

## Chapter Seven

Story Written by [Mindblower](#), Supervised and Directed by [Jake Heritagu](#)  
[Fim Fiction Version](#)

Twilight hadn't realized she was at nearly a full gallop toward Fluttershy's house until her injured shoulder began to ache. She slowed her pace, knowing for certain that she was out of the dragon's reach, for now. *Well...* she thought after a moment or two of consideration, *I think it's a given at this point that nothing is really certain.* She swiveled her ears around, checking for noise behind herself as she walked. *...Well, I don't hear its roar anymore. I should be okay, at least for now.*

The fog seemed to grow thicker as she approached the edge of Ponyville. She was heading toward the bridge that crossed the stream on the way to her friends' new home, but the mist was so impermeable that she couldn't see it until she had literally almost fallen into it. She took a sharp inhale and backed a few steps away from the edge of the chasm. *But where's the bridge?* she wondered, glancing at the path beneath her hooves. *It should be right on the trail.*

"Oh, my dear Twilight!" a voice sounded to her left. She snapped her attention to the cloaked pony that had somehow snuck up on her without her realizing. "What a surprise!" she exclaimed jovially.

"What do you want?" Twilight growled, her eyes blazing with a mixture of suspicion and hostility.

The mysterious mare seemed hurt. "Nothing but to say that the fact you're alive is very pleasing to mine eyes. This world has claimed so many a soul; I'm grateful to see that you're still in control."

Twilight realized what she had just said, and she hung her head slightly, letting her nerves settle. "I'm sorry for snapping at you. This place has me on edge. I'm... not supposed to trust anypony anymore; not while I'm in here, at least."

She nodded. "Trust is a danger you'd do well to erase. The truth only harms in this dastardly place. Do take care, though, not to dismiss it outright; lies won't help you in your final fight."

Twilight threw up her head in exasperation. "Kill things. Don't kill things. Stay in one place and get killed. Explore and get killed. Listen to the truth. Hide from the truth. This is all so--so--!" She tried, but couldn't seem to find the words for her frustration.

"I believe the word you're looking for is 'aggravating,'" the mare suggested.

Twilight nodded sadly. "Not to mention completely and utterly horrifying."

"Fear is an emotion most irritating. It's designed to keep us from trouble, but in some situations it causes danger to double. Here it is a poor, poor way of keeping danger at bay. Monsters *will* find you, regardless of what little you feel--and what little you suppress," the mare stated ominously. "Yes, everything in here is based on fear."

"Well... I guess," Twilight said with a shrug. "Are you actually going to *tell* me anything? Or are you just going to follow me around?" *At this point, I'd probably be fine with either,* she added to herself miserably.

The mare laughed. "I see, you want help as your journey worsens. I'm sorry to say, there's no way for me to share your burden. Though I do wish to see you through this alive... I'm afraid that no assistance can I contrive."

Twilight rolled her eyes despite the fact that she had expected this sort of answer. "Whatever, then. See you later."

She was about to walk off when the mare spoke again. "I have one thing to say, one last thing that is true: Nothing is real if it doesn't hurt you."

Twilight turned to face her, but she had vanished into the fog. She listened for hoofsteps, wondering why she would have run away so quickly, but no sound met her ears. It was as silent as a graveyard, and Twilight felt utterly lonesome once again.

Twilight continued on her way, this time seeing that the broken bridge that had once impeded her progress was now patched up haphazardly, with large, recently uprooted trees linking the two edges of the river and making it possible to cross. Assuming that her talk with the mare that may or may not have been a mirage had something to do with it, she carefully crossed the slippery wood and continued on her way.

The trek to Fluttershy's cottage after that thankfully didn't last much longer. However, when she reached the small cottage where her two friends stayed, she found it in the same amount of disrepair as the rest of Ponyville. Part of the roof had caved in, the windows were boarded, and there was a large padlock and chain on the front--and only--door. Twilight covered her nose as she inhaled a waft of decay. *I am definitely not looking forward to whatever's in there.* The more she thought about it, though, the more she noticed that the horrible conditions and terrifying aberrations were becoming almost... commonplace. It was a thought that unsettled her, so she put it aside.

Not even bothering to try the door, she searched the perimeter of the house and found three

statues off to the side behind the pile of rubble that used to be the roof. They were all made of a dull, gray stone, and there was a wooden podium in the middle of the three. Twilight examined each statue in turn.

The first depicted a unicorn mare with spears sent clean through her eyes, piercing through the back of her head. She looked as if she were screaming in surprise and agony, that the attack was sudden, unexpected, almost as if she had been betrayed. The base of the statue was labeled 'Truth.'

The second statue was of a pegasus, though it was more of a bust, only showing the torso and the forelegs with its hind legs presumably in the pedestal that supported it. This one had a pole that had pierced through one ear and protruded from the other. This one seemed as if it were executed, and its face was limp, expressionless, as was the rest of its body, hanging from the pole it had been stabbed with. The base of the statue was labeled 'Lies.'

The third statue was of an earth pony stallion, though this one was lying face-down, hunched over a sword that had stabbed through his mouth and up through his skull. His now-limp hooves seemed like they once had clutched the sword--lending to the assumption that the stallion's death was at his own hooves, his own responsibility. The base of the statue was labeled 'Secrets.'

