

## Chapter Five: A Matter of Survival

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Rarity stood in her doorway, trying to make sense of the situation.

Outside, the sun had dipped low enough on the horizon that the orange glow of evening passed beneath the clouds over Ponyville. While still oppressive and gloomy, the clouds in question had broken up to a small degree, offering up glimpses of the darkening sky and a few twinkles of starlight. Twilight Sparkle paced frantically just beyond the door, looking around with a wildness in her eyes as the words poured out of her mouth. With some difficulty, Rarity was able to catch the gist of what Twilight was trying to explain. She cleared her throat and made an effort to clarify.

“Just calm down, dear... So, you’re saying that... Mahara disguised herself as *me*, led Spike here, and then disguised herself as *Spike* to slip into the library?” Twilight nodded rapidly, and the pale unicorn bit her lip. “Well... I’m sorry to say this, Twilight, but Spike isn’t here; at least, not anymore. He was definitely here at some point, however. There are enough gems with bites taken out of them to make that abundantly clear.”

“Damn that mare... Monster... Ugh...” Twilight rubbed the side of her face with a forehoof, evidently much more prone to profanity when distressed. “Alright. Thank you, Rarity. I guess I need to start looking around town, then.”

Rarity gave a single nod, then shifted her weight uncomfortably. The pale unicorn spoke her mind before Twilight could inquire.

“I seem to be experiencing a similar problem... I don’t suppose you saw Sweetie Belle on your way to the Boutique?” Twilight’s eyes maintained their wide, panicked appearance, which Rarity took as a *no*. “Normally, I wouldn’t be so concerned about her coming or going. Fillies will be fillies, after all. But... I told her that, if she wasn’t at school, I wanted her to stay inside. Just to be safe. And now you’re telling me that... *thing* lured Spike here. What if she took my sister?”

“Oh my gosh... Should we organize a search party?”

Rarity was about to give her answer when a muddy, curly maned filly rounded the corner. Sweetie Belle froze on the spot, looking as startled to see Rarity as Rarity was to see her. Twilight stopped pacing, turning her head and regarding the dirty filly with similar confusion.

“I... I don’t really wanna go to any parties tonight, if that’s okay with Twilight,” Sweetie Belle mumbled as she drew near. “I just wanna take a bath and go to bed.”

The filly passed wordlessly between Rarity and the doorframe, keeping her gaze low as her older sister’s shock faded to a mixture of anger and irritation. The pale unicorn stopped glaring when Sweetie Belle had disappeared into the hallway, returning her attention to Twilight.

“Rarity, what color were her eyes?”

“The same color they always are, Twilight. She’s the genuine Sweetie Belle.”

“Well... That’s one problem solved, I guess...” The purple unicorn lightly kicked the ground with a forehoof. “I’m gonna start looking for Spike, though.”

“I’d like to come with you, dear, but I think it would be best if I stayed here and kept a closer eye on my sister.”

“I understand.” Twilight turned to leave, only to glance back at Rarity. “Oh, don’t forget, I’m holding a town meeting in the morning. I might as well let everyone know now while I’m out looking for him.”

“Alright, I’m sure I’ll be able to attend. Good luck finding Spike!”

The purple unicorn nodded as she departed, trotting off to the next house. The front door closed, the greeting bell jingled, and Rarity turned her attention to her younger sister. She had expected to hear the bath running, but as she crossed the shop floor, she was greeted with the muffled sound of Sweetie Belle’s voice. She paused at the hallway’s entrance, glancing down toward Sweetie Belle’s bedroom. The door was closed. As Rarity approached, she realized that the filly wasn’t just talking to herself. Her first instinct was to barge in, but she settled on discretion instead. Carefully, the pale unicorn pressed her ear to the door, attempting to identify the second voice in the room.

“I just saw them a little while ago.” The voice was familiar, belonging to another filly. It clicked seconds after hearing her speak.

*Scotaloo*, Rarity concluded, *Sweetie Belle is talking to Scotaloo.*

“They’re a little shaken up about the whole thing, but they’ll be fine.” *Scotaloo’s* voice became heavy with worry after a short pause. “They uh... They don’t know what happened to Twist either, though.”

Sweetie Belle sighed. “I told you splitting up was a bad idea...”

The pale unicorn lowered her head, peering in through the keyhole. Sweetie Belle was alone, but she stood before her window, looking down. Clearly, *Scotaloo* was outside.

“I know... What else could we do, though? We’ll look for her in the morning, I guess. Worst comes to worst, we’ll just have to tell an adult about it.”

“*Scotaloo*... You’re sure we lost it, right? And they’re sure too? I... I hope Twist got away, but... If she leads it to Ponyville...”

“Yeah... Yeah, I know. Like I said, we’ll look for her in the morning if she doesn’t find her way back before then.”

“Do you think...” Sweetie Belle hesitated, her voice wavering. “Do you think she’s okay?”

“Yeah... I hope so, anyway... I’m gonna get going. Sorry about dragging you into this.”

“You couldn’t have known this would happen, *Scotaloo*. Don’t blame yourself.”

Without a word further, the sound of approaching hooves caused Rarity to step away from the door, but not to hide. She adjusted her stance, and when Sweetie Belle opened the door, she found Rarity glaring down at her with disapproval. The filly's eyes widened as she attempted to back up, but with a single **ahem**, she came to a complete stop.

"Would you care to explain what that was about? Or why you're covered in mud and twigs?" Rarity craned her neck forward, lowering her head without reaching eye level.

Sweetie Belle shrank back, grinning nervously. "I- We- Uh- It's- Nothing happened, sis. Everything is A-Okay." Rarity lowered her brow, tapping a forehoof on the floor. "Well, see, Scootaloo thought that we would try and track down the monster, because she wanted to help Applebloom, and uh... We ended up in the Everfree Forest."

"Just you and Sootaloo? Didn't I hear you say Twist was involved in this as well?"

"Oh! Well, yeah, she came with us and Snips and Snails. But we didn't find the monster, so we uh... So we split up to better our chances. That's what Scootaloo said, so that's what we did."

"And Twist got lost in the Everfree Forest?"

"No, she uh... She wandered off on our way back to Ponyville. She was arguing with Snips and said she didn't want to play with us anymore, so she went home by herself. We haven't seen her since."

"And what is it that you're worried she'll lead into town?"

There was a long pause, during which Rarity stopped tapping her hoof.

"Para...sprites?" Rarity's brow shot up at that. "We found a few and they started following us. We tried to lose them in the forest, but they wouldn't leave us alone. They were following Twist when she left us... We kinda think she's gonna keep wandering around until they leave her alone, but if not, she'll bring them back into town."

"Well then..." Rarity straightened up, pondering what she had just heard, comparing it to what she had heard while eavesdropping. "I agree. I hope she gives those dreadful creatures the slip before trying to return home."

"Yeah..." Sweetie Belle stood in silence, looking down at the floor.

*Of course, Rarity mused, it's only natural for her to feel ashamed after disobeying me like that.*

The purple maned unicorn smiled, reaching down to nuzzle her younger sister. "Now now, no need to stand there sulking all night. I was just worried about you. I only want you to stay inside because I don't want anything bad to happen to you. We'll worry about Twist and the parasprites in the morning, but for now, let's get you washed up and ready for bed, shall we?"

The filly smiled, nodding eagerly. "Okay!"

Rarity was pleased to learn that Belle had completed her homework before deciding to go on her

adventure, but not so pleased to learn that she had brought two raincoats with her and failed to bring them back. The scolding was brief and concluded with a short exchange of laughter. They were hideous coats, after all. With Sweetie Belle safely tucked in, Rarity found her thoughts wondering over the events of the day. The most prominent of those events was her reunion with Fluttershy. A void felt as though it had been filled now that she had mended her friendship with the timid pegasus. In its place, Rarity now felt a sense of obligation; she had to make up to Fluttershy for her behavior, somehow.

*Making her a new dress or two is just a start, she pondered. I need something with more grandeur... Oh! Oh... How does one even find a phoenix egg, let alone raise it...? Maybe a baby dragon would suit her better? Oh, but I wouldn't want to make Angel jealous... Perhaps an animal isn't the avenue I should be exploring. Perhaps a plant? She likes trees, doesn't she?*

A knock at the door disrupted her thoughts, and the pale unicorn gracefully slipped over the edge of the couch. Darkness had fallen across Equestria, and the soft glow of the moon was mostly obscured by the cloud cover. As Rarity stood by the window, straining to identify the pony at her door, the clouds shifted just enough for a gentle pool of moonlight to spill over the front door and the pony standing before it.

Fluttershy, realizing she had been noticed, turned and smiled. Her mane was a mess, obscuring her entire face, save for her muzzle. The pale unicorn gasped softly, and for a fleeting moment debated flinging open her door. A creeping suspicion quickly quelled the notion, however.

*You're going to have to try harder than that, my dear...*

"No, you may not enter," Rarity flatly stated as she opened the door, cautiously regarding Fluttershy. "Did you really expect me to fall for that? You're really quite proving yourself to be a one trick pony. *If you are* in fact a pony, that is."

The pegasus's lips parted with surprise. "I- Wha- Fall for um... Fall for what? What ever do you mean, Rarity? No tricks... I'm just... Um... A lot of things happened to me today and I um..." Fluttershy pawed lightly at the ground, pouting delicately. "I don't really want to be alone tonight, if that's okay with you."

