

Chapter 4

The trio broke camp after another quick serving of Starswirl's behemoth stew. "And don't worry about it spoiling, this stuff is meant to last," the elderly unicorn assured the two younger ponies. Once they were finished, they set off again, making their way deeper through the cavern.

Along the way, Twilight found something remarkable. She had just pulled her sword out of a Sahagin, when she noticed a chest covered in dust. "Huh, what's in here?" she wondered, trotting over. When she opened the chest, she gasped. "Oh, now this will come in handy," she said with a smile as she levitated a sword out of the chest.

"The Shadowblade?" Starswirl asked, coming closer. "That is a worthy find indeed! And before a confrontation with a potent foe, to boot! Fate is truly on our side!"

Twilight carefully unstrapped her old blade before tucking it into her saddlebags. She then proceeded to strap her newfound sword to her back. Looking back, she posed a little. "How do I look?"

Fluttershy cocked her head. "Well, um, to be honest, it kind of clashes with your armor. But, I suppose function is more important than form, right?"

"Well said, young Fluttershy!" Starswirl stated, chuckling. "But enough dawdling! We should press onward!"

They proceeded through the cavern before Twilight spotted daylight filtering through an exit. "Wait, where's the monster?"

"Ah, I forgot to mention. This cavern is divided into two segments," Starswirl explained, walking toward the exit. "The divide occurs here. It is in the second half of the cavern that the monster dwells, at the base of a great waterfall, right at the exit that leads to Clydecyan Castle."

"Oh, my, it lives under a waterfall?" Fluttershy asked in amazement. "That sounds terrifying, and yet amazing at the same time."

Twilight nodded in agreement as they trotted through the valley that lay in between the two cavern segments. Entering the next cave, they found themselves at the top of a huge waterfall. Fluttershy gulped.

"From here, we need to go straight down," Starswirl explained. "Twilight, you do know how to slow your falls using your magic, yes?"

Twilight nodded, and looked at Fluttershy. "Can you fly down the waterfall?"

Fluttershy gulped, but nodded. "I'll... try," she said with a squeak.

The pair of unicorns then stepped into the water, and were promptly drawn by the current to the waterfall's edge. They stood suspended for a moment, then began to fall. Fluttershy gasped, and flew after them, careful to avoid the spray. Wet wings made for difficult flying, after all. However, she needn't have bothered. Twilight and Starswirl floated gently down, wrapped in their distinctive magic auras.

As they touched down, their floatation spells ended. Twilight stepped to dry land quickly, using a spell to dry her armor. "The last thing I need is being paralyzed because my armor rusted together," she said jokingly.

Starswirl laughed, drying himself off. "Ah, yes, I forget how much trouble it must be to be a soldier. I'm just glad I don't have to worry about such things."

Twilight sighed, a wistful look in her eyes. "You know, when I was younger, I read about you. I honestly wanted to grow up to be like you, a sage to teach others what I myself had learned."

"It's not the easiest life," Starswirl explained, "but it has its good points. Why then did you become a dark knight instead?"

Twilight looked down. "King Colton all but raised me. And it was his wish that I be a dark knight. I couldn't turn him down. In fact, until recently, I found myself unable to disobey him at all." As she spoke, she glanced at Fluttershy.

Starswirl looked between the two, then his eyes widened. "Don't tell me... when you said she was the last summoner, did you mean that Colton attacked the village of Mist?!"

Twilight bowed her head. "Indirectly, yes. And I was the pawn the king used. I delivered a ring that contained a horde of bombs to the village. That was when I realized that my blind loyalty to King Colton would only result in destruction."

Fluttershy flew over, and hugged Twilight. "I told you, it wasn't your fault. You couldn't have known what that ring would do."

Starswirl frowned. "Passing bold of Colton... to attack a village of summoners, even indirectly..." He paused, and looked at Twilight with dread in his eyes. "Do you think it's possible that Colton would attack other nations?"

