

Elements of Discord, Chapter 2: Lost in the Smoke

(All credit for the My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic world to Lauren Faust. Apologies for the length. I can never seem to do anything... short...)

The sun rose over Ponyville in a dull, ruddy haze that seemed to stain the normally bright and cheery buildings in tones of umber and sienna. The smoke from the Everfree Forest curled up the valley in a dark river, and Twilight Sparkle was reminded of a similar incident involving a dragon. "I wish we could solve this as easily as asking a dragon to nap somewhere else," Twilight Sparkle said as she folded her front legs on the railing of her balcony. Even then, the smoke had left with the dragon. Even if they asked the fire pony to leave, the forest would still burn.

Below her the town was a knot of nervous and worried ponies who didn't know what they should do while overhead the smoke slowly increased. She wished it was like a cloud, but this was just like layers of dirty silk stacked thicker and thicker with each passing hour. When Spike walked out on to the balcony besides her, she turned and looked over, asking, "Still no word from the Princess?"

"You'd be the first to know." Spike replied as he joined her, looking down as well as some ponies were trying to load up a wagon with their belongings. "Well, technically you'd be the second to know. I mean, after me, that is." His claws traced circles on the railing, clearly just as frustrated as she at the helpless sensation. Behind them in the library her friends argued about what to do.

She smacked the rail with her hoof, "Ugh... I've sent her three messages about the fire. The least she could do is say 'Got your letter, Twilight. Hold tight a second while I decide what to do.'" The silence from her mentor unnerved Twilight almost as much as the smoke overhead. Twilight always knew Princess Celestia had some plan or idea, even if she didn't share it. All Twilight Sparkle needed was direction and she'd be out to help as best she could.

When the Doo twins had brought Rainbow Dash and Zecora back to Ponyville, Twilight Sparkle had initially worried about her friends first. It'd taken most of the night for the pegasus to stop coughing enough to tell them about the encounter in the Everfree Forest. Now looking out at all the worried ponies the problem suddenly felt so much bigger. Rainbow Dash had recovered enough to rejoin her friends in the library, but Zecora was still bed bound.

In the meantime, Twilight Sparkle had researched every text, myth, and legend about flaming ponies and come up with nothing. The only scrap she'd found was a tale centuries ago about a pony of fire burning a city of ponies, but the page had been torn in two. Some of her friends thought it was a monster that looked like a pony, others that it was a pony turned into a monster. And others had other problems...

"Ugh, this smoke is absolutely intolerable!" Rarity said as she fanned her hoof before her muzzle futilely. She pointed a hoof at where Rainbow Dash sat, still looking fatigued. The pony's beautiful tail had been singed away to a bare stub. "Why can't the pegasi just... I dunno... flap it all away like the other nasty clouds?"

Rainbow Dash snorted in disgust, pointing at the murky haze with a wing. "Uh, this is smoke, Rarity. Not clouds. And there's a whole lot of it up there. There's nothing to kick, and

it's a little tough to fan it all away when you can't breathe." The cyan pegasus sighed, slumping a little and leaning back on her hooves to look out the window at the sickly orange skies. "I just hope Cloudsdale is above all that gunk. This monster's bad enough for Ponydale. I hate to think what else might be hurt by it."

Twilight Sparkle couldn't stop thinking about it. Zecora's home was gone, and much of the Everfree Forest was now aflame. Someponies had flown by and confirmed the fire was now heading straight towards Ponyville. She shook her head and asked again, "And you're sure it asked about the Princess?" Twilight Sparkle said as she trotted back into the library. "You're absolutely positive?"

Rainbow Dash fell back and laid flat with her hoof across her eyes. "Yes, Twilight. For the hundredth thousandth time it asked where Princess Celestia was." She moved her hoof to glare up at the purple unicorn in irritation. "It wasn't exactly much of a conversationalist. Lots of fire, smoke, and running. Not so much of the talking."

"That it could talk at all is what worries me." Twilight Sparkle said as she walked slowly down the stairs, looking at the row after row of books. She imagined them all on fire, burning in yellow walls of flame and thick gouts of smoke. Not for the first time she thought of bundling them up and getting them back to Canterlot, but somehow that felt like admitting defeat. The Princess would know what to do. When she decided to get in touch, they'd devise a plan and get rid of this fire pony once and for all.

Applejack entered with Fluttershy, the former as grim as she got during a treenapping and the latter appearing every bit as frazzled as Rainbow Dash. Twilight Sparkle approached them, "How's Apple Bloom? Feeling any better?"

