

And so the pair trained and used up the XP they had gained in the last world. Sparkle's energy was pushed up to a hundred and five, surpassing Susan's by twenty five. On her character sheet Sparkle now had "Energy Well" at a four, and Silverstreak said it could go as high as a hundred and forty with another ten XP put into the background. Sparkle said she would see how it went, and hoped having more energy than Susan didn't cut into her naptime. She was feeling a bit twitchy, but assumed she would adjust to her new energy total. *I just have more now, it's not like I drank a bunch of coffee. I just have to get used to it. I mean Susan sleeps just fine with her eighty, right?*

"Where do you keep it all?" Susan asked, the first time she sensed Sparkle coming into the room. "How does a tiny body like that hold more energy than I have?"

"Jealous? He could probably do the same for you."

"Nah, I'll wait until I get super powers and see what they do for me. I've only been low the once, and that was against that robot thing. With us back together I hope it won't happen that way again."

"True."

She also raised her Ryūdō group to a four, cannibalizing her *unarmed* for it. *After all, they're the same thing unless I put energy into the strike. It's just touching something that's the point, after all, and I can catch a mouse with my claws the same as fry it with energy using the same skill.*

Susan, meanwhile, learned one new spell, that of *Balk*, which was resisted by LUCK of all things. She now had spells resisted by REASON, STRENGTH, LUCK, RESOLVE, and in the case of *knockout*, how much damage their bodies could take. *Something will get through, right? Balk* simply made the target's next defense roll not go so well, basically a lesser *Dazzle* but at grade one, easier to pull off.

She practiced her Ninjutsu, getting that skill group and *close combat* up to a five. This allowed her to get her *delay* for martial arts down to a four naturally, which was pretty good, considering. She left herself four XP, just in case she needed another *success* at some point.

Of course she also talked about Jenny (who Silverstreak knew about and said was a great candidate for inclusion into the 'hub family' if she could be found again) and was given a spare communicator to give her so she could go there if they ever met up again.

With that done she looked at the notes for the next world, which had been buzzing her *curiosity* since she read them. It was just a single word:

Ponies.

So she said her goodbyes to Silverstreak, who wished her luck, and stepped through. This was a perfectly normal transit, and both found themselves standing in a highly wooded area with the sounds of wildlife all around them.

Susan breathed deep. The air here smelled... clean? There was a subtle difference in the air between worlds she was starting to realize.

"What do you think?" she asked Sparkle.

"With no destination in mind, one direction is as good as another."

"True. Tell me, does the air here feel especially clean to you?"

"Actually, yes. I hope we're not too far from some sort of town, so we can see what the situation around here is."

"I'm with you. But even before that..."

Susan cast a quick *Question* into the universe, and got back a simple "no" to "Is the

Luna I seek on this world.”

“Pity. Nothing for it I guess.” she sighed, putting her book back. “Let’s see what The Darkness is up to around here and get it done so I can get super powers. *Flight.*” She rose into the air, and sailed above the trees, spinning around and taking in her surroundings. *At least magic works here, and we’re up to Mercury for planets. That’s a good sign. Ah, civilization!* She landed again. “I spotted a town over there, so it looks like we won’t have far to go. No major roads or tall buildings, it might be pretty low tech here.”

“That’s fine. Are you sure it was that direction, you do have-”

“*No Sense of Direction,*” both said at once. They laughed.

“Yes, I just saw it. Even I’m not that useless.”

“Want to fly over there?”

“It isn’t far. I’m going to keep to the ground. We don’t know how magic is regarded around here, so best not to take chances. Though I could swear I saw some colored shapes flying around over there. Come on.”

“This way.”

“Right. Sorry.”

Susan walked for about an hour, and finally the trees started to thin out.

“Call me crazy, but this forest somehow seems familiar,” remarked Susan.

“I imagine it would. I wondered if you would notice.”

“Notice? Notice what? Should I know this place?”

“Kind of. You’ve never been here, but you’ve seen it a few times. Of course with my *Photographic Memory* I realized it right away. And that’s very, very troubling.” *Because once you get to where we’re going, I think you’re going to recognize it, and then you’re going to want some answers I’m not sure I want to give you. But it was bound to happen sooner or later... And I suppose I did make a plea to the Narrator to make it "the next world" I would have to explain things on. And here we are. But HERE? I’m being punished for something, aren’t I? Maybe tricking the crew of the Glomar? Guess I’ll never know.*

“Why? Is there some danger?”

“Danger? No, not as such. You’ll see, maybe I’m way off base, but I think this one is going to be a strange one.”

“Okay, I’ll take your word for it.”

The two eventually came to a path of sorts, so Susan was confident she was on the right track. That’s when the beast stepped out of the trees and onto the path in front of her.

Susan and Sparkle stopped, looking down (and up, in the case of Sparkle) at it.

She stared some more.

The creature stared back at her.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” said Sparkle.

Something about this creature looks familiar- “Hey, you’re a baby dragon!” she blurted.

“That’s right. The question is, what are you?” answered the dragon.

Even the voice sounds familiar... wait a second. Purple scales, green ridges running from the front of the head back to the tail. Pale belly.

“You’re Spike!”

Spike took a step back. “Uh, yes? How did you know that? What are you, exactly?” He looked Susan up and down.

“What’cha doing?” said a voice from behind Susan. Susan stiffened, wondering how it had gotten behind her. *I even raised my Ninjutsu skill, it’s not-* Then she had another thought. *Oh I know that voice too.* She closed her eyes.

“Spike?” she asked.

“Yeah?”

“If I were to turn around and look, would there be a pink pony behind me? With pink hair?”

Spike leaned over to look behind Susan.

“Yeah.”

“And would she have,” Susan giggled, but then thought *no, along that way lies*

madness. Concentrate Susan. “Does she have a... a...” *Concentrate!* “A cutie mark, three balloons maybe? Two blue, one yellow?”

“Last I checked.”

“And Spike?”

“Yeah?!” He was starting to sound a bit annoyed now.

“She’s bouncing up and down, isn’t she?”

“She usually does.” Susan sighed. “Pinky Pie? Or more formally, as we haven’t been introduced: Pinkmania Diane Pie?”

“You even know my name! This is great! Can I guess yours? Huh? Can I? Can I? Can I? What does it start with? I bet it’s G... oh oh oh maybe B? Am I getting close?”

“Pinky?”

“Yes?”

“I’m going to turn around now, and I may, I cannot stress this enough, I may just have to hug you. I just didn’t want you to be too surprised.”

“I love surprises! Especially if they’re hugs, so I think that’s okay.” Susan carefully turned around, and steeled herself. She opened her eyes and stared down, and as she expected, staring up at her was a grinning, pastel pink pony.

“Hi!” said Pinky. She didn’t look like a cartoon character, but at the same time she didn’t exactly look real, either. Nonetheless, she was the cutest thing on four... hooves... that Susan had ever seen.

Susan gave what in fangirl circles would be called a “squee” and threw her arms around Pinky.

“Oh my God you’re real!” she cried.

“Course I am, silly!”

I’m hugging a talking pony, how is this even possible? Is it some kind of trap? A real world someone broke into and then out of again, and brought stories back from? Oh my goodness her mane is silky.

“I did warn you.” asked Sparkle. “But I guess you’re taking it well?”

“I’d ask what you are,” said Spike, looking on as Susan and Pinky were in the middle of the greatest hug Pinky had been in for at least the last hour, if not two, “but I’m not getting much information out of that one.”

“I,” said Sparkle, drawing herself up with all the dignity and poise a cat can muster, “am a cat, and my name is Sparkle. This is the human called Susan. Take us to your leader.”

“Twilight Sparkle first!” shouted Susan, grabbing Pinky in one arm and then pointing in (she hoped) the right direction. “Then it’s on to Canterlot to meet Sunbutt- I mean Princess Solestia!”

Oddly, both animals rolled their eyes in exactly the same way.

They should get on well, after all, they’re both Companions, right?

So Pinky bounded beside Susan as they made their way out of the forest.

“So what are you?” asked Pinky.

“Pinky, it is fantastic to actually meet you in real life, but I’m going to have to explain it to everyone- everypony sorry.” She giggled again. “I can’t believe I get to say that in real life. Anyway, I’ll have to tell everypony so I’d rather just do it once.”

“Okay, I understand.”

“You’ll have to get the mane6 around, I don’t think I should just walk into town as myself. I’ll go invisible and meet everypony in Twilight’s library. Well, the town library that Twilight looks after.”

“Yeah, I don’t think you’ll cause the panic that Zecora did when she visited town, but it- what’s a Main Six? No, you said that differently. Main6? Mane6?”

“Your friends, I mean. Sorry, I said that without thinking. It’s, uh, how I think of your group.”

“Mane 6. I like it. So you know us?”

“I thought you might, and yes, sort of. By the way, there’s something I’ve always wanted to ask you. If you ‘giggle at the ghostly’ and ‘snortle at the spooky’ why did you run

and hide with the rest of the ponies when Zecora first came into town?”

“That’s easy! It just looked so fun I wanted to try it! And I wanted to sing them my new song, how could I do that without being where they were?”

“That figures. And your being behind me in the woods?”

“Pinky Sense. I knew where I needed to be today.”

“Right-o.” *I always thought she was a Seer of some kind. I wonder if I could help her develop those powers, if she actually is supernatural in some way, being an Earth Pony.*

“Should it scare me that I actually understand what they’re talking about?” Spike asked Sparkle.

“It’s gonna get a lot worse,” she replied.

“So you can go invisible?” Pinky asked. “What’s that taste like?”

“Yes. Believe it or not, even without a horn I can do magic. Actually, I don’t have to be invisible!”

“I knew this was coming,” said Sparkle.

“You don’t? That’s great!” said Pinky. “Why not?”

“Because I can be invisible!”

“Now I’m confused.”

“You’ll see. Sparkle, if you would? I want to be, oh, the opposite of Twilight. Dark purple, but with light purple hair. And for my cutie mark, I think maybe nine spheres to represent my nine planets?”

“I think that’s doable. You better strip though.”

“Oh yeah. It’s going to be weird, walking around *town* totally naked. Even if I am in a different shape.” Susan stepped out of her clothes and put them into her sub-space pocket, and she wasn’t sure which fascinated Pinky more. Her being a naked human, or shoving stuff into the air and having it disappear. Spike, of course, stared openly. *Should I? Nah.*

“You might as well do yourself at the same time,” said Susan. “I mean they have cats here, but not talking ones. You can be a younger pony, because of the size limitation. Probably no cutie mark though. Sorry.”

“I’ll try to contain my disappointment.”

“Blank flank!”

“Do you want this spell cast on you or not?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll find your talent someday.”

“You are having entirely too much fun in this situation.”

“I know. Nothing wrong with that, is there? I mean it’s *Ponies!*”

“I do see the appeal, at least for you. Even if I’m at a loss as to explain how this is possible.” *Lie. Oh yeah, it’s going to be rough. “Shape-Shift.”*

Pinky and Spike stepped back as magical energy swirled around them both, and when it cleared, two new ponies stood there. Susan gave a little leap of joy and then had to figure out her new limbs. Also her vision was a little different, and she could feel that she had a *horn*.

Oh, I can’t wait to see a mirror. Wait a second. She looked at her front leg, and sure enough there was her *Minerva Band* with the *materia intact*. *Huh. I guess as it would have fit any of them, even Nanaki, the Band reshapes to fit the wearer? Nice to know.*

“You really can do magic!”

“We both can. I forgot to ask how many planets you had in this system, but I guess it worked out,” said Sparkle.

“Walking with four legs is hard!” said Susan, spinning around. “Oh, I want to see my cutie mark!”

“I don’t seem to be having any trouble,” said Sparkle, giving a bit of a prance.

Susan stuck her tongue out and tried to coordinate her various limbs while looking behind herself to see her cutie mark.

“You’re thinking about it too hard,” said Pinky. “Just let it happen.”

“Easy for you to say. Oh, and Susan isn’t exactly a common name around here. Sparkle, your name is half okay, even if it’s half taken. Maybe you could be Midnight Sparkle, because of your dark coat.”

“That’s fine.”

"But for me... How about Sparkling Magic? You could be my daughter, Midnight!"

"Wow, that sounds great!" said Pinky. "I guess because your magic makes those weird circles?"

"That's right. Oh man, this is weird. I feel so... so... I don't even know. This is going to great!"

"Oh, I get it," said Spike. "You can be invisible by blending in with everypony. No one will look at you twice like this. You'll just be another visitor to town. And coming in with Pinky they'll all know you've been greeted."

"That's it. I knew there was a reason Twilight kept you around. You're pretty smart, huh Spike?"

"Yeah, I guess," he said, blushing.

"So, give me a quick lesson in quadruped locomotion before we get to town."

"Okay! Tag, you're IT!" Pinky bopped Susan on the nose, and wheeled away, laughing.

"Oh, it is so on!"

An hour later, Susan and Pinky were leaning back to back, panting.

"That was fun," said Susan.

"It sure was," replied Pinky. "And I bet you're not thinking about how to walk anymore."

"I guess you're right. How did you know?"

"Just one of those things, I guess. Ready for your big Ponyville debut? And subsequent 'welcome to Ponyville' party?"

"Thanks to you, yeah." She hesitated. "Pinky Pie, I have a confession to make."

"Oh yeah?"

"I always thought you were a little too spastic for your own good. But meeting you in the flesh like this, I see now I've misjudged you. And I'm sorry about that."

"Oh, don't be sorry. I'm entirely too spastic for my own good. That's what makes me, me! Come on, even though they don't know it, everypony is waiting to meet you!"

And so, three ponies and a dragon walked into Ponyville, and Pinky smiled when she saw how widely Susan was smiling. Susan started singing, *after all, when in Rome, right?* She even made a roll with her *Adaptive Skill*, based on *PERsonalty*, as it seems that skill related to *Heart-Songs* here.

"Her name is Pinky Pie!"

"That's me!"

"And she is here to say."

"Say what?"

"She's going to make you smile, going to brighten up your day!"

"This sounds familiar."

"It doesn't matter now, if you are sad or blue."

"It really doesn't."

"Cause cheering up her friends is just what Pinky's here to do!"

"Cause we love to make you smile, smile, smile, yes we do!" they both sang.

"Okay, okay, we get it," said Sparkle. "We can do Heart-Songs now, fantastic."

They both fell against each other laughing. "Come on, let's go track down that pony who all the stallions say is pretty shy for a pegasi."

"I'll go warn- I mean tell Twilight you're coming."

"Thanks Spike. I'll see you later, at the library."

"Look at this!" squealed Susan as she neared Fluttershy's house. "It's just like the show! Look at the birds and things. Aren't they all just so adorable!"

"You see adorable, I just see food on the wing."

"You wouldn't!"

"Of course not. Now, anyway. I just got used to fending for myself a bit more as you weren't around to make us food in the last world. It'll pass."

"I hope so. Besides, remember what shape you're in."

"Oh, right. Never mind. Guess I'll just try some *grass* then." Susan laughed, then walked up to the door and knocked.

Now, knowing what I know about Fluttershy's personality, how is best to make her comfortable and get her to agree to come with me?

A moment later, a yellow pony poked her head out.

"Oh, hello." Her eyes darted about, then settled on Pinky, a familiar face. "Oh Pinky, you're here too. Who's your friend?"

"Everypony is my friend, you know that, Fluttershy!"

"I meant who is this."

"Sparkling Magic," said Susan, introducing herself. "At your service."

"Oh, nice to meet you." Her head was disappearing behind the door.

"I already feel like I've known you for years."

"Okay?"

"The thing is, I have something important to tell you, Fluttershy. You and all your friends. Would it be okay with you if you met us in the library later?"

"Why doesn't she just come with us now?" asked Pinky.

Susan looked over at her. "Pinky, you know as well as I do how shy Fluttershy is. She's going to be a lot more comfortable meeting me surrounded by her friends so she can blend into the background. I don't want to force her into talking with me while we get the others. Unless you really want to, Fluttershy."

When Susan turned back, all that was visible of Fluttershy through the top of her door (it opened independently of the bottom, and there was a pet door as well, so it was three doors in one) was her one eyeball.

"I'll just come later if that's okay with you?" she squeaked.

"Thought so. It was nice meeting you, Fluttershy. I'll see you later, okay?"

"Okay?" She quietly shut the door.

"How did she close the door without hands?" asked Sparkle. Susan looked at her own hoof.

"I've asked myself that many times. Let's see if Applejack is free next."

"How *do* you know so much about us?" asked Pinky.

Susan laughed. "That's a good question. I'll be glad to answer it, later."

"Kinda figured."

"That's the apple farm?" asked Susan, as the farm came into view. "Man, I wish Zap Apples were in season. I'd love to see them."

"You even know about that?"

"And your predilection for being first in line for cider." She nudged Pinky's side.

"I'm starting to think you know a little bit too much about us. Also, you talk like Twilight Sparkle, and we already have one of them."

"In time, all will be revealed. And of course I talk like Twilight Sparkle. I can't even imagine my fangirl reaction to actually meeting her in real life. I mean, she has so many qualities I admire, I can't even tell you. Come on, I think I see Big Macintosh. He's *huge!* He can drag a house yet be somehow unable to carry a cake without strain. Race you!"

"You're on!"

They galloped down to the farm, with Sparkle more slowly following behind.

"Hey, Big Macintosh," said Susan, "Need to talk to your sister. She around someplace?"

"E-yup."

"Super. Should I just follow the sound of Apple Bucking?"

"E-yup."

"Thanks, you've been a super help."

"E-yup."

Susan swiveled her ears (*when did I learn to do that?*) and homed in the sound of apples being kicked off trees. Soon enough, Applejack came into view.

Now then, the Fluttershy meeting went okay, how would I convince Applejack this is important enough to take her away from the farm? Let me think...

"Howdy, Pinky, stranger," she said. "This a friend of yours Pinky? Don't think I've seen

her around town before.”

“This is Sparkling Magic,” introduced Pinky. “Her daughter is around here someplace. We sort of raced here, she’ll be along.”

“Nice to make your acquaintance, but you know how busy I am this time of year, Pinky. I don’t have time to socialize.”

“How do you do, Applejack. Actually, this isn’t a social call, strictly speaking,” said Susan. “This is Element business.”

“Element- now how in the sam hill do you know about the Elements of Harmony? Pinky-”

“Pinky didn’t tell me. I have my sources.” Susan put up a hoof, and then had to compensate quickly or fall over. *That’s harder than I thought.* Even Pinky was looking a little worried at this point. “Look, I know how proud you are of what you do, and rightly so. You work hard for the ponies in this town and I would personally tar and feather any that said different. I know also you don’t like to accept help, and especially not from strangers like me. But I’ve always wanted to try my hooves at apple bucking, so if I can help you get your work done faster, I’m offering. I mean there’s pride and there’s just plain foolishness, isn’t that right? Many hooves make light work, if I’m not mistaken? We get your bucking done and you can hear what I have to say with the others. Does that sound like a deal to you?”

“Forgive me saying so, but not being an Earth Pony you don’t look strong enough to apple buck. And it’s not the same, just using magic, no offense.”

“None taken.” *I would have to cast Telekinesis on each apple individually anyway, which is not happening. Twilight is shown in the show stripping trees in seconds but my magic doesn’t work that way. I wish it did!* “I’m pretty confident of my STrength. Why not give me a shot and let me show you what I can do?” *In fact, I better make sure to hold back, so I don’t accidentally buck the trees over!*

“I suppose if you’re chomping at the bit that bad, I won’t stop you. See that line of trees already done?”

Wait, would they really use a phrase like that? The bit is part of a bridle, a human invention to let us control horses better. Maybe it has a different meaning here?

Susan looked over and saw what Applejack was talking about. “I see it.”

“We need to get to there before I can go with you. Elements or not.”

“Then what are we standing around gossiping for? Let’s get to work!”

“Sure is gung-ho,” muttered Applejack, turning back to work.

“Pinky, can you get Rarity and Dashie, I mean Rainbow Dash, for me? I meant what I said about helping out here, it’s the only way I’d get her to come.”

“Yeah, she can be pretty stubborn, sometimes. You got it.”

“Thanks. See you soon!”

“Okay!”

Pinky turned to go as Sparkle walked up. “Are we leaving already?”

“Nope, I’m going to help get the work done here so Applejack feels it’s okay to leave.”

“And this isn’t about showing off, right?”

“Nope.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

With her increased STrength from *Giant’s Soul*, and incredible stamina (she hadn’t actually spent any energy playing with Pinky) they cleared trees of apples and Applejack looked impressed as she finished hours early. It had taken her some time to get the twist right, jumping at the tree, twisting in midair without falling over, then striking the tree with her back hooves. Of course that just made the tree shake at first, and Susan carefully watched Applejack and what she was doing when she hit the tree.

There must be a trick to it...

And a bit of *Magic Sense* later and she had it. Applejack, unconsciously or not, was using Earth Pony power in tandem with the strike to get the apples to fall. As Susan’s *Adaptive Skill* was for just such an occasion, and she had a ten in it, she worked out making a check in that while striking which worked wonderfully.

At the end, Applejack looked at the cleared trees and back to Susan. "I have to say, you did a farm ponies work today, Sparkling Magic. You've impressed me, I'm ashamed to admit. I figured you would be pooped out after a few trees, but I thought I was watching myself! Guess I owe you an apology."

Maybe she really does just think it's her own physical effort doing the work. How interesting.

"Please, call me Spark."

As in Spark of Magic? Lame, said The Darkness.

"And thanks. You don't owe me an apology. Even you aren't immune to a little species prejudice." She added with grin.

"That's true- Spark. Well, as agreed I'll go with you and hear what this commotion is about."

"Thanks."

"No, thank you. For the work and for what you said earlier. You were right, I do work hard. And I don't like to ask for help. But I've learned in the past that's a little foolish, so I could use the reminder."

"Fair enough."

The two headed for the library, and Susan knew she would be making some RESolve checks in moments to not freak out when she saw...

"Twilight Sparkle!"

Twilight was everything Susan had hoped she would be. Rational, interested to hear her story now that her friends were gathered in the library, and most notably *not* an alicorn princess.

"May I ask what's been going on around here lately?" asked Susan. "I might have come at the wrong time..."

"That's an odd thing to say. You aren't messing about with time travel magic, are you?" Twilight demanded.

"Oh no!" Susan assured her. "I've always felt very wary about that sort of thing. And besides, I have a better spell than that anyway... When I remember to use it," she grumbled.

"Do tell."

"Don't worry, I'll tell you everything. For now, what's the last interesting thing that happened around here?"

"Well..." Rainbow Dash said, "we did just find out A.K. Yearling is *literally* Daring Do! That was pretty interesting. I helped."

"The... what?" Susan looked over at Sparkle, who shook her head.

"Doesn't sound familiar."

"Yeah, I know! Can you believe it? We had an adventure and everything! Maybe I'll even get to be in her next book!" Dash was zipping around the room.

"Somehow I think that's not what you had in mind to hear?" Twilight asked.

"Uh, well..." *I guess there are a few possible explanations;*

1) The characters here and the show I watched at home are separate things.

2) This is further along in the timeline than I've seen, and had I stayed at home and continued watching the show, I would have seen it. I mean she had just gotten her wings when I left. This could be the next 'season' so to speak. And how cool would that be?

3) I'm in some kind of dream state or this world is mutated to match my expectations but provide 'new' adventures for me to go on.

"It's just, if you're doing things I've not heard of, I would have expected you to be an alicorn princess. I knew it was a marketing ploy just to sell toys!"

"A what?" shouted Pinky. The others just gasped.

"Now why would I be... uh, could you girls just give us a moment please?" Twilight's magic dragged Susan and Sparkle into the next room, and Susan decided to not resist as she probably easily could have. "Sorry about that, what you said must have thrown me for a *loop*." Twilight seemed to look at her as though expecting some sort of response. Susan looked back at Sparkle but there was no help there.

"Okay?"

"You mean you aren't... I thought maybe it was a fused... Just a second."

Twilight did something, and Susan jerked away from her, her *dimension sense* going off for a moment.

Oh no, did The Darkness take over-

Don't be ridiculous! Why would I take over this pathetic creature when there are far more interesting bodies to be in? Check her again if you have to.

You better not be lying. Susan did, and no, she registered as totally native to the reality. *What in the world...*

"What was that?" she asked.

"You felt that? But if you aren't-"

"We aren't," said Sparkle with finality. "We're something else. Please just let Susan tell her story and you can all go from there." She gave Twilight a look that promised more answers later, but when Susan looked back at her in confusion she had put on an innocent expression again.

"Oooookay? I guess we'll just leave it at that. Sorry for the... sorry." She walked back to the others, who all looked at her funny. "So you were saying, Susan?"

“Yes, what was I saying?”

“Recent events?” asked Dash.

“Oh yes. So the adventures of Daring Do are actually real, and she sells them as story books?”

“Yup!”

“Okay. Might as well make some money on the side. So, where to begin? I'm a traveler, at the moment, like my father before me. In fact, I'm searching for my father because I believe he might need my help. He hasn't checked in with the person that sent him on his journey in quite some time, and I know for a fact he's about as powerful as one being can be. So I can't imagine something powerful enough to take him, and the people he was traveling with, down. But if he's stuck somewhere, I need to find him. When I started this journey, I brought a friend of mine, named Luna, along. No relation to yours. Sadly we got separated, and now I need to find her, as well. It's all been very problematic, as you can imagine.”

“That's terrible,” said Fluttershy. “And you're still as determined as ever?”

“I'm even more determined. I will find Luna, and I will help my father, it's as simple as that.” She stomped a hoof.

“So you want our help looking?” asked Twilight.

Susan shook her head. “No, that's not it. I asked my magic if Luna was here, and she isn't. That's just the backstory so you understand where I'm coming from. Your current problems are of greater interest to me at the moment. Because very soon now you are going to be attacked by something not native to this world.”

“So it is some kind of fused-” Twilight started to say, but Sparkle gave a small shake of her head. “I mean, what do you mean, not native to this world?”

“When I say ‘traveler’ I don't mean I get on a boat and sail to a new land. I step through a portal to another world. In fact, this isn't even what I really look like. I disguised myself with magic so I didn't cause a panic walking around town.” *Naked. Which I don't know if I'll get used to.*

“Show them! Show them what you look like!” said Pinky. “This is so amazing guys, you have to see this, I mean just wait until you see her actual form she's so different from us!”

“Take a breath, Pinky,” said Rarity. “Don't leave us in suspense.”

Susan nodded at Sparkle, who dropped *Shape-shift*. Everyone but Pinky gasped in surprise. Susan, having sat down on her haunches, now rearranged herself to be more comfortable with only two legs. “So weird to be back in my own shape again,” she said, looking at her hands. *I missed you guys!* “I guess we really can adapt to anything, huh?”

“Speak for yourself, it's not that different for me,” replied Sparkle, who everyone looked at just as cautiously.

“Fluttershy, come back in here, I'm not going to hurt you,” Susan said without looking.

Everyone turned to see Fluttershy cowering down the stairs to the basement.

“Is... is it safe?”

“Look at her, she's no danger,” said Rainbow.

“Judge me by my appearance, do you? My ally is magic, and a powerful ally it is, too.”

“Oh, I bet you know lots of different spells, coming from a different world!” said Twilight. “We should compare notes... sometime...”

The other ponies were looking at her, seemingly just as confused.

“You accept her story?” asked Spike.

“The point is, I can conceptually accept there are other worlds out there, accessible by magic. Her story isn't that farfetched.”

“She hasn't gotten to the part where she seems to know all of us better than we know ourselves.”

“Yeah, about that...” said Pinky. “Spill!”

Susan put her chin on her fists. “Okay. This is going to sound crazy, but where I come from, you're just a story.”

The ponies all looked at each other.

“What do you mean, just a story?” demanded Applejack.

“What I mean is, there are ponies there, but they are non-sentient creatures. They don't talk, or build cities, or apple buck. They don't fly, or do magic, or come in pretty colors.

We, the humans, do those things. Well, we pick apples, we don't just smack the trees and expect them to fall off. But the principle is the same."

"So it's a world full of creatures like you?" asked Rarity. "I would love to design some clothes for you, it would be a marvelous challenge."

"That's right. Oh, there are some non-human lifeforms like goblins and elves, but they are still humanoid. Most can even mate and produce offspring, so we aren't that far apart, actually. The point is, we love stories. As I'm sure you do, given I'm sitting in a library. Even you, Rainbow Dash, though Twilight had to basically shove that first Daring Do book down your throat when you were in the hospital. You egghead." She grinned over at Dash.

"How- you even know about that, huh?"

"E-yup. Anyway, on my world there are stories about the adventures you guys have had. Now I'm not saying those stories and your stories are exactly the same. Or even similar. I don't even know how it's possible someone on my world could have written about your world, but there you have it. So far, I've been pretty spot on knowing what you like, and don't like, haven't I?"

"She knows us pretty well," said Applejack. "And she knew just how to talk to me to make me see reason."

Susan shrugged. "I can, of course, think of some theories as to why this happened, but that's all they would be. Theories. Maybe Twilight would like to talk about them, but I'm sure the rest of you would be only politely interested."

Heads nodded in agreement.

"And that's fine. The point is, this is the sixth world I've visited, and the most strikingly different. All the others had humans, like me, running around. Inari said to expect just about anything, but this was beyond even my imagining. So now you know my history, at least, why I'm traveling."

"You said this was Element business. I take it there's worse to come?" asked Applejack.

Susan nodded sadly. "The original reason my father started traveling. His world was fading away. Year after year- color, joy, the very spark of life was being lost on his world. He went seeking answers. The people he met were seeking answers to their own problems, and apparently those problems haven't slowed down. They are caused by a being I call The Darkness, who wishes to absorb all the energy of many worlds so he has enough power to ascend to even higher dimensions. On each world I faced who or whatever it had taken over, because it can't send more than a fraction of itself to any one world so it works by possession, basically. Its real form would tear the dimension apart, and it doesn't want that because the energy it wants would be lost. The same will happen here, as all worlds are under attack by this being. It split itself up, at least that's what it told me."

"So you want our help?" asked Dash. "And you'll kick this Darkness thing off our world for good?"

"That's the plan. I know you don't know me, but I've know you all for years and years. I've shared your triumphs and cried when you cried. I saw Rainbow's betrayal and what she learned about herself at the hands of Discord. I watched you bring something special to the Gala you attended, and felt every blow during your fight with the changeling army. Even you, Rarity, watching you get closer to your sister when she thought you were Applejack. You're all, each and every one of you, special to me."

The ponies looked away, unable to respond right away to this revelation.

"My name is actually Susan Felton, and I would be honored if you would call me... friend."

"Group hug!" said Pinky, somehow extending her front legs to encompass everyone and pulling them together.

Oh no, this isn't a brony's dream at all. I need to get some clothes on or go back to being a pony.

"So what's our first step?" asked Applejack.

"The princess," answered Twilight. "Spike, send a letter. Tell her we need an audience

as soon as she can manage, first thing tomorrow if that's good, and summarize what Susan has told us."

"On it." Spike went to get a quill and paper.