"See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil," Twilight muttered, addressing each of the statues in turn. Sparing them only a grimace, she carefully approached the podium. On it was a single poem, written on a piece of ancient parchment:

*Blighted are the ones that stay  
Lighted are the paths away  
I can't tell you what to say  
No one keeps you in this fray  
Doom is quickly on its way  
Eager to come out and play  
Death's favorite color is gray*

Twilight studied it for a moment, trying to pull some sort of meaning. *Well, I guess I shouldn't have really expected it to make all that much sense on its own*, she thought. She bent over, looking at every side of the podium, before tapping it lightly. There was an echo. *That means it's hollow*, she realized.

After gently taking the piece of paper and placing it into her magic, she turned and slammed her hind hooves into the wooden stand, mimicking what her friend Applejack had once taught her. The podium splintered, revealing a heavy sledgehammer that was hidden inside. She examined the sledgehammer, contemplating whether or not she could wield something so hefty, or even carry it with her. *Every little thing you keep puts more strain on your magic*, she internally

recited, remembering the spell's instructions. Eventually she did decided to place it into her magical pocket, knowing that it would likely prove more useful in the future.

She immediately noticed the weight, though, that the hammer placed upon her, almost as if she had gained twenty pounds in an instant. "Urf," she mumbled, shaking her head. *Guess I'm reaching my limit. I hope I find a lighter weapon soon, otherwise just lugging this thing around could drain me completely.*

After she had steadied herself, she took the poem out of her magic and set it on the ground, studying it. After only a few moments of thought, though, the dragon's distant roar reverberated across the foggy landscape. The deathly noise made her jump nearly ten meters into the air.

*Deep breaths, Twilight,* she told herself, trying to calm her nerves. She considered trying the sledgehammer on the door, but she decided against it, at least for the time being. *If I do solve this puzzle, I don't want anything coming in after me.*

She studied the parchment again. *Okay, so if that last word puzzle had to do with letters, then this one probably does, too.* She studied the poem for a moment more before realizing that each of the capitalized letters, when put together, spelled 'blinded.'

*It's just a simple acrostic,* she thought. She glanced back toward the statues. *I guess it's pretty obvious what I have to do next.*

She went over to the statue of the mare who was having her eyes gouged out, and removed the sledgehammer from her magic before gently tapping the blunt metal head of her multi-purpose tool on the stone. A crack formed that quickly spread down between the eyes of the mare, and in a few moments the statue had silently crumbled to dust.

Twilight sifted through the rubble, searching for anything relevant, before finding a note: *The door's unlocked.* She blinked in disbelief before galloping to Fluttershy's front door. It was still in chains, as she suspected, with the giant padlock in the center hanging as a solemn gatekeeper. Just as a test, though, she nudged the door with her hoof, though only faintly.

The rusty chain crumbled, with the padlock falling and shattering on the ground.

Twilight nearly lost it. "OH COME O—" She clapped a hoof over her mouth, but not before her aggravated outburst echoed not once, not twice, but three times across the silent Ponyville.

The dragon roared again, though this time Twilight knew it couldn't have been more than a kilometer away. She nearly saw its silhouette reflected in the fog.

Bursting into full-fledged panic, Twilight grabbed the hammer, shoved it into her portable hole, ran into the cottage, and shut the door as silently as she possibly could behind her. Her heart

was pounding in her chest, and she was shaking as she slowly sank to the ground, pressing herself into the wall next to the door. She didn't dare to move.

The dragon's footsteps sent shockwaves through the ground, causing the floor to tremble nearly as much as Twilight was. She heard it hiss and smell the air for her, slowly pacing around the house as if it were the very place it had lost her scent. Twilight steeled herself and froze in place, not wanting to give it any more opportunities to find her than it already had. She was hoping against hope that it wouldn't destroy the cottage looking for her.

Eventually, though, in defiance of all rhyme and reason, she heard the slow flap of its heavy wings as it sailed away. To it, it must have been as if the cottage didn't even exist. That was the only explanation she could think of. Dragons, as she knew from raising Spike, had excellent senses. There was no reason for her to have gotten as lucky as she had more than once.

*Nopony escapes dragons*, she breathed. *At least I'm not the only one getting tricked by this place.* Standing up, she felt a burst of rage as she remembered the completely pointless puzzle, knowing that this place was only toying with her now. Messing with her head. *But...* she thought after a few moments, *I guess it wasn't all for nothing. I did get a hammer.*

She pondered what the mare had said to her earlier, 'nothing is real if it doesn't hurt you.' Did that mean that the dragon was only an illusion, since it hadn't injured her? She realized that she didn't actually see a dragon at any point in the past few hours, that she had only heard one and seen a shape in the fog roughly resembling that of a dragon, but she *had* seen one in crisp detail near the beginning of her journey. Swallowing, she decided it best not to test that theory.

