

Chapter 3

Twilight Sparkle grimaced as she trudged through the desert. The monsters here were relatively weak, but without a partner, she had to rely on her Dark Wave to dispatch groups of enemies. Since the technique drained her life force with every use, she had to stop to quaff a potion more often than she'd like. Fortunately, her precious cargo of one pegasus filly was unscathed.

"I hope I can find somewhere for her to rest soon," Twilight murmured. "I heard that this desert has a town built around an oasis. I need to head there." A trio of domovois, slightly stronger cousins of the imps, interrupted her, and she blew them away with a Dark Wave. Panting, she pulled out another potion. "I'm beginning to run low on these, too."

After another hour of trudging through the sand, Twilight finally saw a town. "Oh, please don't let this be a mirage," she prayed, as she broke into a full gallop through the dunes, keeping the pegasus secure to her back with her magic. Her prayers were answered, as the image of the town didn't fade as she approached. Instead, it became more solid, and she nearly wept with relief.

Barreling through the gate in the town's wall, Twilight glanced around. "Inn, inn, where's the inn?" she muttered frantically. She spotted the sign quickly, and cantered toward it, making sure to keep her burden on her back. It wouldn't do for the filly to be hurt now that they were out of danger.

The door opened, and a bell jingled, alerting the innkeeper to her presence. "Ah, a traveler! What can I do for – " He trailed off as he noticed Twilight's passenger. "Oh, my. She's rather pale, isn't she? Please, feel free to spend the night, no charge!"

Twilight smiled. "Thank you so much," she said gratefully, and headed to the nearby room. She levitated the filly off her back, and onto one of the beds, tucking her in carefully. She then went back to the front desk, where she found a couple of trays laden with food waiting for her. Giving another grateful smile to the innkeeper, she levitated the trays back to the room. Setting one tray on the table next to the filly's bed, she removed her helmet to eat her own meal.

The smell of the food must have penetrated the cloak of unconsciousness, as the filly began to stir. Blinking her blue eyes, she flicked her gaze around the unfamiliar walls, before she spotted Twilight. With a whimper, she tried to burrow deeper into the bed, away from Twilight.

Twilight looked up. "Are you okay?" She paused, then shook her head. "Dumb question, of course you're not okay. Are you unhurt, is what I meant to ask?"

The filly just stared at her, with those aqua blue eyes filled with fear.

Twilight sighed. "I understand completely if you can't forgive me. I mean, I'm having trouble forgiving myself for doing such a thing. But, at least let me make it up to you. Let me protect you."

The filly just continued staring, not even blinking.

Twilight winced. This was going to be more difficult than she thought. "There's some food and ice water on the table there," she pointed with a hoof. "You should probably eat up. You've been out of it most of the day."

This, at last, seemed to break the spell of fear on the filly. She turned to the tray that sat next to her bed. Slowly, she reached for it, grasping the glass of water in both forehooves. She took a tentative sip, before proceeding to drink the entire glass without pausing. Setting the glass down, she took the sandwich, and began eating, slowly.

"I've never actually seen a summoner before, let alone an Eidolon. You're pretty powerful, especially for somepony so young," Twilight commented, between bites of her own sandwich.

The filly didn't respond, content to slowly work her way through the provided meal. When she was done with the sandwich, she took the wedge of cheese, and carefully ate it, one bite at a time.

The unicorn sighed, and began taking off her armor. "Once you're done eating, try to get some sleep. Being unconscious isn't the same as being asleep, so you need to recover properly." Setting her armor aside, she kept her jerkin on. She crawled into the bed next to the filly's, setting her tray on the other table. She dozed off within moments, a testament to how exhausted she was.

The filly finished her cheese wedge, and looked at Twilight. Her eyes were no longer filled with fear, but curiosity. She settled back down into the bed, following Twilight into dreamland.

The two travelers were awoken by the sound of the inn's door being thrown open forcefully. Twilight sprang to her hooves, standing between the filly and whatever was coming through. What she saw filled her with dread.

A trio of soldiers from Colton entered the room, followed by one that bore the insignia of a captain. "Captain Twilight Sparkle, there you are," the captain said. He was an unfamiliar earth pony.

The filly whimpered, scurrying back into her sheets. Twilight looked back at her, then to the captain. "What are you doing here?" she asked, feeling around for her sword with her magic.

"I believe you know, Captain Twilight," the other captain said simply. "The summoners of Mist are a threat to Colton. All of them must be slain. Including that filly behind you. So sayeth His Majesty, King Colton."

