “Well, here’s the report. Take a look if you want, though it isn’t very pretty.”

Bentgrass leaned down and opened the folder. Immediately, Twilight glanced away. Even in her peripheral vision, she could still see the pictures that sat inside. She shuddered as Bentgrass flipped through them nonchalantly.

“So, what were your findings, Doctor?”

“Not much. Cause of death was exsanguination. Massive blood loss from a single wound on her torso.”

“Yes, I’m familiar with the term,” Bentgrass said. Twilight nodded in agreement.

“Oh, okay then.” The doctor cleared his throat. “The ‘official’ explanation is a timberwolf attack.”

While she still tried to avoid the pictures, Twilight had to turn to look at him. “Doctor, you say that like you don’t agree. Do you think something else happened?”

He leveled his gaze at her. “Officially? No.”

“And *unofficially*?” Bentgrass said, finally looking up from the file.

The doctor sighed heavily, removing his glasses from his snout with his magic and rubbing his eyes with a hoof. “There are some... inconsistencies...”

“By all means, Fully, enlighten us.”

No pony moved for a few moments. Finally, Doctor Well stood up and walked to the door. The heavy bolt clicked home as he locked it. He walked back to the desk and took hold of a few of the photos with his magic. “Well, first off, there’s the *number* of wounds.”

“What does that mean?” Twilight asked.

“Look here,” he said, motioning to a picture of Berry’s forelegs. “She has scarring on the heel perioplum of all four hooves and minor abrasions on her knees. These are consistent with some pony running through the forest in a panic. But those are the *only* marks on her legs.”

Twilight thought for a moment before her eyes widened. “Which makes no sense. You would think if she had a timberwolf on top of her, she’d at least throw a hoof in front of her face to protect herself.”

“Very good, Miss Sparkle,” Bentgrass said. Twilight had to suppress a prideful grin.

“Exactly,” Doctor Well said. “She doesn’t have a single defensive wound on her body. No cuts on her fetlocks, no scrapes on her forelegs, nothing. It’s as if she simply laid back and let herself be eaten.”

A shudder ran through Twilight as she imagined the scene. Doctor Well noticed this and gave her a moment to collect herself. After closing her eyes and clearing the image from her mind, she turned back to him and nodded slightly.

He placed the picture down and grabbed another. “But the biggest problem is with the main wound on her torso. Take a look.” He lifted the photo up and held it before them both. “I talked with a local wildlife expert, and she told me that timberwolves traditionally go for the throat, as it’s the easiest way to take down large prey. Ms. Punch bled out from her stomach.”

Twilight felt her gorge rise and turned away after a few seconds. While the wound was nowhere near as gruesome as what she had seen in the forest, it was no less disturbing. The blood had been washed away, leaving only a faint trace of crimson around it. Somehow that almost made it worse; it seemed cold, like they had taken what was once a living pony and turned it into some slide in an anatomy class.

For all the trouble she was having, Bentgrass seemed unfazed. “I see nothing particularly off about it.”

“Look closer.”

For a moment, nothing was said as Bentgrass leaned in closer to the image, brow furrowed in concentration. Suddenly, he straightened and looked at the doctor, who merely nodded.

“One wound. Timberwolves have four claws on each paw.” He set the photo down and floated over a large magnifying glass. “There’s more. Take a look at the wound track.”

Once more, Bentgrass moved his head over the glass, staring intently. After a moment, he turned back to the doctor. “Again, I see nothing wrong with it.”

“Exactly.” Doctor Well traced the picture with a hoof. “It’s smooth. One clean wound from her sternum to her groin.”

Across the room, Twilight had been listening to the two. While she had no intent of coming any closer to the grisly images, she still could not quiet the nagging voice in her head. “So?”

Well moved back to his chair, sitting down roughly. “My older sister is an archaeologist, and she has a saying. ‘The Celestial Parents didn’t design at right angles.’”

Twilight thought for a moment then nodded. “Straight lines don’t appear in nature.”

“Precisely, Ms. Sparkle.”

Bentgrass looked at the two for a moment before speaking. “And that means *precisely* what, doctor?”

Once more he removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “What it means, Agent Bentgrass, is timberwolves have claws. Claws tear, rip, shred. *This*,” he said, pointing to the picture with his hoof, “was *cut*. Most likely with a kitchen knife or something similar. I can’t be certain.” He looked up at Bentgrass, who stood with a judgmental look in his eyes. The doctor fidgeted slightly. “You have to understand, I’m not specially trained for this. Ponyville hasn’t had a single death not caused by accident or natural causes in its entire existence. Coroner is simply an additional duty I was assigned, for Celestia’s sake!”

The room was silent for a few moments as Bentgrass studied the doctor. Finally, he spoke again. “Very well, doctor. What was the other thing?”

Doctor Well sighed heavily. “I shouldn’t even be telling you this. The sheriff was... adamant that the case was closed.”

“And indeed it is, doctor,” Bentgrass said plainly. “I am merely trying to get a firm grasp of the facts as they stand.” He leaned in towards the doctor. “I would hate for my report to the *Princess* to be incomplete.”

A loud gulp came from the doctor. He appeared to be mulling something over in his head, brow furrowed in thought. Finally he spoke. “Very well. Almost all of Ms. Punch’s internal organs were completely intact. Very odd for a timberwolf to kill her and not eat anything, wouldn’t you say?”

Bentgrass nodded his head slightly, looking closely at the gruesome picture. After a moment, he looked back up at the doctor. “Wait, you said *almost* all her organs?”

The doctor turned away from them, facing the wall, his discomfort written on his face. “Her heart,” he said quietly.

“Her heart was found damaged?” Bentgrass asked.

Doctor Well turned back to them slowly. A cold, business-like look was on his face as he leaned forward and rested his forelegs on his desk. “No, Special Agent Bentgrass. Her heart was not found at all.”

Twilight took a step back, her front hoof raising to her mouth. “Her... her heart was... removed?”

“Cut out,” the doctor said coldly. “Two clean slices on the superior vena cava and the aorta.”

Bentgrass nodded solemnly. “I see. And there was no trace of it at the scene?”

“None.”

Twilight stepped away from the desk, taking shaky steps towards the door.

Bentgrass glanced over at her, seeing her unease. “Doctor,” he said, still looking at Twilight, “was there anything else of note you found in your examination?”

Doctor Well leaned back in his chair. The bearings inside it squeaked as he turned it away from them, facing the wall of diplomas. All was silent for a few moments before he answered. “No.”

Bentgrass turned towards him, his eyebrow raised. He seemed to study him for a moment before nodding his head. “Very well. Thank you for your time. Come along, Miss Sparkle.” With that, he walked to the door, unlocked it, and strode out. Twilight followed quickly behind him, suddenly craving some fresh air.

They walked through the lobby silently, Bentgrass not noticing the stare from the receptionist. Twilight trotted a little faster and barged through the doors, deeply inhaling the clean air. After the cold sterility of the hospital, the smell of dried leaves and the cool breeze were a blessing. She stood there for a few moments, her mind trying desperately to make sense of the gruesome facts they had just heard. “That... that was...”

“Informative, yes,” Bentgrass said, trotting past her.

Twilight quickly caught up with him. “I guess that’s one way to put it.” She looked up at him. “So, I guess that means it really was... *murder*.”

“Yes,” he said plainly, turning to face her. “The evidence can not lead to any other conclusion. Ms. Punch was the victim of foul play.”

“Murder...” The word felt foreign on her tongue. The very concept was unthinkable, that a pony would harm another. All the villains she’d faced, the disasters she and her friends had averted were horrible in their own right, but this was different. Nightmare Moon was a crazed goddess bent on revenge, but she never killed anypony. The guards she attacked at the celebration were gravely injured, but they recovered. More than that, her actions—in her mind, at least—were benevolent; she just wanted ponies to bask in her night. Even

Discord wasn't so evil as to kill. He was more of a cruel prankster, more intent on driving ponies insane than harming them. There were deaths during the Changeling Invasion, but that was more an act of war than anything else.

She stood for a few moments before Bentgrass trotted up to her and waved a hoof in her face. She shook her head, clearing her mind of the vile thoughts, and looked up at him, an expectant gaze on his pale features. "Huh?"

"I said we must be off." He turned to trot away, Twilight following him closely. "Now that we have established that it was indeed equicide, we can move on to the next phase of the investigation."

"Wait, don't you have to report to Sheriff Shackle first?"

Bentgrass turned to her, looking as though she'd just asked him to remove his own head. "Why would I do that? I've never even met the fellow."

"But, you told the doctor..." Twilight jerked to a halt once more. "Wait, so you *lied* to him?"

"Not at all. I do at some point intend on liaising with the local constabulary. I simply," he looked up, thinking of the right words, "*exaggerated* my timetable to suit my needs." He smiled at her.

"And that is different from lying *how*?"

He stroked his chin with a hoof. "I guess it's not really. Hm!"

Twilight glared at him. "You never heard 'honesty is the best policy' in grade school?"

"Not when it comes to catching killers, it's not." With that, he trotted off.

She stood rooted to the spot for a few more moments. Then, grunting in annoyance, she cantered to catch up to him. Somewhere in her mind, she wished Applejack was here to give him a good kick for being so dishonest. "Okay, so what *is* the 'next phase?'"

"Now, we must establish a suspect pool. Find out who, if anypony, would wish to harm Ms. Punch." He looked up at the sky, noting the position of the sun. "However, I fear it must wait until nightfall."

Twilight looked up briefly before turning her eyes to Bentgrass. "Why?"

Bentgrass looked at her with that same off-putting small smile. “Tell me, Miss Sparkle. Would you care for a drink?”

• • •

Doctor Fulton Well sat at his desk, eyeing the small manila folder before him. He hadn't moved since Twilight and that strange stallion left. Finally, he opened the bottom drawer of his desk, pulling out a small bottle and a glass. He placed them both on the desk, doing his best to avoid the picture of his family.

*Flitter would kill me.* He had promised his wife that he'd quit drinking years ago, but every now and then, he found an excuse to take a few sips. Already the heady aroma of the whiskey filled the room, the pleasant clinking of the bottle on the glass a soothing sound as he slowly poured. Taking one last look at the folder before him, he grunted and threw back the glass, swallowing it in one gulp. He screwed his eyes shut as the fiery liquid burned his throat, sighing as the pleasant buzz of the alcohol already started to show itself.

He refilled the tiny glass, spinning around in his chair to glance at his diplomas. All the evidence of his many years of study hung on the wall. He truly loved his job. What, he often thought, could rival the joy of telling parents the sex of their foal, helping to extend the life of a loved one, or the tears of happiness when he saved a life? It almost made him forget all the bad moments.

*Almost.* He turned back to the desk, raising the glass to his lips while opening the bottom drawer of his desk. Finishing the shot, he began to refill it as he pulled out a photograph from the drawer: a photograph from the autopsy, one that he had been “firmly persuaded” by Sheriff Shackle to make disappear.

“It will only complicate things,” he said, mimicking the words the sheriff had said to him. He looked one more time at it: Berry's left flank, her cutie mark partially obscured by a splash of blood, and the strange pattern carved into the skin beneath it.

Grumbling, he crumpled up the picture and threw it in the wastebasket, at the same time throwing back the shot of alcohol. He slammed the glass down on the table, the force knocking over the picture of his wife and children. He didn't even move to put it back up.

The last thing he wanted was them looking at him.

*I wish I'd brought a sweater or something*

The cold evening air sent a chill down Twilight's back as she approached the pub, still unsure what exactly she was supposed to do. Bentgrass' instructions were irritatingly vague.

*"Simply walk into the pub and have a seat at the bar. Order a drink, if you like."*

She ground her teeth at the thought. *Why am I still working with that crazy pony?* In the short time she'd known him, he'd been nothing but deceitful and sneaky, two traits she could not stand.

*Still, I don't have much of a choice, do I?* As distasteful as it sounded, if there really was a killer loose in Ponyville, Bentgrass was her best bet at finding out who it was. His methods rubbed her the wrong way, but as long as he continued to get results, who was she to argue? After all, he *was* a seasoned detective.

A loud clang came from behind her. Twilight yelped and spun around, the fur on the back of her neck standing on end. As she scanned the darkness, a sudden movement from a nearby trash pile caught her eye. Her horn glowed brightly, preparing to subdue whatever was stalking her.

"Mew."

Twilight's shoulders slumped, a loud groan escaping her lips. The tiny cat studied her for a few moments before returning to its search for food.

*Great job, Twilight. You're jumping at shadows. And you almost vaporized a kitty cat.* She cursed under her breath and turned back towards the bar.

Taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, Twilight approached the door. A slightly faded sign hung next to it: *The Watering Hole*. Twilight chuckled lightly at the name. The smell of alcohol wafted through the closed door, and light murmurs of conversation mixed with the quiet howl of the wind. She was really not looking forward to this.

In her time in Ponyville, Twilight had learned a lot about interpersonal behavior. She was no longer the repressed shut-in she was when she first left Canterlot, but there were still certain situations that made her very uneasy. What she was sure she was about to walk into was near the top of that list: ponies in mourning. She had barely known Berry, and



here she was about to walk into a room full of ponies who knew her very well, just days after her death. The thought sent her stomach roiling as a light sheen of sweat covered her forehead even in the cool of the night.

*Okay, Twilight, it's not going to get any easier by just sitting out here.* With one final, deep breath, she pushed on the heavy wooden door and entered.

A raucous wave of laughter shocked her as the door swung shut behind her. She looked around in confusion. The small pub was packed full of ponies, most of whom were currently gasping for air between fits of laughter. Twilight's tail flicked behind her as she slowly began to walk towards the bar, her eyes scanning the room. There wasn't a single frown or tear as far as she could see. Ponies were good-naturedly patting each other on the back. The loud clinking of glasses raised in toasts was barely audible over the massive wave of hearty guffaws. A jukebox in the corner played a light, jaunty tune, almost lost over the din of conversation.

As she approached the bar, the laughter began to die down. A large, grey earth pony with a long, blonde mane stood behind the bar, trying to talk while gasping for breath.

"So Berry stumbles up to me and says, 'Tap, gimme four shots of apple whiskey.'"

"Just four? Must have been a slow night!"

Another wave of laughter came at the heels of the joke.

The grey earth pony continued. "Anyway, I said, 'Berry, w-why do you need four shots?'"

"Why *wouldn't* Berry need four shots?"

"Sh-shut up, shut up!" he said, quickly losing his bearing. "Okay, okay so—shut up!" He giggled again. "So, I said 'Berry, why four shots?' And she s... she says, 'Well, Tap, I don't want anypony to feel left out, so I'm gonna buy one from all four of you!'"

The tiny bar exploded. Howls of laughter rang through Twilight's ears as she approached the bar. Countless bottles of alcohol were arranged on two shelves situated beneath a large mirror that spanned the entire bar. In it she could see the patrons still smiling and laughing, drinking from old-style mugs. She turned and scanned the bar. Medium-sized tables were strewn across the floor, each with four or five chairs that were situated low to the ground so a pony could sit comfortably. Every table was full, with ponies standing around them as well. Along the left wall there was a small raised platform with a microphone and what Twilight guessed was a karaoke machine.

The walls of the pub were lined with knick-knacks from various parts of Equestria: a heavily faded wooden sign that read *Welcome to Appaloosa, Population – One More*; a flashing neon sign advertising live mares, which made Twilight a tad uneasy; and a carriage license plate adorned with the letters *MRE CDER*.

Scattered around the decorations were pictures of ponies, whom Twilight guessed were patrons. Some of them were wearing sports jerseys, others simply holding large mugs and smiling drunkenly. When Twilight turned back to the bar, she saw a large collection of pictures above the mirror, each containing a magenta mare performing various activities. One showed her shouting into a microphone stand. In another, four stallions were holding her on their shoulders, while a hat reading *Birthday Mare* sat lopsided on her head. Just above the pictures, a carefully drawn wooden sign read, *In Loving Memory*.

The earth pony behind the bar smiled at her. “Welcome to the Watering Hole, little filly! What’s your pleasure?”

“Oh, um... just a water, please.”

“Hmm, can’t say we’re known for our water, but okay, sure!” He knelt down and produced a mug of water and slid it to Twilight. She pulled up her coin purse when the bartender shook his head. “On the house. Tonight’s kind of a special night,” he said, smiling warmly at her.

“Oh?”

He nodded. “Yup, tonight we pay tribute to a fallen friend.” He raise a hoof to the collection of pictures above the bar.

Twilight followed his hoof and nodded in understanding. “I thought there were a lot of ponies in here for a Sunday night.”

“Well, we all kind of decided that a hangover at work was worth paying our respects in the way she would have wanted.” He turned around to face the pictures above him. “Berry was the last mare who would have wanted us sitting around, crying about her. She would have wanted us to laugh and remember the good times.”

“So, Berry was a regular fixture here?”

Tap let out a bark of laughter. “I should say so! She was one of my best customers. Every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday night, without fail, Berry would be here in that very stool.” He nodded towards the stool next to Twilight. Currently, a slightly overweight blue earth

pony sat there milking a shot glass. He wore a ratty overcoat that spanned his entire body. His black mane stuck out wildly from his head, and a faint, unpleasant smell came off of him. He turned and looked at Twilight, and loudly grunted when he saw her studying him.

Tap shook his head. "Well, not everypony can be as social as Berry was."

A quiet moment passed between the two, laughter still coming from behind Twilight. She took a small sip from her mug before speaking again. "So, it sounds like everypony here really cared for Berry."

"Yeah, she was something special." He produced a towel and began wiping down the bar in front of her. "You know, and I say this with all the love in Equestria, but Berry was kind of our mascot." He chuckled at Twilight's raised eyebrow. "What I mean is, she was here every weekend, like I said, but it was more than that. Every time somepony would walk in the door, no matter what she was doing, she'd stop and welcome them. Hay, if a pony came in after a bad day and couldn't afford a drink, she'd buy him a round! 'All life's problems can be solved with cider,' she'd say."

"Wow, it sound like she... really loved her cider."

He laughed, picking up a mug and wiping it down. "Well yeah, but she wasn't some raging alky. She just liked to unwind and help ponies forget their troubles."

Twilight nodded and took another sip from her mug as Tap went to the opposite side of the bar to tend to another customer. She looked around the bar again. With the exception of the surly pony next to her, everypony in the bar was smiling and laughing. It struck her as a little odd that they would be grieving like this, but the more she thought about it, the less it bothered her. Berry was apparently a friend to everypony here.

*Which makes me wonder why we're looking here for a suspect! Where in the hoof is Bentgrass?* She scanned again, but still could not see hide nor hair of the detective. She sighed to herself and spun back around to face the bar. *Well, if he's not going to do it, I guess I'll have to investigate.*

When Tap was done with the other customer, Twilight flagged him down. He trotted over to her. "Care for a refill, miss?"

She shook her head. "No, thank you. Actually, I was wondering if I could ask you a few more questions about Berry Punch."

He cast her a sideways glance, then brightened back up. "Sure, why not?"

"Well, what happened that night?"

"Let's see, Berry came in at about nine, like usual. It was actually a fairly typical night for her. She started drinking as soon as she came in. She sat around, telling jokes, talking with the other ponies."

"Were there any new ponies there that night? Maybe somepony paying special attention to her?"

"Hmm... nope, just the regulars." Tap gazed at her a little harder. "Are you working for the sheriff or something?"

She gave a nervous laugh. "Oh, no, no. I'm just curious." Suddenly, it dawned on her. "You know, you don't have to talk about it if it makes you uncomfortable."

Tap's eyes softened. "No, it's okay. It's just..." His shoulders slumped and he hung his head. "Well, I mean... I cut her off early. She was pounding them back a little harder than usual, nothing too bad. But I was worried for her. Sheriff Shackle had picked her up a few times in the past for public intox, and I didn't want her to spend another night in the tank, you know?"

Twilight nodded as he continued.

"So a little after midnight, I cut her off and sent her home." His left foreleg pawed at the floor briefly. "How was I supposed to know she'd go to the Everfree Forest?"

Twilight reached across the bar and placed a hoof on his shoulder. "It's not your fault. Hey." Tap slowly looked up at her. "You were just trying to be a good friend."

Tap's mouth curled into a tiny smile. "Yeah, you're right. I know."

Twilight smiled at him. Then, a curious look appeared in her eyes. "So, she never mentioned anything about going to the Everfree before?"

Tap looked up and rubbed his chin. "Hmm, no, not that I can recall. As far as I know, she only really ever went to home, work, or here." He looked back down at Twilight. "She was kinda private like that."

Twilight's head cocked to the side. "Private? But you make it sound like she was the life of the party?"

"Well, in here she was. But out there," he gestured to the door, "she was different. She'd see you on the street and smile and nod, maybe make a little small talk. But she was never really that outgoing. When she came in here and got a little cider in her gut, though." He chuckled. "I guess you could call her a social butterfly." His smile faded, and his eyes glazed over slightly, a look of longing in them. "Kinda makes me wish I'd gotten to know her a little better out there."

An awkward silence fell, causing Twilight to shuffle her hoofs for a moment. She was about to say something, when Tap shook his head. "Bah. Like I said, Berry wouldn't want us to cry over her. *Hey! Listen up!*"

The other ponies all turned towards him, the conversations quickly dying down. Tap raised a mug of cider in the air. "This one's for the best customer I ever had, and one of the best mares I ever had the privilege of knowing!" Everypony in the bar raised their glasses as well. "Here's hoping the Celestial Parents have a nice stock of hard cider saved up for her!" A small wave of laughter sounded. "*To Berry Punch!*"

His toast was echoed by the other patrons who then finished their drinks and slammed the mugs back on the table. Tap turned back to Twilight, when a new voice spoke up.

"Pft. Yeah, whatever."

Both Tap and Twilight turned to the stallion next to her. "What was that, friend?" Tap asked, a slight edge in his voice.

The dirty stallion threw back his shotglass, reaching for the mug of cider next to it. "Yew heard what Ah said." His voice was rough, like somepony who gargled whiskey on a daily basis. He lifted the mug up and spun around to face the rest of the bar. "Hey! Ah got one!"

The other patrons once more turned to face him, all eager to raise the next toast. The blue stallion staggered a little and spoke again. "Here's t' one of most useless wastes of fur Ah've ever known! A lyin', cheatin', thievin' little whore! T' Berry the Bitch!"

The bar was silent as the drunk stallion threw back the mug, a good portion of the cider falling down his coat. He slammed the mug down, almost falling off his hooves, and belched loudly.

Twilight stood shocked. She looked around, and every single face she could see was twisted in anger. Several ponies had stood up from their tables, some beginning to walk towards the drunk pony.

“How dare you!”

“Yeah, Berry was one of the sweetest mares I knew!”

“You better take that back!” Suddenly, Tap grabbed the drunk by his shoulder and violently turned him to face him. “Friend, I think you’d better leave before something ugly happens.”

The drunk pony chuckled. “Somthin’ ugly can’t happen. She’s dead, remember?”

More voices came from the crowd. “Berry was one of my best friends!”

“She took me in when I lost my job, and helped me get back on my hooves!”

“Who in the hoof do you think you are?”

“Ah’ll tell yew who Ah am,” he answered, swaying slightly. “Ah’m the one who knew her fer what she really was.” He turned back to Tap. “A two-timin’ whore who’d spread her legs and rut anythin’ with more ‘n six inches an’ a pulse!”

Tap began to speak, but was silenced when a large pegasus spun the drunk around. Twilight had to suppress a gasp at the sight: the pegasus was easily as bulky as Big Macintosh, his tight black t-shirt straining to hold in the layers of muscle. He was just a hair taller than the drunk, but his bulk made him seem impossibly bigger.

The hulking pegasus grabbed the drunk by the collar of his coat and pulled him close. “Hey, pally! You gots a lotta nerve to come in here and talk about Berry like dat! Especially since yer sittin’ in her stool!”

The drunk barely batted an eye at him. “Oh, this is *Berry’s* stool? Well, in that case...” He wormed his way free from the pegasus’ grasp and turned to the stool. A loud gurgling sound came from his throat. As Twilight watched in disgust, a ball of phlegm that would have made a camel proud flew from his mouth and landed on the stool.

“Dat’s it!” The huge pegasus grabbed the drunk’s collar again and reached back his other hoof to strike him.

“Brick, wait!”

The pegasus froze, turning to look at Tap, who stood behind the bar with fire in his eyes. “Look, we can’t have you breaking any more tables in here.”

Twilight sighed in relief.

“Take him out back to the alley.”

Brick grinned at the instructions. A roar of cheers rose from the crowd as Brick took the drunk’s coat in his mouth and dragged him towards the back door. The drunk struggled feebly, but could do little to stop the muscular pegasus. A few patrons threw their drinks at the drunk pony, the alcohol quickly staining his already dirty coat.

Twilight whipped around to Tap. “You’re just going to let him go out there and beat him?”

Tap’s eyes settled on her with an icy gaze. “We take care of our own.” Another chorus of agreement came from behind her.

Twilight glared at him. She looked over to see the back door swinging closed. She quickly moved to follow, dancing in between ponies who had gone back to their drinks.

The faint smell of trash and urine wafted over Twilight as she closed the back door behind her. The cool autumn air was downright freezing in the dimly lit alley. Only a single bulb above the door provided any light.

As she watched, the bouncer threw the poor drunk against the far wall of the alley, sending him crashing into a large pile of trash. Brick now stood opposite of him, wings unfurled and his eyes dripping venom.

“You’s gonna pay for dem things you said about Berry!” He cracked his neck to both sides, his hooves digging into the cold ground.

Twilight turned to face the drunk, hoping he was okay. He staggered to his hooves.

Suddenly, his whole body posture changed. He no longer swayed on his hooves, and his shoulders were square. Now that he stood up to his full height, he was on eye level with the raging Brick. His head low, he spoke in a soft voice. “I have the information I need, good sir. Please allow me to leave in peace. I do not wish to hurt you.”

Twilight gasped at his voice, no longer the ragged grumble from before. Now, he spoke in a genteel, musical accent. *That... no, it can't be...* “Wait!”

With a primal scream, Brick lowered his head and charged towards the drunk pony. His heavy hoofbeats echoed off the stone walls of the alley. Twilight's horn began to glow, her mind desperately thinking of a spell she could use. She never got the chance.

With Brick now only a few feet away, the drunk moved in a flash. He fell onto his back and thrust out his hind legs. Brick let out a pained howl as the drunk's hooves impacted his knees. In a movement Twilight didn't think possible without wings, the drunk flipped forward and brought his forelegs down hard on Brick's shoulders, driving his head into the ground. Before he could even cry out, the drunk planted his hoof on the side of Brick's face and drove his left hind knee into his chin. A loud crack echoed, and Brick was silent.

All was quiet in the small alley as the drunk stood up. Twilight stood slack-jawed as he removed his overcoat and threw it away from him. It landed next to Twilight, and she looked down to see what looked like pillows lined the front of it. She looked back up and saw the drunk now standing in front of her. He lifted his hoof to his chin. The sound of velcro ripping apart came as he removed his jowls from his face, revealing a thin jaw line.

The drunk calmly trotted up to Twilight and picked up his coat. “Fantastic work in there, Ms. Sparkle. I knew you would be a boon to this case.”

“B... Bentgrass?!”

A small smile graced his lips as he lifted his hoof to his right eye. He pulled it away, holding what looked like a contact lens. He then looked back to Twilight, revealing a yellow, slitted eye. “Naturally.”

He moved past her and began packing his things, removing the wig he wore and stuffing it in the pocket of the coat. “I must say, that was much more fortuitous than I thought it would be. I dare say we—”

“*What was that?!*”

He jerked to a halt and turned back towards her. “Gryphonian hawk-kido. I spent some time in the Mount Grundel eyrie when I was a colt.” He raised his left hoof and slowly rotated it, quiet pops sounding. “It was originally designed for aerial encounters, but I've found that if one is spry enough, it works quite well for hoof-to-hoof comb—”



“No!” Twilight stomped her hoof on the ground, ignoring the dull pain. “Not that! *That!*” She pointed towards the door with her hoof. “Playing dress up! Making everypony in there hate you! I thought we were looking for suspects, not picking fights!”

“But that’s precisely what we did,” he said matter-of-factly. “They don’t hate me, they hate this stallion.” He picked up the overcoat and slung it over his back. “And tonight, I shall take a shower, the dye will wash out, and no pony will be the wiser.”

Twilight’s tail twitched furiously. “And how exactly did that help our case?”

“Simple. Berry Punch had no family. Her parents died a few years back, and she was an only foal. Her apartment was on the second floor of her juice shop, meaning she was almost always there. I already spoke to her grape suppliers before I came here, and they bore no ill will towards Ms. Punch. The good Mister Tap told you how she was somewhat shy during the workweek, so she had few friends outside of the bar.”

“But, I—”

He raised a hoof. “Furthermore, this evening was a tribute to Ms. Punch, offering half-priced drinks, which would attract virtually everypony who would wish to remember her. When I was in there besmirching her name, every single pony in the bar, ostensibly everypony who knew her well, became enraged.” He trotted next to Twilight. “When we combine this with what you learned, that she was not a regular in the Everfree Forest, we can deduce that Ms. Punch was a victim of opportunity, not premeditation.”

“And you couldn’t have just, oh, I don’t know, *asked* them?”

“That would have taken too long. Besides, ponies tend to clam up around me.”

*I wonder why.* Her ears flicked in annoyance.

“Also, to assuage your fears, don’t worry about poor Mister Brick there.” He gestured towards the twitching pegasus on the ground. “I did no permanent damage. He should wake up in around twenty minutes with a splitting headache, but nothing more.” With that, he turned and trotted towards the open end of the alley. “Now then, let’s be off, Ms. Sparkle.”

“No!”

Bentgrass stopped and turned back towards her. The confused gaze was gone from her face, replaced by a simmering anger.

“What do you mean, ‘No?’”

She purposefully trotted up to him, her forceful hoofsteps echoing off the walls. “I mean no! I’ve had enough of this!” She stopped just short of Bentgrass, her face mere inches away from his. “Ever since you got here, you’ve been nothing but dishonest and sneaky!”

“Now, Ms. Sparkle, I assure you th—”

She silenced him with a hoof in his mouth. “No! You broke into my library, you lied to the doctor about working with the sheriff, and you just lied to an entire bar full of ponies, while at the same time insulting their dear friend who just died! And *then*, you savagely beat a pony!” She backed off a few steps, but her gaze was no less intense. “I’ve had enough! I’m not helping you anymore until you start telling the truth!” With that, she stomped her hoof to the ground.

Bentgrass eyed her carefully for a moment. “Very well, ask away.”

“No, I...” She blinked her eyes a few times. “Wait, what?”

His face was as neutral as ever. “You want me to tell the truth, then ask me anything. I am an open book, and we both know how much you adore those.”

Twilight’s mind skipped a beat. “Um... I, uh...” She hadn’t expected him to be so open. In her confusion, she blurted out the first question that came to mind. “What happened to your eye?” Immediately, she winced.

Bentgrass merely let out a low chuckle. “It always come back to the eye, doesn’t it?” he muttered under his breath.

At that moment, Twilight was sure she had never felt so small. Still, she was angry at him, so it didn’t bother her too much. *Well, I may as well go with it.* “What happened? Is it a birth defect? Or a curse of some kind?”

Bentgrass chuckled again. “No, nothing so noteworthy, I’m afraid.” He strode over to her, leaning his head down slightly. “I was recruited into the R.I.S. from Her Majesty Princess Luna’s Night Guard. There were some... complications removing the enchantments they had placed on me.”

Twilight looked up at him with her brow creased. “Enchantments? But I thought it was just enchanted armor that made you all look the same.”

“Oh, for the Day Guard, yes. But the Night Guard is a special assignment that requires something a bit more intensive.” He smiled. “Besides, I’m sure you are aware of Princess Luna’s... flair for the dramatic, yes?”

Despite herself, Twilight chuckled. She shook her head and cleared her throat, struggling to maintain her angry face. “So, all her Night Guards have to go through that?”

“Oh, this is nothing. You don’t even want to *know* what her elite guards have to go through.” He knelt a little closer to her ear. “Pray you never run afoul of Captain Cinnamon Oatmeal.” He gave a dramatic shudder.

Twilight opened her mouth to ask, but just shook her head. “So, you’re stuck like that forever?”

Bentgrass shrugged his shoulders. “Oh, it’s not that bad, actually. The eye gives me improved night vision, which is always a boon.” He gave another low smile. “Plus, Captain Anvil seemed to think it would, ‘help me with the fillies.’”

Twilight’s mood seemed to lighten slightly, but her forehooves still dug at the ground. Bentgrass looked over and noticed this. He backed up slightly and spoke quietly.

“Look, Ms. Spa... Twilight. I realize that my methods are... unorthodox, to say the least.” He ignored the sarcastic look Twilight shot him. “But they are effective, and quick. When dealing with crimes of this nature, time is of the essence. Normal investigative procedures simply take too long. We must piece together the clues and catch this madpony before he strikes again.”

“You think he’ll,” she gulped, “kill again?”

He nodded. “There is little doubt in my mind. A crime as violent as this does not simply come and go. The killer *will* strike again, and it falls to us to stop him.” He turned towards the open end of the alley, looking back at Twilight.

For a few moments, she simply stood there, thoughts raging in her head. She still didn’t like the way this pony did things. If her time in Ponyville had shown her anything, it was that if a pony did the right thing, situations tended to resolve themselves.

*But this is different.* She had never faced a situation like this: a crazed killer loose in her town, murdering innocent ponies. This strange stallion that stood before her, though she still did not fully trust him, seemed to be the best chance they had at stopping any more bloodshed.

Setting her shoulders, she trotted towards Bentgrass. “So, what’s the next step?”

Bentgrass looked down with her, a hint of admiration barely visible on his pale features. “Next, we need to talk to any witnesses. I believe Ms. Fluttershy has already told the sheriff everything she knew. Is there anypony else who lives near the forest who might have seen or heard something?”

“Well, there’s Zecora. She lives in the forest.”

Bentgrass’ eyes went wide. “She lives *in* the forest? Amazing. I should very much like to meet this Zecora.” He looked up at the moon. “However, it is late, and the Everfree can be quite dangerous at night.” He began walking out of the alley, Twilight following close behind. “I suggest we retire for the night. Tomorrow, I shall call upon you when I am ready to go.”

“Do... you have a place to stay?” *Please say yes, please say yes.*

“Yes.”

Twilight breathed a sigh of relief. While she had accepted that she had to work with this pony, sleeping in the same building as him would have been very unnerving.

“I’ve rented board with a lovely young pegasus mare and her daughter on the outskirts of town. I believe she is the local mailmare.”

Twilight halted for a second before continuing. “You’re... staying with Ditzzy Doo?”

“Yes. I despise hotels, and Ms. Doo offered me a very fair rate for her spare bedroom.”

She opened her mouth to ask, but then shut it. She’d had enough headaches from this pony for one day. “So, uh, I’ll... see you tomorrow?”

“Indeed. *Fino a domani*, Ms. Sparkle.” With that, he turned away from her and trotted off.

Twilight shook her head and turned towards the library, her thoughts raging.

*I know I have to work with this pony, but I’m tired of always being in the dark!*

As she walked, she ran through her options. She couldn’t very well ask the Princess about him. It seemed like a waste of her time, and besides, she may not be able to tell her

anything. *State secrets and all that. She'd probably just tell me to smile and nod at him.* She chuckled grimly at the thought. *I never could say no to her—*

She jerked to a halt briefly. A moment later, she smiled and began to gallop home. She may not be able to ask the Princess, but there was one stallion in the Equestrian government who could never say no to *her*. She hoped Spike was still awake.

She had a letter to write.

*So, that's the basics of it. I know that Division Six is super secret, but I hope you can get me at least a little information about this Agent Bentgrass. Now I know you, Shiny. Don't worry too much about me. I can take care of myself. Kiss Dusk Shine for me, tell him Auntie Twi misses him.*

*All my love,  
Twilight*

Twilight rolled the scroll up and placed her wax seal on it. Spike was already asleep when she had come home, so she had put it off until the morning. She woke up earlier than normal, preparing for when Bentgrass came calling.

The letter finished, she floated the now empty bowl of oat cereal to the sink and washed it out. Such a simple breakfast was normal for her when Spike slept in. She didn't mind today, it gave her time to reflect on yesterday. The more she thought about the strange detective, the less she worried. His speech last night about his methodology hadn't completely put her at ease, but as she walked out of the kitchen towards the stairs, the thought of working with him wasn't nearly as worrying as it had been.

The only real worry that remained was Bentgrass himself. For all his curiosity about her, he had let few details out about himself. Hopefully, Shining would be able to give her some kind of insight on the strange pony.

Pushing out the dark thoughts, Twilight walked up the stairs to the bedroom. "Spike," she called up. "Wake up, I need you to send a letter for me."

She reached the top of the main stairs and walked up to the loft bedroom the two shared. Spike had outgrown his basket a few years ago, and they had decided that it was time he get a proper bed. It was slightly smaller than Twilight's, but it perfectly fit the growing dragon. She walked over to the foot and saw large lump under the sheets and a pointy tail sticking out. She chuckled quietly. "Come on, lazy scales, up and at 'em."

Spike didn't answer her, and continued to snore quietly. Frustrated, she took the purple sheet in her mouth and yanked it off, before going to the window and opening the curtain. Bright sunlight fell squarely on Spike, but he still didn't stir. He lay perfectly still, his arms folded under his head, knees tucked into his chest.

"Spike, get up!" She gently nudged him. He still didn't respond. She poked him with her hoof a few more times to no avail.

“Okay, Spike. Seriously, wake up.” Twilight’s ears slowly folded on top of her head. Spike continued to snore lightly, the only movement the rise and fall of his scaly back.

“Spike!” She pushed him harder, her voice becoming more frantic. “Come on, Spike, get up!”

*No, no, no. Please, no...*

“Spike!” she shrieked, now violently shoving him with both her forehooves. “Don’t do this, Spike, wake up!”

*Please, it’s too soon. I’m not ready...*

“Please, wake up! Come on, Spike!” Tears were beginning to form in her eyes, and she ignored the dull pain in her hooves as she pounded on his thick scales. “*Spike! Spike!*”

Spike suddenly shot up onto his knees, knocking Twilight to the ground. His eyes were wide as he shook his head back and forth. “Huh? Wuzza... what?” He looked around for a few more moments, before seeing Twilight on her haunches next to the bed. He groaned and slumped back onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. “Aw, *Twilight!* I was having such a good dream. We were at the beach eating ice cream. Rarity was wearing a swimsuit made of rubies...” He shot up, his cheeks suddenly a fierce red. “Uh, I mean...”

He stopped and looked at her again. Her eyes were red and puffy, and her lower lip was quivering. “Oh, hey, Twilight, it’s all ri—”

She cut him off by leaping onto the bed and embracing him tightly. He jerked at the sudden movement, but relaxed when he heard her snuffle. Spike wrapped his arms around her, returning the deep hug, his claw gently stroking her mane.

“It’s okay Twilight. I’m right here,” he whispered in her ear as her hot tears ran down his shoulder. “I’m still here.”

They sat still for a few minutes, Twilight’s quiet sobbing the only sound in the room. Finally, she pushed away from him, wiping her eyes. She landed a playful slap on his shoulder.

“Don’t scare me like that.”

Spike gave her a small smile. “Hey, it’s not like I did it on purpose.” He stood up, helping her to her hooves. “Now, what was so important that you woke me up from a Rarity ice cream dream?”

“I need you to send this letter to my brother.” She floated the scroll in front of him.

He rolled his eyes. “Twi, we’ve been over this...”

“Spike, please. This is important.” She shot him a pleading look.

He stared back for a moment before sighing. “Fine, fine.” He snatched the scroll from the air and walked to the open window. A deep breath, followed by a small gout of fire, and the scroll disintegrated, Twilight’s eyes following it as the smoke disappeared out the window. “There, done.” He turned back to Twilight, who was gazing softly at him.

He silenced her with a claw. “Don’t, okay? Just... don’t. I’m still here, and I’m going to be here for as long as I can, alright?”

Twilight smiled sadly at him. “Alright.”

Stretching his arms out, he let out a great yawn and walked back to the bed. Reaching down and grabbing the sheets, he began to tuck them under the mattress, speaking over his shoulder. “So, how did it go with Special Agent Whack-job yesterday?”

“Spike!”

He paused and turned back to look at her. “What?”

“That’s very rude! You shouldn’t make fun of the way ponies look, you know that.”

“Yeah, well breaking and entering isn’t exactly polite, either.”

She rolled her eyes. “It went... well, it went. We found out some... disturbing facts.” Using her magic, she picked his pillow up from the ground and laid it on the bed. “It looks like Berry Punch was... murdered.”

His eyes went wide and he dropped the blanket in his hands. “Murdered?”

“*Murdered?*”



Twilight yelped at the new voice. Craning her head upwards, she saw Rainbow Dash sticking her head inside the window.

“Rainbow? What are you doing up there?”

Rainbow fluttered down from the window, the soft breeze from her wings ruffling the bed sheets, earning a quiet groan from Spike as she landed next to Twilight. “I was flying overhead when I thought I heard somepony screaming.” Twilight and Spike shared a bemused glance, Twilight blushing slightly.

Rainbow ignored this and leaned in closer. “So, Berry Punch was murdered?”

Twilight shushed her. “Dash, be quiet. We don’t want to start a panic. Somepony may hear you!”

“Uh, Twi, we’re in a tree.”

Twilight groaned and slapped her face with a hoof. “Dash, no offense, but this is kind of a bad time. What are you even doing here? Shouldn’t you be at work?”

“Nope,” Dash said. “I took the day off. Heh, one of the benefits of being the weather team manager, I get to make my own schedule. Mac’s busy balancing the farm’s books, so I decided to come by.” Her eyes brightened. “So, where is he?”

“Who?”

Rainbow lowered her head, looking down her muzzle at Twilight. “Discord,” she deadpanned. “Come on, Twi! The super secret government spy!”

As if on cue, a gentle knock came from downstairs. Rainbow gasped loudly, her face beaming, and rocketed downstairs. She landed roughly next to the door, unlocked it, and threw it open. Her face fell as she looked at the tall stallion before her. “Dude, what’s with the suit? You going to a funeral?”

“Trying to prevent one, actually,” Bentgrass said, easing past her into the library. “And you must be Ms. Rainbow Dash, no?”

At the mention of her name, Rainbow puffed out her chest. “The one and only!” She rubbed her chest, looking down and inspecting her hoof. “I’m not surprised you’ve heard of me.”

“Of course I have. The R.I.S. has files on all of you.”

Rainbow stiffened slightly. “Oh, y-you do?” She gulped and chuckled nervously. “Uh, you know it was my friend Soarin’ who set me up that account in the Hayman Islands. *Totally* wasn’t my idea!” She smiled at him, her pinion feathers twitching slightly.

Bentgrass stared at her with his usual cold gaze. “Of course it wasn’t.” He turned back towards the stairs, where Twilight was making her way down.

Twilight glared at the investigator. “Oh, *now* you knock!”

“Of course. It’s not business hours yet. Are you ready to go?”

Twilight rolled her eyes before looking up the stairs at Spike. “Spike, we should be gone for most of the morning. If anypony asks, we’re going to see Zecora.”

“Oh, oh!” Spike jumped down a few steps. “Ask her if she has any more of that spicy Zebrican feldspar!”

She chuckled. “Okay, will do.”

“Why are you going to see Zecora?” Rainbow asked. “Oh, does this have to do with Berry Punch?”

Bentgrass nodded. “Yes. I’m hoping she may have seen or heard something that night which might aid our investigation.”

A determined look set on Dash’s face. “Okay, I’m coming with you.”

“Ms. Dash, while I appreciate the offer, I assure you that Ms. Sparkle and I can hand—”

“No.” Dash took a step towards Bentgrass, a fire in her eyes. “Look, Mister Bright Eyes, if there’s some psycho running around hurting ponies in *my* home, *I’m* gonna help stop him.”

Bentgrass opened his mouth, but remained silent, casting a glance to Twilight. She just shrugged.

A moment of silence passed as Bentgrass looked back and forth between the two mares. Finally, he sighed. “Very well, Ms. Dash, if you insist.” Rainbow grinned smugly at him. “But we must be off at once.”

Dash snapped a quick salute and took to the air. “Well then, what are we waiting for? Let’s go, already!” With that, she raced out the door, already halfway down the street before Bentgrass and Twilight made it out the door. Bentgrass looked at Twilight with a raised eyebrow.

Twilight smiled softly at him. “Yeah, she’s like that.”

• • •

The Everfree Forest had stopped being scary to Twilight some time ago. After how many times she and her friends saved the world from certain destruction, a few shadows and weird animal sounds lost their effect. Still, as they walked silently in between the rows of trees, she couldn’t help but feel very small. This time, though, it wasn’t the thought of a wild manicomore or a giant Ursa Major that sent chills across her spine; the looming threat of a deranged pony slicing up helpless mares made her stomach turn. She gulped and pressed forward, the soft beating of Rainbow’s wings above them giving her some strength. She was with friends; nothing could harm her.

*Besides, this time we have a highly-trained government agent wit...*

Next to her, Bentgrass was a shaking mess. A light sheen of sweat was forming on his brow, and every few seconds he would lick his lips and grimace.

“Uh, are you okay, Agent Bentgrass?”

Rainbow fluttered down beside them. “Yeah, you look like you’re about to throw a shoe or something.”

“Yes, I’m... I’m fine.” He flicked his eyes back and forth, eying the trees around them. “It’s this place. I’m not surprised you two can’t feel it,” he said, nodding towards Twilight’s horn and Dash’s wings. “This whole wood seems... wrong. The ground feels strange beneath my hooves, and the air tastes...” he licked his lips again, his upper lip curling in disgust, “sour in some way.”

“If it’s really bothering you, I could just teleport us.”

Bentgrass shook his head. “I’ve already tasted my breakfast once this morning, I’d rather not taste it again, thank you very much.”

“Well, let’s talk about something. Maybe that will take your mind off of it,” Twilight said hopefully.

Bentgrass nodded and looked up at Rainbow. “Ms. Dash, I’m curious.”

“Hm?”

“Well, if I’ve read your file right, you worked your entire adult life to join the Wonderbolts, only to quit after two years. Why?”

Rainbow shrugged. “It’s not that complicated, really. It stopped being fun.”

Twilight and Bentgrass both suddenly stopped, glaring up at Rainbow with raised eyebrows.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong,” Rainbow said after a nervous chuckle, “it was awesome at first!” Her eyes glazed over, her face consumed by a wide smile. “Performing death-defying feats in front of packed stadiums! Thousands of ponies cheering my name! ‘*Rainbow Dash! Rain-bow Dash!*’” she yelled, pumping her hooves in the air. She looked back down at the two with stars in her eyes. “I got to travel all over the country, fly with the best fliers in Equestria! And the money! Oh, wow. I have so much money saved up in offshore tax shel... uh, I-I mean, perfectly legal banks, of course.” She shot a toothy grin at Bentgrass.

“I see. So, what changed?”

Rainbow tapped a hoof to her chin. “It’s kind of hard to explain. It stopped being about the flying, and became all about the show. Now I’ll admit, I like showing off every now and then.” A loud huff from Twilight made her cringe slightly. “Okay, a lot. But that was always a second thing. My main passion is flying. The wind through my feathers, the adrenaline high from pulling out of a steep dive just above the treeline, that light-headed feeling you get when you pull serious G’s!” She twirled around in the air, raising up higher above them before lowering herself back to eye-level. “*That’s* why I love doing tricks. In the Wonderbolts, we never just flew for the sake of flying, it was all about getting ready for the next show. It stopped being fun and started turning into a job.” She shrugged. “That’s when I knew it was time to leave.”

“Besides,” she said, landing gently beside them. “I accomplished all I wanted to. I set records that will probably never be broken, inspired an entire generation of new fliers! The name Rainbow Dash will be forever recorded in Equestrian history!”

“Certainly not for modesty,” Twilight said with a low grin. Rainbow stuck her tongue out at her and turned back to Bentgrass.

“Better to retire on top, you know?”

“I see,” he said, nodding slowly. “But why come back to Ponyville? Surely with all your wealth and notoriety, you could have gone anywhere in Equestria, if not the world.”

“Ponyville is my home. I may have been born in Cloudsdale, but all the best moments of my life have happened right here in this little podunk town. And you know what? I got a pretty good thing going here. A good job.” She looked away, her cyan face turning a slight shade of crimson. “A good stallion.”

Rainbow then took off and hovered next to Twilight. “And the best friends in the world,” she said as she gently nudged Twilight, who giggled. Rainbow turned back to Bentgrass. “What more could a mare ask for?”

“Wow. That’s... very mature of you, Dash,” Twilight said, ducking her head to avoid a low-hanging branch.

Rainbow shrugged. “Yeah, I was as surprised as you! I mean, I’d *heard* of ponies reaching their life’s dream only to find it wasn’t what they really wanted, but I thought that would *never* happen to me.” She chuckled lightly. “I guess I’m more mature than even *I* knew!” Suddenly, she jerked to a halt for a moment. “Whoa, I must be getting old.”

“Rainbow, you’re only twenty-six.”

“I know! I’m on the downhill slope to thirty.”

The group walked in silence, Bentgrass studying Rainbow for a moment before turning back to his front. “When I return to Canterlot, I shall have to update our file on you, Ms. Dash.” He turned to see her questioning gaze, showing her a small smile. “You are much more three-dimensional than it makes you out to be.”

Rainbow blinked several times. “Uh, thanks... I think.”

He looked away and sniffed the air. “I say, what is that... peculiar smell?”

Twilight sniffed and smiled. “We’re almost there, come on!”

They walked for a few more lengths, passing through a thick bush, when a large tree came into view. Gnarled roots stuck out of the ground like a sea serpent swimming through the water. Large branches reached up towards the canopy, thick vines snaking out from the center. Along the heavy branches, small vials and jars dangled from what

looked like homemade rope. A large tribal mask hung above a door set into the trunk, and pale, flickering firelight danced from windows carved into the tree. Occasionally bright flashes of vivid colors would send shadows dancing on the surrounding trees.

A low-pitched, melodious humming came from inside. Twilight eagerly trotted to the heavy door and knocked.

“Don’t be shy, come in and say hi.”

Twilight pushed the door open and walked inside. The air smelled of exotic spices, causing a slight tingling in the back of her throat. The walls of the tree hut were lined with shelves full of mysterious vials and jars stopped with cork, some labeled in strange Zebranic pictograms. Several more imposing wooden masks hung from the walls, the largest of which still gave Twilight the creeps. A roaring fire lit the small home and warmed it from the chill of the mid-autumn air. Upon it was a small cast-iron caldron hanging from an A-frame, a strange viscous fluid with large lumps of... something, almost boiling over the sides. A quiet bubbling came from the red substance.

Next to the pot stood the friendly zebra. She looked at Twilight and Rainbow with a warm grin. “Twilight, Rainbow! Come in and have a rest.” Looking past the two mares, she spied Bentgrass, who was eyeing one of the large masks. “And who is your friend, who is so nicely dressed?”

