

## Chapter 7

The five ponies galloped across the plains, focusing on their final destination. Well, four ponies galloped; Fluttershy was riding on Applejack's back, since she couldn't fly or run fast enough to keep up with the older mares. The orange mare had insisted on it after seeing Fluttershy falling behind. Fluttershy had at first refused, not wanting to be a burden, but Applejack had been adamant.

As they galloped, they presented such a formidable force that most monsters stayed out of their way. It wasn't often that one heavily-armored unicorn, one well-muscled mare (carrying a pegasus filly), and two other unicorns barreled through the area. Occasionally, a monster or two would try to brave the force, only to be trampled under the hooves of the two lead mares, if they weren't shot down by the archer's keen aim.

A couple of hours later, Twilight saw the towers of a castle rising before them. "Is that Stabul Castle?" she called to Applejack.

"Sure is!" the monk replied. "And it looks like Colton hasn't been here, judgin' by the lack of smoke 'n whatnot."

The five collectively sighed in relief, slowing their pace as they approached the castle. A pair of earth ponies stood guard by the gate, one on either side. They had been looking rather bored, one idly twirling the braid in her mane around a hoof. When they spotted the approaching group, they snapped to attention, then offered a bow to Applejack as she approached.

One of them spoke. "Master Applejack! You've returned! We were getting worried, ma'am!"

Stopping before them, Applejack offered a grin. "Pshaw, you worry too much, Caramel." She then sighed. "Still, tighten up the defenses, will you? Ah've lost too many good ponies already."

The other glanced at the unfamiliar faces that were following Applejack. "Um, ma'am..."

"Don't you worry 'bout these folks none, they're with me," the master monk replied. "C'mon, sugarcubes, let's go talk to the king." She led the others into the castle.

Stabul Castle was wider than Clydecyan Castle had been, though not quite as spacious as Castle Colton. In fact, in terms of both height and width, it lay between the two. The visitors took their time admiring the architectural differences... or critiquing them, in Rarity's case.

"... I'm not saying it's *bad* per se, but it's lacking the... *refinement* that Castle Colton has," she was saying. "I mean, even the towers look like little more than blocks somepony piled together into a crude cylindrical structure!"

Applejack rolled her eyes. "That'd be because they *are*," she said.

Rarity blinked. "But... but how can you *live* in a place so aesthetically displeasing?!" she exclaimed.

Applejack sighed, and stopped, looking at her. "Because we're good, honest earth ponies for the most part here in Stabul, and we care about how somethin' *works* more 'n how it *looks*. All that frou-frou nonsense from Colton don't mean a thing here. If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

It was the first time in living memory that Twilight could recall Rarity being struck speechless in regards to how something looked. The white unicorn simply stared at Applejack, her jaw working but no sounds coming out. Lyra and Fluttershy giggled at the sight.

Finally, Rarity found her voice. "I'd... honestly never thought about it that way. I've been living among the refinement of Colton my whole life, I never thought that the other castles wouldn't be as visually impressive." She actually appeared contrite. "I apologize if I offended you, Applejack."

The orange mare grinned, and waved a hoof in dismissal. "Ain't no need to 'pologize, Rarity," she said. "You ain't done or said nothin' wrong."

Before anything else could be said, a yellow-and-red blur slammed into Applejack, knocking her over. Fluttershy, thrown off the mare by the impact, squeaked and righted herself in midair with a couple of flaps. The blur resolved into a young earth pony filly, a year or two younger than Fluttershy. "AJ! You're back!" the filly exclaimed.

Applejack chuckled. "Hey there, sugarcube," she said. "Ah'd like ya to meet some new friends o' mine." She got up, turning to face the others. "This here's mah little sister, Applebloom. And these are mah friends Twilight Sparkle, Rarity, Fluttershy, and – "

"Lyra! It's been a while, how've you been?" Applebloom interrupted.

Lyra chuckled, reaching down to give the filly a hug. "I've been worse, Applebloom. I hope you're staying out of trouble?"