Twilight narrowed her eyes. "The King is clearly not in his right mind, if he orders the deaths of ponies so young. This one doesn't even have her cutie mark."

"That is irrelevant," the captain said with a frown. "Now stand aside, if you're not going to do the deed yourself!"

Finding her sword, Twilight unsheathed it, and held it in front of her. "I'll take a third option: I'll protect her from Colton!"

"Traitor!" bellowed the captain. "Attack!"

The other three soldiers complied with the command, drawing their swords. One of them, however, was struck down as Twilight swung her own blade. She fought down the rising taste of bile in her throat, and parried the blows from the other two soldiers. She swung again, ending another soldier's life. Mentally, she prayed for forgiveness for slaying her own country's ponies.

The captain growled, then turned to look at the filly. She was watching the scene in wide-eyed horror. He grinned. Drawing his own blade, he leapt past the melee, intent on ending the young pony's life. The filly looked up and shrieked as she saw the captain bearing down on her.

Twilight heard the shriek, and broke off her attack on the last soldier. She wasn't wearing her armor, which proved to be a double-edged sword. On one hoof, she could move much faster than the armored captain. On the other, she wasn't as well protected against

attacks. Without enough time to bring her sword to parry, she threw herself bodily over the filly, and cried out as the captain's blade cut into her back. Luckily, her leather jerkin took the worst of the blow, but she was still bleeding.

"So, even a dark knight can be brought low by emotion," the captain scoffed. Twilight turned around slowly to face him, her teeth clenched in pain. "Take this lesson to heart as you pass on, traitor."

"How dare you..." a soft voice said. Blinking, Twilight and the captain turned to look at the young pegasus. "How DARE you!" Aqua eyes burned with anger, and the captain found himself frozen in place by the glare. "You attacked her, your own comrade, just because she's doing the right thing?!" The filly began to glow.

Twilight, recognizing this, grimaced. "Oh, please, don't level the town again," she whispered.

This time, however, instead of the creature from before, what was summoned was a larger-than-average chocobo. The yellow bird charged at the captain, bowling him over, before stomping on him repeatedly. When it vanished, the captain was little more than a pony-shaped pile of broken bone and flesh.

The last soldier, seeing this, simply stared in shock. He didn't even notice as Twilight flung her blade at him, until the sword pierced his neck. Then he didn't notice anything.

Twilight panted, pulling her sword out of the soldier's corpse. She winced as she could feel the cut in her back. Ignoring it for now, she turned to look at the filly. "Thanks for the help," she said.

The filly bore a thousand-yard stare. "I... I just... *killed* somepony," she whispered in horror.

Twilight flinched, but reached over to draw the young pegasus into a hug. "It's okay, don't look. It's never easy, the first time," she assured.

The filly buried her head in Twilight's chest, dry sobbing. "Just... not looking at it... isn't going to make it go away."

Twilight couldn't think of anything to say about that. Before she could ponder further, the innkeeper walked in, shaking his head to clear it from the grogginess of sleep. "What happened in here?" he asked, before looking up. He gasped at the sight of the room.

"Soldiers from Colton," Twilight answered. "There were after this little one. I decided to get in their way."

The innkeeper frowned. "This isn't good. If Colton is sending their soldiers here, it could be construed as an act of war against Clydecyan. Kaipony is part of Clydecyan's territory." He blinked, and looked at Twilight. "But, aren't you a dark knight of Colton?"

"I was," Twilight answered, "but now I'm a renegade. All because I couldn't bring myself to kill this little filly."

The innkeeper smiled. "I'm glad to see a dark knight with a heart. Can you help me throw these corpses out to the desert?"

A few minutes later, Twilight returned to the room, having been given a free potion set from the innkeeper. She'd protested, but he'd been adamant. Eventually, she'd given in. When she walked into the room, she saw the filly looking at her with worry. Trotting over, she asked, "You weren't hurt, were you?"

"Oh, no, I'm okay. But... you were hurt protecting me," the young pegasus said, looking down. "I'm sorry."

Twilight shook her head. "Like I said, I'm going to protect you. Even if that means I get hurt. Besides, you saved me from getting hurt too badly."

The filly continued looking down for a second, then raised her head. "My name's Fluttershy," she said finally.

"Fluttershy..." Twilight repeated, then held out a hoof. "I'm Twilight Sparkle." As she shook hooves with the young pegasus, she flinched as her wound made itself known again.

Fluttershy noticed this. "Oh, you're still hurt! Here, let me," she said, glowing with a soft white light. The light washed over Twilight, and she felt the pain vanish. Looking at her back, she was astonished to see that the wound had disappeared.

