

Within and Without
by [Cloudy Skies](#)
Chapter 10

It had very nearly gone wrong. Even as old Chief Blackclaw departed in a fit of rage and Brenliana began addressing the assembled griffins as *Chief* Brenliana, Twilight was still nervously watching the two contestants. Apparently, it had taken the pair all of two and a half seconds to forget what was at stake. The griffin and the pegasus jostled for position as they ascended, Rainbow Dash nearly missing the entrance to the next cave on the route.

At the top of the mountain, Gilda still came out slightly ahead after the mess of tunnels that were so familiar to her, but Rainbow Dash was practically nipping at her tail as they started their descent. In the dive, Gilda was outmatched. The smaller pegasus was an indistinct blue rainbow-trailing blur against the grey of the mountain until she crashed to the ground next to Pinkie Pie. Gilda followed seconds later, landing a small distance away.

Gilda begun walking towards Dash, obviously still exhilarated and running on adrenaline from the flight, but her grin faded bit by bit as Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash embraced. The two ponies shared a kiss, eyes closed and oblivious to the world around them. Catching Twilight and the others watching her, Gilda gave them a stiff smile before she flew over to join Brenliana and the throng of griffins instead.

Pinkie Pie finally got to host her party.

In the aftermath of the race, Brenliana declared every single griffin in the tribe off-duty and fliers were sent out to bring home those who were on patrol. The festivities were to be held in the village at ground level, out of respect for the ponies. Twilight had no idea how griffins usually celebrated, but Pinkie Pie was quick to throw herself into the thick of the preparations of the party. Before noon, she had half the town helping her cover the seaside village in paper lanterns, streamers, banners and balloons. It amazed Twilight how much Pinkie had managed to fit into the one saddlebag. She knew she shouldn't be surprised, of course, but she was.

For the first time since their arrival in Clawford, Twilight finally had some time to explore the village, and she found it a lot more pleasant than she had expected. Perhaps it was due to the change in leadership, or simply the impending party, but as she wound between the low and simple houses, Clawford simply felt more *alive* than it had before. Griffins were chatting amicably, carrying food to large wooden tables ferried down from the mountain, and they all seemed in a good mood. Every time a patrol of griffins came back home, a deafening round of cheers went up.

Eventually, Twilight had managed to find her way to the coast. It took longer than she'd expected because she'd been stopped numerous times by griffins thanking her for her help. Even though she told them she had done nothing at all, that Rainbow Dash was the pony of the

day, they would hear nothing of it. They knew that the ponies were the reason they had a new chief, and that was all the common griffin in the street needed to know. When Twilight approached Fluttershy on the rocky shores of the great ocean, she was wearing a necklace of seashells that she'd failed to find a way to politely refuse.

"So. How's the ocean?" Twilight asked, sitting down on her haunches. The butter-colored pegasus was sitting on a large rock, watching the seemingly endless expanse of blue. A couple of large stone buildings dominated the shore on their sides, the smell of fish dried, drying and fresh all intermingling with the salty tang of the ocean. The little spot Fluttershy had chosen, however, was bare. A seagull was perched on the pegasus' head. The avian shifted a little when Twilight came near, but Fluttershy soothed it with a soft noise.

"It's very nice," Fluttershy said. "The fishes don't have that much to say, but the seagulls and terns and the oyster-nibblers, they're all sweet." Only now did Twilight notice that the pegasus' hooves and face were wet.

"Been swimming?" Twilight asked with a grin.

Fluttershy shook her head and looked a little embarrassed. "I was going to try, but it didn't go so well. Oh, and I was hoping to see a whale. Kinther told me they breach off the shore here sometimes, but it's very rare this late in fall."

Twilight levitated the paper and coals she'd borrowed from Rarity out from her bags. Writing with a piece of sketching charcoal was hardly the most elegant of solutions, but her quills and inks were back at the fort. "Huh. How long has it been since we left, anyway?" Twilight asked with a weak little chuckle. Dear Princess Celestia, she began writing.

"Just two and a half weeks, I think," Fluttershy replied, flinching as the seagull on her head took off. "I hope Spike is okay. And Angel bunny, too. Oh, and I had a bluejay with a broken wing in recovery. I wonder how she's doing."

"Oh I'm sure they're all fine," Twilight said, though in truth she wondered, too. Had it been that long already? What was Spike doing now? Had Cheerilee taken care of him and the library? It felt as if though she had lost some days somewhere along the road during the sleepless haze.

Dear Princess Celestia, I am writing this report to you from the village of Clawford, where the former chief has been forced to resign his position following a traditional ritual challenge. She'd written three letters earlier today, and hoped to be up to date before the party started.

