

## Chapter 4

The glow of dusk  
Renews the past  
Another day written  
Into memory

The pale winter sun hung low in the sky when Snowfall finally stumbled out of the forest. Numerous bruises covered his body, his usually white coat stained with blood and dirt, one eye swollen closed. After the compulsion, Mistress' guards had beaten him to help lend credence to his story. It was not long before the wounded colt was noticed. A few ponies rushed to his aid, calling out his name, concern clear in their voices. Others galloped off, probably to fetch help for him. Snowfall stopped walking, exhaustion finally taking over. The rigors of his trek through the forest, combined with the creeping chill of dusk, took their toll on him; his aching legs gave out. Voices filled his ears, but his mind was too sluggish to understand them, his body too weak to respond. His good eye drifted closed.

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Snowfall opened his eyes to find himself lying on a bed in Nurse Redheart's infirmary, bandages wrapped around his injuries. Twilight sat nearby, her brow furrowed with concern. Her features relaxed when she saw his eyes open.

"Snowfall, thank goodness you're okay. You and Rainbow Dash have been gone for two days. What happened? Have you seen her?"

Snowfall's heart burned with the lie he was about to tell, tears welling forth in his eyes. "We went exploring in the Everfree Forest and . . .," *Oh Celestia it hurts so much.* "There was an accident."

Twilight stood up, urgency rising in her voice. "An accident? We have to help her! Can you take us to her?" She began making her way to the door, but was stopped in her tracks when Snowfall replied, his voice a whisper.

"It's too late, Twilight." *Please forgive me.* "She's dead." His tears were an unending stream, now. "It's all my fault," he mumbled. "My fault . . ."

Twilight's face went slack as she collapsed on her haunches. "No . . . she can't be . . ."

Snowfall looked away. He could not bear to see the sorrow he had brought upon Twilight. He could do little else but lie there and cry, sobs wracking his body, as a feeling of helplessness washed over him. He burned with the desire to tell the truth -- that Rainbow Dash

yet lived, that it was possible to save her -- but the compulsion sealed his lips when he tried.

Twilight slowly made her way to Snowfall's side. "Don't talk like that, Snowfall. You said it yourself; it was an accident. Don't blame yourself."

Snowfall shook his head. That it was his fault was the only truth Snowfall felt he had uttered. "I'm so sorry, Twilight."

\* \* \*

Word spread quickly, and within a few days a funeral was held for Rainbow Dash. Everypony in Ponyville attended -- Rarity, her black dress contrasting with her white coat; Fluttershy, even quieter than she normally was; Applejack, her cowboy hat nowhere to be seen; and Pinkie Pie, missing her ever-present smile. Twilight Sparkle gave the eulogy.

"I haven't had the pleasure of knowing Rainbow Dash for as long as many of you have, but I counted her among my best friends. She was one of the first ponies I met when I arrived in Ponyville, and she remained a steadfast friend since then.

"Rainbow Dash was always a bit of a prankster, but her pranks never failed to elicit a laugh. Her skill in flying was unmatched by any pony I know. She was always there to lend a helping hoof if somepony needed it.

"When a pony who has lived a long and fulfilling life dies, we feel it right to celebrate their life, and give thanks for the time we knew them; but when a young pony is taken from us, we may not be as comfortable with this. We may feel anger, hurt, disbelief; but hidden beneath all that, we know that there is something to celebrate: that we all knew Rainbow Dash, that she was part of our lives, that she was our friend."

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As the days went on, Snowfall grew more and more despondent. The happiness he had finally felt in the days before leading Rainbow Dash into the forest were replaced with a feeling of self-loathing, a gnawing pain deep inside him. At first he tried to take his mind off dark thoughts with work, like he had done to forget his amnesia what now seemed a lifetime ago. It didn't work; the events in the Everfree Forest were still fresh in his mind. He saw Rainbow Dash's face -- eyes full of pain -- whenever he closed his eyes.

With work unsuccessful at easing his mind, Snowfall began to withdraw from contact, spending more and more time staring at Rainbow Dash's grave, praying for a forgiveness that did not come; he ate less and less.

