

Project A.L.I.C.O.R.N.

Chapter 5

Twilight Sparkle dragged the expedition through the hallways of the laboratory. Her winding path brought the ponies into and out of various rooms that, judging by the perfectly made beds and uncluttered desks, had been kept to support a staff that abandoned the place to what should have been the ravages of time.

“Okay, girls, I’m lost,” Twilight admitted, her head hanging low as they left what felt like the thousandth empty room. “Does anypony know how to get out of here?”

“But I thought you wanted to find the invisible whatchamacallit?” Pinkie Pie asked.

“Indivisible improbability engine. Maybe if I knew what that was, we wouldn’t have to check all these rooms looking for it. And maybe if that directory was more specific, we wouldn’t be wandering around in circles for hours. And maybe, just maybe, if I could talk to the pony who designed this place, I could figure out why every, single hallway looks exactly the same!”

“Chill out, Twilight,” Rainbow Dash said. “I’m sure the Princess can get us out of here in a jiffy. Right, Princess?”

“Actually, I have no clue where we are,” Luna said.

“What?!” all the ponies said in unison, their attention now fully focused on the princess.

“Well, it is my first time down here, and the corridors do all look the same. Besides, I have a good feeling about this one.” She hastily walked down a nearby hallway, pulling the rest of the expedition behind her.

“Pardon me, Princ...er, Luna,” the orange mare asked, having caught up to the alicorn, “but how is it that you could live here all those years and not know about this place?”

“You see, Applejack, when my sister and I sealed away Discord, not only did we free ponykind from his grip, we also began our reign as princesses. Naturally, we had our hooves full securing our borders. Fragile treaties with the griffons, trade agreements with the dragons, skirmishes with the both of them that threatened to escalate into outright war. Then there were all of the internal problems, the bickering pony tribes, the Bridle Rebellion, and the council of nobles that just couldn’t get it through their thick skulls that...” she exhaled sharply, took a long, deep breath, and continued, “Let’s just say I didn’t have much time for reading.”

The ponies, having stopped to let Luna savor the royal headache, began walking again and followed her to a door at the end of the hall. As they drew closer, they noticed two things that distinguished this one from all of the others. First, although it was the same kind of simple, metal plate, this door had the words that Luna translated as “Access Restricted” printed on it. Second, it didn’t slide into the wall when the ponies approached.

“Open Sesame! Presto! Swordfish!” Pinkie Pie exclaimed, gesticulating wildly at the door.

“Pinkie, you know that only works in storybooks,” Twilight said, nudging the pink pony aside. “Now, everypony stand back. I’m going to figure out how to open this.”

Twilight closed her eyes and reached out with magical tendrils to explore the hidden machinery. “Let’s see, if this does...No, that shouldn’t be like that, should it? Okay, there are the gears. Now, if I can just find...wait a minute. Why is it doing that? But if I apply, no, hmm...Maybe if I try this. No, that just—ow, ow, OW!” Her eyes snapped open to see the tail ends of fading sparks and a thin wisp of smoke coming from the tip of her horn. She stumbled over to the wall and rested against its cool surface. “Magical feedback,” she moaned, gingerly poking her aching horn. “I’ll be fine. Just give me a minute.”

“Perhaps if I were to try,” Luna said and stood directly in front of the door. Enveloping it with the silver aura of her magic, she flung it to the side, forcing it to scream a screeching symphony of grated gears and broken bolts. “Shall we proceed?” the Moon Princess asked as the echoes receded.

“That sure was mighty loud,” Applejack stated the obvious.

The door bent at odd angles, wires stuck out of several openings, metal shavings decorated the floor, and a strange smoke wafted from inside the wall. Cringing slightly at her hoofwork, the alicorn admitted, “Perhaps I overdid it a little.”

“A little’? I’d hate to see what ‘a lot’ looks like,” Rainbow Dash commented, earning herself a sidelong glance from the alicorn.

Suddenly, a small creature, much like a large, flat beetle, zoomed around a corner and stopped just inside of the door frame where it hungrily devoured all of the small debris scattered everywhere.

