



The module door opened, and Twilight saw a number of familiar heads turn in her direction.

"She's back!" Rarity gasped, standing up, along with the others.

"Twilight! Oh Twilight, are you okay?" Pinkie cried with wide eyes and flat ears, her hooves shooting around Twilight's shoulders before wrapping her in a hug.

"Pinkie Pie, I'm fine, it's alright!" Twilight wheezed beneath Pinkie's crushing embrace.

"Pinkie, we discussed this, don't crowd the poor girl!" Applejack said, dragging the party pony off before approaching Twilight herself.

"Twi, you okay hon'? Anything you need?"

"Oh," Twilight said. "No, I'm fine, really, nothing happened. He actually just wanted to talk."

Though Applejack was barely audible, the others caught Twilight just fine and wore similarly blank faces.

"*Really?*" Applejack asked.

"Hey, Tumbler!" Rainbow Dash shouted, drawing the tan stallion over.

"Yes mum?"

And then Rainbow kicked him in the shins.

"Yargh!" Tumbler cried, holding up his hoof gingerly. "What the bloody hoof was *that* for?!"

"Fer' making us all sick worryin' about our friend, you creep!"

"I told ya' we knew nothin' for sure!" Tumbler shouted back.

"Well," Rarity began, "What did you talk about then?"

Twilight explained everything about the visit she could remember. From his living quarters to his sad, sordid history, and finally to his reasoning.

"Two ponies?" Rainbow Dash asked, head tilting to the side as her frown deepened by the second. "It only took *two* ponies for him to decide *everypony* needed to be taught a lesson?"

"It's crazy is what it is!" Applejack added. "I don't know much a' anything about how things're done where he comes from, but he's got no right to take his problems out on us!"

"Well sure," Twilight argued, "*we* know that. But he's come here from a life and a world that was cruel to him since he was a baby... A world he tried to save, and a world that rejected him for it. Now, here he is being rejected by *us*. Can you even imagine?"

Rarity stuck up her nose. "*I* never rejected anypony."

"No, but—" Twilight began, "Look, even if he's crazy he's definitely not stupid. *Everypony* here thought anything that made weapons like these must be dangerous and insane."

"Uh... I dunno if you noticed Twilight," Rainbow countered, "but 'dangerous' and 'insane' are *exactly* how I'd describe him."

"That's beside the point!" Twilight snapped. "The point is, he found himself alone, stolen away from everything he cared enough to save. He sacrificed everything to make a better world, and they banished him here for it. I don't agree with what he's done, but I can really understand what drove him to do it. He hates the idea, but he really *is* the product of a tortured life. He's lost so much that all he wants to do is see others feel his pain..."

"That just makes him a bully!" Fluttershy exclaimed. "Bullies are just ponies who make other ponies feel worse so *they* can feel better about themselves!"

"Yeah!" Pinkie agreed.

"It just didn't sound that simple," Twilight said. "It's more like he hates that nopony understands him, so he's trying to *make* us understand."

"Yer' not gonna tell me it's working, are ya'?" Applejack asked.

"I— I don't know," Twilight admitted. "I don't relate to him yet. In some ways, I *can't*. But I can't help feeling sorry for him."

Rainbow groaned, "Twilight, I don't get it! How did you go from wanting to rip this guy to *pieces* to defending him?"

"I'm not defending anything he's done!" Twilight cried, "He's done *horrible* things! I can't forgive him for how much he's hurt me, but it doesn't mean I want to hurt him *back*..."

"Besides, it didn't make me feel any better when I did."

"Did?" Rarity said. "Did *what* Twilight?"

"Well, I got really upset with him at one point, and I think he was getting tired of it, so... he told me to just hit him."

There was a pause as they stared at Twilight.

"*What?!*"

"He *told* you to hit him?" Rainbow asked blankly, before grinning ear to ear. "*Did* you?!"

"I wasn't going to at first, but he goaded me into it."

"And?" Rainbow Dash said expectantly, practically bouncing in place on the tips of her hooves.

"I bucked him in the chest," Twilight finally deadpanned, to Rainbow's hooting approval.

"Woulda' gone for the face myself. But center-mass works too."

"Given recently discovered horrors," Rarity sneered, "I'd have aimed *much* lower..."

"His tummy?" Pinkie wondered aloud to the elaboration of nopony.

"Look, that's not important," Twilight insisted, "What *is*, is that he called me up there to warn us he *knew* we were hatching an escape plan!"

"Did he say anything specific about it?" Applejack asked, to which Twilight shook her head.

