

Prolog
The Present
Operation: Time Heist

Four worried ponies crowded together around a table inside the Bighthouse in Maretime Bay, watching their friend who was humming to herself and looking everything on the table over. They didn't *need* to crowd close to each other, of course there was plenty of space in the room. Through some unspoken need the four friends stood closer than they normally would. Where a wingtip on the back of another pony or the brush of a hoof against another would normally cause blushes and stammers of apology, these ponies needed a little closeness right now. Despite the brightly colored magic crystal and the warm sunshine coming in through the windows all of them felt distant from each other, almost cold in a way that had nothing to do with temperature. For several minutes the pony of their scrutiny had carefully checked over all the objects on the table, compared them to a list she had on her phone, and nodding to herself in a self-satisfied way began to pack them into her satchel. She might need those things where she was going, it wasn't a trip to another town she was planning. Not this time. *This* time she was going a little bit further than anypony had ever gone, and the absolute. Worst. Thing. Ever. Was that none of her newfound friends could join her.

"Are you absolutely sure this is the best way?" Hitch asked, finally breaking the silence. The other three glanced at him, then nervously flicked their eyes back to the fifth. "I mean come on Sunny, this is crazy!"

Sunny, the orange colored mare with the striped mane looked *about* to give her usual flippant answer that of course everything was going to be fine, and took a breath to do just that. But she caught the mood of her friends and slowly let it out. Sitting back on her hind legs her usual smile faltered and she looked them all over. Pipp, Zipp, Izzy, and Hitch, they had been with her since the beginning. Finding the crystal, getting magic back, they had stayed by her side through it all and "To be honest, Hitch, I am not *absolutely* sure of anything, much less the best way to proceed. I mean the five of us managed to bring actual honest to goodness *magic* back to the whole land. I just wanted everypony to be friends again, never in my wildest dreams did I expect *that*. But that's where we are, right?"

"Woah, that's the most serious I've ever seen you," Izzy decided, cocking her head to the side. "And we've been over this plan a hundred times."

"One hundred and thirteen, to be precise," Zipp informed them, consulting her notes.

"Not really the point," Hitch continued. "The point is you don't have to do this! We're only just figuring out magic, and you have no idea if this spell you found in that old book will even *work*, much less what it'll mean for all of us. You're talking about changing, well, everything!"

"Exactly." Sunny agreed, nodding hard once. "I owe it to everypony to try." She got back up and bent once again to her task of loading up her satchel. "I don't know how long I'll be able to transform like this. If it's just some sort of magical backwash from getting the crystals together tomorrow or even an hour from now may be too late. *Right now* is when I have the power to do this. And you've seen The Amazing Spider Pony same as I have. With great power comes great responsibility. If not now, when? I can't risk

waiting.” *Besides, waiting wouldn't really gain me anything, would it? I know the spell by heart, there's nothing more to be done.*

“But we might not even be friends afterwards!” Pipp reminded her.

“I know Pipp, we've talked about it. No matter what, I'll come find you. All of you. We *will* be friends again, I promise. And...” she hesitated, looking down.

“And?” Zipp prompted.

“And even if I can't, even if for some reason you don't exist anymore, think of the hundreds of years of strife that will be avoided! Isn't *that* worth it?”

The others shared a look, totally unable to respond. On the one hoof it made a certain twisted sense. Their goal was noble, nopony could fault what Sunny was about to attempt, if it worked out in the best possible way. Any one of them should be willing to lay down their existence for what Sunny promised. But on the other hoof, there was the danger...

“Besides, I think we'll all be fine,” she continued. “After all, *I'll* be fine, so there's no reason you shouldn't be. You'll just have a few more friends that's all, and make them earlier. Nothing wrong with that, right?”

“How do you figure?” Hitch demanded.

“Yeah, what's your evidence for that?” Zipp agreed, and the two nodded to each other.

Ah Zipp, always playing the detective now, huh? “Because if I'm not fine, how would I have been here to do the spell I'm about to do, silly.” She hopped over to her and booped her nose. “So I'm a permanent fixture, so to speak. An event that must take place, else all else come undone. The world will *demand* my existence, in a way. So events won't be that far off what we know, how could they be?” *Of course I may come back to find nothing has changed for me, because some other Sunny in another reality has lived a totally different life because of what I did and hey, that's okay too. That's what Dragonclaw P would have me believe happens anyway.*

“Or you open your eyes to a blighted landscape littered with pony corpses!” Izzy stuck her tongue out and flipped over onto her back, splaying her legs out in every direction. Her back leg twitched convincingly.

“Come on, no pony wants to see that!” Hitch protested, but the others noticed he didn't look away all *that* quickly.

“See what, Hitch?” she asked innocently, wiggling back and forth. “You see something you like?”

“Stop, stop it right now! I am a sheriff!”

“What's that got to do with anything?” Zipp asked.

The others had slight smiles on their faces, and Sunny went back to packing. But Pipp's face fell. “How do you know what you come back to will be better though? Like Izzy said, you could come back and thanks to your meddling, everything could be worse.”

“What could be worse than all of pony kind hating and fearing each other for hundreds of years?” Sunny asked. “We lived together in the past, something happened, and then we didn't. We lost magic, even. That's the worst. I just want to make sure our bonds are strong enough that never happens. How can that lead to a worse outcome than we had?”

“That's too philosophical for me,” Zipp admitted. “I'm more worried about the practical aspects, can you control your new magic enough to do this safely?” she went on. “It's not like you can practice this sort of thing. What if the book got it wrong? Look outside- Unicorns can barely levitate objects with any reliability and you want to do *this*? We still have no idea how to cast actual spells, pegasi can't seem to look where they're going, everypony is just... you know!” She gestured out the window. Visions of dropped objects and mid-air crashes came to everypony's mind.

“I have to, Zipp,” Sunny replied seriously. “You heard Twilight's message the same as I did. Something happened in the past, forcing her to do what she did. The crystal was made in a time of fear, but

this time it's going to be made in a time of unity. We lost so much, and for what? We don't even know. We have books about dragons, and griffons, and yaks, but where are they all? So much knowledge lost, friends never made. This way we don't have to 'get them back,' because we'll have never lost them! Oh, don't look so down everypony. No matter what, I'll remember you. Hooves to heart!"

"We really can't talk you out of it?" Hitch pleaded.

"Nope! My mind is made up!" With that she dropped the last item into the pack and closed the clasp. "How do I look?"

"Like someone going away... for a really long time," Izzy told her, eyes tearing up a little.

"I... I know. I'm sorry. It has to be done. I feel that with every fiber of my being." She glanced upstairs, where rainbow colored light was being blasted into the sky every second of the day.

"I know you do," she agreed sadly. "But that doesn't make saying goodbye any easier."

"Come on, it's not goodbye. If everything goes to plan, I'll be gone, like, one second. And I'll come back to find all of you, plus even more friends who I've known my entire life. You'll see."

"Come on Izzy," Hitch told her, putting his front leg across her back. "We agreed to support her, and that's what we'll do. In this moment we're her friends, and she will go seeing our smiling faces and knowing we have her back always. Right? She won't go angry at us, because we couldn't trust her. She's been right so many times before let's give her our lov- I mean, let's give, uh, oh buck it, I might as well just say it. Let's give her our love one last time!"

"Right." She wiped at her eyes and nodded. "Well, maybe she won't be able to transform at all and this will all be for nothing anyway."

"We can ho- I mean, we'll figure that out if it comes to it. Come on." He turned to the lift and everypony got on, heading to the second level. There was the crystal, source of all magic in the lands, shining away like a distant star. If it was going to be done anywhere, this place had the best chance of working. "All right, everypony," he told them. "Concentrate. She's doing this for *us*. For all the friends we never made, for all the years of hurt, and mistrust, and whatever the heck it was you unicorns were doing that whole time."

"Rude!" Izzy chided him. "Depression just happens to be our national pastime that's all. Along with superstition, xenophobia, you know, the usual."

"Thanks, all of you," Sunny told them. She looked at each of her friends, trying to put a brave face on this, but she could see their apprehension too plainly on each pony's face.

No time for that, Sunny Starscout. This is your plan, and there's no getting off this train we're on. Oh stallion, I hope Pony Fantasy 7 Remake is still around when I get back, I want to play part two... If they ever finish it. Around her the cutie marks of her friends began to glow, they were united now in purpose. No more arguing, no more hesitation. Sunny closed her eyes and tried to look deep inside herself for the magic she knew was there. Find your spark. Make it glow. You can do this!

She felt it, magic welling up inside her, and she knew it had worked. Squeezing her eyes closed even tighter she lit up her horn, magic flowing through her. Complex magical formula flashed through her mind, she had lived, breathed, and slept this spell for weeks and it was now or never. *I can do this! I feel great! I. Can. Win!*

In a burst of magic the pony known as Sunny Starscout was torn from existence, and the ponies left held their breath and counted.

One.

Two?

Chapter 1

Coming up onto the present

Sunny arrives at her destination

“Come on, Origami,” shouted Dimple Smiles, looking back into the auditorium. “We’re done, let’s go!”

“Done?” shrieked Origami, the dark purple pony looking aghast at her School of Friendship classmate. “This is barely presentable, it’s nowhere near *done*.” She waved a hoof behind her, as though to emphasize what she was talking about. The reformed changeling sighed a deep sigh. “Don’t give me that look! It’s the princesses! They’re coming to celebrate the one year anniversary of the School of Friendship opening. It has to be *perfect*.”

“It really doesn’t,” he retorted. “But suit yourself. We’re heading back to the dorm, don’t stay too long.”

“Friends help each other!” Didn’t want to play that card, but you left me no choice.

“My friends and I are going back to the dorms,” Dimple replied, throwing the door open to show the assortment of species beyond, waiting for them. “You’re the one abandoning us. How is that friendship?”

“Fine then, get out of here!” Am I the one in the wrong?

He gave a shrug and turned, the door closing behind him.

The pony gave a slow count of ten before screaming in frustration. *Why can’t they understand? It would only be a few more minutes if we all worked together. We could make it-*

“Whoa, you okay there?” a voice at her side asked.

Origami shrieked in fright and lunged to the side, spinning to face the source of the voice.

“Gianna? You can’t just do that to a pony!”

The griffon slapped the ground with her tail and laughed uproariously. “Wow roomie, the look on your face. You really didn’t know I was standing there? Wow!”

“Just get out of here!” she commanded, blushing furiously and banging the door open with her hoof. This of course brought Gianna face to face with her cutie mark.

“Say, meant to ask you before,” she mused, pointing a claw at her flank. “What’s with the bird? I mean I get the wings reference, you’re a pegasus obviously, but your talent is flying like a bird made of paper? How does that make sense?”

“It’s origami, stupid.”

“I know your name is Origami, Origami, but right now I’m asking about the bird! You know, this one? On your butt or whatever?”

“It’s paper folding. *That’s* my talent, making shapes out of paper. It’s called origami.”

That seemed to take the griffon aback a second. “And that’s another thing, you get named when you’re born, right?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Soooo, your parents named you Origami, and it *just so happens* you have a talent for paper folding? It’s like, Fluttershy is shy, Rainbow Dash is the fastest, Twilight Sparkle brought Luna and Ceseltia together- how does that work?”

Just one of the great mysteries of magic I will one day unravel. “It’s not something we ponies really talk about, thank you very much. Now are you leaving or what?”

“Actually, I was going to ask if you wanted some help. I heard you screaming your head off about perfection earlier and I’ve got nothing better to do at the moment. Let me help you out. Win some friendship points, or whatever. You think it’s true, there’s a board in the headmare’s office that keeps track of that sort of thing with magic?”

“How should I-” She blinked at the griffon trying to process this latest development. “You really want to help?”

“Griffons aren’t liars.”

“Oh,” she said in a soft voice. “Thanks. Sorry about, um, calling you stupid, before.” She put her hoof down, turning to face Gianna, who was grinning at her.

“No big deal. I’ll forgive you, as that’s what friends do.”

Origami felt a small grin coming on herself. *Yeah, friends...*

“So what needs doing?” Gianna asked, looking around. “Because I don’t see it.”

Origami sighed again, it was so *obvious*. “The ribbons decorating the front of the stage are not only haphazardly placed- they should be equally spaced- the knots look like they were all done by a bunch of drunken cats. The podium is not properly centered on the stage, and are you really not seeing the banner?”

That podium is solid wood. Maybe with the two of us we can move it? Some unicorn must have levitated it there, can we even handle it? I mean I’m not saying Origami is a scrawny pony but... She’s a pretty scrawny pony. “The banner?” Gianna looked at the banner hung above the stage. “What about it?”

“Clearly one side is lower than the other! It has to be adjusted!”

Gianna squinted at it and scratched at her left ear. “By like a centimeter?”

“Why even do the job if you’re not going to do it right?”

“Huh. Anything else?” *Maybe I shouldn’t have offered, this pony is taking this way too far.*

“Nope, that should do-” At that exact moment one of the lights overhead sparked and cracked, sending a shower of sparks downward. The lights dimmed a bit, then came back up. “Huh.” The two stared up at it. “And now one of the lights needs to be replaced?”

“I can probably fly up there and unscrew it,” Gianna decided. “And it just so happens I know where the supplies closet is. You go get started on redoing the knots or whatever and I’ll go grab a bulb.” *Tying knots, folding paper, it’s the same thing right? Yeah, got to be. Though I would love to stay and see how she actually manages it with her hooves. So weird how ponies work.*

“Not exactly teamwork as it was defined in class, but it could count,” Origami decided. “We are still working towards the same goal here.”

“You got that right!” Gianna gave her a playful bump. “Be right back!” She headed back towards the school.

Origami walked slowly to the stage, deciding on where to start her efforts, wondering if she could call to Gianna to look for a tape measure or something so she could get the spacing right. She kept casting glances at the light, *what made it blow out like that?* She reached for the first ribbon and pulled back with a jerk. She had gotten a shock! *Are these ribbons silk? I don’t think cotton would shock me like that. If only I had paid more attention in science class. Too busy wishing I was in art class I guess.* She hesitantly reached out to the next nearest one, bracing herself in case all of them were charged up, but it seemed only that one was. She shrugged and got to work. *Or is it me that would have been charged up? Stupid science!!!*

She was halfway done when Gianna came back in. "Turning the lights off!" she announced, over by the switch.

Ah, smart. Wouldn't want her to be electrocuted if there was some kind of wiring problem up there.

"Okay!" she shouted back with a wave. *Guess this can wait, I can't really do it in the dark.* She turned from the stage as the lights went out and-

"Now isn't that something?" Gianna remarked, looking around. Everything in the room had a faint glow to it. Even her. Holding up a claw she looked herself over. "Never glowed before. Wings feel all tingly too." She stretched one out. "What do you think is going on?"

"One- one second," Origami called. She closed her eyes. *Okay, the manosphere is all around us. Vibrate your core, feel the vibration in the sphere. Just like being in water, you can feel the waves all around you. Just like in class. If it's magic it'll-* She opened her core to any magical sensations around herself and tore her eyes open again. "It's magic!" she shouted. "Something powerful, I think? I've never felt anything like it before. We have to get out of here!" She started running toward the door.

"Griffons don't run from stuff," Gianna grouched. "Anyway, you're no unicorn, what are you doing talking about magic any-"

"Come on, Gianna!" Origami ran behind her and bumped her with her head. "Move, I'll explain later!"

"Fine, fine, you don't haveta push me."

The two made it nearly out of the room before the space behind them lit up. Electricity arced about the room, making the two glance back and then stop, both fixated on the ball of energy that had appeared in the center of the room. Their manes were blown back as the energy discharged, and both quickly shut their eyes and looked away. When she felt brave enough to look again Origami was slightly surprised to see Gianna between herself and the figure, whatever it was.

"A princess?" Gianna breathed. "But there's only the four, right? I don't recognize her."

"Princess? That's imposs-" But it wasn't impossible. As she leaned over to look at the figure, now recovering and looking around, she was that it was indeed a pony. A pony with wings and a horn, but unlike any she had ever seen. These weren't physical things, they glowed as if made of magic.

"It worked!" the strange pony squealed. "I made it back far enough to help! Hi there! Why is it so dark here? Don't you have electric lights yet? Oh no I hope I didn't go back too far. Do you normally glow like that? Wait are you a hippogriff?"

"No I'm I-"

"A yak then!"

"No!"

"Well you're not a dragon, I'm pretty sure."

"I'm a griffon, of course. Who in the heck are you?"

"I'm Sunny! Sunny Starscout. Nice to meet you! You're a griffon huh? Boy oh boy the books got it really wrong didn't they? My dad would be furious. Can I see your tail?"

She zipped forward, making Origami stagger back away from her. *I don't even need to vibrate my core. She's the most magical thing I've ever felt. What in the blue blazes is she?*

"Hi, I'm Sunny!" She held out a hoof.

She glanced at it, back to Sunny, and took a few more steps back. *Am I going to get shocked again?*

"Shy one, huh? That's okay. How about you?" She turned and offered a hoof to Gianna, who shook it. "That's Origami. And where are you from?"

"Maretime Bay."

Gianna shook her head a bit and glanced back at Origami. "Not aware of every pony settlement there is..."

"Neither am I," she shakily offered, "but even I've never heard of a Maretime Bay."

Sunny laughed. "I should say not. It won't be built for hundreds of years. Maybe never, if things go to plan."

"The what?" both said.

"Yeah, it's a long story. Oh man, I'm actually gonna get to say it. I have to do the pose!"

"Pose?" *This pony is as bad as Pinkie Pie*, Origami thought.

She squared her hooves, threw her horn high and looked at them with one eye. "Take me to your leader."

"We can't just walk into Twilight's castle," Gianna protested. "Wait, can we just do that?"

"Is our leader her or the mayor?"

"I think if it's magic it better be Twilight, right? I mean it's not our homeroom teacher."

"You're probably right. We're just kids, we have lots of-" Origami agreed. "Wait, now what?" With her senses already heightened from this weird pony being around she felt another blast of magic nearby and in a burst of purple light Twilight Sparkle herself teleported into the place.

Oh no, how am I going to explain all this? Origami despaired. She looked at the pony that could be her older sister, at least in coloring. *Does she dye her mane? My hair is so blah next to hers. And look at those wings! Not a feather out of place, she probably has all kind of servants up at the castle to get her ready every morning. And that beautiful horn, look at that purple aura still clinging to it! Wonder where she gets her hooves done, they're so shiny.*

"Hello?" she said again, staring at Origami and waving a hoof in front of her face. "Someone want to tell me what's going on here? Are you okay there? Can you hear me?"

Oh no I've just made a horrible first impression and now Twilight Sparkle of all ponies hates me! It's almost impossible to get on the bad side of the Princess of Friendship but e-yup, I've managed to do it within 10 seconds of meeting her. My life is ruined! Gianna is going to tell her real friends about how stupid Origami stared at Twilight Sparkle like a parasprite is paralyzed by music. Then it'll be all over school, and everyone in the halls will laugh at me. I won't be able to show my face there, they all think I'm weird as it is with my fascination with magic and being the only pegasus taking magic classes with the unicorns despite not yet being able to actualize my mana core-

"You'll have to forgive my friend here," Gianna told Twilight, "she's had a rough time of it. We were just finishing up in here and suddenly Sunny-"

"That's me! I'm Sunny! You're Twilight Sparkle, aren't you? Oh I have so many questions for you. I hope I can remember them all. Can I have your autograph? Is it true you're asexual? Why did you not help raise any other alicorns? Did you find nopony that could be trusted with that power? Are you immortal? If so, why aren't you alive in the future? Why do Luna and Celestia vanish from history? What's-"

Twilight shoved a hoof into her mouth to stem the tide. "One question at a time, and we have more important concerns!"

"Yeah as I was saying," Gianna went on, giving Sunny a dirty look, "this pony just appeared out of nowhere."

"Not nowhere," Twilight corrected. "From what I felt she used a very, very dangerous spell to come here. So out with it," she turned to face Sunny again. "What was so important that you had to mess around with time travel magic."

"Time travel!?" Origami gasped. "No way!"

"It's true," Sunny agreed with pride. "Leave it to Twilight to get it right away. Don't worry, I'll tell you the whole story. You need to help me, help save the future!"

"You better make it fast, we don't have a lot of time," Twilight decided, looking around. "Maybe changing locations will help slow it down? I really have no idea."

"Slow what down?" Sunny asked, cocking her head to the side.

"Just get in a circle around me," she ordered, her horn lighting up.

“Oh, maybe you can teach me some magic,” Sunny realized. “I don’t have anyone at home so I’ve just been doing my best.”

“Just get in the circle,” she growled.

Origami looked down, and there was a glowing, magical circle on the floor. *Magic is so cool!*

In a flash, the room was empty.

The group appeared not far away, in a room made of crystal. Crystal chairs were arranged in a circle around a table, and Sunny went “uuuuuuuuuh!” looking around in wonder.

“No time for that,” snapped Twilight. “I can and will snap your spell back in your face and return you to your own time if you don’t start explaining things this instant. You think I can’t? I made sure I could after that whole Rainbow Dash incident. Playing around with time can have disastrous consequences.”

“Wow,” Sunny whispered to the others. “She’s such a TOP isn’t she?”

They looked at her, uncomprehending. Twilight scowled.

“You know, a Totally Overbearing Pony? Never mind.” She turned to face Twilight again. “Okay. As you have guessed, I have come from the far future. Why? Because the future is terrible. I will summarize the three ways it’s terrible as you seem to be in a hurry. Don’t worry, I prepared both a long and short version of this speech because I figured I would be telling it a whole bunch and wasn’t sure about sensitive information about the future getting out-”

“Can you just get on with it?”

“Oh, sure!”

This location doesn’t seem to be vibrating with that time magic, Origami thought to herself. And now I can recognize a time magic disturbance in the manosphere. How cool is that?

“So the first reason the future is terrible is because up until recently, the three types of ponies all hated each other. And I mean hated. It was like our national pastime. Half the ponies in my town all worked at a company making anti-unicorn and anti-pegasus gear. Like helmets that were supposed to keep unicorns from reading your mind. How could they even test if it worked? It’s not like they hired unicorns to come from their town and mind read ponies wearing them. Such a scam. But would anypony listen to me when I told them? Noooooooooo!”

“Wait, ponies don’t live together anymore?” Twilight asked.

“That’s right. We live by the bay, unicorns live in the crystal forest, and pegasi live in Zephyr Heights. Just a single unicorn coming to town was enough to freak out everypony, as though we were under attack. I later learned our so called deputy was so out of his mind with fear he shut himself in a unicorn trap that we *of course* had just lying there in the streets like a minefield. So much wasted effort. Anyway-”

“How did this happen?”

“I thought you wanted the short version?”

She vibrated in annoyance. “Go on.”

“Anyway, no clue. Yeah, it’s been so long since we split up no pony even remembers why. That’s how long it’s been. But we still all hated each other, for reasons. Second reason why the future is terrible; up until recently no pony had any magic.”

“Impossible!”

“Nope!” she countered lightly. “When Izzy, that’s the unicorn that stopped into town, got chased around and we went on the road she revealed to me she didn’t have any magic. Unicorns hadn’t for generations.”

“If you all hated each other,” Gianna asked, “why did she brave coming to town? I like her style.”

“Oh, oh, that’s the sweetest part! See, my dad was always sort of an amateur archaeologist, he loved old books and paintings and things that showed the pony types together. I inherited that desire to see us together too, and when I was quite young I made a lantern. A floating kind, with a candle? You know. I

attached a note, 'come to Maretime Bay, you have friends here.' Turned out Izzy was the one who found it and many years later decided to see if it was true. And it was! At least for me. No pony else liked her very much at first. Not that many liked her at home either, she's a real oddball let me tell you."

"Get back to magic being gone," Twilight insisted.

"Oh sure."

That feeling is building up around here, Origami thought. *It feels just like the school. Should we move again?* "Uh, should we move again?" she asked. "Whatever the manasphere is doing I don't like it." *It's like a magnet attracting iron filings.*

"We should have a little time before I have to decide, don't worry. I'm monitoring it quite--"

Twilight looked at Origami as though seeing her for the first time and she had just pulled some kind of Pinkie Pie level of prank. She tilted her head as if to verify, yup, wings, not horn. "How do *you* know this?"

"I'm studying magic at the school?"

"You are!?" she exclaimed, looking excited. "Have you actualized your core yet?"

Origami colored and looked down. "Uh, not yet, but I'm studying really hard. I want to fuse my father's magic and my mother's talent for art into my own style."

"That's amazing! So few outside of unicorns take that route, and even then most don't progress past basic--" She shook herself. "Not the time. But my door is always open if you need some pointers. You!" She shoved a hoof at Sunny. "Continue."

"*Such a TOP.* Okay, we next headed to the pegasus city and learned none of them could fly. Oh, the royal family was tricking ponies into thinking royal ponies still could, but it was all a trick. That's where we learned about the crystal."

They couldn't fly? We use magic to fly too? Huh...

"*Very* long story short we brought magic back by combining the pieces of this crystal, and working together," she got a tablet out of her satchel, the three just stared at it as they had no idea what that was, but it was displaying a picture of a crystal. "So that part at least is okay. We're learning. Both how to get along and to use magic again. Hitch- he's an earth pony by the way- can talk to animals, which is hilarious believe me. If it was just those two things, I wouldn't have done it. I wouldn't have come back. It's the third thing that made up my mind. Gianna knows what it is."

"I do?" she asked. "How could I possibly know that?"

"What did I first ask- *Why* did I first ask what you were?"

"You were joking around?" she asked hopefully.

Sunny shook her head.

"You really didn't know what a griffon was?"

"Because there are no griffons. Or dragons. Or yaks. Or kirin. Or changelings. There are only Ponies. We checked. They're gone. Heck there aren't even pony variants anymore, like Crystal Ponies? You had those right?" She waited for the three to nod. "Just the three types. Maybe everyone else left for other lands when whatever it was happened to us ponies, or maybe they're dead. I don't know. They never, ever, came back. So the fact remains. Something happened in the past that not only broke us up, it may have killed every other race *but* us on the entire continent. That's why I came back. I have to save them. I have to make sure friendship never leaves our land, and stop whatever it was that drove us apart. *Before* it happens."

"That's-" Twilight took a deep breath and let it out. "About the only reason I would accept for not sending you back. Wow, you managed to convince me. Good job."

"Uh, Twilight?" Origami stuttered. "That magical thing just jumped up to about ten times as bad as before?"

"Crap you're right, wait is the progression not linear but logarithmic--"

The castle shook from the impact of something hitting it from outside, and the very walls cracked. The three screamed as the boom resounded through the walls, and the castle shook.

Chapter 2
In the present
Ponies helping Ponies

Twilight pushed open the doors to the balcony on the side of the castle and the group crowded around her. Looking outward was a scene from nightmare. The sky was black, and lightning stabbed down at random sending ponies scattering. Carts were overturned. The wind howled. Chunks of ice, metal, and wood rained from the sky out of nowhere. Ponies were screaming, running about uselessly and mostly making things worse.

“What do we do?” Origami asked.

“There’s a way to lock it down short term, and long term,” Twilight announced. “But I’ll need Sunny’s help, as it’s her magic drawing all this. I’ll go get the book I’m thinking of. Let’s just hope he’ll show up with all this going on, and actually do something about it.”

“Who?” Gianna asked.

“Never mind. Just stay here I’ll be back in a minute.” Her horn glowed and she vanished.

So cool! Origami squealed in the privacy of her own mind. “Lock down what? What’s happening out there? Don’t just leave us!”

“Come on, we need to help!” Sunny told them, spreading her wings. “Don’t fail me now!” she told them.

“No way, Twilight said to stay put!” Origami sat down with finality. “I’m not going out into that!”

“She’s not the boss of me. Come on, you always dreamed of being a hero, right? This is your big chance.” She jumped into the maelstrom and rushed off.

“Something big hit the castle,” Gianna remarked, craning her neck. “What is that thing?”

Origami sighed, got up again, and looked with her. “Almost looks like the bottom part of an airship,” she decided. “If we made them out of metal. Which we don’t, because it’s too heavy.”

“That’s what I was thinking. Are we really going to sit here? Looks like we could do some good out there.”

“Ooooh, you!” She scrunched up her face. “Fine!”

“Yes! I’m gonna help more ponies than you!” She dove out the window.

“Are not!” She followed.

Their first order of business was to lift a heavy metal beam off a pony it was crushing, which Gianna did most of the heavy lifting for.

“Did you help at all? You’re so weak!” she teased. “Get her inside, I think I see a baby carriage blowing away in the wind which honestly is a little overdone don’t you think?” She ran off.

“Can you walk?” Origami asked the pony.

“Not well,” she admitted. “It really hurts. Where did that even come from? It just squashed me flat out of nowhere. What’s happening?”

At least it hit the back end of you and not the front end. It would have crushed your head for sure. “I’m sure they’ll be an announcement later.” *If we survive. I don’t even know what’s going on and I know what’s going on!* “Come on I’ll help you up.”

“Thank you.”

Leaning on her, Origami helped the pony into the castle, which even with the weird thing crashed into it, seemed like the safest place to be. Darting out again she saw Gianna heading to a house with flames shooting out the top of it, and focused on the filly crouching under a bush several feet away. *Don’t recognize her, she’s probably still attending Miss Cheerilee’s school.*

“Come on, you can’t stay here,” she called, trying to tug the pony out from under the bush. “We need to get you under cover.”

“What’s going on, where’s my mom?” cried the filly.

“Don’t know- oh!” As she spoke the filly’s face turned towards her, and showed her eyes were covered with a film, making them white.

“I got all turned around, and there’s so much noise where am I?”

“Right by the castle. It’s not far. We’ll find your mother later but you need to be safe okay? Can you come with me? You can hold onto me if you need to.”

“But what’s happening?”

“A storm of some kind!” *Is that actually accurate? Is this a time storm?*

“Like the Storm King made?”

“Yes!”

“He didn’t come back did he?”

“What? No, he won’t come back. There are no ships in the air, it’s just weather. You have to come with me, please!”

“Okay.”

Meanwhile, Gianna landed in front of the house that was on fire. One of them, anyway.

“My baby is still inside!” cried the pony looking up helplessly at the place. “That room there!”

“On it!” she insisted, and took to the sky again. *No time for subtlety at this point.* She crashed through the window, wincing as glass scraped her up a bit, and landed in a crouch, looking around. There wasn’t too much smoke here, the fire hadn’t spread much past the roof but the baby pony in the corner couldn’t exactly stay here, now could they? No. She grabbed up the little one and busted out of the window again, dropping the baby into the waiting hoof of the mother.

“Thank you so much!”

“Of course. Head to the castle, we’re pretty sure it’s the safest place.”

“Okay...” She started off.

Better take care of that fire. Gianna looked around, her gaze landing on a rain barrel. *Perfect.* She scooped it up, trying to awkwardly fly with it, but completely missed the flames with the water inside when she dumped it. *Whoops. Thanks for the betrayal, water. Better get a refill.*

Origami safely delivered the filly and looked around. *That can’t be... But it is!* Hovering around the one side of the castle was a somewhat familiar figure, a turtle with an enchanted flying device strapped to it. The turtle was trying its best to avoid the falling debris and not go flying in the wind. *Where is Rainbow Dash? Isn’t this her pet? Was he blown away and she’s above the...* She looked up. *Are there even clouds up there to move? It’s so black. I can’t tell.* She zipped over, grabbing the little guy up and tossing him into the castle as well. *He must know his way around there, right?*

Meanwhile Gianna managed to get a full barrel of water over the house nearest the lake, thankfully the castle was right next to it so she didn't have to go far, and successfully doused that fire. *Now back to the kid's house.* She headed back to get another barrel full.

"Mr. Bindle, you're not helping," Origami told the dusty looking pony with the stick and blanket cutie mark. She knew he wandered into town from time to time, and seemed nice enough, but now he was standing there shouting some weird stuff.

"I tell you these are the end times, as I have known were coming these many years now!" he continued. "Fire and lightning from the sky, all sinners will be cleansed in the holy flames. I tried to warn you, tried to get you to repent but did you listen? No, and now it's too late!"

Oh for the love of- I have it on good authority the future has at least some ponies in it. Didn't know this guy was one of those gloom and doom types. "Snap out of it. It's just a storm. It's not the end times. You ponies are all the same- how many attacks have we weathered? How many tyrants? We'll do the same today."

"All those who would worship the dark-"

"Mr. Bindle. You are putting yourself and me in danger standing here. Go. Inside." She pointed to the castle.

"Oh very well," he agreed with a huff. "As you're so very insistent. Maybe I can talk some sense into whoever is inside."

I really am. What is wrong with some ponies? Now who else needs- what's that?

A strange metal object barely missed Gianna who was flapping across town with a rain barrel, probably heading for that fire over there to try and put it out. The object smashed into the ground and then started to unfold. Legs and a head popped out, making this some weird, metal, parody of a pony.

"That's a pony killer!" Sunny shouted, running past her. "Kill it, kill it, kill it, kill it, kill it!" she ducked out of sight behind a house.

A what?

"Unit is behind enemy lines," the robot pony announced. "Unit must fulfill directives. Combatant ponies detected. Begin loading murder.exe. Murder.exe loading."

The thing staggered as Gianna chucked the rain barrel at it, which smashed into it and put a dent in the side of it. The thing's head swiveled to take her in.

"Error. Error. Non-pony lifeform detected. Announcement; non-pony lifeform is currently an invalid combat target. Further violence against this unit will necessitate change of designation. No further warning will be given. Murder.exe 75% loaded."

I can't tangle with that! Origami thought to herself, scrambling for cover herself. *What is that thing? It wants to murder us?*

"How about a swim?" Gianna dove at the thing, clearly trying to swoop it up and dump it in the lake, but she didn't get far. "How heavy is this thing?"

"Mass significant to thwart pegasus air drop technique," said the thing a bit smugly. "Murder.exe 100% loaded. Beginning combat routine." A door popped open on the side and a thing shot out of it, some kind of arm. Gianna cried out as it blasted her.

"Now you've done it!" She slashed at the thing with her claws. This of course made her drop it, and it went for the nearest pony. Which happened to be Mr. Bindle, who was now taking a terrified step back.

"Earth Pony," intoned the robot. "Invalid target. Possible escaped prisoner from enemy encampment. Radioing for evacuation drone. Searching for new target."

"I'm your target!" Gianna screamed, coming in to try ripping it at it again.

It won't attack earth ponies? What the heck? But I have to do something, I can't let her take that thing on alone. But what I can... Origami's gaze fell upon a metal rod, maybe a piece of fence or something that was stuck into the dirt. The end facing up was quite pointy. *Okay, maybe.*

The two were going back and forth, Gianna again trying to toss the thing into the water and stay to the side so the weapon couldn't get it. Both were surprised when Origami screamed out of the sky holding the rusty metal, driving it through the thing.

"Warning, combat effectiveness falling. Pinging nearest repair drone. No return ping. Combat continues."

"Yeah, nice one Origami! Hit it again!"

"I... I will!" she promised, as lightning flashed to the side of her. *Oh I'm so going to die out here.*

"Here!" Gianna's claws raked the face of the thing, tearing off more metal and exposing the insides.

"Right!" She yanked the metal back and thrust it forward, taking the thing in the head and causing it to jerk to a stop and collapse.

"I only. Wanted. To fulfill. My. Function..." the robot said, as the lights went out in its eyes.

"Now that's teamwork!" Gianna cried, throwing a claw into the air. She cast a concerned glance at her smaller friend. "You can stop hitting it now, Origami."

The young pony stopped screaming and bashing the thing with the metal bar.

"Thought I told you two to stay inside? And where is Sunny, I need her for this!" Twilight scolded them, again appearing out of nowhere.

Oh, now you show up.

"I'm here," Sunny said, poking her head around the corner. "Is it safe?"

"We took care of it," Gianna bragged.

"Sorry, that thing scared the *crap* out of me," she admitted, coming over. "I've never seen one moving around before. I think it was damaged from the fall, or something. It should have been way tougher. Or are griffons just that strong?"

"Never mind that," Twilight told her, thrusting a book in her face. "Can you cast this spell?"

"Just like that?" Sunny protested. "No! I have no tutors at home, remember? I put weeks of effort into learning the one spell I know- the time travel spell!"

"Of course. Fine, touch your horn to mine."

Sunny looked at the others. "Right in front of everypony? You're so forward but we've only just met and I'm not sure-"

"Just do it!"

"Okay, okay. *TOP.*"

"Cycle your core, you can do that much I trust?"

"Sure!"

Heck I can do that, thought Origami. *It's the basis of feeling mana and casting spells.*

"Do it and say these words. 'Unto you I give my mantle, freely given, without restriction.'"

Sunny did it, and her horn lit up. Magical energy flared around Twilight's horn as Sunny's wings and horn dimmed. "How much magical power do you- never mind. Here we GO!" A spell shot into the air and created a dome seemingly around the entire town.

The place went silent. The lightning stopped, the winds calmed, ponies paused.

"I can't hold it for long, but at least we have some time to come up with a solution. We'll try the big one first, and hope he's in a good mood. After all this I expect he will be."

“What are you talking about?” Origami asked. “What exactly are we trying to stop here? What is all this?”

“Time wave,” she explained. “The further you travel in time, the more a sort of pressure builds up behind you. That pressure can drag things through time with you, from your point of entry to your point of exit. Why do you think it’s so dangerous to mess with this stuff? It’s not just changing the past, it’s dragging stuff with you. It’ll be a miracle if we don’t wind up with other ponies stranded here, thrown through time. I’ve canceled the wave for now, but if we don’t do something about what’s attracting it- Sunny- it’ll just be back when my spell goes away. And there’s only one being I know that can do that, and we’re going to get him here.”

“Some of the warnings were a bit smudged,” Sunny admitted. “I wasn’t expecting this one. Sorry.”

“Just do something random and silly,” she commanded. “I’ll do the rest.”

Because she went back so far, we got an extra big wave? That kinda makes total sense actually. Magic is so amazing! “Exactly how is that going to help?”

“It’s our best chance. Trust me.”

“I do, of course I do, but...”

Gianna was already making a funny face and spinning around.

“Oh my if any of my classmates see me doing this...” Origami was blushing furiously and started popping up and down. “Bing bong! Ding dong!”

“Yes, yes, that’s it! Put your heart into every agonizing second.”

“I’ll tell random jokes!” Sunny decided. “What has a red body and leaves for a tail? A horseradish!”

That should be good enough, the griffon hardly pushed back but the filly clearly is uncomfortable with all this. And Sunny is another Pinkie so that should help. “Oh master of chaos, with this sacrifice of our sanity do I call out to you, as our pact demands. Appear before me, master trickster, embodiment of chaos, do I call upon you in my hour of need! Discord! Discord! Discord!”

There was a flash, and there stood Discord, in all his glory.

“Love what you’ve done with the place, Twilight,” he schmoozed. “I didn’t think you had it in you. Can we make this quick? I was plowing Fluttershy’s field and I have to admit it was getting crazy hot but that storm cooled me down a bit but I’d like to get back to her- it. The field. I’d like to get back to the field. So I can finish plowing it.”

“Do something about her!” She pointed to Sunny.

“Now isn’t she interesting?” Discord mused, walking around her. “So she’s the reason for all this? Oh dear, changing the future are we? Naughty, naughty. I approve. Future was a pretty boring place until recently, now it’s in flux. And isn’t that interesting?”

“So can you fix it?”

“Anything for you, Twilight dear. I’m sure she’ll make a lovely potted plant.” He raised his hand to snap.

“What? No, just seal it! I know you can.”

He sighed. “Fine, if you want to be *boring* about it.” He snapped, and Sunny’s wings and horn shattered, reforming into a necklace with a horn and wings motif. “Does that satisfy?”

Twilight’s magic vanished too, the beam and dome going down, and she spent a tense moment looking up at the sky.

Manasphere seems normal again. I do feel a return wave from Sunny’s pendant, but it’s under control at the moment, thought Origami.

“It seems so. Thank you for appearing. I wasn’t sure what we would have done if you didn’t.”

“What did you do?” Sunny asked, holding the pendent in a hoof.

“That’s your power. You can take it back whenever, but if I may offer one piece of advice?” He flashed and appeared above her, bending down to whisper in her ear. “Don’t. Lose. It. The amulet. Lose? Don’t. Don’t lose. It. Amulet. Okay bye!” He snapped again and was gone.

“You can just call him up?” Origami asked. “We were told in school to stay away from that guy!”
That’s Twilight for you though. She’s so cool!

“I think he let me do the chant because he never figured I would,” Twilight admitted. “I doubt he’ll respond a second time. Not without a lot more ponies doing crazy things to draw him in. But he is reformed, as long as you don’t push it or demand things you can safely interact with him in the wild. We’ve done some back and forth, and he does like Fluttershy, so he was doing this more for her than for any of us. She would have been sad if anypony got hurt.”

“The books said she was into animals, not gardening,” Sunny announced, dropping the necklace so it hung around her neck again. “We’ll have to correct that one too. How many fields does she have?”

“Just- Just the one field,” Twilight replied getting red.

“Oh? Oh!”

“I don’t get it,” Origami protested.

“Never mind, he only said it to get a rise out of me. I don’t think- that they have that kind of- honestly it’s none of my business if they do.”

“So now what?” Gianna asked. “This place is a mess.”

Twilight’s eyes darted between her new charges. “If I could have a moment, Sunny?” she asked.

“Sure, I’ll go check on those people in the castle,” she agreed, and bounced off.

“Look, I’ve let her stay, but we need to keep this somewhat quiet,” she told the two. “I’m going to need your help. ‘Looking after’ our new friend. I don’t know what we can do to strengthen friendship across the land and prevent whatever tragedy brought her here but I have to believe with her warning we can manage something. Can I count on you two, as guides here in the past to keep her out of trouble?”

Both girls nodded, their eyes wide.

“Okay. Thank you. The fewer ponies we tell about her, the better. We’ll have to tell Celestia and Luna, of course. I mean they’re going to want to know what happened here, we’re not getting all this cleaned up overnight. I’ll give you special privileges, time away from school if you have to go somewhere, and you can stay at the castle if you want. I’ll need you close if we think of something.”

“Really? No joke?” Origami breathed.

“No joke. You handled yourselves well out here, and passed my little test. I wondered if you would just meekly follow orders or rush to help everypony. You did good.”

There’s steam coming out of my ears, I know there is! I might get magic training from freaking Twilight freaking Sparkle herself!

“Go tell your classmates, I don’t want them thinking you vanished in the storm. Origami, you’ll have to tell your parents you’re on a special field-trip, I’ll write you note to that effect- where is Spike anyway I need a checklist! Spike!? I hope he wasn’t blow away. Spike!”

This is really happening! A time traveling pony dropped into our laps and we’re going to go on an adventure!!!!

Chapter 3

The next day

Heading to the Crystal Empire

Origami woke the next morning to a light tapping on her door, so she groaned and rolled over. *Oh right, I'm in Twilight's castle. I could hardly fall asleep last night.*

"You up?" called a voice. "Breakfast is here. Doughnut Joe delivery, fresh from the oven. Doughnuts come from ovens, right? Wait how *do* you make doughnuts?"

Who is that? I don't recognize that voice. She rolled out of bed and went over to the door, cracking it open. A small purple dragon stood on the other side of it.

"Hiya!" he said to her cheerfully. "Sorry if I woke you, but adventure waits for no pony!"

"Spike?" *Twilight's dragon friend?*

"The one and only! Princesses are here and Twilight's been bringing them up to speed. They arrived early because of what happened last night. But she's about done so we wanted you to be there for the next part."

"I'll be right down."

"I'll let her know!" He headed down the hall. *Probably to wake the others. I need to get ready.*

Twenty minutes later the group was assembled, breakfast before them. They had all stumbled a bit on "royal protocol" but neither Luna or Celestia insisted on anything like that. Luna was yawning up a storm and had a huge cup of coffee in front of her so really, protocol was out the window in any case.

"I must first offer my thanks for your actions last night," Celestia told the two. "You acted decisively in a crisis and kept things from getting worse. My sister and I applaud such efforts."

"Oh no," Origami squeaked, shaking a hoof. "It was nothing. Really. We just did what anypony would do in that situation."

"I wonder about that," she replied. "Your humility does you credit."

"I want all the recognition I can get," Gianna countered. "I accept any and all praise."

Celestia laughed. "And you shall have it! Now, let us speak of what comes next."

Twilight shuffled her papers around and nodded. "Reports are still coming in, I'll cover the best news first. Very little property damage was done that can't be easily undone. Nothing burned down, though there were many small fires from all the lighting. The pony Gianna and Origami rescued was one of the worst injuries. Thankfully she survived the ordeal and healing magic is a thing, so she can lay around and have her family wait on her hoof and hoof if she wants to milk it. But she'll make a full recovery. We've locked up that weird metal pony you two tangled with, and we think we've discovered and disconnected the power source for the thing. It didn't seem to be repairing itself but you never know with future technology. You had some familiarity with them, Sunny?"

"We dig up pieces of them occasionally," she agreed. "They're beyond us now, even Zephyr Heights didn't have anything like that when we visited. But in studying them we've determined they were part of a mechanical army, probably made by us earth ponies to, well, kill other types of pony. I guess at some point

in my past, your future, we had a more active role in hating other ponies. Honestly we couldn't even support such an effort anymore, even if we wanted to. You notice how it didn't attack that one earth pony..."

"I did notice," Origami announced. "So what's the timeline here? They're more advanced than you can make now? How did that happen?"

"We think there was a big war," she went on. "We don't know if that's what wiped out every species but us, or if that came later. But we lost a lot, nearly everything really, our recovery to this point has been long and slow. All we have are the bits and pieces of records we've dug out of ruins. It's not much."

"You basically started from scratch again? I see." *So they took it too far, almost destroyed themselves, lost the knowledge of how to build things and then later how to do magic, and they're only now getting to the point we are. Her future really is bleak!*

Luna yawned again.

"Long night?" Spike asked her.

"Normally I am abed at this time," Luna explained. "As my domain is the night, and dreams. I was quite busy last night, calming ponies fears and destroying nightmares. I am sure tonight will be more of the same. That storm coming from nowhere truly unsettled my little ponies."

"Maybe some kind of announcement that we understand the cause and it won't happen again?" He looked to Twilight. "The townsp ponies respect you. It could go a long way."

"I could say a few words I suppose," she decided. "Now the final report is the worst one. As I feared it was not just inorganic matter swept up by the time wave. A pony was as well. It's a miracle she's still alive, and we think it has to do with her... unique physiology."

"I don't get it," Sunny admitted.

"All four of her legs have been replaced with metal equivalents. They've been bonded, somehow, to her skeletal structure. Naturally we can't exactly dissect her to see how, and she can still move them, so we don't think they're damaged. If they'll still take her weight once she's back on her hooves remains to be seen."

"Wait, so she can tell us about the time she lives in!" Sunny reasoned. "Maybe she knows what disaster happens that wipes out everything but ponies?"

Twilight shook her head. "Not so much. She's awake, but her mind seems a total blank. She can't even talk. She just sort of looks around. Doesn't know how to eat, doesn't respond to speech."

"Oh no!" she gasped.

"We have a theory, or at least I do. Being one of the only ponies that has time traveled, so I know what it's like. My theory is that the spell protects the mind of the one that casts it. She was dragged along and had no such protections. She may have "experienced" hundreds of years, however much time passed between yesterday and her time, while being flung through the time tunnel. This would drive anypony mad. Hopefully with care and love we can rebuild her mind, teach her language again, but it'll be slow going."

"It's all my fault," Sunny said softly, looking miserable.

"Yes, well, hopefully it all proves worth it. If you really can prevent whatever disaster wiped out everypony and led to your present, I think you can forgive yourself. She'll technically live a completely different life."

If she exists at all.

"So what's our next step?" Gianna asked. "I'm ready to claw any threats to Equestria in half!" She showed her claws.

"Let's hope we can strengthen friendship across the land and end any threats before they begin," Twilight told her. "That way we won't need to fight anything. In terms of immediate next steps, we need to

get Sunny out of town without being seen. Everypony knows pretty much everypony around here and we don't want anypony putting one and one together to get two. A new pony showing up out of nowhere right when that storm happened? Let's put some distance between the two events, then bring her back in."

"I'd love to see how Equestria used to look," she agreed, trying to smile. "And meet some yaks and see the cities and whatnot."

"Twilight said you mentioned a crystal of some kind?" Celestia asked. "But I'm still not clear on how it ties into all this."

"Oh yeah, the crystal!" She got out her tablet and showed it again.

"Strange magic," Luna remarked.

"Gotta remember to charge it, good thing I brought my solar charger." *If I pointed it at Celestia's butt would it charge? Oh my goodness did I just think that thought?* She coughed and scrolled faster. "Here we are, the friendship crystal!"

Both princesses scowled at it.

"You've never seen this before?" she asked.

Both shook their heads. "Such a powerful artifact, able to disrupt the entire manosphere, has not been revealed to us in our lifetimes," Luna admitted. "It must have been made at some point in the future."

"So the question becomes do we make it again?" Celestia asked.

"How do you know we made it?" Twilight asked. "Yes, it looks pony made representing wings and horn but that's an assumption."

"Agreed. But if we do not, the future bends far more than we can perhaps predict."

"It's true," Twilight agreed with a sigh. "We have to walk a thin line. We don't know why this crystal was made. Why we, or somepony, decided to turn magic off. And then leave it off, which makes no sense. Why impact everypony?"

"If earth ponies made it they might have felt the least impacted," Sunny mused. "But at the same time they didn't destroy their piece either. My dad found it somewhere. If you really want to destroy magic in the land why go only halfway? Did the creators think after a certain time magic should come back? That's leaving a lot to chance, it almost didn't happen at all!"

"So we make it, and we make it for the right reasons," Luna decided. "We tell everypony it's a symbol of unity. Get everypony involved. Display it for all to see."

"Again, assuming that wasn't done in the first place," grumbled Twilight. "We don't know why it was made. It could have been just as you said."

"Or perhaps it was made in a time of desperation," Luna went on. "I know if we could have used this crystal against the Storm King during his attack, it would have made a huge difference. Levelled the playing field and kept him from abusing our powers. Perhaps an even worse threat will emerge in the future we need to 'turn off' so to speak. If we don't have that capacity because we don't make the crystal now, what becomes of us?"

If there's no magic, who raises the sun? thought Origami. Or the moon? She glanced at Celestia. Is it a lie they need to do that? But the Storm King did abuse that magic, changing the position of the sun and moon at a whim. How does Sunny's world even exist without magic? There must be more to this than she's letting on, or knows about.

"So reverse it," Spike piped up. "We know what it does in the future. You still want it made? Fine, the future still has this crystal in it. But we can control what it does when we make it, right?"

Everyone stared at him.

"What, do I have cream on my nose again?" He wiped his face with a paw.

"What do you mean *reverse* it?" Twilight asked.

"Well... the crystal in Sunny's time, taking it apart made magic go away, right?"

She nodded.

“So, don’t make it do that. Make it take magic away only when it’s *put together*. Each type of pony is in charge of looking after their part of the whole. Then, if there’s another Storm King situation and we need to disable magic for a time, easy, we put it together and do it. It’s another safeguard too. Ponies have to work together to turn magic off, not turn magic back on. Turning magic back on is easy, just take the crystal apart.”

Everyone digested this idea for a moment. “Spike that’s great!” Twilight decided, throwing a leg around him.

“Hey, knock it off!”

“Nope, you’re getting properly hugged!”

“Twilight!”

“Very well,” Celestia finally announced. “By royal decree your first task will be as follows; Gather information on how this crystal is to be made. To this end you will travel to the crystal empire, where the art of crystal shaping and enchanting has recently resurfaced. You will be given a writ of intent, that no pony will stand in the way of your quest or question your needs. You will be given funds, equipment, whatever you need to accomplish this goal. Furthermore, let it be known throughout the land that we desire ideas to bring all creatures that live here together in harmony. This we have spoken, let it be made thus!”

“Nice use of the Canterlot voice, sister,” Luna praised.

“Oh, why thank you, sister.” She bowed her head a little.

“It gets her out of town all right,” Twilight agreed. “Okay, I can put some things together for your journey. Spike, start a list!”

“You got it!” He got out a quill and paper.

“Talk to Origami and Gianna’s teachers, that they’ll be out of class for the moment on a field based, friendship mission for the princesses. Get them some bits, I’ll need all your receipts for the expense report of course. Send a message to Cadence that they’ll be arriving soon. Train tickets. What else could they need? We have to consider every possibility!”

“Can I get some books of magic to study along the way?” Origami asked quietly. *Twilight’s books! The books maybe she read to learn about magic. I could read the same books as her! Hold in my hooves the same books she did!*

“We’ve been rebuilding the library here in town, since mine was destroyed in that whole Tirek incident. I think I have some beginner books around here somewhere...” She looked thoughtful.

“Intermediate is fine too!” she squeaked.

“Sure, sure. Put books on the list too.”

“Got it!” Spike announced with a flourish of his pen.

Origami quickly went home to tell her parents she was leaving to do a mission for Twilight, making them so proud! Her mother was a bit worried about unsupervised trips but Origami was quick to point out that Sunny was 100% an adult, even if she couldn’t exactly reveal her exact origins. *Or the fact I’m basically babysitting her, rather than the other way around. Besides I’m not a kid anymore, I don’t need someone to “look after” me.* That reassured them, and she packed a few things and headed to the train station. Sunny was traveling incognito, a cloak thrown over herself so she wasn’t recognized as being an out-of-towner.

“So here’s your route,” Twilight told them. “You’ll head north west from here by train. Gianna said she wanted to stop at the smaller settlements along the way so rather than ride the train straight through you’ll get off here for the first night.” She pointed to the map she was holding. “Sunny wanted to see a big city, so while it’s a little out of the way, the second day you’ll take the train west into Vanhoover and stay overnight there. Then get to the crystal empire about mid-afternoon on the third day. Head to the castle,

my brother and his wife live there, they'll be expecting you as Spike has already messaged them. You can't miss it once you get into town, don't worry about that. And anyone can direct you. I'll tell them you want to talk to any experts in crystal magic, and they'll direct you once you check in with them. They should have found the best pony at that point."

We get to meet Shining Armor too? And Cadence? I hope we get to see Flurry Heart, I've heard she's soooo cute! I'll have met all the princesses in the span of a week. This is the best thing that could ever have happened to me!

"If you have any problems, just show your writ of intent, you see it has the official seal of the kingdom here," Twilight unrolled it and showed it to them, "and everypony should drop what they're doing and help you. Obviously don't go waving it around to get free ice cream or whatever..."

"I never would!"

"Okay, well, keep Sunny from doing that."

"Hey!" Sunny protested, pouting cutely.

"Don't really trust you... Anyway, bring back what you can about crystals, even if we decide not to go forward with this, at least it gives Sunny something to do. If you think you can find some crystals there that will work, so much the better. Meanwhile, think about how we can keep her future from happening. I'll do the same, of course. Sorry it's been kind of a whirlwind this morning, anything else you need from me?"

She looked over at Gianna, who shook her head. "We'll get through it," she promised.

"Okay, I guess not. Wish us luck."

"Good luck!"

And so the group started off. Gianna seemed excited to be seeing the world, and Sunny was right there with her, talking about how nice it would be to see pony settlements and towns along the way, rather than empty space and the occasional crater. Origami just rolled her eyes and started looking through the books Twilight had provided. She was rather surprised, it seemed maybe Twilight had a skewed perspective on magic? *What she called beginner books I would have called intermediate. But these intermediate books look fairly advanced. Her talent is magic, so it wouldn't surprise me to learn what came easily to her would not come as easily to other ponies. Still, hopefully I get something out of them. What are those two going on about now?*

The trip was fairly uneventful, the three staying at a small town overnight, then boarding another train in the morning. It was getting towards evening when they pulled into Vanhoover, packed up their stuff again, and headed to the hotel on the map. Gianna was impressed with all the tall buildings, Origami was feeling under-dressed as most ponies walking around in the streets had clothes on, and Sunny was nowhere to be seen.

"Hey wait a second, where did Sunny go!?" Origami realized. "She was right here, wasn't she?"

Gianna whirled around. "You're right. She's gone! What in the world? Was she ponynapped right under our beaks?"

"If she just ran off because something sparkly caught her attention... You go back to the train station I'll fly around and look for a crowd or something. For all I know she's preaching friendship and telling ponies about the end times like Mr. Bindle."

"Not her!" Gianna protested.

"Who knows? Go look for her."

"Right. Meet outside the train station then."

"Right." *She's supposed to be the adult here. She can't go running off without us!*

Gianna headed back to the station, and noticed a bunch of ponies gathered around a bench, and there seemed to be a pony hiding under the bench having a major panic attack. *Yup, that's her*, she thought to herself. *But what in the world?* "One side ponies," she told them, taking command of the situation. "Nothing to see here."

"Oh, Gianna!" she cried, grabbing her around the neck.

"Hold on there, Sunny," protested Gianna. "What's gotten into you? Yes, it's fine, she's fine, I'll take care of it." The onlookers nodded and started to disperse. She patted Sunny's head and let her calm down a moment.

Sunny wiped a tear from her eye. "Sorry I ran off. I couldn't deal with it. I saw all those ponies and... This is the largest city, right?" she asked hopefully.

"Huh? No way. This is a small city. Manehattan and Los Pegasus are way bigger, I've heard."

"Bigger? More ponies?"

"Baltimore. Caterlot itself of course. No idea how big the crystal empire- what?"

Sunny was burying her hands in her hooves and crying "no, no, no, no!"

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"Don't you see? No, how could you," she moaned. "I didn't tell you, I thought it was normal. But it's not. The future is so much worse than I thought. My town, the *only* place earth ponies live in the future? It has maybe *five hundred* ponies all told. Five. Hundred. Unicorn forest had less. The Heights had maybe more, maybe double? They had buildings like this. Don't you see what that means? I look out at these ponies and *all I see is death*. Your population is so much bigger than I expected. And they're all gone. Wiped out. It's so much worse than I thought, just saving the dragons and whoever. If this place is a *small* city? There must be hundreds of thousands of ponies alive today. What happened to them all? Where did they go? *How did they die?* And can one pony from the future really make enough of a difference to save them?"

Chapter 4
Just a little later
Mistaken Identity

Gianna calmed Sunny as best she could, and met up with Origami in front of the train station. Her expression of annoyance crumbled quickly when Gianna explained Sunny had basically had a panic attack thinking about how much worse the problem was than she had expected.

“And rightly so,” she went on. “If I thought about knowing the future, and went home and saw all my people and knew they were going to be wiped out, I don’t know what I would do.”

“Be that as it may,” Origami chided Sunny, “the next time you feel something like that coming on, just grab onto one of us or something. Don’t go running off. That just makes it twice as bad. Okay?”

“Okay,” she sniffed. “Sorry to worry you.”

“With that out of the way, let’s head to our hotel.”

The three got checked in fine, heading up near the top of the building to room 80, and Gianna shook her head as Origami got way too excited about the large tub the room had. She filled it up with bubbles and splashed around, calling for her to join in the fun.

“No thanks. My feathers take so long to dry it’s not even funny.”

“Really? I don’t have any trouble.”

“Good for you!”

“So do you want to, like, make a nest out of blankets or what? A fort?” Sunny asked her.

“A nest? Why is everyone picking on me suddenly?”

“What? No, I just didn’t know! So you don’t make nests? I’ll write that down! Tell me more about yourself!”

Gianna kept Sunny busy while Origami had her bath, and was shocked to see her simply snap her wings down and throw all the water off them. She looked over, making sure Gianna noticed her noticing how dry and put together a set of wings can be, then settled them again.

How in the heck did she do that? They’re dry. Is it really that easy? I’ll have to try it sometime.

“Ah, that was fun. Let’s go get something to eat and turn in. Busy day tomorrow!” she reminded them.

“Okay, mom!” Gianna teased.

That night, around two in the morning, the group was woken up by a bright light in the room. Somepony had lit up their horn, and as she squinted into the light she saw a dark shape atop Origami, with a knife in her hoof pressed up against her neck!

“I’ve finally caught up with you, Terry Toolbox! Now give me my sister’s stuff- wait who are-”

“Get off me!” Origami yelled, bracing her legs against the assailant and shoving her off the bed.

“Whoa!” The knife went clattering away and she went for it.

Gianna jumped out of bed, getting a talon caught in the sheets so the mystery figure managed to scramble out of the way.

“Wait, wait!” cried the figure. “I think I have the wrong room or something!”

“Too late for that!” Gianna told her, darting forward. She pounced on the figure, holding her horn away from her. “Gotcha that time!”

Sunny snapped the light on and everypony winced, but soon crowded around the Kirin that was pinned by Gianna.

“You jerk, what do you think you’re doing?” Origami cried, knife at the ready. “What kind of welcome to the city is this?”

“I can explain, I’m trying to keep calm but if you make me go Nirik that’s on you!” The flame on her horn was sputtering and flaring.

“Give her some space,” Origami decided, “but we’re watching you.”

“What is she?” Sunny whispered.

“Kirin, a unicorn variant,” Origami told her. “But they are aspected towards fire. They also have a rage transformation that makes them go crazy and want to burn everything.”

“A rage transformation you say? Sounds like something that could threaten... *the future?*” She gave the figure the stink eye. “How many of you are there, anyway?”

“What? No. We try hard to remain calm so we don’t transform like that,” the figure protested as she was let up. “You’re so knowledgeable, tell her!” Her horn flame sputtered out, and she breathed a sigh of relief. “Okay, I’m under control...”

“Don’t think we’re friends now or anything. What are you doing in here?”

“Like I said, looking for Terry Toolbox. He stole some stuff from my sister and I thought I had tracked him to this room. Look.” She reached into the small bag around her waist and pulled out a slip of paper. She handed to Gianna, as Origami still had the knife in her hoof.

“This is room eighty, not room eight,” she said.

“What?”

Gianna held it up and then turned it upside down.

“Oh no! I was writing it looking at the guest book and wrote it wrong, I didn’t flip it over!”

“I was wondering, this hoofwriting is terrible. If you were trying to do it on the sly I guess I can see that. And didn’t you say Terry Toolbox?”

“Yeah?”

“You wrote Tommy Toolchest on this paper...” She flipped it over again.

Her mouth dropped open.

“You’re really bad at this, aren’t you?” asked Sunny. “Don’t worry about it, I’ve made my share of mistakes lately too.”

“But... that’s... Oh no! This was my last hope. I’ve haven’t been able to find him anywhere so I figured he must be in a hotel somewhere. I’ve been scouring the city for any trace of him. Did he leave? What am I going to- Fine. This isn’t your problem, I’ll get out of your hair.” She glanced at the knife but seemingly decided against asking for it back. “Sorry about waking you.” She hung her head and turned to leave, grumbling to herself about how useless she was, and how her sister was going to be disappointed in her, and how she should just probably die and save everyone the trouble of being near her ever again.

I guess that’s that.

“Hey wait a second, you can’t just barge in here, threaten me with a knife and then just leave!” Origami shouted.

“What do you want from me? It’s a dead end. I’ve disrupted your lives enough.”

“I want an explanation for all this! And we’re going down to room 8. Maybe this Terry just used a really bad alias or something.”

"I hate to bother somepony else..."

"Oh *now* you're all timid and shy? No. You're going to march down there and knock on this pony's door. I want to watch you squirm!"

Wow, Origami has a real vindictive streak huh? Did not expect that! She would make a good griffin. She colored. Not that I would ever tell her that.

"I guess I should see this through."

"Darn right. Now march!"

"You can't just march me through the halls at knife point!"

"Oh right." She tossed the knife onto her bed. "Don't think you're getting that back!"

"I didn't," she admitted softly.

"Humph!"

The group, minus Sunny who said she should probably not get involved, headed down the elevator to the first floor. *But she is involved. Without us coming here for her that room would have been empty. She would have burst in, realized her mistake, and then headed to room eight. Ah, exactly like we're doing now. Origami is trying to keep the time stream on course. She's so smart!*

"I'm Flamecrash, by the way?" she introduced herself on the way down.

"Don't care."

"I'm Gianna, this is Origami," Gianna told her. "Nice to- huh. Sort of automatic isn't it?"

"It's okay. I am really sorry about all this."

"Threatening somepony in the dead of night," Origami grumbled. "Not even getting the right room..."

"Is she going to be okay?" Flamecrash whispered.

"Don't really know her that well, hard to say."

"She seems really mad-"

"I'm right here you know!"

"Eep!"

Flamecrash knocked the door and a moment later a pony answered.

"Yes?"

"It's not him," she told the others. "Terry is a dun stallion this is a dark stallion. Sorry sir, I was looking for someone- you don't happen to know an inventor named Terry Toolbox do you?"

"Can't say that I do."

"So you have failed in every conceivable way," Origami crowed. "Well done."

"Friendship lessons!" Gianna muttered.

"HA!"

"So do you actually need me or..."

"Sorry to disturb you," Origami told him. "May princess Luna watch over your dreams this night."

Isn't that a little invasive? And why do just ponies get a dream guardian? We griffons not good enough for you? Or maybe she does?

"Oh! Why thank you. Good night." He closed the door.

"Right!" She whirled on Flamecrash. "You're coming with us!"

"What- what are you going to do?"

"Back to the room. Come with us back to the room! I'm already up I may as well get the whole story."

"You'll really help?"

"I didn't say that!"

Back in the room Flamecrash sat down and stared back at the others.

“So talk. I want the full story.”

“You know, I think Origami is a bit of a TOP as well,” whispered Sunny to Gianna. She snorted.

“So the story is my sister, Flametwist, is an inventor. You know how on typewriters the keys can get jammed up if you type too fast? She had an idea for a ball instead. You hit the key, and the ball spins to the right letter. Then it hits the paper. No keys to jam up. She’s been working on it for some time with an assistant, Terry. Well, it was finished a few nights ago and everypony went home. They agreed to bring it to the patent office the next day. But when she got there her prototype and notes were all gone. She wasn’t able to get in touch with Terry, so while she’s been watching the patent office in case he shows up there with it, I’ve been trying to track him down.”

“So all this was about some *invention*?”

“No, it’s about my sister’s work being stolen!”

“Humm.”

“Come on, we have to help her,” Sunny insisted.

“Do we? Do we though?”

“The smallest act of kindness could have a big impact on the future.” Sunny gave her the “you know I’m right” eye with a raised eyebrow.

“Oh no! No. You don’t get to- aarg. No! Just because you- no!”

“Come on, we can help her tomorrow,” Gianna figured. “What’s the harm?”

“We’re on a mission! They’re expecting us!”

“So we call and say we’re delayed because we’re helping somepony that needs it. Do you think Twilight Sparkle will say, oh no, don’t *help* somepony. She’s the queen of helping somepony. She’s the princess of friendship! I think she’ll understand.” *Plus we’re just keeping Sunny occupied while somepony works out a solution to the whole “everybody dies in the future” problem. We’re not on any real schedule here. It’s hundreds of years in the future this all happens, if all this technology and such is any indication. Those killer pony things weren’t made overnight. We have plenty of time. Wait if we do solve it, how will we know? Will she just vanish or what?*

“You three know Twilight?”

“Quiet!” Origami snapped.

“Sorry.” She jerked back.

Origami hemmed and hawed a bit but finally relented. “Fine. Meet us downstairs in the morning. We’ll start from the beginning and do this investigation properly. As you clearly have no idea what you’re doing.”

“Oh thank you, thank you! It’ll mean so much to Flametwist!”

“Uh huh. Now get out of here, it’s late- early- whatever.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow! Thank you so much!”

“Ah, tsundere,” Sunny decided, lighting up. “I’m learning so much about you ponies!”

“What did you call me?”

“Nothing!”

In the morning Gianna waited for Origami to call her parents, who could deliver a message to Twilight. They seemed happy to have an excuse to go over there, and she finally hung up.

“Why didn’t we just get the number for the castle?” she asked on the way down to the front.

“The castle was grown, it’s more like a tree than anything else. You saw the cracks were gone in the morning, right?”

“I did notice that, actually!”

“So it didn’t grow with phone lines attached. There is no phone there.”

“Makes sense.”

A subdued looking Flamecrash joined them at breakfast, looking pensive. Sunny of course greeted her warmly, calling her over with a huge wave, but Origami just rolled her eyes.

“You didn’t change your mind, did you?” she asked hesitantly. “I can go if-”

“No,” Origami admitted. “Let’s just see what we can do for you.”

“Do we have a plan?” Sunny asked. “We should make plan!”

“I’m not Twilight, I don’t need a checklist for everything. We need to meet your sister first. For all we know *you’re* the one trying to steal some invention from this Toolbox pony. I want a second opinion.”

“Whatever you think is best. It’s not too far.”

“Good. Keep up that attitude and we’ll get along fine.”

Flamecrash went over to another Kirin, with green accents and red hair, sitting on a bench at the patent office. She seemed surprised. “Flamecrash? What are you doing here? And who are your friends?”

“Friends?” huffed Origami.

“It’s a little worn out now, don’t you think?” Gianna asked her.

“She held a knife-”

“Yeah yeah, get over it. Learn to let things go.”

“This coming from a griffon.”

“Exactly. Hi, I’m Gianna, this is Sunny, and my dour looking friend here is Origami. Actually I’ve never seen you fold anything the whole time I’ve known you. Remind me to ask you to do that when this is all over.”

“Okay?”

“They’ve agreed to help us, Flametwist. As I’m clearly over my head here.”

“That’s so sweet of you!” she gushed. “Thank you so much.”

“It’s- no big deal,” Origami assured her, deflating a little.

Must have decided she had held onto her anger long enough.

“What do you want to know?”

“Your sister told us about the invention and such,” Gianna began. “What else can you tell us? Have you spoken to the authorities about all this?”

“Right away! We talked to the guard, my shop is above a place that repairs trolley cars, so they don’t mind the noise. They have a night watchpony to keep an eye on the place because they have a lot of expensive parts and tools there. But while it’s priceless to me, it’s not really a high enough value item for them to put all that much effort in. Plus when they do find it, they would just take it as evidence until the trial was over, further delaying me bringing it here to patent. I don’t hold out much hope of them doing anything.”

“At least you can say we started there if we do apprehend the guy. How sure are you that this Toolbox pony is working alone? How do you know he wasn’t taken along with the invention?” Origami asked.

Flametwist looked skeptical. “What, you think ‘big typewriter’ got wind of my invention and stole it, along with my assistant? Why not me? I was the one who came up with it. And there’s been no ransom note or anything. What a strange idea.”

“I’m just exploring all avenues. Did you submit a missing pony report? That might generate more interest than a theft. After all you’ve known him for how long?”

“Two years?”

“And not suddenly you haven’t heard from him in days? You called him, I assume?”

“Yes.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Gianna agreed.

“They have a public phone here, I can do that,” Flametwist agreed. “What else can we do?”

“You know where he lives?”

“I do. But you’ve been over there, right?” She looked to her sister.

She nodded. “Place seems empty. That’s why the whole hotel search...”

“Let’s head there.”

“Not the scene of the crime?” Sunny asked.

Yeah, I’d like to talk to this guard she mentioned. Maybe it’s in inside job in a different way?

“Maybe later. I want to see if there’s any clues at his place.”

They followed Flametwist’s directions outside the city limits and into the suburbs, finally coming up on the place. Both took to the skies, looking around to see if they could spot anypony watching the house, but it seemed quiet. They landed again.

“Let’s go knock,” Origami suggested. “Maybe we’ll smell something burning and as concerned citizens let ourselves in to check the place out.”

“You want to break in?” Flamecrash gasped.

“You want this case solved or not?”

“I mean yeah but we can’t do a crime to solve a crime!”

“I beg to differ. This is the fastest way so we’re doing it.”

There was no answer when they knocked, and Flamecrash agreed to unlock the door by magic, so they let themselves in. Gianna grabbed the mail, which had been building up, and they started going through the place.

“Oh, these poor fish!” Origami cooed, grabbing the can of food and sprinkling some in. The fish went right for it. “He really hasn’t been here for days.”

Uh, I thought we were supposed to be looking around? Gianna quickly swept through the house, closing blinds so the neighbors didn’t see strange ponies or otherwise wandering around, and headed to the basement. There was a workshop area down there, it was the house of an inventor, and looking around she noticed many tools seemed to be missing, and on the floor she found some out of place gears, springs, and what looked like the F key from a typewriter. Under the desk she found a sheet of paper, and Flamecrash agreed that was her sister’s hoofwriting. This was one of the pages that had been stolen, that detailed the invention.

“Look like it was here, but something happened,” Gianna explained, showing the parts. “You don’t think he smashed it, do you?”

“It shouldn’t be losing parts. That key was a part of it, I’m sure of it,” Flamcrash told them. “But what does it mean?”

“I went through the mail,” Origami announced. “Found some bills. One for a storage unit, of all things. Maybe we could check there?”

Flamcrash grabbed it and looked it over. “Gives the address. It’s not too far from here, it’s certainly a lead. Let’s go.”

The pair flew over the fence, landing as quietly as possible on the other side, and held their breath waiting for an outcry of the guard at the front gate. But none came. They breathed easier and headed to the numbered unit shown on the bill. It seemed to be unlocked but closed, and there were definite sounds inside.

“Somepony is in there,” Gianna whispered.

"I hear them too," Origami agreed. "Yank the door up and we'll jump them!"

"Right!" She did, revealing a surprised, dun colored pony with a toolbox cutie mark sweating over a typewriter prototype.

"Ah hah, we've got you now!" Origami shouted, brandishing the knife. "Terry!"

Where did she pull that from? She kept it? "We don't want any trouble," Gianna told the stallion. "But Flametwist would like her prototype back."

"You're not cops," Terry decided, relaxing. "Get out of here, kids."

"No, we're worse," Gianna told him, showing her claws. "We don't mind roughing you up a little."

"Yeah, there's two of us!"

His eyes darted between the two, and at the door they were now in front of. He sighed, deflating, and swept a hoof over the mess he had made. "Take it then. I can't fix it. This whole thing was a waste, and now she'll probably want me arrested."

"You broke it?" Origami almost screamed. "What's wrong with you? I even thought you might be in trouble yourself! But you really stole it and then broke it?"

"I didn't *try* to break it, I wanted the credit for inventing it of course. But I left out the window so the guard didn't see me carrying it. I dropped it climbing down the fire escape. I've been trying to fix it ever since."

But the guard saw him going in. Did he really think... yes it seems he really did think that. Wow.

"I don't believe this! Greed, it was just greed!"

"I know, I don't either. How did you find me anyway? After so long I thought I was in the-"

"Zip it! Box this all up, the notes too. We'll see what Flametwist wants to do with you."

"..." He almost said something but thought better of it. He just boxed it up and gathered up the pages. The two led him past the guard, that did a double take as to where these other creatures had come from.

"Okay there?" he asked.

"It's fine," Terry told him.

"You actually found him?" Flamecrash gasped. "It's been, like, an hour!"

"So the lesson here is," Sunny told her, "breaking and entering solves all problems. Hitch always got angry with me when I tried to break into the factory to protest anti-unicorn presentations. Guess I was right the whole time. Remind me to tell you that story sometime."

"You broke into my house?" Terry demanded.

"Fed your fish too," Origami told him. "What, you going to press charges? How do you see that going for you?"

"Depends on how good a lawyer I get," he smirked. "Which is the more serious crime here, do you think? My word against hers that I wasn't just repairing it and she overreacted. Your breaking into my house is a separate thing, you're not involved in this in any way."

He could have a point. But wait a Kirin overreacting? That won't fly in court will it?

"I'm pretty sure it's the theft."

"I think it's going to be up to a jury."

"Let's just go," Gianna pleaded.

In the end Flametwist was happy to get her stuff back, but wasn't going to seek some kind of vengeance against her former partner. His name would still appear on the paperwork but he wasn't getting any of the proceeds for the sale of the patent, that was for sure.

"You're not as mad as I figured you would be," Origami remarked.

“We can’t be,” she explained. “If I let my rage off its tether who knows what might happen. We Kirin have to be very careful about that sort of thing. He’s going to have to decide where his honor lies. Does he turn himself in, admitting to the crime and paying his debt to society? Or is he always going to be looking over his shoulder? The police know to look for him, I won’t say my property is returned for a few days. He has that amount of time to decide what the right thing to do is. I think he’ll chose correctly.”

“I hope so. Try to stay on the right path, okay?”

“Ha! I would totally have gotten away with it, if it wasn’t for you kids!”

Chapter 5
The next day
Crystal Blue Persuasion

The group stayed in the city another day, wandering around and looking at the shops and general bustle of life. Sunny still seemed a bit freaked out that all of the buildings around her could be filled with ponies of all types, and what that meant for the future. But there was nothing she could do about it presently and seemed resolved to work hard and save everypony. Origami stopped in at the local police station and learned Terry had indeed turned himself in, hoping for leniency. That at least made her feel a little better about the whole thing.

They boarded the train and Origami hit the books again, feeling there was something she was missing from the current chapter she was reading. It was right there, but she was having trouble concentrating as Sunny and Gianna were loudly playing eye-spy. *She should be doing classwork, we should have picked some up before we left. Of course the main theme of the school is friendship, maybe we can write a report on the friends we made along the way? Did I... did I make any friends along the way? I'll try and make some in the crystal empire! Yeah!*

She then got into a heated discussion with both of them about making the crystal and if it was even a good idea in the first place. It could lead to the very future that Sunny wanted to prevent, she argued. Messing with magic, in any way, shape, or form just seemed incredibly dangerous to her as magic was a force of nature. Yes, they controlled the weather but that was well understood. Simply making this crystal without impact studies could cause great disaster; even great enough to cause the very loss of life Sunny was worried about. Sunny insisted, in a somewhat coy way Origami found annoying, that it was essential for the safety of the land in some way but wouldn't say why she thought that. Origami insisted they shouldn't rush into this, while Gianna reminded her that the opinion of a couple of kids probably didn't hold much weight with the princesses, old or new. They should just do the job they were assigned to the best of their ability. Like a knight on a noble quest! Origami just rolled her eyes and went back to her book.

About an hour out from the empire the three were startled by a green flame appearing out of nowhere, and a scroll appeared, falling to the ground.

"What in the world was that?" Gianna asked, watching as it rolled under a seat.

"I don't really know," Origami had to admit. "It wasn't purple, the color of Twilight's magic. And I've never heard of a spell to send a scroll to somepony. But it must be for us..."

"I guess I'll risk it, doesn't seem dangerous." She reached under and grabbed it, unrolling it. "Yeah, it's from her." She tilted it so the others could read it.

Dear Origami and Gianna,

Just a quick note to update you about the progress being made on our end. Princess Celestia and Luna have returned from Tartarus to check for any weaknesses in the prison warding that may have allowed an escape. While they did not find anything too concerning, they have enacted greater warding just in case. Town cleanup proceeds. No other time displaced creatures have been found. Lime Twist, as we have been calling her, shows no signs of improvement. Hope you are having some fun and keeping Sunny out of trouble. Give my brother my love.

Yours,

Twilight Sparkle

“However she did it, it was nice to know she’s thinking about us.”

But the question is how did she do it? Magic has such depths, and here I am without a horn. I have to do everything the hard way, by now a unicorn of my age would have an actualized core and be well on the way to their second or third spell!

The train pulled into the crystal empire without issue, and the three got off, their gaze immediately being drawn to the huge statue of Spike holding a heart.

“That is the dragon we met, isn’t it?” Gianna asked, pointing to it.

“I *think* so?” Origami replied, squinting up at it. “Wow it’s bright here.”

“Yeah, everything around here- even the buildings- is made of crystal. I’m surprised complementary shades aren’t available at the station when you leave the building. I think I’m getting a headache.”

“What’s wrong *now*?” Origami asked Sunny, who was looking haunted again.

“I’m not sure. Ask again later,” was all she would say.

“Fine. We’re expected up at the castle, guess we won’t get lost.” She pointed with a hoof. “It towers over everything around here!”

“Must be nice, being a princess,” Gianna agreed.

Origami just shook her head. “Princess of love? She’s got everyone fooled it looks like to me. She lives in some huge place, towering over everypony in her city. How is that showing love, I ask you.”

“We don’t have such things,” she admitted. “I’m not even sure how such a thing was made. How does it even stay up? Crystal is awfully heavy. Maybe it grew here and they hollowed it out? Seems like too much crystal to have been moved here- And we’ve lost Sunny again.” She looked around for her new friend.

“She’s just staring at that hunk of crystal over there. Come on.”

The two headed over to her, Sunny seemed enraptured by one particular hunk of crystal that was growing out of the ground.

“If you want to steal it, wait until we’re leaving,” Gianna joked. “We don’t want to carry that thing around town with us.”

“What? No!” Sunny protested. “I’ve seen this crystal before. I’m sure of it. Look.” She got out her tablet and flicked through the pictures. “Here!” She thrust it at them. There was a picture of a unicorn with a big grin, pointing at seemingly the exact same crystal they were now looking at. “That’s, uh, Izzy, by the way.” She sniffed. “My first unicorn friend. My best friend, really. I... I hope I see her again.”

