

"R-Rainbow Dash? Are you there?"

Twilight Sparkle spun around, her eyes darting about frantically.

"Rainbow? Please! A-Answer!"

Nothing but darkness. There was only moonlight pouring in from a window.

"No... Not you too! Everypony!"

As she twisted around, she tripped over her own hoof and collapsed onto the hard flagstones.

"You can't-! No! Don't leave me!"

She weakly struggled back to her hooves, trying to quiet the ringing in her head.

"Pinkie Pie! Rarity!"

She scrambled backwards, into the moonlight.

"Applejack! Fluttershy!"

The shadows reached for her.

"Rainbow Dash! Please! No!"

She huddled into the corner beneath the window, pressed against the grimy stone.

"Don't-! I just met you all! You're my friends! You can't-!"

The shadows stretched up from the floor.

"You can't take them away from me!"

Her legs gave out, and her tear-soaked face craned up towards the shadow.

"You just can't!"

A terrible grin split its face.

"Who's going to stop me?"

The shadow leapt, and Twilight knew only darkness.

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2% presents

Dusk and Dawn: Harmony
Savagery

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The snake sensed them coming a few minutes before they even neared his hollow. With all of the

noise they created and the unfamiliar scents pouring off of them, any creature in the swamp that couldn't sense them from that far off probably wouldn't last long anyways.

They were expecting this, though. They'd been warned that a large herd of these creatures would pass by this night. There had been smaller herds in the past, and they would harass them as well as they could. Eating their supplies, biting them and leaving them injected with venom. Normally, no creature would've risked getting close enough to perform these actions, nor did they benefit the animals in any way.

But, orders were orders.

Besides, they'd quickly proven themselves to be so unobservant that there was hardly any risk at all. It was so easy, latching onto one of their ankles and slithering away before half the herd noticed anything. The snake had repeated this a few times over the last season.

Not tonight, though. Most of the animals were to leave this massive herd alone.

The snake peeked towards the entrance of its hollow. It wasn't as if any of them would notice it. It tasted the air, and sensed something of interest. A certain scent was heavy in the air—the scent of its favorite prey.

After a few seconds, it retreated back into its hollow, trying to ignore the noise and vibrations of the herd. It had already eaten lately, and besides...

Orders were orders.

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Rusty Fields didn't particularly care for mud. It got everywhere, caking his armor and badges in layers of filth. It even splashed into his eyes on more occasions that he could count. He could never tell how deep it was, leading him to stumble and plunge neck-deep into a puddle every few minutes. Even when it was shallow, whenever he lifted a leg to take another step, it would suck at his hoof as if it were actively trying to pull it back down. Overall, the march was made a messy, onerous task by all the mud. And that was just one item on the lengthy list of things he didn't care for. Bugs, roots, mist, vines... *frogs*. He kicked at one of the infernal creatures, sending it flying across the swamp.

He never voiced these complaints out loud, of course. He was a major of the Royal Army—filth and exhausting work was in the job description. Other officers may ignore that aspect and command hoof soldiers to carry or pull their transports through difficult terrain, but Major Rust was a *true* soldier. He had worked hard to gain his rank, and he wore it with the respect it deserved rather than treating it as an excuse to slack off.

He liked to think that was why he was charged with leading this operation. Behind him, a hundred and a half soldiers labored through the mire. The Somnolent Swamp was a wide expanse of land just south of a particularly persistent Dawn outpost. After a month of attacks and siege attempts, command went for a new strategy: keep the fort distracted from the front while a ground unit snuck in on its completely undefended backside, right through the swamp. By the time the Dawn rebels noticed them, it would be too late, and the Royal Army would overwhelm their stretched defenses.

Perhaps this would've been done earlier if it weren't for the number of reported disappearances in the swamp. Small teams of three to six soldiers had ventured into the wilderness multiple times in the past, but only half of them had ever reported back, never finding out what had caused other

squads to vanish entirely. Rusty Fields wasn't concerned, though. If anything could cause over a hundred soldiers to "disappear" at once, he'd eat his badges. Perhaps a drone or two from the edges would get lost, but that was it.

He took a brief glance backwards, making sure the drones right behind him were in line. (The word line being used loosely—swamps were hardly ideal for tight formations.) The soldiers, in uniformly black coats, indigo armor, and layers of mud, kept their heads rigidly forward, staring at nothing. Rust was surprised they didn't trip twice as often as he did. He turned back, suppressing a shudder. Those soulless eyes were as creepy as buck.

"Sir!"

He turned his head to the saluting soldier, a sergeant, speaking to him. "What is it?" he asked gruffly without slowing down. He didn't care if it meant slipping into more mud; the pace had to remain as steady as possible.

"The scouts have returned. The assault on the fort is well underway. At our current pace, we should be there in an hour."

Rust raised a brow. "That's it? No abnormalities?" he asked.

"Um, no! Sir!"

"Then what are you wasting my time for?" he snapped, causing the soldier to wince. "Get back in formation if there's nothing I need to know!"

He was clearly nervous, but he didn't move away. "I also have a message from Captain Silver Watch!" he explained quickly.

Rust gave him a glare that clearly said, "*Then hurry up and give it.*"

The sergeant licked his lips nervously. "She says that she can't help but notice your illness is wearing you out, and it may be prudent for you to step down from command at this point in time."

This got a short barking laugh. "Is that it?" Rust sneered. "I get a rash and she thinks I ought to step down?"

"She consulted our medics!" he responded hurriedly. "They unanimously agree that you are in poor health, and that you should seek immediate treatment!"

"And let her take credit for finally bringing down this blasted fort?" Rust leaned into the soldier, who just silently bit his lip. "You tell that mare I like her ambition, but the one who's bringing down the Dawn tonight will be me, rashes be damned."

He only nodded and moved back. Rust turned his head to watch the sergeant disappear between the lines of drones behind him. While he was looking back, his hoof suddenly hit a high-rising root, sending him stumbling into the mud. He shoved himself back up almost immediately, ignoring the protests of his aching muscles. Captain Silver was correct to an extent, and that was another thing he didn't care for.

Ever since that moonrise, just about every muscle in his body was sore—as if he had run ten marathons the night before—and each breath felt constricted. It only got worse as the night dragged on. Every step he took and every order he shouted burned. Rust thought he had hid it well so far, but on second thought, of course the medics wouldn't be fooled. He just hadn't

counted on them siding with the captain. Nevertheless, he would stand by what he had said to the sergeant: like hell he was letting any illness get in his way today.

