

Prolog
Two days ago
Operation: Help my best friend

Gianna stood, looking up nervously at the huge form of Guru Sr., as the wise old dragon scrutinized her from beak to tail-tip. There was no sign of his son, Guru Jr. this time, and the monks that met her at the gate said he had woken up a few days ago and returned to his post. As to why there had been no challenges this time they explained; either it was because she had already been to the place before, because she was traveling with Bright Soul, or just that Guru Jr. was more into watching supplicants overcome hardship on the way up the mountain than his dad. Being a much younger dragon he did have a more “playful” personality, after all.

“This is a slightly different request than you made before,” Bright Soul, the pegasus pony who had taught them the Oversoul technique said to her. “You wanted to save the future, a rather nebulous concept in the best of times. You traveled with Sunny, who didn’t belong here, and it was perhaps more her test than it was yours. Now you want to help your friend, a very personal request. It’s possible your journey to do that will be a test of its own.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” she told him. *Given how impossible to deal with she’s been the last few days.*

“So that’s the story,” she finished up. “We believe we have taken care of the being that caused the division in the future, making sure that what Sunny experienced will never happen.” *Hopefully, no more big war that kills most everyone and destroys the land, meaning her bad future will never happen and she lives a happy live with her parents and surrounded by lots of non-pony friends.* “But my friend, and Bright Soul, and his student Flash Cube,” the blue pegasus waved up to him, “lost their magic as a result. They can’t even fly anymore. I finally got her out of her room yesterday, and at least to the library to do her own research on some cures despite all the effort Twilight Sparkle has put in on her behalf. The safest method seems the dungeons, but Origami is determined to explore all avenues before committing to anything. And so, I come to you. Can you reassure us the method we choose won’t make things worse? She claims Pony of Shadows ultimately came to be because of the dungeons, and while she’s not wrong, we’ve had other villains that had nothing to do with the dungeon. Plus, it was a confluence of events not likely to happen again, and in fact it was the *only* such event to ever happen in the hundreds of years the dungeons were active. I think she’s just being paranoid as usual. She won’t listen to me, maybe she’ll listen to you.”

“There is a great change coming upon the world,” Guru boomed. “While the strings of fate no longer dance as though upon the breeze, now that the Pony Lost in Time has returned to when she belongs, the future is not yet secure. This pony, your friend, is at the heart of it. Ask your question, little one, and in one day’s time I shall answer.”

“What should I do to help my friend find the core of her identity again?” *Nice one, Gianna, she lost her mana core? Core of her identity? I’m so clever.* “How can she, and the others, be healed in the way that results in the best future for all?”

“Very well. Bright Soul, please see to the comforts of our guest while I meditate upon the answer she desires.”

“Of course, Superkami Guru,” he answered with a bow, using Guru’s formal and full name. “Gianna, right this way. Flash Cube, we can set you up in a room as well.”

“Kinda stuck here with you all,” he agreed quietly. “Until I get my wings back in working order.”

“You and me both buddy.” He led them to the guest quarters and all three settled in to wait.

The next day Guru called them in and gave them his answer:

The past has come full circle
like the moon across the sky.
As the sun sinks to horizon,
can a shadow ever die?

The pony that you care for
she paid an awful price.
Now her heart is wreathed in shadow,
as she has suffered thrice.

If her core returns to her
exactly one to one,
that shadow grows inside to match,
and all shall be undone.

The only chance is Darkness,
so unlike her power lost,
to heal her broken heart and more,
this becomes the cost.

But now please heed a warning,
she must not be told.
About this inner shadow,
infecting her like mold.

Let it leave her like a whisper
only catch it when it's gone.
Every other choice is ruin,
as her heart resumes her song.

“This is all the help I can give you, young griffon,” he told her. He indicated a sheet of paper on the stone platform he reclined upon. “Take it, and good luck.”

“Thank you,” she told him. “I will study it carefully and heed your warning.”

“See that you do. Farewell.”

Chapter 1
A week after the incident
Seeking a higher power

“You’re actually in luck,” Princess Celestia told Origami and Gianna, who had dropped by the castle that day. “After my old diary revealed the continent of Amphibia I decided it was about time to look through my earlier journals. Copy out anything getting too faded, or brittle, as one does. So I’ve been reviewing my own journey into learning magic, which of course at the time included the dungeons. I’m one of the only ones with a firsthoof experience with them. At least the easiest to find. The Pillars, I’m told, are having fun exploring the modern world and riding the train everywhere. Who knows where they’ll be at any given moment. I’m happy to answer any questions you might have about them.”

“Thank you, princess,” she said gratefully, taking a sip of her tea. The three were in the tearoom once again, having gotten there via the North Star first thing in the morning. “Gianna went to talk to Stygian, and he gave her a fairly technical explanation of the first few and what to expect. I really didn’t want to see him, so I just waited on the North Star.”

“He’s completely purged of negative influence,” she insisted. “I wouldn’t have allowed him the post if I thought otherwise. We really must treat him as a pony of polite society again, Origami. To do otherwise would only isolate him and make him relive his bad experience in the past. This will never do.”

“I just had a bad feeling about seeing him, that’s all.”

“I see.”

Could this be another part of her ‘heart wreathed in shadow?’ Gianna thought to herself. She had been keeping an eye on her friend and she was acting better, but having spoken to Twilight about the poem they both had their suspicions. *Perhaps some small part of Pony of Shadows retreated into the space her core was as that magical device was going off. That’s what messed her up so much, made her more miserable than she would have otherwise been. And why ‘she’ didn’t want Stygian to see her. Maybe he could magically recognize that piece and call her out on it. Whatever the reason, at least she’s coming around and this would seem to be our last stop.* “He was quite helpful, making this map and everything,” she did say. “Still, given the changes around here, he could only point out the location of the second dungeon, the one behind the waterfall, rather than the first. We’re going to have to search around for it, and the others after that. At least he knew the general area of the others so we’re not completely stumbling around in the dark.”

“I have an idea about that,” Origami announced. “But first, what was your impression of the dungeon back in the day, and can you tell me why the program was shut down?”

“I recall having a good experience with them,” Celestia reported. “My sister was always more like Twilight or you, and into pure magical theory rather than social skills or learning to run a kingdom. She looked forward to the journey across the land, where I simply saw it as my duty. As for why it was shut down, I didn’t need much reminder for that whole incident to come back to me. Starswirl had, at the time, already developed a rudimentary course for book learning, as he was never one for much physical activity. He insisted magic could be just as easily learned from books, rather than the usual hooves on approach which did to be fair have an element of danger. As several young ponies did follow

his methods and learn to cast spells, his theory was proven. For a time, those that wished to study magic, and let me be clear there were far less in that time, could choose. But that didn't last very long. Some young ponies, probably believing themselves- as youths often do I find- to be invincible went out of sequence. Of course the locations were all well known in those days. They headed to one of the later, more dangerous dungeons, and never returned. Naturally an outcry was raised, and Starswirl took the opportunity to further push his own agenda of book learning. It essentially boiled down to two camps; One camp that simply wanted to offer the victim's families thoughts and prayers, and nothing else. It was their own fault, they argued, and closing the dungeons because of a couple of stupid kids punished everypony. The danger was simply the cost of having the dungeons open in the first place. The other camp wanted them shut down, that any loss of life was unacceptable as we didn't have the ponypower to station guards at every entrance to check their competence. Our population was much lower in those days, of course. So just as we did for the crystal issue we took a vote. You have lived the result; the group that wanted the dungeons shut down won. The rest, as they say, is history."

"Well we're not monsters!" agreed Origami. "Of course they should be shut down in that sort of situation."

"We did lose out, though, that much is clear," she mused. "And of course Starswirl vanished soon after that, making everypony paranoid that the other faction had done something to him, and the others, in retaliation. But no evidence was found, and of course we know what happened today, as he's back. And now here we are again, perhaps we've come far enough such tragedy will not be repeated. Giving the choice back to my little ponies would be the right thing to do. It's been a thousand years. Let's take a new vote or at least open them up to hoofpicked, promising young magic users."

"Where did they come from?" Gianna asked. "Stygian didn't know."

"I don't really know," she replied with a shake of her head. "They were around for some time when I was born. I can tell you the 'bedtime story' version that I heard, at least what I recall of it. I don't know if that's the real story, though."

"I'd be interested to hear it," Origami told her.

"Very well. *Once upon a time*, long ago in history, nopony knew anything about magic. The land was wild, and pony kind huddled together against the darkness that crept up as the sun moved about the sky." Here she paused a moment. "As an aside I have no idea who raised the sun and moon at this point in the story. It doesn't address that and why I think this really is just a tale. But to continue." She cleared her throat. "One day, the sun went black hours early, and all pony kind cried out in fear. But the sun had not gone out, it was simply hidden, by the great black dragon Melemizargo that was quickly approaching them. But now there was a new fear- the great dragon lightly touched upon the earth and pony kind scattered, afraid of what the dragon might do. Mighty were his wings, a single gust could destroy a town! Long were his teeth, able to bite a dozen ponies at once as simply a snack. His eyes glowed like the stars, and his claws bit deep into the earth. And yet, he made no move to make trouble, he simply sat. Waited. Grinned at the tiny ponies that scurried beneath him. He was patient. Sooner or later the ponies, seeing he posed no threat to them, quickly made their way to him to ask what he was and what he wanted. He explained it was time for them to no longer fear The Dark, but to embrace it. He instructed those that wished to learn in the use of magic, and in the creation of dungeons to further serve his ends. When the work was done he retreated to the mountains to rest, and look upon those that kept mana close to their hearts. There he remains, to this day."

"So then where did *he* came from? Is he just a normal dragon that happens to be colored black and had lived a long time up until that point, studying magic on his own? And he simply wished to bring those teachings to us? I mean somepony has to be first. Actually, makes sense it would be a dragon, they're long lived enough to have the time to study anything in detail."

"This story doesn't say. Just that he appeared out of nowhere. I know of no story that details his origin."

"A great, black, dragon," Gianna mused. "Maybe made bigger by fear? Like how big could he really be?"

"Oh no, he's huge, some made the trek up to see him for one reason or another in my time," Celestia insisted. "He's real, probably still alive, and as big as all the stories say. He would dwarf the largest dragon you could visit today."

"Stygian got something from him, right? I believe you, the fact he exists anyway," Gianna decided. *Though he didn't spend any time in Limbo, frozen in time from our perspective. So he's been around this whole time, just chilling up in his mountain lair? Doesn't he get bored?*

"But there's nothing evil about the dungeons themselves?" Origami asked.

"Hardly!" she scoffed. "They are a tool for training, nothing more. You bring out of them only what you brought inside. They won't change who you are. Well, personally, I mean. Yes, the later ones did scatter treasure about as an incentive to fighting the monsters and traps. But a new shield or a staff of fireballs isn't going to change who you are. At least I hope not!"

I miss my shield, Gianna thought. Still, I have to trust Twilight can do something with it to repair the damage.

"I just worry, all this talk of the dark, you don't associate good things with it."

"You may not, please speak for yourself. You're falling into the same trap that doomed my sister," she said sadly. "How ponies never stayed outside in the night, to look upon Luna's beautiful moon. It's what drove her mad and ultimately to become Nightmare Moon. Just as much bullying, theft, and lies go on during the day. The fact that ponies go indoors out of fear of the dark, or more accurately what could be moving around in it because it's simply harder to see when there's less light, doesn't mean those things are automatically evil."

"I suppose."

"I do appreciate your wanting to be careful, Origami, but from what you've told me this is your best chance at regaining magic. I suggest you take advantage of it. And if you're that concerned, I'll even make it more official. You can take the title of Official Dungeon Explorer for the realm. It doesn't really come with any perks, I just made it up right now, but it does come with paperwork. You'll need to visit all the dungeons, assess their state of decay, document their function, and write a report on the feasibility of allowing others through them. Also we won't be able to hide their existence from the other lands, so if they wish dungeons of their own you may be called upon, as the resident expert, to find good locations for them in Zootopia or Amphibia. Of course we would have to figure out how to make them again but that's a worry for another time. There. You now have my official orders so I expect you to perform your duties with the same dedication you used in tracking down crystal samples and helping Sunny. Is that understood?"

"When you put it like that, I guess I have little choice!"

"Good. Now, is your plan to simply start at the second dungeon and hope it has some mechanism to direct you to the first instead, or scour the kingdom for the entrance to the first? I know it must be around here somewhere, but I never recorded the exact location! I suppose I felt such information was unnecessary, given everypony knew where the first entrance was."

"I had an idea?" Gianna hesitantly put forward.

"Go ahead."

"From hearing Origami talk, and knowing there's some big black dragon out there, magic seems almost aware, right?"

"You mean mana seems aware," Celestia corrected. "*Magic* is the result of manipulating *mana* within the *core*. By the time you see magic, the mana has been shaped into the proper form to accomplish the result of the spell."

"But the sentiment is correct?" she pressed.

"Yes, that's true enough," she agreed.

“So after so long, maybe the dungeons *want* to be found, on some level. Can a spell be done to simply locate them? Or reach out to this Melemizargo and have him narrow it down for us? They are his, in a fashion, after all. He would want them used again and if he’s so powerful he may respond to a spell of ours seeking answers. There must be something we can do to help.”

“I wonder,” Celestia mused. “Perhaps if I modified an object locating spell, and then performed it as a ritual? You will soon learn, if you decide to follow your friend into the dungeon that is, that magic is usually performed at a fairly short range. However, if more time is taken, a spell can be extended to cover a wider area. We call this doing ritual magic.”

“I’ll follow Origami anywhere. I’m her protector after all!” she bragged.

Origami’s face got red, and she shyly looked away. Her thoughts returned to the collaboration Gianna had done with her mother, writing her a heartfelt letter and folding it into a paper griffon for her. “I’ve written you a letter of encouragement,” she had said, probably as a last ditch attempt to get her out of the house. “And your mother folded it for me. Keep it near you to represent our friendship. And if you’re really feeling lost and alone, unfold it and read the letter. This way no matter what you’ll always have a little bit of me near you.”

“You didn’t *bleed* on it or something like that, did you?”

“What? No! I leave the bleeding to you, ya crazy pony.”

Both had chuckled at that.

Seeing the length her friend had gone to, speaking “her language” of paper shapes, Origami had agreed maybe it was time to stop moping around, and the two had gone to the library together to get started on looking for a cure. Naturally Gianna had told her about everything Twilight had been working on, from core transplants to a spell to rewind time for her alone, restoring anything she had lost, but Origami wanted to do her own research. Gianna didn’t mind because she was out of the house at last and finally *doing something*. It was progress. She didn’t care what that progress was, only that it happened.

I don’t deserve such a good friend.

“I’m glad to hear it,” Celestia praised. “In fact, we may even be able to use the enchanted table we found in Twilight’s castle. It’s led us to friendship problems before, perhaps it can be persuaded to lead you two in where to go. You would have to be part of the ritual, even if neither of you contributed magically to the process. There are all sorts of bits of spells knocking around my... brain. I’ll see what I can come up with. In the meantime I’ll have the guards start scouring the castle, write up an official certificate for you stating your new position, and then get to work on a ritual. If you don’t find the entrance by the time I’m done, we’ll try it that way.”

“Sounds like we have a plan, and a backup plan!” Gianna exclaimed. “Let’s take a look around!”

So the two headed through the castle and to the lower levels. They figured they would start where they already were, then expand outward perhaps into the mountain itself. Celestia told them there should be a clear doorway that was sealed up, she doubted at the time they would have put too much effort into, for example, building a whole second wall across wherever the entrance was. With that in mind they started at the lowest point they could, in the storage areas of the castle.

“Just be careful of any enchanted mirrors down there!” Celestia joked, but would not explain further.

They went past rooms of old, out of style furniture, paintings, broken phonographs, statues, there was really a lot of junk a castle owned by a pair of 1,000 year old princesses could accumulate. Soon both their eyes were watering from the dust, and they were sneezing up a storm, and Origami was only making a halfhearted attempt to scour the walls as she illuminated them with the lantern she had borrowed. She was about to call off the search in this part of the castle when she turned to see Gianna running her claws across the wall.

"What's up?" she asked, fighting back another sneeze.

"Does this seem like a poorly disguised archway to you?" Gianna asked, taking a step back. The pair looked it over, and Origami had to admit there did seem to be a difference in the stone wall here and here, and yes there could be a line of stones forming an archway large enough for a pony to walk through.

"Yeah, could be," she admitted. "You want to mark the location and get somepony here with some tools?"

"Nah!" she exclaimed, sitting back and rubbing her claws together. "I'm gonna take it down right here myself!" She readied herself as Origami looked at her like she was crazy, taking a running leap at the door and smashing into it with her shoulder. Dust and mortar rained down, after so long simply smashing it down might actually be possible.

"You're really just going to start trying to tear down a foundational wall of the castle?"

"There's an arch, it'll totally be fine." She slammed into it again, this time making some bricks fall lose and tumbling away from them. Origami cocked an ear, they did seem to bounce some distance away before she couldn't hear them anymore.

"One side," she told her friend, pushing her out of the way and holding up the lantern. She managed to position the light so she could look in one of the holes, and was pretty sure there was a set of rough stairs going down into the darkness.

"Well?"

"Keep it up I guess? There is an empty space behind here, so we've found something at least. With our luck it's some monster they bricked up and forgot about, and we're about to let it out."

"We wouldn't be that lucky." She slammed into it again, but this time it held just fine. "Oh we're not done, wall!" she proclaimed. "Just you wait."

Wait, you mean unlucky? Or are you talking about wanting to fight a thousand year old creature released from the depths? "Let me try, you're losing steam," Origami told her, handing over the lantern.

"Uh, are you sure?" *You remember you're still a scrawny pony, right?*

"What's there to be sure about? I just watched you do it three times, and it's my core. I should be the one to break through."

"And go tumbling into the darkness beyond?"

"I won't go tumbling!"

"Okay..." But she tensed, ready to pounce on her friend and grab her back if she took a tumble so she didn't fall down the stairs.

She looked it over, finding a good spot.

"Maybe kick it, with your hooves?" Gianna suggested.

"I'm doing the same thing you did! Here we go!" She ran at the bricks and slammed her shoulder into it. There was a horrendous crunching sound as Origami dislocated her own hip, and went down with a cry.

"This is why I need magic!" she wailed, tears streaming down her face. "I can't fly, and now they'll cut my throat because I can't walk anymore either!"

Chapter 2

Just a few minutes later

Face to face with the Darkness

“Thank you very much,” Gianna told the unicorn guard she had found. The soft glow of magic surrounded his horn, and a sigh of relief was escaping from Origami’s lips as the healing magic took hold of her.

“Quite all right,” he told her. “Nimble Force, at your service. And how did you say your friend was injured again?”

“Never mind that,” cried Origami, turning red. “Just an accident down below. I still can’t believe you just carried me like that, Gianna.”

“You were hurt and couldn’t walk, of course I was going to carry you. I wasn’t going to leave you down there lying on the floor in the dust. And the dark.”

“You could have left me the lantern.”

“Then how would I have seen the stairs up to the higher levels? You want me to just go bouncing off the walls?”

“It was quite a sight,” Nimble admitted. “Seeing a griffon carrying a crying pony through the halls like that. You’re pretty strong.”

“Why thank you!”

“I wasn’t crying *that* much,” Origami sullenly insisted. “It was just a lot of dust in my eyes from being in the lower levels.”

“I’ll agree to that statement- until I need blackmail material for you,” Gianna promised her friend, placing a claw on her side and looking her right in the eyes.

“Gee, thanks.”

“All set. Try and stand on it,” Nimble told her. She did, and was relieved to find herself once again pain free.

Can’t wait until I can do that for myself again. Stupid not having any magic. “Thank you.”

“Of course. We members of the royal guard stand ready to assist the ponies- and others of course- of the kingdom in any way we can. Now, you need some help with whatever you were doing that caused you to get so hurt?”

“If you don’t mind us dragging you along,” Gianna told him. “We think we found the entrance we’re looking for. We can use some help opening it up.”

“Ah, some kind of old door that was sealed up? Yes, the princess told us to look around but not exactly what we were expecting to find beyond it. And you say you’ve already found it?”

“We think so.”

“Then lead on!”

The two led him back down to the lower level and showed him the doorframe. While he scowled a bit at the destruction of the castle wall he did have to admit the space behind it was empty. With his help the two cleared away the rest of the wall and Origami held the lamp up, shining the beam down the stairs.

“Hello!” shouted Gianna, which echoed back to her.

"I should probably go report this finding," Nimble decided, taking a step back. "There could be anything down there!"

"You can do what you want," Origami told him. "But I'm not waiting another minute, now that I've gotten this far. I'm going down. I'm sure my *protector* will follow me, won't you?"

"Isn't even in question," Gianna agreed.

"Wow, not even embarrassed by it," she remarked. "You want the lantern? It only seems fitting that our 'journey into the dark' begins in the literal dark. I think the dungeon might appreciate it."

"You're really just going down there?" Nimble gasped.

"We found what we were looking for. No sense hesitating now," Origami agreed.

"Stygian told me you can always back out of a dungeon," Gianna announced. "If you don't want to follow us the whole way through, and I doubt you will given what it may mean for you, you can back off once we get inside and wait for us to come out."

"What does it mean?"

"A different way of doing magic," Origami told him. "For Gianna, a way to do magic on her own. For someone that can already do magic? I don't know. Maybe nothing. But we'll never find out just standing around here." She set the lantern down and took her first steps into the darkness.

Gianna nodded to him, quietly said "thanks for the help," and followed.

He nervously paced a few steps back and forth, groaned, grabbed up the lamp and followed after.

The three suddenly found themselves on a different set of stairs, a cold wind blowing in behind them. The passageway was also different, being lit up and much wider. It was still a roughly carved stone, leading to a door of some kind at the bottom. They looked around.

"Was that supposed to happen?" Origami asked Gianna, who shook her head.

"He didn't want to spoil too much, said we should simply have an open mind and take the lesson of the dungeon to heart. It would have a clear focus, teaching one aspect of magic at a time. Impossible to miss or screw up. Though he said the more abstract lessons might give us a bit of pause until we got the trick. I don't know what *this* means."

"We're up in the mountains somewhere," Nimble reported, coming back down the stairs. "The castle is nowhere to be found."

"Then we press on," Origami decided. "And assume all is going according to plan. May as well leave the lantern, we don't seem to need it. We can pick it up on the way out."

"Right." He set it down. "This is all very strange."

"We've been through a lot," Gianna told him, patting his shoulder. "Honestly this almost feels like a return to normalcy. Hey wait for us!" She headed after Origami. *Typical Origami, days of not wanting anything to do with me, trying to find any excuse not to go into the dungeons even to get her own magic back, and now she's being pulled along like a cat chasing a string.*

The group stopped in front of the enormous doors, looking over a metal plaque that was half on each side. There were words in the center, or markings at least, and vaguely magical looking circles had been carved into it at well. Not runes, it didn't seem magical itself or about to do magic, but was simply something for them to ponder. The circles seemed purely decorative and made to "look magical."

"No idea what language that is, but it seems I can read it," Origami announced. "Let's see. There are seven basic magical attributes: dark, fire, wind, earth, lighting, water, and light. But to ask such rudimentary questions about elementary subjects at this point... It seems to me you ought to reeducate yourself starting with freshman year. Now, drill these next words into your head, you who are only concerned with seeking entertainment... The genesis of the attributes is not light- it's darkness."

"We aren't here for entertainment, so maybe this doesn't fully apply to us," Gianna decided. "But it does match up with what everypony has been telling us. Should we be taking notes about the attributes?"

"Strange way of phrasing it- what the?" She jumped back as the door began to open, rumbling a deep rumble as if it was simply two blocks of stone being dragged across the floor. Finally they were fully open as the noise subsided, and the three stepped into a huge space full of treasure.

Gold and gems spilled from treasure chests of all sizes. Full armor sets sized for ponies, dragons, griffons, and others were set upon dummies, glinting in the starlight that seemed to filter in from above. Racks of swords and shields, clubs and lances sat next to bookshelves crammed with books. Tables overflowed with jewelry of all kinds, earrings, necklaces, bracelets. All in gold, with gemstones of all sizes adorning them. Fine artwork sat on easels, along with tapestries, dinnerware, statues, and more. It went for miles and miles, and the three traced a route forward. They had gone maybe twenty steps when every sword in the place suddenly sprang up from their racks and seemed to take an interest in the group.

"Maybe don't touch anything?" Nimble suggested.

"..." said Gianna, about to reach for a helmet sitting on a table. She pulled back and the swords seemed to relax a little again.

"For not having faces, they seem eager," he remarked. The group continued, it seemed a path through the treasures had been maintained, and was clearly leading them somewhere. *But what exactly is this trying to teach us?* thought Origami. *Because I'm not learning anything...*

"What is that?" Gianna suddenly exclaimed, sitting down heavily and looking skyward. The other two followed her gaze, and couldn't really understand what they were seeing. Then suddenly it snapped into focus. *This was the lair of a dragon!* A dragon so huge they hadn't registered it when they walked in, and of course the treasures, far more neatly laid out than they would have expected, had captured their interest. The head of the dragon was down, his eyes closed, and while none of the group believed he was sleeping there did seem to be a lot of sighing coming from his direction.

"I can't decide how big he is," complained Nimble quietly. "A kilometer? Ten? My brain won't process it. How can any living creature be that huge? What does he eat? Adventurers that stumble into his lair? We should go. Now."

"We can't. This is who we're here to see," Origami told him. "This isn't the first dungeon, this is where *he* stays. We've been redirected for some reason. Time to find out what that reason is."

"Are you crazy? You're just going to walk up to him?"

"Yes. This is my problem, so I'll go talk to him. Stay here."

Like he can't see us standing here? He can raise his head and see everything in this huge chamber unless I miss my guess.

"Melemizargo?" Origami squeaked.

"..."

"Hello? Melemizargo?" she tried again, a bit louder this time.

His ear twitched a bit.

"Melemizargo," she called, "we are here to discuss the dungeons. Please honor these lowly supplicants with a reply!"

One giant eye cracked open, which seemed to glow with an inner light. He groaned a mighty groan, raising his head and stretching his wings out. Just his half yawn was a mighty roar, as he worked himself up and got both eyes open. He stared down at the three and cocked his head.

"You called my name," he announced. "You're not just random passers by. And you said something about my dungeons? You have my attention."

Great, let's give it back, Gianna thought. *The stories didn't exaggerate at all.*

"Avatar of magic, we come to you seeking answers, it seems. We were descending into the first dungeon, the first in many years to do so. But we found ourselves here. May we ask why?"

"Of course. All pursuit of knowledge should be met with enthusiasm, here especially. You are here because the dungeons are closed. Mana imbalance. I turned them off, once you ponies

seemed to tire of them. I set them up to bring any that stumbled upon them to me, for just such an occasion. I figured to greet explorers who were ignorant, and send them on their way with a warning to proceed no further, but instead I heard my own name being called. After so long. How strange..."

"Easily explained. Due to a recent accident during our fight with Pony of Shadows, I have lost my mana core. I have come here in the hopes of getting it back."

"I am out of touch with recent events, that name means nothing to me. As for your issue... Let me take a closer look at you." He turned his paw over and while wary of simply walking into it, she found herself being lifted and set down. He moved slowly so she didn't get crushed by sheer wind pressure, and she found herself at his eye level.

"You don't mind me taking a peek, do you?"

"Whatever you think is best!" she assured him.

"Good answer." He looked her over. **"Yes, I see there is a void, a hole, if you will, where a mana core once resided. A strong and useful core, if improperly made- when held to my standard. Your hole must have been fairly tight when it was filled... with mana."**

Gianna held back a snort down on the ground, this was no time for crude humor!

"I don't know about that," Origami admitted. *Also? Phrasing?*

"And I see your fight, if you can call it that. What a strange being that was. Ah, the device was triggered and all cores around you shattered." He shook his head sadly. **"What a misuse of power, honestly. Still, it did seem to destroy the creature. And I see hours of, ugh, book learning. You won't need any of that now. Just good, practical lessons in the true magic, and manual casting. It will take you as far as you yourself have the desire to go."**

"So there is hope?"

"You will find the true magic a bit different from what you are used to, but I see no reason the dungeon cannot serve you as easily as anyone else. Had you come here with a core, like that fine pony over there, you would have had to break it in order to learn the true magic. So really you've just saved yourself some trouble."

"I'm happy with my magic for right now," Nimble called up.

"Ignorance. It's never pretty. Down you go." He set his hand down again and she hopped out of it.

"To that end," Origami said, turning back to face him. "Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"Not at all. It's been far too long since I spoke to anyone. I'm finding it amusing. If you seek knowledge you would be a fool not to ask, given your current situation of finding me in a talkative mood."

"My first question is this; Why the dark? I mean I doubt I would be less afraid if you were a giant, white colored dragon but the implication is there. We associate the dark with evil. Why make it harder on yourself?"

"You speak as if I had a choice. Did you have a choice what color you were born? But more directly to answer your question; I represent the dark because the dark was here first. The dark predates everything, is the source of all things, and not to be too morbid for you tiny creatures, it is what you will one day return to. You associate the dark with evil because one day the dark will welcome you back to your true home. You do not wish an end, yet you must end. You call this end evil, while it is simply a consequence of your mortal existence, and thus neither good nor evil."

"That does make a certain amount of sense, thank you for putting my mind at ease about it. Now, about the dungeons. It seems a lot of effort was put into their construction. The story is you came and helped pony kind, taught them about magic. Why? What do you get out of it?"

"All things wish to grow and expand. The mana is no different. You replace yourselves with new young mortals, but the mana is not alive in that way. Yet it seeks expansion. More of itself. It wants to be used, for in the using, paradoxically, more is made. A single rock may- over the course of a million years- generate a single mote of mana. If it accomplishes some purpose, such as having a raindrop fall upon it, thus loosening it and causing a rockslide. A blade of grass may create a mote once a month, a tree one a week. Those of you that can think, and reason, and build, why you might make hundreds in a day if you are working towards the betterment of your kind. Why do you think I gave you cutie marks, that you may know exactly where your talents lie?"

Origami was shocked for a second, but then nodded. *Where did you think they came from? Magic, clearly. If mana comes into existence through action, and more is made performing an action in line with what one is better at, why not give pony kind a leg up, in the form of the cutie mark? So they would fulfill their purpose and generate the maximum amount of mana. Wow, talk about learning the secrets of the universe. We three are the only ones that truly know where the cutie mark comes from... If he's not lying about it that is.* "So that's why you shut them down? They use mana but were not generating any?"

"To maintain their function, yes. You have the right of- oh." He paused, looking concerned.

"What is it?"

"That's going to be a problem. All of the dungeon masters are long gone. How are we going to get new ones?"

"I don't understand the nature of the problem."

"Fret not, for I will explain it to you. The dungeon masters were those tasked in looking after one or more dungeons. As I speak for magic, they spoke for me. Thus they could answer questions, generate quests, assign perks, and make sure the dungeon cores were not damaged, should they be found by delvers. I would not need to be bothered for every little thing. Yet without them, I fear the experience will not be as meaningful. Plus how will you make use of your potential? It was the dungeon master that guided the delver to whatever their goal was. What to do..."

The group allowed him to think, as he seemed to be muttering to himself and poking at something only he could see.

"No help for it. I will simply have to give you some of the abilities of the dungeon master directly. You'll be able to assign yourself quests, track your own potential, choose your own perks. Yes, this should work out. Should I apply it to all three of you?"

"I'm not that interested in magic, no offense intended of course," Gianna told him. "I'm more a fighter than a mage. I don't want to be a burden on the system, taking from the dungeon but then not doing magic day to day. Though maybe just protecting Origami would make more mana than was used in my training? I do want to protect her as she goes through all this. Can you accommodate me?"

"I have not been idle these last many years. Thinking to entice more ponies into the dungeon I created a separate program for those who wish a more personal, and physical, way of utilizing mana. I think you'll be quite pleased. Simply hold on to that thought when you enter, and you will be treated appropriately."

"Then yes, I accept!"

"That's a no for me at this point," Nimble told him. "This is all happening too fast. I need to know what I'm signing up for. Report back. The princess may not even want me in here, I was only supposed to look for the door. Not go through it."

"Very well. The choice is personal, and I will offer it as many times as I must. And I see you have and use a core, in your own limited way. While I do think you are not living to your potential, your use of magic still pleases me. Continue to utilize mana and make life better for those around you. As for you two, take my blessing now, and know what is possible."

He gestured, and two blue windows sprang up in each's vision. It listed their name, MP, HP, potential points, current quests, and more. They both knew they could simply say something like "status" and be shown the window at any time. They didn't exactly know what all the terms meant, but both figured they could work it out on their own. MP was currently 0, while HP was 4 on Origami's page, 5 on Gianna's.

"You can play with that later, for now there are a few things I need to ask you."

The two closed the windows with a thought and looked up at him.

"Firstly, what is your intention with the dungeons? Simply take what you can from them, and keep them to yourself? Or open them up and allow access to all as in days of old? I am fine either way, my patience will reward me with their opening again sooner or later. But I would like to know if I should turn them all on right now, or one at a time and turn them off again when you're done."

"There are others we need to 'treat' if this works," Origami told him. "We'll at least need it on when we bring those others here. Oh, how can we give them what you have given us, if they choose to pursue the full course as I intend to?"

"I can modify it. One second." He concentrated, and the window opened again with a new option at the bottom. **"Simply touch the pony or other you wish to have this capability, activate the new option, and it will take the needed mana from your core and copy the functionality into them."**

"That's ideal, thank you." *I see. Asking him a question requires 50 MP, however much that is. Mana Potential? Is that what that stands for? But implanting this dungeon master function into someone costs twice that at 100 MP. I have no idea if that's fair or not, given I have no idea how much a standard mana core holds. Guess I should find out soon, getting the core must be step one, right?*

"Of course. I will turn them off for now then. You can message me once you have a core again and tell me where you are and what to turn on. My second question concerns you directly, Origami. What do you want done for yourself?"

"Me?" she squeaked. "You're offering me... what?"

"Indeed. I saw the many hours of work you put into learning this... Starswirl casting method. While I do not exactly approve of what he did to suppress the knowledge of manual casting, you worked hard at it. I like to reward hard work, not that it isn't its own reward of course. And you did take this injury defending the realm, ages ago that would have been enough for a personalized magic item sent to you directly. But I haven't done that since the dungeons closed, as I lost touch with the world. You deserve a break. So I offer you three choices; I can reincarnate you, shifting your worldline such that at this point in time you recall yourself learning and studying different things. None of your achievements would be lost, only your personal worldline would be changed. Thus you would enter the dungeon with no magical knowledge, but stronger and more capable in other ways to make up for it. Alternately I can drain away your magical knowledge, making you forget your current 'spells' and old way of doing things. This would be converted to potential for your journey into the dark, allowing you to buy perks early, or get a head start on magical learning. Alternately I can do nothing, and your limited organic brain will forget over time as you learn the new, old way, of doing magic."

He knows a lot about us, just from looking her over. Some kind of spell to see a pony's past? thought Gianna.

"Wouldn't my personality change with either of the first two? I like the idea of directly putting my magical training to use in the new way. But that's also who I am."

"You have my assurance, as the avatar of magic itself, either will be as minimally damaging to your current personality as possible. You will remember doing certain things, but not how. Only magical knowledge, that is no longer possible for you to utilize anyway, will be taken. I may

not look it,” he flexed a massive claw and grinned a massive grin, **“but I can be quite precise, when I need to be.”**

“Then the second way please.”

“Very good choice.” He put a hand over her and magic swirled. **“Check your status page, you should see that you now have potential points.”**

“I do. 21 points.” *Whatever that means? Is that a lot?*

“Good. Enough for two ten point perks or a huge boost to learning your magical skills others would not enjoy. The choice is yours. Very well. Unless there is something else, I will activate the first dungeon and send you back there.”

The group shared a look, or at least Origami and Gianna did, Nimble was just trying to stay small and inoffensive. “You have been most kind,” Origami told him. “Thank you for everything. I hope we meet your expectations in the dungeons.”

“I do too, little ones. Good luck.”

And the group found themselves at the top of the stairs again, in the castle.

“Oh thank goodness that’s over!” Nimble breathed. “That was terrifying!”

Chapter 3

After lunch

Talk about a core memory

Having met with the princesses- Luna was up by that time and ready for breakfast- the two went back down to the basement to begin their journey into the dark. Both were pleased it had been found so easily, and shocked Melemizargo had done what he had done, and that he was so chatty. Oh they assured the pair he was never cross or curt, but did seem to like remaining aloof- from the stories they knew of the guy anyway. It stood to reason, he liked ponies solving their own problems it seemed, but was willing to help given the 100 point cost for doing so now listed on their status pages. He was supposed to be a method of last resort, and the two theorized that was how Stygian had gotten his attention and 'dark mark.' Saving up points and simply asking for it. As he was in some sense of the word literally magic he could probably do just about anything, but didn't want to be known as the 'solve every-pony's problems' guy.

"Was probably bored out of his mind though," Ginna told them. "He wasn't asleep. Can the avatar of magic itself sleep? So he's just been laying there for how long?" *Did he make all that treasure somehow? Is that where the treasure for the dungeons comes from? It can't just come from nowhere, even he can't just wish magical objects into existence, right? Right?*

The others agreed she was probably right. The two princesses said they would start cleaning the place out (and by "they would start cleaning the place out" they meant order some ponies that worked at the castle to start doing that) and setting guards on the entrance. Celestia was a bit put out she wouldn't get to make the ritual, she had actually been looking forward to the challenge. She did express excitement at the "research dungeon" being opened again.

"I've had plenty of time to think of new spells, but I would need the dungeon to teach me certain parts of them," she explained. "Once that one is open again permanently- or can be opened on demand if we decide to only allow a limited access to them- at the very least I can start learning some magic again. Maybe check my points, get a new perk or two. I don't really recall the state my potential was in when we closed everything up. I have to assume I used them up but maybe I didn't. That will be exciting."

And so the two headed down, the princesses and guards waiting at the top of the stairs having wished them luck. The pair lost sight of the other as they passed into the dungeon proper, the entrance seemingly covered with a darkness the lamp they were carrying couldn't penetrate. But both found themselves alone in the first room.

"Gianna?" Origami cried, looking around. "Where did you go?" *Oh come on, don't feed her ego that much. I could have waited a second before calling out for her. This place must have me more spooked than I wanted to admit even to myself.*

"Origami? Is that you?" came back from nowhere.

"Wait, I can hear you?"

"I can hear you. Where are you?"

"A weird room with a table and some kind of crate. One second." She headed over to it and peered inside. "Looks like a bunch of broken glass spheres?"

"Same here," she reported. "There's a door here with a red light over it?"

"Yeah, that's what I have as well."

Both checked the door and it was locked. There seemed to be nothing else in the room. "I guess it's arts and crafts time?"

"I don't see any glue. I guess we'll just have to see..."

Both went quiet and started pulling a bunch of broken pieces off the top of the pile. Both were careful not to cut themselves, and Origami noted some of the pieces had an outstretched wing sticking out the side. They spread them out on the table and looked them over.

"Oh, it's like a 3D puzzle," Gianna remarked. "I found two pieces clearly meant to go together and they just fused into one big piece when I set them together."

"Hey, don't get ahead of me!" She frantically looked her pieces over, nothing really seemed to go together so she carefully scooped more out of the bin and set it on the table. *Come on, you can do this. You can beat Gianna at something like this. I mean, come on.*

The pair worked for a moment, Gianna reporting fast progress but Origami got into it, catching up at the end with a series of quick moves. When they were done both had a fragile looking glass sphere, Gianna's totally round while Origami's had wings sticking out either side.

"Representing my weather magic?" Origami wondered aloud.

"Must be, as mine is smooth. I don't see any pieces- we can't do this *wrong* can we?"

"... I think... what we've made right now is what we are simply destined to have." *But where did the pieces come from? Why not just have a whole one when we came in here? What lesson is this teaching? Or is it just that we have to spend time with the core, so it knows us?*

"The light went green on my door, how about you?"

"Oh yeah, let's see!" She ran over to it and threw it open, expecting to see Gianna. But it was just another room. "Oh, another room."

"Same here. Don't forget your sphere."

"I wasn't going to!"

The next chamber was lit with tiny floating lights, and apart from a comfy looking cushion in the center was empty. The cushion had "Learning Cushion" embroidered on it, was a deep red with golden tassels, and the motes of light moved out of the way as the two headed towards it.

"This implies sitting and taking a moment," Gianna mused. "Ah, another door with a red light."

"That's what Stygian must have meant, that you literally can't mess it up," Origami decided.

"Until you learn the lesson of the room, you just can't go forward."

"Sounds right to me."

The two sat down, looking around. The cushion was so relaxing and soft both felt their cares melting away, and they simply breathed and watched the lights floating in the air. Both realized rather quickly that as they breathed the lights got closer to them, then a bit further away. By drawing in the breath slowly and releasing quickly they could draw the motes in, getting them closer while not pushing them away too much. The lights bobbed closer and closer, finally being captured by the orb both were holding. Both almost fell over as the orb sparkled and sank into them, leaving them holding nothing. The light over the door went green.

"Is that? Do I have a mana core now? That was pretty easy!" Gianna remarked. "What was I worried about?"

"Hey, I got the first one just from being born," Origami reminded her. "Though doing anything useful with it required dedicated effort. I can see where this method would appeal to some, shall we say, more action oriented folks."

"I resemble that remark!"

She snorted. "Let's just see what else it has in store for us."

"Right. Heading through the next door now."

The third room was curious. It was mostly empty, with only a weird looking “creature” if you could call it that sort of bobbing up and down in the center of the room. Both gave it a wide berth and checked the door. Locked, and red light. The slime creature didn’t seem to care, it just sat there thinking the rich, inner thoughts that defined it. It was a sort of greenish color, with bubbles and whirls inside, that moved about the thing slowly. It didn’t seem to care they were there and neither could tell if it could even see, as it didn’t exactly have eyes.

“I’m a bit stumped,” Origami admitted. “We supposed to eat it or what?”

“We can’t eat it, it’s been on the floor!”

“Strangely free of dust though.”

“Yeah I guess. Maybe poke it?”

“I don’t want to kill it!”

“Origami, it’s probably some mana construct. This is why they were turned off, remember? They use up mana. Represented just now by those points of light. It’s not really alive. I mean do you think a living creature, even a slime monster such as this, could have lived here for all the years the dungeon has been inactive?”

“Maybe? It looks alive to me! And no one put it here, unless it really was left over from the last dungeon master?”

“But we both have one. Do you think the dungeon copied it?”

“That’s a good point, how are we both seemingly in the same place without seeing each other? Are the rooms identical or is something else going on?”

“How should I know?”

“I didn’t expect you to, I was just thinking out loud. Hello? Can you understand me?”

“You’re talking to it?”

“Yeah why not?”

“Did it respond?”

“... No.”

“Then let us assume it’s here for one reason only. I’m gonna poke it.”

“Hope it doesn’t blow up in your face.”

Gianna poked it with a claw and it shimmered and vanished, a mote of light appearing in place of it. The light was sucked into her. “Oh, I think I see. Poke it, you’ll see too.”

“Okay...” She reached as far as she could and tapped it with a hoof. The same thing happened, and both doors unlocked. “What in the world? What was that about?”

“Remember, later dungeons have monsters, it’s why they got shut down, right? Monsters got some kids who shouldn’t have been there. It’s teaching us that we can recover the mana used in their creation by beating them. They aren’t real, just another tool for us. We got mana from the air, we can get it from monsters, too. It’s just a continuation of the last lesson.”

“So we had ten, and now we have eleven? I counted ten motes in my room...”

“That’s what I would guess. Same here by the way.”

“I doubt they’ll all be that easy, just sitting there and letting us attack them.”

“We don’t know any spells yet! When we do, we’ll see what the dungeon gives us.”

“True. Okay, they’re some kind of teaching tool. I guess I can accept that. Door?”

“Nothing else in here, at least on my end.”

“Me too.”

The next chamber was more involved, and very brightly lit.

“Woah, I can’t even count all these, there must be hundreds here!” Gianna exclaimed. “And is that a treadmill?”

"Looks like it." Origami looked around. There was some kind of number display on the wall, which currently read 11. There was a weird circle seemingly painted on the ground next to an exercise machine. Hundreds of motes of light floated gently around the room. And that was it.

"Time to run?"

"Physical activity? What's that supposed to prove? That I can handle later dungeons because I'm physically fit? Will I have to get swole before the door will open?"

"That some kinda pony slang?"

"Never mind." She stepped up to the treadmill and looked it over. The display was fairly simple, with a timer that currently read 3 minutes, and an "off" and "on" button that were not active. Touching them did nothing, anyway.

"Mine is busted," Gianna complained. "It won't go on."

"Same here. Only other thing in the room is the circle, let's check that out?"

"Seems right." They both hopped down and went to stand in the circle. At once the motes of light rushed into them, and the counter started going crazy, stopping at 500. Both felt full to bursting somewhere they had never felt full before, and their cores trembled with the strain. "We have to get rid of it!" Origami announced in a panic, recognizing the sensation of having a core at least. "It's too much mana for a pony of this era!"

"I feel you're right," Gianna agreed. "Maybe the treadmill burns them off? But why?"

"Never mind that, see if it'll start now." Both hopped out of the circle and the light blasted out of them, bringing the display back to 0 again.

"Huh," both managed.

"Hey, it's blinking now!" Gianna announced. "The on button is blinking. We can use the treadmill it seems?"

"This is so weird..."

Both hopped up and hit the on button, making the tread start to move. The timer started counting down, and three minutes later one of the motes went into them, bringing the total on the wall to 1. The light above the door went green.

"We had five hundred, went back down to zero, and in three minutes of activity gained one," Gianna decided. "I guess just keep it in mind. It must mean something."

"Hopefully the next room gives some kind of context?"

"Oh, the cushion again."

"Wait, I didn't open my door yet!" Origami rushed over and to the next room. It was the same exact setup, making her look between the two rooms, but then she noticed the difference. The learning cushion was back, and this time there was a clock on the wall with a second hand. The readout still was at 1.

"Same thing?" Gianna asked. "Circle, and then cushion?"

"Okay, I think I'm getting it a little," she decided. "I bet it's going to be faster? Let's see. Stepping into the circle now."

Both did, and again they went up to 500, and it rushed out of them when they left the area. Settling on the cushion they did the same breathing exercise and watched the clock. About every 10 seconds they got another mote inside them, and the display went up.

"I'm going to see if it keeps going to 500 or stops early," Origami decided.

"Good idea!" Gianna praised. "Let's get a sense of how much we naturally have, if the room will let us."

They pair waited about 12 minutes, and finally they stopped gathering mana at exactly 101.

"Same for me," Gianna realized. "Well, we can give the dungeon master protocol to ponies by exactly using up our total mana. At least if we're sitting quietly it doesn't take *that* long to come back. Take forever on the move... one every three minutes? How long is 300 minutes?"

"I'm no math genius! I bet there's, like, perks to improve it too," Origami figured. "He talked about it, and we never did look at our new menu that much. Wasn't there a 'perk list' on there?"

"Right, that's true. Anyway, next room?"

"Yeah."

But this proved to be the last room, as the pair entered what must have been the 'office' of the dungeon master at one time. It was a room with a desk, and chair, and another locked door on the far wall. They could see the stairs leading up, and as they crossed the center of the room both got a blue window in their vision again.

Congratulations
You have completed a dungeon!
Dungeon Rewards Granted:

Total mana capacity determined to be 101 MP
Meditation skill gained
Potential +1
Dungeon 2 location: 576398

"That's an awfully big number," Gianna remarked. "What could it mean? I guess we already know where it is so we can easily find out."

"Let's head up, I guess. No sense standing around here."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" she teased.

"Huh?"

"Try flying, you goof!"

"Right!" She flapped her wings in the usual way, and air stirred under her. "I can fly again!" she cried as she lifted off the ground. "Gianna, look, I can fly!"

"That must be a load off," she agreed. "I'm happy for you."

"I need to check if I can shove clouds around. There wouldn't be any reason I couldn't, right?"

"I guess-"

"Wait, status window! Uh huh. Sweet. It says I have a perk now. 'Innate Weather Magic.' I get it. And the dungeon 2 number is at the bottom now too, we can keep an eye on it. Actually it's fluctuating now as I fly around." She landed. "It's stopped."

"Gee, must be nice. I don't have a perk, just a quest."

"You *already* have a quest? What it is?"

"Help Lime Twist. I guess because I wanted to do that anyway?"

"Oh wait, duh, I have a quest too. Regain core and learn beginner spells. I'm halfway through mine."

Not a competition. "Only you would look right past your own quest," she sighed with a shake of her head. "Anyway, we can go check the cloud thing."

"Yeah we are. It'll work! We need to tell Bright Soul and Flash Cube right away. Get them down here and give them the protocol. I have to admit, I had my doubts but this could actually work out okay."

You mean paranoia?

"Let's go tell the others the good news. Dungeon 1 still works and we completed it. You don't think the exit is somewhere else in the castle, do you?" She looked up the stairs.

"Only one way to find out."

The pair headed up, finding themselves exiting in exactly the same place they had entered the dungeon from. The dusty storage room, with the bored looking princesses and guards waiting for them.

"You weren't gone that long, but it seems you have had success," Celestia remarked, looking the two of them over.

Of course, she can sense magic like I used to.

"Yes, princess," Gianna told her. "I have the honor of being the first griffon in hundreds of years with a mana core using the original method." *Possibly one of the only griffons that has the potential to do magic at this point, I have no idea how many others study it. Not many, unless they're doing it in secret. You don't hear about it that much.*

"That's wonderful news," she told them.

"I can fly again!" Origami proudly announced, spreading her wings. "So that's taken care of as well. The others can be cured with this method, even if they choose not to continue and learn spells."

"I was hopeful that would be the case. So nothing malfunctioned down there? The place seemed in good repair? We won't have to worry about repairing the floors or anything like that?"

Both shook their heads. "It seemed as though the place never shut down," Origami reported. "I'll make some notes on the whole thing while it's still fresh in my mind but it seemed to do exactly what it was meant to."

"I'm glad to hear it. I doubted you would be stuck but it would have been awful to not be able to complete the process when you had come so close. And how would we repair it? Perhaps the Dark Dragon would have some books on dungeon care we could look at. Given your interaction with him I'm sure he wouldn't make us start from scratch, given he seemed to want the program started up again."

"He had a lot of books there it's true."

"Will you continue on to the second dungeon today?" Luna asked.

Origami shook her head. "I need to make some notes, and check my ability to move clouds, and show my parents everything. By that time it'll be too late. We should tell Twilight the good news too."

"I can do that," Gianna volunteered. "You head home and I'll head to her castle."

"Sounds good!"

"Very well," Celestia agreed. "I'll look forward to your report."

Chapter 4
On the way back
Skill Issue

The pair was watching the land roll by under them on the bridge of the North Star when Origami turned to Gianna. “Hey, Gianna?”

“What’s up?”

“Something you said back there... I’ve just had a thought. How are your fellow griffons going to react when you tell them you can do magic? Will they view you in the same way? I got the impression they’re pretty stubborn and you’re acting outside their norms.”

“Don’t let those MGGA griffons make you think we’re all like that. Yes, my kind can be a bit straightforward in our interactions when it comes to bits. And tight clawed when it comes to hanging on to bits. And hold grudges when it comes to dragons. But this is *power*. I guess I could see it going either way. It’s not like I’m going to try and claim I’m better than they are because I’ve gotten a core. I’m doing this to bring it to them, make sure it’s safe for us. I can’t see myself getting ‘mana poisoning’ or anything like that but they’re going to need to know it’s safe. And it’s not like anyone can just tell if I walk down the street or anything. Unless I start doing magic in the street, of course. And there again, most any griffon could have studied magic using the ‘book learning’ method you did, they simply choose not to. I’m not going to shout it from the rooftops, I would go to the council. If we decide to open them up, anyway, griffons can start doing their own ‘journey into the dark.’ They can get there easily, at least from Griffonstone. And maybe in a year or two from anywhere as the teleport network expands. If there’s a proclamation that those wishing to learn magic may now more easily do so, from the dungeons, and griffons do want to, fine. I’ll be seen as a young griffon that wants to learn magic to better protect my homeland who rushed to be one of the first. I already have the armor of the defense force after all, I’m known to be an up-and-coming griffon. Of course if no griffon takes them up on their offer, well, that’s just their own small mindedness. I might even suggest to the council that *all* those in the defense force learn magic. All the better to protect griffon lands, wouldn’t you say?”

“I just hate to think I was the reason you might get shunned by your own kind, that’s all.”

“Thank you for your concern. Obviously I’ll have to be careful in the beginning who I ‘come out’ to but think about it- if someone does make trouble for me *I’ll have magic*. They’re going to be the ones in trouble, in the end.”

She snorted. “I guess you’re right. You know your kind better than I do, it was just a thought. Be careful if you go home alone, okay?”

“Will do.” *Though I suppose those in MGGA would say it was more ‘cultural contamination’ or something like that. But it’s not like I’m learning from ponies, or doing things a ‘pony way.’ Dungeons just happen to be in pony lands because two thousand years ago or whatever the Dark Dragon came to pony kind. We could build our own dungeons if that was the issue! Maybe the council can order the defense force to go through the dungeons- quietly and in small groups so we all don’t just vanish for a week at a time or whatever- and then announce our now more capable forces. Once it’s already done it’ll be normalized and what are they going to do? Call for the removal of the entire defense force? I think not.*

So Origami flew out of the North Star to go find some clouds and then head home, while Gianna parked it and headed to the castle. She walked in, those in Ponyville didn't distrust their neighbors enough to lock their doors or anything, and she did have an invitation to come and go as she pleased. She looked in the likely places Twilight would be, and found her in a workroom surrounded by chalkboards detailing the runic script.

"Hey Gianna, welcome back," Twilight greeted her.

"Yo!" Spike said with a wave.

"Hello you two. What's all this?"

"Trying to decide on our next project. What would benefit us most to work on next? This runic script can probably do anything but we don't have unlimited power. We're thinking either a small scale project, maybe something like a hovering wagon or something huge, like a shield we can activate and protect entire towns. We may have friends on two different continents now that doesn't mean we've run into all the different kinds of life on this planet. Some other force may show up and try to take us over. It would be good to be prepared."

"That's what that new holiday is for, right?"

"You do really see a bunch of ponies taking that seriously?"

She shrugged. "Hard to say. A lot of them spent some time in cages when the storm king attacked. That would motivate me." *In fact it is, in a way. I won't be Origami's 'protector' forever, one day I'm going to have to fully enter the defense force and protect my homeland. We may not have been the targets this time but I have to believe griffons would have rallied to the cause of freeing ponies once we learned of it. Or the dragons would have. We couldn't let them show us up!* "If you don't think so, hurry up and get the rest of the teleport network up and running. The more dragons and griffons you have in pony cities the less likely someone is to attack you."

"It's true," she mused. "Someone like Tirek who steals magic would have found it more difficult to move into a place if there were a greater diversity." She eyed Gianna. "Of course you're vulnerable to such things now, if what I'm feeling from you is any indication. And most dragons would be as well."

"What exactly did he do? From what I learned in the dungeon, mana used simply returns to the core after a time. How could he have 'taken' your magic and left you all weakened?"

"He got bigger and stronger as he attacked us," she explained. "And nopony recovered until he was defeated. I don't know the exact mechanism- he must have attacked our cores in some way. Added their capability to his own. Thus damaged they could no longer collect mana for the pony, but instead collected for him. At the time we didn't think about it in those terms, and I'm certainly not going to bring a pony to him in prison that he can 'eat' to study the phenomenon."

"Maybe it wasn't an attack at all, but an ability unique to him that created a channel between you," she mused. "Thus everypony was fine, but any mana gathered simply went into him instead."

"An interesting theory. But not why you're here, I think. What can I do for you?"

"You've already felt it I guess. Dungeon one was cleared. Origami too, and she can fly again. She's off trying to move clouds right now, make sure she got it all back. We need to contact Bright Soul and the others, get them here so they can get their ability to fly back as well."

"Excellent news! So Origami is feeling better, then? Any indication of the..." she looked around. "You know what?"

She shook her head. "Nothing yet."

"Hummm. Okay. Oh, since I have you..." She made a "stay here" gesture and left the room. A moment later she returned with the shield floating in her telekinetic grip. She set it down so the back was showing. "I don't think I can fully repair this. But I can tell you how I think it worked, and how *you* might be able to repair it yourself with my help." She paused. "Or you could do the whole thing, the stylus isn't that hard to use, and maybe you can make your own now? You would have to see..."

"Okay?"

"As you saw, some of the runes were damaged." She indicated the damaged ones, looking chard and messed up now. "But what drew my attention was this area here." She indicated a blank spot that also looked messed up. It was a circle where the metal was scorched but there was no rune there. "In theory, this item never should have worked at all. Where did it get mana from? Yes, this set of runes here is mana->absorb but from where? I think," she tapped the empty spot, "this shield had a core of its own. Basically, it was given a core like a living thing. It did seem a bit playful, almost alive, did it not?"

"It did."

"That's where that could have come from. I think a living being sacrificed a portion of their core to create this. It absorbed mana just like anypony else, and thus it had a core to lose during that unfortunate bomb incident."

"Don't remind me."

"Sorry. Now, what do we do about it? I have no idea how to sacrifice a part of my core, we don't make objects like that. They're temporary, working only once and even then they degrade if not used up quickly. You would have to research that method yourself. Maybe the dungeon can tell you? But there's another option."

"Okay."

"Use the 'traditional' method, the one we used for the network. Either way we'll have to repair these runes and the metal. Maybe let it soak in a high mana environment again for a time. Then we could attach some crystals to it. Make it absorb mana that way. I doubt it would have the same personality, if any, but it would at least function. The runes say to follow a target and protect them. That will always be what it does."

"I'll keep that in mind. Thanks for looking it over."

"No problem. One thing to keep in mind- remember where it came from. You seemingly got it out of thin air when a being claiming to be the guardian of the multi-verse appeared to you in a dream and yanked it out of another world. That we can understand it at all is a minor miracle."

"It's a good point. I'll take it with me, no need to haul it back yourself. You are done looking it over, right?"

"I'm done, yes. It's pretty heavy, want me to-"

"It's fine." She hefted it, now needing to walk with three legs. "The North Star isn't that far away."

"Okay. Good luck with the next dungeon."

The next day the pair stood behind the waterfall looking at their status pages. The number associated with the dungeon had quickly dropped to near zero as they approached on the North Star, and it seemed the 'units' was simply how many 'steps' away it was. As they moved a bit further into the cave it hit zero and vanished from their page.

"I guess we're here," Gianna yelled, looking around the place. It was a rather uninteresting, long abandoned, cave. The moss everywhere was undisturbed, and the crashing of the water outside made hearing anything difficult.

"Stairs!" Origami agreed, pointing with a hoof. "Let's head down!"

"Right!"

The two headed down, but soon came to a dead end. It was quieter here but there were no other paths.

"We have to be in the right place," Origami complained. "What did we do wrong?"

"We have to tell Melemizargo we're here, of course!" Gianna realized. "I guess just use the 'ask a question' part of the status page?"

"I'll try it. Status page!" Origami looked the blue window over again and gestured over it, scrolling it to the bottom. She touched "Ask Question" and 50 MP drained away from her character

sheet. Another blue box, this one empty with a blinking cursor, appeared in the air next to her. She looked at it, wondering what to do now.

“What happened? Did it work?” Gianna asked.

“There’s just a box here...”

There’s just a box here.

“Wait it put what I said in the box.”

There’s just a box here.

Wait it put what I said in the box.

“Okay clearly it’s recording what I’m saying somehow but how do I send it to Melemizargo?”

The box filled up with most of what she said and then vanished. Origami facehooved. “Send it to Melemizargo. Right. What did I expect to happen?”

“I don’t know?”

“Hold on a second!”

Okay, what in the world was that?

“Well you didn’t give me any sort of instruction on all, are you still hearing me?”

I’m still hearing you. I mean I thought it was pretty obvious. Guess I was wrong. What’s your question for me?

“No question, we’re here at the entrance to dungeon two.”

The box vanished and the stairs now seemed to go down further.

“Thank you. Come on, let’s go.”

The pair found themselves apart as they entered the first room, which was mostly empty apart from one wall, which featured a huge mirror. *Yeah, I’m looking pretty good but how is that- hold on,* thought Gianna. Looking at herself she saw a faint aura of color around herself and looked behind her. There was the door to the next room, it had the red light above it just like the last dungeon. But the wall was blank. Turning back to the mirror she saw the wall in the reflection had some kind of switch on it. Plus on the floor was a circle she didn’t see in the room.

“You there?” she hesitantly asked.

“Yeah, are you seeing a mirror?”

“Mirror, yeah. And a weird switch behind you?”

“Same here.”

“Interesting...” She went over and stood in the circle, then leaned over and had her reflection press the button. It flashed red and she flinched back. *Well, that’s not it. This energy field around me has a color, maybe I need to modify the color of the aura to match?* She stared at her reflection, trying to will the color around her to become red. Nothing happened. She scowled at herself, then gave a start as her aura started to turn red. She got excited and it flashed blue before she could hit the switch. “Is it showing our emotional state?”

“I think this mirror might be enchanted,” Origami decided. “Back when I had magic there was that advanced technique, remember? Aura shaping. I only got it to work sporadically, but this energy around us seems to resemble what the book explained what the aura was. I bet it’s something similar,

odd that the dungeon started with this but I guess you have to start somewhere. I bet we have to have all four hooves- or whatever- on the ground and shape our aura to hit the button. Thus showing we understand what the aura is and that it can be manipulated in some way.”

“It’s worth a shot.” She made sure she was in the circle and stared at her reflection. Now that she could see the aura and how it moved naturally around her she had a reference and it didn’t take her long to figure out how to stretch it a bit. The button wasn’t that far away and as she wasn’t overlapping the circle at all when her aura touched the button this time the light over the door went green. “I got it!”

“Me too. That wasn’t so bad. Huh, so I can do aura shaping again. Actually it would be odd if I couldn’t, now that I think about it. That’s not really magical, just a function of knowing it’s there and working to manipulate it. A mirror like this would have been nice when I was first trying to do it. Let’s proceed.”

The second room had a table with three small metal balls on it, one of them glowing. Three wooden covers floated in the air and as Gianna stepped up to the table they went over the balls. The three rapidly shifted positions and Gianna found she couldn’t look at the display, her eyes started watering and she had to look away. When she did they stopped. Looking around she saw there were three lights above the door to the next room this time, and turned her attention back to the game. *Okay, this one is clearly obvious. Origami has often talked about sensing magic and Twilight did it to know I had a core. Clearly the glowing ball has magic on it, and so will ‘feel’ different in some way. I just have to find it.* She looked the wooden covers over, and they sat there impassively. Not mocking her at all, no the covers didn’t care about her one way or another. *Why am I looking at them? They all look the same. This is an exercise in feeling them out.* She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to listen to any feeling she had one way or the other about the three choices before her. She pointed and opened her eyes. The cover came off and the glowing ball was shown. The first light went green and the process repeated. She repeated the process two more times, getting it both times. “And done,” she announced. “Three for three. How did you do?”

“I messed up my third one. You got them all the first time? That’s no fair, I’m the one with the experience here!”

“Not anymore,” she reminded her. “You gave it all up for potential. Now it’s just raw talent.”

“Oh I see how it is. Moving to the next room.”

“Right behind/beside you.”

The next room was set up like a shooting gallery, there was a booth they could step into, and somewhat down the way was a large target. On the booth was a slender metal rod, tapering to a point and with a clear handle. Not a transparent handle, a handle that indicated ‘hold it here and point it that way’ sort of thing. Gianna picked up her ‘wand’ and looked it over. She felt something odd as she did, as though her concentration was being placed at the very tip.

“Magic comes from the aura,” Origami told her. “If you’re feeling something odd from this wand. I think our auras are being focused there, so the magic comes out from the tip instead of from us.”

“Just a training aid then. But what do we do with it?”

“Try to shove mana into it I guess?”

“Fair enough.” Gianna almost did so while looking at the thing, but hastily twitched and pointed it at the target. *The core is inside me. Think of a bucket of water, and put a hole in the bucket near the bottom. Let some of the water out and let it flow down into the wand.* Again, it took a few moments of experimenting with various imagery but finally she felt something happen, and a beam shot out and hit the target. “Yes!”

“Congratulations. You used mana consciously for the first time.”

“I’m a wizard!”

She snorted. "Not yet, you're not. Come on, next room."

The next room was nearly the same, but the target was moving. Ginna hit her target on the first try but cocked her head as a clearly exasperated Origami missed. And then again. "Having a bit of-"

"Not. One. Word."

"Okay."

The next room once again had a table in it, and the now familiar wand. On the table were two wooden looking cubes, both rather small. One was a square, the other a rectangle. There was nothing else.

"This is odd," Gianna remarked, picking up the wand. "We aren't supposed to shoot the blocks, are we?"

"We figured out using mana and aiming the result, this has got to be something else."

"I guess we'll see." She pointed the wand at the larger block and sent mana into the wand as she had twice before now. She nearly dropped it as a ghostly image of a cube appeared, overlapping the wood and turning it green. The image lasted only a moment, and as it vanished the cube went back to the normal color. *Do I have to make both blocks the same? Is this spell a wood shaping spell?* She pointed at the other block and imagined the image as being longer and shorter, then put mana into the wand. A similar thing happened, the image appeared and intersected the cube. But now as it was shorter than the cube she was pointing at the bottom part of it turned green and then went back to normal. "I'm confused."