"I know they are. Okay, I mean," Fluttershy agreed as Twilight kept writing at a furious speed. It would suffice if she understood her own words when she re-wrote the letters later. Or better yet, had Spike re-write them.

The pegasus hummed and smiled. "And I'm glad Gilda is so... nice. I hope she'll be okay here in Clawford."

"Well, don't kid yourself. She's not that nice," came Rainbow Dash's voice from behind them. Twilight stiffened and flung her coal clean into the ocean in shock, and Fluttershy slid off her rock with a squeak. The blue pegasus pony was grinning in triumph.

"Don't do that!" Twilight huffed.

"Did you guys know they're actually making me 'honorary wingpony'? They're making the title just for me!" Dash exclaimed, ignoring Twilight.

"Oh, I'm so happy for you!" Fluttershy said with a gasp as she flew back up on her rock.

"This means what, exactly?" Twilight asked, arching a brow.

"I have *no* idea," Dash admitted. "But it sounds awesome!"

"Maybe you get some scary warpaint for your little feathers!" Pinkie Pie suggested as she came hopping along from the direction of the village. Twilight, who had her back to Pinkie, scattered her papers everywhere as she jumped. Fluttershy immediately began helping Twilight gather the letters back up before the wind could steal them away.

"Or maybe a mask!" Pinkie gasped as she bounced over to Rainbow Dash, her cloak looking absolutely ridiculous as it billowed around her every time she took to the air in her trademark 'gait'. "You could get a mask that makes you look like a shark or an ostrich! Oo, or maybe a sunflower! Sunflowers can be ferocious!"

"Or maybe a dragon!" Dash suggested, grinning and draping a wing over Pinkie.

"Um, maybe not a dragon? Dragons are scary. I think a sunflower would be much nicer," Fluttershy said as she gave Twilight the last of the errant letters.

Twilight tucked all the papers inside her cloak. She would have to finish writing later. She could see Applejack and Rarity approaching, along with Gilda.

"Silly filly, you think dragons are scary?" Pinkie asked, giggling. She hopped over to Fluttershy and looked her straight in the eyes. "Tell me, have you ever seen a dragon and a sunflower in the same room, huh?"

"Uh, I- I guess not?" Fluttershy said, retreating a little. The pink earth pony leaned forwards, stretching her neck to its fullest as she ground her snout against Fluttershy's.

"Exactly. Because dragons *know better*," Pinkie finished menacingly before returning to stand over by Dash. Fluttershy's pupils shrank to pinpricks. She had a lot of sunflowers back in her garden.

"Told you they'd be here," Applejack said to Rarity and Gilda as the three of them drew near. "Saw Twilight sneaking away before they could draft her to help hang up the banners."

"I'm sure that a couple of hundred *winged* griffins can manage to fasten a few banners to the rooftops," Twilight protested.

"I'm certain they can, but we need a solution to the food and seating issue," Rarity said. "Unless you want to have raw fish on your table. I mean, they have plenty of mushrooms and some vegetables. I just don't like the idea of, well," she sniffed. "It's barbaric."

Fluttershy swallowed and turned to look into the waters of the nearby ocean.

"We're the guests here," Twilight said, trying to be diplomatic about the whole issue. It was hard to avoid noticing Fluttershy's discomfort. "We could just ask to be seated at the end of a table and see if they can't accommodate us. I'm sure they'll be nice about it. Are you going to be okay, Fluttershy?"

"I will," Fluttershy said with a nod, though she still looked a little unsure. "There are predators and prey out there, you know. It's, um, I guess, natural?" she finished with a brave smile.

"Natural, huh," Applejack said with a great snort. Gilda was apparently very keenly aware of what a minefield the conversation was, keeping very quiet.

"I suppose that's as much as we can hope for," Rarity relented. "It will be interesting to see how they celebrate. If it's anything like their politics, though, consider me sceptical."

"Hey, we know how to party hard," Gilda said with a glare.

"That is precisely what I fear," Rarity quipped.

"Anyway! How are the preparations coming along?" Twilight asked, trying to avert a disaster, seeing the looks the unicorn and griffin were giving each other. Pinkie Pie perked up at this, having been busy trying to convince Rainbow Dash to try on her cloak.

"Oh, it's going to be great! I think there are more griffins here than there are ponies in all of Ponyville! That officially makes this the biggest party ever! I mean, okay, so maybe the gala was bigger, but that wasn't a *party* and you know it." She pouted as if daring anypony to

disagree. No pony did, and so she went on.

