

Chapter One

Some ponies might call Applejack stubborn, though never to her face. She preferred to think of herself as determined. Once she had decided on a goal, it was quite difficult to dissuade her. She also cared very deeply about her friends and their emotional and physical health, and had very little respect for the scholarly arts.

Spike, Ponyville's resident baby dragon and assistant to one Twilight Sparkle, was discovering this first hand as he tried to explain to the stub- *determined* farmpony that Twilight was extremely busy with her latest, *very delicate* experiment and had given strict instructions that she not be disturbed for anything except food, bedtime, or a life-threatening crisis. Even then, Spike had had to insist on the first two.

"Look here, Spike," Applejack said, stamping her hoof down. "Ah don't care what crazy experiment Twi's workin' on. That crazy filly's been cooped up in here for just about a week, an' it just ain't healthy! Ah'm gonna drag her outta that lab'a hers by her tail if Ah gotta, and y'all ain't gonna stop me. Y'all can either move, or have me move y'all."

Spike considered his options carefully. He was secretly a bit worried himself. There had been a number of disturbing explosions from the lab, par the course for Twilight, but far more than usual. Even more disturbing, Twilight wouldn't let him observe the experiment, assist her, or even give him any hints as to *what* she was doing. All she'd say was "it's a special assignment from the Princess!" Which of course meant very little else mattered.

Finally, the tiny dragon made his choice. "If Twilight asks, you had to move me," he said finally, stepping aside and letting Applejack into the library. "I don't want her to think I just *let* you in. She promised to buy me some rubies for dinner on Friday."

Applejack just chuckled. "Don't you worry none, Spike. Ah have a feeling once I got that crazy filly out into the fresh air and let her head clear a bit, she'll thank ya fer gettin' her head outta the books."

"I won't hold my breath," Spike grumbled, returning to his book on proper mustache care.

Applejack just shook her head in amusement and headed down the stairs to Twilight's basement laboratory. "Twi?" she called out as she descended into the lab. She came to a door, which she tried to open, but it was locked tight. "Twi, it's Applejack! Open up!"

Applejack heard some shuffling on the other side of the door. "If I tell you to go away, you'll just buck the door down, won't you?" Twilight's voice could be heard from the other side, sounding exasperated.

"'Fraid so, Sugarcube." Applejack replied, grinning.

Applejack just barely caught Twilight's sigh before hearing the door unlock. It swung open, the doorknob glowing the bright purple of Twilight's magic. "Come on in, then. I guess I should've known Spike couldn't keep everypony out forever. But you've got to promise not to tell anypony what you see here."

"Course, Sugarcube," Applejack replied, not terribly interested in whatever fancy science experiment Twilight might be working on, even if it was for the Princess. She stepped into the lab, trotting down the last flight of stairs. It was mostly as she remembered it from the last - and only, really - time she'd been here. Twilight had those fancy computers and machines of hers set up all around the room; the sheer extravagance of it still overwhelmed Applejack a bit. Computers were tricky to make, and that made them *expensive*. Princess Celestia must have gotten them for her.

There was something new, though. In the center of the room set a large metal podium with a forcefield enclosing the top. Within the forcefield hovered what seemed to be a fairly normal, if ornate, helmet made from a silvery material. It looked vaguely familiar, but Applejack couldn't quite put her hoof on it.

"Hi Applejack!" Twilight said, coming into Applejack's view. She was wearing a white lab coat, a hard hat and a pair of safety goggles. "Sorry it's a bit of a mess down here. I've been kinda busy." She used her magic to pull her goggles off and set them on a nearby table.

"So Ah noticed." Applejack said dryly. "Twi, y'all ain't come outta this here lab for nearly a week now! It's time ta go get some fresh air."

Twilight scuffed her hooves on the floor. "Has it really been a week?" she asked, sounding somewhat embarrassed.

"Fraid so," Applejack said. "What exactly are y'all working on that's so gosh-darn important, anyway?"

Twilight look even more embarrassed at Applejack's question. "Sorry, AJ. Princess Celestia said I wasn't to tell *anypony*, for any reason. I can't disobey a direct order."

Applejack shrugged; it didn't really matter to her. "Whatever y'all say, sugercube, but it's time y'all left it alone for a bit. The girls and Ah are all gettin' together fer a picnic later, and Ah promised I'd get y'all to come along."

"A picnic?" Twilight said thoughtfully. "I am awfully hungry..." She glanced down at her protesting stomach. "I have one last experiment I want to try," she said finally, turning towards the helmet hovering within the protective forcefield. "Just a proof-of-concept, really; shouldn't take me more than an hour or so."