"You know white magic? But I thought only unicorns could harness that power!" she said in shock.

"Um, well, it was difficult, but I managed to adapt both white and black magic into a form useable by pegasi," Fluttershy explained. "Well, useable by me, anyway, I haven't found anypony else to teach it to."

Twilight stared. This young filly was a prodigy in the magical arts, if she could do such things! "That's... incredible, Fluttershy!"

"Well, it took a sacrifice on my part," Fluttershy explained. "I can't control the weather like other pegasi can. Also, I needed the help of my idolons to teach me how to harness the magic."

Twilight shook her head. "Still, you're amazing! I've never met a pegasus who could do such things."

Fluttershy blushed. "Um, well, thanks?"

Twilight sighed. The filly was entirely too pessimistic. Looking up, she saw the first light of dawn creeping through the windows. "Come on, Fluttershy. We need to get ready to go to Clydecyan."

The pegasus blinked. "But why?"

Twilight began to put her armor on. "You heard the innkeeper. If Colton's soldiers are here in Kaipony, it could be a prelude to war with Clydecyan. We need to warn them."

Fluttershy nodded. "Okay, then..."

Twilight paused, looking at her. "If you don't want to travel with me, I completely understand. I mean," she lowered her head, "I did kill your mother's dragon."

Fluttershy shook her head. "I don't think it was your fault. You couldn't have known what your king wanted. I mean, I was angry at the time, and afraid. But, you protected me." She reached out with a hoof, lifting Twilight's head. "And that makes you a good pony."

Twilight smiled. "Thank you, Fluttershy." She continued putting on her armor, finishing with the helmet.

When she was finished, they left the inn. Fluttershy glanced around, watching as the town began to wake up. "So, um, how do we get to Clydecyan?"

"Good question," muttered Twilight. Looking around, she spotted a stallion that seemed to be awake. She trotted over. "Excuse me, sir, do you know the fastest way to get to Clydecyan from here?"

"Going to Clydecyan?" asked the stallion. "Well, your best bet is to go through the Waterfall Cavern to the northeast of here. But when I tried going through there yesterday, some old pony wouldn't let me pass. If he's still there, you're going to have to convince him to let you through."

Twilight bowed her head in thanks, and turned to Fluttershy. "Well, that looks like our destination," she said cheerfully.

As Fluttershy nodded, a pair of mares walked by, talking to each other. "... Poor dear stumbled in, half delirious. Claimed she was from Colton," one said.

"I heard she keeps muttering something about 'Twilight', whatever that means," the other said, shaking her head.

Twilight froze, eyes widening. Then she called out to the mares. "Wait! Where's this mare you were talking about?"

The pair blinked. "Um, she's at the old doctor's house. She's not doing well, from what I've heard. It's over that way," one said, pointing a hoof.

Twilight took off in the indicated direction, Fluttershy doing her best to keep up. She took to the air, flapping hard to stay aloft. It was clear she didn't spend much time flying.

Twilight came across a house that had an aging sign in front of it. It was an old medical symbol. Twilight threw the door open, startling an earth pony mare just inside. "Where's the patient?!" she asked.

"Uh, in the back," the mare squeaked, startled.

Twilight nodded, sprinting to the back room as Fluttershy flitted in, following the panicky unicorn. When Fluttershy came into the back room, she found Twilight sitting on her haunches, staring at a white unicorn mare that lay tucked in the bed. "Twilight? Who is she?" the pegasus asked.

"Rarity," answered Twilight, her voice trembling. "She's a good friend of mine from Colton. But I don't know how she got here, or why she's here."

"Twilight..." murmured Rarity in her troubled sleep, as she tossed and turned on the bed.

The doctor, an aging earth pony, walked to them from the bookshelf. "Whatever the

reason, young one, she's come down with desert fever. Only way to cure that is with a sand pearl. That's something only the Clydecyan royal family knows how to get."

Twilight raised her head. "Clydecyan..." She stood suddenly, and bolted out the door. Fluttershy squeaked, and followed.

Twilight ignored the gasps and yells of townspies as they scrambled to get out of her way. She barreled toward the gate of the town, intent on getting to the castle of Clydecyan as quickly as possible. Behind her, Fluttershy offered apologies to the startled ponies as she passed, flapping hard to try and catch up to the unicorn. By the time she'd gotten to the gate, Twilight was already heading east, presumably to the cave that had been pointed out earlier.

