

## Divergence

### Chapter 3

#### "Evidence"

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Pinkie stepped forward, asking in a high, quavering tone: "Dashie... how could you?"

Dash was pulled from her reverie, her thoughts and feelings poorly sorted. She had been staring blankly at the disheveled mess that was one of her oldest friends, now laying in a beaten heap before her. She turned to the pink filly, whose mane seemed to deflate by increments before her eyes.

"Pinkie, I—ow!" Rainbow Dash yelped, stung by something hard striking her on the flank at high velocity.

Rarity was advancing slowly, horn shining brighter than Dash had ever seen it. Her eyes were narrowed, her jaw bunched hard enough to make a vein near her temple pulse visibly. Rocks were levitating around her, a dozen strong, and she was hurling them one after another at the Pegasus with incredible force.

Having taken a few hits from the stones, Dash knew she was going to feel the bruises for days—provided they didn't break any of her light bones outright. She threw herself into dodging them before a lucky shot could fell her.

"Rarity, you throw *one more* stone at me, I'm going to shove your horn sideways up your—"

Rarity reared back to her hind legs with a scream, abandoning the stones easily dodged by the agile Pegasus. She seized a large log laying nearby with her telekinesis, raising it above her. "[You're supposed to protect your friends!](#)" she yelled, the shout tearing at her throat.

Dash had dropped into a balanced crouch, gritting her teeth, prepared to dart in any direction the moment Rarity hurled the deadly object. "That's exactly what I'm *trying to do!*" she shouted back.

"**Stop It!**" yelled Fluttershy. At volume. The effect stunned everypony to shocked silence. "J- just stop it. Everypony. Please... Just stop," she said, reverting to a whispered plea, dropping her eyes from their wide-eyed stares and moving over to apply her attentions to the insensate Applejack, now and again releasing little exclamations as she examined the wounded pony.

Rarity, glaring blue death at Rainbow Dash, let the log drop and stepped over to the front of the focused Fluttershy; she stood protectively before the natural medic and her patient, as though she half-expected the unstable acrobat to rush over and attack at any moment.

Pinkie walked towards Dash, unafraid—too wounded to be afraid—just wanting to understand. "Why, Dashie? Why did you hurt our friends?"

Looking into the dinner-plate-sized eyes of the pink pony, the lack of her trademark exuberance cut deeply into Dash's heart; she heaved a deep sigh. She'd never felt so horrible, so guilty; she *had* hurt them. She knew Twilight wouldn't be too bad, even soft as she was, but Applejack... she'd gone overboard, and she knew it. This was the one pony she could compete with, *really* had to work to win against. She'd never once backed down from a challenge, and while she and Fluttershy had known one another since their Cloudsdale school days, Applejack had come to hold a very special place in her heart.

"Pinkie. I'm... sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I—"

"*Sorry?! You're sorry are you? Oh yes? Quite contrite, yes, I can see how very penitent you are, you filthy, crass, lowlife-deviant-beast!*" Rarity erupted, unable to contain herself, ending the tirade with a screech. "You could have *killed* Applejack and Twilight both, and doomed us all! So help me—*So. Help. Me*—if harm comes to Sweetie Belle over your little psychotic run, I will *personally skin you alive!*"

Dash hung her head throughout the abuse, flinching as Rarity finished. A tear traced her

cheek, falling to the grass. She was done being angry, and besides, Rarity was right. *If anything happens to the fillies, I deserve it. I really do.*

Pinkie looked over at the white Unicorn through hooded eyes, not a hint of a smile on her face. "Rarity. Hush." She turned her attention back to Dash, gazing down at the stooped Pegasus. Stepping forward, she reached out a hoof, lifting Rainbow's chin upwards until she made eye contact with the bruised blue pony. "Dashie. You have to explain. You have to tell us why you did this."

Dash, to her credit, rendered a very thorough, albeit very thoroughly butchered, account of her experience across the canyon, trying her best to convey the depth of Princess Luna's sincerity, how her serenity and assurance had carried Dash's doubts to conviction, the evidence of the sun-raising... and the Princess's final warning.

Rarity was not in a particularly forgiving mood; refusing to make eye contact with Dash whenever she looked her way and interjecting biting comments regarding the "mental instability of certain blue Pegasi, who may or may not be present, who may or may not be inclined to schedule an extended stay with a psychiatric facility in the very near future."

Pinkie had her head tilted oddly to the side, an odd look of attentiveness to her posture. Dash had the strange but distinct feeling she was only half listening to the story; most of Pinkie's focus seemed to be on her own body. When Dash had finished her story, Pinkie blinked, straightened, and pulled a whole-body shiver. "I believe you, Dashie. I think you did the only thing you thought you could do." A little smile began to slide back across her face. "Even if you did maybe doom all Equestria."

