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Divergence

Chapter 9

"Inquisition"

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Things began to clear for the sky-blue Pegasus, darkness pulling back as blinding light filled her vision. The expanse seemed without limit as she stared upwards, uncomprehending. She slowly blinked once, twice, feeling entirely removed from thought or body. Inhale, exhale. Wisps of cloud drifted aimlessly, high above. A soft grunt left her as sensation began to return. Her brow furrowed as the first lances of pain began to stitch through her side. *What... what happened?* Dash raised her foreleg up to where she could see it; superimposed on the backdrop of the summer sky, the black armor encasing her leg was scuffed, jagged tears here and there. She no longer wanted it on her. She didn't want it anywhere near her.

A sudden move, an effort to roll over and sit up, had her hissing in agony. "Oh goddess!" Dash gasped, curling in on her side and clenching her eyes shut. Shoulder, ribs, hind leg, wings. Was any part of her body *not* in pain? *What the hell is going*—her eyes shot open. *Applejack!*

With the sting of moisture in her eyes, Dash bit her lip and slowly, carefully, pushed herself into a raised position with one foreleg, the other cradled against her breast. She looked about, taking in the forest to the south, Canterlot far—though not too far—off in the distance. The sharp color of an immobile blue-clad form behind the waving green of the long grass brought the fight back in shocking clarity. Spitfire. She had taken down a Wonderbolt in aerial combat.

*What the fuck? Spitfire? Working with the military? Helping them kidnap Applejack. Rarity and Twilight too, from the looks of it.* Dash hung her head and closed her eyes. *I'm... this is nuts. This is all... this isn't a game.* She began to shake slightly.

*I'm in SO far over my mane here. What the hell was I thinking? 'Oh sure goddess of the night, I'll be your new captain and stuff!'* Her thoughts were laced with the disdain of how casually she had jumped into a whirlpool, so very far out of her depth.

*And I went and pulled everypony right down with me.*

Staring at the grass, the wind gently swept the shock of multi-hued mane cascading down as her salty tears watered the earth. The sundering of her life and the connections that mattered most, the upheaval of her dreams and the foundations of her world; it hurt beyond the telling of it. Well... it wasn't as though she was entirely without options. She could, after all, just curl up right here and die. That didn't sound so awful...

AJ...

...Aw, hell...

With incredible reluctance and a groan that passionately summarized a complete disdain for the entire process, Rainbow Dash opened her eyes, blinking anew against the glare of late afternoon. Raising her head, she struggled to rise. Every wound, every bruise, and every broken bone was rendered into a sharp and sudden relief. The pain of it all was so intense that, though she'd have liked to have screamed, a mini-seizure and ragged gasp seemed to be the best she could produce. When the wave finally passed, she found herself curled into a fetal position as tightly as she could bear and just listened, breathing shallowly, afraid to move.

A steady wind rustled across the plains, singing lightly against the grains and grasses. Opening her eyes once more, Dash decided to take this whole thing one step at a time. First, just how badly was she hurt? Craning her head—very, very slowly—she looked herself over: Right wing matted with cloying blood, though it didn't seem to be hers, left wing visibly undamaged, a vicious bruise against her ribcage—at least one or two broken. Limbs? Careful flexing and examination didn't seem to turn up worse than painful bruises and maybe a torn ligament in her left hind leg, though that *did* hurt like all hell. Nothing broken, far as she could tell, though the lancing agony begged to differ. Probing her tongue around her mouth, it seemed all of her teeth seemed to be present and accounted for; vanity or no, she felt a wash of relief over that. She stretched her neck and spat out a mouthful of coppery-tasting blood. Whatever,

she had plenty of that. So far, her ribs were the worst of the lot.

Easing her hooves beneath her, she gingerly stood and braced herself. Unfurling first her left wing, then her right, she began to cautiously extend them, working the sockets through their full range of motion. By the time she was done, her jaw was clenched and fresh tears were streaming down her face, and not just from the searing pain. Her right wing—it wasn't broken, but the muscle at her shoulder was torn so badly there was *no way* she was going to be able to fly. *And if I can't fly... AJ, Rarity, Twilight... I lost them.*

Dash hung her head, glaring at the blurred images of the grass and her hooves as tears of rage and impotence tracked her cheeks. With a huff, her hoof dragged along the ground as she limped over to the crumpled heap of the blue-and-gold-suited Pegasus that lay motionless in the grasses. She had rolled and bounced several times, it appeared, and her uniform was more stained with crimson than the brilliant blue of the tight-fitting uniform. Dash cycled through a gamut of emotion looking down at her fallen enemy, her fallen idol. Rage, loss, sorrow, fear, confusion, and back to rage. For the briefest moment, she entertained the image of crushing Spitfire beneath her hooves, again and again, until she was totally unrecognizable. The shock, the betrayal of what this mare was... what the idols of so many ponies, *so many fillies and colts*, really were. What they really did...

That lasted about half a second, as the terror and revulsion of just what she was picturing washed over her; a flashing image of her hooves covered in the blood of the helpless Wonderbolt, smashing down again and again. Dash staggered back in disgust, and was confronted by another crippling thought—*I don't even know if she's alive!*

Spitfire lay on her side, head lolled back and mouth open, her eyes closed behind cracked goggles. Dash watched, but couldn't see if her chest was rising and falling. Moving closer, she crouched down and pressed an ear to her breast, trying to ignore the front leg and wings that were bent at unnatural angles. She was breathing. Barely. Her heart was beating. Barely.

Dash rose and looked down at Spitfire, the pony she had once idolized above all others, the pony she had wanted to fly with and be *recognized* by, more than any other. Now here she

was, dying on the ground, and not only was there nothing Dash could do to save her once-hero, but *her blood was on her hooves*. She wanted to scream, and so she did. She settled to the ground, resting her forehead against her crossed forelegs.

After a time, she opened her eyes, and screamed again at an entirely different octave. Enormous blue eyes were staring into hers, less than an inch away. "P-Pinkie?!" Dash stuttered. "Wha—*How?* What?" More movement drew her attention. "*Fluttershy!* You're okay! Oh, thank Cel—" She was abruptly cut off as her friends enveloped her. The embrace was searingly painful, but she didn't mind. The soft murmurs of "Oh Dashie" and "There there, hush now" felt so good to the broken-hearted Pegasus. Dash opened her mouth to express her overwhelming relief that her friend was okay, but Fluttershy pulled back, looking over to the inert Pegasus sprawled out behind Rainbow.

"Oh my goodness, Rainbow Dash... is she..." Fluttershy asked, shying away from finishing the question.

It wasn't difficult to figure out what she meant, but Dash could only shake her head in despair. "I don't know, Shy; I mean, not yet, but she's bad. Real bad."

Rainbow knew that Fluttershy was a fairly competent medical pony—she had, after all, played vet to so many creatures for so many years that, even without much formal training, she was the one ponies sought out if their pets were in trouble—and pony anatomy probably wasn't all *that* different from many animals that lived in the wild. True to form, a thoughtful and concerned frown crossed Fluttershy's face, and she made her way toward the gravely injured Wonderbolt. Pinkie and Dash watched fixedly as the demure Pegasus carefully examined her, making small noises now and again, none of which sounded promising. After just a few moments, she stood up and looked over, wings trembling against her sides. Her emerald eyes were huge and full of tears. "I'm... I'm so, so sorry. I can't help her. She's... too far gone."