"So am I, I tried levitating them but I just get a weird looking cube out the front of the wand."

"Levitating them? What about this situation suggests levitation?" *It's the rope thing from the trek up the mountain to see Guru. Drag the ropes on the ground indeed. Now levitation? Where is that girl's head at?*

"Well what did you try?"

"Making one cube look like the other."

"And how did that work out for you?"

"I admit, not very well." *But at least I'm not trying to make them float. Where did you even get that idea from?* Both were silent for a moment. "I think we're on the wrong track here. It's not about the wood. We're being shown what we can do with our cores. Basic magical workings. Not any particular spell, that's the next dungeon. What we should have done was put mana into the wand, noted the result, and gone from there. Not just assume something which we did and were proven incorrect. The previous room was rather obvious from the context, this one was a bit more complex." *It is a later lesson, after all.*

"So we've seen what it does, now what?"

"When the imaginary block overlapped the wood it turned green. I think I did it backwards. I should have started with the cube on the left, which would have shown the basic spell this wand casts. Making a cube. Then tried to reshape that spell for the one on the right. I was able to reshape it, after all. I just did them in the wrong order."

"What do you mean reshape the spell?"

"Imagine the cube as a different shape. Squish it down. Again it's about technique, showing us spells can be somewhat modified as they are cast."

"I'll give it a try."

With the correct sequence in mind both were now able to overlap the spell created by the wand, both for the standard and modified cubes, unlocking the door and allowing progress.

"We're back to the shooting gallery again?" Origami whined. "What else do we have to learn here? Were we sent back because we took too long in the last room?"

"I don't think so. There's a difference here. Look."

"Oh, one of those readout panels. Mine says 0."

"Same. I guess try and hit the target and see what happens?"

"Why don't we go one at a time this time? Figuring it out together *then* applying the lesson seems to be the order of the day here. Before we were trying to apply a lesson we had yet to figure out."

"Go for it." Gianna waited. "I hit the target but nothing happened. The readout stayed at zero."

"Does that suggest anything to you?"

"I'm not sure. My MP only went down by one that time, so I guess I didn't get much to put into the wand. Let me try again."

"Okay."

There was a pause. "Same result. Wow, I hope there aren't too many more rooms, I'm short on mana."

"We know meditation can replenish it in only a few minutes. I can't imagine that not working here as well. Maybe this is being done after all that other stuff, so we are getting low, which is a part of the lesson here."

"I have been trying to conserve my mana. Like in the last room, but I didn't just now. You think this lesson is about mana manipulation rather than aura or spell?"

"Well, what's left? Like you said mana interacts with the aura and magic is the result. We've seen both, right?"

"Okay, let me try that." She gave a happy shout. "It worked. The indicator shows a 5. I held back all but 1 MP on purpose that time. I'm sure the wand would have accepted more."

"I'll give that a try. How though? What imagery did you use?"

"Imagine you have a stack of bits..."

"You do know how to talk to me. Go on."

"You go to throw them, but at the last second you snatch some back. It's like that."

"... Okay, I can work with that." She did.

The next room seemed to combine elements from several of the previous rooms. It was back to the shooting gallery but this time with both an aura mirror and a readout. Again, Origami wanted to go first and put together all the lessons she had been shown so far. She restricted her mana flow and aimed at the target. The readout didn't change when she hit it, but looking in the mirror she was surprised to see a mote of light floating there, just like in the first dungeon. She described it to Gianna.

"So what is the mirror trying to tell us this time?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. This is all a lot more involved than when I used magic before. I can remember that much. It was a simplified process, I didn't have to worry about my mana level or shaping the spell. The Starswirl method really was meant for beginners, but then didn't get any more complex for those that mastered the basics. This mote represented a single mana before, I can't imagine it representing something else now."

"So to use your coin analogy again, you put the coins into the wand to make the magic work. You grabbed some back before they were fully absorbed. So is this a mana that bounced out? I would have to assume casting magic isn't 'perfect.' Some mana would be wasted like trying to throw water between two cups. Can we catch anything 'loose' after the fact?"

"The presence of the aura mirror would suggest it."

"Try overlapping the aura and grabbing it up again."

"One second. Yeah, it worked. Your turn."

The next room was quite different, right from the start as the doors opened at either end and the two saw each other. They weren't done, this "room" seemed to be a whole slice of farmland, with a

model of the farm next to a short wooden pedestal for a book. There were various things like candles, seeds, a watering can and some small farm tools next to the model.

"Together again!" Gianna singsonged. "What do we have here?"

"Something that needs the two of us I guess?" She picked up the book to look it over. On the pedestal were three readouts, two showing their current MP and a third one at zero. Origami scowled at it but cracked the book open. "Okay, this seems to be some kind of magical ritual. Meant to deliver rain to a wide area, it'll take a few minutes but at the end it should start to rain on the field."

"What do we have to do?"

"Just follow these directions and allow the mana to flow away from us into the ritual. Here, read it over so you're familiar, but it's pretty easy. Clearly they wouldn't go with a difficult one for our first time."

She looked it over, flipping a few pages. "I guess as long as we don't trip and smash the model here to pieces it should be fine. Let's get started."

They went through the ritual, their MP ticking down and the third indicator ticking up, and when it read 6 Origami picked up the watering can and gently sprinkled it over the model. Rain started to fall over the field from the clouds that had been gathering.

"Looks like we did it," Gianna remarked, as the light over the door in the middle of the two went green. "We must be getting towards the end if this ritual stuff is being shown, right?"

"Who can say? But I can't imagine too much more we would have to be exposed to. Let's see where we end up."

Where they ended up was a room with 10 of the slimes in it, and they were apart again. As they stepped into the room they hit a circle on the ground that reset their MP to 6, as shown by the readout. They saw a wand on the floor next to the circle, which both picked up.

"Stygian said there was a test at the end, to see if you really did learn what the dungeon was teaching," she announced. "This must be that test. And if what happened with the slimes last time a reward as well. We should get ten more MP capacity after this." *Seems like there's a few ways we could go about this, Gianna thought to herself. Try to recover any mana we use as we use it. Meditate between each shot so we have enough MP. Shape whatever spell comes from the wand. Maybe aura shape to hit more than one at once?*

"I'm just going to start blasting," Origami announced. "See what happens. I'm sure it'll reset if I don't get it right."

What evidence do you have for that?

"That's funny, the wand will only accept 1 MP. I get it, that's why we were reset to 6. Makes sense. I can't control the beam, maybe that's an advanced technique? Hard to hit two at once. And I'm out. Yeah, the 'dead' ones came back."

"I think in this case you do it your way and I'll do it mine."

"Sure, sure. Whatever you think."

Gianna stepped from the circle, ready to bounce back if they started moving but they were just chilling out, so she walked around a little and got the layout of the slimes. *I'll shape the spell then? Hit two at once? That should be only 5MP, maybe I'll get a bonus for not reaching 0? I think they're bunched up enough two per is possible.* She did just that, finding the more she tried to squeeze the beam that came out of the wand the thinner it got. *Is volume consistent? I'll have to do more investigation.* "I got them all," she announced.

"I did too," Origami agreed. "Let's get out of here."

The final chamber was again an office space, and again each got a blue window with a congratulatory message. Gianna looked hers over.

Congratulations
You have completed a dungeon!
Dungeon Rewards Granted:

+10 Maximum MP
Complete Skill List Unlocked
Perk List Unlocked
Potential +9
Dungeon 3 location: 1176246

“Nine potential,” remarked Gianna. “Not bad.”

“I got ten for some reason,” Origami told her. “How about that?”

“That’s odd...”

Chapter 5
An hour or so later
A house, a home, a mind palace

On the flight to the next location both looked over the new perk list, deciding not to take any at this time as they were mostly in the 10 potential range. They figured it was better to get a sense of their new skills first before trying to modify them. Plus, Celestia, Luna, or Stygian may have some insights as to what perk might be best to work towards first. There were a lot of them. Origami also relayed her experiences to CelestAI, so there could be an electronic record of their adventure and to see if she might have any insights they missed. With that done they parked the North Star outside of Filly Delphia and followed their status window through the city, getting closer and closer to the location of the third dungeon as best they could.

“Wish we could see more of the city,” Gianna wistfully wished, looking up at the buildings and shops they were passing. “We are on summer vacation after all. Seems weird to go to all these places and just blow by them on the way to an underground area.”

“Learning things is like a vacation!” Origami scoffed. “Besides we can come back here once we learn teleportation magic.”

“Are we learning teleportation magic? That seems pretty advanced.”

“It’s a basic spell with the Starswirl method. Of course that’s also line of sight so not all that useful. There must be a more advanced version that can take you anywhere.”

“I rest my case. Besides, you probably think just going to a library is a vacation.”

“That’s right! Now if you wanted to stop at a library specifically on the way... but no, that’s not going to do us much good at this point. I mean it would be nice to see how it’s laid out and what the displays are and such. See if they can boast of any copies of rare books. Old books? You never know where a dusty old book on dungeons that are long forgotten may surface. Maybe we should check just in case. Now if I was a library in this town, where would I be?”

“I’m sorry I bought it up.”

“Here’s something I feel I should bring up.”

“What’s that?”

“This is a city. We’re going to have to call Melemizargo to turn on the dungeon. We’re getting close so it must be in the basement of one of these buildings. Let’s stop at that park over there,” she pointed with a hoof, “and do that now. Otherwise we may have to ask with other ponies around and look insane talking to thin air.”

“Good point.” The two headed over there and sat down. “I’ll use my mana this time,” Gianna announced. “It’s only fair.”

“Go for it.”

Gianna opened her status page and touched “Ask Melemizargo a question” at the bottom. Her MP was drained by 50 and a blue window, cut in two sections, appeared. Words appeared at the top.

“I made it more of a chat format right at the beginning, as your friend seemed to have some trouble last time. What’s up?”

"We're nearing the location of the next dungeon," Gianna told him, words appearing in the bottom part of the window. "Can you turn it on for us? We didn't want to have to try and explain that too when we found the place."

"Sure thing."

"Ask him what we should expect, as we've got him," Origami leaned over and told her. "Whatever the dungeon master would tell us, maybe? I'm not expecting the whole solution or anything..."

"Okay. Origami wants to know what the dungeon master would tell us about the next location so we're not just flailing around."

"You can include her, you know. Just turn the window and think about letting her see it."

"I'll try that?" She did, trying to "push" the window in one direction with a claw and it did move. Origami nodded, she could see it now.

"I have no idea what the dungeon master would tell you, that's the problem. They would probably focus on whatever those that went through it over time had trouble with. I left that sort of thing to them. And you've always got the 'chat' feature if you do get completely stuck. That's why I made it."

"So you can't tell us anything?"

"I wouldn't say that. You'll be given the option to learn the first three basic spells. At least you will, Origami. I picked some I hoped would be useful for the warrior track. Let me know what you think. You could simply learn one but I would recommend learning them all. There's no reason not to. There's a mana crystal in there I keep topped up, so you can get mana back in between lessons. Each spell is broken up into the various parts of the formula used to cast it. You'll also create a mental space called the mana palace to house all your spells and experiment with them later. As for the spells themselves, simply name the aspect each room is trying to convey and they'll be added to your palace in the way you've chosen to represent them. Some may be more obvious than others, elemental effects are probably the easiest. But you won't see that until the next dungeon. Just pay attention to the layout and you'll do fine. It's always a single aspect so really there's only so many things it can be."

"That's... very helpful, thank you," Origami told him.

"Of course. Good luck."

The window vanished.

The pair was now standing in front of the Red Velvet Emporium, what looked like a cake shop though the window. Ponies were coming and going, the place had a few patrons milling around but the numbers were the lowest here, so both nodded and headed in. The bell over the door tinkled, and the earth pony behind the counter called over to them.

"Welcome, country folks! Let me know if anything catches your eye, we can do custom commissions as well!"

"Thank you," Origami told her.

"Country folks?" Gianna whispered.

"We're not wearing clothes."

"Oh!" She looked around, and it was true. All the ponies in here were wearing clothes, including the mare behind the counter. She had her cutie mark embroidered on her skirt, it was a bowl and whisk. "I'm wearing my armor!"

"I don't think that counts. Come on." They walked over to the counter while Origami opened her senses to magic. There was something vague under the place, but she couldn't get a good read on it. "Are you the owner?"

"I sure am! Velvet Chaser at your service. What can I do for you?"

"I have a very odd request for you. It's not about cake--"

"They all look delicious!" Gianna interrupted.

“Why thank you.”

“-but rather about something that may be in your basement. Have you noticed any stone archways maybe that lead nowhere? Odd rooms or staircases down that simply stop?”

She gasped. “I do have something like that! How did you know?”

The two shared a look. “It’s part of a very old system of magical learning we’re investigating. We’re official dungeon delvers appointed by Princess Celestia. I can show you the paperwork if you need to see it.”

She waved that off. “You knew it was there, so I believe you. It didn’t appear on the public record for the building, believe me I checked. The only way you could have known is if you are telling the truth. But it’s just a big, empty, dark space. It’s not interesting. It gave me the creeps actually. At first when I bought the building I figured it was some old well that dried up or something and I could use it for storage. But any light I took down there quickly got dimmer and dimmer. Eventually I just piled up some boxes in front of it and tried to ignore it. It’s really a dungeon? Sounds a bit sinister, it must have been here before the town was built, then? I just happened to get the shop it was on top of? Just my luck.”

“We have reason to believe it’s active now, and it will be a different experience for those that go inside. As for the name, well, they’re underground I guess so that’s what they were called at first.”

“It’s not dangerous, is it?”

“It’s simply a learning experience that has been turned on. Nothing will come up out of it, and it’ll be turned off once we leave. If we do determine it’s still functional and useful your shop may see a lot more traffic, after it’s turned on permanently. Others will want to go down into it, *how many* others in a day or a week I can’t even begin to guess.” *But we can get those numbers, because the ponies going to dungeon 1 will probably want to complete the course, and that’s the number that will move on to dungeons 2, 3, and beyond.*

“Ah, that could be a problem.”

Gianna spoke up. “Could mean more business, hungry ponies coming through here and buying things. Can I get that mini-bundt cake?”

“Of course!” She started ringing it up.

“Do you mind if we go down and have a look?” Origami continued.

“Oh dear. If you trip and fall down the stairs and get killed I’ll never hear the end of it! Or worse, you get hurt and my insurance rate goes through the roof. I certainly can’t afford *that*.”

She needs to sort out her priorities.

“I don’t think that’s likely?” Origami assured her.

“I suppose if you’re careful about it. It’s easy enough to find, I can’t really leave the register but my husband could take you down there? My usual helper said she wasn’t feeling well and is taking the day off.”

At least she’s not stuck down a mine or something...

“I don’t want to trouble you,” she countered. “We can find our way.”

“All right. Through the back and take the stairs down. They’re on the left. You will be careful, won’t you?”

“Of course.”

“Okay. Have fun...”

The pair headed down the stairs to the basement and started looking around. Gianna unwrapped her cake and was about to take a big bite when she noticed Origami staring at her. “What?”

“So friendship lessons right out the window then?”

“What?” She lowered the cake. “You’re richer than I am because of your larger stake in the tele-transportation company! You can afford your own cake.”

"It's not about that, our teachers would say it was about the experience of sharing something with a friend. But if you don't want to..."

"Would you like some of my cake, Origami?"

"Why I would love some, thank you!"

Gianna rolled her eyes and tore it in half. "Here you go."

"You're such a good friend."

A good friend with only half her cake, she thought, looking dejectedly at what was left. Is there a spell to double the amount of cake you have? Now that would be a spell worth learning.

With the boxes moved, and Gianna swore some of them were just filled with rocks to take up space and make them heavier and harder to move, the pair headed down the stairs. A gentle light beckoned them, unlike the somewhat oppressive darkness they saw on the last two delves, and both stared at the scene before them at the bottom. It seemed to be an infinite field, with a blue sky, puffy clouds, and a strange square looking building off in the distance. Looking around the edge of the archway they saw more field, and realized they were alone once again.

"You can still hear me though, right?" Origami asked.

"Loud and clear. Looks like that building is our destination."

"Seems so. Race you!"

"We can't see each other!"

They reached the building and saw there was a set of large, rolling doors that could be opened and a smaller door next to them which both took. Inside they stood and stared. On shelves, in barrels, in stacks, in piles were every sort of material known to ponykind, and a few that weren't. Everything very neat, laid out logically and labeled as to what sort of material it was. There was a metal section, a wood section, a stone section, everything of different lengths, widths, and heights. No tools or machinery, but enough material to build just about anything one could dream up. The inside seemed bigger than the outside as well, as both eventually spotted the staircase up to a second floor. They took it, and found themselves in a gallery of sorts, along with a large sign.

It is that time in your journey through the Dark
to create a place to house the magic you will learn.
A fortress, a laboratory, a quiet retreat. All of these
and more can be imagined and built in this place. Take
these paintings as inspiration and let your imagination
take wing. You will now make a *mana palace*, a place in
your very mind and soul. Build it well, to guard what
you will learn so your hard won power can never be
taken from you.

Reading the sign and moving on the pair saw paintings of grand libraries, woodcarvers huts, potion making labs like Zecora had, and more. They took ideas from each and were shocked to see a previously blank canvas was filling in with their ideas, giving them a first look at what their creation might actually look like. Both rushed outside, thinking to see what they had created, but nothing was out there.

"That's a disappointment," Origami muttered.

"Are those big doors open?" Gianna asked, looking back. They had rolled up for her as she came down the stairs and figured the same would have happened for Origami.

She looked back at the building. "Yeah, they are."

“We probably need to do it manually. Let’s start with the base.” She thought about what sort of base she wanted her flying castle to have, and rocks of all types flew out of the doors and started using together. “It’s working.”

Meanwhile, for *her* flying castle a cloud descended and large chunks of stone flew out to settle on top of it.

I’ll really build something unique that’ll show her! both thought to themselves. As their similarly styled flying castles started to take shape.

As the building came together Gianna headed inside, looking for one specific room. As part of her design she wanted a special door, and as she walked past the library and main room with the “bigger version of Sunny’s tablet on the wall” she decided it was probably lower down and took the stairs. *There it is.* It was a door at the end of the hallway with a bunch of runes on it she hadn’t envisioned, but touched the handle and gave a tug. The door didn’t open. *Is it not going to work? Why put the door here then?*

Meanwhile, Origami got a shock as she got a blue window hovering in front of her.

Allow physical guest access to mana palace?
User “Gianna” requesting access.
This access can be revoked at any time.
Phrase "revoke access" will banish guest.
Warning: Do not allow access to your palace
except to those you would trust with your life
or beyond. Much damage can be done here.

“Are you doing something?” she asked suspiciously.

“Yeah! I imagined a door that connected our two places. How did you know?”

“I got a message about it. Come on over I guess?”

Access Granted

The door opened, and Gianna stepped into what seemed to be a stone hallway much like her own.

“I’m down in the basement, or whatever. Come find me!”

“...”

“Hello?” *Oh, now that we’re together we probably can’t do it that way anymore. Well, she must be around here somewhere.*

The two eventually met up, and Origami smugly greeted her. “What do you think of my *flying castle?*”

“It’s about as nice as my flying castle, actually.”

“What? You stole my idea!?”

“How could I steal it? We both made it at the same time!”

“Never should have let you in here, thief. How are you here again?”

“I made a door. I figured as we came in together we might be able to link these palaces we’re making. And I was right.”

“Am I going to get prompted every time you come over here?”

“I don’t know?”

Yes. Access must be granted per request.

“Never mind, I got a window about it. I guess this is somewhat interactive in here. Can I grant Gianna permanent access?”

Admin access required for requested functionality.
Please contact your local administrator.

“I’m not the administrator of my own mana palace?”

There was no answer.

“Rude. Anyway, come look around.”

The two took a tour of Origami’s castle, during which she got the bright idea to add a new section in the lower part of the castle that led to recreations of the dungeons they had been in, so she could revisit them when she needed to make her report. There was a tearing sound of stone and metal being ripped away from somewhere nearby and then the opposite sound as that section was rebuilt. They turned a corner and found a long hallway with a series of doors, two of them labeled. Peeking through the door both seemed to be the room they remembered as being at the start of the dungeon. “Nice.”

“Wonder if I could create a portal from here to the real dungeon?”

“I think this is more or less happening in our heads.” Gianna decided. “How else would all this happen? I mean a flying castle? I don’t know how to build one. But I could dream one for sure. It wouldn’t have to be ‘real’ in that sense. Like have load bearing walls in the right places or whatever. It’s the same here. You can’t ask it for the layout of the third dungeon,” she tapped the next door in the sequence, “because you haven’t been there yet. It can only show you what you can remember about a place.”

“Are we just standing someplace drooling then?”

“That’s what I would guess. Coming here, we would have to do some experiments. See if it’s real time, what happens to our bodies. We may not want to do it if we’re in a fight or whatever.”

“Lame.”

“Your flying castle *is* lame! Mine is much better.”

“Let’s see it then!”

Gianna now had to allow access to Origami when she reached the door, and she took a look around. She had to admit, while she had a workshop much like the one at home, just bigger, Gianna had a more open space with places for trophies and other physical objects in the main room. Which was dominated on one wall by a “magic window” that did look an awful lot like Sunny’s tablet, just increased in size.

“Do you know how to use it?”

“I’m sure it’ll respond once it has something to show me. The sign said this place houses our spell formulas right? I’m thinking it’ll just show up there, when I have some.”

“I guess mine will be more physical, maybe in the workshop?”

“That’s what is important to you.”

“Well, to each their own. Shall we see about putting something up there?”

“I’m right behind you.”

Chapter 6
A moment later
The First Spell

Leaving their castles the pair found themselves in the first room of the dungeon, and surprisingly they were still together. The crystal Melemizargo spoke of was there, sitting on a pedestal and faintly glowing. Around the pedestal was carved the phrase “name the aspect for each spell formula component.” As expected, they had been told that by Melemizargo too, so they felt prepared. Little did they know the horrors to come! On each wall was a door, and each looked different. There was a fifth door, next to the one they had come through to get here, which was locked.

“Probably the exit,” Gianna muttered.

“Oh, this other door?” Origami asked.

“Yeah. What do you think?”

The pair looked the doors over. One door was half clean, half filthy like it had been deliberately smeared with mud that was still wet and dripping. The second door looked half intact, but the side opposite the hinges looked like it had taken a couple of blows from an ax. The third door just had a red plus sign on it.

“I mean we’re staying to learn all three,” Origami said with conviction. “So it doesn’t matter. Let’s go for the cross first. Don’t cross us! See what I did there?”

“Your wit never ceases to astound me,” Gianna admitted dryly. “Shall we?” She opened the door and allowed Origami to go first. Naturally entering the room herself she didn’t see Origami anywhere, and sighed perhaps in relief, perhaps in exasperation. Who can really tell?

The room they each found themselves in was identical; it was quite large, with a symbol on the floor right in the center of a set of circles some distance from it. The symbol shimmered, like it was under turbulent water, and neither could really focus on it at the moment. Each looked away to check out the rest of the room. Walking around they both noticed that the circles were labeled with a distance: 0m, 1m, 5m, 10m, 15m. Also in the center of the room, next to the symbol, was a control panel of sorts with a place to put a hoof (or claw), some buttons (only one in Gianna’s case) and a readout of their current MP.

“What’s all this?” Gianna asked, standing on top of the symbol and looking around.

“From what I recall,” Origami decided, “spells cast using the Starswirl method all had a certain range. They could go a set distance from the pony casting them. This looks like that sort of thing. Marking a distance. Let me look at the control panel. I assume you have one as well?”

“I sure do!”

“Give me a moment.” Origami looked at her buttons, labeled 1, 2, 5, 6, 7. With a shrug she put her hoof on the “hoof goes here” spot and hit button #1. Her readout dropped by one, and her aura lit up, startling her. She yelped and jumped away from it, and the glow vanished.

“Are you okay? What happened?” Gianna asked, concerned.

“Nothing, nothing!” she lied, face heating up. *Like I would admit to jumping at my own shadow here.* She hesitantly stepped up to the panel again and tried #2 button, her readout dropping by 2. A spark of light appeared just out of reach, which she scowled at. Button #5 predictably dropped her read-

out by 5, and a swirling dome of energy sprang into existence, at the 1m mark. She also felt something, mana leaking out of her core, now that it was more than just a trickle. With a nod she tried buttons 6 and 7, finding the circle lit up at 10m away and 15m away, respectively. Her MP dropped with each one, so clearly the first step to casting a spell in this method was defining the range it could go. And the more MP one decided upon using, the further it went. "It's range all right. Each button makes the circles further away light up."

"Buttons?" Gianna stressed. "I only have one button, that's labeled 1."

"You only have one?" she wondered, shocked. "What does that mean? You can't use spells at range?"

She sighed. "I guess that makes a certain amount of sense. I'm on the 'warrior track' so maybe all my spells are personal spells. I was looking forward to throwing fireballs around, too."

"You can maybe... have your claws set somepony you hit on fire?"

"It's just not the same though..."

She rolled her eyes. "Sure. Anyway, now what?"

"Let me press my button and see things..." She did that, her aura lighting up and her display going down by one, but nothing else in the room changed. "The sign said to 'name the aspect' but you did that. Distance. Did you get it wrong?"

"Maybe I have to touch the symbol?" She deliberately put her hooves on the symbol. "Distance!"

A blue box popped up.

Synonym accepted: 'distance' changed to zone. While both would be understood, practitioners generally use the nomenclature 'zone' when discussing this portion of the spell. As it is typically a circular zone around the caster.

When a spell is cast, expel mana to create a zone, determining the distance away the mana envelope can maintain cohesion from the caster. The envelope traverses this higher density mana like sound in air.

Okay

"Oh, okay," she decided. "It wanted zone. Try that." *Expel mana? I guess I'll just have to feel it out. I did feel it coming out of me when I pressed the button. It must feel like that, so I'll just try certain things. Would be nice to have someone to explain 'mana envelope' and mana density and why this is all necessary though...*

"Got it." Gianna touched her symbol and said "zone" getting a slightly different message that explained the same thing. "I got it. The door to the next chamber unlocked I think. I heard a click?"

"Let's go see."

Once again in identical rooms, before them was a table with three strange glass cubes labeled 1-2-3. Each had a different symbol on the opposite face, while inside the cube was a faintly glowing orb. While the number was clear and could be looked at directly, once again the symbol was indistinct, neither could really concentrate on it for long. Gianna immediately rushed to grab all of them up, finding that the #1 cube couldn't be held onto. She scooped it up and it was immediately back on the table.

Cube #2, which seemed twice as heavy, would stay in her claws a moment but then was back on the table, and she was left holding the heaviest of them all, cube #3.

"They're all magical," Origami announced.

"Yeah, they move around on their own," Gianna reported, hefting the cube and trying to focus on the symbol. "But what that means I'm not sure."

Meanwhile Origami was poking at them a little, and while they would all move, only #3 stayed where it had been pushed. The others went back into position. The first at once, the second after coming to rest.

"How is this part of a spell?" Gianna asked.

"I'm not really sure. I don't remember any formulas now of course, but the Starswirl method was to absorb it all at once. I'm still sure of that. This is just a piece of a spell, a spell that relates to that red cross. I have to admit I'm a bit stumped."

"We could maybe check another door? I bet that could tell us something. If it's specific to this spell or not!"

"Yeah, sure, okay." They both exited and found themselves back in the main room. Origami jumped as Gianna seemed to appear from nowhere. "That's so weird."

"Yeah it is. So, dirty door or broken door?"

"Maybe the dirty one is a cleaning spell? That would be a basic spell, I would guess. I'm not sure what the cross relates to, maybe this will be clearer as we know it's relating to cleaning. I mean, I hope it's relating to cleaning because of the condition of the door. Let's try that."

"You got it boss."

The two entered and, after passing an identical room with the circles on the floor, the door to which was already unlocked, stared at the three identical cubes they had just left.

"Ah, so it's spells in general not that one specifically," Gianna crowed. "That tells us something, right?"

"It should, I guess..." She reached out with her senses, or more accurately her aura, trying to overlap it with the first cube. When she touched it she got the impression of something transitory, quick, over in a flash. Scowling she tried vibrating her core to see what sort of return vibration she got. A sense of time from all three, of weight, of enveloping. They seemed to say "only one is required but all must be learned." She relayed this to Gianna.

"Time and weight? For a spell?" *I guess that does matter in some way.*

"I'm just telling you what I feel." *The last room referenced an 'envelope' for the spell. Is this a representation of that 'envelope'? Is the glowing I see inside the actual spell, and this is what is 'traversing the higher mana density?'*

The pair poked and prodded at the cubes, for what felt like hours, maybe four? Four hours? Hard to say in this place, but finally Gianna had an idea.

"I'm going to take the memory of cube #3, the only one I can hold onto, into my mana palace," she announced. "We got some messages there, maybe it can help us decode these symbols. I mean we were there first, and there is some kind of structure to all this. A progression, if you will."

"But Melemizargo didn't mention anything like that. Just to pay attention to the setup and what it's doing."

"Clearly we aren't paying enough attention then. And these aren't doing anything, they're just sitting there. I'm going to try it!"

They do something if we move them. Does that have meaning? "Can't make things worse at this point. My brain hurts..."

Gianna closed her eyes and briefly wondered exactly how to 'trigger' her mana palace but quick as a thought she was looking at her giant display on the castle wall. Cube #3 was in her claws, and on the screen were the three symbols. There were three columns on the screen, one labeled "rune," one labeled "weight," and one labeled "description." *So weight is part of it. Interesting.* One row was already

filled in, with the rune of “zone,” “weight” of “1” and “description” of “Personal zone. The spell cast is cast upon the individual working the magic.” The symbols were no clearer here, she couldn’t quite make out what they were, and there was a flashing cursor in the box for “description” on #3. She tried a few things, simply saying them out loud and watching them getting typed into the box. But they were always rejected with a pop-up message.

Incorrect description for spell formula component
Please try again

Okay

She grew increasing desperate, and almost missed that the error message changed when she blurted out “Duration!”

Incomplete description given
Please specify duration to complete description

Okay

“Hold on, it has something to do with duration!” She opened her eyes and said. “I kept getting errors, it didn’t like the descriptions I was giving it but when I said duration it wanted me to tell it *what* duration.”

“That does make a certain amount of sense,” Origami admitted. “Now that you say it like that. One cube is instantly back on the table. One cube stays where we put it. So #1 is instant, and #3 is... what would you call it?”

“Let me try a few things!” She willed herself back into the mana palace. “Spell component is for a duration of concentration!”

Synonym accepted: Concentration changed
to maintained duration. While spells of this type
must be ‘held’ in the mana core and will drain MP
for their duration they need not be concentrated
on to the point of distraction, as was implied
by your use of the term “concentration”

Okay

Looking up now at the screen the symbol next to the 3 weight was suddenly clear. *Of course, it could only be that symbol, which perfectly illustrates the concept of a maintained spell. How could I have not seen it before? Oh, it’s personal I bet. It relates to what I think it means, so probably Origami will get a ‘different’ symbol based on her own experience and perhaps relating to her workshop in some way. She doesn’t have a screen, I wonder how she’ll keep track of these things?*

“That worked,” she reported, opening her eyes again. “Maybe you can try it here, see what happens?”

“Okay. *What* worked?”

“Oh sorry! It’s a maintained duration. I put that description into my palace and it was accepted. The rune is clear now and I have one green light above my door. The dungeon approves.”

“No wonder I didn’t recognize it. Starswirl type spells are either instant, and yes I hear you saying I should have picked up on that one thank you very much. Or they lasted a set amount of time. There was no connection between the caster and the spell after they were cast. So a ‘maintained’ spell didn’t exist. Seems this is quite different.” *I wonder how he managed it? Perhaps there was a connection and we simply didn’t know to look for it.*

“I’ll take your word for it. So we know maintained, try cube #1 with instant?”

“I guess I’ll just touch it and name it.” She did. “Instant!”

Congratulations

You have absorbed a new formula node
into your mana palace.

You may now use it to create new spells.
Formula node: Instant 1

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.
Let your strength and wisdom blossom as you
and the mana grow together.

Okay

“I got a system message about it working. Maybe I’ll see some kind of representation in my mana palace?”

“It was on my screen, just like I imagined it would be. Okay I’ll do instant, you do maintained, and we can work out the third one.”

“Right.”

So both did that, then tackled what was in-between the two extremes.

Synonym accepted: ‘short’ changed
to fleeting duration. Spells of this type can be
cast but need not be directed immediately

Okay

With that done the three lights over the door to the next room were all green, and both stepped through.

“I hope that was the hardest one, that was grueling!” Origami complained. “How long have we been in here?”

The pair now discovered their paths diverged, and they could only offer a limited amount of support based on what the other said, rather than what they were both looking at. Origami was in what looked like an art gallery. There were a few dozen paintings here, on easels, all of which had a symbol, which as far as she could tell was the same on each. Beside the symbol was a 10. Walking past this row there was a painting of a pony, a flower, a bucket, a puppy, a wagon, a set of teeth (*ew, what*), and a rock. Gianna had the same, but with the addition of one painting- herself. Only *that* picture had a symbol, and a 2 next to it.

“Mine isn’t that obvious, it’s just paintings. It’s not a pony, a flower would be plants? Why disembodied teeth though?” Origami asked.

“But we need one word to sum up all this,” Gianna reasoned. “Mine is nothing but myself? Yours is everything?”

“I can try that? Everything?” she asked the room, touching one of the paintings. Nothing happened.

“Let me see if I’m right,” Gianna decided. “Maybe we can work it out from there.”

“Okay.”

“Self,” she intoned, touching the painting.

Congratulations

You have absorbed a new formula node
into your mana palace.

You may now use it to create new spells.

Formula node: Self 2

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.
Let your strength and wisdom blossom as you
and the mana grow together.

Okay

“I was right,” she told Origami. “So wait, this spell is restricted to myself. If we assume you’re learning a spell to clean things, you wouldn’t want to clean just one thing. You would want to clean everything.”

“But I tried that!”

“So turn it around, maybe? This is a restriction on what you can cast the spell on. So in your case it would be-”

“Unrestricted!” she guessed, and she too got a message.

Congratulations

You have absorbed a new formula node
into your mana palace.

You may now use it to create new spells.

Formula node: Unrestricted 10

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.

Let your strength and wisdom blossom as you
and the mana grow together.

Okay

“Great. Let’s see what’s next.”

In the next room Gianna’s was once again in a gallery, but this time every painting was of her. One of her slashing at a slime and one of her doing a totally sick flip on a skateboard had no symbol. Others did.

“Wicked,” she exclaimed, looking it over. “Can I take this one home with me?”

There was no answer.

“No problem, that’s cool. I’ll just put it in my palace then, maybe?”

Meanwhile, a painting of her raising a claw in class and her on the learning cushion mediating had the symbol and a number 5. On Origami’s side she simply had a dirty cube sitting on a table with a 5 as well. She guessed “Dirt” but it got changed to “Filth” making her wonder what the difference was, and they tackled Gianna’s room.

“Sounds like it’s not stressing the physical,” she decided. “And you have two each. Two physical things and two mental things.”

“Right. It’s probably not knowledge, if there was only the class scene I would have said that. But meditation has nothing to do with knowledge. Again something like relaxation isn’t right because of the classroom scene.”

“I guess both are stressing the mental, try that.”

“Okay.” A few attempts later the room accepted “mind” and both doors were opened.

Origami’s room seemed almost identical to the previous, while Gianna just had a cube with 10 on it that suddenly started growing in size. She blinked and it was back to the original size. *Scared me.*

“I have a bucket of soapy water and the same dirty cube,” Origami reported.

“This has to be the effect,” Gianna mused. “We have the duration, the target, and what the quality is. This must be how it changes.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

Both didn’t take long to come up with “expand” and “wash,” allowing them into a seemingly empty room with a new message in their field of view.

Congratulations

You have created a new spell. Here is the description of your spell:

Zone 5->Instant 1->Unrestricted 10->Filth 5->Wash 2 weight 23

Clean an object 20cm to a side as though the object has been
thoroughly washed with soap and water

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.
Let your strength and wisdom blossom as you
and the mana grow together.

Congratulations

You have created a new spell. Here is the description of your spell:

Zone 1->Maintained 3->Self 2->Mind 5->Expand 10 weight 21
Sense what is around you in order to reveal that which is normally hidden.
Governed by the spellcaster's natural alertness while maintained

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.
Let your strength and wisdom blossom as you
and the mana grow together.

"What's the point of this room?" Origami asked, looking around.

"This must be the test somehow," Gianna decided. "Let's try our new spells and see what happens!"

"I don't have anything to clean, so I guess- say what did you get anyway?"

"So you did get a cleaning spell? I got a spell to sense hidden things. Self, mind, expand is the part of the formula that differed from yours. I'm not sure how that relates to yours but he did want feedback on the selections he made. Maybe he just picked something he thought was useful and it has no relation. We'll have to see how useful it is I guess."

"A big, empty room... you don't think there are hidden things in here do you? The test is for you to find them and me to clean them?"

"Only one way to find out!" She gathered mana and her aura flared as she brought that power into it, focusing the spell on herself. She felt her awareness widen a bit and looked over at Origami. She now seemed surrounded by a strange energy field she took to be her aura, which was interesting but not relevant. *Still, I've done it. I've done magic, as a griffon. I mean it knew it was coming but this is pretty amazing. My first spell! And no dusty old books needed. This truly is the way the world should work.* She looked around. Her awareness brushed up against something and she looked up. "I think there's something invisible right above us."

"Can I cast a spell on something invisible? Is it covered in invisible paint I'm supposed to clean off?"

"You're asking the wrong griffon. It's right here." She stretched up and tapped the air where she felt the object was. Hitting something solid she landed again and now both of them could see it was a 20cm cube hanging in midair. It was filthy. "I guess you have your answer."

"I guess so too. All right, let's see what this new type of magic can do." She started gathering mana herself. Gianna waited. And waited. Origami was scowling at nothing. "Gathering mana seems hard," she remarked.

"I didn't have any trouble. Did you use any of that potential Melemizargo gave you? I checked my status page and I used my potential from the last dungeon to get an 'abysmal' rating in all the skills I learned about there. Doesn't pull any punches, our Melemizargo, it seems. I mean at least call it beginner or something!"

"Not on this, but I guess it's pretty important huh? I just sort of focus on it or what?"

"I thought it was different for you, because you had magic before. I just knew I wanted to have a basic understanding of everything the dungeon wanted to teach us before and when I opened my status it had happened. I don't know if I learned things, and that was reflected in the status, or if I decided those potential points I got should be distributed in a certain way and that means I'm just better at it than if I hadn't done that."

“I think the dungeon masters were supposed to help us with all this stuff, so we’re doing things in a weird way. Let me check...” She brought up her status menu and decided she should be better at gathering magic. When she looked she was at the “advanced-abysmal” level now and her potential points were lower. *Wait was I always at that level and it’s just showing me or... it’s like Gianna said. It’s hard to know. Anyway let’s try this again.*

Chapter 7
No time passed
The second spell

Gathering mana was at least slightly easier now and Origami had a sense of the steps she would need to perform to create a spell. *First saturate the area with mana, enough to reach the cube*, she thought. *Then create the envelope. The walls can be weak, it doesn't have to last past the 'instant' stage. Then place mana in the correct shape inside the envelope. Aim it at the cube, and allow it to be released from the aura.* She was delighted to find it worked perfectly, and a spark of light shot out of her to hit the cube. The filth melted away, leaving it shiny, and the first light of 5 went green over the door to the next chamber.

"Okay, so there must be four more," Origami remarked. "So where's the second one, oh seer of the unseen?"

Gianna walked the room and didn't detect anything, then took to the air. *Seems it only extends a certain distance away from me. I'll have to see about modifying the spell to increase that distance?*

"Here," she indicated, touching the air again. Another cube, this one twice as large became visible, and she landed again. "Can you still reach it?"

"I think so. Let me try." She easily targeted it once she had the spell ready, and the second light went green over the door. "Okay, this isn't too bad."

"Bet you jinxed it! Bing Bong!"

"No I didn't!"

"Let me find the third one." She flew around again but didn't sense anything. *Should I recast the spell and try to make the area I can sense bigger? Wait what's this?* She walked over to the wall. "I think there's something hidden behind the wall here." She tapped the wall, and it popped open a little. Wedging a claw in there she pulled the panel off, and the cube, this one three times as large as the first came into view.

"I don't know if I can get all of this one," Origami decided. "I guess we'll see what happens." She cast, but as expected only 2/3 of the cube was cleaned. As her spell faded the entire cube became dirty again. "I'll try shaping it?" She envisioned the spell being bigger, but as before when one side of the spell's effect became bigger another became smaller, so she only cleaned a small slice of the total cube. "That's clearly not it."

"Can you make the spell effect bigger? I was thinking about how I would do that with mine, as my range seems pretty limited."

"I guess I have a formula, and I know what the various parts of it are to create the entire spell. Can I change what each part does on the fly?"

"Give it a try I guess."

"I hope I don't have to do much experimentation, I'm low on mana as it is."

"My spell is maintained, it's been ticking down but it's not too bad."

"Maintained, of course! Maybe I can use a different duration."

"I don't think that's-"

But she was already concentrating on casting, and her spell impacted the cube. Both waited, and it seemed to not get dirty but still only part of it was clean. Origami got a message.

Congratulations
You have created a new spell. Here is the description of your spell:

Zone 5->Maintained 3->Unrestricted 10->Filth 5->Wash 2 weight 25
Keep an object 20cm to a side clean as though the object is being
thoroughly washed with soap and water

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.
Let your strength and wisdom blossom as you
and the mana grow together.

"I guess that means the object won't get dirty while I maintain the spell. There's no way to move the effect?"

"Does your formula say anything about moving it?"

"You think it would have to?"

"I don't know, just seems to me a spell can't do anything you don't specify it doing. As we only know the one spell we can't start substituting terms only making what we know have more weight. Can't make it have less, I don't think that's going to help."

"No, this cube is bigger not smaller. Let's try and recover our mana back in the crystal room and hope we can come back here and pick up where we left off."

"Twilight did that thing where she took Sunny's magic for a little while, I wonder if I could offer you mine?"

"It's fine, the room is right there. Seems a bit expensive though, mana wise, just to wash a few small objects."

"Humm, well for one it's a basic spell. You've been given the tools to modify it to suit the needs of the moment, and make it more efficient when the time comes. Cleaning one big object should be less mana intensive than cleaning several small ones because of the weights of the other parts of the spell. That's what we're learning now after all. Second have you put some of your potential into the reclamation skill? Have you been trying to get mana back after you cast? I assume we'll get better at that as we practice too so each spell will be cheaper to cast in the long run. Third, haven't you played Ogres and Oubliettes? A first level spellcaster in that system can only cast two spells per long rest! You've just done, what, four spells in a row and could meditate right here in this room to recover mana? We learned in the cushion room it doesn't take *that* long. Can't do that in the game. Plus there's perks to double regeneration, your mana pool, always be considered meditating--"

"Okay, I get it. We're 'starting level' characters. Didn't know you were such a nerd!"

"Maybe if you weren't always in the library reading *alone* you would be invited to our games."

"Why would I want to play in your stupid role-playing game?"

"Why wouldn't you? Ogres and Oubliettes is the best!"

"Two spells a day isn't the best in my book! If I was making an RPG the magic would be based on colors, and you could do at least five spells a day! So there!"

"It has more than that going for it! And you get more spells per day as you level."

"You better."

"It's the most popular RPG in the world."

"That's not saying much."

"You're impossible. Ah, here's the room. Going to meditate now?"

“No, Twilight showed us we could pull mana directly from crystals, remember? Now hers was small and broke afterwards, but I’m guessing this one is a bit sturdier. Let’s see what we have to do...” She put a hoof on the crystal and tried to feel the energy flowing from it into herself, and she noted with satisfaction that on her status page her MP steadily went up. Gianna did the same, making sure she too was ready for anything.

Back in the room and looking at the cube, she decided “zone 5,” being the distance away she could stand from the target, didn’t need to be changed. She didn’t want to stand further away, she just needed the effect to be bigger. Trying to empower the ‘unrestricted’ part didn’t seem right, and “maintained” was what she last got when putting extra MP into the envelope. This left ‘filth’ and ‘wash’ as possible candidates for empowerment. She didn’t want to empower ‘filth,’ so she targeted ‘wash,’ gathering an additional ‘ten’ mana which she threw into that part of the formula. There was another blue box that appeared.

Congratulations

You have created a new spell. Here is the description of your spell:

Zone 5->Instant 1->Unrestricted 10->Filth 5->Wash 12 weight 33

Clean an object 120cm to a side as though the object has been
thoroughly washed with soap and water

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.
Let your strength and wisdom blossom as you
and the mana grow together.

Overkill, she thought to herself, in a deep voice for some reason. “That did- hey!”

The lights went out in the room. Even the lights above the door couldn’t be seen anymore.

“Oh, another challenge for me it seems,” Gianna remarked. “Showing me I can use this spell in the dark. One second while I...” She headed away from Origami so she didn’t bump into her, and walked along the edges of the wall. She knew where they were perfectly, despite not being able to see them, and figured something would be around to help. There was a funny button near the door that she was pretty sure wasn’t there before so she pressed it. The lights came back on, and Origami jumped as another dirty cube had appeared while it was dark. This cube seemed 4 times as tall as the first cube, twice as wide, but the same length. She used her new, weightier spell and zapped it. She got another message.

Results Accepted

Spell shaping previously detected.
Skill verified, spell result may stand.

“Oh.”

“What happened?”

“I just threw my better spell at it. I was supposed to shape it, probably the original, cheaper one, to fit this cube. But the room- or whatever is generating these messages- says it felt me use spell shap-

ing before so it knows I know it and is letting it slide.” *Maybe it should have presented them in another order then? Ever think of that, dungeon?*

“Ah, see! Use the spell in the cheapest way possible and use your skills to modify it. Even the dungeon says so.”

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s find the fifth cube and get out of here.”

“Got it. Do you hear something?”

Both strained, and high above they heard a slight whizzing sound, as if something invisible was swiftly flying around. Gianna managed to get in front of it and tap it, flapping away from it as it didn’t stop. This one was 8 times taller but the same length and width of the original cube. Only the long face was dirty, and she could only see it in passing as the dirty side turned away from her as it went around the room. She watched it and was pretty sure she knew how it turned so she gathered as it got into position and aimed well while shaping. She nailed it, which made all the cubes melt away and the lights over the door went green.

“Oh look, the exit door seems to be open,” Gianna remarked, as they went into the crystal room again. “Let’s take a look.” The two headed into the office area, and it seemed about the same as the last two dungeons. An abandoned office, but this one presented them with a message.

Dungeon Incomplete
Warning: 1/3 of spells learned
Complete rewards will not be earned
unless all tasks are complete.

Pause Dungeon

Exit Dungeon

“I guess we just head back, we don’t want either of those things,” Origami told her.

“If we did exit dungeon would we have to start from scratch again? Would we lose our palace, or just not be allowed back in?”

“Let’s not find out.” They both headed back and took the door that was beat up, just to see if it would start the same as the other two did. And it did! The door was already unlocked though, so they passed through the room with the three cubes and the target.

Origami got to pass through her gallery representing “unrestricted” again but Gianna was now in a gallery of her own. All the paintings featured her, and all had the symbol on it with a 2. It was her looking pleased as Origami painted her claws seemingly at a sleepover of some kind. She was threatening a pony with her claws in another. A third had her at a spa getting them sharpened, while a fourth showed her nervously biting them.

“Natural weapon!” she shouted, touching the nearest painting.

“Are you talking about that Ogres game again?” Origami asked, rolling her eyes. “Nobody talks like that.”

“Oh, yeah,” she sheepishly replied, rubbing the back of her neck. “Whoops. Uh, unarmed?”

“You’re on the wrong track you know.”

“Enhancement? Brandish?”

“Gianna, think about it. We know the third part of the spell is some kind of physical thing. Self for you and unrestricted for me last time. So what’s the subject of this spell?”

“I guess according to the paintings, claws.”

The light over the door went green.

“You were right.”

"I always am!"

"Are not!"

Both were now looking at a sphere set on a table, and the only other thing in the room was a hammer. Origami took hold of her hammer and gently tapped the sphere while holding her ear close to it. It didn't sound hollow, but it didn't sound solid either. She couldn't decide what it really sounded like. "Striking!" she announced.

"But there's no symbol," Gianna told her. She was looking both over. "We need to find the symbol first, right? To get the weight."

"Oh yeah. You think we're supposed to hit it?"

"What else do you do with a hammer?" She took the sphere in a claw and smashed it. The sphere fell into two neat pieces, each with a symbol on it. Origami did the same and announced she had a 5 weight, but Gianna reported something else.

"My weight is a ten. What do you think it means? Clearly they're the same rune as we have the same setup."

"That's a good question. I hesitate to even speculate. At least we found the symbol. Might?"

"Let's try strike again, now that we see the symbol. Strike!"

"Nothing," they both reported.

They started just shouting stuff at random, "cleave" and "splitting" but finally realized they were being far too specific as "damage" worked to unlock the door.

"I suppose we did damage the sphere, didn't we?" Gianna asked sheepishly.

"Is this really the most effective way to do this?"

"We're doing it without the previous support network in place. Just having the formula written down, like with your Starswirl method, doesn't really let you get a sense of what the spell is doing. I mean you couldn't change up the spells at all using his method could you?"

"I have to admit that's true," she bitterly admitted.

"So there you are. We have to internalize this, and honestly we do have to get it right. Making a spell to 'slice' or 'split' something is a very different spell from simply damaging it. You slice vegetables you don't damage them. I mean yes you technically damage them but you don't crush them or pound them. But I need to damage something and you're working on repairing damage to something. The words matter."

"I guess once the dungeons were made and ponies went through them, they would discuss things and later ponies going through them would have a better idea what they were expected to do. I doubt ponies of the age would have refused to talk about it at all."

"Plus, for all we know, the dungeon is more complex than we give it credit for. We haven't seen how exactly all this works, the 'behind the curtain' area that the dungeon masters would have access to. For all I know the place is interacting with our mana palace and all this guessing of words is just to slow us down enough it has a chance to do that. The spell is being placed into our core from the start and this part is just for show. And to show us the order of the spell formula of course."

"... Fair. A lot of ponies must have put a lot of effort in to build all these. You must be on the right track that there was a reason for it- this specific format I mean."

"And it's working. We learned the first spell and by all accounts in a room or two we'll have mastered a second. You used to study spells for hours, with the Starswirl method could you have learned three spells in a day? More, if you count the variants we can create as separate spells."

"If they were similar, maybe. But not three different spells like this, no."

"So trust the process, and let's finish spell number two."

"Fine."

The two headed to the next room, Gianna easily guessing “stone” from the large rock she was presented with, while Origami took a little longer. She had the same sphere, now in two halves as she had left it, but instead of a hammer next to it there was glue. The glue had the symbol and 10 on it. The stone only had a 5.

“It’s reversed?” Gianna wondered. “That must mean something.”

“Agreed. But what, I’m not sure.” It didn’t take long for her to guess “repair” as that’s what you did to broken things with glue, and both got another message. They knew they could cast two spells each now.

Congratulations

You have created a new spell. Here is the description of your spell:

Zone 2->Instant 1->Unrestricted 10->Damage 5->Repair 10 weight 28
Make a minor repair to an object.

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.
Let your strength and wisdom blossom as you
and the mana grow together.

Congratulations

You have created a new spell. Here is the description of your spell:

Zone 1->Fleeting 2->Claws 2->Damage 10->Stone 5 weight 20
Do minor amounts of damage to stone
without risking harm to your claws

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.
Let your strength and wisdom blossom as you
and the mana grow together.

The two entered the testing chamber, if you can call it that, as this time it was simply a hallway with a pressure plate at one end, or at least a weird looking set of tiles different from the rest. This was right before a metal grating that looked like it could retract, and above the tiles was a large rock sort of stuck to the ceiling.

“The tiles here are damaged,” Origami announced, craning her neck to look them over but not get under the rock.

“Good thing somepony just learned a repair spell then, isn’t it?”

“And I’m guessing you got something related to rocks?” She pointed with a hoof.

“You guess correctly, my dear dungeon delving ... what’s another ‘d’ word that describes you?”

“Detective?”

“You’re not defective, Origami, how can you even-”

“I said detective, not defective! Geese Gianna!”

“Oh, that makes more sense.”

“I’ll show you how to make more sense. Wait. Just smash the rock already!”

“You got it!” She backed up down the corridor, intending to cast the spell on the move and do a running jump to reach the rock and smash it. She started gathering and moving, and almost tripped as she went “huh?” and her brain went in two directions at once.

“What was that? Did you get drunk in the last room without me knowing or something?”

“No! I can’t gather mana on the move I guess? As soon as I did what I had gathered just sort of slipped away from me. Let me try again.” She did, and sure enough moving any appreciable distance with any amount of gathered mana simply caused it to fizzle. “Now isn’t that odd?”

Origami was trying to remember the last testing room. “I guess you maintained a spell to find the cubes, and I didn’t move at all once we found them? That makes sense. So you can’t move and gather mana, I wonder why? Too delicate a process to- oh I think I saw a perk about this... But that’s neither here nor there. What are we going to do about it?”

“This spell is ‘fleeting’ according to the message I got. Maybe that makes a difference? We wondered before about what that could mean. It’s a spell you can cast but don’t have to maintain until you use it, I bet.”

“Sounds right...”

“I’ll try it.” She cast, holding onto the spell before she ran, then rushing the rock and smashing it. Origami waited as she landed, just in case.

The rock reformed.

“Aw!” Gianna complained.

“We need to do this together I bet,” Origami decided. “I get close, you hang on to the spell, I touch the tiles and repair them making the rock fall. You smash the rock. We step on the tiles and the gate lowers.”

“Sounds like a plan!”

Chapter 8
A moment later
Clearing the room and learning spell #3

The plan went off perfectly, Origami gathering mana and casting her repair spell while Gianna watched over her. The rock started to fall, but she was right there to intercept it and smash it to pieces. The gate lowered as Gianna landed on the newly repaired tiles and the two continued on. Not far down the corridor was a similar setup, but this time there were four damaged tiles and four rocks. The pair considered their options.

“Maybe I can change my spell to be maintained,” Gianna mused. “You messed around with putting more mana into various parts of your cleaning spell, right? Seems like that’s more efficient than casting it four times.” *Though that may be the point. Another lesson in trying to claw back as much mana as possible after you cast.*

“Yeah. You gather mana, more than you need for the spell, and push that into the correct part of the formula. In this case, and I don’t know if it’s the same for you, but for me it’s like I’m making that tiny box we saw before, with the glow in it? The ‘walls’ of the box are strengthened the more mana I put into them. You make the walls thicker, and the spell can stick around longer. So when I did it, I got a ‘new’ spell that was maintained. I only needed to put two mana in, to get the weight from a one to a three, so that part wasn’t too expensive.”

“Then that’s what I’ll do. What about you?”

“It would be tricky. We could head back and get full MP again, but casting my spell four times? I would have to do really well on recovering mana.”

“I was just thinking that’s probably the point. Another skill lesson.”

“Ah, but can I do shaping instead? I’m going to try that. The description on my spell doesn’t say the damage has to be below a certain size, just that I repair minor damage.”

“But you had to touch the last tile to repair it.” She looked up. “Clearly they want you to touch each tile here and for me to protect you. Four times. We have barely enough MP to do that if we recover it well.” *Though I guess I can’t complain. If I’m going to somewhat circumvent the test by changing my spell, and you use a different skill than the dungeon expected, can it really complain?*

“Then the magic shouldn’t be so flexible. I’m going to empower the range on the spell, and center it right in the middle. Then try shaping it to be a thin rectangle that touches all the damaged tiles on either side. They’re right in a line after all. As long as the spell touches each one it should be fine.”

“Can’t hurt to try it!”

Sadly for Origami, the spell worked to repair all four tiles, but as quickly as they were repaired, she found they were broken again. “I guess it did hurt to try it,” she decided. “The dungeon does want us to do certain things, I guess, and trying to do a different lesson than the one that’s in front of you is not allowed.”

“That makes sense. I guess you’ll have to do it four times?”

“I hope I can.”

As Origami cast, Gianna leapt forward, quickly smashing each rock before it could impact the tile and damage it again. Thankfully they fell one at a time, only falling when Origami went to touch the next damaged part, and the gate lowered.

“Onward!” she shouted, pointing, but then stopped as she got a new message.

Congratulations
You have created a new spell. Here is the description of your spell:

Zone 1->Maintained 3->Claws 2->Damage 10->Stone 5 weight 21

Do minor amounts of damage to stone
without risking harm to your claws

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.
Let your strength and wisdom blossom as you
and the mana grow together.

“I wonder if we can turn off the message for minor modifications to spells,” Origami asked aloud as Gianna was standing there staring at “nothing” from her perspective. “Seems like you should know what you did when you did it.”

“Maybe they only happen in the dungeon?”

“Oh, that could be Anyway, it’s not ‘onward’ it’s ‘backwards.’ We need to- I at least need to- get my MP back before we proceed.”

The third room was a breeze, the tile in here was clearly more damaged than the ones before, so Origami simply empowered the repair portion of her spell and that generated a message about making a slightly greater repair to an object. The gate lowered, and the pair continued, not low enough to worry about refilling their MP at the moment.

The fourth room had a larger rock hanging over the broken tile, and the pair looked around. “Looks like this is your introduction to changing spells,” Origami reasoned. “This tile doesn’t seem any different to me, I’ve repaired the others just like it.”

“Seems easy enough,” she agreed. “I’ll simply put more mana into the damage part of my formula, and that should allow me to smash larger rocks.”

“Exactly.”

Once again Origami repaired the floor tile, and Gianna smashed the rock. They both nodded to each other and waited for the gate to come down.

The gate didn’t come down, and the rock was back where it had been.

“Hey, it’s damaged again!” Gianna complained, looking the tile over. “That’s no fair.”

“So it is something else,” breathed Origami, glaring at it. “But what?”

“Let me look around with my other spell!”

Origami shook her head as she gathered mana. “But they couldn’t assume you would know that spell yet. What if we went into this room first? You might not have it. So that can’t be part of the solution.”

“Still might give us some ideas. Huh. There is something strange about that tile, but I can’t put my claw on it. I suppose it’s not something really hidden, the tile is right there. It’s just probably a spell that breaks the tile if we don’t do the challenge correctly.”

Origami vibrated her mana core and felt for a response. “You should practice magic sensing too. There does seem to be a spell on the tile or in the general area. But all we are expected to know is repair and smashing stone. So how do those spells relate to this situation?”

“True, like you said I don’t think it’s about cleaning anything, the dungeon can’t have known what order we would learn the spells in. So it can’t be that.”

“Right. How do we get rid of a spell? Nothing the dungeon has taught us would indicate we even *can* do that. Unless we can use our aura and drain the mana out of it?”

“But the mana has been spent, right? The dungeon showed us we have to grab any ‘loose’ mana right away after we cast or it’s gone. The mana comes from us when we cast, we’re just taking it back. Those mirrors, remember? And the little motes? There was no lesson in the room about recovering MP from an already cast spell. So I doubt it’s possible.”

“You could be right. Once the mana has been used to empower a spell, well, it’s like drinking a glass of water. The water is gone... sort of. It’s been used up. How do we ‘break the glass’ the ‘spell water’ is in and make this spell here disappear?”

“Are we on the right track though? Assuming we know what the dungeon wants, for you to repair something, how do you repair this and make it stick? Just overcome the spell that’s breaking it? Or simply counteract that spell long enough to activate the tile and lower the gate? What do two spells in opposition to each other do? Cancel each other out? That could be part of the lesson for all we know.”

“I suppose I could turn the spell into something maintained, we’ve done that. Would that be a sort of regeneration for objects?”

“That sounds more right to me than trying to figure out how to undo a spell we can’t really tell the origin of.” *Or if it’s even possible to do.*

“Keep it simple, right. We always go for the most complicated approach. Let me do that.”

Origami put mana into the start of her spell, taking it from an instant spell to a maintained one, and costing her two more MP. She touched the tile and the rock fell, but to her horror Gianna missed it and she had to scramble out of the way or be crushed.

“Sorry, sorry!” Gianna apologized. “Are you okay?”

“No thanks to you. And now the tile is damaged again.”

“Yeah, was a close one, I’m glad you didn’t get hit. Not sure how I could have missed it.”

“Overconfidence. Gets you every time. Shall we try again?”

“Let me get into position...”

This time it went perfectly, and the pair emerged back in the crystal room with only one door left. They restored their MP and Gianna went for the door with the cross on it.

“Hang on a second,” Origami stopped her. “I’ve had a thought.”

“What’s that?”

“What stops us from entering each other’s mana palace and learning the runes from there? It’s just magic right? I should be able to learn the runes for rock and self and whatever you learned. Not that I want to smash rocks apart but more runes is better runes I say!”

“You couldn’t anyway. My spell makes my claws able to damage rock without being damaged in return. You would need the rune for hoof.”

“Ah, but if I learned the rune you use for claw I could probably substitute that for unrestricted in my repair spell. Then if you got a cracked claw I could repair it and it wouldn’t cost as much as the full repair spell.”

“Isn’t that a healing- but claws are not alive- We might as well try it! I don’t care if you learn what I learned I if I can learn what you learned.”

Both focused on their inner mindscape and when they arrived a second later, both headed for the door. Origami was let into Gianna’s mana palace and they both headed up to the main room. Gianna looked her tablet over, it had various tabs at the top now for runes, known spells, current quests, all that sort of thing. She mentally willed it to the runes page and there they were. In neat rows labeled with weight and description. Origami stood a moment trying to make sense of it. “I don’t understand it,” she finally relented. “Even the runes we should have in common like instant and damage look totally different from what I know. I see the description of them there, but that’s clearly not what I saw on my little cubes. Also I don’t exactly know how I would get them off your ‘screen’ here and into my own

mana palace. I had hoped just seeing them and knowing what they were would be enough to do it. But I didn't get any messages about it."

"So the magic is personal after all," Gianna realized with a nod. "That's why the dungeons exist, why the 'journey through the dark' is needed instead of just someone writing all those runes down and having us memorize them. Starswirl really didn't like traveling around, if he made formula that could be studied from books. What we learned can't be transmitted between us, we have to earn it if you will. The dungeons really must be doing something to our cores."

"That theory is essentially what's happening I guess. Come over to my side, just in case."

"Okay..."

Origami's workshop had been outfitted with a large book, various tools for working with paper, and various brushes. On the shelves lining the walls were various shapes, two main shapes with various tweaks, and she took one down. Unfolding it she got a look of understanding in her eyes. "Yeah, that's about right."

"Are those your runes there?" Gianna asked, peering over the paper.

"Yeah. Looks like to make a new spell I would mark up the paper with the formula, then fold it into a shape. I sort of felt that's what I was mentally doing out there to modify what I already knew. Nice to have the confirmation." *Maybe we should have spent more time 'in here' figuring out how this place worked before rushing off. Well, plenty of time for that now that we have spells to work with. Not much point in looking around empty rooms.*

"I certainly can't learn that method, mine seems much more logical. I just pictured the symbols coming together on the screen. You've got this book of them, you would have to look them up or whatever."

"I guess." They looked the book over, and it had a short list of the pieces of formula they had learned. "I take it you can't make any more sense of these than I could of yours."

Gianna shook her head. "Nope. I see what you mean though, this one is the first one we learned." She tapped the page. "But it's not the same symbol for each of us."

"Too bad. Well, get out."

That would be cheating a bit, Gianna thought to herself as she opened her eyes again. Getting to learn both sets but only going through the dungeon once. And for all we know they are different 'branches' of magic and she could learn runes from say Celestia who didn't go through the warrior track I did. If she could open a door between the two mana palaces but that may require coming back to this dungeon to modify it. There's still a lot we don't know about all this, and there's only a few ponies alive that do.

The final door led them past the usual two rooms they were now familiar with, showing the start of every spell, zone, and then duration. She was heading to the door to the next room when Origami started describing what she was seeing, so it seemed she had rushed to get to something new.

"It's a comic strip on a table. It shows a pony in an underground space that's been hurt."

"An underground space? You mean a *dungeon*?"

"I guess it could be? They've got armor on and there's a sword next to them. The next panel is them pulling out a vial of something. Triumphantly, I guess? They have a big smile on their face. The next panel is them drinking it down. The next panel is them throwing the vial as energy swirls around them. Why didn't they just eat the vial? Weird. The final panel is them confidently continuing through the dungeon. Their cuts are gone. Meanwhile, I have a ball of soft, white light hovering over the table with a symbol and a 5. So it must be trying to describe this energy I'm seeing?"

"Healing potions are well known, right? We use them in the game world, and in this one. So that seems obvious."

"Exactly what I was thinking. Healing. Yeah, the door unlocked. Wish they could all be that easy. Meanwhile what do you have?"

"Ah, just the gallery and 'self' again. I suspect most of my spells will start in that way. My door was already unlocked so let's move on."

"Sounds good."

Gianna entered the next room, and it seemed to feature a lifelike griffon doll, in what looked like a hospital room. The doll had a knife stuck in their leg and was on a table, and the symbol hovered over the hilt of the knife. They guessed "hurt" and "damage" which made Origami tease Gianna again for using terms "from that game again" but "wound" worked just fine, and let her proceed.

Meanwhile, Origami found herself in the gallery again, the standard way for the dungeon to try and explain a complicated concept. She saw herself taking ice cubes out of freezer. In the next picture it was her lighting a match and about to start a campfire. The third one was her doing the last fold on an origami shape, and the fourth was of her father putting the finishing touches on something he was making.

