

## Chapter 4: Isolation

Twilight's sight faltered. Her peripheral vision blurred into nothingness. All she could see was the smoldering mound of flesh and scales half-buried under the snow. It dominated her senses, pushing everything else out. She stared at it with a frozen expression. At some indeterminate point, her eye twitched. Wind whipped around the hall, exposing and burying sections of the remains. Her eyes glazed over every new section that showed up: blackened skin, a broken leg and hoof, a withered claw... each came to pass in swift succession before disappearing under the white cover once more.

She became dimly aware of movement around her. The screams and cries of others around her sounded faint and distant; it was like she was hearing them through a dream, or some kind of thick haze. Somepony was shouting something –Applejack, it was definitely Applejack– to get the others to go somewhere. Hoofsteps echoed throughout the hallway, a clatter of knocks and clicks that rattled Twilight's brain. She became aware of being alone in the hall, the only noise coming from the powerful cross breeze. She blocked out the noise and kept her focus on the gory display. The wind exposed Spike's tail, somehow completely untouched by the madness. She felt her hooves go numb.

Something touched her shoulder; she wasn't alone after all. Twilight turned and was surprised to find Fluttershy trying to get her attention. Tears streamed down her face and her body quivered all over. It looked like she had been this way for some time already.

*How long was I standing here?*

Again, Fluttershy shook Twilight. She kept speaking as Twilight began to listen, slowly letting the outside world flow back into her head.

“–others have already gone. Twilight, please...” Fluttershy pleaded. She spoke between sobs and was on the edge of her hooves. Twilight could tell she was fighting every muscle in her body that wanted to flee down the corridor. “We've got to catch up to them. Twilight? Can you hear me? You... you can't stay here. Please... please, let's go. Please...”

Fluttershy faltered, unable to go on. She stared at Twilight with a look of desperation, fighting back another flood of tears as she tugged at Twilight's arm. She looked about ready to drag Twilight down the hall.

Twilight shook her head. She glanced back one last time at the remains. The wind shifted, blowing the layer of powder and ash off of what was left of Scootaloo's face. It wasn't a pretty sight anymore.

Theories, questions, and concerns shot through Twilight's head at the speed of light. In an instant she made up her mind. Her horn glowed. With a sudden crack and a bright flash, she

and Fluttershy were gone. The hallway was again left alone, the only sound that of the harsh wind tossing snow and ice through the air.

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Applejack moved quickly and was the first one back to the base. Her little sister sat in shock on her back, not moving a muscle. Slowing down as she neared the couch, Applejack gently lowered Apple Bloom down onto the cushions. She murmured a series of reassurances towards her sibling and gave her a tight hug. Behind her, Rarity stepped into the room. She too carried her sister on her back. Unlike Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle was screaming hysterically.

"There, there, it's all right," Rarity said, making every effort to sound confident and reassuring. She sniffed and held back another tear as she set Sweetie Belle down on the couch next to Apple Bloom. "We're back where it's safe, I promise. Just calm down."

Rarity's words had little effect on her sister, who sobbed uncontrollably. Her screams did have an effect on Apple Bloom, who emerged from her catatonic state and started screaming as well.

Behind them, Rainbow Dash stumbled into the room. She was pushing along a very dazed looking Pinkie Pie.

"I just need to... just gotta go check on the guest list again... I don't think there's enough cake to go around now..." Pinkie slurred, her mouth hanging slack jawed and her eyes out of focus. "I really should've sent out more invitations..."

Dash deposited Pinkie in the corner and swept by her to begin pacing around the room.

"Oh man, oh man, oh man..." she muttered to herself. She rubbed her eyes and looked at the fillies on the couch, never stopping her pacing. "Did you see that thing? It just... it just had him and then it screamed and then... oh man..."

The fillies wailed even louder at Dash's recollection.

"It's alright, Sweetie Belle, I'm here, we're all here," Rarity said softly, still consoling the filly. "We're all going to be fine now, we're all going to go home now."

Sweetie Belle looked up at Rarity, her eyes filled to the brim with tears and her mouth lost for words. She buried her head in her sister's side, still sobbing but at a slightly quieter tone now.

"There, there," Rarity said with as much care as she could manage. She wiped a tear away from her own eye. "Now, anypony... what should we do next?"