"Meanwhile, you ponies head home, but meet back here tomorrow morning. It's getting late and we'll want an early start."

"But if you can think of anything strange that's been happening, let me know!" insisted Susan. "Pinky, you especially. If your Pinky Sense goes off, I want to know about it, okay?"

"Oke-Doki."

"But this is Ponyville," protested Dash. "Weird stuff happens here all the time."

"You'll know this when you see it. Oh, how far away is Cloudsdale from here, anyway? Dash, may I call you Dash? Can you head there and see if anything strange is going on? I came here and usually I end up in the area I need to be, but let's not count on that."

"You got it," she said, saluting.

"Thanks."

"And actually, Fluttershy, you could ask the animals around here, right? Sometimes they have a greater sense of things don't they?"

"I don't mind," she said shyly.

"What about me? What can I do?" asked Applejack excitedly.

Oh crap, that was about it, but now that I've started...

"Wait, you know where Zecora lives, don't you?"

"Sure, I could get there."

"See what she knows, or if her zebra magic can help us narrow it down. I don't know what she's capable of, but I know you all respect her as a magic user. We may need her help before this is over, and I'd rather she know now than try and explain things later."

"You got it."

"And do you have a task for me?" asked Rarity.

"If you're willing, can you go talk to the mayor? I don't want a panic started or anything, but perhaps some kind of evacuation plan should be created, just in case. You don't have to tell her everything, just that there are signs a creature of immense power may come visit in the near future. And have her make discrete inquiries to other ponies around town, if they notice anything we'll need to know as quickly as possible. Maybe even set up some kind of town watch or something? I don't know, you know the area better than I do."

"Done and done, darling."

"Thank you, all. With a little luck The Darkness won't know what hit him on this world!"

Oh, just keep telling yourself that.

Hey, it's keeping them from freaking out and they feel useful. Sparkle would be proud of me for involving them and not trying to do everything myself.

Exactly why I'm disgusted.

So the ponies rushed off to do Susan's bidding- I mean help Susan out, leaving her alone with Twilight.

"And I thought I was bossy," she said, looking Susan over.

"Oh. I'm sorry, I didn't even think. I just... and then..."

Twilight laughed. "Don't worry about it, I'm just teasing. You obviously have some experience with this, and you do know us, apparently. If something is coming, something you've handled in the past, you are the best choice to take the lead."

"But I don't want to step on any toes, er, hooves."

"Did they look like they minded? Believe me, weird stuff does happen around here and if we six can help you we will, it's as simple as that."

"I'm glad I can count on you. And that you didn't ask a million questions, just accepted me at my word."

"Yes, uh, well. You did, I mean you changed, that's not something you can just fake. I can tell you have some magical items on you but you're not under any magic at the moment."

"You can, huh? Oh, would you like a look at my book of spells? Maybe you can get some ideas, even if you can't exactly use them as presented."

"As much as that interests me, not right now. I want to check the letter over before

Spike sends it and see if there are any prophecies relating to events in the near future we should watch for. You head up to bed and I'll join you later. Do you know where it is? It should be big enough for the two of us. You look pretty long and narrow, no offence, not very pony like I mean."

The two of- focus Susan!

"That's fine. I could stay at an inn or something though... or no I couldn't because I can't stay a pony while asleep. And if somepony should come in..."

"Please, stay here, it's fine."

"All right, if you insist. Thanks again. Come along, Sparkle."

"Right." *Here it comes.*

So Susan went up to Twilight's room and looked around, grinning at all the books and such up there she was so used to seeing in two dimensions. She hit the button to talk to Silverstreak.

"Yes?" said the agent.

"Can you please tell me where I am?" she asked.

"You mean what dimension?"

"No, I mean where in this dimension. Because I'm seeing things that can't be real here."

"You're worried it's some kind of trick?"

"Something like that."

"Just a second. Oh, you're in a non-humanoid dimension. Pretty rare, I admit, but not unheard of."

"But it's impossible for me to be here! Non-humanoid I can accept, that's fine. It's this dimension specifically that's got me questioning my sanity."

"Why is- oh. You've got stories about them, haven't you?"

"Yes, now we're making progress. What's the deal?"

The agent seemed a bit embarrassed. "I would rather someone close to you told you. It's something most *wanderers* run into, actually surprising it's taken you this long. Not that it's bad that it has!" the agent hastily went on.

"I can tell you," Sparkle said, resigned.

"Oh, wait, Sparkle said she can tell me. Thanks, Susan signing off."

"Have a good night."

"So spill it!" she demanded, flopping down on the bed. "What's up with you, and what aren't you telling me about this place?"

How much do I actually tell her? Not about the loops, that's for sure. But maybe just filling in the gaps in her knowledge of being a Paragon would be okay. She shouldn't react too badly to that, right?

"To start with, I need to warn you that if I tell you, you'll never be able to look at things in the same way again."

"Things?"

"People. Events. Places. Everything changes with what I can tell you, right now. I've hinted at it in the past, but it's never really come up, so..."

"You know I have *Curious*, right?"

"Yes. Very well. The main point is that you, me, those ponies out there, every person you've met in your travels, every person you will meet-

we're all stories."

"What do you mean, stories?"

"You're just going to have to hear me out for a little while. Hopefully I can make it clear to you. Let's start with what you already know to be true. You're a *Paragon*, right?"

"More like a half *Paragon*, but sure."

"Exactly! A full *Paragon* wouldn't even be asking this. But you have a character sheet, which is about *knowing things*. Basically, you know things about yourself that not many others do. Everything about you is a specific number, with no room for uncertainty. We know what skills we have, and how good we are in them. We know our stats, and what each of those stats means. I mean the only others we've run into even close were Aerith and friends, right?"

"True."

"Most others can't quantify their energy like we can. Or raise skills like we can. Or heck, cards! What is that all about when it comes down to it? Where do they even come from, and how does just willing them to work change reality?"

"Never really thought about it."

"Exactly, they were just there, a part of you. The point is, there's knowledge a *Paragon* has that you don't, and I guess as you've noticed and it's come up, now is the time to tell you."

"That we're all stories?"

"Correct. Look, how do you know you've had the adventures you had? You remember them, right?"

"Yeah."

"What's another way of saying that? You play back that story in your mind."

"Which, if you turn it around, is the same for me, is what you're saying. They only know I existed because they play back our shared story in their minds."

"Yes! Now, how does this relate to these ponies out there? They're stories too. Each pony is the main character of their own story, just like you're the main character in yours."

"I think you once said something similar, like Tom was the hero of his story."

"And now you understand exactly what I meant. He died, his story ended but yours continued. His story isn't *gone*, because it's a part of you. Just like when you die, your story won't be gone because others will remember you. And so on and so on. But who does this remembering and how do they know these stories if they haven't lived them? That's thanks to people in the universe called *storytellers*. There's theories about how they get their abilities, but that doesn't matter."

"What theories?"

"Oh, well, one is dreams. You know when you dream you seem to live a life perfectly consistent with itself, but when you wake up you think 'what a strange situation that was that I was in.'"

"Sure."

"What if that's not actually a dream, but you remembering something a you in another reality experienced? You've seen different worlds now, you know they can have their own rules and quirks. What if, asleep, the barriers that keep all those different 'you' separate drop a little and give you a peek at other lives 'you' are currently living? What if, across all worlds, there is just one 'you' that's spread out just like The Darkness has done to try and take major branches all at once?"

"There can be only one?"

"Exactly. So someone remembers those events, writes them down, and starts writing a book. And you have events from one reality on paper in another. Another theory is a backup, of sorts. That the lives of those that have adventures are preserved so that others can follow their example. That *storytellers* are tapping into the knowledge of the multiverse directly, though unconsciously, and are compelled to create works showing the lives of others. Another theory is there are more people like your new friend Jenny that can just go between worlds. I

mean you can't exactly take a poll, now can you? 'Excuse me, can you travel between realities?' No one is going to say yes to that question, for obvious reasons. They either bring stories back with them and take credit for writing them or write about what they've seen in the guise of fiction."

"So we're all just characters in a story, huh? And my father knew this?"

"He did, as all *Paragon* people do. He knew his would be a most epic tale, and he wished the same for you as well, I'm sure. I mean would you trade your story for anything?"

"I suppose not. Oh, that's what Jenny meant. When we first met... it makes so much more sense now. I guess. So wait, is some *storyteller* telling our story then? Is someone, like, reading it and experiencing my story now? Do they know me without me even having met them?"

Sparkle nodded. "Probably. They know your adventures, because they remember them the same as you do. Sure, they weren't there at your side, but they remember your actions same as they remember the actions of people that are at their side. Once it's in the past, what's the difference? They're both just *memories*."

"Wow. I guess you weren't kidding."

"Now you know. And also why terrible things happen to people all the time. Even those that don't get XP or usually had adventures, or whatever."

"Why?"

"Because it makes for a better story. Without drama or conflict or trials, a story would be totally boring. And the stronger the story, the more people remember it. And the more people remember it..."

"The longer it stays around. That reality or people or whatever is remembered. Wow. That's the *narrative imperative* you talked about before, isn't it?"

"Yes. Certain things, like you losing Luna, that happen because the story demands it and for no other reason."

"Without her being pulled away from me, none of this would have ever happened. And I would have been totally unprepared for rescuing my father."

"Okay, maybe that's a bad example as it did seem to happen for a reason. But you get the idea."

"I do. I'll have to think about this, but yeah, you were right. It changes things. How I see people, maybe even how I act if I think some other person is 'looking over my shoulder' so to speak."

"Just keep it in mind. When someone reads your story, what do you want them to be reading? About how you triumphed over the Darkness at great personal risk, or how you followed it into madness? I know you're worried about being powerful, and having to kill. Ending a person's story is no light task, but some stories just can't continue."

"I see that. Thanks for telling me what's going on."

"Of course." Sparkle felt a bit guilty, as she hadn't really told her what was going on, only that which a full *Paragon* would know. That didn't make it false, but more was going on than she realized. *That you don't need to know about to do what you were meant to. Sorry, Susan. But at least you're a full Paragon now, just like your father. You know that, in the end, all you'll be is a memory in someone else's mind. I just hope you make it a good one.*

With that, Susan said goodnight and slipped into Twilight's bed, thinking about all she had been told. It wasn't long before she was asleep and Sparkle jumped from the bed, padding her way downstairs.

Twilight was waiting at the table.

"I figured you would come down to talk," she said, floating a saucer of tea over to her. "It seems you know more about things than she does. May I ask why she wasn't told?"

"Of course," she answered. "But first, how many others this loop?"

"Just me. It was standard until this point, so I figured it would continue to be. Guess I was just waiting for you two to arrive, huh?"

"You're the anchor then?"

"That's right."

"Okay. It's been awhile since I heard about them, let me make sure I have them straight in my head, okay? Plus maybe there's been new information I don't know about."

"Go ahead."

"First, the computer that runs all realities, *Yggdrasil, the World Tree*, crashed. Or at least something bad happened to it. So to save all of reality everywhere it was put into a sort of stasis mode, where time repeated itself endlessly. But that wasn't enough. To keep realities from degrading further an *anchor* was chosen, one that would keep their memories from loop to loop."

"Doing good so far."

"Others would sometimes remember, but not reliably."

"My friends are *awake* most of the time. Not this time, of course."

"Figures. Now, how does the Darkness figure into all this? I'm not sure if it was part of the original problem or just stepped in during the chaos, but it is real and it is a danger. When Susan speaks about realities as being leaves and branches and such she thinks she's speaking in metaphors. We know she's talking about how things literally are. At least in the conceptual way the *admins*, those trying to fix the problem, see the *Tree*. Branches have been lost to this creature, and their energies stolen. So certain people inside were tasked with taking care of the problem while the *admins* worked on things from the outside."

"And that's you?"

"Along with Susan and others, yes. Some don't even know the reason they travel, just that they do, usually for their own selfish reasons. But The Darkness is pushed back where we can, and the loops continue. Expect for us. We exist outside of them, so that's why Susan doesn't know about them. Think of us as antibodies, in a way, if that's easier."

"But you could tell her, certainly? How did you learn about them but she didn't?"

Sparkle shook her head. "Her father told me, and told me to tell her only if I thought she could handle it. You know about Sakura, right?"

"Everyone is told about Sakura. You don't think... her?"

"I'm not sure. Being told the people she meets and the things she does will just be undone in a couple of years? What would that do to any of us? Take the world a couple of words ago- we left a girl named Nita with a spell to cure her mother's cancer. Because her magic could take them to the moon, but not cure a single disease. Whatever. The point is, how would Susan react if she knew she could only save Nita's mother that one time? That every other time through that loop, her mom dies? That Cloud and Aerith and the others will reset and not even know her to see her again? That in fact, Aerith usually dies at the hands of Sephiroth? A friend, killed over and over thousands of times, maybe not even aware it's happening. That what she does is important, vitally important for the survival of the *Tree* but that all the friends she makes, all the bonds she creates with others are little more than smoke."

"I know what you mean. You don't want to take the chance she just says 'forget it then' and walks away?"

"Or worse, stops caring and just becomes a monster, like Sakura. That she kills without remorse because they'll just 'come back' in the end. I think she could go either way, honestly. She walks a fine line, and she tries desperately to learn only enough magic, and non-lethal magic at that, to get the job done. I mean she could just *Elemental Devastation* everything and be done with it. But she goes out of her way to learn spells that aren't as effective and can be thrown off, just so she doesn't have to become a killer. She might become a more effective fighter, but at the cost of her very soul. And if she goes further than that? Actually joins with the Darkness to destroy worlds? End the loops? It's not unheard of."

"I suppose not. She really struggles with that, huh? My respect for her has increased."

"She would fangirl out if she ever knew."

Twilight chuckled. "Guess she's read our stories, huh?"

"TV show, actually. She really, really, admires you."

"I could tell. And I've seen the show in my *Fused Loops* on occasion."

"Wait, those are realities fused together?"

"Sort of a gift of the admins. To keep us from going totally nuts we get to learn about

other realities by squishing two or more together. Keeps us on our hooves. Toes. Whatever we happen to have where we find ourselves. Some are... not very nice, like the Bureau loops..." She shuddered. "But at least we get to experience some different lives on occasion, and not just our own for all eternity."

"How nice of them. So now you know. Please just treat her like an *unawake* person that happens to know of other realities."

"I gotcha. No sweat. I should tell you though, I know what's coming."

"What?"

"A being called Tirek. He's going to start draining ponies of their magic, and ultimately destroy my library. I hate it when he does that!"

"That sounds perfect for The Darkness. If that isn't its form this time around, well, that would be very surprising to me. Just be careful, he's not going to be any kind of pushover you may be used to in the past."

"I can understand why. Okay, the hardest part will be pretending I don't know what's coming and acting surprised when it happens. But I've done it before, so it should be fine."

"I appreciate it. I don't know how we're going to fight a being that can drain the magic out of someone, The Darkness can already shut down her magic if given a chance. In the past we've had to attack together because even it can only shut down one of us at a time. I guess we'll just have to see how it plays out."

"That's all you can do. I'd love to hear about your adventures sometime, hopefully we'll get a peaceful moment to talk."

"Sure, sounds good."

"Then I'm going to bed, I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night."

Susan found herself standing atop a hill, overlooking the town at night which peacefully slumbered. *How did I get here?*

"I brought you here," said a soft voice beside her, and Susan turned to behold a dark pony with a floating mane of what looked like stars. Her hooves were adorned with sparkling shoes, and a sash with a crescent moon, matching the one that was her cutie mark, was tied around her neck. She stood tall and proud, her horn held high and wings at her sides.

"Princess Luna!" Susan exclaimed, going to one knee. Then it hit her, she had been in a place like this before. "I'm dreaming!"

"Yes, young one, you are. But this is a true dream, and I am truly with you."

"You can do that?!" *Something I would have learned later in the series, or something they showed and I forgot, or something she can do they didn't think of?*

"Indeed, and my reasons for visiting you tonight are twofold. Please, rise. You are not one of my subjects."

"True, but I am technically a knight and you are a princess. And I do observe *some* customs properly." She chuckled, remembering those she didn't. (Like bowing to the pope.)

"And I do appreciate it, believe me." Susan got up. "First, I wished to get to know this traveler from beyond our world. I must say," she looked Susan's naked body up and down, "you have a very different appearance than our own, don't you?"

"I have found hands to be rather useful at times," she said with a grin. "Though your kind has done wonders even without them." She swept a hand out over all the houses below her.

"Working together, my little ponies have indeed made this land a good one to live in. My second reason for coming here was to apologize. My sister Celestia will meet with you tomorrow, but I will not be in attendance. She believed it best, and I agreed, that I immediately leave to scour the land looking for whatever threat has brought you here. With my ability to communicate in dreams, such as I am doing now, it will be easy for me to keep in touch and report back."

"That's an excellent idea! And no apology is necessary, your highness. In fact I'm pleased my warning is being taken as seriously as it is. There have been times when those I've tried to warn have simply brushed me aside." *Like that time with the area senior when I was with Nita.*

“Sadly, over the years many ancient and evil creatures have been imprisoned using various methods, so they must all be checked to make sure none have escaped. That task falls to me. I consider it a slight penance, as I was once one of those imprisoned beings.”

“I suppose Discord would be another?” *If he exists here, which this will tell me.*

Luna nodded. “Yes, just like Discord. For this Darkness, as you call it, to have taken over something and made it more powerful? Imagine what Discord could do with even more knowledge and power, and less restraint or compassion. Though I suppose the same can be said of me. As I said, I know how it feels to lose oneself to power...”

“I know. It’s a line I walk myself.”

“Ah yes, the letter did mention that you knew us well. Tell me, these stories on your world... am I well received in them?”

“Oh yes! Everyone loves you, just as much as Celestia!”

“I’m glad to hear that. And that my struggle is not lost to you. Friendship, I have heard, can go a long way towards easing those burdens. And a shared experience, like this one, can be the basis for a friendship.”

Is she saying she wants to be my friend?

“That is why I search tirelessly for my Luna.”

“I wonder... could this Luna you seek be my counterpart for your world? Do such things happen?”

“I’m not really sure how that all works,” Susan admitted. “I’ve come across people with the same or similar name, or name and physical attributes...” *Like Tifa and Tiffania.* “But never what I would call a complete analog. But in all honesty I’ve seen such a small fraction of worlds, and even then only enough of them to complete my mission before moving on. Scratch the surface of every world and who knows what similarities might be revealed?”

“It was just a thought. You can...” She looked down. “You can keep them safe, can’t you? My subjects? They’ve gone through so much over the years, especially Twilight and her friends.”

“I can only promise to try my best. If I might brag a little, my best is pretty good. I’ve been successful so far, but I won’t deny it’s partly thanks to the wonderful people I meet along the way. And I know Twilight and her friends will do everything in their power to help. In return I’ll promise to do everything in my power to help them. And all those of Equestria.”

“Then I can breathe easier,” Luna said, turning and looking her in the eye. “Thank you, Susan.”

“Of course, it’s my pleasure.”

“Then I shall take my leave. I will check in with you every few nights, and with my sister every night so she knows my present location. If I am somehow taken down you can at least know the area it happened and send a search party.”

“If you do find something, just get away,” Susan cautioned. “Better to return with the information than be slain in a meaningless combat. I know you are powerful, that’s not the issue. The Darkness will surprise you.” *Like with a stupid metal weapon that can hurt you, and a huge robot body to fight you with.* “Your ponies need you, and this is something we must do together. Promise me you won’t take any risks, please?”

“I promise. When the Darkness is revealed, we shall stand together on the field of battle. Agreed?” She held out a hoof, and Susan bro-hoofed her.

“Agreed.”

“Then I wish you pleasant dreams, young traveler.”

The dream dissolved, and Susan snuggled Twilight closer she thought *You know what? I think this world might just work out fine.*

Up bright, but not so early the next day, Susan heard from Twilight that the other ponies stopped in earlier to say that, for the moment, everything seemed normal around Ponyville.

"Good, we may have some time then," said Susan, yawning. "By the way, we have an appointment with Princess Celestia this morning, right?"

"How did you know that?" asked Twilight. "Spike just brought me the letter from her a little while ago."

"Let me answer that question with another question. Did you know Luna- sorry, Princess Luna, can enter pony's dreams?"

"Really?"

"Oh, you didn't know that. I see. Guess I'll have to ask Princess Celestia about that, and make sure something odd isn't going on. Anyway, that's how I knew. Princess Luna came to see me last night, told me she wouldn't be there to meet me because she was checking up on various characters imprisoned over the years to make sure they were still secure. With her ability to dream chat, she could let us know how she was doing every night."

"What a great idea!" exclaimed Twilight. "Gee, how many foes have they defeated and then just locked up, anyway? Seems like some sort of trend."

"I mentioned Discord, and she was understandably worried. If a being like that was chosen to host The Darkness... it's too horrible to contemplate."

"Yes, he's unpredictable at the best of times. Still," she looked out the window. "No chocolate rain, and the sun is up, and we're all still alive, so it probably isn't him."

"Thank goodness for small favors. Where did such a powerful being come from, anyway?"

"I don't think anyone knows. Maybe he was created when the world was new, from the very chaos that later gave rise to magic. Spike, make a note; look into where Discord came from."

"You got it, Twilight," Spike shouted from the next room.

I suppose it's part of the narrative imperative. If the big bads had been defeated and killed in the past, they couldn't return as threats later. Wait, is that why Batman never just offs the Joker? So that their story can continue? Sparkle, you really have changed my world view now, haven't you?

"A chariot from the castle will be around to pick us up pretty soon. You want something to eat? You'll have to look what I have over, I have no idea if you can eat the same things I can... or would even want to."

"I'll make myself something, don't trouble yourself." Twilight watched with interest as Susan used *Create Foodstuff* to get her some breakfast, and when she was done Sparkle put *Shape-shift* back on them both so they took their pony forms.

"I've asked for the magic to stick around until we get back here," she cautioned. "Don't forget and invite someone back here. Might be a little bit awkward."

"Yeah."

"Oh, better give you the rundown on how to hold things in that form," remembered Twilight. "Here, let's see if you can pick up this book and turn the pages."

Susan finally got the hang of it, having to make *Adaptive Skill* checks for whatever she wanted to pick up. The difficulty check to have something 'stick' to her hoof seemed to be a similar progression as her *Telekinesis* magic, as a kind of touch based spell that didn't need to be actively cast. At least, not for real ponies. But without making the check, stuff just slid off her hoof. But when it stuck, it stuck.

"Just how strong are you?" Twilight asked as she was hefting a bookcase.

"All by myself? Not very," she replied, setting it down again. "But augmented by my magic?" She tapped the bracelet on her front leg. "Strong enough."

"I should say. Oh, I think they're here! Come on."

The three climbed aboard the chariot, pulled by two pegasus ponies in armor, and they took off towards the castle.

"Please try to show a little respect," Sparkle said to Susan as they landed outside the front of the castle. "I know you hate to and all—"

"What are you talking about? I was a perfect lady when Princess Luna came to speak to me, and I'll be a perfect lady now. I *am* a knight, you know. There are forms to be followed."

"Did turning you into a pony knock your brains around?"

"Come on, Midnight. You saw me bowing to Anrieta before. Because she earned my respect. The pope didn't. Princess Celestia? She totally has my respect."

"It needed to be said. But as long as you think that way, that's... probably the best I can hope for."

"This way, you two," Twilight said, hopping out.

Susan was entranced as she walked through the castle. Guards in armor patrolled the halls, everything shone and Susan could feel the positive energy around the place with her *Spirit Sense*. She smiled as the huge doors to the throne room were opened and the three crossed the threshold.

And then was violently thrown back in a shower of green light and sparks, to land on her back in a most undignified fashion. She was immediately ringed with spears that were levitated by unicorns, looking at her most sternly.

"Whazat?" she managed, a ringing in her ears blocking out exactly what she was hearing. Being connected to her *character sheet* she didn't actually have to take it out to check it, and mentally reviewed it for any damage.

None, I should be fine in a second. What the heck was that?

"I'm so sorry!" said Princess Celestia, running down the carpeted stairs towards her. "Guards, it's all right, you may go about your duties. I'm expecting her." They bowed and the spears were retracted. Twilight helped her up.

"I... uh..." Susan managed, vision still a bit blurred. *That's never happened before.*

"Come out to the courtyard, a little fresh air and sunlight will do you good. I'm so embarrassed!" gushed Celestia. "This way, please."

"You all right?" Sparkle asked quietly.

Susan didn't catch it because of her *Poor Sense: Hearing* weakness.

"You all right?" Sparkle asked a little less quietly.

"I will be," she replied. "It's... wait." She had a vision of Sparkle also going flying, but not as far and she managed to land on her feet. "Are you okay?"

"Me? Didn't seem as bad for me, whatever that was."

"Oh. Good."

Now seated in the courtyard, Celestia again apologized. "I didn't even think about it," she admitted. "I was rather nervous to meet you, and it just slipped my mind."

"You were nervous to meet me?"

You are an extremely powerful traveler from another world, reminded The Darkness. Why shouldn't she be a bit afraid? You could totally take her!

"I just wasn't sure what to expect."

"But you can raise the sun! You're a thousand years old! I... just can't see you being nervous about anything, begging your pardon, your highness."

"None of that now," she admonished. "Please, call me Celestia. You are all right, aren't you?"

"I think so. No more double vision and my hearing is... well, back to normal anyway. What was that?"

"After my kingdom had been invaded by the changelings, I thought it wise to put up

some warding magic around the throne room. Nothing not in its natural shape would be allowed inside, and we wouldn't be caught by surprise by ponies who were not themselves. But it was never intended to do what it did, it should have been more of a restraining effect, not throwing you halfway across the castle. And why didn't you go flying as far, do you think?" she asked, looking at Sparkle.

"Ah. Well, I can probably solve that mystery," answered Susan. "I'm carrying a lot more active and inactive magic on my person. On my pony? How do you... never mind. When the spell went off to detect our *Shape-shift* magic, it probably also reacted to all the magic I have going all the time." She pointed out her *materia* bracelet and LUCk raising amulet. "That either caused some kind of feedback effect or they just didn't like each other and boom, I went flying."

"And you're not hurt at all? Please don't spare my feelings if you are, I don't know your customs or anything but please don't feel you need to hold back. I really feel terrible about all this."

"Not to worry, it's nearly impossible to damage me." *Short of stupidly large robots swinging around stupidly large weapons that can pierce Invulnerability of course.*

"I am relieved. This really isn't how I envisioned us meeting. I'm sorry-"

"Twilight, if you would? Perhaps we could start over?" Susan said, getting down on one knee and bowing her head. Sparkle followed.

"What? Oh, of course! Princess Celestia, may I present my new friends Sparkling Magic and Midnight Magic. Otherwise known as the human Susan and cat Sparkle."

"You honor me with this audience, Princess," Susan said regally.

"Thank you for coming," replied Celestia evenly. "I have heard from my student Twilight that a great evil may soon threaten our land. All of Equestria owes you a debt of gratitude for coming to warn us as you have."

"I can only hope my warning comes in time."

"Oh, get up already." Celestia laughed. "I think we're way past that now. Come, sit and tell me all about yourself, and other worlds."

I suppose after a thousand years, she's eager for stories beyond her realm. It can't hurt.

So Susan told her about the adventures she had gone through, and about the forms The Darkness had taken in the past. Celestia listened gravely, nodding and drawing her out with excellent questions about key points.

I also suppose that after a thousand years, she's pretty much got tens in everything because she just needs time to study something rather than XP. So of course she's going to have high ratings in Information Gathering and... what's a nicer way of saying Interrogation?

Putting the screws to someone?

I wasn't asking you!

Sorry. It's hard to tell sometimes, you only have one inside voice you know. I don't get a separate line in here. 'Call for Susan on line two. Call for Susan on line two. Please pick up any white curtesy phone.'

Cute.

Though if you could help me move the pool table about six inches to the right, I bet I could get a jukebox right here. That would be sweet. I wouldn't mind playing my own music, and not just songs that get stuck in your head all the time.

How did you get a... Oh wait, I remember, you got that on the world with all the warlocks.

I only just told you about it then.

Whatever. And you are NOT putting a jukebox in my head. Your voice all the time is annoying enough.

Spoilsport.

"So it seems it can go either way," Celestia decided. "As quietly, if you will, as a battle inside someone's very soul, or as noisy as needing to create constructs of stone towering as high as this castle. And you say the host *must* be killed?"

“That’s what I’ve been told, by a reliable source. I know that’s not how you do things around here, and I applaud that I really do. I try to do the same. But this ends only one way.”

“Let us hope, then, that The Darkness chooses someone irredeemable to be the host so we do not lose any productive citizens.”

“Let us hope.”

“Well. For the moment it seems there is not much more to be said. Until The Darkness makes some sort of move or some *event* happens that it will try to use to its advantage, we can only stay vigilant.”

“With Twilight’s help, I’ll at least check out the town, make sure all the ponies there belong to this world.”

“Should probably start in the castle,” remarked Sparkle. “Where better to strike from than here, in the very seat of power?”

“I would sleep easier knowing my loyal troops were, in fact, loyal. My wards wouldn’t keep out someone simply possessed by evil.”

“An excellent idea. With your permission, I’ll get started right away.”

“Very well. Oh, and Luna sends her regards, but the plan was for her to have spoken to you already?”

“She did, last night. We should be in pretty close contact after this, and I’m looking forward to meeting her after her inspection is complete.”

“I’m sure she feels the same. Twilight, would you show Sparkling Magic around the castle? The full tour, mind.”

“Yes, princess. Come on.”

So the pair scoured the castle, with Susan’s ten and Sparkle’s five in *Dimension Sense*. The place was clean, and after a hearty lunch prepared by castle staff, the pair widened their search down the mountain to Ponyville. Everypony greeted the new arrival with a smile and a kind word, and Susan remarked she had never felt such a positive energy emanating from a place.

This of course led to a discussion about the difference between *magic*, *spirit*, and *dimensional* senses, which Twilight seemed quite interested in.

But is she really interested, or just faking it because she already knows all about each? Sparkle wondered.

They came to a field where Rainbow Dash was helping coach fillies through some kind of routine, and Susan figured she should check out even the smallest pony. *After all, The Darkness tricked me once by not being where it should have been. Inside Balor, and instead chose Biddy. Can I put past it hiding in a baby? It would make me that much more hesitant to kill it.*

Good point, have to remember that one. Note to self: On worlds Susan goes to, always pick the person she least expects. Possibly babies.

“Wait a second, I know you three!” Susan exclaimed. “You’re the cutie mark crusaders! On that quest to find out who you are!”

“Hear that, we’re famous!” said Sweetie Bell.

“I don’t see how,” grumped Scootaloo, “I can’t even fly.”

“Ignore her,” said Apple Bloom. “She’s been grumpy all day about that. It’s kinda getting on my nerves, to be honest.”

“Can’t fly, eh? Maybe I can take a look, offer some pointers?”

“You’d do that?” asked Scootaloo, hope in her eyes. But her face fell again. “But wait, you’re not a pegasus.”