Applejack shook her head slowly with a sigh. Rarity walked up besides Applejack with an equally worried expression. "Is she still blaming herself too?" the white unicorn asked in a rare display of sympathy.

"Yup. Darn filly wouldn't even come out of her room when she heard the news."

Rarity sighed, looking in the direction of her shop, "Sweetie Belle was positively inconsolable." Then she snorted and stomped a hoof in irritation, "It's not as if the girls went out there planning to let this thing loose!"

Twilight Sparkle shook her head. "Ponies are scared. Once they found out it was the Cutie Mark Crusaders... well...someponies just want someone to blame."

"Any word from Princess Celestia yet?" Applejack asked with an annoyed frown.

"None," Twilight Sparkle replied quickly, seeing the worry in her friend's face. Applejack hung her head, and Twilight Sparkle looked at Fluttershy. Clearly the yellow pegasus hadn't slept all night. "How are you doing with the animals from the Everfree Forest?"

"Oh, it's simply terrible," she replied softly. "I'm trying to find enough space for them all, but there just isn't enough room in my house for them all. The bunnies alone take up my entire living room and the birdies are all horribly sick from all this smoke." She said, ears and wings drooping. "And there's always more needing a place to stay."

"Well I've got a barn that's not doing much right now. Why don't you send the overflow my way, Fluttershy?" Applejack offered with a smile, and received one in turn.

Suddenly the front door banged open and Pinkie Pie entered with an annoyed grunt. "Ugh, this whole monster thing is completely ruining my plans for Gummy's six and a half month

birthday anniversary! It's not like he's going to turn a year and six and a half months old every day!"

"Uh, Pinkie? Kinda higher priorities here," Applejack said as she looked at her sternly.

Pinkie Pie stood firm for a moment, and then slumped a little as her smile turned into a frown. "I know, but it was the only idea I could think of for a party! I mean, I don't even want to think of an 'End of Ponyville' party."

Twilight Sparkle walked besides the pink pony and gave her a nudge. "I know, Pinkie. Thanks for trying through."

Then from the stairs to the balcony came a heavy belch and flash of green flame. Spike covered his stomach as the scroll of parchment drifted down. He caught it, purple eyes scanning the parchment. "To my most faithful student, I apologize for my delay in responding. I am very proud of you and your friends for discovering this threat to Equestria. However, I would like you to..." Spike trailed off a moment, his jaw dropping as he stared at the paper.

Twilight Sparkle looked at the baby dragon with a feeling like spiders in her mane. "To what, Spike?"

His voice was almost a whisper as he said in disbelief, "...to assist in the evacuation of Ponyville?!"

"What?" Rainbow Dash said as she rocked forward and hopped to her hooves. "That can't be right!"

Spike went on, "This creature represents a danger unlike any seen in a thousand years. I know you want to act, but you must trust me and leave for your safety to Canterlot. I ask this as your Princess and teacher. Sincerely, Princess Celestia."

Twilight Sparkle stood there in shock in the middle of the library. Why wouldn't the Princess tell her more? Why didn't she believe that she and her friends could protect Ponyville? She looked at all the books, her friends, then walked to the window and looked out at all the shops and homes of all the ponies that lived here. A deep hollow lay inside her chest. "I guess..." she said softly, aware of her friends' eyes upon her, "I guess we have to do as she asks..." Oh but it felt so wrong!

There wasn't much in the way of argument. In the middle of summer there wasn't a storm cloud to be had. Without rain, the fire would spread. Even with rain, the monster would just keep burning things up as it went. As the girls left, Spike started to collect the most valuable books. "At least we've got time to pack up and get out of here. I wonder what's taking that monster so long?"

"I wonder that myself." She said as her horn glimmered and a map of Ponyville lifted from its case, swooshed before her, and unrolled. "Here's where the girls said the city was supposed to be. And here is Zecora's house." She said as she pointed with her hoof. "After that it's Fluttershy's house, then Apple Acres, the bridge, and then Ponyville." Letting her magic roll up the map she rubbed her chin. "If that monster is as fast as Rainbow Dash said then it should have been here hours ago, but it's just walking its way towards us."

"So? I mean it's a flaming pony that burns everything around it to a crisp. It's not like Ponyville is going anywhere." Spike pointed out as he put his hands on his hips. "Besides, remember what the Princess said. She doesn't want us involved."

Twilight Sparkle groaned. That was in a way the worst part. Did she think that Twilight

Sparkle would botch it up? That she wasn't skilled enough in her magic? Why wouldn't she at least give her a chance? She hung her head a little. "Come on, Spike. Let's give the mayor the news."