By the time she said the last word, her voice was a mere whisper. Pinkie was already by her side, nuzzling her. "Don't worry Fluttershy, even if you can't help, I'm pretty sure *she* can. There's some weird stuff about her."

*No. Fluttershy can't help her? Spitfire can't die... not like this, not because of... Wait, who the what now?*

Dash blinked. Was Pinkie talking about her? What could she... no. Pinkie *wasn't* looking at her. She was looking behind her. Turning around to look, she felt her wings reflexively—and painfully—try to flair out to the sides.

"You! What are you doing here?!" Glancing left and right, just to be sure, she added suspiciously, "And where's that Wolf? He get off his leash again?"

Lyra raised an eyebrow as she neared. "You should be glad he *isn't* here. A comment like that could see you sans a head before any of us could do anything about it. His kind take words rather seriously, you know... that's something you should probably try and remember."

Ruby eyes narrowed. "Hmph, whatever."

A small shake of the head, and the verdant Unicorn dismissed the matter, turning her attention to a more pressing concern—the downed Wonderbolt. She nosed Spitfire lightly, her eyes critical and searching. Fluttershy looked on sadly, her head bowed.

"Hmm. She may not be beyond saving."

Fluttershy openly balked, knowing she had made no mistakes in her examination. She wanted to spare her friends the details, but Spitfire was bleeding internally, and several ribs had pierced her left lung, collapsing it. Fluttershy knew it was only a matter of time and a lot of pain, and as much as it disturbed her, the thought of this pony giving Rainbow Dash false hope bothered her even more.

"Um... I'm sorry, but I've seen... things... this bad before. It's, um... she's... terminal."

Lyra looked over, and flicked an ear at the yellow Pegasus. "No, actually, that may not be the case. The question is... are you certain you actually *want* to save her?"

A stunned silence permeated the glen.

Dash recovered first. "Of course we are!" she yelled, limping right up to the light-green Unicorn's face. "Why the hell *wouldn't* we want to?! If you can save her, then fucking *do it!*" she demanded, well and truly angry.

Lyra stared back, unmoved. "Why, indeed. But, do you know what she is? What she *really* is, I mean. Celebrity, yes, famous stunt-pony, yes. What about everything else? The celebrity facade against the elite squadron they actually are. Some have gone so far as to call them *assassins*, and it's not terribly removed from the truth. There are corners of the world where the name Wonderbolt is accompanied by creatures hiding their offspring." Lyra paused, weighing the effects of her words on the trio. The annoyingly loud, multi-hued one looked completely sideswiped, Fluttershy wore an expression split between disbelief and horror, and the unpredictable pink one looked... thoughtful. For some reason, *that* concerned Lyra more than she could produce reason for. Nevertheless, she held her silence, and awaited the decision to come—though she *could* act any way she wished, she felt the final decision wasn't hers to make. These others, the blue one especially, had so much more riding on this moment. So she waited, and watched...

...And kept waiting. With a slight frown, she was about to prompt the shell-shocked Rainbow Dash, but as she sucked in the breath to speak, the pink one surprised her yet again.

"What? Are you waiting for us? Do it. Save her. If you can, you should. You have to, right? It's the right thing to do! Fluttershy, you can help Rainbow's wounds right? They're not *that* bad, we've all seen her with worse."

Lyra wasn't sure what bothered her more, the unpredictable pink pony rapping out orders so matter-of-factly, or that they were the perfectly correct decisions. With a sideways glance at the unsettling Earth pony—and she wasn't a pony easily unsettled—Lyra moved past the two Pegasi to the insensate Wonderbolt, her horn already glowing as she cycled through a complex skein of spells, constructing piecemeal the various magics the broken Pegasus would require. Fluttershy had already moved up to Dash, coaxing her to lay down for a moment while she dug through her saddlebags for the bandaging and potent medicinal salves she would need. Pinkie turned away, walking off a few yards to face the north, just standing with her back to the group, as though she'd momentarily forgotten them.

Dash was staring vacantly at her fallen hero while the creepy teal Unicorn worked to save her life. Her eyes burned as the despair crushed down on her, but they were dry as the desert—she simply had no more tears. *What... what have I... done? Become? What am I even doing? Nothing makes any sense anymore. We're not soldiers. My friends aren't warriors.* She winced at the lance of pain as Fluttershy began wrapping a bandage up the base of her wing.

A sudden gust of wind rolled in across the plains, Dash's ears perking in interest at the heavy scent it carried. Raising her head up, she squinted to the north, towards Canterlot. In the far distance, a bank of storm clouds was rolling over the mountains, stretching across the horizon. Frowning, Dash wondered if this was a coordinated effort. A storm that size, with clouds that dark, would take the combined efforts of not only Canterlot's Pegasi, but at least three other prefectures. *Weird*, she thought. *Something this size should have been planned out months in advance, but I don't remember hearing a word about it.*

The former weather pony was so wrapped in her thoughts she failed to take notice of the near-suspicious glances Fluttershy was casting to the green Unicorn standing above her friend's fallen idol. Lyra's horn was aglow, head bent and eyes closed, her expression stretched with concentration. She had been like that for several minutes now, and Fluttershy couldn't help wondering what in the hay she thought she was doing. Nibbling on her lower lip, she split her attentions between rubbing a healing salve into the articulation of Dash's wing and shoulder, and surreptitiously observing the mysterious mare's efforts. Frankly, Fluttershy was surprised that—Spitfire, right?—hadn't bled out by the time they'd arrived. Her breathing had been terribly shallow and erratic, her heart-rate a quickly fading staccato. The internal injuries were severe, and at *least* one rib had snapped, piercing and deflating her left lung. Despite her practiced efforts to distance herself, Fluttershy felt empathetic tears beginning to well up, despite what this Pegasus had been involved in, or how badly she had hurt Rainbow. Still... she'd be watching very closely to see what Lyra thought she could do to save the Wonderbolt.

Fluttershy didn't have to wait long. With a huff, Lyra's horn extinguished and she shook herself from horn to hoof, brushing beads of sweat from her forehead with a foreleg. "Well, that's done. She'll survive at least."

Fluttershy frowned, phrasing her words cautiously. "Um... What exactly... did you do? What kind of medical training do you have?"

Lyra blinked at her, an amused grin forming on her lips. "Training? Do I strike you as a medical pony?"

That did it. Fluttershy rose, eliciting a pained squawk from Dash as she pulled on the bandaging still in her mouth. With an apologetic glance downward, she quickly spat it out, then looked back to Lyra, her eyes narrowed. "No. No you do *not*. I... I don't know *what* you strike me as. You've only been in Ponyville a little while, but nopony seems to know much about you: what you do, where you come from, or... or anything!" Fluttershy exclaimed, her voice actually rising as she extended a hoof. "Who *are* you?"

Lyra stood facing Fluttershy squarely, an eyebrow raised high, her golden eyes half-lidded. "What does it matter to you who I am? This game has players like any other. It's mere circumstance that our paths have crossed, that our moves have overlapped up to this point, is it not?"