“What does that have to do with anything? I’ve always- I mean... I’ve often run into ponies in my travels that think they can’t do a thing, when in reality the reason they can’t do it isn’t what they expected.” *Okay, I’ve run into one person like that, but in the show they make a big deal out of the fact she can’t fly. Maybe I can figure it out and... Wait a second. When I go back are there going to be stories about a mysterious pony that shows up and does a bunch of stuff around town? Will I see myself, in this form, wandering around episodes? Just*

how connected is this reality to the stories seen in mine? My goodness this is confusion. Confusing. I am confused.

"Right now I'll take all the help I can get."

"That's settled then. Come with me. Oh, you don't mind if I take a minute, do you, Twilight?"

"No, no," she waved a hoof. "I'd be interested to see what your solution to this problem is. If there is one, I mean."

"There's always a solution. The question is how badly you want it. Anyway, over there looks good."

Susan and Scootaloo walked over to where several other young pegasus ponies were practicing, and Susan called out to them.

"Excuse me! Could you help me a second?"

"What do you need?" the one asked.

"Could you two fly for me? Just hover off the ground if you can."

The two looked at each other. "That's easy enough."

"For some," grumbled Scootaloo.

They did, and Susan reached out with *Magic Sense*, getting a fourteen. Given these ponies had no "planet rating" or "grade" we'll say that's enough for Susan to feel something going on with them magically. They landed again and the effect stopped. "Got it. Thank you very much."

"Sure?" the two said, confused.

Now Susan walked over to a space with nopony and told Scootaloo to do the same. "Okay, here goes." She barely got off the ground.

Susan got a fifteen that time, enough to realize whatever those two were doing to generate lift, this pony wasn't doing that. In fact, Susan would go so far as to say her magic had been burned out of her somehow. It wasn't just *magical drag*, but rather *her magic just didn't work*.

"Yeah, kind of figured that."

"What?" She stopped straining and fell to the ground again.

"Look, Scootaloo, it's not your wings that keep you aloft, it's pegasus magic. Just like Applejack's apple bucking is her utilizing Earth Pony magic, you don't fly just by flapping your wings. Honestly it would be impossible for any pegasus to get off the ground that way. You're just too heavy. Same as standing on clouds. I mean how would that work?"

"I... I know." Scootaloo looked depressed.

"You know?"

"I've been telling her that for some time now," said Twilight, walking over. "We've done various exorcises to try and kindle her magic, but nothing has worked."

"Then I guess it's a good thing I came along when I did!" Susan said, smiling. "The solution to your problem is rather simple."

"Really?" She didn't seem convinced.

"For me, anyway. Twilight, we'll have to pause our mission for a couple of hours. And can I use that lab you've got down in your basement?"

"Oh, of course."

"Great. Who's in charge here? We'll need to tell them you'll be back soon."

"Rainbow Dash."

"Really? Someone put her in charge of something? Wonders never cease."

"Hey, Rainbow Dash is an awesome pony!"

"She's a great flyer, yes. Loyal? Absolutely. Known for her attention span? Be honest..."

"Well..."

"I rest my case. Come on."

They told Rainbow Dash she would be back, and back *flying*, so the four walked into town.

"Oh, just a second." Susan got out her book and some money, then cast *Precious*

Conversion to turn it into something shops around here would accept. That done, she went into a jewelry store.

“What are we doing here?” asked Scootaloo.

“What I’m doing needs a focus. Something to hold the magic. Whenever you want to fly you’ll need to have it on. I recommend something that won’t occasion too much comment, but also that you won’t lose.”

“Earrings!”

“Better run that by your parents first. I don’t want to get you in trouble if they object for some reason.”

Scootaloo just looked a bit sad again. “Don’t have to worry about that.”

I guess in the show it’s not exactly clear who her parents are. Maybe... she doesn’t have any? Did they die or was she abandoned or something?

“Okay, on your own head be it. See what I did there? Head? Earrings?”

“Very funny. This isn’t some kinda joke, is it? Did Diamond Tiara put you up to this?”

“You did see who I was with, right? Do you think *Twilight Sparkle*, of all ponies, would allow me to trick you in any way?”

“Well... I guess not.”

“Then pick out your earrings.”

“Okay.”

With that she got a sense of how much things cost around here, and went into a potion shop (because that was a thing here) and bought a bunch of stuff the process could ‘consume.’

“Where did you put it all?” her new young friend asked.

“Otherspace. Don’t worry about it.”

“Weird, I didn’t see your horn light up. Whatever you say.”

As they reached the house, Susan realized the small flaw in her plan.

“Uh, wait out here,” she told Scootaloo. “I need to make sure there isn’t anything dangerous brewing down in the lab, and then we can get to work.”

“Okay.”

Susan went in with Sparkle and the magic disappeared, having fulfilled the request it had been asked for. “First time it’s really been that inconvenient,” she remarked, getting another casting until she left and came back again.

“First time we’ve needed something for this long.”

“I guess you’re right.”

With that done, she did actually go down to make sure the lab was safe, then brought Scootaloo down and did the standard cheating of *Energetic Accumulation* and *Augment Skill: Imbuing* to put a permanent *Flight* into Scootaloo’s new earrings in a fraction of the time it would normally take. With Sparkle having gobs of energy now she could get her rating very high indeed by stealing a bit of her energy, and as the magic was bound into the jewelry, Scootaloo touched them gingerly.

“Never seen anything like that before. I thought Twilight was using advanced magics but this? What was that?” She was looking over at Twilight, who looked a bit impressed herself.

“Oh, just my special kind of magic. Anyway, enough about that, this is about you, kid. Let’s go outside and get you flying!”

“You really mean it? I can fly now?”

“You can really fly now.”

The four went back outside and found an open enough space. Scootaloo started flapping her wings again.

“No, no, just will it to happen,” corrected Susan. “You can flap your wings for show, but this could make an Earth Pony fly. Wings have nothing to do with it. I’m not repairing your magic, I’m letting you have some of mine. Get it?”

“You mean like- Yipes!”

Scotaloo rose into the air and gave a whoop of delight, finding she could, at long last, soar like her fellow pegasi.

“That was a very nice thing you did for her,” said Twilight, watching her loop about.

“Eh, all in a days work. Now let’s get back to it, shall we?”

"You didn't have to come along," Twilight said to Susan as the group stood looking down at the castle. "Just because it was on our schedule from weeks ago to start the cleanup here, I'm sure there's more important things you would rather be doing."

"Are you kidding?" Susan replied. "See the castle of the two sisters? Poke around? Spend some time with everypony?" She looked to the side where all the other were standing and smiled at them. "I may not be here long, so wherever you girls go, I go. Besides, you're all one of the major powers in these parts because of your connection to the Elements of Harmony. I don't want something to attack you while I'm not around."

"Is that likely?" asked Applejack.

"Yeah, even this Darkness of yours wouldn't dare attack us when we were all together!" agreed Rainbow Dash.

"You have to understand how it thinks. Not that I'm saying I do, even a little, but I do know it likes to conserve energy. If it can take you down with one well timed energy blast instead of six, I think that's what it would go for."

"And there's less witnesses way out here!" said Pinky. "If I was going to kill you all, it's where I would do it!" She bounced across the bridge.

"Something wrong with that pony," muttered Applejack, starting across herself.

The others got across, and Twilight started handing out duties for everypony. "I don't have anything specific for you or Spike to do," she apologized.

"Aw, Twilight, I can help!" he complained.

"Spike, you're with me," Susan said. "After all, those of us with fingers should stick together. I'm sure there's things that are easier for us to do, so we'll just poke around and see what those things are."

"Oh, uh, sure. You don't mind? I mean I'm kinda small." It was true, he barely made it past Susan's knee. She was currently human again, once away from civilization she had Sparkle drop the spell, figuring she would nap anyway.

"I don't judge you by your size. Besides, if we need to I can make you grow with magic."

"Really? Oh."

"By the way," asked Sparkle. "Are you planning on wearing clothes ever again?"

"Not around here. Why should I? Temperature is perfect thanks to the efforts of Rainbow Dash clearing the sky during the day."

"You're welcome!" she shouted from above.

"And clothes protect people from the bumps and scrapes of daily life. I can't *be* bumped or scraped. Anything that can even scratch me now is likely to be trying to kill me, and clothes would be the least of my worries. And there's always the remote chance somepony will wander by and I'll need to be *Shape-shifted* again on short notice. This saves me a bit of worry."

"All right, just asking. Gone native, I guess."

"Darn tooting. What's the big deal, anyway? We're all girls here- I mean apart from Spike obviously- but more to the point *completely different species*. It would be like dressing you up in dresses back home. Or putting clothes on dogs before taking them for walks. I mean that would be *weird*."

"I... don't know. I mean you don't need pockets, and what you said is true. I guess I'm just used to seeing everyone in clothes. Ignore me."

"Done! Anyway, show me around, Spike, and we'll see where our segmented joints can be most useful."

"You got it!" he said, slipping his backpack off. "Our tour begins over this way."

The three of them took the tour, with Susan making periodic *Spirit* and *Magic Sense* checks.

"There's something powerfully magic and spiritually active around here," she remarked after feeling it several times. "Along with some other minor magics scattered about."

"Oh, the big thing must be the tree in the basement. We can stop there later, we're just looking for stuff to do and there's not much to do down there. The smaller ones... I have no idea. We'll have to find them sometime."

"Sure, before we leave I'd love to see the tree."

So the two got to work. Susan kept doing *Magic Sense* checks to make sure some innocent looking item wasn't magical and should be treated differently, and suddenly realized one faint magical emanation she was feeling kept moving around.

"Something funny here," she said, making another check. She walked past Spike's backpack, which he had been moving to get snacks and cleaning supplies out of. Suddenly, the magic aura was back the other way, and Susan looked down at the pack. "Spike, are you carrying something magical in there?"

"Huh? Magical? No, not that I know of."

Twilight perked up and came over. "What's this about magic?"

"There's something magical in that bag, I can feel it." She looked this way and that at it.

"Well, dump it out Spike, let's see what it is. Maybe some magical creature crawled into it?"

"I'm telling you, there's nothing magic in there!" But he dumped it out, and held up each object for Susan to sense.

"That's it," she announced, when he held up the comic.

"That?" echoed Twilight, grabbing it with her magic and ruffling the pages.

"That can't be right, I just got that," insisted Spike. "What sort of magic is it, anyway?"

"Far as I can tell, some kind of Pluto spell, relating to either dimension, spirits, or faith. I'm leaning towards dimension."

"You don't think it's haunted, do you?" He backed away.

"Oh Spike, what would haunt a comic book?"

"I certainly hope not," Fluttershy squeaked, also backing away.

"Don't worry, it's obviously a spell, not a spirit," clarified Susan. "You finding anything Twilight?"

"Seems to be perfectly normal," she answered, skimming it. "Good versus evil, bad guy monologs, oddly the good guys seem to be losing here..."

"Losing? That can't be right!" insisted Spike.

"Have you read the whole thing?" Susan asked him.

"Nah, Twilight made me stop last night."

"Yeah, it was way past his- now what in the heck is this about?" She turned the book around and showed them the last page. "This page is blank, the story doesn't actually end."

"Is that some writing there?" Spike asked, looking at the bottom corner.

"If it is, we'll need a magnifying glass to read it," said Rarity. "It looks more like just a scribble to me."

"I think I've seen one around here," said Spike thoughtfully. "Just a second."

He returned with one and read what sounded like an incantation (as it was rhymed) and no sooner did he finish reading it aloud, the book lit up from within and started dragging everypony near it inside.

Not even Susan's STRength checks were enough, and she didn't want to rip out anypony's tail trying to drag them out of the thing, so the ponies found themselves atop a building in what looked like a modern human city. All the ponies. The ponies, who were everyone. They all looked around fearfully.

"Hey, you're a pony again!" exclaimed Applejack, looking over at Susan.

"And what is with that outfit?" added Rarity with disgust. "It's just a patchwork of other... oh my goodness what am I wearing?"

Susan looked down at herself and over at the others, and noticed they were all wearing

flashy “super hero” costumes, complete with masks.

“You’ve turned into the Power Ponies!” Spike informed them. “Except for you, Susan. You’ve become... uh... A princess, I guess?”

The others gasped. Susan looked back and found she had a pair of wings at her side, and Twilight came over and prodded her horn with a hoof.

“Yup, you’ve ascended,” she agreed. “Or did you do this with your magic?”

Susan shook her head. “No time to. I’m as baffled as you all are. Besides, only Sparkle knows that one.”

“So where are we?” asked Fluttershy, trying to look in all directions at once.

“And how do we get back?” asked Applejack.

They all looked at her. “Oh sure, ask the one with the experience traveling worlds... actually that’s probably the best thing to do. Well, either this is some kind of shared dream, or the book acted as a portal and you girls have displaced your counterparts in this world. Quite different than the way I do things, but what do I know? If you want I can call my contact back at the...” She raised a hoof and looked at it, but Silverstreak’s watch was gone. “Or not. Well, at least I still have my...” My looked at her other front leg. “Oh, wonderful. That’s gone too. Can I even...” She tried pulling something from her *sub-space pocket*. “Nope.”

“Would you mind going back to talking in complete sentences again?” asked Applejack.

“Sorry, I’m just missing *all* my equipment, and it seems I can’t pull anything else out here. Oh no, I just had a worse thought. *Light*.” Nothing happened. “Yup, I can’t do magic, either. We’re on our own here. Unless your magic works, Twilight?” Susan couldn’t see the glow because her horn was covered by some kind of armor, but Spike’s cape moved so she nodded.

“Sparkle will notice we’re missing though, right?” asked Fluttershy.

Susan tried to snap, but stared at her hoof in frustration. “You’re right. She doesn’t have access to my book but worst comes to worst she can research the spell to move between dimensions. She’s never done spell research, but she watched me do it, and she’s seen that spell so she can remember it and that’ll cut the time down. Really it’s just sort of implied that anyone who can do my type of magic knows how to research more, so that’s not a concern. Or heck, maybe my watch is sitting there on the floor, and she can call this in to my contact. One way or another, I’m sure we can figure out how to get home.” There was an explosion down below, making them all jump. “But perhaps first we should see what that’s all about?”

They poked their heads over the side of the building and far below, smoke billowed out of the place across the street. It looked as if the entire front of the place had been ripped off from within, sending shrapnel hurling out in all directions.

Several ponies lay hurt and bleeding offscreen, crimson blood pooling beneath them. Their fate was uncertain.

From the wreckage a thick, green, tentacle like mass of hair shot out, followed by another and another, and out from the smoke stepped a dark pony holding a glowing orb. She laughed and looked up at them. “Power ponies? How nice of you to join me!” She started laughing and laughing.

“At least she enjoys her work,” muttered Susan.

“That’s the Maneiac!” Spike informed them. “Remember what Twilight was reading? That’s who we have to defeat if we’re going to get out of this place.”

“How in the sam hill do we do that?” asked Applejack.

“Use your powers! You are the Power Ponies, after all!”

Is that anything like Power Rangers? Go, go, Power Rangers!

Oh, you’re still here? Figures.

I am you, Susan. I go where you go. Watch out.

What?

WHAM A pretzel cart shattered against the edge of the building, obviously thrown by the Maneiac, who was still laughing her head off down on the street.

“Powers! Now you’re talking Spike. Come on girls, let’s go help those innocent citizens of... uh...”

"Maretopolis," supplied Spike.

"Yes, what he said. Spike, hop on. You can coach us as we go."

"Can you fly?"

"Somehow, I just know I can."

"Okay." Spike leapt up onto her back and Susan drew upon Weather Magic while flapping her wings. *At least that works. This is so weird...*

She dived.

Sadly, none of the other ponies were in the same rush to engage in combat as she was (she is a bit weird like that) and Susan didn't exactly understand how her powers worked. As she streaked downwards she got more than twice her INSight away from them in meters, and felt all her powers drop away.

All of them.

That included her wings, horn, special clothes, the power she felt in the others that was somehow in her- everything. She was now falling off a building to her doom, naked, as a plain old Earth Pony. Well, a plain young Earth Pony.

Well, it's been a good run, I guess. What's that noise?

Spike was screaming his head off.

Oh, just Spike, probably thinking about his greatest regret. Listening to me. So, am I going to get the highlight reel for 'this is your life' before I splatter to the pavement or... hello, what's this?

As she neared the Maneiac something strange happened, her hair suddenly got far longer, turned green, and she was wearing an exact copy of the Maneiac's costume all of a sudden. She spent *energy* on REFlexes (*thank goodness I can still do that, at least*) and made the check to gather the hair up underneath her, cushioning her fall, before she hit the ground.

'AAAhahhhhhhhh... what?' Spike finished. "Oh, we're not dead. Great!"

"Yeah, what just happened?" asked Susan, looking herself over. She felt her hair was now like another limb, and she straightened it out, octopus style, and it was strong enough to hold her up.

The Maneiac walked herself over to Susan on her hair, and stood looking her over. "I didn't know I was twins," she remarked. "Who are you?"

"Uh..." *Okay Susan, think. You need a cool super hero name. Something that reflects what just happened. Am I getting the powers of the ponies around me? Wait, reflects?*

"I am the Mirror Mare!" she shouted. "Prepare to taste justice, evil doer!"

"What does that taste like?"

"You okay?" Rainbow Dash landed near her, and Twilight appeared in a burst of Teleportation magic. *Oh sure, she gets to do her magic.*

Suddenly, Susan's costume now incorporated parts of the other two pony's, and she realized she could again shoot elements from her horn or control the weather like Rainbow Dash. *And I notice I have my wings back, too. Huh.*

"Don't worry about me, Power Ponies," she said dramatically. "Stop the Maneiac!"

"Ah, so you are against me," she said, reaching for a mailbox. "Pity."

"How?" both said.

"Rainbow, your power is to control the weather. Twilight, you can shoot elemental energy from your horn! Try something like that!"

"How do you know that?" asked Spike.

Susan was too busy dodging the mailbox to answer him.

Hey wait a minute, what's my Initiative order? This world really did a job on me.

Rainbow Dash shrugged and concentrated, the lightning bolt around her neck lit up and caused dark clouds to start forming. Twilight powered up her horn, but nothing seemed to happen. Applejack tried to get off the top of the building by swinging down with her lasso, but tied herself up instead. *Okay, maybe dropping us into the middle of this wasn't the best start,*

comic book magic?

The Maneiac was laughing again, and off to the side, a tornado started to form as Rainbow's power went out of control.

"How is this helping?" Susan yelled, anchoring herself with the hair. Twilight and Rainbow were swept up into the swirling winds, and suddenly Susan was too as Maneiac got out of range, making her hair shrink back to normal.

"Oh no!"

She grabbed Rainbow as she sped by, and managed to calm the thing down, lowering them both to the ground.

The Maneiac was nowhere to be seen.

"Not the most auspicious start to my career as a super hero," complained Susan.

"Someone want to help Applejack down? And where did Pinky go?"

"Here!" something shouted as it blurred past.

"Is it safe to come down?" Fluttershy tried to call down to her friends, but no one heard her. She flapped down, and finally they were together again.

"Twilight, do you know any healing magic?" asked Susan, then realized that, yes, she did. "Wait, never mind, somehow I know you do. In fact you know a lot of magic... far more than I would have believed. What's up with... never mind. Come help me." They tended to the hurt ponies as best they could, Twilight looking at her strangely as she casually used Unicorn magic.

"How are you doing that? Where are we?" asked Fluttershy again.

"I wish I could tell you," Susan replied. "Spike, how many Power Ponies were there originally?"

"Six."

"Thought so. Odd, that, don't you think? Six Power Ponies, six of you? But there was a seventh there today, me. I'm guessing the magic that brought us here didn't know what to do with me, so it just gave me everything. When that something is around, anyway."

"So, darling, you have all our powers?" asked Rarity. "Including whatever magic we know, or being able to fly when a pegasus is nearby?"

"That's right," Susan answered, creating a stretcher that carried a pony to a nearby ambulance. "Spike, why don't you run down the list while I finish up here?"

"Good point."

So he explained that Pinky was "Filly-Second" and could run really fast. Applejack was Mistress Mare-Velous and had a lasso while Fluttershy was Saddle Rager and could transform, Hulk like, into a creature of rage and strength. Rarity could create objects made of a solidified energy that could be floated about, perhaps the best power as Susan was concerned.

As he was explaining it, Twilight looked at her. "So, you know all my magic, huh?"

"Yup. And how *do* you know so much magic? I mean your talent is magic, I accept that. But you know more magic than I do. And I mean a lot more, which you never seem to use."

"So you don't know everything about me?"

"No, just what powers you have. Why?"

She seemed relieved. "No reason. Just curious."

Finally the last hurt pony was being looked over by medical ponies, and the group wondered about their next move. "May I suggest practicing a bit with our new powers before the rematch?" Susan suggested, as Rarity tried making various things. "Somewhere a bit more private, perhaps?" With the wounded tended to, reporters had started showing up, and flashbulbs were going off. "I don't know if this little adventure is self-contained, or we just messed up the reputation of the real life Power Ponies by letting her escape."

"Sounds good to me," said Rarity. A carpet appeared, which the non-flying ponies

stepped onto, and the group took to the air to see if they could find a quiet spot to practice.

“But shouldn’t we get after the Maneiac?” asked Spike. “She has the orb now, she could power up her doomsday cannon at any moment!”

“Oh Spike, don’t worry about it,” assured Susan. “It’s a story. It won’t advance to the next chapter until all the characters are in their places.”

At least, I hope so. But now that Sparkle has told me all lives are stories, that sort of thing happening at home makes a lot more sense now. Even if I don’t work the same here, I bet that does. We are inside a comic book, after all.

The ponies didn’t need much time to get the hang of their abilities, and they were off to where Spike said her hideout was.

The shampoo factory... *OF DOOM!*

Taking Down the Maneiack

When: Twenty minutes later

Where: Outside the shampoo factory.

The Power Ponies crept closer to the factory, alert for any guards that might be patrolling the place.

“Guess I’ll hang back,” said Spike sadly, “unless you see some kind of power in me, Susan?”

“Just what you’ve always had,” she admitted, and blew a flame out of her mouth.

“Oh yeah!” He brightened up. “I did forget about that.”

“Anyway, you’re hanging back all right. Way back.”

“Wha?”

“You’re heading around the back of the building. I want you to see if you can sneak in the back and grab the orb while we keep the Maneiack busy. Remember, she’s not the goal. Destroying the death ray is the goal. Capturing her is nice, but if we’re busy celebrating that, one of her goons might fire the ray!”

“So loud and in her face?” asked Dash.

“You got it. Give Spike at least a minute, then we hit the place with everything we’ve got.”

“Sounds like the kind of plan I can get behind.”

Spike snuck off down the narrow alleyway and Susan wondered if any of the ponies had *Timekeeper*. Twilight finally nodded to Dash, who flew up to the building, shouting “Hey Maneiack, come out and play!” That done she fired lighting at the sign outside. It short circuited.

Okay, not sure what that achieved.

The large overhead door creaked open, and standing there were four burly ponies with hair related cutie marks, looking tough and ready to rumble. Susan mentally assigned them numbers “three”, “five”, “four”, and “eight.” For no reason at all. Behind them were two more rows of ponies, three and then two, that looked completely identical. Same shirt, same color, same cutie mark.

Am I seeing things?

Behind them was the Maneiack, laughing again like she was being tickled everywhere at once.

What a happy pony she is. Should we really be taking this away from her?

True, we are trying to steal something from her, and that’s wrong.

You’re agreeing with me?

But she stole it in the first place...

So you’re not agreeing with me.

But can a pony having this much fun really be bad?

So you are-

But she does want to destroy the city.

Make up your mind!

The toughs stepped out, and the fight was on. Twilight and Rainbow Dash were in the front, Susan had surrounded herself with her friends, Rarity to the left and Applejack on the right. Pinkie was there, but that wouldn’t last. Susan wasn’t depending on her power given her speed and the range of what she could siphon off from the others. Fluttershy was hanging back, and Spike was already disappearing around the side of the building. Number “four” rushed ahead, and Twilight shot him with her element beam, being not much more than a snowball at this point.

“So maybe I don’t have this under control,” she remarked. But it least it seemed to stun him, and he shook the snow off his face.

“Six” now rushed forward at Rainbow, who aimed a bolt of lighting at him. It totally went wide, striking into the building beside him, and he didn’t even bother dodging.

“Seven” and “nine” moved up, acting in total harmony, and started circling around the

sides. But Pinky shot forward and then did a 90 degree turn, rushing across the battlefield and trying to trip up all the ponies now out. She hit "four", "six", and "nine", while "seven" dodged, and Susan was surprised to see "six" and "nine" vanish in a puff of smoke. "Four" went sprawling.

"I didn't do it!" Pinky yelled as she started circling around again. Moving at right angles, of course.

"Five" moved up and circled around to get at Applejack, while "ten" moved forward into the hole his "brothers" left, scowling. "Two" also shot through the gap, heading left. Rarity now went, and as "seven" was right in front of him, she made a glowing box appear around him, or at least she tried, he dodged out of the way.

The Maneiack now moved up, and Susan felt her hair growing again as she moved into range, but concentrated on Rarity's power which she considered the best. She just thought a little bigger. She put a small sphere in the middle of the enemies and expanded it, hoping to knock most of them over. It worked, also making "ten" vanish while "eight" dodged through the door and out of the way.

"Oh!" said Rarity. "I see."

Sadly this was not *Martial Arts*, in fact it would be considered *Power Combat* but Susan doesn't know about that skill yet, so she had to take her normal delay, whatever that meant here.

Applejack fended off "five" by throwing some golden horseshoes at him, and he too tumbled to the ground.

Pinky did a complex series of turns and shot past "eight" into the factory, saying "ooooh, what's in here?"

"Stop her!" shouted the Maneiack and clone that was knocked into vanished. "It seems I must do everything myself!" From somewhere she pulled a huge spraycan and started aiming it at Rainbow Dash.

Oh, sure, she gets hers, but I don't get mine. What a gyp.

Twilight again tried her ice beam, which succeeded in freezing the legs of "four" together.

Rainbow Dash flew towards the Maneiack, pendent glowing. A lightning bolt started to form but the Maneiack sprayed her with the can, and she dropped to the ground, frozen in place.

Okay, don't get hit by that "beam," I guess.

Applejack twirled her lasso and threw it at the can, probably to try and get it away from her. She deftly moved it aside, and Applejack pulled the rope back.

Rarity again tried for number 7, this time giving him no chance to dodge as she created a dome of force that simply contracted until he couldn't move. He too vanished.

What is going on with those guys? Number "four" didn't vanish, only the clones do.

"Get out here, we need more help!" the Maneiack yelled behind her, and Susan took a step and peered between Applejack and Twilight, trying to see past the hair blocking the door. She saw another of the "clone" ponies running from behind something, and wondered if something good wasn't about to happen. She held her action, but next to her, Twilight tried to freeze the spout of the can. The maneiac pressed the button again, and Susan and Applejack tried to dodge out of the way of the spray. They did, but Twilight couldn't because she was attacking. Both attacks hit, so at least the can wasn't a danger anymore.

"Arg, and get me another hairspray ray of doom!"

"Two" had gotten up, and ran over to "four," doing an attack on the ice hoping to shatter it off so he could move again. He spun and kicked, putting a large crack in the ice and allowing "four" to break free the rest of the way.

Pinky came streaking out of the doorway, trying to clip "three" and "five" who was just about to get up. Both again went tumbling with their hooves knocked from under them.

It was at this time that Susan felt a new power come into range, and as that power was used, she activated it as well. Another ten goon ponies appeared around the Maneiack, while another ten Susans appeared around her.

Not that I couldn't have done that with my normal equipment, if I still had it. Oh well,

at least the mystery of where all those ponies went to is solved. They can only take one hit, but they all get to act individually. In my case, that seems pretty nice indeed.

"What?" shouted the Maneiacak. "Who are you? How did you do that?"

"I told you, fiend, I'm the Mirror Mare. Anything you can do, I can do better."

"We'll see about that. Keep them busy while I fire the ray! It should be charged up by now!"

She threw the can, which was enormous by the way, making the Susans scatter to avoid being poofed.

And that's the official name for it now, is it?

Seems as good as any.

I'm not so sure about that.

The Maneiacak climbed aboard the odd looking machine in the middle of the factory, getting settled into the seat. The design was reminiscent of a huge hair dryer, and the pony started laughing again as she pushed buttons and rotated the barrel.

Then she fired.

Or at least she tried, the beam didn't seem to cooperate and come out of the opening. "What?" she roared.

"Looking for this?" Spike said, holding the orb aloft. He was on a high ledge near a window, and had opened it.

"Give me that!" she demanded.

"Eh, I don't so. Hey Filly-Second!" he dropped it out the window, and Pinky took off, presumably to take it far away.

"After them!" she shouted, and the clones looked at the Susan clones, with the hair of their master, and blocks made of energy floating about them.

"You're kidding, right?" said the one that was probably the original. The blocks expanded to fill the whole space, and slammed down on the goons, knocking them flat. The clones disappeared.

"You're beaten," said Applejack. "Come quietly and maybe you'll get a break come your court date."

"It really wasn't supposed to end like this," said the Maneiacak, somehow looking at the original Susan. "Where in the heck *did* you come from, anyway? You could have ruined everything! Oh well, I suppose it worked out in the end." She looked over at Spike, smugly leaning by the window, and shrugged. "Shut it down."

"What?" everyone said, and they found themselves back in the castle again, the comic nowhere to be seen. Susan was human again, and the ponies were again costumeless.

"All right, someone mind explaining to me what the hay just happened?" asked Applejack.

"Not sure," admitted Susan. "But I do know one thing. I want super powers more than ever now."

The ponies discussed things for a while, and Susan woke up Sparkle and had her put *Shape-shift* back on. "Let's go see this bookstore Spike said he got the comic at. Maybe that'll give us some clues."

So Susan, Spike, and Twilight stepped through a *Teleportal* back to town, and Spike led them to the location of the shop. At least, what he thought was the location of the shop.

"I don't get it," he said, scratching his head. "It was here when I bought the book."

There was a line of stores there, but Spike said it had been in between two that he pointed out. "It can't have just disappeared."

"Given what we just went through, I have to believe it could," said Twilight. "Who knows what magic there is still in the world that even I have no idea about?"

"Guess you're right. Should we just head back?"

“Doesn’t seem to be anything else here we can look into. Sorry Spike.”
“Sorry? It’s okay. I got to save the day and maybe I’ll run into that place again some day.”

Back at the castle, the ponies finished for the day and left for home, satisfied both with the job well done, and the adventure they’d had.

“Sorry you didn’t get to use your power,” Susan said to Fluttershy on the way back.

“Oh, that’s okay. I don’t think I wanted to turn into a giant rage machine anyway.”

Yeah, I know that feeling.

“Probably for the best.”

Susan spent the rest of that night wondering what super powers she might get, but remembering Silverstreak’s warning that she might not be entirely happy with them.

