

Chapter 19

In a flash, they were all back in the Ponyville library, landing in a heap, the shock of warmth and shelter nearly overwhelming for the three travelers. Twilight Sparkle got to her hooves and turned to face them. “Are you all right?” she asked, worry in her voice. “I got to you as soon as I could! I couldn't even be sure I would get to the right place, I just had a vision to go by, and- what *was* that thing?”

Applejack, Rarity, and Rainbow Dash stared at her for a moment, lying sprawled across the wood floor. Then they all gave a tremendous **SHOUT**, and *leaped* at each other, screaming and crying and laughing, grabbing for each other with their hooves, nuzzling each other, tumbling over each other on the floor, rolling over cushions and stray books. The commotion drew Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy, Spike, Apple Bloom, and Zecora out of the upper rooms. No sooner had they emerged on the stairs than Dash shot to them, trying to hug them all at once, while Rarity and Applejack galloped to Twilight and tackled her in a furious embrace, nuzzling her, even licking her- wanting to make sure she was real! With a squeal of delight Pinkie Pie bounced down into their midst, and the white unicorn and the orange earth pony embraced her as well, nuzzling her with delight, and even Fluttershy was caught up in the joy of the reunion, flying over to join the hug, and Dash flew back and picked up Twilight in a great four-legged hug that lifted her off the ground, then Spike leapt into the fray and everypony gave him a nuzzle, and Apple Bloom joined them next, laughing and giggling and Applejack took her up and was crying as she nuzzled her. Every one of them then looked over at Zecora, who started to say something in rhyme but didn't get very far because they all charged her and wrapped around her in a hug that really became everypony hugging everypony.

Ten minutes of hugging and nuzzling and laughing later, the wild energy of the reunion finally abated somewhat, and Rarity found her voice. “Oh, Twilight, you're all right!”

“*You're* all right!” Twilight said with a smile. “It looked like I got to you just in time!”

“You saved our hides, sugarcube, no doubt about it!” Applejack said, sitting back and holding Apple Bloom in her lap.

“But Twilight, however did you find us?” the white unicorn asked. “How did you *get* to us?”

“It was the Beneviolet!” the lavender unicorn said. “It didn't just heal my Horn Rot- it supercharged my magic! And I was able to find you because... well, the Horn Rot was giving me visions, and I had one just a while ago about the three of you, so I knew exactly where you'd be.”

“I thought you didn't *believe* in visions,” Dash said with a grin.

“I still don't,” Twilight said with firmness, “but whether I believe in them or not, I was able to find you because of what I saw, so I'll take what I can get.” Her violet eyes widened. “But seriously, what *was* that huge thing? It was bigger than any animal I've ever seen!”

“You saw an animal?” Fluttershy asked, her curiosity piqued. “A really big animal?”

“Well, we *reckon* it was a world snake-” Applejack began.

“Ooo! You *did* see a world snake! That's what my twitch was about!” Pinkie Pie squealed. “Was he as big as the world? I bet he was!”

“Not *quite* as big as the world,” Dash said, bravado creeping into her voice, “but darn near. Nothing my awesome lighting powers couldn't handle, though.”

“Lightning?” Twilight said.

“Well, yeah-” Dash began, rising to her hooves. Rarity and Applejack did the same, Applejack setting down Apple Bloom as she did.

“Holy cow!” Spike cried. “**Look** at you girls!”

The others pulled away to take in the sight of the three ponies, and what a sight it was! All three of them, even Rarity, had grown leaner, firmer, more solidly built- even Applejack's considerable

muscles had been added to. Their coats were rougher, slightly longer, but their colors were as vibrant as ever. Applejack's Dale Guard armor glistened in the light of the library, the dark red leather rich and waxy, the golden stitching flickering as she moved along with the golden symbol of Gildedale on the cruppers, the emerald on her champron shining brilliant green. Rainbow Dash's scarf hung around her neck, while the dark blue sigils of the pronghorns swirled all over her body, making her look fierce and tribal. Rarity had the presence of mind to strike a pose, and her deerish armor gleamed wild, spring green, the crystal crests on her helmet and the crystal streaks on the torso and the greaves sparkling.