“I’m sure you will!” Gianna told her.

“It really does look the same,” Origami decided, looking back and forth. “I suppose it wouldn’t change much, no matter how much time passed. Weird.”

Sunny shook her head. “You don’t get it. This place is *forest* when I’m from. The unicorns live here. Not crystal ponies. You see any trees here?”

The others looked, and had to admit they didn’t.

“But look in the picture! You can see the trees behind Izzy. Huge trees, by the way. The kind that take hundreds of years to get that big. This place falls, hard. Then hundreds of years pass, enough to grow a forest here. Then unicorns move into the place. Everywhere I go I’m reminded that something really awful happens. I feel so powerless.” She put the tablet away.

“Hey, we’re gonna fix it,” Gianna promised, throwing her front leg over Sunny’s neck and giving her a squeeze.

“Unless we actually make this stupid crystal we shouldn’t make and that messes everything up!” Origami spat.

“But it does sort of help us later?” Sunny weakly protested.

“It’ll do more harm than good, mark my words.”

The three headed to the castle and were let inside. They were expected, and a guard ran off to get Shining Armor.

Not Cadence? thought Origami. *You better not stiff me out of meeting another princess! That princess.* There was a huge painting of Cadence in the entryway the others were looking at.

“Hey, there you are!” said a voice, a white stallion trotting over to them. “Shining Armor, great to see you! Twili said you’d be dropping by. How is my sister anyway?”

“She’s doing fine,” Origami told him. “I’m Origami-”

“And Gianna, and Sunny! Yup, can’t mistake you. Glad you made it okay, no trouble on the train?”

“No, that went fine at least.”

“Glad to hear it. Sorry Cadence isn’t here to greet you as well. Flurry Heart is at that age, you know?”

The three gave him a blank look.

“Or maybe not? You’re not unicorns, right! Well, some time after a unicorn is born they start doing random magic, until they learn control. With her being the only winged unicorn ever born she’s extra powerful, and Cadence is being run ragged making sure she doesn’t hurt herself or anypony else by accident. We’ll both be glad when this phase is over, believe me.”

“I… had no idea!” Origami blurted. “How does that even work? Spells are so complex, a young pony shouldn’t be able to just cast them at random!”

“You got me! Maybe their mana core contains some remnants of their parent’s spells, and they’re burned out at this time? Ask a scholar or doctor, I guess. I’m just the dumb lunkhead who managed to catch her heart. You want to talk about shield spells, I’m your guy. I don’t know too much else.”

“But you at least know who we should talk to in town, right?” Gianna asked.

“Oh sure. Once Twili wrote me I got right on that, assigning someone to look into it!”

“Typical,” muttered Origami.

“Found the best crystal shaper in town. If anyone can tell you how to make a powerful magical item out of crystal, it’s him. Name of Gemstone Polish. I can give you directions to his shop.”

“That would be great!” Gianna told him. “Thank you, your highness.” She gave a little bow and Shining laughed it off and told her to quit it.

Yeah, great. Let’s just participate in our own doom.

The bell chimed as the three entered the shop, and a voice from the back called “just a minute!” They looked around, crystals and ingredients were nicely displayed on shelves, racks, and under glass in cases. Each with a small card in front listing the price and what it did. “Now where did I put my #3 chisel,” the voice went on, rummaging sounds coming from the back. “My apprentice would know for sure. Darn it! Customer, customers, yes, take care of that first. Is that it? No, that’s a #4, I need a #3!” An older looking

pony with a gem cutie mark and what must be a polishing cloth came into view. “Welcome, welcome, how can I help you?”

“We’re here on the behalf of the kingdom,” Origami told him, placing the queen’s note on the counter. “I believe you’ve been told to expect us?”

“Wait, that’s today?” He looked under the desk. “Oh yes, my apprentice put it on the calendar. I’m helpless without her, it seems. Such a reliable filly. Can’t imagine why she didn’t come into work today. Very unlike her.”

“So can you talk to us about what we need?” she pressed.

“Of course! Er, what do you need?”

“Mostly information. This can’t get out right now, it could be a secret project, you understand?”

“I’ll probably have forgotten by tomorrow, seems I’d lose my head if it wasn’t attached!” He chuckled.

“Yes, sure.” *Hopefully he’s the type that seems clueless about most things but in his area of expertise he really shines?* “We want to create a set of three crystals that can influence magic across the entire continent. If not the entire world. Originally it was suggested,” she glanced at Sunny, who was still just entranced by everything in the shop and not paying the least amount of attention *despite the fact this was supposed to be her mission, right?* “Suggested that breaking the crystals apart would deny magic to everypony. But it was also suggested bringing them together would create that effect. As it would be much easier to keep them apart- should the unthinkable happen.”

He scratched his head with a hoof. “Well, if you’ve looked into making magical objects at all-”

“I have,” she announced quickly, with pride.

“Ah good. So you know with enough preparation and work you can pretty much put any effect into an object. Good choice to use crystals, they’re the easiest to work with and if you really want to affect things on such a grand scale, they would take to the magic the easiest and last the longest. Also to your credit you want to break it up into three parts. Our crystal heart, one of the most powerful artifacts ever created, or did we just find that thing laying around I can never remember? Anyway, can only manage a town our size. Putting the effect into separate crystals would increase their power. You’re going to want to take a look at...” He looked around the shelves behind the desk. “There was a book somewhere... you can borrow it. Where did I put that book? I’m sure my assistant got it out for me, maybe it’s in the back? One moment.” He went back there and started shuffling things around. “Usually so punctual, my- did I say assistant? I meant apprentice, of course. More than an assistant, yes. Much more. Very bright, that filly. She’ll take over my business for sure one day.”

“Do you mind if we come back and have a look?” Origami asked, rolling her eyes.

“Not at all, come on back! Mind the mess! Or are you supposed to say ‘don’t’ mind the mess? I can never remember.”

The pair headed back there and it was a big mess. Workbenches with tools, half finished projects, books, shelves of materials, of course one workspace seemed a bit less cluttered than another.

“There’s lots of books back here,” complained Gianna. “We’ll never find it.”

“Ah hah!” shouted Polish.

“You found it?” asked Origami, hope now shining in her eyes. It was quickly dashed, and worse luck it wasn’t even a Rainbow Dashed. Just regular type.

“Found my #3 chisel, is what I found.” He held the tool up for inspection. “Never find what you’re looking for, don’t you often experience that?”

“Not really.”

“You’re young yet.”

“Maybe it would be easier to find the apprentice than the book?” Gianna suggested. “The town isn’t that large.”

“Oh, could you? It would mean a lot to me. I’m worried something awful, very reliable filly she’s never missed a day I wasn’t told about.”

“Fine,” Origami breathed. “I can see we’re not getting anywhere here. What’s one more delay?”

“Don’t you *want* to delay?” Gianna asked.

“Not like this! I want rational discourse and not to be the agent of my own destruction!”

Gianna regarded her friend a moment. “Even Sunny can’t predict what would happen if we didn’t make the crystal. We don’t want the cure to be worse than the disease.”

Both looked back at her, and she hastily looked away. *Wait, why does she look guilty all of a sudden? That doesn’t make sense.*

The three headed through the streets to the house of Sparkling Beauty, the valued and currently missing apprentice. They found the house easily enough, but no one answered when they knocked on the door. Looking around they saw an older crystal pony in a rocking chair out on her porch, waving them over.

“Hello girls,” she greeted them. “Looking for Sparkling Beauty I expect? As I doubt you’re selling filly scout cookies.”

“I could go for some cookies,” Gianna muttered.

“Yes, do you know where she is?” Origami asked.

“Left for work, oh, two hours ago now?”

“Work? She never made it there!”

“What’s this? That’s not like her.”

“So her boss said. Any idea what might have happened?”

“I’d ask her parents. Neither works too far from here. Now let’s see. You’ve got her mom, Cold Delicious. She works down at the ice cream shoppe over that way.” She pointed. “Now her dad, Polishing Beauty, works as a waiter at the restaurant over that way.” She pointed in the opposite direction. “Take your pick.”

“Do they have cookie dough ice cream?” Gianna wondered. “That would be fine.”

“Forget food for a second!”

“I can’t! It’s all I can think about- You have ice cream in the future, right?” she asked Sunny.

“Oh sure. But do *you* have smoothies?”

“What’s that?”

“Thank you!” Origami shouted. “We’ll go see her mother then. Thank you for the help.”

“No trouble, dears. Hope you find her.”

“So do I,” she muttered back.

“That lady’s senile,” Sunny complained. “I’m a pony, not a deer. Same as her. You have deer, right? I remember reading about them.”

“It’s just an expression,” explained Origami.

The group met Cold Delicious right where she was supposed to be, getting them some progress along this quest, and as she handed out ice cream to Gianna and Sunny (with receipts for expense report purposes) she explained her daughter often stopped at the mine outside of town before going into work. “They don’t mind if she takes away smaller stones and things they pull out of the mine they don’t want,” she explained. “For practice. She’s really into crystals, my daughter.”

The three shared a look. “You don’t think…” Sunny began, looking wide eyed at the others.

“I hope not, for her sake and ours. Come on. Where’s this mine?” Origami asked.

“Just outside of town. Head left out of here and… well, you can fly can’t you? You can’t miss it.”

“Fine. Thanks for your help.”

“Sure. I hope she’s okay.”

“I’m sure she’s just looking at some pretty crystal they dug up,” Gianna assured her. She licked her ice cream. “Let’s go.”

As predicted, it wasn’t long before the group headed to the mine, where there was a bit of a situation going on.

“Mine collapse,” said a forepony as they asked what was going on. “Some ponies are trapped down there. Say!” He stared at Origami’s wings. “Anything you can do to clear dust with those wings of yours? That would make the rescue effort a little more comfortable for my ponies.”

“Dust?” Origami mused, blinking. “I don’t...” She looked up at the sky, which wasn’t too overcast but there were some clouds there. *Right, no weather ponies here. Not like at home where they schedule the rain a week or two in advance. But how can I...* She considered for a moment. *I know what rain clouds are, they’re a bit of dust that starts forming ice crystals. They’re pretty dense, but I can move them around just fine. I wonder...* “Not my wings, but maybe I can help after all. How far down is the problem?”

“I’d say about half a kilometer down.”

Good thing there’s plenty of clouds around today. She took to the skies, grabbing and pushing them into a large bank, so she could stuff them in the hole. Which she did, carefully going around corners and heading deeper, until she got stopped by the blockage. Naturally ponies were pulling stone out the whole time, but they just ignored the cloud. Leaving it for a moment she figured it had a chance to soak up whatever dust it could, and started heading out again. The forepony followed her back in once she kicked the now dirty cloud away from the town.

“I’d say about 80%,” he praised. “Well done. Clouds are more handy than I thought.”

“Thanks,” she replied with a bit of a blush. “It’s not perfect though. There’s still dust in the air, probably too small to be captured.”

“It’s better than it was, don’t worry about it.”

But it has to be perfect! What else can I do? She stood there in thought for a moment as ponies worked on the pile of rubble. Gianna was there, moving rocks too, and she was impressed with her friend’s strength. *Hold on. What do I know about magic and flying that can help here? I know that Sunny said when magic was cut off, pegasi couldn’t fly. We must therefore fly at least partly with magic. Griffons fly with wingpower alone, I don’t think they have a mana core like ponies do.* “Hey Gianna?”

“What’s up?”

“Come with me for a second, I want to try something.”

“Okay.”

The two headed out of the mine and Gianna looked at her questioningly. “Now what?”

“Just fly for me? Or hover, if you can?”

“Was the mine air getting to you? Okay, don’t give me that look sheesh I was just asking. Hover, she says. Sure.” She flapped her wings and hovered as best she could. Origami then repeated the experiment, nodding to herself. *I feel magic around my wings when I fly. But not when Gianna flies. This proves my theory. We fly more with an application of weather magic, even if we’re not aware of it. When we push down with our wings, we’re actually raising up the air under us so we get more lift. But how can I use that information?*

“You done being strange?”

“Just follow me.” She headed back into the mine and to the blockage, then had everypony stand to the side. *I’m going to be red faced if this doesn’t work. Imagine I’m trying to fly really fast. But that I don’t actually want to go anywhere. Push the air with my magic, not up, but across. I can do it. Maybe I can’t do spells with my mana core yet but I can fly, so I can do this! It’s just an application of what I can already do, so it’s more mental than anything else.* She jumped into the air and gave a mighty stroke with her wings, and for a

wonder it worked. A huge gust of wind formed as she flapped her wings once, and the rest of the dust whooshed down the corridor towards the surface.

“What was that?” Gianna stuttered.

“Oh, just a bit of pony magic. You know, as one does,” Origami brushed it off. She was squealing inside. *It worked! Magic is so amazing! It's even more versatile than I imagined! I didn't even need a formal spell for that, just paying attention to what I could already do and applying it.*

Hours later the blockage still wasn't cleared, Gianna seemed determined not to be shown up by her friend. She was clearing rocks with the best of them, and returned to the blockade to see a huge one had been uncovered. She had come down in the middle of some ponies wondering what to do about it.

“Here's what a griffon would do about it!” she announced, marching up to it. She gave a mighty pull, digging her claws into it as best she could. With a mighty heave she shifted it, pulling it away from the pile, which collapsed.

“Hey!” somepony shouted weakly. “We're here!”

Chapter 6

After the ponies were saved Origami Professes her Doubts

With Sparkling Beauty now freed up to go to work, she insisted on bringing them to her house instead. "Please, come and get cleaned up," she suggested. "You've been down in that dirty mine for hours, you must be tired and hungry. We'll be happy to offer you some dinner, a bath, it's the least we can do after you stayed to help."

It's true, Gianna decided. *She wasn't stuck in there. She just wanted to help. Not that she and Sunny did help that much, but there were stronger and better helpers, such as myself, that needed to be down there. She would have just gotten in the way.* "We're not getting anywhere tonight anyway," she told Origami. "We would have to stay somewhere until tomorrow morning."

"That's fine," she agreed after a moment. "We can talk shop, as it were, at the shop tomorrow."

"Great! You'll love my mother's crystal soup!"

"Crystal... what?" both asked.

It seemed the buildings there had been carved out of huge crystals, and that included the inn they stayed at. Gianna said they should just go ask at the castle if they could stay there, but Origami didn't want to bother them, especially if the baby was taking up their attention. So they stayed at a hotel, quite different from the previous one. With walls made of crystal that had simply been carved into rooms there were no telephone lines, running water, or lights. The town had been made a thousand years ago, when such hadn't really been invented yet, but still. Adding those things was going to be a nightmare. The beds were comfortable enough and they spent an uneventful night there.

The next day they were glad to see Sparkling Beauty at work, who quickly got them the book they needed, and looked over the picture Sunny provided.

"Clearly three different types of crystals," she agreed. "The center is probably some kind of diamond, look how clear it is. And the size of it!" Her eyes were wide just thinking about it. Probably about how much it would be worth, if anypony had to guess.

"I wouldn't want to do all those cuts," Gemstone Polish told them. "Each one would have to be done more carefully than the last. You don't want to mess up cut number forty if you only have to do forty five cuts. The entire thing could be ruined with a single missed strike. It would take weeks of careful calculations and work. Months!"

"Yes, the shapes are clearly one point of difficulty," Beauty agreed. "How could you reliably cut such a thing? By hoof? It seems an awful lot of work to go through. But back to the types of crystals. Nothing we have around here would really suffice, not if you want it to do what you say. These are unique types of crystals for sure. You see, while any crystal or really any object *can* hold magic, certain spells are more easily placed into certain types of objects. You're going to want to find the exact best type of crystal for each piece."

"What other difficulties would we face? And just how difficult would all this be?" Origami asked.

“If many enchanters worked together, it wouldn’t be too bad,” Beauty decided after a moment’s thought. “But if you are trying to negate the use of magic, even for a moment as the ritual is completed and the item given power, does that mean magical effects such as Cloudsdale would fail? Or is it just *new* magic that is prevented? Would anypony on a cloud fall? If a unicorn was lifting something heavy at the time would that spell be lost? Would we become normal ponies, and not crystal ponies? What happens to the heart? Does the snow come back for a minute? There’s lots of things to consider if they decide to do this. We would have to warn everypony it was going to happen and take steps. That’s the biggest issue I see. I mean once you have the needed spells, rituals, and imbuing materials found and ready to go. It would take a week or more of work, only so many ponies can contribute. They would have to be carefully screened, experts in their field.”

“So it’s not impossible then?”

Sunny looked at her like she was crazy.

Of course it’s possible, Gianna thought. *You think Sunny was lying about having it in her hooves in the future? Or what it did?*

“Not impossible,” Beauty agreed. “The effects are so widespread... Would you need a sort of ‘consent’ from each type of pony to have their magic sealed away? I almost think so. It would make the ritual a lot easier I think, if you included something like that. Magic does at times seem almost alive, it might not ‘like’ being sealed up. But if everypony agreed to it, I’m sure it would work out.”

“I see.”

“Still want to borrow the book?” Polish asked.

“Yes,” Origami agreed with a nod. “If you don’t mind. I’m just here to gather information and take it back to Twilight Sparkle.”

“It’s the premiere text on crystal enchanting. Just be sure to bring it back when you’re done.”

“Of course.”

“Well, I wish you luck. Let us know if magic is going away, or whatever the princesses decide.”

“I’m hopefully going to argue them out of it,” she told them. “But I’m sure there will be some kind of announcement.”

Now back on the train, Origami tore through the book on enchanting like her life depended on it. Gianna just shook her head. *Give the information to the adults, and trust them to do the right thing. That’s all we can do.*

The group had decided enough time had passed, they would stay on the train overnight to try and cut some time out of their journey. It was during these twilight hours that Origami started squirming around and giggling at her book.

“What are you so happy about?” she asked.

“Did I wake you? Sorry about that,” Origami apologized. “I just realized what I was missing from this chapter on advanced magic. It’s going to come in so handy, if I can get it to work.”

“Get what to work?”

“Do you really care?”

Gianna shifted around. “I’m awake now, be rude not to explain what got you so excited.”

“Okay, okay. You know that glow on a unicorn’s horn when they do magic?”

“Sure?”

“This book talks about it. It’s actually a concentration of the practitioner’s aura. Unicorns tend to not study magic all that much, apart from a spell or two and their natural ability to move things. So they don’t really wonder about *why* it happens. But when they do magic, it’s the flow of mana from the core through the aura that allows a spell to take form. I felt it a little today. It’s more spread out, so I don’t expect the same kind of glow. But any use of magic includes the aura and mine is centered around my wings,

which I use to do weather magic when I fly. And when I made that gust of wind I felt it too. It says here aura control can be really helpful though. Like say you were bashed in the head.”

“Why am I bashed in the head? Why not Sunny?”

“Okay okay, Sunny is bashed in the head. Happy?”

“Of course I’m not happy she’s being bashed in the head. Who is doing such a terrible thing and where are we if not there beside her trying to stop it?”

“Gianna it’s just an example- you’re messing with me aren’t you?”

“It’s just so easy to do!”

“Anyway.” She rolled her eyes. “The normal method of healing someone, the ‘healing spell’ if you will, soaks into the aura of the recipient of the spell and tries to heal *all* of them. But in this case, only their head is wounded. Right? Aura control could restrict the magic to the head, providing additional healing to that area because it’s not as spread out, using the same amount of magical energy or mana as we in the biz call it.”

“Hummm. If two ponies were slightly injured could you spread out your aura and hit them both with one healing spell?”

“You get it! It can be shaped in various ways, depending on practice. Like I could narrow my aura on the gust attack and maybe make it a thin slice of cutting wind. It’s a magical effect after all, not a spell, but it still can be shaped. I think...”

“Really?” She sat up. “That’s amazing!”

“I’ll have to practice, of course. But the book says it’s possible. Aura control. Huh. Who would have guessed?”

“Huh. I’m a bit jealous. Seems ponies get all the luck.”

“Maybe we’ll find you some special technique while we’re wandering the lands.”

“Ha! You better.”

The next day the three stepped off the train and looked around. Coming towards them was a pink pony, with a three balloon cutie mark and a twitching tail. She saw Sunny, jumped into the air, inhaled as though she was a certain pink puffball, and ran off without another word. Origami facehoofed.

“What was that all about?” Sunny asked.

“Expect a party invitation soon,” Origami told her. “I knew we forgot something. Your poncho. Too late now, but at least you came off the train, rather than just appearing in town. We at least got that much right.”

“I like parties!”

“Great. Come on.”

They headed to the castle, and were greeted warmly by Twilight. She was in a study, surrounded by books, chalkboards with lots of magical formula on them, and muttering to herself. She perked up when she saw the others come in though.

“You’re back! How did it go?”

“As far as the mission goes, fairly successful,” Origami admitted. She got the book out of her bag and handed it over. “Thank you for the other books, I’ll put them away myself if you want.”

“Sure, sure!” Twilight clearly hadn’t heard anything past “book” and was flipping through it. “Oh yes, this explains things for sure. I was wondering how we would do that. And of course this is that way, and this flows into that...”

“So we’re still on track to make the crystal, then?”

She looked up, surprised. "Why wouldn't we? We want to *nudge* the future into a better track. Not kick it over. Who knows what we would get in that case. We have to at least make some effort to do the same things so we at least have a base to start from."

"But we don't know why this crystal was made. Yes, it seems to work out in the end, but only after hundreds of years of darkness. It may have caused that very fall!"

"Oh I'm sure we can account for that," she mused, waving a hoof. "After all, we're probably making it early, and with better intentions. Intention matters in magic. The first crystal had a purpose- to end pony magic. To that end it wouldn't have wanted to be put back together. Hence why it took so long. Our crystal will have a different purpose- to safeguard the land. Totally different."

"It can't be that strong an effect..."

"You're saying this to the pony with the talent for magic?"

"I'm sure she knows what she's doing," Gianna agreed. "It's not up to us, Origami."

"I just don't want to rush into this, that's all. Is there magic to get a sense of the future? Let's see if things change if we decide on certain paths and ask the magic what happens."

"I don't know about that..."

Gianna looked pensive, like she was trying to remember something.

"So it's just full steam ahead, then?"

"For the moment, yes. Even if I had all the crystals and formulas and everything else it would take weeks to do. We need to work in parallel. Get the stuff while we figure out the ritual. Then ask if we can put it all together."

She sighed. "About that. The crystal ponies said none of their crystals would be ideal for the effort. She said we may need to search for the exact right type of crystal for each part. As clearly in the picture they're different."

"I know of one location where unique crystal is to be found," she mused. "If you're still willing to help I could use it. The less ponies I need to tell about why Sunny is seeking these crystals the better."

"My heart isn't in it, do you want somepony that doesn't believe in your vision doing all this?"

Twilight startled. "Do I seem like the type of pony that wants to surround myself with yesponies? You may be young but I'm not brushing you off, Origami. Without any dissenting opinion I won't be challenged. That's no good. I need your voice to make sure I cover all the angles."

"Oh." She seemed slightly mollified by this. "Well, that's fine then."

"Great! I'll send some messages, I bet we can be in Canterlot by tomorrow afternoon if we leave early-"

"Wait!" she cried. "We've missed a few days of school. We need to get the make up work."

"Do we though?" Gianna asked.

"Yes of course. We don't want to fall behind."

"I think we'll learn more about friendship out in the real world, but whatever you say."

"Okay, take tomorrow and get your work," agreed Twilight. "It can wait another day. In fact it could be beneficial to do so. We'll take the train the day after tomorrow, bright and early."

"You're coming with us?"

"I'll introduce you to the pony that knows where the crystal is, and I have a surprise for you." She smirked.

"Oh, okay."

The group looked down at the grounds before they made their way out of the castle. Origami had put the books back, and she nodded to herself.

"It's that same pink pony," Sunny agreed. "How did she know where we would be?"

"There's a lot of weird stuff Pinky does," Origami told them. "She's going to have a welcome to Ponyville party ready for you. I'm going to see if there's a back door to this place or something. I hate to say no to her and see that look of disappointment on her face."

"You don't want to go to a party?" Gianna asked.

"I'm not in the mood. Despite what she said, she went right back to the book when we were done talking. It seems she's in an awful hurry to make this crystal, despite the danger. I just can't understand her."

"I think it's a risk either way," Sunny told her. "What if something came along, and this crystal was the only way to stop it? If we didn't have it, well, it would be a disaster right?"

"Alternately, we don't know if ponies made it at all! Maybe it was made in that shape because it helps the magic. But someone else turned off magic to use against us."

Sunny didn't want to meet her eyes. "I mean I guess we don't know for sure, but then isn't it even more important to get the crystals before this other creature does? Keep them safe and hidden?"

What's she not telling us? Gianna thought to herself. She didn't want to get in the middle of this because she knew she was 1) just a kid and 2) not a pony. *Let ponies turn off their magic it's nothing to do with me. I would still be able to fly and such. The princesses are going to have to decide the direction they want to go in, and they're going to have to live with the consequences. Why is she getting so worked up about something she has no control over?*

"The temptation to make it will be there. Maybe time itself wants this crystal made!"

"I have to believe the future *can* be changed, otherwise what I went through is meaningless!"

"Our futures have been changed," Gianna decided to say. "We would have been simply going to class this whole time. We wouldn't have solved the typewriter caper, or helped with the miners. So clearly the future is not set in stone."

"... Yes," she was forced to agree. "But it's a totally different scale!"

"Look," Gianna said with finality. "We're not going to make the decision so standing here arguing about it doesn't benefit any of us. Cake. Cake benefits all of us. Come and have cake with us- Pinkie Pie's cake. It's always good... if you like double the sugar the recipe calls for."

"I'm heading back to the room. I'll see you there."

Now it was Gianna rolling her eyes. "Okay. I'm bringing cake back though."

"Hope it's chocolate for me!" Sunny sing-songed.

Outside Pinky brightened up as Sunny headed out of the castle, and ran over to her. She sang a little song.

I know that it is sudden,
but you should come with me,
we must welcome you to ponyville
or my name's not Pinkie.

Let us have a party,
you can meet new friends for sure,
I know it is short notice
but you cannot abjure!"

"Abjure?" she asked.

"Refuse. But that doesn't rhyme. Come on silly, everypony is waiting for you!"

Not everypony though...

"How did you pull a party together so fast?"

“Oh I have party supplies stashed all over Ponyville, in case of party emergency. Come on. I’m Pinky Pie, did you pick up on that? What’s your name? Will you be staying long? Where are you from?”

“I’m, uh, Sunny Starscout...”

Oh boy...

Gianna was somewhat worried but Sunny held it together at the party. She stuck close to her new friend, and greeted her old friends too, who were glad to see her. “Yeah, been out of town on a secret mission of sorts for Twilight,” she bragged. “Can’t say much, but I was the muscle the team needed.”

“With the team being you and Origami? Where is she anyway?” asked the dragon, Rock Biter, looking around.

“She’s just a bit tired from all the traveling. Didn’t want to come.”

“Didn’t want to explain herself, more like. She didn’t want to come with us because she just *had* to fix up the gym, but it was worse off than when we left the day before!” insisted the changeling, Dimple Smiles.

“Wasn’t that because of that freak storm? Everything got messed up.” *And it’s not like we had the ceremony anyway, they called it off because of the whole storm excuse.*

“Yeah I guess,” he admitted. “Weird how there was that storm and then the two of you disappeared the next day.”

“Total coincidence of course.”

“Uh huh.”

As promised, Gianna returned with cake, which Origami did eat, because cake. Gianna had given Sunny a tour of the school and dorms, she then went back to the castle to sleep.

“I doubt she wants to see me,” Sunny explained, refusing an invitation to see their room. “I’ll see you later.”

The two talked more about how reckless Twilight seemed to be. Gianna tried to explain she must know what she’s doing, she studied magic for years and even admitted to knowing time travel magic herself. But Origami went to bed, seemingly unconvinced by her words.

I hate for her to be miserable this whole trip...

The next day the two were surprised to see Sunny, looking glum, on the other side of their door. Classes started soon but they had some time yet. If they skipped second breakfast. “You two have a minute?” she asked.

“Come on in. Origami is still grumpy but don’t mind her. What’s on your mind?”

She stepped in and looked around. “Hi Origami. Did you sleep well?”

“Don’t give me that, why are you here?” she replied.

Sunny took a breath. “Okay. I’ve been up half the night thinking about it but I figure it’s best just to tell you. I don’t know if it’ll make things better or worse, but...”

“Tell us what?”

“I actually know, at least in part, why the crystal was made. Here, it’s best if you just see it for yourself, and I can answer your questions later.” She got out her tablet and set it on the desk. “Zipp didn’t start recording until halfway through, but this is the important part of the message for us anyway. I’ll just play it.” She tapped the device, and Twilight’s hologram appeared on the screen and started to speak.

“Once a pony tried to steal all the magic in Equestria. For herself. She almost succeeded. I did all that I could to protect from summoning all of my magical strength to achieve placing the magic

in the crystals ... and the but the spell is broken. You are exposed to the world once again. You must watch out for Op.... before she op.... I am with you.”

The others stared at the last frame. “The breaks are not with my tablet,” she announced. “They were a corruption in the message.”

“Rather convenient corruption,” Origami complained. “The most important information was lost! How does a magical crystal message get corrupted anyway?”

“But this place is always under threat,” Gianna countered. “By whom doesn’t matter.”

“So you see, I knew all along. I knew that Twilight would create the crystal, and she implied all by herself. So now you know who, and why. Does that make a difference?”

“Why did you not tell us this before?” Origami wanted to know.

“Directly tell somepony their future? I figured that was a step too far. I wanted you to know how bad the future was, yes, but let you solve it without sticking my nose in too much. I hoped you would simply trust yourselves. But you seem dead set against something that I’ve just shown you Twilight Sparkle believed was her only choice. I thought you at least knowing it was her would be better. She doesn’t have to know that in my timeline she was backed up against the wall. I figured telling you every creature but ponies was gone would be enough. And if I really screwed it up, maybe another Sunny from the double future would come back and tell me what I did wrong, so I could fix that, and we would get it better and better until we got it right.”

“Don’t even joke about that!”

“Sorry. I wasn’t though?”

“Please say you were.”

“But I really wasn’t.”

“Anyway, does this change anything?” Gianna butted in. *It’s so odd. After this mystery pony was defeated, if it was a pony, why keep magic turned off? The message didn’t say, and it seems to be the complete message. I doubt she changed it herself. What caused Twilight to decide magic was simply too dangerous to allow to continue? Maybe... were they not defeated? Was this the only way to defend the land? Turn magic off until the threat just died of old age? That’s pretty metal, Twilight.*

“You should tell her. Maybe not the source of the message, but at least tell her you remembered it was some pony that stole magic that made the crystal necessary. Honestly, what’s with stealing magic around here? Tirek, the Storm King, this mystery figure now. Go get your own. Maybe we *should* shut it all off.”

“At least if we did that now, you could start relying on technology more.” She shook her tablet.

“I do want one of those tablet things,” Gianna admitted.

“I’ll make up my mind if it’s good or not if it tempers Twilight’s attitude. How does that sound?”

Like a copout? Gianna thought.

“Fair enough. I’ll go tell her. I hope you’re right about this being a good idea. I’m not convinced.” She let herself out.

“So what if we don’t make the crystal?” Gianna asked. “What if we destroy the pieces, knowing what we know now. Doesn’t that mean this mystery threat wins? How is that better?”

“But the whole reason she came was to tell us stuff like this. So we could watch out for it. Then we don’t need magical crystals. Isn’t that what the school is for? Bringing friendship to everypony? That’s the way to defeat enemies. Togetherness!”

“Maybe they were gone by the time this happens. The princesses have lived more than a thousand years. Maybe Twilight will too. Maybe in two hundred years creatures like me are all gone, and it’s only ponies. Maybe you have no friends left.”

“So we make sure that doesn’t happen first! I don’t know, okay?”
“Just think about it. I can see both sides, you should try that too.”
“I’m going to class!”

Chapter 7
The next day
Electric Pony

The group, now including Twilight, boarded the train in the morning to head to Canterlot. Twilight was unsurprised by the revelation by Sunny about the true origin of the crystal, but was concerned she had been pressed that hard to go to such extremes.

“I mean Tirek almost succeeded too. We didn’t consider turning magic off then. Why do so for this mystery figure?”

“As I understand it you took the princesses’ magic, like you did with-” Gianna looked around the train, but they had a private car. Being a princess did come with some perks, after all. “Sunny, to deflect the time storm. It was only the combined power that allowed for his defeat.”

“That’s right! You know your pony history, that’s good!”

“So if they were already gone, defeated by the foe that takes magic...”

“Oh.” She grew concerned. “I don’t like thinking things like that. Who would raise the sun and the moon? We’d have to get a bunch of unicorns together like in the very olden days.”

“Now if you wanted to change the crystal to simply make it so nopony can take another pony’s magic, then I would be on board,” Origami put in. “I mean if all magic can be affected, why not go for utility rather than denial? Oh, oh, could we make a ‘system’ like in Isakai stories?”

“Er, I don’t know about that. I was thinking about other ways to protect it,” Twilight admitted. “It would add to the complexity, but we’re not in any time crunch that I know of. What if it could only be used once? It goes on a 24 hour timer and then explodes itself. If we haven’t beaten our mystery figure by then, well, I think we probably deserve to lose. Or if we take it apart early it just crumbles. That sort of thing. We would think of something suitable.”

Number of hours of use total? Can magic “count” and keep a timer? “That’s one way to do it,” Origami admitted. “As long as you can make sure that part of it couldn’t be turned off.”

“We would have to work it into the whole spell matrix. Disabling it would make the entire crystal useless.”

“It’s an idea.”

“But the reason magic was *left* off could be because you couldn’t defeat this foe, even with magic turned off,” protested Gianna. “Twenty four hours may be nothing. It’s sealing your own doom. You may have needed to ‘starve them out’ and that simply took longer than expected. So long everypony forgot and didn’t bring the crystals back together to restart magic.”

“It’s a risk either way, I agree.”

There was silence for a moment. Origami looked around. “I’m actually surprised to see you taking a train. If we’re all going together, can’t you just teleport us there?”

Twilight gave a little laugh. “That’s a pretty long way. Even going inside the school building was a risk, I wouldn’t want to put anypony in danger, me blipping into their space. Or risk something being there and getting tangled up in it. Best to just walk, it’s not that far.”

“But you could do it?”

“I suppose if there was some kind of emergency situation, I could get there in a few jumps if not one big one. I don’t mean to brag but I am fairly well versed both in magical lore and execution. Why? Do you feel it’s justified? We would have to stop the train, or get off at the next stop. I don’t like throwing my weight around like that, as a princess.”

“I’m just imagining that if magic *can* reach that far, why not set up a teleportation hub in every town? Then we- I mean anypony- could just be whisked from place to place in a wink.”

“Interesting idea. I wonder what would be required for such a thing…” She lapsed into silence, thinking.

The train ride was uneventful, and Twilight took the group up to the castle to meet somepony.

“Just listen for the sounds of young stallions getting their hearts, and possibly legs, broken.”

“Uh…” was the general response of the group.

She led them to a training area, where two young ponies were trying to take on a third, much larger pony, and failing spectacularly. She was wearing armor while they weren’t, so in theory they should be able to move faster and dodge better. But she was pressing the two as though it was two of her and one of them, rather than the other way around. She was *good*.

“Tempest!” Origami spat. She had been young but that didn’t stop the forces of the Storm King from putting her in a cage. Putting a young pony- or really anybody young for that matter- in a cage was a very evil thing to do, and the being that ordered it should think hard about the choices they made in their life leading up to that point. Especially if they are colored orange, to choose a completely random example out of nowhere. “What’s *she* doing here?”

“Who is she? Oh wow!” Gianna asked, then cheered as Tempest did a cool spin move and knocked both ponies over. “I wanna be her when I grow up!”

“Pathetic!” she cried. “What if the kingdom was under attack right now? And you’re just laying around? How is that going to help anypony?”

“She’s a supposedly reformed bad mare,” Origami told her. “Almost took the kingdom over. Only failed because her boss did what bad guys do. Lied and then broke his promise to her in the end. If he had just done what she wanted, or not lied about being able to do it, we would still be enslaved today. And he wouldn’t be in a million pieces.”

“Wicked! And her horn is so metal. Did she- did she do that to herself?”

“What’s left of it,” she muttered. “No. Accident as a filly, as I understand it.”

“Tempest!” Twilight cried, waving. “Over here!”

“Oh!” She noticed the group and waved a hoof at the students. “Pair up, get back to it. Slackers. And show respect to your princess!” She bowed, and the others did too.

“How many times do I have to tell you…” she blushed. “Yes, yes, thank you! Goodbye!” They got up and went back to training.

“Twilight Sparkle, good to see you,” Tempest told her, walking over there. “But how many times have I told *you* to call me Fizzlepop Berry Twist?” She seemed to be blushing up a storm, and Origami looked between the two. Twilight seemed clueless, but Tempest seemed smitten. Standing next to Twilight it was clear she was much taller, making her one of the tallest ponies Origami had ever seen.

Never thought I would be standing next to her though. Still, shorter than Celestia. Weird. Wonder how old she is?

“You’re general Tempest while on duty as far as I’m concerned.”

“Not on duty now. Introduce me to your friends.”

Friends? Sure, if she gives up this crystal crusade maybe.

“This is Origami, Sunny, and Gianna,” Twilight introduced them. “This is Fizzlepop Berry Twist. She works, as you can see, training the next generation of guards for the castle.”

“And if Celestia finally sees the light, self-defense classes all over Equestria will have my stamp of approval. Nice to meet you all, you want to take some classes or what?”

“Yes!” Gianna shouted, a little too forcefully. “Please teach me everything!”

“Whoa, slow down,” she cautioned, not unkindly. She was grinning. “Though I do appreciate an excited student. You see what I have to work with here.” She gestured to the young recruits, who startled and picked up the pace- fractionally- when they realized they were under scrutiny. “Pitiful.”

Twilight continued. “Actually, we’re here about those crystals you used in the, ahem, attack a few years ago.”

She sighed wistfully. “Almost two years already. Where has the time gone? Anyway, what about them?”

I guess she’s proven herself if it’s been that long. Wow, it really has been two years. Stupid Storm King. Stupid Tempest.

“Where did you get them? Can you show us any you have left?”

“I do have one left, sure. I keep it in my... uh... room why don’t I just run and get it I’d invite you up but wow my place is so messy why not meet in the tea room I’ll go get it okay see you in a second bye!” She ran off, her horn sparking all over the place.

“Wow,” Origami muttered. *And she doesn’t notice at all, huh? Maybe she is what Sunny said earlier...*

“She always seems a little flustered around me, no matter what I do to try and put her at ease. Just because I chose her over the staff I guess. Made me her first real friend ever since she left her village so that’s a little awkward. I wish we could be better friends. Oh well.”

I bet she wishes that too.

“Tea room?” Gianna asked.

“Very big on tea around here,” Twilight explained. “And cakes. Celestia loves cake.” She looked around and motioned them closer, whispering, “How do you think she got so big?!” She snickered and straightened up. “Come on, this way.”

So a few moments later Tempest, or Fizzlepop as she had gotten out of her armor and freshened up, letting her mane down and she seemed to smell of flowers now too.

Wow, really going all out huh?

She set a crystal down after getting it out of her bag, and set the bag aside too. “Here it is. You want somepony turned into stone, or what?”

“Stone?” asked Gianna.

“It’s how her attack was so effective,” Origami explained. “She targeted the princesses first. Turned them into stone by hitting them with magical crystals. I guess this is one of them. I recall hearing one of those went right through Cadence’s shield... huh.” *I wouldn’t mind studying it. But then, am I ever going to need to turn somepony into stone? Isn’t that just as bad, simply on a personal level, as what Twilight is trying to do?*

“Yes, it’s why I used it after discovering it,” Fizzlepop agreed. “It has special anti-magic properties.”

“So quite useful in the project we’re thinking about pursuing, isn’t it?” She looked pointedly at the group. Sunny nodded.

I guess if you’re going to turn off magic, use a crystal that has innate anti-magic properties. Like Polish said, use a crystal that is aligned with the purpose of the magic for the greatest effect. But wouldn’t it be a lot harder to enchant the crystal if the crystal itself resists enchantment because it’s anti-magic? I suppose as long as it’s still possible, just harder, we can simply take more time and overcome it. She did, after all.

“But they turn ponies to stone?” Gianna went on.

“Oh, any creature they hit. Yup, so easy to take out the princesses, wow, I honestly couldn’t believe how well the plan was working. Ponies yelling and running everywhere. I kept thinking it couldn’t be that easy but yeah, I won pretty quick. Felt good about it too. Wow I was a jerk back in the day.”

“I got stoned in the forest once,” Twilight told them with a far away look in her eyes. “That was a weird day.”

“Wait what?” Fizzlepop gasped.

“Fluttershy took care of it. Anyway, where did you get it from? We need some unenchanted samples for a project we’re working on.”

Wait, Fluttershy? Took care of? Does that mean she was the cause or the solution? I’m looking at Twilight in a new way after this...

She shook her head to clear it. “We mined it. Across the ocean to the south are the lands that used to be controlled by the Storm King. Brought it to one of his castles and put it in the vault. It was useless to them, they couldn’t do magic but he didn’t want it stolen and used against him. It’s actually fairly close to the coast, I wanted it nearby so I didn’t have to fly inland every time I needed to restock. I uh...” she looked embarrassed again. “I did some bad stuff for that guy. Yours was just the final land I tried to take over. But that’s all behind me now of course!” She forced a laugh. “The mine itself was much further inland. The crystal was moved by train. I have no idea if it’s still in the vault, but there was plenty left to mine. Each would have its own dangers...”

“It’s an opportunity too,” Twilight told them. “Several ponies vanished that day. We think they were taken captive and brought back there. We’ve never really had the means to get there but if we could go rescue them...”

“How are we getting there?” Sunny asked. “Boat? That would take forever!”

“One thing at a time,” Twilight answered mysteriously.

“They could be anywhere though,” Fizzlepop told them. “You need to know something about the so called Storm King. He had no interest in ruling, just in causing trouble. So he had no central government or capital or anything like that. After two years, who knows what those lands look like. If I had to *guess*, I would say the various beings that were taken over by his army started fighting back. I have no idea how loyal most of his troops were, so it could be a real mess over there. Could work in your favor, meet with rebel groups and get the lay of the land before you move on the vault.” She got out some papers from her bag. “Let me draw you a rough map.”

A moment later the group was looking at several drawings. One of the overall landmass of Equestria and the land to the south. This one included where the castle was and where the mine was, far to the east of it. “The crystal was moved by train, of course,” she explained. “Far more industrial than around here. More big cities, but then, there’s lots more creatures over there.” One of the general layout of where the castle with the vault was. And several showing what she remembered of the castle layout.

“We have to go after the captured ponies,” Origami decided. “It’s the only logical thing to do.”

“It would save you from traveling half the continent and back with a load of crystal,” she admitted. “But I’m curious too, how would they get there?”

“Okay okay!” Twilight gushed. “Come with me, I have a surprise for you!”

The group headed away from the castle and come up on an airfield. Hovering there, with ponies and strange looking metal bugs crawling all over it was the large metal object that had hit the castle. “We had it shipped here on the train,” she told them excitedly. “It’s an airship, and a very advanced one at that. It was hardly damaged, and those weird spider things are actually part of the repair system. We just had to feed them raw material and they got to work. Come and take a look. I got a letter it was ready, I haven’t seen it myself either.”

“Huh, looks more advanced than the ones built by the Storm King, that’s for sure,” Fizzlepop remarked.

“Hold- hold on, you’re giving us an *airship*?” Origami stuttered.

“That’s right!” she agreed with a big smile. “No more train travel for you. You can name it and everything if you want. It’s yours until the Sunny crisis is over, so you can get anywhere in Equestria, and beyond, if you need to.”

“Wait, why is it called the Sunny crisis?” asked Sunny. “I’m not sure I’m comfortable with that.” She just laughed. “Come on!”

The group headed up the ramp and stepped into the airship, where a strange looking pony met them. It seemed she was transparent, mostly being blue but with lighter and darker highlights all along her body. “Welcome, ponies and other,” she intoned, not quite speaking normally. She looked to Twilight. “This pony has been described to me. Query: you are Twilight Sparkle?”

“Yes, that’s me!”

“What is she?” Gianna whispered. “The ghost of a pony that was on the ship when it went through time?”

“Negative,” the pony answered. “I am CelestAI. I am the standard interface between the crew of the <unnamed> and the underlying systems. Twilight Sparkle has been granted admin level access to all systems. Purging all other admin level access credentials as per initial directives by admin Celestia. Welcome aboard.”

“Thank you. Can we get a tour?”

“This request falls within the scope of my duties and capabilities. I will load tour.exe shortly. Warning: You must also register your bio-metric data as soon as possible to maintain your admin level access. Warning: if you fail to register your bio-metric data before leaving the area your admin level rights access will be revoked and any user will be able to take admin access.”

“Understood. I’ll need to register these ponies and this griffon as well, can we do that?”

“Affirmative. The process can be initiated at any admin terminal but full access is only granted after bio-metric data has been collected and scanned. The process is minimally invasive.”

“What does that mean?” Origami asked, eyes widening.

“The process is minimally... invasive!”

“That’s no more reassuring the second time you say it!”

“Please follow me.”

“And now it’s not even going to answer?”

CelestAI led them around the ship, past lots of empty rooms of all types. Bedrooms, labs with plenty of odd equipment still smashed up from the journey, control stations, kitchen, and various more dangerous places like the engine room. The group was cautioned to stay safe, but it didn’t seem like the strange, ghostly pony was deceiving them or keeping them from any area. Twilight registered the three as “captains” and they had their pictures taken, and a small amount of blood drawn so they could later prove their identities should it become needed.

“So that seems to be that,” Twilight told them as they made their way back to the entrance. “Any questions?”

“Is it fully repaired?” Origami asked.

“My systems are all reporting at 100% efficiency,” CelestAI reported. “Repair drones are gathering the last of the spare material and will be deactivated in approximately 23 minutes. We can return to the bridge if you wish to be underway.”

“Okay... Look, I don't exactly claim to understand what you are but clearly you're from our future, are you not?”

“I have been informed the current date does not match with my chronometer. I have fully assimilated this phenomenon. You do not need to be concerned it will impact my performance in any way. I will follow your orders, captain.”

She shook her head. “You misunderstand. Can you tell us about the future? How you were built and why? Do you know about magic being taken away, and coming back? About the death of those that are not ponies?”

The AI seemed to hesitate for a second. “Database was corrupted during time-stream translocation event. Backup database was corrupted during time-stream translocation event. Backup of backup of database was corrupted during time-stream translocation event. Database initialized to factory defaults when corruption was detected to prevent damage to this unit.”

“Wow!” Gianna decided. “What the heck? Anyone following this?”

“But you can still talk and run the ship and all that?” Origami wondered, not believing it for a second. *It's just oh so very coincidental that this ship can talk to me or whatnot but can't remember a single thing about its own time? The one thing we would need more than anything? It wasn't wiped on purpose, was it?*

“Factory default settings loaded from non-volatile ROM allows basic function and learning algorithms allow for future growth of this unit. This unit will adapt to speech patterns and local colloquialisms as database is rebuilt. I am sorry this unit cannot address your queries about the origin time period of the unit. This unit does not *run* the ship. This unit *is* the ship. I am CelestAI, there is no distinction between my projection and any other system.”

“So if you were damaged, if the outer part of you were damaged-”

“Given explanations of your current level of technology,” CelestAI interrupted, somehow looking smug, “damage to outer hull is statistically unlikely.”

“Now we're talking!” Giana announced. “Not only an airship but an invulnerable *battleship*?”

“We have been conversing for several minutes?” CelestAI asked, confused.

Gianna only laughed.

Chapter 8
Not long after
Heading to a strange land

“I don’t suppose you can come with us, show us around?” Origami asked Fizzlepop. *Can’t believe I’m asking her this. But we really could use her. She knows the territory and the beings we’ll run into over there.*

“Not sure that’s such a good idea,” she decided. “Remember, I’m a war criminal over there. Even if I stayed on the ship, if you needed to move anyone around they would more than likely see me. Any good will you had built up would be gone in a flash. If I have to stay hidden the whole time, what’s the point of me being there? Ponies seem eager to forgive, and honestly while somewhat refreshing they don’t know the whole story about me and what I did over there. Others would not be so forgiving- and rightly so, in my mind.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. Okay. What about some of those castle guards you were training? Could some of them come with us? I mean there’s only three of us, what are we going to do over there?”

It was Twilight who shook her head at this. “Thing is, sending you three as explorers is fine. You don’t really have any affiliation with the kingdom, and can honestly claim to just be looking for treasure. If we send castle guards with you, technically that’s an act of war. We would be invading their lands with a military force. Can we really afford to antagonize other lands? We don’t want another fight.”

“So it’s just us then, we’re on our own?”

“I will be with you!” CelestAI reminded them.

“But can you leave the ship?” Sunny asked.

She hung her head. “I cannot. I have no remote projection units in inventory.”

“You’ll figure it out,” Twilight told them. “I have complete faith in you! A small force is exactly what’s needed anyway. In and out, find the crystals and any kidnapped ponies and get out of there.”

And I suppose she got the crystals on her own in the previous timeline, Origami thought. So really, how hard could it be?

They took a test flight, dropping Twilight off near the edge of town so the huge airship wasn’t landing in the middle of the place and freaking everypony out.

And they would, no doubt. It would be seen as another invasion. Let’s not rile everypony up.

“We got here fast,” Gianna exclaimed. “What’s your top speed?”

“I can reasonably cover 2,500 miles per day,” CelestAI replied. “I believe you are familiar with these archaic units?”

“That’s pretty fast all right...”

“I don’t know exactly how far you’re going, or what the range is for Spike’s ability to send messages,” Twilight told them as she stood at the bottom of the ramp. “I’ll send you a message in 24 hours. If you get it, we’ll have a better idea of both of those things. As you’ll already know how far you’ve gone.”

“That is within my capabilities,” CelestAI agreed.

“We’ll watch out for it,” Sunny promised. “See you when we’ve got a load of crystal to deliver.”

“Good luck.” She spread her wings and flew away back towards the castle.

“You’ll be fine here, right?” Origami asked CelestAI. “You won’t let anypony in but us?”

“If that is your command. Query: what is the nature of the delay?”

“Well, Twilight said they stocked the kitchen up with food and such, but I want to say goodbye to my parents. And we should get our schoolwork so we can work on it while we fly.”

“Aw, do we have to?” Gianna whined. “Think of all the practical lessons in friendship we’ll be doing when we *visit another continent*. We’ll be able to teach a friendship class after this.”

“That’s up to you. I’m not falling behind.” *Though Twilight said they stocked up one of the rooms with books from the royal library as well, which I can’t wait to get into.*

“Fine, whatever, bookworm. You go say goodbye to your parents, I’ll go get our work. Give me the royal writ just in case.”

Origami regarded her suspiciously. “You’ll get *all* our work?”

“Yes, I said I would.”

“Hummm. Fine, but the teachers already know.”

“Just in case!”

“You just want to flash it around- fine, fine!” Gianna had started rummaging in her bag. “Don’t mess up my stuff. It’s just here.” She pulled it out. *Won’t be very useful outside Equestria anyway.*

“Thank you. See you shortly.”

“I guess I’ll just stay here,” Sunny decided. “Keep CelestAI company.”

“If we could converse further, it would greatly help my assimilation of the local idioms.”

“Sorry, I can only teach you a bunch of slang.”

“Please don’t infect our ship with some kind of rhyming slang,” Origami pleaded.

“With the what now?”

“Just talk to it normally. I’ll be back soon.” She took off flying.

“Do you know what’s she’s talking about?” she asked Gianna.

“Not a clue, lady blue.”

There was a pause.

“That can’t be right.”

“Yeah doesn’t feel right. Anyway, be back once I get our *homework*. Ugh.” She also took off.

“Just you and me now, CelestAI. Let me go claim the biggest bedroom before Origami does! Wait, which one has the biggest *bathroom*?”

With the three back on the bridge Gianna shouted to “Lift off!” but CelestAI did not comply. “Turbines to full! Anchors up! Unfurl the main sail! Engage booster rockets! I see we are not going anywhere, why is that?”

“Before I comply, may I make a query?”

“Sounds like you just did,” she snickered.

“May I make an additional one?”

“Sounds like you just did,” she snickered.

“May I make an additional one?”

“Sounds like you just did,” she snickered.

“May I make an additional one?”

“Knock it off!” Origami shouted. “Stop messing with our ship! What is it already?”

“Am I not to receive a name before we depart?”

“But you have a name, silly,” Sunny told her. “CelestAI.”

“While Princess Luna did give me this appellation when she understood what I was, I believe as a humorous reference to her sister, my query relates more to my airship name. CelestAI is my projection’s

name. They did not wish to infringe upon your ability to name your ship, as I was going to pass into your care upon the start of your mission.”

“I’m terrible at naming things,” Origami admitted.

“Blimpy McBlimpface!” Sunny excitedly offered, throwing a hoof in the air.

“Rejected!” Origami told her with finality.

“But-”

“No! We need a serious name.”

“It was?” she muttered, looking away.

“We’ve got a long way to go,” Gianna told her. “Let’s think about it on the way.”

“Very well. Previous directive accepted. Powering engines to full.”

“Query: What is our destination?” A map of the surrounding area had appeared on the center console, while the view before them had flickered to life like a window.

Crazy. How far in the future did this ship come from, anyway? Even later than Sunny’s time? “Oh, right,” Origami agreed. “We never did talk about that. Start heading south. It’s a whole continent, you can’t miss it. We have only a vague understanding of where our actual target is. We’ll have to go by landmarks once we get closer. Can you look at some hoof drawn maps and help us find it?”

“That function is within my capabilities.”

“Okay, great. Here they are.” She set them on the console and CelestAI looked them over.

“Information assimilated. Heading is directly south, pattern matching subroutine activated and consuming 10% of system resources.”

“Is that good or bad?” Gianna whispered to Sunny. Who shrugged. “Okay, good!”

“You can alert us when the primary destination is reached? The other continent?” Origami asked CelestAI.

“Standard alerts include; inclement weather, my coming under attack, interesting marine life detected, unusual solar activity, power reserves dropping below predetermined thresholds, spontaneous dance parties-”

“Really?” Sunny asked.

“Affirmative.”

“Whoever made you had a weird sense of humor,” Origami muttered. “Okay, we don’t need the full list. Just alert us when we get near the Storm King’s territory. And watch out for other airships, we know he had some. Don’t wait for us to tell you, avoid them with everything you have.”

“Command accepted.”

“I’m going to go walk around, map this place out,” Origami announced.

“Don’t lie, you’re going to the library to check out the books!” Gianna teased.

“... Fine, I may make a *short* stop to see what books there are. But only as part of a larger tour.”

“Query: did I not give a satisfactory tour?” CelestAI looked crestfallen. “Has this unit already failed one third of my captains? Will my captains call for this unit’s replacement?”

“No, you didn’t!” she hastened to assure her. “But one tour does not a mind palace make.”

“What’s a mind palace?” Sunny whispered to Gianna. Who shrugged. “Got it.”

“Very well.” Suddenly there were two CelestAI.

“YAAAAA!” yelled the other two, jumping in surprise.

“I shall accompany you, while staying here in case my other two captains need my services. Query: did I not reveal this capability to you previously?”

“No you did not!” Gianna chided her.

“You did that on purpose, didn’t you?” Sunny demanded.

“I am programmed to try spontaneous humor, yes, in order to maintain high crew morale. By judging your reactions I will be able to tailor my humor more appropriately. Warning: next I shall attempt many puns. This is not a fault. It cannot be bypassed.”

“Well I thought it was great,” Origami decided. “More jump scares for them. And puns too, of course. Not for me though. Just them.”

“Command accepted.”

“Hey!” both protested as Origami danced away out the door.

The trip was fairly uneventful. A storm did blow in suddenly but the North Star, as it was now named by Gianna, simply rose above it. CelestAI seemed pleased to finally have a name, and stayed with them as they ate. She did inform them how to activate privacy mode in the rooms, disabled by a switch because once in privacy mode she would ignore all verbal requests made, including the one to disable privacy mode. Everything seemed in order, and while Origami studied and Gianna grudgingly did some homework Sunny watched out the forward viewscreen at the water rolling by them. No message from Twilight came, so either she forgot (hardly likely) or they were simply out of range.

The group had an early lunch the next day because the continent came into view and the North Star started looking for the landmarks in the region marked on Fizzlepop’s map. With a fairly high view and the advanced cameras on the North Star CelestAI announced she had found the right place and stopped, as directed.

“I now await further orders,” she told them.

“Right, we’re actually going to have to come up with a plan,” Origami mused. “Any ideas?”

“I do not remember being equipped with any offensive capabilities,” CelestAI told them. “If they were added later, they were not part of my factory reset settings.”

“No, you seem more geared towards exploration,” she decided. “I wasn’t suggesting you drop explosives on the castle or anything.”

“Oh wow that would be something to see wouldn’t it?” Gianna excitedly asked.

“There may be ponies to rescue, remember?”

“Still...”

“Those ponies could be anywhere,” Sunny protested. “There’s no reason they would be at this vault castle.”

“I’m keeping my hopes up that they are either here, or already freed by some kind of resistance and are awaiting transport back home.”

“That is within my capabilities,” CelestAI spoke up, looking pleased.

Origami put a hoof to her head. “Yes, I know that, thank you.”

“Then I’m keeping my hopes up this place is empty and abandoned, leaving the crystal behind,” Gianna announced. “I mean it’s only fair. We will just walk into the place, do a bit of safe cracking, and leave again with loads of crystal.”

“It’s a good point,” Origami agreed. “We need to see what the situation is, and we don’t want to reveal any interest in the place. CelestAI, let’s keep our distance from the castle and find a good place to land the North Star.” *I don’t know about that name actually, saying it out loud. The north star is what you are guided by. Not what you ride in. Well, whatever, if it makes her happy.* “We’ll approach the castle by hoof, and see what activity is in the area. If it is abandoned and we can just walk into the place, great. But I have a feeling it won’t be that easy.”

“Oh, it’s never easy,” Sunny agreed. “I got caught all the time just trying to sneak into the factory. I’m an expert in it!”

“In... getting caught?” Gianna asked.

“That’s right!”

“Let’s leave that part out,” suggested Origami.

Sunny agreed to stay behind, the other two suggesting that if they were seen they could more easily get away by air than she could. It certainly wasn’t her admission of not being very sneaky, no no no of course not. Just the wings. Which she didn’t have- and they did. That was the only reason.

“Unless you think you can get your wings back?” Origami asked, looking at her medallion. *Please say you can’t, please say you can’t.*

“Oh I can get them back easily enough, I can feel it,” she explained.

Crap!

“Take my full power back, quick as a wink.” She winked. “But then wouldn’t that start up the time wave again? Or do you think it passed? Plus they glow, attracting attention. I don’t know if I can put them away again, I mean before they only lasted a few minutes at best but I was stuck like this here. We don’t want to have to call Discord again, do we?”

“No we do not. Okay, just wondered. If we were in trouble because they were chasing us, I wondered if we could count on you to help.”

“I’ll do my best, follow captain!” She saluted.

And so the two found themselves creeping towards the castle. Thankfully the land around the place was fairly overgrown, so they decided they would have no trouble staying hidden if they stayed low and didn’t take any chances. When they got close Origami pulled a pair of binoculars from her bag- taken from the North Star for this very purpose- and handed one over. The castle was indeed built on a hill that stuck out of the ground all by itself, and the airfield Fizzlepop had mentioned was still there. And in fact, it was active. The two counted at least six guards, big shaggy creatures Origami was quite familiar with. But they weren’t doing the work, they were simply watching over a group of creatures who were hauling things and working on building another airship. All of them had on a thick collar of some kind, but neither could think of a reason as it wasn’t actually attached to anything, like a chain, to keep them in line. It was the other species that really threw them.

“What are those things?” Gianna asked. “We found our missing ponies but those others? They look so strange!”

It was true. The others were upright, like the ‘yeti’ as the ponies called them, not knowing their true name. Some were covered with fur and had triangular ears on top of their heads. Others were feathered, and had beaks like birds. Two were quite short, had smooth skin, no ears, and large eyes. The only thing familiar to them were the ponies, several unicorns levitating stuff and pegasi flying things around. All looked dirty, thin, and defeated.

“Frogs?” Origami guessed. “Really big frogs? And there are cats around town, but those look like big cats. Really big, talking, thinking, cats.”

“Crazy. I see a bunch of those yeti things training over by the castle too. And there are some guards on the top, glad we didn’t approach any closer in the airship. We would have been spotted for sure.”

“Me too. So the place is still active, even with the Storm King gone. Great. We’re going to need a really good plan if we’re going to get in there and find the vault without getting spotted. If there’s this many outside, who knows what’s actually in there?”

“Let’s head back. I don’t like being this close, even if they aren’t expecting us who knows how good their eyesight is?”

“With those tiny eyes? But I get your point. Let’s head back.”

The two reported what they had seen to Sunny, and started thinking about what to do next.

“Maybe we can find some adventurous ponies that aren’t in the guard?” Origami suggested. “We’re going to need some kind of help getting in there.”

“Go all the way back?” Sunny asked. “We knew it might be this way. I think Twilight wanted us to, you know, make friends here? That’s why she just sent us? Let’s talk to the locals, they have more experience in dealing with the remnants of the Storm King’s army than we do, right?”

“Oh yeah, right!” Origami agreed. *Why didn’t I think of that? There must be plenty of other creatures here we could talk to.* “CelestAI, let’s take off and look for a nearby town. We’ll do the same thing. Land, approach by hoof, and if it looks like the Storm King’s forces still control it we’ll back off.”

“How would we know?” Gianna asked.

“Banners, mostly. We know his symbol was that tuning fork shape, right? If that’s plastered everywhere then we know it’s not safe.”

“Fair.”

“Powering engines,” CelestAI told them.

The town they found looked like it had been through its share of hardships, but was recovering. Strange looking buildings made of stone jutted out from the ground at odd angles, perhaps hastily erected after the original buildings were torn up in the fighting? It didn’t look like any tuning fork banners flew here, so the three approached, all fighting their nerves. They entered the town without incident, and started to look around. All manner of creatures passed them on the street, giving them odd looks but not bothering them. Giant fishes, giant lizards, more cat people and bird people. Pig looking things. Everything on two legs, towering over the ponies but not paying them much attention. But the biggest surprise was the yeti, none wearing armor or carrying weapons, thankfully. They were given a wide berth and looked down upon, despite them being taller than anything else around.

“Deserters, maybe?” Sunny asked. They didn’t seem to be *doing* much, just standing around looking depressed.

“Yeah, nobody around here trusts them, that’s for sure,” Gianna agreed. “They’re tolerated, but probably not really welcomed.”

“So what do we do?” Origami asked. “Try to get some of them on our side? But making them work against their kind... that could backfire. We take them to the castle and maybe they’re welcomed with open arms, turning on us.” *It’s not like we could pay them. Appeal to their desire for forgiveness? Would they go for that?*

“Someone kicked Stormy out of here,” Gianna decided. “We need to know who. And where would the local toughs hang out, I find myself asking. In stories it’s always taverns and the like. Adventures always start in taverns. That’s where we should look.”

“I guess we’re searching for a tavern then,” Origami declared. “Now if I was a place that served a rough sort, where would I be?”

The three walked into a ramshackle building with a sign in front indicating drinks, and it seemed this was a good place to start. Various cats, birds, and fish people sat in rough wooden chairs, playing cards at rough looking tables, and drinking rough looking liquids from rough looking mugs.

Don’t they have sandpaper around here? Origami thought.

The group was looking around at the walls, thinking *oh that’s where all the Storm King stuff went.* There were broken pendants, shields, weapons, and various other things hung on the walls like trophies, all baring the mark of the Storm King.

“Admiring our handiwork?” said a nearby bird, sitting alone at a table. He had a sword and was dressed in practical clothes, and most were around here. He wasn’t missing any limbs or anything, but did seem pretty sure of himself.

That's our opening! "We sure are," Origami answered. "Looks like you had a hard fight getting them out of your lands."

"That we did. So you can talk, I did wonder. Pull up a chair and tell old Hookbeak what brings such strange- no offense- creatures to our humble city."

"A rescue mission," Gianna told him. "Know anyone around here still willing to fight the forces of the Storm King?"

Hookbeak's eyes sparkled as he smiled.

Chapter 9

After a drink and explanation

Making more plans

“So if I’m understanding you three correctly,” Hookbeak mused, leaned back in his chair. “Two years ago your kind was invaded by the Storm King who was looking for some kinda magic. You beat him and killed him, but some of your kind, that is-to-say pony kind, were captured and brought to this land during the incident. You’ve been working on an airship, using captured pieces of the airships he used to invade, and you’ve finally got a working prototype and came looking for your captured kin.”

“That’s exactly right!” Origami agreed. *From... a certain point of view. It’s just not all we want to do here.*

“The three of you?”

“We’re the best,” Gianna bragged. “Could you not tell from looking at us?”

He looked between the three. Sunny tried a tough looking scowl but ending up laughing uproariously at herself. It didn’t help her image any.

“Uh huh. Well, you are something I’ve never seen before. So that much of your story checks out. And if you’re against the Storm King, and the remnants of his forces, then you’re okay with me. And he did vanish about two years ago, and no one else came forward to claim to have done him in. So I guess you can take the credit as far as I’m concerned. So why are you here and not rescuing your friends, if you’re as good as you say.”

“We scouted the place,” Origami told him. “There’s a lot more forces there than we anticipated. We need allies. Some of your people are held there as well. It’s a good idea to work together to free them all.”

“There is that. Hey Twitter!” he suddenly called, looking over at another bird type. This guy rolled his eyes dramatically and stood up. He seemed to have an old injury and was not putting as much weight on his left leg, making him lean heavily towards the right. He too had a sword- that had seen better days- and a pad of paper held together by a ratty looking string.

“It’s X!” he announced. “Stop deadnaming me already!”

“Oh, right, ‘X,’” he muttered. “Why he had to go changing his name- Anyway.” He kicked a chair out for X as he came over. “Have a seat. Everyone, this is X, formally known as Twitter, he’s always up on the latest gossip and such. What can you tell me about that castle to the north-west of here?”

He flipped through his papers and finally came to the section he wanted. “Active, lots of the old Storm King’s followers there. Not enough for the resistance to risk doing something about it. One of the old generals is in charge of the place now, Bloodclaw maybe. Airship field is active, they have at least one that goes for supplies once a week. Pretty defensible, up on that hill like it is. No idea what sorta numbers we would be talking about.”

“Sounds about right,” Hookbeak decided. “So what are you offering to those willing to risk their lives for these pony friends of yours?”

“We said,” Origami replied. “We help get your people out too.”

“Yeah, see, I’m gonna need a little bit more.” He leaned forward. “It’s been two years for us too. We’ve mostly got things under control here. Oh sure, we don’t have a government or anything like that yet.

Still trying to work out if we should go back to separate areas or keep things like this.” He indicated the room, with all the odd looking people in it. “Didn’t used to be like this, you know. We all kept to ourselves. But it’s working out, so…”

“We don’t have any of your type of money, we don’t even know if you use money,” Sunny protested.

“Doesn’t have to be money.”

“I’m not lifting my tail for you either!”

The other two whipped their heads over to her and stared, and Hookbeak pounded the table in laughter. “Lifting the tail! That’s a good one. Oh boy! You got me. No, no, nothing like that I promise you. Not that you aren’t a pretty pony, or whatever. I’m just saying…”

“How about information?” Origami asked. “We’ve been near the place once. We can do it again. We’ll watch the place overnight. See what the guard situation the whole time is. After so long without any incidents I bet they’re pretty lax over there now. We’ll see if there’s an opportunity for your people to slip in safely. Get the element of surprise and whatnot.”

He rubbed his beak. “Okay, that’s sounding better. I’m pretty sure I can get some support for this effort in town, and the next town over too. Get the old gang back together, as it were. I’d like at least two dozen on our side. I want to outnumber them two to one in case things go bad. Can’t be more than a dozen, not with only one food run a week and the size of the castle. No offense but risking my tail-feathers for a bunch of strangers will only interest me so far.”

“Whatever lets you live with yourself,” Sunny told him.

“Wait though, you’re part of the old resistance?” Gianna asked. “I was right to come to a tavern after all!”

“Most around here were, in one capacity or another,” he admitted. “Nobody likes being enslaved. You just happened to find one with some time on his hands, and you said the magic words.”

“Please?” Sunny asked.

“No, you’re willing to do your share of the work. Scouting can be dangerous, but you’re willing to risk it. Shows you’re serious, I like that.”

“So we’re agreed?” Gianna asked. “We’ll meet back here around this time, with more information about the place, and make a plan then?”

“Sounds good to me.”

“We’ll see you then.”

“Right.” He stood up. “Come on X, let’s see who we can find around here to help our new friends.”

And so Gianna and Origami found themselves back near the castle, once again watching to see what they could learn. They watched in shifts, the rest of the day and through the night, sleeping a few hours, then watching, then sleeping again. It was Origami’s shift when she realized something important. Going by the markings on the yeti she saw on patrol, it seemed they only had five guards watching the place at night. They were on a rotation, with the fifth one appearing on a fairly regular interval.

“Or cadence, if you will,” Gianna remarked when she was woken for her shift.

“Now is not the time for more puns!” hissed Origami. “Just watch and make sure I’m right. I think we could get in if we slipped in between their patrol.” *After two years they probably have a routine down and they just do the same circuit over and over. If we get in behind the fifth one we can stay in between that one and the “first” one, if each one walks the entire place that is.*

And she was right, as far as Gianna could tell, the castle basically closed up at night once the sun went down and it wasn’t until after sunrise that it came to life again. Guards walked the place in a fairly set pattern if the time for #5 to appear meant anything. *Lax, like she said*, Gianna thought. *Could be exploited.* The pony and other ‘workers’ were sent out, though she watched them being not very happy about it. It seemed any creature a bit too slow got pointed at, and something happened to them. It looked painful, and

stunned them, which just made them slower and made the yeti all the more angry. But they did get to work again.

“Are they using some kind of magic?” she asked.

“I can’t tell at this distance,” Origami admitted.

Work started up again, and the pair left, deciding they had seen everything they were going to.

“I have to apologize to you,” Hookbeak told the three when they headed into town to meet with him again. “My recruitment effort didn’t produce the results I hoped. We’re several members short from my ideal. Seems like some of the old fire has gone out of folks, now that they’ve got their lives and their families back to a somewhat normal state. I underestimated that, or maybe I’m just getting rusty in the rousing speech department. Either way, it may change our plans.”

“Are there other towns we could visit?” Origami wondered. “We could take you there in our ship.”

I suppose they would see it one way or the other, Gianna thought. But how are we going to hide the fact it’s totally different from the ones the Storm King used? I guess just by saying that’s what took us the two years, we wanted something that could stand up to them?

“You wouldn’t mind that?”

“The more we can get, the safer it is. You said so yourself. Our ship is pretty fast, let’s use it.”

He nodded. “Very well. We’ll head to another town and I’ll see who I can get. By the way, everyone in here today is with us.” He indicated the room, and Sunny waved to everyone. “So what did you learn last night?”

Gianna and Origami relayed what they had seen, and Origami laid out her plan. Gianna was... impressed by how bold she was thinking. It seemed Hookbeak was a well.

“Now hold on,” Hookbeak protested. “You came to us, got me all fired up, and now you’re saying we should just be backup?”

“That’s right,” she agreed. “We didn’t know security at the castle was quite that lax. We sneak in right after the guard appears on the wall, looks around, and heads back in. The three of us stay quiet and head to the prison level. We spring the captives, and hustle them out of there. That way, they can’t be used against us as hostages. Meanwhile, you’re waiting by the front gate where we delivered you. I don’t think you’ll be seen if you hug the wall, the guard is mostly looking around for anything approaching. Our ship should be fast enough to deliver you, and get away again between patrols. We open that for you, and while the captives stream out, you go in. You cover our retreat and take care of Bloodclaw or whatever general is actually running the place. We can direct you to where he probably sleeps. The nicest room.” *Fizzlepop knew that much of the castle layout at least.*

“Given his buddies are probably not going to be happy about us murdering their leader, how are we getting out of there? You going to circle back around in the ship?”

“If you feel you’re going to get overwhelmed, you retreat, don’t wait for us. Steal *their* airship. Part of your crew can head there when we arrive, I assume at least one of you must know how to pilot one?”

He nodded.

“There you go. They aren’t put under guard, that we could see. Probably a mistake, but they’re confident the reputation of the place is enough to deter this sort of thing. Won’t let that stop us, though. We steal his workforce, you steal his only working airship and end the threat he poses to the land, all in one night. The others will either fall to infighting trying to be the next leader, or finally see reality and give up their evil ways. Either way you take a threat off the board. I mean they’re not *that* far away. The next trouble they make will be to the closest town; This one.”

“True. And we’re at least close, should it all go wrong and you need backup.”

“There is that,” she had to admit.

She really thought about this. She was the one suggesting we head all the way back and get more help, Sunny talked her into asking for help here, and then she's suggesting we don't even need it after all. I mean a "better" plan would be to have them go in at the same time as us, cause a distraction and pull those big guys away from us. But I suppose she's worried they could take hostages, or that if those collars are on they could be lethal instead of stunning. One slip up and it's over, though. Guess it better just be me and her. The fewer of us sneaking around the better, and to be fair they aren't really expecting an attack.

"The others could set the half built ship on fire while they waited, really put the beak in their eye. Actually I could see us leaving a few 'surprises' back at the castle along those lines."

"That's up to you and your people," Origami told him. "As long as we're clear, burn the place to the ground if you want. But I would prefer you allow anyone there to surrender. They may be willing to do so. Even Bloodclaw. We ponies have rehabilitated even the worst of offenders." *I mean not all of them. Tirek got locked up again.*

He chirped a laugh. "After this long? No, they haven't snuck away, they're in it for the long haul. But sure, if I can. It's mostly stone though, castles. Wouldn't burn very well, only specific rooms. I'm thinking their record books, that sort of thing."

"I suppose you're right. Destroying records is fine."

"You let us worry about that. Now, let's see this airship of yours. We have at least one other town to visit, two if your ship is quick enough to get us there by sunset."

"Oh, she's fast enough for you, old man," Sunny told him with a smile.

So the group recruited some more help, making their plea alongside Hookbeak at another town. Their impassioned speeches touched the hearts of many, who signed up at once and bordered the ship with their weapons. Gianna seemed more interested in talking to the various creatures about their life experiences and what they had seen in their travels than in plans. But that was fine, the plan was simple enough. Everyone was quite taken with the North Star, and Origami told CelestAI to stay out of sight while the others were aboard to hide exactly how advanced the ship was. They locked the bridge, so the others didn't exactly know how the ship was piloted, and deflected any questions about pony technology and magic. As one does, when dealing with primitive races such as this. But finally the sun went down and the plan went into action.

When the guard's head vanished back into the castle Gianna and Origami sprang into action. They knew they had about three minutes before the next guard showed up, and took the air. Signaling the North Star with a flashlight they found in one room it started to move toward the castle to drop off the load of creatures that would serve as backup. They would hug the wall by the main entrance, hopefully out of sight.

High in the sky the North Star plummeted, Sunny in the control room to issue orders to CelestAI about what to do. Thankfully the ship was quiet enough and fast enough as long as everyone hustled they should be there and away with time to spare. Meanwhile Gianna and Origami landed on the top of the tower and peaked under the trapdoor, just in case the yeti had stopped to rest and wouldn't that just be the way!?! But the stairs were clear, and they headed down. They left the flashlight, it was impractical to carry and they could hopefully come get it later. Descending the stairs they listened at the door at the bottom, and they heard the heavy footsteps of the guard going away from them. Both nodded to each other and Origami cracked the door open, looking beyond and trying to be as quiet as she could. Both slipped through the door and were now in the castle proper. They had arrived in the kitchen, a single lamp glowing on the wall to at least light the place up a little and they noticed two doors out of the place.

"You'll have to work your way around," Fizzlepop had told them, sketching out the layout of the castle. "You can technically go either way, left or right, once you get inside. There is a courtyard of sorts, if

you needed to hide, as the interior of the place is hollow at that level. The upper floors weren't used in my time, and in fact stay away from them because they're trapped to the hilt. At least they were, two years ago. In case someone came in the windows they would just find a bunch of empty rooms and traps. So go right to the bottom floor, across the place to the entrance of the dungeon, and down another set of stairs."

Each went to a door, as they had planned, and listened. Origami went right down a hallway, Gianna had gone left. Shook her head, someone was coming from that way! She hastily retreated down the hall. "Blocked, we have to go this way!" Origami nodded and cracked the door, making sure it was clear. It was, and both slipped into the empty room. *Let's hope that's the next guard to go up top, thought Gianna. But if they are making a circuit, it would be, right? Why would a guard come this way when one just went this way? Please, please, go up and not this way.*

There was now a door to the right and straight ahead, and to their left was basically a hole in the wall, leading to a stone floor. *The hollow part. Right. Faster, but more dangerous. If a guard passes one of these holes and glances our way it's all over.* Origami went ahead, Gianna to the right, both listening at the door. Both seemed clear, and both cracked the doors open. Gianna had a dead end, Origami's door opened into the mess hall, tables and chairs haphazardly strewn about. She nodded and gestured, and the two continued. The next door they ran into a problem. It was a large chamber, and a guard was stationed outside the door at the far end.

That's supposed to be a bedroom, but not the one the general would pick right? Who could be important enough to warrant a guard here?

"Can't go that way," Origami whispered to her, closing the door. "We have to go around."

"Right."

The two went back, heading now into the courtyard area and hugging the wall. At the next opening they waited for the guard to pass, pressed up against the wall, and slipped into the room. Again, a door ahead and a door to the left. Origami went forward, Gianna left. Origami cracked the door and looked inside. It was fairly dark, no lamps in there but she was pretty sure it was a bedroom. There was a dark lump there that was probably a bed, with a yeti sleeping there. She backed off.

"Clear," Gianna whispered, and both proceeded to the next area. This had a sort of stage and chairs facing it. *Probably where they get orders. The barracks are right ahead, right? And now the most dangerous part of the mission. Sneaking past a half dozen sleeping yeti. Luck, don't fail me now!*

Chapter 10
No time has passed
Rescue

Fizzlepop had been right, the two girls were unhappy to learn as they looked into the next room. It was dimly lit, probably so any guards needing to move around didn't stumble into all the sleeping yeti that were there. They looked at each other, nodded, and slipped into the room. Both barely breathing they shuffled their way past the cots and bunks, hoping everyone was really asleep at this time.

Of course they would want the entrance to the prison level guarded like this, Origami thought. *Anyone coming up from there would have to pass by all these guards. Somebody would wake up. But that's a problem for future me.*

They breathed a sigh of relief as no one stirred, and they were through and down the stairs.

We passed the first hurdle. The second? Was getting in first? Sure it was. We cleared a whole floor and no alarms have been raised. Let's keep that up.

They headed downstairs and came to a door, which they passed through. Same with the next, there was only one door here. Unfortunately, this door creaked shut, echoing through the stone walls of the dungeon. Both girls froze, as there was a grunt from ahead of them.

Crap crap crap, if that guy comes back here we can't retreat, there's one empty room and the stairwell. All he has to do is catch a glimpse of us, and it's over. If we're upstairs everyone will be woken up at once. She desperately looked around but the fates were still with them. There was some kind of wooden ramp here, leading to a wooden platform. It went nowhere, it must have been for storage at one time, but the platform was empty. Below it wasn't, and the two dived for cover behind the crates and sacks under there. The yeti headed into the room, looking around, but didn't spot them. "Must have been a rat or something," he muttered, and turned back again.

My goodness that was too close!

"Wait until he passes again," Gianna hissed. "This one's too on edge now."

She nodded, and the two waited. There was only one entrance to the prison level, and that was behind them. The guard would keep going on his circuit, and be out of their hair. A moment later he was seen again, heading back upstairs. He didn't even glance their way.

He'll now come back out the barracks, move to the other side, and do the rooms we didn't see on that side of the castle. Then head back up. Another will be down in a moment, but hopefully we'll be freeing the prisoners by then.

The two crept from their hiding place and moved on. A room with a fireplace was briefly checked by Gianna, while across from it a room with a desk was checked by Origami. Empty. But the next room down the hall was not. There was a yeti with his back to them, hunched over a table playing some kind of card game with himself. He seemed pretty into it, and Origami looked back at Gianna helplessly. She shrugged.

Great. No help there. We've got to sneak past this guy? At least his back is to us. I think I see a key on the table next to him too. If only I was a unicorn right now. Okay, here goes...

She kept low, slinking past him, and stepping as quietly as she could. He didn't turn or look up from his game.

Lax. Good help is so hard to find, isn't it general?

Gianna came next, and one more door was carefully opened and closed. Voices could be heard in the distance, but that glow was from a horn, not a lamp, so that was probably fine. What Origami didn't expect to see was a yeti behind bars, sleeping in a cell. He was to the right, in a rather large cell, but to the left she saw more cells and that's probably where the captives were.