"Well, that's no mystery then," Rainbow snorted. "He's bluffing. Of *course* we'd try to escape this funhouse! He doesn't know anything."

"I know, I considered that too," Twilight agreed, "but either way, according to him his security isn't interested in taking prisoners anymore if we escape. It won't be like last time."

Rarity grimaced. "Well, it's not like we can stay here."

"I'm with Rarity," Applejack declared, "Whatever the danger's like, every second we sit here is another second Celestia's blind to an invasion heading her way."

"You're right..." Twilight slowly agreed, "...getting back to Canterlot has to be our first priority. I just..."

"You don't want to see anypony else get hurt," Applejack said.

"I was so afraid earlier..." Twilight sniffed, "...I— I thought I was going to lose three more of the best friends I've ever had..."

"Aw, Twilight...!" Rarity cooed, hugging her fearful friend.

"I love you girls..." Twilight told them. "You're family to me, all of you..."

"Eh," Rainbow Dash groaned, "This is getting a bit mushy for me. But Twi', I'd follow you *anywhere* girl. If something happens to me, I don't want you blaming yourself. I *want* to come with you guys."

"I think that goes for all of us," Applejack agreed with a grin.

For a time, it was silence as Twilight smiled at her friends. If there was one consolation to all of this, it was that her friends were with her to give her strength. Pinkie, however, had yet another.

"Well," Pinkie told them. "There's *one* bit of good news."

"What's that Pinkie?" Twilight asked, lips parting slightly.

"Well," Pinkie explained, "he wouldn't bother stopping us if he wasn't a *little* afraid Princess Celestia could do something to stop him. Otherwise, he wouldn't *care* if we got away, would he?"

"Ha!" Applejack exclaimed, "It's always the bright side for you, 'aint it?"

Pinkie posture was suddenly rigid. "Well *yeah!* Just 'cause I'm not *afraid* of the dark doesn't mean I like it all that much. Unless Princess Luna's involved: I love her sense of humor!"

"Alright then," Rarity said, "We'll wait until everypony is asleep, and then, we'll leave this dreadful place behind."

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The passage of time was a difficult thing to gauge in this place, but Mandeville had the decency to dim the lights and color them a mild blue. It almost felt like moonlight, *almost*. One by one, the six friends pretended to head off to the bathroom. It was a bit of a squeeze, but they found they could fit through the hole the commode had been mounted to.

They wanted to avoid suspicion if CAIRO was watching, but they also needed to move fast. Once CAIRO realized he'd been fooled, they weren't going to have much time. Discovery would mean death.

As before, beneath the tile was a field of hydraulic arms. The unfortunate part of this plan was how blind they were to what lay ahead. Without a means of removing their restraints, they had no magic or wing-power to help them.

"I don't like this." Twilight's jaw clenched as she stared down the murky skeleton of the structure. "We should have scouted some of this out first. If we hit a dead-end, we—"

"There's no goin' back now," Rainbow said. "We get outta' here or we die trying."

There was silence as they looked out into the unknown.

"So." Applejack shifted uncomfortably. "Which way, y'all?"

"Well, I know Mandeville's home is that way." Twilight pointed. "And I'm guessing he'd make sure he was as deep and difficult to reach as possible."

"So we head the other way." Rainbow nodded.

"No point sittin' 'round here," Applejack said, "Once he figures we're missin' this'll be the first place he'll look."

"Wait!" Pinkie cried, making them all whip around.

"What?! What is it?!" Twilight demanded, searching wildly for trouble.

"Eye-flutter..." Pinkie began, eyelids corresponding. "Knee-twitch... Sh~sh~sh~shaky~shakes!"

They eyed Pinkie as she shook like she was freezing, until it wobbled out of her system entirely and her eyes narrowed.

"We're bein' *followed!*"

"Followed?" Twilight parroted, eyebrows drawing together. "Is this more Pinkie-Sense?"

"I don't see anypony," Rainbow said, searching in all directions. "You sure that's what it means?"

"Positive!" Pinkie glanced upward thoughtfully. "I mean, I *think* so... Or it could just mean that taffy went on sale somewhere..."

"Uh... huh." Twilight groaned. "Well, keep a lookout just in case everypony."

And so they struck out. They soon found that the stables weren't the only part of this structure. Several buildings interconnected, and every now and then they found thick girders running through them. After a few minutes, they heard a familiar sound.

"Was that—?" Rainbow asked, frowning.

Fluttershy finished Rainbow's thoughts. "A cow?"

"Mandeville has been foalnapping cows too?" Twilight chest tightened. "What in Equestria does he needs cows for?"

