

Chapter Four: *Coming to Terms*

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"I'm not so sure about this... I'm pretty sure we're supposed to stay indoors as much as possible until the whole monster thing blows over. That's what sis told me anyway." Sweetie Belle glanced back at her bedroom door, fearing that Spike might barge in at any moment and foil the plan before it even got off the ground. "But... If you really, really think that this will help Applebloom, then count me in."

Looking up at her friend, Scootaloo snorted, rearing up and placing her forehooves on the wall before her. "Well of course it'll help Applebloom! Everyone thinks that the monster put some kind of spell over her, right?" The curly maned filly nodded. "Okay, so, if we catch the monster, or even better, if we defeat the monster, then we can make it turn her back to normal!"

Sweetie Belle looked back at her door again, lowering her voice. "Yeah but, how do you know for sure that this will even work? And what if we don't find the monster that put Applebloom under a spell?"

A dull flash sparked the clouds, a not so distant crash of thunder rolling in. Not more than a few days ago, the weather had been bright and sunny, typical of the summer weather patterns. In those few days, however, it had gotten progressively gloomier.

"We can sit around doing nothing or we can try to help her; that's how I see it. And if a cockatrice can undo turning a pony to stone, getting this monster to make Applebloom stop acting crazy should be a walk in the park. Besides, if we pull this off, you and I might get monster hunter cutie marks! How cool would that be?" The orange pegasus filly dropped back to all fours, grinning up at Sweetie.

"That would be pretty cool... But... We're just kids. How are we going to do this? There's only four of us..."

"Five! Thorry I'm late!" Twist trotted into view, nearly weighed down by the bags at her sides. "Are you thure we're gonna need all thith thuff?"

"This is an adventure, right?" Snips began to rummage through the supplies without warning, to which Twist raised a brow. "So we need food, water, and ponchos in case it rains. You... You forgot the ponchos?"

"Nobody thaid anything about ponchoth!"

Snips' jaw hung slack for a moment. He glanced back at Snails, who shrugged, and then back to the filly with a curly red mop of a mane. "Have you looked at the sky lately? Of course we need ponchos!"

"Twist," Scootaloo flatly stated, "The ponchos were higher on the list than the food. Come on, seriously."

"What litht?! Nopony gave me a litht!"

Sweetie Belle frowned as the group fell to bickering. "Okay, enough! There are a few ponchos lying around up here. We'll have to share them I guess. If you all keep shouting though, somepony might hear us, so shhh."

“Yeah Twist, stop shouting.”

The red maned filly scowled at Snips, then turned her attention to Sweetie Belle.

“We’ll be waiting right here.” Scootaloo looked to the young ponies surrounding her before continuing. “Grab what you can and let’s get going.”

Sweetie Belle nodded and stepped away from the window, treading as lightly as possible across her room. She had a rain jacket of her own, but she figured that the others would just have to make do with one or two of Rarity’s own rain outfits, of which there were many. The door creaked seemingly louder than normal as it moved on its hinges, the young unicorn cringing as she finally stepped into the hall. She peered into the main room of the building, where Rarity usually did all her work, and froze in her tracks.

Spike was looking right at her.

Only, he wasn’t. He had fallen fast asleep on a pile of half eaten gems, his lips moving slowly in his sleep, kissing the air. Sweetie heaved a sigh of relief and continued down the hall, nudging the door to Rarity’s room in the hope that the door was unlocked. She reflected very briefly on what she had seen; her older sister kissing a dragon, a very young dragon at that, and then her older sister just looked up, smiling as she locked eyes with Sweetie Belle. The entire situation struck her as bizarre, but she wasn’t about to ask Spike or Rarity to explain what she had seen.

The hundreds of dresses lining Rarity’s closet brought her back to the task at hoof. *Theres more dresses in this closet than there are out front... I don’t see why she doesn’t try selling some of these. Oh well.*

After a minute of searching, she located several rain coats, each uniquely designed and decorated. Not long after that, she was carrying the two which she figured Rarity would miss the least past the doorway to the shop floor. Another flash outside, followed by a crack so loud, the floor nearly shook. On cue, rain began to pelt the windows.

Outside, Snips began to shout a string of words that Sweetie Belle was largely unfamiliar with, barely muffled by the walls or the rain.

Spike stirred in his sleep, his claws idly rubbing his middle, and then a little lower.

“Lady Rarity...” he mumbled, “Are you sure...?”

Sweetie gawked in confusion as she watched the dragon and then decided that it would probably be best if she stopped watching.

Making my friends wait in the rain any longer than they have to wouldn’t be very nice. She could hear them more clearly as she approached her window.

The argument between Snips and Twist continued at full tilt. “I hope you don’t kith your mother with that mouth, that’t all I’m thaying!” It had apparently changed topics.

Scootaloo had raised herself against the wall again, as if reaching for the windowsill with her forehooves. "You okay, Sweetie Belle? You look a little-"

"I'm fine. Sorry that it took me so long. I thought Spike might have woken up." She held the ponchos in a bundle over the edge of the sill. "Catch!" she shouted after letting go.

After the others had donned their ponchos to the best of their abilities, and Scootaloo had helped Sweetie Belle climb down from her window, the group set off in the rain, making for the edge of town with as much haste as they could gather in the quickly thickening mud. Twist and Snips continued to argue, and occasionally Scootaloo would join in to tip the favor one way or the other, seeming content to watch so long as the aggression wasn't directed at her. Sweetie had decided not to bother trying to mediate after her attempts had lost their novelty and were simply ignored. Besides herself, Snails seemed to be the only one among them who was giving the task at hoof any thought.

Curious, Sweetie Belle attempted to start a conversation.

"You've been awfully quiet all this time. Are you scared or something?"

"Not really..." The gold coated colt replied. He paused for a moment, then added, "I mean, I'll worry about that when the time comes. No sense in getting worked up when there's nothing to get worked up over, eh?"

"That makes sense, I guess. So uh..." The filly looked around, her gaze sweeping over Snips, covered by half of the coat covering Snails, then Twist and Scootaloo, sharing the other coat. "Do we know where we're going, or are we just looking around?"

"Did you forget the map too?!" Snips shouted, nearly hopping out from under the coat.

Sweetie Belle did her best to ignore them, listening instead to Snails as he explained. "And if no one sees anypony around town with weird looking eyes during the day usually, that means the monster is staying somewhere out of town, but going in when the sun goes down. So that's where we're going, eh? Out of town."

The Everfree Forest loomed just over the next hill. A dense cloud of birds drifted away from the trees with a symphony of alarmed chirping and fluttering wings, and as Sweetie Belle watched in awe, they seemed to drift slowly closer to the group of ponies. Suddenly, an enormous figure exploded from the edge of the forest, twigs and leaves clinging to the massive form for several moments after breaking from the foliage. While not on a collision course with the young ponies, it was passing near enough that it might notice them unless evasive actions were taken.

"Get down!" Scootaloo shouted softly, pulling Twist with her as she dropped to the wet grass under her.

The curly maned unicorn followed her example, as did Snips and Snails, watching the lumbering form closely as it sped by. A few moments passed before Scootaloo raised her head to get a better look.

"Is that... Twilight Sparkle... And Zecora? What are they riding?"

"Where are they heading?" Sweetie Belle whispered.

“Fluttershy’s cabin, maybe? Looks like they’re going in that direction...” Scootaloo turned away from the rapidly shrinking silhouette of the unicorn and the zebra, narrowing her eyes at Sweetie Belle. “You don’t think Zecora and Twilight... Nah.”

“Nah what? I don’t understand.”

“No, it was a stupid idea. Don’t worry about it.” The orange pegasus slowly scanned her surroundings, which Sweetie guessed was to make sure the coast was clear. “Let’s keep moving.”

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Rain fell in sheets as the ground trembled with nearly every burst of thunder. The wind tore at the trees which lined the road back to Ponyville, branches swaying until they snapped clean off their respective trunks. The pegasus whimpered as lightning struck a nearby tree, splitting it down the middle and lighting it ablaze. Her mane hung heavy with rain water, her coat soaked through, mud steadily building up on her hooves. She pressed on, however, fighting the wind and doing her best to sidestep windswept debris. Applejack was right in every respect; the safe thing to do would have been to wait out the storm, but Fluttershy was determined to be with Rarity. The pegasus feared that failing to meet Rarity could be the final straw in the breaking of their friendship, and if braving a storm meant keeping Rarity as a friend, she was prepared to do so.

Overhead, a familiar blue pegasus zipped through the air, just barely visible through the rain. Fluttershy assumed that the intensity of the storm must have forced Rainbow Dash and the rest of the weather team into submission. Considering the poor visibility, Fluttershy wasn’t all that surprised that Dash didn’t seem to notice her, heading straight for the orchard which she had left not long ago. Another nearby flash of lightning nearly brought the timid pegasus to a halt, but she forced herself to keep moving. At the very least, the rain was refreshing, cooling her down as she pushed herself onward, panting. She realized that this was the most exercise she had done since running all the way home from Redhoof’s clinic.

Rarity would be proud, she told herself, trying to think up a distraction from the gut wrenching anxiety which the storm had instilled in her.