"I mean, they're talking about partying all day, all week! I don't know if they know how to play pin the tail on the pony, but I was thinking of maybe making it pin the tail on the politically correct indistinct four-legged blob instead! And we should totally make a conga line. Think about it, I bet we could make it go around the entire mountain!" The party pony's eyes were wide with wonder, her smile threatening to split her face in twain.

"Sounds great, Pinkie, but I think we should get going again tomorrow," Twilight said almost apologetically. "As much as I would love a full week of celebration and fun, we need to get back."

Noting Pinkie's disappointment, Rainbow Dash frowned at Twilight. "Aw c'mon Twilight, we saved like three days because we got a ride here. I may not be an egghead like you, but I'm pretty sure that means we get to party for three more days, right?"

"It's okay," Pinkie Pie said, shaking her head. She offered Twilight a little smile before nuzzling Rainbow Dash. "This party is a teensy-weensy thing compared to the real party that's going on inside me. And if you're with me, that party goes on forever."

Rainbow Dash blushed but did not shy away. The pegasus put a hoof around Pinkie's withers and grinned. "Heh, well, that works too, I guess. If you want."

"I still don't get it," Gilda commented at the display. She was the only one not smiling, but she looked confused rather than angry. "But I don't wanna know, either. I think the party is getting started, so... later!" With those words, the griffin took off, heading over the rooftops towards the center of the village.

The ponies started heading in the same direction by hoof moments later, all expertly herded by the single party pony's insistence that they couldn't and shouldn't miss a moment of the fun. It soon became apparent that griffins were indeed already congregating in the center of the village, clustering around tables. A band consisting of four young and wild-maned griffins was warming up. Apparently, the quartet was comprised of four guitarists. Pinkie Pie was lost in the crowd within seconds, announcing her intent to set up some games, and Rainbow Dash followed.

"What is it she don't get, then?" Applejack finally asked. The four remaining ponies were stood by the corner of a house, slightly more hesitant to join the horde of griffins.

"Gilda, about Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash? I did wonder at first, too, but not any more," Rarity said, shrugging. "They're great for each other, and I think they even need each other. I don't think Rainbow Dash will ever admit it, of course, and Pinkie Pie might not even realize it."

Applejack cocked a brow. "Maybe, wouldn't know about that, but Ah guess Gilda's still a bit sore, and Ah don't blame her for that. It's got to sting."

"She'll have plenty to do if she's staying in Clawford and helping Brenliana," Fluttershy commented. "Sounds like the old chief did a lot of damage, but look at how happy they all are now. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Well, I'm happy for them," Twilight smiled. "Rainbow's been a little, um, weird lately. Perhaps she'll be herself again now. Let's go find them and find out? I'm no Pinkie Pie, but I'll happily take some of the happiness that they're offering at this party right now!"

The party went on well into the night. The dark was powerless before the lanterns, candles, torches and magical lights all scattered around village. Due to the simple layout, without any tall towers or large buildings to navigate by, it was easy to get lost. Around every corner, more cheerful griffins and tables laden with food waited. They had their own table somewhere, free of fish and meats, but Twilight could have sworn it moved around as the evening went on. She hadn't seen it for well over an hour.

Pinkie's politically correct game of pin the tail on the blob was well received, though whether they played it as a game, a joke or a cultural statement, Twilight couldn't tell. She participated in a conga line at some point, and could only assume Pinkie was in the lead somewhere far ahead of her. Later still, Dash soared overhead, chased by dozens of young griffins. Twilight assumed and hoped that it was just some sort of game, but more than one table was upended in the low-flying chase that wound all around town.

It was well past midnight when Twilight finally retired. Brenliana had offered the ponies the use of her home for the night, and they had graciously accepted. When Twilight entered, she wasn't sure she had the right house until she spotted Rarity sitting on the hay in a corner that made up the bed of the humble abode.

The white unicorn wiped her eyes discreetly and gave Twilight a brief smile. "Ah, hello Twilight. I was just going to sleep, actually."

"Rarity? Are you okay?" Twilight asked as she headed over to stand before her. It was fairly obvious Rarity had been crying, but Twilight wasn't about to pretend not to have noticed, much to Rarity's chagrin.

"Don't be ridiculous, Twilight. Why wouldn't I be okay?" Rarity asked, almost indignant. "I am thrilled that Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie have each other, and seeing them happy makes me happy, too, right?"

It had been a question. Twilight moved over to sit at Rarity's side, as close as she could get. She had known this would resurface at some point. "Rarity, when we meet up with Princess Luna again, I am going to tell her that either she explains to you what she knows about Blueblood, or we're going home," Twilight said.

