

Dear Journal,

Do heroes exist only because history chooses to write about them? Are the greatest ponies who ever lived so legendary because they earned that status, or on account of their being in the right place when fate struck? If the ponies of our epic poems surpass the slings and arrows of time simply by the whim of popular knowledge, then could we accidentally be worshipping villains in this day and age?

I never sought to be a famous pony. Not really. Sure, I wouldn't have mind a tiny bit of popularity. Certainly, when endeavoring to make waves in the music scene, I would have been happy if my name had been passed around. However, I never expected to do anything dramatic enough that it would have had my name exalted on high.

Now, I can't help but think otherwise. I toss and turn at night—fighting shivers—fantasizing that one of these days I will walk into town and somepony—anypony—will actually be heard saying my name, if even in a passing joke or upon the flippant waves of gossip. I don't want to make the history books. I don't even want to see my name in lights. I just want to witness somepony speaking of me, and I want it to be something positive and joyful.

It's been a long year of dealing with this curse, and I know the difference between thinking rationally and fancifully. I've encountered many fears, and I've endured my fair share of distress. Is it too selfish of me to think that I could at least *earn* myself a tiny bit of recognition?

No. No, it's not selfish of me. However, it is *foolish*. After all, who will sing of this composure's tragedies or triumphs? Who will chronicle her actions and discoveries into an epic chorus?

Now, I'm starting to realize, that chronicler is me. I do not sing of a fearless vixen, one who faces the darkest shades of freezing night undaunted. No, I speak of a lonesome learner, one who traverses the blackness with only her own hoofsteps to keep her company. Whatever she salvages, she does so by herself, which is a very frightening task to say the least. If saving the knowledge of myself makes me a hero, then I treasure that with every fibre of my being. After all, I wouldn't be much of a hero if I didn't save an audience, even if it's an audience of one.

Ten little chords.

Ten little chords beginning Lunar Elegy #8 were playing through my mind; it was far from enough. I needed to discover more if I wanted to come anywhere near close to composing the entire musical number, much less running the tune's authenticity by Twilight Sparkle.

Of course, the beginning process of mapping out an elegy is always the hardest. I wake up to a melody stuck my head. I let the tune play itself out repeatedly. The music takes shape, forms chords, and grows into an ancient composition that I must then struggle to translate back into the world of the living. There are times when a phantom tune simply takes forever to come into fruition. It pays its toll on my mind, which is the least I can say about my sanity. So, to assist in the evolutionary process, I usually busy myself with menial yet functional activities in an attempt to get the juices flowing out of my mind instead of stirring for an eternity within.

Which is why I was squatting by my garden the other day, dutifully tending to the carrots and planting new vegetables for a solid two hours, around the time I first heard her.

There was a resounding thunder across the face of the woods, followed by a cracking voice behind me. “**Ow!**”

I looked up and wiped my sweaty brow with a forelimb. She was earlier than normal. These collisions, after all, usually take place way later in the afternoon. I got up and trotted slowly towards the side of the cabin where I saw her lying on the ground, rubbing a bruised muzzle.

“Ahem. Can I help you?”

“Nnngh... Maybe if you had a thicker skull among your gardening tools to spare.” Rainbow Dash winced and glared up at the offending structure. “Where'd this stupid cabin come from?”

“It's the rain season,” I said with a smirk. “Some things just spring up out of nowhere.”

“Hey! I'm a pegasus!” Rainbow Dash hopped up to her hooves and dusted herself off. “If anypony should know a thing or two about the rain season, it's me! Still, I have no buckin' clue where this building got off thinking it could block my usual flight path!” She fumed briefly, then cast me a sideways glance. “Good morning, by the way,” she muttered.

“Back at you,” I said with a nod. “Is your head okay?”

“For what it's worth.” Rainbow Dash gripped her skull in two hooves and pivoted it to the side. A number of ritualistic *cracks* sounded off from the top of her spine. “Whew! At this rate, I'm not gonna have enough brain cells left to pass the Wonderbolts Entry Exam, assuming they finally start flippin' inducting for another wingpony soon. Heh. Been waiting for six long years for a new position to open up, ever since Fleetfoot from Trottingham joined the team. Ugh... That lucky, feather-brained—”

“Well, it sounds like you have your future cut out for yourself!” I said with a gentle smile. It was a beautiful morning, and this living spectrum of colors was a pleasant addition to the breezy moment. I briefly forgot how cold I was. “What's the big hurry? Speeding around in the air with no care: you'll get a nasty concussion at this rate!”

“Hmmp...” Rainbow Dash smirked and stretched her wingfeathers. “I wouldn't be living up to my name any other way.”

Ah, there it is. Should I? Yes. Yes, I should.

“And just what name would that be?” I tossed her way with a wry grin, knowing exactly what would happen in response.

I could have witnessed the same reaction even if I had my eyes closed and my ears plugged. Rainbow Dash looked at me, gasped, and floated in midair as if the very grass below was as toxic as my ignorant response. “No way! You mean you *don't* know about me?! Rainbow Dash?! Ponyville's chief weather pegasus?! Master of the Sonic Rainboom and winner of last year's Best Young Flier's Crown?!”

I giggled. Some of the best entertainment in life is free. “Well, my apologies! You certainly sound like a very important pony!”

“I'm more than important! I'm... I'm *radical!* That's like four 'important's' stacked together in an *awesome* sandwich with slices of *tubular* bread!”

“Am I supposed to praise you or eat you?”

“Neither! Er—I mean... nnngh...” She hovered around me, squinting suspiciously. “Is this some kind of a joke? Surely no pony around here could live under *that* big of a rock!”

“Believe me: sometimes I wish I had that excuse.” I gazed over at the carrot garden while producing a melancholic exhale. As lovely as this encounter was, I was getting even further away from bringing the Eighth Elegy to reality. Every now and then I'm reminded of how my life has become nothing more than a hall of mirrors, and even the most colorful hues are merely the reflections of yesterday and tomorrow cascading onward into a dull infinity. “I apologize, Ms. Dash. I guess you could say that I'm new to town. It's comforting to know, at least, that a mare like you is fully aware of how famous and important you are.”

“Heck yeah!” Rainbow Dash smiled proudly. With fluttering wings she “backstroked” playfully in the air around me and the cabin. “From warning the local ponies about stampedes to driving out smoke-snoring dragons, I never leave Ponyville hangin'! Why, I'm even buddy-buddy with Princess Celestia's magical apprentice!”

“Hmmm...” I squatted back beside the garden and resumed inspecting the carrot tops. “You don't say...?”

“Mmmhmm!” Rainbow Dash's wings settled as she perched herself down atop the wooden patio at the front of my cabin. “It's why I was out here to begin with. I'm practicing!”

“Practicing?” I glanced over my shoulder. “Practicing for what?”

“Ponyville's egghead extraordinaire, Twilight Sparkle, is helping some big-wig science professor from Trottingham with a teleportation experiment. And they need help from a fast-flying pegasus to keep track of... *uhm...* the test subject, or something. I dunno. All I know is that Twilight promised me there'd be lasers involved, and lasers are cool!”

I raised an eyebrow and glanced back at her. “Did you say... a *teleportation* experiment?”

“Y-Yeah!” Rainbow grinned wide. “Haven't you heard? Oh wait, you said you were new in town. Hmm... Well, I can't even begin to explain all of the boring numbers and figures involved, but basically this stallion—'Dr. Hay'... 'Dr. House'... 'Dr. Horse', *whatever*—is trying to capture the magic of unicorns in a bottle. Not that *all of you* are capable of blinking around great distances or whatnot, but he's trying to find a way for non-magical ponies to have access to teleportation. Supposedly it can have a major effect on transportation, economy, and other stuff that makes me yawn.”

“Really?” I stared off into the wooden bodies of the trees surrounding me. I hadn't expected this leg of our conversation. I felt a chill for the first time in hours. “That's... That's quite remarkable.”

“Meh... If you say so. The way I see it: it's been thousands upon thousands of years since Equestria began, and *still* other ponies are trying to be as cool as pegasi.” She winked with a smile. “Heh, like teleporting is *really* gonna help them get around as much as us! But I don't care. The experiment gives me a reason to hang out with Twilight, and Twilight's cool so long as she's blowing stuff up in a lab instead of digging her nose in a book.” Rainbow Dash smirked and took off for the bright sky above the woods. “Anyways, I've got some cloud kicking to get to, and then I'll be heading over to Twilight's to help 'make history', as they put it. I'm like 'whatever.' If we get a small scrap of manadust to explode or something, that'll sure as heck make my day.”

I mumbled absent-mindedly. “There's something to be said of short scraps and explosions.”

“H-hey! I like your style!” Rainbow Dash chuckled and soared past me. “Next time I run into you, remind me to share how it all went down! I'm sure I'll have done something awesome to brag about when the time comes.”

I saluted her as she flew off. In the windy vacuum that followed, I murmured to the air. “Awesomeness needs only to remember itself.” I didn't feel sad about Rainbow Dash's absence. I'd gone through the motions of introducing myself to her on so many occasions that the bittersweet departures had long lost their cathartic edge. In many ways, I've forced myself to become acquainted with a necessary apathy upon the culmination of these painfully short meetings. To do otherwise would mean drowning in tears.

However, I couldn't stop thinking about what Rainbow Dash had just spoken about. It had to have been an immeasurably fascinating endeavor in science if it could get *her* to ramble on about it.

Twilight Sparkle and a professor from Trottingham were experimenting with non-unicorn teleportation? Could that have involved some sort of localized spell? Leyline manipulation? A machine of sorts?

I tugged the strings of my hoodie and fought through the shivers as I allowed several memories to resurface. I remembered several of my early interactions with Twilight after the curse began. I remembered our desperate attempts to convey my existence to Princess Celestia. Written letters hadn't worked. Either my words vanished or the scrolls themselves turned to ash on the other end of Spike's green-flaming breath.

It was then that she had resorted to *teleportation*. After a great deal of meditation and focus, Twilight Sparkle teleported the two of us as far as her expert ley lines could reach. We landed two and a half miles outside of Ponyville's town limits. Twilight's plan was to rest, concentrate, and then perform several more concentrated teleportation bursts until we got to the city gates of Canterlot to the far east. This, however, failed after the first immediate blink because two things happened. For one, Twilight had forgotten about me after the first teleport, as if the sheer magical strain of the act was enough to jump-start the curse into infecting her. For another, two miles' distance from the center of Ponyville was akin to dropping a guillotine blade of ice across my spine. Never before in my life did I feel that cold and never would I feel that cold again. I galloped straight to the abandoned barn where I was living at the time and built the biggest campfire any pony in history ever likely conceived. Even still, it took me two solid weeks before I could feel my extremities once again.

But now I had just learned about an experiment to make transportation possible beyond the limits of unicorn manipulation. Seeing as I was an inconceivable distance away from ever mastering Twilight's gift of spatial blinking for myself, what were the odds that I could somehow take advantage of such a remarkable scientific development? I couldn't help but feel my blood pumping in opposition to the deadly shivers. I had to learn more. I had—

My thoughts were immediately interrupted by a loud thudding noise against the side of my cabin. At first, I thought it was poor Rainbow Dash again, cursed by her amnesiac state. But then the voice squeaked forth, “Owie! Who put this cabin here?” It was too high to belong to anything other than a young foal.

“Uhm...?” I turned around and trotted back towards the side of the barn. “Can I *help* you?”

A tiny orange filly sat in the dirt where she had been thrown back on her haunches. A collapsed scooter—its wheels still spinning—was lying on the ground beside her as she pulled a purple helmet off, flung a pink mane loose, and rubbed a throbbing bump on the front of her skull. “Ugh. Yeah. Can you tell me which way the earth is?”

“Right where you left it. It's the thing covered with grass and aphids.”

“Jee, thanks.” She blinked up at me with violet eyes. “Hey, you're a unicorn.”

I couldn't help but chuckle. The utterance was as cute as it was random, two things I could already use to describe this kid. “Last time I checked. Why, is that a problem?”

“Erm, no. Not really.” She stood up and pulled the scooter back up into her grip. “It's just... Well. This is the middle of the woods. I've never known unicorns to be outdoorsy types.”

I shrugged. The urge to let my teeth chatter was bearing down on me, but I wasn't about to give into it in front of this young foal. “A unicorn's capacity for magic is equal to her capacity for change. I've long been acquainted with urban living, but I find myself developing a delightful affinity for far more rustic surroundings.”

She stared up at me, blinking. “Okay. I'm sorry. You lost me at 'capacity'.”

I sighed. “Yes, well, if you run into nearly as many dictionaries as you do houses, then we might have a pleasant conversation.”

“Dictionaries? Hah!” She stood and balanced herself playfully on the wobbling scooter. “I’ve got a best friend for that.”

“And the reason you aren’t hanging out with her on a beautiful day like this is...?”

“Hmmm...” Her face scrunched up into a stubborn scowl.

I blinked. I glanced up at the tree tops, many of them still glistening with dew. “Wait. Isn’t this a schoolday—?”