Twilight flinched. "They already have," she said flatly. "I personally led the raid on Maresidia, just before the mission to Mist. I killed dozens of innocents, for no other reason than the fact that I was ordered to take the Water Crystal."

Starswirl grew somber. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to dig up painful memories."

Twilight took a shaky breath. "But that's another reason we need to get to Clydecyan. King Colton said that the crystals were needed to make Colton flourish."

"So he intends to attack the other nations as well?" Starswirl asked. "That's madness!"

Before they could continue, Fluttershy let out a shriek. "What's that?!" she cried, pointing ahead.

Blinking, the two unicorns faced forward. Somehow, while they'd been talking, they had also traveled through the cavern, and were now at the base of another waterfall. An outcropping of rock diverted the water's flow around a passage that led into daylight. In front of the passage was a monstrous pointed head, surrounded by eight writhing tentacles.

"That would be our monster," Starswirl said grimly. "An Octomammoth. Time to test that new blade of yours, Twilight!"

Drawing the Shadowblade, Twilight stood firm in front of the two more frail ponies. "So how will we do this?"

"Fluttershy and I will alternate casting Thunder spells on it, while you focus on hacking off its limbs. We'll cure you whenever you need it," Starswirl explained. "Sound good?"

Twilight nodded, but Fluttershy frowned. "Do we really have to fight it? I mean, maybe it has a reason for being here in this cave?" She paused. "Although, looking at it, it seems like it'd be more at home in saltwater than freshwater..."

Before either Starswirl or Twilight could reply, an orange-colored tentacle emerged behind them, swatting them all in the direction of the main body. All three yelped in pain. "Does that answer your question, Fluttershy?" Twilight deadpanned, as she and the others regained their footing and faced the monster.

The Octomammoth grinned in triumph, leering at what it thought was easy prey. Its grin vanished in a howl of pain as Starswirl lashed out with a Thunder spell, scorching its hide. It reached out with a tentacle, intent on striking the one that dared to hurt it. Twilight, however, was faster, and the Shadowblade cut clean through the oncoming limb. Hissing, it withdrew, waiting for the next move.

Fluttershy charged a spell this time, arcing lightning between her wings. She then jumped into the air and beat her wings once, flinging the lightning at the Octomammoth. It howled again, sending a tentacle at her. Again, Twilight sliced it off before it could get to its target.

The beast, now clearly enraged, sent two tentacles at Twilight. One she slashed at, almost but not quite dismembering it. The other managed to get around her, lifting her into the air, ignoring her protesting yelps. She swung her sword wildly, trying to hit her captor.

Starswirl, who had been charging another Thunder spell, cursed and cut the magic flow. "We can't use lightning on it while she's trapped like that! What now?"

Fluttershy glared at the Octomammoth, and began to glow green. "We make it drop her," she said simply. The chocobo appeared, and pounced on the Octomammoth's head, kicking and pecking at it repeatedly.

Howling, the beast thrashed around, flinging Twilight into the air. Screaming, she was nonetheless careful not to lose her grip on her sword. Before she hit the ground, Starswirl caught her in his green aura, setting her down safely. With a grateful smile, she charged back into the fight, slicing off the tentacle that she'd wounded before.

By this point, the chocobo had run off, and the Octomammoth was madder than ever. With its five remaining limbs, it lashed out at the three ponies. But the chocobo had done its job; the creature was so disoriented that it couldn't aim properly at its attackers. Twilight sliced off two more tentacles before it recovered its equilibrium.

Starswirl and Fluttershy unleashed their Thunder spells at the same time as it launched a new attack. Fluttershy's spell struck the Octomammoth's face, while Starswirl's actually burned a tentacle clean off. In a frenzy, the Octomammoth struck hard at Twilight, knocking her into a wall. Dazed, but not overly hurt, Twilight ran back to stand in front of the two mages.

"Excellent! Keep it up, it's almost down!" Starswirl exclaimed, charging his next spell.