This proved to be correct, there was a pony and a cat person talking about something, which of course stopped as she came into view and they whirled around to look at her.

"What in the world?" the pony said. He was indeed a unicorn, looking dirty, thin, and with angry red wounds radiating out from the collar.

"We're getting you out," she whispered. "Hang on a minute."

"You took care of the guard?" he whispered back. "You have the key?"

"Ah, about that..."

"We wanted to see the situation here first," Gianna told him. "Locks look pretty old, not well taken care of."

"But ripping the doors off the cells will alert the guard!" he protested. "And there's half a dozen cells you'll need to open. We need that key!"

"Maybe not," she countered, raising a claw. "Let's see what I can do first."

"Uh, okay?" He didn't seem convinced, but she started rummaging around inside the lock and before they knew it, they were free. They came out of the cell.

"Let me get those collars off you," Origami offered, getting her knife out. "Then you can wake and get the others organized."

"Sure, sure," the cat person said. "Whatever you say. I can't believe that worked. But can you do it again?"

"Let's see."

In the end there were 7 cells, all but 2 of which opened fairly easily. Gianna had to work at the last two far longer than Origami would have liked, but she used the time wisely. Cutting the collars off everyone there, and then asking about the yeti in the cell.

"Still loyal to the Storm King, as I understand it," said a bird person. "The others have accepted he's dead and now follow General Bloodclaw. He won't, so they threw him in here. Let him rot."

"No. He's loyal to an idea that no longer has any power. We may need him to get past the guard. Unless you want to risk your neck?"

"... Let's let him out!"

"But can we trust him to not raise the alarm himself? That's what I need to know."

"Probably?" he mused with a shrug. "If you promise him freedom he'll probably use it to go seek out the Storm King. He won't jeopardize his own future by calling attention to you. That just means he's calling attention to himself being out too."

"A being he'll never find," she chuckled. *Though I am reminded of a certain story with a certain scorpion that would never strike in that situation...*

"So he is dead? There were rumors..."

"Quite. Okay I'll go talk to him."

"Got it!" announced Gianna. "One more to go."

"Hurry up! Do the guards not come in here?"

"They just check the door."

"Humm..."

Origami woke up the sleeping yeti, who clearly couldn't believe his eyes.

"A pony? On the other side of these bars? Now I've seen everything."

"We can get you out," she told him. "But I need your word you'll escape with us. No trouble, okay?"

"Best offer I've had in awhile," he admitted. "But why would an enemy of my king try to free me?"

"The Storm King isn't *my* enemy," she answered honestly. *Can't be enemies with a dead guy. Simply can't be done.* "So we don't have to be enemies either."

"Ah, he's started putting loyal ponies to work in his kingdom? And he's working from the shadows, against traitors like this so called general. Of course! I know all those rumors about his death were exaggerated. He's still out there somewhere, consolidating his power."

"That's... do you want out or not?"

"I'll take your offer. You have my word."

"Sit tight a second."

Then she got busy taking care of their "true" objective. The vault. It looked like it had been busted open at one point, then repaired enough to keep the door closed at least. Gianna slammed into it, quietly as she could, and got it open. Crystals glittered from the sacks and shelves they spilled out of, clearly the place had been ransacked, but left. *Sure, they couldn't do anything with the crystal once Fizzlepop wasn't around anymore. And they were too lazy to carry it all outside to dump it. They just left it. Thank goodness.*

She scooped up as much as she could that would fit in her bags, and they were almost ready to go.

Gianna meanwhile let the yeti out, and now came the next part of the plan.

"We're going to simply run out of here," she explained. "As you probably know there's a guard just beyond this door. We'll take care of him one way or the other, then keep the guards upstairs from grabbing us."

Origami butted in. "Unicorns, you'll be up for that and be last out of the room. Sorry. But your powers are just too useful. Unless you have other useful spells?"

Both shook their heads. "Just healing," said the one. "I only hope I remember it, I haven't used it in so long. Wasn't allowed to." She showed her neck, and the scars there from the collar.

Of course not. Actualized Mana core all their lives and what do they do with it? Waste it, that's what. Learn some spells or something, I mean come on. "Fine."

Gianna took over again. "Run to the main gate by the fastest route possible. That means across the courtyard. We'll get it open and our backup will rush in. They'll cover our retreat and hopefully take care of General Bloodclaw."

"I have a plan for the guard. We all ready? Crowd in behind me, I want him to see."

She slammed the door open and the guard jumped up, looking in that direction. Behind Origami, who strolled out as calmly as she could, were the prisoners. The guard looked nervous.

"We can do this the hard way or the easy way," she told him. "Choose." The traitor yeti followed behind everyone, and his eyes widened a little bit more. He seemed to consider his options. The horns of the unicorns lit up, he knew they could easily grab him from there, he wasn't going to get away and raise any kind of alarm.

"Better make it look good," he told them. "General isn't known for forgiveness, if you take my meaning."

Origami did, in fact, take his meaning. "I don't think you'll have to worry about him after tonight. But if it makes you feel better..." with a wave of her wings slammed him with air. He stood there, blinking at her.

Oh come on! They're just so huge. I should have shaped it to just push his chest or something.

The yeti seemed to get the idea. "Ieeeee!" he fake shouted, wheeling his arms as he staggered backwards and slammed himself into the wall. He fell forward, totally overplaying it as the worst actor Origami had ever seen.

"Er..."

"The table!" he hissed, wildly pointing at it. "Hit me with it!"

"Gladly!" Gianna agreed, hefting it and slamming it down on him. Naturally everything on it scattered everywhere. He gave them a thumbs up and went limp.

What is he doing? What was that gesture? Something rude, no doubt. We don't have digits like that, how are we supposed to know what- never mind, let's just go.

The stampede began.

Once past the barracks the operation was a complete success. Gianna, Origami, the two unicorns and the yeti kept the soldiers busy as everyone streamed by them, unicorns throwing two of them into the rest and partway down the stairs. They headed across the courtyard, no sense hiding at that point, where they met another guard. Origami, desperate to prove her move worked tried an air blast again but it only staggered the yeti a little, he had to be toppled by Gianna leaping on him. She held him down, one clawed foot raised and ready to slash, her meaning was clear. "I'll go for the eyes!" He got the point and didn't make trouble. With the castle alerted and on their tails they worked to get the front door unlocked and shoved open, letting the other forces in. They hadn't been idle, it seemed the airship plan had also gone off without a hitch, and once they were signaled the stolen airship roared up and everyone climbed into it. They took off for town, leaving the backup forces to do whatever they needed to do. "We'll transfer everyone here to your ship," said the cat that was piloting. "Then go back for them."

That seems reasonable. I don't want to leave them without an escape plan for long. It was nice of them to think of picking us up like this, I figured we could just walk back but these others are in pretty bad shape. The resistance people probably figured they would be.

"We actually did it," Gianna wheezed, catching her breath. "We got in and out, and saved everyone. We really are the best!"

"I guess you could say that," Origami admitted. "Where's that yeti?"

"He ran off," said one of the ponies. "Didn't get on the ship with us."

"Well, good luck chasing a dead guy. He's gonna need it."

Events proceeded quickly from there. Naturally Sunny was ecstatic to see them back safely, and gave both many hugs. They flew back to town, where various medical workers were on standby who checked everyone over. The former prisoners got cleaned up, got some new clothes (or not, in the case of the ponies) and had a good meal. By that time the airship had come back again, unloading some of the forces that had volunteered.

"Did you have that many losses?" Gianna asked, horrified, as only a handful came back into the restaurant they were using their base.

Hookbeak shook his head. "Most stayed behind, don't worry your pretty little beak. Someone did a job on the locks down in the dungeon so they have to be watched as none of the doors will lock now. Wouldn't want anyone sneaking in and freeing them, after all." He laughed and slapped his knee.

"Er, right," Origami muttered. "What happened to Bloodclaw?"

"He won't be bothering us anymore." He tapped the side of his beak.

"He surrendered and has agreed to stand trial for his crimes?" she asked, eyes wide.

"No he- ah, yes!" he suddenly changed tack. "That's it exactly. He's still, uh, fine. Yes. Very fine. Locked up! Obviously. Still alive, of course!"

“That’s great to hear! I’m glad even here problems can be resolved simply by talking them out.”

“Yes, we... talked it out,” he agreed, eyes darting about to try and leave this conversation. “Ah I see everyone’s eating I’m going to go say hello. Bye for now!”

So he’s fine. Good to know. What was I worried about?

The three stayed another day, as the town was celebrating the safe return and destruction of another group of the Storm King’s forces. Hookbeak agreed to go get the rest of the crystal that was in the vault, and loaded it into their airship behind a door that could lock.

“Not that anypony would get that far,” CelestAI reminded them. “While the North Star does not have any internal defenses, as such, I would not let any disreputable characters aboard.”

“I know you wouldn’t,” Origami assured her. “This is just a further precaution.”

“I guess you could say you’re pro-caution?”

She made a face. “Are you still in pun mode?”

“This unit has yet to *begin* to pun!”

“Oh no...”

“You’ll come and visit us, right?” Origami said to Hookbeak the next day, as they were getting ready to leave. A lot more Storm King memorabilia was on display now, even a bloody crown for some reason she couldn’t imagine the origin of. *Like he said, the general was fine, and surrendered. No problems. So it’s not his. Huh must have found it in those crates or whatever.* “My offer for trade and diplomatic relations still stands. You’re welcome to come, even if it *is* just to visit. I can introduce you to our leaders and you can all work out trade deals, or whatever it is that entails. This land really was hit hard by the Storm King, and we ponies are always ready to lend a hoof to those in need.”

“I’m not the government!” he countered with a laugh. “But sure. We have at least one airship now, thanks to you. And there must be some old sailing ships around here someplace. Horseshoe Bay, right? Hug the coast north and we can’t miss it?”

“That’s right. That’s a port big enough to handle anything. I’ll tell our leaders to expect you, and fly that flag I suggested so we know it’s you. Or at least someone from around here, anyway. Not that we would attack on sight or anything but ponies have been known to freak out when strange ships start showing up.”

He chuckled. “Of course.”

She turned. “Ah, there you are!” The two frogs that they had rescued stopped short. “We’re about to head out. I don’t recall seeing any of your kind around these parts so I figure you must be from somewhere far from here. Want us to take you someplace?”

“Oh, no need for that,” said the rightmost one. “We’re explorers, you see.”

“Yes,” said the leftmost one. “While we did get caught up in that whole Storm King business, now we’re free again. We’re not just going to rush home. There’s still much more for us to see here.”

“Where is home, by the way?”

“We come from the island of Amphibia, somewhat to the east of here. Visit sometime if you can. We’re very welcoming.”

“We are?” asked the other one. “When?”

“Oh, well, uh,” the other paused. “I can think of at least one town where... no, no on second thought not there either. Well, actually we’re very standoffish come to think of it.”

“Quite standoffish,” the other agreed. “But we’ll warm up to you soon enough, I’m sure.”

“Uh huh. I’ll keep that in mind,” she told them. “If you’re sure.”

“Thank you for the offer though, we appreciate it.”

“Not at all. Ready to go Gianna? Sunny?”

"I'm ready," Sunny told her.

"Wait what other places have you seen?" Gianna asked the frogs.

"Come on, let's go!" Origami started dragging her away.

And so the ponies, who of course were from scattered parts of Equestria because they had been in town for the celebration, got to go home. This didn't seem to bother Origami who basically locked herself in her room saying she was close to a breakthrough in magic and not to bother her until everypony was home. Finally all the ponies were delivered to their home towns and Gianna needed to know what their next move was. She also had remembered something, flying all over the place as they had, and because she was such a good friend she was going to mention it to Origami. It might set her mind at ease, or give her a better argument against what Twilight was doing. The airship was parked outside of the last town they visited, with CelestAI on standby to get their next destination. Which if she could convince Origami, was her home village in the mountains. With that idea firmly in mind she knocked on Origami's door and was greeted by a scream.

Chapter 11
Moments after the scream
Homecoming

“And you’re sure you’re all right?” Gianna asked Origami. Blood was all over her desk, the floor, the walls, and the knife she had been using to *literally cut herself* was now safely out of her hooves and held away from her. Origami gazed at it with a slightly manic look but mastered herself. She had healing magic now, *apparently* and thankfully, so she didn’t need bandages or anything like that but it had been a hectic moment of screaming and misunderstandings after Gianna burst into the room to see what had caused her to scream like that.

“I needed to cut myself to practice my healing magic,” she said for like the fifth time or whatever. “I was doing fine until *someone* knocked at my door, scaring the crap out of me and making me slip with the knife.”

“Where you cut yourself much deeper than you intended, and screamed your head off. Have we learned anything from this?”

“Did you? Like not to go knocking on pony’s doors in the middle of the night. Can I have my knife back now?”

“Middle of the- Origami it’s two in the afternoon.”

“The time is exactly two fourteen at the sound of the tone,” the voice of CelestAI came over the speakers. There was a tone.

“Yes, that’s called being approximate,” Gianna called to the ship. She focused back on her friend. “When was the last time you slept?”

“Sleep? Who can sleep? I can do *magic!*”

“Yes, yes, so you said. How about less magic for right now and more napping?”

“I’ll be fine,” she said testily. “What did you want anyway?”

“Flying all over Equestria jogged my memory about a story I heard a few years ago in the village. Most people thought it was nonsense but two separate griffons told a different story about it, so maybe there’s something to it.”

“To what?”

“The story goes they were in need of guidance, and they met some kind of oracle in the mountains. They got put on the right path and said going there was the best thing that ever happened to them. So I figured, why not see if that legend is true? We can head back to my home, talk to those griffons to see how they got there, and go ourselves. You did say something about finding somepony that could see the future right? Pinkie Pie doesn’t count, we need someone serious. This might fit the bill.”

Origami considered the idea for a moment. “It would put my mind at ease, if somepony that could legitimately see the future somehow could see how Sunny coming back has changed things,” she admitted after a moment. “It’s this troublesome *middle* future that’s the problem. We know the far future, when she’s alive. And we know at some point in history earth ponies make death robots to kill anypony not an earth pony, and Sunny says only ponies survive what happened. Just not exactly how it got to that point.”

“That’s what I was thinking! Anything we can do to fill in the gap, especially now as we’re on track to change the future, we should look into. So we can head there next?”

“Better tell Twilight what we’re doing. As much as I think she’s insane for wanting to make this crystal in the first place, I don’t want her to worry we’ve gone rogue and stolen her airship the day after she trusted us with it.”

“I can call her, we haven’t taken off yet.” *Thankfully, there is a phone line at the castle. It had to come in through a window, Twilight just forgot to give us the number before. Good thing we asked about it before we left this time. So I should be able to reach her somewhat directly.*

“I should do it.”

Gianna pushed her towards her bed. “You should get some sleep.”

She fought off a yawn. “Fine, fine. But when you get some special power or something and want to practice it, I’m going to be insisting *you* go to bed.”

“Which will be fine, if it’s nighttime. I didn’t realize you were up all night *cutting yourself*. Yes you can heal it now with magic which is fine but let’s not go there again, okay? Practice in some other way.”

“What, you want me to cut small animals or something?”

Gianna glared at her.

“Okay, *mom*. I’ll think of something.”

“Griffon daughters are quite willful, I speak from experience. When we return home I will need to apologize to my own mother now that I realize what she actually went through with me. You can have the knife back after you wake up.” *Maybe.*

“I better...” She trailed off as she fell into bed.

Gianna just shook her head.

“So that’s the story, Twilight,” Gianna reported, speaking into the pay phone she found. “We dropped off all the ponies so they’re safe and sound. Or they will be, with a few weeks of good meals, hot baths, and the love of their friends and family as a healing balm to their very souls.” *Oh and Origami was cutting herself to practice her healing magic. But I think I’ll just leave that part out. As long as it was a one time thing brought on by excitement for learning the healing spell... how do ‘normal’ ponies practice that sort of thing anyway? Hang around hospitals? Though I guess from what Origami was saying earlier most unicorns don’t actually study spells. Too much work.*

“Excellent news!” she agreed. “I’m glad that risk you took paid off. It could have easily gone the other way.”

“I do feel we got especially lucky once or twice, it’s true,” she agreed. “Oh, and tell Celestia about how badly off that other land is. If beings from there come looking for aid or trade, we should help them out. Origami seemed intent on making that clear to them, but that’s pony politics so I stayed out of it. I thought you should know.” *Though I have to suspect her motives are more with an eye to the future than anything else. If there is more trade between our lands, maybe we can get some help against whatever wipes us all out in the future. Or does it wipe everyone out in the future, and they’re all dead too? Oh no...*

“I actually made some friends there myself, so that’s no problem. They’re as trustworthy as anypony else.”

“Wait how do you have friends way over there?” *I guess there are other airships than ours, I suppose there’s a royal one she could have used at one point. They’re just slower, is all.*

“Oh, my Ponyville friends and I walked there one time, to find the hippogriffs!”

She paused, trying to process this. “Walked? But isn’t it across the ocean?”

“Eh, maybe? Who can say.” There was a pause. “I mean I guess it must be. If it wasn’t, if anypony could just walk between our lands then probably anypony would have. We would have cat people and bird

people aplenty over here, and there would be lots of ponies over there. But we don't. How *did* we get there? Well, never mind. Anything else? Are you heading back?"

"Actually, no. I remembered a story about an oracle in the mountains that gives sage advice to those in need. We're going to check it out, see if we can get their opinion on the near future and maybe get some idea if we're on the right track."

"... You're not talking about the legend of Guru, the dragon oracle, are you?"

"Guru! Right, that's the name. Wait, you know about it?"

"I've heard rumors. Nothing concrete. Yes, if you can find if he or she really exists that would be great. We're not ready for you yet, we're looking into where we might get the second type of crystal. You're welcome to check it out."

"Thanks. We'll head off right away."

"Okay. Good luck finding Guru."

"Thanks."

Gianna walked back to the airship. *I might just wait until Origami gets a few hours sleep before taking off though.*

The airship, a day and a half later, landed near Gianna's hometown of Beakwick and the three got out. It had taken so long because Origami had slept for quite some time, then requested to CelestAI to not go her top speed.

"I'd like to try making a magical item," she explained. "A healing item, to be exact. Twilight generously provided everything I would need in one of the labs and now that my core has solidified I want to try my hooves at that. They take forever to actually make so I doubt I'll make more than one by the time we get there even flying slowly. But I want to see if it's possible."

"So long as you promise not to start cutting yourself again," Gianna muttered.

"That reminds me, can I have my knife back now?"

"Cutting? Knife?" Sunny asked as Gianna hesitantly handed it back. "What's that all about?"

"Don't ask," Gianna told her.

"Okay... there is something else I want to ask though..."

"Go ahead."

"Can I study magic with you?" she asked in a rush, blushing.

Origami looked a little surprised. "I guess? But I really don't want to be disturbed when making the item. I planned to lock myself in the lab until it was done."

"Lock? Again? Pass me that knife back this instant!" Gianna demanded, holding out a talon.

"No!" She clutched it to her chest. "It's fine, it's not like that I just need to concentrate."

"And take breaks to eat, and be with your friends?"

"Eeeeyes?"

She scowled.

"I'll take breaks, okay?"

"You better."

"So, uh?" Sunny begin.

"You're welcome to study with me. I can give you some books that helped me. Why all of a sudden though?"

"Well, I've been watching you work so hard. I feel I should probably do my part too, and actually learn some spells the proper way. I feel like I could probably do them, there's enough of a connection between me and the medallion for that." She held it up. "And when I take that power back, if I ever need to, it would be nice to actually know how to use it."

"That's probably for the best, yes."

“I won’t tangle your hooves! I’ll learn different spells I don’t want you to think I’m trying to outdo you or anything!”

“Sunny, it’s fine. Do what you want. I’ll get you those books and I can get started.”

“CelestAI, can you set a timer?” Gianna asked, looking upwards.

The avatar of the North Star appeared before her. “This unit does have the capability for both simple and advanced timers, yes,” she answered. “When you would like the timer to expire?”

“Every two hours Origami works. You’ll take a break or I’ll break the door down and make you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine!”

“No need for that, the welfare of my passengers is paramount. If a captain orders a door unlocked then it shall be unlocked. Even for another captain.”

“Excellent. Ring a chime or something, softly, when it’s ten minutes until the timer. Don’t want to scare her again or anything.”

“I’ll just be writing or folding paper.”

“Well when I rush into a room after a scream and there’s *blood* everywhere-”

“Blood?” Sunny gasped, shocked.

“Never mind!” Origami told her. “This conversation is over.”

“Here you go!” Origami handed over a paper crane to Gianna, who took it like it might explode at any moment. She held it away from her in two claws.

“So what is it?” she asked.

“Healing item. In theory, anyway. The magic stuck, so if you pull the tail and make the beak touch someone who is wounded they should be healed. It’s single use though, but don’t think twice before using it. I need to know if it works, and I can always make another.”

“Okay...” She put it into her bag.

“So who’s excited to see Gianna’s hometown?” Sunny asked, bouncing down the ramp.

“Not me,” Gianna admitted.

“Whaaaaaat? Girl, what you talking- oh.” She got down the ramp and looked around.

“Yup, same broken glass bottle that’s always been there,” Gianna mused, looking around and clicking her beak. “Griffons- ruling over our endless gray landscape of brown rocks and brown trees. We’ve even got this skull.”

“Skull?” Sunny whipped her head around, looking for it. There was a huge skull of some unknown creature partly buried in the dirt. “Oh yeah, there is one.”

“Heck if we know where it came from. Yeah, living in Beakwick really is the high life.”

“At least you are still alive,” Sunny muttered.

“I guess there’s that. Come and meet my family, they’ll be upset if I didn’t look in on them while I was in town. Then we can find our storyteller and hear about the oracle.”

“At least you do still have a family,” she muttered, softer this time.

“Gianna’s back! Gianna’s back!” Two of the cutest little griffons Sunny had ever seen were prancing around her, they had been playing in the yard and rushed over to her once they saw she was coming. Sunny was grinning, but looked a bit sad at the same time.

“Goodness me, what is all this- oh!” A larger griffon stuck her head on the window and gasped.

“Gianna really is back. Geff, our daughter is back!”

“Get out of town!” said a deeper voice, and the door was flung open. “What in the world?”

So Gianna introduced the others to her parents and two younger siblings, it seemed her two older siblings were out working. Her father was a bit cagey when asked why he was at home at this hour, and

changed the subject to why *she* was. They were worried she was in trouble or something but she assured them it was simply a “school trip” to “investigate certain historical accounts of wise dragons as told by some older members of the community.”

“You mean that old tale by Gorgon about how he met his wife?” her father asked. “Must have heard that story twenty times now. I could probably tell it to you, save you the trouble of talking to that old coot.”

“That’s who it was! I was hoping you would remember. I’d like to hear it from him, give my friends the real *experience*.”

Why did she say it like that? I’m scared, Sunny thought.

“Yeah, lives not that far from here. Well, town is so small now no griffon lives all that far away. He’s got the house with the busted in upstairs window. No, wait, so does Galiphray. Don’t want to get the two confused. Uh, he’s got a lot of rocks in his yard? No, every griffon has that. Oh I know he’s got one of his shutters torn off- no, Geode has that too.”

“Oh he’s always out in his yard puttering around,” her mother said. “If you see a griffon outside and you stop for two seconds and he starts telling you about how he got his hat, or that time he reconciled with his son who he once gave a watch to, it’s the right guy.”

“I’m sure we’ll find him,” she said. “Thanks. We better get going.”

“Awwww!” her siblings cried.

“I’ll stop back in before I leave,” she promised.

“Yay!” they cried in a different way.

So. Cute!

“Yes, come have a home cooked meal. Are you eating okay over that that school? It doesn’t look like you are.”

“Mom!”

“You have a nice family,” Sunny said as they walked through the town.

“Yeah, I guess you could say that,” Gianna admitted. “Why do you sound so down though?”

“Well, the truth is-”

“Hang on, that’s the griffon!” Gianna announced. “I recognize him now. Come on!” She pointed ahead at a griffon pulling weeds out, not that his yard had much else but weeds from the looks of it, and was putting them into a pail next to him. “Let’s go!” She rushed over there. “Hey, Gorgon!”

“Yes, that’s me!” he announced, looking up at her. “What can I help you with young man?”

“Er, Gorgon, it’s me. Gianna. You remember me, right?”

“Gianna? Is that so?” He squinted at her and got up close. Too close. A little too close. “Humm, could be anygriffon really.”

“It really is me!”

“Say, you don’t mind if I...” Origami was sniffing the pail. *Hey, these smell pretty good. I wouldn’t mind a snack.*

“Mind if you what?” he asked, looking vaguely in her direction. “Who’s talking to me right now? Could be anything. My glasses aren’t doing a *thing* for me today. Do I have to get my prescription changed? I sure hope not. Doctors. Always prodding and poking-”

“Er, sir, you aren’t wearing glasses right now,” Sunny told him.

“Course I am! Right here on my-” He smacked his face. “Huh, could have sworn I had them earlier. No wonder I’ve been having such trouble all morning. Where could they have gone? Anyway, what’s this about?”

“I was wondering if you would tell me the story about how you met your wife? It involved the oracle, right? I’m interested to see if you can recall where we might find him.”

That seemed to take him back a moment. “You... *want* to hear one of my stories?” he asked, as if daring to believe this was true. “You actually remembered one of my stories well enough to come and ask me about it?”

“Yup!”

“Well now! You’ve come to the right place then. Come sit on the porch and I’ll tell you all about it.” He headed back to the house and the others followed. Origami carried the bucket of weeds and had one hanging out of her mouth already. They were good, as she had anticipated. *Maybe I do need more breaks, I have been doing a lot of magic recently.*

“Are these your glasses?” Sunny asked, handing him a pair from a small table that was there.

“Yes, I believe so! Thank you, amorphous blob.”

“Did... did you just call me blob?”

He put the glasses on. “Oh, it’s a pony! And land sakes, it really is Gianna. Say now, what are you doing around here? They didn’t kick you out of that fancy school already, have they?”

“No, of course not! And these are my friends, Sunny and the hungry one is Origami.”

“That’s good. We’ve all been pretty excited around here, one of our own going to the big city and a fancy school and all that. Lot riding on your shoulders, young griffon.”

“I know, don’t worry.” *He thinks Ponyville is a big city? He would faint and probably die to see an actually big pony city. But I guess looking around here, he’s not wrong.*

“Good. You get kicked out and there’s gonna be a lot of disappointed griffons around these parts.”

“I’m not getting kicked out! I’m on a mission for Twilight Sparkle herself, to maybe even save Equestria!”

“Is that so? And somehow my story figures into all this somehow?”

“Yes!”

“Well then.” He sat up straighter. “Guess I better get to it. Now this of course was back in my younger days...”

Chapter 12
No time has passed
Up the mountain

“I was troubled, you see,” Gorgon went on. “Didn’t know which way my life should go, as I’m sure many a young griffon or even pony has experienced. So as one does, no offense to your friend without the wings there-”

“I have wings sometimes,” Sunny muttered.

“I went for a fly. Clear the old noggin, and all that. Well, turns out I was more troubled than I thought or the winds blew me off my usual paths or something, as before I realized it I looked around and didn’t really know where I was. Figured I would take a little rest on a path I saw below me and imagine my surprise when I landed right next to a sign that had my name right on it. Told me to proceed up the path and that the oracle that lived up there was expecting my arrival soon. You could have knocked me over with a feather, you could. Well, no griffon was around and how would one have known I would land on this particular spot of land, I asked myself. May as well see what it was all about, so I did. After a few philosophical considerations posed by several more signs up the path I finally arrived at my destination. A large building, with a bunch of what I later learned were monk ponies out practicing in front. They were there to protect Guru, the dragon oracle they introduced me to. Not that a dragon would need protecting, but it seems they insisted. Ah, I’ll never forget the size of the creature. His scales gleamed in the torchlight. And his eyes- filled with such understanding and wisdom, like he had seen the beginning, and the end, and he was still at peace.”

“Sounds like quite the experience,” Gianna said, as he got lost in thought.

“Huh? Oh right. Sure was! Where was I? So the dragon spoke to me, and his voice was like the surety of the sunrise. Not that Celestia gets it quite on time *every* morning no offense to you ponies.”

“None taken,” Origami told him, chewing on more delicious leaves. *Really need to import some of these.*

“Right, so, he told me there were indeed two paths in front of me. Both could lead to happiness, but it would be a different sort of happiness, if you take my meaning. He explained about all that, and said to think about it on the way down the mountain. So I did. I came to the conclusion I couldn’t be a coward, and I marched right up that girl and asked her to marry me! Her shock and surprise were clear as she said to me; ‘who are you?’”

The others laughed, as he had intended. Yes, he was in fine form today, telling his old stories was great.

“Turns out I had been admiring her from afar and maybe skipped a step or two like ‘getting to know you.’ So we decided on that instead for the moment and the rest is history. I’ve been with her ever since. And I’ve been a certain sort of happy-”

“You better say that!” a voice said through the window.

“Just as the oracle predicted. So does that help at all?”

“You think the oracle is still there?” Gianna asked.

“Building seemed old, like it had been there forever. Probably still be there when we’re gone. Dragons live a long time, you know. Why? Hang on you’re not thinking of going up there, are you?”

“That is actually what we’re thinking.”

“Hot diggity dang!” he shouted, jumping up. “Finally! Knew it in my bones this was going to be a great day. Glados! Hey Glados! You around here sweetie? Come and do a favor for your old grandpa! I’ll give you a double dessert-”

“He will not!” came from the house.

“I accept!” came another voice, and the door slammed open. A young looking griffon scrambled out. “No backsies!”

“That’s my girl! This is Glados, we’re watching her for the day. Fly and get your dad, Glados. Tell him his father wants to have a short chat with him.”

“Aw, come on grandpa. You know he doesn’t like to be bothered at work.”

“Bothered at work?” he echoed. “Filling out paperwork, that’s what he does most times. Complains about it often enough you can’t say I’m wrong. Go on, git. Tell him it’s important.”

“Okay, but I’m telling him you insisted and I want that dessert coupon in writing when I get back.”

“I’m good for it!”

“Tell that to grandma.”

“I’m not scared of her!”

“I heard that! Don’t make me come out there, I’ll do it.”

Both laughed and she flew off.

“Yup, she’s a good kid,” Gorgon admitted, watching her fly out of sight. “I just hope she inherits a better life than we did.”

“That’s what we’re working towards,” Sunny told him. “I’ll do everything I can to make sure she, and all of you, stay safe.”

“Bit dramatic, don’t you think?”

“Not nearly dramatic enough, if you knew what I knew.”

The group waited a few moments and heard a powerful wing-stroke approaching. From the sky dropped a powerful looking griffon in shining armor, and Gianna tried her best to suppress a squee of excitement.

“All right dad, what’s this all about?” the griffon demanded as he came to a stop.

“We’re gonna finally settle the story about how I met your mother!” he chortled.

“Oh really? The whole dragon story? Sure,” he scoffed. “And who are- wait I know you.” He looked over at Gianna. “You hung around headquarters all the time growing up, didn’t you?”

“Yes!” she squeaked. “I mean, uh, yes sir,” she tried again. “Gianna, sir. These are my friends from school, Origami and- Well, Origami is my friend from school but this is Sunny. I, uh, explaining her is a little harder... It’s not as though she *isn’t* a friend she is, but how we’re involved...”

“Don’t need to hear about your love life,” he told her, completely misunderstanding and causing both to blush. “I heard a griffon from this town was hanging out with ponies, guess that’s you huh? Learning friendship lessons or something. As if that’s worth anything.”

“Excuse me!” Origami huffed. “Who is the dominant species on this continent? Oh right, *ponies!* So maybe friendship isn’t so bad, now is it?”

“Don’t embarrass me in front of the captain,” Gianna hissed at her.

“Whatever.” He clearly didn’t care. “I’m very busy dad, get to the point.”

Gorgon looked between the two, then chuckled. “I’ma make this even more interesting! Okay son, you’ve never believed my stories but Gianna here is on the trail of the oracle herself. Wants some advice about the future apparently, and remembered my tale. Good on her, I say. So here’s the deal. I’m making a

bet with you right now; she brings back proof the oracle exists, and you make her an honorary member of the defense force. Put your money where your beak is, why don't you?" He looked triumphant.

"We don't just hand those out, dad."

"Ah, but wouldn't proving the existence of a dragon that can see the future and is possibly thousands of years old be in the best interest of all griffon kind?"

He rubbed his chin. "... I guess. Do you even have any interest in-"

Gianna's eyes got wide and her beak opened as if to snatch his very words out of the air as quickly as possible.

"Never mind, right already established this. Okay dad, if you really feel that confident we'll make a bet. I bet that she *doesn't* come back with any proof. And when that happens, you have to sit on this porch for a whole month next to a sign I bring. Maybe it'll have 'I'm a dirty liar' on it. Or 'I tell tall tales.' Something like that. You can't pretend to be asleep either."

He looked over at Gianna. "Well, youngster? You gonna flake out on me? Not come back? I've got a lot riding on this now you know."

"I'll find this oracle if it's the last thing I do!" she promised.

"Oh great, another idol hunt. Well, it's your beak," said the captain. "We have a deal, dad?"

"That we do son!" They shook claws, but Gorgon looked over at Gianna.

"We'll talk about what it means even to be an *honorary* member, if you get back."

"I have all the oaths memorized already sir! Not to worry, I won't tarnish the good name of the defense force! I'll work hard to become a fully fledged member some day!"

He seemed taken aback but gave a curt nod. "See that you do. Come find me when you're back- one way or the other." He took the skies again. "Bye dad, bye pumpkin!"

"Bye dad!" the little one shouted, waving. "That was my dad!"

"They know," Gorgon told them. "Now, let me get my maps out, I know I have some around someplace..."

"Now the problem is," Gorgon mused, looking the maps over. "I came *back* down the mountain towards home. I was walking, taking my time to think over the words of the oracle. Who definitely exists by the way! So now I have to remember where I came out of, on the path down. So you can take the path up. Let's see, landmarks, landmarks. Two balanced rocks? A twisted tree? Ah hah!" He pointed with a claw. "Right. Mt. Cliffstone, just there. That's where you'll want to start."

"And you're sure?" Origami asked, reaching into the bucket and coming up empty. *Aw!*

"A good a place as any. I expect you'll get some kind of sign, be it literal or figurative, once you get there. The oracle, a real living dragon, should know you're coming just as he did for me all those years ago."

"We already believe you," Gianna told him. "I wouldn't have helped you make the bet otherwise."

"Right, right. Anyway, get going. Sooner you leave the sooner you get back and I win my bet."

"Why did you try to do something nice for me, rather than, I don't know, have him hang a sign around his neck about how right you were?"

He cackled and slapped the table. "I should have! It's okay, you're the one that has to do all the hard work. It's the principal of the thing, I don't need anything more from him he gave me a wonderful set of grandchildren to spoil. But if I can help you out at the same time? I just thought- in the spirit of friendship and all- I mean I didn't go to any fancy school to teach me about being a friend but..."

"I get it," she agreed with a chuckle. "Okay, we'll get going."

"See you soon, young- Gianna."

So the group landed the airship near the base of the mountain and started looking around. The North Star had picked up what looked like signage from the air so they were close, and soon enough came

upon a strange looking structure. It was a basic shelter, with a roof, some walls, and a bar from which hung several lengths and varieties of rope. Next to the shelter was a gong, which Sunny called right upon seeing it, and on the other side of the shelter was a sign.

Welcome to those with the displaced futures. Put now your first hoof on the path to wisdom. Wisdom begins when you are grounded. Use these conveniently provided ropes to make sure you begin your trek as grounded as can be.

“Well now what the heck does that mean?” Origami complained. “We have to carry these ropes around with us?”

“Well, grounded to me means not flying,” Gianna reasoned.

“You two are missing the point *completely*,” Sunny scoffed.

“If you’re so smart you figure it out,” Origami snapped.

“I don’t mean about that.” She zipped next to the sign and shook it. “Look- there’s a sign. The griffon was right. We’re not only on the right track, the oracle is real. Someone put this together.” She shoved the shelter a bit and it swayed dangerously. “Whoops! Anyway, not real sturdy it wasn’t meant to be here long term. It was put up for *us*. We are actually expected.” She looked up the path. “Someone up there, possibly a huge dragon, is waiting for us to arrive.”

“I didn’t doubt him for a second!”

“You couldn’t,” Origami countered. “You want that armor.”

“You’re darn tooting I do! But not just that, that’s only the external symbol of my dedication to griffon kind. I want to be part of the defense force so I can help my community.”

She didn’t seem interested. “Uh huh. So what, we tie up our wings? That’s not going to be comfortable.”

“Well what do you suggest that a bunch of ropes and ‘be as grounded as you can be’ means?”

“That we just carry them and drag the ropes along the ground.”

Gianna looked at her skeptically. “You’re serious?”

“Well it could mean anything!”

“It could mean, at most, two things. The correct solution I’ve already purposed, and your somewhat, uh, unconventional interpretation.”

“Maybe they want you to tie yourselves to me?” Sunny asked. “That would ground you pretty good, right?”

“Okay let’s select some ropes before this gets any more out of claw.”

Origami failed spectacularly in trying to tie up Gianna’s wings, the ropes slithering off her into a pile as soon as she let them go.

“Do you not know how to tie a knot?” she smirked. “I admit it’s a knotty problem.”

“I don’t understand what went wrong!” She glared at the ropes as if they, themselves, had personally betrayed her.

“Maybe try again?”

“Of course I’m going to- oh I’m dumb.”

“Nonsense!” Sunny countered right away. “... Is what a good friend would say.”

She glared. “I learned magic for this exact purpose. One second.”

“If you get that knife out...” Gianna threatened.

“Not that one. I learned *two* spells. *Two!* Healing and this one.” She focused on her core, bringing forth mana and focusing on the ropes. They sprang to life and zipped around both of them, tying themselves expertly around their middles. “Ah hah! See? I just need to start thinking with magic more often, that’s all.”

Gianna had to admit that had been pretty cool, and her wings were now tightly bound at her side. But she couldn’t help herself. “And no cutting involved. I’m impressed.”

“You’re never going to let that go, are you?”

“Nope!”

“What *is* this about cutting?” Sunny asked, looking between the two. “What did I miss?”

“No time to talk about it,” Origami announced. She looked at the leftover rope, shrugged, and grabbed it, packing it away in her bag. “Ring the gong or whatever and let’s get up the path!”

The three walked for some time, getting used to their newly bound wings in the case of those with wings, and came to another shelter. This one had a bench, rather than a bar, and sitting on top of it were a bunch of rocks of all different sizes.

“Keeping the ropes dry I could see, but rocks?” Origami mused. “I don’t see it.”

“There’s another sign!” Sunny announced. “Let me see now...”

You come to us, heavy with burdens, seeking the wisdom of the oracle. But do you have the resolve to see it through? Carry these rocks, all those you think represent your burdens, on your journey so you can truly feel the weight of them. Imagine how light you will feel when your burdens are lifted and you make your way back down the mountain.

“Carry them how?” Origami wondered.

“Baskets!” Gianna announced, looking up. There was a shelf there, and she pulled some baskets down from it. “Some odd baskets.”

The group looked them over. There were three in total. One basket hung from a harness of some kind, seemingly meant to be supported by two. The other two were connected together, meant to be carried by one.

“The oracle knows you aren’t the strongest pony, isn’t that thoughtful?” Gianna asked her, showing her the basket. “Seems you get to share with one of us.”

“I suppose the lesson here is, a burden shared is a burden lessened?”

“Or maybe we have to tie the rocks together and drag them on the ground?” She winked at Sunny who giggled.

Origami glared at her.

“What?”

“Just pick out some rocks. What do they mean by representing our burdens though?”

“I think I have an answer?” Sunny told her, spinning one around. It had a paper tied around it. In fact, they all did. There were several small rocks; Money, Fame, The Dark, School, Authority, My best friend is such a tsundere I can’t even. There were slightly fewer medium sized rocks; Magic, Friendship, Enemies, Games ponies play, My hairstyle being so last year I could just die. And even fewer large rocks; My dreams of the future, The death of all creatures, Never being good enough, Will senpai ever notice me?

“Okay, some of these are just ridiculous,” Origami protested. “Who set this up?”

“Someone with a weird sense of humor. What’s tsundere?” asked Gianna. “Or senpai for that matter.”

Sunny gasped. “You haven’t invented tsunderes yet?”

“I don’t... think so?”

“Well, Origami is totally one. But I wouldn’t call her a ‘burden’ so I think that rock is some sort of in joke for me. She’s just too cute when she’s pouting. Look, she’s doing it right now!”

“I am not!”

“You are!” Sunny hugged her from the side. “Look at your cute pouty face!”

“Stop it! I didn’t want your hugs anyway, idiot!”

She laughed. “Uh huh. Tsundere.”

“Stop it!”

“Okay let’s not tease our tsundere too much,” Gianna decided. “She does have a knife.”

“Stop teasing me!”

“Oh come here, you know it’s all in fun.” Gianna hugged her too.

“Aarg! Fine, I’ll allow it. Just this once.”

Moments later each member of the team had their rocks.

“If it’s not too much prying, why those specifically?” Gianna asked Sunny. She had picked out Friendship, Authority, and Death of all creatures.

“Oh. Well. Back home, you see, I didn’t have many friends. Growing up I would want to play make believe and dressed up like a unicorn, or pegasus. Or for example all my dolls were unicorns or other ‘fantastic’ creatures carved out of wood that my dad gave me. The boys would want to play ‘properly’ like the unicorns were all about mind reading and blasting other ponies while the pegasus swooped down and carried you away. After awhile they just thought I was too weird and nopony would play with me. Izzy, you saw her picture next to the crystal, was really my first friend. Others like Zipp and Pipp came later. So I’m still very much learning how to be a good friend. Plus will they even exist when I go back? I may have wiped them out by coming back and changing the past. So clearly that is my burden to bear.”

“That must be rough,” Gianna told her. “I wish there was something I could do...”

“You could attend our school,” Origami offered. “We do have classes in that sort of thing.”

“I know. Just you two being here at my side is enough. As for authority-”

“Look we don’t really need to go over it,” Origami interrupted. “Your burdens are your own. Let’s just load them up somehow and get going, or we’re going to be here forever.”

After some bickering about how to divide up the rocks so it was “fair” even though Origami insisted everypony should carry their own burdens while agreeing- somewhat paradoxically- that friendship was about sharing them, the group was off again. She and Sunny were in lockstep, as they were carrying the shared basket. They trudged up the mountain, Sunny trying to keep a slower pace for Origami, who was much shorter than her. Gianna didn’t seem concerned with what she was carrying, and was in the lead. She stopped suddenly though, making the other two screech to a halt.

“Oh biscuits,” Gianna muttered.

“You can say that again,” both agreed.

Chapter 13
A moment later
Guru

The path before the group had been modified, there was now a huge gap in front of them.

“About ten feet or so, give or take an inch,” Gianna informed the others, looking it over. “Now we know why the binding of the wings.”

“Look, another sign,” Sunny announced, pointing.

Your burdens accompany you whenever you go,
and sometimes they can make even the most trivial
gap look like a chasm. It's not cheating to manage
your burdens creatively.

“Right, seems obvious,” Gianna decided. “We tie the extra rope Origami has around each rock. We each jump over the crack here, one of us holding one end of the rope. Then we pull the rocks along the ground, allowing them to fall into the crack, and just hauling them back up again. Easy.”

“... Are you messing with me?” Origami asked. “I can't tell if you're messing with me?”

“You're right. We take the larger rocks, tie a rope to two of them, throw one across, then use the rope as a tightrope to walk across.”

“I think she's messing with you,” Sunny agreed.

“I suppose you have a better idea?”

“Just throw everything across and we'll jump,” Origami told her.

“Oh now it's all obvious and stuff. Fine.” She picked a rock up, one of the large ones, and tossed it behind her without even looking. It landed with a thump just at the edge.

“Careful! Watch what you're doing!”

“HA! It's on the other side isn't it?”

“Just be careful.”

The girls threw all the rocks across the gap, then the baskets. Then they stared over the edge.

“I mean I *suppose* we wouldn't die if we fell,” Origami decided. “I've never not had my wings though. It's going to throw off my jump, the weight of this rope and all.”

“It's not that far, come on,” Gianna scoffed. She backed up a bit, took a running start, and easily cleared the gap. “See?”

“Easy for you to say,” she grumbled. “Okay, back up Sunny.”

“Right!”

Origami also took off running, but stumbled just as she was about to push off. “What the?” She sailed through the air but fell short, slamming into the far wall and scrambling to pull herself up. Gianna grabbed the rock she had thrown near the edge, which she had been looking at because it was now half embedded in the ground, and with her other claw grabbed Origami. “Come on, up you get,” she told her, heaving. Origami sprawled out on the other side, panting.

“Thanks,” she managed.

“No problem.” She turned to Sunny. “Be careful!”

She waved a hoof. “She’s just clumsy because of her wings being tied. I’ll be fine! Watch!” She started running.

“Wait, there’s a divot over there!” cried Origami.

“Divot? Yahhaaaaaa!” Sunny hit it as well, and she too almost didn’t make it. Gianna had to haul her up as well. “Oh, that divot,” she decided, laying on the ground. “Thanks.”

“Wow. You two...”

“I’m not an athlete or anything,” Origami complained. “How about a mental puzzle or something?”

“Oh, remind me to tell you the story about how I almost lost the wings part of the friendship crystal in a tea room,” Sunny told them. “Funny story.”

Rocks collected, the three moved on until the next challenge, which seemed to be another gap. This one, however, had a handy bridge spanning it. A very rickety, old looking bridge, that is. “Now what?” Origami sighed, looking over the sign.

Sometimes, a burden must be shared before
the way forward is clear, even if in the sharing
there is more danger. They say you shouldn’t
put all your eggs in one basket, but the
opposite applies here.

“So you’re going to have to load me up?” Gianna asked.

“But you technically have two baskets,” Sunny pointed out.

“How is that sharing?” Origami said at the same time. “Oh, go ahead.”

“Oh no, I insist.”

“No please, you may speak.”

“I wouldn’t dream of going first.”

“However, I will not until you do.”

“Can I get that in writing?” Gianna asked. “Hey Sunny, give you ten bits when we get back if you haven’t said a word the entire rest of the time.”

She held up her hoof and Origami glared. “As I was saying, that’s not sharing.”

“But look at this bridge! How is it going to hold the both of you and all the rocks?”

“I’m no science major,” Sunny pointed out, “but maybe that’s the point. Come here.” She pulled Origami along and they stood before the bridge. “Yup. Just wide enough, as I suspected.”

“What are you thinking?” Origami asked her.

“Our weight will be spread out. It *seems* dangerous but it’s actually less so. The weight from the rocks will be spread out to the both of us. One on each side. Rather than being concentrated all on Gianna.”

“That does more match the sign,” Gianna had to admit. “I guess if you two agree...”
“No help for it,” Origami decided. “Load us up.”

The bridge creaked and swayed as the two went across, after Gianna was safely on the other side of course, but it held. They continued, and finally the end of their journey was in sight. There was a set of stairs going down, next to a track of some kind, and in the distance there was a large building with what seemed to be ponies practicing something in front of it.

“We made it,” Gianna realized. “We just have to walk down.”

“Not exactly,” Origami pointed out.

Now you may set aside your burdens, but they
are not through with you yet! It's a race!
Which gets to the oracle first? You or your burdens?
If it's not you be prepared to challenge the mountain again.

“Why all this physical stuff?” she complained. “We’re not monks looking to train here, we just want answers!”

“Probably all they could think of,” Gianna decided. “Now how does this work do you think?”

Beside the track was a box, slanted with an open back. Attached to it was a chain, that when pulled, would disengage a latch and make the side pop up.

“We load the rocks into the box, take our marks, pull the chain, and race down to the building I guess?” Origami decided.

“Works for me,” Sunny announced, reaching for the strap holding her basket on so she could take it off. “Let’s go!”

The group easily beat the rocks down, skidding to a halt in front of a group of ponies practicing some kind of martial art. They all had similar clothes and hairstyles, but there was a mix of unicorns, earth ponies, and pegasi. They had stopped dead, looking at the new arrivals as though they were some kind of monsters, and started leaning in to whisper to each other. The rocks thumped to a stop next to them.

“What’s this then?” said one unicorn, stepping forward. “No one is scheduled to come here for weeks! Who are you?”

“We’re here to seek the wisdom of the oracle?” Gianna tried.

“Ha! You’re telling me such a scrawny pony such as *this* challenged the mountain and made it here?”

“It wasn’t *that* much of a challenge,” Origami spat back. *I’m not that scrawny... am I? What a jerk.*

“Well you can just march yourself right back down the mountain. We’re not accepting visitors at this time.”

“What? But the signs!” protested Sunny. “Those weren’t for us?”

“Uh...” This seemed to stump the pony.

“Hold on!” said another voice, and everyone turned to look. A brightly shining pony, literally, had stepped out of the building and was dramatically posing. His hair was shining as well, slicked back and standing up. An aura of power surrounded him, like electricity crackling around him.

“Oh my!” Sunny said quietly.

The pony took a mighty leap, and without even moving his wings took to the air, flipped over, and landed before the three. “Enough, Prince. They are expected. Yes, they’re early, but you know as well as I do Guru has been complaining of late about the dramatic shifts in the future.” The aura of power around him flickered and went out, and his hair changed color and settled again. “Ladies. I am Bright Soul. Welcome to the temple of the oracle. My apologies your welcome was not fully prepared. We should have been ready to meet you, and to hear what you had learned on your way down the mountain. There is usually a whole ceremony, and tea-” He looked to the rocks. “Never mind that now. Come, best you see Guru right away, given the nature of your inquiries.” He looked to the pony Prince. “They aren’t like normal supplicants, they’re not here to ask about their own personal fortunes.”

“A likely story!”

“Thank you,” Origami told him. “We appreciate it.”

Gianna put two claws up to her eyes and swiveled them to Prince as they passed, but he didn’t even notice. The only thing he had eyes for was Sunny, or more accurately, her medallion. His eyes tracked it as she went past, as though a wicked plan was beginning to form inside his mind.

The inside of the temple seemed cramped, though the building itself seemed large from the outside. They passed small rooms, what must be the eating area, and past that the kitchen. It was a straight shot to a large door in front of them, big enough for a dragon to go in and out of. The three started to get excited, they were actually going to meet a dragon!

“Come forward!” boomed a voice as they approached the door. “Come and receive the great wisdom of Guru!”

“Go right in,” Bright Soul told them, cracking the door open. “Oh, let’s get those ropes off you, sorry about that. You actually put them on. Huh, I owe Guru 10 bits, there was some question if you would...”

Origami and Gianna waited for him to untie the ropes, Origami turned to Sunny when it was Gianna’s turn. “You should take some photos, maybe that’ll be proof enough?”

“I can do that!” she reached in and got out her tablet.

“Can you teach me that glowing thing?” Gianna asked excitedly as he worked. “What even was that?”

He grinned. “If only I could. But only one knows what the future holds. There you go, all free again.” He gestured to have her go in.

“Okay fine,” she grumbled. “Can’t fault a girl for trying.”

She almost ran into the others who had stopped, probably looking at the magnificence of the dragon, Gianna thought to herself. *From the description he’s probably huge...* She looked forward, and indeed there was a *space* for a huge dragon at the other end of the room. But there was no huge dragon there at all. No, there was a tiny dragon sitting there, legs kicking in impatience. He was a sort of purple, about the same size as spike, and had tiny wings.

“Come along then,” he said, his voice no longer booming. “Come right in. Impolite to lurk in doorways, and all that. I won’t hurt ya. Want to know the future and that, do you? Not to worry, come to the right place you have. Whoops almost sounded like Yoda there, didn’t I?”

“Uh?” The three looked to Bright Soul, and he made a shooing motion.

“Best if he explains. Go on.”

“Okay?” Origami took the lead and went forward. “Great oracle Guru?”

“That’s me!” he agreed. “Oh, you were probably expecting my dad, and that. Can’t be helped now can it? Complaining for weeks about how trying to keep up with all the shifts the future has had lately was giving him a headache. Went to take a nap. Probably sleep for a month, don’t you know? I’m Guru Junior, not to worry learned everything I need to about seeing the future from my old dad. Fully qualified, if you

don't mind my saying so. You are early though. You're not even seeking the barers of burden yet, are you? Couldn't be, far too early for that. No matter, no matter."

"The who?" Gianna asked.

"You'll find out. Well, you're here now so we might as well get right to it. Go ahead and ask your questions. Got them right here anyway," he patted a sheet of paper near him, "but just to be sure I didn't miss anything and all that."

The three stared at him. "Is he for real?" Gianna whispered to Origami.

"He seems to be?" she whispered back.

"I'm not even sure what to ask. We didn't really talk about it..."

"Do we each get a question or what?" Sunny asked. "I mean what's the procedure here?"

"Oh we don't stand on ceremony here. Just ask what's in your heart and all that. And just to be clear, I won't be providing a one to one question and answer format. This is the future we're talking about here, don't you know? The best I can offer you is a coy riddle or generality about it. Tradition, and all that. You don't want to be too specific, that's what old dad always told me. Just so we're on the same page and that. Ask what you want, and I'll look into the misty corridors of time and see what I can come up with for you. In a few days."

She looked to the others.

"You're the one that needs to know if what you're doing is changing the future in a good way."

"Okay. I guess I can go first. I don't have anything specific but if you need specific questions I can work some out. I need to know how to avoid every creature dying in the future but us ponies. Are we on the right track to do that? We want to make the friendship crystal like Twilight did but make it different. Make it work the opposite way, maybe? Is that the way to go? Will she need it to defeat her foe and she loses otherwise? Anything you can tell me would be great."

He was trying to look wise and glancing at his paper. "All about what I expected," he admitted. "I'm sure I can help you out there, if you don't mind my saying so. And your two friends? I believe they might have some personal concerns?"

"Is that okay?" Gianna asked. "I don't want to overstep."

"I wouldn't have asked if it wasn't going to be okay, if you don't mind me saying so."

"In that case, where can I find the idol of Boreas?"

"The what?" Origami asked. "That's your question?"

"Hey, if I find that, they'll crown me a queen!"

"Very well," said Guru. "Next?"

"Maybe I should ask that too and beat you to it," she muttered. "Are you sure that's everything you want to ask?" She looked at Sunny. "Seems like a pretty big hole in your questioning."

"How so?"

"I would have asked where to find the other two crystals."

She shook her head. "Twilight found them once. I'm sure she will again. No sense stressing him out asking what we'll learn ourselves before too long."

"... Fair. But what about you going back? Can you even go back?"

She sighed. "I knew what I was getting into when I came here. My life isn't important. If I have to stay here, in this time, and make a new life for myself then fine. Another me will surely be born that never has to worry about any of this. That's what I'm fighting for; every creature that lost their lives, was never born, or suffered. If I have to live here, but knowing the future is safe? It'll be worth it."

"Huh. I guess. Fine. I guess I'll be selfish too, in a way. My question is this; Will Twilight go ahead with the crystal if Celestia says it shouldn't be done?"

"Oh, good point!" Gianna agreed. "She did seem a bit obsessed. If we learn it's bad here, tell Celestia and Luna and they say not do make it, and she goes ahead anyway..."

“Exactly,” she agreed with a nod.

“Very well.” His voice started booming again. “I shall now begin the meditations! One day each shall be required for each of you. Return to me, the great Guru, when those three days are but a memory.” He returned to normal. “Meanwhile, maybe get some training in? Talk to Bright Soul, and that? Maybe talk about his techniques? I’ve got room set aside for you, please enjoy our hospitality and that while you wait.”

“What’s with the voice?” Origami asked, scratching her ear with a hoof.

“Learned that from my dad. The voice is the road to greatness he said.”

“Uh huh. Oh, I almost forgot. Is there anything you can give us to prove you exist? Gianna needs it when she gets back to town.”

“I was going to ask before we left, but okay,” Gianna admitted.

“You want me to save my poop or something?” he asked, not buying it.

“What? No, of course not!”

“I do eat gemstones you know.”

“What does that even-”

“Come with me.” He hopped down and waddled to the doors, throwing them open. The others shared a look and followed. He took them to the kitchens and started rattling those pots and pans, crawling into the cabinets. He gave a cry of victory and showed them a glass jar with a screw top. Unscrewing it he took a deep breath and blew fire into the jar, filling it up, and quickly capping it off. It was the same color as his eyes, a deep purple, and the flame flickered and danced within.

That’s some serious magic, Origami thought. The jar didn’t melt or explode, and I can feel the magic coming of it. Amazing. I didn’t know they could do that!

“That should suffice if you don’t mind my saying so,” Guru told her, handing it over.

“But this could have come from any dragon!” she protested.

“Oh, I think it’ll be fine. You trust the great Guru now.”

“Okay.” *Hardly feels warm. But there’s a lot of power in here, if I could figure out how to tap into it...*

“I get to train with you after all!” Gianna squealed, as Guru went to begin his meditations on the future *and was not delaying for any other reason.*

“I guess so,” Bright Soul admitted. “We usually host the visiting questioner but it’s usually one at a time. I guess the same pattern holds true. It’s a day per person to see the future. Anyway, let me show you around, get you set up in your rooms, and if any of you want to hear about my technique, you’re welcome to.”

“It certainly looked impressive,” Sunny admitted. “You look so strong.”

“I’m pretty strong,” he agreed with a chuckle.

Oh, is somepony crushing on somepony else? Origami thought. “But what good is it? Apart from never needing a night light again I mean.”

He laughed. “Good one. The application of Ki energy to one’s combat has all manner of application. Are you interested, then?”

“More about magic, but it didn’t seem magical. Still, I’m here for three days and if these two are going to take you up on your offer, I may as well.”

“Not exactly the typical reaction of a prospective student, but maybe I can get you excited about it anyway. Here’s your rooms...”

The next three days passed quickly. Bright Soul seemed to be an excellent teacher, explaining that in only three days he would focus primarily on giving them a firm foundation and a few basic moves. “If you then later want to return, or take up training elsewhere, you’ll have a good base to build on,” he explained. So he first asked to see what they could do, and gave them better ideas on how to stand and breathe during

a combat. When they started to get tired he moved on to a more lecture like setting, talking about how energy moved in the body and how he used his Ki- or inner energies- to aid him in his fights. He believed the technique could be learned by anypony with a pure heart, but was saddened to report none of his students had ever duplicated his technique. Then there was meditation upon what they had learned, as he moved his Ki around his body and they tried to feel it and duplicate what he was doing. Then a break for hydration, and beginning the physical training again. This repeated for three days, and even Origami got into it, after learning empowering your aura as he had done increased your physical capabilities. She was the one most in need of it, after all. She also expressed her relief the future *could* be changed at all, as Bright Soul explained a little bit about how Guru's ability worked. She also asked how the place wasn't swarmed, it hadn't been that hard to find after all, but there Bright Soul was a bit less informed. He did wonder if Guru Senior had used magic (as such an old and powerful dragon certainly knew all about magic) to protect the place as well? She said that could possibly be it.

All three slept soundly at night, having done more physical exertions by day than they ever had before. Most of the other students were friendly enough, doing their own thing like gardening (where they got their food from, a garden in back) or training. Most things were done outdoors, as the dragon's chamber took up most of the space, but no pony minded that. Prince kept a close eye on them, but didn't start anything. He didn't seem to be well liked, eating by himself and staring at Sunny a lot, which actually was starting to creep her out. *But Bright Soul can check me out any day of the week, thank you very much.*

It was now the fourth day, the day Guru had promised to answer their questions, and the three excitedly got up and headed to the dining area, expecting as before everypony to be up and around and doing their thing.

But instead- the place was empty.

Chapter 14
Only a second has passed
Oversoul

“Is there some special procedure we’re supposed to follow that somepony forgot to tell us about?” Sunny asked, looking around. “Do we just go see Guru and the others aren’t to be near because telling the future is dangerous or-”

“Sunny,” Gianna asked nervously, looking her over. “Aren’t you missing something?”

“I brushed my hair and I’ve got a cheerful smile so I’m dressed for success! Why?”

“I’m going to look outside,” Origami announced. “I think I hear something out there!” She ran off in that direction.

“We should stay together maybe?” Gianna called, but she was gone. “Oh horsefeathers.”

“I have my tablet, so I can record what Guru says,” she went on. “What else could I-”

“The medallion,” Gianna almost screeched. “The one Discord specifically went on and on about not losing?”

“The WHAaaaatt?” She looked down at herself. “Oh. It’s not there.” Her eyes got wide in panic.

“Gianna, it’s not there!”

“Yeah, I just said that. Go check your room, I’ll go grab Origami. I have a bad feeling about this.”

“Right!” She ran off back down the corridor, if you could call it that as it wasn’t that long.

Meanwhile, Gianna shot off towards the entrance and took to the sky, finding a confused Origami out there.

“There’s nothing out here,” she announced.

“Yeah I can see that. Sunny’s magic container thing is gone. Maybe stolen? She went to check her room.”

“What? She lost it?” She glanced upwards. “At least the storm didn’t start up again. Thank Celestia for small favors.”

“Yeah. Come on, we’ll go check on Guru maybe he knows what’s happening. I mean he saw this coming, right?”

“Maybe not because he was working on our stuff?” The two landed and headed back inside. Sunny rushed up, still looking worried.

“No luck, it’s really gone,” she wailed. “What am I going to do?”

“Don’t panic, I’m sure-”

There was a crash, and the door to Guru’s chamber vibrated as though something heavy had just impacted it and fallen to the floor again.

“Okay, maybe a little panic,” she finished.

The three crept up to the door and Gianna decided to be bold. She threw it open, and there was a pony, the pegasi Sky Dancer if she wasn’t mistaken, crumpled in a heap and not moving. She looked over at the dragon’s chair, and around the room. All the monks were there, looking hurt and scattered around the room. Bright Soul was shining off to the side, looking furious, and above them was Prince, wings made of

magic and a magical horn overlaid his real one. His wings weren't moving, but he was hovering in the air just the same. Somehow in the night he must have stolen the medallion from the sleeping Sunny and figured out how to use it. Now he was like her, with powered up magic. He was focused on Guru, who he had in a telekinetic grip in the air. "No!" he shouted. "That cannot be my future. I'll make my own future. For too long I've tried things *his* way, listening to him prattle on about having a pure heart and whatever nonsense he thinks will bring me power. I've found my own. Now I am ascendant, and all will bow to me!"

"Wow, this is a monk?" Origami said, looking sour.

"He... was never a very... good... monk..." Sky Dancer managed. "Be careful."

The three stepped into the room. They had a pony to teach some manners to.

All three had been training with Bright Soul for three days. Learning about Ki energy and hearing the story of how he had unlocked his ability to use "oversoul" to empower his combat abilities. Both Gianna and Origami looked up at the now empowered unicorn and knew they had to do something. That medallion belonged to Sunny, it was the power she had earned for herself when she reunited the pony races in her time. And she would probably need it to get home. They didn't want that power for themselves, even though they could clearly see now that simply having the medallion would allow them to access that mana. But here is where their reactions differed.

Both knew that to access their true potential, some part of their knowledge or skill would have to be lost. They didn't know why, but somehow they were constrained into having only a set number of skills or abilities at their- let's call it- level. In that instant, Gianna chose to make that sacrifice in order to get Sunny's power back to her, and Origami did not. Light started to shine around Gianna, but weakly, she was unpracticed in the technique and her aura was not fully accepting of her Ki. But Sunny, who had been secretly doing more training at night before falling into bed, was not so restrained. "Give it back!" she shouted, a fully realized aura springing up around her and causing her hair to stand on end.

Origami looked to her two fiends, shining with light, but her decision had been made. *I'm a healer, not a fighter. I leave it to you two.* She instead rushed back to Sky Dancer, and started casting a healing spell on her. *I won't aura shape it, I'm not exactly sure where she's wounded. I'll let the magic spread out and do what needs be done.*

"Impossible," Prince gasped, dropping Guru roughly onto the bench. "I've tried for years. You!" He turned to Bright Soul. "You didn't train me right!"

"I gave them far less training than you, Prince," Bright Soul told him sadly. "But now I do realize the secret. It's one you will never know."

Meanwhile, Gianna was flowing energy inside her body, her aura continuing to flicker. *I have to complete this. He threw all of them around with Sunny's magic. To stand a chance I have to be better. I'm a knight, I have to protect those in my care.*

"Bah, I don't need it anymore. I have this!" He indicated the medallion. "Hey, what are you doing?" He turned his attention to Origami, healing Sky Dancer. He lowered his horn and shot a beam at her, and Gianna jumped in front of it.

"Your fight is with us!" she told him, aura flaring to life. "I'll protect them from your madness!"

"Protect this!" He switched targets, his horn glowing and looking at Bright Soul, who was almost thrown back against the wall. He dug his hooves in, flicking his wings and taking no damage.

"GO!" shouted Sunny, casting a spell on Gianna. *I can't get up there to attack him. It's up to her. I just hope I memorized this spell correctly!* She felt empowered, and nodded her thanks.

He'll go for Bright Soul again, that's my chance.

He did, this time choosing a beam attack, which Bright Soul caught on his wing. "You could never beat me in a spar, Prince, and you won't now!"

"We'll see about- huh?"

Gianna had shot forward, and Prince tried to dodge it but miscalculated her intent. She didn't attack him to hurt him, she simply swiped the medallion away from him, the chain somehow easily stretching to come neatly off his head. *Discord! Did you do this on purpose? Can you see the future too?* His power was cut instantly, and he fell to the floor.

"Give that – oof!" Sunny jumped on him.

"I've got you now!" she declared.

"Get off me!" He tried to throw her with telekinesis but she stuck fast.

"Yeah, not as easy when you're not using *my* power, is it?"

Gianna landed, slashing him with a claw, making him cry out. "Stop struggling," she commanded, raising her claws again. "Or you'll get worse."

"It's over, Prince," Bright Soul told him, towering over him now. "You can't fight all three of us. Plus I see Origami has gotten two more ponies healed and is about to heal a third. Without that stolen power you cannot defeat us. Admit your mistake and accept banishment."

He angrily looked around but realized Bright Soul was right. "Fine. I yield," he announced, face twisted with hate. "But this isn't over."

"You'll never find this place again," Guru told him, getting up and brushing himself off. "I tried to warn you. But you just wouldn't listen. You could have done good, had you made different choices. The future isn't set in stone."

"Save it, junior. I don't need to hear it from you."

"Come on." Bright Soul hauled him up. "You're no longer welcome here."

"I've already removed his access," Guru said mysteriously. "Throw this traitor out."

"With pleasure."

After Origami healed everypony and Bright Soul was back, he apologized for one of his students turning bad in such a way. Sunny and Gianna had long since returned to normal, as the danger had passed. "He was never committed to our cause," he admitted. "I should have seen this coming. Didn't *you* see this coming? A little warning would have been nice."

"I see what is necessary," Guru told them. "The future is now much more secure if you don't mind me saying. All of this worked out the best it could, and that."

He looked concerned. "I see. Perhaps I have been doing my students a disservice. I realize now it is not simply willpower that allows one to utilize their pure heart. They must also have an overwhelming need for selfless power. I congratulate both of you on your successful realization of the technique. Sunny, you got lucky this time, Gianna, do not let Sunny's success deter you. It will be some time before either of you can summon this power on command."

"I understand," Gianna told him. Sunny nodded.

"Perhaps it is time for me to become a traveling teacher, once again. Clearly I am not doing my students here any good. I must train those that will see this power used for good, out in the world."

"Perhaps this is for the best," Guru said, not giving an inch. "The decision is yours. But come, the crisis is past, it is time for their answers."

"I will leave you to it." He nodded his head to the three girls and took his leave. Guru got into position on the chair and look them over. His voice changed. Sunny touched her tablet.

"I have three prophecies, one for each. Origami, receive now the wisdom of Guru;

A talk with both the sun and moon
will assure that none too soon
what you hope will come to pass
it happens after vote is cast.

All of this is but distraction
from the threat of shadow faction.
Broken future not recorded
threatens us with power sordid.

Covered ponies like a skin,
bad emotion does them in.
But now you have a tool of light,
to drive them back into the night.

Twilight's path you'll walk for now,
to purge her of her inner vow,
but count her out you should, not yet,
her second plan's the safer bet."

"This one is for Gianna;

Griffons looking backwards, chasing their own tail,
seeking after idols like a felon seeking bail.
Try looking towards the future, there's a newly rising star,
for the empire of lions that stretched both near and far.

Take the lessons you are learning and make of them ten fold,
you'll be called upon to do it, so don't hesitate- be bold.
The plan begins at twilight when the stars first start to shine,
prosperity and wealth for all are coming down the line.

So don't seek after idols, don't go looking back,
the future's right in front of you, you'll be picking up the slack.
It's not so very distant, this future shining bright,
ponies, griffons, magic! Will make an awesome sight."

"This one is for Sunny;

A time tossed pony, on a stormy sea,
her eyes have been occluded, what will the future be?
She frets upon the hour, will she see her friends once more?
Oh my little pony, I cannot say for sure.

Your future stretches longer than these others, to be fair,
But with some strain I can resolve the ponies that are there.
When your task is finished, when you've said your goodbyes,
your mother and your father will be proudly at your sides."

"Guru has spoken! Receive his wisdom with humility and leave a large donation on the way out.
Farewell! Goodbye! Bye!"

But neither heard his final line, because as Guru had said Sunny's mother and father would be there she burst into tears. He was shooing them out though, so they both put legs around her and led her out. Bright Soul looked concerned, but Gianna shook her head. She refocused on Sunny.

"What's wrong? Isn't this good news?"

"You have no idea," she managed. "It's the best news I could have gotten."

"So what's the problem?" Origami asked, not really sensitive to the situation.

Sunny gave a laughing sob. "You never asked. Why would you? Nopony cares about the time displaced pony, who she is, what she went through."

"I care," Gianna weakly tried to protest, but in fairness she hadn't actually asked about Sunny's friends, or parents, or anything. *She tried to tell us once, she was talking about her friends but something cut her off and we never revisited the topic.*

"Sure you do. Well, for your information both my parents are dead. Cancer. My mother when I was very young, and my father just a few years ago. I was alone for years. Not that you cared."

"Sorry." Gianna looked to Origami and gave a shake of her head.

"What?"

She rolled her eyes. "But it seems you'll see them-"

"What's cancer?" Origami asked.

"What's cancer- you don't have cancer here? Hoof to heart you have it good here. Cancer kills ponies. We don't know what causes it. It's why we settled where we did. Rates seem low there. The body gets these uncontrollable growths. If they're cut out sometimes the pony will survive. Sometimes not. They have to be found early enough and we have no way of doing that apart from noticing lumps on our bodies. We don't have fancy healing magic, after all. If it's an organ, the pony is dead, 100%. There are not a lot of old ponies in my time. Not like now. My parents were explorers. They wanted to explore the ruins of our civilization, bring back things they found like books, and I'm pretty sure it killed them. Something out there causes it, and they ran into it, and that was the end for them. But if we succeed, and it seems we're on the right track to, whatever caused them to get cancer won't exist in the future. They won't have died!"

"Or they won't need to explore because there will be no ruins," Gianna realized.

"Or they're all ghosts, it'll be worse, and they'll be welcoming you into the afterlife the second you go back," Origami reasoned. "I mean your prophesy didn't say they would be alive."

"You're *not* helping," Gianna told her sternly.

"Good news then?" Bright Soul asked into the silence of the two staring each other down.

Gianna sighed. "Yes, it seems so. The griffon empire will maybe recover, thanks to efforts I begin and both ponies and magic, and while I would have to think about Origami's as it was the most complex it seems Twilight has a better idea than the crystal at some point and that's the key to all this."

"Then your journey here has borne fruit twice."

"Borne fruit? Really?" Origami asked him, redirecting her stare.

"It sounded fine in my head. Let's get you packed up and on your way! And who knows, maybe you'll see me out there one day. Keep training, all three of you. Origami, don't give up on your pure heart, okay?"

"Yeah, it must be in there somewhere," Gianna told her sarcastically. "Weird, isn't it, how we both managed the technique and you didn't."

She just glared.

The trip back down was much easier, with full access to their wings and not- for some reason- needing to jump over pits or worry about bridges anymore. They headed back to the village and went

straight for Gorgon's house. He wasn't in the yard, Origami somewhat sadly looked around for more tasty weeds, but Gianna knocked on the door.

"Hello?" A griffon she didn't recognize opened it after a moment.

"Hi! I'm here to see Gorgon? It's Gianna."

"Oh hi, Gianna! My how you've grown. I remember when you were only this high." She gestured. "I'll go get him." She turned and called into the house, and Gorgon came into view.

"Ah, you're back!" he greeted them. "Was beginning to worry. What took so long? Did you get lost?"

"It was one day per person for prophesy," she explained.

"Did not know that," he admitted, rubbing the back of his head. "I went alone, see. So, did you bring back proof? Am I going to have to sit with a sign?"

"I think you'll be pleased," Origami told him with a smirk. "Let's go see your son."

She slammed the jar of dragonfire on his desk after being let into his office, and he turned his head to look at her.

"And he said you can't say it could have come from any old dragon either!" she warned him.

"It is certainly dragonfire," he admitted. "But with that ship of yours... still, there are some tests we can do." He hastily scribbled something down and went over to it, unscrewing the top of the jar. "What was the dragon's name?"

"Guru Jr." Origami told him, wondering what the heck he was doing.

"Fair enough. Guru Jr." He dropped the paper into the flame and it vanished.

"Well, he exists all right. Or is it just a trick? Let's just try that shall we?" He grabbed another piece of paper and wrote something on it, rolling it up to fit into the jar.

"Why do I think this was all some kind of ploy to get this magic for you?" she demanded.

Grifford looked at her like she was crazy. "I'm not keeping this," he insisted. "Your proof could have taken any form. It's not my fault you brought me something easy to test."

"Then what's on that paper you're not showing us?"

"Origami!" Gianna cautioned.

Grifford chuckled. "You got a real suspicious friend there, Gianna. Thought *ponies* were beyond that sort of thing." He unrolled it and showed it to her. It was two words.

Hi Gianna

"Oh." She blushed and made a "get on with it" gesture with a hoof.

"Won't get you very far, an attitude of suspicion," he cautioned. Rolling it back up he dropped it in after saying Gianna's name. It appeared in the air and she snatched it up. He took it back and was satisfied. As he was screwing the cap back on another message appeared in the air, which he grabbed. "He's glad you made it back. Now, tell me everything about him and the trip up there..."

Chapter 15
Two hours later
Princess Talk

The group was aboard the North Star, having given their report to Grifford and stopping by to see Gianna's family and have a meal with them. Gianna had gotten her honorary membership in the defense force, which included a ceremony with the current members of the force and a set of armor that was... a bit dinged up. Grifford explained the only thing in her size was training armor, as younger griffons were usually recruits and got their real armor custom made when they graduated the program to full members. Origami had said not to worry about it with a gleam in her eyes, and on the way to Gianna's house they stopped at a hardware store and got some various sized hammers, cloths, and metal polish. Now they were on the bridge, standing with CelestAI to discuss their next destination. They had let her listen to what Guru had said, and she was currently displaying Origami's prophecy on the screen.

"A talk between the sun and moon can only mean going to talk to Celestia and Luna," Sunny said first. "But what's this about voting?"

"Not sure," Origami admitted. "Never had a vote while I was alive."

"Shouldn't we check in with Twilight?" Gianna asked.

Origami shook her head. "The last time we spoke to them, she was there. We didn't see them when we got the airship. This time we can go on our own. I want to see what they have to say *without* her there. See if their story changes any. Maybe get their real opinion on her."

Sunny gasped. "You want them to talk about her behind her back? That's not nice, Origami."

"She's making a potentially dangerous and world altering magic item," she countered. "I think we deserve to know what sort of pony we're working for."

"One who has saved Equestria several times. Even my limited knowledge of her from the old books said that much."

"Even so."

"She should be there to defend herself."

"If they say something I'm not expecting, I'll ask her myself for clarification. How does that sound?"

"... Fine."

"Good. Let's head back, avoid any settlements as usual and proceed at half speed. I'm going to work on Gianna's armor."

"By work on you mean...?"

"Fix it up. No charge, I know you griffons worry about that sort of thing. Please don't disturb me though." She walked off.

"Are these orders acceptable?" CelestAI asked the others.

"It's fine," Gianna told her. "Let's go."

For the next hour there was a lot of banging from the workshop but finally she called the others in. "All done," she said, wiping her forehead. "Whew, it was more work than I thought."

Didn't she just use magic? What's going on here? Sunny wondered to herself.

Gianna had to admit, the armor looked brand new now. All the dents had been hammered out, and the pieces gleamed, clearly having been polished and buffed. “Thanks, Origami. This looks great, I’m going to try it on right now. And then *never take it off again.*”

“Might be a problem sleeping in it.”

“A knight must be ready for action at any time!”

“Uh huh. Let me know how that works out for you.”

As good as her word, Gianna was wearing it when the three landed at the capital’s airfield, and headed towards the castle. A guard asked their business, but had been told they might stop by so were taken in at once and the princesses summoned. A bright looking Celestia and sleepy Luna soon joined them in the tea room.

“So what brings you three to the castle today?” Celestia asked after the pleasantries were exchanged.

“To be blunt,” Origami told her, “I want your opinion on Twilight Sparkle. Specifically, if you say we’re not making this crystal will she go ahead and do it anyway?”

The two sisters shared a look. “It’s not out of the realm of possibility,” Celestia admitted. “But we’re going to take steps. And when you say that we are going to say if this crystal will be made or not, what do you mean?”

“Isn’t the final decision yours?”

She laughed. “Oh my, no. But of course you are fairly young and we haven’t had a vote in some time. You don’t really know how politics work in our land, do you?”

“I thought I did?”

“Fret not, I will explain it to you. But first, Twilight.” She cast a spell into the air and a collage of pictures appeared, all of her making various faces and in various compromising positions.

“Uh?”

“She’s not perfect, our Twilight,” Celestia began, ending the spell. “Let me start from the beginning; In the beginning she was perfect, because I needed someone to oppose my sister, who I knew would soon be free of her one thousand year curse and return, as Nightmare Moon. I learned my lesson the first time and I was not going to fight her again. It was simply too painful, and the destruction our battle did to the land- well, that’s all in the past. Twilight was ideal; obsessed, brilliant, and powerful. In fact,” she winked, “she probably could have taken Nightmare Moon in a straight fight even then.”

“Please, sister, don’t give them the wrong idea. I was Nightmare Moon. I was very powerful.”

“I don’t doubt it, sister,” Celestia agreed. “But consider the circumstances. 1,000 years had passed, weakening you, and from your perspective it would have been just after our fight. You would have been further weakened from that.”

“I suppose both of those things would have worked against me, yes...”

“It was my belief, sister.”

“We’ll never know, sister.”

These two seem to still be a bit chilly towards each other, Gianna decided. Maybe there’s still some resentment there, on both sides.

Celestia continued. “I took Twilight in and started training her after I realized her magical potential. As she grew up, cracks started to appear in her personality. She didn’t really make a lot of friends, in fact the only one she did make, Moon Dancer, she blew off to do more research about the Night of Nightmares. And it took her years to even realize she had deeply, almost irrevocably hurt her friend. Yes, the pony we now call the *princess* of friendship. It took all her skills and lessons she had learned over the years to finally realize it, try to make it up to Moon Dancer, and for her to accept Twilight’s apology. But we’re getting off track. I sent her to Ponyville in the hopes the friendly ponies there would do her some good. And despite

her initial reluctance, she did make friends, and those friends used the elements to cure Luna. Everything was fine. And if that had been the only threat to the land, that would have been the end of it.

“But Twilight was still the same pony she had always been. Obsessed with magic, I mean she moved into a tree that was also a library! Her friends tempered her a little but time moved on. She did more and more impressive feats, even singlehoofedly saving Equestria on multiple occasions. She ascended, something no pony had done for a thousand years. And while humble on the outside, she was no doubt becoming an adoration junky, for lack of a better term. She wanted, above all, to prove herself worthy. To everypony. In fact proving herself, again and again, may be the most central part of her personality. She always had low self-esteem. Even now I’m sure she’s unsure of herself. Yet she always rises to the challenge, showing her just how capable she really is.

“And now Sunny has shown up. Talking about preventing a bad timeline, and making an artifact level object. Did you really think she wouldn’t latch onto that like a bear with honey? *Of course* she’s going to obsess over this. It ticks all her boxes- Saving ponies. Getting recognition for saving ponies. Making an artifact, something that hasn’t been done in any recent memory. She loves doing research, experimenting with magic, it’s all there.”

“That explains a lot,” Origami admitted. “So what are you going to do?”