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There wasn't anyplace in Ponyville that Apple Bloom wanted to be in right now, so the Cutie Mark Crusader's tree house would do. She slumped against the rail, looking up at that ugly brown gray cloud coming from the west. Her fault. She could hear her cousins working furiously by the barn to save what they could. Her fault. Zecora so sick from the smoke she was still barely conscious. All her fault.

"Apple Bloom?" Came Scootaloo's voice from the bottom of the ramp. The brown pegasus drug her tail behind her as she looked at her friend. "Guess I wasn't the only one who wanted to get away."

"No scooter?"

"No... some stupid colts busted the handle cause... um... what we did..." She said as her ears drooped.

"Everypony hates us cause we let that monster out," Apple Bloom said as she clenched her eyes shut.

Scootaloo joined her at the railing, crossing her her hooves and resting her chin atop them. "Yeah. Looks like it. I ran into Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon at Sugarcube Corner. 'Leave it to the blank flanks to destroy Ponyville.'"

Apple Bloom sniffed and rubbed away her tears before they could betray her. From between the trees the two girls spotted a white pony approaching, and smiled a little for Sweetie Belle. Both had known it was only a matter of time before Sweetie Belle showed up. They were friends after all.

"Hey Belle." Scootaloo called out. The little unicorn just sniffed and tried to smile as well as joined them. Then the act crumbled and she leaned against her friends and bawled her eyes out. Her friends joined suit as they held each other and vented the misery they'd built up over the last terrible hours.

Nopony can cry forever though, and when the tears finally stopped Apple Bloom rubbed her snotty nose with her leg. "We... we can't do this. We can't just sit here! We caused this. We gotta fix it!"

Scootaloo leaned against Sweetie Belle. "What do you mean, Apple Bloom? How are we supposed to fix it?"

"I don't rightly know." The filly said as she rose on her hooves. "But we broke it. We gotta fix it! If we just sit here crying... well..." It would mean Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon were right.

Sweetie Belle stood as well, "But what can we do about a monster?"

"Yeah. It's not like we can't just ask it to leave!" Scootaloo said with a snort.

Apple Bloom frowned and looked at the pair. "Well why not?"

"You want to... to... ask the monster to leave?" Sweetie Belle asked in confusion.

"Apple Bloom, it's a monster!"

"I don't care!" She said and then stomped her little hoof in agitation. "Look, when my big sis took Bloomberg to Appleloosa, the ponyfolk there thought the buffalo were like some kinda

monsters too! But they wasn't, and they didn't figure that out till they talked to em! So I reckon somepony ought ta at least try!"

The unicorn and pegasus looked at each other before they looked to their friend. "Well, all right then!" Scootaloo said as she jumped to her feet as well. "If we're going to do this, then let's do it!"

"Yeah. Let's fine this monster and..." Sweetie Belle began just as sharply as her friends and then softened her tone as she finished, "Ask it really nicely to go away."

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The mayor wasn't much easier to deal with, but she called everypony over to the town hall to give them the bad news. Worry and angry mutters filled the square, and Twilight Sparkle was glad to see that the Cutie Mark Crusaders were out of sight. The mayor tasked her to keep the evacuation orderly while she went around and calmed panicked nerves. Clipboard and checklist floating besides her she checked in on Rarity first.

The white unicorn tisked as she whisked bolts of cloth overhead, but she wasn't packing them up. Instead her scissors snipped with precision and expertise to cut out panels of fabric. Twilight Sparkle watched in amazement as they were sown into elegant saddle packs, each decorated with flowers, a gem or two, or some tasteful embroidery.

"These are amazing, Rarity." The fabric had to be some of her most expensive dress materials.

"What? These old things? Oh, hardly." She said with a dismissive wave and huffed, "I just thought it would be such a bother to carry all this all the way to Manehattan when it could be of some use here."

"Manehattan?"

Rarity nodded with a sigh as she stroked her hooves over the luxurious velvet once used to make Twilight Sparkle's dress, now turned to bags and sacks as she avoided looking at her friend. "I'm fairly sure I can get set up with some clientele right away. And really, I suppose it's time I took my craft to a more sophisticated market." She said proudly, hand on her chest. Then her smile slipped as she looked out the window. "Still, I'm going to miss the peace and charm of Ponyville. It was so conducive to my vision." Then she looked at Twilight Sparkle, "You're returning to Canterlot, aren't you?"

"Canterlot?" Twilight Sparkle blinked and frowned, "Well... I guess..."

Purple gems flew from a bag to sew along the edges as Rarity sighed, "Personally I'd just love to go, but it's so hard getting established there." She said as she completed an amethyst encrusted lavender saddlebag. "But I'm sure that I'll visit you whenever I can."