After she had fully gathered her nerves, she began to examine her surroundings, using the pendant around her neck to provide a faint, flickering light. Fluttershy's cottage was a wreck, but that was to be expected. Broken, moldy furniture littered the floor, the wallpaper was peeling, and the stench of mildew permeated the small home. Twilight didn't want to push her luck by calling out for her two friends. *If this place is anything like the rest of Ponyville, then they've both vanished. No use alerting the dragon by yelling for them. If they're here, I'll find them soon enough anyway.*

That in mind, she began to explore the kitchen. It was filled with various tubes and scientific equipment, all of which was completely corrupted and contaminated with all sorts of gunk that looked as if it had once been food. The counters were filled with vials and jars of the stuff. Tubes wound their way through the air, connecting various different putrid vessels. Twilight's stomach did a flip at the smell, compelling her to quickly duck under the tubes and remove herself from the horrible lab.

The living room was much more bearable, showing only the ordinary signs of decrepity. As she poked through the furniture, though, Twilight noticed an odd cylindrical hole in the ground, just wide enough that a single pony's hoof could fit through. She carefully peered down into it.

At the very bottom of the small pocket there appeared to be a button, with a steady drip of water coming from the rim of the tiny pit. Twilight was about to reach in and press it, but she hesitated at the last moment. Instead, just to be safe, she dragged a limb from one of the broken chairs and poked it down into the hole, aiming for the button.

As she suspected, the stick hit flesh instead of the device, and she watched in slight intrigue as the chair leg slowly disappeared down into the small crevice as she heard something gorging itself on the wood. She glanced down into it again and saw a small, many-toothed wormlike animal just finishing its meal before crawling back up to the base of its lair. The slow drip started again, though this time Twilight knew it was saliva, not water.

*I guess I just have to kill it*, Twilight told herself, sighing. She ambled back into the kitchen and held her breath as she looked for anything possibly toxic. Eventually something did jump out to her, a beaker filled with a substance that looked far too ordinary to be in the twisted laboratory. She levitated a covered beaker of a clear liquid out of the kitchen and set it down on a three-legged coffee table. Removing the cap, she took a small whiff of what it contained.

An intense burning flared up in her nostrils for a moment, but she did manage to recognize the incredibly strong chlorine smell that was hydrochloric acid, likely in high concentration. She cautiously glanced back at the hole in the living room. *This isn't what I want to do*, she reminded herself, *I just don't have any options*.

Exercising extreme patience in the presence of such strong acids, Twilight levitated the beaker into the hole and slowly lowered it until she felt the worm's mouth wrap around the edges. There was a crunch of glass, a hissing of flesh, and finally silence as the small monster liquified.

"I'm sorry, little guy," Twilight found herself saying, and she genuinely felt it. Something in the air had motivated her to press that button, and she had to get to it no matter what. Her life could be on the line. To her, it seemed like it always was.

After she was sure it was dead, she retrieved another limb from a broken armchair and levitated it down into the small hole. She heard a small 'click' as it pressed the button. For a few moments, nothing happened.

Then, Twilight heard the creaking of floorboards and the splintering of wood. The house had begun to shake in ever-increasing violence, and Twilight struggled to stay on her hooves. Broken picture frames fell from the walls and shattered, tables turned on their sides, and cabinets crashed to the ground. As quickly as it had started, though, the tremors vanished. Twilight paused, the silence so absolute that she was unsure whether or not she was still alive.

A terrible, rending siren snapped her to her senses. It was a low wail that seemed to emanate from just above Fluttershy's cottage. It was the same one she had heard before, and it was not,

by any stretch of the imagination, a good sign.

Twilight braced herself, but nothing happened. She paused, looking around. Despite the increased amount of rubble lying around the house, nothing seemed to have changed. She took a cautious step toward the kitchen.

The wooden planks snapped under her weight, and she fell into an infinite abyss.

She woke up in what looked like the strange world she had been to a couple times before, the Otherworld where she had fought the broken alicorn. Wiping liquid from her eyes, she examined her surroundings and tried to hold her breath.

The room she was in looked something like that of a newborn's, though as with everything else in this hellish dimension, it was crooked and disgusting. What remained of the shattered crib was lying in a smoldering pile on the ground. Smoke softly rose to the top of the blackened bedchamber, and as Twilight glanced upward to follow the gray trail, she saw various dolls hanging from the ceiling. Some were made of rags, others of porcelain, but they all shared one defining characteristic: They were hanging by their necks.

Twilight whiffed the metallic tang of blood once more, and she glanced at her hoof to see in horror that it was stained red. She blinked as more of her own blood gushed onto her forehead and down her eyes, and she gasped in horror as she saw her own horn lying in front of her, snapped off at its base.

She must have landed on it when she fell.

Instinctively she tried to pick it up using telekinesis, but a splitting pain carved through her skull, as if it was being split open by a cleaver. Her broken horn didn't move an inch.

She felt herself tearing up, but not from the pain. This was it. It was over. Without her magic, she couldn't fend for herself; she didn't even have a weapon that wasn't trapped inside her portable hole. She realized in a panic that perhaps the hole had collapsed, leaving its contents to dissolve within the netherworld in which it was created, but was reassured when she felt its burden pressing down on her. She inhaled sharply again as she remembered that, since she couldn't open it anymore, that everything inside was now only dead weight.

Twilight shook her head violently, spraying a few drops of the clotting blood to the left and right. *No. Now's not the time to panic*, she told herself. She absently noted that the wound didn't hurt on its own--it only pained her when she tried to use her magic. *Does this mean that it's not real, if it doesn't hurt? There are other ways to disable magic, and I don't know if this world is real or not, either. Then again, I don't know if what the mare said is true or not...*

She sighed in exasperation. "I... I'm not dead yet," she reminded herself softly, staring at her horn. "I need to keep going. It can't get any worse, at least," she mumbled glumly. She knew that resigning herself to death would be pointless. The only option was forward.