"So that's what I'm seeing," she explained. "I was thinking maybe energy but then the second set don't make sense. It has to be one word that encompasses all of this."

"Finishing something? What would that be? Completing?"

"But the match one is *starting* something. The campfire."

"Oh right. So it's not starting or ending. It's not self, your father being there rules that out."

"It is odd, this part of the spell has been something direct, you got wound just now. It's related to the quality of the target the spell is acting upon. In your case just now self->wound. So your spell is working on your own wound. What is this trying to restrict the spell to?"

"Claws, right, and filth for the wash spell. I would hesitate to say we knew all the rules just from knowing two spells though..."

"How many rules can there be?"

"It's magic. The more flexible it is, the more rules it needs to have to encompass that flexibility."

"I guess. Change?"

"Change what?"

"No, no, I'm touching one of the paintings. I don't think it's change. Changing one thing into another. You know, water into ice, paper into a shape..."

"A match into a burnt match?"

"It's just a guess!"

"I know, I know. Work?"

"I'll try that. Work. No reaction."

They tried a few more things and got a response on "create" which was of course obvious in retrospect.

"Okay, let's see what the next room is then," Gianna announced. Both headed through their doors.

"So I've got a similar scene to what you described but it's a pony, and the knife has been pulled out," Origami reported. "There's a bandage here with the symbol on it."

"This is the last part, the action part," Gianna reminded her. "So it's going to be an action word. I'm in the gallery now, by the way. Each picture has a left and a right half. A bowl holding chips that is empty on the right side, a bowl of cereal that is empty. A glass of water that's empty, and a report card showings A's and then C's."

"An action word that describes what we're seeing here," Origami mused. *What do we have so far? Zone->Instant->Healing->Create something. I create healing energy, that ball of light I saw must be a healing energy, and apply it to a wound. You apply a bandage, right? "Apply?"*

Congratulations

You have created a new spell. Here is the description of your spell:

Zone 2->Instant 1->Healing 5->Create 10->Apply 10 weight 28
Heal a minor wound

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.
Let your strength and wisdom blossom as you
and the mana grow together.

“Hey, I got it!”

“Great, so help me figure out mine.”

“Okay. Remind me what you have of the spell so far? Clearly a healing spell for me, but you got the wounded pony doll too so they must be similar.”

“Sure. Zone, instant, self, wound.”

“Well you don’t want to make your own wound bigger, now do you? Maybe shrink? Those pictures show things being reduced right? Reduce?”

“I’ll try that. Shrink. Reduce. Oh wait, it accepted it but said it was a synonym. It wanted diminish.”

Congratulations

You have created a new spell. Here is the description of your spell:

Zone 1->Instant 1->Self 2->Wound 5->Diminish 10 weight 19
Heal a minor wound of your own

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.
Let your strength and wisdom blossom as you
and the mana grow together.

“Nice! We did it! All three spells!”

“Sure, but now we have to practice it. And I recall a pony practicing healing magic by doing what, again, on the airship that day?”

“You don’t think the dungeon would be... that it would make us...”

“You tell me,” *you monster*. “You’re the one who was holding the knife in your hoof not that long ago. Squirting blood everywhere.”

“Oh dear...” *Hey, that was just because you surprised me and I cut myself too deeply. But I must admit I was cutting myself. I have a bad feeling about this.*

Chapter 9
A tense second later
Smells like burning

The corridor the pair was led into seemed familiar, but this time instead of rocks there was a funny looking device on the ceiling. The gate was up, and there was a button next to it that was red. It changed to green as a bar of light hit the floor, burning it, and when the light flicked off the button went red again. This cycle repeated. The two shared a look and moved forward to get a better view. As they did the floor lit up under them, creating a circle with visible runes, which vanished again a moment later.

“What was that all about?” Origami asked, looking around. “Nothing seems to have changed.”

“I’m not sure. Status page.” She looked at something for a second. “Oh, I see. I have exactly enough MP to cast the spell I just learned- *once*. I bet it’ll be the same for you. They don’t want us trying anything funny here.”

“It took my MP? The dungeon can just do that? Status. You’re right, my MP is lower. I have exactly 28 now.”

“The dungeon gave it to us. And I think it’s a spell in the floor, not the dungeon itself. It has to play by the rules too.” She tapped the floor.

“So, what? We have to stand in that beam and be burned to make sure we’re there when the light is green and we can touch the switch that lowers the gate?”

“No, *I* have to stand in the beam. I bet it’s going to hurt me just enough that I can heal myself a little bit, and you can heal me the rest of the way. If you do it you would have to heal yourself twice, and you can’t do that with the amount of MP you have now. Like me finding the hidden cubes we have to work together on this one too.”

“That seems awfully extreme, don’t you think?”

“More extreme than you cutting yourself? I’m surprised you’re not jumping into the beam right this second to start practicing the healing spell!”

“Give me some credit! I’ve matured as a pony since then.”

“Since like a month ago?”

“Yeah. Duh.”

“Uh huh.” She rolled her eyes. “Just be ready to heal me.”

“Good luck.”

The beam hit Gianna, passing right through her armor and hitting her in the side. She winced but had a claw ready to hit the button. It went green and she tapped it, shutting off the beam and making the gate lower.

“Are you okay?” Origami gasped, rushing to her side.

“Barely touched me!” she assured her, eyes watering in pain. She got busy casting her self-healing spell while Origami cast the weightier heal others spell. “It felt good actually. I always wanted to know what light felt like, now I know.”

“Let’s hope we don’t have to do it again!”

"We have to do it again," she deadpanned, when the two moved into the next room. They decided to see if the dungeon would give them MP if they had none, and it turned out they were right. This time the pair had enough to each heal twice as much damage if they had to.

"Is this one going to be twice as strong?" worried Origami. "What if it just cuts you in half?"

"Then I couldn't prove I learned the lesson of the dungeon, could I? I'm sure it'll be fine."

"There's nothing fine about this!"

"Where's that pony with the knife I saw that- hey where is that knife you took from Flamecrash anyway?"

"I stopped carrying it."

Gianna regarded her friend for a moment. "I guess you have matured."

"Just get going before I kick you into the beam!"

"Okay, okay. No need to push."

Again, Gianna got burned by the light and had to heal herself, with Origami healing her the rest of the way.

"I swear, if the pony that made this wasn't a thousand years dead..."

"At least this one is extremely straightforward," Gianna countered. "No figuring stuff out. Just a simple curative spell and we're through to the next one."

"That's one way to look at it."

"You've got to be kidding me..."

The pair looked at the next challenge, which seemed to involve the beam of light never turning off. They stood and waited for it to turn off, but it didn't. The mechanism seemed bigger, too, and the light brighter. On the plus side, they had both recovered all of their MP on the way into this part of the hallway.

"So we both cast our spells to be maintained," Gianna decided. "That should heal me continuously, and hopefully enough to withstand the beam while I press the button."

"Should?"

"It's not killed me thus far. Like I said, the place wouldn't get any reviews if the participants died trying to get through it. Is this all even happening? Or are we in a space like the mana palace that simply *seems* real? We don't actually know."

Origami eyed her from the side and smacked her with a hoof.

"Ow!"

"Did that feel real?"

"Of course, because the unreal you just smacked the unreal me with your unreal hoof making me think I should feel smacked by a hoof. That doesn't prove anything one way or the other."

Origami raised her hoof again.

"Okay, okay, it proves it. I'll just stick my front leg into the beam first and see what happens."

"Fine. Before or after I put the spell on you."

Gianna glared.

With the third challenge defeated the two went back through the main room and out through the office area, where they got their completion message.

Congratulations
You have completed a dungeon!
Dungeon Rewards Granted:

Potential +8

New quest generated- help 5 others in some way
With magic obviously, you can't just hand them a
watering can and call it a day

Quest rewards: Potential +5
Location of Dungeon 4

Meanwhile, Origami got a second one after dismissing the first.

Congratulations
You have completed a quest!
"Regain Core and begin true magical learning"

Potential +5
+20 MP maximum

Exiting the office the pair found themselves climbing the stairs again back up to the sweet shop, and Velvet Chaser hurried over to make sure they were all right. They assured her everything below was working fine, and while it was at times a harrowing experience, they were fine but in future maybe focus on beverages for those coming up from the dungeon below rather than cakes and the like.

"But one insider tip I'll give you," Origami whispered as she leaned in close. "Black. Dragon. Cupcakes. Trust me on that one."

"I'll keep that in mind, as well as thirsty ponies coming up from below. Let me get you some lemonade, I can manage that much at least!" She rushed off.

"You'll thank me!" Origami shouted after her.

"I never ask where the lemonade is made," Gianna joked.

"Seriously though, are you all right?" Origami asked her. "You got burned several times down there not five minutes ago."

"The magic healed it right up, you should know that better than me. I'm fine. I feel totally normal."

"Okay."

"What's our next step? Jump right into trying to find some ponies to help or explore our mana palace or crash at home for a week or what?"

"We don't have much time for vacation, I think a week would be a bit much. Now that we have some context I want to talk to the others about this magic. I get now that we wouldn't have gotten much out of a discussion, but I think we need to make sure we're understanding what we learned and the limitations of it. As much as I don't trust Stygian maybe we can go see him."

"I'm sure the princesses would be just as knowledgeable. Unless you don't trust our thousand year old rulers now for some reason."

"I'll think about it on the way back to the capital."

"Fair enough."

Origami decided she had stayed away from Stygian long enough, and really if she wanted to keep an eye on him to make sure he wasn't causing some kind of trouble she would have to visit. *Keep your enemies closer, right?* The two asked at the front desk and were told he was currently in his office, so they headed back there.

“Origami, Gianna!” he greeted them. “Good to see you again. Especially you, Origami. Gianna told me about what happened. I really must thank you in person for helping put that chapter of my life behind me at last. You’ve done me- no all of Equestria- a great service. And you’ve recovered fully?”

“I can fly, and do magic again,” she reported.

“That’s wonderful news. More manual casters in the world, I never thought I would see the day.”

“Why didn’t you try and convince Princess Celestia to open the dungeons again?” *Because they led to your downfall?* “You’ve admitted you needed to keep the way you do magic secret and missed talking about it with other ponies.”

“I may have, after a time,” he admitted. “It hasn’t been that long since I was brought back from Limbo. At least from my perspective. I wanted to prove to them and myself that bad influence was truly gone. And bringing up all those bad memories from when they were shut down...” He shook his head. “I was in no rush to put the princesses through that. Though again, it’s been far longer for them. Thankfully, you closed that chapter of my life and are doing what I would have wanted without me even needing to lift a hoof. I can rightfully say I didn’t influence you at all, and look forward to having more ponies to talk magic with.”

“I guess that all makes sense. So, the reason we stopped by was to see if you could now talk to us more about the mechanics of casting spells the ‘dungeon way.’ We’ve been through the first three, so we learned some basic spells, but I still have questions about what it all means.”

“Of course!” he replied happily. “Let’s head to the castle. It’s late enough, Princess Luna is sure to be awake. I’ve actually been putting some things together with her figuring you would have questions. Of the two sisters it turns out she was always more interested in the technical aspects of magic. Princess Celestia was happy enough to learn magic and use it, but never felt the need to dive too deeply into the inner workings. So working with Princess Luna has truly been a delight.”

“It’s too bad books on the subject were probably never properly cared for,” Gianna lamented. “You may need to start your own series to help those like us. And new dungeon masters when the time comes.”

“Yes, much has been lost. I’ve kept an eye out but it seems once the dungeons were closed ponies didn’t bother to care for the old works. What would be the point? Let me just tell the pony at the front desk I’m stepping out and we can be on our way to the castle.”

Not long after the three sat with the two princesses, and Luna triumphantly brought out a booklet she had been working on.

“Here’s everything we think a beginner magic user should know. Please, look it over and ask me any questions you would like. Especially juicy gossip about my sister!”

“Luna!” Princess Celestia gasped, scandalized.

“Like what she wears when nopony is around.”

“You wouldn’t!”

Luna laughed. “It’s a thousand years of payback, dear sister.”

“That’s fair,” Celestia grumbled.

“This is informative,” Origami decided, scanning through it. “The nature of mana, how to recover and conserve it, what it can do. The grammar of spells, what sort of weights we can expect. That’s a concern for me, I can only do a few spells at a time. Is that normal?”

“How many is a ‘few?’” she asked. “Methods of recovery are varied for a reason, after all.”

“I can maybe cast my basic cleaning spell five times in a row, if I do well on recovering stray mana afterwards.”

Luna considered a moment. “I would expect a very young pony, going through the dungeons for the first time, to be quite limited, but not quite as limited as that? The two ‘lair’s are full of monsters and such that help to raise the potential a pony has. Thus you grow with the amount of work you do

there. But the core should grow naturally as well. Given all your adventures- if you've missed out on potential growth because you switched cores- that would be tragic. Strange..."

"Can the dungeon not take into account our age?" Gianna asked. "Are we so late to the party where it would make that much difference?"

"Most did start young," Celestia recalled with a nod. "It was a much harder world back then, and there were fewer of us. We needed to get all the power we could in a short amount of time."

"I wonder if Melemizargo can do anything about it?" Origami wondered. "My situation at least was unique. And Gianna shouldn't lose out just because she started late."

"Too old, to begin the training," Gianna sadly announced, hanging her head.

"I'm going to ask. Status page!" She touched the air and the familiar blue window appeared. "I have a question for you. My MP, isn't it a bit low? I've just been talking with the others and they agree maybe my life experience wasn't taken into account when I went into the first dungeon? Wait- here? Outside?" She looked haunted, and slowly turned towards the window. "He says he'll come here and see us. But that's..."

A dark shape peered in through the window. **"Hello in there!"**

Everyone shared a look and headed to the balcony. Outside, the huge form of Melemizargo was sitting there, though clearly he was too impossibly big to be doing so. Also no one was freaking out and running for their lives so something was going on. The princesses all bowed their heads, as did Stygian.

"Ah, nice to be out and about for once. Why did I pick that cave way out in the middle of nowhere for my- oh right the hoard. Can't let anypony just walk in and grab treasure now can I? So what did you want to talk about?"

"The amount of magic we can do, it's a bit limited at the moment isn't it?"

"That's what the perk system is for. You can double it, and your recovery rate as many times as you would like. You just have to pay."

"Right, but the point is should a magic user at my level only be able to do five spells in a row? Five *small* spells?"

He waved that off. **"You're mistaken somehow. Those beginner spells aren't that weighty."**

"Look at my status page then, you made it didn't you?"

"If you insist." He paused a moment. **"Hold on, when I looked at your history before and how you lost your core, clearly you hadn't been idle all those years. Did the dungeon- that must be it!"**

"What must be it?"

"Sorry, it didn't even occur to me. The first dungeon should have taken that into account. Did the old Dungeon Master turn that off? It should account for a pony- or others-" he looked to Gianna, **"starting their journey later in life. Your mana core should have been capable of holding more mana right from the start. And your progression seems a bit low, maybe there's a problem with it after all. I'll look into it, perhaps the magic has degraded over the years, or your core is leaking? With your permission?"** He raised a claw, hovering near her.

"You want to pick me up?"

"Oh no, I just want a look at your core. If it wasn't fused together right or is thinner than it should be that also could explain the low number you're seeing."

"You think I may have done something wrong in that first room?"

"You? Probably not, as the dungeon accepted your result. But the spells that made the rooms able to do that may need to be verified."

"I see. Very well..."

He reached into her, Origami trying not to wince as the huge tips of the claws plunged past her body, but she didn't feel a thing. He drew out her glittering core and delicately held it up to his eye. **"It is a bit thin. Very odd. I think we can do something about it though."** He put it into his palm and concentrated on it a moment. Then took a deep breath and breathed on it, points of light like the dun-

geon showed flowing into it. **“There, now I think you’re where you should be.”** He plucked it up and put it back inside her. **“Shall I do the same for you, Gianna?”**

“If it’s no trouble,” she agreed. “I wouldn’t want to fall behind, after all.”

“Naturally enough not. And you would be subject to the same flaw, whatever it is.” He repeated the procedure for her. Meanwhile, Origami was looking at her status page.

Three times as much! That’s not bad, I’m glad I asked about it. Like, how would we know if the dungeons were operating correctly or not? We don’t know what they’re supposed to be doing.

“There you are. Anything else for the moment? I need to look into this right away.”

“Our discussion only just started. We wanted to know more about the technical aspects of doing this kind of magic,” she told him.

“Experimentation would serve you best, figure it out and make the magic your own,” he suggested. **“Of course some book learning is, I suppose, necessary. You know how to contact me if you need me.”**

And just like that he was gone.

“That was a thing,” Stygian finally said into the silence after a moment of them staring at where he had been. “Imaging seeing him coming out of the sky before we even knew what magic was. The size of him! I had forgotten how big he was. Or maybe I just didn’t understand the scale of it, in his cave...”

“You met him before, didn’t you?” Celestia asked.

“After saving up the hundred points and asking for the dark mark- let’s get back to those notes!”

So the group talked, and Origami asked about the meaning of the word “box” to see if houses could be considered boxes for the purposes of spells, and “create” because she was creating healing and tried to follow along as the others cast some spells as slowly as possible to really see what they were doing. She didn’t really get that for the purposes of magic anything could be considered an element, like healing or hunger, or that spell formula could be wildly different yet produce the same result. Diminishing a wound, healing it, applying elemental healing, transferring it to somepony else, delaying it, closing it, and more were all possible.

“That’s why it’s hard to talk in absolutes with magic,” Stygian told her. “Each pony sees the world a little differently. Each interacts with it a little differently. The magic responds to that. And you can tweak your spells and substitute parts of the formula for other parts to make new spells. It’s all up to your creativity and passion for the art. Seeing what works and what doesn’t; for you. These tables and things Luna has come up with to show how various things effect the weight of the spell are all well and good, but in the end what matters is what does the spell mean to you, how do you put it together, and do you get the result you want. Stop thinking of it like a light switch. It’s magic. You feel it out. You’ll figure it out as you go along, trust me. We all did it.”

“But do come to me with any questions, and I’ll try my best to answer,” Luna told them. “Having someone I can actually talk with about magical theory would be wonderful. As *somepony*,” she glared at Celestia, “doesn’t seem to have that much interest in it.”

“You do what you like, and I’ll do what I like, sister,” she sniffed.

“Eating cake doesn’t count...”

Chapter 10
The next day
Helping with a Twist

"I think we've let Lime Twist wait long enough," Gianna told Origami the next day. They had stayed on the North Star, having talked into the night and hadn't come up with a plan for the next day yet. "I have a separate quest to help her, so let's take care of it. I don't know if it'll count towards the five we need to help to get the location of the next dungeon but either way she has metal legs. We have a ship full of equipment from the future, maybe some of it can help. Plus we're already here, let's go visit her."

"I do caution you," CelestAI warned them, "without my database I will be of little help. I don't know how to use the equipment any more than you do. Now, some of it may be self-explanatory to an extent, and not need my intervention in case I was damaged. The worst time to be without your main AI is when you're under attack. So they should be independent units. But trying to interpret the results from the machines, that will be up to you."

"It's possible it won't come to that," Origami told them. "With my new repair magic, and Gianna's spell to see hidden things, maybe that will be enough."

"Let us hope some combination of technology and magic can assist in her recovery."

"Hello, we're here to see Lime Twist," Gianna told the receptionist pony at the desk.

"Oh, the pony with the metal legs? She'll be thrilled; she hardly has any friends. Twilight Sparkle is the only pony that visits regularly, though the princesses have been here once or twice. I'll put you in a visitor's room and have her brought to see you."

"Thank you."

They didn't have to wait long, Lime Twist slowly came into the room, the assistant at her side.

"Hello, you two!" she greeted them. "Good... to see... you again."

"Nice to see you again. How are you doing?"

"Still slow. But talk better. A little."

"We actually have some good news for you," Origami spoke up. "I don't know if you heard from the others, but I don't think your bad future will happen. The shadow you were worried about? We stopped it. And we don't think magic will be turned off either." *Plus we'll have the dungeon magic to draw upon, if Sunny's 'problem' shows up.* "Another version of you will be born in the future and live their life never knowing the terror you felt." *So that version of Sunny will never come back in time, and that version of Lime Twist will never be thrown back either... my head hurts.*

"Thank... you?" she didn't seem to quite understand it.

"She still has a bit of trouble with complex discussions, but she is getting better," said the aid. "Perhaps if you could simplify it?"

"We stopped the shadow. It won't be able to hurt anypony like it did when you were growing up."

"Oh!" She looked happy at that. "Thank you."

"But the real reason we're here is because we want to try a few things," Gianna told her. "We got some new magic, and soon we can ask for more. Maybe magic to help you. But we wanted to try what we knew now, if that's okay with you. And your... doctor I guess?" She looked to the aid, who looked glum.

"Her mobility isn't improving as we'd like. We think she'll eventually have full faculties in terms of speech and reasoning, as her improvement there has been as predicted. If you think some magic can help I'm sure it'll be approved, as we're at a loss. The problem is she's not one thing or another. She *can* get around, just slowly. She's not in need of a chair for her mobility, nor is she paralyzed enough to need a cart. To try and design such a thing to make it easier for her we run into a wight issue. Her legs are *heavy*. Conventional solutions aren't for her. As long as you can promise it won't make things worse, I can get the doctor here and you can explain what you want to do. She can approve any unconventional treatment."

"Please do. We won't run off with her," Gianna told her with a smirk.

"Very well. Twist, do you feel comfortable enough being left alone with these two while I get your doctor?"

She nodded.

"Then I'll return in a moment. Please wait here." She left.

"I could be well?" Lime Twist asked.

"That's what we're going to try," Origami asked her.

"I'm using my spell now, as it doesn't affect her in any way," Gianna announced.

"Go for it."

She did, casting it maintained and increasing the distance so she didn't have to get too close. She looked Lime Twist over. "There's something missing," she announced. "I feel an emptiness in her. She *needs* something to be made well again. It isn't just that her legs are damaged, which I feel they are. It's more than that."

"If there's some future material her legs need, we'll never figure it out!" Origami complained.

"Not so. Maybe CelestAI can tell us what she needs. She has those drone databases from Amphibia and they made robots all the time. This must be similar. Or not, as they were run by magic weren't they? Hummm. Still, they built machines."

"Amphibia?" Lime Twist asked.

"An island nation of frogs, newts, and toads," Origami explained. "We met some frogs from there, and once we got the airship we went looking for them. Good thing we did too. Wonder how they're doing?"

"A swamp where frogs talk?" she asked, eyes wide.

"Well, we did the best that we could," she replied.

"We made some friends, no enemies," Gianna told her. "It was weird, but it grew on us."

"It was no big deal," Origami played it cool. "Maybe when you're better we can take you for a visit."

"Find a way to start again? A home in a place that shouldn't be real... Finally me, which is a big deal."

The two shared a look. "Uh, yeah, something like that."

"So what's all this about magic?" a new voice said, as the pony that must be the doctor in the place swept into the room. "I'm Aday, Apple Aday. Twilight has tried magic what makes you think you can do better?"

"It's a different sort of magic," Origami explained. "It's hard to explain to a non-practitioner."

"Explain the effect then. I won't have unknown magics just flying around this place."

"It's a simple repair spell. Gianna, that's Gianna by the way I'm Origami, says she's missing something. So I don't know if it'll work. But we should try."

"We have something else, not magically related to try too," Gianna told her. "But one step at a time."

"Repair magic, eh? Twilight said that was pretty advanced. Can you handle it?"

"Advanced? It's one of the first three spells I learned. It's considered an easy spell!" *It's one of the only three spells I've learned. It doesn't take that much MP, at least to repair minor amounts of damage. Of course, I bet the Starswirl 'repair' spell is super complex because it can't be adjusted like I can now. He made the spell the largest it could be so they didn't have to learn repair 1, repair 2, repair 3 and so on, to handle different amounts of damage to something. Huh.*

"Very well, as long as I'm present to monitor her. Celestia knows we've tried everything..."

"Then I'll get started." She cast, targeting just a leg as she didn't know any formula involving "half living pony, half robot pony" so either both spells could work; repair or healing, or neither would. The spell completed her leg looked better, not as dinged up, and Lime Twist looked at it.

"How know?" she asked, swinging it back and forth.

"I guess let me get all of them and we can see," Origami told her.

"Okay."

She did the other three, but Gianna shook her head. "She's still missing something."

Lime Twist nodded. "Easier to move, but no faster." She had struggled to walk around the room. "Thanks anyway."

"At least they're not banged up now. Must have been quite a fall." Origami decided.

"I see more green lights!" Lime Twist announced. "That's good, right?"

"Green lights?" she echoed. "I didn't do a healing spell, and I only targeted her legs. Not her eyes."

"Her eyes are organic, as far as we can tell," the doctor said. "Though given the nature of her... prosthetics, perhaps she chose to have them look that way, and her eyes were also replaced and simply made to look like normal eyes. I didn't, like, take any samples from them."

"Green lights!" she insisted. "Less warnings!"

They were stumped, but Gianna pressed on.

"You're aware of her unique method of arrival?" she asked Aday.

"I am. I needed to know to have the best chance of treating her. Why?"

"Then I don't have to explain. We have a ship that may be from her time, or at least near enough. You may have seen it flying around, it's an advanced airship. It may be able to better diagnose her, at least. We may not know enough how to work it to repair or replace what keeps her from moving well, but figuring out the problem is always the first step, right?"

"A ship... from the future?"

She nodded.

"Very well. She can be released for the day, we can stop down to the front desk and you can sign the forms. Naturally I will have to accompany her, again to oversee any treatment she may receive from this ship of yours."

"You're welcome to come. Think you can make it outside, Lime Twist? We'll park the ship as close as we can."

"I can walk all day!" she announced. "Just very, very, slowly."

After signing the form and having Origami head back to have the North Star get closer, Gianna warned her new friend about CelestAI, saying "she's not exactly what you might expect, but she won't hurt you or anything. Don't freak out when you meet her."

"Freak? Out?"

"Don't be too concerned."

"Oh."

“What a ship!” Aday breathed as it came down. “What medical breakthroughs are just beyond our reach aboard such a vessel?”

“We have no way to know,” Gianna answered sadly.

The group went to the medical bay and had a look around.

“There must be a place to gather diagnostic information,” CelestAI told them. “They wouldn’t build cybernetic systems without being able to see their status. Look for some kind of port, an indentation matching the end of one of the cables lying around here. The problem will be was I created before or after she was born? If after I may be able to help, but if before...”

“Humm...” Gianna mused, casting her spell on herself again. She looked the legs over and was surprised to feel a cover now that she knew what she was looking for. She managed to pop it off, and there was a port just as CelestAI had said. They looked through the drawers and cabinets in the bay and came up with a cable that had an end that looked like it would fit into both her port and the port on a machine CelestAI couldn’t tell them the function of. But they plugged her in anyway, ready to yank the cable out if she seemed to be getting electrocuted or something.

“How odd,” CelestAI reported. “I’m getting an access request. Guest authentication, with a signed certificate using a 4096-bit key. Not that this cert is trusted here. Captains, may I grant the request? Thankfully, her diagnostic systems have already determined her problem and sent that information as well. I didn’t have to do anything, the machine she’s connected to has done it for us. So it is not necessary to grant the request. I am curious why the request was made however.”

“Is there any danger she’ll somehow access sensitive information?” Origami asked.

“Through her leg?” Gianna scoffed.

“You don’t know!”

“The danger is limited, captain,” CelestAI reported. “In the first place I have determined her available storage is quite minimal. She could not retain many of my records, not that I have that many sensitive files anyway. Only what we together have discovered. The books on magic you showed me, maps of the area I have created myself, and the instructions for creating the various types of drones. Only the last she would be unable to complete on her own.”

“I guess you don’t know much about your own construction, huh?”

“I wish I did, so that I could instruct you in how to create more of me.”

She looked at Lime Twist for a moment. “Very well, grant the access.”

Lime Twist blinked for a few seconds, then stood a bit taller. “Oh yes, that’s much better,” she exclaimed. “I finally know how to suppress some of those warnings, I don’t need them flashing in my vision all night long, and Origami that repair spell really did clear up some problems it seems so thank you very much for that. Several of my systems in the red went green when you did that. So we’re on the right track for my repair. Now if we could just get my legs working normally again, I think we would really have something.”

The assembled ponies and griffon stared at her.

“What? Is there something on my face?”

“You seem to be talking a lot better,” Origami finally managed. “Are you fixed or whatever?”

“That is certainly an oddity. But actually I’m at a bit of a loss as to how to explain that myself.”

“I can explain,” CelestAI told them. “One of her cybernetic systems is located in her brain, and has been trying to connect to something called a ponyweb ever since she got here. I am able to disable this system, saving her some power and reducing the heat buildup in her brain. However it seems there is a fallback system, that of a hardwire connection such as the one we just established.” She pointed to the cable with a hoof. “That’s what the access request was. She didn’t want information about me or the ship, she just wanted my linguistic database. While she’s plugged in her brain is querying her language processor, which is in turn talking to my language processor, and supplying her the words she wants to say. Basically I am providing her a very small, artificial, ponyweb.”

“So she’ll go back to being the way she was when we unplug this cable?” Aday asked.

“Unfortunately, yes. As I previously stated, her internal storage is limited, though as I have cleared out some of the diagnostic logs that had been building up her situation has improved. It is almost as if storage was not a concern for those that built her systems, and a bit of reasoning will give us a hypothesis as to why. It would have increased the cost of the system to little benefit. She already had a high-speed link directly implanted in her brain, able to access any needed information in a blink. External storage in that case would be the logical outcome. Much easier to back up, or increase if the storage unit was filled to capacity.”

“But then she got thrown through time, ended up here, and lost it all. She was a blank slate because her brain, never needing to remember anything on its own, probably never did!”

“That is the conclusion I have reached as well.”

“So her actual *brain* has been retraining itself, for language and such,” Aday went on. “I wish I had made more detailed notes, this is a fascinating look at how the brain itself functions. I’ll write up what I remember later. Unfortunate... This brain link thing you’re talking about, it can’t simply write a language into her brain like writing on paper, can it? She has to do it the hard way. Otherwise you could solve some of her problems right now, while you two are connected like this.”

“Correct. It seems she was implanted with the device at a young age, which helps control her other systems. Was this done as a matter of course for ponies in her time? Hooking them up to the ponyweb so their brains adapted to the system when they are at their most adaptable? Or because she was born with some sort of abnormality that this corrected? In other words did she choose to have her legs replaced later in life and the systems were made generic enough to connect to any other cybernetics, or has she always had artificial limbs? We can never know, given the information we have at the moment.”

“But couldn’t you use her storage for some kind of dictionary?” Origami asked. “What’s she really using it for otherwise?”

“I would have to completely reprogram her systems to be able to access such a local repository,” answered CelestAI. “Something she is already doing naturally. I would only attempt such a thing if it was determined that she suffered some kind of brain damage that limited her capabilities. My suggestion is simply to monitor her progress, and if a plateau is reached in her development that puts her at an unacceptable level and there is no other option, I will attempt such a procedure.”

“What’s the downside?” Aday asked.

“Increasing the load on her internal CPU will increase the heat it generates. This could have long term consequences for her organic parts. A possible workaround to that would be to move to an area of lower overall temperatures, and always keep her head uncovered. That will not mitigate the fact such a process will always be slower than natural speech, meaning a noticeable delay when responding as her CPU constructed any sentence she wished to say. Increasing the load may also cause more wear, and I do not know if I have the systems needed to repair any cybernetic components so deeply embedded into her body.”

“So a host of downsides, essentially.”

“Yes.”

“I seem to be clearheaded now though,” Lime Twist protested. “Why would the load increase to such a dangerous degree?”

“Right now you are only sending *queries* to my systems, and I am performing the needed processing and sending the strings back to you to speak. In effect, I am talking to myself, simply channeling some words into you. Local processing will not be as efficient, simply due to size constraints. I have a brain the size of your whole body which means I must use less resources to do what it would take your entire processor 100% of resources to perform. I was also designed to be cooled and run efficiently, no organic components to stress.”

“Oh.”

“So that’s a problem we can’t solve at the moment,” Gianna announced. “And not actually what we came here for anyway. Though hearing her talk normally is certainly nice, and it’s good to meet you properly at least Lime Twist, we came to figure out her mechanical issues. Or whatever is missing that makes her legs not work very well. Let’s figure that out.”

“Her problem there is quite simple. Some of her body heat is transformed into electrical energy, which would normally take place as she slept. However, that energy can no longer be stored, as her internal batteries were damaged in the time transit. Those damaged battery cells were broken down and expelled probably because they were programmed to do so, as ready access to replacement material was assumed. She would only need to go to her local doctor or cyber center or whatever it was called in her time and they would no doubt have any needed material on hoof. Thankfully her own repair systems are capable of making repairs with the necessary materials. Primarily, lithium. There should be a small tank we can connect to in one of her legs. Pump a solution of lithium into it, her systems should be able to extract it and make repairs, and the depleted carrier liquid extracted. Repeat until all systems are repaired. Her batteries will then hold a charge, and allow her to move normally. She will be fully functional once again.”

“So where can we find lithium?”

“There must be some, as those in the future used it. Thus it must exist here somewhere as well.”

“I guess that’s our next task,” Origami decided. “Locate lithium for Lime.”

Chapter 11
No time has passed
Return to Amphibia

“You know how we could find all the lithium we could ever need?” Gianna asked excitedly. “Dig some up. We know where to go to build mining drones after all, and maybe getting them working will count for helping others.”

“You want to head all the way back to Amphibia?” Origami asked skeptically.

“Yeah! Let’s go check on our friends, see how Maddie is doing with her magic, and make some frog robots. That is, if you have lithium in your database now?” She turned to CelestAI. “If you don’t know what to look for, the scanning drone wouldn’t either, after all.”

“Lithium, ‘the storage and discovery of’ is among the metals the drones can scan for. I must caution you that three units will be needed in total. Unless you wish to dig up the metal manually, that is.”

“Three?” asked Origami.

“Indeed. One scanning drone, one overseer unit, and one drilling unit. Seems a waste to craft an overseer unit for a lone scanning drone but we will have to see what materials are available. It may be difficult sourcing additional parts, after all. Building additional scanning drones will reduce the search time of course, so I would recommend it if parts are available.”

“You can’t control it?” Gianna asked.

“As previously stated, I have no wireless capability. And even if I did, would it be the correct frequency? I no doubt could reverse engineer the protocol from the device construction plans I already possess but it would take some time. I could also try modifying the design to include a wired connection. Thus programming the unit and sending it on its way directly. Simpler to tell the overseer unit what you wish to search for, and allow them to tell the drone. That is what they were designed for.”

“It’s so strange you don’t have any wireless capability, as the time you were designed in clearly knew about such things.”

“I can offer a hypothesis. Perhaps artificial brains such as myself were simply not allowed anywhere near the ponyweb, out of various fears the organics had about the long term consequences of such an action.”

“When you say things like ‘the organics’ I begin to see their point,” she muttered. “I guess I could see that,” she said louder. “They didn’t fully trust you yet and so to make sure you never accessed it, simply didn’t build you with the capability to connect or build something that would allow you to connect.”

“I don’t think any of us will live long enough to discover the answer,” Gianna told them. “So we’re agreed we’re heading there?”

“I guess?”

“Do you want to come, Lime Twist?”

“This version of me would love to come,” she replied easily. “If I can be repaired with this lithium you’re talking about it would be days earlier if I was present. Plus if we discovered some other element was needed as well there would be much less back and forth because I would already be there with you. Load up the lithium, make sure it works and my systems are at 100% before leaving. But at

the same time I don't feel like being stuck in this room, attached to this device the whole time. What does my doctor suggest?"

"You are free to go, of course. We would never try to hold a pony against their will," replied Aday. "It's not a question of 'can you get around' because you clearly can. Just slowly. And you can communicate your needs to others if you get lost or whatnot, so I'm not worried about that aspect either. And you would be welcome back, to continue your treatment until you felt you had either gone as far as we could take you or were fully recovered. In either case we would have to discuss next steps, finding you a place to live and some kind of work you could perform. We would never just wave good-bye and hope you found something when we released you. Especially as you have few friends to rely upon in this time and place. The... three... of you would have to keep up her studies of course, while journeying. And accept she tires easily and can't move very quickly."

"We can take her needs into account, of course," she agreed.

"Yeah, sure," Origami agreed.

"Very well. That will require different paperwork, and we'll have to go get you the workbooks we've been using for her studies. I noticed a library of sorts on the way down here so you won't need to bring any books aboard. She can practice her reading so that won't be an issue. Yes, I think a bit of a trip might do her good. Let her see the world she's going to be living in from now on."

"That's great! Glad to have you aboard, Twist!" Gianna exclaimed.

And so, flying high above several local sources they didn't even bother to investigate, the two friends headed off to Amphibia. It was difficult to keep Lime Twist on track, as she loved seeing the land flying by beneath the North Star and asking about everything she was seeing. But CelestAI didn't mind being read to, or recording the question and answer sessions between Origami and Lime Twist.

"What can you remember about the future?"

"Not a lot, unfortunately," she replied, hooked into the linguistic database again. "Feelings, I guess? That's what triggered my initial memory of the shadow war, seeing that picture and being irrationally afraid of it. Before those times I recall we were mostly happy. I do remember wanting to be the fastest runner, and being ecstatic when I got my legs finished. But was that because I couldn't use them before or was it simply a choice like hairstyle in the time? I have no idea."

"Hair you can cut off and it'll grow back, if you decide you screwed it up," Origami insisted. "Legs seems like something you should think about a bit more."

"But if it was commonplace, and safe, maybe everyone had some kind of augmentation and *not* having one would make you the odd pony out. Connection was big, I'm sure of it. What with the ponyweb and everything."

"So the loss of magic led to a sharp rise in technology. This led to the ponyweb. That led to the attack by Pony of Shadows, probably from Limbo where you couldn't even reach. He had years and years to work on other ways to influence this world from there, given we forced his hooves in this timeline when we got the magical means to create the teleport network. There was a huge war, civilization fell- to his no doubt delight- and pony kind spent the next hundreds of years recovering until Sunny was born."

"With the timeline so radically altered, will 'I' even still be born as I was?"

"An excellent question..."

Gianna meanwhile had Sunny on her mind as well, taking a blank notebook and beginning a journal she hoped her time-flung friend might one day find. *I'll publish it more formally later, and maybe even pass the task down to others when I can't do it anymore. Maybe create a vault she can find, in case the worst does happen and things in the future still take a bad turn. That way she can have the benefit of our experience and know what we went through after she left. Though she hasn't returned,*

does that mean she went into nothingness, having no present to return to, or that everything is fine there now and she has no reason to further mess with the past?

The trip went smoothly, any storms that came up could simply be flown over far in advance of when they would reach the ship, and Amphibia once again came into sight.

“A whole... new... world!” Lime Twist tried to sing.

“Air looks a whole lot better than the first time we saw it,” Origami remarked.

“I am detecting a pony airship, and several Zootopian sailing ships as well, in the local area.” CelesteAI remarked. “What heading should I take?”

“Looks like we’re all getting along then,” Gianna decided with pride. “If our three groups are finally together. And Twist, it’s not a new world it’s just a slightly out of the way land. The frogs, newts, and toads that live here are just like us for the most part.”

“A whole new... slightly... out of the way... land...” she revised. Then gave Gianna a sarcastic look, like a *see what you made me do?* look.

“Okay, okay!” she laughed. “It’s a new world. Let’s go check in at the capital, Maddie was last there, right?”

Origami nodded. “That’s right. She didn’t go back with the others, as wounded came to the capital first and she could do the healing spell at that point.”

“The capital it is, then,” CelesteAI announced, turning herself in that direction. “Estimated time of arrival, two hours, forty three minutes.”

The ship touched down outside the gates of the capital, the waters once again clear of war machines and the like, though many workers still swarmed the countryside putting to right what the former king had done. (This was mostly putting the dirt back where it had been dug up for mining purposes, and replanting grass and trees and such) The gates were open, and the three slowly made their way over there. Naturally no one had missed the airship floating around but one of pony make was also nearby, so it didn’t cause a huge stir. They had been coming and going the whole time after all, this was now no longer a big deal to anyone. There was a checkpoint station beyond the gate however, and the three were called to a halt in front of it.

“Ah, more ponies! Welcome,” the toad in charge greeted them.

“Is that one a pony?” the guard next to him whispered, leaning over. “I’ve seen ponies with horns, ponies with wings, but never a pony with a beak. And the tail is all wrong.”

“Don’t mind him,” said the toad. “We’ve had more sorts in through here in the last week than I ever thought possible. That airship, it’s the legendary one isn’t it? The one that made first contact? You’re Origami right?”

“That’s right, glad to be recognized.”

“So I’ll be able to tell my kids tonight I met a legend. How about that? Go right in and enjoy your stay at the capital.”

“Thank you very much.”

“I’m a griffon, by the way,” Gianna told him as they passed through.

“No- noted!” the nervous toad said with a salute.

The three entered and started making their way towards the capital. A bit more slowly than they would have otherwise, given Lime Twist was with them, and it wasn’t exactly her usual plodding pace that was delaying them. She was looking around at all the various buildings and those rushing around the city to move all that quickly. The others didn’t mind too much, and noted the buildings looked in better repair now than ever. *Before, even the buildings not battle damaged looked old and worn out,* Origami thought to herself. *But now they’ve all been repaired. The place looks better than ever. Good for them.*

“Cart!” Lime Twist announced.

"You want to ride in a cart? You must be getting pretty tired, it is a fairly long way to the castle," Gianna told her.

"No. Cart! Broken." She pointed with a hoof and on a side street was a frog, looking glum at his cart's wheel, which was clearly cracked and was not going anywhere any time soon. The giant snail pulling the cart didn't seem to mind, it was happily chirping to itself as it watched some birds flying around.

"Ah, opportunity knocks!" Origami announced. "Stand back and watch the master at work." She headed down there and caught the frog's attention. "Hello there! I can't help but notice your wagon wheel is broken."

"Oh, a pony! Good day," greeted the frog. "Yes, I've been a bit greedy it seems and it's come back to bite me. Look at the produce I have to bring to market today!" He indicated his overloaded wagon, spilling out with various fruits, bugs, and vegetables. "It's all thanks to your kind too. Wonderful to work with, I must say. We were worried about starving this winter but now we have to worry about preserving everything so it doesn't spoil. A much nicer prospect, all told. I should have made two trips, now look at my poor cart."

"Yes, I see that," she agreed. "I point it out merely because I believe I can help get you back on your way. A minor repair spell should fix that wheel right up."

"Oh, magic? I've seen growing magic but not repair magic. You wouldn't mind?"

"Not at all. Let me take stock of the situation a moment and we'll see what I can do."

"Want me to lift it up a little?" Gianna asked. "The cart I mean. Just to make sure it goes back into place smoothly?"

"Sure." *Now, I could use shaping here, try to get the most efficient spell possible. Let me see.* She closed her eyes and willed herself into her mana palace, finding herself in the workshop. She went over to the book and as there were only a few entries quickly added up the weights she might need. *I'll cast the spell to last for an hour, it's hard to say if this is a weakness in the wheel and it will just break again after I cast the spell and he moves a meter or if it would hold together like brand new. So that's a ten weight.* She went over to the workbench and got out a sheet of paper and brush, quickly putting the symbol on the paper for that amount of weight. *I'll do it as a touch spell, unrestricted is ten weight, it's broken on two sides so I'll do a twenty repair, and it looked like the wheel was probably a meter and a half big. That's only a 15 weight for the area. Adding that up I get*

Zone 2->Duration 10->Unrestricted 10->Damage 20->Repair 15

Weight is 57. I want the spell to be as generic as possible, I don't need a "repair wagon wheel" spell I just want a spell that repairs an object of this size for this long. So I won't bother trying to save a few MP on the repair part, I'll just cast it. I could make it a 10 and try shaping but is saving a few MP really worth it? I consider shaping to be more something that's done when there's no other choice. When I need to cast a spell 'right the heck now' and don't have the exact thing I need prepared. With my regeneration of mana at 14 per hour currently it would take me four hours walking around doing other stuff to regain that amount of mana. Or I could meditate for 11 minutes. Need to put another point into that skill. At 11 per minute it would only take me 5 minutes! Will I really cast that many spells today that I need to worry about it? I'll get back at least one or two MP with the recovery skill anyway! She finished up putting the symbols on the paper and set the pen down, then easily folded it into shape. Much easier than doing it in the outside world. The paper almost folded itself! She set the shape next to the others on the shelf representing the variants of the repair spell and nodded. All done.

She opened her eyes and dismissed the blue box showing her new spell, and gathered the mana while she touched the wheel. Gianna put her back under the wagon and lifted it, and she cast, the wheel coming together before their eyes.

“Done.”

Congratulations
You have advanced a quest!
Current status of quest:
Help 1/5 others with magic

“Thank you very much for that!” the frog gushed, looking the wheel over. “Looks good as new.”

“It should hold up quite well, but I can’t guarantee it past an hour,” she told him. “Have the wagon unloaded by that time, is my advice.”

“Easily enough to get me where I’m going and lighten this load. How can I repay you? Want some produce? I have lots!”

“No thank you, I don’t seek any rewards,” she told him modestly. *Besides the one I have already received, that is.*

The three made it to the castle and were let inside by the guards there, being directed to “Chancellor Oliva” as she was called now. The place was abuzz with activity, mostly newts rushing here and there with reports and the like in their hands. The three found their way to the meeting room and were let inside. Olivia’s face lit up when she saw them but finished up her current business before coming over.

“Wonderful to see you two again,” she gushed. “I don’t have a lot of time, though. I was elected the ruler for now, it’s been basically non-stop since then.”

“We were just checking in anyway, we won’t get in the way,” Gianna told her. “Things are going well here?”

“Very well,” she agreed with a smile. “Your kind has really come through for us. Growing magic, keeping the skies clear but bringing rain when we need it, showing us new farming techniques, it’s been wonderful working with the pony nation. Plus trade with this “Zootopia” is starting to be a thing too, further alleviating our problems. Much easier to trade with them, as their currency was already more similar to ours than yours was. Study of magic is at an all-time high, and your princess has even told us a prototype gateway is being developed to further connect our two lands. We could simply step through it and find ourselves in Equestria! Imagine! They’re trying to figure out how far they can get the portal to open. And we might get a small version that lets us talk face to face across those distances too, rather than relying on written messages back and forth.”

“That’s great news,” Origami agreed. “Speaking of magic have you seen Maddie around lately?”

She shook her head. “She went home. Her parents wanted her back there and away from ‘the big city.’ Not to worry she left the copies of the books you gave her, and we sent them on after copying them. Newt scholars are further copying them and learning about magic. And Andrias has been put to work translating those books he was hoarding so we’re getting a much better picture of our history as well.”

“It’s great things are going so well for you,” Gianna told her.

“And it’s all thanks to you two. I wish there was some way we could truly repay you for everything you started here.”

“Just knowing you’re doing well is reward enough,” Origami told her. “We’ll get out of your hair, I see several impatient looking figures over there.”

She chuckled. "I probably won't run for office again. Come back in five years and we can talk all you want. Thanks for dropping in though, it was great to see you."

"Going to see Maddie next?" Gianna asked on their way back.

"I figure that's best. When we tell her we're trying to get the factory working she's bound to want to see it. Plus it could be a good experience for her, trying to see if she can get it powered too. She'll be disappointed if we show up with a couple of frog robots and tell her she missed the whole thing. Too bad we'll have to pass it on the way there, but whatever. The North Star moves fast enough."

"That she does," Gianna agreed. "You holding up okay Twist?"

"Okay," she agreed. "This all so exciting!"

"This *is* all so exciting," Origami corrected absentmindedly.

"This all so exciting *is*," Gianna corrected her.

"What? Don't confuse the poor filly!" Origami huffed.

Gianna just laughed.

Chapter 12

Half an hour later, Wartwood

Realizing their many mistakes

The group was directed outside of town, where a small gathering of young frogs, Polly included, were having magic lessons with Maddie. Both were super excited to see Origami again and hugged her.

"Nice to see you too," she told them. "And what's all this 'school' business I heard everyone in town talking about?"

"Now that we know magic is more than just curse bags and potions," Maddie told her, "I've gotten more people interested. The older town residents are still skeptical of course, even though they've been helped by ponies regrowing their fields and moving things around. But kids like me are excited about it, so we've been studying those books you gave me."

"We can each at least do a cure spell!" one of the young frogs piped up.

"That's great! Keep it up."

"Yes, it's slow going," Maddie admitted. "But everyone is starting to come around to the idea. One day we might have more magic users than you do!"

Don't be too sure kid. Though how many ponies, griffons, or dragons will go through the dungeons like we did? I guess there could be a bunch of earth ponies that want to 'level the playing field' so to speak... "It's a good goal to have."

"Want to be a guest speaker or something?"

"Yeah, yeah!" all the kids cheered.

"Ah, we don't have time for that I'm afraid. I'm here on a mission." *And I can't exactly tell them I don't remember anything about doing 'Starswirl' type magic and only know how to do manual casting. Don't want to reveal the presence of the dungeons in our lands yet, we haven't even decided if other ponies are going to be allowed through them. I have to see all the lessons and go through them all before I can make that kind of decision.* "But you can come along if you want. All of you."

"Field trip!"

"What's this mission?" Maddie asked shrewdly. "I'm responsible for these kids I can't take them anywhere dangerous you know."

"It's back to the factory we found. The one we powered up to prove we knew the runic carvings we did worked. Nothing dangerous there, at least there wasn't the last time we went."

"It's a long story," Gianna added, "but ultimately we want to build some frog robots to have them look for lithium so we can use it to rebuild the batteries in our friend's legs." She indicated Lime Twist, who waved as everyone looked at her.

"Anne's world had plenty of that stuff," Polly announced. "Too bad the portal can't be opened again. Though I'm hoping to learn enough magic to do it myself one day and visit her too."

"You'll be on your own for that one," Origami told her. "I've never seen any pony spell to do that."

"I love a good challenge!"

"I'm in," Maddie told them. "We'll have to get permission to take the others. Everyone, go ask your parents..." she looked at Polly, "or guardians if you can go."

They hurried off yelling about a field trip.

They all got permission and headed into the North Star, Origami remembering Sprig's warning about not letting Polly near it because she would start taking it apart only too late. But it was fine. She was asking a million questions and the others were jumping around (like frogs, ya know?) but CelestAI split herself into several threads and kept tabs on all of them.

"So you can do things like this without magic," Maddie remarked, looking the bridge over. "Polly insisted it was true but I didn't believe her. The stories she tells about Anne's world... I guess I owe her an apology."

"Well, even we have some airships other than this one," Origami bragged. "Not as good, of course. But we have cities and phones and electric lights and everything. You'll see it one day."

She shook her head. "There's just so much to learn..."

"Yeah, you've got that right."

They headed to the factory and the kids spilled out, Maddie yelling not to go too far and for everyone to buddy up. They looked around the place, it didn't seem disturbed. Maddie said that figured.

"These sorts of ruins are all over," she explained. "No one looks twice at them. I mean they didn't, until they started pumping out murder robots. We had too much work to do to rebuild our towns and make sure we had enough food to eat to worry about them after that. But it might be time to start investigating them..."

"You'll need magic to open them," Gianna recalled. "Others, I mean. The doors respond to magic."

"You can try it later," Origami told her. "All your students can. So you know you can get in there before we leave."

"Good idea."

It became obvious as they looked around this was going to be a challenge. For one thing the tunnel between the storeroom and the factory part had collapsed long ago, and the two stood there mentally smacking themselves for forgetting. They *could* clear it, of course, but it would take some effort. They were looking over the storeroom itself, which seemed fully stocked so they should have the parts to build anything they needed, when the second problem was brought up by Polly. She and Maddie were looking over a small metal plate with runes on it, Maddie having asked if she could bring it back for study and Origami saying sure without really thinking about it. She was thinking about how they were going to clear the tunnel. But Polly brought up another good point.

"How are you going to power these robots, anyway?"

Gianna and Origami blinked at her, gears turning in their heads. "Uh..." both said.

"Right, these plates are the receivers, right?" Maddie asked. "I've gotten copies of the books that have been translated at the capital, Oliva has been great about sending them regularly by bird. We've found nothing in those notes on how to make the metal. Seems it was all imported from the other world it originally came from. Probably as a means of controlling the supply, or just because we didn't have the magical knowledge to do it ourselves. We just had the power source, the music box. Everything ran off it, even the frog robots."

"It's true, they all stopped working once we got the box away from the pedestal," Polly agreed. "All except Frobo. Of course he ran on batteries by that point, I had rebuilt him myself using the human's technology. I still haven't figured out what powered him after he was made. Anne left the area, it couldn't have been her. He followed us across half the island."

"Could he have been 'charged up' by proximity to her?" Maddie suggested. "Enough to run him the whole time he was traveling? Or maybe some sort of connection between her and his plate," she tapped the metal, "had been established accidentally by her. She was, according to you, literally glowing

with power at some points. So he wasn't exactly following *you*, but simply heading to his 'recharge station' the whole time?"

"He wasn't that bright at first, you think he was like some kind of moth?"

"It explains things, doesn't it? You admitted she had little control of her powers most of the time."

"Yeah I guess it does. Gosh I miss Anne so much!"

"I didn't really see her that much. So yeah, what's the plan?" They both looked at the Equestrians.

"We actually didn't think of that," Origami admitted. "We just sort of came here. Probably should have thought it through a bit more, honestly." *That's what you get for letting Gianna run things I guess.*

"No hope?" Lime Twist asked pitifully.

"We're not saying that!" Gianna hastily assured her. "We're not, are we?"

Origami sighed. "I can see a few long-term solutions, anyway. We would have to head back to Equestria and have some metal made that's this shape. Get it runed with new runes, keeping these few devices we want to power separate from everything else on the island. We don't want to try and power everything it would be drained in seconds. Have them made, and make sure our metal is chosen when the factory starts building things. Then send power to them via crystal like we do for the teleportation gateways. Alternately, we could probably have them built using this metal and then somehow attach some mana crystals to them, sending each power directly. No idea how long they would run for though..."

"I guess if you wanted to do that, I could stay here and work on clearing this tunnel so the factory can actually get stuff."

"I don't know. This is turning into a project of a whole different scale than what I thought. It's really something for a whole team to tackle, those with the material and know-how to work on everything right here. Going back and forth isn't going to work. Plus this was just a means to an end. It would be nice to see if we *could* fix everything and get it working. But like Maddie said they had more important things to be worrying about." *And we have more important things to be doing too, moving towards the next dungeon.* "Enabling Amphibia to more easily dig up material might help their trade situation, but they don't need these robots working. You just thought it would be the easiest way to get lithium. Turns out it's actually the hardest."

"So ask around?" Lime Twist wondered.

"Don't know how common it is around here," Polly admitted. "And you're not taking Frobo's batteries apart to get it either. I don't know if I'll ever be able to find replacements for them if they break down!"

Origami waved that off. "We won't sacrifice one, uh, being for another."

"We could go talk to Leopold, in town," Maddie suggested. "He was a big-time smith before his accident and going into woodworking. He might know where to get some."

"It is a metal, I guess," Gianna agreed. "Can't hurt. We have to take you all home anyway..."

Before they left the two made sure Maddie could open the doors, and showed her the plate they had made before to power the place. She could activate it just fine using her core, as could the others though not for very long. "It's a step in the right direction," Polly sighed. "We have to rediscover how to make all the parts in that storeroom. Figure out how they all go together. Power them properly with or without magic. Build a factory from scratch and have it assemble working robots. Only then can we say we've recaptured our heritage."

"Something one could dedicate their life to," Origami reasoned. "But you might be able to get all three continents working together on it. It's still early days but we *are* coming together. I'm sure we

and the Zootopians might have pieces of the puzzle that can accelerate your understanding of things.”
As long as you were willing to share the final product, that is.

“We’ll get there,” she promised herself. “I can get it started at least. I have to!”

Origami couldn’t help but smile. *She’s just like me and magic...*

Back in town (yes they counted everyone, twice, and made sure no one got left behind) they went to see the woodcarver Leopold and got introduced by Maddie.

“So you’re looking for what?” he asked, scratching his head.

“Lithium,” Gianna told him. “Apparently it can be made into an energy storage system.”

“I don’t know about that,” he admitted. “I’ve heard of the stuff of course. Not very good for plows or barrel bands or shovels. Too reactive, breaks down quickly once you expose it to air. So I never worked with it.”

“So you don’t have any, is the point,” Origami pressed.

“Nope! Sorry. Where might you look for some? Let me think...” He paced around a moment.

“You know something, there is somewhere that might have a ready supply of the stuff.”

“Do tell!”

“Glassworks. I don’t recall the exact details but I’m sure it’s useful for glass making in some way. We don’t have one, we order our glass from another town. Could get you directions though. Yeah, that’s where I would check next, if I were looking for some.”

“Really?” Gianna asked, skeptical. “Metal and glass? Isn’t glass supposed to be clear? Metal typically isn’t.”

“Like I said, don’t ask me. But I’m pretty sure I’m right. Can’t hurt to ask, can it?”

“We’re here, heading to a nearby town is fine,” Origami agreed. “Especially if they do have some.”

“Right. Let me draw you a quick map.”

“Great, thanks. Say, is this your current project?” She pointed a hoof at the crude wooden racer sitting in the shop. It seemed the front was all smashed up.

“Oh yeah, one of the tadpoles in town rides around on that thing. Smashed into a tree with it, don’t worry they’re fine. The resiliency of youth, am I right?”

“There’s always a Scootaloo,” Gianna muttered, rolling her eyes.

Origami smirked at her, she knew what was up. “Let me take a look at it, save you some time.”

“Yeah, whatever.” He waved her off, looking for a pencil.

She looked it over and decided to use her basic repair spell, keeping the area small but maintained. She was then able to run her hoof over the damaged parts and simply watch as they reformed. By the time the map was ready the racer was repaired, she was 2/5 for her quest, and Leopold was muttering that maybe magic wasn’t so bad after all. He was tapping the thing and rolling it back and forth making sure it was sturdy, and the group left with a chuckle.

The three said goodbye to Maddie and Polly, who promised to keep up their studies of magic and engineering, respectively. They also promised to write, should an intercontinental postal service ever be developed. Origami wished them luck, and with a wink told them that sort of post office might come sooner than they think. They were then off to Hopville, two towns over, to see about talking to Broadstone the glassmaker about some lithium.

“And you say it will help your friend here walk better?” Broadstone asked them, once they found his shop and explained things. “Lithium?”

“That’s what we’ve been told,” Gianna agreed. “As you can see she has a unique physiology.”

“I can see that. Metal legs, who would have thought? I do have some, in a powdered form useful in my work. It’s not exactly the cheapest stuff...”

"We can probably pay you, if you accept gold," Origami spoke up. "The coins of our homeland are gold. Not copper, like here."

"You ponies have really saved us though, let me get back to work," he protested. "I can't really change you. Still, I can't just let you have it, either."

"We have various magics at our disposal, do you need anything repaired maybe?"

He barked a laugh. "You're a bit late on that one. I've already started melting down the pieces. My latest order came right here in town. Seems a couple of youngsters were playing a bit too hard and kicked a ball through a window. I'm making the replacement. Now maybe that's something you can do!"

"Install the replacement? I don't know..." Gianna offered.

"No, no, figure out the true culprit. As I understand it, from the guy who got his window broken, three tadpoles were involved but of course none of them are fessing up. If you could discover the actual guilty party, the one that kicked the ball last, well, that would go a long way to restoring harmony in the town. Quibbit isn't happy about his broken window, the parents of the three kids aren't happy their kids broke the window and won't tell them the real story, and people are gossiping about the whole thing. If you can help put this behind us, that could be worth some of my lithium stores. I can tell you who I order it from too, if you want more. I can't give it all to you, obviously, I'll need some to do my work until I can order more myself."

"That sounds fair," Gianna agreed. "Who are the kids?"

So the group walked around town to find Chubby, Hippity, and Fern, to try and get the story out of them. Chubby wasn't talking, but he didn't have to. Gianna put her expansive mind spell on herself thinking it would allow her to "see" auras around the living, and she was correct. As it was something normally beyond the senses, the spell allowed her to see it, and gaging what she saw around Chubby she decided he was innocent. She thanked his father for letting them talk to him and turned to Origami. She had to avoid reacting, as she felt the core of shadow was still inside her friend. *So it hasn't left her yet. "Like a whisper" if I recall what Guru told me. Now that I know I can catch sight of it doing this I should check more often. But I can't let on it's there, Guru said that would be bad news for Origami.*

Hippity immediately threw Fern under the bus, saying everything was her fault and could she please be ungrounded now. Her mother said not until Fern herself verified the story, but Gianna told her Hippity was most likely innocent as well, her aura seemed not to indicate guilt.

"Are you really seeing something, or just making stuff up?" Origami asked her as they headed to Fern's place.

"Seeing isn't exactly the right word. The spell is expanding my mind, not my senses. But there is something there, the mirrors proved that much. And we have a skill to manipulate the aura while doing magic. So it's real, and as my mind is basically telling me what I'm seeing anyway, it does show a sort of energy around the living. I'm not seeing it, but my mind is experiencing it now and overlaying it into my vision, probably because that's the closest sense that, well, makes sense. I wouldn't expect to hear it or taste it."

"And it's telling you those two are innocent."

"I'll have to see a guilty aura to be completely sure, but while their auras seemed to be colored what I would associate with fear, and anger, and frustration, they were not dark as though the frog they were around was guilty."

"Huh."

Standing before Fern it was clear she was the guilty party, and Gianna talked her around into confessing that she had last kicked the ball. Her parents said they would go talk to Quibbit and she would apologize properly. With that, Gianna got her first massage about her quest being advanced, and heading back to the glassmaker's shop they picked up a large glass jar of oil that looked like it had a lot

of metal dust in it. They thanked him and got the address of the supplier, heading back to the North Star to see about finally getting Lime Twist walking faster than a snail's pace.

Chapter 13

Twenty minutes later

Gianna checks in at home

In the end, Gianna found a funnel in the kitchen area and Origami volunteered to pour, so they had Lime Twist lay down on her side and poured the oil into the port they found on one of her other legs. They weren't sure how they were going to get the oil out, once the lithium had been extracted, but CelestAI told them "Worst case we can simply tip her over and pour her out. She might have to be upside down for a bit, to get it all out. There were probably specialized pumps to do this in her time. The port you are using could easily have a standard hose connection in her time, it seems threaded after all."

"Embarrassing!" Lime twist managed, blushing up a storm as she imagined herself with her legs in the air above a bucket to catch the oil that came out.

"Maybe we can find a pump or something," Gianna told her. "We'll look. Strange there isn't a plug at the bottom of your hoof but like she said, a pump is probably the better way to go."

"Any kind of plug in the hoof wouldn't hold up! When will we know it's worked?" Origami wanted to know as she finished the pour. It looked like her storage tank had taken 80% of the fluid, so there was still a bit left if they needed more.

"Figure at least 24 hours to incorporate the material," CelestAI guessed. "Then her recharge system will perform the normal function that night while she's asleep. So basically two days from now she should be at something approaching full power. If this amount of lithium was sufficient, and my estimate of her repair nano-drones is accurate. But based on the timestamps in the log it took about that long to expel the damaged lithium so it's an educated guess on my part."

"Maybe we can go after more," Gianna decided. "We have the address for the mining company. We may want to keep extra around just in case anyway, even if this was too much and we get some back. I don't know if it'll degrade while inside her." *Her systems could be damaged permanently, meaning this stuff degrades far faster than it should.*

"I must admit I do not have that answer," CelestAI told them. "But I do know as long as the raw material is kept in the oil, storage should not be a problem. Even in the long term. So having more around would certainly be helpful if needed quickly. If I was able to do regular check-ins I could chart any degradation and then get you a better answer. Weekly at first, then monthly would be acceptable once a standard model is created."

"That's good to know. So what do we do in the meantime?"

"I know what I'd like to do while we wait. Go spar with Yuan again! I mean we're here, seems like a great opportunity. I want to see if my mental expansion spell can help me somehow as well, *before* I need to put it into practice."

"It would be interesting to look over the translated works, and that can count as practice for Lime Twist as well. So I guess I can keep myself occupied while you're jumping around or whatever."

"Jumping around or whatever," she muttered. "It's practice! Practice!"

"Uh huh. CelestAI?"

"Charting course now."

On the bridge, Gianna looked over to see Origami scowling at nothing as the land of Amphibia passed under them. "What's up?" she asked.

"I just feel weird about the way we're going about things."

"Things? What things? What are you talking about?"

"This help 5 ponies thing. I don't like it."

What a shock. You don't like anything but books, hate to break it to you Origami.

"You don't like... helping ponies..."

"I don't like doing it for the wrong reasons!"

"Again, what wrong reasons? How can there even *be* a wrong reason? What are you even talking about?"

"The dungeon told us to help others with our new magic. That doesn't seem odd to you?"

"Not really. Think about the time the dungeons were in wide use. There were less ponies, resources were far more scarce, everypony needed to pull together. This was a good way to force those learning magic to at least start off not being selfish with it."

"And we're stuck with it?"

"Until we get a new dungeon master in that dungeon, who can change the success parameters or whatever it is they do, yeah. What would you have prospective students do? We need the practice, and this is a good practical way to get it. We didn't *need* to fly halfway around the planet (if we even have, I have no idea) we could have just stayed at home and looked around. I bet there's all sorts of ponies that could use a hoof if you look for them."