Rarity going to Manehattan? Spike and Twilight Sparkle returning to Canterlot? That dull sensation inside Twilight Sparkle's chest grew. "Well, I can see you've got your hooves full here."

While heading over the check on Pinkie Pie a cyan blur rocketed through the air right over Twilight Sparkle's head and crashed in a heap, knocking goggles and mask off of Rainbow Dash. The pegasus shook herself hard and sat up. "Oh, hey. Sorry about that." She stood and looked back at her truncated tail, "I'm a little front heavy."

“That’s all right. Are you sure you should be flying in this smoke?”

“Nah, it’s not that bad.” She glanced in the direction of the Everfree Forest where the smoke was far thicker. “I’m just spreading the news for pegasi to get their butts back to Cloudsdale as soon as possible. They’re going to be moving it away from all that smoke.”

“They are?” That was one advantage of a city made of clouds, Twilight Sparkle thought. “But... what about you?”

“Buh... me? Well I... I mean...” She rubbed her rainbow colored mane and sighed, looking away. “I dunno. I guess I’ll go with them. Once my tail grows back I’ll have to practice to get my edge again. I can’t do that here if Ponyville... well... isn’t.”

“No, I guess you can’t.” Twilight Sparkle said sadly. Rainbow Dash didn’t look any happier either as she put her goggles and cloth mask back on and flew off to tell another pegasus her news.

Checking in with Mr. and Mrs. Cake was next on the list. They’d need enough supplies for everypony if they were going to leave all at once. In the bakery, she was amazed to see balloons, streamers, and Pinkie Pie in the corner dancing on the table. “It’s the ennnnd of the world as we know it! And I feel fiiiiiiiine!” She sang into a lollipop as the ponies around her clapped their hooves in appreciation. Then Pinkie Pie spotted Twilight Sparkle and hopped off the table to rush to her friend. “Oh you made it! I’m so glad you made it!”

“Pinkie Pie, what is all this?” She said as she looked at the veritable cloud of balloons floating against the ceiling.

“Oh! Well, see, I had a whole lot of extra balloons and party crackers, so I thought I might as well use them for anypony needing a smile. I mean, sure, going away parties aren’t really all that fun, but it’s better than just going away.” She said with a smile, looking over her shoulder at the worried looking ponies saying their farewells.

“But what about you? Where are you going?”

“Me? Oh! Well, I guess I’ll go and see my folks for a bit. I mean there’s not a whole lot on a rock farm that’ll burn, you know?” She said with a snort and grin, “And I think my mom and dad might need a little refresher course on fun. It’ll be good for me too.” She added.

“It will?”

“Sure. I mean there’s not a lot of fun farming rocks, so I’ll have to think of extra fun things to do. So when you visit, I’ll really be able to knock you off your hooves!” Pinkie grin took off most of the edge, but it was still sad to see her eyes. “Oh! Be sure to have a good bye brownie!” She said, turning away to pluck one off a tray and popped it into Twilight Sparkle’s mouth. Chocolate... no pepper or garlic... so why was Pinkie Pie snickering?

She finished up with Mr. and Mrs. Cake and slipped out. The market place was a mess, with every wagon being loaded that could be used to haul away whatever people needed. It was a nice reminder to see Rarity’s packs everywhere. Somehow it made everything even sadder.

When she reached Apple Acres, Twilight Sparkle was amazed to see every member of the Apple family hard at work. They were digging up the smaller, younger trees and carrying them over to carts. She’s evacuating the trees, Twilight Sparkle thought with an amazed smile. Only Applejack could do that. The purple unicorn found the orange earth pony pulling three carts loaded with apples towards the gate, sweat dripping from her brow. “Hey Applejack,”

Twilight Sparkle called out. "Got a minute?"

A wall rose in the west of rolling gray smoke with ever moving orange flame. They could even see the flicker of flame here and there. The fire was still miles off, but those were far too few. "I reckon..." she drawled and then looked at Fluttershy oddly. "Twilight, why is your tongue as green as a sarsaparilla bottle?"

"Green?" Twilight Sparkle blinked in confusion, then groaned. "Pinkie Pie." They took looked at each other and then shared the thinnest of laughs, but it was still a laugh.

Applejack smiled sadly as she shrugged out of the sweaty harness. "Well, it'll leave a funny memory at least."

"I'm glad to see your family got here in time." Twilight Sparkle said as she looked over at all the work.