"Yeah, ah've been good," Applebloom said, then turned to the others. "Nice ta meet ya'll, too!"

Fluttershy hung back, a little intimidated by the more extroverted filly. Twilight and Rarity, however, immediately gushed over how cute Applebloom was, causing the earth pony to blush in indignation.

Before they could get too sidetracked, Applejack coughed. "Applebloom, we need to talk to Big Mac. Ah promise, ah'll come visit later once we're done meetin'." Her voice left no room for argument, and Applebloom reluctantly trotted off to another part of the castle. Applejack sighed. "Ah swear, she's mah kin, but she drives me up the wall sometimes."

Rarity chuckled. "I found her absolutely *darling!* Oh, sometimes I wish I had a sibling of my own..."

Twilight smirked. "You know, your mom told me once you were quite the nightmare as a filly, and that was why your parents decided not to have another foal."

As Rarity blushed, Applejack coughed. "C'mon now, ya'll. We've dilly-dallied enough right here, let's get a move on!"

She led them up a couple of floors to the throne room. The guards outside the doors offered her a bow as she led them through the doors. Looking around, Twilight noted that the room was possibly even more spacious than the throne room at Colton. Then she got her first look at the king of Stabul, and her jaw nearly fell open.

Applejack had mentioned that his name was Big Macintosh. And he certainly was big. He stood a full head taller than most other stallions that Twilight had met in her life. While Applejack was built with lean muscle, Big Mac was simply *built*. Muscles rippled across his legs even as he shifted in his throne. His coat was a bright red, and he had a short-cropped orange mane and tail. A simple golden circlet and red robe was all he wore, not even bothering with a crown.

He looked up from where he'd been studying some papers, and broke into a wide grin. "Well, look who's here," he said in a slow but strong voice. "Welcome back, sis."

"Nice ta be back, Big Mac," Applejack replied, offering a short bow. "Wish more of us had made it back with me..."

The king frowned. "Speakin' of, where's the others?"

Applejack took a deep breath. "Dead ta the last pony, Big Mac," she said. "Monsters ambushed us on Mt. Hoof. Hay, if it weren't fer these folks – " she waved Twilight and the others forward at this point " – ah might not have made it back either."

Big Mac bore a look of shock on hearing that most of Stabul's finest were dead. Still, he shook himself, and offered a grateful smile to the others. "Y'all have mah thanks fer bringin' my sister back safe 'n sound."

Twilight and the others bowed in respect, but Applejack sighed. "We got other problems, bro. They came here ta warn us that Colton's plannin' an attack."

The king's eyes widened. "Colton?! Why in tarnation would Colton attack us?!"

Lyra stepped forward. "King Macintosh, you have to believe what we say. Colton will attack, and soon."

Big Mac's eyes widened on seeing her. "Lyra? What're you doin' here? Don't yer parents need you in Clydecyan?"

Lyra's head bowed. "My parents, as well as everypony else in Clydecyan, lie dead at Colton's hooves. They attacked without warning, demanding that we surrender our Fire Crystal. When we did, they rained fire upon us from the Red Wings."

The king bowed his head in sorrow. "That ain't right... they killed everypony in Clydecyan jus' fer the Fire Crystal?"

"That's not all," Twilight added, stepping forward. "Colton also seized Maresidia's Water Crystal days before attacking Clydecyan. And I'm ashamed to admit that I was the one leading the Red Wings at that time."

Big Mac looked her over. "Yer armor marks you as a Dark Knight of Colton. How come yer here, rather than with them?"

"I drew the line when I realized King Colton wished for me to kill an entire village of summoners, including the foals," Twilight replied. "Fluttershy here is the only

known survivor of Mist." The pegasus filly bowed her head.

Big Mac's eyes were stormy. "Maresidia and Clydecyan... the Water and Fire Crystals... so Colton's after our Wind Crystal, huh? Well, we'll give 'em a fight they won't soon forget!" He rose to his full height, and bellowed, "Lock down the castle! We are in a state of war! Foals and noncombatants to the shelters!" His powerful voice echoed through the room, and the guards bowed smartly before taking off to inform the rest of the castle.