Minutes dragged by. Rust kicked another frog. That was the third one in the last minute. Where were all of these blasted amphibians coming from? He glanced about. The frogs weren't easy to spot, being the same blend of greens and browns as the rest of the swamp, but he could see too many of them for his liking. Hell, some were actually hopping alongside his march. He knew he shouldn't have much to fear from frogs—after all, they were all insectivores—but he was getting crawls up his spine from seeing so many of them hopping into view. There was something about the frogs that he knew he should've remembered, but it escaped him. He looked forward, and nearly jumped out of his skin at the glowing teal eyes in front of him.

"Bucking hell!" he cried, snatching at the trigger of his shoulder-mounted rifle and firing. The eyes didn't react, but only started drifting closer. "What the-?" He stepped back nervously before remembering himself. "Identify yourself!" he bellowed. Behind him, the line of soldiers shambled to a stop with him.

They weren't just eyes any more. The hooded figure had stepped into a patch of moonlight. It was clearly a pony from the silhouette, but still all he could see were those eyes burning into his own.

"This is your second and last chance!" Rust roared, signaling the drones to ready their muskets. "Identify yourself!"

The figure stared unblinkingly at him for a moment longer, and then a yellow hoof emerged from the folds of the cloak. It moved up and pushed the hood down, revealing a roughly cut pink mane. Under her neck, part of a golden necklace embedded with a butterfly-shaped gemstone was visible.

"The Wildcaller," he gasped, before pointing a hoof forward. "FIRE!" he roared, and the drones immediately obeyed, the front line aiming their muskets around him and firing as one. A dozen bullets shot at her, but she didn't move an inch. A second later, she was still standing there unharmed, as her cloak flapped softly.

Rust, stunned, shook his head in disbelief. Muskets were unreliable at the best of times, but with a dozen shots at this range, *at least* one shot should've hit her. "Again!" The first line dropped to their knees while the line behind them took aim and fired with their own resounding *bangs*. This time, Rust kept careful watch through the collective cloud of smoke. He could barely see the paths of bullets by the moonlight reflecting off of them, and could see that none of them actually hit her. He also saw her wings blur for a split second before the drones had fired. She didn't have magic, it was just some pegasus trick. Rust could deal with that.

"You shouldn't waste ammunition like that."

He nearly jumped. The voice had been as quiet as a whisper, but he could hear every word clearly, even from this distance. He grit his teeth. "Ready your weapons," he commanded the drones. As dozens of spears pointed forwards, he began shouting at the pony. "Wildcaller! Surrender yourself right now, and I promise to take you unharmed!"

Her eyes still bore into his. "No. I'll ask *you* to surrender, major," she said in that same soft tone. "You and everypony under your command must put down your arms and follow me."

Rust nearly laughed. "Oh, you know my rank! It must be witchcraft!" he cried in mock despair. "Listen, I have over a hundred armed soldiers at my back! You're just one pony! Why should I be scared of you?"

She tilted her head. "Isn't being an Element enough for you?" she asked. "This isn't the first time I've stopped an army this size."

He spat at her in response. "That's what I think of your Element, Wildcaller! You're nothing more than a witch with a few flashy tricks! All you've done so far was ask me to surrender. Tell me, why should I even consider it?"

The cloaked pony just gazed at him. Eventually, she spoke again. "Because you'll die within six hours if you don't."

His breath caught in his throat. "What makes you say that?" he growled.

"Surely you've noticed. A minor rash on the left side of your neck? Soreness in every muscle, especially your limbs? Shortness of breath?"

A shiver crawled up his spine. "What are you saying?"

Her hoof extended from under the folds of her cloak. In the moonlight, the small, pale bug clinging to her leg was clearly visible. "A Grim Creeper," her airy voice announced. "One of the world's deadliest spiders. I snuck it into your tent as you slept last gloom." The hoof retreated back into the cloak. "It's next to unheard of this side of Equestria, so it's no surprise none of your medics picked up on it. The venom is relatively slow-acting, but it's inevitably fatal if left untreated. I'd say you have only an hour before the effects of the venom become irreversible. At this rate, even if you were to turn and head straight for medical assistance this second, every muscle cell in your body will die one by one, ending with the ones in your heart."

Rust gaped at her, before contorting his face in outrage. "You poisoned me in my sleep?" he bellowed. "And you have the gall to claim you represent Kindness!" He snorted, pawing at the soggy ground angrily. "Tell me, if I'm so doomed anyways, why should I surrender my army to you?"

Her cloak opened again, but this time, a small white rabbit hopped out. It waved a paw around, making sure he could see the small vial of liquid it was holding.

"In the vial is a dose of anti-venom," she explained. "If you surrender, I'll administer it to you. It won't save you on its own, but you'll survive long enough to be given a more complete treatment."

He just scowled at the pair. He could swear the rabbit was scowling back, but the glowing eyes of the cloaked pony captured more of his attention. "I see," he eventually said. "This is a trick, isn't it?"

No response.

"Yeah, it has to be. You're the Element of Kindness, aren't you? Dooming a pony to a slow death by poison? There's nothing kind about that. It's just a fancy trick you've used on other soldiers. You're going to give me that cure no matter what I choose, aren't you?"

Still nothing.

"Look here, lady," he grinned easily. "Why don't you just tell your pet to hand over that stuff, and I'll go along with my assault, alright?"

Neither the pony nor the rabbit moved for several seconds. Finally, the pony sighed, looking

down. For a moment, her pink mane obscured her eyes. "Very well," she said, looking back up. She nodded at the rabbit. Rust grinned triumphantly.

Then the rabbit threw the vial at its feet and stomped on it.

Rusty Fields gaped at the shining shards of glass scattered on the soggy ground.

"That was foolish of you," the cloaked pony told him.

That broke him out of his daze. "CHARGE!" He roared as he launched forward and drew his saber. Immediately, the drones sprang behind him, pointing their shoulder-mounted spears at the cloaked pony. However, they soon stopped as she *Stared* at them. Her eyes seemed to consume Rust's field of vision until all he could see were those baleful, teal orbs. He froze up mid-charge, unable to make himself look away. Behind him, every single soldier was rendered equally unable to act.

At the edge of his consciousness, he could make out her voice speaking again, but amplified as if it was coming through a megaphone. "Anypony who does not wish to serve Nightmare Moon, throw down your weapons!"