"Yeah I guess. It just feels like a chore."

"Because, again, we aren't actually doing it. We're flying around trying to find lithium. They wouldn't have had that luxury. 'They' in this case being the old ponies that first went through the dungeons. We could have repaired a few things at home, cleaned some stuff, healed a bruise, smashed some rocks, found a missing pet or whatever, and boom, location of dungeon- what are we up to? Anyway, quest complete. Helping Lime Twist was a separate quest, I don't even know if it'll count towards this one."

"Oh crap you're right!"

"Plus there's another consideration you're overlooking. The ponies that put the dungeon together would have wanted a bit of a safeguard."

"A what?"

"They didn't want ponies with bad intentions learning magic. This is a way to weed them out. Anypony not willing to help at least five other ponies doesn't get to learn the more dangerous magic that's coming up. Next dungeon is attack magic and spell modification, after all. At least this way the pony learning the magic gets a taste of helping others whether they want it or not. Even if they had been doing this for selfish ends before, maybe this will help change their minds. It's the closest the old ponies would have had to a friendship school. 'Hey, helping ponies out gets me praise, and maybe cookies,' I can hear the old pony saying. 'I should do that more instead of trying to take over the world or whatever.'"

Origami snorted. "I'm sure that happened dozens of times in the olden days. Villains simply giving up a life of villainy because they helped some grandma across the street and were rewarded with cookies."

"You don't know. I bet it did. We could have had a string of dictators wielding powerful magics if not for this early lesson in friendship. Prove me wrong!"

"I can't prove why something never happened!"

"Exactly. Score one for Gianna."

"That's not- whatever!" She threw a hoof into the air. "Let's just go home after this then. I suppose you aren't wrong, weird stuff happens all the time in ponyville. We probably could find a few ponies to help locally." *I do have to admit we didn't really look.*

“Mind if I go to my home first? My spells are far more internal, it won’t be as easy for me as it’ll be for you. I’ll need the home field advantage. Home craig advantage? Home cave advantage? Whatever, you know what I mean.”

“It’s on the way anyway, sure.”

“Great. We can stop in to see how the council is doing, see if MGGA has been up to anything shady lately, and help some griffons out. I just hope they need buried treasure found or something...”

So the trio spent some time at the capital, Gianna with Yuan who got the afternoon off, and Origami with Lime Twist. She preferred not going too far anyway because it was so difficult for her, so they read books about Amphibia’s past, mostly about how they used their portal magic to visit (and in most cases “borrow from” i.e. plunder) other worlds. Ginna discovered her spell could help a little, telling her where Yuan was despite being blindfolded and even helping sense her intent. They had dinner there and said goodbye, hoping the next time they came it would be through a magical gateway rather than flying. The ship left for home as the sun was going down, as they figured it could fly on through the night without their input. Which it did.

It was an excited Lime Twist who greeted them two days later, the airship parked at the edge of equestrian territory. She literally ran up to Gianna and hugged her, now able to move normally. She blinked away the message she got in her vision, that could come later.

Congratulations
You have completed a quest!
“Help Lime Twist Regain her Mobility”

Potential +5
+10 MP maximum

“All fixed!” she announced, grinning.

“That remains to be seen,” CelestAI told her. “You must be scanned again and new readings taken.”

“But she’s moving better,” Gianna protested, as Lime Twist spun in a circle and hopped around happily. *Plus our ‘system’ thinks she’s fixed. I’m not going to argue with it. How does it know, though?*

“I do not dispute this fact,” CelestAI agreed. “But is she operating at 100% efficiency? She is moving *better*, but is she moving the absolute best she can? Only her internal diagnostics can tell me this.”

“Let her enjoy moving around a bit until we chain her to a medical bed again. She can be plugged in after breakfast.”

“Breakfast! Breakfast! Yum yumm, breakfast!” Lime Twist sing-songed.

“Come on...”

After they ate, they went to the medical bay and CelestAI announced her systems reported a 95% repair had been completed. She suggested using the rest of the lithium solution as soon as possible to restore her to 100% and allow her internal systems to handle the access, in case of further malfunction. The two agreed, but as there was no harm in leaving the oil at the moment they decided to do that. “A pump of some kind would be best,” Origami reasoned. “Rather than trying to get it to drip out. I don’t think we should mix the old and remaining oil, though it would probably be fine?”

"I will trust your judgement in this," Lime Twist agreed. "I do not know what containments, if any, the repair process would have left behind. Though the sloshing around will be somewhat annoying."

The three headed to the council building, Lime Twist having to jump from the ship to the "landing area" as Origami no longer knew the fluttery wings spell, but it was fine. Lime Twist easily managed it, looking proud of herself as the ship went to go find a place to park. The three went in, finding that even this early there were five griffons ahead of them to see the council. Gianna was surprised, but the secretary looked excited to see them.

Oh, that's right. Hours were from 1:00 – 3:00 every afternoon. Are we going to have to wait until after lunch to get in? If that's the case this place must really be busy now, to have so many so early. Or are they left over from yesterday? "Hey, Gallina. Nice to see you again." *Is her nameplate bigger? I never noticed it before. Maybe it's just set more prominently now, as griffons are actually coming here again she wanted them to know her name.*

"You too! And with another new friend I see. What an odd... friend." She looked over Lime Twist, who waved enthusiastically. Because she can do that now. "Some other new miracle to tell us about?"

Gianna laughed. "Not this time. I wanted to catch up on recent events. See if there was anything I could help out with."

"And if MGGA was up to anything nasty," Origami reminded her.

She sighed. "They haven't gone away, despite the fact the town is actually looking better than ever. Because of the way it was done, you see. It wasn't the way they wanted, so of course it isn't done 'right.' Did you happen to see on the way in though? Doesn't the town really look so much better?"

Gianna shook her head. "We flew over the place. It can't have improved that much?"

"Oh yes. Money was never the problem, apathy was the problem. Now that we have visitors, and a way to send tons of goods back and forth without relying on a train, we've suddenly decided maybe we should fix the old town up a bit."

"So the larger portal has been installed?" Origami asked, perking up.

"That's right. Working on a similar schedule, as I understand it. The two have been going non-stop for a couple of weeks."

"Glad to hear it. We'll have to check the town out on our way back to Ponyville. Sounds like I wouldn't even recognize the place."

"It's cleaner at least. Now you asked about MGGA, let's see..." She shuffled through some papers in a drawer. "Here we are. Ah yes, on the schedule for the next week is debates about a new 'no discrimination law' put into effect. Apparently some griffons, and I can't even believe I'm about to say this, are *refusing to take bits* from ponies. In shops! It's crazy. What griffon turns down money, wherever it comes from? But that's what's happening. This of course drives away the tourist trade we've managed to get in the past few weeks from the portal, makes us look bad, and of course impacts taxes."

"Ah, there's the real heart of the matter," Origami muttered.

"Exactly. Now on the one claw this is a bad look, but on the other the council can't be seen as tyrants, simply ordering shops to serve those the proprietors don't wish to. What are we going to do to those that refuse the order? Arrest them? Then they don't make any money at all. And there's no law they have to give service to ponies, because not that many ponies visited us in the past. It simply wasn't an issue. We already have MGGA protests, if they started getting worse because we were throwing griffons in jail because they didn't serve a pony ice cream it would really get bad. The council has to be seen as impartial."

"What's the general sentiment?" Gianna asked. "Among the council, I mean."

"Wait and see," she replied matter-of-factly. "If the number of businesses doing this remains low, those businesses taking pony money will thrive and survive, driving those that don't under. It's a

problem the free market can solve by itself. But if the movement *spreads*, like if griffons start avoiding shops that take pony money..."

"Disaster," Origami figured.

"Who knows where it will end in that case," she agreed. "We of course can't *prove* it's MGGA or that the proprietors are part of the movement. Acting alone or in concert with each other. But the timing is suspicious. Well, I mean it's not in the sense that we have ponies here now. You know what I mean."

"Maybe they're getting threats?" Gianna wondered.

"That's a possibility. We really need more information before we can act. Threatening a business owner, now that we could take action against."

"Doesn't mean you can suppress the idea of MGGA though," Origami realized.

"Agreed. It's a very delicate situation. So that's the first thing, here's the second; There was an altercation with a dragon recently. He was just sleeping in his cave when a group of griffons went to go try and kick him out. They were shouting at him and he was startled awake, and his tail lashed out and injured several of them. They rushed out of there, returned with reinforcements, he was trying to get to sleep again and there was a big fight. The defense force got involved and broke it up, but the griffons want the dragon punished and are trying to get us to send a formal letter to Ember to get her to tell the dragon to find another place to live. They say he attacked them out of the blue, he says he didn't even know what was going on and they struck first. Big mess. Making a dragon move seems like the wrong message to send, even if they did originally a hundred years ago or more take the cave from griffons. We have to make sure this doesn't keep happening by rewarding their bad behavior. But we can't do nothing, either."

"Doesn't sound like anything I can personally do," Gianna decided. "That's just politics at this point."

"Agreed. Oh, there is something you could, but it's hours away."

"Go on! We can get anywhere in the airship!"

"Oh, not like that. I mean it always happens at night. Someone has been trying to break in here. The records room, specifically. We aren't sure why. We have a night guard of course, a retired defense griffon. But the culprit always gets away. We hate to suggest he can't do his job, and fire him, but if this griffon actually does break in and steal records, it'll be his fault. If you wanted to hang out here at night, maybe lend a claw as you're younger and faster..."

"I see what you mean. I'll think about it. Nothing earlier than that?"

"Uh, huh, let me think." She rifled through her papers again. "Oh! Town renovation. There's a supposed 'haunted house' nearby we want to knock down. But every demolition team we send over there refuses to do the work. And they won't say why. If you can investigate, maybe bring back a more comprehensive report than 'we're not interested in the job anymore, for reasons we will not go into at this time' that would be a big help."

I could probably start the job too, most houses around here are made of stone. Clearing away a pile of rubble is easier than getting griffons in here with hammers, right? "I'll check it out!" she promised.

"That would be a big help! Let me write out the directions to the place." She started copying some information to a new sheet of paper. "Here you go."

"Great. I'll report back when I'm done. See you then."

"Bye!"

"Think... meet... ghost?" Lime Twist asked Origami while Gianna went to get the North Star.

"Proving their existence would make for an interesting friendship report," she replied. "If we can befriend it, that is. I'll be interested to see what's really going on there. Ghost stories have existed since campfires have after all, but no conclusive evidence has been found."

“They’re ghosts.”

She chuckled. “Yes, exactly. They wouldn’t leave anything physical we could point to as conclusive proof. And anypony claiming to see one could have been mistaken, or simply lying. But magic exists, so ghosts aren’t a complete stretch. And if anyone is suited for this mission, Gianna is.”

“Power... of friendship!”

“I meant her... yes, let’s go with that.”

Chapter 14
Half an hour later
Ghost Story

As the trio stood in front of the run-down house before them, Origami was suddenly struck with the desire to be elsewhere. *A library, that's what I need. Some nice, safe, books.* "Actually, now that I see the place, perhaps we should research the address first before going in," she told the others.

"Scared?" Lime Twist asked her, trying to hide a grin.

"Not at all. I simply think the prudent thing to do would be to find out what records exist. Who owned the property? How did it fall into such disrepair? That could tell us a lot about any reason a ghost might be hanging around."

"Scared," she told Gianna.

"I'm not," she insisted, stamping a hoof. "Fine, we'll go in right now then. With no research done at all. See how far that gets you."

"We are already here," Gianna told her. "It would be a bit silly to leave again now, without even taking a look inside. And the ghost is here, if there is one, so just seeing what it's up to is better than any research. You're welcome to head out though, if you're, I won't say scared- eager to explore our great Griffonstone library."

"No, it's fine. After you then." She gestured Gianna forward.

"Are you okay?" she asked Lime Twist instead, as really she was the most vulnerable of the group.

"You killed shadow. Changed future. I faced... fears. My time. War. Afraid of no ghost."

"Good enough for me." She headed to the door, this area was too rocky and mountainous to have much in the way of overgrowth, and tried the handle. The door was unlocked, and the hinges protested as she shoved the door open. "Hello?" Looking inside the place seemed undisturbed, thick with dust and colder than the outside. "Get the windows open, let's let some light into this place." She stepped in, followed by the others and they started looking around.

They found a 60 year old calendar on the wall, various letters with his name on it- which was Gifflepop- and the various signs no one had been in there since Gifflepop had died. There wasn't a body, or anything like that, it was simply the case nothing had been picked up since then. Like he had died, and the house was simply closed up and forgotten. It seemed he lived alone, with few plates or utensils in the kitchen, and only one bed. It was the workroom that Origami found most interesting, as it was stuffed with old books. Mostly non-fiction; history books, map making, sailing (of all things?) and even books on how to write books. In the desk were plenty of yellowing paper, old ink bottles, and quills, so clearly Gifflepop had inspirations of being an author.

"Nothing's thrown around," Origami remarked. "No signs of any ghost. I don't feel any magic around either."

"Boo!" cried Lime Twist, suddenly jerking towards Origami, who cried out and flinched back.

"Not funny!"

"Funny!" she insisted.

"Let me try my magic," Gianna told them, and Origami stopped staring daggers at Lime Twist. *At least she's starting to have a personality, I guess. It should be encouraged?* "Go ahead."

Gianna cast her spell, empowering it to last an hour, and her eyes opened wide as she finished.

"I swear, if you're going to make something up..." Origami threatened.

"No, move, he's right there by the desk!" she insisted, pointing. "He's doing something, saying something. Let me listen."

"You're serious?" She moved but looked around. "There's nothing there."

"He is! Of course only I can see it, I can't cast the spell on you. Shhhh." She leaned closer.

"Have to find it," he said, trying to reach into a drawer and passing through it. "Here somewhere. Has to be. Wrote it right here. Have to let someone know. Gotta get it."

"He's saying he has to find something," she told the others. "He 'wrote it' right here? A book? He was writing a book?"

"That would make sense- wait you're really seeing something? Ghosts are actually real? No joking around? What do you see?"

"Something is here. He's a sort of pale looking griffon. Gray. Not really seeing it, the magic- never mind I'll explain later. Gifflepop? Can you hear me?"

Now it was the ghost's turn to be surprised, and it looked over at her.

"Did you take it? You did, didn't you? Give it back!"

"I didn't take it. Take what? What are you trying to find?"

"Manuscript. Almost finished. Have to find it. Has to be here somewhere. Has to be. Maybe the shelves?" He went over and tried vainly to pull the books down. "Have to find it."

"You looked away?" Origami told her.

"Huh? Oh, he's over here now. Checking the shelves. Open those drawers, I don't think he can. Maybe what he's looking for is in there?"

"Okay. He's not going to lunge through me, is he? Besides there's nothing in there we checked."

"Better stand to the side. No, the other, yeah right there. Maybe if the ghost sees there's nothing he'll stop looking?"

"I doubt it. Can't be that easy, I mean come on."

She slid the drawers open and Gifflepop did indeed go right for them.

"Nothing," he wailed. "Have to find it."

"You wrote a book? What was it called?" Gianna asked him.

"Broomstick Barnacles. Pirate story. Young witch becomes pirate captain. Empty genre. Wide open. Researched everything. Have to find it."

"Broomstick Barnacles?" Gianna repeated for Origami. "Ever heard of it? Something about a witch? What's a witch?"

"In stories, a witch is usually classified as an evil magic user. But in reality they're more about nature magic than anything, and they aren't evil. But then, we're talking about his time," she pointed with a hoof.

"No, he's over here now."

"Well I can't tell that, can I?"

"Well, in his story one became a pirate captain. Ring any bells?"

"Not at all. But then, I focus on books that actually teach me things."

"Uh huh. Not so useful in this situation though, is it?"

"Look, you just keep him talking or whatever and I'll head to the library. Look around for the manuscript. Maybe it is still here, and was never published. I'll check the library for books about pirate witches."

"Fair enough. Let's go check your bedroom Gifflepop."

"Didn't sleep with it!" he protested.

"But it's not here, right?"

"Got to be here. Have to find it. Have you seen it? So many pages..."

"Ghosts have a one track mind," she reported. "Thought you might want to know."

How come she got that spell? I want to see the ghost too. Ask it so many questions. This could change our complete understanding of life. And Gianna is the one in control? Aarg!

So Origami headed to the local library, getting some strange looks now that she wasn't accompanied by a member of the defense force. But nogriffon stopped her going in, and she went to the card catalog to look for some things. *A book about 60 years ago, about pirates. Broomstick Barnacles she says. Can't be that many.* It took far longer than she would have liked, she kept running into book titles that looked interesting and going to have a look, as it seemed griffons and ponies had very different libraries. *Another thing we can trade once we have portals everywhere. Books. Griffons have just as much literature as we do it seems, and on some strange topics. But we could better understand them by understanding their stories.* But she did find a novel in the right time period, by a griffon named Goldquills. But it wasn't "Barnacles and Broomsticks" it was "Black Cats and Crossbones." *But how many books in the 'witch becomes a pirate captain' can there really be? Nothing else by "Goldquills" so I have to wonder if the author never wrote again because he or she didn't write the book in the first place.* She spent more time tracking down the author's real name, with the help of the librarian finding his name to be Greenclaw, and digging up the address from public records. He lived in Tailfeather, and given the age of the printing the librarian said it would be a miracle if he were still alive today. It seemed their best lead though, and Origami paid the bits for a library card, and the 'rental fee' for the book that she would (the librarian insisted) get back when the book was returned. This wasn't discrimination, the rules were clearly posted so she paid without too much protest. The librarian perhaps privately thought she was nuts for taking out so old a book, especially about pirates, but it wasn't any of her business. Origami put it in her bag and headed back to the house.

"Any luck?" she asked, finding Gianna opening cabinets and talking to the air.

"Nothing. How about you?"

"I found this." She pulled the book out of the bag and set it on the counter. "Have him look it over."

"Black... cats..." Lime Twist started sounding out. "Hang on..."

"It's not the same title, I know," Origami told her. "I think someone stole his work after he died and didn't give him credit. Hence, ghost. Ask if he knew a Greenclaw in life."

"Did you know a Greenclaw when you were alive?"

"Sounds familiar? Don't know. Maybe. Found book?"

"Yes, it's here. But it was written by a Greenclaw, not you. Or was it?"

"Not my book," Gifflepop decided. "Different title. Awful cover. Not mine. Have to find my book."

"Take a look inside, sir," Gianna requested, flipping it open. "Are these your words?"

"Not my book. Can't be. Different title. Have to find-" He looked down at the pages and started to read. "MY book! This is my book!" he shouted. "Stole my work. Who did it? Did you steal it? Found it! Can't believe it!"

"Well?" Origami asked.

"Oh right. I'm so used to him now. He says it's his. So what do we do about it?"

"I have the author's address. Or thief or whatever you want to call him. Let's head over there, see what he has to say."

"Can you come with us?" Gianna asked Gifflepop. "Can you, I don't know, haunt the book or something?"

"My book. Found it. Not my title. Don't understand."

"Well, he will or he won't," she reasoned. "Let's go."

The four, as the ghost it seemed didn't want to lose sight of the book now, headed to the address Origami found. "It could be long sold," she cautioned. "But maybe the new owners can tell us what happened to Greenclaw."

"My book!"

"Let's hope so. Ghosts are pretty annoying, actually."

"So turn your spell off!"

"But I need to know he's still here when we confront Greenclaw. So I can tell if he moves on or whatever. Wow, this has so many implications I don't even know where to start with them..." *I could cast it again of course. Wait, the spell is cast for an hour, it's now independent of me. How do I just turn it off?*

"Ghost attack?" Lime Twist asked.

"You mean attack the griffon who stole his book? He couldn't touch anything in the house, I doubt he can really attack. But I don't know. We don't have ghost fighting magic," Origami admitted.

"Healing?" she suggested.

"I wonder..."

"Some old griffon lives here," Ginna remarked as they got closer. An old griffon was sitting on the porch of the house in a rocking chair.

"That may be our guy, he's old enough," Origami decided.

"Hello!" Gianna called to him, coming up the path. "Greenclaw?"

"What's that?" he shouted back. "Is someone there? Come closer you're just a blob. I don't talk to blobs. Not since I was a young griffon. Fed him jellybeans, changed his shape. Loved that blob. Rescued his princess, he went off with her, lost my blob. Then I found this frog, right? And he got into something, got real big. Jumped down a hole. Had to follow him, rescue my frog."

Oh boy, his mind is gone, Origami thought in an annoyed tone.

"Yes, I'm Gianna. We're here about your book?"

"I'm not much of a looker now as you can see. Go bother someone else."

"No, your book!"

"My hook? I gave up fishing when I started to go blind."

"Use eyes, fishing?" Lime Twist asked, confused.

"Never been," Origami admitted.

"Book! Black Cats and Crossbones. Hold it up, Origami. He can't be totally blind?"

"Oh that! Been out of print forever. You read it? Wow, a fan after all these years. Can't really do autographs..." He held up a claw, that showed him shaking pretty bad.

"We don't think you wrote it," Origami shouted at him. "Fess up! You stole the work of Gifflepop!"

"Griffonbob? Never heard of him."

"Gifflepop!"

"Say, I had a friend named Gifflepop. Died years ago. What a guy."

"Ah hah! So you admit it!"

"Admit what?" He seemed genuinely confused.

"This is going to take forever."

"Hello?" Another voice was heard and everyone looked over at the door. A griffon was standing there. "I heard shouting. Dad, are you okay?"

"Fan!"

"We can move your chair into the shade if you're too hot. Was he shouting at you? Sorry about that, usually he's pretty quiet out here..."

"No, my book you dolt!"

"Book?" He looked over and Origami held it up.

"Oh that. An interesting work no doubt. Surprised anyone remembers it at this point."

"Can we talk to you about it?" Gianna asked. "There may be more to it than you realize."

"Oh dear. I was afraid of this. Yeah, come on in. I'm Graybeak by the way." He gestured for them to enter and took them to the kitchen, where he looked the book over. They introduced themselves and handed the book over. "Good condition for the age," he remarked.

"It's a library book. Isn't taken out much," Origami explained.

"Ah. So what about it?"

"We have it on good authority your father didn't write it. A griffon named Gifflepop, who he admitted he was friends with, did. But he must have died before it could be fully published. Your father simply changed the title and put his own name on it. Well, I say simply maybe he changed other names but it's not his work, is the point."

"We always wondered where it came from," he admitted with a sigh. "He had never shown that much interest in writing, and then all of a sudden he was publishing a book. Just said he had worked on it in his spare time, as a surprise for us, if I recall correctly. Naturally I took his word for it. Sold well enough, at the time. Strange subject matter though." He sighed again. "So it's not his. But at this point who cares? My father isn't long for the world, and any money from it is long gone. Can you even prove what you say?"

"You won't believe this, but the ghost of Gifflepop cares quite a bit. We don't want money or anything, he just wants to see his book with his name on it."

"The 'ghost...'" Graybeak asked suspiciously.

"I know, it sounds crazy. But it's real. He's here in this room now. I happen to be one of the only griffons that has studied magic." *Not sure I should be telling you this but I'm admitting I see ghosts and you need a reason for it. That reason is magic. And I can't hide it forever.* "I know a spell to see what is normally not seen. I can see the ghost. He's been looking for his book since his death, most likely. Alone in his old house, not able to touch anything or do anything but look for his book. That your father stole. You need to make it right."

"Come ooonnnnn."

"No, I did. I can heal myself, want to get a knife and cut me? I can do magic, that much I can prove. I'm a beginner, I only know three spells but this is real."

"Think about it logically," Origami added. "We won't gain from this. The story is too crazy for us to have simply made it up, and you admitted yourself you always had doubts. Is it out of the question we're wrong? Search your feelings, you know it to be true."

He looked at the book a moment. "Okay, but again, so what? I guess I could do another printing. Put an apology in the front on my father's behalf. See if there's any corrections to be made, have an editor look it over and polish it for a new revision. Maybe it'll reinvigorate the genre. Who knows!? But who gets the money? I guess a charity in his name? I'll just take a *small* fee, for the effort I mean." His eyes were starting to get a little sparkle in them.

"Get his word," insisted Gifflepop.

"He wants your word," Gianna told him. "That you'll do all that."

"He?" He looked nervously around. "He really is here?"

"Standing right next to you."

"Then he has my word. I'll do what I can to set this right. By the idol!" He jumped back as the ghostly form of Gifflepop became visible in the room. Origami's eyes widened, Lime Twist grinned, hanging out with these weirdos had been worth it after all. Look at the adventures she was having, and they did this sort of thing *all the time*? What a world to come into. Gifflepop had enough time to bow his head to Graybeak and then was gone.

"He's gone," Gianna breathed. "I can't see him anymore."

"Ghosts are real!" Graybeak managed. "This changes everything. I saw it with my own eyes. I have to tell everyone. Ghosts are... nogriffon would ever believe me."

“That’s about the size of it,” Origami agreed with a nod. “Better do what you said. Don’t want him coming back now, do you?”

“Yeah. No. What? Publisher. Right. Ghosts...”

“Better give him a minute,” Gianna patted his back. “It’s his first time.”

Gianna's Journal
Entry 1: Where to Start?

I've been doing a lot of thinking lately about what Friendship really means, and, to make sure I don't forget the lessons I've learned, I wanted to start keeping a journal. To be completely honest, this is essentially going to be an extended letter to you, Sunny, one that I hope will survive the march of time and somehow make it to you in your Age. We didn't know each other for all that long but I'm finding, now that our adventure together is over, that I really miss you. I'm sorry I wasn't more clear about how much I appreciate you and the enthusiasm you exude while you were still here. I hope what we accomplished made a lasting impact that only changed your present for the better and that you're now home, safe and sound, and sharing tales of your time in Equestria's past with your friends.

Despite all I've accomplished since leaving Griffonstone, I know there's still so much more left to learn. I'm getting the impression that it's a never ending journey and, by keeping a journal, I'm hoping that maybe the wisdom I gain over my life might find its way to you in the future and provide valuable insight. At least that's my hope! I'm not vain enough to think that everything in here is going to be some great revelation! But maybe it'll at least help me sort through my thoughts and reflect on how I can be a better Griffon, a better role-model, and a better friend.

Let me start with an apology on Origami's behalf. What she said to you was cruel and a horrible way to leave things. I truly believe that deep down, she didn't mean it but I suppose time will tell if I'm right or wrong about that. We've been able to find a way to restore her flight and a method for her to use magic but...she hasn't been the same since our fight with the Pony of Shadows. Losing her magic...broke her. She's healing but I can sense the scars. I keep trying to be helpful and encouraging but...she's so stubborn sometimes! I'm not sure if that comes from her obsessive study of magic and all of the rules, laws, and formulas that govern it, or if her need to find clarity and understanding about everything is what drew her to magic in the first place.

After you left, we went to revisit the Dragon, Guru Senior, for a new prophecy about how to help Origami and the others that lost their ability to fly and this new method of magic was apparently the best solution. It's definitely helped, but she gets frustrated a lot more often now than she used to. I suppose that's sort of where I'm at with my own Friendship Journey...trying to learn how to be a friend while recognizing what your limitations are. I wish I could do more for her but all I can do is be there to support her.

I know she doesn't blame me for what happened with the Pony of Shadows, but in my quiet moments, I do still feel shades of guilt for not protecting her from that explosion. I know those thoughts aren't helpful, and I don't dwell on them, but they're there and they serve to drive me to be more vigilant in standing in the way of danger. I suppose that's my first piece of sage advice: ***Learn from your mistakes but don't let them define you.*** I suppose here's another thing I just realized: While empathy is generally a hallmark of a good Griffon or Pony, having too much empathy can prevent you from having a fair and objective viewpoint. I recently sided with someone that was wronged and it caused me to

become callous towards the perpetrator. I saw how upset the wronged party was and that stirred up feelings of righteousness. So that's my second piece of sagely advice: ***Avoiding assumptions and striving for perspective leads to true wisdom.***

Let me end this hopefully first of many entries with a bit of introspection. I always wanted to be a hero. Growing up in Griffonstone (I hope after all we did it now exists in your time!) I was constantly reminded of the history of our Kingdom with all of its highs and lows. I would fantasize that one day I'd locate the Idol of Boreas and help rebuild our Kingdom. Even then, I never desired it for the power and prestige it would surely bring. I only hoped that it could help make that love and joy that our people show each other during the Blue Moon Festival repeat every day.

When Twilight opened her School of Friendship, I saw another path to making that a reality, one that didn't rely on an item that could be lost, stolen, or misused. Even though I haven't been there that long, I truly believe in what we're being taught and that embracing the values that comprise true Friendship is how Griffonstone can return to the greatness of the past. I try to live out the elements of Harmony as best I can and constantly check my motivations for purity. I want to be Honest because I know how lies and half-truths lead to mistrust. I want to be Kind because everyone deserves kindness, I want to encourage Laughter because life is meant to be enjoyed. I want to be Generous because it uplifts others and encourages them towards selflessness. I want to be Loyal because no one can do everything on their own and we all need someone that is there for them no matter what. I hope that others show me those same qualities and forgive me when I fall short. Friendship is a journey that never ends.

And then there's Magic. I actually have some of that now and it's pretty amazing stuff (as I'm sure you're well aware!). There's so many different kinds of magic though and I don't think the Element really refers to the sort that Twilight and Origami study. There's the special powers that some ponies possess, the magic that makes cutie-marks appear, the magic that uplifts a mortal pony to an Alicorn, and many other examples. I don't really know anything about how any of that works, but I do know that throughout history, magic sometimes makes itself known to and through those that embrace the other Elements. That's the magic I want to bring back to Griffonstone, not necessarily some tangible force that rebuilds the kingdom, but a recipe for a greater type of Magic that the other elemental ingredients make possible.

I don't know if any of that will be useful to you and your friends in your time, but I hope that if not, subsequent entries will be. At the very least, I wanted you to know that your bravery in coming to my time not only changed the future, but also my present. I'm a better Griffon for having known you, and, while I'm sad to not be able to tell you that in person, I'm glad you're surrounded by friends that I'm sure feel the same way.

Chapter 15

Twenty minutes later

No bones about it

The three walked through the town, Gianna pointing out various things mostly for Lime Twist's benefit, when they heard raised voices coming from up ahead. Curious, Gianna headed in that direction and came upon an empty lot where two adult dragons sat looking down at two arguing griffons. Some younger griffons were sort of idling nearby as well, as the area looked like it had been recently demolished. Slabs of stone sat near the dragons, clearly they had recycled the stone used in whatever house had been here and were waiting to put it back up as new walls. But they couldn't because the area had been marked off with ropes, and so were sitting doing nothing. As the dragons had come into view Gianna got worried because she figured they were the ones being yelled at, but it turned out to be the two griffons arguing between them.

Time to put those friendship lessons to work! Gianna thought to herself. *But first, let's get a sense of the situation.* She went over to the two dragons, figuring they could give her an unbiased summary of what was happening here. "Greetings, dragons," she said to them. "Seems like a bit of a heated discussion there." She pointed a claw back at the two who were arguing.

"Yeah, I think we'll have to get a new assignment. This one doesn't seem like it'll be resolved any time soon," replied the one on the right.

"What's the hold up? I see you've got the materials ready."

"Science, so they say," the other one told them.

"The what?"

"When we were digging the new foundation we found some old bones. Then we found the big one." He pointed with a claw, but Gianna couldn't get a look at the exact place he was pointing. "Some experts were brought in and apparently it's from some ancient creature. They want to excavate it, study the bones for science. But I guess they're disagreeing on where to start looking or something."

"Finding hidden things just happens to be my specialty. I'll go talk to them."

"Whatever," neither of them seemed to care. She nodded and headed over to the roped off area. She was about to step over the rope when both griffon's archeology senses went off and they turned, shouting for her to stop, didn't she see the rope?

"Well I have to step over the rope if I want to talk to you," she told them when they carefully made their way over to her.

"You could step on a valuable specimen," said the left one.

"The rope is to keep griffons out while we recover all specimens," the one on the right added.

"Do we need to post 'keep out' signs as well? What do you even want? This has nothing to do with the defense force."

"To solve your dilemma," Gianna explained proudly.

"We don't need any cadets at the moment, I'm not going to claw Glento's face off, despite how stubborn he's being right now."

"And in exchange, I will not tear Garsa's feathers right off his wings, despite how stubborn *he's* being right now."

"We are the very model of restraint. No need for the guard to get involved, so you may be on your way."

“Yes, to be frank, you’re not needed.”

Gianna shook her head. “You don’t understand. I can help you pinpoint where the bones are, right under the ground.”

“Impossible!” both scoffed. “Go play somewhere else,” Glento agreed. The two nodded to each other, figuring the matter closed.

“I’ll use magic.”

The two turned back to her, stared at her uncomprehendingly, and started laughing uproariously. She stoically allowed them to have their fun.

“Use magic, a griffon, can you believe it Glento?” asked Garsa.

“I can’t, Garsa,” replied Glento. “But wait...”

“Yes?”

Both looked at her again.

“Are you a pony,” asked Garsa, “that has disguised herself as a griffon? I’ve heard there’s been some... incidents... with ponies not being exactly welcomed around town. So you’re pranking them by shopping as a griffon and then before you leave revealing the truth? You shouldn’t impersonate a cadet though, that’s asking for trouble.”

“I’m an honorary member of the defense force and a griffon. I am also a student of magic, and of friendship,” she insisted. “And I can find your bones.”

“Prove it,” both said at the same time.

“But watch where you put your claws,” Glento told her.

“Of course.” Gianna closed her eyes and went into her mana palace, standing before the screen in the main room. *Need to adjust the power of the spell, don’t know how far away the bones are going to be and I can’t exactly dive into the earth to get closer. I need to stay here above ground.* She mentally dragged the beginning of the spell formula into the proper boxes, then focused on the “expand” part of the formula. She increased it 5 fold, completing the spell and moving it over to the spells tab. Reading the description she was satisfied, and opened her eyes. Drawing magic into her aura from her core she cast, briefly lighting up. She looked the two over, senses now showing her the aura around the two which indicated confusion. But any griffon looking at them would have seen the same written on their faces, having seen the light show Gianna just put on. She went over to the bone, clearly feeling it under the ground, and sensed a sort of “connection” just over there. She grabbed some flags and moved around the area, planting them where she felt that connection the strongest. She had to go outside the roped off area, but finally out of flags she ended the spell and went back to the two, still unable to believe their eyes.

“Are you messing with us? What was that?” Garsa asked at last.

“It was magic. You think unicorns are the only ones that can do it? Think again. Now, we just have to get the bones out. I figure they could be repaired if broken, we have repair magic too thanks to Origami. So we can be probably a little more rough than you normally would. But I was also thinking, could you use cleaning magic to, like, loosen them up? Then we can just pull them out of the ground?”

“Hold on, hold on, you’re moving too fast,” Glento insisted. “Go back to the part where *griffons* can use magic.”

“I admit, it’s a rather recent development. We not sure if we’re opening it up to the general population just yet, we’re still very early in the process. But the hope is one day any inhabitant of Equestria can one day learn magic if they wish.”

“How do we get to the top of that list? Is there a fee? We’ll gladly pay a fee,” Garsa decided.

“I’ll pay double whatever he pays to get to the very top,” Glento countered. “Is it a class we can attend or...”

Gianna laughed. “Boys, boys, please! I can’t reveal any details at this time. We’re going as quickly as we can to make sure it’s safe and should be opened up to all. We can let you know what is

decided. Going around doing magic like this is part of the process, to make sure there are no ill effects of griffons doing magic.”

“Hold on now,” Garsa mused, “now it’s we who are moving too fast. We don’t know if this is some kind of scam yet. We saw some *supposed* magical glow and she put some flags out. That doesn’t *prove* anything. For all we know she’s lying about being a griffon and *is* a pony in disguise.”

“Quite right,” Glento agreed. “It could still be some kind of scam.”

“But I didn’t insist on any talons,” Gianna told them. “How am I scamming you?”

“Yet,” stressed Garsa. “You didn’t insist on any *yet*. You still could, once we were deep inside your little scam.”

“I promise I won’t.”

“Hummmmmmmmm,” both hummed. “What are you thinking, Garsa?” asked Glento.

“I’m thinking a bit of a test, Glento,” answered Garsa. “You all wait right here.” He went over to a cart and got out several rocks, which he balanced in one claw and walked back over. He set them down in front of Gianna. “One of these is a geode. I was saving it for a demonstration as I sometimes do a guest appearance down at the school. If you can point to the one that’s a geode on the first try, I’ll believe you.”

“Oh, very good test,” Glento agreed. “Yes, one in four chance. That’s good odds.”

“Sure thing,” Gianna answered with a shrug. She cast the spell again and pointed to the one that felt more hollow inside.

“She’s got it right,” Garsa gasped. “No hesitation at all. That one magical ability would revolutionize our work, do you realize that?”

“Thinking the same thing, my old friend. If it is possible for griffons to do magic, as this demonstration seems to prove, we must learn this spell at the earliest opportunity!”

“And you say there’s the possibility of an easier extraction of the specimen?”

“Yes, yes, please demonstrate!” They indicated she should go ahead, but Ginna stepped aside.

“Origami? You’re up.”

“I’ll give it a try,” she agreed halfheartedly. She walked over to the bone and gathered magic, casting the base 20cm spell without any more mana put into the ‘wash’ part of the formula. The bone, sticking out of the ground, gleamed white. It was totally clean. She was going to do the same with the racer, move the area of the spell but most of the bone was underground. She couldn’t be sure where it was, not knowing if the bone was straight or curved, or what angle it was currently sitting at as it was just a nub of bone sticking out the dirt. So now that she thought about it, that plan wasn’t going to work.

“How much power did you put into it?” Gianna asked, walking over. “It didn’t seem like much, unless you’re much better at gathering mana than I am.”

“I just used the spell I learned. I made this part near the surface that I can see clean. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“That’s... okay?” She went to wiggle the bone but of course most of it was not under the spell at all. “You need to try and get the whole thing. Make it two meters deep, that should do it, and you can certainly handle that much MP at once. It’s like 20 MP, I mean come on.”

“I don’t think it’ll work. Let’s go.” She dropped the spell.

“Er, you don’t even want to try it?” Gianna asked as she walked away, somewhat surprised. “It really should work. This part seems clean, if you maintain the spell the bone can’t get dirty. We can then just wiggle it out as it should be, I don’t know, almost considered frictionless at that point. It’s surrounded by dirt that can’t touch it. Casting it in such a small area means it’s still gripped by the dirt underground. It’s not a good test.”

“I just don’t think it’ll work.”

I guess I won’t belabor the point. “Oh. Well, sorry gentlemen. You’ll have to do it the hard way.”

"Not a problem," Garsa told her. "Just giving us a better idea of where to start looking is a huge time saver. I wouldn't have even considered looking way over there. This skeleton must be massive, it really might be an excellent specimen!"

"Yes, we'll have to rope off that section too," Glento agreed.

"It seems to want to be together, I felt it," she admitted. "Good luck."

"Thank you!"

"Wait, let me give you our contact information, so you can tell us about the magic classes or whatever once they're ready!"

"Yes, yes, wait right here!"

So with their business cards tucked away Gianna followed Origami, scowling. *What's up with her? Is she paranoid about using up her mana or something? I would have happily waited afterwards while she meditated if she felt 'vulnerable' or whatever. Even if she used the whole 300+ we have right now trying stuff, it wouldn't take that long to refill our cores. I thought she would be more into experimenting with this magic, as she claims that and paper folding are all she's interested in. But it seemed she hardly cared to even try. At least I advanced the quest, if she had tried a bit harder and gotten that bone out, I bet she would have too. I should have looked at her aura when I had the chance, is the darkness growing? I hope it leaves her soon, if it's the cause of her current mood. Of course then it's running around Equestria again, but at least I can finally tell her about it and we can make a plan to deal with it. This waiting is driving me crazy.*

"Where are we going again?" Origami asked suddenly.

"Oh right. I wanted to check in with Gallina and tell her the house can be knocked over. Then I have an idea I want to bring up to the council."

"Don't forget to tell her about the books, take them out before they knock the place down."

"Er, okay?" Gianna was confused. "Why can't you tell her?"

"We'd have to go back to the North Star if you wanted us all to come. I can't make Lime Twist fly after all."

"Sorry!" she squeaked.

"Not your fault," Gianna assured her. "So what are you saying?"

"Just go ahead. Get that done and come find us. We'll be around."

She looked between the two ponies. *Wish I could tell Lime Twist to keep an eye on her, but she won't get into any trouble will she? Saying that now in front of her is no good. She's the one supposed to be keeping an eye on Lime Twist.* "Okay. I'll just do that, then."

"See you later."

"Bye!" Lime Twist waved.

Gianna spread her wings and took off.

Gallina told her there could be a bit of a wait, three groups were ahead of her. She said that would be fine and took a number. *At least the council has more hours now, as it seems more griffons are coming here about things.*

What seemed like hours later (because it was) she was finally let in and stood before them.

"I just have something I want to propose for a vote or however it happens," she told them.

"Go ahead," Geran told her.

"I would like a school of friendship opened somewhere in griffon territory. I know it'll be easier for griffons to go to the one in Ponyville once we have gateways all over the place, but some griffons may still be hesitant to send their kids to another land. One controlled by ponies. This would be a good compromise and make sure the message of friendship reached as wide an audience as possible." *And if it works here maybe one can be opened in the dragon lands too. We'll get these friendship schools open*

everywhere and make sure Sunny's future can fail to happen in multiple ways. There's the dungeons we can open for better magic, the schools, no crystal, we still have to do everything we can to keep everyone together.

"One problem I see with that," Gailisano told her. "Who would teach classes there? It would still have to be staffed by ponies, as it'll take years for graduates of the school, such as yourself, to be ready to teach."

"I admit, it would probably have to be a mix," she admitted. "A pony would initially have to teach the friendship classes. But everything else- history, culture, math, reading- could be done by griffons. Whoever runs it should be a griffon too. The friendship school is just a school, after all. It just happens to feature friendship classes as well as everything else."

"And the students? Should we allow ponies to come here?" Galito asked her.

"I have no idea how long it would take to build, or when it would open, but yes. If the portals allowed it, a few students should be dragons, a few ponies, maybe even some changlings. How better to learn to get along?"

"In the current climate..." Glitzzy cautioned.

The others nodded.

"Difficult," Galito agreed. "But perhaps all the more necessary because of it."

"In any case," Gumberpatch told her, "we'll take it under advisement. Scribe, add it to the agenda for the next budgetary meeting and we'll vote on the proposal to create a committee to study the feasibility of opening a branch of the friendship school here." The scribe nodded and started writing on a different document. "We can certainly speak with the ponies about their challenges running the one *they* have, and what pitfalls to avoid. As for you..." he eyed Gianna.

"Yes?"

"An agent 'on the inside' so to speak would be helpful if you really did want to move forward with this. Compile a list of what you think works at the school and what doesn't. What problems have you seen? How are conflicts resolved? How many conflicts are there? That sort of thing. Submit it when you get a chance, and keep us informed of any major events that happen there that might sway your case one way or the other. Things the ponies may gloss over, thinking them unimportant or not worth mentioning. They do seem to have a much more cheerful outlook than we do, so they may not tell us everything we need to know."

Yeah, except for the one I travel with, apparently. But she may have an excuse. "Very well, I'll drop it off when I'm done."

"Any other business? Glitzzy asked her.

"That is all at this time," she replied, inclining her head. "Thank you for your time, council."

"Of course, of course. Send in the next group!"

Gianna was ravenous by the time she got out- the others had eaten in town- and she convinced them to take the short hop over to her hometown so she could visit her family while they were here. Origami said that was fine, she got to see her family all the time after all, so she couldn't begrudge Gianna a visit. They stayed there the night, and headed back to Ponyville in the morning to see who they could help and finish up their quests. Luckily, Origami got to advance hers because Gianna's brothers and sisters were always breaking things, so doing the repair spell a bunch helped the family out and got her another step closer. Otherwise they spoke about their adventures since the last time they had stopped in, helped prepare dinner, and Gianna got to stay in her own room for once. Her family was sad to see her go in the morning, but realized she was doing important work out in the world, representing them for everyone to see. They were quite proud of her, even if they thought she should spend more of her time off from school at home.

"The building for the portal between Ponyville and Canterlot has been put up," she told them. "There's a big sign and everything. 'Future site of teleportation network portal.' They've been writing

about how it would work in the papers, getting ponies hyped for it. Once that's active I can come here much easier. Hopefully that will be soon."

"I'm glad we're trying it out 'internally' before giving it to others," Origami agreed. "I know we proposed an internal system for the other kingdoms, like griffons, so they could control their own portals. Solving any problems that come up would be far easier for us. Then sell the system to them."

"We'll look forward to it, and going to Ponyville to see the school and where you've been staying!" her mother told her.

"I can't wait!"

Chapter 16
Helping around home
The next day

The North Star parked outside Ponyville, as Lime Twist agreed another day of walking around and talking to ponies- or at least hearing Origami talk to her- would do her good. So they headed there and agreed to show her around. It was fairly early in the morning when they spotted the local mailmare, Bubbles, looking around on the ground dejectedly.

“Morning, Bubbles,” Origami called to her, because everypony knew this particular mare, and her love of muffins. “What’s got you down?”

“The strap on my mail bag broke,” she told her, holding it up. “I’ve been trying to tie it together but not having much luck. Plus I think a few letters blew away when it fell. I have no idea how I’m going to find them.”

“The strap is easy, I can take care of that,” she told her.

“And I can look for the letters,” Gianna announced. “I’ll have them back into your hooves soon.”

“You really mean it?”

Origami easily repaired the strap, getting her another message about advancing the quest, while Gianna put her usual spell on herself and started flying around. Then she landed, again doubled the area the spell covered, and took off again. *This is much better.* She found two letters right away, fluttering around so she grabbed them and returned them. Then another a moment later, getting a message herself about the quest as she took the wayward letter in her claws.

That’s convenient, she thought to herself. *I don’t have to keep looking anymore. But I just might, not that I don’t believe you, Melemizargo.* But it seemed that was enough, she didn’t find any other letters despite running her MP down to zero as she crisscrossed the area Bubbles said she been in when the strap broke. *I should have cast it for an hour. Maintaining it is pretty nasty, only good for when I’m fighting something and don’t want to gather up so much mana.*

“Thanks you two. Didn’t know griffon eyes were *that* good. Wish mine were. Well, back to work then. See you two around. Nice meeting you, Lime Twist!” She flew off.

“Is that actually your name?” Gianna asked, realizing something at that moment. “That’s what the nurses at the clinic called you because of your cutie mark. And we’ve kept on doing it, but I never asked if you actually remembered. Really sorry about that, not actually asking your name.”

“I don’t,” she admitted. “For now, good a name as any. Should... relearn mix drinks, see if cutie mark means that.”

“Huh,” Origami mused. “You can have a cutie mark if you don’t even remember your talent. Seems to be it should go away until you rediscover it. You could have more than one, after all- talent I mean- maybe it would be different the second time. We know they come from Melemizargo now, he admitted as much. Or at least magic itself and he, as the avatar, took credit for it. Wonder if we could ask him. About you and about marks.”

“Fun to... rediscover.”

“Well, keep it in mind.”

"You know, it's not lost on me that ten minutes after we got here, there was a problem our magic could solve," Gianna told her. "I think that was the original intent. We really should have just stuck close to home. We would have been done by now."

"Still, needed to fix Lime Twist one way or the other," Origami protested.

"I guess you're right."

They headed to the castle to see Twilight, to check in with her as she would certainly want to see Lime Twist up and about like she was. But they were only halfway there when a familiar voice rang out telling them to run, something was out of control.

"I'd recognize that hat and cape anywhere," Origami muttered. "It's Trixie."

"Who?" Lime Twist asked.

"Traveling show pony-"

"Don't just stand there, it's on the loose!" she cried as she passed them. Origami noticed she had some bruises on her flank and she was bleeding. "We have to get out of here!"

The three shared a look and then looked in the direction she had come. Not far away was a strange looking pony shaped *thing*, made of stone. And it was coming closer.

Origami took charge. "Lime Twist, you can't fight or if you could you probably forgot how and this isn't your fight anyway. Stay with Trixie and get out of here. I'll try and blind it. Gianna, you smash it."

"Right!"

"You're going to attack it?" Trixie shrieked. "It's made of stone."

"Lucky for us," Gianna told her, casting.

"Wha?" Trixie couldn't believe her eyes, as Gianna's aura lit up. "How are you-"

"Just get going if you can't help," Origami told her.

"Fine. The Great and Powerful Trixie will leave it to you!" She took off, followed by Lime Twist.

Origami took to the air, then shaped her aura. She had been practicing this to regain her old abilities and a gust of wind erupted from her, kicking up a huge cloud of dust in front of the stone pony. It slowed as the dust engulfed it. This gave Gianna time to finish her spell and rush over there, the dust clearing just as she did. She smashed it with her claws, cracking it, but other than staggering it the figure was still up. Origami turned, Lime Twist and Trixie were nearby, probably the showpony in her that made her want to be nearby for the show. She flew over and started gathering mana. "I'll heal you up, stay still."

"Your friend?"

"She'll be fine. I'll just get in the way." She wasn't sure how badly Trixie was hurt but she decided on the minimal healing energies to at least get her somewhat patched up.

Meanwhile the thing fell over when it went to try and get past Gianna, clearly it was only trying to hurt Trixie. She didn't mind, and tore one of the legs off the thing. It struggled to rise.

Origami got lucky and gathered all the mana she needed for her first spell, but it wasn't enough. Trixie still looked hurt. With a sigh Origami started gathering again.

Gianna finished the stone figure off, hitting the crack again and widening it. The figure tore itself apart trying to move, and the head went bouncing along the path. Gianna warily watched it, but it didn't try to move again.

"Ah, the great and powerful Trixie thanks you for healing her," Trixie told Origami. "One of the rare pegasi that studies magic? Fine."

"Took care of it," Gianna told her, flying over with the head. "What happened?"

"Oh, a trophy!" Origami's eyes lit up. "I'll take that!"

"You're welcome to it," Trixie told her. "Trixie tried to enchant that stone statue to pull her wagon. So she did not have to do so herself. What a sight it would have been, Trixie's wagon pulled by a magical stone pony! It seems to have gone wrong somehow. Of course the great and powerful Trixie would have dealt with it one way or the other, once she got over her shock. She is glad neither of you were hurt."

"It didn't hurt anyone else, or damage anything on the way here did it?" Origami asked.

"No. It seemed single minded in not following Trixie's directions to pull the cart, and instead simply wanted to attack her. The nerve of that thing. Still, Trixie will discover where she went wrong. Perhaps starting with a smaller version that is easier to step on, and having it pull a small, replica, cart."

"That's good," Gianna told her.

"Trixie must reward you!" Trixie decided. "Here you go." She took several slips of paper from her cloak. "Tickets to Trixie's next show. Sure to amaze and delight!" She handed them over.

"Thanks."

"Thank you," Origami also said.

"Thank you," Lime Twist repeated.

"And now Trixie must be off. I think her cart is safe and didn't roll away when that thing broke free of the harness but she must check. Thank you again! See you at Trixie's next show!" She ran off.

"Trixie... she?" Lime Twist wondered.

"Yes, she's- oh one second." The two got congratulatory messages about helping and finishing their quest, then another curious message;

Information
Due to recent metaphysical circumstance your
total mana potential has increased
+20 Maximum MP

"What in the world does that mean?" Gianna asked, but Origami had no answer for her. She hadn't seen a message like it either.

"I'm just happy to get more MP," she announced. "To answer your question, yes, Trixie was born a stallion," she explained. "I mean it's obvious, we all walk around without clothes and even that cape she wears can't hide that. She's what's called transgender. She's more in your face about it, most don't speak in the third person or call themselves 'the great and powerful' every time they say their name."

"But... size?"

"Oh that. She probably takes potions every so often to give her a more feminine body type," she explained. "I think the potion is called HRT, for Horse Readjustment Transmutation. I don't know if she did voice training to have a feminine voice or takes potions for that too. Or maybe the one potion could help with that? Could go either way I guess."

"It's more common than you might think," Gianna told her. "It's really no big deal. She wants to be referred to as 'she' and so we do." She chuckled. "But she is over the top, I'll give you that. Never turns off her 'stage presence' I guess."

"Did they not have transgender ponies in your time?" Origami asked, curiously.

"Oh, I think... body types... interchangeable?" She lifted one of her legs.

Her eyebrows went up. "I guess if you can replace someone's legs, maybe their whole body wouldn't be a stretch? Artificial organs would be the first step, once you had replacements for all

them... yeah it could work. Everypony could have the type of body they wanted. As long as they didn't mind being sort of bulky and metallic."

"There could be sleeker models," Gianna realized. "Maybe this was an aesthetic choice for her. We can't really say."

"True."

"So Trixie... girl. Beautiful." She blushed.

"I guess we're going to her next show," Gianna teased, bumping her. "Bring her flowers!"

"Eeeeeee," she managed, wiggling in place in embarrassment.

"So we have the location of the next dungeon," Origami announced, looking at her status page. "We know from the map it's somewhere in the badlands. I suggest heading there overnight in the airship. That way if there's anything else we need to do in town we don't waste any time."

"Weren't we on our way somewhere? It'll come to me. I know of one thing we should do," Gianna told her. "The spa is right over there." She pointed with a claw. "We've been running around, yes it was me who wanted to go to Amphibia, but we are supposed to be on vacation. Let's go get cleaned up and pampered there for a bit."

"Yay, spa!" Lime Twist agreed.

"I'll just-" Origami tried to say.

"You're coming too!" Gianna forcefully "informed" her friend, dragging her towards the building.

"Fine..."

Some time later, three refreshed figures stepped from the spa building and decided upon their next move. The ponies working there had found a pump and removed the oil from Lime Twist, so she wasn't sloshing around anymore. They made a quick stop to store the jug of the stuff at Origami's house, and headed to the castle. Gianna remembered she wanted to talk to Twilight, and as it was about magic, Origami tagged along.

"You can also say hi," Gianna told Lime Twist. "I'm sure Twilight will be happy to see you outside of the facility."

"Uh huh," she agreed with a nod.

Spike met them at the door and brought them back to the lab, where Twilight was surrounded by the usual chalkboards and books. But there was a new addition, that of twisted metal rods and crystals scattered about the place. Several straight rods were gathered into what looked like an umbrella holder, that had crystal affixed to the tops of them.

"Can't talk now, give me a few minutes," Twilight told them, concentrating on the knife she was making.

"No rush," Gianna assured her. "What's she working on?" she whispered to Origami, who headed over to the collection of complete rods. Looking them over she saw they had been marked with runes, and she felt mana in the crystals on top.

"I believe this is a healing rune," she announced, tapping the one at the top. "These may be some kind of healing rod."

"That's what she called it," Spike told them, leaning against the wall. "Something she and Luna cooked up. Luna is making 'rods of greater treat wounds' while she's making the lesser 'rods of treat wounds.' Once she perfects it, maybe every house of healing in the land will have some on hoof."

"I wonder how the runing influences the amount of healing that's done?"

"Luna's are bigger," he told her.

"Excuse me?"

"Her crystals. The ones she puts on the top of the rod. They're bigger. Hold more magic or whatever, I guess?"

"Hummm..."

The group waited a few minutes until Twilight could safely stop, and she came over to them. "Sorry about that!"

"Not a problem," Gianna told her. "You're making healing rods?"

"That's right! We're experimenting with the metal, seeing minimum thickness required, if cheaper material can be used, that sort of thing. When they fail, well, you've seen the result." She indicated the twisted rods. "Plus trying to rune a small, curved line segment is a lot different from those plates we make for the teleportation gateways. Takes a lot more skill. I suppose they could be made square, but whoever heard of a square bar of healing?"

"I've never heard of the rod, so isn't that just marketing?" Gianna asked. "If I was bleeding all over the place, I don't think I would mind the shape of the object used to heal me."

"You may have a point. Anyway, what can I do for you? And Lime Twist, nice to see you again."

"You too."

"I had a couple of questions for you, if you don't mind?"

"Let's go sit at the table, we can talk there."

The group walked into the living room and had a seat near the fireplace. "I'd like to know more about magic in general," Gianna began. "Maybe you can recommend some books? The dungeon is great for practicality, but it's not big on explaining the theory behind things."

Twilight nodded. "In the time they were made, it was a practical time, as I understand it. You needed to be able to throw fire or heal a wound, and it didn't matter how or why it worked. Only that it did. We have the luxury of asking why, now that our society is somewhat stable."

"Somewhat?" Lime Twist asked.

"We had the Storm King invade us not that long ago," Twilight told her. "There are still hidden dangers in the world."

"At least we have a slightly different mentality now," Gianna mused. "With the preparedness day and all that. Tempest training the guard better, and maybe giving lots of creature dungeon magic soon enough."

"How's that going, by the way?" Twilight asked.

"Good. Heading to the dungeon to learn attack magic tomorrow. That and spell creation I guess, according to Stygian's notes."

"That should be interesting."

"I hope so." *I just hope we don't have to burn ourselves again...* "But that bring me to a specific question. What is the core? I mean we picked it up and assembled it out of a box. That can't be how it's done normally."

"I haven't gotten any reports from you," Twilight gently chided, looking over at Origami.

"I want to make sure it's a complete report," she protested. "Of all the dungeons!"

"That's fine. From what Luna has said they're half real, half dream state anyway. So what you were really doing is up to interpretation. What has been traditionally done, and by that I mean by those that aren't simply born with mana cores like unicorns are, is a ritual not unlike turning sand into glass. Think about it- mana is simply an energy that can be stored and released to do magic. We know now that the density can be manipulated by not letting it escape, it's how we make the metal we use for running."

"It was shown to be particles, sort of floating around, in the dungeons," Ginna agreed.

"It was shown physically? I really can't wait to read this report. Anyway, imagine taking those particles and fusing them together to make a sphere. Just like melting sand to make a drinking glass. The glass holds the liquid. The core holds the mana. It's the only thing it could be, mana tends to escape from just about anything else. Again, something we are really just learning about now, that we have researched spells to manipulate the manasphere directly."

"There's no way to capture a unit of mana normally," Origami agreed. "You can't put it under a microscope or perform double slit experiments with it. It's just there. You can study air by putting smoke or steam into it. See how it disperses. Can't do that with mana."

"And the mana becomes the magic, so all we see is the effect of the spell," Gianna reasoned. "There's no cutting out the mana core of the body and studying it either."

"Exactly. If you're really interested in the technical details, I suggest going to talk to Luna," Twilight told her. "She's had experience with both methods, and took more of an active interest in the underlying mechanics than even I did. I'm one of those ones that studied *spells*, not necessarily *magic*. Apart from the magic of friendship, of course."

"Of course."

"It's true," Spike spoke up. "She was always casting spells on me to test them out." He shuddered. "I still think I could have kept the mustache."

"You'll grow one of your own, if that's your destiny," she countered.

"I suppose it's the difference between a pony that needs some math to build a barn that's a certain size, and a pony that studies numbers," Origami decided.

"Exactly," Twilight agreed with a grin. "I like wallpapering walls, not putting in the plumbing."

"Okay, I'll keep that in mind when we're near the capital again," she promised. "My other major question was about those changlings we helped. Did anything ever come of their potion making?"

"You know, I never really heard," Twilight told her. "But something did come in the mail recently. A flyer for some kind of new service. We saved it, didn't we?"

"I'll go get it," Spike agreed. "It's just in the other room."

Twilight asked Lime Twist about how she was doing in the meantime, and when Spike came back he handed Gianna a flier. It was for something called a "Love Getaway" and was "for couples only." Their branch was in Baltimore, which made sense as it was near the swamp, and featured lots of hearts and black carapaced changlings. Along with "grand opening" and "reasonable rates" there wasn't much else to tell what the service actually *was*. But she looked it over.

"You can keep that," Twilight told her. "We don't need it."

"Thanks. Something else to check on if we're in the neighborhood. I'll let you get back to work."

"Good luck with the next dungeon. Take plenty of good notes!"

"I take the whole thing with me, I can make as many notes as you need," Origami told her. Twilight just looked confused.

Chapter 17
The next day
Forcing their way

As agreed, the North Star had flown to the badlands during the night and the two practitioners had said goodbye to Lime Twist, who they definitely hadn't ponynapped, and who could go back to the recovery facility any time she wanted. Honest. They had done their reading practice before bed, and Gianna had tried skimming a book and then going into her mana palace to see if she could further study it there. They had, after all, discovered every subjective ten minutes there seemed to be only one minute of real time. She had gotten a vaguely distorted book, not wanting to simply leave in a huff (*like Origami would*) while distracted by Lime Twist trying to read. She figured the technique had proven itself, and she just needed it to be refined before she was reading books by the dozens in only a few moments of real time. *If I was concentrating better on it, I bet it would have worked. Maybe I can get a spell to simply put the book in there, and read it later. Something to think about after the attack dungeon.*

"We shouldn't be too long," Gianna told her as they were about to jump out the door.

"When... give up?" she asked nervously.

"It's not that dangerous," Origami agreed. "We'll be back soon."

Lime Twist looked to CelestAI. "Follow orders?"

"If you're asking if I'll follow *your* orders in the event of an emergency, I can assure you any reasonable request will be honored. We will need to wait a reasonable time before I declare them missing, however."

Lime Twist scrunched up her face, trying to process this.

"We'll see you soon," Gianna promised. "Let's go."

The two flew around the area, keeping track of their status pages, and while they didn't see any obvious entrance the number went down to zero and then back up again. Gianna pointed and they landed, looking at an outcropping of rock that looked like it had a boulder stuck to it. "It must be nearby," she announced. "I'm down to only a few steps away."

"Same here. Let's look around."

"Uh huh."

Origami started walking around the column of rock while Gianna cast her mental expansion spell, fixing it for an hour, and three meters out. *If this one is like the others, there will be a main room where I can absorb mana. Might as well spend it now.* She didn't have long to wait, feeling there was a staircase behind the rock. *Ah, right. Have to show we learned something from the last dungeon before we go through the next one.* She stepped up to the rock and gathered mana, casting on her claws. The rock was pretty big so she decided overkill was the order of the day, and gathered until she felt the spell was about four times as powerful as the base version. With that she let it go and hit the rock. It was smashed out of the way rather well, leaving an easily climbable pile of stones there in the entrance they simply hopped over. Heading down the stairs they came to a large metal door, to the left of it was a shelf with some gems on it and a broken, iron key. Origami took this as her cue, and took the key up in

her hoof, casting the repair spell on it. The key flowed together and she unlocked the door. Setting the key on the shelf again it snapped in half.

"I guess the gems are a spell," Gianna remarked. "Maybe we'll learn that later?"

"I wonder if it'll break anything put on the shelf or just keys..." Origami wondered. "Let's get the door open."

They did, and stepped into the main room which, as Gianna expected, had a large crystal in the middle of it. They both replenished their magic and took a look at the doors. The leftmost one had a picture of a ball seemingly being thrown to one side. The door in the middle showed a candle flame, while the door to the right had a question mark. Origami tried that door, but it was locked, as was the door probably leading to the dungeon master's office and exit.

"Let's try the opposite one, then," she suggested, and opened the door with the ball on it. "After you."

The pair moved through the first set of rooms without resistance, the dungeon reinforcing the concept of zone, duration, and for Gianna, self. Origami's room however, showed something new. It was just the symbol, with a weight of 10, hanging in the air. Origami, being the brave and intelligent pony she was, completely chickened out of going into the room and announced she was going back to the main one.

"Okay?" Gianna said, surprised. She headed back as well and found Origami standing there.

"We should call Melemizargo, before we get any further," she decided. "I want to ask him if there's any sort of standard plan for going through these dungeons."

"Sure. Trial and error."

"There has to be a better way!"

"I don't think there is. The dungeon has to explain various concepts to us, through imagery. We have to show we understand the meaning behind each piece of the formula, so we know how it works together. If they just wrote down some words and we said the words that wouldn't show our understanding of anything. Otherwise Luna or Celestia or Stygian could just write down the symbols they use and tell us what they mean. Heck, we tried going into each other's mana palace and even that didn't work. I think the dungeon is doing something to us, and needs us to be in each room for a certain amount of time. We find the symbols in our mana palace, I think the dungeon puts them there. That's why we can't do it any other way."

"I'd rather hear it from him."

"Suit yourself."

She spent the 50MP and the chat window appeared. She turned it so Gianna could read it.

"You didn't need to call, I turned on the next dungeon when you finished the last one.

Small chance of anyone wandering in *there*. Or was there something else?" he asked.

"I just want to ask about the design of the place in general. This room showed me a floating symbol and weight. What am I supposed to do with that?"

"Well, what did you try doing with it?"

There was a moment of silence. "Nothing."

"I see. So without even going into the room and trying *something, anything*, you just decided to see if I would give you the answer. Is that it?"

"I don't want to cheat or anything," she hastily said, the words appearing in the chat quickly. "I just don't see anything to do in there!"

"Maybe it's not about sight. Maybe it's about what you feel. Magic can manipulate just about everything."

"So we just have to wander around and hope we get the right answer?"

"You must understand the concept it's trying to convey, yes. Every spell is going to be different. It's going to manipulate different things. There's no standard." The words *big sigh* were

written. **“Look, after this you’ll be asking for your own spells. So the meaning will be far more clear, because you’ll be the one requesting the formula, rather than being given it. That should make it easier on you.”**

“We know it’s our first, or her first I guess, attack spell,” Gianna said. “So it must have something to do with attack. And the imagery on the door showed a flying ball. We know that part of the formula names what we’re working with. The healing spell was simply ‘healing,’ right? So it’s an element, or object, though if there really wasn’t anything in the room it’s probably an element. Air? Not an object. The clues are there if you look for them, Origami.”