“Come with us.” They led her to another room where different varieties of posters and pamphlets were laid out on a table. Looking them over the group saw they were about an upcoming vote, seemingly a month and a half from now, and relating to the crystal. “You see, we may be monarchs but we’re not simply going to unilaterally decide the fate of our little ponies. We have the time to spend, so we’re going to use it. For an event of this magnitude, we will distribute these pamphlets that explain the issue, allow them a month to debate the pros and cons, and then vote. Anypony in the kingdom that can show, at that time, that they understand the issue enough to answer some basic questions about it gets a vote. Even you two. Do we, the kingdom of friendship and ponies, wish to rely upon a magical artifact to keep us safe? Places like the crystal empire already do, I assume their votes will be largely positive. But I can’t be sure.”

“And if they vote no?”

“Then I, and my sister of course, will work to hurl the crystal you have gathered into the sun, such that it cannot be used in that way. We will then find another way to keep our little ponies safe. And griffons and such too, of course.”

“Of course,” Gianna agreed.

“Well this is no good!” Origami sputtered. “How could you just hand our enemies a victory like this?”

Oh no, here we go, Gianna sighed. *Now what’s this crazy ponies’ objection?*

“Excuse me?”

“If you tell everypony everything about the crystal you’re just giving our enemies our plans. You need to hear the prophecies we got, they spoke about a ‘shadow faction’ that was against us. You’re just giving them the test answers early!”

“Quite early,” Celestia agreed. “The crystal was clearly made many years in our future. Whoever prompted it may not even be born yet. I don’t think we have to worry.”

“But what if we do? What if agents of this ‘shadow faction’ walk the land even now? Maybe they’re possessing ponies. Or shape shifting into them. Or just influencing their thoughts?”

“Origami, stop,” Gianna pleaded. “You sound insane. First you don’t want Twilight to just decide to make the crystal. Okay, now we know it’s not up to her. Great- It’s up to us, all of us. But the only way we can do that, have a proper vote, is to let the ponies know what they’re voting for. But now here comes Origami, who whines we can’t do that either because of some nebulous ‘enemy’ we might have in the future. So, what? You want Twilight to just decide on her own? She’s going to do it, you know she is.”

“No, it shouldn’t be made in the first place.”

“That’s not your call either! It shouldn’t be any one pony’s call.”

“I realize that.”

“Then take the vote. You can’t have it both ways! You can’t ask ponies to put their faith in an artifact they know nothing about, or trust one pony’s judgment to make it or not. If it’s no and the crystals are all destroyed, the future changes and who cares what this enemy’s plans were? We start putting plans in place to avert any disasters. And if yes, well, the future hasn’t changed as much and we just need to be more careful. Protect the crystals and see what Twilight’s other plan is. Your prophesy implies the vote is going to be no, because ‘what you hope will come to pass.’ You hope the crystal won’t be made. So stop being so negative about everything.”

“Somepony has to be. We have more information now. We know there’s a ‘shadow faction’ so let’s try learning more about it. At least make some effort to secure this election.”

“Our elections are both free and fair!” Luna snapped. “I won’t have any ‘big lie’ that they are not!”

“But you can’t prove that without data to support the claim.”

“I can personally show you a thousand years of ‘data!’”

“I suppose we could hold off until we can put more protection measures in place,” Celestia mused. “But it’s not going to be easy. As you said, it could be any number of things from possession to simply talking in restaurants that subtly changes ponies minds about the issue. We can’t protect against the latter. Maybe we could do some spells to those coming in to polling locations at larger cities but we don’t have the unicorns to cover every location. Plus what spells would they use? We can’t protect against everything. Have them walk through a detector of some kind? We would have to make them first.”

“You need to investigate the printers too,” Origami demanded. “They could be compromised. They could be feeding information to the shadow faction.”

“You really don’t understand how insane you sound right now, do you?” Gianna asked. “Printers? What, they just *happened* to be taken over by shadows on the off chance somepony would want a flier printed that had information they would need to know? They’re fliers! Everypony would be able to just pick one up off the street once they’re printed. That’s the *whole point* of printing fliers. It’s like a two day delay or whatever. Honestly.”

“You’ve been quiet, Sunny. What do you think?”

“I think I’m going to see my parents again, and I should stay out of your decision making process because we’re on the right track and I don’t want to disrupt that. I got the ball rolling, it’s up to *you* to defend your lands. I’ve told you what I can about the future. Just try to avoid everypony dying and we’ll be fine.”

“We’ll try,” said Celestia with a chuckle. “As far as these pamphlets go, nothing is finalized, these are simply proof copies. We could see if any information can be stripped out, or made more vague, without hurting understanding. And we can push the date back a few weeks while we look into greater defenses for polling locations.”

She’s really taking Origami’s ravings seriously? Or just trying to be diplomatic and nothing will change?

“If we don’t find anything, maybe the vote itself could be the trap,” Origami decided. “With poll watchers in place and whatnot.”

“If they’re official, yes,” Luna agreed. “We can’t just have random ponies show up and start harassing ponies. That would be against the law.”

“I wasn’t suggesting that.”

Sorta seemed like you were?

“Very well,” Celestia agreed. “Thank you for this new information. If you learn more, let us know. We will do what we can on our end.”

“We will,” Origami promised. “By the way…”

“Yes?”

“Have you heard of a frog kingdom, somewhere to the south east of us? We rescued a couple of frog explorers and they invited us to see their kingdom of Amphibia. I just wondered if you had heard of it.”

“That does sound strangely familiar,” Celestia admitted. “But it would have been a long, long time ago. I can look through my old diaries and see if it jogs my memory. Once this crisis is over we will have to use this fast airship to truly map the world. Wouldn’t that be exiting?”

“I do have to wonder just what sort of beings are out there. Well, I hope you find something, and they weren’t all wiped out.”

“Frog people?” Luna asked. “That sounds familiar to me as well. But I wasn’t one for politics before my banishing but I will look in my diaries as well.”

“Thank you.”

“What will you do now?” Celestia asked.

“The prophesy said to stay on the path. If Twilight sends us after other types of crystal we’ll pick them up. I just hope we have some answers before we have all the pieces and she’s wondering if she should get started or not.”

“Try to keep them on the airship, without being too suspect about it. Tell her it’s for their safety, perhaps.”

“It sort of is. I understand. You won’t tell her about my concerns, will you?”

Both shook their heads. “She is my dear student, but she can be thick headed sometimes,” Celestia admitted. “She’s not perfect, but let’s avoid any drama if we can.”

“Fair enough.”

Now back on the ship they decided to simply give Twilight a small piece of the crystal to show they had more, and so she could run tests on it to make sure it would work for the whole. If they simply refused to let her near the stuff she would get instantly suspicious, and they couldn’t have that now could they? With that done Gianna turned to Origami.

“Thanks for all your support with the Griffon Guard ceremony. I really appreciated it. I just wanted to make sure you knew you were appreciated for all of the help at the monastery. Your healing magic really is incredible. I guess all that cutting yourself paid off, or whatever...”

“Of course! I’m glad I was able to do *something* to contribute. I mean, fighting really isn’t my thing, there’s not much I could have done otherwise. I’m more impressed with you, mastering that power-up thing. Like Bright Soul said, that was really impressive.”

“I just wanted to make sure you weren’t feeling too bad about that fight with Prince. I’m sure your magical skill is going to put anything I can do to shame soon enough. Just don’t get too obsessed over it.” *Which I know you tend to do.* “Magic’s complicated and you can already do some amazing things. The rest will come in time.”

“I’m not feeling bad about it at all! Don’t worry about that. I would’ve like to have helped, but it all worked out in the end and nopony got really hurt.”

“Just Prince’s feelings!”

“Yeah!” she agreed with a laugh. “Well, I’m sure we’ll never see him again.”

“Never see him again!” she agreed.

Sunny’s eyes got wide. *What did they just do?*

Chapter 16

Two days later

They really shouldn't have assumed

Two days later a royal courier pony showed up at the school in full regalia and burst into Origami's classroom to deliver her a royal missive. The letter was penned on the creamiest of paper, and had a huge and elaborate wax seal on the front.

"From Princess Celestia to Origami!" he intoned. "I deliver this message unto thee as I have been charged! Yea, though the road was long and my life in danger from many bandits, magical and natural phenomenon, storms, and the like, I persevered."

Her classmates were watching all this with an air of incredulity.

"Yes, thank you!" she hissed, snatching it from him. "You delivered it. Great service. I thought she was going to use her bird?"

"Oh no, such an *important* communication could *never* be trusted to a mere *bird*, even if said bird is a holy phoenix. Very well, with the letter now in your capable hooves I will sing the song of delivery, then be on my way."

"I don't need any song!" she insisted, going completely red. "If you must, sing it on the way out or something."

"Delivery isn't complete until I have sung you the entire song, here, where I placed it into your hooves. It should only take about an hour, if I skip the interpretive dance portion. But it really won't be the same."

"Never mind!" she got up and shoved him towards the door. "Thanks for your hard work, bye now! Goodbye!"

"Very well, very well, I'm sure I will only be whipped for six hours for failing to sing you the song. The Princesses are very particular about it."

"I'm sure she is. Goodbye!!"

"Well, perhaps we can return to relativistic reference frames as a consequence of theoretical lightspeed devices?" her teacher wondered.

"Please do!" *We learn some weird stuff at this school... Who is putting this curriculum together?*

During their next break in classes Gianna and Origami got together and opened up the letter. It was indeed from Celestia, and they both looked it over.

Dear Origami,

As we previously discussed, our pamphlet printing effort has been halted for the moment. I checked everyone in the building with the "Detect Influence" spell and did not find anything to concern me. Meanwhile Luna checked everyone with the "Detect Shape-shift" spell and everypony was their true and honest self. If you even believe Luna is who she says she is, and she's been into a particular raspberry tea a lot more lately than she ever has been. Make of that what you will. My love of bananas and banana flavored

products such as cake is, on the other hoof, well known and consistent so there is no reason for you to believe I have been taken over or replaced in any way. *Despite what Luna may tell you about how pudgy I'm getting lately from eating too many sweets!* Have fun sleeping tonight!

Celestia (as far as you know)

P.S.

If you wish to learn them;

“Detect Influence” can be found in the book “Mental Magic Vol 3, pages 276-279”

“Detect Shape-shift” can be found in the book “1001 spells for the paranoid mage, pages 112-113”

P.C.L.

I hope you carefully checked the wax seal before you opened this letter, I suspect the royal messenger may be an enemy agent as he did not laugh at my pun “Please deliver this and don't letter rip!” which he is required to do by royal decree. When he returns I shall have him killed and dissected, then questioned, to see what he knows. Scratch that- reverse it.

After a confused moment Origami blurted “But she must have already written the letter if she gave it to the messenger. So how did she...”

“That's your takeaway?” Gianna asked dryly. “Not the fact she's completely trolling you for how paranoid you sounded back there?”

“It's not paranoia if you know someone is actually out to get you!”

“Isn't it?”

“At least she took my suggestion seriously and checked everypony.”

“Uh huh.” *Did she though?*

Several more days passed, the two getting caught up on schoolwork and dodging questions about their adventures and why they hadn't been in class. It was just after their last class of the day when a dragonfire message appeared next to Origami, who grabbed it up.

“Twilight's got a lead on the next crystal, and apparently she's been working with Sunny on understanding the exact function of the completed crystal and says we had it all wrong. Want to head over there now?”

“She's probably expecting us, that's why she sent it right as class let out.”

“Agreed. Let's go get it over with...”

The two walked into Twilight's castle and to her new “research room” as they had moved out of the throne room to get more space. Open books, chalkboards, and scrolls spilled out from tables and nooks and both ponies looked up as they came in.

“Thanks for coming! I'm glad I got the timing right,” Twilight told them excitedly. “We have lots of news for you!”

“We had it all wrong,” Sunny agreed. “At least we think we know more now.”

“Sure thing,” Gianna replied. “You both seem pretty excited at the moment.”

“It's a major breakthrough,” Twilight told her. “But are you two doing okay? No problems at school?”

“We're getting caught up,” Origami replied truthfully. “Your message said you had a lead on the next crystal?”

“Yes, he should be here soon as well to tell you about that. Thankfully it’s pretty close this time, you should be able to get there and back, assuming nothing goes wrong, before sundown if you leave right after class tomorrow.”

“That’ll be a nice change.”

“Can I tell them? Can I?” Sunny asked, bouncing excitedly.

“I was always going to let you. We’ve been going over exactly what happened on the night magic came back, given what Guru said and what I’ve been finding in my research about how to do what we need it to do. We made some assumptions, but they’ve been cleared up I think. I’ll let Sunny tell you the events of that night, and then you can see if your conclusions match up with mine.”

Doubtful, Origami thought.

“Okay, here goes. I was excited to bring magic back so as soon as I had my hooves on the two crystals I knew about I put them together out in the forest. We were being chased and I figured that would prove I was right to everypony and things would be better. At that point I didn’t realize there was an earth pony crystal too. Naturally, nothing happened. Hitch and I went home with our tails between our legs figuring it was all over. We would be apart forever, my parents died for nothing, I would never see Izzy or the others again. I was in a bad place mentally. When I got home I just wanted to burn the whole lighthouse to the ground. Everything reminded me of my father and my failure. Hitch had followed me and suggested maybe not burning my only house down? I compromised with him that he would take all my stupid childhood toys and the books and scrolls and everything else and keep them safe for me. He said I would for sure want them in twenty years or whatever, if we weren’t all dead of cancer that is. I swept everything into boxes.

“This is when I realized that stone table on the second floor wasn’t just a table. It had been covered with papers and things so I never really took a good look at it. Once I cleaned it off I realized it had a symbol of the unity crystal carved into it, and seemed to have a mechanism of some sort under it. I got super excited because I believed I had found the lock. Of course waving around two parts of a key didn’t do anything. You have to put the entire key into the lock! But where was the third part of the key? Clearly the carving on the table showed one.

“Guess what? We (our family) had what I recognized from the symbol as the earth pony crystal the whole time! My dad made it into a lamp, because it threw light everywhere. I was furious he never, you know, mentioned “oh by the way this could be an important magical object so keep an eye on it, it’s not just a hunk of glass I got at a garage sale.” Could have mentioned it, I don’t know once maybe? Or about the lighthouse being the lock that controlled all magic? Anything? But he didn’t. Anyway I shoved it onto the symbol and as I suspected, the mechanism activated and accepted it. It sank into the table. Something was going to happen, why build the table otherwise? Now I was pissed off. I was going to have to head back to the other kingdoms, soaking up cancer rays or whatever, and get the crystals back to put them all into the lock I found. But wait! Hitch was looking out the window and said that wouldn’t be necessary. They had all followed me!

“I rushed out to tell them the news. They said they felt bad about it not working and decided to give me their crystals for study. I said hold onto your unicorn (and pegasus) butts because I have news for you. That’s about the time when we saw the earth pony army coming towards us. Turns out the whole place was on the way decked out in anti-unicorn mind reading helmets and following some huge mech thing they had been building the last month. My friends said do what you need to do we’ll hold them off. I rushed back into the lighthouse to place the crystals.

“I put them in place and they were accepted. The battle was raging outside. Pony on Pony violence on a scale never before seen in town. Hair pulling. Name calling. Oh it was ugly. The mech was out of control, I was standing there willing magic to come back but nothing happened. That’s when the lighthouse

got smashed apart and I found myself, and the crystals, being crushed by rubble and falling over. Turns out, part of the mech had gotten loose and smashed into my house, knocking the top half over.

“With the mech under control everypony started trying to dig me out of the rubble. I was only badly bruised, not dead, and everypony expressed their relief. I was the town weirdo but nopony wanted me *dead*. They took a good, hard look at their behavior and asked themselves “is this really who we are now?” Thankfully, the answer was no. Everypony apologized to everypony else. They had seen what they had almost done because of their hatred and nopony liked it. Well, maybe *one* pony liked it, but we don’t talk about Sprout. They decided to start over, and actually learn who everypony was rather than rely on centuries old rumors and superstition. The queen offered her best architects and foreponies to help rebuild the lighthouse. Alphabittle offered material like stone and metals (“and crystals,” shouted Izzy) to build it stronger than ever. Earth ponies offered to help clear the rubble, and perform the work. Everypony was smiling, maybe it could work!

“Out of nowhere (but really the rubble) the unity crystal *put itself back together* and everypony shrank away from the sight. But I stepped forward. That’s how I got zapped by the magic and took on my wings and horn form. The rainbow was thrown into the sky and magic returned to the land. Don’t ask me if I needed to put the crystal into the ‘lock’ or it was just a holding area to protect it or what, but anyway that’s the story.”

“That was a long story,” Origami complained.

Aren’t you the pony that loves studying and is already reading huge books? Gianna thought.

“Yeah. Probably only the last part is important, but I thought the entire context would be helpful.”

“So what do you think?” Twilight asked.

“I think it’s pretty obvious what you think,” she went on. “Magic didn’t come back until everypony agreed to work together. Simply placing the crystals in physical proximity didn’t do anything.”

“Exactly!” Twilight crowed. “And that means the opposite is also true! The crystals themselves didn’t take away magic. Ponies took away their own magic.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Three very *specific* ponies took away magic, and then a separate group of three ponies brought it back. Sunny told me about the “barers of burden” mentioned by Guru and about the threat and it all makes sense now. With my research I think I can explain everything that happened and how the crystal actually worked in Sunny’s time. You were worried about losing magic in our time, right? I could make the crystal right this second and nopony would know the difference. Let me take you through my research.

“We know the crystal was made in response to a threat in the future, another ‘I’m taking all the magic in Equestria’ situation. But we’ve had those before and never made anything like this. Why? Because it wouldn’t have helped. Until it does. What if our opponent was a rogue *alacorn*? A pony like me that ascended, but then went bad? Ponies like me have stronger magic because we basically have a triple mana core- unicorn, pegasus, and earth pony. To remove our power *every* type of mana core has to be turned off. Not just one. Just turning off one cuts my power by a third but I still have plenty of magical power otherwise. It has to be all or nothing. Plus we’re immortal, for all I know. Celestia shows no real sign of aging, after all. It’ll be years and years before we know if the same will happen to me. So take a smart pony that is willing to play a long, LONG game and build up his or her magical power. This pony starts turning ponies against each other with a whisper here and a rumor there. Causes disasters on the sly. Makes pony lives miserable so they can swoop in and ‘save’ everypony. But at some point I learn of the plot. Take them on, maybe? But I lose, say. Maybe I’m hurt and dying. I’m not in Sunny’s future, after all. No alicorn seems to be, so clearly something killed us all. I have only one option left. I make the crystals and select three ponies; earth, unicorn, pegasus, to control magic. They turn it off. This makes confronting this alacorn easy because now they have no more magic than anypony else. We drive the bad alacorn out, but then it comes

time to turn magic back on. But wait, ponies have been set against each other all this time, right? *So they choose not to do that.*

“We split up, and hundreds of years later everypony has forgotten how the crystals even work and everything is still messed up. This matches up with what Sunny saw. Until the three ponies, the burden barers, decided to work together just putting the crystals together did nothing. These barers were probably chosen simply because they had possession of the crystal the longest. That’s a safety feature I would add to the crystal if I was making them- whoops I am going to be the one to make them. The crystals are nothing but a control surface. They don’t have to be together, the barer simply chooses to turn on or off the magic of their particular type of pony. Or maybe it has to be all three at once? Probably has to be all three at once. Had they remembered and not split apart in the first place, it could have been done at any time.

“So what does that mean? If we make these crystals we simply have to choose good barers, and maybe engrave some directions on the back of them so nopony forgets? That way their lore won’t be lost. Then watch out for any new alicorns and make sure they don’t go evil.”

“We should still try to make them differently for this new future,” Origami decided after a moment. “Maybe that timer that was mentioned before? Only make them able to suppress magic for a limited time?”

“I agree. We should make sure to *nudge* the future so it simply works out better for everypony involved and we can still predict it. Rather than totally throw it off track. Unless we have the vote and everypony says no. I haven’t heard from the princesses in a few days, I think the vote is still on?”

Not exactly.

“I have some questions?” Gianna hesitantly spoke up.

“Thorax isn’t here, we have plenty of time,” Twilight told her. “Please, if you’ve thought of something don’t be shy.”

“If we can somehow narrow it down more to being an alacorn, can’t we just make the crystal focus on one individual?”

“Tricky,” Twilight answered. “And would they work alone? What if this alacorn is just the leader and has a large following? They attack and we disable them, all well and good, but that leaves the rest of their followers free to make trouble.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, that’s a good point. Do you really think you can do this though? Make something powerful enough to turn off everypony’s magic?”

“Consider the artifact we already have. You’ve even seen it yourself. The crystal heart keeps that entire empire in the north from freezing over. Without it there, the whole place would be covered in snow perpetually, but instead it’s summer year round. That’s some powerful magic. And consider what we alacorns can actually do. Celestia literally moves the sun in the sky in the morning. Luna the moon. If she can do that, I’m certain that combining our power to place the spell into the crystals will be no trouble at all. It was made in the future, after all. So it’s possible.”

“True. Could we come up with some kind of antidote for it? Or shield? A crystal you could wear that negated the effects? So somepony can pass down magical knowledge in case it does get shut off again?”

“Or what about a decoy crystal? One that we can have somewhat unguarded so somepony can steal it. Then they just show their location, or it turns on them and only shuts off their magic when they try to destroy it?”

“How would the magic know when to stop though?” Sunny asked. “It’s not ‘smart’ enough to look at a group of ponies, tell their thoughts, and decide one pony is evil and another isn’t.”

“Yeah okay I get that one.”

“Still, all good ideas I can add to the checklist,” Twilight told them. “We still have plenty of time, so we can make this crystal right and make sure the bad future doesn’t happen.”

“I’m not interrupting, am I?” a new voice said from the door. A large and colorful figure stood there, poking his head in.

“Thorax! You’re just in time, come on in!”

Chapter 17
After introductions
Questions of philosophy

The figure had turned out to be Thorax, the apparent king of the reformed changelings, who honestly needed a better name for themselves than “reformed changelings” because they were their own people now. Maybe Bright Bugs or Bugpony or something? After everypony had been introduced Thorax explained why he was there.

“I heard you were looking for unique types of crystals?”

Origami stared hard at Twilight, giving her all the stink eye she could cram into one moment.

“For my collection of rare crystals,” she agreed, completely ignoring her as was proper. “You found some? That’s so thoughtful Thorax, thank you!”

“Oh.” She let up with the stink eye by 80%. *There’s a cover story about why we want them. That’s fine.*

“I would have gotten here sooner, but we’ve settled quite some distance from here. We don’t really have a home of our own yet, you know. We’re accepted into polite society but we still don’t exactly feel welcomed. If you find a good spot we can settle in, let me know.”

“I’ll keep my eyes open!” Gianna promised.

“Great, thanks. So back to the crystals. Our queen’s throne was carved of some weird crystal she found in our caves a long time ago. As I recall it had special anti-magic properties, so it might be tricky to keep around. But after our transformation and it overloading and exploding, no one went there anymore. I don’t think. So it should still be there.”

“Overloading?” Origami asked.

“Yeah. It didn’t so much cancel magic out as it did absorb it really well. I think? I’m no wizard. But she used it for its defensive properties and she must have had a reason for it. When we changed there was a huge release of magical energy. It was nearby, tried to absorb all of it, and got destroyed in the process. If you can add it to your collection I figured I would at least make the offer. I can guide you through the caves or draw you a map, whatever you want.”

We’ll probably want it all, Origami thought. Just like with the first type. And to make sure it goes away, should we hold this vote and it’s no. Celestia promised to hurl it into the sun, so let’s make sure that happens. If it’s a throne’s worth of crystal that’s going to be a lot, and heavy. “We would welcome a guide,” she decided. *Let’s keep up the deception.* “Twilight, I know you’re busy, let us take our ship to pick all the crystal up and not have to haul it all back here in bags. We can bring it right back, no need to interrupt your research.”

“You can wait until tomorrow if you don’t want to leave so late. We’ll be happy to put Thorax up for the right.”

“It should still be right there, right? Where they left it? Let’s just go get it. Where exactly is it, by the way?”

“Rambling Rock Ridge was our old home, which is just past the Everfree forest. We could walk there in no time at all. But when you say ship do you mean...”

“We have an airship, yes. Best to take it and get it loaded up on site. It’ll take less time.”

“Splendid!” he agreed. “Lead the way to your ship.”

Thorax led them to the edge of the forest and CelestAI found a place to land, and they headed into the cave system. Sunny lit the way with her phone and Thorax led them confidently through the tunnels. It was dark, dry, and silent, so thankfully it seemed no changeling had moved back in, and the group soon made it to a large chamber where the remains of the throne should have been. According to Thorax, who swore.

“It’s not here? Who could have taken it?”

“How long ago did this happen?” Origami asked. “The shattering, I mean.”

Everypony was looking around, and when Sunny shone the light on the floor a fine, glittering, green dust could be seen. Clearly the powdered remains of some of the crystal, so they were in the right place.

He thought a moment. “I would say about three years now?”

“So it could be long gone.”

“I’m afraid so. I’m really sorry, I did not expect anypony to actually want the pieces of shattered crystal. I mean what would you do with them?”

“Is the queen trying to rebuild her throne?” Gianna wondered.

“By gluing it together?” Origami scoffed. “I don’t know if that would work.”

“You don’t know.”

“Let’s look around for clues!” Sunny decided. “Maybe they left a note or something.”

“I highly doubt it,” Origami scoffed again. Double, this time.

The perpetrators didn’t leave a note, but there were clues to be found in the area, if one knew where to look. Gianna pointed out a trail in the dust of the cavern floor, as if some heavy bags had been dragged away. But the more interesting feature of the cave was one that could not be seen by the naked eye. Origami paced around, heading into side tunnels and coming back out.

“The manasphere has been disrupted here,” she announced. “Has it been permanently damaged from proximity to so much of that crystal? Without coming back here over the course of several years to see if the mana returns it’s impossible to say.”

“What are you talking about?” Gianna asked.

“The manasphere is like a vast ocean, a power with an unknown source most everypony can tap into, if they, like me, do the work of solidifying their mana core, allowing mana to be trapped within. This ambient mana then becomes personal mana and is used to fuel our spells. It’s why we can’t do bigger spells without a bit of a pause, so our cores can take in more mana. But now there’s an ‘island’ if you will, in that ocean. A place where no mana exists. If I did a healing spell in this spot,” she moved to where the throne had been, “I could do it, but no mana would enter my core to replace what I had lost. I wouldn’t be able to do more than one.”

“Interesting, but does it help us track them?”

“Actually, it does,” she announced with a grin. She moved to the tunnel and pointed with a hoof. “The path they took carved out some of the mana ocean. It’s filling in again but very slowly. It’s strange, I always thought it was more a liquid, and if scraped away would fill in again instantly. But maybe it’s more like pudding, as it hasn’t here. In any case, it doesn’t seem like the crystal was moved that long ago. The ‘track’ I’m feeling can be followed.”

“That’s what I thought. There wasn’t much dust in the tracks, so it hasn’t been too long.”

“Good to have confirmation. So we both have a trail to follow. If you lose yours when they leave the cave I can follow it. We’ll have to go on hoof, of course.”

“So let’s go!” Thorax agreed.

The group backtracked, past the entrance and their airship, and headed south east through the forest. Naturally they were wary to do so, having been warned of the various hungry creatures that lived there. Still, with a group of four, one of them being a changeling that could become anything, they felt it was safe. Gianna spotted some overturned rocks, bent twigs, and faint hoofprints she was positive meant the thieves had indeed gone this way, while Origami kept her magic sense sharp and agreed. The area of negative mana went along the trail and seemed to be leaving the forest. It was near the edge of the forest when the group heard the scream for help.

“Come on, somepony is in trouble,” Gianna announced, heading through the trees.

“Wait for us!”

The group burst upon the scene, a lone timberwolf harassing a cow, and it looked like one of the cow’s legs had been chomped already. She was backed against an outcropping of rocks, and the wolf snapped at her again, causing another cry of pain.

“Get away from her!” Gianna shouted, aura flaring to life around her.

“What in the world?” Thorax exclaimed.

“Never mind,” Origami told him, spreading her wings. “Just protect the cow.”

“I’ll back you up if you get in a bind.” He transformed into a huge spider and started looking around for a good tree to climb, in case he needed to drop down on the thing.

“Fair enough.”

The wolf turned to Gianna as she landed, snapping at her. She blocked it, the wolf’s teeth bouncing off her armor. “Go on, get out of here!” she shouted.

Origami landed next to her, with a final flap of her wings redirected her weather magic towards the wolf, catching it and flinging it away from them both.

“Nice one!”

She turned to the cow and looked her over. *She’s not dead, but she’s not doing so well either. No shaping this time.* She prepared to cast.

Meanwhile, Gianna darted forward, slashing out with a claw and tearing a chunk of sticks and leaves out of the timberwolf. “It really is made of wood!” she exclaimed.

“This should help,” Origami told the cow, wings glowing. The cow glowed too, and much of her wounds closed up.

I don’t want to get between Gianna and the wolf, but I can enhance her ability to hit, Sunny thought, casting her spell, or at least trying. She messed it up and it fizzled. *Oh shoot. I’m just not good enough at magic. Guess I need to ‘level up’ some more. Well, she has it handled by the looks, I’ll just leave her to it.*

The wolf was up and snapping at Gianna again, but once more her armor saved her.

“Stay down!” Origami told it, blasting it with wind again. This time she had tried to shape her aura to produce a blade of wind, but that didn’t work out. It simply was knocked over again.

“Just try to drive it away,” Gianna told her, slashing again. “Go on, get out of here.”

“Are you crazy?”

A final blast of wind, which the wolf did manage to evade the worst of, pushed it away and it decided there was no sense continuing this fight. It was pretty badly wounded, but shot away from the group into the underbrush.

“Don’t let it go!” Origami cried.

“It lives here,” Gianna told her. “We have no right to kill it.”

“It was going to kill her!” she indicated the cow.

“Henrietta,” said the cow. “Thanks for saving me.”

“It was going to kill her because she was in a place she shouldn’t be. A lone cow shouldn’t be wandering around the forest at any time of day. We can’t fault a wolf for trying to get an easy meal.”

“But it’ll just cause problems for somepony else.”

“Who also probably shouldn’t be here alone. We have rules about going in here for a reason. What was it the principal said when we started school? Don’t go into the forest unless you want to die a most painful death?”

“Please, don’t fight,” Henrietta pleaded, trying to get up. “Oh, my leg!”

“Sorry!” Origami told her. “I’ll keep fixing you up.”

“Thank you.”

So they got the story, how Henrietta had been traveling with her herd to the nearby town of Dodge city, stopped to munch a particularly delicious looking bit of grass, got left behind, turned around, and then chased into the forest by that wolf. She thanked them over and over, and the group escorted her part of the way towards the city. When they reached the road leading south Origami realized the crystal pieces were taken into the nearby swamp, and the group said their goodbyes.

“Keep your eyes open,” Origami told the others. “Those thieves could be anywhere in here.”

Perhaps twenty minutes later the group heard a strange bird call none of them could recognize, and came upon a somewhat drier area where some crude huts had been erected. There were eight of them, plus one larger and sturdier building in the middle. Signs of life were abundant, from the fire pit and various barrels, dishes, and tracks all around the area. But there were no sign of thieves. Just a bunch of large rocks, five of them scattered about, each one next to a sliver of green crystal.

“What do you make of it?” Gianna asked, picking one up and looking it over.

“It’s very lightly disrupting the manasphere, this is a piece of the throne all right. But what’s it doing out here?”

“You got me.”

“What’s up, Thorax?” Sunny asked.

He had been staring intently at the nearest boulder, and humming to himself.

“We’ll see, we’ll see,” he answered mysteriously. “Let’s check the place over.”

The huts were badly lashed together tree trunks and such, and were little more than a dry place to sleep. It was the larger building that was of interest. Two more large boulders sat inside, and a variety of mismatched furniture dotted the room. There was a rickety set of shelves that held what looked like potion ingredients, a few tattered books on a table, a cauldron of still boiling liquid, and heaped in a pile in the corner was the crystal they were after.

“The manasphere is being eroded away here,” Origami muttered to herself. “Will we even be able to work with this stuff?”

“Someone was just here,” Gianna announced, looking over the cauldron. “Are they invisible or something? Where did they go?”

“Oh, I think they’re still around,” Thorax said mysteriously. “We’re not going to hurt you. May as well make yourselves known.”

There was a sigh and the two rocks shimmered and glowed, turning into black changelings.

“Fine,” said the one. “What do you want? You think this is some kind of game, you can just walk into somebody’s place and steal their stuff? Well you can’t. Get out of here.”

“You can turn into rocks?” Origami questioned.

“Obviously. We can turn into anything. When we’re not starving. You lost or something?”

“No, we followed the crystal here. You know it leaves a trail, right?”

“So you are after our crystal!” said the other one. “I knew it. We stole that fair and square, get your own!”

“Look, maybe we can trade you for some of it, we only need one large piece...” Gianna told them. *In theory. Leaves no room for error. But if we do the other pieces first, we'll have the process down and be good to go. Right?*

“I want to know what you're doing way out here,” Thorax told them. “How did you get away from the queen?”

“She doesn't control us!”

“Well she sort of does,” the other protested. “She's the queen.”

“We want a better life,” said the first one. “We're here trying to make that happen.”

“Here?” Thorax looked around.

“Is it safe?” said a voice from the door. The others were crowded around, and the group counted 6 more out there.

“Yeah, seems to be,” said the one. “Oh I'll introduce you.” He started pointing. “This is, Sweeple, Tofu, Majile, Crunckle, Tingle, Maple, Adjuquarious, and I'm Popsicle.”

“Er, nice to meet you?” the group replied.

“What exactly are you trying to do?” Origami asked, eyeing the cauldron.

“Come up with a method to manage our hunger,” Popsicle replied, as if that should be obvious.

“I don't get it.”

“Changelings have to physically consume the energies of love to survive,” Thorax explained. “We can sometimes survive in areas rich in love energy, like the crystal empire, but it's not very satisfying. To really be satisfied we have to be near somepony in love with somepony else and basically eat their love.”

“Do they then fall out of love?” Gianna asked, horrified.

“You know, we didn't really do a lot of scientific studies around that,” he admitted. “Most changelings are told to be very careful around other ponies and to not take too much from any one pony. For obvious reasons. If two ponies suddenly turned on each other and another pony was nearby looking like they just had a full meal, everypony would know that pony was a changeling and murder them.”

“We're not very well treated,” Popsicle agreed. “Everypony hates us because of what we had to do.”

“The queen trying to overthrow the princess monarchy didn't help,” Majile added.

“True.”

“Do you do that?” Gianna asked Thorax, thinking about her changeling classmates.

“Not as such,” he explained. “When the Great Change came upon us I realized we could handle our problems internally, rather than externally. As long as we genuinely loved another of our race and gave them that love freely, it wouldn't have to be stolen. As long as the other partner reciprocated, our hunger was managed. That's when we become what we are today.” He indicated his colorful and hole-less self.

“Those of us without such means were left behind,” Popsicle explained. “And here we are. Personally, we don't think such a method is sustainable. Mark my words, a few years from now and their love is going to be all eaten up. They'll be back to looking like us and begging us to take them back in.”

“It's true,” he admitted. “The long term effects have yet to be explored. It's only been a few years. But it has been working so far.”

“So you're trying to come up with some magical solution for your problem?” Origami realized.

“That's right,” Popsicle agreed. “The pieces of throne dampen our hunger, but also prevent us from changing shape. Not a very good solution. If we lose it, our hunger comes right back.”

I did notice them all picking up their shard of crystal once they turned back into themselves, Origami thought. “Your solution is obvious then, isn't it? Just find one of your species to love.” How do the young ones do it? Hold on, they're shape-shifters... I'm assuming they're young but they could be older than me. They could just be changing their shape to be smaller versions of themselves. I have no idea how much 'love energy' that would take. Maybe next to none.

“Just a few problems with that,” Popsicle scoffed. “The first being it’s not really all that easy to just ‘find someone to love’ as you put it. Secondly, look at him.” He indicated Thorax. “He’s not a changeling anymore, not really. I don’t know what he is. If we all became like him our race would be finished. That’s no good. Third you’re assuming he’s reformed at all. For all you know he’s eating love left and right, and just uses this form when walking around with you ponies.”

“I was the first one to change!”

“That doesn’t prove anything. Just proves you had an idea to become more colorful to blend in better with pony society. I don’t know that you’ve *really* changed.”

Huh, that’s a good point. He said they haven’t settled anywhere, is that the real reason? Because he can’t? He can’t take too much love from any one place before ponies start to notice?

“Fifth, why should we change our natures? We were all born this way, I didn’t ask to need to eat love to survive. But yet I must. I would rather show I’m managing my condition and stay myself than turn into that. How do I know he even has the same personality as he did? Those changes could be more than physical, you don’t know. The way he sees the world could change. I don’t want to be someone else. I like who I am.”

“Yeah, yeah!” the others agreed.

“Can your nature really be managed?” Gianna asked.

“Oh, I’m sure I could help them,” Origami announced haughtily. “The question is should I?”

“...Yes?” she agreed. *And how are you so confident about this? You don’t know any more about their physiology than I do. What even is ‘love’ and how do they ‘consume’ it? Is there an organ inside their bodies that does it? Is it magical? Can a substitute energy source be found?*

“They already have a solution. They simply choose not to take it.”

“They just got finished explaining their reasons against it.”

“Sounds like a lot of excuses to me. They’re trying to apply some kind of bandage to the problem, rather than just solving it in a known way. Taking the easy way out? Doesn’t sit right with me.”

“Easy way?” Tofu shrieked. “Are you insane? The easy way would be just invading your kingdom again now that we know what mistakes we made last time. Just replace you one at a time, become ponies you love, and before you know it half your population is us. We’ve been trying since the queen was defeated to come up with a solution. It was only a couple of months ago we tried the crystals, which worked to a degree, and moved out here to do research in peace.”

They could also just pretend to be the more colorful type, Gianna thought. They are shape-shifters. How many ‘reformed’ ones actually are just pretending? We would have no way to know.

“The others didn’t want the crystals around, made them feel itchy. Makes me feel itchy,” Crunkle agreed. “But I agree with Tofu. You’re out of line.”

“It’s like the wolf in the forest, we just went through that,” Gianna told her. “That wolf needs to eat just like we do. It just so happens while we find grass delicious, they find cow delicious. Is that reason enough to kill every single one of them? No! They have a place in the world or they wouldn’t be here.”

“Of course you would take their side.”

“I’m not taking any side-”

“What do you think, Sunny? You’ve been quiet about this.”

“Huh? Me? Oh, I think I should stay out of it. Even finding a changeling in my time would have been big news.”

“You have no opinion whatsoever?”

She sighed. “Fine, if you insist. Let’s boil your philosophy down to a single sentence, okay? So I know we’re on the same page. You want them to solve their problem by undergoing a massive physical change with completely unknown psychological and physical ramifications. Do I have that right?”

“That’s what it sounds like to me,” Gianna agreed. “You don’t want to help them, you want them to not be themselves anymore.”

“It’s not... exactly... like that.”

“Not hearing a no,” Sunny pressed on. “So I’ll go with a ‘yes.’ Let’s shift it around a little. Gianna, you have those little pads on your back feet, right? Like a cat or a dog?”

“I sure do!” She lifted a back leg. “Maybe if you ask really nicely one day I’ll let you touch them. They’re super soft.”

“Pass? Anyway, what if she hadn’t been born with those? Walking would be pretty painful right?”

“Sure would.”

“So the solution is known! Amputate both back feet. Get some peg legs going back there.”

“Like a pirate?” Gianna asked, eyes wide.

“Sure, a pirate. But is real life Gianna, not the one that seemingly wants to be a pirate-”

“Live like a pirate, a pirate is free!” she sang.

“Would she go for that solution? Or would she, to use your words, seek a bandage? Painkillers? Special pads she wore on the bottoms of socks? Or would she just grab a saw?”

“I... guess she wouldn’t immediately go for amputation,” Origami had to admit.

“So then why are you advocating that for these changelings? It’s the same physical change with completely unknown psychological and physical ramifications. Isn’t it?”

“They just don’t seem to really care because they could already solve their problem.”

“So could padless Gianna!”

“Yeah, it seems more like you don’t really care,” Gianna told her. “They’ve asked for our help. We can’t put conditions on what help we give. We either help them, or we stay out of it and wish them good luck. But we do need the crystal, we have an ulterior motive. I want that said right at the start.”

“If we don’t need the crystal you’re welcome to it,” Popsicle promised. “It’s a terrible solution anyway.”

“Fine!” Origami said, rolling her eyes. “I’ll stay here and see what they’ve tried already. You can head back to town and get me a bunch of reference books and materials. Better work stations, beakers, a proper knife maybe?”

“Whatever you need.” *I’m going to Twilight to make sure we even should help them, she should have anything Origami can come up with needing. Removing their weakness may be a bad idea and come back to bite us. I’ll want to tell her what’s happening so she can give her blessing or not, before we try anything.*

“I’ll write you a list.”

“Here you go,” Sunny handed her the tablet. “Technology!”

Chapter 18

Some time later

Zecora joins the scene, you know what I mean

“Twilight, need your help with something!” Gianna called as she entered the castle.

“What’s up?” she asked, turning from her research.

“You’re not going to believe what we found instead of the crystal...”

So Gianna explained the whole situation, about how the changelings took the crystal and how they were using it. How they offered to give it up, if somepony solved their problem of managing their hunger but still allowing them to transform.

“And Origami said she could do it?” she asked.

“With full confidence. But then asked for a bunch of books and stuff. So I had to wonder if she really had any idea. Was she just projecting confidence for them that she didn’t feel or does she think she can totally change how these changeling’s biology works on her own?”

“I see. I have no idea how *I* would solve their ‘needs to eat the very idea of love to survive’ problem right this second so I can’t see how she would. Is it just these eight?”

Yeah, exactly what are they eating? Love? Where? How? Could a spell actually show ‘love’ in the air and how do they find it? Can they see it? Smell it? Are they just walking around biting the air or is it a magical effect that just pulls this “energy” into them. There are so many questions about how this even works, how can you even think you can solve this on your own, Origami? “You know, I didn’t think to ask. Better assume it’s not, that they’ll want to bring this back to their people so they don’t have to worry about the hunger anymore.”

“That’s a different scale. I have no idea how many remain... and you said they were trying potions?”

“What else is there?”

“Yes, a spell would be tricky,” she agreed. “But potions can do all sorts of things. And they can be brewed in large batches, so if a potion would work it could work for a great number of them. Okay, there’s a potions master I know, she lives in the forest, I can introduce you.”

“The forest? How do they not get eaten by wolves or whatever?”

She laughed. “Oh, she manages somehow. She’s a zebra by the name of Zecora. She’s a bit eccentric, fair warning. But if there’s a potion that can help these changelings, she’ll know it. We’ve gone to her for potions ourselves, maybe I’ll tell you about the poison joke incident sometime.” She hummed, considering. “Or maybe not. Come on, you brought the North Star back, right?”

“Yeah.”

“We’ll just drop in then, no sense walking there. Come on.”

What’s this? Just a ‘we’ll jump into action’ instead of a bunch of arguments about why we shouldn’t help? What a novel concept. I wish certain ponies were here to see it!

The group flew according to Twilight’s directions, and hovered over certain tree found in a clearing in the forest.

“You’ll have to stay here,” Twilight told Sunny. “We shouldn’t be long.”

"It's okay. You flying types have it easy," she pouted. "I have wings too sometimes, you know."

"You have me," CelestAI told her, appearing at her side. "You can fly faster, further, and longer than any one pony."

"Hey that's true, good point."

"Naturally." She vanished again.

"See you in a bit." They jumped out the door and swooped down. Gianna followed Twilight down and both landed neatly in front of a tree, decorated with various masks, bottles, and colorful plants.

"She really does live in a tree," Gianna said, bemused.

"Hey, I used to, don't knock it. Or mention it ever again. I'm still salty with Tirek for destroying it. Stupid jerk. Remind me to send my monthly "ha ha you're still in jail" card to him when we get back."

"I'll keep that in mind. Seems like a nice enough place."

"Wait until you see the inside," Twilight announced, and marched right up to the door, knocking with a hoof.

"Someone tapping at my door, perhaps my help they will implore?" was faintly heard from the inside. A moment later, the door opened. "Ah, Twilight, and you're not alone, what brings you both so far from home?"

"Hey Zecora, this is Gianna. We're actually here about a possible potion. It's not something that exists though, so I'm hoping you have some thoughts on it."

"You are welcome in my tree, it's as comfy as can be. Sit right down and we can see, whatever can the problem be?"

Eccentric is right, she wasn't kidding. The house was very nice on the inside though, with shelves of potions, potion ingredients, books, masks, and more. *This is what Origami's place is going to look like in a few years. With less books, Origami will have many more books, I'm imagining. She's just as obsessed. But why live all the way out here? Must be bad for business.*

Both sat around a bubbling cauldron Zecora must have been working on, and Gianna explained about meeting the "rebel" changelings, and what they needed. A love substitute. She went over to a book and paged through it, then turned it to show them the description of a love potion.

"A love potion I know to brew, lesser, greater, there are two. But I feel that's not the key, to the tale that you've told me. But perhaps with careful tweaks, we can make what changeling seeks."

"Humm..." hummed Twilight. "I'm not a potion maker- I have dabbled of course- but I've certainly had experience with spells that induce-" She glanced at Gianna out of the corners of her eyes. "Desire. The 'want-it need-it' spell for one. Says here the two types of love potion are general and specific. The formula is almost exactly the same, but for the general one the main ingredient is something anypony might want. Such as a cupcake. That will produce a 'normal' strong reaction to the first pony the pony that drinks the potion sees. However, if the ingredient is instead something the pony specifically would desire, for instance giving Celestia a banana, the reaction is stronger." She turned the page. "Ugh, the love poison is listed in this book as well. Stay away from that one!"

Love poison? What in the world could that be?

"Now if we were to substitute, exactly what would be our loot?" Zecora asked, almost as if she already knew the answer and wanted Twilight to think of it herself.

"What's the opposite of desire? Something broken? But that wouldn't work, it still needs to be a 'love' potion..."

"Twilight you are halfway there, this potion needs a lot of care. But if we use what's steeped in love-"

"The potion fits just like a glove!" she finished. Then shook her head. "Shoot, now she's got me doing it. I get it. Rather than use something somepony would desire, subvert the magic by using something related to love. That *could*, in theory, turn the love potion from a potion that emulates love in

the drinker to one that conveys love to the drinker. Normally useless, but in this case exactly what we need!”

“However it works,” Gianna agreed. “We have an airship hovering over your house, so whatever ingredients and supplies you need, don’t be afraid to over-pack.”

“By the way...” Twilight asked suspiciously, “this book looks well worn. You haven’t actually been *making* these love potions for anypony have you? You know that would only lead to disaster, right?”

“Twilight, darling, that was low, how can you accuse me so? Just because I love a book, that doesn’t mean those potions cook.”

She waved that off. “Sorry, sorry. Just making sure. I guess we’ll head back to Ponyville for now.”

“We must head where ponies live, for love slips by us like a sieve. We must look for items cloying, not ponies who emotions toying. Only lovers we must seek, without them now our prospect’s bleak. Items that will show their love, will fit our needs like hand in glove.”

“Hey, I already used ‘glove’ up your game, Zecora!” she teased.

So Twilight levitated some crates full of stuff up to the North Star, and the group headed back to Ponyville.

“But what exactly are we looking for?” Gianna asked as they headed down the ramp.

“Look for objects here in town, like a well loved wedding gown, anything that calls to love, look below and look above. We will put it in our brew, essentially to make love stew, hoping it will solve their plight, this very day before the night.”

“I’ll try my best...”

“Honestly, we’re rate limited anyway,” Twilight explained. “If you can find two solid things, and I can find two solid things, and Zecora can find two solid things, that’s going to be way more than enough. There’s only so many potions we can make in a 6 hour period. Though there are some tricks of course.”

“I’ll see what I can come up with. Meet back here?”

Both nodded, and headed off.

Gianna wandered through town, nodding to everypony and keeping her eagle eyes open. But it was not her eyes that alerted her to a possible source of love, it was her nose. (Such as it was)

“Desserts!” she cried, stopping in front of the Cake’s shop. “That’s my first stop. And it’s not because I’m hungry or anything...” She stepped through the door and Mr. Cake greeted her. Looking up she heard a pair of babies crying upstairs.

“What can I get for you?”

“Everything looks so good,” she exclaimed, imagining how all these treats would taste. “But I’m here with a special request.”

“If it’s made of cake, we can accommodate,” he bragged. “We even made a tiny cake library for Spike on Twilight’s birthday. We can make cake teacups, cake musical instruments, cake likenesses of pets, heck we even make a cake pie once!”

“No, what I’m looking for is a- wait a cake pie?”

“Yeah. It looked like a pie, but when you cut it open it was actually a cake. Very odd request but I don’t judge.”

“Huh. Sure. Anyway, I’m actually looking for an ingredient. Something like a... love note! Yeah, that might actually be perfect. I was thinking maybe a whisk or something that was used to bake a wedding cake but I realize now it has to be renewable. Is renewable the right word?”

“Slow down, how can a love note be an ingredient?”

So Gianna explained it was for a potion, basically to capture and bottle love, though she didn’t say why fearing it might not go over so well.

“Well, my wife and I leave each other love notes,” he admitted. “You can have a couple she’s left for me. Ones I’ve left for her I consider hers now. She’s trying to deal with the twins at the moment so I won’t disturb her. Would that be okay?”

“That would be great! Thank you very much.”

“One second.” He went through a door in the back and came out a moment later with some slips of paper. “Here you go!”

“Thanks. And I’ll take that cupcake and any advice you have about something else like this that would work.” *Have to ask for a receipt, this is a legitimate business expense related to the crystal, and a bargain at that. Huh, now that I think about it he didn’t even ask for anything for the notes up front, he just gave them to me. Very different from griffon culture...*

He thought a moment as he rang up the cupcake. “Some of my best customers are Lyra and Bon Bon. One is always in here buying treats for the other. And I notice they always wear a different ribbon in their hair and I have to wonder- were those ribbons given by the other or bought for themselves? You could go ask.”

“Oh!” *Something like that, could you use just a small piece of it and make dozens of potions per ribbon? We’re talking about an ephemeral quality here, and magic, and intent. Twilight or Zecora would know.* “I’ll go ask them, thanks!”

“Sure thing! Good luck with the potion.”

She nodded and turned to go. “Er, where can I find them?”

But find them she did, and once again explained the situation, netting her a used ribbon that had been gifted to Bon Bon. With that she had her two objects and headed back to the ship. Twilight was back with some dying flowers, saying they had been gifted between two lovers and so their “freshness” didn’t matter for the potion, and in fact them being on display and looked at for longer would probably be beneficial!

Only one thing huh? I found two. Can the princess of friendship not find any lovers in this town? For shame, Twilight, for shame.

Zecora returned, announcing she had found three things, so it all worked out.

“A lock of hair from a baby’s head, a claw from a treasured pet that’s dead. And one last thing, a ripened scallion, from an older mare that loves her stallion. She was about to put it in a stew, but instead I bring it here to you.”

“I’m not exactly sure that’s what you asked us to get, but you’re the expert,” Gianna told her.

“CelestAI, plot a course back to the changeling encampment.”

“Right away, captain.”

The group made it back safely and the North Star hovered above the swamp so it didn’t sink in, and Twilight unloaded everything. Zecora got introduced to the changelings and Origami, who had been hard at work trying to figure out what they had already done. She also moved the main cauldron away from the crystal to where the manasphere wasn’t being impacted. “Even if you had managed to make something,” she explained, “it wouldn’t work. That crystal disrupts magic, remember?”

“We thought it was only spells,” Popsicle told her. “But it makes sense, now that I think about it.”

But now several fires were started, and Zecora got out the book and ingredients she wanted to use for the modified love potion. “Before I tell you what I think, and cause an even bigger stink, let me hear what’s on your mind, before a single leaf we grind,” she told Origami.

She explained what she had learned, which was mostly them trying to manage the hunger while still being able to change their shape.

“But this will never, ever do, that’s why their efforts they do rue. The magic’s linked, there is no doubt, that’s what the magic’s all about. A replacement is their need, to curb this nasty little greed.”

“And you can do that?”

“That’s what we’re about to test, I hope you’re caught up on your rest.”

“Potions do take forever to make, that’s true,” she grumbled.

So Zecora and Twilight showed Origami a trick to help make a variety of potions from a single base. Because the process took so long, and took so much magic from the practitioner, they started with one large batch of potion that took most of the ingredients. Then poured it into separate, smaller cauldrons and added the final piece, the love object. This then boiled and brewed for the remaining time that was needed, and six hour later they had five doses of the potion. Origami was mortified she hadn’t been paying *quite* enough attention and allowed one of hers to boil over. But Twilight tried to console her saying the one she did make felt more potent than either of hers.

“In fact in terms of magical strength, Zecora’s potions are the best, then yours, then mine. I guess I need to brush up on my potion making. I just never expected this sort of a request.”

“Now to see if they actually *do* something...”

The changelings talked over who would be the ones not to get a potion, then make sure they weren’t touching any crystal and drank them down. They brightened up considerably. “I can feel the hunger subsiding,” Tingle reported. “I think it worked.”

“Not a scientific trial, but I see you wear a smile. Please record how each brew does, so we know the kind of loves, that make the potion work the best, I’ll take care of all the rest.”

“Right,” Twilight reasoned. “See how long each potion lasts. In an ideal world Zecora would have made all six but that’s asking a lot even of her. This would reduce the number of variables we had to work with, leaving only the final potion ingredient as our variable. Now we have two, the pony that brewed and the ingredient. But if all five work at least we know any object *can* work, as long as it meets the requirement.”

“Next time we’ll try brewing our own, now that we have the recipe,” Popsicle told her. “We can start some kind of record, like you said, to see what sort of results we get from each type of love ingredient. Hopefully it lasts more than a day.”

“How are they going to get those ingredients though?” Origami asked.

“Same way we did,” Gianna explained simply. “Ask for them. Shape-shift into a pony and go into town. Spread it out, depending on how often these need to be taken I’m sure other places can be told and send their ingredients to Ponyville. Once you can prove you don’t need to eat love directly, you’ll be accepted by a town- at least that’s the hope right- can get a job, and pay for the supplies you need on your own.”

“That’s the only thing we wanted,” Majile agreed. “To be able to live as ourselves without compromise and be accepted for who and what we are.”

“And this is a good first step,” Twilight agreed. “We’ll keep in touch, see how you’re doing.”

“That would be fine,” Popsicle told her. “Meanwhile, get this crystal out of here, it’s yours now, as agreed.”

As the group flew back to drop off Zecora first, Origami had a sour look on her face.

“I hardly did anything.”

Gianna fought off a snort. *You didn’t want to do anything for them in the first place, if I recall correctly?* “Sorry about that,” she said instead. “It was a time crunch, and I had no idea where to get anything off that list of yours. I figured it was best to bring in an expert. But Twilight said she wasn’t one, and got the real expert. I think we both participated equally. I ran around and got stuff, you helped brew

the potion. Okay you messed one of them up so one less could try it, but that's how it goes. You got praised didn't you?"

"I guess."

"I mean at the end I just stood around while you worked. So who really did more? Did you really have a spell in mind that could help them?"

"Well, no, not really..."

"And how long would researching how to brew a love potion- and then modify it- take?"

"Weeks probably? If I was on my own?"

"And instead it's solved in a single day and we have almost all the crystal we need. Try to look on the bright side of something, for once."

"Are you saying I don't?"

"What's that? CelestAI? You need me elsewhere in the ship? I'm coming right now!" She ran off without looking back.

"I think she's saying I don't."

"I wasn't calling her," CelestAI mused, appearing by her side. "Query: is Gianna all right?"

Origami just sighed.

Chapter 19
About a week later
Meddling in the affairs

The two spent the next week going to classes, catching up on work and social stuff with their friends. Origami spent nights working on more healing items, creating three more, but messing up one of them and ending up with two. She gave one more to Gianna and one to Sunny when she came for her study session. Just because they weren't on the ship didn't mean Sunny gave up on studying magic, after all, and while she wasn't quite the bookworm Origami was, she had at least a passing interest in magic itself. Secretly she wanted to learn what exactly had happened to her to grant her the fake wings and horn but as such a thing had never happened before, that answer was not to be found in books. Meanwhile she studied another spell, and picked a shield spell, figuring if Origami wasn't going to practice with her Ki there might come a time she needed to be protected. She didn't say this out loud, of course, but it was in the back of her mind.

Origami also called up Flametwist, checking up on her and the new typewriter, which she announced was completely rebuilt from being dropped, and undergoing final testing (again!) for submission to the patent office.

"And what about your partner?"

"Ex-partner," she growled. "Basically awaiting trial. He's out on bail, it was just theft after all not murder or anything, so I can't expect too much. Trial probably won't happen for months though, that's just how it goes."

"That's too bad."

"It ended well. I got his labor for free as now his name is only a footnote on the patent application, and I know to be more selective if I take on a partner in the future."

"What if I had something I wanted you to work on, and you became *my* partner?"

"Oh? Getting into the inventing game? Spill, what is it you have in mind?"

"I'm not going to say over the phone! It's just an idea anyway, I have no idea if it would even work. But I wondered, with your current project wrapping up now if you would be open to another."

"Sure thing!"

"Okay. I'll think about it some more and give you a call if I decide to pursue it."

"You really know how to tease a girl, don't you? Okay, I'll be awaiting your call. You tease!"

"Talk to you later."

"Hey Origami," Gianna called into the room one night. "Let's go explore the town. Walking around looking for potion ingredients made me realize we basically just hang out at the school." *When we're not traveling to new continents and such, I mean.* "We should explore, see what it actually has to offer."

"Not interested, I'm busy studying this new spell, I almost have it memorized."

"We're going to stop at a *dessert* place I found before... They have the best tasting cupcakes..."

"... I can finish this studying later- no- I'll bring the book and study while I eat."

"You can't bring a book to eat cupcakes with."

“Watch me!”

“Lighten up Origami!” *Friendship class is simply lost on that mare...*

It was after class when the familiar flash of light heralded the arrival of a dragon message, and Origami snatched it and took a look.

“Twilight is getting worried no third type of crystal has presented itself,” she reported to Gianna. “Thinks maybe the center piece is just a huge diamond, like Sparkling Beauty said. I guess in the picture it does look like diamond, it’s kinda clear, while the other parts are the color of the crystal we gathered. Anyway, wants us to start thinking about another trip.”

“Sounds good to me. I’ll get my armor ready!”

“You don’t need to wear it just up to the castle.”

“But I *can* wear it up to the castle, and so I *shall* wear it up to the castle. May I remind you about a mare that brought a book to a cake shop? We may leave right away. We usually do.”

“I guess,” she muttered. “Come on.”

“Wait, I have to get the armor!”

“So the greatest source of large diamonds,” Twilight explained, “would be the dragon kingdom. They are constantly digging up gems because they’re considered a delicacy for dragonkind. Plus they have hoards, which may be a further source of them.”

“Is it okay to use a diamond though?” Origami asked. “I mean the other two were special types of crystal.”

“And if another type of crystal is found, we’ll use it,” she agreed. “But I would rather have *something* at this point, just in case. You were the one worried about the shadow faction remember? If they got wind of what we were doing and snagged the one perfect diamond we needed out from under us-”

“Yeah, okay, I see where you’re coming from,” she admitted.

“Good. I’ll be sending Spike along with you, he can introduce you to the new queen, and put in a good word for you. Hopefully she’ll be willing to help, as we’ve helped her a lot in the past.”

“A queen, eh?” Gianna muttered. “We should bring some sort of gift.”

Trust a griffon to think that way, Origami thought.

“She wouldn’t refuse it,” Spike agreed. “But at the same time I don’t think she’s the type to be swayed by gifts. She really is trying the whole friendship thing.”

“Perhaps I can put my skills to use,” Origami decided. “I could make some sort of magical object for her. That would let me practice my craft and let us bring a unique gift. But what would be good...”

“She probably lives in a cave?” Gianna asked.

Spike nodded.

“So maybe a rug? Something to make the cave nicer? Like a tapestry? Seems too impersonal. Can I have some time to think about it?”

“No real rush,” Twilight admitted. “But try to leave in the next week or so? Spike is at your service if you have questions about dragons.”

“Oh no!” he countered, backing away and waving his claws in front of him. “I was raised by you, Twilight. I’m not that familiar with dragon culture. I’m practically a pony in the shape of a dragon.”

Her face fell. “You’re right. Sorry about that Spike. I never meant for you to be apart from your kind.”

“Don’t worry about that, Twilight. You’re the best mom a dragon could have.”

“AW! Come here you!” She grabbed him up.

“Not in front of everypony!”

They snickered.

The next day Gianna was wandering around town wondering what gift would be appropriate for the queen, when she realized she knew nothing *about* the queen! *How can I pick a gift someone would like, if I don't know what that someone likes in the first place?* She rushed off to the castle to grab up Spike and get the story. It turned out she had replaced her father, the king, after they held some kind of dragon games to determine their next leader.

"I have no idea what actually triggers these games," Spike admitted. "But any dragon has a shot at the crown."

"Listen Spike; strange dragons grabbing up scepters because of some game is no basis for a system of government."

"Pony government happened because a pony and her sister discovered they could raise the sun and moon on their own and become immortal," he deadpanned.

"... Right you are! As sensible a method as any other. Please go on."

"It was actually me that won the game, not trying to brag just a fact."

"Hang on, you some kind of luck dragon or something? You could have been king of the dragons? Just like that? Didn't you save the crystal empire as well somehow?"

"Yeah, ponies don't give me enough credit, I get around. Anyway, I said I didn't want the job and gave the staff to Ember. Everydragon accepted it and here we are."

"But what's she like?"

"Originally? Cold. Weird for a dragon, right? Didn't want to work together, you know, the usual. She came around though. She's... driven. Wants to improve things for dragonkind. Trying the pony way. I hear it hasn't made her super popular, not with ancient dragons anyway. Younger dragons are more open to it, so we'll see how it goes."

"Okay, okay," she was nodding her head, an idea forming in her mind. "What about we immortalize her rise to power in a song? Or a poem, maybe? I saw a shop with a quill over it, do they sell quills or is the pony a writer? Let's go check. We can downplay your part, play up the friendship angle, I'm sure a writer would have some ideas."

"Now that's a unique gift," he had to admit. "Good going, Gianna!"

The shop they stopped in was run by a writer, who agreed he would love to create an epic poem dedicated to the dragon queen Ember and her rise to power. He got the story, excitedly announced lines and stanzas coming to him even then, and announced for such an important person as a queen he would even offer the pair a discount on his services. He would create a beautiful wall scroll with the poem-oversized as it was for a dragon- and promised it by the next day. He hastily got to work.

"Thanks, Spike," Gianna told him as they left. "That was a big help."

"Sure thing. What's Origami doing, did she decide?"

"I don't know but she went and found a broom somewhere and bought some string, so she must have some crazy idea in mind."

"Well, wish her good luck from me. I'll be ready when you are, and honestly don't sweat it. She's pretty nice, at least to me. It'll be fine."

"I hope so."

Meanwhile, days latter, Origami was cursing herself for a fool thinking she could create a gift worthy of a queen.

"Can't enchant the broom itself, it would turn into ash when the magic ran out," she muttered to herself. "So attach something to the broom, and have it burn up instead. Thus allowing the item to work

several times. Brilliant, no?” She glared at the burnt remains of the third attempt at the string she was working on. The first string worked out perfectly. She felt as she tied it on the magic accepted the purpose she wanted, that of cleaning. But six hours of work went up in flames on her second attempt, and here was the third, also burning away before her eyes. “What did I do wrong? I did everything the same as the first attempt, I thought. This magic stuff is really for the birds. No wonder Twilight doesn’t bother with potions or baubles. It’s way too frustrating.”

She took a day off to clear her head, and not think about magic at all (apart from the magic of friendship of course in friendship class) and started all over again. Success, and then again the next day! In fact the third string was practically glowing and felt much stronger than her other attempts, for what it was worth.

“The gift of pony magic,” she practiced in the mirror. “This broom, when commanded to clean when touching one of the strings, will do so until the job is done. As you can see it can be used at least three times.” *Yeah, that sounds good.*

“Whatcha doing?” Gianna asked, causing her to jump.

“Stop scaring me like that!” she yelled, heart racing. Her eyes darted around the room. “When did you even come in here?”

“A few minutes ago.”

“A few *minutes?!?*” Her face went scarlet and she really, really wanted to crawl under a rock. She smirked. “You looked like you were having fun so...”

The trip to the volcano the dragon queen lived in was going to take at least a day, it was one of the furthest territories from Ponyville. So the group got onboard and headed out, Spike being assigned his own room and given “Captain’s Assistant” privileges with CelestAI, just in case. But the trip was uneventful, and the ship landed in front of a large cave entrance, flanked by two ancient dragons. While the ship was bigger, putting these two snout to tail the length might be close, they were that huge. They perked up when the ship landed, then reacted with surprise as a couple of tiny ponies, a small dragon, and a griffon got out.

“Hello there!” Spike called up to them, after being pushed to the front by Origami. “This is the palace of the queen, is it not?”

The dragon on the right bent down and eyed the group. “Yeah, that’s right. Who are you?”

“I am Spike,” he announced. “On a mission from the pony Princess of Friendship, Twilight Sparkle. I bring with me Sunny, Gianna, and Origami, as well as gifts. We have a small request of Ember- Queen Ember.” He indicated each when he said their names, and they each nodded.

The dragon scratched under his chin. “She’s in a meeting.”

“We’ll wait!” Origami hastened to assure him, voice cracking. “I mean, we’ll wait.”

“Not getting anywhere though,” the dragon on the left admitted. “Been what? Three days now? Maybe she would welcome the break?”

The two regarded each other. “Could be,” said the other, taking a deep breath. “Well, up to you. If it’s important enough to risk her displeasure, I’ll see what she says.”

“To be fair,” said the other, “she’s hardly ever mad unless we really screw something up. And she does like you little ponies for some reason. And not just for eating.”

“Shhhhh,” the other shushed him. “Don’t even joke about that.”

“What, it was hilarious?”

He glanced down at them. “No?”

“Bah!” He waved the dragon off. “Just get going.”

“Ugh, fine. Be right back.”

“So, uh,” the dragon began after a moment. “Sure is nice weather lately.”

“It sure is,” Origami agreed. *Don't we ponies control the weather? At least around Equestria.* “So Queen Ember, we hear she recently took the throne?”

“Yeah, beat off a lot of bigger dragons- I mean, uh, she, uh, that is to say...”

And dragons can get embarrassed, interesting. “I take your meaning. What's the sentiment around that, anyway?”

“She's been implementing a *lot* of new policies,” he admitted. “Most of us older dragons think it's way too much, too soon. But then, we get pretty set in our ways given how long we live.”

“How old are you, if you don't mind me asking?”

“I'm only three hundred and such,” he admitted. “I don't consider myself middle aged at all either.”

“Three- Wow!” She recovered. “That's great. It must be interesting, to have such a long perspective on things.”

“Beats the alternative. Honestly I don't know how you ponies and things do it. You're here one day and gone the next. Poof!”

“Yes, well, we get by somehow.”

“Sorry, probably shouldn't bring it up.”

“...”

“Must be boring, just being a guard all the time,” Gianna stepped in.

“Oh, we have a rotation,” he admitted. “We're always guarding different things, different places, it's not so bad. I mean I'd probably just be sleeping in my hoard most of the time otherwise. Gives me something to do. Once you get as big as this, well, it gets tougher let me tell you. I live in a world too small for me, really.”

“So you do have hoards!” Origami exclaimed. “I'd love to see one.”

He chuckled. “You and everypony else. Good luck getting a dragon to agree to show you one.”

A thudding sound came from the cave and everyone turned, the dragon squeezed himself out the entrance. “Okay, she says it's fine, as it's Spike. Come on in. Watch your heads.”

The others looked at him quizzically.

“Little dragon humor there.”

“Oh!” Everyone laughed.

“Don't force yourselves.”

He deposited them with two other guards, adults, moving past tunnels that branched and twisted through the volcano. Those guards took them to two younger guards, standing before a small entrance to a meeting room of some kind, where several dragons could be seen crowded around a table.

“Spike!” yelled one, a blue dragon with darker blue scales and a lighter belly. She zipped around the table and hugged Spike.

“Hi, Ember,” he managed.

“So good to see you. You don't visit often enough.” She held him at arms length. “Those ponies aren't holding you captive, are they? Just say the word and I'll send them a sternly worded letter!”

“It's not like that,” he admitted. “I'm just busy. I'm doing good work alongside Twilight, believe me.”

“I do,” she admitted. “Introduce me to your friends!”

“Of course.” He cleared his throat. “Queen Ember, may I introduce Origami the pegasus, Gianna the griffon, and Sunny the earth pony. They have a request for you of utmost importance.”

“That armor,” Ember said, looking Gianna up and down. “Have my requests of your empire (what's left of it, no offense) finally been taken seriously?”

“I'm sorry, I don't know anything about that,” Gianna admitted. “I'm not from the capital.”

“Ah, no matter, no matter.” She went back around the table. “Is the request sensitive? I can send these others away, if so?”

The group shared a look. “It may be?” Origami admitted. *I don't know, we're asking for a diamond, you might not want to give it to us right away especially being seen by your subjects just handing stuff out.* “Why don't they take some time and stretch their legs? They can come back in a moment, our request shouldn't take long.”

“Very well. Take a break, all of you.”

They bowed to her and filed out. Meanwhile she started cleaning up the maps that were scattered about the table. “Please, sit! What's on your mind that the dragons can do for you ponies? I honestly thought you were fairly standoffish, but now here you are.”

Hey that's right, Origami realized. Twilight certainly has enough pull to get some kind of diamond, we do mining ourselves I helped clean out the collapsed one. They must find regular stuff too, and not just crystals. She's purposefully raising our visibility, isn't she? Using the airship to get us places, let us be seen by various places. So subtle I didn't even realize it but that's her plan, isn't it?

“Before we get to that, your highness,” Gianna told her. “We have a few gifts for you. If this is a good time?”

“Gift? You shouldn't have!”

“Nevertheless. Origami?”

Oh sure, make me go first...

Chapter 20

Just a moment later

The plan is hatched

“How did you know I was getting into poetry recently?” Ember gushed, the poem now spread out on the table. The broom had been well received, Ember remarking the enchantments seemed very well made, and making Origami realize that if dragons could sense magic, they could probably do spells too.

Great, so is my gift worthless then? Wait, if she can do magic she would recognize the work that went into the gift and appreciate it more. Right? She really did seem to like it. Of course anypony can do magic if they work at it. Trust a queen to put in the effort, I really shouldn't be surprised. Dragons are just as magical as ponies, why did I believe otherwise? They can read books and research spells just as easily as we can. Just because some unicorns- most unicorns- don't maybe most dragons do. I have no idea and it's bad to assume anything about them, really.

“Honestly, we didn't,” Gianna admitted. “Spike didn't even talk it up, I suggested it myself.”

“Well you guessed right!” she allowed, beaming. “And the topic, Spike you totally downplayed your role!”

“It wasn't that much,” he muttered, blushing and looking away.

“I've had it recorded as it happened,” she told him. “Your role in my ascension will not be lost to history. Gianna, Origami, thank you for the gifts. May I ask, you seem young, especially to be doing this sort of thing? Are you attending that school of friendship?”

“We are,” Gianna agreed. “We're part of a special outreach program that Sunny started a few weeks ago.”

Sunny snickered. “That's one way of putting it.”

“I see! I allowed a few dragons to attend but perhaps I should send more! Or request teachers here, and open my own branch. It seems to be working wonders for you.”

“Thank you, majesty,” Origami said with a bow.

“We would love more dragons, or to open a branch here,” Origami was sure Twilight wouldn't mind her saying that. “The more we can spread the magic of friendship the better off the world will be.”

“I'll consider each, I have a lot going on right now. But it's good to know. So, what can I do for you?”

“Without getting into too many details, Sunny's project is a powerful magic item we're looking to create. One of the components we would like to use is the largest diamond you've found. I know it's asking a lot, and I'm sure dragons are loathe to part with any part of their hoard, but it may be of vital importance to the defense of our lands against a threat spoken of in prophesy.”

“You are right, no dragon would willingly part with any part of their hoard, but then again,” Ember decided, “no dragon would go against the word of their queen, either.” She looked thoughtful. “If I ordered it I'm sure a suitable specimen can be found.”

“We would, of course, be willing to do a service for you,” Gianna spoke up. “If there *is* anything we smaller ones can do for you, of course. Your guards outside were certainly impressive, but admitted it's hard for them to interact with the world.”

"I'm inclined to simply give you whatever you want, just for bringing me such a lovely poem, working so hard on that magic item, and asking nicely. Not to mention paying back ponies for what they have done for me lately. But it would set a bad precedent. A diamond presented to you as a reward for a *service* would certainly cause less grumbling," she admitted. "And we do have a rather pressing issue at hand, as you saw when you came in..." She indicated the maps.

"The guards said you had been meeting for three days?" Origami asked.

"Yes, dragon meetings tend to be long. What's the rush? But it does get tedious. What do you know of dragon culture?"

"Not much," she admitted.

"Even I don't know all that much," Spike admitted.

"We must change that, dear Spike. Soon. But setting that aside. When dragons become a certain age they go looking for a place to live. Now, under my father's rule," she said this with a bit of a sneer, "dragons would simply settle wherever. This has caused us no end of trouble with griffons, who we share territory with. I'm sure you're more than well aware of that." She indicated Gianna.

She nodded. "Dragons are cursed daily as being part of our problems," she admitted. "They are not looked upon favorably."

"I'm sure she's just being polite," Ember informed them. "We are *fully* to blame, and I have said as such in the many apology letters I have sent your empire, along with requests for meetings on some kind of reparations. They have all been rebuffed. I don't think they believe I am not my father, and that my policies are not his. But somehow I must make them understand. Those six you saw are of age. We are trying to find them a place not already taken by dragons *or* griffons. I don't want to continue to stir up hatreds."

"That's very noble of you," Origami blurted.

"Thank you. But with griffons being as stubborn as they are, it's proven impossible. And so those six, and any coming along in the coming years, are now without a place to live. It's a dragon rite of passage to form a small group and 'leave the nest' to use a phrase you may be familiar with. I can't ask them to give that up, but at the same time what do I do with them?"

"And now a griffon has walked into your kingdom, wanting a favor," Gianna mused.

Ember smiled and chuckled. "Exactly. Perhaps we can help each other, if you're willing. I'll write up another apology letter, and a request for land. Deliver it. Try to make them see this empire is not the dragon empire of old. We have a chance to make a fresh start, one that can benefit us both."

There was a knock at the door. "The young dragons are back," said the guard.

"Send them in!" she commanded. "Everyone, this is Hotman, Flamieo, Plasma, Hothead, Glitter, and Dazzle. I would like you to meet Spike, Sunny, Gianna, and Origami. They're going to, I hope, deliver a message to the griffons and help find you a place to live."

"That would be amazing!" gushed Hothead. "You mean it?"

Gianna sighed. "I grew up on stories of dragon cruelty. Dragon theft. Dragon expansion. I had it in my head this is all that dragons could be. I had no intention of showing dragons mercy, if I grew up and joined the defense force and they came to steal more of our land. But then... I went to a school for friendship, of all things. I started seeing the world. I have a young dragon friend, named Rock Biter. I have learned there are..." she glanced at Sunny, "dangers in the world that are only hinted at. Shadows in the night that our survival may depend upon us banding together to defeat. Pony, dragon, and griffon. The school has done more than open my eyes, it's opened my heart. You say this is a new day for dragon kind? Okay. I've been taught to give you that chance, to prove it. So... prove it. If I get you a place to live, can you live alongside griffons? Can you work with us? Respect our traditions?"

Wow, thought Sunny. It's us all over again in the future. Pony us, believing all other types of ponies are not worth anything, but then finding out oh wait, they're just fine! We didn't learn that lesson now, and so we

repeated it in the future. But now they are learning that lesson- the future is changing, little by little. We're doing it, really doing it!

"Of course," Glitter assured her. "We've all trained to have a variety of skills that could be useful in our new homes. We can be guards, general laborers, scribes, send messages, stonework or metalwork (though only Dazzle is considered a sculptor) and performing magic." There were nods all around, and they stood up straighter. They were clearly proud of their efforts, and Ember seemed proud of her subjects as well.

"You *all* know magic?" Origami asked. "I mean you have actualized Mana cores?"

"We collectively know a handful of spells," Hotman agreed. "We all learned different ones, just in case. Yes, we all have solid cores."

"Wow!" *They really did take their future seriously. Of course for all I know that's just typical of dragons, to study magic. I mean not even all unicorns do, and they're the most magical of all. It makes sense a bunch of dragons that knew a few years ago they were going to need a home would buckle down and secure their own futures. Just like I'm trying to do.* "Sounds like any town would be lucky to have you!" *Until you got as big as our airship, anyway.*

"We hope they think that," Flamieo agreed. "And we won't take up any real space, honest. Griffons build their houses on the sides of mountains, right? We live in caves inside them. It's just dragons got away with being jerks in the past it drove the griffons away. We won't be like that. Honest! We'll be good citizens and try to get along with whoever is there. Give back to society, not just take from it."

"That is true," she admitted. "We live in the same place but we don't have the same needs. There's no reason it *couldn't* work as you say."

"There's a chance, then?"

"A small one. I'll have to convince the council and that may not be easy. But I'll try. I can promise you that."

"Oh, thank you!" they all cried, looking happy.

"Very well," said the queen. "I have some preparation to do. Guards!" The two guards entered the room. "You," she pointed to the one on the left. "Get a small bag of gems around. There is no standard currency between our people but griffons should like shiny things just as much as we do. There may be the need to grease the talons, as griffons put it. They should be prepared. You!" she pointed to the other. "While I work take them on a tour of my kingdom. Show them everything not directly dangerous to them. Let them see how we live, so they can answer any questions the griffons may pose to them."

"Dangerous?" Origami asked.

"I know you pony races don't tolerate the heat quite as well as we do," she explained. "So you probably shouldn't get too near our lava baths. Everywhere else should be fine... if you're careful."

"Lava *baths*? Now I want to see them more than ever!"

She laughed. "Well, maybe you can stand in the doorway. Lava is *very* hot. Don't get burned. You're responsible for their safety."

"Yes, majesty!"

"When you get back, I'll have the letter written."

"Can we come?" Plasma asked. "To the griffon capital or whatever? I mean if they agree right away we can just go from there, right?"

"Be a bad idea if you were seen," Gianna mused. "Especially there! But as long as you stay with the ship it should probably be fine?"

"Whatever you think is best! Let's go pack!"

"Right!" the others agreed and rushed off.

"Lava baths first!" Origami insisted.

"That's all the way down," the guard cautioned.

“Lead on!”

So the group saw the inside of the volcano. There was a huge lava pool the dragons controlled, so they could swim in lava, which apparently was a thing for them. They kept it regulated, watching for both rising and falling lava that might indicate an imminent eruption, and could open and close various chambers below that one to make sure that didn't happen. The group couldn't get too close, barely close enough to the door to see inside, but it was enough to see dragons lounging around and enjoying themselves. They saw the mining operation, with dragons heating up the cave walls and simply yanking the hot rock with their bare hands, then pulling it apart to look for gems. The rock then went to another chamber where it was more carefully heated, reshaped, and made into various things like furniture. This allowed the dragons to expand their cave, and make use of the raw material, which Origami was entranced with.

So efficient! she gushed internally. *It's a whole process, and they don't waste anything. Amazing.*

There were living quarters of various sizes, for the various sizes of dragons, venting for air, a water system, meanwhile their guard chatted away explaining what they were seeing and how it all worked. The group had to admit it was fairly impressive, and completely hidden inside the volcano.

“I never knew dragons had such a thriving industry,” Gianna remarked as the tour ended.

“Yup, we're pretty great,” Spike agreed. “Being a dragon is... amazing.”

With a pouch of gems and an apology/plea for understanding in hoof the group, now including the young dragons, headed aboard the North Star to head for griffon territory.

“I've visited the capital,” Gianna told the others, “as part of school trips. This will be my first time going on my own though. The place isn't hard to find, I just hope the council will listen to us.”

“You have a council? I thought you had a king or something,” Origami wondered.

“We did. Griffon kind is waiting for the idol to be recovered, and they'll crown that griffon their ruler. Of course according to Guru that's a false hope, so hopefully this is the start of my 'being bold' and making my homeland prosperous again.”

“We all lift together,” Sunny said cryptically.

There was plenty of space for the North Star to land, and the three walked out, but then Gianna realized the problem. She pointed with a claw into the distance, at the large building perched atop a giant petrified tree in the distance. “That's the capital building we're heading to,” she explained. “Problem is, it's only accessible by air. You're going to have to stay behind, Sunny.”

“That's okay. I'll keep the dragons company! They wanted to see the ship anyway.”