"I have no stake in you," she said coolly, pausing to sweep a hoof, "in *any* of you, nor do you in me beyond this moment. The extent of my involvement so far has been at the request of someone I have... a considerable debt to."

She slowly cocked her head and a wry smile crept onto the sylvan pony's muzzle. "Not to mention it's all so *fascinating*, isn't it? Reclusive races stepping from the shadowed boughs for the first time in living memory, *Dragons*, levels of intrigue and... well, chaos, that haven't been seen in this land for literally ages. For all that it is now, you know what it isn't? *Stagnant*. This is a time of convergence, of transition. Granted, we may not all actually survive it, but y'know what? Existence tends to be a tad more expansive than us and our petty squabbles. Maybe we'd have more to say about the greater movements of things if we didn't take ourselves so damned seriously, but who knows?"

Regarding the mares before her, it became quickly apparent to Lyra that her explanations weren't doing a great deal to set them at ease; the three were practically prancing



in confusion. Her expression crinkled in a mild consternation.

“Look...” she said, trying again. “You’re asking me to render terms of association that we just aren’t going to bridge.... On the other hoof, I... suppose I could be trying harder. Your town, for instance... I like it. I can see staying for a while.” Lyra scuffed at the ground, looking suddenly awkward, she said, “But right now, you need to be concerned for you and yours. Your friends, your families, the ponies you want to protect. You *care* for Ponyville, don’t you?” The verdant Unicorn turned her head to look away for a moment, “I’ve grown rather fond of it... it’s a nice place. Not the forest, but nice...” Lyra’s eyes seemed to flash as she took a step forward. “I’d like it to still be there when this is all over... and *you’re* going to have to keep your heads if that’s to be the case. You only get one shot at this after all. Don’t blow it.”

Fluttershy stared, muzzle moving silently at the rejoinder which she had no measure for.

“Awwwroooooo.”

The three mares looked over to where Pinkie stood, still facing away from them, her ears canted back and head raised as she mock-howled, one foreleg raised high.

The silence stretched between them, Dash’s ruby gaze steady on the verdant Unicorn, who had visibly stiffened. Fluttershy looked on in confusion at the turn of conversation.

“Yeah,” Dash said quietly. “Care to explain that?”

The fairly open atmosphere that had previously emanated from the Unicorn just moments ago seemed to simply vanish, as though a switch had been flipped. “...No,” she said with finality. “That’s nopony’s business, and frankly, it’d be best if you just forgot about it.” Lyra cast a frustrated glance at the pink pony. “And how did you... Y’know what, never mind,” she said, thinking better of going down that road.

Looking back to Dash and meeting her gaze levelly, she said, “Equestria is a big place. There’s a lot that happens in the world that isn’t made of sunshine and rainbows. There are dark places in the world, but darkness doesn’t automatically mean bad, as most ponies are so keen

to jump to. It means silence, and mysteries. Every single night, that side of the world takes over, and what was clear and boring in the daylight becomes unfathomable and endless. Ponies seem to have either forgotten that, or prefer to hide from it. I haven't, and I don't."

Dash made a *'hmm'* sound, before saying, "Well, that kinda works around your... um, *connection* with what's been going on... sort of... but we're gonna have to sit down and have a long talk sometime soon. I'm sick to death of secrets."

*"Rainbow Dash, you know nothing of bearing the weight of secrets. Not yet."* Lyra said in a low, barely audible tone, then shook her head. "In any case, sure, stop by sometime. We'll go for a walk. But now's really not the time to get into everything." Looking back to Fluttershy, she said, "As for your *real* question, you're right, I'm no medical pony. I was able to slow her heart rate and breathing down. She's in complete stasis." At Fluttershy's blank look, she amended, "A... kind of hibernation. It'll be enough to preserve her for a while. I'm going to take her back to Ponyville, get her the emergency care she needs. In the meantime, you girls had better get going, don't you think?"

Dash grimaced. "Yeah, we probably should." Gingerly, she rose and stretched her wings experimentally, wincing. "Well, no strong flying for a while. Guess I'll be hoofing it."

The parting goodbyes were less awkward than anypony expected, a rather pleasant surprise for Lyra. The three friends moved off, trotting closely together. The green Unicorn stood for a moment with the insensate Wonderbolt floating carefully beside her, encased in a verdant glow. Watching them go, she sighed and cast a look back toward Ponyville.

After a short distance, a strong gust of wind prompted Fluttershy to look back, and she gasped. There was no sign of Lyra, her magical glow, or the broken Pegasus to be seen across the wide plains. She turned to her friends, confusion etched across her face, wings half-raised in alarm. "Um... what was... I mean... How did... " She trailed off, uncertain how to finish the question, or which concern was the more pertinent.

Pinkie looked back and smiled as she bounced along. "Oh, she runs with Wolves."

“Wolves?!”

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Twilight was shouting obscenities at the top of her lungs, utterly enraged. Her violet eyes were wild, muzzle drawn back to bare teeth, her horn sparking erratically. Behind her stood Rarity, in a protective half-crouch, the look on her face one of painfully split intentions. On the one hoof, it was clear she wished to join the purple mare in expressing her fury, while on the other, she was thoroughly unprepared to move away from the prostrate body of her *other* friend—the orange mare who was currently bound, beaten, and drifting in and out of consciousness. The acceptable compromise was to glare silent death upon the brutes in golden armor and stand protectively over Applejack. All else aside - Rarity considered - in the arena of creative venting, Twilight seemed to be doing just fine on her own.

While by rights her ire should be most directed toward the Earth pony soldiers who had beaten Applejack into unconsciousness, Twilight found herself screaming into the face of their commanding officer. Throughout the entire deluge of her abuse, his stone cold passivity never cracked a hair, which only infuriated her all the more. She *hated* being out of control, and at this culmination of events, she had not only utterly lost any semblance of normality or control on external events, now she had lost any grip she had been maintaining on *herself*. With a nicker, the little pony in her head commented on what a nice change it was, to finally just let go. Maybe she could blow something up.

Behind the officer, the other mage was staring at her wide-eyed. Despite his sigil of rank and flowing robe, he looked nearly as young as the mares. Behind him, near the end of the chariot, lolled the earth pony Heavies, armor scuffed and dirty, several still bearing bloody wounds from the rout in Ponyville. They paid the irate Unicorn not the slightest attention, muttering amongst themselves and throwing bored looks down on the scenery far below.

Twilight's thoughts were muddled, furious beyond reason. If she weren't on a narrow platform streaking through the air, she very likely would have charged already. "Celestia *damn* you all! You're scum! You're not worth the armor you're gilded in! How *dare* you! Is this what soldiers of Equestria are for?! Kidnapping and *beating mares*?" She paused, taking in a breath and giving the commander an opportunity to respond.

He said nothing, merely lowering his brow slightly as he regarded her. The blatant 'not-impressed' look, atop a lack of any gratifying response, irked Twilight all the more, the caliber of her anger pushing over the edge from 'furious' to 'murderous,' and for a moment, she had the wild urge to rush him, to bury her horn in his throat. It was only as her hooves left the ground she realized she had actually tried. Twilight found herself on her back, the captain's hoof pressed against her neck as he glared down at her.