“You’ve got a really swell place here...” She pushed herself on the wheeled contraption so that she was leisurely drifting past the front of my cabin. A whistle escaped her lips. “Did you build it yourself?”

“Uhm...” I blinked awkwardly at her. “Yes. As a matter of fact, I did.”

“Cool...”

“How did you know?”

She blushed slightly. “Lucky guess?” She ran a hoof along a pair of wooden beams forming the front exterior of my dwelling. “You can tell when a place was built by hoof. One day, I plan to live on my own, and when I do I want to have every say in where and how I live. There’s no better way to do that than to build your own house.”

“It’s not as easy as it seems,” I said to the kid as I trotted slowly after her. “It takes a great deal of time, strain, and sweat. Still, it *is* worth it in the end.” My smile lasted as long as my good manners did. “Ahem. So, uhm, haven’t your parents ever preached to you about talking to strangers—?”

She swiftly interrupted me. “It must be awfully scary to live on your own, in a place that you have to build by yourself,” the filly murmured. Suddenly her bright features looked jaded, as if several years had piled up on the filly’s face all at once, casting its shadows over every corner of her orange coat. “But I kind of see that as a *good* scariness, like the type of scariness that’s worth living through.”

I ran a hoof through my mane as I gazed thoughtfully at her. I wondered why I hadn’t run into this little soul before. It was my proud habit to be familiar with every living soul in town, both young and old. In so many months of concerning myself with the lunar elegies, I wondered if I had finally become oblivious to the same background I had been relegated to.

“What’s your name, kid?” I blurted out.

She looked up at me. “Hmmm?” She blinked, as if snapping out of a stupor she was experiencing parallel to my own. “Oh. Ponies call me ‘Scootaloo.’”

“Scootaloo,” I repeated with a nod. I glanced at her flank, observed the lack of a cutie mark, and then smiled at her face. “Named after your love for elegant ballet, no doubt.”

That jab worked. She frowned and stuck her tongue out at me. “*Hardy har*. Very funny. I'd rather be caught dead than have *that* be my special talent!”

“Why does that not surprise me?” I remarked.

“I mean it!” She hopped in place, her hooves pounding on the base of the scooter. “Someday I'm gonna earn a cutie mark for something really awesome! Like flying through hoops of flame! Or base jumping! Or becoming a rock'n roll singer! Or doing stunt pony tricks just like Rainbow Dash!”

“You don't say? You know, she was here just now—”

“**She was?!**” Scootaloo beamed, and I was surprised to see a pair of stubby wings sprouting up from her sides. I honestly hadn't noticed she was a pegasus until the very notion of that name sparkled across the violet shores of her eyes. “I knew it! She was doing some super cool cloud-slicing moves, wasn't she?!”

I blinked at her. *How old was this filly? And she was still flightless?* My eyes wandered from her tiny wings to the scooter's wheels to the fresh ditch that she had made in the earth after colliding with my cabin. I realized that the same excitement and impulsiveness that had flung Rainbow Dash like a missile into my house had brought another pony along for the ride. Very calmly, I nodded and said, “Well, she said she was practicing for a science experiment she was going to help her friend Twilight Sparkle with—”

“Oh! Oh!” Scootaloo hopped in place, beaming, her bright face like a second sunrise to that crisp morning. “She told me all about it! There's gonna be explosions and lasers and stuff! Rainbow Dash said herself that she'd be lucky to get through the experiment without her mane and tail-hairs being burnt off!”

I squinted at that, then smiled at her. “Did she, now?”

“Uh huh!”

“Sounds like you've got a very courageous friend.”

“Yeah! Isn't she—?” Scootaloo stopped in mid-speech. Pensively, she let her gaze fall to her hoof digging in the earth. “Erm. Well. Heh. I can't really say that I count as her friend...”

“Why not?”

She spoke on. “But someday, I'm gonna be as brave as her.” She gazed up again, but this time her smile was softer, gentler, more serene. “And then I'll get to do cool stuff! And maybe I'll know what it's like to be just as awesome.”

I smiled back at her. “Scootaloo...” I squatted down so that my face was level with hers. “Tell me, what’s so awesome about a life when it’s lived in the exact same way as a pony that has lived it before you?”

“I...” She blinked confusedly at me, but something twitching in her eyes told me she was curiously intrigued. “I don’t understand. Why would a pony *not* want to be like Rainbow Dash?”

“I don’t mean to say that there’s anything wrong with that. After all, she’s made a major name for herself in Ponyville, hasn’t she?”

“And how!”

I chuckled and gazed deeply to gather her attention. “But even still, there is only one way for a pony to be like Rainbow Dash. While that’s all good and fine, there are at least a million ways to be a *different* pony, and all of them just as exciting and awesome, wouldn’t you think?”

Scootaloo stared at me, and for the briefest of moments she could just as easily been staring into an abyss. If her cutie mark appeared right then and there, I was almost afraid to discover what it would look like. Even if I went back in time and built my cabin blindfolded, it wouldn’t be nearly as scary as when a young foal discovers the glorious yet all too bitter taste of *opportunity*.

Before she could formulate a response, a voice was calling out from around the bend in the road.

“Scootaloo?!” A white-coated mare with a yellow mane was wandering around the dirt path, frowning and stomping a hoof. “Scootaloo—for the love of Celestia—is that you?! Get over here this instant!”

“Ugh...” Scootaloo rolled her eyes. “Milky White. Will you ever let it *rest*?” With a sigh, she slapped her helmet back onto her head, tucking the pink mane underneath. “I’m coming!” she shouted over her shoulder.

I glanced at the mare from a distance. “An older sister of yours?”

“Pffft. Please.” Scootaloo smirked devilishly. “As if I could be *that* lucky. So long, lady!” Her petite wings blurred, and I watched with muted marvel as she propelled herself up the path atop her scooter, joining the mare’s side. “Milky! I’ve been looking all over for you—”

“Save it for somepony who’s gullible!” Milky White snapped. She wasn’t half as angry as she was concerned. In addition to that, I noticed that she was an earth pony, which made me stare a little bit longer as she ushered the sulking filly towards the heart of Ponyville beyond the treeline. “Why aren’t you at school already? Cheerilee’s class begins in less than half an hour!”

“Awwww, come on, Milky! I was just taking a side route! Rainbow Dash was flying around here and—”

“No more excuses! And unless Rainbow Dash is acting as one of Cheerilee’s chaperones, I

don't want you following her or any other adult pony around town unsupervised! Do you understand me?!”

“Ughhh... Yes, Milky...”

“And don't give me that attitude! I'm only trying to look after you, Scootaloo. Remember that talk we had...?”

The two were soon gone beyond earshot. I sat beside the carrot garden, alone in thought. I suddenly wondered if the lives of so many ponies—cursed or not—remain blank because we're afraid to test the limits of ourselves, especially when those limits are painted with the shades of those who had failed or succeeded before us.

I looked once more towards the woods, and I thought of a dark night when I awoke—naked and screaming—soaked with the chilling mystery of the *Threnody*. It was something horrific and unexplained, but I had *survived* it. I knew that it was more than luck that made me survive such an ordeal. What more was there in life that I had to experiment with, and how much of it was barricaded by fears instead of fate?

“I thank you so very kindly, Miss Sparkle, for assisting me in this endeavor.”

“It's my pleasure, Dr. Whooves,” she said with a smile, telekinetically lowering the last of eight crystals into place. Soon, a ring of identical gemstones was surrounding a metal box located atop a metal pedestal in the center of the town's library. It wasn't just any ordinary box, but a complex, hollow cube with several perforated grooves forming intricate runes along the silver surface. The very top of the cube bore a cylindrical platform that glowed dimly with residual enchantment. “I hope this doesn't come across as too silly,” Twilight murmured as she straightened the last crystal into its copper brace in the middle of the makeshift laboratory, “But I've always been a great fan of your scientific documents. I find the idea of this experiment beyond fascinating. I, for one, believe that all ponies should experience the benefits of magic, regardless of what they were born as.”

“You have no idea how delighted I am to hear a gifted unicorn such as yourself say that,” Dr. Whooves replied. His ocean-blue eyes shone as he leaned into the complex equipment and adjusted a metal panel on the side of the cube with a pair of pliers gripped in his teeth. He dropped the tool onto a tray and resumed speaking, “If earth ponies had half the resources available to unicorns, it would allow their tasks to yield far greater bounties than that of their last five generations of ancestors combined. I only hope you understand that it is not my attempt to abuse magic, but to find a way to facilitate it through safe and applicable means.”

“If you asked me, I’d say it was high time that the Equestrian Science Committee reconsidered the prohibition of the public use of machina in channeling magical leylines,” Twilight said as she trotted around the array of equipment in the center of the room, assisting the Doctor in a last-second, careful examination. “After all, it’s been nearly a thousand years since the Civil War and its legacy of infernal weaponry. With Princess Luna returned and exorcised of Nightmare Moon’s taint, I doubt very much that the world could ever consider using magical machines for evil again.”

“I shudder to think of such a thing!” Dr. Whooves took a deep breath and glanced at his young partner in science. “I spent months on my hooves and knees before the Committee at Canterlot, trying to convince them that a teleporter device could only be used for *good*... to assist agriculture and industry. If this week’s procedure goes as planned, I’m bound to win their financial backup for sure!”

“There’s only one way to find out if this was worth all the time and sweat, right, Doctor?” Twilight Sparkle gave the arrangement a final glance and smiled with pride. “Are you ready to get started?”

“After you, ma’am.” The Doctor bowed from where he stood with a wry grin. “It takes your spark, after all.”

“First thing’s first.” Twilight remarked. She turned towards the corner. “Hey, Rainbow Dash!”

Rainbow Dash sat, slumped on the stairs leading up to the library’s second floor. She was snoring loudly.

Twilight frowned. “Rainbow!”

“Snkkkt—Nnghh...Nyup...Naaugh—Huh? What?” Rainbow Dash looked up, blinking dizzily. “Are we ready? Is it time for explosions yet?”

“For the last time, there *aren’t* going to be any explosions!”

“Awww...”

“Not if everything goes right,” Dr. Whooves nervously added.

“Oh!” Rainbow Dash smiled, her wings flexing. “So there’s still hope?” She exhaled sharply as a pair of goggles were thrown into her chest.

“Put them on and get ready to fly!” Twilight Sparkle said firmly. She turned and gave the Doctor a far more pleasant expression. “Just what should we test the machine on?”

“Erm... Oh dear, I should have given that more thought, shouldn’t have I?” Doctor Whooves gulped and glanced all around the room. “It obviously has to be something inert. Perhaps a metal weight or a container or... or... even a blank book!”

“Heh, yeah, forget that!” Rainbow Dash droned as she slipped the goggles onto her head. “I didn’t volunteer to help you guys just to go chasing after falling books! I could do that for Twilight any

day of the week!”

“Well...” Twilight rolled her eyes, but suppressed a smile. “She's got a point there. Perhaps...” She scanned the familiar contours of her library, then brightened. “Ah! I know just the thing!” She levitated a wooden unicorn carving off a pedestal and levitated it before the Doctor's eyes. “Would organic material be a problem?”

“So long as it's no longer alive, it's perfect!” Doctor Whooves grinned wide. Grabbing the carving's “horn” in his teeth, he carried it over and planted it on the cylindrical platform at the top of the cube. He then backed away to a safe distance and stood beside Twilight. “Alright, Miss Sparkle. Everything has been accounted for. *Whoops!*” He scrambled a bit before finally picking up a switch that was attached to a wire strung into the body of the cube from afar. “Ah, there we go. Couldn't very well get started unless we had access to the ignition, yes?”

Twilight giggled. Rainbow yawned.

“Alas, no need for pomp or gravitas. Let's get on with it, shall we?”

“Here goes...” Twilight Sparkle took a deep breath. Her violet eyes narrowed and her mouth tensed as she aimed her horn at the nearest of the crystals. After a minute of concentration, she fired a purple beam of bright light into the array. The luminescent laser flew through the stone and refracted so that it bounced solidly through the rest of the seven crystals. Once the beam of light had made three full orbits, all eight stones directed a piece of the glow into the body of the cube in the middle. Soon, the hollow container started glowing from the inside as the light spell from Twilight's own horn energized the leylines etched into the machine's silver body. A high-pitched hum filled the room, causing the windows around the library to vibrate within their frames.

“Hey, my teeth are shaking like guitar strings!” Rainbow Dash exclaimed above the rising noise. “That's cool and all, but does that mean *we're* the ones that are gonna explode?!”

“Rainbow Dash...” Twilight hissed aside.

“It's almost reached maximum intake!” Dr. Whooves shouted as a mysterious wind began building up. “By Celestia, it's going just as I planned!”

“How do we know it's time to hit the switch?!” Twilight replied.

Just then, the wooden carving atop the cube started shaking uncontrollably.

“Uhm... Guys...?” Rainbow Dash pointed at the bizarre spectacle.

“Doctor—?!”

“Right! It's a go!” He twisted the node in his hooves. A spark shot through the wire and into the machine. There was a brief flash of light as all of the lasers shot one last time from the crystals into the cube. The center of the room turned black, then the darkness dissipated like a fine mist.