"I mean, it just grabbed him. Just like that," Dash continued, recounting the events to nopony in particular. "And then it wasn't him... did you hear that scream? Oh man..."

"Applejack?" Apple Bloom asked, nearly out of breath from all the crying. Her lips trembled under bloodshot eyes. "Can- can we go home now? Please? I want to go home."

"You bet we will." Applejack held her sister even closer. "We're gettin' out of here. All of us. I'm not sure how yet, but we're gonna' do it lickety split."

"What was it? How'd it get so big?" Dash stopped pacing and spun around to face the rest of the group. "How in the hay did it get to—"

"Rainbow Dash, would you knock that off for one second?" Applejack snapped. She rubbed her hooves down her temple, wiping away the accumulated sweat. "Just... just let me think for a spell. Gotta figure out a way out of here."

"Wait, wait... Twilight can get us out of here!" Dash exclaimed. She pointed out the window. "She can teleport us! Or she can for part of the way, at least. The rest we'll have to—"

A wall of wind slammed into the exterior of the base, cutting Dash off midsentence. The ponies became aware of a rising gale around them, one that sounded louder and more violent than anything they had heard before. The walls shook as they were hit by wave after wave of snow and ice. Metal groaned and double-paned windows flexed, though everything managed to remain intact and in place. For the moment.

The sudden increase in noise revived the crying efforts of the fillies, and they both broke into a new series of high-pitched wails. Applejack moved in to give her sister another hug.

"I think the fridge fell over again," Pinkie said, still staring at nothing in particular. "I didn't mean for that to happen, I'm sorry."

"Oh that's just what we need!" Applejack barked. "How in tarnation did it get so bad so quick? It was just fine not half an hour ago!"

"How far did you say Twilight could teleport us, Rainbow Dash?" Rarity asked, still speaking quietly. She gently rubbed her sister's back in a continued attempt to calm her down, pausing only when she noticed her hoof was still shaking.

"Um..." Dash stammered, momentarily distracted by the storm. "About... about halfway, I think. She said something about it being harder the more she has to bring. But now she might be able to get us farther, since she has less to..."

Dash trailed off as she realized what she was saying. She slumped against the wall,

sliding down to the floor in a fetal position.

"It'll have to do," Applejack said. "It's the only choice we've got. Won't be easy once we're out there, though. Maybe we can take that carriage with us, give us somethin' to hole up in if things gets hairy."

"I've got plenty of spare coats we can bring," Rarity said. "We're going to need a lot of layers out there."

"We'll take the blankets off the beds too. Anything we can carry. Load it all in the carriage. We're only so far from the train station, so we should be able to make it quickly enough. All depends how far Twilight can get us."

"Where is Twilight?" Rarity asked, looking up. "Didn't she come back with us?"

As if on cue, the room flashed purple. Everypony shielded their eyes as Twilight materialized in the center of the room. Fluttershy staggered down next to her, caught off guard by the sudden teleportation. She slinked to the side of the room and fell to her knees, weeping continuously.

"Nopony move," Twilight said, her eyes dry and determined. "Everypony just stay where you are right now."

The room froze. The only sounds came from the crying fillies and the raging weather. Rarity looked at Twilight with a wounded expression.

"Oh, Twilight," she said, each word spoken with a noticeable hesitance. "I'm so, so sorry. I... I just..."

Rarity looked at the floor, unable to make eye contact.

"Not just yet, Rarity," Applejack said quietly. "Not just yet."

"Twilight!" Dash cried. She tore across the room and grabbed Twilight, dragging her towards the door. "Okay, Twilight's here everypony, we can do this now. We just need to get those coats and stuff and we can get out of here. Twilight, are you ready? Can we go soon? Like, right now?"

Dash spoke fast, her eyes darting constantly between Twilight and the window.

"We're not going anywhere." Twilight wiggled out of Dash's grip and backed away, avoiding her sinking expression. "None of us are. Not yet."

Another silence. Even the fillies stopped crying for a moment.

Applejack took a long breath before she started speaking. "Twilight, I... I know you're not... not feelin' too hot right now. None of us are. But we need you right now, alright? We gotta get out of here, you know that. We gotta get help an' get home."

Twilight shut her eyes and shook her head, her hooves beginning to go numb again. "I said no. We can't leave. Not now."

