

The Snowball Effect

Chapter 8: The Order of Things

Ezekiel White stepped out of his car and slammed the door shut. He made a quick survey of the main lab building. It was your typical commercial building, a giant box with floor to ceiling windows in every floor, all lit now that night had fallen. Large letters spelling “Post Petroleum” shined red between the ground and second floors. The rest of the complex was behind the building which was a collection of warehouses, spherical containers, probably generator buildings, and whatever else the facility needed.

He turned his attention to the damage done to the building to go with the sliced gate at the perimeter. The floor to ceiling windows of the ground floor had been shattered and the frames for the doors had been twisted inward. There were no skid marks in the asphalt, but none would be expected from armored tires.

When he heard the Order had attacked this lab, White was expecting something more subtle. However, their approach to civilian facilities was apparently more violent than military transports. Terror was more important than precision.

He walked into the lobby, shards of glass crunching under his shoes. The halls were filled with more of the Order’s handiwork. Chunks of wall and floor had been blown away. They were definitely more violent towards civilians.

“This happened because you couldn’t keep your big mouth shut!” someone shouted. “End of story!”

White looked behind him at a black man wearing a green military uniform with black hair cut very short and completely shaved from the sides and a white man with graying hair wearing a long, white lab coat. The two were walking towards the lobby and apparently deep in a heated argument. He figured it was the soldier who had made the outburst.

The man in the lab coat stopped and turned to the soldier. He was a good head and shoulders shorter than him and frail looking compared to the muscular man in uniform. “Like it or not, the product was at a point where we begin making press releases as our normal operating procedure,” he stated firmly. “This was meant for general use, not just the military.”

The soldier stopped and turned on his heels to look down at the man. His back was turned to White, so he could not see his expression. Though, the man in the lab coat seemed to not be fazed by it as he continued to glare at him. “Well, now no one

can use your product except the Order,” the soldier said.

“We might have not been robbed so easily if your contract had come with at least a token protection force for our facility,” the man shot back.

“Secrecy should have been protection enough,” the soldier replied plainly.

“And that’s why military intelligence is an oxymoron!” the man shouted.

“Enjoying the show?” a male voice asked from behind White.

White turned around to see a man dressed in a black business suit standing there. He immediately noticed the tall, fairly thin man was very tan with deep creases in his skin making his almost white hair stand out even more. “Special Agent Aaron Johnson out of New Orleans,” the man said. His accent along with his tan suggested he was Florida born and raised.

“Special agent Ezekiel White out of Chicago,” White replied.

“They dragged you from quite a ways for this,” Johnson said.

“I’ve been tracking the Order’s activities for a few months now,” White said. “They thought I should look into this.” He looked to the two men still arguing, though not as loudly as before. “Who are our two combatants?”

“The one in the coat is Charles Dockings, the lead scientist on the lubricant prototype that was stolen,” Johnson said. “The one in the uniform is Army Colonel Alec Pence. He was made the military’s liaison to the company when they signed a contract for the stuff.”

Dockings turned to them. “Are you two with the Department of Intranational Affairs?”

“We are,” Johnson said. “I’m Agent Johnson and this is Agent White.”

“I would like to know why a band of heavily armed terrorists barged into our facility and ransacked it,” Dockings fumed.

“The Order takes technology at certain stages in its development,” White replied. “They usually go after military tech, but they’ve been known to go after civilian research from time to time.”

“Which is why you should have kept your mouth shut,” Colonel Pence said. He walked up to White and Johnson and saluted stiffly. “My men have done a search of the area. However, whoever did this has vanished without a trace.”

“They also erased everything they didn’t take,” Dockings said with a slight growl to his voice. “The data has been wiped so thoroughly I don’t think we’d ever get anything usable back. We’re asking everyone if they have private copies of the

research, but if they don't we've been set back years."

"What exactly was stolen?" White asked. "I was told it was a kind of lubricant."

"It's not just any kind of lubricant," Dockings huffed. "This lubricant was going to change the face of the industry. It sets a new standard for friction reduction and contamination prevention. However, it is also not based on oil and once we have the formula down should cost only a little more than its petroleum-based competitors. It was going to put Post Petroleum on the map, but now this disgrace has."

"There's absolutely no clue as to where the Order came from and disappeared to?" White asked.

Pence shook his head. "It was like they vanished into the night."

White rubbed his temples as they suddenly felt tight. "I've heard that all too often regarding them."

"I guess they brought you down here for no reason, White," Johnson said. "The Order got away Scott free this time."

"We don't even have security footage because they took the security network down," Dockings said.

"I guess there's always next time." White turned away and walked towards where the door had been.