"Let's find out," Applejack said, moving to a nearby tile and pressing the gem-like button at its

base. With a hiss, the tile lowered, allowing them access to the room above.

"Somepony stay down here n' hit that button if it closes again." Applejack stepped onto the tile before bounding up into the room.

Twilight, Rarity and Rainbow Dash followed suit, into a room with similar dimensions to the stables. A herd of cows milled around the room, a few of them taking notice of the new arrivals.

"Ulgh, it *reeks* in here!" Rainbow groaned, holding a hoof up to her nose.

"Oh my *stars!*" Rarity exclaimed, curling her lip as her inner brows shot skward. "I don't see a powder room anywhere! Where—?"

"What are those things on the floor? *No!* Are those—?!" Rarity, if possible, turned even whiter. "Oh Celestia, the *horror!*"

"Oh, gross!" Twilight agreed, nose scrunched-up against the powerful odor.

"Stay calm y'all," Applejack said, addressing the cows. "M'name's Applejack! We're in the middle of an escape from this place. Can anypony here tell us what Mandeville wants with you folks?"

Several of the cows backed off at the sight of the ponies entering the room, but otherwise ignored them.

"Uh... Y'all speak Equish?" Applejack asked, eyes darting from cow to cow in vain.

"Allow me, dear." Rarity stepped towards one of the cows. "Excuse us madam, any information you could give us would be of use to Celestia if we hope to perform a suitable rescue."

The cow only grunted, staring at them with beady, blank eyes.

"What's wrong with them?" Twilight asked, unable to tear her eyes away from those eyes. Eyes devoid of the spark of intelligence. They were like zombies. "This is so... *wrong.*"

I-I," Applejack stammered. "I plum don't know!"

"You know," came a male voice from the walls, "I'm rather disappointed Sparkle. I at least expected you'd make it farther than this."

"*Mandeville!*" Twilight gasped, her eyes shooting open and her muscles tightening. "Everypony *RUN!*"

"Nope," Mandeville said simply, and the tiles lowered as one, forcing Pinkie and Fluttershy from

their refuge. "Not this time."

The tiles raised together and sealed, trapping them once more. The ponies put their backs to each other, expecting the worst.

"What have you done to them?!" Twilight demanded, glancing at the cows out of the corner of her eyes. "Why are these cows like this?!"

Mandeville's laughter reverberated through the room in response.

"*What's so funny?*" Applejack snapped.

"There's nothing *wrong* with those cows," Mandeville answered, "They're from *my* Earth. They came here with me. They're not like the ones you know here."

"Why can't they talk?" Twilight asked. "I don't understand."

"Well, they lack the kind of sophisticated vocal chords for speech, firstly," Mandeville said. "But aside from that, they lack the sophisticated *brains* to comprehend language of any sophistication. In other words, they're dumb as rocks. Like nearly all hoofed animals."

"Hey!" Pinkie recoiled, examining her own hoof. "That's just *rude!*"

"Well, this world is obviously different somehow. We have horses where I come from too. Just dumb, earth-toned animals that graze and walk and defecate wherever they roam. Where I come from, humans are the only intelligent species."

Th— the *only* ones? Not even ponies?" Fluttershy asked.

"You're even alone in your own world," Twilight remarked sadly. "But why keep them prisoner then?"

"*Prisoner!*" Mandeville laughed explosively. "*Prisoner*, she says... They're not prisoners, Sparkle, they're *livestock*. I keep a herd here as part of my own personal food supply."

They collectively gasped at the statement.

"You *eat* cows?!" Pinkie asked in horror.

"Not raw. As steaks, cuts, cooked up nice. Humans are omnivores."

"You have a choice, and you *still* kill cows for meat?!" Fluttershy demanded hotly.



"I dunno," Mandeville said, "they taste good."

"I— I don't suppose you eat... ponies?" Rarity asked.

"Not where I come from," he answered. "Some creatures are exempt. Pets, endangered species, insects... Pretty much anything that's not a mammal or fish. Besides, I couldn't find it in me to eat something intelligent."

"But this hardly matters now."

On queue, all four walls opened large enough for one CID to step in from each. They trained their weapons on the group and waited, still as stone.

"You should have listened to me Sparkle," Mandeville said, "I really had no desire for things to end like this, but I'll be sure it's quick. There's no point in letting you suffer further. I want you to know, I won't be watching this. Call me sentimental... I like you."

"Adrian, *please*," Twilight pled.

"*Stop calling me that!*" Mandeville shouted. "You're not going to endear yourself to me by calling me by my first name. Goodbye, Twilight Sparkle, and... well, I never really learned the rest of your names. I remember something about Jack Daniels... Anyway, comfort each other while you can. Your part in this is over."