Blood pounded in Rust's head. He just knew every single soldier in his troop could hear her. Still caught in the Stare, he tilted his head until his saber was poking his own leg. With a quick jerk, he cut a shallow, but long scratch. Focusing on the pain, he tore his eyes out of the Stare. "NO!" he bellowed backwards at his troops. "Kill anypony who drops their weapon!" He charged forward again, keeping his eyes at the cloaked pony's feet. The rabbit there spread its short arms protectively, but he ignored it entirely. He readied his saber to strike the damned witch down...

But one of the frogs caught his eye. Its throat was bulging.

He remembered. It was too obvious. This was the Somnolent Swamp, named for the variety of frogs that lived there.

Hundreds of Somnolent Swamp Frogs, scattered about and within Major Rust's unit, simultaneously croaked up a thick cloud of purple sleeping gas.

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Fluttershy watched as the officer and the mass of soldiers behind him disappeared under the purple fog. The gas reached towards her, but she softly flapped her wings under the cloak, forming an air bubble of sorts around her that held the gas at bay. She sighed and shook her head sadly.

There was a pressure on her front leg as her rabbit rested a paw there, looking up at her. "I know, Angel," she said. She stepped forward.

Then a shot rang out. Angel stumbled backwards, but Fluttershy immediately scooped him up in a hoof. Her wings flared out, shoving the cloak out of the way, and she flapped up to a tree branch. Another shot rang out from the gas, but it flew wide.

She landed in the crook of a branch and the trunk of the tree, well obscured from the ground, and set Angel down. The bullet had only grazed him, but it left a long scratch along the left side of his head. Fluttershy only bent down, licked the wound down its length, and blew on it before turning away from him. Below, the soldier was searching the treetops, swinging his gun around as he scanned for her through the branches and the mist. There was a cloth wrapped around the

muzzle of his helmet, acting as a filter from the fading gas. She looked back up, drew in a breath, and let out a piercing shriek.

Rust jerked at the abrupt noise, nearly firing off another shot, but he stopped himself. Just because his new gun had multiple shots didn't make him any less vulnerable if he had to reload. He scanned around, trying to pinpoint where the shriek had come from, but the gas and darkness made it impossible to see anything. Suddenly, another noise crashed out through the undergrowth. He turned just in time to see a massive mantichore leap at him.

With a gasp, he dove forward just as the predator slammed down behind him, splashing him with yet another layer of mud. He ignored it and rolled away, avoiding the barbed tail that would've impaled his head were he a second slower. The mantichore growled out, whirling on him with both forepaws outstretched. Rust just looked up at the beast and grinned. Too easy.

His gun rang out twice. One bullet hit its exposed chest, and the other took out an eye. With a pained roar, the mantichore stumbled backwards, but it suddenly lashed out with a massive paw. Rust jerked backwards, just barely getting away with his face intact. Instead, its claw snagged on the cloth over his helmet, wrenching it off. He momentarily panicked, but decided that if the mantichore hadn't been affected yet, enough of the gas must've faded so that the air was breathable again.

Then the beast lurched back onto its front paws, facing away, and fled, leaving a blinking Rust behind. That couldn't be right. Two bullet wounds should've enraged the mantichore, not cause it to flee.

There was a whoosh of wind. Rust whipped around and spotted an unholy monstrosity swooping down from the trees. With a gasp, he fired again. His last bullet, a voice at the back of his mind told him. Shut up, he told it. This shot couldn't possibly miss.

The creature crashed into him in a jumble of claws and armor. He had anticipated this, and let it roll him onto his back, splashing the muddy water everywhere. His muscles screamed at him in agony, but he ignored them. He kept rolling until his hooves were directly underneath it, and he bucked as hard as he could, shoving it clear off of his body. After inspecting himself and finding no wounds under his armor, he turned to examine the creature. It was still alive.

He'd seen bats before. He'd never seen a gargoyle, but he knew they were a brutish race of what amounted to oversized bats with stone-like flesh. However, the creature in front of him, crouched into a pouncing position and dripping mud, seemed to be a demented mixture of a gargoyle and a pony. The hideous, snarling face looked as if it had been squashed and stretched out a few times in succession, and just visible under a mane of pink, scraggly hair was a telltale crack on its forehead—the only sign his bullet had hit it at all. Four angular limbs supported a bony torso and a pair of membranous wings, peppered with feathers and ending in wicked, curved talons. However, it had the colors, cloak, and necklace of the Wildcaller.

"By the gates of Tartarus," Rust breathed. "What are you?"

The creature didn't answer, instead only stepping towards him slowly. As it pulled its legs out of the mud, he could see that they ended in blocky claws. He drew his saber, backing away.

"Why..."

He jumped at the noise like the grinding of tombstones, but kept his blade gripped firmly in his mouth. She let out a hacking cough, and spoke again.

"Why do you keep fighting?" Her voice was still as rough as sandpaper, but it was now definitely recognizable as the Wildcaller's.

Rust just scowled and crouched down, pawing the muddy ground aggressively.

"So be it." Suddenly, she changed. She ran at him, splashing mire about even as her scrawny limbs bulged and her snout elongated into a lupine muzzle full of sharpened fangs. Now she was some sort of werepony, dashing from side to side. Rust kept his eyes trained on her as she approached him. In a blink, she was at his right, swiping at his flank. He twisted around to block the strange amalgamation of a hoof, a paw, and claws with the edge of his saber. She lashed at him with her other claw, but she couldn't pierce his armor before he flicked her first claw away with another twist. She was sent off-balance, teetering on her hind legs for only a moment, but that was enough for Rust. He lunged forward and slashed a bloody line across her belly.

She let out a pained howl, but warded him off with another swipe of her blocky claws. He jumped away as she fell back on all fours, smirking at the blood dripping from the edge of his blade.

"See, Wildcaller?" he panted around the hilt. "You're just another pony. You don't scare me."

It was difficult to read her expression when her face was half-wolf, but it wasn't fear, scorn, or anything else he'd expected.

"Is that why?" she asked in a hoarse whisper, ignoring her bleeding wound. "You defy me because you wish to prove me only equine? Then why serve Nightmare Moon?"