"Where did you get that *armor*?" Fluttershy asked, her turquoise eyes wide.

"Well, it's a bit of a long story, darling," Rarity began. "My armor and Applejack's don't come from the same place."

"Yeah," the orange earth pony said. "See, my armor comes from Gildedale-"

"Where's Gildedale?" Apple Bloom asked.

"It's the country just on the other side o' the mountains from Equestria," Applejack said. "It's full o' earth ponies."

"Full o' earth ponies?!" the little yellow filly said with delight. "What're they like?"

"They're a mite different than Equestrian ponies, but deep inside they're really a lot like us," Applejack said. "This is the armor of the Dale Guard, the patrols o' warrior ponies that keep Gildedale safe."

"Warrior ponies? Ooo, this is gonna be good!" Pinkie Pie said, pulling a bag of popcorn out of nowhere.

"My armor, meanwhile," Rarity said, "isn't made by ponies. It was made by the deer of the Shimmerwood."

"You met deer?" Fluttershy asked with amazement.

"We met a whole forest of deer!" Rainbow Dash said with a grin. "We also met some pronghorns, and they're the ones that gave me these sigils!" She spun around in the air.

"I was going to say, it was fresh in my mind, those drawings do seem to be pronghorn designs," Zecora commented.

"Pronghorns?" Twilight repeated. "You met pronghorns?"

"I met three of 'em!" Dash said with a grin. "Wait, how did you know about them?"

"They stop by the Palace of the Sun a lot, delivering messages to Princess Celestia! I used to always see them when she was giving me private lessons," the lavender unicorn explained.

"Messengers? Do they risk hoof and head boldly ensuring the dispatch goes through? Oh, brave and noble servants of the global order!" Pinkie Pie said dramatically, holding a hoof to her forehead.

Twilight laughed. "Something like that. They ride lightn- hey! You mentioned lightning!" she said to Dash. "Is *that* where you got lightning powers? From the pronghorns?"

"Sure did!" the sky-blue pegasus said.

"This is such a neat-sounding story!" the pink earth pony exclaimed, bouncing up and down where she stood. "You should tell it to us! You should tell us right now!"

"Story?" Rarity repeated. She shared a glance with Applejack and Rainbow Dash.

"Huh," Applejack said. "Y'know... thinkin' back on the whole shebang... it *does* make quite a story."

"And I for one want to hear every bit of it!" Twilight Sparkle said with a smile.

"I gotta warn you, sugarcube," Applejack said, "it's a real *long* story, too."

"We've got all day!" Spike said, pointing up at a window. Sure enough, the sun hadn't even reached its apex- it wasn't even noon.

"Hmm," Applejack began. Suddenly, a long, gray length of rope dropped out of the air right in

front of her. She squealed so loudly the other ponies drew back. “**ROPEY!** I really *can't* lose ya! Oh, Ropey, you're the best rope ever!” She hugged it close.

“Okay, now I *have* to hear this story,” Twilight said with a puzzled smile.

“Well...” Dash said, a note of uncertainty in her voice- but she was playing. Rarity wasn't the only one who knew how to handle an audience.

“Please tell us,” Fluttershy said; even she sounded excited.

“I'll lend you my ear, I would much like to hear,” Zecora said, trotting over and sitting down amid the others.

“I suppose you all deserve to know,” Rarity said. She used her magic and removed her helmet, shaking out her violet mane. “At the very least, you deserve to know why it took so long.”

“I'm okay with tellin', provided we can stop for lunch at some point,” Applejack said, setting her rope aside. “I got a hankerin' for fresh apples from Sweet Apple Acres!”

“Sure! We'll tell you everything!” Rainbow Dash said. “In fact, I bet you two will like some of the parts of the story I have to tell!” she glanced at Rarity and Applejack. “I didn't really go into detail about what happened with Niles and the other pronghorns.”

“I got some stuff that happened twixt me and Ashtail... maybe I'll say it,” Applejack said, and Pinkie grinned at the change in her voice.