Twilight barely noticed the passage of time, nor how her body reflexively dealt with all of the monsters in her path. She was moving completely without conscious thought. All she could see in her mind was Rarity, stricken with desert fever. All she could think about was finding the cure. All she could feel –

SLAM!

– was pain, as her thought-deprived body failed to account for the boulder that had appeared in front of her. The shock also served to bring her back to reality. Groaning, she clambered to her hooves, and looked around. She had reached the base of a mountain range. Looking around, she saw an opening in the mountains to her east. Sighing, she began to set off for the opening, when a voice called out to her.

"WAIT!" Turning, she saw Fluttershy slowly floating along. The filly's wings were barely beating hard enough to keep her in the air. Indeed, she was dipping lower and lower, until she finally collapsed, sprawling on the ground in front of Twilight. "You... run... too... fast..." she gasped out.

Seeing the pegasus filly exhausted filled Twilight with guilt. She'd been so obsessed with finding a cure for her friend that she'd not paid any attention to her young charge. She walked over, and knelt down in front of Fluttershy. "I'm sorry, Fluttershy. I didn't mean to run off like that. I was just so worried about Rarity."

Lifting her head off the ground slightly, Fluttershy smiled. "Oh, it's no trouble, Twilight. If I were in your position, I might act the same. Only, I'd probably have flown directly here, rather than running all the way..."

Twilight smiled back, and levitated Fluttershy onto her back. "Let me do the walking for now. You've earned a break."

Fluttershy smiled, and nodded. "Still, don't expect me to sit by and be useless while you're busy fighting. I can help."

Twilight returned the nod, heading into the mountain range. Fortunately, there were fewer monsters in this part of the desert, and they got to a cave entrance without incident. "I hope this is the waterfall cavern," Twilight murmured. She stepped inside.

"Well, it certainly has a lot of water," Fluttershy said, looking around. "That's a good sign, right?" The cave was indeed partially flooded.

"Yes, yes it is," Twilight answered.

They trotted through the cave, dispatching the few monsters that came their way with ease. Fluttershy kept Twilight healed, while Twilight dealt with the monsters one by one. When she didn't need healing, the pegasus would fling a Thunder or Blizzard spell at the creatures.

"Oh, I wish there were another way to deal with these things," murmured Fluttershy. They had just finished dealing with a giant crocodile.

"Sadly, monsters don't respond well to talking," Twilight answered.

Before they could continue, a figure stepped into their path. "That blade... could it be?" Stepping closer, the two saw that it was an elderly unicorn stallion, with a magnificent beard. "Ah-hah! I thought so! Dark Knight, I require your assistance!"

Recalling the townspony's words about an 'old pony' blocking the path to Clydecyan, Twilight blinked. "What seems to be the trouble, sir?"

"It's my daughter, Clover! She's been tricked by a bard, and gone with her to Clydecyan Castle. We don't have much time to waste. I sense something sinister ahoof," the old unicorn said, glancing about nervously.

"Wait, Clover?" Twilight said, eyes widening. "Then you're the renowned sage, Starswirl the Bearded!"

Starswirl nodded. "I'm surprised a Dark Knight of Colton knows my name," he said

honestly. "But enough about me! I'd have gone after Clover myself, but a monster blocks the path to Clydecyan in the caves beyond. My magic alone isn't enough to slay it, but your dark blade should prove helpful!"

"Oh, my," Fluttershy said, peeking around Twilight's neck. "That sounds awfully dangerous."

"This young one," Starswirl said, focusing on Fluttershy. The pegasus squeaked and hid behind Twilight again. "She's a summoner, isn't she? Fantastic! All the better to help us!"

Twilight coughed. "As it happens, we need to reach Clydecyan ourselves."

"Then the choice is made for us!" Starswirl exclaimed. "I shall accompany you!"

And he did so. The trio made their way through the caverns. Starswirl quickly proved himself worthy of his reputation, dispatching hordes of monsters with an ease that Fluttershy found herself in wonder of. Even Twilight seemed a bit awed by being in the presence of a living legend.

Eventually, they came to a room that held a large arcane circle in the center. Starswirl stepped onto it. "Perfect. This circle emits a field that will repel monsters. We'll be safe enough here." He began unpacking his saddlebags, with one of the items pulled out being a tent. He tossed it over to Twilight, who caught it reflexively. "Be a dear and get that pitched, would you?"

Twilight nodded, and began setting up the tent. Fluttershy merely watched, since she didn't have magic to help set things up. Once the tent was pitched, they turned to see that Starswirl had built a campfire in the center of the circle. A pot of something was being cooked over the fire.