She glanced back up at the hanging dolls, searching for anything that might clue her in as to the nature of this other world. An eerie wail seemed to emanate from the ceiling, that of a foal begging for help, but other than that, nothing. Twilight's ears pricked, and she quickly turned around, but nopony was there. There was only a long, dimly lit corridor ahead.

Twilight felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. Something was watching her, and she knew it. As soon as she thought about it, though, she realized the irony: Since when *wasn't* she being watched in this awful, Celestia-forsaken place? She wasn't in a location as much as she was inside an entity in its own right.

After one more quick mental sweep of the room, she picked up her horn between her teeth and limped down the ominous corridor.

The corridor's walls were made of a thick glass, and the lighting was so poor that Twilight could barely see her own hooves. Her journey down the hallway, though, was short; it ended in a thick glass wall, same as the rest of the thin chamber. Assuming she missed something, she turned around and tried to head back to the room with the hung dolls, but discovered that way was barred by a wall of glass, as well.

Twilight set her horn down in the corner of the room, where she was unlikely to forget about it. "Okay, so you want to show me something," she said, praying she wouldn't have to do combat in such close quarters. "What is it?"

As if on queue, Twilight heard spotlights switched on behind her, and she pivoted to see what looked like the inside of Fluttershy's living room again--this time, though, Fluttershy was inside. She looked confused and frustrated, though the source of her ire didn't seem to come from the tarnished state of her house itself. Rather, she looked as if she were looking for something important, or if she were trying to remember something just out of reach, something right on the tip of her tongue.

*I wonder if she knows about the dragon? Twilight thought absently.*

Just then, Rainbow Dash entered through the front door, her expression dull. Lifeless. Fluttershy turned and gasped, rushing toward her lover and gripping her tightly.

"I don't know how we got here," Fluttershy whispered. Twilight was momentarily shocked by how



clear she could hear her; it was as if they were side by side. "How did we get here, Dash? How are we here again?"

"I dunno," Dash said, and her voice was flat, her tone hushed, "but it's going to be okay." She didn't sound like she meant it.

Twilight considered banging on the window, trying to get their attention, but she knew it was pointless; Fluttershy's cottage didn't have a huge, gaping piece of glass that split it in half. What was being shown to her was prerecorded. Either it had already happened, or it was going to happen.

"How do you know it's going to be okay?" Fluttershy asked, pressing her head into her marefriend's chest.

Dash pulled out of her grip, shaking her head. "Somehow. Just... somehow," she said, her voice flat.

"Are you okay?" Fluttershy asked, her expression brimming with worry.

"I don't know that, either," Dash said, her voice shaky. "When that thing attacked us... I just froze. I couldn't do anything to help you. You almost died, Fluttershy. It would have ripped you apart."

"But it didn't. I'm still here," Fluttershy said, stepping in front of Dash's view. "You can't blame yourself for every little thing, Dash. I can take care of myself."

Dash pulled away again, as if she couldn't bear Fluttershy's gaze. "I could have done more. I could have done more to help you."

"You did all you could," Fluttershy soothed. "Dash, don't you trust me?"

Dash paused, her gaze distant, staring off into space. Fluttershy slowly moved closer to her, as if to kiss her on the cheek, but Dash took a step away before she could.

"Shy..." she began slowly, "I want to know if you love me. I want to know that you know... that I'd do anything to keep you safe."

Fluttershy looked up at her. "Of course."

"Then I want you to close your eyes," Dash stated.

"Why?" Fluttershy asked.

Dash stepped closer to Fluttershy, leaning in and planting a quick kiss on her partner's lips. The kiss, though, like Dash's expression, was dull, lifeless. "Because I love you, 'Shy," Dash whispered into her ear, "and I need to prove that to you."

Fluttershy looked skeptical. "Dash, I know you-

She interrupted her. "Shh," she hushed, staring into her partner's eyes. "Please."

Though slightly uneasy, Fluttershy did as she was told, obediently closing her eyes. Dash took a few careful steps away, her eyes glinting when she saw a specific piece of metal in the debris around the living room. She picked it up in her jaw. It was a knife, a rusty, curved blade about eight inches in length.

"Dash?" Fluttershy asked upon hearing the grating sound of metal on metal. "Dash, what are you doing?"

"I won't let the monsters get you, 'Shy," Dash vowed, speaking through the knife with surprising clarity. "I won't let them tear you to shreds. You deserve better than that."

Fluttershy noticed Dash's change in tone, but despite her fear, she steeled herself and kept her eyes shut tight. "Dash, you're scaring me," she whimpered.

"I'm so sorry, Fluttershy," Dash said, and before Fluttershy could whip around to defend herself, Dash stuck the knife in-between her shoulder blades, driving the blade deep and cutting through her throat. Fluttershy made an awful, choking noise before falling to the ground, writhing for a moment and raising her hooves to her neck in a feeble effort to try and dig the blade out, before eventually falling still. Crimson blood gushed from the wound in frantic pulses that gradually slowed, then stopped, as Fluttershy's blood pooled on the hardwood floor.

