

Daylight Burning

Guesswork

Table of Contents

Prologue	2
Ships on Fire	6
The Falling Star	19
The Greater Good	41
Red Tape	50
Prey Animals	56
The Diamond Ringer	71
Inclement Weather	82
Storm Tide	92
Surrounded	108
The Breach	120
Diversion	132
The Last Straw	142
Failsafe	151
Music of the Spheres	163
A Closed Loop	182

PONY FICTION VAULT



Celestia knew that something was wrong. She was awake now, but the sleep amnesia was thick, and her dreams held on for a moment longer. She had been fighting... darkness. In her dream, she had lost.

Consciousness faded in. *I'm blind*, she thought, staring at the ceiling. *Blind in one eye.*

With the tip of her horn, Princess Celestia lit the lantern on the nightstand. Her colorful bedchamber burst into illumination. She was at home, safe in her castle. But still, her right eye saw nothing.

How... curious, she thought, heart pounding. She forced herself to remain calm, despite the rising sense of panic. *There has to be a reasonable explanation for this.*

Celestia rose from her bed, glided over to the mirrored vanity. She inspected herself. The alicorn's pastel mane was a mess, but the eye looked uninjured.

How in Equestria could I have gone blind? she wondered. *Alright, filly, think it through. You don't age, but you're only resistant to injury. Maybe you... slept on it wrong? Poked it with a chopstick at the state dinner last night? The delegate from Trottingham was certainly boring everypony to death; maybe you nodded off over the sushi tray.*

Maybe... maybe I'm just getting old. It was the first time she had ever had this particular thought. *It's a truism that my sister and I are immortal, but nopony really knows how long Luna and I will last. Another thousand years, a million, a trillion-trillion... or maybe just until today.*

She shook her head angrily. *Stop scaring yourself! Go see what Luna and the royal physician have to say before leaping to conclusions.* She glanced at the clock. She'd only been asleep two hours. There was plenty of time before sunrise. *Might as well take a second to straighten up before running out looking like a crazy, old nag.*

She lifted an ivory comb with her magic and ran it through her mane, glancing in the mirror at her world-famous cutie mark. Eight rays of the golden sun. A symbol that every mare and stallion and foal knew by heart. Except this time, one ray was missing.

Celestia couldn't be sure what she was looking at for a moment, it was just so strange. Then, right there in full view, another ray faded away to nothing. Now there were only six left. A chill shot down her neck, between her withers. *This is some sort of countdown...*

She had no idea how this thing could have infected her. But if it was linked to her royal cutie mark, it had a frighteningly large power supply behind it. It could be anything; a wormhole, a temporal rift, a nuclear megaspell for all she knew. She had to get out of the castle.

The Princess levitated her crown and torc from their glass case and cantered towards the window as the jewelry caught up with her. But her cutie mark flared again as she neared the threshold and a jagged knife of pain lanced through her heart.

The immortal mare gasped and doubled over with nausea, falling to her knees. Her royal accoutrements clanged onto the flagstones behind her.

What... what was that!?

She turned and leaped for the door. The knife twisted and cut. She almost fell, but staggered forward, clutching her chest and hobbling on three legs. *Have to save my castle. Have to save my subjects.* A final slash flipped the world upside down and she crashed to the floor.

She had never felt pain like this before. Not when Queen Chrysalis had defeated her six years ago. Not even at the hooves of Nightmare Moon. It was like her very essence was being destroyed.

My soul, she thought. *It's not attacking my body, it's attacking my soul...* The knife twisted again. She gulped air and still couldn't breathe. Time stood still with only the shrieking of pain in her ears.

This was when she first noticed the other presence.

"Give in, Celestia," it whispered, like cool breath on the back of her neck.

Something else, but not in the room. This was coming from inside of her *own mind*.

"We both know it's already over," said the voice. "You made sure of that yourself."

Whoever you are, she said into her thoughts, *you have made a terrible mistake coming here.*

"Oh, Celestia, I disagree," said the voice. "I dis-a-gree! There was a time when you could have won, even after I had infected you this far. But I have all the secret keys to your heart, now. And that means I can do *anything I want*."

The blade sawed at her wounded soul. Princess Celestia retched onto the flagstone.

“Recognize me now?” said the intruder. “You and I have tussled on-and-off for over a thousand years, and even *I* never thought I’d see the Princess of the Sun laid so low as this. You’ve really lost your edge since the kingdom went peaceful, haven’t you? In the olden days, I doubt the wily Celestia would ever have let this happen. But you’re soft now, lazy. Even your once-coveted Elements of Harmony have moved on, attaching themselves to a group of *mortals*, of all things! They must have known to get off a sinking ship. Because ‘goddess’ or not, my dear, it turns out that you’re still only *meat*.”

Hubris was always your downfall, thought Celestia. It will be again.

“Any more empty threats?” said the voice with a bored note. “No? Well then, what do you say we just skip all this pageantry and get back to business? And once I’m done carving your soul into little glowing pieces, I think I’ll take your pathetic sister apart. Do the world a favor. Then onto Twilight Sparkle and her team of misfits. I’m going to have some fun with *them*.”

You should have left well enough alone, thought Celestia. You should have stayed away. Hid in the borderlands, away from civilization. Perhaps eventually you could have found peace. But instead you got greedy, and now it’s too late for you.

The alicorn’s horn burned with a pure sunlight so intense that the tapestries in the room curled and smoked. Inside the vast expanse of her mind, the Princess deftly knocked the blade away from the creature holding her soul hostage. The psychic weapon went skittering off into darkness, and her mental defenses all turned to lock down on the intruder. *Surrender, monster!* she thundered. *It is you who have lost!*

The intruder was fast, though. Faster than it should have been – faster than ever before. It squirmed out of her grasp like a greased eel, and drove even deeper into her mind. She pursued it, descending through her layers of consciousness. *Don’t do this*, she called to it in her thoughts. *You can still surrender to my mercy! It is only a matter of time before I find you, and I promise I will be in a much less forgiving mood when I do.*

Celestia had a plan. She would corner this thing in an auxiliary part of her brain, then collapse her own neural tissue with telekinesis. Give herself a stroke. There would be damage, but it would be small compared to what would happen if she lost this fight.

Her magic flooded the recesses of her mind with sunlight, searching for the intruder. But the longer she scoured her halls of memory, the more elusive her prey became. She had a

strange sense of déjà vu, like this thing knew all of her moves before she even thought of them herself. The intruder was four steps ahead at all times. Every door Celestia opened and every dark corner she shone her sunlight into turned up nothing. And then the pain started in again.

This time it was physical, right behind her eyes. Blood dribbled from her nose as she felt the pressure in her sinuses rising and rising. *It's in my autonomous nervous controls!* The intruder was trying to disable her body in order to disable her mind. She turned her energies on full, tried to erect some sort of defense, but it was too late. The pain grew worse and worse and doubled and tripled. Flashing spots clouded her mind's eye, and the focus on her defensive network faltered. Her cutie mark had one ray left.

How could this have happened?

How could I have not seen this coming?

Get it together, Celestia! she commanded herself. *Warn them! Tell them! This is your last chance, filly. Do something now!*

She began scratching symbols into the stone wall with the tip of her horn. The dark embrace of sleep dragged at her until there was almost nothing left. Only the hope that her allies would be able to do what was necessary if it came down to it.

The message was incomplete but it would have to be enough. Celestia's exhausted neck sagged and her face lay down against the cool stone. The melted thoughts of sleep swirled into her head and tumbled, roiled, but made no sense.

Twilight, this will be hardest on you, she thought. *Luna has already known loss, she will persevere. But she will need you to temper her extremes. Be strong my faithful student. Teach my sister and learn from her.*

And remember that nothing lasts forever. Nothing lasts forever.

Nothing...

6 hours earlier.

It was the end of another busy day at Sugarcube Corner. Pinkie Pie swept the latest batch of cookies from the oven, whistling a tune to herself. She set the tray on the windowsill to cool, admiring the setting sun as she did, but also noticing a group of dark thunderclouds on the horizon. Their ominous silhouettes burned along the edges with the final light of the day.

They look like ships, thought Pinkie. Like sailing ships on fire.

It was a dark thought for such a happy pony. She cocked her head as a chill wind picked up, blowing in past the curtains and causing her coat to stand on end. Her tailed twitched a little, then her ear, then her rump. Pinkie Sense? What could it mean?

Pinkie closed the window against a cold gust of wind, and stepped away. She tossed her oven mitt on the counter, unable to shake the sense of foreboding.

The door to the bakery opened suddenly, and Pinkie jumped. But as the brass bell jingled and two unicorns swept in from the street, Pinkie grinned to herself. If *this* didn't cheer her up, nothing would!

"Congratulations!" cried Pinkie, her eyes lifting into happy crescent-moons. "You are Sugarcube Corner's *one-millionth customers!*" She slammed her hoof down on a big red button. Alarms and buzzers started blaring, and confetti exploded from hidden launchers everywhere. A banner labeled "One Million Cupcakes Served!" dropped down directly over the counter to the sounds of Mariachi music.

Twilight Sparkle lie on her back on the floor where she had collapsed. She pounded on her chest, apparently restarting her heart. "Well, Twilight," she said to the ceiling, "at least you get free cupcakes."

"Actually, the contest is over!" said Pinkie. "All this stuff is from last Fall, right after I bought the shop from the Cakes. But I just love it all so much, I've been setting it back up and springing it on ponies whenever things get slow! So, how surprised would you say you were just now?"

Rarity had leaped into an open-hoof fighting stance at the sudden barrage of celebration. She was fixing her hair now in the reflection from a chrome candy dispenser. The

beautiful, white unicorn looked over at Pinkie. “Any more surprised and you would have needed a mop.”

“Great!” said Pinkie, writing it down on a clipboard. “I approve! Give me a hoof setting this all back up and I’ll let you push the button for the next batch of ‘winners.’ Ponies get all cranky sometimes, but I know they secretly love it.”

Twilight struggled back onto her hooves. “As fun as that sounds –”

“– we’re kidnapping you instead!” finished Rarity.

Pinkie was midway up a ladder, carrying reloads for the confetti blasters. She froze in mid-step. “Kidnapping me?”

“For a night on the town, as it were!” exclaimed Rarity, with stars in her eyes. “Dinner at a fancy restaurant? Dancing? Cocktails? You *are* the pony with the balloons on her rear-end, yes? Let me know when any of this starts to sound like your type of thing, darling.”

“Now! It sounds good now!” squealed Pinkie.

Twilight glanced on the clock. “Spike said he’d be bringing the carriage at eight. That gives us about an hour to get ready.”

“Spikey’s coming?” asked Pinkie. “I haven’t talked to him since he moved back to Canterlot! How’s he been doing?”

“Good, I guess,” said Twilight.

“You guess?” said Pinkie.

“Yes, well, we haven’t really spoken since, uh, since he left.”

“I realize things were a little rough between you two,” said Rarity, “what with trying to raise a teenaged dragon and all. But you really haven’t spoken in two years?”

“Pretty much,” said Twilight uncomfortably. “I’ve been busy, he’s been busy. It’s not official yet, but Celestia plans to make him a Champion of Equestria when he’s old enough. It made sense for him to go study with Princess Luna at the castle. If anypony knows how to sculpt a living weapon, it’s her.”

“A Champion?” said Rarity. “Honestly? Oh, why, that’s wonderful! He’ll be the toast of the town – of the whole kingdom in fact! I wonder if he wouldn’t mind wearing a few Carousel Boutique fashions for the publicity photos...”

“I thought we didn’t need Champions anymore,” said Pinkie. “I thought the Princesses were, like, Champions for life and all that.”

“We haven’t needed one besides the alicorns for a long time,” said Twilight. “But the world is changing. It started the year that Nightmare Moon returned. More threats from the past have popped up since then, and a few new ones, too.”

This gave them all pause, as they relived the litany of foes that they had faced and defeated in eight years as Elements of Harmony. A nervous glance went around the circle, but it was followed by a shared look of determination. They’d been through a lot, and all six of them were still alive.

“Canterlot wants to make a fanfare about the return of the Champion,” continued Twilight. “But I’m afraid its actually *bad* news.”

“What dark talk,” chided Rarity, appearing to shake off the trio’s sudden pall. “So a villain or two has reemerged in past years. Not such a bad record considering the, oh, *thousand* years of peace before that. I’m willing to chalk it up to coincidence until proven otherwise. Training Spike to fight is just a precaution. *And* if it puts him in the highest of social brackets, well then, why shouldn’t his oldest and best friends benefit?”

“And here I thought you were happy for *Spike*.”

“Nonsense. Of course I’m happy for Spike. He was always a bright young dragon. And it was nice to have a masculine sense of humor around the shop. Mares can be so insufferably catty!”

“Well, excuse us!” exclaimed Twilight.

“She *does* run a dress-shop,” pointed out Pinkie. “Oceans of mares – as far as the eye can see!”

“Sometimes the *whole town* seems like that,” sighed Rarity. “Such slim pickings on stallions around here. I can’t believe Derpy married a doctor before I did.”

Twilight shrugged. “Marriage is overrated. I’m busy enough as it is. The last thing I need is some stallion breathing over my shoulder all day.”

Rarity smiled bawdily. "I should *be* so lucky, darling!"

Pinkie Pie fell over laughing.

"You know what I mean," said Twilight, giving them each a look. "Come on, we've got to hurry."

• • •

By eight o'clock, the sunset's oranges and pinks had given way to Luna's vast canvas of stars.

At about this time, a white carriage bearing the royal crest pulled up in front of Sugarcube Corner. It parked in the pool of light under the gas streetlamp, and Spike the Dragon jumped down from the driver's seat. He extended a claw to the three mares exiting onto the sidewalk.

"Ladies," he said with cheesy smile and wink.

Pinkie threw her hooves around Spike and squeezed the big dragon very nearly to death.

"Spikey!" she shrieked. "Look at you! You're so huge, I'm afraid you're gonna eat the whole town!"

He laughed – a resonant bark these days, but still Spike's laugh. He squeezed Pinkie back. "Well, it's happening naturally this time, don't worry. No greed-growth for me."

The dragon's dimensions were maturing too, unlike the various times that he had been magically aged. His cute roundness had become the sleeker lines of a young adult, neck elongated, the spines on his back coming in tough and sharp.

"You're so handsome!" gushed Pinkie. "Ooh, and so strong..."

"If I've learned anything over the years," quipped Spike, "it's that gorgeous cougarponies will only break your heart."

"And when exactly did you learn this?" exclaimed Twilight.

They all turned to consider Rarity.

“Well, don’t look at me!” said the white unicorn. “My intentions have always been honorable!”

“Yeah, Rarity,” said Twilight, “you’re an unsullied daffodil.”

“Cougarpony?!” shrieked Pinky Pie, punching Spike on the chest as he laughed. “I’ll always be young at heart, you big meany.”

Rarity stepped forward with a curtsy. “It was quite gentlemanly of you to bring the carriage, Spike.”

“No more than you deserve, Miss Rarity,” said Spike. He bowed elegantly. “And might I say, you look lovely tonight, madam.”

“Why, thank you,” said Rarity, apparently impressed with his Canterlot manners. “Aren’t you polite! You even nailed the accent. And look at you! Downright dangerous, I have to say.”

Spike smoothed back his head spines absently, reminding them all for a moment of the red dragon in the cave from so long ago. “Yeah,” said Spike, “I’d prefer to keep the blades trimmed, but Luna says they’re important for deterrence.”

“Oh, my!” said Rarity.

Spike turned to Twilight then, and the two eyed each other with some trepidation. The dragon looked amicable enough, but she could sense caution behind his eyes.

Two years ago, on the day he’d left Ponyville, she and Spike had ended things with a screaming match. “*You don’t care about what I want!*” Spike had yelled. “*You just want me to be a copy of you! So you know what? I’m glad the Princess is transferring me to Canterlot! The only thing you can teach me anymore is how to be an OCD nutcase!*”

“*How can you say that to me, Spike!?*” she had shouted back in tears. “*I’ve taken care of you and risked everything, including my life, to protect you. If that’s not good enough, then why don’t you run back to your real family and see how much they love you!*”

He had slammed the door on his way out. It was the worst fight they’d ever had.

But then, the letter. Out of nowhere the other day, appearing on her desk in the study in a swirl of green flame. The message was brief: Spike wanted to see her. So here she was.

They exchanged a brief neck-hug.

“You do look good,” said Twilight at last. “The training has definitely had an effect on your physique. I hope Princess Luna isn’t working you too hard.”

“Oh, it’s not bad. She lets me wear the mouth-guard when she’s kicking me *directly* in the head.”

Twilight laughed. “You know, I remember times I worked a hundred and twenty hours in a week helping Celestia with research. I can only imagine what her sister must be like.”

“Similar hours, but I’m more likely to be carrying buckets of water up flights of stairs.”

“My goodness,” commented Rarity, “will you listen to the complaints of the privileged! The two of you, royal appointees, while Pinkie and I remain but lowly shopkeepers. Not one more minute of this shameless self pity, I insist!”

“Oh, you’re one to talk,” smirked Twilight.

Rarity tossed her hair. “I meant only that we should be thankful for the things we have, including the privilege of choosing our careers. Many ponies don’t get that choice. Like that poor Apple family, for instance.”

“Enough talking!” said Pinkie Pie. “The night is young and this filly needs a cold drink and a hot dance floor!”

• • •

It was a karaoke bar. Pinkie had insisted.

Twilight didn’t mind. After all, it did fall within the optimum range on her activities efficiency chart. Also, Pinkie Pie had a great voice. All of Twilight’s friends did, except for Spike, although even he let himself get dragged on stage for *Wild Horses*.

Pinkie monopolized the microphone all night, which surprised nopony. What *was* surprising was Rarity charging up there and joining her, the two ponies performing number after number to an adoring crowd.

It was the first time Twilight had been alone with Spike since he had left for Canterlot. She hit around for a topic and settled on work. “The others are gone. You can tell me what Princess Luna is *actually* like as a boss.”

Spike glanced at her sideways. “What can I say? You haven’t really heard the Royal Canterlot Voice until it’s been three inches from your ear at dawn. And I was serious about her kicking me in the head. Yes. Yes, I was. But how about you? I heard you’ve been tapped to open the new Ponyville University. That’s quite an honor.”

“I could wallpaper the library with the red tape I’ve had to deal with!” said Twilight with a groan. “At least construction is done. The furniture even came in last week.”

“It sounds like you’re just about ready to commence. You’ll be taking the bullwhip to your overworked, underpaid faculty in no time.”

Twilight looked bemused. “Don’t cut yourself on that razor-sharp wit of yours.”

They drank their drinks for a moment. Then Spike said: “Twilight... Look, I’m really, really sorry about what I said to you. Back then, at the library.”

“Me too, Spike.”

“Also, I don’t want to be Champion of Equestria anymore.”

She nearly spit out her drink. For a moment she could only gape at him. Finally, she said, “Why not!?”

Spike snorted a thin jet of flame. “Well for one thing, I just can’t stand living at that castle any longer. It’s been over a year and a half alone in that place with nopony else to talk to besides Luna, and you know the Princess. All business.”

“There are a ton of other ponies at the castle! What about the servants or the guards?”

“Ever since I started getting bigger, the servants either tiptoe around me like I’m about to chomp their heads off, or turn up their noses like I’m some kind of filthy animal. You burn down one priceless antique tapestry and you’re *equus non gratus* forever!”

“*Draco non gratus*, you mean,” corrected Twilight. “Ouch, though.”

“The guards are friendly enough, but cliquish. And I just don’t fit in. It’s lonely as *hay* up there. I fantasize about jumping in the river one day and swimming away, out of Equestria. Maybe all the way out to the ocean.”

“Dragon wanderlust,” said Twilight with a slow nod. “I’ve always wondered if you’d want to stay in Equestria as an adult, Spike. I knew it would never be easy for you.”

“It’s not just instinct,” said Spike. “It’s the whole ‘guardian of the realm’ thing. I’m not a fighter Twilight. Celestia and Luna have it in their heads that just because I’m going to be huge and fire-breathing someday, that means I can be a Champion.”

“You have to admit the logic is sound.”

“I’m scared. Terrified, really. The things Luna’s been teaching me... I mean, you just have no idea how many ways there are to kill or be killed.”

“We’ve both seen death before,” said Twilight. They both knew she was talking about the battle with Lord Smooze several years back. It had been short, but nasty, and it had cost Shining Armor his life.

“That’s how I know I don’t want any more of it,” said Spike. “No more.”

The silence hung for a while as the music played in the background. Then she said: “Equestria is in danger. That much is clear to both of us. And... and you’re the only dragon we know, Spike.”

Spike looked into his empty glass. “Why else do you think I stay? I haven’t even had *you* to lean on these past couple of years. But I know things are heating up for Equestria, and I have to protect you and the others if I can. And the Sisters... I’m loyal to them, no doubt about it. I feel like I am obligated to stick with this, even though it’s the worst possible choice!”

“Duty is a burden,” said Twilight. “It can be a prison. I’m sorry for that. If you want to leave, I’ll understand. Really, I’m scared too. We all are – Rarity, Pinkie, the others. I know Celestia and Luna are scared *for* us. But I hope you’re not trying to get my approval for quitting because you’re not going to get it.”

He gave an enormous sigh. “Twilight Sparkle never quit a thing in her life,” he recited.

“Not that I can remember, no.”

His eyes took on a look of resignation. “I’m counting on your judgement here. Visit me more often, though, okay?”

She threw her foreleg around the dragon’s neck and gave him a hug. “Thank you for staying with us, Spike. And for writing the letter. You are a good friend and I missed you.”

“I missed you, too, Twi.”

“This is the right choice.”

“I know.”

They glanced up to see Pinkie Pie and Rarity returning to the table.

“I finished your drinks,” said Spike. “Hope you don’t mind.”

“We have to go back to Ponyville,” said Pinkie Pie. “Right now.” Her ear was twitching.

“What? Already?” asked Twilight.

But Pinkie didn’t answer. She looked so haunted that even Twilight started getting a little creeped out.

“Alright,” said Twilight, “Seriously. What’s going on?”

In the background, the celebration continued, but none at this table were part of it anymore.

“I don’t know,” said Pinkie softly. “Something is just... really, really, super-duper wrong...”

• • •

Princess Luna tore through the halls of Canterlot Castle, racing down the straightaways and skidding around each corner as servants and guards pressed against the walls to avoid her. No pony had been able to tell her what was happening to her sister, only that the Princess’s chambermaid had tried to enter as usual and found the door barred from the inside. Celestia was not answering knocks or calls.

At last Luna arrived in front of the ornate oak door that led to Celestia’s private chamber. Two legionnaires paced nervously as she rode up.

“Stand aside,” commanded Luna before either of the guards could utter a word. The stallions were well trained, and fell back immediately, knowing what was coming next.

Luna’s horn pulsed with energy, emitting a glow that spread down her sides, to the tips of her wings and the ends of her hooves. Her moon-and-stars cutie mark left tracers of light

as she moved, and a low-frequency hum sifted stone dust from the walls and ceiling. Luna turned and kicked the heavy door with the force of a battering ram.

The ancient wood cracked and sagged inwards. Luna peered through the split planks into her sister's chambers. She could barely make out a white shape prone in a heap on the other side of the room. Her heart hammered to see Celestia unconscious, just as she had been so very long ago at the hooves of Nightmare Moon. Luna hadn't been entirely in control of herself at the time, but the memories were still hers, and they came flooding back. "Celestia!" shouted Luna, but the white heap did not move.

Luna's horn thrummed even louder as she focused her magic with divine precision. Her haunches surging with a crescendo of energy, Luna bucked up and delivered a double-kick to the door that shook the castle down to its foundation. The door shattered into flaming kindling, and with coals still raining down, Luna shot over the threshold and to Celestia's side without touching the floor.

"Sister!" she said, half pleading. "Arise, sister!" Luna scanned Celestia for injury, but found none. She thrust her head under the white alicorn's neck and tried to prop her up, but it was like lifting a bag of cement. And then she saw the cutie mark.

"No," she said, and her blood ran ice cold. "It cannot be..."

A telekinetic force seized Luna and lifted her off the flagstones like a rag doll. The Princess of the Night could only twist and torque her body uselessly in midair as the iron grip of magic tightened and tightened. Luna began to choke.

"It's been a long time," said Celestia, except that it wasn't Celestia's voice. "My little pony, it has been a long time indeed." The white alicorn rose slowly to her hooves, her famously beautiful eyes replaced now by sizzling red spotlights.

"Not long enough," gasped Luna, barely able to breathe, "*Nightmare Moon.*"

Celestia laughed. "Nightmare Moon was *you*, dear. And what a disappointment you turned out to be in the end. A few fillies with party-favors and you go all to pieces. What a disgrace! You know, I really thought you had the willpower to beat your sister. I *believed* in *us*! You'd think after so many thousands of years, I would have been a better judge of character."

"Celestia," said Luna, even though she knew it was hopeless. "Celestia, please fight her."

“Oh, stop it,” said the white alicorn. “Celestia is locked up nice and tight in here, and she’s not going *anywhere*.” She touched a hoof to her temple. “I think I’ll call myself ‘Nightmare Sun,’ from now on. It’s got a classic ring to it, don’t you think? And my, *my*, but this body is powerful. Far more powerful than you could ever hope to be, dear sister. All this power, though, and it still wasn’t enough to keep her from turning to *me*.”

“She... she would *never* turn to *you!*”

“But she *did*.” Nightmare Sun leaned in and grinned. “She gave me all the secret keys to her heart.”

“*That’s not true!*” thundered Luna, and with a loud *snap* of frost magic she froze the moisture in the air to form a slippery sheen of ice across her body. The telekinetic field fumbled for purchase, trying to hold on, but Luna was too quick. She torqued her weight backwards, leaping away and landing on four hooves. Then, before her enemy could react, Luna blasted forward across twenty feet of floor, tearing the flagstones up like they were made of paper, and stabbed her horn deep into the side of the creature wearing her sister’s skin.

The blacks and blues of shadow magic whirled in a funnel around Luna. She drove the point further and further into the Nightmare’s torso, feeling tissues tearing and separating like cloth.

Luna knew it had come down to this. She knew what her sister would want. She knew that Celestia would forgive her. With a crackle of black lightning, the goddess of the night flooded the white alicorn’s body with concentrated shadow magic. *You will not put my sister through what I went through!* thought Luna. *Never!* Nightmare Sun screamed, black tentacles erupting from her eyes, mouth, nose.

But the sunlight was already beginning to fight back. The Nightmare had been right. Only one alicorn in the world was more powerful than Luna, and that was Celestia. And the Nightmare *was* Celestia now.

Frost magic... Luna thought desperately. *Freeze her solid. Then maybe I can buy us some time. Time to get the Elements... time to evacuate the castle... before... before...*

Nightmare Sun set her hooves firmly and blinding sunlight glared from every pore of her body. “Stubborn mare!” she said. “I suppose no more stubborn than your sister. I made her scream a very great deal before she was mine!”

Waves of sunlight ate away at Luna's shadow magic, tearing the darkness into shreds, pouring out of Nightmare Sun's wound, pushing Luna's horn away. The room was a storm of motion, with furniture, decorations, and even chunks of flagstone whirling about.

At last, the two opposing magics detonated, throwing the two alicorns apart.

"Princess!" shouted a squad of legionnaire stallions, racing into the room. Their eyes shot back and forth between the sisters for a few seconds, unable to make sense of what they were seeing. Then it was too late. Nightmare Sun vaporized them all with a white-hot swirl of magic from her horn. Empty sets of armor clattered to the floor.

Seeing her chance, Luna launched herself again at Nightmare Sun, turning for a supercharged buck that would crush every bone in Celestia's body. Spacetime warped around Luna's cutie mark as she pulled kinetic energy from across the dimensional divide and aimed it square at Nightmare Sun's sternum.

It might have been a perfect shot, had the Nightmare not thrown Celestia's marble-topped dresser in between them to intercept the blow. Luna's supercharged kick crushed the dresser, missed the white alicorn by mere inches, smashed into a column. Flagstone rained down and part of the ceiling collapsed as both combatants barely dodged out of the way.

In the dust and confusion, Luna struggled to regain her balance, but a massive oak table flew into her peripheral vision and caught her square in the temple. It sent Luna tumbling head over hooves against the wall, and then the Nightmare's telekinetic field had her again.

"You," said Nightmare Sun, slamming Luna against the floor, "always," she smashed her into the ceiling, "were," down into the floor, "annoying!" She flung her tumbling into the corner. Luna struggled to her hooves, only to be crushed in between two massive stone blocks.

"Now then," said Nightmare Sun, lifting the beaten Luna back up into the air. "Where were we?"

How could you let it in, sister? thought Luna as the telekinetic noose tightened back around her throat. *Oh Celestia, how could you be so despairing, and I not even know it? If you turned to the Nightmare to help you, even after what it did to me, what it did to us...* The Nightmare was powerful but it still needed a willing heart. It had found one in Luna,

so long ago. Surely, if this was happening now it meant that Celestia had allowed it! How else could this presence have enslaved one of the most powerful creatures in the world?

“That was a nasty little trick just now,” said Nightmare Sun. “I guess I’m going to have to make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

Her telekinetic field bore down on Luna’s horn, wrenching the crystalline structure this way and that as the night-sky demigoddess shrieked in pain. At last, the horn tore from Luna’s forehead. Nightmare Sun nonchalantly tossed the source of the demigoddess’s powers out the window.

“I’ll... kill... you... .” hissed Luna through clenched teeth as tears of agony poured down her cheeks.

“You’re just being silly, now,” said Nightmare Sun with an affected yawn. “Goodbye ‘little sister.’ I’d like to say you weren’t a total disappointment, but I think we both know the truth of it.”

With that, the Nightmare flung the night-sky alicorn against the wall with such thunderous force that it shattered the stone blocks to dust. Luna’s broken body fell into dark oblivion and disappeared halfway down the mountainside. There was only the quiet rustle of the wind after that.

Nightmare Sun peered out across the moonlit valley for a minute, catching her breath. Then she approached the broken vanity mirror and examined herself.

When the Nightmare had been in control of Luna’s body, she had reveled in the psychological impact of the Nightmare Moon form. But she knew that the time for subtlety had come. “A perfect likeness,” said Nightmare Sun, and in the mirror, Princess Celestia smiled back. Scuffed, bloodied, but utterly passable as the real thing.

“Now,” she said, magicking Celestia’s crown and torc into place on her body, “now, now, now. To go greet our loyal subjects.”

And she laughed.

“I’m sorry ta’ say, sugarcube,” said Applejack through gritted teeth. “But I can’t right let you do that.”

“It’s not about what you’ll ‘let’ me do, AJ,” scoffed Rainbow Dash. “It’s about what I’m ‘going’ to do, and what you’re ‘going’ to do about it, which is *nothing*.”

“Alright then,” said Applejack, “if that’s how it is, then you want to make it one-hundred bits?”

Dash’s eyebrow twitched.

“Oho, not so sure now, are we?” said Applejack. “Stop chomping around the bit and pony up already!”

Dash set her jaw. “Fine, one-hundred. I hope you can afford to lose that much.”

“You worry about *yourself*. Ready?”

Dash nodded. “One, two, three, go!”

Both mares punched holes in the bottoms of their beer cans and shotgunned the alcohol down the hatch. They slammed the empty cans on the ground and grabbed more from the huge pile in front of them. It was Friday, both of them had gotten stuck working late and missed the fun in Fillydelphia. But that was okay, they had each other’s company, and all this Hayffeweizen. Now it was a race to the finish and neither pony was ready to give any quarter.

They each shotgunned their third beer. Dash’s eyes looked a little unfocused as she came up for air.

“Smashed already?” taunted Applejack.

“Gimme a break,” said Dash. “Just warn me if you’re gonna toss your cookies, so I can practice my rainbow-dodge!”

“Aw, this is nothin’ compared to what me and Big Mac used to put away.”

“So shut up and drink!”

A fourth hay beer.

A fifth, never taking their eyes off each other.

They could barely stand by the time the last beer hit their stomachs.

“Okaaay,” slurred Dash. “Go!”

Applejack and Rainbow Dash tore off across the fallow field towards the obstacle-course, still set up from the latest Sisterhooves Social. Apple bins and wooden planking made a treacherous road to run in the dark, especially when the two ponies were having enough trouble just walking in a straight line. It was reckless and stupid and perfect entertainment.

“No wings,” Applejack reminded Dash as they galloped up to the first set of obstacles.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.”

“I’m serious, sugar. You spread them pinion feathers and I’ll pluck ‘em right out!”

“I heard you the first time!”

They struggled over planks and under bars, through rings and hoops. Applejack swore as she barked her shins on a beam. Rainbow Dash stumbled and knocked her head so hard she saw stars. The two rivals pushed and shouldered past each other, neither one able to gain a clear advantage.

They reached the mud pit. Bad enough to fall in during the day, but at two in the morning, the mud would be freezing.

Applejack let out a grunt of exertion as she leaped out over the muck, almost clearing the entire distance. At the end, she grabbed a hanging rope in her teeth and swung onto the opposite platform. *Maybe us earth ponies can’t fly*, she thought, *but by golly, we sure can jump!* Even Pinkie Pie could leap massive distances compared to the unicorns.

Dash hopped up onto a line that ran between platforms and galloped along the thick metal wire like a tightrope walker. “You’re not losing me that easy!” she yelled.

Suddenly, an object like an airborne freight train tore the sky in half over their heads. Applejack fell and rolled across the ground and Dash toppled off the wire, landing right in the freezing mud with a *splat*.

The object flew across the river and crashed with a resounding impact in the gorge a half-mile away.

They could hear Winona barking back at the farmhouse. “What in *tarnation* was that?!” said Applejack over the ringing in her ears. Her mane stood on end from the static electricity in the air.

“Yuck, look at this!” said Dash, trying to shake the mud off and scrape it out of her hair. “Whatever it was, I’m going to go kick it in the face for that!” She made to take off into the air, but Applejack grabbed her by the rainbow tail.

“Hold your horses, girl!” Applejack growled. “The authorities need ta’ be warned first. It could be *anything* out there. It could be dangerous!”

“Psh, danger’s my middle name! But if you’re still a scaredypony, we can *both* check it out,” said Dash. “And then go ‘warn the authorities’ or whatever.”

Applejack arched an eyebrow. “I reckon you’d have to be dumber’n a sack a’ hammers to go charging into something like this. But alright. We’ll take *one* look.” And she slapped her cowpony hat back on.

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“Over there!” shouted Applejack as she galloped at full speed through the brush. She and Dash barreled from the treeline out into the moonlight, trailing leaves and branches behind them. Across the meadow lay the rocky expanse of the gem fields.

Applejack looked at the mountainside far above where Canterlot Castle perched, silhouetted by the moon. “Whatever came out of the sky most likely started up there,” she said.

“You’re a little sloshed to be doing ‘fancy mathematics,’” Dash pointed out.

“Getting hit by a sonic boom tends to sober a pony up pretty fast.”

Dash snorted. “You should try it with a cold mud bath.”

They reached the edge of a lopsided crater. Whatever had fallen from Canterlot Mountain had apparently struck down here, then bounced several times across the waste and landed in a thatch of tough desert grass fifty paces away.

“Stay behind me,” said Applejack. Dash groaned but complied.

Cautiously, they approached the object, which was still smoldering and threatening to set the grass alight. Applejack grabbed her hat in her mouth and beat out the nascent flames before they could turn into a real fire.

Rainbow Dash slowly circled the object. “It’s a pony,” she said.

No need to ask if it’s still alive, thought Applejack grimly. *Had to be some kind of accident, or a magic experiment gone wrong.* This made her think of Twilight, whose own experiments were notoriously unpredictable. “Uh... any idea who it is?” Applejack asked, trying to keep a hollow note out of her voice.

“AJ, you’re not going to believe this,” said Dash as she prodded the body with a hoof, “but check it out. I think this is *Princess Luna!*”

“Princess Luna!” gasped Applejack. To her shame, she felt a moment’s relief that it hadn’t been Twilight after all, but Applejack shook it off as she realized the deeper meaning of this. Somewhere out there was a new villain, or an old one returned, capable of kicking the crud out of an alicorn. She double checked, but it was Luna alright – the crescent-moon cutie mark was still mostly visible. Right now, the Princess looked more like a burned pile of hair and bones.

“She’s still breathing!” said Dash, kneeling down next to the night-sky alicorn’s face. “Just barely. But yeah, she’s alive.”

I thought the Princesses couldn’t get hurt, thought Applejack, dread creeping up her spine. Both Applejack and Dash had seen worse, more grisly sights before. Injured ponies, dead ponies. It came with being on the Ponyville Volunteer Fire Brigade for so many years. But it was never easy, and the ramifications of this particular situation were ominous, terrifying.

“What happened to her horn?!” said Dash. “Look, it’s just gone.”

“Dash,” said Applejack, in a daze.

“...maybe it got blasted off in the crash... And her wings... they’re just crushed to pulp... look at this...” Her voice was shaking.

Applejack cleared her throat. “Rainbow Dash!”

The pegasus tore her eyes away and looked at Applejack.

“I’ll stay here with the Princess. You go get Fluttershy. Tell her to come out here right away and bring her medkit. Then wake up Twilight –”

Rustling movements in the dark caused both ponies’ ears to perk up.

“Horseapples,” Applejack muttered under her breath. Then she shouted, “Who’s there?”

Out of the shadows slinked half a dozen diamond dogs.

“Yummy pony come onto our land?” said one of them. “Break the truce, eh? Good, good, we hungry tonight.”

“We ain’t fixin’ for trouble,” said Applejack. “One of our kind had a bad accident and crashed here. We’re just gonna take her and go.”

“Do we likes this plan?” asked the diamond dog. The rest chortled and giggled wickedly. “No, I don’t think we likes this plan, pony, I think we rather be having a tasty treat, and maybe some other fun with two pretty mares –”

That was as far as he got before Rainbow Dash shot forward – so fast that she might as well have teleported – and drove her fore-hoof deep into the center of the diamond dog’s gut. The dog went flying backwards and crashed into two of his fellows, gasping for air, his ugly eyes bugging out.

Another diamond dog exploded from the ground behind Applejack, running face-first into a trademark apple-buck that could have knocked out three mouthfuls of teeth. He emitted a sad whimper and collapsed.

Applejack was a little slow from all the beer, though and she didn’t even see the next assailant until he leaped onto her back and sank his teeth into the hard-pack muscle of her neck. She let out a holler, rearing and bucking until he lost his grip and bounced up into the air. At that point, she delivered a double-kick that blasted the dog straight through the side of a giant cactus. He rolled out on the other side, looking like a pincushion.

Every second we waste with these varmints is another second off Princess Luna’s life! she thought with frustration. Now where did RD get off to?

The cyan pegasus was dancing with a dog wielding a two-handed club. The dog charged, chopping and slashing. Dash dodged left and right, a multicolor blur, until the dog overreached on his final swing. A blur in the corner of the dog's eye became a cyan hoof smashing into his jaw, so hard it almost knocked him right out. He stumbled back and spit out a tooth.

"Shoo, doggy," said Dash.

Again, he attacked with a snarl, but he wasn't even half her speed. Dash dodged into the air, flipping upside-down as the diagonal swing missed by an inch below her. She made eye contact with the surprised dog, and winked. A heartbeat later, Dash's double-hooved death-from-above came around and smashed his head into the ground.

"I've hit turbulence tougher than these guys," laughed Dash. Then she stumbled to her knees and drunkenly emptied her stomach onto the ground. A diamond dog closed in behind her, looking to take advantage, but Applejack came charging out of nowhere and kicked the dog so hard that it nearly split him in half.

The rest of the pack was suddenly in a race to get away. They stumbled over each other to burrow into the rocky soil, sprint off into the darkness, anything to avoid being the next to have his face beat in by two of the toughest mares in Equestria.

"Aww!" lamented Rainbow Dash, wiping her mouth off with the back of her hoof. "Is that all you've got? You know for dogs, you guys sure do act like a bunch of puss--"

"Hey!" said Applejack, straightening her hat, "we don't have time to fool around! Help me get Luna outta here before they come back with reinforcements."

"Okay, hold on..." said Dash. She stumbled over behind a cactus and retched again. "Uuughhh," she said.

"You fight pretty well for being totally drunk," remarked Applejack.

"It's how I learned."

"Ha! Me too!"

Dash helped Applejack throw the fallen alicorn's front leg over the cowpony's shoulder, then ducked under the other leg. "This Princess... weighs a ton," she groaned.

“Lift!” commanded Applejack, and the two lifted. Applejack knew that jostling the Princess like this could injure her even further, but if they left her here, she was dead anyway. The two started the long trek back to town.

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Fluttershy had no idea what she was doing. Ordinarily, she would *never* have agreed to go out on a date with a stallion she barely knew, *never* have asked him to walk her home afterwards, and certainly *never* have spontaneously started kissing him on her front porch. She spent so much time these days taking care of everypony else, it had been so long since she’d done anything for herself. *And when it rains, it pours*, she thought as they made out.

She had to admit, at least, she could have chosen a worse stallion. Shield Banner was very nice, and he had a good job – some high-level thing up in Canterlot. He was ruggedly handsome with his unshorn fetlocks and dark brown coat, and he was a unicorn, which was interesting. She’d never had a unicorn before. Fluttershy knew a workaholic when she saw one, but that didn’t bother her much. After all, Macintosh had been a workaholic...

Shield Banner. That’s who she was with tonight. She wasn’t going to sabotage it by dwelling on the past.

Somewhere, a little voice was telling her that she *was* sabotaging it by coming on too strong. She didn’t want to spook a perfectly nice stallion. But Shield Banner had lavished her with attention tonight, been a perfect gentlecolt. She hadn’t felt like this in a long time, and it was making her reckless. So she kissed him, and kissed him again, growing more and more passionate, until she had him backed up against the side of her cottage.

