

From behind the crystalline structure, brown, spindly, deerlike hooves reached for footing as the figure stepped out. The same stature as a pony, if more weedy, the figure's auburn body was followed by a short tail. A curly, sandy blonde mane was held upon her head by a white and purple pattern band, adorned in the back with a pair of feathers.

"Hey!" Rainbow Dash cried gleefully, cracking her first smile in days upon recognition of the young bison. "Little Strongheart!"

She barely opened her wings to clear the distance between them in the cavern, Strongheart taking a wide-eyed step back just before Rainbow landed next to Corey. She promptly folded a wing over the young bison's back before mussing her hair with a hoof. "What's going on? What're you all doing together?"

"R-Rainbow Dash?" Strongheart sputtered, before smiling herself as her mane was assaulted. "So you *are* here! And the others as well?"

Strongheart looked out to see five other faces smiling out of the crowd at her and making their way forward. None before Twilight, who arrived next to Rainbow in a flash of light. "Yes, all of us. I understand Corey being here, but—"

"An' *you!*" Rainbow spat, before kicking Corey straight to the knee, causing him to yelp and clutch it. "Where'd *you* go, huh?! Did'ja try running off till your conscience got the better of ya'?"

Corey took a breath, before turning towards her. "*Running?* I—"

"Look, I *get* you wanted to get lost before Mandeville found ya, but what the hay *took* you so long?!"

"I would be interested to hear this as well," came the cool voice of Etherea, who had sidled up to them with nary a sound. Corey grumbled under his breath as he finally stood up again. "I cannot imagine what deal could ever be struck between Mister Webber and our foe, but I'll not accept a trio of wanderers into our midst rashly."

"Gee, thanks," Corey muttered as Etherea looked Little Strongheart over.

"And a little lone bison among them? Most curious companions, even without our highness' pet factored in. Just what brought you along on this strange pilgrimage?"

Strongheart peered tentatively into her unblinking eyes. "Well, your princess did. And if I might speak for my herd, we are all terribly sorry for the news."

"The princess did?" Twilight repeated. "Princess Celestia? How?"

Strongheart reached inside a woven satchel slung over her back, and with her mouth pulled out a white and gold envelope bearing a broken seal in the shape of Celestia's sun emblem.

"Indeed?" Etherea commented, gripping the paper in her magic and allowing her eyes to float over the contents.

It was too much for Twilight to hope that her mentor had somehow survived. A thousand logical reasons against the idea swam in the back of her mind, and yet, if there was one pony in Equestria who could defeat death itself, Princess Celestia would be that pony.

"To my friends in the East: if this message has reached you, it means I, and maybe even my sister have fallen. As such, Equestria and the world at large are facing their most desperate hour."

Twilight felt her very heart sag. Of course. Exciting though it was, it was just a contingency being put into action.

"I believe my subjects will press on in our absence, and they will need all the help they can get. I cannot ask you to join us, and that is not why I am sending this missive. I wish to simply pass along the message that in the doings of our foe, a young dragon named Spike was murdered. I believe you were acquainted with him, and I offer my condolences for a life I too was touched by.

"I humbly ask that you pass this news on, and wish you the best in these troubled days. Your friend and servant, Princess Celestia."

Twilight sat, processing the message. "Is that all?"

Etherea looked it over. "Yes. No sign of magical tampering, no hidden messages that might be recognized. The seal is genuine, and it is penned in her hoof."

"I don't know if that's good enough for you, Etherea, but it's good enough for me," Smolder declared. "War room. Five minutes."

~~~~~  
~~~~~

"I don't get it," Pinkie said. "That was the most boring secret message ever!"

In the war room, the group had gathered once more, the letter laid upon the center table.

"I bet there's a secret meaning to it!" Rainbow cried. "Y'know, like in case Mandeville got a hold of it he wouldn't know what she was really up to!"

“That’s,” Twilight began, eyeing Rainbow as though she might turn into a changeling any moment, “kinda perceptive of you, Dash. You’ve got a point: It doesn’t even mention the bison herd by name. If somepony else got to this, they wouldn’t be able to make anything of it. They’d know it was important, but nothing else.”

“Well, what’s the skinny then Strongheart?” Applejack asked. “It don’t make sense to drag yer kin into all this, but who’s she want you to pass it on to?”

“And why did she mention Spike?” Fluttershy wondered aloud, Philomena now happily perched on her shoulders. “It’s too short to be by accident, isn’t it Philomena?”

“Your princess has largely stayed out of my herd’s way,” Strongheart said. “But there is one matter for which she has always consulted us: dragons.”

All but Pinkie and Rainbow Dash stared blankly, the two of whom let out knowing gasps.

“That’s *right!*” Pinkie exclaimed. “The bison really really *really* really like dragons!”

“Yes,” Strongheart affirmed, nodding, “we have always revered the dragons, timeless masters of the skies and devourers of the earth. Your princess calls upon us to speak to them for her, when it is needed.”

“Why does she need *you* to speak to them?” Twilight inquired.

“Any can speak to a dragon face to face, but finding one is a different matter. We, however, were taught the draconian language of smoke by the dragons themselves.”

“Language of smoke?” Fluttershy asked.

Twilight mildly smacked the side of her own head. “Smoke signals!”

Strongheart nodded. “Outsiders rarely ask about the tradition, but through tribute we earned the right to learn and use them. And so, we can send word to the dragons if it is necessary.”

“Whoa,” Rainbow said, suddenly wide-eyed, “does that mean you could call a dragon to fight for you or something?”

Little Strongheart’s pupils went small, before her eyebrows formed a flat line above them. “We did *not* offer respect to the dragons to usurp their power and make them do our bidding. Many have tried this. All have failed.

“Dragons are proud, and will not follow the commands of flylife groundlings. They are aware of

their strength and care not for our problems. They do not do *'favors,'* nor will they become *'obedient'* when saved by another creature. The myth of the dragon oath has cost many their lives in duplicitous stunts, from juvenile fools to kings."

Twilight stared at the floor and chuckled. "Spike took to that one too. He read it from an old book, even fashioned his *own* code."

"Well, it makes sense that dragons'd be wise to folks wantin' to wrangle them to their service," Applejack offered. "Who wouldn't want a dragon gaurdin' their castle or fightin' their battles for 'em? Size of a house, tail like a club, fire that can melt steel, teeth that treat diamonds like hard candy..."

Strongheart nodded gravely. "We were recognized by the dragons because we asked of *nothing* in return but to know them better. They resent any attempt to be used. My herd knows better than to try, and it was only out of respect for her last wishes that we sent along your princess' message."

Strongheart frowned, staring away from the group. "It was *not* done lightly."

"I'm sorry," Twilight began, "but I still don't understand: just what is this about? What did you read into that letter that we're missing?"

Strongheart took a breath, before turning to her. "Dragons are proud, like I said. They are strong, and they are *far* from few in number. But dragons rarely meet, and it's even rarer that they mate. Long lived though they might be, the life of every dragon is precious to them.

"Dragon infighting happens, and sometimes a dragon will kill another dragon, but this is a matter the dragons at large condone. Personal. What dragons do *not* condone is the slaying of a dragon by something else. It is a crime they enforce the world over. Those who slay dragons are not long for the world."

"So..." Twilight stared, the idea taking root. "You're saying the message was meant to tell the dragons... that Mandeville killed Spike."

Strongheart sighed. "And by extension, that draconian justice is to be had."

"My stars!" Rarity exclaimed, the implications dawning upon the onlookers.

Little Strongheart fixed everyone in turn with a glare. "Your princess has always been fair and respectful in her dealings with us and dragons in the past, and that alone is why we granted her request. But make no mistake, this reeks of manipulation, and to see her attempt something so desperate rather frightens us. Do not be surprised if this goes wrong."

Smolder chuckled. "I don't see why it should go wrong. This is perfect! We won't even *need* to risk our own, just point the fire breathers in Mandeville's direction and let *them* provide the necessary distraction. Maybe they'll have to regroup once or twice to match him, but an army of vengeful dragons at his doorstep isn't something he can ignore."

Strongheart's eyes darkened as she let out a snort and pawed at the stony ground. "So you *would* manipulate them to further your own ends."

Eyes of varying expression ping-ponged between the general and the young bison, who continued to speak.

"You forget who you're speaking to. My herd sees the ponies as allies, but we are friends of the dragons as well. We will *not* stand for one happily disposing of the other, nor will we remain silent if you try."

Smolder stood up. "That a threat then?"

"I won't stand for it either!" Twilight cried, stepping beside Strongheart. "I won't let anypony *use* Spike's death like this! Celestia hoped the dragons would *join* us, not be *used* by us while we cower here safe in our caves!

"Other than Spike, I never met a dragon I much cared for. They're bullies, they're selfish and greedy and incredibly vain. But that doesn't mean it's right to lure them into a suicide run!"

Corey stood up himself, hunching over to avoid the low ceiling. "The way Strongheart here's been talking about them, I doubt if they're stupid. Once they find out they have any army standing between them and their target, I don't think reinforcement is gonna be the first thing on their minds. You think they'll want blood for *one* slain dragon? What do you think they'll call it when they fly blind into anti-air gunfire and a few of them get shredded before the survivors retreat? It might be Mandeville's weapons that killed them, but we'd be the reason they're dead."

Smolder grumbled, but sat down. Etherea slowly nodded her head. "There's nothing else for it. Any hope we have of getting aid from the dragons will require a joint effort. They will need to know we stand to lose as much as them."

"In other words," Applejack said, smiling, "we need a mite bit of honesty."

Little Strongheart slowly beamed as the three took her side. "You'll not regret this. The most they can do is refuse you if you exhibit truth. Otherwise, it is nothing small to make an enemy of the dragons."

There were noises of ascent throughout the war room, only silent when Etherea spoke up again. "Then upon their response, we shall send an emissary to meet with the dragons and arrange for

an alliance.”

“I’ll go,” Twilight said. “If they’ve come because of... b-because of S-Spike, they need to hear this from the pony that was closest to him.”

“That goes fer me s’well,” Applejack told them, before winking. “Y’know, honesty and all.”

Rainbow took one look at Fluttershy, who kept opening and closing her mouth like a fish, and said “Probably best if ‘Shy n’ I stay here. Y’know, I’m not known for being a stable element with dragons.”

Pinkie considered. “Well, I’ll go.”

Corey shrugged. “Never seen a dragon up close. Why not.”

“I’ll go too!” called a voice from the door.

Trotting inside was Princess Cadance, who offered Twilight a smile. “Sorry I’m late. I have the gist of things though.” She wagged her ears, noting Twilight’s confusion. “Supersensory spell.

“Dragons don’t normally attack unprovoked, but it’d be foolish to go undefended. Aside from that, I know a thing or two about diplomacy.”

Little Strongheart smiled at the new arrival. “Oh, are *you* the sister princess of which our herd has been mentioned?”

“No, I’m afraid not my friend,” Cadance answered, her ears folding. “Princess Luna fell alongside Celestia. I am Cadance. I *am* a princess, but I am not quite as they were.”

“But,” Strongheart began, her expression softened, “you are the leader, aren’t you?”