“Twi,” Applejack said flatly.

“Don’t worry, AJ.” Twilight smiled at her friend. “Tell Spike that if I don’t come out in time for the picnic he has my permission to come down and drag me away. I just have a theory I want to test; I’ll be done in time. I promise.”

Applejack studied Twilight for a long minute. “Pinkie Pie Swear?”

Twilight’s face fell. “Seriously?”

“Do it.” Applejack insisted.

Twilight sighed. The Pinkie Pie Swear was not to be invoked lightly, as it seemed to give Pinkie Pie *carte blanche* to violate the laws of physics to ensure you kept it. For anypony that knew Pinkie Pie, it was a serious oath. No chance of getting Applejack to back down, though... “Cross my heart, hope to fly, stick a cup cake in my...” pause, close eye, *then* touch. “Eye.”

Applejack immediately became friendly again, smiling happily. “Alrighty then! I’ll see y’all at the park!” Applejack cheerily galloped up the stairs, presumably to give Spike his orders.

Twilight sighed in relief as her friend left. She’d been terrified that Applejack would recognize the helmet, but she supposed she needn’t have worried. It wasn’t a particularly memorable piece of armor without its occupant. Twilight supposed she should be thankful - if Applejack or anypony else discovered she had the helm of Nightmare Moon in her basement, the fallout would be... unpleasant at best.

The helmet had begun as a perfectly normal if beautifully crafted piece of armor, which Nightmare Moon had crafted out of magic for use in her intimidating costume. Once it had sat upon the head of an imprisoned goddess for a thousand years, however, it absorbed quite a bit of her magic, transforming it into a potent artifact; it could act as a storage of vast amounts of magical energy. With whatever traces of evil it might have contained purified by the Elements of Harmony at the same time as Luna, the helm became a potent tool for any talented unicorn. What’s more, it had a direct link to Princess Luna, allowing one to open a magical channel to her, another reason for the secrecy. Such an item could be incredibly dangerous in the wrong hooves.

Thank Celestia it was in Twilight Sparkle’s.

Celestia had given Twilight the helmet along with a seemingly impossible task - using the helmet’s magic and its link to Luna, determine what, if anything, caused her transformation into Nightmare Moon. The storybooks all said it was Luna’s own jealousy which caused her to fall, but Celestia believed otherwise and Luna’s own memories were hazy at best. Twilight’s job was

to determine if there might have been any outside forces at work, and she took the task *very* seriously.

Twilight supposed it would be good for her to get out of the lab and into the fresh air for a bit, but she had one last thing she wanted to try on the helmet. It was a tricky branch of magic, and little research had been done on it, but it was safe enough for a careful unicorn. Twilight trotted over to the table where she left her experiment log and picked up a quill with her magic. She dictated quietly as she wrote, a habit gained from years of dictating to Spike.

“Experiment number twenty-nine: Chronal rupture by way of temporal entanglement,” Twilight murmured as she wrote. “Colloquially, a ‘time window’. The requirements for such a rupture are: a clear idea of the event intended for viewing; a magical, physical, or personal link to the event; and an abnormally large amount of magical energy.” She glanced over at the checklist she’d drawn up for the experiment shortly before. “Let’s see... A clear idea of the event. Easy enough, I want to see Luna’s transformation into Nightmare Moon.” She checked off the first item. “The helmet is linked to Luna and it’s symbolic of her transformation, that’ll be the link.” Another checkmark. “And the helmet’s own magic combined with mine should be more than enough power.” A third check and she gave a satisfied smile.

“Okay. Everything’s all set,” she said, her horn glowing as she delicately powered down the forcefield protecting the helm. Her magic took hold of the headpiece, levitating it towards her as she continued to write in her log, effortlessly controlling both the helmet and the quill. “I’ll only be using the bare minimum amount of magic necessary to galvanize the helmet’s own energy, and open a small window. All I need is to know that it’s possible; practical trials will commence at a later date.”

She gently lowered the helmet onto her own head. It was a surprisingly close fit, if just the slightest bit too large, but she resisted casting a resizing charm. Messing around with the incredibly powerful magical artifact was generally a bad idea.

She breathed in deeply, then let it out slowly. “Okay. Here goes nothing...” she whispered. Time magic could be dangerous if you weren’t careful. It was why almost nopony studied it; there were next to no guidelines, no studies, and no experiments; only the barest minimum of knowledge existed and it was all centuries old. Twilight had done her research, though, and she felt reasonably confident she could handle it. So before she could talk herself out of it, she lit her horn and focused on the helmet.