"No, sorry, I'm afraid it's not okay with me." Rarity reached beyond the threshold of her doorway, brushing Fluttershy's mane from her eyes. "Because Fluttershy knows full well that while I support her decision, I'd rather not partake of that sort of... *Lifestyle...*"

Emerald green eyes narrowed in response. "That's not what I meant, but I can see how that could have been misinterpreted. My mistake."

"Indeed." Rarity turned away from the door, intending to shut it. "Now if you'll excuse me-"

"Okay! Okay wait." The faux Fluttershy pressed closer to the doorway, teetering just on the edge of entering, but kept at bay by an unseen force. "I have no intention of *hurting* or *killing* you. My intentions couldn't be farther from that, I assure you. Please, just hear me out. I tried to trick you, that was poor behavior on my part-"

"Part of a long line of poor behavior on your part." Rarity held the door halfway open, listening to the imposter out of curiosity.

“Granted, but... I’m going to try something different. Or I was, anyway.” The Fluttershy imposter took a step back, straightening her mane with her forehooves. “Twilight is right. What I’ve been doing isn’t exactly acceptable by any standard. I figured, maybe I would try asking...”

“Oh?” Rarity leaned against her doorframe, arching a brow. “What, dare I ask, do you require of me that you would come here disguised as my best friend?”

“I figured I would try asking for blood, instead of getting it as a result of deception.”

The unicorn shook her head. “Well you’re already off to a bad start. So you’ve come here for a drink, then? That’s awfully presumptuous of you. What makes you so sure that I’d be a willing donor?”

“I thought you were supposed to be the generous one.” The pale unicorn cocked her head at that, but Mahara continued before the pale unicorn could get a word in. “I came here because I was hoping that generosity might extend toward prolonging my life.”

“A bit melodramatic, but I’ll bite. I’m assuming you need blood to survive?”

“Yes, that’s correct. I’m not in immediate danger of dropping dead, but...” The faux pegasus shuffled slightly. “I lost a lot more blood than I’m comfortable with, today. The plan was to slip in while you had your guard down, and then warm you up to the idea before asking you.”

“That’s still fairly underhooved...”

“I know... I figured I could run with the connection you have with her. It worked once or twice before. It seems to backfire about just as often, though... Sometimes I assume too much.”

“Yes, well, we all make mistakes...” The unicorn fully opened her door again, and the imposter regarded her curiously. “When you lured Spike here earlier today, you didn’t take Sweetie Belle. Why?”

Faux Fluttershy smiled. “I doubt you’ll believe me, but... I actually brought Spike here to keep an eye on your sister for you. I hadn’t figured she would run off though. Knowing Spike, he’s probably looking for her right now. I didn’t take her because, honestly, I still feel bad about what I did to Applebloom. That was a very, very big mistake on my part, and I wish I could take it back.”

“While I appreciate the gesture, I know full well that it was just a byproduct of something you did for personal gain.” Rarity shifted back to her hooves as the imposter shrank away slightly. “While we’re on the subject of Applebloom, however, what exactly is stopping you from-”

“It’s not something I can just clop my hooves together and undo. Everypony is just going to have to wait for it to wear off. She’ll be perfectly fine after that.” The imposter looked to the ground, lightly tapping her hoof. “Well... I suppose I’ll be leaving, then?”

“Not...” Rarity trailed off, shifting uncomfortably, glancing away from the imposter. “Not necessarily. I may well regret this, but... I feel sorry for you. You’ve been lying and sneaking around because you’re afraid. I’m not sure if anyone else can see it, but it’s obvious to me.”

The unicorn paused, waiting for the imposter to meet her gaze. “And also, even if I don’t approve of your

behavior, you've been doing wonders for Fluttershy. I haven't seen her so happy in a long time. If I help you, I'll be helping her. There are several conditions, however, before I'll agree to anything."

The imposter stood straight, locking her gaze with Rarity's. "State your terms; I'm listening."

"Very good. First and foremost, you absolutely must tell Fluttershy the truth. The whole truth. She deserves to know what you are."

"I couldn't agree more-"

"Second, you are not to lie any further about your intentions. If you need blood, you are to ask for it yourself, and not while disguised as another pony."

The faux pegasus stood silently, waiting for Rarity to continue.

"Third, you are not to track blood through my shop. It stains, and I don't have time to waste cleaning evidence of your distasteful habits. Similarly, you are not to get blood on my coat or mane. No stains of any sort, or the deal is off."

After another brief pause, the faux Fluttershy nodded. "Understood. You have my word."

"Yes, well, we shall see just how valuable your word is, won't we?" They stood eye to eye in the doorway for several intense seconds before Rarity turned and trotted into her shop. "You may enter."

The pale unicorn crossed the room to a couch, seating herself, but never once taking her eyes off the imposter. The door glowed softly as she shut it behind the pegasus, drawing all the curtains soon after. She propped her head up on a forehoof in the process, watching her guest as she would a potential shoplifter.

"Now um..." the faux Fluttershy began, standing a few noses from Rarity. "I'll need to bite into an artery..."

Rarity considered that for a moment, raising her head from her hoof and looking at the back of her foreleg. Slowly, she extended that foreleg toward the faux pegasus, twisting it so that the artery faced the ceiling.

"And you can stop levitating that needle behind my head. I already told you that I'm not interested in harming you."

"Oh, you noticed?" The unicorn grinned. "You'll forgive me, but a good business mare always has a backup plan."

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*Man, Twilight is gonna kill me... I can't let Rarity down, though! I've gotta find Sweetie Belle, even if it means staying out all night!*

The pint sized dragon trudged slowly through the underbrush of the Everfree forest. The moon hung

overhead, pale fingers of light stretching through gaps in the canopy. While it had been easy enough to follow the filly's tracks out of town and right up to the edge of the forest, he had lost her trail sometime after the sun had gone down.

Even though he was young, it seemed to him that the creatures of that strange stretch of woods regarded a dragon of any size or age with respect. Not one pair of eyes leered out at him from the darkness. The more he considered it, however, the more he realized how empty the forest seemed. His pride slowly shifted to a sensation of anxiety.

"Sweetie Belle...?!" He called into the darkened forest. "Hello...?!"

Silence followed his inquiry, as it had every time prior. He had lost count of the number of his attempts to get a reply. He had completely lost track of time, at that. Even if he was sure that he was getting lost, and his search for Rarity's younger sister seemed increasingly hopeless, his determination was unwavering.

*Lady Rarity told me that Sweetie Belle was my responsibility, and so help me, I'm gonna find her!*

"Sweeeetie Beeelle?! It's Spike, can you hear me...?!"

A sudden rustling caught his attention, followed by a low, distant rumble. A few dark clouds hung in the sky, so thunder wasn't out of the question. The rustling commanded his immediate attention, however.

"Sweetie Belle, is that you?!" Spike crept closer, watching for the source of the rustling. "If it's you, say something!"

The rustling died down as another rumble echoed off the trees. "Sweetie Belle?"

"Will you *pleathe* thtop thouting?" A face accompanied the voice shortly after; Twist poked her head out of the bush, nervously looking around.

"Sorry! Sorry... What are you hiding from?"

Another rumble, much closer, steadily rolled on, becoming more distinct. Footsteps.

Twist's eyes widened as she leaped out of the bush, breaking into a gallop. "That!"

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There was no choir of birds to wake Fluttershy the following morning. What little sunlight trickled in through the windows was sickly. The sky beyond was overcast, dense and heavy clouds rolling against one another as they blotted out the sun. Shakily, the pegasus slipped her hooves over the edge of the couch, shifting her weight onto them. In lieu of Mahara's disappearance, she had slept downstairs. The candles she had set on the windowsills had melted down to nothing but solidified puddles, the lanterns completely burned out. Angel had fallen asleep at the door, propped up against a wall. He stirred as Fluttershy approached him, but shook his head solemnly as he met her hopeful gaze.

Mahara had not returned during the night.

Fluttershy shuddered, biting back a dry sob. She had no more tears to shed. Her eyes ached, red and swollen from crying herself to sleep. Her body feebly resisted her attempts to move. The feeling was unpleasantly familiar.

*No, she told herself. I've come this far. I'm not going to slip back into self pity. I'm going to find her, and I'm going to make her explain. I want to... I can... I can fix this. I'm going to make this better...*

*Somehow...*

Her gaze drifted over the room. Several pictures had been torn off the wall. A shattered flowerpot was scattered across a table. She had torn one of her pillows open at some point during her frantic spree of destruction. Tufts of woolen stuffing were strewn across the room. Rusty blotches lingered on the floor, a reminder of the blood which had pooled there the previous day. Before fully breaking down, she had cleaned it up, but the stains remained. Fluttershy had little reason to doubt that the blood belonged to the missing red mare, but the shattered window remained a mystery to her. She was certain that it was directly related to the grisly scene she had come home to, however.

A distant rumble of thunder caught the pegasus's attention. While the thought of staying put and waiting for Mahara was appealing, Fluttershy knew that doing so would risk sliding back down the slippery slope of depression. She felt the need to go into town, both to look for her companion and hopefully seek comfort in her friends. Another rumble drew her gaze to the edge of the Everfree forest. Hundreds of birds hovered over the treetops, circling, almost appearing to follow something. She wondered for a moment if it could be Mahara before remembering how most animals seemed to avoid her on sight, much less follow her.