They could tell Mandeville's voice had left them, and all that was left were them and the CID.

"I can't believe this is happenin'..." Applejack stared at the CID.

"I— I'm not ready to d- ...to d-...!" Fluttershy moaned, cowering in a huddle before she felt a hoof around her neck. Rainbow smiled sadly back at her.

"At least," Twilight said, "we're doing this together."

Pinkie then somehow managed to crush the entire group in a hug, and suddenly they smiled in spite of themselves.

And at once, several things happened. The CID stepped forward to take their shots, and a tile in the floor sank down, drawing their attention. From the darkness, something that looked like a steel and glass pineapple bounced in front of the friends.

"Grenade," the CID cried together, before a blinding flash and an ear-splitting sound overtook them all.

Twilight felt a surge of energy rushing by her, but found she was unharmed, save for her eyes. She heard the sound of several heavy objects clattering onto the metal, and something that sounded like the crackling of electricity. She opened her eyes and found herself barely able to see from the flash, but she could ascertain that the lights in the room had all gone out. That, or she was blind.

Cows mooed in panic, stampeding however they could in such a small space, the noise of hooves on metal a deafening cacophony. And then from below a great, blurry purple light entered Twilight's vision, and she heard a female voice call out to her.

"Snap out of it you foals, we don't have long! Follow me, and be quick about it!"

"Who's that?" Pinkie asked.

"It's not important right now, just run!" another, male voice replied from below, as the light ducked into the open tile. Twilight jumped down, her vision only just beginning to clear, and joined her friends in following the two figures through the maze of tile arms.

One thing she could tell now was that one of the pair had hooves which clopped loudly on the metal as they ran. The other was a much quieter two-step, though a clattering sound accompanied it, as if the figure were carrying a length of chains. She also noticed that while they were in a hurry, they weren't traveling as fast as any of them could go. It was strange.

"Here," the male said simply, stopping as the mystery mare held her violet light up to a huge horizontal girder crossing the floor. The male then stepped into the light, and pulled something in the girder open with his—

"Hands," Twilight breathed, as the figure pointed a finger inside.

"Come on, hurry hurry, inside!"

In single file, the group scrambled into the orange girder, the human stepping in last and crouching as he pulled it shut again.

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Mandeville tried his best to occupy his mind with his computer. Specifically, a game on the computer. Wasn't much else he *could* do. The Internet was a Universe —perhaps even *several* Universes— away.

It hadn't taken him long to get bored after arriving in Equestria. He suspected there was a lot of absurdity in that notion. Surely plenty of people would *love* to trade his Earth for this one, full of

peace-loving pony-people who lived happy, carefree lives in this idealized world. Even *he* was tempted early on to make merry with the ponies, maybe shut CAIRO down and leave this place buried and hidden.

But there was no such thing as a clean-slate. He was marked. He would *always* be marked.

Oh sure, they might have welcomed him, he might have lived among them happily, for a time. But he would always be a stranger. That alien who moved into town. The guy who ate meat, but was trying to change. The guy who made weapons of unbelievable power.

He'd always be silently judged. The foals would whisper when they passed his lawn, about how he was a monster who might zap you with his death-ray if your ball bounced into his backyard. He'd take twice as long to be trusted by any of them with *anything* as they might trust one of their own.

And it wasn't fair.

Mandeville took his aggression out on a digital Korean soldier, throttling him with a black-gloved hand and throwing him like a stone into a nearby shack, which collapsed as though it were made of balsa wood. Satisfying. But it could only *partly* stave-off the second pang of guilt he'd felt in the past few days.

First Trixie, now Sparkle and her friends...

The normal ponies died sometimes in the testing, but he'd never met them. They were just announcements, names and numbers.

He'd liked Trixie. Arrogant to be sure, but in a cute way.

Ponies could be genuinely cute. Not the forced sort of cute, where some profit-bingeing cigar-chompers make something with an enormous head, ridiculous eyelashes and fat glossy lips before then nuking them with every garish pink and purple of the girly-spectrum. *Real* cute. 'Kittens on Youtube' cute.

Then there was Sparkle. He supposed she was cute too, in a dorky way. At least he picked up on that before she figured out he'd done in her pet. From there it was glaring and screaming. Still, she'd heard his story. And he had to admit: for being the murderer of her BFF, she had really seemed to... *understand*.

That in itself was fascinating. He'd done *nothing* to Peppermint, yet the stallion had attacked him in futility without even asking for his version of events. Contrariwise, Twilight Sparkle almost felt a kinship with him. He could feel it. A bond of sorts, likely helped by his offer to be kicked across the room.