Turning away from the mask, Bentgrass walked over to Zecora. “Special Agent Bentgrass, of Their Majesties’ Royal Investigative Service,” he said, giving her a slight bow. “*Hivyo nzuri na hatimaye kukutana na wewe, Miss Zecora. Twilight anaongea sana sana ya wewe.*”

Zecora blushed briefly and smiled back. “It is quite rare to see one so young, who is well-spoken in my native tongue.”

After watching the exchange, Twilight stepped towards Bentgrass. “You speak Zebranic?”

“Yes. I spent some time in Zebrica when I was a colt.”

“Of course you did,” Twilight mumbled, rolling her eyes before turning back to Zecora. “It’s great to see you again, Zecora.” She sniffed the air again. “What’s that smell?” she asked, walking towards the large caldron.

“It is braken-root stew, a favorite of mine. If you would like, you can give it a try.”

Twilight leaned over the pot and took a big sniff. The second the acrid smell hit her nose, she coughed loudly, her face turning a slight shade of red. The many layers of exotic spices made her eyes water. She fell back, sputtering and wiping her nose. Looking up at Zecora, she smiled sheepishly. “Smells...” she sneezed, “delicious.”

Zecora chuckled. “I understand your lack of haste. Bracken root is an acquired taste.”

“Well, Hay, I’ll take some! I’m starving!” Rainbow alighted and grabbed a large bowl from a shelf before hovering over the roiling liquid. The bowl balanced between her hooves, she dipped it in the viscous stew.

“Uh, Rainbow, you might wanna...” The words caught in Twilight’s throat as Rainbow tipped the bowl up, slurping loudly. With eyes wide, she watched Rainbow devour the entire bowl in a matter of seconds, the pegasus finally lowering the now empty bowl and issuing a loud belch.

Rainbow chuckled. “Heh, excuse me.” Without asking for permission, she once more dunked the bowl in the pot.

Aghast at both her friend’s horrible manners and appetite, Twilight stared. “Rainbow, I thought you didn’t even like Zebrican food!”

“I don’t, but this is really good!” She took another loud slurp from the bowl, a large chunk of root falling in her mouth. “Behides, Ah hawen’t attin’ sin beakfust.”

“It’s like nine-thirty! And weren’t you sick a few days ago?”

Rainbow swallowed loudly, a happy sigh escaping her lips before she scowled at Twilight. “That was then, this is now. And now, I’m hungry.”

Twilight groaned. *Somewhere in Equestria, Rarity is having a seizure.*

As Rainbow made for the stew again, Twilight turned to Zecora. “So, anyway, Zecora, there’s actually a reason we stopped by.”

“Yes, I had a hunch that you did not come for lunch.”

Twilight shook her head. “No. I assume you heard about what happened to Berry Punch?”

Zecora hung her head, turning back to stir the bright red stew with a large ladle. “Yes, I heard, my dear friend. Such a sad way for a pony to meet her end.”

Twilight nodded and pointed to Bentgrass. “Agent Bentgrass is an investigator from Canterlot, and he wanted to ask you a few questions.”

During all of this, Bentgrass had been ambling around the hut, examining the various artifacts strewn about. Upon hearing his name, and Twilight clearing her throat after a long silence, he turned to face the three mares. “Hm? Oh, yes, quite right. Twilight?”

Twilight glared at him before bringing a hoof to her face. *If he keeps this up, I’m going to have a permanent hoof mark on my head.*

“So, Zecora, the attack happened in the Everfree. *We,*” she said, casting a hard glance at Bentgrass, “were wondering if you saw or heard anything?”

After a moment of silent pondering, the zebra shook her head. “I’m sorry, my friend, but this is a vast wood. I live too far away to know anything good.”

Twilight sighed. “No, it’s okay, Zecora.” In her mind, Twilight groaned. *How are we supposed to catch this pony if nopony saw anything?* True, Zecora had been kind of a long shot; the Everfree Forest *was* one of the largest expanses of wilderness in Equestria. The likelihood of her knowing anything was slim. Still, the disappointment hit her like a ton of bricks. *There’s a killer on the loose, and we have no idea where to even look!*

Zecora must have read the frustration on Twilight’s face. She stepped back from the pot, gently laying down the ladle and making her way over to Twilight. “Twilight, I wish I had what you need, to catch the pony who did this deed.”

Across the hut, Bentgrass’s ear flicked, and he straightened his back. “I say, Ms. Zecora, I am amazed at the collection of artifacts you have amassed.” He idly ran a hoof across a large wooden mask. “Any museum in Equestria would die to have some of these pieces. Tell me, what exactly is this?” he said, pointing towards the mask he’d just touched.

“What you see is a *kuwakaribisha* mask. Welcoming friends to your home is its task,” she said, walking next to him.

“I see. And this one?” He pointed his hoof to a small statue of a very well-endowed stallion.



Zecora blushed. “A likeness of *Uzazi*, and as you can see, he is thought to be able to help a mare conceive.”

“How scandalous,” he said, earning a muffled chortle from Rainbow. Bentgrass then casually walked over to a shelf beside the door. “And... what of this?”

“Ah, a family heirloom is what you admire. A *Kathoga*, a ritual dagger, passed down from my sire.”

As she talked, Bentgrass reached up and lightly ran his hoof across it. The knife was about three hoof-lengths long, the blade curved into a slight “S” shape before tapering off into a wicked point at the end. Small, intricate glyphs adorned the hilt of the blade, leading to a golden hasp, inlaid with several gleaming gemstones.

“I see.” He turned back to Zecora. “Pray tell, what *kind* of ritual was it used for?”

Zecora shook her head. “I’m sorry. While the dagger is a sacred family relic of mine, the details of the ritual have been lost to time.”

Bentgrass nodded, turning to the side and pacing around the hut. “You know, Ms. Zecora, the Everfree Forest can be quite a dangerous place, even for one as familiar with its wildlife as you. Tell me, why do you live out here, so *far* from everypony else?”

“Peace and solitude are what I seek. In my personal affairs, I don’t like others to peek,” she said, her gaze hardening slightly.

At this, Bentgrass turned to face the mare. From Twilight’s position, it looked like he was leaning in towards her, as if trying to add more power to his casual gaze. “Really? Well, that just raises even more interesting questions. Zebrica is quite far from here, the border is on the other side of Equestria.” He took a few slow steps across the dirt floor of the hut towards her. “As I understand it, most of Zebrica remains undeveloped. If ‘peace and solitude’ were what you seek, you didn’t have to travel as far as Ponyville to find it.” He stopped a few steps from Zecora, his impassive look melting into that icy glare of his. “Why come so far?”

Zecora lowered her head slightly, meeting Bentgrass’ cold stare with one of her own. “My reasons for leaving are my own, and I do not think I like your tone.”

The quiet roiling of the stew was the only sound in the large hut. Rainbow was frozen, her twice-refilled bowl of stew hovering halfway to her mouth, staring at them ever since the heated exchange began. Across from her, Twilight stared with her mouth slightly

agape. Bentgrass and Zecora continued to stare each other down. The flickering light from the large fire danced in their eyes, tiny spots of light reflecting from the gold bands around Zecora's neck and from Bentgrass's slitted eye.

Finally, Bentgrass stepped back, bowing his head slightly. "Ms. Zecora, I do humbly apologize. It was not my intention to offend. If I have done so, I ask for your forgiveness."

Zecora continued to glare for a few more moments before her eyes softened. "Granted."

Flashing a wide smile at her, Bentgrass turned towards the door. "Well, ladies, I believe we have taken up enough of Zecora's time. Once more, ma'am, I apologize for my insensitive words. Should you think of anything, please don't hesitate to tell me, won't you?"

Zecora simply nodded.

"Fantastic! Twilight, Rainbow? Let's be off." With that, he walked out the door.

After a few tense moments, Rainbow took to the sky. "Heh, sorry, Zecora. Hey, wait up!" She flew out the door after the agent.

Left alone in the quiet hut, Twilight turned towards Zecora. "Zecora, I'm so sorry! If he brought up a bad topic—"

Zecora turned away from her and walked slowly back to the pot of stew. "Do not fret, my unicorn friend. Some wounds... just take time to mend."

Twilight gave her a soft smile and turned towards the door. As she reached the door, she glanced back at Zecora. The zebra was staring into the fire, her eyes somewhat glazed over. Twilight frowned and stormed out of the hut.

Rainbow and Bentgrass stood beside a nearby tree. Twilight stomped up to the agent and glared at him.

"How *dare* you? We came to Zecora for help, there was no need to interrogate her like that!"

"I'm an investigator, Ms. Sparkle. Asking questions is what I do."

"I'm with Twilight on this one," Rainbow said, taking to the air and hovering at eye level with him. "You didn't have to give her the third degree like that!"

Bentgrass looked between the two mares. "I *did* apologize, did I not?"

"That's not the point!" Twilight yelled. Bentgrass lowered his head, looking at his hooves. Twilight opened her mouth to yell again when he cut her off.

"Why did she assume it was murder?" he said quietly.

"Huh?"

Bentgrass raised his head. "In there, she said she wished she could help us find the *pony* that killed Berry. If she *truly* knows nothing about the case, why would she try to help us find a pony, and not a timberwolf?"

"I told her you were an investigator from Canterlot. She probably put two and two together."

"Perhaps, but even beyond that, it was very clear from her words and body language that she is hiding something about her past." He level an icy gaze towards the hut. "In the context of a murder investigation, I find that very suspicious."

"Are you trying to say she's a suspect?"

"Not at all. It is much too early in the process to throw around accusations." He turned back towards the two mares. "I'm merely saying that she has... aroused my curiosity."

"That's still no reason to go all psycho on her!" Dash added.

"Need I remind you, Ms. Dash, that there is a killer on the loose? Saving ponies' lives is more important than saving their feelings, yes?"

"True," Twilight said, advancing on Bentgrass. "But that doesn't mean you have to interrogate everypony you meet! Ever hear the phrase, 'you catch more flies with honey than garbage?'"

"I don't care about catching flies. I care about catching murderers."

"And how does alienating everypony in town help you do that?" Twilight sighed and glared at him again. "Look, a lot of the ponies in this town are good friends of mine. If

you want me to keep helping you on this case, though I fail to see *why* you feel you need it, I will *not* have you disrespecting my friends like that anymore, got it?” She thrust a hoof into his chest.

Bentgrass stared down at her hoof. He closed his eyes and let out a deep breath. “Very well, Ms. Sparkle. In the future I will attempt to be more... gentle.”

“That’s right.” With that, Twilight walked off, leaving the tall detective feeling just a little bit smaller.

• • •

The walk out of the Everfree was a quiet one. None of them felt the need for conversation after the strong words from Twilight. The dense trees soon gave way to the open fields that marked the borders of Ponyville proper. A gentle, sloping hill stood between them and the town. They continued to walk in silence, the dry grass crunching beneath their hooves.

In the back of her mind, Twilight was quietly praising herself. *R.I.S. investigator? Foal’s play.*

“Hey, who’s that?”

Twilight snapped out of her trance to look where Rainbow was pointing. In the distance, two ponies were approaching. One was a short, rotund earth pony with a shaggy red mane falling over his yellow coat, a v-neck shirt stretched tight over his portly frame. His thick legs turned outwards slightly as he walked, a confident swagger obvious even at a distance. A lanky mare with a black mane and purple skin walked beside him, her steps seeming much more timid. Twilight smiled when she recognized them.

“Sheriff Shackle! How are you today?”

“Wonderful, just wonderful, Twilight, my dear!” His heavy jowls jiggled when he spoke, his voice sounding very proper, an almost Canterlotian haughtiness to his words with an exaggerated sense of mirth tainting his voice. “Ms. Dash! Always a pleasure to see the local celebrity!”

“How’s it hanging, Big Shack?” Rainbow said with a grin.

Shackle just chortled at this. Then he turned to face Bentgrass. “And this must be the mysterious Canterlot cop I’ve heard about.”

Bentgrass leaned his head down and pulled his badge case from his coat pocket, flipping it open in his hoof. “R.I.S., actually. Special Agent Bentgrass.”

“My mistake,” Shackle said, his eyes hardening slightly at the sight of the badge. “I’m Sheriff Shackle, and this is my deputy, Hay Bale.”

The meek deputy smiled awkwardly. “Hello, sir. Twilight.” She turned to Rainbow. “Hi, Rainbow.”

“Hey, Bale!” Rainbow chuckled at her own joke. Bale turned her head away and giggled, a slight blush creeping onto her face. Sheriff Shackle cleared his throat pointedly, and she snapped her head back, a forced look of business on her face.

“So, what brings you out this way, Sheriff?” Twilight asked.

Once more, a genial smile graced the sheriff’s pudgy face as he turned towards Bentgrass. Even though he stood on the upward slope of the hill, he still had to crane his head up to face the tall stallion. “Well, I just came back from Doctor Well’s office. It appears somepony was in there yesterday asking some odd questions about poor Berry Punch.”

Bentgrass nodded slowly. “Yes, there were some... *circumstances* surrounding her death that concerned me.”

Shackle laughed, a hearty, full laugh that made Twilight a little uneasy. “I know what you mean. An *animal attack*, in the Everfree Forest? How *odd!*”

Bentgrass held his level gaze. “Funny, Doctor Well seemed to think it *wasn’t* an animal attack.”

“Yes, well, the good doctor has been under a lot of stress recently, you see? Now... I’m sorry, what did you say your first name was?”

“Agent.”

The sheriff pursed his lips for an instant before the disarming smile appeared again. “Very well. *Agent Bentgrass*,” he said, trotting alongside him and putting a foreleg around him, “Ponyville is a peaceful little hamlet.” As he spoke, the two stallions walked slowly towards the crest of the hill. Ponyville stretched out before them, the tall buildings intermixed with humble thatched-roof homes. In the distance, they could see ponies milling about. The crowded market on Hoofsdale Street buzzed with activity. The whole place seemed to glow in the mid-afternoon sun. A sense of pride filled the sheriff’s voice

as he spoke. “Why, did you know that in its entire history, not *one* pony has died from anything other than accident or natural causes?”

“Yes, the good doctor mentioned this. Quite an impressive feat.”

“Indeed!” Shackle beamed at the words. “In fact, when I retire in three months, I will hold the record for the longest period of uninterrupted peace in the history of Equestria! 35 straight years and not a single case of violent crime!”

Bentgrass looked down at him. “Well then, I’m very sorry that you won’t be holding that record. I’d afraid the evidence is *quite* clear that Ms. Punch was the victim of foul play.”

Shackle stepped away from him. He still smiled, but a hardness filled his eyes. “Evidence? *What* evidence?”

“How about the fact that her entire body was intact?” Bentgrass said, his eyebrow arched. “Very unlike a timberwolf to kill and not feed.”

Shackle chuckled and waved a hoof dismissively. “Maybe the beast was rabid. Poor thing probably didn’t even know what it was doing.”

At this, Twilight stepped forward, confusion splayed across her features. “But Sheriff, her heart was... cut out.” A quiet gasp came from behind her. In the back of her mind, she realized that Rainbow Dash didn’t know this.

“Using two *very* clean and precise cuts?” Bentgrass added.

“Scavengers. Beasts of the Everfree have *very* sharp teeth, you know.”

Bentgrass glared at the sheriff, a coldness seeping into his eyes. “Apparently much sharper than your deductive abilities.”

Twilight gasped quietly. In the short time she’d known Bentgrass, he had never openly insulted anypony. She had thought that *he* would think it was beneath him somehow. But as she watched, Bentgrass no longer held the impassive, relaxed stature he normally had. Now, his ears were splayed against his head, his tail hanging still between his legs. His eyes were cold as ice as he glared at the sheriff.

“I’m sorry,” Shackle said, his wide smile fading. “It sounded like you were insinuating that I am not performing my duties properly.”

“It was *not* an insinuation,” Bentgrass said coolly.

The portly sheriff’s body stiffened, the fur on the back of his neck standing on end. He leveled his gaze at Bentgrass, his front hoof digging into the brown grass that covered the hill. “Now see here, *Mister* Bentgrass. *I* am the law in this town. I do not appreciate strange ponies coming into *my* town and telling me how to do *my* job.”

“Oh, my apologies. I thought that since you were not *doing* your job that you *needed* somepony to tell you how to do it.”

Sheriff Shackle stomped a hoof. “I am in charge of this investigation, and *I* have deemed it closed. This was an animal attack, plain and simple.”

Bentgrass took a step towards him. “And the fact that innocent ponies may be in danger is of no concern to you?”

“How dare you—”

“Sheriff,” Twilight said, slowly approaching him, “I understand your reluctance. I myself didn’t want to believe that a pony could actually... *kill* another.” A small shudder passed through her. “But when viewed objectively, the evidence clearly states that—”

“The *evidence*,” he said, “says what *I* say it does. Let’s not forget, *I* am the experienced police officer here.” He looked her up and down, sizing her up. “Who are you?”

“A doctorate-level student of one of the most powerful beings on the planet,” Twilight said, an edge of steel in her voice. “And *I* think you really should look into this.”

“There is nothing *to* look into, Miss Sparkle. The matter is closed.”

“But, I—”

“I said the matter is closed!” he yelled, causing Twilight to step back. “And if I were you, Twilight, I would seriously reconsider running around with this... this *agent*,” he sneered, glaring at Bentgrass.

“Sheriff Shackle!”

All five of them turned to the new voice. A colt, maybe about in his mid-teens, was galloping towards them. He looked very out of breath, and his face was flushed red. His short legs strained to push him up the gentle slope of the hill. He staggered up to the

sheriff and threw both hooves on his shoulders, bringing him face to face with the portly stallion. “Sh-Sher... Sheriff, you... you gotta...” he gasped.

Shackle took an abrupt step back, shrugging off the colt sending him falling to the ground. “For goodness’ sake, colt, calm down! Now, what is it?”

The red unicorn stood up on shaky hooves, taking a moment to collect himself. Finally, he spoke. “You gotta come to the hospital! Two more bodies were found near the edge of the Everfree Forest! Oh, by the Goddesses, they were so torn up th—”

“*Shut up!*” He turned to glare at Bentgrass before turning towards the gasping unicorn. “Go back to the hospital. Tell Doctor Well I’ll be there shortly.”

The colt nodded and ran off. As he left, Shackle turned back to the group.

“Another animal attack, Sheriff?” Bentgrass said coldly.

Sheriff Shackle glared at him, huffing. “Now you listen here, *Agent* Bentgrass. This is a local police matter. Unless you have some sort of paperwork claiming authority over it, I don’t want to see you anywhere *near* this!” He took a step towards Bentgrass, his eyes blazing. “If I find you sticking your snout in this again, I shall *personally* see you escorted *out of Ponyville!* Do I make myself clear?”

“Crystal.”

“Good. Come on, Deputy Bale!” With a final stomp of his hoof, he turned and waddled away.

Bale turned to them. “Nice to meet you Agent Bentgrass. Twilight. R-Rainbow.” After another blush, she turned and galloped after Shackle.

The three of them stood there for a few moments, watching the two ponies trot away down the hill. All was silent, even the quiet breeze had died off. Finally, Rainbow took to the air and turned to Bentgrass. “So wait, that’s it? We’re just going to give up?”

Bentgrass closed his eyes and lowered his head for a few moments, taking a few deep breaths. Finally, he turned to Rainbow. He held the same impassive gaze as ever, but the corner of his mouth was turned upward. “Of course not.” He turned and trotted away.

Rainbow turned to Twilight. “Okay, Twi, it’s official. I like this guy!” Without another word, she flew to follow him.



As Rainbow left, Twilight stood rooted to the spot.

*Two more ponies...*

A slight tremor worked its way through her body, her left hoof beginning to paw at the ground. During the time she had spent wondering about Bentgrass, trying to figure *him* out, this mad pony had killed two more innocent ponies. She had slowed him down, demanding he explain his reasoning and methodology.

*And now, more blood has been shed.*

A new emotion began to course through Twilight's veins. A hot, sickly feeling that washed over her in waves. It wasn't something she felt often, but when she did, gods and monsters had learned to shy away.

She was angry.

Slowly, she turned back to face the forest, glaring hard at the swaying trees, a slight breeze sending a tiny cascade of dead leaves twirling to the ground. In her mind, however, she wasn't directing her hateful gaze at the forest itself; the wilds woods of the Everfree were dangerous, but they were of no concern to her now. This time, she peered past the dark shadows, the snarling creatures, the cold, uncaring ground. She stared directly at the pony, whoever it was, that had decided it was a good idea to kill in her town.

Her hoof dug into the ground as Bentgrass's words from the previous night replayed in her mind.

*It falls to us to stop him.*

"And we will," she whispered. Turning around sharply, she galloped off towards Bentgrass and Rainbow.

Ponyville General Hospital.

Paradoxical to being in one of the more rural areas in Equestria, it was actually one of the most advanced medical centers outside of Canterlot. Some of the latest technological and magical healing devices were installed in high-tech patient rooms, and cutting edge surgical techniques were often fielded here. The large, shining white complex with seemingly countless windows upon multiple floors stood tall among the humble homes and shops that dotted the town. The late-afternoon sun gleamed from those windows, like the many eyes of some feral beast blinking out to the countryside.

Bentgrass, Twilight and Rainbow stood on the crest of a large hill to the left of the massive structure. After making their way there, stealthily following the sheriff and his deputy, the group had tried to walk into the front door. The rude nurse who worked the front desk had stopped them with the aid of a few orderlies who would seem more at home on a professional hoofball field than at a hospital. One in particular, a pegasus with underdeveloped wings whose bulk would put Big Macintosh to shame, hadn't said anything beyond monosyllabic grunts of agreement when the nurse had told them they weren't allowed inside by order of Sheriff Shackle.

The pale inspector stood silently, evaluating the building for several minutes before speaking. "Alright, you two wait here. I'll be back in a little while."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, Bright Eyes," Dash said, stopping him with a hoof as he tried to walk down the hill. "I *know* you're not thinking of just leaving us here. After all this, we're coming with you."

Bentgrass shook his head. "No, Ms. Dash. We shall have to be very clandestine with this. It is easier to hide one pony than three." He turned to face Twilight, who hadn't said a word since their unpleasant encounter with the sheriff. "Besides, what I shall be doing will not be... strictly *legal*, and I do not wish to—"

"I don't care."

He blinked several times, his tail freezing to the side. "Ms. Sparkle?"

"I said I don't care," she said, shooting a cool gaze at Bentgrass. "Ponies are dying. It's obvious that the *sheriff*," she scowled at the thought of the fat stallion, "cares more about his little record than innocent ponies. If this is what we have to do to stop the bloodshed, then I'm in."

Rainbow walked up next to her, placing a wing on her shoulder. “Me, too. Besides,” she said, a flush of red coming upon her face, “I’ve, uh... kinda broken into this hospital before.”

A moment of silence as Bentgrass looked at the two mares. Finally, he gave them a small smile. “Very well, then. Let’s go.”

Rainbow and Twilight fell in line behind Bentgrass as he trotted towards the back of the hospital. The sun had begun to fall behind the large hill they stood on, masking their movements in slight shadow. Walking as quickly as he could while remaining quiet, he finally reached the wall of the building, crouching next to one of the ground floor windows. Smaller windows, barely larger than a pony was wide, were spaced along the ground, showing hints of the lower levels. The two mares lined up next to him as he peered his head to gaze inside the nearest window. He saw a small care room with a single bed, occupied by a pony that seemed to be unconscious. Crouching below the window, they crept along the wall before finding themselves beside a door. Bentgrass tried the knob, sighing when it refused to turn.

“Keep watch,” Bentgrass said. He leaned his head down to his coat pocket, coming up with a small black satchel. Unzipping it with his teeth, a small tool fell into his hoof. One end had a wide rubber piece, which he took in between his teeth. Sticking out from the other end was a small bent piece of metal with several smaller bars beneath it, each a different size and with jagged bends and twists.

Lowering his head to the knob, he pushed the bent piece into the lock. A series of clicks came as he twisted his head slightly back and forth. Twilight peered over and saw him manipulating the smaller metal bars with his tongue, one poking out and wiggling inside the lock before receding and another replacing it. After a few moments and several more bars tried, a louder click sounded and Bentgrass turned his head, the knob turning with it. As he placed the tool back in its bag, Rainbow slid inside the now open door. Twilight walked up as Bentgrass put the satchel away.

“Do I even want to know where you learned that?”

“Probably not. Ladies first, Ms. Sparkle,” he said with a slight bow.

Bentgrass eased the door shut behind them and the trio found themselves in a long white hallway. Cold fluorescent light poured from the ceiling, and waxed floor tiles echoed their hoofsteps back to them. Numerous doors lined both sides, each with a clipboard hanging next to them.

“Wow, that’s a lot of clipboards!” Rainbow turned to Twilight with a grin. “You sure you don’t work here, Twi?”

“Shh!” Bentgrass ushered them into an open door just as an orderly rounded the hallway on the opposite end. The three stood, holding their breath as the mare walked passed the door. After the hoofsteps receded, Bentgrass peeked his head out the door. Deeming it clear, he motioned for them to follow.

Twilight made her way outside and stared down the hallway. “So, how do we know where we should be going?” she whispered.

“Most likely, the morgue will be in the basement. We shall head down.” With light hoofsteps, Bentgrass moved down the hallway, the others following suit.

“Great,” Rainbow moaned. “As if it wasn’t creepy enough. ‘Hey, I got a great idea, let’s keep the room full of dead bodies down in the dark basement!’”

“Would you prefer they keep the stockpile of corpses in the lobby?” Bentgrass whispered as they rounded a corner to find a set of wide stairs. Rainbow halted for a brief moment before grunting and following down. Twilight let out a grim chuckle.

When they finally reached the bottom of the stairwell, Bentgrass sidled up to the door, slowly turning the knob and cracking the door open. A few muffled voices came from around a corner. Motioning to be silent, he gingerly pushed the door open, hugging the wall. On the other side of the door, a long hallway stretched out before them. The floor was made of cold concrete, and the walls were unpolished metal. The only light provided came from small incandescent bulbs overhead. A single door sat on the side of the hall they crept down, keeping as snug to the wall as possible. Bentgrass slowed down as the voices became more clear.

“Of all the times! Thirty-five years I’ve been sheriff of this town, and only three months from retirement all Tartarus decides to break loose!”

Peeking his head around the corner, Bentgrass saw Sheriff Shackle and Deputy Bale standing before a pair of large doors at the far end of the hallway. Each door had large windows on their upper halves, and a large black sign hung above them, the words *Mortuary Affairs: Authorized Ponies Only* written in white block letters. Bentgrass darted his head back when Sheriff Shackle abruptly turned around. Though the hallway was quite long, easily twenty lengths between them and the door, Bentgrass’ keen hearing picked up the conversation.

“Sheriff Shackle, maybe Ms. Twilight was right,” Deputy Bale said.

“Quiet with that!” he snapped. “I won’t have that kind of crazy talk floating around. A pony running about *killing*. Ha! It’s absurd!”

“B-b-but Sheriff, what about their hearts? And that strange mark on their fla—”

“*Shut up!* I will not have *you* questioning my authority as well!” His voice suddenly got very cold. “Or perhaps you’d like me to contact your parents in Hoofston. Tell them the kind of *lifestyle* life their daughter leads.”

A loud gasp came from the timid deputy. “No, sir! Please, they’d disown me!”

“Then you will keep your mouth shut and do as I say!” He stomped his hoof to the ground, the hollow sound echoing almost as loud as his voice. “Now, no pony is to go in that room except for me, do you understand? *Nopony!*”

“Yes, sir,” came the meek reply.

“Good. Now, I have to go talk to Mayor Mare, try to smooth this over before the papers get wind of it.”

Bentgrass shoved the two mares backwards as the Sheriff’s hoofsteps began to approach. Quickly reaching for the doorknob, he blanched when it would not turn. Twilight’s tail began to twitch behind her as he hurried for his lockpick.

“Now, I shouldn’t be more than an hour. If Doctor Well tries to leave, you keep him here until I return. I wish to have... *words* with him in private. Oh, and Deputy Bale.” The hoofsteps paused. “Remember what I said. No more of this... *murderer* talk. Understand?”

“Yes, Sheriff Shackle, sir.”

“Very good.”

Twilight silently urged Bentgrass to work faster, the quiet clicks coming far too slowly as the hoofsteps began to come closer again. She saw Rainbow all but bouncing on her hooves, her ears splayed to her head. Small, wet clucks came as Bentgrass manipulated the picks with his tongue. Twilight’s horn began to glow, preparing to teleport them out as the hoofsteps sounded almost around the corner.

Finally, with a slightly louder click, Bentgrass twisted his head to the side and pushed on the door. He barely had time to remove his pick from the lock when Rainbow and Twilight shoved him inside the room. He fell into the room, easing the door closed just as the hoofsteps rounded the corner. None of them dared to breathe when the steps stopped just on the other side of the door. The soft clicking of Rainbow's chattering teeth was the only sound in the dark room as they waited. Twilight felt a wing wrap around her, and she leaned into her friend.

After a few agonizing moments, the steps resumed, followed by a series of grunts as the Sheriff retreated slowly up the stairs. The trio let out a collective sigh as Twilight's horn glowed, casting a lavender glow across the room. Several shelves of medical equipment lined the walls.

"Man, I can't believe I actually *liked* that colt!" Rainbow whispered as she separated herself from Twilight. "Talking to Bale like that! I outta fly out there and kick his sorry flank!"

"Yes," Bentgrass mused. "The dear Sheriff is quite an unseemly fellow." He walked away from them into the darkness, his eye glowing softly. "However, we have more pressing matters at hoof. We *must* get inside that room!"

"How? There's only one door." Twilight walked up next to the pacing Bentgrass.

"Could you teleport us in?"

Twilight shook her head. "I have to either see where I'm going or have physically been there before." She furrowed her brow in thought. "Maybe we could talk to Bale. She sounds like she wants to help us."

Bentgrass shook his head. "No. While she may be sympathetic to our case, she seems the dutiful type. I doubt she would betray the Sheriff, loathsome though he may be." He paced for a few more moments before jerking to a halt. "Wait! When I looked around the corner, there was a beam of sunlight pouring into the room. There must be a window! We should be able to crawl in."

"But those doors had pretty big windows. If she so much as turned around, she'd see us."

"You're right, blast it." Bentgrass tapped a hoof to his chin. "We shall need a distraction." He pondered for a little bit, his eyes darting back and forth. Suddenly, his ears perked up and he smiled, turning to face Rainbow.

“What?” Rainbow took a step back, slightly disturbed by his leering gaze. “*What?*”

“Ms. Dash,” Bentgrass said, eyeing her up and down, “when we were speaking to Sheriff Shackle, I noticed that Deputy Bale’s eyes tended to... linger on you.”

“Uh, okay. So?”

A quiet slap from Twilight’s hoof hitting her face came as Bentgrass rolled his eyes. “Specifically, your posterior.”

Rainbow turned to look at her cutie mark. “Oh. *Oh!*” She turned back, chuckling softly. She looked back up and saw both Bentgrass and Twilight staring at her. Rainbow looked between them both several times before her eyes widened. “W... wait. Y... you w... you want me t...” She waved both her hooves in the air. “*Oh-ho-ho* no! No way! Not happening!”

“Ms. Dash, *please*. We *must* get inside that room and examine the bodies!”

“Okay, so, have Twilight do it!” she said, pointing at her friend. “She’s got that whole ‘sexy librarian’ thing going on, right?”

Twilight blushed softly. “I-I do?”

Bentgrass sighed. “I need Twilight in the room with me. She knows intimate details about this case.” He took another step towards Rainbow, who backed away from him. “Besides, the Deputy has already made her... interest in you quite clear.”

Rainbow stared at him, before walking up to Twilight. “Come on, Twi,” she said, a note of desperation in her voice, “you *know* how long I’ve been fighting those rumors.”

“Look, Rainbow.” She placed a hoof on her shoulder. “You know I wouldn’t ask you this if there was any other way.”

Several moments passed as Dash’s eyes darted between the two, desperately searching for an ally. Finally, she grunted loudly. “You *owe* me for this, egghead!”

“I am very grateful, Ms. Dash,” Bentgrass said as he walked to the door, motioning for Twilight to follow him. He looked back at a clock on the wall. “Now, give us approximately five minutes to reach the window, then approach the deputy. Remember, you *must* encapsulate her complete attention.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Rainbow muttered. She walked to a large metal bin and looked at her reflection, adjusting her mane with a hoof. “I know how to flirt. You two just be quick.” Satisfied with her mane, she flashed a smug smile into the reflection, nodding slightly before her scowl returned.

As they walked out the door, Twilight stopped and touched Rainbow’s leg. “Thank you, Rainbow.”

Dash merely grunted as she stared at the clock on the wall. Twilight eased the door shut behind her and followed Bentgrass up the stairs.

“Do you think she can hold her attention long enough?” Bentgrass asked.

“Trust me, if there’s one thing Rainbow Dash is good at, it’s basking in adoration.”

• • •

After a few more close calls with the staff, including one harrowing moment when the muscle-bound pegasus orderly nearly ran into them while carrying an entire hospital bed on his back, they once more found themselves outside the hospital. Bentgrass was leaning down to check the several small windows that lead to the basement levels.

“So, why was Ms. Dash so resistant to our little plan?”

Twilight followed behind him, scanning for anypony watching them while he checked the windows. “Well, I’m sure you’ve noticed that Rainbow is pretty tomcoltish.”

“It would be rather difficult not to.”

“*Anyway*, she’s been like that her whole life. Ponies see that about her and they just assume that she... well, you know...”

“Prefers the company of mares?”

“Exactly.”

“Hm. Ah, here it is!” he whispered. He knelt down and peeked into the window. “The coast seems to be clear.” He ducked his head down and once more pulled out his lockpick. “Being that it’s not true, I can see how that would be quite aggravating.” Taking the tool in his mouth, he set to work, soft clicks coming from the window while Twilight faced away and scanned for followers.



“Yeah. Don’t get her wrong, she has nothing against ponies of... *that* persuasion, she’s just tired of the leers and rumors. They only really started dying down recently.” She sighed. “She’s not going to be too happy when this is over.”

A hard click came and Bentgrass slowly opened the window, putting his pick set away. “She’ll be even more upset when she finds out that the slabs the bodies are on are quite far away from the door,” he said casually as he stood up.

Twilight stared at him. “Wait, so the deputy wouldn’t be able to see us?”

“Most likely not.”

“Then, why did you...”

Bentgrass looked at her with a slight smile.

All was quiet until Twilight gasped loudly. “Special Agent Bentgrass!” she whispered.

“What?” he said, easing himself down the windowsill. “Even the most sophisticated amongst us are allowed a... certain modicum of pettiness from time to time.”

Rainbow Dash was one of Twilight’s best friends. She had stuck by her through thick and thin. Yet in that moment, Twilight couldn’t help but suppress a quiet chuckle. Clearing her throat to regain her composure, she slid herself down the open window.

The cold, metallic floor clicked under Twilight’s hooves as she set down, instantly crouching down. A rank stench of ammonia and bleach hit her, causing her to snuffle and wipe her nose. Looking around, Twilight was struck by the sterility of the room: it was immaculate, shelves along the walls neatly organized with medical instruments and supplies of all kinds. Along the far left wall, rows of pony-sized metal doors were set into the wall, each with a tiny placard bearing a pony’s name, age, and race. She shivered at the thought.

Across the room was a door with a small window. Staying crouched, Bentgrass crept over and slowly peeked over into the window. After a moment, he snuck back to Twilight. “Doctor Well’s office. He appears to be asleep. Over there,” he said, pointing to a pair of slabs standing in the middle of the room. Upon both there were white sheets with small stains of red covering roughly pony-shaped lumps. Twilight gulped hard.

Keeping a steady eye on the door to the doctor’s office, Bentgrass walked over to the first slab, Twilight trailing behind. He reached a hoof to the sheet, looking underneath it. A

quiet gasp came from him, causing Twilight's knees to shake. *How bad could it be if it shocks him?*

Slowly, Bentgrass lowered the sheet, looking over his shoulder at Twilight. "Ms. Sparkle, I believe it would be best if you stood by the wall."

"I can handle it," she said, though the tremble in her voice made her doubt even herself.

"Twilight, this is... quite gruesome."

"Bentgrass, we don't have time for this!"

He sighed. "Very well, Ms. Sparkle." With that, he took a clean corner of the sheet in his mouth and yanked it away. Twilight had to stifle a scream.

What lay under the sheet had at one time been a unicorn stallion, but it hardly resembled a pony anymore. Twilight tried desperately to look away, but her body refused to answer her mental pleas. A hot, sickly feeling welled up in her gut. She fought to contain her lurching stomach, but then a glint of light from the pony's head caught her eye. Once she saw the space where an eye should have been, the fight was over. Twilight ran over to the sink near the wall and vomited. She stood by the sink and spat a few times while Bentgrass continued to examine the body.

"Take no shame, Ms. Sparkle," Bentgrass said, his eyes not leaving the carnage before him. "I myself am slightly... disturbed by the level of violence displayed here." He leaned in towards the body, seemingly immune to the sight and smell of death.

Taking a few slow breaths, Twilight stepped next to him. The smell of decay and gore slammed into her nostrils, causing her to fight back a second wave of nausea. Steeling herself, she turned back to the remains. "It's... it's so..."

"Yes," he said. "This makes no sense! Berry Punch's murder was clean, meticulous, pointing to a killer of sound mind and forethought, but this. This is almost... *feral* in its execution."

"How... how could a pony have done this?"

Bentgrass didn't answer her. He scanned the corpse up and down before his back stiffened slightly. "I don't believe a pony *did*. Look," he said, pointing to a series of wounds on the body's leg.

Twilight crept closer, still tasting bile, and looked where he pointed. A cluster of jagged wounds sat just below the left hind knee. Looking closer, she saw tiny punctures arranged in a semi-circular pattern. Her eyes widened. “Those... those look like—”

“Bite marks, yes. Much too small to be equine.” He looked up at her. “And yet most definitely *not* a timberwolf.”

Stepping around Bentgrass, Twilight worked her way up the body, still fighting her stomach, and examined the torso. Large smears of blood obscured the stallion’s deep blue coat. More of the small punctures lined the torn sides of each wound, with similar marks adorning the exposed rib she could see. Even the stallion’s horn was dotted with bites.

Suddenly, something caught her eye. Leaning as close to the body as she could manage, a small lump underneath what looked to be the remains of the pony’s stomach stood out from the rest of the carnage. She squinted, before recoiling and waving to Bentgrass. “Agent Bentgrass, I think there’s something in his stomach.”

Bentgrass gently pushed her out of the way, leaning in much closer than Twilight had. A moment of squeamish panic hit her. *Please don’t let him reach his hoof in there...*

“What... is this? Twilight, hoof me those forceps.”

A pair of mouth-operated forceps floated over to him. Taking the tool in his mouth, Bentgrass gingerly began to tend to the shape. From her vantage point, Twilight couldn’t see exactly what he was doing, and she was grateful for that; the idea of digging around inside the horror before her made her already empty stomach lurch.

After a few moments of prodding, Bentgrass finally stood back up straight, a small, gore-covered ball held in the forceps. Twilight took a few massive steps back as he turned to walk to a sink next to the one Twilight had used a few minutes ago. He bent down and set the thing inside the basin, spitting out the forceps on the counter. Twilight heard water running gently for a few seconds, followed by a gasp from Bentgrass.

“Oh, my word.”

Unable to contain her curious nature, Twilight shuffled towards the sink and peered in. Her tail froze behind her when she saw what the small shape had become. Laying in the middle of the basin, surrounded by reddish water, was a tiny blue ball of hair sprouting two sets of insect-like wings. Four spindly legs jutted out from the ball of fur, and a pair of large eyes stared back at her. “It’s... it’s a... parasprite!”

Bentgrass was silent for a moment. He reached a hoof over and grabbed a surgical probe from the instrument pallet next to the sink. Slipping his hoof into the attached ring, he gently began to prod the dead creature. “Not an ordinary parasprite. Look.”

Twilight took a closer look at the creature, and immediately noticed what he meant. The thing’s jaw was held open by the probe. Parasprites normally had a single row of small, rounded teeth, useful for chewing anything they could get their hands on. The creature laying in the sink had several rows of razor-sharp, serrated teeth, some jutting out at wild angles, giving the small thing a shark-like appearance. Looking higher up, Twilight only then noticed its eyes; instead of the single-hued orbs like usual, both eyes were spotted with blobs of red, looking like tiny drops of blood in a cup of water.

Bentgrass continued to poke at the thing. “Perhaps a... genetic anomaly? Or some sort of mutation?”

Twilight had no answer for him. She had only even seen a parasprite once, and she hadn’t been too intent on studying them at the time. She looked once more towards the mangled body across the room. “So, wait. *One* little parasprite... did all of *that*?”

Silently, Bentgrass slid off the probe and walked back to the body. He looked it up and down for several seconds before motioning to Twilight. “No. Come, look.” She stepped next to him and looked where he was gesturing: another cluster of jagged bite marks, this time along the pony’s neck. “See? The bite marks are different sizes. This was more than one parasprite, most likely an entire swarm.”

“An entire swarm? *All* with the *same* genetic mutation?”

Bentgrass huffed. He walked quickly to the nearby cabinet, and returned with a small plastic bag. Taking the forceps in his mouth once more, he picked up the dead parasprite and gingerly placed it in the bag, sealing it with a hoof. He put the bag in his coat pocket and stepped back, running a hoof through his mane. “Yes, I agree. This makes no sense!” He walked to the slab next to them and pulled back the sheet, this time only halfway along the body. Twilight could see it was a unicorn mare in a similar state as the body before her. Bentgrass’ tail twitched furiously behind him.

After a few moments of silence, Twilight voiced the concern that began eating at the back of her mind. “So... maybe the sheriff was *right*? Maybe it *was* just an animal attack.”

Bentgrass said nothing. He leaned into the second body, examining it. Suddenly, his tail froze and his ears splayed across his head. “No,” he said, once more beckoning Twilight

to his side. She walked over and stood next to him. “See there?” He gestured his hoof to the gaping hole in the mare’s chest. Her stomach still tumbling in her gut, she leaned in to see where he pointed when she gasped lowly. “Indeed. Her heart has been removed. Two clean slices.”

Bentgrass walked back to the other body. “This one as well. This is definitely our pony again.”

Twilight stepped back from the slabs towards the open window, desperate to smell something other than death. “So what? He just randomly found these two bodies and did his thing? That’s ridiculous!”

“I agree, I cannot—”

“*So anyway, Deputy!*”

Twilight jerked at the sudden shout from outside. She whipped around to face Bentgrass. “Rainbow must be losing Hay Bale! We have to go!” She reached her hoof up and grasped the edge of the windowsill.

“Yes,” he muttered, shuffling towards the window. “Though this rai—” He froze in mid-step, glaring back at the second body.

“Bentgrass! What are you *doing?*” To her horror, Bentgrass was walking back to the slabs. She glanced out the window, the sun almost set in the horizon.

“What... is *that?*”

Turning back, she saw Bentgrass standing almost with his muzzle on the dead mare’s leg. Grunting, she lowered herself back from the window and walked over to him. “Agent Bentgrass, we don’t have time for this! We need t—”

Her words caught in her throat when she saw what Bentgrass was staring at. On the mare’s hind leg, just above the trio of diamonds that made up her cutie mark, a series of marks somehow stood out from the rest of the wounds. When she squinted, she could almost make out some kind of pattern.

“Twilight, give me that bottle of alcohol on the counter.”

“Bentgrass, I think we’ve done eno—”

“*The bottle!*” he snapped, a fire in his mismatched eyes.

Taken aback, Twilight slowly floated over the small bottle. Bentgrass yanked it from the air with his mouth and leaned into the body. A small stream of alcohol sprayed from the bottle, cleansing the stray blood from the wound. The clatter of the bottle falling to the floor mixed with the quiet dripping as both ponies stared at the body before them.

Now that the ichor had been cleared away, a bizarre pattern stood out on the mare’s light-purple flank: a wide crescent moon shape opening upwards towards her cutie mark. Twilight guessed it around two hooflengths wide. A long cut snaked up and down connecting the two points of the crescent, the lazy waves reaching almost the bottom of the moon. Centered above the crescent was an odd shape, like two parentheses mixed together with a third facing up bisecting them.

“Twilight. *Twilight!*” Bentgrass lightly shook her, snapping her back to reality. She turned to face him. “Go check the stallion. See if he has a similar mark.”

Nodding absently, Twilight walked over to the other slab. She leaned down next to the stallion’s left hind leg, just above the safety pin cutie mark, still partially obscured by ichor. “Yes, he’s got one t—”

“What are you two doing here?”

Twilight jerked upright. Doctor Well stood in the middle of the room, a clipboard hovering beside him. His lab coat was wrinkled and disheveled, and his mane looked wild and unkempt. “Sheriff Shackle said you two weren’t allo—”

“*Doctor Well!*” Bentgrass stalked over to him, coming nearly muzzle to muzzle with him. His ears were flat against his head, and he stood taller than normal, bearing his full height down on the doctor. Doctor Well gulped loudly as the imposing stallion stared at him, eyes blazing. “I shall only ask this once,” Bentgrass said, his tone dripping venom. “Those patterns on their flanks,” he said, gesturing towards the slabs. “Did Berry Punch have a similar mark on her?”

The doctor stood silent for a moment. Finally, his shoulders slumped, and his head hung low.

Bentgrass took a step back, his eyes narrowing. “You *lied* to me.”

“Doctor Well,” Twilight said, quickly stepping over to him, “I don’t understand. This is important information! Why wouldn’t you tell us?”

“My guess is he was... *persuaded* by the good sheriff to keep that information private.” Stomping his hoof, he turned around and walked towards the open window.

“But, why?” Twilight’s gaze was as pleading as her voice. “Ponies are dying! Why would you do that?”

“I... I had no choice!” Doctor Well spoke clearly, but looked down at his hooves. “I got in trouble a few years ago. I got called in to perform emergency surgery on a young filly. When I got the page, I was... at the pub.” He looked up briefly to see Twilight flash a look of disgust and backpedal away from him. “I swear, I only had a few drinks! I thought I was okay! But, she... she didn’t...” He slumped down to his haunches, his voice reduced to a few blubbering moans.

Across the room, Bentgrass glared at the doctor. “And Sheriff Shackle covered for you, yes?”

Doctor Well nodded, still quietly crying. “He... he put in his report that the death was unavoidable. He never said anything else about it. Then, last week, he comes in and asks me to... *lose* one of Berry’s autopsy photos. He threatened to tell the hospital board, *my wife!*”

Bentgrass took a few measured steps towards him. “And because you are too spineless to live up to your mistakes, you agreed.”

The doctor looked up at him, tears still falling from his eyes. “Y-you don’t understand! You don’t live here! You don’t work here!”

Suddenly, Bentgrass shot towards the doctor, reaching down and grabbing his collar with a hoof. He lifted the blubbering doctor to eye level, his eyes twitching. “And if I *ever* find that you are withholding evidence from me again, *neither shall you!*” He held the shivering doctor for a few more moments, his eyes boring into him, before he roughly dropped him and turned back towards the window. “Let’s go, Ms. Sparkle.” He looked over his shoulder at the doctor laying in a heap on the floor. “The *stench* in here is getting to me.” With that, he climbed out the window.

Twilight quietly walked to the window. She reached up and grabbed the sill when Doctor Well called out.

“Twilight?”

She looked over her shoulder. Doctor Well stood once more, his whole posture screaming defeat. “Y-you understand, don’t you?”

Twilight held his gaze for a few seconds before slowly turning her head and climbing out the window.

The sun had almost set, golden rays shooting out from beyond the hill before Twilight. A small gust of wind rolled over her and she leaned into it, hoping to wash away the dirty feeling from the morgue. Looking up she saw Bentgrass standing facing away from her, digging a rut into the ground with his forehoof. She slowly walked up to him.

“Agent Bentgrass. Are you... okay?”

Bentgrass took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “Yes, Ms. Sparkle. I’m... I’m alright.” He still faced away from her, staring at the sky. “I do not suffer corruption well.”

“I still can’t believe it,” Twilight said, walking next to Bentgrass. “Why would he lie like that?”

“The fear of losing everything is a very powerful motivator, and in the wrong hands, it can be used to ruin even the best amongst us.”

“I just can’t believe it.” She gazed up. The golden and reddish colors were beginning to fade from the sky. Several stars were almost visible through the haze of sunset. “A cover-up, run by the sheriff! I always thought things like that only happened in books.” She turned back to Bentgrass. “Well, at least now we can get Shackle out of the way.”

“Not likely.”

“But we have evidence that he’s covering this up!”

Bentgrass sighed. “Evidence that was obtained illegally. Besides, getting the orders to remove him would take several days.” He frowned. “Even the *secret* levels of government are plagued by bureaucracy.”

“This whole thing seems so... unreal,” Twilight said, looking back at the sky.

Bentgrass slowly scanned his head around the evening sky. “There are many... undesirable aspects of a pony’s mind, most of which we as a society prefer to ignore. They are the very reason Division Six was created and tucked away. Sometimes those aspects break the surface of the peaceful culture we have built. Only certain ponies are



able to handle it.” He turned his gaze to Twilight, his normally hard eyes now very soft. “Ms. Sparkle, I must apologize for dragging you into all of this. I can’t imagine you wanting to see such things as you have in the past few days.”

“No, it’s okay,” she said, still gazing upwards. “Ignorance may be bliss, but too much bliss can be dangerous.”

He let out a small chuckle. “Indeed.”

“So, what’s the next step?”

Bentgrass sighed. “I must admit, I’m not sure. With all the new information we gained tonight, more questions have been posed than answered.” He turned and walked towards the road back to town. “I highly doubt the answers will just magically fall into our lap, though. Perhaps we should—” He stopped, suddenly noticing that Twilight was no longer beside him. Turning around, he saw Twilight standing still, her eyes wide. “Ms. Sparkle?”

“Magic,” she whispered. “*Magic!* Of course, why didn’t I think of it before?” She ran up to him. “Do you still have the parasprite?”

“Yes.”

“Good! I have an idea! We need to get to the library.”

Bentgrass opened his mouth to question her when a flutter came from above them. Rainbow Dash set roughly on the ground next to them, a deep scowl on her cyan face.

“Ah, Ms. Dash. I trust everything went swimmingly with the deputy?”

Rainbow grumbled something under her breath.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that.”

She looked at him, hatred burning in her eyes. “I said I have a date with Deputy Bale. It was the only way to keep her in the hallway when you two eggheads started *yelling in the morgue!*”

Behind her, Twilight tried her best to hide her smile. Bentgrass let his be obvious as he faced Rainbow. “Actually, Ms. Dash, I rather think the two of you would make quite the cute couple.”

*“Cram it, milquetoast!”*

At this Twilight walked up to Rainbow and put a sympathetic hoof around her shoulder. “You know, Rainbow, I’m sure Big Macintosh wouldn’t really mind if you brought another mare into the bedroom.”

