

Chapter 1

It was a fairly quiet day in most corners of Gaia. Like any other day of spring, it was warm, but not too hot for the races of Gaia to enjoy themselves outside. One might consider it just another day. In one part of the world, though, a rumbling sound split the air, causing the various wildlife to start and flee.

A group of five airships flew through the air, each held aloft by a series of propellers. Colored red, the cannons along the top of each airship left little doubt that these were warships. They flew in a 'V' formation, similar to geese or other birds. On board the airships, ponies clad in red chain armor scurried about, making sure nothing was wrong with the propellers or the hulls.

On the lead airship, a solitary pony stood at the base of the main propeller shaft. It was unique because, in stark contrast to the red chain uniforms of the other ponies, this one was clad head-to-hoof in dark blue plate armor. Hardly anything could be seen of the pony's coat beneath the armor, although a slate-blue tail poked out from the rear. The flared helmet had an opening for a lavender horn to poke through. The visor was currently up, showing the unicorn's soft, rounded face and purple eyes. Currently, though, she was gazing at her hooves, a distant look in her eyes.

"Captain!" came the voice of the helmspony. "We'll be arriving at Colton shortly."

"Understood," the armored pony replied listlessly, not looking up. Her response caused a few of the red-clad ponies to pause in their duties.

One stallion turned to his companion. "Captain Twilight's been out of it for a bit, huh?"

The other soldier, a mare, snorted. "After what we did? I don't blame her at all."

Another mare walked up to them, grimacing. "Orders are orders, but this? Killing innocents just to get at the crystals?"

Twilight Sparkle, dark knight and captain of the Kingdom of Colton's Red Wings, sighed. Her thoughts turned back to the events that her subordinates were discussing.

A trio of mages stood between the Elder of Maresidia and the invaders from Colton. The soldiers advanced, as Twilight entered the room. Behind the Elder, she could see the

crystal that her king wanted. She gave a curt nod to her soldiers, who drew their weapons. The pair of black mages saw this, and began their arcane chants. Two soldiers leapt at each mage, slaying them before they could finish. The lone white mage looked around, fearful, then broke and tried to run. A pair of blades ended her life quickly.

Now only the Elder stood between the soldiers and the crystal. Twilight stepped forward, as her soldiers cleared a path for her. The Elder tried to stand his ground, but she flung him aside with her telekinesis. When a couple of soldiers raised their blades to end the Elder's life, Twilight stopped them with a raised hoof. She stepped onto the dais that held the crystal, and levitated it into her saddlebags. As she stepped off the dais, she looked at the Elder with sympathy, before leaving.

"The Red Wings are supposed to protect ponies, not harm them!" a crewpony shouted.

The shout roused Twilight from her introspection, and she raised her head, stepping forward. "That's enough!" she barked, silencing the chattering soldiers.

"But, Captain!" one of the original mares protested. "You can't possibly condone what we've done!"

"Listen up, all of you," continued Twilight, ignoring the protest. "His Majesty, King Colton, concluded that the Maresidians' knowledge of the crystal was a threat to our kingdom, and so he ordered this raid. For Colton to flourish, we need the crystals, and we will retrieve them... through any means necessary." Her tone, while strong at the beginning, veered into uncertainty towards the end.

"Captain..." chorused the soldiers nearby. Even the helmspony tossed a glance back towards his commander.

Before anything else could be said, a shout came from the bow of the ship.
"MONSTERS! DEAD AHEAD!"

Twilight banished her uncertainties in an instant. "ALL HOOVES, BATTLE STATIONS!" she cried, reaching up to close her visor. Soldiers scurried to the cannons, training them on the oncoming monsters. The air was soon thick with the roar of cannon fire, and the smell of lit gunpowder.

A trio of winged eyeballs, ahrimans, managed to slip past the barrage of cannon fire. Twilight narrowed her eyes, levitating a red-colored fang from her saddlebags. She flung

it at the center ahriman, and hit it square in its single eye. When the fang shattered, it burst in a brilliant plume of flame, incinerating all three monsters.