With her sights set on the slowly approaching Ponyville, she let her thoughts wander in search of solace. She dug up happy memories, only to find that they reminded her of darker times. Thinking of the spa made her think of the day Rarity tried to leave her there. Thinking of the day Rarity tried to leave her at the spa reminded her of the following days she spent alone in her bedroom, curled up and weeping on her bed, as she had been doing for months prior. For the week or so following Fluttershy’s final visit to the spa, Pinkie Pie had attempted to assume Rarity’s place at her side, doubling her efforts to cheer up the pegasus. While she had once again been inconsolable after that final visit, she very swiftly returned to her senses with the combined realization that in misery, Fluttershy had pushed her best friend away, and that her other friends still cared enough to help.

The pegasus was aware that Rarity may have tried to visit after her second breakdown, at least once. Fluttershy had heard the pale unicorn’s voice in her cottage not long before but she had been able to overcome the more crippling aspects of depression. At that time, however, she had still been too ashamed to bring herself to meet Rarity. It also occurred to her that the nature of her visit may not have

been entirely pleasant. The few words she had heard from the pale unicorn were argumentative. Twilight and Applejack responded similarly, and Rarity left immediately afterwards, slamming the door on her way out.

Whether she had come to apologize or to twist the knife remained a mystery.

The edge of the tree line was in sight, Ponyville just a few minutes beyond that. *I can make it*, she convinced herself, ignoring the ache in her legs and the burning in her chest.

The streets were empty of all but only the most determined ponies, either by choice or by job. Ditzzy trudged through the wind and rain, stopping at every mailbox to deliver the mail to what was hopefully the correct address. She smiled as she noticed Fluttershy coming her way.

Even at a shout, she was just barely audible over the onslaught of wind, rain and thunder. "Heck of a storm we're having today, huh?! I hope Princess Celestia gets everything all figured out soon; I can't fly in this and making my rounds on hoof is taking forever!"

"That's... Nice....!" Fluttershy huffed in response, fighting the urge to slow her pace.

The grey pegasus shrugged, smiled and went back to her deliveries.

Fluttershy could see the spa. With a renewed burst of strength, she pressed on at full speed, galloping heavily down the muddy street. Her weight shifted awkwardly as she rushed toward her destination, trying to throw her balance, but she resisted, coming to a stop only after barging through the front entrance of the building. She stood there, chest heaving as she gasped for air, a puddle of mud and water spreading around her. The spa attendants froze in their tracks, looking at the soaked and muddied pegasus as if she were a fire, or a swarm of parasprites.

Rarity gasped softly, drawing Fluttershy's attention. The pale unicorn was in the process of putting her hat back on, her coat already buttoned up. With a smile, she hung her hat back on the peg and started to unbutton her coat for presumably the second time.

"I was worried you weren't going to come, dear, especially not in weather like this! Well, if you were that determined to make it here," She looked to Aloe. "Cancel my appointment cancellation. We would like the full service package as originally discussed."

"Of course," the soft pink mare replied. "Right this way."

With the novelty of Fluttershy's disheveled appearance effectively faded, Lotus and Aloe smiled warmly, gesturing to the curtain which led deeper into the spa. Rarity had referred to it as a silken portal into paradise. While the pegasus might not have put it in such grandiose terms, she had to agree. Excluding the most recent and painful experience tied to the building, the majority of the other memories which greeted the pegasus were very pleasant, almost dreamlike.

The steam room would ordinarily be the first stop on their trip through the spa, but considering that Fluttershy was filthy for the most part, Rarity insisted that she be cleaned up. The pegasus considered the irony of that, seeing that she would be taking a mud bath with Rarity in the very near future. As warm, soapy water swirled around her slick fur of her yellow coat, the pale unicorn cleared her throat,

craning her neck over the edge of the bath so as not to be heard by the nearby attendants.

“As I began to say yesterday, I realized at the party that the way I’ve been treating you recently... I’ve been... I wanted to...” The pale unicorn hesitated, glancing around as she tried to form a coherent sentence. Fluttershy tilted her head as she watched, unsure if the unicorn was working up to an apology or a justification for her actions. After about a minute of stumbling, Rarity snorted, closed her eyes and pressed on.

“There’s really no other way to say it; Fluttershy, I’ve been a bitch. A right haughty bitch.” Fluttershy gasped softly, but Rarity shook her head, intent on finishing her thought. “Mistreating you has been, without a doubt, the worst mistake I’ve made in my lifetime... Probably the worst I’ll ever make. I thought that, by trying to help you the way I was, or by being abrasive when no one else would, to try and... Well, bully you into losing weight, that I was being generous.”

Rarity opened her eyes, sorrow pooling in the azure pools of her irises, brimming in the corners of her eyes as tears. “I was wrong. I was horribly wrong, and I wish I had realized it sooner. The generous thing to do would have been to give you as much time as you needed to return to your senses. I got so caught up in trying to help you that I guess I lost my patience, when all you really needed was time and support.”

The unicorn paused, looking away for a moment, biting her lower lip. “I know that just telling you that I’m sorry may not sound like much, but...” Rarity met Fluttershy’s gaze with a look of shame, offering her apology as humbly and delicately as she could. “I really and truly mean it, and I hope that, in time, you can forgive me. You’re my best friend, and... It hasn’t really been the same without you.”

Fluttershy’s vision became misty, sniffing softly as a tender smile found its way across her lips. “Oh... Rarity, of course I forgive you... I’m sorry for shutting you out like that... For shutting everypony out. I just didn’t know what to do. It felt like my whole world had come crashing down.”

The drain gurgled softly under the bath, a whirling spiral working its way to the clouded surface of the water. Rarity smiled, reaching over the edge of the bath to hug the wet pegasus.

The pale unicorn shook her head slowly. “It’s quite alright, dear. You have nothing to apologize for. I’ve been down that road myself, and I’m fortunate to have handled it as well as I did. Blueblood had the decency to show me what a complete ass he was up front, at least, so I suppose that helped soften the blow. Would you like to talk about it, perhaps?”

“It’s um... It’s still a sore subject with me...”

“I understand. Let’s talk about something else, then. I’m sure we have plenty to catch up on.”

A dull hiss accompanied the slowly rising steam as Lotus tipped a ladle full of water over heated rocks. In minutes, a thick, humid cloud filled the small wooden sauna. Fluttershy had almost been reluctant to enter, suffering a momentary flashback, but Rarity waited patiently until the pegasus was ready to continue. They entered together, taking their familiar seats as the steam rolled gently against the floor. Rarity had requested as much privacy as possible for this appointment, as evidenced by the blue pony’s departure once the steam was thick enough to do its job. While not entirely necessary, considering that the largest hurdle had already been cleared, Fluttershy was still grateful for the gesture.

Rarity must have been determined to make this work, she thought to herself, smiling as the pale unicorn gave a happy sigh. *Would she have been this determined if I hadn't come today?*

"So..." Rarity flashed a little grin, leaning forward. "Why don't you tell me a little about this new friend of yours?"

The pegasus had put Mahara entirely out of her mind to focus on Rarity, but at her mention, a sudden rush of emotion filled her thoughts. As much as she wanted to dwell in the positives, all she could think about was her growing suspicion. Aware of her growing apprehension, mostly due to the frown and the distant look spread across Fluttershy's face, Rarity cleared her throat again.

The pale unicorn began to address her. "If you'd rather talk about something else, that's fi-

"I... I'm telling you this because you're my best friend, and because I trust you..." Rarity fell completely silent as Fluttershy took a deep breath, her cheeks beginning to flush. "Um... Okay... Here goes... I... I like Mahara."

"Well of course you do, dear. I thought you were friends."

"I mean I *like* her... *I kissed her yesterday* like her." Rarity arched a brow, pursing her lips with what could either be curiosity or conviction. "It um... It just kind of happened... When I look at her... When I hear her voice... I feel like I felt when I was with Lucky. It's the strangest thing... From the first night I met her, I just felt this attraction to her..."

"When did you...?"

"I don't really know... She's the only mare I've ever had feelings like that for. I still like stallions... At least I think I still like stallions, but..."

Rarity slowly began to smile, gently placing her forehoof on Fluttershy's. "You don't need to explain yourself... I'm happy for you. I may not understand it completely myself, but, if being in a relationship with her is what makes you happy, then by all means, you should pursue it."

"I... Um..." The pegasus smiled, blushing. "Thank you. There's um... There might be a problem, though. I... That is, she... I think she might be the monster that has been attacking everyone..." Rarity's eyes widened, but Fluttershy continued before she could say anything. "Now I don't know that for sure, and I'd like to think that it's just my imagination, but... There are a lot of coincidences, and they're starting to add up, whether I want them to or not... It's just so hard for me to see it... Mahara is such a nice pony. She's always helpful, she always listens when I need to talk about things, she's been nothing but polite to all of you... But... It could all just be an act that I've swallowed all too willingly..."

The pair sat in silence for a minute or so, not quite making eye contact, listening to the low sizzle of water boiling off the rocks. Fluttershy wondered if perhaps she had said too much, idly following the purple curls of Rarity's mane.