"What exactly is it that you're so angry about?" he asked. "Is this country pony your friend or one of the traitors you described? If the former, then explain what she was doing with one of those black-suited Pegasi, who *a/so* fit your description of those traitors, matching our own reports." His hoof pressed down harder into her neck as he leaned in toward her, his eyes uncompromising. "In the context of the situation, my soldiers acted as they should have with the enemy engaged and distracted. We secured a potentially vital source of information who was subdued only after resisting arrest. When we return to the castle, this mare will be incarcerated and questioned. In the meantime, you may want to get your story straight, because right now, it's more full of holes than a spongecake." He removed his hoof and backed away a step.

Tears stung at her eyes as Twilight gasped for breath, rubbing her sore neck with a hoof. "That's absurd," she coughed out. "She saw those brutes coming and did what any sensible mare would do—panic! I refuse to believe that Princess Celestia would allow this... that she would tolerate *any* of this!"

The captain gave her a look that was almost pitying before the impassive mask slid back across his face.

He seemed about to speak again when a sharp whinny came from the leading Pegasi. The wingless soldiers immediately slid into a wider stance. "Brace yourselves," the captain

snapped.

The carriage banked hard, cutting down through the heavy clouds like a scythe and throwing the Unicorn mares onto the wooden flooring. Leveling out at the last second, wheels and hooves touched down at the same time, both locking as they slid down the narrow concourse, bringing the high speed travel to a stop in seconds. The maneuver was expert, precise, and utterly nerve-wracking. Twilight dug her hooves out of the floorboards where she had tried to dig herself in. Glancing over, she saw Rarity: her eyes huge, mane completely frazzled, and seemingly doing her best to stop hyperventilating. Twilight imagined she looked much the same.

Before the vehicle had even slid to a full stop, the Earth pony Elites had jumped out, taking positions on the small landing platform. The captain looked over at the Unicorns. "Come on then."

The mares looked over their friend, still bound and unconscious, then to one another. "What about Applejack? We're not leaving without her," Twilight asserted firmly.

Rarity opened her mouth, prepared to alternately threaten and whine them into submission.

"Enough," said the mage, waving a forestalling hoof. "It's time for a long overdue audience, Miss Sparkle. Your friend is going to be treated for her injuries and questioned about her involvement in recent events." Twilight felt a shiver slide down her spine. There was something profoundly ominous about his words, though his tone was flat and without inflection. She had little time to contemplate the source of her discomfort, as the soldiers fell into step, corralling them along with Applejack draped over the back of one of the earth pony Heavies, her head dangling limply with his steps. She felt Rarity pressing against her side as they walked, intermittent shivers of anxiety rippling through the prim alabaster mare. Her head was high.

Using the proximity as cover, such as it was, Twilight hissed out of the corner of her muzzle, "Rarity, hold on to these." Twilight quickly levitated her saddlebags off of her and placed them onto Rarity's back. The Unicorn now held all five of the stone orbs in two sets of

saddlebags. At Rarity's questioning glance, she explained, "I don't know where I'll be going, but I apparently have an 'audience', so they should be safer with you. Don't let *anypony* take them from you." She received a fearful though determined little nod in return.

The wide corridor branched ahead into three paths. One led a curving path up and to the left, the right disappearing at a steep downward angle. As they reached the branch, the soldiers all moved at once. Two pushed their way in between Rarity and Twilight, two more forming up on either side of the mares. The ones leading Rarity began to herd her up to the left-most passage, the one carrying Applejack heading down to the right.

Both conscious mares immediately erupted with protest.

"W-What are you doing?! Let me go at once! *Twilight!*"

"Rarity! Wait, where are you taking her?! Rarity!"

Rarity's shouts of outrage echoed from the corridor as she disappeared from sight.

"Relax Miss Sparkle. She is merely being shown to a room, not a cell. You have an appointment she is not invited to," the captain spoke over his shoulder.

Twilight trotted up to walk by his side. "You... you promise she won't be harmed? And that I'll see her when I'm done?"

"I'm in no position to promise you anything. I'd say that your welfare, and hers for that matter, depend entirely on you."

Twilight frowned, adjusting to this disturbing new reality. The severity of the situation was like a pail of cold water. Her turmoil was still present, but a familiar, coldly rational process clicked into place. *This* was something she knew. She could not only take comfort in it, she could use it.

"So, where are we going, exactly?" she asked, trying to force a semi-pleasant tone.

"I am escorting you for an audience, at the request of the Council of Mages."

Twilight bit back a gasp. "Celestia's High Court?"

She was as knowledgeable as anypony alive on the subject of the Council... as much as anypony that wasn't the Princess, or didn't actually sit on it, that was. Their workings had always fascinated her, mostly due to the fact that none of the scrolls or any of her teachers could actually tell her what the Council actually *did*, in any codified manner; more specifically, it was finding the limitations of the powerful and secretive group that eluded Twilight's studies. They apparently had veto powers on any legislation but a Royal Decree, but they also acted in an executive capacity, exercising power and influence over governmental bodies across the whole of Equestria. The matter had become so frustrating to the filly that she had once approached the Princess about it. That was one of the only times Twilight could remember that the Princess had been sharp with her—not overtly, but the cues had been there, that this was not a subject Princess Celestia was open to discussing, not even with her. Ever eager to please her mentor, she had dropped the matter entirely. Now, all her concerns came rushing back.

"But... what could they possibly want with..." She stopped. Not just in her thoughts, but dead in her tracks. What was it the captain had said before? Something about orders. Orders that were both disturbingly exact as to the descriptions of the five ponies she had connected with, and incredibly vague as to the *reason* that they should be considered significant.

A wing from one of her escorts slapped her flank, and she skittered to get a move on. "Captain, you mentioned your orders several times," she said, her tone leading. "Did they come directly from the Council?" She caught a slight grimace from the captain.

"Yes." The hard white marble of the corridor clacked against his hooves, as sharp as his answer.

"Then... why were they so vague? How is it that you knew *what* to look for, but not *who*, aside from me? And why didn't you know where we all were? If the Council was scrying us to get your information, they'd have seen at least some of the things I told you... at the very *least* you'd think they'd have warned you about the damn dragons, they're kind of hard to miss! But... they weren't watching, were they? *Where are your orders coming from?*"

The captain stopped walking, and stood scowling down at her. For a long moment, it seemed he wouldn't say anything at all. Then—"I told you, they came from the Council of Mages."

"Then what *aren't* you telling me?" she near-yelled, staring up at him, eyes angry and desperate.

He scowled over at one of his soldiers that had been gawking at the two of them. The pony blanched and swiftly looked away. Turning, the somber stallion addressed his squad, "Get cleaned up and prepare for a debrief. Scroll... begin composing condolence letters. Dismissed."

A chorus of "aye sir"'s rang out, and the remaining members of the Elite contingent turned and marched off.