Once Cadance nodded, the smile returned. “Then this will do well! Having the pony leader present acknowledges the importance of the dragons. It will be seen as a show of respect, rather than to send mere scouts.”

Smolder grunted. “It’s settled then. Hey kid,” he said, addressing Strongheart, “when can we expect our scaly visitors?”

Strongheart frowned at him ever so slightly. “They’re already here.”

The room’s occupants turned to stare in her direction. And then to everyone else.

~~~~~

~~~~~

Twilight hadn't been conscious for her grand entry into the caverns, so the route leading to the outside surprised her in its length.

Miles. Literally *miles* of underground passageways. Generally linear, with a few odd bends, the caverns led under the peaks of Canterlot, beneath the plains, all the way to the slanted slot canyons of Rambling Rock Ridge. A labyrinth of sandstone where the earth had been heaved up eons ago, massive plates of rock tilted in their exodus.

Silence defined the trip. Not a voice in the dark. Not a whisper when daylight shone at the end. Neither a mutter, titter or sigh, until at last they had satisfactorily cleared the entrance, and Twilight removed the gag-spell from each member of the group.

Rarity let out a high-pitched groan. "Oh, that's so much bet—"

"*Ugh!*" Pinkie growled as the spell lifted, flexing every muscle in her face with increasingly ludicrous expressions. "I *hate* not being able to talk! Do you *know* how much I hate not being able to talk? Cause' if I wrote 'hate' on every chromosome of every cell in my body, it wouldn't be a gajillionth of the—"

"Pinkie, we all hated the trip," Twilight explained flatly. "Let's not mull over it, okay?"

"I can be silent when it is called for," Strongheart told them, "but I must admit, my kind aren't much for your sorcery. It is... rather frightening."

"I'm sorry," Cadance offered, lip pouted slightly, "it's a necessary precaution on the way out of the caves. We can't have Mandeville's minions doing a more thorough inspection of these caverns. Theoretically they shouldn't hear us, but this system isn't fully mapped. We don't know what other interchanges exist with the surface."

Towards the back, Corey winced. "Oh. Well I wish I'd known that coming in."

Twilight turned to him, lips parting unconsciously. "You weren't followed, were you?"

Corey looked her straight in the eye and smiled. "No, we were very careful. And however good Mandeville's tech is at detection, they're not historically much for stealth."

"So, how did you figure out where we'd holed-up anyhow?" Applejack asked. "Now we can ask an' all, I'd been wonderin'."

Twilight sidled up to him. "Yeah, where exactly have you *been*? I thought you were with the princesses during the battle, but when I got there you were nowhere to be found."

Corey sighed as they continued walking. "I'm so sorry. I wish I could say I fought the good fight for your princesses. Mandeville showed up in the throne room, and it became a sort of standoff. Mandeville struck first. I hadn't even fired a shot, and he hurled me right off the balcony.

"I don't remember much after that," he chuckled. "I smacked into the opposite building and tumbled to the ground, but this pair of refugees on their way out caught me. Husband and wife, pegasus, both of 'em. Peach Pit and Gale Force. They were going to fly this cart northbound, figured they might stand a better chance of avoiding the battle, and by then it had all slowed down. I was lucky, they're good people. Hid me under a tarp and hauled me off with them to a place called Hollow Shades."

Applejack whistled. "That's a ways, that's halfway to Manehattan. No wonder it took so long."

"I've heard of that," Twilight said, "it's a little alpine town in the Mutterknot Woods."

"Yeah, well," Corey muttered. "I'd have been here sooner, but when I came to I'd broken four ribs, cracked my skull, dislocated my shoulder and had an all around bad day.

"Your medicine here is unbelievable, by the way. That kind of injury takes months where I come from to heal."

"You poor thing," Rarity cooed, leaning into him. "Stuck in some hospital bed without the first idea of what had happened."

Corey took a casual sidestep and stared at the ground somewhere ahead. "The papers said what happened a few days after I woke up. Yeah, it was pretty brutal. They mentioned executing you, Twilight. I didn't believe it. Was probably just in denial over it, but I guess a broken clock can be right twice a day."

"Well that's silly," Pinkie commented. "You're not a clock, *or* broken. Well, not *anymore*."

"I dunno," Corey muttered, smirking, "I wake up, and suddenly it's everything I was afraid of. I've ruined this place. That sort of thing doesn't fix quick, however much Skele-Grow you have in the medicine cabinet."

Rarity frowned, and mouthed "Skele-Grow?" to Twilight, who only shrugged before addressing him. "Corey, you haven't—"

"Yes I have, Twilight. I've seen the sun and the moon. I've noticed the floods of ponies blowing into town because they couldn't risk staying under Mandeville in the areas he influences. I've listened to ponies crying their eyes out in the streets when the papers told them what happened to the people they relied on since they were kids.



"I never could have known this would happen, but I still caused it."

They had all stopped moving, eyeing Corey's inscrutable expression. Finally, Cadance stepped forward. "My aunt would never blame you for—"

"It's alright, thank you Princess," Corey said. "This isn't about me, it's about making things right, and you can believe me when I say I've no intention of failing twice. I've got your back."

They turned a corner as they continued walking, following a map Cadance held of the area.

"If it had not been for the phoenix," Little Strongheart said, "we would never have found you in this place, let alone the caves."

"Philomena led you here?" Twilight asked, eyeing the firebird as it bobbed happily on her back.

"That bird is the reason me and Strongheart got in this together," Corey told her. "When I was finally well enough, I offered Peach and Gale thanks and said fair thee well. They put me in the basic direction of the resistance, since they'd been hearing a few things in town. Hollow Shades has been really pullin' for you guys out here, I keep hearing things around, even while stuck in a bed.

"So, I took my space blanket out and trudged the countryside back towards Canterlot. Mostly stuck to the treeline, keeping out of the open in case Spotters were still floating around. Eventually though, I caught the attention of what I *now* know to have been a pack of timber wolves."

"Hoo-wee," Applejack exclaimed, shaking her head. "Ruin yer roadtrip, that would."

"Well it certainly didn't help," Corey said, softly kicking a stone in front of him. "Bit a couple times in the initial attack before I could pull out my shotty. Fell apart into sticks easy enough, but it didn't stop the bastards. They kept pulling themselves back together. I had to take the long roads, rough terrain they couldn't move through. Still followed me though, even across a river, till I skirted around Dodge Junction.

"Place crawled. Thought I'd lose the wolves in the desert, but somewhere along the line they took it personally. Mandeville's using the place for something, not sure what. All I know is the railroad dead-ends there, or at least it does now."

Twilight hummed thoughtfully. "Dodge was about the only place CAIRO wouldn't let me ride to. He never said we were avoiding it, but the trains I hitched to never went there, and there were only a couple he refused me."

Corey turned to her, raising an eyebrow. "You were riding trains with Mandeville's robo-butler? Just what *e/se* happened while I was gone?"

Pinkie responded instantly, bouncing alongside him as they walked. "Twilight got all kidnapped, and then cloned, so Mandeville used the clone to make everypony think she was gone, *including* us! But really she was stuck with Mandeville in this big dreamhouse right next to his house, and she rode trains and watched stuff and read a whole bunch of other stuff but was so so really sad because she was all alone! But then Rainbow Dash and the Wonderbolts busted her out in a great Twilight train-robbery, and then we brought her back here!"

Corey took a moment to stare. " 'Kay..." He looked Twilight over. "Not sure that explains the leg, or why she's been floating this whole time."

"Oh," Twilight exclaimed, touching down for a moment from her self-levitation, "those are kinda related. When I got captured, I sorta got into a scuffle with Mandeville. One of the CID shot me through the knee. I get around better now levitating than on hoof."

Corey exhaled loudly, eyes becoming stony. "Hope you don't mind, but I'd like to kill that fuckin' guy."

"No no, he was pretty upset over it actually," she explained, her tone firm. "And yes, I *do* mind. Mandeville may be horrible, but he's going to be tried by the Equestrian legal system. I'm not like him, I *refuse* to be a killer."

He then eyed Pinkie herself. "And somewhere in all that, you evidently managed to find a straightener," he said, noting her still flattened hair.

Applejack sidled towards Corey as Pinkie stared in reply. "Well hold on there, y'all, how'd you lose those wolves?"

Corey smiled. "Well, that's where my travelling companions came in. I got slowed down climbing this dune. They split off at some points, and I think they herded me into a trap, vicious little fuckers. They started creeping in behind me when I see Strongheart here silhouetted under the sun on the dune, like she was freaking Gandalf or something."

"Grand what?" Rarity muttered.

Corey sighed, before Twilight's eyes lit up. "Oh hey, I got that reference! The Two Towers, Helms Deep, 'look to the east' and all that?"

Corey leaned back as his eyes dilated slightly. "Where in the world did *you* see 'Lord of the Rings?' "

“Oh, Mandeville had me watch a lot of that stuff with him,” Twilight answered, casually clearing their path of a few small boulders and arranging them in a corner according to size. “I think he wanted to see what I thought of it all.”

“Huh,” he uttered, giving Twilight’s unnatural rock formations a stare. “Well, if we ever get out of this, I know who I want to be neighbors with. Kinda sucks, being the only one in on the joke.”

“Well, um,” Rarity recoiled, breath catching in her throat, “p-perhaps we could procure Mandeville’s viewing materials then, when this is over I mean. After all, if you’re Twilight’s neighbor you’re mine as well.”

Corey laughed. “Yeah, it’d be nice to have *some* callbacks to home.”

Twilight covertly smirked at Rarity, whose eye she caught. The slightest glow graced Rarity’s cheeks as she looked away and into the side of a rock wall that appeared to have fascinated her.

“So Little Strongheart,” Cadance addressed, “you were on your way here with Philomena when you crossed paths?”

The young bison nodded. “I knew to follow her, to where I did not know. But in that moment, she grew agitated and flew off course. Clever bird, I believe she recognized Corey from afar.”

“So what did you do?” Cadance asked.

Applejack chuckled. “In’t it obvious? If there’s *one* thing that’ll shake a timber wolf’s branches, it’s fire, and Philomena’s a *phoenix*. I don’t reckon they had to do much.”

“Yeah,” Corey agreed, nodding as he ducked under a rocky archway too small for him, “she flew up over Strongheart and against the sun, letting out this screech and a blinding flash of light. Last I saw of those wolves was them hauling ass for the other horizon.

“We made camp that night. I couldn’t believe it was the same bird. We hacked things out, figured we were looking for the same place. I don’t know how Philomena knew where to find you guys, but I get the feeling she’s got her ways. Might’ve been watching from afar, she’s clearly got eyesight a peregrine falcon would kill for.”

The bird in question almost appeared to beam, turning her head and waving a wing in his direction.

“It sounds like *nopony* has had an easy time of things,” Rarity said. “All the same Corey, I’m glad you’ve returned to us. We were beginning to fear the very worst.”

Corey allowed himself a slight grin. "You weren't the only one. When I found out how things went down, I had no reason to think anyone had gotten out of that, much less the whole team. It's been a pleasant little consolation."

"I hate to interrupt," Cadance began, rolling up her map, "but where exactly are the dragons meeting?"

"The badlands," Strongheart answered. "Just beyond the southern hills, past the stampeding grounds of my herd."