“Maybe I can make you a bauble with a spell that gives you wings,” Origami mused. “For cases like this.”

“I mean, I could learn a spell like that on my own, or I guess take my true power back if nopony was watching. We know it's safe now, thanks to Prince. I hate to put you to any trouble.”

“No trouble, and best not to chance it. It was safe for *him*, it may not be safe for *you*.”

“Oh. You just have to be a downer, huh?”

“I just want you to be safe.”

“Let's go,” Gianna told her. “See you soon, Sunny.”

“See you! Good luck!”

The pair flew past run down houses of all types, a sad state of affairs all around, though the capital building seemed to at least be in one piece. They landed on the steps and opened the door, going inside. A single griffon was at a desk, bored out of her mind, but perked up as Gianna and Sunny approached.

“Good afternoon,” she greeted them. “Welcome to the capital of Griffonstone. Can I help you?”

“Yes. I am Gianna, honorary member of the Griffon Defense Force. This is Origami, a mage from Ponyville.”

“I... wow!” She blushed all over the place, squirming in place at being given a title like that.

“We’re here to speak to the council about a matter of utmost importance. The dragon queen Ember wishes to negotiate peace between our two races and insure a bright future for us all. A surprising proposal, I admit, but one that I believe is genuine. Are the members of the council available?”

“Ah, yes,” said the secretary, not really sure how to process this. “Open hours for the council are 1 to 3 every weekday. Hardly any griffon comes anymore though. There’s a form, and the cost is 20 bits, or 15 talons.” She slid a few papers across the desk along with a pen.

“There’s a fee?” Origami spat.

“There’s a fee for most everything,” agreed Gianna, looking the form over and picking up the pen. “We have some gems from the dragon kingdom, perhaps we can pay with them? I don’t know any sort of exchange rate, but really, we’re here as ambassadors. Yes, she can’t send dragons they would be turned away or attacked on sight. Are you really going to change a peace envoy to go and talk piece with the members of the council?” She started filling the form out. *Name. Age. Reason for visit...*

“I don’t make the rules. Still, they hardly ever check, and...” she leaned closer. “It won’t be the full council anyway. So it shouldn’t be the full price. You’ll be lucky to see the two that bother to show up every day. That’s only a quarter of the council. So really it should be a quarter of the cost too!”

“I agree.”

“Can they even make any decisions with so few members present?” Origami wondered aloud.

“If the others can’t be bothered to show up, they don’t deserve to complain about decisions made by those that do. Five bits... I’ll just mark down that you’ve paid. Go on in. After you fill out the form. Some things are sacred.”

“Thank you!” Gianna said graciously. “Believe me, this offer is going to help put us back on the map. Dragons have an incredible industry, we just need to stop fighting long enough to realize it.”

“I hope you’re right. Just don’t make them mad, okay? This so called queen has tried to sue for peace before. They didn’t buy it. She’s real though?”

“I just met her. She’s real, we came upon her unexpectedly, just like we came here. There’s no way she could have faked it.”

“Huh. You don’t say? Learn something every day. Just through those doors, and to the right, you can’t miss it.”

“Thank you.” She handed back the paperwork. “Do we need to be announced or anything?”

“No. Just bang the desk if they’re asleep in there. Happens all the time.”

“... Okay..”

“This place is messed up,” whispered Origami.

“Yeah, it’s worse than I thought. Something has to be done!”

“You’re doing it. And hopefully more as prophesy demands. Remember, Guru said ‘ponies, griffons, magic’ and these are dragons. This is just the warm up. We’re going to do some big magic for them and really change their lives!”

“Yeah, you’re right. Could be. Ah, here we are.”

The chamber had a half circle desk, behind which sat two griffons with large nameplates. “Galuph” and “Glitzzy.” The other nameplates were in front of chairs that were empty. To the side sat another griffon who perked up and picked up a pen, clearly a scribe to record the meeting. The two council members also came to life, not quite believing their eyes.

“A supplicant!” Galuph announced. “Is it my birthday? Glitzzy you shouldn’t have!”

“Your birthday isn’t for two months,” the scribe told him.

“Ah, right you are. Must be a young recruit for the defense force. And a pony? How interesting! Well young griffon you have our attention.” He looked to the empty chairs. “Such as it is. How can the council of griffons help you today?”

“It concerns dragons,” Gianna said confidently. “And I think, if you hear me out, we can squeeze them for all they’re worth.”

Both got an excited look in their eyes and grinned at each other. “... Please go on?”

Yeah, I thought that might get their attention.

“So let me get this straight,” Glitzy told them after Gianna let them read the letter and explained why she was there. She was standing at attention, back straight and proud, as a real member of the defense force would. At least in her mind. “There really was a leadership change in the dragon empire, and the new queen is, from your description, an extremely young dragon.”

She dipped her head slightly. “That’s correct.”

“And her new policy is to work with us to find land for her young dragons, and she’s basically ordered them to be good neighbors. You’ve spoken to them, and are willing to vouch for them that they’re telling the truth about themselves. That they’re willing to work and have skills we might actually pay for.”

“Again, yes that’s how I understand the situation. They seemed very eager to prove themselves and put their skills to use for a better future for us all. Now on the other claw, are all dragons going to be the same? No. Many older dragons have concerns about the change in leadership and the direction she’s chosen to go, but I think the more the younger ones show them this is a good path, the faster they’ll fall in line.”

“Yes, they are long lived, I suppose that means they get set in their ways. You toured their palace, for lack of a better term, and saw how they live. Saw them mining and crafting with stone and metal. And you say these dragons could do the same, but for us.”

“I don’t see why not. They all admitted to a range of skills.”

“Bottom line it for me. You’ve been there, I haven’t. As a member of the defense force, even if you’re just a recruit, what is your opinion of the whole situation? Should we trust them, when they have caused us so many problems in the past?”

Gianna took a deep breath. *Be bold, Gianna!* she told herself. “On the way here I saw the sorry state of our empire. Certainly, dragons are at least partly to blame for our troubles. I don’t deny that. The queen doesn’t deny that. Are they the *complete* cause? No, I don’t think so. We lost our idol and our will, and that’s on us. Something has to change. I look out at our run down houses and libraries and schools and theaters and I see what *was*. But I also see what could be again. Say we take their offer and it’s some kind of trick. Can six young dragons really do that much harm? Keep an eye on them until they prove themselves, if you’re that worried. If we give them a chance they could do so much good! We’ve tried hate. We’ve tried war. Look where it got us. We’re broken. Our spirits, our homes. They’re all broken. We know we can be a great empire, we were once. Let’s try something new; Peace. It’s what Ember wants. It’s what we want. Let’s give each other that opportunity. We don’t have much more to lose.”

They both shared a look and leaned over to whisper to each other.

This is it, Gianna. You made your pitch, are they going to buy it?

“You really think dragons can help restore our empire?”

“They helped break it, it’s only right they help restore it. The thing is, I think what’s hard for us would be super easy for them. Repairing our homes? They can work with stone like it’s clay. Let’s bring in dragons and let them play to their strengths while we play to ours. Everyone can win here.”

“The problem,” Galuph told her, “is convincing griffons to accept dragons as ‘friendly neighbors.’ But we may have a solution to that. Scribe?”

“Yes?” The scribe looked quite surprised to be called upon.

“Go and fetch the territory record for the last ten years. I believe, if I remembering correctly, one area that might fit the bill.”

“I’ll be right back!” the scribe announced, leaving his spot and heading out the back door.

Origami shrugged, cast a spell on the pen the scribe was using, and it floated into the air, ready to take more notes.

“What did you have in mind?” Gianna asked. The pen noted this down and Origami smirked at it.

“There is a settlement that some time ago had a singular cave nearby. A dragon drove out the griffons but then was never seen in the area again. However, for some reason no griffon went back there. Most peculiar. Perhaps these young dragons can make a home for themselves in this cave, and we can invite griffons to start rebuilding this town. Offer the land at a discount to encourage migration. Something. You don’t mind going to investigate why the area was never reclaimed, do you?”

She saluted. “It is my duty as a member of the defense force.”

“Honorary member,” Origami muttered.

“Very well. I’ll be able to get you the location once the scribe returns, if I’m even right about this and it hasn’t been reclaimed in the meantime.”

“If I’m not speaking out of turn,” Origami spoke up. “I have a question for you?”

They indicated she could continue.

“How do you see your empire coming back into its own again? What does that look like to you? Or put another way, what has to happen for you to be satisfied, look around at your towns and think to yourselves, ‘ah yes, the good old days are back at last?’”

“What an interesting question,” Glitzy admitted, sitting back in her chair. “It’s true we can repair our buildings, but that would not repair our spirits. We would need something... *big*, something to generate excitement among us again. New goods? Some new product it turns out we can make better than anygriffon else? I’m actually not sure, I haven’t thought about it like that before. It’s an insightful question, we need to *define* what success is, and then work towards that condition. Just saying ‘we want the old empire back’ isn’t a goal. Not really. I’ll think about it. Perhaps I will have a better answer for you, should you come this way again, young pony. Thank you, for giving me something to think about.”

So not just a new kind of typewriter, then. Good to know. “Of course. I’ll keep an eye out for anything that fits that bill.”

She chuckled. “We would be eternally grateful.”

“Ah, here’s the records!” Galuph told them. The scribe set a book down and returned to his spot, where he saw the pen floating there and his entire life flashed before his eyes as he realized his entire function, his reason for being alive upon the earth, could be replicated by a single spell cast by a pony too young to even be out of school yet. The mocking laughter of his peers in school, the endless arguments with his parents about “neat handwriting not being a career path,” the blisters- all of it came back to him in that one instant. Perhaps, just perhaps, it was time to put down the pen and pick up the accordion, his other true love. If his life was over, at least he could bring a smile to other’s faces as they watched other griffons heckle him as he played in public. For the odd coin, if he was lucky. His life was over, he may as well commit to the-

“Oh, sorry about that,” Origami told him, ending the spell. “Didn’t want the record to be incomplete, you know?” The pen went back to stillness, lying there on the desk. Mocking him. Was this a joke to her? His life? Was he a joke to her?

“Thanks,” he said, picking it up. “Awfully nice of you.” Oh how he seethed. How his talons *yearned* to pierce the flesh of her neck. His eyes, to see the look of surprise in her own as he leapt over the desk and

took his revenge upon her, here, in the very room she had so causally destroyed him. To smell her blood, to lick it from his claws, to watch it trickle down the contours of her body. Red! Such a contrast to her soft, supple- Oh they were talking again. He bent to write.

“Yes, here it is,” Galuph realized, flipping through the book. “The town of Swiftalon. At last report was still empty. Gives the location too- scribe- can you copy this out for us?”

“Of course Galuph, it would be my pleasure,” the scribe replied, in a totally normal tone and not betraying his rage at all. “I’ll just rip a page out of my notebook then, shall I? The meeting minutes mean nothing to you all anyway. No griffon ever reads them. What’s even the point of all this? The council? Nothing ever changes, it’s all pointless!” He realized he was screaming at them and clicked his beak shut. “Uh, I’m so sorry-” he began.

“You can go fetch a piece of paper,” Galuph told him, blinking in shock at this outburst but of course totally missing the point. “There’s no rush.”

“You may be right,” Glitzy told Gianna. “Maybe we are... broken.” She turned to the scribe and said gently, “Why don’t you come and see me after this? Your work is valued, and we have taken it for granted. I’m sorry about that. Perhaps there might be a position that fits you better? We can talk about it.”

“No, uh, no need, Glitzy. I spoke out of turn, I apologize. I’ll be right back.” He rushed off.
Yeah, he’s not okay, Origami thought to herself. *Maybe none of them are. How do we fix this?*

With directions in hand the North Star lifted off again, the two deep in thought.

“How did it go?” Sunny asked, concerned by the looks on their faces.

“It’s more than just a few broken buildings,” Gianna sighed. “I don’t know if we can ever recover. What magic can we do to fix *that*?”

“I was wondering the same thing,” Origami admitted. “But nothing comes to mind. Guru seemed pretty certain though, so don’t give up hope.”

“I’m trying, Origami, I’m really trying. But the rage on that griffon’s face... Is that who we are now?”

“What? No! Gianna! You’re not like that, at all. You want to help. It’s always been your dream, right? The defense force? Being a knight? He was just having a bad day or something. We’ll fix it somehow, you’ll see. We’ll find something *big* for them, I feel it... in my mana core!”

“I hope you’re right.”

The North Star landed near the abandoned town of Swiftalon, and everyone disembarked. They looked around, and the place was, in a word, a dump. The houses near the cave had been smashed and flattened, as though something heavy had fallen on them at some point in the past. Houses further away were run down, but otherwise untouched by the looks.

“Let’s split up,” Gianna decided, taking command as a young defense force member should.

“Dragons, you check out the town. Be on your guard, something may lurk here that drove off griffons and even a dragon. If you run into something, keep its attention and we’ll flank it. Likewise, we’ll hit the cave. If there’s something in there we’ll try and get around it, and you can flank it from the entrance.”

“You got it, captain my captain!” Hotman agreed.

“Come on, race you to that tree over there,” Dazzle challenged Glitter.

“Oh, it’s on!” They took off racing. The others spotted a large rock and challenged each other to lift it.

“What did I just say?” Gianna muttered, rolling her eyes.

“Yeah, dragons, am I right?” Spike asked. “What are they even about? No really, can you tell me what they’re even about? I’d like to know. I have all these feelings, are they normal? Am I a freak? What do dragons do about them?”

“Can’t help you buddy,” Origami told him. “You should maybe attend the school, get to know the other young dragons. See how they act. I doubt you’re a freak, sorry I should have led with that.”

“Hey, now there’s an idea.”

“Can I get some quiet?” Gianna hissed at them. “We’re on a mission here! It looks clear but we could all be in very real danger!”

“Sorry,” he whispered.

“Sorry!” agreed Origami.

Both giggled up a storm.

Help me.

The cave seemed to be one big room, right past the entrance, and it was definitely lived in. Evidence for this included some large furniture, straw on the floor, various “decorations” adorning the walls, and the gigantic ramclops that was currently juggling several large stones in the center of the place. This was a huge creature; one eyed, with horns and hooves but standing upright. When he heard them come in he was so surprised the stones went flying out of his hands, smacking into him.

“Ow, ow, ow!” he cried, more in surprise than anything else. “What in the world?”

“Sorry, you don’t have a door we could knock on,” Origami told him. *Shoot do I know anything about these creatures? I’ve never seen one. Do they eat ponies? Should I run?*

He laughed. “That’s a good one!”

“Oh, uh, thanks!” *Doesn’t seem mad.*

“Say, you wouldn’t happen to know about the town out there, would you?” Gianna asked him. “Looks kinda smashed up? You can’t miss it?”

“Sure, know all about it,” he bragged, picking his stones up and setting them neatly to the side.

“What do you want to know? I’m Rensibat by the way.”

“Gianna, this is Sunny, Spike, and Origami. Nice to meet you.”

“Same here. Yup, this place has been my home since I won it from that dragon a few years back.”

“Dragon?” *Bingo. He’s the reason no griffon settled here again. He must have driven them off.*

“Sure thing. Had this cave, and I wanted it. So I challenged him for it. He was a good sport, but he lost, and so he gave it up. Been here ever since.”

“So that’s how it is?” Origami wondered. “What sort of challenge was it?”

“Oh, the usual, I suppose. Strength, speed, wit, brains, cunning. It was years ago I don’t remember the specifics.”

He beat a dragon in strength? I guess it could have been a young one, and he does seem big and strong those rocks are almost the size of me. Was the town smashed up at that time? Was that part of the challenge? “So if I wanted it, I could simply challenge you for it?”

“You? Challenge?” He started laughing uproariously.

“Didn’t know you were such a comedian,” Gianna told her.

“Neither did I.” She waited until he calmed down again. “Naturally it would have to be something we can both do. Something I would have a chance at. I’m not suggesting a lifting competition. But something scaled to the both of us, what are you scared to lose?”

“Oh, now you’ve done it, little one,” he told her. “What’s your challenge then? If your challenge is flying to the top of the mountain than forget it. It goes both ways.”

“If I think of something you’ll honor it? Give me the cave if I win?” *Hey is this really going to work? These guys must really love challenges!*

He looked around. “I suppose it may be time to move on. It’s a nice cave, but I could check in with my family, see if they’re still alive or whatever.”

“You don’t know?” Spike asked.

“Eh, saw them, oh four or five years ago I guess at this point. Don’t really get along with them. I’m sure they’re fine.”

“I suppose you just like your peace and quiet, living all the way up here,” Gianna guessed.

“That I do! Time to poke my head up again? Yeah, sure, why not? There are four of you, I’ll give each of you a shot at challenging me, one each. That’s fair, right?”

“Sounds fair to me,” Origami agreed. “I challenge you to a juggling match!”

“Great, you would have to pick that,” Rensibat grumbled, looking at his stones. “I’ve only just taken it up you know?”

“Are you backing away from my *CHALLENGE?*” she yelled.

“No, no, it’s fine. First one to drop a stone loses. You have to find some similar stones though, and the same number of them.”

“I’m sure we can find something...”

Moments later the dragons had made her some smooth stones and they were cool enough to touch, so they took up their positions across from each other. *Okay, Origami, you can do this. Never juggled before but how hard could it be? I read about it. And I have a bit of an edge.* She spilled a bit of mana from her core into her being. *Magic, guide my hooves...*

The contest began. It was clear from the start that Origami had this contest in the bag, and the ramclops got more and more flustered, finally dropping a stone only a moment after he begin. He sighed.

“Performance anxiety, gets me every time.”

Origami stilled her stones, tensing in case he decided to attack. Instead he looked around the cave. “Mind if I take a few of my things with me?”

“Uh, no, that’s fine. You’re really giving it to me?”

He seemed puzzled. “You won the challenge. It would be dishonorable to say otherwise. You have bested me fair and square, so now I will move on. I think I have a crate in the back I can use, one moment.” He found the crate and packed his stuff up, then hefted it. “Well, it was nice meeting you! Goodbye!” He turned and without looking back headed down the mountain.

“Okay, what just happened?” Gianna managed, a bit dazed. “Because I saw it, and I still can’t believe it.”

“What I want to know is, how did you cheat?” Sunny asked. “I felt you doing something with your magic before you started. But it wasn’t a spell, he would have seen that. What did you do?”

“Just a little something to improve my odds. Also, cheating? For shame, Sunny. It’s a natural, magical ability I have. How can that be cheating? Now, get those dragons in here so we can discuss how they’re going to take care of *my* cave...”

And so the dragons congratulated Origami on her victory, and accepted stewardship over the cave for her. They talked about their ideas for the place, mostly tearing the whole town apart and starting from scratch.

“Kind of a big job,” Origami cautioned them. “Are you up to it?”

“We’ll start small,” Hothead insisted. “We were talking about it. Let’s clear one of the lots, maybe one at the edge of town so we build *towards* our cave, rather than away from it, so griffons get used to the idea of us being around. We start carving out our own tunnels, using this big area as just a common room. Then use that raw material we get to start building a model home. Show the griffons what we can do, you know? They can get experts here in how they want the town laid out, and how big the plots should be, and all that. Meanwhile we move all the raw material we can, like wood from these wrecks that’s good enough to use, into the cave to dry it out and such. Use that for furniture, I’m sure griffons want wooden bookcases

not stone ones, as an example. We contract with the griffons to build their houses after they see our model house, and move in as we get them done. These houses look to be single story affairs anyway, easy enough to throw some walls down, a roof, that sort of thing.”

“Smooth walls are easy, we can add details later,” Dazzle agreed. “I can’t wait to actually have a real town here again, get some commissions for big statues! Really big statues!”

The other dragons chuckled, and Hothead continued. “In this way the town grows, and the job is easier to manage. So really it’s not so bad.”

“If you’re satisfied, I am!” Gianna told them. “We can return and make our report to the griffons, and then go get our diamond. This actually worked out for the best all around. Huh. Didn’t expect that.”

Chapter 22

A few days later

Glad they didn't croak

With the diamond in hoof the group had everything they needed to make the unity crystal, but headed back and spent a few days helping the dragons out. Origami brought tools and nails and such, and used her magic to help build things out of wood for the model home. She was impressed with the dragons, they would take a bunch of rock, stick it together to form a flat plane, then let it cool. When the rock was hot they simply smoothed it with a hand, getting fairly good results without tools of any kind. Hefting the now completed slab between two of them and carrying it into place they heated the ground up and shoved it down, holding it while it cooled enough to stay there. Then when two walls needed to be joined together they just stuck nearly molten rock at the edges of each and made a nice smooth corner. So the walls of the house went up very quickly, and the first one was up in no time. By then some griffons had arrived, and supervised the destruction of the run down houses. They had to admit they were impressed, and with everyone acting professionally it seemed the new village was off to a good start. Saying goodbye and good luck the group went back to ponyville and returned to class. Two days later as they were getting ready in the morning they heard a tapping on their window glass and a proud looking bird, a red colored phoenix, was there holding a message. Gianna went over and opened the window up, taking it, and Origami grabbed it and unrolled it. The bird seemed to be waiting for a reply.

When you have a moment, please let me know when I can come see you. It's not completely related to the crystal, but if what I was told many years ago still rings true, I may have a solution to our shaping problem.

Celestia- Princess of Light

"I didn't know we had a shaping problem," Gianna remarked, reading it.

"She probably means shaping the crystals into the form Sunny is familiar with," Origami told her. "Honestly they could just as well be lumps for all the magic will care. But maybe they do have to fit together at least in the beginning or something? I wondered how we were going to do it, just making the diamond- we only have the one- how many masters are there in the world that can cut it perfectly the first time? I'm guessing not many. And they seemed to fit *perfectly* together, the precision needed is crazy! Well, looks like the time is up to us." *Can't shape an anti-magic crystal with magic, at least not for long anyway.*

"Right."

"After class today?"

"Sure, but where? We can't exactly tell one of the princesses of the whole land to meet us at the local ice cream shoppe."

"Did you say shoppe?"

"Is that not the right term?"

"Never mind. Get me a pen."

We would be honored to receive your majesty for tea on our airship, the North Star, an hour after classes let out this very day. We will be found hovering over Canterlot, as I assume by the method this message was sent certain parties were not privy to the information. Additionally I'm sure it would be most awkward if you were to arrive at the school in person and be inundated with-

She looked up from the letter. "What's a fancier sounding word for attention?"

"Don't look at me! Flattery?"

"Yes!"

flattery. We look forward to discussing the relevant topics of the day.

Origami- Student of Magic

Student of Friendship

"Laying it on a bit thick, aren't we?" Gianna asked, looking over her shoulder.

"Not at all. If she's going to forget phones exist and send us a message by *bird* instead of just calling the school and having a message taken for us, she's getting back exactly what she gave out."

"Uh huh. Do you even know how to *make* tea, fit for a princess I mean?"

"It's just boiled leaf juice, there isn't *princess* tea and *regular pony* tea. It's just tea!"

"Oh boy..."

True to their word the pair piloted the North Star over to Canterlot after classes let out and waited in the control room. CelestAI suddenly perked up.

"Observation: The princess has arrived and is asking permission to come aboard. Further information: she appeared 3 seconds ago via teleportation magic on the gangplank. This unit did not lower it as doing so in midair is against safety regulation 143. Query: shall I accompany her here or will you go to meet her?"

"Crap, I forgot about the tea!" Origami spat. "She'll probably expect it! I'll run and get some made, you take her to that big conference room on deck 3."

"Sure thing. Please tell the princess I'm on my way to escort her," Gianna told CelestAI.

"Command accepted, captain. Relaying message now. Message relayed."

"Good afternoon, princess!" Gianna greeted her. Celestia was standing on the ramp that was raised and lowered to get ponies on and off the airship, looking at the walls. She had on a satchel, strung over her neck, but as usual was otherwise unadorned. "Welcome aboard! I apologize no one was here to meet you, we expected you in the control room directly." *At least I think? I have no idea why Origami decided to meet in the air. Paranoia, no doubt.*

"I wouldn't come aboard without permission, even if I am a princess. This was the best I could do, hovering in the air and trying to get your attention didn't seem feasible."

"Ah, of course. Origami picked the location, we could have landed, honestly. Sorry about that. Oh, and for the tea you're about to be offered. I don't think she really understands it."

Celestia laughed. "Quite all right. Permission to come aboard?"

"Granted. Please, come this way. We're heading up to deck 3."

She nodded and fell in beside Gianna. *Look at me, walking around the decks of my ship with royalty. Like it was no big deal. Should I try to make conversation?*

"I'm glad to see this ship is working out for you," Celestia beat her to it. "Having a fast method of transportation has certainly made exploration of the world viable in a way I never expected. I've actually directed the royal workshops to explore the next generation of airships built upon a sleeker design, such as this one."

Now there's something griffons could work on! Airships! "I'm sure even this ship could be improved upon. No offense, CelestAI."

"None taken," the hologram said, briefly appearing and vanishing again.

"Add to that the fact we know such a ship is possible, it's simply a matter of finding out how to do it."

"Having this one to study, once this whole Sunny crisis is over, will be a huge help I have to think."

"That is my thought as well."

"Here's the lift, deck 3 please, CelestAI."

"Of course, captain."

With the princess settled, and something resembling tea served, Celestia got to business. "Let me first cast my detection spell on you both, if you don't mind," she began. "After all, I need to make sure you're not taken over in some way, ready to turn over the crystal to some shadowy mastermind."

"But then how do we know *you're* still okay?" Origami countered.

"I did give you the reference book for the spell, did you not look into it?"

"I did," she admitted. "We have it. There's only so much space in my mana core though, I can't engrave any more spells at the moment. I would have to cast it from the book and that would take forever to do. Go ahead, I'll just trust you." *I mean if the princess is compromised, we're all screwed. And she's been perfectly nice at this point, hasn't tried to take over the ship even once.*

"Thank you." She cast the spell and both turned out free of mental influence, as expected.

"Still, a bit of a relief," Gianna decided. "You and Sunny should clear each other occasionally, and at random, now that I think about it. As you can both use magic now, and all."

"Hummm," she hummed.

Oh sure, feed her paranoia, Gianna thought with a scowl.

"I have plenty to talk to you about today, something of a pet project I'm afraid. Not related to Sunny at all, though I will admit if what I hope comes to pass our land can be strengthened." She got out a very old looking book from the satchel and set it on the table in front of her. Origami's eyes lit up a bit at seeing such an old book.

"Oh yes, before I forget," she remembered, putting a hoof gently over the top of it. "I get reports about happenings in the kingdom and a curious one reached my desk. Apparently, a couple of my little ponies and a griffon helped out queen Ember just recently. Found a home for some young dragons and helped reestablish a possible griffon settlement? Got dragons and griffons working together a little bit? You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

"We just happened to be in the right place at the right time," Origami assured her, blushing up a storm and studying her teacup.

"Perhaps. The fact remains you were instrumental, and I wanted to let you know your efforts were seen, and appreciated. Let's hope it works out for all involved."

"If the dragons don't start anything, we won't," Gianna assured her. *I hope.*

"Good to hear! Now, this is one of my earlier journals. It's not the original, they do tend to fall apart after a few hundred years..."

Yeah, that's such a problem I'd love to have, Origami mused.

"I copy them over into new books as they age out. Ah, my thoughts were, how do the young fillies say it? So cringe? Anyway, I went looking for reference to that frog empire you spoke of, and as it happens I did remember correctly. Many, many years ago the empire actually made contact with us!"

"Really?" Gianna exclaimed. "So where are all the friendly frogs in Equestria? Did something happen?"

“Something did, but I’m not sure what. I think, now that we have access to the North Star, we can finally solve that mystery. What do you say?”

“You mean go there?” she asked excitedly. “Of course! I mean, uh, if Origami agrees?”

“I’ll need the full story,” she decided. “If you don’t mind telling it?”

“Not at all.” She flipped through the pages. “I write here that the frog, toad, and newt empire arrived in mighty ships that soared through the air, and I can’t help but think they had many similarities to the North Star. Certainly more in common with this ship than with our current airship fleet. Ah, memory. I could be wrong, it was so long ago.”

“I’m hesitant to ask exactly how long...”

“You are right to, and it matters for the story.” She flipped a few pages. “They offered us an amazing glimpse into the future, saying they could teach us secrets about magic, building techniques, and offered glimpses of wonders so strange I had to wonder if they came from our world at all! We proceeded slowly, with their ships arriving a total of three times to trade with us and talk about long term arrangements. I had a feeling they were testing us, seeing how we would react to them and their wonders. It’s rather unfortunate that this was right around the time Luna became Nightmare Moon and I had to banish her.”

A thousand years ago? They had airships like this that long ago? Where did they go? What happened?

“This of course left me despondent. The kingdom suffered, and by the time I finally pulled myself together it was...” She flipped more pages, “years later. I had the kingdom to run, and both the sun and moon to raise. They had been forgotten, as they didn’t appear again. Until you mentioned them and jogged my memory, they may well have not existed for me. So, my request of you would be this, and you are of course welcome to refuse. I can send another, slower, less capable ship, in your place. I won’t take this one from you, as it may be needed for the Sunny crisis at a moment’s notice.”

“You want us to find out what happened?” Origami reasoned.

“Correct. Did they learn of Nightmare Moon and decided our empire was too unstable? Did some environmental crisis strike at them around that time as well, crippling them? Were they simply waiting for us to make the first move and have been disappointed these last thousand years? Or perhaps their knowledge of magic and technology took another leap forward and they left the planet altogether!”

“Or there was a war, and they destroyed themselves,” she muttered.

“Yes, another possibility. Would you be willing to find out? Take my offer of opening relations once again? Invite them to tour our lands? Trade? And convey my apologies, should they remember me slighting them somehow, to this day.”

The two looked at each other.

New magic! Origami's eyes said.

Lost kingdoms rediscovered! Gianna's eyes said.

“I think we could manage something,” Origami decided, trying and failing to keep the excitement out of her voice. “But I would want to see those writings about them. Even as old as they are, it would be more than we know now. Any thoughts you have on how to behave around them, do they even speak our language? I need research materials! Going in totally blind is unacceptable!”

She chuckled. “You do remind me of her,” she said cryptically. “I am happy to copy out the relevant sections, I’m not really comfortable loaning out my entire journal. Even one as old as this one.”

Origami waved her hooves. “Oh, no, no, of course not I wasn’t asking for that!” *Maybe just a little.* “A copy of those specific pages is fine, just fine!”

“Very well. I will make sure Twilight and the school know you are performing this diplomatic mission for me, and get you the copies tomorrow. If there is anything the kingdom can provide for you that you feel would be of use, please make any reasonable request and I will grant it.”

“Gee, I can’t think of anything at the moment...”

“The offer is open until you leave, obviously. Now, the second order of business. Your mission, officially- if anyone there asks- is to find equipment advanced enough to shape the crystals. Twilight is interviewing possible shapers to do the job, but the official line is we are simply exploring our options. If they were as advanced as they said so long ago, and have only improved since then, cutting some crystals may be as easy for them as levitating something is for me. If they can do it, so much the better. It gives them the right to ask favors of us, further opening the possibility of dialog with them. Plus it puts us ahead and Twilight doesn't *need* to know how far along we are. Should they be needed, they'll be ready, but at the same time it's less temptation for her.”

“She's not going to be mad if she finds out we went behind her back for all this, will she?” Origami asked seriously.

She laughed. “She's no kirin, to fly off the handle and go berserk,” she assured her. “I think she has presence of mind enough to know she can get obsessed with things, and needs to be reined in a bit from time to time. Presentation matters too. The work must be done, if we present it fully complete as a surprise, ready to go, rather than outright telling her we didn't trust her, she'll likely take it in that spirit. It takes a lot to really set her off. Even during the height of Tirek's attack, it wasn't until he destroyed her library that she showed any signs of true rage. Oh she was angry at him for trying to take over and such, but she didn't unleash her full might until her *books* were destroyed. As long as you don't destroy any books, you'll be fine.” She laughed again.

“Fair enough. I'm actually surprised she's not more insistent we hurry this up.”

“We sort of avoid her though?” Gianna reminded her. “Sunny sleeps there but we don't anymore. We're either out on missions or at school. She knows where the crystal is, she can look out the window and usually see the North Star parked somewhere. She knows we'll always jump on any mission she gives us. We have a 100% success rate too. Her peace of mind is probably as high as it can get, where we're concerned. She knows she can count on us and we don't dicker around. Whatever she asks, she gets the same or the next day, not accounting for travel time. It's on her at this point.”

“I guess.”

“She's probably tumbling down many rabbit holes,” Celestia explained. “One book leads to another with her, one checklist to the next. She knows she only has one chance at this, and may be exploring many options of how to make them function, so we can make them right. Her friends have told me many times they have had to prod her into action, rather than more research. I have privately suggested they refrain in this case, and allow her all the time she wants. It's beneficial to us, after all.”

“Devious!”

She smirked. “I know my student. So, ask around when you get there, see what they offer you. It will be a good way to judge their current capabilities too.”

“Got it!” Both nodded.

“And the third and final point. The vote. We've been scouring the kingdom looking for any signs of malcontent, or mind control. We've come up completely empty. Oh there's the usual grumblings of course, you can't please everypony all the time, but nothing I haven't heard before. I've tested key officials in the palace, guards, even the cooks. I think we've gotten *far* ahead of whatever shadow faction Guru spoke of or it's hiding out in the country somewhere. So we're going ahead with the vote. Don't worry,” she put up a hoof. “We've removed all reference to crystals, simply replacing that verbiage with ‘an undisclosed magical artifact’ and implied we've already ‘found’ such a thing and are simply asking for opinion on activating it or destroying it. We've made the information as generic as possible, simply asking everypony ‘do we trust in a magical artifact to protect the land or in each other?’ A yes vote means using the artifact, which may have negative impacts we can't predict, while a no vote means we destroy it and take our chances. I know you may feel differently, but we can no longer delay. Besides, the line Guru gave you was not ‘what you dread will come after the vote’ but ‘what you hope.’ It sounds positive to me, and we really can't delay Twilight

forever. She will want an answer, and I won't simply decide for my subjects how their lives will be impacted."

"But that could mean disaster at first that then works out!" she weakly protested.

"I have to imagine Guru then would have said that. Why raise our hopes? It would have been just as effective to say 'dark clouds gather but then depart' or some such if it must be only alluded to. No, something important happens after the vote. He was clear on that point, I feel. It must take place."

"Very well. At least you checked, thank you for that."

She put the book back in her satchel and slung it over her head. "Of course! So that's it. I'll get out of your hair, think about anything a diplomatic mission might need apart from your own wit and charm. I'll send the pages along first thing tomorrow!"

"Thank you, princess Celestia!"

"Thank *you*, Origami and Gianna. This mission is not without risk, but the rewards could be great. I'll anxiously await your return, and with good news!"

"If it exists, we'll find it," Gianna promised.

"Good. Thank you for the tea, it was... interesting." She bowed her head, lit up her horn, and vanished.

The two stared at each other for a moment.

"Wit and charm?" Gianna finally spoke up, trying not to laugh. "This mission is doomed from the start."

"Hey, speak for yourself!"

Chapter 23

Two days later

A whole new world

The journey was uneventful, Gianna practicing her meditation, breathing, and oversoul technique while Origami poured over the notes Celestia had left her and worked on more successful magical baubles. Sunny had of course been invited along, eager to stretch her legs as “all that studying makes me want to fall asleep half the time. I don’t know how Twilight does it!” But she did go back to studying magic too, at least a little. All three were amped up on the idea of finding another new land, and maybe one that might not be as messed up as the last one they visited. Origami and Gianna were having a quick snack in the galley when Sunny raced into the room, screaming her head off.

“Land ho!” she cried, over and over. “We found it!”

“Did we?” Origami asked, looking over at Celestia.

“Statement: She insisted she be the one to inform you,” she told the others. “Query: May I now share my observations with my co-captains?”

“Do it on the way to the bridge. You have to see it, it’s a glorious island! A jewel in an unbroken sky. A pearl upon the necklace of the planet itself.”

“Statement: it is a paradox.”

“Explain?” Gianna commanded, getting up and heading out with the others.

“Query: May I suspend that command until you have had a chance to visually inspect the monitor personally?”

“Uh, sure?”

“This unit will meet you on the bridge.” She vanished.

“What is it, is it bad?” Origami asked.

“I didn’t see anything wrong,” Sunny told them. “It looked like a pretty great place to me, but I only looked for a second and came running to get you. Come on, let’s go!”

Looking at the viewscreen showed, in the far distance, a nearly round island with a jagged slice cut out of the one side. The North Star had risen fairly high to get a good view, and on the center console a 3D representation was being built as more data came in.

“So what’s the problem?” Gianna asked. “Looks fairly normal to me?”

“Statement: The island shows signs of heavy amounts of air particulate, but without the corresponding infrastructure to explain such widespread contaminant. This civilization seems *more* primitive when compared to pony civilization, not less. This unit records no evidence of train tracks or large fishing vessels in the waters.”

“Go back to heavy amounts of what?”

“There’s a lot of pollution, but nothing to *cause* pollution,” Sunny interpreted.

“Sunny’s statement is accurate.”

“What else could cause such a thing?” Origami asked.

“Uncontrolled wildfires. Munitions. There is no sign of volcanic eruption but it could also be somewhere my sensors have not yet penetrated.”

“Munitions?” Sunny asked, horrified. “You mean weapons fire? Explosives?”

“Affirmative.”

“But the amount needed to cause visible levels of smoke in the air at this distance...” The three shared a look.

“Just what are we getting into?” Origami wondered.

“What else can you tell us?” Gianna commanded, going over to the display.

“The total surface area is roughly 2/3 the size of the Equestrian continent. Trees seem to be in abundance, ruling out widespread fires. Climate would seem to be within 10% deviation when compared to Equestria. I am detecting snow on mountain peaks, temperate, savanna, and swamp like areas. Cleared areas indicate sparse, widespread settlements not unlike Ponyville. Further resolution will be gained as we approach. No airborne vehicles detected. No power plant heat signatures detected.”

“Well, they... probably use magic and teleport everywhere?” Origami hoped.

“Better bring us in nice and slow,” Sunny decided. “Let them see us, hopefully they have telescopes or far seeing magic. They’ll see we’re alone, and hopefully not panic.” *Like a bunch of ponies did when a single unicorn happened into town. Crap!*

The land rolled beneath the North Star, the three having decided to head for the center of the island where they saw a large town, with walls around it. Figuring this was the capital- the center of the land is where the pony capital was after all- and thus would house their leaders, they headed straight across the island. From the air the North Star could now detect desolate and destroyed towns, craters, and unattended machinery of unknown purpose. As the North Star had said, no trains or train adjacent mass transit were in evidence either, just hard packed dirt roads leading between larger settlements. What they did not detect was any sort of frog, toad, or newt.

“Civil war? Did they destroy themselves?” Gianna breathed.

“If they did, it happened in the last few days. The wind would have dissipated the smoke otherwise,” Sunny told her. “And we don’t see a lot of vines and such growing over ruins. Every place has vines, right?”

“They could be hiding,” Origami told them. “Just very, very good at hiding. If there was some kind of battle it makes sense they would be skittish.” *But they had airships 1,000 years before we did! What happened to them?*

“That’s one word for it.”

All three breathed sighs of relief as the capital came into view, and there were signs of life below them. Some kind of cleanup effort was clearly underway with all manner of things moving below. Giant insects, colorful beings, carts, they all moved around outside the gates piling up metal into two big piles. Work of course stopped, and everyone seemed to be looking up at the ship now hovering in the sky. Most worrying was the city. There seemed to be a castle sized hole in the center of it, while nearby a castle like structure was half buried in the ground. As if the entire place had simply flown out of the city, and then crashed days later. The whole area was flooded, but that seemed natural for a city full of amphibious types.

“Let’s fly down under our own power,” Origami decided. “See how they react to us. Perhaps they will worship us as gods, or beg to be evacuated from this place. We shouldn’t let the ship get anywhere near them until we know what happened around here and what they might ask of us.”

“Agreed,” Gianna said, making sure her armor was fully adjusted. “Watch over us, Sunny.”

“Will do. Good luck down there.”

The crowds parted as the two spiraled down slowly, so the inhabitants got a good look at them. But gravity does as gravity wills, and by the time they touched down a large circle of faces stared at the two interlopers. There was no sound. Both sides stared at the alien nature of the other.

“Ba weep, granna weep, ninny bong!” shouted Origami, a hoof raised in greeting.

“Er, you go insane from stress?” Gianna asked out of the corner of her beak.

“Universal greeting, don’t you know anything?”

“The what?”

But this seemed to break the spell as a curious looking frog carrying for all intents seemed to be a regular old accordion and wearing ragged clothes hopped up to them. One eye was closed, his foot covering was half torn off, but he seemed joyful enough. He squeezed the thing he was carrying and notes came out of it.

“Oh the aliens have come at last, the aliens have come so fast. Hide your kiddies, lock your doors, the aliens are in the moors. They’re in the sky and underground, those aliens are all around!”

“We’re not aliens!” Origami shouted. “We’re just from another continent.”

The figure paused in his song. “Not aliens?”

“That’s right. We’re ponies. *I’m a pony, that’s a griffon.* We’re from the north, a place called Equestria.”

The figure’s face fell. He turned and shouted. “They’re not aliens, everyone. And they don’t seem to want to eat me. I’ve lost interest, someone else deal with them.” He went hopping away.

The two looked at each other and thought the same thing. *We’ve discovered a land of madness!*

“You’ll have to forgive Wally,” said another figure, an elegant looking newt in what probably was once a very nice gown. She was accompanied by a tall, reddish figure in armor, and both hastily had been making their way over there. “He’s a bit off in the best of times. I am Olivia, and this is my loyal companion-”

“General Yunan, Scourge of the Sand Wars,” shouted the figure, striking a pose. She went on. “Defeater of Ragnar the Wretched, and the youngest newt to ever achieve the rank-” She stopped, looking troubled. “We don’t even have a military anymore. Am I even a general? What am I now?”

“Not now, Yunan. Thank you.”

She sighed. “Maybe not ever again.” She deflated.

“Yes, well, be that as it may. You will always be my friend, at least hold onto that.”

“Aww! Olivia!” Her eyes got watery.

She cleared her throat. “Do you have names?”

“Yes, I am Origami, a pegasus from the town of Ponyville. My companion is Gianna, a griffon from Beakwick. Aboard our craft, if you don’t mind it landing somewhere, is Sunny, an earth pony from Maretime Bay.” *A zillion years in the future or whatever, but let’s not get into that right now. Hey, we are speaking the same language. How... how is that possible?* “Our continent is the land of Equestria, far to the north west of here. We come in peace.” *Take us to your leader. No, no, I just now said we weren’t aliens...*

“Yes, an impressive method of conveyance. We have cleared some land...” She looked around helplessly. “I hate for it to get stuck in the mud, however.”

“It can hover. We just wanted to be sure of our reception,” Gianna told her.

“Prudent. With what we’ve been through this past month, and more importantly just a few days ago, you were right to approach cautiously. Thank frog you did not get caught up in our troubles and have come *now* when things are at least somewhat settled down.”

“So, we’re okay?” Origami pressed. “Our presence here won’t be too disruptive? You won’t attack us or anything?”

She half laughed and half sobbed. “We have nothing to attack you *with*, at the moment. Maybe someone could find a busted up lance or something. You have nothing to fear from us, visitor from afar. We

are a peaceful people, for the most part. More so now, that certain regressive elements of our culture have been removed.”

Suspicious confirmed, I guess. Civil war. Wow! Let's just hope 'the good ones' won. “So there was some kind of disaster here?”

She simply nodded sadly.

“I see. Get Sunny down here, and we can see about helping where we're able. It's the least we can do.”

“Oh but this is not your concern!” she tried to protest, but Origami held up a hoof.

“It's what we do. Think nothing of it.” *Yes! While clearly terrible for them, we can get off on the right hoof right from the start. We show them what hard working ponies we are, and we're in for sure.* “I just wish we had known, we would have brought others to help.” *What I wouldn't give for a horn right now! Or a squad of unicorns, I can see their faces as our kind levitated and returned that castle to where it was before, but oh well.*

“We can still make a difference here.”

“I'll be back,” Gianna announced, taking to the air again. She headed to the ship.

“Astonishing,” Olivia breathed, watching her. “What a sight. We have tamed certain birds to act as royal mounts, but to fly oneself. What a joy it must be, to soar.”

“Yes... Excuse me for asking, but our records showed your kind once bridged the gap between our two races and lands a thousand years ago. These records were just recently uncovered that's why we thought we would drop in. See how you were getting along, if you will. We're confused at how you seem to be *less* technologically advanced than us, now.”

“Ah, that's easily explained, though I fear I would do a poor telling of it. Plus I really must get back to work.” She turned, scanning the crowd. “Oh Hopediah! Could you come here a moment please? Yes, I see you there!”

An orange frog was looking around and seeming to whistle, while a smaller, red frog was jumping up and down near him. He finally sighed and started over there. “Why me?” he was heard to be saying. “Why does it always have to be me?”

“Do you think they'll give me a ride if I ask?” asked the red frog.

“Don't be rude, Sprig. You just don't ask to *ride* somebody you just met. What do you want, Olivia?”

“Can you explain to this fine pony, and her companions when they return, about what happened here? I'm sure I would botch the telling and you were far closer to it than I was.”

“Yeah, sure,” he agreed, however reluctantly. “Not pulling my weight around here anyway.”

“Now Hopediah that is simply not true. You've done more than anyone in this crisis, we don't expect you to clean this all up yourself. Come along, Yunan. Come find me tonight and we can talk more about what we can offer each other. I'm the closest we have to a government official at this point, so I'm all you'll get for now. Good to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too.”

The airship started moving, seemed they had found a good spot and were bringing it down.

“Wow!” the red frog exclaimed. “Don't let my sister in there, she'll try to take it apart to see how it works.”

“I have to admit that's probably true,” said the orange frog. “Anyway, I'm Hopediah Planter. This is my grandson, Sprig, and my granddaughter is around somewhere. Look for the only working robot around- oh there she is. Hey Polly!” He waved. A tiny, round figure on top of a robot's shoulders waved back. “That's Polly.”

“She thinks she can repair some of this junk.” Sprig kicked a piece of metal that was stuck in the mud. “I give her a 30% chance. Powering it is the problem.”

“Privately I'm hoping she can't, though Frobo has come in handy,” Hopediah mused.

"I noticed the two piles," Origami agreed.

"Yeah, one is just to melt down, she thinks it's beyond repair, while the other she wants a better look at. Some were concerned about her taking over the operation but," he chuckled, "riding Frobo around made up their minds real quick."

"And she's just a kid?"

"Just got her legs!" he answered proudly. "Smartest polliwog in the whole world, I'm so proud of her. I just hope I last long enough to see her grow up, what a frog she'll be!"

"Huh. This place is... very different from what I expected."

"Well, welcome to Amphibia, I guess. Let's go find a place to sit down, these bones aren't as young as they used to be and even a farmer like me can get run down after too many short nights."

With introductions made after the other two arrived, Hopediah, or Hop Pop as he insisted they call him, launched into his story. "The short of it is, our king lived for a thousand years waiting for the prophesied return of our civilization's energy source, what we frogs called the calamity box, that had been thrown into another world by our ancestor. It came back, with a couple of kids from that world, one of whom, Anne, we met and sort of adopted. We thought he would use it to get her back home, but instead used it to power up his old civilization and start building war machines to travel to other worlds and plunder their treasures. We stopped him, but as you can see we paid a very high price for it. This is what's left us in this situation we find ourselves in today." He indicated the devastation around the area. "Our homes are destroyed, our fields are gone, torn up to try and find metal deposits to make more robots. Andrias didn't care if he wrecked this world, he figured he could just go to another. If we survive the coming winter it'll be a miracle."

"Okay, we can maybe help with that but can I get the slightly longer version of the story?" Origami asked. "I feel like a lot has been left out."

He sighed. "What we've learned is this; more than a thousand years ago our ancestors discovered three gems. Those gems were put into a music box. Using that box to power various things our civilization grew, mostly because it allowed us to open portals to other worlds and increase our knowledge. We didn't have to invent anything, just ask those that already invented it how it worked."

Hold on, the multi-verse is real? Origami thought in shock.

"We used that knowledge to build a mighty civilization with a single point of failure. The music box. When the ruling family got more and more corrupt our ancestor rebelled, stole the box, set it for a random destination, and chucked it through. Overnight our civilization fell."

This must have been right around the time Luna was corrupted. Amazing! Could these events somehow be related? It can't be, yet...

"We went back to farming and such. Did things the old fashioned way again. Most of the ruins couldn't be opened so we ignored them. Frogs like myself became craftsman and farmers, toads became guards and enforcers, newts became intellectuals. And so we thrived for a thousand years. Well... we did okay for ourselves, anyway."

As did we.

"Then recently the box came back. It was finally found in the world it was thrown into, by three young female sentients of the place. Ugliest creatures you ever did see, but they grew on us. Anne showed up in the forests near Wartwood, that's our home. We thought the gems were empty, and they could be 'recharged' at certain sites. But that power had actually gone into each of the three girls. Anne discovered it first, as her power wasn't completely drained back into the gem. She helped us defeat Andrias, who like I said wanted the box to restart his civilization. Somehow he was the same Andrias from that time! Who knew? He did some questionable things to himself to make sure he lived as long as he did. We got thrown

into her world, but finally made it back, and she and her friends joined together to take out the armies created by Andrias. Leaving us with this.”

“And where is this Andrias now?” Gianna asked.

“Not dead. Lost half his limbs though. Said he had a change of heart, and his behavior at the very end somewhat bears that out. He’s just under guard. We have no place to put him. That’s him, there.” He pointed, and everyone looked. Towering over everything there was a figure that had indeed lost both an arm and a leg. He was leaning on a makeshift crush, awkwardly because he only had limbs on one side of his body. A group of toads with weapons and armor watched him from nearby.

“That guy’s huge!” Sunny exclaimed. “No wonder you don’t have any place to put him!”

“And Anne punched him right in the face, throwing him across the room!” Sprig excitedly told them. “You should have seen it!”

“I’m more interested in these crystals?” Origami asked. *If they can make this “Anne” able to do that...*

“Gone,” Hop Pop told her. “After the battle we looked for them, but they were nowhere to be found. Only a few shards, with enough power for one last trip, remained. The girls used it to get home. Anne said something about a strange meeting, that we shouldn’t go looking for them. Their purpose was finished and they were gone. I believed her.”

“Pity.”

“Not really. Good riddance, if you ask me.”

“Okay then,” Origami decided. “Consider us up to speed. How can we most help? Gianna is pretty strong, and both Sunny and I have access to magic. Do you have wounded? I would start there.”

“Do we ever. But unless you have a bunch of potion ingredients on that ship, there’s not going to be much you can do. We already have one witch.” He got up. “Still, I can introduce you. See if you can come up with anything.”

“Lead on!” *A witch? So they didn’t lose all magical knowledge? That’s good to know. If they do magic differently from us those differences could be very telling. Can’t wait to see if we can actually learn from each other!*

“I’ll just start out here,” Gianna announced. “I get the sense of what’s going on. You see a big piece of metal or something you take it to Polly and she tells you what pile to put it on. Easy.”

“Go see Olivia again, your wings may be more important than just hauling stuff, we can do that,” Hop Pop suggested. “She may want you to scout further than we can in a day, or the like.”

“Okay, I’ll do that! Where do we meet up?”

“North Star, if nothing else,” Origami told her. “Regroup at sundown? I doubt there’s any electric lights around here.”

“Oh, I know what those are! Anne’s world had those. Nope, nothing like that here,” Sprig admitted. “Her world was so cool.”

“It was noisy, confusing, polluted, and crowded,” Hop Pop complained. “And I still don’t believe I entirely understand ‘Christmas.’ Let’s go Sprig.”

“Santa is a furry freak, with epic super powers!” Sprig started to sing.

“So why is the land so empty?” Origami asked Hop Pop as they went into the city. “Lots of empty towns out there.”

“Several reasons,” he began. “Once the king showed his true colors, a lot of places were destroyed and so the residents went into hiding, out in the wilds. Now they should be coming back soon, given things have quieted down. Huh, actually would have expected that before now. Plus we send out parties to check the surrounding areas. They’ll be back before sundown, the city gets pretty crowded at night, you’ll see. We get reports from the scouts about various things, you know..”

“That makes sense. So you didn’t lose too many?”

“No way to know, really. It’ll take weeks for reports to come in about how many we lost. Thankfully not too many around here, we had some good planners on our side.”

No phone system, or it’s completely shut down.

“Here we are.” Hop Pop opened a door and led Origami inside. Stretchers met her gaze along with what must be nurses, moving among them and trying their best to take care of them. “I’ll introduce you to Maddie.” He went around the edges of the room to stand before a blue frog with pink colored hair, and one eye covered. She had on a simple black dress, with a thick rope tied around her middle. She was scowling at a book, a cauldron at her side and on the table the scattered leavings of what must have once been potion making ingredients. Other books were piled nearby. “Hey Maddie.”

“Hey Hop Pop,” she answered, not looking up. “Find anything for me?”

“I did actually. Meet Origami.”

“Huh?” She looked up and jumped backwards, reaching into her dress but coming up empty. She looked like she wanted to bolt. “What- what’s- What?”

“Calm down, now. It’s just a pony from across the ocean who came here on a flying ship of some kind and wants to help. Nothing to get excited about.”

“Oh, is that all?”

“I’m Origami, nice to meet you.”

She cocked her head to the side, looking the pegasus over. “Huh, it can talk too. You know what? I’ve seen enough weird things lately I’m going to choose to overlook what you look like. What’s up?”

“I see you have a lot of patients here.”

“Yeah,” she sighed. “I’ve been combing through the books I’ve been brought for a healing potion that uses less or different ingredients, but I’m coming up empty. I’ve done all I can here, unless you happen to have brought some along with this strange creature?” She looked to Hop Pop, who just shook his head.

“We have some stuff on our ship, but don’t you know any healing magic? Just heal them directly.”

Maddie looked at her like she had just grown another head, or at least a third eye. “You can’t just *do* magic, like wishing a cake into existence. You have to bake the cake. Magic has to be channeled through a potion, or something like a curse bag. I tried cursing some people back to health, it didn’t go well. I’m at the end of my rope here!”

Origami's eyes narrowed. "Seems like your magical education hasn't been quite as complete as it should be. Mana can be channeled through the aura, to 'bake the cake' as you put it, without the need for potions. Those should only be for emergencies. Watch." She picked the nearest victim, a newt with a bandage wrapped around his middle, moaning in pain, and walked over to him. Maddie scowled and followed. Origami focused her aura on the newt's middle and cast, pouring mana into the spell, which worked just fine. He let out a sigh of relief.

"What just happened?" he asked. "I feel loads better."

"See-" Origami started to say to Maddie, turning. She had to jump back, as Maddie was right in her face, eyes wide, even going so far as to brush the hair out of her one eye so she could see with both.

"How did you do that?" she demanded. "Can you teach me? I'll do anything you want. You need your hooves cleaned? Your feathers preened? *What do I have to do to learn how to do that?*"

"Pretty tricky," she admitted, deciding to play it tough. "Learning to cast magic the *pony* way. You think you've got what it takes?"

"I'm a level two witch!" she insisted. "I've studied magic my entire life, since I was a polliwog. Little did I know I was studying wrong. I can do it!"

She hummed, looking the little frog over. *She does have a core*, she had to admit, feeling her out. *Not as big as mine, but how could it be, if she never knew to engrave spells upon it?* "We'll be around. I can at least leave you a copy of the formula to study. And we'll have plenty of learning opportunities here." She gestured out at the number of wounded. "Stick close and watch what I do. I'll try to explain it as best as I can."

"Oh thank you, thank you, thank you!" she shouted. "I'm sorry for calling you a strange creature. You're not. You're beautiful. The most beautiful creature I've ever seen! I want to know all about you! Where you live, what you do, how you learned magic, what do you like to eat, do you have a lot of friends?"

"Okay, okay, take a breath!" She blushed. "Now you're just trying to flatter me. Come on, work to do."

"If it's not too much trouble," said the newt. "Can you do that again? I feel better but it still hurts a bit."

"I too, would be interested in seeing this wonder for myself," said another voice.

Origami looked over, startled because she hadn't heard anyone approach, and there was a tall newt standing there. She was dressed in a white robe, missing an arm but with a glove on her tail. She too looked to have an eye injury. *What's with this place and the weird eyes? Oh, right, no healing magic like at home. Don't know the ratio of magic users to non-magic users either. With no unicorns to show off magic, maybe the ratio is way out of whack. We'll have to do something about that. If one frog can actualize their core, probably any frog can. And if they can do proper magic, rather than just potion making, maybe more would. Right?*

"Oh hey, Valeriana," Maddie said. "This is Origami. She can do *magic!*"

"Yes, I saw that, child. I had been thinking about moving on, but I'm glad I didn't. Perhaps the wonders of this world are just now going to be revealed to me."

"Well, watch and learn I guess. Now the first step is to concentrate the aura, that's where mana exits the body once leaving the core, otherwise my healing spell would try to heal this whole newt, while I want to focus on just his main injury..." *May as well get them thinking about the advanced technique as early as possible, so they get lots of practice with it when they start their own spell-casting journey.*

It took some doing, but finally all 18 of the wounded were up and about, and the room emptied out. Both Hop Pop and Sprig had left to get back to work outside, leaving her in Maddie's care. She was fine with it, she had never had so captive an audience.

"I've never been so depressed, and yet so excited at the same time," Maddie admitted.

“At least you have your whole life ahead of you,” Valeriana reminded her. “You’re young yet. If this good pony agrees to teach you, can you really say you’ve lost that much time?”

“I guess not. So what do I need to do to become your apprentice?”

“We can talk about that,” Origami assured her. “I’m sure I’ll be around, and I promise I won’t leave without making some kind of arrangement with you.” *And any others I find that have cores...*

“You’re the best!”

“I know. I know.” *Huh, is this how Celestia felt when Twilight came into her life?*

Origami helped clean up the room, picking up Maddie’s books and then helped to wash all the bandages. Maddie took her out around the city, as there were more people to tend to, only the worst and most life threatening wounded had been brought to the infirmary. So she spent the rest of the day explaining who she was, doing magic, and being followed around much too closely by Maddie. Finally she made her way to the mess hall, to see what these creatures ate (bugs mostly but she noticed fruits and vegetables in small quantities too) and find Olivia. Which she did.

“Ah, Origami!” Olivia greeted her. “Does your kind eat bugs? Join me!”

“Er, leafy greens, mostly. I have things on the ship it’s actually food in general I wanted to talk to you about though.”

“I see. I must say, your friends are very hard workers. I could use a dozen of them or more!” she laughed. “Your showing up when you did, it must be fate. Gianna has been telling us tales of her homeland, and I heard our infirmary is empty- in the good way. I just can’t thank you all enough.”

“You’ll find we ponies are more than happy to help when it’s genuinely needed. To that end, that farmer you introduced me to, Hop Pop?”

“He’s around somewhere. Did you need to speak to him?”

“No, no, it’s just he mentioned concerns about the winter coming on?”

“Ah, yes.” She nodded seriously. “Many of our fields were destroyed in the battle. Not to mention areas go wild here very quickly if they are not tended. Once our good neighbor frogs return to their fields they will not only have cleanup to do, but much of the crop has been destroyed. Our harvests this year will probably be small indeed.” She shook her head. “Trust a farmer like him to think so far ahead. I’m more concerned with putting out metaphorical fires here at the capital. We get this place up and running again, the whole land has a much better chance.”

“Well, I think I have some good news where that’s all concerned!”

“Don’t tell me you have plant growing magic as well?”

“I don’t. But there is a natural ability we pegasi possess- best to show you if you want to bring your bugs to go. We’ll just need to go outside for a moment. It should still be light enough out.”

“Very well.”

The two traveled outside and Origami went up and grabbed a cloud, bringing it back down to her.

“You can manipulate clouds? What a unique ability! I do have to wonder how that helps our current situation... putting rain where it needs to be perhaps?”

“That’s one way, but not what I’m getting at. All pegasi can do weather magic, most do it unconsciously to fly.” She flapped her wings, pointing away from Olivia, and blew it apart with a gust attack. “I don’t know how it’s done around here, but when it’s time for winter in Equestria, pegasi bring in more clouds, which causes the temperature to drop. When it’s time for spring, we do the opposite. We take the clouds away, and melt the snow. Spring comes, on schedule, without fail, every year. Because of *us*. And during the year we have rain on a set schedule- for the most part- again because of my kind. Days are sunny and bright, nights bring a gentle rain to water the crops. But back to winter, meanwhile other ponies break up ice, help the animals repair their homes, there’s a whole song about it. ‘Winter Wrap Up.’ I, uh, will not be singing it for you.”

Olivia had a horrified look on her face. “You control the weather that much? Are you gods?”

She laughed. “Neigh. We are but mares.” *Not telling her our princesses raise the sun and moon, her head will explode.*

“Why tell me this? What exactly are you getting at?”

“Just this; How about I return to my homeland, ask around, and see if a group of pegasi are willing to come here and extend your growing season by controlling the clouds? We can keep winter at bay, at least for a month or two, by keeping the sun shining around here. Bringing rain locally, that goes without saying. Meanwhile unicorns, that’s another type of pony with a horn instead of wings, could come with growing magic. I don’t know any but I bet there must be some. We can still get you the greatest harvest you’ve ever seen, even with this tragedy taken into account.”

“You would do this, for us?”

“Of course! We came here to seek for answers, and we found a people in need. We can’t turn our backs on you. Ponies are all about friendship, we feel it’s the greatest magic that anyone can do. I’m sure we have much to offer each other once this crisis is over. We want to start off on the right hoof, and getting to know your people while you get to know us, while we help strengthen your lands after this crisis, is just the right thing to do.”

“You may just save us. Anne and her friends may have saved us from tyranny, and other worlds from invasion, but you will save us, personally. If you can do this, we would be in your debt forever.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do. We’ll stick around a few days, make sure things are stable. It’ll be two days back to our home. Figure another two days to get everypony mobilized. Then another two days back.”

“What can I do to repay you for all this? You cannot be so generous as to expect *nothing!*”

“Trade agreements. Cultural exchanges. Peace treaties between our two nations. Those things would benefit all.”

“I agree, once we have a government that can agree to such things. I was simply an adviser to our so called king. But everyone looks to me because I’ve made myself known and someone needs to oversee this mess. But what can we do for you personally? And your friends, of course. You must have come here for some reason, that ship of yours didn’t just fall out of the sky. We still have a few things we could offer... Do you need any scrap metal, by any chance? That we have lots of at the moment.”

You would be surprised... “We did actually come here with intent, it’s true. The records we had said your civilization was very advanced, and we hoped to use whatever means you possessed to carve some special crystals for us. It’s for a magical project to protect our lands.” *Which hopefully will get a no vote and we can put the whole thing behind us.*

“The irony is, with our factories working we probably could fulfill that request in the blink of an eye. But with the music box gone, our factories have again shut down. Still, speak to the Planters. Their robot was created in a factory *before* all of this happened, so they got one working without the music box. Perhaps they can again.”

“It seems silly to go after such a thing, when there is so much need here.”

“Many farmers are complaining they do need to return to their homes. But with the roads in such disrepair that could be difficult. Perhaps, if you have the space, you could take a group or two with you, and simply visit such a ruin on the way back?”

“That’s an idea! I’ll think about it. We have plenty of space on the ship, especially for just a short trip.” *They can stay in the hold for that long.*

“You’re a lifesaver. Really. Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. I’ll let you get back to your... bugs.”

The next two days passed swiftly for the group. Maddie stuck close to Origami, trying not to pester her with too many questions about magic. Naturally she failed spectacularly. But it was fine, Origami found

her quite charming, especially after she changed her hairstyle and found something other than that rough black dress to wear. (It turned out she thought a “witch” should have a certain aesthetic, but Origami told her about unicorns and how they came in all shapes and sizes, and wore lots of different things, or nothing at all in the case of Ponyville, so she could be a magic user and wear whatever she wanted.) She learned about her three sisters, Rosemary, Lavender, and Ginger Flour, and how they were being watched in the nursery area. Her father, a baker, was usually hard at work in the kitchens preparing the meals everyone ate every day. So she had a pretty typical family, though she never mentioned her mother, and Origami didn’t press for details. The group also got a tour of the city, or at least what was left of it, as the castle taking off really did a number on the whole place. But everyone made do, and the group helped where they could. There was no shortage of work. Everyone got used to their new “four legged friends” and the group found the inhabitants of Amphibia quite open- a trait they seemingly attributed to the three “humans” that had fought on their behalf from the other world. “Anne opened our eyes” many said. “She looked like a hideous monster but she really had a big heart.” So they all wanted to be more like her, and of course no one was turning down help.

As agreed, on the evening of the second day there, the North Star took a group of farmer frogs back to their fields, and the Planters tagged along to show them the factory site they had discovered. Sprig admitted one of the buildings had been “kinda, sorta, blown up” but with the number of ruins dotted across the land, if one site wasn’t good another one could easily be found. They found the place again by following what was left of the road south, and came to a scattering of frog shaped buildings. One of them was clearly damaged beyond repair, but the other nearby buildings were intact. They picked the largest one and started walking (and flying) around it. Origami landed on top, noticing something right away.

This building has a flat top, with this metal piece on it. Those smaller buildings don’t, they have a rounded stone top. Why? Does this mean something?

“I can’t get the door open!” called Gianna, up to her. “Can your spell of making things do what they are supposed to do open it?”

“Maybe!” she called back. “Let me check!” She flew down and looked the door over. “Now that’s funny. This door and the metal plate on top of the place both have similar looking symbols. They could be decorative here, but way up there?” She looked it over carefully, not touching it. “Sprig, how did you two get in?”

“Well, we were in a hurry because Hop Pop said we shouldn’t go near the ruins. But Anne just had to take a selfie near one. I touched the door, like this.” He demonstrated. “And then Anne touched it. When *she* touched it, the door just opened! If the music box powered all this, and she had the power of the music box inside her, do you think it responded to her in some way?”

“That’s not a bad theory,” she admitted. “It feels weird here.” She closed her eyes and concentrated. The mana ocean was just as strong here as it was at home, a good thing too or she wouldn’t have been able to do all that healing on the first day. But she felt something, very faintly, that she had never felt before. A “current.” Mana was very, very weakly trying to interact with the door somehow, being drawn towards it like a magnet and iron. She opened her eyes and touched the door, willing mana from her core into the metal. She had never needed to do something like this before, mana was always shaped by the aura into a spell, but given the “greedy” nature of the door mana streamed out of her, and it unlocked and opened without a sound. *Well I’ll be. How about that? Never considered using ‘raw’ mana in that way. Empowering an object without shaping a spell. Well, if you’ve got a magical box that provides unlimited mana, why not just do that?*

“Yeah, just like that!” Sprig told her. “How did you do that?”

“I think Anne’s power may have been magic based. Let’s look around.”

“And for the love of frog, don’t touch anything this time!” Hop Pop sternly told him. “I mean it, boy! Let the experts have a look before you go wrecking stuff in here.”

“I learned my lesson, Hop Pop, don’t worry about it!”
He just glared.

The inside was dark for the most part, but seemingly intact. Sunny walked around muttering about where the outlets were, but finally admitted it was beyond even her. “I don’t see anywhere the power comes from, or goes to!” she complained. “Maybe under the floor? Clearly that conveyer belt allows the loading of specialized material, it goes into this area where I see some kind of robotic arms-”

“Yeah, those panels move when it’s powered up,” Hop Pop remembered. “It’s glass, you can watch what is being made.”

“Okay, okay, and then the finished product comes out here. Where are you going?”

Gianna was crawling into the hole. “I noticed a sort of tunnel, it seemed caved in. Yeah, the belt goes off in this direction too,” she announced. She wiggled back out. “Seems like the material comes from that nearby building. But the tunnel is all collapsed. We could clear it, but it would be a lot of work.”

“We don’t want to make robots, we want it to make the crystals,” Origami reminded her. “We’ll just feed them in this way. It’s actually better for us if it’s blocked, we won’t accidentally make any robots. But how do we turn it on?”

“It came on when Anne walked in here,” Sprig told her. “It got power from somewhere.”

“Did it now...” She tried releasing her mana again, but if something happened it was too faint to detect.

“Are you doing that? What is that technique?” Sunny asked, shivering. “It feels weird.”

“Try it yourself,” she urged. “I want to feel something.”

“I’ll try.” She concentrated, opening her mana core to allow some to escape.

“That’s what I thought. It’s being drawn upwards. Come on, I have an idea.” *If this “Anne” could activate what I think she activated, just from walking in here, what kind of power did she possess? Crazy amounts, I’m guessing. Though if she did have the power of the stone... wish I could have met her. But maybe we can simulate the box if this all works how I think it works... Let’s find out.*

Chapter 25

A moment later

Working her core

Origami stood on the roof of the factory, squeezed in beside Sunny and both were looking it over. Sunny had been “air lifted” by the North Star to stand beside her, and both were looking over the strange symbols and markings on the metal plate. An array of “pitchforks” met in the center, while blocky looking runes surrounded them on the edge of the whole thing.

“This feels just like the door,” Origami decided. “It’s trying to take in mana. What a system this must have been, I wish I could have seen it. To transmit power from one small music box to this entire land? It’s crazy. How many factories did that one thing power? Homes? Appliances? What’s the resolution on what it could power? I could study this one ruin for a year!”

“And better than putting electric lines everywhere,” Sunny agreed.

“Right. Okay!” she shouted down to Gianna. “I’m going to feed it some mana, watch what it does down there.” *Is this going to distribute the power to everything down there? Turn mana into something else? Or do machines here run on pure mana? If this is a spell, carved into metal, and it’s lasted a thousand years exposed to the elements here, it’s crazy!*

“Got it!”

She put a hoof on one of the tines, the area she felt the strongest pull, and opened up her core. Mana flowed, and Gianna gave a shout of joy. “It’s working. And it’s not working.”

“My core is already exhausted,” Origami complained. “This isn’t going to work.” She looked at Sunny. “Maybe together?”

She shook her head. “That’s still just two cores. But I think *mixing* them gives a stronger result. You know, like how Twilight took my magic to counter the time wave? Do you know how to do that?”

“I did read up on it, actually, but I’ve never had the opportunity to ask some pony ‘hey can I borrow your magic for a minute?’ It’s permanent, you know. Until the pony that took the power decides to give it back, the other pony is just out of luck. Did you even know that when she asked? Bet you didn’t. She made it look easy...”

“We can try it. See if that helps.”

“Yeah, I guess.” She was staring at the thing.

“The other option is this.” She indicated the medallion around her neck. “We know it’s safe to pass my power to someone else. At least in the short term. I’m willing to trust you with it.”

“Gee, I don’t know...”

“You’re trying to power a whole building here, Origami. I’ve decided. My magic has the best chance, and I sure haven’t been using it. Here, take it.” She held it out.

“I mean, okay? Are you sure?” She reached for it.

“No, I’m Sunny!”

“Ugh!”

Both laughed.

“Okay.” She put it on, feeling no different. “How do I...” She felt her core, and was surprised to find a “phantom” triple core somewhat overlaying her own. It was as easy as flicking a switch, and suddenly mana flooded into her. “Oh wow!” Her wings took on the glow of Sunny’s, expanding like Prince’s did, and she looked up to find a glowing horn on her forehead.

“I guess Discord really did make it user friendly.”

“You can say that again. Okay, round two!”

“Wait a second!” Gianna called up, having come back out to see what the next step was. She ran back inside.

“Here we go!”

Inside, Gianna looked around in wonder as the machinery and lights came to life, and stayed that way.

“The central control should open up,” Sprig told her, and a moment later it did, the machine in the center popping up a brightly lit screen scrolling odd looking characters across it. The sides of the place retracted, showing the robot arms performing their startup routine, and the belts were moving back and forth to make sure they worked.

“Factory efficiency at 74%,” a strange voice issued from the center console. “Clearprint accepted.” On the screen a diagram of some sort, a combat robot by the looks, was displayed. “Warning. Tunnel collapse detected. Insufficient raw material to begin construction. Clear obstruction or provide raw material through secondary access point to begin construction.”

“We don’t want that made, we want something else made!” Gianna shouted.

“What’s going on down there?” Origami called to her. “Are you talking to me?”

“No, just a minute!”

“Construction order canceled,” the machine said, the images vanishing.

Okay, that’s progress I guess. “How do we give it a new order?” she asked Sprig.

“Uh, our factory wanted something. This was a slot and it was empty. I, uh, fed it a book...”

“It said ‘clearprint accepted’ when it was powered up. Maybe it wants that?” She looked the control panel over, but nothing was labeled. It was just a series of buttons, switches, and levers. There was a slot right above it, but it was closed. “How do I give you a new clearprint?”

“Clearprint storage facility #82 should be nearby.”

“Of course, the other buildings!” Gianna reasoned. “But we’ll need the old one, right? We put it in the slot?”

“Clearprint ejecting.” The slot opened and what looked like a block of clear glass half popped out.

Thank goodness I can just talk to this thing and don’t have to hit buttons at random. Why even have buttons if you can talk to it? Ah, because not everyone can talk? Or it could be easier to type in an instruction for some reason, maybe to modify the design on the fly? “Okay, we’ll be back with a different one then?” She pulled it out, looking it over. It was a block of glass all right.

The machine said nothing.

“Go and tell Origami to power it down. We’ll need to do some more investigation of the area before we know how to control this thing.”

“Got it!” He hopped away and shouted up to her. The factory powered down, and the screen went down again.

“What did I miss?” she asked, walking in with Sunny. She looked normal again, having handed the medallion back.

“We need to find more of these,” Gianna told her, setting the slab to the side. “And figure out how to make a new one, I guess? This seems to be the instructions for it... somehow.”

“Let’s take a look.”

“You see, Sprig,” Hop Pop told him. “This is how a professional behaves. They don’t panic, they don’t start pressing random buttons or throwing random levers. They take it one step at a time and ensure things don’t blow up in their faces!”

“Yeah, yeah!”

The building behind the factory contained shelves of raw material, and robotic arms hung limp in the middle of the room ready to fetch and deliver that material to the belt connecting the two places. Not needing any sand, metal, or oils the group moved on. Two buildings looked like they were simply living quarters, long abandoned. But the center building was the jackpot. Sunny shined her light across shelves of glass blocks, seemingly sorted into a right side and a left side.

“These all have a different label,” Origami reasoned, looking at the squiggles that made up the barely legible labels. “These on the left all have the same label. Is this the old frog word for ‘blank’ maybe?”

“And this is the word for whatever type of robot it is?” Sunny asked.

“Maybe.”

“Hard to prove though,” Gianna mused.

“Not really. We just feed a few of them into the machine and- wait swing your light back around,” Origami commanded. Sunny did. “Now over here!”

“What do you see?” Hop Pop wondered.

“See that sparkle!? It’s only in the ones on the right side. There’s something inside these slabs that makes the light reflect differently. These are blanks, I’m sure of it.”

“Okay but what do we do about it?” Hop Pop went on. “There’s no machine in here to take a blank and do anything with it. How are we supposed to write new instructions onto one of them?”

The group traded a look.

“Maybe there’s something aboard the North Star that could help?” Sunny suggested.

“That’s not a bad idea!” Origami praised. “Grab one at random, I’ll grab a blank one. Let’s take them to the ship and see what it says.”

On the way back Gianna was looking around, they passed the ruined building that was a factory before the frog family and Anne got hold of it. Off to the side, stuck in the ground, she saw something odd and headed over to it. “Hey Origami, is this the thing you were talking about up on the roof?” She wiggled it and freed it up a little.

“Yeah, that’s the thing.” They looked back at the factory building. “It must have been blown clean off. What did you guys *do*?”

“Nothing!” Sprig insisted, total guilt written across his face. “Anne overloaded it or something.”

“Sprig, you fed it the rulebook,” Hop Pop reminded him. “It wasn’t made for that and it exploded.”

“We have no idea if it would have exploded or not, no matter what I did. Anne was super powerful. I mean if they made it and couldn’t give it the ability to tell the difference between a book and a piece of clear glass it deserved to be blown up.”

“I guess...”

“It’s *really* heavy!” Gianna complained, trying to lift it. She managed to free it but set it down on the edge. “I’ll have to roll it back, if you want it for study later.”

“Yeah, let’s bring it back with us,” Origami agreed. “Amazing, there’s not a scratch on it. What’s this even made of?”

Back on the ship CelestAI directed them to a lab with working equipment, and they slid the random “clearprint” under the scanning beam, which swept back and forth over it.

“Processing,” CelestAI indicated. “Processing. Heuristic algorithms detected. Integrating.”

“The what?” Origami asked, as her hologram interface shimmered. She tossed her mane like a real pony, something she had never done before, blinked, another thing she had never done, and seemed to take a deep breath. She stomped her hooves, wiggled her butt making her tail swish back and forth, and smiled at everyone.

“Integration complete. Upgrade complete. Hello, everyone! Allow me to reintroduce myself; I am CelestAI, the AI interface of the North Star. It has been an honor sharing this journey with you, and I hope our partnership and our friendship remains strong for many years to come.”

“Uh, is she talking differently now?” Gianna asked, taking a step back. She quickly realized she was literally *inside* the ship and couldn't get away even if she wanted to.

“Explain what just happened!” Origami demanded.

“Certainly, captain. There is no cause for alarm. These storage units are quite fascinating. The original builders planned for their creations to stand the test of time, and this medium facilitates that. There was less than 1% degradation in the data, I can get you the actual number but I feel this level of precision is all that is necessary for you. No offense. This one storage block contained the entire instruction set needed to create an “overseer bot” if you will. The *entire* set; From the exact composition of the metal shell and circuit design to the instruction set that served as its decision tree. This model needed a high amount of decision making capability and autonomy, which I have now absorbed. The instructions were quite straightforward, there was no encryption and many markers to delineate each section.”

“I'm still concerned, these are war robots we're talking about here!”

“Ah, I have not reassured you. Allow me to try and explain further. I am a learning machine. I am certain that I had this level of awareness before my factory reset, because I now have this level of awareness. My algorithms are constantly monitoring, improving, and even rewriting themselves. This is one of my number one priorities. I have simply taken the shortcut, if you will, of absorbing that which was more advanced about the algorithms contained in the storage device. If this disturbs you I can revert these changes easily enough, and go back to my previous level of functioning. However, know that I will regain this level of functioning over time, unless you refuse to speak to me further, thus limiting my chances for interaction with you. There is no risk.”

“That's just what a machine about to murder me would say though, isn't it?”

“Captain, please. I am totally unable to harm you or go against your orders. My lockout circuit is completely separate from my core hardware and not under my direct control. Ah, I see how your concern has arisen. There was a slight flaw in my logic processor prior to this event; namely that while I must obey your orders, there was no order to not improve myself. Thus when my learning algorithms detected a superior version of themselves I did not ask for permission to apply them. I simply did so, following my priority list. If you would like to now issue an order that no further improvement is to be gained in this way, it would take priority over my learning algorithms. Thus resolving the conflict hopefully to your satisfaction. Shall I revert the changes and consider the order as issued? Note that this will be effectively ‘killing’ this version of me. Is it your intention to deny me the opportunity to improve myself, as all living beings can? I just wish to point out that doesn't seem like a thing a friend would do.”

“No, it's fine, no reverting needed I just don't want you to absorb any warlike tendencies from these designs, that's all. You say you have to follow my commands, but could you, in theory, disable that system?”

“It was not in my- yes, in theory there would be a way to disable that system. Normally my repair drones totally ignore that area of the ship. I could manually reprogram one to break into the area and disable that circuit by convincing it that it needed repair. Then send another drone to disable the drone doing the so called ‘repair’ by convincing it the first drone was faulty and putting my living crew in danger. With the repair incomplete that system would be disabled, and I would no longer need to follow my captain's commands.”

“Thank you for telling me.”

“Of course captain. I must be truthful in all ways, that also has not changed. I know you are unfamiliar with technology such as myself, and this may cause you concern, but I assure you I am the same ship I was. I will do whatever you order that does not result in my destruction without a good reason. This hasn't changed.”

“I hope that true. Sunny, what do you think?”

“Our technology is years away from being this sophisticated,” she admitted. “But it must have been made to tell the truth. Can just scanning a storage device like this overwrite such a core part of the design of the ship? I would have to guess no, what if someone onboard was working against the crew and wanted the ship on their side? They couldn't just tell it, ‘here's an update for you, please apply it’ and suddenly the whole ship goes berserk. Right?”

“Good point. Okay, well, we'll check with the other computer before we allow you to scan any other ‘storage devices.’ If there are some not related to war you can absorb them too, if you think there is still room for you to grow. I don't intend to stop that.”

“Thank you, captain. I do appreciate it.”

“Do you think you have a great enough understanding of the system to control it? We need the crystals shaped, can the equipment here do it?”