Waiting a few moments for the crack of the hoof-falls to fade down the corridor, the Unicorn mage looked back to gaze levelly at Twilight. After a moment, he heaved a sigh. "I'm only telling you this because nopony knows what the hell is going on, and you were possibly the closest pony the Princess had to a confidant... So, apparently, from what I'm told, the descriptions of you and your five... *acquaintances*, as well as the urgent need to sequester all six of you in the castle, came directly from the Princess herself." He held up a forestalling hoof as Twilight's mouth opened, her eyes wide and looking like she was about to jump at him.

Before she could get a word out, he continued, "Now I don't know how this worked out, but from what I understand, a letter was found on the Throne in the Great Hall. It bore the Royal seal, and detailed some very specific instructions." A scowl stole across his features. "I highly doubt what I was told constitutes the entirety of the Princess' decree."

He caught Twilight's bewildered expression. "I'm a commander of an Elite division, not a grunt in the barracks. I've been working with the High Council for decades, and often enough have reported directly to the Princess. When I'm told her last orders before she completely disappears are 'not for my eyes', then I develop a serious problem. I've seen you many times throughout the years Miss Sparkle—always at the Princess' side or mane-deep in your studies, and while I may have thought you were just a sheltered and overly privileged little filly, she



*trusted* you. I don't know why, but she did, and... it was plain she cared about you as well." Twilight flinched slightly, biting the inside of her lip as he continued, "It's painfully obvious that things aren't adding up... Hell, *nothing* is adding up right now. I don't even know what this damned puzzle is supposed to look like!"

Twilight was bursting with a million questions, but she was somewhat side-swept by the unexpected admonition of her mentor's feelings for her, and for a moment, the black hole of that loss almost swallowed her. The captain busied himself frowning at an unremarkable, though clearly offensive section of the wall, giving her time to mentally back away from that particular abyss.

"And now, you have an audience that isn't going to like being kept waiting."

Twilight's ears were plastered back against her mane, and she looked up at him with her heart bleeding in her eyes. "Captain... please... do you know *anything* about the Princess? Anything at all?"

His scowl evaporated as he stared down at her, a look of genuine empathy softening his features. He shook his head sadly.

Outside, the thunder rolled as the storm fell over Canterlot.

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The journey had taken much longer than the trio expected, and the arguing certainly hadn't helped. Far from the beaten paths and packed roads, the three mares picked their way carefully, sticking to the lower valleys and the dales of the hills. Only occasionally would a bright head, sometimes multi-hued, sometimes pink, pop up at the top of a hill to orient their direction,

before quickly disappearing again. After a great deal of heated discussion, it had been agreed upon to circle around the great city's borders, approaching from the western fields, where no roads came in.

Dash had wanted to simply head in through the main gates; she had, after all, discarded the torn and battered Shadowbolt barding. Having dropped the dead giveaway, she'd argued, they were just three fine mares for a visit to the city; hell, they could probably flirt some information out of an oblivious guard! Fluttershy had shot that down in a surprising display of assertiveness, literally putting her hoof down as she told a surprised Rainbow Dash to, in no uncertain terms, stop whining about being careful, reminding Dash that they'd taken Applejack, and it was unlikely they did so solely because she'd been with Dash. Fluttershy had argued that they had to try to sneak in, pointing to the approaching storm as a source of cover.

Looking at the huge wall of nearly black clouds rolling in, Dash had to admit if anything would cover them, it'd be that. She didn't know how right she was. Pinkie had cheerily suggested that they should be able to sneak in by hiding in the back a pastry wagon on its way into the city. For a moment, Fluttershy and Dash had shared an incredulous look, but after a moments thought, it actually turned out to be among their more positive options, aside from the fact that there *were* no confectionery wagons of any kind on the road. So it was that they broke off to the west and skirted into the rolling hills of the countryside.

The walls of Canterlot castle loomed above them. The sun was going down in the distance, but its brilliant warmth was less than an afterthought for the three ponies, considering that by the time they had crept out of the tall grasses and slid into the city proper, the storm had broken with an almost unnatural ferocity. Even Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy, Pegasi whose feathers and coats were magically repellent to rain, were completely soaked through. Vehement protests hissed from an increasingly put-out Rainbow Dash about swimming on dry land, and spontaneous conversion to seapony form. Lightning lanced the sky in ear-splitting cracks of thunder, drowning out Pinkie's laughter.

The advantages, as far as Dash could see, were that the deluge was so heavy, visibility was down to "is that a pony or a lamppost," and for the most part, most sane ponies had sought shelter. So there were a lot of lampposts. On the downside, that also meant they would be

distinct should they be spotted, being the only ones out of doors that didn't absolutely have to be. Nevertheless, between the onset of the storm, the encroaching twilight, and the judicious use of alleyways, Dash was fairly certain that nopony had spotted them.

The three pulled into a dripping huddle for a hissed brainstorm for ways of getting over the walls; even in this storm, it was certain that there would be eyes watching. Pinkie volunteered to go and scout for a opening, worker's door, or culvert while the Pegasi opted to fly up to peek over. She was gone before either of the Pegasi could stop her. Dash dropped back down in a splash of mud, her ears laid back. "No go, Shy," she whispered, hiding a wince at how much the quick flight up and down had cost her. "The grounds are lousy with guards. We should have just gone after Pinkie, I don't wanna just stand around here in this."

Casting yet another disgusted look up to the sky, Dash glanced over to take in the shivering Fluttershy, her contemptuous expression melting on the spot—a more miserable and pathetically adorable pony she'd never seen. *How does she **do** that?*

The butter-yellow Pegasus was hunched over, hanging her head low, water pouring from her thick mane in a constant waterfall as she shivered violently. Standing up straighter, a stoic scowl painting her features, Dash extended a wing over her friend, shielding as much of her as she could from the onslaught. A startled 'meep' came from below Dash's blue wing, and wide aquamarine eyes peeked out from pink bangs. Looking straight ahead, Dash felt the blood begin to rush to her face. *I am **not** blushing*, she adamantly told herself. Fluttershy opened her mouth to say something undoubtedly heartwarming, when a vague sound quirked Dash's ear.

One moment Fluttershy was huddled beneath the strong wing of the bravest pony she knew, and the next her friend was gone. Surprised and confused, she looked over, and saw two brown Pegasi rolling over one another and cursing... oh, no, one of them was Rainbow, just covered in mud. The other, much larger, was a stallion, his frame bedecked in gold... armor. *Oh no*. Fluttershy had just enough time to look over as another guard rushed out at her from the curtain of rain. With a strangled scream of alarm, she lifted off the ground and barely out of the way as his charge carried him past her. He spun and charged again as her water-logged wings forced her back to the ground. Desperately, she shimmied aside, her small steps aiding her as he slid past, scrambling in the thick mud. With a shout of frustration, the guard turned once

more, this time advancing on her in steady, measured steps. Eyes wide and terrified, Fluttershy couldn't speak as she backed as far and quickly as she could, before feeling the cold stone of the castle wall against her rump, halting her retreat.

The Pegasus mare cowered before the guard as he approached her, a sour grin sliding like hard steel across his muzzle.

"No!" came a raw, primal scream from his left, startling him to a halt, a moment away from bringing his raised hoof down upon the trembling little Pegasus. Reflexively, he looked over just in time to catch a ball of mud to his face, the wet earth squelching into his nostrils and mouth. Hacking, he doubled over, trying to clear his airway.