"That... Is certainly a troubling predicament..." Rarity bit her lip, glancing to the side briefly. "Have you told anyone else? What do you feel you should do?"

"No, you're the first pony I've told... And... I'm going to talk to her about it... There um... She told me that she had secrets she wasn't ready to share... Maybe this is what she meant...?"

"Maybe... I'd like to come with you when you decide to confront her. Just in case..."

"I don't... That is... Thank you for offering, but... This is something I should do alone. I don't think she'll hurt me. I... I don't think she *wants* to hurt anypony..."

Rarity gave a slow nod, pursing her lips again in a concerned pout. "Whatever you do, dear, be careful."

In the few months since her last visit, the area of the spa reserved for massages and related body work had changed relatively little. The plants which decorated the room had grown a few inches, perhaps, and some of the bottles lining the shelves had moved or been replaced, but the appearance was fundamentally the same. Fluttershy paused to consider why she found the static nature of the spa an oddity, only to realize that it was because she herself had changed so drastically. She had been too distracted during her previous visit to notice, but now that her mind was much less burdened, it was rather shocking. If Lotus or Aloe felt the same way in regards to her, they certainly weren't showing it.

Carefully, the pegasus climbed the steps to the raised platform on which she would receive her massage. What had once been a request on behalf of Rarity had now become incorporated into her visits; a pair of pillows were brought out for the pale unicorn no sooner than she had settled down. Even if she couldn't see with a thick green beauty mask smeared over her face, or cucumbers in her eyes, Rarity probably knew the interior of the spa like the underside of her hoof. The familiarity of it all brought Fluttershy a much needed feeling of calm. Since the presence of the spa twins and their hired help was a necessity at this stage of the treatment, the conversation had taken a much lighter tone.

"And can you believe the audacity of them all, canceling their order like that *after* waiting for me to buy all the materials? I've requested that they reimburse me for the costs but they haven't replied. If I didn't have to stay home and keep Sweetie Belle out of trouble, I swear, I would march right up to Canterlot, knock on Octavia's door and wring her little neck as soon as she opened up!" Rarity huffed several times, her masseuse coming to a complete stop, looking down at Rarity, and then at Fluttershy and Lotus.

As the pegasus tried to think of a way to respond, distracted by how good it felt to get a proper massage, she glanced through a nearby window. The sound of the rain outside had melted into little more than white noise, but now that she was watching the droplets splash and roll down the glass, the soft drumming of the rain resurfaced.

"I hope you plan on waiting until the weather improves, at least," Fluttershy replied, smiling timidly.

"Hmm?" Rarity turned to face her, still completely blinded by the green spread and the cucumbers. "Oh, yes, of course. I'm still amazed that you actually made it here, quite frankly. It looks absolutely horrid out there. I'm not even sure how I'll make it home without undoing all the hard work they've done!"

Fluttershy could practically see the bit signs in Lotus and Quake's eyes. "Well, I didn't come from home. I was at Sweet Apple Acres checking up on Applebloom. It's about the same distance, though." She paused, biting her lip. "And um... Big Macintosh was attacked yesterday evening as well..."

The cucumber slices fell away from Rarity's face as her brow shifted, to which Aloe responded by retrieving a fresh pair. "Oh my... Is he...?"

"Oh, yes, he's fine now, but..." The pegasus paused, groaning under her breath as Lotus worked a stress knot out of her back. "It's almost hard to imagine, someone as big and strong as him getting attacked like that. He seemed a little embarrassed about it, actually."

"Well I don't really blame him. Think of it this way; until now, only fillies have been attacked, and then suddenly the strongest stallion in town is added to that list as well." She held perfectly still as a fresh pair of cucumbers were applied to her face. "It would almost be as if my dresses were suddenly listed with Sweetie Belle's... creations."

"I... I guess that makes sense... I just hope this stops soon..."

For the second time that day, Fluttershy was completely covered in mud. Not just covered, but submerged to the neck in the stuff, idly shifting her weight from hoof to hoof as the mud gave a weak attempt to pull her down. Rarity, who was wrapped up in kelp and looking completely ridiculous as always, had explained the significance of both the kelp and the mud, but the pegasus had forgotten exactly what it was that made them so important to their spa ritual. Though the beauty mask had been wiped away, Rarity's eyes were still hidden behind a pair of cucumber slices.

The things she goes through to stay beautiful... Fluttershy giggled softly.

"I'm completely serious, dear! I shunned the idea at first, but really, there are a lot of full figured ponies in Equestria. Maybe not so much around here with the exception of Lyra, Mrs. Cake and yourself, but Manehattan? Filliadelphia?" The pale unicorn grinned, clearly getting excited, slowly prancing in the mud. "An entire market I hadn't even considered, and I would have the very best model for it right from the start!"

The thought struck Fluttershy as both novel and worryingly nostalgic. Memories of her brief run with Photo Finish came to mind, giving her cold hooves on the idea. On the other hoof, the thought of having outfits that not only fit but were tailored just for her was certainly a pleasant one, and she had greatly enjoyed helping Rarity make dresses. Fluttershy hoped that modeling in public would be out of the question. Rarity could have all the fame and attention, and that would be just fine with her.

"Well... I..."

"Don't dismiss it right away, dear. Just, give it a little time, think about it, and let me know when you've made your decision." Rarity lifted a hoof out of the mud, waving it around slightly. "I would have to get in contact with a few ponies anyway before we would even begin to get started on this project, but I think I've made enough headway into the world of high fashion that they'll trust my inspiration when it shines."

"Rarity, I would be more than happy to help you. Just, no um... no cameras, okay?"

"Oh heavens no. I would never do that to you again. You will be the inspiration, but not the poster child, as it were." Rarity smiled, taking a few steps closer to Fluttershy, bumping into the rim of the bath. "If you *do* ever feel like some time in the spotlight, though, never hesitate to ask."

“Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Outside, the downpour had softened to a light drizzle, a few ponies taking advantage of the waning storm to quickly go about their daily errands. A few distant rumbles of thunder served as a reminder that the storm had not passed entirely, however. In fact, from what Fluttershy could see from the windows, the cloud cover was as thick as ever, though sunlight filtered in through several gaps in long, illuminant fingers. Though her bathrobe was perhaps a bit too tight, the pegasus gave a happy sigh as she stepped out of the shallow pool she had been soaking her hooves in, glancing over to Rarity; the unicorn looked similarly relaxed, smiling fondly back at Fluttershy.

“I really missed this. Not that I didn’t come here on my own, but, it’s not really the same when I’m by myself. Actually, I did cancel a few spa appointments during our little sabbatical.” The unicorn paused, looking thoughtfully out the window.

“Really? Why um... Why did you do that, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Twilight said that I should find something to do to keep myself occupied while I was trying to help you get well again, or I might get depressed myself. I’m not entirely certain how we came upon the subject, but she told me that archery was once the sport of nobility.” She grinned. “It takes very precise and controlled magic to thread an arrow, she said, and even more so to hit a target. Well... I’ve been practicing a lot more now that it’s warmer...”

“Oh my... You’re not... You’re not shooting animals, are you?”

“Goodness no. Of course not. You know me better than that, you silly girl.”

The pegasus smiled. “Sorry. I’d like to watch sometime... If that’s okay with you, of course.”

“Absolutely. It does get a bit lonely out there.”

By the time the pair had shed their bathrobes and approached the exit, the rain had ceased entirely, pillars of sunlight stretching down to Ponyville like spotlights from Celestia herself. Rarity smiled, hugging Fluttershy tightly, a gesture which the pegasus warmly returned. It felt as though a great burden had been lifted, knowing that her best friend was still her best friend.

“Same time next week?” Rarity asked with an air of hopefulness in her voice.

“Of course.” The pegasus said, smiling. “I wouldn’t miss it for anything.”

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A long puddle marked Rainbow Dash’s path through the Apple family farmhouse, from the front door to the bathroom. Big Macintosh had begrudgingly agreed to mop it up so that Applejack could spend a moment of privacy with her; a moment of privacy involving a bath. The pegasus was thankful that the tub was large enough for them both, but then, Mac used it as well so it had to be big. The blond mare smiled across the soapy water, but Dash had other things on her mind, only half acknowledging her. Apparently concerned, Applejack raised her voice.

“Yer still worried ‘bout them clouds, huh sugarcube?”

“Hmm?” Dash focused in on Applejack. “It’s... Yes and no. I mean, we can figure it out eventually, and it’s not like the clouds are completely impervious, they’re just stubborn. Unusually stubborn. It’s almost like there’s something holding them in place. Princess Celestia and her team are still looking into it, but they all agree the source of the problem is definitely magical.”

Dash turned her attention to the window, watching droplets splash harmlessly against the window pane before rolling down the glass. Applejack was silent, probably waiting for her to say more.

“She told us that Cloudsdale has completely shut down weather production. Every able bodied pegasus is being tasked with trying to contain this mess until we find a solution.”

Applejack drifted a little closer, and Dash could feel the blond mare’s hooves against her flanks beneath the bubble clouded surface. The touch made her feel warm, suppressing a gentle, pleasant shudder.