"Aw, shoot. Soon as they heard 'fire' and 'Ponyville' they came a runnin'. Trying to get out as much as we can before the fires do." She walked over to where the Apple family were loading carts with everything edible and precious. Got Seymore and Appleton and that there is Mighty Micah." She said, pointing at each transplanted tree one after the next. Applejack sighed, "Course we won't be able to get out the really old trees." She said as she walked towards the trees.

"You talk like they're a part of your family." Twilight Sparkle observed as she looked at the largest trees closest to the farm house.

"Sure are. I know most pegasus and unicorns don't quite reckon why we care so much, but these trees were here when I was a filly. And my parents and grandparents too." Applejack said as she put a hoof on a large, gnarled trunk, trying hard not to cry, "And until today, I always thought they'd still be here if I ever had a foal of my own. But I reckon if I do then the apple trees in Appleloosa will have to suffice."

"Appleloosa? That's where you're going?" That hard emptiness grew inside her.

"Yup. We'll take as many trees as we can and find some place nice for em. That fire might take Apple Acres, but it won't take them all." She sighed as she stood beneath an enormous tree almost as high as the barn. "This here's the oldest tree on the farm. Heck, in Ponyville, I reckon. Old Johnny. I'm the only one that can buck his apples. Been here almost a thousand years or so, since Ponyville was founded."

Twilight Sparkle frowned, "A thousand years..."

"Yeah, long time for an apple tree. Miracle he still produces at all." The orange pony cocked her head at the unicorn, leaning towards her. "Huh? You got an idea runnin' through that head of yours?"

"Maybe." She said as she rubbed her muzzle with her hoof. "Princess Celestia said that this was a threat the likes of which hadn't been seen for a thousand years. And I found a story about a city being burned that long ago. So what happened a thousand years ago?"

Applejack frowned as she scratched her ear awkwardly, "Um, I'm pretty sure I'm not the pony to talk to about academics, Twilight Sparkle. That's what we keep you around for."

"Yeah. It is," she said as she rose to her feet. "I think I need to check this out."

"Ain't you supposed to be evacuatin'?"

"Maybe. But maybe not." She said as she turned to run down the road, "I'm going to check on Fluttershy and make sure the animals get out too!" She called out over her shoulder

as she raced towards the deepening gloom.

The road to Fluttershy's cottage was eerily quiet. The smoke overhead nearly blocked out the sun, and here and there little patches of smoke curled through the trees. For most of the run the only thing she heard was her hooves. Tiny flecks of ugly ash drifted down through the air like dirty snow. The air tasted salty and bitter and every now and then she'd start coughing if she breathed too deeply.

When she reached the cottage she saw a small army of animals being lined up in neat rows with the yellow pegasus fluttering overhead. "Now remember to stay with your partner all the way to Whitetail Wood. Be sure not to stop for grazing or napping." She said calmly to the agitated critters. She landed right besides Angel Bunny and Winona, Applejack's herding dog. "Angel, Winona, please make sure no one gets lost on the trip, okay?" Angel Bunny wiped a tear from his eye and then nodded and saluted before hopping to the lead while Winona took up the rear. Then the collection of animals started to move out.

"You're not going with them?" Twilight Sparkle asked in concern.

The pegasus coughed softly and shook her head. "Oh no. I can't do that."

"Oh. Then you're going to join Rainbow Dash in Cloudsdale."

"No, I can't do that either," she said as she led Twilight Sparkle to the cottage on the edge of the meadow. The wide crescent was filled with long grass and wild flowers; in the smoky twilight they were turned into grays and umbers. This close the purple unicorn could hear the distant roar and snapping crackle. Inside the cottage were dozens, possibly hundreds, of injured animals. Bandaged, splinted, they lay on almost every space available.

Twilight Sparkle gasped, "Oh no! How are we going to get them out?"

"Oh, I think we'll be okay. The fire should go around the meadow and miss us, right?" She asked that soft, whisper voice that strained for hope.

"The fire might but what if the fire pony just trots right across the meadow and lights up the trees on this side too? Or if there's embers... or..." And then Twilight Sparkle was hushed when Fluttershy put a hoof on the unicorn's mouth to silence her.

"Twilight, I can't leave," she said in a note of finality that made Twilight stare in shock, "This is my home. This is their home. I can't just leave them." She said softly as she turned to face Twilight with that serene smile.

"We'll find something. Some carts. Some... anything! Some of the Apple family can come and... I don't know. Something!" Twilight Sparkle blurted as her brain failed her. Forget the fire, the evacuation, Princess Celestia's lack of confidence in her abilities or even the monster; this truly staggered her.