A knock at the door, while it normally would have startled her, barely registered as worth a glance.

The pegasus looked to Angel, who was, in turn, looking out through the broken window. He looked back at her and shook his head.

*Not Mahara... Who, then?*

Before she could even reach the door, Pinkie Pie peered around the edge of the window frame, her expression home to a delicate smile.

"Hey there Fluttershy. Is everything okay? You don't look so good." The pegasus stood there silently, her expression blank and empty, waiting for Pinkie to continue. "Oookay... Well, Twilight wanted me to tell you that she's holding a town meeting, but she's probably going to say a lot of nasty things about your new marefriend, so I wasn't sure if you'd want to come."

Fluttershy glanced away, lightly tapping her forehoof against the floor.

"You um... You know about Mahara and I? Who else knows?"

"I don't think anyone *e*lse knows yet, silly! I just know because I... Got a combo about it!" The pink mare's smile became more of a goofy grin as she nodded rapidly. "Really weird combo, actually! Don't worry though, I won't tell anypony."



The pegasus donned a smile of her own, already feeling just a little bit better talking to Pinkie. Seeing that her presence was helping the pegasus cheer up, Pinkie smiled even wider.

“Thank you, Pinkie. I um... I’m having a bit of a problem right now, though...” Fluttershy came closer to the window, glancing at the edge of the forest as another crash broke the dreary tranquility outside. “Have you um... Well, maybe felt... Do you have any idea where Mahara is? She um... Something happened here and I don’t know where she went.”

“She didn’t wreck up the place! You did! You musta been real mad last night, huh?” Fluttershy appraised Pinkie Pie with wide eyes, then cocked a brow. “Combos again! I’ve got a million of ‘em!” The pink mare giggled in a way that the pegasus perceived as nervous. “I haven’t seen or gotten any kinda senses or tingles about her, though. Sorry...”

“That’s um... That’s okay. Maybe some of the ponies around town have seen her...”

“You’re gonna come to the meeting, then?”

Fluttershy gave a nod, opening the door and stepping outside. Pinkie tilted her head as she made eye contact, then she smiled and shrugged, bouncing down the path. The pegasus watched for a few moments before turning to Angel.

“If she comes back while I’m away, please make her wait for me. I... I’m upset that she lied... Or said that she lied... But um... Sometimes, friends keep secrets because they don’t want to hurt each other. I understand that. I just want to... I um... I can help her. I know I can.”

Angel nodded up at her, then closed his eyes as she leaned down to nuzzle him.

“Thank you.”

The rabbit nodded again, then waved her toward the path, shutting and locking the door in front of her.

Pinkie hopped in place at the bottom of the hill, waiting as patiently as she could for Fluttershy to catch up. Smiling, the pegasus trotted down to her friend, and they made their way to Ponyville together.

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*Oh! Woah! There it is again! I haven’t felt that one in a while! What does that one mean again? A doosie! That’s right! Right in town square! Oh wow, I wonder what it will be! Maybe Applejack and Rainbow Dash are finally going to tell everyone that they’ve been giving each other sleep hugs and tongu shakes? I don’t see what all the fuss is about, keeping those kinds of things a secret from everypony! Oh well, maybe Twilight can explain it to me. She reads all kinds of books, she has to know. Oh? What was that, Fluttershy?*

“I asked if you’ve um... No... Nevermind. It’s not important.”

“Aw, come on! You’ve gotta tell me now! I’m all curious!”

“Have you... Have you ever been in love?”

“All my life!” Pinkie grinned widely, nodding away as she rebounded off the ground.

“Wha- Really? With who? If um... If you’re okay with telling me, that is.”

“It’s pretty obvious, really! I’m in love wiiiiith...” Fluttershy watched her intently, holding her breath.

“Parties! I absolutely love parties! Always have! Always will!”

“Oh Pinkie... That’s... Nevermind.”

The pink mare giggled, shaking her head. “I know whatcha mean. I guess. I just never really took the time to look! Or pay attention if anypony was looking at me! I dunno! Why? Should I start paying more attention to that kinda thing?”

“It’s um...” Fluttershy blushed, her wings unfolding slightly. “It’s nice... Having someone to be there for you... Knowing someone cares about you...”

“Like a friend, right?”

“More than um... More than just a friend.”

“So like, a best friend? Like with you and Rarity!”

Fluttershy faltered a bit, almost stumbling over her forehooves. “N-no! She um... She doesn’t have feelings like that for me... Or for any mare, apparently. This is um... This is something more than friendship. Love is, I mean. I... I’m sorry for bringing this up.”

“You’re pretty silly sometimes, Fluttershy! That’s okay though. If I find a pony that I like more than a best friend, you’ll be the first to know!”

“That... That’s alright, Pinkie. It’s something that’s supposed to be kind of private... I think it is, anyway...”

“Oh! Okay, if I find a pony that I like more than a best friend, you *won’t* be the first to know!”

*This love stuff is a little confusing! It’s like a best friend, but you don’t tell everyone right away? Why not? If I have a best friend that’s more than a best friend, I’d want to tell everyone! I’d want to have a party! Maybe it’s because she’s shy? Yeah, that’s gotta be it! Who can blame her, though? Poor Fluttershy. I hope that doesn’t happen to me when I find a best friend that’s more than a best friend. Ooh! Yeesh, I wanna get this doosie over and done with! What else is Twilight gonna say about Mahara that’s so important anyway? She already embarrassed her in front of half the town at my party the other day! But a lot of ponies were a little drunk, so maybe they don’t remember everything! Well, leave it to Twilight to be thorough.*

Several other ponies joined them as they made their way into town, idly chatting about what the meeting might be about. Some of them seemed to think it was about the weather, others suggested that it had to do with the monster.

“I hope this doesn’t have to do with the deliveries I botched last month,” Ditzzy Doo mumbled as she passed Pinkie.

“Botched? If it weren’t for you, I’d have never gotten Gummy a few years ago!”

*There you go, Ditzzy! Smile! That’s the pegasus I know! Now that they mention it, though, the weather has been pretty weird lately... I’ll ask Dash about it if I see her, because if this keeps up, I’ll have to cancel the beach party I planned! Actually, maybe Fluttershy knows about the weather. How about it, Fluttershy?*

“I... I’m sorry, what did you mean?”

“The weather! What do you know about the weather!”

“Oh... Um, Pinkie, you know I’m not involved with the weather team...”

“Oops! Sorry, I forgot!”

The town square was already fairly crowded. Ponies milled about anxiously as they waited for Twilight to start speaking, but it seemed that she was waiting for a larger audience. Another distant rumble turned most heads skyward, but the clouds continued to hold their onslaught. Pinkie idly followed Fluttershy as the pegasus combed the crowd, occasionally asking if anypony had seen or heard about Mahara. Fluttershy looked increasingly distraught as the answer was consistently *no*.

*I wish I could help... I don’t like seeing her all down in the dumps like this. I’ll help her look for Mahara after the meeting! Yeah, that will cheer her up! Wow, does Twilight really need to be up on a stage for this, though? Then again, when she tried passing out pamphlets that one time, I made a paper cupcake out of mine! Oh! Is that Zecora on the stage with her? I can’t believe I used to think she was evil! What is she talking about with Twilight, I wonder? Probably going over her notes. I don’t think Zecora has met Mahara yet! I’ll have to introduce her when we find her! Oh! Hi there, Rarity! Yeah, I’m okay. Kinda cruddy weather. What’s that on your back?*

“It’s a quiver, dear,” the pale unicorn replied.

Rarity was wearing her mane up, tied into a semi bun with several long curls dangling free. Pinkie had only seen her do that at parties, when she was wearing fancy dresses. The novelty made her prance excitedly.

“Soooo what’s a quiver?”

“A quiver is what an archer uses to hold his or her arrows.”

“Oh! Is that what those are?” Pinkie leaned closer to the unicorn, inspecting her cargo. “I thought you were just carrying around a whole bunch of feather dusters!”

“No dear, I was practicing archery.” Rarity smiled, shaking her head a bit. “I thought I would have time to go home and wash up before the meeting, but it would seem I’ll not be fortunate enough to have that

luxury. Only a minor inconvenience, however. I don't suppose you've seen Fluttershy, have you? There's something I need to discuss with her..."

"She's right over..." The pink mare whipped her head around, looking for the timid pegasus in the crowd. "Oh, nope, she's right here!"

"Hello, Rarity. I um... Have you seen... I'm looking for... I'm sorry, you go first..."

"Mahara," the pale unicorn stated. "Yes, and that's precisely whom I need to speak with you about."

The unicorn held up her foreleg to Fluttershy, but Pinkie was able to catch a glimpse of circular scabs marring her coat before she lowered it again. The pegasus gasped, her lower lip trembling.

"O-oh my..."

Rarity just smiled, giving a single shake of her head. "No need to fret, my dear. No force was used. I volunteered."

As Fluttershy took several steps in the pale unicorn's direction, she glanced back at Pinkie, flashing a humble smile.

"Pinkie... I um... I need to talk to Rarity alone for a little while. Thank you for coming to get me though."

"No problem! I hope everything is okay!"

Fluttershy's smile faded, her expression suddenly heavy with worry. "We um... We'll see..."

V ^ ^ V

"'Bout damn time somepony decided this monster thing 's worth warnin' everypony about! Hell, she shoulda' tried ta getta meetin' organized tha first time mah lil' sis got bit!" Applejack stomped and snorted, then turned her attention back to her right, locking eyes with Rainbow Dash. "Ain't Ah right?!"