A series of strangled stutters came from Rainbow, her head darting between her tormentors. Finally, she let out a loud scream and took to the sky, the gust of wind mussing Twilight’s mane as a streak of rainbow soared out of view.

Bentgrass turned to Twilight, a playful smirk on his face. “Why, Doctor Twilight Sparkle! That was downright *rude!*”

In her mind, every time Rainbow had called Twilight an egghead or a nerd flashed before her. As she trotted away from him, she turned over her shoulder with a sly grin. “What? Just a... certain modicum of pettiness.”

Bentgrass let out a quiet chuckle and moved to follow her.

Bentgrass walked around the basement lab, taking in the technological wonders that filled the room. A bank of what he assumed were computer towers lined one wall, each aglow with small multicolored lights. Large metal pipes ran into the floor, leading from a vast container of some unknown glowing, green liquid. He thought it best to not ask where it led, or what it carried. A faintly acidic smell came from a large cabinet filled with beakers and vials, some with bubbling liquid inside of them. He ran his hoof over the cabinet, raising the limb to his face and letting out a quiet, “Hmm,” when he found no dust.

He stopped next to a giant metal tower along the wall. Twilight was crouched behind the computer, the occasional click of turning knobs barely audible above the whirring of cooling fans inside the device. She flipped a switch, and the machine let out a loud hiss, causing Bentgrass to leap back. “So, let me see if I understand you properly, Ms. Sparkle. You’re saying that every time a unicorn performs magic, they leave behind... a residue?”

Twilight backed out from behind the contraption, staring at Bentgrass through a tiny pair of black-rimmed glasses. “Well, that’s a very crude and simplistic way to phrase a very complex theory.” She walked to the other side of the basement, the wooden floorboards creaking quietly as she made her way to a large screen along the left wall. “But essentially, yes.”

After looking at his hooves for a moment, Bentgrass grimaced and worked his tongue in his mouth. “I shall have to remember to open doors with my hooves,” he muttered.

“Oh, don’t be such a baby,” she said. A series of quiet clacks came from a keyboard beneath the screen as Twilight tapped in commands. The screen suddenly flashed to life, bathing her in an eerie green haze. “All ponies emit some form of thaumatic energy.” She looked over her shoulder at him. “Don’t you know anything about magical theory?”

“Only the very basics. The R.I.S. tends to eschew theory in favor of more practical things, like psychology and criminalistics.”

Twilight groaned and turned towards the main screen. “Fillystine.” She pulled a table towards her with her magic, on top of which sat a large, glass dome on a metal base, scattered with various dials and buttons on one side. The soft glow from the monitor cast a green hue across Twilight’s face as she punched in a series of commands.

“All magic leaves behind traces in the form of thaumatic radiation. In the case of passive magic, like an earth pony growing crops or pegasi flight, the radiation dissipates almost

immediately.” A loud pop made Bentgrass jump. The glass dome suddenly began to emit a faint white light, the quiet hum of electricity emanating from it. “But active magic from unicorns can last for much longer.” She turned towards Bentgrass, who nodded slowly. “Give me the parasprite.”

Silently, Bentgrass lowered his mouth to his pocket and pulled out the small plastic bag. Using a pair of mouth-operated tongs, she took the deformed creature out of the bag and placed it inside the device.

“And this pertains to the case... how, exactly?”

Twilight turned to face him. “Well, I got to thinking about the parasprite. It’s possible that particular one could be some sort of genetic mutation, but a whole swarm with the *same* trait? The odds are beyond astronomical!”

“Agreed.”

“Now, there is another possibility. What if they were magically mutated?”

“Hmm, interesting theory, Ms. Sparkle. The killer mutates a swarm of parasprites and forces *them* to attack the victims.” He began to pace slowly around the domed device. “He would be able to keep a large distance away, thus ensuring he leaves no physical evidence. However, isn’t that a little... *complex*?” He turned back to face her. “As I understand it, minor cosmetic changes require an awful lot of effort. Would it even be feasible to make such drastic changes permanent?”

Twilight frowned slightly, but held the determined look in her eyes. “I’ll admit, it is kind of a long-shot. But the theory is sound, at least on a mechanical level. And the scanner will let us know if I’m right.”

With that, she walked back to the controls and hit a button on the console. The dome flashed a brilliant white, causing both ponies to look away before it dimmed back to a dull glow. A soft hum emanated from the device, rhythmic clicks coming from inside. Twilight walked over to it, looking at the display on the side. “If there are traces of thaumatic radiation on the parasprite, this machine will detect it.”

Bentgrass smiled at her. “I believe I see where you are going with this. You wish to identify the *type* of magic used.”

“Exactly. Different disciplines of magic have unique traits and signatures.”

Bentgrass slowly nodded. “Ah, I see. We have used a similar forensic process to identify where drowning victims died by examining the water in their lungs.”

Twilight made her way back to the glowing dome, fiddling with the knobs on the machine. Every now and then she turned back to look at the large screen. “Yes. If I can identify the signature of the magic used on the parasprite—”

“Then we can vastly narrow our suspect pool.” He smiled at her. “Once more, Ms. Sparkle, I stand humbly impressed.”

She blushed at the compliment. “Well, don’t pat me on the back yet. This is all still very theoretical. It’s... actually going to be my next publication. The scan will most likely take until morning.”

“Well, in any case, it is a massive step in the right direction.” He pulled out a piece of paper from his coat pocket, eying it carefully. A rough sketch of the bizarre markings from the victim’s flank covered the entire page. “Now, we must find out what this symbol means.”

“And that’s where I come in!” They both turned to see Spike walking down the stairs.

Twilight smiled up at him, walking to meet him at the bottom of the stairs. “Did you get the books I asked for?”

Spike looked around the room at the collection of scientific oddities before hunching over and curling his arms up at his chest. “Yes, Master,” he growled, squinting his left eye and wringing his hands together. “Soon, you will be able to *rrrr-rule the world!*” He threw his head back and cackled.

He abruptly stopped his evil laugh and cleared his throat when he saw her scowl. “Uh, anyway, I got the books you asked for. *Sage Sash’s Symposium of Symbols*, *Ironside’s Intelligence of Ideographs*, and *Pitch Perfect Pictograms*, all sitting on the main table upstairs. Also, since I feel like this is going to be an all-nighter, a plate of miniature daffodil sandwiches and a large pot of coffee.” He spread his arms out and gave a deep bow. “Who do you love?”

“Um... Shining Armor?”

Spike’s arms fell as he huffed at her, tiny wisps of smoke coming from his nostrils. “I think I’ll go feed the sandwiches to Pee Wee. At least *he* appreciates me,” he grumbled as he turned away and walked up the stairs. Halfway up, he groaned and scratched his back.

“Hey, stop it!” She tossed a nearby rag at him.

He picked up the rag and threw it back at her. “Oh, come on, Twilight! They’re *my* wings! I can scratch if I want.”

“They’re not wings yet, and if you keep messing with them, they *won’t* be.”

“Well, can’t you use a spell or something to make them hurry up and erupt already? This itch is driving me insane!” he pleaded, rubbing his back against the wall of the stairwell.

Twilight shook her head. “Sorry, Spike. Dragons are extremely resistant to outside magic, you know that. Besides,” she said, raising her eyebrow, “you remember what happened that *last* time you had an unnatural growth spurt?”

“Meh, I’m sure Ponyville would under”—a loud yawn overtook him and he stretched his arms—“understand if I leveled a few buildings,” he grumbled as he walked out of the basement door.

After the door slammed, the basement was silent save for the rhythmic clicking of the scanner and the quiet whirring of cooling fans in the massive computer towers. Bentgrass turned back to Twilight, who watched Spike leave with a sad gaze.

“You two seem to be very close,” he finally said.

Twilight gave a sad smile, still looking at the shut door. “He’s my number one assistant.”

Bentgrass slowly approached her. “One’s heart does not break over an assistant, Ms. Sparkle.”

Twilight spun around to stare at him, but the annoyance died off as she looked at the impassive gaze he gave her. She nodded slowly, pawing at the floor. “When I was growing up, I didn’t have many friends.” She frowned. “Actually, I didn’t have any friends besides Shiny... Shining Armor.”

She paced back towards the computer screen. The green light reflected off of her glasses, her eyes unreadable. “When I moved to the castle to study with the Princess, we started seeing each other less and less. Then he shipped off to Basic Training, and... I was alone again.

“Celestia tried to get me out more, giving me errands out in the market, assigning me with special study partners. But at the end of the day, I’d always crawl back to my books.

Where it was... safe.” She turned back to face Bentgrass. “Then one day, Celestia walks in my room with this tiny little dragon that I hadn’t seen in years, says he’s going to be my new assistant. I can still remember him asking what a ‘library’ was! I was a little hesitant, but he was so *eager!* Within a few months, we were inseparable, and he’s been with me ever since.” She sighed, a distant look in her eyes. “I don’t know what I’m going to do without him...”

“How much longer does he have?” Bentgrass asked after a few moments.

Twilight’s eyes went wide for a moment, shocked at his insight. Finally, she shook her head, her ears splayed. “There’s no way to be sure. We still know so little about dragon biology. But... it’s been getting harder and harder to wake him up in the morning.”

“Shouldn’t he be preparing? Finding a cave, building a hoard?”

“We found one already, on the mountain range at the other end of the Everfree Forest. That way the smoke from his snores won’t bother anypony. As for a hoard, we’re both pretty sure that once Rarity finds out, she’ll spend almost all her free time gathering gems for him.”

Bentgrass raised his eyebrow. “They don’t know yet?”

She shook her head. “He doesn’t want them to worry. I told him they’ll need time to get used to it, but he hates the idea of ponies crying over him.”

The room was silent once more, until Bentgrass placed a hoof on her shoulder. She jerked at the touch, surprised more that he would actually *touch* somepony than by the act itself. “You know, Twilight, what little we *do* know tells us that the Wrymm-Sleep *is* a natural part of a dragon’s life cycle. You had to know it was coming.”

Twilight shrugged off his hoof, staring at him through narrowed eyes. “Knowing doesn’t help.” She raised her head to look at the ceiling once more. “He’s been like... he *is* my little brother. And one of these days, he’s going to go to sleep, and I’m never going to see him again. I’ll be long dead by the time he wakes up.”

She turned to Bentgrass. Though her face remained neutral, a wet sheen had built up behind her eyes. “I just can’t help but think, did I teach him enough? When he wakes up he’ll... he’ll be all alone. The Princess will still be here, but what if she forgets about him? Will he be able to care for himself?”

“What if ponies forget about the sweet little dragon he was, and think he’s some monster? Who knows, maybe after a hundred years he... he’ll forget about me.” A single tear worked down her cheek. “Did I let him know how much he means to me? Did I ever... did I tell him I loved him enough?”

Bentgrass said nothing for a while, then gently placed his hoof back on her shoulder. “Twilight, a very wise pony once said, ‘Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.’ Loss is not an obstacle easily conquered, and lesser ponies have torn themselves to pieces wondering what could have been.” His voice suddenly got very distant. “Wallowing in the pits of past mistakes, wondering if only they had done things differently...”

Twilight sniffled and looked at him. He wasn’t looking at her, rather he seemed to look past her, staring into nothing. His pale grey eye was facing her, and for a split second, she thought she could see a faint wetness in it.

“Well,” he said suddenly, turning to face the stairs, “I, uh... I believe you have your hooves full down here. I-I shall go upstairs and peruse the books gathered by young Mr. Spike. See if I can decipher this symbol.” With that, he trotted up the stairs, his hoofsteps lost under the whirl of technology as he closed the door behind him.

Slowly, Twilight walked back to the computer screen. He was right; they had a job to do. She set herself to the task, her hooves slowly typing in commands. As she typed, listening to the rhythmic clacks of the keyboard, she tried desperately to clear her mind of the one thought that would not go away.

*Spike...*

• • •

Big Macintosh eased himself into his bed with a sigh, the springs protesting under his considerable bulk. The sun had finally set over Sweet Apple Acres, and Mac wanted nothing more than to melt into his bed and tune out the world. From dawn to dusk, he had sat at the kitchen table downstairs, slowly sipping on light cider while juggling the many ledgers that made up the financial side of the family business.

Through his father’s old reading glasses he had stared at endless rows of numbers. While Applejack was the heart of the family business, as well as a good portion of the muscle, Mac was the brains, having spent a few years away at an upper-class business school at



the behest of Granny Smith. She had said it was because the future of the farm lay in his hooves, but he suspected she was just tired of the math.

Even as he laid his head on his pillow, visions of production numbers, tax rates, and expenditures danced in his bright green eyes. As soon as the books were balanced, he'd headed straight to bed, only pausing to remove his ever-present yoke. He hadn't even bothered with a shower, figuring that since he was alone, nopony would care. *Besides, Rainbow said she kinda likes the way I stink*, he thought with a warm smile.

It was years ago when they'd first met. Dash and AJ had been friends for a long time, though Mac never really paid her much attention beyond recognizing her as a pretty face. It was only when the two mares had butted heads in the Iron Pony competition that he truly began to appreciate her. There was a certain grace to her every move, the kind only a trained athlete could have. What had really drawn him in, however, was her spirit. She had a fire, a passion, a drive to be the best in all she did. No matter what the activity, she threw herself at it, all the while wearing that smug grin that made his heart flutter.

Only after she had come home from her time in the Wonderbolts had he finally worked up the courage to ask her out, shaking like a leaf in a storm and stuttering like a colt. A series of pleasant lunches turned into romantic nights on the town. Eventually, she became somewhat of a regular fixture at the farm house. Mac grimaced at the memory of the first time he'd officially brought her home. The speech Granny Smith had given Rainbow, threatening to clip her wings if she didn't treat him right, had made both of them shudder.

*None of that matters.* For the first time in his life, he felt a connection with somepony that only seemed to grow with time. Every moment with Dash made him feel complete: a whole stallion. Turning his head, he looked to the dresser that sat next to the door, his mind going to the small box inside. It had cost him almost a month's worth of disposable income, and AJ was going to pitch a fit when she found the money gone, but he felt Rainbow was worth it. Now, he just had to work up the courage to use it. Sighing heavily, he turned back to face the opposite wall. *Maybe some day...*

A creak from the nearby window broke him from his reverie. Lifting his head off the pillow, he saw the pane was opened slightly, a faint breeze carrying the sweet scent from the orchard into the room. *Funny, I don't remember leavin' the window op—*

A shadow suddenly passed over the floor, a strong breeze ruffling the curtains around the window. Mac jerked upright, instantly alert. Leaping out of bed, he stared at the open window. "Who's there?"

There was no answer. Cocking his head, he slowly approached the window, eyes scanning the darkness. It had been many years since somepony had tried to break into the farmhouse, and that poor soul had left in an ambulance instead of a paddy wagon. Still, a sense of unease crept into his mind as he stepped towards the window. Then, he heard it: a faint scratching, like somepony rubbing a hoof against the wooden paneling of the farmhouse. Mac took a defensive posture, muscles in his legs tensing, ready to whip around and buck whoever dared to violate the sanctity of his home.

For a moment, he stood still as death, ears straining for signs of life. The soft breeze had died down, leaving an eerie calm in the room, the only sound being his bated breath. Finally, he let out a long breath he hadn't realized he was holding. *Dang it, Mac, yer gettin' para—*

In a blur of movement, something lunged from outside and tackled him to the ground. Mac let out a strangled cry as his legs were pinned to the ground. He struggled for a moment before his eyes finally opened to reveal a pair of rose-colored eyes staring at him.

“Hi!” Rainbow said cheerfully, leaning down and pecking him on the cheek. Mac stared at her through wide eyes as she fell off of him clutching her sides, her scratchy voice cracking under a torrent of laughter.

Mac sat up roughly, glaring at her. “Dag-nabit, Dashie! It's been almost a year! I think you've earned the right t' use the front door!”

She slowly sat up, wiping a tear from her eye. “What, and miss that epic face you made? Never,” she said with a grin.

Mac grumbled. “Come here, filly.”

“*Whoa!*”

Mac hefted Rainbow off the ground with ease, hooking his hooves under her forelegs and gently tossing her to the bed. Before she could react, he leapt on her, pinning her down with his legs. He glared at her for a split second before leaning down and kissing her passionately. She tensed, but soon melted into the kiss. He worked his foreleg underneath her, his hoof gently rubbing the spot between her wings, making her groan and lean into him harder.

The two continued the affectionate display for a few minutes before Mac finally pulled away, earning a frustrated groan from Dash. Once she finally opened her eyes, she shot him a sly grin. “Mmm, I should piss you off more often.”

Mac chuckled lightly. “You do what you can afford,” he said, rolling off of her. She turned to face away from him as he placed his foreleg around her, pulling her close. She adjusted herself, snuggling up next to him, enjoying the feel of his large muscles and the faint smell of apples and earth.

“So, how goes the finances?”

Mac groaned. “Slower’n zap-apple jam in January. How in the *hay* can a day of doing math be more exhausting than a day of buckin’ apples?”

“I get you. I always hated math. That was the worst part of the Wonderbolts, we always had to exactly plan out our routines. Angles of attack, wind resistance, every arc planned down to the degree.” She shuddered.

“Well, I think I got it all done. Though if the R.I.S. comes a-callin’ here in a few weeks, I expect you t’ hide me.”

Rainbow chuckled. “Lucky for me they’re already here.”

“Huh?”

She rolled over to face him. “Oh, that’s right, you don’t know.” She proceeded to tell him everything she knew. The strange government agent, the trip to Zecora’s, sneaking into the hospital. Mac sat in rapt attention. As she rattled on, detailing the gruesome events, his hold on her tightened slightly.

When she finished, he just stared at her. “Wow.”

“Yeah, I know, right?”

“So, somepony... killed Berry Punch?”

“I know. It’s hard to believe. A *murderer* in Ponyville.”

“And now two more ponies?”

Rainbow simply nodded.

“Do you know who?”

She shook her head. “I, uh... kinda left before Twilight could tell me.”

“Why?”

She rolled back over, leaning against him. “I don’t want to talk about it,” she mumbled.

Mac decided not to press the issue, so he simply put his foreleg back around her, pulling her in tight. They lay there for a few minutes, him gently stroking her foreleg. Her feathers gently rubbed against his chest, the soft down a very pleasant sensation. Slowly, she began to relax, her muscles releasing the tension they always seemed to hold.

“Hey, Mac?”

“Eeyup?”

“Did... did you know Berry Punch?”

Mac sighed. “Well, I seen her a few times, when me’n AJ would go down t’ the Waterin’ Hole to celebrate a big bumper crop. But no, I didn’t rightly know her. Why, did you?”

“Not really. I mean, before I joined the ‘Bolts, I would always go down there to listen to the races on the weekends. I saw her there every time, and she seemed nice enough. Always laughing, being the center of attention. I wanted to go say hi, but I always put it off. Figured I’d just do it next time. Now, it’s too late.” She shifted in his grasp, her wings fluttering slightly. “It’s weird. Like, one minute she’s there, the next... poof, she’s gone. Makes you think.”

“Oh? About what?”

“You know... *things!* Like... what’s *really* important. What... what we leave behind, ya know?”

Behind her, Mac smiled. Often he wondered how she really felt about him. It still confused him how a daredevil like her could love a simple farmpony like him. All the time, she was brash, headstrong, even obstinate. When they were alone, however, she would let her guard down, and Mac would see the *real* Rainbow Dash: caring, a little insecure beneath the cocky grin and wild attitude. He also knew it was moments like these that made her uncomfortable, and he knew how to make her feel at ease.

“Aw, is my little jock tryin’ t’ get introspective?”

“Eh, go have sex with your sister, yokel.”

“Funny, according t’ the rumor mill, you’re the one—”

She jerked her head around, a deep scowl on her face. “Mac, tonight of all nights, you finish that sentence, and I swear to *Celestia* I will buck you into next week.”

“Mmm, don’t tempt *me* with a good time.”

She elbowed him lightly. “Perv.”

He chuckled, nuzzling her behind her ear. “Ah, I’m just messin’ with ya, honey.”

They lay there quietly for a few moments as Mac’s heart began to race. “But I... I understand what yer tryin’ t’ say. Like... like life’s short, an’... um, ya wonder where yer goin’, an’... an’ who ya want t’... uh, t’ be there when... when you get there.” He mentally kicked himself. His eyes flicked back to the dresser.

*Dag-nabit, Mac! Just do it!*

“M-Mac?”

*Oh, thank Celestia.*

“Eeyup?”

“Uh, I need to tell you something.”

“What?”

He could feel her body tense, the muscles in her wings jumping. “Well, I... I-I, uh...”

“Dashie, what is it?”

“I... I’m, uh...” Finally, she sighed, the tension leaving her. “I’m gonna stick close to Twilight until that agent pony leaves. She, uh... she may need some protection, ya know?”

Mac said nothing for a few moments, simply holding her close. “Well, you be careful. It ain’t just you anymore.”

She suddenly jerked upright, whirling around to face him. “W-w-what?”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Well, it’s not just you. There’s an ‘us’ now.” He lowered his eyes, the blush only hidden by his red fur. “I can’t rightly put into words how much ya mean t’ me, Dash. I... I’m not sure what I’d do if somthin’ happened to you.”

Rainbow visibly relaxed, her wings lowering back into place. “Oh... heh, right. Well, don’t worry about me. Careful is my middle name!”

He looked back at her, a playful look in his eye. “I thought it was Firefly.”

Dash rolled her eyes and smacked him on the shoulder. “Smart-flank,” she mumbled before rolling back over. Mac chuckled and pulled her back in. Slowly, the two began to relax more, the day taking its toll on them both for different reasons. Mac could feel the rising and falling of her chest slow, the breaths nearly falling into rhythm with his own. He laid his head in her mane, the scent of rain clouds filling his nostrils.

“Mac?”

“Mmm?”

“Love you, hillbilly.”

He planted a light kiss on her ear. “Love you too, featherbrain.”

They drifted off to sleep, a content smile on both their faces.

• • •

There was no moon, the bright stars that flickered in the sky providing little light to the ground below. Deep in the Everfree, it was pitch black save for the mild glowing of fireflies. Predators stalked through the trees; large, glowing eyes piercing the darkness. It was the one area of Equestria untouched by pony hooves. Here, the monsters and creatures of nightmares reigned. However, there was one area of the black woods that even the fiercest manticore didn’t dare to tread.

The light from a small fire sent twisted shadows writhing across the stone walls of the forgotten palace. Once opulent tapestries, now rotted by time, hung from rusted nails set in stone. Outside the small chamber, tendrils of ivy had reclaimed much of the castle.

The sound of hooves clicking on stone echoed in the room. A figure wrapped in a thick brown cloak walked past the fire and up to the small altar on the wall. A pair of silver candle holders sat on either end of the altar, dried wax obscuring the intricately carved symbols and figures. The flickering light reflected off of an old silver plate, splattered with faint traces of crimson. A coppery scent wafted up to the figure's nostrils as he looked down on the fruits of the previous night's harvest, the two reddish lumps on the plate glowing with a dull sheen.

A quiet murmur came from beneath the cloak, whispered in an ancient language unheard by ponykind for thousands of years. The words rolled off the figure's tongue with practiced ease as a light wind began to blow in the small room. The candles began to dance wildly, the wind picking up speed as the chant became louder and more aggressive. Outside, the creatures of the Everfree became silent, some fleeing from the arcane magic flowing from the room.

The figure was shouting now, the howling wind extinguishing the small campfire. Strangely, the candles did not go out. Instead, they began to glow even brighter, the light almost blinding and turning a bright red. The figure reached out a hoof and picked up the first harvest, still slick with blood but now as cold as the outside air. Lifting the harvest up from the plate the figure could feel the arcane magic of the ritual pulse into it, the small lump quivering and pulsating.

Finally, as the final words were screamed in the driving wind, the mound of flesh beat. Slowly and lethargically, it pumped, trying to push blood that no longer existed, the arcane energy of the spell resurrecting the cold lump of muscle. With a final yell, the figure thrust the harvest into its mouth, biting hard. Instantly, the figure's eyes began to glow with a dull shine, soon blazing as bright as the red flames on either side of the altar. The eyes went wide as the figure swallowed, feeling the power transfer from the organ. The essence of the pony it came from drained into the figure's body, infusing it with raw arcane power.

Panting from the rush of power, the figure snatched the other harvest and shoved it into its mouth, swallowing it almost whole. The cloak rippled from the inside as power—*unimaginable* power—coursed through the figure's veins. The last harvest gone, the figure let loose a feral howl that echoed through the now silent room, the blowing wind cutting off as soon as the ritual was complete.

The figure gasped for breath before the hood fell away, revealing a cruel smile. The involvement of the agent from Canterlot was an... unexpected nuisance. But that was all it was: a minor setback.

*Soon, very soon, I will have the power to get my revenge. All who scorned, mocked, rejected me shall kneel at my hooves once I take my rightful place among the stars!*

A deep, melodious chuckle echoed in the small room as the figure turned to leave. The agent and the Princess's apprentice could do nothing to stop it. The experiment with the insects had been a complete success. All that was left now was to test on a more... complex animal.

Deep in the heart of the Everfree, an inequine laugh echoed through the still trees.



*BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!*

“Gah!”

Twilight jerked upwards, drawing several gasping breaths and craning her head around. Finding herself still in the basement lab, she sighed and slouched back in the large chair. Her left foreleg was completely numb from where she had laid her head on it, intent on resting her eyes for a few minutes. The blaring alert from the computer told her that she had slept most of the night, a fact confirmed by the angry soreness in her back.

She arched her back, groaning at the loud series of pops and cracks as she looked up at the screen. The computer had finished its examination of the parasprite, and she placed her black glasses back on her snout to read:

**Analysis complete:**

**Species:** *Parasitus Magica*

**Weight:** 0.50 lbs

**Status:** Deceased

**Cause of Death:** Breakdown of cellular tissue due to genetic instability.

**Additional Notes:** Presence of foreign thaumatic radiation detected. Levels of radiation over 200% lethal dose for creature of its size.

Twilight frowned at the screen, her brow furrowed as she did math in her head.

*In order for thaumatic radiation to build up to those levels, the parasprite had to have been exposed to over...*

Twilight gasped. *1.21 kilojoules?*

Setting her jaw, she typed on the keyboard:

**Query:** Identify signature of thaumatic charge.

A series of clicks came from the CPU tower next to her.

**Answer: Unknown. Signature is not native to Equestria.**

**Command: Broaden search parameters to include surrounding nations.**

**Accepted, search initiated. Estimated time of completion: 17 hours.**

Twilight sighed once more and leaned back in her chair. The CPU began to whirl, the custom-made processors searching for a match. Deciding there was nothing more she could do now, she eased out of the chair, shaking her hoof to wake it up. After another series of angry pops, she made her way to the stairs, her steps slow. The reality of what she was doing sent a chill across her back. This wasn't some obscure science project; she was actually hunting a *killer*. Lives had been lost, blood spilled, and whether they knew it or not, the citizens of Ponyville were relying on her to stop it.

A wave of frustration ran through her as she made her way up the stairs. *How can Sheriff Shackle be so uncaring?* She had known the portly stallion for years, and he had always come across as a fine pony, genial and caring. Knowing that he cared more about maintaining his perfect crime-free streak than the lives he was sworn to protect rubbed her in every wrong way.

Gritting her teeth, she shook her head. *Whatever. If he doesn't want to do anything, then Bentgrass and I will handle it. And after we catch this psycho, his fat flank will be out of a job.* She idly wondered if she should take such pleasure in ruining a pony's life, but the thought passed almost immediately.

As she reached the top of the stairs, muffled voices came from beyond the door. Apparently, Bentgrass and Spike were talking. She reached for the knob, but paused. The strange detective hadn't had any interaction with Spike beyond the tense confrontation that first day. A twinge of panic hit her, as she remembered the conversation they had the previous evening about her young assistant. Bentgrass was anything but subtle, and she feared what he may do with the information.

She smiled as an idea came to her. Closing her eyes, her horn glowed softly in the tight stairwell. The voices beyond the door slowly became clearer, as if she was standing right next to them. Opening her eyes, she could see faint outlines of the two in the kitchen through the wooden door. She said a silent thanks that she had read about that "See Me; Hear Me" spell. The magic in full effect, she listened.

"You seem quite adept in the kitchen, Spike." Bentgrass stood next to the kitchen table, watching as the adolescent dragon walked between the refrigerator and the stove, an iron

frying pan in his claws. Twilight's stomach growled at the smell of cooking pancakes that wafted through the door.

"Heh, well, somepony has to be. Twilight can't cook to save her life. She must have read every cookbook in the library, and she could *still* burn cereal!"

Twilight grimaced at the insult, making a note to hide his stash of gemstones later as she continued to listen.

"Well, knowledge and skill are two very separate things." Bentgrass walked over to peer over Spike's shoulder as he ran a whisk through a bowl of eggs. Spike shrugged him away and continued to stir. Bentgrass walked back to the table, sitting on one of the low set chairs. "She's very lucky to have you."

"You're telling me!" he said with a laugh as he poured the mixture into the frying pan. "Now, don't get me wrong, I love Twilight more than anypony on the planet, but sometimes she can get a bit, um..."

"Neurotically obsessed to the point of neglecting even basic hygiene?"

"Uh, I would say 'focused,' but whatever." He reached into a cabinet above him and pulled out a spice jar, dashing a bit on top of the slowly cooking eggs. "Anyway, I think it's part of that, uh, O.D.C., or whatever. She just gets so *focused* on the minute details that she misses out on the bigger picture."

"She seems to rely on you a lot."

Spike shrugged. "Yeah, but I don't mind. I'd do anything for her; she's like my sister. Plus, she pays me in gemstones!" he chuckled. He stiffened and craned his head around to face him. "Um, I don't have to pay taxes on those, do I?"

"I believe snacks are deductible," he said. "You say she's like a sister? Our file says she hatched you. I would think she would be more like a mother."

"Yeah, but Princess Celestia took me and raised me after that. Once I was old enough to read, and not burn the castle down with my sneezes," he chuckled, "she assigned me as Twilight's assistant. She said we'd be good for each other."

"Indeed you are," he said, looking softly at him. "She will have quite a difficult time once you... go away."

Spike abruptly stopped stirring the eggs, and Twilight could see him tense. “So she, uh, told you, huh?”

“Yes. She’s quite worried about you.”

Spike began to stir again, much slower than he had before. “Yeah, she would be.”

Bentgrass leaned forward in his chair. “Forgive me if I overstep my bounds, Spike, but you don’t appear too broken up about the whole issue.”

A quiet chuckle escaped Spike. “Let me tell you a story, Agent Bentgrass,” he said, still slowly stirring the eggs. “Three years ago, me and Twi went to Canterlot to see her brother’s new foal. It was great, even though the colt kept yanking on my tail.

“Anyway, while we were there I got a wild bug up my tail and decided to see if I could finally learn something about my species. The library may have a lot of books, but it’s *nothing* compared to the Royal Canterlot Archives. I went there and began looking. Eventually, I found an old book, actually bound in *leather!* That creeped me out a little, but it seemed to be what I was looking for.” He set the whisk down and picked up a spatula, reaching for a frying pan of pancakes. “Old thing, the text on the cover almost completely faded, but it was by one of Starswirl the Bearded’s apprentices.” The pancakes flipped, he walked over to the fridge and pulled out a few strips of hay bacon, throwing them on a large pan on the last burner.

“So, based on what I know about myself, born bipedal without wings, breathes green fire, wings grow in later in life,” he said, flicking his wrist as he counted them off, “I was able to identify my species. I’m a *Drakenwvyrn*, one of the largest species of dragons. We grow every year until we die.” Twilight suppressed a chuckle as his chest puffed out.

His expression darkened. “Then I read the next line. Do you know the average life expectancy of my species?” Bentgrass shook his head. “Thirty-five hundred years. The longest recorded was over seven thousand. In one sentence, I learned that I’m going to outlive everypony I know and love by thousands of years.”

Bentgrass said nothing for a moment, the sound of the spatula scraping against the frying pan and the sizzle of the bacon the only sounds in the library. Eventually, he spoke. “What did you do?”

Spike let out a wry chuckle. “The only thing I *could* do. Curled up into a ball and cried, right there in the Archive.

“About four hours later, Twilight kicked in the door to the Archive with about half a platoon of Royal Guards. Heh, she can get a bit protective. She found me there next to the book, still crying. She asked what was wrong, but I couldn’t even form words at that point. She read the page next to me, and then *she* cried.

“Eventually, she picked me up and took me home. I cried myself to sleep. When I woke up the next morning, the tears had just... stopped. It still hurt, but I just... couldn’t. Twilight said some nonsense about running out of tears. She’s always been a bit sappy like that.”

Bentgrass finally stood. “Still, Spike. I fail to see why you’re choosing not to tell your friends? Shouldn’t they have time to... prepare?”

A loud clang echoed throughout the library as Spike threw the spatula across the counter, whipping around to glare at Bentgrass. “You don’t get it, do you? Every time I go to sleep, that could be it! I might not wake up for a hundred years! Why do you think I stayed up so late yesterday? You weren’t there that morning, you didn’t see Twi...” His fists began to clench, a visible tremor moving through him. “I... I can’t, okay? I can’t let my last memory of my friends... my *family*, be of them crying. I just can’t.”

As Spike turned back around, Bentgrass’s eyes narrowed. “Well, I’d heard that dragons were selfish, but I had no idea.”

Slowly, Spike turned back to face him. “What did you just say?”

“You heard me,” Bentgrass said, leveling a deadly gaze at Spike.

Spike took a step towards him, smoke billowing from his nostrils. “Just who in the *hay* do you think you are?”

“I am somepony who has thought about this for longer than five *seconds!*” he snarled, glaring down at the enraged dragon. “By the *stars*, boy, by your own words, they are your *family!* Don’t you think they have the right to know their friend is leaving forever? Did you ever stop to think what *they* would feel? No, you’re only concerned with *your* feelings, *your* memories!”

Spike opened his mouth, but Bentgrass continued. “Suppose one of them has a secret, something they didn’t have the nerve to tell you. Then one day they *finally* work up the courage only to find you gone!”

“Well, I—”

“Or, Luna forbid, you have an argument with one of them!” He leaned towards Spike, bringing his face inches from him. “Believe you me, my young drake, having the last memory of a loved one being you saying hateful things, *that* is a pain that I would not even wish upon the killer we are currently hunting.”

The two stared at each, neither backing down. Twilight squinted her eyes into the spell, and saw a slight tremor in Bentgrass’s hoof. Finally, after a tense few moments, he spoke quietly. “Your breakfast is burning.”

“Huh?” Spike spun around to see a plume of black smoke rising from the frying pans. “Aw, *horseapples!*”

Twilight shook her head, canceling the spell. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and strode into the kitchen, a fake smile on her face. “Morning, you two. What are we talking about?”

Bentgrass held his gaze on Spike for a few seconds before turning to Twilight, his angry glare replaced by his usual impassive gaze. “Oh, nothing, really. Stallion talk, you probably wouldn’t be interested. Right, Spike?”

Spike finished dumping the burnt remains of breakfast into the sink, a small plume of steam rising as he ran the faucet. “Y-yeah. Hey, Twi.” He turned to her with a blank face. “I uh... I burnt breakfast.” Turning off the water, he brushed past her, staring at his feet. “I’m gonna go... alphabetize... something.”

She watched him leave, a large lump forming in her throat. Before she could dwell on it, Bentgrass tapped her on the shoulder. “So, what did the computer say about the parasprite?”

She cleared her throat. “A lot, but at the same time, not much.”

Bentgrass flashed her a confused look. “Um, what?”

“Well, it confirmed that it *was* magically altered, but it couldn’t match the signature of the magic to any form known in Equestria. I widened the parameters to include surrounding nations, but it’ll take a while to run through the entire database.”

“Well, that’s the ‘a lot.’ What’s the ‘not much?’”

She sat down roughly at the table, resting her head in her hooves. “Well, it said that the parasprite died from massive cellular degradation.”

Bentgrass raised an eyebrow. “And that means *what*, exactly?”

“Well, transformation magic is very dangerous. Basically, you’re saturating the subject’s DNA with thaumatic energy to the point where it becomes malleable. Then you insert instructions on what you want to happen, and the DNA does its job. If you’re not specific enough with the instructions, the cells won’t reform properly, and they begin to die. That’s why it’s been banned since the beginning of Celestia’s reign. It’s not a pleasant way to go.”

Twilight furrowed her eyebrows, thinking out loud. “The scan said the parasprite was exposed to over 1.21 kilojoules of thaumatic energy. That’s *way* more than would be needed for an animal of that size. My guess is that whomever cast the spell simply dumped as much power into it as he could. The change took hold, but the excess of energy killed the parasprite. A beginner’s mistake,” she mumbled.

Bentgrass slowly nodded. “Hm, makes sense. So, we are dealing with an amateur caster, one with little experience in transformation magic. Were you able to identify the type of magic?”

“No. The computer was set to only compare with Equestrian magic.” She frowned. “I would have set it to scan all known types, but that would have overtaxed the system. The gem lattice can only handle so much info at once. I’m working on improving the output, though.”

Bentgrass sat down opposite of her. “Wait, *you* built the equipment down there?”

Twilight’s eyes went wide. “*Oh*, no! I just wrote the code for the gem enchantments! A colleague of mine in town, Dr. Whooves, designed the device based on my specifications and a team of contractors from Canterlot built it.”

He leaned in towards her. “So, you basically invented an entirely new realm of technology in your basement?”

Twilight blushed hotly. “Well... I guess I did.”

“Hm,” he said, eyeing her thoughtfully. “Makes me even more curious as to the *real* reason you are a small-town librarian and not a celebrated college professor.”

Twilight fidgeted in her chair. “So, like I said, all I could narrow down was it’s not native to Equestria. I widened the parameters, but it’s going to take some time.”

Arching his eyebrow, Bentgrass leaned back in his chair. “That matches with what I found about the symbol. I poured through every one of those books,” he said, gesturing to the table in the main hall, “and all I was able to ascertain was that it is not of Equestrian origin.”

“So... we’re stuck?”

He ran his hoof through his neatly cut mane. “It would appear so. Unless the killer decides to knock on the door and announce himself, we are at a standstill.”

A sharp knocking came from the front door. Both Bentgrass and Twilight turned the door, before facing each other.

“Let us hope that I am prophetic.”

Twilight stood from the table and walked to the main hall. With her magic, she opened the door to reveal Zecora. She smiled, but it faded quickly as she took in the state of the zebra. The tight braid that usually held her tail in place was missing, leaving the appendage frayed and messy. Her mohawk was unkempt, hanging limply across her head. Her deep teal eyes were wide and panicked, large bags underneath both.

“Oh, my goodness, Zecora! Are you alright?”

“Yes, but we must skip the pleasantries. A dark truth has been revealed to me.”

“How nice to see you again, Ms. Zecora.” Bentgrass slowly trotted into the main hallway, his eyes carefully neutral.

Zecora glared at him. “I have no interest in quarreling with you, stranger.” She turned to face Twilight, who wore a puzzled gaze. “Twilight, my dear, we are all in terrible danger.”

“Calm down, Zecora. What happened?”

She pushed past Twilight, walking into the main room. “Last night I was sitting in my hut, drinking some tea, when a dark feeling passed over me. I knew it could be nothing good, so I went outside to commune with the woods.”

Bentgrass raised an eyebrow. “What a ravishing conversation you must have had with the oak trees.”

“*Be quiet!*” Twilight hissed at him.



Shooting a scowl at him, Zecora continued. “A full night of meditation and stillness led me to the source of this illness. Your search for a killing pony must cease. What you hunt is, in fact, a beast.”

At this, Bentgrass perked his ears up. “Do tell, Ms. Zecora.”

“A legend passed down from ancestors of mine. It is the Mbwun, foulest demon of the ancient times.”

“M-Mb—Mbwun?” Twilight struggled through the foreign word, the odd dialect twisting her tongue into knots.

Bentgrass walked past her and sat down on a cushion next to the main table. “Hmm, interesting. Please, Ms. Zecora, tell us more about this... Mbwun.”

“For the true terror to be known, you can not be told, only shown.” With that, she reached into her saddle bag and procured a small canvas satchel. She turned the satchel over, dumping a strange green powder into her other hoof. With a flourish, she blew the dust into the air, covering the room in a cloud of tiny particles, a swirling cloud of green that obscured Twilight’s vision.

In the blink of an eye, she was no longer in the library. Instead, Twilight looked out upon an grassy plain, the sun beating down harshly on her. Tall grass waved in a gentle breeze, and a few gangly trees twisted their way out of the ground. Twilight’s jaw went slack as she took in the illusion. Everything was strikingly detailed and lifelike, save for the deep emerald tint. The dry grass crunched underhoof, tickling her as she walked. She could actually *smell* the plains: the arid wind tickling her nostrils, the sickly sweet aroma of the savannah grass. Even the oppressive heat from the jade-tinted sun made her sweat.

In the distance, several zebras mulled around a watering hole, dipping their heads down to parch their dry throats. A group of foals kicked a ball around near the edge of the water, laughing gleefully. From the mouth of the small pond, a zebra mare called out to a foal in a foreign language, the small filly answering in kind and leaving her friends. Twilight spun around several times, taking it all in. “Zebrica,” she muttered.

Zecora nodded. “Yes, my ancestral home, in all its beauty.” Her voice carried a sad tone, and she hung her head. “Sadly, it was not always as peaceful as you now see.”

Another billow of dust, and the landscape flashed away to reveal an arid desert. Before Twilight could ask, a shrill cry rang out. Whipping her head to look, a zebra fell to the ground, impaled by a long spear. Two others appeared from behind a nearby dune,

walking up to the fallen stallion and rummaging through his saddlebag. “Long ago, before the Joining of The Herds, Zebrica was a land filled with strife unheard.” The two stallions gathered what they could from the dead zebra and kicked him in the head, laughing cruelly before galloping away. “Bandits roamed the lonely plains, killing any to earn their gains.”

Another flash of green, and a shrieking cry made Twilight jerk. They were back in the plains, but it was no longer the serene place it had been. Now, bodies littered the landscape, impaled by spears, others slashed across the throat, their limbs bound by bolos. Across the field, a massive stampede of zebras charged towards her, shouting war cries in a foreign tongue. “The leaders of the great Herds warred and fought, over trivial things that, in the end, mattered naught.”

Suddenly, an inequine shriek shook the ground. The charging herd ground to a halt, a look of pure terror on all their faces. From the grass rose a dark shape, the jet blackness stark against the green haze. It rose higher and higher, a murky cloud that must have spanned dozens of pony lengths. From the middle, two yellow eyes glowed fiercely, vertically slitted pupils glaring hatred at the amassed zebras. “From the depths of Hell the Mbwun arose, a vile beast of terror and sorrows.”

Once more the ground shook and several more shapes lunged from the tall grass. Twilight gasped when she saw them. Several looked like they could have been ponies, but from where their head would have been rose a torso rippled with twisted muscle, a long snaking appendage jutting from the middle. Its head was vaguely pony-shaped, but the eyes were smaller, almost lost under the wild shock of mane that hung down. Another creature was completely unidentifiable: it looked like a mass of fur and teeth, with two tentacle-like things jutting from the side, propelling it towards the frightened zebras. More and more of the impossible creatures lunged towards the herd.

Twilight turned away as the deformed things hit the wall of retreating ponies. Though she did not see, she could hear cries of pain and fear, along with the sickening pop of bones breaking and sinew tearing. “The demon ravaged across the plains, the blood of the innocent leaving its stain. Even the bravest of zebra warriors ran, for the Mbwun had the power of creation at its hands.”

“The power of creation?” Bentgrass asked, carefully studying as a Zebrican warrior was disemboweled before him. As Twilight suppressed a gag, she noted his expression: he looked almost bored, like he heard this kind of thing everyday.

Zecora nodded. “The very thought makes me ill, but it could bend the laws of nature to its will. It mutated and twisted beasts of all kinds, creating vile chimeras and controlling their minds.” The carnage around them had finally died off, all the zebras dead or dying. “Unopposed, the demon laid waste to the land. Thousands of zebras died by its hand.”

Once more, the green cloud shimmered to show a different plain, this one devoid of life. On one side stood the giant miasma, its glowing eyes flicking back and forth wildly, while a horde of vile abominations seethed and roared beneath it. Twilight gasped as she looked across the plain. A sea of zebras spanned as far as she could see, each dressed in war paint and carrying various weapons. This time, she could see no fear in their eyes, only set determination.

“Finally, the great herds united as one, and through their efforts, the day was won.”

Upon a large wooden platform stood a large Zebrican warrior; layers of thick muscles covered his mighty frame. With a loud battle cry, he jumped from the platform and charged the demonic menagerie before him, the army following him. At this, the creatures rushed forth as well, snarling and drooling. The two armies raced towards where Twilight and Bentgrass stood. With a final yell, the Zebrican warrior and a creature she could not identify clashed right in front of her before the whole scene vanished, the green cloud dissipating to reveal the library once more.

Twilight stood still for a few moments, trying to process what she had seen.

“An amazing tale, Ms. Zecora.” Bentgrass approached her slowly, his eyes unreadable. “Pray tell, what makes you think that these deaths are the work of this, ‘Mbwun?’”

“I have a deep connection with the beasts of the Everfree. It was they who told the truth to me.”

“The... *forest* told you?”

Zecora nodded slowly. “As I said, the forest is my friend. It spoke to me, asking to make this end. The animals are crying out in pain. It is not just ponies that are being slain.”

Twilight nodded thoughtfully. It made sense when she thought about it. Earth ponies had a special connection to nature, and zebras were an offshoot of the same race. A small ray of hope fluttered inside of her. Though the idea seemed a bit far-fetched—an ancient Zebrican legend come to life in modern-day Ponyville—if what Zecora said was true, then maybe it *wasn't* a pony doing these horrible things. While the idea of an ancient demon would fill the average pony with dread, Twilight and her friends had seen and

done enough that it didn't faze her as much as the idea of a killer pony. *Deranged gods I can handle.*

Twilight slowly approached her. "Okay, Zecora. If it *is* this... Mbwun, how do we stop it?"

"It was the sacrifice of many zebra lives, that allowed the herds to survive. The only other way that I can see, may be the Elements of Harmony."

From behind her, Bentgrass cleared his throat. "Ms. Zecora, I wonder if you might look at something for me." Zecora eyed him dubiously before nodding. He walked up to her and pulled the sheet of paper out of his coat pocket. "Tell me, have you ever seen this symbol before?"

Zecora looked at the strange drawing for a few moments, her brow furrowed in thought. Finally, she looked up at him. "Zebrian elements I can surmise, but this symbol is new to my eyes."

"Hm, I see. Thank you," he said, folding the paper back up and placing it in his coat. He looked up at her with a solemn gaze. "Zecora, I want to apologize. When last we met I was a bit... short. Ponies are dying, and I can't figure out the who or why. I can clearly see the puzzle pieces in my head, but for the life of me, I can't force them together. In my zeal to stop this madness, I unfairly judged you. With this new information, I finally have a lead that I can track down." He bowed his head, closing his eyes. "Please, forgive me."

Behind him, Twilight eyed him skeptically. If *she* was having some trouble accepting this, the cold, logical Bentgrass should be calling her a lunatic. *He's up to something...*

Zecora regarded him for a few moments before giving a small smile. "Your passion to save ponies' lives, explains your actions in my eyes. You have my forgiveness, my well-dressed friend. Maybe together, we can make this madness end."

"A capital idea!" he said with an uncharacteristic grin. "Now, can you tell me anymore about this Mbwun legend?"

She shook her head. "Sadly, I have told you all I can. I only know stories from my sire and dam."

"Hm. Perhaps you could write home and ask them?"

"N-no, this I can not do. Besides, they... they would not know anything new." For a split second, Twilight could have sworn she saw a nervous twitch in her eyes.

Bentgrass sighed. “Well, if that’s the way it is, so be it. Now, here is what I propose. Go back to your hut and see if you can recollect anything, *anything* more about this legend. We shall stay here and continue to examine the evidence we have gathered.” He gently placed a hoof on her shoulder. “Together, we will stop this.”

Zecora nodded, already walking towards the door. “I will try to remember what I can. We *shall* drive this beast from our lands!” She looked to Twilight. “You and your friends should prepare, to bring the Elements to bear. I will try to find another way, but that may be the only option to save the day.” With that, she walked out the door.

As the door shut, Twilight eyed Bentgrass. If she had learned nothing else about the strange pony, it was that nothing he did could be taken at face value. He was never this polite with her, and he got the feeling that he respected her. To somepony like Zecora, whom he obviously didn’t trust, his kind words set warning bells off in Twilight’s mind. “So, what do you make of... that?”

Bentgrass said nothing for a moment. The look on his face was not one she had seen before. Rather than the cold, impassive look he normally had, a strange emptiness covered his face. Growing impatient, she tapped him on the shoulder.

“Hm?”

“I asked you what you thought of what she said.”

“Oh, yes. It was, um, quite a tale.” He walked back towards the main table, his eyes unreadable.

“Well, this is good, right?” Twilight asked, a hopeful tone in her voice. “I mean, it explains everything.”

“Yes, it does, doesn’t it? All the answers wrapped up in a nice, tidy package. How convenient,” he mumbled.

“What does that mean?”

He shook his head. “Never mind. Now, the *real* value of that conversation was her recognition of the symbol as Zebrican. If that is indeed the case, I may know somepony who could help. Though, I shall have to make use of young Mr. Spike’s fire to fetch him.”

Twilight chuckled. “Well, I’ll let *you* ask him.”

He raised his eyebrow for a moment before shaking his head and walking towards the door.

“Wait, where are you going? Spike is upstairs.”

“I need to think for a moment. Sort of, *dwell* on the facts as they stand. Perhaps go get some breakfast that isn’t burnt beyond recognition,” he said, gesturing to the blackened remains in the sink. “I shall be back shortly.” With that, he left the library.

Twilight stood for a moment. Finally, she groaned and walked towards the basement. There were still a few tests she could run while the computer was finishing its analysis.

As she reached the door, a mighty burp and a flash of green came from upstairs. After a few moments, an exasperated groan came from Spike. “You know what? I’m gonna tell Ditzzy Doo to take the day off! I’ll just deliver *all* of Ponyville’s mail *myself*!” A few stomps and he appeared at the top of the staircase. “*Twilight! Mail!*”

A scroll sailed through the air, bouncing off of a few steps before landing at Twilight’s hooves. With a small giggle, she picked it up and began to read.