Rust's face hardened into a scowl. He began to lurch forward, but suddenly, her wings flashed out, and she rocketed into the darkness above. He peered about the canopy warily. What was the witch up to now? What winged abomination should he expect swooping at him this time? He couldn't see anything in the darkness. There were no sounds but the squelching of the mud around his hooves. Not even her blood gave anything away. He edged toward his gun, which was still sticking out of the mud. Perhaps he would have time to reload and tip the odds in his favor.

He had only managed to clear the chamber of mud before something blurred at the edge of his vision. His head whipped around just in time to duck a massive paw. He scrambled backwards through the mire as the mantichore landed back on its forelegs and let out an overwhelming roar in his face. Rust grit his teeth around the hilt of his saber, standing resolute despite the spittle flying at him. It had both eyes intact, but there was still fresh blood around one. It was the same damned mantichore!

Finally, it shut its mouth and slowly stepped towards him. Rust quickly dove forward with his blade, but the mantichore lifted a ponderous paw and swatted it along its flat. While he kept his grip on the saber, Rust's entire body was shoved back by the sheer force, whereas the beast only suffered a light scratch. And still, it advanced.

As he slowly backed away, Rust realized that he was low on options. His best weapon against this thing was out of reach and out of ammo, while his other weapon was so far ineffective. Judging by the agony racking his body, it would be even more so soon. If he were to try and run—well—he'd might as well be signing his own death warrant by turning his back on it. But there had to be something he could use!

Suddenly, there was a flash of yellow to his right. He risked a quick glance and saw two wings snap open. A wall of wind immediately crashed into him, sending him toppling backwards into the grime while his blade flew off even further.

"No!" he shouted, lunging after them the moment he got his hooves under him. He was only half a meter from his saber before his body suddenly snagged onto something. "What the-?" He jerked his head away, but the material tugged right back. He tried to move his left hoof, only to catch his back hooves in the trap. In a few mere moments, Rust's entire body was trapped by the sticky threads, all but a single hoof stuck against glue-like strands. He'd been caught in a giant spider web.

Bucking Hell! How did the witch set this up so quickly, and without him noticing? Rust's eyes turned to his saber. It was sticking out of the mire, with its familiar, well-worn hilt pointed straight towards him. Maybe he could use it, if he reached far enough... He stretched out his right hoof, as far as he could manage. Only a few inches away. He started to swing his body back and forth, trying to stretch the web further. He stretched his hoof out...

And then a spindly yellow hoof tilted the hilt away. Rust looked up, and had to resist the urge to yell in horror. That gargoyle transformation had been creepy, but he'd seen scarier wereponies in plays. This, however...

"Bucking hell," he gaped. Six cylindrical legs, feathered wings, a shell-like carapace rather than skin, a bulky, misshapen body, but most horrifying of all was her face. Four bulging eyes gazed at him unblinkingly while two enormous fangs jutted out, hiding her mouth entirely. This was an abomination against all that was good in Equestria. What little was left of it, anyways.

Slowly, it transformed back, the fangs and extra eyes sinking back into its head. He never stopped gaping at it even as it settled into the form of a perfectly ordinary pony. She sat down in the mire; the cut across her belly had disappeared. At the edge of his vision, he could see the manticore slowly pawing into the shadows of the swamp, but she never took her gaze off of his.

She started to speak again, her quiet voice mixed with curiosity and pity. "Please, tell me. Why do you keep fighting? You'll die in few hours now, after exerting yourself like that. But you defied the venom, resisted my Stare, and escaped the gas to fight me and a manticore, even though you were clearly outmatched. Is it some sense of duty that drives you to do this? Loyalty to Nightmare Moon?"

Rust's gape had turned into a hard glare as she questioned him. Her damned voice was so annoying! Like the witch thought she was his mother or something!

"She's a monster," the Wildcaller continued. "She doesn't care about any of her subjects. She's left so many thousands homeless and starving, and has executed countless ponies for petty reasons. She's a tyrant. You *know* this. And yet, you fight to defend her reign. Why?"

Rust only broke his silence a few more seconds later to spit at her. "Yeah, she's a bitch," he grunted. "No doubt about that. But she's in charge, and nothing's changing that. You're worried about what she's done so far? Her night, her laws, her bucking taxes?" He let out a bitter, wheezing chuckle. "You know *nothing*. She could crush Equestria with one hoof if she wanted to. To obey her is insanity, but the alternative? Impossible. You're damned Dawn and your little war aren't helping one bit. You should just back down while any of you are left. By resisting her, you're just throwing away the lives of ponies on both sides."

"No."

He sneered at her. "What's that, 'Element of Kindness'? Are you denying it? It's a tough pill to swallow, isn't it?"

"No," she said again. "That's a reason for giving up. *You* haven't given up. You endured what

would've killed ten ordinary ponies. Why? What are you struggling against? What are you fighting for?"

Rust's scorn slid away from his face. He could only gape at her again.

"Please," she whispered, staring into his eyes. "I can't help you if I don't understand."

There was only silence between them. Eventually, his head slumped down wordlessly. She backed away.

"Um, alright," she sighed, her voice suddenly much quieter. "If you don't know, then... That's okay, I guess." She pawed the mire for a second, before turning around. She gingerly trotted away from the web, but stopped. She looked back. Her face was barely visible in the darkness of the swamp. "Um, that venom will be painful, so I'll just... um... that is, if you don't mind..." Her head snapped back forward. "I'm sorry!" she squeaked, before disappearing into the shadows of the swamp.

Rust watched her go listlessly. He let out a deep breath through his nose, and turned his head back up. He could just see the clearing in the swamp where moonbeams poured down from the gap in the canopy.

The mud wasn't so bad, really. He could bear it for now.

There was a rustle above him. He glanced up just in time to see a white blur land on his back. A spike of pain shot through his muscles, but he ignored them to look at the rabbit. It was unharmed and holding a dagger longer than its body, propping the hilt over its own shoulder. He resisted the urge to laugh at the ridiculous image. Instead, he merely studied it as it stared back with a solemn expression.

"Heh, look at me," he snorted. "Taking pity from a rabbit." He shook his helmeted head before turning back forward and tilting it back, exposing his throat. He could feel the rabbit's shifting weight as it reached forward. "Element of Kindness, huh?" he muttered. "Well, considering the circumstances, she's doing a damn fine job."

Rusty Fields took his last breath.