This isn’t you, she said to herself. *You’re making a mistake*. But she couldn’t stop. Everything in her romantic life had been so disappointing for so long – she just needed to forget.

They both gasped for air. “You should come in,” she breathed. “Um, I mean, if that’s okay.”

“Oh, Fluttershy,” said Shield Banner panting and grinning. “*Why? Why* do you have to do this to me? You know I’ve got early muster in two hours. I’m going to be in a heap of trouble if my troops aren’t parade-ready by then.”

“Your troops look parade-ready to me,” said Fluttershy, and teased his mouth with hers until he fell back into their kiss.

Shield Banner leaned against her, pulling her to his chest with a foreleg, breaking off at last with only the deepest reluctance. “Fluttershy, if you keep this up, I will not be able to say no to you. And I *have* to go to work. I *have* to. Duty calls, and duty can be a harsher mistress than, well, than anypony I know.”

She gave him a playful nip on the side of his chocolate-brown muzzle. “I just thought it would be funny to make you walk all the way back to the castle at ‘full-attention.’”

“Thanks a lot for that,” he said, arching an eyebrow. “Good thing it’s a cold night.”

“It’s not cold in my cottage,” said Fluttershy in a tiny voice. “If I lit a fire it might even get a little too hot –”

“Stop. It,” he said with a grin. He nipped her back. “I wish I could indulge us both, but if I was willing to skip out on my job, I wouldn’t be your kind of guy anyway.”

She had to give him that one.

“Look,” he said. “I have next Wednesday off. I would love to take you to this great jazz club in Canterlot. My friend’s trio performs there on weeknights and they are just fantastic. What do you say?”

“That sounds wonderful.”

Fluttershy watched him trot off down the road. Something about his step made her think of Macintosh again.

She was suddenly overcome by a flood of relief that Shield Banner had turned her down. *What the hay are you thinking, inviting him in on the first date!? Real classy, Fluttershy! He must think you’re some kind of... of... wanton hussy! Are you really so lonely that you’re willing to put on the saddle for the first stallion to buy you dinner?*

That wasn’t fair; Shield Banner was a catch. But he wasn’t Big Macintosh, and that’s who she was still pining for right now, despite her every effort.

Fluttershy let herself into her cottage and went straight to the icebox, feeling hot tears spring up in her eyes. It had been three months since she and Big Mac had separated.

Now her farmpony husband was living in an apartment on the other side of town, and here *she* was acting like a stupid filly in heat because she couldn't move on.

It was a mocha almond fudge kind of night for sure.

She had barely brought the first bite to her mouth, however, when somepony knocked on the front door.

Shield Banner coming back? Fluttershy didn't know whether to be happy or sad about it. *Alright*, she thought, *I'll just tell him... what? That I changed my mind? That I don't feel well all of a sudden?* He was not going to like that, but what choice did she have?

The hoof pounded on the door again, hammering insistently this time.

I must have made a better impression than I thought!

She glided back to the entryway and peeked through the curtain. It was Applejack and Rainbow Dash carrying something. *What in the world are they doing this late at night?* She unbolted the door and pulled it open.

"Girls, why -?" she started, but they pushed past her and dragged whatever they were carrying into her living room. The first thing she smelled was hay beer. Then she gasped as that odor was completely overpowered by burnt hair and flesh.

A real emergency. Fluttershy's first instincts were to cower, to leave it up to everypony else, the way she used to all the time. But then her medical training kicked in and she was too busy to be scared. She hastily cleared off a space on the couch. "Do you know who it is?"

Rainbow Dash looked utterly exhausted. "Luna."

"Princess Luna!?"

"Yeah," said Applejack, gulping air. The cowpony's endurance was legendary in Ponyville, but even she was on her last wind.

"Set her down over here," said Fluttershy, and the two mares lay Luna down as gently as possible. Fluttershy went to her doctor's coat hanging on the wall and retrieved her stethoscope, then took the medkit off the top shelf next to the door. She ran an IV and began a cursory investigation of the patient.

“We found her like this,” gasped Applejack. “She fell from Canterlot, we think... Landed in the gem fields... I think she was already unconscious when she hit.”

“Okay, let me see here.” *Looks like the burning is superficial,* thought Fluttershy. *Barely coat-deep. So many other wounds, though... and that’s just what I can see on the surface. The wings are the worst – crushing injuries from the dorsal humerus, all the way to the metacarpals pegasi. This is going to require surgery.*

“Her horn,” said Fluttershy, bringing the lantern up to inspect the ruined socket on Luna’s forehead. “Do you have it?”

“We didn’t have time to look,” said Rainbow Dash. “We got attacked by a pack of diamond dogs. Good thing yours truly has been working the speed bag on weekends. I made mincemeat out of them, you shoulda seen it.”

“I may have helped a little,” said Applejack dryly.

“Yeah, AJ was there, too.”

“Applejack,” said Fluttershy suddenly. “You’re bleeding!”

“Oh, this?” said Applejack, trying to get a look at her own neck.

“Here,” said Fluttershy, handing Applejack a towel. “Please, try to be more aware of your own injuries. I can’t take care of all of you at once.”

“Thanks, I guess I just forgot I was hurt. RD? Did the dogs get you at all?”

“Nope,” said Dash. “But I think I might have to throw up again.”

Fluttershy’s attention moved back to Luna. She made a short diagnostic list in her head. *Edema, bleeding, hematoma, fracture, burns...* The Princess was a mess. *How could this have happened to an alicorn?*

Fluttershy made sure intravenous fluids were flowing to the worst injuries, and she injected Luna with an osmotic diuretic to keep the internal bleeding from causing shock. The next step would be to correct Luna’s pH balance and get some electrolytes flowing into her. It was all just a stopgap though.

“We need to get the Princess to a hospital.”

“That’s exactly where she’ll be in the most danger,” interrupted a voice from the doorway. The ponies all turned to see Twilight Sparkle striding in. Behind her came Rarity and Pinkie Pie. All three were resplendent in evening wear.

“Twilight!” exclaimed Fluttershy, “Why are you dressed like that?” She sniffed the air. “Have you... have you been drinking?”

Pinkie belched loudly.

“You guys are all drunk?” asked Rainbow Dash.

“Until a few minutes ago, so were we,” pointed out Applejack, going to the kitchen to put on some coffee.

“We didn’t exactly expect this to happen,” grouched Rarity.

“How did you even know to find us?” said Dash.

Rarity shot over a look of profound incredulity. “Pinkie Sense, if you can believe it.”

“Pinkie Sense...” said Applejack. Then, “No kidding...”

They all turned and looked at the bright pink pony.

“What? Three tail twitches, rapid eye blinking, double ear flicking, and an itchy back. It can mean only one thing –”

Fleas, thought Fluttershy.

“– a serious doozy!” said Pinkie Pie. “And I would definitely call this a serious doozy.”

“Will all you ponies please be quiet?” demanded Twilight. Her horn glowed deep purple as she probed the fallen alicorn’s body. “Oh Princess... how did this happen to you...?” Then the magic intensified and Twilight said, “Stand back, I’m casting a spell.”

“Wait, wait!” said Fluttershy. “We don’t know what will happen if you try to use non-alicorn magic to heal her.”

“This isn’t a healing spell,” said the purple unicorn, “In fact, this will probably make her condition worse. But it has to be done.”

Before Fluttershy could utter another protest, there was a concussive pop of air and time froze as the world shattered into a million silvery shards.

• • •

Twilight couldn't remember who she was.

For a long time, she floated between places and ponies, events passing before her eyes. A crowning ceremony, two alicorns side by side, a childhood in the Canterlot gardens, tutors, mentors, etiquette, posture, diplomacy. Afternoons with her sister, laughing and getting into trouble. Ponies whispering about how the two daughters were destined for great things. Maybe greater than any two ponies ever born.

Then came adolescence, a time of brooding and disappointment. She was the lesser of the two sisters, and she always would be. It was simply a trick of fate. No matter how she tried, she always be second best. Forever, for eternity.

Jealousy. It burned for years. A hundred years, five hundred. *I shoulder half the responsibility*, thought Twilight. *It's not fair that she would be revered and I would be ignored.*

“The sunlight always wins out over the night, when the two compete.” This was a different voice. Hardly over a whisper of the wind. It flowed through Twilight's mane like cool breath. “They will never see you while they are still blinded by her.”

The cities grew up around her. Fillydelphia was a tiny circle of hovels, a logging camp, a general store. Manehattan was a single street with a flour mill and waterwheel, a tavern, a one-room sheriff's office. Twilight watched ponies scurry about like ants, placing wood and stone, days and nights and weeks and months and years racing by as buildings spread like moss. Life was different when there was a time limit, when it mattered if a pony rushed or relaxed. For mortals, life was a ticking clock, always. It inspired them to greatness. And they inspired her. She wanted more.

“I can make you free of her,” said the voice. “You deserve to be recognized. Even now your sister secretly laughs at you, degrading your contributions to the cycle.”

My beautiful starry sky goes unappreciated, seethed Twilight. *My moon casts its light over a fearful population. They hide in their homes at night because the day is brilliant and warm.* How could she hope to compete? She had been given a lackey's job. At one time, she had been destined for greatness. It wasn't fair.

“It should be *your* day,” said the voice.

It will be. And she let the Nightmare in.

It was dark for a long time.

But the darkness ended. The Nightmare was stripped away by the blinding light – not sunlight, this was a different sort. It warmed a pony to the soul, and her soul was washed clean.

Twilight was ready to live again. She was ready to try again. She appreciated what she had, and what she had was forever.

“Celestia,” she said, turning to her sister. “I was wrong to envy you. It was not your choice to be the most powerful. You have done nothing to spite me. You have always wished the best for me.”

“I have,” said Celestia. “And yes, my sister. I will always be more powerful than you. But power is only one ingredient of destiny, Luna. The other is will. And in that regard, my sister, I have never met a greater pony than you. Your determination is the kind that can change worlds forever. More than magic ever can. More than I can. This is why I need you by my side.”

“Thank you,” said Twilight, her eyes filling with tears. “I missed you so much.”

“And I missed you,” said Celestia, and she started to laugh.

She laughed harder and harder, and Twilight tried to pull away from her grasp, but she wrapped her forelegs around Twilight’s neck and hung on, howling with crazed laughter in her face. Twilight tried to fight back, but she couldn’t remember how – couldn’t even really remember who she was. She started to choke as Celestia desiccated before her eyes, skin and muscle shriveling up, peeling, cracking. Her eyes boiled and melted, leaving two flame-filled holes like blast furnace vents.

“I missed you, Twilight Sparkle,” said the thing that was not Celestia. “Oh yes, I know who you are. I had a taste of your magic when you and your friends hit me with the Elements of Harmony way back when. Do you remember that? Mortals can have such short memories. It hurt, Twilight Sparkle. A lot. I have to commend you really, that was some excellent spellcasting on your part. It was like being scoured alive, but it didn’t kill me. And do you know what that makes you? Very. Unlucky.”

Twilight Sparkle screamed as the grip tightened and tightened and she felt her bones buckling, ready to snap horribly with the slightest more pressure. And then the pressure tightened again. “It’s not real, it’s not real it’s not real, it’s not real, it’s not real! It’s not real! It’s not real! Auuhhh–”

“Hey! I know you!” said an unmistakable voice. “You’re Black Snooty!”

The constriction paused. Twilight teetered on the edge of madness.

“Or was that Queen Meany? You know, I can never keep you bad guys straight. Hey, what’s this do?”

Pinkie Pie popped the Nightmare’s ear off.

“What the –” said the Nightmare.

“Mmm, juicy!” said Pinkie Pie, eating the ear. “You taste like grape soda, Black Snooty. That is a very good choice. I would have guessed licorice since you’re so evil and all, but grape soda... maybe you’re not so bad!”

The Nightmare cast Twilight aside as it turned to lash out at Pinkie. But Pinkie wasn’t there anymore and it clawed at empty space.

“So this is like, a dream world, right?” said Pinkie, leaning over the Nightmare’s shoulder. “Alright, how about a pair of tanned cabana colts and a jacuzzi filled with champagne? Or is it not that kind of dream?”

“Grahhhh!” screamed the Nightmare, swinging to grab her again, but only managing to sock itself in what passed for its face.

Pinkie lounged in a deck chair some ways off, sipping out of a coconut shell with a swizzle straw. A single brilliant beam of sunlight cast down from above, glinting off her heart-shaped sunglasses. “You know, I could get used to this,” she said. “Nightmare baby, I think you’ve got yourself a new roomie!”

The Nightmare took two steps in her direction and put its weight down right on a suspiciously placed throw rug. Naturally, the rug concealed a circular hole, through which the Nightmare fell like a sack of potatoes. Its angry scream echoed down into the darkness until finally petering out.

Pinkie Pie jumped up from the deck chair, pulled a wood-saw from behind her back and threw it down the hole. She made sure to finish the last of her drink, then ran over to Twilight.

“Get up, silly,” said Pinkie Pie. “You’re not really hurt.”

And Twilight wasn’t. She was still shaky, but otherwise okay. “How... how are you doing this?”

“Oh, you know, I have many strange and mysterious powers.” Pinkie beamed cheerfully with her moon eyes.

“There you are!” said a voice from a short distance away, and Rarity stepped into the light. She was clad in translucent, golden armor, her hair flowing like a purple cloud of stars. “When you didn’t come back right away, we began to worry that you’d gotten lost in here. I volunteered to look for you, and Pinkie sort of hung on for the ride.”

“Pretty!” said Pinkie, admiring Rarity’s new look. “What am I doing in my boring old skin? Let’s see if I change shape too.” She bit her lip in concentration.

“Oh, goodness,” said Rarity, rolling her eyes. “I suppose you’ll want to turn into a giant cake or something.”

“What’s the point?” said Pinkie sadly. “One can not be a cake and eat it too.”

“Thank you! You saved my life!” said Twilight, giving them each virtual hugs. “And Rarity, I didn’t think you knew how to astral project!”

“Sweetie Belle has been learning the basics at school recently, and she’s needed me to tutor her.”

“You did really well. But come on, let’s get out of here. I’ve got what I came in here for, and I’m definitely ready to be back in the real world.”

“It never fails,” said Pinkie. “Every time I’m about to start eating we have to rush off somewhere.” She looked longingly at the bowl of dream custard she had been devouring, then shrugged and threw the entire thing down her gullet, bowl and all.

• • •

“The Nightmare?” said Rainbow Dash. “But didn’t we kill the Nightmare with the Elements of Harmony?”

“Or changed its alignment to good, that’s what I had thought, too,” said Twilight as Applejack handed her a glass of water. “But it turns out the Nightmare survived somehow, and with all of its malevolence intact. And now it’s come back.”

Dash stared at Luna’s head. “In there?”

“No,” said Twilight. “What I met in there was just a fragment. The real Nightmare is in Princess Celestia.”

“Come now, Twilight,” said Rarity. “We both know that’s impossible. The Nightmare would need permission from Celestia herself!”

“I know what I saw,” said Twilight. “And I believe it. Especially under the circumstances, I mean look at her!” She motioned to Luna. “However it did it, the Nightmare was able to overpower Celestia and... take control of her. It’s the only explanation.”

They were all quiet for a few moments. Then Rainbow Dash snorted and stomped a hoof. “So what are we gonna do about it?” she said.

“First things first,” responded Twilight. “We have to figure out some way to move Luna to a secret location where Fluttershy can get her stabilized. And we need to find her horn, so that we can... try to reattach it I guess. We certainly can’t let the diamond dogs have it or we’ll be in all kinds of trouble!”

The other ponies nodded in agreement, save one.

“You can’t do this kind of surgery in someone’s basement,” insisted Fluttershy. “It’s extremely delicate work, dangerous even under the best circumstances. And besides, I’m not a surgeon, I’m just a physician assistant.”

“You’ve assisted on plenty of surgeries,” said Twilight.

“Assisted! Because I’m an *assistant!* But there was always a supervising surgeon and and it was always in a tightly controlled environment, not these... these...”

“Battlefield conditions?” said Spike, stooping in the doorway. “Because that’s what it’s looking like to me. War.” The heat from his scales curled the edges of the wallpaper. The

ponies had to step back as he approached Luna and placed a claw gently on her cheek. "I'm here, Luna," he said. "And I will get whoever did this to you. I swear it."

"How does it look out there?" asked Twilight.

"Clear," said Spike. "But we shouldn't waste any time."

"The longer Princess Luna stays here," said Twilight to the group, "the more likely it is that we'll all be captured. If the Nightmare has control of the Royal Guard, then they're probably out looking for Luna's body right now. Or maybe even us. We have to move this whole show somewhere else. I'm sorry, Fluttershy, that's how it's got to be."

"Look," said Rainbow Dash. "If we can find the horn and put it back on, she can heal herself, right?"

Twilight and Spike exchanged a look. "Theoretically."

"Well, I can dash out there and find it right now!"

"And how do you reckon' you'll see it in the dark, in a field full-a giant crystals?" said Applejack. "It'll be like looking for a needle in a stack-a needles!"

"That's easy. Rarity can come with me!"

Rarity's mouth fell open and she looked over at Twilight.

"Well," said Twilight with a hesitant shrug, "I *could* show you the spell to find the horn. It's not really hard..."

"Luna's mind is one thing," said Rarity, "but gallivanting around the gem fields in the middle of the night? Perhaps I should season myself with a bit of Hollandaise first. A sprig of parsley in my hair?"

"You'll be safe," said Spike, "I'll go too. And I'm kind of in the mood to run into diamond dogs tonight." He snorted a jet of smoke from each nostril.

"And me!" shouted Pinkie Pie, jumping up and down.

Rarity looked, chagrined, at Luna's broken form. "I don't know what came over me. Of course I will go. For the Princess, I will face any danger!"

“Then it’s settled,” said Twilight Sparkle. She turned to Applejack. “AJ, you and Fluttershy will move Luna. I’m sorry to ask you to carry the Princess again, but at least we can use a wagon this time...”

“Think nothin’ of it, Twilight!” said Applejack with determination. “Whatever I can do to help.”

“Um,” said Fluttershy and everyone turned to look at her. “I, maybe, know a place where we can hide her and do the operation.”

“Fluttershy, you’re a genius!” said Twilight, catching on immediately.

“I musta missed something,” said Applejack. “Where to now?”

Twilight and Fluttershy spoke together: “The Ponyville University!”

“The medical wing is mostly complete,” said Fluttershy.

“And interference from the artifacts department will scramble any magical attempts to search for her,” added Twilight.

“Sounds good,” agreed Spike. “But that still leaves you out. What’s your plan?”

“Right. First, I’m heading to the library to secure the Elements of Harmony. If the Nightmare has control of Celestia, then it will know what she knows. I have to hide the Elements where even the Princess couldn’t find them. Then I’m going to Canterlot Castle.” Twilight set her jaw. “To be with my beloved teacher and ruler. In her time of crisis, ‘Celestia’ will need her trusted apprentice at her side more than ever.”

The rest looked at her, stunned. Spike said: “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“I have to see the impostor for myself. I need to know if Celestia is still alive or not, whoever is in control of her body. Plus, if I have a chance to inspect the scene of the crime, maybe I can figure out how this happened.”

“But the Nightmare... what if she knows that you know?” asked Pinkie Pie. “Omigosh, what if she knows that you know that *she knows that you know?*”

“I’ll take precautions,” said Twilight. “And if it comes down to it... well, I’m no pushover myself.”

The rest of the ponies looked unconvinced, but Spike nodded. He was sold.

“We’ve faced things like this in the past,” said Twilight, looking at each of them, “and more often than we’ve wanted. Nightmare Moon, Discord, Tirek, Lord Smooze, and just about every color of dragon imaginable. But each time, I have been lucky enough to have you six to depend on. There isn’t a single pony in Equestria that I would want on my side tonight more than any of you. Keep each other safe out there. Get your jobs done. And good luck.”

• • •

“Please, Doctor Stables,” said Nightmare Sun, pulling the name from Celestia’s memories, “do try to make this quick.” Her violet eyes beamed with warmth and kindness as she looked down at this pathetic little creature. “As you may understand, I have many matters to deal with in the wake of this attempted coup, and my health is hardly in question –”

“Hold still, Princess,” growled the doctor. “I know full well how hardy you alicorns are, but the guards told me there was a hypersonic explosion in the room right before they found you unconscious. Proximity to that sort of thing can scramble your nervous system, cause cardiac arrhythmia, and even worse things. I gotta make sure you’re okay after that, or I wouldn’t be doin’ my job. Follow the light with your eyes, please.”

Nightmare Sun did as he asked. She amused herself in the meanwhile with fantasies of snapping his bossy little neck. *Just pretend for now. There will be plenty of time for that kind of fun after they capture the dragon and the apprentice. Once those two have been dealt with, there won’t be a creature in Equestria powerful enough to oppose you. And then you can feed to your heart’s content...*

She turned at the sound of boots echoing on marble floors from the east hallway. A heavily armored pony with a dark-brown coat marched in, flanked by a clerk and a gaggle of advisers.

“Princess,” said the pony. “Thank goodness you’re okay! I was on my way back to the castle when I received word of the tragedy. I have dispatched the entire guard to find the traitor Spike.”

“Thank you, Captain” – Nightmare Sun accessed Celestia’s memories again – “Shield Banner. Excellent work.”

He removed his helm respectfully with orange unicorn magic. “I take full responsibility for what happened to Luna. I should have seen this coming... should have had something in place to prevent it –”

“You can not blame yourself for this, Captain. No pony could have foreseen a betrayal so vile. Spike surprised me at my most vulnerable, while I was asleep in my chambers. He told me he would kill me if I moved, and held me hostage until Luna came. Then...” She choked back a tear. “... he killed her. He murdered Luna with that green hellfire of his, and then the guards as well. If I hadn’t thrown him from the castle at that point, he would no doubt have incinerated me too.”

“We will capture him soon, Celestia, I give you my word. I will go myself and bring the dragon back in chains.”

“No,” said Nightmare Sun. “I want him dead.”

“Your Highness...” said Shield Banner uncomfortably, “Procedure dictates that he be brought in for interrogation and indicted for treason...”

“He killed my sister, Captain. I watched him do it. There is no doubt that he is guilty, and I sentence the traitor to death.”

“Yes, your Highness.”

“When it’s done, bring his body to me. I don’t want any of your ponies hurt because they tried to be gentle with him, do you understand?” She jerked her head at the doctor. “You. You’re done now.”

The doctor looked at her carefully, then bowed graciously and left.

Nightmare Sun turned back to Shield Banner. “What about Twilight Sparkle?”

“We’ve got agents going door-to-door in Ponyville right now, looking for her. She was last seen leaving Fillydelphia two hours ago. Don’t worry, Princess, we’ll track her down.”

“Take the greatest care with her,” said Nightmare Sun. “Twilight Sparkle may be in league with the traitor Spike. It may be necessary to terminate her as well.”

“Your Highness! Twilight Sparkle has saved this kingdom from destruction several times! She is one of our most trusted operatives! Are you sure about this?”

“No, I am not sure. But Spike and my apprentice are very close – they grew up together after all. It is not impossible that he may have convinced her to help him. It would explain how Spike was able to overpower me. How he was able to kill Luna. There is no other way, in fact. It had to be some sort of enhancement spell, or an artifact. It would explain everything.”

“I suppose it would...” said Shield Banner. “But I urge you to let me interrogate her before we do anything... irreversible.”

“Of course,” said Nightmare Sun. “Of course.”

“Thank you, your Majesty. I will dispatch ponies to villages along the route to Fillydelphia as well as –”

“That won’t be necessary,” said a voice. Both Nightmare Sun and Shield Banner looked up to see a certain purple unicorn trot into the room, tailed by a pair of guards who didn’t seem to know what to do.

“Princess...!” said Shield Banner.

“It’s okay,” said Nightmare Sun. “It’s alright now, Captain. You and your stallions can go.”

Shield Banner considered her for a long moment. “Very well, Princess. I will see personally to the other matter. As for you, Twilight Sparkle,” he said, turning to the purple unicorn, “upon dismissal, please proceed directly to the guard house for debriefing. I will have an agent waiting for you.” He bowed, placed his helm back on, and led his entourage out.

“Oh, Princess,” said Twilight, once they were alone. Her eyes filled with tears and she embraced Nightmare Sun. “I’m so, so sorry about Luna. Was it Spike? Was it really him?”

“It breaks my heart to say so, my faithful student,” said Nightmare Sun. “But yes, it was Spike. I saw him kill Luna with my own eyes.”

Twilight stammered for what felt like forever. “Why? Why would he do something like this?”

“Instinct,” said Nightmare Sun. “He had been growing more and more distant from all of us recently, even from Luna and myself. Spending nights alone on the rooftop, drifting

away from pony society. I think his dragon instinct became too loud to ignore anymore, that he tried to eliminate us and seize the crown for himself. The royal coffers would have made quite a dragon hoard for one as young as Spike.”

“But... I’ve known Spike for decades! My whole life! I tried so hard to teach him right from wrong. He must have been forced to do this! Maybe somepony else was blackmailing him, or using magic on him. I just don’t know how I can accept this.”

“Twilight, you do not understand dragons as I do. I have been dealing with them for over a thousand years, and let me assure you that Spike is... *was* unique in his generosity and gentleness. Dragons are evil, selfish creatures, without exception. In hindsight, it is not surprising that he did this. It is only surprising that he did not do this sooner.”

“Oh, Celestia. If he could attack you... if he could *kill Luna*... then I have truly failed.”

“It is my fault,” said Nightmare Sun. “I decided to take a dragon into our care long before you were born. In the end, I did this. I believed we could tame the beast. But some beasts can never be tamed, Twilight Sparkle. Some need to be put down.”

Twilight stared into Nightmare Sun’s eyes, her jaw set with a steely determination. “I will do whatever is necessary, my Princess. Of that I give you my word.”

“I know you will, my faithful student,” said Nightmare Sun. “I know you will.”

“Well, *I’m* not walking in the water,” said Rarity. “That scummy soup is probably swimming with leeches!”

“There are no leeches in the Ponyville swamp, Rarity,” Spike said with a sigh.

“There’s one now! I think I saw it flitting about beneath the water,” said Rarity.

“Do leeches ‘flit?’” said Spike. “I don’t think leeches ‘flit.’”

“I’ll bet you don’t know the first thing about leeches!”

Spike looked at her. “And you do?”

“Since *you* are the one asking *me* to wade through chest-deep swamp water, Spike, then the burden of proof falls to *you*, yes?”

“Why don’t you just jump between trees, like me-ee?” Pinkie Pie singsonged down from the boughs of a tall willow. She bounded effortlessly between limbs ten and fifteen feet off the ground, then sailed twenty feet to another tree. It was like she weighed nothing.

“Come now, dear, you know I can’t do that sort of thing,” said Rarity. “My powers are based more on the upkeep and application of fabulousity. Which is an *excellent* reason, by the way, not to ruin my coat with a flitting swarm of leeches!”

“There *are* no leeches,” said Spike.

“You know, this swamp reminds me of this thing I saw once,” said Rainbow Dash, “about these Candiru fish that can swim right up your pee hole.”

Rarity looked aghast at Dash. Then she rounded on Spike with giant, shiny, puppy-dog eyes that must have taken up three-quarters of her face.

Spike threw his claws in the air. “By Celestia, alright!” He helped her climb up onto his shoulder.

They moved slowly and deliberately for nearly an hour, following the faint, indistinct signal of Luna’s horn. The fairylight from Rarity’s own horn shone brighter than a lantern – more than enough to illuminate their way through the foggy wetlands.

Spike was very aware of Rarity's presence as she sat so close to his face. He caught a glimpse of the white unicorn's beautiful blue eyes shimmering in the ethereal light. Her coat was like cane sugar, even after a night of rocking out and swamp-trekking. As always, she smelled faintly of marshmallow.

Rarity, you are still a knockout, thought Spike with an inward sigh. He would always pine a little for Rarity, even though there were a million reasons it would never happen.

"We found Luna in the *gem fields*," said Dash. "I've crashed pretty hard before and I've only thrown stuff two, maybe three hundred feet tops. How in the world did the horn end up all the way out here!?"

Spike peered into the darkness ahead, his ears searching for the slightest sound. "Magical artifacts exist in more dimensions than normal objects," he told Dash. "A unicorn horn for example is four-dimensional entity, existing across infinite, similar, three-dimensional spaces. That's how it collects natural magic from the planet and the sun so efficiently. This nature makes it hard to track if it's separated from its three-dimensional host pony, though, because –"

"Get to the rainbows!" said Dash with frustration.

"It teleports around by itself," said Spike. "With a hop, skip, jump."

"Thank you! Sheesh! You really were raised by Twilight, weren't you?"

"She'll appreciate the compliment."

Pinkie Pie stopped suddenly. "Oh, gross," she said. "Cross my heart guys, I 'smelt' it, but I didn't 'dealt' it this time."

"What are you talking about?" asked Spike, and then he smelled it too. *Methane*. A thick pocket hanging over this whole area. *I had better be darn careful with my fire*, he thought. *One wrong move could blow the lot of us into candy corn*.

They slogged along another hundred paces.

"It's right nearby," said Rarity. "We're close, everypony."

"Up ahead," said Dash. "Two o'clock." A faint blue glow among the lily pads.

"Looks more like eleven o'clock to me," said Pinkie.

There were several beats of silence.

“I don’t get it,” said Spike.

Pinkie arched an eyebrow. “I was being serious,” she said.

“Oh... alright,” said Spike. “Well, you’re both right, since a four-dimensional artifact coincides with our space at constantly changing coordinates –”

Pinkie gave a bitter laugh and her eyes sparkled with an orange glow. “I get it, I get it, ‘Pinkie’s a riot,’ but Celestia forbid I have anything to add to the conversation.”

“What was that, darling?” said Rarity.

“The sound of another screw coming loose,” said Dash, flying along.

“An insult from Dashie,” said Pinkie. “What a surprise. You just can’t help yourself, can you? ‘Pinkie Pie you’re not as annoying as I thought.’ ‘Pinkie Pie, you’re so random.’ Talking down to me, right to my face, you’d think I was Fluttershy or something!”

“Whoah,” Dash said, taken aback. “Way harsh...”

“Ha! Way true, you mean. You know, I think I’m finished with you high-and-mighty ponies.” Pinkie Pie’s eyes burned with a bright orange glow. Her hair swelled and then deflated, hanging straight-as-boards down her back and over one eye. “I’m going back to Ponyville, and if you’ve already bought a birthday gift for Gummy this year then I hope you kept the receipt!”

Spike could hear Luna’s voice in his memory: *Sudden and severe changes in mood or alignment can debilitate a pony as fast as any wound. It is sometimes the only way to defeat a particularly elusive opponent.*

“She’s hexed,” he said.

Rarity looked up at Pinkie with worried eyes. “What can we do?”

Spike turned and sloshed up to the tree below her. “Listen to me, Pinkie. You aren’t acting like yourself. Something out here is affecting your mind and you are in danger. You need to come down here right now.”

“Lay an egg, dragon,” she shouted down to him. “Then *suck it!*”

What is the source of this? he thought, looking around into the murky darkness. *It could be local wildlife, Royal Guard, hallucinogenic fungal spores for Celestia's sake! Should we press forward or fall back? Try to restrain Pinkie or search for the cause of her behavior?* He had been through hundreds of training scenarios with Luna, but now that it was for real, he couldn't decide what to do. *Get it together, dragon! Everypony is depending on you!*

"Spike," hissed Rarity. "Can you feel that energy? Something powerful is casting magic out here. Something besides Luna's horn."

Spike's mind raced. He had a plan, but it was a terrible risk. *Don't make the wrong decision now.* "Okay... first, kill the lights. Then I need you to localize the source and hit them with a flare. Can you do that?"

"That will be the easy part, darling."

"Do it. Dash, get Pinkie."

Dash nodded and put on her game face.

Rarity's fairylight dimmed to nothing, and they all held their breath in the sudden pitch-black. Spike could feel the tension from Rarity's body as she concentrated on locating the energy source. It was a testament to her fine magical dexterity that she could do it without casting light from her horn if she wished. Even Twilight had trouble with that trick.

The wet noises of the swamp crept to life, crickets and frogs, clacking beetles and the screech of a bat. Spike closed his eyes and listened with dragon ears. The sounds of wildlife were not uniform. He could hear them shutting off in sections, as if they sensed a creature was passing close to them. In this way, he found he could distinguish the negative space of at least four separate entities moving to surround them. Only one of them was close enough for Spike's plan to work. He would have to wait until the others were closer before he acted. *I still don't even know who or what is out there. If it's some sort of swamp creature this might just make it mad...*

In the blackness, Pinkie Pie said. "Well, I guess that settles it. You go your separate way and I'll – *what the hay are you doing?* Ow, stop pulling my hair Dashie... that's cheating!" The sounds of Rainbow Dash and Pinkie locked in an arboreal wrestling match sifted down from the trees.

"We're running out of time, Rarity," urged Spike.

“Just... another moment...” whispered Rarity. “There you are!” There was a fizzing pop of magic and a radiant energy ball snapped from the end of her horn. It described a graceful arc into a southwesterly copse of trees, where it burned bright white, perfectly illuminating a dozen ponies in legionnaire armor and black cloaks.

Spike could hear the three other squads closing in. Not four entities, as Spike had thought, but more than twenty pony soldiers.

“Seize them!” boomed a voice. “Restrain the pink one first, she’s the most dangerous!”

“What... hey!” yelled Rainbow Dash.

The squads charged toward them. *Sixty feet... forty feet... twenty feet*, thought Spike. *Sorry colts, you’re just doing your jobs. But so am I.*

“Dash,” yelled Spike. “Take a bath!”

To Dash’s credit, she only hesitated for a second. Then she tackled Pinkie Pie and the two of them went hurtling out of the branches and splashed into the algae-thick swamp water.

Spike grabbed Rarity by her waist and fell backwards into the foul water, dragging her with him. As the darkness closed in over them, Spike exhaled a single jet of flame up to pierce the underside of the gas cloud.

The air ignited with a *whumph*, and sheets of liquid fire roared out across the surface of the water in all directions. The Princess’s elite guards were engulfed in the inferno and went down screaming into the water by the dozen. Spike felt sick. *This is the Nightmare’s fault*, he thought. *The Nightmare just killed those ponies, not me.*

It took only seconds for the methane-air mixture to burn off, but they were terrible seconds.

Spike and Rarity exploded from the water, gasping for air and gagging on debris.

“Where are...” said Spike, casting about.

With a splash and a small geyser of water, Dash flapped up into the air, soaking wet and carrying Pinkie Pie in a full-nelson. The pegasus shook herself off, splattering Spike and Rarity with even more rotting plant material.

Rarity hadn't said a word yet. She just stood there with her hair plastered to her face, looking too traumatized to speak.

Sloshing noises sounded from all around, and to Spike's surprise, the pony soldiers began struggling back to their hooves as well. *Fire suppression magic*, he realized. *Of course. They knew they were hunting a dragon tonight...*

"Dash, get Pinkie out of here!" said Spike. "Rarity and I will get the horn!"

Dash looked at him, then over her shoulder towards the horn, then down at Pinkie. *Torn in three directions*, thought Spike. *Please Rainbow, just do what you're told for once in your life.*

But he never got to find out what Dash might have done, because at that very moment a blur of armored motion appeared in front of him and a lance of brilliant orange magic struck him square in the chest. Spike's body careened backwards across the water, smashing through a cluster of rotting stumps thirty paces away.

"What... the..." he said, holding his head as he dragged himself back to his feet. His ears were ringing and there was a disturbing numbness coming from his entire left foreleg. Before him stood a dark-colored unicorn in legionnaire barding.

"Spike the Dragon," called the pony. "I am Captain Shield Banner of the Royal Guard. I offer you this one chance at clemency. The Princess has ordered you executed, but your friends will be spared if you surrender now."

"Does that sound like an order the Princess would give, Captain?" asked Spike. "Celestia is the very image of mercy. Where is that mercy tonight?"

"Apparently, it died with Princess Luna," said Shield Banner. "Celestia may be a goddess, but she is still a pony in the end. And if that was my sister you'd murdered, I'll admit that mercy would be furthest from *my* mind."

"Luna was my mentor and my friend, Captain. I would never have hurt her."

"Forgive me if I take my Princess's word over that of a *dragon*. Now are you going to come quietly or are we going to have to get rough with you?"

Shield Banner's horn flared orange again and the tense silence was torn by Pinkie Pie's wail. "The corn cakes!" she cried. "I ate them *all*. They weren't mine and innocent ponies

went hungry!” She slumped against a broken tree, her voice wracked with grief and agony, as if she was reliving all the worst moments of her life.

“Stop it!” yelled Rarity. “You’re hurting her!”

“*You* are the ones with the power to stop this, not me,” said Shield Banner. “Now surrender, traitors! Miss Pie is running out of time.” His horn flared even brighter.

“I’m sorry I was born pink, Daddy!” sobbed Pinkie, cradling her head. “I’m sorry I was born pink!”

“That does it!” shouted Rainbow Dash, and she was on Shield Banner faster than a thought. Orange flashes lit the swamp in staccato bursts as she lay into him with a flurry of blows, but each strike, kick, or buck collided with layers of force-fields and did no damage. Finally, Dash arced into the air and shot downward with her death-from-above move, but Shield Banner cast a glowing net from his horn, and suddenly Dash was entangled and splashing down into the water. Her head breached the surface, only to be dealt a sharp blow by the captain’s iron-shod hoof that caused her neck to whip back. Before she could recover, the guard captain fell on Dash, holding her under the water with his considerable weight as she thrashed around, unable to breath.

“Agile fighters shouldn’t attack hard targets head-on,” said Shield Banner with a laugh.

Spike let loose a terrible, furious roar. A dragon’s roar. He charged headlong at Shield Banner, summoning up the hottest flame he could produce – the kind that could melt stone. But just as he moved into range of the guard captain, Spike felt a massive, uneven weight crash into him from above, and suddenly he was wrestling with three snow-white pegasus guards.

One bashed him in the stomach with a powerful kick, while the others tried to yank his forelegs behind him. Spike angrily threw one pegasus over his shoulder, skipping the stallion across the water like a stone. He chomped his maw down on another, cracking the guard’s armor and tasting blood. The guard struggled to pry the dragon’s jaws open, but Spike torqued his neck and smashed the soldier through the side of a log. The third pegasus dodged left and right – a move that Rainbow Dash herself liked to use – and when the guard came around for the customary left-hook, Spike reeled back and headbutted him so hard it knocked the guard’s helmet right off.

Rarity had skidded into a patch of grass and huddled there, looking shocked and terrified. But now as Spike finished off the last guard, he noticed that she had clambered

to her hooves and was casting a spell. *No, Rarity, he thought, don't draw attention to yourself.*

There was a snap of magic and another white flare arced out into the swamp. This one landed in some brush, and there, floating in the water, was Luna's horn. Spike looked back at Rarity. She smiled at him, tears in her eyes. "Go on!" she said, motioning with her hooves. The Element of Generosity.

Save the Princess. Save Equestria.

He was in the water before another soldier could move, thrashing his body back and forth, building a rhythm. Within seconds, Spike was tearing forward along the surface. He had wondered for many years how a wingless dragon like himself could ever hope to measure up to a red, or green, or any of the rest of them. He had received his answer the first time he'd seen the ocean.

In the water, nopony could catch him. He was a blur. He shot past Shield Banner and raced straight on for the horn.

Shield Banner was not expecting this at all. He jumped off of Rainbow Dash and wheeled around towards the fleeing dragon. "Restrain the mares!" the guard captain shouted to his legionnaires as he took off after Spike.

It was too late, though. Spike had gotten his moment of surprise, and he was almost upon the horn already. He could see its night-sky glow on the surface of the water. It rippled and warped through space, seemingly in three... two... six places at once.

Got to time this just right... Gotcha! He reached out and seized the horn as he tore past in the water. Luna's familiar power pulsed through his body, recharging him.

Spike doubled his speed and raced through the swamp, changing direction randomly and losing the airborne tail in the trees. After two miles he could no longer see pegasi through the canopy, and he slowed down to a more steady pace, dipping below the water and opening the green fans on the sides of his cheeks that acted as gills. Under the surface, Spike was invisible, even to heat-detecting magic. He could swim like this as far south as he needed to, then double back around Ponyville and enter the University from the east.

I completed the mission, he thought bitterly. I did what I had to for the greater good. Luna is our only hope against the Nightmare, the only hope for Equestria. Pinkie, Dash, and Rarity will just have to take care of themselves for a while.

He had never felt less like a hero in his entire life.

“So let me get this straight,” said the intelligence agent in his cultured Trottingham accent. He was a charcoal gray earth-pony with a shock of white hair, and he peered down at a sheaf of papers through owlish spectacles. “You and your friends arrived in Ponyville at 0200 hours, at which point you parted ways with the dragon and came directly to the castle?”

“Yes,” said Twilight Sparkle for the hundredth time. “Pinkie Pie had a premonition of danger while we were in Fillydelphia. I thought it best to check on Celestia and Canterlot. I only wish I had arrived sooner.”

Why is this taking so long? she thought, blinking painfully against the light of the interrogation lamp. *It's getting hot in here, and I need to get back to work. I successfully deceived the Nightmare, and once I'm free of this garbage, I can start figuring out what's really going on in this castle...*

“Your friend, Pinkamena Diane Pie,” the agent said, flipping through the papers quite nimbly with his hooves. “The one with the ‘premonition,’ as you call it. Chaotic alignment, it says here. Non-magical divination. Conditional reality bending. Very unusual powers for an earth pony. And she has a history with the chimera Discord, am I correct?”