“What are you doing down here, little guy?” Fluttershy asked and brought her face close to the big, black bug. “I’ve never seen anything like you before.” She watched it lick the floor clean before introducing herself, so as not to disturb its meal. Responding to the affection, the beetle zipped back along the wall and around a corner. “Wait, come back!” In an instant, the normally timid pegasus was flying, doing her best to keep pace with the beetle. The other ponies also gave chase, following the strange beetle which fled underneath the wall of a much larger room. “I just wanted to be your friend,” the yellow mare said, pawing at the beetle-sized hole.

“You can’t just go running off like that,” Twilight said. “Who knows what could be down here.”

“Oh, um, I’m sorry. It’s just that...I’ve never...um, I didn’t mean...I’m sorry.” Fluttershy hid behind her mane, squeaking under the pressure.

“Forget about that,” Pinkie Pie said, drawing attention away from the relieved pegasus. “Look at all this stuff! It looks just like your basement, Twilight.”

The purple unicorn looked around the room at the apparatuses decorating every available

surface. Pinkie was right; it did look like her basement, rather it would have if twelve Twilights lived there instead of just one. Light shone through the bubbling chemicals in various shapes and sizes of glassware, creating beautiful patterns that danced across the tables and walls. Strange, metal devices lay dormant, their gauges and dials waiting, *wanting* to reveal unknown mysteries to anypony gifted enough to understand. A giddy smile grew on her face as she rushed to see everything, all at once, instantly. She was dashing from flask to flask when her hooves tried to take her in two different directions, and she tumbled onto the floor, knocking something off a bench, onto her head, and finally resting open on her nose.

“A book!” Twilight gasped and magically flipped through the pages. “It’s blank? No, there’s some here at the beginning. What’s it say, Princess?” She danced with excitement and levitated the book in front of Luna, who slowly pushed it away, keeping her eyes fixed on the creatures blocking the exits. Groups of three metal spiders barred both corridors, interlocking their legs to produce a formidable wall.

“What in the hay are these things?” Applejack whispered.

“I don’t know,” Twilight, suddenly sober, whispered back. “I’ve seen my share of golems and other magical constructs but nothing like this.”

Fluttershy walked toward one of the metal spiders, pausing only slightly when its four glowing, red eyes focused on her. As she drew closer, the spider raised its scythe-like forelimbs off the floor, posed to strike.

“It’s okay. I’m not going to hurt you,” the yellow pegasus told the rearing spider and gently extended a hoof. “My name’s Fluttershy. What’s your name?” She watched its unreadable expression and waited for a response, one that came in the form of a sharp downward motion and an electric crackle. With a sudden yelp, the yellow pegasus jumped backward and carefully avoiding the use of her hoof, flew to the safety of Luna’s tail.

“Hey! Nobody hurts Fluttershy while I’m around!” Rainbow Dash yelled and charged toward the wall of spiders, now bristling with sharp points.

“CEASE THIS AT ONCE!” Luna bellowed and pulled the rainbow pegasus out of the way of a nasty swipe. “I AM PRINCESS LUNA, BEARER OF THE MOON, BRINGER OF NIGHT, RULER OF THE LAND OF EQUESTRIA. YOU WILL ESCORT US TO THE...TO THE ONE who...who...” she shook her head, “THE ONE WHO RULES...over...this...” She coughed and tried to continue but slumped to the floor, cursing her treasonous legs.

Applejack awoke to a clammy, stone floor sticking to her face. “Ugh, what happened?” she asked, lifting her head a little.

“I don’t know, exactly,” Twilight Sparkle said. “We seem to be trapped in here.”

“Trapped?!” the orange mare jumped to her hooves and fell back down. Her face took on a

green tinge of nausea.

“Try not to move very quickly. I made the same mistake earlier.”

“Would you two please be quiet,” Rainbow Dash said, opening her eyes a sliver.

“You feelin’ a little under the weather, sugarcube?” Applejack asked.

“I *hate* headaches,” the rainbow pegasus said and shielded her eyes from the bright lights.

“What has happened?” Luna asked, standing up and rubbing her head. “I last remember requesting an audience with their leader. Where are we?”