"Twilight," Rarity said, gasping. "It's not- you can't mean that! I just-"

"Shush!" Twilight snapped, and Rarity stared at the purple unicorn as if she had grown an extra horn.

It wasn't fair. A lot of things that Luna did weren't fair. She was secretive and plotting, and even when she deigned to explain things, more questions popped up that she wouldn't answer. Twilight had no problems slowly peeling back the layers when it came to the questions of the past and matters arcane. She didn't even mind the fact that there was obviously more reasons for this journey about which the princess had offered no comment. All these things she could live with because she knew the princess would get to it in her own time. Luna had shown willingness to talk, she just needed time.

She drew the line here, though. It wasn't right to single Rarity out and make her suffer like this. "I am serious. She's ignored you outright, and I want to know why, too," Twilight said, frowning at the whole issue. She didn't like the idea of confronting the princess about it, and the thought of parting ways with the princess was even less appealing still, but some things were simply more important.

"It's not like that," Rarity muttered. The fashionista was not often sullen like this, but there was no exaggerated drama to her expression this time. "I just have to know."

"Why, though?" Twilight asked. "Would you give him a second chance?"

Rarity lowered her eyes at this and shook her head slowly. "What else is there for me to do? He's was supposed to give me purpose. Without him..."

Twilight sighed. She had heard this all before. Slowly and calmly, she got up and walked over to Rarity's nearby saddlebags, opening one of them.

"Twilight? Whatever are you doing?" Rarity asked, alarmed. She was up in a second, trotting over to Twilight. "Those are my saddlebags, you'll get everything in disarray!"

Undaunted, Twilight levitated up a large sheaf of papers. Rarity tried to wrest them from her, her horn glowing brilliantly, but all of Rarity's sketches, drawings and notes were surrounded in a purple glow as impenetrable as Twilight's resolve. The white unicorn didn't hold a candle to Twilight's grip, and Twilight's stare was twice as intense as the magic she wielded.

"*This*," Twilight said, spreading everything out in a circle around them. "This is part of the Rarity I know." The papers had formed a near-perfect globe around the pair of unicorns. They were surrounded by dress designs, landscapes, notes on fabrics, fashion and culture, all lit up by the glow of Twilight's horn. The floor under them was the only evidence that they were still in the same house, surrounded as they were by colorful fields, dark forests, regal mountains, stark tundra and the churning waters of the ocean.

Singling out a particular sketch, she brought it over to hover in front of them so they both could see. "What's this?" Twilight demanded.

"It's... a picture of the Oakwall forest with some notes on travel wear and fabric choice," Rarity replied nervously. "Can you let me out, please? Twilight?"

"This?" Twilight asked, bringing forth another sketch.

"My thoughts on streamlining the production of cloaks and color themes inspired by landscapes," Rarity said. "Twilight?"

"And this?" Twilight pressed.

"Ah. Well, I ran out of some of the color tools I use, so I- why are you asking me this?" Rarity stopped herself.

"Because," Twilight implored, "these are the works of a talented and skilled pony with vision, taste and drive. These are ideas and thoughts of the owner of Carousel Boutique, one of the finest fashion stores in all of Equestria. A wonderful pony." Twilight smiled gently. "*This* is you, Rarity."

Rarity was stunned. The white unicorn pony did not move even as Twilight neatly collapsed the globe to re-stack the papers, slipping them neatly into the saddlebag again with practiced ease. Paper and magic were two things she knew well. She didn't give the fashionista so much as a moment to recover, though. "In fact, it's just part of who you are. Do you know what else you are? You are the very best friend anypony could have. You're strong," Twilight said.

"You're generous," agreed a voice behind her. Fluttershy.

Twilight turned to find all their pony friends standing by the door. They must have entered while they were obscured by Rarity's art, and now stood shoulder to shoulder looking at the two unicorns.

"And clever," Applejack added, taking off her hat.

"Really cool, too. Almost as cool as me," Rainbow Dash offered with a grin.

"And totally drop-dead knock-out pretty! I mean, wow!" Pinkie Pie said with a bounce.

"Which is why you don't *need* Blueblood," Twilight told the still-silent unicorn. "Perhaps he really is super swell and everything you ever wished for. I hope Luna sets you up for a date with him, and that you have a great time while he explains how he hit his head in the bathtub that morning. Just please try to remember that you're more than this, Rarity." Twilight looked at Rarity, hoping for any sign of recognition, any indication that the words made it through. "You don't need him," she repeated.