These enchanted items certainly are useful, Twilight thought. *Just another reason to regret having to kill as many Maresidians as we did...* A pained cry from behind caught her attention, however. Whirling, she saw that one of the cannon operators had been knocked over by another monster. She grimaced, racing over. "Are you alright?" she asked.

Before the injured soldier could answer, another shouted, "There are more incoming!"

"Curses!" Twilight spat, facing the newest threat. It was an enormous bird, a zuu if she recalled correctly. She drew a blue fang from her saddlebags, and flung it. The zuu foolishly snapped the fang up in its beak. Its head was immolated seconds later by an impressive display of lightning, and the great bird fell to the ground far below.

Looking around, Twilight could see no more monsters, not on her ship nor on the others. Raising her visor, she barked out, "HEAD COUNT! Are we missing anypony?"

A few minutes later, after receiving signals from the other ships that everyone was accounted for, her own ship's headcount ended. "We're all here, ma'am," a soldier said. Twilight sighed in relief. No pony had been lost... good.

One soldier, however, spoke up. "There've been a lot more monsters than normal lately..."

Twilight frowned. "Is this a sign of things to come...?"

The silence was only broken by the sounds of the airships' propellers.

"Captain!" called the helmspony, who hadn't budged during the whole skirmish. "We're now over Colton."

Note to self: give that stallion a raise for bravery under fire, thought Twilight. Out loud, she barked, "Everypony, prepare for landing! Once we're down, return to the barracks! I'll deliver the crystal to the King personally."

The town of Colton lay along a thoroughfare that led directly to the nearby castle. The town's eastern and western borders did not extend past the lines made by the castle's

eastern and western walls. To some, it may have seemed a silly idea, giving potential invaders a direct line to the castle. But to the founders of Colton, it was ideal; such a castle-and-town design would minimize civilian casualties in the event of invasion.

The castle itself was quite wide, and consisted of a main keep and two large towers, one on the northwestern end of the walls, one on the northeast. The northwest tower belonged to Twilight Sparkle, and she used its topmost room as her sleeping quarters.

The sight of the Red Wings landing was, by this point, commonplace to the ponies of Colton, only a few sparing more than a glance towards the airships as they landed and their crew disembarked, heading for the castle. As her troops filed off towards their barracks, Twilight kept going straight ahead to the stairwell leading to the throne room. Along the way, however, she was intercepted by another pony.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the triumphant hero!" said the azure unicorn that hailed Twilight. She was clad in the same red armor as the other soldiers of Colton, but she wore a flowing white cape as well, nearly a match for her cornflower blue mane. Her violet eyes, similar in hue to Twilight's own, had a glint of condescension in them. "At least, I assume you're triumphant! You've yet to fail a mission for the King, after all."

Twilight sighed. "Yes, Captain Trixie, I was successful. The Water Crystal is in our hooves, bought with the blood of Maresidian innocents."

Trixie, Captain of the Royal Guard, narrowed her eyes. "Pity? From a dark knight? Hmph." The azure unicorn turned away from Twilight. "Whatever. Come along, Captain Twilight. His Majesty, King Colton, awaits."

Twilight followed her fellow Captain, carefully concealing her irritation. She and Trixie had never seen eye-to-eye. While she was humble and concerned for her fellow pony, Trixie was always showboating, and cared little for the feelings of others. Twilight sometimes wondered if perhaps Trixie had chosen the wrong profession; if the azure mare should have been a traveling performer rather than a guard captain.

She was brought out of her musings by an armor-clad hoof. Looking up, she realized that they were in front of the doors to the throne room, and that Trixie was holding her back. "My apologies, Captain Twilight, but I need to have a word with the King alone." Not even giving her a chance to answer, Trixie proceeded to step into the throne room, shutting the door behind her.

Twilight frowned. That was another thing that worried her, in addition to the increased number of monsters. Trixie and King Colton had had many private meetings lately.