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The catapult was released, launching a small boulder into the night sky. It arced through the air over a marshy field, until it dropped down onto a small fort. However, just before it would've smashed against the stone wall, there was a white shimmer as it passed through a curtain of magic. It lost nearly all of its momentum and only bumped weakly against the fort wall before tumbling down. It landed on top of a pile of similar boulders stacked at the fort's base.

Already, a few soldiers were working to reload the catapult, but at a sluggish pace. Out of a field of a few dozen other siege weapons, that catapult was the only one in use. A minute later, it fired again. This one simply bounced off the solid dome over the fort and joined the pile. One of the soldiers yawned.

Several minutes passed like this before a group of three ponies approached the active catapult. All of the soldiers around it immediately stood at attention on seeing the armored earth pony in front. There was a quick exchange and a few orders given. Puzzled, the soldiers heaved against the catapult, turning it a few degrees to the left. Meanwhile, one of the boulders was rolled from the ammunition in front of one of the unicorns. She bent down and started etching glowing lines

and symbols into its surface with her horn. Half a minute later, she backed away, and the soldiers loaded it into the readied catapult.

With a final command from the officer, they fired the catapult once more. The boulder, now glimmering with magic runes, soared through the night sky, but veered a hundred meters off-target. By now, all of the soldiers' interests had been piqued, and they watched as it fell into an empty plain. Suddenly, the unicorn activated her spell. In a flash of red light, the world around the boulder warped.

The boulder smashed itself against the wall of a fort that hadn't been there moments ago. Meanwhile, to the right where there was a fort moments ago, there was only a bog peppered with boulders.

The field was silent for a few seconds. Then, with several cries of outrage, every single catapult, ballista, and trebuchet was realigned and firing at the location of the real fort as rapidly as possible.

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There was a pink flash as a unicorn appeared in a room illuminated by dim lanterns and rows of glowing gemstones. The room rumbled as another series of projectiles pounded against the fort walls.

"Damn it all," Trixie grumbled as she immediately trotted towards a massive diamond set into the wall. The few other unicorns present quickly shuffled out of her way. "It just had to be lunch break, didn't it? They've been chucking rocks since moonrise, and only now they see through the illusion!" She continued to mumble darkly as she lowered her head, and fired a beam of hot pink magic at the diamond. It let out a brilliant glow as it amplified the spell, and a thin barrier began to form over the entire fort. Already, the shaking from the assault began to lessen. "What they hay were our spotters doing, letting a spell-breaker by?"

"We were at lunch break, same as you!"

She hardly spared the pegasus a glance. "All of you? At the same time? That entirely defeats the purpose of having spotters in the first place! Just whose foolish idea was that?"

The wall-eyed mare just shrugged, muttering something about muffins, and flew up to a high platform near a thin horizontal slit in the wall, where moonlight shone through. She immediately pulled two telescopes from her back, set them in the slit, and peered through both of them.

Eventually, Trixie cut off the spell, turning her head back up and sighing in relief. The rumbling had all but faded by the time the pegasus next spoke. "Wuh-oh! There's three spell-breakers incoming!"

Trixie looked up from her work. "How much time?"

"I'd say twenty seconds 'til launch! They should hit at the same time!"

She nodded. "The rest of you," she said the surrounding unicorns, "finish with the rest of the wards." By now, a few other ponies had rushed into the room and to the platforms, so Trixie teleported to an unoccupied window. She peered out the thin slit at the distant army. "So you think you may break the Great and Powerful Trixie's defenses, do you?" She bent down and began channeling magic into her horn.

"They're gonna launch!" the pegasus cried. "Impact in six seconds!"

She opened her eyes, easily spotting the three glowing projectiles soaring through the night sky. Adjusting the spell accordingly was foal's play.

"Three! Two! One! ...Never mind!" The pegasus realigned her telescopes. "Ouch! You teleported them backwards?"

"They were made to break deflecting and hardening enchantments," Trixie answered smugly, teleporting back to ground level. "Nothing was stopping Trixie from merely altering their spatial coordinates to say, a half a kilometer backwards. While leaving their momentum intact." She tilted her head back, basking in the praise of the other ponies in the room.

After a moment, the pegasus pulled back from her telescopes. "You only destroyed a trebuchet and a ballista, the latter only because that boulder bounced twice," she remarked. "You could've asked for coordinates."

Trixie opened her mouth indignantly, but visibly stopped herself. "Thank you," she said instead. "Trixie shall keep that in mind next time."

"How about we have no next time and snipe the unicorns making the spell-breakers?" another pony threw out.

"Perhaps if we had any weapons with that range and precision, which we don't," Trixie responded. "It's wonder you've lasted this long without any." She tilted her head. "Actually, if somepony were to bring Trixie the base materials, she could temporarily fashion an arbalest, but she couldn't guarantee the quality..."

"Trixie!" A pegasus clad in golden armor burst through a set of doors into the room. "Wildcaller Fluttershy has returned!"

She raised her eyebrows. "Already? Well then, no need for the arbalest. The siege will be dealt with soon enough. Give the signal to Colonel Frostbeak," she told the soldier. "Trixie shall be with Fluttershy shortly." He saluted and galloped back through the doors.

Trixie charged up her horn and fired her magic at the diamond again. "Trixie trusts that the rest of you are capable of holding off the assault yourselves for twenty minutes?" She got a collection of "Sure"s and "Yes Ma'am"s from the room. "Very well." She cut off her magic. "I'll leave you all to it."

She disappeared with another brilliant flash.

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Compared to the heavily armored front side of the fortress, the rear defenses might as well not have existed. The stonework here was no stronger than a few brick walls, but that wasn't an issue—the fort was backed right up against the swamp. Siege weapons, or even a battering ram would've had trouble being used from that direction. However, there was a small wooden door with nothing more than an enchanted lock keeping it closed. A small group of earth pony and unicorn soldiers could've easily brute-forced their way through it. It begged the question, why haven't they tried?

As Trixie set her horn against the scrying gem set into the door, it seemed she might find out. With a brief light show of magic glows and flashes, she unlocked the complex brass mechanism

and swung open the door. “Fluttershy!” she announced from within the lit room with a flourish of her arms. “Welcome back! I see your mission was successful!”

The pegasus smiled softly at her. “It’s good to see you too, Trixie,” she said, “though...” She pawed the boggy ground and glanced backwards at the dozen soldiers and the manticore standing behind her. “...It wasn’t entirely successful.”

Trixie blinked and dropped her pose. “Not entirely? What do you mean by that? Are there more soldiers coming?”