The wooden carving was gone.

“That did it!” Doctor Whooves exclaimed. His grin was positively electric.

Twilight was already spinning to face her companion. “Rainbow Dash! Go long!”

“On it!” She saluted, opened a window, and rocketed skyward.

The room filled with an eerie silence as the two scientists waited for the blue pegasus to return.

“How far should it have gone?” Twilight nervously asked.

Dr. Whooves gulped, his body visibly shaking in anticipation. “At least four hundred feet. I was afraid to aim for anything longer. I just wasn't sure how much energy output this device could manage.”

“Sometimes the smallest steps are the safest steps, Doctor. I applaud you for planning with caution.”

“Ohhhh...” He squirmed nervously where he stood, his eyes locked on the open window. “All the world's planning will mean nothing if it doesn't work. And I would hate to think of what horrible fate I may have dealt your charming art piece if worse came to worst.”

“Charming art piece?” Twilight blinked at him, then giggled. “My dear Doctor. If it would somehow aid science to feed that gaudy thing to a radioactive hydra, I'd do it in a heartbeat.”

“Heh. Of that I have no doubt. It's almost as if—” He stopped as his eyes suddenly lit up. “Good gracious! Back already?”

Twilight spun to look. “Rainbow Dash?” She gulped. “Well?”

She entered through the window, her forelimbs crossed. She paused for dramatic effect, then smirked deliciously as she unfolded her upper limbs to display the wooden unicorn carving in her grasp, completely intact. “Ta-daaaa!”

“Yes! It worked!” Twilight reared her hooves before nudging the Doctor with a bright grin. “Doctor Whooves! I am so, *so* very happy for you!”

He merely stood there, his face plastered with euphoric shock and disbelief. “Four hundred feet...” He gulped and grinned slowly, his eyes glossy. “Nearly half a town's length of spatial displacement straight up into the air, and yet there's not a chip missing from the test subject!”

“Yeah, and get this!” Rainbow Dash grinned and held the carving up high like a trophy from where she hovered. “It was still *on its way skyward* when I caught up with it! I think you just built yourself some crazy awesome magical teleporter cannon thingy!”

“Errrm...” The Doctor made a face.

Twilight rolled her eyes and smiled at him. “Don't mind her. I'm sure we'll be putting *your* words of discovery into the history books, Doctor.”

“Hey!” Rainbow Dash frowned. “Don't I get my name carved into some science statue somewhere too?! Why should just the three of you get all the credit—?” She paused in mid-sentence, doing a double-take. Swiftly, she pulled her goggles up to her brow and squinted down at me. “Uhm... Just who in the heck are you?”

“Me?” I smiled wide from where I sat on a reading bench, applauding. “I'm incredibly impressed!”

“Gah!” Twilight Sparkle gasped and spun around. Doctor Whooves was no less startled as the two of them jumped in place. “Who... What...?!” Twilight stammered, gazing at me in shock. “How did you get in here?”

I allowed my face to become awash with “shock” and “confusion.” “Uhm... I just trotted in? I apologize. Was the library off limits today?”

“Can't you see that we're conducting a science experiment?” Twilight exclaimed, beside herself. “The library's closed to act as a temporary laboratory! I had my assistant Spike put up signs and notes all over town!”

“Uhm...” I felt my ears drooping as I smiled innocently. “Does that include the side door?” I pointed at my saddlebag. “It was wide open when I came here to return my checkouts.”

Twilight blinked. She then turned to frown at Rainbow Dash. “Rainbow... Did you leave the side door open again?”

“What?” She blinked and juggled the carving in her grasp. “No! Of course not! Erm...” She bit her lip and gazed around the ceiling, her voice cracking. “At least, I don't think so.” A gulp. “Eheh... Though I guess it's possible I could have...”

“Unngh...” Twilight ran a hoof over her face. “I'm sorry, ma'am,” she looked my way with an exhausted expression. “But you weren't supposed to be here. Who knows what danger a random pony like you could have gotten—?”

“Did you see how successful we were?!” Doctor Whooves' grinning expression was suddenly blocking my view of Twilight. The scientist's ecstasy was overwhelming. “We teleported an inert object safely and successfully at a distance of over four hundred feet! Can you imagine what ponies could do if we somehow found a way to harness this sort of technology into common practicality?!”

“Uhm... Doctor?” Twilight leaned over him, nervously smiling. “I know you're excited, but I don't think this is a time to—”

“I think it's absolutely fantastic!” I spoke up. “If I'm to understand correctly...” I pointed at the crystals surrounding the cube. “The gemstones magnify a light spell cast by a practiced unicorn, which

is then channeled into the machine. The cube then uses a complex layering of artificially drawn runes that mimic the natural compositions of ley lines, so that the mana streams expound upon themselves and produce a core of unbridled magic that can be focused into a single, modulated spell?”

All three ponies gazed at me blankly, that is until Rainbow Dash shook her head and rubbed it achingly. “Okay. Who invited the encyclopedia in a hoodie?”

“That is... quite a remarkable observation,” Doctor Whooves said with a smile plastered across his face.

“Are you a fan of the Doctor's?” Twilight leaned in and asked. “I've met every unicorn in Ponyville, and—if I may be so bold—very few of them tout a career in advanced science.”

I smiled gently at my foalhood friend. “Let's say I've... been tutored over time by the *best*.”

“Well, despite the circumstances,” Dr. Whooves extended a hoof. “It's a pleasure to share this moment of discovery with a unicorn so avidly schooled, Miss...”

“*Lyra*,” I replied with a smile and shook his hoof. “*Lyra Heartstrings*.” I stared at the group. “And I hardly intend to subtract from this marvelous occasion.”

“Not at all, Miss *Heartstrings*.” Dr. Whooves grinned at his two associates. “If our subsequent experiments over the next few days prove to be just as successful, then in a matter of years we may have teleporting equipment like this available in every household! Why, the sheer possibilities for non-magical equines to make full use of this gifted technology is mind boggling!”

“Yeah, well...” Rainbow Dash unceremoniously planted the carving down onto Twilight's backside. “This pegasus has to teleport her bladder really quick, if you catch my drift.” She yawned and flitted away. “Try not to blow anything up while I'm not here to witness it.”

“Erm... by all means, Miss Dash,” the Doctor remarked with a nervous expression.

Twilight rolled her eyes and trotted off. “I need to run some tests on the structural integrity of this... *um*... piece of art, to make sure it's in as much one piece as it *looks*. If you'll excuse me, Doctor... erm... and Miss *Heartstrings*.”

As Twilight strolled away, I turned to look at the Doctor. “It sounds like your goal with this device is to make teleportation accessible to non-magical ponies, and yet I notice that you require the enchantment spell of a unicorn such as Twilight Sparkle to power the machine...”

Doctor Whooves blushed slightly. “Yes, well, this is merely a prototype. No matter what design I concoct, a teleporter such as this will inevitably rely on unicorns to provide power. However, once I have a self-sustaining mana battery implemented, I imagine a device such as this could perform hundreds of long-distance spatial displacement charges on one single magical charge alone.”

“So, it's more of a means of magical conveyance than it is a self-sustaining generator.”

“But of course. We've yet to discover magic that comes from nowhere.” Doctor Whooves chuckled pleasantly. “Some things that exist in science fiction must stay in science fiction.”

I giggled as well and admired the machine from afar. “I can't help but notice that the cylindrical platform atop the cube is made of arcanium.”

“Absolutely.”

“Arcanium is often used as a magical suppressant. Does the platform have a dual function?”

“As a matter of fact it does, Miss **Heartstrings**. To focus the teleportation spell, the machine needs a singular point of discharge, a place where all of the artificial ley lines converge. Such an exit point for the machine's mana streams is located just beneath the platform.”

“So, if you hadn't put a layer of arcanium there...”

“The spell would emit from the device in a solid stream of unbridled energy.” Dr. Whooves chewed on his lip as he gave the machine a nervous glance. “That platform serves more than a tiny teleporter pad, you see.”

“Oh, so there *could* have been lasers involved.” I smirked. “Even explosions.”

“Not if we can help it!” Dr. Whooves said with a grin. “Thankfully, Miss Sparkle has not only been helpful in disaster-proofing the device, but in providing a safe interior within which to conduct this experiment.”

“She's very selfless,” I murmured, gazing towards the far end of the treehouse library. “In a lot of ways.” I took a deep breath. Twilight and Rainbow Dash would both be back soon, and undoubtedly the distance would have rekindled their forgetfulness, along with their ire. If I wanted to avoid an awkward situation, I had to take leave of Dr. Whooves, but not without asking a question that had been hammering the walls of my mind. “I can't help but notice that the arcanium plate affords very little space for test subjects.”

“Yes. We hope to perform more tests by sunset. With Miss Sparkle's permission, I would like to work on larger and more dense objects. You're welcome to witness if you like, Miss **Heartstrings**.”

I smiled pleasantly at him. “As much as I would enjoy that, I can't help but ask.” I took a deep breath. There was no turning back now. “What if your next prototype could afford a larger teleporter pad?”

“I don't understand. Why would we need a larger platform?”

I stared directly at him. “For teleporting living subjects.”

Dr. Whooves blinked at me. I could detect the wince in his expression before he bore it. Nevertheless, I listened as he paced and said, “That... is quite difficult, Miss **Heartstrings**. I dare not experiment with that sort of a situation, not now and perhaps not ever.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Dare I ask why?”

“Far be it from me to establish limitations so early, but it does not seem remotely safe.”

“How so?”

“Unicorns—such as yourself, Miss **Heartstrings**—are more than capable of surviving teleportation performed by yourself or other unicorns. However...” He gestured towards the cube in the center of the eight crystals. “Though a device of this nature is empowered by a unicorn’s light enchantment, the magical burst that comes out the other end of the layered runes is anything but natural. When a unicorn teleports herself from place to place, what emerges through the process is the same creature. This is because she has merely traveled the streams of the same magical leylines that her essence is empowered by. This goes for any other pony—unicorn or not—that she teleports with her. Her essence—her *soul self*, as it were—preserves the nature of her being and those who share the transient leylines through which she propels her corporeal self.”

“But...” I thought aloud, my eyes locked onto the suddenly sinister device in our midst. “...when the machine teleports a living thing, what comes out the other end has been... disconnected from the leylines, hasn't it?”

“Or so theory would say,” Doctor Whooves said with a nod. “The experience of teleportation would not kill the living subject.” He then gulped and added with a nervous smile. “Not at first.”

“How do you mean...?”

“Well, the subject would emerge from the teleportation in relative control of her or his faculties. However, the disconnection with the leylines would cause a unavoidable sever between the pony's physical body and incorporeal essence.”

“It's like ripping the ghost from the flesh.”

“In a manner of speaking.” He nodded gravely. “You see, Miss **Heartstrings**, it was never my goal to transport ponies with this device, but simply to allow non-magical ponies a means to deliver material objects to each other from a distance. It would be a long time—perhaps beyond my years—before a device like this could teleport living creatures by purely artificial means.”

I felt my tail flick at the sound of that. I gazed up at him. “So... you mean that it is *possible*?”

He chuckled, running a hoof through his mane as he gazed aside. “If only there was a way to compensate for a test subject's incorporeal disconnect. The only solid solution I can think of is for another unicorn, one gifted with at least an intermediary knowledge of expert sorcery, to approach the test subject immediately following the teleportation and manually reacquaint her with her natural leylines. But I wouldn't even begin to imagine the type of concentration and mana that would take. The very prospect—at least as we currently perceive it—is far too dangerous to be practical.”

Far too dangerous, but still incredibly enticing...

Doctor Whooves' words were all I could think about. I sat on the front patio of my cabin the next afternoon, engulfed in thought. My lyre was resting beside me; it remained unplayed. I should have been practicing the Eighth Elegy, but I couldn't stop pondering about the magical box and the wooden carving it had propelled invisibly skyward beyond the rooftop branches of Twilight's library.

All this time, I've been obsessing over the lunar elegies. Why shouldn't I have been? They seemed obviously made for me to focus on. It was as though they had been inserted in my brain for a reason. Since the first day I woke up in this world of chills and ghosts, the *symphony of Princess Luna* had been my task to uncover.

But what if I didn't have to finish that task? What if there was another way out, even if it was cheating?

I'm stuck in Ponyville. I know that. I live that. But what if I could forcibly remove myself from this place? And to what end? My heart soars with the implications. I could see my parents again. I could reach the ancient magical libraries of Canterlot. In a miraculous blink, I could even show up on the doorstep to the royal sisters' palace and rob their attention just long enough to listen to my pleas and save me from this blasted curse.

But, even if I could do all of that, what would I have to look forward to? Doctor Whooves had made it perfectly clear: something alive like me could not survive the teleportation process, at least not for long. I would emerge on the other end of the procedure as some pathetic golem that thought it was me. My only hope, then, would be for a unicorn like Twilight or an alicorn like Princess Luna to somehow... "reattach" my soul to my body before I could even *pretend* to ask for help from the outside in curing my curse. And even if I traversed all of those wicked boundaries, how much time would I have to accomplish all that I needed to do before I would be consumed by utter cold and forgetfulness, so far away from my new warm "home?"