Dash stared at her marefriend's body for what seemed like hours. Then, she screamed, a heartbroken wail so powerful that it caused even the thick glass Twilight was standing behind to vibrate. And when she was finished, she collapsed next to Fluttershy's body, sobbing into her pelt and hugging her as if she was still alive, as if she was in disbelief at what she had just done. As if she would do anything to take it back.

The spotlights shut off.

Twilight collapsed to the floor, not realizing she had been crying until sobs started to rack her body. She curled up into a tight ball, knowing that the scene shown to her likely hadn't happened yet scared and petrified by it all the same.

*That... that didn't happen... I'm only wasting water, she thought, clinging to anything that might help her break out of her stupor. I don't know when I'm going to be able to drink again.*

*It was only an illusion. It didn't happen.*

*This isn't any reason to give up. You don't even know if Fluttershy or Rainbow Dash even stepped hoof in this world.*

*You're letting this place get to you. If you let it get inside your head then it's all over. You have to snap out of it.*

*Dash wouldn't do that to Fluttershy.*

*She just wouldn't.*

But nothing helped. It doesn't matter how much she tried to comfort herself, how much she tried to grasp the truth, to hold it close to her and wrap it around her like a warm blanket. She wanted facts, cold and stable; she wanted reason and rhyme to rely on, an explanation sturdy and steadfast.

Nothing was enough. Information couldn't override emotion.

She had just witnessed a murder.

And so she cried. She cried until she started to shake, trembling with pent-up fear and emotion that she had tried to keep under wraps. And she was terrified, not just by the Otherworld that presented her with such horrors, not just by the fact that she was more powerless and fragile than ever before, but because she knew she might not be able to fulfill her promise to Spike after all. To stay safe. To stay strong. And to come back okay.

And he would never forgive her for not keeping that promise.

She took that idea and latched onto it, gripping it so tightly that she was afraid she would strangle it. And she held onto it, letting it pull her up off of the stone ground, waiting patiently as it wiped the tears from her chin and cheeks, letting it steady her hooves and clear her eyes. And she took that idea and tucked it away, safe and sound, somewhere she would never let it go. She was doing all of this for him, her little number one assistant, and nothing would stop her from keeping him safe.

And the world beckoned her onward. At the far end of the corridor, there was a booming noise as spotlights turned on once again. And Twilight, cautious now more than ever, trotted up to the window, and watched.

The scene looked to be in a divided bedroom. One side had an enormously pink and red color scheme, with butterflies and wildlife painted all along the walls. The other side had a more blue and green color scheme, with pictures of the ocean and the sky. Toys and clothes were scattered everywhere in and out of the two cribs in the room, and inside both Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash stood, having a conversation.

"I don't know, Dash," Fluttershy mumbled, staring at her hooves. "I don't know if I'm ready to do this with you."

"Well, what's wrong?" Dash asked, concerned, though she likely knew what was bothering her significant other.

"It seems too good to be true," Fluttershy said. "I just *know* something bad will happen. I just don't think I *deserve* it, Dash. It's just all too wonderful. I think... I think we should wait."

"Wait for what? 'Till we're older? How old? Do you wanna wait a year, or two, or five? Then where will we be?" Dash demanded. She saw the look in Fluttershy's eyes as she bombarded her with the fierce questions, and sighed. "Look, 'Shy. I'm not going to force this on you. But it's all here, and just last week you were saying this is all you ever wanted. And you're saying you don't *deserve* it? After what you've been through-

"That's exactly it, though," Fluttershy interrupted, startling Twilight. Fluttershy was never one to argue, but she seemed upset, conflicted. "I-I'm afraid that I'll do the exact same thing!"

"You would never," Dash said sincerely. She tucked her hoof under Fluttershy's chin, gently nudging it upward so that they were looking each other in the eye. "I know you, Fluttershy. Don't you trust me?"

"I do! I do," Fluttershy said, shying away from her marefriend's hoof. "I just don't trust myself. You're just so amazing at everything you do, and I... I'm just not."

Dash stepped up to Fluttershy, pulling her into a light hug. "Are you worried that you're going to mess something up and that I'm going to hate you forever?"

She nodded miserably, and Twilight could see the self-loathing reflect off the tears forming in her eyes. "I always am."

"Y'know, sometimes I worry about that, too," Dash said nonchalantly, stepping away from Fluttershy and turning back toward the blue side of the room.

Fluttershy's ears pricked, and she turned around as well, clearly surprised. "You do?"

“Totally,” Dash affirmed, gazing thoughtfully at the clouds painted on the ceiling. “I’ve told you before. About how, back when I was little, I only cared about how fast I could fly, and the stunts I could pull, and just how awesome I thought I was.”

“You’ve always been awesome,” Fluttershy said.

Dash giggled. “Sounds weird when *you* say it, ‘Shy. Yeah, I was pretty cool. But the thing is, I only cared about *being* cool. And if you weren’t as cool as I was, then you’d better make way for number one. I *thought* I was cool. I *thought* I had friends. But... no matter how many ponies looked *up* to me, I never really had anypony who could really *understand*. And then when I met you, and you told me how you felt... I never thought it would work, honestly. But it did. And it’s awesome, isn’t it?”