‘Okay, easy, Twilight. Easy, just feed a little magic into the helmet...’ She felt the helmet respond, growing slightly warm as it began to radiate magic. *‘Okay, good... now just focus on what you’re looking for... remember what the books said... pull the fabric of time together like a bed sheet, then push through the wrinkle.’* It was an infuriatingly vague description, but quite a bit of magic was done more by feel than by formula, and so sometimes such textual descriptions were necessary. She could feel what the old tome had meant, anyway; she could feel the

texture of time flowing by her like a stream of soft velvet. She focused on the feeling, grabbing hold of a small portion of it with the helmet's magic as gently as she could. She could feel the time-fabric around her tensing up like a captured animal as she bunched up a small wad, and, with another magical tendril, tried to poke through.

Nothing happened. The fabric resisted her efforts and tried to pull from her grip. Annoyed, Twilight fed more magic into the helmet, strengthening her grip and pushing against the wrinkled portion harder. Still it resisted.

Twilight felt angry now, angry at this stubborn magical abstract for defying her. It wasn't even real, it was just a nonsense sensation her mind made up to process things it wasn't meant to deal with. She was the personal student of Princess Celestia! She wouldn't be beaten by some magical abstraction!

She forced more magic into the helmet, a bright-white aura forming around her horn as she began to exert herself. The force of her push multiplied rapidly, forcing itself harder and harder against the very fabric of reality, until suddenly... the helmet glowed brightly, and Twilight felt something *give*.

All too late Twilight remembered to visualize the event she was looking for and hurriedly tried to construct an image in her mind. It was too late; the window was open now, only it was more of a giant tear than a window, and it was growing. Twilight felt the wind whipping up around her, pulling her in.

"No! No, no, no, no, not good!" she said, her horn glowing as she frantically tried to repair the rip, but it was too late. An uncontrolled time-rip was not to be trifled with; the only thing she could do, she dimly recalled from the ancient tome on time magic, was try and keep her destination firmly in mind, in hopes that she could find the other end of the rift and reenter, returning to her own time.

Twilight shut her eyes and let herself be sucked in, focusing as hard as she could. "Princess Luna," she whispered. "I need to see Princess Luna, just before the Nightmare..."

Suddenly, she was gone, the helmet and rip in time with her.

A brief but endless sensation of falling...

An explosion of colors that ponies had no name for...

Time pulled away from her, then came rushing back in an explosion of light...

Twilight opened her eyes.

She was laying in a crumpled heap in what appeared to be a small alleyway. Her entire body ached, especially her horn. "Ugh... where...?" She struggled to her hooves.

Time travel. Right. Twilight imagined pony bodies weren't meant to travel the wrong way through time. Sadly there was no experimental data to corroborate this, as far as Twilight was aware, successful time travel had never been recorded. Until now, she supposed.

"Oh my gosh..." Twilight breathed, reality finally setting in. She *traveled in time*. The book specifically said **don't do that!** In big letters and bright red warning ink! The ramifications of interfering with the past were entirely impossible to predict. What if she nulled her own existence? Caused a temporal paradox that imploded the universe? Oh dear Celestia, what if she accidentally erased one of her friends from existence? Or all of Ponyville?

Twilight noticed she was huddled against the alley wall.

She had to calm down. Panic wasn't helping anypony. She needed to organize her thoughts. A checklist. Yes. That was what she needed. A way to line up her thoughts in a neat little line and deal with them one at a time. The world would make so much more sense if she had a checklist...

First of all, she needed something to write with. She looked around, checking for anything that might have been pulled into the rift with her. Just a few feet from where she'd awoken, the Helmet of Nightmare Moon was glowing dimly on the ground as residual magic slowly leaked away from it. Beside it, smoking slightly, was Twilight's experimental logbook, with the quill still inside. With a relieved smile, Twilight seized the book with her magic and levitated towards her. Her horn was still sore, but a simple levitation charm was easy enough.

The book was slightly singed around the edges, causing Twilight's inner librarian to cringe, but its contents were mostly unharmed. She took a deep breath and opened to a clean page, levitating the quill as she hurriedly constructed a checklist. Her penmanship was sloppy, and it certainly wasn't the most orderly or specific checklist she'd ever written, but given her situation Twilight felt it was a forgivable lapse. She built the checklist around her memories of wilderness handbooks and guides on how to handle being lost in an unfamiliar place. Of course, she made some changes as there were no guides to being lost in an unfamiliar *time*. Twilight resolved to write one at the soonest opportunity.