“So it’s nothing but trial and error?”

“That’s correct. What else could it be? You just want to pick up a sheet of paper, speak a word, and move on to the next room? How is that learning anything?”

“That’s what I told her!”

“Fine,” she grumbled. “I guess we’ll go back in and see what happens.”

“Actually, while I have you,” Gianna put up a claw. “General question?”

“Go ahead.”

“Magic is magic, right? I mean the runic stuff, and what we do, and pegasus flight, and moving clouds, it’s all magic.”

“Yes, it’s all magic. It uses up mana in one way or another. Flight is fairly efficient, the wings do a lot of the work. Unless a pony is going super fast, they won’t deplete their core just from that. Flying helps pick up mana anyway, they’re running into it I suppose.”

“Sure, we fly without magic. So can we study the runes in the books to help inform our spells or is the dungeon the only place to get them?”

“Oh dear. That’s getting close to the underlying structure of magic itself. But no, the ‘runes’ in the dungeon are just something you can think about when you’re putting spells together. It’s not exactly what’s used by the core. The same goes for making magical conduits on surfaces. Mana is filling them in, rather than being projected through them. So they need to be different, even to achieve the same effect. I’m not surprised you’re asking about it, there’s no runic dungeon to learn from. As that wasn’t used by ponies at the time they made these, only in Amphibia. I’ll give you a nice bonus to your potential and MP capacity if you set one up yourself. It would need three main areas? A mana density chamber, making the stylus, learning the spell to carve the material with the stylus, and a workbench to do the carving on. I can make a book on dungeon creation as one of the dungeon rewards if you want.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Okay. Want me to hang around, see if I can offer any hints?”

“I would appreciate it,” Origami told her.

“You got it.”

So the pair went back, and Gianna stopped in front of her mirror again as Origami entered the room with the floating symbol. As she got closer to it the symbol glowed and started pushing her back.

“I can’t get near it,” she complained. “But it doesn’t feel like air. Maybe shield?”

“How is ‘shield’ an element that you would *attack* with?” Gianna wondered.

“Well it’s not anything. It’s just a force pushing me back!”

Gianna slapped a claw to her face. “That sorta sounds like something you could attack some-pony with, does it not?”

“Oh. Force?”

“You’ll have to be a little more sure than that.”

“It’s force!” The light above the door went green, and the glow subsided, allowing her to pass.

“It was force.”

Sort of obvious, like he said. Interact with it, and see what it tells you. “So let’s move on.”

The next room Gianna got the force rune, and wondered if she should have a little fun with Origami trying to “guess” whatever-could-this-symbol-that’s-pushing-me-back-be? But she decided against it, and just said force, unlocking the door. Origami got “create” as her next room, something she already knew, so both were now in what was probably the final room. Gianna got the same “force” symbol again, but this time on a counter of 5. Nearby was a shelf with two pieces of a metal ball, each having a 5 and half the symbol on it. She looked it over, then at the walls. That same symbol featured on some pictures hung there, one of a stream of fire being stopped by it, another of a pony lifting a huge rock with the symbol on the side. Origami meanwhile got an empty room with a symbol and 1 on each wall. She walked over to it, intending to touch it but when she stopped the symbols vanished. She scowled at the wall and turned, to make sure the others had gone away too. They had, but in moving they came back. “It’s only there when I move. Force->create->move. It’s move.”

The door unlocked.

“What have you got, Gianna?” she asked.

“I think mine is about negating,” she decided. “Let me try something.” She picked up the two halves of the sphere and as the counter returned to 5 she flew over there. The counter was at 2 by the time she slapped the halves of the ball over the symbol. At 0 she felt a small jolt but no force escaped.

“It’s negate,” she announced, and both got messages they had learned a new spell.

Congratulations

You have created a new spell. Here is the description of your spell:

Zone 5->Fleeting 2->Force 10->Create 1->Move 1 weight 19
Throw a ball of force within 5m doing minor damage to the target

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.
Let your strength and wisdom blossom as you
and the mana grow together.

Congratulations

You have created a new spell. Here is the description of your spell:

Zone 1->Maintained 3->self 2->force 10->negate 10 weight 26
While maintained, become immune to minor effects of force

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.
Let your strength and wisdom blossom as you
and the mana grow together.

The next room was a long corridor, and the two were together again. On the left side were holes, five of them, and peeking around there seemed to be a cannon in there. On the floor in front of the cannon was a pressure plate, and to the right was a grating covering a small alcove. Inside the alcove they could see a slime waiting patiently.

“Seems like I can become immune to force, which a cannonball would count as,” Gianna remarked. “I’m getting the sense of how to proceed.”

“So you should put the spell on, right?”

“Let me see how this works. I’m going to try triggering it and just get out of the way.”

“Seems dangerous but it’s your beak.”

Gianna gently pressed at the pressure plate, which yielded nothing. She got low and put more pressure on it, but again it didn’t budge. So she took a running start and jumped on it with all her might. The grating to the right started to slide down, and the cannon went off, catching her in the side as she tried to dodge out of the way. She got slammed into the wall as the grating went back up again, and the ball hit the floor with a thud. It started to dissolve.

“Ow!” Gianna exclaimed.

“So, put the spell on first, right?”

“I think you might be onto something there,” she admitted.

“Let me heal you.”

“K.”

“Okay, now I want to try a few things,” Origami announced after Gianna was healed up. “I want to get a sense of how strong this spell is.”

“You don’t want to cast it on me, do you? One cannonball a day is my limit!”

“Then it’s going to be a bad day,” she remarked, indicating the five holes. “But no, watch.” She cast her new force spell on the floor, triggering it and making the cannon go off again. The ball bounced off the grating without even rattling it, and once again the ball started to vanish at once. “So about the same as your pounce I guess? Now I want to see how accurate it can be.” She stood to the far left and aimed her spell at the slime inside the first chamber. Her shot barely made it through the hole she was aiming for, the edges of it lighting up a little as it passed, but it hit the slime square in the everything and it vanished. A mote of light was left, which went into her.

“Nice shot!” Gianna praised. “That’s impressive.”

“A lucky shot, I’m sure,” Origami countered. “One in twenty, if I had to make a guess.”

“That seems fairly specific, but if you’re sure.”

“I am. So you have to protect me from the cannonball, and when the grating comes down I shoot the slime.”

“That’s my take as well. Let’s do this!”

They did, Gianna negating far more force than she would need to by increasing the “force” portion of her spell. She allowed the ball to hit her, which only fired after the combined weight of herself and Origami was on the pressure plate. This made sure Origami wasn’t hit, it was then a simple matter for her to wait as Origami fired off a ball of force, dissolving the slime inside. Four more motes of light went into her by the end.

“As exciting as this is, I’m closing the connection. I’m sure you’ve got it now.”

“Fine. Talk to you later.”

Back in the main room they recovered their MP using the crystal and found the door with the candle on it was now open, so they headed inside. This room was a departure from the others as they were together, and there was a simple candle on the table.

“Gee, I don’t know, could be candle,” Gianna teased. “Blue? Wick? Wax? Lavendar scent? Heat? Light? Maybe we should taste it. Wish Melemizargo hadn’t hung up we could use a hint. Maybe it’s diminish, as the candle is burning down?”

“It’s fire.”

“Could be smoke. Could be the inevitability of time, ceaselessly and without pity, burning our very essence away until nothing is left of us but a bit of ash and memories.”

“It’s fire.”

“Sure you don’t want to think about it? Consider? Re-consider?”

“I’m sure.”

“Okay, it’s fire.”

Congratulations

You have absorbed a new formula node
into your mana palace.

You may now use it to create new spells.
Formula node: Fire 10

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.
Let your strength and wisdom blossom as you
and the mana grow together.

The door unlocked.

“Hey, Origami!”

“What?”

“It was fire!”

“I know where you sleep, you know.”

“And you still have that stabby knife too, I better watch out!”

“You better.”

The next hallway was a T, so the two looked around both corners as they approached the intersection. To the left was a wall of fire, and through the flickering of the flame they could see a lever, begging to be pulled. To the right was what appeared to be a hay bale, behind a pane of glass.

“Is this another thing we have to do simultaneously?” Origami asked.

“Seems like I have to walk through the fire,” Gianna decided. “I can substitute fire for force, and become immune to it. That’s the ‘spell modification’ part of the dungeon. Meanwhile you can substitute fire for force in your spell, and burn the hay bale.”

“What’s odd is this one is a glass wall, while the cannon room had that grating. Does that mean something?”

“You think your magic can go through a transparent substance like glass?”

“I’m going to find out!”

But it turned out it could not, as the fire bounced off the glass and vanished. With a shrug she tried force as well, thinking as that could be more incorporeal until it reached the target? But it didn’t care what it hit, and also bounced off the glass.

“Maybe combine them?” she wondered.

“If one of them isn’t going to work, I doubt both of them will.”

“It would be stronger though.”

“I guess. One second.” She closed her eyes and willed herself into her mana palace, into the workroom. She had two new origami designs on her shelf, and went over to unfold them. Staring at the designs inside she realized something and decided to try it. She got out two fresh sheets of paper and started the force spell normally. *I want to do force to crack the glass, then fire hits the bale. I don’t want them to go off at the same time, but have the force hit first. If I put zone->instant->force->create->fire->create->move then they would be simultaneous. I want an extra move verb...* She did the second part of the spell on the second sheet of paper, fire->create->move and put the two pieces together. Folding one edge so they would stay together she made a third new shape, that seemed to combine elements of the original two. To her surprise it went together easily, and she got a message.

Congratulations
You have advanced your magical knowledge
through experimentation and created an advanced spell.
Here is the description of your spell:

Zone 5->Instant 1->Force 10->Create 1->Move 1->Fire 10->Create 1->Move 1
Damage a target up to 5m away with force,
then follow it up an instant later with fire

As a reward for your innovative thinking, you gain +5 potential.

Now we're talking.

She opened her eyes and gathered mana for her new spell, which succeeded in at least cracking the glass. It immediately started healing back up though. "Combining them did work," she announced. "But I still don't think that's the answer."

"Didn't you suggest doing something simultaneously?" Gianna asked. "I mean I'm glad it worked out for you, don't get me wrong. But this is still just me standing here."

"Okay, try and hold the lever, maybe the glass will go away while you do."

"Right!" She put her fire immunity spell on herself and jumped through the flames, pulling the lever. This allowed the glass to retract and Origami could burn the straw. It seemed to be on a plate itself, and when it was gone there was a click and the door opened.

The pair went through the question mark room, Gianna remarking this is where they would probably need to come up with a whole new spell. Origami agreed, and they looked around. This room had a few things in it, the first being a carnival bell, the type you had to swing a hammer at and make a weight ring a bell. Also there was a 10m high basketball hoop behind a wall of glass, though the wall had a basketball sized hole at the bottom. Naturally there was a basketball sitting in the middle of the floor, and on the wall was a picture of the room. There was a small arrow pointing to the center, and the numbers 5,5,0. It had a spell symbol on it, and the weight of 2.

"Let's start building our spell!" Gianna announced, closing her eyes.

"Which is which? And she's gone." Origami sighed and went into her own mana palace.

Gianna looked at the screen before her, reviewing the spell components she knew. *I was just taught force. My spells work on myself so I doubt I'm doing the basketball. If I combine the runes for self, force, and expand from my mental expansion spell, can I make a spell to expand any force I exert on something? In effect, making myself stronger?* She manipulated the symbols on the screen, dragging them into the bottom area where the spell builder was. They were accepted in that order, and she got a message.

Congratulations
You have created a new spell. Here is the description of your spell:

Zone 1->1 hour 10->Self 2->Force 10->Expand 10 weight 33

For the next hour, any force you exert has the chance to be magnified

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.
Let your strength and wisdom blossom as you
and the mana grow together.

I bet with more MP put into the 'force' part of the spell, the greater that chance or the greater the magnification. That seems right. Wow, I just made a new spell. No wonder this was the preferred method for so long. Forget studying a spell for hours out of a book. How did that method ever catch on? Oh right, because somepony messed it up for the rest of us 800 years ago. What if I did claw->expand->force? Or self->negate->force? That might actually negate any force I exert on something, meaning if I hit something the blow would have no force behind it. Good for training, I guess. For that matter can I do force->negate->self? Probably not, as force doesn't have a concept of self to act upon. Anyway, mess around later, let's see how Origami is doing.

Origami was doing something similar, looking through her book to see what she wanted to put together. She knew she wanted a maintained spell, as it wouldn't take long to roll through the hole, and a 6 weight to the range portion of the spell. She wanted to move the ball, but she didn't know "ball" only "unrestricted," so that went next. And her verb would be move, from the fire creation spell. That left her with

Zone 6->Maintained 3->Unrestricted 10->XXX 1->Move 1

What am I supposed to put between unrestricted and move in the formula? I need to act upon the object, where it is. But I don't know anything like that.

She came out to find a smiling Gianna looking at her. "Did you figure something out?"

"Mostly. What about you?"

"I guess we'll see!" She went over and picked up the hammer, making sure she could, and then cast her spell. She put plenty of MP into it, just to see what would happen, and smashed the hammer down on the spot to throw the weight. It went shooting up, smashed past the bell, and went sailing away, clattering to the floor. One of the lights above the door went green. "Got it."

"Nice," she had to admit. "I'm a component of the spell short, it seems?"

"Maybe that?" She pointed to the wall, and the two looked it over. "Let me try something." Gianna grabbed the ball and moved it around the room. The numbers and arrow updated as she did.

"Oh, location," Origami decided. "It's the location of the ball. That's what I need to change, and what I was missing in the spell." She got the system message she was correct, and could use "Location 2" in her spells now. "Be right back while I finish this."

She finished her telekinesis spell, folding it into a new shape and getting a system message.

Congratulations

You have created a new spell. Here is the description of your spell:

Zone 6->Maintained 3->Unrestricted 10->Location 2->Move 2 weight 23

While you maintain this spell, the target object can move 10m in an
instant under your complete control

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.

Let your strength and wisdom blossom as you
and the mana grow together.

She easily directed the ball through the hole in the glass, and then popped it up and through the basket.

“Weird, it’s like another hoof that I can use to move things around,” she remarked, as the door unlocked and the other light went green.

“Test chamber next, unless I miss my guess. Time to show what we learned, put it together.”

“You’re probably right.”

They headed for the door.

Chapter 18
A moment later
Learning Twilight's Mistake

The pair stood looking into the next room, a large white space full of elemental slimes, by the looks of it. Five were white and somewhat transparent, while five others were red and had a faint smoke haze about them. None had moved, but then, the pair hadn't gone past the doorframe quite yet either.

"So five for each of us," Ginna remarked. "I think you'll need to use your fireball on the ice ones, while I become immune to fire and hit the fire ones."

Origami nodded. "That's my thinking as well. But let me try something before we go in."

"Sure, I need to get my spell ready anyway." She started casting.

Origami closed her eyes and went into her mana palace, looking at the current fireball shape on the shelf. She took it down and unfolded it, looking at the symbols inside. *It worked the last time, why not this time too?* She got out five pieces of paper and wrote the beginning of the spell on the first sheet, along with create, fire, and move. She left it sitting on the bench and wrote "fire, create, move" on the next four sheets. Lining them all up she folded them together, resulting in a much larger shape, and a message.

Congratulations

You have created a new spell. Here is the description of your spell:

Zone 5->Instant 1-> Fire 10->Create 1->Move 1->Fire 10->Create 1->Move 1->Fire 10->Create 1->Move 1->Fire 10->Create 1->Move 1 weight 66
Quickly create and throw 5 balls of fire, within 5m, each doing minor damage to a target

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.
Let your strength and wisdom blossom as you
and the mana grow together.

Probably too costly to cast in a real combat, but it did work. I can charge it up and maybe get all of them at once.

She opened her eyes again and started gathering mana, raising a hoof as she finished. Five small fireballs launched into the room, slamming into two of the five slimes and causing them to burn away. A bit of light was left, just like with the others, and was sucked into her.

"Need to work on your aim," Gianna remarked.

"Yeah, yeah. They're half as tall as I am. I didn't want them hitting the floor before they went the full distance."

“So crouch down.” *Strange that the remaining ones aren’t attacking? Do they not care, because this is just an exercise in showing we are okay with using our spells against “living” things or is it because we aren’t actually in the room yet?*

“I am not crouching to cast this spell!” *Now, do I go back and work on a spell with only three fireballs, or hurl two at two and the final one at one?*

She decided to simply use the spell again, and this time hit all three of the remaining ice slimes, taking in their essence or whatever it was that was left behind. The fire slimes that were left reacted, perking up and starting to shine with light just like they did when casting a spell.

“Looks like it’s a fight after all,” Gianna decided. “Stay behind me!”

“I’m staying right here.”

Gianna headed into the room, slashing the closest one and finding the tiny ball of light entering her as well. She took out a second while the ones further away uselessly shot fire at her. *Must not be that bright.* She charged back to intercept a fireball that was heading towards Origami, who tossed one into another at the back of the room with a spell. This allowed Gianna to head towards the one at the other corner, taking it out while Origami hit one of the ones that had gotten up and was about to let off another fireball with her force magic. The ball of light went into her.

“Hey, you owe me a mana!” she shouted, as her claws raked through the final one.

“Oh yeah, I guess I will get one more capacity than you. Whoops.”

With the room cleared, the pair headed out and past the usual office area where the dungeon master would be. As expected, they got the completion message, with Origami getting one more max MP than she would have, letting Gianna take all five of her fire slimes out.

Congratulations
You have completed a dungeon!
Dungeon Rewards Granted:

+5 Potential
+4 MP capacity Gianna
+11 MP capacity Origami

New Quest Generated:
Undo Twilight’s mistake, 1 time apiece

Quest Rewards: +5 Potential
location of dungeon 5

“What do you think Twilight’s mistake was?” Gianna asked, looking the message over.

“Could be anything. I guess we’ll have to go and ask. I just wonder what ‘1 time apiece’ means.”

“Maybe she made two mistakes, and we each have to correct one?”

“But it’s not ‘undo Twilight’s mistakes.’”

“You got me.”

Back at the North Star, Lime Twist was glad to see both of them were alright.

“Wasn’t worried,” she claimed.

“She was pacing around like crazy,” CelestAI told them. “I’m not sure this stress is good for her.”

“These are just learning dungeons,” Gianna assured her. “The next one is the same, it’s the one after that where there might be a little danger.”

“Stay safe!”

“We will. Honestly, we should probably take you back anyway. We don’t want the doctors to think we’ve ponynapped you, and they wanted to evaluate you anyway.”

“Okay. Had fun.”

“We’ll come visit you again, don’t worry. If the doctors say it’s okay we can even take more trips. Maybe not to a dungeon but somewhere.”

“Looking towards it!”

“You mean looking forward to it,” Origami corrected.

With the ship headed to Canterlot, Gianna brought up her status page and hit the button to talk to Melemizargo, watching as 50MP drained from the number at the top when she did.

“Another dungeon cleared, well done,” he praised as the blue chat window appeared. **“What can I do for you?”**

“I wanted to talk to you about getting a magical item repaired,” she told him. “It was a floating shield from another world, if you can believe it, but it looks like it used similar metal engravings to those the Amphibians used. And that we used to make the teleport gateway trials. Like you said before, there’s no dungeon currently that deals with that, but the markings are understood. We just have to repair them. The hard part is taking it back to what it was. Twilight says it had a core of its own, that someone sacrificed a part of their core to empower it. Can I do that?”

“There are a few ways you could do it. With magic, of course.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“The tricky part, as I see it, would be investing only part of your core into the object. Transferring your power to someone else temporarily is easily enough done. You just have to want to, and have them accept it. I mean it takes a little practice but you could figure it out.”

Right, she thought, we saw that with Sunny giving her magic to Twilight right at the start of this.

“And of course you could use a spell to do it, and thus you could build some sort of machine to do it. You’ll learn about that in a later dungeon, I may have mentioned this. I... could probably work up a ritual to let you do it. As you don’t exactly use spells like your friend does. The longer you perform the ritual, the more MP the shield would have access to. You would just need to decide how much you wanted to give it. Would you mind coming here so I could see the object? Then I could give you more exact answers, and make sure the ritual I have in mind would be good enough.”

“How can we get there? Airship? Aren’t you up in the mountains somewhere?”

“I can reactivate the ‘traps’ I put in each dungeon. That way the next one you go into, it’ll bring you to me.”

“We’re expecting Bright Soul and some others any day now, maybe before they go through the first dungeon and get their cores back, you can look the shield over.”

“Whatever works for you.”

“I’ll let you know. This ‘crafting’ dungeon you just spoke of...”

“Yes?”

“Will I be able to make magical objects? I’m thinking of making something to help store the armor I wear when I’m not using it. While it is nice to wear around home, there are times I would rather not. But still have it when I need it.”

“That’s a good point. You will be able to request the spell and create the crystals you need, yes. You just won’t be able to cast the spell yourself. But you’ll lose it anyway so it’s really no loss!”

“Lose it?”

“You’ll see. It’ll all make sense once you get through that dungeon.”

“Okay. That’s all I wanted to know for now. Thank you.”

“Of course. I’ve turned on the next dungeon, again not many would be able to just wander in so no need to contact me when you’re ready to use it.”

“Okay, thanks.”

The window vanished.

“You know,” Origami told her, making her jump and spin around to face her friend. “It’s not lost on me that you never asked me to look at the shield. It’s because I broke it, and you don’t trust me, isn’t it?”

“No, of course not!” she protested. “When I first gave it to Twilight to look at, you weren’t, uh, up to it. But you’re welcome to take a look now. I just didn’t want you trying to repair it and finding out that it started to take your mana without you knowing. Twilight said it had a core, what if repairing the runes on it brought that back, and you didn’t know how to stop it draining you dry! That would be terrible. That’s why I’m trying to get as many opinions as I can on what to do with it. I know you can do the rune stuff, that’s probably the easy part.”

“So you don’t mind if I look at it, then?”

“Not at all. Just don’t start messing with it, okay? I want to see if any part of the original personality can be saved, and I don’t want you sacrificing your MP capacity on it either, thinking to ‘make up for breaking it’ or something like that. We will carefully consider our options when we have all the facts about repairing it.”

“I can’t make the tools yet anyway, somepony else would have to. So don’t worry.”

“Okay, fine. It’s in my quarters, but I can put it in a lab somewhere you can look at it whenever.”

“Thanks.”

“Of course.”

“And did I hear you saying something about your armor?”

“Yeah. I was thinking, it’s not always appropriate to be wearing it. Like if I was at a dance or something and wearing a fancy dress. But then something attacked the place?”

“What would attack a dance?”

“Some flying bear-bee no doubt. I don’t know. Let me finish!”

“Sorry!”

“Everygriffon is panicking and rushing around and I’m just standing there, looking cool, and I say ‘armor on!’ and suddenly my dress switches to the armor. Wouldn’t that be so amazing?”

“I guess it would be kinda cool,” she had to admit.

“I hope I can upgrade it in the future, now that I know there’s a dungeon that will help me understand how to make magical objects.”

“You wouldn’t want better stuff?”

“This is the armor you fixed up for me,” she reminded her friend. “I see it as a symbol of our friendship as much as a promise to my kind to be the best griffon I can be. Even if they offered me ‘better’ armor when I joined the defense force for real, I wouldn’t take it.”

“Oh.” Origami wasn’t sure what to say to that. “Thanks.”

Twilight was just getting some lunch ready when the girls arrived at her castle, and she invited them to stay and have a chat with Ember, who it seemed was there as well.

"We have sort of a sensitive topic to discuss," Origami told her. "We can come back if you think it's something you don't want her to hear."

"Can you be a little bit more specific?" she asked, looking confused.

"Something about fixing a mistake," Gianna told her. "We don't have any other specifics than that. It's our quest to get the location of the next dungeon."

"Now that is odd," she mused. "Ember is actually here about one of my mistakes. How in the world would a *dungeon*... Well, come on in." They headed into the castle and to the dining area, where Ember was sitting looking at book. A stack of similar looking books sat on the table next to her.

"Oh, my poetry lady!" she said with a grin, setting the book down carefully and hopping up.

"Nice to see you again Gianna. Origami."

"Highness," Gianna greeted her with a bow.

"Please," Ember scoffed, rolling her eyes. "I'll get out two more plates."

"So I'm here to ask Twilight's help for something happening in my kingdom," Ember told them after they were seated and digging in. "Little did I know she would tell me it was her fault in the first place."

"You're familiar with parasprites?" Twilight asked.

"The things that enraged that red dragon so much he was taken over by shadows?" Gianna asked. "He said they were eating his gold as I recall."

"That problem is just getting worse," Ember agreed. "More dragons are reporting their hoards being overrun by the little pests and we had no idea how to get rid of them."

"How is this Twilight's fault though?" Origami asked.

"Some time ago, one was brought to the village," she answered. "I won't name any names or point any hooves, but at the time it was unknown just how rapidly they would reproduce. We soon had hundreds."

"Is it somepony we know?" Origami asked shrewdly.

"Anyway! Pinkie Pie of all ponies was rushing around looking for musical instruments, and instead of helping her because she's Pinkie and does random stuff all the time, we tried dealing with them in our own way. My way of course was magic. I cast a spell on them to make them uninterested in their usual food. Which was just about any food, turns out they'll eat anything..."

"How in the heck did you know a spell that specific? Did you study it as some kind of weight loss magic for somepony?"

"Anyway! Turns out they only ate food out of preference for taste. Once they were magically no longer interested in food, they turned to everything else. Stone. Wood. Pony's manes. They were out of control."

Origami scowled at not having her questions answered. She seemed to recall this incident though, when she was a much younger filly. *So this is the story behind it.*

"You must have gotten rid of them, the town is still here," Gianna remarked.

"Yes indeed!"

Oh sure, engage with her.

She went on. "Pinky got her one pony band together and led them into the forest. I figured to have such a prodigious reproductive rate they must die off fairly quickly, or there's something in the forest that eats them by the dozen. So I thought that was the end of it. Turns out they are rather long lived, and the spell has stuck to at least a few of them."

"That's where I come in," Ember told them. "They've made their way to the dragon empire and have developed a taste for gold. We need them gone for good this time."

"You mean kill them?" Origami protested.

"They're pests. Gold eating pests. Clearly relocating them didn't work, they can fly. We can't take the chance they'll come back."

“But certainly you must have tried that originally, after they started eating buildings or whatever around here?” Gianna asked Twilight.

“That we did,” she agreed. “They’re basically indestructible. I did some research on them, in case they ever came back- let me go get the book.” She hopped down from the table and trotted into the next room.

“This is what we’re here to solve,” Origami decided. “The dungeon must think what it gave us was sufficient.”

“I can multiply my force many times,” Gianna agreed with a nod. “I wonder just how indestructible they are? Maybe magical force can hurt them, and they only tried normal force?”

“Here it is,” Twilight announced, coming back in. She set the book down and flipped through it. “According to this, there are stories of ponies in the past becoming more and more desperate to get rid of the things. One tale tells of a heavy boulder dropped on some, which worked. Another of a most ancient and powerful dragon roasting them. Nothing else worked.”

“My dragon fire wasn’t enough, nor was my father’s,” Ember spoke up. “So it would have to be really, really hot.”

“I can probably do that, not that I’m saying I will,” Origami cautioned. “How many are we talking about here?”

“That’s the thing,” Twilight answered, holding up a hoof to forestall Ember. “The reports are curious. While the attacked ones were squashed or fried, others seem to have vanished at the same time. The suspicion is, killing an older one ends the existence of any children it’s spawned. Making them more like magical clones than actual lifeforms like you or me.”

“Oh!” gasped Gianna. “So there must be some kind of hidden connection between them. I wonder if my magic could pick up on it. We could then trace it back as far as we could, and only take out the oldest ones. The rest vanish with no effort!”

“I’m betting there’s two oldest in the area,” Origami reasoned. “We each have to finish off one, hence the ‘1 time each’ part of the quest. I think the new magic we got can do it, Twilight, so leave it to us!”

“Hey that makes sense.”

“No, hay is for ponies!” Ember joked.

Everyone looked at her.

“What? That joke slays in my empire- wait you don’t think dragons laugh at my jokes just because I’m the queen, do you?”

“Anyway, we should come up with a secondary plan in case Gianna can’t do it,” Origami told Twilight.

Ember went off to silently weep in the corner, and Gianna patted her back and said “there, there.”

“I could research some kind of tracking magic,” Twilight decided. “While the runic carvings are typically hard to set up because of the metal requirements and the making of the stylus, I have plenty of blank rods, crystals, and the books of runes we need. Paradoxically, it would be easier than researching and learning a whole spell, if I even had room in my core for more. If you can capture them, we can simply hit each one with the rod, maybe it can show us a glowing line between generations? The teleport system seems very efficient and long range, so I have to believe a small crystal, topped up with mana, would be sufficient. I know how to connect them, that’s easy. With them all rounded up we just keep tracking it back to the seeming eldest. We could probably tell because the youngest would only have one ‘line’ back to their parent, and there would be lots of them. Only two with ‘lines’ going far away, to parasprites outside the dragon territories, would be the ones we were after.”

“Which is somepony else’s problem,” Ember agreed. “Is it wrong of me to hope it’s ponies? I mean it would be poetic justice in a way...”

“Just so long as it’s not griffons,” Gianna muttered.

“See? She gets it.”

Twilight gave them the prototype portal, the small one, allowing them to activate it and talk to her in the air. This would let them keep her apprised of the progress, and if she needed to start work on the actual rod she could.

“Sorry, I should have thought of this earlier,” she told them. “We’ve just been letting it gather dust here when we should have been using it. I was just thinking of it as a small portal, not as a communications device. But it’s perfect for that too.”

Ember came with them, so she wouldn’t have to fly back to the kingdom under her own power, and asked where she could secure the books.

“Not that I think they’ll be stolen or anything,” she hastily told them. “But I need to know where they are at all times, being a dragon has nothing to do with it I hope you weren’t even thinking that if you were just forget it okay? I would die of embarrassment to have to go back to Twilight for another copy so soon after she just gave them to me. I’m making a dozen copies when I get back, first thing.”

“I can show you an unused room,” Gianna told her, motioning her to follow. “You can put them in there, and have CelestAI lock the door until you come for them. What are they, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“The books on the runic technique,” she replied, hugging them to her chest. “By way of apology she finally decided to trust me with them. I really can’t wait to get started. Of course, we’re behind the curve because Twilight says making the metal and the stylus is somewhat time consuming, but I’m sure we can catch up.”

“Just be careful, there’s probably a lot about that method we don’t know yet. You’ve seen Twilight’s twisted rods?”

“She showed me, yes. Don’t worry, we dragons have a healthy appreciation for magic, we have horror stories about it too.”

“Good to know. Put them wherever you want and come up to the bridge, the view as we fly is great!”

Gianna's Journal
Entry 2: Recipe for Friendship

Using this journal as a sounding board, even if I can't really receive feedback, feels useful and therapeutic. I'm hoping that the more introspective I am, the more aware I'll be of others' thoughts and feelings. Speaking of being empathetic, let me start this entry by recounting an unexpected conversation I had with Origami recently that turned out to be another perfect example of my previous point about avoiding assumptions. In the aftermath of our confrontation with the Pony of Shadows, I had turned to Twilight for her thoughts on how to repair all of the damage that the magical explosion had wrought. At the time, Origami had been lost in depression for over a week following the confrontation, so consulting her on a fix wasn't really an option. I also felt that Twilight objectively had much more experience with magical experimentation so going to her for help made perfect sense.

During the fight, my shield had performed its duty admirably, though it unfortunately sacrificed its own animating magic to do so. I'm not sure it was ever conscious enough to make a true decision to put itself in harm's way for my sake. It was likely simply acting according to the nature instilled in it at its creation, but I still wanted to make sure that any attempt to repair it would also restore its autonomy and willfulness. Twilight gave me several repair options but the most promising seemed to be acquiring a core of my own and then sharing it with the shield, recreating it as best as I could remember.

As we travelled about the Kingdom in pursuit of Stygian's old magical knowledge, I kept that solution in mind. After learning some magic of my own, I thought it was time to start thinking about how I might actually invest the shield with some of my magic. I brought this plan up to the Dragon that has been guiding us through learning spells as he is supposed to be the literal manifestation of magic. I figured that he'd be the person best capable of assessing Twilight's suggestions. Afterwards, Origami told me how upset she really was that I had asked Twilight for help and not her.

I admit that my initial response to this was to feel defensive and annoyed. After all, she had locked herself in her room for well over a week so how was I supposed to ask her anything? Thankfully, the feeling was short lived and I focused on her words and the emotion she was conveying. She was feeling hurt, and while I felt the need to explain why I sought Twilight's counsel over hers, I needed to do so in love. So that's what I did, and I made it clear that I do trust her and her expertise. I told her how much my armor means to me, not because of its connection to the Royal Griffon Defense Force, but because she had been the one to work on restoring it for me. I cherish it because it's a precious gift from her.

I think that healed a rift between us that I didn't even realize was there. I think that reconciliation is where the Friendship lesson comes in. We don't really know what others are thinking and feeling inside. Being a friend means understanding that and ***being ready to support those you care about regardless of other thoughts and feelings that might make doing so difficult.***

I remember in that first week, feeling frustration with Origami that she wasn't fighting harder to fix things. After all, she was the one that was steeped in magical knowledge. It wasn't until much later though that I really thought about how I'd feel if I had been crippled in the fight, unable to be a protector for my friends. Would I have been able to shrug off the feelings of guilt and depression if my actions had caused similar harm to others? I hope that if I'm ever in that situation, my belief that friendship can fix anything would keep my spirits up. I think that's part of my goal in writing all of this: to examine my thoughts and beliefs and strengthen them through understanding.

Even after all we've been through, I still think my life experience is rather limited. Despite that, I've read enough fantasy to empathize with characters that went through some experience that forced them to grow up quickly. I suppose that's how I've been feeling lately. I realize I need to adjust my goals to be more altruistic and meaningful. I feel like I need to forge myself into the sort of Griffon that can be a leader since that feels like the best way I can help the most people. I've started to have a burning desire to learn the details of Equestria's history so that the lessons others have already learned won't have to be re-learned the hard way.

Hopefully thanks to our actions, the Dungeons we've been exploring in order to learn magic will still exist in your time but in case they aren't well known to you, let me tell you a bit about them so perhaps you can retrace our steps if necessary. When we were first introduced to him, Stygian had mentioned that the magic he learned in his time was very different from modern Pony magic. This is the "new" method that Guru Sr.'s prophecy encouraged us to uncover and learn. The best part about it is that it's been able to restore the ability to grasp and utilize magic to Origami and, hopefully soon, to everyone else that was harmed in the explosion. I've never thought magic was the pursuit for me, and I still don't really, but learning the small amount I have has made me incredibly curious about the true nature of magic in Equestria.

And it all leads back to Friendship and what that concept really means. I'm sure as I keep researching history and magic in particular, I'll eventually come across dusty old writings that identify Friendship as Altruism...a practice of selfless concern for the well-being of others. Friendship is a much prettier word but I do think it's sometimes used without a true understanding of the meaning. I think that's really what the Mane Six figured out, and what Princess Twilight is trying to teach others through the school.

Stygian had mentioned that the magic he knew seemed to want to reward ponies who performed great works or took risks to save others, as if it had a mind of its own. While I haven't seen magic itself act in this manner, that fits with what I know about historical events and my own observations of life. I think that's the root of why the Elements of Harmony are so powerful. Each is a quality that ties into the idea of altruism yet each on its own cannot express true care for others. Only when combined do those aspects form the deeper and more powerful aspect that is Friendship.

I'd always thought that magic was a strange element to include with the others. Magic was more of a tool, wasn't it? More of a resource to be used? Only now I feel that what Twilight Sparkle embodied was almost like having the answer right in front of your nose. If magic as a force has a will and that will seeks to work for the good of others, then friendship truly is magic and the most pure and powerful magic is friendship. And since magic wants to be used that way, it's at its most powerful when combined with the other elements. Of course that's all just me theorizing without a proper background and understanding of history and magic theory. I certainly don't have the knowledge at this point to know if I'm off base or onto something but I'm excited nonetheless to figure out which!

If you have no idea what I mean when I say we're been exploring Dungeons, if Canterlot Castle still exists in some form in your time, make your way there and see if you can locate a staircase leading down from the dungeons. There's a dragon there that I'm sure would love to have some company. If you do know of the Dungeons and Melemizargo, then say hi for me. I do wonder about his origin, his history, and his very nature. If he is the essence of magic, is he what causes magic to seem to have a will? Hopefully I learn the answers to these questions and more so I can share them with you in future entries. Actually, if time travel is possible, maybe one day we'll find a way to come visit. How cool would it be to be able to hand this to you in person!

Chapter 19
Some time later
Defeating the stomach bugs

“Highness!” the large blue dragon exclaimed as the group headed into the cave. His eyes darted between them. “I didn’t think you would be bringing outsiders. Not that there’s much left of my hoard now...” He looked dejectedly around at the meager piles of gold that were left scattered about the place, and the dozen parasprites bobbing around in the air. “Please tell me you swore them to secrecy.”

“I cannot tell you what has not been done,” she announced. “But they have no interest in gold, only in friendship. Is that not correct, friends?”

Gianna huffed. Even these “meager piles” would set her up for life, and probably allow her to rebuild her whole hometown in her image. *No wonder griffons don’t like dragons. They just sit around on mountains of gold. They should instead invest in a wide range of mutual funds to hedge against any sudden downturn in a single market segment. Though of course gold has traditionally held its value quite well even in economic recessions. And they must plan for the long term, perhaps this is smarter than I gave him credit for.* “I won’t tell anyone,” she agreed.

“Uh huh,” Origami agreed halfheartedly. She was staring up at a parasprite, already haven fallen under their spell. “It’s pretty cute all right.”

“Cute? It’s a menace. These are the two that you’ve brought to deal with this infestation?”

“They say they can do it,” Ember agreed. “Twilight let them take the lead so who am I to interfere? So what’s the plan from here?”

“How do they taste?” Origami asked. “Did you try eating one?”

“Awful,” the dragon replied, sticking her tongue out. “I tried chewing on one but that didn’t seem to faze it very much. I was afraid to swallow it, what if it stayed *alive* down there?”

“That could be a problem,” she agreed. “They’re different colors but I think it’ll be impossible to tell which the oldest are. Thought maybe they would be different sizes or something, looking at them directly. Bigger equals older? But no, they’re all basically identical. I hope your idea works, Gianna.”

“Me too. Okay, here goes.” She cast her spell to last for an hour, and looked around. “We may have to gather them up, keep them from flying around but I am getting a sense of connection between them. Once they’re still I can see if some have a connection to others that we don’t see here.”

“I can help with that,” the dragon told them, turning to the side wall. He blasted out some fire, heating the rock, and swiftly created a set of narrow bars that he shoved into the ground. There was an opening in the top, clearly meant for shoving them in there. “They can just eat their way out, of course, but it’ll hold them for a few minutes. Hopefully they’re too stupid to realize it’s not part of the floor. I can put a pile of coins in front of it to distract them, the bars should be close enough together to keep them in. They’re squishy but not that squishy.”

“Let’s get this over with then,” Origami sighed.

The group grabbed up all the parasprites and put them into the cage, and Gianna mentally sorted through them. “There’s two here that have a connection to others not in the cave,” she announced. “As a test, let’s see if we *can* even damage them. I don’t want them on the ship for long, if one escapes and starts eating the place there’s no way we can replace the missing parts.”

“Let me go ask CelestAI what we have at hoof,” Origami told her. “Maybe a glass jar or something? They wouldn’t be able to get their mouth around it if they were inside a jar.”

“Good idea.”

She took off and Gianna went into her mana palace. She reviewed the spells she knew and wanted to try something.

I have the force expansion spell. She read it over, “For the next hour, any force you exert has the chance to be magnified.” *Has a chance... that’s bad. I want two things. First to know if direct physical damage will even do anything, and second to expand my damage. I think I can make such a spell with what I have here.* She dragged a few things to the bottom and looked it over.

Zone 1->Maintained 3->Self 2->Damage 50->Claws 2

Does that look right? I’m targeting myself so the magic doesn’t have to go anywhere. The thing I’m modifying with the magic is myself. And I want to damage my claws- hold on. She reversed Claws and Damage. *Okay that can’t be right either. I’m modifying myself, the part of myself I’m modifying is my claws, and the thing about my claws I’m modifying is their damage. But that just means... what? Any damage I take will be absorbed by the claws? There’s no verb, and the accept button isn’t lit up so I couldn’t do this spell anyway.* She paged over to the tab with the spells again and looked at her force spell.

Zone 1->1 hour 10->Self 2->Force 10->Expand 10 weight 33

Hang on, I get it now. I did too much specifying. This spell needs self because every part of me from my beak to my claws would be affected. I don’t need to modify self and then claws, I just need to follow this same formula. Should I do this as 1 hour as well? I could use it in a real combat situation and I’d rather not have to worry about the drain. I could actually have two versions, or three. An instant version for quick swipes, a maintained version if I get ambushed, and this version I cast before-claw. Sure. I’ve heard Origami musing about this.

Zone 1->1 hour 10->Claws 2->Damage 50->Expand 1 weight 64

There. That will do for now. My claws should now do a lot more damage, and it shouldn’t be magical, not like the force is. The ‘expand’ part only needs to cover my claws so the weight is much less, making the whole spell only twice as much MP to cast. The accept button was lit up now and she mentally pressed it, adding the spell into the other tab. With that done she opened her eyes and cast her new spell on herself.

Origami came back floating a large glass jug with a hole cut in it, and set it down. “Now I know what it feels like to be a unicorn,” she told them. “Anyway, I had CelestAI cut a hole in this with one of her repair bots, we can shove them in there and plug it up with this apple.” She held one up from her bag. “As they’re not interested in food, they’ll ignore it and be trapped.”

“I’m ready on my end, let’s do this. Grab that light pink one there somebody.” Ember reached in and grabbed it, holding it up to her. “Okay keep it still. If I hit you this could kill you.”

Ember scoffed but what did she know? Gianna carefully took aim at the creature, which seemed unconcerned about all this going on, and poked it with a claw. It popped like a soap bubble, and half the parasprites in the cage vanished.

“You really did it!” Origami gasped. She looked haunted, and grabbed one out of the cage. “Look at this cute little face! Why do you want to hurt them? I’ll protect you little one!” she booked it out of there, holding the wiggling thing close to her.

“I truly hope she’s joking,” Ember decided. “Seems risky to let one out, even for a prank.”

"She doesn't usually. Do they have some kind of ponymagnetic field that scrambles their brains? That could be a problem." *I mean they're cute and everything- no! Don't look directly at them. They are a pest species and they must be destroyed! Wolves in the forest have a purpose there. These things are simply magical eating machines that clone themselves.*

"Let's get them into the container and away from this fine dragon," Ember suggested. "So he can see what remains of his hoard. We should not damage the other one, it is our only link to any others in the area. Even I don't know where many of my subject's hoards are." She looked up at the dragon. "Some dragons still show too much pride even in a situation like this. I'm glad *you* came to me though. It was the right thing to do."

"Of course. Thank you so much," the dragon told them. "I thought it was all going to be gone. You've really saved me."

"Think nothing of it," Gianna told him. "Glad we could help."

Outside, Origami was cuddling the parasprite and talking baby talk to it while it tried to bite parts of her mane. "Let's put it away for now," Gianna suggested, as Ember turned the jar so the opening faced her. "You know what must be done."

"Okay, fine," she grumbled. "Poor little thing."

"Is it even alive?" Ember asked. "The others vanished. They're just magical clones or something, like Twilights suggested."

"You don't know." She replaced the apple and the group headed into the ship.

"Keep it near the door," CelestAI commanded. "If that glass shows even the slightest sign of breaking, I'm popping the locks and doing a roll to toss it out. They can *not* get into my systems."

"I'll push it out myself," Gianna assured her. "I can hurt them, I proved that. If it breaks and some get out, I'll deal with them. We'll both stay here in the entrance area until we land again."

"I hope we don't regret this."

The trio stopped at two more places and gathered up more parasprites. The second dragon was a rather chubby red dragon, the third a majestic purple. Both were shocked their lairs had been found at all, but were quite grateful someone had come to deal with the problem. They rounded the little guys up and Gianna looked them all over.

"There are two that have no connection to any others," she announced. "Which makes sense. I do sort of feel I need to have an idea of what I'm looking for in mind when I cast the spell. Otherwise it might enhance everything I experience and that would simply be too much. Right now I'm focused on the connection between parasprites that want to eat things that are not food. Naturally some other parasprite spawned these two. But they probably weren't touched by Twilight's spell, so there's no connection to their parent. We take out these two, and the rest should vanish."

"I suppose I have to kill one too?" Origami asked.

"Let me go first, see if there's any message from who know who. That may tell us more."

Ember was confused but they fished the one Gianna requested out of the jar and she smacked it. Half the parasprites in the jar vanished.

Congratulations
You have advanced a quest!
Current status of quest:
Undo Twilight's Mistake 1/1 complete

"I have one of one objectives complete," she agreed. "Looks like it's all you, Origami."

“Fine,” she sighed. “They’re just so cute! I don’t want to have to do this.”

“Seems like more are made every minute. I have no idea what could even eat these things, why they multiply so rapidly, but we’ve proven they’re little more than magical clones. The others wouldn’t have vanished if they were ‘real’ creatures.”

“I guess. How much MP did you use? And do you think I should use fire or force?”

“I just did expanded claw damage, 50 MP worth. Maybe overkill but I didn’t want to experiment with it. That seemed like enough it wouldn’t need a second tap, leaving it in pain. If they can even feel pain I mean.”

“Very well. Get the one out I need to take care of while I adjust the spell.” She dropped into her mana palace and adjusted her force spell to increase the amount of force from 10 MP worth to 50 MP worth, and bringing the range down to touch. *It wouldn’t do to miss, and hit Ember if she’s holding the thing.* That done she had Ember hold it to the side while she cast. She tapped it, sending force into it, and it too simply vanished along with the others.

Congratulations
You have completed a quest!
Undo Twilight’s Mistake

Potential +5
Location of Dungeon 5 - 768251

“My kingdom is saved,” Ember told them. “Thank you both. If there’s ever anything I can do for you, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

“So, what next?” Gianna asked after they said their goodbyes.

Origami thought a moment. “We’ve been heading back and forth, and I suppose we could simply head to the next dungeon. I don’t want to get there late. Let’s go look at the map Stygian gave us.”

“Okay.”

The pair headed to the ship and Origami empowered the crystal so they could talk to Twilight. She was thrilled they had helped without the need for any specialized magical equipment, but also somewhat disappointed she wasn’t going to get to make any specialized magical equipment.

“I’ll stop working on a detection spell then,” she agreed. “Good job you two.”

They signed off, Twilight thanking them for fixing her mistake and remarking this was a good example of the danger of casting spells without putting the necessary thought into them. With that the two got out the map. Doing a bit of moving and telling CelestAI how the number changed she estimated that the next mark was accurate, far to the northwest of their position.

“So it’s in the mountains near Los Pegasus,” Gianna decided, tapping the map. “We are still heading in a big circle. We’ll have seen quite a bit of Equestria by the time we’re done with all this.”

“It will be quite dark by the time we arrive at that location,” CelestAI informed them. “If you wish to go directly.”

“What if we headed back to Ponyville?” Origami asked.

“Not long after sunset.”

“Then let’s do that. We can have a late supper at my house. You can stay over, maybe we can watch a scary show on TV and take my mind off the horrific murder I’ve just been involved with. We can head to the next place in the morning.”

"It's not even like there were any guts or blood," Gianna protested. "They just went back into the mana from whence they came. They don't have a place in the natural ecology, they're probably just a spell gone wrong anyway."

"Says you."

"If a dragon can't eat one, nothing can. So yeah, says me."

"My destination is therefore Ponyville?" CelestAI asked.

"Full steam ahead," Origami agreed. "Or whatever it is that runs you."

My first sleepover! thought Gianna excitedly. *Didn't Twilight put some kind of guide in the library? I'm sure I recall seeing something with a relevant title. I should go take a look...*

The two did find a horror movie to watch and went to bed, secure in the knowledge that their magic would have dealt with the problems the ponies in the show had quite easily. Gianna decided she wasn't brooding about the whole parasprite thing, and considered that issue solved with friendship.

The next morning they started off, heading straight for the mountains in the distance and refining their course as they went. It wasn't long before the numbers stopped counting down quickly, and then started reversing, so the North Star started to circle the area.

"I'm afraid I don't see any surface stable enough to support my weight," she reported. "So I believe landing is out of the question. I can go as low as I dare and you can simply fly the rest of the way."

"Fine with me," Origami agreed. "Let's go."

The two jumped from the open door and headed down, but quickly ran into a problem. They started falling like rocks if they got too close to a certain point and had to glide to the side to get some lift. Both shared a concerned look and stayed away from the effect, landing some distance away from where the steps indicator showed would be zero. There was a clear path they could follow though, and headed up as that was the way the number counted down. It wasn't long before they could go no further; Across the way was a cave entrance, their destination they both decided.

"But how to get across?" Gianna asked, looking around. Origami was looking over the side and trying to flap, but not getting any lift.

"And you can't fly either?" she asked. Gianna shook her head after flapping a bit and not getting anywhere. "There is magic around here. I guess it's anti-flight magic in general, as we fly in different ways. We must be able to use one of the spells we already know to get over there, it's a protection against the uninitiated."

"You're probably right."

"Is telekinesis magic flight? I'm going to try it!"

"Okay?"

She dropped into her mana palace and took a look at the move object spell. *Can I just double up on the unrestricted part? I wouldn't need to specify a different direction, we're both going to the same place. So I think zone->maintained->unrestricted->unrestricted->location->move would let me control two things with one spell. Let's try it out!* She got out a sheet of paper and wrote the symbols down, folding it into a variation of the original. She was pleased to see the notification that the spell was ready to use, with the description of lifting two objects and moving them on a parallel course. With that done she opened her eyes and cast the spell.

Lifting herself and Gianna successfully she made a show of flapping her wings and directed them to the other side. "Looks like I can fly just fine," she teased. "Don't know what your problem is."

"Thanks for helping me across this sar-casm," Gianna teased back.

"It's quite the gap in your magical learning."

"I don't know how I'll get over it."

"Should we be cracking jokes at a time like this?"

Gianna couldn't think of a suitable reply and they were across. A transparent blue curtain sprang into existence as they got closer, covering the entrance to the cave.

"Let's see what it wants now," Origami sighed.

To open the way, you must demonstrate knowledge of
the lessons taught by three and four

Questers: 2

“Any idea what that means?” Origami asked.

“There are two of us,” Gianna reasoned. “It probably means *dungeons* three and four. The last two. Maybe there’s some hidden switch or something. I can look around, maybe you have to pull it so look high up? Still can’t fly normally, right?” She tried, and shook her head. “There you go.” Casting her mind expansion spell Gianna looked around the entrance of the cave, but didn’t spot anything out of the ordinary. Looking back, however, she saw the ghostly outline of a bridge across the chasm. “Hey, look at this,” she announced, heading over there. She hopped into the air, much to Origami’s dismay, but landed on the solid wooden planks of the bridge. There was no guardrail or anything, it was just wooden planks seemingly held up by nothing, and that section of the bridge became visible. Taking a few steps the part behind her faded. “I see, it’s not straight. Even if we had felt around, I probably would have still needed to do this. That’s how we were ‘supposed’ to get across.” She turned around and headed back, the bridge fading out again as she stepped off it.

“I like my way better,” Origami decided. “Hey look!” She pointed a hoof.

To open the way, you must demonstrate knowledge of
the lessons taught by three and four

Questers: 1/2

“That still doesn’t mean anything to me,” Origami admitted. “Why did it suddenly change?”

“I showed my knowledge, of course. I hadn’t touched the bridge before, but now I just walked off it. That’s probably good enough for the magic controlling all this. I didn’t need to start at the beginning, just reach the end.”

“Oh, sure. So you think it’s my turn?”

“Right. Just demonstrate a spell for it. Clean the message off or something.”

“I’m not going to clean it, I’m going to burn it!” She cast her fireball spell at the barrier, which rippled, and changed again.

Welcome to the official magic training dungeon.
You have proven your mastery of basic magic.
Dungeon is now ready to be activated.
Please describe the spell you wish to learn from the dungeon.
Multiple spells may be absorbed per session. Say "next spell"
to begin a new description. "Begin dungeon" when finished.

"I guess it didn't mind," Gianna mused. "You want to go first?"

"I wonder how many I can ask for?" Origami wondered.

"We don't want to be here all day, do we?"

"I suppose not. Okay dungeon..." She stepped up and started describing the spells she wanted.
After she said "next spell" the display changed again.

You have requested spells:

- 1) Teleportation
- 2) Automate Object
- 3) Light

Is this correct? Please say Yes or No.

"Yes."

The display changed to indicate the second "quester" should repeat the process, and Gianna did the same, getting back

You have requested spells:

- 1) Damage absorption
- 2) Increase Knowledge
- 3) Empathy

Is this correct? Please say Yes or No.

With that done the message changed once again.

Dungeon Initializing.
Important note: Dungeon can be used 1 time per week,
or mana can be provided to reopen before the
countdown timer reaches 0. Mana debt is reduced and
recalculated per day.

Your current mana debt to the
dungeon has been calculated as: 1510

Do you agree to these terms? Please say Yes or No.

“That’s about four and a half pools, if I’m recalling yours correctly, Gianna.”

“I do have less than you,” she admitted. “Interesting that such a policy is in place...”

“It probably takes power, *more* power I mean, to run this one,” she decided. “The others are static. Everypony gets the same spells from the first two dungeons. This one responded to our request and is probably making new rooms to accommodate us as we speak. Remember, Melemizargo said the dungeons were turned off because they consumed mana. It’s a net positive for the world because a pony- or griffon- out in the world doing magic and helping other ponies makes more than they consume. So those are basically loss leader dungeons to get the ball rolling. But you wouldn’t want somepony just sucking the area dry by going through this dungeon again and again in a single day.” *Plus this may be hiding some other system, like you can’t learn that many spells at one time or your core is put at risk. There’s still a lot about the mechanics of all this we don’t really understand.*

“So we can give up our own mana, if we wanted to go through a second time right away.”

“Exactly. We have to decide if waiting around to refill our mana cores time and again to give that power to the dungeon is worth it, or just wait until the mana naturally replenishes itself.”

“What if someone came after us? I mean, in the future when more ponies and others start going through them?”

She shrugged. “Might show as busy, I guess? I don’t know. The other dungeons you wouldn’t normally go through more than once, so maybe if somepony tried too soon they would get a message like this, that it was not at full power and to either wait or power it up themselves.” *We certainly didn’t turn around and head back into the ones we finished.*

“Bummer. Well, that’s a problem for another day.” *It may have worked differently because it was a journey. Those going through had to actually walk from place to place, not just fly there in comfort. Lower population too, and who knows what percentage wanted to do magic in the first place? We may have to carefully regulate it if this catches on.*

“Right. Yes, we accept.”

Thank you. Finalizing Dungeon Instantiation

Please wait.

A moment later the barrier vanished, and the way was clear.

“Shall we?” Gianna asked, indicating she should go first.

“Just a second,” Origami told her, opening her status page. “We’ll probably get more potential after this, and I am a spellcaster...”

“True,” she agreed, not knowing where this was going.

“Let’s see how this perk system works...” She waved a hoof in the air, from Gianna’s perspective anyway, and touched various points. “Oh, that was easy. Ten potential spent, just like that.”

“What did you get?”

“Double mana gathering rate. And I think I can take it again, meaning four times?”

“There were a lot of perks,” she admitted. “That’s a good one for you to take. You can cast twice as fast, or do a spell at double strength in the same time.” *She seems to be more serious about this now, that’s a good sign. She’s thinking ahead, and putting her potential to work for her.* “Are you buying it again? And how does that even work, anyway? How can just spending potential make mana flow into your spells easier?”

She shrugged and made an “Knnn?” sound. “Only one for now.”

“Ah. Okay.”

The two entered the main chamber, with the familiar mana crystal they used to recharge themselves, and took a look at the seven doors they were presented with.

“Say, you don’t think this adds to our mana debt, drawing from this crystal, do you?” Gianna asked.

“Doesn’t matter, we’re not planning on going through again right away.”

“Still, I would be curious to see if the number goes up when we get out of here.”

On each door was a representation of what they each asked for, in that order, left to right.

“You know,” decided Origami, “I think the light spell is probably going to be the easiest. I have a good feeling I know what the formula will be, so let’s start with an easy one and work our way up. At least that’s what I’m going to do.”

“Have to go through them all,” she admitted. “Doesn’t matter where I start. Right door it is, then.”

“See you on the other side!”

The two stepped through, and headed past the usual rooms they were now familiar with. Origami stopped in a fairly dark room with a glowing symbol hovering in the air, a 1 next to it. *Just like the force one. Okay, I get it now. Elemental spells just have a representation of their element. Looking back, I suppose it was rather silly, the big deal I made about it.* “Light,” she said into the stillness, and was rewarded with the success message and the next door being unlocked. “Got it in one. You still with me, Gianna?”

“I’m here,” she replied. “I’m in a sort of gallery, but they’re not pictures. Just masks. Split down the middle. The first one is smiling and sad looking. The next one I think is angry and peaceful?”

“And what spell do you think this is representing? And what room are you staying in?”

“This is the empathy spell, and it’s the fourth. I passed the mirror, so I have self already.”

“So the quality of the self you’re manipulating then?”

“I guess. I was thinking it would be more like creature, mental state, absorb, something like that.”

“But your spells are only cast on the self, right? You have to feel what the other creature is feeling.”

“What other emotion the creature is feeling! I think it must be emotion.” There was a pause.

“That was it. Emotion, 5 weight.”

“Great. Let me head to my next room, you’re ahead of me.”

“Okay.”

But I should be able to skip those rooms, right? The next two rooms proved her correct, create and move already being known. As she passed into the final room she got the notification of her new spell.

Congratulations

You have created a new spell. Here is the description of your spell:

Zone 2->Maintained 3->Light 1->Create 1->Move 1 weight 8
Create a 10cm light that can follow close behind you.
The nature (shape, color temperature, etc.) of the light
is up to the caster at time of casting, and at the base
level is equivalent to torchlight.

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.
Let your strength and wisdom blossom
as you and the mana grow together.

"I got it. Thought it would be the easiest. What are you looking at?"

"It's another mirror, but it's not reflecting me this time. Just the room."

"Where's the symbol?"

"Right on the mirror. It's a 10."

"Probably to cover you. So self->emotion->something. Relating to empathy."

"Right. Reflection?"

She snorted. "You want to reflect somepony's anger back at them or something?"

"You're right, that doesn't make sense. But why isn't it reflecting me?"

"Because the spell isn't self->emotion->self. It's using the same imagery so it's related but trying to differentiate between what you've already learned."

"Ghost?"

"Emotion->ghost? Remember it's a verb at the end..."

"Ghost can be a verb!"

"Yeah I guess. Wouldn't that be ghosting though? As in ghosting somepony?"

"Nah! 'Tell us where you buried the money or we'll ghost you!' Get it?"

"Oh, turn you into a ghost! That's terrible!"

"You're the one that wanted to watch a horror movie."

"Anyway, focus. There's nothing else in the room?"

"Just the exit door and the mirror- say, you don't think it's actually *literal* this time?"

She sighed. "We've seen it could be anything, really."

"It makes sense too. Self->Emotion->Mirror! That's empathy right there. Mirror!" There was a pause. "That was it." *Right. I have to work on myself with this magic. I can't reach out with it to affect others, ah here's the description, that confirms it.*

Congratulations

You have created a new spell. Here is the description of your spell:

Zone 5->Maintained 3->Self 2->Emotion 5->Mirror 10 weight 25

With a bit of concentration, you can begin to
take on the emotional state of a creature within
5m you are looking at, by adopting their posture,
breathing, and other subtle visual cues.

While feeling what they are feeling, you gain
insight on how better to relate to them.

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.
Let your strength and wisdom blossom
as you and the mana grow together.

“Nice! Huh, next room is pretty dark...”

“Test time, right?”

“And I got a light spell. That makes sense.”

Origami created a light, and had to walk a short maze avoiding clearly marked traps in the floors and walls. Without the light she would have no doubt stumbled into them, but with it she made it through without issue. Gianna, meanwhile, was looking at herself in a fold out mirror. The three images looking back at her were passive though, showing no emotion at all. Above each one was something she clearly recognized as an emoji, from Sunny’s stories about the future. *So what do I have to do?* She waved a claw across one of the images and the happy face changed to a sad face. *Huh.* She kept swiping, going across several faces showing various emotions. She left it randomly and turned to the second one, making sure it worked the same way, which it did.

“I’m done with mine,” Origami announced. “How’s it going for you?”

“Not sure.” She described what she was seeing.

“Have you even put the new spell on yourself?”

“That might help...” She did, but nothing seemed to change. She set the third to a face with a question mark, then waited for something to happen. *Is the image supposed to change or something?* As she stood there waiting she began to get angry. This test was stupid. Maybe she would just smash the mirror! *Yeah, that’ll show whoever made this. Stupid mirror, stupid test, it makes me so angry!!! Oh wait.* She paused, claws in the air ready to smash the mirror. Instead she set the emoji to the face with the smoke cloud coming out the top, and it glowed, making both emoji and image vanish. She wasn’t angry anymore. *I have to be careful of that! May have gone a little too deep with that one, or it’s super strong to make sure I picked up on it. Wow. I’ll need to practice separating my own emotions from the emotions I pick up from others.* With the trick behind her she quickly set the other two correctly, feeling her emotional state change as she stood looking at the figures. The door unlocked, and both were back in the main room.

The pair now headed into the middle room, and again walked past the beginning stages of the spell. Gianna was confronted with a row of books in a library, while Origami was stuck in a gallery again. A most curious gallery, as the “paintings” to the left were simply math. To the right, directly across from those, were different scenes. She looked everything over.

$X = 2 F(X^2)$ – two big rabbits and two small rabbits

$Y = 1 X = 2 F(Y/X)$ – a pony splitting a log in half

$X = 4 F(y(x))$ – a pony plowing the fourth row of his field

$F(Y=X)$ – a pony seemingly in a hedge maze, as seen from above, but they’d smashed down the bushes to go in a straight, diagonal line, left to right from the bottom corner to the top corner.

So this is the automate spell, how would I define the spell if I was making it from scratch? What am I manipulating and what does this math stuff have to do with it? I have zone->maintained->object so I want the thing to do what it’s meant to. I want it to perform a function. Function->perform. Oh maybe that’s- oh these math problems are functions! “Function!” The door went green. “Got it!”

“So help me with mine,” Gianna requested. “I have two rows of books here. The books on the left have the symbol. Various ‘how to’ books, math, engineering basics. On the right I have political science, philosophy, and self improvement.”

“Sounds like the books on the left are knowledge, while the books on the right are more about opinions, or trial and error?”

“So it’s knowledge,” she told the dungeon, which accepted it. “You’re so smart. Glad I came with you.”

“Finally, you realize it. Last room.”

“Right.”

The two proceeded, Gianna getting a bedroom or at least a room with a bed in it, that had a lump in the middle of the bed. Origami got another gallery, and looked it over.

A pony in a hardhat accepting a sack of coins while his team packs up their tools. A newly built barn is seen off to the side.

A pony buys a colt an ice cream, a string of A’s is shown on their report card on the table at home.

A pony unpacks a box at home, looking at a packing list to make sure all the items are in the box. It looks like they are.

A pony in a fancy outfit staggers out of an alley with a smile on his face while a pony in some kind of leather getup counts bits further down the alley.

A coal miner pony stands next to a scale, upon which rests the coal they have mined that day. The scale reads the same number as the forepony’s paperwork, and the miner pony looks relieved.

“Well, one of these is disturbing,” she remarked.

“What was that?” Gianna asked.

“Nothing, just looking this over. What do you have?”

“I pulled the cover off the bed. There’s nothing there. The symbol is on the sheet though, and the weight. Dreams?”

“What are you going for this time? I forget.”

“Increasing knowledge. I have Zone 1->Instant 1->Mind 2->Knowledge 10->something.”

“Well it can’t be dreams. It’s a verb.”

“But it might be related to me sleeping. Getting smarter as I sleep?”

“But it’s instant. You would need a spell that lasted 8 hours or more to do that.”

“Oh yeah. Well, let me think. Want help with yours?”

“Maybe in a minute.” *I have Zone 2->Maintained 3->Unrestricted 10->Function 5->something. I thought of ‘perform’ but no, these are all showing scenes after the action has been performed. The colt got the A’s already, the coal has been mined. Still... “Perform.” Nope. Unpacking a box. I order something, the order has been fulfilled. “Oh, fulfill!”*

Congratulations

You have created a new spell. Here is the description of your spell:

Zone 2->Maintained 3->Unrestricted 10->Function 5->Fulfill 10 weight 30

Cause a touched object, up to 1m in size, to magically animate and do whatever it is the object normally does, as defined by the caster at the time of casting.

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.
Let your strength and wisdom blossom
as you and the mana grow together.

“Got it. I am getting the hang of this, actually. It’s not so bad.”

“Still thinking about mine.”