*From the Desk of General Shining Armor:*

*Hey, kiddo. Alright, I’m going to get right to it. I got the information you wanted, but it wasn’t easy. Personal info on Division Six agents is hard to come by as it is, but this Bentgrass pony is a special case. None of the contacts I have in the Service could get me anything. They either didn’t know, or they refused to talk about him. From what I was able to gather, he’s kind of a political landmine up here. I had to go through some... unusual ponies to get this. I’d tell you the details, but I don’t really get it myself. Let’s just say I owe General Cloudhammer a serious favor now.*

*His name is Agrostis Bentgrass. He’s 35, originally from New Horseleans. He comes from old money. Apparently the Bentgrass family owns one of the most successful sod and turf businesses in Equestria. One brother, deceased, mother and father are also dead. He was married at one point to a pegasus named Skylight.*

*He told you the truth at least about his service. Records show he was in the Night Guard for a few years. Rose quickly in the ranks, on his way to becoming a Command Sergeant Major in record time. Then things got ugly.*

*It happened seven years ago, August 23rd, 2 N.S.R. The date sound familiar? It was right after I initially put up my protection spell around Canterlot. In the early days it was still*

*unstable, and several areas had been deemed possible breach points. Staff Sergeant Bentgrass was stationed at one of those points. According to the official report, a foal came up to his station crying about being lost. Bentgrass left his post to help the colt find his mother. It was decided later that the kid was a Changeling infiltrator, an advanced scout for the main body. Now, nopony could prove anything, so no official charges were leveled, but it's a generally accepted theory that that is how the Changelings got into Canterlot.*

*It gets worse. Remember how I said he was married? His wife died in the invasion. After that, it gets really sketchy. From what my source could find, Bentgrass nearly broke. He was about to join Princess Luna's Elite Guard before he got scooped up by the R.I.S. You don't want to know what those guys have to give up. Something to do with Negative Magic.*

*That's all I know. Look, Twilight. Watch your back around this guy, he sounds unstable. Stay safe.*

*Shining*

The scroll fluttered to the ground. A torrent of thoughts and emotions flooded her mind.

*Oh, that poor pony.* It was something she couldn't even imagine, losing a loved one like that. She and her friends had been in danger before, tested against the best efforts of crazed demigods. Through all of that, she never let herself think about what could happen, the idea being too much to handle at the time. The nights following those adventures had been spent in tears, but even then she refused to dwell on such morbid thoughts. Her heart ached for the lonely stallion.

*So that's why he's so cold.* Funnily, she hadn't put much thought as to why Bentgrass was so... detached. Knowing what she knew now, it made sense. If *her* actions led to the death of somepony she loved, she wouldn't be able to cope.

*Shining is right. I need to be careful—* Twilight roughly shook her head. While Bentgrass certainly had undesirable traits, he had shown himself to be nothing but competent and trustworthy. Twilight chuckled to herself. Her earlier misgivings about him had all melted away in the past days without her even knowing it. Now, she trusted him. She wasn't sure why, but she did. He had a genuine concern for the safety of ponies he'd never even met. Surely a trait like that wouldn't be found in somepony who would turn on her and her friends.

She began walking towards the basement, her mind still roiling. *Also, it probably doesn't hurt that even with that eye, he's pretty cute, she thought with a small smile. In fact, the eye pro—*

Twilight jerked to a halt, her eyes wide. "Oh, Celestia, I did *not* just think that."

"What was that?" Spike called from upstairs.

"N-nothing! Uh, nothing!" Shaking her head, she descended the stairs to her lab.

• • •

Bentgrass sighed contentedly, washing down his breakfast muffin with a swig of tea. If nothing else, his stay at Ms. Doo's house had given him an appreciation for the pastry he had never had before. Hoofing a few bits out of his pocket, he stood and walked out of Sugarcube Corner, doing his best to politely ignore the ranting pink mare behind him. *It seems even the best researched personnel files can't prepare you for somepony like her.*

He walked a fair distance, taking in the sights of the humble town. Thatched-roof shops and homes lined the streets, giving out a strange sense of home often missing from bigger cities. In many ways, it reminded him of New Horseleans, at least in the welcoming atmosphere. He nodded politely to the few vendors he passed, including a cream-coated earth pony mare selling sweets. He raised an eyebrow to the lime green unicorn standing with her, who was all but openly staring at him.

Finally, he reached what he deemed a safe distance from town, approaching a large tree on a hill. The sounds of Ponyville had long since died off, leaving only the gentle rustling of the leaves in the breeze. He took a deep breath through his nostrils, inhaling the scent of dying leaves and cool autumn air. In all honesty, he did like the outdoors, though there was nothing quite like the roar of a small fire and a nice port while reading to truly get him to relax.

Taking one last glance to ensure he was alone, he reached into the deepest pocket of his coat, producing a hoof-sized gem, emblazoned with runic symbols. He smiled lowly. *If Ms. Sparkle ever found out about this, the entire city of Ponyville could burn and she wouldn't notice.*

Carefully, he set the gem on the ground and tapped it three times. The emerald flashed a brilliant green and shot a thin beam of light up to his eye level. The beam widened to about head-sized to form a field of static. The gem hissed white noise for a few moments while the signal was found. Finally, the screen turned black, and a voice spoke.



“Authorization?”

“Charlie, Three, Four, Seven, India, November,” Bentgrass answered quietly.

A moment of silence and the voice spoke again. “Confirmed. What can we do for you, Agent Bentgrass?”

“I have a Priority One information request.”

“Priority One? That’s only in cases of imminent public danger.”

“How astute of you. I see somepony has been reading the manual,” he deadpanned.

The voice sighed. “What is it?”

Bentgrass took one last look around before continuing. “I need you to get in contact with our operatives in Zebrica. I require information about a mare. A mare by the name of Zecora.”

It was late afternoon before they finally got a reply from Bentgrass's mysterious source. Twilight had spent the rest of the day running every test she could think of on the parasprite, trying to find something about the strange magic that killed it, but so far every test had come back negative or inconclusive. After getting back from his breakfast trip, Bentgrass joined Spike in poring through the library again, trying to find a clue about the symbol. The few times Twilight had come upstairs, she noted that the two worked surprisingly well together, though Spike seemed to avoid the agent's strange eyes.

Now, Twilight and Bentgrass stood in a large field overlooking Ponyville. The tall grass swayed gently in the breeze, an ocean of light green and brown at their hooves. The descending sun dipped behind a tree to their left, casting long shadows across the field. Twilight did her best to appear casual, but every now and then she couldn't help but cast a sad gaze at Bentgrass. The letter from Shining had revealed a lot about his odd mind. Eventually, he noticed her glances.

"Ms. Sparkle, you have been giving me the most peculiar looks ever since I returned from breakfast. Something on your mind?"

*Your life-changing mistake and your dead wife...*

"Oh, uh, just wondering if this pony will be able to help us." She gave a half-grin.

Bentgrass raised an eyebrow for a moment before turning back to the front. "The Professor is Equestria's foremost expert on ancient Zebrica. If anypony can shed some light on this symbol, it's him." He scanned his head back and forth across the empty field. "Though, I admit to being curious as to why we had to meet him way out here."

"Well," Twilight said, grateful for the change of topic, "long-range teleportation is still a new science. It can be very dangerous in enclosed spaces. If the sending unicorn is off by even a little bit, the subject could materialize inside a wall."

"I see. That would be... most unfortunate." His ear flicked and he turned his head skyward. "Ah, look who it is."

Twilight craned her head upwards and saw a rainbow contrail streaking across the blue sky. As she watched, a cyan dot bobbed and weaved between clouds, drawing a pattern with her wake. A small smile graced Twilight's lips as the dot suddenly darted straight up above them, rocketing towards the heavens.

Twilight's horn glowed, and with a loud pop a spyglass appeared before her. Floating it to her face, she could see the focus in Rainbow's eyes as she jetted upwards, as well as the wide smile on her face.

Suddenly, Rainbow's whole body jerked and her wings snapped to her sides. Her momentum carried her up for a few seconds before gravity reclaimed its hold on her and she began to plummet.

"Ms. Sparkle, is that *supposed* to happen?"

Twilight said nothing as fear gripped her heart with icy fingers. Rainbow was tumbling towards the ground with frightening speed. Her body seemed limp, her limbs flailing in the wind as she spun and twisted. Only her wings appeared to be in control, but they were still locked to her side. Her mane flowed wildly in her face, only briefly concealing the closed eyes and blank face.

"Twilight..." Bentgrass's ears were flat against his head as the pegasus continued her freefall with no sign of consciousness.

"Come on, Rainbow, come on," she whispered. As the limp form in her vision fell ever faster, heading right for the large tree on the hill, Twilight's horn glowed again, this time preparing to catch her unconscious friend.

With only a few dozen lengths to go, Rainbow's eyes shot open and her grin reappeared. In a show of near super-equine agility, she flipped over mid-air and lashed her wings out, the strain visible on her face as she struggled to arrest her fall. Finally, still traveling at frightening speeds, she landed on a large tree branch. The branch groaned in protest as her weight hit it, bending at an obscene angle before bouncing back. The force flung Rainbow a few lengths into the air before she fell once more. With a mighty *thud*, she hit the ground on her shoulder, her legs tucked into her body. She rolled several times before hopping up with a flourish and landing on her hooves beside Twilight, her wings standing straight up and a cocky grin on her face.

"Ha, still got it," she said with a waggle of her eyebrows.

"Oh, my goodness, Rainbow! What happened?"

"What? I'm fine," she said casually. "That was one of the tricks we used to do in the 'Bolts. The team would be flying at opposite ends of the stadium and I'd fake being knocked out. I'd fall, the team would race to try and catch me." Her eyes went wide, and she gestured wildly with her hooves. "They'd just miss me, everypony would be

screaming. At the last second, I'd bounce off a cloud and roll to the ground, and the crowd would go *insane!*" She arched her eyebrow. "You'd know this if you had gone to a few more of my shows like you said you would."

Twilight let out a sheepish chuckle as Bentgrass walked up. "A most impressive display, Ms. Dash. Though I must ask what you're doing here."

"Duh, I'm here to help you guys, like yesterday!"

Bentgrass sighed. "I appreciate that, Ms Dash, but I believe we have everything quite in hoof as of now."

"Hey!" Rainbow snorted. "You wouldn't have had *anything* in hoof last night if it weren't for me! I'm staying. Besides," she cast a deadly glance at Twilight, "you *owe* me, remember?"

Twilight smiled. "Yeah, I remember, Dash. But all we're doing is meeting with a professor from Trotsburg. Bentgrass thinks he can help us identify the symbol we found."

"Symbol? What symbol?"

"The symbol the killer carved into the victims' flanks after ordering a swarm of mutated parasprites to devour them alive."

Rainbow's eyes went wide before a barely suppressed look of disgust washed over her cyan face. "Uh, you know what? I probably should, um, check in with the weather team. Heh, you two seem to have everything under control. Maybe I should... just... um, what's going on?" she said, staring at the ground beneath her hooves.

A sharp breeze had picked up, blowing a cascade of leaves of the large tree and creating a whistling sound as it moved between the browning leaves. Twilight followed Dash's gaze downward and her eyes went wide. The ground was glowing, an eerie blue haze suffusing the brown of the leaves.

"*Dash!*" Twilight's horn lit up as she telekinetically grabbed Dash. Rainbow let out a loud yelp as she was yanked away in a blur of cyan and lavender. Nearly a second later, a bright flash made all three look away.

When they looked back, a yellow earth pony stood before them, coughing violently. His curly red mane was mussed from the teleport, and a few errant blades of grass stuck out

from the top of his head. He appeared to be older: streaks of grey ran through his mane, and there were wrinkles around his blue eyes. Beneath a plaid sweater vest, his skin was wrinkled, but he seemed fairly solid, hints of firm muscle visible beneath his skin. His cutie mark was a ragged scroll under a magnifying glass.

His coughing fit continued for a few more moments. Finally, he spat a large ball of phlegm onto the ground and chuckled. "Heh, nothing like a wee bit o' teleportin' t' clear out the sinuses, eh?" He shook his head and looked at Bentgrass. "Ah, Benty, mah boy! It's been too long, lad!" He walked up and took the detective in a fierce bear hug. Bentgrass's eyes went wide under the force of the embrace. Twilight couldn't help but snicker at the squeaking noise the agent made as he tried to breathe.

"Uh, Twi?" Twilight looked to Rainbow, still caught in her magic field. She smiled sheepishly and released her.

"Indeed, Professor," Bentgrass gasped. Finally, the old stallion released him, and Bentgrass took a deep breath. Straightening his coat, he turned to the two mares. "Twilight, Rainbow, may I present Tornbald Parchment, Professor of Zebrican History, Trotsburg University."

Twilight nodded politely. "Good afternoon, Professor."

"Always a good afternoon when ye meet an old friend flanked by two lovely mares," he answered with a great bow.

Dash's face held a questioning gaze. "Um, you don't sound Zebrican."

"Well, ain't you just the observant one?" he said with a playful smile. "Ah'm Scoltish, if'n ye can't tell by the ginger mane and thick brogue!"

"So, how does a Scoltish pony end up studying Zebrica?"

"Ach, who wants to study Scoltland? The weather's always cold and rainy, the food's awful, and all the lads walk around in skirts!" he said with a bark of laughter. Twilight just couldn't hold back an undignified snort at the lame joke. Dash just rolled her eyes.

"Aw, Ah'm jest joshin' ya, lass. Don't get me wrong, Ah love mah homeland. But there's jest something about Zebrica. The culture, the traditions." He leaned in closer, a lewd smile on his lips. "The mares."

Bentgrass cleared his throat loudly. “Professor, I believe we can spare the ladies the perversion of an old stallion.”

“Oi!” said Parchment. “Ah’m fifty-seven. Ah’m not old!”

Rainbow rubbed the back of her neck, looking around. “Uh, yeah, okay. I’m gonna just... go. Twi, keep me posted, ‘kay?” With that, she launched herself upward and flew off.

Twilight didn’t acknowledge Rainbow. She simply stared at the professor, her brow furrowed in thought. Suddenly, she jerked her head up. “Wait a minute. Tornbald Parchment... didn’t you used to work at Princess Celestia’s school?”

Parchment beamed. “Aye! Ah was the Under-Professor of Zebrican History.”

“I remember reading about you in the paper. Weren’t you fired?”

A loud bark of laughter made Twilight blink. “Ach, no, Ah wasn’t fired! Ah quit that place!”

“Um, you *quit* Her Majesty’s school?”

“Aye! Too many rules and regulations. It’s all political up there, isn’t it? Besides, who wants to work up there with a bunch of stuck up, snooty *unicorns*?” His eyes widened. “Eh, heh-heh. No offense, ma’am.”

“None taken,” she deadpanned. “I’m *pretty* sure I read they fired you.”

“Would’na surprise me. Prolly a story cooked up by the Board o’ Regents t’ save face.” He scowled, but a jovial smile set on his lips. “Well, the lot o’ them can kiss mah cutie mark! Ah love me new job. Sure, it’s not as flashy as Her Majesty’s, but Ah got mah own lecture hall, lots o’ field work, and plenty of students to teach.”

“You know, Ms. Sparkle here was offered a position at Her Majesty’s school,” Bentgrass said, looking directly at Twilight.

“Oh, really, now? Well, congratulations, lass!” He gave her a wide grin.

Twilight blushed. “Um, actually, I turned down the position.”

Parchment seemed to tense. “Oh. Y-you... turned *down* a position in Canterlot?” Twilight nodded. “Well, that’s... interestin’.” He smiled at her once more, though his lips were very tight. Twilight began pawing at the ground, looking to Bentgrass.

After a brief period of awkward silence, Bentgrass clear his throat. “Professor, might we get down to business?”

Parchment shook his head. “Oh, um, aye. So, where’s this parchment yer wantin’ Parchment to look at?”

Bentgrass pulled the drawing out of his coat, offering it to him. “We’re absolutely stuck on the meaning of this symbol. A local zebra mare, Zecora, said it looked to be of Zebrican descent, but was... unclear as to its meaning.”

“Well then,” he said, taking the paper, “let’s have a look, shall we?” He reached into his saddlebag and produced a thin pair of glasses, setting them on his snout as he walked over to the tree. Leaning against the old oak, he held the paper up to his face, studying it intently. After several moments of thought, his eyes widened. “Oh, my. Is this... oh, it *is!* Benty, lad, where did ye say ye found this?”

“I didn’t.”

“Well, would you mind? It’d really help if Ah could see the original.”

Bentgrass frowned. “That would be... *difficult*. Rest assured that my depiction is accurate down to the slightest details.”

“O... kay, then. Well,” he said, clearing his throat, “what ye’ve got here is an ancient Zebrican spirit ward. Ah’ve not seen this particular symbol before, but it matches others Ah have.”

Bentgrass leaned in to look at the paper again. “A spirit ward?”

“Aye. Judging by the shadings around the crescent, Ah’d put it about, oh, the mid-Zelan Dynasty.”

At this, Twilight gasped. “Wait, the Zelan Dynasty? But, that was over three thousand years Pre-Banishment!”

Parchment nodded. “Aye, like Ah said, ancient.”

“And what was its meaning, Professor?”

The old stallion began pacing around the tree, his head held high as if he were giving a lecture. “Well, ye have t’ understand, lad. E’rypony knows that Equestria was a mighty different place before the reign o’ the Sisters. That goes doubly for areas around Equestria, *especially* Zebrica. Things like robbery, rape, even cold-blooded murder were all but common.” Twilight gulped, a visible chill running down her body. Parchment nodded. “Aye, t’was not a very good time to be around.”

Bentgrass nodded in understanding. “I see. And the symbol?”

“Well, when a Zebrican bandit would kill another, he would carve this symbol on the victim’s flank, believin’ it would prevent the spirit from returnin’ t’ seek vengeance.”

A quiet descended across the field. Twilight looked to Bentgrass. He seemed to be taking in what he heard, his brow furrowed in thought and his left forehoof idly playing with a long blade of grass.

“Tell me, Professor, would it be uncommon for a pony to never have heard of this?”

Parchment bellowed in laughter, leaning his bulk against the tree so hard that another shower of dying leaves fell to the ground. “That’s a good one, lad! Tell me, Benty, how many ponies do ye know that know somethin’ about Pre-Celestial *Equestria*, let alone Zebrica? Besides,” he said, flicking his ear to dislodge a fallen leaf, “most records of that time period were destroyed when the Royal Archives burned during the War of the Night.”

Bentgrass looked up and level a cool gaze at him. “And, what about a zebra?”

“Hm.” Parchment rubbed his chin with a hoof. “Eh, no, not really. As Ah said, it’s very old, and not a time in history that many wish t’ dwell on. Uh, well...”

“Well what, Professor?”

He shook his head. “No, it’s nothin’.”

Twilight stepped closer to him. “Please, Professor Parchment, anything would help at this point.”



Parchment looked between them for a moment before sighing. “Well, this Zebrican mare friend of yours. Tell me, does she speak in rhyme and have a picture of the sun for a cutie mark?”

Bentgrass’s ears perked up. “Yes on both counts.”

“Would ye happen t’ know how many rays are comin’ out of the sun?”

Twilight thought for a moment before Bentgrass spoke. “Eleven.”

At this, Parchment sighed again and sat down, grunting slightly as his old body settled on the dry grass beneath the tree. He rubbed his brow with a hoof before looking up at Bentgrass. “Lad, I dina’t want to be gettin’ somepony in trouble.”

Bentgrass leaned down, his eyes firm. “Professor, this is a *murder* investigation.”

Twilight walked over to him and sat down next to him. “Professor, why is her cutie mark important?”

He sighed once more. “Well, ye see it’s not a cutie mark. zebras are like donkeys or cattle, they don’t *get* cutie marks. It’s a tribal inscription, means she’s a shaman. That’s why she speaks like that. In Zebrican culture, it’s seen as a mark of enlightenment. All shamans, artisans, and village elders speak in rhyme. The eleven rays from the sun means she’s a master level shaman. Most likely, she started studyin’ Zebrican magic around the same age that *you* did, lass.”

Bentgrass stood straight. “So, she *should* have recognized it.”

“Oi!” Parchment stood up, walking right up to Bentgrass. “I didn’e say that! Don’t be puttin’ words in mah muzzle like that, lad! Besides, Ah said Ah haven’t seen this particular symbol before.”

“But she should at the very least be able to recognize it as a spirit ward, yes?”

Before Parchment could answer, Twilight stepped in front of Bentgrass, glaring hard at the agent. “Stop! If Zecora said she’s never seen it before, then she hasn’t. I told you to stop accusing my—”

“I am not accusing, Ms. Sparkle. I am asking questions to better form a hypothesis. I would think that you of all ponies would appreciate that.” He turned back to Parchment,

his eyes neutral. “One more question, Professor. Does the word ‘Mbwun’ mean anything to you?”

“Hm, Mbwun.” He rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment before shaking his head. “The word rings a bell, but Ah can’t tell ye why. The double consonant and the long ‘u’ sound means its probably a Zinzi word.”

“Zinzi?”

“Oh, eh, they’re one of the Southernmost herds in Zebrica. If’n it is, it’s not surprising that Ah’ve not heard it. They’re a wee bit... secretive. Ah’ll look into it, though.”

Bentgrass nodded curtly. “So, she lied about that as well...”

“Oh, now hold on just a minute!” Twilight stamped a hoof in front of him. “Just because this pony hasn’t heard of some ancient legend doesn’t mean that Zecora is a killer!”

“It could mean a great deal, Ms. Sparkle, and if I were you, I’d—”

A sharp buzzing sound interrupted him. Twilight cocked an eyebrow as the agent stiffened and tapped at something in his coat. Bentgrass cleared his throat. “Well, thank you for all your help, Professor. Would you mind terribly staying local for a few days? I might find need of your expertise again.”

“Sure thing, boyo. Ah’m on a bit of a sabbatical anyway.”

He nodded. “Thank you. I’m sorry, but there is something I need to handle. Ms. Sparkle, I shall meet you at the library shortly. Professor, it was good to see you again.” With that, he turned and cantered away, his long strides allowing him to leave the large field before either of them had a chance to ask questions.

Twilight stood rooted to the spot, the fetlock-high grass tickling her as it blew in the soft breeze, but she barely noticed. Her eyes were narrowed, a harsh gaze level at the fleeing Bentgrass, his shrinking form backlit by the almost setting sun. *How dare he?!* She had already warned him about that. She’d known Zecora for almost a decade now; she knew she wasn’t capable of such horror as they saw in the morgue.

A gentle tap on the shoulder shook her from her thoughts. Parchment stood next to her, a sympathetic look in his wizened eyes. “Well, there he goes. Um, are ye all right, lass?”

“No, I’m not. I’ve already told him that none of my friends could have done this. Hay, he’s met some of them, but I feel like all he ever sees is suspects. How can he be so... cold?”

Parchment sighed. “He wasn’t always like that. See, Ah’m an old friend of the family. Known Benty since he was but a wee colt. His parents and his brother died in a fire when he was around ten. Poor thing did’nae even have his cutie mark yet. After that he was a bit more... logical than most ponies. But ever since, well...”

“His wife died?”

Parchment’s shoulders sagged. “Oh, ye know about that? Aye, ever since Skylight, he’s been so focused on the evils of the world, always lookin’ for the worst in ponies from the moment he meets them. Ah’ve told him that’s no way t’ live. If he only focuses on finding the things ponies hide, he’ll end up missing out on the things right in front of ‘im. Ah fear it’ll be the end of ‘im someday.”

“Well, I kind of understand that. I love logic and facts more than most ponies, but even I know they can only take you so far. True wisdom comes from fact tempered by emotion, and my emotions tell me he’s wrong about Zecora.”

“Twilight,” Parchment said as he turned to face the tree, “look, Ah don’t know exactly what’s going’ on here, and somethin’ tells me Ah don’t want to. But, while Benty can get a bit... *focused*, we’ll say, his instincts are usually spot on. Are ye *sure* yer friends couldn’t be involved?”

Twilight sighed and turned to face the setting sun. The question played on her mind, racing around like a Wonderbolt derby. As much as she hated it, she could see the logic in Bentgrass’s argument. There were a lot of clues piling up, most pointing towards Zecora. *Maybe...*

She focused more on the sky, taking in the multi-hued tones of sunset. Slowly, a warm smile spread across her face. The burnt oranges, bright yellows, and light pinks: they reminded her of her friends, of all the adventures and hardships they’d faced over the past years. The lessons she’d learned. The warm smile turned into a confident one as she turned back to Parchment.

“Yes, I am. I may not know as much about his kind of thing as Bentgrass, but I know an awful lot about friendship. You have to trust your friends, and trust yourself that you

know them.” Her eyes set on the old pony, resolution set on her face. “I *know* that Zecora couldn’t have done this.”

Parchment regarded her for a moment, then nodded, a slight smile on his face. “Well, I hope yer right, fer both yer sakes. Well,” he said, adjusting his saddlebags, “I suppose Ah’ll head to the local inn, get mahself a room. I brought a few books Ah think may help. Ah’ll also contact a few of mah colleagues, see if an can’t find more about this symbol or that ‘Mbwun’ word. Ah’ll let ye know if Ah find anything.”

Twilight nodded. “Thank you very much for your help, Professor.”

“Well, anything for a lovely mare and an old friend!” he said with a bow. Twilight nodded her head as he walked away. After several steps, he stopped, turning back to her.

“Oi, Twilight?”

“Yes?”

“Watch out for you and yer friends. There’s dangerous things ahoof.”

She nodded once more. As Parchment walked away, Twilight sat down on the soft grass, enjoying the view for a moment. Ponyville absolutely glowed in the waning sunlight. Windows reflected the sun back at her, giving the impression of hundreds of tiny eyes winking. Ponies could be seen closing their shops and heading home for the day. All in all, the town exuded the calm serenity that made her fall in love with it in the first place.

The calm, however, refused to come to Twilight as she sat and thought. *I don’t care what Bentgrass says. Zecora can’t be behind this!* True, she didn’t know every single detail about the reclusive zebra, but Twilight liked to think she was a good judge of character. There was too much control behind Zecora’s eyes, too much wisdom and gentleness to allow for the thought that she could slaughter innocent ponies.

Suddenly, Twilight gasped. *Of course! Oh, it’s so obvious, why didn’t I see it before?*

All but leaping to her hooves, she took off at a full gallop towards Ponyville.

• • •

“Angel Bunny, could you please get me another roll of gauze?”

The tiny rabbit snapped a quick salute before hopping across the floor of the cottage, heading for the medicine cabinet. After a few moments, he returned with the gauze in his mouth, placing it next to Fluttershy.

“Thank you, honey.” Turning back to her patient, she carefully wrapped the wolf’s foreleg in another layer before setting it with some tape. She smiled warmly at the injured creature laying on the rug in the middle of her living room.

“There you go, sweetie. Now, make sure you take it easy on that leg. The wound wasn’t very deep, but it could have been worse. Honestly, what were you thinking going after that buck all by yourself?”

The wolf whined quietly, turning his head in shame and letting out a few mewling cries. Fluttershy chuckled. “Oh, that’s silly! You know your mate loves you. You don’t need to risk your life to impress her.” He hung his head, his tail drooping between his legs. “Now, I want you to stay out of the hunt for the next week at least. Let the rest of the pack bring the food back to you, okay?”

At this, the wolf jumped up, but yelped loudly as he tried to put pressure on his injured leg. She looked him right in the eye. “I don’t care what the other boys think. You need time to heal, understand?” she said firmly.

He whined once more, then nodded and limped towards the door. Fluttershy smiled warmly and waved. As the wolf left, she walked over to the window and watched him rejoin the waiting pack outside. A few of the wolves playfully nipped at his leg, only to be chased away by a snarling bite. They all turned back to the window and barked happily before turning and running back to the woods.

“Well, Angel, that was the last patient for the day, I think.” She looked down at the white bunny at her hooves. “Now, how about we go make some carrot stew?” Angel’s eyes brightened and he nodded, his long ears flopping back and forth before he turned and hopped towards the kitchen.

Fluttershy giggled and turned back towards the window. The Everfree was quickly disappearing in shadow, the sun now almost completely set. In the waning light, the forest seemed to lose a bit of its foreboding, looking almost pleasant. Only those who lived near it knew better, and Fluttershy wouldn’t dare walk into it at night. Still, though, she couldn’t help but admire the beauty of the woods. Long shadows snaked out from the treeline, dark fingers reaching out towards the cottage. The sound of nocturnal animals beginning their day drifted through the open window, creating a pleasing symphony to

her ears. A light breeze carried the scent of dying leaves. Fluttershy inhaled deeply, drinking in the smells of nature.

She turned to walk to the kitchen when a sudden movement caught her eye. Gazing hard at the wall of shadow, a shape began to emerge. Instinctively, she ducked down, a quiet “Eep” escaping her lips. After a few moments, she gathered her courage and slinked back to her hooves. A figure stood at the edge of the woodline. She could tell it was a pony, but the brown cloak it wore prevented her from getting a good look at its face. She squinted, trying to identify this stranger, when two glowing lights appeared. As she watched, two yellow orbs lit up underneath the pony’s hood. For a moment, a feeling of recognition hit her. *Wait, is that—*

A cacophony of shrill cries snapped her back to reality. Jerking back, a wave of chaos flew past her. Birds of all colors were screaming in panic, dashing for the open window. Fluttershy held up her hooves, trying to calm the frightened birds. “What’s wrong, babies? Why are y—” In mid-sentence, she looked down at the floor, and her eyes went wide.

Standing in the middle of the room was Angel, but something seemed off. He wasn’t just standing still; he seemed frozen in mid-step, his left hindpaw hanging in the air. Fluttershy took a step towards him, but jerked to a halt suddenly. The tiny rabbit began to shake, not a normal movement, but rather like his whole body was vibrating. It started in his ears, but soon spread to his whole body.

“A-A-Angel? Honey, what’s wr—”

In an instant, the spell was broken, and Angel fell to the ground. A piercing screech echoed in the small cottage as Angel began writhing in pain, clutching his head. The scream only got louder as his limbs spasmed hard, sending his tiny body flopping like a fish out of water. As she watched in horror, Angel began to claw at his head, tiny flecks of blood falling to the ground around him. Fluttershy ran over to the convulsing rabbit. When she reached his side, his hind leg lashed out at her. A shrill cry left her as the force of the blow launched her back, impacting the wall with a harsh crack.

Finally, with one last massive twitch, Angel lay still on his belly, his white fur stained with his own blood and more flowing from dozens of scratches on his head. With a loud groan, Fluttershy lifted herself to her hooves and looked at him. Through her tear-clouded eyes, she saw his chest rise and fall, a tiny sense of relief flooding her body. The feeling died quickly when another sound came from the prone rabbit: no longer a high-pitch scream of pain, but a low growl, angry and feral.

Fluttershy instinctively took a step back as Angel's torso began to pulse and writhe like a balloon filling and deflating. His limbs began to ripple, accompanied by a series of sickening squelches, like sinew tearing and grinding. With another low moan, he pushed himself to his knees, staring at the ground. A line of drool fell from his mouth. He reached a paw up, and Fluttershy yelped as he slammed it down on the floor with enough force to crack the wood—but that wasn't what filled her with abject terror. As the limb hit the ground, it seemed to stretch and lengthen, a horrible crack sounding as it hit.

Shaking harder than she ever had before, she took a tentative step towards her pet and dear friend. "Angel?" she whispered.

At the sound of her voice, Angel let out a primal howl and raised his head to look at her, drool dripping from his large fangs and his blood-red eyes glowing.

The sun had finally set over Ponyville. Firefly lanterns lined the streets, glowing with gentle brilliance and casting soft shadows across the homes and shops that now lay dormant. A few crickets could be heard chirping away, offering a final song before retreating for the coming winter. The only other sound on Mane Street was the clip clop of hooves.

Twilight approached the library door with a confident swagger in her step. She raised a hoof to push open the heavy door but paused, her ear flicking forward. Beneath the hum of the firefly lantern above the door, muffled voices were just barely audible beyond the door. Curious, she pressed her ear to the door and listened.

“This is... quite fascinating. And you’re sure this is accurate?” She immediately recognized Bentgrass’s melodious accent.

“Absolutely,” said a voice she didn’t recognize. It spoke with a Trottingham accent, but the voice sounded... *off*, somehow; distant, like he was talking from across a field. “Have I ever let you down before?”

A quiet chuckle came from Bentgrass. “I will elect not to answer that.”

One eyebrow arched, Twilight pushed in the door, impatient to see who this new voice was. As she entered, her jaw dropped, dumbstruck. Bentgrass stood alone in the main room of the library, a bright green emerald laying on the ground before him. Odd runes glimmered and shifted on its surface. Her breath caught. A blurred, wavy picture, as if projected onto a waterfall, hovered above it. Through the image, the head of a stallion stared directly at her, his piercing blue eyes studying her intently. His mane seemed to shine a brilliant white, even in the dull lighting.

Before she could say a word, Bentgrass cleared his throat loudly. “Thank you, Agent. I’ll contact you again should I require more information.”

The stallion nodded. “Understood. Oh, and Agrostis, next time lock the door before you use a highly classified device.”

Bentgrass nodded and tapped a hoof to the gem. It flashed a brilliant green before growing dark. Sighing quietly, he picked up the emerald and slipped it into his pocket before turning to Twilight.

“Was that—”



“An old friend from Canterlot Intelligence. He is quite a good source of information. Now, if we—”

“No, not that! Was that a long-distance communication gem?” She walked up to him, her eyes wide. “I thought those were just theoretical!”

“They are,” he said flatly. “Now, I believe—”

“How did you solve the problem of signal degradation without a massive lattice to boost the power? Does it have a runic battery of some kind?” She frowned, her eyebrow furrowing, and then grinned and clapped her hooves together. “*Oh!* I bet it taps into natural ley lines to allow—”

“*Twilight!*”

She jerked as if slapped, looking up into his eyes.

“Murderer on the loose?”

“Oh, right.” She grinned sheepishly, then cleared her throat. “Sorry. Hey, where’s Spike?”

Bentgrass turned his head, nodding towards the couch that Spike was sprawled out on, snoring quietly. Twilight shot the dragon a fearful gaze. “I think you can relax,” Bentgrass said, stepping in front of her. “He *has* been awake for over twenty-four hours.”

Twilight nodded, exhaling deeply. She cleared her throat, her face growing serious. “You’re right. Now, I think I have this whole thing figured out.”

“Do you?” Bentgrass said in a low voice, his face neutral and his eyes at the ground.

“Yes! It’s so obvious, I can’t believe we didn’t see it before! Somepony is *framing* Zecora!”

“Really?”

“I know, it makes perfect sense when you think about it!”

“How so?”

“Well,” she began, walking toward a cabinet in the corner, “she’s the perfect scapegoat. Most ponies are still a bit skittish around her. They don’t know her as well as my friends

and I do. It wouldn't take much to convince some that she was a killer." She opened the cabinet, and began digging through the index cards inside.

"What are you doing?"

"Going through the records. If somepony wanted to frame Zecora, they'd need to know about Zebrican culture. I'm seeing if somepony has checked out any books on Zebrica."

"Twilight..."

"Now, I think you should use your 'theoretical' device to contact the R.I.S. Check any library within 50 miles or so."

"No."

Twilight jerked to a halt and spun to face him. He still sat at the table, his normally hard eyes now gazing at her with disturbing neutrality. "No?" She marched up to him, meeting his eyes. "Then what are you going to do?"

He said nothing for a moment. There was no joy in his eyes, just a cold, business-like gaze. "I am going to go to the Everfree Forest and bring Ms. Zecora in for questioning." His tone left no room for argument.

Twilight glared at him. "I already told you, Zecora is innocent."

"Pray tell, on what do you base this hypothesis?"

"On the fact that I know my friends! Zecora is a gentle pony. She couldn't have done this!" she said with a loud stomp of her hoof.

Bentgrass leaned forward, his forelegs resting in the table. "Tell me, how well do you *really* know her?"

"What do you—"

"What do you know about her family?"

Twilight opened her mouth to defend her friend, but nothing came out. Her brow furrowed, her eyes darting back and forth as she tried to think of something, anything about Zecora's family. After a moment, she spoke quietly. "W-well, it never came up."

Bentgrass flicked an ear and snorted. “Oh, *come now*, Ms. Sparkle. In almost ten *years* of friendship, it never came up?”

“Well—”

“Never came up?” He leaned forward in his chair, eyeing Twilight intently. “Or perhaps every time it did, she would cleverly deflect and change the subject?”

Silence descended in the library, the only sounds being the ticking of an old grandfather clock in the corner.

“I... Well, she...”

“It doesn’t surprise me, really.” He stood from the chair, pacing thoughtfully around it, his hoof steps muffled by a multi-colored rug. “I mean, if I had the kind of trauma that *she* did in my childhood, I’d avoid it as well.”

For as much as she wanted him to be wrong, Twilight couldn’t hold back her curiosity. “What kind of trauma?”

Bentgrass stopped and faced her, his eyes cold and businesslike. “Witnessing her father murder her mother.”

More silence. Twilight’s jaw hung slack, her eyes wide. She tried to say something, but no words came out.

Bentgrass nodded. “My thoughts exactly.” He continued to pace around the table in the center of the room, though he kept his eyes locked on Twilight. “She was five at the time. Her father was a diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic. One day he had a psychotic break and killed his wife while Zecora watched. Would you care to know how he did it?” He didn’t give Twilight a chance to respond, stepping towards her, all the while maintaining his cold gaze. “A single stab wound. To her *heart*, with a long, curved blade. Does that ring any bells?” He gave a grim chuckle. “Family heirloom from her father, indeed.”

Twilight shook her head. “No. Just because something bad happened in her past doesn’t mean she’s a cold-blooded killer!”

“I am not saying she is a cold-blooded killer. You know as well as I do, Miss Sparkle, that mental disease and defects can easily be passed from one generation to the next.”

“Oh, so now she’s crazy?” she scoffed, turning towards the basement. “You’re grasping at straws.”

Bentgrass followed her as she stepped down the stairs to the lab. “No, *you* are denying the evidence that is right in front of your face!”

“You have no evidence!”

“Don’t I? You saw how negatively she reacted when I pressed her about her past while we were in her hut.”

Twilight stopped in front of the large computer, spinning around to glare at Bentgrass. “You just *said* it was traumatic! It’s no wonder she didn’t want to think about it!”

“There’s more than that, if you would open your eyes. Did you not see how disheveled she appeared when she came by this morning? And when I asked about her family, she began to stutter and her eye twitched.”

Twilight let out a wry laugh. “Oh, so now you’re determining her guilt based on the fact that her *eye itched?*” She pushed past him and walked towards the domed device that held the parasprite. “I’m not listening to this anymore! I have work to do.”

Bentgrass marched next to the device, glaring hard at her. “Running away will not make what I have said any less true, Ms. Sparkle! What are you doing?”

“I’m running more tests on the parasprite.”

“Oh, *now* who’s grasping at straws? You yourself said there were no more tests you could run that would tell us *anything!*”

She didn’t look up, keeping a steely gaze on the machine. “Well, anything is better than standing here, listening to this... this *lunacy!*”

“This is *not* lunacy! This is logical deduction based on rational observation of the facts!” He reared up and placed his hooves over Twilight’s, stopping her from activating the machine

Unshaken, Twilight leaned towards him, craning her head to bore her gaze directly into his. “*Deduction?! This is nothing but conjecture! You’re seeing things where there isn’t anything to see!*”

Twilight could feel his breath on her face, but Bentgrass didn't back down. "Face it, Ms. Sparkle. Every *single* piece of evidence we have points *directly* at Zecora!" He narrowed his eyes at her. "You are simply too *blinded* by your emotions to see that!"

"The evidence is circumstantial at best! You would see *that* if you weren't so cold and heartless! What's wrong with emotions, anyway?"

With a swift motion, Bentgrass shoved the table away, the metal wheels squeaking loudly before it crashed against the wall. "Emotions get ponies killed!" he roared.

"Oh, why, because that's what happened to Skylight?"

Even as the words left her mouth, she regretted them. Bentgrass's whole body tensed, his eyes going wide. In the harsh light of the lab, his serpentine eye seemed to burn with an angry glow. A slight tremor began to work its way down his body, his left forehoof tapping at the wooden floor. His jaw was tight; Twilight could almost hear the grinding of his teeth.

She took a step back. "B-Bentgrass, I—"

"It seems you have been"—he paused, his lips pursing—"doing your research on me, Ms. Sparkle. That is to be commended," he said with a curt nod, turning to face the glowing computer screen.

Twilight shrunk back further. "Oh, Agent Bentgrass, I'm—"

"I made a mistake. My wife paid the price." He leaned forward, resting his hooves on the table. He spoke in a low tone, pain seeping through his voice. "I allowed the cries of a foal to override my sense of duty. Because of that, my wife is dead, along with many other ponies."

The whirring of cooling fans and clicks of the computer were deafeningly loud in the silence. Twilight took a single step forward, lifting a hoof to place on the agent's shoulder, but her confidence failed as she approached. Anything she could think of to say seemed hollow, meaningless platitudes that would only insult the agent further.

After a moment, Bentgrass turned to face her. His eyes were once again disturbingly neutral. "So you see, Ms. Sparkle, I can not, and I *shall not*, let feeling and emotion cloud my judgment. I follow logic: pure, unyielding logic. I would think a scientist like yourself would appreciate that."

They held each other's gazes for a moment, then before Twilight could stop herself, she spoke. "I said yes."

"What?"

"The teaching position in Canterlot. I accepted as soon as the Princess asked."

Bentgrass shot her a perplexed look. She plopped down on her haunches, eyes on the floor beneath her. "I was scared, of course. But I knew it made logical sense. I know I'm... I'm a genius. I know all the material, and the Princess vouched for me, so why shouldn't I?"

"We didn't tell anypony at first. Princess Celestia wanted it to be a surprise. Heh, one of her little pranks. Not even my family knew. So, Celestia sent me the material, and I started making lesson plans."

She frowned. "Then I started worrying about extra credit assignments, labs, field trips, professional speakers, exams, a grading schedule. I couldn't stop. I *had* to make everything perfect. This would be the first time in my life where *I* was the one grading. Other ponies' lives were in *my* hooves." She stood up and walked over to the computer, a blank glaze over her eyes.

"I'd been obsessed before, but this was different. I couldn't sleep through the night, I barely ate. All I could think about was impressing the students I'd have, living up to my 'expectations,'" she said with a grim chuckle.

"It came to a head when Spike took a short holiday in Canterlot. Without him to keep me in check, I just couldn't stop." She slowly turned to face Bentgrass. Her eyes were slightly damp by this point; even the agent's face had softened somewhat. "For five days I didn't eat or sleep. Spike came home and found me collapsed on the kitchen floor. I was in the hospital for two days being treated for malnutrition and exhaustion." She looked away from him, her forehoof pawing into the wooden floor. "Celestia found out, of course. She said that I should leave it alone for a while, but the offer was open if I ever wanted it."

Bentgrass nodded slowly, taking a few tentative steps towards her. "You see, Ms. Sparkle? You let your feelings overwhelm you, and it almost killed you."

She jerked her head back to face him. The green glow from the computer reflected vividly off his eye. "No, don't you get it? I should have listened to my instincts in the first place! Logically, it made sense, but I didn't *feel* ready. I ignored my feelings and it almost killed me."

“I know some of the facts point to Zecora, but it doesn’t *feel right*. You asked for my help on this case. I said yes because, initially, I didn’t trust you. In the past few days, I’ve learned that your logic is unparalleled, but you’ve closed off your heart.”

As he shot her a confused glance, she sighed and stepped closer to him. “Look, Bentgrass, I get it. Really, I do! I used to think just like you: the heart just gets in the way, focus on the facts.” She slowly placed a hoof on his shoulder. He flinched under the contact, turning his mismatched eyes to her. “But Celestia sent me here to learn how to listen to my heart over my head, and I’ve seen such amazing things in the past ten years. I’ve *felt* joy I never knew, and I’ve learned more than I did my whole life before I came here.”

Twilight bit her lip, unsure of her next action. She looked into his eyes and gently placed her hoof on his cheek. “What’s the use of knowing everything if you feel nothing?”

Bentgrass said nothing, though he relaxed under her touch. The two sat for a moment before he turned his head away from her. “T-Twilight, I—”

A series of shrill beeps came from behind them. Turning quickly, Twilight saw a flashing message on the computer screen. She hurried over to it and began punching in commands, the clacks echoing off the oak walls.

Bentgrass eased up behind her. “What is it?”

“The computer finished its analysis of the parasprite,” she said, her hooves flying across the keyboard as her eyes darted back and forth, reading the flickering display. All the emotion from before had drained from her voice, replaced by a scientist’s zeal. Bentgrass glanced towards the screen, but he couldn’t understand the advanced symbols and words that danced across the screen.

In an instant, Twilight’s hooves froze in place above the keyboard. A loud gasp issued from her as her ears splayed against her head, her tail frozen in place behind her. “No,” she muttered, her breathing becoming ragged and upset.

Bentgrass looked down at her. “Ms. Sparkle, what is it?”

“No, no it can’t be,” she whispered, seemingly to herself.

In a rush of movement, Bentgrass grabbed her shoulder and turned her to face him. His eyes were deadly serious. “Twilight, what does it say?”

Twilight's mouth opened and shut a few times, her mouth disobeying her mind's command to speak. When she finally found the words, they came out as barely a whisper. "The... the magic that mutated the parasprite. It's... Zebrican."

The word hung in the air for an eternity, seeming to echo across the oak walls and various scientific regalia strewn across the lab. Bentgrass held her gaze for a few more seconds then opened his mouth to speak.

A bloodcurdling scream from above them cut him off. They shared a quizzical glance before turning and racing up the stairs. As they ran through the basement door, Twilight nearly galloped over Spike, who stood waiting in the middle of the hall, rubbing sleep out of his eyes.

"Twi, what was th—"

Another cry pierced the air, though this one made all three of them cringe. It was a feral, wailing cry, the high pitch making Spike grasp his sensitive draconic ears. When the echoes finally died, Spike turned towards the door. "Never mind. What was *that*?"

The three raced to the front door as Twilight threw it open. Stepping outside, they were greeted by the serene streets of Ponyville. They glanced around, but nothing moved, the road in front of the library eerily quiet. Even the air seemed stale and dead. Twilight stepped out onto the road, straining her eyes and ears to see something—*anything*—out of the ordinary, but nothing stood out on the moonlit street. Stopping next to a house across from the library, she turned back to the others. "Maybe it was ju—"

"*Look out!*"

At Bentgrass's words, Twilight reacted faster than she thought possible. She leaped back just in time to avoid a dark mass rocketing through the space she had just occupied. The thing landed on the ground next to her with a wet slap. Twilight turned around and a sharp gasp of horror left her.

A black pegasus with a snow white mane lay in the ground. His left wing was ruined, the exposed bone glistening faintly in the moonlight, the appendage itself hanging limply by a few thick shreds of flesh. His legs convulsed, his eyes wide as dinner plates. A series of strangled wheezes came as he tried to breathe through a ragged hole in his neck. He looked at Twilight, a pleading, pained look in his eyes.

Twilight ran up to the stallion and knelt by his side. Looking him over, she barely suppressed a gag as the metallic stench of blood assaulted her nostrils. With a grimace,



her horn lit up and a lavender glow enveloped his neck. The pegasus gasped loudly and moved to get up, but she held him still. “Take it easy. That should seal your airway for now, but we need to ge—”

The shrieking howl came again, this time sounding very close. Twilight whipped around and froze.

Of all the things Twilight had seen over the years—hydras, manticores, even Discord—none had looked quite as... *wrong* as what stood before her. It was at least twice as tall as Bentgrass, but where the agent was thin and lithe, the abomination that glared at them had a torso that bulged with unnatural muscle. Its arms and legs were similarly built, ending with three vicious claws. Two wiry limbs snaked out from its sides, segmented like an ant’s and ending in wicked points. Its skin was a patchwork of soft white fur and a dark, chitinous carapace that looked wet under the moonlight.

The most terrifying feature was the thing’s head. Two beady eyes, dark black with tiny blood red pupils, sat before a long, tubular muzzle that had dagger-like teeth jutting out at wild angles, giving the creature a crocodile-like appearance. A black button nose dotted the end, and a strange cut ran along the upper length. As Twilight watched in sickening horror, the beast’s mouth split open along the cut, the lower jaw staying in place while the two upper halves opened up and out, revealing a long forked tongue.

The beast howled once more, rattling Twilight down to her very soul, and charged forward, moving with a loping gait. Twilight looked down to the injured pegasus, her horn glowing again. In a purple flash, the stallion vanished, Twilight hoping he would be alive when he rematerialized on the other side of the library. She turned back to see the monster now only a few lengths away. A sickening musk, like rotted meat, washed over her. Her horn glowed as she prepared to teleport herself away, the beast lunging with its impossible muzzle opened wide.

Before Twilight could activate the spell, a flying shoulder from Bentgrass sent the creature hurtling to the side. The force of the blow sent it flying into a nearby building, smashing through the large window with a terrific crash. Bentgrass gracefully landed on his hooves a few lengths away. He didn’t move, planting his hooves firmly on the ground. A loud roar came from inside the building and the wall exploded, the thing lunging outside and racing towards Bentgrass.

Twilight could feel the vibrations from the monster’s foot falls in her bones as it leaped once more, its claws raised to cleave Bentgrass in two. With his trademark speed, Bentgrass rolled onto his back just in time to see it sail over him. He thrust his hind legs

upward, delivering a vicious double-buck to its midsection. It let out a howl of pain, rolling on the ground before crashing into a small collection of garbage cans. Lashing out with a claw, the beast knocked the metal cans away, sending them flying as it spun around to glare at him again. It let out a low growl, rivulets of viscous drool falling to the ground.

Bentgrass bent his forelegs slightly, his left hoof moving ahead of his right, assuming what Twilight guessed was a fighting stance. He lowered his head, his eyes locked on the thing with burning focus. This time, the beast did not charge, instead stomping towards the agent with deadly intent. The ground shook as it moved, and its claws left deep gouges in the cobblestone streets. By the time it was only a few hooflengths away, it towered over him, its hot saliva dripping down onto the ground. It howled once more and swiped at Bentgrass with a wickedly curved claw. Moving with almost frightening fluidity, he reared up his forelegs to block the strike, twisting his body to drive the paw into the ground. As the paw struck dirt, he kicked up his hind legs and delivered a series of lightning quick bucks to its face. Twilight could see several of the thing's jagged teeth flying from its mouth as it shrieked in pain.

Suddenly, one of its wiry limbs curled around to strike at Bentgrass. At the last moment, he saw the incoming arm and jerked his body to the side. Bentgrass let out a cry of pain as a jagged red cut tore across his left hindleg. Seizing the moment, the beast lashed out with one of its claws, this time connecting with his chest. He grunted in pain as he tumbled a few lengths down the road, rolling several times before spinning around to get back on his hooves.

The beast was already upon him, both forelegs raised to smash Bentgrass. He tucked his legs in and rolled underneath it. This seemed to catch the monster off-guard for a moment, and Bentgrass made the best of it. Once more on his back, he wrapped all four of his legs around one of its hind legs, his knees facing opposite ways. With a loud grunt and a jerked movement, he drove his limbs in opposite directions.

The creature howled in agony as its left hind leg was broken, a small piece of snapped bone piercing its carapace. To Twilight's horror, however, the move seemed to take a lot out of Bentgrass. He had no time to react when one of its mighty paws grabbed him by the neck, slamming him down hard against the ground. Strangled cries came from the bound agent, his hind legs continuing to kick at it. The blows impacted hard chitin and the thing seemed not to notice. It growled once more and opened its twisted maw, ready to devour Bentgrass. His eyes were steady, glaring back coldly as the beast raised its head up and dove down.