I sighed and tucked my hooves under my hoodie's sleeves before hugging myself.

Just when I think that this whole situation couldn't be any more exhausting, I witness something as tantalizing as this scientific experiment taking place under my very nose, and it simply eats at me. There is something so dreadfully frightening about performing the elegies, and no matter how deeply I explore those unearthly compositions, I find myself growing even further and further from my goal. The idea of teleporting myself to someplace where answers may lie is extremely tantalizing, but is it any less of a frightening venture? Just because it's *different* doesn't mean it's *safer*, and no matter how I spin it, it still demands the same bottomless well of courage from me as the alternative.

As a matter of fact, I've never been much of a courageous pony. I don't know how the likes of Rainbow Dash or Applejack or Twilight Sparkle manage to summon such bravery from the depths of their souls. To attempt being strong in a cursed world is like starting a fire with sticks of ice. There are times when I don't even know how I can walk out of this cabin in the morning. On countless occasions, I've felt lonely in this place, but it doesn't compare to how often I feel utterly and bitterly *afraid*.

There was no point in entertaining the notion of the teleporter machine. With the life I live, it's easy to grab onto bizarre things after confusing them with symbols of hope. All I am, and all I'll ever be, is a musician. It's best to leave heroism to the heroes—

I gasped suddenly upon hearing a shrieking cry, coupled with the cacophonous sound of tumbling limbs. I glanced over from the front of my cabin to see a tiny pony having collapsed in the center of the dirt road. Several wheels spun from an overturned scooter, and I felt my heart skipping a beat.

In an instant, I was up on my hooves and galloping over to the scene. The dust had just begun settling as I stumbled upon her. My ears pricked to hear her squealing breath desperately stifling a pained moan.

“Uhm... Hey there, kiddo?” I leaned down towards her with a concerned expression. “Are you okay?”

“Nnnngh...” Scootaloo's eyes were clenched shut. She hissed through gnashing teeth. “I'm **fine!**”

“That's quite the tumble you just took.” I glanced behind her, spotting a sharp rock jutting in the center of the path. Deep wheel marks spelled where the scooter had crashed after hitting the obstruction. “Better watch out when you come around the bend. This path was built long ago, and I suspect not many ponies have looked after it since.” My eyes caught her forelimbs clutching a spot on her rear left leg. I reached towards it. “Here, lemme see—”

“I said I'm **fine!**” she hissed and practically batted my limb away. “I'm a tough pony! I've taken worse tumbles befo—*Ow! Owwwww...*” I could see the smallest hint of moisture clinging to her eyelashes as she hissed through chapped lips.

With a gentle smile, I reached forward again. This time, she was too weak to protest, and I parted her forelimbs in time to see a nasty red gash having been burned through the orange coat of her rear leg. It was hardly anything to go to the emergency room for, but *Celestia* it looked like it *stung*.

“Whew! That's one heck of a case of road rash!” I said. I attempted a chuckle, as if it would alleviate her pain. It didn't. So I distracted her nerves with a pair of hooves gently caressing her chin. “Here. Follow me. I think I have just the thing for that.”

“I... don't need... any help...” She grunted, still fighting the pain like a pony would bang her head against a brick wall.

"I'm not sure your leg agrees with you." I stood up straight and a bright green glow filled the air from my horn. "Don't worry. I promise it won't take but a second."

Scotaloo mumbled something. With her face hung in a mixture of embarrassment and frustration, she hoisted herself up to a standing position. Gently, a haze of glittering telekinesis wafted over her injured leg. She allowed me to support her weight with magic as I escorted the filly—limping—to the front of my cabin.

I swiftly ducked in through the door to my home. In less than a minute, I had emerged with a first-aid kit full of materials that I had assembled after a year of wandering through Ponyville. I learned long ago that if I was ever to be seriously injured, the only pony I could safely rely on to fix me up was myself. It was a pleasure, then, to help another soul for once in a blue moon.

"Just sit still, and I'll get you patched up."

I cleaned the edges of her wound. Next, I applied a medicinal ointment to a bandage before softly wrapping it around her scraped leg. All the while, Scotaloo remained remarkably dormant. She barely winced as I worked through my ministrations. Every now and then, the faintest hiss would spill from her lips. I soon realized that she was being brave—a little *too* brave. Her entire upper body began shivering, like a leather balloon that was waiting to burst.

Calmly, I prepared a second bandage while uttering, "I apologize in advance for the smell."

Scotaloo stirred. Her voice came out as a tense grunt. "Sm-smell? I don't smell anything..."

"Well, that's just the thing..." I smiled softly as I stood behind her. "It's a very rare ointment. I promise that it'll keep your scratch from getting infected, but at the same time it has a different effect on everypony. Some ponies smell something horrible. Others—well—they don't smell anything, but it still affects them."

She gulped. Her head and neck were quivering at the breaking point. "Affect them how...?"

"They have a mild reaction," I murmured. "Their nose gets a little runny and their eyes start to water."

"You... Y-you mean it's normal?" She asked, and I detected the slightest snuffle.

I smiled and gently nodded. "Yes, sweetie. It's normal."

Her sniffles doubled, then quadrupled, and finally Scotaloo's body became still as she relaxed. I didn't bother looking at her tear-stained face as I squatted down. "Now lift the leg one more time. I'm almost done here."

She did so obediently. I applied the last bandage and pulled it tight. As I stood up, I got a close look at the filly's wings. I couldn't help but squint. I noticed something for the first time: Scotaloo's longest feather stems appeared abnormally short, as if they ended abruptly at half the normal length for a pony her age. I cleared my throat and marched around so that I sat on the patio's edge beside her.

“So... are you going to tell me why?”

Scotaloo sniffled one last time and dried her face with a forelimb. “Why, what?”

“Why you felt like speeding around the dirt road on that scooter like a bat out of Tartarus?”

She frowned and faced off towards the afternoon horizon with her forelimbs folded. “Hmmp... I'm practicing.”

“For what?” I chuckled. “The Demolition Olympics?”

“Pffft! No!” She glared briefly at me. “Look, lady, thanks for making my leg feel better, but don't poke fun at me!”

“Hey... I meant no offense!” I exclaimed with a soft smile. “I just think fillies your age have better things to be doing than attempting suicide.”

“It's not suicide,” she said with a sigh, then ran a hoof through her pink mane. “It's a pegasus thing. I can't expect you to understand...”

I shrugged. “When I was your age, I accidentally 'rearranged' my bedroom quite a few times trying to discover my magical gift. Heh. You see, even young unicorns have been known to make a mess out of themselves on occasion.”

“But I shouldn't be making messes! I shouldn't even be on the stinkin' ground anymore!” Scootaloo sighed long and hard. She hugged herself and stared forlornly into the sky. “I practice on my scooter all the time, if only to feel what it's like.”

“What *what's* like?”

“Speed. Wind. Soaring.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Flight?”

Her nostrils flared. She looked defeatedly into the soil beyond the patio and muttered, “I'll never know how she makes it look so easy...”

Ah. But of course.

“And just who is 'she', if I may be so bold to ask?”

“Ugh. Look...” Scootaloo stood up and began limping away. “Whoever you are, thank you. I mean it. But... I really didn't mean to bug your or nothin'. I... I have places to be. I should be doing homework or some other boring junk right about now anyway.”

As she trotted off, I fiddled with my hoodie's sleeves and murmured to the wind, “You know,

we haven't had a terrible thunderstorm in nearly eight months.”

“I know,” Scootaloo's voice sounded practically defensive as she trotted towards the distance. “Ponyville's Weather Flier is the only pegasus in Equestria with a perfect record.”

“Do you really think she got so perfect without getting scorched by lightning a few times?”

Scootaloo stopped in her tracks. She glanced back at me.

I looked into those violet eyes from afar as I said, “It's much more than courage that makes a pony, kid.” I pointed towards her fresh bandage. “Sometimes, what looks perfect is really just something sculpted out of a life of countless bumps and bruises.”

Her face was remarkably deadpan when she gave her swift response. “I've been given enough bumps and bruises in life already, lady.” Her face briefly grimaced, as if that was something too sacred to admit until then. There was a distant look in the child's gaze as she picked the scooter up, all the while her stubby wings twitched. “I... I just want to be *cool* already. *She's* earned it. Why can't I?” She gave one last snuffle; there was no more need to hide it. Nevertheless, everything disappeared into a brazen frown as she jumped on the scooter and blurred down the road and out of my life once more.

I sat alone with my lyre and my beating heart. Slowly, I closed the first-aid kit and sighed. I knew that I could only depend on myself in this life; perhaps it was high time I stopped pretending I could look after others as well. Some of us could only dream of being heroes. Others have earned the title with no hope of receiving it. I will forever be stuck as a bard to such ponies' legacy.

“Alright...” Doctor Whooves stepped back from the cube after having placed down a black cylinder atop the machine's arcanium platform. “Fifty kilograms of ram-crafted iron alloy. This will be our heaviest test subject yet.”

“What's the distance we're going for this time, Doc?” Rainbow Dash asked.

Doctor Whooves glanced at Twilight Sparkle, gulped bravely, and said with a grin. “Nine hundred feet. I fear, Miss Dash, that by the time you catch up with it, it'll have achieved a great deal of velocity.”

“Sounds dangerous,” Rainbow Dash said. Her ruby eyes lit up. “Ready when you are!”

“Have... *uhm*... Have you been able to catch something of this mass before?”

Rainbow snickered and glanced aside. “Hey Twi! Remember that one time Big Mac's outhouse was placed a little too close to the edge of a hill and I happened to be doing a cloud run overhead just as he was—?!”

“Ahem.” Twilight Sparkle smiled nervously at the stallion. “She can handle it, Doctor. Are we ready to begin?”

“We're using twelve crystals this time. It should be more than enough to channel the required energy into the runic matrix.”

“Okay then.” Twilight carefully approached the nearest stone on a pedestal and tilted her horn forward. “I'll need a few moments to concentrate, then I'll give you the signal.”

Doctor Whooves sat on his haunches while gripping the wired switch. “I await with anticipation.”

Rainbow Dash watched from where she hovered above. The center of the library shimmered with a deep purple light as Twilight focused a light spell through the structure of her horn. Her mane billowed in a magical wind as bulbs of sweat ran down her face. “Almost... Almost...” She briefly gnashed her teeth, took a deep breath, and finally exclaimed, “Casting now!”

A bright flash illuminated the room. In the next blink, all twelve crystals were being joined by a thick web of criss-crossing violet lasers. Twilight Sparkle briefly stumbled, only to be supported by the weight of Doctor Whooves leaning into her.

“Are you alright, dear?”

“Never mind me!” Twilight found herself having to shout. The room was echoing with a loud hum as the crystals flickered all around the metal cube. “Do we have the energy contained?”

“Just about!” The Doctor yelled back, grazing the switch in his grasp with a tense pair of hooves. “I adjusted the intake of the machine so that the artificial leylines will absorb the mana stream with thirty-five percent resistance!”

“You think it's enough to compensate for the increased charge?”

“If not, the device should harmlessly expel the mana stream into the lateral absorption banks!”

“Well, that sounds anticlimactic!”

“Not on my watch!” Doctor Whooves smiled wide as the room swirled with an ethereal haze. “Are you ready, Miss Dash?”

“Hit it, Doc!”

“Consider it hit! Nine hundred feet or bust!” He pulled the switch.

The lasers from the twelve crystals shot immediately into the cube. What *wasn't* so immediate, however, was the rate of glowing light from the heart of the box. Instead of instantly dematerializing the black object on top of the machine's platform, a low whining noise began emanating from the center of the cube.

“Uhh...” Rainbow Dash made a face, her fluttering wings drooping slightly in midair. “That doesn't sound good.” She gulped. “Am I the only pony who thinks that doesn't sound good?”

Twilight Sparkle flashed a worried glance. “Doctor?”

“I...” Doctor Whooves' mouth was agape as he glanced at the delayed teleportation. “I don't understand! We should have witnessed the discharge by now!”

“Maybe it's taking longer cuz the metal weight is heavier?” Rainbow Dash blindly speculated.

“No, it should have nothing to do with the test subject's variable weight,” Twilight exclaimed. “It's as if all of the mana has disappeared. But that can't be possible! The box—”

“Good heavens,” the Doctor gasped.

The two mares looked fearfully his way.

He flashed them no less a worried look. “Of course the mana charge hasn't disappeared. The reason we're not seeing it is probably because the enchantment immediately pierced the outer layers of artificial leylines.”

“You mean the beam was strong enough to pierce to the center of the apparatus?” Twilight Sparkle breathily exclaimed.

“Uhm...” Rainbow Dash fluttered lower. “Is that bad?”

“The core of the cube's runic chambers isn't built to handle that much magical stress!” Twilight Sparkle shrieked as the room started resonating with an alien cacophony. “It could very well be overloading as we speak—”

“I'm aborting!” Doctor Whooves shouted. It was becoming difficult to hear his own voice. “I'm shutting it all down!” He fiddled with the device. He pounded on it, seething.