Rarity was quiet for the longest time. The other came close, and Fluttershy wordlessly hugged Rarity. The others joined in, one by one, and Rarity hugged back tightly as she replied. "Thank you, everypony. I'll... think on it. No need to trouble the princess on my behalf, Twilight. I think I have a handle on it." She was smiling serenely as she let go, looking over at all her friends.

"You sure about that sugarcube? Because Ah say t'aint right, still," Applejack muttered.

"Positive," Rarity said with nod, lifting her own mane with a hoof and raising her head. "Do you doubt such a strong and clever pony as I can handle it?"

Applejack and the others grinned and laughed at that, and Twilight sighed in relief, confident that Rarity would be alright.

The next morning, Twilight was the first to rise and slip out from under the blanket they shared. The house was a little chilly, but she was eager to finish her last letter to Princess Celestia. Having flung the last of the black coals she'd borrowed well into the sea, she rummaged through Rarity's saddlebags for a replacement. After a few moments of searching, she had to settle for a bright green coal-like stick. The resulting multicolored letter reminded Twilight a little too much of some of the letters Princess Celestia had on the wall of her study, sent to her by admiring foals all around Equestria.

The thought stuck with her for a while. When Applejack stirred and silently walked over to where Twilight sat, she was still levitating her coloring stick, staring at the finished letter with unseeing eyes. She registered the farmpony sitting down next to her, but did not acknowledge her until she spoke up.

"What're you thinking about now then, sugar?" Applejack asked, yawning.

"Celestia," Twilight replied, frowning.

"Hoo boy," Applejack chuckled. "Just when Ah thought we had you back at the head of the herd, fixin' stuff." The orange earth pony was smiling, and Twilight couldn't figure out whether she had meant to cause offense or not. All the same, the comment stung a little.

"I just think I finally get it," Twilight said, almost surprised at her own words. She was putting the pieces together as she spoke. "Luna told us that Princess Celestia would have liked to go on a journey with us before, right?"

"Yep, that she did," Applejack agreed.

"She never mentioned anything like that to me when I was younger," Twilight mused. "So she must have meant *us*, truly, not just us as in 'Twilight and her friends', though."

"S'what Ah had assumed, yep."

"And while we're all good friends, what really unites us?" Twilight asked, having a hard time keeping her voice down as she spoke.

"Ponyville and the whole Elements of Harmony thing, Ah reckon?" Applejack asked with a shrug.

"The Elements, yes. Luna has talked a lot about the past. Things you find only in history books, and even some things that you don't, but she hasn't even once commented on the Elements. Celestia has wanted to keep quiet about it, remember?" Twilight smiled to herself. She knew she was getting close to something.

Applejack snorted. "Ah'm well aware, and you can bet your flank that it bothers me somethin' fierce that Ah'm supposed to keep a secret." She gave Twilight a lopsided grin that did not reach her eyes. "And that's the *honest* truth."

"Obviously," Twilight grinned, "this is all related to the elements somehow. I've got to ask her about it when we meet her."

Applejack nodded. "Well, Ah'm with you all the way, anyway."

Twilight was putting the finishing touches on a letter to Spike when the rest of the ponies stirred. Fluttershy accidentally stepped on Pinkie when she got up, and the resulting squeak woke the rest of them. Rainbow Dash waited until all the others had gotten up and wrapped herself in the entire blanket with a smug grin. She had all of three seconds of bliss before Rarity seized the blanket with a glimmer of magic. The pegasus was unceremoniously unrolled and deposited in the hay before Rarity packed the much coveted blanket away.

Outside in the village streets, griffins were hard at work negotiating the unique array of problems related to cleaning up after yesterday's day-long celebration whilst preparing to feast and party again today. Undecided on how to approach the issue, the result was that fish bones and other detritus was swept under the tables while the surviving balloons were guarded like treasures. It felt a little like walking through an unusually festive graveyard, what with all the bones. Twilight and the others eventually found Brenliana and Gilda in the midst of it, talking animatedly with a pair of elder griffins.

"I still say that we should host the coronation and the trials right away. We are technically leaderless until you swear the oath and we take the ritual flight," one of the old griffins said.

"And I say, with all respect to you and yours, that we can afford to wait until everyone has had their fill of fun and rest both," Brenliana said, dismissing the two griffins with a wave before turning to the approaching ponies. "Good morning! Applejack informed me you plan on leaving already?"

"Yeah, you know, got places to be, other towns to save," Rainbow Dash said with a smirk.

"How very big of you," Brenliana laughed. "I shall see to it that we have you well supplied before you leave, and I will have some of my strongest carry you as far as they can get whilst making it back here before nightfall. I'd take you all the way to the border, but I can't bear to see any of my flock gone right now."

"That is quite alright, and more than we would have asked for," Rarity assured the griffin, and the other ponies nodded.