It all came down to the same thing: She had felt something for him because she knew what suffering was. She didn't have to *imagine* what being without a mother was like. She took the emptiness in her own heart and imagined it getting worse.

Bam.

In the game, his stealth-run ended by hawking a grenade into a massive fuel tank, which exploded happily, making a martyr of the poor soldier he'd caught inside the nearby outhouse. Oldschool games had their charm, if nothing else...

Peppermint and the mare had been shocked by the horrors of his childhood, but neither of them were close to tears.

But Twilight was. Twilight hadn't pitied him: she had felt *empathy*. Really, Twilight was the closest thing he'd found to a real friend in Equestria, sad as it was. He was going to miss her...

It only made things clearer though: if he was to be accepted, they had to know his pain.

"Alert!" CAIRO said. "Intruders detected in Dairy Annex. Intruders detected in Dairy Annex."

"Hmm?" Mandeville groaned, his eyes drifting towards the ceiling. "Isn't that where we left Sparkle?"

"Correct."

"Put it on screen," Mandeville ordered.

"Unable to comply. Annex was struck by a burst from an Electromagnetic Pulse grenade."

"*What?*" Mandeville exclaimed, brows knitting. "Couldn't have been the ponies, right? Even without those collars they wouldn't know to set off an EMP."

"Correct. Escapees were accounted for. Intruder is a third party."

"Son of a *bitch*." Mandeville stood up from his chair. "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

"That we have encountered this party before?"

"Yeah." Mandeville strode across his room to a porthole. "And let me guess: the tracking implants were fried too, so we can no longer track those girls?"

"Correct."

Mandeville grunted in response, not taking his eyes away from the facility outside. "You never left," Mandeville whispered to no one. "I thought you were here and gone, you son of a bitch, but you've been here the whole time."

"Shall I have the drones begin a 'search and destroy' cycle?" CAIRO suggested.

"Yes," Mandeville said, nodding. "But not Sparkle, the purple one. Have her re-captured."

"I see. Her productivity was invaluable during her work cycle."

"Huhm?" Mandeville croaked, eyes to the ceiling. "Sure. 'Productivity.' "

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Twilight stared ahead as she climbed through the dark steel tunnel, at the one pony in the world that she hated.

Trixie's unexpected presence and role in rescuing them was the only thing keeping her mouth closed as they followed the dark-haired human and his flashlight. To where, she had no idea, but it was probably more reliable than aimlessly wandering.

Twilight guessed they had to be a few hundred yards away from where they started. It was difficult to tell, having already made three turns when faced with the junction of one of the massive vertical girders. The gap wasn't much, but the hollow vertical girders went down for what looked like forever. All the while, the girder rattled and groaned with the sounds of horizontal girders moving along above and below them. The human didn't seem afraid, however, which was helpful.

She'd barely caught a glimpse of the human's features when they first ducked into these girders. Aside from his neck, most of what she saw of his body was black. His clothes were black, his hair was black, his —saddlebag?— was black.

Even the two guns slung over his back were black. Or at least a very dark grey. She could tell they were guns, but they were far removed from what she'd seen attached to the CID. Both of them were appropriately long, and both had pump-like mechanisms on the underside —which the CID's versions lacked— but that was where the similarities ended. The back-end of one of them was folded-up somehow, with a tall bar raised over its body, which housed what looked like half a set of binoculars —a *monocular*?— on top. The other was longer, and looked like a rounded plastic box, save for the bit that looked like a small tire fixed crosswise under the barrel and in front of the pump-like mechanism.

Just how many ways did you need to kill something?

Whenever the human turned to address them, he would do so holding his light towards them. His face was lost in the shadows. The one good glimpse she'd gotten of it was the start. She recalled thinking the human's face looked youthful, and he certainly moved at a decent clip for an upright biped slogging through a tunnel mired with cables.

She hadn't figured these girders were hollow inside, but the lengths of pipe, cables and wires explained why. There had to be *some* reason they could move, after all. And naturally it made them lighter, which was important if these things moved like they did.

And with that, Twilight found an immediate concern. "Um, sir?" Twilight said cautiously.

He didn't bother to turn around. "This need to be said right now?"

"Yes."

"Well, say it quick. Those CID have damn good ears, and this'd be about the worst possible place to get caught."

"What happens if these beams start moving?" Twilight asked, the other ponies vocalizing their agreement.