“Nnnngh!” Rainbow Dash was gripping her aching ears at this point. Lanterns and light fixtures wobbled overhead. The windows along the edges of the library began to crack. “Ughhh—D-Doc?!”

“The failsafe!” He bellowed. It came across as a whisper against a gigantic earthquake. “The lateral banks have burnt out!”

“Then that means—!” Twilight began.

Rainbow Dash was already swooping down. As the cube flashed a bright purple, its metal shell buckling, she swiftly yanked Twilight and the Doctor away with two hooked forelimbs. “Get down—!”

The cube ruptured. The black cylinder was spat out, landing two feet deep into a wooden wall as the twelve crystals shattered. Tremors bred tremors, and soon the shuddering stopped, giving way to a low bass hum as dust settled across the room. Shadows danced across the interiors of the hollow treehouse. Books and tattered pages spun magical cyclones, beneath which a groaning Doctor Whooves stirred to life.

“Nnnngh... Great Starswirl... My head...” He winced visibly, his ears and nostrils streaming thin trickles of blood. He glanced up and gasped at what he saw.

A huge gash had been torn in the body of the cube, exposing its glowing purple core to the room. Despite the disastrous explosion, the teleportation machine was remarkably intact, except for one key detail. The arcanium platform had been blown clean off. What was more, the cube had fallen and was currently lying on its side. The onion layers of artificial leylines were exposed to the air so that the one opening of the device was currently being aimed at—

“Miss Dash!” Doctor Whooves sputtered.

“Ughhh...” Rainbow Dash barely stirred, lying paralyzed on her side. She was overcome by waves of pure magical energy billowing over her figure. The torn mouth of the cube was facing directly towards her, and the pegasus had very little strength to wake up, much less crawl away from the threatening contraption.

Doctor Whooves tried crawling towards her. He instantly winced, then glanced down at his rear limbs. A cloud of glass shrapnel from one of the mana crystals had embedded viciously into his knee, spilling a small pool of blood across the floor. Panicking, he flashed Rainbow Dash another glance, then looked to where Twilight Sparkle was lying just a few feet away from the pegasus.

“Miss Sparkle! Hckk...” He winced past a wave of pain and again struggled in vain to crawl towards the two mares. “Can you move?”

“Can... hardly... breathe...” Twilight whimpered. She was glued to the floor, but for a completely different reason than the other two. As waves of mana billowed out from the lopsided teleporter, her horn resonated with a weak, pulsating light. “Too... much energy. Feel my nerves... going numb...”

“Miss Dash is going to be in a worse situation if we don't—” Doctor Whooves began, but was suddenly overcome by a loud groaning sound. He glanced up with wide eyes as he saw a heavy bookcase stuffed with thick tomes teetering from the recent burst of energy. “Oh dear...” He curled inward and covered his head with two hooves. The hulking wooden structure fell over him.

A loud crash filled the room, but Doctor Whooves was untouched. He found himself being dragged away from the collapsing bookcase at the last second. Twitching, he glanced up at me.

“Who in Celestia's name are you?!”

“You're welcome,” I grunted, sweating. I finished pulling the Doctor to a safe distance from the disaster and looked over at Twilight's and Rainbow's situation. I too was deeply affected by the overloading cube. Even from over a dozen feet away, I found it hard to stand upright. If it wasn't for the fact that I was watching the experiment from an adjacent hallway when everything hit the fan, I would have been in as bad a shape as the others. “Never mind introductions, Doctor!” I struggled to speak past the waves of raw magic pouring from the ruptured device. “Is there any way to turn this thing off?”

“I... I...” Doctor Whooves shook off the confusion of my presence and forlornly glanced at the situation at hoof. “No pony but one of the royal alicorns themselves could shut it off at this point! There's nothing we can do but wait for the pent-up energy to exit the machine on its own!”

“Just how long are we talking about?!” I exclaimed above the deep bass roar. I shaded my squinting eyes with a hoof as I looked at Twilight and Rainbow alternatively. It was hard to hear anything above my beating heart, much less the mana-spilling cube. “A couple of hours?”

“More like minutes, ma'am!” the Doctor exclaimed. “There's too much mana inside the thing to stay contained for much longer! I fear the first burst was but a precursor!”

“What do you mean by that?!”

“Even shattered in pieces, the teleporter is going to do what it's designed to do!” The Doctor pointed as I helped him into a sitting position. “And that's emit a solid beam of energy in the form of a spatial displacement spell! And right now, the unguarded mouth of the machine is aimed at—”

“Rainbow Dash...” I murmured. “I'll move her—”

He held me in place with a strong hoof. “**No!** If you get any closer to the core, you'll be as worse off as them!”

“But we have to move them! Both of them!” I felt my teeth chattering. It wasn't the cold this time. I looked all over the rumbling, billowing scene. “Any ideas?”

He looked up at me as if for the first time. “You're a unicorn! Praise Luna!” He pointed at a splintered plank of wood severed from a collapsed bookcase. “Perhaps you can give one of them a boost—!”

“I read you!” I exclaimed. Trying to steady my breaths, I planted all four hooves tightly against the floor and concentrated hard through my horn. With the most intensely focused burst of mana I've ever summoned in my life, I levitated the wooden plank upwards and pierced it through the sphere of swirling energy. “Nnnngh...” I strained and sweated as I attempted shoving the thing towards the dormant, moaning figure of Rainbow Dash. It felt like carving a plastic butter knife through wet cement. “I... I-I don't think I can reach her!”

“Then don't!” Doctor Whooves shouted. The bass hum of the machine was intensifying once

more. We both felt the advent of another mana-burst coming from the sundered teleporter. “Miss Sparkle's closer! Try and pull her out first!” He pointed. “Then the two of you might be able to work together and get Rainbow Dash out!”

“Twilight!” I shouted as I pivoted the plank her way. “Did you hear the Doctor? Grab ahold!”

“I... I...” Twilight blindly lifted a hoof and miraculously found her end of the wooden object. “Who... Who is that...?”

“Let's play guessing games later!” I shouted. The windows started rattling again. Glass that had fractured before was outright shattering as I tugged telekinetically at my end of the plank. “Just hold on tight! I need your help in saving—”

“Rainbow Dash!” Twilight cried. She stared in horror at Rainbow's limp body while she was being tugged towards me. “Just hang in there!” She cast one look at the ruptured cube that was aimed at the pegagus and almost sobbed. “Oh please Celestia, no...”

“Nnngh... Tw-Twilight...” Rainbow Dash barely stirred. Her feathers were practically molting from the machine's proximity.

“Do you hear me?!” Twilight stammered as I finally pulled her over to me and the Doctor. She collapsed into my forelegs and tried to regain her bearings. “Just... Just breathe easily, and we'll have you out of there—”

The machine began pulsing. A wave of pure magic knocked all three of us onto our backsides. I stumbled accidentally over Doctor Whooves' bleeding leg, causing him to shriek in pain. By the time I got up to my hooves once more, I was assaulted by a sudden beam of pure sunlight. It took several seconds of wincing to realize that the front door to the library had been flung open.

“What in hay's name is going on in here?! Is everypony alright—?” A high-pitched voice began, then gasped, then practically shrieked. “Rainbow Dash!”

I next heard Twilight breathily murmuring, “*Oh no...* Stop! Go back outside! Don't come anywhere near her!”

I looked up at the library's front entrance. The first things I saw were the four spinning wheels of an overturned scooter. My heart sank, and my wavering sight danced over to see her little orange body practically swimming against the waves of nauseous mana.

“Listen to me, Scootaloo!” Twilight shrieked. I numbly helped her to her hooves as she shouted above the noise and bedlam. “Go back! Don't try to touch her! That machine's about to blow—”

“She's... She's h-hurt!” Scootaloo squeaked into the billowing streams of energy. Her gnashing teeth reflected streams of murderous violet light as she inched herself painfully towards Rainbow Dash. Whether or not she heard Twilight's words of warning no longer mattered. We watched helplessly from our end of the library in utter horror. “We... I... I-I gotta get Rainbow out of here!”

“Mmmf... Wh-what...?” As if sparked to life by the sound of her own name, Rainbow Dash's eyes fluttered open. She saw Scootaloo. She saw the pain in her face. Then, she saw the cosmic glow of the teleporter on the verge of erupting. With one gasp, she snarled Scootaloo's way and poured all her strength in raising a numb forelimb. “Kid! Back off! I mean it—”

For a brief moment, Scootaloo collapsed on four knees. She winced from the contact her bandaged leg made with the library floor. That must have sparked a fire from deep within. Her eyes blazed as she summoned an animalistic growl, fluttered her tiny wings, and propelled herself like a comet into Rainbow Dash's side.

“No! Don't—” Doctor Whooves was shrieking.

But it was too late. The machine exploded for a second and last time. A stream of purple energy popped out the box's torn mouth and billowed across the wooden floor. Rainbow Dash gasped, until her tumbling body was replaced by Scootaloo, who was then replaced with nothing. In a bright burst, the filly was gone, and only a dim purple haze remained.

Once the noise and mayhem of the disaster had dissipated, Rainbow Dash's yelling voice was immediately filling the void.

“Dang it! Dang it dang it dang it dang it!” Her dizziness replaced with shock and anger, she tried bounding up to her limbs. She only managed to bump into several bookcases and shattered bits of laboratory equipment. “Nnnnng—Raaugh!” She bucked her hooves repeatedly into a wooden table, viciously knocking it over and spitting into the air. “Idiot! What in the hay did she think she was doing?! That... *nnngh*... stupid... stupid...”

The cube lay dead and quiet. No longer encumbered by waves of mana, I numbly stumbled over towards her and helped her up onto all fours. “She... She...” I mumbled in a dry voice, gulped, and gazed at the charred ring of soot that marked where Scootaloo was standing last. “She... was teleported away. She had to have been! Miss Dash, if we could just—”

“Hmmmph!” She seethed and shoved me to the floor before marching across the library. “Twi! Tell me! Where is she?! Where'd that dumb machine send her?!”

Twilight Sparkle was gazing at the empty space of the library with her jaw agape. Her eyes were moist, on the verge of tears.

“Twilight!” Rainbow Dash grabbed her shoulders and shook her. “Look at me!”

Twilight gulped and looked at Rainbow Dash. Her lips quivered. “I... I don't know, Rainbow. If I had any idea that this could have happened...”

“But it *has* happened!” Rainbow Dash growled. “That stupid thing teleports crud to places, right? So where's the kid? Did it send her nine hundred feet across town or what?”

“There's no way to tell,” Doctor Whooves suddenly muttered.

Rainbow Dash spun to face him. “Bad answer!” She frowned. “I'm having a look!” She stretched her wings to fly out—

“No! Stop!” The Doctor winced past his bleeding pain and gestured for her to remain in place. “I mean it! The machine's energy output magnified Miss Sparkle's enchantment by ten-fold! Furthermore, the damage dealt to the machine can't guarantee that the child was sent anywhere predictable!”

“Just tell me where to go searching for her, Doc!” Rainbow Dash exclaimed. She steeled herself with a frown to avoid imminent hyperventilation. “I don't think that teleportation thingy is very foal-friendly!”

“What I think the Doctor is trying to say is that the machine did in fact send Scootaloo somewhere, but there's no telling where exactly!” Twilight Sparkle teetered, still attempting to regain her balance. “It... It could have been in any direction.”

“That isn't *helping*, Twi!”

“Just give me a second...” Twilight limped across the room. We watched anxiously as she picked up a collapsed blackboard, levitated a piece of chalk, and began flurrying through an array of high-level math equations at dazzling speed. Her forehead was furrowed in deep thought. Her lips murmured unintelligibly.

“With that rate of discharge,” Doctor Whooves spoke between painful breaths, “A body that small would have been sent at least five times the distance we had estimated teleporting the last test subject.”

“Yeah? So what?” Rainbow Dash fluttered desperately between the two scientists. “What does that mean? What do I have to work with?”

“Just let me **concentrate!**” Twilight snapped, gritting her teeth as she struggled through a few lasting equations. She clenched her eyes shut, murmured breathily, then struck a final figure. Spinning around, she gazed up at a wide-eyed Rainbow Dash and practically whimpered, “She could be anywhere in a *thirteen mile* circular area.”

“With this place—the location of the teleporter—as the center,” the Doctor added in a forlorn breath.

Rainbow Dash gazed left and right between the two. She flung her forelimbs above her tattered mane. “What does that *tell me?*”

“She could be two miles north of us, two miles south of us, southwest, southeast—There's no real way to tell!” Twilight Sparkle said and gulped nervously.

Rainbow Dash took a deep breath, her ruby eyes hardening. “Well, what are we waiting for?” She made for the nearest shattered window. “Twilight, you tell the mayor that I'm fetching every

able-bodied pegasus in Ponyville. We're combing the area! We'll search all day and night and all week if we have to!”

“It's not a matter of *if* you find her, Miss Dash!” The Doctor exclaimed. “It's a matter of *how soon*.”

“Why?” Rainbow Dash flashed him a frown. “What **now**?”