“I also had things happen to me that you two weren't around for,” Rarity added. “Hm, I suppose now we're *all* going to learn the *full* story of our journey.”

“I gotta go get Sweetie Belle an' Scootaloo!” Apple Bloom cried, bouncing to her hooves. “They're gonna wanna hear this too!”

“Yes, please go get Sweetie!” Rarity said with a smile. “Oh, I so want to see her!”

“Go an' get Big Macintosh, too, why don't ya?” Applejack said. “An' tell him to bring *apples!*”

“Sure will!” Apple Bloom said, dashing for the door.

“I got a feeling we're gonna need some tea,” Spike said, standing up and heading for the kitchen.

“Good idea, Spike!” Twilight Sparkle said. She smiled. “And once you've got the kettle on, go get a quill- and plenty of paper.”

That night, high above the fields of Equestria, in the great shining city of Canterlot, deep within the Palace of the Sun, Princess Celestia sat in her private chambers, a fire blazing in the enormous fireplace to keep out the chill that still pervaded the spring nights. A short ground desk sat in front of her, and next to it was a large stack of official papers: dispatches, reports, proclamations, orders for the various ministries that helped Equestria function. Flipping through a report on imports, she told herself for the hundredth time that she really should have been in bed. She didn't *need* to sleep- not with her divinity- but she liked it, liked the chance to rest her mind and dream. Since Luna had retaken control of the night and all its business, she had been able to reclaim the full night off she used to enjoyed more than a thousand years ago. So she *really* should have been in bed. But old habits died hard, and a thousand year habit of burning the midnight oil was a difficult one to break. There was another, even older habit at work also: her tendency to want to know as many details of the country's functioning as she could. When she had been much younger, her tendency had been to micro-manage everything she could get her hooves on. More than fifteen hundred years of life had taught her to be more relaxed- but the impulse to be controlling was still there.

Still, she squelched it now, as she had learned to do, and with a golden shimmer of her large horn she set the report aside. It could wait until morning. The white winged unicorn rose to her hooves, her shining aurora mane billowing in divine wind. Stretching her great wings briefly, she turned and began to head for her bedroom. She had barely taken a step, however, when a trail of

shimmering purple energy slithered down from a high window, stopping just in front of her. It sparkled briefly for a moment, then swirled, and a rolled-up scroll popped into being, tied with red ribbon.

Oh, Twilight, Celestia thought with a smile. She had wondered when she would be getting her student's next friendship report. In fact, it had worried her for a while: Twilight Sparkle hadn't sent her a report in almost two weeks, and she usually managed at least one report weekly. Still, Twilight was learning about friendship at her own pace, and it wasn't Celestia's business to hurry her, or to pry. She had done enough to set her on the path. Catching the scroll with her telekinesis, the Regent of the Sun was surprised to see that it was not the typical friendship report. Where those were thin, a single sheet of paper, this was a very thick roll, comprising multiple leaves, dozens of pages. No sooner had she begun to ponder the meaning than another cloud of purple magic wafted in through the window, swirling around and materializing into *another* scroll thick with pages. Then *another* cloud of magic flew in, and one more, both of them coalescing into rolled-up bundles of numerous pages. As she levitated them all before her, Celestia noticed they were numbered, 1, 2, 3, 4 written on the blank side of the outermost page. Then, a thin stream of purple magic, a fifth one, came in through her window, and when it swirled around it revealed a much thinner scroll, a single page more like what she was used to. It had *PLEASE READ FIRST* written on the outer side of the page.

Curious, Celestia trotted back to her cushion and settled down upon it, setting the scrolls on the rug beneath her. Levitating the indicated scroll, she unwrapped it and unfurled it, reading:

Dear Princess Celestia,

My sincerest apologies for not writing to you over the past twelve days. Unfortunately, I have spent most of them in the grips of a particularly bad case of Horn Rot.

“Oh, dear!” Celestia said softly. “I wish she had told me.” Granted, Horn Rot was a nasty disease, and it would be particularly so for a pony as powerful as Twilight Sparkle. It was also difficult to cure with healing spells, because it just fed on the magic used and caused the victim more pain. Still, Celestia was certain she could have helped- if nothing else, she could have put Twilight into suspended animation while the cure was brewed.