“Well, no. I was just hoping I could convert many more soldiers there,” she admitted.

Trixie rolled her eyes. “Oh, you shouldn’t worry that much! A dozen extra soldiers is still quite a feat!”

“Not really,” Fluttershy mumbled, looking down. Years ago, the movement would’ve hidden her face in a curtain of pink, but she didn’t have enough mane to manage that look anymore.

One of the soldiers behind Fluttershy, a unicorn mare, spoke up, saluting. “Permission to speak, Ma’am?”

She looked around Fluttershy at the soldier. “Permission granted...?”

“Captain—well—former captain Silver Watch, Ma’am!” she stated sharply without moving her hoof from her head. “I believe the Wildcaller’s intent was to recruit our entire unit while avoiding casualties. In that respect, she failed. Terribly, if I may be frank.”

“How terribly?” Trixie asked, furrowing her brow. “How large was your unit?”

“Precisely one hundred and sixty-five personnel, Ma’am!”

She stared blankly at the soldier, looked into the thick, forested marsh, and peered back at the doorway. Two soldiers might’ve had trouble squeezing into it side-by-side.

“I can’t say I understand command’s strategy either, Ma’am,” Silver Watch answered the unspoken question, her salute sagging for the first time. “I suspect they didn’t really care at this point.”

Trixie just shook her head. There were so many things wrong with that hare-brained plan, she couldn’t begin to list them. “We may discuss the inadequacy of the Royal Army’s tacticians later. Come on in, everypony,” she said, backing into the doorway and gesturing. “We have other matters to attend to.”

“Wait, just like that?” Silver Watch asked, dropping her hoof entirely. “You’ll trust us that easily?” The other soldiers were muttering similarly astounded comments.

“Of course not!” Trixie chuckled amusedly. “You’ll be detained until we can investigate each of you in detail, making sure you’re not spies. But the Dawn would never refuse a pony who wishes to escape Nightmare Moon’s tyranny!”

The soldiers were still whispering amongst themselves, but nonetheless filed into the doorway. Meanwhile, Fluttershy was stroking the manticore’s mane as she muttered soft words into its ear. It nodded, and as soon as she backed away, it padded back into the shadows of the swamp. Fluttershy then walked into the fort after the last soldier, and Trixie shut the door.

There were already a few Dawn soldiers in the room, standing armed and at attention around the exit. The unarmed former Royal soldiers pawed the stone floor nervously. "You there!" Trixie pointed towards one of the guards. "Escort these soldiers to the cells. See to it that they're given food and reasonable bedding!" Her nose scrunched up. "And a quick wash wouldn't hurt. What the hay have you lot been rolling in?" she asked the Royal soldiers.

"You don't want to know," one of them deadpanned. Silver Watch immediately shushed him, but Trixie quickly let out a laugh.

"It's quite alright, you're no longer soldiers, so you're no longer obligated to act the part," she reassured them.

"Um, aren't we still soldiers?" another asked. "I mean, soon, we'll be *your* soldiers."

"Only if you choose to be."

This got some astonished stares from the soldiers. "You mean, we don't *have* to fight?"

"Of course not!" Trixie rose to her hind legs and waved her arms dramatically. "The Dawn Militia aims for peace and freedom for ponykind *and* the world! Enlistment is entirely voluntary! Anything besides would only blight our mission!" She fell back on all fours. "Besides," she added, "Nightmare Moon has already gone and made an enemy of the entire world. We hardly need a draft to get recruits. Anyhow, you are dismissed."

Even as they were lead away by the Dawn guard, the soldiers animatedly chatted amongst themselves. At one point, the Dawn soldier let out a comment that set the whole group to laughter.

Trixie turned back to Fluttershy, gesturing to another hall. "Shall we?"

The pegasus nodded, her gaze directed at the floor as usual. "We should get it over with." The two friends began to walk through the hallway.

"But Trixie has to wonder, over a hundred soldiers, and you couldn't bring back a single drone?" she asked, looking at Fluttershy. Even with her shortened mane, her face was shadowed from the light of the lanterns lining the hall.

"I could've, but I didn't. I slit their throats."

Trixie froze mid-step, but Fluttershy kept walking. After a moment, the unicorn rushed up back to her side. "You *killed* them? Why? Just *why*? This was one of our few opportunities to capture them safely!"

"We've already caught almost three hundred drones," the pegasus answered. "All they've done for us so far is sleep and consume resources."

"Resources?" she sputtered. "*Resources* is the issue? We have plenty of resources! And resources sustaining ponies are never wasted! How can you say--?"

"Another thirty isn't going to help us find a cure any faster."

"That's not the point!" Trixie hissed at her. "Every drone we capture and cure is a life we save from Nightmare Moon!"

"But what if we don't find a cure, Trixie?" Fluttershy asked, her voice hollow.

"Don't say that, Fluttershy! We have to!"

"Have to?" she repeated. "That doesn't matter in reality, Trixie. Those drones have had their minds completely wiped out. How can we hope to cure empty holes in their brains?"

"That doesn't mean we should just give up on them!" Trixie shouted.

"Have you been to San Francisco?" Fluttershy asked, suddenly stopping and looking Trixie in the eye for the first time that night. "Have you been in the institute, surrounded by white walls and potted plants, looking at rows and rows of breathing, blinking ponies, and seeing nothing but *corpses*?" The unicorn couldn't move her eyes as those teal orbs seemed to suck up her vision. "I've seen more life in mold! Seeing them, knowing Nightmare Moon can *do* that to ponies..." Fluttershy suddenly cut off the Stare, leaving Trixie blinking, and started walking again. "I can't stand it," she whispered. "If they can't be saved... Death is better than that half-life."

Trixie was quiet, looking at her dispirited form. "Shouldn't that be theirs to decide?" she asked quietly.

"But they can't, can they?" she snipped. She let out a sigh. "Ponies think that being the Element of Kindness is easy for me. I'm such a gentle loving soul. How could I possibly fail at being kind?" She shook her head. "It isn't easy. It isn't easy figuring out what's the kindest thing to do. It isn't easy when there doesn't seem to be a kind option. It isn't easy making way for kindness in the middle of a war."

She looked back at Trixie, the bottom of her eyes beginning to glisten. "But that won't stop me from doing my best. It's the least I can do for everypony."