"Um..." Dash could think of absolutely nothing to say to that, so she turned to gaze at Fluttershy, who had been—while almost preternaturally unobtrusive—listening attentively; she was taking in everything. She blinked, startled under the sudden scrutiny.

"Fluttershy?" Dash prompted.

"I... I don't know..." she muttered, glancing from the still livid Rarity, to the

not-quite-happy Pinkie Pie, to the openly pleading Rainbow Dash; her oldest friend. "I... it's not the most important thing right now. Twilight, Applejack—they're hurt, and we need to get them care right away. We have to get them back to Ponyville."

Rarity snorted. "Very well done, Rainbow Dash, your *brilliant* plan worked marvelously," she said, her scorn searing into the Pegasus like acid.

Dash winced, but refused to look away from the Unicorn this time. Despite the previous wave of forlorn weariness, her ire was beginning to rise again.

"*Nope!*" chirped Pinkie Pie, crossing a good four feet in a single bounce, hopping between the two mares. "We're done with all that hurty stuff now, 'k guys? And if anypony starts anything like that again, why I'll just tie her up with her own tail and *drag her through every puddle of mud on the way back home,*" she finished, fixedly grinning in Rarity's face.

Rarity, for her part, blanched—as much as her alabaster coat could visibly allow—certain to her very soul that this pink... *creature*, would actually do it.

"*Fine. Very well.* Have it *your way* Pinkie," Rarity said, lifting her nose to the air, and turning lightly back towards Twilight. Her horn lit again, and both Twilight and Applejack began to float softly off the ground, their bodies cushioned in the magic. "We should move quickly; I'm not certain how long I can maintain this."

Pinkie and Fluttershy moved to the Unicorn, Pinkie snagging up Applejack's hat where it lay on the ground. Flipping it into the air, it spun three times before falling to settle perfectly on her head. After a moment's consideration, she cocked it roguishly to the side.

Fluttershy looked to Dash, who hadn't moved a muscle to follow them. "Aren't you coming with us?" she asked, already sounding sad, as though the question had answered itself.

The other Pegasus grimaced. "That's... probably not a good idea."

"I'll say," came a haughty barb.

Pinkie blinked and asked, "Why not Dashie?"

Fluttershy took a step towards Dash, her mouth open to speak.

Everypony froze as a shock of light and clap of thunder violently erupted in the distance, splitting the night in a brilliant bolt, casting a stark relief across the friends' faces, distorting their frozen expressions with jagged shadows. A beam had shot straight upwards in a solid spear, like a beacon, drawing their eyes to the source; an ancient and dilapidated castle was revealed—startlingly close, its every window filled with the searing light, casting a surreal aspect on the surrounding forest for miles around.

Dash blinked, breaking the spell the incredible sight held her under. Gravely she turned her gaze on her friends. "*That's* why. Guys? Guys!" she shouted, jerking them from their transfixed state. "You have to get AJ and Twilight home. Now."

Dash didn't hear Fluttershy shout her name as she sped toward the castle; the source of this nightmare.

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Days had passed, or so the clocks counted and the calendars assured.

The atmosphere of the usually light-hearted and joyful little town was now subdued and tense; the streets mostly empty, shops open but vacant. No pony could remember a time like this. For the first day, the darkness had endured for twenty-four hours without break. A lone courier Pegasus arrived late in the natural hours of the first night after the disaster, meeting with the mayor behind closed doors, before leaving as abruptly as he came. Shortly after the mayor issued a proclamation of emergency; curfew was established, watches were set and directed toward the Everfree Forest, and travel outside the town's borders was strongly discouraged. No announcements had been made regarding Princess Celestia.

The sun finally broke the horizon on the second day. Everypony cheered its rise, but their bursting celebration held a current of desperation. The weak cheer quickly stilled altogether as the ponies saw the rising orb was not the brilliant sun they knew so well, but cast its

reddish-orange light fitfully, as though none too pleased to be making an appearance. Nor did it take its usual track through the sky; staying low to the horizon as it made a two-hour trek from rise to set. The moon mirrored its path like a silver guardian, drifting in parallel above the sun as it made its belabored journey.

The next day, the sun was up for nearly four hours. Everypony in town solemnly gathered to watch it rise; even the youngest foals roused from their uneasy slumber.