He blasted the Octomammoth as it lashed out at Fluttershy. The lightning stunned it long enough for Twilight to slice off the offending tentacle. It only had one left.

However, it wasn't finished yet. Growling, it sent its last tentacle to wrap around Twilight, and flung her into Starswirl. The two unicorns, caught off-guard by the move, were sent sprawling. Winded, they were helpless as the Octomammoth lashed out again, intent on finishing them.

"STOP RIGHT THERE!" Fluttershy screamed, flying right into the creature's face with a deadly glare. The Octomammoth froze, eyes widening as it took in the furious pegasus filly. "Haven't you seen what your aggression has done to you?! Look at yourself! Your mother would be ashamed to see you acting like this when you're so badly hurt! Do you want to worry her?!"

Starswirl and Twilight's jaws dropped as the Octomammoth actually appeared contrite. "What in the world...?" Starswirl muttered.

"Is there anything she *can't* paralyze with a glare?" Twilight wondered aloud.

"Now, here's what's going to happen. You're going to go back to the ocean, or wherever it is you came from, and you're going to stay there and recover. Your limbs will regrow, given time. After that, you're going to avoid causing anypony problems, okay?" Fluttershy's voice had softened, but it was no less firm.

The Octomammoth nodded its huge head, and slunk off into the cavern, perhaps finding an outlet to the ocean. Fluttershy smiled, and flew back over to the unicorns. "The path's clear," she said, her voice back to its customary soft tone.

The two unicorns just stared at her. Then they looked at each other. "Remind me never to get on her bad side," Starswirl said.

"Trust me, it's not pleasant," Twilight replied with a nod.

The trio left through the passage, stepping out into the sunlight. "From here, it's only an hour to Clydecyan Castle, if we keep up a brisk pace," Starswirl said, setting off.

Twilight followed, matching his pace. Fluttershy opted to ride on Twilight's back, since she couldn't keep up with the older ponies normally. As they rounded a bend in the mountains, they saw the spires of Clydecyan Castle ahead of them. "Wow," murmured

Fluttershy. "I've never seen a castle before, let alone gone into one."

The two unicorns slowed a little, looking up at the impressive castle. The main keep was taller than Colton Castle by a fair margin, although the structure had less ground area. Twilight couldn't help but appreciate the difference in style. The spires were more refined-looking than Colton's, and the castle seemed brighter overall. Why, even the airships looked more colorful next to this castle.

Twilight suddenly did a double-take. *Waitamminute, Colton's the only country with airships! Those are...* "The Red Wings!" she shouted.

Starswirl and Fluttershy looked up, just as the first explosion went off on the castle parapets. Several more explosions followed, as parts of the castle fell into ruin.

Starswirl gasped. "No! CLOVER!" He broke into a full gallop, Twilight right behind him. The bombardment continued, leaving the once proud Clydecyan Castle in ruins, although it remained mostly intact. The two unicorns got to the castle gates just as the barrage ended, and the Red Wings flew off.

The three ponies stared in horror at the destruction before them. "Maresidia was one thing, but this..." Twilight murmured.

"Clover..." Starswirl breathed. "CLOVER!" He darted into the castle, jumping over the ruined gate. Twilight blinked, and followed.

Inside the castle, the destruction was made worse by the presence of bodies. Some were still burning, while others had cooled off. Twilight forced down the bile in her throat, following Starswirl as he cantered up a flight of stairs. Two more flights followed, before Starswirl skidded to a stop. Twilight barely stopped herself from colliding with his rear.

"Oh, no..." Starswirl breathed, taking a few trembling steps forward. Looking past him, Twilight could see a unicorn mare lying on her side in the center of the room. She didn't appear to have been hurt by the explosions, but her back had three arrows sticking out of it. Blood stained her emerald-green coat from the wounds. "My dearest Clover..." the unicorn stallion murmured, kneeling beside the mare.

Twilight stepped forward, but stopped short of the elder unicorn. What could she possibly say or do to comfort him? He'd just lost someone who was as close as a daughter to him. Fluttershy hovered next to her, equally uncertain.