"Well, if that happens, then great," she said as she calmed a trembling fawn with her wing. But from her tone it was clear that she didn't expect it to happen. Not with the fire so close. The meadow would be their only protection. And if the fire pony crossed it...

"I'll send help!" Twilight Sparkle promised, taking her friend's hoof in her own and holding it a moment. She couldn't believe she was doing this; leaving her friend, now. She should... what? Fight? Try to invent a magic spell to make it rain? What could she do besides send somepony to get Fluttershy and the injured animals out?

"Thank you, Twilight Sparkle. Please, take care of yourself and Spike." She said with a note of finality as she turned and started to gently sing to the injured animals in her care.

Twilight turned, doing all she could not to burst into tears as she ran back along that silent road, her dear friend's song echoing in her ears. At Apple farms she tried to find Applejack, but she was pulling a load towards the town. She told Big Macintosh about Fluttershy, but the large red pony just looked at the wagons loaded with trees and apples and muttered about doing the best they could.

Twilight Sparkle raced towards town, trying not to think of how she'd left her friend behind. She tried to focus on the nagging mystery; it was the only thing keeping her together. She knew about Nightmare Moon's attempt to take over Equestria and overthrow her sister. That had led to Princess Celestia using the Elements of Harmony to banish Nightmare Moon to the moon until recently, when she'd escaped only to be stopped by Twilight Sparkle and her friends. But what had really happened back then? How had Princess Luna become Nightmare Moon? She simply had to know. As much as she wanted to race back to be with Fluttershy or help Pinkie Pie keep the worried ponies happy or save Applejack's precious trees, Twilight Sparkle needed to know.

In the village she spotted a sweaty and exhausted Applejack behind two carts, with two more being carried by her kin. "Applejack!" She said as she grabbed her friend's harness. "It's Fluttershy!"

"Fluttershy? What about Fluttershy?"

"She won't leave her cottage. There's lots of animals too sick to move, and she won't leave them. I dunno what she's thinking." She said as she looked back the way she'd come.

"Darn filly," Applejack said with a scowl before looking at Twilight, "Don't worry. I'll get these emptied out and get my family to help evacuate all her critters. And when we're back here I am going to give that pegasus a piece of my mind... erm, gently or coarse." Applejack then smiled and put her sweaty hoof on Twilight Sparkle's shoulder. "Now, what are you going to do?"

What was she going to do? What could she do, better than anyone. "I'm going to find an answer, Applejack. I'm going to find a way to stop this."

"Thatta girl. You hit the books. I'll hit the road." She said as she shrugged out of the harness and called out, "Get these wagons unloaded, lickety split!" Ponies scrambled to help her remove the fruity cargo.

Twilight Sparkle raced into the library and skidded into a pile of books, knocking them in a disorganized heap.... which fell into the next stack, and the next, and the next. "No! No!" She gasped and clenched her eyes closed to try and stop the tumble, but her attempts to stop the avalanche of texts was for naught. When the books stopped falling, Twilight found herself in a perfect circle of texts. Spike leaned against a half loaded crate and sighed, "You know, if you wanted them all on the floor I could have taken care of that."

"Quick, Spike. I need... I need..." She froze and then smacked the sides of her head with her hooves. "I don't know what I need!" She needed whatever book would have the answer, even if she didn't know exactly what it was. Then a light went on in her head and she grinned. "Pinkie Pie! I need Pinkie Pie!"

"Yessss?" Pinkie Pie said from right behind her, making Twilight yelp and jump, landing on the ridge of books.

"Huh? Pinkie Pie?" she stammered.

“That’s me!”

“How’d you get here?” Spike asked as he looked from where she was standing to the door and back again.

“I was just bringing you two some of the left over treats.” She gestured to a set of Rarity’s saddle bags on her flank loaded with cakes, “Why? Did you think I just magically appeared at the moment it would freak you out? Cause that would be really cool!” She beamed as she held out the bag of sweets.

Twilight grabbed her shoulders, “Quick, Pinkie, I need a book!”

Pinkie blinked, looked at her skeptically, looked over at the books littering the floor, and then back at her. “Well, uh, it’s not like you’re short on em!”

“No, no, Pinkie! I need a specific book! A special book! One that will tell me what I need to know about Nightmare Moon and what happened in Equestria a thousand years ago. You got to help me find that book!” Twilight said, shaking her friend in a panic.

“Twi...iiii...iiii...iiiiiii...” She tried to say when Twilight released her. Landing on the books she huffed. “Twilight Sparkle, you’re the librarian. Not me. I mean sure, I may have occasionally found whatever book you needed at a particular moment in time with freakish regularity, but it’s not like I can just pick up a book and...” She picked up one text in her mouth and finished around it, “ithll be tha ome shu wan!”