"Yeah, you're right. I... I dunno, though." Dash cast her gaze to the ground as Applejack furrowed her brow. "I'm just not sold that it's *her*. What kind of pony could do that?"

"She *ain't* no *pony*, Dash!" The pegasus whined just slightly, mouth twisted into an anxious frown. "She's a monster! A dangerous, blood thirsty monster that's been bitin' mah kin! Ah ain't gonna stand fer that!"

Applejack looked to her left in time to see Big Macintosh nodding in agreement. "Ayep. She ain't givin' us a choice, if ya ask me. She's a bad seed pretendin' ta be a good apple."

Applejack returned her focus to Dash as the pegasus blinked several times. "What does that even... Okay, look; what I'm saying is we can't chase her with torches and pitchforks without a really good reason. She's weird, and she's different, I'll give you that, but unless she gives somepony a letter that says *Twilight was right* or someone catches her in the act, I'm not going to give her trouble for being a few roots short of an apple tree."

The pegasus came to a stop, hovering in place. "Oh for the love of... Did I just make an apple pun?"

Applejack's serious demeanor cracked with a smile, followed by a fit of giggling as Big Macintosh snorted a chuckle. Just hearing Dash say that made her feel better, if only marginally.

"Farms rubbin' off on ya, sugarcube. Might as well jus' move in."

The pegasus's grin made her question if her apple pun was as unintentional as Dash would like her to think. The thought of having the pegasus living in the same house with her was very comforting, though not without its own anxieties. While Dash spent the majority of her free time with Applejack already, having her move in was a very big step. The farm house also didn't truly belong to them. It belonged to Granny Smith. As far as the elderly mare knew, Rainbow Dash was just hanging around to make extra money helping out on the farm.

As far as the majority of ponies knew, that's all Dash was doing, but clearly, that excuse was finally starting to wear thin.

A considerable amount of ponies had gathered in the town square by the time Applejack, her brother, and her pegasus lover arrived. On the stage, the mayor was having a conversation with Twilight and Zecora. Of course, Applejack couldn't hear a word of it over the sound of all the other conversations taking place amongst ponies in the crowd. Somewhere nearby, she could hear Pinkie Pie chattering excitedly with Ditzzy Doo. From the fragments she could fish out of the ruckus, she realized they were talking about her pet alligator.

*No sense in interruptin' em.*

Only moments later did Twilight turn to the crowd and stomp her hooves against the stage. A hush fell over the square, conversations dying out mid sentence. With a few exceptions.

"Everypony, your attention please!"

"I'm not actually sure how big alligators are supposed to get, either!"

"Pinkie!" Twilight snapped in the direction of the pink mare.

"Sorry!"

"I'm sure you've all heard the rumors or seen a few ponies with strange injuries the last few days." The purple unicorn's gaze swept over the crowd, very briefly making eye contact with Applejack. "Today, I'm going to give you the facts as we know them thus far, and preventative measures that can be used to keep you and your families safe.

"It should go without saying, then, that there is in fact a monster of some kind lurking in or around Ponyville at this time. I have been taking notes on its behavior and, in addition to that, Zecora possesses a great deal of knowledge about the monster as well. She and I will be addressing that later. The first topic I'd like to address is identification. Some of you may have met or seen a red mare around town lately by the name of Mahara. Enough evidence has surfaced to confirm beyond reason of a doubt that

the monster and Mahara are the same individual.”

“Son of a bitch...” Rainbow Dash whispered, her expression shifting from curiosity to a scowl.

“Ah toldja, sugarcube,” Applejack quietly replied. “She’s gotta go.”

Twilight had begun to pace now, her expression very serious, the crowd following her every move. A distant flash over the mountains was chased by a low rumble, but the unicorn was not to be distracted.

“...is her most common, public form, she has been proven to take the form of other ponies, as well as entirely different species. The single uniting characteristic between the monster in any form it may take is the eyes. She possesses eyes of a very bright emerald green, with pupils that dilate horizontally. The best example I can give is that she has eyes similar to a dragon, like... *Spike?*”

With the exception of the low winds and rumblings of the brewing storm overhead, the town square was fully silent as Twilight looked off into the distance, narrowing her eyes. The number of turning heads increased as the silence stretched on for more than a minute. Rainbow Dash turned and took to the air to try and get a better view as Big Macintosh stood on his hind legs to do the same.

*Now what in tarnation...*

Just before Applejack turned to see what everyone else was looking at, a look of joy came over Twilight as her eyes widened. “Spike!”

Sure enough, as the blond mare looked away from the stage and toward the Everfree Forest, she spotted Spike, but he was not alone. As she looked harder, she noticed he was riding a filly with a curly red mane.

“s that...” Applejack tilted her head toward Dash. “Applebloom’s friend?”

“The one with the lisp? Yeah, I think so. Hold on, I think they’re saying something...”

They had yet to cross the river, their shouts barely carrying across the distance. In the blink of an eye, their shouts didn’t need to. Their warning had become evident, echoed by Twilight and countless other ponies as an enormous, multi-headed form smashed through a group of trees.

**“Hydra!”**

Three of the hydra’s mouths parted with a simultaneous roar, the fourth joining in after a brief delay. The shock dispersed and a wave of panic swept over the crowd. Pegasi launched into the air, but earth ponies and unicorns battered against one another, frantically trying to clear out of the square. Applejack fought against the surging crowd as she watched a screaming mare vanish under thundering ponies. Pinkie bobbed above the rush in intervals, looking more excited than afraid.

“E-everyone stay calm!” Applejack glanced back to the stage as Twilight shook visibly, barely staying on her hooves. “We can handle this! R-right, mayor?”

The mayor shoved Twilight aside, looking around frantically. “We need to evacuate! Immediately! Do not

return to your homes!” Berry Punch kicked her door open and then slammed it behind her, countless other ponies actually running in the direction of the hydra to reach their houses. “Get clear of Ponyville and head for Whitetail Woods!” The mayor bolted immediately after finishing her announcement.

Part of Applejack agreed, following the surging crowd for several paces as she considered galloping back to the orchard.

*But what about Twi? Pinkie? Rarity an’ Fluttershy? Ah... Ah can’t jus’ leave ‘em here...*

The purple unicorn fell to the stage, looking off into the distance. “Come on Twilight, think! Think!”

“Dash...” Applejack looked up to her pegasus. “Should we run?”

“You can get going if you want,” Rainbow Dash looked down to her, then around the square, “but I’m gonna stay here and help out however I can.”

The square had emptied considerably, but quite a few ponies remained, a few running in circles out of frenzied confusion, others limp against the ground, bruised and bleeding. Dash swooped over to one of those injured ponies, trying to scoop the moaning stallion up in her forelegs. Several others swiftly followed her example. The rest of the lingering ponies seemed to be in Applejack’s state of mind, unsure of what to do, watching the hydra in its awe inspiring destruction. It smashed through a house on the edge of town as though the building were made of paper.

Macintosh stepped forward, looking over the wounded. “Ah’m with Dash, sis. These ponies need our help or they’re good as dead!”

Twist, with Spike on her back, raced past the diminished crowd and up to the stage with tears in their eyes. Applejack followed them slowly, devoting most of her attention to the hydra. It snapped at a mare that had dived into a side alley, still a few houses away from the square. A wet scream and a triumphant roar signaled its success. All present cringed. One of the remaining mares let out a mournful wail, falling to the ground in hysterical sobs.

“Twilight, I’m so sorry!” Spike knelt beside the unicorn, trying to dry his eyes. “We didn’t know what else to do! I... I went looking for Sweetie Belle last night and found Twist instead, and then this hydra caught up to us and-!”

“Spike, it’s... It’s okay. I’m just glad you’re safe. We... We need to leave, though. That hydra will be here any minute.”

“Abandon your homes? No, I say!” Zecora stomped, the strength in her voice echoing off nearby buildings. “You all should stand and fight today!”

Several ponies poked their heads out of their doors. Zecora’s words sparked up a burning fury in Applejack. She nodded up at the zebra, then turned to the lingering ponies.

“Zecora’s right! We can’t jus’ let this big, dumb bastard destroy our town an’ turn our friends inta lunch! We gotta’ stand an’ fight! ‘s them or us!”

“Is a hydra a them or a him?” Pinkie wandered between the crowd and Applejack. “Maybe it’s a her? Do hydras have genders?”

“Pinkie! Go get as many knives as you can carry! Anythin’ sharp!” Applejack directed her gaze to the alert ponies before her. “That goes fer ya’ll as well! If you live on tha same side of town as tha hydra, help somepony else gather weapons! An’ if ya don’t wanna fight, help tha wounded an’ clear tha hell out!”

Without a word further, Pinkie bounded off in the direction of Sugarcube Corner, flanked by Mr. and Mrs. Cake. The majority of the crowd quickly dispersed, most of them sticking to the hydra free side of Ponyville, others getting dangerously close to the ravaged areas of town as they entered the shops and homes of friends and neighbors in search of armaments.

“My farming friend, that was very well put.” The blond mare turned to the stage to find Zecora grinning down at her. Her grin faded quickly as another roar bounced off the walls. “We must conspire, the hydras nearly afoot.”