In that time, my friends Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy, along with my other friends Zecora and Apple Bloom, took the best care of me they could, keeping me entertained and tending to me when I became bedridden by the intensity of the disease. In this they were ably assisted by dear Spike.

“My goodness,” Celestia murmured. So it *had* been bad.

However, I am now completely healed, in as good a health as I was before, so you need not worry. The reason I am so improved is due to the actions of three of my other friends, Applejack, Rainbow Dash, and Rarity. They undertook a long journey to the Archback Mountains to find a flowering plant called the Beneviolet, which ultimately cured my Horn Rot and saved my life.

“The Archback Mountains?” Celestia repeated. They were very far away, even on the wing. For three ponies, two of whom she knew were not pegasi, to make such a journey across strange lands was a sign of great bravery indeed. She began to suspect the reason behind the four scrolls, but she continued to read Twilight's letter.

On their journey, they encountered many strange and fascinating lands, and met many amazing

and wonderful creatures. These included the ponies of the Kingdom of Gildedale, including their King, Hammer Hoof,

“Ha! So they got through Gildedale?” Celestia smiled, wondering how on earth they had convinced the Daleponies to let them pass. She knew young Hammer Hoof had been quite adamant about keeping magic out of his lands; he had written as much to her in more than one letter. Then she recalled that she had yet to inform Gildedale about Luna's return. She had wanted to go in pony and tell Lord Hammer Hoof herself, but she simply hadn't been able to find the time. *Perhaps I should make time*, she thought.

three pronghorns from the Pronghorn Network,

“I wonder if they met Clive?” she said. The stoic old pronghorn had been handling her dispatches for almost sixty years now and showed no signs of slowing down. The more recent additions to the route that included Equestria, Niles and Audrey, were also very pleasant- more pleasant than Clive, really, who tended to be a bit stiff and formal. He could also get a bit pompous when he tried to talk about the Dreaming, even to her- who was in the Dreaming all the time anyway.

and the deer of the Shimmerwood, including their ruler, Lady Falalauria.

“They met Lala!” Celestia cried, smiling enormously at the thought of her very old friend. She hadn't seen her in... not terribly long in the grand scheme of things, but far too long for her liking. Then and there she made up her mind: she was going to go visit Gildedale within the fortnight to tell them about Luna, and she would swing by the Shimmerwood as well. Luna could run the country just fine for a day or two.

Through their whole journey, they persevered, drawing strength from each other, learning and growing through their experiences. They have shared their tale with me and my other friends, and I have had Spike transcribe it. It is contained in the other four scrolls I sent you, and I hope that you will read it as well. In my humble estimation, it is a tale worthy of the Royal Archives, a grand story of endurance, courage, and hope.

My own experiences, and the experiences all my friends have shared with me, have taught me a very great lesson about friendship. It is easy to be a friend of somepony when times are good, and all is well. Yet when times are bad, when darkness falls, that is when true friendship shines. A real friendship endures even the stiffest challenges, and a real friend will be by your side to lend a helping hoof not only when you are at your best, but also- especially- when you are at your worst. A real friend will give up much for you- perhaps even their own life. And if you would truly be that pony's friend, you must be prepared to give up just as much in turn. I can only hope that if I am ever called to struggle and sacrifice as much for my friends as they have for me, I will prove worthy of the challenge.

Your Faithful Student,

Twilight Sparkle

Celestia smiled broadly as she finished the letter. She could feel the love and the friendship radiating through Twilight's words- it was obvious she had been touched very deeply by the things her friends had gone through on her behalf. *You grow more and more wise every day, Twilight Sparkle*, she

thought, *and so do all your friends*. That could only mean good for the world.

With such a strong endorsement from her prized pupil, Celestia could not resist. As she had told herself earlier, it wasn't as though she *needed* to sleep. She certainly never got tired. Seeking out the first of the four scrolls, she levitated it up with her magic, removed the ribbon, and unfurled it. "I do so love a good adventure story," she said as she began to read.

THE END

THANK YOU