Rarity approached him one day as he sulked by Rainbow Dash's grave. "Snowfall,

darling, can we talk?"

Snowfall said nothing, but looked at her and nodded.

"We're all terribly worried about you, my dear. Rainbow Dash's death hurt all of us, but you've been taking it especially hard. You have to understand, it wasn't your fault. We've all mourned for her in our own way, but we've also continued on with our lives; it's what she would have wanted. You understand, don't you?" Concern was apparent in her voice.

"I'm sorry for worrying you, Rarity, but you don't understand, not really." His voice was rough from disuse.

"Well can you explain it, then, darling? I want to help you."

Snowfall shook his head. "I want to, I really do, but I can't. Rainbow Dash . . . " *She's alive, what happened to her is my fault.*

"Won't you at least come inside and have a warm meal? You'll catch cold if you stay out here." Rarity took her scarf off, wrapping it around Snowfall.

Snowfall hadn't realized just how cold he was until Rarity mentioned it. He forced a smile, nodding. "Okay, Rarity."

The oatmeal warmed his belly, and despite his protests, Twilight Sparkle and Rarity made sure he ate every last bite in the bowl.

"Snowfall," Twilight said. "There's another reason Rarity brought you here. I've been doing research about a cause for your amnesia and I believe it may be magical in nature. With your permission, I'd like to try something."

A spark of hope -- not for regaining his memories -- his experience in Mistress' camp made him unsure that he would want those memories returned -- but for breaking the compulsion -- came to life inside Snowfall, a beacon of light pushing away the darkness within ever so slightly. He nodded his assent, sitting on his haunches in front of her, eyes closed.

"Okay, here goes . . . ," he heard Twilight say. "Let me know if you want to stop at any time."

At first, nothing seemed to happen. Snowfall slowed his breathing, trying to relax his mind, to clear it of all thought. Then he felt it, a delicate probing, skirting across the surface of his consciousness.

"That's . . . odd," Twilight said. "It's like there's something blocking me. I'll keep trying."

Pain suddenly shot through Snowfall's mind, a thousand white-hot needles pressing in from all directions. It was an agony unlike anything he had ever felt. He didn't realize he was screaming until the pain suddenly stopped.

"Snowfall! I'm so sorry, I must have done something wrong."

"No!" Snowfall panted from the exertion of his scream. "Keep going. Keep trying."

"But --"

*"Please, Twilight."*

Snowfall closed his eyes, gritting his teeth for the pain that was to come. It struck suddenly, pushing away his other senses. Pain was all he knew. He was not sure how long he had been floating in that void of pain when something . . . shattered, the pain vanishing in an instant. His eyes snapped open. Twilight stood in front of him, clearly drained by the extended use of her magic.

"Did it work?" Her voice was hesitant.

Snowfall searched his mind. The emptiness where his memories belonged remained, but something felt different. "Rainbow Dash . . . she's . . . alive." The strain of Twilight's spell, combined with the shock of finally being able to speak the truth drained Snowfall. His eyes rolled up in the back of his head and he collapsed into unconsciousness.

\* \* \*

When Snowfall opened his eyes again, he lay in a familiar bed, his head thrumming with pain. Had it really worked? Was the compulsion gone? "Rainbow Dash is alive," he spoke. An immense feeling of relief washed over him at hearing the words leave his lips. The spark of hope flared into a raging fire, extinguishing the darkness. He could -- no, he *would* -- rescue Rainbow Dash and punish the garnet mare for what she did.

"Why didn't you tell us sooner?" Twilight's voice startled Snowfall. He hadn't seen her in the room.

"I'm sorry, Twilight. I never wanted any of this to happen. I didn't want to hurt anypony." Snowfall went on to explain everything that he had learned at the encampment in the forest: that he had served willingly, the compulsion, the cause of his amnesia, what had happened to Rainbow Dash, that Nightmare Moon was still a threat. Twilight's face paled at that news.

"Now," Snowfall said as he got up, heading for the door. "I'm going back there. I have to

save Rainbow Dash.”

“Snowfall, you can’t do this alone. Let your friends help you.”