"My, he certainly doesn't waste time," Rarity gushed. "Now *he* is a true king. Oh, if my heart weren't already taken by another..." She offered a look to Twilight, who blushed under her helmet.

"He's certainly... um... proactive?" offered Fluttershy.

Lyra nodded. "King Macintosh is well-loved by his people. He sometimes says he's not really worthy of being a king, but that's part of his charm. He's charismatic without being arrogant."

"Thank ye kindly fer those words, Lyra," Big Mac said as he stepped down from the throne. "But we've got a problem. Ah'm sure you know by now that we lost most of our best monks on Mt. Hoof. That in mind, would ya'll be willin' ta...?"

"Say no more, King Macintosh," Twilight cut in with a bow. "We'll be more than happy to assist in the defense of Stabul." The others all nodded.

Big Mac smiled. "Thank ye all." He looked them over. "Hm... Would you two mind helpin' our medics?" he asked, pointing to Fluttershy and Rarity.

Rarity smiled, tossing her mane a little. "But of course, King Macintosh! I'd be more than willing to lend my white magic to aid your own healers!"

Fluttershy nodded as well. "I'd like to help out, any way I can," she said.

"Perfect!" Applejack said. "Ah'll lead you two where ya need to go, then we'll proceed to lock down the castle!"

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A few hours later, Applejack, Twilight, and Lyra stood just outside the gates of the castle with a contingent of lesser monks. Twilight took comfort in the fact that Rarity

and Fluttershy were relatively safe in the shelters with the medics. The lockdown of the castle had proceeded smoothly, no pony had argued or made a fuss. Well, no pony except Applebloom. The little filly had been upset that she'd been pulled away from cooking dinner for herself and Applejack. Still, she understood the situation. With everything secure, there was nothing to do but wait for the attack.

They weren't disappointed. A mere three hours into their vigil, a shout came from the ramparts. "Colton soldiers spotted!"

"Get ready, everypony!" Applejack declared, settling into a fighting stance.

Twilight drew her sword and Lyra readied her harp. A few moments later, the first wave arrived. Two soldiers stood in front of a lieutenant, who ordered them to attack. As the soldiers charged, Twilight and Applejack struck. Applejack bucked one soldier with both hind legs, dropping him instantly. Twilight swung her blade while offering a silent apology, cutting the other soldier's legs out from under him before finishing him off. The lieutenant turned to flee, but the other monks pony-piled onto him, crushing him with their flailing hooves. Everypony let out a breath. That had been easy.

Their reprieve was short-lived. An explosion went off in the courtyard, causing the gatekeepers to whirl. "The Red Wings!" Twilight gasped, as a few more explosions rocked the castle.

"Grr... it really rubs me the wrong way ta do this!" Applejack said with a growl. "Everypony, pull back into the keep! No use standin' out here just ta get killed!"

The other ponies were quick to comply. They made a dash for the keep's door, avoiding the explosions and shrapnel that were flying every which way. One poor earth pony, though, was hit directly by one of the bombs. He was incinerated instantly, not even getting a chance to scream.

Everypony else made it safely, and Applejack barred the door. She looked apologetically at Lyra and Twilight. "Sorry 'bout this, girls. Ah reckon ah've gone and drug ya into a hopeless fight."

Twilight shook her head as the door rattled from a fierce blow. "We were already involved, and if I can save just one life, it'll be worth it."

"Heh. Ah reckon we'll save more 'n that, Twilight!" Applejack declared.

The door splintered under another blow, then shattered. The next group to enter

drew gasps from the guards. "Monsters?! Colton has monsters in its employ?!" one of them exclaimed.

Applejack bucked a fish-man monster, a Sahagin, into oblivion. "This proves that this Nightmare Moon pony is disruptin' the natural order o' things!"

Twilight thrust her sword into a Domovoi. "I hate it when I'm right, sometimes," she griped.

Lyra dodged a swing from another monster, and bucked it. While not as strong as Applejack, she was able to daze it, leaving it open to another pony-pile of monk trainees.