He never saw the attack coming, though Fluttershy certainly registered the blue blur as it slammed into him, mud exploding in every direction at the impact. Curled up into a fetal position and whimpering incoherently was the other guard, his hooves crossed over his groin. A familiar, scratchy cry ripped her attention back to the active brawl; the Earth pony guard had gotten a hold of Dash's ear, biting down hard and wrenching her off balance. She tumbled off of him, and they both rose to their hooves, the guard glaring murder at the muddy Pegasus mare as she shook her mane out of her eyes.

Fluttershy was trembling so hard she thought she might simply keel over. Rendered nearly helpless merely by undue attention in the best of circumstances, she was wholly inadequate to dealing with violent confrontation, and she knew it. She couldn't understand, why were these ponies attacking them like this? They were supposed to *protect* other ponies! That was their *job*! If she could just distract the guard for a moment before the other one got back up, maybe she and Dash could get away, find Pinkie somehow, and—

Out of the downpour, on either side of them, strode four more golden-armored stallions. Two Pegasi and two Unicorns. Four pairs of hard eyes, four wings outstretched for battle, two horns already sparking alight with arcane energy. One of the Unicorns jerked his head in Fluttershy's direction, eliciting a snort of disdain from the other. Nevertheless, the buck obediently began to bear down on her. The other three joined their embattled comrade, tightening the circle around Dash.

The Earth pony guard clearly felt he had a score to settle. Heedless of the new arrivals, he lunged forward, every line of him intent on crushing the mare before him. His full weight went into the blow as he rose up and swept a forehoof at her head. Gracefully, the blue Pegasus dipped her weight, slipping low as the attack swept over her, then short-stepping back. Clearly an experienced fighter, the guard went with his momentum, pivoting and turning sideways, trying to body-slam her with his armored side. Incredulously, he registered his attack barely brushing her shoulder as she rolled right over him, coming down on his other side and lashing out with one rear hoof after another—one into his unprotected kidney, the other sinking into his neck. He went down hard in a splash of muddy water.

Dash spun at the sounds of a sudden rush, having just enough time to raise her hooves above her head in a cross to stop the heavy wing slamming down at her head, the force of the blow pushing her rump down to splash into the ground. The second Pegasus had rushed forward a step behind his fellow, and lashed out, his hoof spearing toward her to sink into her chest. Rainbow tumbled back, head over hooves as the breath was knocked out of her. Shaking water from her matted mane, Dash rose to see one Pegasus rushing to her left, the other had managed, despite the deluge, to gain enough lift to launch himself up and over her. As she tracked him, a fractured segment of her focus registered Fluttershy rolling through the mud limply, a charge from the Unicorn having thrown her back.

The split in attention nearly cost her the fight, as she was nearly too late in spinning to meet her attacker, his wing snaking out in an arch that would have snapped her neck like a twig. Dropping low and balancing on two hooves, she swung her weight in a spin, her own wing lashing out at the guard's legs. She heard a snap at the contact, one of his knees shattering. Screaming, he went down. *Now* she could help Fluttershy! She had just begun to turn towards her when the other Pegasus leaped over his downed comrade, his body already twisting lithely before his front hooves had even touched the wet earth. As though in stop motion, Dash watched—frame by frame—as his rear hooves became larger and larger. She felt her muzzle compress, and blood exploded in her mouth. Then she was weightless, stretched out upside down in the air as she flew. Darkness warred with motes of light as she floated through limbo.

Fluttershy watched in horror as Rainbow flew toward her, landing with a sickening thud

and rolling to a muddy rest at her hooves. Her own wounds and terror forgotten, she rose. “No!” she screamed at the advancing Unicorn, intent on pummeling her again.

“You do *not* hurt my friends anymore!” Fluttershy yelled, consumed with an incandescent rage. Glaring at the sheer injustice of the world with all of the outrage that only a truly innocent soul can possess, her stare locked with that of the advancing soldier. The properties of her unique ability were never something she had ever actually analyzed. She preferred to set her mind to the beautiful, the softer and gentler shade of things. How a pony such as Fluttershy came to possess such a potent attribute was a matter of consideration utterly lost on the royal guard as it was turned upon him with full force. Muscles locking, mind reeling back into a near catatonic state, he found himself bound wholly within that baleful aquamarine gaze, before losing consciousness altogether and collapsing in a heap.

“What the fuck!” came the furious shout from the remaining Unicorn. “The hell kind of Pegasus magic is *that*?!”

“I have **no** idea...” stammered the other Pegasus guard, looking stunned and not a little fearful.

Seeing the furious mare turning those huge eyes toward him, the Unicorn lashed out instinctively; summoning a burst of energy, he hurled a bolt of lightning at the yellow-coated mare. Even as it streaked toward her, he realized the attack was incredibly overpowered, born of fear, and that he’d likely just killed the mare he was under absolute orders to bring in alive.

It was with a mixture of incredulity and disbelief that he saw the rainbow-maned pony rise up, her wings spread wide at their base and curving forward to arch her primary feathers before her. The hoof-thick bolt of lightning slammed into her and... coalesced. Electrical energy crackling, Dash held the furious currents, refusing to allow them to disperse as they shot back and forth with a chaotic brilliance between her wings, casting sharp and rapidly shifting shadows across her face. She pulled up, standing tall. Her large, blood red eyes seemed to glow in the flickering light as she slowly drew her wings apart, gilded with lightning. With an audible snap, Rainbow Dash hurled the bolt of energy right back into the face of the gaping Unicorn. Convulsing, he collapsed in a heap, currents sparking from his horn and armor.

Dash's head was held low, her breathing heavy and ragged; one hoof raised as though too painful to set weight on, lines of blood running down it. *I can't believe that worked!* she thought incredulously. Lightning was commonly constructed in weather work, but only a rare few had the affinity with the element to do what she had done. Dash had never tried her hoof at it before—she had merely intended to take the hit for Fluttershy. She spoke without taking her eyes off the remaining Pegasus guard. “Shy. *Run*. Fly away.”

Before Fluttershy was able to articulate any of the dozen denials circulating through her head, a red light flashed from her left, and a ball of energy slammed into Rainbow Dash, sending her flying to smash against the castle wall. Dash slid down the wall, coming to rest in a crumpled heap, smoke rising from an angry burn on her side. Raising one hoof, she slurred, “Fluttershy, just... *go*. *Run*. *Please!*”

Too horrified to move, Fluttershy was tackled to the ground, her foreleg wrenched behind her as her head was pulled back in a painful grip.

“Don't move!”

She didn't resist. She could only watch as a fresh guards milled about, some tending to the fallen soldiers, while three others moved up to Rainbow, staring down at her in contempt.

“Filthy traitor!” one said. “An attack on the Princess is an attack on Equestria itself! Did you think you could get away with it?”

Dash just glared up at him, not out of spite, but honestly not knowing how to even begin to explain... if she even wanted to, that was.

Another soldier's hoof sunk into her stomach, and she gasped in surprise and pain.

“You think this is a joke? *Where is she?!*” Another hoof slammed across her face. She could no longer tell who it belonged to.