Twilight vocalized her contemplation, remembering the land. "That's a full two-day trip on hoof. We'll need to decide on a safe campsite for tonight, but I wouldn't use it for the return trip. Need to keep our tracks covered."

"Sounds like a plan," Applejack agreed, as the grassy lowlands finally came into view.

"Whoa-ho-ho and off we go!" Pinkie proclaimed, taking the first steps to the south.

~~~~~  
~~~~~

Dodge Junction stood before them, laid out half a mile from their perch between a cluster of rocks. Two pairs of binoculars, held by hands and hooves respectively, stared out into the little desert town.

"CID," Twilight told them, "dozens of them."

"I don't like this, Twi," Applejack huffed. "Those things are eagle-eyed, no reason to think they can't see us if we can see them."

"Actually," Cadance said thoughtfully, "our field studies have shown they only tend to see well at a few hundred yards, at least when they're idle like this. They only seem to have supersensory when they're alerted to something."

Corey grunted with a nod, scanning the area. "In guard mode, they assign each CID a sector of the horizon, and they stick to it. They're imaging is decent, but the hawk-eye stuff only kicks in when the other CID are helping it process the area from another perspective. Then they can deconstruct what's going on in the pixelated mosaic they see when they zoom in too far."

"I didn't understand half of that, but I surmise the key is to be discreet, and we'll just be blobs of color to them?" Rarity suggested.

"Yeah, this far away we'll be nothing but tiny, fleeting specks. They have a threshold to filter out

random noise that comes up in their video signal, so we'll just be dust in the wind as far as they're concerned. CID are fantastic search and destroy units when they have a general direction to look in, but they suck as guards. There's a reason the Spotters got invented."

"That said, we should still wear these on our cutie marks." Twilight began handing out squares of cloth from her bag. "I doubt ponies are welcome here, but I'd rather be a chance trespasser to them than known fugitives."

"They're still gonna figure something's up though, even if they can't ID you."

Twilight found the plain bits of cloth suddenly taken from her and stuffed back in her saddlebag by a blue glow. "Hey! Rarity, what—"

"Why I was thinking much the same thing," she said, ignoring Twilight's indignant sputtering. "That's why I embroidered *these* myself."

From her own bag, Rarity pulled out a number of colorful elastic harnesses, like pants that defeated the purpose of wearing pants. Each were a solid, consistent color save for stitched-in cutie marks of no familiarity to Twilight. The barely thigh-high leggings would cover their cutie marks, no question.

"Uh," Applejack offered a glazed stare at the orange pair floating before her. "Wow Rare, they sure are..."

"Ooh!" Pinkie exclaimed. "Drafty pants!"

An annoyed cluck sounded off of Rarity's tongue as she donned the off-white piece designed for her. "*Pants?* Don't be silly, I'd *never* in good conscience have a mare wear such an unladylike *ensemble*, unless it were *flawlessly* form-fitting and complementary to—"

A rasping sound in the background gave her and the others pause, until Corey flopped from his crouched position to flat on his back, where the rasping led him to convulsions. His eyes were jammed shut.

"Good heavens!" Cadance cried as the others shared looks of concern.

"Corey, what's happening?!" Twilight demanded. "Are you alright?"

"Aww, he's *fine!*" Pinkie said, beaming down at him. "He's just laughing!"

Applejack stared at her. "Laughin'?"

And indeed, the breathless rasps gave way to hearty guffaws barely held back as the human's

face went cherry red on the ground. “Y-you... You!”

“You?” Strongheart asked, watching the man as though he might combust at any moment.

“*You made ASSLESS CHAPS for CAMOUFLAGE!*” he managed to belch before writhing on the floor again in hysterics.

“Chaps?” Rarity echoed. “These haven’t *nearly* enough legging to be chaps. And I don’t see what’s so funny, or how lacking a mule makes *any* sense!”

Corey was too busy cupping his hand over his mouth to reply, but Twilight rolled her eyes as she examined the articles of clothing. “More human slang. It’s the lack of covering over the rump.”

Cadance only continued to frown, glancing between the clothing, Twilight and Corey. “Is not covering the rump funny?”

“Humans have this weird particular deal when it comes to the unmentionables,” Applejack explained. “ ‘Parently it’s kind of a ‘thing’ fer ‘em to keep clothed all the time. Even seeing ponies without is weird to him.”

“So,” Cadance considered, “maybe clothes that don’t cover what they usually hide appears to defeat the purpose of clothing to him?”

Twilight groaned. “No, I get the feeling it’s less mature than that. He already had a name for the clothes, which tells us it’s not unheard of in human culture, just unusual, or...”

“Yes?” Rarity urged.

“Or he’s referring to clothing designed specifically for the rare situations that don’t involve covering up... or else, that covering up interferes with. He’s basically thinking they look like the sort of thing a mare might hide under the socks in her chest of drawers.”

Rarity blanched, glancing back over the garment she was now wearing as though it were a spider.

“I-I,” Corey wheezed, having a slight coughing fit amidst an avalanche of giggles, “I guess you guys wouldn’t have leather, so w-what is that, satin?”

“It happens to be Eagliptian cotton, if you *must* know.”

Corey cackled afresh, deepening the crease in Rarity’s brow and compounding the color in her cheeks.

“Perhaps,” Rarity said loudly, beginning to remove the garment, “I could demonstrate a human euphemism and inform you that *YOU* are an ‘ass!’”

Corey sat up at last, grimacing up at her.

Twilight watched, bewildered as Rarity tucked the garments away once more. “What about the disguises? They look useful, and—”

“Oh Twilight, we’re travelling with the only alicorn princess left and the only other human in Equestria! What does it *really* matter if they happen to recognize *us*?!”

“If they recognize *me*,” Twilight argued, “who knows how mad he is that I escaped?!”

“Fine, *you* wear it! But don’t act surprised if he—”

Cadance finally lost her temper. “That’s *enough!* This bickering has sidetracked us for too long—”

Suddenly, a blaring air siren called out across the dusty land, reducing the shouts to relative whispers. CAIRO’s voice flooded the air. “It is now one-minute to detonation. Any unauthorized personnel advised to remove to minimum safe distance: one standard mile.”

“Oh fuck,” Corey declared, pulling out and switching on a small handheld device with three radial black and yellow triangles, marked beneath a gauge that was softly chattering at them. “Oh *fuck!*”

“Detonation?” Twilight said.

“One *mile*?!” Applejack cried.

CAIRO continued talking over the distant loudspeakers. “All occupants without eye-protection are advised to turn away for ten seconds upon detonation. Forty-five-seconds left to reach minimum safe distance.”

Corey immediately seized his binoculars and scanned the horizon. “Not in the town... not left of us... *there, one klick west on a tower!*”

He immediately started running east for the railroad tracks. Twilight barely glimpsed the hastily built tower and bulbous object hanging from it before she and the others turned to follow.

“We have to clear over a quarter-mile, fucking *move!*”

Clearing boulders, dodging cacti and stumbling through dry brush, they raced for the promised

land beyond the tracks. Corey plodded along, slowly losing pace with the rest of them, only to yelp as Twilight's magenta glow plucked him into the air.

"We're not gonna make it, and if I teleport they'll know we're here!"

"Fifteen-seconds," CAIRO droned, as the tracks loomed closer and closer, revealing a slight ditch dug into the other side.

"That'll have to do!" Corey shouted. "When we hit that trench, get down, *stay* down, cover your eyes! This is gonna be *bad!*"

"Ten... Nine... Eight..."

The ditch was still too far, Twilight knew. Putting on every ounce of speed she possessed, she catapulted Corey ahead of her to bounce over the tracks.

"Seven... Six..." Cadance caught her eye at this, and joined Twilight. They grabbed Rarity, then Little Strongheart, every member of the party and hurling them up and over to safety that drew ever closer.

"Five... Four... Three..." At her bidding, Twilight leapt onto Cadance's back as she took flight, clearing the distance.

Being one of the least athletic in the group however, Twilight misjudged her dismount and leapt off too soon, tumbling over a shrub, scrambling to her hooves on the tracks mere feet from her friends.

"Two... One..."

Twilight stood up, only to stare as a light wind pulled at her from behind them. She stared, rapt before her entire world vanished in a light only slightly less intense than the time she'd accidentally glimpsed the sun through a telescope.

She heard her friends scream her name as she jammed her eyelids shut against the luminous assault on her senses, before feeling something very solid shove her back into the ditch with her friends.

Twilight only just dared a glimpse up to see her savior, Philomena, struck above them by some invisible force. She screeched as what looked like smoke billowed off the side facing the town, sucked towards it before an intense, indescribable wash of heat and sound blasted away over top of them. The poor bird had stood no chance, ripped apart and vaporized in front of them.

"*NO!*" she shrieked, though she couldn't even hear herself saying it over the howl of the blast.



It was like a minor earthquake, but with the combination of heat, sound and blinding light it felt to Twilight as if the very world was ending.

She could hear her friends screaming, a sound barely penetrating the all-encompassing roar of the gargantuan destructor. Be they in pain or fear, she had no way of knowing.

However, just as Twilight wondered if it was ever going to end, it was over. The heat, the sound, even the light itself relented, surrendering once more to the glow of the sun. She stood up, to find herself joined by the others.

“Everypony okay?!” she asked, making a quick count.

“I-I think so,” Cadance replied, coated in a thick layer of dust like the others. It was as if they’d passed through a sandstorm. “Except for... oh poor Philomena.”

As soon as she’d said this however, another great flash shone behind the ditch, and the red and gold plumage of the great bird soared overhead once more.

“Oh yeah!” Pinkie said. “Phoenix, duh!”

Corey had been first over the top, staring towards the town. Once Twilight joined him, it was apparent what he was staring at.

Great and terrible, the mushroom cloud ascended the heavens on wings of fire, smoke curling higher and higher. An empty ring parted in the clouds above, making way for the massive fireball’s ascent. Below, dust drifted up from the ground, great tendrils like arms reaching up towards the flaming pillar as if in reverence to a wrathful god.

Ash coated the ground, steam rising from the cacti, fire likewise crackling in the brush. Half of everything was on fire. As was much of Dodge Junction.

“Twilight,” Applejack whispered behind her, “this all feels a mite familiar, dunnit?”

“Far too familiar,” Rarity added.

“Just what in the world was that?” asked Little Strongheart, who like Cadance appeared to be dazed in the aftermath.

“A nuke,” Corey answered, “and a small one.”

“*Small?!?*” Cadance repeated.

“Yeah, probably testing tactical versions. These things generally take out around a hundred miles, and even the first ones annihilated entire cities. The fact that we’re this close and weren’t cooked by rads means this was designed for lesser targets.”

“Rads?” Applejack asked.

“Radiation,” he elaborated. “It’s how they work, releasing gamma rays that flash-fry everything at first light and then blow everything left standing to hell in a blast of heat.”

Twilight recoiled and began prancing from hoof to hoof until a stabbing pain reminded her of her injury. “*Gamma* radiation?! I knew these things were destructive, but oh Celestia, we—”

“Should be okay, given these readings,” Corey said, checking his Geiger counter. “Provided we don’t have a picnic here anyway. But we need to get clear before the fallout starts to settle, unless you guys fancy sprouting additional limbs.”