I mean I suppose if I got something like that, where I could use the powers of anyone around me, it would be somewhat useful. Who knows what abilities the people guarding my father will have. On the other hand, if it’s just robots like the Giant Mainframe monster, I wouldn’t get anything. And I can already Mimic stuff. Oh well, no sense worrying about it.

The next day, Applejack stood at the door of the library and asked Twilight and Susan if they could help her with a little problem she was having in the fields, and they both agreed. As they headed out there, she explained.

“Seems my fields have gotten an infestation of Vampire Fruit Bats, and they’re ruining my crop. Ravenous little beasts are everywhere. I’m hoping one of ya can come up with a spell to save it!”

“Gee, I’m not sure,” admitted Susan. “Most of my magic isn’t permanent. But I’m happy to see what I can do.”

“I appreciate it.”

Arriving at the field, Susan met with Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy, seeming at odds with each other.

Everyone said hello, and got down to business.

“We have to drive them away, think of the cider!” insisted Dash.

“They have as much right to live as we do,” put in Fluttershy softly. “And to live they have to eat. And this is what they eat.”

“Can’t they go eat wild apples somewhere?” asked Applejack.

“Naturally they would only want the best,” said Susan with a chuckle.

“Can’t argue with that. So what have you got for me?”

Susan looked over at Twilight. “There might be a spell to make them uninterested in apples, we could try that.”

“Uh, isn’t that worse than driving them off?” Susan asked her.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean they eat the juice of the apples. If you put them off apples... they’ll die. They’ll starve in the midst of plenty because they no longer have interest in the one thing they eat.”

She seemed taken aback. “I... never thought of that.”

“Really Twilight, I’m shocked at you,” said Fluttershy. “What were you thinking?”

“Tell them *your* great idea,” Dash said with a hint of a mocking tone.

“Just set aside some trees for them. I’m sure I can convince them to stay in one area.”

“But I need *all* my current trees to fulfill my orders for the year,” complained Applejack. “I keep good records, and I’m pretty good at estimating crop year to year. I only sell to ponies what I know I’ll grow. Why do ya’all think I’m so worked up about this?”

“Do you have *land*?” asked Susan.

“Land? Got huuuuuge... tracts of land. My family founded this town you know. We marked off tons of space years ago in case we wanted to expand. See those empty fields? Ours.”

“And do you have seeds?”

“You want seeds? Just look around you, every apple these little monsters have eaten

will have a bunch of seeds in it. Why? Don't know how it happens where you come from, but around here apple trees take many years to grow!"

"Not to worry, Applejack, we've got everything we need. Twilight, can your magic separate the apples and the seeds?"

"Probably."

"Good, that's great. Once that's done, we'll need to spread the seeds out. How many should we plant? A hundred? I mean how much land do you have?"

"Enough. You're really gonna grow that many trees?"

"Yup. Trust me, this will be great."

So the seeds were gathered and Susan handed them out. "They don't have to be shoved into the ground, just place them every so often. I have to warn you, the spell I'm going to cast doesn't discriminate, so you might get other trees mixed in. It's for the bats, so I suppose that's fine. Oh, Twilight, I wonder if maybe we can work together on this. I'll need my magic stopped where we *don't* want more trees to grow. This spell basically extends to as far as I can see, in the end. I know you and your brother can do barrier magic, can you tweak that spell to stop my magic getting out? Or maybe the princess would know something similar, if she can spare us a moment of her time. The spell will only need about a minute to work."

"I'd go and ask her, but I can't teleport that far."

"I can get you there, if you're willing."

"Sure."

So Susan opened her *Teleportal* to the castle, and left it hanging there so she could get back.

With her gone, the Apple family got to work, with Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash, and Susan all walking a line and "planting" the seeds as Applejack suggested. (Susan hit Granny Smith with the *Alleviation* knife, making her feel better than ever, and she even helped.)

By the time that was done, princess Celestia was standing there watching them, and they all went to one knee.

"Rise, my ponies. Ah, it's nice to get out of the castle once in awhile. Sparkling Magic, I hear you're about to grow Applejack here a new field?"

"To protect the rest of her crop, yes."

"I can provide a barrier, and I'd love to see your magic in action. This," she indicated the *Teleportal*, "is certainly a wonder. I'll have to research something similar, now that I've seen it."

"I'd be happy to give you the spell diagram, but I doubt it will be helpful. We can talk about that later, I hate to keep you from your duties so if you're ready, we'll get started."

"Of course. Where would you like the growth to stop?"

They showed her and Celestia put a sparkling barrier up she said would contain all magic. As Susan had previously used the *Foliate* spell (back in chapter 57, to cover the graves of the fallen drow with grass) she simply had to look the formula over to refamiliarize herself with it. That done, she took the two minutes to cast, and held it until the field was full of new apple trees, ready for the bats to move into.

"I see it, but I don't believe it," said Applejack, walking about. "It's like this place has been growing for years!"

"Yup. Oddly it's cast as Moon spell, relating to nature, rather than Saturn, relating to time. But I guess we can't argue the results."

"I'll say. I'll get a fence put up so the bats feel secure, if you can do your thing and get them over here, Fluttershy."

"I'd be happy to," she answered. "And thank you, Spark. I guess you're good for more than just beating up super villains." She winked.

"What's this about super villains?" asked Celestia. "Anyway, Luna's report last night was good, nothing to report yet. Thought you would like to know. Now, about that spell formula..."

Helping Hoof

When: 4th day in equestria

Where: Outside Twilight's Library

"Are you sure you don't mind?" Rarity asked again, looking worried. "I really hate to ask, I don't know what I was thinking, not making arrangements for her. Imagine my parents going out of town at the same time I am! And with all this Darkness business too, but life goes on and this trip has been planned for months and these show tickets are impossible to get and-

Susan held up a hoof and covered Rarity's mouth. "I don't mind, honestly. Just have Spike send me a picture when you get there so I can reach you if something happens, on this end or yours. He can get me a message if you need me, and I can *Teleportal* over to you if something happens to Sweetie Belle."

"Which it won't," put in Sweetie.

"Exactly. So please put your mind at ease, and concentrate on your fashion show."

"If you're really sure!"

"Go on, get out of here!" said Sweetie. "Your train leaves soon, doesn't it?"

"Well, all right. You be good, Sweetie Belle." Rarity hugged her sister.

"I will."

"Thank you again."

Susan nodded, and Rarity turned and joined the other ponies headed to the train station. With a final wave they went out of sight.

"So, will you?" Susan asked.

"Will I what?"

"Be good?"

"Of course!"

"I'm going to hold you to that."

"I could take care of myself, you know?"

"Maybe, but that's not the issue here. The issue is Rarity has asked me to look after you, and you're now staying at the library with me. So that is what I'm going to do."

"I mean it isn't that long."

"A whole week is pretty long, depending on how you look at it. I hated taking care of *myself* the last place I was at, because I was separated from Sparkle here. It was terrible."

"Really?"

"Honest. Don't you have school pretty soon? I can tell you more about my travels when you get back. Do you need to bring anything?"

"I'll go get my backpack..."

With Susan going back inside the *scene* ended and she was human again. "Aarg that's annoying! I'd make an item with *Shape-shift* in it but I don't have XP. He could have warned me."

"Not useful outside this world though, but I suppose you could recycle it and get most of the XP back like he showed you." Sparkle replied.

"Right."

"By the way, why do you call The Darkness it but Silverstreak him? Neither really has a gender."

"Huh, you know, that's a good question. And I think of Inari as her..."

"Bye, I'm- Oh!" Sweetie Belle came downstairs. "I will never get used to that."

"Sorry, it wears off at odd moments sometime. I'll see you later, okay? Have a good day at school."

"Yeah, yeah." She left.

"Why do I get the feeling she's not super enthused about the learning process?"

"Were you super enthused about history or herbology? All you wanted to learn was magical stuff."

"That they couldn't teach me. Okay, I see the parallel. So!" She looked around. "These shelves seem extremely haphazard, you think Twilight would take offense if I straightened them out?"

"Actually, I think she might."

Susan paused in mid reach to grab some up. "Actually, you might be right. Better not risk it. We have plenty of time now, though," she settled herself down on the floor and pulled out her book of magic. "How about we try to narrow down where The Darkness will strike from around here? A couple of yes or no *Questions* might be very helpful, don't you think? And I can work on *wards* too."

"Sounds good to me," Sparkle replied, going to lay down in the corner.

"Don't go too far. I'll want some *shape-shift* ones to start, and that's your department. Twilight was kind enough to put that alarm spell on the place so if somepony gets near the door I can transform before they come through, but if you're asleep or not nearby..."

"I know. Get them ready then."

So they worked on those, and Susan shoved them into her *sub-space pocket*. Then she paused. "What do you have in your *pocket*?" she asked.

"Not much at the moment, why?"

"Just a thought." She pulled out all her *wards* and divided them up. "Not sure why I'm carrying around all of these things. You might need them too. Take half of them, and actually we're going to make a few more esoteric ones you can have, like *Telesummon* and *Dimension Gate*. After that whole comic book thing, I would feel better if you had some means of reaching me. The next sub-dimension I get sucked into might not give me super powers, after all."

"That brings up an interesting topic," Sparkle said carefully. "I've been thinking about what I wanted to say about that, but I was going to leave it until we got back. But now is as good a time as any, I guess."

"You're against it."

"I didn't say that!" She waved a paw. "There's just something I want you to carefully consider."

"You're my conscience in a way, so I'll listen."

"Do you remember, after Tom visited you in that dream, talking about having his babies."

"The mental image will be with me forever, why?"

"We talked about you 'heading the call to adventure' and what that entailed."

"Getting XP and such, I vaguely recall."

"My point then was, and still is now, the universe gave you something and in exchange, expected a certain amount of 'repayment' so to speak. You're plenty powerful, but you save whole realities so it balances out, I think. Now you're going after something else, and a far bigger thing this time. A type of power not many people get to experience. You've seen worlds of magic, it's actually pretty common. Despite all the wacky restrictions others seem to run into with it, it's still magic. But worlds where people just have *powers*? The ability to just do things? That's a lot more rare."

"I agree, that's probably true, though one would think with the sheer number of realities out there, powers, high technology, magic- they would somehow balance out. And it's not just a whim, it's by necessity. You didn't see that mainframe thing, it almost killed me! And magic was nearly useless there-"

"But we got through it. And that's the level you're at now. So that's the level of repayment the universe demands of you currently."

"You're worried that if I get more power, the universe will want more repayment?"

"We know The Darkness can step up his game. If it's starting to move material like this weapon metal across realities, how long until it starts moving people, too? In effect, you're both escalating the war until one of you loses. I'm just afraid The Darkness has further to go, as in the end it could sacrifice an entire reality by just blowing the whole thing up with you in it. It would lose the potential energy from that one, but it's losing more not using that option."

"You're saying it won't if I stop getting more powerful? That's nuts! Why would it say 'I

will go no further in my pursuit of destroying Susan?”

“I’m saying that you should be prepared to fight in likeness to yourself. Right now it’s focused on magic users and misdirection. Like with Balor, not choosing the obvious thing to take over and surprising you from behind. But if you get powers, it’s going to throw powered people at you.”

“I thought you said they were rare.”

“Realities with them are rare. But in those realities why wouldn’t there be lots of people who can use powers? It would take the place of magic, after all, and usually lots of people get magic where there’s magic to be had. It may be secret from those that don’t, but it’s still there, being used.”

“True.”

“Consider, not many people have your ten RESolve. If it started taking people over, and there’s no saying it couldn’t take over a bunch of people like it did with the warlocks, it could throw a bunch of people at you. Either by corrupting their power source or just putting lots of shards of itself into people. Do it quietly enough and on a world an agent of Silverstreak hasn’t gone to yet, and who knows how many people it could pull out?”

Susan considered. “Because that’s what makes a better story.”

Sparkle nodded, a little proudly. “You’re learning. That narrow escape you had, having to use a card to continue the fight? And then spending all your energy and 3XP to drive the weapon through the mainframe to kill it? Wasn’t that a better story than just you going in there, casting a spell, and crushing the thing without a problem?”

“Knowing how reality works is kind of a bummer, you know that?”

“Why do you think I didn’t tell you until we got here and it rubbed your nose in it?” *And why I still haven’t told you the whole truth.*

“I get it. I guess it is something to think about. And better to start thinking about it now rather than when we’re about to step through a portal. Thanks for looking out for me, Sparkle.”

“Of course.”

That cat is deluded if she thinks you not getting any more powerful will stop me throwing whatever I can at you to stop you. Sure, I’d rather have you on my side, but having you out of the way is a close enough second I’d settle for it. You’d make a great addition to my team, going around helping subjugate worlds rather than save them. For once you’re on the right track, much as it pains to admit it. I will keep throwing stuff at you until something sticks, whatever powers you manage to find or create for yourself.

Nothing has so far, and it never will.

But I like to conserve energy, you know that. You keep depriving me of realities, and soon the energy cost of stopping you will be less than the energy I would lose if I didn’t. So I’d be more inclined to just open a portal to whatever world you were on and pour all kinds of expendable troops at you. Blowing up a whole reality? That cat thinks big. But that would take energy, and that is the opposite of what I want. For now I’m content to work with what the world offers, maybe bring over some metal, that’s easy enough to transport. Even a person or two, I’ve got one in mind, actually, he should be free soon. Keep annoying me though, I dare you.

Don’t worry, I intend to.

With that in mind, Susan asked *Question* a few times.

“Will The Darkness reveal itself on this world within the next week?”

No

“Will The Darkness reveal itself on this world within the next month?”

Yes

“From where will The Darkness strike at me?”

The moon

“Who has The Darkness taken over to strike at me?”

Unknown

Really, you thought I wouldn't put up blocking magic around myself? What do you take me for? Every third being on this world has a powerful magic at their disposal. Even if mostly what they do with it is float things around.

Ah, so you're a unicorn, then!

Or some other magical creature. They aren't the only ones that can do magic on that scale, you know.

“I better send a ‘Dear Princess Celestia’ letter,” Susan said, getting up and getting some paper. “Have Luna check out the moon for me.”

“In... English,” Sparkle reminded her.

“Crap! Wait, there must be something...” She paged through her book. “*Literacy*, there is one. And it's only grade three, what grade three spell can I drop and learn this instead?” She looked her character sheet over. “Actually, why do I still have *Barrier Against Spells*? I have an imbued *Magic Domination materia*, which is way better. I would rather lock down an area totally than just make myself immune to magic, right?”

“Of course any allies wouldn't be able to do magic.”

“What allies? Has there been anyone that could use magic that was actually useful to have around in any combat situation? I don't really recall any.”

“I'd have to think a minute.”

“Exactly. And this would protect them as well as me, if they stuck close. So is there a grade five spell I'd like to pick up in place of it? Let's give a look see.” She paged through her book. “Actually, let's solve a couple of problems we've run into in the past.” So she forgot *Barrier Against Spells* and picked up *Literacy* for 3XP, *Comprehend Technology* for 3XP, and *Carbon Copy* for 2XP. “And I admit, I've not run into any technology I didn't understand, but that could change. And I'm always copying spells out of my spellbook for people, so that tedious chore is done. In fact I could make a copy of this book now to give my dad when I rescue him, so he can have all Silverstreak's stuff to use himself.”

“A nice little ‘get out of jail’ present for him.”

“I know! Aren't I thoughtful? Twilight must have some blank books around here, maybe I can find one that's roughly the same size. Or we could get one, these books came from someplace so a blank one shouldn't be that hard. Anyway, let's write our letter.”

So Susan wrote to Celestia and sent it off with *Send Object*, muttering “Could have sworn I knew that one, but from writings is fine.” That done she poked around the library as she could now finally read Twilight's books, and had some lunch. About a half hour before Sweetie Belle was going to get out from school there was a knock at the door and Susan hastily put her pony face on, requesting the spell ‘until my interactions with whoever is at the door are done for the day.’

It was a pony she had never seen before. He was an Earth Pony with a dark brown coat, a black mane, and a paintbrush cutie mark.

“Oh, I was expecting Twilight,” he said. “Is she in?”

“I am Twilight. *New* Twilight. Don't let the fact that I look, sound, and act totally different throw you off. Looking for a book? Sorry, we're fresh out.”

He looked about. At all the books. “So you ate Pinkie Pie and morphed into a new pony, is that it?”

Susan laughed. “Actually, she's on vacation in Manehattan for the next week. I'm minding the place for her. Sparkling Magic at your service. Are you looking for a book?”

“Some advice, actually. I might need some magic done, too. And she's usually

amenable to helping ponies out.”

“This is your lucky day! I am also known to get my hooves dirty from time to time.”

“It isn’t dirt so much as water I’m worried about. My basement is flooding and I have no idea what to do about it!”

“That does seem odd, given the rain around here is rather carefully regulated. I’m happy to come take a look, but I’m watching Sweetie Belle and I expect her home soon. Give me your address and we’ll stop over when she’s back.”

“Thanks. I’m Bristle Brush, by the way.” He gave his address, and Susan said she would be there soon so he left.

“How was school?”

“It was okay, I guess.”

“Okay? Not super duper learntastic?”

“Uh, no?”

“What is the matter with them? Well, hope you’re up for- wait, do you have homework?”

She sighed. “Yes.”

“I’m sure it can wait. Bristle Brush stopped by, said his basement was flooding. I’m going over to take a look, so how would you like to come with me? I’m still not sure where everything is around town, after all.”

“Okay.”

So the two went over there and Brush let them in, then showed them the basement.

“This is one flooded basement all right,” Susan said, looking around. She was standing in about knee high water, and Sweetie was splashing around.

“What’s so strange about it is I’ve never had a problem like this before. Always been bone dry.”

“I can get rid of the water easily enough, but I’m not sure that would solve your problem. Sweetie Bell!”

“What?” she looked guilty and stopped splashing.

“What would you do next to solve this mystery?”

“Wha? Me? You’re asking me?”

“Shouldn’t I? What if this was your house, what would you do?”

“I don’t know.” She looked around a moment. “I guess the water had to come from somewhere, maybe see if anyone is missing some?”

Bristle Brush snorted, but Susan nodded. “Good idea. Let’s check for any nearby ponds or wells. Something raised the water table around here, let’s go see if we can figure out what. We’re too far from the stream that runs through town, so it’s not that. I’ll be back.”

“So which way should we start looking?”

“I don’t know. Maybe that way?” she pointed off in a random direction.

“Why that way? What’s your reasoning behind that direction?”

“You talk an awful lot like Twilight, you know that?”

“Thank you. Now answer the question.”

She looked around more seriously. “Okay, maybe this way?”

“And?”

“Because water runs downhill?”

“Good reasoning, it does look a bit higher there, doesn’t it? Come along.”

The pair didn’t have to walk long before they came to a well that was in somepony’s backyard. “Now here’s a good suspect.”

A pony pulling weeds looked up at them. “Can I help you?” She had a light green coat and a waffle as a cutie mark.

“Having any problems with your well?” Susan asked, tapping it with a hoof.

“Went dry about two days ago, so that’s certainly a problem. Why?”

“Oh, just tracking down something for your neighbor, Bristle Brush. He’s got a flooded basement, you’ve got a dry well. What do you think about that, Sweetie?”

“Maybe the course of the water changed? It’s running down that way now?”

“Could be. Now the way to tell would be to go down and have a look. Problem is, I’m probably too big to fit down a well like this. But you could go.”

“Me?” she squeaked.

“Sure. I’ll give you some flying magic and the ability to see in the dark. You can go down and see what the problem is.”

“What if I get stuck?”

“If you’re not back in a minute I’ll just teleport you back. There’s no danger.”

“Well... I suppose I might get my cutie mark in well inspecting. I’ll do it!”

“That’s the spirit.” Susan put the spells on her, just making the difficulty for *Darksight* thanks to a minimum roll, and Sweetie hopped down the well after getting the hang of flying.

“No wonder Scootaloo wanted to fly so bad. You have this spell and you don’t fly everywhere?”

“Twilight can teleport, but she walks everywhere.”

“Oh yeah. Funny how that goes, isn’t it?” She ducked into the well.

A moment later she was back. “It’s the weirdest thing,” she reported. “It almost looks like a tunnel was dug and diverted the water!”

“What would do that?”

“I have no idea.”

“Strange. Well, I guess the thing to do would be to block it back up again. Think you can handle it?”

“You mean lift rocks? I can barely lift a flower, much less seal up that passageway again!”

“I wonder...” Susan touched her with her horn again and cast “*Augment Skill: Unicorn Magic*,” on her, and given her low rating even with the magic she had going, it was enough. *Sweetie Belle should now be at least above average at magic, as she doesn’t have “planet ratings” either. That’s a thought though, wonder if I could learn Twilight’s magic now, given I can read her books. She must have books on magic, and I have an Adaptive Skill.* “Go down and try it now.”

“If you say so.”

Again, a few moments passed, and a wet Sweetie Belle came flying out of the well.

“I did it! I did it!” She was dancing on air, literally. “I can’t believe I did it!”

“Great job, kid. Now we go drain out the basement and see if this guy’s water problem is solved.”

“Do you think it will stay dry?” Sweetie asked as Susan *Teleported* the water out and into the well.

“Not sure. We still have a mystery, don’t we? Did that passageway you found always exist, and the water just eroded into it? Or did something make that tunnel? Always look for the root cause, Sweetie Belle. Ask yourself what caused what until you run out of things to ask about.”

She looked thoughtful and nodded.

What, that was it?

What did you expect?

You made the kid do all the work!

I gave her a chance to succeed at something and she did. Sure, my magic helped, but this was a solvable problem for her. I felt she was a little down going to school this morning, so I’m glad this came up. She’ll have a story to tell her friends about the mystery of the well, and how she solved the case. At least up to this point. That’s no bad thing.

Ugh, it’s this place, isn’t it? So full of friendship and goodness and pony power. It’s infecting you with friendship disease. Making you more thoughtful and want to be all ‘what do you think’ and ‘how can I make this pony feel better.’ Yuck. I’m not even sure I want the energy from here anymore.

You’ll leave? Really?

...

...

Nah. But I'll have to see what I can do to take these ponies down a peg. And you too, of course. I wouldn't leave you out of it.

You're all heart.

The next few days passed uneventfully, and Bristle Brush's basement stayed dry, so that was a plus. She fed Fluttershy's animal friends, and looked in on the other's houses to make sure everything was okay. (Crime wasn't really a problem, but it was Ponyville so one ever knew what might pop up.) Luna came to her and said everything seemed fine, which Susan didn't admit to already knowing given the *Question* she had asked. She did ask about the moon, though.

"I walked every inch of that place for a thousand years," Luna said sadly. "There was really nothing up there but me and my seething anger that my sister had betrayed me. Little did I know she was hurting just as much. Celestia can go there if she wants, and I will raise and lower it as is my duty, but never again will I willingly step upon the surface. I know every rock there, all of them mocking me for my weakness. Uh, by that I mean in giving in to the evil thoughts I had, not that I actually did not succeed in taking over."

"Oh, yes, I uh, figured that. All right. As long as you don't know of some other creature that's been sent there since then, I'm sure you would have run into anything else that could be a threat today. So we'll just have to keep our eyes open."

"I expect so."

"Thanks for all your hard work, and being away from the castle. It can't be easy."

She laughed. "I do not get out nearly enough, this is an excellent excuse. And you should see the night life in some of these- ahem. Yes, hard at work. Farewell for now."

The dream dissolved.

Susan read up on (and tried) Unicorn Magic, sharing what she learned with Sweetie and helping her get the hang of *Telekinesis*. (It was more just plain encouragement, as it seemed Unicorns had the same "magical muscle" that her friends back in Hogwarts had once talked about. So basically just practice and you'll get it, sort of thing, rather than her using *Magic Sense* and offering specific advice.) She also helped, where she could, with homework but couldn't help staring at her while she held a pencil in her mouth.

"Why do you hold it that way?" she asked at last. "I mean you can stick things to your hoof, right?"

"I guess it's kind of hard this way," she admitted, spitting the pencil out. "And you can't talk to people while you do it. But it's how we learned writing."

"Try it the other way."

"Okay." With the pencil firmly stuck to her hoof she managed to write pretty well. "Of course, when I'm better at magic I can just float it around."

"True. But imagine showing the crusaders your new technique and having it picked up over the whole school. And you'll be the one that started it!"

"I will, won't I?"

Of course that got her thinking about what *else* a pony could stick to, and when Sweetie Belle came home the next day she found Susan carefully walking along the wall of the library.

"Do I even want to know?" she asked.

"It's fun!" Susan exclaimed back. "Try it! You just have try picking the wall up and holding onto it. Now the back hooves are a little trickier because you probably don't pick much up with them. But it works. I bet you could stick to other things, like surfboards or... hey, what kind of tricks could Scootaloo do if she was never in danger of falling off her scooter?"

"Are you trying to get us killed for some reason?"

"Hey, your talent could be wall walking. Can you take the chance and miss out on your cutie mark?"

"That's a low blow, is what that is," she grumbled, but put her hooves up on the wall to give it a try.

Later that evening they went to buy groceries, hoping to make Twilight something special when she got back from her trip. She wanted to try it first, of course, as pony cooking and human cooking were slightly different. Sweetie was making some suggestions as they walked, and Susan happened to look up.

"Bubbles!"

"Who?"

"That mare! Bubbles! Hey Bubbles!" She waved her hooves.

"Are you talking to me?" Bubbles said, surprised, as she landed.

"That is your name, isn't it?"

"Most everypony calls me Derpy, or Ditzzy Do. Sometimes they call me Muffin, which is weird. I mean I enjoy a good muffin same as the next pony, but I'm not muffin crazy. I mean if someone offered me a muffin button in my house, like I just hit a button and a muffin appears? Okay I'd probably take it. But I wouldn't press it *all* the time. And now you're looking at me like I'm crazy. What were we talking about? Oh, my name. Yeah, I don't even know what my real name is anymore, people call me so many things."

"That's terrible!"

"Eh, I know myself, isn't that all that matters?"

"True, she has her cutie mark," muttered Sweetie.

"Say hello, Sweetie."

"Hello!"

"Hi! So, you need to send a letter or something?"

"No, actually. I have an offer for you. An offer and a question."

"Okay?"

"How would you like me to fix your eyes? And by fix I mean straighten, I don't want to imply that you're broken- they're broken, or anything like that. I just thought since I knew a spell that could do it I would offer."

"Wow, you could really straighten my eyes out?"

"I've done it before, and it worked then."

"When you did straighten my eyes out before? Am I repeating time again and forgot? That happens *so much!*"

"Uh, no. I mean I straightened somepony else's eyes who had a similar condition.

Sorry, I guess I wasn't clear."

"Oh! I get it. Gee, thanks for the offer, but I think I'm going to decline."

"You're what?" asked Sweetie Belle, and Susan couldn't really believe what she was hearing either.

"It's like she said," she said to her. "My eyes aren't broken, I just happen to see a little differently than other ponies. I've gotten used to it, and hardly anyone teases me about it anymore."

Apart from the whole not knowing your own name thing.

"Being the way I am makes me who I am. If I change that, am I even me anymore? Is fixing my eyes killing who I am and replacing me with a pony that looks like me and has my memories, but who isn't me?"

"No, I don't think so," Sweetie replied after a moment. "It's just fixing your eyes."

"Still, I think I'll remain the way I am. But I do thank you for the offer, and the spirit in which it was given."

"Sure."

"You said there was a question, too?"

"Oh, yeah! What's your cutie mark mean? That isn't rude to ask, is it? Watching Sweetie Belle here has put them on my mind."

"You really want to know? Nobody asks me that. Wow. I'll be glad to tell you. Can we meet over in that cafe in about twenty minutes? I'll even buy you a muffin. I need to finish my deliveries for the day."

"Sure, that'll be fine."

"Great! I'll see you then." She waved and took off again.

"There goes the strongest willed pony I've ever seen," Susan remarked, watching her fly away. "I don't know if I could have turned me down with the offer I made. The person I cured almost did, but saw sense in the end."

"Strongest willed or dumbest?"

"Be nice. She's made her choice, and we should respect it."

Though I think I see a way to help her not regret it, should she change her mind later after I'm gone...

They quickly got to the store and shoved the stuff back through a *Teleportal* to make it to the cafe on time, where Bubbles ordered them muffins and tea and told her story.

Half an hour later the two ponies staggered out, and Bubbles flew off, a big smile on her face.

"Okay, better warn Twilight," Susan said at last. "She can warn everypony in town. Never ask Bubbles what her cutie mark means. Or maybe they know and that's why no one has to ask anymore?"

"Yeah. Who would have known it meant *that*?" Sweetie Belle's eyes were wide, and she kept jerking them to the sides as if something was going to jump out at her at any moment.

"And that she could describe it in such, uh, graphic detail."

"What if I get something similar? I'm not sure I want to be a crusader anymore."

"Now, now, I'm sure she's... I'm sure it's not all... You should just... Your cutie mark will fit you, just like everypony. You'll love it, I'm sure."

"Are you sure?"

"Ummm..."

Still, once at the library and leaving some time for the shock to wear off, Susan sat down to write.

Dear Bubbles,

I hope this letter finds you well, and that you will allow me a second opportunity to selfishly offer to help you. Enclosed you will find five sheets of paper with a funny symbol on them. These contain a healing spell, the same spell I offered to cure you with. As you will never have the opportunity to experience this magic again, I thought I should offer it to you one last time just in case you ended up regretting what you said to me the day we met.

It's a long story. You can ask Twilight Sparkle about it if you're interested. Suffice to say that when you read this, I will be gone from the world. (Not dead, don't worry!)

To use them, simply touch the person you want to heal with the paper, envision them being better, and say "healing." It will heal just about anything, from broken bones, poison, disease, anything but curses. You will notice I included five, I didn't want to send you just one and have you save it for a future need but then never use it and feel bad about that later. Or you do use it, and the next day you wish you had it back because something comes up.

Please use the five as you see fit. They are yours now and the decision is yours, as it always was. You are a strong and deserving mare, and you have my respect whatever your decision is.

*A true muffin fan,
Susan Felton (A.K.A. Sparkling Magic)*

She sat and made five *Alleviation Wards*, then put them into an envelope and addressed it to Bubbles. *I'll just tell Twilight to put it in the mail once I'm gone.*

The next day Susan was reading something over for Sweetie when there was a banging on the door. She got her pony face on and heard the tail end of a speech that went a little like this:

“Come out, Twilight, for the great and powerful Trixie challenges you to a dual to show that once and for all that she is- You aren’t Twilight.”

“Trixie Lunamoon? Is that really you? Hey, it is! I wondered if I would see you around here anywhere. Come on in!” She pushed the door open wide and stepped to the side to let her through.

“Uh, the great and confused Trixie... is confused.” But she stepped through the door anyway.

“Hi Trixie,” Sweetie waved from the table.

“Hello. Is Twilight around?”

“Sorry. She’s away another day or two. Manehattan. You’ll have to make do with the adequate and well traveled Sparkling Magic.” She gave a bow.

“After Trixie came all this way, she isn’t even here? My grand entrance was wasted? Trixie is somewhat upset!”