Not this again... “I wouldn’t say a *history*, per se. There was this one time a few years ago he managed to get into her dreams from his stone prison. But it was actually more of a... playful thing. No harm came of it, and it was an easy matter to seal the minor leak in his petrification spell.”

“Why didn’t she approach you about it immediately?”

Because she liked it. “Pinkie is Pinkie,” said Twilight with a sigh. “What more can I say? In the end it was harmless. Romantic, if you must know.”

The agent arched an eyebrow. “Actually, that doesn’t sound the least bit harmless to me.”

“Discord was bored,” said Twilight. “There was nothing he could do to affect the real world anymore. And he and Pinkie can be like-minded at times. They were just having fun.”

“The last time I checked, Discord was still an evil *demigod*, master manipulator, and one of the Marearchy’s arch nemeses. *Not* one of your Ponyville fun-pals. I think that Pinkie Pie’s gallivanting clearly constitutes a breach in national security.”

“Look,” said Twilight. “First of all, you don’t have to tell me a thing about Discord. I know all about Discord, okay? Second, I understand how this all seems on paper, but even Celestia waved it off after a time. Those of us who know Pinkie trust her implicitly. In fact, she’s saved my life several times. What have *you* done for me lately?”

The agent was eating honeyed oats out of a bag. “Oats?” he offered.

Twilight just looked at him.

“Intestinal blockage is a real threat, Miss Sparkle,” said the agent. “Fiber will save your life, too.”

“I get enough fiber, thanks.”

“That’s what they all say,” sighed the agent, shuffling his papers. “But it’s never true.”

“That’s it, I’ve had enough of this!” said Twilight. “What is your name, anyway?”

The pony gave her a sympathetic half-smile. “I know you won’t like this, but my name is privileged information.”

“Of course it is,” Twilight said. “Of course it is! Well you listen to me, whoever you are. I answer directly to the Princess. Not to *you*, and not to your *boss*. Now I am here *voluntarily* as a favor to Guard Captain Shield Banner, and I do *not* appreciate being locked up in this tiny room with this lamp in my eyes, while you stuff your face with oats and crack wise at me! Quit bogging me down in administrative nonsense and open this door right now!”

“You know what I think?” said the agent. “I think Luna is still alive.”

“You... what?”

“Missing body. And then you come in here with her scent all over you.” The agent placed his hoof into the saddlebag that lay against the wall and pulled out a small crystal orb with a single point of light inside.

“A magic dampener?” said Twilight, raising an eyebrow. “Is that really necessary?”

The agent continued to remove orbs until he had half a dozen of them arranged on the table. It was the most Twilight had ever seen together like this. Each cost a king's ransom.

That's enough to slow even me down, she thought, trying not to let her sudden sense of panic reach her face. *What in the world are this pony's orders? Did Nightmare Sun find out about me? Is this my last chance to escape!?*

"Expensive toys," she observed. "Don't you think those might be more useful to the ponies tracking down Spike?"

"But I *am*, Miss Sparkle," said the agent. "You ought to know that you don't fool me one bit. I haven't been in Canterlot long, but I know that ponies around here are a little afraid of you. 'Greatest unicorn in a hundred generations,' the Princess says." He arranged the orbs carefully on the table. The tiny point of light in each one pulsed in sequence as the dampeners began attuning themselves to one another.

"You're making a mistake," said Twilight.

"I know all about you, Miss Sparkle. I've seen your file. I know the real you. They call you an 'operative,' but you're not a war mage and you're not a spy. You're just a *librarian*. And I can see *right through you*, Twilight the Librarian. For better or worse, you know what really happened to Luna. And you are going to tell me everything, right now."

She sent a powerful blast of telekinetic force hurtling forward, charging it with enough magic to take down the opposing wall and anything else in her way. Twilight didn't like injuring one of the Princess's soldiers, but it was suddenly now or never.

The massive vortex of energy disappeared down into the six spheres, leaving only a gust of wind that whipped the agent's cloak over his thigh. He was a blank-flank. Secret Police. The agent slammed both hooves down on the desk, causing Twilight to recoil away.

"You're not taking me seriously, Miss Sparkle," he said. "I am not bound to any code of ethics. I can do *anything* I have to in the name of protecting the Princess. Even to you." He sat back down and fixed his cloak. "I do respect you for trying to escape just now. You're braver than you look. But if you try to scratch me again, kitty, I'm getting you declawed. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

Twilight desperately tried to think of a way out, but there was nothing.

"Yes, Miss Sparkle?"

“Yes.”

“Good.” He pointed his hoof at her. “I’m going to hold you to that, now, okay?” The agent turned to the door. “Doctor Stables, you may enter.”

The door opened and the squat form of the Royal Physician appeared. He didn’t make eye-contact with Twilight.

“Give her the shot, doc.”

Stables dipped his mouth into his saddlebag, retrieving a single syringe.

“Truth serum,” said Twilight.

“Lucky for you,” said the agent, as the doctor prepared the injection. “I find that a little chemical persuasion is often more effective than nastier options. The side effects are still rather severe, I must warn you. But I would have to be an idiot to spare you the needle when we’ve only just met, don’t you agree? Now, tell me what you know about the coup attempt tonight, what you *really* know, and maybe we can avoid this whole unpleasant business.”

“Spike is innocent,” said Twilight, changing tactics. “He didn’t do this. It was Nightmare Moon. She attacked Luna and took control of the Princess’s body. The creature wearing the crown is an impostor.”

“Well, well,” said the agent. “Now we come down to it.”

“Whatever happened at the castle tonight had nothing to do with Spike or any of us. Spike has been with me all night in Fillydelphia. Your ponies should have been able to tell you that much.”

“Spike is resistant to magical detection, as you well know, Miss Sparkle. It wouldn’t be hard for him to fake his whereabouts.”

“Well, he didn’t. He’s been framed by the Nightmare. If you are really Celestia’s soldier, then help *me*.”

“Why did you lie in the first place?”

“I had to assume that you would take the impostor’s word over mine. Am I wrong?”

“That depends.” He leaned forward. “Is Princess Luna alive or not?”

Twilight looked at the agent for a moment. “I don’t know.”

He scratched his chin with a hoof. “I must admit,” he said at last, “your story is so crazy that it rings true. I’m inclined to hear you out. But only under the effects of the serum, of course, just to make sure we have trust between colleagues. Doctor, you may proceed.”

“I’ll need you to restrain the prisoner,” said Doctor Stables gruffly.

“Very well,” said the agent, and he walked around behind Twilight and clamped her hooves firmly to her sides.

The doctor approached them and raised the syringe.

“Doctor Stables,” said Twilight. “Listen to me. You *know* this isn’t what Celestia would want.”

“Hurry up,” said the agent.

Stables refused to look at Twilight. He held her shoulder still and set the needle to strike.

I can’t believe this is really happening, thought Twilight. I’m sorry, Princess. I almost made it.

“Oops,” said Doctor Stables, and he stabbed the needle into the agent’s foreleg.

“No!” the agent shouted, slapping the doctor’s hoof away, but it was too late. The injection had gone in. “You little sack of *mmmmphhh*– “

Twilight kept her hoof clamped firmly over the agent’s mouth as the tranquilizer tore his strength away. He beat weakly at her foreleg and tried to elbow her in the ribs, but whatever Stables had hit him with was potent. Within ten seconds, the agent was sleeping like a foal.

That’s twice you’ve needed saving in a single night, Twilight, she thought to herself. We’ve got to get these averages back up.

“Took long enough for him to go down,” snorted the doctor. “That clop-promazine cocktail I gave him was the strongest stuff I had.”

“Wow... is he going to be okay?”

“Yeah, he should be out for a few hours, though. It’s too bad it came to that,” said Doctor Stables. “It sounded like he was starting to believe you. Just not fast enough.”

“So... so *you* believe me?”

“Of course I do! I am Celestia’s doctor. I had *better* know when something is disastrously wrong with my patient.”

“Oh, thank goodness! Quick, get these dampeners put away.” The two ponies scooped the orbs into their lead-lined case. Twilight’s horn crackled back to life, spitting off a few purple sparks. She looked towards the doorway. “What about the two guards outside?”

“What guards?” said Stables. “Both of them were called away on emergency orders a few minutes ago.”

“How did you manage that? You’re just a doctor! No offense.”

Stables grunted. “I’ve been working in this castle for a long time. I know how things work around here. It shouldn’t be too hard to escape if you go now.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t leave quite yet,” said Twilight, putting her saddle bags back on. She kept the dampeners. “In fact, do you think you can get me into Celestia’s bedchamber?”

Stables looked her over. “More favors? Wasn’t saving your flank enough?”

“Thanks, doctor.”

“Oh, think nothing of it!” he grumbled. “And yes, I think I can. But you’re going to need a disguise.”

The Ponyville University was a long walk from Fluttershy's cottage, and to make matters worse, the cowpony and pegasus had been forced to take the hilly backroads to avoid attention. By the time they arrived, the bite-wound on Applejack's neck was aching like the dickens from rubbing against the harness straps.

But we made it, she thought as she pulled the wagon rumbling over the bridge onto campus. Hang on Princess Luna, we're almost there.

A stranger's lantern moved in the darkness up ahead, its light sliding across the maze of brick buildings. Applejack felt a jolt of adrenalin reach her heart. "Rent-a-clops," she whispered to Fluttershy. "Quick, help me get the wagon in here." The pegasus added her shoulder to the yoke. Together they steered the apple-cart into an alleyway between the music hall and the history building.

A security pony sauntered up the walk in his white shirt and little black tie. This one was a green unicorn who looked like he'd had a few too many candied oatcakes over the years. A lit cigarette dangled from the side of his mouth.

"Doesn't he know those things cause cancer?" whispered Fluttershy.

"Shh!" said Applejack.

The security guard strolled past their hiding space, not even glancing in at them. He finished his cigarette, stamped it out on the ground with a hoof, then started walking away, whistling and jingling his keys with his magic again.

"And now he's littering?" whispered Fluttershy.

"Shh!" said Applejack.

The guard had almost made it around the corner, when a fit of coughing and sputtering erupted from beneath the fruit and blankets on the apple cart. Fluttershy moved to press a cloth over Princess Luna's mouth, but it was too late. The guard had already noticed the sounds coming from the alley. He turned and started walking back to take a look. The lantern hovered before him, and a billy-club came up to join it.

Applejack readied herself for a fight. She was going to have to disable this stallion without seriously injuring him, which was one hay of a fine line to tread. This wasn't one

of Dash's adventure books, where a pony could get knocked out with a blow to the head and wake up a little dizzy later on.

Suddenly, Angel Bunny appeared on the ground at their feet.

"Angel!" hissed Fluttershy. "Get back on the cart!"

Instead of obeying, Angel looked up at her with an expression of pure determination, then sprinted out into the moonlight. He tore across the courtyard like a white lightning bolt, took a running wall-leap off a fountain, and snagged the rent-a-clop's hat in his teeth. Angel was away into the darkness before the security pony knew what had hit him.

"What the hay?" the guard exclaimed, feeling for his hat with a look of disbelief. "Darned research animals!" He turned and galloped after Angel at full speed, which for him was really not that fast. In fact he looked like he was about to collapse from exhaustion by the time he disappeared around the first corner.

"No, Angel!" said Fluttershy. "Let go of me, Applejack! I have to go after him!"

"Priorities, sugar!" Applejack said, restraining the pegasus gently until she stopped struggling. "You don't have to worry about Angel Bunny. That security pony will *never* catch him. Our mission right now is Princess Luna. Now c'mon, focus! Where do we go from here?"

"Um, the science hall." Fluttershy scanned the area for a moment. "We'll cut around the side of the art building, along the river path. That should take us right to it."

"Good work," said the cowpony. "Lead the way."

• • •

The massive science hall was designed to look like an ancient temple from the time of the Three Tribes. It was one of the largest structures the cowpony had ever seen.

"The big city comes to Ponyville," Applejack said with a sour note as they approached along the brick walkway.

Fluttershy strained her neck to gaze up at all the columns and arches in the silver moonlight. "Twilight said it's going to be the second largest school in Equestria. She said it would be good for the town's economy."

“Twi grew up in Canterlot,” said Applejack. “So she don’t see nothing wrong with Ponyville ‘urbanizin’ as she puts it. But this ain’t Canterlot, and I already know what happens to river towns that turn into river cities. Crime, mayhem, and pollution. Just like Manehattan.”

“Well, if we don’t get Luna in there right away,” said Fluttershy, “urbanization will be the least of our problems.”

“Boy, have you got that right,” the cowpony agreed. “Open the door, sugarcube.”

The yellow pegasus nodded and dipped her mouth into her saddlebag to retrieve a key. She fiddled with the lock for a while.

Applejack paced nervously. “What’s the holdup?”

“The bolt turns,” said the pegasus, blowing a strand of hair out of her face, “but the door won’t budge. I think somepony must have barred it from the inside.”

“Twilight said we could just walk right in with that key! Are you doin’ it right?”

“I’m pretty sure they taught me how to work a doorknob in med school, Applejack.”

The cowpony stared at her. “Good gracious, girl, did you just sass me?”

“Oh my gosh,” stammered the pegasus. “I’m so sorry! I don’t know what came over me, all of this is just so intense...”

Applejack waved a hoof and chuckled a little, albeit without much humor. “Don’t sweat it, sugarplum. I think a little sass is good for a mare.” She trotted up to the portico and tried the lock herself. Sure enough, the door was held fast from the other side. “Gravy!” she muttered.

“What are we going to do now?” said Fluttershy. “Is Princess Luna really going to die out here because some janitor pony put the security bar down?”

A loud, ragged coughing startled the two ponies. It was Luna, struggling for air. Fluttershy hopped up onto the cart and stooped to examine the fallen alicorn. She took her stethoscope in her mouth and moved it from place to place on Luna’s side. “It’s a tension pneumothorax,” Fluttershy said. “I was afraid of this.”

“Pneumo-what-now?”

“There’s air leaking into her chest and it’s collapsing her lungs,” said Fluttershy. Luna gurgled and wheezed. “That’s why she can’t breathe. Quick, quick, hand me a syringe from my bag.” Applejack did so. Fluttershy used her teeth to pull the rubber plunger from the barrel, then stuck the open needle into Luna’s chest, right under the foreleg. There was the wet hiss of escaping air and Luna’s breathing eased up a bit. Fluttershy removed the glass barrel and taped the needle down against the alicorn’s dark coat.

“Well?” said Applejack.

“That buys us time, but not much. Minutes maybe.”

“It’ll be enough,” said Applejack confidently.

Angel Bunny reappeared from under a hedge. The white rabbit was covered in twigs, leaves, and spider-webs, but otherwise looked none the worse for wear.

“Angel!” cried Fluttershy, scooping him up. She squeezed the little bunny until his head just about popped off, then held him at foreleg’s length and scolded him. “Don’t you ever run off like that again! I almost had a heart attack!”

“Great job back there, partner,” Applejack said to Angel in a mock whisper.

The rabbit squeaked and grinned sheepishly, placing a paw behind his head. Fluttershy huffed and set him down on the ground. Angel Bunny began to examine the front of the science hall. He looked over to Applejack.

“We’re locked out,” said the cowpony.

Angel took off again, scrambling up a vine trellis and squeezing through the bars of a ventilation grate.

“Wait!” exclaimed Fluttershy, but the rabbit was gone. “Twice in a row! He did it *twice in a row*?”

“I never thought I’d say this,” said Applejack, “but right about now, that critter is Princess Luna’s last and best hope.”

A minute later, the ponies heard the scraping of wood-on-metal behind the door, and then a dull *clunk*. This time when Fluttershy turned the key, the latch disengaged and the door swung open. Angel sat on the ground near the kick-plate, motioning for them to enter. Fluttershy glowered at him, but it was hard to argue with success.

Applejack pulled the whole wagon right into the science hall. The doors slammed shut behind them, casting them into echoing darkness. The cowpony dug around in her saddlebag until she found a lantern and lifted it in her mouth, the magic igniter sparking the wick into flame.

Towering over the two ponies was a huge skeletal monstrosity. Its maw was filled with razor-sharp teeth, its eyes like black, empty caves. Fluttershy emitted a shriek so high-pitched that it was barely audible, and fainted dead away.

Applejack froze, terrified, until she realized that the creature was standing stock-still. She approached with caution. A knee-high fence made of red-velvet ropes surrounded its feet, and there was a brass placard on a wooden stand off to one side. Applejack read it aloud.

“The *Saddlesaurus rex* was one of the largest land animals in the late Ponitaceous Period. Scientists believe that it went extinct at least 150 million years ago.” She nudged Fluttershy with a hoof. “This thing’s just dust ‘n bones. We need to get the Princess into the medical school.”

Applejack heard a squeak from the little white rabbit, and she turned to see him pointing off into the darkness. “It’s been dead a long while, little fella,” she said, “it won’t harm you none.”

But Angel shook his head and pointed again, beyond the *Saddlesaurus* display. Now that the cowpony looked closer, she could make out faint forms moving around in the shadowy science hall. They weren’t alone in here.

“Y’all better come out right now,” said the cowpony, her voice as still as she could manage.

At first, there was silence. Then, a low voice. “Looks like we’ve been made, gentlecolts.”

“Hey, Commander,” said another voice. “That rabbit saw us. Maybe we ought to recruit him.”

There was a smattering of laughter from every direction in the pitch-black hall.

“Darn it, show yourselves!” shouted Applejack, snorting and stomping a hoof. A bead of sweat ran from her brow.

“I suppose it’s only fair, since we can see you two just fine.” A gray pegasus stallion wearing dark-purple armor stepped into a single shaft of moonlight. His gold eyes had slitted cat-pupils, and his wings were like those of a bat.

The shadows swirled to Applejack’s left and right, and a second and third gold-eyed pegasus appeared. A fourth figure melted out of a solid wall twenty feet behind her.

“The Night Guard,” whispered Fluttershy.

“I’m glad somepony around here still remembers us,” said the Night Guard leader, flashing a set of very un-pony-like fangs. “Now will you kindly explain what you’re doing with our Princess?”

• • •

By the time Twilight made her way up to Celestia’s bedchamber, the place was crawling with investigator ponies. They were taking photographs, drawing chalk marks on the floor, and placing tiny flags over bits of evidence.

The room was a disaster. All of Celestia’s beautiful furniture was upturned and in pieces. A portion of the ceiling had caved in, and the wall leading to the outside was simply blown away, leaving only a howling void and a starry sky.

Twilight walked amongst the investigators, wearing the white lab-tech outfit that Doctor Stables had given her. Twilight’s tag identified her as a pony named “Red Letter.” Her job was “blood-spatter analyst.”

The floor in the center of the room was one giant, dark stain. Twilight couldn’t help but stare. Her mind started thinking up all kinds of questions that she didn’t really want answers to. She wondered, for instance, how much of it had come from Celestia and how much from Luna. She wondered how fast an alicorn would have to bleed in order to outstrip her regenerative abilities and actually die from it. She wondered how much the Nightmare had hurt Luna *before* trying to kill her –

“You!” came a voice. “Purple unicorn.”

Twilight’s heart nearly stopped. She looked over to see a crime scene pony wearing a trucker’s hat. He was scanning the rubble with a beam of light from his horn.

“C’mon, c’mon,” he said impatiently, concentrating on his work and barely looking at her. “Gimme a hoof over here.”

Twilight glanced around furtively, but nopony else was paying her the slightest bit of attention. She wove through the crowd of investigators and made her way over to trucker hat pony.

He was bright canary yellow, and his tag read: "Trace Evidence." Twilight wondered if this was his name, his job, or both.

"Tilt this rock back a little so that I can finish my scan," he said through a bushy, blue mustache.

Twilight obliged, grabbing the heavy section of stone with her magic and lifting it completely off the ground. The crime scene pony swept his light into the space under the rock, then stopped. He slowly looked up at Twilight, then at the massive rock itself.

"You're a strong one," he commented.

"Oh! I mean... uh... urrrghhh," said Twilight, feigning exertion. She dropped the stone slab to the ground, wincing a little when the thud temporarily attracted the attention of a few nearby ponies. She grinned sheepishly at trucker hat. "I've been working out."

"Me too," said trucker hat. "But compared to you, it looks like I've got a ways to go."

Twilight smiled nervously and tried to make a nonchalant retreat, but the pony continued the conversation. "What a mess, huh?" he said.

"Uh, yeah. That's definitely one way to put it."

"I've been doing this twenty-five years," the stallion said. "Never thought I'd be working a scene in *this* room."

Twilight let out a genuine sigh. "Me neither."

"You from East Barn?"

"Excuse me?"

"East Barn. East precinct? I don't recognize you."

"Oh, I'm... uh... an intern... from the Ponyville University... satellite... program?" Twilight gave a petrified grin.

“Cool, that’s cool,” he said, nodding. “We all gotta start somewhere.” Then he leaned in conspiratorially. “You know, they’re saying it was the dragon who did this.”

“I might have heard,” said Twilight, checking her sarcasm. “What do *you* think happened?”

The pony shrugged. “I’m going to wait until all the evidence is in. Never did have an opinion on the lizard, myself. Not so popular around West Barn, though, I’ll tell you. Some ponies were convinced he was a rotten egg even before all this. Too bad for the dragon if he’s innocent.”

Twilight had to agree. “How about this giant pool of blood in the middle of the room?” she said. “I thought the perpetrator was supposed to have immolated the victim.”

“Sometimes if a body is flash-vaporized, it can leave a moist residue that is heavier than air. But look who I’m talking to here, expert.” He chucked her on the shoulder with a well-meaning hoof. “If you need coffee, it’s over there. Better wake up, Red Letter. It’s going to be a long night.”

Too late, she thought.

Twilight had been worried she might have trouble blending in, but the room was a swarm of activity. She passed mostly unnoticed, especially with her junior credentials signaling to everypony that she wasn’t worth talking to. Eventually she found a chance to slip away into an unoccupied corner.

Okay, she thought, *here’s the plan: try not to dwell on the consequences of screwing this up.*

Twilight tuned the resonance of her horn down and the pliability up to produce low-frequency thrums of energy. Then, by alternating in moments of high-frequency energy, she created a rhythm that began to warp the very fabric of reality. She focused the signal with sympathetic pulses from her cutie mark, and suddenly, space and time unhitched from each other. Energy and matter began to flow backwards along the timeline, and Twilight felt a nagging sense of disembodiment which grew stronger and stronger. *Keep calm, keep calm*, she told herself. *Temporal disconnection is always uncomfortable.*

It was more than just uncomfortable, though. It was like being dragged backwards down a steep hill, strapped to a runaway apple cart. The unicorn felt a wave of nausea and had to redouble her concentration to keep the spell from fizzling out.

You can do this, Twilight! Focus on what's around you. Pay attention to the space, not the time.

It... it's Celestia's bedroom. Investigator ponies coming and going.

Twilight watched herself leave, walking backwards out of the room. She wasn't seeing with her eyes now, she was seeing with her horn, which reached into the fourth dimension and touched both past and future.

Guards, guards, more guards. Plainclothes ponies, probably Secret Police.

Then there was a blur of motion, and Twilight began to witness the battle between Nightmare Sun and Princess Luna, only happening backwards. The unicorn looked on in fascinated horror.

It beat her so easily, she thought. Even if we get Luna's horn back, how in the world are we going to defeat the Nightmare? A direct hit from the combined Elements might not be able to harm it in Celestia's body.

Twilight sped up the rewinding, then started skipping gaps of time, until she arrived at what she estimated was the beginning of the Nightmare incident.

A bedraggled Celestia combed her hair in the mirror.

It's you, thought Twilight, a lump forming in her throat. Really you this time, my princess. Not that... thing downstairs in the throne room wearing your face.

Something seemed to catch Celestia's eye – something shocking. She stumbled back from the mirror, mouth agape, and turned to stare at her cutie mark. Twilight could see that the princess's legendary sun mark was missing three rays, and then a fourth disappeared, even as she watched. She saw the alicorn rush to escape the room, only to fall prey to some sort of terrible hex trap. Celestia screamed like a wounded animal and crashed to the ground, screamed again, then vomited onto the floor and thrashed around in agony.

She had been like a second mother to Twilight. Now Twilight had to stand here and watch her suffer like this without any way to help. Luna's broken body, facing down the terrifying Nightmare fragment, the intelligence agent with his orbs and his syringes... and now this. Twilight felt like collapsing to the ground under the weight of all of the horrible things she had seen tonight. *No more, I'm all done. Please, I don't want to see any more.*

Stop it! she ordered herself. *Keep it together Twilight! Keep. It. Together!* She gritted her teeth as tears squeezed from her eyes. *This has already happened! This has already happened. You can learn from it, use it in the present. But only if you focus! Now pay attention!*

Celestia had begun to conduct psychic warfare with the enemy. She lay absolutely still except for her violet eyes, which vibrated like she was in REM sleep. This went on for minutes, Celestia's horn glowing bright, then dimming, then bright again. After a while, a trickle of blood fell from Celestia's nose. And then more than a trickle. Celestia began to bleed from her ears next, and then from her mouth.

Twilight sobbed silently to herself, but she didn't look away. She had thought it rather melodramatic earlier when Spike had made his vow of vengeance on Luna's behalf, but now Twilight found herself making a vow of her own. This one wasn't for Celestia, though. It was for the Nightmare. *I'm going to destroy you, Nightmare, for doing this, for hurting us like this. I promise. I promise. I promise...*

The Princess worked stiff, weak legs to push herself in the corner. She placed the tip of her horn against the wall and began to scratch symbols. It was clear that she was at the end of her strength.

That wall is destroyed in the present, thought Twilight. *But not in the past, Nightmare. Come on Princess, I knew you would have a plan. Tell me what to do. Tell me how to save you!*

Celestia only managed to scratch out a few lines before she succumbed to exhaustion. Then her neck sagged and her head lay down on the flagstones. She closed her eyes and went still.

BOTH PRINCESSES MUST ACT AS ONE.

Twilight stared at the message forever, as if looking at it hard enough would reveal its meaning. *That's it? Both princesses must act as one? But it's already too late for this!* A feeling of hopelessness swept over her. *All this was for nothing then. We've lost.*

She tamped it down angrily. *No! Celestia is never wrong about this kind of thing. If this was the message she left for us, then it is surely the path to victory. I have to talk to Luna about this. She'll know what it means.*

Twilight had barely finished ruminating on this when Celestia's eyes shot open and turned to look directly at her. The alicorn's lips peeled back in a bloody grin.

"Well, well, well," she said. "An interloper, taking a little peek back in time, yes? I hope you enjoyed the show, whoever you are, because it's the last thing you'll ever see." A rippling wave of white energy surged from the Nightmare's horn and a portion of Twilight's spell structure blew away like morning fog. It was a dispel hex – so powerful that it reached across the fabric of reality to strike at her. Space and time ground against each other like gears running in opposite directions and Twilight held onto the spell for dear life.

Impossible! thought Twilight. *I was perfect in my calculations! She should never have been able to sense me...* But this was Celestia she was dealing with. When it came to alicorns, nothing was a given

Twilight struggled to maintain the structure of the time spell, but a second white energy wave crushed her psychic framework to dust. She managed only a single, clipped scream as reality tore wide open and she went hurtling through the hole.

Twilight fell straight upwards for millions of miles, at a million miles per hour. Planets and stars whirled past, and then she was in an airless vacuum. Twilight grabbed at her throat as the breath in her lungs rushed out into the void. She began to suffocate.

The unicorn heard the splash of water and then she was looking up into a blinding light. Her blurry vision adjusted slowly, and now she could see the masked face of a doctor pony. The doctor held baby Twilight up and swept mucus from her newborn mouth with a cloth. Twilight inhaled her first sweet breath of Equestrian air.

"It's a filly!" said the doctor. "A healthy little unicorn!" He swatted her on the rump and infant Twilight started crying, loud and clear.

"Listen to her," said Twilight's mother, exhausted and covered in sweat. "She's going to be an opera singer when she grows up." Her dad laughed and cried at the same time and reached up to hold his new baby daughter.

Mom, Dad... thought Twilight.

But before Twilight's mind could really process any of this, time and space ground together again, and the world turned sideways. Twilight was back in magic kindergarten, scratching numbers into a piece of paper furiously as she tried to be the first in her class

to finish the test. “Done!” she shouted, and all the other foals groaned and rolled their eyes.

Time spun again, and she was yanked backwards into a room filled to brimming with ponies, streamers, balloons, and confetti. “Hi, I’m Pinkie Pie!” said a pink pony jumping in front of her. “And I threw this party just for you!”

Do I know this mare? thought Twilight. Nothing seemed real anymore. *She’s so familiar...*

Then the room was stretching out and warping, and Twilight with it and the buzzing in her ears became the roar of a waterfall. Just when she felt like she couldn’t take it anymore, there was a sensation like a giant rubber-band snapping and everything went black.

The next thing Twilight knew, she was waking up on the stone floor of Celestia’s bedchamber. She felt delirious and exhausted, but at least her body and mind were both back in the present. *Thank goodness for small favors.* She tried to get up, but something was wrong with her back legs. *I’m paralyzed,* she realized in horror. *It’s the temporal bends... I have the temporal bends! My nervous system is fried from extreme time dislocation.*

Twilight looked up and quailed in fear. “You,” she said.

“And you, Twilight Sparkle,” said Nightmare Sun, standing at the entrance to the bedchamber. “Not that I’m particularly surprised. I thought you might be part of this coup attempt from the very beginning. Spike and Twilight: the perfect team. You forgot one thing, though, my former apprentice. In *my* kingdom, good always wins, and evil always loses.”

Behind the alicorn stood the charcoal-gray intelligence agent. He did not look happy.

The last of the crime-scene ponies fled through the broken doorway, and then it was just Twilight and the enemy.

The purple unicorn swept her gaze across the ranks of soldiers. “Gentlecolts, the creature before you is not Celestia. She’s an impostor, the same creature that created Nightmare Moon. You know in your hearts she isn’t acting right. *You know it!*”

“Arrest her,” ordered the Nightmare calmly. The Royal Guard began to advance.

Twilight couldn't walk, couldn't even think clearly. It was a small miracle she was still alive. Twilight had no time, energy, or concentration for anything but the simplest of spells. So she did the first thing that came to mind.

With a snap of magic, a bright green watermelon appeared in midair about halfway between Twilight and the Royal Guards. It fell straight down to the flagstone, cracking its rind open and spattering red pulp across the floor. Then another melon appeared in the exact same place as the first, and it fell too, breaking open on the floor. And then a third appeared. And a fourth. The trickle became a flow, and a half-dozen watermelons tumbled from the ceiling all at once, bouncing and rolling in all directions.

"Oh, crap," said one of the guards.

The flood gates opened and twenty-thousand watermelons came pouring down from the ceiling like a great fruit tide. An avalanche of watermelons. A watermelon tsunami.

The guards were simply swept away. They hacked at the rolling sea of melons with their swords and axes, but for every melon they cut in half, a dozen more took its place. The flow was relentless, and the guards found themselves pressed against the stone walls, down onto the floor, or up against the rafters by the sheer weight of so much fruit. They backpedaled into the washroom and hallway, only to find that the river of green melons had followed them. There was no escaping the relentless flood.

Teleport, Twilight! Come on, teleport! the purple unicorn thought frantically. She charged up the spell to take her away from this horror show, but the flow of watermelons pressed against her as well, and she found herself carried along with them. She had only moments before the entire bedchamber filled up with watermelons and pushed her right out of the castle and into oblivion. *Teleport, darn it!*

And then a heavy thrum of energy caused Twilight's head to jerk up in surprise. Right before her, even as thousands of watermelons continued to rain down, an archway of invisible force formed and parted the green ocean. Nightmare Sun walked through the space, her horn burning with sunlight. She did not look particularly impressed.

Invisible chains of telekinesis began wrapping themselves around Twilight's neck. In desperation, the unicorn dragged herself along the floor with her forehooves, trying to reach her saddlebag, even as the chains snapped taut and dragged her backwards towards her enemy. *Come on Twilight, do it!* With one final lunge, Twilight snagged her pack. She flung open the clasp as Nightmare Sun lifted her into the air, and six magic dampeners rolled out onto the floor.

The chains binding Twilight were gone in an instant, sucked into the powerful magic vacuum. Twilight collapsed back down to the hard stone floor and gasped for breath.

Nightmare Sun laughed condescendingly. “You’ve only neutered yourself, Twilight. You cannot cast spells either, now.”

Twilight placed her nose inside her pack for a second, emerging with a sparkling gold crown, which she flipped up onto her head. “That’s what *you* think,” she said. The crown’s purple, star-shaped gemstone flared so brightly that even the alicorn had to look away for a moment. Before the surge of power had a chance to disappear down into the orbs, Twilight’s horn burned with a searing light as she seized the energy for her teleportation spell.

The seconds before disappearance stretched out like minutes as the wormhole of the spell formed. In these precious few moments, Twilight watched in alarm as a wall of compressed magic formed behind Nightmare Sun, focusing and spiraling down around her, exploding with a thunderous roar. The white alicorn rocketed toward Twilight faster than a shot arrow, her face contorted in rage. In slow-motion, she grew closer and closer, aiming her alabaster horn straight for Twilight’s heart. The spell completed just as the stiletto-point of Celestia’s horn touched her chest.

Both ponies disappeared in a massive flash of purple energy.

The flow of watermelons stopped as if somepony had thrown the faucet closed. The last few tumbled down the fruit mountain and rolled across the flagstone, as the air crackled with static electricity. All around the room, bruised, battered, and sticky soldier ponies were crawling back onto their hooves.

The intelligence agent picked himself painfully off the floor for the second time today. “She could have warned me to step back,” he muttered. “But of course not. ‘There’s no time, sorry chap!’“ *If it’s even really the princess*, he added to himself. *My gut tells me that the apprentice was right... But whatever the case, it’s probably best just to play along for now.*

He pushed his way through the piles of fruit to the massive scorch-mark left behind by Twilight Sparkle’s escape. “You all certainly made a good show of it,” the agent commented to the guards.

“Why don’t ya shove off?” said one of them. “You saw what that unicorn did.”

“She made off with my magic dampeners, is what she did,” the agent said in a low and menacing tone.

“That’s it!” groaned another soldier, this one younger than the rest. “Game over, stud! They’ve already killed Luna, Celestia is next! She’s next! She’s probably already dead –” Several other soldiers moved to shut the kid up, but the agent spoke before they could get their hooves on him.

“They won’t kill her,” said the agent, removing his spectacles nimbly with a hoof and pulling out a handkerchief to clean them.

“How do you know that?” said the kid.

The agent replaced his spectacles, lit a cigarette and took a long, weary drag. “Because who’s going to raise the sun if she dies?”

The winds were changing. Storm clouds that had been headed out to the coast crept back in over the valley now, slowly blotting out the moon and stars. Rarity felt the rumble of far-away thunder growing ever closer, vibrating up through the wooden floor of the paddy-wagon as they creaked along. The Royal Guard procession was a column of torches bobbing in the night.

Pinkie Pie was still coming out of the hex that Shield Banner had used on her. She was sullen and uncooperative, practically catatonic, lying on the floor of the cage with her back to them. Rainbow Dash was sporting a split lip and a serious shiner, but the worst wound was to her pride.

“I still can’t believe he left us,” said the pegasus, pounding one cyan hoof into the other.

“I already told you,” Rarity said, “that I was the one who decided Luna’s horn was the highest priority. You can’t blame Spike, I asked him to leave us behind.”

“If he had just *helped me*,” said Dash, “instead of *running away like a little filly*, we could have gotten that horn and *all* escaped!”

“Rainbow, you know that’s not true,” said the white unicorn. “The fight was over, and we had lost. We would have been captured either way.”

“Well, I guess we’ll never find out now, will we?” said Rainbow Dash. “Since you made that decision for all of us. You want to be the leader, Miss Bossy? Then fine: I blame *you*, Rarity. Thank you so much for landing us in this cage, on the way to our executions. Hey, at least we’ll have the honor of being the first ponies put to death in a millennium. That’s something, right?”

Rarity gave Dash an icy look, and she held it for a long time. Finally, she said: “I am sorry you feel that way, Rainbow. I really am.” She lifted herself onto her hooves and made her way to the front of the cage. “Yoo-hoooo? Pardon me?” she called out to the closest guard.

He ignored her, glancing at the sky. A light rain had begun to fall and soon the road would be a river of mud.

“Yoo-hoo,” said Rarity again. “I need to talk to somepony, please. It’s about the Princess.”

The guard met her eye, then huffed and approached. “What is it?”

She leaned close. “Princess Luna is still alive.”

“Rarity!” shouted Rainbow Dash from the rear of the cage.

Rarity glanced over her shoulder as Dash leaped to her hooves. “Let me out please, I can tell you where to find her, where to find all of them. Twilight, Spike, and the other two, Fluttershy and Applejack. That’s their names. I can tell you everything you need to know. We were all going to meet up at the –”

“No!” Rainbow Dash cried and charged across the short space to slam into her. Both ponies hit the floor, Rarity’s chin bouncing against the wooden planks so hard she was lucky not to bite off her tongue. Her ears were ringing and she felt Dash’s weight pressing down on her. The guard raced to get the cage unlocked.

“What are you doing?!” Dash screamed at her.

“What I should have done to begin with!” Rarity screamed back. “I don’t want to be a traitor to the Princess anymore! All these things that Twilight and Spike told us were lies! You’re a fool to believe them, Rainbow Dash! *They* did that to the Princess! They tricked us and made us follow their story. The Nightmare is dead, don’t you see?”

“Horseradish!” Dash yelled. “That’s horseradish! Twilight and Spike are our best friends—wuhhhh...” Her sentence cut off abruptly as a brilliant bolt of orange unicorn magic sliced between the cage bars and clubbed her in the stomach. Dash keeled over and gasped for air, rolling in agony.

“There will be no fighting in my prisoner transport, thank you very much,” said Shield Banner, walking up. “Now what is going on here?”

“This unicorn says she wants to turn state’s evidence,” said the guard.

Shield Banner snorted. “Is that so?” He turned to Rarity. “You? You want to help us catch your friends?”

“Yes, sir, but they’re not my friends.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Please, sir,” said Rarity. “You saw what just happened. You saw what my so-called accomplices think of me. It’s the truth, I can tell you everything.”

“So? Tell me.”

“Luna is alive. They’re transporting her body in an apple wagon to a secret location. Twilight and Spike lied to me and forced me to do what they wanted. They sent us into the swamp to look for Luna’s broken horn, so that they could steal its magic and use it against Celestia.”

Shield Banner arched an eyebrow. “Go on.”

“I know where they will be, I know everything they said and did tonight. I’ll sign anything you want, testify to anything. Just, let me out of this cage, please. I’m afraid of what she’ll do when she wakes up. And if I was a bit more comfortable, I’m sure I could remember more details.” Her eyes wavered with tears as she gave Shield Banner her most trustworthy, most beleaguered, most vulnerable expression. She stopped short of the pouty lips, though. *Pouty lips would have been too much*, she thought to herself. *Good choice, Rarity.*

Shield Banner considered her as he marched along behind the wagon. Thunder rolled in the not-so-distant sky.

At last, the Guard Captain turned to his clerk. “We’re coming up on Acorn Outpost, why don’t you tell the stallions to graze and we’ll take a ten minute break. Let this unicorn out of the cage immediately.”

“Thank you!” said Rarity. “Oh, thank you, thank you for believing me.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” said Shield Banner. “If I find out you’re lying, I can promise you only the worst possible outcome.”

“That sounds more than fair,” said Rarity with relief. Dash stared up at her accusingly from the ground, her eyes teary from pain. Rarity looked away.

The guard opened the cage and escorted the beautiful unicorn to the ground. Her shackles stayed on.

• • •

“Y’all don’t understand, we’re trying to save her life!” said Applejack.

“It seems you could be doing a better job of it,” said the Night Guard leader in low tones, his gold eyes staring from the darkness.

Applejack snorted. “Maybe we *could* help her if y’all would just get out of our way and stop actin’ like a bunch a’ bone-headed Nightmare Night rejects!”

White fangs flashed in the darkness, and one of the pegasi emitted a low growl.

“Excuse me,” said Fluttershy suddenly. “Hello?” Everypony turned to look at her, and she cowered a little. “Hi, um, I’m Fluttershy, and I’m the physician assistant who’s been in charge of Princess Luna’s care tonight. I’ve done everything I can to stabilize her, but she is very gravely injured. If we don’t get her into the medical wing *right now*, she *will* die. Arrest us afterward if you must, but please, we need your help.”

The dark pegasi regarded her with their strange eyes.

“Well?” said Applejack in frustration. “Do y’all want to be responsible for her death or what?”

“Applejack!” admonished Fluttershy softly. She faced the looming shadows. “Please, we all want the same thing here. Luna is running out of time.”

The Night Guard leader looked back over his shoulder. “Purple Heart, take a look for yourself.”

“Yeah, no problem,” said one of the soldiers with a no-nonsense Manehattanite accent. He gave a mighty flap of his membranous wings, gliding out of the darkness and over Fluttershy’s head, landing on the apple-cart without making a sound.

“Please, be very careful with her,” said Fluttershy.

“It’s okay,” said the dark pegasus, giving her the hint of a reassuring smile. “I’ve been a medic for a long, long time.” He gently inspected the princess’s various wounds, then placed his ear against Luna’s torso.

He doesn’t even need a stethoscope, thought Fluttershy.

After another tense minute, Purple Heart looked up. “Honestly,” he said, “I’m amazed she’s survived this long. Without her horn, she’s as mortal as these two.” He wagged his chin at Applejack and Fluttershy.

“Alright,” said the Night Guard leader. “Show us the way, then. And you, cowpony. Mind your manners.”

Applejack glowered back at him, but that was all.