"Well why not?" Rarity practically shouted, a hint of venom in her voice. Everypony jumped at the sudden outburst, including her. She shrank back into the couch and pulled Sweetie Belle closer. She took a deep breath before speaking again. "Twilight, listen to what you're saying. Applejack's right, we need to leave immediately to get help. Why do you think we shouldn't?"

"Because... because..." A conflicted look appeared on Twilight's face as she struggled for the right words.

"Okay, we don't have time for this." Applejack started to stand. Apple Bloom clung to her, muttering pleas for her not to leave her. "Don't worry Apple Bloom, I'm just goin' a few steps. I'll be right back, I promise."

Slowly, Apple Bloom's grip loosened and she curled into a ball on the couch. Applejack walked by the momentarily distracted Twilight and up to Dash. "Rainbow Dash, can you fly through that?"

Dash stared at Applejack, then turned to face the storm. It thundered at her glance, snow blowing by at a practically horizontal level.

"I'll understand if you say you can't," Applejack explained, "but it looks like Twilight might need to collect herself a bit more first. So, I need to know, can you get through—"

"I can fly through this," Dash declared. She stared fixedly at the clouds.

"Are... are you sure, Rainbow?" Fluttershy spoke up. She slowly stood and approached the window, looking nervously outside while wiping tears from her eyes. "I've never seen weather this bad in my entire life. I... I don't want anything to happen to you, not... not now."

"I can fly through this," Dash repeated, louder this time. She turned to face the others. "I can fly up and over it. No storm is too thick or too strong to keep me down. I can go get help and be back here in no time."

"Good. Grab your coat an' get going. An' watch the door. Dang thing's about ready to

pop open with the wind pressin' up against—”

Metal groaned and screeched as rebar suddenly burst out from the doorframe. They spread quickly, crisscrossing the door until it was completely covered in a spider web of old steel.

Twilight's horn stopped glowing.

Applejack's eye twitched involuntarily and she gritted her teeth. “Twilight,” she said, fighting to keep her tone calm, “you mind sharin' with us why you did that?”

“Because one of us isn't us.” Twilight said. A look of confusion fell across the group, though Twilight carried on before anypony could say anything. “At least, one of us might not be one of us. She might be something else. Something very, very dangerous that absolutely cannot get out of here. And none of us can go anywhere until we know for sure.”

She paused to collect her thoughts. The others, taken aback by her accusation, fumbled for words as well.

“Uh, Twilight,” Fluttershy squeaked from the corner of the room, sniffing continuously and still wiping tears away, “wh-what do you mean? What's going on here?”

Twilight sighed. She started pacing along the floor, looping through the room around her friends. “Let me explain. There was something here, an organism of some kind. It was trapped way out here in the middle of nowhere. When we got here, it was somehow able to get a hold of Scootaloo—”

The mention of the name sparked a new round of weeping from the fillies and Fluttershy. Twilight waited for them to calm down, and continued.

“This thing got to her and... absorbed her. Became her. For all intents and purposes, it was Scootaloo. It walked like her, talked like her, acted like her, but it wasn't her. It was this... thing. And once it became her, it had just one goal: expand to infect every living thing it could. It happened to Scootaloo, it happened to Copper—”

“Alright, wait, stop right there,” Applejack interjected. She looked Twilight straight in the eye. “What's this about Copper now?”

“You know where she is? Is she alright?” Rarity perked up. “What happened to her, Twilight?”

Twilight hesitated and glanced at Dash, who looked down at the floor.

“There’s a room back there, at the end of the lab,” Dash said. She hesitated before going on. “Twilight and I, we... we found Copper. What’s left of her at least. She’s... she’s gone. She’d been turning into one of those... um...”

Dash tried to say it, but nothing would come out. Applejack looked back and forth between her and Twilight. Mumbling something to herself, she walked through the lab door. The others listened to the rear door open and Applejack step inside. A few seconds later, the door slammed shut, followed by hurried hoofsteps. Applejack came back into the common room, the color drained from her face.

“Applejack?” Pinkie asked, reaching out to pat Applejack on the back. “Is it true? Is Copper really...?”

Applejack drew away from Pinkie’s hoof, instead returning to the couch and sitting with Apple Bloom. The sibling immediately squeezed up close, burying her head in Applejack’s side and crying silently.

“It’s true alright,” Applejack said quietly. She hung her head and placed a hoof over Apple Bloom, gently stroking her mane.