Twilight had regained consciousness with a mild concussion and had been released from the clinic with an order of bed rest. Applejack had been admitted to critical care; her broken rib and fractured foreleg left her heavily bandaged, with a prescription of pain medication she flatly refused to take—despite the constant, if passive, nagging she received from Fluttershy.

The five stayed together in the library for the most part, taking comfort in one another's presence, if little else. Twilight maintained a brooding silence since she had awoke, settling a pervasive anxiety upon the general atmosphere.

Dash had not been seen since their parting in the forest, and it was anypony's guess if she was alive or not. Her welfare had been as much a subject of discussion as her intentions.

In the weak light of the third day, Twilight spoke gravely to the assembled ponies. "Girls," she began, the word falling like the somber call to a counsel of war. "I've been thinking everything through, and there are few things I'm not confused about. There are far too many coincidences surrounding my coming here—about my research into the prophecy, and subsequent discoveries about the Elements of Harmony. I think... I think Princess Celestia knew this was going to happen. I can't get much farther than that with any assurance, but everything has lined up far too well for me to believe her hoof was absent from how things have unfolded. I can't... I don't understand why she wasn't direct with me, or for that matter, bothered with me at all in procuring the Elements," she went on, waving a hoof vaguely before her. "I've been having Spike send letters to the Princess three times a day, but either she's not receiving them for some reason or... I don't even want to consider the alternatives. But one thing is clear: I have to stay true to the Princess. She gave me a task, and it is unfulfilled. I have to go back into the forest, and try to get to the Elements."

The announcement was met with scattered, if half-hearted, protestations and the near-immediate reaction she had both feared and expected. They insisted, once again, on going with her; she had as little success in dissuading them as she had the first time.

"Um..." Twilight began with more hesitancy, "we have to discuss what happened with Dash, one more time. I want to believe that she was under some kind of compulsion, not in control of herself, as much as any of you... but after hearing everypony's perspectives, I don't really think that's the case. I know you all feel betrayed; you've known her a lot longer than I have. But if we encounter her in there, and she tries to stop us again, I..." Twilight broke off, biting her lip. She knew what she had to say, even believed she was right, but giving voice to her intention to take Rainbow Dash down if need be, by any means necessary, pulled a string in her heart. It was true that she hadn't known the brash Pegasus long at all, but she'd come to feel as much a connection with her as she did with the still-loyal ponies sitting with her now. How these crazy ponies had come to claim such a place in her heart in such a short time, when all her life she'd barely given a second thought to social ties outside of the most common courtesies, was beyond her.

A delicate "Ahem" stirred Twilight from her musings, and she focused her attention to the white Unicorn.

"We all know what you're trying to say, dear, and as you said, you know as much as we do about what happened. What you may not be fully understanding is that we've all known Rainbow Dash much longer than you have, and as such, her vile betrayal cuts all the deeper. The others may still have reservations—though how *you* can Applejack, after how badly she beat you, I'll never know—but I for one, have *none*. When I see her again, I will attend to her *personally*," Rarity finished primly, the glint in her eyes bespeaking her tightly reined fury at the absent Pegasus.

Pinkie spoke from where she lay on the floor, not raising her head from its resting position on her hooves, "You're wrong, everypony. I know you are. I get why Twilight won't believe me; she doesn't know. But you Applejack; and you Rarity; an' Fluttershy too. If I told you my tail was twitch-a-twitchin' right now, you'd all dive for cover." Applejack flinched a bit at this,

sending a reflexive glance to the ceiling as Pinkie continued, “And I’m telling you that my Pinkie-sense told me Dashie wasn’t lying. She *was* telling the truth.”

Rarity was biting her lip and looking like she’d dearly love to argue the point, but Twilight got there first, her eyebrows raised high into her mane. “Pinkie-sense?” she asked, looking around at the group.

A weary Applejack turned to the confused Unicorn with a deadpan expression. “Long story, sugarcube. Anyhow, Ah been thinkin’ ‘bout all this my own way, ‘n see here: me ‘n Rainbow been close for ages now, ever since she came down from Cloudsdale to help Fluttershy set up her cottage. It may seem like we argue more’n otherwise, but honest truth is that’s just our way, how we ‘spress ourselves. Ain’t neither one of us sharp on that mushy, frou-frou stuff, so we’ve always shown how we felt with jibes an’ horsin’ about. Camaraderie type-a-thing. Wouldn’t expect *ya*ll ta understand that, Rarity,” Applejack snapped, casting a glance at Rarity, where a repugnant look was painted on the Unicorn’s face for all to see. “Ah know what yer thinkin’, but we ain’t discussin’ it, so you can wipe that look offa yer face right now.”