He walked out of the building and towards the parking lot. When they called him in, he took a fighter jet down here. Something told him his superiors would not be pleased they used a fighter jet to get a man from Illinois to Louisiana just for him to talk for a couple minutes.

There was not much he could do. This was clearly the work of the Order based on eyewitness accounts and what evidence there was. However, there was no trail to pick up on as usual. Unlike most circumstances where he had crossed the Order, he was too late to really do anything except file a report and wait for the next. Hopefully, it would not be another civilian facility getting attacked.

His phone rang. He took the rectangular device out of his pocket and pressed the accept button. A white-haired man appeared on the screen taking up almost the entire body of the phone. White did not recognize him at first until he said "Good evening, Special Agent White," in a voice he was all too familiar with.

"Smith," White replied in a quiet, irritated voice.

"That I am," Smith said.

White slid his finger towards a tracking option on his phone.

“Don’t bother trying to track me,” Smith said. “We could talk for hours and you would still not make it through my network.”

White scowled at Smith. He said this with an arrogant smirk on his face like he was enjoying this. Smith must have called to taunt him since he could not stop him this time. However, White smirked himself when something came mind. “What’s the matter, Smith? Is military hardware getting so hard to steal the Order has lowered itself to smash and grabs on civilian facilities?”

“Perfection takes a holistic approach,” Smith said. “What good is having the best guns if you don’t have the best materials to maintain them? Even something as simple as lubricant can mean the difference between victory and defeat.”

“You’re crazy,” White said.

“Most prophets and visionaries are seen that way by the ignorant masses until they’re proven right,” Smith boasted. “However, I didn’t call to shoot the breeze about our latest acquisition. I’m calling you because I’d like to get in touch with our mutual friends, the ponies. I have something that will interest them.”

* * *

Twilight Sparkle glanced over to Rainbow Dash practically inhaling her salad from its bowl. She shoved her snout in and grabbed so much food her cheeks bulged. She fortunately chewed with her mouth closed before swallowing.

Rainbow Dash licked her lips. “The grass here tastes great. What are the long leaves in it?”

“Dandelion,” Cupcake said. “It’s a common flower in both our home dimension and here. Most consider it a weed but the whole thing is edible and quite good.”

“Maybe we should bring some home to Equestria,” Rainbow Dash said.

“That’s probably not such a good idea,” Moondancer said. “They’re still weeds, and quite prolific ones at that. You could cover your entire country with them if you’re not careful.”

Twilight Sparkle looked around the dining hall. It was nothing too special with brick walls and no windows as it was deep in the main building. Lights hanging from the ceiling provided illumination instead. She had never seen a common dining area of this size. Even the castle in Canterlot had many smaller ones instead of one big cafeteria like this.

The room was filled with conversation. The ponies had clumped into groups and were discussing whatever was on their minds. Twilight Sparkle could not make any particular conversation out and did not want to eavesdrop.

Everyone stopped what they were doing and turned to the main doors as they swung open. The three stallions Magic Star sent to fix their transport machine walked in. "It's fixed," Four-Speed said.

Twilight Sparkle jumped to her hooves. "Really?" She galloped to them. "Can we go home right now?"

"Not right now this minute, the rainbow is rebuilding power," Four-Speed said. "However, we'll be ready in an hour."

"Ah yeah," Rainbow Dash said, pumping her hoof in the air. "I'll get to sleep in my own bed."

"I'll also be able to tuck in all my little animal friends." Fluttershy paused and then suddenly said, "Be right back." She galloped out of the cafeteria.

"Thank you so much for getting your machinery working so soon," Twilight Sparkle said.

"The part that needed replacing was easy enough to make a replica of and replace," Steamer replied. "We believe we've even fixed the extended time in the vortex. It was probably because the thing wasn't properly calibrated, but it is now."

"That's a lot of work for something you'll use once to send us home and never touch again," Rarity said, though with a tone like she was hinting at something.

Everyone looked to Magic Star. She looked around her and rolled her eyes. "I'll reconsider travel between Dream Valley and Equestria."

Everyone cheered.

"That doesn't mean I've agreed to it yet," Magic Star stated. "I've give you my decision in the morning."

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That hour passed like nothing. Twilight Sparkle walked into the elevator with everypony else. Literally everypony else was there. The elevator took them down to the chamber with the mysterious machine where some were already on the massive controls and getting things ready. The group dispersed as they filed out of the elevator.

Twilight Sparkle noticed Fluttershy had bulging saddlebags strapped over her back. "Fluttershy," she scolded.

Fluttershy sighed. She turned to the bags to her sides. "Sorry, guys."