"These ones aren't moving any time soon," he answered. "These pipes feed into long-term structures. The power runs through rails built into the girders so everything can run while they move, but plumbing and other stuff has to be fed-in and unplugged every time. You stick to a route with pipes running through it, you tend to be safe. Everything else is a gamble."

"Oh," Twilight sighed with a smile, "well that makes sense."

"Good. And if that'll be all, no more talking till I give the all-clear. Ask whatever you like *then*."

Twilight distinctly heard a few of her friends grumbling. No doubt Rainbow would be slow to trust another human, leave alone be ordered around by one.

Pinkie was being surprisingly quiet. Perhaps it was being placed in the third situation in a short period of time where she'd anticipated death or terrible injury, but somehow even *she* maintained a stony silence.

Soon they passed the steady rumbling of machines, terrifying in its loudness. They found they were being joined by several more pipes in an increasingly confined space, until the human stopped, laying his simian fingers over the side of the wall. Pressing firmly, he forced the panel open into a world of steam and pale blue light.

"Alright kiddies," the human said at last, "welcome home."

He crouched as he ducked outside, beckoning them all to follow. Trixie went next, and soon Twilight stepped out, pausing a moment to notice the panel the human had pressed out. There was graffiti on it, words etched into the metal saying, 'home, sweet home.'

The blue light was coming from the open top of some manner of cistern, the caustic reflections of rippling water cast onto the ceiling above, like at an aquarium. The reason for the steam was less obvious, but being in the presence of water at least ensured it made sense.

"This is a water treatment mod," he told them, now fully visible in the light. "If any of you are thirsty, I suggest you hydrate and store as much water as you can. We rest here and bug-out in twenty-minutes."

He was younger than Mandeville, certainly. His brown eyes gleamed with youth and intelligence, yet his tone was commanding. "By the way, I think Trixie can get those restraints off you."

Trixie nodded, pointing her glowing horn towards Twilight, who heard a lot of clicking and scratching behind her neck. Finally the pressure on her horn and neck left her, and the apparatus clattered on the floor. *Relief at last.*

Trixie set about freeing Rainbow Dash next, whose wings stretched as she groaned gratefully.

"You said we could ask questions now, right?" Rainbow asked, taking a tall stance and staring-down the ape.

He nodded. "I did. Nobody will hear anything with these machines going, so we're safe for now."

"Okay. So who the hoof *are* you, and what in the hay is Trixie doing back here *with* you?"

"Specialist Fourth-Class: Corey Webber. United States Special Forces, acting Corporal—"

"Hiya, Specialist-Fourth-Class-Corey-Webber-United-States-Special-Forces-acting-Corporal!" Pinkie blurted gleefully as she popped suddenly into Corey's view from below, practically in his lap. "I'm Pinkie Pie, and I'm from Ponyville! But then again we're *all* from Ponyville, so maybe I should have said *we're* from Ponyville instead of just me."

"Um... hi," Corey said, trying to lean his face as far from Pinkie's as possible. He offered his hand cautiously. "Nice to meet you."

"And it's *so* nice to meet *you!*" Pinkie cried, seizing his hand with her hoof and shaking it enthusiastically. "Especially since you saved our lives and all that. Boy oh boy, I've *always*

wanted to be friends with an alien! Good thing you're not like that *other* alien. He really ticks me off, y'know that? I wouldn't wanna be *his* friend. Though Twilight seems to think he might not be all that bad, but I dunno— Mfuffbbd!"

Pinkie found her motor-mouth obstructed by an orange hoof as Applejack guided her away with an apologetic smile. "Don't mind Pinkie, mister, she's just excited is all."

"Yeah," Corey agreed, staring at his hand. "How was she grabbing my hand just now?"

When none of them answered, he shook his head rapidly and found his train of thought. "But yeah, seeing as my rank doesn't mean anything here, nor does the United States, I'd probably be fine with you calling me Corey, or Webber. Be formal as you like, really doesn't matter at this point."

"A soldier," Rarity cooed. "Most *chivalrous* of you to rescue we fair mares as you did... but I must ask you something personal dear."

Rarity scrunched-up her nose as Corey slid down the cistern into a sitting position.

"Do..." Rarity said, pausing. "Do humans usually... *smell*, like that?"

"I've been stuck here about a week. No change of clothing. Can't take too much water from the system for hygiene or CAIRO will start investigating it."

"Well surely you can stand to be without *all* that clothing for a while?" Rarity said.

"Please." Corey waved his hand in a 'shooing' manner. "I've got enough trouble with the idea that I'm talking to a horse. I don't need to be reminded that you things are naked."