“What we’re dealing with here,” Twilight said, carrying on with her speech as if there had been no interruption, “is an organism that imitates other life forms. And imitates them perfectly.”

Fluttershy spoke even softer than before. “And you’re saying, Twilight, that you think one of us might be... might be one of those things?”

Twilight nodded grimly. Fluttershy pulled herself into an even tighter ball while Dash walked over to soothe her. Rarity and Applejack stared at Twilight in abject disbelief.

“How can you even say that, Twilight?” Rarity held Sweetie Belle even closer. “How can you accuse one of us?”

“How do you have any notion that Scoo— that that thing got to any of us?” Applejack asked, brushing over the name as quickly as she could.

“Whoa, hey, can we all freeze for one sec here? Why are we having an argument now?” Dash asked as she provided some support to the crying Fluttershy.

“It had over a day to wander freely throughout the base,” Twilight responded, ignoring Dash’s question. “We all saw her, and now we know it was on its own for periods of time as well. It’s completely possible it got to somepony.”

“It’s *possible*?” Applejack snapped, glaring at Twilight. “Some idea you have that one of

us might've been attacked, with the rest of us somehow bein' none the wiser, is why you're gonna lock us in here? Gonna strand us out here away from help? That thing is *dead*, Twilight! You saw it. Burned up, ain't nothin' left except a big pile of ash."

"We can't take the risk!" Twilight shouted back. "If this thing gets out of here, it could spread to all of Equestria. No pony anywhere would be safe."

"That doesn't mean we can't go for help now," Rarity pointed out. "We can bring others in here, or at least get ourselves to a... safer area first. Get our sisters out of here, that sort of thing."

Twilight shook her head. "They especially can't leave."

Applejack shot Twilight a harsh look. "An' just what is that supposed'a mean?" she asked tersely.

Twilight's eyes narrowed. "We need to keep an especially close watch on them."

Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom looked nervously at Twilight and then each other. They resumed crying while Applejack stood up, taking a protective stance in front of the couch. "No. Stop right there, Twilight. I don't wanna hear another word of that."

"They were with it the longest!" Twilight shouted, her body tensing up. "They were alone with it when the rest of us were busy or together."

"No!" Applejack took a step towards Twilight, nostrils flaring. Suddenly Dash appeared between the two, her hooves in the air and a worried expression on her face.

"Girls!" she shouted anxiously. "Stop this! Look at this, what are we doing? Why are we fighting at a time like this?"

"She's the one accusing our sisters of being one of those things!" Rarity cried. She continued to keep a tight grip around Sweetie Belle.

"I wasn't accusing anypony," Twilight said defensively. "I was just pointing out who might possibly be the most likely—"

"Don't sugarcoat it, Twilight." Applejack took another step forward. "We know what you're thinkin', an' I won't have it! No way am I gonna stand here an' take somepony sayin' that about my sister. I don't much care who says it."

"This isn't right!" Dash pleaded again. "Girls, we're friends. Come on now. Look where we are."



Dash looked at Applejack. "We don't get angry with each other like this."

Dash turned to Twilight. "We trust each other. We figure out a way through this without getting crazy."

Applejack kept silent. Gradually, she returned to the couch with her sister. She wiped a few tears from her eyes, not looking at Twilight.

"So let's all just relax," Dash insisted. "This is not the time to... to fall apart."

Twilight took a step back and considered for a moment.

"Look," she said slowly, "I'm sorry if I made you all more upset. I realize it's a... tough situation to grasp right now. But it's the one we're in."

She moved to the window and gestured to the storm. "Here, consider this. We can't get through that."

"I said I could make it through that," Dash said, mostly to herself.

"We can't all get through that," Twilight continued. "Even if I wanted to teleport us all, we couldn't make it the whole way, and if we get stuck out there then we're in even bigger trouble. It's getting late right now. I just need some time to come up with a test, come up with a way to prove that nopony is... to prove that we're all safe and clean."

The others looked at each other, but remained silent.

"Remember what Hawks said." Twilight turned to the door. "He's coming back in less than a week now. Maybe even sooner. Help is already on the way, we just need to wait a few more days for it."

"No way we're stickin' around here for a few more days," Applejack grumbled under her breath.

"All I'm asking for," Twilight said, ignoring her friend, "is some time. I can work in the lab, I can run a few tests, and I can come up with a solution to this. Really, I can. I just need some time, and for you all not to go anywhere."