“I’m sorry, there’s nothing I can do about that. You may choose to be upset, or not, as you please. If you’d like to stay in town I’m sure Twilight will be happy to answer your challenge when she returns.”

“She never has before,” grumbled Trixie.

“You’re too showy. If you really want to challenge her, do it away from prying eyes. I know, I know, that’s not your style. But then again, your style is failure, so perhaps not trying the same thing over and over would be in order, yes?”

“Well, Trixie... Just who are you, anyway?” She looked Susan over.

“I told you, Sparkling Magic. Let me take your hat and cloak and we can have some tea. And the cookies should be done momentarily as well.”

“I helped!”

“Trixie will allow this.”

Susan levitated her hat and cloak over to the hatrack and she sat down at the table. “I’m watching the place, and Sweetie Belle here, while the others are gone. But I know Twilight pretty well, and she does not like showing off. She’s terrified that if people knew how powerful she was, they wouldn’t like her anymore. Now me, on the other hand, I don’t mind showing off. *For the right reason.* If I can help somepony or do a good deed, I’m more than happy to let everyone know how powerful I am.”

“She’s telling the truth, believe me,” said Sparkle, walking in in pony form.

“May I introduce my daughter, Midnight Magic? Midnight, this is The Great and Powerful Trixie.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“You may just call me Trixie.”

Susan grinned. “So, you really want to challenge Twilight to a magical duel, huh?”

“Trixie must regain her reputation!”

“I wonder. Midnight, Sweetie? What advice would you offer our friend here?”

“Give it up,” said Sparkle at once. “Not worth the hassle.”

“I disagree,” said Sweetie. “I think, if done properly, Twilight might accept.”

“Go on.” Trixie leaned closer.

“Twilight... she’s like Spark here. She doesn’t learn magic to show off or be better than everypony. She does it to make sure she can keep her friends safe. I mean this is Ponyville, you never know if a manticore is going to wander through or the town will be overrun by Parasprites. But if there’s a crisis, you can bet Twilight will be there doing everything she can to see everypony through.”

“What are you saying?”

“I think I know what she means. You want to know what kind of challenge I would accept, if I was in Twilight’s horseshoes? Make the duel to magically help as many ponies as you can in a twelve hour span- without them knowing. You each take a half of the town and you don’t announce your contest at all. Anypony that catches you trying to help them doesn’t

count. You have to find out a problem they're having, solve it, and get away without being discovered. It's got everything. Who knows the most magic so they can solve the most problems? Who can use the least amount of that magic possible so there's less risk in being caught? Magic isn't just explosions, you know."

"Trixie doesn't know *what* you mean. However, perhaps your idea does have merit, little filly."

"And that's the cookies!" Susan said, as the oven dinged. "Time for a break, Sweetie. You want milk?"

"Uh huh."

So the four sat and talked, and had cookies. Even Sparkle, who had developed a taste for them, at least in a pony body. Trixie was somewhat nice, when she wasn't posturing and making grand claims.

"And you say you can climb right up the wall?" she asked Sweetie, who couldn't help bragging about the odd things Susan had taught her. "Just by focusing on trying to pick the whole thing up?"

"That's right. And my writing is improving since I've been holding the pencil with my hoof instead of my mouth."

"Extraordinary. And you say this sort of thing just comes to you?" she asked Susan.

"The wall thing was just a passing fancy that happened to work out. I have no idea why other ponies haven't learned writing that-"

She was cut off by a crashing sound nearby, and everyone jumped.

"That can't be good!" Susan exclaimed. "We should go check it out."

Trixie got her hat and cloak back on and joined the others, and there was a crowd gathered around a house that seemed to have partially collapsed.

Susan pushed her way through and made a *Spirit Sense*, getting a sixteen.

"There's somepony under that rubble!" she exclaimed. "Everypony who isn't a unicorn, get back, now! You!" She pointed to a random Earth Pony standing there, "This town has a hospital or something right?"

"I'll get someone right away!"

"Get back I said! Unicorns to the front." There weren't many, but even Sweetie Belle stepped up. "Start lifting that rubble. Carefully, we don't want it to collapse again. Come here Sweetie!" She got a quick *Augment Skill: Unicorn Magic* again, and then started to help lift as Susan directed. She and Sparkle did what they could as well, Susan having mastered at least this much Pony Magic through *Adaptive Skill*, and though Sparkle had only half the rating, she was at least average at it and could help. Slowly the collapsed house was tossed aside, piece by piece, and finally the limp form of an Earth Pony covered in dirt, scratches, and blood was gently lifted out.

"Get him onto the cart," said the medic that was on scene. "We'll take him from here."

Susan couldn't exactly whip her knife out, and another *Spirit Sense* combined with a *First Aid* of seventeen and nine told her that his spirit energy was still strong, and he probably wouldn't die of his wounds.

And if I need to, I can sneak over to the hospital later. Don't want to make a scene here, after all.

Are you sure? You always want to make a scene.

This would be a bit hard to explain, I'm trying to keep a low profile around town. Let the medical ponies do their job, I'm sure they have healing magic.

Fine, whatever. I'm not one to tell you what to do.

Since when?

Since always! But then, I don't really see time the way you do.

Susan made sure before they left there were no other ponies trapped, and they sped off to treat the wounded pony.

"How did you know he was under there?" asked Trixie.

"His life energy. I can sense it, it's no big deal."

"No big deal? Trixie would love to learn this skill if... Could... you teach me how to do

that?"

She shook her head. "I think if ponies- if other ponies could do it, they would already be doing it. I'm the only one who seems to be able to that I've ever met."

"Oh."

"Anyway, I'm more interested in why this house suddenly collapsed like this."

"Doesn't that sort of look like a tunnel?" asked Sweetie Belle, pointing with a hoof.

"Maybe a tunnel that collapsed? Oh, and nice job helping, you did good."

"Thanks. Hanging out with you certainly is exciting. Oh, oh!" She spun around, trying to look her hindquarters. "Did I get a cutie mark for rescuing ponies from collapsed houses?"

Little bit specific, don't you think? Susan laughed. "No, sorry. Keep trying." She carefully made her way through the wreckage and yes, it was possible a tunnel had been dug under this house that got a little too close to the foundation. So it did what all things do in gravity- fell.

"You don't think this is The Darkness, do you?" Sparkle asked on the way back home. Crews were already at work putting up a fence around the area and discussing the best way to repair the damage.

"Awfully roundabout way of going about things. That pony didn't even die, so it didn't get any energy. And unless he was Thor Pony or Dr Whooves in disguise, what does collapsing the house of one random pony accomplish? And what's it taken over? Some kind of giant worm? You don't have giant worms around here, do you?"

"Not that I've ever seen," replied Sweetie. "Are you going to look more into it?"

"Probably. But I'm not too worried yet. After all, once is odd, twice is puzzling, three times is enemy action. Just because two underground related things happened doesn't mean my enemy is up to something. What would be the point? It wants to turn or destroy me, and then take this world's energy. I don't see how a bunch of tunnels accomplishes that. I mean make the library collapse when I'm asleep? Sure. Make some random dude's house fall on him? I'm not buying it."

"I hope you're right."

"Trixie... I would like to hear more about this, if you don't mind," said Trixie. "Helping that pony back there, I see what you were talking about. Using magic to help others, not just for the sake of saying you know a bunch of magic. Perhaps I can help further? And you seem to be fighting some kind of darkness?"

Susan considered "We could always use another powerful spellcaster. Okay Trixie, I'll give you the run down. First of all, when I get back to the library, something you might consider odd is going to happen..."

And so Twilight and the others returned, and Sweetie went home. Susan reported, quite truthfully, that she had been a delight, and Sweetie couldn't stop talking about all the adventures they had. And what she had learned. However, almost immediately Twilight made plans to leave again which got Susan thinking what exactly she did to make money.

The others were more or less obvious. Rarity had just come back from her 'job' and she was constantly at work either making or coming up with clothes to make. Given how often she traveled and had designs featured in shows, her stuff must go for some hefty bits, so she probably wasn't hurting any. Rainbow Dash was the resident "weather pony" and literally controlled when the sun shone and when rain fell. She was probably paid by the town, out of tax money. Pinkie Pie was an official party planner, and her services were always in demand from what she had heard while walking around town. (Several ponies approached her to ask when she would be back, as she was by that time known to be a part of the group.) Applejack- too obvious to even mention. Keeping the town in apples, baking things to sell with apples, making cider, in fact that pony needed to hire some help! She ran herself ragged!

Fluttershy... now there was an interesting case. Did she run some kind of animal day care? Susan wasn't even sure. And Twilight herself, was running the library her "job?" Because as libraries go, it wasn't all that big. But the building had been there before she arrived so the books and things inside weren't exactly hers. They belonged to the town. So perhaps that *was* her job. Enough ponies came and went during the day the week she was out, and Susan had collected some late fees, but not enough she could have made a living with them. Still, she felt it rude to out and out ask and hoped perhaps the answer would come along if she kept her eyes open.

In any case, Twilight and the others met her sister in law, Princess Cadence, at the train station. The pair planned to spend a day together at a nearby festival that was going on.

Something about a traveling museum? To some famous wizard, I guess. Maybe I'll pop in later, see what it's all about. Meanwhile I may as well keep taking care of the library, I should get her salary!

With her guards dismissed and the train pulling away, Cadence took Susan off to the side. "Luna has contacted me in a dream," she said. "So I know who you are. I've got ponies in the Crystal Empire looking out for anything suspicious, so nothing will come from that corner if I can help it."

"Thank you, that makes me feel better. Have a good visit with Twilight, okay?"

"Will do."

The two marched off and the others stood a moment talking about how great it was for them to spend time together. That's when Pinkie Pie noticed the whirling shape falling from the sky.

"Get behind me!" shouted Susan, "Sparkle, get ready to drop *Shape-shift* if I need to hold a sword."

"You got it," she replied, taking up a position behind Susan. *I'm ready to fight at your side now, and show I'll you what a martial arts using cat with my energy total can do!*

"There's no need for that," said the spinning shape, crashing into a tree. "Ow. My left antler!"

"That voice sounds familiar," both Rainbow Dash and Susan said.

Something in the tree sneezed, and the leaves burst into blue flames, burning away to nothing.

"Discord," the ponies shouted. Susan said it as well, but it was with narrowed eyes and more than a little concern.

And it was. The serpentine form of the 'lord of chaos' was there in the tree. Two different kind of antlers, one buck tooth and a tuft of hair hanging from his chin. Four different

claws, even his eyes and eyebrows were different sizes, like no part of him could be symmetrical. The being that had ruled Equestria, the *entire planet*, before Celestia had finally sealed him in stone and put him on display in her garden as a further warning to others that might get any ideas. (Or something, who knew why she put him there?) Discord could snap his fingers and reshape reality in any way he wanted, apparently without limit. Susan felt as vulnerable as she had ever been looking up at him. Before this creature of magic and “whimsy,” all her spells might well be her just wishing really hard for something to happen. As effective as driving to a store to buy something you knew *was only available at another store*.

She had done a *Dimension Sense* as the spinning form approached, getting a twelve, and she felt he shouldn't belong there.

But is that because he doesn't, or because that's The Darkness? Either way, that is probably the most dangerous creature I've ever been in the presence of.

Hey! I take offense to that!

No, I know what you want. And what you can do in these lower dimensions and counter it. This guy... he can just snap his fingers and make basically anything happen. Plus he's so random, it's hard to pin the guy down to what he wants. Not power, he already has that in spades. No, I'm worried you've taken him over and now he'll just snap his fingers and turn me into a duck or something. I don't want to accuse him because if I'm wrong he might take offense. But if I don't, well, what could I really do about it in any case?

A surprisingly defeatist attitude, coming from you. I like it. I admit, the thought had crossed my mind. But there's someone around here much more my style. I think you're going to be surprised when you see them!

“In the flesh,” said Discord, sniffing. “At least I think it's all there. Can someone check?”

He dropped out of the tree in a heap.

“I don't recall him being blue though,” she whispered to Pinkie Pie.

“Yeah, why in tarnation are ya blue?” Applejack asked him.

“I'd have thought that was obvious!” he exclaimed. “Can't you see I have the- wait a second. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven.” He counted on his seven fingers, though usually he had only three (and a thumb). “Usually there's only six of you little ponies, and I don't see my dear friend Fluttershy among you. You haven't... **gasp wheeze** replaced her, have you? With this angry looking pony here?” His one arm suddenly shot forward to point at Susan.

“No, she's just off doing her own thing,” replied Rainbow Dash. “Are you really sick? I bet Sparkling Magic could heal you, couldn't you?”

“Yes, how is it possible for you to be sick?” asked Susan, taking a hesitant step to the side and away from the offending limb.

“Ah, you must be Sparkling Magic. Charmed!” He sneezed and a house that was nearby started floating around. He pulled his hand back, got up shakily, and gazed down at them.

“Same here. Are you all right?”

“Oh, just the blue flu. I'll be fine in a year or two. I guess. Maybe.”

“A year?” stammered Rarity. “What kind of disease is this?”

“You get used to it. Of course there is a cure, but I'm more interested in this... pony here. And that pony there.” He pointed to Sparkle. “They're a bit different, aren't they? Their magic isn't the same, I can tell that from here.”

“You can... of course you can. Why wouldn't you be able to?” asked Susan.

“Even in this state, I am still myself. Let's just see then, shall we?”

He snapped his fingers, and Susan was astonished to feel her connection to her *character sheet* somehow break, and he was holding it in his hand!

She was too shocked to even move as he looked it over.

“Oh I see,” he said at last. “That all seem to be in order then.” He sneezed again and handed it back to her, dripping wet.

“Uh...”

“Oh, yes of course. How rude of me.” He pulled a line out of the tree next to him and clipped the papers to it. “I'm sure they'll dry in no time.”

“How did you even do that?” Susan blurted. “You can’t just... I mean you did but it’s... How...”

“It seems your new friend is at a loss for words. Chaos magic, of course. I am sort of a master of it? It’s a bit on the fritz now though.” He snapped, looking at the house that was floating and it was put back, upside down. “Ah, close enough.”

“You mean there’s a branch of magic that really can show me another person’s character sheet? Or some equivalent?”

“Interested?” he asked with a grin. “I could give it to you.”

“Hey, I don’t trust this,” said Rainbow Dash. “Knowing you there’s some kind of catch.”

“Rainbow, I’m hurt. Aren’t we all friends here? I was just getting to that.”

“So there is a catch,” put in Applejack.

“If you call it that. She’ll just lose her mind.”

The ponies gasped.

“I don’t mean right away, of course!”

“Why would I lose my mind just using this so called chaos magic?”

“Oh it does funny things to others,” he replied, snapping again and restoring her connection. “Taking in the magic of the Chaos Moon will forever corrupt all other magic you do. And each time you cast a spell, a little more of yourself is given over to chaos. Soon, well, to put it simply and in your terms, you either die or become an NPC. No longer would your will be your own, magic would rule you. It’s pretty handy though, think it over.”

“Thanks but no thanks. Even if I could see character sheets-”

“It’s not just that. You can trade in cards, see someone’s exact *delay*, even go back and retroactively prepare for something you weren’t prepared for the first time. It’s quite useful.”

“And all it will cost me, in the end, is my sanity? Thanks, I have one being already after my mind, I don’t need two.”

“Too bad. You could have been my first Chaos Priest, and spread my words to other realms.”

“As interesting as this all is,” Applejack remarked, “did you come here for a reason?”

As if remembering, Discord sneezed again. “As difficult as it is for me, I’m here to ask for your help,” he said pathetically. “As I remember now that Fluttershy is on that trip of hers to see the Breezies, it falls to you ponies to take care of me. I mean we are friends, right? And friends do take care of each other?”

The ponies shared a glance, as if trying to convince themselves that the others hadn’t run off in terror and thus, they shouldn’t either.

“Can you cure him?” asked Rarity.

“Oh no!” said Discord, as if shocked. “She knows full well the sometimes awful effects of mixing different types of magic. Imagine her magic pitted against something that can make *me* sick! And don’t think of using *dead magic* to cure me either, thinking a magical disease will simply go away if you do. I’m basically made of magic, you’ll kill me, instead!”

The ponies looked to Susan. “I don’t know,” she said with a shake of her tail. *Hey, finally got the hang of that.* “I have spells to cure disease, but that assumes regular, every day stuff. Not something magical in nature itself. Could it fight back somehow? Would every single microorganism get a resistance check against it? There’s a lot of variables there.”

“Best not to chance it,” said Discord. “You never know what my magic might do, if you tried. No, I should let it pass naturally, in the company of my good friends.”

And so the group found themselves in Applejack’s barn, which she fixed up with a spare bed she had laying around. Susan, of course, had to send the *teleportal* back for Discord because he said he was too weak to go much further from that spot, but finally he was laying back.

“There must be something you can do,” Applejack pleaded. “I don’t want to lose my barn for a year!”

“I don’t want to antagonize him,” Susan admitted. “In a clash of our magics, I’m pretty sure his will win. He doesn’t seem to have any limits; energy, magical... I’ve been feeling him out, and his magic does feel *weird*. I can’t protect myself, or you guys, if he decides he’d rather have me out of the way. I seriously dread the thing The Darkness has taken over, if it

isn't him."

"Who's more powerful than Discord?"

"I'm afraid we'll soon find out."

"I couldn't help but overhear," shouted Discord, his ears shrinking back down from enormous size, "but if you are all serious about curing me, there is a way. Didn't I mention that before? I thought sure I did..."

"Let's hear it, this should be good," said Rainbow Dash.

"To the far south east, past the badlands where the dragons roam, there is a cave. Through this cave is a tunnel fraught with peril. At the end of this tunnel is an opening. Through the opening four pillars stand, carved with runes by long forgotten ponies. Past the pillars is a chamber, lit with eerie light. Past the light is a metal grating, ageless, timeless. Past the grating... is a breeding ground for a certain type of mushroom. Pluck a mushroom and bring it back here, and it can be used to create a potion that can cure this blue flu of mine."

"Why can't you just snap your fingers and wish yourself there?" asked Applejack.

"In my condition? I would never get past the guardian, of course."

"Guardian? Who guards a cave full of mushrooms?" asked Rarity.

"No one knows who put the guardian there," he replied in a whisper. "But it makes sense, doesn't it? To protect these mushrooms that only grow there? Obviously someone, long ago in history, wanted to keep the place to him or her self."

"Pretty convenient you finding out about it, then," sneered Rainbow Dash.

"You do know how long I've been around, don't you? I wasn't always a stone statue, after all. And I have to do something to keep myself occupied, so I travel. See the sights. Poke into things. You never know what you might find, am I right?"

"So how are we supposed to get there?" asked Applejack. "Susan, can you do it?"

"Never seen the place, so I can't go there, not directly anyway. Sorry."

"Oh, not to worry!" Discord said happily. "I can show you where to go. If we get started now we'll just make it by sundown."

"You mean fly all the way past the badlands?" said Rainbow Dash. "Even for me that's a bit of a stretch."

"Not to worry," Discord said with an evil grin. "You have everything you'll need with her around."

Discord had snapped his fingers and created a sort of golden chariot, complete with harness for one. "I'm supposed to pull that? It's huge!" she complained.

"I think I see where he's going with this," Susan said, shaking her head. "But seriously, did you have to make it out of solid gold?"

"I could have used depleted uranium. Under the circumstances I showed admirable restraint."

"What's that?" asked Pinkie.

"A very heavy metal. Plus it'll kill you. Slowly."

"That wouldn't be fun."

"No, it would not." Susan got out two anti-gravity units she had stuck into her sub-space dimension and giving them a twist, stuck them to the chariot. "Okay, Rainbow. It should be lighter now, but here," she slipped off her bracelet, feeling weight return to her, and handed it over. "This will make you a lot stronger. Plus we'll put some buffing magic on you, to make you faster. Hopefully that should be enough to help get us there before tonight."

"Is that what that does?" asked Rarity. "I thought it was rather gaudy, but I didn't want to say anything. It being magic explains a few things."

"It's a memento of another world, and some good friends of mine."

"What are those numbers that just appeared?" Rainbow asked after she slipped it on.

"How healthy we are. Touch that light purple one there and say "Speed Up" to raise your speed. Sparkle?"

"Yeah, yeah, your favorite spell and mine. *Acceleration.*"

"And now for mine- *Augment Skill: Pegasus Pony Weather Magic.*"

She zipped from one end of the barn to the other. "Do you see how fast I am now? This is great! And you could walk around like this all the time?"

“Not if I didn’t want to bump into stuff. Impress us with your flying power, not just running around. Come on.”

So everyone piled into the chariot and Rainbow zipped into the harness, shooting into the sky and carrying everyone.

Susan got out her book and looked over *Tireless*, and cast that on her too.

“Good thinking,” said Sparkle. “Who knows if she could keep that pace otherwise?”
She probably believes she can.

And so the group landed at the cave, and the magic fell away from Rainbow. She handed the bracelet back, too. “Thanks,” she said, trying not to let her excitement show. “For a while there, I was the fastest thing in Equestria. It’s not something I’ll soon forget.”

“Actually, Discord can just snap his fingers and be anywhere. So isn’t he still faster?”

“Thank you for that vote of confidence, Pinky Pie,” sniffed Discord, wiping a tear from his eye.

“I mean that actually move from place to place in a straight line.”

“Well, go on, straight through,” said Discord, waving a claw at them. “You can’t miss it.”

“Come on,” said Susan, glad to be away from Discord at last. “Let’s go see what this ‘guardian’ is all about.”

So they trooped through the tunnel. Susan was expecting traps or something of the kind, but the passageway was rather short, and there, as Discord had said, was a chamber. Odd light filtered down from above, shining through what looked to be various crystals, and there were the four pillars.

And three guardians. They appeared to be made of stone, three dragons with wicked looking spears in their claws. They were upright and tall, and each had a glowing crystal set in the forehead. One was set in front of the portcullis protecting the mushrooms, the other two at opposite ends of the room and within striking distance of the pillars.

“I don’t like the looks of this,” said Applejack, pacing around nervously. She put a hoof out to tap the statue, and jerked it back. Nothing happened.

“They are magic,” said Susan, getting a fourteen on *Magic Sense*.

“Here’s the mushrooms,” said Rarity. “What stops us from just floating them out to us?” Her horn lit up but then so did the crystal on the dragon by the portcullis, and she gasped. “It’s redirecting my magic to itself!”

“What does that mean?” asked Applejack.

“It’s like I’m trying to lift that whole statue by myself, rather than just a tiny mushroom. Twilight’s the one you need for heavy lifting power, darlings, I’m more about quantity.”

It’s true, she’s seen on the show levitating an impressive number of things at once, something my magic would struggle to do. No, that my brain would struggle to do. I often wondered how she multitasked so well.

“There’s writing on these pillars, does it mean anything?” asked Pinky.

Susan touched it and cast *Literacy*, and the gibberish resolved itself. “Apparently we need to have four ponies atop these pillars, that will open the gate. Hopefully I can then get past the guardian before the others can reach you and get out with a mushroom.”

“What about just smashing them before they come to life or whatever?” asked Rainbow, whacking one with a hoof.

“Oh, yes. That would be the smart thing to do. Why does no one try that in movies where statues are obviously about to come to life? Good thinking.”

“Of course! How about that, I’m starting to think like Daring Do already!”

So Susan became human and got out her sword and *Avatar of War* state, and even remembered to get out a *Time Anchor ward* and activate it. She smashed into the front statue with all her might and sparks flew.

The statue was undamaged.

Sparkle threw *Destruction* at it, but the jewel just glowed again and redirected it to a nearby piece of stone.

“Okay, that’s different.”

“How about *Phase?*”

“I’ll try it.” Again, the magic was redirected and the statue itself was phased, which didn’t help them much.

“Wait, try your magic now!” suggested Susan to Rarity, who tried plucking a mushroom.

The gem still lit up, and the statue stayed where it was.

“*Dimension Step?*” wondered Sparkle.

“I hate to push it. Whatever that gem is, it seems determined to negate everything we try.”

“Then I guess it’s pillar time,” said Rarity with disgust. “I guess you’ll have to lift us up there, Rainbow Dash?”

“I’m already on top of mine,” yelled Pinky.

“How in the world...”

“Just climb up!”

“But when- Never mind. What do you mean, climb up?”

“I can show you,” said Susan, a bit sadly as it seemed Pinkie already knew about it.

“Everypony ready?” asked Rainbow Dash, about to land on the pillar.

“Ready!” everypony called. Susan was in position just in front of the statue. Sparkle was to hang back and defend the others with *Deflection* or try to take the statues out by busting their legs or whatever with her Ryūdō.

Rainbow landed on the pillar, and Susan expected to roll *Initiative* against the statue.

Nothing happened.

“Is it broken?” asked Applejack. “It has been here a spell. Get it. A *spell?*”

Susan rolled her eyes. “The gems still work, I don’t know why the pillars wouldn’t it.”

“It specifically said ponies had to be atop them?” asked Sparkle, looking up at the ponies.

“Yes.”

“How does it know?”

“I figured weight or something, you think-”

“I got mine!” shouted Pinky, and Susan turned. Hers was lit up with pink energy, the runes now glowing.

“How in Equestria did you do that?” asked Applejack, surprised.

“Just put magic into it. It’s easy.”

The others concentrated, and the four pillars lit up. As they did, the metal bars began to slowly rise with a scraping sound, clearing the way forward into the chamber. The eyes of the dragon statues seemed to glow, and as one they stepped forward, smoothly bringing their spears to bear.

Susan shot forward, hoping to at least get on the other side of her statue so she could be in position when the bars were fully retracted.

Wait a second, I know Deflection, I should have had Sparkle dart under the bars, put a mushroom in her sub-space pocket, and get out again. Shoot.

The statue swung its lance in a wide arc, gouging the floor and making sparks fly. Susan jumped back away from it being missed by centimeters.

Sparkle held her action, waiting for the statues to make their move. She didn’t have long to wait. “*Deflection,*” she cast, as both stabbed towards the ponies nearest them. The spell went wild as their gems glowed, and both were forced to dodge or be skewered. Applejack simply pivoted, planted her front hooves and lashed out with her back hooves, knocking the weapon aside. Rarity did a most unflattering flattening of herself to the pillar while squeezing her eyes closed and yelling at the top of her lungs.

Like that’s going to help, thought Sparkle. “Defensive magic is out too!” she shouted,

“Get in there!”

Sparkle and Susan were up again, so again Susan tried to get past the statue but it moved like a serpent and blocked her path again. *Doesn't matter, the bars still aren't all the way up.*

Sparkle cast “*Entangle!*” but the plants were redirected to the entranceway, doing no pony any good.

Then the statues went again. *My goodness those things are fast!* Sparkle thought, watching them act as one and again try to make pony kebabs. Rarity, eyes still closed couldn't exactly dodge this time, and cried out as the spear sunk into her. All heads turned towards her.

“Rarity!” everyone shouted, and Rainbow's wings pumped once, shooting her off the pillar and into the statue. She was trying to smack it away from Rarity, but as soon as she cut the flow of magical power to the pillar, the portcullis smashed down and the statues meekly took a step back and assumed their former positions.

“Are you okay?” Rainbow asked anxiously, holding her up.

“I'm afraid this is the end for me, sweet Rainbow Dash,” she said dramatically. “Never again to see the light of day. Or make another dress. Or scold Sweetie Belle for doing something that she means well at trying but screws up in every. Possible. Way. Tell Twilight and the others that I love them all, and they were such good friends of mine-”

“If you can talk that much, you must be fine,” said Susan, by that time standing next to her on the pillar. (It wasn't actually that high for a human, and Susan can jump really high now, remember?) She stuck the knife next to the wound and it healed right up, leaving just a red mark on her flank.

“Oh, I guess I'm fine after all,” she said, getting up. “Goodness, that red does look fetching against my white coat, doesn't it?” She gasped. “I just had the most wonderful idea! What about instead of making clothes for ponies, why not just *paint* clothes on? That would show off a ponies' physique and look simply dashing! Plus it would wear off so they would have to come have it applied again and again- the bits would just roll in! Oh I can't wait to try it!”

“Yeah, you're fine,” said Rainbow, rolling her eyes. “But we need a new plan. That did not work.”

“No it did not,” Susan agreed. “We'll have to think more defensively next time, give you all armor rather than rely on spells cast on the fly. Because we saw how well that worked.”

“Yeah, what were you doing? I could have gotten by that statue thing easily!”

“You could, could you?”

“Like it was nothing.”

“Maybe you'd like to face it down this time, and I'll stay on the pillar where it's nice and safe.”

“Why don't you do that?”

“Maybe I will!”

“Actually,” put in Sparkle, “that's not such a bad idea.”

“Huh?” both said.

“Think about it. They went for the closest targets, this pillar and that one. What if we were on those pillars instead? That would be way safer, we know how to *dodge*.” Rarity just sniffed. “Rainbow keeps the third one there busy with her aerial acrobatics and when the gate is up, she just zips in and out with a mushroom.”

Susan considered, looking over at a grinning Rainbow Dash who looked eager to try it. “That's not a bad plan,” she admitted. “We can defend ourselves better, no offense Applejack, that was a nice hit on your part.”

“Naturally.”

“I was going to suggest you going to get the mushroom, but you're in the same amount of danger either way. I can't think of any major problems with it, and if you're willing Rainbow Dash, we'll get it set up for the next run.”

“Let's do this!”

So this time two armored “ponies” sat atop the two nearest pillars, and Rainbow was

flying around the room. Susan held her sword with Unicorn magic, which apparently was enough for the pillar which was already glowing. Sparkle nodded she was ready and put power into it, so the others activated theirs.

This time things went much better. The statues were just as fast, but this time they faced opponents with lots of combat experience. The one even had his spear snapped off by Sparkle hitting it with Ryūdō, but it continued to flail about as though it wasn't broken so she just had to stand there, head cocked to the side like 'what are you doing?' Apparently it hadn't been 'programmed' with what to do should that happen. Rainbow Dash was as good as her word, getting into the room with little trouble, and held a mushroom up amidst the cheers of her friends.

"You did good, Rainbow," Susan admitted, ruffling her mane. She was back in human form, that *scene* now being over. "You really are twenty percent cooler than me."

"Of course- wait, you even know about that?"

Everyone laughed in relief, and they presented the mushroom to a Discord who seemed to have gotten over his illness with an unmatched speed. He seemed pleased as well.

"Oh, well done all of you!" he congratulated them. "Especially you, Susan. Making that sacrifice for the good of the mission, why, I wasn't sure you had it in you."

"It was a good plan, and are you telling me this was some kind of test?"

"I had to *know*," he said at a whisper.

"You dragged us all out here for nothing!?" demanded Applejack.

"Not nothing. I saw your faces in there, you all felt great for having worked together and overcome a significant challenge. I might even go so far as to say you're just a little better friends now, or am I wrong? A little shared danger will do that, I've noticed."

No one had an answer.

"So we weren't in any actual danger?" Rarity asked, noticing the red on her coat was gone.