“Ah don’t know much ‘bout hydras, but Ah figure we hit it hard an’ fast. Least we can do is give tha others time ta escape.” She jumped up onto the stage, turning to watch the draconic form rip apart a house in search of another pony to snap up. Two of its maws were already red with blood.

“A hydra is well armored, unfortunately. Its eyes and its mouth are not; that’s the key.”

Twilight had gotten back to her hooves, shaking considerably less now that a resistance was mounting to deal with the invasion. The first batch of sharp objects was dumped out of a saddle bag on the ground in front of the stage. Slowly, the purple unicorn levitated a chef’s knife out of the pile and turned it in the air.

“There’s nothing we can do for your sister now,” Applejack heard a chocolate colored stallion say as he knelt beside the weeping mare. “But you can fight even harder in memory of her, so that others don’t have to know a similar loss.” The mare gritted her teeth, nodding, still sobbing as she got back to her hooves.

“That’s all I’ve got,” shouted Ditzzy Doo. “Carrot is still rummaging through her drawers! She should be here in a minute!”

“Somepony better buy me a drink after this is over,” mumbled Berry Punch, saddle bags full of bottles of liquor at her sides. A damp white rag was stuffed into the mouth of each bottle.

A white unicorn with a wild blue mane stepped wordlessly onto the stage, dropping a box full of records besides Twilight. She lowered her goggles, red eyes narrowed as she floated one of the records out of its sheath. “I’m ready when you are.”

“Spike, take Twist to the schoolhouse and make sure Cherilee knows what’s going on.” Twilight leaned close to the little dragon, glancing to Twist and then back to him. “Help her get the fillies and colts as far away from here as you can.” The filly and the dragon were already a house away when Twilight shouted, “And send a letter to Princess Celestia! Let her know what’s happening down here!”



The pile of sharp objects grew considerably in the following minute, a dozen ponies making deliveries, then standing at the ready in front of the stage. Mr. Cake rejoined the crowd with a strange device in his mouth; a handle seemingly made of wood with a metal cylinder attached horizontally to that. Applejack's brow shot up as she realized what it was.

"Aw damn," Macintosh snorted as he came to the same realization. "Ah shoulda' galloped back fer tha shotgun..."

"Ya wouldn't have had time. 'Sides, Ah gotta plan an' Ah'm gonna need you an' Dash fer it ta work."

"Yer prob'ly right... Ah wonder where he got that one, though. Don't look like mine..."

Tired of chasing the ponies that ran by and smashing up the houses they ducked into, the hydra turned all four heads toward the battle ready gathering in the town square. It narrowed its eyes, inhaled, and let out a fearsome roar.

"Aaaalright everypony! This is it! Make yer mommas proud!"

V ^ ^ V

The sound of screaming and crumbling buildings was only slightly muffled by the walls of the town hall; Rarity stayed by the window, watching the chaos just outside. Fluttershy whimpered softly, drawing the pale unicorn's attention.

"How... How bad?" She couldn't bring herself to look, trembling as she leaned against the wall.

"Very." Rarity's expression was all but grave. "If you're going to try and evacuate, now would be the best time to do so. It looks like the ponies down there are planning to fight the hydra right here in the middle of town."

"Is anypony hurt?"

"Several, but Dash and a few others are already tending to them. They're not even hydra victims. I'm assuming they were trampled when most everyone fled the square." She paused, glancing to the side. "And from the looks of it, the hydra has already eaten at least one pony..."

"I should be down there! They... They need medical attention!"

"Fluttershy, dear, in my honest opinion, you'll be much better off leaving town or staying out of the way for now." The unicorn turned back to the window, then wrapped it in her magic, lifting the latch and opening it. "As for me, well, fate would have it that I'm prepared for just such an occasion."

"Are you... Will they kill it?"

"As far as I'm concerned, this is now a matter of survival for all of us. The hydra knows where we live. If it survives this encounter, it may well find its way back here."

The pegasus got to her hooves, still refraining from looking outside. "What if... What if I-"

“Don’t be foolish!” Rarity spat, snapping back to Fluttershy with a glare. “That creature doesn’t care if you disapprove or if eating ponies is wrong! If you try and reason with it, there’s no doubt in my mind that it will gobble you up without a second thought or a trace of guilt!”

The pegasus shrank back, nodding slowly. “You... You’re right. Should I um... Should I stay here with you?”

“If the battle goes poorly, it won’t be long before the hydra reduces this building to a pile of rubble. I’m going to make as much of a difference as I can before that happens.” Rarity turned her gaze to the window again, putting her forehooves on the frame. “If and when I tell you to run, I don’t want you to hesitate. It’s a long way to the ground from up here, and I don’t think your wings will do an adequate job slowing your fall if you find it necessary to take a shortcut.”

“Alright. I promise.” Fluttershy swallowed heavily, working up the nerve to look outside. “I’m going to stay with you as long as I can, though.”

“That’s already more than I could ask of you, dear.”

The unicorn drifted a diamond tipped arrow from her quiver, holding it horizontally in the air to examine it while, at the same time, her magic condensed into a hazy shape around it. A soft, ambient pink washed back against Rarity’s coat, but her eyes had closed. The tranquility of her expression drastically contrasted the mayhem unfolding below.

Fluttershy could only faintly hear the unicorn inhale, the glowing shape around the arrow becoming more refined. A string of magical energy drew tightly against the nock of the arrow, held in place by a slender, radiating crescent. The unicorn’s brow furrowed slightly as she drew the arrow back all the way, and then just as suddenly, she resumed her state of peace.

The hydra’s maws let loose with a blood chilling roar just as the pegasus peeked out the window.

Rarity’s eyes snapped open.

She let her arrow fly.

V ^ ^ V

No sooner had Applejack finished speaking did the second head give a shrill cry, recoiling and twisting in the air. A small gout of blood erupted from its left eye.

“Rarity!” Rainbow Dash shouted.

Twilight and several other ponies glanced to the very top of the town hall. The pale unicorn was just barely visible in the window frame, already levitating another arrow into position.

“s as good a signal as any! **Chaaaaarge!**”

Twilight watched as they stampeded as one, their desperation, fear and courage welling up into a furious

battle cry. The hydra actually stopped, looking stunned as little more than twenty ponies rushed toward it at full speed, knives, saws and sharp looking poles clenched in their teeth. Before they reached their target, she and Vinyl Scratch wrapped the pile of sharp objects and records in their glowing levitation. Together, they unleashed several volleys of gleaming metal and vinyl which sailed over the advancing ponies and struck the hydra with varying degrees of success. Some of the knives, forks and records penetrated the hydra's scaly armor, drawing shallow streams of blood, while others bounced harmlessly away and struck the ground or shattered on impact.

The hydra's shock wore off, and it seemed largely unimpressed, dislodging most of the knives with a shake. Rarity's second arrow, on the other hoof, plunged deep into the third head's right cheek, just a little below the eye socket.

"We need to aim higher!" Twilight shouted to Scratch.

The magenta eyed unicorn nodded. "Wait for them to fall back, then we'll try again!"

From across the square, Twilight Sparkle anxiously watched as the group divided, half of them to the left and half of them to the right. Ditzzy and Dash circled just out of the hydra's reach, doing their best to distract as many heads as they could. Three of the heads, including the two gored by Rarity's arrows, were taking the bait. The fourth snaked low, fangs bared as it prepared to defend.

Applejack's voice carried across the square, distorted slightly as it bounced off buildings. "Lay into the knees an' ankles as hard as ya can!"

The fourth head swung in an arc across the ground, forcing the attacking ponies to jump back. Berry Punch wasn't fast enough, knocked away from the hydra and sent tumbling into the dirt. She sprawled for a moment, shakily rolling back to her hooves moments later, no worse for wear. In those few moments, as Twilight's gaze had followed the mare, the others had successfully reached the hydra's legs, ferociously jabbing and swinging at it, ripping several scales free of the left leg and slicing into the meat beneath.

Mr. Cake had kept the fourth head busy, dodging and weaving as several loud bangs emanated from where he stood. The moment they had begun to rend the hydra's flesh, however, the fourth head swiveled toward its injured leg as the other heads realized they had been distracted, but the ponies refused to withdraw until the hydra's jaws were nearly upon them. Big Macintosh rolled away from the left leg, narrowly avoiding a toothy maw, only for Carrot Top to find herself snagged by the mane.

Twilight held her breath as she watched the fourth head lift her off the ground, but Ditzzy swooped in before the purple unicorn could even grasp Carrot with her magic, tugging the mare free just as another head tried to bite down on her. The fourth head spat out a mouthful of orange hair as the second and third snickered. The instant they stopped snickering, another arrow plunged into the second head, just slightly above its right eye. Furious, the hydra decided that Rarity was a greater threat than the ponies dodging around its feet. With a roar, it lumbered slowly toward town hall, both injured heads staying low to keep the ponies at bay.

"Scratch!"

"Already on it!"

Vinyl Scratch levitated several records out of her box, spinning them in the air until they blurred. As Twilight lifted another volley of forks and knives off the ground, something moving across the rooftops caught her eye.

*That's...*

V ^ ^ V

**“Surprise, fillyfucker!”**

Pinkie Pie flung herself off the rooftop closest to the hydra, completely behind its field of view. Her ice skates glimmered as she pointed all four of them at the neck of the first head. The hydra gave another shriek of pain as Pinkie slid down the side of that neck, carving four gushing lines deep in its scale clad flesh. She concluded the descent by wrenching free, blood trailing out behind the blades of her skates as she somersaulted away from the beast. Pinkie watched as the first head wavered, arterial spray clouding the air around it with a pink mist, but it refused to go limp.