"Mmm... That smells good, Mr. Starswirl. What is it?" asked Fluttershy.

"Just an old family recipe; behemoth stew, guaranteed to fill your belly with just one serving!" the elderly unicorn said with a chuckle.

"Um, it's not made from real behemoths... is it?" the pegasus asked.

"What? Oh, no no no!" Starswirl replied. "It just gets its name because its so filling, more than one serving makes you feel like you ate a behemoth. That's all."

"Oh... okay," Fluttershy said.

When the stew was ready, Starswirl ladled out three servings into ceramic bowls that he carried with him, levitating two of the bowls over to Twilight and Fluttershy. As they began eating, both Twilight and Fluttershy had to admit, it was pretty tasty.

"Wow! This is excellent, Sir Starswirl!" Twilight enthused, taking another chunk out of her portion.

"About that, youngsters, would it be too much to ask if you could just call me 'Starswirl'? Adding 'Sir' or 'Mr.' makes me uncomfortable," the elder unicorn said.

"Oh, sorry, Starswirl," Fluttershy said between bites.

Twilight was less easily swayed. "But a unicorn of your caliber deserves the utmost respect! I could hardly – "

"Now, miss... erm..." Starswirl facehoofed. "Bless me for being an idiot for forgetting proper manners! You two know my name, but I've yet to ask yours!"

"Oh! I'm Twilight. Twilight Sparkle," the younger unicorn said.

"Fluttershy..." whispered the pegasus filly.

"Right. Miss Twilight, I'm old, and I'm entitled to respect. But just because I'm entitled to it, doesn't mean I *want* it," Starswirl explained. "So you can show me respect by respecting my wish to be addressed informally."

"Well... if you insist, Starswirl," replied Twilight. "But, in return, just call me 'Twilight'. 'Miss' makes me feel like one of those valley fillies who think of nothing but stallions."

Starswirl laughed. "Easily done, Twilight!"

A few minutes later, they were finished eating, and Fluttershy excused herself to the tent. Starswirl checked on her, and smiled.

"The dear's already sleeping," he said, coming back to the fire. "Who exactly is she?"

"She's a summoner, from the village of Mist," Twilight replied. "Maybe the last summoner," she added darkly.

"Sounds like there's a story there," mused Starswirl. "Still, at least I know I wasn't

wrong. She has great magical potential, if she was able to harness magic despite being a pegasus. Why, she may one day outstrip me in the field!"

"Surely you're joking, Starswirl! You're a sage, master of countless spells!" exclaimed the younger unicorn.

Starswirl suddenly looked uncomfortable. "Well... to tell the truth, my memory's going in my old age," he admitted. "I can't remember half the spells I used to know." He laughed bitterly. "Even celebrities aren't immune to the ravages of time."

Twilight nodded slowly. "Well, she's certainly talented. She told me she was able to harness magic with only her eidolons for guides."

"Amazing," murmured Starswirl. "Such a talented young filly... almost reminds me of Clover."

"Your daughter?" asked Twilight.

"Not by birth," explained Starswirl. "That's a common misconception. She was an orphaned filly that I took in as a student. One day, she started calling me 'father'. I was startled, but a part of me was overjoyed."

"Fascinating," the younger said. "So why'd she run off with this bard?"

Starswirl's eyes darkened. "Because I wouldn't consent to their union," he replied. "The bard was a mare as well. It isn't natural for two mares to be wed!"

Twilight found herself answering, "Perhaps when you were you were younger that was the case. But times change, ponies change."

Starswirl looked at her for a moment. "Perhaps you're right. All the same, I'd sooner have Clover back by my side." He sighed, then looked back up. "Speaking of motivations, what drives you to Clydecyan?"

"A close friend of mine is suffering from desert fever in Kaipony," Twilight said simply.

"Ah, so you seek a sand pearl, and quickly. Even my magic can't cure that disease," Starswirl nodded.

Twilight was silent for a moment. "So, exactly what sort of monster are we going to face?"

"It's a vicious one, with eight writhing tentacles. We must kill it, and quickly," Starswirl replied. He looked nervous again. "I hope it's just an old stallion's worrying, but I fear something terrible is going to happen. And I likewise fear that we're running out of time."

After another moment of silence, Starswirl excused himself to the tent. Twilight stayed outside a few minutes more. *This foreboding I feel*, she thought. *Is it worry about the monster we need to face? Is it Starswirl's worries rubbing off on me? Or is it something else entirely?* After a moment, she got up, and went into the tent. *One step at a time, Twilight Sparkle. Everything will be alright. You'll see.*