The sound of coughing caught the attention of all three, as another unicorn mare stumbled in from a side chamber. Her mint-green coat was dusty, as was her light cyan mane, but she was otherwise unscathed. Looking up, she gasped, blinking orange eyes. "Sir Starswirl?"

Starswirl sprang to his hooves. "You... You're that bard! The one who brought Clover here!" Snorting heavily, he pawed the ground, looking ready to charge at the young mare.

Twilight, however, quickly put herself between the two. "Now wait just a minute! Clydecyan is lying in ruins around us, and the first thing you want to do is attack somepony who's just survived the destruction? What is the matter with you?!" she yelled at the older unicorn.

"If it wasn't for that bard, Clover would never have been here!" Starswirl yelled back. "It's because of her that my daughter is – "

"She's still breathing!" Fluttershy's soft voice managed to make itself heard over the unicorn's. Starswirl immediately stopped, and kneeled beside Clover again. He felt her neck, and sure enough, he felt a pulse. The touch also served to awaken the wounded mare, as she began coughing a little.

"Oh, Clover, thank goodness you're alive," Starswirl said.

"F-father...?" Clover asked weakly, blinking her red eyes.

"Yes, Clover, I'm here. Don't worry, I'm not leaving," Starswirl assured her. He then glared at the approaching bard. "Stay away from her, you spoony bard!"

"Father, wait," Clover said, catching Starswirl's attention. "There's something... you need to know. Lyra's not just a bard. She's... actually the princess of Clydecyan."

Starswirl's jaw dropped, as he looked again at the bard. She wore a red vest with a yellow cape fluttering behind her. A red tiara adorned her head. At her side hung a harp, its condition rather pristine despite the devastation around them.

"I'm sorry... for not telling you sooner, Father," Clover continued. "Lyra dislikes politics... so she traveled disguised as a bard to escape court intrigue. When we met... we fell in love. It was as simple as that. But... you didn't approve. Because she was both a bard, and another mare."

Starswirl was speechless. He simply stared, alternating between his adoptive daughter and the mare she loved. Finally, he found his voice. "Why did you flee? Why didn't you just tell me?"

Clover smiled sadly. "Because... Lyra didn't want anypony else to know. I went with her, reluctantly. But living together without your blessing... I couldn't do that. I'd finally convinced her to come back with me to explain everything. We were just about to leave..."

"Until Colton attacked," Lyra said flatly. "Their Red Wings flew in, demanding that we surrender the Fire Crystal. But when we complied, they started bombing us. My mother and father perished in the blaze, and Clover shielded me from the arrows of a few spiteful archers."

Starswirl looked down at Clover, his eyes filled with wonder and sadness. "You love her this much? Enough to give your life for her?"

Clover chuckled a little, but it turned into a hacking cough. A few drops of blood dribbled out of her mouth. "Forgive... my selfishness... Father. Lyra... I love... you..." Her eyes closed, and her body went limp. One last breath passed through her mouth. Then she stopped moving entirely.

"*Clover!*" Lyra and Starswirl's anguished cries caused Twilight to wince. She and Fluttershy exchanged looks. They were intruders on a moment of grief.

"Sir Starswirl," Lyra began, her voice breaking. "Will you help me give her her Last Rites?"

"Of course... Princess," Starswirl said, his voice likewise breaking.

Both of their horns began glowing, as did Clover's body. Fluttershy stared, entranced. "What... what are they doing?" she asked Twilight.

"Last Rites. It's what we unicorns do with our dead. We change their bodies into raw magic, and let it disperse. Such is our way," Twilight answered, her eyes shadowed by her helmet. "Supposedly, it returns the magic to the world, allowing for another unicorn to be born elsewhere."

"That sounds so sad," Fluttershy whispered, "yet so sweet at the same time. I've heard that pegasi cremate their dead, and scatter their ashes to the winds. I don't actually know, since there weren't that many pegasi in Mist."