*Whump!*

An annoyed bark came from the beast as a mail box enveloped in a lavender mist bounced off its head. Whipping around, it snarled at Twilight, who stood across the road glaring at it. "Get away from him!" Her face was twisted in determination, but her trembling hooves betrayed her fear. It screamed out again and turned to face her, casually throwing Bentgrass aside. He hit the ground hard and groaned in pain.

Twilight stared at the thing as she picked up a large rock on the side of the road. Howling in fury, it took off towards her, awkwardly limping on its broken hind leg. Twilight stood firm and launched the heavy rock. Her blood ran cold as the thing batted it out of the air without even slowing down.

Setting her shoulders, her horn glowed as she charged the one offensive spell she knew. With a loud grunt, a beam of blinding light lanced towards the creature, but her aim was off. The tight beam grazed its side, a dark line of singed fur the only damage. It continued to race for her, its gaping maw open as it howled with blood lust. She furrowed her brow and charged for another shot, but it was too late: the monster lunged at her, claws outstretched. Twilight rolled to the side, but let out a cry as the tip of one claw hit home, a jagged red cut slashing across on her left shoulder.

She grimaced, feeling blood ooze from the angry cut. She moved to scramble to her hooves when a giant paw slammed down beside her. The creature stood in front of her, drool falling from its gaping maw and landing in her face. She gagged as the thing's hot, fetid breath overwhelmed her. She closed her eyes, not wanting to see the end.

An earth-shaking roar came from in front of her, even deeper in pitch than the monster's cry. She flinched, awaiting the stabbing pain of those jagged teeth, but it never came. Instead, a wave of searing heat and the overwhelming stench of burning fur and flesh washed over her. She whipped her head around, gagging over the dirt. Slowly, she opened her eyes and gasped.

The beast was retreating, its paws clawing madly at its deformed face as goutts of green flame seared its flesh. Beside Twilight stood Spike, standing at his full height, with his shoulders just above her head. His arms were outstretched, claws bared and flexing, the moonlight glinting off the razor-sharp tips. Strong plumes of smoke poured from his nostrils as a raging green glow danced from between his bared teeth.

"*Don't touch her!*" he growled in a voice lower than she could have ever imagined coming from his throat. The beast seemed to regard him for a moment, before its high-pitched

wail echoed once more and it launched itself towards him. Spike bellowed in draconic rage, the volume rattling Twilight's bones. Small wisps of green flame licked out from his mouth and around his muzzle as he charged toward it.

They ran at each other with frightening speed. The beast raised its claw to swipe at the raging dragon, but hit nothing but air. In a show of agility Twilight had never seen, Spike bent his sinewy legs and leaped, twirling around to land on its back. His claws dug into its flesh, piercing deep into its chitinous armor. With another loud roar, he dove his face down and bit the back of its neck. Teeth sharp enough to chew through diamonds sank into its hide, earning a pained wail as the thing flailed its limbs, trying desperately to dislodge him. The creature lashed out at him with one of its spear-like limbs, but the sharp tip glanced off of Spike's diamond-hard scales.

Spike bit down harder, eliciting another howl of pain from the monster. A spurt of brackish blood oozed from Spike's mouth when the creature suddenly fell backward, landing on top of him. With speed it hadn't shown before, it rolled over and grabbed Spike with one of its massive paws. Spike let out another angry growl, lashing out with his sharp claws, but the monster endured the pain. A loud roar, and it lifted him up and launched him towards a nearby house.

"*Spike!*" Twilight could only watch in horror as her friend and brother was sent crashing through the house, obliterating the wall. The monster roared triumphantly and lumbered over towards where he landed.

After a few seconds, Spike stood up from the rubble, clutching his head and groaning. He shook his head and looked up to the beast's raised paw racing towards him. He threw his arms up to block the blow, but jumped slightly when the paw bounced off a translucent purple wall. The monster let out a howl of frustration and continued to beat on the shield. Spike shot a glance to Twilight who stood behind the creature, horn aglow, straining with effort. Every time the beast hit the shimmering wall, she grunted loudly.

"Thanks!" he shouted, and inhaled deeply. Twilight saw him prepare and dropped the shield in between the creature's punches. With another primal roar, a gout of green fire lanced towards the monster. It recoiled and roared again, clawing at its face.

Spike capitalized on the distraction. Cutting off the blaze, he lunged forward and grabbed one of the thing's legs. The beast growled at him and lashed out with its chitinous limbs, battering the dragon's midsection. Another roar of draconic rage and Spike jerked himself to the side, flinging the behemoth towards the house he'd just destroyed. It squealed as it landed, already turning to get back up, but Spike was faster. He darted to

its side and grabbed the limb that had been savaging him. Gripping it with both claws, he dove his face down and bit as hard as he could. Even with the chitin armor, the limb snapped like a twig under his crushing jaws.

The beast lay on its side, howling in agony as its limb was ripped from his back. It turned its head to snap at Spike, but a white blur rushed to meet its face. Bentgrass slid on his side at blinding speeds, driving both his hind legs into the monster's jaw. Several more teeth were flung from its mouth, and its head fell limply to the ground.

Its legs twitched angrily as Spike jumped off of its back, breathing heavily. He stared down at the bizarre creature, smoke still seeping from his mouth and his clenched fists shaking. Spitting its foul-tasting blood from his mouth, he knelt down and helped Bentgrass to his hooves. "You alright?"

"Yes, I'll be fine," he said, though he seemed to be favoring his left side over his right. The two looked wearily at the abomination before them, now still save for the rise and fall of its muscled chest.

Now that the loud sounds of battle were quiet, a small crowd of ponies had gathered around the street, some hanging out of doors of homes that lined the road. All were shaking with fear at the monstrous thing that lay on the ground.

"Spike!"

Spike spun around just in time to see Twilight leap at him, wrapping her hooves around him in a fierce hug, which he returned eagerly. The two embraced for a moment before separating, Twilight taking in the shape of her adopted brother. A small scratch on his left side was the only indication he had been in a fight, save for the traces of ichorous blood trailing from his mouth. "Are you okay?"

Spike let out a dry laugh. "I'll be fine." He grimaced and spat loudly. "Though my taste buds may never recover." He craned his head and pointed towards the angry cut on her shoulder. "Are *you* all right?"

Twilight nodded, though she winced when she gingerly touched a hoof to the cut. Slowly, both of them looked down at the unconscious thing before them. "What *is* it?"

"Most likely, another Mbwun chimera," Bentgrass said. He looked over the deformed creature with contempt. "One too dangerous to be allowed to live." As he spoke, he knelt down and wrapped his forelegs around its neck. Twilight stepped forward to protest as his shoulders tensed, preparing to snap its neck.

*“Stop!”*

All three turned at the new voice. Limping down the street towards them was Fluttershy, though she looked horrible. A long gash ran down her side, and a large wound on her left foreleg made her wince every time she stepped. Before Twilight could speak, Fluttershy lunged towards the beast, knocking away Bentgrass’s hooves and embracing the creature in a maternal hug.

“Fluttershy, get away from the monster!” Twilight cried.

Tears streaming down her face, Fluttershy looked up at her. “He’s not a monster! He’s my friend!”

Twilight shot her a puzzling glance before looking again at the thing. Slowly, she once more took in its features: the black, button-like nose; the long, floppy ears that hung limp from its head; the beady eyes; the tufts of white fur. Realization slowly dawned on her, and her jaw went slack. Her eyes darted between her friend, and the barely recognizable creature she had known for years. “F-F-Fluttershy, is... is that...”

Fluttershy nodded slowly, running a hoof lovingly across the thing’s long muzzle. “Angel Bunny,” she whispered through her sobs.

Twilight had to take a step back. She had known Angel since she arrived in Ponyville. Sure, he seemed to have an attitude problem, sometimes being even more obstinate than Spike, but the tiny bunny loved Fluttershy unconditionally. His protectiveness of his owner and friend was infamous in the small town. Now, laying on the street, the animal no longer seemed horrifying or terrible. It seemed... sad, pathetic, tragic.

As slowly as she could, Twilight walked towards Fluttershy. Still casting a wary gaze at the hulking Angel every now and then, she knelt down at her side. “Fluttershy, what happened?”

Fluttershy never took her eyes off of Angel, still gently stroking his monstrous muzzle. “W-we had just finished with t-t-the last patient when A-Angel f-fell down and started screaming. He... He,” she paused as a wracking sob hit her, “he c-changed and attacked me.” She looked to Twilight with a pleading gaze. “Oh, I know he didn’t m-m-mean to! It must have been... h-her...”

At this, Bentgrass stepped towards them, a cold look in his eye. “Her? Her who?”

Fluttershy said nothing at first, merely sobbing and shaking her head. Finally, she looked away and spoke softly. “I... I saw her. Just outside t-t-the Everfree, right b-before Angel... right before. It... it was—”

“What’s going on he— *by the Goddesses!*”

The ponies whipped around to see Sheriff Shackle and Deputy Bale standing on the other end of the street. Shackle was staring at the fallen rabbit, abject terror plastered on his chubby features. He took a few steps forward, tripping on a cobble stone that was knocked loose during the fight. Carefully pacing around it, he looked from the beast to Bentgrass and Twilight. “W-what *is* that thing?”

“A creation of the *pony* that has been killing your citizens!” Bentgrass announced in a voice much louder than was needed. A series of murmurs came from the slowly growing herd of ponies, their eyes shifting from Bentgrass, the monster, and Shackle.

The sheriff snorted indignantly, though his eyes were darting back and forth, a light sheen of sweat appearing on his rotund brow. “N-now, I’ve told you, *Mister Bentgrass*,” he said, though he looked to the displeased crowd instead of the agent, “there is no k—”

With a few long trots, Bentgrass was brow to brow with Shackle, leaning his head down to glare at the sheriff. “I have had *enough* of your incompetence! You *shut up* and let me do my job!” Shackle gulped, his knees shaking as he nodded pitifully.

Bentgrass turned sharply and walked to Fluttershy. “Now, Ms. Fluttershy, you must tell me. *Who* did you see?” Fluttershy didn’t acknowledge him, merely sobbing and continuing to stroke Angel’s chitinous hide. Annoyed, Bentgrass knelt down and took her by the shoulder, whipping her to face him. “*Who?!?*”

She gulped, her eyes still puffy from the tears. Finally, she closed her eyes and hung her head, her tail going limp behind her. “Zecora,” she whispered.

A collective gasp came from the amassed ponies, but none were as loud as the one from Twilight. “Fluttershy,” she said, throwing Bentgrass’s hooves off of her and gently turning her friend to face her, “are you *sure?*”

She could see in her eyes the disbelief, but Fluttershy slowly nodded her head, her ears flat against her head. “Y-yes. She look just like she did w-when we first saw her. T-t-the brown cloak, the glowing yellow eyes.” Her gaze hardened somewhat, though sadness still shone through the anger. “I saw her, Twilight. She... she did this to Angel.”

“Miss Twilight, Benty!”

Twilight spun around to see Professor Parchment, gasping as he ran towards her. He skidded to a halt at the sights before him. “What in the name of all the lochs is *that* thing?”

“Apparently, a victim of the Mbwun I told you about,” Bentgrass said, still eying Fluttershy. He finally turned to the old stallion. “What are you doing here, Professor?”

He said nothing, his jaw slack as he stared at the fallen creature.

“*Professor!*”

Parchment jerked his head up, shaking his head. “Oh, uh, well Ah did a bit o’ studyin’ on that word ye asked me about. Turns out it *is* an ancient Zinzi word.”

Bentgrass narrowed his eyes. “So, you found mention of this Mbwun legend?”

He shook his head. “No, lad. There’s no such thing. Benty,” he said, his voice thick with worry, “it means ‘self’ in old Zinzi.”

Bentgrass shot him a puzzled glance before his eye went wide. “Of course. Twi—”

“Of course! Zecora!” Twilight spun to see Shackle rubbing his chin with a hoof, facing the crowd. “She’s the only pony who could have done such a... a terrible thing! Well, fear not, Ponyville,” he said, puffing out his chest and taking on a dramatic pose. “I, Sheriff Bound Shackle, will go and arrest this... this *criminal* myself, right now! I will see justice done!” he yelled with a flourish. Several ponies cheered, though most just eyed him skeptically.

Bentgrass stood, staring at Shackle through narrowed eyes. “We are coming with you.” He then stepped past Shackle, not waiting for a response.

“Absolutely not! This is *my* town, and I—”

Bentgrass jerked to a halt and spun to face him. The moonlight reflected from his slitted eye, glaring at the fat pony. “You are welcome to try and stop me, good sir.”

Once again, Shackle gulped, though he held his ground, digging into the road with his hoof. “V-very well. Come on, Deputy Bale!” With that, he turned and ran towards the edge of town, Bale taking shaky steps to catch up.



Twilight stood, walking over to Spike, who was still rubbing his tongue with his hand, spitting and gagging. “Spike, you stay here with Fluttershy and...” she turned and cast a sad glance at the monster on the ground, “Angel. If he starts to get violent...”

Spike nodded. “Got it. You be careful.”

With that, he reached over and gave her one more tight hug. She returned it, then pushed him away and trotted up to Bentgrass. The agent turned to face her, his eyes now as impassive as ever.

“*Now* do you believe me?” He then turned and began running after Shackle and Bale.

She glared hard at him, though in her heart she could not muster the anger she wished she could feel. Though she still could not believe it, she could not deny what her friend had seen. Without another sound, she galloped after him, leaving behind the crowd of ponies still staring at the yellow pegasus that sat on the ground crying, and the beast that had once been her dear friend.

Twilight and Bentgrass raced through the Everfree Forest as fast as they dared, which was much slower than Twilight wanted. The thick canopy prevented the moonlight from penetrating, meaning the only respite from the dark shadows threatening to swallow them was the dull glow from her horn. Dodging fallen trees and low-hanging branches was difficult enough; doing so by horn-light while at a dead sprint was all but impossible. Bentgrass's slight limp wasn't making it any easier, either.

What seemed like ages ago she and Bentgrass ran past Sheriff Shackle and Deputy Bale. Though they were a few minutes behind them to start, they found Shackle huffing and wheezing shortly after they entered the forest proper. With an empathetic glance at Bale, they ran past them towards Zecora's hut, ignoring the panting cries of protest from the fat sheriff.

Finally, the pair slowed as they smelled the telling scent of exotic spices and herbs, signaling they were close. Bentgrass placed a hoof over his lips and made a shush sound, then pointed to Twilight's horn and shaking his head. Twilight nodded and cut off her magic, plunging the woods back into darkness. Turning back to the front, Bentgrass crouched low and began to creep forward, Twilight beside him.

Twilight was amazed that the tall stallion made so little noise while moving through the sea of dead leaves. His gangly limbs moved with an otherworldly precision, landing in dry grass and leaves without a sound. Twilight did her best to emulate his movements, but the guilt gnawing at her made her steps clumsy and loud. Finally, she turned to Bentgrass.

"I'm sorry."

The agent shot her a withering glare, once more placing a firm hoof before his muzzle.

Twilight was undeterred, the guilt weighing too heavily on her. "I'm sorry about earlier."

Bentgrass sighed. "Think nothing of it, Ms. Sparkle," he whispered. "You're a scientist, not a war mage. Combat magic isn't something easily grasped."

Twilight rolled her eyes. "No, I meant—"

"I know what you meant, Twilight, and it's all right."

"That was way out of line, bringing up your wife like that. I was just so angry."

Bentgrass sighed. “Let not your heart be troubled, Twilight. Old wounds, improperly healed, require very little salt.”

Twilight nodded and turned her head forward, ducking slightly to dodge a low branch. The spicy smell was growing stronger, but she couldn’t hear any of the usual signs of life from the hut, or the surrounding area: no quiet explosions from mixing concoctions, no melodious humming, nothing. All of this only added to her worry for her friend.

“I still can’t believe it,” she whispered as she gingerly hopped to the left to avoid a patch of poison ivy. “I mean, I’ve known Zecora for *years!* She’s never shown signs of being... unstable.”

“I was getting to that before we were... interrupted.” His voice was low, business-like. “After her father killed his wife, he was committed to a Zebrican mental institution. Having visited one on a case a few years ago, I can tell you they are... not pleasant places.” He shuddered slightly before continuing. “Three weeks ago, he committed suicide in his cell. I believe this is what caused Zecora’s break from reality.”

“Still. She came to help us! She wanted to stop this. Why would she do that?”

Bentgrass sighed. “It would seem to be further evidence of her instability. Think about it,” he said, ducking closer to her to speak lower, “the professor said the word *Mbwun* is a way of referring to one’s self. My guess is her rational mind could not face what she had done, so it made up a story about some ancient Zebrican demon, which she called the *Mbwun*. Subconsciously, she knew what it meant. The story set, she came to us for help in stopping the demon, not realizing what—”

Twilight jumped as a loud crash came from beyond the tree line. Bentgrass jerked to a halt, holding a hoof out to stop Twilight. He crouched down after a moment, inching forward until the tree hut came into view. Twilight crept up beside him as he knelt before a fallen log, and peeked her head up to look.

The upper canopy of the forest was still thick; only a few faint slivers of moonlight scattered down on the tree hut. Dark shadows extended from the tree like wispy tendrils of blackness reaching outward. A faint orange flicker from the windows was the only other light visible. The placement and color reminded Twilight of the gleaming eyes of a predator. The masks that hung from the branches glared at her, snarling faces painted in shadow from the sparse light. Several had fallen to the ground, the ropes torn as if somepony had ripped them down in rage.

Twilight strained to see any sign of Zecora. The dim glow flickered and danced in the windows, casting angry shadows barely visible in the dark ground. A flash of movement passed in a window. Twilight instinctively ducked down, though she cursed herself under her breath. Here was one of her closest friends, obviously in need of help, and she was jumping like a foal.

After a moment, Bentgrass tapped her shoulder. “All right. You wait here, I’ll go.”

As he moved to rise, Twilight yanked him back down by his coat. “No, I’m going first.”

“Twilight, it’s too dangerous. I can not allow—”

“*No!*” she hissed. “That’s *my* friend in there. I don’t care what she’s done. If you’re right, then she’s not dangerous, she’s *sick*.” She cast a glance to the hut before turning back to him. “I’m going in there and helping my friend, understand?”

Bentgrass chewed on her words for a moment before sighing. “Very well, Twilight.” She stood, but he held her in place. “Now remember, she likely has no memory of committing these deeds. Trying to confront her with this will only confuse her further.” He lifted his head to cast another glance at the dark hut. “Try and convince her to come with us to Ponyville, and we will get her the help she needs.”

Twilight nodded and stood up. Taking one final breath to steady her tattered nerves, she stepped from the shadows and began her approach to the dark hut. Now that she had a clear view, her tail froze behind her, and her ears splayed hard against her head. Several of the jars from the trees were broken, their contents splattered on the tree, shards of ceramic laying around the gnarled roots. Scratch marks and hoof prints dotted the trunk, as well.

The grim situation weighed heavily on Twilight with every step she took; her legs felt like they had lead weights attached. Zecora had been a dear friend for almost a decade, and in that time she was nothing but a gentle, humble equine. After the stumbles of their first meeting, she had become more and more welcome in the small town. Her dazzling storytelling abilities made her irreplaceable during Nightmare Night, and she had come to the elementary school numerous times to teach lessons about nature, medicine and history.

Twilight shook her head, steeling herself as she approached the hut. She stood beneath one of the windows carved into the trunk, and reared up on her hind legs to peer inside. The flickering glow came from a dying fire in the middle of the floor, tossing ghostly shadows in the already dark room. The caldron that usually hung above it was knocked

over. Beyond the shimmering shadows, she could see no movement, so she eased down and walked to the door.

She raised a hoof to knock, but stopped. *What do I say? 'Hey, Zecora, my friend thinks your a deranged lunatic. Want to come to the library for some tea?'* She huffed, annoyed by her own nervousness. This was one of her best friends. Setting her shoulders, she brought her hoof down on the door. A quiet “eep” escaped when it swung open under the force of the gentle knock. Despite her mental coaching, her tailed flicked behind her as she gingerly stepped into the hut.

“Zecora?” she said, her voice sounding more shaky than she had hoped. “It’s Twilight. I just wan—” She jerked to a halt, feeling icy dread overcome her, and she turned back to the door. “Bentgrass, come here!”

The words had barely left her mouth when the agent strode next to her. “Oh, my.”

The room was poorly illuminated by the dim embers of the fire and the bright glow of Twilight’s horn, but what they could see was chaos. Nearly all of the relics that had hung from the walls, obviously precious artifacts from her home, were strewn about the floor. The large tribal mask Bentgrass had asked about the last time they were there was smashed into several large pieces, and the tiny fertility statue was broken in half. All of the many jars of potions and cure-alls were broken and leaking on the dirt floor of the hut.

Twilight shuffled over to the back wall. Bathed in lavender light, scratches and pock marks marred the walls. It looked like a feral animal had tried to claw its way out. Even the shelves themselves were torn down and scattered, littering the floor.

“Twilight, shine some light over here.”

She turned to where Bentgrass knelt, on the bottom side of the overturned kettle. Walking over, she leaned her head down to shine more light on the pool of liquid he was investigating. She squinted, trying to identify it, but its color was obscured by the purple light. It seemed viscous and thick, and gleamed brightly under her light. Her tail froze behind her as the realization hit. “Is... is that...”

Bentgrass gingerly touched a hoof to the pool, raising it to his nose. He inhaled deeply and grimaced. “Blood,” he said, still looking at his hoof. “Still fresh.”

Twilight’s knees turned to jelly and she sank to the ground. “So, is she...”

“Most likely not. Judging by the amount of blood, she is probably still alive.” He scanned the room, idly glancing about as Twilight got back to her hooves and stood by his side.

She, too, looked around and took in the destruction around her. “What happened in here?”

“Nothing good,” he said flatly. “Perhaps one of her chimeras turned on her.”

Twilight opened her mouth to protest his words, but as she continued to scan the hut, she couldn’t find the words to fight him. The claw marks, the smashed shelves, broken artifacts. *It all fits, if she really...*

A series of hurried hoof steps came from behind them. They turned to see Sheriff Shackle leaning against the door frame, gasping loudly as sweat poured from his chubby face. “Ponyville... Sheriff’s... Dep... Department!” he gasped.

Bentgrass glared at him for only a second before continuing his scan of the hut. “How nice of you to join us, Sheriff.” A shuffling of hooves and Deputy Bale appeared in the doorway, huffing slightly.

The fat pony wiped the sweat off his brow and stared at Bentgrass. “How *dare* you! I told you before, Ponyville is *my* town, and *I* will make any arrests! Don’t think that shiny gold badge means you can waltz in and do *my* job!”

Twilight ignored his indignant rant, looking around the hut for signs of her friend. Suddenly, her ear flicked, angling towards a pile of rubble in the corner. Turning her body, she peered into the mass of shadow. “Shh!”

“Miss Sparkle, how dare you—”

“*Shut up!*” she hissed.

Shackle opened his mouth, but a cold glare from Bentgrass silenced him. He tip-hoofed to Twilight. “What is it, Ms. Sparkle?”

She said nothing, merely inclining her head towards the darkness. The purple glow from her horn showed a pile of debris near the wall of the hut. A large plank of wood, most likely from a table, leaned against the pile, resembling a door. Bentgrass turned his head slightly, angling his ear towards the pile, and then he heard it: a quiet, raspy breathing, along with an occasional grunt.

With a thought, Twilight reached out her magic and grabbed the board, slowly easing it away. The obstruction removed, she refocused her horn to light the shadows. A small cry came as she looked.

There, beneath what looked like a miniature hut made of rubble, sat Zecora, though she was barely recognizable. Several long, jagged cuts ran down her angular muzzle, lines of dried blood staining her coat. Blood slowly dripped from her ears, where it looked like somepony had ripped her earrings out. Her forelegs were curled underneath her twitching body, her hindlegs slightly bent like a cat ready to pounce.

The worst part, and what sent a jolt of pity racing through Twilight's heart, were her eyes. Both were bloodshot to the point that her irises were almost completely red, and her pupils were barely visible pinpricks. Both eyes darted back and forth at a frenzied pace, dancing between the four ponies before her.

Twilight took a hesitant step towards Zecora. With a shuddering breath, she knelt down and reached a hoof out towards her friend. "Z-Zecora?" The zebra's whole body jerked at the slow movement, her wild eyes focusing on Twilight. "I-it's me, Twilight. Are you... what happened here?"

Zecora canted her head, quirking her eyebrows. Her shuddering breath seemed to match the twitching of her body, but she gave no other indication that she heard Twilight. Now that she was closer, Twilight could see more tiny scratches dotting her striped coat. Peering down, the one forehoof that she could see was torn and cracked. Somewhere in the back of her mind, the pieces fell into place as she turned her head once more to the destruction around her. *She... she did this...*

"Twilight," Bentgrass said in a hushed voice behind her, "very slowly, step away."

She shook her head, turning back to face her shaking friend. "No. I'm not leaving h—"

"*Twilight!*" he said more forcefully. "The dagger is missing."

Slowly, she turned her head to Bentgrass, who motioned to the one shelf in the entire hut that was still on the wall. She looked to see the brass stand that once held the ceremonial knife now empty. Inhaling sharply, she turned back to Zecora and looked down. She had just enough time to recognize a bejeweled gold bangle around Zecora's hidden foreleg before she was roughly pushed aside.

"That's enough of this!" Sheriff Shackle stomped a forehoof, glaring at Zecora. "Ms. Zecora, you are under arrest for the mur—"

It almost happened too fast for Twilight to register. With a feral shriek, Zecora exploded from the pile of rubble towards the sheriff, brandishing the dagger. Shackle barely had time to cry out when the blade sank into his chest with a wet crunch. He fell to the ground, Zecora landing on top of him.

“Sheriff!” Deputy Bale rushed towards the fallen pony. As she neared, Zecora whipped her head around and snarled. She lunged backwards with both her legs, bucking Bale square in the jaw. She flew back and hit the wall with a thunderous crash before falling limply to the ground.

With a sickening pop, Zecora pulled the blade from Shackle’s chest, causing him to cry out once more as blood poured from the gaping wound. She rose to her bloody hooves and turned to face Bentgrass and Twilight. The wild look in her bloodshot eyes remained, and a small amount of white-ish spittle dripped from her mouth as she growled at them.

Twilight was rooted to the ground. Her brain was still trying to process what she just witnessed when Zecora charged at her, screaming loudly. As she neared she raised the dagger high, the sheriff’s blood still dripping from the blade, all Twilight could see were the frenzied eyes of her friend, and the bloodlust in them.

Zecora brought the blade down towards Twilight when a white hoof deflected her foreleg. The force of the blow jerked Zecora to the side just in time to see Bentgrass’s other hoof flying at her face. With a dull crunch and a howl of pain, Zecora reeled back, clutching her snout. Bentgrass leaped on her, tackling her to the ground.

Zecora roared in anger and tried to bring the knife to bear, but Bentgrass turned to his side on top of her and pinned her forelegs to the ground. Grunting loudly against the struggling zebra, he managed to wiggle the manacle towards the end of her wrist.

Sensing his plan, Twilight’s horn glowed and she yanked the blade off Zecora’s arm, flinging it to the side. Zecora yelled again and reached her head up to Bentgrass’s. Her mouth found his right cheek and bit down hard. Bentgrass screamed and tried to get away, but Zecora’s jaw was clenched tight. Warm blood began to trickle down his face. With a desperate cry, he rammed his elbow into her gut. She gasped loudly and released him, and he rolled away.

As Zecora gathered her breath, Twilight’s horn glowed once more. A layer of purple light spread across Zecora’s midsection. Immediately, she began to struggle against the



restraint. Twilight squinted in effort; the telekinetic blanket was just enough to keep her down, but she kept it light enough so she didn't hurt her.

Her hoof steps were light as she knelt behind the groaning zebra. "Zecora, please stop!" She cautiously reached a hoof to her shoulder. "You're not well. You need *help*. Please let us—"

Zecora whipped her head around to face her, sending droplets of spittle flying. Twilight looked briefly into her eyes; all the warmth was gone, replaced by blind fury. With a primal scream that made Twilight's ears ring, Zecora bucked both her hind legs back.

The blow connected with Twilight's chin, sending her spinning back toward the wall. Sharp pain registered in her mind, but was soon replaced by numbness and an all-consuming drowsiness. She struggled to her knees, but the world spun wildly around her and she fell back to her side.

Raising her head briefly, trying to see through the growing blackness, she vaguely heard somepony call her name. She opened her mouth to respond, but only a muted groan escaped as she laid her head back down and the darkness consumed her.

• • •

*Swirling darkness and muted sounds.*

*Somewhere far off in the miasma, somepony talking.*

*In the distance, a faint point of light.*

*The inky blackness surrounded her, thick ooze seeking to drag her into oblivion.*

*Surging her strength, she pushed hard against the consuming black, reaching for the light as the voices grew louder and more distinct.*

*"—en almost a day, an' she sti—"*

*The heavy accent gave her hope, and she pushed as hard as she could against the dark, the light enveloping her.*

• • •

With a heavy groan, Twilight opened her eyes, only to close them immediately under the harsh assault of light. The ground beneath her felt soft, inviting, a slight warmth from below beckoning her back to sleep. She groaned once more and moved to sit upright, but a gentle hoof eased her back down.

“Whoa, easy there, sugarcube. Ya took a nasty blow t’ the head.”

“Ngh, A... Applejack?” She opened her eyes again, this time slowly. The world came into focus, revealing her friend standing by her side.

“Last time I checked,” she said with a soft grin.

“Where am I?”

“Ponyville General.” Twilight turned and saw Rainbow standing on the other side. Rainbow reached a hoof to Twilight’s foreleg. “Bright Eyes over there brought you in last night,” she said, nodding her head towards a couch along the far wall.

With a grunt of effort, she sat upright, pushing past Applejack’s hoof and took in her surroundings. The dull florescent lights of the hospital bathed the muted grey walls in cold light. A small machine next to her beeped softly in rhythm with her heartbeat, long wires connected to pads on her chest. A large window to her right revealed a large field bathed in late afternoon light, gold rays of sunlight bouncing off of browned grass.

Turning her head back, she saw Bentgrass laying on the couch. His normally immaculate suit was wrinkled and stained, and his mane was ragged, a far cry from its usual coiffured state. A large bandage covered his right cheek, a tiny spot of red in the middle.

“Are you okay?” she said, her voice thick with concern.

“Yes, I shall be fine.” He tenderly touched his hoof to the bandage, wincing slightly. “The wound required several stitches, but it’s no matter. Besides,” he said, a small smile on his face as he looked into Twilight’s eyes, “Captain Anvil once told me that, ‘chicks dig scars.’”

“Shoot, Twi, I wish I coulda seen ‘im! Th’ doctor told me he came in here bleedin’, limpin’, an’ draggin’ four ponies by his teeth!” Applejack looked to Bentgrass, a warm smile on her face. “Ya ever get tired of being a secret agent, we could use ya on th’ farm.”

Twilight gasped as the memories of the previous night flooded back to her. “The sheriff! Is... is he...”

“Still in surgery,” Bentgrass said, rising from his seat and walking to the bed. “Under the care of Doctor Well.” He let out a grim chuckle. “Were I in a more jovial mood, I would point out the delicious irony in that.”

She slowly nodded, letting out a small breath she didn’t realize she had held. While the fat stallion may be one of the most despicable ponies she’d ever met, she was still glad he was alive. “And Hay Bale?”

“Deputy Bale escaped with merely a fractured jaw. She’ll be drinking her meals for a few weeks, but she will be fine.” He cast an even gaze at Rainbow. “It appears you won’t be getting much... *action*, on your date, Ms. Dash.”

“*Shh!*” She glared at him before casting an innocent gaze and a toothy smile to Applejack.

“Uh, what’d ya mean, her da—”

“*Twilight!*”

All four turned to see Spike standing in the doorway, a tray of drinks in his claws. The tray fell with a loud crash as he lunged towards Twilight and enveloped her in a tight hug, earning a loud groan from her. “Oh, Twi, I was so worried! They didn’t know when you were going to wake up, and I was afra—”

A muffled snicker from behind him made him stop and turn around. Rainbow held a hoof to her face, not quite holding in her laughter, and Applejack wore a warm smile. Quickly, he released his hold on Twilight, stepping away from the bed and running a claw over his head spines, clearing his throat. “Erm, I mean, uh... Glad you’re okay.” He grinned sheepishly.

Twilight smiled at him, laid back down and winced, the sudden movement sending a wave of dull pain and nausea through her. Rubbing her brow, she saw a large basket on the table next to her bed. Cookies, cupcakes, and brownies of all shapes and sizes overflowed from it, leaving a sea of crumbs and fallen treats beneath. She smiled. “I take it Pinkie was here?”

Applejack laughed. “Yep. All of us were here at some point. We finally decided to take turns watchin’ over ya ‘til ya woke up.” She frowned, looking at the clock on the wall. “Come t’ think of it, Rarity an’ Pinkie shoulda been here by now.” She shook her head. “Ah, well, yer awake now, so I guess it don’t matter anyhow.”

Twilight nodded slowly, her mind adrift. Her memories of the previous night were still muddy, a blurry pool of shadows and pain. One memory, however, was burned into her mind.

*Her eyes, staring at me...*

“Where’s Zecora?”

A brief moment of silence followed. The three ponies and adolescent dragon nervously looked away. The quiet sound of hooves pawing at the ground and a scaly tail tapping a hesitant beat echoed in the small room.

Finally, Bentgrass cleared his throat. “Downstairs, in custody. I managed to subdue her last night, but only just. Since then she has been...”

“I want to see her.”

“Twi, you’ve... we’ve *all* been through a lot.” Dash laid a comforting hoof on her foreleg. “I think we should all just go home and rest.”

“No,” she replied, shaking her head slowly to avoid the dull pain. “I want to see her.”

“Ms. Sparkle, you’re really in no condition to—”

Before Bentgrass could finish, Twilight threw the sheet off of her. With a loud groan, she rotated her prostrate body to the side, her hind legs dangling over the edge of the hospital bed. She started to lean forward when a slight wave of nausea hit her. Before she could fall back, Spike leaned in and gently touched a claw to her back, propping her up. She looked over at him with a thankful smile. With Spike carefully guiding her, she eased off of the bed and stood to her hooves. A dull pain throbbed in the back of her skull, but she screwed her eyes shut and waited for it to pass. A few moments later, she opened her eyes and stared resolutely at Bentgrass.

“Take me to her.”

• • •

The trip down to the basement was quick. Rainbow and Applejack lead the way with Spike staying next to Twilight to support her. Bentgrass walked behind them, eerily silent the whole trip. They walked down a flight of stairs that Rainbow and Twilight quickly

recognized. When they reached the bottom and walked down the cold hallway, Twilight made a concerted effort to not gaze down the adjacent hall to the morgue.

She shivered as she walked past the cold stone walls of the basement. Breathing in through her nose, she could smell... nothing—not the pleasant scent of potpourri from the lobby, nor the stark antiseptic of the patient rooms. Down here the air seemed stale, like there was something that even the wind refused to carry. The harsh, direct light of naked bulbs hung every few feet did very little to assuage her nerves. There were no windows down here, which made the fur on the back of her neck stand on end. *Even the morgue had a window! What could possibly be worse than that?*

After a few more lengths, they finally rounded a corner that showed a large door marking the end of the hallway. Twilight couldn't fight a shudder as she stared at the imposing door. Unlike upstairs, where each door had one simple lock built into the knob, this one didn't even *have* a knob. In the very center of the door sat a thick metal wheel connected to four large, heavy-looking bars, each spanning the length of the door and locking into place along the wall on each side. Above it hung a sign: *Psychiatric Ward. Authorized ponies only.*

On the left wall was a large pane of sturdy glass, behind which stood a unicorn wearing hospital whites. Bentgrass walked up to the window and pressed his badge against the glass. The unicorn studied it for a moment, then stared at Bentgrass before nodding and lighting his horn. Twilight jumped as the four bars on the door retracted from the wall with a thunderous clang. Slowly, the door swung open and the five of them walked inside.

Sterile was the only word Twilight could think of to describe the hallway they found themselves in. The floor tiles, the ceiling, even the walls were blindingly white, so much so that it almost hurt to look at them. The floor wasn't waxed like the lobby, but there wasn't a single scuff that she could see. Warm light diffused from above. She looked up, squinting at the lights. A slight tingling in her horn confirmed what she thought: the lights were thaumatic, not electric. She thought about it and it made sense; every aspect of the hall seemed to be aimed at exuding a calming effect. Given the patients held here, it was probably a good idea.

The hallway was wide enough that all four ponies and Spike walked side by side and still had room to move. Situated on the walls, about every ten lengths or so, a large window sat next to a sturdy-looking door, secured like the one they just walked through. Curiosity getting the better of her, Twilight edged to the side and peeked in one of the windows.

The floors and walls of the cell were padded all the way around. The only break in the plush padding was the window itself. In the middle of the large room sat a blue mare. Her grey mane was wild and ragged, like she hadn't bathed in days. The mare lay on the ground on her side, a slight line of drool falling from her mouth and collecting in a puddle beneath her. She looked to the window and saw Twilight. In an instant, she leaped from the ground and rushed to the window, placing her forehooves on the window and sticking her tongue out. Twilight yelped and jumped back, staring at her. It took her a moment to realize that she was panting like a dog.

“Yes, Screw Loose is one of our more... *fun* patients here.”

Twilight tore her eyes from the window and saw a cream-coated unicorn mare with a blue mane, tied neatly into a ponytail. She wore a white doctor's coat, and a clipboard hovered in the air next to her. “I'm Doctor Stitch, and *you* shouldn't be out of bed, Doctor Sparkle.”

Twilight fidgeted a little, still not used to her official title. “I feel fine, Doctor. We wanted to pay a visit to Zecora.”

Doctor Stitch's face fell, and her eyes scanned between the group before she sighed heavily. “I don't think that would be wise. Ms. Zecora is... not well.”

“Please, Doc.” Applejack stepped forward, offering a warm look at the doctor. “She's our friend. I know she's in a bad way at th' moment, but we'd be much obliged if we could jest talk to her fer a minute.” The rest of the group nodded their agreements except for Bentgrass, who silently looked at the ground beneath his hooves.

Doctor Stitch floated her clipboard back to a holder on the wall and sighed again. “That's the problem. She's... not in a talking mood at the moment.” She looked up and saw the looks of confusion on their faces. “Very well. Follow me.”

The group continued down the gleaming white hallway. Twilight tried to avoid looking at the many windows lining the hallway, looking straight down at the ground, but she couldn't help a few glances. In one, a purple stallion paced around in circles, apparently yelling at somepony who wasn't there. Another showed an elderly mare pressed against the glass, a murderous glare in her eyes. In the next window, a young stallion with a wild mane sat calmly in the middle of the room, smiling widely at Twilight. His eyes were wide open, and a slight twitch danced on the corner of his mouth. Twilight shuddered and turned her eyes back to the floor.

Finally, they arrived at the end of the hallway, Doctor Stitch motioning to the window on the left side. Rainbow and Applejack immediately rushed to the window, though Twilight hesitated. In her mind's eye, she could still see the look of unfiltered anger, the primal hate in Zecora's eyes. It wasn't something she was eager to see again.

A loud gasp from Spike shook the memories from her. He was next to Dash and AJ, though he was crouched slightly so he could see. Bentgrass stood against the opposite wall, still examining his hooves. Twilight stepped towards him. "You're not going to look?"

"I've seen it," he said quietly.

Turning away from him, she took a deep breath and stepped to the window, squeezing between Applejack and Spike. She gasped as she looked in. Zecora was pacing along the back wall of the cell. All four of her hooves were encased in odd-looking shoes that ran all the way up to her knees, several buckles running up the side. The ends of each were tipped with thick padding. Her face was obscured by a large muzzle, a cage of thick metal bars and straps that went around her head. The ground she paced on had smudges of red, and when Twilight looked harder she could see many of the scratches and cuts on her coat were still bleeding.

Rainbow whipped back and glared at Doctor Stitch. "Why haven't you treated her wounds?"

"She wouldn't let us get close enough! We treated a few when she was unconscious after Agent Bentgrass brought her in, but as soon as she woke up, she began fighting and kicking anypony who got near her."

Twilight shook her head. "Well, can't you sedate her?"

"Again, we tried. I've pumped enough Thorazine in her to kill a manticore." She trotted up to the window and gazed in, running a hoof through her hair. "It's like nothing I've ever seen. She *should* be comatose! I'm going to give her another hour, then I'm going to have to anesthetize her."

Slowly, Twilight looked back to the window. Zecora still paced along the wall, giving no indication that she had seen them. "Can she hear us?"

"No. There's a soundproofing spell around all the cells."

"Can you please lower it? I'd like to talk to her."

The doctor scuffed her hoof along the ground. “Doctor Sparkle, that’s not a good id—”

“Please,” she interrupted. “Lower it. I want to talk to my friend.”

Doctor Stitch looked between the group and sighed. “Very well. But I don’t think you’re going to like what you hear.” Her horn glowed briefly and a quiet pop came from the window.

At once, Twilight could hear a quiet grunting from inside the room. Zecora was breathing heavily, but made no other sound. Twilight cleared her throat. “Zecora? It’s Twilight. Can you—”

As soon as she began talking, Zecora whipped her head up, glaring at the group of ponies. Her eyes narrowed, and with a furious shriek, she lunged towards the window. Spittle flew from her mouth as she screamed. She didn’t slow down as she approached, and with a final leap, she rammed her head into the strong glass, leaving a stain of sweat and blood. All three mares and Spike jumped back, Applejack letting out a loud yelp. Zecora was knocked back from the impact, but immediately jumped to her hooves and charged the window again, this time beating her forehooves against the glass.

“Zecora, it’s us.” Rainbow’s voice was almost drowned out by Zecora’s howls or fury, though Twilight could hear the tremble in her voice as she spoke. “It’s Rainbow Dash and Applejack, remember?”

Zecora didn’t let up, continuing to pound her hooves on the window as she screamed in rage. Twilight looked at her face and saw the same look as before; no more wisdom, no kindness, just rage: pure, unfiltered hatred. “P-put it back up.”

“Doctor Sparkle, I told y—”

“*Stop calling me that!*” She glared at the doctor, even as tears began to fall from her eyes. “Just put it back up.”

Doctor Stitch sighed and lit her horn. Another quiet pop and the screams cut off, though they could still hear a dull thumping as Zecora kept assaulting the glass.

Twilight stood in the middle of the spacious hallway, looking at nothing but the ground beneath her. Spike cautiously walked up to her and put an arm around her shoulder, but Twilight shrugged him off. “I want to go home.”



Applejack walked up to her and nodded. “Sure thing, sugarcube.” She turned to look at Doctor Stitch. “She okay to leave, Doc?”

“Well, there was no severe damage. I’d like to keep her for another day for observation, but it appears she has good friends to keep an eye on her,” she said with a small smile. “Doc— *Ms. Sparkle*, if you start to feel ill, please come right back, okay?”

Twilight was already walking down the hallway, still not looking up. “I already feel ill,” she whispered as she walked away, the muted thumps against the glass sounding like thunder in her head.

The three of them silently made their way back to the library. Bentgrass hadn't said a word since they left the psychiatric ward, merely staring straight ahead. Spike walked next to Twilight. A few times he had opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Twilight kept her head down, trying to lose herself in her thoughts, but no amount of focus could drown out the whispers and rumors surrounding her.

"It must have been all the years of isolation that drove Zecora bonkers."

"Is it true that she tried to kill Twilight?"

"I heard she ripped the sheriff's heart out and made him eat it before he died!"

Spike sighed and spun to face the ponies leering at them. "All right, guys, that's enough. Twilight's had a rough night. Please leave us alone." The amassed ponies ignored him, still muttering to each other and leering at Twilight.

Finally, Spike growled and raised his head to the sky, unleashing a small torrent of green flame. The ponies before him cried out and retreated from the searing heat. Spike looked back down at the frightened crowd, smoke bellowing from his mouth. "*Get outta here!*"

The ponies turned tail and ran, the memories of Spike's fight with the monster still fresh in their minds. Spike let out a sharp breath, expelling the remaining smoke before turning back to Twilight and placing his arm over her shoulder. "Come on, Twi. Let's go."

Wordlessly, the trio continued. The group let out a collective sigh when they finally reached the library, all of them eager to get away from the leering eyes and whispers

Libraries weren't exactly known for their upbeat energy, and the Books and Branches was no exception. Twilight had always done her best to keep the library quiet and calm, minor laboratory explosions notwithstanding. She found the quiet very reassuring; a gentle presence around her that kept the worries of the world at bay.

However, as she sat at the kitchen table, her head resting on her forelegs on the tabletop, the serenity felt oppressive. A thick cloud of dread permeated the small kitchen, dampening her already sour mood. Even the colors seemed muted and dull despite the bright late-afternoon sun that poured in from the window above the sink. The only sound was the rhythmic tapping from Bentgrass's forehoof. Seated across the table from

her, the agent was as silent as he had been in the walk from the hospital. He sat there, staring intently at some random point on the far wall, a slight scowl in his face.

Twilight sighed and rubbed her eyes. Part of her wanted to be happy. They'd caught the killer; Ponyville was safe once more. However, the echoes of her friend pounding her padded hooves on thick glass ran through her mind, killing any relief she might feel. *Zecora...*

A quiet scraping sound brought her back to reality. A plate bearing a daisy sandwich was pushed in front of her. Looking up, she saw Spike wearing a sympathetic smile. She turned her head away and pushed the plate back to him.

Undeterred, Spike pushed it back. "Come on, Twi. You have to eat something."

"Not hungry." She didn't even raise her head.

"It's your *fav-o-rite!*" he said in a sing-song tone. Twilight didn't even flinch.

Spike sighed and picked up the sandwich, taking a small bite and chewing thoughtfully. Several more minutes of silence passed. After he finished the sandwich, Spike turned and put a claw on Twilight's shoulder. "Hey, Twi, cheer up. I know things seem bad now, but don't worry. They'll go back to normal eventually. They always do."

"Not this time," she muttered, shrugging off his claw.

Spike was unfazed. "Twi, think about it! Nightmare Moon; Discord; the world-ending eldritch abominations that you and the girls knock out of the sky every other Saturday! This is *nothing* compared to those, and life went back to normal anyway."

"This is different!" She stood from her chair and walked to the sink, staring out the window. "This... this time a friend got hurt! Somepony *I* know is gone and never coming back." Her voice became very small. "I should have done something."

"No." Spike walked up and grabbed her by the shoulders, whipping her around to face him. His slitted eyes bored into hers. "You stop that right now, Twilight! There was nothing you could have done. There was *no way* you could have seen this coming. You hadn't even seen Zecora in almost a month!"

"Exactly!" She threw his claws off and stormed away, crossing the tile floor and stopping near the wall. "All those things you mentioned! Deranged goddesses, vengeful spirits! I can solve those problems without breaking a sweat! But the one time somepony really

needs my help...” She slowly slid down the wall to the ground, the floor very cool against her haunches. “I should have been able to do something,” she said, hanging her head. “I... I failed her.”

The sound of claws clacking on the floor made her turn around. Spike stood before her, appraising her with an angry gaze, and roughly grabbed her shoulders. Twilight let out a soft grunt as he yanked her into a fierce hug. Twilight sat still at first, but eventually returned the gesture, enjoying the pleasant warmth radiating from his steel-hard scales.

The two sat there for a moment, Bentgrass’s tapping hoof the only sound in the tiny kitchen. Finally, Spike pulled away and looked into Twilight’s eyes, his claws still on her shoulders. “You know, Twi, for a genius, you can be pretty stupid at times.” She chuckled as Spike sat down next to her, bringing his knees to his chest and wrapping his arm around her. “You can’t be everywhere, Twi. Don’t let all those times you’ve saved the world trick you into thinking you’re some kind of superhero. Sometimes bad things happen to those we love, and all you can do is accept it.”

“I know,” Twilight said, “but this isn’t a fallen apple tree or a lost opportunity at meeting the Wonderbolts. Zecora’s gone, and... and she’s not coming back.”

“You’re right. And you know what? You could do what you’re doing now and just cry about it.” Spike sighed, turning his head to look at her. “Tell me, is that what you’re going to do when *I* leave?”

Twilight took in a sharp breath, turning her head to face his.

“Is it? Are you going to mope around for the rest of your life?” A gentle smirk graced his lips. “Because if you do, so help me Celestia, I will find a way to bring you back to life, just so I can yell at you.”

Twilight tried to maintain her sour countenance, but couldn’t hold back the bark of laughter. “You would do something like that.”

He stuck his chin out, a sideways grin on his face. “Darn right I would!”

The two laughed. As their laughter died down, Spike turned back to Twilight. “Look, what happened to Zecora sucks.” Twilight glared at him. “What? It does!” he said with a shrug. “But life goes on, you know? She’s gone, but we’re still here. All we can do is move on, and remember the good times.”

“I know.” She spoke softly, her head still hung low. “I just wish I could have been there for her, maybe spent more time with her.”

“Y-yeah.” Spike was silent for a moment, gnawing on his lower lip. “H-hey, Twi?”

“Yeah?”

“I think... tomorrow I’m gonna tell the girls—about me going away, I mean.”

A small smile spread across Twilight’s face. “You are? But I thought you didn’t want them to worry?”

“Well, I don’t,” he stammered, rubbing the back of his neck, “but I think they deserve to know, you know?” His head turned to Bentgrass, who hadn’t moved during the entire conversation. “Besides, I’d hate to leave things unfinished for them.”

When he turned his head back to Twilight, he groaned loudly at the goofy grin she wore. “Oh, shut up.”

“What? I didn’t say anything!”

“You didn’t need to! You had that, ‘aw, my widdle guy’s all grown up’ look you get!”

She turned her head up, looking at the ceiling with a playful smirk. “I have *no* idea what you’re talking about.” She peeked her eye back down at him and the eyebrow he raised. When their eyes met, they both collapsed on each other’s shoulders in a fit of giggles.

Finally, after she wiped a tear from her eye, she looked back at him with a smile. “Thanks, Spike. What am I going to do without you?”

“Continue to be brilliant,” he said with a half-grin. “And most likely have a nervous breakdown before the year’s out.”

Twilight chuckled again. “You know, you have this uncanny ability to ruin a moment.”

He opened his mouth to reply when a loud, obnoxious knocking came from the main room. He rolled his eyes and stood up. “I’ll get it.”

Slowly, Twilight stood back up, making her way back to the table where Bentgrass sat, still tapping his hoof. She eased herself back into the chair, eyeing the silent detective. Neither the rhythm nor tempo of the tapping had changed since her conversation with

Spike had begun. It was a little unnerving, the way he sat there. His head was supported by his foreleg on top of the table. His brow was furrowed, and he stared at the far wall with blank expression that made the hair on the back of Twilight's neck stand on end. If it weren't for the staccato tapping of his other forehoof, Twilight might have thought he was asleep.