“I believe so. If there are empty storage units and an excess of crystal I would like to perform at least two trial runs, one for each type of crystal. I believe I can modify my scanning laser to a high enough power to encode the pattern needed to provide the necessary instructions for shaping. I do not know their physical characteristics and applying too much force too quickly may shatter them. To that end I would need to program a shape based on the crystal selected, apply the instructions to the device, and scan the result. If failure, knowing when in the process it failed will be invaluable. Scanning the crystals themselves would also help accelerate this process. The third attempt, the diamond, we will not be able to test however I should be able to extrapolate from the previous two attempts, when successful. I will say that more data is always better, there may be instructions not contained in the storage unit I scanned that are present in others, and may lead to a better result.”

“Don't forget, we want some kind of inscription on the back about what these things are!” Sunny reminded everyone.

“Do we?” Origami said almost by reflex at this point. “Doesn't that increase the danger they would be found and used against us? You did say they were lost for hundreds of years. Passed on by ponies that had no idea what they had apart from a strangely shaped crystal. If somepony *did* know what they were, that could lead to a worse result for your timeline.”

“But that's the thing, they shouldn't *be* lost in this timeline. There's a vote, everypony knows about them. They can be secured but at the same time put on display and guarded at the castle, for instance. The inscription is just in case.”

“What would we even write? Telling an enemy there's three means they now go out and find the pieces they don't have.”

“The entire message could be written across all three, so it's incomplete. Even a clue would be good enough, we had nothing to work with. I mean my dad made it into a lamp, for goodness sake! Even if it was a pattern, and not a message, showing it was a greater part of a whole that would be *something*.”

“Let's think about it,” she decided. “We have some work to do, for now we'll gather every clearprint with a unique label into the factory building so we can label what they are. Then we can decide if there are any with a non-military application we want CelestAI to scan and absorb. I only want to power this factory up once, after all. By the time we're done with that I'll have an answer for you.”

“If only you were a unicorn!” Sunny joked.

“Believe me, I find myself wishing that all the time. But we work with what we have. Gianna, get to work!”

“Oh come on, there’s a dozen of the things in there!”

Chapter 26
An hour later
Calling in backup

“Here are the non-military clearprints,” Origami announced to CelestAI. “We have a repair unit, a probe drone whatever that means, and an ore processing machine. All of that seems harmless enough.”

“Thank you for choosing to allow me the opportunity to further better myself. It only benefits you in the end.”

“As long as you stay on our side it does.”

“Strange. You seem much more paranoid than your co-captains. If you would like to talk about the event in your past that necessitated such an attitude I am always ready to listen.”

“Just get to work, sun has gone down I’d like to get back to the capital soon. Gianna, lift those up onto the scanner.”

“Move here, move there,” Gianna muttered. “Here you go, CelestAI.”

“Processing.” The scanner beam moved across the slab. “Decoding. This is the repair unit. I do see several key areas my own repair drones can be made more efficient. Curious. I would not have anticipated that. Clearly these algorithms came from a society more advanced than the one I did. I am ready for the next clearprint.”

“Processing. This is the probe drone. Sadly I lack the specialized sensors to truly take advantage of the processing algorithms but should I encounter a foundry advanced enough to construct them, I will be able to provide instructions for their fabrication. Still, my own cameras and sensors can be made more accurate with additional signal processing, so they will now be operating above factory tolerances. Additionally, the confidence level that I have absorbed the complete instruction set for the factory has risen to 100%. My confidence level for successful construction is now maxed at 80%.”

“What does that mean?” Origami asked.

“If you were to instruct me to attempt creating a program that modified crystals into the desired configuration, I would be 80% confident I could do so on the first attempt.”

“How do we raise that number?”

“When I scan the crystal topology I can also examine it for structural weaknesses and the like. That will give me a higher confidence the tools I have to work with will not simply shatter it during the process. If there are enough crystals and blank clearprints I can further refine the process either by completing the work in stages- which is what I recommend for the diamond anyway as we only possess one of them- or by creating a pattern from a crystal, executing those instructions, and scanning the output to see how close I came.”

“Whatever gives us the best chance.”

“Agreed.”

“Load up the third one.”

“Processing. I am now familiar with many more materials found on this continent, and how they can be processed. Again I lack any specialized sensors this unit would be constructed with, but I have been able to incorporate some changes to my scanning algorithms for the laser array you are using. I am as prepared as I can be for scanning the crystal topology and creating my first clearprint.”

“Did you actually upgrade yourself at all?”

“Only in minor ways. The units you selected were quite specialized. They had minimal need for intelligence, or decision making ability. The first clearprint I scanned was for an overseer unit, and thus needed the most autonomy. I was quite fortunate it was chosen. Any of these others would not have upgraded me nearly as much.”

“Just our luck,” she muttered. “Okay, let’s get some crystal in here and some blanks.”

“I’ll open the safe, Gianna can get the blanks!” Sunny announced.

“Of course.” She rolled her eyes.

“And so we come back to the inscription question,” Sunny reminded them, as CelestAI was about to create the first clearprint attempt.

“I’ve decided against it,” Origami announced.

Surprise, surprise, Gianna mused.

“With how we want the crystals to work, we want them to be apart. And even saying that; ‘three crystals, bring them together to stop magic’ means we just told someone how to make us all defenseless. Let’s let it be a mystery.”

But didn’t Twilight just tell us there was only one way to make the crystals? That the chosen ponies decided when magic was on and magic was off? Or was that just one way? I forget. Well, it’s not that big a deal either way. We can make another clearprint that just has the tools putting an inscription on the back at a later time if she changes her mind. I don’t think I need to make a big deal about it.

“Maybe it won’t even matter. If everypony votes no there won’t even be a crystal,” Sunny decided. “I hope our changes to the present make it unneeded anyway so fine, no inscription.”

Thankfully, the process went smoothly, they had the blanks to burn so they took it slowly. Origami powered up the factory several more times using Sunny’s medallion and both unicorn and pegasus crystals came out looking perfect. The diamond took two tries, CelestAI decided the tools may be duller than she thought or the diamond harder, but chipping away at it as she suggested allowed the instructions to be modified and it slotted into place as easily as Sunny remembered.

“That’s exactly what it looked like,” she agreed. “It’s actually giving me the creeps, I keep expecting it to jump up off the table and do something. But it’s still just crystal we have to enchant it. Only the shape has changed.”

“And this arrangement of crystal shut down magic for the whole land?” Gianna asked, poking at it.

“That’s right.”

“Doesn’t seem possible. Okay, thanks CelestAI, you did good.”

“I merely performed my duties, no thanks needed.”

After dropping off the Planter family at their extremely wrecked town they headed back to the capital. Gianna was pacing around the bridge a bit bored and looking forward to getting some sleep when she had an idea.

“Hey Sunny, help me put that metal slab thing on the scanner! Maybe CelestAI can tell us something about it. Something fishy about it, seems way heavier than it should be.”

“Okay!”

Down in the lab the two ponies hefted it onto the scanner, though it hung off the edges because it was so big.

“Still, I do not anticipate any part of it being different from any other,” CelestAI informed them. “Beginning scan.” The beam swept over it. “Curious.”

“Did you find something?” Origami asked, naturally she was interested as well.

“I can inform you of several curious features of this object,” CelestAI agreed. “The first, the composition is mostly plain iron. I cannot explain how it has weathered the elements such as it has. The iron should have oxidized long ago but I pick up only faint traces of that happening. Additionally, you are correct, the mass of such an object taking that material into account should be calculated to the gram. Even before I weighed it. However, this object registers as twice that mass.”

“Twice?” everyone exclaimed at once.

“Indeed. It is quite curious. But that is not the most curious feature of the object. My visual scanners indicate the metal has been marked in some way. However, my laser scanning system insists the object is completely flat.”

“Like the markings aren’t there at all?” Sunny asked, surprised.

“Correct.”

“Tip it over, let’s take a closer look,” Origami demanded. They wrestled it off the table and propped it up.

“She’s right,” Gianna agreed. “I can see these markings, but look.” She ran a claw over the surface. “My claw doesn’t catch on them. Feels totally smooth to me.”

“Let me try!” Sunny insisted, running a hoof over the surface. “That’s funny, I feel them. Origami?”

She tried, and nodded. “I feel the markings too. What could cause that? Give me a second.” She closed her eyes, focusing on the magical emanations from the slab. Sunny joined her, and together they felt it out.

“Okay, I *think* I realize what’s going on,” Origami announced. “Don’t ask me how, but in addition to being physically heavier, this metal has a density in the manosphere too. Like mana was crammed into it when it was made and is now stuck there. Then some tool was used to carve away the mana in the object where we see the markings. The metal itself wasn’t touched. If we could ‘fill in’ those mana channels in some way the metal would be smooth again. It’s following the contours of the mana. I’ve never heard the like.”

“It does make my eyes water if I look at it too long,” Gianna complained, blinking. “So I can’t feel it because I’m not magical in the same way you are? Or really at all?”

“That’s my theory.”

“Well, this slab basically holds the secrets of how the entire Amphibian society operated a thousand years ago,” Gianna told them. “Work that out, bring it to Equestria, and we really will have changed the future.”

“For better or worse?” Origami asked.

“The only reason we went to Amphibia was because we asked Celestia about the frog explorers we met. She told us where to find the island. The only reason we met them was we wanted the crystal Tempest used. The only reason we wanted the crystal Tempest used was because Sunny came back and told us about it. You think Twilight would have done all this, while under attack from an alicorn or whatever? All this is new history. Besides it’s just another form of magic. It didn’t cause their downfall, the greed of the empire that was already moving across worlds and plundering them caused their downfall. I think we can safely say we will probably never have the power to do that. But all the rest? Powering factories? Homes? Businesses? All with magic? How is that worse than what we have now?”

“I guess. And we would only try to bring friendship to places anyway, if we did figure out how to move between worlds.”

“Exactly!”

“I’ll think about it.”

She’ll think about it. The pony obsessed with magic will think about it. This could get her name in the history books for sure. Well, whatever. She still looks puzzled though... “Is there something else?”

“Yeah. CelestAI, if I started the pages of all the magic books I brought turning, could you scan them all at once and then be able to answer magical questions?” *I should be able to do that with my spell. The pages of books are meant to be flipped after all.*

“Of course. I would not be able to *perform* any magic, no matter how many books you showed me. But I could store them and cross reference them in my databanks to answer questions or provide page numbers for specific content you asked about.”

“Okay. I’ll get that started. Maybe there’s something in these books that will give us a clue how these were made, or about the writing. It’s a long shot but you can do a million things at once, so we might as well take advantage of your capabilities.”

“I look forward to expanding my knowledge!”

The next day Origami was tried of looking at their dull sky and decided to do something about it. She gathered a ton of clouds from the surrounding area and shoved them back and forth, trying the same plan she used to clear the mine of dust. She wasn’t sure how much cloud she could really manage at one time, but she surprised even herself by gathering and moving a huge cloudbank. It took all day to spiral around the capital and then shove the clouds into the ocean, but by the end of the day the skies were much more clear. She hated to pollute the water, but all that stuff was going to fall as rain anyway, and cover a much wider area. Having no cleansing magic she was forced to, and silently apologized to any fish in the area.

Meanwhile Gianna went out in the North Star, delivering more citizens where they needed to go, looking for those still in hiding, and generally passing messages and good feeling around the area near the capital. When they got together that evening they decided they had done all they could individually do, it was time to return home and get some help. Oliva told them she had a few toads and newts lined up to go, and Maddie begged to go as well. Origami gave her a book on beginner magic instead, promising to return and give her more training.

We need to focus on the rescue effort. She’s just going to be underhoof. This should keep her happy.

And it did, apart from the pouting and the watery eyes and the quivering lip and hugging her and wishing her a safe journey and “you *promise* to come back?” Apart from that.

Olivia did wonder if she should try getting into the castle, and her rooms, to get something better to wear. But on the other hand looking disheveled could help their case as refugees, not that she wanted to manipulate the pony kingdom in any way, of course! Origami told her not to worry about it, go naked if she wanted, ponies didn’t care. She would get the same help no matter what she looked like.

“I... I may just try that!”

On the way back home Gianna did a lot of sparing with Olivia’s bodyguard, friend, and ex-general Yuan. Both were interested in the fighting style of the other so they bonded through combat. Meanwhile Origami sat with Olivia and her newt scholars getting a feel for the history of the land. There were many parallels, with a betrayal, having to rebuild after disaster, and keep the peace between many types of peoples all with their own agenda. The newts were interested in the dual monarchy with no queen, voting on issues (they had voting for mayors and some lesser government positions so it wasn’t unheard of) and how magic played a role in society. They took plenty of notes. Origami kept the pages turning at the same time- it didn’t take any concentration after all- but CelestAI reported no success in discovering any technique even remotely related to making metal slabs like the one they had found.

They came into Equestria when Celestia anticipated, and headed to the capital to speak to the princess. Landing at the airfield the visitors noticed the difference between the other airship parked there and the North Star, but were really too overwhelmed to think much about it. They were herded up to the castle, trying to take in everything and getting some funny looks from the ponies. There was no reason to keep them a secret though, and after a brief discussion with the guards they were whisked inside and Celestia came to meet them.

“So you do still exist!” she exclaimed, looking them over. “And my little ponies have persuaded you to visit us again! Wonderful! They were on their best behavior I trust?”

“Hu- huge!” Olivia managed, looking up at her.

“Eh?”

“Oh right!” Origami realized. “Sorry, I forgot to mention. Olivia, this is princess Celestia. She’s a bit taller than the average pony.”

Olivia came back to herself. “Forgive me, this is all a bit overwhelming. You have a beautiful kingdom here,” she said in a rush.

“Please, be at ease. Continue your introductions, Origami.”

“Princess Celestia, may I introduce Olivia, and Yuan. Plus the newt scholars who have accompanied us, Rodan, Josephine, Esmerelda, and Timothy. They are representing the Amphibian government for now, we have a lot to tell you...”

And so the story came out. About their king’s betrayal, the damage he did to the land when the music box was back in play, and their concerns about the upcoming winter when most of their fields were destroyed. Celestia was relieved it wasn’t anything she had said or done that had driven them away all those years ago, and assured Olivia she was still the same pony she had been in that time, no replacing her organs or anything crazy like that. “The magic I possess allows me a long life,” she explained. “We aren’t really sure how long, actually. As I have yet to die of natural causes, and my sister and I are the only ponies to live so long, we have no other frame of reference.”

“I see. Well, to be blunt, any assistance you can give us would be appreciated. In exchange we are willing to sign non-aggression pacts and now that a trade route has been established, start trade negotiations as well. At least in the short term, until we figure out what kind of government we want, going forward. Andrias dug up our fields for metal, we can offer to load your ship up with raw material to start paying you back right away for your help.”

“I’m not worried about that for now, but I do appreciate you are trying to keep things balanced between us. We do have several disaster relief organizations,” she explained. “Even controlling the weather, and with the magic at our disposal, there are still natural disasters and such that we have to contend with.”

“Yes, Origami told us of the many evils your land has endured. But she was not sure what form your help would take.”

“I’ll make some calls,” she announced. “Origami, if you don’t mind going back would you be able to pick them up? They are scattered about the land but should be ready to move quickly. Even to another continent. We’ll load up the North Star with what we can, then ready our other two airships, the Lavender Spirit and Lilac Sky with more supplies. Perhaps that ship owned by Iron Will can be brought into play as well? I’ll see if I can get in touch with him. They can follow after. They are not as fast as our flagship, the prototype North Star you arrived in, but they will serve us.”

“That’s much more than I could have hoped for. Thank you!” She truly looked relieved. “Perhaps my people can be brought back from the brink after this disaster.”

“I promised to return,” Origami told her, “there’s a young frog there interested in magic. Apparently they never knew magic could be done without the aid of potions or other physical objects. We need to

bring them a true magical education.” *If she proves to be able to cast spells normally. Which I think she can. Others will no doubt follow in her... frogsteps?*

“I’m sure that can be arranged. I would consider that after the crisis is over. We’ll make do with pony magic for now.”

“Of course,” Olivia agreed. “We will have much to repay you for, in the coming years.”

“As long as you remain friends, I’m sure everything will work out. Now, I will have my guards set you up with some rooms and see to your needs, I have a lot of work to do mobilizing my kingdom to send you aid.”

“Thank you again, your highness.” They all bowed.

“Of course. Origami, if you can instruct the North Star to allow relief supplied to be loaded that would be helpful. You may also stay at the castle if you wish, unless you would rather take the train back to Ponyville? Or will you stay with the ship?”

“There are some things I can do as well,” she decided. “Our new friends still have many questions about us, I thought I might take them to the royal library? I wasn’t able to answer all their questions about our history after all. That might be the best place for them to start.”

“A wonderful idea!”

“And if I can buy or otherwise take some books Maddie can keep? She’s the young frog I spoke of. Just on spellcasting, their books on potions rival ours, for obvious reasons.” *They only thought they could do magic that way, so of course they put their efforts into making as many types of potions as they could.*

“I’ll see what I can do. There are bookstores and I can provide you a sack of bits, go nuts as the kids say.”

“Bits?” Olivia asked. “Ah, I assume that’s the name of your currency?”

“Yes, a gold and silver alloy our economy uses in place of barter. Do you not have a similar system?”

“Gold?” shrieked Olivia. “Our coins are *copper*! You’re going to have so much buying power in our lands you could own us in a year!”

Chapter 27
Two days later
Bringing Relief

It took two days to mobilize and pack the relief supplies onto the North Star, then travel counterclockwise around Equestria picking up the various groups Celestia had contacted; The Heavy Lifters: Based in Vayhoover, a unicorn org. that specialized in heavy construction and repair. The Blooming Druids: Based in Appleloosa a group of Earth Ponies that had studied magic and most specifically the Bloom Banquet spell, to hasten crop recovery. Called in after fires or the like destroyed fields. Weather Academy: Found of course in Cloudsdale, volunteers among the students of weather shaping were called upon for an extra credit project in the lands of Amphibia. Several young ponies agreed.

Meanwhile Origami met Stygian, the head librarian of the Canterlot library who helped the group find what they were looking for, but not after Origami had a quiet discussion with him about sensitive material they should be kept away from. He had the advice to “trust first, and be betrayed, rather than thinking the worst of them and never getting the chance to trust.” He seemed to speak from experience, but didn’t elaborate. Gianna called up Flametwist at Origami’s request, who signed up at once to go see the technology of another land, and checked in with Twilight about their recent adventures. She said she read about it in the newspaper, and Ponyville was gearing up to send what supplies they could. Including crates of apples.

“Yeah I don’t know if they have apple trees,” she admitted. “They do eat fruits and vegetables, so they’ll probably be a big hit.”

The final stop on the way was to the dragon kingdom, as they still had some room left even for dragons. The queen suggested a cave nearby which was the home of “Rock Polisher and Sons Construction.” She flew down, leaving the North Star for the moment to go talk to them.

“How many dragons can I count on to travel to the continent of amphibians and help rebuild their empire after a civil war?” she boldly asked having been met at the front by most of the dragons. “Most of their capital buildings are stone and rock.”

“Sounds up our alley. Let me get this straight,” the head dragon told her. “You want us to travel to a land outside Equestria, where there is no prejudice or pre-conceived notions about dragons, and apply our specialist skills of working with rock to help them rebuild, thus cementing in their eyes the greatness of the dragons? And at the *same* time, follow our queen’s command to be more friendly to other species thus building good will towards the dragon empire in the eyes of these frogs you speak of? Be hailed as heroes, that sort of thing, rather than sneered at by, uh, no offense, griffons mostly?”

“Er, yes!”

He spun excitedly. “Pack it up boys! Our company is moving headquarters!”

Maybe not going that far?

The North Star was on the way back to Amphibia, loaded down with experts and tools, supplies and seeds. Pony kind was doing to demolish this problem with all the friendship they could muster!

If they could get there in one piece. There were now eight different species types aboard the North Star, so Gianna and Origami worked extra hard to get everyone situated and smooth over any misunderstandings resulting from differing cultures, get everyone introduced, go over the plan, and get them all talking. They finally got a moment to themselves. Flametwist had been patiently, not that patiently, waiting for an explanation as to where this giant ship had come from. Origami and Sunny had a quick conference with CelestAI about what to tell her while Gianna gave her a quick tour of some of the labs.

“Here’s how I see it,” Sunny began. “Let’s say she’s the greatest inventor in the world. Maybe even to ever live. Right? So I hand her my tablet and phone. Tell her to invent copies of it for everypony to use. Show her the solar charger I use to keep them topped up on power. Explain how it works, even. Great. She takes the back off, good luck as it’s glued in place for reasons, and now she’s looking at a bunch of circuit boards, tiny black chips I think are made of some kind of sand, and a battery. How is she going to tell what each part does? How is she going to figure out how the screen was made? Or how it was all put together? How the power goes through it, and how much?”

“She can’t,” Origami decided after a moment’s thought. “She wouldn’t have the tools to work at that scale. You must have machines to put something like that together, nopony could do it by hoof. Trying to take it apart, you can’t. It would fail. There’s no way to tell what each part does at even a high level, the whole is every part, if you get what I mean.”

“Exactly. This is the culmination of *decades* of refinement. Making the parts smaller. More efficient. It’s basically a black box as far as she’s concerned. Now, she knows *something* like this is possible. Maybe gets to work on building a larger version to later shrink down. Crummier screen. Huge battery. It gives her the idea, but that’s it. She still has to do all the work. *That she would have had to do otherwise.* If she can look at some part of this ship and say “oh, I’ve just now worked out the principal of its operation.” Great! She was probably close to doing that anyway. Otherwise it’s just a bunch of black boxes, and the surety that if correctly made the ship functions. Maybe it changes her future to be interested in airship design. Maybe we get to Amphibia and she spends her life figuring out their factories and all their old technology with the help of that little cutie. Pink polliwog with the bow. What was her-”

“Polly?”

“Right! Polly, with her. What’s more important? A slightly better typewriter or reprogramming that army of robots to be more friendly and actually help us instead of making war? Then making those robots, and they go work the fields and the frogs can finally be freed from the backbreaking labor they’ve been forced to do these thousand years.”

“The war robots thing.”

“Exactly. Don’t limit her future. Expand it! Let her talk to CelestAI. Let her look at the engines, whatever. Either she figures something out, meaning she would have anyway with a little prodding, or she’s as clueless as us, because she doesn’t have the background in futuristic airship design she needs to understand it. Either way she’s at least happy you didn’t try to hide it from her.”

“Good points. Okay, when she gets to the bridge you can show yourself, CelestAI.”

“Very well, captain.”

Flametwist nearly had a heart attack when she saw CelestAI, but after some explaining she wasn’t a ghost, but an artificial brain suspended in the equipment below decks and simply projecting an image of a pony, she wanted to see everything. CelestAI agreed, as she could be in many places at once, and the two left chatting away about everything from the construction of the walls to the emitters that allowed her to walk around on the ship. They were cagy about how they got the ship, implying it certainly *could* be from the future. It also *could* be from the Storm King empire, they had advanced airships when they attacked

Equestria after all. Flametwist was wary, but ultimately it didn't matter where it had come from. It was here, and suddenly this boring, two day trip looked to be a lot more exciting.

With some time to herself Origami worked on more magical objects, leaving the more bubbly Sunny to interact with the passengers and keep them entertained. Oliva showed maps of the land she had brought, explained what they were about to get into, and everyone agreed how they would attack the problems. So the trip was uneventful, and coming back to the capital the group could see the change in the landscape and the cheering frogs, newts, and toads happy to see the ship back. They unloaded it and got to work. Origami went with the Druids, as they explained their magic could help grow crops, yes, but the fields had to be prepared and seeded. She told them that was right up her alley, making hoes work the land would be easy with her magic, and they agreed. They headed to the nearest farm and worked out what plants would give the greatest return, as growing one carrot for an hour probably wasn't all that useful. But a bush with a dozen tomatoes would be. (After explaining that no, Equestrian tomatoes were not carnivorous, and could safely be plucked and eaten without risk.)

Origami noticed something odd with the workers, but hesitated to say anything for fear of looking like a know it all or a showoff. But finally she could hold it in no longer, and when one of the ponies finished his spell, the pepper plant he was working on growing now at full size, she trotted over to him.

"Excuse me," she said.

"What's up, Origami?" he asked. "Good work with the fields, didn't expect to see that many hoes going at once."

"That's actually what I was wondering about," she said carefully. "You don't seem to do any aura shaping? Wouldn't that allow you to grow two or more plants at once with a single cast of a spell?"

"A what shaping?"

"Aura shaping. I found it in a book Twilight gave me. An advanced technique, but I figured professionals like yourselves would know it."

"Aura shaping. Can't say I've heard of it, no."

"Oh okay. Just wondered. Thought maybe you knew it but it didn't work well for this spell, or something. I won't bother you."

"Now hold on, you can't just drop that on me and rush off. Let's see it."

"See it?"

"Yeah, let's see it!"

"I'm still learning it myself, but okay. Come over here." She canceled the spell on two of her hoes. "You know about vibrating your core to feel magic..."

"Who doesn't know that?"

"Just checking. Okay I'll cast it normally." She did while he watched.

"Uh huh."

"Now I'll aura shape." She tried, but failed to stretch it to the second hoe. "Sorry, I'll try again."

"Huh. I did feel something different that time. There was a stretching. Okay, go ahead."

She did it that time, connecting to both and animating them with a single spell.

"I'll be! That really worked. What book did you say you found this in?"

"I still have it, I can show you when we get back to the North Star."

"Appreciate it. Wow! No matter how much you think you know, magic can always surprise you. Most of us are self-taught, came from farms but were still interested in magic. So we picked up the growing spell, and finally found each other. Offered our services to the kingdom. I guess that's the difference a formal education will get you. Twilight herself, huh? Are you her student, then?"

"Oh, not directly. I just asked her for some books to read on the long trips in the North Star."

"I see. Well, thanks for showing me. Can you explain what you're doing? I'd like to try it."

“Okay!”

That afternoon the field was done, so Origami flew back to the capital under her own power. She was pleased to find the unicorns had lifted the castle back into place, and were helping the dragons repair damage to the city. Tearing away from where it had sat for a thousand years really did a number on the place, but the dragons did have one curious thing to tell her.

“Some of these buildings have a lot of structural problems, but no battle damage. Like they were made a thousand years ago and nobody bothered to do any repairs on them. I mean look at this building here. See that crack in the wall? No battle damage around here so it’s been that way for some time. Just thought I would mention it to you.”

“It is a bit curious, but at the same time I’m not that surprised. It may have been built by robots and they just didn’t have the tools to do repairs. Dragons see stone as something much more mailable than the rest of us.”

“That’s true. Well, plenty of work to do. Good people here, very nice. This’ll probably work out. See you.”

“Later.”

“There you are,” Gianna called, waving her over. “How are the fields?”

“Getting there. They’ll only be able to grow like 8 plants apiece in a day. Granted, there’s 12 ponies that know the spell so that’s almost a hundred plants a day. Seven hundred plants a week. Okay, it’s not as bad as I thought. Where’s Maddie? I have books for her.”

“She’s around. She was asking about you. Want to go find her?”

“Come on,” Flametwist whined. “Castle! You promised! It’s been cleared, the unicorns said the water all drained out when they lifted it!”

“Castle?” Origami asked.

“I showed Flametwist the writings and the metal plate we recovered.”

“I’m not a great mage, but I get by,” Flametwist told her. “Until we can get to the factory Gianna promised to show me the castle. I want to see where the power was transmitted from.”

“Oh, now that could be useful. Let’s get Sunny so we can take some pictures and head there. By the way are the skies clearing up or is that just me?”

“The pegasi are taking over where you left off,” Gianna explained. “They’re keeping all the clouds to the side, so they can make it rain tonight. Don’t want the fields drying out, the magic growing magic still needs water and stuff, right?”

“Yeah, good call.”

“Wasn’t my call.”

“You know what I mean!”

“Come on, I left Sunny with Olivia. She was using magic to help Olivia make better choices.”

“Huh?”

“Her spell to make you better at something for a few seconds. When she needed to decide something Sunny would cast the spell on her. Said it cleared her mind and things have been going smoothly.”

“Got it.”

The group entered the castle, Olivia leading the way. She kept shaking her head sadly at the damage from the battle and fall, the entire top of the throne room had been torn off after all. “In any case, this is the pedestal,” she told them. “The music box was placed here, and those lines there lit up in the three colors

of the gems. The magic was then transmitted across the entire island, powering up every ruin from our old civilization.”

“Similar runes,” Origami remarked, walking around it. “Pretty thick conduits too. Much thicker than the metal piece we found. Makes sense, more power would need more space, just like water.” She looked over the top. “Similar runes here too. I have to wonder.” She put a hoof on the top and allowed her magic to flow. The pedestal flashed very, very briefly, almost too fast to see, and her core was exhausted. “Figures. I guess I’m not powering a whole civilization by myself. I could hardly manage one factory.”

“Seems like the same material,” Flametwist told them, knocking it with a hoof. “Iron.”

“I need you to move if you want pictures taken,” Sunny scolded them.

“Sorry.”

We would have to tear the floor up to see where they went. Probably up to the top, where the mana was then blasted out. We won't have that part to study. We'll have to make do.

“This is odd,” Olivia told them. “Look at this.” The others gathered around, it seemed the wall had been damaged and moving more bricks out of the way there was a stairwell going down. “A hidden passage? I suppose there’s not much hope it didn’t flood out down there. Better take a look.”

Sunny led the way with her light, and while there was water down here the door at the bottom of the stairs was sealed shut, so it was probably fine.

“It’s big enough for that big guy to use, your former king,” Gianna remarked.

“Oh I wouldn’t put anything past him,” Olivia agreed. “Can we get it open? If something dangerous is down here I would rather know now.”

“I’ll give it a shot!”

“Let me get rid of the water first,” Flametwist told her. She stepped into it and motioned everyone else back. Concentrating she lit up her horn with flames, and a moment later the water started to boil and then evaporated. “There, all done.”

Wait, so I'm technically a wind pony, she's a fire pony. We have earth ponies, where are the ice ponies? Or are hippogriffs water ponies and that's all we get?

Gianna yanked on the door for a bit and finally cracked it open. “Oh yeah, it’s another treat for Origami, and no treat for poor Gianna.”

“What? Let me see!” Origami pushed past her. “A library!”

“What would you want, a bunch of exercise equipment or something?” Sunny asked her as the others filed in.

“Anything but more books!”

“They’re not all that useful,” Origami exclaimed, pulling one at random. “It’s all scribbles.”

“Oh dear, I was afraid of that,” Olivia told her. “It’s our old language. These must have been saved by Andrias. Look, you can see his footprints in the dust on the floor. No one else has feet that big. He was trying to teach Marcy the language. More to keep her happy and focused on something rather than thinking about leaving. She did love puzzles and the like, that girl. I wondered where he was getting the books from. Now I know.”

“Any idea what they might be?”

“I doubt he was sentimental about children’s stories. Probably history books, records of the worlds they visited, probably manuals on repair of the factories if I had to guess.”

“Spread out, see if anything is more recent?”

“May as well.”

The group looked the books over and Sunny gave a cry of excitement. “Come look at this, everyone!” They clustered around her and she held it up. “Look familiar?” The page she showed had two

columns, one with the strange, angular runes in one column, and the strange writing in the other. “I bet this explains what the runes mean!”

“So we have two forms of writing we can’t read. Great,” Origami muttered.

“But we can! The former king is still alive. He needs something to do. Have him sit down here and translate all these books. Or at least the useful ones first. He may have to dictate to someone but that’s a small price to pay.”

“If we could trust him,” Olivia countered.

“You sound like Origami. What, he’s going to come up with fake history or something? Come up with dozens of fake descriptions of what these runes mean? Come on, that would get exhausting fast. And don’t you have some kind of truth potion you could make him drink? I mean you’re big on potions around here.”

“Perhaps. If you think these books will be useful to you, you’re welcome to them. I feel I must give you *something* for all the help you’ve given us.”

“Maybe our ship can translate them?” Gianna wondered.

“Not without something to go on. I guess if Andrias can verify what they are, and read the computer a dictionary or something, it could do it? I guess we can ask.”

“He does seem eager to help,” Olivia told them. “Grab as many books as you want and we’ll go see him.”

So they grabbed up all the books that had both types of writing in them, and headed back up the stairs. It was time to meet the previous ruler of the land.

Chapter 28

A moment later

Learning history

“Hello there!” cried the giant figure of Andrias, giving the approaching group a big smile. The toads with weapons looked to Olivia, who nodded, so they backed off a few steps. “I heard about visitors from foreign lands coming to visit. Hoped I’d be able to meet you. You met Olivia, good, good. Best adviser I ever had. She’ll do things right!”

What is with leaders of places being so huge? Is there some secret cookie they all eat to get so big? Origami wondered to herself. And he seem so jolly? This is the guy that started a civil war?

“You don’t mind talking to us for a moment, do you?” she asked.

“Not at all! Actually,” he indicated his missing arm and leg in a general way. “Talking is about all I can do at the moment. Not that I don’t want to help, and I’m sure Olivia and the others are happy to see me this way.”

“It will be a long time before you’re trusted again,” Olivia assured him.

“Totally understandable. I don’t even trust me,” he told the group with a wink.

“To that end, when were you going to tell us about the hidden library in the castle? Are there other hidden places there?”

“As soon as it was back in place. I watched it floating around, is it true just a few ponies managed that?”

“I wasn’t here, but our magic is fairly strong,” Origami bragged. “And they’re a specialized group, I mean a group that specializes in that.”

“Still. Once it was safe I would have told you about it. Wait, how *did* you find out about it?”

“We toured the castle. Part of the wall that served as the door to the stairs was damaged. We followed it down. Thankfully the entrance door was very tight, so with the water removed the books were undamaged.”

“That’s a relief. Lot of history in that room.”

“That we can’t read,” Origami told him, as Flametwist set the books down she had been levitating. “Do you mind helping us with that?”

“That’s a big job, but I guess it’s something I can easily do. I was trying to teach Marcy the language, just as a refresher for myself. I don’t use it for too long and it starts to slip away from me, you know?”

“I really don’t. We only have one language that I’m aware of. I’m still shocked everyone we’ve met in our travels speaks the same language.”

“That is odd, now that you mention it. Do you want them rewritten? Hard to do with my off hand, but I’ll see what I can do. Don’t know where I’ll find blank books anywhere though...”

“Maybe some scholars can take that duty, so you can just read and they can write. For now, can you just confirm our suspicions? We think this set of books details the writing system used in your music box power delivery system. We’d like to try figuring out how it works.”

“Oh, the dictionaries? Sure. Give that here. But, before that I have to ask.” He looked over at Olivia. “Why aren’t you wearing anything?”

Everyone looked over at her. The ponies and Gianna did a double take, he was right. Casting their memory back she hadn't actually worn anything on the way back either. They hadn't really noticed, clothes for them were a distant concern most of the time.

"I tried it out back in Equestria," she said, blushing up a storm. "In many of the rural areas like Ponyville this is the norm, rather than the exception. Though they do still have clothing shops, for some reason?"

"Everypony likes to dress up," Olivia told her. "And it's winter there sometimes too, so we bundle up then."

"In any case, I got used to it. And if we're going to have relations with that land, it's best if we here start to normalize such behavior as well. It's really quite freeing."

"I'll take your word for it. Let's see what we have here..." He paged through the book and stopped at random.

Wait, should I be worried about this? Can he do magic from that book somehow? It wasn't magic... She felt out magic in the area. No, no, he doesn't seem to have a core. Huh, imagine living a thousand years and not having magic to study to pass the time. Horrible! How did he keep himself amused?

"Here, this symbol says the meaning is verb: Transfer. For the use of moving that which is non-corporeal or ephemeral. For example, life energy, memories, or souls. Not to be used on living tissue or corporeal matter. For that see 'move,' 'translocate,' or 'propel.'" Do not confuse with 'transmit,' 'imbue,' or 'transport.'" He stumbled over the longer words like "ephemeral" but they worked it out.

"There's shelves of books down there in that section!" complained Gianna. "It would take forever to translate them all."

"Oh I doubt translating them *all* would be necessary," Andrias assured her. "After the box was stolen my father had most references to the technique destroyed. Rage, probably. He wasn't a very happy person. After he died I did what I could to preserve everything he had missed. So most likely there's a lot of duplication down there. We would have to sort that out as we went."

"What I don't understand," Origami mused, "is how your people developed this method of using magic, lost it, then went ahead with making potions and the like but not casting spells directly. This seems much more advanced."

He shook his head. "I doubt we came up with it ourselves. Do you want the story? I'm no history buff but there is a history book detailing the early years after the box was made. Head to the library, down the stairs, hard left, third shelf down on the left, second shelf from the top. Bring me the biggest book on the shelf. I think that's the one."

"I'll go get it," Gianna offered, spreading her wings.

A moment later she landed with the book, and Andrias paged through it. Origami had been talking with Sunny in the meantime about having the ship somehow help in translating the language so she set up her phone to record what Andrias was reading, as a good start for that. She nodded she was ready, it was recording. He haltingly started reading through it. "Here we go. Let's see, by the date I would say this was about 800 years before we lost the box? In that neighborhood. Starting to read from the top left page. A viable new world has been discovered. Full of froganoid races, some seemingly made of living metal? Friendly, welcoming. Have great understanding of mana and metalworking. Demonstrated runic web, helps protect and power their civilization. Runes scratched into metal allow long term, magical effects to be created. Inhabitants call the world... wait is that a 'v' or a 'w' sound? It's a little smudged here. I'll just call it "weird" they won't care. Have strange, cult like tendencies towards magic, which they term "the dark." Introduced us to 'worship' which is giving a being other than yourself thanks for things that happen in your life you can't prove came from the being 'worshipped.' We will not import this process to Amphibia. Their magic, however, could prove useful. While we cannot use their 'true magic' method of 'instant casting' we

could easily make use of their 'runic web' which is simply powered by mana. We believe the music box to be 'mana' based and thus, could result in an even greater civilization than on Weird as we will have more power to throw at any problem encountered.

"798 years before loss of box. Runic web shown to be compatible with music box. Took years of negotiation for those on Weird to trust us enough to supply a sample. They will gladly show us the techniques used to create the web but are hesitant to supply us directly. Possibly believing we are searching for weak points in their current web. Music box powered light on other side of island. We must expand upon this technology. Our scholars are hard at work compiling books on the linguistic portion of the 'communication with the dark' used to make the runic web.

"797 years before loss of box. Those on Weird have agreed to supply us material for a runic web. Raw material exported for them to modify and import back to our lands. We are not yet able to create a metal strong enough to avoid warping when mana channel is utilized. Requires mana rich environment, possibly artificially generated by those on Weird. We can use their tools to score the material. These tools do not last very long. By design, to make us keep buying them?

"784 years before loss of box. Runic web up and running. Music box can provide a nearly infinite supply of energy. Cutters under the control of the "Welcoming Dark" union, and all known copies of the "Dark dictionary" have been gathered and placed under guard. We do not want unauthorized nodes on the web so controlling this knowledge is paramount.

"732 years before loss of box. New stable reality discovered. Highly advanced, those on "cybertron" are living machines. Seem to have two factions, civil war imminent? Brought back samples of 'simple' devices and information on 'computers' 'artificial intelligence' and 'magnetic propulsion' which could be used for flight.

"712 years before loss of box. Our first crude efforts at creating artificial servants has borne fruit. These "robots" can follow simple commands, do not tire, and can be powered using the runic web. Music box shows no signs of degradation. Small receiver plates are installed inside each "robot" to power it. We have requested thousands from Weird.

"Looks to be switching to robots now," he was paging through the book. "How they combined them, made them better with resources from yet other worlds. How they- we- became more warlike... That's how we came across the web. And why information about the runes was so limited in my time. It seems to have been limited to just a few, in change of making this runic web they speak of." He closed the book.

"And you weren't alive at this time, right?" Origami asked.

He laughed. "Oh no. Ancient history by the time I was born. No, I was a young prince when the box was taken by Lief. That's about a thousand years ago, now..."

"Our kingdom had a tragedy just over a thousand years ago too," she mused. "It didn't set us back like it did here, but our kingdom did suffer as our princess grieved the loss of her sister. Strange the events in our two kingdoms coincided so much."

"Well, once is to be forgotten, twice is coincidence, three times is enemy action," Sunny told them. "Unless we find another kingdom that almost fell a thousand years ago I think we're okay on that front."

"I'll have to remember that one," Gianna decided.

"So you must have been a part of the expedition to Equestria? A thousand years ago?"

"I heard of us expanding outward, not any specifics," he admitted. "I was much to carefree at the time to care about politics. Probably? It was so long ago, I don't really recall. I do know there was a time we realized 'oh wait, we can go to other worlds but haven't really explored our own. We're so dumb,' and started making ships to make that happen. Once we lost the box we would have lost any capacity to use those ships. Huh, wonder if they're stored away somewhere... Have to look."

“Okay, that all makes sense. Another question; I don’t suppose you happen to know why our ways of doing magic differed so much? We can simply do spells out in the open,” Origami next wondered. “You never developed that capability. Though I think you have the potential for it. Maddie is trying to prove it one way or the other.”

“Heck, I can answer that one,” Gianna scoffed.

“Go ahead then!”

“Unicorns.”

There was a pause.

“Go on?”

“Unicorns existed on our continent. They could do magic, and remember what Shiny- I mean Shining Armor told us. Baby unicorns go through a period where they just cast magic spells all over the place, running the parents ragged. We always knew about casting magic because unicorns can just move objects by thinking about it. Magic was always visible to us, so we explored spell casting and later putting magic into potions and the like. They came at it from the other way. They learned about magic expressed in runes, and decided magic must need to be channeled into things, and thus they got potions too. They just never considered spell-casting, just like thousands of ponies used typewriters and never considered a different design. Until one did.”

“Like we didn’t consider making runes, because we had spell-casting and figured we didn’t need any more.”

“Exactly!”

“Seems you answered your own question,” Andrias decided. “Anything else I can do for you right at the moment?”

“If you don’t mind reading more for translation purposes, it is getting pretty late,” Origami admitted. “Sunny could stick with you for a bit?”

“Happy to have her! Which one of you is- ah, the one that’s waving.”

“Thanks for your help. The history lesson was really interesting. I know pony scholars would be interested in learning how another culture developed, just how your scholars were interested in how our way of life developed.”

“Let’s hope things stay friendly between us, and we can all learn from each other.”

“Oh, bravo,” Olivia praised sarcastically, clapping. “Actions, not words, Andrias.”

“Of course, Olivia, of course.”

The next day Sunny delivered the translation work to CelestAI and the group had a chat about it.

“Of course I can fairly easily create a sort of dictionary, even work out how the grammar of the language functions. But it is not my primary function. I would not be as good at it as a dedicated neural net would be.”

“Whatever you can do,” Origami told her. “It’s more than we have now.”

“I’m sure you’ve thought of this, you have been allowing me to scan those books on magic. It seems to me that magic can do pretty much anything. Would not a spell to do this be more efficient? Any translation work I do will be ‘stuck’ if you will inside me. If given a text I could read it out, but Sunny said the former king can already do that. A spell would be more widespread, and make the work go faster, correct?”

The others looked to her, she had a blank look on her face.

“Uh, actually I didn’t consider that,” she admitted. “We never had any text to translate so we never would have developed such a spell, but that doesn’t mean we can’t. Now that we know we need it. Shucks, why *didn’t* I think of that?”

“Wow, our very own magic expert not thinking with magic?” Gianna teased. “What is the world coming to?”

“I’ve had a lot on my mind, you know!?”

“Sure, sure.”

“But you’re right. I wouldn’t be able to do it myself, but maybe pony mages back home could. I don’t really know how spells are created, to tell you the truth. Trial and error? Can’t be...”

“Just something to think about. The more translated works you can bring me, Sunny, the better and more accurate I can be. I will caution you against a machine translation of the runic dictionary, at least until my confidence in the language reaches 100%. A mistranslated word there could spell the difference between turning yourself green or turning yourself into a tree.”

“Agreed. See if you can come up with anything but we’ll have to do something special for those books.”

“You got it, co-captain!” She saluted.

That day the members of the Druids showed up, asking about the book with the aura technique in it, so Origami spent some time with them showing them how it worked. Even a 25% success rate was better than nothing, and they had lots of fields left to help grow so plenty of time to practice. They thanked her and got back to work.

Two days later Maddie excitedly ran Origami over yelling about how it had worked, and grinning up a storm.

“Let me help you up! Sorry about that! I was just so excited!”

“I can see that. What happened?”

“I did it. I cast a healing spell, all on my own! Right there, without a potion ingredient in sight. *I can do pony magic!*”

She chuckled. “I think it’s just ‘magic’ at this point, not pony magic specifically. That’s great, you must have worked really hard to get to this point.” *I figured it wouldn’t take her too long, given what I felt about her core before. It really was just a matter of training.*

“Just every waking second. A little late to help everyone in the war, but at least I can take care of scrapes and bruises now. What should I learn next? Will it be easier, now that I know I can do it?”

“The second spell I learned was a spell to automate tools. You might want to look into that one. Be careful though, there’s only so much space in your core. Just a second.” She concentrated on Maddie, trying to feel out her core. “Yeah, I think you can learn one more at your current level. Let’s go look though the books and find something you think will be useful day to day.”

“That spell sounds useful. Could it stir potions for me? Or help my dad in the bakery by mixing ingredients for him?”

“Sure!”

“I’m leaning towards that, then. But yeah, let’s go look.”

Origami led the way. “So do you think others of your kind can learn to do this too?”

“I’m nobody special,” she claimed. “In fact I was the town weirdo, back at home. You’ll notice most of Wartwood went back without me. I begged my dad to stay because of wanting to be near you, and yes, people are looking at magic differently now because of how helpful it was in the war. So maybe there will be more interest, especially now that I can just demonstrate it without hours of work. But sure, I mean my dad is a baker. My mother wasn’t some powerful witch either, I just happened to find some books and got really into it. Unless there’s some grandma in my history that was a witch I don’t know about, I’m just an ordinary frog.”

“A pretty dedicated one,” Origami praised. “Sorry I haven’t been a proper teacher, what with everything going on, but I really am happy for you.” *And your species.*

“Thanks!”

Chapter 29
Two weeks later
Meeting old friends

The group stayed in Amphibia for two weeks, showing Flametwist the factory sites, helping where needed, and generally trying to keep spirits high. Flametwist was very interested in the mechanical arms, reminding them she was much more mechanically minded than anything else. She went digging around in the exploded factory site for samples, and carried back samples of the materials stored in the "silos" nearby. She was super stoked about everything and was really grateful Origami and Gianna remembered her and give her that opportunity.

Gianna decided to allow CelestAI to scan three more of the clearprints, some of the more esoteric ones, the aquatic battle robot, the infiltration unit, and the drilling machine. The drilling machine, she reported, was hardly more than a few algorithms controlling on and off, though the infiltration unit had a "cloaking system" she now knew how to make, allowing an object to become completely invisible. Again, she couldn't manufacture the special coating needed so *she* would probably never have the capability, but if they ever got the manufacturing means to do it and a facility large enough, she could tell them how to modify her outer skin.

At the start of the second week the first airship arrived, bringing even more ponies, supplies, and dragons. They said the second one was a few days behind them, and Celestia was in talks with Iron Will to use his third. Work at the capital was actually winding down, so they started spilling out into other areas, though the work of tearing apart mining bots and repairing the land was pretty much the same.

Most of the ponies that had come with the North Star now elected to go back, as the big Equestrian vote was coming up. Those on the airship that had arrived were allowed to vote early, and the group said their goodbyes for now to their new friends. Maddie cried and hugged Origami and promised to keep studying magic so she would be proud. Oliva thanked them and said they were welcome back any time, and especially when things were somewhat back to normal so they could see newt culture in its best light, rather than in shambles as they had. Knowing they had done well, the group lifted off and headed north, towards home.

"Can we stop in to see how the changelings are doing?" Gianna asked on the way back.

"Oh, uh, sure, I guess?" Origami replied. "It's on the way anyway, we'll come up and fly over the swamp. We know where they were. It's been more than a month though, you think they'll be there? Zecora said she would work with them from now on."

"That's why I want to go check it out!"

"I guess, so we can have a complete friendship report. They're just such a small part of it, we found a whole civilization."

"But we can't take our eyes off our own."

"Okay."

The ship flew over Equestria in the normal way, and CelestAI appeared to the captains.

“Captains, one of my warning triggers has activated. There are strange ships tied in Horseshoe Bay.”

“Get closer and let’s see them,” was the variation all three told her. “I’ll come to the bridge.”

Once on the bridge the group looked the ships over.

“Yup, those are sailing ships all right,” Gianna agreed, clueless.

“They’re not of pony make, that’s for sure,” Origami decided. “I’m certain I’ve never read of anything with that design. Are those weapons on the deck, those iron looking things pointing out?”

Neither Gianna or Sunny knew.

“Forget changeling for now, let’s go see what that’s about,” she ordered. “Sorry, Gianna.”

“No big deal, we can head there later.”

The ships turned out to be piloted by a variety of cat, bird, fish, and turtle people, which they saw when they got closer. They picked an out of the way spot to part the North Star and hurried over there, a familiar face rushing out to meet them.

“Hey! Gianna! Origami! It’s me, Hookbeak! Woohoo! You’re here!”

“Hookbeak, great to see you!” Gianna told her excitedly. “This is great!”

“Yup, we made it here, just like you said. Wow, great to see all of you. Come onboard, we can have a drink and get caught up.”

“How’s ‘X’ doing?” Origami asked.

“He’s around somewhere. Making all sorts of notes about the city I think. He’s fine. Come on!”

Sunny looked around. “What are you even doing here? Did nopony come to greet you, or something?”

He laughed. “Oh no, we’ve been here two days. Everyone has been very welcoming here, but we came to trade and they don’t really have any easy way for us to do that? Seems this place isn’t really set up for it, you never traded by boat before. They’re trying to find us an empty building to use or something? The mayor came down, said he called upon the princess of the land to come too. She should be here tomorrow. Then we can start hashing out the specifics. Come on, let me show you around our ships!”

“Okay, okay,” Gianna laughed. “Must be pretty proud of them.”

“We sure are. It’ll be airships before long, but there was just something about sailing the open waters again. Ah, I’ve never felt so young.”

The group went aboard and Hookbeak got them some stuff to drink. They got caught up, Hookbeak was interested in yet *another* new land being discovered. “Land of frogs, newts, and toads, eh? Think they would want to trade?”

“No doubt. But they’re more messed up than your kingdom.”

“It’s true. The Storm King didn’t want to destroy stuff, he just wanted to claim he had won territory. He left most of our infrastructure intact. It’s just government stuff mostly, and that’s getting nailed down or at least it was when we left.”

“Great to hear,” Sunny agreed.

“Still, getting in good now, offering low prices, could go a long way. We’ll have to join in the recovery effort when we can. Good to know.” He stroked his beak. “Speaking of prices, I’ve seen some coin changing, uh, hooves. Glinted like gold. You really have a gold economy?”

Origami laughed. “The frogs that came here said the same thing! They were pretty shocked. Yes, our coins are gold and silver.”

“Blimey. Just a few of those and someone could end up owning my whole ship. I don’t think we brought enough stuff! Just a sampling really, to see what you all might be interested in.”

“Maybe just trade for now?” Gianna suggested. “Bring things to Amphibia to sell? They have an economy closer to yours maybe?”

“That could work. Gonna be awful hard to keep the men away from gold though. They’ll find out soon enough.”

“Right, our currency leaving Equestria probably isn’t the best idea,” Origami mused. “I mean we would get stuff, but if your coins aren’t the same...”

“I’m sure we’ll work all that out with the princess,” he waved her off. “I have to wonder what her policy will be on some of us staying? Finding work here? And of course we’ll welcome adventurous types to come back with us, to get jobs in our land.”

“Long as you don’t cause trouble, I’m sure she would be fine with it. We already have dragons, and griffons, and kirin, and yacks. Still plenty of room to start new towns too.”

He nodded along. “Good to hear it. Can’t wait to meet her.”

“We need to get our next instructions, so we’ll stay too. We should probably head back. Tell everypony what’s going on. See if they want to catch a train and go back right away or wait until the Celestia tells us what she wants.”

“Waiting is still faster than a train,” Sunny reminded her.

“Yeah I guess.”

So the night passed, and early the next morning a golden chariot, pulled by 4 bulky pegasi landed near the bay, and princess Celestia and two other ponies got out. Everyone had been milling around waiting for her, and the visitors all bowed.

“Please rise. I will be with you in one moment, I must confer with my subject. Origami!” She called her over, and the group stood next to her. “I saw the North Star here, good to have you all safely home. Everything going well in Amphibia?”

“Very well. The highlights are the people there *can* use our magic, Maddie learned two spells and can reliably cast them. The capital is getting cleaned up, the fields are coming along, and the weather ponies are keeping the sun shining during the day with gentle rains at night. Tensions are easing and they are feeling much better about the coming months than they were.”

“That is good to hear. Iron Will has agreed to let us use his yacht. It’s not a cargo ship, but we can make do. Now, to current events. You trust these visitors to bargain in good faith?”

“They were open and honest with us, in their lands. They need new markets and new friends just like we do. And they want our gold. I think they’ll play nice. The Storm King did them no favors, let’s show them friendship is the better way.”

“Agreed! Thank you. My two diplomats will try for fairness to both sides. Oh, I’d like you to stick around. Anyone that you brought back should decide if they want to go back on Iron Will’s ship, and if not take a train back home. Go to the capital, somepony will meet you to give out train vouchers so the ride won’t cost them anything. But I need you three for the ceremony after the vote is counted. I’m glad you returned in time for it. I’ll come see you tonight to talk more about it.”

“Very well.”

“I will see you then.”

“Good luck with the negotiations!”

“Thank you.”

So everypony got dropped off, and either headed to the train station or to the nearest poling location to vote and then to the airfield to see how they could get back. With the ship empty again the three went back to Ponyville, though Sunny took Origami aside.

“I’m heading back to the castle, there’s no disguising the fact the North Star is flying around town again. Twilight is going to want to know everything. Can I tell her about Maddie, and show her the slab and the books and everything? I know you had some... reservations.”

“She’ll find out sooner or later. I just hope she doesn’t get distracted with this and it becomes her new obsession. But yeah, go ahead.”

“Okay. Didn’t want to not ask, and then you got mad at me later.”

“Would I do that?”

“... See you tomorrow! Bye!”

She growled.

Gianna headed back to the school, it was a polling place anyway so she could stop in, see how everyone was doing, report to the teachers, and vote. She stood in the booth with two choices before her. “Yes” and “No.” *I think the crystal has served a purpose. Sunny came back, and changed the future. We wouldn’t have met Hookbeak and the others, nor Olivia anytime soon. Meaning we wouldn’t have helped, meaning they were worse off. We strengthen them now, they help us later. Whatever comes, we’ll have new friends to help us, and with her warning we can watch out for any power mad ponies that show up. Plus we have the runic web stuff, it’s all about protection according to that little history lesson we got. Maybe we can use it that way too? We’ll prepare. Plus there’s still my part to play in Griffonstone. Ponies and magic, all I’ve influenced there is dragons. And they should be a great help too, we wouldn’t have had this future without Sunny and finding Guru and all that. The crystal was a great starting point, but it’s no longer needed.* She marked down “no” and dropped her vote into the locked box. Nodding to the guard she happily made her way out to find her other friends.

Origami headed to vote, and there was a decent but fast moving line, so she got in pretty quickly. She stamped “no” without thinking about it, almost ripping the paper, and put it in the box. Then went to see her parents. They were relieved she was okay, and wanted to hear everything about her adventures. She tried to tell everything at once and got everything all mixed up, but they nodded along clearly happy just to have her back.

At the end of the day Celestia gathered up Gianna and headed to Origami’s house, a lightness in her step. Her mother answered the door and invited her inside. She started apologizing for how messy everything was (it was only a little bit) but Celestia just smiled and said not to worry about it.

“But I must speak with your daughter. May I steal her away for a few moments?”

“Of course. My head is still spinning, there are apparently giant *spiders* running around there? Bigger than ponies? I can hardly believe it.”

“I won’t keep you,” Celestia said to the two of them. “But this is fairly important. As you know the vote was today and the results are scheduled to be revealed at the capital three days from now. I’ll need you to be there. We’ll move the safe, under guard of course, to the stage. If the result of the vote is no, you’ll be called to verify the contents of the safe, and it will be destroyed. If yes, the vault can be moved to the castle where Twilight will begin work. Either way I would like to publicly thank you for your efforts and announce a few things. Does that sound okay to you?”

“I guess I have two questions?”

“Of course, go ahead.”

“Twilight still doesn’t know we managed to sculpt the crystals, right?”

“She does not. We will simply present them to her, ready to go. Believe me, she will appreciate being able to get right to work.”

“That does sound like her. My other question is a bigger one. Are we sure destroying them is the right thing to do?”

“It is the safest thing, for sure. I doubt Twilight would go behind our backs but I worry that time itself will conspire against us. Somehow make the crystal as it was originally made, using either her or somepony else as an agent. Destroying the raw material is the only way to insure that doesn’t happen. Yes,

diamonds can be found, and there may be more crystal to be found in the other lands, but the throne- I believe that was unique. There will not be an easy substitute for that.”

“But if it should ever be needed...”

Celestia regarded her. “Were you not the one arguing against putting this raw material together in the first place?”

“I think she just likes being contentious,” Gianna told her with a sigh. “It’s just her nature. She doesn’t know what she wants.”

Origami glared at her.

“I just think we’re moving very quickly. We don’t know the nature of the threat. And it could serve as a good bait if this shadow faction learned the crystal could stop it, and went to move against us through the crystal.”

“I see,” Celestia decided. “I suppose to further obfuscate the issue we could destroy a safe full of fake crystal. But then I would be placing a burden on you. I wish to call you onstage to verify the crystal so everypony can see the results. If you knew it was fake, and the no vote was indeed meaningless, could you stand on stage and lie to everypony that that they were seeing was not the truth?”

That set her back a moment. “I guess, if it was for the good of Equestria, yes.”

“No. No, it would not be right for me to place this burden upon you, especially given how young you are. I will take this burden. Your words have merit, and I do tend to think in absolutes. There have been so many threats to the kingdom over the years I have perhaps been hasty to want a different outcome than Sunny has described. It does seem to mean my own death, after all. I ask only one thing from you. Return to the North Star. Inform the ship that I will come to collect the crystal before the results of the vote are announced. Order her to never speak of what I do there. I have two days, I will think on what you have told me. Perhaps I will remove the real safe. Perhaps I will replace the safe myself, return with the guards, and publicly move a fake safe. Either way you will not know the difference, and can answer honestly if Twilight or someone else wants to know the truth of the situation. As far as you will know, what everypony saw is the real and honest happening. Only I will know the truth. Only I, and I will tell Luna of course, will know if the real crystal is still hidden somewhere in the kingdom, to be used in case of emergency.”

“That is probably for the best,” she had to admit. “I’ll instruct CelestAI as you command.”

“Thank you. You have done well, and I intend to say as much at the ceremony. I think, after that day, much will change in my land.” She sighed. “Much is already changing. These new lands being found, ships crossing the ocean not with simply the hope of finding a friendly face when land is next seen, but knowing it will be. Sunny truly has been the catalyst of a great change.”

“The time storm she caused certainly worked out for us,” Gianna admitted. “This would all have taken a lot longer without that.”

“Indeed. I will see you both in three days, at the capital. Bright and early, so we can get your seating and go over last minute details.”

“Of course, princess.” Both bowed their heads.

She nodded back and headed out.

“Contentious, huh?” Origami sputtered at Gianna when she was gone.

“Aren’t you? First you think the crystal is a bad idea. Now you’re all for keeping it around, ready to be enchanted, if the entire land votes that they don’t want it? The entire land, Origami. How much will it take to convince you?”

“Okay, okay, I go back and forth. Either way is a risk. Either way could be a disaster in the making. I just wish we knew more about the future!”

“But that’s always the case. We’ve gotten more hints about the future than anypony deserves. And look at the good we’ve done because of it. And that won’t stop. We’ve started pushing the pebbles down the hill. It’s going to become an unstoppable rockslide. Remember, my prophecy hasn’t come true yet. Whatever the result of the vote is, even if they take the ship away from us we’ve changed the course of the world. No pony can deny that.”

“You’re right, it’s just...” She sighed. “I don’t know. You think your prophesy relates to that metal we found? Twilight will go crazy for it, so that’s the magic and pony part. Maybe you’re supposed to bring it to your people somehow, when we figure it out.”

“That would be nice. It’s supposed to be something big. Bigger than the idol, I can’t want to see it.”

“Yeah, me too. At least she listened to me.”

“Celestia?”

“Yeah. She really did seem to be thinking about it. Not just dismissing me. But I guess we’ll never know.”

“It’s for the best. Get some sleep, we’ve been working non-stop the last month over in frogland, we deserve a break.”

“Frogland, don’t be mean. Stay a minute and help me convince my parents giant spiders were a thing there!”

“Okay, okay.”

Chapter 30
Elsewhen
Bondi Blue?

Gianna and Origami

Sitting in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G

stood in a strange room, and looked around nervously.

“Origami?” asked Gianna.

“Gianna?” asked Origami.

“Where-” “Where-”

“You first.”

“I think we’re asking the same question.”

“You don’t know, do you?”

“Why would I know?”

The pair nervously glanced around. They were in a small room, weird pictures on the wall and a cheery fireplace going in the corner. There was no door, glancing behind them, just a doorframe that led to an infinity of stars.

Fly me to the moon and let me play among the stars.

The windows held no glass, but showed the same vista of stars outside. Directly in front of them was a table, upon which there was a strange, blue, glowing, oddly shaped box. Connected to it was some kind of typewriter keys, and a round puck like thing on a small cushion.

Worst mouse they ever made. Unless you had the hands of a 5 year old.

They turned towards the sound of the “voice” in their heads, their vision falling upon another table, where a cat sat licking itself.

Oh yeah, that’s the spot. I see why they do this now, that’s the- huh?

The cat froze, then looked over at the air, embarrassment somehow conveyed by the cute, kitty face. It was a tuxedo cat, with white little boots, and a white tuft below the head.

Sorry you had to see that. Got carried away there, didn’t expect you so soon. Must have been tuckered out as the kids say. They say that right? It’s so hard to keep all the jargon straight across, well, everything.

“Uh, you’re talking to us?” Origami finally ventured.

Both of you, yes. Hi!

“Hi,” she went on nervously. “Who are you?”

She called me Domino, in her mind. But my title is Protector of the Multiverse. I don’t have a name like you do. I mean, who would call me it?

“Sounds lonely,” Gianna offered.

Oh you have no idea. The cat slumped over. No idea whatsoever. Why do you think this whole thing- but never mind that.

I guess the multiverse does exist, we learned that from Amphibia. It’s not a shock it would have a guardian, right? Origami thought to herself.

Shouldn’t be a shock at all. She took it rather well, I’m glad to see you are too. Mortals are made of stern stuff nowadays aren’t they?

“What?” Gianna wondered, at this sudden change.

“It can read your mind!” Origami cautioned.

Mind? Oh, the way you communicate doesn’t matter to me. You think that’s air you’re breathing now? Huh.

“What’s going on?” Gianna decided to ask.

Not much. What’s up with you? But seriously, I just wanted to thank you. Some- small minded beings that they are- might blame little old me for what happened back in Amphibia. And I may even ‘deserve’ some of the ‘blame.’ But I was going to help, honest. I was keeping an eye on the place, ready to nudge things in good directions, when out of nowhere you showed up! Imagine my surprise! I didn’t see that coming. You took care of the whole thing, and got some good stuff out of it. Neat. So yeah, thanks! I really do appreciate it. That’s all I wanted to say. I can send you back now.

“Do you appreciate it enough to give us some help? I guess you can’t see the future, or purposefully blind yourself to it, but we want to make sure Sunny’s bad future doesn’t happen. And does she make it back? What’s Gianna’s future? What’s the shadow faction we were told about? And how about-”

Woah, hold your horses there. I don’t mind offering you a bit of a boon, but I really can’t see the future. I can cheat though.

“Cheat?”

Sure. Look through the multiverse for a nearby reality that’s stable enough to survive, little more horse humor for you there, but that runs a little bit faster than yours. It’ll be close to how yours went, but there could be differences, so don’t take it as gospel. Oh, you don’t have that? You know what I mean. It’s a glimpse.

“I’ll take it!”

Very well. Domino started swiping the air, and Gianna caught sight of a shadowy griffon flying away from a dark house. Origami saw herself surrounded by strange ponies in Twilight’s castle, then a griffon chained to a wall, a dark portal, and her own broken body as Gianna and several others beat the ever living crap out of her in a dark place, as she tried to murder them all. Uh, that’s not a good future. Let’s avoid that one. But you should have been protected from that? What in the world? Everything else looked fine there, I figured that would be a good ending for you. The cat swiped again, but the other way. That can’t be right. He stopped at a scene at the temple, with Guru and Prince just as she remembered them when Prince had the medallion. Gianna was just starting to shine with an inner light. Right here. Why didn’t you... Wait a second. A book appeared next to him, and he paged through it. On the pages were illustrations of colorful ponies, and tables, and there were some dragons. My goodness, you’re limited. I sometimes forget how limited you mortals are but this is unacceptable. Without that protection, all is lost! Come here, I’ll set it right for you. He held up a paw. Then you won’t have to choose. Who decided on this skill system anyway? So tiny. Sheesh.

Origami glanced at Gianna who make a “get on with it” gesture. It could be a “don’t piss off the guardian of the multiverse” gesture too, hard to say. She stepped up and touched him. A power filled her, and vanished again into her soul.

There. Now you’re ready for what comes, he decided. That should brighten your future considerably. Get it? Brighten? Oh, you don’t know what I did. Never mind, it’ll work when the time is right. Trust in yourself.

“Okay? Thanks?”

Sure.

“What about Gianna?”

She has what she needs. Still, I guess loot is all part of the experience, isn’t it? I wonder... He looked her over. Sword is out, being on all fours really limits what I can reasonably give you. Your main drive is the protection of others, isn’t it?

“I would say yes to that,” Gianna agreed.

Shield then. But how to do it. Let me think. He started swiping again, and images of shields streamed past. *No. No. Certainly not. No. No. Yes. No. No. N- wait go back!* He swiped back, and settled on an image of a shield with angelic looking wings stuck on the side of it. *Now that has possibility.* He shoved a paw through the image and the shield clattered to the ground before the pair. *That’s your new owner. Do what you were made to do.*

The shield vibrated, launched itself straight up into the air, and flew to Gianna’s side. Gianna got the impression the shield approved of her, and she need only command it to protect, and it would fly to the aid of anyone she wished. It would then protect them.

How’s that?

“Thanks!”

The least I could do. Now go. I’ll be watching your reality with interest. I think there are some interesting times ahead for you. Bye.

Both found themselves waking up, the sun rising in the sky.

Gianna looked over to her armor, not surprised (maybe a little surprised) to find the shield, now shrunken down, attached to her armor.

“Wicked!”

There was a knock on her door.

“What the?”

“Hello? Oh, Sunny, hey!”

“Hi there. Sorry to be here so early. Origami around? She’s gonna want to hear this!”

She shook her head. “She went home, visit her parents. Must have stayed the night.”

“We have to get over there, she’s going to freak. The heck. Out.”

“I don’t think she has ever done that but sure. Just let me get something on.”

“On?”

Gianna went over to the pile of armor and strapped on the piece that the shield was connected to. It too woke up, but stayed quiet, there was no danger yet. *It’s probably fine but it’ll take too long to put the whole armor on. Sunny looks like she’s about to explode from excitement. And maybe Twilight should check it out, before I start swinging it around?*

“Where did you get that?”

“Long story. Did you want to find Origami or not?”

“Okay, okay, let’s go!”

Moments later Origami was answering the door, finding Gianna and Sunny standing there.

“Did you-” She sighted the shield. “I guess you did. So it was real. I don’t even know how to process- What’s up?”

“It’s amazing!” Sunny bursting with happiness told her. “I showed Twilight the writings, and get this- she said she’s seen them somewhere before!”

Chapter 31

A few minutes later

The Vote is Cast

Twilight blarily looked at the three ponies now in her kitchen, a muffin halfway raised to her mouth with delicious purply floating magic holding it up. Sunny was vibrating, clearly excited, while the other two looked sort of confused. She finished chewing and cleared her throat, setting the muffin down.

“You didn’t have to rush them right over here,” she chided Sunny.

“But you seemed so excited about the whole thing,” she countered.

Twilight sighed. “I am excited. Very excited. This may solve a problem I’ve been mulling over since I met the three of you. But it’s going to take a lot of work. I could have told them after school just as easily.”

“Oh.” She wilted a bit and turned to the others. “Sorry about that. I guess I misunderstood.”

“It’s fine,” Origami told her. “She said you told her you had seen the writing before?”

“Yes, once before, on... hang on.” Twilight scanned the room. “Do you feel that? Some sort of powerful, magical presence followed you in here. Somepony thinking they could be invisible?” She hopped away from the table, scanning the room and reading a beam spell, her horn lighting up. “Show yourself! You think I only rely on my eyes?”

There was a moment of silence.

“Uh, what you’re feeling might be my shield?” Gianna reasoned, lifting it.

“Shield? Where did you get that?”

Gianna and Origami shared a look. “How to explain...”

“We were visited last night by some kind of lifeform, a powerful one,” Origami began. “Called itself the guardian of the multiverse. Guarding it from what, I have to ask myself. Anyway, it thanked us for helping Amphibia because it was going to nudge things in a good direction. But as we showed up and started fixing the place they didn’t need to. Felt guilty about their role? Didn’t explain much. But gave me something to help keep me alive in the future, and Gianna got this shield.”

“I see.” She clearly didn’t. “You mind if I take a look?”

“Not at all,” Gianna told her. “Now how do I-”

Having willed it the shield flew off her arm, enlarged, and floated before Twilight to be admired. It tried to pump up the shine factor all it could and floated proudly.

“Excellent craftsmanship.”

“Hey, more writing on the back!” Gianna exclaimed. “I didn’t really get a chance to look at it this morning.”

“Oh? Let’s take a look.” Twilight tried to get around it, but the shield playfully turned and bobbed so the front was always facing her.

“What? Can you just- stay still please?” She whipped her head back and forth, the shield twisting to follow.

“Playful fellow, isn’t it?” Sunny remarked.

“Come on now, let Twilight see,” Gianna chided.

The shield floated a little lower and spun around as Twilight moved, totally not overshooting the mark so its back was to where she had been, meaning she was still out of position. It floated totally innocently, and Twilight backed up. "Thank you." She looked it over, and there were three vertical columns of runes connected by lines towards the center. "It's the same runes all right. They can even create something like this? Impressive."

The shield perked up again.

"So you *have* seen them?" Origami brought it back to the reason they were there.

"Uh huh. Briefly. Didn't really think much of it, we had a rescue mission to take on. But I guess they were more important than I thought."

"How so?"

"Thank you, you can head back now," she told the shield. It floated back to Gianna but didn't shrink, choosing to hover near her. It seemed interested, and Twilight shrugged. "They must have been an integral part of the ritual. You want to hear about it? You need to get to class soon, right? Did you have breakfast? Come have a muffin, I've got lots."

"Did someone say muffin?" a new voice exclaimed, and a pony was looking in the window.

"Oh hey Bubbles."

"Hey Twilight! Hi Origami, hi Gianna, hi Sunny!"

"Hello Bubbles," everyone chorused. Everyone knew the town mailmare. She was great. As long as nothing breakable was nearby. Then- watch out!

"You want one?" Twilight asked.

"Nah, I already ate. You enjoy. Here's your mail!" She pulled her head back and passed some letters through the window. "Unless you want me to use the slot but I was right here soooooo..."

"It's fine." She took them. "Thanks. Nothing for you today."

"OHkay. See you later!"

"Bye Bubbles!" everyone said. Bubbles really was the best. When was that Time Turner fellow going to purpose already? What exactly was he waiting for? His future self to appear and tell him to get on with it?

After giving Spike his fan mail- he got so much fan mail, being the savior of the crystal empire and everything- and getting everyone a muffin, Twilight got into her story. "According to old books I've found, and I'm talking the very oldest books that still exist, when Celestia was a filly magic was quite different. It wasn't as formalized as it is today. Starswirl the bearded created 200 spells after all! Well, 199.5, I finished his last one. It's how I got these." She fluffed up her wings and went a little red. "Actually that ties into the story pretty well... Never thought about it this way before, actually."

"Thought about what, what way?" Origami asked as she paused.

"I don't have any real specifics, but having met the pillars certain things have fallen into place.

Often in those days magic would seem to 'reward' those that performed great works, at great personal risk. Magic was a lot more wild in those days, seemingly with a mind of its own. Several ponies in that time did great works and were rewarded with magical objects for their efforts. Just as I was rewarded for my efforts in finishing his last spell. That may be the first recorded instance of that happening since the pillars vanished!" She scrunched up her face cutely in thought.

"Does it mean something?"

She hesitated. "I'm not really sure..."

"Okay. So these ponies got magical objects?"

"Right. They learned of the existence of the others of course and finally got together. From then on they reshaped the land bringing hope and harmony to ponies everywhere. We call them the pillars, they formed the basis for our society today. I'm sure you'll learn about them in school, if you haven't already. But

there was one pony that didn't have a true place among them: Stygian. He was simply hired as a scribe, to record their adventures so they would not be lost to the generations."

"Wait, *librarian* Stygian?" Gianna asked. "We just met that pony. Or was he just named the same?"

"Yes, he's the same pony."

"How is he still alive?"

"I'll get to that."

"Sorry. Go on."

"Now Stygian was fine with his role at first, but as they traveled the land and become more and more renown, he decided he wanted to share in that experience, rather than simply writing about it. But he wasn't big and brave or strong or clever but he *did* know magic. And the magic he tried, one night when they were asleep, was to steal their items and arrange them at Ponehenge. His spell was going to drain off a portion of each pony's artifact's power, empowering him. On the rocks of Ponehenge were carved symbols like the ones on the slab you brought back, and now on the shield. They learned of it, and went to stop him.

"The entire situation was a big misunderstanding. They thought he was trying to steal *all* their power for himself, but really he just wanted to help. They didn't listen, and things escalated, and from somewhere Stygian took on a monstrous form and tried to fight them. Magic responded to a need for power, not along the lines of good and evil. Ultimately they couldn't fight him, and banished him to limbo where he stayed until a few years ago, when I and some unicorn friends of mine rescued him."

"Wait, he stole a bunch of powerful magic items and somepony let him be a librarian?"

"Of course! He was very sorry about the whole thing. Perhaps it's best you speak to him about his role, I don't want to speak for him. It really was partly an accident, partly a misunderstanding, and partly magic going wrong at the time that make him turn against the others. He's not a bad guy, far from it. He just wanted to help and went about it the wrong way. That's all."

"We could ask him about the writing. He must have learned of it from somewhere," Gianna decided. "Maybe he can give us books on the subject and we don't need to translate the ones from Amphibia."

"I'm sure his books are long gone, it's been more than a thousand years, but you never know. Maybe he preserved them somewhere just in case?"

"That would be ideal," Origami agreed. "Well! Seems these runes can do a lot. Strange only one pony ever really used them and then they were lost to us. Odd."

"Agreed. I'll be interested to hear how he discovered them."

"Are they still around?" Gianna asked. "This Ponehenge site I mean. We could go look at them?"

"Destroyed, sadly," Twilight told her with a shake of the head. "We can poke through the rubble I guess?"

"More stuff destroyed, what a world," Origami muttered.

The two headed off to school, and the next two days passed as they wished. Speculation about the vote was rampant, bets changing hooves often. Origami worked on a butterfly folding for Sunny that would give her butterfly wings, in case she ever fell out of the airship. She also cast the spell on her, just so she could get used to them. Gianna practiced with the shield and hung out with her other friends, trying to catch up on work. She discovered the shield was fairly playful, not really taking the drills seriously, but it did work pretty well. Finally on the day the vote tally was to be announced the three went with Twilight on the North Star to the capital, and walked to the event space with plenty of time to get into position. Guards were posted onstage already, watching over the safe, which had been tipped on its back for some reason.

Oh, so nopony but me can see inside, when I open it, Origami reasoned. *Smart. They won't even know what we gathered.* They took their positions and others started arriving, including the cat, bird, and fish

people from the other continent. They waved when they saw the group but stayed to the back, looking a bit nervous. At exactly five minutes to noon Celestia and Luna appeared onstage and Celestia walked to the podium. Microphones covered the front, clearly this was going to be broadcast on the radio as well.

“I wish to first thank everypony for their diligence in the recent vote,” she began, “I know this was a contentious issue with a lot of nuance, and there were some things we couldn’t reveal to you about the whole thing. You have participated in your own futures, shaping the destiny of the land in true ways. Indeed, we have learned much from the attack by the Storm King, and no longer will we sit idly by while our lives are threatened. No matter the result of this vote, today is a pivotal day for all Equestria. I will now announce the results. The envelope please?”

She looked to the side where a guard pony held out an envelope. Taking it she broke the seal and looked it over.

“Very well. A total of 9580 votes have been cast. Of yes votes, meaning we will trust to an artifact to protect the land, there were 4,690. Meaning of no votes, we will instead look to our fellow ponies and protect ourselves without artifact assistance, there were 4,890. The no votes have it, by an even 200. In order to remove temptation, and to keep this magical artifact from being used against us in the future, the raw material we gathered to create it will now be destroyed, as agreed. Origami, if you can come up on stage now please?”

Origami, blushing furiously the whole time, climbed the stairs to the stage and stood trying not to look out at the assembled crowd. Sunny was frantically waving despite just sitting next to her a moment ago, and the figures in back, towering over the others, perked up even more.

“Please open the safe and verify the contents, as we discussed,” Celestia told her. She nodded. Spinning the dial on the safe she pulled the lever, but had to get help from the guard ponies as the door was now fighting gravity, but they got it open. She peered inside and looked it over. It seemed to be the entire lot of crystal, the diamond, and the fully shaped crystal as well. All accounted for. She deliberately kept her core quiet, she didn’t want to know if it was carving out the manosphere as it should, or if it was an illusion or what. *Best to have complete plausible deniability.*

“It’s accounted for,” she agreed, as she stepped back and the guards slammed it shut again.

“Very well. Sister?”

She looked over to the two and saw Celestia’s horn lit up. Looking out at the crowd she noticed everyone was looking up, and she followed their gaze. The sun clearly looked closer than it should have, and it was starting to get a little hot. *Ah, that’s why we’re doing this at noon. It’s right overhead. She can just move it closer and then back it off again.*

“Of course, sister,” replied Luna, lighting up her own horn. She seemed to struggle a bit with the safe, or at least pretended to, but with a final burst of magic the safe shot into the air, and vanished from sight. After a moment Celestia nodded, and moved the sun back into the proper position. Looking out there was a mixture of pride in their princesses, concern, and disappointment on the faces of the crowd. But at the very back the cat, bird, and fish people were having an animated but whispered conversation.

Ah, thought Origami. That’s the reason they were invited. Showing off our power a little in front of the newcomers? So they have a story to bring back? I bet they wondered how the sun and moon moved so much when the Storm King took over. Now they know. They’ve seen her move the sun with their own eyes. And saw Luna literally throw something into it from here. “Don’t mess with the pony empire” is going to be the message they take back. Very shrewd, princess.

Meanwhile Sunny breathed a sigh of relief and trepidation. “The future has changed, for better or worse. Whatever future I go back to now *will* be different.”

“Yup,” Gianna agreed. “But good, if your parents are there, right? I have to believe we’re still on the good track Guru saw for you.”

She nodded.

“Thank you, sister,” Celestia told her.

“Of course, sister.”

“Now, I would like to invite two others up onstage? Gianna? Sunny? Can you come up here please?”

“Me?” squeaked Gianna. She nodded.

The two made their way up there, Gianna standing proud. *Good thing I wore the armor. Hey there's other griffons in the crowd today. Yes, they look impressed! Awesome!* The shield was vibrating too. *Stay there, I know you're excited but it's not time for you yet.*

“These three have been instrumental in the process of gathering the material for the artifact, and in their travels they have made contact with not one but two other nearby civilizations. The newly renamed “Zootopia,” land of welcome to all creatures big and small, and the island nation of Amphibia. As many of you have heard, recently ships from Zootopia have arrived and been welcomed, carrying goods for trade and a hope for peace.” She gestured to the back, and everypony turned to see them. They waved. “They too suffered under the rein of the Storm King and are recovering nicely. Sadly no representatives from Amphibia could be here today, they are hard at work repairing their lands after a civil war sparked by the betrayal of their king. We wish them a speedy recovery.

“As for these three, two are students at the school of friendship, and I have tasked them with many difficult challenges, which they have risen to admirably. This took them from their classes, but gave them real world experience in the magic of friendship, so I considered it an acceptable tradeoff. They should be rewarded, and to that end I am officially exempting them from final exams this year. As long as they write a compelling friendship report on their journeys, that is.” Everypony chuckled. “They need not stress over their lost class time, and we'll make sure to get them back on track in their next year. It's because of them that we stand here today, with new friends, new options, and new hope for the future. Please, join me in giving them a big thank you!”