“Well that don’t sound too bad. Ya’ll got a princess workin’ alongside ya, so it ain’t gonna be long till ya sort this mess out.”

“Yeah... I know...” The blue pegasus heaved a sigh, then locked eyes with Applejack, trying to think of the best way to phrase what she was about to say, her expression heavy with worry. “AJ, I think ponies are starting to figure us out. What you and I are. One of the pegasi I was working with today, trying to beat back the storm over Ponyville... He made a joke about me playing in your orchard or eating your fruit, something dumb like that, and I kinda snapped at him, ended up chasing him through the streets at one point.”

The blond mare snickered, resting a bit of her weight against Rainbow Dash, gently kissing her on the breast. Just having Applejack nearby was a source of relief to her, lifting a hoof out of the water to rub the back of Applejack’s neck.

“Sugarcube, we both knew that ponies were gonna find out sooner er later. An’, ta be honest, ‘sides maybe Rarity, Ah don’t think anyponys gonna mind.” She went quiet for a moment, then let out a little laugh, explaining before Dash could inquire. “Hell, Ah’m pretty sure Twi has’a crush on Princess Celestia, tha way she’s talkin’ ‘bout her an’ tryin’ ta impress her all tha time.”

“I’m pretty sure her first love is and always will be books. That girl is never gonna get laid.” They laughed, and then fell into a comfortable silence, embracing one another and listening to the rhythmic pattering of rain against the roof. “So what are we gonna do then? Cut our losses and let everyone know?”

“Dash, sugarcube, you can do whatever yer comfortable with. Ah support yer decision one hundred percent.” The pegasus squeezed with her other foreleg, holding her close. “Oh, by tha way, did Mac show ya his lil’ griffon toy yet? Probably ain’t tha best weather ta learn how to use it, but he was mighty set on teachin’ ya.”

Dash loosened her grip, looking down at the blond mare, mouth bent with confusion. “Griffon toy?”

“Yeah. ‘s like a cannon, but smaller. Well... Kinda. Don’t shoot cannonballs er fireworks; ya load these lil’

cylinders into tha barrels. Ah shot it once but Ah'm no good at it. He said maybe you'd have better luck since you can fly." The pegasus felt Applejack's hooves moving along her back, cradling her. She realized after a few seconds that the blond mare was imitating how the *griffon toy* was held.

"Gotta use both forelegs ta handle tha thing."

"Sucks that I'm not a unicorn then. They could do it hooves free."

"Huh... Ah bet they could."

The drain gurgled around soapy water and the day's grime. As Applejack had intended, Rainbow Dash felt very relaxed, smiling as she looked at the blond mare from beside the tub as she finished drying herself off. Her thoughts still lingered on how to handle telling their friends about their relationship. She followed Applejack out into the hall, passing by Applebloom's bedroom. The filly stood by her window, looking out into the rain. It had lessened, but was still falling fairly heavily.

That poor kid... Seeing her like this is way too weird. I hope she gets better soon... She stepped away from the doorway, closing the gap that had formed in her brief pause. Not just for Applebloom either... This is hurting Applejack too. She's strong, but... Everypony has their limits.

"Say, didja see Fluttershy on yer way here? She left right before ya got home. Strangest thing happened when she left, too. Right after she stepped into the rain, Ah swore Ah heard Pinkie Pie."

As Applejack set herself down on her bed, Dash gave her a look of concern. "Are you hearing things again, AJ? Maybe you need more sleep."

"Maybe... Ah know Ah'll feel a lot better when that Mahara girl gets a hint and leaves town."

Dash stayed at the foot of the bed, trying to process everything she had seen and heard over the past few days. "Alright. If you *and* Twilight think that Mahara is bad news, I'm going to trust in that. I'm not going to be a jerk to her or anything, but I'll keep a closer eye on her and let you know if I see anything suspicious." She grinned, crawling onto the blanket to join Applejack. "Just because Fluttershy says she's alright doesn't mean she's alright. I mean, you remember how she handled the whole parasprite thing."

"Ah just hope she ain't in over her head." Dash nodded slowly as Applejack rested a hoof on her folded wing. "Fluttershy don't always see things fer what they really are..."

V ^ ^ V

At some point, all five of the young ponies had stopped paying attention to where they were going. Only when Scootaloo realized that they had gotten thoroughly lost had Snips and Twist stopped arguing. The rain had stopped, which didn't mean much since the leaves were still dripping with collected rainwater, and the cloud cover had become slightly less dense, but the few rays of sunlight that occasionally swept over the trees failed to pierce the gloom of the Everfree forest. Twist sniffled softly, her eyes beginning to water. The last thing Scootaloo needed was a sobbing filly on top of everything else.

"It's okay," the orange pegasus calmly stated. "Sweetie Belle and I have been in here before with

Applebloom. Nothing to be afraid of. Just a big forest.”

“A big forest full of all kinds of dangerous critters! Snails and I found that Ursa Minor in here, remember?”

“Oh...” After a moment Sweetie Belle added, “Yeah and Spike found that dragon too.”

Scootaloo sighed. “And the cockatrice... Okay, so there are some dangerous, magical creatures living in the Everfree forest, but, as long as we’re careful and we stick together, we should be fine, right?”

Snips and Snails looked at one another and shrugged, and Sweetie Belle tried to force a smile. Twist continued to sob quietly. Scootaloo sat down, trying to think of a way out of being lost. If she could fly, it would just be a matter of getting above the canopy and checking the surrounding areas.

That’s what Rainbow Dash would do, she told herself.

She buzzed her wings several times, but to no avail. “This sucks! What are we gonna do?!”

“Why don’t we follow our tracks?” Sweetie Belle looked down at her hooves, frowning as she noticed the mud clinging to them. “I mean we haven’t been walking in circles or we would have been retracing our tracks by now.”

That seemed to comfort Twist, her soft weeping settling into a heavy breaths.

“We could just keep moving, eh?” Snails stepped forward as he said this, pointing ahead of himself.

“We’ve come this far, maybe if we go a little deeper we’ll find the monster. And besides, you can only go halfway into a forest.”

Scootaloo cocked her head. “What does that even mean?”

“Do I actually understand something none of you do, for once?” The colt grinned, first at Snips, then at everyone else. “Okay, it’s like this; once you’re in the middle of a forest, that’s pretty much halfway from any side of it. So if we’re in the middle of the forest, and we keep moving in a straight line, we’ll come out the other side eventually.”

“Okay, hold on...” Sweetie Belle furrowed her brow.

“Wow... Snails that’s...” Scootaloo grinned, shaking her head. “Okay, let’s keep moving forward then. Anywhere is better than here, especially once the sun goes down.”

“If the forest isn’t perfectly equal on all its edges, then you’re not always going to have the same distance from the center to the edge.” Sweetie Belle drew an egg-like oval in the mud, then pointed to it. “See?”

“We’re not here for geometry lessons,” Snips snipped. “Now let’s get going before the sun goes down.”

Scootaloo nodded and took the lead, checking back to make sure everyone was following. Twist stayed in the rear, gradually getting wet and looking much less eager to be on the adventure, but probably too

afraid to head home on her own. Snips and Snails were in the middle, talking amongst themselves about how they planned to catch the monster, their plans entirely outlandish and impossible. Sweetie Belle trotted about even pace with the orange pegasus, carefully surveying the surrounding forest.

"You look pretty tense," Scootaloo commented.

"Well this *is* the forest where we almost got turned to stone. I'm just being cautious." Sweetie's brow elevated as she turned her attention to the pegasus. "Also we're hunting for a monster, why *aren't* you tense?"

"I dunno, actually. I guess It's just exciting to me. We're going on an adventure, like-"

"Like your idol?"

"She's not my idol! She's just... Really cool." Scootaloo could feel herself blushing, looking away from the cotton candy maned unicorn as she tried to regain her composure. "Anyway, that's beside the point. This is exciting! Well, aside from getting lost. It's like a calm before the storm kind of feeling."

"It already rained, Scootaloo." Sweetie Belle resumed her careful sweep of the surrounding forest as the orange pegasus heaved a sigh. "I think I get what you're saying though. Maybe."

"Maybe is better than nothing. Oh, hey, what's that up ahead?"

The trees seemed to thin out ahead of them, a bit of light filtering in through the gaps. At first, Scootaloo figured that, like Snails had suggested, they had come out the other side of Everfree forest, but as they drew nearer, she realized it was just a clearing. Not just a clearing, either. There was some sort of body of water occupying the open space. The air had a humid, musty smell about it, and though the sky was visible through the opening in the trees, it had a brownish tint to it.

Twist said what Scootaloo was thinking. "A bog? In the middle of the foretht?"

"Looks more like a swamp, really," replied Snails.

Snips trotted ahead, peering out beyond the tree line. "What's the difference?"

"I dunno." Snails shrugged, joining him. "I guess they're the same thing, eh?"

Twist looked to Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle, still looking distressed. "Well, now what do we do?"

"We keep looking... I guess? This whole plan kinda hinged on the monster finding us and then we would go from there." Scootaloo sat down, leaning against a tree. "You were right, Sweetie Belle, this idea wasn't so hot after all."