Spike's voice wafted in from the main room. "Sorry, we're clo— hey!"

Twilight turned at the sound of approaching hoofsteps. Not two seconds later, Professor Parchment rounded the corner, wearing the same tacky sweater vest as before and beaming at her.

"Ah, there's the crimefighin' couple of the hour!" He walked up to the table and stood by the middle, flanked by Twilight and Bentgrass. "Ah jes' wanted t' congratulate the two of ye! The streets o' Ponyville are safe once again!"

Neither one spoke, or even looked up at him as he grinned at them. Parchment stood there for a moment before leaning next to Twilight. "So, how does it feel to be a hero once again, lass? The whole town will be singing yer praises fer a while now!"

Twilight shot him a glare then turned her attention back to Bentgrass, who still hadn't moved.

With a nervous laugh, Parchment turned to Bentgrass. "Eh, so, Benty. Ah suppose ye should be headed back to Canterlot now, eh? Not much left to do."

Bentgrass said nothing, merely continuing his attempt at tapping a hole in the kitchen table. After a few moments of silence, Twilight sighed and spoke. "And what about you, Professor? Shouldn't you be getting back to Trotsburg?"

Parchment nodded. "Aye, Ah'm headin' t' the train station now. But it's a long ride, so Ah figured Ah'd stop by and see if yer library has any books that catch my fancy. Ah'd send them back as soon as Ah'm done with them."

"Of course. Spike can help you find anything you'd like."

"Um, actually, Ah was hopin' you would lend me a hoof, Miss Sparkle." He smiled at her and leaned in a bit closer. "Ah'm workin' on a special project, and Ah'd like yer input. Ah think ye'd be an immense help."

Twilight sighed and rolled her eyes. *Yeah, I bet I know what kind of 'input' you want.* Still, it would be a chance to get back to her work, and possibly help take her mind off of Zecora. "Sure, why not?" She slowly stood and began to walk towards the main room. "It's not like I have anything better to do," she muttered.

Parchment beamed at her. "Oh, thank ye so much, lass! Ye'll probably be havin' a lot o' time on yer hooves, now that ye've caught the killer."

"Have we?"

Both Parchment and Twilight jerked to a halt, turning to face Bentgrass. He still sat at the table, staring at the same spot on the wall, but the incessant tapping had ceased.

"What was that, Bentgrass?" Twilight asked.

He turned his head to face them. "I said, 'have we?' Have we *actually* caught the killer?"

After a moment, Parchment took a step towards Bentgrass. "What're ye talkin' about, lad? That crazy zebra mare is locked up right now!"

"True," Bentgrass said, before locking eyes on Parchment, "but *is* she the killer?"

The words hung in the air as silence descended. Twilight eventually spoke up. "But, Bentgrass, *you* were the one who was sure it was her."

"Yes, I was. Now... I'm not so sure."

From behind them, Parchment let out a scoff. "Lad, have ye gone mad? Ah told ye about the spirit ward, *and* the word Mbwun!"

"Yes."

Parchment stared at him before snorting and stamping a hoof. "She nearly *killed* the sheriff, and she tried to kill the two of *you!*"

"I am aware of this, Professor," Bentgrass said quietly, now looking down at the ground, pawing at the white tile floor. "But still..."

Twilight stepped up next to him, her hooves shaking. "But what?"

“Well, if you’ll permit me,” he said as he slowly looked up at Twilight, the barest hints of a smile on his face, “it doesn’t *feel* right.”

After a moment of silence, a loud bark of laughter came from across the kitchen. Parchment took another step towards the pair. “What’s there t’ *feel*, lad? Ye said she was crazy, an’ look at her! She’s droolin’ on herself in the loony bin!”

“Precisely!” Bentgrass looked away from Twilight, the cold, business-like gaze once again on his face. “I believed her to be delusional, not... stark-raving *mad!*”

“What’s the difference, lad?!”

“There is a large difference, Professor! Even patients in the grips of the deepest psychosis are able to at *least* form coherent words. She’s acting more like... like a cavepony!”

Twilight stepped in front of Bentgrass, ignoring the incredulous look from Parchment. “Keep going, Bentgrass.”

Bentgrass walked past them both and into the main room of the library. He paced across the wooden floor, looking down at the floor as he spoke. “Think back to Berry Punch, Twilight. Remember the autopsy photos?” Twilight nodded through a shudder. “Not a single mark on her body past what was needed for the killer to get what he wanted. It was precise, methodical, *conservative* even.” He stopped pacing and faced Twilight. “Do *any* of those words describe Ms. Zecora in her current condition?”

“Not in the least!” Twilight was smiling now. A bright ray of hope shined inside of her. It was possible...

“Furthermore,” Bentgrass said, resuming his trek around the room, “*Doctor Sparkle*, in your estimation, how difficult would it be to cast the kind of spell required to mutate the parasprites and poor Angel Bunny?”

Twilight’s brow furrowed, numbers and calculations flying through her head. “Well, I don’t have all the variables, but based solely on the amount of power used on the parasprites, it would take an enormous level of concentration and focus.”

Bentgrass had made his way over to her. He looked dead into her eyes. The harsh, interrogative look in his eyes remained, but a light smile played across his lips. “Again, did Zecora seem capable of *any* level of focus?”



Twilight met his gaze with one of her own, his determination mirrored in her eyes. “Absolutely not!”

From across the room, Parchment spoke up. “Okay, so... who *did* do it then?”

Bentgrass glanced at Parchment before turning away and walking towards one of the massive bookshelves along the wall. “I don’t know.” His eyes closed, though Twilight could see them dart back and forth as he thought. Finally, he let out a loud grunt and reared his forelegs up, slamming them against the shelf. Twilight tensed slightly, her inner librarian screaming at the abuse of literature.

Bentgrass stood there for several seconds, resting both his forehooves against the shelf, breathing heavily, his head hung. “The puzzle pieces are right there in front of me, but for the life of me I *cannot* make them fit together!” He eased himself back to the ground, his eyes still closed. “There is something we are missing here. Something important..”

“So, what do we do next?” Twilight asked.

“Wait, don’t tell me yer actually *belivin’* this, lass?”

Twilight whipped around and glared at him. “*She’s my friend!* If there’s a chance, even a chance that she’s innocent, we have to look into it.” She stared for a few more moments, then turned back to Bentgrass. “What should we do?”

Bentgrass tapped his chin a few times. “We shall go speak to Ms. Fluttershy. See if she is *absolutely* sure it was Zecora she saw. Most likely, she is at the Sheriff’s office, where they are keeping Angel.”

Twilight nodded. “Okay, let’s go.” With that, she trotted towards the door. “Spike, hold down the fort.” Spike snapped her a quick salute.

She had almost reached the door when Parchment darted in front of her. “Uh, what about mah book?”

Twilight arched an eyebrow. *I don’t have time for this dirty old stallion!* “I’m sorry, Professor, but this is more important. Spike can help you find whatever book you need.”

“Ah’d *really* prefer you t’ help me, lass,” he said with a pleading gaze.

Bentgrass walked up to Parchment, placing a hoof on his shoulder. “I’m sorry, Professor, but Ms. Sparkle must come with me. I believe there is still a killer on the loose, and I

require her assistance. Young Mr. Spike can help you just as well as she could.” He nodded towards the dragon behind them.

Parchment looked at them for a moment then sighed. “Ah suppose yer right, lad. Well, come on, boyo,” he said, walking over to Spike. “We’ve got work to do! Ah’m sure you and me’ll get along just fine!”

“Oh. Yay,” Spike muttered, glaring at Twilight, who merely shrugged as she opened the door.

“Spike, help the professor any way you can. We’ll be back before too long.” With that, Twilight stepped out the door and into the late afternoon sun, Bentgrass trailing behind her.

As they walked down the street, their hooves clicking quietly on the cobblestone beneath them, Twilight looked at the road, eying the remains of the fight last night with Angel. Large gouges had been torn in the road from the beast’s deformed claws, and several lamp posts were bent at odd angles from where it had charged at them. To their right, a group of workers were clearing debris from one of the demolished houses. Through the gaping hole in one, Twilight could see the trench that Spike dug when he was thrown through it. She shuddered at the memory, quickening her pace to leave the thoughts behind.

As she trotted, she couldn’t help but feel a twinge of excitement run through her. It seemed that Bentgrass was finally coming around, realizing that Zecora was set up in some way. This left the sad thought of exactly what happened to the poor zebra, but Twilight shook her head and put that on hold. They could work on helping Zecora once they caught the real killer. Her steps became more solid and she set her jaw, a light smile on her face.

*Just hang on, Zecora.*

• • •

By the time they had reached the station, the sun was almost set on the horizon. The Ponyville Sheriff’s office stood out; amongst the thatched-roof, multi-story buildings that made up most of Ponyville, the single-story brick and mortar structure seemed soulless, cold. A large sign stood in front of the door, underneath which was a smaller sign bearing Sheriff Shackle’s name. A small firefly lantern hummed quietly above the double doors, each with a single window in the middle lined with steel bars. The streetlamps that

lined the road bathed the building in a warm glow, offsetting its cold demeanor. Not even pausing, Bentgrass pushed the door open and walked inside, Twilight close behind him.

Inside, the building was almost as impersonal as the outside. The walls were a bland beige that faded into the white tile floor. Benches lined the walls on both sides, going from the double doors they had entered from to the single door at the end of the hallway. A large bulletin board hung on the left side wall, adorned with fliers for local businesses and advertisements for upcoming community events. On the right was a large window with a small hole cut in the middle, behind which sat a very bored looking young stallion. Twilight recognized him as the colt who had run up to them on the hill a few days ago.

Bentgrass wasted no time marching up to the window and banging on it with his hoof. The colt let out a small yelp and nearly fell out of his chair, the comic book he was reading flung high into the air. After he collected himself, the colt glared through the window at the two. “Sheriff’s not in. If this is an emergency, you can wa—”

Another slam on the window cut him off. Bentgrass pressed his shield case against the glass, glaring right back at the crimson stallion. “Bentgrass, R.I.S. I understand this is where you are keeping Angel Bunny?”

The colt studied the badge for a few moments, his eyes darting between Bentgrass and the photo ID, before answering. “Uh, who?”

Bentgrass rolled his eyes. “The giant monster that attacked last night.”

“Oh, that!” The colt nodded slowly. “Yeah, we got it chained up down in the basement.”

Twilight felt a very tiny wave of pity. It may have tried to kill her, but it was *still* Fluttershy’s best friend. *It must be killing her to see him like that.*

“Is Ms. Fluttershy down there, as well?”

“She was, but she left about an hour ago,” the colt said, moving to pick up his comic book. “Somepony came a little before that, then they both left. Something about a family emergency or something.” He leaned back in his chair, propping his hind legs on the desk before him.

“A pony?” Twilight asked. “Who?” The colt only offered a grunt as he shrugged his shoulders. Twilight growled and lit her horn.

“Hey!” The colt bolted upright as the comic was torn from his hooves. He moved to yell at her but quickly backed down when he saw her glare.

“Well, what did he look like?”

“I... I don't know, lady! He was... he was a pony, all right!” He bent back once more to grab his book. “Look, I've been very busy today. The Sheriff may not survive the night, and Deputy Bale's going to be in the hospital for the rest of the week. I'm just here as part of a high school work program, okay?”

Twilight opened her mouth to yell when Bentgrass calmly laid a hoof on her back. “Twilight, she's not here. This... *foal* is not worth our time. Let's be off.”

She met his eyes for a moment, then slumped her shoulders, nodding. She cast one more annoyed glance at the colt behind the glass before walking back to the doors.

The cool breath of autumn met them as Bentgrass shut the door behind them. He stepped out onto the cobblestone road, gazing up at the sky. Brilliant colors danced across the horizon as sunset neared its end. He sighed, turning to Twilight. “It seems the Fates are against us today, Ms. Sparkle. For once, I find myself at a loss as to what we should do next.”

“We should wait here, I think.” Twilight trotted towards the side of the building and sat roughly on a bench set along the wall. “If I know Fluttershy, she'll be back here as soon as she can to be with Angel.”

Bentgrass followed and nodded. “Quite right. If anything, she sh—”

A shrill buzzing came from inside his coat. Twilight's ears perked up as she looked at him, excitement building inside her despite the situation.

Bentgrass tapped his coat and the buzzing stopped. He glanced at Twilight, then sighed. “I guess there's no more need for secrecy.” He looked over both his shoulders before turning away. “Follow me.”

They walked quickly across the street, Bentgrass constantly scanning for onlookers. After a final glance around, he turned down a small alley between two shops. The temperature seemed to drop a few degrees, the tight confines of the alley amplifying the light breeze. The alley appeared clean, an empty dumpster the only thing Twilight could see in the waning light. An unlit lantern hung from the right wall. As Bentgrass stopped next to it, Twilight looked and noted with a little disgust the pile of dead fireflies inside.

After one more glance around, Bentgrass pulled the green gem from his pocket, setting it on the ground in front of them. He tapped it three times with his hoof and it came to life, casting a green hue across the alley with red highlights coming from the runes. In a brilliant flash, a small screen, maybe three hoof-lengths across, shimmered to life before them, bearing a picture of an old pinto unicorn smiling genially at them.

“Ah, Agent Bentgrass!” The face rotated to face Twilight, and the stallion’s smile faltered slightly. “And Doctor Sparkle! Doctor, I must congratulate you on attaining the security clearance needed to view a device such as this.” Though his smile remained, his eyes glared daggers at Bentgrass as he spoke.

Bentgrass seemed unaffected. “Director, I can assure you, if *anypony* is deserving of trust, it is Ms. Sparkle.” He turned to Twilight and gestured at the floating image. “Twilight Sparkle, may I introduce Director Top Notch, head of Their Majesties’ Royal Investigative Service.”

Twilight smiled weakly and nodded. “Um, nice to... meet you?” Something about the way his cheerful Trottingham accent clashed with his cold eyes made her ears splay against her head despite herself.

Notch appraised her for a moment before his smile returned. “Well, I suppose I can allow it this one time. After all, she did help you catch the Ponyville killer!”

“Yes, about that, Director...”

Notch continued. “You both did a fine job of it, if I do say so myself. Doctor Sparkle, have you ever thought of working for the government? I dare say you’d be a fine addition to the agency!”

“Director, if you would please—”

“Now then, Agrostis. I want you back in Canterlot as soon as possible. There’s a spot of trouble brewing in Stalliongrad, and I think you’d be the perfect fit for it. Don’t worry about the paper work for the Ponyville job, I can—”

“*Director!*”

The screen shook briefly. Director Notch seemed stunned, but quickly regained his composure. “Yes, *Agent Bentgrass?*”

“I apologize, sir,” he said with a bow of his head, “but I believe my work here is not done.”

“Oh?” Notch raised an eyebrow. “I thought that Ms., um...” he looked down, and Twilight could hear paper rustling, “Zecora, was in custody.”

“She is, but both Ms. Sparkle and myself believe there is something more at play here. We have reason to believe Zecora is being set up.”

“I see,” Notch said, his brow furrowed. “What makes you say this?”

Bentgrass’s eyes darted back and forth for a second before he spoke. “I... I have a feeling.”

“A feeling?”

Though his hoof was pawing at the dirt floor of the alley, Bentgrass nodded firmly.

Notch eyed him curiously for a moment. “Do you have any evidence?”

“Well, no, not at present, but—”

“Motive? Means? Opportunity?”

“Not *strictly* speaking, no...”

“Anything at *all* besides your gut that points to somepony other than Zecora?”

Bentgrass nodded. “Personal observation, sir.” He then proceeded to explain everything they had discussed at the library. Top Notch remained silent through out, merely nodding his head occasionally.

When Bentgrass finished, Notch studied them both with a pensive gaze for a few moments. Twilight’s hoof tapped a steady rhythm on the ground. *If he doesn’t believe us, we’re stuck.*

Finally, Notch spoke. “Well, that *is* disconcerting.” He rubbed his chin for a moment then nodded. “I agree with your assessment, Agent Bentgrass. This warrants further investigation.”

“So, Bentgrass can stay?” Twilight asked hopefully.

Notch shook his head. “Sadly, no. The situation in Stalliongrad is getting a bit out of hoof. I need my best pony on this one, and that’s you, Agrostis.”

Twilight stood and opened her mouth, but Notch silenced her with a hoof. “*But*, as I said, this case appears far from solved. So, I shall dispatch another agent at once. Let’s see, the nearest agent is,” he looked down, and Twilight once again heard the shuffling of papers, “Agent Surehoof in Baltimore. If he leaves tonight, he can be in Ponyville by the end of next week.”

“Next *week*?” Twilight stomped her hoof against the dirt floor of the alley. “So, I’m just supposed to sit around and wait, while Zecora suffers in a padded cell?”

“I’m sorry, Doctor Sparkle, but that’s the best I can do. Division Six only has so many agents, and as I said, I *need* Agent Bentgrass in Stalliongrad. If you’d like, I can speak to your brother about pulling in a few Royal Guards in the interim. I do hope you understand.”

“I... I understand.” Twilight sat down on her haunches next to Bentgrass, both looking thoroughly beaten. “I don’t like it, but I get it.”

“Good,” Notch said with a sigh. “Now, Doctor Sparkle, you are more th—lcome—atter—”

The audio began to fade as the screen sputtered, bright flashes of static illuminating the dark alley. Bentgrass moved forward and tapped the gem a few times. “Director, could you say that again, please? You’re breaking up.”

“I shall se—ou retu—ntgras—”

Bentgrass let out an annoyed grunt and stepped on the gem more forcefully. The ghostly image of the Director sputtered a few more times before disappearing in a flash, the gem now dark. Bentgrass picked it up and knocked it against the brick wall behind him a few times. He held it to his face, studying it closely before sighing.

“Must be some sort of interference. Blasted new technology,” he muttered, placing the gem back in his pocket. “Not that it matters. The Director was quite clear in his instructions.” He turned to face Twilight. “It would appear... this is it, Ms. Sparkle.”

She stood up and moved in front of him, her ears splayed against her head. “You could still stay! I mean, you disobeyed Shackle when *he* told you to leave.”

Bentgrass let out a quiet laugh. “The sheriff is an odious wretch who wanted me to stop because I was making him look bad. Director Notch is...” His eyes got very distant, as if fond memories were playing across his mind. “Well, let’s just say that I owe him more than you could imagine. If he tells me to leave, I will obey.”

Twilight tried to find the words to fight, but nothing came out as Bentgrass began to walk out of the alley. The combination of his posture, his still tail and splayed ears, and the words he used left no doubt in her mind: there was no talking him out of this.

The pair exited the alley and walked back into the street, pausing to look up at the sky. It was fully black now, stars shining brightly and the moon a tiny sliver. They were alone in the road, other ponies having most likely retired for the night. Under the gentle hum of the streetlights, the only other sound was Twilight’s hoof gently kicking at a loose cobblestone.

“So,” she finally said, still looking at the ground beneath her, “this is where yo... where we say goodbye.”

“It seems so. But as Director Notch said, this is far from over.” He looked up at the sky, scanning the horizon. “Agent Surehoof is a fine pony. When he arrives, help him any way you can.” He seemed to tense, his hoof pawing at the ground, before he placed it on Twilight’s shoulder. “You have excellent instincts, Twilight. Don’t forget that.”

Twilight nodded. She opened her mouth, but remained silent, opting to bit her lip rather than speak. Finally, she met his gaze again. “And, um, what about you? Would you... uh, I mean, do you think you would ever, I don’t know... come back to Ponyville?”

Bentgrass held her gaze for a long while. As they locked eyes, Twilight found herself drawn to his pale, grey eye. It sparkled with intelligence and a hint of emotion that he seemed to try and hide.

After a very comfortable silence, he gave her that same half-smile that he had first greeted her with in the library. “Stranger things have happened, Ms. Sparkle. Stranger things, indeed.”

Twilight laughed under her breath, and the two began a slow trot down the road. Every now and then, one would glance to the other, but would quickly avert their eyes as the other did the same. After a few steps, Twilight finally broke the now very awkward silence. “So, uh... do you need to stop by Ditzzy’s house to pick up your things?”



He shook his head. "I tend to travel very light. What little possessions I brought with me could easily be mailed. Besides, I must get a move on if I am to make the late train to Canterlot."

"Oh, okay. I could teleport you, if you think you might miss the train."

Bentgrass chuckled quietly. "Once more, no, thank you. The food at the hospital wasn't any good the first time. I doubt it would be improved upon a second tasting. Plus, I'd like to avoid the embarrassment of vomiting on myself in the middle of the train station."

Twilight laughed. "Oh, stop being such a baby. Almost every earth pony has the same reac—"

"Yes, I know. In fact, as I understand it, a few of the new long-range teleportation companies are beginning to offer vomit bags to customers." He turned to look at her, but she wasn't there. He stopped and turned around to find Twilight standing very still in the middle of the road. "Twilight?"

He walked up to her, but Twilight remained still, her brow furrowed and her eyes darting back and forth. As he watched, her mouth began to open slightly, a confused look on her face.

"Twilight, what is it?" He stepped closer to her, placing a hoof on her shoulder. "Twilight, I know that look, what is it?"

"He... he coughed." She was muttering to herself under her breath, her mind racing a thousand miles an hour. Deep in the recesses of her brain, tiny facts, unimportant by themselves, were beginning to come together. "He coughed?" Finally, she gasped and her eyes went wide. The last piece of the puzzle slammed home, the full picture now terrifyingly clear. "Oh, no."

Bentgrass began to speak, but she threw off his hoof and took off down the road at a dead sprint, turning her head back to him. "Come on, we have to get back to the library!"

"What, why?" Even as he questioned, Bentgrass ran after her, his long legs allowing him to catch up quickly. "Twilight, what is at the library?"

As they raced down the streets of Ponyville, her answer came in a breathy voice.

"Parchment."

• • •

Rainbow Dash stood in front of her bathroom mirror, doing the one thing she would never admit to doing: fixing her mane. Contrary to everything Rarity had ever said about her mane, the “I Don’t Care” look actually took some work to pull off. It was a fine middle ground between looking like a slob and being prissy, and Dash felt she nailed it perfectly.

After a few more minutes, she sighed into the mirror hanging on the cloud wall by an enchantment she didn’t even come close to understanding. In all honesty, she didn’t really want to go out tonight. Just a few hours prior, she had seen one of her best friends in a state of total madness after trying to kill one of her *other* best friends. Even for a former Wonderbolt and Element of Harmony, it was a trying experience.

*Still, it’d probably help to get my mind off of it for a bit.* Their bi-weekly “date night” had been a ritual for months now, and it was something they both looked forward to. Just the thought of him, his mane neatly combed to the side, the smell of his bath soap only barely hiding the scent of apples and earth, made her begin to forget her troubles. Flashing a cocksure grin to her reflection, she deemed her mane good enough.

She had barely registered the flash of movement in the mirror when a white hot flash of pain reverberated through her skull. Whatever it was that hit her was heavy, and almost immediately she slumped to the ground. The soft clouds felt like concrete as her head bounced off the floor.

As a black tunnel began to devour her vision, a loud ringing echoed inside her head. The wave of nausea that had been growing suddenly dulled as the world fell out of focus. Right before the darkness claimed her, she heard a sound over the ringing: a sinister chuckle, and an oddly-accented voice.

“Evenin’ lass.”

The sharp sound of hoofbeats echoed off the buildings that lined the road. The few ponies that were still out stopped and stared at the two ponies racing down the street.

“Twilight, stop!” Bentgrass was several lengths behind Twilight, but he was rapidly closing the distance.

She rounded a corner so fast her hooves skidded across the cobblestone road, picking up speed as soon as she was stable. *Spike is alone in the library with that... that monster.*

A few loud hoofbeats came from behind her. She yelped and skidded to a stop as Bentgrass leapt in front of her. She moved to go around him, but he sidestepped to block her.

“Get out of my way!” She lowered her head, her left forehoof digging at the ground.

“No.”

“We don’t have time for this!” Her horn flashed. As soon as she materialized behind him, Bentgrass whipped around and grabbed her tail. Twilight yelped loudly as she tried to run, but was yanked down to the ground. She growled and kicked her left hind leg at him, which he easily deflected with a hoof.

“Twilight, that is enough!” He leaped in front of her, his eyes boring into her. “Now look, I understand that you are upset about Zecora, but that is no excuse for throwing around baseless accusations!”

“They’re not baseless!” She stared right at him through narrowed eyes. “He’s been manipulating us from the very beginning!”

“Oh, and you’re basing this off what? A *cough*?”

Twilight made to go around him, but he maneuvered to block her. A growl escaped her as she glared at him. “Ninety-seven percent of all earth ponies experience severe nausea and disorientation from the influx of outside magic when they’re teleported. There have been *zero* reported cases of *anypony* suffering any kind of respiratory distress!”

“And that means he’s a killer?”

“No, it means he’s lying to us, and *that* makes everything else clear.” Her words came fast, her expression cold. “Think about it! Parchment needs to throw the police off his scent, so he carves some Zebrican gibberish onto Berry’s flank. Naturally, the local zebra would know nothing about it, making her look suspicious.” She took a hard step towards him. “*Then* when she didn’t know, who would be the next pony somepony would ask? Equestria’s leading expert on Zebrican history!”

“Parchment.” Bentgrass slowly backed away from her, his eyes wandering. Quickly, he shook his head and stared back at her. “What about the magic used on the parasprite? Your own computer said it was Zebrican.” Twilight said nothing, merely staring at him. Slowly, his eyes widened. “And... Parchment has spent most of his life in Zebrica.”

She nodded. “Zebrican magic is heavily based in potions and incantations. It’s not a stretch to assume he picked something up.”

“But—”

“Furthermore, his lack of expertise would explain the magical overexposure on the parasprite. It must be a powerful spell.”

“But what about the Mbwun? Zecora used the word, and it *is* a way to refer to oneself.”

“And *who* told us *that*?”

Though Bentgrass still glared at her, his tail began to droop. “Still, *why* would Parchment come *all* the way to Ponyville to kill ponies he’s never even met?”

Twilight chewed her lip for a moment, but her eyes remained hard. “Look, I’m not saying it’s a perfect theory, but you have to admit it explains a lot.”

Bentgrass sighed. “I will admit, there is some... *logic* to your argument.”

“Then let’s go!” Twilight grabbed his foreleg and pulled. “Spike’s alone in the library with him!”

“*But*,” Bentgrass said, jerking away from her grasp, “I have known the professor for most of my life. He would *not* have done this!”

The street was silent for a few moments. Bentgrass raised an eyebrow as Twilight stared at him. “What?”

“Bentgrass, think about what you just said.”

A few more moments of silence before he gasped quietly. Slowly, he settled his shoulders and looked away. “Well played, Ms. Sparkle.” He looked back to her, a deep scowl on his pale face. “Very well. But *I* shall ask the questions!”

Twilight nodded and took off running, Bentgrass quickly catching up. They were less than a block from the library now; Twilight could see the light from their bedroom window high in the canopy of the old tree. She quickened her pace and lowered her head, swallowing the thick lump in her throat. *Hang on, Spike...*

They rounded one more corner when the library finally came into full view. A final burst of speed and Twilight skidded to a halt in front of the door. She turned, preparing to buck the oak door open.

“Twilight!”

She paused mid-buck as Bentgrass finally caught up. “Remember, we are just asking questions. There is no need to destroy your home.”

Twilight grumbled, but nodded. She turned back to the door, took a deep breath and opened it. “Spike? Profe—” She stopped dead in her tracks.

The library was in shambles. Twilight felt a cold lump in her gut as she raced inside, carelessly stepping through the sea of half-burned books on the floor. “*Spike?*” The smell of burnt paper stung her nostrils. Twilight ran to the center of the room, the smoke from the charred carving on the table stinging her eyes. She spun frantically, her eyes scanning through the wreckage: the many bookshelves turned to splinters, the deep gouges in the floor, blackened scorch marks everywhere.

“*Spike!*” She raced into the kitchen, Bentgrass hot on her heels. She skidded to a halt in front of the overturned kitchen table. Gingerly stepping around the jagged shards of broken plates and glasses, Twilight darted her head back and forth, then spun around and ran back towards the main room, heading for the stairs.

“*Spike? Where are you? Spi—*”

As she reached the top step, her breath caught in her throat, and she felt the blood drain from her face. On the ground in between her and Spike’s torn mattresses lay a large puddle of green blood. In the middle was a single purple scale, one edge torn and cracked.

Twilight fell to her knees as hot tears began to well up in her eyes. Her lower jaw quivered, her mind refusing to process what lay before her. “No. Oh, no, please no.”

She felt Bentgrass kneel beside her and lay a foreleg over her shoulders. “Twilight.” She didn’t acknowledge him. “Twilight!” He leaned forward and took her chin in his other hoof, gently turning her head away from the grisly scene and towards his face. “Twilight, you know how difficult it is to remove a dragon’s scale. This is a message: Spike is alive. Parchment... he wishes us to find him.” His voice sounded distant. Even as he spoke, his eyes drifted away from her, glazing over slightly. He shook his head and stood up, reaching into his coat to pull out the gem. “I shall call for backup.”

Twilight slowly stood and tore her eyes from the blood. Despite the cold lump in her stomach, she couldn’t help but feel a tiny swell of pride as she scanned the room. The bedroom, much like the downstairs, was all but destroyed; her expensive telescope was bent and shattered, all of her drawers were on their sides, and there were countless claw marks and burns on the ground. *At least Spike made him work for it.*

“Blast it!” Twilight turned her head to see Bentgrass furiously stomping on the still-dark gem. “Still nothing. There is something interfering with the signal. I can not reach Canterlot.”

She began to speak when a faint scratching came from their right. They both whipped their heads towards the linen closet. The two of them shared a brief look before leaping to their hooves. They crept towards the closet door, listening intently to the fluttering noise from inside. Twilight took a moment to wipe tears from her eyes before looking to Bentgrass. He stood beside her, knees bent slightly forward. He looked to her and gave a sharp nod. They both turned back to the door as Twilight’s horn glowed.

The door flung open. They both stepped forward to look, and Twilight gasped. “Pee Wee!”

Amongst a pile of burnt bedsheets, the young bird lay in a slowly growing puddle of blood, the ragged stumps where his wings had been twitching slightly. Slowly, he turned his wide eyes towards Twilight, and let out a pitiful gurgling sound, his tongue lolling out from his missing bottom beak.

She knelt down to the broken bird. “Oh, what did he do to you?” Pee Wee let out another painful warble and shot Twilight a pleading look. She stared for a moment before gasping, her eyes going wide. “Y-you want me to...” The bird slowly nodded, his limp tongue flopping against his throat.

Slowly, Twilight stood and took a step back. “Okay.” A soft lavender glow enveloped the phoenix’s body. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” she whimpered as she closed her eyes.

Bentgrass flinched as the bird suddenly erupted into flame. The body hissed and popped for a few moments, then stopped. When he turned back, all that remained was a small pile of ash and the pungent stench of burning flesh. He whirled around and stared at Twilight, his mouth agape. “Twilight, what did you—”

A brilliant flash of light cut him off. The ashes alighted, the searing heat causing him to shy away again.

From the ball of flame flew a small bird with brilliant golden and red plumage. It exploded into the air, flying several tight circles around the two ponies before landing at their hooves, squawking loudly and gesturing with his new wings towards the pool of blood in the bedroom. Bentgrass’s eyes widened. “Oh, a phoenix!” He turned to Twilight and raised his eyebrow. “Spike has a pet phoenix?”

Twilight bent down to the panicking bird. “Pee Wee, *Pee Wee!* Calm down.” She reached out her hoof and gently stroked the his plumage. The bird stopped its flailing, looking at her with a worried gaze. “Listen, Pee Wee, I need you to fly to Canterlot. Remember where we visited Philomena?” The bird nodded. “Good. Go get her, tell her to bring the Princesses and my brother here as fast as you can, okay?”

With a sharp nod, Pee Wee took to the air and glided to the bedroom window, his feathers smoldering with gathering magic. He opened his wings and paused, casting another worried glance to the green pool of blood.

“Don’t worry,” Twilight said, “we’ll find him. I promise.”

He looked to her and nodded once more before turning back to the window. With a loud cry, he rocketed through the open window, leaving a trail of fire in his wake.

Bentgrass watched the magic bird leave, then turned to Twilight. “How long will it take him to reach Canterlot?” She didn’t answer, her own eyes drawn back to the purple scale on the floor. “Twilight!”

She shook her head and faced him. “A full grown phoenix could make it in two hours. It’ll take him a bit longer. We need to find where Parchment took Spike.”

As she said the professor's name, Bentgrass's ears fell to his head. "Yes," he mumbled, taking a few slow steps towards the staircase. "I... I still can't believe it. I have known him for *years!* How could he do this? *Why* would he?"

"I don't know, and right now, I don't care. We need to—"

"Twilight!"

Both ponies jumped slightly as the new voice came from beneath them. After a brief look, they both ran downstairs to find Big Macintosh in the doorway panting heavily, sweat pouring down his face. "Twi— Oh, thank... thank th' Sisters." He stepped inside on shaky hooves. "Listen ya... ya got..."

Bentgrass stepped forward. "Please calm yourself, Mr. Apple. What happened?"

Mac raised an eyebrow at the pale detective before turning to Twilight. She nodded. "He's with me. Now, what's wrong?"

He took a moment to catch his breath before speaking. "Dash was supposed t' meet me fer dinner tonight, but she never showed. I figured she got caught up dealin' with Zecora or somethin', so I went back home. Talked t' Apple Bloom, come t' find out that AJ never came home from th' hospital this afternoon."

A cold feeling began to build up in Twilight's stomach. She opened her mouth to speak, but Mac continued. "There's more. On th' way here, I stopped by Sugarcube Corner *and* the Boutique." He took a deep breath. "Twi, th' girls are missin'!"

Bentgrass fell to his haunches. "Parchment must have taken them. But why? Why kidnap your friends and Spike? This makes no sense!"

Twilight stepped next to him, placing a hoof on his shoulder. "'Why' doesn't matter now. We need to find them."

"Y-yes, you're right." He cleared his throat and stood, straightening his coat. "He has never spoken to me about visiting Ponyville. Twilight, can you teleport us to the local inn?" She nodded. "Good. Hopefully he left something in his room that may give us a clue as to where he took the girls and Spike."

Mac stepped forward. "I'm comin', too."

Bentgrass sighed. "Look, Mr. Apple, we don't have time to—"



“Hey!”

Bentgrass jumped slightly at the baritone yell. Big Mac stepped towards him, bringing the two eye to eye. Even though they were the same height, Mac’s hulking frame made the lithe Bentgrass seem very small.

“Look, buddy. I don’t know who *you* are, or who this... Parchment is,” his voice was low, his eyes boring into Bentgrass, “but whoever he is, he’s got my sister and my marefriend.” He took another step forward, now mere inches from Bentgrass’s face. “I’m comin’.”

To his credit, Bentgrass didn’t flinch under Mac’s withering gaze, though Twilight heard him gulp. “Very well. The more the merrier.” Taking a step away from the enraged Mac, he cleared his throat and turned to Twilight. “Ms. Sparkle, if you would?”

Twilight shot one last glance at the bloody scale on the floor, then nodded and lit her horn. “Hold on to your lunches, boys.”

• • •

*The Barnyard Inn* was a humble establishment. The U-shaped building spanned a single block on the fringe of Ponyville. A large wooden sign stood in the middle of the dirt parking lot, several carriages parked around it. A flash of purple light and a loud pop broke the calm of the parking lot, followed by a violent retching and wet plops on the ground.

Twilight was unaffected by the teleport, but found her stomach turn slightly at the rancid scent of half-digested apples wafting over her. Mac knelt on the dirt, spitting out the last of his lunch. Behind her, Bentgrass stood on shaky legs, looking very green around the gills.

“I forgot how... unpleasant that is.” Bentgrass shook his head and turned to Twilight. “I shall go speak with the manager.” With that, he took off towards the office.

Twilight turned her attention to Mac, who still sat on his knees, heaving slightly. “Are you going to be okay, Mac?” He merely nodded, taking several shaky breaths. He shuddered, and Twilight took a step back. “Close your eyes, Mac. It’ll help the na—”

“We have t’ find ‘em, Twi.”

She stopped at his words. Raising her eyebrow, she slowly walked to his front. Under the pale light of the lamp from the sign above them, she could see a tear snaking down his crimson muzzle. Mindful of the pile of sick, she knelt before him. “We will.”

“You don’t understand.” He took several quivering breaths and cleared his throat, still looking down at the ground. “First Ma n’ Pa, then Granny Smith last year.” He slowly raised his head to meet hers, his eyes red. “I.. I can’t lose AJ, too. And Rainbow!”

Mac finally stood, his legs wobbly at first. Groaning, he took a few steps away, turning his back to Twilight. “You ever been in love, Miss Twilight?”

Twilight hesitated before answering. “Um, no.”

“Neither had I, before Dashie.” His head slowly turned upward, gazing softly at the sliver of moon high above him. “Y’ know, I—I always thought my life would be simple: work th’ farm, support AJ and Apple Bloom, let them two go off ‘n find love. Weren’t never any time fer me t’ find it. Then... then she came along.” A heavy sigh left him. His bulky frame seemed to deflate slightly. “Now I had somethin’ fer myself. Somethin’ special, that I won’t let *nopony* take.”

Twilight slowly made her way next to him. Though dwarfed by his size, she leaned into him, feeling the slight shudder that ran through him.

He finally lowered his head, meeting her eyes. “An’ now... there’s still so much we have t’ do. So much I... I ain’t said.” He growled and kicked at the dirt, sending a small cloud of dust from under his massive hoof. “Consarn-it, I shoulda just asked her!”

“Macintosh.” She reached a hoof up and lightly touched his face. Slowly, he turned to face her, his eyes damp. She stared into his eyes, her eyebrows set. “We’ll rescue them. I promise.”

The two held their gaze until Bentgrass came running over. “The Professor stayed in room five.” Mac nodded and took off towards the long building, Bentgrass and Twilight right behind him.

They crossed the dirt parking lot and ran under the awning covering the doors. Each had a numeral emblazoned on the front. Mac ran until he found the door they were looking for. Without even pausing, he spun around and delivered a hard buck. A deafening crack came as the wooden door exploded into splinters under his muscled hind legs. Whirling around, he barged inside.

The room was spartanly furnished: a queen-sized bed with drab brown sheets sat next to a chest of drawers; across from that stood a large writing desk. The three immediately began searching for anything. Twilight moved towards the back of the room. A large mirror reflected her worried look back at her as she scanned the pearl countertop for anything Parchment may have left behind.

“Hey, Twi! Come here, look at this.”

Twilight spun and saw Mac standing next to the writing desk, hefting something onto it with his mouth. She rushed over and saw a set of saddlebags, instantly identifying them as the same ones that Parchment had worn when they first met. “These are Parchment’s.”

“Why would he leave ‘em behind?”

“That is a mystery for later.” Bentgrass grabbed the bags and turned them up, dumping the contents on the desk.

Twilight separated the items with her magic, laying them side by side on the desk. To her eye, nothing stood out: a pair of reading glasses, some quills, a few granola bars, a book featuring a mare in a very lewd pose that made Twilight shudder. She slammed a hoof on the desk. “Ugh, there’s nothing here that tells us where he could be! Just a bunch of... random junk!”

“Twilight, I think I may have found something.”

Twilight turned to face Bentgrass. He was sitting on his haunches, holding the saddlebags upside down with his head half-inside. Somewhere in the back of her mind, Twilight found the sight very amusing. Presently, she simply stared at him. “What? What is it?”

Removing his head, Bentgrass stood and placed the bags on the desk with the opening facing up. “Look here.” He pointed to a large lump in the side of the bag. “It appears to be some kind of... secret compartment sewn into the lining.”

Twilight gently pushed him aside and lit her horn. A loud tearing sound, and she reached inside the lining. Slowly, she pulled out the contents: a thick scroll, tied lovingly with a burlap band. As she levitated it out, she could almost *feel* the age radiating off it. Countless wrinkles marred the paper, several places along the edges torn and frayed. A heavy musk wafted off it, reminding Twilight of the historical wing of the Canterlot Archives. Whatever this was, it was ancient.

Bentgrass pushed the items from the desk sending them clattering to the floor. Twilight gently laid the scroll on the desk and undid the burlap tie. With a scholar's patience, she eased the tie off and began to slowly unfurl the old parchment.

"We ain't got time fer this!" Mac roughly elbowed his way between them and grabbed the scroll, heaving the end across the table, laying it bare. Twilight gasped and glared at him. He just shrugged.

She was about to berate him when she looked down and gasped. Every inch of the ancient scroll was covered with faded black ink, endless lines of some odd language interspersed with odd glyphs and symbols. What really shook her were the drawings that ran beneath the scroll; deformed monsters, ponies being consumed by ghoulish creatures while others fled. They seemed to tell a story, Twilight assumed the same as the writing.

"Oh, my," Bentgrass whispered.

Twilight looked away from the scroll to see his eyes squinted and his brow furrowed. "You can read it? What does it say?"

Bentgrass was silent for a minute, his eyes darting back and forth. Finally, he spoke. "Well, this is a very old dialect, but... it appears that Ms. Zecora was not far off."

"What do you mean?" Twilight's tail began to twitch behind her as she eyed the freakish creatures on the parchment before them.

"From what I can gather," he said, tracing the writing with a hoof, "it seems that Mbwun was not a demon, he was the Chief of a small herd on the southern plains of Zebrica. They were... um, beset on all sides by enemies."

Twilight looked to where he pointed and saw a pony with his forelegs thrust upward in prayer. A wicked looking claw reached down to him, holding a strange glyph.

"Chief Mbwun prayed to the gods for aid. For a time, nothing came to him, and his herd seemed doomed. Then one night a..." he squinted harder, his head slightly cocked to the side, "uh, a shade? Shadow? I'm not sure the word, but it appeared to him in a dream, revealing to him a... a dark ritual."

"What kinda 'dark ritual?'" Mac had stepped back from the table to give the scholarly ponies room to work, but now worked his way back to their side.

“Well, it seems that through the practice of,” he shuddered, “*equine sacrifice*, the ritual allowed Mbwun to consume the natural magics inherent in a pony’s heart.”

Both Twilight and Mac flinched away from the scroll. Beneath where Bentgrass now pointed was a pony tied to a table. Another pony grasping a large, curved blade in one hoof, plunging it towards the victim.

“This ritual gave Mbwun incredible magical abilities, the likes of which the zebras had never seen, including... ‘the allowance to grasp that which only the Eternal Dam and Sire could wield.’”

“W-what is that?”

Slowly, Bentgrass turned to Twilight, and for the first time since they’d met, Twilight could see nervousness in his eyes. “The power of creation.” He turned back to the scroll, once more tracing it with a hoof. “He created vile abominations, chimeras of all types, perverting the very face of nature, twisting it to his will. The herd’s enemies were crushed underhoof.”

“Why do I feel a ‘but’ comin’ on?” Mac asked.

Bentgrass continued on, now fervently scanning the paper. “*But*, the power was tainted. It quickly drove Chief Mbwun insane. He began to slaughter his own zebras to further his power. The more he killed, the greater his creations became.” Bentgrass stepped away from the scroll, walking towards the bed, his eyes glazed over. “Oh, my old friend. What happened to you?”

All was silent in the small room before Twilight stomped her hoof on the ground. “And? What happened next?”

Bentgrass plopped down on the bed. “The rest unfolds much as Ms. Zecora said. The great herds of Zebrica united under one banner and fought back. Eventually, they slayed Chief Mbwun and buried him and this scroll, hoping it would never surface again.”

“So, wait,” Mac stepped away from the desk and turned to Bentgrass, “if this scroll’s so important to ‘im, why would he leave it here?”

“I’m not sure.” Bentgrass didn’t even look up at him. “Perhaps he is approaching some sort of endgame and feels he doesn’t need it anymore.”

Behind them, Twilight studied the scroll, her eyes roaming across the page as her mind worked over what she'd just heard. *It all has to be connected. Why would he kidnap my friends? What could he want fr—* Twilight's head shot up, her eyes widening. "Oh, no."

"What?" Mac walked back to her. "Twilight, what is it?"

Twilight slowly turned her eyes to him. "The Elements of Harmony. That's what he wants, *that's* why he took the girls!"

At this, Bentgrass jerked his head up. "Twilight, the Elements are locked up in Canterlot Castle under the most advanced protection spells known to ponykind."

Twilight shook her head. "No, the jewels are just mediums, a way to focus and weaponize the power of Harmony. The *magic* is inside us. It's our friendship, our love for each other."

Bentgrass walked over to them, his ears slowly falling against his head. "Ms. Sparkle, are you saying that Parchment could activate the Elements?"

"No, not exactly. You said that this... ritual allows him to consume the natural magic of a pony, right?"

"Yes?"

"So," Twilight said, her ears splayed against her head, "if he were to absorb the magic from the Bearers of the Elements of Harmony..."

Bentgrass slowly reached a hoof to his mouth. "Not even the Princesses would be able to oppose him." The two stared at each other for a moment, the implications racing through their heads.

"Okay, so we *really* need t' find them." Mac gently stomped a hoof to snap them back. "So, does any of this give us any clue as t' *where* he woulda taken them?"

Bentgrass shook his head and nodded, pushing past them to examine the contents of the saddlebag on the floor. He pawed through them feverishly, before slapping them away. "No, Sisters damn it! Nothing!"

"What about the scroll?" Twilight stepped next to Bentgrass and eased him back to his hooves. "Maybe something about the ritual can give us a hint."

He nodded and returned to the desk. He scanned the scroll intently, his eyes and hoof racing from side to side. “It appears that the ritual requires a large amount of naturally-occurring magic.”

Twilight nodded. “So, he’s most likely near a massive ley line junction.”

Behind them, Mac’s head darted between the two. “Uh, somepony please speak Equestrian. Ley what now?”

“Oh! Sorry, Mac.” Despite the situation, Twilight blushed slightly and reverted into teacher mode. “Ley lines. Basically, invisible rivers of magic that flow across the world. They keep the thaumatic energy evenly distributed across the globe, *except* for the points where they intersect, called junctions.”

“Indeed,” Bentgrass said from behind her. “And lucky for us, there are not that many of them. Twilight, do you know where the nearest is?”

Twilight thought for a moment, then shook her head. “Yes, but he wouldn’t be there.”

“Why not?”

“Well, because it’s in Canterlot. That’s why the Princess moved the castle the—” Twilight’s eyes shot wide open, and she gasped loudly. “I know where they are!”

• • •

A quiet ringing and a dull throb.

“—*nbow Da—ust wa—ase!*”

Dash groaned as the quiet buzz in her mind slowly became a deafening roar. She shook her head to clear the noise and was rewarded with a blinding pain. She gritted her teeth hard, the pain so bad she swore she could feel her head physically throbbing.

Slowly, the pain and the ringing subsided, and she peeked open her eyes. A muddy blur welcomed her, muted colors swirling and dancing in her vision. As she cautiously lifted her head, the voice came again.

“Rainbow, please, say something!”

She immediately recognized the cultured voice. She opened her mouth to speak, only managing a dry croak. “Ngh... Rarity?”

“Yes, I’m here. Oh, thank goodness you’re all right!”

“Ugh, that’s debata—” She yelped as she tried to sit up. “Huh?” With a groan, she looked down, and her blood ran cold.

A thick vine ran across her midsection, binding her wings and her forelegs. A similar vine held her hind legs together, and another bound her to the slab of rock she was situated on. On her left, Rarity was bound in much the same way, though she also had a strange ring affixed to her horn, a soft blue glow emanating from it.

Dash craned her head up, darting it around to take in her surroundings. She was in the middle of what appeared to be a massive courtyard, lined on four sides with a stone wall several pony lengths high. Flickering torches lined the wall, providing soft light. The ground had at one point been cobblestone, but thick weeds snaked through the floor, pushing up the loose stones. Trees grew outside the wall, the starlight casting gnarled shadows across the ground.

Dash gulped. “Rarity? W-where are we?”

“I think we’re in th’ old ruins in th’ Everfree.”

Rainbow whipped her head around to face the new voice behind her. “Applejack?”

“Yup. Fluttershy’s here, too.” A quiet whimper confirmed that.

Dash’s heart began to race even faster. Though her vision was limited, she could see Applejack was bound as well, though a few extra vines held her hind legs together. *Smart move, whoever you are. One swift buck and you’d be done.*

“Can you move?”

A few grunts, then a sigh. “Nope. Got me tied like a calf at a rodeo.”

A thought passed Dash’s mind. “Hey, are Pinkie and Twilight here, too?”

“Um, Pinkie’s right next to me.” Fluttershy’s voice was barely a squeak. “But she’s not moving. And... and she looks like she’s b-b-bleeding really bad.”



Icy fingers gripped Dash's heart. "Is... is she..."

"N-no. She's still breathing."

"Of course she is!"

All four mares whipped their heads at the new voice. Across the courtyard, a figure seemed to bleed in from the shadows. His dark brown cloak covered every inch of him except his face, which was hidden in the darkness. As he neared, two bright yellow eyes began to glow from underneath the hood, and a low, sinister chuckle echoed in the empty space. "Th' ritual requires th' harvest t' be taken only shortly after death." With smooth fluidity, he eased next to Dash and lowered his hood, revealing a older yellow stallion with a curly red mane. His bright yellow eyes bored into Dash as he smiled. "Would'ne do any good to have her spoil before yer friend arrives."

Dash's eyes went wide. "You... you're that creepy professor guy!"

His smile got even wider, the edges threatening to break off his face. "Aye! Professor Tornbald Parchment, at yer service." With that, his eyes began to glow brighter, and an odd haze built up around his head, like heat lines off a paved road. In a blur of movement, he lifted off the ground, hovering a few lengths above them, still grinning madly.

All four of them gasped quietly. Dash was the first to find her voice. "B-b-but, how? You... you're an earth pony!"

Parchment's eyes glared down at Dash. Quicker than even she could have moved, he landed next to her. "Aye! A *filthy* earth pony!" He leaned his head over her, bringing his face inches from hers. Dash gagged at the rotten stench coming from his mouth. "That's what they called me, when they fired me, th' *bastards!* They called me *filthy!*" Dash cringed as small flecks of spittle hit her face.

He slowly paced away from the group, his head held high. "Ah bring them th' discovery of a lifetime! Somethin' that'll change th' entire way we look at ancient Zebrica, rock th' very foundation of magical studies!" He whipped around, his eyes gleaming like fire. "An' what do they do? They try an' *take it from me!*"

While he ranted, Dash kept tugging at her restraints. *Come on, come on! Just let me get one wing loose...*

“Nineteen years Ah slaved away in that wretched school, an’ those *unicorns* spit in mah face!” He was no longer looking at them, his eyes glaring at the ground beneath him as he paced back and forth. “They *laughed* when they did it! ‘Oh, how can ye hope t’ be a full professor at a school for *unicorns*, when yer not even magical?’ Well...” He turned to face them, and his eyes blazed with light once more, the air around his head once more shimmering and dancing. He grunted, and Dash could see his body tense from exertion.