A moment of silence passed between the two. Finally, Trixie stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Fluttershy in a hug. The pegasus' own arms reached out from beneath her cloak to squeeze Trixie tightly.

"Trixie is sorry for yelling at you," she muttered over Fluttershy's shoulder. "This is just as hard for you as it is for any of us, if not more so."

Fluttershy just nodded, nuzzling into Trixie's neck. "And I'm sorry for using my Stare on you."

"It's alright," she smiled. "Trixie is quite used to it, having been exposed to it so often back in Ponyville."

"I'm sorry about that, too."

"Hey, you can't say Trixie never deserved it," the unicorn chuckled.

"I guess that's true." She could feel Fluttershy's mouth curling into a smirk. "Angel still doesn't really like you. He stayed in the swamp to keep an eye on the Royal Army, but I think he just didn't want to deal with you."

"Trixie wondered where the white menace had gone off to." Slowly, she pulled away from the embrace. Fluttershy reluctantly let go. "Speaking of which, what did you do with the rest of the soldiers?"

"Oh, well, the major was quite troublesome," she muttered, downcast. "He put up a hard fight, and, well, I don't think I could've gotten him to convert, so...."

Trixie just nodded. "So one less strong officer to fight for Nightmare Moon. It's alright, Fluttershy, we've all been there."

The pegasus scuffed the stone floor with a hoof. "That shouldn't make it any easier, though."

She paused, and sighed despondently. "I suppose you're right."

Fluttershy continued. "Everypony else is alive, but I broke some of their front legs."

Trixie winced slightly. "That makes sense, Trixie supposes. You're just preventing them from having to fight for a few weeks. I suspect some of them might even be grateful."

"Trixie, Fluttershy!"

They both turned to the voice of a pegasus soldier. Trixie briefly noted that he seemed to be the same one that had told her of Fluttershy's arrival. "Colonel Frostbeak's forces are ready for the port!"

"Very well," Trixie said, straightening up. "Trixie sees no reason to delay any further." She nodded at Fluttershy, who took in a breath and held it. They both disappeared from the hall in a flash of magic.

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They reappeared in a chamber that seemed large enough to take up half of the fort. The floor here was not stone, but packed dirt, and covered with a few hundred armored pegasi standing at attention in formations. High above was the stone dome that made the top of the fortress. In the center, where they had arrived, were several unicorns and a circular granite platform with a black, rune-covered arch in the middle.

Trixie was already marching towards the unicorns before the pink flash had entirely faded. "Trixie assumes the coordinates are set?" she asked commandingly.

The foremost unicorn saluted. "Yes, Ma'am! We have received the go from Colonel Frostbeak!" he said sharply.

"Then let us begin." With that, Trixie pointed her horn at the massive sapphire set into the peak of the arch. Her Element glowed brilliantly as she fired a stream of pink magic at it. Beams from the other unicorns soon joined hers as they took positions by her side. In seconds, the runes etched into the arch began to shine as a disk of blue light appeared in the middle. It quickly expanded to fill the entire archway, and the unicorns cut off their magic. All of them but Trixie seemed winded, panting as they stepped away off the platform. Trixie, meanwhile, hardly seemed affected as she sat down, raising her chin vainly at the portal. Fluttershy trotted up to her side just as a shadow appeared in the portal.

A griffon, nearly covered in spiked black armor, marched out of the light. She ruffled her wings slightly as her tail lashed out of the portal. "Ach, I dinnae think I'll ever get used to yer glowy unicorn magics," she groaned as two other griffons, in slightly less intimidating armor, stepped out behind her.

"Oh please, Colonel, no need to be dramatic," Trixie said dismissively. "Besides, I'm sure you

griffons have plenty of mages yourself. Magic can't be *that* foreign to you."

"Tha' stuff's different, Lass," she protested indignantly. "Griffon mystics get their power by commandin' the elements—natural stuffs! They'd use the winds to send us places, 'stead of these crazy holes in star-time ye unicorns deal with."

"Space-time," she corrected the griffon.

"Same thing, i'nit? Besides, we aren't the only ones. Rams, deerfolk, zebras, hell, even the gnolls work with the elements. You ponies are the only ones tossin' around fireworks jus' ta pick things up!"

"Um, excuse me?" Fluttershy spoke up before Trixie could respond. "Do you have that package for me?"

Frostbeak cast a critical eye over her. "Aye, we do, if callin' it a 'package' makes ye feel any better about it." She craned her head over her shoulder and called into the portal. "Haul it in!"

The griffons backed away from the glowing arch as dark shapes appeared in the shining disk. They quickly resolved themselves into two armored griffons pulling a wagon. Once they were completely clear of the portal's blinding light, none of the ponies present could resist a gag—it was loaded with a bleeding heap of red, raw meat.

"You sure ye dinnae want it cooked, Lass?" Frostbeak asked, looking back at Fluttershy. "Makes it a mite easier for ye hay-eaters ta swallow."

"...No, raw's better," Fluttershy replied after a brief pause. "The fresher it is, the easier it is to use." She started to remove her cloak, letting it drop to the ground.

"Fluttershy," Trixie started, reaching out with a hoof. "You don't have to do this."

"No, I don't," she mumbled, shrugging the hoof off. "But without... material... to work with, my bigger transformations are too unstable."

"But—"

"Please don't try to talk me out of it." Fluttershy's face started to morph, her muzzle stretching out while her teeth multiplied and grew to the size and shape of knives. "Let me just get it over with."

Suddenly, her wings flashed out, and she sprang headfirst into the wagon. The griffons around the wagon gawked back at her, while some of the less disciplined ponies had to jam their hooves over their mouths to keep from retching at the bloody spray Fluttershy was making.

"Bloody hell, Lass!" Frostbeak cried, shielding her face with a lightly armored wing. "I've seen wyverns with less atrocious table manners!" Fluttershy ignored her, continuing her voracious feast. By now, the griffons around the cart had backed away a safe distance.

"Ach," one of them grumbled, wiping his helmet with a talon, "This is the first time I've been covered in this much blood before the battle's even begun!"

Finally, half a minute later, Fluttershy was done, though she was hardly recognizable. There were a few wet slurping noises from the bottom of the cart before she finally raised her head.

"So..." Trixie said, trying to ignore the gory mess. "Are you ready to begin?"

She made a lumbering motion, raising an arm and holding up one unsteady claw. She then gripped the edge of the wagon, and started to heave her body out. Unfortunately, she only succeeded at capsizing it. The wagon tipped over, unceremoniously dumping her mass into a sprawling blood-covered heap over the stone platform.