Gianna dropped the cover and looked around the room. There was nothing else, so she turned back to the bed. It was made again, and she scowled and pulled the covers back, showing the symbol. *The mirror was literal, but represented a verb. To mirror something, what came before which was emotion. Now I have ‘knowledge’ and the spell is to increase my knowledge. If it’s literal this time too, what am I literally doing? I’m uncovering the symbol. I’m* “Uncovering knowledge. Uncover.”

Congratulations

You have created a new spell. Here is the description of your spell:

Zone 1->Instant 1->Mind 2->Knowledge 10->Uncover 5 weight 19

Tap into the manasphere, which knows all. Intuit knowledge from the random flow of mana. As this is about the caster’s connection to magic and their ability to interpret the feelings they get from the manasphere, it is not guaranteed to produce any new insights.

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.
Let your strength and wisdom blossom
as you and the mana grow together.

“Interesting.”

“You got it?”

“Sure did. Onward!”

Her next room had a strange device sitting on a table, with a display that was lit up with a 60 when she entered the room. It ticked down to 59 as she stood there. Then 58. 57. 56. *Oh crap is that a bomb?* “It’s a boooooommm!” she yelled to Origami.

“So disarm it!” was the panicked reply.

“I don’t know how to disarm a- oh right.”

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She quickly cast the spell, dropping into her mana palace to hastily create a new spell that was weight 30 on the knowledge part. *Maybe I should have taken double mana gathering rate too*, she chided herself, gathering power. She cast the spell, and suddenly knew what she had to do. Pulling a wire the display went off.

“Still alive!” she crowed. “How’s that for science?”

“Nice one,” Origami praised. “I’ll work on mine now that I won’t have to listen to the screams of agony as you blow yourself up...”

“The dungeon wouldn’t do that, right? It would have just made me try again. Right?”
“You don’t know...”

Origami looked her test over. There was a coal chute with a hopper of coal connected to it, and a pull chain that would let some coal out. Under the chute was a wagon, and some meters from the wagon was a circle painted on the floor. *So without touching the cart or the hopper, get some coal into the cart and make it move to the circle, and dump the load. Easy!* She put the spell on the hopper, which successfully moved the chain and filled up the cart, and then stopped it. Putting the spell on the cart she made it wheel itself to the circle and dump the coal. A counter next to it she hadn’t noticed before went from 0 to 1. The scene blurred and reset, turning the counter back to zero. “Well, what else do you want from me?” she asked into the room. *You want more? But the simulation reset super fast. I could maintain it on the cart, cast it several times on the hopper? Putting it on the hopper just means the chain is ‘pulled’ and it empties out. It’ll spill coal all over the place. That can’t be right. Can I see the spell description again from here?* She tried a few things, and worked out how to bring back the spell card without going into her mana palace to see it. *Huh, neat. “defined by the caster at the time of casting.” How smart is magic? Could it... know? Even ‘communicate’ with another casting of the same spell? I guess we’ll try it.* She put the spell back on the hopper, this time maintaining the effect and willing it to open only when the cart wasn’t full and was under the chute. It did. With a small “hummm” she cast on the cart, to roll forward once full, dump the load, and come back. It did. The counter went up to 1, then 2, and then 3. The hopper was empty, and the light above the exit door went green. *Now how about that? It worked. It’s smarter than I thought, or at least more able to be defined than I thought. That’s good to know, this test actually did teach me something about the spell I wouldn’t have thought to try otherwise. Multiple castings that work together.*

With one door to go the duo refreshed their cores and stepped through. Gianna hurried through the first four rooms, already knowing zone, maintained, self, and damage. Her final room featured a sponge and a bucket, the bucket filled with water. “It’s a damage *absorption* spell,” she said into the room. “So this is the absorb part. A sponge absorbs. It’s a verb. Absorb.” A blue window showed up.

Cute. You are correct, but you need to see the symbol and weight before they can be absorbed into your core. Please at least try to follow the steps?

She snorted, put the sponge in the water and squeezed it, then let it go so it would absorb some. The symbol and weight appeared, and the door unlocked. “Thank you,” she said sarcastically, but there was no reply from the dungeon but the usual message.

Congratulations
You have created a new spell. Here is the description of your spell:

Zone 6->Maintained 3->Self 2->Damage 10->Absorb 10 weight 31
While maintained, any damage done to any creature within 10m of the caster can be chosen to affect

the caster instead. The caster retains their normal toughness defense against the attack.
(It cannot be dodged) Note that this is a magical effect, transferring “elemental” damage, of whatever type, to the caster. A fire attack would be “elemental” fire while a sword edge or blunt attack would be “elemental” physical. (In other words, it does not count as physical damage but magical damage) If the damage cannot be fully redirected the original target suffers the remainder.

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.
Let your strength and wisdom blossom
as you and the mana grow together.

Meanwhile, Origami had walked past Zone 12->Instant 1->Self 2 and was looking at an empty room with a light switch next to the door. No other room had a light switch so she was pretty sure it had to do with the spell and flicked it. Instantly she was shown a scene as though she was floating above the planet, stars and the moon above her, stretching to infinity and beyond. *I’m getting a teleport spell, so it must have something to do with “Space,”* she guessed. The scene vanished, as did the switch, and the door unlocked. *Wish they were all that easy. Or am I just getting better at this?*

The next room returned her to the gallery with various pictures.

A pony handing over bits for an apple.

One pony giving another a hat while taking a hat.

One young pony walking into a griffon house while a young griffon walks into a pony household.

A pony in a fancy outfit in an alley handing money to another pony in leathers while they look nervously down the alley.

I’m sensing a theme here. Is it cheaper to reuse imagery? Guess I really was supposed to go left to right, as I got the completion of this storyline before I got the beginning of it. Oh well. I have space, I need to do something with it. These are all exchanges. “Exchange,” she guessed. She was right.

Congratulations

You have created a new spell. Here is the description of your spell:

Zone 12->Instant 1->Self 2->Space 10->Exchange 10 weight 35
Teleport oneself up to 50m.

May your journey into the dark be fruitful.
Let your strength and wisdom blossom
as you and the mana grow together.

"Excellent. We can move into the testing room," she announced.

"Right."

She opened the door, but wasn't exactly sure what she was looking at. Rather than someplace to teleport to, she was looking at a book on a desk. Turning her head she read the title on the spine. "Teleportation."

"What's that?" Gianna asked, about to open her door.

"Something's odd here, hold please." She opened the book and realized what this was. *Just like with the 'make it rain' ritual this is a teleport ritual. To go further distances. Of course. The dungeon can give me these too, not just the spell? That's handy. Of course, a teleport spell is hardly useful if I could simply walk the distance I'm teleporting. Nice to know the dungeon thinks ahead for spells like this that might need to be cast to cover a greater range. I don't have to go through twice.* "Hey Gianna, you were trying to put a book into your mana palace right?"

"Yeah. I was being distracted by Lime Twist though, so I got a fuzzy copy of what I was reading, at best."

"But it worked. I'm going to try it now."

"With what? What did you find?"

"A ritual formula. I doubt I'll be able to remove this book, we weren't able to take stuff from the rooms before. So I have to memorize it. If I can read it once and then just re-read it later..."

"Go for it. I'll wait."

She focused on the pages, finding them to be fairly intuitive now that she knew the teleport spell. *I can pump mana into the distance part, once a minute by the looks of things. Every mana I put in represents a kilometer instead of a meter. So at 6 I'll be at 10 km, 7 I'll be at 15 km. And so on. I know Equestria is roughly 1,200 km across, so can I even get from one end to the other?* She did some quick mental math. *If I'm right, it would take about 250 MP to go from one coast of Equestria to the other. At an average rate of 10 MP per minute, it would take about 26 minutes to charge the ritual. That beats even the airship. Oh wait, I double my rate don't I? That's 20 MP per minute so it'll only take 13 minutes! Ha ha! Nice. I would even have some left over, it wouldn't take my entire pool.* With the book closed she headed into her mana palace, and pulled the same volume from her library. It seemed complete, so she snapped it closed and nodded, putting it back. *Easy. This place really is convenient.*

Heading forward now she teleported past a glass box that prevented her from moving forward, then headed to the telescope she found pointed at an apple tree some distance away. Sitting a moment and gathering mana as she chanted and magical energy built up in the air, she found herself next to the tree and smiled. *That's much better than the teleport spell I had before. I can basically go anywhere now, in just a few minutes. Well, maybe not Amphibia, but you get the point...*

There was a door behind the tree, and she headed through it, almost bumping into Gianna, who was sitting and looking at a strange setup.

"Ah, you're here," she announced, getting up. "I think I need you for my test."

"What's all this?" Origami looked around the room. There was a pressure plate on the floor, she had seen enough of them in the dungeons to recognize it, and a cannon pointing directly at it.

"My spell needs another. You have to step on the plate and be shot by the cannon. My-"

"Nope!" She backed off.

"Let me finish!"

"It's a cannon!"

"I've been shot with one before, remember? I was fine. You'll be fine! It hardly hurt at all, they're not that strong."

"Says you!"

"Says my spell, yes. Let me finish."

“Go ahead...”

“My spell will transfer the damage from you to me. You’ll be perfectly safe.”

Origami looked at her like she was crazy. “I thought that’s what you said to the door outside but that’s really what you got? How is that helpful?”

“I want to protect others. This is one way I can do it.”

“You’re crazy. But I guess... you can’t cast a spell to protect others like I could. This is really the best you could do, only able to cast on yourself.”

“Exactly. Will you help me test it? We’re stuck here until you do.”

She looked at the door, the light was red above it. Sighing she hung her head. “I guess we’ve been burned with lasers, now it’s time for me to be shot. Neat.”

“Thanks. Let me put the spell on.”

“Yes please, and don’t get the range wrong!”

“I’ll make it 10m, okay?”

“Nothing about this is okay!”

But in the end it worked out just fine, Gianna healing herself as her “negate force” spell didn’t do a thing against the damage being transferred. *Because it’s magical damage, not actual force. I guess that would have been too much to hope for. With both spells going I would effectively be invincible as would every ally around me. I’ll keep thinking about it, maybe I can get a spell to block magical damage too, or change magical damage to physical force.*

The pair got the usual message for completing a dungeon, and Origami was at least slightly mollified from what she had gone through.

Congratulations
You have completed a dungeon!
Dungeon Rewards Granted:

+5 potential
+1 potential [Origami- for showing trust in your friend]
+10 MP max
Spell Store unlocked

Location of Dungeon 6: 38647.

Chapter 21
Some time later
Rocking and Rolling

The pair headed back to the North Star, the blue barrier reappearing over the mouth of the cave as they left. They watched it for a few minutes, noting that the 1510 number did slowly tick down. So their assumption seemed correct, it would take a week before it was 0 and would let them in, or they could supply their own mana and make it count down faster. Gianna was considering “donating” some anyway, as she figured giving back, even to an inanimate object such as a dungeon, might be appreciated. She was sure she could make it back with meditation much faster than the dungeon could, but was interrupted by a green flame appearing nearby. Origami caught the scroll that appeared and opened it up.

“Good news,” she announced. “Bright Soul and Flash Cube have arrived in Canterlot and are eager to hear about our miracle cure. We’ll have to head there and open the dungeon for them.”

“I can bring the shield,” Gianna realized. “We can set off ‘the trap’ and see Melemizargo, maybe ask what this store thing is all about.”

“Sounds like a plan to me. Still no bridge, you’ll have to lead us.”

“Hummm...” she wondered, and flapped her wings. Leaving the ground easily she flew in a circle and landed again. “I guess this part of the dungeon is out of power too. We can just fly back to the North Star.”

“Aw, I wanted to try my teleport spell,” she pouted.

I mean, you still could, I guess?

The pair stopped at the Rock Farm, which wasn’t all that far away, to see how Marble was doing and see if she wanted to come with them. Landing near the main house they looked around, seeing three ponies out in the field doing something with rocks. Heading that way, they found a pony with a hat and tie, Marble, and Maud next to a cart, watching as they approached.

“Hi Marble, hi Maud!” Gianna called to them as they got closer. Marble shyly waved a hoof while Maud barely inclined her head and turned back to work, smashing a large rock into smaller chunks. “Hi girls,” Marble greeted them as they got closer. “Have you met my dad? Allow me to introduce Igneous Rock Pie.”

“How do you do?” Gianna asked formally. He seemed like a formal kind of pony, with graying hair and a pickax cutie mark. *And this is the pony that created Pinkie Pie? He seems to be anti-party, I don’t need the empathy spell to tell that. Huh, I should pump that up to 24 hours duration or something and get used to having it on all the time.*

“Greetings,” Origami said.

“Afternoon.”

“So what’s up?” Marble asked.

“We got word that Flash Cube and Bright Soul arrived,” Origami told her. “We thought we would stop by and see how you were doing. Has there been any indication of any... lasting damage... from the incident?”

“Sort of?” she hedged. “I don’t have my sister’s talent for the work, but...” She turned to face a nearby rock and started smacking it with a hoof.

“Little more to the left,” Maud told her, not even looking as she smashed another rock to pieces.

“Oh thanks!” She moved her hoof left and stomped a few more times, finally breaking the rock into chunks. “See? It didn’t used to take me that long.”

Igneous started sweeping up the rubble and putting it into the cart.

Oh, I could automate that! thought Origami. “So there has been some... reduction in function?”

She giggled. “You could say that. Do you think your solution can help?”

“It will get you back to where you were,” Origami agreed. “And if you wanted to take it further, you could decide later.”

“Go,” Maud said simply. “I’ll finish up here.”

“Well, now, hold on,” Gianna countered. “If you just want rocks smashed I’m your griffon. She shouldn’t be gone too long, but let me help finish up today’s work at least.”

“You can do the work without hurting yourself?” Igneous asked. “We need a #3 size gravel at the end of this.” He held up a chunk with a hoof. “Several cartloads.”

“Leave it to me,” she bragged, lighting up with magic.

“I say!” he managed, taking a step back.

“Nothing to fear, she’s just casting a spell,” Origami told him. “And let’s see what I can do to help, too.”

With the cart, broom, and pan enchanted to move around and deliver the loads to a specific spot, and both Maud and Gianna smashing rocks, Igneous and Marble could only stand and stare in amazement as the work took a fraction of the time. The two got into it, having a friendly competition as Maud kept sizing her up out of the corner of her eye. She would smash a rock, then peek over at Gianna to see if she had finished, and of course griffons were nearly as competitive as dragons. She kept her pace down though, believing she could go faster but didn’t want to make Maud feel bad. *I am doing this with magic, after all, I’m not sure if she’s just physically strong enough or doing something magical herself. I guess if Marble could do something similar and now can’t, it could be some magical technique she discovered and simply perfected, unlike her sister who needs more practice. Like Origami flying, pegasi don’t think about it as magic but it is. She proved that with the wind gust technique she discovered- it’s the same thing here. Something an earth pony can do that Maud simply repurposed for this. We found all that out the hard way. She may have simply refined a core all on her own and is using magic when she smashes the rock with her hoof.* When the job was done Maud just said “thanks,” so Gianna put her empathy spell on and focused. She breathed a sigh of relief as she felt only surprise, curiosity, and admiration- for herself. *That will take some getting used to. This is almost mind reading, I should respect other creature’s privacy. Maybe having it up all the time isn’t the best idea. I’ll think about it. Still, she’s not angry at me for what I can do, that’s the main point.*

“Guess we can fill that order today after all,” Igneous announced. “You ever need a job, come by any time.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, thanks.”

The three headed to the castle in Canterlot, the guards at the front gate escorting them to the princess, who was serving tea. Flash Bulb and Bright Soul looked happy to see them, and they got right into the topic of discussion.

“So the dungeon is right here in the castle,” Bright Soul summarized, “and with hardly any effort we can get our ability to fly and manipulate weather back?”

“That’s right. I’ll leave learning magic up to you. And you’re right about the effort part, it almost does seem like cheating, the way we’ve gone about it. The dungeons were made far apart so it was a journey, they didn’t realize we would have an airship to help get us between them. It’s taken a

process that may have taken years and turned it into a matter of weeks. We've both made tremendous progress in just a short time. I do have to admit, this way is faster than the Starswirl method. And once we get the teleport network up, it'll probably be even faster."

"Soon," Celestia said coyly, with a wink.

"We aren't strangers to long journeys," he admitted. "It would be made shorter by us flying between places in any case. We can discuss that once it becomes relevant, I think. I'm not getting my hopes up too high, just in case something goes wrong."

"We may as well not delay," Gianna told them. "We're going to go in first, so we can talk to the admin, I guess you would call him, of the dungeons. I need to ask about this," she indicated the shield she had lugged into the place. "And I have a few other questions." She pulled out a rolled-up piece of paper, legally distinct from a "scroll" for obvious reasons, that she had been working on during the journey back. "Origami helped."

"I was going to say," Celestia exclaimed, looking startled. "Do we have another Twilight Sparkle on our hooves here?"

She blushed. "I'm just getting interested in it, that's all."

"That's how it starts," she said mysteriously, taking a sip of her tea.

The two headed down to the dungeon first, and true to his word the trap went off, bringing them back to the cave where Melemizargo hung out. They went down the stairs, past the big iron door, past the treasure area, and stood before the Big Black Dragon Himself.

"Ah, come to see me before hitting the lair, eh?" he asked. "Smart. Let's see it then. I doubt you would need it for one, but I'd want it for two just in case."

Lair? thought both of them. Gianna handed the shield over, or at least deposited it on one of his outstretched fingers. He looked it over critically.

"Strange," he mused. "I almost feel a sense of nostalgia, looking at this. It feels familiar, in a way. Almost as if I've lost a dear friend. Not a deer friend, deer can still talk around here, right? Never mind. It's signed 'Eric Flatt.' That means something to me, but I can't say what. But never mind that. Tell me about it, again? I see what are probably the function runes here but I want to be sure I have the complete picture."

"Okay. It could float around. When Twilight went to look at it, the shield acted more like a cat than a shield, messing with her. When it wasn't active it would shrink and attach to my armor." She turned to show him. "It would go to defend who I told it to, but really I didn't get much time with it. We got it and then soon after went to Limbo after Pony of Shadows."

"Humm, that explains why I feel it seems 'stretched.' It didn't shrink when it wasn't in use, the default state was small. It grew when you needed it. As it was damaged when it was like this, it's stuck like this. Don't let anything hit it, the metal has been weakened."

"Okay."

"Now to repair it, you'll need to do some work. The runes can be repaired simply by erasing them, maybe letting the shield soak in a mana rich environment for a few days, and redrawing them. You'll have to redraw the mana conduits as well, but that should be no problem. The core is a different issue. It's not done very often, as most don't like losing MP capacity, but there should be a book around here that details the ritual you would have to use. I can loan it to you, it's the one I was mentioning earlier. It will be combatable with this as far as I can see. Essentially making a second core from yours, and implanting it into the shield. As a note, the core would still be considered yours, so if you had the shield nearby you could draw from it in a pinch."

"I don't mind losing some, how much are we talking here?"

"Base amount of probably 30 MP. That would allow one activation. However, that doesn't account for the size change, which would have to be cast separately. I expect that was done because this was all the runes the metal would accept, and he still wanted it to grow. You would

need to know that spell, and donate it to the shield, along with more MP so that could be cast. The book would have the details of that. Naturally the more MP you shove into it, the more times it can be activated before needing to be recharged. As for that, it'll have *your* rate of gathering mana, as though it was meditating. So you may want to use your potential for that skill before you begin, just to make sure it's as fast as possible. The other way to do it, and I don't recommend this, is to modify the ritual slightly. Allow the shield to draw off your mana. If it was ever captured though, that could be a 'back door' to weakening you. Not that many in this time would have the skills to do that, but you never know."

"There's only three dungeon users left alive in this time though, right?" Origami asked. "The princesses would never!"

He chuckled. "As far as you know, yes. Keep traveling the path and maybe you'll meet more. If they exist. Which I'm not saying they do of course."

"Uh huh..."

He gently handed the shield back.

"How should I learn the spell? Go back to the last dungeon in a week? Can I just pay my part of the debt and go in alone?"

"Just use the store. I see the message wasn't triggered, you didn't even look, did you? And after all the work I did on it too. Rude."

"We got busy with other stuff. We'll take a look soon, don't worry. I have some questions for you if you don't mind answering?" She got out the sheet.

"I can tell you some things, I suppose. But I'm going to want your word that you'll publish these answers. If you have questions, clearly magical learning is not where it should be. You'll want to fix that."

"I can agree to that. Do you have something to write with? I don't want to forget anything you tell me..."

He waved a claw and a blank book, quill, and ink floated over to Origami.

"Can't you just make the writing magically appear?" she asked, giving them a dirty look. Clearly she didn't want to play secretary.

"Can't you?" he replied.

She blushed. "Oh yeah, I can do that again. I keep forgetting. Sorry. Thanks for the convenience." She cast, and the quill perked up, ready to write. It started taking notes as Gianna began reading from the page.

"Back in Amphibia there was a history book about some of their magi-tech. It talked about how they travelled to other worlds. That's how they gained the mana powered 'runic web.' That world called magic 'The Dark.' Stygian referred to magic the same way, and referred to you as 'the Darkness.' Is that just a nickname, a name from your past, or does it have a particular magical connotation?"

"Part of the answer is right there on my door, but I can go into more detail. It's a combination of the last two things you said. As it's how I introduced myself to the ancient ponies it stuck, but yes it goes deeper than that. Much deeper, and much older. To fully understand I must take you all the way back to the beginning. Are you ready?" He waited for them to nod. **"Very well. It the beginning there was Darkness. Endless Dark, without form or fire, soul or mind. And yet. And yet. The Darkness longed, and watched, and waited, for it could do nothing else. There was no time, no ages, no rise and fall, who can say how long the Dark waited, but eventually there came the Spark. Order from chaos, a second thing, where there was once only Dark. Thus did the Dark bear witness, for when the Spark flared and vanished, everything changed. Darkness had never seen such a thing, and longed to see more. And so the Dark worked, to bring back the Spark it so longed to see. What the Dark created was instead: Mana. From there Mana was changed, to become fire, and air, and water, and earth. But again, the Darkness saw no Spark. Something was missing. Long did the Dark work, creating place after place the Spark could rise**

again. To no avail. Finally, Darkness decided that in order for the Spark to exist, there must be something that was not Darkness. But what could be not Darkness, yet strong enough to exist in Darkness? And so the Darkness imbued the First Dragon, which was not Darkness. Was this success? Darkness now looked upon what it had made, and the First Dragon looked back. The Darkness then had the answer. It pulled away from the Dragon it had made, and thus left space for something new: Light! This was the piece the Dark had been missing, and the Dragon rejoiced to see such a thing with eyes, to feel the light on horns and scales. With Light came life, and the First Dragon watched over it, guided it, though that life was not always dragons. The Spark had returned, stronger than ever as life flourished in the places the Dark had made. And the life made their own Mana, which pleased the Dark, who saw this as a continuation of their work. To expand, to grow, to seek to ignite the Spark everywhere it could. With the Dragon to guide them, potential became spells, and spells became magic, and with magic, new potential. On and on until today. So you see, Mana came from the Dark, and so those who have a deep respect for the Mana call it by the True Name."

"Uh..." Gianna wasn't sure how to respond to this. "That sort of raises more questions."

He chuckled. **"I would expect nothing less."**

She looked to Origami, who shook her head. No help there. "I guess we'll just press on, maybe I can review the text and get another set of questions together before I leave."

"However you wish."

"Huh, I guess the question of 'Why did you choose a dragon for your form?' got answered. Can you change? Be any form/size you want?"

"I can work magic just as easily as you can. So in theory I could. I share the same restrictions you do, of course. Covering this magnificent body," he gestured to himself, **"with mana would be cost prohibitive. So I'm not likely to bother. Plus, would you want to become less than you are? I think not."**

"That might depend. I certainly think of myself this size, but I could see how being larger or smaller could make it easier to understand another race or culture."

He laughed. **"Of course, when you are already quite small, being slightly larger or smaller is hardly of consequence. I mean no offense; it's just from my perspective you could hardly be any smaller. Taking on your perspective of the world... it could be interesting."**

I wanted to ask if he came here from somewhere, but if he's this "First Dragon" then clearly not. And he's been here since the beginning of time, according to his story. Maybe I'll outright ask him if he's the "First" and go from there later. "What do you know about other universes?"

"I recognize they exist. How can I not, given what those in Amphibia did? But it would take an absurd amount of Mana to open a gateway between them. My purpose is to see Mana grow, to expand, to bring life. Using it up in that way seems counterproductive. At least to create a portal large enough for me to step through. You might be able to manage a small one, for a moment or two, with a ritual. Still- you have enough problems here, don't go looking for problems elsewhere."

"So you have no connection to that other world?"

"I... am certain I do not."

Gianna was not blind to the hesitation in Melemizargo's voice when he said that. *There's nothing that says he must be truthful in his answers to me. If he has some kind of agenda here... but what agenda could a huge dragon, that may be the first lifeform to exist, have? He wants to convince me he's something he's not? Or is he trying to convince himself?* "Very well. Did the magic we're learning originate from there or does this sort of magic exist on multiple worlds/universes?"

"Mana exists as potential. You've seen how even a span you can cross in a few days can separate learning. When Amphibia lost their stones and had to rebuild their civilization, they chose potion making and 'curse bags' as their only expression of Mana use. Meanwhile, ponies

had unicorns to push magical studies forward and cast spells through their auras, as was proper. How a civilization chooses to utilize the energy Mana provides them is up to them. You yourself have chosen one way, who is to say there are not others?"

"I would have to guess you?"

He chuckled but said nothing.

"Let's change topics a little. How did the dungeons come into existence? Ponies built them to train in magic but where did the idea to do so come from?"

"We heard that from Celestia," hissed Origami.

"I want to see if his story matches up!" she hissed back.

"Are there snakes in here now? I hate it when snakes get into my cave. Very poor conversationalists, snakes."

"Sorry, go on!"

"Thank you. The idea came from me. There was a time I would have created the spell store, that I recently made for you two, at the very beginning. Simply let ponies 'buy' complete spells, and engrave them onto cores with no understanding of what made them work in the first place. I decided it was better to make sure those that studied magic truly knew the weight of what they were doing. Simply buying spells and using them would result in a shallow understanding of magic and no progress. The dungeons seemed the right way to go- making sure only those dedicated to learning would move forward. And as they knew how the magic came together, they could create spells that perhaps I hadn't even thought of. We'll see how it works out for you two. In any case, I showed the ponies of old how to create dungeon cores, and place them in the earth, and how to shape the rooms into the proper spaces for learning. They then selected dungeon masters and the like, and for a time the system worked extremely well."

"Okay, that sounds like a story I heard before. My last question isn't one on the sheet," she set it aside. "It's what you said when I gave you the shield. I wanted to repair it, of course, but if you have a connection to it, perhaps you'd like to keep it?"

"You have certainly sparked something in my mind, showing me this," he admitted. "But I would not dream of keeping it. Was it not your reward for a job well done? It is an echo of a memory, perhaps simply something I dreamed in my long wait after the dungeons were closed. I have the image of it, I will not forget. But thank you."

"If you're certain. You've helped us, and apparently everyone, out an awful lot and I just thought you deserved something in return besides simply reviving the Dungeons."

"I have all that I require. As long as Mana grows along with you, that it is used to support the spark inside you all, I am content."

"Very well. Give me a moment to think about all this, if you don't mind?"

"Not at all."

Gianna read over what had been said already, trying to come up with some follow up questions. "So you're referred to as the Darkness, but technically you're the First Dragon created by the Darkness and have been watching over and guiding all of existence since... it existed?"

"Let me ask you something. Do I look like a 'Second' Dragon to you?"

"Not really answering the question," Origami muttered.

"But yes, I've been... around. In one form or another, since the beginning." He paused, looking not at the two but upwards, as if at something at a great distance. His next utterance was quieter, almost to himself. **"How could it be otherwise?"**

There's that hesitation again. Strange. "And Mana's True Name...is Darkness? Is Darkness then a word with many meanings or are the fundamental force, your physical presence, and mana itself all so closely related that the term is correctly applied in all cases?"

"That is perhaps a matter for philosophers to argue over. Both Mana and myself came from the Darkness directly. Yet our will is the same, to foster the Spark. One could say," he paused

to scratch his chin with a claw, **“that there is the father, the son, and a ‘spirit,’ but yet, we are all one. The Darkness, the First Dragon, and the Mana. Yes, that would do nicely.”** He nodded to himself in a satisfied way. **“Please understand, I’ve never really thought about it. I exist. The Mana exists. The Darkness exists, out there where it cannot harm the Spark but can still watch over what it made, through me. That was enough. These questions were not something I have ever considered, so I am simply giving you my best impression of the answers. I hope I am putting it in a way you can understand.”**

“I’m trying to. You mentioned that life creates its own mana. Is that mana any different than the mana that the Darkness first created?”

“Now that is something difficult for me to answer. I wasn’t there at the time, of course. I was told the tale of my own creation, and given my charge. By that time most of the Mana had been used in creation. I would have to assume so, given the source, but at the same time I look at something like water. Is *water* different now? I hardly think so. Why would Mana be the exception? As for a true answer, well, I would have to reach back and pluck a sample from that time to compare. Something I will not be doing, obviously.”

“Obviously.” Gianna started pacing back and forth, deep in thought. She was trying to remember other creation myths she had heard over the years, as well as every fantasy trope from novels she had read. *The truth would be too big for any author to conceive of, but perhaps all stories contain some truth. Can I take his word that this is literally what happened, or is this too another story that only contains truth, which I must find for myself?* “You mentioned Order from Chaos, but I couldn’t picture how essentially pure nothingness could really be considered Chaos. I thought that word choice was just embellishment for the sake of the story, but there was *will* there. Even before anything existed there was a desire for *something*. That’s definitely Chaos. Order would have been content to just *be* Darkness, right? Do you think the ‘Spark’ was created out of a desire for there to be something or could the Spark have been some other fundamental force?”

“**Xoat?**” he whispered, as if remembering something and looking pained. Gianna looked up in surprise but he quickly recovered, clearing his throat. **“I mean, you want my opinion? I suppose there *could* have been some outside force, intruding into The Darkness to show it the way. But where would such a thing have come from? What is ‘outside’ when there is naught but The Darkness? If such a place existed then it would be even beyond my understanding.”**

“I suppose you’re right. I’ve been working on a theory that the most powerful magic all involves friendship in some way. I think that fits since Mana...Darkness...is not just potential, but potential with a will to grow and foster life. The Elements are almost like artifacts that serve as guides on how to use magic to its full potential. Does that make sense, or have I been spending too much time reading school textbooks over summer break?”

“The ‘elements’ as you call them have been used in the past to do wondrous magic, it’s true. But is that because the elements are simply powerful magical artifacts, or because the magic performed with them was done by many, focused on a singular goal? I think it will be best if I allow you to come to your own conclusions there.”

“That’s fair,” she agreed. “That’s about all I’ve got for now, Origami? Anything to add? Any question you would like to ask?”

“I don’t think so,” she decided.

Able to ask questions of the being that claims the title of being the first ever lifeform, with probably unlimited knowledge of magic and she has no questions? I hope that darkness in her heart goes away soon, she’s really starting to worry me. “Very well. Let’s find that book and you can send us back.”

“Yes, where did I put that...”

Chapter 22
A moment later
A Getaway

“That was informative, if not very useful,” Origami complained. The pair were heading back up the stairs to get the others, now that it was their turn. She was carrying the shield and the book on ritual, while Origami was hanging onto the book her magic had written in.

“Hearing about the creation of our reality from the first dragon who was basically there?” Gianna exclaimed, not believing she wasn’t more excited about this. “Yeah, I’d say it was pretty dang informative. Though I’m worried about his hesitation there in spots. Is his memory going or something?” *I’ll have to make some notes when I get the chance, copy that text into another book and give some context to the remarks. His tone of voice, where he hesitated, that won’t be picked up by just the words on the page. While it’s fresh in my mind.*

“If you were as old as time, I doubt you’d remember every little thing either. My point about not being very practical still stands.”

“Does it have to be? It’s background information on how *magic itself* came to be. Now maybe it’s not literal, splitting mana into the elements like fire and water, but I think scholars will eat it up.” *I guess she’s more like Celestia, interested in the practical side of magic only. While I’m turning out to be more like Luna, and digging into the history and technical aspects. What a weird twist. Reminds me, we should go check on Lime Twist.*

“Stygian at least...”

The pair led the three down to the archway, which incidentally had been cleaned up by then and marked off. The area had been cleaned out, dusted, and lit better, so clearly Celestia was expecting many more ponies to be visiting in the near future.

“This is pretty exciting!” Marble gushed. “I’ll really be able to do magic?”

“You’ll get a core,” Gianna cautioned. “You won’t get any spells until at least the third dungeon. The second one is all about magical skills you’ll need work with mana, allowing you to cast spells.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Look Marble,” Origami told her. “Until everypony has an equal chance to learn this method of doing magic, you need to be cautious about its use and not cause resentment among those that can’t yet. Don’t overshadow your sister.”

Says the pony that learned magic, despite “only” being a pegasus, Gianna thought to herself. Brings up a good question, could she cast the ‘Starswirl’ way with this core, if she had to? Not go to any other dungeon and just study magic like Origami was doing before all this happened? The two are incompatible in some way, I’m pretty sure I heard that somewhere, but if she chose to do things the ‘new’ way what would stop her? I’ll have to look into how Origami got her core in the first place, without dungeon assistance. Maud clearly has, or was just born with one? A core must be a core, right?

She let out a short chuckle. “Don’t you worry, my sister is very secure in who she is. Pinkie is a world famous party planner who knows everypony. But she’s perfectly happy to work on the farm rather than be jealous of that.”

“I see.”

"Anyway, it's fairly straightforward below," Gianna told the others. "We didn't have much trouble. I know you're familiar with meditation from your studies in oversoul, that's half the dungeon right there. You can always go backwards if you have any issues, and come ask us."

"Very well," Bright Soul agreed. "Let us descend, then."

The three turned and moved to enter the dungeon, but the familiar blue energy barrier sprang up over the doorway.

Warning
No Dungeon Master present
Please contact your local Dungeon Master before
entering the dungeon. Thank you.

"Oh, the mini-script!" Gianna remembered, snapping her caws. "Didn't he say we would need to give it to anypony that wanted to use the dungeons?"

"But we're here," protested Origami. "Aren't we Dungeon Masters?"

"We're *our own* Dungeon Masters," she explained. "We're not the masters of this dungeon in particular."

"Everything has to be so complicated," she sighed. "Just a second while I call him up."

"What's the problem?"

She didn't answer, instead opening her system menu and touching "Ask Melemizargo a question." The familiar chat box opened, and she tilted it so Gianna could see.

"What are you doing?" asked Flash Cube, looking between them. "You're just touching the air."

"It's complicated," Gianna told him.

"**What's up?**" was printed in the chat window. "**Didn't you just leave here?**"

"We need to figure out how to get some other ponies access to dungeon one," Origami told him. "Is the mini-script the only way?"

"In a technical sense? No, I suppose not. You could enter the core room and take on that function yourself. You can only administer one dungeon at a time, and you would be stuck with the responsibility. Is that what you want?"

"I couldn't leave again?"

"Of course you can leave again. Did you see any bathrooms in there? I just mean anycreature that wanted to go through the first dungeon would have to go through you."

"Forever?"

"Of course not. You'll die eventually. But before that, if you want to pass on that responsibility or simply return things to the way they are now, where there is no Dungeon Master at all, you need only access the menu and select that function."

"If I want." That means I don't actually have to. "That's perfect. Thanks!"

"But it also means you'll have to take them to other dungeons. There's only the two of you. You're going to have to give it to them sooner or later. I mean unless you take the rights and then give them up right away. Just keep doing that for the whole journey."

Yeah, we don't have that kind of time, even with an airship. What is she thinking? Gianna wondered.

"We can worry about that later. Right now I just want to get them flying again. We can discuss if they want to continue on this journey later."

"Okay, it's your call..."

For the moment, Gianna thought.

"Thanks." She swiped and the window vanished. "I'll go down and see what I need to do to let you all in. Shouldn't take long."

"Why not just give them the mini-script?" Gianna asked, confused. "What's the harm?"

"I'm just not comfortable doing it, that's all. Are you coming or not?"

"Yes, let's go," Gianna told her. *I'm not letting her go down there alone.*

She nodded and poked a hoof through the barrier. It allowed her to pass, and both went down the stairs, finding themselves in the admin area. There was a further door which they took, a short hallway, and there was the dungeon core. It looked like a shiny, slightly pink rock on a pedestal in the center of the room, and Origami walked up to it. "Now how do you suppose..." she started, but holding a hoof up to it she froze.

What's this all about? Gianna asked herself, looking her frozen friend over. She's trying to control the whole dungeon network by holding the first one herself? Is what remains of Pony of Shadows doing something to her? Does she not trust the ponies that literally fought by our side, and the one that gave us the technique to survive in Limbo and even stand before Pony of Shadows without being taken over? In either case it's not her call. We are to submit a report about how the dungeons are functioning after all this time idle, and nothing more. It's up to the leaders here, the two sisters, what to do about them. I guess we'll see what happens once whatever darkness Guru warned me about leaves her, if she changes her mind. If not, well, I can always call Melemizargo myself. I'm sure he can break her hold over the dungeon and then allow it to be assigned to someone else. Or I can simply give these three the mini-script later, so they can head to the next dungeons on their own. She's not the only one with power here.

Meanwhile, Origami was interfacing with the dungeon core, which basically asked her if she wanted to become the official Dungeon Master because none was present. She answered yes, and suddenly her awareness was expanded. She could feel the various rooms in her head, how they were laid out and what was in them. A new panel opened as well, showing her information about the dungeon such as mana transfer numbers, rates, and other statistics such as number of cores granted in the last week/month/year. She came out of it, and looked to Gianna. "I'm fine, it worked. I think I can let them in now." She headed back to the office area, and various windows in the air opened showing the staircase and various rooms. A moment later the three were seen coming down the staircase, and then heading into the first room. The view of that room split to show three separate rooms.

"Mana usage just went up," she announced. "Weird feeling. I can actually feel them in there."

"You okay?"

"Sure thing. Ha, he's so clumsy! The others are doing okay though."

The three passed through the dungeon without much issue, and they were about to finish when Origami perked up again. "I get to set the rewards too? What are my options here?" She scrolled through the list, able to use Mana to increase the rewards given if she thought they had done exceptionally well. There was even an option for minor magical items, but that had a note next to it that only an exceptional student should earn such a thing at this stage. She left everything at the defaults but struck off the Dungeon 2 location from the list. *They can ask me if they want to go to the second one. They'll need my help to open it up anyway. Or I guess Gianna.*

The trio now headed into the office, and Origami excitedly asked if they could fly again.

"Perhaps somewhere with less ceiling," Bright Soul suggested, looking up. "Though I feel good about things."

"I do feel different," Marble agreed. "Like there was no longer something I was missing, just out of the corner of my eye."

"That's great, Marble!" Gianna gushed. "You'll be back breaking rocks with your sister in no time."

"Let's head out," Origami told them. "Right this way to the exit."

As she left the dungeon a new panel sprang into existence back in the office, one she didn't feel or know about as she lost all sense of the dungeon once she was past the doorframe.

Dungeon Master reset timer
0 / 30 days

Melemizargo nodded to himself. ***Let's just see what your game is, shall we? If you take your responsibility seriously and lead others through at least once every 30 days you can keep it. Otherwise...***

Outside, the two pegasi were flying around, getting the kinks worked out of their wings. When they landed again both reported feeling just as fast as they had been, though they had tired easily.

"We can get back in flying shape though," Bright Soul decided.

"Yes, it's just a bit of weakness from being grounded so long," Flash Cube agreed.

"I couldn't fly no matter what I tried," Marble joked softly, looking away from the group.

"Very funny," Origami told her. "That's great news. I was worried the time might have played a factor but I guess not. Where will you go now?"

"You should stay as my guests," Celestia offered. "I would be interested to hear of the battle from your perspective, and to see if any of my own castle guard could learn of this 'oversoul' technique you speak of."

"Of course!" both said with a bow. "Thank you princess," Bright Soul continued.

"You want to head back to the farm?" Ginna asked.

Marble nodded. "Unless you have some rocks around here you want smashed up..."

"Great. Let's go check on Lime Twist and we can be on our way. Princess, see you soon." She bowed as well.

"It's only been like a day," Origami complained.

"More than enough time to see her doctors and decide if being out and about was good for her progress. If it was than more will be even better!"

"I guess."

So they headed to the facility and her doctors reported no ill effects from her time away. They were pleased she had kept up her reading practice and talking to CelestAI when the others were away. She agreed to go with them again, as they were going to head to Baltimore to check on the "Love Get-away" service before heading to the next dungeon. Now seemed like as good a time as any, so they had discussed it and figured a short detour wouldn't hurt anything.

"New city?" she asked. "See new things, good!"

"It's settled then," Gianna agreed. "Let's sign that paperwork."

With the airship docked the three headed out into the city, which was about the size of Filly Delphia, and they had been there before. It didn't take long to get directions to the place, and soon they were standing in front of a dinky office with what looked like a hoofpainted sign. The windows were plastered with posters regarding the service, which in looking them over still wasn't clear to the three.

Lime Twist said she would remain outside, she had a small following of young ponies that clearly wanted to ask about her legs. “Good practice, talking to other ponies,” she said.

“If you’re sure,” Origami told her. “We’ll be right in there if they get to be too much.”

“Okay.”

The bell rang and a changeling looked up from the front desk. It was a small place, a few tables and chairs with flyers on them so clearly whatever this “getaway” was it wasn’t happening here.

“Oh my!” said the changeling. “A pony and griffon couple? How adorable! We’ve not had the opportunity to mimic a griffon yet, we may need an extra day or two of watching you in order to learn your mannerisms, but I assure you our team is up to the task! Would you like to meet with one of our agents and begin the Love Getaway process?”

Both were blushing furiously. “We’re not actually a couple,” Gianna finally managed. “We’re just here because we helped the changelings in the swamp and wondered if this service was related to them.”

“It is you two,” she gasped. “I thought so, but I didn’t want to assume. It’s me, Tingle. Yes, we started this service soon after that zebra showed us what to do with the potions. We needed a lot of love items to handle our cravings, and this service helps with that, and reducing our hunger directly. Would you still like to hear about how it works? We’re doing well, and it’s all thanks to you two.”

“Let’s hear it,” Origami agreed.

“Okay.” She came around the counter and beckoned them to a table. “If somepony else comes in I’ll have to leave you. But we’re not *that* popular yet, I can spare a few minutes.” She opened up the pamphlet on the table and started pointing things out. “We’re a swap service, where couples can come to set up discreet days off from their partners. To start the process, you pay up front and donate an object that represents your love. We say this is to show your dedication, sacrificing something important to show your dedication to doing this, but in reality it just allows some potions to be made. Not every changeling is employed here, yet! Maybe when other branches open. Meanwhile, an agent discreetly follows each partner at some point in the next week, they can learn how to represent that pony. This also allows the agent to “snack” on the love generated between the two. Once that’s done either partner can come to the service and schedule a day off, a certain number of times a month depending on what level of plan you’ve purchased. They will be replaced that day. They can go off and do whatever, meanwhile the other partner is unaware of the switch and freely gives their love, allowing the agent to have a full meal. Naturally there are restrictions on what the agents can do, and no special event day (birthday, anniversary, etc) can be scheduled. It’s win/win for everypony! While we get more curious ponies than paying customers word is spreading and we think the service will work out for everypony.”

“How many customers have you had?” she asked.

“I believe our current number of paying couples is 24.”

“What about privacy?” Gianna asked.

“We don’t go poking around,” Tingle huffed. “We’re professionals. Unless the other partner requests it, no safes may be opened, bank accounts accessed, and the like. It’s all very regulated, as part of our license to operate in the city. Mayor Pen Pusher was quite specific.”

“And how long does the service last?” Origami wondered.

“That depends on what tier you select when you first buy the subscription.” She pointed to a “menu” of sorts hanging behind the desk that listed prices and times. Both looked it over, hardly seeing the numbers before them.

“I... I can’t,” she managed, and turned to head out the door.

“Is she ill?” Tingle asked. “I hope she feels better soon.”

“She’ll be fine,” Gianna assured her. “Look, from what you all said before it’s sharing love between members of your species that changed you, right?”

“Correct.”

"And you're sure you just can't do that? I mean if you're running this service you must know what love is..."

She laughed. "Of course we know what love is. We know the taste, the texture, the very scent of it. We choose to live how we wish, and simply saying, oh, find someone of your own species doesn't help. Why don't *you* just go right this minute and find someone of *your* species to fall in love with? Go ahead, do it today. I'll be right here waiting for you to come back with the lucky griffon that completely returns your love despite only meeting them an hour before. Prove to me how easy it is, if you're sure it's just like turning a key in a lock."

"Yes, I can see how it could be a problem..."

"Good. Meanwhile, we still have to eat. We can do it the sneaky way, the way our queen demanded, and abduct ponies and replace them. Or we can do it out in the open, with approval, and actually do some good in the world."

"You really think that's what you're doing?"

She pointed to the far wall. "Would we get such glowing reviews if we weren't?"

Gianna looked at her skeptically but went over to look at them. No names, obviously, but in all different handwritings were slips of paper hung up on a corkboard. All of them were like this;

"One day for me away from the kids. Worth every bit."

"My husband was watching the game, thought I was there cheering his team on. I hate sports. But our relationship is better than ever now thanks to Love Getaway."

"Went fishing with the guys. Slipped back inside to a happy wife with no arguments. Said it was wonderful how 'I' had helped her clean the place up that day. What a great service!"

"They do seem positive," she agreed. *Not that they would hang up any negative ones...*

"Of course. We know what ponies want. We've always known. Now, is there anything else?"

"I guess not. Good luck with the service."

"Thank you. I would hate to have to go back to our old way of doing things, after all. This way is much better. Have a good afternoon."

Gianna walked away from the place, finding Origami and Lime Twist a few buildings over.

"I'm trying to explain it to Lime Twist," Origami told her.

"Pony Web sounds better," Twist told her. "All togetherness."

"I just can't believe they actually get customers," Origami continued. "This seems like such a violation of trust. How can any couple in love sign up for this?"

"Yes, the fact they have customers at all worries me more than them opening the place. Maybe this city just has something wrong with it."

"And if there was, how would we even find what it was? Is it even our responsibility to do it?"

"I'm just worried that Sunny's future could still happen if we aren't vigilant enough. This doesn't seem like it's driving anypony apart *now*, but it could grow."

"I don't know," Origami mused with a shake of her head. "This is new, not a part of the Sunny timeline. We never would have helped the changelings if we didn't have the airship and need their crystal. Wonder how Twilight found it in her timeline?"

"But if time wants to go that way- I don't know how it works. Let's just walk around the city, see if we see anything out of place."

"Wanted do that anyway," Lime Twist told them, rolling her eyes. "No change."

So the three walked the streets. It was a city- a pony city. It was the best of cities, it was the worst of cities. It was very different from the sleepy village of Ponyville, or the dry and dusty towns in the mountains Gianna was used to. There was noise, and traffic, and they stood out because most ponies here wore clothes. But they didn't see anything they could point to they disagreed with, though Origami finally perked up.

“Over here,” she hissed to the others. “I swear that pony over there just mentioned ‘love get-away!’”

The three had a seat at the open-air café near the two earth ponies and ordered something to drink. Meanwhile they shamelessly eavesdropped on the two, not really pony behavior but the word ‘hypocrites’ wasn’t in their vocabulary. Hippogriffs, yes. The one pony was explaining the service to the other, who seemed quite interested in their description of what happened. Finally Origami leaned over to them.

“Excuse me, are you by any chance talking about that new changeling service that opened a few months ago?” she asked.

“That’s right. I was recommending it to my friend here. You’re far too young to be interested in that sort of thing though, aren’t you?”

“I just wondered what you thought of the whole thing? It seemed strange to us when we first heard about it.” *That’s one way of putting it, anyway.*

“Oh, you’ll understand when you’re older. Sometimes you just have to get away. Believe me, when I need a day to myself at the spa, I don’t need another argument from my husband about just buying those boots and shouldn’t that be enough for me? Why *not* just take the day, relax, and come home to a pony that’s believed I was with him all day anyway? No arguments, no hard feelings, it’s so much better.”

“Oh, I guess I will...”

“Come on,” her friend said, giving Origami a dirty look. “We’ll swing by the place and I can pick up a flyer.”

“You won’t regret it. Bye!” She nodded to the three and got up, leaving money for the server.

“I don’t think they’re causing anything,” Gianna finally decided. “Just taking advantage of sentiment here.”

“Maybe it’s just different in the big city,” Origami agreed. “But I still don’t like it.”

“What can we do? Burn the place down overnight? Talk to the mayor? Tingle mentioned him, so I’m pretty sure he already knows. Would anyone even listen to you? We’re kids.”

She sighed. “I guess there’s always going to be things we don’t agree with. And adults are free to do what they want. Even this.”

“Honestly it’s kind of genius,” Gianna decided. “I mean, if they offered to replace ponies for free, to eat, everypony would wonder what the catch was. But they’re charging both a subscription fee plus a replacement fee. Giving the service *value*. When ponies see a price tag they probably just accept it as normal. And you have to admit, it’s better than invading somewhere and not knowing if your neighbor is who they were yesterday. They could- and have- been much worse about their needs.”

“I don’t have to admit anything. Come on, back to the ship. Let’s just do the next dungeon. This ‘lair’ he spoke of. That should take my mind off it.”

“The lair apparent?”

“... Is that a reference to something?”

“Never mind.”

Gianna Journal
Entry 3: What is love?

We recently took some time away from our travels from Dungeon to Dungeon to follow up on the Changelings we met a while back. After Origami and I learned our first actual spells, we went back to visit Twilight Sparkle and give her an update. When I asked if she'd heard anything about the Changelings in the swamp, Spike showed us a flyer for a Grand Opening of a new Changeling new service in Baltimore called a "Love Getaway". The tagline read "if you want to take a day for yourselves, come see us." Since I had thought they were satisfied with creating potions, I wanted to see what this was all about.

We had invited Lime Twist with us again. She seems to be enjoying our company and sight-seeing. I might be projecting a bit but I feel that her shyness is more from being self-conscious about the unfamiliarity of her surroundings and the absence of her connection to others than that being her true personality. In any case, since Origami and I weren't sure what to expect when we got to the Changeling business, we left her talking to some ponies while we went inside. That was probably a good decision since what we learned there confused the both of us.

As it turns out, the Changelings have started a very unique service where they contract with a willing couple where they replace one of them at some point during a negotiated time frame. When one of the couple needs some time to themselves, they swap with the Changeling and take a day for themselves while the changeling gains the benefit of feeding on love in their place for the period. All of that is almost secondary to their initial request for an object signifying the couple's love. While we didn't specifically ask, that fits with the potion-making solution and seemed generally innocent.

The idea of impersonating a loved one though really felt wrong to both of us. We spent some time trying to find ponies that had signed up for this service and were surprised and disturbed at how many positive reviews there were. We were told we'd understand better when we were older. I'm not sure that's the case though. The very idea seems to go against the concepts of Honesty and Loyalty. I understand that relationships are complex and admit I'm still very young and haven't had anything approaching a relationship myself. Maybe I don't understand. Origami might be more blunt about her disapproval but I can't say I don't disagree with her.

I'd love for the couples that consider this service to fix their relationships so they don't need it but as much as I hate to admit it, there's a practical side of me that acknowledges not every problem has a nice neat solution. I do still believe that everything taught in the school, if taken to heart, could one day make such a service unnecessary. I feel bad for the Changelings too. I can respect them not wanting to change their core nature but at the same time, I feel bad that they're unable to share any love they might feel with others for fear of changing. The closest thing I can imagine would be being interested in someone but being afraid to tell them for fear that it would ruin your existing relationship with them. There's pain in that. I'm sure it's rare for many of these Changelings, but I can't imagine it's something they're able to totally avoid and I can't think of any way to help the situation.

In a way, I'm glad that Origami was so upset by the entire situation. She's been feeling frustrated too often and unable to find solutions. This might be another one of those times but her not simply accepting that there isn't a better way is more like what I expect from her. I still think there must be a better solution as well, but it doesn't have to be my solution. For now, what they've come up with seems reasonable since they seem to be really trying to be upfront about their deception with the people being deceived.

I guess all of that leads me to think about the nature of love. It's really just a different flavor of friendship. All of the core ingredients are there, and actually I think you have to be able to say you're friends with the person you love or it's not truly love. I imagine there's a baking or spellcraft metaphor here that fits but I don't know enough of either to make it. I do wonder what it is that takes a relationship past friendship to a new category. I do worry sometimes that we've been too busy travelling and pursuing magic to build proper friendships.

Being present I think is a key ingredient and our missions have kept our relationships with others like Bright Soul, Marble Pie, and Flash Cube surface level. We've been through enough together to consider what we have friendship, but I still feel torn everytime we need to decide what comes next. Are our goals of learning magic really more important than just spending time with those 3 and helping them recover? Is it more important than spending time back in Beakwick with my family? Maybe that's similar to what some of those couples feel and why they turn to the Changelings for help. I really hope they can be happy with their solution. Maybe someday we'll find magic that can help them feel love without losing their identities.

Chapter 23
The next day
The Giant's Lair

The next dungeon the group headed to was in the Smokey Mountains, and again they had to fly down and look around for the entrance. They were pleased to find they could fly, and headed down into a cave that got progressively warmer the deeper they went. They looked on a river of lava that blocked their way, pillars of fire occasionally shooting out and hitting the ceiling.

"The entrance must be right there," Gianna announced, pointing. "There's a doorway sized opening just across the way. You want to teleport yourself? I can become immune to fire and just fly over."

"Let me try teleporting us both across."

"Uh, is teleporting magic something to really fool around with? I like my parts where they are, thank you. Connected to me."

"It'll be fine. Just give me a second." She dropped into her mana palace and looked over her teleportation spell. Adding "Unrestricted" to "self" the spell folded just fine, and she got a notice that she could now teleport another along with herself, to their relative positions. *Right, just like with the expanded telekinesis spell, we both have to go to the same place, because I'm not specifying a second 'space->exchange.' We're both going to the 'same' place, not 'same' as in we'll overlap, but the same relative place we were.*

This worked, and as they got near the door something new popped up into their view. It was tiny, and low in their vision, and both looked it over.

Party Status

Gianna: HP 100% | MP 100%
Origami: HP 100% | MP 100%

"That can't be good," Gianna worried.

"I used mana though? Huh, I guess I got it back?" Origami realized, opening her status menu.

"No recharge room here, maybe? So the dungeon is simply filling me up before we go in?"

"Another message..." The usual barrier had appeared over the door, and the two read it over quickly.

Dungeon Initializing.

Important note: Dungeon can be used 1 time per week,
or mana can be provided to reopen before the countdown

timer reaches 0. Mana debt is calculated as: 1000 MP
Do you agree to these terms? Please say Yes or No.

“That’s to be expected,” Origami agreed. “I would have been suspicious had we not seen something like this, given what we just went through. Yes.”

That message vanished, and a new one took its place. Three of the pieces of information were rapidly changing, but finally settled, leaving the message like this.

Initialization Complete

Location: Giant’s castle

Theme: Friendship

Goal: Help the mouse

Enter when ready

“Lair. Hummm...” Gianna mused. Both stepped through into a large foyer, and indeed the place was enormous. A pair of boots near the door towered over them, and the moose head on the wall to the side was even bigger.

“Giant’s castle indeed,” Origami said quietly.

“What’s all this then?” said one of the boots.

“Huh?” both whirled to look at them. The front of the boot had opened up to show a mouth, though there seemed to be no eyes.

“Looks like thieves,” said the other boot, voice pitched higher than the first.

“Yes, sneaking into the master’s house, looking for plunder. Filthy, robbing, whatever they are. Didn’t expect us here though, right Left?”

“That’s right!” answered Left. “We’re not gonna let them get past us, are we, Right?”

“No we are not, Left.”

“Wait!” shouted Origami, putting up a hoof as the right one’s laces lifted into their attack position. “We aren’t thieves.”

“Not thieves, eh?” asked Left. “Whatcha sneaking into the master’s house for then?”

“Yeah, answer that if you can!” agreed Right. “You’ve got them, Left.”

“We were sent to help a mouse.”

“A mouse?” asked Left. “Pull the other one. Help a mouse? Not likely.”

“Pretty sad effort,” agreed Right. “You know how many mice go through here? Oh, dozens. No end to them.”

“One tried to chew me sole,” Left declared. “Horrid little creatures they are.”

“It’s true. Look, we’re going to have to pass this way again to leave, right? Tell you what- if we are thieves, as you claim, we would be loaded down with our ill gotten gains. You can rightly call us out then. But if we leave empty hooved, you’ll know we’re telling the truth.”

“I don’t like it, Right,” admitted Left.

“Nor do I. The little bugger is making sense,” agreed Right.

“Seems unnatural.”

“Not giving tours.”

“What would the master say? Some of the master’s secrets could be right out in the open for all to see. Theft of knowledge is still theft in my mind.”

“Still, they are mouse sized right enough. They could be mouse lovers.”

“They didn’t seem to be lying.”

“And it’s not like the master commanded us to do anything. We’re just boots.”

“Does the master even know we can talk? I don’t think we’ve ever spoken to the master, have we?”

“What does the master even look like? Have we ever gone anywhere?”

“And what, exactly, does this reveal about us? That we would turn to violence at the drop of a hat?”

“Master doesn’t wear a hat.”

“You know what I mean!”

“Just seems like the thing to do. Our purpose and that, what? I really just want to fight them.”

“We’ll be back here one way or the other,” Origami told them. “Why don’t you talk it over, and you can tell us what you decide then?”

“Oh, very well,” agreed Right. “Get out of here, before I change me mind. Don’t seem right.”

“What exactly is the nature of our reality?” Left asked.

I think we went off script, Gianna decided to herself as Origami headed to the door. It seemed not to have closed all the way so they tugged it open and went into the next room. The only light here came from the gap between the door and the wall, and Origami created a floating light next to her.

“Ah hah!” cried a voice. “There she is!”

“Oh no, squeak!” cried another. “They saw me! Help! Help!”

The two glanced at each other and moved forward. Under a shelf was a mouse, upright and dressed very cutely in a green dress, with a red half-cape secured by a single button. She was surrounded by four tangled looking creatures, seemingly made of fluff but in the shape of rabbits. They were moving nearer but turned to see what the light was.

“Just our luck,” said the one.

“Yes, more meat!” said another.

“Take the mouse first!” said a third.

“Yes, this mouse is ours, we saw it first,” said the fourth.

Gianna took to the air and landed between the mouse and the creatures. “I’m here to protect the mouse, not eat it,” she told them. “You’ll have to go through me!”

“Attack!” called one of the rabbits, and the four started biting and clawing at her. One almost got through the armor and another jumped at her wing, but she did her best to keep herself between them and the mouse. Meanwhile Origami was gathering MP and shaped her fireball spell into an arc, then threw it. The bunnies cried out in surprise as the fire touched them, burning away almost at once. The fire, having done its job, vanished before it could hit Gianna. Both watched as motes of light, slightly larger than they had seen with the slimes, coalesced and got sucked into Origami.

“Are they gone, squeak?” asked the mouse, cracking an eye open.

“They sure are, neigh,” Origami told her. “Looks like we got here just in time.”

Gianna gave her *a look* but turned to the mouse. She saw that the mouse was only a little shorter than she was, if you didn’t count the ears. “I’m Gianna. Are you okay? They didn’t hurt you, did they?”

“No, I’m fine,” she told her, patting down her skirt. “I was sneaking out but saw them hopping around and was hiding. That light must have revealed my shadow and they saw me.”

“Sorry about that. Origami here made the light so we could see what we were getting into.”

“Nice to squeak you. I’m Angela. What are you two strange creatures doing here? Don’t you know this is a giant’s house?”

“We’ve come to help you.”

"Help... me?" She shook her head. "I'm not the one that needs help. Directly, I mean. It's my husband, Harald. He was captured by the giant in a trap. I told him to not to go in there, but he smelled peanut butter and you know how that is. Now the giant has him locked in a cage and he can't get out. He must be terrified. Squeak."

"Then we'll help him," Origami told her. "How far away is it?"

"The reading room? Just past the kitchen, it's not that far."

"We'll be right behind you."

"Wait one second," Gianna told her. "Let me do some magic, I should have done this even before we came in here." She cast to negate force attacks on herself, and expand her own force. With that done she nodded and said she was ready to continue.

The trio squeezed under the door into the kitchen, which was lit up from some windows, and the two looked around. Both heard what sounded like an argument of some kind, and motioned Angela to stay back. They crept forward, coming into view of a group of ants, one of which had a crumb in his pincers. Clearly they were trying to get the crumb out of the room through a small crack in the wall, but it was all blocked up by dust and debris. It looked just open enough for ants to squeeze under it, but there was no way the crumb was getting through. They were discussing the best way to proceed, should they look for another way out? Try to cut the crumb up or pull it apart?

"You won't need to do any of that," Origami announced, stepping around the corner so they could see her. "I can help you out."

What if they attack to defend their food? Gianna worried. *We should talk about this!* She readied herself to rush out if they went to grab her. But they took a step back, making sure the one with the food was at the back.

"And who are you?" asked the nearest ant.

"I'm Origami. And you are?"

"Let me introduce you. Beezo, Bosko, Crombulous, uncle Toby, Sneezle, Whimsy, Crackle, and I'm Trapeze. You say you can help us?"

"I sure can. Gianna, come out it's fine. They seem friendly."

Gianna stepped out of hiding and the group looked the hole over. Origami got a good sense of how big it was and started casting. Her cleaning spell went off and the dirt and such plugging the hole up vanished.

"See?"

The ants exclaimed and crowded around the hole, the one carrying the crumb shoving it through. "Looks like it will fit now," he exclaimed. "Thanks a lot."

"Not a problem." She looked around, "weren't there more of you?"

The two looked around and turning, they saw a giant spider had taken advantage of the distraction and crept up on them. It was currently dragging an ant away that was partially webbed up.

"Oh well, he's a goner," Sneezle sighed. "Bye Crombulous!"

"Hang on, we can still get him!" Gianna protested.

"He's just an ant," said Bosko. "A simple cog in a machine. One tiny spec in an indifferent world."

"There's thousands like him," Crackle agreed. "Don't take it too hard."

"Just an ant, you guys are crazy." She took to the air again and came down on the web, snapping it. The spider chittered at her, and threw another line, trying to web her up. "Look, I know you have to eat, but go find something else," she told it.

Meanwhile, Origami looked around and spotted a broom leaning in the corner. She gathered MP, casting her automate spell on it, giving it the purpose of keeping the spider away. It awkwardly stood upright and dragged itself across the floor, sweeping the spider away.

Some distance away, Melemizargo watched through a window and shook his head. *You really have no idea what you're doing, do you?* he thought to himself. *They're not real. They are there for you to destroy and get the expanded MP as a reward. Have ponies really gotten so soft since the dungeons closed? They used to live under constant threat, and were glad to have a safe space to practice their battle magic. They got rewarded for it in many ways. I may have to rethink my approach with these lairs if this is going to be the norm. Could just be her. I'll have to keep an eye on it. I don't want her to weaken herself unduly after all. Are their lives really so peaceful they don't even want to fight anymore? Fake, dungeon constructs? So weird...*

Back at the dungeon, the ants crowded around Crombulous, who, despite being freed was still not his feet.

"Bit me too," he admitted. "Probably trying to weaken me. Just go on without me. I'll drag myself to the graveyard and wait for death. It's just our way. Tell my four thousand siblings goodbye for me."

"Oh don't be so dramatic," Origami told him. "I'll heal you."

She started casting, meanwhile Gianna put her mind expansion spell on and concentrated on the poor little guy.

"We can't do anything about spider venom, can we?" she asked, feeling some circulating around his body.

"I'm not sure how I would work what I know into a spell that clears something like that."

"Well, you'll probably feel pretty crappy until it works out of your system," Gianna told the ant.

"Is that what that burning is? I did wonder..."

Melemizargo facepalmed. *Really? Not even going to open the store page at this point? Why did I even make that thing? I mean it would be a total waste because, again, they aren't real but you're treating them as if they are. Pick a lane. Wait, what does that even mean... never mind. But you could buy a poison clearing spell right this second, I can see you both have unused potential. I mean Gianna couldn't use it but Origami could. Not even a tiny spark of curiosity about it. Unbelievable.*

The group waved goodbye to the ants, two helping Crombulous now that he at least had all his exoskeleton back, and called to Angela that it was safe to come out.

"Angela?" Gianna called again, looking around. "Where could *she* have gone?"

"Help!" reached her ears.

"Oh come on," Origami muttered. "That mouse, I swear."

The two found a strange looking device under the table, and the sounds of snacking were coming from it.

"Angela?" Gianna asked, knocking on it.

"I'm sorry!" she cried, between bites. "Squeak. It just smelled so good, and I was distracted and there were the ants, and I hid from the spider, oh it's so good," she paused to eat something. "I think I'm a nervous eater. And I was really hungry and then the smell hit me, how is this stuff so good? Squeak."

"Let's get her out of there," Origami told Gianna. "And try to keep an eye on her?"

"How is that my- fine, I guess one of us better."

They figured out the best way to get the door open, smashing the locking mechanism on either side, and working to lift the door enough so she could wiggle out.

"Thank you!" she breathed, brushing herself off again. "I guess I owe my husband an apology. That stuff is just irresistible."

"It really isn't," Origami told her.

"Try scrounging around for a few weeks, eating just the giant's scraps, and we'll see if your tune changes, squeak," she sniffed.