“I could always use another pair of hooves,” Pinkie said thoughtfully, “never *could* put up streamers as fast as I’ve wanted.”

Corey shrugged. “Okay, but I hope you’re also good with losing all your hair.”

“EVERYPONY FOR HERSELF!” Rarity shrieked to the wastes, heading the exodus of Dodge Junction.

~~~~~  
~~~~~

To the east they found the edge of a forest and opted to make camp just inside the tree line as night fell. They made a meal of mushroom soup from some wild fungi Twilight had identified to accompany the hay-and-oat-meal. With the presence of Philomena, starting a cooking fire was a cinch.

“So weapons like those are *common* in your world?” Cadance asked, expression keeping stony ever since their narrow escape.

“I wouldn’t say ‘common,’ ” Corey replied. “Most upper tier countries have them, but they were only used twice against anyone. We know how powerful they are and what might happen if we enter a straightup nuke-fight. Hell, we used to make tests like *that* all the damn time. Then about thirty years ago, we just sorta stopped. I like to think we learned better.”

“A sign a *real* strength is knowing when *not* ta use it,” Applejack said, nodding with a smile.

“It’s little wonder though,” Twilight added. “You never said before that those bombs emit gamma

radiation. Who knows what kind of lasting impact that could have?”

Corey nodded gravely. “Yeah, I probably should’ve realized we were entering a damn test site, but my counter’s been haywire since we arrived in Equestria. I think the magic in the air keeps tripping it up. Ha... when I first checked it after we got here, it was so screwed up I expected to drop dead of radiation sickness the first few minutes. Pretty sobering. I’ve had the thing turned off since I realized what was happening. I came *this* close...”

He held two fingers a centimeter apart. “...to blowing my own damn head off, rather than endure radiation poisoning. That was a fun afternoon.”

Cadance fought to catch Twilight’s eyes, staring between her and Corey in question once she finally did. Twilight merely replied with a grimace and the faintest shake of her head.

“I don’t even understand,” Twilight said, after a fashion. “How does something like that *work*? It can’t just be a product of combustion, it’s far too small.”

“I don’t get the high science aspect of it,” Corey answered, “but essentially it fires some kind of projectile into a substance like uranium or plutonium, and that causes atoms to ‘split.’ That causes a chain reaction and releases unfathomable amounts of energy, and you get a nuclear explosion.”

“*Split* an atom?” Twilight repeated, frowning, before her eyes lit up.. “Wait... *nuclear* explosion. Nuclear, like the nucleus of an atom. So you split the nucleus into lighter elements, and what happens to the electrons? Well some get released, and that’s just energy, and splits more and more nuclei... oh Celestia. It... it’s turning matter *directly* into raw energy. That kind of power would be *unbelievable!*”

“Yeah, these days it’s mainly a power source,” Corey agreed. “Most efficient and clean thing we have. The bombs are just the dark side of a shiny coin.

“But yeah, don’t expect anyone to go living in that town for another fifty years. That place is irradiated to *shit* by now.”

Applejack sighed and lowered her head. “Poor Cherry, her plantation’ll be all but worthless now. That’s her whole livelihood gone. I might have to find her when all this is finished, if Sweet Apple Acres ain’t turned into a minefield while we’re gone or somethin’.”

A few of them chuckled, only for her to give a pained expression. “Uh, that wasn’t a joke.

“Hey Corey, best get that hay before it goes cold. That’s pure nutrition there, y’ll need your strength.”

Corey stared down at the strands of hay he'd picked out of the oatmeal. Picking one up, he gave it a tentative sampling with his teeth before awkwardly crunching and giving a pained swallow.

"Hmph!" Rarity exclaimed. "I suppose we can add 'picky' to the list alongside 'insensitive,' *can't* we Corey?"

"Hey, I'm not picky; I eat MREs for crap sake," he argued. "Human bodies just aren't good at digesting cellulose, we're not geared for grazing. When's the last time you saw an orangutan eating grass?"

"Look, I'm sorry for laughing at your..." He choked back a mirthful bark. "Clothes. It's a cultural thing, I'm sure they would've worked just fine—"

"You just couldn't have kept that to yourself?! Been the gentlecolt and spared my feelings from your perverted, immature—"

"My mind is in the gutter, I'm sorry, it's usually not such a problem except our cultures are pointedly different and you triggered a response to a quirk in yours."

"Oh, so it's *us* possessing the 'quirk' is it?" Rarity turned around, facing the woods. "You're gone for weeks, and the moment you're back I try endearing myself to you in any way only to be brushed off and humiliated! Like every stuck-up, overwrought Canterlot crockpot—"

"Do I have to *take* this?!" Corey demanded, glancing from face to face. "No, no I think I don't! I crawled and clawed and fought my way back here to help you guys! I *could* have taken the Midnight Train to anywhere, but I marched my ass *back* to this heart of darkness to—"

"Oh I'm sorry, what was that you said to Rainbow Dash before? Ah yes, 'thank you for doing your *job*.'"

"That's over the line, Vera, and you know it," Corey growled.

"Oh use my *name* why don't you?! Rather than your pithy little nicknames, how about telling us you've cared at all or paid any attention to who we are?! Say my name! *Say it!*"

Corey fixed her with a stare to pierce flesh and stone alike, and pointed at them in turn. "Rarity. Twilight Sparkle. Pinkie Pie. Applejack. Little Strongheart. Princess Cadance. Philomena."

With that, he dumped the remains of his canteen over the fire, which sizzled down into embers. This done, he walked himself out of the camp.

"Wha— Wait, Corey, where are you going?" Twilight asked.

Corey didn't immediately answer. "For a walk, I won't be long."

Igniting her horn in the absence of a fire, Twilight leered at Rarity.

"What?" Rarity demanded.

"Rarity, that wasn't fair. You need to talk this out with him... whatever *this* is."

Rarity gave an indignant breath, mouth hanging open. "You're taking *his* side?!"

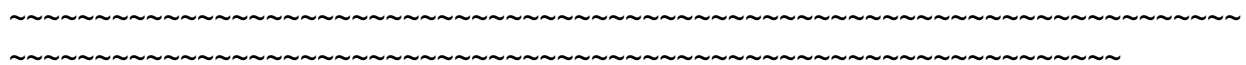
"He apologized and you just kept beating him down," Twilight said, her voice stern. "The ball's in your court."

Rarity's eyes narrowed. "I *can't* believe you're not supporting me in—"

"This isn't about sides, we're all on the *same* side! This group is broken up enough as it is with what's happened between Rainbow and Applejack; we don't need a second rift between you and Corey too.

"Please, for me, go talk to him."

Rarity looked to her friends, none of whom appeared angry, but fixed her with an expectant gaze all the same. She sighed, nodded, and cantered off into the woods.



Rarity found him with relative ease, leaning against a tree by a large clearing. She had tried sneaking up so as to steel herself, but stumbled onto him far sooner than she had been expecting.

"Oh, hello again," she said automatically, instantly regretting the complete lack of penitance in her voice.

"I'm sorry I laughed," he deadpanned. "I don't know what else to say about that, and really I don't think you expect me to."

She winced, before shaking her head.

He casually turned towards the clearing. "So what's the *real* issue then? Am I just not shaping up to your expectations?"

“As a *soldier*?” she wondered out loud. “Not at all! You’ve done a commendable job, and you’ve been invaluable to us in this whole terrible business, but—”

“But I’m not the pristine white-knight you *thought* you saw riding in back when we first met.”

She sat down, ears folding down, thankful of the darkness to mask the red in her cheeks. “I really hate your ears at times, I can never be sure what you’re thinking.”

“I’m thinking you’ve tried being sweet on me since we met, and that maybe I’m not the refined gentleman you were picturing.”

Even in the darkness she was cherry red. “I suppose I’d be flattering myself if I accused you of being awfully perceptive. I... will admit, you rather fascinated me, coming to our rescue as you did. You risked your life for us, all the while being... disarmingly charming, to a point.”

Her wistful smile vanished into a pout. “But then there were those moments of human vulgarity that put me off so, and I’ve been all the angrier that you keep waking me from the dream. And then I worry that you feel nothing in return.”

Corey couldn’t help but smile. “Hey, as far as non-human creatures go, you’re pretty cute.”

A silent gasp floated through Rarity, and the air she breathed might have been helium for how light she appeared, eyes sparkling in the moonlight.

“But yeah, I can be a bit crass, I’m only human. You get what you pay for.”

“I don’t get it though,” Corey said, “why me? I’m not even your kind.”

Rarity found herself sidled up beside him. “Does not the heart want what the heart wants?”

Corey shrugged. “I... guess. But we’re not even the same species, doesn’t that bother you? I mean, I guess I’d ask how it would work, but in my world we’ve already covered same-gender relations which denotes similar ethical questions so—”

“Well no, strictly speaking it’s,” Rarity bit her lip, “unusual, but not unheard of. What does it matter, really, if— oh Celestia, you’re into colts aren’t you?!”

“Wha—” Corey recoiled, eyebrows vanishing into his hair. “Oh *come on*, what was that before about you flattering yourself?! Didn’t I just say you were cute?!”

“Okay, I’m sorry!” Rarity squeaked, blushing furiously. “Look, in my experience it wouldn’t be the first time. Some of the more fashionable stallions I’ve approached had, shall we say, ‘*exotic*’ tastes?”

Corey lowered a brow. "And interspecies doesn't count as 'exotic'? Look, I..."

"It's just hard for me to wrap my head around," he told her, staring into the stars. "I come from a world where humans are the only consenting intelligent species. There are people who have..." He coughed. "'relations' with other species, but that's illegal because typically it's not the other species' idea. It's just odd looking at something non-human and feeling anything in the way of romance, y'know?"

"So you're saying," she appeared to wilt, "You have trouble seeing me as more than an animal."

"No, no, that's not it at all. I just see you as people when we talk, but then I look at you and realize how similar *and* how different we are. It just takes getting used to."

Rarity leaned against the tree beside him, nearly at eye level on her haunches. "Tell me then: is there even the *slightest* chance it could work?"

Corey turned to look at her, as he hadn't before, absorbing the details under a different light. Perhaps it was just the moon. "Yeah, I think there could be a chance."

"Then," Rarity whispered, swallowing and leaning closer, "close your eyes a moment, so we can find out."

Corey sat there, looking rather trapped as her great blue eyes grew and grew, until closing his own felt as natural as letting go of a breath.

In a moment, he felt a hoof sliding gently over his neck, followed by the slightest warmth in the air over his face. Finally, soft warm lips pressed into his own, seeking purchase as the rest of her warm body slid over him.

In the dark, all notions of species vanished as he relented, one hand stroking her long neck as his own lips parted. Both heads angled to better access the other's lips, which danced over each other, gently grabbing and nipping and drawing the other in playfully. They breathed loudly through their nostrils, lest the moment end. Suddenly, there was no human or pony. Simply a lad and his lady.

Corey's hand moved its way up her graceful neck, fingers weaving through her coat, the perfect blend of tack and softness. Expecting to find an ear beside her head, Corey paused only a moment when he found none, momentarily stumped before searching higher and finding his target.