Her plea finished, Twilight faced the group. They all looked her straight in the eye, save for Applejack and Rarity, who avoided her gaze.

Finally, Dash spoke up. "We can stay for tonight at least, I guess."

"Or a little longer than that, if need be," Rarity added, shooting a look at Applejack.

Applejack grimaced. "I'm only agreein' to this because of the weather outside right now," she said begrudgingly. "Should this storm clear up before then, we're outta here. Each and every one of us is goin' home. An' you won't be stoppin' us, Twilight."

Twilight opened her mouth to argue, but a pleading look from Fluttershy stopped her. Instead, she nodded her head and walked towards the lab.

"Thank you," she said earnestly. "I'll get to work right now. You all stay here, I'll let you know as soon as I have anything."

She reached the door and paused before going in.

"And... watch each other. Watch each other close."

Before any of the others could respond, she disappeared into the lab. The door slowly swung shut behind her.

Nopony spoke at first. Dash sniffed in the air.

"Uh, Pinkie," she said somewhat awkwardly, "I think your muffins are burning."

Pinkie twitched and snapped out of her fixed state. She scampered into the kitchen, her body stiff and bounce-free. Back on the couch, Rarity and Applejack stayed silent. They temporarily blocked away the outside world, trying their best to help their younger siblings grieve. Dash returned to Fluttershy, holding on to the weeping pegasus as she rocked slowly back and forth on the floor.

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"Are they asleep now?" Applejack whispered. Rarity looked up from the sleeping fillies on the couch and nodded.

Applejack sighed. "That's a relief. I wasn't sure if they could get any sleep tonight. They really need it."

"I think we all do," Rarity said. She kissed her sister on the forehead and stood up from the couch.

"Rarity, I've got those jackets you wanted," Dash said. She emerged from the hallway with a large load of clothing on her back. She dumped it at the foot of the couch, in front of Rarity.

“Thank you, Rainbow Dash,” Rarity said. Her horn glowed and she started picking through the winter garments. “I guess I really should start packing things up. It’s not something that’d be good to put off until the last... minute...”

Rarity’s voice grew faint as she pulled out a small, puffy red jacket.

Dash winced when she saw it. “Aw, shoot, I’m sorry, I meant to leave that one behind—”

Rarity collapsed to the floor, her face dissolving into a wall of tears. She sobbed into the pile of jackets as Dash stuck her arm around her.

“Alright, easy there...” Slowly, Dash scooped Rarity up and led her over to the table. It had been brought back out and set up in the center of the room. Her body shaking all over, Rarity slid into one of the chairs.

“Thank you,” she said, wiping her eyes. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to... I mean, I’ve been trying to stay collected, so as not to further upset Sweetie Belle, but...”

Unable to go on, Rarity collapsed back into a fit of tears. Dash sat down next to her to offer more reassurances. Behind them, Applejack started to pace around the room.

On the other side of the room, Fluttershy rose from the floor. Wobbling a little, she walked over and sat down on the other side of Rarity.

“Feeling better there, Fluttershy?” Dash asked. Fluttershy nodded slowly but didn’t say anything.

As Applejack continued her frenzied pacing, the three sat in silence around the table. Each kept her head down, not focusing on anything in particular. For a few minutes, they just listened to the sound of the storm outside, which had again gotten worse once the sun went down. The walls were vibrating so often now they scarcely even noticed.

The kitchen door opened. Pinkie stepped out, an oven mitt and steaming tray of cookies clamped in her jaws. She quickly hoofed it over to the table and set the tray down next to a bowl of salad and some hayseed sandwiches; all were completely untouched.

“Pinkie, you really don’t need to be cooking anything right now,” Rarity said, having calmed down slightly. “I don’t think any of us have much of an appetite.”

The group murmured in agreement, all of them ignoring the feast in front of them.

“Yeah, Pinkie,” Dash said, pushing the closest plate of sandwiches away from her, “I’m

not really feeling up for any food right now.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay.” Pinkie wiped her forehead and turned around. “I hear ya. Lemme finish up this cake and I’ll be all done for the night, I promise. Just one last thing in there, that’s all”

“Pinkie, that’s not—” Rarity started, but Pinkie had already disappeared back into the kitchen. Rarity sighed and let her head fall back to stare at the ceiling.