“Come on, that was awesome!” the pink mare shouted. “You should be dead! You cheater!”

The head in question responded by lunging at her. The pink mare tried to move, but found herself unable to budge. Pinkie’s eyes widened as she realized the blades of her skates had lodged firmly in the ground when she landed. She cringed, eyes shut tightly as she tried to comfort herself.

*It's been a good run! I had lots of fun parties and met lots of good ponies! I hope the afterlife is just as fun as this life was! I'll be seeing the reaper pony any second now... I wonder if she's already waiting for me?*

As Pinkie opened one eye, she was not met with the hydra’s jaws, or the reaper, but an aerial view of the square. Below, a stream of glowing knives plunged into the wounds she had inflicted on the hydra, pouring right out the other side of its neck as the hydra’s screeching cry was cut short, vocal cords completely severed. The first head and neck gave off a purple glow as Twilight ripped it completely free of its body with a shower of bright red gore. A cheer rose from the ponies on the ground, and also from above her. Pinkie looked up to find herself face to face with Rainbow Dash.

“Oh! Hi!”

“You’re pretty lucky, you know! Twilight barely had time to pull you out of your skates. I took over for her so she could do... *That.*” The pegasus’s expression suddenly hardened. “Oh shit...”

Pinkie directed her attention back to the battle, only to witness two heads erupt from the hydra’s freshly cut stump of a neck.

“That’s a bunch of horseapples!” Pinkie pouted as her surprise attack was rendered completely pointless. “Who decided a hydra could do a cheap trick like that!?”

“Ditzy, get down there and tell everyone to fall back! It’s time we lit this birthday candle!”

“Dash, as much as I love parties, this is no time for a birthday!”

The cyan pegasus only smirked, motioning to her cargo. A pair of saddle bags clinked and sloshed at her sides, damp rags and bottle mouths visible over the rims.

“Oh! Where’d you get those?!”

“Berry Punch. I’m gonna need you to light and drop them for me. Think you’re up to it?”

“You better believe it!”

“Then get on my back and let’s get going!”

V ^ ^ V

The hydra was visibly limping, halfway to the stage and town hall, as Rainbow Dash dropped out of the sky. Pinkie Pie held tightly to the pegasus, leaning slightly to the left to watch the fight below. The pegasus could feel her shifting in place as they swooped high over the hydra. Dash glanced back in time to watch the pink mare light one of the fire bottles with a match, holding it carefully just behind the pegasus’s left flank. Pinkie said something, but it was lost in the whistle of the wind as they raced toward their target.

“Get ready!”

The two new heads glistened wetly, one of them writhing in the air. An arrow and a knife jutted from the left and right eyes of one of those new heads, completely blinding it. Another arrow split the air, but the head it was intended for jerked to the side, causing it to miss its mark completely.

“Now!”

“Did you miss me?!” Pinkie shouted down at the hydra, releasing the ignited bottle. “I got you another present!”

The bottle shattered against the hydra’s body, a bright orange flame spilling down the front of the draconic terror. While the flames clung to breaches in the hydra’s scales, it seemed unaffected for the most part. Dash pulled up, beating her wings to regain altitude as the pink mare held on tightly.

“Pinkie, are hydras fireproof?!”

“Not on the inside!” She leaned forward to point to the flames licking the hydra’s superficial wounds, a foreleg around the pegasus’s neck. “They need to cut us a bigger target before we can paint it!”

“Okay! I’m gonna drop you off by Twilight and Vinyl! Let them know and flag me when you’re ready for another pass!”

“Ookie-Dokie-Loki!”

The pegasus slowed as she skimmed near to the ground, allowing Pinkie to slip off. She rolled head

over hooves several times, then shook herself off and leaped onto the stage. A cry of agony brought Dash's attention back to the battle. The hydra had caught a stallion in its jaws by the foreleg, blood streaming from its mouth as it bit down harder. A purple glow had just begun to envelope him as another head swiveled around, ripping the rest of his body away and gnashing savagely until he was enough of a pulp to swallow. Ditzzy came up alongside the cyan pegasus as she climbed back into the air, but seemed unable to take her eyes off of the hydra.

"How could such a horrible creature exist?!" The grey pegasus's voice wavered as she fought back the tears. "We have to kill this thing! We'll be doing all of Equestria a favor!"

"I'm with you on that one! I just sent Pinkie with instructions for the unicorns! We're gonna try another bombing run if they can strip away more scales!"

"Okay, but Applejack said she and Zecora are about to try something! She wants us to be ready to extract them when they're done or in case the plan backfires!"

Rainbow Dash nodded, nervously watching the zebra and her lover as they stood side by side with Big Macintosh.

*Please don't do anything stupid, AJ...*

V ^ ^ V

"Sis, Ah just want ya ta know," Big Macintosh looked to Zecora, and then back to Applejack. "This plan is perty damn stupid!"

The blond mare just smirked, tipping her hat forward as they galloped toward the hydra from the side. The zebra trailed several pony lengths behind, to give the stallion enough time to prepare for her as well without sacrificing speed or time. She realized that Big Macintosh was right, but enough ponies had already died to the multi-headed terror; it was time to try something drastic. Zecora was fearless enough to go along with the plan, and Applejack greatly appreciated the support.

The other ponies were doing their part. Twilight and Vinyl kept two of the heads busy with floating knives and saw-like records. Ditzzy Doo and Rainbow Dash circled overhead, drawing off another pair of heads. The revolver, as Mr. Cake called it, had been reloaded, splitting the air with a reverberating crack as he fired from a distance. While the bullets had ricocheted off the hydra's scales for the most part, they found purchase in the gaping wound on the hydra's leg. After peppering the injury with hot lead, the head they had left undistracted lowered defensively, as if intending to deflect any further rounds with its cranium.

The hydra was playing right into her hooves.

Applejack shot a quick glance to her brother. "Ready?!"

With a nod, Big Macintosh poured on enough speed to pull ahead, launching himself into the air and turning toward Applejack while airborne. Applejack followed his lead, locking her forehooves with his as he shifted his weight back, hind legs against her underside.

“Don’t get’cherself killed!” he shouted as he jerked back, half bucking, half throwing her down at the hydra’s lowest head.

A feeling of weightlessness came over her as she plummeted down. Her hat drifted away, leaving the wind to whistle through her ears and mane. The blond mare gritted her teeth as she aimed all four hooves down at the hydra’s skull.

*Ah wonder if this ‘s what it feels like ta fly...*

The hydra looked up far too late to do anything evasive. Applejack hit her mark with a crack, feeling immense satisfaction as she felt bone pulverized beneath the hydra’s scaly hide. The air around her buzzed with unintelligible noise. If the hydra screeched, it was extremely brief. The head she struck lost consciousness almost immediately. She realized she had absorbed a great deal of the impact herself, but the rush of adrenaline she was riding dulled all but the vaguest notions of pain.

“Ah’m jus’ gettin’ started, ya scaly fuck!”

Applejack hopped forward, bringing her hooves down again. She alternated as she stomped with all her might, hoping to drive fragments of bone into the hydra’s brain as she traced the fracture she had caused, doing everything in her power to weaken the hydra’s defenses. Berry Punch and several others made an effort to hack and slash at the downed head, but they fell back almost as quickly as they advanced. Applejack looked up to see Zecora floating just shy of one of the hydra’s gaping maws, saved by the gentle glow of Twilight’s magic.

The blond mare looked back mid stomp to see that several ponies were shouting something.

She could feel the unicorn’s glowing embrace, pulling her away from the head she had been pummeling, and caught a glimpse of Rainbow Dash just behind a rapidly approaching head of the hydra.

A sinking feeling penetrated her courage.

*Ah’m sorry, Dashie...*

A sharp, stabbing pain raked through her left flank in multiple spots, anchoring her, ripping her free of Twilight’s levitation. Her body went momentarily limp as the head jerked upward. Something in her leg snapped like a twig, triggering an even more intense explosion of pain. Applejack wasn’t ready to stop fighting, however.

“Let! Me! **Go!**” Applejack lashed at the hydra’s toothy snout with all her might, feeling the scales soften as her hooves pelted them relentlessly.

The teeth dug deeper, carving through her flesh, her blood spilling out against the hydra’s jaws. The head jerked again, another head just barely visible in the blurred corner of her vision, ready to grind her into a paste. Blood began to run from the hydra’s nose as she continued to strike, mixing with the blood spattering from her forehooves.

“Ah **ain’t** dyin’ like this, ya big, ugly sonova’ **bitch!**”

She felt another jerk, and then she was flying again, the hydra drifting away from her, much like her blood. A trail of crimson fluid streamed out behind her. Rainbow Dash caught up, cradling the wounded mare in her forelegs as tears streamed down her face.

“Hey there... Sugarcube...” Applejack began to feel very tired. “Mah plan weren’t... Such a good idea... After all...”

“D-don’t talk!” Dash swallowed, looking down at Applejack’s legs, then back to her. “I w-wasn’t fast enough! I’m sorry! Please! Please don’t die!”

A sound like chimes washed in through her ears as the world around her became increasingly muffled.

“Ah ain’t gonna die... Hydra let me go... Ya silly pegasus...”