"What's next for you, then?" Twilight asked. "The chief hasn't come back at all? I'm sorry about how it all turned out, Gilda."

"Eh, if he's that dumb, he can stay away. If he comes back, that's cool too, but I got stuff to do now," Gilda said, grinning up at Bren. The older griffin returned the smile. "Brenliana has named me wingleader of her old wing of griffins."

"That is awesome!" Dash exclaimed excitedly.

"I know! Bet your lame little weather patrol doesn't have warpaint," Gilda said. Rainbow Dash didn't reply, her gaze growing distant and an unsettling smile spreading across her face.

Twilight nudged Dash in the side, getting a little worried. "Rainbow, *no*. Mayor Mare would never allow it. I hope."

"Unless it's up to Cloudsdale, because they manage the weather patrol," Rainbow Dash

said.

"Ooo, we can send a letter and ask when we get back home!" Pinkie Pie agreed. Twilight facehoofed discreetly..

"Totally doing that," Dash concluded. The pegasus looked straight up at Gilda, suddenly hesitant. "But hey, Gilda..."

The griffin arched a brow at the smaller pegasus.

"I mean, thanks, for everything," Rainbow Dash said, swallowing. She looked to Pinkie Pie for support, and the pink earth pony smiled back at her. "And I just wanted to say I'm-" Dash made to continue, but Gilda interrupted her.

"Don't say it. Seriously, Dash, that's just not gonna work. Yeah, it sucks, but I'll live and get over it. Can't change anything now, right?" The griffin lit up with a smirk. "Besides, I'm far too cool for small fry like you now. Got my own flight, and I just got my real family back."

"Sure, cool," Dash said, smiling right back at the griffin. "You keep telling yourself that," she laughed, swishing her tail. Gilda only shook her head and laughed, holding out a claw for a high-five.

"Don't be surprised if I pop by Ponyville sometime, Dash." Gilda hovered off the ground and gave the other ponies a wave. "I don't do hugs, but yeah, I'll catch you all around." With those parting words, the young griffin took off towards the top of the mountain, leaving the ponies with Brenliana.

"She'll be okay," Brenliana said, watching Gilda go. "Clawford cannot thank you all enough. I am not sure you even realize how big a help you have been. With the chief gone, the Blackclaw tribe will be a peaceful family once again." The chief surveyed the griffins that milled about them with obvious pride. "I do not know what the future holds for us, but I will ask Kinther to make a painting in your honor inside the cave of memories, commemorating these events. I don't expect you to settle for this, though. Please, name your reward, and if it's within my power to grant it to you, I will."

After a last round of cheers for the ponies and their part in aiding the Blackclaw tribe, the party finally departed from Clawford, yet again riding on griffins' backs. When the volunteer griffins put them down and said their goodbyes, they had shaved a good chunk off their journey back towards Equestria, and their saddlebags were brimming with what appropriate food the griffins could find. Though they didn't have a road to follow, it felt good to be moving again, Twilight found.

A month ago, the notion that she would enjoy walking across the windswept tundra would have made her laugh, but right now, she couldn't keep the smile off her face. It was a little hard to keep walking what with Rainbow Dash flying straight ahead of her, though. The pegasus was flying backwards, facing her. Her forehooves were crossed, and she looked thoroughly annoyed.

"Okay, so, this tribe, the Blackclaw, they got this warpaint that colors feathers awesomely," Dash said. It was not the first time she broached the subject. She'd been flying alongside Twilight's griffin for much of the ride.

"I did wonder how Gilda got the tips of her feathers purple like that," Rarity admitted.

"Yes, Dash, they have some very nice paints, and I'm glad they let you and Rarity have some," Twilight agreed.

"And they have these scary awesome masks of all kinds of creatures," Dash continued.

"I bet it'll scare off th' varmints," Applejack chuckled to herself. She patted the saddlebag where she carried hers.

"Mice and rats are all very nice once you get to know them, you know," Fluttershy protested.

"Masks that fit a pony just as well as a griffin," Dash said, staring at Twilight.

"As we have clearly seen," Twilight agreed.

"I'm a dragon!" Pinkie Pie roared from behind them, wearing her new and fearsome mask. Twilight idly wondered how she didn't trip and fall. She couldn't imagine how Pinkie saw a thing out from behind the mask, considering she was deliberately wearing it upside-down. At least, she hoped it was deliberate.

"Yes, yes you are, Pinkie," Rainbow Dash agreed. "Because when the chief of the tribe said we could have anything, you went with the cool mask, and now you are a dragon." The pegasus narrowed her eyes at Twilight. "But some of us didn't go for the cool masks or the awesome paint."