Come to think of it, it was after one of those meetings that we got our orders to attack Maresidia. Hmm... She shook her head violently to dispel those thoughts. *No, I can't assume anything. For all I know, I'm being paranoid.*

Her musings were interrupted as the door opened. Trixie stood on the other side. "His Majesty will see you now," the azure unicorn said with a smile. As Twilight walked forward, Trixie fell into step beside her. Pausing just before the steps, Twilight offered the King a bow.

King Colton was an earth pony with a white coat and a brilliant red mane. Well, it had been brilliant, earlier in life. Now, he was getting on in years, and streaks of grey could be seen. Nonetheless, his voice was strong as he addressed Twilight. "Welcome home, Captain. I am told that you have the Water Crystal?"

"Yes, your Majesty," Twilight replied. She levitated the crystal out of her saddlebags, and floated it over to the King.

King Colton reached out with his hooves, gripping the crystal between them. Trixie came up next to him, her eyes wide with wonder. "So, this is the Water Crystal?" the unicorn marveled.

"Indeed it is. Quite a sight, isn't it?" As he tucked the crystal away, he waved at Twilight with a hoof. "You are dismissed, Twilight."

Twilight offered another bow, and turned to leave. She hadn't gone more than a few steps before she stopped. She hung her head. *I should just leave, but...* Raising her head, she spun around, approaching the throne again. Trixie and King Colton were discussing something in hushed whispers. Twilight took a breath. "Your Majesty!"

The two whispering ponies jumped, spinning to face Twilight. "Yes, Twilight?" asked the King, voice placid.

"Is there something wrong?" added Trixie, her voice equally calm.

Twilight took another breath. "Your Majesty, forgive my impertinence, but what exactly are your intentions? My troops are... to put it mildly, displeased after the raid on Maresidia. They feel our orders were too harsh."

Before she could continue, King Colton raised a hoof. "Is yours among the voices that say such things?"

Twilight's eyes widened. "No, Your Majesty! I only wanted – "

"Silence!" The King cut her off. "Dissension leads only to treason, Twilight Sparkle. And that is something I can not and will not tolerate. You are hereby relieved of command of the Red Wings."

Twilight was aghast; this wasn't what she'd meant at all! "Your Majesty!" She tried to step forward, but a gesture from Trixie had two royal guards in front of her, swords drawn.

The King continued as though the interruption hadn't happened. "If you wish to earn back my favor, then slay the phantom beast that lurks within the Cavern of Mist. Afterwards, deliver this Carnelian Signet to the village beyond the cavern." He withdrew the ring from his robes, and flung it at Twilight, who caught it by reflex. "You will depart at dawn tomorrow."

Twilight attempted to protest, but she was forced back a pace by the royal guards. Glancing at Trixie, she saw the guard captain had a very smug look on her face. Grimacing, Twilight tried to come up with a way to reason with the King. Before she could, however, the door to the throne room banged open, and a purple blur zoomed in, a rainbow contrail in its wake. Twilight mentally groaned, knowing that this wouldn't help.

"Now wait just a minute!" A sky-blue pegasus said as the blur resolved into her. Her rainbow-striped tail was the only part of her distinctive traits that wasn't covered by her purple, draconian-shaped armor. "You're demoting her just for asking a question? That's just unfair!"

"Rainbow..." warned Twilight, but the pegasus ignored her.

"Are you just going to demote anyone who even tries to – "

"ENOUGH!!" roared King Colton, silencing the pegasus. He glared at her, as did Trixie and, to a lesser extent, Twilight. "Rainbow Dash, you know better than to address me in such a way! But if you are so worried for Twilight, then by all means, go with her! And don't come back without delivering the signet!" With a curt nod, the guards forced both Twilight and Rainbow through the door.

Outside, Twilight continued glaring at the pegasus. "You did that on purpose, didn't you?" She had dropped the formal tone that she normally used in the King's presence.

"Eh-heh..." Rainbow Dash, commander of Colton's dragoon forces, rubbed a hoof

behind her head in embarrassment. "Maybe. As if I'd let you go off to that cave all alone." She threw a hoof around Twilight's shoulders, being careful since they were both wearing full-plate armor. "Come on, one monster killing, one little delivery, and you'll be back in the air in no time at all."