Rainbow Dash said something, but it was so distant she could barely understand it.

The corners of her vision began to blur even more, a heavy shade following. She looked down to where the hydra had bitten her. Long, gushing wounds marked where the teeth had torn chunks out of her left flank. That much had been expected. Where her left hock should have begun, however, she found only jagged bone protruding from the center of a mangled stump.

“Oh... Sugarcube, we gotta... Go back... Ah... Ah think... Ah left somethin’ behind...”

V ^ ^ V

Rarity had run out of arrows a few minutes before watching Applejack’s daring plan spring into action, but as she and Fluttershy witnessed its grizzly conclusion, the pale unicorn’s expression became very grave.

“Go. Go now.” Rarity looked away from the battle, visibly fighting to keep herself from breaking down. “I’ll be right behind you.”

“Wha-What about the others?”

But as Fluttershy looked around the square, she realized just what losing Applejack, and subsequently Rainbow Dash, had done to the morale of the ponies facing the hydra. Evidently, no one had expected Applejack to sustain such a gruesome injury, herself included. After all the dangerous situations and near misses she had heard stories about or been a part of, the pegasus realized that their luck had finally begun to run out. Another emotion was building in Fluttershy as well. Seeing one of her friends take a potentially fatal wound was the breaking point.

The pegasus stepped up into the window frame, glaring down on the hydra as it slowly limped closer, impeded more by the flurry of knives than it was by its injury, dragging one lifeless head behind it by the neck. Twilight and Vinyl held their ground, valiantly flinging every sharp and blunt object they could magically grasp at the approaching terror. Big Macintosh, Pinkie Pie and Carrot Top were among the few earth ponies still determined to fight, stabbing the hydra in the leg and torso whenever the opportunity presented itself. She could feel Rarity biting her tail, trying to pull her back inside. Her pupils shrank as she glowered back at the unicorn, and Rarity immediately let go.



“Please...” The pegasus’s expression softened as Rarity pleaded, a tear rolling down her cheek. “Please dear, don’t do... Whatever it is you’re about to do! Please!”

“Take care of Angel for me... Okay? And um...” Rarity’s eyes widened with horror as Fluttershy took another step forward, smiling gently. “Thank you for being such a good friend.”

“Fluttershy!”

The pegasus had almost forgotten what it felt like to freefall. The sensation evoked memories of her youth. Taking a deep breath, she spread her wings as wide as she could and began to beat them against the air. The effect was minimal at first, but as she persisted, she felt the slightest bit of lift. The landing was rough, and the stage shook under her hooves, but she had slowed her fall enough to avoid serious injury. The success of one suicidal plan only meant that she could begin the next suicidal plan.

If Twilight Sparkle and Vinyl Scratch noticed her landing not far behind them, they didn’t show it. They had fully invested their concentration into stabbing at the hydra with whatever sharp objects weren’t embedded in the ground, successfully blinding two of the heads. The hydra was nearly close enough to snap at them, steadily dragging itself forward. If anything, it now seemed more interested in mauling the unicorns than eating the ponies jabbing it with sharp objects.

Fluttershy stepped between Twilight and Vinyl, narrowing her eyes. Both unicorns glanced at her, looking mostly confused.

“Fluttershy,” Twilight began. “Don’t-”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered in response.

One of the heads made eye contact, finding itself unable to look away. **“Just who do you think you are, huh?! This is our home! These are good ponies you’ve been terrorizing! How many innocent lives have you ended today just to satisfy your hunger, you monster?!”**

All four heads swiveled toward the pegasus as she took another step forward.

**“You should be ashamed of yourself for what you’ve done today! You’re nothing more than a scaled murderer! I want you to turn around, right now, and go back where you came from! Don’t ever come back here again!”**

Fluttershy jumped off the stage as one of the blinded heads lunged for her, getting a mouthful of splinters. As quickly as she could, the pegasus trotted around the hydra, feeling a chill as it turned to follow, just like she had hoped it would. Even with the hydra’s injury, it would only be a matter of time before it caught up to her. If everything went according to plan, she hoped to get it thoroughly lost in the Everfree forest before that happened. Another head snapped blindly to her left, nearly shearing off a wing.

“What are you waiting for?!” The pegasus looked over the surrounding ponies. “All of you, get out of here!”

Twilight successfully put out another of the hydra's eyes as she shouted, "Fluttershy, there has to be another way! Don't do this!"

*If it can't see, there's less chance it can find its way back to Ponyville... The pegasus galloped a few paces, trying to stay clear of the hydra's biting radius. But once it can't see me... If anypony else makes a sound, it might turn back toward them... I'm just going to have to run and shout...*

The hydra had but a single functioning eye left by the time Fluttershy led it to the center of the town square, gnashing viciously at the air around and in front of the pegasus. Ditzzy Doo was just returning from her emergency flight with Rainbow Dash and Applejack, her mouth agape as she hovered behind the hydra, watching the yellow pegasus lure it back the way it came. Fluttershy wondered for a moment if Ditzzy could lure the hydra with her, but she already knew that the hydra was only following her because of her Stare. The moment she broke eye contact, it was liable to turn around and head right for town hall again.

While Dash might be able to carry her, she knew that Ditzzy could barely carry a flower pot.

*If the hydra can still see, it might be able to follow either of us back home... But... If the hydra goes blind when we're away from the town, Ditzzy might be able to lead it into the forest by making noise! I hope it's stupid enough to fall for that!*

"Twilight! I need you to-" Fluttershy cried out in pain as she stepped on the blade of a knife, cutting a wide gash in the back of her rear hoof.

Everything happened so fast after that, from Fluttershy's perspective. The pink maned pegasus cried out again as she stumbled, falling back and onto her right flank. Ditzzy gasped, attempting to dive in to the rescue, but a lunging head knocked her right out of the air, sending her crashing into the ground well away from the hydra. The hydra's single eye narrowed, all four surviving heads grinning as they loomed over the pegasus.

Twilight's levitation wouldn't be fast enough. Size and weight were never the issue so much as speed.

A drop of rain splashed against Fluttershy's face. She had nearly forgotten the storm brewing overhead. The hydra stood out against the blackness of the sky. A bright flash struck the library's lightning rod, followed by a ground shaking boom. Another drop of rain. The hydra's heads closed in for the kill. Its entire body glowed as Twilight tried to pull it away from her, but the necks had more than enough reach. All at once, they lunged, grinning wickedly around open maws.

Fluttershy whimpered, curling up as tight as she could.

The sky wept.

"Just because I told you I would protect you..." The pegasus opened her eyes to find emerald green irises cutting through the darkness of the downpour. "That does not mean you need to be reckless."

"Mahara..."

The red mare slowly rose into the air.

“I’m a little late, I know, but I hope you can forgive me.”

A bright red stream slipped over Mahara’s lip, racing down her chin.

“Now... I want you to promise me something...”

The hydra’s teeth sank into Mahara’s body, halfway between her fore and hind legs.

“No...” Fluttershy shook her head, frantically trying to get to her hooves. **“No! No! No! Put her DOWN!”**

“I want you to close your eyes. No matter what you hear or feel, don’t open them. Can you do that for me, please?”

The tendrils of flesh she had used to push Fluttershy out of the way slowly unwound, releasing the pegasus and leaving her behind.

“Just close your eyes.”

The red mare smiled, another stream of blood flowing over her lip to join the first.

“Everything is going to be fine.”

Mahara’s eyes began to change color, green rusting to a near fluorescent red.

*“I promise.”*

The change radiated out from her eyes; her skin began to peel like old paint, revealing something black and murky beneath the surface. Her mane became heavy, inky and wet against her face. Her lips flaked away, her teeth growing jagged, like interlocking razors. Her entire form seemed to pulse, dark lines of flesh spiderwebbing across the hydra’s jaws like blood vessels. The hydra made an attempt to spit her out as it gave a muffled shriek, but she seemed to be locking herself into place. The three remaining heads tried desperately to rip her out, but digging into her only seemed to get them covered in the same sticky threads, stretching away from her body and spreading over theirs wherever the hydra made contact.

**“Please don’t watch, Fluttershy...”** Mahara’s voice echoed in a disjointed chorus, overwhelmingly mournful. **“I don’t want you to see me like this...”**

The hydra squirmed. Twilight had long stopped trying to drag it away, watching at a distance with the other ponies out of some combination of horror and morbid curiosity. The lines of black flesh reached all of the hydra’s eye sockets in unison, pushing through scaled eyelids and pulped ocular tissue like roots. The single remaining eye darted frantically, forced to remain open as Mahara pulled its eyelids back, digging in through the tear duct and around the rolling green orb. She had already invaded its nostrils. As the hydra began to gag, Fluttershy was struck with the horrible realization that the black vines were spreading down its throats as well.

**“Please...”**

Irregular bulges shifted and twisted under the hydra's flesh, accompanied by a wet peeling sound.

***“Just close your eyes...”***

Three of the hydra's necks erupted in a shower of gore, the full length of the windpipe exposed as Mahara's blackened flesh spread the gaping incision. They couldn't even squeak. The hydra fell into spasms as the heads attached to the severed necks began to writhe, pulled down by an unseen, likely internal force. One of the heads imploded. Blood and chunks of grey matter mixed with the falling rain as fragments of skull and jaw were wrenched out through the wound in the neck. The flesh inverted. Jagged bone projected from the wet meat beneath the hydra's scalp as the head was turned completely inside out.