*Friends.* That Twilight still considered him a friend after everything that had happened warmed Snowfall’s heart. “Okay Twilight. Gather them quickly, we don’t have any time to waste.”

Within half an hour Twilight, Rarity, Applejack, and Snowfall were gathered at the edge of the Everfree Forest, warmly dressed and with saddlebags full of supplies. Fluttershy was too afraid to venture into the forest; Pinkie Pie remained behind to keep her company, as well as to prepare a party for their return.

Gray clouds hung low in the sky, promising snow, as the party began their trek into the forest. The tower and keep were deep in the forest; deep enough that they would have to make camp for the night midway through their journey. They walked in silence, the only sounds those of the forest itself.

“Snowfall,” Applejack broke the silence. “If this place is as guarded as you say, how’re we going to get Rainbow Dash out?”

It was a valid question and one that Snowfall wasn’t entirely sure of the answer to. He spoke about the tunnel that Spring Blossom had mentioned to him; he didn’t know where it was, but finding it was a better plan than just waltzing in the front gates.

As daylight faded, the group made camp for the night, clearing a small area of snow and setting up their tents around a roaring fire to push away the cold. While eating their evening meal they continued to discuss strategy. Snowfall drew out as best as he could remember the layout of the fort they were heading to, including the inside of the keep where he last saw Rainbow Dash. Twilight had brought a book which contained spells she felt might be useful, flipping through its pages as they talked. With darkness descending, they settled down into their tents for the night.

They awoke at first light to find that the clouds had made good on their promise; snow had begun to fall during the night, small flakes lazily drifting downwards, coating everything in a brilliant white. After a quick breakfast, they resumed their trek through the eerily quiet snow-covered forest, the only sound the susurrations of the falling snow. The snowfall got thicker and heavier as the day went on, limiting visibility to only a few yards by the time they reached the fort.

“Well dang, how can we find the tunnel in this weather?” Applejack asked.

“I think I can help with that,” Twilight said as her horn glowed, her book floating out of its

saddlebag. "There should be a finding spell in here somewhere . . ." Pages flipped by as she scanned them. "Aha! Here it is." Her horn glowed brighter, a pale orange orb appearing in front of her.

The orb circled around them a few times before heading off to their left, meandering through the trees. Slowly, it led them to a section of the outer wall that looked no different from the rest, hovering lazily.

"Twilight, my dear, where's the tunnel?" Rarity asked.

Twilight frowned, walking up to the orb. "The spell says it should be here, maybe --" She stopped talking when she heard the hollow sound her hooves made on the ground directly under the orb. Twilight's horn glowed, the snow and foliage covering the area moving away to reveal a small wooden hatch in the ground, which she then opened, the rusty hinges squealing in protest.

Opening the hatch revealed a narrow staircase descending into darkness. Twilight was the first to head down the staircase, the others following close behind. The soft white glow emanating from her horn illuminated a stone hallway. The dust covering the floor was unmarred by hoof-prints; the air smelled musty, old; it was clear that this passage had not been used in quite some time. The hallway lead straight for about one hundred feet before ending in a staircase similar to the first. Snowfall took the lead, carefully opening the hatch at the top of the stairs just a fraction so that he could peer out unseen. The room above was just as dark and dusty as the hallway. The room they entered was small and empty, save for a pile of decaying rags in one corner. Only one wall held a door, locked from the inside with a chain. A dim orange light flickered under the crack of the door.

"I can get that open for ya right quick," Applejack said.

Before anypony could suggest that they should try and open the door quietly, Applejack braced herself and gave the door a mighty buck. The door shuddered but remained standing. The second buck sent the door crashing to the floor, the sound echoing down the hallway. The group cringed, hoping that they were not heard. Their hopes were dashed, however, when they heard hoofsteps approaching. They backed into the shadows of the room as two colts rounded a corner at the end of the hallway and began to approach the door.

"I've never been down this hallway before," one of them said. "What's in that room?"

"I don't know," the other replied, approaching the doorway. "It looks old, though. The door probably just fell off its hinges. Nothing to --" His words were interrupted when Snowfall's kick hit him in the head with a sickening crunch.