Twilight, for her part, shook her head whilst smiling. "Some of us didn't."

"No, *you* asked for a map. Newsflash, Twilight, we already had a map!" Dash groaned.

"We had an old, outdated map of Scandineighvia made by Equestrian explorers long

ago. A map nopony has seen fit to update in over fifty years, Rainbow," Twilight patiently explained not for the first time. "What I have is an up-to-date map commissioned by the old chief less than a year ago. Cartography is under-appreciated!"

"How can everypony else be wrong? That's not how it works! If nopony cares about it, there's a reason! Like, how about this one - it's boring!" Dash cried.

Twilight rolled her eyes at her pegasus friend. "Okay, first off, that's a major logical fallacy, and second, you don't take issue with Fluttershy's decision."

"Yeah, well, uh," Dash shrugged mid-flight. "She's Fluttershy. She does silly stuff like that. You're supposed to be smart!"

Fluttershy frowned. "I don't think it was silly."

"If you thought declining a reward was silly, and did it anyway, you would be a special kind of mad, darling." Rarity chuckled at her own words.

"I'm *not* mad," Fluttershy said forcefully, causing a few odd looks to be cast her way.

Twilight wondered whether Fluttershy regretted her decision or if she was just still brooding. The yellow mare had said that the only thing she could think of was that she wished the griffins wouldn't eat other animals. Of course she knew that she couldn't ask an entire civilization to change because of her, and she meant no offense by refusing a reward, but she had said it wouldn't feel right.

Fluttershy had admitted that she didn't want any memories of Clawford, and what worried Twilight was the nagging feeling that there was something else to it. The kind-hearted pegasus had seemed to accept the omnivorous nature of griffins more easily than Twilight had expected her to. It did not at all explain why she had been so quiet ever since they left Clawford. Once, Twilight had caught her muttering to herself when she thought nopony was looking.

Late in the afternoon, only a few hours after they had begun their march, it began raining. It started as a drizzle that would have felt refreshing in a warmer climate, but rapidly crossed over into "torrential downpour" territory. While it was still above freezing, each of the huge drops were spat at them in furious anger. The fact that the wind had died down a little was small comfort; tails were drooping and wet, dragging along the ground. Hoods up or no, the cloaks were soaked and manes were slick against their heads and withers.

"Not that Ah mind a bit'o rain, but Ah reckon weather griffins must be even lazier than you, Rainbow Dash. This is just downright silly!" Applejack had her hood half-way pulled over her hat and looked patently ridiculous.

"I don't know if they even have a weather patrol," Dash yelled back over the rain. It was hard to hear anything but the splatter of rain. "The clouds are moving so fast, even if I kicked a hole for us, it'd be gone in a second!"

"Perhaps we could simply make camp until the rain passes, then?" Rarity suggested. "I mean, it's not like my mane could possibly suffer any more past this point, but we could slip and fall. A broken leg here would spell disaster."

"Aw, I'm sure we could just carry you!" Pinkie said.

"Yes, well, I'm certain you could, and you're a dear for saying that, but I still don't wish to have my leg broken, Pinkie." Rarity said, smiling at the pink pony. "And the ground is getting very slippery."

"I don't want Rarity to break her leg either, actually!" Pinkie announced, looking at Twilight with big blue eyes and a quivering lower lip. "Twiliight, camp please!"

"It really won't be much of a camp, will it, though?" Twilight said with a defeated sigh, but she agreed. Anything was better than nothing. Within minutes, they located a large boulder, and sought refuge on the lee side. It was marginal comfort, but the ponies seemed to breathe a little easier.

"Ah sure am glad the saddlebags are waterproof," Applejack commented, glancing down at hers as she shed them. It was an almost loving look. "Useful and solid stuff, nothin' fru-fru about'em."

"I assure you, looking fashionable is useful too, Applejack, even if you cannot appreciate exactly how," Rarity quipped, but she was smiling at Applejack at what was unmistakably praise for the saddlebags she had made.

"Oh no, we are not going to have to listen to you two go on about that while we sit here miserable in the rain!" Twilight warned them, having missed their expressions as her back was turned.

"Miserable?" Pinkie Pie interrupted. "Why would you be miserable? It's just a bit of rain, everything else is still great!" The pink pony was busy massaging Rainbow Dash, kneading where her wings met her back. The pegasus was putty in her hooves, mewling. "We kicked flank back there, and we're heading home!"

"I- well. I suppose it is, and we did," Twilight huffed. Trust in Pinkie Pie to ruin a good complaint.