More enemies, soldiers and monsters alike, were pouring in. Despite their valor, the trainees found themselves getting seperated and picked off. Twilight grimaced. "We need to pull back! Force them into a choke point!"

"The staircase leadin' to the throne room's right behind us," Applejack said. "That's where we'll make our stand!" With that, they pulled back into the staircase, including those trainees that had survived. The enemies were quick to follow.

On the staircase, Lyra fretted. "We can't afford to lose here, can we?"

Applejack smirked. "Don't you worry, none. Big Mac's probably givin' those Colton cretins a hay of a time elsewhere. Our job is ta keep the worst of them offa his back..." she paused to buck at a trio of soldiers that ran up the stairs after them, "... and crush whoever we can!"

Despite her bravado, the enemies were pouring in at a steady pace. The chokepoint wasn't effective enough to stall the flood. More trainees fell, one gasping in shock as a Colton soldier heartlessly ran him through.

Lyra panicked at the sight. "We can't stay here! We need to retreat!" She ran up the stairs.

"Lyra!" Twilight called, rushing after her.

With a muttered curse, Applejack and the last standing trainee followed, Applejack slamming and locking the throne room's door behind her. "Hoo-ee, reckon we mighta bit off a bit more 'n we can chew?"

"Maybe," Twilight said. "But we can't afford any more retreats. The crystal's just

past this room, isn't it?"

"Sure is," Applejack replied. "Hopefully, that door'll stay locked long enough for us to catch our second wind."

Without warning, the lone trainee turned to the door, and undid the lock. Lyra gasped. "That's no monk, it's a spy!" As she said this, the trainee's visage distorted and warped, changing into a Gargoyle.

"Low-down dirty...!" cursed Applejack as she bucked the creature into a wall. Twilight struck it down moments later.

But the damage had been done. The door to the throne room burst open, revealing another set of monsters. Despite their weakness, the three mares managed to slay all of them. More were coming through, however.

"Ugh, this is ludicrous!" Twilight moaned. "C'mon, let's go to the crystal's chamber! We'll have to make our last stand there!"

The other two nodded in agreement, and dashed for the door leading to the crystal's chamber. Lyra stumbled for a moment, but quickly recovered and joined them. Applejack took a position directly in front of the Wind Crystal, with Lyra on her right and Twilight on her left. Three soldiers from Colton burst into the room, pausing as they saw the Wind Crystal on the platform behind Applejack.

*Kthick!*

Two of the soldiers gasped as their third member was cut down from behind. Before they could recover, they two were struck down by a rainbow-colored blur. A blur that resolved into a cyan pegasus, who grinned at Twilight.

"You always seem to get in trouble, don't you, Twilight?" the pegasus asked with a chuckle.

Twilight stared, dumbfounded for a moment. Then she laughed, running forward to wrap her friend in a hug. "Rainbow Dash! You made it!"

"Duh. What, you thought one earthquake would be enough to do me in?" Rainbow snorted, returning the hug with one leg, while her other kept hold of her spear. "Thought you had more faith in me than that."



"Uh, Twilight? Mind doin' some explainin'?" asked Applejack, coming forward.

"Oh, right! Rainbow, this is Applejack, Grandmaster monk of Stabul, and Lyra, princess of Clydecyan," Twilight said, indicating each pony. "Girls, this is my friend Rainbow Dash."

Rainbow smiled and waved with the hoof that wasn't holding her spear. "Nice to meet you!"

Lyra returned the greeting enthusiastically. Applejack, however, wore a skeptical look. "So, one of yer friends jus' *happens* to show up right when she's needed most? Seems a little convenient."

Twilight rounded on the monk, eyes blazing. "Just what are you suggesting?"

"First off, how'd she know to come here to Stabul?" asked Applejack, unfazed.

"She could have followed the Red Wings!" answered Twilight.

"Second, why'd she wait until now to show up? We coulda used the help before now!" continued the monk.