“We’re trapped, Princess,” the purple unicorn began. “I’m not sure what those things did or how they did it, but we seem to be stuck here. At least we’re all still together.”

Looking around the cell, the Moon Princess saw the other ponies resting on the ground or in Applejack’s case, finally standing and exploring the empty room with her. The walls and floor were the same as the others in this labyrinth, flat slabs that looked like somepony carved the place out of a solid piece of impenetrable rock. The only defining feature of this room was a transparent, green barrier, behind which a dozen metal spiders provided further discouragement to escapees.

Luna threw her magic against the barrier, producing little more than a pop. Her eyes widened, and she lowered her head, aiming her horn directly at the glowing field. Collecting an orb of silvery magic, she hurled the miniature moon against the green wall. A sharp crack rang in everyponies’ ears, followed by the pained moans of the ponies themselves.

“Anything, Princess?” the purple unicorn asked, bringing a hoof to cover her left eye.

“Bide a moment, Twilight Sparkle,” Luna said, closely inspecting the wall. Gathering another globe at the tip of her horn, she aimed her magic at the floor.

BOOM

“Cut it out!” the rainbow pegasus yelled, coughing on the dust. “That’s not helping!”

Luna looked at everypony plugging their ears and attempting to conceal their discomfort. A soothing light flowed from the Moon Princess and washed over the group. “Better?”

“I feel...great, actually,” Rainbow Dash assented and the others murmured agreement.

Smiling, Luna gave a quick nod and focused her attention back to her work. Her spell only pulverized the floor a few inches before reaching another barrier buried in the stone, leaving only a crater, dust, and various sizes of jagged rocks.

“Ooh, ooh! Fluttershy! Your friend is back.” Pinkie Pie bounced and pointed at the small creature darting around the spiders.

The yellow pegasus rushed over to see the black beetle eating stones on the other side of the barrier. "Oh, thank goodness you're back. We seem to be stuck in here, so um, could you help us. Pretty please."

Twilight, who had been watching the hungry bug, cried out, "Princess, look out there and tell me what you see."

Luna glanced where the unicorn was pointing. "I see an unclassified species of beetle cleaning the debris off of the..." She paused, now intently staring at the creature. "Twilight Sparkle, that is brilliant. Everypony, gather here. I have a plan." The ponies huddled around the alicorn who explained the details of their escape.

"Whoa, Nellie!" Applejack exclaimed. "Isn't that a mite dangerous?"

"They don't call me Rainbow 'Danger' Dash for nothing." The rainbow pegasus puffed out her chest in what she thought was the most heroic pose possible.

"But it's too close," Twilight said. "Even if she does make it, can you imagine what would happen to us if she tried it at this range?"

"That is your role," Luna addressed the purple unicorn. "I want you to take the others into a corner and conjure a shield. That should provide enough protection."

"I don't know if..." She felt the gentle pressure of the alicorn's hoof against her lips.

"Twilight, we can't doubt ourselves now. Celly trusts you, and so do I. You can do this."

"Okay, Luna, I'll do my best. Alright, everypony into the corner."

The four ponies huddled in the corner behind the magenta shield, leaving Luna and Rainbow Dash standing in the center of the cell. Silver magic streamed from the alicorn's horn and armored both ponies. Properly protected, the rainbow pegasus took to the air and started flying around the room, and she soon felt the magical force pushing her faster. Gradually, the wind swirled around, picking up pebbles and clouding the air with dust from the floor. Even the largest stones were swept up by the whirlwind, bouncing off the shields and circling around for another blow.

"Come on. Come on," Rainbow Dash said through clenched teeth.

Faster and faster the whirling pegasus flew, feeling the familiar resistance. The wind stung her eyes and ripped at her furiously flapping wings but failed to deter her. With one final push, she pierced the veil of light and magic, filling the place with every color imaginable. Bursting through the flickering barrier, Rainbow Dash streaked past the stunned spiders and through the rapidly closing door, her multicolored trail fading behind her.

"We did it Princess!" Twilight exclaimed, releasing her spell and letting in the dust. "Princess Luna? Luna, are you okay?!" She rushed over to the alicorn who had collapsed onto her side.