"That's right. All ponies have their own ways of dealing with their dead. Earth ponies, from what I hear, bury their dead, to feed the good earth. Though we have nations, we're divided even more by our species. Such is the way of ponykind," Twilight said.

By this point, Clover's body had completely faded away, individual sparkles of magic floating off into the air. Starswirl and Lyra's horns ceased glowing, and they both let out breaths.

At this point, Twilight felt it safe to step forward. "I'm terribly sorry for your loss. Both of you. But, Princess Lyra, I need to ask. Who was it that led the Red Wings?"

Lyra looked up. "I didn't see them myself, but I heard some of the Colton soldiers talking about her. It was somepony by the name of Nightmare Moon."

"Nightmare Moon?" Twilight blinked. "I haven't heard of her before."

"From what I heard, she's a newcomer to Colton," Lyra replied. "Supposedly, she's very charismatic and powerful."

"It matters not how powerful she is!" Starswirl thundered, causing the other three to jump. "I will destroy her with my own hooves if need be!" He got to his hooves, and headed for the stairwell.

Twilight intercepted him. "Wait! You can't just go alone!"

Starswirl flung her aside with his magic. "I don't need anypony's help to destroy Clover's killer! Not even yours!" He cantered down the stairwell, out of sight of the others.

"Well, that could have gone better," grumbled Twilight as she clambered to her hooves.

Fluttershy flew over to Lyra, who had silent tears streaming down her cheeks. "It's not easy, losing somepony close to you. Believe me, I know. I lost my mother, and most of the ponies I know. But I don't let it get to me. Not anymore."

Lyra looked up at her, eyes still streaming. "You're right. I know you're right. Clover wouldn't want me to grieve over her." She wiped her eyes with a hoof, and stood. "As Princess – or rather, Queen – of Clydecyan, it's my duty to rebuild my kingdom."

"Your highness, there's a favor I would ask of you first," Twilight said, stepping forward.

Lyra blinked. "A favor? From me?"

"As the last remaining member of the Clydecyan royal family, you're the last pony alive who knows where to find a sand pearl. A dear friend of mine suffers from desert fever in Kaipony. Please, your highness, you must help me. Help her!" Twilight's normally strong voice began to break near the end.

Lyra looked at her. "This friend of yours... what's her name?"

"Rarity," Twilight answered, voice trembling.

"And she means a lot to you, doesn't she?" Lyra asked. "As much as Clover meant to me?"

Twilight hesitated, but then nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

Lyra closed her eyes and let out a breath. "I couldn't turn down such a heartfelt request." She opened her eyes again, and there was a spark in them that hadn't been there before. "Sand pearls are found in the antlion's den to the east of the castle. We'll need to use the royal hovercraft to get there. I'll accompany you to the den, and to Kaipony once we have the pearl."

Twilight nearly collapsed with relief. "Thank you so much, your highness!" she said, bowing.

"Just one thing," the mint-green unicorn said. "Don't call me 'your highness'. As far as I'm concerned, we're friends helping each other. And my friends can call me Lyra."

Twilight blinked, but then nodded. "Alright... Lyra."

Fluttershy looked at both of them. "Um, we haven't really introduced ourselves to you, have we?"

Twilight gasped, but then recovered her composure. "Right. I'm Twilight Sparkle, former commander of Colton's Red Wings, and now a renegade."

"I'm Fluttershy, from the village of Mist. And, possibly, the last of my kind, the summoners," the pegasus said.

Lyra nodded to both of them. "We all have sad tales, it seems. Let's set off, Twilight and Fluttershy. To the antlion's den, then to Kaipony! After that, who knows?"

Twilight knew that Lyra was forcing her enthusiasm in order to cope with Clover's passing, but she didn't comment. It would be tactless of her. So, the three ponies departed, although Lyra stopped to look back for a moment.

"Farewell, my beloved Clover," the reluctant queen said, before leaving.