Finally, she set the quill down and took a deep breath. She felt a lot calmer now; problems never seemed so bad once you disassembled them into a checklist. "Step one," she said quietly to herself. "Take stock of your immediate surroundings, supplies, and physical condition." That she had gotten from the guides; most of them agreed that the first thing to do was understand the immediate situation.

Well, she was sore and aching all over, but it was fading quickly. Her... somewhat active lifestyle had made her adept with dealing with pain; hanging around Pinkie and Rainbow Dash had a tendency to be painful. Her horn still throbbed; it would be a while before she could perform any magic more complicated or powerful than simple charms. For supplies, she had only her book and the Helmet, still softly glowing at her feet. That only left her immediate surroundings.

Twilight looked around, analyzing the buildings on either side with the studied eye of a filly who had memorized many a book on architecture and history. "Definitely Canterlot," she muttered, taking note of the fine construction and elegant roofs. "Maybe... late classical era?" That seemed right, exactly what she'd been aiming for, in fact. Nightmare Moon had appeared in Canterlot, and her appearance had more or less marked the end of the classical era. For a minute, Twilight harbored a brief hope that she'd find the other end of the time rift, which could lead her back home. But the rift would only be open for a space of about ten seconds, and she was likely years off the mark.

So she was in Canterlot, late Classical-era, in reasonably good condition but without much in the way of magic. She had nothing to her name save a book and a very dangerous magical artifact. She had no bits and no job with which to obtain bits. Her first instinct was to go find the Princess and ask her for help, but she quickly discarded it. Even if the Princess was capable of sending her into the future, something the tome she'd studied had said in no uncertain terms was impossible, this Princess wouldn't recognize her. She hadn't even been born yet.

Oh Celestia, she hadn't been born yet.

Where would she sleep? How would she eat? Would she ever see her friends again?
How-

Twilight noticed she was huddled against the wall again.

She forced herself to her hooves and looked back at the checklist. She could panic later. In fact, she added that to the bottom of the list: "Panic later." She then returned to where she left off. "Step two," she read aloud, the sound of her own voice calming her. "Minimize impact to the timeline." Well, she didn't intend to impact the timeline. All the same, she *was* Twilight Sparkle. She had a habit of finding problems to solve. The best solution, of course, was to avoid civilization all together, which wasn't acceptable. The next best thing was to attempt to avoid all momentous events, which wasn't really feasible. Besides which, Twilight doubted her ability to withhold help when needed. So, the final solution, a disguise. If she wound up in the history books, and knowing her luck, she would, she needed to at least ensure it wasn't Twilight Sparkle in those books. She didn't want to think of what might happen if she showed up in history a good thousand or so years before she was born (*don't think about not being born yet,*

don't think about not being born yet...).

Illusions were never Twilight's forte, and her horn was too sore for anything complicated. Luckily, being friends with Rarity (*no don't think about your friends that you'll never see again*) had taught her a few handy charms. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, placing the book back on the ground so she could focus completely on the spell she was casting. Her horn ached in protest, but the spell was simple enough. She felt a sensation like warm water washing over her, and opened her eyes. She glanced down at her hooves, then back at her flank.

Her coat had turned bright blue.

Sadly, Twilight didn't have a mirror and didn't have the energy to conjure one, but from what she could see the disguise was adequate enough. Now she just needed to disguise her most noticeable feature, her Cutie Mark. Being magical itself, a Cutie Mark was difficult to disguise, but a simple alteration with an illusion... Twilight turned to look at her Cutie Mark, concentrating for a moment. It shimmered, before changing slightly. It was still fundamentally the same, but a different color (dark purple), and the orientation of the stars had shifted. It was the best she could do at the moment; it would have to suffice.

Having taken all reasonable steps currently available to reduce her impact on the timeline, Twilight returned her attention to her checklist, levitating the book back up to eye level. "Step three," she read, checking off the previous step. "Gather information and ascertain time period. Step four, obtain lodgings and a source of income."

She lifted her gaze up towards the mouth of the alleyway. Both steps three and four required her to go out there. To interact with the world of one thousand years ago. It was both exhilarating and terrifying. On the one hoof, she had an unprecedented opportunity to observe history in action. On the other hoof... she was trapped in a time period one thousand years before she, or nearly anypony else she knew, was born. The only ponies she knew would be the Princesses, and they wouldn't even recognize her.