"I am fine, merely exhausted," Luna said, her eyes fluttering open, "and yes, we did do it."

And then Rainbow Dash tried to escape but got caught.

The End.

"What kind of ending is that?" Twilight asked.

"What about it?" Rainbow Dash responded. "It's the truth."

"You aren't braggin' about how you managed to figure your way out," Applejack said.

"Or how you single-hoofedly fought off seventeen kajillion meanie-mean, nasty spider-pantses...es," Pinkie chimed.

"Or how you sacrificed yourself so I could get away," Rarity added.

"So what if I did do all that?" the rainbow pegasus said. "I didn't make it to Canterlot, and even if I had, the Princess was already on her way. I didn't make a bit of difference. Everything was riding on me, but it didn't matter. I didn't matter."

"If you ask me," Celestia said, "I think you made a great deal of difference. Because of your actions, Luna was here when I faced Athanox. I do not know what the outcome would have been had she not intervened, but—"

"One of us would have died," the dragon rumbled and entered the room, cradling Luna in his arms. "Sit back down, Celestia, she is merely resting." Tucking the sleeping alicorn into the heavy blanket on the ponies' bed, he continued, "The ritual of unbinding is complete. We are now at peace."

Still standing, she gestured toward Rarity. "You are still holding one of my subjects captive. Do you expect me to ignore that?"

"We will discuss a trade in the morning. You may stay if you wish, but I must bid you a good night." Yawning, he turned from the ponies and left for his own chambers.

"Good night, Noxie!" Pinkie Pie waved at the tail sliding around the corner.

"Princess?" the purple unicorn asked once the dragon was completely out of sight. She expectantly looked up at her teacher who returned a half-hearted smile.

"I'm afraid I must put you in a difficult position, Twilight," Celestia began. "You must lead the negotiations tomorrow."

“What?! But I don’t know anything about negotiating with dragons! I haven’t done any research! I’m not ready!”

“Luna has been forced into a recuperative state, and she needs me,” She watched her sleeping sister for a few moments before continuing. “Right now, she is very vulnerable, and I must make sure she is as far from danger as possible. I will take her back to Canterlot tonight and watch over her.”

“Mmnn...C-Celly,” the night alicorn murmured underneath the blanket.

“I’m right here,” Celestia said, rushing over to her sister’s side. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“...B-book...” Luna mumbled, her eyes shut tight, “...Answers...”

The older alicorn nuzzled her little sister who relaxed and drifted back to sleep. Turning toward the other ponies, the Sun Princess asked, “Do you know what book she was talking about?”

“Heads up!” Pinkie Pie shouted amidst the noisy expulsion from her party bag.

Celestia caught the flying book and after removing the confetti from her mane, flipped through the pages. “This is an old language, a very old one indeed. The characters would place it as pre-Equestrian, but their construction makes this complete gibberish. It also includes some symbols that I’ve never even seen before. This is an excellent find, but...hmm.”

“What is it, Princess?” Twilight asked.

“This page is different from the rest. The technique changed, and look at this.” She hovered the book in front of Twilight, pointing at one word in particular. “This one here and this one.” She slid her hoof a few lines down. “The first one is my name, and the other one is Luna’s.”

“That would mean that whoever wrote this would have had to know you before you came to Equestria, but that doesn’t make any sense. How could they know you if you weren’t here?”

“We can’t jump to conclusions, my faithful student. Now, try again, what else could it mean?”

The studious unicorn tapped her chin. “We know that ancient civilizations often focused on the movements of celestial bodies. Those could be their names for the sun and moon.”

“Very good, Twilight, that is a excellent possibility—” Celestia stopped, and her eyes grew wide with shock. “The sun! Oh crepuscular rays, I forgot the sun!” She snapped the book shut and hurriedly gathered Luna onto her back. “I’m sorry to leave you all like this, but I need to return to Canterlot immediately. The whole year could be thrown off if I don’t hurry.” She galloped out the door, her voice echoing as she called back to the ponies. “Remember, keep your weaknesses hidden from him and you’ll do fine. Good luck.” A flash of light later, and the place was quiet again.