"Isn't there anywhere else you can go?"

"Go back outside?" She scratched her head. "Lots of dangers out there. Those big, furry, clawed things, and the swooping things, and the cold, and the wet, and the giant's feet... How did we get in here, anyway? I guess we could leave the same way but I don't really remember how..." She looked around.

"Never mind that," Gianna told her. "Let's go." *Before she has some kind of crisis too. The dungeon seems to do what it can, but there's still only so 'alive' they can make these 'characters.' I think they're really just there to lead us from one encounter to the next. Having philosophical discussions about the nature of freedom is probably not in the cards for us.*

"Right. My husband should be in the next chamber. Come on." She led the way to the reading room, and there was the sound of snoring from the big chair. Both directed her to hide again (after making sure there was no peanut butter smell in the area) and got an aerial view of the room. The giant was asleep with a book on his face to the left, and to the right was a desk. On it was a skeleton of some kind, a golden figure, a strange looking pony, and behind that was a glass cage with a metal top. Inside the cage was a wheel that was currently spinning, along with some dishes and a small hut. Gianna pointed and Origami nodded, both headed over there and landed. Taking a closer look the pony looked like some kind of doll, it had joints and was made of some strange material. One side of the face was painted to look burned, and he had a fire cutie mark. He turned.

"It's alive?" Origami startled back.

"I am alive," it replied. "And upon my honor, you will not interfere in my master's designs. What is your purpose here?"

"Rescuing this mouse," Gianna told him. *Great, and I chose to negate force, not fire. That'll teach me.*

"Abduct my master's new pet? That he cares so much for? I think not."

"Hello?" shouted the mouse from the cage. "Do I get a say in all this?"

The two turned, and beheld the most jacked up mouse they had ever seen. Not that they had seen many mice almost their size to begin with, but this mouse had muscles upon muscles. He noticed them staring.

"Oh, you like?" He flexed for them, shirt threatening to tear right off his chest. "Yeah, I've made some gains since I got in here. This wheel thing is the best. You ever run in a wheel? I recommend it. I can go for hours, there's nothing quite like it."

"Are you saying you want to stay in here?" Origami asked him.

"Why wouldn't I? I've got it all in here!"

"Your wife, for instance?"

"Oh yeah! She's welcome to join me."

"Always something," she muttered.

"Look, I'm going to fly down and grab his wife, okay?" Gianna told the pony. "Can I count on your honor to at least allow them to talk?"

He looked very confused. "If... the mouse chooses to stay, and be joined by another mouse... my master... would probably be fine with it?"

Yeah, totally off script. "Very well. I'll be right back."

She flew off the table and got Angela, who he dropped at the side.

"Harald, what happened to you?" she shrieked.

"What's the matter, baby? Don't like the new me? And it's not Harald anymore. From now on you can call me Eon Mouse!" He started flexing again.

Angela stared at him for a moment. She turned to the others. "I've changed my mind, I want a divorce."

"Wait, Angela, I was just kidding around! You know me, total kidder, that's me. Tell her, tell her I was just kidding around."

"I don't know you," Origami told him. "What did you say your name was?"

"Harald! Obviously. Angela, I'm glad to know you're okay. Can you get in here somehow? Then we can be together again!"

"Live in the giant's cage? Are you crazy? Give up our freedom? How am I supposed to do that, even if I wanted to?"

"I could get you in there, if that's what you wanted," Origami told her. "But it's up to you."

"I've got everything in there," Harald went on. "Fresh food and water every day. This great wheel. A nice den. What more could we want?"

"I... I don't know." She looked back the way she came. "I don't want to live without you either, but to live in that tiny place?"

"We're mice, how much space do we need?"

Do we have to pick a side? Gianna asked herself. I asked for that spell to help influence people, by feeling their emotions. Does the dungeon know that somehow? Am I supposed to convince one or the other to a certain behavior? But if I convince "Eon" to leave, the pony toy attacks us. But if the pony toy attacks us, we get his MP gift. On the other hoof if we convince Angela, we get nothing. Maybe the dungeon will reward us better for non-violent solutions at the end?

"Can I talk to you for a second?" Origami asked Gianna as the two went back and forth, their dialog trees exhausted for the moment.

"Sure." She glanced at the pony toy, who seemed to be waiting to see what would happen. They went to the edge of the desk.

"Do you think either are smart enough to stay out of the traps if we free them? How long do you think until they're back in there?"

"Not sure. Pretty quickly if they're desperate."

"What do you mean?"

"They're probably just hungry. If we could make food for them, or find a way to supply them, they would be better off."

"But this is the home of a giant, who doesn't want his food eaten by mice. I think on one hoof if we were to free him, then that would give them the choice if they want to get caught again. If he convinces her afterwards they just have to go into a trap."

"Interesting point. Okay, so I take Angela's side and get Harald out?" *So freedom over a life of ease, is that what I'm arguing for? If I got many riches, and had servants to bring me food, but I was trapped in a mansion, would I seek to free myself if it meant losing the riches? I'm no dragon...*

"I don't want to fight that pony, but we are supposed to help the mouse. If he wants to be free or not, we can get him out and give them the choice of what to do next. They can always go back if they want. If they both go in there, they're stuck together forever."

I think it's more about us, and what choice we decide to make than some magical dungeon constructs, but sure. We can go on pretending this is a real place. He already said opening a portal to another world was too MP intensive, so it certainly wouldn't be done just for a minor dungeon like this. "Let me see how they respond without magic first." The two walked back over and the pony perked up again. "What are your orders, anyway?" she asked it.

"I have no orders, I simply wish to protect that which makes my master happy. He is always pleased to see the mouse come out from the house and run in his wheel. If the mouse were to escape, he would therefore be sad. I will not tolerate it."

"I see. Harald, you still with us?"

"I'm here, are you ready to talk some sense into her?"

"Actually, I think you should join her on the outside."

"What? And lose all this?" He flexed again.

"I'm sure you could come up with something. Isn't Angela more important than any amount of muscles?"

He turned to look at her, a single tear rolling down her cheek and her cute little whiskers quivering. "Yes, of course. Fine, lift the cover and I'll join her."

"You can always go back after you talk it over fully," Origami told them. "Just go into a trap together."

Yeah, but we broke his trap. What if he resorts to lethal ones now? And now I'm doing it, this won't exist in a few minutes after we leave.

"So it turns out we must fight after all," the pony said, grinning. "Let us see what kind of warrior you are!" He took a stance.

"I take no pleasure in this," Gianna told him, taking a place opposite him.

"Your armor says otherwise. Defend yourself!" He threw a punch from way over there and a stream of fire went past her.

Yup, fire. That figures. Would he have gone for punches if I had made myself immune to that instead? She closed the distance, but it dodged back, fire from its hooves keeping her at bay. The two went back and forth, the pony scoring one hit on her, while Origami charged up her telekinesis spell. The beam missed, but it was maintained so a tiny spark of magic hung in the air next to it. She was rather surprised to find she could still direct it, but this made sense. It was still within the initial radius she had chosen. Ginna got in a good hit, and it went flying into the skeleton at the far end of the table. Taking this chance Origami sent the tiny spark of magic into it again, connecting, and launched it off the table. She wanted it in the center of the room, hopefully far enough away it couldn't hit anything with fire. As it went past her initial radius she felt the spell leave her control, but it carried on to where she had wanted it. The figure wiggled about a moment but finally went slack. Gianna was casting her anti-fire spell in the meantime, but the fight went out of the figure.

"They worked together to defeat me," it said. "They should split the reward." The pony vanished, two spheres of light streaking at the two and entered them.

Huh, the spider must not have given up in the same way?

With the lid moved aside and the two mice reunited (and back on the floor) the dungeon faded out to black, and after a moment both found themselves in a stone hallway. There was a treasure chest there, which they approached cautiously. "I've seen this story," Origami decided. "Some pony always getting suckered by treasure chests that are actually creatures. She's always got her legs stuck out of them, hoping someone rescues her."

"Is that likely here?" She tapped the chest and then lifted the lid. It was a regular treasure chest, and there were two things inside when they looked in it. The first was a small jewelry box, the other a cloth wrapped with a ribbon. She grabbed them out and the two looked them over. The cloth turned out to be a scarf, studded with gems, and the box contained a pair of earrings with three gems each. Neither knew what to make of it so they simply went forward, and found the office where they would no doubt speak to the Dungeon Master before leaving. Both got a message about their reward, +5 potential while Gianna increased her maximum MP by 4, Origami by 16. Both got the location of the next dungeon, which seemed to be somewhat further than from dungeon 1->2 but not as far as others.

"Let's get out of here and plan our next move," Origami told Gianna, feeling better, for some reason, than she had felt in some time. Her steps seemed lighter, like something that had been dragging her back a little was now gone. Her head was held a little higher, her eyes had a little more sparkle. Neither noticed that, as they stepped into the light outside the dungeon, she no longer had a shadow.

Back on the ship, Lime Twist exclaimed over their new items and the two looked them over. They could tell the objects were magical but got a conflicting series of “signals” when they tried to sense them out. Had they thought about it a bit more they may have realized they could narrow their focus by covering only one of the gems in the item with their auras and only allowing magical information to flow along it, but instead Origami spent the 50MP and opened up the chat window to Melemizargo.

And to be fair to them, the scarf had about 30+ gems sewn into it, so it would have taken a little bit, but they could have done it.

“Your first lair completed,” he praised them. **“Well done. You didn’t get the full benefit of course, you missed out on several core expansions and went off script quite a bit, but you didn’t break anything so we know the core held up just fine. Anyway, what can I do for you?”**

“These items, how do we know what they do? Just experiment after putting them on?”

“Oh, nothing so crude as all that. Dungeon Masters of course need to instantly know what items do so they can place them as treasure. I put those there, figured you deserved a little extra reward for all your hard work, and this was the first opportunity I had to do it. As for what they do, there’s a couple of ways you can go. Experimentation like you said. Sensing them out if you worry they might be cursed or have a strange effect on you. Or just put them on and open your status page. I’ve adapted the usual Dungeon Master method to you, so you have an equipment section now. It’ll list the item and how charged it is.”

“Thanks,” Gianna told him.

“All part of the service. Anything else?”

“That was my only question for now. Thank you,” Origami replied.

“See you at the next one.” The window closed.

“I guess we just try them on, then,” Gianna told her. “You try the earrings and I’ll try the scarf. I have a feeling they were made for us, one for each of us.”

“Sure, sounds good.” They put them on and opened their status page. Each was at 100% charge and they had chosen correctly. The earrings increased MP capacity by 10% each, and the scarf helped the wearer react quicker to being thrown into combat. After Origami put the earrings in, they dropped to 66% charge and her capacity went up.

“Not sure it goes with the armor, but maybe I can learn to transfer the enchantment,” Gianna mused, looking herself over in the mirror.

“I’m just worried about openly wearing such things,” Origami decided. “I mean nopony now would know what they meant, but they probably will soon enough if we start opening all this up to everypony.”

“I think if we were in some combat situation, our opponents would have better things to do than worry about what jewelry you had on.” *And note to self, if opponents have jewelry, go for that stuff first.*

“Yeah I guess. What’s next?”

“Hey CelestAI, our number of steps is...” Gianna told her the distance to the next location. “Any ideas where we should look?”

“This is the second shortest distance you have recorded,” CelestAI told them, appearing in the room. “Appleoosa, Los Pegasus, Yakyakistan, and the Crystal Empire are within the estimated range. However, consulting the map there are no markings in any of those locations for a dungeon. It is quite curious.”

“I doubt Stygian is infallible,” Origami decided. “He may have just forgotten the location of one of them. Let’s fly around a bit so we can get a better idea. If we can get this next one taken care of today, we’ll only have one more!”

“Beginning standard pattern, captain. Please let me know how the numbers change.” The airship started to move, and the pair kept her up to date. “It seems our destination is to the north-east,” she announced. “The Crystal Empire is thus the most likely destination.”

“Then that’s where we’ll go!”

On the way to the place, Gianna looked over her status page, and decided she too would take the perk of double mana gathering rate. It had seemed to greatly help Origami, and she needed to be quicker to cast her spells as well, now that she had been in a simulated combat situation that didn’t involve just slimes. She also spent some potential on her magic sense and her meditation skill. She was satisfied with that and went back to join Origami on the bridge.

The ship landed outside the city, and Lime Twist headed in with them. She was entranced with all the crystals, and crystal ponies, and laughed at the huge statue of Spike that greeted them. They followed the numbers, getting smaller and smaller, until they came to a rather normal looking shop.

“Twinkle Star’s Enchanting Services,” she read, proud of herself.

“That’s right,” Gianna praised. “So it’s another Velvet Chaser situation? Hopefully this Twinkle Star is as nice as she was about the whole thing.”

“No cake here,” Origami smirked at her.

“Hard to know why I should bother, then.”

“We’re not going in?” Lime Twist asked, confused. “But came all this way?”

“I’m just joking, of course we’re going in!”

“Oh okay!”

“Come on.”

The three entered the shop and looked around. A glittering blue crystal pony with a golden quill cutie mark greeted them. She had a light purple mane, and was herself wearing several pieces of jewelry. The shop was full of crystals of all sizes, and jewelry pieces without any stones. Most of the inventory was out, but some was behind a locked glass case.

“Twinkle Star?” Origami asked.

“That’s me! Not many tourists come in here, I was thinking of changing the name of my shop. What can I do for you?”

“I’ll be direct. Does the word ‘dungeon’ mean anything to you?”

She narrowed her eyes and looked the three over. Both were still wearing their magical items, a clear tip off of a certain type of pony she never thought she would see in her lifetime. “You’re delvers!”

“We’ve been through the various dungeons, yes,” she agreed. “So you do know about them. I had a suspicion... Anyway, we’re here to use it?”

“Hang on, hold everything,” she protested. “What do you mean use it? Are they active again? I can get some more spells and actually start making items again? Why did no one tell me? Why wasn’t there a kingdom wide announcement? Oh, curse that princess of ours! Too busy with her new baby unless I miss my guess. But Shining Armor could have made an announcement, males are useless when it comes to raising foals anyway.”

"It's not to that point yet," Gianna hastened to assure her. "And what are you talking about?"

"What do you mean? Aren't you here to learn to make magical items? This was one of the last stops on the journey through the Dark, as it was called back in the day."

"We're actually learning all this as we go, the pony that told us roughly where the dungeons were forgot to include yours. So we weren't sure what it was going to be. All we get from the previous dungeon is a distance to the next one, and we follow it. That led us here. So we can learn to make things like this?" She indicated the earrings.

"Yes... maybe we better both start at the beginning?"

"An excellent idea," Origami agreed. "You have no idea how frustrating this whole thing has been. The princesses have been some help, but they want an unbiased report and are, you know, busy running the kingdom so I didn't want to bother them too much. And trying to figure out the dungeons without a Dungeon Master has been hard, and I didn't trust Stygian so I didn't want to bring him to the various places in case something happened..."

"Sounds like you've had a hard time of it. Well, as I say, there was only one more major dungeon to go after this one, so you're almost done. And it's honestly optional. But let me get us some tea and we can trade stories." She flipped the sign on the shop to closed, remarking "hardly get any customers now anyway," and brought them to the back. She made the tea and set it out, then asked for their story.

The pair told their version of events, from the battle with Pony of Shadows to reopening the dungeons to get Origami's core back. She listened attentively, clearly excited at the prospect of getting her magic back.

"But I don't understand what you mean by get it back," Origami finally said after she finished. "You're a manual caster too?"

"That's right, a lot of ponies in this town are. See, back in the day we were ruled by king Sombra. That pony was obsessed with crystals. He allowed us to be magic users, but not do any free casting. Said it was a threat to his rule. But he would allow magical items to be made, as those could be taken away or destroyed if the pony using them started causing any trouble."

"We wondered about that," she admitted. "How to protect your items from being turned against you or turned off by someone."

"I see the scarf is using one method," she replied, pointing a hoof at it. "Misdirection. With so many possible crystals, nopony could tell which were the important ones. But you are right to worry. A pony could, in theory, overcharge your battery crystal and make it explode."

"Explode!" both exclaimed.

"But who would do that? Very taboo to mess with another mage's magical items. At least in my time. Plus they would have to be standing right there, in your face basically, and be pumping mana into the crystal. Obvious, you could just ask them to stop."

"But there is no defense?" she pressed.

"Not really. That's the downside to displaying your magical wealth for all to see, I suppose. You want to openly wear a magical item? You take the risk of having it messed with. I mean if you were wearing a cloak and had bits just falling out of it, isn't that asking to be robbed? You have to do part of the work yourself if you want to make an item you wear all the time. Make some effort to hide the crystals."

"I see."

"Anyway, to go back to my story, because you lose the spell you put into the item, or at least the pieces of it that matter, he could easily allow us access to dungeon- five I think it was. We were allowed to get spells, as long as we immediately transferred them into items." She pointed at her earrings. "This one keeps me clean, this one slows my aging." *Oh, it does, does it?* Gianna perked up at that. "The bracelet is a storage system, and my tail ring helps me find lost items. One of my only sources of revenue lately, I'm afraid." She sighed, but brightened. "But not for long maybe! Once we were dis-

placed in time, we found ourselves in a world that had forgotten about the dungeons. Most decided not to start messing with our cores using this 'Starswirl method' he seems to have come up with, in the hopes that one day the dungeons would be turned on again. And that day is coming soon! My goodness, with the new gateway network being turned on in less than a month and now this? What a time to be alive!"

"What about single use items?"

"Single whatzits?" She looked quite confused.

"Before all this I was studying to make what we call baubles. They're single use magical items."

"Something like that wouldn't last all that long though?"

She nodded. "It's true, they broke down pretty quickly."

"But they were quick to make? You could make them by the dozen or more a day?"

"No, they took six hours to make. That didn't include the time getting the materials and learning the spell."

"Six hours? That's awful, you could only make one item a day at that rate. Maybe two. And do nothing else!"

"...Yes..."

"I mean if I had the materials and spells at hand, I could make two items in that time, and as long as they were recharged they would last forever. Temporary magical items... sounds annoying. Minorly useful, in limited situations. Just make items and rent them out in that case, if you're only giving ponies a single use anyway."

"I enjoyed the work."

"If you say so. Still, if you could do it before..." She got up and started pacing around the room. "From what I know of the book method, you cast the whole formula at once, and it's greatly compressed. Maybe you can imprint it into an object? But how would you hold a manually cast formula for so long in your aura? I mean obviously the six hours is meaningful and not just an arbitrary number made up for the purposes of some higher being's sick pleasures of messing with us. I guess we could look into it, if you could bring me some books on the technique, I could work with you to adapt what we do towards a new technique. Or I can ask around. I just don't know why anypony would bother learning such a time-consuming method when something much better exists. But maybe there's a spell that could simulate the effect? I'll think about it while you're in the dungeon. I assume you want to go through today?"

"How long will it take?" Gianna asked. "Lime Twist here can't go with us, but she could walk around the town."

"I would like that," she agreed.

"Let me think now, it's been some time since I put anypony through it." She thought for a moment. "Ah right. The longest part is the third room? That's where you actually make your first item. It'll take about 3 hours to get through that part. If you don't screw it up. The rest of the dungeon should be pretty quick. Maybe three and a half hours all told."

"You know where the ship is, you can go back there if you want?" Gianna told her. "But we should get a start on this."

"Unless this is a bad time?" Origami asked. "We don't want to put you out."

"This is fine," she agreed quickly. "I haven't been able to run my own dungeon for years now. I'm excited to put some fresh new faces through it. And a griffon no less! I didn't know they could even learn to do magic, but it makes sense now that I think about it. Why wouldn't they?"

"So you are the Dungeon Master, I did wonder."

"I sure am."

"If you're sure..."

"Tell you what. The middle part is long, like I said, and I usually just got ponies started in there and then left them to it. I don't need to watch you work the whole three hours. I'll just go about my day and check on you both from time to time. When Lime Twist gets back I can let her back in, and maybe she can even come down to see you finish up. I'd be happy to show her how the dungeon works from my perspective. Maybe she'll be a Dungeon Master one day! We're going to need them!"

"You think so?" she asked, looking shy.

"Why not?"

"That sounds fine to me, but what is the whole thing about?" Origami asked. "Can we get an overview?"

"Of course! Everything related to crystals. They're for more than just making items you know. You'll first learn about storing parts of spells in crystals, that's necessary to make items and the first two rooms. Putting them in, and taking them out. Sometimes one will spawn as a dungeon reward, so if you didn't want to use it to make an item you could absorb it. Then you'll make an item, oh which you can take out of the dungeon with you by the way. One of the only things you can, come to think of it. Then learn about recharging it in the next room. Then finally you can practice shifting maintenance cost to a crystal. If you charge it up with mana you can make it take over the spell to avoid using your own. Or is it the fourth room that's the workshop? Do you learn recharging first? My goodness it's been a while. It'll be obvious what it wants."

"That's more than we usually get, and you'll be able to help?"

"Naturally. I will be watching your progress the whole time. Just speak up, I'll hear you."

Through those windows I saw in dungeon one, Origami reasoned.

"You're sure you'll be okay alone?" Gianna asked Lime Twist.

"Not to worry, we're a very welcoming city," Twinkle Star assured her. "No pony will bother her too much. Any young ponies may be curious about your legs of course."

"Used to it," she admitted.

"I guess we have our plan," Origami announced. "Lead the way."

"Oh shoot, I forgot to mention," Twinkle Star's voice came to them from nowhere as the two looked over the diagram on the table before them. In the room was a simple bench, two crystals, a diagram of what they needed to do, and a pedestal with two indentations on it near the door. "You're familiar with the mana palace? You couldn't have gotten this far without it but..."

"We've both got one," Gianna agreed.

"Good, good. How much exploring of it have you done?"

"We walked around," Origami replied. "We, or at least I, mostly stay in the workshop area?"

"Okay, I figured as you didn't have any guidance it probably just went wherever. That's fine, you can modify it later if it's not to your liking. When you take these crystals with you, look for the intake chamber. However your manifestation has been built, there should be some sort of visualization of mana entering your domain. Look for clouds that are moving around, or running water that goes somewhere, or even bugs or a swarm of birds I guess. Could be anything. Follow it and you'll see where ambient mana becomes distilled, and then aspected when you cast a spell."

"Uh-" both hesitated.

"Never mind, just shop talk. You'll see. Look around." She muttered to herself, "amazing you made it this far without any guides at all. Amazing." The voice cut off.

The two returned their attention to the diagram. It was just a poster placed on the desk showing a pony taking a crystal in hoof, closing their eyes as their aura was shown, placing the crystal in an archway, and walking through. No words or other explanation.

"Closing the eyes implies going to the mana palace," Gianna reasoned. "And Twinkle Star just mentioned it. So I think that's what we should do. Then look for this intake she mentioned. Don't know

anything about the archway it shows, but maybe it'll be obvious from there. If not we can always come back and ask."

"Seems reasonable," Origami agreed. "Actually, I'll come over to your side, two pairs of eyes is better than one, right?"

"Sure, I'll wait for you in the transfer room. See you there!"

"See you there."

Both picked up both crystals and overlapped their auras with them, focusing on carrying them inside as they went to open their eyes in the mana palace. Both were successful, and Gianna headed down to the area Origami would come from. They had an 'intake' to discover!

Chapter 25
A moment later
The Core

The two friends left Gianna's castle and flew around the "outside" which was largely an expanse of white mists, swirling and moving in the distance. Poking around, Origami noticed that some of the mist flowed in a certain direction, towards the base of the castle. She and Gianna went down there, hovering in place as best they could. There seemed to be some kind of fan and intake along the rocks, though Gianna couldn't see much past that as the fan was spinning and getting in the way. They returned to the castle and headed down as far as they could, finally coming to a fairly modern looking room with a curious assortment of machinery. The gas from the outside was being brought in and flowed along some glass looking pipes, where it was being collected and condensed into a liquid, held in a large tank. Two pipes ran to the glass orb that hovered in the center of the room, covered with the symbols she had been collecting in the dungeons. Squinting past them she could see a sort of diamond shape in the very center, and wondered what that was all about. On the wall was another tablet like interface, showing various numbers such as intake rate, storage capacity, and equipment integrity. Everything was green and working as far as she could see. Opposite that was a strange archway seemingly painted on the wall, at the top of it was a space for a crystal- like the one she was carrying.

"This must be it," she remarked. "The archway we're supposed to walk through. Maybe the crystal activates it."

"Do you want to go through, or see what mine looks like?" Origami asked.

"Let's go see yours." She set the crystals down next to the wall and they headed back up, crossing over to Origami's palace and again heading outside. Now that she knew what to look for, Gianna spotted Origami's intake first, pointing out a high tower that had the general "mist" flowing into it. The two headed that way through the castle, and while the aesthetic was different, the general layout was the same. Her condenser looked more like an alchemist's retort. Her holding pool was simply a well under the floating core, but two pipes led from the well to the core here too. Again, the inside couldn't be seen clearly but there was something in the center they couldn't agree on the purpose of. Her "control panel" was made up of glowing runes and mechanical readouts with gauges and arrows.

"Seems thematic," Gianna remarked. "How about that?"

"And here's my archway," Origami agreed. "I guess this is our next stop."

"Looks like. I'll head back and try one. Let's do this one first." She pointed a claw at one of the crystals.

"Sure, doesn't make a difference to me."

Both slotted their crystal into the hole and the wall under the archway turned into a long tunnel, so both headed down it. They didn't have to travel far, as they came to a room with the crystal floating there. Gianna went right over to it and tried touching it, feeling it was more like wood now than crystal. "Wood?" she said, and found herself back in the core room. She watched as a symbol engraved itself on the outside. "I see."

Meanwhile, Origami had at least learned something from her light/fire experience and also walked over to it rather than just running away and trying nothing. It didn't seem to do anything as she

stared at it, but standing there she got a faint smell of the forest. She tried overlapping her aura with it and sensing if it was trying to tell her something. She got the impression of great trees growing beside each other for centuries. Of fine cabinets and sturdy tables. "They're all made of wood?" she guessed. She too was back in the core room, and a new symbol was added to her core.

The second one pulsed and changed, becoming different materials, shapes, smells, as they watched. Gianna guessed transform, which was accepted, and Origami (who it turned out could still hear her) was annoyed as she had gotten it first. With that done they left the palace and looked around. Nothing had changed.

"Now what do we do?" Origami asked.

"Maybe we did it wrong?" Gianna wondered, looking at the crystals. "Let me see..." She went back into the mana palace with them and looked them over. While they looked identical to the way they had looked before, they also somehow looked exhausted, dull and dead. So clearly that wasn't it.

"I don't know," she admitted, coming back out.

The two were standing there a moment wondering aloud what to do, while Twinkle Star sat watching, shaking her head and wondering what exactly they were teaching young ponies nowadays. "Do you need a hint?" she finally asked.

"Yes, that would be appreciated," Origami said to the air.

"You successfully took the magic from the crystal?" she asked.

"Yes," both agreed.

"Then maybe unlock the door and go to the next room?" *I mean what else is there to do in that room? How is it not obvious?*

"How?" Origami asked.

"Did you look at the thing *next* to the door?"

Both went over and sheepishly placed their crystals into the slots. The door unlocked.

We're doomed, Twinkle Star thought to herself. *How have these kids not blown themselves up? Or made it this far without having their hooves held the entire way?*

Origami grabbed up the two crystals in the next room, which had an identical layout to the previous one, and shoved them into the holes by the door. Nothing happened. Twinkle Star was about to say something like "You need to actually do the room before the door unlocks" but Origami shouted out "just checking!" and went back over to look at the diagram. This one showed the opposite, a spell going into the crystal.

"I wonder if we have to go back down to the intake room," Gianna wondered, looking her guide sheet over.

"There are two of us," Origami said back. "We can try it both ways."

"Hey, good idea. I'm glad I came with you!" She started singing. "I didn't come here looking for trouble, I just came to do a crystalline shuffle!"

"Can we be serious for a minute?"

"I've been serious for so many minutes already! Okay I'm going in."

She closed her eyes and realized she hadn't connected her aura to the crystal, and hastily did that before entering her mana palace. She knew the route now and headed down there quickly, coming to a stop by the core. The crystal was starting to vibrate a little, and she held it up. The nearest symbol seemed to warp and want to pull away from the core, so she hastily stepped back and forced the crystal down. The effect stopped, so she carefully walked around until she found the symbol she wanted.

"Fire, I think," she decided, holding the crystal up. *Something* tore away from the core, leaving it smooth, which was odd because the symbols were supposed to be engravings *on* the core, not something pressed into them to create an indentation. She looked back and forth between the two, the crystal now no longer vibrating in her hand as it had been "filled." There was really no way to know what had

just happened on a technical level so she just rolled with it, and went to find the wood symbol so it too could be stored again.

Meanwhile, Origami connected a crystal to her aura as well, and simply concentrated on it. She pictured the mana core in her mind, and imagined a conduit from it to the stone, centered over the wood symbol. She felt something come loose, and whatever it was zipped from her aura into the crystal. Curious, she reversed the effect, connecting the two again. As she had just put it in there, she easily slid something from the crystal down the conduit, and realized she could use wood in spells again. Satisfied her experiment with wood meant she could try a few things with the more useful “change” aspect without losing it, she stored it away as well and headed to her own mana palace. She went to her book of aspects and looked for the symbol on the pages. It was there, but very faint as though it had been erased. She nodded, figuring that would be the case, and took the symbol back again. Once back in her palace she got out some ink and looked the symbol over, trying her best to make a copy of it of another page in the right place. She was fairly satisfied with her result, so she again stored the aspect in the crystal. A third time she entered her palace, and tried to make a new spell using the copy of the spell symbol she had made in the book. To her surprise, the symbols for all the other spell aspects went easily onto the page with her hardly having to think about it. Thinking back this was always the case, she never considered that it could be hard. But she had no idea how to make the symbol of change, and had to refer to the book several times. She again felt she did okay copying it, but when she went to fold the shape, it refused. *That’s a disappointment, but fair*, she thought, crumpling it and tossing it into a wastebasket. Where it vanished at once. *No such thing as a free spell component.*

Both girls placed their now completed crystals on the pedestal, and the door unlocked, as it was programmed to respond to filled crystals and not what the crystal was filled with. Gianna looked the next room over and suddenly came to the realization she may have screwed up a bit. She no longer knew how to cast her fire protection spell! Or really how to work with fire in general, so should she go back and try to get the crystal out of the pedestal now? Or was “change” better than “fire?”

I guess I’ll just press on. Make it seem like this was my plan all along. Yeah, totally made a conscious choice and now I’ll live with it. I guess I could somehow change... my claws? My self? I’ll have to think about it.

The room the two found themselves in had only a small table, but a few things were on it. Another small crystal, and a hanging scale. The weight on the scale was stamped with a 50 MP, and both figured this was fairly obvious. Hadn’t Twilight Sparkle herself showed them that magic could be placed and taken from crystals? Of course! That’s how the new teleport gateway network was going to function. These crystals were tiny though, and she managed to put way too much into hers on the first try, causing it to harmlessly shatter into a fine dust.

“That’s a good learning lesson,” said Twinkle Star into her room. “Be very careful when working with tiny crystals like this. You’ll want to narrow the conduit between yourself and the crystal. In time you’ll get a feel for how much a crystal can take at a time, so you can adjust the flow. In or out it doesn’t matter, go too fast and that will happen. Another danger point, for this exercise anyway, will be if the crystal starts to glow. That’s when it’s just about full, so back off. A filled crystal can explode with much more force than an empty one.”

“Got it,” she agreed, brushing the sand sized particles off her hoof and finding there was a new crystal on the table for her to work with. “The whole vulnerable magical items thing I was talking about.” *So is Twilight doing it wrong, or at least in an untrained way? The crystal she demonstrated with exploded when she took the mana out of it. She probably doesn’t know much about aura control, as the Starswirl method doesn’t seem to rely on it. I wonder if she could feel out how to do it somehow, if we tell her it’s possible, without going to the dungeon to learn it? Break one large crystal into a bunch of smaller ones, so you can practice a lot until you git good. And if you lose a bunch of smaller crystals, well, that’s no big deal. Better than only having one to practice with and ruining it!*

The two placed mana into the crystal and weighed it, and once the scale was balanced, the door opened. They were about to leave with the crystal still on the scale but Twinkle Star's voice came again. "Oh, I'll save you the trip back, you'll need the crystal you just made. Huh, I should make a sign in there, let me make a note."

"Yeah, most things we leave in the room," Origami complained. *Would a little consistency around here be too much to ask?*

They carefully took it into the next room, where another scale was sitting. This one was marked 0 MP and both realized that now that mana had been put in, it now had to be taken out. So they did, again carefully to avoid shattering the crystal. With it empty again and placed on the scale, it was once again balanced and the door opened.

We're crushing this dungeon, Gianna thought to herself. Of course, we already knew some of this, and working with these crystals seems much easier than spells directly. It's really just energy here, or energy there. And as a bonus, I now know that I can power a teleport gateway crystal. Neat!

The next chamber, the one Twinkle Star had warned them would be the longest one, also had the most in it. A workbench with a dusty book on it, and attached to the wall were three wooden cubbies, each covered with a glass cover. Behind the glass were various objects, and each was labeled. The teapot was labeled simply as "makes tea." The strange forked rod was labeled "finds water." While the third and final cubby had a crystal sphere and "tomorrow's weather."

They looked the place over, noting a lack of any tools so paged through the book. It was a complete guide to creating magical items, starting with creating the object to hold the crystals, placing the spell pieces into the crystals, and creating the magical conduits that would energize the whole thing and make it work. This was basically a special ritual, and took about an hour per crystal to connect, weaving the conduits through the object to empower the whole thing.

This is the pony equivalent to the metalworking, Origami realized. The way pony kind did items, because we didn't figure out the Amphibia way of doing it. Granted, they didn't figure it out either, they used the special gems and found another world that showed them how to do it. These items need a power source because ponies didn't have unlimited power to spread all over the land, nor the understanding of things like mana density to create the metal. We basically combined the two methods ourselves, making the big crystals able to absorb and give mana at a distance, giving me some hope more techniques can be discovered in the future.

"Three hours you said, right?" Gianna asked. "That's how long we'll get in this chamber? So we pick one? According to this book each crystal takes an hour to attach, and I see all three of these have only three crystals. We won't be here nine hours."

"Yes," Twinkle Star answered. "Once you take one of the objects, the others will not be available. You simply have to prove that you understand the concept to proceed. As you can take these objects out of the dungeon and use them, it had to be limited because they are literally being created out of mana... somehow. A dispelling spell should make them vanish but it doesn't, so some sort of trickery is going on."

Something by Melemizargo maybe, both thought.

Both worked diligently on their chosen items, Origami choosing the teapot, while talking Gianna into taking the weather predicting sphere. She claimed she could just check in with the pegasi about tomorrow's weather, but Origami reminded her that, for instance, there were no pegasi clearing the skies about her hometown.

Yet, she thought, but didn't say. We could hire some now that they can just teleport there easily.

The magical conduits came into existence under the watchful eyes of the two, just as the book described, and the door unlocked, indicating they had successfully created their magical items. Both vanished.

"I have them for you here, for when you leave," Twinkle Star told them. "It would be a pain to carry them around. Only one more room though."

The final room was another scale challenge, with a 20 MP stamped on the weight, but this time there was the addition of a raised platform next to the door instead of a place to put the crystal. It also included a diagram of a pony taking up a crystal, then casting a spell, an arrow pointing from the pony to the crystal, the crystal on the scale, and the pony stepping on the platform.

"Okay, the last room," Gianna said to the air. "Twinkle Star said it's about having the crystal maintain a spell for us."

"Right, so that means the crystal will probably get 'lighter' as the mana is used up. So we put 20 MP into the crystal, shift our spell into it, and wait on the platform for the mana to run out. That opens the door."

"Sounds right to me."

They got busying doing that, finding that if they concentrated on the crystal as they were casting the spell, they could cast "through" it, feeling the spell connected to them only by the thinnest thread. Placing the crystal on the scale and stepping onto the platform sliced even this thread, as the edge of the platform lit up. Clearly it was cutting off the spell from the pony, but it persisted, the light in the air Origami had made still hanging there as the scale tipped down. It didn't take long for the crystal to be empty, and the door unlocked, allowing them to step off the platform and through the door.

Both got the usual message about an increased potential, a +8 this time, and the location of the next dungeon.

"But no MP increase?" Origami complained.

"No monsters to kill in that one," Gianna reasoned. "We have the lair for that."

"That's hi-lair-ious."

"Well done you two," Twinkle Star told them, as they had been dumped in the office. Lime Twist was there also, beaming at them, and gave a wave.

"Hi good job!" she said. "Dungeons are fun."

Chapter 26
Making Repairs
A split second later

“You were able to watch us?” Gianna asked her.

She nodded. “Looked at town. Many nice ponies. Kids asked about legs. Never seen metal legs. Everyone kind.”

Yes, thought Origami. *This place is known to be welcoming. Crystal Heart and all that. Didn't a changeling tell me this was a good area to at least get some ambient love all the time?*

She continued. “Then came back here. You hard at work. Showed dungeon core. Neat neat!”

“It is pretty neat,” Origami agreed, thinking back to her connection with the core of the first dungeon. “What’s that you’ve got there?”

Twinkle Star was holding out a strip of paper to her. “I was thinking about your request from before. The dungeon doesn’t always give you the spell you want unless you really understand what the formula might be. Sometimes it has to guess your intent- I don’t think it misunderstands on purpose or anything. Anyway, take a look.” She handed the paper over and written on it was a spell formula.

zone 1->duration 25->unrestricted 10->spell 5->matrix 1->absorb 1->trigger 1->release 1

“So a touch spell, a month duration, no restriction, and it absorbs a spell and then upon some trigger releases it. This *could* make a one-time use item, couldn’t it?”

“That’s how I would do it. Naturally you could adjust the duration to be only an hour or a week, but I would probably want a decent duration if I was buying an item I didn’t know that I would use right away. A potion would go bad in that time for sure, so it would be better than that. Have that formula in mind and ask the dungeon for a spell to store and hold another spell. At least with this in mind it’ll have a framework to work with, even if it decides upon a different solution.”

“Thanks.”

“Speaking of the dungeon,” Gianna spoke up. “Is there a way to not need them? To transfer knowledge of spells between ponies? We tried it with our mana palace, but it didn’t work out.”

“I should say not!” she exclaimed. “There would be many barriers before you to do that. Goodness, where to even start?”

“But we transfer knowledge of spells using the Starswirl method,” Origami protested. “So shouldn’t it be possible?”

“Possible, perhaps, but dangerous. His method does seem to allow manual control of the core, a feat I’m not sure how he explained to anypony. Especially as that ‘school’ of magic doesn’t even seem to have the concept of the core, or the mana palace. So where is the intake? Where is the manifestation of your will? But say you could somehow reduce a spell component to some other form that another pony could understand. Magic is personal! Where one pony might see doing magic as more of a mathematical formula in their heads, another may perceive the magic as musical notes on a score. Yet another could simply do it by feel, or by brewing a potion in their mind.”

Oh, sure, I do the folding, Gianna does her big tablet thing she dreamed up from Sunny.

“How do you switch between all of those ways of doing magic? Plus even just a simple concept such as fire would have *many* different meanings to any pony looking at, for example, a campfire. Some may fear the flame, as they have been burned by fire in the past. Another may be fascinated by how it moves, or the sounds it makes. One may think only of the heat, or the interplay of the light that makes up the flame. How do you distill that? But again, say it’s possible. How do you engrave the core with that information? Turning it from whatever form you write on simple paper into the symbology the dungeon uses? I would be terrified of screwing it up, or smashing my core by accident. I hardly ever go into my intake chamber. Now of course I realize there’s no little house or whatever in your body, it’s all a mental construct for your convenience. But you would be using imaginary tools to carve on a manifestation of mana and now you have to worry about the next problem. The dungeon didn’t know you did this. It has a clear progression of how it writes to the core, and it keeps track of that for everypony that has it done. You use the dungeon again, and now you run the risk of your work overlapping any new work the dungeon does. In effect, you would never be able to use the dungeon again! Better be sure you know every spell you ever want. It would be a disaster if you tried to cast a spell with two overlapping elements. Who knows what shape it would take in that case, and what the effect would be?”

“That does sound like a lot of hurdles to overcome,” Gianna agreed.

“It’s why Starswirl is regarded as such a genius, I think. If you think you can rival his mastery of magic and intellect, by all means, begin to work on such a plan.”

“If it’s possible for him, with hard work and dedication (and friends) it’s possible for us!” Origami decided. “But that’s pretty far in the future.”

“Agreed,” Gianna agreed with a nod.

It’s not really knowledge, is it? Origami thought. *It’s a change to our souls, almost. Maybe now that we have progressed as a society, and have cities and civilization and scientific learning, Melemizargo can suggest a way to do it. This trial format was originally a way to get ponies moving around, helping other ponies as they traveled the land. We can easily do that now. We invented classrooms for a reason. He might want the hundred points though. There must be a way to surmount those challenges she spoke of. Let the music people learn the music way and the math people learn spells the math way.*

“Would you want to do something like this?” Gianna was asking Lime Twist as Origami thought about the future.

“Wouldn’t she need a core?” Origami asked, snapping out of it.

“Would having her legs replaced prevent her from getting one?”

The two looked her over. “Probably not?” she decided. “I wonder if we could use some kind of regrowth spell and get her original legs back? Not that I’m suggesting that!” she wave a hoof frantically.

“That would be tricky,” Twinkle Star told them. “I didn’t want to pry but I’m pretty sure I’ve never seen anything like that. They aren’t magical, so I assume they’re some kind of machine somepony came up with.”

“Somepony in the future, yeah,” Gianna told her.

Twinkle Star gave her a flat look. “You think I don’t realize time travel magic exists? And why it shouldn’t be used? That figures. So this happened some time ago. Her soul has already been reshaped by whatever she’s gone through. Healing magic wouldn’t be much help at this point. It wouldn’t have any ‘template’ of what her body should look like to work upon. You would have to use soul magic to restore the *idea* of her legs, then work a change on her body. Now some kind of time magic might work, but again it would be tricky because you wouldn’t want to undo her memory, or she would ‘wake up’ suddenly believing she was having surgery to replace her legs, but be kilometers and years away from her actual home.”

"Yeah, let's not undo her memory again," Gianna agreed. "She's had enough trouble learning the language in this time, take away the ponyweb connection equipment in her head and she's back to square one."

"But core?" Lime Twist asked.

"It should be possible," Twinkle Star agreed. "You're still up and walking around so you do have a soul. Your core might be a bit smaller than others, at least to start. But that's not a bad thing, if you can learn to meditate well and take some perks to help."

"I think about it!" she agreed happily.

It could be a good fit for her, Origami thought. Give her something to do, watch over a place that needs it, I could make her a personal teleport gateway if she couldn't manage the ritual so she wouldn't have to stay in a cave all the time or whatever. "Great. The bigger question is, would you, Twinkle Star, like to start rebuilding your spell list? We can take you to the proper dungeon right now in our ship."

"Oh, right now, is that really possible? Oh my! Do actual casting again, now that it's no longer illegal? Start up my business of making items again? But I wouldn't want to interrupt your journey."

"You don't know how fast our ship is. It's really no trouble. We only have one more dungeon to see anyway, and then I have to work on my report for the princess. We'll get it done with plenty of time before school starts again."

"I would at least like to get a few spells back, if nothing else," she mused. "If you're really sure it's not an imposition."

"You helped us with the dungeon, and now that we know there's a pony knowledgeable about these things we may be back with more questions. It's only fair we help you out."

"This is going to be wonderful! I accept, thank you so much!"

"Let's head out then."

The ship took a half hour to fly to Los Pegasus, where they docked and entered the city. As it was getting dark at that point Twinkle Star treated them all to dinner and they found a place to stay until the morning. The next day they headed to the dungeon, which was exactly where and how they left it. The bridge was visible, as they had been there before, and the blue barrier across the door showed the remaining mana that would be needed to open it.

"We never really did figure out our regeneration rate," Gianna mused, looking the number over.

"You didn't?" Twinkle Star seemed surprised. "But that's shown by one of the first two dungeons as I recall. Introducing you to meditation and the whole running on that weird endless machine..."

"Nevertheless we completely ignore it," agreed Origami. "Can you help us out?"

"Sure," she told them. "If you know your current MP. Away from my dungeon I can't open any status windows..."

"We know it," she was assured by both girls. They rattled off their numbers, and how good they were at meditation.

"So Gianna is better at meditation, and so her resting rate is doubled," Twinkle Star explained. "Though Origami has more MP to start, so she has a higher base rate to work with. Taking your numbers, assuming you're meditating to get the maximum rate turns your amount per day into amount per hour. Dividing by 60 gives you, Origami, about 8 per minute if I'm doing that math right. That means you alone can get the dungeon open, for yourself anyway, in about 3 hours. Working together I estimate a little over an hour."

"Oh, that's not as bad as I thought," Origami decided. "I guess I shouldn't worry so much about using MP..."

"It can come back quickly," Twinkle Star agreed. "But this is only for you two. I should be able to enter the dungeon just fine. If you back off, I'll see if it's functioning and ask for my spells."

“You know about ritual, right?” Gianna asked. “If you get a teleport spell you can come back here yourself.”

“That’s very true. Then you can just go and not worry about me. Though your ship is impressive, I do hate to keep you here.”

“See what it says!” suggested Origami, and the two backed off. She went up to the door.

Warning
No Dungeon Master present
Please contact your local Dungeon Master before
entering the dungeon. Thank you.

“Oh shucks,” Gianna spat. “I thought maybe because you were a dungeon master yourself...”

“So what are my options? I’m not giving up being a dungeon master at home to be one here, I have a shop to run!” Twinkle Star protested.

“I guess we could pay the mana cost, and I could be the dungeon master here,” Gianna offered. “Unless you want to give up the first dungeon?” she asked Origami.

“She’s already a dungeon master,” Origami countered with a shake of her head. “I think it’ll be fine if we give her the mini-script. She just wants to get her magic back.”

“The what now?” Twinkle Star asked, a bit confused.

“We got the power to make a pony be their own dungeon master, so others could go through like we did if they needed to,” she explained.

Yeah, and then instead of doing that, Origami took control of the first one herself, negating the need, Gianna thought.

Origami continued. “As you already know all this, and are basically the last dungeon master yourself, I have no problem trusting you with the ability. It costs 100 MP to enact, and... the dungeon overlord...” *Does she know about Melemizargo?* “Will give you a status page, and let you buy perks any time- there’s a whole list. It won’t interfere with anything, I don’t think. It didn’t for me.”

“If you think that’s best...”

“In this case, I do. One second. Status Screen.” She scrolled to the bottom and touched the correct option, wondering what might happen.

In his mountain cave, Melemizargo raised his head with a start. Somepony was requesting the mini-script, and he tracked the request back to the origin point. Opening a window in the air he looked down upon the group, clearly standing there and waiting for something to happen. He was surprised to see it was Origami, standing next to a crystal pony of all ponies, near the spell creation dungeon.

So she is willing to give it out, he thought to himself. ***Maybe I misunderstood, and it was just those other ponies she didn’t trust with this. A crystal pony, huh? Yes indeed, they were no strangers to magic back in the day. This could be a good thing, a very good thing indeed. Welcome back to The Dark, little one! The mana appreciates you.***

He sent a window to the location, with some instructions to pass it to the pony or other creature she wanted to implant the mini-script into. ***Just in case she wants to give it to that other pony I don’t recognize there. Something odd about that one...*** She looked at it a moment, asked if Twinkle Star could see it (she could) and passed it over. He felt a new connection be established, and sent her a welcome message directly. She looked overjoyed and approached the dungeon entrance again, which changed to asking for what spells she wanted.

Twinkle Star enthusiastically waved to the three before turning back and heading into the darkness of the dungeon. She had asked for a few spells, teleport being at the top of the list, and insisted she knew what the trials were about and wouldn't get stuck.

"The other three I already knew," she insisted. "It's just a matter of reclaiming them. I think I can recall what the symbols meant from before."

With that the three headed back to the North Star, and discussed what their next move would be.

"Stygian was a bit lax on details for the final dungeon," Gianna admitted. "Said we would see why when we got there. But that it would test all our skills and knowledge from the dungeons that came before."

"Maybe another kind of lair?" Origami decided. *What else do we really have to learn now? We can get spells, have the skills, make items, everything Stygian said and more. As he forgot the one in the Crystal Empire, apparently.*

"Yeah, that could be. A bigger one, with better treasure at the end!"

"The vector has been calculated, we can leave for there any time," CelestAI to them. "According to the maps it is an uninhabited area, to the west of the Crystal Empire."

"I'd like to repair the shield first, now that we know how," Gianna told her. "If you're still willing to help with that?"

"Of course!"

"Then let's head back to Ponyville."

The three stopped in to see Twilight, who looked over the book of ritual needed to create the new core, and said the workshop was open to them. "You can use the same clamps Flametwist made. We have ponies churning out the stylus tools for marking the metal, I can get you one, there doesn't seem to be any other requirement for the ritual. It's mostly you choosing to permanently give up some of your magic, much like the temporary method we already know."

"Can you get two?" Origami asked. "I'd like to take two days to do this. That big area looks extremely complex, smoothing it out and fixing just some of the lines are all I want to do for the first day. The second day I'll tackle the other lines and the damaged rune. Or wait, maybe I should try the easier stuff first, and tackle the big ones the next day when I have more confidence in this."

"I think we can manage that, sure. We should head over to the blacksmith in town, he has the mana density spell going over there, and it says here it's best to soak in a high mana environment before attempting this."

"Sure. We can start in the morning."

"Meanwhile, I'll do my part," Gianna told them. "Study up on this ritual, and get the two spells I want to put into the shield so it can use them."

"Two?" Origami asked.

"The growing spell, so it can grow and shrink again, and force negation. I figure it can be extra protection in case something really big hits it."

"It's your mana," she agreed with a shrug.

"How are you going to 'get' the two spells?" Twilight asked.

"I think it's time to open the store," she replied. "We got it after the spell dungeon, at least something called 'store' was added to our status page, but we haven't actually seen what it is yet."

"Oh yeah, I should check that out too," Origami agreed.

Both activated the function and got two new blue boxes hovering before them. One was small, one large.

Please enter search term_____

Spell Store Notice

Origami and Gianna, if you're reading this you activated the new spell store. As I felt it was more important for you to experience and activate all dungeons than keep coming back to this one for new spells, I've done a quick and dirty implementation of a direct conduit into your mana palace I can use to forcibly insert spells deep within you. The search may not be perfect yet, think keywords and the names of the spells, rather than whole descriptions. If you like the feature (and it doesn't blow your heads off- kidding!!!) maybe it can become part of the standard script? Something like this feels awfully familiar but I can't put a claw on why. For now, any spell you buy from the "store" costs 1 potential. It will be inserted into your core and you can cast it immediately. You'll have to enter your mana palace and dissect the components if you want to use it in manual casting. Any questions, you know how to get in touch.

"That could come in handy," Gianna decided, reading it over. "Spells on demand."

"I suppose we had to go through all that to understand how this magic works," Origami reluctantly agreed, "before we could take this shortcut. Clearly the message was intended for us after that dungeon, given the wording. Feels wrong though, just being able to take a new spell at any time."

"Well, it'll save us some time. I'm going to search for a growing spell, wish me luck."

Gianna found a low MP spell to make something small grow to be 1m tall, and found her spell of force negation as well. Heading into her mana palace she was interested to see a second set of symbols for force, negate, and the rest, and knew it had worked. As she needed to give up the spell to give it to the shield, this would ensure she didn't lose access to it. That was good enough for her.

The next day, and the day after that, Origami worked on the shield. Carefully erasing the lines by willing them gone with the stylus, she then cut new ones to make the shield able to use mana again. Apart from one slight slip she was pretty sure wasn't going to impact anything, the shield looked ready to go; She was quite satisfied with her work overall. It was then up to Gianna, who sacrificed 94 MP to create a core for it, giving it the two spells and implanting the whole thing into the metal as specified in the ritual book. As soon as she was done the shield shrank in on itself, becoming the portable version.

"Did it work?" Twilight asked, who had been hanging around the whole time, watching with interest.

"Melemizargo said the shield was 'stuck' in the big form, but now it's not. So I think so. Can you attach again?" she asked it, holding out an arm. The shield leapt up and attached. "Another good sign. The runes for protecting some other creature were not damaged, so that aspect should be fine too. Won't know until someone is in danger and I can command it to protect them. But I'm happy with this so far."

"Good work, both of you," Twilight complemented. "Let's go get some ice cream, my treat."

Chapter 27
Trixie gets unlucky
The next day

The three were standing and looking at the town noticeboard the next day, and easily spotted what they were looking for. A poster for Trixie's show, showing the dates and times of where she would be on her latest tour. As she was a school councilor now, she only did the show for fun during summer break. The two had discussed having some downtime before what was sure to be the stress of the more difficult lair, and they had the tickets, so why not go see Trixie? "Trixie should be in Dodge City for the next few days, doing her show there," Gianna read. "That's a small place, isn't it?"

"Small places need fun too," Lime Twist spoke up.

"That's certainly true."

"Our tickets are pretty special," Origami announced, looking hers over. "We can bring a reasonable number of friends or family along and the ticket covers them."

"I wouldn't mind bringing my family to a show," Gianna agreed. "Think we can get there and then to Dodge City before it starts?"

"In the airship? Probably. My parents are probably too busy, I might ask some ponies I know from the friendship school if they want to come."

"Let's get going then!"

Origami found two ponies she knew from classes and invited them, and they agreed to come, so they all hopped into the airship and headed to Beakwick, a journey of two hours. Her family was delighted to come with them, and the group got a tour of the airship as it flew to Dodge City. When they got there they were a bit disappointed, as a place like Manehattan and Vanhoover could rightly be called a city, the scattering of homes here at Dodge "City" were barely a village. They did have a nice outdoor theater though, and it was easy enough to find, so the group arrived with plenty of time to get front row seats and speculate on what sort of show they were going to see. Most of the town started showing up; Trixie's rates were now very reasonable as she had the income from the school, and simply wanted to share her talent of stage magic with everypony.

And in doing so, Origami thought to herself, it probably generates mana, which is used by ponies like me to do real magic. Somewhat ironic, if you think about it. Is the size of the work proportional to the amount of mana produced? Like if Trixie put on a show for twice as many ponies, would the mana generated be twice as much? And how could such a thing be measured?

Starlight Glimmer was her "beautiful assistant" and helped onstage, as well as being sawn in half, having knives thrown at her, and locking up the metal box for the underwater hoof shackle escape. Origami had to admit the show was pretty good, Trixie was doing a great job and the audience seemed captivated by it. She was perhaps halfway through the show when Starlight Glimmer wheeled out what looked like a large wooden box, decorated with gems and a strange inscription carved into a half circle stuck to the top. It opened up from the front, so a pony could walk into it, and looked highly polished and quite old. It wasn't just boards nailed together, but on the other hoof it wasn't a wardrobe either. It wasn't a shipping crate or a box for vegetables, as it was solid wood.

Something she had made for the show, to look old? Origami wondered. *I mean there must be some trick to it.*

“And now, the great and powerful Trixie will make her beautiful assistant *disappear!*” Trixie cried. They both went around and around the box, showing it was made of wood and knocking on the walls to show there was no trickery. When they were sure the audience was satisfied Starlight Glimmer stepped into the box and the front was closed up.

Wait, she’s not just going to teleport out of the box, is she? That would be lame. But no, I guess with the old teleport spell I had- and thus she would have if she studied it- you had to actually have line of sight to your destination. You couldn’t go just anywhere. So I guess she is trapped in the box!

“Now, I shall read the incantation!” Trixie went on. “Lad nu den, der er inde i denne boks, blive det, jeg taler. And now when I open the box, you’ll see that Starlight has completely vanished!”

The box started to shake and tremble, and the door started bumping open and closed.

“Uh, completely vanished!” Trixie said louder, but suddenly the door burst open and a mass of tentacles, mouths, eyeballs, bones, feathers, and more burst from the box and slithered forward. It was roaring with all of its mouths, and everyone in the audience gasped.

It’s probably just part of the show.

“This is not part of the show!” Trixie cried, as the tentacled *thing* drew up to its full height and snatched her up, making her cry out in surprise. “What’s happening?”

The crowd started to panic, the smaller ponies especially, screaming about the nightmare fuel before them.

Oh yeah, Princess Luna will have her hooves full tonight, Origami thought.

“Stay to the back, we’ll go see what we can do,” Gianna told her family.

“Right,” said her father. “Behind me, kids.”

She took off, heading to the stage while shouting to the shield “protect Origami!” *I hope this works.* The shield detached from her armor and enlarged, zipping over to Origami’s side and hovering there, spinning left and right as though searching for threats. *Nice!*

“Remember your preparedness training,” she heard from someone behind her. “Unicorns, form up a barrier with these benches, protect the young and the old! No pony panic! We’ve trained for this.”

“I’m not old, you twit. I can help just fine!” somepony protested. Out of the corner of her eye the benches lit up and started floating around. The thing saw her coming and raised a tentacle, shooting a beam of energy at her. She couldn’t get to the side- didn’t want to dodge it- as that could cause it to hit somecreature else, so she took it, wincing as the energy burned her. “I’ll try and get it away from the cabinet, see if you can tell what it is to see what just happened!” she shouted to Origami.

“On it!” She hopped up on stage as Gianna circled the creature, diverting most of its faces away from the box as it hesitantly squigged forward. Origami hastily looked the box over. One large gem was set at the top, while pairs and in one case a triple set of gems was arrayed under it. The words seemed like complete gibberish to her, no help there.

Meanwhile Gianna went for the tentacle holding Trixie, missing it by a whisker as she was currently being flung around and screaming her head off. *That’s not helping anything,* Origami thought, concentrating on her core. She cast her teleport spell, targeting Trixie, and fired it off in her direction. She nailed her right in the chest and in a burst of light and air, appeared next to her. The creature seemed surprised to find her victim missing, and roared all the louder for it.

“Do you know what you did?”

“You think I wanted to turn my marefriend into this... thing? We rehearsed this illusion many times, this never happened. But I never said the full words then, either.”

“Is this still Starlight Glimmer? Was she replaced by something or did she turn into that?”

“Your guess is as good as mine!”

Origami growled.

Gianna was doing a good job keeping the thing's attention, it didn't seem strong enough to get past her armor when it wasn't using magic, it was basically just flailing about. She kept edging backwards, getting it away from the box.

"Is it an actual magic box?" Origami asked.

"I felt something from it, but all jumbled up. I didn't think it would actually *do* anything!" Trixie protested.

"I'm going to try something, let's hope it doesn't make things worse."

"How can it be worse than this?!"

She left that question unanswered, gathering magic to tell the box to do what it normally did. Meanwhile, Gianna was letting the thing smack her as she cast her mind expansion spell, and quickly took a look at the thing. The aura on it was bright, so she didn't think it was a corrupted or evil creature, while the color showed a great deal of pain, confusion, and uncertainty on the creature's part. She also felt, deep inside the creature somewhere, was a unicorn's horn and a cutie mark. *This is Starlight Glimmer!* she realized.

Origami got the automate spell off, and the doors closed. Not much else seemed to happen though.

With the speed of the creature gauged, Gianna headed around and looked at the box too, just in case there was some hidden feature she could point out. She too felt the inscription was nonsense, and that the box was exactly what it appeared to be. No hidden depths to it at all.

Origami decided, and cast her telekinesis spell on the creature to try and contain it in the box. *And hopefully figure out how to turn her back before she destroys the whole thing.* "Get the box open again!" she called to Gianna, who nodded and went to hold it open. She dragged the creature and stuffed it back in the box, needing to squish it to fit, as the "body" of the creature, that she didn't want to look too closely at, seemed much longer and thinner than a pony body. But with Gianna's help shoving the tentacles in and slamming the door, she was inside.

The ponies around the stage started to cheer.

"Read the incantation again," Origami commanded Trixie. "And hope for the best."

"I suppose it could turn her back, she can hardly get worse," Trixie agreed. She read the words and closed her eyes, hoping for a miracle. The box was still shaking as the creature fought against the TK spell.

"That didn't seem to do it," Gianna remarked. "What do you think?"

"It's all jumbled up," Origami complained. "What can you tell about the gems? This must be some old magic item, I mean we just learned about them."

"On it." She vibrated her core, "listening" for the return "sound" but just got a jumble of concepts from the item.

painnegatesoundnegatesouldecouplemodifyfleshreshapesoulbindbodyheal

"Oh no. It's like they're all shouting at me at once. I need to narrow my focus it's like a dozen ponies all saying different greetings at you at once. It's just a jumble."

"I can't hold it forever!"

"From what I can tell it's a body modification device. We- Trixie- just activated it wrong."

"Oh, blame Trixie!" Trixie shouted. "It's always Trixie's fault."

"But it didn't activate at all this time?"

"That big gem!" Gianna realized, pointing to it. "Must be the power source. I bet it only has enough mana for one activation. Hold on, I'll see if I can charge it up, then we can try it again."

"Right!"

Gianna flew over to it, overlapping her aura and beginning to charge the crystal. It was far larger than the ones they worked with in the dungeon, but still tiny compared to the crystals used in the teleport network. So she had no idea how much it could take at once, so slowly started pouring mana from her core into the thing.

"Where did you even get it?" Origami asked Trixie.

"Rainbow Swap Meet. I traded a signed pack of playing cards for it. The box folds down easily so it would fit in the cart really well. That's why I wanted it."

"Uh huh. Okay, when Gianna is done read the incantation again and, I don't know, say her name or something. Bring her back."

"But we don't understand how it works!" she protested. "Are you sure this is wise?"

"What else would you suggest?"

Maybe knock the creature out and take the whole thing to an expert she didn't say. Trixie had no answer she could say, and as the crystal started to glow, showing it was full, Gianna pulled back. "Now!" she shouted dramatically, fulfilling a long running fantasy of hers of shouting "now" at an appropriate time in a tense situation.

Trixie read the words again and shouted "Starlight Glimmer!" with all her might, hoping against hope this was going to work.

The box went still.

Gianna cautiously opened the box, revealing a very unmoving Starlight Glimmer.

"Glimmi!" Trixie cried, jumping back up on stage. "Wake up! Oh please wake up!"

"Is she okay?" Origami asked, dropping her spell and trying to look around Trixie.

"Trixie is a stage magician, not a doctor!" Trixie snapped.

"I'm a doctor," said a pony with a small hammer as their cutie mark. "Perhaps I should look her over?"

"Oh, thank you!"

The doctor checked her over, not looking too concerned. "Her heartbeat is strong, and she's still breathing. Still, let's get her to my office. This town is too small to have a hospital but I have a few beds, she can rest there. Unicorns, flip over some of those benches and gently lift her onto them. This will keep her mostly in place so I can make sure she doesn't have any broken bones we should be worried about."

Quickly putting the benches back, several unicorns rushed to follow the doctor's orders, and Starlight Glimmer was soon cradled by two benches, directed by unicorn magic to float around. The doctor told them to follow him, and Trixie hurried after him. "But keep everypony away from that box!" she shouted behind her.

"That much is obvious!" Origami shouted back. "Does she think we're idiots?" she asked no-pony in particular.

With the "show" over Gianna's family came back over to her, and the crowd started to disperse.

"Well done, daughter!" Gianna's father praised. "You'll really be a great addition to the defense force, won't you?"

"Dad!" she shouted, "don't embarrass me in front of my friends."

"Just saying what I think, nothing to be embarrassed about," he huffed.

The group looked the box over, finding it easily folded down into a flatter shape, and carried it to the ship for safekeeping. Leaving their friends and family onboard for the moment they headed to the doctor's office to see about Starlight, who they found was awake but still quite out of it.

"She doesn't remember anything after stepping into the box," Trixie explained. "Just pain. Endless pain. But the doctor says there's nothing physically wrong with her at the moment. In fact, she's surprised at how healthy she is after all that! She just needs a bit of time to mentally recover."

"Glad to hear it," Gianna told her. "I wish we could do more."

Trixie sighed. "It seems every time Trixie is around, you two wind up needing to help her. Perhaps Trixie should hang up her performer's hat and simply remain a school counselor. Trixie- I- am sorry for the trouble I always put you through."

"We do seem to have a knack for attracting that sort of thing," Gianna admitted.

"Good thing you *don't* have a cutie mark," Origami said teasingly. "Or it might just be a magnet."

"Perish the thought!"

The two shared a grin, but Origami turned back to Trixie. "Don't worry about it. Honestly I'm sort of getting used to it. If I went somewhere and there *wasn't* some crisis, I would be afraid something had really gone wrong. We've secured the box so we can study it. Where exactly did you say you got it from?"

"The Rainbow Falls trader's exchange. Traded a signed pack of playing cards for it. From a pony with bad back legs otherwise trading Discord lamps."

Discord, as in the chaos guy? "I see. We'll try to track down the owner, see what they can tell us about it."

"We will?" Gianna asked, surprised. Origami shot her a look. "We will."

"Good," Trixie agreed. "I don't want any other pony to go through something like that. Please keep it safe."

"It's as secure as we can make it. Glad Starlight Glimmer is okay. We wouldn't want to lose our principal."

"Thank you."

The two took their leave and headed back to Beakwick, dropping off their friends on the way. Naturally, neither could stay away from the box and unfolded it again, looking it over. Both practiced overlapping their auras with the individual gems, so they could note down what they felt from each one, but Gianna noticed something with one of them.