Rainbow leaned over to Twilight. "Is she always this suspicious of new ponies?"

"She was doing fine until now," replied Twilight. "She didn't act like this at all to me and the others when we saved her on Mt. Hoof."

"Huh. Well, that's a bit of a snag," Rainbow said off-hoovedly.

Blinking, Twilight turned to look at her...

*Sclrtch!*

... just in time to take the spear to her shoulder rather than her side. She gasped as pain shot through her, only able to stare into her friend's turquoise eyes. *Wait, turquoise?* Her thought was interrupted as Rainbow lifted her spear, and Twilight with it. With an expert flick, the pegasus sent the unicorn flying into a wall, causing Twilight to cry out.

"You really ought to listen to your friends, Twilight," Rainbow said coldly.

"You no-good varmint!" Applejack snarled, bounding forward to give the

Dragoon a kick. Rainbow flipped over the strike, smacking the orange mare in the skull with the pole of her spear. This dazed Applejack long enough for Rainbow to buck her with both hind legs. She wasn't a monk, but her strength combined with her armor was enough to send the earth pony crashing into the platform that held the Wind Crystal.

Lyra was the only one left standing between Rainbow Dash and the crystal. The mint-green unicorn was paralyzed with shock. She'd heard nothing but good things about this pegasus, and it seemed that not a word of it was true.

Noticing Lyra's panicked look, Rainbow smirked. "Care to test your luck, princess? I'm not exactly afraid to hit royalty."

Lyra took a shuddering step backward. This pegasus had just defeated Twilight and Applejack effortlessly. What chance did she have?

"Thought so," the prismatic mare said with a scoff. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to collect the Wind Crystal." She floated forward, passing the wounded Twilight and the unconscious Applejack. Before she could reach the crystal, however, she was suddenly yanked backward by a blue aura, to stare an angry white unicorn directly in the eyes.

"How *dare* you, Rainbow Dash! I'd have thought of all ponies, you would be the last to turn your blade on a friend!" Rarity was furious. She'd gone to investigate the crystal's chamber when she heard the sounds of battle tapering off, just in time to hear Rainbow's remark to Lyra. A quick glance around the room had given her all the information she needed. "What do you have to say for yourself?!"

Behind her, Fluttershy flitted past to start tending to Twilight. Rainbow didn't notice, paralyzed by the intensity of Rarity's anger. "Rarity, I..." The normally cocky pegasus was speechless. She hadn't counted on this.

"Hesitating, Rainbow Dash? That's not like you," a new voice said derisively.

[Into the chamber walked a midnight-black mare.](#) She stood a head taller than even Big Macintosh, the largest pony Twilight had seen to date. A helmet and chestplate of some turquoise material adorned her head and torso. Her eyes matched the armor, but they weren't normal eyes. They had slitted pupils, similar to a dragon. Her mane and tail were also very unusual, looking like somepony had sewn pulsing, nebulous parts of the night sky onto her head and rear.

But by far the most striking feature about her was the fact that she bore a pair of

wings *and* a horn. Everypony had thought alicorns were the stuff of legends and myths. Even so, Twilight knew at a glance who this pony had to be. "You're... Nightmare Moon!"

Those draconic eyes turned to regard her, as Fluttershy ducked behind Twilight for cover. "So, you're Twilight Sparkle. My predecessor in commanding the Red Wings. I should thank you, they've been quite helpful in retrieving the world's crystals."

"You're a madmare, Nightmare Moon!" Twilight exclaimed, trying to stand up. Her injuries, however, forced her back down. "Do you really think you can get away with this?!"

The alicorn laughed, a cruel, haunting sound. "You deluded foal, I already have gotten away with it! No pony in the world can stand up to the power I wield!" She laughed again, then turned to regard Rarity, who'd let go of Rainbow Dash in her shock on seeing the huge pony. "As for you, it seems my lieutenant has a soft spot for you. Therefore, you'll be coming with us."