He was once more surprised as the straight ear promptly folded down at his touch, and Rarity moaned quietly into his mouth in response. Adjusting, he curled his fingers over the slender ear,

thumb running over the length. This at last made the mare's lips pull away as she cooed, leaning into the touch.

Left like this, he continued his assault on her ear, while using her exposed neck as a new target for his lips. She let out a bubbly giggle before leaning further into it, sighing contentedly as he worked his way up her neck all the way to along her jawline.

This had the result of leaving his arm in a rough position as he continued massaging her ear, and so he abandoned the ear in favor of tracing her hairline with his fingers. Once more, the unexpected literally struck him as his knuckles knocked directly into something hard halfway over.

Rarity let out a gasp that promptly transformed into a hearty moan, while Corey promptly realized the protrusive obstacle was in fact her horn. Struck by sudden inspiration, he made to turn the blunder into something of use, fingers circling the horn's base as he caressed the spiral fluting with his thumb. He didn't know how something made of solid bone offered any feeling, but he could see an argument being made.

He felt Rarity's body tense up and shiver as she gasped again, before leaning into his caressing hand and letting out a particularly high and girlish giggle. The hoof around his neck drew his lips back into her own as he massaged her horn, until her other hoof slid down his chest, his stomach, and lower.

This caused a raise in Corey's eyebrows as he also felt a distinct heat in her horn, the gentle sound of levitation magic, and the crystal glow just beyond his eyelids. It was only when he felt a tug on his belt and heard the sound of a zipper that he wrenched his lips away and opened his eyes at last.

"Whoa whoa whoa, what are you doing?"

The center of Rarity's eyebrows arched upward as she gave a disappointed moan in response.

"Look, I'm going along with this," Corey said, looking her in the eye, "this is actually pretty fuckin' great."

Rarity blushed and offered a smile. "Appropriate phrasing, for once."

Corey rolled his eyes and smirked. "But I'm not going from 'ambivalent' to 'full throttle' in one night. I'm just not ready for that yet, I've gotta wrap my head around it."

"H-how..." she croaked, eyebrows slowly furrowing. "How is *that* fair?! You touched me first, you naughty thing, you're in *no* position to complain when I return the favor!"



“*Touched* you?” he repeated. “I never *touched* you! What—”

“*You* know!” she said, blushing furiously before whispering, as though in a crowded room, “*My horn?*”

Suddenly the illicit gasp and giggling from before wormed its way into the proper sector of his brain. “Oh shit. Um.

“Look, okay, I didn’t know that was a... thing. I actually forgot it was even there—”

She gave a silent gasp, turning redder still as she glared at him. “Are you calling my horn *small*?! You... *you*—”

“No, please, hear me out!” he pleaded. “Humans don’t have them, I had no idea! You just reacted to it, and I improvised; I promise from my end it was *mostly* innocent.”

“Ooh!” she growled. “Fine, I forgive you, but,” she stared out the corner of her eyes, “I’d rather I didn’t have to.”

She sighed before sliding off of him. “I suppose there’s no point picking up from here, you’ve bothered me a bit too much to continue without escalating things.

“You’re *quite* certain you don’t want to, just far enough? It doesn’t have to be *everything*, and really you’re lucky that a lady is offering—”

“Thank you,” Corey said, hands raised over his chest, “but I think that’ll do for a first date.”

Rarity sighed again. “Fine. Isn’t *this* a reversal. I suppose we should get back before they think we really *have*—”

“Yeah,” Corey agreed, getting to his feet and starting the walk back to camp with her.

“Though if we want to keep up such appearances,” she crooned, smirking, “you *might* want to button-up again.”

The clearing went silent with the crunching of leaves a moment later, only to be punctuated by the sound of a zipper.

~~~~~  
~~~~~

Twilight barely had to look up once Corey and Rarity made it back to camp, the woods being far too covered in leaves to move silently. It had been a prime reason for choosing this spot, as well

as keeping out of sight from the open desert beyond. Nobody could sneak up on them from the ground.

The group looked to the two as they re-entered. Twilight might have noted a spring in their step, if she could even tell for the state of the forest floor. The firelight from the reignited campfire danced over their features, putting much of them into harsh relief.

“So,” Applejack broached, “you two kiss n’ make up then?”

Corey yelped as he stumbled, Rarity finding a spot to sit down with a touch more grace.

“Damn root,” Corey muttered before finding himself a seat. “We hacked things out, no worries.”

“None at all,” Rarity agreed, beginning to set up her sleeping bag.

The group stared expectantly as the two went about their business, doing everything to mime nonchalant behavior short of whistling a jaunty tune. Twilight took this opportunity for herself. “Okay, well good then!

“So, I have something to ask of everypony. Well, everypony that’s been in with the resistance since,” she said, pausing to find the right words. “S-Since the battle.”

From her saddlebag, she pulled a series of four scrolls, holding them aloft with her magic. “When I went to Memorial Hall, I found these at the base of a memorial... for me.”

Cadance smiled softly as Pinkie, Applejack and Rarity shared looks of understanding.

“I know these were meant for me,” Twilight continued, “but I also know you never really expected *me* to read them either. And I don’t want to read them if you don’t want me to. Maybe you said things you didn’t mean for me to know till later, but felt you needed closure in order to say goodbye. Maybe you’re afraid whatever you said will change our relationship somehow.

“If that’s the case, you only need to say so, and I’ll drop your letter in the fire right now. Oh, and sorry to tell you Pinkie, but I kinda saw yours already.”

Pinkie gasped. “Twilight, that was *private!*”

“Private?” Applejack parroted. “You didn’t even roll it up! Hay, you didn’t even set it face-down!”

“I did?”

Twilight offered a smile. “It was really sweet Pinkie, thank you.”

Pinkie crossed a frown with a pout and crossed her forelegs, but repeatedly glanced at Twilight from the corner of her eye. Finally, she unwound, remarking, "Aww, I can't stay mad at you!"

"Well, you've got my say-so Twi," Applejack told her. "Meant every word, hope it goes without sayin'."

Rarity sighed. "You've my consent as well, though I hope you don't mind that it's not..." She prodded her cheek with her tongue. "Wholly exclusive."

"If all is said, I'd suggest we all settle in," Little Strongheart said, curling up on the ground. "We'll want to make the last leg in the morning as soon as possible. Dragons can be infinitely patient, but that does not mean you should make them wait."

"You're sure you don't need a sleeping bag?" Cadance asked her, setting her crown on a miniature pillow beside her.

"We've no need for such things, princess. The land provides."

At that moment, there was a sound of rushing air, before Pinkie Pie found herself standing in front of a brightly-colored inflatable miniature fun-house. "Suit yourself!"

As she bounced inside the inflatable door—locking it with an inflatable key, somehow—Rarity stared at her own modest setup. "And all I brought was a mosquito net."

Said mosquito net secured her sleeping bag with a polyester bottom and a full baby-blue canopy at the top. The netting itself appeared to consist of lace.

Corey caught Twilight's eye in question, and all she could do was shrug. "Well, goodnight everypony."

Tired murmurs of "goodnights," "good evenings" and "sleep-tights" washed over the campsite, but Twilight was far from ready to turn in. After all, she had some reading to do.

Zippering her sleeping bag over her head, she brought out the two scrolls and let her horn light-up her heavy-fabric haven. Both bore wax seals, crudely inscribed after the fact with the names of the writer, likely with a hot needle. The one simply labeled "AJ" was snapped off in a tiny magical effort, the contents inside revealed.

*'Dear Twilight,'*

Even here, the shakily penned words devolved into a scrawl, a number of ink blots accompanying the comma, as if merely writing her name had inspired some involuntary spasm.

*'I'm sorry. I'm so so sorry. You ~~were~~ are my friend and I just watched it. You probly felt betrayed. I didn't even try. I didn't know what to do and I'm so sorry! Your kin, your my sister as far as I'm concerned. I should have protected you better, I should never have lost sight of you when you wandered off or got captured. We turned our heads and you were gone. I'd rather have been up there with you.'*

Twilight shook her head, trying her hardest not to add to the salty blotches already baked into the parchment.

*'The service was the hardest thing in the world. Your folks were there, cept your brother. I couldn't look your ma or pop in the eye, knowing I didn't protect their girl for them. Then we had to watch you disappear into the ground. I almost wanted them to bury me with you, I don't know how to live with this, I just keep thinking there had to be something we coulda done but we didn't do it.*

*I'm gonna make this right. I'm gonna do it for you. I'm not gonna let you die for nothing. This heres the truth. Were gonna fight back, and were gonna make Equestria free again. Were gonna let you be at peace.*

*I love you Twilight Sparkle.*

*Applejack'*

Twilight felt like someone had swung an axe into her chest. She couldn't stop a few droplets from falling from her eyes and onto her pillow. It was no profound eulogy, not that she expected one, but it was her friend spilling the contents of her heart onto the page. Raw and unrestrained, grammar mistakes and all.

"I love you too, Applejack."

Rolling the scroll back up, she hesitated to open Rarity's. She wasn't sure how much she could take in one sitting. She was sure to have trouble sleeping tonight.

Finally the seal with the elegant calligraphic "R" broke, and it unfurled before her.

*'Dearest Twilight,*

*How does one say "goodbye"? How does one simply sum-up a lifetime's experiences with a pony she calls one of her closest friends?*

*Though, as I write this, I realize it hasn't been a lifetime at all. Barring Rainbow's part in our destinies all those years ago, it's only been little more than a year, but I feel as if I've known you my entire life.*

*Without you, the binder of our motley lot, what are we to do? We were friends before, neighbors. But then you came along, you made us inseparable, you brought a second destiny to us all. Are we now destined to fall apart with you gone? Rainbow looks keen to make it so —t'would be fitting of her, having made it, to unmake it— but I really think she just misses you.*

*As do I. I can hear your voice, even now, and I would do wondrous and terrible things just to hear you share another excerpt from those "Magic Monthly" magazines you're so fond of.*

*And then I realize it: I can hear your voice, as clear as a bell. I don't know how to say goodbye, so I'm not going to. Because you're still here. The memory of you spurs us all to fight on, unites us even if you can't be with us in body. What we've learned from you, the things you did to inspire us; it all informs our actions and decisions. Those acts echo through us, in how we were changed by them. You're a part of me Twilight, still binding our friendship together, however tenuously. We're better than we were, because of you.*

*I wish I could say I really believed you were here, in spirit or some other such thing. But those are the reasons I KNOW to be true, and not simply what I WANT to be.*

*However, if some shadow of you has found its way elsewhere, then I hope you've found Spike and the princesses by now. And possibly Corey, should the worst have happened. Do give them my love.*

*Your best friend... truly forever and ever,*

*Rarity'*

Twilight smiled, filled by a warmth she was all too familiar with by now. That warmth that came whenever she realized just how lucky she was to have these ponies as her friends. She could scarcely imagine many others that could lift her spirits like this. Nothing fell from her eyes, but she wiped them anyway, just in case.

It was longer than Applejack's, and much different for its tone. There were no tear streaks on the immaculate paper, Rarity wouldn't allow such a thing to ruin her work. But while Applejack's was clearly impromptu, a raw deluge of emotion penned from the cockles of a broken heart, Rarity's was structured. There was almost a thesis to it, an overarching plan. She had clearly thought out what she considered her last words to her.