The unicorn filly sat next to Scootaloo and smiled. "Hey, don't give up just yet. If you're right, when we do catch the monster, we'll be helping Applebloom. That's worth at least trying."

The orange pegasus returned the smile, nodding. "Thanks. Alright, yeah, we just keep looking then. Monsters are gross, right? Why not hide out in a swamp when they're not hurting ponies?"

“Do we have to? I want to go home and the bog ith really groth looking...” The red maned filly pranced about in place, eyes narrowed behind her glasses.

“You can go home whenever you want, Twist.” Snips grinned back at her. “I’m sure all the nasty monsters in this forest would just love a snack.”

Scootaloo arched a brow as she got to her hooves. “Snips, you’re being kind of a dick.”

“Don’t you thtart too, Thcotaloo! It’t h like everyone hath a filthy mouth all the thudden!”

“Hey, what’s a dick?” Sweetie Belle looked over the stunned expressions of everypony present. “What? Is it something bad?”

Scootaloo snickered and made her way to the edge of the bog as Sweetie Belle persisted with the question until Twist explained it to her. Her reaction got a laugh from everyone, but after that, an eerie quiet settled over the group. The orange pegasus thought about raising her voice on multiple occasions, but something about the place gave her the urge to stay silent. It wasn’t necessarily creepy, because it was brighter there than it was in the forest, and it wasn’t dead quiet either because of all the frogs croaking and splashing around.

Looking to the others, she found their expressions similarly heavy with worry. Sweetie Belle wasn’t necessarily looking as worried as everyone else, Scootaloo included, but she was on her way there.

The orange pegasus couldn’t bear it any longer. “I’m getting seriously weirded out. Does anypony else feel like...”

“Like we’re being watched?” Twist looked around nervously, continuing in a near whisper. “Yeth, I’m getting that thame feeling...”

The others nodded before Scootaloo added, “All in favor of bailing and heading back to Ponyville?”

The decision was unanimous. They turned and quickly retraced their steps, rapidly nearing the tree line. A stagnant odor outpaced them, however, thick enough that it rolled over the muddy ground in a fog like cloud. Several long shadows unfolded over their path, covering them in the process. Scootaloo didn’t have to look back to know what it was.

“Shit Shit Shit!” Snips broke into a gallop around the same time as Snails, but Twist was faster than them both, leaping over a bush and disappearing into the forest. “Wait damn it! Wait for us!”

Scootaloo was about to yell for Sweetie Belle to start running, but as a vicious roar shook the ground, the unicorn filly was off like a shot.

V ^ ^ V

Fluttershy had nearly forgotten what it felt like to feel so overwhelmingly happy. The weather appeared to reflect her mood, clouds gradually receding, more and more sunlight pouring down on Ponyville. Though she was a fair distance from town, looking back, she could see it come alive again, as busy as it

would have been on any normal day. Perhaps even busier, considering that the storm had caused major delays in most ponies' schedules. For the moment, however, that did not include the pegasus. She had not a care in the world, singing along with the birds that gathered around her as she made her way home.

Provided that her talk with Mahara went just as smoothly as her meeting with Rarity, Fluttershy was sure that everything would be just fine. *It's all just a misunderstanding*, she told herself as she cleared the trees, approaching the hill on which her cottage sat. *I'll have a nice, long chat with Mahara about all this, and ask her to answer me as honestly as she can, then we'll talk to Twilight and sort this whole mess out.*

The pegasus slowed down as she reached the foot of the hill, considering what would happen if the red mare was responsible. *Even if she did bite Applebloom, and Scootaloo, and Big Macintosh... She didn't seriously injure any of them... And... Maybe she had a good reason...? Why am I even considering this? She... She bit several ponies... What should I say? How can I even help her?*

Her focus shifted the moment she got a good look at her cottage. From the foot of the hill, she could see that the window to the right of her front door had been shattered. At first, the pegasus thought it was just damage from the storm, but as Fluttershy drew nearer, a sharp pain stung the bottom of her hoof. She yelped, jumping back, lifting the hoof to examine the cause. Instead of a stinger, a piece of glass.

Did the window shatter outwards?

She looked over the ground carefully, taking slow and cautious steps with her uninjured hooves. Reaching the front door, she noticed that the window to the left had been opened. A chill passed through her, making her delay in entering. Fluttershy had heard of break-ins before, but had no memory of one occurring in Ponyville. Biting her lip, she leaned toward the shattered window. The jagged edges of glass were tinted red in multiple places with what she could only imagine was blood. The pegasus recoiled, debated running back to town, and then strengthened her resolve.

"Mahara? Are um... Are you in there? What happened?"

Silence greeted her. The pegasus felt her blood running cold.

With a deep breath, she nudged the door open just enough for her to see inside. All the curtains were drawn save for the ones for the window which had been broken. As she opened the door wider, she spotted them on the floor; ripped off the wall presumably by whatever had broken the window. A sinking feeling had long since welled up inside her, bordering on panic and terror as she stepped inside her home. She was drawn to the broken window again, able to get much closer since the majority of the shards littered her front lawn. In several places, black and white hairs were stuck to the reddish smears.

Did something... Jump through my window? Fluttershy glanced behind her as a something clattered in the kitchen. *Maybe an animal just got startled by the storm and jumped out through the window in a panic? I'll need to find the poor thing... Pull out the glass and stitch it up... And... Where is Mahara? Did she decide to go out on her own?*

She took a few steps deeper into the room, then froze as she spotted something on the floor.

In the light pouring in from her opened and broken windows, a thick pool of blood glimmered softly, casting a crimson tinted reflection. A knife sat in the center of the pool, its handle sticking straight up. She realized that there were several other knives scattered around and in the pool as well. The pegasus cringed, wishing to shrink herself down and hide. The blood had come from something in dire need of her help, however, and realizing this, fleeing ceased to be an option altogether.

"H-hello? Whoever... Whatever you are... Are... Are you in here? Mahara? Angel? Please... Please let me know you're safe!"

Trembling, the pegasus reached for a lamp, bathing the room in light as it began to glow. Illuminated, she took in the full scope of the damage.

A light trail of blood ran from a few paces outside the kitchen to the crimson pool, where the knives overlapped the edge, discounting the single knife seemingly stuck in the floor. Fluttershy was still uncertain if the source of the blood was a pony or an animal, but she had a feeling that it had come from the former. Mahara remained the most likely candidate, but the pegasus was also uncertain of which side of the knife the red mare had been on. There was a second trail; bloody hoofprints that started at the edge of the pool and seemed to lead into the kitchen.

Somepony had walked right through the puddle.

Please, not Mahara...

Approaching the kitchen, Fluttershy realized that while whatever had broken her window was likely long gone, the same pony responsible for the hoofprints might still be in her house. She found herself hoping that it was the victim and not the pony responsible for the violence. Her skin crawled, heart racing as she braced for whatever horrors awaited her just beyond the doorway.

Anypony but her...

Instead, she was met with an empty kitchen and a few more wet hoofprints. A piece of paper sat folded on the counter.

Before Fluttershy could examine the paper, a creak from behind made her jump, the pegasus pulling a one-eighty in the air. Angel threw up his forelegs, waving them around. The cupboard door was open just a hair, evidently where the bunny had been hiding.

"Oh, Angel! Are you alright? What... What happened?" Fluttershy's eyes widened as the rabbit hopped onto the counter, pulled a butter knife out of a drawer and began to pantomime stabbing. "Oh my goodness... Is everypony... Did anypony... Die?"

Angel shrugged, looking uncomfortable just thinking about it.

"Was it... Was it Mahara? Is she the one who got stabbed, or... Did... Did she do the s-stabbing?"

The rabbit gritted his teeth with his brow furrowed, shrugging again, then pointed to the note, lifting it off the counter and holding it out to her.

“Did she leave this for me?” Angel nodded, waving it at her with urgency.

The corner of the paper was stained red, but had since dried. A few smaller drops had struck the paper in various other places as well. Fluttershy looked nervously to Angel, then unfolded it and began to read.

“I’m sorry about your cottage, first of all. I plan to make that up to you, but there are more pressing issues that I need to attend to first. At the top of that list of issues is my apology to you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m very, very sorry for lying to you about nearly everything. You’ve been patient and understanding, and I would have loved to explain myself to you when you arrived home today. But, since I have been stripped of that opportunity, you deserve at least a glimpse at the truth until I can tell all myself.”

“You were right.”

“You were right, Twilight Sparkle was right, and Applejack was right. I have only myself to blame for the aggression my presence is generating, and I don’t want to put you at risk. Time is against me now more than ever, so forgive me for being so brief.”

“For the time being, and until I’ve taken care of a few essential things, this is goodbye.”

Fluttershy stood there for several minutes, staring down at the bloody note. There it was, written plainly for her. *A glimpse at the truth*, as Mahara called it; the beginning of a confession.

Gritting her teeth, the pegasus let the note fall.

I trusted you...

She slammed her hoof against the counter, remembering the shard of glass only after it was ground deeper into her cut. She glared at the bloody shard, then ripped it out of her hoof with her teeth, spitting it into the sink. The pegasus took deep, slow breaths through her nose as she watched her blood spill out of the cut.