Twilight’s horn glowed and she pulled the book from her friend’s mouth. “Professor Zsnuz Zsnuz’s Unabridged History of Equestria! Perfect pick Pinkie!” She opened it, checked the table of contents, and then rapidly flipped through the pages. Behind her Pinkie perused books at random while Twilight focused on the text and read aloud.

“So it was that the pegasus unicorn Nightmare Moon waged her rebellion against Princess Celestia. Aided by powerful magic and her five lieutenants, the Nightmares brought all of Equestria to its knees.” Twilight Moon’s eyes went round as she looked at Spike. “Not ‘Nightmare’... ‘Nightmares’!”

“As in Nightmare Moon had help?”

“Yes!” Her eyes darted back and forth over the page. “They helped subjugate and conquer all the ponies of Equestria. Nightmare Screamer led an army of trolls and hobgoblins from outside the land to rule it. She was a pegasus who could fly so fast that she made the skies scream and explode with darkness.” She showed him the picture of the dark red and blue pegasus who wore a sneer on her face.

“Sounds pleasant.” Spike observed sarcastically.

“More pleasant than Nightmare Vicious.” Twilight said, wincing back from the next picture of another pegasus with dark green hide and sickly green mane and tail. A curled, thorny vine was her cutie mark, and Twilight tried to imagine that it was sap dripping from the thorns. “She was Nightmare Moon’s interrogator. Apparently she also liked to experiment and toy with other ponies.”

“I see the name ‘Nightmare’ is pretty fitting. She gives me the shivers.”

“Nightmare Whispers.” She blinked and turned the page, looked for more, then turned back.

“That’s it?” Spike asked with a small frown.

“That’s it. Just a name.” She frowned and looked at the next entry. “Nightmare Strife.

A unicorn pony who manipulated her enemies into destroying each other.” The white unicorn with gentle eyes and a pale golden mane reminded her of Rarity. There was a golden apple for her cutie mark. “According to this author she was an unwitting pawn and completely innocent of any wrong doing.”

“I’ll say. There’s no way someone as beautiful as that could ever cause anypony problems.” Spike said with a dreamy smile at the picture.

“Easy loverboy,” She teased, and turned the page. A massive picture filled the entire page showing a burning city and in the center was a rearing black mare with a mane of flame, chains holding it in place. It wore a blackened helmet and armor. “Nightmare Fury.” Twilight Sparkle breathed. “Nightmare Moon’s champion. She fought Princess Celestia’s personal guard, and laid waste to any that challenged her.”

“That sounds like our fire pony.” Spike said, looking over her shoulder at the book. “Does it say how she was beaten?”

“According to this, Princess Celestia used the Elements of Harmony to banish Nightmare Moon to the moon. Then she was forced to bind each of the remaining five nightmares.” She scanned through the page and then swallowed hard, “It says that when Nightmare Moon was imprisoned, Nightmare Fury stormed through the capital city in a rage. They were able to subdue her by dropping her into a well, then chained her beneath the ruins of the city.” Then she frowned, “And... one of the Elements was lost?”

“Lost?” Pinkie Pie poked her head over Twilight’s other shoulder. “What, like... missing lost? Did they check under the sofa cushions?”

“It doesn’t say.” She flipped forward. “It doesn’t say anything about the others. Only that they were bound as well, but at a terrible price. Eventually they were all defeated and Equestria could finally rebuild.”

“Well, now that you know what our fire pony actually is, what are you going to do?” Spike asked in concern.

Twilight Sparkle walked up to the balcony and stepped out into the sooty afternoon sky. She could see the orange glow, like a terrible sunset gone wrong. It was too red and bloody and moved vaguely through the smoke that choked the air. Beneath her was Ponyville, with its shops and ponies and all her friends. Behind her was Canterlot and the place she was supposed to go to be safe.

Slowly she scowled at the flames. “We’re going to fight her.” Twilight Sparkle said firmly.

“Fight? But you were told to evacuate.” Spike said, waving his hands.

“And people should be evacuated. Anyone that wants to get out of Ponyville should head straight to Canterlot as fast as they can.” Twilight Sparkle said as she straightened, “But I’m not going to just give up on my home and lose all my friends.” She looked back at the baby Dragon with a smile, “I’m going to need you to finish packing here, just in case. Okay, Spike?” She asked, smiling, hoping he didn’t argue. She couldn’t stop thinking of Fluttershy all alone, refusing to leave. She didn’t want to think of Spike in harms way either.