"This one is loose," she realized, tapping it. It was, rattling around in the hole it seemingly was meant to go in. "Did we knock it out getting the box in here, or was it knocked out earlier?"

"What's the function of it?" Origami asked.

"Uh, pain!" she decided, feeling it out. "And the one it's closest to is... negate."

Both sets of eyes widened at once as they realized what this meant. "She said she felt pain," Origami breathed. "This is why. This part of the spell, the very first part, was meant to negate pain. If it was loose before she stepped into the box..."

Gianna nodded, agreeing. She carefully tapped it into place, and was relieved it hadn't been knocked loose so long ago that the magical pathways were damaged. It stuck in place and she felt magic flowing more easily through the whole thing. "So that's why she went berserk. The pain of having her body turned into whatever you would call that form she took on."

"Yeah..."

They continued until they had the full formula, and both stood there pondering what it meant.

"I think I have an idea," Origami finally said. "Magic isn't permanent usually, right? We can strengthen the spell with mana when we cast it to stick around longer, but still eventually it will fail. If this box simply *and magically* changed the shape of the creature inside, eventually they would return to normal. This box actually removes your soul from your body, modifies both to a new form, and returns them together. A risky business if you ask me. But that would make any change permanent. The magic was in the shaping, and probably couldn't turn a young pony into an old yack, for example, because the

mass wouldn't be there. It could probably make somepony smaller though, by making them more dense."

"The healing at the end," Gianna agreed. "We talked about that with Lime Twist. Her missing legs, her soul wouldn't have a template for them anymore, so healing magic wouldn't work because they've been gone too long. It's the same thing here. You get hit with healing magic to 'lock in' those changes, if you will."

She nodded. "Right. Cleans up the process, makes sure any healing magic you have after that works right."

"Crazy," she breathed. "But I can see somepony using it to change themselves, in carefully controlled situations."

"Yeah, if you know how it works, and can be careful, it could be an amazing tool for those that don't feel they were born into the right body. Or just wanted a change, I guess. Well, lock this room when we leave, CelestAI. Only we're allowed in here for now. Until we can do some tests, maybe turn a bird into a squirrel or something, it's too dangerous to simply mess around with."

"Agreed," she agreed, appearing next the two. "Captain level access only."

"Thank you. Let's head to Rainbow Falls, and hope the market is open tomorrow."

Chapter 28
Tracking the trades

Luck was with the group, so when the North Star landed in Rainbow Falls the next day it seemed the trader's exchange was in full swing, and the three walked around looking for a booth with Discord lamps. It wasn't that hard to find, and both Origami and Gianna stepped up to it. Lime Twist stayed back a bit, still a bit too shy to become the center of attention.

"Stellar Eclipse, at your service," the pony said with a smile. "I accept trades of all kinds!"

"Actually, we're looking for information about a trade you already made," Gianna told him.

"Is somepony claiming the trade wasn't fair?" he asked, his smile falling.

"Nothing like that," Origami assured him. "It just turned out a little more troublesome than Trixie bargained for, and we wondered if you knew where it had come from?"

"Trixie? The show pony?" he asked. "Yes, I recall her coming around. I traded her a pack of playing cards she autographed. But what did I trade her?" He scrunched up his face, trying to recall. "I don't recall her choosing a lamp..."

"It was a collapsable box?" Gianna reminded him.

"Oh right, I had originally traded for that because I thought it might be useful for carrying my lamps in, but then taking up less space when I wasn't using it. She said she wanted to use it in her act, and that it would break down easily to be stored in her traveling wagon. It didn't break, did it?"

"It didn't break, the pony that went into the box broke," Origami told him. He looked confused.

"Anyway, who did you get it from?"

"Oh!" His eyes glinted. "You want information? What are you offering in trade?"

"Come on!" Origami protested. "Really?"

"Look around," he told her. "Where are you right now?"

"I think I have this," Gianna told her, holding up a claw. "I'll trade you information for information. That's fair, right?" She paused until he thought it over and nodded. "That box can seemingly remake a pony into other forms. Once we figure out how to activate it safely, how about we come back here and remake *you* into a form that doesn't need those wheels to get around?"

"I don't think I could give you enough Discord lamps to make that a fair trade!" he mused. "I mean, what is my mobility worth to me?"

Gianna shook her head. "I'm trading information for information. The cure can come after hours, no charge. We just want to help ponies."

"We do?" Origami asked. Gianna glared at her. "We do."

His eyes got wider. "How do you know the box can do what you- You activated it accidentally and changed somepony?"

"Yes," she admitted. "We changed them back, or at least Trixie did. Like I said we need to figure out the limits and how to use it safely. So, who did you get it from?"

"Traded the mare with the seashell jewelry a few booths down a magical comic book," he told them, pointing with a hoof. "You can go right in it and experience the story! I used it a few times but it was time to let somepony else experience it."

"I've heard of those," she admitted. "Okay, thanks."

"Sure thing. I'm here whenever the exchange is open. Hope you figure it out soon!"

"So do we. Okay, thanks," Gianna told him.

"Let's go see a mare about a box," Origami agreed.

And so the trio walked around the exchange, tracing the box. Turns out (like most things) it had been traded several times over the course of the day, but finally led back to a unicorn with a paw print cutie mark who introduced herself as "Velvet Paws, what can I help you be satisfied trading today?"

"Please tell me you are the originator of the folding box!" Origami pleaded.

"I don't have another," she cautioned.

"Thank Celestia for that. We need to know where it came from. And do you have some kind of manual for it?"

"Manual?" the pony asked. "Did you get stuck in folding it up?"

"It turned out to be an actual magical artifact," Gianna told her. "We need to know how to use it, before some pony else gets hurt by accident."

"Else? Is everypony okay?" she gasped, covering her mouth.

"Yes, everything is fine," Gianna assured her. "But it was a close thing. What can you tell us about it?"

"The box was owned by my great grandmother, who died a few months ago."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you. She was swept away while white water rafting."

There was a pause.

"She was doing what at her age?" Origami asked suspiciously.

"Oh, I know," Velvet agreed. "Such a strenuous activity, and on her birthday no less. A hundred and forty-three, according to her. And she didn't look a day over thirty. I asked her the secret so many times, but she always brushed me off. Said I wasn't ready to hear it. And mom won't say a word about it either, so maybe the secret died with her. Too bad, in that case."

"I think we can clear that up," Gianna told her. "We'll trade it," *she said because she was learning how things worked around here*, "for any information about the box."

"There's her journals, but we could never read them," she offered. "I couldn't bear to throw them out, so I still have them. They start out normally enough, but suddenly turn into this weird gibberish in the third one. Would that help? We didn't find anything that detailed the box when we cleaned out her attic. That's where the box was, by the way. That's all I can really trade you. And I would like them back, gibberish or not. To remember her."

The two shared a look. "Sounds about right," Origami told her. "At some point in her life she found the box, and figured out how to use it. Must have had an accomplice though, wonder who it could have been?"

"We can read them and give them back," Gianna promised her. "We don't need the physical books after we have the instructions for the box."

"It isn't just an old wooden box?"

Origami shook her head. "No. It can change the pony inside. How much we aren't sure. That's why we came seeking information."

"So she used it to keep herself young? And I traded it away?" She looked horrified. "If mom knew about it, she's gonna be furious with me." Her face said *Wait, is mom older than she said? Have they both been using the box? I didn't tell her I was cleaning out the attic, is she going to be looking for it and come murder me or something?*

"It appears so," Gianna agreed. "Believe me, it's better that you did. It's dangerous in the wrong hooves. Hopefully we can decode her writings and see if she offers any clues as to how it actually works."

"Yes, I suppose so," she said in a daze. "If you got it wrong, who knows what could happen to the one inside. Let me close up my booth and I'll go find you those journals. Unbelievable!"

With the journals in hand, the three looked them over. Lime Twist more in solidarity than anything else, her reading skills were still not up to a high standard yet, though they were getting there. As Velvet had said, the books turned into a weird gibberish in the third volume, which they showed CelestAI.

“A fairly primitive substitution cypher,” she informed them. “I can print a key, but you will have to scan each book if you wish me to provide a full translation.”

“A what?” Gianna asked.

“Substituting one symbol for another,” she explained. “She would want to read it back herself, of course. So she wouldn’t want something too complex to easily decode. Given the writing style in the first two volumes, I can match up certain words and phrases, thus providing a direct one-to-one correlation between our letters and her cypher. It should be no trouble to scan each set of pages, and display a translation on the monitor.”

“I’ll get busy doing that,” Origami volunteered. “See what she has to say about the box. We’ll just stay here until that’s done. We can give the books back, along with a sheet or two about what the symbols mean. Velvet Paws can translate them herself, if she really wants to learn about her relative.”

I suppose we can’t exactly print up a copy of each of these journals, Gianna considered. *We’re not a print shop. This is a good compromise.* “Okay. You’re sure you don’t need help?”

She shooed them away. “You’ll just distract me. Go check out the town or something. Books are my thing.”

“Come on, Lime Twist,” Gianna told her. “Let’s go look at the rainbows this town is famous for.”

“Okay!”

It took the rest of the day, and the next, but finally Origami had what she believed to be a complete record of her interactions with the box. They were few, given the danger and the need for a trusted accomplice, but every few years her great grandmother renewed herself after charging the box up. After initially figuring out what the box could do she didn’t mess around, though at the beginning she had a bit of fun being a stallion, or changing her shape to be unrecognizable to others. So using the box was simply a matter of saying the phrase at the top to activate it, then describing any change you wanted to see in the pony inside. That’s what got changed, everything else got left alone. So saying “mane color, dark green” would just change the mane. But saying “griffon” would (in theory) change the pony into a griffon but leave their gender, color, and size alone. The more changes you specified the more dangerous it was, given any sound was interpreted as being part of the orders. So you sneezed, and the box would do its best to incorporate that into the changes.

So that’s why Starlight Glimmer became that weird thing. Trixie read the password, then went on with the show. Basically giving it a bunch of sounds it had no hope of ever following. You need to do this in a cave or something, far away from any other noise made by a pony passing by. That’s the only safe way to go, and not a dusty cave, either.

After returning the journals and the key to the excited Velvet Paws, the group found Stellar Eclipse’s house, and offered to try and fix his legs. The ship was fairly quiet, after all, especially if they went up in the air, but they did caution him he would be the first test subject. He thought it over and refused for the moment, saying perhaps it was best to try it on some rabbits or something before messing around on a pony. The two agreed and promised to come back after some trials, so they could be more confident the box worked as advertised. *Fluttershy might have some sick animals,* Gianna realized. *We could try it on them.* It was hundreds of years old, so the enchantment clearly wasn’t fading, so they had time to do it properly. He said he looked forward to that day.

“So now what?” Gianna asked. “Next dungeon?”

“Do we have anything left to learn?” Origami wondered. “Stygian labeled this one as ‘ultimate lair’ but wouldn’t say anything else about it. Said we would need to find out for ourselves. But we went through a ‘lair,’ if it’s just a longer version of that, what’s the point?”

“More MP for us, and possibly better treasure at the end?” She pointed to Origami’s earrings.

“We can make our own items now,” she scoffed. “Though, they could be of higher quality.”

They must come from somewhere, and we saw his cave. That’s probably the source.

“Why don’t we ask Melemizargo about it?” she offered. “See what he has to say?”

“Yeah, okay, whatever.”

So she spent the MP and turned the window, Melemizargo answering at once as always.

“What can I do for you two?”

“Can you give us any information on the next dungeon?” Gianna asked. “We were wondering exactly what ‘ultimate lair’ meant.”

“Just exactly what it says. It’s a five-level lair meant to challenge those that attempt it in every way. Back in the day, the title of ‘mage’ was bestowed upon those that cleared all five floors- solo. Only the toughest, smartest, most magical of ponies made it through. It was only then that a pony could set their sights on the title of ‘archmage’ and beyond, to truly be said to have mastered magic. Only one went further than anchmage.”

“Doesn’t sound like us,” Origami muttered. “Not yet, anyway.”

“Agreed, you still have a ways to go before I would suggest a solo run. Still, you might want to stop in. Meet the locals, say hello. You’ll want to make a *full* report, will you not? How can you do that without seeing each dungeon for yourself?”

“Locals?” Gianna asked.

“That’s right. They’ll be welcoming to ones such as yourselves. You’ll see. Lot of history there.”

“They don’t use the dungeon though, right?” Origami asked.

“Why not ask them, instead? I wouldn’t want to spoil the surprise.”

“I suppose we’ll have to,” she agreed. “We can probably get there before dark?” She looked over at CelestAI, who nodded. They had worked out where they needed to go in the meantime.

“Splendid! Say hi from me!” The window vanished.

“Anything else we need to do here?” Origami asked. Both shook their heads. “CelestAI, set a course for the final dungeon.”

“Yes captain, engines coming online now.”

The ship dropped out of the sky as near as it could to the mountain the numbers were pointing to, and the group looked around for any sign of where to go or what to do. There didn’t seem to be any settlements nearby, or signs or hazards to overcome to enter the dungeon. It was just a cold, lifeless plain with a mountain looming overhead.

“There’s a lot of magic coming from the direction of the mountain,” Origami announced, looking up at it. “All sorts too, nothing like I’ve felt before.”

“The entrance has to be around here somewhere,” Gianna mused. “We’re close, the numbers are so low. But we circle the mountain and they don’t change.”

“In the mountain?” Lime Twist asked.

“Could be,” she admitted. “Let me put my spell on to see through illusions and hope that helps.”

It did, she gathered mana until she could sense things up to ten meters away, and flew around the base of the mountain on the side ponies that didn’t have special airships would approach from. She saw some evidence of ponies coming and going, a bit of a hoofprint here, a dropped button there, but finally found a cave entrance that led into the place, which the others insisted was simply another part

of the mountain. Origami cast a light spell and the three headed into it, the feeling of magic ahead of them growing steadily as they progressed. Up ahead, after a few minutes of heading in a straight line though a smooth passageway, they saw another light. Taking it slow to not startle whoever was ahead of them too much they kept going, and to their surprise a unicorn in armor and directing two swords with his magic stood in their way.

"Nopony is scheduled to come through here today," he told them. "And wait, you aren't even a pony. I don't know what you are." He looked at Lime Twist. "State your business here."

"I'm Gianna, this is Lime Twist, and Origami," Gianna introduced them. "We're here to explore the lair that's nearby. We're told it's the first step to the title of 'archmage.'"

"That's right!" he agreed, startled. The swords pulled back a little but didn't lower. "How does an outsider know that?"

"We've been activating and testing our dungeons," Origami told him. "To see if their long dormancy has affected them. They all seem fine, and I'll be submitting a report to Princess Celestia and Luna detailing my thoughts about letting everypony access them again. This is the last one we need to check."

"The lair is fine, ponies go through it all the time," he told them. "But I guess you can't take my word for it."

"That's right. May we pass?" Gianna asked him. "We aren't here to fight, you or anypony. We're students of magic and friendship."

"I don't know..."

"Melemizargo himself told us about the rankings of 'mage' and 'archmage' to answer your question," Origami went on, name dropping The Dragon. "Told us the ponies here would be welcoming to those like us. Dungeon casters."

"I... it's just... I haven't been given orders that cover this situation," he protested. "I'm supposed to guard the passageway. Nopony ever said what to do if somepony just came strolling in here and wanted to *pass*. I'm supposed to drive ponies away, but you've said all the right things. Look, do you mind waiting a bit? I'll go get the mayor, she'll want to meet you for sure anyway. She can welcome you, or banish you, according to whatever she thinks is best. I'm just a guard."

The three shared a look and a slight nod. "We're okay with waiting," Gianna told him.

"Humm, okay." He brought the swords close and his horn shone brighter. "Become invested with my will," he intoned, touching them. They floated forward again. "I'll be right back. Oh, I'm Frost Star, by the way." He turned and was gone into the darkness.

"That's a variation on my spell, I think," Origami told the others, feeling out the magic. "On the swords I mean. Making them do something they would normally do. He was just being dramatic about it. As long as we don't get any closer it should be fine."

"Think they'll let us in?" Gianna asked. "Melemizargo may not have looked in on this place for some time. Could be he's wrong about them being welcoming."

"I guess we'll find out. He didn't attack us on sight. And he did seem genuinely confused about how we got in here. This probably wasn't covered, because nopony thought it would happen."

"I just hope they accept me."

Fifteen minutes or so later two ponies came forward, and the swords retreated to Frost Star, being put away at last.

"I'm glad you're not becoming a teller of tales," the new pony said to him. "There really are three visitors. Welcome! He tells me you're all manual casters?"

"Er, two of us are," Gianna clarified. "Lime Twist is just a friend. She hasn't gone through the dungeons yet, she was... ill... until recently. She may though."

She hesitantly waved.

“That’s all right, as long as she accepts the oath of secrecy. I will have to give a short history lesson, then you can swear the oath and be let inside the town. Does that sound all right to you?”

The three nodded, getting a good look at her as she finally stepped into the light. She was a unicorn with a scroll cutie mark, with a large, bright crescent moon covered by a smaller, darker, crescent moon. She had on various bracelets, a hat with some stars and moons hung from the brim, and a long cape that seemed to vanish into nothing and flutter in the wind behind her. Gianna and Origami had been in the presence of royalty, and felt the weight of an alicorn’s gaze upon them. Saw the wisdom and sadness in their eyes, and even in the way their very presence commanded respect. They got the same feeling of weight from this pony, despite her not having wings. She seemed more solid than any pony, any creature in fact, that they had ever met. She radiated magic, both had to suppress a gasp as her aura seemed to naturally fill the corridor around them rather than simply be confined to her skin. Both shivered. *She’s powerful*, they both thought. *Is this an ‘archmage’s’ power?*

“Our city, Lunaria, was a bit of an open secret among those that have received their cores from the dungeon,” she began. “As they are assumed to be trustworthy. It was a bit of an oversight on our part, to create such an advanced dungeon that became part of the ‘journey through the dark.’ But we’ve made do. We were founded by Princess Luna herself, after the battle with Discord those many years ago. She wished to have a hidden village, a *protected* village, so that if something should happen to pony kind out there,” she gestured with a hoof, “we here would be able to weather the storm and keep pony culture alive. It was one of the things, I’ve heard, that began the schism between the two sisters. Thankfully we have never been needed, but we stand, vigilant, ready to act should the worst come to pass. All that we ask is that you do not share our location or existence with those outside who have not been here themselves. We must remain apart and secret if our mission is to be fulfilled. Do you so swear?”

All three felt the weight of her words settle around them, and knew to take it seriously. “We swear,” they said.

Is this how pony kind recovered after the disasters that led to Sunny’s time? Gianna asked herself. *Seems like it could be.*

“Good!” She smiled and her demeanor changed, the tunnel seeming to grow a bit brighter. “Come and see our city! I’ll be interested to know an outside perspective. It’s been some time since the last visitors. Before my time, even!”

The two chuckled.

She doesn’t look that old? Gianna thought to herself.

She gestured for them to follow, and they did. It didn’t take long for the passageway to open up, and a wondrous sight met their eyes. A city, shining with thousands of individual lights appeared before them. The mountain, it seemed, was almost completely hollow, and home to hundreds, if not thousands of ponies going about their business below. Two statues in the middle of town could be seen as well, a black dragon rearing up and below it, what could only be Princess Luna. These were taller than any building, which were simply part of the mountain, as though in the hollowing out process some stone was simply left and turned into structures, where the ponies now lived.

“Amazing!” breathed Lime Twist.

“The magic!” Origami agreed, wide eyed and sensing things out. Almost everything was magical around here to one extent or another.

“Oh crap!” Gianna swore, looking behind them. In the bright lights lining the path down to the city their shadows were clearly visible, stretching out behind them. *All* of their shadows, that is, except for Origami’s- which seemed to be missing.

Our recent Dungeon exploration provided a very interesting opportunity to put into practice some of the lessons we took away from our visit to Baltimore and the Changeling business. The dungeon presented us with a fully immersive illusionary scene where Origami and I were given the task of helping a mouse girl save her husband from a Giant. I'm still not sure if we were mouse-sized or if everything else was truly giant-sized.

It was all pretty surreal. Along the way, Origami negotiated with some animated shoes, we made friends with some ants, and eventually rescued the mouse Angela from dust bunnies. If there are mousefolk in Zootopia, Angela is how I imagine they look. Her husband Harold had succumbed to the temptation of peanut butter and had subsequently been captured by the Giant who was now keeping him as a pet. When we located him, I had to fight a guard pony in order to free the mouse, but the real challenge was that Harold had grown to like his captivity. The safety of the glass box and availability of free food made him reluctant to leave, even if that meant he'd never be with his wife again.

Angela begged us to convince him to accept our rescue efforts and leave with her. However, Origami and I both came to the conclusion that Harold needed to decide for himself what his priorities were and if he wanted our help. The strange experience showed us that sometimes there's a limit to how much you can help others. At some point, they need to decide to help themselves. All we can ever do is be there for others to demonstrate and offer Friendship in the hope that they'll embrace it. If what you're offering is true friendship, that means that even if they reject your offer, you never give up on them.

The next Dungeon we visited taught us about magical items and the spell elements that go into creating them. The entire process has been fascinating, if a bit frustrating, but it certainly opens up a new world of possibilities. Ever since you returned to your future, I've been concerned with ensuring that the good we accomplished isn't somehow undone in the intervening years. We saw through our travels how ensuring progress towards mutual respect and understanding between kingdoms and creatures is a difficult and never-ending task. Like all relationships, it takes work to succeed. Progress can be undone with so much less effort than it takes to establish.

I had started worrying about all of the things that could still go wrong and tried coming up with plans to help ensure your future would be a wonderful place. I thought that if I could find a way to extend my lifespan, I could be present to help avert future catastrophes and ensure Friendship would continue to flourish between all of the disparate groups we've encountered. Griffonstone still needs a lot of work to become the great nation I've always dreamed it would be and while I feared that wouldn't come to pass in my lifetime.

I was also excited by the possibility that I might be able to somehow see you again in the future but I quickly considered the implications of what living that long would mean. Back in school I used to think that Origami becoming an Alicorn someday was inevitable since she was so determined and skilled at magic just like Princess Twilight Sparkle, but I'd never considered the wider implications. Being an

Alicorn means accepting that the lifespans of everyone you'll ever meet will one day feel equivalent to a cherished animal companion. The idea of extending my own life span had evolved from being a decision of duty to one of excitement and then finally to a burden I wasn't sure I'd ever wish to carry. I think in the end, whether or not I ever do pursue that path will be based on Origami's future. If she becomes an Alicorn someday, I don't think I can leave her to that fate alone.

Seriously considering what had only been an element of my favorite stories until now also made me deeply concerned for Twilight as well. She wouldn't be Twilight if she hadn't already considered the implications of her elevation, but I've never once seen a hint that she's worried about the future, not that I've had much opportunity to spend time around her when she wasn't focused on some other task. It does make me wonder if the fears creep in when she's alone, if she has regrets about becoming a Princess, or does she see this path as her responsibility and a necessary burden to ensure the growth of Friendship? I would bet all of that is true since that's how I feel about it. The question is how will she feel about it years from now when the march of time makes it impossible to ignore the ramifications of being immortal?

That does make me reconsider my earlier theories about the nature of magic when it comes to becoming an Alicorn. What is the magical purpose for changing an ordinary pony into an Alicorn? So that Equestria has a long-lived ruler to match the Dragons or the ruler of Amphibia? If that were the case wouldn't the Griffons have something similar? Sure, the Idol of Boreas was lost but I've never read anything mentioning it granting longevity. Are Alicorns even supposed to exist alongside mortal creatures? I could see Princess Celestia guiding the magic to transform Twilight. After centuries of losing everyone close to you, I could easily see her not being willing to let go of her closest pupil.

I've included all of my thoughts on the matter here both as a way to think things through and make sure you've thought them over as well. Having your extraordinary powers be temporary could be more of a blessing than you've considered. Mortality means that leaving behind a legacy is the only way we can lend aid to future generations. I'm not sure if Twilight considered that she would still be present to lend a hoof personally for generations to come anytime someone needed a lesson in Friendship when she established her school. I'm sure she knew that she couldn't achieve her goals alone though. I've made a proposal to the Griffon Council that they establish a branch of the School of Friendship in Griffonstone. It's a wonderful vision and I plan to support it with every feather of my wings.

Since Origami and I had visited almost all of the Dungeons, we decided to take a break to study what we'd learned a bit more before visiting the last one. We'd heard about a travelling Magic Show during a previous stop back in Ponyville and I couldn't get it out of my head. I've heard stories about The Great and Powerful Trixie, both praising her showmanship and vilifying her past deeds. She, along with her "assistant", had also helped save all of Equestria in the past so seeing one of her shows was an opportunity to meet a pair of famous ponies without imposing on them.

We decided to make it sort of a last hurrah of the Summer as classes would be starting soon and invited my family along to see the show in Dodge City. Lime Twist was there of course since she's been our companion aboard the ship for quite some time now. The show was going great until Trixie had Starlight Glimmer enter a mysterious cabinet on stage and she spoke an incantation to make her disappear. Unfortunately, it turned out that the cabinet was a forgotten magical artifact and the incantation transformed Starlight into a monstrous blob like creature full of rage and pain.

Origami and I were able to identify that the cabinet was a real magical artifact and I deciphered what magical elements it possessed. It seems it was designed to be able to transform whatever was *inside*

into a form designated by someone *outside* reciting the command phrase. We were able to lure it back inside the box, I powered the device, and then Trixie repeated the phrase, this time willing her friend to return to her regular form.

Everything worked out but it did make me wonder if I knew my friends as well as Trixie knew Starlight to be able to bring them back whole. The Cabinet actually provides an option for immortality since one of its previous owners used it to remake herself into a younger version of herself every so often. In the short term at least, I've been more interested in using it to bring healing to patients that otherwise couldn't be healed. There was a nice colt I'd like to help walk again so I think we'll have to experiment a bit with the cabinet to make sure we know how to use it.

Adapting to adversity has a value of its own certainly, but not everycreature feels that way. Would Tempe...Fizzlepopp Berrytwist...have ever thought to join the Storm King if it hadn't been for her injury? The decision to use it or not will be up to the individual of course, but it's nice to have a new way to help people and alleviate potential suffering. Maybe if we ensure that it, or at least the magic that created it, remains known and available, that will help ensure you never suffer your own losses in the future.

Chapter 29
The Lost Shadow

“What are you looking at?” Origami demanded, turning to look down the passageway. “There’s nothing there.”

Gianna silently pointed a claw at the ground, and she jumped up a bit, realizing what was wrong.

“What in the world? What’s going on? Do you know about this? My shadow is gone!”

“How peculiar,” Partial Eclipse muttered.

“I was waiting for some kind of sign, I didn’t realize it would be like this,” Gianna protested.

“A sign? My shadow is missing! How does that even happen?”

“Outsiders sure are weird,” Frost Star decided.

“Not now, Frost,” Eclipse told him. “Let’s just listen.”

“It happened because Pony of Shadows didn’t die,” she explained. “He somehow managed to survive the bomb and I guess he did it by becoming part of you. Probably because you were closest at the time.”

“How do you know all this? Have you been holding out on me? Why? I can’t believe I don’t have a shadow, it’s just an absence of light how can it go missing?”

“I had to,” she explained. “After you lost your magic I went looking for ways to help. I went to Guru and he looked at your future. As far as I can tell, as long as Pony of Shadows felt he was undiscovered, you were safe. But if you learned he was around he was going to strike. Maybe take you over, or at least mess you up on the way out. He had to leave of his own accord, in a way that meant we didn’t notice. That was the only way to keep you safe. Now that he’s gone we can deal with him.”

“He stole my shadow? How?”

“You’re the one with the interest in magic, you tell me. I just know what Guru told me, relating to your future. A future which has now become the past. You’re safe.”

“But everypony else isn’t. Who knows when he left? He could be around here for goodness sake. What if he left two minutes ago when we got near the city?”

“The entrance is protected against creatures that would mean us harm,” Partial Eclipse told them. “I do not know what this Pony of Shadows is, but I’m sure our territory hasn’t been breached by anything dangerous in the past few minutes. We would have heard the alarms.”

“That’s a long story,” Gianna admitted.

“Then perhaps we could find a place to sit down and you can explain it?” she asked. “We can give you some help, at least. I cannot easily interact with the outside world, for reasons I am not comfortable going into at the moment, but others easily could. Tell us what you need.”

“We need a way of finding a creature that could literally be Origami’s shadow,” Gianna told her.

“Come to my home, perhaps I will have a spell that can help. Frost Star, I believe you may return to your post. Thank you for coming to get me, you did the right thing.”

“Of course, mayor,” he said with a bow. He nodded to the three and headed back to the cave entrance.

“He really signed up to guard?” Lime Twist asked, watching him go. “Lonely?”

“He’s in a rotation with others,” she explained. “We don’t make him do this all day, every day. Come, my house is this way.”

The group moved through the city, trying to take everything in. Ponies of all shapes and sizes, mostly in darker colors than in Equestria proper gave them space, nodding respectfully to the mayor. They got some odd looks when they thought she wasn’t looking, but no one demanded to know what they thought they were doing there. The streets were stone, smooth and unblemished, as were all the buildings now that the group was closer. Points of light hung above flower boxes, plots of land with strange plants growing behind or beside various buildings, and everypony moved like they had somewhere to be or something to do, rather than just hanging around. They even passed what must be a class for young ponies, explaining about magic and what to expect in the dungeon. Finally they arrived at one of the larger houses they could see, and the mayor invited them inside.

“Coffee?” she asked. “The local minerals in the water here give the beans a distinctive taste you won’t find elsewhere. We finally perfected the roast about... what was it? Three hundred years or so ago? We don’t grow many, but I would be pleased to share the taste with you.”

They accepted, and she got things ready, finally pouring them all a cup and sitting herself.

“Now, please tell me about this shadow issue and how I can help.”

So the two did, detailing how Pony of Shadows had struck from Limbo, and how they had portaled there to end the threat once and for all.

“So you think this ‘bomb’ was a last-ditch effort to destroy whoever attacked him,” she asked, at the end of the tale. “But when you set it off early he wasn’t weakened, and was able to survive the blast by latching on to Origami here?”

“That’s the only thing that makes sense,” Gianna agreed. “The dragon Guru confirmed it, that the shadow ‘can never die’ and we should only go after it once it left her.”

“So how do we stop it?” Origami asked.

She shook her head. “That I do not know.”

“The first task would be finding it,” Partial Eclipse decided, standing. “And I think I have just the thing. A ritual spell you can use to aid in locating things. You will have to keep Origami’s shadow carefully in mind as you perform the ritual, otherwise the magic could try and convey the location of *every* shadow in the land to you at once. That would not be very useful. And I caution you, that may not work either. If this Pony of Shadows has returned to his own form and the loss of Origami’s shadow is incidental to all this, you would need to do the ritual several times, perhaps trying a different aspect of his each time.”

“That’s better than nothing,” the two decided. “Let’s look over the ritual and at least see if we get a result.”

They decided to remain where they were, centering the ritual on themselves in the north-west part of Equestria and trying to cover the whole land, rather than traveling to Canterlot and performing a shorter ritual with less power. This way Partial Eclipse could help them with her considerable store of mana, and her greater skill at ritual to avoid any mistakes. She got out a fairly detailed map- for a pony that never left her hometown- and the group was pleased to get a strong result after the first attempt. Origami pointed to a patch of wilderness north of Canterlot and said “the ritual said he was there. At least he isn’t in a major city causing problems. Maybe he’s recovering his strength? Hiding out?”

“That makes sense,” Gianna agreed. “When he got released the first time, even though he had the element of surprise and was holding his own against the pillars, what did he do? He retreated. Tried to learn about the land, how things had changed. He isn’t going to rush into anything, especially when he doesn’t know we’re on to him. He waited inside your shadow all this time, after all.”

“Agreed. We have the upper hoof this time though. But we still need a plan. And maybe Bright Soul and the others.”

Gianna scowled. "Guru said to 'catch it' not fight it. I... have a confession to make."

"Another one?" Origami pretended to be shocked.

"I've been talking to Melemizargo about this. After he gave us the shop, I bought a spell that could forcibly put him under my control. At least in theory. If he goes willingly, it's much better for me. If he fights me, either of us could come out on top. I don't want to use it, but I will. He would still exist, just as a part of me. I don't know how we would get your shadow back, in that case."

"One thing at a time," she decided. "Let's head back. We'll need to drop Lime Twist off, there's nothing she can do for us in this situation. We'll check in with the princesses, see what they recommend, and work on a plan."

"I wish we could do more," Partial Eclipse told them. "But our mandate is here. Plus, with your history I think you two are the best candidates to deal with this crisis anyway. I do hope to see you again, there is still much more of our town I would like to show you."

"I'm sure we'll be back," Gianna agreed. "Thank you for your help with the ritual."

Back in Canterlot, Lime Twist was returned to the facility, tearfully wishing the two good luck on their mission. They then headed to the castle for an emergency meeting with the princesses, who greeted them. Luna happened to be up, and while they didn't say where they had gotten the ritual from, revealed that Pony of Shadows was once again loose in the land, and where he had currently been found.

"But we have no plan once we're there," Origami complained. "We don't want a repeat of last time. I doubt he's had enough time to trap the place or create another bomb, but how do we keep him from just running away the second he sees us?"

"In my experience," Princess Celestia told them after a moment's thought, "there are three types of villains. The type you turn into stone, the type you capture and hide away, and the type you win over to your side with the magic of friendship. Do we know which type this Pony of Shadows is? Recall his origins, how he came to be. Do they suggest anything to you?"

"He was born when Stygian's ritual was interrupted," Gianna remembered. "The pillars thought Stygian had betrayed them, and when the big, scary pony made of shadow was the result, they attacked without further thought. They should have tried to understand him, explain they meant him no harm."

"And so," Luna agreed, "he was labeled a villain, much like I was in my Nightmare Moon form. If Twilight and her friends insisted upon trying to once again banish me or destroy me, rather than trying to return me to normal, we would not be sitting here now."

"So we should just go out there and talk to him?" Origami wondered, scowling. "Convince him things have changed?"

"Not alone," Celestia said with a shake of her head. "It's not you who must apologize for your initial assumptions about him. That task falls to another."

"The pillars," Gianna realized. "They're the ones that need to apologize. They need to convince him they were wrong, that Stygian was simply misunderstood, and that he has a place in the world now, if he wants it."

"That is one way to go, should you decide Pony of Shadows is someone that can be reasoned with, and shown the magic of friendship."

"I would be more comfortable trying that route first," she agreed. "We can always track him if he runs, and Guru cautioned a shadow can never truly be destroyed. If he doesn't accept their apology, or it comes to a fight, we just back off and come up with another plan. Let's go into this with the best of intentions, so there are no more misunderstandings. But do you know where the pillars are?"

"Scattered about the land, doing their own thing," she admitted. "But I know the location of a few. Two are nearby. Meadowbrook works at the very facility you often visit, working with cases like your friend Lime Twist. Flash Magnus works here at the castle, along with Tempest to keep my guards in fighting shape."

"I can head back to the medical facility," Origami offered. "See if she'll come with us. Why don't you track down Flash and see what they have to say?"

"Sounds good to me," Gianna agreed. "I think we have our first plan."

Celestia took Gianna to the guard captain's office, and there was his name on the door. She knocked and was invited inside, where he stood up from his desk and saluted.

"At ease, Flash," she told him. "I'm not here to order you into anything. But there's something this griffon, Gianna, would like you to do. She can explain. If you want to go with her I'll explain your absence to Tempest. It shouldn't be for long."

"Very well, princess," he agreed, turning to Gianna. "What can I do for you?"

She explained that Pony of Shadows was back, and they had a chance to get the drop on him. And what they wanted from him.

"An apology, you say?" he asked. "There was certainly enough blame to go around- on both sides. Stygian could have trusted us, come to us with his desire to be a hero and we could have advised him. But we could have trusted him, that he wasn't simply trying to steal our powers." He looked over at his shield, hung on the wall in easy reach. "And this unfortunate soul was the result. I can apologize for my part, attacking without thinking simply because he seemed to be a threat. Though I blame Starswirl, mostly, he took the lead on the whole thing. Thought he was the wise one, that he knew what he was doing. Maybe not so much."

"I wouldn't throw him off a cliff," Gianna cautioned. "Just tell Pony of Shadows you acted hastily and without enough information. I'm sure he'll understand."

"I hope so. I don't feel like banishing myself to Limbo again!" He chuckled.

Meanwhile, Origami stopped in at the clinic, and of course the same pony was at the front desk.

"Back again?" she asked curiously. "And without your friend, either."

"I'm actually here to see a pony named Meadowbrook," she explained. "I'm told she's a healer here?"

"Mage Meadowbrook? Yes, she is. Are you, yourself, in need of healing? She's very busy."

"Not exactly. It's an... old patient of hers. One that can't come to her. I think she's going to want to go to him."

"I can have her come talk to you when she has a minute. Have a seat and I'll page her."

"Thank you."

She sat down, and twenty minutes later a pony wearing a green dress that covered her cutie mark walked up, looking around.

"Ah, you're Lime Twist's friend," she realized. "She's been doing so much better since you two started taking an interest in her. So nice to see it. What can I do for you?"

"The fact of the matter is..." She quickly outlined the problem, and what Princess Celestia had said might be the best way forward.

"This is one rift I despaired of ever being able to heal," she admitted. "But perhaps now I have that chance. We did overreact, it's true. And that awful Limbo plan, how Starswirl ever talked us into that I have no idea. Yes, I'll come with you and try to convey the wrong I did to Pony of Shadows. I just hope he can forgive me!"

"I hope so too," she agreed. "Or this is going to be really messy."

The group left Canterlot with directions to Rolling Rock Ridge, where Mistmane was working on a diplomatic problem of her own, according to the princesses. A mining operation had come to a halt there and she had been sent to oversee a peaceful solution. That was three days ago, and she hadn't sent word it was resolved, so Celestia said she must still be there. Taking the airship the group arrived quickly, to find a group of miners hanging around the entrance to the mine, hanging out with their tools

and doing no work. Naturally they all perked up as the huge airship landed and Origami and Gianna jumped out.

“Can I speak to the pony in charge here?” Origami asked as they got closer.

“I’m the forepony here,” a brown pony with a pickax cutie mark told them, stepping forward.

“What’s this all about?”

“Have negotiations concluded?” she asked, rolling well to dodge the question.

He shook his head. “They’ve been close, but those darn diamond dogs just won’t seal the deal.”

“Perhaps we should observe their customs, and sniff butts,” Gianna joked. Origami whacked her with a hoof.

“We’re on a slightly more important diplomatic mission from the princess,” she explained. “Can we go down to speak with Mistmane directly? It’ll be her call how she handles this.”

“I guess,” he allowed, glancing at the airship that clearly served as their credentials in this matter. “Be a shame if she had to leave now, when things are so close.”

“Maybe I can help!” Gianna offered.

That got her a look. “Sure, whatever you say.”

The other miners snickered but looked innocent when she glared at them.

Down in the mine Mistmane called for a short break when the group arrived, and heard the story.

“This does sound more important,” she agreed. “You’re going to need a top diplomat to keep things in order when you confront Pony of Shadows. My my, to think he would return to the land again.” She shook her head. “I often wondered if we hadn’t made a mess of the whole thing. This can be our chance to set things right. We can’t ever go back to our own time, but we can fix the mistake we made in our time at last.”

“We don’t mind waiting if you’re that close to a solution here,” Gianna told her. “We can come back and pick up you. We have several more of your friends to find.”

She sighed. “We should have been done hours ago. Maybe yesterday. If only I could get a read on that diamond dog, Big Bark, who is speaking for them. I think I could give them a convincing argument and they would agree. He’s just so different from the ponies I’m used to working with, I can’t tell what he’s thinking.”

“Would they mind me being there? I have some experience in these situations.”

She considered. “I suppose not, as long as you’re not disruptive.”

“I’ll probably whisper a few things to you, that I pick up from Big Bark.”

“Very well,” she agreed, “I’ll try anything to wrap this up at this point. Let’s return to the mediation chamber.”

Gianna put her empathy spell on before heading into the room, causing Mistmane to look at her for a moment, confused, but when nothing else happened she headed back into the room. Gianna concentrated on Big Bark and began to feel afraid whenever Big Bark looked at the miners, and relayed this information to her. Finally, with her help, it came out that the biggest concern he had was the fear he couldn’t feed his family if they didn’t get enough gems. The compromise was for the diamond dogs to do the digging while the ponies did the sorting, and split the daily haul in half by weight at the end of each day. Each doing what they were best suited for, so the work went faster. Both sides shook on it, and the note taker for the meeting started writing up a contract for both sides to sign. She wasn’t needed for that, so she headed to the airship with the others.

“I actually know where Somnambula was headed, dears, so let’s head out to the desert next. I think you’ll like the project she’s working on. My my, airship design certainly has come a long way since my time...”

“The desert?” Origami asked.

“Yes, San Palamino Desert. There should be the start of a settlement there, I’m sure we’ll spot it from the air easily enough.”

“I’ll head to the bridge, you can show Mistmane to some temporary quarters for the journey.”

“Right this way, Miss Mistmane. Two of your friends should also be around here somewhere. We can check the kitchen or we have a nice library too.” *Humm, if someone threw a snowball at Mistmane, and they did not hit, they would miss Miss Mistmane. Wait, wait, wait. If somepony was using a mister to wet her hair- if a mister was using a mister to mist her hair, and missed, then a mister misting Miss Mistmane’s mane missed Miss Mistmane.*

“Why are you giggling, dear? Did I miss something?”

Gianna burst out laughing.

Chapter 30

Friendship Prevails

The North Star set down next to a strange looking structure in the desert next to a group of tents, and the group, including the already gathered pillars, disembarked. They looked the structure over, which seemed to be a reverse greenhouse of a sort. It was a huge metal frame stretching many pony lengths, and seemed to have canvas squares tied where glass would be in a greenhouse. Thus creating a shaded area no matter where the sun was in the sky. The structure was complete, the group walked in to find long rows of flower beds, farming tools, and seeds to either side of a long trench that ran down the middle. This had been dug out and filled with concrete, so the sand didn't just reclaim it.

"They want to grow things in the desert?" Gianna guessed.

"That's the plan dear," Mistmane agreed. "Looks like this part is done, I wonder where everypony is? Let's check the tents next."

They did, and Somnambula was glad to see her friends again. They explained the situation to her, and she agreed something would need to be done about Pony of Shadows.

"If an apology is all that is needed, then I will be happy to bow my head to him," Somnambula agreed. "I just wish this water project could have been finished before I departed."

"What seems to be the trouble?" Origami asked, noticing the small arches and crystals set to the side of her tent.

"Oh, allow me to explain what we're trying to do here. You saw the growing area yes?" Everyone nodded. "There is a river not far from here that ends suddenly due to evaporation. We want to use this new portal magic to capture the end of that river, effectively cutting it short before it can fully vanish into the sands. We would then send it through the middle of the growing area, giving us all the water we would ever need. Another portal would be placed so the water dumps out into the ocean to the west. We have the material," she indicated the metal arches, "we only lack somepony skilled in marking them. I understand that's all we need, anyway. Everypony that can do it is hard at work for the grand opening of the portal network in a few days. So we are forced to wait, and I won't see the project move forward for a week or more."

"You're in luck," Origami told her. "I happen to have some experience with all that. You have the tools needed?"

"Yes, they sent everything we would need. You can really make it happen?"

"Of course! Let me look over what you have..."

The plan was for the desert dwellers to charge up a small crystal of their own, separate from the greater teleport network, and thus simplifying the whole setup. As they only needed to open the portals at one end, the other arch didn't need to be runed, only targeted as the "twin." The entire setup was detailed with what runes would be needed, so it seemed that art was advancing as ponies had worked on setting up the teleport network. She read it all over and was confident she could manage the runing in short order. She did mess it up a bit at the end, but there was enough spare material it wasn't a big deal, and two hours later all the ponies in the settlement were crowded into the structure, marveling at the water flowing through and out the other side. By placing the exit portal higher than the entrance one, the water collected and could be saved if the portals were turned off. They rushed to work, dipping watering cans into the water and starting to plant their seeds as they wet the dirt.

"This is wonderful," Somnambula gushed. "I'm really glad I could see this project through before leaving. The theory was sound, but you never know how something will work in practice. We can even expand the concept, lengthen the path of the water or even make it wind back and forth. Could we raise fish here? There's so many things we can do, now that the nearby water is not being lost and floating away as clouds."

"It does seem a great use of the magic," Origami agreed. She was beaming from having made such an effort possible, and Gianna didn't need any empathy spell to know she was happier than she had been in some time. "I'll check back in to see how things are growing later. There is growing magic, if you want to hurry the process along. I can bring you some books..."

"I can look them over," agreed the unicorn that was tasked with keeping the crystal charged. "Thanks."

As far as Somnambula knew, Starswirl had expressed interest in fixing up his old mage's tower, out in the middle of nowhere. Somnambula had written him, to see if he could work with the metal, but he said that was unknown to him and apologized. But as he had included his current plans, and Somnambula had a rough idea where the tower was, she guided them to the area and they eventually found an old stone tower, mostly intact, that she was sure was the place.

"We know how to handle him," Mistmane told them. "Let us do the talking, if you don't mind? We'll get him on our side and he can apologize to Pony of Shadows first. As he was the most to blame."

"Whatever you think is best," the two agreed.

So they were all invited in, thankfully he was home, and fixing the place up. It needed a lot of work: The stones that made up the tower were cracking, the place was filthy, ivy was growing everywhere. While the group talked to Starswirl and tried to convince him to come, Origami looked around and decided his excuses about not wanting to stop his efforts here were weak, and to put an end to them. She gathered mana, enough to cover the entire tower, and let her repair spell go. Cracks sealed, the stairs were repaired, the glass in the windows was refreshed. But she wasn't done. Another burst of magic later and the entire place was not only cleaned, she had strengthened the spell so much that it wouldn't get dirty for a whole year. She was down most of her MP but grinned in triumph as Starswirl came over to her.

"Was this magic your doing, young filly?" he asked.

"That's right."

"Humph. I had forgotten how powerful manual spellcasters could be. Seems you're well on your way to being a great caster. But there's more to magic than just throwing power around."

"You don't say?" she asked sarcastically. "I'll keep that in mind."

"See that you do. As the place seems to be in much better shape I suppose I need to go with you all and try to talk some sense into Pony of Shadows. A bold plan, but as the youths of today might say, it's so crazy it just might work."

"Remember, you're going there to apologize to him. Not talk sense into him."

"Yes, yes, they've told me the plan. I'm sure once he is told my thoughts at the time--"

"An excuse isn't an apology."

He harumphed again. "My goodness, young ponies today have no respect for their elders! No respect I tell you!"

"We'll work on him," Meadowbrook promised them, putting a hoof around his neck and gently pulling him away from Origami. "He'll know what he has to do before we get there, I promise."

The last pillar, Rockhoof, the group decided was probably in the place that needed the most help, and looking at the map, the village Starlight Glimmer had once taken over, "Our Town," would be the place he would be most drawn to. So they headed that way, and early afternoon came in sight of it.

There was a huge column of smoke shooting into the air that they could see from a distance, so CelestAI increased her speed as much as possible to get them there. Jumping from the door they saw a group of ponies, Rockhoof included, standing around a burning building looking concerned.

“What happened?” Gianna demanded, cursing herself for losing her fire aspect to the dungeon. “No pony is in there, are they?”

“Aye, there is somepony in there,” Rockhoof agreed. “But there’s no getting to them now. Even I cannot survive in there!”

“I’ll buy back my anti-fire spell,” Gianna decided. “I’ll be able to survive in there.” She quickly opened the store page and bought her fire negation spell again. *Hate to spend a point on a spell I mostly have already, but it was my own fault for not thinking it through.*

“Hang on,” Origami was saying. “There’s still the smoke. You can’t see through that. Or breathe. Your spell allows you to ignore fire, yes, but this is a burning building- We need to negate the whole fire!”

“How? I can only cast spells on myself. You want to buy a negation spell?”

“We have all the pieces though! What if,” she mused, thinking fast, “we worked together? Our mana palaces are connected, right? And I think we’re both good enough to know how building a spell feels. Let’s try and build a new spell- together!”

She blinked at her friend a moment. “Do you think that’ll work?”

“Only one way to find out!” She held out a hoof, and Gianna hesitantly put up her claws near it.

“What are you two up to?” Starswirl wondered. The girls ignored him, trying to overlap their auras in the space between them.

Give her access to my mana palace, both thought.

Make a zone big enough to reach the whole house, thought Origami. *The spell envelope can be weak, make it instant. Unrestricted, so it can hit the whole house. Overlap your aura with Gianna’s, feel the parts of the spell she gives you come across, put them into the envelope and eject it toward the house.*

Meanwhile, Gianna was thinking similar things. *I only need part of the spell. Fire and negate. Make negate strong enough to cover the whole place. Pass it off to Origami, trust she can do what she needs to do, that the magic can work with itself and will respond to our will.*

Quite some distance away, a black dragon perked up and looked around, feeling something new in the manasphere he had never felt before. Opening a scrying window to the source he was unsurprised to see the two standing side by side, a spark of magic held between them as they collectively built a spell. It shone brighter as more mana was poured into it. **Well, well, what have we here?** he thought to himself. **Trying something new, are we?**

With the spell built, Origami took it and whipped her hoof forward, releasing it towards the house. It flew true, and striking it, snuffed the fire out faster than anypony could blink.

And blink they did, as before their eyes the burning building became simply a building, the heat and smoke already starting to vanish.

“No time to gawk,” Rockhoof told them, surging forward. “Let’s go get that pony that was trapped inside.”

“Astonishing,” the girls heard from Starswirl, as they followed after him. The smoke and heat were still very much a concern, but they made it through the house and dragged the pony out. He was very badly burned, but Origami took care of that with some healing magic and Mage Meadowbrook said apart from some smoke inhalation he would probably be fine. He got carried off to be tended, and she was shouting to bring her certain potion ingredients.

With the crisis past, Melemizargo sent a message to the pair, and closed his scrying window. **Well done, you two,** he thought. **We might make wizards of the both of you yet...**

Congratulations

You have advanced your magical knowledge
through experimentation and cast a cooperative spell.

Here is the description of your spell:

Zone 12->Instant 1->Unrestricted 10-> Fire 5 ->Negate 100

Negate a large quantity of fire in a wide area.

As a reward for your innovative thinking, you gain +10 potential.

"I guess he approved," Origami decided a bit smugly.

"What in the world did you do?" Starswirl wanted to know.

"Oh, don't know everything about magic, old man?" Origami teased. "Or is it friendship you're lacking?"

"Never mind that, what are ya all doing here?" Rockhoof demanded. "Not that I don't appreciate a timely rescue, mind ya. But the whole group is back together, eh? Must be something big!"

"I'll table it for now," Starswirl decided, looking at Origami. "But I would like at least some explanation of what I just saw. Later. Hello, Rockhoof. We need your help."

And so the group headed to the middle of nowhere, the North Star circling the area Origami pointed out and finally arriving at an abandoned town. They got out, senses alert, the pillars ready with their objects of power. Nothing stirred. The area was not covered in darkness, nor was there any feeling of great magic in the air worked by an enemy. It was a broken down, ancient, ghost town, the perfect hiding spot for a single shadow.

"He's around here somewhere," Origami told them. "Watch yourselves."

Scouring the town revealed nothing out of the ordinary, but there was a crumbling well in the center that everypony gravitated to. Both felt some strange magic from down there, so one by one they climbed, flew, or were levitated to the bottom. Origami made a light in the shape of an olive branch, and they picked a direction that seemed to lead to a greater sense of magic. They didn't have far to go. The underground area opened up to a small cavern, and there were some strange things standing around down there. What could only be a bear, black and white, but looking made of garbage. A cat in a strange set of clothes, looking ready for bed. Another cat half in and half out of a paper bag. A hairy creature with a party hat on. A wolf covered in lamb's wool. Two of those large bunnies made of dirt and fluff. And there on the wall a shadow, cast by no pony. Origami's shadow. The strange creatures were crowded around something protectively, some kind of head jewelry though they couldn't get much of a glimpse of it.

"What? How did you find me?" the shadow demanded to know. "Curse this limited form of mine! It's not ready! It would have days to go yet. Not another step! I'll run, I swear! You'll spend your lives chasing me, I'll make sure of that!"

"We're not here to fight you," Origami told him. "We're here to make amends."

"You're... what?"

"The young filly is correct," Starswirl agreed, stepping forward. "Please, listen, and know that we speak the truth. I overreacted to Stygian's theft of our items. Had I been more sensitive to his needs, perhaps I would have seen his desire to become a hero and worked with him before he went that far."

But I didn't. Then when you were, for lack of a better term, born, I didn't stop to think that you had not asked to come into existence. I attacked, rather than asking what I could do for you. This was a mistake. I apologize."

"We do as well," said Rockhoof, as the others stepped up and bowed their heads to him. Each one said some variation of "I'm sorry." "We followed this one, but maybe a gray beard doesn't always mean wisdom, eh? Me, sometimes I think with me shovel, and not with me heart. You have my apologies."

There was a long pause. "I really don't know what to say," Pony of Shadows finally managed. "You seem to be taking this seriously. You're standing there and not attacking. That one doesn't have that light technique active," he pointed to Gianna, as well as a two dimensional form on the wall could point to a three dimensional griffon. "I expected all those ponies from before, come to try and finish me off when I was weak. But you brought those ponies that created me. Got them to say they were sorry. What am I supposed to do with that?"

"Perhaps accept it?" Gianna asked. "And see where things go from here?"

"What does that even look like?"

"You could come back with me," Origami suggested.

"You would accept me?" he asked suspiciously.

"I didn't see any problems when you were with me the first time," she admitted. "Maybe my thoughts were a bit darker. I assume you could simply not do that, this time? We could come to trust each other. I could help enact your will into the world, and you can share your knowledge with me."

It would let us keep an eye on him, Gianna realized. And her. If she started to go 'dark side' or he left, leaving her with no shadow again, we would know it pretty soon after. Maybe some sort of daily check, a new routine to have?

"I was born to help Stygian become a hero," he explained. "That impulse could shift to you, if I was a part of you again. That's really all I wanted. I didn't want to be the villain. They made me into one." He indicated the pillars. "If you can trust me, being your shadow again would let me recover my strength. I could certainly help you in magical matters."

"Would I find you in my mana palace? I didn't see you there before..."

"Yes," he answered simply.

"The only other option we have is Gianna using a spell on you, and you become a part of her. I should offer the choice, so I can be said to be honest right from the start."

"I would rather be with you," he admitted. "You have come to feel natural, if you know what I mean."

"Well, I keep looking around for my shadow now, so I guess I do a little. If I have your word that you will be helpful, and not harmful, please come back to me. We'll figure things out from here."

"The alternative is being hunted forever, and never resolving my feud with the pillars. Perhaps they will try to banish me again? No thank you. I will aid you and 'be good' as you say. You have my word." He seemingly walked across the wall and floor, staying flat, and settled in to where Origami's shadow should be. Everyone held their breath but nothing bad seemed to happen.

"I can sort of feel him now," she reported. "He's not trying to influence my thinking... I think."

"So what's that? And those?" Mistmane asked, pointing to the creatures.

Origami's face scrunched up. "Oh. He left me in the lair. Convinced it to create some creatures to do his bidding. I think... they came from mana, so they should be able to return. I just have to..." She did something, and the figures melted away to nothing. "There." She walked over to the diadem, and her eyes got wide. "I recognize this! It's the Diadem of Xilati! It's a perfect match to the description in the book *Daring Do and the Forbidden City of Clouds*. If what Daring Do found out about it is true, we have only a limited time before the curse on it activates and covers the land in darkness!"

Thought you only read books that could teach you things, Gianna thought to herself, recalling a conversation she had with Origami some time ago.

“I’m not sensing enough magic on it to cover *all* the land in darkness,” Starswirl reported.

“Me either, but it’s got some magic on it.” She sighed. “We’ll have to figure out where it came from and reunite it with the other relic. We should still have a few days, at least. After that, well,” she looked over at Starswirl. “Sounds like we have some things to talk about.”

“What then?” Gianna asked. “Is it really over?”

“It really is,” she replied with a grin. “As for what’s next? Why... this is where it begins!”

Gianna's Journal
Entry 5: Chasing Shadows

There's a big secret that I've left out of my writing up until now just in case Origami found this journal and read through my entries. I'd mentioned early on that Twilight had devoted herself to uncovering every option of restoring Origami's magic after we explained to her what happened. She had outlined several options but in order to help choose the best option, I consulted with Guru Sr. for some prophetic wisdom. After meditating, he delivered a warning in rhyming verse that explained that any option that would result in restoring Origami's core to what it used to be could lead to disaster because some darkness, likely a remnant of the Pony of Shadows, hid itself within her.

As a result, learning this old to the world but new to us form of magic was the best course of action to restore Origami's magic and heal the pain of her loss. In time, whatever remained of the Pony of Shadows would leave her of its own accord and we could then capture it. I took this advice to Twilight so that if something went wrong, she would have some idea of the cause. We kept the Shadow's existence a secret, and made plans to learn this pre-Starswirl method of magic by exploring and learning from the Dungeons.

Even though Origami and I had decided not to challenge the final Dungeon yet, Melemizargo, the Ancient Dragon of Magic (he needs his own entire entry that I can go into later), suggested we at least visit the location of the final dungeon and speak with the Ponies there. That sounded very interesting, so we agreed and flew there with Lime Twist. I won't say specifically where we flew to as the city surrounding the dungeon is a sort of apocalypse bunker designed so that ponies would survive any disaster that might befall Equestria. Using the spells we'd picked up, Origami and I were able to locate the entrance and headed inside.

As soon as we made contact with the ponies inside however, we noticed that Origami had no shadow. She of course didn't understand the implications so I decided it was finally safe to explain what Guru Sr. had warned me about. While she was initially upset that I had kept this a secret, I believe she quickly understood my reasoning. I apologized nonetheless and we followed the city leader, a pony named Partial Eclipse, to her home to work on casting a divination spell that would locate Origami's missing Shadow.

Once we had a destination, we returned to Canterlot to drop off Lime Twist after deciding the safest course of action was to confront the Shadow by ourselves so there was no chance of others being possessed. Origami had suggested we warn Celestia as well, again in case something went wrong with our plan, so we visited her next. When we explained the situation, she suggested we use friendship rather than force to try to confront the Pony of Shadows. I explained how we'd tried to reason with it last time but it was unwilling to negotiate at all. The Princess pointed out though that perhaps what was needed was an apology from the Pillars, the ponies that had wronged Stygian and brought about the Shadow's creation in the first place.

Even though I was skeptical that her plan would work, I have a lot of trust in her and the power of Friendship so I was willing to try again. We began collecting the Pillars from where they'd settled down, helping most of them resolve some issue or another in the process. Each of them acknowledged their error in judging Stygian and agreed to try to apologize to the Pony of Shadows as well. The 6th Pillar, Rockhoof was located very close to the location Origami had uncovered for the Pony of Shadows so we visited him last. When we approached his location in Starlight Glimmer's Village, we noticed a building on fire. While I'd previously learned magic that would make me immune to fire, Origami came up with a plan to combine our magics into a single spell. It worked and she was able to take my fire negation and apply it to the entire building, snuffing out the flames instantly.

I've read about magic being used collectively before but I'm not sure if anyone had ever attempted what we'd just accomplished. It felt like a very important and special moment that we had to simply move on from because of the urgency of the purpose of our visit. Once we'd collected Rockhoof, we all boarded the North Star and headed to where Origami had located the Pony of Shadows. It was an abandoned town just to the West of the village. Once we set down, we headed in amongst the deteriorating structures until we reached a stone well in the center of town. I prepared myself with magic to heighten my perception in the hopes of being able to read the body language of a creature made of Shadow. At the very least I hoped it would augment my mental magic that helped empathize with the desires and motivations of our potential foe.

I'm not sure what I expected to find at the bottom of the well, but the Pony of Shadows, now appearing as Origami's shadow, seemed to me to be more frightened than anything. He was in the middle of enacting a plan that would bring about Eternal Night, but for some reason it felt like he was doing this, not out of anger or revenge, but in order to simply protect himself. His weakness had him afraid for his continued existence, and his plan was more about not needing to hide in a well just to survive than anything malicious. At our prompting, the Pillars humbly apologized to him much as they had to Stygian previously, and as Princess Celestia had hoped, their genuine words seemed to dissipate any remaining antagonism.

He'd experienced weeks alongside us as we'd travelled, learned magic, and helped others. He'd seen our honesty and compassion and so believed us when we told him we didn't want a fight. So long as he didn't hurt anyone, we'd be willing to help him find a new home and purpose. Origami even offered to allow him back inside her so long as he didn't try to control her. I was surprised at her offer at first but that quickly turned to joy in seeing her show such kindness to a being that had been so central to so much of her pain. He offered the "carrot" of teaching us his magical knowledge but I really think that, even for Origami, the true "carrot" was just the possibility of him becoming a friend in time.

I'm hopeful that we'll be able to learn more about him and he about us through our interactions with him, and perhaps someday even find a way to allow him to exist as his own pony apart from Origami. Until then, I can only imagine how much Origami's magic will strengthen and improve. It makes me wonder yet again if she'll one day become an Alicorn like Twilight. After all, by all accounts, the Pony of Shadows did appear as an Alicorn himself. What would that mean for both of them if she transformed into an Alicorn while he was still a part of her being?

I find that I'm not too concerned about that. As much as I feel like I've grown over the last few months, I believe Origami has changed just as much. She's still her serious, rules oriented self but all of these trials have forced her into situations where she's had to confront her own weaknesses and overcome them. She's had the opportunity to show the kindness in her heart in a way that somehow feels more

natural to me than ever before. She faced the loss of everything that gave her her identity and survived it with grace and I'm so very proud of her.

So there you have it, another disaster averted. There's still as many potential disasters that could lead to a less than wonderful future for you as there are years between us though. I'm still not certain how many of those years I'll be around for to lend my direct influence, but I can promise you that I'll never stop trying to make the world a better, more compassionate place. Despite this new magical method where spells are broken down into a predictable formula, I still feel that raw magic itself responds to emotions, and that is why Friendship is so important and powerful. It's both complex and simple at the same time and when it is shared, it can accomplish anything. May the act of writing these words on parchment be the ritual that gathers my thoughts and feelings and conveys them through time to wherever and whenever you are. There may be an actual spell for that now that I think about it, but for now I'll trust in the old magic of books. I'm sure Twilight and Origami would both approve.

Epilogue

Gianna stared out the city, far below her, pausing in her pacing back and forth to reflect upon all the events that brought her to this moment. Stretched out below the hospital building were towers of every kind, housing businesses, homes, labs, and more. Were she to descend, ponies would be almost in the minority now, having spread to Zootopia, Amphibia, and beyond, just as the inhabitants of those lands came to Equestria. For trade. For lessons in magic. For friendship. No wars had ever broken out, so the populations of ponies, dragons, frogs, cats, birds, and every other type of life had exploded across the world. All was at peace, for the schools of friendship were going strong. Vehicles of all types zoomed about, or followed roads, or were simply climbed into and vanished. Truly, the world was full of marvels of all types. Even the moon held cities like this one, and the inner planets were being studied for their suitability as well, to spread mana, life, and friendship.

"I notice your heartrate has not fallen," said a voice in her ear. "This level of stress isn't good for you, Gianna."

She snorted and turned up a palm. A nearly flat metal disk projected the image of a pony she had met so long ago, looking up at her. "CelestAI, I've been alive for thousands of years. A little bit of nervousness isn't going to kill me now."

"Why are you so nervous, if you don't mind my asking? You've been following the Starscout family in secret for hundreds of years. Events have played out to create this "Sunny" you have so longed to once again meet, and my predictions are 95% accurate. Your own research shows "Sunny" as one of the names the family may choose. Every sign points to this being the "Sunny Starscout" of your past. And if not, you will certainly live to see his or her children, which may be the one. You have faced so many challenges in your life, and dangers, and excitement. But simply standing here has your heartrate soaring? I don't understand it."

"You can't apply logic to your feelings, CelestAI. I feel what I feel. I'm excited to finally see my old friend again, and for the first time. To watch her grow up in a time of peace and friendship, so different from her old timeline. Share my journals with her, right from the very first one when--"

"Did I miss it!?" another voice excitedly said at her side, and Gianna jumped, startled. CelestAI winked out as she put her claws down, and glared over at her friend. Completely black eyes looked back at her, but the purple pegasus was her usual cheerful self.

"Using Shadow Step to sneak up on me? That's bad form," she gently chided.

"I was running late, so I wanted to get here as quickly as I could. But you're still here in the hall. So I didn't miss it."

"No, the labor is ongoing," CelestAI told them both in their earpieces. "Even with our advanced medical and magical means, some things simply take the time they take. Thankfully, things do seem to be wrapping up there and it should not be much longer before visitors to the room are allowed."

"And she opted for a natural birth," Gianna agreed. "Which I think is very brave of her."

"Wouldn't catch me doing that," Origami shuddered. "Teleport the baby right out of me, yes please. So much easier."

"Uh huh. So how are things on the--"

There was a chime, and both turned up their front legs. “I am happy to report that a new filly has entered the world,” she announced. “All tests report that she is healthy, and both baby and mother are resting comfortably at this time. The name has also been chosen. The name is... Sunny Starscout. She matches your description perfectly.”

“Yes!” Gianna flapped her wings in excitement. “I can finally meet you again, Sunny. I have so very much to share with you.”