And Fluttershy watched; unable to look away, unable to close her eyes.

Two more heads suffered the same horrific fate, completely mutilated and left to fall limp against the ground. The remaining head was the only one that could see. Mahara had forced it to watch the carnage. That single eye rolled down at the pegasus, pleading wordlessly. The pitch black mare paused, directing her attention to Fluttershy.

*Do they... Do they want me to...*

Fluttershy stared back, a shiver passing through her, and slowly, she surveyed her surroundings. The path of destruction which the hydra had carved through Ponyville lay directly behind her. At least three ponies had been brutally devoured. Applejack's fate remained uncertain. The pegasus narrowed her eyes.

“This... All of this... Is because of you. You *deserve* to be punished.”

***“As you wish...”***

The hydra gave a pitiful whimper as black veins began to show through its eye, bulging against the surface, distorting the curve until it collapsed in on itself, leaving a pulp filled crater. She could see Mahara inside the hydra's skull, undulating, constricting.

The final head burst like a grape.

The body followed, several jagged lines severing the flesh as Mahara ripped it apart from within. The remains of the hydra caved in on itself, a flood of torn and mutilated tissue riding a wave of dark blood. The pegasus could feel it washing over her, felt chunks of the hydra brushing against her in passing.

Mahara fell away from the broken, draconic form, staggering. A ray of sunlight pierced through the clouds as the storm subsided. Her black flesh began to bubble, cringing as she took a step toward Fluttershy. The glowing red of her eyes became softer, shifting back to green.

***“I'm sorry... I'm sorry it had to be like this...”***

The clouds quickly began to disperse, sunlight pouring through openings in the sky. Mahara's flesh took

on a lighter shade, the red of her coat slowly replacing her inky appearance. She stood nose to nose with Fluttershy, the green of her eyes looking pale and washed out.

***“But they were right all along...”*** The echo in her voice faded, uniting into a single, weak whisper. “I’m just another monster...”

Several loops of intestine hung free from her body, a section of vertebra exposed to the world. Her gaping wound gushed, but already the fountain of blood was beginning to wane. Her blood and viscera sizzled in the light of day, giving off wisps of smoke.

“And no one can love a monster...”

V ^ ^ V

Mahara collapsed against Fluttershy, and the pegasus went down with her, holding the wounded red mare as they lay in a glimmering pool of hydra blood. Twilight could hear the door to town hall opening behind her, the approach of hooves, the sound of Rarity’s voice, but she couldn’t take her eyes off of what lay before her, steadily spreading over town square like a crimson flood.

*She... Killed the hydra... Just like that...*

Rarity shook her head in the corner of Twilight’s vision, then jumped off the stage and galloped toward the heap of bone, flesh and scale and the two ponies sitting just about in the center of it all. Pinkie Pie followed right behind the pale unicorn, hopping gleefully as though nothing out of the ordinary had occurred, though she did seem to vibrate in the air mid hop at least once.

“She is vulnerable now, it’s time to end this. Follow my lead, there’s no time for remiss.”

“Zecora... She just saved all of us...”

The zebra turned toward Twilight, glaring as she snorted. “No, Twilight, she saved one pony! Do not tell me that she isn’t a phony!”

The purple unicorn took a step forward as more and more ponies approached the pair at the center of the carnage. The sound of Fluttershy’s sobs carried across the open. She turned to Zecora, looking more troubled than anything.

“You’re probably right as far as her origins are concerned, and she has done some terrible things to good ponies in recent days, but Zecora... She just saved the life of my friend.”

“But is Applejack not also your friend?! Where was Mahara when her flesh the hydra sought to rend?!” The zebra stomped, absolutely livid. “Do not be fooled by such an act! She has deceived you before, this is a fact!”

“This wasn’t an act, Zecora. That hydra is *dead* and we’re all still *alive*.” She made her way to the stairs, the zebra staying put as she fumed. “I’m not saying she’s a good pony, don’t get me wrong, but... I don’t think she’s evil... I want to wait to hear back from Celestia before we take any action.”

In the distance, Pinkie suddenly shot into the air with a yelp of surprise, convulsing as she hovered. She dropped casually back to the ground with a distant giggle.

“I can understand why you would hesitate, but this matter is dire! It is not safe to wait!”

Zecora leapt off the stage and broke into a gallop, passing other ponies as they cautiously made their way toward the steadily growing crowd. Twilight took off after her, pushing several ponies aside as she tried to keep up, catching snippets of conversation in the process.

“...never seen anything like it. Dark magic, maybe?...”

“...absolutely horrifying! No pony should be able to...”

“...she step in before the hydra murdered Aloe, huh?!...”

“...the same mare Twilight was warning us about?...”

“...poor Coconut... I was just talking to him yesterday...”

“...even more dangerous than the hydra, in my opinion...”

“Yeah, I guess the doozie just happened!” Pinkie shouted excitedly as Twilight drew nearer. “I wonder what it was if it wasn’t the hydra!”

The next shout came from Fluttershy. “You keep away from her!”

Twilight broke through the crowd to find Fluttershy standing over the wounded red mare, wings spread wide to keep her out of the direct light of the sun. Mahara stirred softly, her eyes heavy as she surveyed the ponies surrounding her. Across from Fluttershy, Zecora crouched low to the ground, a knife clenched between her teeth. The zebra glanced to Twilight, then back to Fluttershy. The crowd behaved in a similar fashion, and then broke into shouting and shoving.

“Let the zebra finish her off!”

“What’s wrong with you?! That mare is a hero!”

“That thing is hardly a mare! It’s no less a monster than the hydra!”

“How many more would be dead right now if she hadn’t intervened?!”

“How many would still be alive if she had killed the hydra sooner?!”

“Everypony, please!” Twilight stomped as she came between Zecora and Fluttershy, hushing the bickering ponies. “It is not our place to decide her fate! Yes, ponies are dead because she didn’t arrive sooner, and yes, she has displayed a powerful and destructive magic that I’m unfamiliar with, but she has saved countless more lives in defeating the hydra than we might have risked trying to finish the fight ourselves! You are all forgetting a fundamental truth about the nature of a pony. There is good and evil in all of us. The fate of this mare should be Princess Celestia’s decision, not the will of an angry mob.”

“She... would be disappointed... I think...” Twilight glanced down at the source of the voice, finding Mahara grinning up at her. “Twilight Sparkle... defending an unholy abomination... Still... I appreciate... your compassion...” The red mare coughed, droplets of blood spattering from her mouth.

“You deserve to be treated fairly,” Twilight replied, “even if you’re a lying fraud.”

The red mare whispered something too faint for her to understand, then smiled, resting her head against the ground. She closed her eyes, gradually going completely still. Twilight parted her lips, her brow knitting as she focused on the red mare’s chest. Fluttershy faltered as she came to the same conclusion, giving a short, dry squeak. As gently as she could, the pegasus nudged Mahara with a forehoof, finding the red mare completely limp. Twilight watched as several of the ponies behind Fluttershy cast their eyes down, others looking on with anger and indifference. Fluttershy tried again, but Mahara did not stir. The pegasus let out a pained gasp, closing her eyes tightly, violently shaking her head.

“*Please no...*” Fluttershy whispered. “*Please... Please wake up...*”

Rarity lifted a hoof to her back, rubbing gently. “I’m so sorry, dear...”

Fluttershy looked to Twilight again, maintaining her stance over the body of her friend.

“Twilight, I need to take her away from here...” Fluttershy trembled as she fought to contain her sorrow, her eyes darting. “I... I don’t want leave her like this... Out in the open... They... They’ll desecrate her! String her up like a scarecrow!”

Zecora spat the knife into her forehooves, lunging for Mahara “And she is deserving of such an end!” Fluttershy shifted into her path, glaring back at the zebra. “Why is this something you refuse to comprehend!?”

Twilight reached out with her magic, but the knife found purchase in Fluttershy’s left shoulder. The zebra froze, eyes wide and terrified as she found her blade embedded in the pegasus’s flesh. Twilight was too startled to gasp, too shocked to even blink, while other ponies recoiled from the sight. Fluttershy refused to budge, still glaring, casting a deep shadow with her full wingspan as she stood over Mahara. An intense silence stretched on for almost a minute, all eyes on the pair.

“I see now that you have already made your decision... Her influence is much stronger than what I had envisioned...” The zebra released the knife, turned from Fluttershy and slowly made her way across the town square.

Several ponies lowered themselves to strike Zecora as she approached. “Let her go,” Twilight commanded, and they reluctantly backed down.

A sea of ponies parted around the zebra. “Twilight Sparkle, my friend, remember my warning.” She looked back to the purple unicorn, her brow furrowed, pained. “Do not be surprised when you wake to greater horror, some morning.”

Zecora vanished into the crowd, the sound of her hooves growing faint under the murmur of hushed conversation.

Fluttershy whimpered softly as she pulled the knife out of her flesh, dropping it with a splash. In that same moment, Pinkie came up beside her, harnessed to a cart.

“I figured you’d probably want one of these...” The pink mare gave a delicate smile that was not returned.

Pinkie went quiet after that, looking down at the rippling pool of blood as Fluttershy and Rarity lifted Mahara’s body into the back of the cart. Twilight, and all the other ponies present, watched as the three of them left Ponyville in the direction of Fluttershy’s cottage.

V ^ ^ V