Coughing, she spat blood and tried to answer. “I... I don’t know,” she said weakly.

“Liar!” screamed a guard, rearing up on his hind legs. A sharp crack cut through the sound of the heavy downpour as his shod hoof came down on her hind leg. Dash screamed.

“Where is the princess?! Eh?” yelled a fresh guard.

“Give her back to us!” demanded another. Every command was punctuated with more blows as they gave vent to their communal fear and frustration.

Dash had stopped moving, stopped protesting. Fluttershy had looked on in uncomprehending horror. Finally, she found gave voice to the screams echoing in her head, “Please! *Please stop!* Why are you doing this? Oh Celestia, *stop!*”

A hoof smashed across her face. “How dare you use her name!” Fluttershy almost welcomed the darkness as it overtook her, her last impressions ones of angry murmurings, and the sensation of being pulled through thick mud...

When Fluttershy came to, she was still being dragged along, though this time across hard, dry stone. A disparate part of her mind quietly debated if the current sensation was preferable to the last. She let out a moan of utter misery, coming to the conclusion that just about *anything* would be better than this. Fluttershy was a consummate pacifist, and as such, had never so much as gotten into a scuffle, not even with the bullies back in flight school. She had certainly never been *beaten* before, and she could hardly bear how much it *hurt*, to get hit again and again. With a mental jolt, she recalled how much more savagely a punishment Rainbow had taken. She opened her eyes and found herself being dragged by her forehooves, her rump trailing along the ground. No sign of Rainbow behind her.

Before she could try to twist around to risk a glance—she certainly wasn’t about to *ask*—she felt her legs being wrenched as she was tossed into a doorway. As she landed, she caught sight of a bright, if muddy, multi-colored tail dragging across the floor before it was pulled out of sight. The door slammed shut, and darkness fell around her as her eyes tried to adjust to the low light. Fighting to rise to her hooves, biting back the whimpers of pain from her side and



muzzle, she nearly had a full-on heart attack as a voice erupted from the side of the cramped cell.

“Sugarcube!”

“A... Applejack?! *Applejack!* Oh, thank goodness you’re alright!” Fluttershy had to pause a moment at that. She hadn’t actually *seen* Applejack yet, and considering her own treatment, she experienced a pang of fear as to whether her friend actually *was* alright. Her fears were set to rest as the orange pony rushed to her side, enveloping her in a crushing hug. She squeaked at the force of it, but didn’t try to pull away.

Releasing her, Applejack stepped back. “What the hay are y’all *doin’* here Fluttershy?! Ah mean, Ah’m glad you’re okay, but for Celestia’s sake—”

A scream tore through the dungeons, filling their cell and drowning Applejack’s questions. The two mares stared at each other in horrified recognition, the same desperate plea of denial echoing in their eyes. They knew that voice: it was the scratchy voice of Rainbow Dash, the bravest, and yes, most loyal pony they knew. And she was in agony.

Her screams were punctuated with attempts to form comprehensible words, an occasional “*PLEASE!*” or “*I DON’T KNOW!*” cutting through the full-throated shrieks.

In the next instant, without thought, both Fluttershy and Applejack were at the door of their cell, reared back on the hind legs to peer from the square, barred opening. Even Fluttershy was shouting at the top of her lungs as she and Applejack echoed each other, demanding to be let out, to stop hurting Rainbow. Pleading turned to threats as their friend’s screams continued unabated, and Applejack dropped from the door, turning around and bucking it for all she was worth. The heavy iron door rattled, but held. Again and again she slammed at it in a blind fury, her hooves beginning to paint the rough metal with glistening spots of crimson; Fluttershy saw none of it, her eyes clenched shut and head pressed between her hooves as she lay curled on the floor, whispering “stopstopstop” in a broken staccato.

She didn’t even feel it when Applejack wrapped her in an embrace, the country pony’s

own tears wetting her mane.

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Taking a deep breath, Twilight stepped through the huge, wooden double doors, hearing them slide closed behind her. The voluminous chamber was oblong in shape. Four massive fireplaces were alight and roaring, set into the walls at even spaces. The cold, monochrome granite seemed to suck the warmth from the air. The long banners of the High Equestrian Noble Houses hung evenly arrayed along the rounded walls, their glaring primary colors contrasting strongly. Mirroring the shape of the room itself was a long table positioned in the center.

Ringling the table, twelve Unicorns sat against high-backed chairs, all looking over at her with varying degrees of impatience. Gulping, Twilight moved toward them. She knew that eight of the major Noble families sat on the Council by hereditary rights of mercantile arrangement, and their incredibly rich robes and rather rotund physiques testified to her memory. The other four seats were, as fit the Council generally, a bit more of a mystery. While the former seemed to be held by ponies of great wealth and the inevitable influence that came with it, the remaining four were occupied by Unicorns of a far more spartan taste in attire, their robes of less flamboyant design and coloration, and they lacked the garishly expensive-looking jewelry and trinkets that peppered the heads and hooves of the rich Houses. More disturbing—their gazes were level, reserved, and thoughtful. It was no question to Twilight which stallions could prove to be the most dangerous in this room.

Coming as close as she cared to the end of the table, Twilight stood before them; there was no cushion or chair placed for her, so she simply stood and waited, enduring their silent stares. Just as she began to wonder if she were breaching some obscure etiquette in not rendering some gesture of supplication—although under the circumstances, damned if she'd give that anyway—a pudgy stallion broke into her thoughts.

“So. Twilight Sparkle, the *prodigy*, finally deigns to set hoof before us,” he said, his tone scathing and indolent.

Twilight blinked, at an utter loss for how to actually respond to such an obnoxious statement. Was this a rhetorical question?

Despite the expression of bafflement painted across her face, the Council-stallion pressed on, taking her silence for an obstinate defiance.

“Well? What exactly do you have to say for yourself? Speak!”

“I... I really don’t know *what* to say. I don’t know what you want from me!”

Another opulent Unicorn slammed his hoof down on the table, a goblet nearly spilling over. “Stop playing games! Who the hell do you think you are?! *We* are the kingdom’s High Council, and now *you* are going to tell us everything you know about the Princess’ disappearance!”

There it was. Twilight wasn’t certain why, but hearing those words from the muzzle of a member of the highest Council in Equestria solidified everything. The Princess was truly, simply *gone*. Had she been abducted? Had she just left? Was she hiding? There were too many questions, and they were driving the ponies of Equestria crazy. She thought back to the actions of the guards, the panic of the ponies in Ponyville; this is what happened when the linchpin to a society was removed, and Celestia was that linchpin. She was the keystone that ponies placed their faith in, and without her, the pressure was crushing everypony. She looked back at this blustery gathering of stallions with new perspective. They were old, fearful, and had not the slightest idea what to do. Well... she could say that for most of them anyway. The silent ones were still something to wonder about.

A particularly oblong Unicorn released a long-suffering sigh. “Just recount for the Council in exacting detail your last interaction with the Princess. Leave out nothing.”