They’d barely taken ten steps, however, when there was a brilliant burst of purple magic in the entrance hall. A powerful shock-wave smashed into them, picking the ponies up and scattering them like leaves on the wind. Fluttershy collided with the side of the apple-cart, squashing a wing painfully and cutting her cheek on the wooden side. Applejack went spinning off into the darkness as her lantern bounced along the ground and went out.

Fluttershy struggled to get her bearings as the dust settled. It was pitch-black and the pounding of her own heart was deafening. Magical light sputtered near the middle of the entrance hall, cutting through the dark with its strobing, purple glow. Fluttershy could make out the silhouette of a familiar unicorn, struggling to get up. *Twilight! You made it! You’re alive!*

But something was wrong. The unicorn was moving strangely, like her rear legs weren’t working. She dragged herself frantically along the floor. *She’s trying to get away from something*, Fluttershy realized. The pegasus moved her gaze thirty paces behind Twilight and her blood ran cold.

Nightmare Sun clambered to her hooves. She threw out her enormous white wings in fury. “Twilight Sparkle!” she roared. The sunlight poured from the mighty alicorn in torrents. Her horn was a brilliant, glowing lance. With a single leap, Nightmare Sun cleared the hundred paces from her to Twilight and slammed down right in the purple unicorn’s path, shattering the tiles.

“You’re quite the pony,” said Nightmare Sun. “It’s clear that I keep underestimating you. Let’s put an end to that vicious cycle right now.” She condescendingly knocked Twilight’s Element of Magic crown off with her hoof, sending the golden artifact clattering and skidding across the tiles. Invisible chains yanked Twilight into the air, and a ray of sunlight focused into a cutting beam that carved along Twilight’s shoulder. The unicorn let out a scream. Fluttershy caught a whiff of burning flesh. “Now, tell me where Spike is,” commanded the Nightmare. “Or you are in for a *very* great deal of suffering before I kill... you...?” She trailed off as she became aware of a galloping sound growing louder and louder.

Applejack leaped out of the darkness and smashed her full, muscled weight into the alicorn with a bone-crunching tackle. All three ponies went tumbling out across the tile floor, legs every which way, spinning and sliding. The cowpony recovered from the impact first, scrambling to her hooves and throwing herself onto the rising alicorn, bashing the Nightmare's head against the floor. The two grappled desperately, almost crushing Twilight in the process.

Without even realizing what she was doing, Fluttershy leaped into the air and flew at maximum speed towards the injured unicorn. Her rational mind might have protested this plan, but it wasn't making the decisions now. Maternal instinct was.

Fluttershy watched Applejack sink her teeth into the Nightmare's cheek, rending the flesh with a savage scream. The Nightmare roared in pain and bashed a hoof into the bandages on Applejack's neck, causing the cowpony to let go with a shout as dark red soaked through the gauze. The two combatants tore into each other, snarling and biting and striking with abandon, fur and blood flying in all directions. Somehow Applejack managed to keep her hat on through all of this.

Fluttershy landed right behind Twilight, threw her forelegs around the purple unicorn's chest, and pulled backwards with the strength of abject terror. Flapping her wings madly, she made slow progress. Twilight was small for a mare, but her rear end was dead weight. It took more than twenty heart-pounding seconds for Fluttershy to drag the wounded unicorn under the stairs.

Luna! she suddenly remembered, and turned toward the cart, but it was empty. Luna was gone. *The Night Guard took her... and left? Right when they were needed most?*

"Only a stupid earth pony would attack an alicorn with her bare hooves!" laughed the Nightmare, on top now and pinning the cowpony's forelegs to the floor. "There is a reason why your race has always been on the bottom of the pile. Let me demonstrate why you are the subject and I am the princess." Her horn charged up to deliver a killing blow.

"You ain't no princess a' mine!" shouted Applejack, and she reeled back and slammed her forehead against Nightmare Sun's muzzle with a loud crunch. The alicorn's grip slackened. She choked and gasped, blood pouring from her nose. Applejack took the chance to get her rear hooves up between their bodies and kicked as hard as she could, sending the Nightmare careening backwards across the science hall and smashing down into a glass display case.

Twilight, barely conscious, grabbed at Fluttershy's foreleg. "Dampeners..." she said. Her shoulder was a maze of angry red burn-lines.

"Shh, Twilight," said Fluttershy, examining the unicorn for additional injuries, "don't try to talk. Just lie still." She grabbed a packet of sulfa powder from her bag and prepared a bandage. Angel Bunny bounded over, carrying her stethoscope in his mouth, his tiny eyebrows furrowed in determination. "Thanks, Angel."

"Dampeners," said Twilight, a little stronger this time. "Fluttershy, you have to collect the magic dampeners... we teleported with them, but they scattered... tie them together... use them on... Nightmare..."

"What are you talking about?" She followed the unicorn's pointing hoof, and now she could see them. Small crystal orbs, which had apparently fallen out of thin air along with Twilight and the Nightmare. They had rolled everywhere, to all corners of the room.

"There are six," said Twilight. "Her magic is... weak now, but not for long..." And then she was unconscious again.

Be brave, Fluttershy ordered herself. Move fast, don't get seen; you can do this! But oh, Celestia, I'm not a brave pony. I'm just not.

• • •

"Have a seat anywhere," said Shield Banner, motioning around the dank garrison commander's office.

Rarity shuffled in, her typical grace hampered by the iron chains around her ankles. She looked around the grimy space, trying not to let her disdain show. This was no time for ladylike pleasantries – she had to seem supremely grateful, no matter what. She chose a spot on a dusty mat in front of the garrison commander's desk and sat down daintily. The predawn had grown freezing cold, and they were both wet and muddy from the rain.

"So," said Shield Banner, settling in behind the desk. "Tell me why you shouldn't hang with the rest of the traitors."

"Because I was coerced," said Rarity. "Twilight and I grew apart a long time ago, mainly due to her... ah... strange ambitions. It's been a relationship of convenience for years. I accompanied all of them tonight just to do some networking, you know, for my business. But as you can see, Twilight and Spike had other ideas."

Shield Banner frowned. “You mean to tell me they’ve been planning this for years, and you never came to us about it?”

“It was just talk! Twilight was dissatisfied with the way Canterlot had been run since Luna had returned. She said that a democratic republic would make for a more responsive and fair government, and that only a revolution could bring about one of those.”

Shield Banner snorted. “A democracy? Maybe if she wanted the government to be deadlocked and ineffectual.”

“That’s what I said! But I never, ever, for one second thought it would come to this, or else I would have turned the traitor in years ago. I never thought she was serious. I ask you, who would? This is Equestria, not some dark adventure novella. Nothing like that has happened in centuries!”

“Indeed,” said Shield Banner. “Please continue.”

Rarity expounded further on the tale, feverishly recounting how Twilight and Spike had threatened her with torture or even death if she went to the authorities, how they forced her to use her magic to locate the horn. “And then she told me, ‘The guards will never believe you, so if we fail, you’ll go down for it just like us...’” Rarity broke off to sob into her hoof. Shield Banner sighed and handed her a tissue. “Thank you, thank you,” she said, sniffing. “Twilight told me, ‘Help us, and when I’m in charge, we’ll make you a hero. Otherwise, you’ll end up in a shallow grave, and maybe, just maybe, we’ll kill you first.’ Oh, it was horrible! Horrible!”

“Well,” rumbled Shield Banner. “You did the right thing, in the end.”

“I know,” sobbed Rarity. “I just wish I’d had the courage to do it sooner.”

“That would have been preferable, yes,” said Shield Banner. “Still, the fact that Luna is alive is a stroke of luck I wasn’t expecting. It just begs the question of: why?” He looked up at Rarity. “Why would the conspirators want to *fake* Luna’s death?”

So many competing lies... “I have no idea,” she said.

“Alright,” said Shield Banner, “let’s back up. The conspirators are Pinkamena Diane Pie, Rainbow Dash, Twilight Sparkle, Spike the Dragon... am I missing anypony?”

“Two, actually. Applejack and Fluttershy were tasked with moving the princess.”

Shield Banner leaned forward. “Did you just say Fluttershy?”

“Yes.”

“Yellow pegasus? Pink mane?”

“That’s the one, yes.”

Shield Banner’s face grew very tight. He sat back slowly. “Fluttershy,” he muttered to himself, grinding his teeth. His eyes burned with sudden, intense fury. “Well,” he said in a dark tone, “how about that. She kept me away from the castle with the oldest trick in the book...”

“Did I say something wrong?” asked Rarity, genuinely frightened by this unexpected reaction.

Shield Banner cleared his throat, and his face became inscrutable once again. “No, in fact it all makes sense now. It makes too much sense.” He was quiet for a moment. Then he asked: “Where is the meetup point?”

“Appleloosa,” said Rarity. “They’re taking the princess to Appleloosa.”

“Well, they won’t get far,” said Shield Banner. He stood up suddenly. Rarity shrunk back, but the Guard Captain was only heading over to the door. He called for his clerk, and when the young stallion ran up, Shield Banner whispered orders to him.

Meanwhile, Rarity’s telekinetic threads swept into Shield Banner’s saddlebag and seized the tiny brass key that she had detected with her treasure sense. The inhibitor ring around Rarity’s horn was supposed to prevent this sort of thing, of course, but the seamstress didn’t find it too hard to work around. She spent her days threading needles, after all.

Make a fool of me, will you, she thought as she lifted the key from the pack and sent it darting through the air toward her. Lock me up in chains and throw me into that disgusting wagon and make me sit on this dirty floor will you... She seethed with anger. Beat up Rainbow, torture Pinkie Pie, threaten us all with execution... She tucked the key into her hair, right behind her ear. Just you wait, you boor, you pig. It is on, now.

“Water?” said Shield Banner coming back.

“Thank you,” she said with relief and appreciation, accepting the waterskin from the Guard Captain. “You are truly a gentlecolt among stallions. But I fear what will happen if Twilight finds out I turned on her... She’ll want to kill me... or worse...”

“You’ve got nothing to worry about now,” said Shield Banner. “This thing keeps getting weirder and weirder, but we’ll unravel it soon enough. And when we do, those responsible will be punished so severely that nopony will ever try this again.”

Rarity started to cry with relief. “Thank goodness we have ponies like you to protect us.”

• • •

Nightmare Sun screamed in fury as she blasted her way out from underneath the massive pile of glass. She flapped her enormous white wings and rose into the air, broken shards falling from her like droplets of water. “Pathetic little earth pony, I recognize you now,” she snarled. “You wielded one of the Elements the night I returned from the moon, didn’t you?”

“I woulda thought you’d remember me sooner,” said Applejack from her hiding place behind a stone pillar, “considering how badly we beat the stuffin’ outta you.”

“Sorry, but all you meat-bags look the same to me,” spat the Nightmare. Liquid fire roared in helices along the alicorn’s skin. The light from her horn was blinding. She lifted a hoof to her cheek and pressed the torn flesh back together. After a second, it was like the wound had never existed. “What a shame, really, that you won’t be around to watch me turn Equestria into my own personal stockyard. It’s going to be just fantastic, just marvelous. But I guess some ponies are more trouble than they’re worth.”

A tiny spot of flame appeared at the alabaster tip of her horn, growing and burning hotter and hotter. It doubled in size, tripling, again and again until a molten boulder of magma roiled in space above the alicorn. With a powerful crack of magic, Nightmare Sun sent the lava ball spinning directly at the cowpony.

Applejack scrambled to her hooves, diving out of the way as the massive fireball melted through stone like butter. The cowpony leaped up onto a marble planter, then flung herself at a chandelier, swinging on the light-fixture as the lava sphere roared beneath her. *Daring Do, eat your heart out!*

But the boiling boulder swerved upwards to chase her. Nightmare Sun was controlling it with her monstrous telekinesis. The magma plowed through the floor directly below

Applejack, sending the cowpony tumbling head over hooves into a pile of stacked-up chairs and desks.

Applejack squeezed out from under the furniture and tried to make a run for it, but the lava orb had split into three smaller spheres now, and began to circle around her, their orbits moving to cut off any route of escape. She feinted left and right, but the lava just continued to circle in, closer and closer. Smoke began rising from the edge of her cowpony hat. She smelled burnt hair. The air was so hot it was agony to breathe.

Shoot, she thought, casting about for an escape that just wasn't there. *I guess... I guess this is it. Well, I gave it my all, didn't I?*

Apple Bloom and Big Mac. The harvest was going to be tough without her help, but those two were Apples to the core. They'd make it. *Sorry I couldn't stick around longer to grow old with you, guys. I have to go see Ma and Pa now.*

The heat grew so intense that Applejack swore she could feel the exact moment she began to cook in her skin.

Shield Banner watched the chariot descend from the heavy, rain-soaked sky. Its occupant was long overdue to meet them here at the outpost, and if there was one thing the Guard Captain hated, it was waiting around. At last, the chariot touched down and Shield Banner spotted a silhouette dismounting the vehicle. It was the intelligence agent, owl-spectacles glaring in the torchlight.

“You’re late,” said Shield Banner as the agent walked up. “That’s not like you.”

“Yes, sorry about that,” said the agent. “Things have been a little topsy-turvy at the castle since you left. Secret time-traveling infiltrations and god-tier watermelon-floods and so forth. I barely had time to make the tracking rune you needed.” He patted his saddlebag.

“It sounds like we’re having comparably bad nights,” said Shield Banner.

“Oh, I didn’t even tell you the best part: Celestia has been kidnapped.”

“Yes,” said Shield Banner with a black note. “I heard. Spitfire relayed the news, although she lacked details. Maybe you’d better start at the beginning.”

The agent gave Shield Banner a brief rundown of the incident at Canterlot. “Then, Celestia blasted straight at the Apprentice, just as Miss Sparkle was teleporting. The Princess was caught in the event horizon and pulled through herself. That’s the last we’ve seen of them. We’ve got the Royal Diviners locating Celestia now, though. It shouldn’t be long.”

“I may have a head-start on that, actually,” said Shield Banner. “I just dispatched several teams to Appleloosa. Depending on what they find, I can be on a train there myself within the hour.”

“Appleloosa?” said the agent. “Where’d you get that?”

“It came from an informant we picked up,” said Shield Banner. “One of the conspirators, in fact. She told me Luna might still be alive.”

The agent looked at him. “I suppose I don’t have to tell you to take whatever she says with a lick of salt...”

“Of course,” Shield Banner assured him. “I’ve already set rather extensive precautions, and once I put the tracking rune on her, she might as well belong to us. If she’s lying to

me, or if she tries to escape... Well, she'll wish she hadn't. But for now, she's the best we've got."

"Which pony was it? Rarity?"

Shield Banner looked at him strangely. "Yes."

"However did I guess," said the agent.

"Not partial to seamstresses, are we?"

"Seamstresses I'm fine with," said the agent. "It's the skilled liars that concern me. You ought to see her Clearance-K file –"

"Oh, you and your files," scoffed Shield Banner.

"– which lists charm and manipulation very prominently among Rarity's skill set. Also on the list: disguise, protocol, languages, sleight-of-hoof, acting, appraisal, fine-motor telekinesis, and treasure sense. Would you like me to go on?"

Shield Banner reconsidered him. "Well, she's a charmer alright." He stroked his chin with a hoof. "Maybe a manipulator. I don't know, she seemed legitimate enough, but my instincts have already been wrong once tonight. I'd hate to think I let a double agent slip by, right under my nose."

The two ponies looked at each other for a moment.

"We'd probably better go check on her," said the agent.

"You know, I was just about to say the same thing."

They turned to trot back toward the garrison buildings. After a moment, they quickened to a gallop. Cold rain fell across them in sheets.

• • •

Dash was trying to pick the lock on her shackles with a wet twig, which was turning out to be even less effective than she'd expected, and she hadn't expected much.

A harsh whisper suddenly came from just outside the cage bars. "Rainbow Dash! Psst! Rainbow!"

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” said Dash. “Come back to gloat, Rarity? You two-faced, turncoat, rain-soaked horse-apple!”

“Shh!” said Rarity, and she tossed something through the bars. It landed in the straw at Dash’s hooves. A tiny brass key.

The pegasus looked over to see Rarity standing in the shadows behind the cart, wearing a Royal Guard’s hooded cloak – probably as much to shield her hair from the rain as to disguise herself.

“What are you doing here?” Dash asked, not sure whether or not to pick up the key. “Didn’t you just *betray* us, like, *half an hour* ago?”

“Goodness, Rainbow,” said Rarity. “I don’t know whether to be flattered for my acting abilities, or offended for my integrity! How could you really believe I would turn my back on all of you?”

Dash sighed. “After the night we’ve had, I’m willing to believe anything is possible.”

“Well,” said Rarity, “that was a pretty weak apology, but I guess you’re forgiven. Your little performance helped me sell it to the Captain, after all. Although I’m sending you the bill if I chipped a veneer.”

“What’s going on over there!?” shouted a red earth pony guard from a nearby doorway. Rarity and Dash froze, holding their breath. “If those prisoners are getting too chatty,” the guard called over to Rarity, “feel free to rough ‘em up a little.”

“Uh, yes sir!” said Rarity in a gravelly baritone, throwing him a salute.

The guard nodded and turned back to his conversation.

“I can’t believe that worked,” Rarity said with a sigh of relief.

“Well, he’s a little distracted,” replied Dash. The red pony guard was talking up a pretty squire-mare with a shapely rump. Despite the storm, despite the crisis, he was still trying to get lucky. *Can’t really blame him if the world’s about to end...* thought Dash with a snort. “Pinkie,” she whispered, picking up the key. “C’mon, help me get these shackles off.”

The pink earth pony didn’t even look over her shoulder. “Go away,” she said.

Rain fell harder across the camp, moving from cold to freezing. Dash and Rarity exchanged a look.

“Pinkie Pie,” said Dash, “you *have* to get your marbles together. If we don’t break out of here, they’re going to *kill us*, do you understand?”

“He made me see all of it,” she said, “at the same time.” A hot tear ran down her muzzle.

“There, there,” said Rarity, putting a hoof through the bars to rest on Pinkie’s shoulder. “The past is gone, dear. Those things he made you see are just pictures now. You aren’t that pony anymore. You’re strong now.”

“The Pinkie I know is a hero,” said Dash. “She’s unstoppable. And she’s my *best friend*. You have to get up, Pinkie Pie. You can’t let the Nightmare win. You can’t!”

Pinkie was silent for a long time. Then, at last, she sniffed and sat up, wiping her eyes. “I was a sad pony, once,” she said. “Sometimes, I still am.”

“We all are, sweetie,” Rarity soothed.

“So, are you back in it with us?” said Dash.

Pinkie Pie looked up. Her hair was slowly starting to crinkle up into its usual mass of curls. “Okie-dokie-lokie,” she said.

“Thank you, Pinkie,” said Rarity with a sigh of relief. “Now you two get your shackles off, while I take care of the cage lock.”

“Alright.”

• • •

Rarity crept around to the front of the wagon, pulling out a set of pins from her hair. She had barely begun to work on the lock, however, when they all heard the splashes of heavy hoof-falls marching up through the camp in their direction.

“Twitcha-twitch!” hissed Pinkie, but it was too late.

Rarity and Shield Banner saw each other at exactly the same time. The white unicorn barely had one chance to do something. Anything.

“Pinkie!” she cried, rapping her hoof on the locked cage door. “Knock knock!”

“Ooh, ooh,” said Pinkie, banging the door open and poking her head out. “Who’s there?”

“Lettuce,” said Dash from behind her, shackles dropping to the floor. “Lettuce out of this stinking mudpit!”

“Prison break!” shouted Shield Banner. “Grab them!” His horn flared and a spray of orange bolas whirled from its tip, streaking between the bars of the cage directly at Dash. But the captain’s attack hit nothing but a luminous rainbow contrail.

Dash was away like a rocket, snatching up a surprised Pinkie Pie and Rarity, and plowing through the cluster of guards like bowling pins. She reared up and increased her angle of ascent, flapping up over the outpost’s battlements and ramparts, up into the stormy sky. *If I can gain enough altitude, she thought, as the rain pelted her face, I can turn it into speed and get a Sonic Rainboom going. No pony in the world is going to catch me then.*

Something was wrong with her flight trim, though. Dash’s pegasus aura – which was malleable and could stretch around things like chariots and carriages – was deforming backwards at a weird angle. Of course, she *was* carrying a full-sized mare under each foreleg and that always wreaked havoc with her aura, but it felt like more than that...

She looked over her shoulder, and in the stark relief of the lightning, saw that somepony had thrown a loop of wire around her ankle and was hanging onto the line now for dear life. He was a charcoal-gray earth pony with a shock of white hair and owl-spectacles. Despite the storm and the freezing rain, he began crawling up the line using his teeth and hooves.

Horse-apples! she thought, freaking out. *I’ve got to brush him off before he gets to me!* Dash dipped back down towards the treeline – a risky move under any circumstance, but absolutely insane with almost zero visibility and a crosswind like this. *Well, that sounds like my style, doesn’t it?* she thought to herself.

“I just want to talk!” shouted the earth pony into the roar of the wind, but Rainbow Dash knew better than to believe him. *Does he think I’m an idiot!?*

“What’s happening?” shouted Rarity, sounding terrified.

“We’ve got a stowaway!” Dash shouted. “But not for long!”

“Wheeee!” said Pinkie Pie as they descended into the forest canopy.

The agent crashed through the ocean of foliage, spitting out leaves by the mouthful. A massive tree trunk rushed up at him, and he yanked the line hard, swinging wide, just barely clearing the obstacle. Lightning flashed again, and Dash could see he had lost his spectacles. “Oh, you’ve done it now, missy!” he shouted, and continued to climb, looking pissed-off.

“Let’s see how you like this!” yelled Dash, pulling up hard, until her flight-vector was almost completely vertical. The rain tore at them like icy knives. She struggled to go faster and faster, higher and higher, into the great thunderheads over the valley. Equestria fell away into the yawning darkness below, and now the sheet-lightning echoing through the clouds seemed close enough to touch.

The agent grabbed the last section of line in his teeth, and threw his foreleg out to grab Dash’s rear hoof. She kicked backwards with her other leg, but the agent swept the blow aside, climbing further up her body. “I said pull over!” he growled, grabbing for her wings.

They entered the absolute darkness of the stormclouds. Dash spun as fast as she dared without losing hold of Pinkie and Rarity. She felt the agent’s hooves slip on her rain-drenched feathers, then he lost his grip around her waist and slid back towards the trailing line again.

Blue static electricity crackled across the ponies’ skin and manes as they soared up and up through the black mist. Dash was getting exhausted – the weight of four ponies was just too much to handle unless she was Rainbooming – but there was just a little further to go...

They punched through the top layer of clouds and soared up into the clear night sky. Surrounding them were billowing, white mountains under a vast sea of stars, and the clearest, brightest moon that Dash had ever seen.

And suddenly, her pegasus aura winked out. They stalled, inertia still taking them upwards, but at a quickly receding pace. *Omigosh, omigosh, omigosh!* she panicked. *My flight field! Concentrate! Kick-start that sucker!* But over and over again, the energy that should have surrounded them was drained away by something else. Dash tried to sense the direction. *Something close by. Some sort of magic-drainy-thingy.* Their upward inertia ran out and for one terrible second, they were weightless.

It's Rarity, though Dash suddenly, she's absorbing the energy... In that same moment, an orange glow burned from Rarity's eyes. The unicorn's cry of alarm froze into ice crystals in the thin air. In a flash of orange light, she was gone.

Then they were falling. Down, down, away from the moon and sky, into roiling cotton-ball mountains, down through the thick and terrible storm clouds. Back into the rain, the hurricane wind, the darkness.

Dash felt something slap against her cutie mark, and she looked back to see a piece of paper peeling away from her flank. A strange, glowing rune flared with light and sank painlessly into her flesh. The agent gave her a little salute, then flung himself off of her back and into space, falling through the storm, pointing his body downwards at an angle. He was aiming for the lake.

What the hay was that thing he stuck on me? she thought with panic. *Some sort of homing beacon? A poison? A hex? Some kind of bug egg that's going to grow in my skin now? What do I do?* She looked down at Pinkie Pie, still tucked under her foreleg. Ice had coated Pinkie's hair, and the poor earth pony was shivering madly from cold. *She's not used to the altitude like a pegasus,* thought Dash. That made up her mind. She had to save Pinkie Pie.

Dash nosed into a dive, wings flush against her back. Her pegasus aura was returning, but too weak to slow their fall. She focused the paltry field into a point in front of her, and a cone of water vapor flared along her flight path. It grew steeper and steeper as her speed approached the critical threshold. The ground was getting kind of close.

At last, a massive charge of magic detonated along the surface of Dash's flight aura, releasing a blinding array of chromatic shock-rings over the whole valley. She and Pinkie blasted forward into the night on a rainbow trail.

Still not fast enough, thought Dash as they tore through the sky. *Sorry Rarity...*

• • •

The Guard Captain lifted a hoof to shield his eyes from the blinding Sonic Rainboom. For several seconds, the valley lit up as if it was day.

Beside him, a gold pegasus in a blue flight-uniform paced back and forth, bouncing excitedly on her hooves. "Do you want us to pursue?" she asked. "I have Fleetfoot and Soarin' in a holding pattern, just give the word."

As if you could catch her now, thought Shield Banner as he watched the glowing shock-waves dissipate. “Not yet,” he said. “We don’t want to spook her. Better to let Rainbow Dash lead us back to the enemy and strike when we’re good and ready.”

“If you say so,” said Spitfire, “although I don’t like being benched like this.”

“Come now, Wing Leader,” he said. “I’ve not forgotten that Rainbow Dash saved your life, once.”

“So have you,” said Spitfire. “And I’d kick your rump upside-down if you ever turned on Equestria. Look, I admire Rainbow Dash’s flying ability, but her lack of discipline is the reason she’s not a Wonderbolt today. I think a mare like her is exactly the kind of pony who would get duped by a false cause.”

“I agree with you,” said Shield Banner. “And I believe in you. That’s why I’m letting your team stay in the game at all. But for now, I need you in a support role to avoid a conflict of interest. I hope this will not affect your performance.”

“No, sir. Of course not. Wonderbolts always fly true.”

He turned back to look into the driving rain. “Ah,” he said. “Here he is now.”

The agent falling out of the sky was nearly invisible against the backdrop of the storm – just a pinprick of black in a sea of rain and lightning. Then he hit the lake, and the massive geyser exploding from the surface of the water was a little hard to miss. Shield Banner watched the lake slosh and ripple like a giant bathtub. Minutes ticked by, and still the agent did not resurface.

“Sir,” said the gold pegasus, “shouldn’t we... uh... go help him?”

“Patience is a virtue, Spitfire.”

At last, they heard a splashing sound from a bed of cattails nearby. The agent pulled himself onto the beach and collapsed, coughing up water.

Shield Banner walked over. “Well? Did you get it done?”

“Fine thanks,” gasped the agent, turning over onto his back, “and you?”

“Stop wasting time and answer me.”

"I'm afraid not. She kicked me off before I was able to plant the tracker rune."

"Horseradish!" said Shield Banner, slamming a hoof down. He shouted into the storm. "*Horseradish!* It's just one thing after another tonight!"

"Yes, poor you," said the agent, crawling painfully back onto his hooves for the third time in as many hours. He was wringing out his tail when a flash of white light issued from his vest pocket. He poked a hoof in, pulling out a pair of owl-eyed spectacles. "Ah," he said to himself, "there you are." He put them on.

"Orders, sir?" asked Spitfire.

"Return to the outpost for now," said Shield Banner with a rumbling sigh. "Rotate the scouts and make sure your team is standing by for action. Then come meet me at the castle. I'm going to see if the Royal diviners are onto anything yet. And while I'm at it, I'll be interested to know if our 'informant' is finally ready to tell the *truth* this time. I think she is."

They all looked back at Rarity. The filthy white unicorn wore an iron bridle with a thick chain attached to Shield Banner's saddle. Orange magic still crackled along her coat from the powerful recall spell that Shield Banner had planted on her, back at the outpost. Rainbow Dash's flight aura had both triggered and powered the latent spellframe, and here was the result. Rarity looked drunk, woozy from all the hexes he had just put on her. Even still, there was fear in her eyes.

"Shouldn't she be turned over to Canterlot Intelligence?" said the agent.

"Not this time," said Shield Banner. "I think I'm going to exercise my privilege as Guard Captain and question her again myself. Let's just say she and I have a few things to work out."

"Seriously," said the agent, "you shouldn't waste your time on a single prisoner, Captain. You've got other ponies to do that for –"

"This unicorn thought she was more clever than us," interrupted Shield Banner. "I'm eager to show her that she was wrong. And she won't be doing any more escaping either, now that I've got her hexed to the gills." He walked over and grabbed Rarity by the collar, yanking her off the ground as she cried out in pain. He brought her level with his face, looking right into her eyes. "You have good reason to be scared, traitor. I promised you the worst possible outcome, and now you're going to find out what that is." He threw her back down into the mud. Then he turned to the agent. "Do you need a lift to the castle?"

“I’ve got a few errands to run first,” the agent said. “But I’ll be in touch. Try not to ‘over-interrogate’ the prisoner.”

“Trust me, she’ll know the date and time of her death long before it happens,” the Guard Captain said, and saluted. “You have your orders, Spitfire. See you in Canterlot.” He disappeared with Rarity in a flash of orange magic.

“Well, *he* was in a great mood,” said Spitfire.

“The Captain takes everything very personally,” said the agent. “Make sure he doesn’t hurt Rarity too much, okay? I have a feeling that nothing here is what it seems to be.”

Spitfire considered him. “I’m not sure what I can do, but I’ll try to stall him as long as possible.”

“Thank you, Spitfire.”

Once she was gone, the agent reached into his saddlebag and pulled out a yellowed map of Equestria. His tracking rune was transmitting nicely from where he’d stuck it on Dash’s cutie mark. Shield Banner had been right about one thing at least: the rune would lead straight to Twilight and the rest of them, not to mention one or both Princesses.

The agent put the map away and peered into the distance to the southwest. It was time to see if his hunch was correct.

The cowpony had actually given her a surprising amount of trouble.

I hate pain, the Nightmare seethed, I hate injury, and I hate this meat body!

Celestia was a demigoddess for sure, but even alicorns perspired, digested, excreted. *I inhabit the most perfect creature ever made, and still have fluids coming out of every orifice.* It was enough to make her sick to her stomach, which just reminded her that she even had a stomach in the first place.

In fact, the only thing that made her feel even slightly better was how well everything was going for her overall. As soon as she reduced this annoying insect to another stain on the floor, she would be close to total victory.

“Time to die,” whispered Nightmare Sun, and she brought the lava spheres together with a star-burst splash of molten rock, crushing the earth pony to cinders.

Now where is that purple unicorn? she thought, scanning the room with her telekinetic feelers. *Ah, there you are.* A small pony body, under the staircase. Prone, unmoving, Twilight had apparently succumbed to shock. It would be a trifle to kill her now.

Don't forget the other one, Nightmare reminded herself. She swept her feelers around the hall, into each window and nook, but the yellow pegasus was nowhere to be found. *Those blasted magic dampeners,* the Nightmare remembered suddenly. *What if she gathers them up somehow? Those things are far too powerful to leave to chance.* But locating the dampeners themselves would prove difficult, since they were invisible to her sensors. Better just to find the pegasus and pull her little wings off.

A sputtering of purple light emitted suddenly from beneath the staircase, and Twilight teleported ten feet. Her horn produced another raw set of sparks, but she only managed to warp six feet this time.

That coward pegasus has probably already run away, thought Nightmare. *And I've waited too long for this.*

“Remarkable,” said the alicorn, walking over to Twilight and shaking her head. “Barely enough magic left to light a candle – barely conscious even – and here you are still trying to escape.”

“You know,” came a voice from behind the Nightmare, “she never *did* quit a thing in her life.”

The alicorn turned around in surprise, catching a glimpse of Spike’s reptilian eyes flaring green, toothy dragon’s-maw opening, the bright flash of atomic fire. Then Nightmare Sun was engulfed in a brilliant emerald jet of super-heated plasma. It seared her flesh off, disintegrating skin and muscle in seconds, boiling her alive. She screamed into the inferno, rearing and sliding backwards on two hooves, throwing her wings out to maintain balance. The jet of flame roared brighter and brighter, and the Nightmare felt her bones cracking and splitting in the cosmic heat, felt her face vaporize.

At last, the energy stream petered out. Nightmare Sun skidded to a halt, smoke billowing from her body. She landed back down onto her front hooves and snorted. Already, the alicorn’s muscles were knitting back together, organs reforming, reshaping, feathers erupting from newly-grown skin. Within ten seconds, she was completely unharmed.

But what an attack! she thought. “I guess you do have hellfire after all.”

“Oh, that was just my warning shot.”

A piercing roar accompanied Spike’s steel-hard claws as he leaped for her. The Nightmare danced aside, and Spike’s flurry of attacks slid along the surface of an invisible forcefield. He carved huge furrows in the floor, tiles shattering, but he couldn’t connect with the alicorn. Spike changed tactics, spinning around the other way with a tail sweep of such force that it created a visible pneumatic shock-wave. But the blast simply reflected off of her shield and back onto him, sending him skidding away. He circled her for a second, then back-flipped thirty feet off the ground, landing upside-down against the side of a column, claws digging into the stone.

Oh, here comes the high attack now, the Nightmare thought with some amusement. She had known many dragons in her time, and Spike fought with attributes of both dragon and pony styles. He was such a fascinating specimen that she almost regretted having to kill him.

The dragon took a deep breath and launched another compressed beam of radioactive fire at her. This time the Nightmare was ready. She dodged backwards, paused, then dodged again, using her shield to deflect whatever portion of the plasma fire still managed to find her. The stone underneath her hooves boiled and cracked, but she dodged over and over with agile grace and alighted on an undamaged piece of floor each

time. Finally, the searing jet burned itself out and Spike nearly collapsed from exhaustion.

“My turn,” said the Nightmare. She formed her telekinesis into a huge invisible hammer, and brought it crashing down on Spike. The dragon was caught in mid-leap and smashed down into the tiles like a wall had fallen on him. He pushed himself up to standing again, bits of tile and mortar crumbling from his furious reptilian visage, and charged forward. The Nightmare raised the hammer again, aiming at Twilight Sparkle this time.

“No!” shouted Spike, changing directions, running for his unicorn sister. He knew he would never get there in time.

But Nightmare’s attack was only a feint. With four distinct whipping noises, invisible chains that had been sneaking up on the dragon suddenly shot forward like cobras, wrapping around Spike’s neck and hauling him backwards, flailing into the air. She constricted her magic around his vulnerable throat. Try as he may, he couldn’t get his claws beneath the chains. Tighter and tighter she pulled, breaking the scales around his neck until he bled through them. She could feel his diamond-hard vertebrae buckling, the cartilage of his throat a hair’s breadth away from crunching like celery.

The Nightmare held him like that for about twenty seconds, until his eyes were quite glassy and he had stopped kicking. Then she released the pressure, and Spike collapsed down to the floor, clutching his neck with both claws and taking desperate, wheezing breaths.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” she said. “I might have let you run, if you’d been wise enough to do so. It’s really too bad you got caught up in all of this in the first place. This is all Luna’s baggage you’re carrying tonight. I usually have no beef with dragons.”

“You don’t say,” croaked Spike.

“I do. You are truly awesome creatures – savage and pure, like myself. Even you Spike, and you’re just a pup.”

“Thanks, I guess. Since I’m so ‘savage and pure,’ do you mind if I ask you one last question?”

“Ask.”

Spike rubbed his throat painfully. “Why did you do this to yourself?”

The Nightmare looked at him.

“You have a pony soul,” said Spike. His third eyelids flicked over green dragon irises, slitted pupils dilating and contracting. “Inside. You... you’re a pony. Or you were at one time. So, why did you do this to yourself?”

The Nightmare lifted her eyebrows. “Eternal life, of course. What else is there? Without eternal life, all other goals are pointless. Nothing you do lasts forever.”

“But you’re a shadow of yourself,” said Spike. “A ghost. You’re not blessed with eternal life, you’re doomed to it.”

“I’ve seen things in my time, dragon, that would change your mind. Did you know that the soul is destroyed when the body dies? Think about it. There is *nothing* on the other side. Only the void, and nopony exists in the void.”

Spike shook his head. “No. That can’t be true.”

“I have seen it!” she said, slamming a hoof down like a meteor. “It is null. Zero. We do not rejoin loved ones, there is no heavenly paradise. All living things just wink out, forever. This,” she waved a hoof around them, “this is *all there is*. I was here before Celestia, before Discord, before the Three Tribes even, and I’m *never leaving*. Do you understand? *Never!*”

“That’s insane,” said Spike. “You’re insane.”

“Your opinion will matter very little after you’re dead,” said the Nightmare with a shrug. “Consider that your final lesson from dear, sweet Princess Celestia.” Her horn ignited like a firework, magic roaring from its length. “Now as I’ve said, I like you, Spike, so I’m going to kill you quickly. A blow to the head, a crushed skull, yes? Nopony can say I’m without mercy. Twilight, on the other hand...” Her voice became a low growl. “Twilight Sparkle has gone to great lengths to rub me the wrong way tonight. Plus, I owe her from before. Ohhh, yes I do. So for Twilight, I think, something a little more fun. Shall we say... drawing and quartering? I think that’s appropriate for treason.”

Twilight Sparkle jerked into the air like a marionette, all four legs pulling taut. Her joints locked outwards and began to stretch. “All around the mulberry bush,” the Nightmare singsonged, “the monkey chased the weasel...”

“Now!” screamed Spike.

Something darted behind Nightmare Sun, light and quick as a butterfly. A heavy sash, strung with six crystal orbs, fell straight down around the alicorn's neck, pulling tight like a noose.

Nightmare Sun screamed in rage, turning around and bucking out with a powerful back-hoof. Fluttershy tried to dodge, but caught a glancing blow across her shoulder, spinning backwards across the science hall and crashing into the *Saddlesaurus rex* skeleton. She slid to the ground as the massive structure collapsed on top of her in an avalanche of stone, steel, and dust.

It was too late for the Nightmare, however. The orbs were already doing their job: all outward expressions of her magic suddenly became sublimated, equalized, drained away. She yanked desperately at the pink sash, but it wouldn't break. *Is this... hair? The pegasus strung the orbs with her own mane?* Pony hair would never break, it could only be cut. She bared her teeth to bite through it, but even as she did, a sensation of intense cold assaulted her legs. She dropped clumsily to her knees.

She was wading in a pool of black, liquid smoke. It curled up from beneath the floor panels, surrounding her, clinging to her skin and leeching her body heat away. The invincible, immortal alicorn began to shiver. She tried to leap away, but the smoke grew solid like swamp mud and sucked her legs back into its depths. Flapping her wings madly did nothing as the orbs pulled her flight aura out of alignment and she nearly toppled over onto her side in the shifting morass. She grew weaker and weaker, colder and colder.

The liquid smoke coalesced before her into a demonic pegasus with golden eyes and bat-wings.

"Cinnamon Oatmeal," said the alicorn. "This isn't the end, I hope you know."

"It is for you, Nightmare," he said in voice like cold iron. Then his head snapped forward, his fangs sank into the alicorn's neck, and he drank deeply of her immortal lifeblood.

"See you soon," she whispered in his ear, and then everything went black.

• • •

Can't breathe. Can't see.

Oh goddess, oh goddess, Celestia, I'm buried alive.

Please help me... I don't want to die like this...

A loud crack, a splitting, a crumbling, a sliver of light slicing through the darkness. A hoof reaching out to her. Fluttershy grabbed onto it and crawled from the jaws of death.

“You are one lucky pegasus, lemme tell you,” said Purple Heart, helping her extricate herself from the *Saddlesaurus rex* skull. The monstrous head was all that had survived the collapse of the display intact. It had come down directly upon Fluttershy, mandibles open, ironically shielding her from the rest of the falling rubble.

“Nothing about *any* of this feels very lucky,” she said, dusting herself off.

The Night Guard medic leaned in to examine where the Nightmare had kicked Fluttershy. His eyes flashed gold, and she got the strangest sensation he was peering *into* her shoulder. “Looks like the joint is good to go,” he said. “I ain’t seen too many ponies take a buck like that and just get up like you did.”

“It’s sore, but I don’t think I’m injured,” said Fluttershy, rotating the joint and flapping the corresponding wing a little. “I kind of spun away when she hit me.”

“Well it was one hay of a brave move,” said Purple Heart. “You saved all of us.”

“I couldn’t let her hurt Twilight.”

Spike called over from across the hall: “Fluttershy, are you okay?”

“I think so,” she called back.

“She’s fine,” said Purple Heart. “Commander?”

The Night Guard leader considered the unconscious, white alicorn laying on the ground before him. “I’m unharmed. And the Nightmare is down and out, finally. Of course, we have a new problem now: what do we do with her?”

“I much prefer that problem to the one where we were all about to die,” said Spike.

“Oh my gosh, Applejack!” cried Fluttershy. She flapped her way up into the second floor landing. The lava orb had cooled into a smoldering mound of tar and ash. There was no possible way the cowpony had survived. Fluttershy covered her mouth with a hoof and her eyes filled with tears.

Purple Heart alighted on the scorched carpeting next her. “Hey, Commander,” he said over his shoulder, “I think it’s cooled off enough by now.”

“Get them out of there,” said the Night Guard leader.

“Yes, sir.”

Purple Heart strode over and started kicking the mounds of rock and ash away. After a second, Fluttershy joined him. They quickly reached the bottom of the debris pile.

Applejack and another Night Guard pegasus lay in the burned crater. They had both been petrified into black-diamond statues.

“Lookin’ good, Commander,” reported Purple Heart. “Thawing them out ASAP.” He yanked the stopper from a test tube and sprinkled the contents all over the two statues. The diamond cracked and split, eerie blue light shining through from the inside. The fairy-fire grew more and more intense, until a hot wind pushed Fluttershy back, and both she and Purple Heart had to jump away, spreading their wings to steady themselves.