Before Rarity could protest, the starry mane began to swirl around her, hiding her from view for a moment. When it cleared, the white unicorn had vanished. Rainbow, seeing this, stood up and trotted over to the Wind Crystal, grasping it in her mouth before putting it in her saddlebag. She then trotted back to the alicorn. "Ready to go, boss."

Nightmare Moon chuckled. "Indeed. Come along, then. It's time to leave this castle."

As they turned to walk away, Lyra finally found her voice, though it trembled. "Are you planning on raining fire on Stabul, like you did Clydecyan?!"

Nightmare Moon blinked, and looked at her. "Ah, it seems I missed somepony in that den of cowards. You have the luck of Tartarus, apparently." She then waved a hoof in dismissal. "But to answer your question, no. I had Clydecyan destroyed because they didn't have the spine to fight for their crystal. Stabul, though weak, at least put up a fight. Ponies who fight against hopeless odds are intriguing. But I have no need of cowards in the world I plan to make." With that, she left, Rainbow Dash right behind her.

Lyra was left utterly speechless. She didn't react even as Fluttershy healed Twilight and Applejack, bringing the monk back to consciousness.

"Ugh... consarn that feather duster! When ah get mah hooves on that pegasus, I'mma – " She stopped on seeing Lyra. Frowning, she trotted over. "Lyra? You alright, sugarcube? That pegasus didn't rough you up none, did she?"

Lyra didn't respond, but Twilight walked over as well. "We saw Nightmare Moon. She's... even more powerful than I thought. I could *feel* the power rolling off of her."

Applejack looked unsettled. "Well, can't say ah'm sorry to have missed that," she said after a moment. She turned back to Lyra. "Sugarcube, what's wrong?"

Lyra slowly turned to face her old friend, her eyes brimming with tears. "She... called Clydecyan a den of cowards. She said she ordered my home destroyed just because we didn't fight for our crystal."

Applejack was about to object, but Twilight held up a hoof. "Lyra, I think you've been bottling things up a little too long. It's past time you let everything out. No pony in this room will think less of you."

Lyra held her composure a few seconds longer before she finally broke down. Flinging herself into Applejack, she began sobbing loudly into the earth pony's shoulder. Applejack, in response, simply wrapped her forelegs around Lyra in a hug, stroking the mint unicorn's mane. Through it all, Lyra babbled out apology after apology. She apologized to her parents, for failing them as a princess; she apologized to Clover, for failing her as a lover. And she apologized to the other three present, for being so weak yet thinking she could stand on her own hooves.

At that, Fluttershy joined in the hug, her own eyes brimming. "You're not weak, Lyra! You're far stronger than I am, by a long shot! I couldn't even show my face to Nightmare Moon, but you kept standing and facing her! And I know for a fact that your parents and Clover don't want you to apologize to them. You've done nothing but try your best, given the circumstances, and they'd be proud of you."

Lyra looked down at the filly, hiccuping slightly. "How can you know?" she choked. "How can you be so sure? You never met them."

"Because you're a good pony, Lyra," Twilight said, joining the hug herself. "You helped us get the sand pearl for Rarity, and you helped us out a lot when we crossed Mt. Hoof. You haven't been a burden on us, Lyra, not at all. Just understand something; all ponies need to cry sometime. You've been through so much in such a short amount of time. Bottling things up will only make things worse when you finally let them out."

Lyra just nodded, letting a fresh wave of tears out. For a time, the four friends just stayed that way, the three comforting the one as she released all of her pent-up emotions.

Then Applejack looked around. "Um, where's Rarity? Ah'd have thought she'd be here with us..."

"Nightmare Moon took her," Twilight said flatly, stepping away. "And I'm going to get her back."

Applejack blinked, then smiled. "Well, shoot. Count me in fer this! I wouldn't miss it fer the world!"

Lyra nodded, finally drying her tears. "I'm in, too," the mint unicorn said. "You've all helped me out, so I want to do the same for you."

Beside her, Fluttershy smiled. "I'll stick with you, Twilight. You did so much for me, so it wouldn't feel right to leave you now."

With that, the four left the chamber, to plan their next move in the plan against Nightmare Moon.