The other colt rushed up with a wordless shout. Snowfall was about to kick this one as

well when the colt froze in place, his eyes darting wildly between the ponies he now saw. Twilight's horn glowed as she held the colt in place.

"Is he . . . ," Twilight said in a whisper tinged with fear.

Applejack knelt beside the downed colt, quickly examining him before nodding at Twilight.

"Snowfall, you *killed* him!"

"He deserved it," Snowfall said simply. "And so does this one." These ponies had Rainbow Dash, they had used him to get her. He didn't care what happened to them. Snowfall felt a burning anger rising within him. He would rescue Rainbow Dash, and he would *kill* that horrid mare. He again prepared to kick the now immobilized colt when his leg was grabbed by an invisible force. He glared at Twilight.

"No, Snowfall," she pleaded. "He's no threat to us, now. We can just leave him here; my magic will hold him."

Snowfall continued to glare for a moment longer before he was able to calm his anger, pushing it down into a small spark, his desire to hurt the colt waning. "Fine," he said, coldly. His hoof was released as the colt slowly floated to a dark corner of the room.

The white colt led the way down the now quiet hallway, trying to find the hallway with the cells where he had last seen Rainbow Dash. Aside from the two colts they had already subdued, the halls were strangely empty. A couple twists and turns found Snowfall in the familiar row of cells. A lone guard, his back to them, stood by one of the cell doors. Snowfall nodded at Twilight, whose horn began to glow. As the guard stiffened, held in place by Twilight's magic, Snowfall approached the guard and dealt him a solid blow to the head, just hard enough to knock him out. The guard collapsed as Twilight's magic released him.

Snowfall glanced through the barred hole in the door, but it was not Rainbow Dash he found, but Spring Blossom. She staggered off her tattered cot and up to the door when she saw him peer in.

"Snowfall! Is that really you? Did she bring you back again?" Her voice quavered.

"I'm free of her, now. I came back to rescue Rainbow Dash. Do you know where she is?"

Spring Blossom shook her head. "They took her out of her cell not too long ago, but I don't know where they took her. Please, take me with you," she pleaded.

Snowfall nodded. "Step away from the door." Once she had done so, he turned to Applejack. "If you would do the honors."

Applejack opened the door with a mighty kick. Spring Blossom emerged from her cell, hesitantly at first, before embracing Snowfall in a tight hug, whispering her thanks over and over while tears streamed down her cheeks. Once she had composed herself and introductions had gone around, she relayed what information she could about what had been happening. The keep was so empty because most of the guards were outside, watching from the walls and the main gate for anypony that dared approach. Mistress -- Snowfall could tell that she was trying hard not to use that name -- had been nervous lately for reasons she certainly wouldn't share with a prisoner like Spring Blossom.

They began to cautiously make their way to the first floor of the keep. When they arrived at the massive wooden door that led into the courtyard Snowfall turned to face the group.

"We should split up; we'll find Rainbow Dash faster that way. Applejack, I want you, Spring Blossom, and Rarity to search the rest of this building. Twilight and I are going to the tower on the other side of the courtyard. We'll meet back at the tunnel in half an hour. If anything should happen to me, promise me you'll at least get Spring Blossom out of here safely." He looked each of them in the eyes until they nodded.

Snowfall opened the front door of the keep, revealing that the weather had not changed. He and Twilight stepped out into the snow, sparing one last glance back at the others before they were hidden by the falling snow. They saw no other ponies while traversing the courtyard to the tower, but the limited visibility filled them with uncertainty. Before they knew it, the tower loomed at them out of the white, along with a very surprised guard. Before the guard could recover, Snowfall lowered his head and charged, slamming into the ribs of the startled colt and sending him sprawling. Twilight took the opportunity to open the door and hurry in, Snowfall following after giving the now wheezing colt a kick in the head.

As Twilight and Snowfall made their way up the tower, they checked every room for Rainbow Dash, but she was nowhere to be seen. It was not until they reached the roof of the tower that they found her. She lay on an altar, her hind legs chained to the stone, her eyes wide with fear. The garnet mare stood over her, her horn radiating a black aura that seemed to absorb the light. Strangely, the snow did not seem to be falling on the tower.