He bit his lip, exchanged a worried glance with Twilight, then looked once more Rainbow's way. “No living thing has ever been teleported by a machine like this before.” He winced and sat up straight while clutching his wounded leg. “All hypotheses suggest that a living pony may survive spatial displacement, but not for long.”

“What do you mean *'not for long'*?” Rainbow Dash's voice cracked in horror.

“What he means, Rainbow, is that Scootaloo—wherever she is—will soon lose her faculties, followed by swift paralysis, on account of her body being separated from her incorporeal self.” Twilight tried to calmly explain the horror of the situation. “The machine has essentially disconnected her from the leylines that keep her consciousness and physical self in perfect sync. In a matter of time, her body will cease to function, like a sort of magically-induced suffocation.”

“Then... Then...” Rainbow Dash fidgeted in mid-air, bit her lip, then barked, “Then we must fetch her and bring her to a smart, magicky unicorn like you so you can... *c-can put back together* her leylines and crud, right?”

“I...” Twilight Sparkle squirmed where she stood. “I've never tried something like that before—”

“But is it **possible**?”

“Well, sure! But—”

“Then it's enough to go on!” Rainbow Dash pointed. “Get the Doc to a hospital! I've got a rescue team to round up!”

“Miss Sparkle... Miss Dash...” Doctor Whooves winced as Twilight propped him up against her. “I must apologize for this series of disastorous events—”

“Apologies can wait, Doc! Scoots needs us!”

“But... Everypony just wait!” My voice sounded across the room as I jumped into the center of the library, waving my hooves. “We can't go about this blindly! There's gotta be—*I dunno*—a way to know for sure just **where** the kid is!”

All three jumped in place, glancing at me.

“Uhm... Who...?”

“Where'd you come from?” Twilight Sparkle blinked.

My eyes twitched. I was amazed at how quickly even *I* had forgotten a case of misfortune within misfortune. “Erm... I was... just...”

“Were you here the whole time?”

I snarled and stomped my hooves. “Look, who cares?! Seriously?” I frowned in Doctor Whooves' face. “It takes a light-based enchantment spell to activate the machine, right?”

“How...” He squinted nervously at me. “How did you know—?”

“Yes or no? Answer me!”

“Yes.” Twilight answered for him, staring at me warily. “I channeled a light-intensive spell into the crystals that were then absorbed into the machine. The runes built into the device do all the rest, transforming the spark into an artificial teleportation spell.”

“Then, if it's light-based...” I rubbed my chin in thought, then gasped wide. “Perhaps an illumination spell can trace where the machine sent her!”

“I...” Twilight glanced at the twitching Rainbow Dash and wounded Doctor. I could tell she was beyond her wit's end. “I haven't performed a light spell in ages. Even if I could...”

As Twilight was speaking aloud, my mind was flying circles to make even Rainbow Dash proud. I thought of the glow of a lantern above my head in a dark cellar while I performed the elegies. I imagined the subterranean world undulating around me as I threw myself down a gauntlet of forbidden songs. Shades of light had danced before me, just as a spark of inspiration was twinkling before me then. “Don't worry!” I grinned suddenly and galloped towards the hallway at a pace to match my heartbeat. I found my saddlebag right where I had left it upon arriving at the library earlier to watch the experiment. “I think I have it covered!” I reached deep into one of the pouches and produced my lyre. “I know a song that has a side effect of disseminating faint light from shadow and—”

The hairs of my coat stood on end as a deep chill entranced me. Shuddering, I stumbled in place.

“Uhm... Guys?”

I turned around. My heart sank.

Twilight Sparkle and Doctor Whooves had hobbled away. Outside the shattered windows, I could hear the yelling voice of Rainbow Dash as she rounded up every pegasus within earshot.

I took a deep breath. One way or another, I always end up alone. *But Scootaloo?* I suddenly wanted to find her more than anything. It's not everyday I find out that I'm not the only pony who's

incapable of flying out of this place.

I looked at my lyre. The golden body and taut cords felt cold to the touch, just like what I was about to do. I felt naked and awkward in the middle of a rubble-strewn library. It amazed me how acquainted I had become with the dark, pristine interior of my subterranean cellar. Nevertheless, I trotted over towards the wrecked cube, stood above it with my instrument, and took a deep breath.

Perhaps...

Just perhaps... these elegies were given to me for a reason. What's a pain to me could be blissful deliverance to others. I've long discovered my music to have an edge that my words fail to deliver. **Luna's compositions** have transcended the obscuring layers of time, delving into a realm of pure forgetfulness only to emerge with new and enchanting tonality in my hooves. I've taken it upon myself to become the steward of these forgotten songs. Did I have another thankless job to attend? Was I to be the nameless steward of souls as well?

I may not be a courageous pony, but I like to think of myself as an intelligent one. **Princess Luna's songs** had once served her some mysterious purpose in ages gone by. Though the function of the tunes are forgotten, it doesn't mean I can't invent new applications for them. If I'm not here to be creative and resourceful, then why else would a phantom like me exist? I was never born to be a hero, but I'd hate myself forever if I failed to be a good bard.

Once I had collected my nerves in the center of that wrecked room, I put my telekinesis to use, and began strumming the first of the lunar elegies. The dissonant strings of the "*Prelude to Shadows*" slowly filled the lengths of the library. Ironically, the first portion of the symphony was all that I required. I had no intention to play any of the tunes that followed.

Less than a minute into the performance, and the side effects of the elegy began assaulting me without mercy. I started trembling all over as a deep paranoia overwhelmed my body and mind. I wasn't used to playing this song in the daylight, and I felt like everything that was lying still around me was suddenly squirming to life. Despite my desperate need to clench my eyes shut, I kept them wide open, taking in every horrid hallucination that dared to flicker and jump before me until a ray of truth made itself known.

Through the dancing shadows and squirming shades of the song's eerie tones, I finally found what I was looking for. Beams of light separated before me, so that I saw with a mystic sight-within-sight, discovering a spectrum unknown to most mortals. The bands of brightness separated, and soon one ray in particular was arching away from the heart of the dead teleporter. It was a fresh beam of luminescence, as infant as it was artificial. I stopped playing my lyre and drifted forward, breathing it in. It tasted like vanilla and bone. The dreadful succulence led me—limping—straight out of the library, until I nearly collapsed from the waves of cold that resulted from my having aborted the magical elegy in mid-performance.

My heart pumped, wracked with darting fears. I fought the flowers and grass squirming around me like a sea of snakes. Tilting my head up, I was enraptured to see the beam leading straight northwest, past the edge of town, past Sweet Apple Acres, and towards the base of a misty mountain range that—sure enough—was no more than three miles' distance.

I now knew where Scootaloo was.

My breath came out of me in a happy whimper. I was so hammered with cold and frayed nerves, I would gladly have collapsed right there. But I couldn't. The afternoon air above Ponyville was buzzing with more and more swarming pegasi. The streets thundered with scampering hooves and murmuring voices. The entire city had come alive in panic. One of the town's precious foals had gone missing by the most bizarre of circumstances, and she had to be found.

Wincing, I pulled myself up on all fours. “Nnngh... Twi... Tw-Twilight...” I murmured. I shuffled forward, teetering sickly. The *Prelude's* toll on me was almost worse than the exploding teleporter's. Like a zombie, I limped through town. I put two and two together in my head and guessed where Twilight had taken the Doctor. I was elated beyond measure when I stumbled upon the front entrance to the Ponyville Hospital and—indeed—I had found her.

She wasn't alone. While Nurse Redheart and several other ponies were tending to Doctor Whooves, Twilight was speaking a mile-a-minute with a distressed mayor. Among the other ponies surrounding the frantic scene, I spotted a familiar soul...

“Please! You must find her!” Milky White sobbed. Carrot Top and Colgate were standing on either side of the sobbing mare, holding her up and nuzzling her. “That poor filly's been through so much! I brought her here to Ponyville to start a new life and forget about where she had been! This is the last thing I could have ever imagined would happen!”

“I promise you, Miss White,” Twilight Sparkle planted her hooves on the mare's shoulder. Her fragile desperation was hidden from everypony me, her foalhood friend. “We will find Scootaloo! Rainbow Dash is already on it! I need you to stay calm and let us all conduct a search—”

“She's northwest!” I grunted, coughed, and all but collapsed into the group. I heard Caramel's murmuring breath as I was helped back into a standing position. “Scootaloo's northwest of here! Don't waste your time searching anywhere else...”

Twilight and the others squinted hard at me. “How... How could you possibly know that?”

“The teleporter was enchanted by a light spell, right?”

“Uhm... Yes.” Twilight gave me a strange look. “What's your point? Just who are you? We kind of have a situation here—”

“Yes—*Right*—And I'm trying to tell you where Scootaloo is!” I snarled as the confused looks around me doubled, tripled. “I cast a spell that revealed to me a light trail leading to where the teleporter sent Scootaloo! You need to send everpony about two and a half miles northwest—!”

“Twilight!” Rainbow Dash floated down, flanked by the hovering figures of Cloudkicker and Raindrops. “I've got a team of fifty already! I sent Candy Mane and Blossomforth to fetch more! How should we go about doing this?”

Twilight immediately spun and replied. “We shouldn't waste precious pegasi on nearby areas. You should fly over the furthest parts of the teleporter's range while earth ponies and unicorns cover the town.”

“Yes!” the mayor spoke up. “Everypony, listen! Gather in groups of three and cover a separate district of the village! Carrot Top! Go fetch Applejack and Big Macintosh and work out a plan with the other farm families to cover the nearby woods—”

“Hey!” I barked as a wave of chills racked me in the middle of the scrambling villagers. “Didn't you hear me?! I just said I know where she is—”

“Nnngh...” Twilight rubbed her forehead. She gazed at me with mixed disgust and nausea. “Huh? What are—Who's yelling? We need to—”

“Pay attention!!” I leaned forward, panting. “Scootaloo's northwest of here!” I glanced frantically at everypony, feeling the situation swiftly slipping away from my hooves. “Just calm down, stay next to me, and listen! I promise, I can help you find her—”

“What are we standing around for?!” Rainbow Dash shouted. She was twenty feet above us. She might as well have been four galaxies away from *me*. “We need to find her and bring her back here so that Twilight can—I dunno—mind delve her or something!”

“Better hurry, Miss Dash!” Doctor Whooves exclaimed, wincing as Nurse Redheart treated him. “Every moment wasted risks losing Scootaloo forever!”

“What... What does he mean?” Milky White sobbed.

“Just calm down! Please!” I shouted. “I know where she is—”

“Now's not the time for practical jokes,” Carrot Top said, frowning at me. “Unless you're able to help—”

“I just told you seconds ago that I conducted a spell that can help us—”

“I better get prepared for her return,” Twilight Sparkle said, rubbing her head again as she stumbled towards Doctor Whooves. “If I'm not meditating by the time she gets here, I may not be able to reattach her to the leylines.”

“Everypony fan out!” Rainbow Dash said, darting off as her fellow pegasi spread in opposite directions. “Counter-clockwise formations!”

“I'll get the Apple Family!” Carrot Top galloped away.

“No—*No wait!* Please!” I reached out, but stumbled to my haunches, panting. Everypony was running everywhere but towards me. The desperation and panic in their bodies was pulling them away from my body like unraveled yarn. If this was any other day, any other occasion, then perhaps I could very easily have plucked a receptive soul out from Ponyville's bitter-cold sea of amnesia. But this...

I shivered, hugging myself, watching as the fruitless search began under a slowly setting sun... what could very well have been a foal's last day on earth.

Numbly, I stumbled into my cabin. I plopped my saddlebag atop my cot. I let my body slump down on the floor before the fireplace.

I did not light it.

I stared into the dry, unlit lumber lying before me. There were so many ashes, so many dead and lifeless flakes of brittle wood, and still I was no warmer that day than I was the first morning I was introduced to my curse.

My ears pricked. The veteran musician inside me couldn't help but hear the faintest of shouting voices beyond the windows to my house. The search was going on across Ponyville. Dozens upon dozens of ponies were desperately combing miles of acreage, and they were all blind.

I knew where Scootaloo was. I knew she was suffering, dying even. I also knew that wherever she was—she'd be better off than me.

Two miles—maybe three—from the center of Ponyville: I had never even remotely gotten that far from the birthplace of my curse, not even that one time Twilight had personally teleported me. The furthest I ever dared to tread was to Zecora's place in the middle of the Everfree Forest, and even that was a paltry mile-and-a-half distance at best. Every time I came back home from buying those precious soundstones, it took the better part of a day to warm my body back to being able to *feel* once again.

I heard more shouts of pegasus voices outside. Wincing, I clenched my eyes shut and ran a pair of hooves through my mane.

I was born to a rich family in the streets of Canterlot. The first and only time I hurt myself was one day, when I was a foal and I had spranged my ankle chasing the family cat down the stairs. I only wore a cast for half a month, and still I thought it was the most excruciating pain a pony could ever go through. Afterwards, I grew up, and I lived my life day by day, book after book, music sheet after music sheet, in the luxury of college life, in the glow of an alicorn princess who guarded and watched over us all. What did I know of agony? What did I know of struggle? Even this curse—for all its frigid horrors—is painted with the rosy colors of friendly faces who would gladly help a stranger, would talk to her, would even hug her.