Applejack stopped her pacing and glanced at the lab door. A small beam of light appeared under it, and she could barely hear the sound of clinking glass behind it.

“Alright,” she said, facing the table, “so what are we gonna do?”

Fluttershy looked up at her quizzically. “W-what do you mean, Applejack?”

“Y’all know what I mean,” Applejack said. “What are we gonna do to get out of here?”

“But Twilight said that—”

“Twilight is not exactly... doing so well right now,” Rarity spoke up. “You saw her today. That doesn’t seem like an at all healthy response to... to what happened.”

“She didn’t even say his name,” Fluttershy said. Her lip started trembling as she fought to keep her composure. “She didn’t even cry.”

“How’s she supposed to react?” Dash asked, her voice rising. “How the hay are *any* of us supposed to react to that? I don’t even know how to feel right now.”

“Look, I realize this is hard for her. It’s hard for all of us,” Rarity said. “But locking us up here while she goes about on her wild theory is not the right way to do this. Not at all.”

“I don’t know about that, some of what she said, um...” Fluttershy started to say, but she stopped short.

Rarity stared at her. “Don’t tell me you believe her idea that one of us might be one of those... things.”

“It’s not that I believe her or anything, it’s just, uh...” Fluttershy said, slinking down in her seat. “It’s just what she said might, you know, be something to at least think about... or something like that, maybe...”

Fluttershy looked at the floor. Dash inched her chair away from the table, avoiding

looking at anypony else.

"Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash," Rarity said gently. "Just relax. Think about it. You all saw what... what that thing had to do. It made a large, noisy mess. There's no way that could've happened to any of us. Not without somepony noticing something. There's no way at all."

"Yeah, Rarity's right," Applejack said. "Rainbow, you saw Copper. You saw that mess. Ain't no way somethin' like that would slip in under our noses. Twilight's just havin' a bad reaction right now, an' I feel for her... but it's keeping the rest of us trapped here when we should be high tailin' it home. We can't have that."

"She lost Spike," Fluttershy said, looking up again. The group bristled at the name. Rarity coughed, covering up an oncoming sob.

"That means a lot to us," Fluttershy went on, her eyes beginning to well up, "but it means a lot more to her. We have no idea what she's going through right now."

Applejack sighed and leaned forward.

"Spike was a friend. A very close friend. I loved him. We all loved him. I don't wanna picture how it's gonna be without him, an' I'm miss him dearly already." Applejack paused to glance at her sister sleeping peacefully on the couch. "But he ain't kin. He just ain't. He may've been to Twilight, but he wasn't to me. So right now, my main concern is gettin' Apple Bloom out of here just as soon as I can manage. End of story."

"Spike wasn't all we lost," Dash muttered. "We gotta get back for Scootaloo, too. Let the others know..."

Rarity gave her a dirty look. "Don't you dare bring up that—"

"It wasn't her fault!" Dash defended. "It wasn't even Scootaloo at all. It was never Scootaloo. Scootaloo's just... gone too."

"They were both our friends," Applejack said. She stood up, her eyes traveling from pony to pony. "And now they're gone. There's nothin' we can do about that. Now it's just a matter of getting' home. I reckon' when mornin' comes 'round, the storm will have let up a spell. We can try again about convincin' Twilight to get us out of here. Otherwise... well, I'll figure out a way out myself."

"She said she wouldn't let any of us leave," Dash reminded her. "And I don't think you can force her. This is Twilight we're talking about. She could probably trap each of us in some magic bubble at the first sign of trouble."

Applejack shut her mouth, thinking over a response. Nothing immediately came to mind and she started pacing the floor.

"Then we'll just have to appeal to her reason," Rarity said simply. She rose and walked over to the couch, where she sat down next to Sweetie Belle. Her sister, still asleep, shifted in position, rolling over and rubbing up against her older sibling. "I'll think of something. I always do. Everything will be okay."

"I don't think I can sleep tonight," Dash said, changing the subject. "I feel a little tired, but not sleepy. I just feel... sorta numb."

"I know what you mean," Fluttershy said. She laid her head down on the table, mindlessly fiddling with an empty plate with one of her hooves. "I want to cry some more, but right now I... I can't. I don't know what to do."

The door to the kitchen swung open once more. Pinkie, a large cake balanced on her back, trotted up to the table. Wordlessly, she started cutting off slices onto plates.