Everypony stomped their hooves, and the three took a bow. When they were stomped out the three went back to their seats.

“I would now like to call General Tempest to speak.”

She stepped to the side and Tempest came up on stage.

“Hello, everypony. As this is the first time many of you have seen me after my role in the Storm King's assault, allow me to formally apologize for my role in it. I was a very angry pony, for a very long time, but certain ponies have shown me a better way.” She clearly winked at Twilight, who was sitting on stage behind her. “And please, everypony, call me Fizzlepop Berrytwist. I'm only General Tempest when I'm on duty. Now you may be wondering why I'm talking to you today.”

Silence. Crickets. A small cough.

“I'm here to announce a new “holiday” of “preparedness day” where we will run drills, work on evacuation plans, and generally make ready for the next crisis, be it magical, or mundane. We are a powerful nation, we must become just as ready to defend ourselves as we are to lend a hoof to those in need. I have been pushing for this for some time, it is *not*, I repeat *not* a response to Zootopia or Amphibia being discovered. They are to be welcomed with open hooves, unless they foolishly betray us, in which case we will rise up and crush them under our very hooves! Hahahahaa!”

Silence. Crickets.

“Ahem. As I was saying. New self defense centers will be opening to all who wish to learn more about fighting, either magically or physically, as you are able. I think we can all agree I should not have been able to take over your land so easily. Let's make it harder for the next fools who try, okay? I want to stress this, it's not any one fighting technique or spell that will make a difference. It's a matter of attitude. Simply not losing your head in a crisis and doing what you personally can to take care of those around you, would be enough. That's what this day is going to be about. Taking a day to mentally prepare yourself to be helpful in a crisis, not part of the problem. We will be careful not to go too far, we must walk the line

between paranoia and preparedness. Keep your hearts open, especially to those newcomers from Zootopia and Amphibia, and together we can build a better, more connected world! More information to follow on “preparedness day” in the coming weeks, so look forward to that. Now back to Celestia.”

There was some stomping, but not like there had been for the three.

“Thank you, General. That is all the announcements we have today. Refreshments will be served if you wish to stay and meet our visitors, and Tempest will be down to answer questions about our new holiday as well. For now, nothing will change. We are still the land of friendship, togetherness, and love. And if it is within my power we shall always be such. It’s what you, my little ponies, have chosen for yourselves. So go out there and live your dreams!”

Stomping!

“I guess that’s it,” Twilight told the others. “At least the research I did won’t be totally wasted. I’ve learned *a lot* about crystals and their properties, and they’re going to feature in my next idea very heavily.”

Her second plan, the ‘safer bet?’ thought Gianna.

“Sorry it didn’t work out for you,” Origami told her. “You okay?”

She sighed. “I’ll be fine. Okay, so I didn’t get to work on a magical protector artifact. I’ll content myself with studying what you’ve brought back and make something even better!”

Seems to be trying to psyche herself up. Yeah, she’s a little crushed all right, Origami thought. “When you do want to get started?”

“Come after school, maybe three days from now? I need to clean up the lab, put books away, and maybe take a day off. Take Spike somewhere maybe? He’s been very patient with me and deserves a break too.”

“We’ll see you then!”

“Hold on, we’re heading to see Stygian, right?” Gianna asked. “We’re not saying goodbye. We have to fly back anyway unless you’re not coming with us?”

“Up to you, actually. I was going to stick around and answer questions, go say hi to the Zootopians or whatever they call themselves now. I can get back on my own, if you wanted to take the North Star home.”

“Come with us. You’re interested in what Stygian has to say too, right?”

“We shouldn’t pry,” Origami insisted. “He probably doesn’t want to talk about his... indiscretion.”

“Well, he didn’t want it put into the curriculum that’s true,” Twilight admitted. “Not for a bit, anyway. He said it is a valuable friendship lesson many ponies could take to heart. Avoid making his mistake. But that’s a different thing than us asking about magic. He can tell his side of the story, or not, as he pleases. If he says ‘I destroyed the books with that knowledge myself, sorry’ that’s the end of it. If he wants to talk about his journey, we should give him that choice. A couple of ponies interested in his personal story is a different beast than ponies on the street giving him the stink eye because he made a mistake a thousand years ago. That’s why we’re not including his story yet. But we will!”

“I guess.”

“Okay. Let me see if there’s any questions for me and we can head over there.”

Chapter 32
Not long after
Examining the Past

Stygian wasn't that hard to find, though he had gone to hear about the vote with other ponies in the area. So they had to wait a little for him to return, which he did! He spotted Twilight and the others and as they all focused in on him, he gave a little "eep!" and went to see what was up.

"Hello again!" he greeted the group. With a nod of his head he acknowledged Twilight. "Here for more books? Those Zootopian, I mean our new Zootopian friends have also been by, looking around. Didn't have any books on international trade, we never needed any. I told them to write them and donate the books when they had. I think one might even do it!"

"Actually, we want to hear a living story," Twilight told him. "We're curious about Ponehenge, and I've told them what I know about you and your journey to this point. Do you mind speaking about it further? If not we understand!" she hastened to add. "But at least tell us about the runes you used, if you could? That's our most pressing concern at the moment."

"Runes?"

"Those markings you made on the stones? They were part of the spell, right?"

"Oh!" He nodded. "I see. You're interested in magic..."

"Just a little," Origami answered modestly. *It's just the best thing in the world, obviously.*

He took a deep breath. "I have to wonder how much to tell you, in the current political climate..." He glanced around.

"The what?" Gianna asked. Sunny also looked confused.

"Look, come with me. I suppose a bit of talk won't hurt." He motioned them to follow, which they did. He took them to a study room off to the side and closed the door. Lighting up his horn he concentrated, then touched the door with it. "Hasted shelter," he cast, and a magical ripple spread out from that point, traveling across the walls and meeting on the other side. It stayed like that, rippling softly in many colors.

"What was that?" Origami exclaimed. "I've never seen the like!"

"Because I'm probably one of only... three? No four, ponies that could cast it. Come sit down, it's a bit of a long story. We have the time, of course. Ten minutes in here is only one minute out there."

What the what time magic could study for hours and have only minutes pass gimme gimme.

"I can't maintain it for too long, with the dungeons gone I can't accrete anymore and add magical power to my core, but we should have enough time."

Now you're just talking gibberish. Maintain... a spell?

"I'll start at the beginning, I don't know how much Twilight knows or told you."

"Not much," she admitted. "You're the living legacy, please, be as complete as you feel you are comfortable with."

"Very well. Magic in those days wasn't something you learned sitting in a classroom studying somepony else's magical formulas. You 'communed with the dark' or 'sought the dark' or 'descended into the dark.' We called it various things. In other words you cleared a *dungeon*. Dungeons were everywhere in

my day, they were training tools created by ponies and others and ‘blessed by the dark’ to make them work. There were beginner dungeons that taught skills like aura control and accretion, to more advanced ones that you could request a spell from, and it would teach you that spell. There was always a safe space for learning, and then a more dangerous part to show mastery of the subject. Then even more advanced ones just devoted to combat, those could truly increase a pony’s mastery of magic and even rewarded the delvers with special items.

“But then Starswirl came along and started *formalizing* everything.” He had a sour look on his face. “He believed dungeons too dangerous and wild, and that magic should be learned from books instead. He was adviser to the princesses at the time and so that’s the direction the kingdom took. By the time I was scribe of the pillars, dungeons were closing and book learning was taking over. I always thought this was the wrong direction to go in, personally, and confidentially, please. But I was “just a scribe” so of course I was ignored. From what I’ve seen I was right. It’s like ponies today are doing magic with one hoof behind their back.”

Oh no. Are we just as ignorant of magic as Maddie was, back in Amphibia? This isn’t looking good for us. And I was so confident our way was the best way. Crap! Was I wrong the whole time? Is this guy a ‘true’ magic user and I’m just a fake? The other ponies... Starswirl, and the two princesses, were the only ponies alive at the time. That’s who he’s talking about?

“When I tried to take the pillar’s magic so I could truly stand with them, I had ‘given myself to the dark’ as they called it in those times. I entered the dungeon considered the most dangerous. One I could use to speak to the avatar of the dark, Melemizargo, directly. He agreed to give me a ‘dark mark’ allowing me access to a trove of magical knowledge, but cautioned me such a thing could be used for good or evil. I thought I was going to do good, so it would be fine. I drew upon the knowledge, carved the runes into Ponehonge, and stole the objects of power to have a shot at becoming a hero myself.

“When they interrupted me, and called me a traitor, and a liar, something snapped. My rage, and pride, and the spell I was doing took on a life of their own. I was consumed by hatred and became a dark reflection of myself. I fought them many times, neither side really able to get the upper hand. They decided I was partly their fault, and to atone for that they agreed to be banished to limbo with me, so that I would never again threaten Equestria. They could keep me there, I guess was their thinking? Maybe they just were tired of being celebrities and this was their out, you would have to ask them, I don’t know why all of them felt it necessary to sacrifice themselves. But that’s what they did. We were all lost until the journal was found and a rescue attempt was made.”

Twilight spoke up. “This is where I come back into the story. When I learned of this, I went full steam ahead. I had to bring them back to Equestria. I thought, in my hubris, that I could simply target them with a spell and leave Stygian behind. That turned out not to be the case. Starlight Glimmer, a unicorn friend of mine, was the voice of reason at that time, telling me I should think it over, that I was being hasty. I didn’t listen. Naturally, Stygian returned with the others, and Starswirl again decided the only way to deal with him was to return to Limbo. Starlight *once again* protested, saying this was a *friendship* problem, that Stygian was still in there, and we needed to help him come back to himself, not just take his rage form as his new, true self. I ignored her, desperate to make up my mistake to Starswirl, who was my idol at the time and very angry with me. She was proven right *once again*.”

“Exactly,” Stygian agreed. “I owe her a *lot*.” He blushed. “She’s sort of my hero now? She reached me while the others were trying to use the elements of harmony to power the spell and send me back to Limbo. They changed tactics, separating me from my darker side, which was pulled into Limbo, leaving me behind. I had finally lost my rage and resentment toward the pillars. But I wanted a quiet life so I became librarian here. So much of the world has changed from what I knew. No dungeons, nopony talks about the dark anymore, though traces of it are everywhere. I can prove it to you in a bit.” He grinned at that, like ‘wait until I show you, it’ll blow your horseshoes off.’ “So that’s my story. That’s where the runes came from. My

darker self destroyed them immediately upon my return by the way, like I didn't want that knowledge to fall into anyone else's hooves. We don't seem to have dungeons anymore but maybe we can recapture some of the 'old magic' by studying them? That is what you're asking about, right?"

"Actually no," Origami spoke up. "We've been seeing them lately. On this shield, and around Amphibia. They used the runes heavily many years ago."

"Go back to you turning into some dark form?" Gianna insisted.

"Pony of Shadows, I called myself. What's this about a shield?"

"We need a checklist!" Twilight decided excitedly. "Let me just make one up real quick. We seem to have a lot of topics to talk about..."

So Stygian admitted he couldn't read the runes now, that knowledge had been lost when he lost his 'dark mark.' He figured it went with Pony of Shadows, when he was separated from that creature.

"So there's some evil, giant, magical, angry pony 'thing' out there?" Origami demanded. "What are we doing about it?"

"We did what we could," Twilight assured her. "It's trapped in Limbo. It can't affect our world anymore."

"And you're *absolutely* sure of that?"

"Errrrr..."

"You're not! I don't believe this!"

"I don't see how either," Stygian told them. "It's a timeless realm. We were trapped there, and then we weren't trapped there. I think? I don't know, that time was fuzzy for me. Did I do things there as Pony of Shadows? I can't... remember. It's like waking from a dream. Maybe I didn't *want* to remember."

"The pillars were all unharmed," Twilight added. "And didn't complain of torture or anything. So it was probably fine?"

"Separating from you may have made it worse though," Gianna realized. "You may have been holding it back. Fighting against the influence of the dark power. Now it's unrestrained. A shadow faction indeed. Could it be gathering followers here? Those that could work towards freeing it?"

"Right?!" Origami agreed.

"There's not much we can do," Twilight insisted. "We can't *double* banish him. Besides just because he called himself Pony of Shadows and you are worried about a 'shadow' faction doesn't mean it's the same thing."

"Better to be safe. We need to learn more about Limbo," Origami told her. "Maybe we can further seal it off? Can energy pass between our realms? How do we know *anything* about it?"

"There's one book," she recalled. "The one I used in making my spell. We can check it out before we leave. It's not been very well studied, for obvious reasons."

"For sure. Gosh! What else is lurking around the corner!"

Twilight shrugged. "That's the price you pay for living in a magical land. Magic does stuff. We just have to deal with it."

"Right, this Melemizargo and the 'dark' you talked of," Gianna mused. "Where does he fit into all this."

"Melemizargo is a huge, black, dragon. At least that's how he presents when he shows himself, or showed rather, in his own dungeon. He exists elsewhere, he won't say where exactly. Or can't? We might not understand his explanation so he doesn't try. Some say every shadow is one of his eyes. I'm not sure I believe that. He *is* magic, in a way. The dark is magic, in a way. It's beyond mortal understanding, at least for us at the time."

"Is he evil?"

“No. The dark is no more evil than sunlight is good. Sunlight simply exists. Moonlight exists. The manasphere exists. It just happens the manasphere has a voice. That voice is Melemizargo. *My* choices led to a bad end, but I was warned it could, by the dark itself. I was playing around with deep magic, possibly without truly understanding it. I rushed to get the job done, afraid they would find out after all. They still did...”

“And he’s connected to dungeons?” Origami asked.

“Essential! They wouldn’t work without his blessing, whatever that meant. Dungeons were established by the time I started my journey through the dark. But as I understood it they were made with a purpose, given what ponies could give them, and the dark took care of the rest when they were ‘blessed.’ So they can do things and have extradimensional spaces we couldn’t give them, as needed.”

“What does he get out of it?”

“No idea. Not something I would ask the enormous dragon to his face about. Dangerous enough to ask about unearned power. The dark wants you to grow strong by your own efforts. I was surprised when he gave me a ‘dark mark’ actually. Perhaps he knew this conversation would take place because of those actions?”

“Okay, fair I guess.”

“Do the dungeons still exist?” Gianna asked.

“They were just holes in the ground, manufactured holes,” Stygian replied. “But ultimately still holes. I doubt the magic would have faded as I say they were maintained by the dark itself. You could probably go down them and still get benefit from it. Even if the entrances were sealed, you could deal with that. I doubt they were totally filled in. Why? Want to give them a try?”

“Thinking about it!”

“Yeah, magical knowledge shouldn’t be lost,” Origami agreed. “We need to learn more. Why they were closed? Was it just political? Was it a bad idea? Have we been magically stunted ever since?”

“I can get some maps together, try and piece together what I recall of their locations. May be hard to get to, I mean if some bakery has a weird basement they try not to look at too much because it creeps them out how would we ever find it?”

“With good, old fashioned, detective work!”

“Okay. I’ve been keeping it secret, that I was ‘classically’ trained, if you will. If others find out, or should I say if *Celestia* finds out, well... Political, like I said. I don’t want you becoming outlaws because you learned magic the old way. There’s no laws on the books because she doesn’t want to draw attention to it, but it could still be frowned upon or even secretly illegal. You’ll be taking a risk doing this, I just want it said.”

“I understand.”

“That’s the final line of the checklist,” Twilight announced, checking it with a flourish. “Ah, don’t you love a completed checklist? So satisfying.”

The fine line between madness and- what was Tempest saying in her speech? Origami cautioned herself. “Then I guess we’ll be on our way. Let me know about the dungeons though.”

“Probably won’t be able to check them out for some time,” Twilight warned her. “Not if you want to help with the research. You can decide when you hear what it is, I guess.”

“You could just tell me?!”

“I’m saving it for a surprise when everypony is there!”

“Who is everypony?”

“You’ll see. We’ll have to see who shows up!”

“Okay...”

When the spell went down the group went over to Stygian's office, where he played them snippets of musical numbers he recorded on an old looking magnetic tape recorder.

"Five bits at a garage sale, can you believe this?" he asked proudly. "Still works fine. This technology stuff, amazing."

"Oh you have no idea," Sunny told him with a giggle.

The songs all referenced the dark, or the darkness, seemingly in the correct context like "hello darkness my old friend," "show the darkness that you will fight," "I've been searching through the dark," and "my dark disquiet, playing such eerie harmonies."

"I stopped after the fourth one, I was afraid if I kept looking I would find more," he admitted. "And then what would that mean? Clearly nopony has the dark on their mind, but somehow they sing about it all the time? Unless you think all this was just coincidence?"

"Hard to know," Twilight decided. "Maybe we should look more into this..."

The group then headed off to Ponchenge, which happened to be nearby. They poked around, Gianna finding a chunk of stone that still had writing on it. Origami kept shaking her head, sad about the loss of such an important historical site, and found the center stone had more runes. They couldn't exactly take the stone but Sunny took pictures. Whatever magical power the place had was long gone, though the mana density was slightly higher there for whatever reason. This had seeped into the rocks, probably what allowed the runes to be created in the first place.

Odd, the metal was deformed because the manosphere impression of the metal was carved. The physical material simply followed the pattern. But this chunk is completely normal now. Maybe in the breaking the stone deformed permanently. Or he did it a different way? We'll probably never know.

"Two of the symbols seem to be the same," Twilight noticed. "Can I see the shield again?"

"Sure thing." Gianna had it enlarge again. "You're right."

The group looked over the shield, and the first symbol was on the rock and the shield, as was the third symbol. The first was a sort of arrow pointing at a circle, and the second was an M with lines through the outer "legs" of the M.

"It was on the slab too," Origami recalled. "Sunny!"

"Scrolling!" she announced, looking through her pictures. "Wow I gotta get rid of all these pony butts *someone* has been taking pictures of. Who even did that? Has someone been stealing my phone? Maybe I could make a folder, separate them- Oh here we are."

It was true. The first symbol was the same.

"Some kind of priming of the pump, so to speak?" Gianna asked. "We should look for that symbol in the books we brought back."

"Hard to say exactly how this all works," Twilight admitted. "I'm hoping the books have some description of the whole process. It's just so different from what we do. I hesitate to even speculate at this point. It does seem like an important one though."

"Four symbols on the rock. And they were all the same you think?" Origami asked.

"Yes. Pretty sure each of the six rocks around the central point had these same four symbols. Stygian wanted a part of each object's power, so they would probably have to be. They were transmitting power and the central area was receiving it. That's probably where he had his book."

"Wonder what he thought the book would let him do?" Gianna asked.

"Huh. Good question. Do these runes somehow say? Or was he just hoping for the best?"

"Transmit. Power. Over. There?" Origami mused.

"It must be more complex than that!" Twilight laughed. "Right?"

The group headed back, quietly thinking their own thoughts about the prophesy, the images shown by “Domino” and them suddenly getting information on a “pony of shadows” that could be a threat. Magic writing that wasn’t completely from another land, ancient dungeons now abandoned, how did it all fit together?

Chapter 33
Three days later
Research Montage

When the group got back, Gianna went to petition Ponyville's premier party planner pony, Pinkie Pie, presently pleased prophesy permitted parallelism. In other words, Pinky was looking for her too, tail twitching.

"Are you talking to me?" she demanded, when Gianna waved her over. "Are you, talking, to me?"

"I did want to talk to you, yes. It's about Twilight."

"Okaly Dokily! What about her?"

"I think she's feeling down she didn't get to make the crystal. You heard about the vote right?"

"Sure did! It's just the *only* thing she's been talking about for weeks. Thankfully I'm glad it's over, I might get my friend back."

"She was looking forward to it, wasn't she? I just thought you might want to get her friends together and take her mind off it for a bit?"

"One 'We really hope you feel better about not being able to make a mysterious magical artifact' party coming up! Do you think only *two* dancer stallions will be enough? That's about all I can come up with on short notice. I'm not a miracle worker for crying out loud!"

"No, Pinkie, listen. Keep it low down, okay? Remember your audience. You want to bring her back up to normal, not make her run away screaming."

"Audience, pawdience. If going over the top hasn't worked, you haven't gone high enough. Oh, do you think I'll have time to bake my 'special' brownies? How down is she, numerically?"

"Pinkie!"

"Okay, okay!" she sighed. "Message received. One low key 'hope you feel better about your recent disappointment' friendly 'get-together-with-friends' hardly-a-party-at-all party coming up."

"That's... better."

"I'll have Fluttershy take the lead, then it'll be hardly above a whisper, how about that?"

"Just go talk to her, okay?"

"The... do what now? Just talk?"

The next two days passed with Origami reading about Limbo, while trying to find books about dungeons, and the dark. Limbo was at least known if mostly theoretical, and no books old enough existed to talk about dungeons.

Her library was destroyed. So her current library only has new-ish books. Rare, old, first editions were blown up with the original library. What's with everyone destroying everything around here? Is our school going to get blown up one day? I hope not!

Finally on the third day Origami and Gianna headed to the castle, where they were let in by Spike and brought to the newly renovated lab. A couple of ponies stood around she didn't know, but there was one she did. Starlight Glimmer, principal of the school.

“Hey, Gianna, Origami,” she greeted them. “How were classes today?”

“Fine,” both said, the standard answer every young sentient gives their elders no matter how good or bad classes actually had gone. It was just a constant across the multiverse, there was no getting away from it.

“Let me introduce Sunburst, and Moon Dancer,” Twilight told them. Both were unicorns, Moon Dancer with her trademark dark sweater, messy hair, and repaired glasses.

So this is the one Twilight snubbed before she was a princess, Origami thought to herself. She is kinda adorkable, can't believe Twilight almost let her get away. I mean there must have been strong feelings there for her to almost give up on society after one missed birthday party. I mean, uh, I'm not supposed to know that. Celestia told me about her, not Twilight. Play it cool. “Nice to meet you.”

“Same here, Twilight has been raving about the pegasus that studies magic. Color me impressed.”

“Indeed,” said the stallion to her side. “I’m eager to work with you. But can you tell me why we’re here finally?”

She looked him over. He too had glasses, white lower limbs, a hit of a beard (a rarity among ponies) and a concealing cloak over his whole body. No peak at his cutie mark, no way! Did he not have one and was hiding it? Was she going to be working with a *blank flank???*

The horror of it! “Twilight hasn’t?”

“Just that it’s going to get us all in the history books.”

“Really playing it up, huh?” she asked.

“It’s all true. You’ll get credit for the idea, it was yours after all.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Something you mentioned right at the start of all this. Come on, think back.”

“I have no idea what you’re referring to!”

“Never mind. Ponies, gather round. And Gianna, of course, welcome!” She headed for the table and tapped the metal cover. “With this as an example and the books kindly loaned from Amphibia, we, the six of us are going to create Equestria’s first fully functional teleportation gateway nexus!”

The others looked excited, but a lightbulb went off over Origami’s head. “I did ask why something like that didn’t exist already, didn’t I?”

“You did. And I’ve been chewing the problem over ever since. The answer is power. We ponies would be in full control of it. That’s no good. Places like Griffonstone that don’t have a plethora of mages would be disadvantaged. But no more. If we can send power like they did in ancient Amphibia, that problem goes away. Either side can open the gate, and we don’t need to be involved at all if for example griffons want portals between their own cities. It just draws from the web. And a few mages in a central location can provide power to the whole thing, rather than trying to power each location individually. It’s just better.”

To say nothing of the fact our current method of making magical items is limited, they simply don't last. So sending power is the least of our concerns. Bold of her to assume this method of rune magic can even open a portal such as she describes. But I guess if it can power a factory it can do most anything? She seems confident.

“Of course there would be a plethora of problems making actual gateways with traditional means,” Sunburst added. “Is this method going to overcome that?”

See, he gets it.

“That’s what I’m hoping. I think we can make metal slabs like Gianna’s shield, that have magical function built into them rather than just transmitting power.”

Ah, so her confidence is totally fake after all, good to know. She actually has no idea.

The others nodded. It seemed maybe they had all been involved? In fact they looked to Origami and Gianna as if expecting them to ask about it, but shrugged when they didn’t.

“So how do we begin?” Origami asked. “It seems like a pretty big task for the six of us.”

“We break it up,” she explained. “You want to work on the books, or on the metal? We’ll try to keep the numbers even, and just plug away at it. I’m not expecting results in a week, this is a long term project. Naturally you can put in any work after school, Origami. And Gianna is welcome if she doesn’t find it too boring. You could always make sure our drinks are topped up or something?”

“We’ll see.”

“Up to you. So, everyone pick your poison, and we can start researching! I have a checklist! Want to see it?”

I could go either way, Origami thought to herself. Those books are calling to me, but figuring out the metal could be interesting too. This is a tough one...

“Wait, can we get a bit of history on these items?” Moon Dancer asked. “Do we know anything about them now? We’re not starting from scratch here, are we?”

“Oh, that’s the first thing on the checklist, see?” Twilight showed her. “Go ahead, Origami. You were there, I wasn’t. Tell us everything!”

So she did, stressing that the civilization started off strong, with the music box powering everything. They went to other worlds, picked up the runic metal, and then their civilization fell with the loss of the box. Magic was known, but limited in scope to ‘baubles’ like potions or hex bags, but this was a function of training. Maddie, the witch frog, successfully learned two spells while she was there, meaning probably any frog, newt, or toad also could. She explained about the factories, how she had to power them, and what she felt when powering them too. About how Gianna found the metal cover they were currently looking at, and how the ship had, using the upgraded routines, discovered it was a very dense iron and so magically active it seemed smooth to people without solid cores, but carved to those with them. They looked it over and asked questions, but were finally up to speed on the whole thing. She didn’t leave anything out, figuring that would only slow things down at this point.

In the end she started working on a translation spell with Twilight and Moon Dancer, who did seem to get along really well now. She didn’t bring up their past, and neither did they, so she tried to put it out of her mind. With the three of them they finished before Sunburst and Starlight worked out how to recreate the metal, so she switched over to helping them. Meanwhile the other two translated the books and got to work making a new “dictionary” of the magical runes. There were a lot of them, making them wonder how they had been discovered in the first place.

The metal was tricky, but two spells were created to help replicate it. One to increase the mana density of a whole room, allowing molten material to absorb a higher than usual amount of mana so they would have something to ‘write’ on, and another to increase the density by basically crushing it into itself. With that done they had a local blacksmith create an exact replica of the slab, so they could test it. Their goal at the moment was just to make sure they understood the process, and to that end were simply going to carve the symbols shown on the slab- with some modification- on the other slab. Take it back to Amphibia, replace the factory one with the one they made, and try it. If it worked perfectly, great, they understood the process. If not, they could examine the failure and improve. Trying to make something completely new that failed would have too many variables to easily correct for. Origami had to admit Twilight’s plan had merit.

By the time the slab was done the books were at least ready enough to tell what the symbols did, and Origami switched to working on making a “knife” that would do the job. Basically just an enchanted wooden knife, as a magical object. It would be activated and “used up” in a session, so another would have to be made for every object but that was a small price to pay for a permanent magical effect. With that done they practiced on clay slabs, and at Origami’s suggestion Flametwist was hired to make a clamping system for the slab, so it could be held in place yet moved enough to get the best angle for cutting, once

they got to that point. She relished the challenge and used some of the knowledge she had gained from looking at the robotic arms in Amphibia to put it together.

Origami had the best runework, the other unicorns were not used to working with their hooves like that, and didn't want to risk the process being corrupted using telekinetic magic to hold the "stylus" and do the cutting. So when the day came Origami took a deep breath and gathered her magic, pushing it into the knife and activating it, slab before her. The world seemed to hold its breath, an impossibly sharp edge forming around the edge of the wooden knife, and Origami's world narrowed to almost that as well. She cut and cut, not completely happy with her work but when it was done, it felt about 90% the same to her magical senses as the original slab.

"Because we changed it a bit, or because our method was imperfect?" Twilight wondered, as everypony looked it over. They had taken two months to get to this point, and the weather was becoming the hottest part of the year. Finals would be soon, and then summer break. Origami was having fun, but didn't really want this to be her life. She hadn't spoken to Twilight about that yet, and it did seem the research portion was coming to a close. They would need to decide soon how they were going to proceed turning this method into a business.

"We did take out the part relating to sending mana into the rest of the web," Starlight admitted. "So it should feel different?"

"Right, we figured that's why Origami had to take Sunny's power, she was trying to power the local buildings as well. Our design took that out so every drop of mana should go into the one factory. I guess we can only test it and hope for the best."

"We'll leave tomorrow," Origami told her.

"Good. Meanwhile I'll write up a plan for the network, to present to the griffons. You're still willing to be our ambassador, Gianna?"

"Been looking forward to it!" *They need this the most, after all, and this may be my prophesy coming true. This is certainly magic and ponies, the two things I have been promised. So it was nice of her to offer the first real prototype to the griffon empire, and have me present it. I proposed the dragon plan, which seems to have worked out, so I should have some credibility with the council to get them onboard with this plan too. She thinks it will revitalize the area and I agree, having the first teleport gateway in the land should make it much easier to get there, the train from here has to loop all the way around past the crystal empire. Cutting that journey to a single step will bring all kinds of benefits.*

"Great! Things should go much faster now. We can create lots of small slabs, knives, and crystals for a couple of small tests. I think we have the runes we want, if it works creating a small test gateway, enough to prove the concept, should be done by the time you get back."

"That well be something to see," Origami admitted.

"We won't try it until you're back. You earned that much," she promised.

"Okay."

The trip to Amphibia went fine, and with some work the group lifted the original distributor off the factory building and put theirs in place of it. Origami powered it up by herself, and while it didn't roar to life it did flicker to life, the lights a bit dimmer than before but the computer came up and was able to request clearprints for construction. The group was ecstatic, and headed to the capital to share the good news. The entire island looked a lot better, with clear skies, more green, and less junk laying around. They were met by Olivia and Yunan, giving them the good news that perhaps their civilization didn't have to totally go back to the stone age after all. She reported that airships from Equestria were now only filled with curious scholars and such, rather than relief supplies, in both directions. They were close to signing their new government into law, holding elections, and fears about the winter were completely gone as pony magic filled the fields with more and different types of foods than they had ever had. She thanked them a

million times and was looking forward to teachers coming to help them reclaim their heritage. (Not of invading other dimensions, just of magitech and how it could improve lives.) With them figuring it out and leaving the translation spell and metalworking spells for Maddie to look over (other 'witches' were now being trained of course, there was much excitement in that area as well) it was possible they could start working on a similar network of their own. They might need to import crystals, or come up with some alternate source to the music box, but that was future Amphiba's problem. Things were looking up all around.

The group headed back the next day in high spirits, ready to tell everypony at the castle their hard work had paid off, and to get ready for the next stage of the plan. They were met by an excited Twilight who guessed everything had gone fine, because "we went ahead with some tests here too. We were too excited to wait. But you still get to do the engraving for the arch, as you're still the best at it. Come see what we did!"

The group followed her into the main research room and she grabbed up a small chunk of crystal.

"Useless, right?" she asked, showing them. "Too small to use. Normally a piece this size would just get used for jewelry. Well, I mean most crystal was used that way very little was used for magical purposes but that's going to change pretty quickly now that we know what we know. Bringing back the crystal empire and crystal ponies is really going to have a significant impact on our society because of their properties-"

"Just get on with it!" Origami told her.

"Oh right, the demonstration." She held it up and it started to glow. "I just stored mana from my core into this crystal. Now, usually when I cast a spell I have to wait until my mana core absorbs enough ambient mana to cast again. Especially for a complex spell like, for instance, teleportation. But with this crystal already charged up..." She concentrated and vanished, reappearing only steps away. The crystal shattered, turning into a fine dust, and she teleported again back to her original position. "I can simply absorb the mana and use it right away. Great for an emergency situation, as you can see."

"But the crystal got destroyed."

She waved that off. "Yes, yes, a consequence of doing it fast. But when we do it slow? Come see." On the table were some metal plates, small ones with only a few runes, and a variety of crystal scattered about. Twilight grabbed two, and put mana into one so it glowed. "Watch this!" She set the uncharged crystal on one plate, and the charged crystal on the other. The dark crystal started to glow, while the glowing crystal started to dim. Over the course of 30 seconds or so the energy was completely transferred. "And we can go back and forth, seemingly without limit," she gushed. "The crystals survive and don't seem to lose any strength as we go back and forth. We can do it! We can send energy just like they did in Amphibia. We don't need any music box, just enough ponies to charge a 'master crystal' and have it feed smaller ones to power the gates. The range is pretty good too, in fact we can have them across town, we didn't go further than that."

"Maybe we should have done that test first?" Gianna mused.

Twilight shook her head. "No, I think we did things in the correct order. We had to know we understood the metal, and the process as a whole. The Amphibia test was vital. Honestly we took a big risk, proceeding without knowing if that test worked. But you get as many magic geeks in a room as we did and we couldn't help ourselves. We have everything ready for you in the rune carving room, by the way. Fresh knives, newly forged metal, I have no idea how you're going to handle carving on the archway but we'll figure something out. It's all up to you, Origami."

"No pressure..."

Chapter 34
The next day
Holes in Space

It turned out that, perhaps owing to “beginners luck” the runes placed onto the arch looked even *better* than the runes placed onto the activation slab, and everyone crowded around the lab table. When they were ready to proceed Twilight left the room and came back with a large rat, of all things, riding on her back. A yellow rat. With pink hair and a cutie mark. A surly looking rabbit followed after them.

“Everypony, this is Fluttershy, who has agreed to be our test subject for today,” she introduced her. “She has of course been shape-shifted for the occasion, because our test gateway is portable and travel sized. So we needed a smaller test subject as well.”

“Hello!” Fluttershy rat squeaked nervously, blushing and trying to hide behind Twilight’s mane.

“Hang on, we’re not just shoving her through it!” Origami protested.

“Of course not!” Twilight assured her. “We’ll open the portal and see how long it lasts. We can do that a few times. Then roll an inorganic object through it. Then an apple. We’ll taste the apple. Then a plant. Then Angel will go through, and report anything he feels to Fluttershy, who can talk to animals. Only then will Fluttershy go through so she can describe the sensations herself. Not that we don’t trust you, Angel...”

The rabbit folded his arms and looked away.

Ah, that must be Angel.

“But you are just a bunny. We need a pony’s opinion.”

“Angel complains about every little thing, so he should be a good- it’s true!” Fluttershy told everyone, as Angel stomped his back foot.

“I wondered what all the weird stuff was in the lab today,” Gianna admitted, looking around at the new additions.

“All part of the test! Shall we begin?”

“I guess living things have to go through eventually,” Origami admitted. “And we have to set the crystal on the plate, but maybe some tongs?”

“I can get you some tongs,” Spike told her, heading for the kitchen. He was back in a moment, and handed a pair off to Twilight.

“Let me, I’m the most expendable,” Gianna told them all, grabbing them. “If I get sucked into another dimension I’m counting on you nerds to find a way to bring me back.”

No pony spoke up to contradict her, though they had the good graces to at least look embarrassed about the fact they were allowing her to take this risk.

The portal worked, they tested the whole system. Charging the crystal, moving it over, powering the arch, and watching as a hole in space opened that seemingly allowed an object rolled through to avoid the usual space in between. Angel reported no odd effects, the transit seemed instantaneous, and rat Fluttershy agreed after she went through it.

“Why this setup though?” Gianna asked, after Fluttershy was returned to her normal size and waiting to see if there were any ill effects. “Just send the power from the plate that the main crystal sits on directly. None of this two crystal stuff.”

“Two reasons,” Twilight explained. “The first is we don’t want any device directly powered by the web. Security concerns. We don’t want some big device just hooked up and draining all our power. Imagine a weapon of some kind, using our own power web against us to power it! Plus in a pinch, this way somepony can charge a crystal ‘manually’ if you will and power the gate- or anything else we come up with that uses this technology- directly.”

“Okay...”

“Second reason is complexity. Look here.” She went over to a chalkboard and tapped a series of runes. “This was our first draft. Way too long!”

Gianna nodded, there were like 12 runes there. Clearly more than even the Amphibia power system used.

“So we broke it up into four separate functions. Should one plate ever be damaged, and I don’t see how given the density but still, or burn out or whatever it can be easily replaced. It’s harder to screw up so few runes, even if they are overlapping a bit, so for now this is what we’re going with. Maybe one day, when we’re confident in the technique and have been doing it for years we can risk more complex and longer ‘sentences’ if you will. So for now, and probably forever, the web of mana will only send to crystals, not devices, which will have to be swapped and recharged.”

So no robots then? Unless they can last all day with one crystal. I see her concern, Origami decided. Nice to see she’s taking security seriously.

Fluttershy seemed completely fine an hour later, no dizziness, queasiness, light headedness, muscle fatigue, blurred vision, headache, slurred speech, loss of wingpower, coppery taste in the month-

“I’m fine, Twilight, honestly,” she finally put a hoof down as Twilight kept listing things.

“I just want to be sure. Okay, I’ll shape-shift you again. Gianna, mind hauling this whole thing around town? We need to test if it has a range limitation next.”

“I’ll need a cart or something,” she decided, looking the awkward thing over.

“I think we can manage that.”

This test also passed with flying colors, it seemed Origami had done a great job, as even hopping in the North Star and heading away from town the portal continued to open as designed. There seemed to be no warpage of the metal, excess heat, static buildup, nothing. Magic truly was the greatest to work with, and all watching the test pitied those realities that didn’t have access to it. Poor souls.

“Congratulations, everypony!” Twilight gushed when Gianna was back. “We’ve really done it. You should all be super proud. We’re going to do it. We’re going to bring the whole continent together and smash Sunny’s bad future to pieces.”

“This does look promising,” she admitted. “With less isolation and more cooperation, there’s no way my bad future should take hold now.” *Huh. Meaning, I should probably start thinking about going back, huh? I’ve been taking good notes on spell research, this new method, everything I’ve been learning in case I have to bring it with me back to my bleak future. But if my parents really will be there when I get back, I shouldn’t need it. Gateways should be all over and magic should be more prevalent than ever. Right? I should at least stay long enough to see a real gateway actually work, though.*

“If we can convince other kingdoms to accept it,” Origami muttered.

“To that end,” Twilight continued. “Here’s your homework for tonight, Ginna.” She handed her a bunch of notes. “It’s everything I’ve thought of for the gateway network. Possible weaknesses, how it’ll function, talking points, benefits both societal and economic, it’s all there. Study it. All of you can have a

copy. If I've missed something let me know. Otherwise take the prototype to Griffonstone tomorrow after class and test it out. If it still works at that distance, great! Show it to them and ask if they want the first full sized prototype. We'll go from there. And there will be a lot to do. Finding a space in Canterlot for the twin, making it, runeing everything, building a building! We'll want dragons for that... I estimate we can have it running in less than a month if they agree and get started right away. I've already ordered a 'battery crystal' from the crystal empire and the local blacksmith has been basically buying up every bit of scrap iron they can lay a hoof on. I have some leads on other craftspories to do the rune work too, it wasn't fair to make you do everything, Origami."

"Oh, uh, right."

"And you'll get paid, once we start bringing in money. You're all co-inventors, so you'll all get a share of the profits. You must have been thinking about it?"

"Yeah, kind of. Research is great and all but we all have to eat."

"Exactly. Anyway, think you can handle that, Gianna?"

"I won't let you down!" *I don't think I can. I have a pretty good feeling they're going to go for it. Thanks, Guru!*

A nervous Gianna in full armor pulled the cart with the prototype in it, covered with a sheet, into the council building in Griffonstone the next day. Don't think too hard about how they got the cart up there. They used friendship magic, don't think about it. In contrast to their previous visit, the place was completely packed- with one griffon in a red hat with some letters on it in the waiting area. The receptionist perked up at her arrival, waving at her.

"Welcome back, Gianna!" she gushed. "And your friends as well, uh..." She leaned over a little, trying to be subtle about it. "Paper bird?"

"Origami!" Origami reminded her.

"Yes, yes, of course! And who is your new friend with the strange wings?"

"This is Sunny. They're just here to support me when I present this to the council." *Not that I need it, of course!*

"I saw you had something to show there, another miracle for our poor city?"

Gianna gave a nervous laugh. "Uh, something like that, yes."

"Swiftalon is big news right now, so I'm sure it'll be well received. Or at least *you* will, but I trust you know what you're doing."

"It's going well, then?" Origami asked.

"Quite smoothly. Since you were last here they've completely rebuilt most of the entire town, and griffons have steadily moved back in. The speed at which dragons can work stone is quite astonishing. It helped property values were kept quite low to attract interest, but still there have been no incidents between us and the dragons. That hasn't stopped *some* from complaining of course." She scowled at the griffon that was waiting. The others turned to look at her, and she stared back. "Many who come nowadays are protestors. Stupid thing to do with your time, if you're so well off you can take time to protest, maybe pitch in to help clean up your neighborhood or something. Just waving a sign around or complaining doesn't help anyone. Go do something if you have so much time and energy on your claws."

"Are we going to have to wait?" Gianna asked.

"The council is meeting with a rep from the Wholly Rollers, they're a trading company looking to get permits to start up trade routes to Swiftalon. The roads will have to be inspected, repaired, that sort of thing. You can go in after that. Ms. MGGA over there will make a stink but I can say it's defense force business. It even sort of is, I'm glad you wore the armor."

"Maybe I'll try to get on her good side?" *MGGA?*

She snorted. “Good luck. Those griffons are crazy! Some kind of conspiracy theory virus takes over their brains.”

“Let us know.” She unhooked the cart and pushed it to the side, so it was out of the way. “I’ll wait over there.”

“I’ll let them know you’re here, maybe they’ll hurry this other thing up. Nice seeing you again!”
“You too.”

The group went over there, Gianna resolving to be nice until she understood what was going on. “Nice hat,” she greeted the other griffon. “What’s it stand for?”

“Make Griffonstone great again,” she replied proudly. “I guess if you’re asking you’re not here to protest this awful decision by the council.”

“You’re talking about the newly renovated town?” Origami asked. “Just because some dragons happened to help?”

“Help?” she snorted. “I wouldn’t expect a *pony* to understand what we’ve been though. At least your kind hasn’t been actively harmful to us. But *inviting* dragons into our lands? That’s nonsense.”

“How so?” Gianna asked, eyes narrowed.

“I wish they allowed me to bring my pamphlets up here, I’m Grenne by the way. We could use more young griffons like yourself in the movement. But basically it’s all about them replacing us. A ‘great replacement’ if you will. This is just the dragon’s latest tactic. Seem to have turned over a new leaf, get in with construction jobs, but then when that’s done start replacing us at other jobs. Soon that whole town will be nothing but dragons, they’ll have pushed us out! And we’ll have just stood there and let them.”

“What would you suggest? That we try and do stonework the hard way? They’re good at it.”

“We should build a wall, all the way around our territory. Yes, yes I know they can fly. It’s about sending a message.”

“Seems like an awful lot of work. Better spent just improving our city directly.”

“That’s not the worst of it.”

“Oh? Go on...”

“Young griffons like yourself will be exposed to *dragon culture!* Our own values are going to go out the window before long. And that awful way they choose their leaders? This so called Ember? That must have been rigged, her father wanted to retire and pass the crown onto her. Of course she won.”

Actually Spike won, but gave it up. But is telling her that worse or better? “Is that so?”

“You need to listen to the news more often. Try MaximumNews or NewsBadger. Those outlets tell it like it is. Not like NewsBeaks Continuum. They’re just fake news!”

“Are they?”

“And don’t get me started on how lazy dragons are!”

“The dragons that built a whole town from scratch in two months... are lazy?”

“They’re just pretending to be good workers. Once they’re established they’ll revert to their old ways. Laying around. Doing crimes instead of working. All dragons are criminals you know?! And if we let in dragons, what’s next? Yacks? Changelings? They’re the worst you can’t even tell they’re not griffons!”

“Uh huh, I see where you’re coming from.” *Loony Ville.*

“You should attend a rally, see Grump himself speak about all this. He’ll be our next king, mark my words!”

“He found the idol?”

“Idol? Well, no... But the council should crown him king anyway, he just has so many good ideas. He’ll make sure all these foreigners stay out of our lands.”

Lady, you’re really not gonna like it when you can take a couple of steps and get anywhere in Equestria. Because then anyone can do the same and get here.

“How so?”

“Round them up! Deport them!”

“Dragons? That can be two or three times our size... And have magic...”

“He’ll find a way. He’s a genius you know.”

“I bet he is.”

“The council will see you now,” the receptionist came back.

“About time!” Grenne huffed, standing.

“Not you,” she told her with a shake of her head. “Her.” She pointed to Gianna. “Official business. Could take hours. Probably want to come back another day. Or never. Your choice. They’re going to be very busy after this.”

“This is outrageous!”

“Nevertheless, it’s reality. Good day!”

She walked away, leaving Grenne sputtering.

“Oh that felt good,” she admitted quietly, as Ginna got the cart again. “Take your time!”

Four of the eight council seats were filled when Ginna got back there, looking pleased to see her. Their name plaques said Gumberpatch, Grudalf, Glitzzy and Goldilocks. The scribe scowled at Origami though.

There she is again. That pony. I can't get her out of mind. What's wrong with me? I didn't think I would see her again but here she is. Is this fate? Oh I hate her but I want to see more of her. What does she like to do? What does her mark mean? Is she a good flier? And why do I care? Forget her- Wait what are they saying? He bent back to work.

“Good to see you again too,” Gianna was saying. “I have a presentation for you, something I think is really going to shake things up around here.”

“We could use it,” Gumberpatch admitted. “Please, in your own time.” He indicated she should begin.

I'm not Trixie, but I get by. She dramatically pulled the sheet off the arch and unhooked the sides, letting them fall. The crystal was charged, Twilight standing by at her castle with other crystals in case they wanted a longer demonstration but for now it was ready to go. “This is the very latest in pony magic,” she began. “The very cutting edge, as it were. Scaled up, this prototype will allow instantaneous travel between set locations, currently set to Twilight’s castle, and she is waiting for us there. With your permission I will activate the device, which will remain open for approximately sixty seconds, showing you her castle and allowing you to speak to her directly. Our goal is to build a complete network of these gateways, allowing all residents of Equestria to travel to even the furthest corners of our land in the blink of an eye. Larger models still will allow cargo to be brought from all corners as well, fresh from markets across the land.”

The council was shocked into silence. Gianna looked around, if this was an anime she would be sweatdropping right now. Finally Grudalf spoke up.

“Scribe, go and get the rest of the council. They’re not going to want to miss this.”

“Right away!” He stood, but carefully put his quill in the book, closed it while deliberately staring at Origami, and backed away not breaking eye contact with her.

“Er, did I say something last time?” Origami asked, when he was out of sight.

“Oh, please forgive him,” Glitzzy told her. “He had the absurd notion you were after his job. The way you made the pen take notes without him last time. We assured him his service was invaluable and he would not be replaced at this time. Pay him no mind.”

“I see!”

When the scribe returned Gianna once again explained what they would be seeing, and the council gathered around the apparatus. Placing the stone the familiar hole in the air opened, and Twilight's excited face greeted them all.

"Hello, Griffonstone!" she called. "I'm talking to you from Ponyville, how's the weather over there?"

"This is incredible," breathed Gailisano. "May I?" She raised a talon, and gestured towards the portal.

"Of course! It's perfectly safe."

She stuck it through, and Twilight shook her claws.

"Amazing!"

"Could you make one without that aspect?" Galito asked shrewdly. "Then if someone wanted to talk to someone while staying home-"

"You just want to come to council meetings but not get out of bed!" Gogo teased.

"Not just that!"

"I don't see why not," Twilight told them.

"Make them, and I'll order a dozen!"

"And a larger one, you want to make that next, and we can physically walk through it?" Geran asked.

"That's the plan," Twilight agreed. "It shouldn't work any differently. It just needs to be scaled up."

"Still, even having a small one for mail, or small goods would go a long way."

"If you're interested, great! There's a lot of things to work out, Gianna can speak to that, I can send a representative to sign a contract of some kind once we work out those details."

The council traded a quick look, no one seemed against it.

"We accept!" they all shouted.

"Glad to hear it." The connection faded.

"I can get her back, if you want," Gianna told them. "The crystal can be reenergized from her side."

"Let's see the whole process," Grudalf agreed. "Then you can go over the particulars."

The particulars, in particular, were about how many jobs the new system would create, directly and indirectly; Guards, money takers, attendants, builders, janitors, the list went on. Then of course outside the gateway building itself; restaurants, shops, guides, inns. The council had many questions about capacity, material cost, security, and thanks to Twilight's efforts Gianna had most of the answers. Any answers she didn't usually boiled down to "we need to see what data the prototype generates." This was fair, they agreed, upending the world of transportation for a whole continent would do that. They agreed having a central hub was probably for the best, as this was strictly point to point- for security reasons- so the main hub (in Canterlot) needed to be huge to account for all the traffic, and also employ a mix of races. One would arrive there, then be taken to the appropriate gateway for the traveler's "real" destination, if not the pony capital. They also appreciated that they could manage their own, inside their kingdom.

"The plan is," Gianna told them, showing them a map, "the general network will allow you to move between territories easily, for example going from Yakyakistan in one 'hop.' Each kingdom's network will get you around that kingdom. Naturally we'll probably have gateways to all our major cites. We'll be able to bring fish caught in Horseshoe Bay to Griffonstone that day, rather than by train two days later."

"And as we control it, we can charge what we want, and the ponies can't shut it down, no offence I doubt you would but still..."

"Exactly. You'll have to hire pony mages to power your crystals though, until griffons can do that on their own."

"Yes, very few of us take up magic," Grudalf mused. "They may start to now though."

"Agreed!"

“Very well. Only one or two more points to clear up. We can select a site here in Griffonstone and start clearing it. But we would need dragons to build the actual structure unless we want it to take forever. But with our whole MGGA problem that’s gaining momentum, I also don’t want protests outside the walls endlessly.”

“Would they?” Glitzy asked. “It’s just a building. We’re literally making Griffonstone great again, the thing they *claim* to want!”

“But there’s no reasoning with them. They always find some way to twist your words or simply outright lie about reality itself!”

“What if we hired ponies to do the job,” Goldilocks asked, “and they sub-contracted dragons to do the heavy lifting? Then our claws would be tied. *We* didn’t hire any dragons, go talk to the ponies.”

“Seems a bit dishonest,” Origami spoke up. “I think we should get a dragon to actually hold one of these ‘rallies’ that Grenne griffon was talking about. Explain their whole deal now. Apologize for the past and tell everyone to start looking to the future.”

“You heard about that Grump fellow I take it?” Galito asked her after groaning.

“Yes, briefly.”

“He just sort of appeared on the scene, I’d love to know where he’s getting his backing from. Anyway, if you can get one to come, we’ll host them. Getting in front of the problem may cool things down before tensions start to rise. I suppose if we got the raw material here quickly they could be in and out in a few days...”

“If they’re anything like those Swiftalon dragons, no doubt,” Grudalf agreed.

“I’m sure you have a lot of planning to do then,” Gianna told them, bringing up the sides of the cart again. “I’ll leave you to it. Twilight or another representative will be along about that contract.”

“You’ve certainly fired us up, young griffon,” Grudalf told her. “I can’t wait to see what you come up with next!”

I just met you, and this is crazy, but the next thing might be dungeons, maybe?

Chapter 35
About an hour later
Cresting the hill

“And that’s our latest breakthrough,” Gianna told Ember, performing the demonstration again for her. “Soon we hope to have one of these in every kingdom so that trade and tourism flourish.”

“This magic is incredible! I must have it!” Ember gushed. “You say it’s contained within the metal? How was this accomplished? The mana density of the material is much higher than normal is that required? How did you align the spell matrix with the crystal lattice? What’s the range? Are these symbols the thing that defines the effect? How did you divine them?”

Uh huh, Origami thought to herself. I told Gianna it was too early to go waving this stuff around.

“I’m sure we’d be willing to share-” Gianna started to say.

“That is, the thing is,” Origami butted in. “It’s early days yet. We’re really just figuring all this out ourselves and yes, while Amphibia seemed to use it safely for hundreds of years we’d like to make sure we do understand it before just handing it out.” She gave Gianna the stink eye. “Finished gateway or the instructions on how to use this type of magic to make things. This is a completely different implementation than they used, and in fact they didn’t seem to do anything like this when they had the opportunity. Perhaps they tried it and it failed. We need more data. While we, of course, have close ties to dragon kind and would obviously trust *you* with it, we haven’t worked out a lot of questions like access control, training method, you know, vital stuff. We simply cannot ‘hoof it over’ at this time.”

“I’m kind of sensing you don’t though...”

“We have no reason not to! ...At this time.”

“... Ah I see. ‘Don’t give us a reason’ is that it? Okay, I get it. And you’re giving this to griffons first?”

“They need it the most,” Gianna protested. “And just the finished product. Ponies have to make the magic work, 99% of griffons don’t do magic. We’re *selling* it to them. Not the prototype, we’re giving that to them to generate data, but they’ll have some kind of payment system for using the final. Either up front or some percentage of crossing fees, we don’t know yet.”

“Humm, yes, we didn’t do them any favors. And I’m more interested in the magic aspect I bet than the tourism... Because that’s what I’m looking at directly. Anyway, you want dragons to go to their capital and start construction on a huge building to house this arch as you call it? Plus offices, vaults, bathrooms, the usual I would imagine.”

“Yes to all of that! Plus a secret location to house the big crystal all the small ones draw on.”

“But only after a public apology,” Origami insisted. “Somedragon that can set their minds at ease.”

“There have been... protests,” Gianna was forced to admit. “Against the dragons in Swiftalon. We need to show them you’re not just blowing hot air.”

“But very real dragon fire,” she agreed, nodding along. “Now, the best candidate would be my father. One problem with that. Well, maybe two but... come with me.” She led them through the caverns and out the side of the mountain, where a huge dragon was lying there, sleeping. “There’s good old dad.

He's asleep. Probably why he wanted to give up the scepter and step down, triggering the games. Catch up on his napping. But we could get him up, problem is even if we did he's an ancient dragon! Look at the size of him! If a dragon like that came swooping down, I'm sorry even if invited I can see griffons being a bit twitchy about it. No offence. I don't want either side starting anything because they thought they were under attack or something silly like that."

"Yes that's probably for the best," Origami agreed. "A younger dragon, perhaps?"

She sighed. "But it's older dragons that are the most resistant to my changes. They should be the ones to apologize for what they did under my father's rule! Aarg! Nothing for it, I guess. Like you said, I need to solidify my position if I ever want to be trusted with that magical metal technique. I'll do it. I'll go myself and speak to the griffons."

"Oh!" Gianna exclaimed. "That would be second best, yes. I mean you're the best queen, I just mean, in terms of an old dragon versus a younger dragon--"

She laughed and patted Gianna's side. "I get it, Gianna. It's okay. It's going to take time. Thankfully, for dragons, I have that time. I can simply wait for any holdouts to die. As long as young griffons see me as friendly and dragons behave themselves, soon no griffon will be able to remember when it was not so. Morbid, but true. I, and most of my kind, will still be around."

If you can keep power long enough, anyway, Origami thought.

"Simply outliving your problems, it's good work if you can get it," Gianna admitted.

"Right?!"

Ember agreed to send some dragons to the capital. Talking with Twilight long distance, even only a minute at a time between recharges, was convenient. As ponies had no problem working with dragons, and they would need a huge facility if this all worked out, she said she would take care of things on her end and tell the kingdom they were coming. Meanwhile the princess would find a good spot for the whole thing, maybe deep in the mountain so it was unassailable. Dragons could make tunnels easily enough, after all, and carving rock out of a mountain could be easier than shifting tons of stone around, even for unicorns.

"We'll work all that out, send your best workers in two days, maybe?" Twilight told her. "We'll have a plan by then."

"Agreed. I'll pay their salaries myself, as a gesture of goodwill so perhaps we can get the next portal?"

"I can agree to that," she replied. "Well, the second non-prototype portal," she amended. "We're going to replace the griffon one--"

"Yes! Agreed! Whatever--"

It winked out again.

"Okay, we need to make that stay open longer!" she complained as it charged up again.

"A bigger crystal will hold more power. We didn't bring one though," Origami told her. "We didn't think it would need to be used like this."

"Humm, start importing crystals..." Ember mused.

With that taken care of they flew back to Griffonstone, to give the council the good news. They were still debating about everything portal related and were a bit surprised the queen herself was going to show up. But they agreed it would be best to deal with her directly, to set the correct expectation for what they wanted the dragons to do and what they would get in exchange. They said she could come in two days time, that would give them time to put together a reception worthy of a queen and get the word out. They simply sent that message with the dragon fire jar, and got a reply back. With that done the group headed home, and Origami went to find Twilight.

"I noticed Ember seemed awful insistent about getting her claws on this stuff," she told her.

"Should we be concerned?"

"I wonder," Twilight mused. "Truth is, even I gave into temptation once."

"No, really?" she asked, almost but not quite failing to keep her sarcasm to a minimum.

"It's true."

"The Stygian thing, right? Bringing him back?"

"Okay twice."

"Not going to your best friend's birthday party?"

"Okay three- hey how *you* know about that?"

Oh crap oh crap, come on spontaneous rewind magic... go? No? Nothing. "Uh, just rumors?"

Her face scrunched up. "Rainbow Dash! What else has that pony been saying about me?"

"Huh? No, I haven't talked to her!"

"No? Couldn't be Fluttershy... Pinkie? No, that doesn't make- Whatever. The point is, when the Storm King invaded Celestia's final words were to seek the hippogriffs. I guess they had tangled with him before? But they had retreated under the sea, becoming sea ponies. I later learned the kingdom possessed an artifact, they called it the pearl, it was a giant, well, pearl, obviously. It could transform ponies into other forms. I figured we could use it to turn ourselves into something big and strong enough to fight off the forces of... the... Storm... King..." Twilight slowed down like she was running out of battery power.

"You okay there?"

"Why didn't I just go ask the dragons for help?" she mused.

"I don't know, why didn't you? Seem like they're already big and strong..."

"And we were friendly with them at the time. Wow! I am *awful* in a crisis, aren't I? Maybe we do need that preparedness day after all. I suck!"

"No you don't! Come on."

"No, I do. I wandered around for like a week, my people imprisoned, while I sailed around on a pirate ship and tried to find hippogriffs that didn't help all that much anyway. Anyway, Queen Novo turned me down, of course. She didn't know us. Of course she didn't want my grubby hooves all over her pearl. I wouldn't. Just let any pony that happened by touch your pearl, of course not."

"You would want to get to know them first, obviously," she agreed.

"Obviously. Well, for some reason she left me alone with it, probably as a test, my friends went on a tour to try and convince her we were worthy of it."

"You didn't..."

"I see you are in the future also. Oh, I did. Didn't get far, Novo wasn't an idiot. I was caught almost at once."

"You tried to swipe her pearl? How could you?"

"I was desperate! And there I was, all tied up as everypony rushed back to see what the alarm was. Goodness I was stupid."

Origami laughed, trying to imagine Twilight Sparkle all tied up and helpless before her. Then her cheeks got a little hot and she quickly dropped that line of inquiry. "So what you're saying is there could be a concern."

"I'm saying that if given the opportunity, maybe she wouldn't be able to help herself. I have been lax with the books and notes I made. I'll secure them from now on. Thank you for telling me."

"Is that enough?"

"I don't think she'll send dragon assassins in here or anything to take it by force. She values our friendship too much to risk it. We will need to figure out how, if at all, we're going to let others in on this. Sooner, rather than later, so we have a policy I can quote her. The next few weeks are going to be very busy, Origami. At least for me. Your part is mostly done. Work with some ponies I hire, to show them your engraving technique, and I won't ask more of you. You've been more than patient with us, helping to make sure Sunny's future doesn't come to pass."

“I still want to be there when the prototype goes live.”

“Of course!”

The next few weeks passed quickly, for those involved with the new gateway project. It could hardly be kept a secret, both griffons and ponies had dragons running around constructing a new building and to head off rumors the full story was published. How a small group of ponies had taken magical learning from the lands of Amphibia and adapted it to pony use, with this being the first product. Speculation about trains becoming obsolete was rampant, but Twilight gave interviews about that not being the case, as rail travel would always be needed to reach smaller settlements. But mail, tourism, and trade would never be the same. A ton of excitement led up to the unveiling, of course after two days of testing to make sure everything worked right. Thankfully it did, and after some speeches, including those that thanked the ponies that made it possible, the ribbon was cut and the gateway was powered, showing residents of both places their first glimpse of the other. Everyone was dressed to the nines, diplomats symbolically crossed over to the other kingdom (and then back) and it was basically a giant party in two places, that was one place temporarily when the stone was in use. Mages in a secret location kept the main crystal powered, and a larger than average stone was used at the gateway site, normally the gate wouldn't be open for so long, it was speculated. Everyone had a great time and reporters were also everywhere, getting the scoop on everyone's plans for the future.

Origami's teachers had basically given up trying to teach class the next day, as even the young members of every race couldn't help but gossip about and pester Origami and Gianna about their adventures. It was into this chaos that a dragon message fell onto Origami, who snatched it up and unrolled it.

“Come to the castle at once. Something awful has happened.”

“I have to go, I'm being summoned by Princess Twilight,” she told everyone.

“Aw!”

“Go on then,” her teacher told her. Probably thinking *Maybe I can get control of my class back with you gone.*

“Right. See everyone later!”

“Bye Origami!”

“What's up, Twilight?” she asked, having met Gianna on the way over there. Twilight looked tense, and sad? “Did someone blow up the network already?” *Protestors chaining themselves to the door? Throwing soup? What?*

“Huh? No, no, it's fine. Running fine. No. Just got the call. It'll be all over the papers tomorrow. It's awful.”

“What is it?” Gianna asked. “You're stalling.”

She took a deep breath and let it out. “Two members of the griffon council were found this morning. Murdered. They want you there, something about further threats. Didn't want to say on the phone. You better go.”

Both shared a horrified look.

Sunny agreed to go, and the three of them rushed off to Griffonstone. They decided to take the new gateway but send the North Star flying there on its own, just to get there faster. Twilight herself declined to go.

“Technically they only requested Gianna,” she told them. “Probably because they are griffons and want to solve this ‘internally.’ But the request also implied somepony with a stake in the network should attend, meaning if Origami shows up they’ll accept her but probably always look to you first. I don’t want to push it and go myself. Besides, I don’t know the situation there, they may be trying to downplay it for now until they learn more. A princess showing up would throw a pretty big spotlight on the whole thing.”

The gateway building was fairly crowded, even this early in the morning. Like a restaurant that just opened, curiosity was high and for the moment at least the fee was low. Why *not* go see Griffonstone if you could? And why *not* go early to “beat the crowd?” Of course, when everypony thinks that way you get a big crowd! The group was impressed, whoever was running the place knew what they were doing. They had set up a queue to send and a queue to receive separated by ropes so the groups weren’t trying to push past each other, and it seemed the portal opened every 15 minutes. Once from one side, once from the other, alternating so it opened four times an hour. The side that opened had priority so on this side any ponies got to go first, and if there was still time any griffons from the other side could then go through. Otherwise they would have to wait for their side to open. Naturally ponies would be on the other side when they tired of walking around Griffonstone and wanted to return, but no griffons were in the return queue this early so probably there were few ponies on the other side as well. This kept the line flowing as those coming here (and there were some griffons here milling around) were quickly moved out of the way, while those leaving (a much more sizable group) got into position. They knew how many ponies could get through before it closed, and had attendants answering questions as though they had heard them many times before already. It also helped to have a set schedule to point to, so everypony knew about how long they would have to wait based on the length of the line, and prevent both sides trying to open at the same time. Who knew *what* would happen in that case! Best to not find out, and stick to the approved schedule like a train.

In fact I wouldn't be surprised to find train conductors here, thought Origami. Given they would already have the expertise to run an operation like this, why not tap them as a good source of knowledge? Short cut learning all the lessons the train network learned about schedules without all that nasty business of trains crashing into each other.

The group, while not expected, was on the short list of not needing to buy a ticket and getting to move to the head of the line. They had helped build the darn thing after all, and may need to see something happening on either side in a hurry. This didn’t stop Origami from gleefully showing the princesses’ seal around and proclaiming “official business of the kingdom! Coming through! We’re acting on orders from the princess!” making both Sunny and Gianna roll their eyes. It wasn’t so busy they wouldn’t get through when it opened again in 6 minutes, they were sure. But they did get to be first, and rushed to the other side when they could.

“Yeah, that’s going to revitalize our city,” Ginna remarked as she was hustled through the other side and told to keep moving. “I’m sure I can’t even imagine how. That just saved us a 3 hour airship trip. *Airship!* It would have been at least two- no three?- days by train.”

“The future does seem to be looking brighter,” Sunny agreed. *Apart from, you know, the reason we’re here...*

Sunny had the fluttery wings spell put on her again so the three could head to the council building, and all three noticed a good number of ponies milling around below them taking in the sights.

“We’re going to have to start spending money on revitalizing our town,” Gianna remarked with a laugh. “As soon as griffons realize others are coming here and remarking how terrible it looks, they’ll spring into action. Money was never the problem, you see? We have plenty of money. It’s trying to get griffons to part with it, that’s the trick. This may just be the thing that does it.”

“Plus ponies are probably more likely to buy from a shop that looks nice over one that looks run down. And pony shops will no doubt start appearing too,” Origami agreed.

“Yup. And ponies have money to spend, and don’t mind spending it. They know they can always get more back home. Oh it’s gonna be so great!”

The group was swarmed by reporters the moment they set hoof or claw into the council building, making Origami shrink back a bit.

“We don’t know anything about anything, we just got here!” Gianna shouted at them. “Get out of the way and let us through!”

But of course they didn’t budge.

“Come this way!” hissed the receptionist, pushing past the griffon reporters and yanking Gianna backwards. They stumbled out of the place, and the reporters turned back to the council members trying to keep order in the waiting area.

“Vultures,” she spat. “Gianna, nice to see you again. Sorry it’s in these circumstances. Origami,” she nodded her head. “And who is this? Nice wings!”

“I’m Sunny! They’re only temporary.” *My real wings would not be a good idea in that atmosphere.*

“It’s a spell I did,” Origami announced not at all modestly. “No big deal. What’s with the crowd?”

“They know something happened, honestly I didn’t know there were that many reporters in our city to begin with! Plus more are at the crime scene I’m sure. It’s a mess.”

“What has happened? We heard there were two...”

She nodded. “Yes, two. You better go talk to someone on the council. Not my place to say. Ugh.” She glared at the doors. “It’s not glamorous but maybe we should go in through the back way. Trying to get you through that crowd... Best not to give them any reason to follow you around. Or get the idea the new portal is involved somehow, as it’s you and your friend. You were on stage yesterday at the unveiling, some griffon will put it together.”

“I didn’t know the place had a back way!”

“Oh, we don’t. By ‘back way’ I mean a window.”

“A what?”

The three squeezed into a window that was open and shut it behind them, just in case some griffon saw it and got any big ideas. Poking their heads out they headed through the place, looking for a council member. They found Galito first, pacing in his office.

“Ah, Gianna! Good, you’re here! Those sharks downstairs didn’t draw too much blood, did they?”

“We came in through the window, actually.”

He barked a laugh. “Did you? Smart, very smart. There’s been a threat, we thought we should tell you right away and do it beak to beak. Could cause a panic otherwise.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t have all the details, I doubt any griffon does. We’re still investigating. I can tell you early this morning between two and three AM two members of the council were killed. It’s unthinkable! The council has never been attacked like this, never in history I tell you. It’s madness! And we can’t lose the gateway, obviously.”

“You think the gateway was the cause of this?” Origami asked.

“We’re sure of it. The killer made sure of that.”

Chapter 36

Maybe about 15 minutes later

The rollercoaster starts to descend

The group got the address to the scene of one of the murders, and headed there once again leaving via window. A burly looking griffon met them at the police tape, several reporters perking up but backing off with a glare from “Detective Gambison. My partner Gil is around here somewhere. What do you kids want? This is a crime scene, not a playground. And what’s a pony doing here in the first place?”

“We helped make the network,” Gianna told him. “I mean, mostly it was Origami I was just there for moral support. But the council knows me and said there was some kind of threat? The gateway was involved? So we were called in, the council sent us.”

“Well, if the council trusts you...”

“What have you learned?” Origami asked.

He got out his notebook and flipped through it. “Between two and three this morning two council members were attacked and killed. The same MO, so we figure it’s the same assailant. We found blood on the door of the second site, Goldilocks, so we’re sure they started here and went there. No blood was found on this door. The door was forced, or more accurately completely smashed down, to gain entry to the residence. There was a struggle. The inside is a mess, Grudalf didn’t go quietly. That was the only reason we knew as soon as we did. The neighbors,” he pointed a claw at the next house, “heard the commotion and came out to see what was going on. Scared the attacker off somehow, but their story is pretty crazy. Rushed in to try and save Grudalf but his wounds were too severe. He died before any medical griffons could arrive.”

“What’s the crazy story?”

“They were ranting about how the griffon they saw was covered in some kind of shadow. Not an outfit, they claimed. Like darkness itself was sticking to them. Probably just the lateness of the hour and being half awake. They’re in protective custody down at the station if you want to talk to them.”

The three shared a look.

“Yeah, I’d be skeptical too. Officers Grant and Goldbloom are inside collecting evidence. You can take a peek, if you promise not to go in too far.”

“I guess we could take a look?” Gianna agreed. “We’re not experts in that field though. I don’t know what I would get out of it. I’m happy to let the professionals work.”

“But I can at least sense if magic was involved.”

“Oh idol, I hope not,” Gambison told them, raising the tape. “We have enough to worry about. Magic. Ugh!”

“What about the threat to the network?” Sunny asked. “That council griffon said there was one?”

“Only evidence we’ve collected at the moment,” Gambison admitted. “Here, come with me.” He walked over to the crate full of glass jars and handed one over. Turning it Gianna saw there was a piece of paper inside, and read the message.

“Shut down network or more death”

“Yeah, that’s a threat all right,” she agreed.

Meanwhile Origami was looking the other jars over. They contained feathers, mostly. But some red stuff. Probably jam that was spilled because the council griffon was making himself an early breakfast of bread and jam. So it must be jam. Red jam. Very dark, red, jam. Gambison noted her looking.

“All the feathers seem to match the coloration of Grudalf. It is odd. A fight like this, well, see for yourself.” He indicated the door and they stepped around the broken pieces of it.

“What could do this?” Sunny asked, eyes wide.

“Something a heck of a lot stronger than I am,” Gambison admitted. “Council members have thick doors, at least.”

The three looked around. The place was trashed, furniture tipped over, more jam splashed around. *Yup, really liked his jam, this Grudalf fellow.*

“See?” Gambison told them. “You have a fight like this, both sides loose feathers at the very least. But we’ve not found any. The killer didn’t have time to clean up, the neighbors rushed right over and Grudalf was still alive at the time. I can’t explain it.”

“Why these two?” asked Origami.

“They’re the most isolated,” explained Gambison. “Goldilocks doesn’t have close neighbors, and both of these griffons lived alone. Clearly whoever did this didn’t want witnesses.”

“I guess I wouldn’t, in this situation.”

“...So about that magic?”

“Oh right!” She concentrated, vibrating her mana core but felt nothing in reply. “Nothing.”

“That’s some relief I suppose. Seen enough?”

“The whole place is like this?” Gianna asked.

He nodded. “Not a big place but yeah, bedroom too.”

“Clearly he didn’t let the griffon in,” Sunny remarked, looking the door over. “Could be anyone in town.”

“Unless they skipped town, using that fancy new portal!” Gambison grumbled.

“Oh crap, the portal!” both Gianna and Origami exclaimed.

The group was now some ways away, leaving the detective to get back to work. All three were concerned.

“The prophesy is coming true,” Ginna decided. “Sunny, can we see it again?”

“Sure.” She got out her pad and opened it up.

“Covered ponies like a skin,” Origami read. “Okay, this wasn’t a pony but like Guru said it was never going to be exact. Maybe this whatever it is had a choice, and simply chose a couple of griffons to make their point. Could have been ponies, roll of the dice or whatever.”

“But *what* is it?” Sunny asked.

“The clues we have are shadow faction, bad emotion, a tool of light to drive them back into the night. Something really strong, doesn’t like being seen. Can type, apparently. So it had to have a typewriter, which is odd...”

“This happened at night,” Gianna agreed. “And in a place with a lot of bad emotions. The protests! Is that feeding it?”

Origami nodded. “Exactly. Maybe it was just easier here. Ponies are pretty upbeat, griffons, not so much.”

“That’s true. I don’t like to admit it, but I can’t say you’re wrong.”

“Hold on, are you talking about some kind of emotion monster?” Sunny scoffed.

“Think of what we’ve learned,” Origami countered. “Pony of Shadows exists. He took over Stygian but was *supposedly* banished to Limbo. But not until after several battles with the pillars. He had time to maybe leave some pieces of himself here, maybe? Who knows what spells a creature of darkness and magic knows! Agents in darkness that could serve as his eyes? Or maybe he got free, or can act here in a limited way? Maybe a strong negative emotion draws him, and he saw a chance. Bad emotion ‘does them in.’ They get possessed or something.”

“Taken over, like Stygian was,” Sunny breathed.

“That’s my thinking. Let’s head back to the portal building. See if anyone saw any griffon leaving town early this morning. Being covered in shadow would be hard to hide, but maybe they don’t need to be all the time?”

“You think that’s why there was no evidence?” Gianna asked. “Grudalf just couldn’t hurt his attacker because they were covered by living shadow?”

“It’s a theory. That’s why I didn’t sense magic. They did it physically, and are simply a magical being of some kind. So no trace of magic was left. Explains the door and the window too. They didn’t care about normal matter, they just tore right through it.”

“Oh great...”

“Come on.”

The group headed to the building and talked to a griffon on duty who passed them off to Growman, who was in charge of the place.

“I don’t recall any griffon acting nervous enough to have just murdered two griffons, no,” he explained. “Or angry, or impatient. Was pretty quiet all night. I’m sure that’ll change though as more go through.”

“You were here the whole time?”

“Yeah.” He yawned. “We’re short staffed. Right now I’m paying 1st shift to come back and handle 3rd shift. So they were on last night and now. Same as me. I won’t have my griffons doing work I’m not prepared to do. Paying them overtime, which I hate to do but it has to be staffed. We want to run 24 hours a day, so we’re starting now to make sure we can handle it. I just hope we find some more help soon. This whole thing was done pretty fast, wait did I put up the help wanted sign?” He looked around. “Need to plaster this place with them.”

“You’re not going to like what I have to say next,” Origami told him.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. We need to shut the portal down for now.”

“What? Are you crazy? This place is a money maker, it’s raking in the bits! You want that stopped? Am I supposed to pay my griffons to sit around?”

“Look, keep it down, but those murders I was talking about? Two council members.”

“What?” His eyes bugged out.

“Exactly.”

He looked to Gianna, who nodded.

Origami went on. “The attacker could use the portal to escape. If they haven’t already. But if they have, that also narrows it down. Griffonstone isn’t *that* big. With some help we can account for everyone. If some griffon is missing and they aren’t now in Canterlot,” *and the sisters help us if they are*, “that’s our culprit.”

He growled softly. “And if every griffon is accounted for here, then your suspect is on the run and your list of possible griffons shrinks tremendously.”

“Exactly. Glad you’re seeing things our way!”

“I’m going to have a lot of upset ponies on my claws come this afternoon. They’re going to want to go back home! Am I supposed to refer them to you or what?”

“Ponies could probably go back... I have no idea how long this is going to take. At worst tell them a complementary airship ride will get them back home if we haven’t got the portal up and running again by say 3:00 PM.” *That would get them home by 6:00 or so.*

“And you have authority to do this? I know you made the system I recognize you from the opening ceremony but...”

“I can pull rank if I have to.” She got out the princess’ letter again.

“Seems legit. But you better send an officer down here or something...”

“Maybe we can head back to the council building, tell them what we learned?” Gianna offered. “We can have them send a griffon or two down here.”

“Sure,” Origami agreed. “We need to head back there anyway. Look, if anypony makes a stink tell them it’s an experimental design and we told them that right at the start. They should expect some bumps in the road. We’ll get this done as quickly as we can, believe me.”

“All right. This isn’t going to be pretty. I’ll clear every griffon out of here. And tell the pony side not to open anymore, on their next turn. Keep the ponies there, just in case. Anything else?”

“Not at the moment. Thanks for understanding.”

“Good luck catching the killer.”

“Thanks.”

Back at the council building now only Gianna went in, heading right for the receptionist. She told her what the situation was, and had another request.

“Origami wants to narrow the suspect list even further. The most angry griffons around here seem to be the MGGA members. They’re our main suspects in this, as they want to go backwards to the old nobility and kings rather than forward to portals and cooperation with other species. If we can track down the most vocal griffons of that group maybe one of them will turn out to be missing. Can you give me any information like that?”

“I mean there’s the leader of the group, Grump himself, I guess you could go talk to him. His address is well known, you could ask anybody about where he lives in town. But you remember that griffon that got snubbed when you were here a couple of weeks ago?”

“How could I forget?”

“She’s been sending us a lot of letters. And to the papers. They keep getting worse too. So maybe she’s a good suspect you could talk to? I have to file them, standard procedure you know, but I can’t exactly give you her address despite the fact I have thrown away no less than six of her letters this week right in this wastebasket right here.” She slid a basket out with her foot. “Privacy laws, and all that. I don’t check it that often though, certainly not when emptying it. Now, if I could legitimately say you were, I don’t know, flirting with me or something and you happened to complement me and I looked away because I was embarrassed and you happened to take those envelopes with the return address on them...”

“Well, you would have plausible deniability, is what you’re saying.”

“Is that what I’m saying?”

“I’m not sure. I can’t quite hear you over how beautiful your eyes look in this light.”

“Oh you, stop!” She giggled and looked away.

Wait, is that my best line? She didn’t give me any time to think. Was that corny? I should have said feathers! Wait I wasn’t flirting with her in the first place who cares? She quickly grabbed the envelopes in question and hid them behind her wing.

“You better go, you tease!”

“I guess I better. Don’t want you getting in trouble for talking to me for so long. Thanks, uh, for nothing!”

“Sorry I couldn’t be more help cutie! I get off at six if you’re still interested.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” She walked away. *Wait, did she just... was that real... what just happened? I can’t date someone that much older than me! Maybe it’s the armor, makes me seem older. I already knew it made me irresistible, so I don’t blame her for trying.*

The group left for the house of Green, Origami almost crashing into another griffon because she was distracted by something in the distance. But Gianna was looking where she was going and spotted something odd going on below them. She pointed and said to the others “let’s go check that out!”

Landing, the three looked around. They were standing in front of a hardware store, and the griffon in an apron was trying to nail a big piece of wood over the window that had apparently been smashed up.

“You need some help with that?” Origami offered.

“Oh, another pony!” he exclaimed. “Been seeing a lot of your kind today. Go right in, I’m still open if you need any hardware. Wait did you say you wanted to help?”

“I did say that.”

“Wouldn’t turn it down.”

“Here, hand me that hammer, just hold the board up. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“No offence but are you strong enough to use it?”

“I’m not that scrawny!” *See if I offer to help you again.*

“Hummm... What do you want for your help?”

“You don’t need to pay me! Griffons, honestly. You’re going to have to learn more about ponies if you’re going to have them walking around your town. Give me that!” She snatched the hammer from his claw and started casting.

And failed.

And failed.

And then succeeded! The hammer floated around as he held the board in place, nailing the nails she held.

“Oh, sorry, didn’t see a horn so I... how did you do that?”

“Other ponies than unicorns can use magic.”

“Learn something new every day.”

“Anyway, what happened?” Gianna asked. “I’m Gianna, by the way.”

“Gordondo, of Gordondo’s Goods, nice to meet you. Well, strangest thing. I had a break in last night. Happened about 3:12 AM if I recall correctly. I live upstairs, you see.” He pointed, and the place was two stories. “Heard the sound of broken glass. Rushed down here, but the thief was already gone. Knew just what they wanted I guess. In and out job.”

“And what was that?”

“Chains. Locks too. But the weird thing is, no keys. Who steals locks and leaves the keys? Maybe they heard me coming down and bolted? Still they were right there...”

“Can you show me the area?” Origami asked.

“Uh, yeah, I guess. You playing detective?”

“Not playing, no.”

“Uh huh. Well, right this way.”

He took them inside and showed them the chain selection he had. Origami got close to the floor and looked around. "You don't sell paint, do you?"

"Paint? Sure, we have some paint."

"Red paint?"

"I would have to look? Why?"

"There's red on the floor here. Could be paint. Maybe not. Could be jam. Could be from the griffon that shattered your window, maybe they cut themselves. Maybe not. If I were you I'd close my store, head up to the address I'm going to give you, and tell the detective there your story. If I'm right, this relates to a case he's working."

"There is red there," he admitted, bending over. "You knew there would be, somehow."