Suddenly, the ground began to shake violently, groaning so loud that Dash could feel it in her bones. As she watched, large fissures appeared throughout the yard, spitting up massive plumes of dirt. With a final loud scream, Parchment rocketed into the air as several large pillars of earth shot up from the ground, raining dirt and rocks on the bound ponies.

Several loud, panting breaths escaped him. “*Who’s magical now?!*” A maniacal laugh echoed throughout the courtyard while Parchment slowly descended, the haze around his head dying out.

“What the *hay* does any o’ that have t’ do with *us?*” Applejack grunted loudly, once more fighting her restraints.

On Dash’s other side, Rarity cleared her throat. “What my *friend* is trying to say, sir, is that is indeed tragic, what they did to you.” Her voiced oozed sympathy, so much so that even Dash couldn’t tell if she was faking or not. “But none of us are involved in this. You have been wronged, and for that I *am* sorry, but please, let us go.”

Parchment chuckled. “Oh, no, lass. You’re *very* involved. You an’ yer friends are th’ key t’ the next phase of my plan.” He grinned at them again, his eyes narrowed.

“*What plan?*” Dash glared at him. *Gotta keep him talking. Twilight is probably on her way.* “Your plan is to kill random ponies to... to *what*, get back at your boss?”

“Oh, no, Ms. Dash. Maybe at first, but not anymore.”

Dash scoffed. “Then what? You’re just... killing for the sake of killing?”

He glared at Dash, digging his hoof into the ground. “No! Ah kill t’ reach a new, an’ better reality for *all!*”

“What’re you on about?” Applejack cried. “How’re you makin’ life better by *killin’?* That’s crazy!”

“*Silence!*” Quicker than she could blink, he launched himself at Applejack, almost instantly at her side. “Ah’m not crazy! Ah’m a visionary! A prophet!”

Slowly, he backed away from her, his eyes bouncing between the bound ponies. “This power, it’s shown me so much. This world is chaotic, adrift, *lost!*” He leapt towards Fluttershy, his glowing eyes making her cringe. “We coddle th’ weak, an’ condemn th’ strong! It flies in th’ very face o’ nature itself!” Fluttershy whimpered as he leaned in close. “Well, not anymore!”

“W-w-what... what do you mean?”

He smiled at her, licking his lips. “Very soon, Ah will have the power to remake the world. Look!”

He once more took to the air, and all four mares followed him with their eyes. Slowly, the sky above them began to shimmer like the ocean. Parchment’s eyes glowed brighter, and thousands, *millions* of wavy lines slowly emerged from the darkness. Dash let out a quiet gasp. The lines snaked in from the surrounding forest, the weeds in the courtyard, even them; five beams of multicolored light joining the white ones from the woods. She looked as they all flowed upwards, and once more her jaw dropped.

All the countless beams of light slithered towards a large sphere that hung in the air above them. The ball seemed to be dozens of lengths across, and it danced with an ethereal grace, bobbing and weaving slightly to some cosmic tune. Random shapes twisted and spun inside a maelstrom of color and light at its center. Like arcs of electricity, the lines shot out from inside of it in every direction, eventually fading from her sight.

Parchment laughed again. “Ye see it now? These ley lines connect t’ every corner of th’ globe.” His voice grew distant, his eyes glazed over. “From here, my magic will spread to every living thing on the planet. Ah shall give my gift t’ the wind, an’ all o’ creation will be born anew.”

In a flash, the lines disappeared. All four mares snapped their eyes back to the floating stallion, who grinned at them with that wicked smile. “An, that is where you come in, lassies!” With a dull thump, he landed on the ground next to Rarity, leering at her. “Once Ah have consumed you, Ah’ll defeat yer pitiful sky goddesses. An’ then, th’ world will be remade as it should be!”

Rarity let out a sharp bark of laughter. “You’re not going to,” she shuddered, “*consume* anypony! Twilight has probably already sent word to the Princesses. Any second now, she and her brother will come crashing through that wall with dozens of Royal Guards!”

Parchment chuckled. “Oh, Ah know she’ll be comin’ here, that’s the point! But she’ll not be sendin’ for anypony.” His eyes glowed brighter as he stepped back from her. “Ah’ve got her little messenger.”

A rustling sound came from behind them. Rarity turned towards the sound. “*Spike!*”

Spike hung limply in the air next to Parchment. Small spatters of greenish blood stained his scales, and more trickled from a large wound on his head. With a nod of his head, Parchment sent the unconscious dragon flying away, impacting the stone wall hard enough to crack it.

“What have you done to my Spikey-Wikey?!” Rarity yelled.

“Oh, don’t worry, he’s still alive. Bait is no good if it’s dead.” His smile seemed to grow larger, offset by the wild look in his glowing eyes. “Little bastard put up a fight, so Ah had t’ subdue him.”

“Hey!” Parchment slowly turned to face Dash. She glared right back with her trademark intensity. *Keep him talking, keep him talking.* “So, is that what you did to Zecora?”

Parchment threw his head back and laughed, the sound echoing off the stone walls around them. Taking several deep breaths, he looked back to Dash. “Oh, that zebra bitch? That was nothin’. Jest a few dormant genes activated.” He chuckled again. “Unlocking a gift from her family!”

Dash clenched her jaw. “So, why? Why drive her crazy like that?”

“Eh, the power needed time to mature. Ah knew somepony would come, so Ah gave them a rabbit t’ chase.”

His ears suddenly perked up. In another blinding flash of movement, he settled next to Fluttershy. “Speakin’ o’ rabbits, did ye like what Ah did t’ yer little friend?” He licked his lips as Fluttershy gasped. “Oh, he wasn’t much t’ look at t’ begin with, but now that rabbit’s dynamite!”

Fluttershy’s lower lip trembled. “Y... You did that t-to Angel?”

Leaning in close, Parchment's eyes grew very cold, his lips curling into a cruel smile. "Aye, lass. An' very soon, with your power inside me, Ah shall do th' same t' every livin' thing on th' planet." He leaned back and turned to face the others. "Can ye picture it? A world free from th' bondage o' pitiful things like sentience, love, *friendship*." He spat the last word. Turning his head back to the stars, his eyes glazed over again, his voice distant. "Th' strong will thrive, th' weak will perish, an' all shall bow at my hooves."

"No."

Parchment tensed, slowly turning his head back to face Fluttershy. "What did you say?"

"I. Said. *No!*" As Parchment finally met her eyes, Fluttershy set her jaw and Stared. Immediately, Parchment froze, his eyes locked with hers. "You listen to me, mister! You will *not* hurt any more of my friends!" She leaned her head up towards him. Her eyes narrowed, but the intensity of her gaze never faltered. "Now, you undo these ropes and let us go this *instant!*"

Parchment blinked a few times. "Um... no." His eyes glowed again, and with a nod of his head, Fluttershy was flung across the courtyard. She slammed into the wall, the loud crack of snapping bone echoing across the courtyard, and fell to the ground limp.

"*Fluttershy!*" Dash thrashed against her bonds, but they still held fast. Tears welled up in her eyes as she saw her childhood friend lay still against the cold stone wall, one wing bent at a horrible angle.

Parchment huffed. "Pitiful mind magic." He cricked his neck to the side and turned back to the ponies. "Do ye understand now, lassies? Ah'm above you. Ah'm *beyond* you."

"You let me outta here, you sireless son of a goat! I'll *show* you what *I* understand!" Applejack struggled with all her might, but her bonds refused to budge. Still, her eyes dripped venom as she glared at the leering stallion.

He let out a loud bark of laughter. "Oh, you've got some *fight* in ye! Ye have *passion!* Ah like that." He slowly made his way over to her, licking his lips. "You know, we've probably got some time before yer friend shows up. How about we," he reached his hoof and rubbed Applejack's cutie mark in a slow, circular motion, "get t' know each other better?" Applejack grimaced under the touch, but held her defiant gaze.

Next to her, Dash's mind was racing. *Oh no. Come on, Dash, think! Think like a hero! What would Daring Do d—*

At once, it all became crystal clear. All the signs and cues were so obvious, she couldn't believe she didn't see it before. As the realization struck her, Rainbow Dash did the last thing anypony would have expected her to do in a situation like this.

"Pfffttt-bwahahahahaha!"

Parchment slowly lifted his hoof from Applejack's flank and turned to Rainbow. "Oh, and what's so funny, lass?"

"Y-y—" Dash struggled to breathe through the fit of laughter. "You... you sound like... like a Daring Do villain!"

Parchment smiled lightly, slowly walking towards her. "Oh? How so?"

"Li-listen to yourself! 'Oh, I shall have my revenge on th-those who wronged me! Th-the world will soon be mi—" She couldn't even finish the word before another fit of giggles took hold.

Parchment stood next to her, still smiling lowly. "Ah fail t' see how that's so funny, Ms. Dash."

Rainbow took a big gulp of air, trying to find her voice. "And-and you know what else you fail to see?" Parchment said nothing. "You can't see how badly you've *bucked up!*"

He raised an eyebrow. "Oh?" He turned and began to walk away.

"Uh, *yeah!*" Her laughter finally subsided, Dash's face once more held the cocksure grin. "Do you have *any* idea who you've pissed off by kidnapping us?" Parchment shook his head, a bemused smile on his face. "Well, first off, you have her brother," she nodded her head towards Applejack, "and my colt friend. There's a reason they call him *Big Macintosh!* He can buck a tree clear out of the ground, and when he gets here, he's gonna break you in half!" Dash's sides began to ache from the gale of laughter.

Parchment laughed with her. "Oh, Ah'm *so* scared!"

"And then, and *then*, you have our best friend: Twilight Sparkle! The most powerful unicorn on the *planet!* The freaking Element of *Magic!* She's saved the world more times than I can count, and *you* kidnapped her best friends!" She narrowed her eyes at him, chuckling once more. "You're kinda stupid, ain't you?" Parchment froze. Dash saw him tense up, and grinned. *Gotcha!*

Slowly, Parchment turned back to face them. The look of mirth was gone from his face, replaced by simmering anger. “What did you just say?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I said you’re a *moron!*”

“Shut up,” he growled, walking back towards Dash.

“No wonder they *fired* you!”

“Shut up!”

“How could *you* possibly teach ponies *anything?!*”

Parchment stormed up next to Dash, slamming his hoof into the stone she was tied to. “*Shut up!*”

Dash grinned at him. “Face it. You’re nothing but a stupid, ignorant,” she paused, trying to remember the insults she used to hear other foals say on the playground, “mud-kicking, dirt-sucking, ground-pounding *common earth pony!*”

With a loud yell, Parchment leaped on top of her, repeatedly slamming his hoof into her face. “*Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!*”

After several long moments, Parchment climbed down from the stone, taking several heaving breaths. He walked over to the other side and his eyes glowed again. A very long, curved blade floated beside him. Strange drawings covered the hilt from the tip of the blade to the ring that slid over his hoof. He turned back to Dash, panting. “You know, Ms. Dash? Ah think we’ve played enough. Yer unicorn friend won’t mind *one* friend missing.”

Dash groaned and raised her head off the stone. Her left eye was already starting to swell. “So... so now you... you kill me?”

“Aye, that’s the plan,” he said coldly.

Dash’s eyes quickly darted to something behind Parchment before looking back at him. “Well, before you do that,” she groaned again, turning her head and spitting blood on the ground, “there’s something you *really* need to do.”

“Oh?” Parchment slowly raised the knife, taking aim at her chest. “What’s that, then?”

Dash smiled. “Turn around.”

Parchment paused, raising an eyebrow at her. Curious, he lowered the knife and turned around, just in time to see the massive red hoof impact his face hard enough to crack the bone.

“You!”

Mac retracted his hoof, hatred blazing in his eyes, and swung again.

“Don’t!”

He reached back for another blow, spittle flying from his mouth.

“Touch!”

The Professor’s face deformed further as small droplets of blood were flung from Mac’s hoof, and he swung again.

“My!”

Mac finally released his hold on the Professor, only to turn around and buck as hard as he could.

“*Filly!*”

The crunch of snapping bone rang out as Parchment went flying, his landing point lost in the shadows. Mac turned back around to face where the stallion had been and spat.

“Mac!”

“Dashie!” Mac spun and took a vine in his mouth, yanking it off her. He ripped the rest off and helped her up before putting his hooves around her and pulling her into the fiercest hug they’d ever shared. They held the embrace for a few moments before each pulled back, looked into the other’s eyes, and shouted in unison.

“Marry me!”

“I’m pregnant!”

A cricket behind the stone chirped, unaware of its excellent timing.



“Eeee-what?”

“Oh, my gosh. Oh, my go—”

“Can that lovey-dovey crap an’ get us outta here!”

“AJ!” Mac whipped around and set to work on the vines around her. Behind him, Twilight and Bentgrass freed the others. Twilight gingerly lifted the ring off of Rarity’s horn, earning a loud sigh from her, before the pair turned to retrieve Pinkie Pie.

Mac slowly eased Applejack off the stone, bringing her close for a tight nuzzle. “You okay, haystack?”

She nodded. “Yeah, I’m fine. Thanks, big brother.” She pulled back and stared at him and Rainbow. “The three of us are gonna have a long talk later!”

Mac and Rainbow gulped. He began to speak when a deep, melodic chuckle came from behind them. The group turned in unison. From the shadows, Parchment walked towards them, his eyes glowing brightly. His cloak was gone, revealing his crumpled chest and mangled face. A loud crack came as his chest popped back into shape, his face reforming with several wet pops. “Well, well. Th’ gang’s all here! Finally, we can begin.”

Bentgrass stepped forward. “Professor, *please!* Stop this!”

Parchment shook his head. “Benty, what’re ye doing here, lad? Ah let ye leave the library! Ye were supposed to be goin’ back t’ Canterlot, awaitin’ the dawn o’ th’ new world!”

“I am here because my dear friend needs me!”

“It’s too late fer that, Benty.” He smiled once more. “This world is lost, and Ah am the only one who can bring it back.”

“No, Tornbald! That’s not you talking. It’s this power, it’s driven you mad, can’t you see that?” Parchment’s smile faltered slightly, and Bentgrass took a step forward. “I have known you since I was a foal. You helped to *raise* me after my parents died! I know you, this isn’t you!”

Parchment blinked several times, his posture slumped a bit. “Benty... ye don’t... Ah...”

Bentgrass pressed forward. “No, Torn. I *do* know. You were wronged and you wish justice. I understand that, truly I do! But look at what you’ve done! You’ve *killed*

innocent ponies! Committed heinous acts, perverted your very *mind!* How does that make you any better than those you loathe?” Parchment fell to his haunches as Bentgrass approached. “This has to stop, Professor.” He reached a hoof down to his shoulders. “Please, old friend.”

“Ah... Ah...” Parchment shook his head violently. “No. No, no, *no!*” He jerked his head up, glaring at Bentgrass with glowing eyes. He cried out once more, and a wave of telekinetic energy blasted Bentgrass away.

“Bentgrass!” Twilight lit her horn and caught the airborne pony, easing him down to the ground next to her. “Are you alright?”

Bentgrass said nothing. He simply stood up, ground a hoof into the ground, and stared at the approaching Parchment with his usual cold gaze.

“That’s enough o’ this!” Parchment stomped towards them. “Ah will not be stopped by th’ likes o’ you! Ah have discovered the *true* gift of magic—one beyond what any *unicorn* could accomplish! With you as my first subjects, Ah will spread my work all across Equestria!” He lowered his head and glared at them, stopping several lengths away. “And now, Ah take what Ah need.”

“I don’t think so, buddy!” Mac stepped forward and slammed his hoof down. “If you want t’ hurt my sister and my... my *wife*,” he cast a quick glance to Rainbow, who smiled at him, “then you’re gonna have t’ get through *me* first!” He snorted loudly, digging a small trench in the dirt with his hooves.

Parchment said nothing for a moment. A smile slowly began to spread across his face. He let out a deep chuckle that soon morphed into raucous laughter. The echoes bounced off the high walls surrounding them. Finally, his laughter died down and he looked at Mac. “*Through* you? Laddie”—his eyes blazed to life, the air around him crackling and distorting—“Ah’d rather *use* you.”

From behind Mac, Dash scoffed. “This guy’s off his cumulus!” She marched forward to join him. “Come on, Mac, let’s ge—”

A thick red leg stopped her in her tracks. Confused, she looked up at him. “Mac?”

He didn’t acknowledge her; his eyes were wide and locked on Parchment. His lower jaw began to tremble, the vibration soon spreading to his whole body. As Dash watched, Mac turned to face her in slow, jerky movements, the shaking growing stronger.

“D...Da...ssshhh—” Their eyes finally met. A yellow film began to seep in from the corner of his eyes, devouring his pupils as the veins in his irises pulsed and throbbed.

His whimper turned into a loud roar, and he lashed out with his massive foreleg, launching Dash towards the wall. Dash had no time to react and she slammed into one of the stone pillars they had been tied to. She groaned and struggled back to her hooves when a loud scream jerked her attention back to her colt friend.

Mac was laying on his side, grunting loudly. His back legs were flailing, pounding into the ground, when he began to slam his forehooves into his head. “*Get out! Get it out, get it out!*” He flopped onto his stomach, slamming his head into the dirt as he writhed. The slight tremor from before was now a violent shudder, Mac’s body helplessly flopping on the ground as he cried out.

He screamed as his back began to writhe and pulse, like snakes were crawling under his skin. With a horrible, wet tearing sound, half a dozen bony spikes erupted from his back sending a splatter of blood into the air. The spines raised up in the air before lowering and clamping down around his midsection, tiny tendrils of bone spreading between them across his belly and sides. His torso began to lengthen, tripling his already massive size. His hind legs began to stretch back, a sickening crack, accompanied by a pained howl, came as his knees reversed angles. The skin began to puff out, bulging muscle bulking up his legs. His forelegs grew wiry and thin, stretching out to double the length of his hind legs. In a shower of blood, his hooves cracked and broke apart, growing into four thick, sausage-like fingers on each.

His scream began to deepen, dropping several octaves as the hair of his tail began to twist and writhe, each hair straightening before being braided together. Eventually, the single, rock-hard mass of his tail pulled away from his body, ending at nearly double his full length. The end suddenly inflated, leaving a large bulge of bone the size of a pony’s head.

His voice was now deep and guttural, a horrible warbling cry that echoed throughout Dash’s mind. His eyes, those beautiful green eyes she loved, were now blood red. His face flattened out, and his teeth began to grow. As she watched in horror, two of his teeth surged in length, sharpening to gleaming points. The thing that had been her colt friend slammed its deformed fist down, shaking the ground and sending Dash careening off her shaky hooves.

Behind the beast, Parchment was sweating and grunting, having fallen to his knees at some point. Blood trickled from both his nostrils as he finally stood on shaky hooves. He looked to his creation, then smiled and cackled at the gawking ponies.

“Do ye... do ye see it now?” He took a shaky step forward, panting heavily. “Behold! The future of *all ponykind!*”

Dash took a small step forward. “M... M-Mac?”

The thing before them whipped its massive head towards her and roared, the force nearly knocking all the ponies to their knees. Its sinewy tail whipped back and forth behind it, its hind legs scratching at the ground.

Parchment finally composed himself, calmly strolling beside his creation. “Now, my pet,” he chuckled.

“Kill them.”

With a warbling, alien howl, the thing that had been Mac slammed his fists into the ground and charged forward.

“Scatter!” At Bentgrass’s yell, the group dispersed in different directions. Rarity and Applejack dove behind one of the stone altars, Twilight popped out of existence and reappeared by the wall next to the fallen Fluttershy, and Bentgrass ran towards Parchment. Dash’s legs refused to move, the sick feeling in her gut paralyzing her as the thing barreled towards her. *Mac...*

“Rainbow!”

The beast lunged for her, mouth open, only to bounce off a blue dome of magic surrounding her. Dash snapped back to reality and turned to see Rarity, horn aglow and jaw clenched.

Rarity cast an eye to Rainbow. “R... run!”

Behind her, the beast howled once more. Dash turned back around and saw the thing’s raised fist flying towards her. Dash rolled out of the way right before the giant fist shattered the weak force field in a shower of sparks. Rarity let out a loud cry and collapsed.

The creature’s head whipped towards the fallen Rarity and snarled. With unnatural agility, it leaped towards her, landing only a few lengths away. It licked its gnarled lips and leaned down, jaw stretched wide. A flash of movement and the beast met with a pair of orange hind legs. It cried out and fell back to its haunches.

Applejack spun back around and faced the thing that had been her brother. “Come on, Macintosh. It’s me, your sister Applejack, remember?”

The Mac-thing rubbed its aching jaw and stood back up on its freakish legs, looking down at her through narrowed eyes. It slammed its fists into the ground, sending grass and cobblestone flying, and snarled at her.

Applejack didn’t budge. “Snap out of it, Mac!” Her jaw was set and her brow furrowed, but tears had begun to well up in her eyes.

With another demonic howl, it lashed out at her with a fist. Applejack jumped back, narrowly avoiding the hit, and she turned and ran, the beast in hot pursuit.

• • •

Across the courtyard, Bentgrass slowly crept behind Parchment. The old pony was watching his creation chase Applejack through the yard, laughing with twisted glee each time it tried to smash her. With his other-worldly stealth, Bentgrass positioned himself right behind Parchment, bent his legs slightly, and pounced. There was a blur of movement, and he hit the ground muzzle-first.

“Lookin’ fer me, lad?”

Bentgrass whirled around just in time to catch Parchment’s hoof to his face. The supernatural strength of the hit knocked Bentgrass back several lengths before he rolled and recovered his stance. He spun to face Parchment, but only saw a blur as he zipped away at impossible speeds. Before Bentgrass could even register the sound beside him, two hind legs viciously bucked his side, sending him sprawling again. This time, Bentgrass was slow to recover. He lay on his side, gasping for breath, and blinked several times to try and clear the large black spots from his vision.

Parchment slowly walked over to him. “It didn’t have t’ be this way, boyo.” He delivered a savage kick to Bentgrass’s midsection, earning another groan. “Ye could have had a place in my new world.” Another vicious kick. “Ah let ye go! Why did ye have t’ come back?”

“Y... you know me, Professor.” He struggled to his elbows. “I always enjoy it when things get complicated.” Bentgrass swept his hind legs towards Parchment, knocking him down to the ground. Bentgrass followed through with the movement, spinning himself around and rolling on top of Parchment. Bentgrass wrapped his hind legs around Parchment,

pinning his forelegs to his body, and delivered a series of vicious punches. Parchment's head bounced off the stone floor under the force of the blows.

Bentgrass pulled back for another blow when Parchment roared at him, his eyes glowing brightly, and a pulse of telekinesis slammed into him. Bentgrass was sent sailing through the air, the world around him tumbling and spinning until a pair of blue forelegs caught him. Rainbow eased him down to the ground, all the while glaring at Parchment.

Touching down, Bentgrass turned to her. "Thank you for th—"

Rainbow launched towards Parchment, moving so fast she tore a small trench in the ground before barreling into him. The two rolled across the courtyard before Rainbow landed on top of him. She slammed his head into the ground. "Change him back!"

Parchment laughed up at her. "Why would Ah want t' do that?"

Rainbow punched him in the face, her eyes wild. "*Change him back!*"

Faster than even Rainbow could have moved, Parchment grabbed her and rolled, ending up on top of her. Rainbow struggled and kicked, but he pinned her legs with his, leering at her. "Insolent little filly." With a loud pop, the dagger appeared on his hoof. He raised it high.

"Parchment!"

Bentgrass wrapped his forelegs around Parchment's chest and hurled himself backward, slamming Parchment's head into the ground with a sickening crack. Bentgrass released his hold and spun his body to the side, pushing himself back to his hooves and taking a few steps back to join Rainbow.

As they both watched, Parchment slowly stood back up, his head hanging limply. With a loud crack, he jerked his head to the side and it righted itself, the skin on his neck pulsing and writhing as the sinew healed. He rolled his head around and looked back at them, smiling.

"Ah think not."

• • •

Applejack rolled to the left, narrowly avoiding the giant fist that slammed down next to her. Her breathing was ragged and sweat poured from her brow, but she pressed on. The

thing that was her brother tirelessly chased her around the courtyard, slashing away at her.

Up ahead, Applejack saw the far wall of the yard rapidly approaching. Groaning, she veered to the left. The slight loss of speed cost her, as the monster lashed out once more with a fist, this time connecting and knocking her to the ground. Bouncing roughly a few times, she finally came to a halt and struggled to her hooves just in time to see the thing lunge at her. She cried out and rolled away, the beast so close she could feel its rough hide against her fur.

Before she could recover, its tail whipped around and the bony mass at the tip struck her. A loud crack echoed in her head as an agonizing pain lanced through her chest and she was sent skyward. She sailed through the air until a blue glow enveloped her, jerking her to a halt. She screamed at the sudden movement, the pain in her sides intensified tenfold. Below her, Rarity eased her to the ground. As she helped her to her hooves, the creature barreled towards them, head lowered and mouth agape.

“Girls, get down!”

Rarity and Applejack fell to their bellies, Applejack crying out again. No sooner had they landed than a brilliant beam of purple light lanced above them. The beast howled in pain, the force of the beam sending it reeling backwards. Twilight stepped forward to her friends, her horn still aglow. Grunting loudly, one of the massive pillars of earth rose from the ground and darted to the stumbling creature, knocking it off-balance and sending it crashing to the ground.

“Rarity! The vines!” Twilight raced towards the fallen monster, her horn already charging for another shot. The monster locked eyes with her, and rolled to the side as her horn discharged, the beam impacting the far wall in a shower of sparks. It climbed back to its hooves and roared, charging at the approaching unicorn.

Twilight looked past the creature and saw her target. Gritting her teeth, she poured on the speed, now at a dead sprint towards the beast. Its large, bulldog-like teeth glistened in the torchlight, its fiery orange eyes locked on her. Twilight’s heart fluttered, but she pressed on. *This worked before. Please let it work again.*

Now merely a few lengths apart, the best reared up on its hind legs, fists clenched to smash Twilight. She grinned and pressed on. With only inches to spare, Twilight ducked and ran between its hulking legs, its fists hitting nothing but dirt. The monster howled and spun to find its target, and immediately froze.

Standing in front of the wall, Fluttershy Stared at the behemoth, her wings still bleeding and her legs shaky beneath her. The creature fell to its haunches, its jaw hanging open. Fluttershy slowly limped towards it. “Big Macintosh? I’m sorry... I’m so sorry about this.” Her gaze hardened, a tear dripping down her face.

A brilliant beam of light slammed into the creature’s side, sending it howling in pain to the ground. Before it could move, Applejack leaped in front of it and bucked its face as hard as she could, crying out from the pain in her chest. One of its massive canines snapped off as its head jerked back.

“Rarity, now!”

From behind the stone wall, dozens of vines floated towards the creature, propelled by blue magic. With a seamstress’s precision, they wove and wrapped around its legs and tail, binding them to its massive chest. One vine, nearly as thick as Twilight’s leg, wrapped around its mouth and tied into a tight knot.

The vines spun and danced around the creature until finally the glow surrounding them died off. Rarity fell to her knees, panting heavily. All four ponies looked down at the bound monster, now still save for the rise and fall of its chest.

• • •

Bentgrass ducked his head to the left, narrowly avoiding the hoof flying at him, and came back with a vicious uppercut. Parchment cried out and staggered back. “Why did you bother to kidnap them, Professor? Still the same old pervert?”

“That unicorn bitch needed t’ be taught a lesson!” Growling loudly, he lunged forward and unleashed a flurry of punches. Bentgrass bobbed and weaved, deflecting the blows with his forelegs, but could not keep up with the supernatural speed. A hard right hoof hit his jaw, sending him sprawling. Parchment slowly advanced on him. “T’ be so casually turned down—as if my life’s work, the work of gods themselves, was somehow less important than her worthless sniveling in a treehouse’s basement!” Rearing up, he brought his forelegs down to crush Bentgrass’s skull.

Bentgrass jerked to the side and Parchment’s hooves met nothing but dirt. Throwing a hoof around his legs, Bentgrass heaved his weight against Parchment, knocking him to the ground, before rolling on top of him and pinning his legs. “You really have gone mad.”



Parchment slammed his head into Bentgrass's, knocking him back. Parchment flipped up and landed on top of him, slamming his foreleg into Bentgrass's throat. A strangled cry escaped Bentgrass, a faint cracking coming from his neck as his windpipe began to buckle. Parchment leaned in towards him. "After Ah kill you, Ah'll make that filly watch as I slaughter and consume her friends, *slowly an' painfully!*" He slowly twisted his elbow on Bentgrass's throat, smiling widely at the panicked gasps he made. "Time t' sa—"

A cyan blur slammed into Parchment. Grasping him in her forelegs, Rainbow repeatedly drove her knees into Parchment as she pushed through the air. With one final blow, she released him, sending him crashing to the ground after several hard bounces. Parchment slowly got back to his hooves and looked up, only to see Bentgrass's hind legs flying at his face. The blow knocked him back, but he managed to stay upright. Before he could react, Rainbow blazed past him, striking his face with a satisfying crunch.

The two continued the assault, never allowing Parchment time to recover. Every time Rainbow would strafe by and deliver a flying punch, Bentgrass would immediately follow with several lightning-fast strikes. Parchment's world devolved into a series of blue and white blurs along with searing pain.

Finally, after countless passes, Rainbow banked hard and charged Parchment again. She scooped her forelegs around his midsection and rocketed skyward.

She continued rising until the torchlit courtyard was a just a speck beneath them. She tossed Parchment up, spinning him around, bringing his broken, bloodied face to hers. "Last chance! Change him back!"

"I... Insolent little filly! Ah'll—"

"Wrong answer."

Dash spun and rocketed downward. She could feel the professor's bones healing beneath her. Faster and faster she flew, the wind screeched around her, her eyes stinging from the cold air. Dash's wings pumped hard, still picking up speed. Below her, she could now make out the faces of her friends, staring up at her.

With mere lengths to go, Rainbow shouted and hurled Parchment to the ground, simultaneously banking hard and leveling out. Parchment slammed into the ground with bone-shattering force, sending plumes of dirt and rock skyward.

Rainbow executed a tight circle in the air and landed next to Bentgrass. The two slowly approached Parchment's broken body sprawled on the ground. Already, his bones were beginning to knit themselves back together.

He slowly lifted his head to them. "You... you cannot beat me."

"It's over, Professor!" Bentgrass knelt down to him, a pleading look in his eyes. "Look! Your monster has failed!" He pointed to their left. Parchment slowly turned his head and gasped. The thing that was Macintosh lay on the ground, unconscious, its legs, tail, and jaw bound in heavy vines. The remaining five mares slowly walked towards him. Twilight was supporting Pinkie, who had regained consciousness at some point, while Fluttershy leaned on Rarity.

"Professor." Parchment whipped his back to Bentgrass. The battered agent knelt beside him, his eyes soft. "Please, end this. Let me help you." He extended a hoof towards Parchment.

Parchment's eyes darted between the bound creature, the approaching mares, and Bentgrass's hoof. "No." His eyes blazed to life again, the air around his head crackling loudly. "No, no, **NO!**"

A wave of telekinetic energy slammed down on top of them, pressing them down to their bellies. A deafening crack came from all around them as the wall surrounding the courtyard exploded outward, sending stone and earth flying into the forest.

Parchment rocketed skyward, glaring down at the struggling ponies. He panted heavily, his eyes dilated and wild. "Ah will not suffer you *insects* any longer! Th' power of th' Celestial Parents themselves is at *my* hooves!" He floated down, landing in front of Twilight with a sharp thud. "Of what consequence are you anymore? Ah am more than pony, more than life! *Ah am a god!*" With a loud pop, the dagger appeared on his foreleg. "And now, Ah take my place among the stars." With that, he raised the knife high. Twilight closed her eyes.

He tensed to bring the blade down, but paused, then stepped back, lowering the blade. "But first," he walked over to Bentgrass, glaring down at him, "ye've been a dear friend for so long, Benty, so Ah'll give ye a choice. Is there any particular way you'd like to die?"

Bentgrass looked around at the others struggling to move, deep fear and pain in their eyes. Facts raced through his mind, everything he'd seen in the past few days. He tried to

think of some other way, *any* other way. It was stupid; it was insane; and most likely, he wouldn't survive. Finally, his shoulders slumped.

*It must be done. Forgive me, Twilight.*

"No dragons, please," he whispered.

Parchment narrowed his eyes. "What?"

Bentgrass looked up at him, a pleading look in his eyes. "I... I don't care how you kill me, just please, no dragons." He hung his head, his voice barely a whisper as he looked down at the ground. "I'm... I'm terrified of dragons."

All was still for a moment. Parchment stared at Bentgrass curiously before a wicked smile crept into his face. He chuckled quietly. "Are ye now? Well then, it's your lucky day, boyo!" His eyes glowed again, as Spike's limp body floated over to him. "We got a dragon right here."

Across the courtyard, Twilight struggled fiercely against the downward push of his magic. "No! No, *you leave him alone!*"

"*Silence, worm!*" Parchment floated back several lengths, placing Spike on the ground between him and the group. His eyes scanned over Spike. "Although, he's jest a wee little blighter, isn't he?" He smiled cruelly at Bentgrass as his eyes blazed brighter than ever. "Ah think a growth spurt's in order."

"No! No!" Twilight's horn glowed brightly, but something was suppressing her magic. She could only shake helplessly as the air around Parchment began to crackle and buzz.

Spike's eyes shot open as the same field enveloped him. "Tw... Twilight, what's hap—" His speech devolved into a pained howl as he was slammed spread eagle on his stomach, small sparks shooting from his scales.

A loud groaning sound, like grinding rocks, echoed across the courtyard. Spike's left arm jerked outward, nearly doubling in length as the scales ripped apart, leaving most of his arm covered in sinewy muscle. Twilight watched in horror as the muscle inflated and bulged, new scales growing in from the exposed tissue. Boiling hot tears streamed down Spike's snout, blubbery cries of agony escaping his lips as the process repeated on the other limbs and his tail, green blood staining the ground beneath him.

The two small lumps on his back suddenly exploded in a shower of blood. Long, thin bones shot skyward before breaking apart, taking the form of skeletal wings. Tiny, snake-like tendrils of flesh crawled up the bones, fanning out in a thin, purple membrane with red veins snaking in between. As Spike cried through gritted teeth, his face stretched and narrowed, the scales tearing to reveal bone before healing. The process repeated over and over as the horns on his head began to jut upwards.

Twilight whimpered, tears pouring down her muzzle. “Spike!” She mustered her strength and fought hard against the magic binding her, but her hooves didn’t budge. It felt like a mancore was sitting in her.

Spike’s cries of pain gradually deepened, the high, cracking shrieks now rumbling roars. A series of deafening cracks, like twisting metal, and his torso began to lurch forward, the muscle and sinew tearing and reforming constantly, making him slowly grow. His tear-filled eyes turned to Twilight. He reached out for her with a trembling arm, still rippling with growing muscle. “T... Twi—lllllll—”

“Spike!” Twilight struggled to reach her hoof to him, when she felt the weight on her back begin to lift. Around her, the others were beginning to move, as well.

The instant she regained her footing, Twilight leaped towards Spike, but before she could get close a white foreleg restrained her. She whirled around, glaring at Bentgrass. “Let me go! *Let me go!*”

Bentgrass held her fast. “Twilight! *Twilight, wait! Look!*” He pointed past the still growing Spike to Parchment.

Twilight looked and gasped. The professor’s entire body was shaking violently. A thick plume of what looked like white smoke was pouring out of his mouth, eyes, and nose before being drawn towards Spike.

“S-s-s-st... st-st-stop.” His voice was barely a dry croak escaping from his shriveled lips. His face distorted, the skin around his mouth retracting and shriveling, revealing rapidly decaying teeth. A milky film spread over his eyes, still wide and staring at Spike. The deep crimson of his mane began to fade to a stark white.

“S-S-St—st-stop!” All over his body, the firm muscle began to shrink, leaving cracked, wrinkled flesh hanging from his bones. His eyes, still locked on Spike, looked like rotten grapes barely sitting in their sockets. The skin on his head cracked and flaked, but no blood flowed; tiny flakes of skin and dust fell from the cuts.

A final, parched squeak escaped his torn lips, then the storm around his head instantly dissipated. The frail, skeletal body remained motionless for a moment before collapsing to the ground. In front of him, Spike convulsed one more time then flopped to the ground.

All was still in the courtyard.

Finally, Twilight lunged to her hooves and raced to Spike. She skidded to a halt in front of him, her eyes wide. His head was now almost as big as she was, two horns jutting out from his forehead. Large, membranous wings draped his massive back, still slick and glistening. His hind legs were thick and squat, his arms long and muscled. Patches of exposed flesh dotted his hide, scales half-formed in some places.

She knelt before him, reaching out and placing a hoof on his massive snout. “S... Spike?”

Spike groaned, a deep, rumbling sound that made Twilight’s tail twitch behind her. Slowly, his eyes opened. “Ugh... T... Twi?” His voice was deep and clean, a far cry from the scratchy, adolescent voice she had heard that afternoon.

“Yes. It’s me, Spike.” Tears still leaked from her eyes, but a wide smile had settled on her face.

“When did you get so tiny?”

Twilight laughed. “I’m not sure. I,” she sniffled and wiped her eyes, “I guess I haven’t been eating my alfalfa lately.”

Spike groaned and tried to stand up. He made it halfway before crying out and falling back down. “Take it easy, Spike. You’ve been through a lot.”

“Good idea. Oh, hey. I... uhn, I think we need to keep an eye on that Parchment guy. He seems a little sketchy.”

Twilight cried out and lunged at him, wrapping her forelegs around his massive snout. She gripped him tight, nuzzling into him. “Sh... Shut up, Spike.”

Across the yard, Bentgrass and Rarity slowly approached Parchment’s desiccated corpse.

“W-what happened to him?” Fluttershy asked, limping up to them.

Bentgrass knelt down to Parchment's body. "Dragons are innately magical creatures. Their fire and immense size are fueled by unparalleled natural magics. Parchment was... ill-equipped to handle the raw power of Spike's biology." Bentgrass gently ran his hoof through the remains of Parchment's mane. "He dumped so much energy into the spell that it awakened Spike's inherent draconic nature."

"It... it got greedy, began to draw in *all* his magic," Rarity whispered.

"A beginner's mistake..." Bentgrass muttered as he stood, turning away from the lifeless husk before him. "There are few forces on Earth that can withstand the pure, untempered fury of a dragon's inherent magic."

"So, it's over?"

"Not quite." Slowly, Bentgrass turned around and walked away. Rarity and Fluttershy shared a quick glance and followed.

Ahead of them, Rainbow and Applejack stood before the deformed creature that had been Macintosh, still bound and unconscious. As Bentgrass approached, he heard quiet sniffing from Applejack. Rainbow stood with her jaw hanging slightly, her eyes wide.

Bentgrass eased next to Applejack. Neither said anything for a moment, both simply stared at the beast before them. Slowly, Applejack and Bentgrass turned to face each other.

"Is there anythin' we can do?" Bentgrass slowly shook his head. She sniffled. "There has t' be *somethin'* you can do t' help 'im!"

"Just one thing."

The two locked eyes, understanding passing between them. Finally, Applejack turned her back to the monster. A single tear fell from her eye. "Make it quick?"

"He won't feel a thing."

Applejack tersely nodded and stepped away, while Bentgrass knelt down next to the thing's throat. Rainbow darted her head between the two. "Wait, what's going on? What are you doing?"

Bentgrass looked over his shoulder. "What must be done," he whispered.

Rainbow stared for a moment before her eyes went wide. Moving at blinding speed, she shoved Bentgrass away, standing in front of the monster, her wings flared. “Oh, no! No way!”

Applejack turned back to face her. “Let ‘im through, Dash.”

Rainbow stomped her hoof, staring at her through narrowed eyes. “What are you doing? AJ, this is your bro—”

“*My brother’s dead!*” She glared at Rainbow, tears now streaming down her face. “That... that *thing*, ain’t my brother, an’ he ain’t your...” she sniffled loudly, “it ain’t your husband. Only thing left t’ do is put that thing outta its misery.”

Rainbow stood slack jawed. She sputtered, trying to find words to protest when Bentgrass laid a hoof on her shoulders. “I’m so sorry, Ms. Dash, but she’s right. His mind is gone. Whatever remained of your fiancé was... ripped out. This beast,” he motioned towards the thing behind him, “cares not for you, nor Ms. Apple. It’s... it’s the equine thing to do.” With that, he gently pushed Dash out of the way. Her legs moved on their own, her mind still reeling, tears welling in her eyes.

Bentgrass knelt by the monster’s throat, feeling for its windpipe. When he felt the solid lump, he placed both his hooves on it. Behind him, the girls all turned away. Bentgrass cast one more glance at its eyes as he tensed his shoulders. “I’m so sorry, Mr. Ap—”

“*No!*”

Rainbow violently shoved Bentgrass away, her teeth barred and eyes narrowed. “This is *not* happening!” She spun around to face the creature. “Mac? Come on, Mac, wake up.” The beast didn’t stir. Growling, Rainbow struck its snout with her forehoof. “*Wake up, Macintosh!*”

The beast let out a low growl. Its eyes fluttered open, the crimson irises darting back and forth before locking onto Dash.

“Mac, it’s me, it’s Rainbow. You remember me, right?” She eased forward and placed her hoof on its head. “It’s just you and me now, okay? He’s gone now, it’s just us.”

The beast growled at her, struggling with its bonds. Its narrowed eyes glared at her, but she never faltered. “Come on, Mac! You have to remember!” Rainbow stepped back a bit, her eyes never leaving the monster’s. “You... you know, I’d known for a while that you had your eye on me. Remember that cider thing a few years back?” She laughed at the

memory, but her voice was cracking, tears still in her eyes. “Don’t think I didn’t notice you slowing down on that treadmill a few times to get a look at my flank.”

It growled again, this time loud enough that the others all took a step back. The thing began to fiercely struggle with the vines. “Rainbow…” Twilight’s voice was shaky.

Dash’s eyes never left his. “My parents said I was crazy when I told them I was dating an earth pony. Heh, ‘you’ll never be able to slow down enough for that’ they said.”

“Rainbow, get back!” Applejack retreated further as the vines surrounding its legs began to crackle and fray.

“The daredevil and the farmer! Ha, not even Discord could have thought that one up!” Dash was nearly yelling now to be heard over the barely muffled cries of the thing as it struggled for freedom. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she realized that she should be terrified. She should be running away, but she held her ground. “But we made it work! A year later, and I still love you as much as when we first went out!”

With a mighty crack, the vines around its legs finally have way. The beast rolled to the side, climbing to its hooves. Its tail whipped back and forth as it raised its forehooves to paw at the rope muzzle.

Twilight’s horn glowed brightly. “Stand back, girls.” She set her shoulders, Bentgrass stepping beside her and leaning into a fighting stance.

“*No!*” Rainbow jumped in between them and the monster, head low and wings flared.

“Ms. Dash, get out of the way!”

“Not a chance, Milky!” She spun around to face the creature. “You hear that, *Mac? I’m not giving up on you!* You know why?” She stomped her hoof. “Because I’m marrying you, Macintosh Apple. Whether you want to or not, dammit I’m putting a ring on you!”

The beast finally worked the vines off its muzzle. It let out a loud roar and lowered its head, glaring at Dash.

She never faltered. “I don’t care if I never fly again. I don’t care if I never leave the ground!” The tears finally broke the barrier and began falling down her face, despite her fierce gaze.



The beast raised a hoof to move, but stopped mid-stride. Its raspy breathing slowed somewhat as it stared at Rainbow.

“I’ll do whatever it takes. I’ll live on the farm, sit in a rocking chair, make lemonade, knit foal clothes, churn butter, whatever! I’ll spend the rest of my life on the farm, just as long as I get to spend it with you!” She took a step forward, her jaw clenched despite the flow of tears. “Because I love you, Mac.”

The courtyard was silent, save for the raspy breathing of the monster. The other ponies held their breath, watching the scene unfold, silently hoping, yet ready to flee.

Slowly, the thing’s head tilted to the side, its eyes never leaving Rainbow. Its mouth opened, and a deep, rumbling growl came out.

***“D-DDAAAAASSSSHHHHIIIEEEE.”***

“Yes!” Rainbow took several steps towards it, now only a few lengths away. Tears still flowed down her face, but her eyes brightened. “Yes, it’s me, Mac! Now come on, I need you to fight this. I know you can beat this, Mac! Don’t let that wacko win!”

The monster’s head began to twitch to the side, its breathing growing erratic.

“Think about me. Think about us. Think...” she looked down briefly, placing a hoof on her belly before turning back to the beast, “think about our... our foal.”

The twitch grew more pronounced. It began to grunt loudly, its muscles convulsing.

“You want her to grow up like Apple Bloom, never knowing her father? Then you need to fight this!”

The creature’s entire body began to convulse, as it groaned in pain. Its skin began to smoke, and Rainbow could feel heat radiating off it, but she still stepped closer.

“Your foal needs you, Mac. I need you. So you’d better fight, ‘cause dammit I’m not going to be a single mother!”

It sank to its haunches, clutching its deformed head. Loud grunts of pain echoed across the courtyard as more tendrils of smoke rose off it. The heat was intense, but Rainbow remained.

“You need to come back to me, Mac. Because I need you. I... I love you.” She looked him right in the eye, slamming her hoof into the dirt. “*You come back to me, you inbred redneck!*”

A deafening roar, and the monster burst into flame. Rainbow was yanked back by a lavender glow, before she was dropped on her haunches next to Twilight, her eyes wide and full of tears. The beast fell to its side, howling and pounding at the ground. The fire burned so brightly that all the ponies had to turn away from the searing heat. The stench of burning hair and flesh wafted over them, the light so bright they could see it through their closed eyes.

Then, as soon as it started, it stopped. The heat, the light, the smell, the sound, all vanished in an instant. Rainbow turned around first and gasped. There, laying in a circle of burnt grass and cracked cobblestone, was Macintosh. Smoke still rose from him, but it was quickly fading.

In the blink of an eye, Dash was at his side. “Mac!” She cradled him in her hooves, placing her ear to his chest. She let out a bark of laughter when she heard his heart and felt the rise and fall of his chest. Her smile faded when she looked at his face; his eyes were shut, no expression whatsoever.

“Mac? Come on, Mac, wake up.” She gave several light taps to his cheek, but he didn’t awaken. She tapped him again, harder this time. “Mac?”

No response.

She felt tears in her eyes once more. “Mac! Wake up! Please, wake up!” She leaned down and nuzzled him lightly, tears flowing once more.

“Mac, please, wake up.”

Bentgrass's hooves clicked quietly on the polished linoleum floor, the sound nearly lost under the thrum of activity around him. The corners of his mouth turned up for a brief moment. *Nothing seems to breath life into a hospital like the threat of death.*

He paced back and forth down the hallway, deftly avoiding the roaming orderlies and nurses that tried to pull him into his own hospital room. There were others that needed the attention much more than him. He could sleep later. He tuned them out, focusing on his own hooffalls, his eyes staring straight down, rising only when he reached one particular window.

He casually peeked inside. Big Macintosh lay on a double-sized hospital bed, motionless save for the soft rise and fall of his chest. Bentgrass couldn't hear through the thick glass, but he could see the green display of the heart monitor blip up and down in a gentle rhythm as Mac continued in the same deep sleep that he'd been in for the past three days.

A sharp movement across the room drew his attention; Rainbow Dash, fast asleep on a tiny couch along the wall, tossed fitfully, her brows arched and a light sheen of sweat on her face. He could almost hear the pitiful moans from her slightly opened mouth.

"Looks like one hay of a nightmare." A large stallion sidled up next to Bentgrass, peering in the window. "You want to wake her up?"

Bentgrass couldn't see the stallion's face in the reflection, but he didn't need to. "Something tells me that she might prefer the nightmare to her reality at the moment, General."

Shining Armor nodded, but said nothing. The two stood there for a few moments, watching Dash toss and turn.

Shining finally stepped away and crossed to the other side of the hallway, sitting down on one of the low-set benches lining the wall. He sighed, his horn glowing and lifting the helmet off of his head. "So, I just got back from Canterlot. Princess Luna is examining Parchment's body." He ran his hoof through his mane, still a bit damp from wearing the helmet for so long. "Funny thing, though," he set the helmet down beside him, looking up to Bentgrass, "when the Guard got to Parchment's hotel room, there was no sign of the scroll Twilight told us about."

"That has already been taken care of." Bentgrass never even looked away from the window.

“Taken care of *how*, exactly?”

“That is classified, General, and outside your purview.” Shining bristled at the comment, but Bentgrass continued before he could speak. “Rest assured that it is in a safe location, being examined by top ponies as we speak.”

Shining leaned towards him. “Examined by who, exactly?”

Finally, Bentgrass turned away from the window and looked to Shining. His words were slow and careful, as if speaking to a foal. “Top ponies.”

Shining open his mouth, but sighed and slumped back down in his chair. “So, you knew Parchment, right? What happened to him? Was he always crazy?”

Bentgrass sighed and crossed the hall, easing himself down into a cushion next to him. “The fear of losing everything can drive ponies to the brink. Actually *losing* everything can push them over.” He leaned back, his head thumping against the wall, his eyes staring straight up. “When he was fired from Her Majesty’s School three months ago, he... he seemed to take it rather well. He had always been a petty stallion, but I never thought he...”

“Was a deranged psychopath that wanted to take over the world?”

Bentgrass shook his head. “No, that was the power talking. I read the journal we found in his saddlebag. He killed Berry Punch of his own will, desperate to prove his theory and that he could be ‘just as magical as any unicorn.’” Shining shifted uncomfortably at that statement. “But once that tainted magic entered him...” Bentgrass sighed again. “You know, for a moment that night, I... I saw him, behind the magic and madness. He was terrified.”

A heavy silence fell between the two. They sat there for several minutes, ignoring the coming and going of doctors and nurses for several minutes. Bentgrass’s eyes were glued to the ceiling, the events of the past few days rushing through his mind, the decisions he’d made. One in particular kept coming back. He let out a loud sigh.

Finally, Shining broke the silence. “So, Twilight told me and the Princesses everything.” His hoof idly flicked the plumage on his helm as he spoke. “You’ll be happy to know that by royal edict, once Sheriff Shackle is fully recovered, he’ll be looking for a new job.”

“He shouldn’t be the only one.” Bentgrass nodded his head towards the heavy wooden door at the end of the hallway.

Shining chuckled. “Oh, don’t worry. Princess Luna has already had a little chat with the Equestrian Medical Service. Doctor Well might want to take a nice picture of his medical license. Twiley was particularly adamant about *that*.”

Bentgrass’s tail twitched ever so slightly. “And... how is your sister?”

Shining eyed him for a moment, his eyebrow arching as he appraised him. “She’s good. Hasn’t left Spike’s side yet.” He let out a sharp breath. “You know, growing up, our mom always said I was hovering over Twilight, doting like some wet nurse. It’s funny now to see *her* doing it to this giant dragon.”