"Pinkie, we told you we're not hungry," Dash said. She sniffed in the air, and after pausing for a moment, reached for a plate. "...but geeze that smells really good."

Slowly, and with a minor reluctance, everypony got up to help themselves to a slice of cake. Pinkie passed out plates, taking one for herself only once everyone else was served. Everypony silently stared at her piece, picking at it but not taking any bites.

"Um... I was gonna say something... but now I'm not so sure," Pinkie said. "I mean... I feel like I should... shouldn't I? Shouldn't one of us say something?"

"Don't worry about it, Pinkie," Dash said, taking a bite. "We get what you mean."

The conversation died. As the storm outside brought the weight of the world down on their heads, the ponies started to eat. It wasn't long before Applejack finished her slice and sat down next to her sister. She curled up around her tiny body, being careful not to disturb her slumber. She put her head down and closed her eyes.

"We'll get out of here," she whispered into her sister's ear. "Don't worry sis. We'll get out of here real soon. That's a promise."

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Twilight ignored the muffled voices coming from outside the lab door. If she had taken the effort she could've discerned the individual voices of each of her friends, but there was no time for that. She had to concentrate now.

*Organization. That's the first step, like always. Organize your notes, organize your tools, organize your thoughts. Put everything in its proper place and always know where it is for when you need to refer to it.*

Twilight gathered her supplies together at an empty desk. Empty petri dishes, a worn-out Bunsen burner, a microscope, and a box of slides on one side. Every relevant note of Copper's on the other. Most of the notes were still scattered around the lab, but after spending the previous day painstakingly going through all of them, these, along with the little black ledger from Copper's room, seemed like the most relevant ones.

*A sample, that's next. Something to test on and learn from. Something physical you can observe and investigate. Something that can lead to an answer.*

Using a scalpel she found in a locked drawer, Twilight cut a slice off of Copper's remains. She took no chances, levitating the blade and dish from the opposite side of the room. She dared not take a step closer, and once all the pieces were in order on the slides she pulled them out of the room and slammed the door shut. The scalpel she left to fall on the twisted meat; she wasn't going to touch it again or even open the door if she could manage it.

*There. You've got everything you need. You've been presented with a problem and the means to break down and solve it. You can do this, Twilight. You're in your element.*

"That's right!" Twilight said proudly. "This is what I do. I'm a scientist with a mission and the ability to get it done. So let's get started!"

Twilight pulled a few notes forward and flipped the ledger open. Magically pushing one of the slides under the microscope, she began to dictate. A quill floated nearby to jot down her thoughts on a spare piece of parchment.

"First sample of the organism. Initial observation proves inconclusive; cells appear identical to a normal pony cell. Spike, could you grab me a—"

Twilight froze. The words had left her mouth automatically. She'd said them hundreds of times before, thousands. They were part of the routine.

The quill dropped to the paper as her lips trembled. Twilight slumped over, first in her seat and then onto the floor. Her eyes moistened, and then tears flowed out as she started weeping.

*Hey, hey, cut that out! You need to focus right now, you need concentrate on the task—*

"Oh shut up," Twilight grumbled. She pushed herself into a corner under the desk, brushing aside fallen scraps of paper. All the strength she had mustered earlier, all the bravado

she had put up to keep her explanation in line, it all swept out of her with each falling tear.

Memories of the past flew by in her head. Spike helping her study, Spike assisting her on one of her experiments, Spike making her laugh when she was feeling down. Spike being there when she felt alone. She heard his voice clearly, feel his scales brush along her arm. Between sobs she tried to picture him right there, tried to get one last glimpse of her friend.

And then, just like that, they were all gone. Regulated to the part of the brain for old memories. Twilight tried to rise back into her seat, to get back to work. But she couldn't manage it. She stayed on the floor, curled up and crying into her hooves.

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Rainbow Dash fumbled around the dark kitchen. She drew her hoof along the wall in search of the light switch. She tripped over a misplaced pan on the ground and quickly hopped forward, nearly falling flat on her face in an attempt to keep the noise to a minimum.

"Lousystupidpotinthemiddleofthestupidfloorinthestupiddark," she angrily cursed under her breath. "Where's that stupid switch... finally."

She blinked as the fluorescent bulbs flickered on and filled the room with light. She stumbled over to the refrigerator and started to root around, eventually pulling out a sandwich.