V ^ ^ V

“I’m fairly sure if we intrude that we would be extremely rude.”

Twilight Sparkle persisted, trying the front door again only to find it as locked as it had been the first time. Zecora pondered the futility of a second attempt as she made her way to a window beside the front door. It slid open without issue. The zebra gave Twilight a cheery, slightly sarcastic smile, then gracefully crawled through.

The curtains she had passed through in slipping over the windowsill were light, but thick enough to keep the room blanketed in darkness. The fact that the sky had opened up with a fearsome downpour was not contributing to illumination either. Zecora spread her stance cautiously, poised to strike at a moment’s notice. Twilight tumbled in clumsily behind her, but the zebra held her concentration, her gaze sweeping the room for movement or potential threats. After several careful scans, she eased up marginally.

"I had expected to find at least one of them home, but it would seem for the moment that we are alone." She paused, taking a few steps further into Fluttershy's empty cottage. "Well, now we are here, my friend. What is it that you intend?"

"This was kind of spur of the moment on my part, Zecora. I kind of assumed we would find Mahara here and confront her, or try and convince Fluttershy now that I have your support to back up my theories."

The zebra glanced back at her, narrowing her eyes slightly. "By confront you mean kill? Was that your will?"

"If we can find a nonviolent solution to this, I would prefer pursuing that avenue instead."

Zecora turned, taking a step closer to Twilight, who watched her nervously.

"But if the creature insists on a fight, will you assist me in taking its life?"

Twilight shuddered, glancing to the side. "I... I'm not sure if I can... I had planned more on telling Mahara that she should stop what she's doing, and that we would be informing Princess Celestia of her actions." Zecora raised a brow, coming a few steps closer. "I had hoped she would just surrender. And... What about Fluttershy?"

"She would sooner kill you than surrender herself. Thus far, we are lucky she has relied on stealth. That she has refused to harm Fluttershy is a mystery to me..." The zebra turned away, venturing deeper into the darkened cottage. "She is nothing more than a monster in pony form, you see. We will all sleep safer the sooner we kill her."

"What happens if we don't kill her?" Twilight's hoofsteps came slowly, following Zecora at a distance.

"Then Equestria is likely to see dark times indeed... Do you still doubt that this must be done with speed?"

"I understand, it's just, we're breaking into Fluttershy's house and all." Twilight offered as she continued on ahead, pausing in the doorway to the kitchen. "Maybe I should have thought this through."

Zecora checked her surroundings again, shaking her head. "We do this not without just cause. We commit one wrong to prevent worse loss." It occurred to her that Twilight was still situated behind her, despite having just watched her move forward.

The purple unicorn's eyes went wide with fear as their gazes met. "I... I didn't say that... That isn't me!"

Zecora turned, finding herself at point blank range with a pair of glowing green eyes.

"Boo."

The zebra curved like a whip, bringing a forehoof against the side of the green eyed pony's face with a wet sounding crunch. She narrowly dodged as the pony lunged at her, a glint of metal showing through the low lighting. The figure approached, very slowly, illuminated for the blink of an eye as lightning

flashed.

Mahara in the flesh; thick rivers of blood flowed from between her lips and down her neck.

"I deserved that, sure." She took a few steps closer, eyes burning through the darkness. "Taking a swing at you was reflexive after you broke my jaw, though, so don't hold that against me."

"Your time in this world is at an end. Your existence, today, I aim to expend."

Zecora took another step back as Mahara continued to advance. "I'd rather do this Twilight's way, I'm afraid. If you really, really want to spill my blood, though, I'm going to make you cover my losses personally, and if I do that, I'm not making any promises that you'll survive."

Another flash revealed the array of knives held tightly in her fleshy coils, fanned out around her body like peacock feathers.

"D-did you hear us talking, then?" Twilight swallowed heavily enough for it to be audible, and without looking at her, Zecora could guess that she was backing up toward the window.

"I did. And I don't intend on *killing* anypony, but your friend here is going to make that very difficult if you don't rein her in." She stopped her advance, holding the knives defensively. The zebra paced before her, glaring.

"You will surrender yourself to Princess Celestia, then?"

"No. I've been imprisoned long enough, I think. And if Celestia is ready to forgive Luna for what *she* did, then I think she should consider doing the same for *me*." She lowered her knives, smiling. "I can be different this time. I didn't know how to control it then, but... This time, it will be different. Tell her that."

Twilight and Mahara locked eyes, the purple unicorn frozen to the spot. The opening was clear. Zecora rushed in, leaping over the wall of knives and flesh, burying a hoof in the side of the red mare's neck. There was a sound somewhere between a pop and a crack as the mare tilted her head in the direction of the blow, dropping all her knives and falling limply to the floor. Twilight gasped in the corner, but the zebra could not be distracted.

She grabbed one of the knives off the floor, holding it between her forehooves, and aimed it down at the base of Mahara's skull. Green eyes rolled up at her, narrowed, fangs bared.

"Will. You. **STOP!**" Her voice echoed, as though many were speaking as one.

The zebra felt a pressure on her hind legs, her torso. She had been ensnared, but her forelegs remained momentarily free. With a near feral cry, she mustered all her strength and drove the knife home, plunging it through red coated flesh and feeling it stick in the floor on the other side of the creature's neck. Mahara's blood splattered against the floor like water from a broken pipe. Green eyes exploded to red, and then grew distant, as did the rest of the room, glass clinging to Zecora's body as she was thrown through a window. An unnatural howl reverberated through her body as a red mist followed her through the window like a cloud of parasprites.

Engage the beast... How foolish was I? Is this truly how I am to die?

Zecora knew that she had failed her kind, the ponies of Equestria, and every living thing on the planet. Somehow that seemed even worse than her swiftly approaching death.

As the mist enveloped the zebra, a sensation like thousands of tiny needles burrowing into her through her pores wiped her mind with a wave of pain, intensifying by the moment. It held her there, several noses above the ground, her blood starting to run as the mist began to peel away her flesh in thin strips. Zecora could feel the hatred, the lust for blood, knowing that in seconds she would be torn apart, consumed by it right down to her marrow.

Twilight's voice sounded so distant. "Mahara! You don't have to do this! Please!"

And the peeling slowed.

Zecora felt her body drop a few noses, still cradled in the humid, suffocating, paralyzing mist that Mahara had dissolved into. Somehow, she could feel it considering her as it hesitated. With a low, disembodied growl, the bloodied zebra was released, tumbling into the wet grass like a broken doll. The mist condensed back into a pony, glaring at down at Zecora with eyes that faded back to green.

"I want to prove you wrong, so remember this moment..." Mahara growled, looming over her so that the red mare blocked her view of the sky. "I have spared your life, even though you felt justified in trying to end mine. But, I will not show the same compassion should we come to blows again." With that, she disappeared into the trees.

For what felt like an eternity, the zebra lay on her back, gazing up at the distant sky as rain fell from the clouds like tears. She could feel a number of gashes spread out over her body, some worse than others, some still jutting with shards of glass. Hundreds of smaller, longer cuts marred her flesh like red stripes. The rain felt soothing against her wounds, washing away freshly flowing blood.

"Zecora!" Her body ached as she craned her neck in the direction of Twilight's voice. "Oh my gosh! Zecora, are you...?!"

"Wounded, yes, but not fatally. I have healing potions in the form of tea. But I think it best that we take our leave, lest the monster decide to rethink my reprieve."

The world rolled and shifted as the zebra got to her hooves, droplets of blood splashing the ground under her as she made her way back uphill. Twilight followed at her side, never taking her eyes off of Zecora, which she assumed was for fear that she might collapse. Her injuries, save for the shards of glass sticking out of her in several places, were largely superficial. Had Twilight hesitated even a moment longer, however, it would be a much different story. She shuddered, putting the thought out of her mind.

This time I was not prepared... Zecora glanced at the window as she lifted herself onto the lid of her chest. Next time, it is the monster who should be scared...

Regardless of what Zecora had repeatedly told her, Twilight Sparkle was almost positive that the zebra looked faint, as if she would lose consciousness at any given moment. Still, she maintained control over her enchanted trunk, drawing all kinds of strange looks as they thundered into town on what was otherwise a piece of luggage supported by dozens of ghostly legs. However, Twilight had neither the time to explain the trunk, nor why Zecora was bleeding. The zebra gave one last command, and the legs skidded to a halt, dropping the chest roughly in front of the library.

The trip from Fluttershy's cottage to the library had been much more dry than the trip from Zecora's hut to Fluttershy's cottage, and for the break in the rain, Twilight was thankful. She hopped off the lid, bounding up the steps, and knocked on the door several times. She received no response.

"Spike! I'd like to come in! Hint hint!" She glanced back, the zebra lingering by her belongings and ignoring the growing crowd, most likely gathering the materials she would need to heal herself. "Spike you're being very irresponsible! This is serious!"

Twilight waited another minute before unlocking the door herself and stepping into the library. The interior was dim, specks of dust filtered through rays of sunlight let in by the windows. Still not a peep from Spike. No stirring of any sort, not even the scrape and click of his claws against the floor. The library was completely still, and without Spike's usual, friendly greeting, it felt eerily vacant.