Twilight sighed. "I hope it's that easy. I think I need to read up on this 'phantom beast'." She began walking away.

"Oh, get some actual sleep for once, would you?" quipped Rainbow. "I'll do the research this time. Leave everything to me."

Twilight blinked, but then smiled at Rainbow. "Thanks. Sleep sounds good..." She walked away as Rainbow flew off into a nearby room to begin planning.

Twilight retrieved a few items from a storeroom on her way to her tower. *I know Rainbow said to leave everything to her, but she's forgetful sometimes*, she thought. She continued down the hall, thinking about what other preparations she could make. Before she could get out into the courtyard, however, a voice called out to her.

"Twilight!" Turning around, the dark knight found herself facing another unicorn. Unlike Trixie, however, Twilight felt no irritation speaking to the white mare before her. Even if she did spend forever and a day on her mane and tail.

"There you are, darling, I heard you'd returned!" Rarity, resident white mage and dressmaker, said as she trotted down the stairwell. "I'm rather put out that you didn't tell me you were leaving in the first place, dear. Are you quite alright?"

Twilight sighed. Rarity was a little fussy, but the white mare meant well. "I'm fine, Rarity. Physically, anyway, aside from a little fatigue. Wish I could say the same for the Maresidians..."

Rarity's blue eyes narrowed. "Well, I can see you need your rest, Twilight. I'll visit you in your tower later, okay?"

Twilight was grateful that her helmet covered most of her cheeks, so Rarity couldn't see her blush. "O-okay," she said, cursing the stutter that appeared.

Rarity didn't notice, though, and simply trotted back up the stairwell after giving Twilight one last look. The dark knight sighed. *That mare... I wonder why she fell for me?*

Twilight was far from blind, or stupid. She knew that the fashionista had feelings for her. The problem was, Twilight wasn't sure if she reciprocated those feelings. As a dark knight, Twilight was trained to harden her heart against emotion. Yet Rarity and, to a lesser extent, Rainbow Dash, had managed to find places in that hardened heart. Rainbow was a good friend, while Rarity... Rarity wanted to be more.

Twilight yawned, breaking her chain of thought. "Bah, I'll worry about it later," she muttered. Looking up, she blinked as she realized she was outside her tower. She paused for a moment, then shrugged as she got ready to open the door.

"Twilight Sparkle, my dear friend! It's been some time, how have you been?" Twilight sighed, turning away from the door to greet another pony in her life. Though, perhaps 'pony' wasn't quite the right word. Her coat was a dusty grey, with a darker grey set of stripes running across her body. Her mane and tail likewise had alternating stripes of white and dark grey in them. She wore blue coveralls that hid most of her body, and a set of saddlebags that carried much of her portable engineering and alchemical equipment.

"I've been better, Zecora," Twilight answered honestly.

Zecora, the lead airship engineer for Colton, blinked at the lacklustre response. "Why, what is wrong, dear Twilight? Your eyes are as dark as your armor tonight." As was her custom, the zebra mare spoke in rhyme. She'd confessed to Twilight once that she did so in homage to the zebra homeland, which had been lost long ago to monsters. The remaining zebra now lived in the village of Mytherein, on an island in the middle of the ocean, co-existing with minotaurs and griffons. Zecora had come to Colton, though, to study new and improved means of transportation. Through working for the King, she had come to know and befriend Twilight, Rainbow, and Rarity.

"Well, I retrieved the crystal from Maresidia, as ordered. But we had to kill several of the mages to do so. When I told King Colton that my troops weren't happy about it, he removed me from command of the Red Wings," Twilight explained in a dull tone.

The zebra's eyes flashed. "Removed from command?! An absurd move! What will the Red Wings do without you?" She sighed, pawing the ground with a hoof. "The King's actions mystify me. I do not know what his intentions could be."

"I'm as confused as you are, Zecora," Twilight said. "I've been asked to slay the phantom beast in the Cavern of Mist, then to deliver this Carnelian Signet to the village beyond."

Zecora nodded. "Swiftly you must do this task. I will rest easy once you come back.