She turned to Twilight. “Listen here, Twilight, cuz here’s what matters: Dash ain’t no traitor. It ain’t in her. She cares more about her friends than she does her own life. ‘Bout this time last year, Fluttershy an’ Dash an’ me were hoofin’ it about the back country, up north ‘round the bend of the Everfree, just explorin’. We took a rest in a scenic li’l meadow we happened upon. Fluttershy an’ Ah were havin’ a drink at the creek runnin’ through, when we heard this huge crack behind us. An ol’ dead tree had given way, an’ was loomin’ over us on its way down fast. Dash had been flyin’ about up above an’ saw it ‘fore we did. Just as we’re about to get it, Dash slammed inta us from the air, pushin’ us clear. That tree came down in a almighty crash... an for what felt like forever, Ah thought Dash hadn’t made it out. She did o’ ‘course, an’ was mighty pleased with herself, lemme tell ya. But if she hadn’t? She still woulda’ done it. Ah know that sure’s anything. In the forest Ah... Ah got carried away—swept up in everythin’. Ah should’ve heard her out...”

Fluttershy nodded her agreement from her place on the couch pillows.



Twilight and Rarity shared a glance, their reservations wavering but unchanged.

The divide in group consensus tacitly ignored, Twilight began to lay out the logistics for the trip.

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On the fitful dawn of the fourth day, Twilight and Applejack decided they had recovered enough to act on their plan. Fluttershy, however, was none too pleased. Applejack was still heavily bandaged, but flatly refused to be left behind. She limped along stoically beside a grim-faced Twilight.

The group gathered what few supplies they felt were needed, and packed them into their respective saddle bags. They had trotted past the edge of town when they heard the warning cries shouted from the posted lookouts on the roofs behind them. Stopping to watch something breaking from the canopy of the Everfree Forest, it soon became clear that the odd sight was a group of Pegasi flying in a tight formation, headed right for the town. They landed some short distance in front of the group, conversing briefly amongst themselves in muted tones, before trotting up as a unit towards the five friends.

A tight-fitting weave of black and dark blue covered the Pegasi; emblazoned bolts of lightning crossed vertically over their shoulders and met at the chest in a 'V' shape. Three were large, barrel-chested stallions, evidenced by their size and the squareness of jaw. The others were smaller; obviously young mares by their graceful lines and sinuous movement, though their coat-tight uniforms revealed the angular lines of taut and powerful frames. They held about them, one and all, an air of tight discipline and singular purpose as they trotted in formation towards the friends.

A gasp came as one from the Ponyville cadre; the lead Pegasus mare had broken off

from the others as they halted, the leader continuing on alone. Raising a hoof, she had pushed back her goggles and pulled back the cowl. Magenta eyes regarded the group, still shocked to silence; though not at the unveiling of her face. They had recognized the leader for who she was the moment she broke from the other uniformed Pegasi; the way she moved, the cyan wings, and her rainbow colored mane. All were easily distinguishable and unmistakable.

Twilight's eyes were large as the lead pony pulled her mask off, revealing the Pegasus that had occupied so many of her tormented thoughts. She stepped forward with no small amount of apprehension to meet the steadily approaching rainbow-maned pony...

"Rainbow Dash," Twilight said flatly, sweeping her with a cool look from hoof to laid-back ears.

Dash pulled to a stop before Twilight, giving her a small nod and a carefully neutral expression. "Twilight," she acknowledged, before glancing away and stepping around her, leaving the bookish unicorn momentarily nonplussed.

Coming to a halt in front of Applejack, Dash's composure suddenly fell away; her eyes alight with conflicted emotion as she took in the workpony's injuries. "AJ... Applejack... I'm so, so sorry... I—"

AJ shot a tight little grin at the faltering Pegasus. "Lucky shot was all that was, sugarcube," she quipped dismissively. The two mares stood staring at one another; the light smile spread to Rainbow as, for just a moment the world's troubles fell away from them. The few words were enough to bring the two to every understanding required between them. The soft smiles slowly took on the character of familiar, challenging grins as they leaned in to press their foreheads together in mock challenge—stylized goggles meeting worn Stetson—before chuckling and stepping back.

Rainbow cast a look around, taking in Pinkie and Fluttershy, and throwing them a friendly wink. Rarity had been glowering since Dash had appeared, looking as though she wanted to say something harsh and was struggling to contain herself. Dash barely spared her a glance before turning back to Twilight. "Twi, it's time to head up to the castle. Princess Luna will explain

everything.”

Twilight blinked. “*Who?*”

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Chapter 2

← “Confrontation”

Chapter 4

⇒ “Foresight”