The colonel looked down at her, visibly raising a brow under her helmet. She leaned towards Trixie. "Does the lass really know what she's doin'?" she asked doubtfully.

"Don't worry, she just doesn't use this form often," Trixie answered, watching the creature's struggling movements. "She'll require a moment to remember how to operate it."

A spiked tail whipped out in a wide arc, prompting a few unicorns and griffons to back up sharply. Finally, she managed to roll back onto her legs and shove her scaly body off the ground. A massive pair of wings stretched into the air, and started shaking the blood off. Ponies and griffons alike shouted complaints at the spray.

"Sorry." Her voice sounded soft and quiet, but it *felt* like a deep rumble that reverberated through all of the listeners' bones. The wings folded back up, and she reared back to sit on her haunches, her head rising to well above the height of the stone arch. She rolled her head and shoulders around, stretched her arms, and worked her tooth-filled jaw. Finally, she leaned back forward and settled smoothly back on all fours.

"Okay, I'm ready," Fluttershy rumbled.

Frostbeak craned her neck up at her face. "Hell's Bells, Lass!" she called out. "When I said ye ate like a wyvern, I was only joking! I didn't think you'd actually turn into one!"

"Well, dragon, actually," she replied.

"Enough talk," Trixie said sharply, teleporting onto Fluttershy's back. "The time has come! Pegasi!" She amplified her voice, making herself audible throughout the entire chamber. "Prepare for takeoff!" The room was flashed with color as all of the soldiers simultaneously crouched down and spread their wings. Trixie pointed her horn straight up at the dome above them, and her Element shone brilliantly. There was a deafening rumble, like a mountain shifting. Dust rained down from the stone until a crack of light appeared through the middle. It slowly grew wider, letting moonlight pour into the dim chamber.

"Colonel Frostbeak! Ready your troops!" Trixie called. She immediately nodded towards one of the other griffons, who pulled out a horn and dashed toward the portal. He angled the end towards the portal and blew into it.

Even as the horn blared, Trixie was still shouting. "Only a month ago, we seized this fort, right in the middle of enemy territory, and planted ourselves firmly within it! Since then, we have sat still and done little but watch as Nightmare Moon's army fruitlessly threw itself against our walls! But now, our waiting is at an end!"

Fluttershy suddenly unfurled her wings and flapped, pushing herself and Trixie into the air. "Today, we will advance! We will overwhelm their forces and strike a blow harder and fiercer than any they have felt before!"

The unicorns pointed their horns at the portal, causing it to split down the middle. The two halves rotated to the ground, so that the portal formed a horizontal disk rather than a vertical semicircle. "In the chaos and confusion left in our wake, our main forces will secure this territory! By

moonset, we shall have pushed our boundaries to Windmane Range!"

Fluttershy rose towards the opening in the dome, now just wide enough to accommodate her new wingspan, or a dozen pegasi side-by-side. The griffon with the horn blew once more, and the armored predators began to pour out of the portal, flying in circles around the chamber. They were quickly joined by the pegasi, forming a double-helix that spiraled towards the dome.

"To end the Nightmare..."

Every soldier roared, "AND BRING BACK THE SUN!"

Fluttershy perched onto the edge of the fort, just outside the dome, and let out a resounding roar. The Royal Army, standing at their siege weapons could clearly see and hear the blood-covered yellow dragon, as well as the cloud of soldiers gushing from the crack in the dome.

"FOR THE DAWN!"

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It took Twilight several seconds to notice that the pain had stopped. She weakly tried to suck in enough air to soothe her aching lungs, spent from screaming.

"Pathetic."

Her eyes shifted up towards the alicorn standing in front of her.

"Absolutely pathetic," she repeated. "I've hardly drained a third of your magic, and even then, you were on the verge of death."

Twilight whimpered, trying to curl up her body as much as the chains allowed. Suddenly, Nightmare Moon's hoof lashed out, striking her cheek. Her head snapped to the side, but the pain hardly registered.

"How can one with your magic, your potential, possibly be so soft?"

She slowly probed her mouth with her tongue, finding one tooth that wiggled in her gum.

"It's inconceivable, how you allowed yourself to come into this situation in the first place."

The hoof lashed out again, this time from the other side. The pain was slightly sharper.

"You could've levitated the entire landslide to safety, gutted the manticore in a blink, incinerated the forest..."

The metallic tang in her mouth told her that she had bitten her tongue.

"...Flash-frozen the entire river, created a bridge out of air, or even face me. But no, your incompetence forced you to rely on lesser ponies. Just what has Celestia been teaching you?"

Her ears instinctively flicked at the name.

"Then again, that would explain it. Celestia has always been so soft, so unwilling to let the very concept of pain into her perfect little world."

The hoof moved again, and Twilight flinched. But it only grasped her chin and forced her to look into the alicorn's eyes.

"Such a waste." She smiled—a vicious, bloodthirsty grin. "But it's not too late to save you."

Nightmare Moon backed away, dropping Twilight's head. Her snout hit the hard floor.

Then a black blade suddenly flickered into existence and slashed Twilight's foreleg open.

She was aware that she had been screaming again. Her arm was still burning with pain. She blinked away her tears and looked at the wound. It was wide open, showing bone, but somehow not bleeding at all.

"Your re-education begins now. Heal yourself. I'll be back in twelve hours to do it again. I'll repeat as many times as I feel is necessary. You'd better make some progress by my second return, or the cut will go clean through."

She left the small cavern.

Twilight was still numb with pain. It took her a few minutes to comprehend what Nightmare Moon had said. She shivered, trying to recall the contents of her medical spellbooks. It was hard, as if she were trying to pull the memories from molasses.

She tried forcing magic from her horn. Only sparks came out. She tried again. Were they a bit brighter, this time? Or maybe they were weaker. She didn't know. Her arm still hurt.

She curled up again, cradling the open wound with her other arm as well as she could.

A few minutes passed before she made any sound.

"G- G-"

She sucked in a quaking breath, and tried again.

"Gi- Giggle... a- at the... the gho-"

She suddenly broke out into a series of hacking coughs. She didn't know how long it lasted. There was blood on the ground when she was done. She started again.

*"Giggle at the gh- ghostie...,
G- Guffaw at... at the grossly,
Crack- Crack up at the creepy..."*