Fluttershy nodded. “More than I could ever hope for. I’ve told you that before, haven’t I?”

“Yeah, just last night. Twice,” Dash added. “So yeah. But the thing I’m the *most* afraid of is you thinking that I’m too good for you. I’m not. I’m afraid that you’re going to leave me for some stupid reason like that, and when I try to get you back, I hurt you even more. Fluttershy, of everypony in the entire *world*, even our closest friends, I think you’re the only one I can really trust.”

Fluttershy looked almost overwhelmed. She glanced at Dash, then her hooves, then hesitantly at Dash again. “Y-... You really mean that?”

Dash nodded, taking Fluttershy’s hoof in hers and gripping it tightly. She seemed like she was struggling to contain herself. “Fluttershy, I need you to make me a promise,” she said, her voice choked.

“Anything,” Fluttershy said.

“Promise me you’ll love me,” Dash said, “and I’ll promise that I’ll love you.”

Fluttershy didn’t hesitate. “I do.”

Dash grinned despite herself, exhaling sharply and wiping away her tears, as if she had been worried about the answer. “Then I do, too,” she cried, pulling Fluttershy into a crushing, loving embrace.

The spotlights shut off.

Twilight stepped back, pondering what the scene meant. *Assuming this is like the others and it didn't happen, at least not yet... maybe this is something that should happen? Or maybe this is what has to happen if that other scene is going to be prevented.* She nodded, liking the way that last thought sounded. *I'll be sure to let them know, the next time I see them. If there's anything I can do... then I should try it. They'll think I'm insane, but I can't even imagine how I'd feel if I let them alone and what I just saw ended up happening. Maybe they will think I'm crazy. But at least the two of them will still be alive.*

She heard more spotlights turn on to her left, illuminating a large, hollow cloud room that was probably hollowed out of a thunderstorm. It looked dank and slimy, well, as dank and slimy as clouds could get, anyway. Dash was inside, poking around the rubble and trash inside. She seemed like she was looking for something, probably for clues.

Then Fluttershy entered, and the dour, bitter expression on her face made Twilight immediately know where this was all going. Dash, however, either didn't notice or didn't care, because as soon as she saw her marefriend she cantered up to her and gave her a bear hug.

"Fluttershy! Where have you *been*?" Dash said, nuzzling her before Fluttershy pulled away. "I've been looking all over Cloudsdale for you. Well, what's left of it, anyway. Guess I shouldn't have worried, huh? You look great," she said with a relieved smile.

Fluttershy's expression softened. "I'm glad to see you, too, Dash. I thought I would never see you again."

"You know I would *a/ways* come back for you, 'Shy," Dash assured softly.

"But... why did you leave in the first place?" Fluttershy asked, her tone tinged with just the slightest bit of accusation.

Dash winced, knowing she didn't have an answer to that question. "Look, I-... The dragon--I can't do it all, okay! I'm just glad you made it out of that okay."

"You didn't come back for me," Fluttershy said, tears welling up in her eyes. "I could have *died* if I didn't find you here, Dash. Why did you just leave me out there?"

"Because I was told to come here," Dash said, not willing to meet Fluttershy's gaze. "I checked back where the dragon attacked but nopony was there. I just thought that, well, maybe you'd made it out okay."

"Or the dragon *ate* me," Fluttershy pointed out.

“There was no blood!” Dash protested.

Fluttershy held her gaze.

Dash exhaled. “I’m so, so sorry, Fluttershy. Nothing like that will *ever* happen again. But you’re here, and I’m here, and we’re going to make it out of this, and *that’s* what matters. Period. Okay?” she added, looking up at Fluttershy with her best pleading expression.

Fluttershy sighed, turning around. “Dash... I want to know if you love me,” she said.

“Of course I do,” Dash said. “I couldn’t imagine life without you, ‘Shy. I was so scared when that thing attacked, I... I just tried so hard not to lose it and go hunting after you. I knew that you had made it out alive.”

“How?” Fluttershy asked.

“I just did,” Dash stated. “I’m the Element of Loyalty, Fluttershy. I would *never* leave you behind. Don’t you trust me?”

“Dash, I need to know if you’re going to stay with me no matter how tough things get. I need to know that, no matter what happens, I can count on you to be by my side. I need to know that you won’t betray me like you did when we saw the dragon!”

Dash looked hurt. “I didn’t betray you.”

“Yes you did! You abandoned me!” Fluttershy yelled, with a startling amount of intensity. She added, quieter, “I thought I was going to die.”

Dash drew up closer to her marefriend. “I would *never* let that happen.”

“I don’t know if I believe that, though,” Fluttershy said, staring at the floor. “I don’t know if you’re going to keep your promises. You can’t build a relationship on lies.”

“Fluttershy, I know that,” Dash said. “Give me some credit.”

“Dash, I want to know if you had the choice, would you let me out of this Celestia-forsaken world, or would you save yourself?” Fluttershy asked suddenly, staring intensely at the dark cloud floor.

“I would save you. Always,” Dash said softly. Not waiting for a response, she reached a hoof around Fluttershy and pulled her into a firm kiss on the lips, absorbing her and not letting go until she was sure she had made her point. And Fluttershy accepted it, her passion even more intense than her partner’s. The kiss seemed to last an eternity.