"This isn't funny anymore, Spike! We have an emergency and I need to send Princess Celestia a letter as soon as possible!" No response.

Maybe he's asleep? But why would he be? It's not that late in the day...

There was one last thing she could try to get him to respond. "Spiike, Rarity is here! She says she wants to see you!" The silence continued, and her frustration mounted. "Wet, sloppy make-outs with Rarity, Spike! Come on!"

"Spike is still very young..." The zebra commented in passing, carrying a homemade looking satchel toward the kitchen. "Do you not feel you are jumping the gun?"

The purple unicorn was too irritated with and increasingly worried about Spike to respond to Zecora's sly remark, looking around nervously as she tried to imagine why he had failed to reply.

Evidently sensing Twilight's distress, the zebra smiled and shook her head. "My good friend, do not fear. Surely he is very near."

"This couldn't be happening at a worse time. I... I need to write my thoughts down while they're still fresh and organized. Where's my quill...?"

"Should I search for him as you write? My unfamiliarity with your home may well bring him to light."

Twilight was only half listening, nodding and waving her hoof at Zecora as she grasped her quill with her magic, dipping it in an ink well. The zebra disappeared into the kitchen, no doubt the source of softly clattering cups as she prepared her medicinal tea.

"Dear Princess Celestia,

"Understand that when you receive this letter, there has already been a considerable delay, as Spike had gone missing. I probably should have written back to you immediately after your last letter, but I assumed that knowing more about what we may be facing was the more rational course of action. In short, there is a dangerous, potentially deadly creature lurking around Ponyville. It commonly assumes the form of a red earth pony mare, and calls itself Mahara. I am almost positive that this creature can change its form, so the fact that it frequently manifests as a female is potentially a ruse.

"So far, I have observed the following personally:

-The creature cannot enter a building without permission from the owner. Once permission has been granted, however, the creature may come and go as it pleases.

-The creature is affected by direct sunlight, and quite possibly weakened to a large degree.

-Potential evidence to support my shape shifting theory: it would seem that the creature cannot change the color of its eyes while assuming another form, as all ponies exhibiting the signs associated with the Mahara entity, including an imitation of Rainbow Dash, have had green eyes.

-The creature can dissolve itself and travel as a red mist of some sort.

-The creature is able to withstand injuries that would prove fatal to a normal pony.

"I had waited to ask Zecora, a zebra friend of mine, if she knew anything more about the creature we are faced with. She has provided me with a wealth of information, and a good deal of it coincides with my own observations. However, you should know that, according to the zebra folklore which Zecora recounted to me, the creature has some sort of direct connection with Nightmare Moon. I am aware that Nightmare Moon has been defeated, but as a precaution, I advise that you either directly address Princess Luna with this issue or place her under surveillance until there is proof for or against her involvement with the presence of this creature.

"The creature addressed me personally when we attempted to confront it not long before writing this letter. It expressed that it had no interest in killing anypony, but became extremely violent when provoked by Zecora. I pleaded with it to reconsider its actions, however, and it left us peacefully. It also suggested an interest in audience with you to discuss terms of some sort regarding its freedom. Lastly... These are not my words, but she, that is, the monster itself, asked me to convey this message to you:

"I can be different this time. I didn't know how to control it then, but [sic] this time, it will be different."

"I'm not entirely sure what to make of this myself, nor am I able to discern the motive of the creature. Your immediate correspondence is desired as I am not entirely certain what course of action should be taken, if any at all. I do however plan on holding a meeting tomorrow to inform the citizens of Ponyville that there is a very real threat in this so called Mahara.

"Again, please respond as soon as possible.

"Your faithful student,

"Twilight Sparkle"

Twilight had assumed that writing the letter would make her feel better, but without Spike to send it, she was reminded of his apparent absence and only felt worse. The library was pristine, so it wasn't as if the creature had forced its way in somehow, and Twilight knew that Spike was smart enough not to let it

inside, especially after receiving the order from her to restrict access to the library. However, with no way to tell where he was or whether or not he was safe, her mind was quickly becoming a blur of panic. She rolled up the parchment, sealed it and calmly set it on the desk, then stumbled away from her seat as the anxiety took hold.

“Zecora, what if he ran away again?! I shouldn’t have been so hard on him... He’s just a baby dragon...” She fell to her knees, her fear so intense that a wave of nausea rolled over her. “He’s like a brother to me, Zecora... I hope he’s okay, wherever he is...”

The zebra leaned out from the kitchen, regarding Twilight with wide and confused eyes. “Twilight Sparkle, calm yourself. In this state you will be no help. If he is like a brother, as you say, then surely you will see him before the end of this day.”

Sniffing just a bit, the unicorn nodded, getting back to her hooves. “Yes, you’re right. I need to think about this rationally... Where do you think we should start looking for him? Do you think he went to the Everfree forest? Or maybe we should just wait here and hope he comes back home?”

Before Zecora could answer, there was a tiny knock at the door. A few seconds passed before Spike’s muffled voice drifted into the room.

“Hey, I uh...” There was a pause, the embarrassment in his voice carrying very well through the door. “I kinda locked myself out, Twilight.”

Narrowing her eyes, Twilight looked back at Zecora. “Do you think maybe he’s just careless?”

Zecora smiled, shaking her head again. “A moment ago, did you not lament that perhaps your words were too harshly spent?” She dipped back into the kitchen to finish preparing what Twilight assumed was her tea.

The unicorn sighed softly in agreement, making her way to the door, floating her key along beside her. Spike smiled up at her as she opened the door, waving. Outside, the sun was just beginning to get familiar with the horizon, long past noon, but not quite dusk.

“Sorry about that. Rarity came by and asked me to watch Sweetie Belle while she spent some time at the spa. I kinda lost my key somewhere between then and now.” He shuffled his foot a bit, looking down. “And I know I was supposed to watch the library, but I figured as long as I locked up when I left, everything would be fine.”

“It’s alright, Spike. I was just worried because I didn’t know where you were.”

“Yeah, I probably should have left a note...” The dragon twiddled his fingers, looking down, and then peering up at her. “You’re not gonna make me sleep outside or something are you? For leaving without leaving some kind of note or for losing my key?”

“What? Spike, quit being weird and get in here.”

No sooner had the words left her lips did Twilight feel a sudden surge of paranoia come over her. Spike crossed the threshold of the library as though nothing were out of the ordinary, stopping when he saw

Zecora standing by the kitchen. The unicorn glued her eyes to the pint sized dragon, shutting and locking the door behind him.

"Oh hey! Zecora is visiting?" Spike gave a little wave, grinning widely. "Hi Zecora!"

The zebra smiled, nodding in greeting, then turned her attention to Twilight, once again taking note of the unicorn's troubled expression. She had finished her preparing tea by this point, looking to be in much better shape as the healing magic visibly mended her wounds with every sip.

"Yes... Zecora will be staying with us since the monster attacked her at her home. I'd like to have a word with her in private, though." Making sure she was out of Spike's line of sight, she frantically pointed to the kitchen.

"Oh, don't mind me then!" The dragon looked around the room, seating himself at the writing desk.

The zebra watched Twilight as the unicorn crossed the room, tilting her head in confusion, following her into the kitchen all the same. Once inside, the unicorn looked around the corner to make sure Spike was still seated and out of earshot. She motioned for Zecora to move closer, craning her head forward so that she could speak at a whisper.

"Zecora, I think I just let Mahara in." The zebra's eyes shot wide open, glancing to the doorway. "How do we make sure it's really Spike and not an imposter?"

"If you are in possession of an image of Celestia's sun, presenting it to Spike will show us what must be done." The zebra looked around the room before fixing her gaze on the doorway again. "My friend, we must make haste. Every second in conference is a second we waste."

"Okay. I have a pendant like that lying around that should work. What... What do we do if it's the monster?"

"The sun maintains its grip on the land. If the creature has trespassed, we make our stand. This is not something I can do alone, so this time do not hesitate when its cover is blown."

Twilight nodded, and the pair of them reentered the foyer, diverging to either side of Spike as they crossed the room. A thought occurred to the unicorn before she reached the sun pennant, however. She raised a hoof, and Zecora slowed to a stop.

"Hey Spike?" The dragon looked back at her, smiling. "I have a letter I need sent to Princess Celestia. It's on the desk there."

"Oh? Right now?"

Zecora narrowed her eyes, shaking her head subtly, but Twilight persisted. "Yes, right now. It's right in front of you."

"Uh..." The dragon glanced down at the desk, then back at Twilight. "Are you sure you shouldn't look it over a bit more first? I mean, you read that book again, right? Maybe you want to make sure all your notes are correct?"

Twilight began to move again, eyes locked with Spike as she made her way to a shelf holding a picture of Celestia and a necklace. The necklace was a gift from the princess herself, but now its importance to the unicorn extended beyond sentimentality. She wrapped it in her levitation magic and slipped it around her neck, a charm in the shape of the sun dangling from the chain.

"I never read the book, *Spike*. You would know that if you weren't a monster in disguise."

"Okay, you got me. I figured I would try to take the offensive this time." The imposter turned to Zecora, narrowing its eyes. "And you, remember what I said. I meant it. Don't give me a reason to show you just how much."