Rarity gasped. "I am neither a 'horse' nor a *'thing'*. I am a *unicorn*, and you would do well to remember that."

"You might as well be a pink elephant, because I'm *wholly* unconvinced that I'm not just cracked, in a coma, or dead."

"Well," Twilight said, "I can safely say you're not either of those last two."

"Says the purple unicorn with purple and pink streaks dyed into her natural midnight blue goth-girl hair," Corey chuckled.

Twilight frowned at the sentiment. "Look, I know you humans don't have magic where you come from, but... is that really so ridiculous to you?"



"I bet this shit isn't really water at all." Corey banged his fist against the side of the cistern. "It'll turn out I've just been drinking bleach this whole time."

"Okay look," Applejack said, tiring of Corey's world-weary attitude. "You answered half of Dash's question—"

"Who's 'Dash?' " Corey asked.

"I am. Rainbow Dash is the name," the Pegasus answered.

"Of *course* it is!" Corey laughed, throwing his hands up into the air.

"Like I was sayin'!" Applejack growled, "You hadn't answered about Trixie. Where'd you two meet up? How'd y'all go about rescuin' us? I'm thankful, believe me when I say, but I don't understand is all."

Corey stared over to Trixie, who looked at the floor after meeting his gaze. After a moment or so, she finally started talking. "Mandeville decided against letting Trixie go. Instead he offered her the chance to leap to her death into a fiery pit.

"He had never meant Trixie to *do* it of course. Only to scare her into staying. But she... I couldn't bear to show my face around you ponies again. So..."

"You decided to do it," Twilight deadpanned. "Is that true?"

Corey nodded. "I watched those stables a while. Trixie leaving meant something unique, so I followed her underneath the tiles. She made to leap, but I caught her.

"Had to taze her poor little backside while she was still scared and screaming," Corey continued, holding up a little grey device, which he squeezed, making an arc of electricity flash between two metal prongs. "Both to calm her down, and kill the little tracer bug they put in your brands."

"Tracer bug?" Applejack asked, eyeing her ruined cutie mark with sudden suspicion.

"It's how he found you guys back with the cows. You were never going to get away from him with those things under your skin. That EMP grenade took care of that though."

"EMP?" Rarity asked. "Twilight, do you know what he's—?"

"Electromagnetic Pulse," Corey answered. "Fries anything with an electronic circuit. Pretty harmless to living things, up to a certain point. Too much will fry your entire nervous system. Dead useful against Mandeville's tech, but I only have so many."

"So what made you decide on helpin' us?" Applejack asked.

"A few things," Corey answered. "Mostly Trixie here. Blames herself for you getting stuck here—"

Twilight snorted coldly. "With good reason."

Corey turned towards Twilight. "She convinced me to risk everything on getting you out alive. I've revealed my hand to Mandeville now, and he's going to be looking for me. I don't have the rations to feed a party this big, so we're all going to need to escape this place *now*. Be a little thankful she's gone this far out of her way to make amends. It's not like she *had* to do this. She saved your lives."

"I know that saving a life doesn't make up for costing somepony theirs," Trixie said, finally looking Twilight in the eye. "I don't expect you to forgive me, but I—"

"But you what?!" Twilight shouted, making Trixie flinch. "You thought if you did me some favors you could start feeling better about yourself?! You thought maybe that anything you did could bring Spike back, or take away *every horrible feeling* we've been subjected to in this place?! I'd rather be *dead* now than to have *ever* seen you again!"

"Look here now," Applejack said firmly. "You don't mean that. I *know* you don't mean that, Twilight Sparkle!"

"Of *course* her name is 'Twilight Sparkle,' " Corey groaned in the background. "Why *wouldn't* it be?"

"Do you have something to *say* about my name?!" Twilight demanded, rounding on Corey. "What about 'Corey'? What kind of name is that for a *human*, huh?"

"Don't you *dare* make fun of him!" Trixie said, suddenly enraged. "He saved *all* of our—!"

Trixie suddenly found herself bathed in a magenta aura, before it threw her painfully into a wall.

"How dare *you*?! How dare *you* even *speak* to me, let alone tell me what to do!"

"Twilight!" Fluttershy shouted.

"Please...!" Trixie wheezed, still under the grip of Twilight's magic. "I'm sorry...!"

"No you're not!" Twilight spat, lifting her body and shoving her against the wall. "You don't know how I *feel*! You don't even know what you're sorry *for*!"

Trixie began to choke, and the metal behind her groaned as Twilight pressed her harder and harder against it.

"Twilight, stop it *right now!*" Applejack yelled.