Fluttershy abruptly broke away, though, and seized the back of Dash's head with one hoof and the side of Dash's chin with the other. "Liar," she hissed.

There was an awful pause, with Fluttershy, since she had Dash in a death grip, drawing out the moment as long as she could, letting Dash soak in the terror of knowing that a single twitch could cause paralysis.

"I still love you," Fluttershy murmured.

Before Dash could respond, Fluttershy screamed, twisted, and snapped her neck. She fell to the floor limply, not even uttering a sound.

Utter silence. Fluttershy said nothing, she just stared at her hooves in shock, as all the world seemed to stop for a minute, utterly frozen in time.

Then she slowly turned, looking up at Twilight through the glass.

At first she was confused, but suddenly she realized that the hairs on the back of her neck were standing up, and that her senses were going on overdrive. She backed up, only to hear glass shatter behind her, with a bloody blue hoof reaching into her thin chamber. More smashes. Dash, now lacerated, was now approaching her just as Fluttershy was breaking out of her own illusion.

Twilight managed to break out of her petrified stupor and back up as the Element of Loyalty slowly ambled toward her, the same dull, dazed look in her eyes as when she had killed Fluttershy. Soon Fluttershy caught up with her, as well, slowing her pace when she and Dash were side by side. Fluttershy stared right at Twilight with a bitter, vindictive glare that was accented by the bleeding cuts all around her body.

The two lovers spoke in an eerie unison. "*All I wanted was for somepony to tell me the truth,*" they echoed, their voices raw with betrayal, their breath reeking of death. "*All I wanted was for somepony to love me.*"

Twilight's lips formed words, but no noise escaped other than a faint squeak. Her back was to the wall, now, and her two friends were now bearing down on her, their murderous intentions clear. There was nothing she could do.

She felt a crushing blow land on her head, right where her horn used to be. She saw blinding light. Then, bottomless darkness.



Red.

The color of passion, the color of rage, the color of love and war, of bloody wounds and eternal conflict. The color of dying gasps, of the moments just before the final rest. And Twilight found half of her face covered in it.

Gasping, she staggered to her hooves, wiping the thin, rusty pigment off her snout and out of her eyes. Her nose was stuffed up with whatever she had passed out in, something she honestly was thankful for, though the air around her was so thick and humid she was afraid she would pass out again. Her head was pounding, the blow to her forehead still smarting, and her legs were shaky and numb. Her body trembled with the effort of remaining conscious, but she knew that if she let herself give up, then it was all over, and she would never see the light of day again. She would never see Spike again. So she steeled her nerves, closed her eyes, and waited for the pain to dull, for the shock to recede, and, eventually, for her ability to think clearly return.

Moments passed, hours passed. She either recovered immediately or after a stalwart, stubborn stand against the weakness that so sickened her, she couldn't tell. Minutes or months, days or decades. Wherever she was, she knew that if she opened her eyes to take the horror in, that she might finally lose what little bits of sanity she had come to rely on, and that was too big a risk to take.

But when her limbs ceased vibrating, when the pain in and on her head faded to a dull, warning ache, and when she was confident that she could at least walk a few steps forward before resting again, she slowly wiped the dried substance off her eyelids and opened them once more.

She found herself in a suffocatingly warm chamber that was drenched, from top to bottom, in blood. There was so much of it, in fact, that it seemed to be dripping from the ceiling and had pooled on the floor. However, Twilight noticed when she took a step that the blood on the ground didn't feel quite like the thick fluid she was used to seeing gush from her enemies. It had a rough, soggy feel, and she soon realized why; on closer inspection, the blood was separating into water and plasma. It was likely days old, but the environment was too wet and humid to keep it from clotting properly.

Twilight gagged, and she knew that if she could smell, she would have passed out. Fresh blood, though horrifying to her as well, was different, a result of a battle. This blood, however, reeked of death, so utterly, in fact, that when she inhaled she could taste the iron on her tongue. When she backed away, her legs sunk into the ground, and she felt the texture of flesh beneath her hooves.

She shuddered, feeling her courage crumble. It was more horrible than she ever could have imagined.

She hastily searched for an exit, but there was none. The only feature in the room besides the dying blood was a sword stuck in the middle of the floor. It was pure black, and incredibly thin, only a few centimeters wide, with its point stuck in the soft ground. Its hilt was suspended in the air, and it had a thick mouth guard, its position telling Twilight that the blade itself was, when held in the mouth, meant to be oriented to the right of the wielder, and used for charging and slicing attacks. The grip itself was padded, with custom tooth marks likely used by its original owner.

It was the exact same sword that the Broken Alicorn had wielded, and it was the same sword that had impaled Rarity and struck her in the shoulder.

Twilight got the sinking feeling she was going to have to fight.

As if to answer, her pendant began to crackle and hiss slightly. The walls began to undulate, each individual pulse sending a ripple of humidity crashing through the room, and Twilight realized after a moment that the noise seemed to mimic the frequency of her heartbeat. Ripples spread across the surface of the putrid blood, and the back wall of the corridor slowly began to move, spreading apart as slow hoofsteps could be heard approaching.