"I'll leave that up to your imagination," he said with a wink. "Now, a word in your ear, Susan, if you don't mind?" He was holding her ear and she slapped a hand over her head where it used to be. "And don't worry, the others won't hear this. Something is *coming*. Something I don't even know if I could stop, if I tried. You sacrificed something small this time, your place in the spotlight, and let someone else come up with the plan that worked. But the next time your sacrifice will have to be a bit larger, and again you're going to have to trust somepony else to come up with the plan. I hope you're up to it." He let the ear go, and it flapped over to Susan and reattached itself. "Let me know if you change your mind about being a chaos priest, Susan. We could do marvelous things together! Ta Ta, everyone! I'll be seeing you!"

He snapped his fingers and the chariot, the cave, the mushroom, and he vanished in a burst of light.

"Guess I'll just get us home then, shall I?" Susan said with disgust. "Thanks for the consideration, Discord."

Ain't no Tunnel of Love

When: 12th day in Equestria

Where: Library, With the CMC, with books

That afternoon, as "Twilight Time" was finishing up, Apple Bloom cleaned up her potion making equipment and came over to Susan.

"Uh, Susan?" she began.

"What's up, Bloom?"

"My sister has to go deliver some pies two days from now, and she's gonna be gone for nearly two days after that. She doesn't want me staying on my own but Sweetie Belle said she had fun staying with you so I just wondered if you weren't doing anything maybe you'd like to come and stay at my house so she feels better about the whole thing because I know she trusts you."

"Slow down, Bloom!" Susan laughed. "I'd be happy to stay on the farm with you. Unless, Twilight, you know of something going down soon?"

"Let's see. In the past couple of days we've had Rainbow Dash's Birth-a-versary."

"I still say Cheese Sandwich sounded familiar. I wish I could place that voice! But what a great singer he was!"

"Yes. Watched the Pony Tones perform after healing Big Macintosh, and helped me with teaching the Crusaders. The Breezies are supposed to head through town tomorrow, but honestly if you could just put your *Teleportal* at either end they won't even have to go through town. That would only take you minute."

"True. I could just give somepony who's seen where they have to go a *ward*. Then I wouldn't even have to be there."

"So no, unless The Darkness shows up, we're set. Why do you keep glancing out the window, Scootaloo?"

"I just have the strangest feeling my entire class is going to show up for some reason. I can't shake it."

Great, did I somehow screw reality up for these ponies?

"Don't worry about it," Twilight made a brush off motion with her hoof.

And so with the Breezies safely in their home without incident, Susan stood with Applejack and Big Macintosh before their apple pie carts on the 14th day in Equestria.

"And you're really okay with this?" asked Applejack.

Susan chuckled. "I'm basically freeloading off you ponies, and until The Darkness makes a move I can prepare here or anywhere. I'm glad to give you some piece of mind so you can get your pies where they need to go."

"Not that I couldn't stay here on my own," Apple Bloom insisted.

"You know, Sweetie Belle said the same thing to me." She turned to Applejack. "Must be about that age, you know?"

"I remember when I was her age. Well, all right. But it's not just her, there's a lot of work to be done on a farm."

"I saw the list. It's no big deal, honestly."

"Yeah, go on, big sister. We both know who this is, can you really say she couldn't handle it?"

"I suppose not. All right." She went and stepped into her harness. "I'll see you two in a couple of days."

"See you then."

That day went smoothly, Susan doing the harder chores around the farm and leaving the easier ones to Apple Bloom. The next day she asked if they could go and Susan could give her some tips on bucking apples. Susan said sure, so the two of them went out to the fields to practice.

"Now remember," she said, setting some baskets out under the tree. "Move your magic through your body and into the tree. Imagine it lightly striking all the apples and knocking

them into these baskets. It's not about how hard you hit the tree, it's about how well you control your power."

"Here goes."

They practiced for a half hour or so and finally all the apples were off that tree, and they moved to the next. "All right, I'll get more of them at once this time!" Bloom insisted, delivering a mighty kick to the tree. Susan shook her head, about to remind her it wasn't about STrength when the tree ripped out of the ground and fell over. Both ponies stared at it.

"I guess I don't know my own strength," remarked Bloom. She turned to look at her flank. "No tree kicking cutie mark, what does it *want* from me?"

"Uh, I don't think that was you, completely," said Susan, looking over the site.

"What do you mean? I bucked the tree and it fell over. Even I know about cause and effect! Man, my sister is gonna be mad I ruined a tree..."

"What I mean is, look for yourself."

She pointed down at the hole ripped open where the tree used to be and there seemed to be a tunnel under it. "What would have caused that?" she asked, walking around the hole for a better look.

"I don't know, and I think it's time I did. This is the third tunnel I've found around Ponyville since I got here, and it's starting to worry me."

"You mean like the well thing? Sweetie Belle told me about that."

"Exactly. Then there was that collapsing house, and thankfully the pony that lived there wasn't seriously hurt. If this problem gets worse there could be major structural damage to the town before long."

"And if we can't buck trees because they'll fall over, it's the end of Sweet Apple Acres. Are we waiting for my sister to get back?"

Susan shook her head. "I want to get to the bottom of this immediately. Go and get Sparkle, would you? She should be sleeping around here somewhere. We're going to see what's digging all these tunnels."

"Sure thing."

She returned with Sparkle in tow, wearing something odd on head with another one slung across her back.

"She really did buck a tree down," remarked Sparkle, looking down the hole. "And we have our third time."

"Which is why we three are taking a journey to *the center of the earth!*"

"You really think it'll go that deep?" Apple Bloom asked excitedly.

"I hope not, my insurance only covers holes less than six feet."

"Oh, here, take your lantern."

Lantern. Get a load of this kid!

Hey, she hasn't been conditioned to think with magic like we have. And it makes sense, why be at a penalty when something technological will do the job?

What the- you're actually impressed, aren't you? That she thought ahead. I don't believe this.

Susan took it and strapped it on her head, then moved the tree out of the way so they could get down into the hole.

"You think you can put it someplace else?" Bloom asked sadly, as Susan lowered it to the ground out of the way.

"Sure. I have a spell to dig a hole. When we get back and see where these tunnels aren't we'll plant it again. It'll be fine."

"Great!"

Beams on, the three wandered through tunnel after tunnel. Sparkle was in the lead, having the best dark vision, then Susan, then Bloom. The tunnels seemed endless, and there were multiple branches going off in every direction.

"I'm getting a bit worried," said Bloom, as they passed another intersection.

“Like claustrophobic worried, ‘oh sweet Celestia I’m underground and there’s no escape and I’m going to die’ sort of thing, or just ‘all these tunnels under Ponyville can’t be natural’ kind of worried.”

“The second one. Who or whatever has been doing this has been at it a long time.”

“I hear you. Where do you think we are now? The farm is pretty far from the town, you think we’re at the city limit yet?”

“Maybe. We’ve come pretty far.”

“These tunnels are awful big, too,” Susan said, starting to walk again. “I mean I don’t even have to bend down or anything. Where is all the dirt going? These walls are pretty even too, I don’t think this was some kind of huge worm. It would leave debris and stuff as it scraped along. Unless it had some kind of acid skin, and was just dissolving the ground. That would be a scary thought, some kind of huge worm taken over by The Darkness, and I can’t even hit it with my sword because it would just eat through it. And I couldn’t throw magic at it because The Darkness would shut it down. But we did learn a trick, if Sparkle and I both cast something at the same time it can’t get both. Would that really be something even Discord couldn’t stop? There’s another branch of tunnels, they really do seem to go for miles. Shoot, there’s a spell that will provide a map of an area if you walk along it. I should have gotten that going when we dropped in here. We haven’t made any turns, I’m going to get some paper and rush this corridor again, maybe do some mapping down here. What do you say, Bloom, do you mind staying with Sparkle for a minute?” She turned around. “Apple Bloom? And I’m talking to myself...”

And she was, there was no longer a filly following her. *Only the grim specter of her own failure for letting Applejack down when she discovers you let her sister die.*

Knock it off, Darkness, I don’t need a macabre voiceover. “Sparkle, hey wait, Bloom is gone!”

She whirled and ran back. “Gone? It’s a tunnel, where could she go?”

“She wouldn’t be stupid enough to go down a side passage without me, right?”

Making a lot of assumptions right now.

Susan dug a trench across the tunnel with a hoof. “Just so we know not to go past this if I get turned around. Come on, she can’t be far.” She ran two steps then stopped again.

“Ugh, I’m an idiot. Been hanging around people like Harry too much. *Telesummon.*” No small pony appeared.

“Oh dear,” said Sparkle.

“Either she fell down a shaft, and so she’s not in a general ‘that way’ direction anymore or...”

“She’s dead.”

“Yeah, let’s not jump to any conclusions. Come on.”

The two peered down a nearby juncture and Sparkle made a *perception* check, getting a seventeen. “Look, signs of a struggle!” she pointed out, running forward a bit.

“So she didn’t fall. Come on, we can catch up to whoever did this and maybe get some answers!” She dug into the ground again, then marked an E for ‘exit’ pointing the way they came, and the two were off.

This passage didn’t go far before it split again, and Susan made another mark and pointed to the right. “This way.”

“What, you see something?”

“No, I know something. She couldn’t have gone *this* way because my spell would have pulled her out. She must have gone parallel to us down this passageway.”

“I guess I can’t fault that logic. Come on.”

The tunnels branched again and again, making Susan with her *no sense of direction* completely lost. She was forced to stop and spend the two minutes per time asking *Question* if Apple Bloom had gone down this way, but finally caught up to the perpetrators. She peered around a corner and into a larger chamber where a group of what appeared to be humanoid

dogs were arguing about something.

Diamond Dogs, Susan recalled, from the episode where a couple of them had abducted Rarity for her gem finding spell. They basically lived underground and searched for shiny things, to what end though wasn't clear. Rarity turned the tables on them because they were kind of stupid, and she was a mane character (get it?) but these looked a little more rough and tumble.

There were six of them of various sizes, and they all wore a sort of vest with crystals shoved in the pockets. They all had a collar on, the largest one wearing one with better looking gems stuck into it. They had some lights going so the place was lit, but she couldn't make out what they were saying. In one corner Bloom was stuck in a cage seemingly made of rock.

So I'll just go in there, bash them around a bit, and rescue her, was Susan's first thought. But then she had a second one. *That won't solve the problem. Remember chess. What's my objective right now?*

- 1) *Rescue Apple Bloom without harm*
- 2) *Figure out why these tunnels are being dug*
- 3) *Stop them from digging more*

Just beating them up, they won't tell me anything. This calls for more strategic thinking. What? Not solving a problem with outright violence? I grow more disappointed in you by the day around here it seems. Then maybe for once I'm on the right track. Grumble grumble. Did you just say- never mind.

"Here's the plan," she whispered to Sparkle. "You go *Invisible* and get past them. I'll keep them focused on me and you can get her through a *Teleportal* and back home. You have a *ward* for that, right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. I'll see if I can get them to tell me what they're up to, and meet you back there."

"Got it." She backed off so the light from the spell didn't fall across the entrance to the chamber so much and vanished.

Susan got out her *Enhance Sword*, not bothering with the *Crystal Blade* because she didn't want to look *too* scary and just make them run off. She needed them to think they had a chance and stuck around long enough to spill the beans.

She gave Sparkle twenty seconds or so and stepped into the light, sword floating next to her.

"I'll be taking my filly back now," she announced.

"Told you she would come," one smacked the other on the back of the head.

"How did she find us?" he replied, rubbing his head.

"Where did she get that?" asked another.

"Must be a trick," said the fifth.

"Quiet!" said the big one. "You are in our territory now, mare," it sneered. "You cannot make demands of us."

"We are many, you are one," said the smallest one, while still trying to hide behind the big one.

"You do see the size of my sword, don't you?"

"You see the size of our clubs, don't you?" one said, picking up some kind of snapped off stalactite. The others reached for theirs and grinned at her.

"Perhaps we could come to some kind of agreement," Susan said, hoping she sounded a bit nervous.

"Now she wants to talk," said the big one. "Not so much bluster now!" They all laughed.

"What are you all doing down here, anyway?"

"Doing what diamond dogs do," said the smallest one. "Digging! Looking for treasure!"

"What? Under an apple orchard?"

“Diamond dogs very thorough. Big treasure here someplace!”

“Really? Know that for a fact do you?”

“Told it! Told it! Won’t share it with you, Diamond Dogs did all the work!”

“I don’t want your treasure, you’ve certainly been busy down here. It must be a lot of work to create so many tunnels.”

“It is, it is!”

“Quiet!” said the big one. “We tell you nothing!”

“Not even who told you about the treasure? I mean I would hate to think you were looking for nothing. Are you sure someone wasn’t just tricking you?”

“Who told us? Who did tell us?” The big one looked at the others, who gave him a blank stare back. “Was it you?”

“I thought it was him.”

“It wasn’t me. It was him.”

“It couldn’t have been me!”

They went on bickering until the big one shut them up again.

“So you don’t even remember,” Susan said with a sigh.

“It’s here someplace, and diamond dogs will find it!”

They howled.

“I’m sure you will.”

Meanwhile, Sparkle had made her RESolve check to not freak out while walking past the dogs, (because of her *Phobia* weakness) and got a fourteen, accounting for the -1 penalty for Invisibility.

I’m invisible, they can’t see me. I can sneak past them, they aren’t even looking this way. They aren’t even dogs, they just happen to look like dogs but they live underground like dwarves. That’s all they are, is dwarves. Without beards. Or axes. Or helmets. Or rousing drinking songs. Or a universal antagonism with elves.

She finally made her way over to Apple Bloom, who was waiting to see what Susan would do. *I could easily bust her out of there with Ryūdō, but that is Spirit Energy based and does make a flash. I don’t know how sensitive to light these dog things eyes are, they probably have a better sense of smell than anything else. But should I chance it?*

“Apple Bloom,” she whispered. “Hey, Apple Bloom.”

She made her equivalent to a REASON check, getting a ten. “Sparkle, is that you?” she whispered back.

“Yeah. Look, while she’s busy you need to get out of there. I can get you home but the magic will make a light. We need to go around the corner and out of sight.”

“I’m kinda stuck in this cage, if ya hadn’t noticed.”

“Try using Earth Pony magic. That cage is made of rock, and you’ve been practicing using your magic to do certain things. Well, send it into the bars and snap them off.”

She considered. “I guess if I can make an apple fall off a tree way over there when I’m on the ground, I should be able to make a bar fall off a cage when it’s right here. Okay, I’ll try it.”

“No, not yet. Wait until they’re totally distracted. I’m going to set the *teleportal* up out of sight over there. You can’t see me pointing. You see that passageway opposite where Susan is?”

“Yeah.”

“Down there. Smack your way out and run towards it.”

“Got it.”

Just as the dogs howled, Bloom delivered a mighty kick to the bars of the cage, trying to force magic through them. With a two rating and five energy put into the attempt, she got a seventeen to bust out, and sprang free. She stuck her tongue out at the dogs and fled down the corridor, through the hole in the air and back to the farm.

Sparkle was waiting for her. “Good timing, now we wait for Susan.”

“Will she be all right?”

“I’m more concerned about those creatures, even if they are mostly doglike.”

"We will!" replied the dogs.

"I just have a sort of request though. Can you dig a little lower down? I don't mind so much you digging the place up, but doing it so close to the surface is causing the ponies trouble. And believe me, you don't want to cause ponies trouble."

"Trouble? What trouble?" asked one.

"Things falling into your tunnels, like houses. If ponies start getting hurt you know they're going to come, in great numbers, and make sure no pony gets hurt again. Where will that leave you?"

"We aren't afraid of a few ponies!"

"Really? What about a dozen royal guards, in full plate armor and trained in battle? A single unicorn is standing here, unafraid to face you, what do you think twice your own number would do to you?"

"We could still win!" insisted the big one.

"Not likely. Believe me, dig deeper and fill in the tunnels you've already dug. Besides, it's for your protection as much as the ponies. What if you're digging under something heavy and it falls right on top of you just then? You don't want that, do you?"

The group got into a huddle, and had a quick discussion about it.

"We'll think about it," the leader promised, turning back to her.

"That's all I can ask. Well, you boys have fun, okay?"

She turned to go.

"Hey, what about your little pony friend?"

"What pony friend?"

"The one we captured!"

"I don't recall any such thing."

"She's right- she escaped! You tricked us!"

"I did? When? I was just standing here and talking. One of you must have been assigned to watch her. Don't blame me if you can't do your jobs."

"It was your turn!" one said to the other.

"No, it was his turn!"

"No, I had a turn last time!"

Susan just shook her head and backed off down the tunnel. One quick *teleportal* later and she was standing back with Apple Bloom and Sparkle and putting her sword away again.

"I'm glad yer okay!" Bloom said, hugging her.

"I'm glad you are!" Susan replied. "Nice escape job, I watched you bust out of the cage. You did good."

"Thanks."

"Now, let's see about getting this tree replanted, and then we'll head down to the mayor's office. I want to know what she has to say about diamond dogs digging up her town."

“So that’s the story,” said Applejack, as the sun was being lowered and the moon was going up that evening. “I hate to ask you for more help like this, Apple Bloom can’t stop going on about how you moved those trees that were in danger of falling into those tunnels made by those no good diamond dogs. But this is serious!”

Twilight and Susan shared a look. “I remember those two, the Flim Flam brothers,” said Susan. “They had a good invention, and if they hadn’t pushed it past what it could actually do, they might have won that cider making competition.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“The trouble is, there’s really no law against selling a tonic, as long as can’t hurt anypony,” said Twilight. “As far as their claims, well, we would have to prove it in a lab, and nopony has time for that.”

“But what about claiming it’s magical when it ain’t?” asked Applejack.

“There you might have a genuine grievance. I think we could stop down to their tent tonight and take a look for ourselves.”

“Trixie would also like to come,” said Trixie, who had finally cornered Twilight about the “duel” Susan had suggested, and they had been talking about the logistics when Applejack had arrived.

“It couldn’t hurt,” admitted Twilight. “Two known experts in magic and you, Susan, who has been seen around town now a little while. Ponies are getting to know who you are.”

“Only because I fell in with your group.”

“No, because the crusaders can’t stop telling everypony about you,” she replied with a giggle. “But even so, you’re the only one among us that can tell if this so called ‘elixir’ is actually magic.”

“Ahem!” said Sparkle.

“Sorry, one of two among us. But I don’t think they would believe a filly... or a cat. Sorry, Sparkle. Even around Ponyville, that might be a bit too much to ask.”

“Discrimination! Here, of all places! I can’t believe it. One of these days it’s going to be the world of the cats and it’ll be humans serving us.”

Wait, isn’t that any world with cats?

“Anyway, let’s go before the show is over for the night!” insisted Applejack.

“Trixie, I have a mission for you,” said Susan as the ponies walked out the door. “Find a police pony and have them meet us down by the tent. I want an official presence there if possible. Everypony knows you studied under Princess Celestia, Twilight, but that still doesn’t mean you can arrest anypony, should it become necessary.”

“That’s true.”

“Trixie will not fail you!” She galloped off.

“Come on, tent is just outside of town.”

Why am I not surprised.

So the group, Apple Bloom included, went down to the tent and saw a white pony with gray hair singing his way out.

“That pony looks familiar,” said Apple Bloom.

“That’s the pony that got cured last night! What’s he doing back here?” asked Applejack.

“Let’s ask him,” Susan said simply, since the cycle of suffering is sadly circular.

But he saw the intense looking group making a beeline for him and tried to scamper.

“Running now?” said Susan, having *Spirit Stepped* in front of him and causing him to bump off her. “You must be feeling better.”

“Wha- what do you want?”

“The thing I always want. Answers.”

"I don't have to talk to you!"

He tried to dart around her, but two unicorn magic force bubbles appeared around him, and lifted him off the ground.

"Maybe not, but you do have to come with us," Twilight said, and Susan passed control of the struggling pony over to her. (Meaning, she dropped her part of the magic.) "Let's go inside, shall we?"

The group, now plus one, pushed into the tent and the two brothers stopped the money collection process midgrab.

"Now what's all this?" asked the pony with the apple slice cutie mark.

"It seems highly irregular," said the pony with the apple minus one slice cutie mark.

Which one is Flim and which one is Flam? Oh well.

"We've come to see if the claims for your product are true," Susan said, forcing her way through the crowd with ease. (Partially due to the fact she was far stronger than anypony here, and partially because most of the crowd was the sick, infirm, or aged. They couldn't fight back if they wanted to.)

"Ask him," said the pony Susan was now going to think of as "Flim." "He'll tell you, we all saw it right before our very eyes!"

"Oh, I can do you one better than that," insisted Susan. "Applejack, when did you say you saw this pony before?"

Applejack gave her the time. "Excellent." Susan jumped on stage and faced the ponies gathered there. "Hello friends, just one moment of your time and I guarantee, you'll be an angry mob in- I mean we'll get to the truth of this matter in no time. What you're about to see is time, yes time my friends, replayed here right before your very eyes. Let's see what Applejack saw just earlier this day, shall we? *Time Area!*" With a fifteen result, time started replaying, and there was a ghostly copy of the brothers onstage, and this very pony was seen taking the 'elixir' and getting down off his crutches.

"Same glasses, and same... overalls to hide the obvious cutie mark."

"Just a coincidence," assured 'Flam.'

"Uh huh. What do you say, oh crowd?"

They started shouting for more proof, and Susan looked over at the brothers.

"Say now, you can't just come barging in here and take over our show. We'll have the police after you!"

"You're in luck," Susan said, as Trixie and a pony with a police cap came in from the entrance. "We can have this out right here." She waved for silence and the crowd complied.

"For now, you all go home. If this tonic works, it'll be here tomorrow. You can come back then. If it doesn't, well, these fine boys will either be behind bars or singing a different tune."

"Move along here!" ordered the officer pony. "Clear this tent."

"There's no law against selling our tonic!" insisted Flim when the tent was empty.

"But potions are regulated," shot back Twilight, floating a bottle of the stuff over to her. "And I don't see any ingredients listing on this bottle. That's flouting the law as well."

"For this very reason," explained Susan to Bloom, who nodded. "Plus, if a pony was allergic to one of the ingredients, the brothers could be sued if they died after taking it. So it protects them as well as the consumer."

"Potions? Who said our tonic was a potion? We made so such claim, did we brother?"

"No we did not, brother!"

"Now just a dog gone minute. I heard you say your cure was magical! Su- Sparkling Magic can use her time spell and prove it."

"Ah, now there you're mistaken," said Flam. "We said our cure 'sounded' magical, but we made no claim as to be actually *being* magical."

Her mouth dropped open a little bit.

"Is that right, miss?" asked the officer.

Applejack grabbed the bottle and looked at the label. She looked around the tent. All that was there was signage relating to the name. It didn't say magical anywhere. "I guess it is."

But it's awfully underhoofed, leading ponies on like that."

"We're sorry you misunderstood. Now, perhaps if this matter is cleared up?"

"There's still the issue of the product label," said the officer, grabbing the bottle for himself. "And the claim this pony has been seen cured twice. How do you respond to that accusation?"

"I've... never been here before tonight?" hedged the pony, who was still floating in the air.

"You claim that isn't you?" The police pony pointed to the still image of the pony on stage, frozen where Susan had "paused" the magic.

"Yes?"

"Somehow I'm not convinced."

"How do we know that isn't some kind of illusion?" asked Flim.

"I was here," said Applejack. "As was my sister, my brother, and my grandmother. We'll all give an official statement this is the scene we saw earlier."

The officer considered. "It's still a bit of your word against theirs, but if this filly here will come with me to the station and cast the same spell, perhaps we can verify it truly does show the past."

"Happy to oblige!" said Susan.

"Then let's go, all three of you."

"Wait!" said both brothers. "There must be some sort of agreement we could come to here?"

"Yes, a meeting of the minds. Anything!"

"Scared?" asked Susan. "All right officer, let's say these boys made an honest mistake and were looking to rectify the situation to avoid jail time. Of course they would have to refund all money so far taken in."

"Of course."

"Label the bottles properly."

"Goes without saying."

"And I can't help but notice..." She rewound the *Time Area* and let it play again. "The claim of how quickly the product works. I mean that pony was cured like magic." *Like my magic. I could cure all those ponies that come here, and then spend my life doing nothing but that. I didn't realize in such a magic society ailments like that even could exist. Weird. I suppose I shouldn't feel bad. I do plan on doing something similar back home, once I find Luna and rescue my father.*

And leave all other worlds to burn, is that it? Suits me fine.

Oh, right. Darn, what am I going to do...

"What are you driving at?"

Susan shook her mane to clear her head. *Time to consider that when I've actually done the two things I'm trying to do.* "I'm saying they must offer a 100% money back guarantee. Let the buyer take the product on stage. If they're cured, fine. If they aren't..." she looked over at the brothers.

"What if we toned our act down a bit, just said the juice- I mean tonic had certain health benefits? That it wasn't a cure all?"

"That would be acceptable."

"You're willing to drop the charges against them if they do that?" he asked Applejack.

"Refunds, better labeling, and less wild claims? Yes, that'll be fine."

"Very well. I'll be round in the morning to make sure you're keeping your end of the bargain."

"Of course, officer. Of course!"

"Then I wish you ponies a good night."

"Woohoo!" said Applejack as the group came out of the tent. "That showed em! Thanks for your help, everypony."

"Did we?" asked Susan. "Lately I've been trying to think more about solving the problem instead of just the short term solution." *Like this Darkness problem I'm having. All*

these worlds, is this really the best way to about things? “And I have to ask myself, what would I do in their hooves?”

“You heard them... oh. Well, what would you do?”

“Pull up stakes in the dead of night and be gone by morning. There’s lots of towns out there but only one Applejack to get suspicious of them. They start up in a new town and no pony questions it, we haven’t solved anything.”

“You think they didn’t mean a word of what they said?”

“I think that’s a distinct possibility.”

“I’ll have some officers stake the place out tonight. If they try to run, we’ll catch them.”

Oh yeah, I was thinking I would have to come out here tonight myself. Rough them up a little if I caught them leaving. But we have the law on our side this time. Why am I a bit disappointed and why does that scare me?

“But what would you charge them with?” asked Twilight. “Just leaving isn’t against the law.”

“Ah, but the deal with Applejack here was they do certain things. We can still arrest them for fraud and unsafe food handling if they aren’t going to uphold their side. Packing up shows clear intent to defraud. You can come down to the station and make your statement now, if you’d like. Just so we have everything nice and tidy for the morning.”

“Sounds like a plan to me. Come along, Apple Bloom. The rest ya’ll, I’ll see tomorrow.”

“See you, Applejack.”

The next morning, Twilight slipped a paper over to Susan and showed her the picture on the front page of the brothers being led away in hoofcuffs. “They tried to run,” she said, pointing to the headline.

“Now we’ve solved the problem,” said Susan with a grin.

Later that day she heard some kind of rhythmic thumping coming from upstairs and suddenly a drum was added. It cut off rather suddenly, but Susan had *Curious* so she went up to see what was going on.

She found Rainbow Dash sitting on a simple stool, and Twilight in front of a chalkboard with some ponies drawn on it, separated by chalk lines.

Twilight looked annoyed. Dash looked bored.

“Hey Susan!” called Dash. “You don’t have a spell to help me learn stuff, do you?”

“Sort of. What’s this?” Susan walked over to the board and looked it over.

“*This* is my lecture on the history of the Wonderbolts,” she growled. “But it seems Rainbow Dash here would rather goof off than learn it.”

“Why do you want to?” Susan asked her.

“I don’t,” was the reply.

“Seems a bit of wasted effort then.”

“She *has* to learn it,” Twilight insisted. “If she wants to pass the test and become a reserve member of the Wonderbolts.”

“Ah. I see. Aren’t they just, like, stunt flyers or something?”

“They have a lot of functions, actually,” Twilight explained. “Their role has evolved over time. Maybe *you* should listen to my history lecture!”

“I’d love to. But then, I don’t have to pass a test about it, so my interest would be purely to satisfy my curiosity. Not to actually memorize a bunch of stuff. Two very different things.”

“But you could,” asked Dash slyly.

“I have a good memory, and still one point left in *history* from my *history of magic* class. I could probably make that check if I put my mind to learning- why are you grinning at me like that.”

“You could turn into me and take my test for me!”

“Uh, no. Sorry Dash, but that’s not going to happen.”

“Why not? You seem to like learning new stuff, just like Twilight. I just want to fly.”

“And therein lies the reason they probably make you do it.”

“Huh?”

“Look, Rainbow Dash,” she grabbed the stool and sat down. “What does a flying group need with ponies learning history anyway?”

“That’s what I said!”

“Because it isn’t about learning history. And that’s the point.”

“I say again: huh?”

“Look, they need to know you have a certain discipline about yourself. But they can’t really test for that directly, can they? I’m sure being a Wonderbolt isn’t all lounging around and getting wing massages. It’s a lot of hard work. One way to weed out candidates who might just give up is with things like... a history test. Can you demonstrate at least a passing willingness to do something you don’t want to do in order to do something you do want to do? In your case, fly with the Wonderbolts. If you can, great, you’ve shown your mettle in a way they can quantify. If you can’t then your desire isn’t strong enough and you’re out.”

“I guess I can see that. But what am I supposed to do? Listening to Twilight drone on about stuff that happened over a thousand years ago is boring!”

“I do not ‘drone,’” Twilight said in a huff.

“That long, huh? I guess that’s the downside to having an immortal ruler. They think their own personal history is the length of time ponies should learn about.” She waved a hand. “But that aside, you have two... no three choices. The first, and easiest; give up. Do you want to give up?”

“No!”

“Then you have two choices. The first is buckle down and endlessly repeat the facts to you, as given by Twilight, and force them into your brain. Keep them there long enough to pass the test and hope you do all right. This is called ‘cramming’ by the way.”

“I don’t recommend it,” put in Twilight.

“Eh, it has its place. Unless you’re going to be retested sometime down the line, it could get her through.”

“And the other option?”

“Goes back to what you said about us. We like learning stuff. We’re curious about things for various reasons. Me, because how different worlds have evolved over time is rather interesting. I would look for parallels to other worlds in a history lecture, maybe your Wonderbolts have some parallel to groups from worlds I’ve been to. Plus I’m just curious about stuff. You aren’t. And you’re never going to learn about something you aren’t interested in. That’s just a fact. Take me and *Astronomy*, back when I was growing up. I wanted to just learn magic, and spells, and about my abilities that no one seemed to have but me. So I basically cheated. I put a single point into the skill and when test time came, I put *Augment Skill* on myself and passed them that way. I didn’t want to learn it, I was never going to learn it. But I was somewhat okay with putting points into *Animal Handling* or *Imbuing* that I did all the time. I learned- the stuff I had a desire to learn. *Could* I have learned *Astronomy*? Sure, like I said, I have a good memory. But it was the desire to learn that drove my ratings. It’s the same with you. Either get interested, come at it from a point you can relate to, like how flying formations have changed over time, or forget it. Because no amount of learning will happen for those that don’t care.”

“Maybe that’s where I went wrong,” mused Twilight, magically picking up her clipboard. “I’ve been focused on Rainbow’s *style* of learning, but not the *content* of the lesson. Maybe I should have tailored it a bit more.”