"A threat from the beast, how very cute." The zebra spat in its direction, glaring. "With the sun to aid us, you'll find me resolute."

"As much as you seem inclined to barbarism, I would still like to try and settle this with diplomacy."

Twilight stomped as she stepped forward. "What have you done with Spike?!"

"Spike? Oh, he's perfectly fine, I guess. He's probably still at Rarity's." The imposter snickered. "Let's return to the task at hoof, however. You have something that is rightfully mine. If you return it to me, I will leave without a display of aggression. You seem to have hidden it, however, or else I would have taken it and left while the two of you were plotting against me in the kitchen."

"Property is what you seek? Twilight, of what does this monster speak?"

"The book. Of course you want the book. It's the key to sealing you up again, isn't it?"

The monster in Spike's image stepped away from the desk, slowly approaching Twilight as Zecora kept a constant distance behind it. Mid stride, as it left the golden rays of the low hanging sun, it exploded into a fine red mist, reforming as the red mare Twilight Sparkle had grown to despise.

Mahara came to a stop several paces from the unicorn, tendrils of flesh twisted around themselves, folded against her back like a bed of snakes. She looked back at Zecora, snorting softly before returning her focus to Twilight.

"The fact that this particular book is the object in which I was imprisoned is irrelevant. I could have just as easily been sealed away within the moon. I could have just as easily been slain, at that, but your mentor seems to favor longer, more thought provoking punishments. Nightmare Moon, or Luna, if you prefer; she seethed in her lunar cell, plotting revenge. I, on the other hoof, looked inward, focusing on the hows and whys of my incarceration instead of what I planned to do when I was free."

Twilight and Zecora slowly circled around Mahara as she tried to get them both in her sight, but they maintained their distance, keeping her between them. "Are you trying to tell us that you're reformed? Was that the point of your message to Princess Celestia?" The unicorn skirted along the shelves as Mahara tried to get her back to the wall.

"It may be hard to swallow from where you stand, but I've come a long way to reach this point. I

apologize for losing my temper back at Fluttershy's cottage, but it's difficult to maintain my composure when someone is trying to murder me. You understand, I hope. To that end, I'm sorry for what I did to the fillies, Applebloom especially..."

"And what did you do to her, exactly?"

"What I very nearly did to Fluttershy. Something that I had no need to do, and I regret it entirely. Really, if the two of you will kindly *stand where I can see you*," she glared back at Zecora, then quickly returned her attention to Twilight. "I'll gladly explain everything. But first, I need the book. Please. That's all I want, and then you two can beat the hell out of me if it will make you feel better."

Twilight considered that, glancing to the drawer where she had hidden the book in question. Mahara traced her gaze to the spot and smiled, turning toward it. Before the red mare could reach the desk in question, however, the unicorn pulled the drawer open with her magic, swiftly levitating the book to her side.

"I don't have any reason to trust you, Mahara." The unicorn floated the book behind her as Mahara turned toward her, brow furrowing. "Deception seems to be your favorite card to play whenever somepony has something you want. For all I know, you have no intention of discussing much of anything with Princess Celestia, and once you have the book, you'll use it to further whatever schemes you have in mind."

"Considering that I could have easily turned to violence, a few harmless lies seemed to me like the more rational option." The red mare took several steps forward, stopping when Twilight lifted her sun pendant.

"A few harmless lies?! You're using those lies to drink blood from innocent ponies! While impersonating their friends, at that!"

"I never said I was proud of my actions... You think I like lying to everypony I meet? You think I like the fact that I need to drink a pint of blood every day just to survive?! You have *no idea* what this is like! I never asked for *this*! If I had known what I would become, what other ponies, even my *own family* would think of me, I would have told Luna that I... I would rather she just let me die..." Mahara fell silent, looking out the window for a minute as Twilight held her breath, ready to use her magic if necessary. "But... You know what they say... Misery loves company."

"What are you trying to accomplish, then?"

"What anypony, any living thing tries to accomplish, really. I want to live, free of persecution, if possible. I don't want to be the thing that goes bump in the night anymore."

"If what you say is not more lies," The zebra circled around to Twilight, looking first to the unicorn, then back to the red mare, "To behave as you were would be unwise."

"I don't have a choice... You think ponies will just let me drink their blood if I ask nicely? That's a real laugh. If I don't drink fresh blood on a regular basis, I'll die. I don't have the time to get ponies to trust me enough to become my personal blood donors."

"Well..." Twilight began, lowering the pendant. "Why don't you wait here until I contact Princess

Celestia? Maybe we can help you. I'm sure she-

"I'm sure she'll put me right back where I was. This isn't as simple as turning me back into a cute little filly, Twilight. This spell only goes one way, and my very existence is a reminder that Luna tried to betray her." She began to advance again, slowly, carefully putting one hoof in front of the other. "I'm not ready to see her. Not yet... There are things I need to do first, and at the top of that list is getting my book back."

"Why is it so important to you? Why would you risk coming here in broad daylight to get it back?"

The red mare froze in her tracks, glancing to the side. "It's... It's my diary. The only remaining record of my life. Do you even know how a sealing spell works? You have to bind the victim to something that is emotionally significant to them. For Luna, obviously the moon would be the object of choice, but for me... She could have sealed me in the moon with Luna, but isolation is part of punishment, isn't it? She had to use something that contained my emotions, all the fear and anxiety I was experiencing..."

"And how am I supposed to believe any of this, Mahara? All you've done until now is lie. What proof do I have that this is any different?" The room suddenly became dark. Twilight looked to the window as clouds obscured the sun. "You have only yourself to blame for the situation you're in."

"If this as far as diplomacy will take me, then I see now that force is the only option after all. Remember that I tried to settle this peacefully. You have forced my hoof." The cords of flesh against the red mare's back began to unwind, stretching out around her.

"You are a monster that cannot speak truth." Zecora lowered herself, ready to strike. "You, yourself, have forced your own hoof!"

The zebra launched herself at Mahara just as Twilight reached out for the red mare with her magic, but Zecora simply passed through her as she evaporated into a red mist, weaving around the unicorn's attempted restraining spell and swirling toward her. Eyes wide, Twilight stumbled out of the way, just in time to watch Mahara engulf the book with her intangible form. As the unicorn levitated her pendant toward the mist, it receded slightly, but maintained its grasp on the book, pulling with a force equal to that of Twilight's magic.

Out of the corner of her eye, Twilight saw Zecora opening a small pouch and dipping her snout into it. Seconds later, the zebra was blowing a golden powder from her lips. It billowed out like a cloud, and the red mist swirled frantically to avoid it. The unicorn felt it in her nose as she inhaled a moment too late, her concentration breaking as she sneezed. Book in tow, the mist flooded the other side of the room, solidifying back into a mare.

With the book held in her mouth, Mahara wordlessly glared at them, her tendrils intertwining and then spreading not as individuals, but as enormous, bat-like wings. With a single stroke, she propelled herself backwards through the window, quickly becoming a blurry silhouette on the horizon.

Several minutes passed in silence as Twilight attempted plan her next course of action. In that time, the sky began to clear once more, sunlight washing over Ponyville. The first words to her lips had little to do with either of those things, however.

“What was that just now? The powder trick, I mean?”

“If you should find that your magic does not meet your needs, know that the creature is averse to sunflowers and their seeds.” The zebra trotted into the kitchen, retrieving a dried sunflower head from within.

“Sunflower seeds?” The unicorn raised a brow. “You’re kidding.”

Zecora smiled, dropping a mouthful of sunflower seeds into an empty pouch. “Would it be less strange were she averse to garlic instead? Believe me my friend, the sunflower dust is the reason she fled.” The zebra dropped the pouch, twisting her hoof on top of it, pulverizing the dried seeds within.

“Zecora, I need to find Spike. Princess Celestia needs to get that letter as soon as possible. Will you stay here and guard the library for me while I go out and look for him?” The unicorn began a trot to the door, looking back at Zecora as she awaited a reply.

“Of course I will, be safe, my friend. But on the creature’s words I would not depend. Thus far no creature has been maimed, and I pray for Spike’s sake that has not changed.”

“Me too... Well, if she said she got him to go to Carousel Boutique, that’s the first place I’m going to look. If he comes home before I do, though, have him send the letter.” Twilight paused at the door, looking down at the lock, and then the broken window behind her. “If Mahara comes back... Please don’t try to fight her. Stall her if anything. Your life is more important.”

“Twilight, I appreciate your concern, and from these encounters I have learned. But should find I have the advantage; know that creature will find me more than she can manage.”

Twilight hesitated, her key floating beside the lock, but the zebra gave her a nod of encouragement, then shouted a command in her native language. As Twilight opened the door, the chest outside came to life once again, somehow squeezing through the doorway and scuttling up to Zecora. Smirking, the unicorn stepped out into the early evening, an orange glow just barely settling on the horizon as the sun prepared for its descent. She turned her gaze in the direction Mahara had flown, feeling dread at the prospect of the coming night.

She’s not going to be happy when she realizes that isn’t really her book... I just hope this doesn’t mean something even worse for the rest of us...

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