The blue fire burned out after ten seconds. Then slowly, two pairs of eyes blinked themselves open.

“What... in... tarnation,” said Applejack weakly, turning over and shaking off the thick coating of ash.

“Applejack!” cried Fluttershy, and she bowled into the cowpony, holding her in an embrace as tears poured from her eyes. “I thought... I thought you were...!”

“You mean, I’m not?” said Applejack, patting herself down. “Well ain’t that the bees knees! I thought I was a crispy-fritter for sure.”

The other ash-covered pony clambered up his hooves and stretched his bat-wings out, flapping the dust from them. He was huge – close to Spike’s size. “You have me to thank for your continued living,” he said in a thick Stalliongrad accent. “You are lucky that Chyornyj Slon is fast as Chyornyj Slon is strong.” He offered her a hoof.

“Chee-yornee-what-now?” said Applejack, accepting and hauling herself up to standing.

“It means Black Elephant,” said the Night Guard Leader. “And the big lug is right. His timing had to be perfect, so as not to tip the Nightmare that her attack had failed.”

“Well, then thank you kindly,” said Applejack. “You even managed to save my hat, and you can’t possibly know how much *that* means to me.”

“Hopefully not as much as your life,” said the Black Elephant.

Fluttershy turned to the Night Guard leader. “What is *your* name? We can’t just call you Commander.”

“My name is Cinnamon Oatmeal,” he said. “And it is a pleasure to meet all of you, although it could definitely be under better circumstances. Spike, we already know, because of his work with our Princess Luna.”

“Boy, am I glad to see you guys,” said Spike.

Applejack turned to Cinnamon Oatmeal. “No offense intended, partner, but that’s not quite the name I expected.”

This got a smile out of him. “I did not always look like this, you know.”

“Twilight!” said Spike, suddenly.

They all turned to see Twilight Sparkle struggling to sit up. Spike rushed to help her, cradling the little unicorn in his arms. Everypony converged in the center of the hall. Fluttershy returned to patching up Twilight’s wounds, winding the gauze around the ugly burns on her shoulder. Purple Heart bent down to assist her.

“Aw, jeez,” said the Night Guard medic, eyes flashing gold. “Temporal bends.”

“You think that’s what it is?” said Fluttershy. Purple Heart nodded grimly.

“Luna? Where is Luna?” said Twilight, still in a daze, struggling even harder to sit up.

“Princess Luna is okay,” said the Night Guard leader. “We had our fourth member, Slim-to-None, secret her back into the medical facility during the fight.”

“So, she’s still in the building?” said Fluttershy. “I hope Slim-to-None has sufficient medical training.”

“Actually, we brought in a specialist from the castle. He’s agreed to keep everything hush-hush for now. Do you know Doctor Stables?”

“I do,” said Twilight, breathing a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

“How long until you can move your legs, Twi?” asked Applejack.

“That’s not how it works,” said Twilight. “The damage is...” She took a deep breath. “It’s probably permanent.”

“What... but that’s...!” Applejack snorted, loud and furious, and stormed away. The cowpony’s eyes blazed with anger as she strode over towards the unconscious Nightmare, looking like she wanted to pound the alicorn into pulp.

Cinnamon Oatmeal was beside her immediately, placing his hoof on hers. “No, Applejack. Celestia will feel it, too.”

“But the Nightmare told us that Celestia was dead,” said Applejack, yanking her hoof away.

Cinnamon Oatmeal shook his head, his golden eyes glimmering in the torchlight. “Celestia is alive. She is still in there, although the Nightmare has imprisoned her inside of her own mind. The Princess can still see and hear and feel everything, but she is helpless to do anything about it.”

“How horrible!” gasped Fluttershy.

“Actually,” said Spike, “that’s good news. It means that all we have to do is figure out how to get the Nightmare’s soul out of her, and we can save the Princess!”

“It should be possible,” said Cinnamon Oatmeal. “But it will not be easy. I was naive to think that the events of the first Nightmare Night could not repeat themselves again. In fact, we were extraordinarily lucky that these crystal orbs were here. I for one thought it was impossible to power-sink an alicorn.”

“It’s the synergy,” said Twilight. “They grow exponentially stronger in proximity to each other. In ancient times, it was illegal to have more than one of those things in any given room. Most of them were eventually destroyed by fearful unicorns. That there just might be every single magic dampener left in the entire world.”

“But wait,” said Fluttershy to Cinnamon Oatmeal, “I saw you turn into smoke when you were right next to the orbs. Wasn’t that magic?”

“*Negative* magic,” said Spike leaning forward. “Am I right?”

The Night Guard leader regarded him with a cool gaze. “Yes, you are correct: we use negative magic. You can imagine why that’s not public knowledge, though. We have enough PR headaches as it is.”

“I know just what you mean,” said Spike.

“Negative magic...” said Twilight. “So, you guys are... .?”

“Dead,” said Purple Heart. “Technically.”

“Fascinating,” said Twilight.

“Um,” asked Fluttershy, “I’m so glad to see everypony getting along finally, but how much time do you think we have before they find us here?”

“Not long,” said Cinnamon Oatmeal. “In case anypony missed it, we’ve made a hay of a racket. The Royal Guard ought to be knocking on the door any minute now.”

“I can’t wait,” said Spike.

An object suddenly smashed through one of the windows up near the roof of the science hall. It careened overhead as everypony ran out from under the falling glass. Spike threw his body over Twilight and the shards bounced off his scales harmlessly.

The flying object slammed against the wall, got caught up in a floor-to-ceiling tapestry, and tumbled all the way down to the tiles, completely wrapped up in cloth. The Night Guards immediately moved to surround the thrashing silhouette, looking poised to attack.

“Hey!” said Applejack, running forward. “Listen!”

“Wheee,” said a weak voice inside the huge tapestry. “Let’s do that again!”

The Night Guards leaned in and each took a corner of the fabric in their teeth. Then, in perfect sync with each other, they leaped back and tore the tapestry to pieces, freeing Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie from the endless yards of cloth.

Dash was up on her hooves in an instant, putting up her dukes and snorting steam from both nostrils. “More of you lunkheads?” she growled. “C’mon then, c’mon, let’s do this!”

“Whoah there, sugarcube,” said Applejack, cantering up and standing between Dash and the Night Guards. “These guys are on our side. Take it easy.” She had to bob and weave to keep Dash looking at her and not at the dark pegasi behind her. “Are you listenin’ to me?”

Dash collapsed back onto her haunches, weariness suddenly coming to full light. “Okay, good. Tired. Pinkie Pie,” she said, “needs help.”

“Hi, g-g-g-guys,” shivered Pinkie Pie, “long t-t-time no see.” She looked cheerful as ever, despite the fact that her lips were about as blue as her eyes.

“Go,” said Twilight to Spike. The dragon nodded, lumbered over and swept Pinkie up into his arms.

“Oh, my Celestia,” she breathed. “You’re so warm.”

“Spike,” said Dash.

The dragon looked up. “Dash, I –” he started.

“ – did what you had to do,” said Dash. She looked down at her hooves. “I get that now.”

Everypony was silent for a second. Then Twilight said: “Where is Rarity?”

“I tried to get us all out of there,” said Dash. “I did everything I could. But the Guard Captain zapped her away right out of my hooves. She’s probably at the castle now getting waterboarded or something.” She kicked a rock off into the darkness and slammed a hoof on the ground.

“And there was this crazy pony who was like zoom with a wire on her ankle!” said Pinkie. “He grabbed Dashie’s wings and was all ‘pull over!’ He said, ‘You made me lose my glasses, missy!’ Then Dashie was like spinnn, and he almost fell off, but then he went smack! With paper. Then he was like, ‘I’m outta here! Whoosh!’ and he feeeeeell into the lake! And what happened to Fluttershy’s hair? I kind of like it short like that, actually.”

“Wait a second, did you say a pony with glasses?” said Twilight. “Did he have a white mane?”

“He *did*,” said Pinkie. “Isn’t that silly?”

“Yes,” said Twilight in a dark tone. “Really silly. Dash, why don’t you come over here for a second.”

• • •

“The University?” said Shield Banner. His horn dimmed as he turned his magic off.

Rarity sat in a heap before him, staring at the stone floor. Her face was wet with tears.

“Yeah,” Spitfire said from over Shield Banner’s shoulder. “Private security notified Ponyville Police, who sent the information directly up the chain. Sir, it can’t be coincidence: a disturbance like this *has* to be our ponies.”

“Well,” said Shield Banner, taking a deep breath and wiping his hooves and forehead with a towel, “it’s nice to see that the national security apparatus is working for a change.” He looked over at the defeated Rarity. “Now that I know where to find the conspirators, I have something else special planned for this one.” Shield Banner whistled to the door guards, who swept in and picked the limp, white unicorn up, dragging her away.

“What did you do to her?” asked Spitfire, once they were gone.

“Nothing physical,” Shield Banner assured her. “Yet. I was just taking a little peek inside her mind.”

Spitfire paused for half a second, then said, “You could get in big trouble for that, sir.”

“If a law prevents us from rescuing Princess Celestia,” said Shield Banner, “then for the perseverance of the kingdom, it *must* be suspended.”

“Something tells me that Celestia would rather you not break her laws, even to save her life.”

“Don’t be so sure. She seemed... different tonight,” said Shield Banner. “It was as if she’d come around to a view of things more consistent with my own, to be honest. Luna’s apparent death was... a wake up call, perhaps.”

He turned back to Spitfire. “At any rate, whatever she may or may not disapprove of, it’s not her decision to make. We *have* to save her, at *any* cost. Do you understand? This isn’t about morality, or honor. The alicorns are everything. They *are* Equestria. They are all

that stand between us and a planet full of monsters that would love nothing better than to kill us and eat us and steal our land and our magic.”

Spitfire arched an eyebrow. “That’s maybe an extreme way of putting it, sir…”

“Do you think that griffons are afraid of ponies, Spitfire?” he asked. “Do you think dragons are? How about Discord, or all the various ‘Discords’ still out there? It is called the Princesses’ Peace for a reason. Without an alicorn, Equestria is low-hanging fruit. So, yes, Spitfire, I will stop at absolutely *nothing* to save her and Luna, too, if I can. Now do you have a problem with that?”

Spitfire looked at him, her eyes steady and calculating.

Shield Banner raised his eyebrows. “Well?”

“No, sir,” she said. “None at all.”

“I knew I could count on you, Wing Leader,” said Shield Banner. “Take your team south and scout the area around the University, but don’t engage. Wait for my guard column to arrive. We’ll take the place in force after that. Dismissed.”

Spitfire headed out to the balcony, into the wind and the rain, and leaped into the stormy sky. *I agree with him*, she thought as she flew. *Celestia help me, but I agree with him.*

• • •

“Well, I’ve gone over your cutie mark with a dozen different scans,” said Twilight Sparkle with a frown, “and it looks clear to me.”

Rainbow Dash shrugged. “Who knows, then. I’ll tell you right away if it starts glowing or something weird.”

“Yes,” said Twilight, still not convinced by her own readings. “Please do.”

“What now?” asked Applejack.

“We need to secure this building however we can,” said Twilight. “Once Luna wakes up, she can order the Royal Guard off our backs. Then we can go retrieve the Elements of Harmony and research on how to deal with the Nightmare. But our safety must be the priority right now because only we know the truth.”

“She’s right,” said Cinnamon Oatmeal, turning to his stallions. “We have to make this building impregnable before Shield Banner gets here.”

“Chyornyj Slon will die to protect Princesses,” said the Black Elephant. “But boarded-up windows are good first step.”

“Wait a second,” said Fluttershy. “Shield Banner? Did you say *Shield Banner!*?”

“Yes,” said Spike. “That’s the overzealous bonehead who has been hunting us down all night. Why?”

“Um,” said Fluttershy in a very, very small voice, “no reason.”

They set to work on the first line of defenses, stringing tripwires and building barricades. The Night Guards found a medical stretcher and bound the alicorn to it. Cinnamon Oatmeal had been exsanguinating her at regular intervals for a while now, which had worked to keep her more-or-less sedated, although now and then, the Nightmare would mumble in her sleep and give them all a tense moment.

“How long can you keep her like that?” asked Spike.

“Honestly,” said Cinnamon Oatmeal, “I don’t know.”

They worked in silence for a while. The Night Guard had brought a number of chemical and magical explosives with them, and rigging them up was a relatively easy if grim task after moving all the timber and rock.

“Look,” said Spike at last, “why doesn’t Cinnamon Oatmeal just ask Shield Banner to stand down?”

The Commander let out a clipped laugh. “You have any idea how loony that sounds?”

“In Soviet Equestria,” said Pinkie Pie, “Oatmeal asks if *you’re* crazy.”

“You have been to Stalliongrad?” asked the Black Elephant.

“Don’t mind her,” said Twilight to the rest of them. “She’s the ‘joy and the laughter.’”

Cinnamon nodded knowingly. “Well, the Guard Captain and I are on pretty poor terms, I’m afraid. Shield Banner is very traditional. He’s never been happy with the idea of the Night Guard. And since he considers us predisposed to evil already, it won’t be a stretch

to lump us in with the ‘traitors.’ I wouldn’t put it past him to try to arrest me just for having talked to you ponies.”

“Well, what choice do we have?” asked Spike with outspread claws. “We can’t prove to the Royal Guard that Celestia is possessed! Not before sunrise, anyway.”

“What happens at sunrise?” asked Twilight.

“I don’t know,” said Spike. “*Do you?*”

They all looked around at each other, then over at the white alicorn.

“No,” said Twilight. “But probably nothing good.”

“I will approach him if it comes down to it,” said Cinnamon Oatmeal, “but for now, I recommend that we wait for Luna. Stables is already in the procedure now. Once the horn is reattached, the Princess’s alicorn regeneration should handle the rest, although it will be months before she’s at full health again.”

“Okay,” said Fluttershy. “I’d like to explore the rest of the building to see if there’s anything we can use.”

“Good idea,” said Twilight. “Take Dash with you as backup. Applejack, you set up watch at the front entrance. Pinkie, stay here – we’ll need your help if the police decide to attack before the guard arrives.”

“Slon, go with Applejack,” said Cinnamon. “Purple Heart with Dash and Fluttershy. Don’t get lost, you guys.”

“You can count on Corporal Pinkie Pie, sir!” said Pinkie with a salute. She was wearing a green army helmet that had apparently appeared out of nowhere. “Oh, and I found this while we were cleaning up.” The pink earth pony pulled out a glimmering gold crown inset with a purple gem. The Element of Magic.

“Where is she keeping these items?” asked the Black Elephant.

“We’ve learned to stop asking questions like that,” said Spike.

“Pinkie, thank you!” exclaimed Twilight, accepting the artifact to inspect it. “Totally undamaged, of course. Although it’ll be another hour or two before its charge returns.” She took a deep breath and looked around at the group. “We have to hold out until Luna

is awake or it's going to be our word against the Nightmare's all over again. So, let's get to work everypony. We can't have much time left."

"It'll be enough," said Applejack confidently.

"You always say that," scoffed Dash.

Applejack tipped her hat. "And I haven't been wrong yet!"

Within an hour's time, the Elements of Harmony and the Night Guard had turned the science hall into a fortress. There was nothing to do after that but wait for the other horseshoe to drop. Lightning sang through the hostile sky and the wind howled. It felt like armageddon.

Maybe it is, thought Twilight, with the jaded tone of exhaustion. *And so many books left on my bucket list*. She looked over at Pinkie Pie, who was chattering away to the Night Guard Commander. *Pinkie*, she thought. *Now there's a pony who is no good at waiting*.

Pinkie was saying to Cinnamon Oatmeal: "So, you guys really drink blood, huh?"

Cinnamon glanced over at her. "Yes," he said.

"Pony blood?"

"Not if we can help it."

"Oh," said Pinkie, "Okay. That's good, I guess. Blood, though. Sounds kinda yucky. Does it taste different to night-ponies like you? Like, sweet or something?"

"No," Cinnamon said, staring out past the barricade. "It certainly does not."

"Sad!" declared Pinkie. "Hey, I know! I could give you some cooking tips! Wouldn't that be fun? Any recipe can be saved with a little sugar, I always say. Or a lot of sugar. *Especially* a lot of sugar. Rhubarb honey scones with caramelized blood glaze! Blood-and-carob smoothies with blood-soaked banana cupcakes –"

"Pinkie, stop bothering the Commander," said Twilight, turning a little green.

"We'll talk about this later," said Pinkie to Cinnamon in a stage whisper, and she pranced off.

Down in the courtyard below, the Ponyville Police were cordoning off a perimeter around the building. Twilight watched more and more lanterns join the line. The police hadn't made any threatening moves yet, but it was only a matter of time. *As soon as Shield Banner and the Guard get here*, Twilight thought, *then the fun really begins*.

Something large and silent moved up behind her and Twilight turned with a start. It was just Cinnamon. He'd crossed the length of the entire landing without making a sound.

“You guys sure are quiet,” said Twilight, heart pounding.

“Thanks, we practice every day after school,” said Cinnamon with a smile. “Sorry to startle you. How is the rest of your team doing?”

“I think we’re all just glad to be back together again. Well, except for Rarity I mean...”

“She’ll be okay,” said Cinnamon. “Shield Banner is many things, but he’s not a murderer.”

“I hope you’re right,” said Twilight. “In his mind, though, *we’re* the murderers. I doubt we can say exactly *what* he’ll do. I mean, wouldn’t *you* kill to save Luna?”

Cinnamon didn’t say anything.

An icy breeze pushed in through the window and the rain blew against their faces. Twilight thought she saw movement in the sky overhead, but when she looked again, there was nothing.

“Won’t be long now,” said Cinnamon.

Twilight turned to him. “What if we can’t do it?” she said. “What if we fail?”

He regarded her. “I don’t think that will happen.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“I’m not just being pointlessly optimistic, you know. Celestia’s plans reach further than you and I can imagine. If this is how it’s all gone down, I can’t help but believe that she somehow meant for us to be standing here, waiting for Shield Banner like this.”

“That’s a scary thought.”

Cinnamon Oatmeal shrugged. “That’s what it means to be a Princess, I suppose. She seems to have picked her champions well, though. The dragon is a remarkable young creature, and you are a remarkable unicorn. Her favorite, you know.”

“Her favorite?” said Twilight.

“Of all of the various Apprentices. You’re familiar with the history? All the dozens before you? Well, you are her favorite.”

“You mean *ever*?”

“Yes. Clearly, she considers you akin to a daughter.”

Twilight nodded slowly. “I don’t know what I’m going to do if I lose her.”

“Princess Luna has been something of a mother to us as well,” said Cinnamon. “Seeing her so gravely injured was... well, it was something I wasn’t prepared for.”

Twilight glanced over at him. “I’m sorry,” she said.

Cinnamon’s golden eyes glittered in the moonlight. Then he cleared his throat. “Yes, well, we are winning for now. We may be surrounded and we may have a lightly-sedated evil demigod in captivity, but we are winning. We just have to keep going.”

She huffed and gave him a half-smile. “I wish I shared your confidence, Commander, but thanks for trying to cheer me up. It almost worked.”

He smiled back, and she felt a sudden spark of attraction. His slightly demonic nature, his eyes, his fangs, they were all kind of... interesting, actually. *Okay, stop being weird, Twilight*, she admonished herself. *This is really, really not the time for that sort of thing. And also, he’s dead. And also...*

...and also I’m paralyzed now. But there had to be some way to heal her. Magic always had an answer, for a price.

“Psst, you guys!” Pinkie Pie said suddenly, running up behind them. “Look! Look! Somepony’s here!” She was pointing down to the ground floor of the entrance hall. Cinnamon helped Twilight move over by the railing.

A single pony was standing in the middle of all the destroyed tiles. At first, Twilight thought the pony was one of theirs, but then she caught the reflected light off a pair of round spectacles and a shock of white hair.

“It’s him,” she said through her teeth.

Even before she had finished the words, a rush of black smoke erupted out of the floor around the agent. When it had cleared, Chyornyj Slon’s massive form towered over the bespectacled earth pony.

“Shall I crush this bug for you, Commander?” Slon called.

“No,” said Cinnamon thoughtfully. “Hold steady. I don’t think he’s here to fight.” He peered down at the agent. “Are you?”

“Against these odds?” said the agent. “You poor ponies wouldn’t stand a chance. But alas, I come in peace.”

“And as Shield Banner’s tool, no doubt,” said Twilight.

“I represent myself only. Now are we going to parley, or what?”

Cinnamon considered him. Then he nodded. “Alright. Slon, take him into custody.”

The dark pegasus giant seemed disappointed that violence wasn’t necessary. He shackled the agent’s forehooves with magic cuffs as black as the void.

“Please try to pick these,” said Slon. “It will be funny.” He pushed the agent up the stairs.

Cinnamon turned back to Twilight to see a cold look in her eyes.

“Friend of yours?” she asked.

“Not exactly,” said Cinnamon. “But he’s covert-ops. The Night Guard are also technically covert-ops, so there a certain camaraderie there. If he’s shown himself to us like this, we should at least hear him out.”

“He was going to torture me,” she said.

“I’m sure it wasn’t personal.”

She just looked at him.

“Come on,” said Cinnamon, “he’s a clever one, but I don’t think he’s more clever than the two of us combined.”

“You should talk to him,” said Pinkie Pie, and they both looked at her. “I like his glasses.”

Slon reached the top of the stairs and shoved the agent forward onto the landing. The agent barely stumbled.

Twilight turned to Pinkie. “Go check on Applejack in the north wing, please. She’s all alone, and we need Slon to stay here.”

“You got it!” said Pinkie. She pranced toward the door, stopping beside the agent on her way out. “Nice dive!”

The bespectacled pony regarded her. “Thanks.”

“You’re pretty cool!” she said.

“I almost died,” said the agent.

“See? You know just what I’m talking about,” Pinkie said with a wink. “Look me up after this!”

The agent appeared a bit flustered for a moment. “Okay,” he said.

She left.

“That...” said the agent, “that was...”

“Pinkamena Diane Pie,” said Twilight. “The treasonous wench, yes.”

• • •

Three ponies walked among the gallery of bizarre sea creatures. Giant octopi, manta rays, parrotfish, all live specimens in climate-controlled tanks. For the moment, Fluttershy was keeping an eye out for the dangerous ones.

This aquarium is incredible, she thought. I’ve never seen anything like this before.

“How about this one? He looks really nasty.” Rainbow Dash leaned in to gaze at a horrible demon-eel through the glass. It was the size of a fire-hose.

“It’s not his fault he looks that way,” said Fluttershy, “it’s just his place on the food chain.” She walked a few steps ahead of Dash, stopping to check a clipboard against the contents of another tank. “These will do,” she said.

“Jellyfish?” said Purple Heart, coming over.

“Not just any jellyfish,” said Fluttershy. “Mare’s veils. Incredibly potent sting, but not lethal. Freshwater variety. And a huge stock. Look at the size of this tank!”

“Spike could use it as a jacuzzi,” said Dash.

Purple Heart laughed. “You should see the things Luna puts him through. Jellyfish would be tame.”

They walked to the next tank. “Leeches,” said Fluttershy. “Bred from specimens collected in Ponyville Swamp. That’s a bit disconcerting.”

“Rarity was right!” said Dash. “I can’t believe it.”

“At least they’re not Candiru,” said Purple Heart.

“Bwa-ha-ha!” said Rainbow Dash. “You can say that again!”

Fluttershy marked the clipboard at the last tank, where two freshwater sharks paced with eternal anticipation. “You boys as well, I think,” she said, and sighed bitterly. “Sorry, fellows. Well, that should do it, the medical wing isn’t very large, and I’d hate to endanger more animals than... than absolutely necessary, I guess. Now you’re sure you can transport all of these creatures, Purple Heart?”

“Yeah, although it’ll take everything I’ve got. I won’t be much use to you and the Night Guard after that, so I hope this plan of yours works. Uh, no offense.”

“None taken,” said Fluttershy. “And that makes two of us.”

“What was that?” said Dash suddenly. Her ears swiveled as she detected a faint sound, then she peered through the wooden slats to the outside. The other two looked over her shoulder. They could see a group of lanterns approaching the building.

“Finally,” said Purple Heart.

“Elements of Harmony!” boomed Shield Banner, using a variation on the Royal Canterlot voice. “We have you surrounded!”

Fluttershy felt queasy. Only a few hours ago, she’d been developing a genuine attraction to the stalwart stallion. They’d built a nascent friendship and appreciation for one another, not to mention started rounding the bases like it was the bottom of the ninth. But now the Nightmare was using him as a weapon against them. It was painful to see him fooled like this, but she was also angry to think of what he might have done to Rarity.

“We have complete control of the area and its skies,” continued Shield Banner. “There is no escape. There is only a choice of whether you want to make this any worse than it already is.”

“Blah, blah, blah,” said Purple Heart under his breath. “Freakin’ martinet if I ever met one.”

“Yeah, and he’s a jerk, too,” said Dash.

“You know, he’s not as bad as you all say,” said Fluttershy with a small frown. “I mean, he thinks he’s saving Equestria. That counts for something, right? His protectiveness of the Princesses is, um, touching... if rather extreme. And he’s very sensitive and romantic. He’s a poet musician, and he has a minor degree in dance –”

Purple Heart looked at her incredulously. “Well, as much as Renaissance Stud out there might foxtrot like nopony’s business, he’s never been much of a friend to us.”

“If that’s your attitude,” said Fluttershy, “then the Nightmare is *still* winning.”

“You will find that I am a reasonable stallion!” boomed Shield Banner from outside. “We can agree on terms for the Princess’s life. If you are serious about it, come to the vestibule within the hour.”

“See?” said Fluttershy. “And you all thought he was going to rush in, swords-swinging.”

“Maybe,” said Purple Heart slowly, looking back out the window. “I don’t know though. Something’s fishy about this.”

• • •

Thunder pealed, nearly drowning out the rush of rain on the command tent. Shield Banner clicked his bronze pocket-watch shut. All of the pieces were just about in place. His mentor Shining Armor had always taught him that diplomacy meant nothing without a hammer poised to drop.

A rush of air sounded behind him, and the shadows from tendrils of smoke played against the wall. *The final piece*, he thought. *But upon which side of the board did you land, Cinnamon Oatmeal? Mine, or theirs?* He used his magic to pour himself a drink, the crystal decanter clinking against his glass.

“Liquid courage at a time like this, Captain?” said Cinnamon. “If alcohol affected me anymore, I think I should like to join you.”

Shield Banner turned around with a smile. “It’s just lemon water, Commander. You know I don’t drink either. But the decanter was a gift from my late father, so I figure ‘why let it go to waste?’“

“You always were the sentimental sort,” remarked the dark pegasus.

“Said the pot to the kettle. But I digress. Tell me: where have you been?”

The dark pegasus stared at him with those weird, golden eyes of his. *Bloody bastards don’t even blink*, thought Shield Banner to himself. *Glass eyes, like a doll. So unnatural.* He wished the Night Guard pegasi weren’t so necessary to Equestria’s defense. If he ever had the chance to replace them, well, there’d be some reorganization then.

“Chasing down leads, Captain,” said Cinnamon. “We’ve been chasing down leads all night.”

“Really?” asked Shield Banner, sipping his drink. “And you didn’t think I’d want to know about it? You decided to fall off the map instead? I’ve grown used to your insubordination by now, but during a crisis like this, frankly I’m surprised at you. And then a most disturbing report: Spitfire told me that she actually saw you *helping* the Elements barricade the science hall. Now what am I to make of it?”

“That Spitfire has even better vision than I thought,” said Cinnamon. Shield Banner’s face grew very dark at that, and Cinnamon held up a hoof. “Sorry, sorry, I don’t mean to joke. It’s been one of those nights. Well, I guess I’ll get right to the point, then.” The Night Guard stepped aside to reveal a small, purple unicorn, reclining on the floor behind him. “I believe you’ve already met Twilight Sparkle, the Royal Apprentice.”

Shield Banner’s eyes narrowed. “Tell me she’s your prisoner, Commander,” he said in a cold voice.

“Not quite. Actually, she is my charge.”

“Shield Banner,” said Twilight, “we need to talk.”

The Captain looked back and forth between the two of them. “Then talk,” he said. “Just remember that I could have half the Royal Guard in this tent in the blink of an eye. And

if you're thinking of overpowering me yourself, Apprentice, then you'd best pray for luck."

"Shining Armor told me all about you before he died," said Twilight. "I remember him saying that there was no finer pony in Equestria to replace him as Captain of the Guard. He called you an honorable stallion."

"Your brother was a hero," said Shield Banner. "He gave his life to stop Lord Smooze and protect Equestria. I wonder what he would say if he could see you now."

"Maybe he would believe me," said Twilight. "Maybe not. It doesn't matter – Shining Armor is gone, and it's just us here now. I want you to know that I do not fault you for trying to protect the Princesses. Whatever your means, your dedication is admirable, Captain. But it is time for pony to stop fighting pony and turn to face the real threat. The Nightmare has returned."

"I can confirm her story," put in Cinnamon Oatmeal. "My stallions and I fought a spirited battle against the Alicorn in the science hall not two hours ago, and I have no doubt that it was the Nightmare, through and through."

"So you say," remarked Shield Banner. "But the fact remains that the Nightmare could not have possessed Celestia without her expressed consent. This is impossible."

"I know," said Twilight. "By Celestia, I know. I have been wracking my brain all night trying to figure out how this could have happened. But it did happen. We have managed to restrain the creature –"

"Restrain? You restrained Celestia?"

"Yes."

"How, may I ask?"

Cinnamon and Twilight exchanged a glance.

"Exsanguination," said Cinnamon.

"The two of you are digging your hole deeper and deeper," said Shield Banner. "Let me see her immediately."

“I’m sorry,” said Twilight. “Not yet. You have already shown yourself to be an adept third-party teleporter. If we took you to the Nightmare, you could just transport her over to your side of the line and then send the cavalry in on us.”

“So,” said Shield Banner, “you won’t let me inspect her, you don’t offer a shred of evidence, and yet you ask me to believe you? Based on what? Your trustworthy countenance?”

“In the end, we really are just making a plea of mercy. Hold off your assault for another hour. We will have your proof soon, I give you my word.”

Shield Banner’s young clerk poked his head into the tent at that moment and froze when he saw the two ponies speaking with the Captain.

“Yes, yes, what is it?” said Shield Banner impatiently, motioning him over. The clerk handed him a paper, and Shield Banner nodded. “Tell them to proceed,” he said, and the clerk left.

Shield Banner turned back to his guests. “I want to believe you,” he said. “At a certain level, I *do* feel that you might be telling me the truth, however insane that is. But within my capacity as Captain of the Guard, I have a duty not to let this situation drag on any further. So, I’m afraid I must deliver an ultimatum here. This is your last chance. Give me the Princess.”

“I can’t,” said Twilight.

“Then for what it’s worth,” said Shield Banner, “I’m sorry if I’m wrong.” With that, he flung the rest of the liquid from the decanter into Cinnamon Oatmeal’s face.

The splash landed with an acid hiss. Fumes erupted from the dark pegasus’s skin and he reeled back, howling like a wild animal, slitted pupils narrowing down to black lines. In the lantern-light, his white fangs bared, Cinnamon looked to Shield Banner like the monster that he was. Twilight threw her body across the Night Guard, horn bursting into purple light as she charged up her signature teleport spell.

“Oh, no you don’t!” said Shield Banner, and a cone of light flared from his horn, rooting Twilight and Cinnamon securely to the fabric of spacetime. “Intruders!” thundered Shield Banner. All around them, the sides of the command tent flew up, revealing an entire legion of armored ponies.

Unable to escape, Twilight squeezed her eyes shut and, with a crack of magic, encapsulated Cinnamon and herself in an indestructible purple bubble.

“You,” said Shield Banner to a pair of nearby unicorns, “bring that force-field down.” The two acknowledged and opened fire with their green beams of energy. Twilight’s shield bowed as it absorbed the blow. “The rest of you stand guard until her field shatters. It won’t take long, considering what *she’s* been through tonight.”

Sure enough, Twilight was already beginning to sweat from the strain. She looked out defiantly through her shimmering bubble at the soldier ponies, then down at Cinnamon, whose skin was continuing to erupt into boils. “It was healing potion in the decanter!” she said. “Wasn’t it? Oh, by Celestia, the reaction is spreading...” Cinnamon’s flesh flaked off like ash.

“You can’t imagine the strength of will it took to sip that vile stuff,” said Shield Banner. His clerk appeared again by his side. “Is it done?” he asked the young stallion. “Do they have the Princess?”

“We just got word,” said the clerk. “The Wonderbolts do *not* have the Princess. Celestia was not in the location indicated by Spitfire’s flyby.”

“What?!” he exclaimed. “How could she screw this up? Tell them to keep looking!”

“He was right about you!” said Twilight, her voice warbling through the luminescent barrier. She was crying tears of fury. “He told us to prepare for a double-cross, and he was right!”

“Who do you mean?” demanded Shield Banner, but almost as the question left his mouth, he knew the answer. “*The agent*,” he growled. “*Running errands* indeed! Is there *no pony* who is truly loyal to the crown anymore?” He turned his glare on the clerk, who whimpered and shied away. Shield Banner rolled his eyes. “Not you! Go to the diviners and tell them to release the secret weapon. I was really hoping it wouldn’t come to this, but it has. Relay the order.”

“Yes, sir,” said the clerk, and he dashed off into the rain.

Shield Banner approached Twilight Sparkle’s iridescent shield. “Tell me where Princess Luna is,” he commanded.

“She’s alive!” said Twilight. “And she’s safe! And pretty soon, she’s going to be here to kick your rump in the mud for putting us through all of this!”

“No matter,” said Shield Banner. “I’ll just pry that information out of your head when we’re done dealing with your friends. Enjoy the paddy-wagon, Twilight. I won’t be long.”

Shield Banner turned back to his soldiers. “Lieutenant, commence with the assault. Bring this building to the ground if you have to, just find the Princess.”

“Aye sir,” said the pony. “To my side, stallions! For the Marenarchy, for Equestria, chaaarge!”

Trumpets blared from all around, and the courtyard erupted into the deafening sounds of war.

• • •

“– and caramel apples, and candy-coated popcorn! I’ll bet I can get Scratch to DJ, too. That pony is always game for a party –”

“Hold on a second, sugar,” said Applejack, pushing the brim of her hat up as she looked out through the slatted boards. “Something is going on in the courtyard.”

“Ooh! Are the soldier ponies giving up?” asked Pinkie Pie. “Twilight and Cinnamon went out there to talk to them a while ago. Wouldn’t it be great if everypony finally believed us, then we could all just go home and finally get something to eat –”

“They’re not giving up,” said Applejack, “In fact... good gracious! I think they’re attacking!”

“Or that too,” said Pinkie.

A sea of armored ponies crashed in waves against the side of the building, shaking the massive stone structure on its foundation.

“Alright Pinkie,” said Applejack in grim tones. “Just like how we planned.”

“It’s time to kick plot and chew bubble gum,” said Pinkie. “And I’m *all* out of gum.” She buckled her green army helmet under her chin as the first explosions began to sound.

Fleetfoot shot back in through the window, skidding to a halt on the burned carpet. The rest of the Wonderbolts were standing guard over an empty entrance hall. “Message relayed, Wing Leader,” Fleetfoot said to Spitfire. “Orders are to keep looking.”

“Keep looking?” commented High Winds. “Oh great, the Princess might be dead, but keep looking guys.”

“They *must* have had advance warning,” said Spitfire, scanning the room with her blue-tinted, heat-vision goggles. “She was *just here*. How could they have moved her without leaving a thermal print?”

“Maybe it was that purple unicorn,” said Soarin’.

“No, the Captain was dealing with her outside when I left,” said Fleetfoot.

“It was the Night Guard,” said High Winds. “It had to be them. Those fellows are dead as scarecrows. No heat signature whatsoever.”

“Agreed,” said Spitfire. “The breach has already begun. They might be willing to kill the hostage rather than let us rescue her, so we’ll have to hurry.” She revved up her flight aura. “Spread out, go room-by-room. There’s no other choice. We’ve got to do it the hard way.”

“You know, Spitfire,” said a voice from the rafters above, “I couldn’t have said it better myself!”

“Combat formation!” shouted the Wonderbolts’ leader, but the cyan blur was already upon them.

• • •

“Do it,” ordered Shield Banner.

The earth pony engineer lit the fuse on the dynamite with a jet lighter. “Take cover!” he yelled, and everypony but the Captain dove behind a tree, or pressed against one of the low walls in the courtyard.

The blast tore the side-door off its hinges and disintegrated the rubble barrier behind it. Bits of burning shrapnel and molten rock rained down upon the soldiers. Shield Banner's orange force-field shimmered from the blow.

"Forward!" he ordered, and the legionnaires thundered into the building. He marched in on their heels, surveying the scene. Empty, but clearly a great battle had happened in this room. Everything was completely destroyed, including what appeared to have been a *Saddlesaurus rex* skeleton. Several hallways branched off into the darkness. "You," he said, pointing at a squad leader, "take your team north to the medical wing, search every operating theater for –"

"Captain!" shouted a soldier behind him, and Shield Banner turned forward to see a cheerful pink pony standing almost nose-to-nose with him.

"Beep!" she said, poking his horn with her forehoof.

"You again!?" said Shield Banner, swinging an iron-shod hoof at her, but the pink pony skipped back out of reach, light as a feather.

"You again, *yourself*, you big meanie," said Pinkie Pie, bouncing around. "Bet you can't hit me!" She blew a raspberry.

The Guard Captain's horn flaring bright-orange as a wave of hexing magic shot towards the pink earth pony. But just as it got to her, Pinkie reached behind herself and held up a large, oval mirror. "Return to sender!" she said as the spell reflected right back into Shield Banner's eyes.

I am ten years old, lying with a broken leg in the gully, miles down the road from my house. I lie here for hours in the sun, screaming for help until my voice is just a dry whistle. My leg is twisted under me. The pain is unimaginable. I think I'm going to die.

Now I am seventeen, weeping over a casket. The doctors said Tornado would get better, but he didn't. Tornado was the hero in the family. Now I have to be the hero.

Now I am twenty-two. All of these bodies, my own stallions. Dead, because of me. The first time I've had to order them into battle. They tell you all through training, these ponies died so that many others could live. It's different when they're lying there in front of you... they're just colts...

"Sir!" A hoof slapped his face. "Sir! Get up!"

Shield Banner pried his eyes open. “Horseradish,” he wheezed.

The present returned in a watercolor bleed. Then he was back with his troops storming the Ponyville University Science Hall. *Celestia... I have to find Celestia...*

“What are the orders, Captain?”

“Advance!” he rasped.

Deep in the building, Shield Banner could hear the muffled *booms* of traps going off as other teams met their own fate. He was going to lose more ponies tonight, and Pinkie Pie was nowhere to be seen.

• • •

The agent almost tripped over his shackles for the hundredth time as they raced through the maintenance corridors beneath the University. “Get these cuffs off of me!” he said. “I can help you carry the alicorn!”

“Keep mouth shut,” said Chyornyj Slon. “Or I will pull your jaw off like drawer.”

“Well!” said the agent. “That was rather violent, mate. No need for that kind of thing.”

“Quiet, you two,” said Spike, sweeping the labyrinth of tunnels with his dragon eyes. He consulted the blueprints that Twilight had found earlier. Applejack had said she was going to be set up in the north wing, waiting to give the signal, but that’s where they were operating on Luna as well. *I have to be absolutely sure of my bearings*, he thought, *or else I could catch our own ponies in the trap.*

Nightmare Sun lay still tied down to the stretcher, supported between Spike and Slon. The white alicorn murmured and tossed her head.

“Ah, gentlecolts?” said the agent. “I don’t mean to be a negative nancy over here, but it looks like she’s starting to wake up.”

“Her regeneration must be accelerating,” said Spike. “Slon, are you *sure* you can’t drain her like Cinnamon Oatmeal did?”

“Nightmare’s blood is evil,” said Slon. “Commander said it makes evil thoughts.”

“Oh, well, we certainly wouldn’t want you having any *evil thoughts* now, would we?” said the agent.

They carried on through the dark tunnels, listening to the Royal Guard above them clear barrier after barrier with their own explosives. *Boom. Boom.* The lanterns hanging from the ceiling swung back and forth, causing their shadows to pitch and roll like a stormy sea. The Night Guards had set their traps to block-off and seal-up the paths leading deeper into the building, rather than to maim or kill. Spike wondered if anypony was dead in spite of it.

They reached a maintenance hub with corridors leading off in every direction. The floor had a large drain in it. “Alright,” said Spike, “I think this is it. Let’s get the charges set up.”

“For Celestia’s sake, unshackle me!” implored the agent. “Let me help!”

Slon motioned for his attention. When the agent looked, Slon had a pair of plum-sized rocks lying on the floor. Slon stomped them both into dust.

“You have conquered the language barrier,” said the agent. “I think I’ll just sit here like a good little prisoner while you two save the day.” He looked over at the Nightmare, who continued to murmur in her sleep. “Well, old girl,” he said. “This has just about been the best night ever, am I right!?”

• • •

Rainbow Dash pinwheeled across the landing, legs striking out before anypony could react. Fleetfoot caught a right-cross to the jaw. High Winds dodged a microsecond late, and went down groaning, clutching his nose. Soarin’ dodged a little *too* far, getting caught up in a crystal chandelier and bringing the whole thing down upon himself.

Dash sent her death-from-above crashing down against Spitfire. It was a combo-finisher, charged with aura energy that Dash had sapped from the rest of the Wonderbolts. There was a brilliant burst of rainbow and gold light, and Spitfire’s aura burned with ghostly flame, then sizzled with steam. She had her hooves up in a cross-block. She had stopped Dash’s strongest attack cold.