“Oh, by all means, the style is important,” agreed Susan. “She may be a kinesthetic learner, and given her obsession with flying that’s probably the case. Trying to get her to sit still like this probably is torture for her. Get her moving. Have her act out the history you’re trying to learn, rather than just passively absorbing it. You’re not stupid, Dash, you can learn this. Just find your way.”

“I’ll keep trying, it seems I have no choice.”

“Just be thankful you have such a good friend in Twilight here, who is willing to go the extra mile for you. I’m sure she has other things she’s rather be doing.”

“Oh. Yeah. Thanks.”

“It’s okay,” she replied with a grin.

“Good luck.”

“Wait, what did you mean when you ‘sort of’ had a spell to help me learn things?”

“Oh, that you remember? I can transfer my rating in something to someone else. If I sat and learned everything I could instantly pass it on to you. I’m not, so don’t ask. This is your struggle. Embrace it!”

“I know. Let the... learning... begin.”

What Else Am I Good For?

When 19th day in Equestria

Where: Train into the Rainbow Falls

“Wow.” Susan stood on the train platform and looked up at the cascading water that flowed, seemingly from every corner. Somehow there were a multitude of waterfalls in this part of the world, and each one seemed to have a rainbow of color shot through it. It even looked like the source of water for the town was a waterfall, hanging in midair, that fed a small pond and stream that then further went tumbling to the ground below. They had come rather a long way up the mountain, but Susan had to say, this was a pretty unique view.

“So?” asked Pinkie Pie, waving a hoof. “Aren’t you glad you came along?”

“This is an impressive sight,” she admitted, “but how do they stay up? I mean that one seems to pass through a cloud, of all things.”

“Magic, silly.”

“Ugh, now I know how others feel when I say that. It’s magical all right. Thanks for insisting I come.”

“Of course. Plus, I think you’re going to be needed today!” she said with a wink.

Oh yeah, I wanted to actually do some tests to see if Pinky was some kind of Seer. I... have no idea what those tests would entail, but it completely slipped my mind. She’s effective enough without me knowing for sure, and maybe that’s all part of her gift too. Not being pinned down.

The group was headed to a “swap meet,” and Susan figured she probably wasn’t going to ‘swap’ for anything. Most of what was in her *sub-space pocket* at the moment were either gift/memento type objects like the stuffed Moogles and huge Shuriken, actual weapons like her shotgun, or totally dangerous like that cask of basilisk venom she was still carrying around. She wasn’t about to give up any of it, not for anything she might find around here.

But the others seemed excited, and it seemed Celestia herself was there as some kind of arbiter of the whole thing, so at the very least she could stop by and talk to her.

It wasn’t a half hour after they got there that Rainbow Dash dropped out of the sky next to Susan.

“There you are!” she said. “Quick, you’ve got to come with me!”

“I do?” She found herself being pushed along. “I guess I do.” She found herself in front of a booth filled with, of all things, statues of Discord. Holding a light bulb. “Oh, it’s a lamp!” she said, looking one over. “Say, did you make these?” She looked over at the pony behind the counter and noticed something odd. What wasn’t odd was the fact he was a pegasus, or his black and purple mane. No, the odd thing was being strapped into something like a cart, with large wheels on the back. *He must be paralyzed?*

He nodded.

“Not bad, you’ve actually captured him very well.”

“Thanks.”

“I thought you might be able to cure him,” whispered Rainbow Dash. “That would be worth a stupid lamp, right?”

“You want a Discord lamp?”

“I don’t. That guy with the Orthros does. Then I can trade the Orthros for the book I want!”

“Ah. Well, I’ll offer.” *What’s an Orthros?* “So my friend here wants a lamp, and I have a rather unconventional trade to offer you.”

“She said it was the chance of a lifetime, which sounds a bit suspicious.”

“Well, unlike certain brothers I could name, my cures are actually magical. Plus they, you know, work? Would you trade a lamp for never needing to be in that brace of yours again?”

“That’s impossible,” he scoffed. “I have a spinal injury from an accident years ago. I’ll

never walk, or fly, normally again.”

“And that’s where you’re wrong. I can heal you.”

“Really.”

“Really.”

“I’ll give you all my lamps if I can fly out of here. Give me the sky back and I’m not sure what I would do.”

“Did you hear that?” squealed Dash. “Make with the magic so I can get my lamp.”

“How’s your studying going, by the way?” Susan asked her.

“You’re asking me this now?!”

“I’m not just a magic dispenser, you know.”

“I thought you liked helping ponies with your magic.”

“I do. And I’ll help this one here. I just want to be sure you appreciate it and your studies are going well. Tell me some historical facts about the Wonderbolts and we’ll call this even.” Rainbow looked puzzled. “It is a swap meet, after all, so we’ll swap facts for my magic.”

“I do appreciate it, and we don’t have time for this! That book could be traded away at any moment! Please! I’ll tell you some later!”

“Okay, I’ll hold you to that. Stand still, sir, this will take a few minutes.” Sparkle cast *Accelerate Magic*. “A few less, now.”

Five minutes later, after an impressive light show that drew a few curious ponies to see what was going on, she unbuckled the harness keeping the pony on his wheels and he shakily stepped out of them. *I could have used the knife, but these ponies are used to magical glows, if not the circles my magic makes, but that’s something he knows and can accept. I spent a few minutes at the beginning to save an hour of trying to explain a healing knife at the end.*

“I’m standing,” he said, awed, then flexed his wings. With a mighty push he went into the air, and gave a whoop of delight. “I’m flying again!” The ponies nearby clapped for him, and he came to a heavy landing. “Everything seems to be in order, I... I can’t believe it. How? How did you do this?”

“You watched me. I used my magic.”

“Can I have my lamp now?”

“My booth is yours,” he said, not one to go back on a promise.

“I just need the one, thanks Spark, bye!” She grabbed a lamp and flew off with a woosh.

“Sorry about her,” said Fluttershy, taking off too. “She’s just really excited about this book.”

“NERD!” Susan shouted after them.

“I really can’t thank you enough,” said the pony. “I was told not even magic could fix me, but here I stand. This... this is the best day...” Tears were filling his eyes.

“My magic is a bit different than most,” Susan admitted. “And I’ll just take one lamp myself.” She chose one of Discord upright. “You don’t have to give me your whole stock.”

“Oh, but I insist! That was the deal!”

She slipped it into her sub-space pocket, laughing. “Then I’ll make you a new deal. I’ll trade *my* lamps for *your* old cart. Seeing as how you probably don’t ever want to see it again.”

“You want this?” He gave the thing a kick.

“Yup.”

“I guess if you think that’s fair.”

“It is for me.”

“Take it. I can’t thank you enough, honestly.”

“Have a good day,” she said, taking it. She stuck it into her *Pocket Dimension* from writings, which was empty at the moment, as it was pretty big. The cart, not the *Dimension*. That was limitless, unlike her *pocket*. She didn’t need it cluttering up that space. *If I need a pony cart, I’ll take the extra time and energy to get it out.*

“Why did you take his cart?” Sparkle asked when they were away from the booth.

“Well I didn’t want his lamps. One is fine, imagine showing an actual Discord lamp to my friends... *that I can say I actually got in Equestria, made by a pony! It would have infinite value!* Plus, he needed other stuff to trade, I hated to make him leave empty... hoofed.”

“Yes, I suppose. But why the cart?”

“That’s another kind of reminder.”

“Oh.”

“There you are! Quick, you’ve got to come with me!” Susan found herself being shoved again.

“What the? Did someone change the Matrix?”

“What? Come on!”

“Gonna be that kind of day.”

Susan was now standing before a stall displaying a book, and Fluttershy was holding the leash of a two headed dog bigger than she was.

“Oh, that’s an Orthros.”

“She said she didn’t want it anymore unless Fluttershy goes to live with her in Manehattan until it’s trained!”

“Well I can’t make you another Fluttershy, Dash. This reality isn’t large enough to hold that much cuteness.”

“Oh my gosh!” said Fluttershy, coloring and putting a wing over her head.

“I mean just the one is almost too much! She’s making *me* cuter just by standing here next to her.”

“Stop!”

“No, no, I thought you could do that spell, you know, the one you said could transfer knowledge? If you gave this lady Fluttershy’s knowledge of animals, she would be happy.”

Susan looked over at this pony. She was an Earth Pony, unless that hat of hers was covering a horn. Orange and yellow mane, light yellow coat, and three teddy bears as a cutie mark.

Do they call them teddy bears, here? That would be an odd parallel.

“What about it,” asked Susan. “If I gave you Fluttershy’s knowledge of animals, plus the Orthros, would that a fair trade for the book?”

“You can do that?”

“Yes I can.”

The pony looked between Susan and Dash, who was nodding her head jerkily. (Not like a jerk, I mean up and down really fast.) “This I have to see.”

So Susan got to work magnificently managing more magic. She made a *ward* from her book with *Unlock Potential* in it, then handed it over to Fluttershy.

“What’s this?”

“The spell. Touch this pony and think about transferring your knowledge of animals to her. Then say ‘illuminate.’ It’ll be done.”

“I thought you were going to do it,” said Dash.

“The spell transfers knowledge that the caster possesses. I can’t suck her knowledge out, she has to do it.”

“Oh. However it has to work, I guess.”

“But I don’t want to lose my knowledge of animals!” protested Fluttershy.

“No, no, it’s making a copy of your knowledge. You won’t lose anything, believe me.”

“And you’ve used it before?”

“Once at least, if not a couple of times. What, after all this time *now* you don’t trust me.”

“No... I do. Okay.”

“Well, I do seem to know everything there is to know about training an Orthros,” admitted the pony. “And bears. And squirrels. And birds. And bunnies. And-”

“You don’t have to go on all day! Can I have the book now?”

“It’s yours.”

“Woohoo!”

“Thank you, Susan,” said Fluttershy. “I’ve never seen her this happy.” Rainbow was zipping around the sky, leaving a colored trail wherever she flew.

“NERD!”

“I don’t even think she can hear you.”

“Probably not.” Susan chuckled. “It is nice, seeing her like this, isn’t it? Anyway, glad I could help.”

“Told ja!” said Pinky hopping along.

Susan just shook her head.

Two days later, Spike barged in to the library and shouted for Susan, who came up the stairs in a rush.

“What? Is it The Darkness? Is it attacking Ponyville? What’s wrong Spike?”

“No, it’s Rarity. I think I... uh, may have accidentally driven her insane.”

“You did what?” asked Twilight, coming up behind her.

“She was feeling down so I went to the castle of the two sisters because you said there was other magic there and I found this book which had a spell and now it seems to have taken her over and she’s gone nuts!” He took a deep breath.

“Say that again, and count to five between each word.”

“The puppet master for the fair yesterday didn’t like her cart. She doesn’t take rejection well, apparently, and I wanted to cheer her up. So I went to go find her something magical, something that could help. I found a book and gave it to her, and it allowed her to remake things however she thought of them. Or just wish stuff out of thin air. She started small, but now she’s going around ‘improving’ everything and she hasn’t slept or eaten since yesterday.”

“We better check it out,” said Twilight.

They didn’t have to go far. Just outside the library the road had been turned into solid gold, and a nearby tree had been turned into some kind of crystal. “I think you may have a point, Spike,” admitted Twilight.

“She wanted me to keep it secret, but I didn’t know she would go this far! Please, you have to do something.”

“I guess so,” agreed Susan. “The question is what.”

“If you just get the book away from her, maybe that’ll be enough.”

“Easily. But she could be anywhere now.”

“Just look for- there!” Spike pointed. “There’s Owlicious. I asked him to keep a watch on her from above. Let’s go.”

As the group got near, Susan activated her *Magic Domination* item so Rarity couldn’t cause any trouble, and walked up to her trying to do something with her magic.

“You!” she shouted, spotting Susan and the others coming. “You did this!”

“And it seems not a moment too soon. Rarity, why don’t you take a nap for a little while, huh?”

“Sleep, at a time like this? I have so much to do!”

“That wasn’t a request. *Somnolent Smog*.”

Rarity dropped like a brick.

Careful not to wake her, Twilight slipped the book out of her pack and opened it.

“This book is blank,” she said, showing it to the others. “Are you sure it’s this one?”

“It’s what she turned the book into when she first got it. I don’t understand.”

“It’s not even magical anymore,” Susan said, getting an eleven on *Magic Sense*.

“There was some sort of green light that went into her horn as she was reading it. Maybe the magic left the book and went into her?”

“I hope not. I don’t want to have to cut her off from magic. Let’s bring her back to the library, at least. Maybe she’ll feel better after a little nap.”

They let her sleep for three hours, then Susan locked down magic again and they woke her up. Naturally they had a shackled by the back leg to the desk down there. "Traitor!" she yelled at Spike. "You gave your word to me that you wouldn't tell anyone about the book."

"He gave his word to Rarity, yes," said Susan. "But I don't think you're her anymore. Who are you?"

"I'm Rarity, who else could I be? Now let me go, I must share my sense of design with the entire world! And where is the book, I must have it back!"

"Are we going to have to keep her here until it wears off or something?" asked Spike. "We can't just keep her prisoner down here."

"It's blank," Twilight said to her, picking it up and showing her.

"Then I must not need it," she decided. "The magic is now a part of me. Release me and let me go about my business!"

"A part of her... I wonder if that's true. I do have a spell to project my soul into someone else's. I wonder if I could do that and tear it out of her that way."

"We've got to do something," said Spike, as Rarity was trying to move the desk and break the chain.

"You're *sure* this doesn't have any sort of easier solution?" Twilight asked pointedly at Spike.

"You're the magic expert, not me!"

"Like telling her the truth?"

"How would that help? That isn't magic."

"Never mind then. You don't mind trying this spell of yours, Susan?"

"Mind? Using magic? You must have me confused with someone else."

So Rarity got put back to sleep again, and Susan cast *Soul Projection* on herself while touching her. She found herself in a very green place, not green with grass and trees and such, but green with a sickly light that came from up ahead. Not that the place wouldn't be green with grass, but when Susan bent over to see what was jabbing her in the foot, she found the grass had been turned into crystal, each blade distinct as a jewel.

"Wonderful," she said to no one in particular, and carefully made her way to the path and then towards the light that was up ahead. She passed the sort of thing one might find in Rarity's soulscape, like pretty gazebos set for tea, and picnic baskets set on the hillside with glasses of champagne waiting to be enjoyed.

Do they even call it champagne here? That would be- never mind.

She crested the top of a hill and there was the source of the light: a blob of green hanging in the air. Beyond it things looked normal- normal grass, normal trees, normal blankets. Looking back she saw everything before that was modified in some way, and believed that her soul was being taken over by the magic somehow. *If that light had managed to corrupt this entire landscape, I'm not sure anything would have gotten her back.* The light was just hanging there now, and seemed to be shining a light ahead of itself, which was currently turning the grass into that crystal stuff she saw earlier. *So just how aware of me is it?*

She decided to test it, and as was normal for this sort of situation, thought about her sword and was unsurprised to not find it in her hand. *She hasn't seen it, after all. But you know what she has seen?* She concentrated, and her bracelet from the Power Pony adventure appeared. She willed the blade to appear through *that*, and was rewarded to feel the reassuring weight of it in her hand. "Thanks Rarity," she said, dashing forward. The light didn't seem to notice her approach and she felt no resistance as she brought the blade up and sliced it in two. "How do you like that, weird magic orb?" she asked, about to turn her back and walk out of there. The orb didn't answer, but neither did it fall to the ground or disappear. It just sort of closed up again and kept going.

Rather one track mind, huh?

Susan then tried various things to stop, slow down, or turn the orb from the task of corrupting Rarity's soul. She tried her magic like *Immobilize*, and unicorn magic to no avail.

She tried crushing it, entrapping it, putting walls around it, even grabbing it with her bare hands. Nothing worked. It just slowly and steadily fired that beam of energy that was slowly sweeping forward and converting everything in here to some shinier form.

“What do you think you’re doing,” she screamed at it in frustration. “This soul was far better before you started making all these changes.”

The orb stopped, and the light beam from the front of it died away.

Susan brought her blade up, wondering how shouting that had gotten the things attention. (She had been shouting at it all along in frustration.)

It winked out, and the landscape blurred a bit and when Susan looked again, the changes were undone.

What just happened? The application of force was meaningless but telling the thing I liked her better before shut it off? What kind of magic was that?

When she opened her eyes again the real world, she found herself staring into Rarity’s pretty, jewel like eyes.

“Darling,” Rarity said, “I’ve just had the strangest dream. And if you could, might you tell me why I’m shackled to a desk in Twilight’s lab?”

A bit later, Rarity left with a wave.

“Thanks,” said Spike. “And don’t worry, I’ve learned my lesson.”

“Bring obviously magical things to a magical expert to be looked over before just handing them over to somepony?” asked Twilight.

“Er, yes, that too. Well, gotta start the packing, we leave for the Games tomorrow!”

And then the fun begins.

Ah, the Equestrian Games! Where ponies and griffins from all over the lands come together in a spirit of friendly competition and togetherness.

Susan was worried.

For one thing, time was running out on her *Question* deadline of The Darkness appearing within the month. For another, there were thousands of beings running around now, and Susan couldn't hope to check even a fraction of them. If The Darkness started making trouble here there could be a lot of collateral damage, and that was the last thing she wanted.

Well, the last thing would really be for it to suck all energy from this reality and all nearby ones leaving them a husk of their former glory and empty of life.

She sat with her friends and watched the Cutie Mark Crusaders perform their routine on the field, Scootaloo flying high with the *Imbuing of Flight* Susan made for her. Spike had a bit of trouble lighting the torch, but that was sorted by a spell cast by Twilight. The three princesses; Cadence, Luna, and Celestia, presided over the games from the top box along with what looked like leaders of other lands. Susan was hopeful she would finally get to meet Luna in person at some point in the near future, given they were not very far apart at the moment. She had last been visited the night before and told all was quiet, and that security around the Games was higher than ever before.

"Of course, I had to call off my journey to arrive in time for the Games," she said, looking none too pleased. "It would look bad and enflame rumors if I wasn't there. Of course, with you there, I doubt this Darkness would really try anything, but we can't be too careful."

Susan agreed.

Of course security has to come from somewhere, The Darkness had said to her after that. And while you're here, and a bunch of security forces are here, and I know that... where do you think I'll be during this time?

Not here.

Exactly. Enjoy the Games!

So saying Susan was worried was a bit of an understatement.

Then the games began, and Susan finally saw the kind of magical contests she would have expected in her own world had Quidditch not come into fashion. There were various feats of Earth Pony Magic shaping, like throwing rocks or smashing them to pieces. Pegasus ponies had aerial courses to get through, or creating a cyclone of a certain size. And of course Unicorns had lifting contents or multitasking challenges, like floating a number of balls through hoops simultaneously. And there were more normal events like races and such, that would have not been out of place on her world in the Olympics. (If the contestants hadn't been ponies, that is.)

That day ended uneventfully, and Susan went with Twilight to go see the princesses.

"Nice to see you again," said Cadence.

"I feel better having you around," said Celestia.

"..." said Luna, because she wasn't there.

"Oh, Luna?" said Celestia, "She'll be back. She wanted to personally inspect the guards around the stadium. I have to say, she's been taking this whole thing very seriously. I think, and this is just between us, she's trying to make up for all the lost time she spent on the moon. She wants to show she has our best interests at heart, and help protect Equestria the same amount she troubled it in the past."

"I'm sorry to keep you two apart," Susan said honestly. "But I know The Darkness will

show up soon, possibly in a matter of days, so we can't be too careful."

"What is its goal?" asked Cadence. "I've had my subjects looking out for odd happenings, but maybe if I knew more about it, I would know better where to look."

"It wants to kill you. Not because it has anything against you personally, just that you have something it wants. The trick is, it wants to kill you in the most energy efficient way possible. So that's why it just doesn't show up and start killing you directly. If it can take over something that was going to kill a bunch of you anyway, it'll use that power rather than its own."

"Bringing energy down from another dimension must be somewhat difficult."

Difficult to do with precision, clarified The Darkness. Too much and your lower dimension goes poof. But I'm getting better at moving things from one reality to another, so I've got that going for me. Even if I might not be able to use my power on you directly, there are plenty of powerful people in the multiverse I can harass you with.

"I suppose if you think about it a certain way, it would be like us looking down at a lower dimension. How careful would we have to be when trying to interact with beings that, to us, are flat as a piece of paper?"

"I see your point. I don't mean to be rude, but I'll be somewhat relieved when this threat is over and you can move on."

"I know. I've had a lot of time to get used to the idea. When I show up I have to tell whoever lives there 'hey, other realities exist, and yours might be blown to pieces unless we, one single girl and her cat, can stop it.' Not the easiest thing to hear."

"But we do want to thank for you everything you've done," Celestia added. "Twilight has been writing me, and we couldn't ask for a better visitor. You don't demand anything for saving us, you don't make trouble, you just get on with helping where you can and letting us live like we always have."

"I'm honored to save a land like Equestria. I never thought, when I started this journey, that I would actually get to meet you all. That is thanks enough."

She stayed a little longer, discussing the things she liked best about the land and went back to her rooms. She was a little surprised Luna hadn't come back yet, and she had something of a growing suspicion as to why given the answer to her *Question*.

After all, Bidy seemed all helpful at first too. If only I could get close enough to do a quick Dimension Sense on her.

Told you.

What? What did you tell me?

Some time ago I told you how paranoid you would get. How you would want to sense everything and everyone. Just like every other person that Wanders. You didn't believe me. Who's laughing now?

I'm just being cautious.

Keep telling yourself that.

The next morning, Susan saw concern on the faces of the guards at the hotel, and she was directed to see the head of security, which she did. This was a large, light blue stallion with a nightstick as a cutie mark.

So, what, his special talent is beating ponies up with a stick? How do you even find out a talent like that? Any ideas?

Be nice.

"Sparkling Magic? Good. I've been told to inform you of anything odd that goes on around here. Two trains from Ponyville have not made their scheduled stops here since last night.

"Two trains in a row?" Susan's blood started to chill.

"No, that's just it. There was a train that came as normal between those times. It had a stop in Ponyville, so we didn't think anything of the first train being late. We figured it had broken down or something. But when the third train didn't come, we thought you should know."

"Thank you. I'll look into it."

“Just doing my job.”

Susan went to find her friends and tell them she was going back to Ponyville. “If it’s nothing I’ll be back. If it’s not nothing I’ll be back with an angry expression and you better be ready to come through the *Teleportal* back there because it’ll be bad.”

“We’ll be ready,” promised Twilight.

Susan and Sparkle stepped through, looking around. Things seemed quiet.

“A little too quiet,” remarked Sparkle.

“Train station doesn’t seem to be on fire or anything.”

“A little too... not on fi- that doesn’t even work!”

“Come on.”

The streets seemed strangely empty, but no one was shouting about running for their lives, so Susan was confused.

“Of course the streets are going to be empty, everyone is at the Games,” Sparkle reminded her.

“Sure, but *this* empty? Let’s poke around some more.”

They passed an outdoor cafe that was serving breakfast, and a cream colored pony sat, looking depressed, at a table. She had a pink and blue mane and tail, and what looked like three wrapped candies as a cutie mark.

Wait a second, I know that pony.

“It’s Bon Bon, isn’t it?” Susan asked, walking up to her.

“Yes?” She looked up blearily at Susan.

“Is something wrong? You look down. And don’t I normally see you out with somepony?”

“Yes,” she sniffed. “Lyra. But something happened to her last night.”

“Something? What happened? Please, it’s important!”

Bon Bon looked her over. “You’re that new pony in town, who was watching the library when Twilight went on vacation, aren’t you?”

“That’s me, Sparkling Magic. Now please, what’s happened?”

“I don’t know,” she said, close to tears. “For some odd reason Lyra insisted on taking a walk late last night. She never has before, but she got out of bed and said ‘I’m going for a walk, I may be some time.’ I tried to tell her it was too late, but she wouldn’t listen, and left the house. When she didn’t come back for two hours I got worried, and went out after her. That’s when I ran into them?”

“Them?”

“Ponies with the same story as me! Like all the unicorns in town just up and decided to leave.”

“Were they found?”

She nodded sadly. “They were taken to the hospital. But it’s terrible, something terrible happened, and I don’t even know what. You can’t even get near the place now, so I don’t even know how she’s doing. I just don’t know what to do.”

“Look, you have no reason to trust me but I’ll head there now. They’ll let *me* in, one way or the other. I’ll see what’s going on and let you know about Lyra, okay? Just stay put.”

“You would do that, for me? Oh, thank you!”

“Which way is it from here?”

“Down that way, turn left-”

Susan looked at Sparkle, who nodded. “I can get you there.”

“She remembers,” Susan said. “I’ll be back just as soon as I can.”

“What do you think happened?” Sparkle asked as they raced towards the place.

“I don’t know, but she seemed pretty worried. I don’t get it, is this the start of The Darkness attacking? What’s it doing?”

“Staying away from you, maybe? Like you said, you weren’t here, so it was the perfect time.”

“Yeah. Look at- oh great.”

The reason Bon Bon said ‘you can’t get near the place now’ was not because of some quarantine procedure or something, but that the place was mobbed with ponies, though not a unicorn was to be seen.

“Guess we know why the streets are so empty now,” remarked Sparkle. “Could it be some kind of disease?”

“Hey, a unicorn!” somepony shouted. “It’s that new pony! Maybe she knows what’s going on!”

The crowd turned, and Susan was now faced with a scared, possibly angry mob that wanted answers. *And me with my pitiful two rating in Speaking. This’ll really go well.*

“I don’t know what’s going on,” she shouted as they crowded around her. “I just got back into town this morning. When I heard something happened to unicorns I came running. I’m hopeful I can help the doctors figure out what’s happening before... uh, before something happens to me.”

“Is my baby all right?” screamed a woman a few rows back. “Will she get better?”

“Can anyone tell me what they know?” she shouted back.

Scared voices all blended together, and Susan waved her hooves for quiet again. “One at a time,” she tried to say, but no one listened. (Her minimum check, a three, made this the natural result.)

“Phase me, we’re going in,” she said to Sparkle, who jumped and landed on her back.

“Phase,” she cast, and they ran ghostlike through the crowd and the doors, appearing in the bedlam inside which seemed just as bad as that outside. Ponies scurried this way and that, while those in the waiting room looked like they had been there for hours.

“Keep it up,” Susan said to Sparkle, “we’ll just be in the way if we go solid again. We’ll find Lyra, might as well kill two birds with one stone, so to speak.”

“In this case, one pony is as good as another,” Sparkle agreed, nodding. Susan walked the hospital, freaking out more than a few ponies when she passed through them, but as she couldn’t exactly talk to them she couldn’t reassure them she wasn’t a ghost. Her fifteen LUCK check meant she had to look a little longer than she would have liked, but it wasn’t minimum so she found a dull gray pony who had the name Lyra on the door lying in a bed. She had Sparkle drop the spell and looked her over.

Her mane was limp and dull, and even her coat was now only slightly green, being more a gray than anything else.

“Just like the others,” Susan remarked, stepping closer.

“Every unicorn in this place looks like this,” Sparkle agreed. “But why?”

“Poor thing.” Susan stroked her horn, which almost seemed *fragile* now, and she stirred.

“Sorry, did I wake you?” asked Susan.

“Who...”

“I’m... look, my name is Susan. I know it’s not a pony name, and you’re not dreaming. But you’re going to have to trust me. I ran into Bon Bon on the way here, and she’s very worried about you. I said I would check up on you. Please, can you tell me what happened to you last night?”

“Susan?”

“Yes, that’s my name.”

“Sounds like... human name...”

Susan paused, but figured it couldn’t hurt. This pony might not live out the day, why not give her a little hope? *Actually, do they have stories about humans like we had stories about them? Didn’t see any at the library but that doesn’t mean anything. It would make sense that was the case, and... maybe she’s a storyteller, and she’s going to write about humans so that’s how she... however she knows about us...* “Yes, Lyra, humans are real. I’m one and here to help.”

She weakly chuckled, finally managing a “Knew... it.”

“Can you remember what happened, Lyra?”

“Show me... hands...”

“My... fine.” She checked the door, and everypony running past didn’t seem interested

in this room, so she locked it and drew the curtain over it. "Let it go." Sparkle let the spell drop, and Susan held up a hand for Lyra to see it.

"Hands..."

"Yup, these are my hands. Happy? Now please, what happened to you?"

"Cutie... mark..."

"I don't have a cutie mark like this, only you ponies get them."

"My... cutie mark."

"Your... I'm going to lift the covers, okay?" She nodded. Susan lifted them off and her face hardened. "It's gone," she breathed, "it's gone."

"I know..." A tear fell from Lyra's eye. "Help... me."

"I will," said Susan, putting the sheet back down and stroking her head. "I'll do everything in my power to make you better again, okay?"

"Promise?"

"Pinky promise."

"O... kay."

"Just rest now. I'll tell Bon Bon... No, I'll bring her here in a moment. I want to look you over first."

"K."

Lyra closed her eyes again, and Susan got to work.

Her health level is unchanged, at least most ponies have health in that range. Her Spirit Energy is still strong, it's her magic that's messed up. (Eighteen on Spirit, eight then thirteen on Magic) No, more than messed up, it's missing. Her magic is missing. This isn't a disease, at least, I don't think it is. She pulled out her knife and held it to Lyra, but nothing happened. No, it's almost like her magic was stolen. With no magic, there's no cutie mark. In fact I'm surprised she can even speak. I mean isn't how saturated this place is with magic that talking ponies would have evolved in the first place? But I suppose even if I lost my Spark of Magic I could still talk. It might just be the shock of losing it that put her into this state, and she'll recover otherwise. Apart from never lifting... no, holding anything again! Even that's magical, she wouldn't be able to pick anything up.

As a last test, she did a *Dimension Sense* but didn't feel anything amiss there. Her *aura* was in poor shape, which was to be expected, and with that there wasn't much else Susan could do. *There's no way I can restore her magic, I can only move Spirit Energy around. Even if I could give her some of mine, it isn't like my energy. I convert energy into magic to do a spell. How would I convert some and give it to somepony else?*

"For now, this is all I can do," she said softly. "Pony me." Sparkle turned them back into ponies and Susan opened a *Teleportal* back to the cafe.

"Bon Bon," she hissed, hoping nopony saw this.

Bon Bon nearly fell out of her chair when she looked over at Susan, as she was looking at a hole in the air into the hospital. Susan walked out.

"Go through, she's stable for now and she may recover on her own. She's lost her magic, but physically she's fine. I'm going back to talk to the princesses now, we'll figure this out. The staff might be a bit surprised to find you in there, but that's your problem. Oh, and the door is still locked."

"How are you- no it doesn't matter. Thank you." She gave Susan a quick hug and leapt through. She made sure her tail was through and dropped the spell. *No time for subtlety.* Susan opened another one right then and there, and stepped back through to the hotel. She found her friends, who were meeting with the two princesses.