The bags opened and several bushwoolies climbed out. They all groaned in disappointment.

Twilight Sparkle rolled her eyes. However, she could not help but smile. She would have to admit there were some books and stories she would like to take home with her.

“Everything’s ready to go,” Gingerbread announced from the controls.

“Can I say something before you start your machine up?” Twilight Sparkle asked Magic Star.

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. “Here we go.”

Twilight Sparkle shot an irritated glance towards Rainbow Dash.

“I don’t see why not,” Magic Star said.

Twilight Sparkle turned to the group. She thought back to when she first came to Ponyville. She reacted to suddenly finding herself in a crowd like this with irritation. However, she felt happy to have met all these ponies. Perhaps that was an important lesson in friendship: once it has entered your heart, you will be more open to more.

“I want to thank you for your hospitality while my friends and I were here,” she said. “We came through your portal by accident you had every right to be angry with our intrusion. However, you for the most part greeted us like guests and I think we’ve all learned from each other. I sincerely hope you will allow travel between here and Equestria because I think there is so much we can show each other and make new friendships.”

“Yadda, yadda, yadda,” Rainbow Dash interrupted her. “Let’s just fire up this bad colt and go home.”

Twilight Sparkle glanced at Rainbow Dash irritably again. However, she could only heave a capitulatory sigh. “Fine.”

A chirping came from the control panel.

Rainbow Dash growled. “Now what?”

“We’ve got a call from Special Agent White,” Gingerbread said.

“I wonder what he could want at this hour,” Magic Star said.

A device floated down from the control panel. It projected a rectangular image in midair in front of it. The image was that of an older human male with pale skin like Megan though duller in color and with slight creases in the face. His hair was dark gray in color and kept much shorter than Megan’s.

“To what do I owe the pleasure, Agent White?” Magic Star asked.

“The Order,” White answered.

Whispers arose from the crowd. Twilight Sparkle had no idea what he was talking about, but immediately got the sense it meant something here. Judging from the hushed tone, it did not mean something good.

“The Order?” Magic Star repeated. “What would they want with us?”

“You can ask them,” White said. “I’m playing piggyback for their message to you.”

The image divided in half and White moved to the side. A human with white hair appeared in the other half. A harsh light shined on him, made more brilliant by the blackness behind him. “Greetings, ponies,” the man said.

Magic Star lowered her brow. “Smith,” she said in a low, menacing tone.

“Ah, the illustrious Magic Star, we finally meet face to face sort of.” Smith smiled and seemed unfazed by Magic Star’s cold greeting. “Forgive my surprise now that I get to see you. After seeing what your unicorns and pegasi are capable of, I didn’t think they’d be taking orders from a mundane.”

“We prefer the term earthling,” Magic Star said sternly. “And let’s drop the pleasantries. What do you want with us? I thought you were only interested in advanced technology.”

“We were initially,” Smith said with a cold quality to his voice that sent a chill through Twilight Sparkle. Everything about him gave off a sinister energy like she had never felt. “However, your arrival has caused a paradigm shift on this world. I highly doubt it is mere coincidence our seemingly normal world has gotten less normal since you arrived. You’ve introduced magic into the balance of power.”

“Your point?” Magic Star asked with a cold quality to her own voice.

Smith’s mouth bent into a lopsided grin. “My point is the Order must be the most powerful force on this planet in the coming new era. While having the best technology was good enough before, we must now have magic.”

“You want pony magic,” Magic Star gasped, her stern expression melting into one of shock.

Smith’s grin became even more lopsided. He gave a slight nod. “Yes. However, that’s not why I called. You see, we’ve picked up a not so little lost lamp of yours.”

The image of Smith moved to put him off to the side. A light came on to reveal Princess Celestia with shackles on all her angles.

“Princess Celestia!” Twilight Sparkle gasped. How could Princess Celestia be

here and captured by these humans?

“A princess?” Smith repeated mockingly. “Well, we seemed to have hit paydirt.”

“Release her, Smith,” Magic Star demanded.

“Of course,” Smith said, stepping back into the center of the image. “However, I want something in exchange. You see, in order to figure out how to use a technology, we need to study it and learn how it works and how it’s built etc. Magic should be no different, so I need subjects to study. I’d say ten unicorns would be enough.”

“You’re sick,” Magic Star stated.

Smith frowned. “I’ll take that as a no. Though, they say a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. We’ll just have to settle on experimenting on the pony we have.”

“You can’t!” Twilight Sparkle shouted, getting into better view of the image.

“That’s right!” Rainbow Dash pushed Twilight Sparkle to the side.