Spitfire flung Dash backwards. The two circled each other like wolves.

“Lovers’ quarrel,” said Spitfire with a smirk.

“We had our time, ‘Fire,” said Dash. “But I always kind of knew I’d have to kick your ass someday.”

“Aw, come on, Dashie, you’re breakin’ my heart over here.”

Dash warped across the room with a supersonic punch, but Spitfire spun and dodged just out of reach. The wind from Dash’s strike whipped through Spitfire’s mane, as the gold pegasus used the momentum to catch Rainbow Dash under the chin with a perfect flip-kick.

Dash slammed up against the ceiling and then crashed into the floor, landing hard on her wings. Her flight aura had absorbed some of the first hit. The second was all bad. Dash clambered to her hooves and tried to take off, but her wing made a cracking noise and seared with pain. She stumbled and almost fell; it was that old injury from so many years ago. *OH, GREAT TIMING*, she thought.

Spitfire’s aura blazed and she spun into Dash with a whirling cyclone-roundhouse. Dash barely managed to get a foreleg in the way before the strike slammed into her, sending her tumbling into the railing.

Spitfire came in to deliver a coup de grâce, and Dash fainted down and threw a sweep against the back of her opponent’s legs. As Spitfire fell, Dash reversed her spin and smashed Spitfire across the face with a back-hoof. The two ponies locked into a ferocious grapple.

Spitfire had a grin on her face and blood on her teeth. “Nice try, kiddo, but I do this for a living.” She swept her hoof down, tearing it from Rainbow Dash’s grasp, and threw a crushing elbow into Dash’s already-black eye. Dash gasped, and then Spitfire hit her again in the same exact place. Dash let out a cry of pain this time and wrenched her body away as her vision clouded with spots.

The hollow noise of Spitfire’s hooves on the floor, then the rush of wings. Dash couldn’t see the attack coming but she knew it was there, braced herself as best she could, and then Spitfire’s brutal double-buck hit her in the chest. Dash crumpled away from the blow, trying to absorb it, but the air rushed out of her lungs as she fell backwards against the railing. *Still not as bad as an Apple-buck*, thought Dash, coughing up blood.

A flurry of left and right hooks assaulted her, and she managed a ragged defense, delivering a counter-punch here or there, slugging Spitfire pretty good a couple of times. But the Wonderbolt wore her down, and then Dash slipped up and dropped a hoof.

Spitfire swept inside of her opponent's guard, locked Dash's elbow and sent the cyan pegasus spinning face-first into the railing. Dash rotated in midair and brought her rear hoof up and across Spitfire's ear, knocking the gold pegasus down, but she couldn't control her own momentum and toppled over the banister. Dash barely managed to snag the landing with her hooves and teeth as part of the railing fell and smashed to kindling on the tile floor below.

"You always did have great stamina," said Spitfire, wiping a line of blood away from her mouth. She snorted steam and pawed a hoof at the ground, getting ready to charge. "But I don't have any more time to play nice. Sorry, kiddo."

With a fiery explosion and golden contrail, Spitfire launched herself straight at Dash, flight-aura focused to a razor's edge. The Wonderbolt aura-blade was a lethal attack and Dash was shocked to see her former friend using it against her. Dash had no choice but to let go of the landing as Spitfire's aerial attack cut through the wooden floor like paper. A single sliver of Dash's hoof separated as she began to fall.

Oh crap, oh crap! thought Dash. The green tiles of the entrance hall rushed up at her face. It occurred to her how ironic it would be for the great Rainbow Dash to die from falling just thirty feet. She squeezed her eyes shut.

The impact never came. Instead, she landed against something taut and stretchy. A trampoline. A giant pink trampoline.

Dash descended down to the floor with the heavy impact of her fall. Pinkie leaned over the edge with a quick bro-hoof.

"Now we're even!" she said.

Then with a *sproing*, the trampoline sent Dash careening back into Spitfire's surprised face.

"Rainbow-grab!" shouted Dash, even as Spitfire moved too late to block. Dash's foreleg whipped around Spitfire's neck and clothes-lined the gold pegasus, dragging her backwards into the air. Spitfire thrashed to break free, but the blow had stunned her.

Have to finish this quickly, Dash thought, wincing through tears.

She fired her rainbow-aura for maximum thrust, and although her injured wing screamed with pain, she was still able to summon a massive blast of speed. With a roar of

exertion, Dash swung around in a three-sixty, transferring nearly all of her momentum into Spitfire. “RAINBOW THROW!” screamed Dash as she released the gold pegasus.

Spitfire shot straight upwards at a ludicrous speed. She wasted the last remnants of her flight aura trying to slow down, and when she met the inside of the stone dome, there was nothing left to protect her. Spitfire struck head-first, making a hollow, coconut sound, and sending a crack up the wall. Where she bounced off, there was blood. She fell like a shot bird.

Dash fell too, spiraling down toward the tiles. At the last second, she reached out and grabbed onto a frond from a planted palm tree, sliding down the trunk and rolling out on the floor. She turned to look over her shoulder, just in time to see Soarin’ catch Spitfire right before she hit the ground. The gold pegasus looked like a rag doll.

“Horseradish,” breathed Dash. “But she was asking for it.”

“Dashie!” came the voice of Pinkie Pie, over in the corner. She turned to see her friend standing by a chalk-outline of a door on the brick wall.

“Oh no, are we really doing this? Pinkie, I’ve seen you get up to some weird things before, but –”

“Pshh,” said Pinkie, rolling her eyes. “What better time to yank their chain?” She opened the door. “Come on! Hurry!”

Dash did not need to be asked twice. She galloped over to Pinkie, just as the rest of the Wonderbolts leaped from the landing in pursuit. Together, Dash and Pinkie Pie slammed the door shut. There were two impacts on the other side, then silence.

“You’re stretching it a little, Pinkie,” said Dash, examining the now-solid wall.

“That’s a strange way of saying *thank you!*” exclaimed Pinkie Pie. “Or *glad to see you!*”

“Oh yeah, thanks,” said Dash with a wry smile. “I had it all under control, though.”

“I know, I just like to help,” said Pinkie with moon-eyes. “Now let’s go see how Applejack is doing.”

• • •

At the end of the darkened corridor, a tail made of purple hair whipped around the corner and was gone.

“What...?” said Spike, looking up from his work. “What was that?”

“More attention, puzhalsta!” said Chyornyj Slon. “Your eyes need to be on the bomb.”

“Uh,” said Spike, “I have to check something out real quick. Slon, finish the preparation and wait here for Applejack’s signal.”

“You’re going to leave me alone with this lunatic?” said the agent.

“Spike!” said Slon. “Do not go wandering off. We have work. And the Nightmare, she stirs.”

But Spike was already loping down the hallway on all fours. “This will just take a second!” he shouted over his shoulder as he charged on into the darkness. “Keep working!”

“Don’t be an idiot!” Spike heard the agent yell, but Spike pressed on until he was out of earshot.

I’m seeing things, he thought to himself as he ran. *There’s no way it was really her.*

Further on, however, he found a shiny, purple hair snagged against a cement corner. Unmistakable.

Rarity, thought Spike, peering off into the maze of darkness before him. *I thought she was Shield Banner’s prisoner; what the hay is she doing down here?*

It occurred to him that it might be a trap. In fact, it probably *was* a trap. But he weighed this against the possibility that Rarity had somehow escaped her captors, and was now lost down here, alone. He *had* to follow the trail. It was *his fault* that she’d been kidnapped in the first place. At least, it sure felt that way. He had an obligation to live that down. Rarity was his friend. Maybe something more, if only things had been different. If he hadn’t been just a baby when he’d met her. If they weren’t a dragon and a pony. Still, Spike was surprised to find that his feelings had remained consistent throughout the years. *She’s so much more than other ponies give her credit for*, thought Spike.

He reached a point where the tunnel dipped down, and now the floor was covered in water. The sump-pumps were apparently not working yet, and the maintenance hall looked more like a dank sewer. Spike felt the tickle of claustrophobia and quickened his step through the inch-deep flood. The lanterns swung in circles overhead, making him feel crazy, dreamlike.

At the end of the hallway, he came to a steam junction, where a room full of pipes rattled and clanged and hissed in the dark. *They're testing the boilers*, he thought. The process could take days, and it could make this area very dangerous. Sure enough, a jet of steam shot from a pipe-weld nearby. He leaned away from it, although he was immune to the heat. *Good thing I'm a dragon*, he thought, *but Rarity could still get hurt if she wandered in here.*

"Spike," said a voice and he turned with a start. Through gaps in the steam-jets, he could make out the faint outline of a pony. "Spike is that you?" The figure started to stumble towards him, moving directly into the path of the steam.

"Rarity!" said Spike, throwing himself forward and blocking the hissing gas with his own body. The white unicorn fell into his arms. Spike turned so that his scales could protect her from the intense heat, and cradled her as they made their way over to the wall.

Rarity was drawn and pale and her mane was a mess. She was still wearing her evening gown, although it was in tatters by now. She looked like a flower corsage that had been trampled on a dance floor.

"It's okay," he said, holding her, "Rarity, it's okay, I've got you, you're safe now." An explosion sounded from overhead, and water showered down over them in a million tiny droplets. "Well, you're relatively safe," corrected Spike, "but I've still got you." He inspected her for injury, but she seemed more-or-less intact. No blood, no burns, nothing like that.

Wait a second, thought Spike. *What the heck is this thing around her neck?*

It was a black, stone amulet, dull and chitinous, shot-through with irregular, oval holes. It pulsed with an eerie green glow – bizarre, alien, and yet... beautiful. He stared into it, and it stared back.

"Do you love me, Spike?" whispered Rarity.

"Yes," he heard himself say. He did, he had, he *always* had. She was the only pony he'd ever wanted. The thought made him lightheaded.

“Then kiss me,” she breathed.

He was helpless to resist. Spike leaned down and their lips touched, parted, their tongues running together. He found her mouth as hot as the steam. The white unicorn drove into the kiss, fierce and gentle, and they inhaled each other.

“Rarity,” whispered Spike. Everything was far away, except for the heartbeat in his ears and warmth of her breath. He ran his hands across her neck, her back, her diamonds. She bit his lip, held onto it in her teeth, so that he felt the momentary thrill of pain. He was forgetting everything. His mission, his friends – he’d waited so long to be with Rarity, and it was finally happening. The events of the night were like a bad dream. This had become the only reality that mattered.

The building rocked with another explosion – very close, probably directly above them. A lantern in the tunnel behind fell from its line and crashed against the floor. It shook Spike out of his stupor for an instant, and he remembered Applejack, counting on his plan. He remembered Twilight, and Princess Luna...

“Shh,” said Rarity, “stay with me.”

“I... I can’t...” he said. He was nauseous, his vision blurry. Something was happening to him. It was tied to the amulet, like it was feeding off of his emotions, growing stronger as he grew weaker. It was devouring his love for Rarity.

A changeling’s heart, he realized. Somepony made a dried changeling’s heart into a magic amulet. That’s pretty darn morbid, actually.

He reached for it, missing as his hand grew weak, thumping clumsily against Rarity’s neck. Angrily, he grabbed again with force and purpose.

Rarity’s horn flared baby-blue, and something shiny flew up out of her sash and sliced into the quick at the base of his claw. The projectile was so narrow and razor-sharp that it passed easily between his scales and stabbed him right in his nerve. Spike cursed and flinched his hand back.

“Ah, ah,” scolded Rarity and made a smile unlike any he’d ever seen on her face. “A lady removes her jewelry when she wants to. Grabby Spikey-Wikey forgot his manners.” Her eyes burned with an all-too-familiar orange glow, a point of green in each of her pupils. Spike realized that he was looking at layer upon layer of hexes.

How many hexes can a pony's mind handle? he wondered. *Not this many.* Spike pinched his fingers on the projectile and slid it out from under his claw. It was a steel sewing needle. He threw it to the ground with a *ping*. "Don't do that again, Rarity," he said.

Rarity tossed her foreleg around his neck and breathed on his cheek, rising to her hind legs and rubbing her curves against him. "That's *Miss Rarity* to you, wyrm. Now show me what you learned while you were away at school." She attacked his mouth with her tongue again. The amulet burned like a green coal, and Spike's vision went double, his chest felt like it was caving in. His love for Rarity was a conduit through which the changeling's heart was literally sucking his life out.

"Get... off!" he said, shoving her away. Her head clanged against one of the hot pipes and she collapsed to the ground with hair across her face. "Horseradish," he said. "Rarity!" He was torn between checking to see if she was alright, or more wisely running the *hay* away.

Rarity looked up at him with a wicked grin, a spot of blood running down her forehead. Her eyes were green-and-orange furnaces. "Oh, baby wants to play rough? That's mama's favorite game!"

The white unicorn's horn ignited. Another glint of light flew from her sash and sliced with enormous speed into a narrow split between Spike's armored chest-scales. He felt it pierce into his body, probably missing his heart by an inch or less. He thundered forward to tear the amulet from her neck, and a third sewing needle curved around and stabbed through the taught skin of his lizard-eardrum. Spike went deaf on that side, howling with pain, still trying for the amulet, lumbering forward. Every pipe and valve tripped him up and he tumbled to the floor with a mighty splash. *My inner ear*, he thought with horror. *She must have nicked my inner-ear. And my eyes* – He slapped a claw over his eyes just as two razor-sharp needles drilled into the back of his hand.

All it would take would be a single bolt of hellfire to vaporize her. *I can't fight you, I can't...* "Rari—" A needle flew down his throat. He gagged on blood.

"Mind your manners, Spikey-Wikey, or I'll have to punish you some more," said Rarity. "You know, I've always wanted a dragon slave. What can I say, it's a girl thing. And I simply can't *wait* to indulge myself, but I need to know that you are completely subservient. Now are you going to keep being a bad boy? Or are you going to lie there and take it like a stud?"

"Safe word!" he cried. "What's the safe word?"

She laughed. “That’s cute, honey.” Her horn thrummed with magic.

He dared to look, and caught the glimmer of a whole swarm of sewing needles rising into the air – steel hornets poised on invisible threads. The changeling’s heart thrummed green with power and Spike’s vision swam, clouded-over. His body felt like it weighed a thousand tons. It was killing him. “Wait!” he rasped from the edge of consciousness.

Then they all stabbed at once.

She'd done her best, but it was over. Within the space of a few hours, Twilight had sent her consciousness back in time, had teleported herself and an alicorn ten miles, had summoned a watermelon flood of epic proportions. She had endured burns, bruises, and temporal bends. The well was finally dry.

"You've got to get out of here," she said to Cinnamon Oatmeal over the sound of the energy beams. Her force-field was growing thin.

"Both of us..." he said. "I can... carry you..."

"Stop it! This is the only way! Get to Purple Heart and get healed. They *need* you in there."

Cinnamon looked up, his face flaking away, skin riven from forehead to chest. "Try not... to die, would you?" he rasped. "...Looks... bad on our evaluation..."

"On three, okay?"

"Okay."

One, two, three, she counted, then released the spell, allowing her force bubble to implode. At that moment, Cinnamon discorporealized into a cloud of smoke and swirled down a storm-drain.

"Don't let him get away!" shouted one of the dusky unicorns. Other nearby war-mages blasted the ground with multicolored lightning, but the smoke was gone within seconds. A gout of burnt earth rained down over them, splattering the ponies with mud.

One burly sergeant marched up to Twilight and slugged the exhausted mare across the face, knocking her flat.

"No!" said the dusky unicorn, her green telekinesis grabbing the sergeant's hoof. "Do not strike her! She is the Royal Apprentice!"

The sergeant looked up, rain-soaked cigar clenched in his teeth. "Not anymore, she ain't."

• • •

They were right on her tail. Applejack put her head down and ran as hard as she could.

She thundered past a T-intersection, where another squad of soldiers picked up the chase. The cowpony had almost thirty soldiers pursuing her now. Just a little further and she'd have them standing right on the "X."

A unicorn's fireball whistled past her ear, blasting a trash can into the air. Applejack slid under the flying obstacle and scrambled back to her hooves, turning on the speed as the ponies behind her tripped and fell. She pounded around a corner, holding tight to the inside of the curve, then leaped down a flight of twenty stairs. *Got to love being an earth pony!* she thought to herself, tugging on her hat as she accelerated again. She could smell the fountain now, feel its cool breeze. She was almost there. *Heck, I could keep this pace up all day.*

And then she was sweeping through the archway into the north wing. The sign read: "Medical Sciences."

This area had its own entrance hall of sorts – a lush, green atrium, dappled with trees and vines, skylights looking out on the predawn sky. In the center of the plaza was a fountain, where water poured down the sides of a modern-art sculpture.

Now look at this, thought Applejack as she ran past. *This is just what I'm talking about. What the hay is that sculpture supposed to be? Two pyramids and a ball? More city nonsense! Give me art that actually looks like something, for Pete's sake!*

She ran partway up the side of a tree, then took a massive leap, scrambling up onto a balcony. *Well, I hope y'all are ready, Spike, cause here goes!* Applejack raised a rear hoof and pounded on a vertical pipe running through the floor. *Clang! Clang! Clang!*

Down below, the soldiers charged into the atrium. They looked around for the noise, but the echoes made the direction indistinct. They didn't spot her right away.

"Spread out and search," said the leader, a red pegasus mare.

More and more soldiers arrived. *Twilight was right,* thought Applejack. *Close off the right hallways and stairwells, get all the soldiers in one room together. Then spring the trap.* Of course, if for some reason the trap *didn't* spring, then the atrium would be a dead-end for Applejack in any number of ways.

A minute crept by. *What's taking so long, Spike?* she thought, wiping her brow. *What in the hay is that dragon waiting for? I hope nothing happened to him.*

Suddenly, one of the soldiers spotted her. “On the landing, up there!”

The armored ponies started swarming across the hall, their hooves an echoing cacophony on the marble and glass. The first soldier charged up the stairs with a snort of fury. Something had gone terribly wrong.

Spike! Where are you?

• • •

“Spike!” shouted Chyornyj Slon, peering down the dark hallway. “Of course. Of course this happens now. Spike!”

“He’s not coming back,” said the agent. “I told that dragon not to go off by himself. No doubt he stumbled headfirst into one of Shield Banner’s pitfalls.”

“Spike is clever dragon,” said Slon. “He would not be caught.”

“Everypony has their weak point,” said the agent.

Clang! Clang! Clang! It was coming from a vertical pipe that ran down through the maintenance hub.

“Chyort voz’mi!” swore Slon.

“Spike can take care of himself for now, comrade,” said the agent. “We’ve got to set this bomb off and get the Nightmare out of here.”

Slon glared at him. “We?” The giant, undead pegasus rose to his hooves, gold eyes feral, deadly. He grabbed the agent like the pony weighed nothing, held him up. Slon’s breath was so cold that it caused ice to form on the rims of the agent’s glasses.

“I don’t suppose begging for my life would help?” said the agent. “I’m actually quite good at it.”

“Stand up straight!” said Slon. The agent complied. Slon produced a midnight-black key and unlocked the agent’s shackles, tossing them into his saddlebag. He released his captive.

The agent rubbed his fore-ankles painfully. He pulled out a crushed pack of cigarettes and knocked one into his mouth. “Thanks, mate. Got a light?”

Slon looked at him, bemused, then lit a match. Once the agent was taken care of, Slon used the fire to ignite a fuse leading down into the floor drain. The sizzling flame burned and flared, racing down and out of sight, to some place deep underground.

Slon picked up one end of the alicorn's stretcher, motioning for the agent to get the other side. "I am watching you *very close*, tovarisch. If you betray us..."

"I won't," said the agent. "Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye."

"Or worse," said Slon. "That is promise."

"We can discuss the exact terms later. Now let's get out of here before this hallway turns into riverfront property."

• • •

Applejack slugged one pony across the nose and bucked the next down the stairs, but they just kept on coming. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the red pegasus from before looking for an opening to dive-bomb her.

This could be trouble, thought Applejack. *Got to make sure I give that pegasus my undivided attention.*

"Hyah!" she yelled, turning and delivering a stunning double-kick to the foremost earth pony, sending him crashing back with his fellows all the way to the ground floor. A second later, the red pegasus dove towards Applejack, head lowered, forelegs curled, teeth bared. Applejack ducked just in time. The pegasus pulled up, hugging the wall. She hadn't gotten more than twenty feet away when a tan lasso looped around her hind leg and yanked taut, sending the pegasus into a wide arc at a breakneck speed.

Applejack set her hooves against the floor, hauling on the rope with all of her might. She let out a groan of exertion, every muscle in her body flexing beneath her orange coat as she held the line in her teeth. The red pegasus careened into her fellow soldiers like a runaway train. Armored ponies went flying in every direction.

Applejack spit out the rope and tipped her hat. *Pretty small-caliber compared to my usual competition*, she thought with satisfaction. *RD woulda never fallen for that.*

Then they felt it. An explosion, different from all the rest. Instead of a concussive *bang* elsewhere in the building, this was an ominous seismic *rumble* from deep underground.

It shook the atrium and the water in the fountain sloshed out over the side. Then a new rumble. This one was like the rush of a waterfall, and it grew louder and louder.

“Well, I oughta say it’s about time!” said Applejack, and she threw herself to the floor.

A jet of water shot out of the top of the sculpture, arcing all the way to the ceiling and drumming on the glass. Then the sound of metal tearing, rivets popping, and fans of water sprayed out from the sides of the structure.

“Fall back!” shouted somepony. The soldiers scrambled to get up, to retreat, but it was too late. At that moment, the major flow of the Ponyville Subterranean Aquifer – dammed by a precise cave-in downstream – came rushing straight up through the University water main.

The sculpture exploded from the ground like a rocket, dragging its concrete moorings with it, flying all the way up through the glass skylight with a terrific *crash*. All the lanterns went out as the rain swept in, and an ocean of water roared up through the floor, instantly flooding the room to shoulder-level. The torrent swirled like a reverse-whirlpool, and the soldiers crashed into each other, lost their weapons, cursed and shouted in the drenched darkness.

“Fluttershy! Purple Heart!” boomed Applejack. “That’s your cue, y’all!”

Down below, Fluttershy nodded to the Night Guard medic. Purple Heart closed his eyes and sat back on his haunches, placing his forehooves together. Waves of energy pulsed from his entire body – dark magic, with a strange dissonant tone to it. A layer of mist appeared over the churning whitewater. At first, it was just in pockets, but soon, the whole atrium was blanketed in fog.

“Your unicorn friend was right on the money,” said Purple Heart, black waves of magic shuddering from his skin. “And these poor bastards have no idea what they’re in for.”

“Start with the jellyfish,” said Fluttershy.

Purple Heart nodded. He began the transport.

A soldier somewhere in the dark cried out in pain. Then another, and another, until a wave of screams swept through the entire crowd, echoing off the glass and marble walls, heightening the contagious fear. They trampled over each other to escape the horrible, agonizing stings. There was no escape. They were submerged to their necks, and the

current ensured that every one of them was immediately covered with the sticky creatures.

“Bring in the scorpidae, now,” said Fluttershy. “For variety.” The hum of dark magic increased as Purple Heart transported in a whole rainbow of poisonous tropical fish.

Fluttershy was furious with herself. *To use these animals like this... to sacrifice their lives... dear Celestia, it's unbearable. I should be ashamed – I AM ashamed! But... but I have no choice... This is the best we could come up with, and we can't let the Nightmare win. I have to protect my friends, however I can...*

“Fluttershy!” Purple Heart was shouting. “Is it time or not?”

“Sorry, sorry,” said Fluttershy. She looked around at the screaming stew of soldiers. “Yes, there should be enough blood in the water to start the second wave.”

“Roger *that!*” said Purple Heart. “Soup’s on, everypony!”

The mist grew even thicker, and the water filled with piranha, rays, electric eels. The screams began anew.

Fluttershy listened to the soldiers thrash around in the stinging, shocking, biting darkness. *Poor little sea creatures, she thought with a tear in her eye. Poor sharks, poor lampreys. Poor Candiru. You're the real victims here. You're the real victims.*

• • •

Shield Banner watched from the front of the building as his squads retreated. The soldiers were all covered in a vast panoply of tiny, terrible wounds. The water here was already ankle-deep.

“Watch out for jellyfish, sir,” said one of the soldiers as he passed by. A half-hour ago it would have been the stupidest warning in the world.

Celestia cautioned me about this, Shield Banner seethed. She told me what would happen if I hesitated to kill the traitors; if I showed mercy or restraint! She told me not to let my feelings cloud my duty. Now, Spitfire could die and it would be my fault for not killing Rainbow Dash when I had the chance. My stallions are being eaten alive in there, because I didn't do something about the Night Guard before tonight. How many more of my ponies must pay the price for my being 'too gentle?'

Yet still, the thought nagged at him. *What if I'm wrong? What if I'm wrong? What if...*

Such second-guessing was a dangerous pitfall for a military leader, and Shield Banner clamped a lid on it. Perhaps he *was* wrong. But he had made his call, and now he had to live by it. Hesitation would only endanger his ponies' lives at this point. *I won't fail you again, Celestia.*

"Sir?" It came from behind him. "You wanted the prisoner delivered to you?"

Shield Banner turned to look over his shoulder. His clerk stood with a bound, chained, and blindfolded Twilight Sparkle.

"Yes," said the Captain. "And the other matter?"

"We just got word," said the clerk. "Spitfire's going to live."

Shield Banner nodded and exhaled. "Thank goodness. Let me know the moment she is out of surgery."

"Yes, sir," said the clerk. "So, uh, do you still want to...?" He motioned at Twilight.

"Unfortunately, yes," said Shield Banner. "It's the only way forward at this point."

• • •

Applejack saw a blast of green magic fire from the far side of the atrium. A searing bolt shot past her, and for a second, she felt a smug rush of elation. But then the green light ricocheted off two walls and a tree-trunk and blasted her right in the chest. Twenty-thousand volts wracked through her body, a cry of pain silenced as her vocal chords seized up. She crashed to the ground, smoke rising from her coat. "Nice... *cough cough*... nice shot, ya blasted varmint..."

Unicorn sharpshooter. Just her luck.

Two white pegasi slammed down right in front of her, one rearing up to bring his iron-shod hooves down on her face. They weren't going to give her a chance to recover.

But at that moment, a Night Guard suddenly melted out of the shadows directly behind her. He seemed to warp forward, jumping whole gaps of space, until he stood directly before the first white pegasus.

“Go to sleep,” said the Night Guard, golden eyes flashing.

The white pegasus collapsed.

The other Royal Guard had a bayonet mounted to his helmet, like a bladed facsimile of a unicorn’s horn. He charged forward and stabbed the Night Guard through the chest. But the dark pony merely exploded into mist, then reformed behind his attacker, delivering a crushing buck to the white pegasus’s legs. The Royal Guard toppled into the churning waters below.

The Night Guard savior stumbled as well, crumpling to the floor.

Applejack ran over. It was Cinnamon Oatmeal, or what was left of him.

“They captured...” he said, “Twilight...”

“Don’t talk, partner,” she said. “We’re gonna’ get you some help.” Applejack scooped the fallen leader onto her back and leaped down from the balcony to the white marble below.

Another bolt of magic bounced off two walls and a planter and cut a burnt divot in Applejack’s hat. *Close one!* she thought, leaping forward just in time to avoid a third green bolt, chipping off the marble floor. A fourth bolt skidded over the water, looped around inside a trash barrel, and flashed through Applejack’s mane as she ran.

• • •

They retreated to the second-floor waiting room. Applejack laid Cinnamon down on the ground, and Purple Heart began to administer a series of antidotes. They could hear Chyornyj Slon cleaning up the rest of the tattered opposition in the atrium.

“Royals will probably attack from the other side of the building, now,” said Purple Heart as he worked. “We have to get ready for their next move.” He wrapped a bandage around Cinnamon’s head and injected a final dose into his foreleg. “You alright, now, Commander?”

“Better,” said Cinnamon. He sat up slowly, body language returning to normal, although his wounds looked far from healed.

A ceiling vent was suddenly kicked open by a cyan hoof and two ponies came tumbling out onto the floor. Rainbow Dash looked pretty beat-up, but she was still snorting steam.

Pinkie didn't have a scratch on her, although her hair looked like a powder puff from all the dust and cobwebs.

"Air vents," said Dash. "Huh. I can't believe that worked."

"Told yooooooooou!" said Pinkie.

"Do these two always have to bust in comedically?" asked Purple Heart.

"Um," said Fluttershy, "actually, yes. Particularly when they're together."

"Where have you ponies been?" Applejack said.

"Oh nowhere," replied Dash. "Just *kicking the tar out of the Wonderbolts!*"

"She was awesome!" said Pinkie Pie leaping into the air. "And I saved her life, too."

"Uh, yeah," said Dash. "I ended up needing a little help with Spitfire."

"Lovers' quarrel?" asked Applejack innocently.

"Excuse me?" said Dash.

They were interrupted by Chyornyj Slon, ducking in through the doorway. "Spike is missing," he said.

This was met by silence from the room.

"How?" asked Cinnamon.

"Spike said he must check on something," said Slon. "He wandered off into maintenance tunnel and disappeared."

"Why would Spikey just walk off?" said Pinkie Pie. "He's nothing if not loyal! That's why he's the new Rainbow Dash!"

"The new what?" asked Dash.

Pinkie stared at her. "You mean nopony has told you about that in seven years?"

“You’re wrong if you think Spike just wandered off,” said another voice. “He was tricked.” They all turned to look. The bespectacled agent walked into the room behind Slon.

“I released the prisoner for time being,” explained Slon. “If that is okay with you, Commander.”

“Hmmm,” said Cinnamon. He peered into the agent’s eyes.

“Good heavens, mate, what happened to you?” said the agent, examining the Night Guard leader’s wounds. “Garlic extract? Silver nitrate?”

“Healing potion, actually,” Cinnamon said. “I guess we owe you thanks for the warning about the Wonderbolts incursion. We managed to get the Nightmare away just in time.”

“I knew that would be his plan,” said the agent. “In all the years I’ve known him, Shield Banner never could put the stick down. He means well; I’ve seen him perform many heroic deeds myself. But his lawful side has a way of getting the best of him.”

“You don’t say,” said Dash, holding an ice-pack to her eye.

“Well, the truth is, he’s well off the deep end by now,” said the agent. “His world view would be in conflict if he backed down, since he’s already broken his own rules a number of times tonight in belief that you are villains. He can’t stop. He’s just going to press harder.”

“Well, the guy’s already trying to kill us, so what the hay else could he do?” asked Dash.

Just then, a voice boomed from outside of the lobby, down in the flooded atrium. “Elements of Harmony, and Night Guard traitors.” After that, silence.

They all looked around at each other.

“I reckon we’d better find out what he wants,” said Applejack.

Immersed. A flood of ice cold water. He was being flushed down the largest toilet in the world.

Spike's eyes wrenched open. His head felt full of cotton, and a single thought pounded through his mind.

Water! Water! Twilight's plan worked! Maybe a little too well...

He was body-surfing through the tunnels like a log flume, crashing against every pipe and exposed brick, riding the cresting wave. In his half-conscious state, the obstacles had felt like nothing more than giant pillows, but the pain was returning.

Then his heart froze. *Rarity, oh no!*

Spike looked around frantically as he rolled and pitched over and over in the water, catching sight of a shredded evening dress in the white foam. He pushed off the wall, skidding across the surface of the wave, getting his bearings. He had endured any number of hellish trials under Luna's guidance in the past two years, and he'd always been best in the water.

By some miracle, Rarity was not only alive, but conscious. The white unicorn was horse-paddling and kicking and choking like a madpony. Spike aimed, dove, and swept her into his arms. Immediately, the wave overtook them and they were totally submerged.

Spike threw his hand out towards the wall, felt it bounce against the stones, and slammed his claws in with all of his might. He groaned with pain as they slammed to a stop. Spike's joints and body were full of steel needles – he could feel them grinding against bones, piercing his tissues. But he was tougher than they were, now that the changeling's heart was no longer weakening him. Spike's draconic physiology would eventually dissolve and absorb the needles, in fact. For the time being, it was only pain, and Luna had taught him to endure pain.

The tunnel was wider here, and the water pressure lessened a bit. He held Rarity to his chest. The unicorn thrashed around, searching for air, finding none. She was drowning. Spike leaned his head down and embraced her mouth with his own. Rarity froze, still panicking, but after another terrified moment, finally realized what he was doing. She opened her lips and allowed Spike to offer his breath to her.

The water was his home. It rushed over his gill-fans, eased his wounds, soothed his mind, and refreshed the air he gave to Rarity. Spike ran his hand across her collarbone and found that the changeling's heart had indeed been swept away in the flood.

Spike, you lucky, lucky idiot, he thought. No wonder you're still alive.

Rarity held tight around his neck as a million tons of water tore against them in pitch-black darkness. Spike slammed his other claws into the wall and began walking on all fours back up the tunnel to the surface. He was extremely grateful that he and Rarity had survived the encounter. Exactly *who she was* at the moment, however, was a question that ate at him with every step.

• • •

Twilight Sparkle sat blindfolded on the marble floor of the atrium.

“Do I really need to explain what’s about to happen here?” boomed Shield Banner, as Applejack, Fluttershy, and the rest looked on from across the water. “One thing you ponies ought to know: Celestia forbade me from extending mercy to you. In fact, she ordered you executed on sight. So it is *against her wishes* that I have tried to end this peacefully again and again. Instead of gratitude, however, I have received insults, demands, threats. Well, I am all out of patience, now.

“I am giving you the same ultimatum I gave your leaders. Deliver the Princess to me immediately. Otherwise, I will execute Twilight Sparkle to ensure that you can’t use the Elements against the crown. Then, we will cross the moat and finish the job.

“I don’t want any of this to happen. Please, please, don’t call my bluff like your leaders did. Save yourselves. You have five minutes, starting now.”

• • •

On the other side of the atrium, the ponies were utterly stunned.

“What... what do we do?” demanded Applejack.

“Nothing,” said Chyornyj Slon, his jaw set. “We must do nothing.”

“Oh... oh Celestia,” said Fluttershy covering her mouth. Pinkie tried to comfort her, while Dash fumed. They couldn’t hand over the Nightmare. They couldn’t buy any more time. The sight of their friend bound and blindfolded was maddening, terrible.

“No! Twilight!” screamed Dash. She tried to leap into the air, but a loud *crack* sounded, and she landed back down, one wing spasming at the wrong angle. “Gahh!” She slammed her hoof against the ground, tears in her eyes, staring at her friend across the churning moat. “Twilight!”

The minutes ticked by.

“I can’t stand it!” cried Fluttershy. “I can’t do this!” she turned to run, crashing into Applejack, who pulled her into a tight embrace. “Let go of me,” said Fluttershy. “Don’t make me watch! Please, don’t make me watch!” She sobbed into Applejack’s shoulder.

Pinkie’s eyes were rapt with horror, but she could not tear them away from the scene of Twilight, waiting, waiting. For once in her life, the party pony was speechless.

Rainbow Dash cast about with uncharacteristic despair, to find that all her friends had the same helpless look on their faces. “We’ve got to do something,” said Dash in a ragged voice. “C’mon, please...”

But nopony could think of anything to do.

• • •

“Commander!” said Purple Heart, rushing back through the double-doors.

He found Cinnamon Oatmeal hunched over the Nightmare’s prone form.

“Sir...?” said Purple Heart. “What... what are you doing?”

“Hmm?” said Cinnamon, looking up. “Oh, just making sure she wasn’t coming to. Can’t be too careful.”

“Right...” said Purple Heart. “Okay.”

He just lied, thought the medic. The Commander just lied to me.

“Uh, sir,” said Purple Heart, “we’ve got a problem out there. You heard what Shield Banner said?”

“Yes,” said Cinnamon. “And we have no options. We must let Twilight do her duty.”

“I... I figured as much,” said Purple Heart. His eyes darted over toward the Nightmare, and strangely enough, the medic noticed Cinnamon Oatmeal unconsciously lean towards her, as if wishing to hide something. On a whim, Purple Heart’s eyes flashed gold and he scanned the Nightmare’s body.

Her soul was a swirled black-and-blood-red, as usual, but nothing out of the ordinary. Her physical body was identical to his last scan. Even her neural pathways were within control parameters. *Okay Heart, he thought. Combat stress. It’s causing paranoia. You have to get this under control.* His eyes flicked up to Cinnamon, preparing to speak about the situation again, but the words died on his tongue.

Cinnamon’s soul was the same black-and-blood-red swirl as the Nightmare.

“Too much,” said Purple Heart. “You drank too much.”

“Ah, the undead,” said Cinnamon with a smirk. His veins burned like a map of lava-lines. He examined his hooves and wings as if seeing them for the first time. “Not quite as pathetic as the meatbags, but still woefully impermanent. After all, you can still be killed. It just takes a little more effort.” His fangs glinted in the low light. Behind him, the Nightmare stirred, began to sit up.

Purple Heart leaped into the air, trying to get away, but Cinnamon had always been a little faster.

• • •

Time was up.

“I wish this was my decision to make,” said Shield Banner quietly, just to Twilight. “But I must disable the Elements of Harmony. It was *you* who attacked the Marenarchy, and *Celestia* who ordered you killed. I am only the instrument of justice.”

“You sound like you’re trying to convince yourself,” said Twilight. “Either way, I’m all done begging. If you’re going to do it, do it. Just know that you’re making the biggest mistake of your life, that waiting another hour could have saved the kingdom.”

Shield Banner’s sword rang like a bell as it cleared the sheath. Twilight heard it spin over and turn upside down behind her back, felt the cold point touch her neck.

“I’ll make it quick,” said Shield Banner. “Out of respect for your brother.”

Twilight Sparkle closed her eyes under the blindfold. *No more sleepovers at the library, she thought. No more Winter Wrap Up, no more tea with Rarity, or dinner with the Apple family. No more book club with Rainbow Dash. No more Pinkie parties, no more quiet talks with Fluttershy. And no more Spike – the only brother I have left.*

They were all so much stronger than they knew. Her death did not mean defeat. Her friends would find a way to win this thing without her. They would never give up.

Now that her time had come, Twilight Sparkle was calm. She didn't even flinch as the blade came down on her.

• • •

A single drop of blood. It rolled down Twilight's neck, following the curve of her clavicle. The point had gone in exactly one millimeter before slamming to a halt.

The sword hung in midair, radiating dark blue energy – a telekinetic field which had swept away Shield Banner's magic like dried leaves. For a moment, it pulsed with light, then the sword flung itself into the churning flood.

A silhouette appeared at the top of an adjoining staircase and a collective gasp swept the room. It was Princess Luna.

The night-sky alicorn descended the stairs, making her way down to the marble dais that rose over the flood waters. It was only when she reached the platform and snapped a glowing orb of moonlight into the air that the extent of her injuries became apparent. The Princess was back, but she was not healed. Her broken wings were bound tightly to her sides, and her horn was swathed in bandages where it had been reattached to her forehead. Her coat was torn and matted. But she was still Luna, and she projected a palpable sense of power and command.

"Your majesty!" said Shield Banner, falling to his knees. The rest of the ponies quickly followed suit.

"Captain," said Luna quietly. "Order your soldiers to stand down. You have been the victim of the Nightmare's manipulation. The Elements of Harmony have been right all along."

"The..." Shield Banner took a step back. *Of course, it was always a possibility.*

What if I'm wrong, what if I'm wrong. A mantra since the events of the night had taken a turn for the stranger, since Spike and Rarity had cast doubt on Celestia's story. *What if I'm wrong...* He'd not really had an answer, except to trust his own intuition. Shield Banner's blood rang hollow in his ears. His throat went dry. *I've been used by the Nightmare. I've been a tool of evil.* A profound sense of unreality swept over him. This was his worst fear come to life.

Then his eyes narrowed, and he recast his gaze at Luna in suspicion.

Luna's laughter was utterly humorless. "Do you suspect me as well now, Captain? Perhaps I am the ringleader of this imagined coup d'état. Perhaps this was all just the first gambit in some 'War of Lunar Independence?' I promise that if that were the case, Captain, you would already be dead."

Her horn flared like the full moon, and the rumbling of water ceased. The atrium became a still, silent lake, echoing with hollow drips. The storm outside had abated, leaving behind the fresh scent of washed earth.

"I suppose you will be needing this," said Luna, dipping her head, and a delicate glowing sigil lifted from her horn. It floated like a leaf, down into Shield Banner's hoof.

This is accurate, he thought, examining the tiny blue glyph. *It's Princess Luna's royal seal. This proves her identity beyond a doubt.*

For a moment, nopony in the atrium spoke another word. At last, Shield Banner scraped his wits back together.

"You," he rasped to a nearby sergeant. "Release the Apprentice." The pony leaped to obey. Shield Banner turned to his clerk. "Recall the secret weapon. For goddess' sake... do that right away. Inform the medical corps of Rarity's condition. And get them ready to receive Princess Luna, Twilight Sparkle, and Commander Oatmeal as well."

"Don't forget the Nightmare, Captain," said Twilight Sparkle, as her bonds were released. She pulled off her blindfold, to reveal a gaze like violet stone.

Shield Banner nodded, meeting her gaze with one of his own. They were just doing their jobs now. "Yes, somepony inform the diviners that we'll need everything they've got on demonic exorcism."

"Right away, sir," said the clerk. He could barely stop bowing long enough to leave the room.

Luna's horn flared with moonlight and the surface of the water froze over in a blast of divine frost magic. Together with the Elements of Harmony, the Princess of the Night crossed the atrium to stand before Twilight and Shield Banner.

The four Elements immediately swept Twilight up into a tearful hug. Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie were weeping openly, and Applejack was doing a poor job of holding her own tears back.