"Snowfall?" Disbelief showed in Rainbow Dash's eyes.

The mare turn around, the darkness fading from her horn. "You? Impossible!" Her eyes widened, a momentary look of fear passing across her face, quickly smoothed over. "I do not know how you broke my compulsion, but I *will* find out." She turned to Twilight. "Was it her?"

Twilight glared at the mare. "So you're the one behind all this? We can't let you bring



Nightmare Moon back!”

The mare laughed, a rich laugh full of amusement. “Foal! You really think you can stop me? With the power my Lady has given me, you do not stand a chance.” Her horn began to glow again.

Snowfall felt the tendrils of her spell spreading across the surface of his mind, his will to fight beginning to leave him. *No. Please no!* “Twilight,” he managed to choke out. “Get Rainbow Dash out of here!” He lowered his head, gritting his teeth, fighting with all his might the spell that was burrowing into his mind. He closed his eyes. Images danced across his mind. Twilight Sparkle, Rarity, Applejack, Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash, all the friends he had made in his short life in Ponyville, their faces smiling, their eyes full of love. Looks of terror replaced those of love as Snowfall saw a wave of darkness spread across the land, enveloping Ponyville, ponies screaming, running, crying. *So this is how it ends? I’ve failed everypony . . . No! It can’t!* Deep within Snowfall the spark of anger he had kept contained flared into a brilliant flame, pushing away all other thought; the tendrils in his mind vanished.

“NO!” His voice boomed. “YOU CANNOT DO THIS.”

The mare’s eyes opened wide in fear, her mouth hanging open. She staggered back a few steps as the spell broke, bumping up against the low wall of the crenelle. Snowfall felt more tendrils attempt to burrow into his mind, but the flames of his anger burned them away. He charged at the mare, slamming into her, sending them both tumbling over the edge, falling to the frozen ground below.

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Twilight Sparkle collapsed when the spell that was holding her suddenly vanished. “Snowfall!” She cried out, running to the spot where he had fallen over the edge. Blood drained from her face as she saw the grisly sight below. Snowfall and the mare lay in a tangled heap on the ground, their bodies twisted at unnatural angles, blood staining the snow around them. Neither pony moved.

“Twilight?” Rainbow Dash asked from behind her. “Is he . . . “

Twilight turned to face Rainbow Dash, releasing her shackles with a simple unlocking spell before returning her gaze to the ground below. Rainbow Dash walked up beside her, following her gaze. She gasped at the sight below, quickly turning away.

Twilight placed a comforting hoof on Rainbow Dash’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, Dash.”

Voices began to float up from below; guards had discovered the bodies.

“The Mistress, she’s dead!”

“Finally, I am free of this accursed place!” Other voices cheered their agreement with this.

“What? TRAITORS!” Voices grew angry as sounds of fighting began.

The sound of hoofsteps quickly coming up the tower stairs brought Twilight’s thoughts back to what she should be doing.

“Can you get us down?”

“Sounds like I don’t have much choice in the matter,” Rainbow Dash said, stretching her wings.

There was little time for mourning as they made their escape. Only brief words were exchanged when Twilight and Rainbow Dash met up with the others in the keep. Rarity and Applejack both gave Rainbow Dash huge hugs, relieved to see that she was well. Spring Blossom’s ears dropped when she saw that Snowfall didn’t return with them.

They journeyed back to Ponyville in silence.

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“Snowfall came to us a stranger, not just to us but to himself as well. We welcomed him with love and kindness, but that was not enough. Without knowledge of his past, Snowfall was not sure how he could fit into life here in Ponyville. It was not until Rainbow Dash was captured by a servant of Nightmare Moon that he knew his purpose: he would undo the damage he had done and save her. In the Everfree Forest he made the ultimate sacrifice. He gave his life to save Rainbow Dash’s, to save everypony’s lives. Although his time with us was short, he will always remember and love him.”

As Twilight’s eulogy ended, snow began to gently drift down from the sky.

End of Part 1