Smith grinned again. “It seems there’s some dissent in your ranks, Magic Star. Why don’t I let you talk over this for, say, ten minutes? However, I’ll take no answer as a no we’ll begin our testing.”

Magic Star turned to Gingerbread. “Cut the audio.”

Gingerbread nodded.

“Everyone out of view of the camera.” Magic Star walked away from the device. Everyone gathered around her.

“How did Princess Celestia end up here?” Fluttershy asked.

“She might have followed us,” Applejack said. “She does know a lot of magic.”

“I think it’s somehow a trick,” Rainbow Dash said. “There’s no way these humans could have captured Princess Celestia. She’s way too powerful.”

“I don’t think so,” Twilight Sparkle said in a quiet voice. It pained her to think of it, but it was the only logical answer. “While Princess Celestia is the most powerful pony in Equestria, it’s because of our sun. The vast majority of her magic is tied to our sun. Because the sun here behaves differently, she doesn’t have that power. In that case, her magic is no better than your average unicorn.”

“We’ve got to save her then!” Rainbow Dash darted to the control panel. “Open that thing up to their base.”

“We don’t know where their base is,” Gingerbread said.

“You’re not doing this alone anyway,” Magic Star said. “The Order is our

problem. They captured Princess Celestia and intend to experiment on her because they have witnessed our magic. We also know this world and humanity far better than you do.”

“But, she’s not your princess. Why would you put yourself at such risk?” Twilight Sparkle asked.

“Because evil only triumphs when good does nothing,” Magic Star replied.

“I also already have a plan devised,” Wind Whistler said.

Rainbow Dash darted back to the group. “What is it?”

“We are going to surrender,” Wind Whistler stated.

There was a long, awkward silence.

“Run that past me again?” Rainbow Dash said quizzically.

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Celestia looked up as the door slid open. Smith walked in with his arms behind his back. “You ponies are apparently not all that loyal.”

“Refusing to make a trade in lives is hardly a test of loyalty,” Celestia said sternly. “Besides, I don’t know what ponies you were talking to, but they are not from my country.”

“A couple seemed to know you,” Smith said.

Celestia remained silent. Twilight Sparkle and her friends must have been with the ponies in this world. If only she had been so lucky.

“Regardless, we’ll just have to settle with you for the time being,” Smith said. “I should tell you we took the liberty to make what we call a magnetic resonance image of your head to see what it looks like on the inside. A very interesting picture to say the least. However, we need a closer look to see how exactly everything works.”

Celestia gulped. “You don’t mean...”

“Opening up your skull and prodding your brain the trunk of nerves in your horn? Of course,” Smith said.

One of the humans wearing a white coat picked up a tool with a circular saw blade. The blade started spinning and the machine screamed a piercing, high-pitched whine.

Princess Celestia felt a cold sweat spread over her body. She had never seen such a tool, but she knew exactly what it was for. It was meant to cut bone, her skull to

be exact.

“I’m afraid you will likely perish from the procedures we must conduct,” Smith said, sounding remorseful and looking away. “However, we are not completely heartless. We will put you under and spare you the pain.”

Celestia noticed something out of the corner of her eye. A human in a white coat plunged a large syringe in a vile and pulled back the plunger to draw a clear liquid into it. He pulled the long needle out and pushed the plunger in to squirt a small amount of the liquid out. “You’ll go to sleep and not feel a thing.”

Celestia tried to back away from him, but the shackles kept her in place. There was no escape. She might be able to fight, but she suspected the long objects the humans in olive green carried were some kind of weapon. They could incapacitate her or kill her if she tried anything. Even she could not face these numbers without the sun.

The sun was what really worried her. Although old age would never take her life, she knew she would eventually expire. A disease or injury would end her temporal life someday. However, if she died now with the sun tied to her, would it survive? Could her death mean the death for all of Equestria? She had been alive long enough to accept the inevitable, but she could not bear the thought of the slow, cold death in darkness her subjects would face without the sun.

The human stepped towards her. He aimed the needle towards her side.

“The ponies want to talk,” someone announced.

“Everyone hold off!” Smith shouted.

The human with the syringe took a step back and placed it on the table next to him.

A monitor came on with the image of a yellow mare with green hair. She frowned and glared forward. “Over my objections, ten unicorns have agreed to your terms. However, if Princess Celestia has been harmed in any way, the deal’s off.”

“I assure you she is in the peak of health,” Smith said. “Trust me, we checked.”

Celestia shuddered. She was not sure what the thing they did to her head was, and she did not want to think of what else these humans might have done to her body while she was unconscious.

“Then name a time and place for the exchange,” the mare said.

“Death Valley salt flats in hour,” Smith said.

“We’ll be there,” the mare replied. The monitor went black.