I am not hero material. If anything, my soul is empowered with patience, not courage. I don't have a single versatile inch of muscle or intestinal fortitude to boast of.

That day, shivering before a fireplace that I was too guilty to light for myself, I knew that all I had was knowledge, a memory. I knew where Scootaloo was. I could remember it, where everypony else couldn't. If one soul was to die that day, I knew another that would not be able to live with herself.

If this is what Nightmare Moon had meant for me, then I respect her as much as I hate her.

I threw myself to my hooves before my brain had a chance to protest. The first thing I threw over my hoodie was Rarity's gorgeous sweater. Next came a second coat—one that I had barely used and still smelled like the dumpster I grabbed it from nine months ago. I added the scarf, socks, and stockings next. The woolen cap and cloak covered the entire ensemble. As if all of this didn't weigh enough, I brought along my saddlebag and stuffed it full of blankets. I hadn't realized it at first, but I was sobbing by the time I marched out the cabin's front door. No single pony faces the reaper with dry eyes. Bundled like a woolen tank, I enjoyed the last few drops of sweat I was allowed, and galloped northwest under the shadows of misguided pegasi in the decaying afternoon.

This wasn't the Everfree Forest, but I wished it was. No less than ten minutes into marching through the woods, I realized how terribly hilly it was. Every other step sent me stumbling over a sharp rock or exposed bit of stone. Pulling myself back up was a difficult feat. My bundled clothing stiffened my limbs, so that I felt like I was wading through a sea of bed blankets. No matter how much I wanted to free my legs, I couldn't afford to shed a single scrap. I may have been shivering then, but I knew that in less than an hour I'd be traversing a veritable arctic circle.

Twenty minutes in. I couldn't feel my lower legs. At first, I thought it was because the cold had already hit me. I soon realized that it was because I was getting worn out by clopping my hooves over so much stone and pebbles. I was foolish to think that the mountainside would start abruptly far north of my destination. As a matter of fact, the mountain was gradually giving birth to itself beneath me with each step I took. I've gone on several jogs in my life, but each occasion had been on even ground, and never scaling uphill.

It didn't help that the sun was setting. The light was already being obscured by the thick sea of trees surrounding me. To my utter dismay, the forest only grew denser and denser the further north I marched. I was so desperate to get to Scootaloo's location, it hadn't dawned on me just how easily I could get lost from my goal. If I had to readjust my bearings, it was now or never... before I lost any of my senses to the frigid wall I was just about to pierce.

Pausing, I sat on my haunches and pulled my lyre out from my saddlebag. It took a long time to

focus my telekinetic talents. It took even longer to gear myself for playing the “*Prelude to Shadows*” out in the middle of such a foreboding location. My entire body tensed as I heard the enchanting elegy drip forth from my trembling instrumentation. Soon enough, I relocated the beam of light tracing Scootaloo's teleported path. It swam over me like a frozen lightning bolt, leading me further towards the neck of the mountainside. It was with small relief that I found the *Prelude's* normal waves of paranoia failing to engulf me. Then, I realized, I had become so tense and frightened with my present task that the elegy's side effects had simply become unnoticeable.

Without wasting any time, I pocketed the lyre away and marched after the streak of light. It shone above me like a burning plume of platinum fire. I saw my breaths forming against the dense woods before me. The magical beam grew brighter and brighter, and that was how I knew night was coming. If there were pegasi swarming overhead, I could no longer see them. I could only focus on each hoofstep I made as I scaled hill after hill, because soon I couldn't concentrate on anything else.

The first wave of cold hit. I imagined that I was a mile out. Every time I opened my mouth, I felt as if my very own saliva would freeze, and yet it was all I could do to stop from suffocating. Bundled as I was, I felt like I was carrying a small house up the side of a mountain. I knew that if even so much as my scarf fell off, I might freeze to death right there, and yet to stop and think twice meant robbing another second of life from Scootaloo. It's hard to convince oneself of another pony's plight when all one feels is the stabs of icy pins and needles with each trot. I pulled my body forward, attempting to convince myself that I had been in worse spots, then trying to make myself believe that the previous attempt wasn't such a blatant lie.

The second wave of cold hit, and it felt more like a wall of invisible snow than an actual wave. I no longer felt like I was walking; I was *burrowing*. My hooves were carving their way through powdery mounds of frost. I felt as though my eyes were being stabbed, and I realized it was because my tears were freezing. There was a pathetic whimpering sound in my ears. I gasped, thinking I had stumbled upon Scootaloo, but then realized that those tiny whimpers belonged to me. I almost wondered if I was the one who had been zapped with the teleporter instead, for my soul felt as if it had been disconnected with the puppet legs flagrantly tossing it forward.

And that is how I discovered pain. I mean *true* pain, the sort of pain that a body is not meant to endure, only to dream of, toying with nightmares that fuel us into avoiding stupid, self-destructive actions during the waking day. It's the sort of pain that exists as a last ditch spark to startle a ghost and fling it back—screaming—straight into the body where it belongs, as a final means of avoiding death. And there I was marching straight into the gaping maw of that very same oblivion, and for what? Even if I was lucky enough to get to Scootaloo in time, what chance did I have to bring her to Twilight swiftly enough for my old friend to maybe or maybe not save the foal's life?

The fact of the matter was—dead or not—I would never earn myself a gravestone. But Scootaloo...

There were tears in this world that belonged to her, and all of them incalculably warmer than mine. I snarled at the mountain. I screamed at it, clawed at it, and pulled myself up it. It felt pretty intense at the time, but I'm sure all of my utterances came out as kitten meows against a great pale planetoid. Trees surrounded me like gray mane hairs, and I was a starving flea hopping away from the throbbing arteries. I glided through a land of stale blue ice, painted with horrors that I had only ever

read about, poetically fantasized about, until it all slammed down around me with the sudden shriek of twinkling stars, and that's how I realized something had woken me from my frozen stupor, three shivering hours into the suicidal climb.

“Nnngh—**Gah!**” My eyes flew open and I shot up, bundled like a funeral shroud. Instead of a coffin, I found myself surrounded by granite and wood. It was the very crest of the mountainside. The sun was bleeding over the blurry edges of Ponyville lying to the southeast. I thought I heard a vulture shrieking above me, until those shrieks turned into fitful sobs. I looked up, and I saw her.

Scotaloo was dangling, upside-down and paralyzed, with her tail-hairs caught in the angry spokes of a dead tree. I was sobbing. I knew I was. The world blurred and unblurred as I stood up and reached towards her.

And then I fell down.

I gasped. I couldn't feel my body. I was a shell, deader than the rock around me. I was afraid to look at my hooves in the scant twilight afforded me, for fear that I might see blue lifeless skin peering through my mint green coat. I tried to stand up, the best I could do was roll over. I felt sudden, sharp bites of pain from where my body stumbled over rough pebbles. The fact that any of my nerves still answered to torment was a very queer thrill at the time. I embraced the jolt running through me and sat up, reaching two alien hooves overhead in a desperate bid to reach her.

There was no denying it. Scotaloo was less than two feet away. Still, I couldn't so much as touch her. If I was rescuing an adult, I would have cursed up a storm. Instead, I focused, imagined a tune from my childhood—anything to center myself—and propelled that energy through my horn. There was a brief green spark as I surged a burst of telekinesis towards the stars. Thankfully, the branch holding Scotaloo happened to be in the way, and it snapped. Scotaloo plunged towards me like an orange comet. I caught the foal with whatever part of my body was least painful to *her*.

“Ooof!” I shrieked, rediscovering the mists of my breath as I tumbled under her weight. The severed branch that had once held her bounced ineffectually away into the shadows of the night. I briefly wondered if I too might have snapped.

“Nnngh... Where...?” Scotaloo flailed, twitched. She was like a newborn, adrift in a wave of confusing shadows and nausea. Her eyes never once stopped rolling back in her head. “Who... Wh-Who...?”

“Y-Your t-t-ticket out of h-h-here,” some voice replied, horrifying me with its frigid stutters.

“I... I can't...” Scotaloo sobbed. Scotaloo retched. Scotaloo stammered, “I-I can't... can't feel...”

“You and m-m-me b-both, k-kiddo.” Something was putting her on my back as the world spun one hundred and eighty degrees. I was beside myself with horror. My eyes were playing a simulation of me stumbling down the mountainside, and suddenly that simulation became real. “J-J-Just hang on t-t-tight. Whatever y-you d-d-do, don't let g-go. I'm g-g-going to get you h-home.”

“My wings...” She trembled all over. Something colder than a glacier was stabbing my back in several places. Scootaloo's teardrops were like a sea of knives. “I... I can't feel my wings...”

If I was a stronger pony, I wouldn't have replied to that. “I kn-know you c-c-can't, Scootaloo.”

“But... But I—”

“I'm g-gonna get you home. That's all I can do—” No sooner were those words uttered, I saw the dark earth plunging towards my face. “Unngh!” I had slipped on a boulder and was sliding blindly down a hill of pebbles. The night sky blurred, and I no longer felt the icy pain in my back. “Sc-Scootaloo!”

I gasped, tumbled, and reached my hooves out as soon as I saw a shade of orange. I wrapped her in my forelimbs before she could get nearly as banged up as I. That was all that mattered, and next came the breath of air being flung out of my body as I fell the last five feet to the bed of leaves and branches looming below.

“Nnnngh!” I weathered the wave of pain surging through my frame. After several freezing moments, I unfolded my arms and found her shivering identically in my grasp. “S-Say something.”

She gulped and clutched tighter to me. “Owie...”

“Good enough.” I picked her up again. I picked *myself* up again. I considered donating her one of the many blankets in my saddlebag, until I realised just how sweaty she was. The night was so chaotic and excruciating, I easily forgot I was the only blisteringly cold soul in Equestria. I navigated the hillside like a drop of molasses, serenaded by Scootaloo's frightened sobs. “Gotta... find... Gotta get somewhere...” I gulped and teetered left and right. I could have sworn I was going in the right direction, but the Sun had disappeared and I no longer knew east from west. If I still had the energy left to play the *Prelude*, I would much rather have started a forest fire to grab some pegasus' attention. “Gotta get one of the ponies to see us... so they can fetch Twilight and... and...”

“So... So tired...” I heard Scootaloo say. Each word was a gunshot to my startled ears. “Just... want it all to be quiet—”

“No! No!” I shouted. I snarled. Through the nightmarish cold, I felt her broken wings fluttering against my shivering flesh. We were both prisoners of a shadowy world, and only one of us was deserved to go free. “Stay awake, Scootaloo! Stay with me!”

“Can't... Just... Just want to—”

“Talk about something! Tell me about your fami—” My tongue limped half as badly as my legs did. I gulped dryly and spoke to the invisible blizzard slicing across my face. “Tell me who you want to be like, more than anypony in the world!” I inched my way forward. With each successive trot, my limbs grew weaker and weaker. I could have sworn I discovered absolute zero. My heartbeats were miles apart. “Better yet, tell me why!”

“She... She isn't afraid of anything...” Scootaloo's voice came as a gentle drip between hiccups.

It was the last piece of warmth I had to go by. All of the bundled clothing felt like a thin paper napkin between me and her burning presence. “She does everything by herself, and yet she's loyal to everypony...”

I was stumbling at this point, lurching, crumbling. I pulled myself on scuffed knees, my quivering eyes locked onto a patch of gray haze ahead of us: a clearing. If I could get there, and maybe start a fire...

“Y-yeah?” My voice danced on ectoplasmic strings, entreating her as I wormed myself pathetically in the dirt, slowly entombing myself in the saturated earth. “What else?”

“Sh-She's brave.” Scootaloo clung to the last feeling bits of me. Her voice was soaring away at the speed of light. I drunkenly envisioned it as the foal's maiden flight. “She's... She's like me.” A sob, a gasp, then a whimper: “And I hate being alone...”

“You're not...” I panted, yanking my head forward, but my legs weren't obeying me. The ice had crept up to my spine. The clearing was a continent away, and the only thing not failing me was my voice, the last semblance of my soul. “You're not alone...” I scraped the surface of oblivion in fitful desperation, trying to leave an etch that could be remembered. “You're n-never alone...” My mouth stopped talking as soon as my chin collapsed into the wet soil.

When the light left my eyes, I did not think about my parents. I did not think about Twilight Sparkle or Moondancer. I did not think about the fireplace, Applejack's neighborly drawl, or Rarity's fabulous sweater. I did not think about **Luna's undiscovered elegies or unwritten compositions**. I did not even think about Morning Dew's voice and what it did to my heartbeat.

All I thought about was Scootaloo, about her wings, and how there'd be no pony to remember those words of hers, because she passed away in my forelimbs and not theirs.

No, I was not dying a hero, but I knew who was. It was a noble thought, warm enough on its own. I held it gently to myself as I embraced the endless night.

It was the emptiness in my forelegs, and not the flames, that woke me.