"Or I'll stop you myself," Corey shouted, pulling out what Twilight could only figure was a very small gun. He held it easily in one hand, his other hand pulling back part of it along the top and releasing, allowing it to slide back with a threatening 'click-click' sound. He pointed its blocky front-end at her threateningly.

"I don't suppose you set that thing up with an anti-magic spell?!" A glowing magenta bubble appearing around Twilight as she turned her attention back on Trixie.

"Twilight!" Fluttershy cried. "Please, let her go! You're better than this! You *know* you're better than this!"

"We start fighting each other now and we're *dead!*" Corey yelled.

Twilight ignored them. "I could *crush* you! I could *crush* you and it wouldn't feel as bad as *everything* I've experienced because of what you've done! Maybe I'll believe you're sorry when you know what I've been through!"

"Twilight," Applejack said sadly. "Don't ya' know who yer' soundin' like?"

Trixie gasped as air filled her lungs once more. She choked on it as the magical grip on her body slackened.

"Oh Celestia," Twilight whimpered, her eyes reduced to pinpoints as she stared at the terrified Trixie. She released her entirely, dropping her shield and stepping away.

"Mandeville was right. We're no different at all."

"Is that a remark against humans," Corey asked, finally lowering his gun, "or a remark against Mandeville?"

Twilight winced, forgetting she now had a human to impress. "Mandeville said that because our worlds and cultures are so different, he'd always be second-class to ponies in Equestria. He said he wanted to prove we weren't any better than he was.

"Bring us down... to *his* level."

"Well," Corey said, "he's not wrong. Far as I can tell, save for upbringing and diet, we're pretty similar. We get sad, we get angry. We get happy, we get hungry. Far as I'm concerned, it's less

nature and more nurture after that."

"Trixie?" Twilight grimaced, making the blue unicorn flinch. "I can't forgive you. But... thanks. For coming back for us."

"And by the way," Corey said. "Before you go on another psychotic break, make sure you know who to *really* blame for your troubles. *Me.*"

Pointed pairs of equine ears immediately perked up and pointed in Corey's direction, joined shortly by the gaze of several eyes.

"You?" Fluttershy asked.

"What makes it all *your* fault?" Rainbow added.

"*You!*" Twilight hissed, her eyes almost looking *through* Corey in their understanding. "You're one of the humans that were sent to *kill* Mandeville, for a crime he didn't commit!"

"Didn't commit, my *ass!*" Corey fired back. "His weapons were purchased directly by terrorists and used in a great bloody rampage through Paris!"

You weren't able to prove anything! You went behind the law to kill an innocent human!"

"I was under official orders."

"Hold on," Applejack said, eyebrows knit. "Are y'all saying *Corey's* the reason Mandeville and this whole hog-sized mess've turned into Equestria's problem?"

"Mandeville was a threat. Even if it *was* a clerical error, his incompetence got people killed. We couldn't risk having a resource like him backing our enemies.

"I don't even get it," he continued. "After everything you *know* he's been doing, what the living *hell* is this garbage about him being 'innocent?' "

"You didn't hear him," Twilight said, "We all know what he's done here already, so why would he bother lying about that? When he was talking about his life before, and about the terrorists and what they believed. He *hated* those kinds of people. Above everything else, he wanted to use Mandeville Arms to make your world a better place than it was.

"And then you tried to get rid of him. You stranded him, away from everything he ever knew, loved or cared about. You took his purpose in life away from him. It would be like watching your cutie mark disappear."

"I'm sorry," Corey blurted, cocking his head to one side and leaning his ear towards her.  
"Cutie-what?"

"Cutie *mark*." Applejack turned around so her left flank was visible. "It's what we call these. Pony-folk, zebras and some others have 'em. They show up whenever sompony figures out the talent that makes them unique."

"Really? I just thought they were tattoos. What do the boys call them?"

"Boys?" Fluttershy said. "Why should a cutie mark be something different to a boy?"

"Wha—? I mean, seriously?" Corey asked. "I mean, it just sounds like one of those things, you know? Girls call them *dolls*, boys call them *action figures*."

Corey received naught but knit brows and blank faces.

"Jesus, this society is *whipped*..." Corey muttered to himself. "*Horsewhipped*."

Twilight groaned impatiently. "Look, the point is he's doing this because of what *you* did! Yes, what he's doing is insane, but he's not acting, he's *reacting*. He never *wanted* any of this!"

"Fine, I was the bad guy there. It's my fault. But things are the reverse now. Mandeville is going to put a wound in this world that might kill it, and *I* don't want to see that happen.

"For better or worse, I owe you guys my help. And believe me, you're gonna *need* it."