She glanced down at the floor. The Helmet. She'd need a way to carry that. She levitated the Helmet off the ground, contemplating what she could do with it. Briefly, she found herself wishing Pinkie Pie was here. Pinkie had a way of carrying objects on her body that by all rights she shouldn't be able to...

"Need some help carrying that?" asked a chipper voice.

"Oh, yes, that'd be greeeeaaaah!" Twilight began to reply automatically, before she realized somepony was, somehow, *standing right behind her*.

"Is something the matter?" asked the mystery pony. Twilight turned around to confront whoever had managed to sneak up on her, and was greeted with a surreal image. For a brief

moment, she thought, in some bizarre way, Pinkie Pie had heard her call and managed to follow her back in time. The voice was eerily similar, as was the manestyle, the general body shape, and even the Cutie Mark - three purple balloons. But the similarities ended there - rather than a pink Earth Pony, this pony was a pegasus with a coat that was, somehow, the exact same shade of white as a cloud. Her mane was an almost painfully bright blond, and she had a cheerful smile that was nonetheless more subdued than Twilight was used to from her party-crazed friend.

"I... uh... you... startled me," Twilight explained, lamely.

"Oh, *that!*" the strange pegasus said, waving a hoof dismissively. "I do that all the time! Surprising ponies is my special talent; that's why my name's **Surprise!**"

Twilight jumped a bit as the pegasus, named Surprise apparently, shouted her name suddenly. "Uuuh... nice to meet you, Surprise. I'm... Blue Star." Not Twilight's most inspired idea, but all she could come up with on short notice. "How... how long were you standing there?"

"Oh, not long!" Surprise said cheerfully. "I just saw you standing all by yourself in an alleyway and wondered what you were doing!"

"Oh, I... um... I was looking for my helmet!" Celestia dammit, she really was bad at this whole 'making up excuses' thing, wasn't she? Undeterred, she held up the helmet. "It's... a family heirloom. Yeah, that works. I dropped it and it rolled in here. That's all. Nothing strange about that!" She smiled desperately.

Surprise gave her a blank look, staring straight into her eyes. Twilight grinned back desperately, sweat beading on her brow. *Come on, buy it, buy it...*

"Makes sense to me!" Surprise suddenly exclaimed. Twilight gave a sigh of relief as Surprise leapt into the air, hovering over the now-blue Unicorn. "Hey, wanna go get some cookies? I know this really neat place that makes the absolute best pastries *ever!*"

Twilight stared open-mouthed at the pegasus. She again harbored a brief suspicion that this was somehow Pinkie Pie in disguise, except she was now doing backflips in the air. "Umm... I'd love to Surprise... but... I don't have any bits to pay for it." She rubbed the back of her neck with a hoof in embarrassment. "I, ah, just got to Canterlot, and I don't have a job yet." True enough. "I don't even have a place to stay..." Her head drooped as the enormity of her situation hit her again. How was she going to survive?

Surprise gasped in sympathy. "Oh, you poor thing!" she exclaimed. Suddenly Twilight found herself the victim of an airborne glomp, as Surprise swooped down and wrapped her forelegs around her in a big hug. "Don't worry, Bluey! You can stay with me until you find a place!"

Twilight blinked in surprise. “R-really? Would that be okay? I mean, you only just met meaaaaaaah!” She suddenly found her scooped off her hooves as Surprise displayed a surprising strength, lifting her up and carrying her from the alleyway. Twilight barely had time to seize her logbook and the Helmet with her magic before she was whisked away.

“Woohoo!” cheered Surprise as they zoomed out into the busy street. Twilight took a brief break from panicking to marvel at the architecture. It was like a trip through an incredibly realistic museum recreation. “My very own houseguest! We’re gonna have the bestest time ever!”

Twilight couldn’t help but laugh. “I hope so...” She looked up at her new friend. A new friend... it gave her a warm, fuzzy feeling inside. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad, being trapped in this time.

Oh! That reminded her. “Hey, Surprise!” she called up to the pegasus. “I can’t seem to remember; do you know what year it is?”

“Sure I do!” Surprise said amiably. Apparently she didn’t find forgetting the year at all odd. “It’s the year six hundred and fifty-two!”

If this was the year 652, then... Twilight quickly checked the date in her mind. Assuming Nightmare Moon’s escape happened *exactly* one thousand years after her imprisonment, then... she was five years too early.

Well, horseapples.