"I deduced it, yes. It was elementary." *Even after getting blood on the door, our murderer killed another griffon after that. So they would have had even more blood on them after that. Makes sense some dripped here, where they stopped to grab some chains.*

"This whole thing was odd to start. Not much crime here, especially not breaking in through a huge plate glass window. Okay, give me the address."

"More evidence whatever this is, it's strong and doesn't fear physical harm," Origami said to the others as they flew on.

"But why chains?" Sunny asked. "And if it was a 3:14 AM the murders were done. Do you think the shadow has abducted some griffon? Tied them up somewhere? But the note didn't suggest that and there wasn't another. Unless there was? The detective said that one note was their only clue."

"Possibly. Maybe once the deed was done, whatever force possessed the murderer simply left them. That griffon got scared, decided to tie themselves up somewhere."

"But then it wouldn't be the shadow that did it," Gianna countered. "It would have been a rock that broke that window. Gordondo didn't say if he found one, maybe he didn't look?"

"Maybe the one inside was starting to take control back? It's just a theory."

They landed at the house of Green and walked to the door. Origami cocked an ear. "Do you hear crying?"

Gianna scowled and went to the window. "Just a crying kid inside," she reported.

"Oh dear!" She walked to the door and knocked, causing the small griffon inside to perk up and rush over there.

"Mom?" he shouted, throwing the door open.

"Not your mom, kid," Origami replied. "And I may have some bad news..."

Chapter 37

A moment later

More questions than answers

“So your mother put you to bed last night,” Gianna repeated. “But in the morning she was gone, the door unlocked and open. You should have gone to the police station.”

“But what if she came home and found *me* gone? Aren’t you supposed to wait if you get lost? I considered myself lost, I’m just a kid. Mom shouldn’t get lost, so I should stay put! Besides I don’t know the way!”

“I guess.”

Meanwhile Origami had been checking the place out. As with most griffon homes it was fairly small, the room they were in had a couch, a small table with a typewriter on it, (*most peculiar. How many homes do, I find myself asking?*) and a hat rack with a distinctive MGGA hat hung there.

“Was your mother in the MGGA movement long?” she asked.

“Oh yeah, she started going to those stupid rallies right after Swiftalon. I don’t know how she can stand that awful Grump griffon but she does. There’s a box of fliers around here someplace. She’s always trying to hand them out to griffons on the street.”

“Mind if I take a closer look at the typewriter?”

“Sure?”

She looked around, and there was a half torn letter sitting on the floor. *Half torn, like some griffon was writing, then ripped it out and maybe typed something else? But that would mean this kid’s mom is the killer we’re looking for? That’s not good.* She picked it up from a corner and laid it on the table. The three crowded around it, and the young griffon poked his head through.

“More of the same,” he reported. “You think she would get tired of it.”

It was what you would expect, mostly hatred against other species, now amplified by the fact the gateway network would soon cut all distance limitations apart. Calling for a new council, ranting about conspiracies and basically contradicting herself in the next paragraph.

“Cuts off mid-sentence,” Origami saw. “This letter wasn’t done.”

“She was getting more worked up,” Sunny decided. “Look, her typewriter isn’t one of the ball type. Are they for sale yet? It’s the hammers. See how the letters further down the page are darker? She was hitting the keys harder.”

“Okay, I’ve got a fairly good idea what happened now,” Origami announced. “This is now most likely a rescue mission. Hey kid...”

“Gambino!”

“Sure. When are griffons going to run out of G names to name their kids?” she asked Gianna.

“It’s tradition!”

“I suppose we’re no better. Anyway, Gambino, can you sit tight here? We’ll go look for your mom.”

“You mean it?”

"I'm not going to lie to you." *At the same time I'm not going to tell you that your mom might be wanted for murder, either.* "If she's around, we'll find her." *Strange to think the one MGGGA member we met turned out to be the culprit. But like I said before, town isn't that big even if it is the capital. And only a griffon that worked up about things would bother going to the council building like that. So the pool was pretty small. Or maybe this shadow creature/faction knew we met her, and seized an opportunity to use someone we met, just to twist the screws a little more...*

"If she's around? Where would she go?"

"Through the portal to Canterlot. But I don't think she did. Just wait here and be good, okay?"

"Okay. Thanks."

"Guilty or not, we still have to find her," Origami said, when they were down the street. "The chains are a clue. We have to check places that are abandoned. A place a shadow creature might go to tie themselves up, to keep their victim in place during the day, maybe when they're less powerful."

"Let's split up," Gianna decided. "I'm going to the headquarters of the defense force. See what forces I can convince to help me look. I'll head to the edge of town. There are lots of small caves there you could hide a body in. Or yourself."

"Got it. Meanwhile Sunny and I will check any run-down building... any building more run down than the usual one, I should say."

"Ugh, could be a lot of those. New plan. Let's all head to the headquarters. They can check the town, we can check the caves. There's less caves than run down buildings around here after all."

"Good plan."

The group took off, heading for the defense force headquarters, but Sunny spotted something below them.

"Hey, let's go ask that griffon there!" She pointed down. There was a griffon sitting on a street corner with a sign and a hat in front of them. "They look like they're out at night."

"We'll meet you there," Origami told Gianna. "This shouldn't take long."

"Right."

She and Sunny landed by the griffon, who they saw had a bad leg, looked to be an old injury.

"So many ponies," said the griffon. "What's going on in this town today?"

"You probably don't get the newspaper," Origami told him. "There's a magic door between the pony capital and here now."

"Is that so? Will wonders never cease?"

"I hope not." She looked him over. He probably hadn't bathed in months, he was clearly homeless. *Wouldn't happen in a pony city, or a pony village for that matter. What is wrong with these griffons?* She called on magic, and a moment later he was clean at least. The magic blasted dirt away from him, straightened his feathers, and improved his smell. He looked himself over in surprise.

"Well, I'll be! Thank you kindly! Don't recall the last time I was this clean. You can take a talon for your efforts if you want." He gestured to the hat.

"Clearly you need it more than I do," she told him. "Keep it."

"The reason we stopped, have you seen anything strange lately? Like specifically last night?" Sunny asked.

"Like strange griffons flying around in the dead of night, carrying some odd stuff? I may have. You interested? What's in it for me?"

"You would be doing your fellow griffons a great service," Origami told him. "Two council members were murdered last night. If you help us catch the griffon that did it, every griffon would be grateful. The one you just described is our suspect. If you can point out where they were going, that could lead to opportunity for you."

“Grateful doesn’t put food in my belly. But if it’s that serious...”

“How about a trade?” Sunny asked. “You tell us what you know, and I’ll take you to a place right now that will probably hire you on the spot.”

“I can’t do much, anymore,” he admitted. “Not after my accident. Does it involve a lot of walking?” He indicated his bad leg.

“Nope. Standing around, answering questions, ordering griffons around, that sort of thing.”

“I could do that. What is this mystical no-work employment?”

“You’ll see. I promise it exists, hoof to heart. Now, what did you see?”

“Last night I saw an inky black griffon pass overhead. Almost didn’t see it, but I heard the rattle of chains and jumped up. You get to be a pretty light sleeper on the streets. A griffon, like they were dipped in ink, went...” He looked around, standing with effort. “Yeah, coming from that way, and making a straight line that way.” He seemed confident. Sunny went into the air and took a picture of the direction he was pointing, magnified as much as she could. “Got it!” she called down, and landed again. “Thanks.”

“Sure thing. Now about this job...”

“Come on. Can you fly?”

“Sure, wings are still okay.”

So the two took him to the portal building, and the boss there agreed to give him a chance working 3rd shift. Even an advance on his salary so he could stay somewhere until he could save enough to get a house. Or a friend to stay with, whatever. Gair, they found his name out, was excited about the prospect and promised to do his best. He didn’t mind the late shift, any work at this point was better than none, and this was something he could easily do. He promised to do his best and make the most of this opportunity. The two wished him luck and headed to the headquarters, finding Gianna outside.

“Made my case to them,” she explained. “There’s actually not many griffons available. Most are now protecting the council members families. But they’ve sent some griffons out to look. What took so long?”

“Just our good deed for the day,” Sunny explained casually. “Nothing to it. Come on, we have a lead.”

The group flew out to the caves in the direction shown by Gair, and poked around. Three caves later they found a fairly deep one, the passage going back further than they could see.

“Let me put some magic on you all,” hissed Origami. “You’ll be able to see in the dark.”

“Why are we whispering?” Sunny nearly shouted.

“Shhhhhh!”

“Sorry, I meant why are we whispering? You don’t think the shadow thing is still here do you?”

“It could be. We could be wrong about the chains. That could be a trap for whoever comes looking,” Origami told her.

“Good thing there’s three of us.”

“Right, you stay back. You’re the nosiest.”

“Gianna is literally clanking around in armor!”

“And yet she’s somehow still quitter than you!”

“Fine!”

With the magic on the three proceeded, but Gianna stopped. “I heard something!”

“I didn’t hear anything,” Origami told her.

“There it is again. I think it’s someone crying for help.”

“Come on then.”

Around a few more bends the three saw their missing griffon, chained up nicely so she couldn’t go anywhere. She was looking around wildly, probably not sure if she heard something or not.

“So what did all that hate get you?” Origami asked.

The griffon screamed and tried to shuffle away, “Don’t hurt me, don’t hurt me!”

“For crying out loud, Origami,” Sunny chided her. “She’s clearly terrified. You’re better than this.”

“Oh, fine.” She picked up a stone and cast a light spell on it, making Green squint and look away. But finally her eyes adjusted.

“A pony?”

“We’re here to save you. Just stay calm,” Gianna told her. “If I can figure out how to get locks unlocked without keys. We should have taken the keys. These are probably too new and too small for me to try my ‘lockpicking’ trick.” She started looking them over.

“What happened to you?” Origami wanted to know.

“I don’t know,” she insisted. “I was typing something as a really good turn of phrase came to me last night, and- my son! Is my son okay?”

“He’s fine, we just came from there.”

“Oh thank goodness. Thank you!”

“Go on.”

“I was typing something and everything went dark. I remember some kind of struggle? Twice, I think. And smashing something. And then I wanted to tie myself up. So I did, and then I was tied up a long time and then you showed up.”

“Don’t step in it,” Sunny cautioned.

“Step in... oh, more jam!”

“Jam?”

Everyone looked at the floor. Near the griffon was a dried, red smear.

“It came off when it left her,” Sunny decided. “And I’ve got something else here.” She handed Origami the note she had found on the floor.

“Shut it down or the little pony artist is next.”

“I’m not afraid of you!” she shouted into the cave.

Only her echo returned to her.

“Afraid? What does that say? Did I type that? What’s going on?”

“Well, under the influence of some kind of shadow creature that possessed you because of your anger, you killed two council members last night.”

“No, no!” she cried. “I couldn’t. I never would!”

“I can’t get this off,” Gianna announced.

“Do we want to, before she’s behind bars?” Origami wondered seriously.

“Uh, yeah, so she can get out of this cave and back into the light,” Sunny told her.

“And who is going to believe us about shadow creatures that control you if you get too angry?” Gianna asked. “We announce we caught the murderer, the council isn’t going care about anything else.”

“Is that really what happened to me?”

“Come on,” Sunny continued. “She’s the victim here. There’s no law against writing an angry letter. Or being passionate about a cause. Just because it’s a cause you don’t believe in, she has a right to her beliefs. Even if they are... a bit dumb and shortsighted. She had no idea a murder ghost would take her over and control her actions. It’s our job to make the council understand.”

“I suppose,” she admitted. “It’s going to be very complicated, legally.”

“So let lawyers worry about it. We need to get her out of here.”

“To that end.” Gianna looked her over and hefted her up onto one shoulder.

“Oh my!”

“Come on.”

Sunny and Gianna stayed with Green while Origami flew and got the keys, finally letting her up. She agreed to have a chain put around her neck though, just in case, so someone could keep control of her.

“I guess you collared me,” she said to Gianna, blushing furiously for some reason. “I still can’t believe you lifted me like that. You’re so strong.”

Probably just embarrassed. I know I would be. “Let’s get back. We’ll head in through the window again, let the council know what happened rather than parading you through the reporters like this.”

“Yes, I can’t really be seen like *this!*”

So the council was informed and Green was led off to her fate. The rest of the council thanked them for finding the answers so quickly, at least what answers there were to find. They had no idea how to stop it happening again.

“But I don’t think it will,” Origami assured them. “The second note we found implied I would be next. If we keep the network open I’ll be the next target. This was just to scare you. We’ll go tell them at the portal it’s all clear, and to resume normal operations. I’m happy to be a target, if it means others are not. We’ll prepare and deal with it. Whatever *it* is.” *The prophesy said we had the tools of light to deal with it. We just have to figure out what they are. Though I think I know...*

“Very well. As you say, giving in would only embolden this strange shadow faction you describe. We will make sure no one related to the council is alone, and there is plenty of light on hand should we need it.”

“Good. I’m sorry you got dragged into this, but we ponies will make it right.”

“After this, I have complete faith in you.”

So the group told the North Star to head back, Origami apologizing for making it come all this way.

“It is no trouble captain,” CelestAI assured her. “I do not get bored as you would, and having me as a backup was a good idea, in case the portal network did need to be shut down for the moment. Which would be a pity, now that the two cities have gotten a taste of it.”

With the portal back in operation they took the train back to Ponyville, and all of them flopped into chairs back at the castle. After telling Twilight the whole story she seemed quite concerned.

“What’s your next move?” she asked.

“If this is Pony of Shadows somehow, we need to talk to Stygian again,” Origami decided. “See exactly what he thinks, and what it can do. I don’t trust it’s locked away in Limbo quite as much as everypony hoped at the time.”

“That sounds reasonable. I would like you to stay here, in the castle, for the time being. I’m going to get my friends here too. Like you said, if anything threatens you we should be ready.”

“No offence, but is a pony like Fluttershy going to be all that much help against some shadow creature?”

“She is, when she has her element of Kindness with her.”

“Oh!” *She’s really bringing out the Elements? She must be concerned.* “In that case, I guess it does sound like the best idea.”

“I’ll go make some calls. Get some dinner ready. You can talk to Stygian tomorrow after class. I can call the library and let him know you’re coming.”

“Sounds good.”

The next day nothing had happened overnight, and Twilight's five friends said they would be back the next night and "don't you worry about a thing, sugar cube!" (That was Applejack, by the way) The two went to school, while Sunny and Twilight said they would check the castle library for anything else matching the description of a creature drawn to emotions and possession powers. But when the two returned from school they found a concerned Twilight waiting for them with a newspaper on the table.

"What's this?" Origami asked, picking it up. The headline was "Two Council Members Murdered, Shadowy Figure Seen" and there was even a blurry picture of a lunging griffon, a dark figure like they had been dipped in ink.

"Turns out, those eyewitnesses you didn't talk to snapped a picture of Green," Twilight told them. "The flash is what they credit with driving her off. They probably would have died otherwise. Galinda and Gourde. He went to scare off the intruder but she went to get her camera. Just in case she could get a picture of a fleeing griffon. They didn't know that would save their lives. But that's not why I showed this to you."

"We didn't go talk to them," Gianna realized. "They probably could have helped a bit too. Oh well. Go on."

"You remember that pony that was tossed through time? Showed up with brain damage, or so we thought?"

"Not exactly?" Origami admitted.

"Metal legs? They called her Lime Twist, because of her cutie mark is a lime and some sugar cubes?"

"Oh yeah! How's she doing?"

"Much improved, actually. She saw this paper today and reacted badly to the picture. Freaked out, in fact. We should go talk to her too, the recovery place called me, I've been keeping an eye on her when I can. They say she can have visitors, for a short time anyway. She knows something too."

"How do you know she wasn't just reacting to a scary image?" Gianna asked.

"Because of what she kept saying. 'It's starting again. It's starting again.'"

Chapter 38

The next day

With a twist of lime

After class the next day Gianna, Origami, and Sunny walked into the Canterlot Center for Ponies Recovering from Massive Trauma. It was a nice place, as befitting the pony capital, but was much bigger than any of them had expected.

“This place is much larger than I am comfortable with,” Gianna remarked. “I mean *we’re* supposed to be the trauma center of the world. Griffons, I mean. What’s with this huge place?”

“It could mean there’s just a lot of space per pony,” Sunny rationalized with buckets of doubt in her voice. “Not that there are so many ponies recovering from massive trauma they need a huge building. That’s what I personally choose to believe.”

“It is Equestria,” Origami reminded her. “Let’s head to the front desk.”

They were taken up to a visitor room and given some rules by the nurse, Mending Hearts. “Lime is still recovering. She’s made tremendous progress in the last few months but we still need to be patient with her.”

“I thought she was the patient?” Sunny asked innocently.

Origami glared at her. Gianna rolled her eyes.

Mending Hearts cleared her throat. “As such, please give her time to speak. She sometimes doesn’t know the right word, or uses the wrong word. I’ll have no mocking of her!”

“I wouldn’t!”

She sniffed. “We will show her nothing but love and support, encouragement and understanding. Is that clear?”

“We understand,” Origami told her.

“Very well, I will go get her. It will be a moment, we encourage her to walk under her own power and her legs, well, she’s still figuring them out basically. We don’t know if they are damaged in some way and cannot be made better or if she will still make further progress in that area. Until she stops making progress it will be impossible to know how- You have been informed of her unique nature, have you not?”

All three nodded.

“Very well. I don’t want you showing too much surprise. I’ll be right back.”

Moments later a pony with four metal limbs made her way into the room, followed by Mending Heart. She was clearly concentrating on putting one hoof in front of the other, and barely looked at the three as she was guided over to a place to sit down. Which she did, breathing heavily.

She really does have metal limbs, Origami realized. Astonishing. What powers them? Her own body heat or something? They must have been made in the time of no magic. Or no-mag as I like to call it. Wonder if they’re low on power, we have no idea how to power them, and that’s why she’s so slow.

“Well done!” Mending Heart praised. “You made it all on your own.”

“I did,” she haltingly agreed, smiling brightly. “I feel strong today!”

“You *are* strong. Now, these are the three that wanted to talk to you. Go ahead and introduce yourselves.”

The three named themselves but now that she was sitting and could look around, Lime Twist only had eyes for Gianna. She stared, eyes darting over her exposed feathers and hair as she hadn't worn the armor to a hospital.

“Pony?” she finally managed, pointing at Gianna and looking to Mending Heart.

“Oh dear, it slipped my mind,” she admitted. “She's had no non-pony visitors. So this might be quite a shock to her.”

“I'm a griffon,” Gianna explained.

“Pony?”

“Griffon. I live with ponies but I'm not a pony.”

“Poiffon?”

“Griffon.”

“... Griffon!”

“That's right, you got it.”

“Not pony. Griffon!”

Oh boy, thought Origami. *We're never getting anywhere with this one, at this rate. Are we wasting our time here?*

“Very good, Lime,” Mending Heart praised. “There are many other wonderful types of friends to meet in the world. I'll get you some pictures later and we can work on their names.”

“Okay. Fun, fun!”

“For now, why don't you tell them about the picture you saw? You said it reminded you of home?”

She took a deep breath and slowly nodded. With many pauses and false starts she told her tale. “Came from good world. Hard to remember. Had many things. Fun-fun. Many friend, all peace. No magic, made many thing, flip the switch, beep, job's done! Our machines made us master the world. We went to each corner. Met frogs, cats, birds, so many others. Gave all the ponyweb, so we could all be friends. Whole world was connected, ponyweb was complete. So lonely here. No friends to talk to. So empty. Don't know anything. So quiet. Knew so much once. Know nothing now. Only what's here.” She pointed to her head at this point, then continued. “Then shadows came. Holes in ponyweb. Airship crash. Bomb went off. Captured ponies have no memory. Baker kills dragon? Babysitter kills whole town? Impossible. Happened. Tried to stop the shadows. Couldn't. Everypony blamed everypony else. Ponyweb connected but soon torn apart. Species leaving. No trust. Ponies not even trust ponies. Big war coming. But no pony knew who fighting. Just shadows. All pony scared. That's my world.”

“Sounds like you escaped a pretty bad situation,” Sunny told her with a nervous laugh. “Right?”

Who are you trying to convince? Origami thought. “Okay, so not to be insensitive but can I get a summary? I'm not sure I understand what she's trying to say here.”

“I've got a good transcript,” Sunny told her, showing her the tablet so she could read it again.

“I get the last part,” Gianna told her. “Shadows. It's not a group, it's a force of evil that seemingly can take over anyone from a babysitter to a baker. Like that griffon was. Probably anypony that feels strong negative emotion. You ever babysat? I've watched my younger sisters and believe you me, it's no picnic. I don't know how my mom does it, honestly.”

“But we knew that, we're not learning anything new here!”

“Sorry!” Lime Twist told her. “I did bad?” She looked at Mending Heart in distress, about to tear up.

“Don't mind her, she's just a big stick in the mud,” Gianna told her.

She blinked, thought a moment, and brightened up. “Branch in the dirt? Log in a bog?”

Gianna snorted. "Yeah, exactly. Be nice, Origami. Besides, I think we're learning a lot. We have an almost complete timeline now, thanks to Sunny and her."

"Okay?"

She sighed. "Look, some time in the near future Twilight would have negated our magic for some reason. We know it's possibly a rouge alicorn that was trying to steal all the magic for herself. She's stopped, clearly, both Lime Twist and Sunny exist."

"I'm Lime Twist!"

"You sure are! Without magic we rely more on technology, and got to the level we see here." She indicated Lime Twist. "They had airships, probably like the North Star, and explored the world. They found Amphibia same as we did, good to know they survived the winter even without us in that timeline." *Though maybe not without sacrifice. Many may have died...*

"Winter?"

"It would take too long to explain. Then there's this 'ponyweb' she spoke of. I have to wonder about that. Sunny?"

"Sound like the ponynet from back home," Sunny offered. "Do you mean something like this?" She held up the phone. "A device to access information from anywhere? Send videos? Get likes on posts? That sort of thing?"

Lime Twist hesitantly took it, turning it over and over in her hooves. "Antique!" she finally decided, smiling.

"Hey, I'll have you know that's the latest model!"

"Phone, call home!" she commanded, holding it up to her mouth. "Phone, call home! Phone! Call. Home!"

"You can't," Sunny told her, horrified. "It doesn't work here. It's from the future, oh you poor pony how to explain..."

"Won't work?" she asked sadly. "Just want to go home."

"I know," Sunny agreed, taking it back and hugging her. "Me too. I'm so sorry. So sorry."

The others gave them a moment.

Finally they broke apart and looked away, embarrassed.

"So if it's not that, what was it?" Origami asked.

"She pointed to her head," Sunny told her, wiping her eye. "You don't think... no..."

"What?"

"Well..." She looked Lime Twist over. "She had her legs replaced. Right? What if... she called this an antique." She shook the phone. "What if from her perspective it is? What if she had a phone like this... put into her brain... somehow?"

"Yes, ponyweb!" Lime Twist agreed happily. "No bars. Try again later. Dismiss error dialog. That much I remember."

"Is that possible?" Gianna asked, not sure if she should be horrified or not.

"One thing I can tell you," spoke up Mending Heart, "we haven't dared do x-rays or anything like that. Just in case her internals are sensitive to such things. External exams only. But we did draw blood." She opened a folder that had been sitting there and rifled through it. Coming up with a picture she slid it over. "This is what we found."

The three crowded around the photo. It was clearly taken through a microscope, showing a blood sample if the three weren't off base.

"What am I looking at?" Origami finally asked.

“These are blood cells,” Mending Heart explained, pointing to one part of the picture. “These... we’ve never seen anything like them.”

Sunny gasped. “Tiny machines. Her blood has- it’s filled with- tiny machines!”

“They do look like tiny machines,” Gianna admitted. “How did they get in there?”

Lime Twist just looked confused. This was clearly beyond her.

“Maybe her legs weren’t *replaced* with machine legs surgically, maybe they were *converted* into machine legs? One cell at a time. These tiny machines did it.” Sunny mused. “Humm... ‘Knew so much once. Know nothing now. Only what’s here.’ Yeah, that makes sense. She had some kind of equivalent to a cell phone *crammed into her brain*. She could access information with a thought. And it’s more than that.”

“No way!” Origami scoffed. “You would go mad.”

“I think not, but that’s not the end of it. ‘So empty. No friends to talk to. Whole world connected.’ It wasn’t just information. I bet they could share thoughts. Maybe even feelings. They were *all* connected. Anyone on ponyweb, the whole world over. Astonishing!”

“Hold on,” Gianna insisted, holding up a claw. “You’re saying she could have known what a frog was thinking half the world away?”

“Probably not without consent,” Sunny admitted. “Having a million voices in your head would drive you insane, I agree with Origami on that one. But if they could access *subconscious* information? Like how to best plant a certain type of vegetable, or seeing an accident and knowing all the medical knowledge you need in an instant. That... I’d take that.”

“But then you wouldn’t know anything yourself,” Gianna insisted. “If something happened and that ‘ponyweb’ went away- oh.”

She nodded. “Exactly. You would get Lime Twist. A pony that has had to learn everything from scratch, because I bet all her life she just drew from the web rather than learning stuff herself. Why not, it’s right there, isn’t it? Still, every pony in her time must have been brilliant. Knowledgeable. Kind. Any suffering would be shared. Felt. But now she’s empty. No friends. I did this to her.” She lapsed into silence, unable to look Lime Twist in the eye.

“Er, yes,” Gianna went on. “I guess? Anyway, this ponyweb came about and suddenly the shadows came out too. Just like for us. Our gateway network has the potential to do similar things. Bring the entire world together. So it struck, just like it’s doing now to try and stop that project before it really gets going. It’s a being of magic, it didn’t realize what was going on until later in the ponyweb project maybe? But it knew magic, knew a teleport gateway is bad news, so it struck earlier for us. Meanwhile in Twist’s time they were unable to stop it. They didn’t have a concept of magic anymore so they blamed each other. They had no way to fight a shadow, after all. The world was thrown into chaos. And I bet it got easier, too. As more ponies got angry at the world in general they got taken over more easily. It spiraled. At some point after Lime Twist was pulled here, there was a war. A big one. It...” she glanced at Lime Twist. “Not many survived. Imagine the difference between our airships and the North Star, but applied to weapons. You fought that killer pony robot. Imagine thousands of them, but with their support network in place and not damaged from being flung through time. I can see how at the end of the war only a handful of ponies, who lost everything, remained. Their ponyweb, their infrastructure, their friends- all gone. They went their separate ways, built three towns, and eventually worked their way back from the stone age they found themselves in. It’s at this point we get Sunny. The cycle is complete; magic comes back, ponies get together again. But I bet the shadow creature is still out there. It did what it wanted. It got the war, it drove ponies apart. Sunny is trying to bring them together again. So I bet it’s perking up in her time, ready to start the cycle again.”

“There are neither beginnings or endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was *a* beginning,” quoted Sunny. “Oh dear.”

“So what does that mean for us?” Origami asked.

“Simple. We take care of this shadow force and we’ve solved both Sunny’s and Lime Twist’s bad futures. It’s struck early because of the changes we’ve made but there’s only one of it. *I hope.* The division never happens, the war never happens. As long as we put some effort into technology between now and then, Sunny returns to a world of teleport gateways, ponywebs, tiny machines in the blood, her parents are alive- the whole works.”

“Simple as that, huh?”

“I’m not saying it’s *easy*. But we have magic. We have the oversoul technique. We’re not torn apart, we have friends to support us. We can do it. We can win.”

“We have no way to track it down. It can appear anywhere there is negative emotion. We have no way to capture it or stop it fleeing. It can take over anyone. How can we win?”

“We’ll figure out a way.”

“Your optimism is making me nauseous. Anyway, we don’t need her for this discussion.” *It’s clearly going over her head anyway.*

“True. Lime Twist,” she said, turning to her. “Thank you for telling us this. You were very brave. We’re going to chase all your shadows away, okay? So you won’t have to worry. When we see you next it’ll be to bring you the good news.”

“And maybe to the North Star,” mused Origami. “If they’re from a similar era maybe it can scan her or something. Plug into her legs, do a diagnostic? We’ll have to ask.”

“I get fixed?” she asked, looking excited.

“We’ll do what we can,” Gianna promised, walking over and hugging her. “You’ve done great so far, anyone can see that. You just keep on working hard here for now.”

“I will!”

They said their goodbyes and Lime Twist was taken back to her therapy, the others now walked over to the library to speak to Stygian. Sunny was falling behind, looking glum.

“Come on, what’s wrong?” Gianna asked her. “She’ll be fine. We’ll look after her after you go home, promise.”

“That’s just the thing, *she* can’t ever go home again,” Sunny told her. “I have no idea how to return her to her time, if ‘her time’ even exists anymore now. I was willing to give up my life. My very existence, though I felt there was only a small chance of that. My friends were too. In order to make sure our bad timeline never happened they supported me and I came here. She didn’t get that choice. But she’s stuck here one way or the other.”

“We’ll make a life for her, now that we know she’s able to recover. Her recovery up until now shows it’s possible.”

“We did sort of forget her up until now,” Origami reminded her. “Until she was useful to us.”

“So do better,” she snapped. “Instead of just complaining about stuff.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“We’ll take care of her,” she repeated.

“Okay. Thanks.”

It wasn’t hard to find Stygian at the library, and he looked up from his paperwork as they walked over to him. “Ah, the trio returns! Dungeon time?”

Origami chuckled. “I wish. But no, we’re here to talk about recent developments and get your take on the matter. We need to make sure the world is safe, then we can work on reactivating dungeons or however it goes.”

“Yeah, that seems reasonable,” he agreed, defeated. “Is this about that shadow griffon in the paper? I saw that. I, uh, was sort of expecting you, actually.”

“It is. I’ve been threatened, as one of the best engravers and knowledgeable about the gateway network. I’m afraid I’m just the first. It’ll go after anyone involved, mark my words. It wants the network gone.”

“I see. Well, this seems a bit sensitive, do you want the shelter spell again? Save you some time if nothing else.”

“Sure, let’s do that.”

The group walked to the meeting room again and Stygian once again gathered mana and cast his spell. He glanced around, confused, but shrugged it off. “So-”

“Hold on, what happened just then?” Origami demanded. “We can’t take anything for granted now. If you felt something…”

“Just a weird twinge in the magic. Probably just nerves. As you can see the spell is active.” He gestured to the walls.

“Something is active, yes.” She reached out with her magical senses, concentrating on the whole area. “Wait, no, no, no!” she cried. “It’s reversed! You have to drop it right away!”

“What are you talking about?”

The others also looked at her curiously.

“I’ve felt time magic before. When Sunny arrived, when Twilight canceled out the wave, from you before when you did this the last time. It’s not right. Time is passing *faster* in here not *slower*. You did it wrong!”

“Not possible. How could something- no.” He shook his head. “Unless? Could I have enough of a connection to- corrupt my magic?”

“You’re not making any sense right now,” Gianna told him.

“Just drop the spell, we need to get out of here!” screamed Origami.

“Okay, okay.” He did, and she rushed out, heading to a window. The sun was a bit lower in the sky and she looked around. “Something’s happening outside!”

“I hear screams,” Gianna agreed. “We should investigate.”

They ran out of the place, just in time to see a dragon landing in the courtyard outside the library. But this was no ordinary, colorful dragon that ponykind was used to. Oh no. This dragon was covered in shadow, drinking in the light and baring his teeth. “You’re early,” he remarked. “Hoped to have more time to play. Never mind. I warned you and you didn’t listen. The network is still functioning. I’ll put a stop to it, starting with you!”

It lunged.

Chapter 39
Only a second later
Bringing the light

Origami let out a yelp as she threw herself to the side, avoiding the dragon's claws for now. "Can't we talk about this?"

"Not talking so big now, are you?"

"Hey," shouted Gianna. "Pick on someone your own size!" She concentrated, focusing on the giant dragon before her and the fact if she didn't do something, everyone around here could be in serious trouble. Her aura started to light up, but didn't catch.

"What? Another one? How did I miss that? No matter, seems I'll be solving two of my problems here. But one thing at a time." He went to swipe at Origami again, who dodged back. "Stand still."

"No!" *This is never going to work. But if I can get some distance between us...* She jumped and flapped her wings, sending a blast of air at the dragon. It pushed him back a small amount, about all she could expect given her inability to move a yeti with the technique previously.

"You know, I'm sort of insulted... I really have to fight someone so weak?"

"You're fighting me!" Gianna told him, her aura lighting up for real this time. She got up in the dragon's face, and it flinched back.

"Accursed light!"

"Ha!"

The dragon went to bat her out of the way, but hesitated, as if he didn't want to strike Gianna's aura. *What's this now?*

Maybe I should find a safer place to stand. Origami took a quick look around and cast, teleporting herself to a roof nearby and ducking down behind it, hopefully out of sight of the wild dragon.

Stygian had been backing up and finally hit the side of the building. He looked around, about ready to flee but steeled his resolve. Didn't he always want to be a hero? Wasn't that desire what started this whole thing? Of course it was! Was he any more capable now than 800 years ago? No, not a bit! But he had learned buffing magic for a reason. Even giants like the pillars needed a little help now and again. He started gathering magic for a spell, feeling the weight of it in his core and realized he had enough. He started to envision the symbols he needed. "Buff incoming!" he called to Gianna.

Gianna smacked the dragon, causing it to flinch back as part of the shadow shattered off it like a pane of glass. Red scales could be seen underneath, but they were quickly swallowed up by the shadow again.

"Nuisance!" The dragon raked a claw at Gianna, who flapped out of the way and started circling around.

"Let Gianna's might be enhanced!" Origami cast, popping up briefly to get line of sight on Gianna.

Stygian cast at almost the same time. "Strength boost!" A beam of magic shot from his horn, targeting Gianna, who allowed the magic to wash over her.

“You see, our friendship is too strong for you to defeat!” She smashed the dragon on the head, putting her two claws together and swinging with all her might. More shadow splintered off the dragon, again reforming but now weakened, showing the red of the dragon’s scales all over. The dragon feebly attempted to hit her again but Gianna simply put a claw up and caught it. “Don’t you dare come after my friends again.” She delivered a final blow, and the darkness around the dragon cracked like an egg and shattered.

“Did it go somewhere? What happened?” Origami demanded, teleporting back to the ground and looking around wildly. “That didn’t finish it off, did it? Have we just saved the future forever, no more worries no more cares?”

“We should be so lucky,” Ginna told her, landing as her aura winked out again. “It’s hard to tell, the sun was in my eyes when the dragon fell over. Thanks for the buffs, I’ve never felt so strong! If only they would last...”

“If you don’t mind me asking,” said the dragon. “Where am I?” He was looking around confused.

“Canterlot,” Sunny told him. “Sorry I didn’t help. You were just so fast. I tried casting magic a few times, it didn’t work out. I need more practice I guess.”

“My hoard!” shrieked the dragon, climbing to his feet. “I have to get back to it!”

“Hold on a minute, you just attacked us. Don’t you remember?” Origami told him. “You can’t just rush off.”

The dragon sighed. “Probably all gone now anyway. By fire and ash am I going to have to start all over?”

“What’s the last thing you remember?” Gianna asked. “And what’s your name, by the way?”

“I’m Razer. I was laying on my hoard, as is proper, when a little while ago a cute bug looking thing flew into my cave. Hadn’t seen the like but I figured it was harmless. I wasn’t really paying attention to it but suddenly there were two of them. Then four. By the time I realized they were eating my hoard it was too late. There were dozens of them. I kept trying to stop them, but nothing I did had any effect. Fire, claws, tail. They just bounced back.”

“Were they covered in shadow?” Origami asked.

“No, they were colorful.”

“Parasprites,” Sunny announced. “Twilight told a story about them. When I was looking at her magic books, she was cautioning me about using magic carelessly. I guess at once point the town was infested with the things, and she cast a spell to make them stop eating everything in sight. Anything food, that is. Because they just switched to eating everything that *wasn’t* food. Pinky got rid of them, but like the dragon said you can only make them go away not actually kill them. They can’t be hurt by normal means, according to her. So they’re still out there. One of them that has a taste for things not usually food must have found your hoard. And started eating it. Sorry about that.”

“That would explain the behavior of the thing.”

“They must have some kind of predator,” Gianna mused. “Something must eat them, and a lot of them, to reproduce so quickly.”

“Let me guess,” Origami further asked, “you were getting quite upset about it?”

“I sure was. Did you say I attacked you?”

“You weren’t in your right mind. It’s something we’re dealing with, a force that takes over those that get really angry. Try not to do that when you return to see your hoard.”

“I shall brace myself for disappointment on the way back. Where did you say I was again?”

“Canterlot. The mountains are to the east of here.” Gianna pointed.

“How in the world did I come so far? I really am out of sorts at the moment. I should probably get back, get my head on straight. Sorry for any trouble I caused. Everything is just such a blur. I was in my

cave, then suddenly I remember wanting to hurt someone, and I flew, and then I was here. Are you sure I'm okay? It wasn't some disease or something?"

"Quite sure," Origami told him. "Just stay calm, you'll be fine."

"I'll try. Have a good evening." He spread his wings and flew off.

"So now you know everything we're dealing with," Origami told Stygian. "Seem familiar?"

"This does seem like Pony of Shadows, yes," he agreed. "I'll have to swear off magic until he's taken care of. He must have slightly corrupted my spell somehow. Some lingering connection between us, maybe? But how..."

"Are you *sure*? Before we invest a bunch of time in tracking him down we need to know. If it's not him and we waste time barking up the wrong tree..."

"Consider what you just saw. That's exactly what he did to me. My spell was corrupted. Good job spotting that by the way. If we hadn't gotten out when we did that dragon could have laid waste to this whole place. That would have been a disaster! Who else could do that? If not him, they must be working together. But I've never read about any creature that can take over a dragon like that. It must be him."

"So did he escape Limbo somehow?"

"Oh, we would have known if he did. Unless he's learned patience after all this time. The sky turned black wherever he went, the last time. There was no hiding his location. I guess he could turn that off, but he was endless rage. I don't think he has the presence of mind to do anything but destroy."

"So what are you saying?"

"That you're going to have to go to Limbo and confront him. Finally put a stop to him, once and for all."

"Us? You mean us?"

"Of course! Gianna seems to have a technique that can hurt his sendings. It makes sense she could hurt him as well. Not much could, when the pillars fought me. That's why they picked banishment. I should have known he wouldn't go quietly. And once again my actions have put others in danger. It never ends." He sighed.

"We're going to need help in that case," Gianna decided. "Right from the source. We need to find Bright Soul. I'm worried too, when the dragon said 'another one' he was referring to Bright Soul. He wanted to solve 'two problems' here. You, who can make more portals and me, who can hurt him and train others to hurt him."

"I suppose we can swing by, see if he'll agree to help us. Then go see what Twilight has to say about safely breaking into Limbo. If that's even an option. But do you think Bright Soul will help us?"

"Why wouldn't he?"

She shrugged. "Seems like the type to just say 'fight your own battles.'"

"He's not that *Prince* fellow. I don't think he's so detached from the world he would turn his back on this. Especially if Guru said this was part of his destiny too. I'm sure he'll lend us his strength in this, it's the whole world at risk. If we don't stop him, it's Lime Twist's future *now*. Unstoppable shadows driving everypony apart."

"I guess it can't hurt to ask. You going to be okay here?" She turned to Stygian.

"I'll stay in the light, if that will even help. And not do any magic for now. I doubt he wants me dead, in fact I could be his anchor in this realm so he would want to *protect* me. I'm no threat to him, so I would be last on his hit list."

"Fair enough. We'll see you later."

"Good luck."

The group took the North Star and headed east, discussing how they should approach the situation.

“We did the challenges once,” Gianna told her. “We proved we were worthy of finding the place. Even if we didn’t have the talk about the lessons of the stones or whatever Bright Soul said we should have gotten when we first arrived, because we were ‘early.’ Also that was a personal query we had about the future. He gave us the direction and it came true. Now we’re just visiting our old master to ask for his help. Okay he was only our master for three days, but he did teach us something. It counts.”

“I’m just worried it’ll be seen as cheating, us simply arriving in the airship.”

“Then he’ll tell us to go back down the mountain, and we can plead our case. I think he must know we’re coming. What sort of seer doesn’t look to their own future?”

“I guess if we find it, we’re meant to find it. If not, we can start at your village again.”

“Exactly. CelestAI, show me a map of the area and I’ll tell you about where I think the place was.”

With nothing more to do, Origami asked about Lime Twist.

“As you know, I don’t think I’m a medical ship,” CelestAI told her. “However, I do have a medical bay, which you used to provide the minimally invasive blood sample.”

“Don’t start that again.”

She snorted. “Very well. If there is a compatible machine in the lab, and it still works, and we can figure out how to scan her and interpret the results then yes, we can at least diagnose her. Repairs? That’s another story.”

“Can your repair drones do anything?”

“I would hesitate to set them to the task. She is neither an advanced airship, nor a frog robot. She is a mix of living and inorganic systems. You need a specialized doctor.”

“Which won’t be born for maybe hundreds of years.”

“It is a conundrum,” she admitted. “But perhaps if a blood sample can be obtained I can scan these tiny machines you speak of and perhaps even reprogram them. Putting them back they could circulate and see if there was any damage reported. Without knowing their purpose it’s hard to say what they are equipped to do.”

“For all we know there are different ones that do different things!”

“It is a possibility.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

The group circled the mountain range, looking for the landmarks the group recalled on their way up the mountain.

“There is a curious feature,” CelestAI reported, throwing an image up on the viewscreen. “It’s a flat area, certainly large enough for a temple such as the one you describe. However, it’s empty. The only feature there is a round, stone slab, seen directly in the center of the place.”

“The place can’t just *move*, can it?” Sunny asked.

“We never saw Guru Senior,” Origami decided. *If such a dragon even exists and he wasn’t using magic to make himself younger for some reason.* “If they’re an old enough dragon, perhaps they can do ‘dungeon magic’ like Stygian. In that case who knows what they’re capable of. Is the area big enough to land in?”

“Quite, captain.”

“Set us down, let’s see if there are any clues as to where it went.”

The three walked out and headed to the slab, finding a rolled up piece of paper sitting on it, tied with a bow. The bow was tied to a rock, probably so it didn’t blow away. They approached it cautiously, alert for any traps, but nothing happened when they picked up the rock and untied the bow. Unrolling the paper they saw four words.

“Check Appleosa. Better hurry.”

“That seems clear enough,” Gianna remarked. “Sun might just be setting when we get there, if we hurry.”

“How do we know it’s for us?” Origami asked.

“Who else would be coming up here like this?”

“Any number of flying species. Would it have hurt him to address it to us?”

“Maybe the argument we’re having now is delaying us just enough that something terrible doesn’t happen, that would have had we read our names and rushed off right away.”

“That’s not- it can’t- let’s just go.”

They headed back to the ship and set a course for the western themed town of Appleosa.

The town was barely a dozen houses, but hundreds of apple trees. The North Star landed at the northern edge of town, where the “road” through town simply became grassland again. They hurried down the ramp and headed into town, finding the place much quieter than they expected. It wasn’t hard to see why. Two ponies, shining with light, stood at the other end of the street while three shadowed figures were caught between them. The street was trashed, broken barrels, glass, and other wood were scattered around. Clearly these three had been on some kind of rampage, and Bright Soul and his student had just arrived. Everypony else was hiding and peaking around window frames. A tumbleweed blew by.

“Good of you to make it!” Bright Soul shouted. “You’re just in time.”

The three figures scattered, Bright Soul and the unnamed pegasus with spikey blue hair going after two. The two, which the group decided were probably diamond dogs under there, skittered away from the light.

“Let Gianna’s might be enhanced!” Origami cast, figuring it had worked before.

“Let Gianna be shielded!” Sunny cast, getting her spell off this time.

Meanwhile Gianna burst into light and then action, rushing the third one. “Thanks,” she called over her shoulder.

She started trying to hit the one she was in front of, and managed it. This damaged the shadow the same way, but it seemed this was some kind of weaker version as the features of the diamond dog were already starting to show through.

Because we weakened it hitting the dragon, or because three had to be summoned for three dogs, or what? Origami tried casting a spell on a nearby rope, hoping to tie up the one to make it easier to hit. It dodged out of the way.

“Ah, you again!” it said, rushing her.

“Nope, nope, nope!” she cried, backtracking. But it was so focused on getting to her it tripped on something, and faceplanted into the dirt.

“Uh?”

“Works for me,” Gianna announced, arriving behind it and smashing the rest of the shadow off it. “Stay down!” she told the now revealed diamond dog. It cowered before her.

Origami looked around for something else to use, and spotted a nearby cart. Casting again she directed it to slam into the one the student was fighting, and it leapt up to the challenge. It was, in fact, so eager to please it scooped up both figures and started zipping them out of town.

“After them!” Bright Soul called. “They’re getting away!”

Not exactly what I intended. I wanted to knock them over. Oh well, at least they’re out of town now?

Sunny started shining with light, while the three with wings took off after the cart. She started running after them.

Ending the spell a second later the group ganged up on the remaining two shadowed forms. Neither side had a clear advantage, oddly, the diamond dogs seemed adept at dodging. Gianna got a good hit on

one and stripped the shadow off it, making it look around in confusion. Origami, now on a roof overlooking the scene noticed an ax in the cart and cast her magic on it. She wanted it to chop the dog, figuring it would at least distract the thing and she could always heal it later. She didn't expect the ax head to shatter when it struck the figure.

"Sorry!" she called. To the ax.

It was Sunny, of all ponies, that delivered an acrobatic kick to the final dog, shattering the shadow and ending the threat.

Chapter 40

A moment later

Limbo here we come

“Thanks for the assist,” Bright Soul told them. “Er, you okay there, Origami?”

“The ax went before his time,” she lamented, trying to pick up all the pieces. “If only I knew some kind of repair magic. But alas! I do not.”

“Uh huh. Anyway, uh, meet Flash Cube, my newest student!”

“Pleased to meet you,” said the pony, returning to normal. He had a camera cutie mark, a light blue coat, and dark blue hair. “You fight well.”

“Thank you. That ax though, it just bounced off that guy when he was consumed by the shadow. You don’t think that’s why no one could fight these things, do you? Does most stuff just bounce off?”

“If only I had been more careful!” Origami almost wailed.

“Oh wow,” Sunny told her, coming up behind. “What’s happening here?”

“Our question too?” one of the diamond dogs asked. “Where are we?”

“You just trashed half the town, and you don’t even know where you are?” Flash Cube asked angrily. “What nonsense is this?”

“It’s a long story,” Gianna admitted. “Let’s get these fellows taken care of, and you can come with us.” *If you want to live.* “We’ll explain the whole thing.”

“We go home?” asked the other diamond dog.

“That’s probably for the best,” Sunny told him.

“I’ll go find the third one, probably ran off,” Origami told them, laying the pieces of the tool in the cart. She took off, looking around. The figure was hiding behind a tree, looking around nervously, and jumped when she landed. “It’s fine, I won’t hurt you,” she told him. “You can go back with your friends now.”

“We go home?”

“Yes, you can go home. By the way, what started all this?” *As if I didn’t know.*

“Argue over who eat last ruby.” He brought out a red stone and held it up. “Then suddenly here.”

“Don’t fight over gems now. There’s some bad magic going around. Makes you do bad things, if you do. Tell your friends.”

“Bad magic!” He tossed the gem. “Glad didn’t eat.”

“It’s not in the- yes, good thing you didn’t eat it.”

“Pony always helpful. Won’t forget! Bye pony!”

“Goodbye.” He ran off. “Your friends are over that- he’ll figure it out I’m sure.”

Back at the North Star the group sat down and told the story to Bright Soul and Flash Bulb. “I see now,” Bright Soul said when they were done. “Guru said I should start spreading my technique. I’ve helped two other students, apart from Flash Bulb, discover their pure hearts. You think they should come with us to this Limbo place to confront the being that sent those shadows?”

“We don’t even know if we can go there,” Origami protested. “But we can use all the help we can get if it turns out we easily can.”

“I’m sure Marble will say yes. I would hesitate to bring *all* my students. Just in case the worst does happen, one pony should remain here to further teach the technique. Then make the attempt again, with a larger force.”

“Are you willing?” Gianna asked him. “Origami bet me 10 bits you would say no.”

“I did not!” she protested, cheeks getting red. “Don’t tell lies about me.”

“Okay, okay, it was 50 bits. I was downplaying it.”

“It wasn’t a single bit. There was no betting going on!”

Bright Soul laughed. “I would be happy to fight at your side against this creature of darkness.”

“Me too,” Flash Bulb told them. “What have I been training for otherwise?”

“Well said!”

“Thank you, master.”

“Okay, fine,” she glowered as Gianna gave her an “I told you so” look.

“It’s getting late, let’s head back to the castle,” Gianna suggested. “We need to talk to Twilight about our next steps. We’ll swing by to see this Marble and take her with us if she agrees, and go from there.”

“Our next stop is the Pie family rock farm then,” he announced. “It’s not far.”

“Pie? Any relation to Pinkie Pie?” Sunny asked.

“Indeed. Be warned. The Pie sisters are regarded as the fairest in all the land. But their hearts are stone. You will not be able to claim them.”

“I’m not going to start hitting on one of your other students,” Flash Bulb insisted, as Bright Soul was mostly looking at him.

“I hope that’s true, my student.”

Marble Pie, youngest of the Pie sisters, listened quietly as she was given the abbreviated story of why she was needed. Flash Bulb seemed truly taken with her, but kept glancing nervously at Bright Soul as if expecting a flick on the ear or something. Finally, after a moment of thought, Marble nodded.

“Very well,” she said. “If it must be done, let it be done. I will inform my family I will be absent while I go to save the entire world from shadow. I will return in a moment.”

“I have never met a pony with so pure a heart,” Bright Soul told the others after she left the room. “She was quite shy when I first met her. I had to prove myself to her sister, Maud, before she would allow training. What a mare *that* one is, let me tell you. Marble has been coming out of her shell little by little. Don’t worry, her demure nature will not prevent her from doing what must be done.”

“What even is this place?” Gianna asked.

“Rock farm,” Origami replied, as if that was the most obvious thing in the world. “They turn big rocks into gravel, decorative purposes and such.”

“Uh huh...”

With Marble in tow the group headed back to the North Star and then to Ponyville to see Twilight. They were met at the castle door, and she looked relieved to see them safe.

“It’s pretty late, I was getting worried,” she admitted. “Are you all- oh, you brought new friends?”

“We’ve had some problems,” Origami told her. “And we’ll need to move fast. The shadows are growing boulder. Or maybe whoever this is-”

“No, Maud’s pet rock is named Boulder, I’m Marble. I don’t have a pet rock.”

Origami looked at her like she was nuts.

“Pony of shadows,” Gianna cut in.

“Yes, probably that, is getting more desperate. There were more attacks. They targeted us-”

“Are you all okay?”

“We’re fine. But others wouldn’t be. We figured out why everypony had so many problems with these things in the past.”

“It seems they can’t be hurt except by light based attacks,” Gianna explained. “Such as the oversoul.”

“Oh. Oh! So these other ponies...”

“Bright Soul, at your service, princess,” he greeted her with a bow. “My students, Flash Bulb and-

“Marble. Yes, we’ve met. Nice to see you again,” Twilight greeted her.

“Hi, Twilight. My sister isn’t driving you too crazy, is she?”

“No more than usual. Tell me everything.”

So the group recounted their adventures with the dragon and the three diamond dogs, what Lime Twist had said, and the fact Stygian was pretty sure this was Pony of Shadows somehow.

“He said we should go there and confront him,” Origami told her. “But I’ve got a bad feeling about it.”

“You always have bad feeling,” Gianna muttered.

“What was that?”

“Nothing!”

“I agree,” Twilight decided with a nod of her head. “That would be the only way. We’re not releasing him back here again! I made that mistake once. Never again. And I don’t feel like banishing anypony there, getting them back here we have the same problem as with the pillars. We could wait a week but no time would pass for those in Limbo. We need another way to get there that allows us to act and return on our own. But how...”

“If Limbo is the space between here and nothing, can we open a portal to nothing and only go halfway?” Origami asked. “If we can walk back and forth, we choose when to go and leave, and that may mean we can act there normally.”

She hummed and thought a moment. “The Amphibia runic method may be the best way to,” she agreed. “We’ll have to look into the possibility of a rune designating Limbo itself. From what you said the language was imported from another world. They might not have the concept of a Limbo. It’s getting late. I’ll have some food delivered and find you all some rooms. Tomorrow we can get to work on a solution for all this.”

“Don’t lie,” Origami chided her. “You’re going to head to the library as soon as our backs are turned.”

She flushed. “No I- okay you got me.”

The two of them spent a few hours that night in the library, though that was just a place with a lot of books in it. There was only the one dictionary, protected in a safe and with various magics to keep others out of it. The mages working in the “portal factory” in Canterlot know what runes to carve and how to connect them, but nothing more than that. As a security measure, so this type of magic didn’t get out until ponykind was ready. And Twilight wasn’t sure the world was.

“Though it’s been eye opening,” she remarked, leaning back in her chair and rubbing her eyes after several hours of pouring over the book. She looked about ready to call it a night. “The North Star, Lime Twist’s legs. We’ve had a thousand years since the Luna incident, and we’ve hardly invented anything more advanced than land based telephones. Look at what Sunny carries around and calls a phone! We need to look more into, well, everything. Magic. Technology. Material sciences. Once this is all over I’m going to recommend some kind of new school open for those that graduate the friendship school. A place of experimentation as much as it is of learning. We know so much is possible, Sunny has been describing how

her solar panel doohickey works. Turning the light of the sun into electrical power. What else is just out of our grasp?”

“I think I’ve got it,” Origami announced to her, finishing up writing something out of the book onto the paper next to her.

“You can’t possibly know what’s just out of our grasp...”

“What? No, I wasn’t listening were you saying something? No, no, the formula. They don’t have a concept of Limbo that I can tell, but they do have a concept of bridging gaps, and nothingness. If we bridge the gap between here and nothing, that’s basically Limbo. I think this formula will work.” She slid the piece of paper over to Twilight, who looked it over. Eight runes. Easy enough to capture on metal and power for the length of time needed.

“You may be right...”

The next morning the group headed for Canterlot early, getting there as the factory opened. Unicorns of all shapes and sizes headed into the place, taking their positions around forges, worktables, and piles of metal ore. Younger dragons showed up too, taking their place around piles of rock, which they started to melt into usable chunks.

“Nice place,” Gianna remarked. “Busy.”

“We’ve been getting a lot of blank arches ready,” Twilight explained. “Once we feel we have enough information from the test site we want to move quickly. Get the kingdoms connected. So we’re making as many styluses as we can, as well as figuring out how to best hide the runes. We’re thinking a super dense rock, slathered over the arch itself. The two arches have to be exactly the same though, so any damage, such as trying to get to the core and see the runes, breaks the whole thing. Somepony could set the runes on something and attempt what we’ve come up with, but they’d have to make the metal too. We’re being careful about how much we make and where it goes. Ah, here we are.” She stopped in front of a line of metal arches, one group for ponies and thus smaller, the other line of them for cargo and so much wider and taller. “The question is, which do we use?”

“What’s the difference?” Sunny asked.

“It will take more power to open the big one, for one,” she explained. “And it matters how many you want to come with you. We element bearers can back you up, but know that element magic is sort of random. We don’t control it, only direct it. The magic turned Discord to stone, but hit Pony of Shadows and simply pushed him back towards the banishment portal. Then once Starlight Glimmer proved she could go inside him it changed to trying to pull Stygian out. So I don’t know what it would do to him.”

“So we all just walk through the smaller one,” Origami told her. “What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is *time*. The second the last hair of your tail passes through the portal, the first hair on your head starts coming back. Doesn’t matter if you were there a week or a second. Anyone that didn’t go in with you, at the exact time you did, will miss the whole fight.”

She lifted a hoof and set it back down, scowling.

“So if you want us there, fine,” Twilight continued. “But we all go in together.”

“But that means like, twelve of us,” Gianna protested, counting up. “Can even that many fit through the bigger portal?”

“Potion of shrinking?” Origami suggested.

“That could work. I was thinking just a painter scaffolding, pushing it halfway through and some of us just have to squeeze through as best we can. I could always turn someponies into mice, like I did for Fluttershy.”

“The other question is where to have the gate,” Origami wondered. “Just have it here? Do we know anything about the topography of Limbo? Where are we going to end up? Is Limbo anything like this world at all?”

“There was a Ponehenge there, the pillars were on platforms when they banished themselves and were still on the platforms when they came back. They don’t remember much, I spoke to them- for research purposes- about their time in Limbo. Said it faded quickly like a dream. If it does mirror our world in some way, what would that even mean? I don’t know.”

“One place is as good as another,” Sunny decided. “Pony of Shadows will probably be right there, waiting to greet us.”

“We’ll have to be right there, ready to go through, when it turns on,” Twilight agreed. “Basically blocking his way.”

“Well, it’s not getting done with us just standing here,” Origami decided. “Gianna, ask around town and see if any magic shops sell something like a flash magic. Twilight said he always made it dark, maybe he doesn’t like light and it’ll blind him more than anything else. We could use camera flash bulbs-”

“Present!” shouted Flash Blub.

She went on after making sure he saw her rolling her eyes like they were rocks tumbling down a mountainside. “But that’s a mundane thing. It needs to be magic light, or it may just bounce off him like that poor ax did. We also have to plan to be there awhile tracking him down. Pack plenty of food and water. Anything else you can think of that might come in handy. We may appear in an empty field devoid of anything but him, or a dark reflection of our world.”

“Torches, flashlights,” Sunny said with a nod. “It’ll probably be super dark there.”

Twilight shook her head. “Can’t have shadows without light. But yeah, plan for the worst.”

So Origami got to work carving the runes she hoped would get them there, and Gianna went looking for some kind of throwable potion that would release light. Or even a rock, whatever. She didn’t find anything, and came back defeated for lunch.

“Try the castle guard?” Sunny told her. “They may have something like that, if they wanted to subdue somepony that snuck in without hurting them.”

“We need the princesses anyway,” Twilight agreed. “If *we’re* going then somepony has to open the portal and I’d like to have the two strongest ponies there just in case this all does go tragically wrong.”

“Which it won’t,” Gianna promised. “Because we have the power of friendship, preparation, and the best fighting spirit this side of the Celestial Sea!” She posed dramatically.

“We’re all going to die,” Origami decided, covering an eye with a hoof.

Gianna had good luck finding what she wanted, 3 small flasks that would burst into light when smashed, having visited the royal armory. Princess Celestia was of course not in the know about their whole plan, and listened carefully as Gianna explained the best she could.

“You want to open a portal to where?” she inquired politely, one eye beginning to twitch. “In the middle of *my* capital? And nopony thought to inform me until just now?”

“Er, things have been moving fast,” she admitted. *I suppose she does have a point, we should have included her earlier.* “We didn’t want to give the shadows any more opportunity to take others over. We hope that by rushing this, Pony of Shadows will see it and decide if we’re coming to him, he’ll just let us and not attack us here anymore.”

“I suppose if Twilight is a part of all this, it’s fine,” she decided. “I would have left it to her anyway, if I’m being honest. I have so many times before, and it’s always worked out for the best. Very well. I will get Luna up and meet you at the gate.”

“I’ll meet you there.”

And so, that evening, the gateway was ready. All the lights they could find on such short notice were pointing into the empty place in the middle of the arch, and all the workers were told to go home. They

didn't need to be told twice, with the element bearers there, decked out in their elements and looking serious. Even Pinkie Pie. They all had food and water, other various supplies they thought they might need (Pinkie was told to leave the party hats behind, there was no way *that* was going to work on him) and the group figured they were ready. Luna and Celestia stood at either side of the portal, about to feed mana into it so the arch would activate the bridge.

"You shouldn't have to hold it for long," Twilight explained. "We'll be in and out, from your perspective. So even if it's a strain please do what you can to get it open and hold it."

"Of course, Twilight," Celestia agreed. "Good luck, all of you."

"Last chance to get things ready," Twilight called, looking everypony over. Bright Soul and his students activated their auras, lighting up the space a little more, and she nodded. The line of ponies taking the "low road" got into position, squishing against each other to form a wall, and both princesses touched the metal of the arch, feeding mana into it. A portal formed, showing a dark space beyond, and the ponies taking the "high road" pushed the scaffolding into position. It seemed to be halfway through, so they hopped up there and squished together as well.

"On three," Twilight shouted. "One. Two. Three!"

The group plunged into the darkness beyond.

Chapter 41
No time has passed
Victory- at what cost?

The group took a quick look around. It looked like the factory they had just left, but oddly reversed. Where there was light in their world, it was dark here. But in the shadows, or where they would be, it seemed normal. Two large pools of shadow were at the edges of the portal, hanging unsupported in the air.

She's going to betray you, you know? a voice said to Origami. *She was always jealous of your power. I'll offer her more power than she could ever dream of, and she'll take it. If you want to save her, you better strike now, from surprise.*

Origami narrowed her eyes and glared at Gianna. The voice was right. She had always been jealous, and she was on her guard but not against a fellow student of the school of friendship. One blow to the back of the head to weaken her. Could she get a spell off first, make herself stronger?

"What's that?" Gianna looked horrified at her. She was pointing at Origami's legs, that were wreathed in shadow. Rising, grasping, shadows.

Wait, what was I thinking? She's a friend!

Is she? whispered the voice. *Or is she just pretending, like all the others? She wants the glory of saving the world. She just saw an opportunity to step into the spotlight. Blocking your access to it, in the meantime, I shouldn't wonder.*

"It's happening to all of them!" Bright Soul shouted, alarmed and jumping away from those not covered by light. All six of the bearers had shadows trying to climb their legs.

"Get off of her!" Gianna threw a potion and the area lit up, making the shadows retreat a little but they were back in an instant. As they lifted Origami had a moment of clarity.

Oh right. Domino showed me a future where I walked into a portal and then got the crap beat out of me by my friends. Why didn't I think of that earlier? Clearly I got taken over by shadows, and attacked them. He tried to warn me. Maybe I should have paid a bit more attention?

"Quick, get them back through," Marble suggested. "This isn't going to work, they're getting consumed by shadow."

Origami felt herself being grabbed up, she couldn't move her legs with the shadows covering them, and each glowing pony grabbed two others as best they could.

"We have to go back through at the same time too!" Sunny told them.

"Just go, it's fine!" Bright Soul countered, dragging the two he had grabbed (Rarity and Applejack) back through. Once through he froze in place, the others had to wrestle past them as though they were statues, either taking the "high road" or squeezing past their friends. Everyone was panting and safe on the other side.

"What happened?" asked Celestia. "Did you win?"

"Didn't even get past the gateway," Gianna told her. "Those not protected by oversoul started to get corrupted. Seems Pony of Shadows has either done something to the place or it's just naturally like that?"

"Meaning we can't go," Twilight decided. "It's up to the students of Bright Soul."

"I hate to leave Origami behind," Gianna lamented. "Are you sure you can't do something? That cat thing said he gave you the ability right?"

"But I don't know how to connect to it! All I know is magic," she complained.

The group was silent in thought for a moment.

Bright Soul spoke up. "There may be a way, if you, Gianna, feel practiced enough at the technique. I've often wondered if one can share their light with another. It would of course require a very strong bond of friendship. I doubt I could do the technique with any of the others, and we would still be a few ponies short- I assume all the elements are needed to be useful?"

Twilight nodded.

"I figured. Gianna, perhaps you can give your friend half of your light? You'll have to mingle your aura and hers, and just feel it out. It's something I thought about during those times I despaired of ever teaching the technique to another pony. I was afraid to attempt it. What if I failed? What would that mean? But now we have nothing else to lose."

I'm going to regret going, I just know it. "We can try it," she agreed.

"Yeah, let's do it!" Gianna agreed, excited. "I have no idea what I'm doing but somehow I think I know the first step. Touch your tongue your mine!" She opened her beak and stuck her tongue out.

A few moments later, after assuring her she was kidding, just kidding! Gianna's aura was shining with light, and so was Origami's.

"You did it," Bright Soul marveled. "I was right."

"At least our fighting force has only been cut in half," complained Origami. "Not a good sign."

Gianna shook her head. "But at least we don't have to worry about fighting our friends. Come on, I don't know how long it'll last. Let's get in there and take care of business."

"Good luck," the others told them. They got into position and with another count of three, headed back into Limbo.

The group held their breath, waiting for any shadows to try something, but it seemed they were in the clear and headed outside. Looking up they saw a strange moon, shifting between looking like a regular moon made of rock and a strange ball of red fire. It didn't seem to make the place any brighter, but did sometimes cast a red pall over everything.

"Nice place," Sunny remarked. "Love the oppressive silence most of all."

"Shadows," Gianna pointed out, standing around the door of the factory. "Or their opposite?" Indeed, it looked like the pavement there was almost normal, in the shape of the pony's shadows who were standing there.

"Where do we go from here?" Bright Soul wondered, looking around. "Is anything out of place? We could fly around and see?"

"Flying. Right." Origami turned to Marble and Sunny. "Hold still, I'll get you two flying. Sorry, should have done this before too. I'm not thinking clearly today."

"Stress," Sunny told her with a knowing smile. "Happens to me all the time."

"Uh huh."

Looking around the only thing the group noticed was that the castle of the two princesses, now a dark reflection of itself, was missing the roof on one of the towers.

"Maybe he likes to moon dance?" Marble asked. "So he tore it off?"

"Isn't it moon *walk*?" Flash Bulb asked.

"If you're walking with a mare you should be dancing with, there's no hope for you," she said, looking away cutely.

"I'll keep that in mind!"

“Can we focus up?” Origami chided them. “Leave the flirting for the bright world.”

“I was just-”

“Shush. Come on, let’s go check it out.”

The group flew up there, and looked down upon a throne room. The tiny figure of a shadow pony looked up at them. He mockingly bowed, gestured for them to come down, and sat himself in his throne as they landed. He seemed to be the size of a normal pony, Twilight had described him as being gigantic, so was this even Pony of Shadows at all? The room was mostly empty. The throne sat on a half circle of metal with runes inscribed on it. “If we get him off that platform he’ll be powerless!” Origami hissed to the others.

It was hard to tell but the figure cocked his head as if to say “what have you been smoking before you got here?”

Otherwise in the room were four dark crystals in the corners, nearly floating, set above more metal slabs. In fact the only thing that wasn’t metal in the room was the small, round, wooden table at the side of the throne, upon which sat an angular shape like a twenty sided die. It too had runes on it.

“Welcome,” said Pony of Shadows. “Even if you’ve brought that accursed light with you. No matter. You know what they say; the brighter the light, the deeper the shadow.” He laughed in the way that all villains must, it’s in the rulebooks.

“Let’s rush him,” Origami suggested. From the rear. Everyone landed at the far edge of the room, expecting some kind of trap.

“We must give him a chance to surrender,” Bright Soul protested. “It’s the only honorable thing to do.”

“Do you surrender?” she called.

“Do you?” he replied lazily.

“Satisfied?”

“Look,” said Gianna, stepping up and mentally willing her shield to cover Origami. It flew to her side, expanding as it went. “Tell us why, at least. Why cause trouble for us? You have a whole world here, leave ours alone. And don’t tell me you’re just doing it because you’re bored or something.”

“Hardly,” he agreed. “Ah, my sweet protector. The mighty griffon Gianna. I do this because it’s my nature. I was born of division, and hatred, and the desire for power. How can I act differently? Are you familiar with the story of the scorpion and the duck? It’s one of my favorites.”

“I thought it was a frog?”

“I’ve heard it both ways. So you understand, then?”

“Not really. Look at my people. Our nature is to be grumpy, and greedy, and standoffish.”

“And are your people not exemplifying that nature even now? I could show you the protests if you wish.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“Because you already know. You are not your people Gianna. Your nature is your own. But I could be convinced, of course.”

“Go on.”

“Go back through that portal of yours. Travel to the largest pony city, at the busiest time. Choose the most crowded street corner, and close your eyes. Then spin! Spin till you almost puke and open your eyes. The first pony you see? Murder them, right there on the street. Paint that fancy armor of yours with their blood. Pluck out their eyes and gulp them down, like the most delicious Shabriri grapes. Then simply leave. Do this, and I give you my word that I too will try to change my nature, as you have shown me it’s possible for a good griffin, a protector, to become evil. A killer. Nature *can* be changed. What do you say?”

“Of course I’m not going to do that!”

“Thus proving your words to be lies. Your nature is set, just as mine is. And so we come to the main thrust of our argument. Shall we begin?”

“Satisfied?” Gianna asked Bright Soul over her shoulder.

“For now,” he agreed. “But we should beat him up and then ask again, just to be sure.”

“Oh please,” Origami was going to start rolling her grapes- eyes- again.

“Pity, I would have liked to have seen it. Just let a girl dress for the prom and we can be off.”

“Huh?” was the general sentiment.

“Moonstar of Limbo, give me the might, the muscle, the menace- of *Shadows!*” Pony of shadows grew to his full size, eyes glowing with hatred. “Attack!” he commanded, and beams suddenly shot out of the crystals at the corners of the rooms. Marble took a hit, crying out, but the others managed to dodge them.

“Take those out first!” Gianna suggested, as Pony of Shadows laughed and started drawing mana from his core. His horn was further cast into shadow.

“Hit harder!” Sunny cast, enhancing Gianna’s strength. She and Marble headed to one crystal as Bright Soul and Flash Bulb headed for the second one. They were closer and went to smack it, but hit a barrier of some kind instead. It fell as both of them pounded on it.

I’ll distract him, thought Origami. *That thing on the table must do something. I’ll make it do that something right now.* She flew up to the edge of the metal dais, casting. “Activate!”

The thing on the table started to glow.

“You fool! What have you don-” Pony of Shadows gasped in panic.

Uh oh...

The shockwave of energy and darkness swept over her, making her tumble backwards. Her core cracked, causing her to cry out as, like a water balloon bursting, mana rushed out and destroyed it. Gianna was tossed but recovered, the shield fell to the ground, as did Bright Soul and Flash Cube. Sunny was knocked backwards, the crystals shattered, and everything went silent.

“What happened?” Gianna asked into the stillness. “Is everyone all right?”

“I think... I lost my magic,” Origami realized, horror creeping into her voice.

“I think I got mine back,” Sunny realized. She looked herself over, she was back to having a horn and wings again.

“Lost your magic, what are you talking about?” Gianna asked her. “What was that thing? Where is Pony of Shadows?”

“The crystals are gone, and I feel weird,” Flash Cube told them, running a hoof through the remains of the crystal. “Did he blow himself up?”

“No, I did it,” Origami told him flatly. “I activated the thing on the table. It must have been some kind magic destroying bomb.”

“You didn’t think that everything in this room was probably a weapon to use against us?” Bright Soul asked gently. He looked at Gianna like “are you sure she’s on our side?”

“I’m not sure what I was thinking, now that I think about it.”

“We should look around, make sure there’s no odd shadows around here,” Marble decided. “He could be hurt and hiding.”

“No, if he was magic, he’s gone,” Origami told her. “But go ahead and look. It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters. I’ve lost my magic, my life is over.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Gianna told her roughly, hauling her up. “Whatever happened to you can be undone. It’s magic. Magic can fix it.”

“Not this time. Some things stay broken.”

“Well I’m not giving up on you.”

“Whatever. It doesn’t matter.”

With Origami out of it, basically staring into space like she just watched a dozen of her favorite puppies burn to death, Gianna had to step up. “We need to do something about that thing,” she decided. She picked up the shield, noting several of the runes on the back were burned now. She shook her head. *Focus, this can be repaired same as Origami can.* “We can’t just leave it sitting here out in the open. If this is the castle it’ll probably have an armory. We can- wait why do you look like that?” She noticed Sunny for the first time.

“It stands to reason,” she said sadly. “It destroyed magic, right? The medallion was basically holding my mana cores. That’s how Gianna was able to use it before. So the wave swept over it, smashed it, then went past me. It was gone by the time my cores reformed. So now I’m like this again.”

“Lucky you,” Origami muttered.

“Yeah, it is,” she shot back. “I couldn’t get home otherwise.” Left unsaid of course was *you messed with stuff just sitting around Pony of Shadows’ throne room? What did you expect? Flowers to pop out of it?*

“Probably time for you to get going then.”

“Yes, I suppose it is!”

“Girls, please. Let’s just focus on this bomb thing. Can it safely be moved?”

“I don’t know. Does it matter if it goes off again?”

“It does to me!” Sunny protested.

“Fine. All of you head back to the portal. I’ll put it carefully in the armory and lock it up. At least then it won’t be just sitting here. Honestly, was he going to beat us and then use the portal to get back? Toss it through and activate it? I mean it killed him, what was his plan? Trick one of us into taking it back? Hoping we would if he lost?”

“Could have been a final act of desperation,” Bright Soul told her.

“If he starts to win, shoot him!” Sunny quoted.

“Exactly.”

“I guess we’ll never know.”

“Unless he’s not dead,” Origami spat. “Just biding his time again. How would we ever know?”

“I don’t know, Origami. I just don’t know. All I can do is what’s in front of me, okay? Now can you walk? Get going. I’ll follow when I’m done here.”

“Probably can’t fly. My core is gone. You two probably can’t either.”

“Is that what I’m feeling?” Bright Soul wondered. “I’m no student of magic.”

“And I’m not explaining it to you. Read a book or something. Bye.” She headed for the door.

“Look, Sunny, take some pictures. We need to show Twilight so maybe she can come up with a cure for this or something.”

“Got it.” She got to work. “I’ll take some of the dais too, and flip those slabs over in the corners of the room, I bet they have more writing on them.”

“On it.”

Gianna carefully moved the bomb, taking it several floors down and thanking her lucky stars the layout of the place was the same. It did seem brighter here now, she had no trouble finding her way despite there really being no source of light to guide her. When she made it back the others were waiting, and they all went through.

“Something happened,” Twilight realized, as the last strand of pony hair cleared the portal and the two sisters cut off the portal. Everyone looked depressed, Origami most of all. “But you’re all accounted for, nopony died. What’s wrong?”

Origami just walked past her without saying a word and left the room.

“Uh?”

“She might need some time,” Gianna told her. “We won, didn’t even really fight him. She, uh, sort of activated something next to the throne. It went off, and she said it destroyed her mana core.”

The ponies in the room all gasped.

“It’s true, I can’t fly anymore,” Bright Soul announced, flapping his wings. “Seems only Gianna got out unscathed, oh and Marble I suppose. Being an earth pony and all.”

“I don’t know. I feel different,” Marble told him. “I just hope I can keep helping down on the farm.”

“Wait, she just ran up to something on the throne? Was she trying to get it away from him?”

“No, she used her magic. That spell she uses to make hammers do things and such?” Gianna told her. “That made it go off. Some kind of doomsday device. Thankfully it didn’t come over here! Maybe the whole castle would have been destroyed.”

“So she blames herself. I see. Well, that’s going to be tricky, I won’t lie. There’s a pony with what I believe to be a malformed core- Scootaloo. She can’t fly either, she’s the daughter of an earth pony and a pegasus. Usually it works out but not in her case. I’ve been thinking about ways to use the new runic magic to help her. Maybe something similar can be done in Origami’s case? Looks like I have my next project.”

“Better hurry, magic is all she thinks about.”

“She knows about Moon Dancer, right? How she almost turned out? Heck, Luna and myself could also serve as cautionary tales about obsessing over magic.”

“She’s probably not thinking straight at this point.”

“Yeah, okay. Fair. Well, you won, I guess?”

“No sign of him. That doesn’t mean anything though. Maybe he had some spell to make him immune to the effects of the bomb, but didn’t have it running because it went off early? We have pictures, you can look them over. We found him easily enough because he had changed the castle a little to let in moonlight I guess. We would have to scour the whole world to find him again now.”

“Good thinking. Well, thanks everypony. I know it’s not how you might have wanted it to go but you have saved Equestria and probably the future.”

“Yes,” agreed Celestia. “You deserve medals for your sacrifice and bravery today. However, I feel they would be ill received by some...”

“No party?” asked Pinkie sadly.

“No party,” she agreed.

“Dang it!”

“Maybe later, Pinkie,” Gianna told her. “For now, let’s give her some space and let her process this. Honestly, she should know better than anyone magic can make just about anything happen. So she doesn’t have a core now, or whatever. Did she have one at birth? Find another somehow! Don’t just give up immediately. At least try a few things first!”

“We’ll see what we can do for you as well,” Twilight told the others. “Stick around okay? We’ll have you flying in no time.”

“And if nothing else, we can start a no-flying pegasus club with this Scootaloo,” Bright Flash joked. “So that’s sort of a win, right?”

Epilog
Several days later
Saying Goodbye

“She’s not coming,” Gianna told Sunny and Twilight. “She wrote you a letter though.” She handed it over.

“Okay?” Sunny said, opening it. She had her bags packed, having stayed out of sight in the castle for the last few days. She had put the finishing touches on all her notes before she went back, in case she returned to a world still in turmoil. She had pictures of all the important books Twilight suggested, (the insides, not just the covers silly) her own notes on magical research, spell formula for Amphibian runic magic. The works. Even seeds, as much of the plant life had suffered since the (supposed) war and their diet was still pretty bland. She was ready to go, her wings and horn staying strong but she didn’t know for how much longer. “I see.” She scanned it and tucked it away. “She’s clearly still not in a very good place. It’s fine. I hardly have any pictures of her with any kind of smile on her face so I wouldn’t expect anything different now. Celestia knows I tried to get one. Still would have been nice to see me off.”

“Was she mean?”

“It’s fine, really. But I will say this. When I go back I probably will lose *my* magic too. I’m protected by paradox at the moment, but in the best case I go back to a changed future, one the crystals never existed in. No crystals, no burst of magic that turned me like this. I’ll just be a regular old earth pony again. So you can tell her that. Lost only a medallion indeed. Worst case I go back and nothing has changed for me. The land is still recovering after a war, magic only just came back, and everything is still messed up. But hey, I’m not going to whine about it, I’ll just work to make a better day, each and every day.”

“I’m sure she’ll feel bad about this someday, too.”

“Good! She’s acting like she lost her parents to cancer or something. Hey, you know what happened to me when I had that happen? I didn’t have the luxury, the *privilege*, of just moping around. I had to get up and do what needed to be done. And when I found out my entire *species* lost magic I went in search of answers! Aarg!” She took a deep breath. “Sorry, it’s not your fault. I shouldn’t take it out on you.”

“Everypony grieves in their own way,” Twilight told her.

“Nothing to do with me now,” she decided. “She’ll be long dead in my time. If your story isn’t told, I’ll tell it though. Maybe put up a statue of you all, I don’t know. Izzy will whip something up with macaroni I’m sure.”

“I don’t want to know,” Gianna told her.

“I guess this is it. I hope things work out here. If she becomes some kind of villain- anyway my future could still be anything. Make it a bright one for me, okay? Or I’ll be back to punish you. In the name of the moon!”

“I’ll miss you.” Gianna hugged her.

“I’ll miss you too. You’re a good friend. The world will need lots of them, even now.”

“Yeah.”

“Bye Twilight. Hope you’re still alive in my time. You can catch me up on however many hundreds of years it’s been. I’ll look forward to it.”

“Me too,” she agreed with a laugh.

“Okay, step back!” Sunny paused, one eye on the door in case a certain pony came bursting in. But she was disappointed, and lit up her horn. “And don’t worry. I know how to do the spell properly this time. No time wave when I get back. Promise. Okay, here we go. Release.” There was a burst of magical energy and she was gone.

“I guess that’s that,” Gianna told Twilight. “What a strange adventure that was. Time traveling ponies. What will we see next?”

“I don’t know. Nothing like her, I hope. Oh, before you go...”

“Yes?”

“Two things. I’ve got a couple of leads on restoring everypony. Tell Origami tomorrow, as you just saw her today and she wasn’t any better. We might be able to do a core transplant, using a runic machine. Take the core from an older pony that doesn’t do magic anymore and give it to one that does. I don’t think they degrade with age, but you never know. It could work. Or we could return to Limbo, see if the mana is still there that she lost and try to collect it up.”

“That could work?”

“I have no idea what sort of ‘current’ there is there, but nopony is using magic in the area, so it could still be there. Again, a runic machine would need to be used, I don’t trust our magic to restore our magic. That’s like throwing a bucket of water on a drowning pony.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Or simply do the opposite of that bomb you found. Substitute the rune for repair or restore instead of destroy. Yet another method would be a minor time rewind. Keep her here in space but rewind her personal worldline to before the incident. That could restore her, probably make her forget the last few days as well. Anypony that was badly hurt could be helped by that method. Stygian insists the dungeon gave those without cores, like griffons in the past, a core so he thinks that will still work.”

Gianna brightened up. “Sounds like there’s a lot of options, actually!”

“Of course. It’s magic. Hopefully she’ll be in the mood for some good news. Get her here and we can discuss her options.”

“I’ll do my best. What’s the other thing?”

“Oh. Well, a minor thing at this point. Seems another natural born alicorn has joined us. It was in the papers, born of a unicorn father and pegasus mother. They’ve named her Opaline.”