And the thesis fascinated her, *inspired* her. Such a warm idea, and yet so grounded. The power of friendship at first felt like this intangible force when she began its study, clearly powerful, but seemingly arbitrary. After all, why *friendship* of all things? It sounded preposterous before that fateful trip to Ponyville.

But Rarity might have had a point. Twilight was one of the strongest unicorns she knew, but without all she learned from Princess Celestia it could never be used to the same effect she considered her personal standard. And without Rainbow's sonic rainboom, she might never have unearthed the power she held in the first place. And Spike... what would she have ever done without him, especially after Shining Armor left for the academy? She had already been a recluse; would she have been too unsociable to even recognize her need of her friends when she faced down Nightmare Moon?

Her friends and loved ones were a part of her, quite literally. No wishy-washy metaphysics or platitudes necessary. The lessons she learned, the strength she had acquired; half of it was her own hard work, but the other half was them. She was a product of these individuals. Celestia was still with her. *Spike* was still with her.

This was going to demand some more exploration on her part, at least once she'd finally dried her eyes. But for now, sleep beckoned her, and the muscles in her cheeks were getting rather sore.

~~~~~  
~~~~~

That morning, Applejack and Rarity were both awoken with a hug from an oddly emotional Twilight Sparkle. Applejack had been first, receptive to the gesture. As Twilight knew, Applejack expressed just how grateful she was to have her back.

Rarity was also receptive. Too much so. Without opening her eyes, Rarity seized the subject of her embrace around the neck and brought Twilight's face to her own with a joyful giggle.

All too late, Twilight pulled desperately away as Rarity mashed her lips against her own, unable to escape until she pressed a hoof into her face and shoved as gently as she could manage under the circumstances. Rarity finally opened her eyes, disengaging from Twilight with a "smack".

The two turned a deep red, before Twilight whispered. "Rarity... *what in the?!*"

Rarity giggled. "So sorry dear, I was having a... dream?"

Twilight stared. "This didn't happen."

"What didn't happen?" Rarity replied, before whispering. "Though in all honesty, it wasn't all *that* bad."

Twilight scampered away, muttering something about needing to check her breakfast or eating the map.

Once they had all packed and eaten, they passed through the remainder of the journey with nary an incident more. The Badlands were believed by many to be the caldera of an ancient, monumental barrel volcano set into the southern hills. Sand gave way to red stone as they passed through the narrow canyon, a great craggy “V” forged by the erosion of flash floods in the rainy months.

The regions between Dodge and Appleoosa were desert, but the Badlands were the true wastes. Wholly uninhabited, dry as a bone, with only one way in or out.

At the other end, a familiar voice called over to them.

“Little Strongheart!”

The young bison, recognizing the great feather-wreathed bison ahead of them, shot forward. “Chief Thunderhooves, I have returned with the pony ambassadors!”

“Yes,” Thunderhooves boomed deeply, “and some old friends, I see!”

They approached the chief and his lone-feathered bison guards. The chief drew a breath upon sight of Twilight. “Twilight Sparkle, keeper to the young Spike, who our herd called friend. I offer my condolences; the news was a great shock. Even the revered ones have come in light of this tragedy.”

“Thank you, Chief,” Twilight said. “I appreciate that.”

“You already met Pinkie Pie, Applejack and Rarity. Our envoy is joined also by Specialist Fourth-Class Corey Webber, who knows the most about the perpetrators involved, and Princess Mi Amore Cadenza, current head of the resistance, and future leader of Equestria.”

“Princess Cadance is fine,” the princess told him, bowing respectfully. “Thank you for honoring my aunt’s wishes, Chief Thunderhooves. We’re aware this was not a small request.”

“The leader herself has come?” Thunderhooves noted, great brows rising. “Unexpected, but most welcome. The Lawkeeper will appreciate this over faceless, expendable messengers.”

“Expendable?” Corey repeated. “I dunno how things are done here, but messengers where I come from didn’t get held accountable for what they send.”

“Dragons are easily offended, friend,” Thunderhooves explained gravely. “An angered drake is unlikely to make much distinction between the messenger and their sender, and they care little for the laws or traditions of groundlings. Understand, it is only a long-standing relationship with Celestia that bids us to take such a risk. *All* in this valley are in terrible danger if this goes

wrong.”

“Forgive me,” Cadance said, “but I’m afraid I don’t know as much about the dragon hierarchy as my aunt. Who exactly has come, who is this Lawkeeper?”

“The drake, Gaunt, is the one dragon responsible for enforcing draconian law,” Strongheart told her. “They challenge each other for the right, if they care to. Dragons are too vain to have kings or true leaders, but the Lawkeeper is a dragon that is highly regarded all the same.

“It is a task that requires the Lawkeeper to be vigilant. It requires sacrifice and dedication to dragonkind, and is therefore unattractive to those who wish merely to expand their hordes and live in luxury. Those who value dragon pride and the survival of their kind may feel themselves compelled to take charge. The Lawkeeper can be fought for their position, or they may surrender it.”

Thunderhooves hummed in agreement. “And Gaunt did not come alone. She brought with her two escorts, and a young one I believe to be her son. I think she is trying to groom him to be her successor.”

“Well,” Cadance began, “I suppose we shouldn’t keep them waiting?”

Thunderhooves nodded. “Very wise, princess.”

~~~~~  
~~~~~

With that, they followed the chief and his fellow bison down the path into the crater. Everywhere, towers of jutting jagged rock rose from the ground, twisted and sharp. Twilight soon realized that nothing grew here. Even modest dry shrubs avoided what were evidently poisoned lands. Even insects had no business in this place, for she never saw a single one.

At last however, Thunderhooves and his entourage came to a stop before a mesa which looked to have a series of rock spires jutting out the top, like a set of bottom teeth. A sandstone ramp looked to lead up the mesa, which Chief Thunderhooves pointed to. “Up there is where you will meet Gaunt, though I advise you not to address her by name.”

“All sirs and ma’ams,” Applejack confirmed, “you got it.”

“And please,” Little Strongheart urged, “choose your words carefully.”

They offered scattered nods, before Twilight took a deep breath, and ascended the ramp.

It was a short climb, with each revealed inch of the mesa causing Twilight’s spine to tingle in



expectation. The first sound they heard, however, was not what she expected.

“This stuff is bland and tasteless!” a voice shouted, clearly male, though nowhere as deep as any adult dragon Twilight knew. “What else’ve you got? You’re holding out on us! What even *is* this, it’s like a bad knockoff of lapis! An’ I don’t even like *real* lapis!”

Another bison backed himself into their view, keeping his head low as a decorated bowl bounced off one of his stubby horns. “Sir, sorry sir! It’s turquoise, it’s the best we have out here! If you want we can—”

“Aw, get outta my sight, you overgrown cow!”

The poor victim of this onslaught slipped on his way down past them, sliding to the ground on his chest.

“So, that’s the son then?” Twilight considered aloud.

“Watch out for bowls,” Pinkie suggested.

They ascended the remainder of the ramp, to reveal none of the adults, but the adolescent beast sitting atop a boulder ahead of them. Red-skinned, lean bodied, with a golden crest and impressive-looking wings, his beady eyes glanced sideways as he tracked an aquamarine stone he had tossed vertically into the air like a softball. “Oh, so *these* are the little pony tattlers we’ve been waiting for! Took your sweet time.”

Twilight gasped silently, turning to Rarity, who shared her expression and found her eyes. They had encountered this young dragon before.

“We apologize that we couldn’t arrive sooner,” Cadance offered, bowing her head. “I am Princess Cadance of Equestria, and this is the envoy we send to meet with the—”

He promptly burst into a fit of laughter, tossing the sphere of turquoise again. “You really brought a princess, the mamby-pamby pony princess!”

Twilight glowered, remembering the same term used to describe Princess Celestia, now being used on her old friend and sister-in-law to her very face. She didn’t want the drake to notice her and complicate things, but she had a feeling that it was inevitable. “She is the rightful ruler of Equestria, and she deserves your attention, if not your respect!”

“Ha!” he scoffed. “She ain’t *my* ruler, dragons don’t answer to no... wait.”

He let the lump of turquoise clatter to the floor as he advanced, eyes narrowed at Twilight. “You look familiar, pony. Why’s that?”

The others turned to Twilight with similarly narrowed eyes, who didn't get a chance to answer before an obsessively curled purple mane shot to the front.

"Because unfortunately," Rarity snapped, "We've met before."

Finally looking between the two unicorns, the truth visibly dawned in his tiny eyes. "Right, the migration!" His expression soured. "You and that squirt broke-up our raid! We didn't even smash *one* phoenix egg!"

At that moment, a bright flaming blur assaulted his head, scratching and pecking as he flailed wildly.

"Philomena!" Pinkie cried.

"Augh!" The young dragon repeatedly swatted the air. "Call it off, *call it off!* Stupid phoenix!"

"Philomena, *stop!*" Cadance shouted, prompting the bird to turn to her, perched atop the dragon's head with disappointment on her face. "I understand, but we're here for a reason! Just let it go."

Philomena sighed, before kicking off and onto a nearby rock with unnecessary force.

"Keep your turkey on a leash, *nags*," he ordered, flicking off a loose scale from his head. "As for you two." He pointed between Twilight and Rarity. "Keep outta my way, or we might just continue where we left off before."

Corey stepped forward, holding his AA12. The young dragon was far bigger than any of the ponies, but Corey was nearly a head taller. "You touch one a them and I'll blow your scaly ass back to Jurassic Park, pal."

"Corey, it's okay," Twilight said.

Beady eyes took a single look at the human and wrenched a grin onto the dragon's toothy visage. "What are *you* supposed to be, a spindly suit-chimp?"

Pinkie recoiled. "Hey! That's *my*—"

A great series of roars shook the air around them, apparently directionless, echoing off a thousand surfaces before two shadows blotted the sky. No sooner had they looked up than two massive bodies touched down on either side of the mesa with force enough to make them all stumble.

Much akin to the dragons Twilight had encountered, they were gargantuan. Easily bigger than the library had been back home, heads several times the size of her whole body. The two were of the same common build as most dragons she had encountered, like the one Fluttershy had dealt with, or the infuriated green drake she and Owliscious had to rescue Spike from. Colored teal and dark orange respectively, they closed their leathery wings and peered down at the scene.

“Um,” Applejack uttered, barely audible, “Howdy. So, which one a y’all is—”

A third great impact knocked loose stones off the rocky spires behind the young dragon, before a long skinny claw the size of a cart seized onto a spire and began to climb. The figure wound its way up from behind the spires like a clawed, winged serpent, deathly pale with an underbelly and wings the color of a bruise. Catlike amber eyes looked to them in turn as it reached the top, overlapping dagger-like teeth shut tight over a similarly long and thin snout, the deepest sound of breath filling the air as it smelled them. It reminded Twilight of a gharial, to the extent that she wondered if it was partial to fish. Instead of spines along its back, a leathery crest surrounded the head like that of a frilled lizard, the sun peeking through to reveal bluish-black veins.