“All right. And I’m going to write the Princess too. She needs to know,” Spike replied firmly. His price for staying behind. She nodded and he rushed to her, hugging her neck firmly. “Please, please, please be careful!”

“I will, Spike. Take care of those books, and that letter.” She said as she turned and

rushed out, with a worried Pinkie Pie running after her. Outside, Twilight Sparkle saw the rest of her friends helping clear out the last of the apples from the four carts.

"Twilight! Applejack told us about Fluttershy-" Rarity began.

"Yeah. We need to take these carts back and get her out." Twilight began, then looked at Golden Delicious and Red Delicious, the brown and light yellow colts covered in sweat from all their hard work. Even Applejack couldn't manage four carts herself.

"Well then what are we waiting for?" Rarity said and without hesitation shrugged into one of the harnesses, trying not to shudder at the touch of another pony's sweat.

"Rarity, what are you doing?" Applejack asked in bemusement.

"Why helping our friend, of course. Besides, I think we're the only ones who haven't exhausted ourselves preparing to evacuate." The prim unicorn replied before she pressed her shoulders into the harness with a most unlady like grunting. The wagon rocked and then started to roll up and over the bridge leading towards Apple Acres and their friend.

"Yeah! Let's do it!" Pinkie Pie said as she climbed in front of a wagon as well and followed. Applejack just gave a sweaty shake of her head and started after her friends.

As Rainbow Dash climbed in as well Twilight Sparkle stepped in front of her and shook her head. "Wha- Twilight, what are you doing? We got to get going!"

"We are!" She said as she looked at the other three wagons; Applejack plodding back as resolutely as ever, Rarity straining to follow suit, and Pinkie Pie somehow making progress with her ridiculous little hops in the harness. She looked back into Rainbow Dash's eyes. "You've got to get us rain, Dash."

"But I told you, it's summer!"

"I know Dash. But I also know that if there's anypony in all of Equestria who can find some rainclouds, it's you. Please. We can't stop these fires without rain."

Rainbow Dash looked worried as their eyes remained locked together. Finally the cyan pegasus lowered her eyes, lipped pressed together and backed out of the harness. She took a breath and gave a strained grin. "You betcha! I'll get some clouds here, even if I have to go all the way down to Phillydelphia to find em!" She reached out to hold Twilight Sparkle by her shoulders. "You girls take care of Fluttershy. Why she had to pick now of all times to grow a backbone..."

"We will." Twilight Sparkle replied. Rainbow Dash backed away and crouched before she launched herself skyward. Twilight Sparkle watched her blue friend disappear into the smog overhead before she shouldered into the harness. Gritting her teeth the empty wagon rattled after her friends. "Hang on Fluttershy. We're coming."

* * *

Within her cottage, Fluttershy certainly would have disagreed about growing a spine. The darkness grew outside her windows with an ominous irregularity punctuated by orange and red glares that made the shadows leap and crawl across the walls. The normal crackle of a fireplace had magnified a thousand times outside her walls, and she had the unpleasant feeling of being a log in a stove that hadn't quite caught.

The animals had worried, stirred, whimpered, and remained dutifully still despite their

fear. She'd stuffed cloths wherever she could to keep out the smoke as her pink mane and lemon yellow wings tried to circulate the stuffy air as best she could.

A baby bunny with burned paws stirred on Fluttershy's couch, ears twitching and nose sniffing the air. Slowly the bunny limped towards the little door Fluttershy kept for her friends to leave her cottage. "Wait, come back little one." She said as she rose and opened the door to her cottage.

Fire. A wall of fire crackling over the far side of the meadow as the green leaves smoldered and combusted. So close, the smoke was actually carried up in glowing orange and yellow plumes like endlessly twisting trunks. Fire danced and twisted like terrible beasts gnawing at the woods her friends called home. Only the meadow kept the fire at bay as the green grass proved poor sustenance for the fires.

Fluttershy feared fire. Fire, more than anything. When she'd faced down a dragon, her friends assumed it was because of the dragon's size, fangs and claws, or its thunderous bellows. No. It was the fire the creature could create simply by wishing to. A fire that destroyed everything it touched; a fire that hurt hundreds of her animal friends and consumed thousands of their homes. It was all she could do not to run and hide inside her house and pretend like it was simply night falling. But she couldn't do that. Not anymore.

Because there, at the edge of the inferno, stood the fire pony. It looked right at her from across the wide meadow with its burning eyes. A flaming ember gaze met delicate blue for the longest and terrible moment, and then it started across.