Now, I believe it is time for me to go. My roommate has a temper, as you well know." As Twilight chuckled, Zecora turned and trotted off.

Twilight sighed again, then turned around to enter the tower. After greeting her maid, who assured her that her room was spotless, Twilight climbed up to her room. She then took off her helmet, shaking out her mane. Piece by piece, she removed her armor, until she was down to the leather jerkin she wore underneath. Stripping that off, she placed the armor on one ponequin in her room, the jerkin on the other. Her lavender hide was now bare to the world. On her flank, her cutie mark of six stars was revealed.

Twilight climbed into her bed, pulling up the covers. Gazing out of the window, she sighed. "What's come over King Colton, recently?" she wondered aloud. "He's become obsessed with the crystals. And ordering us to kill innocents to retrieve them..." She shook her head violently. "Still, I can't defy him. How could I? He raised Rainbow and I like we were his own foals. This will all turn out right in the end. I'm sure of it." With that reassurance, Twilight closed her eyes to go to sleep.

A few minutes later, just as Twilight was beginning to doze off, she heard hoofsteps on the stairs. Blinking rapidly, she sat up, as Rarity stepped in. The white mare was far from pleased. "Twilight Sparkle, what is the meaning of this?"

"What do you mean?" Twilight asked, suppressing a yawn.

"You know full well what I mean!" snapped Rarity. "Rainbow Dash told me that the two of you are off to kill some phantom beast tomorrow! Why? You only just returned from Maresidia! Can't the King give you some time off?"

Shrugging, Twilight turned away from Rarity. "You know as well as I do that the King's word is law, Rarity."

She could almost *hear* Rarity's frown. "Twilight, what is wrong with you? You're acting... rather oddly."

"Nothing's wrong, Rarity," Twilight replied, a little quickly.

"That's not what you said earlier," scoffed the white mare. "Twilight, look at me."

For a few moments, Twilight considered just lying down to ignore her. But she knew Rarity wouldn't leave just like that. The lavender unicorn sighed. "I had to kill several Maresidians just to get to the crystal. I'd never turned my blade against another pony before. I guess as a dark knight, I can't avoid this. Soon, I'll probably stop feeling

remorse for the lives I take."

Rarity stepped closer, her frown replaced by a look of concern. "You and I both know that will never happen, Twilight Sparkle."

Twilight sighed, flopping back onto her bed. "I wish I was as certain as you. But I can't defy the King. By the Sun, I'm a coward..."

"Twilight Sparkle, you are not a coward!" Rarity exclaimed. "How could you even say such a thing? This isn't the Twilight I love!"

She clapped a hoof to her mouth as she said that, and spun to face away from Twilight, who'd sat up to face her. For a moment, there was an uncomfortable silence between the two.

"You leave for Mist at dawn, yes?" Rarity finally asked, her voice calm.

"That's right," Twilight replied. "But don't worry about me. Rainbow's coming, too. We'll be fine."

Rarity nodded, and began walking to the stairwell. As she reached it, she turned back to face Twilight. "Come back to me in one piece." With that, she trotted down the stairs.

Twilight looked after her for a moment. "Thanks, Rarity. But you know that we can't be together. A dark knight and a white mage... it would never work out between us."

She laid back down, facing the window, as she drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, Twilight met Rainbow in the foyer. Both were fully dressed in their armor. Rainbow gave Twilight a smirk. "Ready for some action, Twi?"

Despite herself, Twilight grinned back. "You know it. Let's kill us some monsters."

Rainbow laughed. "Lead the way, oh mighty slayer of toads."

Chuckling, the two mares departed the castle.

And so, the dark knight Twilight Sparkle was stripped of her command as captain of the Red Wings. She and the dragoon commander Rainbow Dash head toward the dark valley that houses the village of Mist.

With the dawn of the airship came the realization of Colton's dreams, but also the beginning of its militarism.

The Royal Air Force, the Red Wings, soon marked Colton as the leading superpower of the world. Now, with monsters plaguing the land, Colton uses its power to collect the world's crystals. Why?

The crystals silently shed their light...