No Luna. "Where's Princess Luna, I have the most urgent news."

"You didn't see her in Ponyville? She told me there was a tremendous spike in bad dreams there last night, but didn't want to trouble you getting her there. She said she could reach there by morning on her own."

Great, did something happen to her too, or is something else going on?

"What did you find?" asked Twilight.

"All the unicorns in town were attacked last night by something. Darn it, I should have had her show me where and looked back in time! I didn't even think of it."

"Are they... dead?" Rarity asked.

“No, they’re alive, just- what are you doing?” she asked Sparkle, who was casting a spell. Before them stood Lyra in her ‘damaged’ state, if she had been standing there. “Oh, an *Illusion.*”

“This is how you found them?” Celestia demanded. “Pale, gray, weak, no magic?”

“Yes, exactly. Has this happened before?”

“It has. Everyone, I’m afraid Tirek has returned.”

"Wait, you can't mean Tirek! Centaur? Changes ponies into dragons? Rainbow of Darkness?" Susan had, of course, sought out the original Pony episodes, and the enormous tone shift between the pilot and subsequent episodes could not be denied.

"Rainbow of What?" asked Rainbow Dash, taking offense.

"I do not know of any Rainbow of Darkness, but Tirek is indeed a centaur. He and his brother Scorpan came to our land a long time ago, in the age of Starswirl the Bearded. They came with conquest in mind, but only Tirek remained in that mindset once among us. With his help we were able to foil Tirek's plans, and locked him away."

Everypony looked to Susan, who shrugged. "The story I know of Tirek is very different, and comes from another pony story altogether. Not part of your... continuum... you might say. Strange that the being would be so similar, and yet so different. But wait, how is he still alive?"

"Who is to say what his natural lifespan is," replied Celestia. "Plus, his ability to absorb magic may grant him some form of natural longevity."

"Wait, absorb magic? You better start from the beginning."

"This is the beginning. Tirek can grow physically stronger the more magic he absorbs. Right now he is probably weak from his long imprisonment, and can only absorb from the most strongly magical among us. Unicorns. Soon he will be able to draw the magic from all pony races, and become powerful indeed."

So that's why Discord was frightened. Could this being, if powerful enough, steal his magic as well? And what would that mean? Can he steal my magic? And what would that mean?

"So let's stop him!" said Rainbow Dash.

"It's not that easy, now," Susan cautioned her. "If that's The Darkness, and I don't see any reason why it wouldn't be, it now has two different ways to shut me down. When I cast a spell it knows how to simply splinter my magic, and now it seems if I get too close it'll just suck my magic right out of me! What if that means my *imbued* items crumble to dust? You have no idea how much work I've put into them."

"I've felt their power, I have some idea," put in Dash. "Letting them do what they do couldn't have been easy."

"You got to see three of them," said Susan, "I have seven on this bracelet. You don't know what they can do."

"Oh."

That's an idea though, could I Mimic his stealing of magic? Pull some of his into myself? I doubt Magic Domination would work, he would just absorb the magic from beyond its range. This is going to be tough.

"Plus we can't kill him," said Sparkle.

Pinkie Pie nodded. "That's- wait what?"

"I think a being like this I wouldn't mind killing," said Susan. "He's clearly evil, and the first thing he did after breaking out of prison is to go back on the same rampage that got him in prison the first time. I don't think Fluttershy will be able to redeem him."

"I wouldn't mind trying though."

"No, I mean, if he is The Darkness now, and we kill him, that energy goes with it. It has implied as much in the past. Something about cutting his losses and just taking what he had gotten, remember?"

Susan paled. "That means that if I kill him, all the unicorns he's stolen magic from would never recover. We have to move fast."

"Can you take him down without killing him?"

"I have a couple of spells, like *Hypnotic Field* that he might be dazzled by. But I would only get one shot if he can absorb magic. I'd have to cast it away from his range of shutting

my magic down, then somehow force him into it. And he'd get resistance against it, so there's no guarantee it would work. Do you know what his REASON is? I don't. At least he can't spend energy on it..."

"What happened the first time?" asked Fluttershy. "He must have stolen pony magic then too, right? He wouldn't have given the magic up voluntarily."

"My memory of that time isn't clear, perhaps Luna would know more. Or books at the time might have some record. We can look."

"I'm sure there's a spell that can transfer the power back," Twilight said with confidence.

"It's illegal on my world, but I have a spell. It can force someone to do something, and once in the *Field* he wouldn't be able to resist. I could make him do it."

"That assumes it goes both ways," cautioned Sparkle.

"True, they may have just been magicless until they died."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," chided Celestia. "First we must find him. When we know the general area he's in we can see how much power he's taken and perhaps close the area off somehow."

"Good point. Now, unless someone has a likeness of the fellow, I don't think my seeing a low resolution youtube video of a different version of the guy in another reality is going to be enough for my *Descry* magic."

"I think my ears are broken!" said Pinky, banging one. "I didn't get half that."

"Never mind," said Twilight. "There is a way to track him, isn't there, Princess Celestia?"

"Yes. I will go and summon him, then you can discuss strategy." She turned to leave the room.

"Him?" asked everyone.

"Discord."

That shocked everyone there but Susan. They were all talking about what that meant, but she already knew. *Right, he could tell my magic was different, and said something like even in the state he was in or something, right? Even with a limited rage, he could pop back and forth between major cities and scan the area.*

She didn't waste time, instead started reading over her book and looking for useful things.

"I can think of one thing, off the top of my head," said Sparkle, coming over to her.

"Remember what you used to block off the *Weapon* attack on Midgar?"

"Something Barricade, right?"

"*Bolstered Barricade*. Read that over for me again, will you?"

"Sure." She turned to it and looked it over, and decided she was right. "Put into a *ward* this could be just the ticket. I only need five, my current Sun rating could get that. Put energy in and they could be DTR 10. It's L range, not S but okay, I could work with that."

"Nope, never mind. I see the problem," she said sadly, shaking her head.

"What?"

"It's maintained. I hoped it was permanent. No such luck. He could just drain the magic out of them."

"Oh. Yeah, we need something else. Something I never thought I would want to cast. *Elemental Storm*."

"Going for overkill, are we?"

"Am I? Make it *Knockout*, and nopony will be seriously hurt. But knock him out and at least I can get close enough to use *Dead Magic* on him."

"And thereby destroy any chance of him giving the magic back directly."

"How confident are you that you can come up with something?" she asked Twilight.

"Very," she answered.

Right, she's probably dealt with this many times before, in different ways. She wants to see how we'll handle it. I suppose as long as she doesn't strenuously object to any plan, it's good enough. Still, does she know our magic well enough to know what we're talking about?

“Okay. I think we have some kind of plan then. We just need to get him into an area the storm can hit him... and keep him there for the eighteen minutes it’ll take me to cast this spell.”

“Nine minutes. I don’t use it often, but I do have *Accelerate Magic* for this very reason.”

“Nice! What else do we have... I have an *Unfailing Resolve*. And some useless stuff like *Love Interest* and *XP Bonus*, which I suppose I can always use. Seriously, these cards are supposed to be keeping me alive, and I already love Luna.”

Everypony gasped.

“My Luna, not your Luna.”

“Oh.”

“Why does it even exist? It’s not going to keep me from getting killed.”

“I’ll do you one better, want to betray someone?”

“What? You get that card so much! Never betray your teammates. *EVER*.”

“I do get it a bit. This is more useful, a *Power Overwhelming*.”

“Oh, spending forty or so energy in one action to get a nine minute spell instantly? Yes please.”

“Course, if you wanted the guy dead I could just hit him with Ryūdō for 20d10 damage.”

Susan stared at her. “You’re a dangerous cat now, you know that? I’m glad you’re on my side.”

“As you should be.”

“Who’s a dangerous cat now?” asked Discord, walking in. “This guy right here.”

“But not to us, your *friends*,” Fluttershy reminded him.

“Oh no, I mean only to those that would try to break up our friendship. How are you, by the way? Did you have a nice trip?”

“Oh, very nice, thank you.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Discord, we have called you here to help us pinpoint the magic stealing being known as Tirek,” said Celestia, following him in. “Find him. Do not engage him in combat. If he were to take your magic to supplement his own, I fear he would become unstoppable.”

“Yes, no doubt. Tell me, where is that other princess of yours? I don’t see her here anywhere.”

“We aren’t sure at the moment. Let us worry about her, for now, please do as I have asked.”

“But of course. Your wish is my command.” He snapped and was gone.

“I better start reading this spell over, see if I can understand how to cast it,” said Susan. “Then I guess we have our plan.”

Susan and Sparkle both read it over, Sparkle *assisting* Susan with her check of an entire nine. As Susan got only a twelve, and needed fourteen, she shrugged and spent the one XP for a bonus. She then rolled *Magic Theory* and got an eighteen, which was more than enough.

“What exactly are you going to do?” Celestia asked nervously, hearing them talk.

“It’s non-lethal. No property damage either. Well, minimal, but only like trash cans blowing around. Anyone struck will just be knocked out, I promise. I don’t care who he is, bolts of *Knockout* raining down from the sky will take him out. And he won’t be able to absorb the clouds, right?”

“No, if he could do that we would all be in trouble.”

They then explained the rest of the plan.

“At the very least, he wouldn’t be able to use his stolen magic,” Celestia agreed.

“Stealing it, that may just be something he can do, and not magical at all.”

“Leave that to me. Once he’s unconscious we can set a few things up.”

“I’m not sure I’m really appreciated around here,” said Discord, popping back up again. “Did you even think to look in the last place you knew he was?”

“He didn’t move from Ponyville? Why?”

“I don’t know. You didn’t want me near him, so I didn’t stop to ask. Will there be anything else?”

“Actually, yes. You need to lure him somewhere he can’t easily take cover under something. Can you trick him into thinking you want to join him, and get him someplace out in the open? Vanish as soon as the clouds gather though. I’m going to be casting a spell hard and fast, and I don’t want you out in it.”

“You do care!”

“Until the moment you betray me. But you wouldn’t betray a friend, right?”

“Perish the thought.”

“So can you do it?”

“Trick someone? Please, you forget who you’re talking to.”

“All right. I’m going with Discord. You don’t mind taking Sparkle and me there, do you? Someplace away from him, like the opposite side of town or something?”

“I suppose not.”

“Great. Just one thing…” She pulled out a *Time Anchor* and used it. “Give me some sign he’s in position and I’ll start the spell. And Discord?”

“Yea?”

“Thanks, for your help.”

“Oh. I mean, oh. Of course.”

He snapped, and they were gone.

“Good luck!” everyone said.

“Wait, shouldn’t we be, like, helping?” asked Rainbow Dash. “I mean she just ran out on us!”

Susan found herself in Ponyville somewhere, with Sparkle by her side. “You’ll know my signal,” said Discord, and vanished again.

“You want the card?” asked Sparkle.

“Let me see if I need it,” she replied. “We may need that one for later.”

“You got it. Uh, how are we going to avoid the *Storm*, if I might ask?”

“I still have wards with *Magic Immunity* in them. We can use a couple once it’s cast.”

“Ah.”

So Susan quickly calculated how difficult it would be to cast the spell instantly, and found she didn’t need anything special at all.

I can use the card and get an effective 10 REASON. That makes my minimum result a seven. I am at a nine penalty for the time, meaning an effective minus two. I need a fourteen to get it, and sixteen plus minus two is fourteen. Throw one more in for the spell itself, a seventeen, and I can’t fail.

So Sparkle just maintained *Accelerate Magic*. She had put *Acceleration* on them both, maintained by the *magical focus* she had made previously, for that very purpose. Susan had the book out and ready, and the moments ticked by.

Suddenly a claw started waving in front of her, and she nodded. “That’s the signal. Don’t let me down now.” She threw her max energy in, which was only three away after all. *May as well get a slightly better rating in the skill.*

She got a twenty nine out of a possible thirty six.

Clouds instantly appeared and blocked out the sun, and thunder was heard across the land. Immediately, bolts of magical force a full meter across rained down upon the townsfolk, exploding in a twenty four meter radius blast that, had it been fire or something that could physically damage things, would have flattened the town in short order. Wind picked up, blowing small things around, and the daylight turned to dusk as all sunlight around Susan was snuffed out. If somepony didn’t know better, they might think the end had come. And for one

being, it had. *You messed with the wrong girl. But you already knew that, didn't you, Darkness?* It said nothing in reply, so Susan shrugged and calmly pulled a *ward* out of her *sub-space* pocket and activated it, while Sparkle did the same. Then she slipped her book back in. "Let's go see if we can find him," she shouted.

"What?"

So Susan, aided by some glowing arrows that had appeared, made her way to where Tirek lay, unconscious. Bolts still fell all around him, so he didn't appear to be faking it, but Susan didn't want to take any chances. She immediately cast *Dead Magic* on him, only then did she let up and release the storm. Immediately the sun came back out, but silence filled the space where before the thunder and explosions of the bolts hitting the ground were the only things that could be heard.

Have to apologize to Fluttershy, all her animal friends will be knocked out too. Probably scared them a fair bit, but maybe they won't even remember that. It would have happened pretty quickly.

With that done, Susan needed answers, and didn't want Tirek, even somewhat powerless, to have any opportunity to make trouble. She cast a quick *Shrink* on him, taking his current +2 size modifier and turning into something small enough to pick up. That done she finally did a *Dimension Sense* on him, and as she feared, he belonged there.

"We didn't get him," she angrily said to Sparkle. "This isn't the host."

"Then who is?"

"I'm afraid to guess. Still, let's take care of some business first."

She tossed him to the ground again and got out her shotgun and knife. With the shotgun barrel pinning him down, she hit him with the flat of the blade and woke him up.

"What's going on!" he screamed, trying to thrash his way out from shotgun. "That storm... wait, what are you?"

"Your death," Susan answered. "Unless I hear some answers I like."

"You're Susan!"

"You know me? But you aren't The Darkness, I can't be better at that skill, and I got a twenty four on it. How do you know my name?"

"I was warned about you. How powerful you were. How you had come to this land in the guise of friendship, but how you would betray it, as I was betrayed all those years ago! Let me go this instant! What is this?"

"It's a weapon from another world. It can turn you into a bloody smear in an instant. Now talk! Can you give the unicorns back their magic or not?"

"Why do you care? Do you want their power for yourself? Do you want it transferred to you? I won't give it to you, you hear me! I will fight to rule this land instead of you!" He tried to do something, Susan felt, but nothing happened. "My power. What have you done with my power?"

"Turned it off. You can no longer use magic. Do you need it to return the magic you stole, or is that just something you can do? What about stealing more? Can you still do that?"

"I won't answer. Destroy me, then! Go ahead. I tried to take over this land and failed, you think in the end you'll do better? Someone will betray you, and you will fall like I did. Count on it."

"I suppose I could use the card," Sparkle said, looking at her character sheet.

"That's not funny."

"Oh, you remember humor? Look at yourself, is this really who you are? That creature is terrified, and it's not The Darkness. So what exactly are you doing?"

"Making sure... Making... He can't..." *I could have kept him unconscious. Twilight was confident she could transfer the magic back. He wasn't The Darkness, and given what he was saying he may have thought he just needed to protect himself from me. That isn't evil, just misguided. Maybe he wouldn't have been evil after breaking out... was he let out? As a distraction? What am I doing?* "I don't know. I think-"

Susan's *Ninjutsu* and *Spirit Sense* warned her and she dodged back as a blade of darkness went spinning past her. She brought up the shotgun and looked around.

“Nice reflexes,” said Nightmare Moon.

Susan didn't think, didn't consider. She knew who her enemy was now, and it had given her something nice.

"Mimic," she cried, flinging a bolt of darkness back at the pony who had been Luna.

"Really, Susan," she said as it splintered to pieces around her. "Did you think I wouldn't be immune to my own attack? I kept my promise, I hope you notice. The Darkness has been revealed, and here we are, standing together on the field of battle. You just didn't think it would be on opposite sides." She laughed.

"Get out of her," Susan growled through clenched teeth.

"No, I don't think so. I rather like this body." Nightmare Moon stretched and furled her wings. "And you do too. I told you I might go inside a princess next time."

"Don't think I won't kill you."

"In front of all your little friends?"

"Friends?" Susan turned, and there were the six ponies she had gotten to know. Six. Six ponies. "Where's Celestia and Cadence?"

"Probably dead," she mused, "they didn't see me coming, after all."

"You monster!"

"Sticks and stones, Susan. Tirek, how are you doing down there?"

"Save me, master!" he shrieked. "This otherworldly creature means to destroy me!"

"We can't have that, now can we? He's such a loyal beast." Suddenly he was teleported out from the ground where Susan was, and into the air near Nightmare Moon.

"You seem to have lost weight, Tirek dear. Have you been binging on diet soda again?"

"Master, you are changed. What has happened to you?"

"Yes, I've taken my real form once again. These ponies," she indicated the six, "believed their little light show some time back 'cured' me or whatnot. Elements of harmony, indeed. But I was simply biding my time. Until you came along, actually."

"I am undone, master. She has taken my power!"

"Oh, don't make such a fuss. I can give it back to you." Susan felt her connection to the *Shrink* spell break, and darkness swirled around Tirek. Suddenly he was standing tall again, and seemed to be gathering energy for a blast.

"Not quite yet, Tirek," Nightmare Moon said, holding a wing in front of him. "There is one more *little* surprise I have for Susan here, before we get started."

"What are you planning now?"

"You recall that charming metal I hurt you with on the last world? Of course you do. I found a way to hurt you even more on this one. You are rather fond of this place, aren't you?" She pointed to Ponyville, where unconscious ponies lay in the street. "I mention it because I brought something different to this world. Look upon it now, and know despair." She reared up and smashed the ground, and a ring of darkness spread out from her, shooting past them and across the land in seconds. The ground started to shake, and in horror Susan watched as concentric rings of Ponyville exploded and collapsed. "Explosives, in the tunnels the Diamond Dogs dug for me! Isn't it wonderful when a plan works out so well?" The town was in ruins, the tunnels doing their jobs of directing the blast around the entire town, which was collapsing as the helpless ponies stood and watched. Finally the rolling booms died down and the ground stopped shaking. The town was rubble.

Susan was livid.

She swapped her shotgun for her *Crystal Sword*, becoming the *Avatar of War* and charging Nightmare Moon. She had used her *off hand* to draw the blade, and was now holding it in two hands.

"Is that what you want to rule, just devastation?" Sparkle said to Tirek, who also looked a bit shocked at what she had done.

She was up next, but held her action until Susan reached Nightmare, because she's smart like that.

Tirek changed up some kind of attack, a ball of energy appearing between his horns.

Rarity of all ponies acted, sending as large a rock as she could lift at Nightmare, who chopped it to pieces with a blade of darkness that appeared next to her.

"You're throwing rocks at me? Please."

Susan reached Nightmare Moon, and raised her sword to deliver a mighty blow.

Sparkle stopped holding, casting *Elemental Line: (Wind)* under both Tirek and Nightmare, who were still next to each other.

She got a twenty six and Susan got an eighteen, both which smashed into the barrier created by Nightmare. Susan realized she was only one off from piercing it, and spent an XP, smashing through it. The barrier went down as both were hit with quite a bit of damage from the *Line* and Susan rolling a one on her hit location table. She put a huge gash in Nightmare's neck, and she went down. Susan positioned her sword over the wound.

"Leave. That. Body!" she demanded.

"And take who instead? Tirek?" Nightmare wheezed. "Just to ease your conscience a little? I don't think so. Look me in the eye and end my life." She spoke more softly. "You took me down in one action, you and your *cat*, acting as one. What an ally you would make."

"I won't ask again."

Stronger now. "And I won't refuse again. Kill me. My work here is already done."

"Master!" said Tirek, his ball of energy complete but unable to fire for fear of hitting Nightmare.

"Is she worthy of being your master?" asked Sparkle, walking up. "You saw what she did. Blew up a whole town. That's what the thing inside this body will do, to the whole world, if it got the chance. Whatever it promised you, your life would be drained just as the life of every creature on this world would. Susan is fighting to protect the world. Even you! Because you have the right to exist too."

"Master, is... is this true?"

"I hadn't decided. If you showed promise I might have allowed you off world with me before I destroyed it."

"You admit it!"

"What of it? Are you going to betray me now? You know what that's like, don't you? Kill her! Kill Susan now! Don't worry about me, I'll gladly give up this world to see her die right in front of me."

"No," said Tirek, his ball of energy disappearing. "I see now I was just being used. Susan, I'll make you deal."

She made a RESolve check, getting an eighteen, and growled "What?"

"Allow me her magic. With that I at least won't be a husk anymore. I'll return all the other magic I stole." He looked over at the remains of the town. "At least, to any that are still alive. You have my word."

Susan remembered, or maybe it was Discord whispering in her ear about sacrifice and somepony else coming up with the plan when it went down.

"It's your world, Twilight, what do you want to do? I don't... want... to kill your princess!"

"Do it," said Twilight, causing the ponies around her to gasp.

"Are... are you sure? I can't take it back. Even if I reload, it's her. She... I can't..."

"You said yourself, there is no other way, right?"

"But there has to be! I can't, I just can't kill Princess Luna!"

"Do we have a deal?" asked Tirek.

"We have a deal," said Twilight. "But you're going to help us rebuild, and learn our way of life. Even with Susan gone we can stop you one way or another. Don't think we can't."

"It is agreed then." He held up a hand and magic started draining from Nightmare's body. Her hair stopped being all starry and turned back into normal hair, which hung limply. "It is done." Susan glanced over, and yes, her cutie mark was gone.

"So now only one thing remains," Nightmare said, smiling. "Me. What will you do, Susan? Have your *cat* deal the final blow? She could now, I know what skills she has. Or will you make an innocent little pony do your dirty work for you? I'm waiting!"

“Last chance!” Susan wasn’t sure if she was shouting that to Twilight or Nightmare.

“It’s okay, it will all work out. End this!” shouted Twilight.

Of course, thought Sparkle. Though the next loop, none of this will have happened. No one will even remember this loop apart from Twilight. And I’m sure she’s seen worse. But I can see it’s agony for Susan. Is it time to tell her? But she’s so vulnerable right now, emotionally. What would that knowledge do to her?

“Goodbye Luna. If you’re in there, I’m sorry!”

The blade came down.

And Luna was no more.

“No!!!” Susan shouted, throwing her blade away from herself. “Why do I have to do this? And don’t you dare say this is what the universe wants for giving me my power. It wants me to be a killer? Answer me, Sparkle!”

“No one has those answers,” Twilight said softly. “Now pull yourself together. We have a lot of ponies to save.”

Susan mastered herself with difficulty, that high RESolve once again serving her well. “I understand.” She held out her hand and the blade came whistling back, and she reabsorbed it.

*Don’t worry, it’ll be easier next time. And the time after that. And the time-
One more word. Go ahead. Say one more word.
HAHAHAHAHAHAH*

Susan was in awe. Twilight showed a level of power even she believed would be off the charts, as she picked up basically entire sections of Ponyville at a time to look for survivors. *How in the world???* But it was not her place to question, it was her place to help. So she hit them with the knife, and they got up to help, speeding the recovery even more. Naturally they dug the hospital out first, and Tirek was good as his word, returning the magic he had stolen which diminished him in size. After hours of work, long into what would have been the night, (there was no one to lower the sun and raise the moon) the two princesses appeared, looking rather startled.

“You’re alive!” gaped Susan, looking over at them.

“I may have sent them a few hours into the future,” remarked Twilight. “I do know some time magic, after all. Just as Nightmare moon struck I got them to safety. She couldn’t do anything about what I had done, so she just teleported us all here to watch her destroy everything.”

“What’s happened here?” demanded Celestia.

“Did we win?” asked Cadence quietly.

“We won,” Susan answered angrily. “If you can call it that. Come on, there’s still sections we need to check.”

It wasn’t long after that Twilight announced everypony was accounted for, and started organizing temporary shelters so ponies could get some sleep. The majority of the townspies were fine, having been knocked out actually worked in their favor because after being buried they didn’t panic and make their situations worse. So Susan saw very few she couldn’t heal completely in a few seconds, which made her feel only a little bit better.

As ponies rushed this way and that following Twilight’s orders, Susan slipped away with Sparkle.

“Not even going to say goodbye?” asked a voice behind her.

“Pinkie Pie.” Susan didn’t turn around.

“That’s me. I was the first to meet you when you came, it makes sense I should see you off. I’ll let the others know... after you’re gone.”

“Thank you. Tell them I’m sorry for what happened. For what I had to do.”

“They know. Don’t be sad,” she said, putting her hooves around Susan. “Our whole pony reality is safe now, right? All sorts of different versions of me will never know the fear of The Darkness, because you came here and defeated it. Luna’s still out there, right? Another one that we did save with the Elements. That wasn’t all mean and just pretending to be our friend.”

“I hope so, Pinkie. I’d like very much to believe that.”

“We’ll rebuild, better than before even. And I heard Twilight saying Tirek should raise the moon now, to remind him of the responsibility he took on when he took her magic. So, no tears, okay?”

“You first.”

“I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too. All of you. I’m sorry, I have to go.”

“I know. Find your friend and tell her all about us, okay?” She let Susan go.

“I will.”

Susan hit the button and an agent of Silverstreak appeared. “I’m ready to come back.”

“I’ll open the... is everything all right?”

“I’m ready... to...”

“I understand.”

A door of light opened before Susan, and she stepped through it.

“Goodbye...”

Susan found her way to the room and threw herself down on the bed, not even responding to Sparkle, who really didn’t know what to say in any case.

She padded out, then went to find Silverstreak.

“Sparkle! And... no Susan. What’s... it was bad wasn’t it? Darn it, I hoped seeing the ponies would give her some... what happened?”

So she gave the full report, and asked Silverstreak’s advice about what to tell Susan.

“I understand your concerns,” he agreed. “Telling her about the loops might ease this pain, but might send her into a tailspin of not caring about anyone she killed. Let’s give her some time and I’ll tell her what I tell all *Wanderers* like her.”

That time came two days later, when Susan dragged herself out of bed and made herself presentable again. This included clothes, a novel experience after not having worn any for like the last twenty days or so. She then went to find Silverstreak.

“Feeling pretty bad right now, huh?” he said to her, after they had greeted each other.

“Sort of an understatement.”

“I know. Thinking maybe you want to quit, maybe it isn’t worth it, going to a world where you know you have to destroy a life before you can leave again. And that one, I should have been more explicit, or explained more about the stories thing before you left. That one was my bad. You just seem so capable. Not that you seem less so now,” he hastened to add. “To see someone you had basically come to know through their stories corrupted like that... It’s probably the hardest thing you can experience.”

“But what do I do?”

“You do what all my *Wanderers* do. You keep going, because the alternative is even worse. You do the job, and you come back here and feel miserable for a couple of days. And I say ‘good job saving that world,’ and you feel even worse. And you train. And you feel lousy. And you think, ‘maybe that should be the last one.’ But I’ll tell you which should be the last world you visit.”

“Which?”

“The one you come back from and say ‘yeah, that wasn’t so bad that time. I’m ready for

more.' I think you can see why."

"Because by the time that's my attitude about this, I really will be too far gone. And it'll be another Wanderer like me that has to feel bad about taking me down."

He nodded. "So for now you're still okay, right?"

"I'll live. There are other versions of her, right? Other leaves?"

"Of course! A single reality has countless ways it can go. Branches upon branches spring from the main branch, and each one has many leaves. Those worlds are safe because of your actions, Pinkie Pie was right about that."

"Do you—"

"Sparkle told me."

"Oh. Guess I don't have to report then."

"Nope. I do have some good news, if you're ready for it."

"I could use some."

"I found you a good world with a metapower individual. The outfit you get when you change is a bit... leggy. But apart from that, it should be acceptable."

"Leggy outfit for powers? Look, are you sure I should be going after that sort of thing?"

"Only you can know that. Maybe having powers would have helped in the last world, maybe not. Luna was always going to have to die, from before you arrived. Like I said it's hard to know what you would have but it wouldn't have been worse. Right? Having more options is always better. You were lucky no ponies died in the attack, but it could have gone the other way. Powers might help keep others safe where magic can't."

"Until you get too many and get paralyzed by the paradox of choice. But I hear you. It's just something Sparkle said, like it's just a heavier weight I'll have to bear."

"I can't say that last world was the worst it's going to get. The Darkness can be quite inventive when it wants to be. And almost certainly you'll need powers, not magic, to rescue your father. Better to get them early, learn what you can and can't do with them, before you absolutely need them."

"You're right. Very well. Let me spend some XP and we can—"

"Actually..." he held up a hand. "Might want to hold off on that. Some skills like *Spirit Sense* will carry over, but some won't. Remember, you'll lose all access to magic, apart from these." He pointed to the bracelet. "Skills relating to powers you'll then have to learn. Like hitting people with attacks, as the magic itself won't aim them for you. Now you won't be able to put many points in, training on your own, but unless you have something you're burning to get, you might want to wait this time, see what powers you get, and look at the whole picture when you get back."

"Sensible. Okay, back into the fray. Tomorrow. Give me one more day to bum around here."

"Take as much time as you need. In fact, it will probably be pretty close to nighttime when you arrive there, so take a day and a half."

"Who should I ask for, by the way?"

"Just do what you always do, and ask around for Luna."

"This isn't you being all coy and thinking we'll all have a laugh about it later, is it?"

"What? Ahem, no, this'll work out. Trust me."

"It better."

So Susan and Sparkle stepped through the gateway to the next world, and as Silverstreak had said, it was nighttime, with a large crescent moon in the sky. Both looked around, but the streets were deserted. It seemed a fairly modern city, with electric lights and cars parked everywhere.

"Just ask around for Luna, he says," grumbled Susan. "I'll ask him around for- that doesn't make sense."

"What's that?" asked Sparkle, and they watched a young girl dash into a store across the street.

"Seems as good a place to start as any."

"Hey, there's another one," she said, looking up. A man shaped figure was heading in through an open window high above.

“Things might get interesting quick around here,” Susan remarked, calling her *Enhance Sword* out. “Best get to it.”

They leisurely made their way across the street, and as they did a bunch of people stumbled onto the street with them. They were pretty average folks, apart from their huge, glowing red eyes, that is.

They went past Susan like she wasn't even there, and she watched them curiously.

“What do you suppose is going on here?” she asked. “Zombie jamboree? Helloooo!? Hello? Anyone home?” They filed past and also went into the store.

“I think that girl is... she fell down.” Sparkle said, looking in through a window in the store. “Those glowing eye people are attacking her!”

“Then I guess I better-”

That's when every window in the place shattered, and Susan saw the girl in the middle surrounded by powerful waves of energy. *Now that's power!* She was screaming her head off, bleeding from a scrape on her leg, and looked utterly out of place as the odd creature standing behind the counter winced and covered her ears. Sparkle couldn't get closer, but Susan didn't mind, and came up behind the girl, who looked surprised to see a girl with a huge sword on her shoulder strolling around at night.

She stopped screaming.

“Thank you,” said Susan, wiggling a pinky finger in her ear. “Now, someone want to tell me what the blue blazes is going on here?”