*“I am Gaunt,”* the beast rumbled in two voices. One voice that was elegant, commanding and recognizably female, the other that was a deep whisper, and sounded like stones grinding together. It almost sounded like a mountain was speaking to them. *“Keeper of dragon law.”*

Twilight jumped as two claws grasping one of the rocky spires snapped it off with a sudden motion, and Gaunt’s slithering body flowed through the resulting gap towards them, coiling her body into a sine-wave pattern as it surrounded them from every side but from whence they came in a scaly cove.

“*Garble,*” Gaunt demanded, head leaning in towards her son.

The teenaged Garble lost every bit of his smug demeanor. “Uh, yeah mom?”

*“We dragons care not for the affairs of groundlings, but it is beneath us to antagonize them. Ideal is to pass them, like ships in the night.”*

“Y-Yeah mom, ships, got it.”

Applejack found herself muttering under her breath. “Seriously, that’s *her* son?”

“What?” Pinkie whispered back. “You don’t see the family resemblance?”

Applejack didn’t move so much as a muscle. “No.”

*“The bison tell that the law is broken,”* Gaunt hissed. *“A dragon is slain, our precious blood lost*

*to the dirt. A crime to be met out with no less than the same fate.*

*“The bison have earned our trust, through wantless fealty. They garner no darker purpose, and it is for this alone that your procession is not already scattered to the four winds, as ash.”*

Cadance stepped forward, eyes locked onto the catlike slits. “You would kill us before hearing us? You would risk your chance at fulfilling your law? Why?”

The Lawkeeper opened her mouth, head bobbing in a blast of laughter, mirthless and terrifying. *“When a dragon is truly slain by groundlings, the news carries on whispers and rumors in shadowy places. Those who know of the law know better than to invite us to fulfill it. The wise run. The wise hide.*

*“Those foolish enough to summon us, assuming they can manage such, have always been charlatans. They care nothing for dragons, but to use us, to lure and direct our wrath upon their enemies. Or, the true slayer will claim the deed as that of another, in order to stay our fury.*

*“Destroying these arrogant fools has become my usual manner of dealing with them. The arrogance wears on one over the centuries, watching it fade as they realize their mistake. They feel so cunning, until they see we are no mindless beasts, that we see through their deception.”*

With a guttural growl, the dragoness leered at Cadance. *“This, however, is unusual. You come by the grace of our bison followers, at the behest of your late Celestia, who has shown herself wise when regarding our kind. You come, a princess yourself, instead of a faceless messenger. You are either quite brave, or quite stupid. One or the other, you have my curiosity. So then.*

*“What do you wish to bring to my attention? Who do you expect me to destroy?”*

Cadance stepped forward. “A dragon was murdered. A young dragon, little more than a child.”

*“The blood of the young is especially precious. And cowardly to spill when the newly hatched are so vulnerable.”*

The princess nodded. “This dragon was a friend to us, family even. Whatever we hope you will do, we desire justice for the one we loved.”

Gaunt’s eyes widened. *“Family? What childish dream is this? You test me with this lie, and I will not be tested. Provide proof of this, or I shall kill you.”*

Twilight stepped quickly before her massive head. “It’s all true! Princess Cadance is my sister in law, and the dragon we speak of was kept in my care. His name was Spike... he’s been with me since I hatched him when I was a filly. He w-was like a brother to me, and a... a son. And I loved him like both!”

In a move that made Twilight jump, the huge snout pressed into her chest, inhaling deeply as the amber eyes pierced her own.

*"The scent is still strong on you. You do not pretend, but your bond with the wyrm I DO question. Dragon eggs can sit for centuries, and some are abandoned, but those who hatch them raise the baby to be little more than a slave. We liberate our kind from this indignity, and it is unwise to admit such disgrace."*

"He was never a slave!" Twilight cried, stone-faced. "I would have *died* for him!"

*"And yet here you stand, and it is he that fell. Mere words,"* Gaunt breathed.

Twilight pressed her eyes closed. "I *did* fail to protect him. I should never have left him alone."

"Wait wait," Garble said, roused once more, "we're here for the pony-hearted runt? Ha! Got himself in over his head, big shocker."

Twilight snorted like an animal as her eyes shot open again, rounding on Garble. "Don't you *dare* talk about Spike like that! He had a bigger heart than a stupid bully like you could even *dream* of!"

The Lawkeeper looked to her son. "*You have met this young dragon, Garble? Is the mare's story valid?*"

"Oh yeah mom," Garble laughed. "Squirt was over the moon about his pony friends in ponytown. Tried to join the migration. Thought he might even fit in for a little while, till he wussed out on us. Then the two fluffy unicorns and this blue pony come trouncing out of the woods lookin' to protect him and acting all tough. It was *adorable!*"

Garble wiped away a tear at the memory as he continued to laugh. "But then they all ran away and disappeared all the sudden, like a big happy, scaredy-cat family!"

Gaunt's eyes narrowed as her head visibly tilted. "*Truly?*"

"Uh huh."

Gaunt rumbled thoughtfully. "*Why was it that this... Spike... sought to join the great migration? It does not sound as though he wished to be part of your 'family.'*"

Twilight shook her head, trying her best to control herself. "He had questions about himself, questions I couldn't answer. I urged him to go and followed him in secret to make sure he was safe."

*“And he returned of his own will? Of course, he could have simply been conditioned by you, like some cur.”*

“What’s it matter anyway?” Garble demanded. “He was barely a dragon at all. He even *called* himself a pony by the end of it! Turned his back on all dragons. That makes him *nothing*, so why should we avenge some ruined pony-lovin’—”

Twilight was scarcely aware of herself as she leapt directly in front of Garble, menacing him with her horn. “DON’T YOU *EVER* TALK ABOUT SPIKE LIKE THAT!”

The owner of a sharp, unfazed red claw flicked her in the nose. “Or what? You’ll *run away* again?”

“I’ll make you regret *every word*,” Twilight seethed.

“He was a wrecked dragon, and he’s a waste of our ti—”

In broad daylight, with his mother and two other fully grown dragons watching, Twilight’s horn erupted with a blast of magenta, firing a bolt point-blank into Garble’s chin. He stumbled backwards from the arcane uppercut, before Twilight pounced, sacking him backwards towards the coils of his mother. Twilight could barely hear the panicked protests of her friends.

The two escort dragons hissed and snarled, making to move in, before the Lawkeeper spoke. “*NO! I will tell you when to intervene. My son provoked this, it is his fight.*”

Garble sat for a moment, wide-eyed at the livid unicorn fruitlessly beating him across the head and neck with her good foreleg. Taking one good look at her wrapped leg, his claws grabbed hold and twisted.

Twilight’s assault ended with a cry of pain, even making her forget her magic as her good foreleg moved to scrabble against the iron grip of the claw that was bending her leg. He laughed as Twilight struggled uselessly against the small but powerful reptile, until the tables were turned as Twilight rolled over, forcing Garble on top of her.

It seemed a suicidal move, with the young dragon overpowering her even without the aid of his superior mass, but as a pony this move served her well. Coiling her hind legs back, she delivered a powerful buck into his gut, flipping him head over heels behind her. He released her in surprise, leaving a still throbbing pain, but a free hoof.

“You little,” Garble coughed, winded, “purple pansy!”

Violently hacking his very lungs out, Garble faced Twilight as she stood up, before a final cough

turned into a gout of orange flames aimed at her like a hose.

With barely a movement, a planar magenta shield formed in front of Twilight, redirecting the hot gases in every direction but the one intended. Noticing this, Garble stopped, before taking a deep breath. Unleashing a guttural noise, Garble's throat produced redder, thicker flames.

The shield vied against it, Twilight herself sweating from the heat and exertion, despite the burning flames crashing over her like waves on a stone. At last, Twilight shoved the shield forward against the current, before literally exploding it in his face.

The breath of fire ended once more, Garble clutching his nose as Twilight stood, ready. "Stupid...*pony!*"

With that, Garble lunged for her blindly, but Twilight was ready. With a flash of light, Garble's momentum-driven body moved from just in front of her —about to seize her neck— to just behind her. He continued careening forward, confusedly bouncing over the mesa top, until he slipped over the edge with a noise of surprise. A single red claw gripped the rocky edge over the short drop, before his wings began to beat, and he clawed his body back on top.

"Let me know if you need that lesson repeated," Twilight cried. "I can tell, you're a slow learner."

This only served to inspire another blind charge, and Twilight was feeling creative. She eyed the discarded lump of Turquoise and took it with her magic right into Garble's path.

The young dragon saw the glowing lump of floating cyan too late, ingesting it, and clotheslining himself with the back of his own throat. His feet slipped out from under him, leaving him to a pratfall onto his back as she force-fed the rock down his throat.

This done, she only added insult to injury, whirling the lump in a circle within his stomach and causing him to twirl on the floor like a hula hoop.

"Ugh..." Garble moaned, red face growing greener every passing second, "Stop it, stop, I'm gonna cube it!"

"I thought it was more of a sphere," Pinkie commented.

Finally, Twilight relented, allowing the discombobulated dragon to stumble drunkenly to his feet.

"Thus concludes my lesson on centripetal force," Twilight quipped. "I really hope it's sinking in."

"You," Garble hissed, marching himself back over. "You!"

"*Garble, enough!*" Gaunt ordered.

Garble looked up at his mother, his brows a straight line. “Wha— You’re just gonna let her—”

*“You are no match for this pony’s magic, my son. I am saving you further humiliation.”*

Garble stared, wide-eyed, before slamming a foot into the floor and flying for a boulder on which to sulk.

Cadance stepped forward, almost throwing herself before Twilight. “Lawkeeper, we’re sorry! Spike was dear to her especially, we didn’t come here to fight or offend y—”

*“Be not ashamed for your sister’s boldness, princess,”* Gaunt chuckled. *“To challenge a dragon, even a young dragon, and my son in the presence of myself and two other full-grown drakes? This one has spark.”*

*“Tell me then, bold one,”* she said, coils rippling as she approached Twilight, *“who has committed this crime?”*

Twilight stared into her eyes and took a deep breath. “He’s like nothing we’ve ever known. He’s called Adrian Mandeville, and he’s from another world.”

“He’s one of my kind,” Corey told her. “No magic at first, just weapons, like this.”

Pulling out his AA12, he switched-out his revolving magazine for an alternate in his pack, clumsily painted green. Taking aim, he fired a shot at one of the rock spires. Rather than a spray of buckshot, a point on the spire erupted in a burst of fire and smoke, and the section above the shot fell backward into the desert floor.

The dragons’ throats rumbled deeply, watching the spot where this occurred. Corey re-holstered the weapon, explaining to the group, “Grenade rounds, modified the shells myself while I was healing. Figure they’ll come in handy.

“That’s just a taste though, we’re talking about an army. Mandeville was bad before just with his tools, but he took down Celestia and Luna. He’s got their power now, making him about the most magical power anywhere.”

“He even controls the sun and moon now!” Twilight expanded, as Gaunt’s slit eyes narrowed.

*“I see,”* the Lawkeeper growled. *“This is not the lone act of a simple criminal, but one of the many deeds to the name of a terrible warlord.”*

*“And the young Spike’s demise was effected by an underling, or the leader himself?”*



"I saw Mandeville himself do it with my own eyes," Twilight said, eyes winced shut. "It's his doing either way, because his 'underlings' are all just machines."