"Can't you fix that, though, Twi?" Applejack asked. "Ah mean, surely there's some spell

to cover us or something?"

"Uh, well," Twilight blushed a little. "See, because we have great weather ponies in Ponyville, there hasn't really been any need for it. Everything's on schedule, so I haven't really had time to research. I know there's a spell for it." She did not like feeling inadequate when her friends actually needed her magic.

"Didn't take you much more than to see Rarity doin' it to learn her little gem finding trick, right?" the farmpony asked, tilting her head.

"Well, no, I suppose not," Twilight admitted, giving Rarity a smile at that, and receiving one in return.

Applejack shrugged, uncomprehending. "You saw Luna do her spell. That round ball. Ring any bells?"

It did indeed ring a veritable clock tower. She opened her mouth to protest, but found no words. It had been some sort of magic, and she'd seen Luna do it. She'd even gone so far as to touch it. Visualizing it and creating something similar couldn't be that hard, surely? Twilight closed her eyes and tried to capture what she had felt when she had touched the globe.

The memory came to her almost too easily. She nearly lost her breath as she relived the moment when she had brought her hoof through the light given shape. She went through it a hundred times in less than a second.

"Guess not then," Applejack said with a huff.

The unicorn willed all distractions to fall away and focused entirely on the task. She reached out towards what she found in the memory and found it stuck to her like a magnet. Twilight connected with what she thought she had touched and it guided her, willed her to use it. It was something completely both completely foreign to her, yet intimately familiar.

Fascinated, she molded what she found, gave it shape around herself and her friends, fashioning a globe covering them all and the area as she remembered it. She was just about to try to play with this odd presence when she was startled into opening her eyes by a huge, resounding boom from somewhere behind her.

"What in tarnation!" Twilight could hear Applejack shout above a chorus of yelps and sounds of alarm.

As it turned out, the spell had worked. They were surrounded by a half-translucent purple globe streaked with reds, blues and, for some reason, brilliant silver. The globe bisected the top of the boulder that Twilight had forgotten to visualize and account for. The part that the

light had passed through was cut off cleanly. Half a ton of rock lay on the ground out in the rain.

"That... that could have gone very wrong," Twilight blurted, her mouth hanging open. "I'm so sorry!"

"We're all okay," Fluttershy soothed, "What happened, Twilight? That looked... dangerous."

"What would have happened if I'd hit any of you? Never mind the rock, but- wait, why isn't my horn glowing? I-" Twilight was flabbergasted. She wasn't maintaining the spell at all. She willfully tried to shut it off, but nothing happened.

"Well, I take it you didn't exactly plan it like this, then?" Rarity asked, experimentally poking the globe itself with a hoof. Twilight was about to yell for her to stop, afraid that it would be dangerous, but nothing happened. It let her pass as if it were nothing.

Rainbow Dash had stood up at the noise like all the others, but only now noticed that her wings were spread and pointing straight up. The pegasus mare seemed to have some issues folding her wings, giving them a helping nudge with her snout while glaring daggers at Pinkie Pie.

Pinkie Pie was grinning hugely at Dash even as she spoke to Twilight. "Well, some of my best parties are surprise parties, you know! I mean, I haven't nearly hit somepony on the head with a boulder yet, but that's my problem, not yours!"

"Let's make the best of it, Ah say." Applejack said with a little shrug. "It keeps the rain out just fine, and it don't appear to harm us none."

"It's just, this isn't magic," Twilight said, staring at the offending globe. "I'm not doing anything, I don't control it!"

Rarity's raised her brows at this as the only other unicorn here, but the others did not seem to be nearly as alarmed by this as Twilight was. Nevertheless, Applejack's pragmatism had merit, and Twilight *did* feel a little tired. The purple unicorn gave great yawn and sat down. Once she had her hindquarters on the ground, it was very easy to lay down.

"Oh, are you tired? Are we going to stop for the night? I thought we were only waiting for the rain to pass." Fluttershy sounded a little surprised, and indeed, Twilight was the only pony who actually looked ready to go to bed.

"I guess, perhaps I could just have a nap?" Twilight reasoned in a sleepy mumble, and Fluttershy nodded at that, ever smiling. Twilight closed her eyes and felt more at ease right away. She could feel sleep lingering right around the corner, and it felt ever so tempting. The

Moon waited for her even before she began dreaming, and the mountains around them were replaced by spires.

"Do not let her go to sleep!" Twilight heard somepony shout. The voice was distorted, both terribly loud and far away. She slowly and reluctantly cracked an eye open to see a silver-trailing shadow fast approaching through the air outside the bubble.

[Chapter 11](#)