“Well, he has been through a lot.”

“Yeah. Apparently, Princess Celestia has asked an old dragon friend of hers to come and take a look at him. Some ambassador or something from the fringe country. He should be here in a few hours.”

Another silence, though this one heavy with tension. Shining was tapping a steady rhythm with his hoof, gently gnawing on his bottom lip. Finally, he grunted and stood, his helm floating in the air next to him. “Look, Agent Bentgrass, I...” he groaned, running a hoof through his mane again, “aw, Tartarus. Twiley told me about what happened in front of the library the other day, with the monster-rabbit... *thing*. Now, I make no effort to hide the fact that I don’t trust you intelligence types. All those shadow games you play make me very nervous.”

“As well they should, General. That is the point.”

A loud sigh came from Shining as he closed his eyes for a moment, his brow furrowed. “All that aside, Agent Bentgrass,” he finally looked back down at him, his eyes soft, “you saved my sister’s life. Thank you.”

Slowly, Bentgrass rose to his hooves. He smoothed out his coat, then met Shining’s eyes and nodded. The two held each other’s gaze for a moment, then Shining stepped away, placing his helmet back on. “Well, I better get back to it. Take care of yourself, Agent Bentgrass. It’s been... *interesting* knowing you.”

“Likewise, General.”

Shining nodded and walked away. As soon as he turned the corner, Bentgrass’s face fell to a deep frown. He stepped back to the wall, sliding down and sitting roughly on the bench.

• • •

*The open sky beckoned her.*

*Bending her knees, Rainbow leaped off the ground, and with a flap of her wings, rocketed towards the heavens. The sudden acceleration made her insides feel like they were being compressed into her hind legs. She smiled through gritted teeth and pushed higher. Breaking through the cloud ceiling, she snapped her wings taut and banked hard to the right, ripping through a cloud that exploded outward in a shower of raindrops.*

*Rainbow's face twisted in concentration as she bobbed and weaved between clouds, g-forces pulling her in all directions. The first shot of adrenaline was already working through her as she danced in the sky, exhilarating in the feel of the wind rushing through her feathers.*

*"Goin' my way, birdbrain?"*

*Rainbow looked to her left and grinned. Mac flew next to her, expansive red wings propelling him to her side. They shared a quick nuzzle before Rainbow peeled off and leered at him.*

*"If you think you can keep up, hayseed!"*

*With a sharp flick of her wings, Dash executed a right barrel roll and fled, leaving a rainbow contrail behind her. She spared a glance behind her, grinning at the crimson dot slowly catching up to her. Turning back to the front, she poured on the speed.*

*Pretty soon she felt his presence next to her. Rainbow led him through dizzying acrobatics: hairpin turns, deadly corkscrews, all at mind-numbing speeds. Mac kept pace through it all, the tips of his wings constantly rubbing with hers.*

*Rainbow squinted against the howling wind. "Not bad for your first time, farmcolt!"*

*"Why, Dash?"*

*"Huh?" Rainbow turned to face him and screamed. What was her husband was now a rotting husk. Decayed flesh dropped from his frame, the skin mottled and clinging to his bones. His eyes, those green eyes she loved to get lost in, were gone, replaced by two gaping holes that bored into her.*

*"Why didn't you save me?"*

• • •

Rainbow's eyes shot open. She jerked her head up, her eyes darted back and forth as she tried to reaffirm her grasp on reality. Realizing where she was, she let out a long breath and flopped her head back down on the stiff couch cushion, the pounding in her chest slowly subsiding. Staring at the off-white ceiling tiles for several long moments, she arched her back and groaned at the loud pops that came from her spine. *Stupid earth pony hospitals. Would it kill them to bring a few clouds down?*

Rainbow yawned and slowly sat up, rotating her limbs to a cacophony of loud pops and cracks. The firm, unyielding couch in the corner of Mac's hospital room had been her home since they arrived. Despite protests from her friends and the doctors, she had been determined to remain at his side. She idly rubbed her aching face; the swelling around her eye had finally gone down, though the iris was still an angry red. She looked around the room, seeing the same sterile white walls and large window overlooking the scenic hill outside, but gasped when she saw the bed. "Mac!"

Macintosh was sitting up on the large bed. A large bouquet sat on the nightstand next to him, several balloons floating overhead, and a small, black felt box sat next to it. Dash raced over to him, ignoring the groans of protest from her sore limbs, and embraced him in a fierce hug, burying her face into his coat.

She held him for several long seconds before she noticed that he hadn't hugged her back. Slowly, she pulled away to find him still staring off into space, his face neutral. She eased off of him and sat down on the bed with her legs tucked underneath her, brow furrowed and a shaky smile on her lips. "Mac?"

"How long?"

Rainbow's heart fluttered at the his tone: it was cold, detached. She cleared her throat and spoke. "Nearly three days. The doctors weren't sure if you would wake up at all, or if you did if you"—she gulped, doing her best to stop the quiver in her voice—"if you'd still be you."

Mac slowly blinked. "Girls okay?"

"Yeah. Pinkie had a pretty bad concussion, but you know her, she's acting like it never even happened." She laughed, but even *she* thought it sounded forced. "Fluttershy's not going to be flying for a few months. Heh, not that she'd care."

He opened his mouth, but closed it immediately, his lower jaw quivering. Rainbow shuddered a bit at the movement. Slowly, painfully, Mac spoke. “A... AJ?”

Dash took a deep breath. “Three cracked ribs. They offered her some magic-powered wheelchair, but she refused it.”

“Y-you?”

She gave a pitiful laugh. “Come on, Mac, you know me! It’ll take more than some super-powered egghead to take down Equestria’s greatest flier!” She puffed her chest out, but he gave no reaction. She deflated, slowly easing back to her sitting position.

“It’s been crazy the past few days. A bunch of suits came and took Zecora to Canterlot to see if they could help her. Division Six agents have been hounding us, asking all kinds of questions.” She let out a nervous laugh. “I’d say you’re almost lucky you’ve been asleep.”

The room was silent for a few painful minutes. Dash opened her mouth several times, but closed it as her words failed her. Mac just stared at the same place on the far wall.

Finally, Mac looked down at the felt box on the nightstand. “I see this made it here.”

Despite her best efforts, a light blush made its way across her face, her heart rate speeding up just a bit. “Uh, yeah. Apple Bloom found it when she was bringing some of your stuff from the farm.” An awkward silence fell between them. Rainbow’s eyes darted back and forth, desperately trying to find *something* to say. “I, uh... I-I didn’t open it!” She rolled her eyes; she’d said that *much* louder than she had intended. “In case you, you know, wanted to do the whole, uh... ‘down on your knees’ thing. I mean, I know that’s not rea—”

“Just go, Rainbow.”

She stared at him for a moment. “What?”

He still hadn’t turned to face her. “I said go. You saved me, brought me back, and I thank you, but you don’t have t’ try ‘n spare my feelings. I understand if you wanna leave.”

“Mac? What are you talking about? I’m not going anywhere!”

He let out a snort. “Rainbow Dash, stop tryin’ t’ placate me. Just go, already!”



“What’s your issue?” Dash hopped off the bed, staring at him with her eyebrow raised. “Why would y—”

“I tried t’ *kill* you, Dash!” He finally turned his head. His eyes were red and puffy, a wet sheen built up inside. “I... I can remember everythin’. Every second of it.” He looked down at the ground, his eyes scanning back and forth. “It was... it was like a, a voice in my head. Screamin’, *howlin’* in my ears! I di— I didn’t just wanna kill you. I... I wanted t’ *hurt* you. Wanted t’ tear you apart, *rip ya t’ pieces!*” His voice trembled, his eyebrows creased, spittle flew from his mouth as he spoke.

“M-Mac,” Dash said, her voice quivering, “that wasn’t you. It was *him!* He was contro—”

“*I shoulda been stronger!*” The dam finally broke as he whipped his head back up, tears streaming down his face. He looked down at his body. “All this muscle, all this strength, an’ I... I couldn’t even stop myself from hurtin’ the two most important mares in my life.”

“Mac, I...” Her voice faltered, her words failing her.

“So you can go. I understand.”

“Mac...”

“Dammit, Dash, stop tr—”

A stinging pain cut him off, a warm tingle spreading across his cheek. He turned his head and saw Dash slowly retracting her hoof, glaring at him through puffy eyes. “You stupid son of a goat!”

He slowly rubbed his hot cheek. “Rainbow, I—”

“Who the *hay* do you think you’re talking to?” She jumped back onto the bed, straddling him with wings flared. “I’m Rainbow *bucking* Dash! The Element of Loyalty! Former Wonderbolt! I’ve beat down demons, gods and monsters, you think *this* is too much for me?”

Mac opened his mouth, but she cut him off. “You think some freak of a pony is going to keep me from the stallion I love? Well, I got news for you, buddy! It’s gonna take a *lot* more than you trying to kill me to scare *me* off!” She took several deep breaths, her wings slowly lowering back to her side. She gently laid down next to him, his face inches from hers. “You’re stuck with me, Macintosh Apple, and there’s not a damn thing you can do about it.”

Mac held her gaze, his eyes searching for some sign she was lying, but found none. Eventually, he turned away. “Dash, it’s... it’s more than that. I mean... *look* at you! Like you said, you’re Rainbow Dash! You live yer life at a thousand miles an hour! Head’s in the clouds, *literally!* Yer a national hero, a celebrity!” His gaze fell downward. “An’ who am I? Just some... dumb bumpkin who kicks trees fer a livin’.”

“Mac, I—”

“I mean, could you *really* give all that up? Leave yer home in th’ sky? Come live on th’ farm like an earth pony? Give up *all* that fer *me*? Could you ev—”

Rainbow reached up and grabbed his head with both hooves. She jerked his head to hers, and kissed him. Though they had kissed many times in the past, Rainbow was certain that it was the single most passionate kiss they had ever shared. She held him for for what seemed like hours, until she finally pulled back, a single tear rolling down her cheek, a smile on her lips, and her voice cracking.

“Eeyup.”

• • •

At the top of the small hill next to the hospital, Twilight, Applejack, Pinkie Pie, and Rarity stood witness to a very strange sight. Near the tree line, where the yellowed grass gave way to a sea of fallen needles and pine cones, stood Spike’s looming form. Three days ago, he had been a mere head taller than them; now, he was easily three times their height when on all fours and a little over eight pony lengths from tip to tail. He stood rigidly still, save for the occasional twitch, as a smaller, yet much older dragon examined him.

Spike groaned, raising his bandaged left arm to his face to scratch it. “How much longer am I going to have to stand like this?” His voice, once high-pitched and scratchy, was now a deep and rich baritone that reverberated in Twilight’s bones. “These bandages itch.”

“Longer if you don’t hold still and let me work.” Twilight was amazed at the stark difference between the two dragons. Despite being nearly a thousand years older than Spike, the green dragon, being only a bit larger than Princess Celestia, looked relatively tiny next to him. Where Spike’s body was stocky and packed with ropy tendons and fatty flight muscle, the smaller dragon was thin and sinewy, more closely resembling a reptile than what Twilight had come to identify as a dragon.

“Spike, Ambassador Sharptooth came all the way here from Tacksworn as a favor. Patience, please.” Princess Celestia stood next to Twilight, watching the old dragon slowly circle around Spike, running his claws through the air around him, the light green glow reflecting off Spike’s scales. Bentgrass stood behind them, clad in his immaculate black suit coat, watching the scene silently. Every now and then, Twilight would look over at him with a smile, but he never met her gaze.

“Oh, I didn’t mind coming down, Princess.” Twilight was amazed that he was able to walk around so nimbly on two feet with his eyes shut. “Spike here is one of the first dragons besides myself to be raised by ponies. I’m just as interested in his well-being as you are.” As Sharptooth waved his claws over his shoulder, Spike groaned quietly and fidgeted.

“Uh, you okay there, Spike?” asked Applejack.

Spike squirmed again. “Y-y-yeah, I’m fine. It just—heh heh—tickles a bit. *Ow!*” A tiny bolt of electricity passed from Sharptooth’s claw into his tail. Spike whipped his head around, glaring at him. “What was *that?*”

“A dragon should not be ticklish.” He ducked under Spike’s tail, his eyes still closed. “Now, stop squirming.”

Twilight stepped next to the old dragon. “Ambassador, please. Is Spike healthy?”

A slight frown creased his face. “His aura is... *odd*, somehow.” He now stood directly in front of Spike, his glowing claws inches from his muzzle, causing a gentle buzz to ripple through his snout. “Remind me, Spike, how old are you?”

“Uh, I just turned nineteen a few weeks back.”

The buzzing abruptly stopped. For the first time in minutes, Sharptooth opened his eyes and stared at Spike, scanning his massive frame. “Shells and *shards*, boy, you’re still a *hatchling!*”

“Hey!” Spike’s long tail swatted at the ground, the shock wave sending a small flurry of pine needles falling to the ground.

Sharptooth slowly stepped away, falling back to all four legs. He made a quick circle around Spike before looking back to Twilight. “And you’re *sure* this wasn’t greed induced?”

She nodded. “We’ve been careful to monitor his hoard. By what I know about dragons, it’s actually pretty small.”

“Aw, come on, *Twilight!*” A stifled giggle came from behind him. Spike whirled his head about to glare at Pinkie, who stood with a hoof at her mouth. “Oh, shut up! Besides,” he blew a tiny plume of smoke, his eyes darting upwards, “it’s not the size that counts.” At this, Pinkie collapsed, struggling to breathe under gales of laughter.

“But, is he *okay?*” Twilight turned to look at Spike, doing her best to avoid the large swaths of half-formed scales on his chest and belly.

Sharptooth stepped back and looked to her. “Well, *whatever* it was that caused this left his bones severely demineralized.” He looked up at Spike. “I’d advise you eat a diet high in gem stones for the next month or so, specifically labradorite. It’s high in calcium and will also speed the healing of your injuries.”

“Spike has t’ eat junk food?” Applejack chuckled. “Oh, *however* will he manage?”

“Also, no strenuous activity during that time, especially flying.”

Spike groaned. “Aw, I wanted to try out these babies.” For emphasis, he gave his new wings a few beats, causing a sharp gust of wind that almost knocked Twilight over.

“Better to wait than to have them snap off mid-flight, yes?”

Spike grumbled something, standing upright on his hind legs and crossing his arms. Twilight tapped Sharptooth’s arm. “But, other than that?”

Sharptooth scratched the top of his head. “Other than that... well, injuries aside, just by looking at him I’d say he’s a perfectly healthy young *Drakenwyvrm*. If I didn’t know any better, I’d put him at just past his first wyvrm-sleep.”

The hill was silent for a moment. Twilight’s friends looked at each other in confusion, but she and Spike were staring directly at Sharptooth. Twilight was the first to break the silence. “Uh, Ambassador, Spike is about to *start* his first wyvrm-sleep.”

He raised his eyebrow. “Really, now? Hmm.” He turned back to Spike. “Tell me, Spike. How do you feel?”

“Uh, *great*, actually. Well, except for the, uh, you know.” He held up his bandaged left arm, also gesturing towards the off-colored scales across his belly. “But, yeah, I feel real good. More alert than I have in months.”

“No unusual hoarding instincts?”

“None more than usual.”

“Hmm.” He tapped his scaly chin a few times, his eyes looking upwards as he thought. “Well then, it would appear... you skipped it.”

Silence reigned once more. After a moment, Rarity walked next to Twilight. “Twilight, what is he talking about? What is a ‘worm sleep?’”

Spike stepped forward. “Wait, wait, back up. How can I just ‘skip’ a vital part of my life cycle?”

Sharptooth sighed. “It’s sad to see a young dragon so ignorant of his own biology.”

Spike swatted the ground with his tail. “Hey, less snark, more smart!”

Sharptooth let out a huff of smoke, glaring at Spike. “Impudent hatchling,” he grumbled, then clear his throat. “Well, the wyrm-sleep is tied to a dragon’s *size*, not his age. This is why dragons of the same species go into it at different ages. In fact, by your age, most *Drakenwyvrms* have already started theirs.” He grinned. “You probably would have, too, if your hoard was a bit more... substantial.”

Spike opened his mouth, but Sharptooth continued. “You see, when not caused by greed, a dragon’s growth requires massive amounts of magic. When the body senses the need to grow a substantial amount, normally every few hundred to a thousand years, it triggers the sleep, so it can focus all its energy on growing, and not the usual biological functions.”

Twilight slowly nodded. “Like a caterpillar going into a cocoon.”

“Indeed.” He looked to Celestia. “While you have yet to tell me *exactly* what’s going on here, Tia,” he turned back to Spike, “my guess is that some incredibly powerful source of magic somehow formed a link between itself and Spike’s internal magic.”

Once more, Twilight continued for him, pacing around Spike. “So... when Parchment linked their magic together, Spike’s body *sensed* the raw magic in him, and drew it in to fuel his growth.”

Sharptooth nodded, looking at Spike. “I’m actually surprised you survived it. If it’s anything like I imagine it, it couldn’t have been a very... *pleasant* process.”

“You have no idea,” Spike muttered.

Sharptooth cocked an eyebrow, but continued. “So, since your body no longer senses the need for the massive growth that happens during the Sleep, it’s ‘reset its clock,’ as it were.”

Spike leaned down, bringing himself face to face with the smaller dragon. “S-so I’m *not* going away for a hundred years?”

The Ambassador smiled at him. “Apparently not.”

“I get to stay?”

“Yes.”

A trembling smile played across Spike’s lips. “Like, for really *real* get to stay?”

Sharptooth nodded. “Congratulations. You don’t have to wake up to find everyone you’ve ever known and loved is dead.”

Applejack cleared her throat. “Uh, somepony wanna tell us wh—”

“*Wooo-hooo!*” Spike rose back up, flared out his new wings and let loose a torrent of green flame. “*I’m not going away! I get to stay!*” Spike howled again and twirled around.

“Spike, watch out!”

“Hit the dirt!”

“Incoming!”

All the ponies ducked to avoid his massive tail, feeling the wind as it soared above them. As his spin continued, the tail smashed into a nearby pine tree, knocking it from the ground and sending it crashing into the woods.

Spike didn't seem to notice. "Twilight, did you he—" He stepped towards them, but yelped as he stepped on his tail. With a very undignified shriek, he fell backwards and crashed into a tree, landing on his rump and sending a deluge of dead needles and pine cones crashing on his head.

"Ugh, stupid giant tail." He shook his head and turned to Twilight, ignoring the howls of laughter from Pinkie and Applejack. "Twi! I get to st—"

"I know!" In a flash, she teleported herself up to him. Twilight squeezed his muscled neck as hard as she could, which wasn't very hard since she couldn't even wrap her forelegs all the way around. Spike squeezed back, earning a strangled yelp and a slight cracking sound. He immediately released her, looking down as she gulped for air. "Heh, sorry. New arms, too."

"It's okay, Spike," she chuckled. "It's perfectly okay." She dove back at him, burying herself in his muscled hide.

Sharptooth looked at them both, his eyebrow raised. "Yes, now you have the pleasure of watching them wither and die before your eyes."

*"Ambassador?"*

He turned to look at Celestia, who stared at him with wide eyes, and shrugged. "What? It's true. Besides, the sooner he accepts it, the better off he'll be."

Celestia groaned, rubbing her eyes with a hoof. "Tact, Sharpie. Tact."

He just rolled his eyes. "I forgot how sensitive you ponies can be. Now, Tia, I believe it's time you and I had a chat. A magic powerful enough to affect a dragon *that* much"—he nodded his head towards Spike, who was still being assaulted with nuzzles from Twilight—"is something I think I should know about."

Celestia began to speak when a bright flash went off behind her. All ponies and dragons turned to find Princess Luna standing before them, flanked by two bat-winged night guards. "Indeed you should, Ambassador."

"Princess Luna." Sharptooth reached over towards her. The two guards tensed, but a small nod from her stayed them as she offered him a hoof. He reached a claw out, shaking gently. "It's been too long."

“Indeed, Ambassador.” She turned to Celestia, but her eyes locked onto Bentgrass. “Special Agent Bentgrass. I am glad to see you well.”

Bentgrass smiled. “And I, you, Your Highness.”

“Wait a minute.” One of the bat-winged guards stepped forward. “*Bentgrass?* Staff Sergeant Bentgrass?”

Bentgrass nodded at him. “Captain Anvil, it is nice to see you again.”

Anvil stepped forward and grabbed Bentgrass’s hoof, shaking it firmly. “I didn’t recognize you without the enchantments! I haven’t seen you in, what’s it been, five years?”

“Seven, sir.” He looked at the other guard and gave a curt nod. “Captain Hammer.”

The other captain just stared at him. “Bentgrass. Started any wars lately?”

Bentgrass smiled. “Not as of late, sir. Though I do have my eye set on Camelon.” Anvil suppressed a chuckle, earning a leer from Hammer.

“So, Agent Bentgrass,” Rarity said, stepping forward, “you know these two gentlecolts?”

He nodded. “Ladies, may I introduce Captains Anvil and Hammer, commanders of Her Majesty’s Night Guard.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Anvil said with a nod, before turning back to Bentgrass. “How have you been? Last time I saw you, you uh...” he let out a nervous chuckle, “weren’t doing so hot.”

Bentgrass approached Anvil, his expression dropping slightly. “Actually, sirs, I wonder if I might have a word. In private.”

The two captains eyed him for a moment before turning to Luna. “Your highness?” Anvil asked.

“As you wish. I have things to discuss with my sister and the ambassador. Meet me back here in twenty minutes.”

The guards saluted her, and she returned the gesture with a nod. Anvil put a foreleg around Bentgrass, walking him towards the top of the hill. “Okay, what’s on your mind?”



The three of them crested the hill, Bentgrass casting one more solemn gaze at Twilight before they walked down.

Her guards gone, Luna turned to face Celestia. “I have finished my examination of the Professor’s body. I believe we, as well, should retire to someplace a bit more”—she glanced over at the ponies openly staring at them—“private.”

Celestia nodded. “Sister, Ambassador, please follow me.”

“Wait, Princess Celestia!”

Celestia and Luna turned to see Rarity approaching them. She marched towards them, but soon jerked to a halt as a bright blush passed over her face. “Uh, heh heh, that is to say, Your Majesties,” she gave a deep curtsy, “I just was wondering, what about Zecora?”

At this, Luna sighed and stepped forward, her eyes cast downwards. “Your friend is currently at Canterlot Psychiatric. Rest assured, she will be receiving the finest care possible, all at the Crown’s expense.”

“It’s the least we can do.” Celestia slowly took her place next to her sister.

Applejack stepped forward. “Thank ya kindly, Your Highnesses, but what I think Rarity’s tryin’ t’ say is,” she paused, taking a deep breath, her eyes meeting with Luna’s, “is Zecora gonna be okay?”

The Royal Sisters shared a brief look. Finally, Luna kneeled down, bringing herself eye level with them, and sighed. “While your friend is now much calmer now that that vile stallion is dead, we”—she cleared her throat, an annoyed look briefly flashing in her eyes—“that is to say, *I* am afraid the damage... has been done to her mind.”

“I don’t understand,” Applejack said. “Parchment’s dead, so how can he still be controllin’ her?”

“He never *was* controlling her.” Luna scuffed her hoof against the ground as she spoke. “It seems that whatever Parchment did physically altered her brain chemistry. Her EKG resembles that of a severe schizophrenic now. Such fundamental changes are... most likely permanent.”

“But... but Macintosh changed back!”

Celestia knelt down to them. “It was your brother’s love for Rainbow Dash that saved him. Zecora has no such connection.”

As they spoke, Rarity slowly wrapped foreleg around Applejack. “S-s-so, Zecora is...

Luna shook her head. “I am sorry, my friends, but for the moment, yes.” She reached out a hoof, placing it gently on Rarity’s shoulder. “But, fear not. With time, therapy, and magic, the doctors are... *hopeful* that she will someday recover her faculties.” Applejack gulped, but nodded.

“Celestia,” Sharptooth said gently. She turned and met his eyes, nodding slowly before tapping her sister in the shoulder. Luna rose and stepped back. Sharptooth looked to the ponies. “I am very sorry for what has happened, ponies. Please accept my condolences.”

Rarity sniffled, but stepped up to him, giving another deep curtsy. “Thank you, Ambassador. You are a true gentledrake.”

Celestia smiled at the scene before turning to walk away. As Luna and Sharptooth moved to follow, she cast a glance back at Twilight, who still stood with Spike. “We’ll talk more later, my faithful student.” Twilight nodded. With that, the three ancient beings walked away.

Once they had crested the hill, Applejack turned back to Twilight, who had finally released Spike’s neck, adjusting herself so she was sitting on his muscular arm, resting her weight against his chest. “Now, will one of y’all tell us what in the Sam Hill is goin’ on with you?” she said as she glared at Spike.

He sniffled. “Uh, well... It’s uh, it’s kind of a long story.” He looked down to Twilight and laughed. “And I guess I have plenty of time to tell it, don’t I?”

“I guess you do.” She nuzzled back into him, enjoying the soothing warmth radiating from his body. “Girls, if you d—” A scalding liquid dripped on her shoulder, causing her to squeal and slap at the stinging pain. Once the sting was gone, she looked up and saw a near-boiling tear slowly crawling down Spike’s muzzle. Twilight grinned up at him.

He raised an eyebrow. “What?” She didn’t answer, content to simply grin. “Wait... oh, no. No, no. Don’t you say it!”

Twilight’s grin widened. “I guess you’re *not* out of tears after all.”

Spike banged his head against the tree, another shower of needles falling on them. “And you say *my* jokes are corny!”

Twilight chuckled. She looked up at him, appraising his new body: the wicked-looking spines that ran from his head to his tail, the razor-sharp teeth filling his massive jaw, the thin wisps of smoke that were near-constantly pouring from his nostrils. No longer the chubby little baby he had been, he now truly and fully resembled the terrifying beast of myth and lore. Yet despite the fearsome appearance, his eyes retained the same playful glint they always had.

An odd pressure slowly built up in her chest. Here was Spike, her number one assistant, cradling her like she had done for him so many years ago whenever he had a bad dream. For years, he’d been by her side through whatever came their way, his oddly keen logic and deadpan humor a constant through the highs and lows. And now, through the actions of a lunatic, he would never leave her. The lump in her chest throbbed and she lunged back at him, squeezing as hard as she could. Before she knew what she was doing, she spoke. “I love you, baby brother.”

Spike sniffled again and gently squeezed her back, ignoring the chorus of “aww’s” from the girls. “I know, Twi. I know.”

Slowly, Twilight pulled away and looked up at him with wide eyes, her lips pouting.

He chuckled softly. “No.”

She pouted her lip out further.

“No!”

She held her gaze.

“Ugh! You’re going to keep giving me the puppy dog eyes until I say it, aren’t you?”

She slowly nodded.

Spike sighed and pulled her back into his chest. He lowered his massive head, gently nuzzled against hers, and whispered, “Love you, too, big sis.”

“*Mac!*”

Applejack gingerly stepped away from Spike's side as Rainbow Dash and Macintosh walked up the hill towards them. Rainbow had a wing draped across his back, but withdrew and stepped away as Applejack embraced him. He threw his foreleg around her and squeezed tight, but instantly withdrew as she yelped and clutched her bandaged side.

Mac took a half-step back. "AJ, I—"

"Sssshhh." She gently pressed a hoof against his lips, a firm smile on her face. "Not one word, ya hear?" He tried to speak again, but she pressed harder against his mouth. "*Not... one... word.*"

Mac nodded and leaned in to nuzzle her softly. "I'm just glad you're alright, Jackie."

"You kiddin'?" She pulled away and grinned at him. "This ain't nothin'! I'll be back in th' orchards in a week!"

"Oh, no, you won't!" The warm smile on his lips melted into a scowl. "You ain't gonna be doin' nothin' but plantin' yer keester in that wheelchair they offered! Me, Bloom, an' Caramel can handle th' bucking 'til you're up on yer hooves."

"Aw, Mac, come on! I can—"

"Not... one... word."

She grumbled something under her breath, but smiled at him.

Rainbow left the siblings and approached the rest of her friends. "So, hey! You girls notice anything new?" She struck an exaggerated pose, turning her head away from them. The others walked up and gasped. The noonday sun glistened and sparkled off the earring hanging from her left ear. At the end of several silver links was a brilliant emerald, cut into the shape of an apple half. In the center, built from ruby, sapphire, and topaz, was a tiny rainbow-colored lightning bolt.

"Wah-ha-ha!" Everypony cringed as Rarity shoved her way to the front of the group. "Oh, Rainbow, you have no *idea* how long I've been waiting for this!"

"Heh, yeah, I—wait, *you've* been waiting?"

Rarity sighed and tossed her mane. "Oh, Rainbow, *darling*, everypony has known this was coming for *ages*! We were just waiting for Macintosh to finally work up the nerve to ask."

Not even Mac's red coat could hide the fierce blush spreading across his face. "Uh, y-you have?"

"Oh, of course! Now, Rainbow, as soon as you and Mac feel up to it, you simply *must* come to the boutique and give me your honest opinions of the dress and tuxedo I've created."

"Wait, you've already made me a *dress*?" Rainbow took a tiny step back.

"*Yes!*" Rarity squeaked, her words all but gushing out. "I dare say it's one of my finer moments. Like you, it's bold, yet just subdued enough to remain feminine and demure. And, *oh!*" She began to trot in place, taking dainty steps in the air. "Macintosh, you will simply di— er, that is to say, you will *swoon* when you see what I have made for you!"

Mac gulped, slowly stepping back to his fiancée's side. "Uh, th-thank ya kindly, Rares, but I thi—"

"Oh, and you simply *must* let me know who the Mare of Honor will be so I can make the proper ensemble." She gasped again, stars glittering in her eyes as she clopped her hooves together. "And then you must tell me what you think of the designs I have for foal clothes! Oh, won't it be *marvelous*? Little rainbow-maned earth ponies, crimson pegasi, or maybe e—"

"*Oh, look, here comes Fluttershy!*" Rainbow zoomed past her to where Fluttershy was emerging from behind a particularly dense copse of trees. Rarity let out a quiet "hmpf," tossing her mane once more, then followed.

Rainbow landed next to Fluttershy, gently wrapping a wing around her, careful of the thick cast on her left wing. "How's the wing doing, 'Shy?"

"Oh, it's fine, thank you. Though, the bandage is a bit... tight." She nodded towards the large white bandage that wrapped around her whole midsection.

"Fluttershy, *please* don't tell me you were in there hiding from the Ambassador?" Rarity eased up next to her. "I know you don't like dragons, but he was an absolute gentleco— er, *gentledrake*."

Applejack nodded. "Sides, Spike's bigger'n he was."

"Oh, um, I wasn't actually hiding..." Fluttershy's eyes scanned everywhere but their eyes, her hoof dug a small trench in the dirt beneath her.

Pinkie scratched her bandaged head. “Well, if you weren’t hiding in the woods, then... why were you hiding in the woods?”

“Well, um...” Fluttershy slowly stepped back from them, walking backwards to peek at something behind the trees. “I... I was...” Her head darted back and forth between her friends and whatever was behind the trees. Slowly, she stood up straight, shaking her head gently to move her mane away from her eyes. “Now, everypony just... just stay calm.” She turned once more to the trees. “It’s okay, honey, you can come out.”

Pinkie leaned over to Rarity. “Um, I know my head’s kinda wonky right now, but did Fluttershy just tell *us* to stay calm?” Rarity opened her mouth to reply, but all that came out was a strangled yelp.

From behind the dense row of trees limped the hulking form of Angel Bunny, his crocodile-like muzzle covered in bandages and a thick cast on his leg. The amassed ponies let out a collective gasp and backpedaled a bit, Pinkie actually slipping on the sea of browned needles. Twilight’s horn blazed to life, tiny sparks shooting from the tip, but Fluttershy jumped in between her and Angel. “Twilight, wait!”

“Fluttershy...” Twilight made no move, but her horn still sizzled with magic as she glared at the monster that had tried to kill her just two days prior.

“It’s okay, girls. He’s not going to hurt anypony.” Fluttershy turned to Angel, reaching up and running her hoof along his muscled arm. “Are you, honey?”

Twilight was about to protest, but stopped as she looked at Angel a bit closer. His deformed muzzle was pointed downward, and the remaining tentacle-like appendage was currently trying to dig a hole in the ground at his feet. Twilight had to shake her head once she realized that the mutated, hulking, bloodthirsty monster... was wringing his claws and trying to hide behind Fluttershy.

“Poor Angel feels just *awful* about what happened.” Fluttershy continued to gently rub the patchwork of black chitin and white fur on his arm as she spoke. “It wasn’t his fault, though! That evil pony was controlling him! He said it was like a voice shouting in his head, forcing him to do terrible things.”

“He’s right.” All the ponies turned to Macintosh. He looked between them all, then lowered his head. “I mean, if it was anything like what”—a tiny shudder worked through him—“y-yeah, he’s tellin’ th’ truth.”

Fluttershy nodded, stepping away from Angel and walking back to the rest of them. “Exactly! He’s agreed to help clean the mess he made in town, *and* help Rumble with whatever he may need until Thunderlane is back on his hooves.”

Nopony moved for what seemed like an eternity, save for the occasional flick of a tail or twitch of an ear. The rustle of dying pine needles in the wind was the only audible sound. Finally, a loud grumble came from behind them all. Shaking the remaining needles off his body, Spike flipped back down to all fours and lumbered past them, his footfalls sending vibrations through their hooves, and stood before Angel. Upon seeing the other male approach him, Angel jerked his body back upright, bringing him eye level with the large dragon. With Spike on four legs and Angel on two, they glanced around, only briefly making eye contact before looking around again. Finally, Spike broke the silence.

“Hey.”

Angel grunted, slightly inclining his head.

“Sup?”

Angel gave a noncommittal growl, shrugging his shoulders and shaking his head.

“Hey, sorry about the, uh...” Spike waved his claw in a circular motion over his face. “And the, uh...” He repeated the motion, this time gesturing to his left side. “Heh, you know...”

Angel grunted again, waving his paw and shaking his head, then turned and pointed to the stump on his left side, which appeared to already be growing back.

The two stared at each other for several more moments. Finally, Spike held up his fist. “We cool?”

Angel looked between his fist and Spike’s face a few times, then grunted once more, nodding his head and bumping Spike’s claw with his own.

Spike smiled, then walked back to the group. “Yeah, he’s cool.”

The ponies stood in silence, their jaws slack. Rarity sighed and shook her head. “Boys.”

A wave of laughter erupted from the group. Rarity’s words seemed to break the tension in the air, and soon the sounds of light conversation drifted across the field. Pinkie Pie was bouncing up and down beside Macintosh and Rainbow, listing absurd plans for their

wedding reception, while Rarity continued to swoon over Rainbow's earring. Fluttershy divided her time between comforting Angel and nervously glancing at Spike.

Twilight was in mid-conversation with Applejack when she saw movement in the corner of her eye. Turning, she saw Anvil and Hammer walking back up the hill, though Bentgrass was strangely absent. Twilight met them halfway. "Excuse me, sirs, but where is Agent Bentgrass?"

The two guards shared a look, a nervous look in their eyes. Finally, Anvil spoke. "Um, he said he was heading to the library, then he was gonna, um... leave town.."

At this, the murmurs of conversation stopped. All of them turned to the two Captains. Applejack was the first to speak up. "Hold up, I know that little snake in th' grass ain't plannin' on leavin' without sayin' goodbye!"

"Actually, I think that was his plan." He idly rubbed the back of his neck with a hoof. "Although, I uh... I think he wanted you to talk to him, Ms. Sparkle."

"Me?"

Spike let out a laugh. "How convenient, Twilight wants to talk to him, too! Over dinner, right, Twi?" He waggled his eyebrows.

She blushed furiously. "Spike!"

"What?" He smiled at her, showing all of his razor-sharp teeth. "Oh, come on, Twi. I've seen those looks you shot him every now and then."

"Twilight!" Rainbow saddled up next to her, throwing a wing around her. "Don't tell me you're getting sweet on old Bright Eyes!"

"I..." she stammered, shrugging off her wing, trying hard to hide her blush. "I, I find him... *intriguing*." The rest of the girls tittered at the admission, further heating Twilight's cheeks.

"Well, then!" Spike nudged Twilight's haunches with a claw. "There's only one thing for it! Get your flank over there and talk to him!"

She dug her hooves into the ground, trying to stay in place against his gentle prodding. "Now, Spike, I—"



“Ah, ah, ah!” He leaned in close to her, bringing his snout inches from her. “You have to do what I say, I’m a big scary dragon now!”

“Easy, Spike! That’s probably why he left in the first place!” Rainbow hovered in the air next to Spike’s head.

Twilight looked up at her, her eyebrows furrowed. “What are you talking about, Dash?”

Dash shrugged. “Well, I mean with as scared as Bentgrass is of dragons, he probably doesn’t want to be anywhere *near* Spike right now.”

“Bentgrass isn’t scared of dragons!” Twilight let out a short laugh. “Where did you get *that* idea?”

Dash landed, taking on a slightly defensive posture. “What? That’s the last thing he said to Parchment before he died! Didn’t you hear him?”

“No, I was across the courtyard with the other girls.”

“Oh. Well, yeah, Parchment asked him how he wanted to die, and Bentgrass said anything but dragons, because he’s scared of dragons.”

Twilight cocked her head to the side. “But, that doesn’t make any...” Slowly, her furrowed brow straightened, though the confusion was plainly written on her face. She turned away from them. “I, uh... I-I have to go.” With that, she trotted off, not even sparing a glance behind her.

Dash smiled, flying back to Mac’s side. “Aw, our little egghead is growing up! She’s gonna ask her first stallion out on a date!”

“Hey, it’s not her first date!” Spike grinned and leaned in close to the group, speaking in a very loud voice. “And since we’re on the subject, Rainbow, what’s this I hear about you having a date with Deputy Bale?”

The silence was suffocating. Everypony and dragon stared at Dash, struggling to contain their laughter. After a few moments, Mac turned to his beet-red fiancée, raising his hoof like a school colt.

“Uh, *how long* was I out again?”

• • •

Twilight walked towards the library in autopilot, her eyes never leaving the ground before her. Her tail flicked back and forth much faster than her steps. Her mind was a torrent of facts, memories, and theories: the many pieces of the puzzle floating before her in her mind's eye. Several times they tried to slam together and form a picture, but each time she shook her head. *There must be some variable I'm missing, some fact...*

As she approached the front door, she took a deep breath and plastered a smile on her face. She knew that once she clarified things with Bentgrass, everything would be fine. She pushed open the door, pointedly ignoring the voice in the back of her mind telling her otherwise.

The lingering scent of burnt paper greeted her as she eased the door closed behind her. Twilight hadn't been back to the library since that night; the hospital had been her home until she was sure Spike was okay. Great piles of books were still strewn across the scorched and scarred floor. Gingerly stepping around them, she made her way into the main room.

Bentgrass stood in the center next to the table with the destroyed carving, a purple book in his mouth. He set it down gently, then his ears twitched as Twilight entered the room proper. She kept moving towards him as he slowly turned around. Their eyes met.

And she knew.

It was clearly written on his face: the splayed ears, the drooping tail, his slumped shoulders. Everything about him, even his normally unreadable eyes, screamed of guilt and pain. He made no move to approach her once he saw her jerk to a halt.

Twilight could feel the blood drain from her face, only to have it race back as her cheeks flushed. Her limbs turned to jelly, and she stumbled backwards over a pile of half-burned parchment, her eyes twisted in a mix of confusion and anger. Dozens of questions danced on her trembling lips, but none made it any further.

Bentgrass sighed, his head hung low. "I... I saw Parchment's nose bleeding after he changed Mr. Apple." His hoof flicked at the ground beneath him, feeling the wood grain of the floorboards. "Then, I remembered what you said about dragons being highly resistant to outside magic."

Slowly, Twilight began to regain control of her limbs. She took one step forward, making him wince. He raised his head and began to look around, his eyes scanning everywhere

except her direction. “Honestly, I thought that he would have an aneurism of some kind trying to affect Spike so drastically. I didn’t know h—”

“*Exactly!*” Twilight surged forward. Books and papers went flying out of her path, flung at random as she advanced on him. “You didn’t *know!* And yet, you acted! You risked Spike’s life on a—on a—a *guess!*”

Bentgrass looked up as she drew near. His serpentine eye had lost some of its normal fire, now looking as pale as his grey one. “Twilight, please. You must understand t—”

“Understand *what?!*” He winced, looking away from her withering glare. Tiny sparks shot off from her horn, dissipating almost instantly. “That you care so little about his life that you were willing to just throw it away? *We trusted you!*” She took a half-step back, her brow creasing. “I... I-I thought I... Th-that maybe...” She shook her head, looking back to him with a venomous glare. “And you just said his life, my little brother’s *life*, wasn’t worth it, so y—”

“*One life!*” He slammed his hoof down, whipping his head back to face her, a fire in his eyes. “*One dragon* versus the suffering and pain of every *living* thing on the planet, you are *damn* right that I did! To save your friends, to save *you!* And given the chance, I would do it again! And again, and ag—”

His head jerked violently to the side as a stinging pain spread across his cheek. Twilight retracted her hoof and took several steps back. Her lower jaw trembled, but the storm of conflicting feelings in her mind barred any sound. She briefly saw Bentgrass look at her, but in that moment her strength left her, and she fell to her haunches. Twilight stared at the floor, and took a shuddering breath. “Get out.”

Bentgrass didn’t move at first, simply rubbing his hot cheek. Twilight’s quiet sniffles were deafening in his mind. Finally, he took a few shuffling steps towards her, reaching out with his hoof. “T... Twilight, I—”

“Get out.” The front door blew open in a lavender blur, but her head never left the ground beneath her. “Never come back.”

Slowly, all the pain and guilt melted from his face, replaced by his trademark impassiveness, though a wet sheen was barely visible in his left eye. Standing up straight and adjusting his suit, he stepped past her towards the open door. Halfway there, he stopped, glancing back over his shoulder. “Some day, Ms. Sparkle, you will come to see the logic in my decision.”

After a few eternal moments of silence, Twilight whispered back. “And on that day, I’ll be as lost as you are.”

Bentgrass cleared his throat and resumed walking, his hoofsteps echoing in the now still library. He hesitated at the front door for only a moment, before walking outside and quietly closing the door.

All was still in the library.

For what seemed like hours, Twilight sat there, amidst the rubble and debris. For the first time in her life, her mind failed her; words, thoughts, even feelings refused to surface. The silence permeated her whole being. A rough edge from a gouge in the floor stabbed at her haunches. Nothing felt real; memories of the past days, the things she’d seen, what she’d learned. It all seemed like a distant mirage, a haze at the edge of her mind that refused to coalesce.

Slowly, Twilight willed her limbs back under her control, and she rose from the floor. Still looking down, she sniffled once more and set her shoulders. When she raised her head, there was no more pain in her eyes, just a blank neutrality that she forced upon herself. Shuffling, plodding hoofsteps brought her to the main table, and she looked down at the purple book Bentgrass had laid there.

*Terrific Timeliness for Teachers: The Egghead’s Guide to Time Management in the Classroom.*

She sank back to her haunches and, as a quiet snuffle escaped her, glanced back toward the front door.

“Thank you.”

*Six Months Later*

Agent Bentgrass yawned loudly as he strolled through the breezeways of Canterlot Castle, the sound of his hooffalls reverberating off the pearl painted walls. He nodded at a passing pegasus carrying a giant stack of papers, gingerly stepping out of his way. As he walked, he ran his tongue across his teeth, grimacing slightly. *Blasted overnight trains...*

After several more twists and turns, he finally arrived next to a heavy wooden door with the R.I.S. emblem on it. Crossing to the opposite end of the hallway, he checked his reflection in a window. He gently ran a hoof through his styled mane, turning his head slightly to inspect at different angles. Satisfied, he smoothed down his suit, cleared his throat, and opened the door.

He was instantly greeted by the sound of several quills scribbling furiously on parchment. Easing the door shut behind him, he smiled at the mare behind the desk along the left wall. “Mrs. Moonbeam, a pleasure as always.”

The turquoise unicorn looked up at him, and gave him a tired grin, flicking her head to clear the errant strand of mane across her eye. “Agent Bentgrass! How have you been?”

“Apparently nowhere near as busy as you.” He gestured towards the 6 quills floating in a turquoise aura above the desk, each writing on separate pieces of scrolls that hung beneath them.

“Ha! This is nothing! Wait until I get about six more quills in the air, then you can start talking about overworking!”

Bentgrass opened his mouth, but only a loud yawn came out. “Oh, pardon me.”

“Rough night?”

“Overnight train from Stalliongrad. A two week operation followed by a summons from the director. I wonder if I should update my life insurance policy.”

She just smiled at him. “The Director is with his grandson, but he’s expecting you.”

With a final smile and nod, Bentgrass walked to the large door with a frosted window, the words *Director Top Notch* painted in thick black letters in the middle. He gave a light knock.

“Come in!”

Opening the door, Bentgrass saw the Director, greyed mane still impeccably coiffed around his horn, sitting behind his desk. Across from him was a pinto earth pony wearing a grey military cadet’s uniform, his brown mane fashioned into a sharp crew cut. The Director smiled. “Ah, Agent Bentgrass! Please, come in.” Bentgrass eased the door shut and quickly crossed the office, standing before the desk. “Have you met my grandson Pip?”

“Not as of yet.” He gently inclined his head towards the young stallion. “A pleasure to finally meet you. Your grandfather speaks very highly of you. I see you’ve been accepted to the Military Academy at West Hoof.”

Pip opened his mouth to speak, but Notch cut him off. “Halfway through the semester, and he’s already at the top of his class,” he said with a wide grin.

“Aw, Granddad...” Pip turned away slightly.

“You know, Pip,” Notch comically lowered his voice, “Agent Bentgrass here spent six years in the Night Guard.”

At this, Pip immediately looked up at Bentgrass, his eyes wide. “You worked for Princess Luna?! That’s so wicked!” He puffed his chest out. “I’m going to be captain of the Night Guard some day!”

“A lofty goal.” Bentgrass smiled at him. “Well, if half of what your grandfather says about you is true, then Captains Anvil and Hammer may have competition in a few years.”

“Pip here is on his Spring Break!” Notch threw a foreleg around Pip, hanging off of him like a foal. “He’s cavorting with his lovely young marefriend. What’s her name? Donkey, Dumpy...”

“*Dinky!*”

Notch laughed. “Okay, okay, sorry! Say, how about you go down to the Castle kitchen and save us a table. Need to talk a bit of shop with Agrostis here.”

Pip nodded, giggling as Notch ruffled his buzz cut mane. “Sure thing, Granddad! Nice to meet you, Agent Bentgrass.” The agent nodded to him as Pip walked through the door.

As Pip closed the door behind him, Notch looked up to Bentgrass and gestured to the chair with his hoof. Bentgrass eased himself down as Notch spoke. “Now then, Agrostis. I understand you’re most likely running on bad coffee and good thoughts, so I’ll get right to the point. You remember the Ponyville incident six months ago, yes?”

Bentgrass nodded. “It’s hard to forget a time when the fate of the world hung in the balance.”

“If I read your report correctly,” he said, gesturing to a manila folder on his desk, “a great deal of the credit for closing that case goes to Doctor Sparkle.”

“Her contributions cannot be overstated. Were it not for her, things could have gone... much worse.”

“And that is *exactly* the problem!” Notch leaned in, resting his elbows on the desk. “If nothing else, that case highlighted a serious problem with our organization. We are horribly, dare I say *laughably*, ill-equipped to deal with cases involving the arcane. Only half of our field agents are unicorns, and of those merely a dozen or so of those have any experience with exotic magics like the ones you faced in Ponyville.”

Bentgrass arched his eyebrow. “Indeed, it seems we are at a bit of a loss. However, I fail to see what this has to do with me.”

“I’m getting there. It was with these facts that I approached Their Majesties with a proposal.” He stood, his tired bones creaking quietly as he crossed the room to open a large filing cabinet. “In a nutshell, we are greatly swelling the ranks of Division Six, with the expressed purpose of stacking the field with agents who are well-versed in forbidden magics.”

Bentgrass nodded slowly as Notch pulled another plain manila folder from the cabinet. “I see. So, I assume that we are pulling unicorns from the War Department, yes?”

“No.” Notched eased himself back into his chair. “A brief chat with General Armor nixed that idea. It seems that combat magic is falling out of favor with the young. He can’t spare the mages without compromising national defense.”

“Well, then where will we be procuring unicorns well-versed in obscure magic?” He let out a quite laugh. “Surely not *academia!*”

Notch laughed. “Of course not! I’d not send you into a hostile situation with some aging bookworm.”

Bentgrass tilted his head slightly. “Well, then wh—” His eyes widened as it dawned on him. “Oh, no, Director, that is a very bad idea.”

Notched raised his hoof. “Now, now, I understand your hesitation, and let me assuage your fear by saying no, they will *not* be official agents, only probationary.”

“Probationary?”

“Yes. The program started a few months ago. We sent out letters requesting the aid to some of Equestria’s foremost experts on dark and forbidden magic. All of them young, in fine physical condition, with a bright head on their shoulders. They will all be assigned a supervisory agent and sent out on random cases, just to test them out. If the agent feels they have what it takes, then the offer will be extended to become an official agent.”

Bentgrass studied him for a minute before nodding. “I assume that you wish me to be one of these *supervisory* agents?”

Notch smiled. “The first actually.” He floated the manila folder to Bentgrass, who plucked it from the air. “And here’s your case. There’s a rather... *cheeky* pony down in Manehattan doing very naughty things. Local police are flummoxed, and the bodies are starting to pile up.” He nodded towards the folder. “Everything you need to know is in the file. I want you two on the next train.”

Bentgrass had opened the folder as Notch spoke, his eyes flying across the pages, soaking up the details. After a few moments, he looked back up. “Director, if I may, this seems to be a... rather serious case. I’m not sure guiding somepony around by the hoof is going to expedite things. Besides, is a serial killer really the best way to introduce a civilian to what we do?”

Notch smiled. “Trial by fire, as they say.”

“Director, I really would prefe—

“This is not a request, Agent Bentgrass.”

Silence for a beat, then Bentgrass sighed and slumped his shoulders, though a small smile played on his lips. “Very well, Director. Tell me, is she at least any *good*?”

“I’ve always thought of myself as *great*.”



Bentgrass jumped ever so slightly at the new voice; he hadn't even heard the door open. Standing up and turning around, he looked at the new pony. A azure unicorn mare with a blue and white mane stood before him, a smug grin on her face. She wore a white coat, similar to his but with a collar more like a trench coat than his V-neck, that ran down her flank to just above her cutie mark. She approached the desk with a confident swagger, stopping just in front of Bentgrass. "I assume you're the 'super agent' everypony has been telling me about."

Bentgrass arched his eyebrow, though his smile remained as he raised a hoof. "Special Agent Bentgrass. Pleasure to meet you, Miss..."

The mare maintained her brash smile and gently tapped his hoof.

"Probationary Agent Lulamoon. You may call me Trixie."