My eyes flew open. A campfire was being lit right beside me. It was so close, I could stick my tongue out and taste the flickering sparks. I did just that, and it burnt my tongue, making me realize that I was indeed alive.

I jerked—violently at first. When I next tried sitting up, I realized that I was still freezing cold, and shivered madly like a reanimated corpse. Squinting, I looked up to see a pale pegasus squatting over the tiny blaze, applying the finishing touches with a cluster of flint and steel in her hooves.

“Come on... Come on... There we go. That should just about do it—”

“Cloudkicker!” a familiar, raspy voice barked from several feet away. “The heck are you doing over there?! This is no time to roast marshmallows!”

“But... Rainbow Dash!” the pegasus pointed right at me. “This unicorn here is freezing—”

“The heck are you talking about?! What unicorn?! We got what we came out here for!”

“I... But... Don't you see her?”

“The only unicorn we should care about right now is Twilight! And she's waiting for us! Now stop horsing around and let's move!”

Cloudkicker blinked. A pale sheen glinted across her eyes. The moon had risen, and she reeled

briefly in a dazed manner. “Huh... Y-You're right. What... What was I thinking?” I watched as her shadowed figure marched blindly over me, then took to the sky with a flurry of feathers.

As she left, I saw two figures huddled a few yards from me. Rainbow Dash was squatting, cuddling the shivering figure of Scootaloo in her grasp.

“Shhhh... It's okay, kiddo. Can you hear me?”

“R-Rainbow Dash?!” Scootaloo gasped. “Oh Rainbow Dash! You found me! I knew you'd come and save me!”

“Just relax, pipsqueak. We're not out of the woods yet. I'm going to get you to Twilight. She has a trick that'll get you as good as new.”

“Rainbow Dash...” the foal's voice sobbed. “I-I was so scared...”

“Yeah, well, lucky for everypony, that stupid machine landed you in the middle of this clearing. Now hold on tight!” Rainbow Dash scooped Scootaloo up in her forelimbs, flapped her sapphire wings, and bolted into the moonlight. She soared straight towards Ponyville, leaving me with my shivers and the campfire.

I took several panting breaths. I turned over and—using my teeth—yanked my saddlebag open. I finally made use of the many blankets there, praising Celestia for the fire that Cloudkicker had made before the curse sapped her and Rainbow Dash of reason. As I huddled there besides the blessing warmth, I finally discovered the strength to sit up. As I did so, I found my breath leaving me.

Indeed, I was in the middle of the clearing. The ground around me was solid, exposed granite. With the moonlight shining down overhead, Scootaloo and I must have appeared like two inky dots against an alabaster sheet. Any pegasus with an elementary skill in aerial sight would have spotted us in a blink.

But... how in Celestia's name...?

I had collapsed in the middle of the woods.

Then... just how did we end up out here...?

Fatefully, I turned around. I scanned the edge of the hilly forest. It was then that I saw it: a trail of leaves and scattered soil leading a solid swath from the treeline to where I sat, huddled with the campfire.

I raised a hoof to my face. The barest hint of feeling was returning to my nerves, just as I was becoming awash in joyful disbelief.

She...

*She had **dragged** me.*

Scotaloo...

I murmured something. My lips were chapped, but I delighted in the pain it took to smile. I bundled the blankets around me. This was not my cabin. This was not my fireplace. This was a mile away from town at best, with every inch of me still shivering from the cold.

I had never felt more comfortable in my entire life.

“It was the arcanium plate,” Doctor Whooves explained, hobbling as he strolled alongside Twilight Sparkle across the center of Ponyville several afternoons later. “I installed it to act as a buffer between the heart of the teleporter and the object being teleported. What I hadn't taken into account was that the material simultaneously acted as a mirror, and was reflecting waves of mana back into the center of the cube.”

“That must have been what wore away the outermost layers of artificial leylines,” Twilight thought aloud, nodding. She kept her pace slow so as to not exhaust the mending stallion's pained gait. “With each subsequent test we ran, the machine passed our visual examinations on the outside, but we didn't realize to what extent the machine was being deteriorated from the inside out because of the constant waves of reflected magic.”

“This village almost lost something precious because of my mistakes.” He sighed, his head hanging. “Maybe now's not the right time to leap upon artificial teleportation. Assuming the Science Committee doesn't revoke my official laboratory privileges, I'm halfway tempted to put this whole experiment on the shelf for another decade.”

“Hey, it's a mistake we both made, Doctor.” She smiled and gently nudged him. “You did everything in your power to help us track down Scootaloo. I seriously doubt that the Committee will strip you of anything, and it would be a crime to see you quit such a promising endeavor after you've come so far.”

He smiled bashfully. “I see why Princess Celestia chose you to be her star pupil. You are a boundless well of hope, Miss Sparkle.”

“Heehee... Null hypotheses aside, even scientists can afford hope, Doctor.”

Their voices grew distant, and in their place came Rainbow Dash's and Pinkie Pie's.

“And so Cloudkicker and I were skimming the mountainside, and that's when I said, 'Let's give

it one more pass!” Rainbow Dash, already hovering, performed a dramatic dive in mid-air. “So I was like—*SWOOSH*—and then, out of the corner of my hawk-like vision, I totally saw her! The little scamp was shivering cold, and she could barely open her eyes. I knew I had to be extra careful while holding her. There was no telling if any little jolt or dip in flight might—*like*—knock her *spirit* loose from her body or whatever it was that Twilight said the machine did to her.”

“Wowie, Dashie!” Pinkie Pie bounced gaily, her eyes bright as she took in the dramatic lengths of Rainbow's tale. “I knew you could be super-gonzo-heroic! But it's nice to know you can be super-gonzo-gentle too!”

“Yup! I cradled her like a baby! And I've—like—cradled babies only twice in my life. Well, maybe three times, if you count that one day I took Apple Bloom for a ride over Sweet Apple Acres.”

“Apple Bloom's a baby?”

“Well, she sure barfed like one!”

“Heeheehee! Well I'm just glad you and Twilight were able to stop Scootaloo from barfing!” Pinkie Pie bounced. “Oh, and dying!”

“Heh... Yeah. That was certainly a close one.” Rainbow Dash flapped her wings while taking a deep breath. “Y'know, Pinkie, I'm saving ponies everyday. But Twilight? It's not everyday she's on the 'superhero pony list.’”

“Yeah! We should totally get her a trophy or something!”

“Heh! Good idea. Let's talk to Rarity about makin' one for her. Cuz if there's anything I hate, it's when something truly awesome goes unpraised.”

As they drifted by, I finished strumming the ten chords of the Eighth Elegy, repeated in variance so as to make a semblance of a melody. I took a deep breath and shook my left hoof in front of my face. Half a week had gone by; I was still barely getting the feeling back in my limbs. Praise Celestia for telekinesis. If I couldn't make music anytime I wanted to, I'd go as insane as this curse wants me to.

Because that's all a curse is made to do, right? It afflicts a pony's sanity, makes her wish for the sweet release of death. Surely it doesn't give her magical opportunities to save the day. Or does it?

I have long dreaded unraveling the eighth elegy, but suddenly it wasn't half as foreboding a prospect as I first imagined it to be. Along with the instrumental there would come a whole wave of frightening circumstance. But what helpful side effects could **Luna's forgotten tune** also bring? I could only expect the magic of the song to be beneficial to anypony but me. That's what kept it a curse, and what maintained my task of re-discovering it so daring... or perhaps even brave.

I sighed again, and then caught something orange in my peripheral vision. My heart skipped a beat, for it was the first time I had seen her in hours. I glanced over, and soon wasn't wasting anytime. Zipping my lyre away in my saddlebag, I trotted over. She wasn't looking at me. Her gaze was halfway skyward. I didn't need a compass to know it was pointed towards Rainbow Dash.

“Ahem.”

Scotaloo blinked. She looked up at me. “Oh... Uhm... Hello there.” She pointed at my saddlebag. “Nice music, by the way.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You were listening to me just now?”

“Yeah,” she said, her body deflating with a tranquil exhale. “This city's full of sounds. I don't notice it half the time, cuz I'm rarely sitting in one place, I guess.”

Upon hearing that, I squinted curiously at her. “Where's your scooter, anyways?”

The foal rolled her eyes and angrily blew a lock of pink hair from over her brow. “Milky White's taken it away from me this week.”

“Wuh oh. Did somepony get in trouble?”

“Nah. Not this time.” She squirmed her rear hooves against the earth. “Heh. She said something about 'Me needing to get my bearings back.' Pfft! I feel just fine! Ever since Twilight zapped me with her magic horn, I haven't felt the slightest bit dizzy!” As soon as Scotaloo said that, she teetered ever so slightly with googly eyes, then blushed. “Well, *almost*.”

I smiled. “If you ask me, I'd say Milky White was just trying to look out for you.”

“Heh. She's fussed over me a lot more than all the mares before her.” Scotaloo took a deep breath and squatted low to the floor, folding her limbs underneath her as she gazed lonesomely across the village. “I guess that means I'm stuck with her.”

“That's a good thing, right?”

Scotaloo bit her lip. “Hmmm... It could be worse.” Her stubby wings twitched uselessly. “A lot worse.”

I said nothing to that.

When she noticed I wasn't leaving her side, she rolled her eyes and groaned: “Alright. Just get it over with..”

“I beg your pardon? What is it you want me to get over?”

The little foal cast me a wry smirk befitting a filly twice her age. “You're about to gush over how amazing it is that I survived such a horrible accident and shower me with gifts. Please—as much as I like attention, I've been dragged to Sugarcube Corner three times already. My stomach hurts enough as it is.”

“I would never think of such a thing.” I said with a chuckle. “After all, you strike me as... as a

lot 'older' than most foals your age.”

She briefly went cross-eyed before snickering at me. “That's about the silliest thing I've ever heard.”

“Is it really?”

“Yeah, really.” She sighed and stared once again across the village with sad eyes. “Cuz I certainly don't feel *cool* enough to be older. When I grow up, I wanna be just like Rainbow Dash! I wanna do awesome things, and I wanna do them alone so that nopony else gets to steal my thunder!”

I glanced at the ground and stirred where I sat. “Yeah, well, some ponies hate being alone.”

Scotaloo glanced up at me. Her tiny feathers fluttered as she gulped and said, “I was alone once. But then Rainbow Dash swooped down and saved me. She took me away from the mountainside when I was freezing to death from that crazy machine that zapped me.” What came next was a triumphant smile, but something jaded hung on the edges of it. “If it wasn't for her... I'd just be a stupid corpse in the middle of nowhere.”

I sighed, but then smiled. “Scotaloo...”

She blinked awkwardly. “You... Uhm... You know my name?”

I squatted down in front of her. I looked her square in the eyes, making contact where our gazes previously couldn't in a frantic night full of horror and shadows. “For all I know—or anypony for that matter—Rainbow Dash is the greatest hero Equestria has ever known.”

“Heck yeah, she is!” Scotaloo beamed. “She's terrific—”

“But I don't need to convince you that the sort of feats that Rainbow Dash accomplishes, she could do in her sleep.” I pointed at her chest. “The bravest pony on that night was you.”

She frowned. “Me?”

“Yes.” I nodded. “Because you went through scary things that you weren't prepared for. You endured stuff that nopony your age—or any age—should ever have to endure. It's facing the unknowable and making the impossible happen that determines true courage. You, Scotaloo—*You* are a courageous pony. I... I can only hope and pray that—as you grow older, someday exceeding even Rainbow Dash's age—that you remember that it was *you* that got you through that night, that it was *your strength* that got you to where you are now.” I took a deep breath and smiled lovingly at her. “Because once you recognize that strength inside of you, there's no telling how much you can... bless other ponies around you too, becoming an absolute hero yourself, something worthy of song and smiles.”

Scotaloo blinked at me. There was no telling when or where the accursed glint of moonlight would finally fall upon those bright, violet eyes. But as she stared at me, and her grin brightened, and her tiny wings fluttered as if catching wind for the first time, I no longer cared about the grim curtains

of life, but rather took the time to cherish something precious as it bloomed right there before me.

“Hey! Scoots!”

“Scoot-Scoot-Scootalooooo!”

We both looked aside. A pair of young foals were waving at her from afar.

“Heh... Right... I almost forgot...” Scootaloo giggled, struck with the honey-sweet burst of a returning memory. “I have some ‘*crusading*’ to do tonight. Uhm...” She leaned in and whispered mischievously. “Promise not to tell Milky White if you run into her?”

I giggled and stood up. “Go and be with your friends.” I ushered her with a wave of the hoof. “You have many years left to be courageous...”

She scampered away on cue, leaving me under a cadence of giggles too holy for song. I watched her and her two friends run towards the edge of town under the melting afternoon. From where I stood, I couldn't tell where their pastel coats ended and the sunset began.

It's a brave thing to be alone. As long as I make song of it, I'm saving something.

After all, it's never too late to be a hero.

Background Pony

VI - “Heroes and Bards”

by [shortskirtsandexplosions](#)

Special thanks to: [theworstwriter](#), [Props](#), [TheBrianJ](#), and [Daredevil](#)

Cover pic by [Spotlight](#)