Dash was furious. She charged over to Shield Banner and swung on him.

He didn't lift a hoof to defend himself. It was a good one, too – a true aura-charged pegasus punch, crashing against his cheek, cutting his lip open. Shield Banner spit out blood and wiped the back of his mouth with a hoof. Dash went in for seconds, and the Princess stopped her this time.

"I think we've had," said Luna quietly, "enough of that."

Dash pulled her hoof back and rubbed her fore-ankle. For a moment, she stared daggers at Shield Banner. Then she said: "How... how is Spitfire doing?"

"It was touch-and-go at first, but they say she's going to make it," said Shield Banner. "I'll let you know the moment her condition changes."

"Okay," said Dash. "Good." She pointed a hoof at him. "This isn't over between us. Not by a long shot. The Princess won't be there to protect you forever. Uh, no offense, Your Highness."

"None taken," said Luna with some amusement. She turned back to Shield Banner as Dash stormed off. "I must see Celestia right away, but first things first. I'm afraid under the circumstances, I must relieve you of your duties as Captain of the Guard."

"Of course, Your Majesty," said Shield Banner. His voice was unwavering, but it sounded far-away in his ears. This was the end of everything he'd spent a lifetime building. "I will submit my resignation at the soonest possible opportunity. May I suggest Hard Target from B Company for my interim replacement?"

"Very well. But you misunderstand, I can not accept your resignation."

"Your highness, I have tried to do the best job I could tonight. I have been overindulgent in my duties, perhaps, but I operated from the most convincing evidence at the time. It

was not enough. There is now a severe conflict of interest between the Royal Guard and the Elements of Harmony.”

“I’m well aware,” said Luna. “That is why I am currently detaching you from the Royal Guard, and reinstating you as a junior member of the Night Guard.”

“Your... Your Highness!?”

“Captain, whatever your crimes tonight, you are Shining Armor’s successor and the finest battle-caster in the corps. We simply can not do without you until the crisis is past. And for what it is worth, you should know that I am sympathetic to your situation, and that I am no stranger to extreme measures myself. By grace, I certainly am not. What transpired between you and the Elements is unfortunate. But that is war.”

“I’m not sure what to say, Princess.”

“Do not thank me yet,” said Luna, “for I doubt my sister will agree with my verdict. She rarely does. Come now, Captain, it is time to see what the monster has done to her.”

• • •

“Commander Oatmeal,” called Luna, as they pushed in through the double doors. “Lieutenant Heart!” But there was no answer. For some reason all of the wall-lamps had been extinguished, and shadows swathed the room in long, dark strokes.

“Something’s wrong,” said Fluttershy, stopping dead in her tracks.

“No kidding, love,” said the agent, straightening his glasses and taking the lead. He was flanked on the right by Chyornyj Slon, and by AJ and Dash on the left. They spread out into the room, everypony on guard.

“Blood,” said Slon after a moment. Sure enough, a spray of blood sliced across the shadows on the floor, and a streaking trail led off around the corner.

“Oh, no!” cried the intelligence agent suddenly. His voice was filled with such despair that they all charged over to him, expecting a dead body, or worse. Instead, what they saw was a little circle of ash-piles on the floor. “Oh, goddess,” said the agent placing a hoof to his forehead. “Oh, goddess, no.”

“What is this?” said Dash.

“My magic dampeners!” cried the agent. “Look at what’s become of them! Do you have any idea how long it took me to acquire that many!? And now they’re ruined! Utterly ruined!” He fell to his knees and started scooping the ash into a jar.

Fluttershy looked nonplussed. “You shouldn’t scare ponies like that.”

“The one who should be scared is the Nightmare,” said the agent in a black tone. He turned and the lantern glare in his spectacles obscured his eyes. “She’s crossed the line now.”

“Commander Oatmeal did this,” said Slon, walking over to the discarded stretcher. The bindings had been severed by magic.

Applejack arched an eyebrow. “Come again, partner?”

“Negative magic,” Twilight spoke up. “He destroyed the orbs with negative magic. It would be the only way.”

“Nightmare’s blood causes evil thoughts,” said the agent. “Isn’t that what you said earlier, Slon?”

“Da,” Slon rumbled.

“This totally sucks!” exclaimed Dash.

“Y’all,” said Applejack, poking her head into the room, “come look at this.”

The copious trail of blood led down the hallway, through the door into a restroom, and down into a floor drain. They all looked at it for a moment, letting the ramifications sink in.

“Gross,” said Pinkie Pie, at last.

“Looks like they’ve escaped,” said Twilight. “But why escape at all? Why not just attack when Luna is weakest? What is she waiting for?”

“Dawn,” said Luna. “She’s waiting for dawn.”

Their gaze turned up to the skylights. Already, the first rays of the morning pressed against the fading storm. Blue sky peeked through the clouds. It looked like it was going to be a bright and sunny day.

“Princess,” said Shield Banner, poking his head in through the doorway, “we found Purple Heart.”

“Show me,” said Luna.

It was a short walk to a nearby reception area. They came upon a circle of medics attending to a heap on the floor that might once have been a pony. Purple Heart’s wounds were so grievous that even Luna could not look upon him without discomfort. He was barely alive.

“Step aside,” said Luna to the other medics, who were fumbling with the Night Guard’s aberrant anatomy. The Princess lay down and cradled Purple Heart against her body, passing a hoof over his cold brow.

“I tried to get away...” said the Night Guard medic. “To warn...”

“I know,” said Luna. “You have done well tonight.”

“...Glad... my death... means something...” said Purple Heart. “...Always afraid I’d just... slip in the bathtub... you know?” His laughter turned into coughing.

“But you can’t die!” said Pinkie, distraught. “You’re already dead!”

“He’s been exposed to UV radiation,” said Twilight. “I... I don’t think there’s anything we can do now.”

“...Got to see sunlight one last time,” said Purple Heart.

Slon approached, picked up his friend’s hoof. “You have always been one badass pony,” said Slon, “for a capitalist pig-dog.”

“Thanks, Slon,” said Purple Heart. “Sorry I won’t be able to visit Stalliongrad this summer after all...”

“When we meet again, comrade,” said Slon, “*you* can show *me* around.”

“Deal,” said Purple Heart. He coughed again and when he recovered, his breath was a death rattle. “Where’s the Apprentice?” he whispered. “I have to talk to her.”

“I’m right here,” said Twilight.

“Take... my hoof...”

She clasped it. A rush of negative magic shot through her like lightning, hitting her spine, coursing up and down through her nervous system to the ends of her hooves. *He’s erasing the past, she thought, taking the threads of fate onto himself, transferring my wounds, my exhaustion to himself.*

At last, the waves of temporal disturbance settled. Purple Heart fell back, all of his strength spent. “Tell Cinnamon I forgive him,” he whispered. His gold eyes shimmered. “And tell Slim I’ll see her around. And that her cooking sucks.”

Then, with a soft, sifting noise, the pony began to disintegrate. His hooves collapsed into ash, his chest and face caved in like a burning log. Within twenty seconds, the dark pegasus was nothing more than an outline of dust, which scattered as a draft blew in from the atrium.

Twilight lifted herself to her hooves. She stomped and snorted, tail whipping back and forth with strength. All of her wounds were gone. Her horn let off a pulse of renewed magic that made all their ears pop. Everypony stared at her in shock, except for Luna, who looked on with grim satisfaction.

“A fitting final act,” said the Princess of the Night.

• • •

Twilight eyes settled on the night-sky alicorn. “What now?”

“Now for Celestia,” said Luna. “If I know my sister, she has surely left some sort of clue for us to follow.”

“The message!” said Twilight. “‘Two Princesses must act as one.’ That’s what Celestia wrote on the wall right before the Nightmare took control of her. Does that phrase mean anything to you?”

“The Failsafe,” said Luna, looking surprised for a moment, then pensive. “By grace, these really are desperate times.”

“What is the Failsafe?” demanded Twilight.

“It is a spell,” said Luna, “designed long before Celestia and I were born, when the government was still shifting from unicorn to alicorn rule. They knew the sun would

always be more powerful than the moon, and that any pair of alicorns linked to the two would share that imbalance. So they created a way for the lesser to even the odds, just in case the greater ever decided to follow a path of tyranny.

“What we faced before was Celestia in her night-cycle. She will reach her maximum power at sunrise and none of us will stand a chance after that, least of all me. If we are to win, we must sever the connection between the alicorn and her star. We must block out the sun.”

“Block out the sun?” said Dash. “What the heck is big enough to do that?”

“I know,” said Twilight. “The moon.”

Luna nodded. No pony else spoke for a few moments.

At last, Pinkie Pie said: “Why wouldn’t the Princess just write: Failsafe?”

“Because it wasn’t a conscious thought when she wrote it,” said Luna. “It was premonition. And premonition is never meant for pony eyes. I must warn you all, the Failsafe is a terrible gamble. Once the casting is begun, it can not be interrupted or the consequences for the solar system could be... dire.”

“Just tell us what to do, Princess,” said Twilight.

“First things first. Shield Banner, round up what is left of the Royal Guard and get them ready for a mass-teleport to Canterlot. In order to use the Failsafe, we will need a magic transmitter that can amplify our efforts enough to move the heavens off their tracks.”

“Aye, Princess,” said Shield Banner, and he left through the swinging doors.

“This *trans-mitter*,” said Applejack, wrestling with the unfamiliar word. “It’s at the castle?”

“No,” said Luna. “It *is* the castle.”

“Did I make it in time for cake?” came a voice from behind them all. “Please tell me there’s still some cake left.” They all turned to see an exhausted Spike climbing up a back stairwell with a bedraggled Rarity in his forelegs. They were both soaking wet.

“Spikey!” shrieked Pinkie Pie. “Rarity!”

“Hey guys,” said Spike. “Hey Princess, you look good.”

“I *knew* you were alive,” said Luna with the hint of a smile. “I *knew* it. My dragon is tougher than all of the Royals combined!”

“Are either of you hurt?” said Twilight, rushing over with the rest of the girls.

“Not me,” said Spike. “Just...” he panted, “had to swim a long, long way to get out of those tunnels. Rarity, though... I don’t know what’s wrong with her.”

Rarity looked as if she was listening to far-off sounds. When she looked over at Twilight, it was without recognition. She did not even really seem to know where she was.

“Rarity,” said Spike. “Say something.”

Nothing.

“Okay,” said Fluttershy, as she took Rarity gently by the shoulders. “Okay, Rarity, come with me. We’re going to go have a seat over in this office and I’m going to make sure you’re not injured anywhere.” Fluttershy looked up. “Pinkie, you want to give me a hoof over here, please?”

Rarity allowed herself to be led inside, walking without a word, without expression. Staring at nothing.

Spike watched them leave. He covered his face with his hands and swore bitterly, started to walk away. Luna caught up to him halfway down the hall, cleared her throat, but he just walked faster.

“Spike, stop,” she ordered.

He stopped but didn’t look at her.

She walked up beside him. “Spike, I am sorry about what happened to Rarity.”

“I thought I’d saved her!”

“You may still have. We will just have to see what the doctors and mystics say. Do not give up yet, Spike.”

“I’m going to bucking *kill* the Nightmare, Luna,” he said, smoke pouring from his nostrils, “I’m going to rip her right off of Celestia and break her in half over my knee.”

“While I appreciate the sentiment,” said Luna, her midnight-eyes flashing, “it appears that you’re letting your emotions get the better of you. As I suspect you did earlier. I think we both know what happens then.”

Spike glanced at the ground. “It makes me predictable.”

“It makes you *quite* predictable. No wonder you allowed yourself to be swept up in a trap set by a Royal, of all ponies. I was *sure* I had trained you better than that.”

“You did.”

She let him sweat for a few more moments, but then the Princess sighed and her tone eased a bit. “Learn from this, and then let it go. True, you blundered into a trap. But it speaks volumes that you survived, and perhaps even managed to save Rarity.”

“Yeah, *maybe*,” rumbled Spike.

Luna moved into his line of vision so that their eyes met. Emerald-green, night-sky blue. “Spike, you made a mistake. But otherwise, you have shown the utmost bravery and leadership throughout this long night. Despite your stumbles, you have not disappointed me. You have never disappointed me, my dragon.”

“Princess,” said Spike with surprise. “You... you’ve never... I mean, you’re always so hard on me –”

“Because I believe in you,” she said. “And because we all knew this day would come. So my sister and I both picked our champions. Celestia chose Twilight Sparkle, and I chose you. You must admit, after all this time, it is almost a relief to play the game we have practiced for so long.”

“Oh, for sure,” said Spike. “I’m having a great time.” He sighed and looked back down the hallway, where Dash and Twilight were pretending not to eavesdrop. “Uh, Princess,” said Spike, turning to Luna again, “I hate to ask, but have we lost anypony?”

“Purple Heart is dead,” said Luna. “Cinnamon Oatmeal is possessed and in the Nightmare’s thrall. There are many serious injuries on the Royals’ side, but surprisingly, no fatalities.”

“None?” said Spike. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

She shook her head.

“Wow,” he said. “Twilight and her crazy non-lethal schemes. Too bad for Purple Heart, though. That stallion could play skee-ball like no pony I’ve ever seen. Skee-ball. What a random skill.”

“That was his cutie mark,” said Luna. “Before he became Night Guard. I am not sure if I could blame him for choosing a different path in life. It is to our lasting benefit that he chose us instead.”

“Amen to that,” said Spike.

• • •

An hour later, as true sunrise neared, the various defenders of Equestria found themselves digging in around the Canterlot Observatory. The building lay on a prominence a quarter-mile up the mountainside from the castle proper. Twilight had to marvel at the view. Equestria looked like a patchwork-quilt from this high up.

The ragtag remainder of the Guard crouched in position behind sandbag barriers set up around the Observatory. Well over a third of the corps was missing from the lines, having been taken to the Canterlot Horsepital instead, and many of the remaining troops were rookies or noncombatants. The soldiers shifted nervously in their positions.

These soldiers are in hastily reconstituted units, brooded Luna. Many haven’t held a weapon since basic training. Even as an ambush asset, they will need strong leadership. Thank goodness they trust Hard Target. And thank goodness Spike returned to me. To us.

A number of times already, she had considered not using the Failsafe after all. It was a terribly selfish thing to do, to endanger the lives of every creature on this planet, just to prevent the Nightmare from seizing control of Equestria. Except that Luna knew it wouldn’t stop with Equestria. It wasn’t unforeseeable that the Nightmare might enslave the entire world’s population, what with Celestia’s power added to her own. And that was a fate worse than death.

At least this way, they’d go down fighting.

“Hard Target,” she said. The stallion cantered over.

“Yes, Princess.”

“I need to be absolutely clear about this. Do not order your soldiers to attack until the Event occurs. No matter what. The Nightmare’s regeneration makes any attack prior to the Event next-to-useless. We will use the strike team first, to hold her until the Event. Let the strike team do its job. Do not attack too soon, or I promise, she will reap through your ponies like a field of wheat.”

“Aye, Your Majesty,” said Hard Target. “We will wait, no matter what.”

• • •

Shield Banner’s horn glowed orange as he lifted the giant crystal lens into place. He was almost finished re-calibrating the Observatory’s main telescope. *I really hope this works*, he thought, tightening down the copper bolts to secure the lens. Before him lay several pages of Twilight Sparkle’s hastily-written chicken scratch, themselves interpretations of some ancient schematic from the Canterlot Archives. It had been a long time since the Failsafe had been devised, and as Shield Banner measured the angle of the lens, he couldn’t help but think how easy it would be to mistranslate a single word, or forget to carry the six. Then they’d all be dead.

Putting my life in the hooves of a mare I damn near put to the sword.

His future was bleak even if he did survive. Ironically, his chances actually got worse if they managed to save Celestia. He knew she would be furious with him. Would he be drummed out of the service? Would he be imprisoned? For a pony who craved stability, this was excruciating. And to think, just this morning, he’d been looking at houses in the city.

“The blink of an eye,” he muttered to himself, twisting the lens into its felt-lined housing. He held up a protractor and measured the angle, made another adjustment. “Your life can change in the blink of an eye...”

“Shield.”

He turned to look behind him. “Fluttershy,” he said. He turned back to his work. “I’m sorry, but not now.”

“Really?” she said. “After everything that’s happened, that’s all I get?”

“I am in the middle of a precise operation here. You and I *do* need to talk, but this is not the time or the place.”

“I’m in the process of treating Rarity,” said Fluttershy. “Just tell me what you did to her and I’ll leave.”

“Some of the details are classified. Maybe if you had security clearance... but you’re not a Royal Guard doctor.”

Fluttershy looked at him nonplussed. She held up a gold necklace, studded with a large pink gem in the shape of a butterfly. The legendary artifact thrummed with power that rattled a nearby teacup in its saucer. “Well?” she said.

Shield Banner paused, looked around. They were alone in the room for the moment. He turned back to the massive array of lenses inside the copper telescope, rearranging a few more of them with his magic. “I used an invasive mind probe on her,” he said. “I can’t say that I was gentle about it, either.”

“That’s... horrible.”

“She turned out to be rather hard to read, actually, so when Spitfire’s information came through, there was little reason to continue the probe. At that point, I decided to employ her as a trap for the dragon. I implanted an aggression hex-cocktail that amplified her more dangerous instincts and placed her into Spike’s path with a few well-chosen weapons.”

Fluttershy was ashen-faced. “What then?”

“Then, I don’t know. The explosion happened, the flood. I guess he managed to swim with her to the surface.”

She shook her head, her shock turning to anger, despair. She was feeling too much at once. “I... I just don’t even know what to say, Shield. You should *see* what you did to her. I don’t know if she’ll *ever* be the same.”

“I wish I could take it back,” said Shield Banner, firmly. “I never meant to hurt an innocent. This whole thing has been one disaster after another for everypony involved. I’ve made some incorrect decisions and others have paid the price. I’m going to have a price to pay myself, eventually.”

“Shield Banner, I’m *not* mad at you for hurting my friends,” said Fluttershy. “Can you believe it? I know that the Nightmare made us fight each other. *We* hurt a lot of *your* ponies too, to say nothing of all those poor, innocent sea creatures! I’m mad because you *liked* it. You took *joy* in hurting my friends, as revenge for what happened to the Princesses. That’s not duty, that’s cruelty.”

“What can I say, Fluttershy? That I’m sorry? Fine, I’m sorry. I’m just a pony, after all. But I’m also sorry that you seem to think the real world is as gentle and sweet as your darling little animal sanctuary of happy endings.”

“What I *thought*,” said Fluttershy, her voice thick, “was that you were a decent stallion. I guess that was my mistake.” She turned and walked away.

He watched her leave. “Horseradish,” he said.

• • •

The first rays of the dawn breached the horizon. After the long night, the sun seemed too-bright, piercing. It was hard not to marvel at its beauty, even though everypony knew what it meant.

“Nightmare’s awake,” whispered Dash to herself as she soared through the sky.

To the south, far beyond the edge of the Everfree, Dash’s excellent pegasus vision picked out a single point of light well above the horizon. The light grew brighter and brighter, started accelerating straight for Observatory Hill, leaving a fiery contrail in its wake.

There she is! thought Dash. Luna had said the Nightmare was going to be pretty far away in order to avoid scans from the Royal Diviners, but she hadn’t said anything about space! *Looks like the Nightmare’s about... two hundred leagues out, going, maybe a half-league per second?* Dash wasn’t exactly a math whiz, but she could do flight calculations in her sleep. *Got a little wiggle-room, a few minutes, but no more than that. Time to send the signal!*

She pulled a cardboard-tube contraption out of her saddlebag. Pinkie had tried to tell Dash how to use this thing, but the party pony was notorious for saying a whole lot while basically saying nothing. Dash started going over the steps in her head. *Okay, 1. Place hoof on cardboard handle, 2. Point blue arrow away from face... or was that towards face?* She turned it over a few times. *Got to be away from face.* 3. *Grip string firmly.* Dash took the plastic end-ring in her teeth. 4. *Close eyes,* 5. *Pray...*

She hauled on it with all of her might. Something in the tube ignited. The thing let out a massive explosion of multicolored sparks and confetti, along with a thunderous sound of flatulence that echoed across the whole valley.

• • •

“The signal!” said Pinkie Pie, jumping up and down. She exploded into paroxysms of laughter and rolled around in the grass.

“Really Pinkie!?” exclaimed Twilight, standing next to her on Observatory Hill. “Pranking Rainbow Dash when we’re in the middle of all this? Are you nuts?”

“I for one thought it was funny,” said Princess Luna with a chuckle. “And why not one more laugh before we roll the grand dice?”

“One minute!” shouted the caller, eye stuck to his spyglass. They could see the pinprick of light in the sky now, growing brighter and brighter, closer and closer. It was silent, though.

She’s outrunning her own sound waves, thought Spike with a sinking sensation. How in the world are we going to survive this? Again? I didn’t ask for any of this crap. I just wanted to get drunk and hit on mares last night, but no-o-o, some insane disembodied pony soul has to come and try to kill me and everypony I love –

“Spike,” said Luna. “I am needed inside. Remember, you are third to engage. Let the other two take her for as long as they can.”

“Yes, Princess.”

Then, seemingly on impulse, she leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. “Fight well, my dragon.”

He watched her gallop off without another word.

Spike touched his cheek for a second. Then he turned back around to see an intense, bright light in the sky, racing toward them like a living comet.

The Nightmare had arrived.

• • •

Omigosh, omigosh, thought Fluttershy. *Omigosh, omigosh, omigosh!* She kept her eyes tightly closed. The air in the Observatory's tiny entrance parlor seemed stuffy, too hot. She couldn't breathe! She had to get away!

"Ready, Fluttershy?" said Twilight, from behind the yellow pegasus.

"No," said Fluttershy in a tiny voice. "But, yes."

"Don't worry," said Twilight. "You've got this. You can do this."

"Squeak!"

Twilight peered through the peep-hole. "Just another few seconds. Get ready!"

The light in the frosted-glass windows grew brighter and brighter. Fluttershy's heart pounded like mad. She was drenched in a cold sweat, knowing that if anything went wrong, even slightly, she would be dead before she hit the ground. But she had no choice. *Face the Nightmare now, or run from her forever.*

"Now, Fluttershy! Now!" Twilight's horn flared with magic and the doors to the Observatory slammed wide open.

Fluttershy took three steps across the threshold, stood directly in the path of the oncoming meteor, and opened her eyes.

• • •

The Nightmare hung in midair, an equine inferno wreathed in plasma-flame. All pretense of impersonating Celestia was gone. Her eyes were blazing red spotlights, her mouth full of fangs. Celestia's rose-tinted coat burned with an inner light of its own, a glare so bright that it made the morning sky seem pitch-black in comparison. She was a force of nature.

And she was trapped in the Stare.

"Hold position!" commanded Hard Target. "Hold position! Wait for the Event!"

Whoah... thought Spike as he watched the living comet churn and roil, dwarfing the tiny yellow pegasus standing before it. The Nightmare's spherical firestorm was sending off a fierce, hot gale that beat against the soldiers, whipping Fluttershy's mane and tail around

like a pair of flags. Spike could only imagine the willpower that kept the yellow pegasus rooted in place.

But it worked! he thought.

A brutal handful of seconds ticked by. Fluttershy's hair began to singe at the tips, and the pegasus started wilting like a flower in the intense heat. But even as her legs grew limp and her shoulders sagged, Fluttershy's expression only hardened, and the gentle yellow pegasus actually leaned in towards the inferno and mouthed a number of words. Spike could just barely read her lips from where he stood.

"How dare you!?" said Fluttershy to the Nightmare's beautiful, terrible face. "*How DARE you!?*"

“Twilight Sparkle,” shouted Luna from across the Observatory’s main chamber. “The time is now!”

“Just rest here, Rarity,” said Twilight. She eased the white unicorn down on a padded bench off to the side of the telescope. “Don’t move, okay? This will be over in just a few minutes. I hope.”

Rarity’s eyes were dull and unfocused. Twilight couldn’t even tell if she understood what was going on.

“Twilight Sparkle!” shouted Luna again.

“Here I am, here I am!” said Twilight, scrambling into position. “Ready to begin the broadcast!”

Luna dipped her head, and her horn flared dark blue, mixed with the white of moonlight. A chime sounded, a delicate tone that hung in the air.

Twilight’s horn pulsed with violet light, and an answering tone joined Luna’s. Then a pulse of deeper purple, and the sonorous sound of a bell. Twilight’s horn flared green, red, yellow, and each time a new chime echoed throughout the Observatory, creating a haunting melody of magic. Luna’s echoing tones joined hers, and the two ponies wove together a song so ancient that it had serenaded the birth of the universe.

It was the Music of the Spheres.

• • •

“Your strength is waning, little filly,” taunted the Nightmare.

Fluttershy drilled her eyes into the Nightmare’s gaze. Spike had mentioned that while fighting the demon at the University, he had caught a glimpse of her soul, and realized that she had been born a pony. Now with the Stare, Fluttershy could see much the same thing, except that she could also judge the nature of that soul.

“Celestia teaches us forgiveness,” said Fluttershy, the roar of swirling fire almost drowning her out. “You may be a dark goddess now, but you were just a foal back then, all alone in a plague-ravaged city. Your mother and father died and left you by yourself.”

The Nightmare's eyes narrowed to hear her own past, but she said nothing.

"You were an orphan," said Fluttershy. "You were scared! But you don't have to be scared anymore. We can help you... you're not alone."

"We're all alone, you fool," laughed the Nightmare. "Even when we are shoulder-to-shoulder with a thousand others. Because nopony is ever truly out for anypony but themselves. Even the great saints did what they did in order to gain personal karma, and the favors of fate. Altruism is just hidden bargaining."

"The reason doesn't matter," said Fluttershy.

"Yes, it does!" said the Nightmare. "Yes! It! Does! You're as naive as a newborn if you think your Princess is any different. Celestia has turned your society into a flock of sheep even more obedient and blind than the barnyard animals you hold in thrall. You're nothing more than her pets. And I should just give this body back and retire to this 'peace?' You insult me."

"So instead, you devour souls," said Fluttershy. "You take from the helpless. You murder the innocent!"

"Oh, I've done worse than *that*," scoffed the Nightmare. "The truth is that every pony has to decide what to sacrifice. If they decide that their arbitrary 'morals' prevent them from sacrificing *what is necessary*, if they decide that it's 'just not worth it,' then they die. I've made a different choice."

Fluttershy shook her head. "Thank grace that your mother isn't alive to see this. If she wasn't already dead, you would kill her with disappointment."

"What do I care about *her*?" cried the Nightmare, suddenly furious. "About any of them? They've been dust for two thousand years!" Her blazing corona thundered and lashed, the light growing to almost blinding. Her voice reduced to a thin whisper. "But you're here right now, and I'm here right now. So scream, my little pony. Scream."

Fluttershy cried out in the intense heat, and blisters appeared on her forelegs, her neck. Still, she dared not turn her eyes away from the Nightmare. If she did, they would all be dead in a second.

"Wait for the Event!" Hard Target was shouting to his troops. "Wait for the Event!"

And then they heard the music.

It was beautiful.

“Too late,” said the Nightmare.

Fluttershy had reached her physical limit. Her eyes rolled up into her head as she collapsed to the ground.

The Nightmare formed a whip made of plasma-fire, flung it high into the morning light, and brought it down directly upon the yellow pegasus. There was a solar-flare explosion so fierce that it flash-boiled the ground under her, blasting the rock up into a lava font. But when the smoke and lava-spray cleared, it became apparent that the plasma-whip lay against the surface of an orange force-bubble. Inside, Shield Banner stood defiantly before the Nightmare, protecting the fallen Fluttershy.

Nightmare erupted with laughter. “Trying to redeem yourself *now*, tool? It’s a little late for that!” Her whip flew into the sky and then exploded down against Shield Banner’s force-field again. The ground under the former Guard Captain fractured like broken glass, and he grunted as blood ran from his nose and ears.

The music from the Observatory grew louder and louder, echoing out across the valley. The whole castle began to shake, sonic waves resonating from deep within its stone core. The sky took on a faintly red tint.

For the first time, a look of worry passed over the Nightmare’s face. “Bah!” she said, dismissing the former Guard Captain. She leaped into the air, aiming to arc over Shield Banner and fly into the Observatory through the open dome. But just as she cleared the outer-wall and caught sight of Twilight and Luna inside the main chamber, an orange tractor-beam snagged her rear hoof and stretched like rubber as she soared upwards. It stretched further and further, refusing to break, until at last, the reverse-pull of the beam outpaced her weakened flight-aura. She sling-shotted backwards, away from the Observatory and crashed down against the hard flagstones in a cloud of dust.

“I’m not finished with you, yet,” said Shield Banner through gritted, bloody teeth. He lowered his horn and charged her.

The sky’s red tint deepened. A shadow was falling across the land of Equestria.

The Nightmare turned back towards Shield Banner, screaming in rage, her lava whips slicing the ground to ribbons. Shield Banner dodged to the side as chips of stone exploded all around him. The moment the Nightmare’s attack had passed, Shield Banner was up on his hooves again, teeth gritted, nostrils flaring, leaping directly at his foe.

They traded blows. She fired a purple sunbolt just as Shield Banner's horn skidded along her right elbow. There was a ferocious flash of orange light and the Nightmare recoiled into the air, blood spraying from the stump where Shield Banner had teleported her foreleg off. But Shield Banner felt a brilliant spike of magic stab through his soul and let out a scream of agony as they both fell.

I can't teleport now... thought Shield Banner through a haze of red. *But I have to continue the attack until one of us is dead!* The point of military training, Shield Banner had learned early on, was not just to learn to fight. It was to learn to fight *automatically*, so that in circumstances where death was seconds away, where the soldier was riding the edge of physical and mental exhaustion, he would still kill the enemy.

Shield Banner landed on all four hooves, watching the Nightmare spin away in midair, timing his next attack to lead the target with perfect geometry. His heart pounded with agony and fear, but he knew his aim would be true.

A fan of orange arrows leaped from his horn, arcing to points fifteen feet behind the Nightmare, and sure enough, she flew right into them. The conjured projectiles *thunked* all up-and-down the alicorn's body, piercing her wings, chest, and neck. Her back spasmed as she lost control of her flight-aura and fell from the air, bouncing several times across the stone, tumbling down a grassy hill, splashing out in a massive reflecting-pool. For the moment, she lay still.

"Fluttershy!" said Shield Banner, rushing over to the dazed pegasus. "Can you stand?"

"I... I think so," she said. She clearly had first- and second-degree burns all across her chest and legs. "Dizzy..."

"Put your foreleg around my neck. We've got to get you out of here –"

They were interrupted by the thunderous roar of flames. Shield Banner turned to see the Nightmare explode from the reflecting pool down below, flash-vaporizing the water into steam. Her stump-foreleg was beginning to regrow already.

"Get ready to hold your breath," ordered Shield Banner, and Fluttershy squeezed her eyes shut and clung tightly to him.

The Nightmare tore through the air on a plasma-contrail and came screaming down upon them, lava-whips whirling and slashing like roto-copter blades. At the last second, Shield Banner's horn flared orange and he and Fluttershy sunk down into the stone at

their feet. The lava-whips carved glowing lines in the ground, but none of them struck flesh.

“Clever,” chuckled the Nightmare, her pupils turning red as she peered down into the stone. *Of course, they can’t stay too deep for too long.* Her wings opened and she took off into the air, scanning the ground, tracking the two ponies as they melded through the rock. Instead of moving directly back to the Observatory, Shield Banner was apparently headed toward a lone tower hanging out over the cliff. It was a safe place to leave the pegasus, or rather, it would have been, except that now the Nightmare had a quick plan to kill them both.

Just as they reemerged from the stone, both gasping for air, the Nightmare used her plasma-lash to slice through the entire rock-outcropping. The tower and its staircase detached from Canterlot Mountain, falling backwards as Shield Banner and Fluttershy ran for their lives over the crumbling ground. They leaped into space as they neared the edge, but Fluttershy’s wing was injured and she shrieked and pitched downwards. The Nightmare watched Shield Banner turn in midair, trying to catch the pegasus with a magic tether. Then they both fell out of sight.

The Nightmare let out a victorious laugh, but her elation was short lived, as a stabbing pain suddenly cut through her heart. “Arggh!” she cried out, her flames sputtering for a microsecond before bursting back to life. Her gaze turned up to the darkening sky. She had to get into the Observatory. She had to stop whatever they were doing.

Before she could act, however, a different type of shadow fell over her. The Nightmare flared her wings instinctively, dodging backwards, but not fast enough. Spike was already in midair, having leaped from the apex of the Observatory’s roof. When he slammed down upon her, the flagstones beneath them shattered in a spider’s-web pattern twenty feet wide.

• • •

“It’s working!” said Twilight. “It’s working!”

“Redouble your efforts, Twilight!” ordered Luna. “For the kingdom, for your friends, leave nothing untapped!”

Twilight squeezed her eyes shut and channeled everything she had into her horn and its celestial harmony. The Music of the Spheres soared with pure divinity, penetrating stone and air and earth and flesh. Every living thing in Equestria could hear the music now.

Canterlot Castle – the oldest cosmic transmitter known to ponykind – sang to the heavens and the heavens sang back.

And then she heard Luna scream: “Twilight Sparkle, look out!”

Twilight’s legs were suddenly assaulted by a feeling of intense cold, and she dropped clumsily to her knees. She was wading in a pool of liquid-black smoke.

Cinnamon.

The smoke sucked out her body heat with terrifying rapidity, and she gasped at the sudden, freezing cold. Twilight had no choice, she had to stop casting or she was dead.

“Gahh!” Twilight cried as she torqued her body around and detached from the spell structure. Her horn flashed purple as she summoned a localized whirlwind that stripped the clinging smoke from her skin. But the liquid cloud doubled back on her as she scrambled to her hooves, trying to leap away. “Okay, how about a taste of your own medicine?” Twilight said, and her horn ignited with the golden light of the sun.

She raked the surface of the liquid-smoke cloud with the beam, causing it to dissolve and retreat. At last, the cloud coalesced into the solid form of Cinnamon Oatmeal, who shrieked like a banshee and leaped away more than forty feet into the rafters. The red-gloom of the eclipse deepened, and the corrupted Night Guard disappeared into the shadows.

Where the hay did he go? thought Twilight desperately, scanning the underside of the Observatory’s dome with the sunbeam from her horn.

“Twilight Sparkle!” she heard Luna call. The wounded Princess’s voice was shaking. “My horn... I am not strong enough to hold the Failsafe closed by myself!” Luna grunted in pain as the crystalline surface of her horn cracked along a line of neon-white. Still, the night-sky alicorn played on.

A flash of movement from overhead drew Twilight’s eyes and her sunbeam fired in reflex, but the descending dark pegasus exploded again into a cloud of smoke and Twilight’s beam shot through a doughnut-hole in the middle. And then an ice-cold body crashed down upon her and his fangs were on her throat, in her throat.

Twilight tried to cast, but the cold, negative magic of the Night Guard disrupted her positive charge, causing it to falter and fade. *More than one way to skin a tomato*, she thought, and she struck him in the face with the edge of her hoof – the way Rainbow

Dash had shown her. This caught him by surprise, and Cinnamon recoiled for a moment. She took that chance to scramble out from under him, turn on her front-hooves and coil her haunches in midair – just how Applejack had taught her to do it.

“Apple-BUCK!” screamed Twilight, giving him a double-shot to the head.

Cinnamon’s jaw shattered into pieces, and he stumbled back, tripping over his own hooves. He almost fell. But then the Night Guard righted himself and glared at her, golden eyes narrowing. His jaw hung off like a broken step.

“Oh...” said Twilight. “Rats.”

Cinnamon’s mouth dropped open wider than was possible for a pony, like his neck was being unzipped from the top-down. Inside was a horrible maw of yellow needle-teeth, and a fat, forked tongue that slithered out to wrap around Twilight’s hind leg, yanking her to the floor. His fangs grew to horrific proportions, and his tongue snapped taught, dragging the purple unicorn’s leg towards his throat.

Twilight’s horn flared as she fired a hail of telekinetic javelins at his face, but again, the positive magic spiraled down into his vast maw, absorbed by the negative magic at his core. The Nightmare’s presence always intensified the abilities of those she possessed, as Twilight had known, but she hadn’t realized just how much this made Cinnamon a counter to... herself!

What do I do? What do I do? she thought frantically as the tongue dragged her closer and closer to the rows of yellow teeth.

Just then, Twilight heard a terse *thwip* in the air overhead and Cinnamon’s head snapped back with a hiss. White smoke poured from a hole in his cheek. He began to claw at his face with his hooves.

Another *thwip* and suddenly there was a hole in his chest as well, also pouring white smoke. Something was firing tiny projectiles into the corrupted Night Guard. The holes in his body burned with an inner light, sizzling and searing inside, and Cinnamon’s tongue unwound from Twilight’s leg and reeled back into his mouth, leaving a coating of green mucus. Twilight looked over her shoulder for the source of the missiles.

Rarity stood by the door, heaving for breath, horn burning baby-blue. She looked delirious, utterly drained, but somehow she was still on her hooves.

All across the Observatory, tiny bits of metal began to detach themselves and fly over towards Rarity. The corners of a decorative coat-of-arms. An ornamental spearhead from the top of a painting. A fork and knife from a crumb-covered plate. Various pieces of a candelabra. Within seconds, there was a miniature asteroid-belt of metal scraps in orbit around the white unicorn.

Silver, thought Twilight. She's using her treasure-sense to find silver.

The corrupted Cinnamon snarled and leaped at Rarity. There was a flash of baby-blue magic and the adjoining space between them was suddenly filled with a half-pound of impromptu silver projectiles. Cinnamon shrieked and doubled over in midair as the metal thudded into every part of his body, but his momentum was too great. He barreled right into Rarity, and the two ponies went crashing through the swinging doors into the Observatory's parlor.

Twilight set to gallop after them, to help her friend. But from across the room, she heard Luna gasp in pain again. Blood was sprouting in the bandages on the Night Princess's forehead. Twilight was torn between rejoining the Music of the Spheres and going to save Rarity.

The choice was made for her, however, when Pinkie Pie suddenly cantered in and headed towards the Observatory parlor. She had a sharp, wooden stake in her mouth, and a mallet stuck out of a saddlebag stenciled with the words: EMERGENCY MONSTER-SLAYING KIT. There was a wreath of garlic around her neck. "Got this!" she said cheerfully.

"Twilight Sparkle!" thundered Luna in desperation.

"Yes, Princess!" Twilight's horn glowed purple as she stepped up to the telescope. Within seconds, her tones had woven back into Luna's composition, and together, they held the heavens still.

• • •

Spike held the struggling Nightmare down with one hand, raising the other to the sky behind him. Nightmare's horn flared with sunlight, but too late. "This is for Rarity!" he screamed. Spike brought his diamond-hard fist down on the Nightmare's face like he was pounding a post into the ground.

He struck her again and again with the full weight of his rock-and-metal skeleton, feeling the Nightmare's skull buckle, crack, split. Every blow landed with the force of a bomb

going off, the ground shuddering, sending up a dust shock-ring around them each time. “This is for Luna!” he cried. *Boom*. “This is for all the ponies you’ve murdered!” *Boom, boom*. Meat and hair stuck to his fist, teeth flew over his shoulder.

I have to keep hitting her, he thought desperately, keep hitting her and never stop! Because if I do...

At that moment, the Nightmare managed to sneak one of her rear hooves between them, bashing Spike in the midsection with a battering-ram kick. Spike gasped in pain as one of his floating ribs cracked, but he hung on. His jaw opened wide and the spark of atomic flame ignited.

Let’s see you get away from this! he thought as the reaction built in his throat and his claws dug in.

At that moment, the alicorn let loose an attack of her own. An incredibly bright beam of light, less than a hair’s width, leaped from her horn and cut a perfectly round hole in Spike’s chest.

“Guhh...” he wheezed, feeling his left lung melting, deflating. Instead of green flame, a thick gout of blood poured from his mouth. The Nightmare’s horn charged up another bolt, which she fired blindly as his claws continued to rake her face. There was a telekinetic explosion, catching Spike in the chest, blasting him away, sending him cartwheeling against a nearby tree so hard that he shattered the trunk into toothpicks. He struggled to get up on the other side. Blood sprayed from his mouth again as he collapsed.

The Nightmare hissed in agony of her own, trying to crawl away. Half of the alicorn’s face was hanging off. She dragged herself along, hoof over hoof, her skull struggling to knit itself back together, crushed and liquified flesh sealing, regrowing. She just had to get away for a minute. Just a minute, and then she would tear every pony in this castle into strip-steak.

And then a sound like a gong echoed across the valley. Canterlot castle vibrated under their hooves with a sonorous echo. The music from the Observatory had swelled to a crescendo, and every pony in Equestria looked up to the sky. The sun was gone now – there was only a boiling red circle. The moon lay directly between the kingdom and its star.

“Arghh!” cried the Nightmare, pain seizing her heart once again.

“The Event!” thundered Hard Target, thrashing the Equestrian battle-standard in the air over his head. “All units prepare to attack!”

In the unnatural red light of the false-dusk, two dark shapes appeared over Hard Target’s shoulders. Chyornyj Slon and Slim-to-None, the last two Night Guards, bared their white fangs, golden eyes flashing. They were ready.

“EQUESTRIA-A-A-A-A-A!” The battle-cry reverberated through the lines, and the rag-tag remnants of the Equestrian Guard fell upon the weakened Nightmare in a tide of steel.

• • •

Fluttershy hung by a hoof, struggling to lift herself onto the narrow ledge they’d landed upon. After much thrashing about, she suddenly remembered that she had one wing left in working order, and started using it to help herself. Fluttershy’s control of her flight aura had always been laughably bad, but all she needed was a little boost. She lost a few feathers, then made it up onto the flat surface where she lay on her back, gasping for air.