Hastily, Twilight pulled the sword out of the floor, though it sounded as if it was being pulled out of its most recent victim. Her left cheek and most of her snout was covered by the hilt's guard, with the black blade pointing in the other direction. She noted that the blade itself had a peculiar pattern on it and didn't seem to be made of steel. She also noticed that the sword was balanced beautifully, and somehow her teeth fit perfectly into the grip even though the indents had clearly been designed for a stallion, perhaps a guard. She could only attribute that to this dimension, this Otherworld, bending the rules, and levelling the playing field for her sake and the sake of whatever this fight was supposed to test.

Her adversary entered. Its head, very large in proportion to the rest of its body, was down, hanging limply from its neck, so limply, in fact, that it appeared to be broken. It didn't look like it had any skin or hair to speak of, it seemed to be held together only by muscle, bone, and scab. It was a little taller than she was, but not by much. Its wings were plastered to its sides by the clotting blood, and its body was a primarily a reddish brown, same as the old, dead liquid that had flooded the room. Twilight saw a bud of a horn, the smallest horn she had ever saw, protrude from its eyeless, noseless, hairless head.

Twilight had no magic. She had no tricks. Her head was pounding with the pain of her severed horn, her heart was beating out of her chest as adrenaline tore up and through her system, and she could barely breathe, her left nostril only barely beginning to clear. She walked with a limp, she was disoriented, and she felt like she was about to throw up a lung.

But she had a weapon. She could fight.

The monster, which could only really be described as Malformed, roared. It wasn't as much a roar, though, as a strangled, gurgling sound as blood spurted from seams all across the mass that was, supposedly, its body. Malformed charged Twilight, its legs showing surprising amounts of speed considering it looked and sounded as if it wasn't alive, and that it never should have been animated.

Twilight backed up before leaping to the side, raising an eyebrow as Malformed simply crashed into the wall behind her, spraying blood and sending a splatter of the thick liquid up the fleshy, breathing walls of the chamber. Twilight, breathing through her nose, suddenly recognized the sharp tang of bleach. No, not bleach.

Hydrochloric acid.

Malformed slowly turned to her again. The core of its body lurched, and it regurgitated gallons blood in Twilight's general direction. She narrowly dodged the spray, wincing as parts of it caught her pelt, causing stinging burns. *Wait a minute*, she thought as she dodged another charge from the deformed monster, *if I don't end this quickly, the acid from Malformed will accumulate on the floor! I'll be disintegrated from the hooves up!*

At that realization, she went on a sudden offensive, waiting for Malformed to charge and then leaping up behind it to its left and slashing at it. For a moment she thought she hit only air, but was rewarded for her efforts when Malformed uttered its horrifying, gurgling roar again and she saw a long seam running down its shoulder that wasn't there before.

It retaliated, though, with insurmountable, panicked speed, tackling Twilight to the ground, submerging her face in blood. Instinctively Twilight reared her back legs under her adversary and bucked, sticking her limbs deep into what must have been her attacker's heart. Malformed was thrown backward, and Twilight struggled to her hooves, gasping for the putrid air that was now her savior. She could barely see through the blood and death that surrounded her, and as her teeth began to chatter with anxiety as she saw Malformed recover, she realized something critical: her weapon had fallen into the increasingly acidic pool of separating blood.

She barely had time to let out a panicked yelp upon noticing this before Malformed was on her again, pursuing her with a primal lust, an ancient hatred. It reared, then vomited the contents of its chest cavity toward Twilight.

This time, however, she wasn't so lucky; her muscles, which were already screaming for oxygen, failed her, and acidic fire licked up her flank just over her cutie mark. She screamed as the chemical set her skin alight with terrible flares of pain. It was a feeling not unlike burning to death.

And the only thought that was going through her mind was, *So this is how I die.*

Malformed shrieked as Twilight staggered backward, her already wounded hind leg now completely numb. Her vision was blurry, one eye sealed shut, her only weapon submerged in death. But she wasn't done yet. Even if she was going to die, she was taking this *thing* with her. A last act of spite to the world that didn't even give her a fighting chance.

*I'm so sorry, Spike.*

As Malformed broke into a gallop, aiming to stab Twilight through the heart with its tiny horn, she twisted violently to the side, then, as a last-ditch effort, wrapped her front hooves around her adversary's neck, and squeezed. A dull crunching found her ears as she smashed its trachea and snapped its spinal cord, and she felt the vibrations that rang through its neck as Malformed gurgled its final death throes. Twilight's front limbs were on fire from the monster's acidic skin, and she could feel her pelt beginning to rub off as she struggled to hang on, but she didn't care.

Malformed collapsed, and Twilight fell alongside it, propping herself up on its body so that she could at least breathe, at least offer herself one last chance at survival, one last, fleeting opportunity to see Spike and Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy and Celestia and all her other friends again. She leaned against blood so that she wouldn't have to succumb to the death that crept up to her chest, soaking her half-burnt-off pelt in brown.

She couldn't feel three of her legs. Her breath was a slow wheeze. Any little movement she made caused her pain threefold anything she had felt before, and she knew that the acid around her legs and torso was slowly digesting her, as well. No pony won that fight. Not Twilight, and certainly not Malformed.

And as Twilight felt the darkness approach her, as she saw spots perform ballet on all that she saw, she whispered to no pony in particular, *I tried so hard. Please, just... please...*

But even as she began her journey into the ultimate darkness, she didn't quite know what she was asking for.