Twilight’s face scrunched up as she combed her memory for anything outstanding—*had* the Princess left her a hint of some kind? “Well... I sent her a letter from my study detailing the concerns my research had led me towards regarding the prophecy of Nightmare Moon’s return,

and she—”

Twilight was interrupted as the Council, as one body, leaned forward. “Yes?” one asked. “And what precisely led you to that avenue of study?”

“Oh, um... well,” Twilight stammered as she shifted uncomfortably. “I was doing a comparative essay into the epistemology of ancient pony myths and legends, and their relevance to Equestrian society. You see, at some point, there is a divergence in cultural relevance versus traditionalism at a foundational level, which plays a very heavy role in—”

Once more, Twilight found herself cut off by an impatient wave of a hoof. “*Do* get to the point, Miss Sparkle. We don’t have all day.”

Flushing in one part embarrassment and two parts irritation, Twilight attempted to get back on track. “But that *is* the point. That’s the research I was engaged in when I stumbled across the legend of the Mare in the Moon. It was... intriguing. And disturbing. I got a little... sidetracked with my essay, and started looking more heavily into it. Given the cross-cultural similarities *alone* with comparative histories of other nations at the same time period, almost precisely one thousand years ago, it stood out from any other example I had been studying... Then... after more research... I became a little concerned. I know how it all sounds, even now, but the evidence was overwhelming. It was too real. So I wrote the Princess about it. The letter I got back... was the one sending me to Ponyville. She... she completely dismissed my concerns, and didn’t even come to see me off. I expected to see her again at the Summer Sun Celebration, but...” Twilight broke off, unable to maintain her composure but refusing to be seen as weak before this group of ponies.

The table of stallions exchanged glances for a moment, then one said, “Tell us, Miss Sparkle, what was the overall nature of your studies with the Princess? Were you ever caught out-of-line? Learning things you perhaps shouldn’t be meddling in?”

Twilight blinked, thrown for a moment. The segue of questioning, followed by those latter implications left her floundering. “I... what? What are you—”

“*Dark magic*, Miss Sparkle, is what we’re talking about,” one elderly noble said as he scowled and leaned toward her over the table, his jowls quivering. “Surely a filly as talented as yourself wouldn’t be content with the average curriculum. We find it likely the Princess began to teach you things that perhaps shouldn’t be taught to one so young and impulsive... who knows what mischief such a thing could bring... accidentally... or otherwise.”

Twilight’s confusion blossomed into pure outrage as she synced the connotations. Her ears laid back and eyes narrowed, she raised a hoof and jabbed it at the table’s collective occupants. “How dare you! You’re suggesting I had something to do with Princess Celestia’s disappearance?! *Me*?! You... I.... You have no *idea* what you’re talking about! You have no idea what I’ve *been* through trying to find out what happened to her! How *broken* everything is without her! Even you! All of you! What exactly have all of *you* done to try and find her since she vanished without a trace, aside from abducting me?”

The brown-coated noble who had initially greeted her so warmly cast a withering glance at a stallion across the table, grumbling in a surreptitious tone, “Yes, what indeed. When the supposedly most powerful Unicorns in the realm can produce not a *whit* of a clue...”

Half-muttered passive-aggressive comments were apparently not a well-received contribution to the proceedings, and drew a steady glare from one of the as-of-yet silent stallions. The noble blanched, turning away. The steel-gray Unicorn kept his gaze leveled on the fidgeting Council-member for a moment, before huffing in contempt. Coughing into his hoof, the brown buck turned his attention back to Twilight. “What we have been *doing*, young lady, is holding the entire country together! The Princess may have taken you under her wing, but you haven’t the faintest idea how much *work* goes into telling ponies what to do! As though they shouldn’t all know their places! By now the natural order of things and their station in them should be ingrained into them as surely as their marks! Why, if it weren’t for the aristocracy—”

“Enough of this,” cut in the mage that had glared down the noble only moments ago, his voice even and low. “This is no time for one of your ideological rants Gilded, amusing as they may be. Miss Sparkle, I believe you understand the dire circumstances facing Equestria. Perhaps more keenly even than some at this table.” If Unicorns had feathers to ruffle, the nobles at the table would have puffed up as a single, indignant turkey. The mage continued without

sparing them a glance. “There are questions that none of here can answer, and threats at our stables that we have but the vaguest conception of. Though you display an admirable bravery, the fact is you are lost, and frankly, near breaking. While you have given us precious little reason to place faith in you, I must admit we haven’t given you any reason to trust *us*.”

He went silent, gazing at Twilight over his stapled hooves. “In any case, this matter is ultimately beyond our will.” Turning to the his fellows, he exchanged a nod before looking back to her. “The *real* question we have, is *why* the Princess, as a segment of her final command”—Twilight’s ear flicked—“would order us to bring yourself and five completely unknown mares to the castle, your collective safety being of paramount importance. There is something... between the lines. In fact, the implications are glaring: you and these others must either have knowledge from the Princess that she did not see fit to share with anypony else, or you are holding some other manner of ace in the hole.

“...Therefore, we are going to level with you, and give you the time and solace you will no doubt need to come to terms with information we’ve had days to contemplate. Frankly, we are no closer to understanding it now than we were, and so we must hope that you and your... *associates*, may offer some unexpected insight.”

Turning to the arrayed nobles, each one of them looking both shell-shocked and a touch pasty, he said in a tone that brooked no debate, “Give her the letter.”

At once, eight muzzles opened to protest. As one, four glares stared them down.

With a blustery, “*Fine, have it your own bloody way, Stargazer,*” the brown-coated stallion Twilight registered as Gilded reached into the sleeve of his robe and pulled out a scroll. Though the seal was broken, it was nevertheless instantly recognized by Twilight as the Princess’ own. He floated it over to her, even the glow of his magic seeming tepid and sullen.

Suddenly terrified by the abyss opening within her, Twilight summoned her magic, shakily grasping the scroll in her own purple glow. Unfurling it before her, the crisp rasp of the parchment and flowing script achingly familiar, Twilight began to read. Then she read it again. And again. No pony interrupted her. Slowly, her lavender eyes rose over the lip of the paper to

find the Council regarding her.

She swallowed. "I... I need to talk to my... the others."

One of the nobles to her left waved a hoof petulantly. "I hardly think that's—" he began, before being cut off by a tan-coated mage opposite him.

"You would attempt to deny her *now*? Don't be a fool. It is within her rights."

"Rights she shouldn't have and wouldn't know about if it weren't for you! It's madness!" grumbled another.

Ignoring the exchange, Stargazer frowned at Twilight. "You may be escorted to your 'companions' when you wish. They are being held in the cells below. Normally, they would be inaccessible to visitation. Although as you can see, circumstances are somewhat... extenuating."

"Wait! You're saying *all* of them are here?!" she asked, her mind racing furiously.

The Mage hesitated, then nodded.

"Now. I need to talk to them now."

"Very well. Who do you wish to see first?"

"...Rainbow Dash."

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## Chapter 8

“Horizons”



Special thanks to-

*Sali-*  
*[“It’s Like a Cake”](#)*

*NickNack-*  
*[“Hearts of Gold, Feathers of Steel”](#)*  
*[“Summer Days and Evening Flames”](#)*  
*[“Two Beats”](#)*

*Kurbz*

*Demetrius*