Shield Banner, she thought suddenly. He saved me... slowed me down so I could roll instead of crash... There was no time to rest. She had to find him.

Fluttershy struggled to her hooves. An intense wave of pain took her by surprise as her adrenalin high ebbed for a moment. She was burned and beaten down, her mind drained from maintaining the Stare. But still, she pressed on.

Shield Banner lay nearby in a twisted heap. There was a bright halo of blood around his head, where it had struck hard on the rocky ground. A piece of masonry, easily a pony-length across, had pinned most of his lower half to the ground. He wasn’t going anywhere unless they could lift or teleport this chunk of flagstone off of him first.

Fluttershy took a few, painful foal-steps over to him, and half-collapsed, half-laid-down beside him.

“Shield,” she said. Even without further examination, she could tell that he was gravely injured. His back was bent in three places, and his abdomen was already distending from internal bleeding. She ran her hooves gently over his body and he cried out in pain. He felt like a sack of broken glass.

“Fuh... funny thing is...” he said, “if this ledge hadn’t been here... we might have... been fine.”

Fluttershy stared up at the edge of the cliff. It had only been about a sixty-foot fall. Shield Banner was right, if they had fallen the true height of the mountain, one of the ponies in his pegasus squads or Rainbow Dash might have caught them. Or he could have conjured a safety net, or a parachute, or summoned a giant bird... Any number of options.

“But there wasn’t enough time...” said Fluttershy. Then her eyes refocused and she went to work. She unbuckled his armored barding, releasing the straps so that the plates of steel fell away one by one. She pulled his Captain’s cloak off, held the fabric down with her hoof and started tearing strips away with her teeth. Without a medkit, she couldn’t do much, but if she could just keep him alive until they could get a medical evacuation...

A rush of air sounded behind her, and Fluttershy turned, startled. It was just Dash, pulling up from a dive and skidding to a halt right next to them.

“I’m so sorry you guys,” said Dash. “I’m so sorry, it happened so fast, and I was looking at the Nightmare –”

“Dash,” said Fluttershy, grabbing her foreleg with a hoof. “It’s okay. We need to evacuate him to the hospital, right away. Get a pegasus team down here, and a unicorn.”

“Don’t... don’t waste the medevac...” said Shield Banner, “never make it...”

“The hay you won’t!” shouted Dash. “Fluttershy, I’ll get your medkit and a stretcher, and find somepony to lift this rock off of him. Hang on!” She was away in a streak of colors.

Above them on the cliff, the sounds of savage battle rang out – magic explosions, the clang of steel, the shouts and screams of soldier-ponies. The Failsafe was in full effect, and the Royal Guards were on the attack. Down here, though, it was just the two of them, the wind, the clouds, and the eerie red sky.

“I... should be up there... with my stallions...”

“Don’t worry about them,” said Fluttershy, mopping the sweat from his brow. “Hard Target is with them, leading them. Worry about yourself. Worry about staying alive! After everything you put us through last night, you don’t get to go out a hero.”

“Just this once...” he said. His hoof found hers and he held it tightly to his chest. “The truth is... I’m scared... to die.” He smiled wistfully. “Better this way... though.” His eyes closed. “Tell Rarity... sorry...”

“Oh, no, you don’t! Shield! Stay awake! What’s... what’s your favorite ice-cream?”

“Cookie dough,” he said.

“Mine’s mocha almond-fudge,” she said. “What’s your favorite song? Come on, Shield. Answer me! You have to stay awake until the medevac arrives.”

“Glad...” he said, his voice barely a whisper, “that you’re... here... now.”

“Shield,” said Fluttershy, tears pouring down her face.

“You are...” he said, “so kind... so beautiful... My life for yours... I can live with that.”

Then Shield Banner released a long, slow breath, and did not draw another.

• • •

No matter which way the Nightmare turned, she met a wall of spears or a hail of arrows and fireballs. And there, on the tip of the offense, were the Night Guard, fighting evasively, driving her mad with their hit-and-run attacks. She fell back and fell back again, moving down the mountainside. They weren’t letting her anywhere near that Observatory, and by now, it was becoming apparent that she was too weak to force her way through.

A line of spearponies charged in from the right, and the Nightmare blasted them apart like bowling pins.

Alright, she thought, gasping for breath, well if I can’t stop them, maybe I can just move the sun! I’ll break the eclipse by using their own tricks against them.

She turned and fled full-speed down the mountainside. The Observatory was the most powerful nexus of Canterlot Castle, but there was another. *The Throne Room*. She turned on the speed as she reached the castle proper, zooming through hallways and plazas. The soldiers were in pursuit, but she had outpaced them for now.

At last, she reached the double doors of the Throne Room. With her lava-lashes, she cut a perfectly square hole in the doors, kicked it out, and stepped through into the massive hall of arched ceilings and stained-glass windows.

She cantered down the long, red carpet, her hooves echoing on the marble underneath. There was the strange whiff of something – chemical. But it was gone almost

immediately. The Nightmare peered around suspiciously. She appeared to be totally alone.

I don't have time for this, she thought angrily. I have to move the sun before the Royal Guard arrives.

She reached the throne.

This ought to do it.

The Nightmare began to emit music from her horn, the beautiful chords and tones weaving into the composition of the other two players using Canterlot as their amplifier. She began to draw the sun away from the moon, and more than that, give it a push and a spin, so that she would have time to defeat the enemy.

She became aware of the sound of dripping water. It was close by, loud and steady. It made her nervous.

Reluctantly, she broke off her efforts to join the Music of the Spheres, instead casting about for the source of the dripping. *Of course, it could just be a leak, she thought.* But she was having the strangest feeling it was something sinister.

At last, she determined the direction of the noise. It was coming from the antechamber behind the throne, hidden by a thick curtain. The Nightmare sliced the curtain down with her lash and stepped across the boundary, igniting her horn to illuminate the dark chamber.

As it turned out, the sound she was hearing wasn't water dripping. It was the ticking of a clock. A clock attached to sixteen tons of dynamite.

The Nightmare leaped into the air, firing every last ounce of energy she had left into magic propulsion, trying to escape the building. But instead she crashed into what felt like a lead wall. Her spine compressed, folding like an accordion. The Nightmare fell to the ground.

An enormous Night Guard pony slammed down, shattering the marble. He placed his giant hoof on her chest and shook his head.

"Get off of me!" she screamed, boring into him with a sunbolt. But the Night Guard did nothing to dodge it, just leaned on her with his incredible bulk as the beam carved through his flesh. She chopped off part of his snout, his ear. Sliced through his neck. A

huge gout of black blood came gushing out and the giant Night Guard faltered, but did not fall. She blasted him with explosion after explosion, but he soaked up the damage, skin flaying off in ashen flakes, muscle burning through to bone. *Just a few more strikes, she thought, and he'll be a charred skeleton. Then I'll brush him aside.*

A crossbow bolt suddenly pierced the Nightmare's head from temple-to-temple. Her horn sputtered, and she was barely aware of a second pony leaping down from the ceiling. He was a charcoal gray earth-pony with a white mane and spectacles.

"Stop that," he told her, reloading his crossbow.

"What are you doing?" she screamed at them. "You're going to die too!"

"Fair trade," said the agent.

"Как посеешь, так и пожнешь," said the Night Guard. "Товарisch."

• • •

The detonation eviscerated the castle. The fireball alone was several hundred feet in diameter, and it left a monstrous mushroom cloud hanging off of Canterlot Mountain. A thick rain of debris and stone-chips came down across the entire area.

On a facing hill, a team of ponies crouched in a hastily-dug ditch. Most were wearing yellow hard hats, except for one with a cowpony hat on instead.

"Hoo-wee!" said Applejack. "That was loud!"

"I hope that was enough explosive," said Apple Bloom, pushing back her hard hat so that she could lift her binoculars up over the lip of the ditch. "That was all we had in the Royal Surveyors stash. If I'da had proper warnin', me and the rest of the Corps coulda blown her up *twice* that big!"

"But did we get 'er?" said Applejack, squinting. "I don't reckon I can tell." Slowly, she crawled out of the ditch and stood up on the grassy hillside. The mushroom cloud was still expanding into the air. Applejack started trotting towards the huge crater where the Throne Room had stood only moments before.

"Big sis!" shouted Apple Bloom. "Be careful! She might not be down for tha count!"

The sound of a gong echoed throughout the castle, up and down the mountain, and the moon began moving again, passing out of the way of the sun.

“She had better be,” said Applejack to herself, “‘cause we ain’t got the eclipse to save us *now*.”

• • •

Luna collapsed, blood running down her forehead.

Oh, no! thought Twilight, and all of the strain of the Failsafe fell to her. *That’s it, I’ve got to bring this thing to a close before I lose control of it.* Slowly, she wound down the song, slower and slower, easing out until it was just a lullaby.

The gong noise sounded throughout the Observatory. The Failsafe was complete.

“Princess!” she said, running over.

“I’m okay,” said Luna, struggling to stand. “Go, go! Finish off the Nightmare.”

Twilight dashed into the parlor to find Cinnamon in a heap on the ground with a stake through his heart. Around his neck was the chain of garlic.

Pinkie was off to one side, trying to comfort Rarity, who looked like she’d been crying.

“Rarity!” said Twilight. “Are you okay?”

Rarity looked up at her in a daze. “I don’t... I mean, I don’t remember...”

Twilight frowned. *There’s probably going to be some permanent damage,* she thought. Then she looked over at Cinnamon. “Darn it. Is he...?”

“No, silly,” said Pinkie. “That just puts them into torpor.”

“Torpor? You mean... hibernation?”

“Don’t you know anything!?” said Pinkie. “I thought you read books.”

Twilight just looked at her. “Come on, then,” she said, “you heard the explosion. We have to find the Nightmare’s body before the sunlight is able to rejuvenate her. I just hope the dynamite was powerful enough to knock her out completely.”

“Rarity,” said Pinkie, gently helping her friend up. “Just a little further. We can do it.” Pinkie Pie looked exhausted. They all did.

“Just a little further,” Twilight said to herself.

They pressed out into the morning sun.

• • •

It didn’t take long to find the Nightmare. She lay on her side in a charred, glowing crater, a wisp of smoke curling from her body.

“Careful, everypony,” warned Twilight as they approached.

They were still several hundred feet away when the Nightmare woke up. Her eyes flared red in the sunlight, and her mane-of-fire sputtered back to life. But before she could struggle to her hooves, everypony became aware of a whistling noise descending from the sky above.

“Hit the deck!” screamed Twilight, and all the ponies fell to the ground in a duck-and-cover.

Rainbow Dash arced from the heavens and landed on the Nightmare with a devastating rainbow nuke. For the second time in as many minutes, the Nightmare found herself at the epicenter of a bone-melting explosion. The flare of rainbow light was blinding.

“That’s all we got planned, right?” said Applejack, straightening her hat as the last of the debris rained down on them. All of their ears were ringing. “Don’t want to walk into no *third* bomb.”

“Just the coup de grâce,” said Twilight. “Get equipped, girls.”

Necklace. Necklace. Necklace. Necklace. Big crown thingie. Dash crawled out of the crater and limped over to them. *Necklace.*

“Charge ‘em up,” commanded Twilight. Each of the Elements took up their place in the firing line. Their gemstones revved and seared with energy, each producing a unique chord that melded with the others to shake the mountainside. The gemstones of the Elements of Harmony were some of the most powerful artifacts ever created – so powerful in fact that each one had a mind of its own.

I don't know why you found us worthy, thought Twilight to the ever-present consciousness of the Element of Magic. She squeezed her eyes shut. *But help us end this now. Please. Say this is enough.*

The Nightmare struggled back up to her hooves, broken and bloody, destroyed and defeated. But even still, her wounds were scraping themselves closed, her muscles desperately working to repair the damage. After everything that they had done to it, Celestia's body refused to die.

"That was..." she rasped, "the best try yet." Her voice began to gather strength. "But as you can *see*," she grinned as her mouth compiled itself back together, "you have still los—"

Twilight's eyes suddenly shot open. The flaring beams of light emanating from them were whiter-than-white. The purity of the divine.

A shock-wave of the same white magic thundered from the other five gems, expanding, brighter and brighter. At its peak, a massive rainbow erupted from the crest, arced through the morning sky, and crashed down upon the Nightmare.

The rainbow swept through Celestia's body. A river of energy cascaded over the alicorn, through the alicorn. Every pore, every cell was flooded with the intense, positive magic of the beam.

The Nightmare screamed and screamed.

At last, the searing white light exploding into billions of sparks, which floated down around all of them like luminescent leaves. The magic flowing through Twilight ceased. The reaction was complete. For a moment, she felt terribly empty, a loneliness from being detached from the magic of the gem. But she hung onto her emotions. She had been through this each time that she'd wielded the Element of Magic. After a few seconds, it passed.

On the ground before them, where there had been one pony, there were now two. Celestia lay on her side, bruised and scuffed, but whole. A dozen feet away lay a tan earth pony with a red mane.

Celestia stirred, trying to get up.

Twilight hesitated, looked back at her friends. Her face contorted in indecision. "Princess!" she called to the alicorn. "Is it... is it really you?"

Celestia was so weak, she could barely support the weight of her own head. But she turned slowly and looked into Twilight's eyes. "My faithful student," she whispered. Her eyes closed in exhaustion. "My faithful student..." Tears were running down her face. Twilight charged over and took the immortal, white alicorn in her forelegs, dissolving into an ocean of her own tears as she held Celestia close. The Princess was alive.

Pinkie pointed at the tan earth-pony on the ground. "Dash, or AJ, one of you tough ponies. See if that's *her!*"

"If that's who?" said Applejack. Then realization dawned on her. "Oh, my stars and garters..."

"Get up!" said Rainbow Dash, lifting the tan earth-pony to her hooves. "Who are you?"

The earth-pony looked around dazed for a moment, but then a look of shock and disgust crept onto her face. "What?" she said, staring at her own hooves, her own body. "What? How is this...?" She tried to pull away from Dash, but Dash locked her in an iron grip.

"Who are you?" said Dash. "Answer me!"

The tan earth-pony headbutted Dash in the mouth. Dash fell back, blood streaming down her face, and the earth-pony leaped away and tried to make a break for it. But before the pony had run twenty feet, a beam of moonlight shot down from above and seized her in its glaring brilliance.

The earth-pony started laughing. It was the wild-eyed laughter of madness. "There's nothing beyond this!" she screamed. "You can kill me, but you're all doomed anyway!"

"Silence!" commanded Princess Luna. Her beam intensified and the earth-pony, who had once been called the Nightmare, let out a scream. She was petrifying into stone. It started at her hooves, then the transmutation crept up her body, over her flanks and her ankh cutie mark, up her neck, until only the Nightmare's head was still flesh.

The Nightmare's pretty purple eyes bored into Luna with insane desperation. "We're going to the same place," she said, sweat coating her face. "And that place is nowhere. Even you and your sister. Death is just like before you were born. You'll be nothing some day."

"Perhaps," said Luna. "But you first."

The stone sealed up over the Nightmare's mouth, and then all that was left was a statue.

“Your weapon, Captain,” said Luna.

Hard Target drew his mace.

Luna’s horn flared as she lifted the weapon into the blue, Equestrian sky. The metal pulsed and glowed, becoming infused with every last bit of lunar-magic the Princess had left. Then she brought the weapon down again and again, until there was nothing left of the Nightmare but gravel.

Luna threw the mace away, collapsed to her haunches, onto her side. The green grass felt soft against her face. She closed her eyes. The remainder of the Guard swarmed around her, mixing with castle servants, and she felt herself lifted onto a stretcher and taken away. She was so tired. Just... just sleep now. Celestia was alive. They had won. They had won.

We won.

Sugarcube Corner was a warm glow in a cold, blue night. Two ponies stood on the front porch, conversing by lantern-light.

“After that,” said Pinkie Pie, “the Princesses both said we were totally *heroes*. And they gave us this big ceremony where we all got medals and everypony cheered for us! The Princesses dedicated a big stained-glass mural to us, too! And that’s the story of how we beat Discord.”

“I’m honestly shocked that so few ponies know about your exploits,” said the charcoal gray pony with the white mane. He had a smattering of bandages on his face and neck, and his leg was in a sling. “To hear the average laypony tell it, you six barely exist.”

“Well,” said Pinkie Pie, “the Princesses have always reminded us that we’re military. Celestia doesn’t want us making money or getting too famous from being Elements. She says it could lead us down a path of corruption, and that it’s too dangerous for us to risk it since the Elements are so powerful. If you want to know what *I* think, though, I think that the Harmony Gems would never stick around if we became corrupted. They would just leave and find somepony else.”

“Good point.”

“And also – now I’m just *saying* here – the Princesses live in a *castle*, right? A castle!”

The agent laughed.

“How about *your* friends, though?” asked Pinkie. “Sorry I forgot to ask about them.”

“That’s okay,” said the agent. “Cinnamon Oatmeal recovered quickly, once the Nightmare died. He’s still on paid suspension pending observation, though. They have to make sure a scrap of the Nightmare didn’t remain alive in him, dormant somehow. If you ask me, I think he needed the vacation anyway. It can’t be easy having memories like that, of killing your own ponies.”

“How about the other one? What’s-her-name.”

“Slim-to-None?” asked the agent. “Well, she and Purple Heart had a thing going, so she’s taken it really hard. She’ll be okay, though. We’ll all be okay.” He stared wistfully into the dark.

After a moment, Pinkie Pie picked up his forehoof and held it. Their eyes met and she smiled at him until he smiled back.

“How come you like me?” asked Pinkie.

The agent arched an eyebrow. “What’s not to like?”

“I dunno. You’re so cool and mysterious,” said Pinkie. “And I’m so... so... *not* mysterious. And you’re like, deadly and dangerous, and I only cook a mean *soufflé*.”

“You want a reason, Pinkie Diane Pie? You want just *one* reason?”

“Just one!” she said with moon-eyes.

“Because you love life. You get excited about everything, and it’s always so fresh and new to you.”

“Well, duh, every day is a new day!”

“I hate to say it but that is a waning attitude in Equestria. I know very few ponies who love life the way you do, and I know far too many who feel like every day is the *same* day.”

“That’s just ‘cause you hang out with a bunch of love-starved, government wonks!” said Pinkie. “You’d have a totally different view if you hung out with more pastry chefs instead.”

This made the agent laugh again. “And what makes you think you know me so well?”

“You kind of remind me of my father,” said Pinkie Pie.

The agent arched an eyebrow and just stared at her. “You should know, considering we’re on a date here, that a lesser stallion would be running for the hills right now.”

“Oh, silly, that was a compliment,” she replied with the wave of her hoof. “Mostly.”

“Mostly?”

“Daddy was a hard worker and clever, just like you. But he was also too serious for his own good, hint hint.”

“I *have* to be serious,” said the agent. “I deal with serious things, serious ponies. I’m neck-deep in serious.”

“Well, you don’t have to be like that around me,” said Pinkie. “I think you already know that. I think *that’s* the real reason you like me.”

“Fine,” he said. “Then why do you like me?”

“Because glasses are sexy,” she said.

“Flattering,” he said, “but cheap. Try again.”

“I guess... because you listen to me. Like, really listen, instead of just sort-of listen. Dashie’s my best friend and even she does that to me sometimes.”

“You’re an endless font of eccentric wisdom,” said the agent. “I mean that. And speaking of dangerous, you are also truly terrifying on paper. I’ve seen your Clearance-K file. Did you know that you are rated the same threat-level as Twilight Sparkle?”

“And I don’t even have to work at it!” exclaimed Pinkie Pie with more moon-eyes.

The agent checked his pocket-watch. It was a tiny, bronze thing, engraved with a shield cutie mark and the letters SB. Looking at it made the agent sad, and he shifted his gaze back to Pinkie Pie again, which always cheered him up. “My shift starts in an hour,” he said. “I’ve got to run, I’m afraid.”

“Going to snap anypony’s neck tonight?” asked Pinkie, pantomiming the action.

“No, I’m still on medical leave, so I’ll just be looking at charts and pushing paper around. Maybe, if I feel like I’m dying of boredom, I’ll go get a sandwich in the cafeteria. It’s a lot less romantic of a job than most ponies think.”

“Dour,” said Pinkie. “Love-starved. Wonks.”

“Right,” said the agent.

“Now tell me your name.”

“Still classified. Hasn’t changed in the last fifteen minutes.”

“I can’t just call you ‘the Agent!’ I’ve been playing the pronoun game all night just so I don’t have to say it! *You.*”

“Everypony thinks it’s weird at first. Then they get used to it. You will too.”

She sighed. “It’s not even like I care what it is. I just don’t want to *not* know.” She shrugged. “But whatever. Maybe I’ll make up a name for you. One that’s so embarrassing you’ll have to tell me your real name. It’ll take a while, though. I’ll let you know what I’ve got the next time I see you.”

“So, you’d like to go out again?”

“Isn’t that what I just said?”

“Well... uh... great!” He thrust his forehoof out in front of him. “Have a lovely evening.”

“Hello-o-o-o,” she said to him, bonking herself on the forehead with a hoof.

“What?” he said, suddenly concerned.

“I’ve been waiting for a kiss for, like, weeks now! Rarity said to be a perfect lady and let you make the first move, but to hay with that! I’ll be an old nag before you pony up.”

And she tackled him under the full moon.

• • •

“You want to know something I ain’t told no pony else about the battle?” asked Applejack, leaning back on the sweet-smelling bale of hay. She used the rim of her beer bottle to tip her cowpony-hat up for a better view of the stars.

“A secret?” said Apple Bloom, lounging in the grass nearby. “You gave the Nightmare a left jab when ya shoulda given her a right hook or somethin’?”

“C’mon AB,” said Applejack. “I’m serious.”

“Alright, I didn’t mean to laugh at ya,” said Apple Bloom. “What is it?”

Applejack looked pensive for a few moments. Then she said: “Twilight’s a legendary unicorn. Fluttershy’s a doctor, Pinkie Pie’s got gypsy magic, and RD is the best flyer I ever seen, and one of the best fighters, too, although I’ll throttle you if you ever tell her I

said so. Rarity... I mean, we don't get along, but I know that girl is clever as a fox. Me, on the other hoof? I'm just a simple farmpony. A meat-shield if I'm lucky enough to be *that* useful. All during the battle, we were running around in the dark, gettin' chased, and I couldn't quite figure out what I was even doing there. I knew in my heart that I was already dead, that there was no way I was going to survive the fight. That the best I could do was just not to get in everypony's way before I died." She kicked a rock.

"Not get in their way?" said Apple Bloom. "Are you off your gourd, sis? They'd fall apart without you! *Twilight* would fall apart without you. You want to talk about how powerful she is, but you're the one she leans on in the crisis. You're the pillar of sanity when it's all goin' crazy-like. I've seen it! You're not just a simple farmpony. You're a *damn fine* farmpony. You are the *paragon* a' farmponies! And you make your friends brave when they ain't brave."

Applejack didn't say anything for a while. Then she said: "Even when I'm wettin' my britches?"

"I'd imagine *especially* when you're wettin' your britches, big sis."

"Thanks, AB. Thanks a lot. Hey, you almost ready?"

"You bet," said Apple Bloom, chuckling, stretching out her legs, tying her mane back in a red ponytail. She'd never been much of an athlete in her youth, but she'd had to run a *lot* in the Royal Surveyors Corps. "I reckon I'll beat you through the Sisterhooves Course, tonight. You may'a been the big sister growin' up, but I ain't no runt-filly no more!"

"Is that so? Care to put your money where your mouth is?" said Applejack.

"A hundred bits!" said Apple Bloom.

Applejack's eyebrow twitched.

"Oho!" said Apple Bloom. "Not so sure now, are we?"

• • •

Spitfire sensed movement in her darkened hospital room, and she looked over with a start. The silhouette of a rainbow-maned pony stood in the doorway.

"Hey," said Dash.

Spitfire crossed her forelegs. "Visiting hours are over."

"I know," said Dash. "I flew in a window on the third floor and snuck down here."

"Why go to all the trouble?"

"Because we need to talk, and I didn't want the paparazzi taking pictures of it."

Spitfire sighed and turned over in the hospital bed. She couldn't turn too far because of all the tubes and drains. "Can't imagine what the hay *we* have to talk about."

"How about the fact that I almost killed you?" said Dash. "How about the fact that if you'd died, it would have ruined my life?"

"Ruined *your* life?" said Spitfire.

"Well, it's not like you would have cared," said Dash. "You would have been dead."

Spitfire just looked at her.

"Okay," said Dash, "let me try again. I'm really sorry I fractured your skull."

"Mmm," said Spitfire, "alright. Apology accepted. By the way: Rainbow Throw? Really?"

"Argue with its effectiveness," said Dash. "I double-diamond-dog-dare you. And while we're on the subject, you owe *me* an apology too, for using your aura-blade against me. You could have cut my leg off!"

"I was under orders."

It was Dash's turn to give Spitfire a look.

"Alright, sorry," said Spitfire. "Sorry I tried to cut your leg off." Then suddenly, she was staring at Dash with the most peculiar expression.

"What?" said Dash.

"Soarin's an idiot," said Spitfire.

"O-o-okay..."

“He’s a great flyer and a lovable oaf, but he’s just not Captain material. I know Hard Target is having to do double duty while Soarin’s in charge. How would you like it if I gave you temporary command of the Wonderbolts? The doctors are talking six months before I’ll be cleared for active duty, and hay, if you’re doing a good job, I’ll just promote myself to brass.”

Dash smiled. “Actually, Spitfire, I’m going to have to turn you down.”

Spitfire gaped at her. “Are you *nuts?*” she said. “I just offered you the Wonderbolts command! You don’t say *no* to that! *You* don’t say no to that!”

“Would you believe I’ve already accepted another job offer?”

“It had better come with a six-figure Hearth’s Warming bonus, because otherwise, I still can’t believe what I’m hearing.”

Dash pulled out a folded page. She handed it to Spitfire.

“This is an executive letter-head,” said Spitfire. “From Princess Luna’s office.”

“Read it,” said Dash.

Spitfire did. After she was done, she handed Dash back the page. “Congratulations,” she said.

“Thanks,” said Dash. “You’d better heal up quick. There’s going to be another team at the castle now, and I can promise we’ll keep your on the tips of your hooves.”

“I look forward to it,” said Spitfire. Then she laughed. “You’re a hay of a scrapper, kiddo. The student has surpassed the master.”

“I was never your student,” said Dash. “But sometimes a rival is just as good as a mentor. See you around?”

“See you around, Rainbow Dash.”

She slipped out through the open window, leaping into the night sky.

Dear Rainbow Dash,

In light of recent events, it has become evident that Equestria's military needs an overhaul. To this end, my sister and I have decided to reactivate a number of special-forces protocols from the ancient past. I think you are well-suited to leading one of these protocols: the air wing of the Canterlot Night Guard, code-named the Shadowbolts. I must warn you that the training process will require a number of sacrifices, but I promise that you will be gaining a very great deal in return. Contact me if you have any questions.

Princess Luna

• • •

Rarity poured herself a new cup of tea. "I can't complain, really," she said to Fluttershy, sitting across from her in the Boutique's parlor. "It is such a *drag*, though, having to arrange the matchsticks by size, and put the pentagonal block in the pentagonal hole, and sort the objects by color, day after day after day."

"I know it's boring," said Fluttershy, "but Rarity, you have *brain damage*. It's important for you to rebuild those neural pathways as much as you can. How is your short-term memory loss?"

"Better. I still get fuzzy sometimes, but who knows how much of that is due to old age."

"We're not even thirty yet!"

"Ancient!" announced Rarity, then the two mares laughed. "The truth is, I'll just be happy when I can get back to sewing. Thank goodness I had just completed a backlog of dresses the day before the Nightmare attacked, or I'd have to mortgage the shop!"

Fluttershy fumbled with her empty teacup for a moment. "Um... Listen, I've been waiting a month to say this..." She bit her lip.

"Out with it," said Rarity.

"It's about Shield Banner," said Fluttershy. "Before he died, he wanted you to know he was sorry."

Rarity froze for a microsecond. Then her hoof continued to lift her cup to her mouth. She sipped and her eyes took on a far-away cast. The cup shook a little. Then she set it back in its saucer and stared at the ground.

Fluttershy wrung her hooves awkwardly, not sure what to say.

At last, Rarity sighed and sat back on her sofa. "I never should have tried to play spy," she said. "I was in over my head. Shield Banner accused me of thinking I was more clever than him, and he was right. I *did* think that. I suppose I learned my lesson, though."

"It wasn't your fault," said Fluttershy. "It was the *Nightmare's* fault. And she's dead now."

"She left quite a wake," said Rarity with that far-away look again. "But nevertheless, we prevailed."

"Yes, we did," said the pegasus. After another moment, she said: "Look, I'll be in Canterlot for the next few days, helping with ponies injured during the battle, but we should do this again when I return. We've grown apart in recent years, Rarity. All of us. I don't want it to be like that anymore. I miss the old group."

"Me too, sweetie," said Rarity.

Rarity let Fluttershy out and closed and locked the front door, then pushed the floor-lock and the deadbolt shut.

She left every light in the shop burning as she headed up to bed. For the past month, Rarity had found herself uncomfortable with letting pools of shadow develop in her home. The lamps burned day and night now at Carousel Boutique.

Rarity sat down at the vanity, preparing to put her hair up in curlers and remove her false eyelashes. Her horn glowed baby blue as she picked up her brush and began to run it through her shiny purple mane. After a few strokes, her eyes glanced up into the mirror.

Grinning back, blood pouring from her mouth, was the demonic face of Miss Rarity. The killer's eyes burned with homicidal insanity as she slammed her hooves against the other side of the glass, cracking the mirror in huge concentric circles.

Rarity screamed and recoiled away, falling backwards on her stool and crashing to the floor. She kicked her way into the corner, hyperventilating, her screams of terror swallowing themselves up. This was it. She was dead.

"I'm dead," she whispered.

But after a few moments, nothing had happened. Rarity opened her eyes and caught a glimpse of herself in the full-length closet mirror. She was herself again. No blood, nothing. Frantically, she turned to look at the vanity. The glass was whole and unbroken.

It wasn't real. It wasn't real. Just hallucinations. I've got to get a hold of myself.

"I have got to get a hold of myself," she said aloud. Then she placed both forehooves to her face as sobs wracked through her body.

• • •

"Easy, Princess," said Spike, gently lowering Luna down into the water.

"Ah!" gasped Luna as the hot bath hit her still-tender incisions. The Canterlot surgeons had operated again and again over the past month to help her regeneration set things right.

"You're doing great," said Spike. "Just a little further."

"I have changed my mind," said the Princess, voice wavering with pain. "I wish to remain stinky!"

"Shh, it'll be worth it," said Spike. "You just have to be a big, tough alicorn for me." It was what Twilight used to say to him when he was little. He couldn't help but chuckle at the memory.

"And now you laugh at me? Your divine lord and master?"

"I was laughing at myself, actually, but maybe next time I *will* laugh at you."

"I shall... outlaw it..." said Luna. Her reconstructed wing-joints submerged into the steaming basin. "Ow! Oh, oh..." She cried out in agony, unable to hold back a sob, squeezing Spike's clawed hand with her hoof.

Spike squeezed back and held onto her. "You'll get through this, Princess."

"I know," rasped Luna. She cleared her throat. "I know. You should have seen me the first time I fought Celestia. The first Nightmare Night. I was a mess."

The dragon dipped a copper ladle into the bathwater and poured the contents over Luna's mane while he shielded her eyes with a clawed hand. The galaxy of stars that flowed along her back became apparent as normal pony-hair – albeit unusually sparkly – once it got wet. Spike opened the container of soaproot and aloe cream, added a touch of rose-oil for scent, and worked it into the Princess's mane with his claws. Luna let out a content sigh, despite her many aches and pains.

“The weight of a kingdom on your shoulders,” commented Spike, pressing his thumbs into her sore muscles. “How you and your sister do it is a mystery to me.”

“It is the highest possible honor,” said Luna. She tilted her head back and looked at him. “And, of course, we have no choice.”

“You’d quit if you could?” asked Spike, wiping a few suds away from around her midnight eyes.

“No,” said Luna with a sigh of resignation. “It’s really all I have ever known.”

Spike took the hanging shower-head and gently soaped and rinsed her wing-joints. Again, Luna let out only a single sob of agony as he passed the sponge over her incisions.

“We’re almost done, Princess,” soothed Spike. He drained the tub and, after a final rinse, shut off the water and stood to get her a towel. “Time for your nightly checkup with the Royal Physician. I think it’s Doctor Hayfever on staff tonight. Then off to physical therapy.”

“I almost forgot to ask,” said Luna, “has there been any sign of Doctor Stables? I thought that perhaps somepony forgot to inform me...”

“No, still nothing,” said Spike with a frown, helping her towel off. “Disappeared without a trace. I hate to say it, but he was probably killed at some point during the battle. Vaporized or something, so that there was no corpse.”

“Perhaps,” said Luna. “Still, odd.”

Spike went around the royal bath-chamber, cleaning and setting things up so that Luna could reach them in the morning. “Okay,” he said at last, slipping his foreleg under her chest and propping her up. “You ready?”

Princess Luna grimaced with pain, but she braced herself to step over the edge of the tub. Another round of surgeries, another month of recuperation and she’d be close to fighting shape. For now, though, if she was going to be a bag of broken bones, at least she had Spike.

“My dragon,” she said, closing her eyes for a second and leaning into him.

“My Princess,” he said. “Ready? One, two, three, step!”

• • •

Fluttershy almost went straight home, but the night air was warm, so she decided to take the long route back to her cottage. She strolled through the empty town square, feeling strangely at peace in the glow of the streetlamps.

All her life, she'd been a shrinking violet. It had been a miracle that she'd had enough courage to attend medical school in the first place, but she had done so little with it afterwards. She was always too afraid of failing.

Something had changed, though. *Maybe it was Shield*, she thought. The way he'd been so brave for her, even when she knew he was terrified. Him and Purple Heart, too, and Chyornyj Slon, and all the others who had died fighting that demon. Fluttershy had the strangest sensation that she owed something to these ponies. They were dead, and she was alive. They would never do or think anything ever again. She had the freedom to act.

This kind of empowerment was a strange sensation for her, and Fluttershy had no idea what to do. So, in another uncharacteristic move, she decided to follow her impulse.

Fluttershy started walking. She maneuvered down street after street, until she came upon a bright green apartment building. She let herself in the front gate and up the stairwell to the second floor, where she stood outside apartment 214. She knocked.

After a minute she heard the sound of the chain-lock being disengaged. Then the door opened. A red stallion's face poked out and his eyes widened in surprise.

"Hi," said Fluttershy.

After a moment of shock, Big Macintosh said, "Hey."

"Can we... can we talk?" said Fluttershy. "Just talk." She kicked a hoof idly and glanced at the floor.

He looked at her, a cavalcade of conflicting emotion crossing his face. At last, he bowed his head and nodded. "Eeyup." Macintosh stepped back, letting Fluttershy past him.

The door clicked shut.

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Twilight helped Celestia prop herself up in bed, so that the Princess could look out the window into the starry sky. Then the purple unicorn sat down in the chair at the bedside, turned up the lantern, and started jotting down the Princess's itinerary for the next day on a notepad.

"Always working," said Celestia.

"I learned from the best," said Twilight. She chewed on her eraser for a moment. Then she said: "Princess, one thing I never could figure out. The Nightmare. She kept saying you had given her the 'secret keys to your heart.' That she had used them to possess you. What was she talking about?"

"Oh, yes," said Celestia. "Well, the secret keys are a set of protocols that govern each sentient mind. With all of the keys to my heart, the Nightmare knew my brain better than I did. She was able to control it completely, like a machine."

"But how did she get those keys? Did she buy them somehow?"

Celestia looked at Twilight for a long moment. "Twilight, the keys can not be forged or stolen. They can *only* be given out of love. Not through hypnosis, not through torture. And I have *no idea* how she came to have them."

A strange voice cleared its throat from the darkened far-corner of the bedchamber. "How indeed?"

Twilight Sparkle spun to face the intruder, her horn blasting into light, charging with thunderous magic. And then, in a flash of white, her horn was gone. So was her mouth.

"Mmmpphhh!" screamed Twilight furiously.

The shape from the corner moved closer, and took on form and substance. "I'm going to put your mouth back Twilight, but if you try to call for help, I'll have to take it away again, and your nose, too, if you catch my drift." Twilight's mouth reappeared, and she gasped for breath.

"You," said Celestia, her eyes narrowing at the intruder.

It was the squat form of Doctor Stables. He removed his spectacles and examined them for dust. "Yes, you lovable, gullible pony, you. It's always been me."

"Who are you?" said Twilight. "Really?"

“I’ll give you a hint, my dear,” said Doctor Stables. “*What fun is there in making sense?*”

“*Discord*,” said Twilight with a black note.

“Doctor Discord, at your service. The truth is, I’ve been controlling this body for years now from my stone prison. It’s not quite the same thing as being free myself, but it helps to pass the time. And how! Let me tell you Twilight, your Princess has not felt the ravages of age on *any* part of her fabulous body. Although she is on birth control. I’ll let you draw your own implications from that.”

“What do you want!?” demanded Celestia, her face burning.

“Only to save the world,” said Discord.

“No, really, what do you want?” asked Twilight.

Discord laughed. “To save the world, I swear it! Celestia could tell you herself if she wasn’t so inclined to keep secrets from her loved ones, am I right, Princess? The truth is that you’ve probably never even heard about the prophecy of the Nightmare Fracture. The prophecy that the Nightmare would bring about the end of the world. It almost came true, too.”

“But... it’s over now, right?” said Twilight. “The prophecy has not come to pass, because the Nightmare is dead.”

“Tell her, Celestia,” taunted Discord.

“Eight years ago,” said Celestia after a moment, “when you beat the Nightmare during the Summer Sun Celebration, I captured her soul in an artifact called a stasis-bottle. For years I experimented, trying to find a way to destroy the Nightmare’s soul. But I couldn’t do it. She was indestructible. I could only hold her in the bottle and hope that some day, I would find a way to kill her once and for all.”

Twilight’s look of surprise turned to anger. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you are mortal,” said Celestia. “I prayed that you would never have to deal with the Nightmare again in your lifetime. I... I was trying to protect you.”

Twilight sighed. “Fine. She’s dead now, anyway, right?”

“That’s just it,” said Celestia. “After the battle, I went down to the caverns under the castle, to inspect the stasis-bottle and find out how she’d managed to escape. But Twilight, she’s *still there*. Her soul is *still* in the stasis-bottle.”

“But... how could there be two Nightmares?”

“I know ho-o-o-ow,” sang Discord. “I could tell you everything, but I don’t think I feel like it.”

Celestia and Twilight just waited.

“Oh, you party-poopers,” said Discord. “Of course I can’t possibly *not* tell you now. Very well. I call to your attention: Exhibit A.” An easel popped into existence next to him. On it was a large diagram of an eye. “Your right eye, my lady.”

Celestia’s forehoof rose to her eye. The one that had gone blind when everything was beginning.

Discord placed a plastic overlay on top of the diagram. This was filled with a number of arcane magic glyphs.

“A time-beacon,” said Celestia. “In my eye. You put a time-beacon in my *eye*?”

“It was easy,” said Discord. “I was your doctor, after all. You’re a smart mare, Celestia. You tell *me* the rest of the plan.”

“I send the Nightmare’s soul back in time,” said Celestia. “To exactly one month before tonight. I use the time beacon in my own eye as a target.”

“And you give her the secret keys to your heart,” continued Twilight, “as you send her back.”

“The Nightmare dies in an epic battle in the *past*, and we all live happily ever after in the *present*,” finished Discord. “And you two said I didn’t know how to save the world. I’m hurt.”

“You...” stammered Celestia. “My sister and I were both tortured, almost to death by that thing!”

“Yes, and don’t forget who put your sister *back together again*. Clearly, I had your best interests in mind the whole time. If you two experienced any discomfort, then I think we can chalk it up as a fair trade for being petrified for centuries.”

“So, what did you get out of it?” said Twilight. “Besides the joy of watching us all suffer?”

“Why *chaos* my dear,” he said. And now his laughter turned sinister. “Wonderful, delicious, tantalizing *chaos*. More than this kingdom has seen in *eons*! My goodness, it was *so beautiful*. But even more importantly, it was just what I needed to break free of my stone prison.”

“The guards,” said Twilight, “they would have reported if your statue was gone –”

“I left a replica of course! Come on, Twilight, I thought you were the bright one.”

Twilight and Celestia glared at Discord for a moment. Then Twilight said: “So, what now?”

“Now? You and Celestia go down to the catacombs and get your temporal wands a-waving! Or you could choose *not* to do it. You could decide that it’s not worth it. Then maybe time will revert to a scenario where you never sent the Nightmare back. A paradox time-storm! Won’t *that* be chaotic!” He laughed. “So I win either way. Ta-ta, you two. I’m off to see the world. Equestria is just too small-time for me anymore. Maybe I’ll go hang out with some dragons for a change.” He grinned. “Wait until they get a load of me.”

Twilight stomped on the ground three times in rapid succession and suddenly, a huge magic circle appeared on the floor of the bedchamber, searing in neon-white with glyphs three-feet across.

“We made a few improvements to this room, Discord!” shouted Twilight. “You’re trapped now!”

But Discord just laughed. “Oh, oh, how rich. Twilight Sparkle, you are such a cutie-pie, I simply can not stand it. I’ll definitely be seeing you again before you die of old age. Maybe I’ll pop back in around, say, twenty years? It’s a date. Bye now, and take care.”

His laughter echoed about the room. Then Doctor Stables’s body fell apart into a thousand apples, bouncing and rolling in all directions at once.