Flaming tongues escaped from between Gaunt's many teeth as she growled. "*Then the thing you peddle is war.*"

Cadance nodded grimly. "A full assault is the only way to him. We have a plan in motion to negate his power, but an attack on his fortress is the only way."

"*You expect us to follow your command?!*" Gaunt snarled, a tiger-like clicking maintained at the pit of her throat.

"No, you may do as you please, but you will not fight alone. The remnants of the old Equestria are gathering to fight in four days time! We only hope you will join us!"

"*One who can defeat Celestia and Luna without magic. One who now wields the power of both. This, for the sake of one infant drake?*"

Steam and smoke expelled from the Lawkeeper's nostrils like smokestacks on a steamboat, but it appeared to be a calming force over the serpentine dragon. "*Empires rise and fall, gods rule and are dethroned. Species arise, only to vanish. We see it all, the impermanence of you flylife groundlings. As irrelevant as for your individuals to live and die over the course of a simple century-long siesta.*"

"*This,*" she said at last, "*is not our fight.*"

"Not your fight?" Twilight repeated, tilting her head as she shook it. "Of *course* it's your fight! It's *everypony's* fight!"

Gaunt gave a deep scoff as Twilight continued. "Mandeville now controls the sun and the moon. If we fail to stop him now and reclaim that power, he'll become unstoppable! And the day he dies of old age, we'll never be able to reach him! The sun and moon will stay locked! The world will freeze and burn all over, except the places those points meet! Everything will *die!*"

"*Our kind will not,*" Gaunt whispered coldly. "*Our kind bathe in rivers of molten lava, and others still roost in the cold high places where none else may live. We will readily survive the eternity or extinguishing of the sun, when all others fade away.*"

"How will you survive without other creatures or plants?" Twilight demanded. "Even those atop the food chain need the ones at the bottom."

Gaunt snorted. "*Do not play stupid with me, child. It is no mystery that we dragons subsist upon the sweetbreads of the earth, not the flesh of fauna, nor the fruit of flora. Your 'chain' is*

*irrelevant to us.”*

Twilight looked over the Lawkeeper’s long and thin snout, exasperated. “I know dragons don’t *only* eat gems though! I mean, look at you! Your mouth is clearly shaped for catching large fish, so I can imagine *you* at least—”

The great wyrm snarled, her tail wrapping around a nearby boulder before she constricted it hard enough to crush it into several pieces. *“Do not condescend to me this way! How dare you suggest I be petty enough to enter a war for my own gratification! I am Lawkeeper. I chose to uphold order amongst my kind, sacrifice my own ambitions to protect all dragons. Selflessness defines my station, unicorn.”*

*“Let me be absolutely clear: your survival is of no concern to us. We prefer lives of solitude, and a world without things that sneak and scurry and slay is quite appealing. We remember the times before you ponies, and we will not mourn or miss you when you are gone.”*

Twilight reeled at the cold, unfeeling words rumbling forth from that terrible mouth. It was not Gaunt’s form that made her a monster. “How can you say that? How can you just... turn your back on *everything*?! You can’t hide from this forever, you’re a part of this world too! You can’t just wash your hooves of—”

In a motion she barely followed, Gaunt’s body wound violently, before she lunged towards her, enormous jaws clapping together just in front of her with a terrible “SNAP.”

*“NEVER TELL US WHAT WE CANNOT DO!” she roared, leaving Twilight to feel as though she’d been struck by lightning. “It is only by my graces and your own truthfulness that you are not already vanished from this world! Your fearless approach intrigued me, but make no mistake: one more such insult, and my jaws will claim you. Not for tearing, not for the flame. I will devour you, whole, alive and screaming, writhing into my gut.”*

*“Diamonds yield to my gullet, unicorn. What chance do you think you would have in it?”*

Twilight felt herself grow dizzy as she sat on her rump. Gaunt’s appearance, while serpentine, had not triggered her ophidiophobia; she was too much lizard and crocodile in visage. Now however, having seen the flashing teeth and been threatened with ingestion, unwanted memories of the chimaera flooded her thoughts...

*From behind, it had knocked the wind out of her, and the next thing she knew there were fangs in front of her. Her lower body felt hot and compressed, and she knew then that she was halfway down the serpent’s throat. The pressure rose, the air hot and humid as the great throat swallowed, drawing her down. Daylight faded away, for what she then thought was forever, her body dragged into a place where she would surely die. No, she was already dead, it just hadn’t set in yet. She couldn’t breathe, for there was no air in the esophagus. She screamed her*

*precious air reserves out, struggled against the pulling muscles. She knew it was for naught; she was just food now...*

Twilight snapped out of her reverie to find she was shaking like a leaf, breath ragged as she backed off of Gaunt.

Noticing this, Rarity, Cadance and Pinkie Pie rushed forward to steady her, asking if she was okay or not. Applejack, on the other hand, stepped forward.

"I gotta say," Applejack began, "I'm a mite confused. See, I thought dragons were proud."

Gaunt's eyes narrowed, and neither of them noticed the winding tail until it had coiled around Applejack's back leg and hoisted her into the air in front of the beast.

*"You have but a minute to clarify your meaning, or I will fulfill my promise."*

"NO!" Twilight shrieked, struggling to move past her friends as Applejack's stetson fell to the floor before them..

*"Very well then."* Gaunt growled. *"Make it thirty seconds."*

With that, the Lawkeeper's maw opened to a ninety-degree angle, and Applejack found herself lowered into it. Past rows of terrible teeth, she was shoved bottom first into the throat, upper body supported by the prehensile tongue. Twilight couldn't watch, lying on the floor, muttering to herself in fear.

"Better start talking, pony meat!" Garble jeered from her perch. "Clock's ticking!"

"W-what I mean is— ugh!" Applejack groaned, the throat giving her body a tug that sunk her in another few inches. "I thought the meaning of the law was that *no pony*, not lord or lumberjack, c-could slay a dragon and get away with it!"

Another gulp brought Applejack to the pits of her forelegs, which clung to the base of the mighty tongue.

"I-if that were the c-case, what would it *matter* who the dragon was, or how young?! Are you gonna tell Mandeville he can g-get away with it? Don't you want that reputation, that nothing or no pony can escape, even if they have the biggest, fanciest army?"

The prehensile tongue tired of her grip on it, so it wrapped around her forelegs and forced them to her sides. The next gulp drew her past her shoulders, making her cry out as the sphincter began folding her ears forward. This deep in, she was steadily sinking, along with her friends' hopes for her.

“Ah, please...” She panted, voice becoming tense as she shouted to be heard. “Cause Mandeville ain’t afraid of ya! He ain’t from around here! Don’t you want to teach him what h-happens? Shouldn’t even the one who killed Celestia still be afraid of dragons?!”

Applejack’s face was the only thing visible to the world, as her ears crawled through the sphincter. She cried out, as she felt the tug of another swallow, cursing her now overly active sweat glands for helping the process. Her pupils contracted as the sphincter closed over her ears, chin, and in a heart stopping moment covered her eyes. She had time to utter a plea before it sealed over her mouth, and nothing of her orange body could be seen anymore.

“No,” Twilight whispered, to who she didn’t know. Gaunt’s mouth closed at last, Applejack only visible as a lump in the pit of her throat, awaiting one final swallow to begin the final descent. Tears streamed down Twilight’s face. “Please, no.”

Gaunt stood, unbearably still, staring into the middle distance. Seconds ticked by, an eternity, waiting for the Lawkeeper to move.

Garble, on his rock, was similarly impatient. He leaned forward intently, no doubt eager to see one of the ponies meet a sticky end in his mother’s gut.

Finally, the great dragoness’ chest expanded, and then her throat. She opened her mouth wide again, ejecting a billowing plume of smoke. Something slimy, orange, and moving choked and coughed on the floor in front of them.

“Oh thank Celestia!” Rarity cried, rushing over to join the others who promptly embraced the regurgitated rancher, only to hesitate at the sight of the slime covering her.

*“I would say you should be thanking me,” Gaunt said, “but it would be a lie to say she had no part in it.*

*“You are correct, pony; to vanquish that which vanquished Celestia would remind the very world of who we are, and keep the fear of us for eons. It would make the inevitable loss of dragons in the effort more palatable.*

*“But this is still a considerable gamble, and it will matter to other dragons whether your ‘Spike’ can even be counted among us at all. And after it all, it may be simpler still to await the Armageddon you foretell, and have no other threats to our kind in the first place.”*

Cadance approached her. “That depends entirely upon how prepared you *really* are for a world where only dragons survive. A world without green grass, lush forests or the songs of birds on the air. It will all be silent, and grey. Your kind will survive, certainly. But you must ask yourself if to survive, is to *live*.”

*“Spare us your platitudes,” the Lawkeeper groaned. “I promise nothing, but that all will be considered. We must take leave, if we are to act at all. I thank you for the rare honesty we have received this day. If nothing else, it is a welcome exception.”*

“You’re welcome,” Cadance told her. “And we thank *you* for considering at all!”

Gaunt closed her eyes and offered a nod before facing the midday sun. Her great, leathery wings opened wide as her wound body straightened to a gentle curve. Her escort followed suit, and together they beat the air beneath them, kicking up sand and blasting it into their hair and eyes. By the time Twilight could see again, the three were already shrinking steadily into black specks against the sky.

Garble, however, was hovering between in easy view. He glared at Applejack, before turning a fiercer look onto Twilight, every feature contorting. She offered a wry smile, eyes narrowing mischievously. The young dragon pointed two claws at his two eyes, before pointing slowly her way.

His threat made clear, he took off into the stratosphere, following his mother at a distance he seemed determined not to close.

“Blah!” Applejack gagged dramatically. “I’m gonna smell like brimstone and a rock tumbler for a week.”

“That took stones,” Corey told her, shaking his head. “Hope it was worth that.”

Cadance sighed, before snorting. “That was unbelievably stupid, risky, and I can’t officially condone it. I’d wonder if Rainbow Dash wasn’t right about you being a liability, but then I remember that she was on you about *not* taking risks.”

She smiled, winking. “Seems you’re a bit of a wildcard, Applejack.”

Applejack grimaced. “I promise I didn’t do that to prove nothin’. I just knew we were losing ground fast, and without those dragons, I wasn’t so sure winding up beneath that one’s skin would matter in the long run.”

“I’d rather not think about what might have happened,” Twilight hinted, as she lowered Applejack’s discarded stetson back where it belonged. “Let’s just be glad it went like it did.”

At that moment, the bison from before thundered back up the ramp carrying a plate of glassy black stones on his head. “Hey, I know the turquoise was a bust, but I remembered we’ve also got all this obsidian! Y’know, it’s *kinda* gemlike and... stuff.”

He stared around, looking for a sign of scale or claw. "Aww, c'mon, they left already!?"

He dumped the plate straight in front of him where it shattered, the obsidian shards clattering glassily to the floor. "Dude, the revered ones are *jerks!*"

With that, they watched him trot off in a huff.

"Well," Pinkie said to the silence, gazing at the obsidian, "shouldn't let *this* go to waste!"