Behind her, the kitchen door clicked open. Dash spun around to find Sweetie Belle staring back at her. Her eyes were red and moist, though she had stopped crying.

"Oh. Hi, Rainbow Dash," she said quietly, looking down at the floor. "I just wanted to get some water."

"Uh, yeah, sure," Dash said. "There are cups by the sink."

Sweetie Belle slowly trotted to the sink. She pushed a glass under the tap and started filling it.

Dash looked on, taking a quick bite from her snack.

"I was just getting a sandwich," she said. Her cheeks grew red at the attempt at conversation. "Guess I should've had some earlier when Pinkie offered them. There might be some of that cake around here too, if you wanted any... uh, you couldn't sleep?"

"The storm just woke me up," Sweetie Belle said, not looking back. "I think Pinkie's still awake back there."

"Yeah, yeah, I saw her reading. And that's some powerful wind out there, so I can



understand it waking you. I haven't really slept either. Just sorta, um... how you, uh, how you feeling?"

Sweetie Belle turned around, sipping her water. Her expression remained unchanged. "I dunno. I stopped crying. I feel kinda... empty."

"I know how you feel," Dash replied as empathetically as she could.

"That's what Rarity said," Sweetie Belle said, a hint of edge in her voice. Her head drooped. "That's what everypony's been saying to me"

"Well, it's true," Dash said. She put her sandwich down on the counter and went up to Sweetie Belle. "Just remember, we're all here for you right now. Anything you need, anything you want to let out, just say the word."

"It's just... I don't know," Sweetie Belle said, her eyes starting to water once more. "I don't know what to do or how to feel. I just want to keep crying and crying and I wish we never came here in the first place and... and..."

Tears started falling again. Dash knelt down and wrapped her arms around her, cradling her softly.

"Hey, hey, don't worry," Dash said softly. "It'll be okay."

"And everypony keeps saying that too!" Sweetie Belle cried out. "I don't even know what that's supposed to mean right now, I just..."

She carried on weeping. Dash hugged her once more and raised her head up to look her eye-to-eye.

"Because it will," Dash pressed. She sat down on the floor, leveling herself with Sweetie Belle.

"Look, I'll level with you. For everypony who's gonna tell you that 'it's gonna be alright' or 'everything will be fine', most of them probably don't know what they're talking about. They're gonna need to say something to try to cheer you up, though. Even Rarity's gonna keep saying it. They've gotta say something. But for a while, it doesn't matter what they say, because you're still gonna feel really, really crummy. We all are. And really, that's how you should feel. We lost friends we loved, and that's about the worst thing that will ever happen to you."

"But," Dash continued, wiping a tear out of Sweetie Belle's eye, "eventually, it will get better. It really will. You'll still feel sadness, you'll still miss your friend dearly, you'll still have that lingering numbness about the whole thing, but... but you'll start to be able to deal with it. You'll

live your life, and you'll start to be happy about things again, and even though you'll still feel really sad every once in a while, you'll just... you'll feel like you know what you're supposed to do. And it's just... it's..."

Dash sat back and smiled weakly at Sweetie Belle. "I dunno. Sorry, I just felt like I had to say something."

"It's alright, Rainbow Dash," Sweetie Belle said, sniffing and wiping her eyes. "Thanks. Thanks for trying to help."

"Hey, it's what I'm good at," Dash said. The two hugged tightly. "Alright, you should get back in there and try to get some sleep. And stick close to Rarity and Apple Bloom over the next few days. They're gonna need you as much as you're gonna need them. We all need to stick together now."

"Yeah, yeah, I know what you mean." Sweetie Belle smiled and headed for the door. Reaching it, she turned around one last time. "Are you gonna be alright, Rainbow Dash?"

Dash had to chuckle. "Yeah, I'll be fine kid. Go on now. And don't let that storm spook you. It's like I told Fluttershy: weather is weather is weather. You can take it."

Sweetie Belle nodded and walked back into the common room. Dash slumped against the wall, her eyes going vacant.

"I'll be fine," she murmured, brushing her mane out of her eye. "Yeah, of course I'll be fine. Big, tough Rainbow Dash... I can do this. Come on, get it together. I can make it through this."

She sighed. Flapping her wings and pulling herself upright, she returned to her sandwich. She ate silently, ignoring the screeching wind outside as she munched down her midnight snack.